**Employers' perspectives on the relevance of international experience to the employability of graduates**

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# Context

## The relationship between employability, mobility and lifelong learning

When thinking about the value of work and study experience abroad, the question emerges of whether such experience has a bearing on learners' employability. Programmes such as the Leonardo European training programme (<http://www.leonardo.org.uk/>), have the enhancement of employability of participants as their key objective. Employability in this context is read as the broader definition of developing lifelong learning attitudes rather than the narrower definition of gaining employment:

*'Employability also implies the ability for keeping it (employment) and as a key element here, the ability to update vocational skills.'* (Kristensen, 2004: 66)

The notion of change is implied within this definition, as it is implied in the nature of the knowledge economy - there is no employment for life and in a fluid way in the job market *'occupational profiles disappear and new ones are created.'* (Kristensen, 2004: 66)

Kristensen emphasises that under the driving forces of globalisation and technological innovations the rate at which such change happens has significantly increased. According to Giddens' definition of globalisation, the emphasis in employment has shifted from *'lifelong employment to lifelong learning: how to maintain one's employability throughout one's working life.'* (Kristensen, 2004: 67)

The responsibility thus starts to fall on the individual to continuously update their skills. Kuijpers and Scheerens highlight that within a knowledge economy, the notion of employability is articulated as lifelong learning, not lifelong employment (Kuijpers and Scheerens, 2006). With the changing and increasingly unstable job market, the idea of lifelong employment is becoming less feasible. In light of this, the employee's propensity to gain employment and to be successful in employment rests increasingly on their employability skills. The traditional notion of training for life, or for the purposes of a single organisation has become outdated, *'career development goes beyond the boundaries of organisations: the so-called "boundaryless careers"* (Arthur in Kujipers, 2006: 304). Within this mobility is described as a central characteristic of contemporary career development (Kuijpers and Scheerens, 2006: 304). In the findings of their research on employers' perceptions of the positive outcomes of mobility, the authors highlight several aspects. The research indicated that employers perceived that mobility opportunities within the company influence the employee's potential for career development, their propensity for work exploration, the feeling that they are in control of their career as well as their motivation to build a network to support their career development. While the focus here was on the effect of mobility opportunities within the company, it is possible that if employers value this within the company they would also see the potential of mobility at undergraduate level as contributing to developing the same skills and abilities described in this study.

This conceptualisation of employability is also supported in educational research on employability. The Pedagogy for Employability group reflects on the changing nature of employment:

*'It is now widely appreciated that jobs may not be 'for life'. Careers will more typically be diverse, including voluntary, home and family-based work, retraining and career shifts… Many people make career changes that take them away from their main qualifications and perhaps towards the exercise of 'soft skills'…'*

(Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006: 3)

Taking this into account makes it necessary to see the workplace as a place for learning and for the successful graduate in employment to adopt an attitude of lifelong learning. A number of studies have emphasised the value of international work or study experience to enhancing learners' propensity for lifelong learning. By taking a more holistic approach to education which is not constrained to the classroom or to disciplinary knowledge, international education contributes to learners' personality development, to broadening their horizons, enhancing their willingness to learn.

Kehm for example highlights that international experience helps to develop the students' personality and broaden their horizons through enhanced *'cultural enhancement, personality development and foreign language proficiency'* (2005: 21). Kehm draws on empirical work to highlight the fact that a majority of former Erasmus students have quoted their study abroad as a factor which helped them obtain a job. This would suggest that the broadening of horizons, the more rounded personality which study abroad helps to shape in individuals, is something which is valued by employers.

In addition, evidence presented by Kehm shows that students with international experience are much more likely to take up jobs abroad, as well as are more likely to be given work in their home country which involved international assignments. It is not clear from Kehm's text whether the graduates interviewed worked in small local firms or whether they were employed by large companies committed to international work. The question emerges of whether a smaller size company, to which international working is not a mainstream activity, would still value international experience in graduates. Within this research therefore it was necessary to explore whether aspects such as cultural awareness, global awareness, social skills in working in a multicultural environment, would make a difference to a smaller businesses.

Besides the argument for a more rounded personality and enhanced cultural awareness as some of the positive effects of international experience on graduates' employability, a number of the soft, transferable skills associated with employability emerge as the positive enhancements which work and study abroad brings.

## International experience as a way of developing transferable skills

The notion of employability encompasses both disciplinary knowledge and broader, transferable employability skills. This mixture of abilities is not only reflected in a number of influential models of employability within higher education research (Knight and Yorke, 2006; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007) but is also reported to be valued by employers themselves. In his treatment on what labour markets want from education Yorke refers to research from Harvey (Harvey in Yorke, 2006) which demonstrates that beyond the disciplinary understanding and skills, employers look for the interdisciplinary transferable skills which a graduate has. On this basis, a number of employability models in education have emerged, most influential of which are Knight and Yorke's USEM model (2006) - understanding, skills, efficacy and metacognition.

In their report on pedagogy for employability, The Pedagogy for Employability Group draw on empirical evidence in eliciting a list of skills and attributes which employers expect to find in graduates. This includes:

* imagination/ creativity
* adaptability/ flexibility
* willingness to learn
* independent working/ autonomy
* working in a team
* ability to manage others
* ability to work under pressure
* good oral communication
* numeracy
* attention to detail
* time management
* assumption of responsibility and for making decisions
* planning, coordinating and organising ability

(The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006: 4)

Within this, the view of the employable graduate is this proposed by Reich, who describes the graduate who can deal with the demands of the contemporary workplace, as a *'symbolic analyst'* (Reich, 2002 in Yorke 2006: 5). The symbolic analyst has both disciplinary skills and understanding, as well as the underpinning transferable skills, including communication and interpersonal skills, collaborative working skills, experimentation, systems thinking.

The phenomenon of mobility, study or work abroad, has been widely reported in research literature as making a positive contribution to developing transferable skills and employability attributes in learners. In addition, there is a significant overlap between the skills and attributes which employers expect from graduates and the kinds of skills, abilities, attributes which international working or study experience is reported as equipping students with.

In her study on placements abroad, Kristensen provides evidence that students benefit from the experience, highlighting that they gain *'increased self-reliance and a bigger propensity for taking initiatives and making efforts to changing one's life situation'* (Kristensen, 2004: 68)

This triangulates with a Dutch study reported in Kristensen's work which emphasises the influence of mobility in developing self-confidence, ability to adapt to change and enhanced ability to take initiatives. All of these attributes are recognised as valuable as employability attributes. One of the elements of Knight and Yorke's USEM model is self efficacy, for which confidence is essential. Ability to take initiatives is valued by most employers depending on the role and the ability to adapt to change as already discussed is essential for the learner to be able to adopt an attitude of lifelong learning to their employment.

Despite these positive examples of the influence of international experience, there is a danger of confusing initiatives which promote such exchanges with the phenomenon of globalisation. In exploring issues around the internationalisation of Higher Education, Gacel Avila deliberately sets out internationalisation as separate and different from globalisation (2009). According to the author, the premise of internationalisation is in recognising the differences and traditions between nations and through such enhanced knowledge and understanding, becoming respectful of those differences and their unique value. The author argues for the need for global citizenship education which has multiple benefits and aims. The most important of these are the goals of acquiring and developing employability knowledge and skills and the development of intercultural sensibility and a capacity to appreciate cultural differences (Gacel Avila, 2009: 125). While the emphasis in the article is not on employability but on benefits to students and graduates becoming better global citizens, it is possible to see how this kind of awareness would be more than relevant in the context of employment, particularly in relationships with clients, customers and colleagues. The question is - from the employers' point of view, is this relationship between an international experience of education, enhanced global citizenship and enhanced employability evident to employers themselves? Do employers see how international experience and global citizenship can mean that a person is more employable, potentially more efficient and able in the workplace? These are some of the questions which shaped the direction of the study.

Gacel Avila's notion of enhanced global citizenship through international education is shared by Kristensen, who in addition elicits a number of different attributes which a learner can develop through the experience of internationalisation, such as overcoming prejudices, being self-critical, being responsive to criticism from others, increasing one's understanding of other cultures. Some of these aspects are indeed recognised in research literature as core employability attributes - such as being self critical and being responsive to criticism. These particular aspects of reflection are closely associated with PDP activities within the higher education context (Hawkins, 1999; Kumar, 2007; Moon, 1999). Yorke and Knight's emphasis on metacognition in the USEM employability model is addressed here (2006). Being culturally aware on the other hand, relates to both emotional intelligence and to global awareness, both of which have been defined by Yorke and Knight (2006: 8) as essential aspects of employability. Thus in terms of employability, learning intercultural awareness implies acquiring skills in emotional intelligence, particularly in terms of empathy to others, being self aware and self critical and thus improving one's ability to reflect.

The author gives as an example the AFS - the American Field Service - as one of the first organisations to use international exchange as a pedagogical approach to learning cultural awareness. She further refers to the 'contact hypothesis', according to which through extended contact with each other, two different groups start to accumulate knowledge for each other which in turn reduces the possibility of prejudice, heightens empathy with the other group. Kristensen (2004: 48) presents internationalisation as primarily serving outcomes related to promoting peace, improving international relations, establishing common interests on the basis of which to build positive international relations. While these outcomes have definite and evident implications for learning relevant to many disciplines within the public sector, it is necessary to reflect on whether and how such outcomes relate to or can be useful in the context of private sector employment. On the one hand the contemporary workplace is increasingly multicultural which would presuppose that employees have to have the cultural awareness and understanding to be able to communicate effectively with both colleagues and clients. On the other hand this does not necessarily mean that within a recruitment situation, an employer would place this kind of understanding and awareness as an essential attribute, whether they would seek it out within an application, whether even if the candidate has been able to articulate their assets in this respect, the employer would take this into account.

