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EMPLOYABILITY

**INTERNATIONALISATION AND EMPLOYABILITY: ARE WE MISSING A TRICK?
HOW DO EMPLOYERS VALUE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE?
PREPARE YOUR STUDENTS FOR THE GLOBAL JOB MARKET
EAIE DUBLIN 2012 CONFERENCE REPORT**

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DUBLIN CONFERENCE REPORT



INTERNATIONALISATION AND EMPLOYABILITY:



ARE WE MISSING A TRICK?

ELSPETH JONES

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Countless studies advocate the benefits of international study abroad, but what skills do students actually develop during these periods? And what about those immobile students bound to their native country? Should more be done to enable them to develop similar skills to their mobile counterparts?

CULTIVATING SOFT SKILLS

“Even if domestic graduates never leave their own country, on graduation they will be forced to compete in international, or multinational, work and discovery environments.”¹

A recent British Council/Think Global survey² found that 79% of chief executives and board level directors of businesses in the UK think that in recruiting new employees, knowledge and awareness of the wider world are more important than achieving a high degree grade. Increasing globalisation and the interconnectedness of multinational work environments have intensified the demand for graduates capable of operating in culturally diverse contexts and studies have shown that employer requirements are broadly consistent from one country to another.

In countries from west to east and north to south, universities are seeking to design curricula incorporating the skills employers are looking for. Often described as ‘soft’ or ‘transferable’ skills, they relate to generic personal and interpersonal qualities which are independent of the field of study. Research shows that some of these skills are developed through international mobility experiences and yet the connection between outcomes from these programmes and the transferable skills employers require have rarely been made.

INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

Studies have identified profound transformational learning in students through international mobility experiences in a range of geographical contexts. These include questioning personal identity and sense of self, with significant results being widely reported

in terms of personal growth, self-efficacy, maturity and enhanced intercultural competence. From an analysis of such studies it is clear that the list of skills developed shows a remarkable similarity to those shown to be required by employers in other studies, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1: KEY SKILLS COMPARISON

Key skills required by employers	Key skills developed through international mobility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness • Initiative and enterprise • Willingness to learn • Planning and organising • Integrity • Commitment/motivation • Problem-solving • Flexibility • Self-management • Team work • Communication skills • Foreign languages • Networking • Leadership • Customer service • Interpersonal skills • Intercultural skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness, self-confidence, sense of identity, and personal independence • Being informed, greater interest in global affairs and cross-cultural perspectives • Organisational skills, project management, decision-making, creativity and taking on responsibility • Vision, independence, experience, broader outlook and attitude • Problem-solving, coping strategies and risk-taking • Patience, flexibility, adaptability, open-mindedness and humanity • Team work and team leadership skills • Fluency, accuracy and appropriateness of language competence • Mediation skills, conflict resolution, sensitivity, humility and respect • Forging of relationships and networks • Challenge to personal stereotypes, cultural relativism • Enhanced intercultural communication, conducting business intercultural • Cultural empathy • Non-judgmental observation, respect for local values without abandoning one's own • Cultural understandings, ways of thinking and adaptation to complex cultural environments

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Given that findings of this kind have been reported from a range of studies, it suggests that students will benefit if we design international experiences into higher education curricula. Yet there continue to be challenges in ensuring that academics, students and employers are aware that international experiences can offer such benefits.

OPTIONS FOR NON-MOBILE STUDENTS

Perhaps an even more important challenge is to consider how internationalisation of the curriculum 'at home' can offer similar opportunities for the static majority of

However, this requires us to recognise and value the cultural insights which our students (and staff) can offer by embracing a broad notion of 'culture'. A group of students in a contemporary European university is likely to include people from differing national, religious, ethnic backgrounds, of different genders, sexual orientation or with physical disabilities. Such diversity can offer creative 'intercultural' opportunities, and one route to enhancing intercultural competence – an important objective of curriculum internationalisation – may be on our own doorsteps.

WE ARE YET TO MAKE THE MOST OF DIVERSITY IN OUR UNIVERSITIES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

students, *ie* those who do not take part in an international experience as part of their programme of study.

There is growing recognition that the intercultural competence required to operate effectively in global contexts is equally important for living in our increasingly diverse and multicultural local communities. And yet the increasing demand for graduates with first-hand experience of living and working among other cultures suggests we are not making the most of local diversity. We cannot simply rely on the mobile minority of students to respond to employers' needs. The kind of employability skills arising from international mobility should also be available through an internationalised curriculum at home for the static majority of students.

UTILISING LOCAL DIVERSITY

To synthesise and simplify the distinctive elements of international mobility experiences, they offer experiential learning opportunities in an inter-cultural context, taking people beyond their standard comfort zones. However, if we view internationalisation as one dimension of diversity in higher education, it is clear that domestic environments could play an equivalent role in offering opportunities to engage with 'cultural others'. Our multicultural classrooms can be a resource to be used purposefully in developing intercultural skills for all students.

For example, international community volunteering has been shown to yield beneficial learning outcomes of the type described here. Could the same be true for local 'intercultural' volunteering, such as with different religious or faith groups, shelters for homeless people or drug addicts, women refuges or with people who have severe mental or physical disabilities?

INTERNATIONAL VERSUS INTERCULTURAL

We are yet to make the most of diversity in our universities and local communities to support intercultural learning in domestic settings. As such, we do not know whether internationalisation (or 'interculturalisation') of the curriculum 'at home' can offer parallel development of intercultural competence and transferable employability skills. It comes down to viewing international and intercultural as two sides of the same coin, to incorporating relevant learning outcomes into our curricula for all students, not simply through mobility opportunities, and to introducing assessment tasks which measure whether these have been achieved. We will only be able to promote the value of the internationalised curriculum 'at home' to students and to potential employers when we can demonstrate the benefits and outcomes of such experiences as clearly as they have been demonstrated in the literature on internationally mobile students.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

In summary, if the transformational potential of internationalisation for student learning is to be realised beyond the mobile minority, the relationship between 'international' and 'intercultural' needs further exploration within our curricula. A number of questions for further reflection arise:

1. Are curriculum designers and the wider academic community aware of the potential power of the international learning experience in enhancing student employability?
2. Are the students who take part in such experiences aware of this and can they 'sell' this to employers?
3. Are employers aware of the transferable skills which can arise from international experiences?
4. What contribution can internationalisation of the curriculum at home make to employability for non-mobile students?
5. How can we make better use of local multicultural contexts to offer similar learning outcomes as have been demonstrated through international experiences?

Chesterton said, "the whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land."³ If international mobility experiences in higher education can bring about such a change in perspective, we owe our non-mobile students similar opportunities. The question for academics is whether we can open curricula to creative approaches which may offer equivalent outcomes through intercultural engagement and internationalisation of the curriculum at home. **E**

This essay is based on a forthcoming journal article by the author: *Internationalisation and employability: the role of intercultural experiences in the development of transferable skills*, to be published in 2013.

1. Zimitat, C. (2008) Internationalisation of the undergraduate curriculum. In: L. Dunn and M. Wallace (Eds), *Teaching in Transnational Higher Education*. London, England: Routledge.

2. Think Global and British Council, (2011). *The Global Skills Gap: Preparing young people for the new global economy*.

3. Chesterton, G. K. (1909) *Tremendous Triffles*.