

# **Exchange Studies' Impact on Employability and Future Career Choices**

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## **BACHELOR'S THESIS**

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### **Abstract**

This study will examine the impact a study abroad period can have on a graduate's employability and future career choices. What kind of skills does the graduate attain from the experience, and what value do they have in the employment process, and later in the graduate's professional life? Are these skills sought after in the modern workplace? What are the skills and competencies needed in today's workplace and the future? And how does the period abroad affect the personal development of the graduate, and how does this contribute to employability?

A study period abroad is most often talked about in a positive light, both from the schools promoting it and from the students who have been on one, but how is it from the recruiter's perspective? Is it only seen as a benefit, or can it be something frowned upon? These are some of the questions I aim to answer through this study.

This study aims to find out if a study period abroad has an impact on employability and career opportunities, but also if it affects the students' future career choices.

A qualitative method was used in this research for data collection. The data collection was done in the form of interviews with recruiters at companies and graduates in the workforce.

The findings in the research imply that most recruiters take into consideration international experience when recruiting new talent, but the value it has in the eyes of the recruiter depends somewhat on the recruiter and their own experiences. The findings also suggest that international experience most likely has an impact on the graduate's future career choice in one way or another.

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## EXAMENSARBETE

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### Abstrakt

Denna studie undersöker vilken typ av inverkan studier utomlands kan ha på en akademisk students anställningsbarhet och framtida karriärval. Vilken typ av kompetenser får den utexaminerade av erfarenheten och vilket värde har de sedan i anställningsprocessen och även senare i den utexaminerades yrkesliv? Är det här kompetenser som är eftertraktade på den moderna arbetsplatsen, och vilka färdigheter och kompetenser behövs på dagens arbetsplats och i framtiden? Hur påverkar utlandsperioden den utexaminerades personliga utveckling och kan detta bidra till anställningsbarheten? En studieperiod utomlands lyfts ofta fram som någonting positivt för de studerande, både skolorna uppmuntrar till det och de studerande som har varit på en utbytesperiod talar oftast gott om det, men hur är det ur rekryterarens perspektiv? Är det bara till fördel, eller kan det ses som en nackdel också? Dessa är några av frågorna jag söker svar på med min undersökning.

Syftet med denna studie var att ta reda på om en studieperiod utomlands har en inverkan på en studerandes framtida anställningsbarhet och karriärmöjligheter, men också om den påverkar den studerandes framtida val av yrke och karriär.

En kvalitativ metod användes i denna undersökning för insamling av data. Datainsamlingen gjordes i form av intervjuer med rekryterare på företag och utexaminerade i arbetslivet.

Resultaten i forskningen antyder att de flesta rekryterare tar hänsyn till internationell erfarenhet när de rekryterar nya talanger, men värdet det har i rekryterarens ögon beror till viss del på rekryteraren och deras egna erfarenheter. Resultaten tyder också på att internationell erfarenhet med största sannolikhet har en inverkan på kandidatens framtida yrkesval på ett eller annat sätt.

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Språk: engelska

Nyckelord: studera utomlands, utbytesstudier, anställningsbarhet, karriär, kompetens, färdigheter

## OPINNÄYTETYÖ

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Nimike: Vaihto-opintojen vaikutus työllistettävyyteen ja tuleviin uravalintoihin

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### Tiivistelmä

Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitetään, millainen vaikutus opiskelujakso ulkomailla voi olla valmistuneen työllistymismahdollisuuksiin ja tuleviin uravalintoihin. Millaisia taitoja valmistunut saa kokemuksestaan ja mitä arvoa niillä on työelämässä ja myös myöhemmin valmistuneen työelämässä? Ovatko nämä taidot joita halutaan nykypäivän työpaikalla, ja mitä taitoja ja osaamista tarvitaan tämän päivän työelämässä ja tulevaisuudessa? Ja miten ulkomaanjakso vaikuttaa valmistuneen henkilökohtaiseen kehitykseen ja miten se vaikuttaa työllistettävyyteen? Opiskelujaksosta ulkomailla puhutaan useimmiten positiivisessa valossa sekä sitä tarjoavien koulujen että opiskelijoiden keskuudessa. Mutta miten se on rekrytoijan näkökulmasta? Nähdäänkö se vain hyötynä vai voiko se olla paheksuttavaa? Nämä ovat joitakin kysymyksiä, joihin etsin vastauksia tutkimuksellani.

Tällä tutkimuksella pyrittiin selvittämään, onko ulkomailla opiskelulla vaikutusta työllistävyyteen ja uramahdollisuuksiin, mutta myös opiskelijan tuleviin ammatinvalintoihin.

Tässä tutkimuksessa aineiston keräämisessä käytettiin kvalitatiivista menetelmää. Tiedonkeruu tehtiin haastattelemalla yritysten rekrytoijia ja työelämässä olevia valmistuneita.

Tutkimuksen tulokset viittaavat siihen, että useimmat rekrytoijat huomioivat kansainvälisen kokemuksen uusia kykyjä rekrytoissaan, mutta sen arvo rekrytoijan silmissä riippuu jonkin verran rekrytoijasta ja heidän omista kokemuksistaan. Tulokset viittaavat myös siihen, että kansainvälisellä kokemuksella on todennäköisesti tavalla tai toisella vaikutusta valmistuneen tulevaan ammatinvalintaan.

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Kieli: englanti

Avainsanat: opiskelu ulkomailla, vaihto-opinnot, työllistettävyyden, ura, taito

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## 1 Introduction

Exchange studies are a topic that is often brought up for students at the beginning of their university studies as an opportunity for them to experience living and studying abroad for a shorter time. A study period abroad, from my experience, gives you as a student a chance to grow and mature as a person and become more independent. Living and studying abroad will most likely give you challenges and opportunities you wouldn't face in the home setting.

Studying abroad by doing an exchange semester or year is quite common nowadays, and more and more students take advantage of this opportunity to study and live abroad for a shorter time. No wonder, since you often get good scholarships and other benefits for going abroad, and schools and teachers often promote this opportunity. Which is a good thing, in my opinion. Then add to that the stories, pictures, and videos people share from their exchange periods, and you, as a student, are sold on the concept.