Teekens (2003) explores the value of such enhanced intercultural competence and understanding within the context of teaching. The contemporary classroom, much like the contemporary workplace, is multicultural and this has implications for the kind of understanding and awareness a teacher needs to have. In some respects it is probably less problematic for intercultural sensitivity to become part of the essentials in terms of employability within the teaching profession, as this sector is already attuned to similar issues of inclusion, ethnic and cultural awareness. What is interesting to explore is how and to what extent does the private sector consider these issues, and make the relationship between employability and intercultural competence. With current legislation promoting diversity and equal opportunities in the workplace (Race Relations Act, 1976; The Disability Discrimination Act, 1995) it is possible to see both the business imperative as well as the ethical dimension for intercultural competence in employees. This question in particular was explored within the interviews, as employers were asked to comment on the relevance and importance to their business of global awareness and of the ability to work cross-culturally.

## SMEs' perspectives on international work and study experience

While the value of mobility and international experience has been extensively explored from students' and graduates' point of view (Tang et al., 2008), there is less evidence in terms of the employers' perspective on the value of international experience for graduates' employability. This to a large extent determines the focus of this study as being on the employers' conceptualisation of employability and more specifically on their perspectives of how and whether mobility/ international working and learning experience has a worthwhile impact on this employability.

A further defining element for the study is the size and nature of the companies selected to be studied. Inevitably, for large multinational organisations the terms international working and mobility would be part of their everyday vocabulary. A study by Velo and Mittaz (2006) on the challenges of hotel chains' expansion into international markets pinpoints the crucial relevance of understanding the culture in which a business operates for the success of this business. The skills and attributes which were identified as necessary for a hotel business to develop in their staff in order to be successful abroad, included intercultural awareness, initiative and managerial drive, including leadership skills, flexibility and open mindedness, planning and adaptation skills, ability to take into account cross-cultural factors in preparing a business plan; commercial awareness and customer relations skills, team working skills (Velo and Mittaz, 2006: 507). Virtually all of these skills and attributes as discussed previously are characteristic assets of the experience of working and studying internationally and this is only one example of the central importance of such experience for larger companies breaking new ground in working internationally.

It is less clear how relevant these competencies are perceived to be by smaller, local businesses. Since small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are frequently the first employer of graduates, their perspective on this is relevant where we are concerned with graduate employability. In addition, it is likely that these smaller companies' relationships to international experience and expertise would be different, often less easy or less evident in comparison to this which larger multinational companies have.

At the same time many of these businesses increasingly have an international dimension to their work. For all these reasons, it becomes more than relevant to consider their stance towards prospective employees having international work and study experience. The reality which these companies face needs to be considered in relation to international experience. It is possible that this reality may mean a less flexible or less open minded attitude towards international experience. It is also possible that these companies in particular face more severe competition in international markets and need employees who are motivated, capable and prepared to break new ground in this area. Within these boundaries, this research set out to look for some answers to these questions.

# Methodology

In order to respond to the concerns and questions outlined in the literature review above, the study focused on SMEs, working locally within the South Yorkshire region. The companies fell into three broad categories: law firms, architectural practices and manufacturers. A total of 13 interviews were carried out, of which 5 were architectural firms, 5 were law firms and 3 were manufacturers. The reasoning behind choosing three quite different areas of practice was to see how companies of similar size yet who would inevitably have different relationships and interests related to international working would respond to the idea of the relevance of international experience to graduates' employability.

A phenomenological approach to the data gathering and analysis was applied. The reasoning behind choosing a phenomenological approach was that the study was interested in the way employers would describe or conceptualise their understanding of employability and their stance towards international experience (work or study) acquired by graduates and applied within the context of these employers' work. Creswell emphasises the purpose of phenomenology as describing the individual's *'lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon'* (Creswell, 2007: 57). In this respect the respondents were asked to comment on what they themselves look for in recruiting graduates, what some of the key skills and attributes would be which they value in the context of their work. Further, their experiences of and relationship to international work were explored in order to understand how these experiences have influenced their attitudes towards international experience in graduates.

The commonalities in these respondents' responses were sought in terms of the value which they attributed to different skills or attributes relevant to their business. Commonalities were also sought in the way they spoke about the advantages or even the drawbacks of graduates having international experiences. The philosophical perspectives of phenomenology were observed. As far as possible, the interviewers/ researchers suspended all presuppositions as to the stance which employers would take towards international experience. Respondents were encouraged to comment even in instances where they expressed a negative view towards international experience. Negative as well as positive stances were explored in depth, in order to understand the complexities in the way in which these employers had developed a relationship to the subject.

While the analysis of the data was carried out through developing a composite description of the experiences of all employers from all three fields, in writing up the findings any themes commonly emphasised by each of the fields were separated to show how the relevance of a particular aspect could vary across disciplines - for example, the element of client care came across as particularly crucial for law firms and this implied that they would be looking for this particular kind of communication skill in potential employees; this was not so much the case in manufacturing companies.

 It was important to reassure employers that the fact that some of them had not had any aspect of their work which involved working internationally did not mean their views were irrelevant to the study. Such reassurance was necessary with quite a few of the companies interviewed, including those which had had involvement in international projects with limited or no success.

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## Access

Access to the companies was secured through connections with firms which had had previous engagement with the university, either through recruiting placement students or graduates of the university, through carrying out collaborative projects with the university or through previous participation in research projects run by the university.

Despite of these links with employers securing access was challenging and frequently meant that the researcher had to meet with the person who was available to speak about these issues. In some cases the researcher spoke to the managing director of the company, and in others she spoke to the Graduate Recruitment Officer. This has a bearing on the kind of responses which were given. For example, on a few occasions the managing director of the company did not have direct involvement in the recruitment process and therefore found it difficult to articulate the specific skills and attributes a graduate would need to have to perform well in the role. Conversely, the graduate recruitment officer had a very good idea of the skills and attributes which the company would be looking for. This difference in the emphasis of the roles of the respondents within the company are taken into account and made explicit in the analysis and presentation of the findings where relevant. Following is a list of the respondents' roles within their companies:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Lawyer 1: | Managing Director |
| Lawyer 2:  | Partner  |
| Lawyer 3: | Graduate Recruitment Officer |
| Lawyer 4: | Practice Manager |
| Lawyer 5: | HR Manager |
| Manufacturer 1: | Managing Director |
| Manufacturer 2: | Managing Director |
| Manufacturer 3: | Managing Director |
| Architect 1: | Managing Director |
| Architect 2: | Managing Director |
| Architect 3: | Managing Director |
| Architect 4: | Managing Director |
| Architect 5: | Managing Director |

The issues around extracting employer opinions and understanding their standpoint towards employability are further taken into account. The following points are made by the Pedagogy for Employability Group:

*'However, employers' 'wish lists' should not necessarily be taken at face value. Teichler (1998) questions whether employer statements should be interpreted as providing direct and objective information concerning demand in employment system, noting that such statements are often inconsistent with actual recruitment and personnel policies and practices. Harvey et al. (1997) showed us that the set of desired attributes differed within an organisation: line-managers, recruiters, strategic managers had different emphases.'*

(The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2006: 4)

The authors argue for caution in choosing to regard statements by employers about what is important in employability for a graduate as truth. In the case of this research, this did indeed prove to be an issue since a few of the managing directors interviewed were unsure as to what a list of employability skills and attributes for a particular role would be and described this as a *'gut feeling'* about the person. However, the central concern of the research was indeed on these employers' 'gut feeling' so to say, of what employability is and how international experience relates to it. Rather than looking to extract from them a list of skills and attributes, the purpose of the research was to understand their personal perception of what an employable graduate is and whether their experiences of working and studying abroad would stand out as relevant, as a competitive advantage, or not. In these terms the concerns of the Pedagogy for Employability group apply, yet they do to constrain us for seeking out the employers' perspective on the issue and asserting this as a valid construction of understanding of how employers think about the issue.

## Ethics

Issues of informed consent were addressed by briefing participants thoroughly regarding the purposes of the research, the possible uses of the outcomes of research were discussed as well as discussing questions such as why this research is relevant for the university, as well as how the employers' perspective fits in with the aims and objectives of the research. Participants were asked to sign a consent form informing them that the interview would be recorded, what the data would be used for as well as reminding participants of their rights within the interview process- their right to withdraw from the study, to withhold information, to remain anonymous in the dissemination of the process. In addition, at the end of the interview a debrief was carried out with each respondent inviting them to comment on the process and express any concerns they might have either regarding the questions, their own responses, or the way the interview was conducted. Respondents were further invited to ask additional questions regarding the scope of the study the aims and objectives of the study as well as what is planned for the findings of the research. Most employers expressed an interest in seeing the finished report or executive summary.

Confidentiality and anonymity were observed throughout the process. Besides respondents being aware of their rights of confidentiality and anonymity, respondents' names or any information which could lead to revealing their identities were kept confidential.

# Interview questions

3 points to construct an understanding on the basis of:

* employers' own articulations
* what they have picked out of a list (our articulation)
* evidence in the literature

Employers were asked to reflect on the kinds of skills they would be looking for when recruiting a graduate. They were presented with the scenario of advertising a graduate post and were asked to reflect on the skills and attributes they would specifically look for in the person they were recruiting. It was expected that employers would be able to discuss both the subject specific/ hard skills of employability as well as the soft, transferable skills relevant to the post. No leading or indication was given at this stage regarding the kinds of skills which they should discuss.

