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EXPERIENCE ABROAD ON EMPLOYMENT

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Global Employability: Common Challenges in Preparing Students for a Global World of Work

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Global changes, automation, and digital technologies, as well as “new economy” jobs and the “new ways of working,” are changing the employment landscape completely, creating a modern culture of work that is transnational and fluid. Higher education institutions are currently under pressure to rise up to meet global challenges and prepare students to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world. The value and definition of global employability skills—as well as common challenges and good practices around the matter—are prominent points of discussion at higher education conferences and meetings. Moreover, “de-demonizing” the concept of employability is important, as it entails much more than just helping students find a job upon graduation. In higher education, employability is—and should be—about maximizing the talents of each student and preparing them for the world that awaits them upon graduation.¹ Fostering employability can prove beneficial not only for students, but also for institutions and for society at large (Ripmeester); it turns graduates into brand ambassador alumni, happy to recommend their study experience at their higher education institution, and it also supports graduates in maximizing their talents, creating a return on investment for society.

Indeed, in the past few years more and more universities are taking action in the matter by offering plenty of educational opportunities and innovative programs to cater to students’ employability needs. However, a large fraction of students still feel unprepared to make that transition from education to the world of work and often need extra support in their first career

1. For more on the value of employability for higher education institutions, along with five guiding principles on employability strategies, see “When being ‘book-smart’ is not enough; skills graduates need to succeed in the future workplace” (IHE Handbook 2018).

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steps after graduation.² Thus, we wonder what more universities can do in order to sufficiently equip students for the current global workplace and support them in finding the right work placements.

Our organization Expertise in Labour Mobility³ has been supporting international labor mobility for more than twenty-five years through career guidance and consultations, workshops, publications, events, digital career tools, and more. Our work gives us the opportunity to cooperate with universities from around the world and communicate daily and directly with international students at different university-degree levels. With our attention focused on global student employability throughout the years, we have noticed that especially now, most universities are actually doing a remarkable job in providing students with a combination of the hard and soft skills that are required to succeed in specific fields. We see students with impressive qualifications, with study or internship experiences abroad, getting involved in hands-on group projects and activities.

Nonetheless, we also see some prevailing problematic patterns. Namely, most students are confused about which career path to follow after graduation; they are usually unaware of how effectively to market their skills or approach prospective employers, and they also overlook cultural differences in their job search. Hence, we believe that although most universities have improved when it comes to providing students with skills that are needed to succeed in their future careers, the majority of students still don't know what to do with those skills, how to translate them in order to improve their job prospects, or how to apply them in the workplace, either at home or abroad.

For most students, effectively **articulating skills** gained through various courses, co-curricular programs, and international experiences is a common struggle, regardless of their level of degree or country of origin. Recent studies confirm the link between international experiences and the development of those global employability skills that are currently in demand. Every student should jump at an opportunity to go abroad, and

2 See a review of the research in Pollock's blog post "Student Employability is a necessity, not a choice" on the Expertise in Labour Mobility website.

3 Expertise in Labour Mobility (ELM) is an organization aimed at customizing solutions for international labor mobility. Founded in 1992, it works with large corporate clients and higher education institutions across the globe, with a focus on the connection between graduates and job opportunities.

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most students probably understand that such an experience will prove beneficial for them in the future. However, the majority of them still need help to unpack the skills gained from a global experience, link them to the skills gained through both their academic and personal life experiences, and ultimately convey an inclusive and fitting message to a prospective employer, a professor, or even future colleagues. Workshops, webinars, and other activities that show students how to reflect on and add meaning to their experiences will help them translate these into words that future stakeholders will understand, whether in industry, academia, or non-profit environments.

Another issue that we have identified is students' unfamiliarity with **cultural discrepancies** in career development and job hunting. Part of developing global employability skills involves becoming more interculturally aware and therefore understanding the cultural values that underlie how people around the world do and perceive things. That also entails taking into consideration the cultural norms that influence the job searching process in different countries before setting out on a global job search. This fact, in addition to a growing student mobility, demands an expansion in career guidance and employability support in order to provide tailored help to students from different cultural backgrounds who want to follow a global career.

As many university practitioners are struggling to engage with a diverse student population, **train-the-trainer** sessions, which will equip them with the necessary intercultural awareness and knowledge of global market features, are essential to ensure that students receive the right approach with the appropriate information. Moreover, digital tools built to support students' global employability can also prove helpful by facilitating knowledge sharing, building international connections, and helping institutions reach and engage with a wide range of students wherever they are in the world.⁴

And while it is true that there is no "one size fits all" when it comes to career advising and job searching around the world, it is also proven that demands for skills differ from country to country.⁵ Unfortunately, most students (and maybe career advisors, too) are not aware of the differences

4 See Ripmeester, "Career Chats: Managing Expectations, Moving Towards Solutions," <https://www.labourmobility.com/the-xpat-journal-careerchats-managing-expectations-moving-towards-solutions/>.

5 For more research findings on global employability skills, see Mohan et al.

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in resume and CV writing across the globe, or how to underline the skill set valued most in a particular job market. As Ripmeester states, “The differences in job hunting are ingrained into the cultural DNA of both the job seeker and the prospective recruiter. If higher education truly wants to provide their students with the opportunity to go for a global career, we need to make them understand what gets them hired in the different countries” (78).

On top of those cultural differences in the actual job-hunting process, students need support to understand what kind of placements they should go after in accordance with their unique skill set. Their skills and qualifications might not match the needs of a certain labor market, but in a global and expanding economy there are myriad opportunities. Including employability skills in the curriculum and developing systems that offer students global employability skills, are only two steps in preparing students for the global workforce. Another imperative step in this process is providing meaningful support to help students identify the skill set they have developed and, moreover, to help them articulate it in a way so that other people, in different countries and sectors, can understand what the graduate has to offer and how it aligns with the prospective job environment. This step can be realized with the support of workshops, events, digital resources, or any other system suitable for and applicable to an institution, depending on its size and structure (Brown, J).

For all this to happen, **collaboration** is the key: collaboration within institutional departments and academics, with international and domestic students, with local and multinational employers, with local and national governments, and, last but not least, with experts who can help institutions close the gap between education and the world of work.