"European and U.S. institutions have promoted the value of learning abroad experience for many years" - (Potts, 2015, p. 1)

So, why is going abroad so heavily promoted? What are the benefits for the students?

Well, to begin with, globalization and international trade are the reality of today and most likely also for the future. The world is becoming more united, and people, companies, and countries are better connected to each other than ever before. This means more communication across borders and more interactions happening between people from different cultures.

A main promoting factor for globalization is technology and its development to what it is today, and the possibilities it offers for people and companies to connect. Capitalism and the idea of free markets can also be seen as a driving force for globalization, as when companies grow bigger, they usually tend to expand their business to markets abroad when they have reached a certain point. These companies that are going global are usually then built up with employees from all over the world and have an international workforce. This means that intercultural communication has become a skill that is valued by many companies today, especially in the bigger ones operating globally.

Then, another view on the subject is how staying abroad impacts the students who have gone through it. A study period abroad not only allows you to connect with other students from all over the world and learn to communicate with people from different cultures. It usually also comes with some challenges you need to figure out and some problems to solve. Living in a foreign country with a different culture and probably with people speaking a different language than your own is one thing. But also, being alone and learning how to survive on your own without your family and friends as a “security net” is another. This allows you to learn more about yourself and grow stronger as an independent individual.

Companies and society in general benefit from having educated people and employees with the right skills working at the right place at the right time where their skills are needed. This might be one reason why studying abroad is promoted, since students get a chance to develop their skills in a new environment and give them a chance to get intercultural communication skills and cultural understanding that they wouldn't get at home.

The change of scenery and different everyday life the student gets to experience on a study period abroad might also give him or her a new perspective on life and on who they are and what they want to do in the future. The self-development and growth they experience might also change their view of their future. Do they want the same things as before? What do they want to work with? Where do they want to live? Did the study period abroad show them some new possibilities for career paths?

Some research has already been done on the subject (e.g., Potts, 2015; Sisavath, 2021), and at least one bachelor's thesis has been written on this subject. This thesis work will focus on the skills needed in the future workplace and whether recruiters consider that a study period abroad fosters these skills. What kind of skills and characteristics do you acquire from studying abroad that could be of use to a future employer and give you an edge in the employment situation?

The work will also investigate if and how a study period abroad can impact the student's choice of career or future career path. Could it have an impact on the student's choice of work in the future, and why so in that case?

This is an interesting topic to do some more research about, and it is relevant to find out how a study period abroad impacts the employability of the graduate. This research will focus on the skills and characteristics that are important when it comes to employability.

It is also important to find out if studying abroad can have an impact on the student's choice of career in the future.

## 1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this work is to find out if a study period abroad matters in an employment situation, but also to find out if it could have an impact on future career choices for the graduate. Also, the reasons why a study period abroad could matter in an employment situation will be investigated.

## 1.2 Research questions

The questions I want to get answered with this work are:

- Does a study period abroad have an impact on employability and career opportunities?
- What kind of impact does a study period abroad have on the student's choice of career in the future?

## 1.3 Aim and goals

The goal with the data collection is to get some valuable thoughts and opinions from the recruiting experts in the field but also to get some views from the ones on the other side, the students and job seekers, that have been through the experience and how they think it has had an impact on their working life.

## 1.4 Methodology

In this thesis work, I will use qualitative data collection as the method to gather the information I need for my research. The data I collect, I will then compare to other research

and studies, and together with the theory as the basis, I will then try to answer my research questions to my best ability.

Since I chose to do a qualitative data collection, I will be conducting interviews with a certain group of people who are relevant to the purpose of the research. This means I will be conducting interviews with HR people, recruiters, and managers for my research for the first question. For my research for the second question, I will be conducting interviews with people who have been on an exchange already and are either finishing university or are already working.

## 2 Definition of concepts

The words “employability” and “skills” will be mentioned frequently in this thesis work, so I will explain these concepts so that it will be easier for the reader to understand what they encompass.

### 2.1 Employability

Employability is defined as “the skills and abilities that allow you to be employed,” according to the Cambridge Business English Dictionary. (Cambridge University Press, 2011)

The concept of employability is something that is a very current topic in today’s economy, with a very competitive global environment. There has been a shift from economic nationalism to a more borderless economy where national governments have limited powers to protect domestic workers and companies from foreign competitors. Economies of the past were more ‘closed’ and, in that way, protected from competitors outside of the nation. Nowadays, the rules have changed, and a lot of the economies are more open to international competition as trade barriers have been lifted, and foreign exchange and financial services are becoming more global. (Brown & Lauder, 2001, p. 100)

This global market not only brings more opportunities for international trade but also more opportunities for workers looking for a job or a career they are interested in. This, of course, also means more competition on the working market where highly skilled workers have the benefit. This new economic competition has led to a rapid growth in higher education since workers want to enhance their employability. (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2002, p. 4)

In pace with globalization, there has been an increased emphasis on graduate employability, and this reflects the importance of knowledge, skills, and commitment from employees as valuable sources for the company in their pursuit of efficiency, innovation, and productivity. (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2002, p. 10)

Depending on the market, though, a high number of higher education graduates will compete for a smaller number of jobs, which means that a university degree might not be enough to get a specific job. (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2002) In this sense, other factors will most likely play a role in the recruitment process besides the university degree and the skills acquired from it.

## 2.2 Skills

A skill is defined as “an ability to do an activity or job well, especially because you have practised it,” according to the Cambridge Dictionary. (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

The National Skills Task Force in the United Kingdom published a research report in 2000, in which they defined the term skills as “the idea of competence or proficiency – the ability to do something well.” Skills are also related to knowledge about equipment, products, and processes, including how they work and what their capabilities are.

There are three main types of skills:

**Generic skills** – skills that are more general and useful in several occupations

**Vocational skills** – occupational or technical skills that are connected to a certain occupation

**Personal attributes** – the characteristics that employers often seek in a candidate when recruiting, such as motivation, judgement, and leadership

Higher levels of skill are not just beneficial for the individual alone. Higher-skilled individuals benefit the company and the economy of the country. They earn more, are less likely to be unemployed, and live longer. Higher skills raise productivity in firms, and countries with a large quantity of higher-skilled people tend to have better economic growth. (Department for Education and Employment, 2000)

### 3 Literature review

There have already been some studies made within the topic of exchange studies' impact on graduate skills and employability, and I will also go through some of these studies and later also compare the results from these with my own results. I have also found articles and research about what skills and competencies that are needed in the workplace today and in the future.