Part of the reasoning behind this question was to understand not only what employability meant to these employers, but whether in the definitions which these employers gave of employability, the skills and attributes which research literature associates with international experience would feature as significant and as making a difference in the recruitment process.

In order to triangulate the definition or concept which employers articulated of employability, a further question was posed. The question presented them with a list of transferable skills, which research literature associates with the experience of working or learning abroad. Employers were asked to first of all scale how important each of these skills was in terms of their business, and secondly to comment on the ways in which these skills were important in their work. The following skills and attributes were included in the list:

* global awareness - in terms of both culture and economics;
* ability to work cross-culturally - both within and beyond the UK;
* emotional intelligence - sensitivity to others' emotions and the effects that they can have;
* adaptation and flexibility - the ability to adapt to new environments and ability to be flexible in your approach to people;
* self-awareness - awareness of own strengths and weaknesses, aims and values;
* initiative - ability to take action unprompted;
* willingness to learn - commitment to ongoing learning to meet the needs of employment and life;
* reflectiveness - the disposition to reflect on the performance of oneself and others;
* self-confidence - confidence in dealing with the challenges of employment; confidence in presenting oneself to the outer world;
* self-management - ability to work in an efficient and structured manner;
* political sensitivity - appreciates how organisations actually work and acts accordingly.

Respondents were asked to scale these skills and attributes in one of three categories: **essential; useful but not essential; not useful.**

Finally, employers were asked directly about whether they could see the relevance of international experience to the skills and attributes which they themselves had associated with employability.

The following sections present the findings of the analysis of these questions, which helps us to understand employers' viewpoint regarding the nature of employability within the context of their workplace and the place which international experience occupies within this viewpoint on employability.

The analysis of the interview data was broken down into two streams:

* What skills and attributes employers look for in terms of employability;
* What advantages in terms of skills, attributes and experience employers associate with international experience;

Within this the analysis further focused on the extent to which these two aspects overlap each other - can the skills an attributes which employers look for be enhanced through international experience? Do employers recognise this? Do employers see the benefits of international experience as relevant to the context of their own work?

# The local nature of work, and its influence on how employers perceive international experience

The interview schedule questioned employers regarding the way they perceived their company as well as whether they had, or were interested in fostering an international dimension to their work. This serves as one indication of the attitudes which these companies adopted towards international work within their company. This attitude could possibly further have an impact on whether they saw the relevance of their employees being specifically trained, or having specific skills and attributes which prepared them for working internationally when required.

As the study was concerned with SMEs in particular, the size of the company influenced the possibilities and opportunities which these employers could engage in with regards to working internationally, and inevitably the larger companies had more of an interest and more of a stake in international working.

In these terms, there were two aspects which the research questions aimed to capture - attitudes of the employer with regards to an international working dimension for their business and any attitudes they might have towards prospective employees' experiences of working internationally.

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## Manufacturers' view

As compared to both law firms and architectural practices, as a group, the manufacturers interviewed were most positive about the advantages and possibilities which working internationally could offer them. Manufacturer 3 for example was positive about the possibilities of working internationally and seeking out new markets to expand into. Despite the fact that he describes the company as having limited success breaking into international markets, he was nevertheless positive about a possible international dimension of working for the company:

***Manufacturer 3:*** *We have very limited international opportunities. We have tried penetrating a couple of markets in Europe with little success. We actually have some products going out to Spain presently, so we are in conversations with Spain…*

***Researcher:*** *So how do you feel about expanding into markets into Europe?*

***Manufacturer 3:*** *I think it represents a good opportunity, especially in frozen foods, the UK is seen as the market leader in ready meals. And that is a market which is going to expand in Europe so there is an opportunity there.*

Similarly, in the case of Manufacturer 2, the way in which this company director described the business acknowledged and emphasised its international dimension. The employer himself was actively engaged in going abroad and learning about different processes related to his business and inviting students from abroad to take up placements in the company:

*We also have students come work from abroad. We have four students from Singapore, they live with us actually, for six weeks. They work in the business and they are also doing product development projects.* *We have also had a French student who was working with us for a couple of months which again brings a new thinking into the business. You get students from the other side of the world, they have a completely different idea about how things should be and it is interesting to get that. I also think for students to have work experience abroad and bring that back is really good and that's what we do as a company. I have been here five years - I have been to China, Austria, Germany - all over Europe looking at those different things. For example when I went to China I studied traditional Chinese medicine in food. And we have tried to bring that back into business, and we did develop some products on the back of that but it is about trying to move the business forward.*

*(Manufacturer 2)*

The way the employer spoke about the business indicated that he placed a lot of emphasis on development and innovation. In addition, it was evident that despite the relatively small size of the business, this employer thought of it as having an international dimension, and saw the relevance of this to the competitiveness of the business as well as for its development and growth. Similarly, Manufacturer 1 spoke about a number of locations worldwide to which the business both exported and purchased goods from. There was a significant dimension of the business which involves trading internationally.

These manufacturers' views stood in contrast to the kind of thinking which the companies who described themselves as working only locally expressed.

## Law firms' views

In describing their work, many of the SMEs interviewed emphasised the 'local' nature of their business and described themselves as a local practice. Potentially this could be one of the factors which affected the way the company attributed value to international experience in graduates.

In some cases, particularly with law firms, companies described themselves as 'working locally', working exclusively with British law, under British jurisdiction. These companies did not hold any international dimension to their work in very high esteem, or as being of significant importance. Despite the fact that some of these companies did work internationally, they did not consider this a major part of their work, or an area that they saw themselves developing in the foreseeable future.

The discourse was dominated by working in a local, secure, tried and tested market within which they knew they would be successful and which was evidently their priority. The following are some examples of this:

***Lawyer 1:*** *Yes, for example we might be acting on behalf of someone who is buying the business and for example they might have an overseas subsidiary.*

***Researcher:*** *So would you say in that context knowledge of the culture was relevant?*

***Lawyer 1:*** *Not unduly no - obviously we have to be very careful as to what advice we provide to clients so we would define very carefully that we are only able to deal in English law. Where there are overseas elements we would recommend to a client that they should allow us to instruct an overseas lawyer. And therefore whilst we may have to do some work in interpreting what the overseas lawyer says, the responsibility for advising on overseas law passes to the overseas lawyer. So we wouldn't try to get involved with overseas jurisdiction we would make sure that we got suitable advice that we could pass on with our retainer to the client.*

The situation was slightly different with the largest legal practice which took part in the interviews, which employed 2,500 people and had offices both in Spain and in Britain. These offices however were seen as two separate units, where the people in Spain worked with Spanish law only, while the employees in Britain dealt with British law only. Unlike the rest of the law firms which were interviewed, in this case there was a clear dimension to the work which involved working internationally, and understanding the jurisdiction of other countries. Correspondingly, there was a clear recognition on this employer's side that there was an international dimension to the work:

***Lawyer 3:*** *I think the other international aspect is in terms of our personal injury division. We actually have a large team of people who litigate and represent clients - people who have been abroad and have had accidents, injuries, illnesses, or something has happened, and we will represent those individuals back in the UK but we'll sometimes litigate in foreign jurisdictions. So whilst again the work is done out of the UK we will be liaising with people in those countries and out of those jurisdictions.*

***Researcher:*** *So would the employees have to have knowledge of the legal system in this other country?*

***Lawyer 3:*** *That would be helpful. We don't expect people to come into the firm with that knowledge necessarily because it is quite specialist and actually equally in terms of the claims, we could get claims where different jurisdictions have been applied. So it is not necessarily just Spanish claims that we are dealing with. It could be a whole range - clients from South Africa, Canada, so we wouldn't expect somebody to have legal knowledge of all those different jurisdictions necessarily although some knowledge could be an advantage. What we do find is an advantage, is the ability to be able to speak foreign languages. Because then you can converse with somebody in their native tongue, so that can be advantageous.*

It is not surprising that the employer does not have it as a requirement that a new employee to the company should have detailed knowledge of foreign jurisdictions, as this would be an unreasonable demand. This employer highlighted that *'some knowledge'* of foreign jurisdictions would be an advantage. It is encouraging that the employer recognises the relevance of such knowledge as transferable as this means she focuses on the transferable skill of working internationally rather than on the specific knowledge of a country's jurisdiction. She further highlighted the advantage which knowledge of languages would have in this situation. Beyond knowledge of languages however, there was no identification of more specific, transferable skills or attributes which a graduate could use to demonstrate to employers their ability to work internationally or to work with foreign jurisdictions.

