

Leveraging Global Experiences in the Job Market

BY CHARLOTTE WEST

WHEN COOPER NELSON DECIDED to enroll in a joint-degree program between the College of William & Mary and the University of St Andrews in Scotland, his ability to get a job after graduation was foremost on his mind. “I accepted my offer into the program as a senior in high school believing that having the joint program on my résumé would make me stand out when I applied for jobs,” says Nelson, who completed his bachelor’s degree in economics in May 2016.

Looking back four years later, he says that while his participation in an international degree program didn’t lead to active recruitment by firms, it has provided a major talking point during his job interviews. “I found I could leverage my myriad of experiences in the joint program in order to



stand out. Employers seemed genuinely interested in the program because it's so unique. This allowed me to showcase whichever aspects of myself were more appropriate for the given interview question," he explains.

As part of the joint-degree program, which was created in 2011, students spend two years at St Andrews and two years at William & Mary, which recently won the 2016 Simon Award for Campus Internationalization. Nelson was able to use examples from his time in Scotland during the hiring process: "For example, when faced with the classic 'what was your biggest challenge and how did you overcome it?' question, I could easily respond by discussing how my second-year transition to life at a new school in a foreign land was difficult but taught me to quickly adapt to new surroundings."

Nelson, who joined a consulting firm in Washington, D.C., after he graduated, adds that the program also helped him develop soft skills such as being able to interact with people from diverse backgrounds: "Once you've met people from literally all over the globe, talking to a potential employer becomes easier. Being exposed to so many people simply by being in the program helped me understand that everyone is interesting in their own way and has something they can share."



Cooper Nelson

Preparing Students for the Global Economy

Nelson is representative of the growing number of students who are focused on the career outcomes of higher education generally—and international education specifically—when making decisions about which institution to attend. A recent study from Kaplan done by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), for example, found that graduates believe that institutions of higher education have a responsibility to prepare them for today's global economy and workforce.¹

"Employability has received more attention in higher education, in general, over the past several years. This is in direct response to the questioned affordability and value of a college education and the potential fiscal return on one's educational investment," says Constance Whitehead Hanks, former associate director of Clark University's Center of Study Abroad and an expert on career integration.

Families also think about the potential career outcomes of international education programs when they are making decisions about higher education. "A study abroad semester or academic year abroad is a significant portion of a student's time in college and must be considered an integral part of the student's entire academic experience as well as preparation for advanced degree or postgraduation employment," Whitehead Hanks adds.



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According to Brett Berquist, international director at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, employability has become one of the key motivators for decisions regarding international higher education. “There has always been a focus on return on investment when it comes to moving to another country and investing significant resources in an education far away from home. But our current fascination with rankings and other performance metrics has made it easier for student consumers to compare results and calculate the potential ‘break-even’ point on their investment. [As a result], universities are increasingly reflecting on their mission and making the case for how the educational experience they offer will equip their students for their changing career over the course of their lifetime,” he says.

Presenting international programs in employability terms also helps attract a wider student audience. “This focus on employability is also an effort to articulate the importance of studying abroad to students who might not be interested any longer in learning foreign languages or in embracing a costly experience abroad as an opportunity for personal growth alone. It is a pragmatic argument ad-

ressing an increasingly pragmatic audience,” says Paloma Rodriguez, international education coordinator at Santa Fe College in New Mexico.

Angela Manginelli, director of alumni relations at AIFS Study Abroad, adds that presenting education abroad in terms of career outcomes helps make a case for its added value. “As a field we are, at times, still having to prove to people that education abroad experiences are educational and not merely an add-on to the college experience. By focusing on the career outcomes of international education, we are able to get hard data—in addition to anecdotal evidence—to support the work we do,” she says.

Employability Drives International Program Design

Martin Tillman, president of Global Career Compass, adds that the employability demands are also affecting the types of international education programs that are being developed. “Globalization of the workforce, increased mobility of students, rising demand from employers for ‘global-ready’ graduates, are but a few of the new forces of change impacting the traditional structure of international educational experiences available to students. The momentum of these forces will continue to influence the focus of higher education policy and planning with re-



Offering Career Services to International Students in the United States

While discussions about employability have recently become more prominent in the education abroad field, its role has received less attention in the realm of international student services. Although many international students pursue their entire education abroad precisely because of the perceived benefit of a foreign degree, their host institutions are often unprepared to provide them with comprehensive career services.