#### 3.1 Skills and competences needed in today's workplace

On the Finnish Educational Boards site, there is a report called "Osaamisrakenne 2035". In this report, the writers bring forward some of the skills and competencies needed in the future workplace according to their research. The examination was done in different types of vocational fields, which means that the results also showed the different types of competence that were needed in different vocations. As an example, they mention problem-solving, mastering complex entities, and responsiveness as particular skills needed in the transport and logistics sector. In the social and health care sector, digital skills are becoming more important. Key competences in general working life were, on the other hand, in the fields of natural resources, food production, and the environment. These skills are such that are needed for larger change-related phenomena, such as climate change. (Opetushallitus, 2019)

A globalized and growing world market has also led companies and educational institutions to focus more on changing their work patterns to be more internationally oriented. (Crossman & Clarke, 2010) This can, of course, suggest that different skills are needed in the modern workplace, which is more internationally oriented than before. Several research studies have been made in this area about the skills needed in the modern workplace, but also about the skills graduates can improve during a study period abroad. Some skills that are often mentioned in literature and research about international experience are "soft skills" such as language skills, communication skills, teamwork, and empathy. Besides soft skills, Crossman & Clarke (2010) also add the potential for networking and the opportunity for experiential learning as the main benefits students get from their international experience.

According to Bird, much of the present-day leadership literature emphasises the importance of intercultural adaptability and global competency, and skills and traits such as thought to encompass, empathy, open-mindedness, initiative, flexibility, intercultural sensitivity, communication, extraversion, agreeableness, cooperation, openness, inquisitiveness, tolerance, and self-awareness. (Crossman & Clarke, 2010, p. 602)

The Australian Government has developed an Employability Skills Framework that guides the institutions on what attributes the employment sector values most in graduates, according to the Department of Education, Science and Training (2002). The employability skills mentioned in the framework are communication, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, self-management skills, planning and organizing skills, technology skills, life-long learning skills, and initiative and enterprise skills that contribute to innovative outcomes. (Potts, 2015, pp. 452-453)

In the study, Potts (2015) did she could conclude that learning abroad contributes to at least four of the skills mentioned in the employability skills framework, at least from the perspective of former participants. Those skills were communication skills, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, and self-management skills. This suggests that a learning period abroad may have a more significant impact on the graduate's future than anticipated by most universities.

### 3.2 Exchange studies' impact on employability

Soubin Sisavath made a study about the benefits of studying abroad and the impact on graduate employability, which was published in 2021. With this study, he wanted to investigate the benefits of studying abroad when it comes to graduate employability. "Prior studies in America, Australia, Japan, and Europe have shown that study abroad experience enhances graduate employability positively." (Sisavath, 2021)

The results from Sisavath's study also confirmed this statement since the students who had been on overseas exchange benefited from the experience in the sense that they developed employability skills such as interpersonal and communication skills. The study abroad experience was also considered to increase job opportunities for the graduates because of the skills that they improved during their stay. (Sisavath, 2021)

In the article “Do stays abroad increase intercultural and general competences, affecting employability?” the authors bring out some of the skills and competences that can be attained from doing a study period abroad. In the study, they researched whether stays abroad and intercultural experiences impact students’ personal development and occupational competences. They surveyed 367 students, all of whom had spent at least one semester abroad before. One of the skills that is mentioned in the article is intercultural intelligence or competence. The terms are used synonymously, as Genkova mentioned in an earlier article, but intercultural competence is more about the behavioural aspect, while intercultural intelligence is more about the problem-solving aspect. In the study, they tested 4 hypotheses, the first one was engagement. The first test showed evidence that people who have stayed abroad showed a significantly higher engagement. The second one was resilience. In this test, the results showed that those who had been on a stay abroad showed more active problem solving and greater dissociation ability. The third one was cultural intelligence. This test showed a clear difference between the people who have been abroad and the ones who haven’t been. On average, the people who have stayed abroad had higher cultural intelligence. The last test was occupational performance capacity. There were no bigger differences in the dimensions of stability, discipline, social competence, and cooperation willingness. But in this test, the dimension of engagement also showed that participants with a stay abroad had higher engagement. (Genkova & Kruse, 2020)

In another article, “International experience and graduate employability: stakeholder perceptions on the connection” by Crossman & Clarke, the authors report on the findings that were made in an Australian qualitative study about the connection between international experience and graduate employability. With an increase in globalization and internationalization over the past decades, the need for graduates to be able to operate in culturally diverse environments has heightened. (Crossman & Clarke, 2010) In the article, they also mention how student mobility continues to be promoted for students to increase their knowledge and develop the skills required in modern organizations, according to Chan and Dimmock, and Teichler. (Crossman & Clarke, 2010) p.602

The data that was collected in this research shows that all the participants in all stakeholder groups supported the idea that international experience should be a recognized part of

university business education. Connections between employability and international experience could be found throughout the data. (Crossman & Clarke, 2010)

According to Crossman & Clarke (2010), the positive impact on employability stems from the soft skills that the graduates develop during their stay. Skills such as cultural understanding, personal characteristics, and ways of thinking.

### 3.3 International experience and career choice

International experience in the form of a study period abroad can be an eye-opening experience for the students, since they experience a complete change of milieu and get to interact with students from other cultures and learn how to live and study in another country. This experience can also bring some new insights and challenges, which might contribute to the student's personal development. In Potts (2015) research, the respondents put the highest value on the maturity and personal development that the learning abroad experience brought them. But the question is whether the experience can make them rethink what they want to do in the future, and maybe have an impact on their career choice somehow.