## Architectural companies' views

In the views expressed by architectural practices there was an evident leaning towards describing the business as local and as working locally. Further to this some of these employers' apprehensions regarding the negative effects of working internationally became apparent:

***Researcher:*** *Is there an element of your work which involves working internationally?*

***Architect 2:*** *Not particularly, no. We are a Sheffield-based firm - well, not generally - I have to say that I did a job for a client - something in Bulgaria, three weeks ago - so I've just brought something back with me to look at and to do some drawing work on, but I didn't have any input into going there or anything. The job was to do with tourism effectively - probably quite a small out of the way place which is trying to build up its image as a tourist destination.*

***Researcher:*** *So is that an area that you might be looking to expand in?*

***Architect 2:*** *Well if people come to us with jobs certainly yes, but it is like I say historically the practice has generally worked in Sheffield where we have had jobs as far ranging as Wales and Scotland, but otherwise our contacts and connections are generally more local than international. Partly because of the size of the practice. And also … what we find is, when a job is large enough, it becomes European tendered so you will find that a Belgian architect bidding for a job that is conceived from my office and you start to question why - my personal view of globalisation why do people - I bet there's a load of people on the motorway to Leeds in the morning who are passing a load of people on the motorway coming from Leeds, and effectively one is doing a job there and one is doing a job here, and it is causing all of that traffic movement and effect on the environment, potentially unnecessarily. So there is a time and a place for international movement of people doing work and there are other times when it makes a helluva lot of sense for the people who are on the ground locally to do it.*

Architect 2 was generally open-minded about the possibilities of taking on international work, as is clear from his example of opportunities for work in Bulgaria. He did however describe the company as a local practice. Further than this, he highlighted the difficulty of European tendered work where the competition becomes more extreme for an architectural firm. It is important to note that the employer is open-minded, albeit a little sceptical about how successful he would be on an international market. He further expressed certain reservations about the globalisation of practices, and emphasised the positive advantages of working locally: to the environment as well as to people's wellbeing. It is not surprising therefore that this employer further expressed reserve towards accepting international experience as beneficial to employability in itself:

***Researcher:*** *If a graduate was to come to you and they had in their CV evidence of experience of having worked for an architectural firm abroad, or studied architecture abroad, would that make a difference to you? Would it stand out for you …*

***Architect 2:*** *It would stand out but it would stand out as something to be of consideration… on the negative side there is a consideration that architectural practices aren't commonly global at all are they. Firstly somebody who is qualified I know it sounds arrogant but it isn’t intended to be, but somebody who has an architectural qualification from another country doesn't necessarily mean that it is comparable with what on paper seems to be the - somebody who trains ad says I am trained to be an architect in a certain country may only have, theoretically, reached the level a part 1 graduate. So you have got to understand - you have to look in more detail as to what that means…*

While this employer acknowledges that he would notice this in an application, the associations which this experience would have were not necessarily those of 'employable graduate'. He mentioned that such experience in a job application would signal associations with globalisation, *'on the negative side there is a consideration that that architectural practices aren't commonly global at all are they' (Architect 2)*. He further speaks of the fact that architectural training varies across countries and therefore a qualification from another country would be cause for concern. A qualification from another country is of course not the internationalisation or mobility experience which this research is concerned with, however the fact is that this was not clear to the employer outright. The reality of this employer' understanding of international experience is an underlying association with globalisation, which as a director of an SME he was averse to.

Thus in some ways this employer equated working internationally with the phenomenon of globalisation, which naturally had created a negative reaction in him. It is possible that a number of local firms would take this view, despite the fact that internationalisation, in the context of gaining experience of working or studying abroad, has very different aims from globalisation. At the heart of the idea are the values of understanding and appreciating cultural diversity which are very different from the objectives of globalisation. It may be the case therefore that part of the challenge of employers accepting and understanding the value of international experience would be in ensuring that these employers differentiate between the experience of mobility as an asset to graduates' employability and the phenomenon of globalisation.

Other concerns regarding international working were related to economic and logistic concerns - how stable the employer estimated that the market was and whether the company would be able to secure profit from any such engagement:

***Researcher:*** *Is there an aspect of the work which involves working internationally?*

***Architect 4:*** *Yes, we do some work internationally but not a lot; we are very specific about how we work abroad we prefer to do the front end designs and then work with a local practice and really - we'll only really venture abroad if we think we can get real value from it because we get a lot of big projects in the UK, most practices work abroad to get big projects we tend to get more of the big UK projects. We are about the 8th or 10th largest practice in the UK, so quite a big company.*

***Researcher:*** *So is it not an area that you are looking to expand in?*

***Architect 4:*** *I think you never say never in business if something comes along we are looking at for instance at the moment to do some custodial work - designing some prisons in Germany. We have got some projects that are very early stages out in the Middle East in Abu Dhabi and Dubai although that market is quiet at the moment. They are suffering. We have done prisons in Chile and we also have a partner company in South Africa based in Pretoria, where we do lots of different work. We are not trying to conquer the world we are quite successful in the UK market.*

As the extract illustrates, architect 4 was generally cautious and sceptical about opportunities for taking on work abroad, however he was not in any way negative about such opportunities. Rather he highlighted the pros and cons of such engagement, and emphasised that where it made business sense the company would engage in projects internationally. Similarly the company director of architectural firm 5 described that the emphasis in their work was on working locally. For him taking on work abroad would mean establishing offices internationally, and this was something which he associated with uncertainty, with risk taking and as overall problematic *'we have enough problems trying to get paid in England without trying to get paid abroad'.* As a concept therefore working abroad was seen as risky and problematic.

These accounts by employers illustrated the caution of SMEs towards international working - these companies would take on the work only where it made business sense and they would not take risks associated with such ways of working. It is possible that these views of international work as risky could be a factor determining these employers' attitudes towards international experience in the graduates they choose to recruit.

Even the larger architectural companies (such as architect 4) which had established connections and projects for working internationally, were cautious in seeing their international work as shaping ways of working, or impacting on the way they recruit into the company. In the case of architect 3 the company director actually described the practice as international. Their employees were said to be required to go abroad and work internationally, collaboratively with a French practice, they further have 'two outposts in India and Holland'. In addition a major project is about to begin with building 10 universities in Libya. This would suggest that this company's employees would have to be prepared for working internationally. However there was no indication that this aspect was seen as part of the professional development of staff or that any qualities in staff were sought which would facilitate their understanding of the place in which this work was being done, be it Libya, Holland, France etc. While this company's projects indicated that there was a clear need for a workforce which was capable of working internationally, this was not recognised in the professional development of the workforce, or valued as an employability asset.

Further to this, the employer describes that even though the firm was interested in working internationally, they would approach this aspect of their work in a *'conservative'* way; that they would venture on international markets with caution, *'slowly'* and *'gradually'*.

Similarly to the response gained from Law firms therefore, architects were equally guarded about international working, even if they were not as fenced into the idea of themselves as a local practice, as was the case with law firms. It was interesting that even though some of these firms engaged in international working, they did not see it as necessary to prepare their employees for working internationally in any way - in none of the firms was there an aspect of CPD which involved preparation for international working. It is unsurprising therefore that these firms would not seek out the skills and attributes which working and studying abroad could bring to a prospective employee.

There was a general consensus amongst architectural firms that working internationally needs to be approached with caution, conservatively. While these firms would consider offers for work abroad, none of them were convinced that such engagement would not be more trouble than it was worth.

Comparatively, by far the most positive response regarding prospects for working internationally came from manufacturers. It was interesting to explore whether the extent to which employers were prepared to accept international working opportunities was also in direct relationship to the way they would attribute value to international work or study experience in recruiting graduates.

# Skills and attributes employers look for and their relationship to international experience

Employers were asked to express in their own words and from their personal perspective, what employability means in the context of their work and what specific skills and attributes they would look for when looking to employ a graduate. Where possible these responses were triangulated with the responses these same employers gave when reflecting on the importance of skills which research literature associates with international experience (such as global awareness, ability to work cross-culturally, emotional intelligence, initiative etc).

1.

## Interpersonal skills and the ability to work cross-culturally

In their own articulation of what employability is, all of the law firms interviewed unanimously emphasised the importance of client care: the interpersonal skills which are needed when communicating with clients in different circumstances.

Lawyer 3 for example emphasised the ability to empathise and build rapport with others, as an important asset in the law profession:

*'And also a really key skill is client care skills - the ability to empathise to build rapport with other people and then the whole concept of relationship building rather than just a pure - what makes for good customer service - a bit wider than that. So some of our clients we have, in terms of the personal injury side we could have some of the clients for years on end and once we are their lawyer quite often we could actually take on a counselling role, building rapport, empathising, listening - the softer characteristics that we might be looking for.'*

*Lawyer 3*

Counselling, empathising and listening are skills which this employer placed particular importance on. Lawyer 5 similarly focused on client care and emphasised two different sides of client care which they would seek out when interviewing graduates. The first side referred to keeping the business commercially viable, the relationship which the lawyer establishes with a client determines whether the firm would get repeat work from these clients and whether they would be able to sustain their reputation. The other side of client care was this related to counselling - the different situations which a lawyer has to deal with and be able to respond to, when dealing with clients who may be experiencing quite substantial emotional distress. The employer emphasised that within the recruitment and selection process they would be looking at how a graduate would demonstrate abilities in both of these aspects of client care: whether they are commercially aware of the implications of good client care and whether they are able to extend courtesy and communicate with a client in difficult circumstances:

*'we'd ask them questions about why would client care be important to a firm such as ourselves, and to think about the fact that clients would refer us on to other people and that would be how we would generate work. And then if we were going to get repeat work from people obviously we need to do a good job. And how they might cope if a client was upset, with a particular piece of news, how they would deal with that particular situation so I suppose it is through questioning as well.'*

*Lawyer 5*

Thus interpersonal skills and a high level of emotional intelligence, expressed in the legal context as client care, were considered a key asset for a graduate to have. This is an indication that when eliciting the benefits of their experience abroad graduates should seek to communicate their employability through emphasising how this experience has given them opportunities to develop skills of working with clients, of communicating with people, counselling, giving advice.

To support this, research literature has given significant indication that international experience would contribute to developing interpersonal skills, particularly in the context of ability to work cross-culturally and enhanced emotional intelligence skills. Gacel Avila (2005) argues for an enhanced ability in students to communicate cross-culturally (and this notion is not related necessarily to language ability), while Kristensen (2004) emphasises the positive effects of international experience on personality development in individuals which allows them to understand other people and cultures more fully. Similarly, Teekens (2003) emphasises the ways in which international experience can contribute to broad-mindedness, understanding and respect for other people, and applies this to the context of teaching multicultural groups.

