

2 Transnational graduates and employability: challenges for HE language departments

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Abstract

Drawing on the research done for the British Academy's Born Global project, this chapter explores employer demand for the skills graduates in and with languages can develop. The research outcomes raise challenges for Higher Education (HE) professionals to articulate more clearly the nature of language degrees and the transnational profile of their graduates. Departments need to help students to recognise their employment-related skillset and to understand how to communicate this to prospective employers. The chapter includes practical suggestions and a focus on specific terminology which are recommended to colleagues across the sector.

Keywords: transnational, intercultural, cultural agility.

1. Defining the challenges

In 2016, the British Academy published the data from its Born Global research project on language skills for employability, trade and business (British Academy, 2016a). The project followed concern reflected in national surveys such as Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 2016) annual skills surveys and British Chambers of Commerce reports about the lack of language and intercultural skills amongst current and prospective employees.

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How to cite this chapter: Wyburd, J. (2017). Transnational graduates and employability: challenges for HE language departments. In C. Alvarez-Mayo, A. Gallagher-Brett, & F. Michel (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability* (pp. 11-19). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.innoconf2016.650>

Amongst the data are findings from the small to medium sized enterprises, reported separately for companies who do and do not currently use languages in their business. 67% of those using languages agreed that “foreign language skills are equally as important as sciences, technology, engineering and maths” (Morris & Kashefpakdel, 2014, p. 60) in relation to job prospects for the current and next generation. More importantly, 41% of those respondents who do not use languages also agreed, while only 33% disagreed. Meanwhile 70% of those who use languages and 68% of those who do not, agreed that “multilingual international graduates have a strong advantage in the jobs market” (Morris & Kashefpakdel, 2014, p. 37).

As part of the Born Global research, a large data set was also analysed to explore correlations between language qualifications and three indicators of subsequent labour market success: earnings, employment outcomes, and job satisfaction. The data came from the British Cohort Study of 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in the same week in 1970. An analysis of the data from the year 2000 (the only year for which it was available) revealed that:

“Little evidence was found of any direct association between the possession of language qualifications and labour market outcomes at the age of 29, whether measured through earnings, employment outcomes or job satisfaction [...]. While there was some incidence of UK-educated linguists securing superior labour market outcomes, these effects disappeared when statistical controls for social background and academic ability were introduced; this suggests that this association was linked to other factors such as social background rather than language study” (Morris, Kashefpakdel, & Mann, 2014, p. 2).

Thus, on the one hand language graduates should have a massive advantage in the labour market, and on the other hand, from studying a previous generation, those advantages do not appear to be evidenced. This is further borne out by recent data showing unemployment rates six months after graduating – Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) – with caveats about reliability from self-reporting, and the single snapshot in time (HESA, 2013-14). However,

as this data forms part of the Key Information Sets published to prospective students, it cannot be ignored (Table 1).

Table 1. DLHE rate of unemployment of 2013-14 graduates six months after graduation (HESA, 2013-14)

Degree subject	Unemployed
All subjects	6.50%
All Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences	5.60%
Sciences total	6.00%
Languages	6.70%
Business & Administration	7.80%
Computer Science	11.30%
Engineering & Technology	7.70%

It is encouraging that language graduates outperform several more ostensibly vocational subjects, although they slightly underperform the arts, humanities and social sciences as a whole. If they have skillsets that should put them at an advantage, this presents a challenge, requiring a focus on two stakeholder groups: employers and students of language degrees.

2. Communicating to employers

There is ample evidence, including from Born Global, that the recruitment of transnational, globally agile graduates is not a challenge for employers: they can hire them from outside the UK if, as CBI Skills surveys suggest (CBI, 2016, p. 49), they are dissatisfied with UK graduates². Ironically, it has been noted in the Born Global research how rarely employers specify a requirement for language skills in their graduate recruitment documentation (e.g. British Academy, 2014a, p. 5).

In fact, employers may not fully understand what a language degree involves (British Academy, 2016b). The lead researcher reported in 2015 to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Languages that some expect a language degree

2. This situation may change in the light of Brexit if EU workforce mobility is restricted – which might drive employer pressure on the government for increased language and intercultural training in all education sectors.

to produce employment-specific language skills, and if these are not explicitly evidenced, are thus disappointed. In the process, they may overlook the wider graduate skillset:

“Language degrees also provide skills well beyond technical proficiency with languages which are important to employers and which can be under-appreciated both by students and by employers” (British Academy, 2016b, p11).

To address this gap in understanding, Born Global challenges the HE sector to define Modern Languages degrees more clearly. Such definitions already exist in the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) subject benchmark statement (my emphasis):

“The study of languages enables students to **understand the similarities and differences between cultures**. [...] In this sense it is **inherently intercultural**. The study of languages enables students to **understand ideas and events that cross national boundaries**, the **current and historical relationships between countries**, and the **ways in which other countries interact with the UK**. In this sense it is **transnational**” (QAA, 2015, p. 8).

