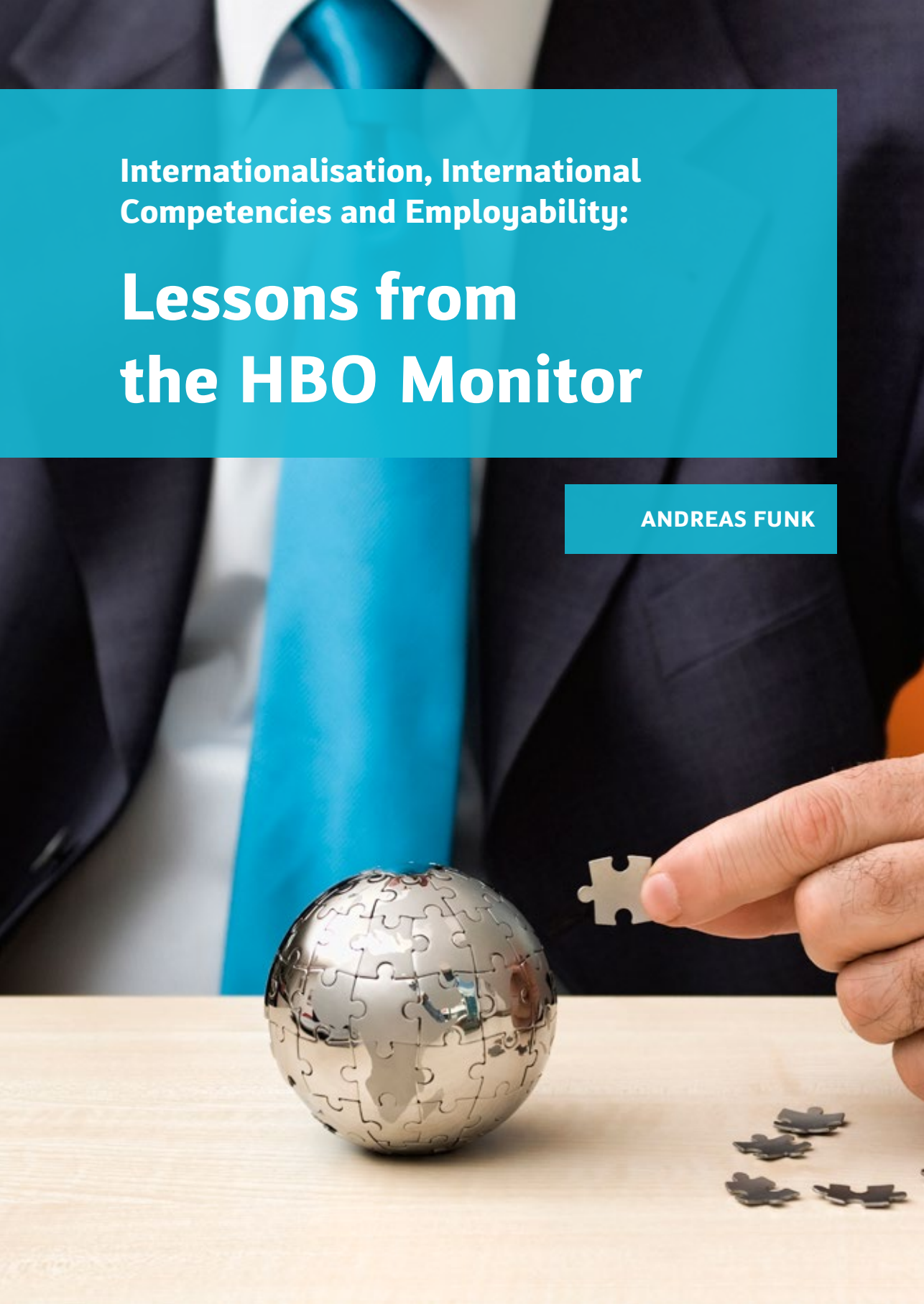


**Internationalisation, International
Competencies and Employability:**

Lessons from the HBO Monitor

ANDREAS FUNK



Summary

Internationalisation has become an “institutional imperative” for many institutions of higher education. Two propositions are that internationalisation would help students develop competencies needed in today's globalised world, and increase the employability of students. This piece summarises findings from the HBO-Monitor (a survey amongst alumni of Dutch universities of applied sciences) to substantiate the aforementioned propositions. The analysis suggests that internationalisation measures such as a foreign experience are conducive to the acquisition of international competencies. By contrast, little support derives from the HBO dataset concerning the link between internationalisation (or the thereby acquired competencies) and an increase in employability. However, a good number of alumni confirm that international competencies are needed in their current jobs. Based on this project, the Research Group International Cooperation will set up a longitudinal study on internationalisation at THUAS and its impacts.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, internationalisation has become an “institutional imperative” for many institutions of higher education (Hudzik in Jones and Killick, 2013, p. 166). It is a global trend that academic universities as well as universities of applied sciences increasingly place internationalisation at the center of their policies. Consequently, the internationalisation paradigm also penetrates the Dutch sector of tertiary education. That The Hague University of Applied Sciences (hereafter THUAS) made internationalisation a focal theme is just one example of many. Hence, the dominant view amongst theorists *that* internationalisation policies are to be designed and implemented has become manifest in the practice of policy-makers: internationalising higher education seems to be a must. The related discourse on the *how* and *why* of internationalisation is less saturated and deserves closer attention. What then is the rationale for internationalisation and how can it be implemented best?

Again, theory seems to advance practice on these questions. Indeed, literature on internationalisation provides answers as to why internationalisation policies are valuable and how internationalisation can be done effectively. As for the *why* of internationalisation, obvious questions are: Is internationalisation a means to an end or valuable in itself? If former is the case, what then is the final end that makes up the value of internationalisation? And is there evidence that this final end is achieved by internationalisation in practice? Turning to the *how* of internationalisation, one confronts questions such as: What are the important ways of internationalisation? Which of these ways are most effective? What role does internationalisation at home, as opposed to a foreign experience, play?