Considering this evidence from the literature on internationalisation as well as the findings of research pointing to interpersonal skills as crucial in the context of the law, it was interesting to discuss with these employers whether and to what extent they saw the relevance of competences such as *'ability to work cross-culturally'* to their work. This particular ability is explored in the analysis because it relates strongly to interpersonal skills.

Law firms were unanimous regarding the importance of working cross culturally, much more so than architects. There were some very specific examples and situations given in which the ability to work cross-culturally would be essential for the business:

*'…we are now representing a large number of polish immigrants on the personal injury side because unfortunately they are doing work quite often which is sort of manual work and the standards aren't quite as high and they are being subjected to injuries. To then have this global awareness and ability to understand different cultures - they would both be important.'*

*(Lawyer 3)*

*'Ability to work cross culturally - that is essential because you have to be sensitive to the fact that we are a multicultural society and therefore we have clients who come from lots of different backgrounds and therefore they have to be able to deal sensibly with all of those people and in a way that enhances the reputation of the firm.*

*(Lawyer 1)*

These are only a few of the comments which highlighted the paramount importance which law firms placed on ability to work cross-culturally. The benefits of this kind of understanding were evident to them, both in the context of working with clients from other countries as well as in the context of working with British clients coming from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

In contrast, the views of architects regarding the relevance of working cross culturally differed from those of law firms. Architect 3 for example showed awareness of some of the possible aspects of the company's work where cross cultural awareness was necessary:

*'Ability to work cross culturally - again, while we are doing projects in the UK that is of limited benefit. When we are for instance doing universities in Libya, the more you are aware of other cultures - it is a Muslim country and there are a whole other issues there. But again it is not essential.'*

*(Architect 3)*

Despite the fact that he is aware of the issues of intercultural working, this employer still makes the point that this is not an essential competence in an architect's work. This goes back to the issue of some of the employers seeing their business as primarily UK based and UK focused. From this point of view, it may seem that the competencies which employees need to have when working abroad are not necessarily seen as essential when working within the UK. It does appear that the fact that the UK based work may also entail working with people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds is not at the forefront of this employer's mind, the way it is for example with Law firms who may have interactions which require intercultural competence daily.

However further evidence showed that the issue may be in what these employers understand by 'working cross-culturally'. For example from architect 5's comment it appears that this employer associated working cross-culturally with necessarily working abroad and the primary skill he associated with this was language ability:

*'Working cross culturally - it is not essential for us. I know a lot of businesses do a lot of work abroad but we don’t choose to do that so it is useful but I am not saying it is essential. We don't suddenly need to recruit people who speak Portuguese or Spanish or whatever because we are not working in those sorts of regions.'*

(Architect 5)

Working cross culturally is a necessity if working within a multicultural society, which in the UK context in particular is highly pertinent. Yet not all employers interviewed showed awareness of this as a business imperative, or constructed the concept and its related competencies as relevant in the context of working in the UK, not only working internationally. The following comment from architect 1 reinforces this point:

*'I put those two (global awareness and working cross-culturally) are not necessarily useful because at the moment we are working exclusively in the UK. I mean I think for anybody it is important to be… but not specifically in terms of the way we run our business, I don't think those are important to the business. I would like to think that most people here have got the global awareness, and could work across cultures. I suppose I ought to say that's useful but not essential (referring to 'ability to work cross-culturally'). Because we are working with people from different cultures here in our office.'*

*(Architect 1)*

There is lack of recognition on the side of these employers of the business imperative for cross-cultural awareness, which is evident in this comment. Architect 4 similarly supports the perspective that working cross-culturally simply does not apply within the context of architecture:

*'Ability to work cross-culturally - I think again it is useful but it is not essential. From our business point of view the majority of our clients are British. Now whether that's Asian British or ethnic British or whatever, it is a British client and it is governed by British law and it is governed by British design standards and culturally, buildings, unless you are building something quite culturally different like say a mosque, are fairly culturally British. I think it would be interesting … I have done it we have put in some of our people for instance in South Africa and they slotted straight in because a building is a building wherever you build it really. It is the concept of enclosing space in a meaningful way that it is a delight for people to occupy. So whether that needs a cultural understanding I am not really sure.*'

*(Architect 4)*

This employer makes two different points - firstly, that intercultural awareness is not significant as long as the business is working with British clients, regardless of what ethnic or cultural background they have. His second point is that intercultural awareness does not have a bearing on the activities of building design and building construction. Without being an expert in architecture, it is difficult to make a critical judgement as to whether this is indeed the case in the area of architecture, however it raises questions for possible reflection and debate within the architectural community - does intercultural awareness really have no bearing on the design and construction of buildings? As for the first point which this employer made - his view is evidently not shared by lawyers who similarly work with a predominantly British client base, who are of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The law firms however as we have seen from their comments and choices - are very much aware of the need to be able to work cross culturally. It needs to be said that with law firms this is a more evident business imperative as law firms' business is people. Yet this is also to some extent the case with architecture - this becomes particularly clear where further in the interview architects have spoken of the need for teamwork and interpersonal skills in their employees. The question remains therefore as to why these employers do not see the link between their businesses and cross-cultural working. The more important question it raises is whether or not architectural students should or should not make efforts to enhance their ability to work cross culturally.

Manufacturing firms were significantly more positive than architectural firms about the importance of the ability to work cross culturally. While two of the three manufacturers ticked 'useful but not essential', similarly to the responses of architects, their comments reflected a more positive view:

*Similarly in our business specifically….(hesitates)… I am going to put the ability to work cross culturally as useful but not essential albeit that one is perhaps arguable with the increasing diversity of the nationalities that work within the manufacturing arena. There is an argument that actually it is pretty essential these days.*

*(Manufacturer 3)*

This comment by manufacturer 3 shows the increasing awareness in this employer of the importance of being able to work cross culturally. Similarly the comment from manufacturer 2 demonstrates awareness of the advantages from a business point of view of the ability to work cross-culturally:

*Ability to work cross-culturally - we are doing that, and actually in terms of the business, we have people from all over the world working in the business, and we believe that's a strength, because it really brings all sorts of thought processes.*

(Manufacturer 2)

Where an employer sees the benefits in terms of the business imperative for a skill or competence then it is more likely that they would seek this out within a job application. Finally the comment from manufacturer 1, who is a managing director of his company, shows an astute awareness of the cultural and ethnic diversity within his own business. Such awareness demonstrates that this employer further bears this in mind when recruiting into his workforce:

***Employer:*** *Well we have lots of different cultures in our business so we have Chinese, English, Korean, Irish, we have workers from Brunei, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Polish as well, so culturally we are very, very mixed up.*

***Researcher:*** *So you mean to work together your employees would have to have that understanding…*

***Employer:*** *Well there are a lot of cultures within our business so ability to work cross culturally is good. At least from an awareness point of view. We have some Muslims, Indians, Sikhs and Hindus, so very mixed.*

(Manufacturer 1)

## Commercial awareness

Some of the businesses interviewed emphasised the need for graduates to be commercially aware. Overall two of the five architects interviewed spoke about commercial awareness, this compared with three out of the five law employers and only one of the three manufacturers. They phrased commercial awareness differently, in terms of the understanding and awareness which they were looking for.

Law firms emphasised the importance of commercial awareness. Lawyer 5 was particularly specific regarding what they would expect in terms of commercial awareness from their employees:

***Lawyer 5: …****and also a level of commerciality so an awareness not just of the law, and the legal side but the other pressures on a solicitor in terms of making sure that they quote correctly to clients, that they think about the fact that they would have fee targets when they joined us and they think about that side as well.*

***Researcher:*** *Sorry, I am not familiar with fee targets?*

***Lawyer 5:*** *Well as a solicitor, you would have a target of fees that you have to generate over the year so the amount of work that you bill basically. So there is no point offering to do a piece of work for a client who is going to be very research heavy and you are going to have to put a lot of time into it, if you are not going to get fees back to cover your time. So it is just having an awareness of issues like that really.*

Meeting fee targets and selecting to take on work which would be profitable are amongst the aspects which this employer emphasised as commercial awareness in the law. This highlights the importance of understanding not only the subject specific side of the profession but also the commercial and profit making side of law. Increasingly, and since it was emphasised by a number of employers, this is key to being a successful lawyer. Can international experience demonstrate this kind of understanding and awareness in graduates? How can graduates successfully articulate and demonstrate such skills for employers?

Commercial awareness further has relevance in the context of manufacturing. Manufacturer 3 spoke about commercial awareness as the importance of knowing the wider world of work:

*I think… can I give specific examples…I think where they had taken the opportunity to work in industry, in the commercial world. Not necessarily in a sphere that they are looking to be employed, but they perhaps would have a more rounded attitude. There is a danger I feel that at the end of their degree course that they would have had a very long time in academia, and if that has been the sum total of their experience, then that's a fairly narrow experience. Whereas if they had their arms a bit more open to how the world works, particularly in smaller businesses where however much you want people for their specific expertise, actually what you are looking for is somebody to make a broader, more genuine contribution. You have to multitask in a small business, because you tend not to have to employ specialists who are too narrow.*

*Manufacturer 3*

It is interesting that the employer spoke about work experience in a broader more general way - not necessarily work experience in a specific area, but work experience which helps these graduates to gain a better understanding of the world of work, particularly the commercial challenges of running a smaller size business. In this respect, he saw the benefits of work experience as enhanced commercial awareness - something which he evidently had no confidence in academia providing students with. The need which this employer has expressed for commercial awareness and an awareness of how small businesses work within a national and international context (all three manufacturing firms interviewed exported abroad) is also related to global awareness, understanding of the world - these are aspects which research literature relates to international work and study experience (Gacel Avila, 2005; Kristensen, 2004). When thinking about the value of international experience therefore it becomes necessary to construct this and articulate this as an opportunity for students to gain commercial awareness, in the context of how businesses work, what their relationship is to the global market.

