Do employers value international study and internships? A comparative analysis of 31 countries

Do employers value international study and internships? A comparative analysis of 31 countries

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Abstract

International student mobility is often promoted as enhancing graduates' employability in globalised labour markets. Nevertheless, empirical evidence on this assumed causal link remains limited. Particularly the perspectives of employers remains understudied. Therefore, in this paper I analyse (1) whether European employers value study abroad; (2) which specific skills employers need when valuing international experience; and (3) whether 'signaling effects' of employing international graduates exist. The analyses are based on Flash Eurobarometer 304 'Employers' perception of graduate employability' (n = 7,036), conducted in 31 countries. The results reveal that a minority of employers consider international experience when making recruitment decisions. However, significant variability across the countries can be detected. Furthermore, the findings indicate that international education is particularly valued when employers need graduates with good foreign language and decision-making skills. In addition, the results indicate that with higher shares of foreign graduates in a company, the likelihood international experience is valued increases.

Keywords: international student mobility; employability; employers; education-to-work; multi-level analysis; Europe.

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, intra-European student mobility has been increasingly promoted by the European Commission. The annual budget allocated to the Erasmus programme, the most

popular exchange programme for higher education students, for example, exceeds 450 million euro (Souto Otero, Huisman, Beerkens, De Wit, & Vujić, 2013). Besides cultural and social rationales, the promotion of intra-EU student mobility is associated with economic benefits: study abroad would enhance the competitiveness of Europe among global knowledge economies (Van Mol, 2014b). Overall, it is expected that study abroad enhances students' employability, as international students would improve, for example, their language proficiency, intercultural skills and independency (e.g. Anquetil, 2006; European Commission, 2016; Van Mol, 2014b).

However, little empirical evidence supports the idea that study abroad would lead to employment gains. Although student mobility is generally promoted as giving students a competitive advantage for their future careers, empirical research into the link between student mobility and employability remains surprisingly scarce (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Li, 2013). Whereas a handful of studies focused on mobile and non-mobile students' perspectives on employability (e.g. Brooks, Waters, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011), the perspective of employers has been largely neglected (Van Mol, 2014a). This is rather unfortunate, as employers form the link between employability and actual employment (Prokou, 2008). Consequently, in this paper I focus on employers' perceptions of international learning experiences. The analyses are based on Flash Eurobarometer 304 'Employers' perception of graduate employability', which surveyed companies with more than 50 employees in all (current) EU-Member States, Iceland, Norway and Turkey in 2010 (n = 7,036).

This paper advances the literature on international student mobility and employability in several ways. First, most previous research on the employability of (formerly) international students focused on students, policy-makers or higher education practitioners' perceptions and students early career experiences in the labour market. Differences in labour market

trajectories between those who spent a study abroad and those who remained at home are thereby often attributed *a posteriori* to their international exchange. This paper complements these perspectives by empirically investigating whether employers actually consider study abroad as a selection criterion when recruiting graduates. Second, the handful of available empirical studies incorporating the perspectives of employers mainly rely on rather limited case-study evidence (e.g. Crossman & Clarke, 2010), oversampled companies employing Erasmus interns (e.g. European Commission, 2014), had very low response rates (e.g. Bracht et al., 2006) or a low number of companies per country (European Commission, 2014), introducing a significant bias in the data. To my knowledge, this paper is one of the first papers to provide a large-scale international comparative analysis on employers' perspectives. Third, most research focused on graduates' experiences *studying* abroad. I extend this perspective by also incorporating employers' perspective on international internships. This is particularly relevant in the European context, as a growing share of students go abroad as part of work placement schemes (Deakin, 2014), and it has been reported employers might place more value on previous international work experience instead of a study period abroad, as work-based experience might provide a better preparation for the world of work.

2. Background

2.1. Graduate employability

Graduate employability is generally understood as the skills and abilities of a graduate to find employment, remain in employment or obtain new employment when required (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Thijssen, Van der Heijden, & Rocco, 2008). It has become a key term when defining outcomes of higher education as today there is an 'explicit concern with universities producing new workers' (Morley, 2001: 131). Governments and

employers now expect higher education institutions to prepare graduates for the world of work (De La Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000; Heaton, McCracken, & Harrison, 2008), as graduates 'are perceived as potential key players in the drive towards enhancing value-added products and services in an economy demanding stronger skill-sets and advanced technical knowledge' (Tomlinson, 2012: 408). As such, there is a general expectancy that higher education institutions should ensure qualifications match the needs of labour markets (Prokou, 2008). Particularly in the aftermath of the economic crisis, there has been an increasing emphasis on how higher education systems can meet employers' needs, which is reflected, for example, by the national and European programmes on the modernisation and internationalisation of higher education (Pavlin & Svetlik, 2014). Influenced by the quantitative benchmarks on international student mobility set by the European Commission, higher education institutions today often stress the relevance of international student mobility for – among other outcomes – enhancing graduates' employability. Nevertheless, it remains an open question whether or not employers really take international experiences of graduates into account when making recruitment decisions.