To start with the *how* of internationalisation: The dominant view on the ways of internationalisation is that both internationalisation at home and internationalisation as foreign experience can be effective. Let us call latter statement a first proposition related to internationalisation. In terms of the *why* of internationalisation, there is broad agreement in literature that internationalisation policies are not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. The real value of internationalisation, the reason why it should be done, derives not from internationalisation itself, but from its end, or output. And again, there is broad agreement that internationalisation has at least two positive, valuable outputs. On the one hand, internationalisation would help students develop competencies needed in today's globalised world. On the other hand, internationalisation would also, be means of the international competencies, increase the employability of students. These two claims shall be called the second and third proposition related to internationalisation.

The objective of this piece then is twofold: First, it aims to introduce the above-noted three proposition concerning internationalisation by means of presenting the key literature on the field. Mainly, the outcome will be presented in the Literature Review. Second, this article intends to analyse data with regard to the three propositions. Here, the objective is to analyse a dataset with regard to the essential aspects the three propositions entail (in the Results section), and then to evaluate (in the Discussion chapter) to what extent the propositions can be supported on the basis of the dataset.

Methodology

The findings presented in this piece rest on two distinct methods. First, a literature research has been conducted to retrieve and present the essential propositions related to theories on internationalisation. Here, the focus was on the key contributions in the field of internationalisation in higher education. Recent sources have been considered as well as seminal works of the past. The essence of this literature research is presented in the literature review and readopted in the discussion section to put the data results in context.

Second, quantitative survey data has been analysed with the aim to test or find evidence for the main propositions related to internationalisation policies. For that purpose, secondary data was used. More precisely, the raw data stems from the so-called HBO Monitor, an annual survey conducted amongst alumni of Dutch universities of applied sciences. More than 56,000 alumni participated in the HBO Monitor, of which 900 are former students of THUAS. This raw data hence comprises information on the target group of this study, namely former students of THUAS.

Additionally, the raw data provides rich information on a broader group, namely alumni from all other universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands. Latter dataset was used as a control group, in order to find out whether there are significant differences between THUAS alumni and others. The comparison can be interesting insofar as THUAS places internationalisation particularly high on the agenda. This ambition is illustrated by the fact that, as of 2014, new students in all academies of THUAS have to fill 12.5 per cent (30 ECTS) of their four-year Bachelor program with international activities, ranging from an internship or semester abroad (student mobility) to participating in full programs of study or minors in which English is the medium of instruction, or an internationally themed minor. To compare findings of the target group of alumni of THUAS with those of the control group (alumni from all Dutch universities of applied sciences) might bring out insights on the degree to which a pioneering institution in internationalisation brings out different results than others, now or in the future.