Architect 5 described that the commercial awareness or astuteness which he would be looking for in a graduate was related to being aware of the financial and economic reality which the business was facing in the current economic climate. In addition the employer emphasised he would expect graduates to be aware of the existing competition in the sector, as well as to be aware of how *'commercially tight and astute'* the business needs to be to survive:

*I think it is an understanding and it is very difficult, but it is an understanding of how our industry operates and how commercially astute people need to be. And that's very difficult for an academic institution to grasp that - I know that everybody reads the papers, but the reality of it is difficult world out here at the moment. Our fees have on average come down by 30% across the board this last year. We have reduced numbers here as a business, because we have inevitably had to do. There is a lot of competition out there at the moment. Now that's very difficult for a student coming out of university - who might be 22 or 23 who doesn't really understand that at all but it is trying to get some level of understanding of how commercially tight, and how commercially astute the business needs to be to survive.*

*(Architect 5)*

It is evident that it would be a significant advantage for any graduate applying to this organisation to be able to demonstrate the commercial awareness skills which this employer has outlined. What is interesting is that the employer realises that this would be difficult for a young person to understand and that, alike the example from manufacturing, he does not really expect the experience of higher education to have prepared graduates with this knowledge. Yet commercial awareness has become part of the key employability provision across the HE sector (Moreland, 2006) and employers are unaware of this, as manufacturer 3 demonstrated by saying that university could not prepare students with commercial awareness). It is a fact that it is difficult for HE to make provision in this respect without the direct intervention and expertise of employers, which emphasises the need for employer engagement in such provision. What is more important in the context of this research is that there is little evidence linking international experience to enhanced commercial awareness in students. Considering that this could be potentially a significant competitive advantage for any graduate in the law, architecture, and undoubtedly many other areas, this highlights the need to explore the possibilities for international work or study experience to focus on providing students with commercial awareness in the relevant sector.

## Demonstrating enthusiasm for the role

Some employers described that in graduate recruitment one of the aspects they pay particular attention to and which particularly impress them at interview is the passion and enthusiasm which the candidate demonstrates for the role.

Architect 3 for example identified this as important: *'do they talk with passion and knowledge about the projects that they have in their portfolios'.*

On some level we could argue that in order to demonstrate passion for the work, the candidate must have experiences to evidence this 'passion' and enthusiasm. It can also be argued that working or studying abroad demonstrates passion for understanding and discovering the subject in a different context, and this would be especially true for a subject which requires artistic inspiration such as architecture. Employers themselves made this link between working and studying internationally and the passion and enthusiasm this candidate must have for the subject:

*'Often for working abroad, it would have been people who by their nature have more initiative, keen to acquire experience and knowledge and often that's quite a good thing, I mean there must be something about an individual like that.'*

(Architect 3)

Similarly, it is interesting that Architect 5 when speaking about the need for a passion or *'spark'* in graduates, he also says that one way to demonstrate this for graduates is to show commercial awareness, and awareness of the world around them:

*'And somebody who has a spark abut them, over and above your normal student who is maybe not that interested in some of the commercial world everybody lives in - there are not many people I see like that to be fair these days it is a lot different now.'*

*(Architect 5)*

This is particularly striking as this employer states that this 'spark' is a differentiating factor which not many students he sees have. As such, it is a valuable employability attribute. It is also of course possible to associate this broader interest in the world, this commercial astuteness with international work or study experience, but this is not a link which the employer himself makes.

An interest and passion and enthusiasm for the job, is also something which law practices identified as an employability trait. Lawyer 3 emphasised passion and enthusiasm for the law as a profession, as one of the key attributes they would look for in graduates:

*'There are some softer traits in terms of a real passion for law, which can be quite hard to put your finger on because it is different for every different individual and that is a real trait and something that they would need to convey enthusiastically and then a real - in terms of this passion for law in terms of commitment to law, and a real drive to get things done and to not be fazed and to be keen to pursue this career even though it can be quite a hard career.'*

*Lawyer 3*

In her description of this passion and enthusiasm the employer highlights the difficulty of conveying this within an employment selection process. She is aware that it is something which would manifest itself differently in every individual, that the applicant would have to work hard to convey this passion and enthusiasm to an employer. So how does a graduate demonstrate these quite difficult to describe and qualify traits as passion and enthusiasm?

***Researcher:*** *So some of those such as the passion for law, how would a graduate demonstrate this to you?*

***Lawyer 3:*** *I think they - on paper - they would demonstrate that what we would read as signs that they are passionate about law, or if we have a non law graduate who has subsequently chosen to pursue law down the line, understanding their reasons for doing that and finding out the reasons for doing that can well demonstrate a passion. To actually give up their time further than just their legal studies, if they are a legal graduate to give up their time to understand law in practice - so getting work experience volunteering in legal advice clinics or in a citizens advice bureaus. So then there is a time element and then just actually articulating to us why they want to come into law, and what it is about law that they are enthusiastic about.*

The elements which the employer emphasises as demonstrating this passion for law are first of all the commitment to the law profession, not least in the time and effort put into getting additional experience in law practice on the side of the graduate - in this respect any form of work experience (volunteering, working in legal advice clinics, citizens' advice bureaus etc) and the time element - how much time the graduate has dedicated to this over and above what they were expected to in their studies, would be very impressive to an employer.

It is interesting that even in the context of this research which emphasises the value of international work/learning experience, this employer did not refer to such experience as being evidence of the passion and commitment to the law they are looking for as a business. It is not there in the list this employer gave of examples of additional time spent on understanding law in practice which included volunteering, working in a citizens' advice bureau. There could be a number of reasons for this, however there is still a very strong argument that working or studying abroad shows commitment and passion for the subject. It is usually those students who have a real interest in their subject who are prepared to leave the comfort of what they know and explore how their area of interest operates in different contexts. Yet once again this does not seem to be a link employers naturally make for themselves. It is therefore in the hands of the graduates themselves to articulate this passion and commitment to the field and illustrate this through examples within a job interview, to be able to draw on their international experience as a way of showing interest and commitment to the law.

Similarly to the previous example, lawyer 4 emphasised that she would seek involvement in law practice broader than just being a solicitor:

*'I would want to potentially see some involvement in something other than just being a solicitor. Maybe some involvement in the community.'*

Lawyer 4

If we question the reasons behind this - what might be the advantage to the firm if a prospective employee has engaged in work related to the law in a context other than a law firm, possibly volunteering, involvement with the community? The question was not asked of this respondent but potentially there may be a number of reasons why she emphasised this point: it could demonstrate passion and commitment to a career in the law; it could also demonstrate broader knowledge in different sectors, other than the private sector and would potentially mean a fresh perspective and a new way of thinking being brought in.

An essential point here is that the employer is impressed and takes into account - moreover seeks out - experience over and above the standard that a graduate would have, in a variety of contexts. Yet the reality is that while employers recognise the relevance of extracurricular activity such as voluntary work and work in the community as showing passion and commitment, they do not naturally place international study and work in this category. The reasons for this are unclear and indicate he need for further research or for a dialogue between employers and educational institutions. In addition, once again this emphasises the importance of graduates making this connection and articulating and 'selling' this experience to employers, as employers evidently are not always prepared to make these links themselves.

# Skills and attributes employers associate with international experience and the value employers attribute to these

Having explored with employers their own conceptions of employability and having followed this up with exploring their attitudes towards a list of employability skills defined by the researchers, employers were asked to articulate in their own terms whether they could see the benefits of international experience to enhancing graduates' employability. If they did see a link between employability and international experience, where was this link and how important it was it in the context of their work? A significant proportion of the employers interviewed saw personality development, in its many different forms, as one of the key advantages of international (work or study) experience.

## Architects' perspective: A more open attitude to life also means better interpersonal skills

Architect 4 emphasises the benefit of international experience to having a broader perspective on life and on the profession:

*As an architect - I think students who have worked and travelled abroad are a bit more worldly-wise, obviously; I think they are usually a bit more rounded as people. I am not convinced that it necessarily makes them better architects because I think that's a talent - design is a skill that can be honed but you have to have a basic skill. I think sometimes they have a bit more of an open view on life and on architecture and on design. I would always encourage students to go and travel but they need to get good work experience wherever it is they go. They need to work in a practice and learn the core skills. Doing gap years is great as well, but you are not really learning - you are learning about life but you are not necessarily learning about how to do a job. I'd always encourage students to do that.*

*(Architect 4)*

He speaks of a more 'open view on life, on architecture and on design'. At the same time however, while he makes the relationship between a different perspective on architecture and design, the employer is quick to emphasise that this is in no way an essential in terms of what he is looking for in employing a graduate. For this employer this more open view on design, architecture, life, contributes to producing a better person, yet not necessarily a better architect. Much more crucial to him is the core skill of design:

***Researcher:*** *When you said a more open attitude to design, what did you mean by that?*

***Architect 4:*** *I think like anybody if you travel and work abroad, and you work with different cultures you have got to have a more open mind because you just see things differently, you see different cultures different way of working different architecture. It is bound to make you think a bit wider I think. Just through living in those cultures. I am not saying it is essential by any means. I don’t tend to look at CVs and think oh I'll interview them because they have worked abroad I tend to look more at the quality of what they have done the quality of their CV and their portfolio, and they might have lived all their life in Sheffield.*

In other words, according to this employer, what international experience brings is a more open attitude to life, to design, to people, and to architecture. How this translates into employability is evidently not straightforward for the employer himself to articulate. However, these same employers who do not see the relationship between a more open attitude to people, life and to work, are the ones who place an emphasis on key employability skills as being the ability to communicate with people, to be open towards others, not to be *'primadonas' (Architect 1)*, to be able to work in a team. The following is a comment which reinforces this point:

*I also look for people that I think have a well rounded personality. I think - and to give you an example I've seen students walk in this room to be interviewed by me whose portfolio is mind-blowing but they can't look at me. And they can't communicate. And a big part of architecture is being able to communicate your architecture to other people. So you might be the best designer in the world but if you can't sell it to a client you might as well not bother. And that sometimes is lacking I think in students. Now that's a lot to do with being young but you know again the better students are the ones who communicate, who interview well who interact with you in an interview, who you feel have got a bit of a personality and are respectful and have got manners - basic manners, basic understanding of how to talk to people and I actually think that is lacking in a lot of students - they could be really talented and they just have no social skills and both are as important.*

(Architect 4)

This employer emphasises precisely the importance of having a more open attitude to people, being able to communicate and being confident in themselves, as well as in his own words: 'a well rounded personality'. This was the second most important attribute which the employer focused on after speaking about the importance of the subject specific skills.