According to some of the participants in a study conducted in the U.S., the study period abroad impacted their career choices in the way that it allowed them to be more ambitious and less tentative when choosing a career. It seemed like the experience abroad gave the participants a wider view of career possibilities and more confidence in their pursuit of a career path. (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017)

The results from Potts' (2015) research about the early career benefits of learning abroad also showed signs that learning abroad might benefit the graduate's career. The participants had a positive view of the benefits of learning abroad and the impact it had on their early career experiences. 69% of the respondents also reported that their learning period abroad was worthwhile or very worthwhile for increasing motivation and passion for their chosen career direction. (Potts, 2015)

Potts (2015) also mentions in her article that the respondents in her study reported that they got new perspectives on the home country, which might also affect the decision on career choices in the future for the graduate.

In a study from 2021 investigating the benefits of studying abroad for graduate employability, a survey was conducted with 163 former exchange participants from three universities in Laos. In the survey, as much as 91.4 percent of the respondents considered their international experience worthwhile to develop their career prospects, especially the potential for pursuing an international career. (Sisavath, 2021)

## 4 International experience in the working life

What kind of impact does the international experience have later in working life for the graduates who have been abroad? Is it valuable or not?

Well, as mentioned earlier in the introduction (Chapter 1), the world is becoming more united thanks to the technology of today and the communication and connection possibilities it offers. Technology has also had a massive impact on international trade with an increase in overseas trade through easier communication between businesses and consumers, which has led to an international market and the globalization phenomenon.

The business environment is heavily affected by globalization, and most companies of today are involved with international trade in some way. A lot of companies also operate globally and have offices spread around the world. This, of course, means that there are many companies with an international work environment where people from different countries and cultures work together.

This shift to a more global market is not only limited to products and services, but it also means that some employers are operating globally when they are looking for talent. This has led to greater competition in the job market as well.

### 4.1 International experience and graduate employability

According to earlier studies, for example, Soubin Sisavath's study about the benefits of studying abroad and the impact it has on employability, his studies show that it enhanced employability thanks to the skills the graduate acquired during their stay (Chapter 3.2).

According to the definition of employability by the Cambridge Business English Dictionary, it is about “the skills and abilities that allow you to be employed”. This suggests that employability is directly connected to the skills and abilities the graduate has.

#### 4.1.1 The USEM model of employability

According to Yorke and Knight (2006), employability is influenced by four broad and interrelated components, not only skills. These components are:

- **Understanding** – Refers to the knowledge and understanding of a subject, a key outcome of higher education.
- **Skills** – Refers to ‘skilled practices’ or ‘skilful practice’, which implies that the skills are acquired based on an awareness and responsiveness to the context. In other words, having the right skills for the practice.
- **Efficacy beliefs, students’ self-theories, and personal qualities** – Refers to the students’ beliefs about themselves and their personal qualities. Malleable self-theory suggests that tasks are viewed as opportunities for learning rather than as performance-oriented chances to demonstrate competence.
- **Metacognition** – The student’s self-awareness regarding learning, and the capacity to reflect on, in, and for action.

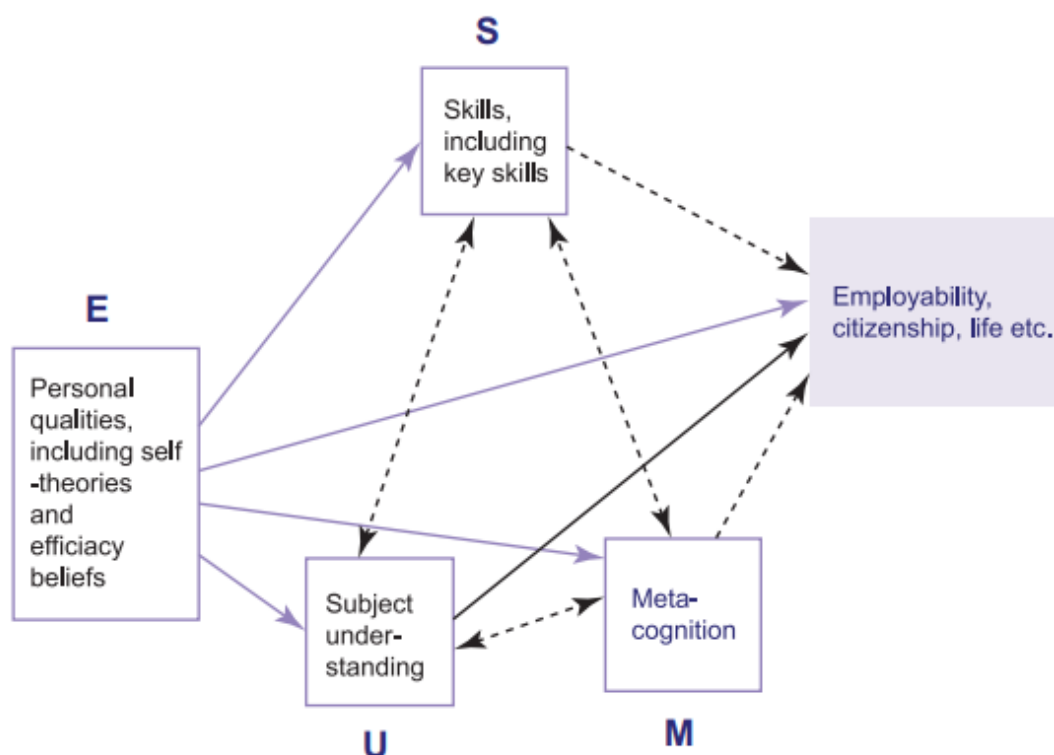


Figure 1. The USEM model of employability. (Yorke & Knight, 2006)

This model is a good presentation of what “the skills and abilities” connected to employability are and gives a better understanding of the concept. (Yorke & Knight, 2006, p. 5)

Yorke and Knight also list some of the skills and personal qualities connected to employability. Some of the personal qualities mentioned are self-awareness, self-confidence, independence, emotional intelligence, adaptability, stress tolerance, and initiative. Some of the core skills mentioned are reading effectiveness, information retrieval, language skills, self-management, critical analysis, listening, written communication, explaining, and global awareness. Some of the processing skills they mention are the ability to work cross-culturally, ethical sensitivity, planning, coping with complexity, problem solving, decision making, and teamwork skills. (Yorke & Knight, 2006, p. 8)

## 4.2 Skills needed for the international workplace

The demand for skills has risen over the past decades, and this also puts pressure on the candidates applying for jobs. Some of the factors that have contributed to this demand are the rapid technological change, global competition, and product and service specifications. Skilled workers who can adapt to new business and production techniques are valuable in this era of technological change. In the global market, the products and services have also become more complex, which requires skilled personnel. Customers also demand more and more products and services tailored to their individual needs, which also requires a skilled and adaptable workforce. (HM Treasury, 2004)

### 4.2.1 Important skills to master in an international work environment

Harvard Business School has mentioned four important skills for the candidate to master if they want to work with international business/in an international work environment:

First, strong communication skills. Communication skills are important for everyone working in a business environment, especially those who want to work as leaders. But good communication skills and language skills are also very important for everyone working in an international work environment.