However, universities are beginning to recognize the importance of offering career services to their international students. “If we really believe that global competency is an expectation for all of our graduates, how do we make sure then that we are fully engaging our international community on campus with those same kind of experiences? We are looking at what we can do to ensure that our international students have the same kind of opportunities to be learning

about careers and professional opportunities while they are here in the United States, within the limits of their visas,” says Cheryl Matherly, vice president and vice provost of international affairs at Lehigh University.

Some schools are hiring dedicated career services professionals who work exclusively with international students. For example, New York Institute of Technology, which won the 2016 Simon Award for Campus Internationalization, hired James Huang as an international student support specialist in its Office of Career Services.

As international students are not allowed to work off campus, he helps his students find “smart volunteer opportunities” to build their professional skills. “For those who can’t obtain internships, I work with students to find smart volunteering opportunities where they contribute their special skills to a nonprofit organization. This year, for example, business students from

spect to campus internationalization and in particular, the development of partnerships with business and industry to widen opportunities for experiential learning and practical work experience,” he says.

Martha Johnson, assistant dean for learning abroad at the University of Minnesota, agrees that there has been enormous growth in the number of education abroad program models designed to develop skills, such as internships, practicums, or research.

Berquist says that there has been a move away from traditional semester and year-long study abroad programs where students “processed the experience progressively in following years” to more shorter, high-impact experience where there is a need to “help students through the processing before they enter the job market.”

As Tillman puts it, “education abroad programs must be purposefully structured in such a way as to support learning outcomes which strengthen core skills and competencies which are known to be valued by employers in all sectors.”

Employers Focus on Global Skills

Rodriguez says merely participating in education abroad is not sufficient to achieve the desired career outcomes: “All the research done in this area shows that for a variety of reasons (such as employer misconceptions toward study-

ing abroad, students’ inability to articulate the experience, etc.), listing a study abroad program in a résumé alone does not significantly increase a student’s employability chances.”

According to Berquist, “it’s not the education abroad experience per se that interests employers. It’s the skills acquired during the experience.”

So what types of skills are potential employers looking for? Mary Appleby, associate director of student professional development at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia, says that graduates need to be able to demonstrate capabilities beyond the technical and functional skills aligned to their studies. “Global employers expect graduates entering the workplace today to be agile learners, proficient communicators, and to work across cultures,” she says.

Ann Hubbard, director of academic assessment at AIFS Study Abroad, says there is a significant intersection in the skills that have been identified as necessary in the global workforce with those that define intercultural competence. “It’s things such as self-awareness, flexibility, adaptability,



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our Nanjing campus performed neighborhood and market research for a chamber of commerce; communication arts students from our Beijing campus edited and produced videos for an international organization; and marketing students from the Vancouver campus taught branding at a Bronx middle school,” he says.

“They all made high-impact contributions while adding value to their résumés. Even if their intent is to return home, having such experiences helps them gain an advantage and stand out among others who may have also studied abroad.”

He also helps international students understand U.S. business and employment practices: “Aside from immigration regulations, international students face language and cultural barriers. I emphasize often that their distinct styles of résumés, presentation, and interviewing are not wrong, just not the American norm.”

And he offers advice on how to make con-

nections with potential employers and put their best foot forward during interviews. “A piece of advice I give is to not introduce oneself as ‘Hi, my name is ___ and I’m an international student from ___.’ In the job market, students must be known for their skills, knowledge, and abilities, and not for where they’re from.”

The University of Auckland in New Zealand is another institution that has developed employability initiatives targeted at international students. According to international director Brett Berquist, they have recently launched a universitywide strategy on work-related learning to provide support to academic and administrative units to help students take ownership for developing their employability profile. “We have found that sometimes international students prioritize their academic performance to the detriment of building the social connections that provide them with a kiwi profile that can be a

determining factor in gaining employment after their studies,” he explains.

New Zealand allows international students to work in any job for one year after they graduate and then add another two years for a position that is related to their studies. Berquist said that while many international students have high grades, they don’t necessarily have the social skills that employers seek. They also lack a local network to help find a job.

“To help students understand the need to build their profile from their first year of study, we have designed a program called ‘employability insights’ working with Career Development and Employment Services, and our alumni relations team. We pair students with alumni for social interaction and a visit to the alumni’s workplace to help our international students find ideas for making those connections early in their studies,” Berquist explains.

and perspective-shifting. Nearly every recent survey of employers—whether with a global or domestic focus—rank this notion of ‘ability to adapt in diverse workplace settings’ or ‘work effectively in diverse teams’ in the top three most valued traits,” she explains.