It is evident that this employer contradicts himself as in his first comment he separates personality traits from being a good architect and in his second comment he emphasises the importance of a well rounded personality, confidence and ability to communicate as central to being a good architect. This phenomenon occurs repeatedly in the data, where the same employers who did not place an emphasis on personality development as crucial for employability were the ones who expressed a need for their employees to be able to work as a team, to be able to confidently present themselves, to have customer focus, amongst many other personality characteristics. This leads to the conclusion that while a link exists between international experience and employability, it is not always one which is evident to employers. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the prospective employee, the graduate who has had international experience, to make this link for the employer. This is a phenomenon which is neither new nor exclusive to international experience. Carl Gilleard of the AGR (Association for Graduate Recruiters) highlighted this in relation to any work experience which graduates may have had, whether this was bar work, or shelf stacking:

*'It is about how you convince the employer that working behind the Student Union bar actually was a very good experience for what I am applying to do here. And it is making that kind of connection which is all-important but not many employers are going to do it for you, so you have to do it yourself.'*

*(Carl Gilleard, Careers central, Work experience, Selling your experience).* [*http://destinations.shu.ac.uk/units/unit-w022.shtml*](http://destinations.shu.ac.uk/units/unit-w022.shtml)

Further than this, employers themselves emphasised the fact that they expect the applicant to make these connections themselves and that they are definitively influenced by the candidate's ability to extract and articulate their experience. Architect 3 reinforces this point:

*'At graduate level the most important thing is the person. And it is asking the question, giving the people a chance to just tell us about - that's what I do in my interviews - lets say we have an hour let's split this into three parts - you tell me about yourself, and I will tell you a bit about the company and so they need to be 'selling' themselves. I mean having been abroad has been the most wonderful experience, and that's interesting and it is showing them as a more rounded person and probably demonstrating either initiative or a degree of confidence, a pluckiness - timid people would probably never go abroad. Probably - it is never going to be - I doubt if it is going to do any harm so it is probably a positive, but it is not - if somebody can't express themselves properly, has got the most dreadful portfolio of work, having been abroad isn’t going to make a difference. It is the person and the CV and demonstrating that they are a good designer. Our business is design and we need people who can design.'*

(Architect 3)

While this employer's priority is evidently design and the ability of the graduate to design, he is equally interested in their personality and within an interview situation, his focus is on the personality which this graduate is able to communicate to him as an employer. The employer furthermore sees the contribution which international experience can make to the graduate's ability to draw on personal experience and let their personality come across. Yet, as in the examples by Carl Gilleard, this employer emphasises that the experience in itself is not what is going to make the difference in this process but the graduate's skill in eliciting and articulating this experience.

## Lawyers' perspective: life experience, independence and people focus

The law employers which were interviewed expressed some common themes when discussing the advantages of international experience. These included gaining life experience, demonstrating independence and developing people focus:

***Researcher:*** *In your own words what might be the skills that you perceive a graduate might have gained from working or studying abroad?*

***Lawyer 2:*** *Again it is the life experience, it is a bit like students who go away to university rather than staying at home and studying at home. There is a great deal of experience that is gained from being independent and going - standing on your own two feet it does demonstrate certain characteristics in terms of independence and maturity which you can actually do that for 12 months and live in another country in a completely different culture, I certainly think that they are attributes that would be there that you would definitely think that the students had done that.*

This employer sees the advantages of the graduate being able to demonstrate independence and maturity. Once again, the positive aspects of experience abroad are related to personality development in the individual.

Lawyer 5 similarly to lawyer 2 saw the potential of international experience for developing independence. She further spoke about confidence building, and especially interpersonal competence - confidence in meeting other people, being outgoing with people. This is seen as important to the profession particularly due to its customer facing aspect. Finally she commented on international experience as providing a broader awareness of culture:

***Researcher: …****what would you expect the skills or attributes are which graduates can get from working or studying internationally?*

***Lawyer 5:*** *From working abroad, hmm, I suppose… we would hope that if they have spent time working abroad, that they would have been able to develop maybe some more independence in terms of building up their confidence, moving somewhere new, having to look after themselves without the support of their parents, or the educational institution where they're based in in the UK, so we would hope that they are quite independent and maybe encouraged to become more outgoing and more confident in terms of getting to know more people. I suppose as well, you would hope that it would broaden their awareness of different cultures and different people, and just help to give them more life experience really.*

Besides to enhanced confidence, Lawyer 5 further linked international experience to initiative and to adaptation and flexibility.

Similarly, lawyer 4 emphasised two main aspects (other than speaking languages) as advantages emerging from international experience - she described individuals as becoming more 'people focused' through international experience, which echoes the previous views that it enhances interpersonal confidence and she further expressed an opinion that it gives people a wider view of what is happening in the world - this relates to what other employers have described as broadening their horizons.

Lawyer 3 was able to articulate the advantages of international experience in more detail:

***Lawyer 3:*** *I suppose the softer skills which I do think are relevant are, I suppose they are a bit more ….(hesitation) …cultured, I suppose they have had to go through the process of potentially they are more outgoing - because quite often it can mean going on their own to explore whichever opportunity it is in another country so they are perhaps more outgoing… I think we then get people who are more confident in their own abilities which certainly is yes, a plus, equally as I said language skills are a plus as well, and I think it shows in a person, if they have done that and have perhaps stepped outside of their comfort zone, that they are willing to take on more challenges and are perhaps less fazed by daunting opportunities, which again are quite interesting and appealing attributes.*

This employer highlighted personal attributes which graduates would have gained from international experience such as being more confident and outgoing, but also somebody who would step outside of their comfort zone, be willing to take on more challenges, have more initiative. The employer describes those as *'interesting and appealing attributes'*, and the emphasis is once again on international experience developing personality characteristics. This employer had significantly less difficulty in articulating the range of attributes which international experience would bring. One of the reasons behind this could be that her position was one of having direct involvement with graduate recruitment - she was the graduate recruitment manager. Compared to the testimonials of the majority of the employers interviewed who were managing directors and perhaps had less of an idea of what to look for in graduate recruitment and had varying degrees of involvement in this, it is probably natural that the recruitment manager was more aware of what the company would look for.

## Manufacturers' view: broadening horizons and *'cultural commentary on food'*

There were several aspects of the advantages of international experience which manufacturers identified and which stood out as different from the responses which law or architecture employers gave.

Manufacturer 3 essentially described that international experience relates to broadening horizons and an experience beyond the purely academic. He further related this to the ability of a person to take on a variety of roles to make a 'broader contribution' to what is expected within one role:

*There is a danger I feel that at the end of their degree course that they would have had a very long time in academia, and if that has been the sum total of their experience, then that's a fairly narrow experience. Whereas if they had their arms a bit more open to how the world works, particularly in smaller businesses where however much you want people for their specific expertise, actually what you are looking for is somebody to make a broader, more genuine contribution. You have to multitask in a small business, because you tend not to have to employ specialists who are too narrow.*

*Manufacturer 3*

This broader contribution which the employer is referring to is essentially flexibility within a role and the ability to take initiative and be useful in more than a small area of expertise. The manufacturer also feels that this is something which is missing in contemporary education and at the same time these are attributes which are crucial within a small business. Within a smaller business employees need to be able to multitask and be flexible regarding their roles.

Another aspect which this employer emphasised was the cultural commentary which he felt that a person with international experience could bring to the business:

***R:*** *You mentioned that you had a placement student from France, could you see how she contributed to the business, with knowledge from a different country.*

***M3:*** *Yes. Particularly in the food industry, if you are bringing somebody in and she was specifically working in the product development area, so she brought aside from any academic skills, just a different cultural commentary on product, which would bring a totally different angle.*

*(Manufacturer 3)*

For food manufacturers this does seem to be an advantage - the experience of different ways of working with food, taste influenced by culture and tradition etc. - thee are aspects which experience abroad can contribute to, as Manufacturer 2 highlights from personal experience:

***M2:*** *You get students from the other side of the world, they have a completely different idea about how things should be and it is interesting to get that. I also think for students to have work experience abroad and bring that back is really good and that's what we do as a company… For example when I went to China I studied traditional Chinese medicine in food. And we have tried to bring that back into business, and we did develop some products on the back of that but it is about trying to move the business forward.*

A similar notion on the relevance of international experience in the context of food, taste, and cultural influence on food is expressed by Manufacturer 1:

***R:*** *Looking at a graduate's CV would you see it as an advantage if they had given evidence that they have studied or worked abroad.*

***M1:*** *yes it would, but it would probably have to be in a certain specific area of interest directly related to what we do. For example if it is in sales and they have worked abroad in Spain or France and they have an understanding of the culture, the food, or the taste.*

*(Manufacturer 1)*

* 1.
	2.
	3.