The second skill mentioned is emotional intelligence. An emotionally intelligent person tends to be self-awareness and capable of self-regulation. They also tend to have empathy and be able to understand others' personal experiences and emotions. They are also capable of motivating not only themselves but also others.

The third skill is cultural awareness. Every culture is unique, and this might lead to misunderstandings, terminated deals, or international embarrassment. Strong cultural awareness can help you communicate and act in a way that helps you reach your goals.

The fourth skill is the so-called hard skills needed to do business. These are skills such as basic economic principles, financial accounting, and entrepreneurial frameworks. In international business, knowing macroeconomic theory is a good foundation if you want to move into a leadership role. (Stobierski, 2021)

#### 4.2.2 Top skills for succeeding in international business

HULT International Business School has also made a blog post mentioning the top skills needed for success in international business. According to business leaders, their own world-class faculty and successful alumni, they have identified the top seven skills needed for success in international business:

Cross-cultural communication skills are an important skill to have for anyone working in a diverse workplace.

Excellent networking abilities are also important if you want to develop a strong network of connections outside of your home country.

Collaboration or teamwork skills are also important if you want to be successful in international business.

Interpersonal influence, or the ability to influence others, is also fundamental for business success.

Adaptive thinking helps in today's business environments. You must be able to react and adapt quickly and resolve problems with an "out-of-the-box" thinking.

Emotional intelligence, or “EQ,” is also a critical skill to have when doing international business since it has a big influence when it comes to business interactions.

Resilience and mental toughness are also important skills to have if you want to succeed in international business, since it can be a very demanding work environment. Together with emotional intelligence, resilience is the key if you want to meet the challenges of global business and succeed. (Reynolds, 2017)

## 5 Methodology

There are two strategies you can use in research when it comes to collecting data: you can either use a quantitative method or a qualitative method. Or you can choose to use both strategies to get a more comprehensive view of the topic you are researching. The quantitative method is a data collection method that is usually used when collecting data from multiple sources, and it focuses on the type of data that can be quantified. That means data that can be measured and put into numbers. The qualitative method instead focuses on collecting data from fewer sources, and it emphasises words and more in-depth information to get a better understanding of the subject. Depending on the purpose of the research, one method can be more useful than the other. (Bryman & Bell, 2007) p.28 & 29

The quantitative method studies a bigger population, and the purpose of this type of data collection is to get a more general idea of the situation and search for explanations for the phenomenon that is being studied. This method uses a deductive approach, which means that it is usually used to test already existing theories. As mentioned, this method is more focused on numbers, and it can be used to get statistical information that can be presented in the form of graphs, tables, and figures. With this method, the researcher acquires a lot of data that can be easily compared to earlier studies and theory. In that way, the data collected can be used to test a theory. When using the quantitative method, the researcher usually uses questionnaires to collect the data. (Bryman & Bell, 2007) p.28

The qualitative method uses fewer sources of data, and the focus here is not to get statistical information but instead to explore the subject to get a better understanding of it. This method uses an inductive approach, which means that it is usually used to generate theories instead of testing them. In some cases, this method can also be used for testing theories. When using this method, the researcher usually gathers the data through

conducting interviews. In this way, the researcher gets more in-depth answers to their questions and can generate their theory of the subject, compare it to earlier theories, and get a better understanding of it. (Bryman & Bell, 2007) p.28 &29

The benefit of the qualitative method is that you can get more information from every question you ask since it is more focused on open-ended questions where the interviewees can answer more freely, and you, as the interviewer, can ask follow-up questions. Compared to the quantitative method, which is more focused on gathering a lot of data with the same form of questions to all the respondents and with questions that are more of the short-form answer type and statistically inclined. The disadvantage of the qualitative method is that it is more time-consuming since you must take time to plan and conduct the interviews. In that sense, it is hard to gather data from a lot of respondents since you must be present yourself and ask the questions. With the quantitative method, the disadvantage is that you don't get as in-depth answers as in the other methods, and you have to make sure that the questions can't be interpreted in the wrong way before you send out the survey. There might be a higher risk of misinterpretations that lead to inaccurate answers in the quantitative method if the questions aren't checked thoroughly. Another disadvantage of the quantitative method is that the survey is usually sent out to a big group of respondents, so it is less personal, and some respondents might not take the survey as seriously as an interview would be; this can also lead to inaccuracy in the results.

In this research, I chose to use the qualitative method and use fewer sources of data, but instead go into more detail on the subject, and hopefully get a better understanding of it. I conducted interviews to gather the data I needed for my analysis. I did interviews with two students who have studied abroad and have graduated now, and three interviews with recruiters from companies that work with international business. The questions I used will be open-ended to get the respondents more freedom with their answers and get a more personal view.

The reason I chose the qualitative method was that I wanted to get a more personal and detailed view of the subject than what you get with questionnaires. I also realized that in a lot of the research done before, the researchers had used the quantitative method, so I wanted to take on a different approach.

I did the interviews both in person and online, depending on what worked best for both me and the interviewees. I also asked if I could record the interviews, and I ended up recording all of them, either through Teams or with the voice recorder on the phone.

## 6 Analysis and Findings

In this chapter, I will bring out the results from the data collection I have done. I chose the qualitative method to gather data, which means I conducted interviews to collect the information I was interested in. I will present the results I got from my interviews and analyze the findings. I will then also compare the results with the results from earlier research and theory and summarize them.