Several experts also reinforce that higher education institutions are not just preparing students to work internationally as the local labor market very often requires a global perspective.

“The local workforce is increasingly global and diverse. It used to be the discussion focused on jobs that are global in their scope, but the shift needs to be recognizing the benefit in sectors such as healthcare or education, where cross-cultural skills are beneficial in a different way,” says Johnson.

Whitehead Hanks adds that it’s important to “remember... people’s local identities. International education provides students with an ability to appreciate different local lifestyles, problems, and solutions. In this way, it prepares them for both the global and local workforces.”

Miguel Lara, who earned both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Clark University in Massachusetts, participated in a study abroad program through CAPA International Education in which he did an internship with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Youth Offending Team (YOT), which works with juvenile probation. He says that through his internship he was able to gain teamwork and communication skills that have been valuable in his current position with the federal judiciary.

“While interning for the YOT, I was initially overwhelmed with the team I worked on considering the variety of individuals I interacted with. There were police officers, substance-abuse workers, mental-health officers, probation officers, and intervention specialists. Having had the experience of working on a diverse legal team in London, I was able to understand how important it is for all individuals to be on the same page when completing tasks. Each individual was held accountable, and the same went for me even as an intern,” he says.

He has been able to transfer skills he gained in London to his current job. “In London, I also had to communicate constantly with the head probation officer and police units, informing them how my caseload was. Any interactions I had be it in the courthouse, prisons, and home visits, had

to be recorded. In my work today, communication among all parties in the courthouse has to be accurate to avoid any inconsistencies and misunderstandings,” he explains.

Helping Students Connect International Experience and Future Careers

Many students need guidance in making the connection between their international experience and their future career path. Nannette Ripmeester, founding director of CareerProfessor, advises educators to create opportunities to help students learn to “translate those skills into a language employers understand. For example, if you had to live on a shoestring while abroad, you’ve learned to manage budgets; if you had to overcome culture shock, you have proof of your flexibility and adaptability,” she says.

While some institutions have comprehensive career integration initiatives, a first step is often just asking students to reflect on their experiences during predeparture and reentry workshops. “The rise of guided reflective practice has enriched the education abroad experience in many corners. Students can move more quickly through the process of cultural adjustment and understanding by reflecting frequently on their experience, whether this is through journaling, guided debriefings, a mentoring program, or other arrangements,” says Berquist.

Rodriguez says that international education experience should be designed to develop the specific skills that employers are looking for. She suggests that international offices develop a strong relationship with career services on their campuses: “Only if the student has the opportunity and support to develop these skills and become aware of them through mentorship and reflection will the experience be useful for employability purposes. Secondly, students need to be able to articulate the skills they have gained in a way that is relevant and intelligible to employers. For this students need training. It is upon us, international educators, to collaborate with career services professionals in order to develop together adequate materials and sessions to ensure student readiness in this area.”

Other experts echo Rodriguez’s recommendation. For international offices that do not already have a relationship with career services, the first step might be a single event. “I recommend reaching out to career services to ask if they would like to partner on a workshop or event that would bring in more study abroad alumni to their office. Once they get to know the study abroad alumni students, they could have them in mind when an employer contacts them and wants a student who has interacted with people from international backgrounds, knows a second

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language, etc.,” says Jodi Hicks, assistant director of overseas programs at Chapman University.

Mark Lenhart, executive director of CET Academic Programs, says that in addition to helping students articulate skills, “we could also do more to help students understand the importance of fit.” As he explains it, “students need to research that culture and be prepared to demonstrate how their experiences, and their study abroad experiences in particular, make them a good match.”

The need to help students articulate the career benefits of their international experience is not limited to study abroad. Cheryl Matherly, vice president and vice provost for international affairs at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, cautions that it’s easy to assume that students who are participating in international internships or fieldwork will automatically make the connection between their international experience and their future employment because the experience is seen as career-related.

“It was a big surprise to me to realize that if the internship was not exactly in line with what students saw as a career goal, they tend to see it as more of just a really good international experience. I realized we have to be intentional with all of our students,” she says.

Matherly adds that even with intentional activities linking international experiences with career outcomes, it may still take students time to make the intended connections: “A lot of students have told me they didn’t quite get why we were doing (these reflection exercises), but they were grateful because they realized later that they were exactly those kinds of questions that were going to be asked by employers.”