2.2. The added value of international student mobility for employability – theoretical perspectives

Inspired by Bourdieu, Munk (2009) formulated the theoretical notion of 'informational capital' in relation to international student mobility. When students go abroad, they accumulate knowledge and intercultural skills on the one hand, and 'symbolic capital' invoking a 'signaling effect' which distinguishes them from non-mobile graduates on the other hand. Two theoretical approaches can be connected to this notion, namely human capital theory and signaling theory (see also Cai, 2013).

In human capital theory, it has been postulated that investments in education enhance individuals' knowledge and skills, which are rewarded in the labour market in terms of better occupational opportunities and returns (Becker, 1975; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004). Nevertheless, today investments in (higher) education do not automatically guarantee a smooth education-to-work transition, as an increasing number of people obtain the same degree, leading to an inflation of educational qualifications (e.g. Rauhvargers, 2011; Tomlinson, 2012). In such a context, student mobility 'might be perceived by young adults as a way to achieve a competitive advantage for their entrance into the labour market after graduation' (Van Mol, 2014b: 31). International mobility can then be considered an additional investment in human capital, as specific skills such as foreign language skills, personal development and intercultural competences are expected to be gained abroad. International students particularly point to benefit from study abroad in terms of interpersonal and communication skills, teamwork skills and problem solving and analytical skills (e.g. Potts, 2015), as well as increased foreign language proficiency (Van Mol, 2014b) and intercultural skills (e.g. Anquetil, 2006). Employers might make inferences about these specific skills when an applicant mentions a study and / or internship abroad in his/her résumé.

The human capital perspective mainly focuses on an individual's responsibility to invest in his/her education in order to enhance employability. A complementary perspective is offered by the signaling theory (Faia, 1981; Spence, 1973; Stiglitz, 1975), which postulates that 'hiring is an investment decision for employers' (Cai, 2013: 459). Employers screen job applications looking for signals for credentials that candidates have certain desired skills. Foreign education thereby signals specific skills (e.g. intercultural and language skills) and personal characteristics to employers (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008a), i.e. the 'symbolic capital' in Munk's framework. From the perspective of signaling theory, in a globalised world

employers would receive the signal of foreign credentials. Furthermore, these signals are subject to change. After all, employers make hiring decisions under conditions of uncertainty (Protsch & Solga, 2015; Spence, 1973), and their experiences with graduates with similar profiles might therefore influence their recruitment decisions. For example, when an employer employs more graduates with international experience and these graduates perform well in the company, an employer might be more inclined to contract other graduates with international experiences, as they might make inferences on specific skills they know these graduates possess. Consequently, it can be expected employers who employ more international graduates, value international experience more highly.

2.3. The added value of study / internships abroad for employability – existing empirical evidence from some European countries

Research in non-European countries revealed that study abroad is indeed often connected to the idea of increased employability, both by students and their families (Bodycott, 2009; Waters, 2007; Xiang & Shen, 2009), as well as by employers (see e.g. Rizvi, 2000; Waters, 2007). Recent research in Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom, however, partly contradict these findings. From a student's perspective, employability has been documented as one of the main drivers for work placement mobility from the UK (Deakin, 2014). It also figures within the decision-making process of those who go on short term exchanges such as Erasmus, but it seems to play a more secondary role, as it is rarely the most important motivation for going abroad (e.g. Findlay, King, Stam, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006; Van Mol, 2014a; Waters & Brooks, 2010). Most existing empirical studies, furthermore, report a rather pessimistic perspective of European students in terms of the value of studying abroad for their employability. This holds both for credit mobility (whereby students spend an exchange period at a foreign higher education institution) and degree mobility (whereby students obtain

their degree in another country). Brooks et al. (2012) showed, for example, that many formerly mobile British students think many employers do not value a study period abroad or a foreign degree, and some even believed foreign education decreased their chances of getting a job. Similar findings have been reported among students in the Nordic context (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008b, 2011; Wiers-Jenssen & Try, 2005). Explanations for this lack of advantage is thereby tentatively attributed to the fact that employers might not always have an idea of the value of a foreign degree, whereas they are able to assess the quality of domestic higher education institutions. Furthermore, de Wit and Jones (2014) argued there might be a discrepancy between the discourse used by academics and employers. As academics do not always use the right language to describe the benefits associated with international experiences (both at home and abroad), it is often difficult to convince employers of the importance of internationalisation. Interestingly, however, a study in the UK suggested that only one third of employers would value a study exchange abroad, compared to two thirds valuing foreign work experience (Archer & Davison, 2008). As such, it seems that employers are increasingly interested in students who undertook an internship/work placement abroad instead of an international study period or degree.

