

3 The year abroad: understanding the employability skills of the Global Graduate

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Abstract

This chapter will examine the employability profile of outwardly mobile British graduates and the ways in which their international skillset fits the UK labour market. It will draw upon several recent reports to highlight the current shortage of professionals with such global skills. In this context, the chapter will demonstrate that internationally mobile British graduates can help meet this skill gap and that they are ideally suited to working in the current, increasingly-globalised UK economy. The chapter will also highlight the importance of describing the global skillset in a manner that conveys its value and uniqueness to employers effectively. Drawing upon the author's experience managing international work placements at Sheffield Business School (SBS), it will be argued that many final year students and recent graduates fail to recognise the distinctiveness of their profiles. As job seekers, they typically define themselves through their language skills, whereas the enhanced competencies gained through the year abroad are often not understood or articulated appropriately. Therefore, the importance of a sharp focus on the global skills to reflect the higher demand for such attributes in the UK will be discussed.

Keywords: global graduate, employability, languages, year abroad, mobility.

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1. Introduction

One of the most prevalent trends in the higher education sector in the UK is its push towards integrating employability in undergraduate courses (Higher Education Academy, 2014a). This principle will only become increasingly significant in future years, particularly in the light of the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and its employment metrics (Department for Business and Skills, 2016, p. 21). Many universities, therefore, are seeking to forge closer collaboration with employers and to gain better awareness of their recruiting needs.

According to numerous studies (British Academy, 2016; Diamond et al., 2011; Higher Education Academy, 2014b), the current, highly-globalised UK economy has fostered the need for an internationally-minded workforce. Intercultural professional competencies, as well as foreign language skills, are seen as important requirements to perform effectively in this context. This global skillset is rare amongst UK graduates (British Council, 2013), and increasingly, British employers find themselves looking overseas for the well-qualified, multilingual, globally-minded international graduates they cannot easily find at home.

In this chapter, I will argue that the UK can help bridge this skill gap by encouraging student outward mobility. I will bring in my extensive experience managing international work placements at SBS to illustrate how language graduates who have benefitted from international mobility fit this sought-after profile closely. Our applied language courses are combined honours in Languages with International Business, Tourism or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). All our degrees have an embedded 18-month compulsory mobility period abroad; this is split between a study semester at a European university and a work placement year in the target language country. By the time our students graduate they have achieved highly developed cross-cultural competencies and other key core skills. In addition, they have consolidated their subject knowledge and have acquired extensive international work experience. However, despite this well-rounded, multi-faceted profile, our graduates often fail to articulate their professional profiles appropriately. Following the trend

observed in language graduates across the UK, they define themselves primarily through their language competencies, and this narrow focus on language skills to the detriment of other core competencies has been proven to limit these graduates' employment avenues (British Academy, 2016). In this chapter, I will argue that understanding and appropriately articulating the full skillset is crucial in allowing linguists and other internationally mobile British graduates to reach their professional potential.

2. The Global Graduate concept

Employers and higher education institutions use the Global Graduate concept to describe a globally-minded young professional with sound intercultural awareness and with the ability to interact effectively in an international environment. Global Graduates are so sought after because they have the usual professional attributes traditionally expected by employers, and *in addition*, the global attributes needed to engage with others and to work effectively in an international professional context (Diamond et al., 2011). Table 1 below shows how both sets of competencies compare.

Table 1. Core competencies and global competencies comparison

CORE COMPETENCIES Prospects (2015)	GLOBAL COMPETENCIES (Global Graduates into Global Leaders. Diamond et al., 2011 p. 8)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good communication • Effective leadership • Planning and research • Teamwork and interpersonal skills • Self-management • Relevant work experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work collaboratively with international teams • Enhanced communication skills • Drive and resilience • Embracing multiple perspectives and challenge thinking

It is worth highlighting that, contrary to what one would expect, multilingualism does not feature prominently in the global skill set. There is conflicting research

on this matter, with some reports highlighting the importance of foreign language fluency to UK business (British Academy, 2014, 2016; British Council, 2013; Confederation of British Industry, 2015), and others suggesting that languages are useful but are not a must for most recruiters (e.g. Diamond et al., 2011). The overall consensus seems to be that *languages add value when they are offered in addition to the global skillset*. In other words, multilingualism on its own is less likely to attract recruiters' interest, as the ability to speak another language is rarely the main skill employers look for. The soft-skills associated with language learning and reinforced through the year abroad are, therefore, as or more important to employers than foreign language fluency. This is why it is so crucial for language graduates to, first, recognise their whole set of skills, and second, learn to describe them appropriately.