### 6.1 Interviews

For the interviews, I did a set of questions beforehand, so I knew what to ask during the interviews to get the information I wanted. I asked different questions for the recruiters and the graduates since I had different information that I wanted from the different interviews. I will attach the questions at the end of this work, and I will just write the answers down below in running text.

#### 6.1.1 Recruiters

##### **Recruiter no.1**

The first recruiter I interviewed worked at a company that has made a booking software that they sell to ferry companies. They already have a lot of international customers all over the world, for example, in Canada, the USA, the UK, Australia, and so on. When they find new customers who are interested in the software, they might need to make some small changes to suit the customer's needs. Some of the employees in the company work with this kind of development stuff. The company keeps in regular contact with its customers and helps if there are any problems with the software or bugs, so some of the employees work only with customer service. The company is originally Swedish, and most of the workers in Finland are also Swedish-speaking.

The recruiter's position in the company was customer sales manager and sales executive, but she had done some recruiting in the company.

As mentioned, most of their employees were Swedish-speaking Finns, but they had one Swede and one Brit working remotely for the Finnish office.

She valued international experience when looking at candidates in the recruitment process. It didn't matter if the candidate had done an internship or a study abroad; both were equally impactful. In her opinion, just living abroad gives the student a different view of the world and inspires other ways of thinking and gives the student a better understanding of other cultures and people.

International experience has a big impact and is valued when she is recruiting new talent, and the candidate with international experience would have an advantage in the recruitment situation.

When looking at skills, she is looking more at work experience than whether the candidate has a degree. Teamwork skills, interpersonal skills, and cultural understanding are important.

She thinks that most of these skills can be improved during a stay abroad, just by interacting with others and working together.

Other benefits, in her opinion, are that it takes a lot of courage to go abroad and live alone, you must figure it out by yourself, and you become more independent. You might also get to know yourself better and what you want from life.

If she had to choose between two candidates with similar backgrounds, but one of them had been abroad, she would be more inclined towards the one with the experience abroad. The international experience would be a deciding factor if no other factors were present.

And as mentioned, she doesn't put more value on a certain experience abroad, just that the graduate has lived abroad is beneficial.

A study period abroad can be seen as a negative thing if she sees that the candidate has trouble staying in one place for a longer time. But that is also something she looks at whether the candidate has been abroad or not. Usually, as an employer, you want your

employees to stay as long as possible in the company since recruiting and educating new talent can be costly.

She has also done an internship abroad and recommends going abroad during your studies.

### **Recruiter no.2**

The second recruiter works at a global company with an office here in Vaasa. The company works with innovative technologies and lifecycle solutions for the marine and energy markets. They have 17,800 employees in 79 countries.

His position in the company is manager of an expert team in R&D. So, he is responsible for recruiting people for the team he leads. The team consists of seven people, of whom five are international talents.

Most of the candidates applying for a spot in the team have some type of international experience. He values international experience since they need to be understanding of others and able to work together in a diverse team.

When it comes to skills needed in today's workplace, and not just for his field, he mentions general soft skills. Skills such as adaptability, cultural understanding, accepting diversity, tolerance, and emotional intelligence. He also mentions that Finland is a trust-based society and that this is something that he values and teaches his co-workers. They shouldn't be afraid to ask for help, and you should help the others. So, teamwork is important, working together towards the same goal. A strong ego is a bad quality to have when it comes to teamwork.

The understanding of different cultures and people, or so-called cultural intelligence, is something that can be improved during a stay abroad, in his opinion. We are getting smarter by interacting with other people.

Other benefits from studying abroad are that you get a more open mind, and you practice empathy and understanding for others. Interacting online is different to that in person, and when going abroad, you meet people in person and interact with different people than in your home country.

In his opinion, it doesn't matter if the candidate has done an internship or a study period abroad; just the experience abroad is valuable.

He has never seen a stay abroad as something negative when looking at candidates, and he can't come up with anything right now either. Only positive in his eyes.

The recruiter himself is from France and has moved here to Finland and has a positive view on international experience.

### **Recruiter no.3**

The third recruiter works for the same company as the second recruiter but has a completely different role from him. She works as the general manager for project controlling for energy storage and optimization.

She is responsible for a team of nine people, of which four are in the USA and five in Finland, and soon she will have two in Australia also.

In general, she doesn't take into consideration international experience in the recruitment process. Other factors are more important in her opinion, such as experience and how suitable they are for the team. So, the stay abroad doesn't have a big impact on her decision on a suitable candidate.

A willingness to continually learn, openness for change, being curious, and having a can-do attitude are skills and traits that she thinks are important today and in the future.

Curiosity and courage are needed if you are going abroad, so it shows that you have been bold and you took that step.

Other benefits she mentions are improved English skills, better communication skills, and learning to be in a multicultural environment.

If she had two candidates with the same background, it would still be other factors that would be more important in the decision than the international experience. The candidate's personality and how they would fit in with the team would be more important.

There's no difference for her if the graduate has done a study period abroad or an internship.

She doesn't see an international experience as something negative or positive because it doesn't matter that much to her when recruiting. She takes on a more holistic view and looks at the person for who they are.

She has no personal experience of a study period abroad or an internship abroad.

### 6.1.2 Graduates

#### **Graduate no. 1**

The first person I interviewed was a graduate from Novia University of Applied Sciences with a bachelor's degree in business administration within the field of international trade and marketing. She had been on two internships in Thailand during her studies in 2015 and 2016, where she had worked as an office assistant, sales representative, and snorkeling guide.

During her studies, she worked at a Ferry terminal with customer service. After graduating, she went to Australia to work for a few years with different kinds of backpacker jobs. In 2019, she started to work for a company selling printers, and she was doing business-to-business sales work and finding new customers. In 2022, she hit the wall, and after that, in 2023, she decided to start her own business as a mental coach.

In Thailand, she worked for a Finnish company, but they had a lot of international customers besides the Finnish and Scandinavian customers. During her work in Australia, she met a lot of international people while working in sales. While selling printers in the company, she had mostly Finnish customers. On the other hand, her mental coaching business has some customers outside of Finland, since she is doing the coaching online and in English as well.