Importantly, the few available international comparative studies show there is significant international variability in whether students link a study period abroad with increased employability (e.g. Bracht et al., 2006; Van Mol, 2014a). Students from countries such as Italy, which is marked by less positive career prospects for higher education graduates, for example, more often report enhanced employability as a significant driver of mobility (Van Mol, 2014a). Also in Eastern European countries, students rate the professional value of participation in the Erasmus programme higher than their peers in Western Europe (Bracht et al., 2006; Rivza & Teichler, 2007; Teichler & Janson, 2007; Van Mol, 2014a). Therefore, I expect significant variability in the relevance of study abroad in

recruitment decisions across Europe, with employers in Eastern and Southern European countries taking study / work abroad into account more often when hiring new employees.

3. Methodology:

3.1. Data

In order to investigate whether employers across Europe take international experience into account when making recruitment decisions, I rely on the Flash Eurobarometer 304 'Employers' perception of graduate employability'. This telephone survey targeted company employees responsible for hiring and recruiting people, and was conducted between 30 August and 7 September 2010 in all EU-Member States, Croatia, Iceland, Norway and Turkey. The target group were companies with more than fifty employees in the private and public sector, excluding the agricultural and education sectors. The survey aimed to investigate to what extent employers employ graduates and how graduates are valued in the workplace. Furthermore, the study aimed to gather information from recruiters in enterprises on how they perceive graduate employability and whether higher education graduates have the right skills, knowledge and competences to cope with the type of work they envisage. The survey contains questions on the importance of foreign experiences (study / internships) when recruiting graduates, and is therefore very relevant for the purposes of this paper. The number of employers interviewed ranged from 100 (Malta) to 404 (France). Unfortunately, no information is available on the response rate. The total sample comprises the answers of 7,036 companies.

3.2. Variables

3.2.1. Dependent variable

The dependent variables measure the importance attached to study / traineeship abroad by recruiters. These variables are based on two statements, namely 'It is very important that new recruits have studied abroad' and 'It is very important that new recruits have done an internship abroad', which recruiters could rate at a four-point-Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). Although the Flash Eurobarometer does not allow us to distinguish between credit and degree mobility, both questions give an indication of the value employers attribute to foreign experience of recent graduates. Given the ordinal nature of the variables and the fact that few employers strongly agree with this statement in each country (see figure 1), these variables are recoded as a binary variable, indicating whether recruiters value study / internships abroad (0 = no; 1 = yes).

3.2.2. Independent variables

First, from a human capital perspective it can be expected students gain specific skills abroad, which are potentially valued by employers. Therefore, I investigate which transversal skills are related to valuing study/work abroad. In the Flash Eurobarometer, employers could rate the importance of a range of skills and competences when recruiting higher education graduates on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 'not important at all' to 4 'very important'. These skills and competences are 'good with numbers', 'good reading/writing skills', 'foreign language skills', 'computer skills', 'sector specific skills', 'communication skills', 'analytical and problem solving skills', 'ability to adapt to and act in new situations', 'decision-making skills', 'team-working skills', and 'planning and organisational skills'. Whereas I investigate the relationship of all these skills with the value employers place on international experience, it can be expected that particularly foreign language skills, communication skills, analytical and problem solving skills, team-working skills and ability

to adapt and act in new situations should be valued, as these are among the most common documented outcomes of international student mobility (see e.g. Potts, 2015).

Second, in line with signaling theory I expect study or internships abroad to have a 'signaling effect' to employers. Therefore, I included two variables on the share of international graduates among the employees of the company: first, the share of international graduates from Europe in the company and second the share of international graduates from outside Europe in the company. Both variables are measured on an 8-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (None) to 8 (more than 50%).

3.2.3. Control variables

In the analyses, I control for a number of possibly confounding variables. First, I control for the relative importance of educational fields based on the question 'From which educational fields do you mostly recruit higher education graduates?'. Employers could indicate a number of educational fields, namely Engineering, Business and Economic Studies, Languages, Law, Teacher Training and Education, Medical Studies, Humanities, Art and Design, Communication and Information Sciences, Social and Behavioural Sciences, Natural Sciences, and 'Other' (0 = not mentioned, 1 = mentioned). This variable is included as it has been suggested international experience is particularly valued for Business and Economic Studies (Bracht et al., 2006). Second, employers who are more internationally active are logically more inclined to attract graduates with international experience (Archer & Davison, 2008; European Commission, 2010). Therefore, I control for a company's international activities. This variable is based on the question 'What percentage of your day-to-day operations involves dealing with people in- or from other countries?', which recruiters could rate on a five-point-Likert scale, ranging from 1 (none) to 5 (more than half of the operations). Third, I control for company size, which is a dichotomous variable (1 = 50-249

employees, 2 = 250 or more employees). The first category is taken as the reference (baseline) category. Fourth, I control for the ownership structure of the company. This is also a categorical variable, with three categories (1 = public, 2 = private, 3 = mixed). The first category is the reference category. Fifth, I control for the share of higher education graduates employed in company, measured on a 11-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (none) to 11 (91-100%). Sixth, I control for the importance employers place on international rankings of higher education institutions as a selection criterion, as Souto-Otero and Enders (2015) showed that larger employers who are more globalised in terms of staff and operations are also more likely to place importance on the rankings. This variable is measured on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not important at all) to 4 (very important),

