

# 159 International experience – not a must have in the labour market: Why? Where? And for whom?

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## Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

## Abstract

There is a mixed evidence regarding job related assets of European student mobility. We use employers and employees' perspective (N = 26) from a study on soft and hard skills in the graduate labour markets in Germany. The Q-Methodology carried out as part of narrative interviews show relatively low relevance of an international stay for career outcomes in comparison to other skills. The participants underlined that a stay abroad per se is not crucial; it must be made explicit which skills you learn during an international experience to show why it is an asset. Although the study showed that an international stay is not necessarily a career booster, some differences in ratings occurred. This result shows that some aspects such as different study level, type of mobility, country of origin or country of the job, may lead to different labour markets outcomes of an international stay.

## Full paper

The politics will see as many as possible students mobile (e. g. Bologna process). There is a mixed evidence regarding job related assets of European student mobility (Van Mol et al., 2020). Firstly, most studies on this topic are based on rather small samples. Secondly, some studies use self-reporting from the graduates on the importance of a stay abroad. Thirdly, it is not clear if indeed a stay abroad and not other unobserved characteristics are cause for better career prospects (Bryła, 2015; Di Pietro, 2019). Besides, scientific literature shows that a stay abroad is not necessarily seen as a must have in the labour market (King et al., 2010; Petzold, 2017). However, studies considering the employers' perspective cover the topic only in few items (but see Petzold, 2017). In this point the study presented steps in. Its main aspect was the relevance of soft and hard skills required in the labour market for academics in Germany.

For data collection, we used problem-centred interviews (Witzel and Reiter, 2012) with an integrated Q-sort as a part of Q-Methodology (Brown, 1980). The fieldwork took place between November 2019 and July 2020. The sample consisted of 12 employers and 14 employees from different disciplines. The employees' work experience after their master's degree ranged from one to ten years. The group defined as 'employers' had personal responsibility and/or were responsible for the selection of new employees. The participants were asked to rank 43 elements, soft and hard skills, according to their relevance for the labour market on a scale reaching from (+4) indispensable to (-4) less relevant. One of the elements was defined as "International Experience". Thus, all elements were evaluated globally, simultaneously with the relevance of the other characteristics. In this way, it was possible to determine which elements were the most relevant and not only relevant for the graduate labour market, as is often done using scales, where a single item is rated.

The findings show three areas of the labour market with different skill requirements. Whereas the first area 'The world of rules' applies rather to the professions and academia, the two other areas 'The middle field' and 'The people-oriented and critical market' can be found throughout the labour market. The disciplinary affiliation does not play a role (more details in Kmiotek-Meier et al., forthcoming). In all three areas the element "International Experience" was ranked relatively low: in 'The middle field' as the least relevant out of 43 elements, in 'The world of rules' on the 39th rank, and 36th in 'The people-oriented and critical market'. Preliminary findings from an accompanying survey show the same picture: international experience is not as relevant as the other skills.

The participants underlined that an international experience per se is not crucial, but “what you do out of it” may be (Interviewee 2). Thus, it may be helpful in a recruiting process when special skills are sought after, e.g. language skills or cultural sensibility. Interestingly, skills such as “Willingness to learn”, “Being considerate of the views and feelings of others and responding appropriately”, “Taking initiative”, “Openness to new ideas” were ranked relatively high in all three areas. Such skills may be linked to an international experience. The participants underlined that it must be made explicit which skills you learn during an international experience to show why it is an asset.

Generally, the study showed that an international stay is not necessarily equal to a career booster. Despite the fact that an international experience was generally ranked low, there were some participant ranking it very high. This result shows that different types of jobs asks for different skills. Other potential aspects such as different study level (Bachelor / Master), type of mobility (credit / degree) or country of origin or country of the job, may lead to different labour markets outcomes of an international stay. Thus, more nuances in this research branch are needed.

While this study captured a (partly) perspective from German employers and employees', there are also other perspectives and indicators used to research the influence of a stay abroad on future career of graduates (e.g. time before the graduation and the first job, position, income). More systematic approach regarding the outcomes of a stay abroad would help to see the bigger picture from the fragmented findings.

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