She is certain that her internship abroad has influenced her career choice. She has always wanted to go abroad and live in a warm climate, and the internship was a perfect way to get out of her comfort zone and see what the world has to offer. She loves adventure and exploring new things, so she continued travelling and working abroad. After the burnout, she wanted to do something she was passionate about, and she decided to start her own business.

During her stay abroad, she got a lot of life experience, and she got to see cultural differences and adapt to new environments.

The stay abroad didn't have an impact on her job searching process, in her opinion, since the printer company manager met her at an event, and she got recruited on the spot without talking about the stay abroad. In the different jobs in Australia, they didn't have that much of requirements, so it didn't matter.

The stay abroad had an impact on her personal development and on developing her emotional intelligence. She also became bolder and courageous. She had a shift in perspective and started thinking outside of the box. She got more independent and started taking action in her life.

## **Graduate no. 2**

The second graduate I interviewed had also been a student at Novia University of Applied Sciences and had done a bachelor's degree in business there. She then continued with a master's degree in economics at Vaasa University.

Her international experience started with an internship at Wärtsilä in Italy, working as a project assistant and coordinator. She also did an exchange period in Argentina studying business. And during her master's degree, she studied for one year in Italy.

After graduating, she has been working as a Project Controller at Wärtsilä in Vaasa. She's working with finance and project management in international teams. And since the company is doing business globally, the customers are also international. So, when handling the projects, she is working in an international environment.

She also said that her international experience has influenced her career choice. She knew she wanted to work internationally already before she started studying, so she started looking for opportunities right from the beginning. The internship and studying abroad period were a good start to her career in an international environment. Although it was more the courses that she took within project management that got her interested in the career she chose, and they were a good base for her job as a project controller.

During her stays abroad, her English skills improved a lot from the daily use. She also gained a lot of confidence and got comfortable being in new situations. She also learned a bit of Italian and Spanish during her stays.

The international experience probably had some positive impact on her job search. The internship in Italy helped her get a foot in the door with Wärtsilä, where she is now working. In her opinion, it is good to have international experience on your CV in general, but it doesn't make you stand out as much as before, since it is more common nowadays.

## 6.2 Analysis

When it comes to the recruiters, it seemed like international experience in any form was a positive thing for the candidates to have, even though some recruiters put more value on that kind of experience than others. One of the recruiters was more indifferent towards international experience and valued other factors more.

From the two graduates I interviewed, I also got a positive view on the international experience for students in general, and the impact it had on their personal and professional lives. Both also thought the international experience in some way had affected their future career choices. One of them continued working abroad after her internships and school was finished. The other graduate knew she wanted to work internationally, so the internship and studying abroad period was a good base for her future career in an international environment.

### 6.2.1 Skills

When it comes to skills, both the graduates and the recruiters mention communication skills and cultural understanding, or cultural intelligence, as skills that can improve during a stay abroad. Other skills mentioned were soft skills such as adaptability, emotional intelligence, and empathy. Teamwork and cooperating with others were also skills that could be improved during studies or an internship abroad. Improved language skills were also mentioned. These skills, such as soft skills like teamwork, emotional intelligence, and empathy, are also mentioned in earlier research.

In the USEM model (Chapter 4.1.1), the authors also mentioned all the skills above in the list of important skills that contribute to students' employability.

Communication skills, emotional intelligence, and cultural awareness are also skills mentioned by Harvard Business School when they listed important skills to have in an international work environment (Chapter 4.2.1).

Problem-solving is also a skill mentioned in earlier studies and can be interpreted as a needed skill when going abroad, from my studies as well. Problem-solving is also mentioned by the Finnish Educational Board in their report called "Osaamisrakenne 2035" as an important skill when it comes to working with logistics, for example (Chapter 3.1).

### 6.2.2 Personal development

All of them agreed that you need to be a bit bold to take the step and go abroad. It takes you out of your comfort zone and brings you into new situations where you need to be able to feel comfortable even though the situation is new and uncertain. You also become more independent when you don't have your support network around you, as one of the graduates said.

Self-awareness, self-confidence, independence, emotional intelligence, adaptability, stress tolerance, and initiative are also qualities that are needed and can be improved during a stay abroad, when you look at earlier studies and the results from my studies. These are also qualities that Yorke and Knight (2006) list as personal qualities that are important and have an impact on employability (Chapter 4.1.1).

### 6.2.3 Disadvantages of a period abroad

Only one recruiter had something that could be negative about the candidate being abroad, and that was if it is a sign they are a bit restless and can't stay in one place for a longer time. But that is something she looked for in other ways also, like how many times they have switched jobs and how short the employment periods were. So, an exchange period isn't normally something that would alarm her in any way, it is more positive.

### 6.3 Overview

Here's a brief overview of the answers from the interview.

First are the recruiters' opinions:



Figure 2. Question: Is international experience considered in the recruitment process?



Figure 3. Question: Is international experience valued in a job candidate?

Then the graduates' opinions:



Figure 4. Question: Do you think the international experience influenced your career choices?



Figure 5. Question: Do you think the international experience influenced your career choices?

Mind map over the international experience from the graduates' point of view:



Figure 6. Mind map over the international experience from the graduates' point of view.

## 7 Discussion

When you look at the results from the interviews and compare them with the theory and the results from earlier research, you can see a lot of connections and similarities.

All the earlier studies, at least those that I looked at, showed that international experience had a positive impact on the graduates' employability to some degree. It was both the skills that the graduate acquired or improved during the stay, and the experience of living abroad itself. The students get to experience a new environment, learn about themselves, become more independent, and interact with others and learn about their cultures.

When it comes to skills, it seems like the international experience is not so much about the vocational skills that you get from studying and taking the courses within your field, but more about the generic skills and personal attributes. As Potts (Chapter 3.1) mentioned in her study, skills such as communication skills, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, and self-management skills are some of the skills that can be improved when studying abroad.

Crossman & Clarke (2010) also mention other “soft skills” that can be improved during a study period abroad. They conclude that skills such as language skills, communication skills, teamwork, and empathy are often mentioned in literature and research about international experience (Chapter 3.1).