3.3. Analytic strategy

Given the binary nature of our dependent variable and the fact that the companies are situated within different countries, I use random intercept models (Guo & Zhao, 2000; Hox, 2010; Snijders & Bosker, 1999). The key dependent variables are whether recruiters value a study or internship abroad. The chosen approach allows to control for cross-sectional variation across countries. The equations are estimated in Stata 14.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the included variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Specific skills sought by employers			1	4	
Good with numbers	3.28	0.71			6,900
Good reading / writing skills	3.55	0.60			6,975
Foreign language skills	3.03	0.93			6,953
Computer skills	3.59	0.58			6,991
Sector specific skills	3.52	0.69			6,936
Communication skills	3.59	0.57			6,998
Analytical and problem solving skills	3.55	0.59			6,966
Ability to adapt and act in new situations	3.60	0.55			6,966
Decision-making skills	3.41	0.64			6,954
Team-working skills	3.67	0.52			6,992
Planning and organisational skills	3.46	0.62			6,973
Share international employees			1	8	
From European countries	1.56	1.20			6,846
From non-European countries	1.27	0.7			6,837
International activities company	2.68	1.40	1	5	6,791
Share graduates in company	3.85	2.42	2	11	6,514
Importance higher education rankings	2.34	0.97	1	4	6,916

	%	Min	Max	N
Value study abroad (ref: no)	22.0	0	1	6,953
Value internship abroad (ref: no)	26.3	0	1	6,945
Main recruitment fields		0	1	
Engineering	51.2			6,924
Business and Economic Studies	52.5			6,924
Languages	7.2			6,924
Law	14.3			6,924
Teacher training and education	6.0			6,924
Medical studies	7.7			6,924
Humanities	6.9			6,924
Art and design	5.0			6,924
Communication and information sciences	15.6			6,924
Social and behavioural sciences	9.2			6,924
Natural sciences	7.7			6,924
Other	21.5			6,924
Company size		0	1	7,030
50-249	77.0			
More than 250	23.0			
Ownership structure		1	3	7,036
Public	21.5			
Private	73.8			
Mixed	4.7			