The benchmark statement further defines language graduates (my emphasis) as follows:

“The study of a language enables students to **participate in societies whose language they study** and to **operate within different linguistic and cultural contexts**. This places them in a **privileged position** in that they can **reflect on their own society from new perspectives**, thus **increasing their understanding of the concept of citizenship**. They can **compare and contrast diverse visions of the world**, thereby **promoting intercultural understanding** and bringing distinctive **benefits both to their own society**, for example, in employment terms, and to the **societies of target languages**” (QAA, 2015, p. 9).

The adoption of this kind of terminology by HE Institutions in prospectuses, on websites and in degree transcripts could assist employers in understanding the skillset of language graduates better. The massively diverse HE context presents further challenges, however; how can employers understand the range of major-minor combinations of subjects or CVs which include language learning through institution wide language programmes (whether for credit or extra-curricular)? Effectively, the sector is producing both graduates *in* languages and graduates *with* languages. In addition to reflecting the benchmark statement descriptors, it is crucial to ensure that language learning outcomes are mapped to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) so that employers also have a transparent account of the language competence of applicants.

3. Communicating to students

As alluded to above, “given the high-level skills provided by language degree study it is probable that language graduates are under-selling themselves” (British Academy, 2016b, pp. 12-13).

HE language departments have a duty to ensure that their students understand what employers are looking for in order to best demonstrate their unique attributes. The principal researcher for Born Global provided the following insight into employer thinking (my emphasis):

“Executive directors of global talent use a **complex matrix of skills** to select a successful recruit. They prioritise sector or industry-specific knowledge and a **range of transversal and soft skills**. **Cultural agility** is an **essential attribute of the global graduate**, as they will be expected to work in multilingual and culturally diverse teams face-to-face and virtually. The ability to **approach a problem from multiple perspectives** and to **take into account different cultural expectations** in finding solutions is key to **effective transnational cooperation**” (Holmes, 2015, p. 9).

This maps well onto the subject benchmark statement above, even though languages are not specifically mentioned. Holmes continues to define the transnational graduate as a ‘value-added recruit’, who is not necessarily a linguist, but is likely to have been mobile during their studies:

“The candidate who, in addition to meeting the core requirements of the job specification, can demonstrate an **international outlook** and a **global mind-set**, together with fluency in more than one language and culture, is likely to be selected over the candidate with few or no language skills, whose only experience outside the UK was on holiday” (Holmes, 2015, p. 9).

In the context of the UK National Outward Mobility Strategy, *Gone International* (Bøe & Hurley, 2015) reported on the 2012/13 graduating cohort six months after graduation:

- Mobile graduates were less likely to be unemployed (5.4% vs 6.7%).
- Mobile graduates were more likely to be working abroad (11% vs 2%).
- On average mobile graduates earned more.
- A higher percentage of mobile graduates than non-mobile graduates entered the following sectors: *Professional, Scientific and Technical, Education and Finance and Insurance*.

As outward mobility is compulsory in language degrees, this data further underpins the language graduate’s employability advantage which departments can exploit in their documentation.

To assist students further, departments could download and adapt the language graduate skills grid (Wyburd, 2011) developed within the UCML Shaping the Future project. It suggests five categories of linguistic, cultural and intercultural,

intellectual, employment specific, and personal skills, all from which students can select according to their experience and studies.

The importance of this approach is highlighted by reports from both [Holmes \(2015\)](#) and HE Careers Advisors in public symposia, suggesting, for example, that many language graduates fail to highlight their enhanced communication skills in their CVs and application letters. One HE Careers Advisor, at a 2015 London Language Show Symposium on Employability, reported that language students often start by looking for roles explicitly requiring languages (only to be disappointed), or approach employers at careers fairs to ask what ‘jobs with languages’ they have. As noted above, this is not the way employers work and I believe students need to turn their approach on its head: first seeking careers they are interested in, matching their valuable skillset to these, and then presenting their transnational multilingual credentials within that package rather than putting their languages centre-stage. This approach may challenge their identity as ‘linguists’, but in employment (as opposed to academia) a ‘linguist’ refers to the professions of translator, interpreter, teacher or academic, equipped with relevant postgraduate qualifications.

4. Conclusion

With the upcoming HE Teaching Excellence Framework, including metrics related to graduate employment, there is tension about whether it is the role of HE educators to prepare students for employment or deliver more vocational programmes. From the British Academy Born Global evidence ([British Academy, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a, 2016b](#)), the transnational skills of the language graduates are already much in demand. There is, however, a major communications challenge for language departments. This involves marketing language degrees to prospective students in terminology which reflects employer demand, in addition to focussing on their intrinsic intellectual content. Furthermore, it puts an onus on language departments and their institutional careers services to educate students to translate the skills gained

from their degrees into employer-friendly language and to present themselves to employers as the embodiment of the transnational graduate. As outlined above, I believe the tools and terminology required for these tasks are already in existence and that one major impact from the Born Global research project should be for the sector to adopt these proactively.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

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Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability
Edited by Carmen Álvarez-Mayo, Angela Gallagher-Brett, and Franck Michel

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Cover design and cover photo by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-49-0 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-50-6 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-51-3 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

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Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2017.