Most of the skills mentioned above were also mentioned by the recruiters and the graduates. The first recruiter talked about how teamwork and interpersonal skills were important, and that they can be improved during a stay abroad (Chapter 6.1.1). The second recruiter also mentions soft skills such as teamwork and emotional intelligence, and he thinks that empathy is something you get to practice when you’re studying abroad and interacting with others (Chapter 6.1.1).

When it comes to employability, many of the skills and personal qualities that can be improved from a stay abroad, according to both earlier studies and my study, are also listed as important skills and qualities for employability in the USEM model of employability. Yorke and Knight (2006) mention qualities such as emotional intelligence, self-confidence, independence, adaptability, stress tolerance, and initiative as important personal qualities when it comes to employability. They also mention skills such as language skills, self-management, critical analysis, creativity, and global awareness as important for employability (Chapter 4.1.1).

When it comes to the skills needed for working with international business or in an international environment, the most important ones, according to Harvard Business School, are communication skills, emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and hard skills (Chapter 4.1). So, if you disregard the hard skills that the graduate acquires from taking courses, you can see that the other skills mentioned by Harvard are the same soft skills that are mentioned in my research and earlier research as skills that can be improved during a stay abroad. This, of course, suggests that a stay abroad might improve the skills needed to work in an international environment and hence can be seen as valuable in the recruitment process.

The same applies to the skills mentioned by the HULT International Business School (Chapter 4.1). Many of them are mentioned as skills that can improve during a stay abroad, such as cross-cultural communication skills, Collaboration or teamwork skills, and emotional intelligence. Resilience and networking skills are also skills that can be connected

to a stay abroad and that are mentioned directly or indirectly in my research and earlier studies.

As you can interpret from the definition of employability, it is mostly about the skills of the candidate looking for a job (Chapter 2.1). As the earlier research and articles imply, and my results, you can improve a lot of the soft skills when studying abroad. Also, personal development, independence, and the character of the student can be improved during a stay abroad, which might also make the candidate more appealing in the employment process. In a world with a rising demand for a skilled workforce (Chapter 4.1), anything that the candidate does to improve the skills needed in the workplace is an advantage. From this, you can conclude that studying abroad most likely will have a positive impact on the graduate's employability. How big of an impact it has is hard to tell, but that is something for future studies to investigate.

When it comes to future career choices, both graduates I interviewed said that the study period abroad had impacted their future career choices. One continued working abroad for a few years and is now working with international customers, and the other started working for a global company in an international work environment. Both thought the experience abroad was a good foundation for their future career and had a positive impact.

## 8 Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find out if exchange studies have an impact on employability, but also on the students' future career choices.

Most of the earlier research showed that the participants viewed international experience as something beneficial for their future careers. Most research and theory used in this thesis focus on studying abroad experiences, but some of the research and the data from the interviews suggest that any international experience can have a positive impact on employability.

In conclusion, a study abroad experience or internship abroad will most likely have a positive impact on the student's employability in the future, depending on the situation and recruiter, and the experience can also have an impact on the career or career choices in the future for the student.

The results I got from my research were in line with the purpose of the work, which was finding out if a study period abroad matters in the employment situation and if it impacts future career choices for the graduate. The findings also gave valid answers to the research questions of this work, which were: Does a study period abroad have an impact on employability and career opportunities? And what kind of impact does a study period have on the student's choice of career in the future?

I think the results from my research are quite reliable since the data collection was in the form of interviews, and I tried to ask questions that made them think about their answer. I then listened and asked follow-up questions. But even though I had just a few people I interviewed, I got to see some differences in their views on international experience in the recruitment process. For example, you could see how the recruiter who hadn't been abroad didn't value the experience as much in the recruitment process as the others. This can, of course, suggest that the results may be a bit influenced by the respondents' subjective experiences. If the respondent had a great time and experience during their stay abroad, they might also think that the experience has a greater impact on the employment situation or the graduate's career than it does.

To get a more objective view on this larger-scale research with a focus on how the graduates perform in the workplace, how they work in teams, and on what level their soft skills are after a study period abroad versus no international experience could be of help. This could show the differences and what kind of effect the international experience has in working life, and in what way it should be considered in the recruitment process.

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## 10 Appendix

### Interview Questions

#### Recruiter

- 1) What position do you have in the company, and what is your role?
- 2) Do you have a lot of international talent amongst your employees? Percentage? (If so, how come? What do you believe is the reason?)
- 3) Do you take into consideration international experience in the recruitment process? (Why, in what way?)
- 4) How big of an impact does international experience have on the decision of a suitable candidate, do you think?
- 5) What skills are needed in today's workplace and the future, in your opinion? (Why?)
- 6) Do you think some of these skills can be improved during a stay abroad? (e.g., Interpersonal, communication, problem-solving)
- 7) Are there any other benefits from studying abroad that might be beneficial for the graduate in their working life (besides improving professional skills)? (e.g., candidates' personal development, maturity, networking, ability to handle stress)
- 8) If you had two candidates with similar educational background and work experience, but one has studied abroad and one hasn't, which one would you choose? Would the international experience have a big impact on your decision, or would it be other factors that have more importance?
- 9) Is there a difference if the graduate has studied abroad or done an internship, which one is more favourable in your opinion, and why in that case?
- 10) Can a study period abroad be seen as something negative in the recruitment process? (Are there some disadvantages, or is it only a positive thing?)

**Graduate**

- 1) What is your educational background? (University)
- 2) Can you tell me more about your international experience? (Study abroad/internship/other?)
- 3) What have you been working with after graduating, and what are you working with right now? (What is your role?)
- 4) Are you involved in any international matters at your workplace? (International clients/work environment/international trade)
- 5) Do you think the study period(internship) abroad has had some influence on your career choice? (In what way, if that's the case)
- 6) Did you gain or improve some skills during your stay? (Which skills and in what way?) (e.g., interpersonal/social skills, communication, problem-solving)
- 7) Do you think the study period abroad(internship) has influenced your job search in a positive way/helped you get a job? (Helped you in the recruitment process)
- 8) Has the stay abroad impacted you in other ways that might have benefited you in your working life (besides professional skills)? (e.g., personal development /maturity)