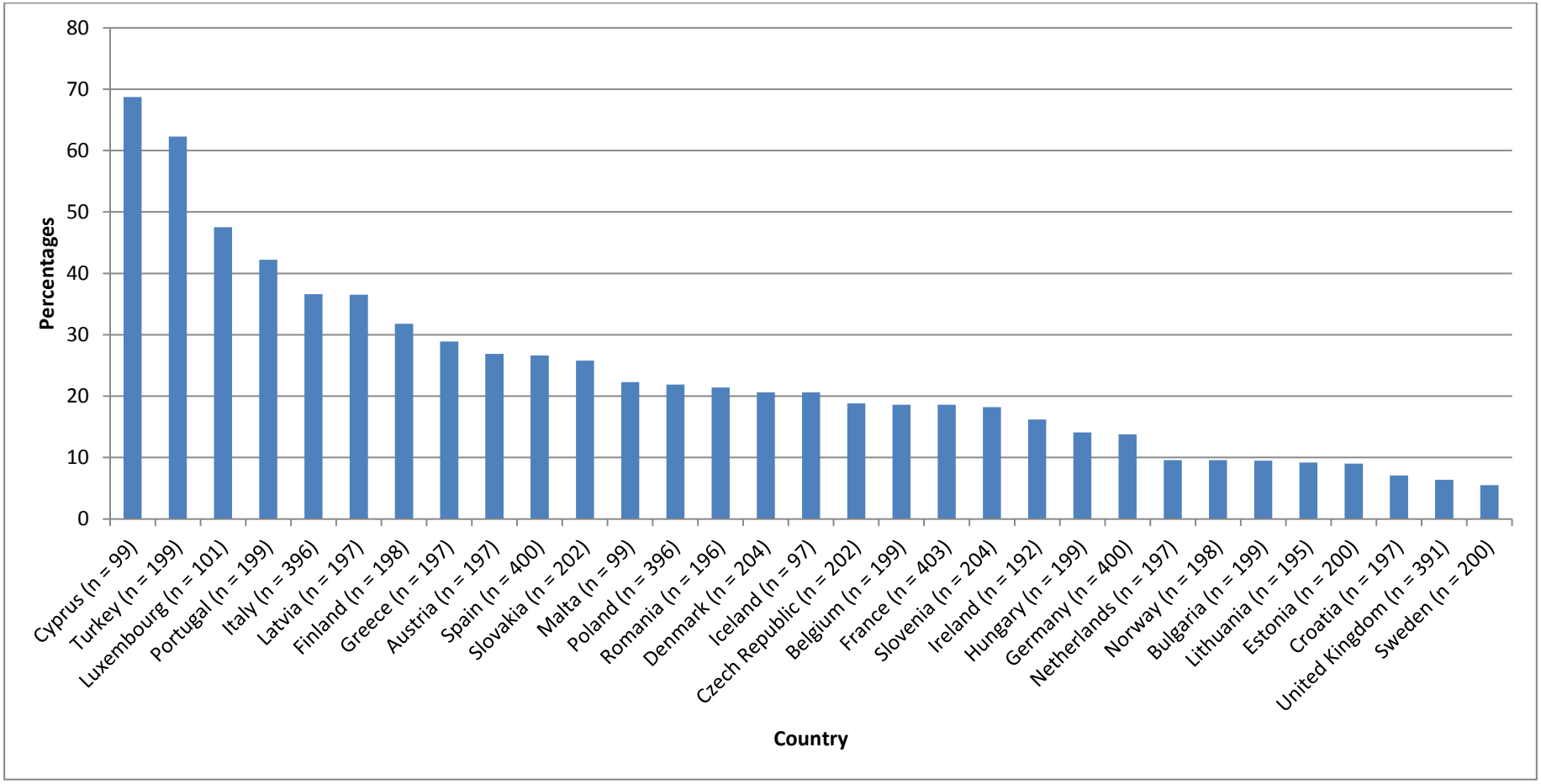
4. Results

4.1. Descriptives

In a first analytic step, I investigate the descriptive statistics. Considering our dependent variables, it is interesting to notice in table 1 that employers value an internship abroad more highly than study abroad. Nevertheless, the difference is not very large. Overall, about one in four employers rate an internship abroad as important, against one in five employers valuing international study. Regarding our independent variables, it can be noticed that no specific skill stands out. However, one of the variables that can be expected to be strongly associated with study abroad, namely foreign language skills, is the least important criterion when making recruitment decisions. This might be related, however, to the fact that a minority of the surveyed recruiters hire new employees with a background in language studies. Furthermore, the share of graduates with an international degree in the surveyed companies is rather low. This holds for both the share of graduates from European and non-European countries.

Table 1 does not tells us anything about the potential international variability across Europe. Therefore, figure 1 and 2 present the importance recruiters attribute to international study / internships per country. Considering study abroad, it can be noticed that in most countries, around 80 per cent of employers do not place importance on international study. In a number of countries, this percentage even succeeds 90 per cent, namely in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Norway and the Netherlands. On the other side, there are a number of countries where employers

Figure 1: Share of employers valuing study abroad, according to country where the company is based (percentage of employers valuing study abroad)