## Would employers seek out international experience?

While there were a number of positive skills which employers associated with international experience, it was further necessary to explore whether these employers attributed importance to international experience, whether they would seek this experience out within a job application and what would it signal to them.

When asked whether she would seek out international experience within a job application, Lawyer 3 brought up the issue of whether there is weighting attributed within their selection and recruitment procedures for different kinds of experience:

***Researcher:*** *It is a complex issue. It is the extent to which you seek it out within a CV as well.*

***Lawyer 3:*** *Yes, I … we wouldn't always ….(much hesitation)… I think for example foreign languages are something that we actively, positively weight in our applications. So if we have somebody who can speak fluent French to a good level they will get awarded marks for that in our short-listing criteria of who gets through to the next stage. Further than that we don't place any particular weighting to - that somebody spent some time abroad. But that said, for example we ask people three key questions and a question might be - or one of this year's questions is* ***'Give us an example of something with hindsight which you would change and what you have learnt from this'.*** *And if somebody was able to draw on experiences from their time abroad to answer that question very well, then that does make them attractive. So I suppose what I have found is that people who spend time abroad maybe have more experiences to draw on and have a wider range of experience as a kind of a whole person that then means that they might have some slightly more attractive qualities or sort of want either experiences to draw upon and make them slightly more attractive.'*

As the employer emphasises, while foreign languages are something the company attributes weighting to in interviewing for graduate level posts, this is not the case with international experience. It is possible that a lot of the hesitation of this employer to state that international experience is considered as an employability asset stems from the fact that international experience is not formally attributed weighting in the recruitment and selection processes of the firm. This is despite the fact that this employer was able to articulate quite well the positive potential of international experience in terms of skills and attributes.

The employer did emphasise however that the applicant's ability to give examples from personal experience, of how they have dealt with difficult situations and what skills they have used to resolve this, is attributed weighting in the selection process. Such questions are common in interviews and the success of the candidate in this situation depends on having a range of personal experiences which would illustrate to an employer their ability to deal with different situations and respond to challenges. This is where the employer herself perceived that international experience would come in useful, in demonstrating to an employer that this is a well rounded individual with personality, confidence and ability to cope in different situations.

Once again this delivers the message that international experience would not be found under one of the boxes which employers would be looking to tick when interviewing graduates, yet it could well be the source of experiences which demonstrates confidence and a well rounded personality to employers and which could, in a competitive graduate recruitment market, give the student who has this experience competitive advantage.

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# Conclusions

This study sought to build an understanding of employers' perspectives on the value of international experience for university graduates. Employers were encouraged to express views on what employability meant in the context of their work and for their employees. On the basis of their understanding of employability, this research sought to explore whether international work and study experience had a place within this understanding, whether such experience was sought out, or recognised as a factor enhancing employability.

It is important to recognise that this was a small scale phenomenological study which did not seek to generalise on employers' views on the subject of mobility, but rather to provide an indication of some of the complexities in the ways the employers interviewed perceived international experience and employability in the context of their own business. The views of these employers contribute significantly to our understanding of the ways in which employability can be problematised, particularly where employers' conceptions of employability differ from those expressed in research literature and therefore those influencing higher education provision.

Research literature on internationalising the student experience stands firmly behind the idea that study or work abroad enhances skills and attributes in students which can be directly related to enhanced employability. Yet the findings of this research indicate that this relationship between international experience and employability which academic literature readily makes and HE institutions readily adopt, is not as obvious to employers themselves. The idea of global awareness and intercultural competence is not at the forefront of employers' minds when recruiting into their workforce. At the same time however, client care and interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and a broader awareness of the commercial world of business are only a few of the essential competencies which employers repeatedly confirmed they would seek evidence for within the selection and recruitment process. Thus while it may be evident for research literature and for the HE sector that there is a strong relationship between these competencies and international experience, this is not necessarily obvious to employers themselves.

A further difficulty was that it became apparent from the interviews with employers that they do utilise a tick box approach in some parts of the selection process; within this approach international experience is not attributed any weighting. However, when it comes to interviewing graduates, employers repeatedly stated that they would look for evidence of experience outside the purely academic, which has allowed the graduate to demonstrate initiative and a passion and interest in the area, an understanding of how business works. Current examples which employers gave of how graduates would demonstrate this within the selection process included voluntary work, any part time work, working n the community. While international experience is not currently part of this list this is not to say that employers would not value its potential in this respect, provided the applicant was able to articulate the value of this experience.

A further, much emphasised factor by employers was the ability of graduates to show personality at the interview, to demonstrate that they are a well rounded individual with life and wok experience who is capable of confident self presentation and effective interpersonal skills. For many of these employers, these personality traits were the second most important evidence of an employable graduate next to subject specific knowledge and skills. Once again it is easy for research literature to argue that there is a strong relationship between the development of personality and international experience, particularly in developing self-confidence, interpersonal competence and for gaining life experience. Employers themselves associated life experience, a more open attitude to life and a more rounded individual as he key benefits of international experience. This did not change the fact however that international experience in itself did not stand at the forefront of employers' minds as contributing to graduates' employability.

These findings highlight the challenge which faces graduates. On the one hand, a responsible student who actively seeks out opportunities for enhancing their employability would choose international work or study as part of their course. On the other hand, the findings of this research suggest that employers would not necessarily look at evidence of international experience as attainment. What the findings suggest employers would look for however, are the skills and attributes which a graduate has gained from this experience. This has several implications for practice.

First of all it places a significant responsibility on students to see their international experience as an opportunity to enhance their employability skills and attributes. International experience as attainment may mean little to employers, however the skills and attributes it can develop in learners are some of the key competencies employers actively seek out in the recruitment process. This is in no way a new responsibility for learners. Career guidance resources increasingly emphasise that for any work based learning experience the university graduate would have to put in the effort to articulate its value in the context of the job they are applying for (Gilleard, 2009). It is also well known that employers are not very likely to make those key connections between the kind of experience a student has had and its value to their business. The key responsibility of the learner is therefore to establish these relationships themselves and to articulate these to the employer in an effective manner.

Besides the responsibility which is placed on learners, the findings of research have implications for the responsibilities of higher education provision for employability, especially where internationalisation of the higher education experience is concerned. This responsibility can be expressed as the need to align opportunities for work based learning or study abroad more closely to the needs of employers. The employers interviewed identified a number of factors - skills and attributes - which would give a positive competitive advantage to a graduate applying for a job in their company. These factors included interpersonal competence, people focus, commercial awareness, ability to demonstrate passion and enthusiasm for the area, independence, self confidence and a rounded personality. Where international experience is made available to students therefore, it would make sense in the context of employability to have direct opportunities for students to develop these skills and attributes. Further than this, it would make sense to make both students and employers part of this process. While it may be the intent of international experience to provide opportunities in these areas, is there a discussion which makes the student part of this intent? In addition, while we may seek to construct international experience as an opportunity for enhancing employability, is this part of employers' vision of employability as well? Evans et al. (2006) propose a model for work based learning experience, which involves a three way dialogue between employers, academic and support staff, and learners, on the nature, content and outcomes of the work based learning experience. The authors maintain that such dialogue is part of an agreement which ensures the experience is meaningful to the learner's employability. An argument can be made here for a similar model to be adopted.

This need to align international experience provision to employers' needs becomes even more apparent where employers emphasise aspects of employability which do not seem to be part of students' international experience. Commercial awareness in one example of an attribute which employers expressed they valued yet which was not identified in research literature as a goal or an outcome of working/ studying internationally. There is a responsibility on programmes which promote international experience to emphasise this factor and facilitate this kind of learning in students if international experience is to be linked to employability. It is in some ways related to global awareness which is recognised in research literature as an outcome of international experience. But this link needs to be emphasised so that graduates themselves are able to articulate it to employers in terms which these employers would understand.

Besides the responsibilities which HE provision has in making international experience valuable to employability and the responsibilities which fall on the learner, there are also external factors which would influence employers' outlook on international experience. It does appear that SME employers in particular can construct an understanding of international experience in a very different way to this in which international exchange educational programmes or Higher Education do. Educational international experience is concerned with raising intercultural awareness, enhancing learners' ability to communicate cross-culturally, and enhancing a broad range of cultural competencies. The aim of international experience within HE should not be to reinforce the ideas of globalisation, yet from an employer's point of view this association seems to be prominent. The idea of globalisation is one which SMEs will naturally be averse to as it disagrees with the ways of working which they adopt. Going back to the research literature on internationalisation, Giddens (in Kristensen, 2004: 66) sees globalisation as the driving force behind the shift from lifelong employment to lifelong learning. The findings of this research show a conflict in associating the notion of globalisation with international work and study experience - as long as this association is made, it seems employers will have an uneasy relationship to international experience, and any potential positive effects of such experience - educational, enhancing employability - may be seen as secondary by employers. There is an argument therefore for shifting the discourse on international experience and this on lifelong learning for students, away form the idea that such experience and such thinking is driven by globalisation.

This research has highlighted the need to tailor international experience in a way which would enhance its relevance to employability. Considering the shared responsibilities which learners, employers and academics have within this process, the need to disseminate and build on the findings of this research plays an important role. A dialogue is needed with employers regarding the kinds of experience which would be valuable in the employment context for a given subject area. Such dialogue would go both ways in contributing to tailoring international experience to the goal of employability and to raising awareness in employers of the potential advantages of international experience to the context of their work.

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