Helping Students Leverage International Experiences

Institutions have found a variety of ways to help students draw connections between their international experiences and employability, ranging from campuswide career integration to international studies certificates where students develop an e-portfolio that can be shown to prospective employers.

The Learning Abroad Center at the University of Minnesota, for example, launched a career integration initiative three years ago with the goal of incorporating students’ experiences abroad into their career and life planning. According to Johnson, the center convened a campuswide working group to assist them in better addressing and supporting the career development aspect of programs abroad.

Johnson says that they engage with students “before, during, and after” education abroad. “It quickly became apparent to us that while we had historically engaged in efforts to assist students upon reentry, that is actually too late in the process. We have worked to create information tailored for students at each point in the process. Our career colleagues have been invaluable in creating these strategies and tools. For instance, our predeparture checklist did not previously list a recommendation to meet with a career adviser before going abroad. Now it does!” Johnson explains.

At Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, Russian professor Mary Nicholas has created a course, The Global



Workplace: Preparing to Work Around the World, for students in the College of Arts and Sciences. For the first part of the course, students read a variety of literature that allows them to study the notion of work culture in different countries. Students then move on to exercises designed to help them consider their own global competence and finish the course by developing digital portfolios to demonstrate their ability to work in a global workplace.

“It’s a very intentional approach to helping to close the loop between a way that students think about their time abroad and the relationship to actually getting a job afterwards,” Matherly says.

Other institutions are developing opportunities for students to have career-related international experiences without needing to travel abroad. Swinburne University of Technology, for example, is collaborating with the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom and a nonprofit partner in India to launch a virtual internship program in 2017.

Teams of four to six interns from both institutions will participate in a paid 12-week project-based internship with a social enterprise based in India. The program includes professional development workshops with career consulting professionals addressing topics such as navigating a virtual work environment, managing time, dealing with distractions, and communicating effectively. Students also participate in one-on-one career consultations throughout the program to explore career opportunities and take part in a

reflective workshop that includes employability skill development.

“I developed the concept whilst working with overseas communities...as a way for students who are unable, either because of financial disadvantage or personal commitments or disability, to gain global exposure and experience,” Appleby says.

Another example is the International Studies Certificate at Santa Fe College, a program that integrates curricular and cocurricular elements, such as study abroad. The capstone project for the certificate is an electronic portfolio where students reflect on their global learning.

“The electronic portfolio is a tool that easily allows us to connect career development to every aspect of the program from the very beginning. As students participate in experiences at home or abroad they upload to their e-portfolio their reflections, pictures, and international research projects with an employer audience in mind,” Rodriguez explains.

Other organizations and institutions provide students with concrete opportunities to leverage their global experiences on their home campuses. Education abroad provider AIFS Study Abroad, for example, offers its alumni the opportunity to be ambassadors upon their return home.

“This professional development program provides students an opportunity to share their study abroad experiences in a meaningful way and offers a series of monthly workshops focused on the job search process. We discuss topics including marketing your international experience in an interview, how to navigate interviews successfully, and what to do once you are in your first professional position,” says Manginelli.

Clark University has a similar initiative that invites study abroad returnees to work at study abroad fairs, speak with prospective students, and participate in pre-departure orientations.

“Through these conversations they learn to thoughtfully express the value of their experiences and often come to a slow realization of how much they have changed during their time away,” says Whitehead Hanks.

Assessing the Employability Value of International Experiences

Even though employability has received much more attention in the international education community in the last few years, some experts caution that there is a need for both more academic research on the topic and the development of concrete assessment tools. It’s also important not to overstate the potential career impact of education abroad.

Uwe Brandenburg, managing partner at CHE consult, says that education abroad experiences are best leveraged to strengthen student employability when we are able to know who benefits from which type of mobility and who doesn’t. “This means proper evaluation and monitoring. Taking internationalization as being good in itself leads to no, or biased, assessment,” he says.

Berquist notes that the body of research on the relationship between education abroad and employability is small but growing. However, he notes it’s important not to overstate the potential impact of education abroad on a student’s career.

“I encourage international educators and career services professionals to be cautious not to set false expectations in terms of an immediate (career) benefit from international experience. It is often over the course of one’s career that the benefit is perceived, not in immediate job prospects after graduation.”

¹ <http://kaplan.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Going-Global-Are-graduates-prepared-for-a-global-workforce-EIU-Kaplan-WhitePaper-2016.pdf>

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