3. The year abroad as a differentiating factor

A year of study or working abroad is one of the most reliable paths to global competencies (British Academy, 2012). At SBS, our combined language students develop their global attributes by working overseas in roles which tie in with their degree specialisms. As an example, an International Business with Spanish student may work as a Corporate Purchase Intern for a multinational firm based in Madrid. This combination of experiential, hands-on learning, the immersion in a foreign culture and the need to overcome challenges on a regular basis provide the right ingredients to develop a highly-skilled and much sought-after professional profile.

Global professionals, such as the ones graduating from SBS, find themselves able to gain employment more quickly and have better long-term prospects than graduates without international experience. The findings of the 2014 Erasmus Impact report (European Commission, 2014) confirm this: 64% of international recruiters consider an extended period of residence abroad as important; “internationally mobile students are half as likely to experience long-term

unemployment” (ICEF Monitor, 2014, n.p.); one in three students who have undertaken a work placement abroad have been offered a permanent job by their host company. Not only that, but in addition to being better positioned for their first role, Global Graduates can expect a faster progress up the career ladder – particularly if their year abroad has been done as a work placement.

“Experience of working overseas and immersion in a different culture can catapult a graduate into being considered for rewarding and challenging roles” (Diamond et al., 2011, p. 4).

Despite all the evidence highlighting the enhanced employability prospects for graduates with a year abroad, only a very small minority of British students choose to take part in international mobility programmes. The UK ranks 25th in the world for external mobility in higher education according to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2013). The outward mobility ratio for tertiary students in the UK is 1.2%, which contrasts starkly with the 4.3% ratio in Germany (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2016). British universities often pride themselves on their internationalisation efforts; however, the vast majority of their investment is focused on inward student recruitment.

The contrast between outward and inward internationalisation trends in UK universities could not be more glaring. A few facts illustrate this matter very clearly. The UK has one of the most internationally diverse student populations in the world, with one student in six being from a foreign country. It is the second country in the world, after the US, which attracts the most overseas students (Universities UK, 2016). The UK hosted 428,724 foreign students in 2016; however, it only sent 27,337 students abroad on either study or work placements – and many of these students lived in English-speaking countries. British universities do not invest in outward mobility sufficiently (HEFCE, 2013) and this is what has created the current global skill gap in the UK labour market. The poor outward mobility ratio is seen as a weakness in the British higher education sector, a fact reflected in HEFCE’s (2013) UK Strategy for

Outward Mobility, with its vision of increasing the number of internationally mobile British students by 2020.

4. Conclusions

In order to maximise their career opportunities, graduates with a year abroad need to appreciate that they are value-added professionals and that their international experience is their unique selling point. They must also learn to define their skills in employer-friendly language, utilising vocabulary that is familiar to recruiters. At SBS, final year language students are encouraged to brand themselves as Global Graduates and use skill mapping exercises to gain awareness of their attributes. They also learn to define their profile in employer-friendly language. To this effect, the following terminology is useful:

- Linguists must define themselves as **Global Graduates** with extended experience of studying and/or working abroad.
- Linguists must emphasise their **global mindset**; that is, their cultural agility, maximum adaptability and their ability to build a quick rapport with professionals of other nationalities. Demonstrating these attributes with examples taken from the year abroad will reinforce their global label even further.
- Linguists must also highlight their **global skillset** and draw employers' attention to their extended experience of working collaboratively in multicultural teams, their resilience and problem-solving abilities and indeed, their foreign language and subject-specific skills.

Internationally, mobile graduates are highly-skilled individuals. The challenge they face lies not with their profile, but with their ability to showcase their unique set of attributes. If they can do so successfully, they will be in the best possible position to realise their professional potential.

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