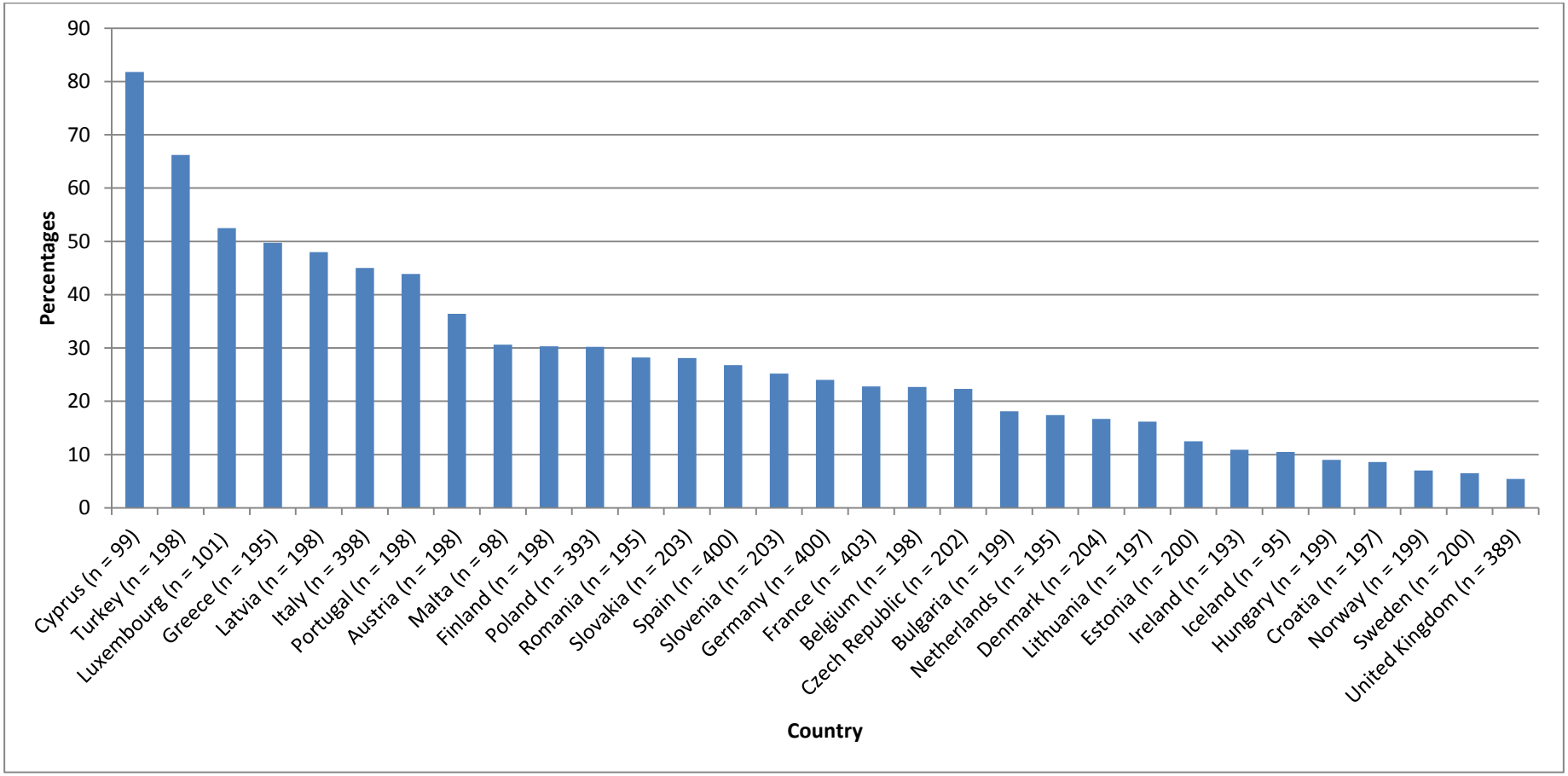


Note: Based on the statement 'It is very important that new recruits have studied abroad'. The figure shows the share of employers stating to 'rather agree' and 'strongly agree' with this statement.

generally place more value on study abroad. This is the case for employers in the Southern European countries: Cyprus, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, as well as in Turkey, Luxembourg, Latvia, Finland, Austria and Slovakia. The data from the Eurobarometer thus suggest it are particularly Southern European and peripheral countries where study abroad is valued.

When considering the importance attributed to internships abroad, however, a different picture emerges for some countries. In five countries, over 90 percent of employers do not value an internship abroad. This is the case for the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Croatia and Hungary. On the other end, more than half of employers in Cyprus, Turkey and Luxembourg, and almost one in two employers in Portugal, Italy, Latvia and Greece rate an internship abroad as important. This number is around one third for employers in Poland, Finland, Malta and Austria. In addition, some observations can be made when comparing figure 1 and 2. First, in only three countries study abroad is rated significantly higher compared to an internship abroad. This is the case for Hungary, Iceland and Ireland, but employers in these countries place a rather low importance on both forms of international experience. Second, recruiters do not seem to significantly differentiate between study and placements abroad in Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom. In the vast majority of these countries, employers place rather low importance on both forms of international experience. Exceptions are Finland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and Turkey. Third, in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovenia an internship abroad is rated more highly compared to study abroad. The data hence suggest significant variability across the European Union.

Figure 2: Share of employers valuing an internship abroad, according to country where the company is based (percentage of employers valuing internships abroad)



Note: Based on the statement 'It is very important that new recruits have done an internship abroad'. The figure shows the share of employers stating to 'rather agree' and 'strongly agree' with this statement.

4.2. Multivariate analysis

The null model (not presented, available on simple request to the author) only included the independent variable and the random-effects, and indicated significant variation across countries in terms of the importance employers attribute to international study and internships. Therefore, the multilevel approach is preferable.

In table 2, four different models are presented. Model I investigates the relationship between the skills employers seek among new recruits and the value they attribute to study abroad on the one hand, and the signaling effect of international graduates on the other hand. The model shows that employers are more likely to value study abroad when they seek to employ graduates who have good language skills, computer skills, and decision-making skills. Furthermore, the model reveals a significant correlation between the share of European and non-European graduates in the company and the importance employers attribute to study abroad. As such, the assumption of a signaling effect is supported by this model. In model II, the control variables are added. The correlations detected in model I persist. In model III, I investigate the relationship between the importance attached to specific skills in recruitment procedures and the value employers attribute to internships abroad on the one hand, and the signaling effect of employing international graduates on the other hand. Similarly to model I, a significant relationship is detected for foreign language skills, decision-making skills and the share of European and non-European graduates in the company. In model IV, the control variables are added. The correlations detected in model III also persist in this model.

Table 2: Multilevel binary logistic regressions on the value of study and internships abroad (odds ratios, standard errors in parentheses)

