

University study abroad and graduates' employability

There is a positive association between study abroad and graduates' job prospects, though it is unclear if the link is causal

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ELEVATOR PITCH

In recent decades, the number of university students worldwide who have received some part of their education abroad has been rising rapidly. Despite the popularity of international student exchange programs, however, debate continues over what students actually gain from this experience. A major advantage claimed for study abroad programs is that they can enhance employability by providing graduates with the skills and experience employers look for. These programs are also expected to increase the probability that graduates will work abroad, and so may especially benefit students willing to pursue an international career. However, most of the evidence is qualitative and based on small samples.

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- + Study abroad programs may provide graduates with the skills and the experience employers are looking for.
- + By increasing the probability that graduates will work abroad, study abroad programs may especially benefit students who seek to pursue an international career.
- + Study abroad programs may improve the employment prospects of students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds.

Cons

- University students may decide to spend some time abroad during their study not because they want to grow academically and professionally, but because they seek adventure and excitement.
- While graduates who have studied abroad are found to be more employable relative to their non-internationally mobile peers, this difference may reflect the influence of unobserved individual characteristics, such as personality.
- Most studies on the relationship between university study abroad and graduates' employability are qualitative and anecdotal.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

Employers, students, and administrators who manage international student mobility programs at higher education institutions perceive a connection between study abroad and graduates' employability. This may call for greater promotion of study abroad programs in general, and particularly among students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds and in countries where participation has traditionally been low. However, given that individual unobserved characteristics driving the decision to study abroad are likely to be correlated with future labor market opportunities, it would be important to have more evidence demonstrating that the perceived relationship is causal.