	Study abroad		Internship abroad	
	Model I (n = 6,450)	Model II (n = 5,765)	Model III (n = 6,718)	Model IV (n = 5,764)
Independent variables				
Specific skills sought by employers				
Good with numbers	1.08 (.057)	1.08 (.064)	1.06 (.052)	1.04 (.057)
Good reading/writing skills	0.99 (.061)	0.96 (.065)	0.99 (.058)	1.00 (.063)
Foreign language skills	1.76 (.080)***	1.63 (.085)***	1.74 (.075)***	1.56 (.076)***
Computer skills	1.19 (.083)*	1.21 (.091)*	1.05 (.068)	1.06 (.074)
Sector specific skills	0.95 (.050)	0.96 (.056)	1.02 (.052)	1.04 (.057)
Communication skills	1.15 (.0.82)	1.14 (.088)	1.05 (.070)	1.04 (.074)
Analytical and problem solving skills	1.00 (.069)	1.02 (.077)	1.06 (.070)	1.10 (.078)
Ability to adapt and act in new situations	0.94 (.070)	0.96 (.077)	1.10 (.078)	1.08 (.081)
Decision-making skills	1.30 (.086)***	1.25 (.090)**	1.27 (.080)***	1.23 (.083)**
Team-working skills	1.05 (.083)	1.09 (.093)	0.88 (.064)	0.87 (.068)
Planning and organisational skills	1.00 (.068)	0.92 (.068)	1.01 (.065)	0.98 (.068)
Signaling effects				
Share of European graduates	1.15 (.039)***	1.12 (.041)**	1.15 (.039)***	1.10 (.041)*
Share of non-EU graduates	1.17 (.055)**	1.13 (.060)*	1.17 (.055)**	1.11 (.058)*
Control variables				
Main recruitment fields				
Engineering		0.97 (.076)		1.01 (.075)
Business and Economic Studies		1.18 (.091)*		1.26 (.092)**
Languages		1.30 (.178)		1.36 (.181)*
Law		1.15 (.131)		1.00 (.110)
Teacher Training and education		0.80 (.150)		1.02 (.179)
Medical Studies		0.99 (.149)		1.31 (.181)
Humanities		0.91 (.150)		0.97 (.152)
Arts and Design		1.11 (.195)		0.89 (.153)

Communication and Information Sciences		0.99 (.112)		1.02 (.110)
Social and behavioural sciences		0.87 (.130)		0.89 (.126)
Natural sciences		0.90 (.132)		0.92 (.125)
Other		0.87 (.086)		0.95 (.089)
International activities company		1.10 (.031)**		1.14 (.031)***
Company size (ref: 50-250)		1.08 (.096)		1.06 (.089)
Ownership structure (ref: public)				
Private		0.86 (.090)		0.93 (.093)
Mixed		1.11 (.202)		1.19 (.205)
Share of graduates in company		1.00 (.016)		0.99 (.015)
Importance higher education rankings		1.31 (.039)***		1.25 (.037)***
McKelvey & Zavoina R2	.15	.15	.19	.18
ICC	.11	.15	.10	.12

* < .05; ** < .01; *** < .001

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I explored an often neglected perspective on the nexus between international student mobility and employability; namely the perspective of employers. The analysis is based on a large employer survey in 31 countries. Besides investigating the value employers attribute to international experiences and international variability across the studied countries, I also focused on the relationship with the specific skills employers seek among new recruits, as well as possible signaling effects of employing graduates with international experience within companies. Several conclusions can be drawn.

First, from a human capital perspective I expected that international students make an additional investment in their human capital, acquiring specific skills abroad. In the existing literature, particularly interpersonal and communication skills, teamwork skills, problem solving and analytical skills as well as language skills are often mentioned as the main gains of international learning mobility. Hence, it could be expected that employers would particularly value study or internships abroad when searching for new recruits with these skills. The results showed that study and internships abroad are particularly valued when good foreign language and decision-making skills are among the main recruitment criteria, but not the other skills. Whereas the relationship between the value of foreign experience for language skills is relatively straightforward, the relationship between international learning mobility and decision-making skills is less clear. A tentative explanation derives from the fact that moving abroad might be a challenging decision for young adults, reflecting a specific personality profile appreciated by employers. Overall, the presented findings support the idea that employers *might* value the additional investment in human capital students make when moving abroad. The increase in employability of graduates will be particularly noticeable when these graduates apply for jobs where a good command of one or more foreign languages is valued or when decision-making skills are an important recruitment criterion. Nevertheless,

the flipside of the coin is that when recruiters particularly value other skills such as organisational, team-working or communication skills, for example, the advantage of having studied abroad might not apply anymore. In such situations, international learning mobility might not form a source of distinction to employers *vis-à-vis* their non-mobile counterparts.

Second, I expected a signalling effect of employing international graduates. Employers who have positive experiences with (formerly) international students would be more likely to value study or internships abroad. The results indeed revealed a positive correlation between the share of foreign graduates employed in a company and the importance employers attribute to international student mobility. This correlation persisted when controlling for possible confounding factors such as international activities of the company. As such, it seems that when employers have positive experiences in the work place with formerly international students, the likelihood of recruiting more internationally experienced students increases.

Third, only a minority of European employers rate international student mobility as important. This is in line with the case-study evidence of graduate students in the UK (Brooks et al., 2012) and Norway (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008a, 2008b). For both countries, the rather pessimistic view of graduates on the value employers attribute to their international experiences is confirmed by the perceptions of employers in this study. This finding suggests higher education institutions might fail to communicate the benefits of foreign experience either to students or their potential employers, and advocates for more emphasis on the personal and professional outcomes and skills of a mobility experience instead of emphasis on the mobility experience itself (De Wit & Jones, 2014). Nevertheless, the findings also revealed a significant variety among employers across Europe in terms of valuing international experience. Whereas previous studies (e.g. Bracht et al., 2006) suggested study abroad is particularly valued in Eastern and Southern European countries, our results only confirm this hypothesis for Southern European countries. The analysis showed that learning

mobility is principally valued in Southern Europe, Austria, Finland, Latvia, Luxembourg and Turkey. The fact that employers in Eastern European countries are not more likely to value international experiences might simply have to do with the timing of previous studies, which focused on countries that just joined the European Union or were not even a member yet (e.g. Bracht et al., 2006). Perspectives of employers on international experience in these countries might have changed. For the Southern European countries, it can be hypothesised the higher value attributed to international student mobility by employers reflects the impact of the recent economic crisis. Due to the crisis, a very high number of young adults with a higher education degree are unemployed (Van Mol, 2016). In such a context, employers dispose of an increased pool of graduates from which they can recruit. Study or internships abroad might have a stronger signaling effect in such situations compared to economically more prosperous countries. The findings for Austria, Finland, Latvia, Luxembourg and Turkey are more difficult to explain. A tentative explanation could come from the fact that international student mobility is rather common in Austria, Finland, Latvia and Luxembourg. Finland, for example, is one of the few EU-countries attaining the quantitative benchmarks for Erasmus student mobility (Van Mol, 2015), and Latvian young people are more mobile compared to young adults in other European countries (Lulle & Bužinska, 2015). Furthermore, the Latvian government is placing a lot of emphasis on programmes which aim to convince their diaspora to return to Latvia for work. Finally, Austria and Luxembourg have a very international student body, and the geographical closeness of their major cities and universities to neighbouring European countries and higher education institutions might mean many Austrian and Luxembourgish students dispose of foreign educational credentials. In these four countries, it is possible international experience is the norm rather than the exception. The high value employers attribute to international experience in Turkey, on the other hand, can be explained from a scarcity perspective. According to figures from the UNESCO Institute for

Statistics in 2010, Turkey has one of the lowest inbound and outbound mobility ratios of the countries analysed in this paper (0.7 and 1.5 per cent respectively). In such a situation, foreign credentials might have a distinctive effect on a résumé.

Fourth, the results also confirm that employers place a higher value on internships. The analysis revealed that, overall, one in four employers value work placements abroad compared to one in five employers valuing study abroad. Nevertheless, also here some variability can be observed. In a considerable number of countries, employers do not seem to differentiate between study and internships abroad. Exceptions are Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal and Turkey, where international internships are rated as an important selection criterion by more than 40 per cent of the surveyed companies.

Finally, some limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the Flash Eurobarometer data do not allow us to distinguish between short-term exchanges, such as Erasmus, and longer term diploma mobility, whereby students pursue their whole higher education degree abroad. Nevertheless, future international comparative studies might investigate whether any differences exist in the value employers attribute to these different forms of mobility. Research in the Nordic context, for example, suggests particularly a foreign degree might create a disadvantage, as employers are often not aware of the value of such degrees (e.g. Wiers-Jenssen, 2011). Nevertheless, the Nordic context is quite specific, as becames apparent in this study as well. Future studies would hence benefit from a wider focus incorporating the viewpoints of employers on both short-term exchanges and degree mobility in countries where student mobility is more highly valued, such as Greece or Italy. Second, the analysis does not allow us to explain why the international differences documented in this paper exist. Future research could investigate whether such differences can be attributed to a differential organisation of educational systems or labour markets. Third, the available dataset does not allow us to distinguish between different foreign study / internship destinations. It is

plausible, however, that foreign education gained in some countries is more highly valued by employers. Particularly 'vertical mobility' (Teichler, 2009), whereby students go to countries that are considered to be academically superior to the home country or whereby they pursue an education which is not available at home, might be more valued compared to 'horizontal mobility' (Teichler, 2009), whereby students move between higher education institutions / education systems of more or less the same level of academic quality. Consequently, it is strongly recommended future research disentangles how employers might value different destinations. Fourth, no information is available on the response rate for the Flash Eurobarometer survey. It hence remains unknown whether these results can be considered to be representative for all employers in the 31 studied countries. Finally, the complexity in recruitment processes of graduates with foreign credentials is not captured through the questions posed in the Flash Eurobarometer survey. International experience might give graduates indirect benefits such as cultural competence and leaderships skills that might be used by the graduate during job talks to explain how foreign experience adds to his/her employment profile. Therefore, qualitative research involving both recruiters and graduates might be highly relevant to in-depth uncover the dynamics behind recruitment decisions of employers.

In conclusion, I have shown that despite policy rhetoric on the importance of international learning mobility for a range of outcomes including future employment prospects, in most countries only a minority of employers take international experience into account when making recruitment decisions. Nevertheless, when employers search for graduates with particular skills such as language skills and/or decision-making skills, they value international experience, giving those who studied or worked abroad a competitive advantage compared to their non-mobile peers. As such, if the 'enhanced employment prospects argument' connected to international student mobility is to remain, more could be

done to inform students on the specific sectors and companies where the skills gained abroad are valued, and more could be done as well in terms of convincing or informing employers on the valuable skills students acquire when studying or working abroad.

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