In the following, it will be clearly indicated whether findings refer to the target group or the control group. That such a comparison is legitimate, again, rests on the fact that both groups of respondents have a similar experience, as all have passed applied sciences programs in higher education in the Netherlands. Moreover, the target group and control group resemble each other in terms of generic features such as gender and age (see figure 1).

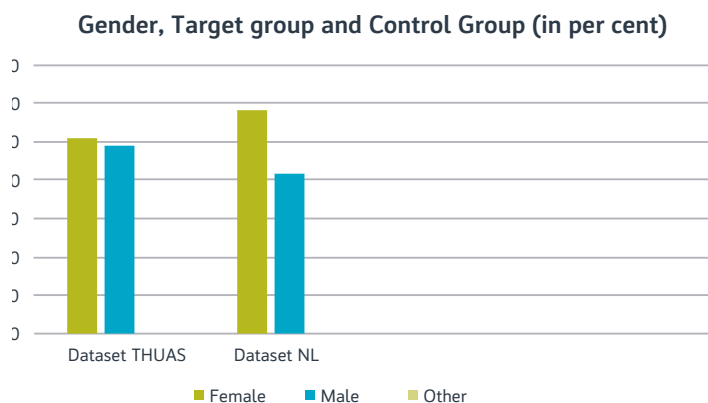


Figure 1

As for possible limitations of the chosen methods, one aspect needs to be stated. First, the usage of secondary data comes with the limitation that the design of the corresponding survey is pre-defined. Concretely, our Research Group places in the annual HBO Monitor a bloc of ten questions that target precisely our research objective. The rest of the questions, in particular the questions that target all alumni nation-wide, are pre-defined. This research picks out those elements of the data that were relevant to the research question – the wording of the pre-defined questions is, however, not always consistent with the wording used in this particular research. Still, all questions and results appear in the HBO Monitor exactly as mentioned in this report. The crucial value of using secondary data here derives from the quality of the HBO Monitor dataset – to generate an equally big and rich data collection would have been beyond the capacities of our Research Group and hence not feasible.

Literature Review

The Ways of Internationalisation?

First of all, what is the meaning of internationalisation in the context of higher education? Coryell et al. (2012) identify four ways of internationalisation amongst institutions of higher education. First, internationalisation can mean to conduct research on an international level. This level at which internationalisation can take place seems to refer more to the mission of research universities, and here also more to the conduct and experience of staff than of students or alumni. For that reason, internationalisation as conducting internationally-oriented research is beyond the scope of this study and will be disregarded in the following. Second, to facilitate a diverse multinational and multi-ethnic study environment by attracting foreign students. Third, internationalisation consists of an internationally themed curriculum – a policy named internationalisation at home. And lastly, internationalisation can mean to make possible or even stimulate a stay abroad – this can refer to a study abroad or doing a placement abroad. To sum up, one can think of internationalisation as encompassing four distinct ways, three of which are of particular importance for this study namely facilitating a diverse study environment with internationalized curricula (internationalisation at home), and enabling students to gain experience through a stay abroad (internationalisation abroad).

What then does the literature say about the individual value of internationalisation at home and internationalisation abroad? To start with internationalisation as studying or doing a placement abroad. In fact, several studies support the value of such an international experience, showing that a stay abroad, and studying abroad in particular, can be an important vehicle for reaching institutional internationalisation objectives (Coryell et al., 2012; Crossman & Clarke, 2009; Hoven & Walenkamp, 2013). Not all students, however, can afford to study abroad and not all students have the desire to do so. Still, this group of students can benefit from the value of internationalisation at home (see Crowther et al., 2000; Nilsson, 1999).

Internationalisation at home aims to design ways for local students to develop international competencies without having to go abroad. Alternatives are following a minor on an international topic, participating in a so-called international classroom or completing an internship at a company that conducts business internationally. In short, the idea of internationalisation at home is to make use of the diversity that is already existent within the higher education institution and its local or regional environment (Mak & Barker, 2013). Whether internationalisation at home can deliver the same value as a foreign experience is a matter of disagreement in literature. Whilst some studies suggest that the benefit of internationalisation at home can be similar to the positive effects of a study abroad or placement abroad (of Leggott & Stapleford, 2007, and Jones, 2013), other scholars point out that a foreign experience is in many respect more valuable (of Crossman & Clarke, 2009).

To sum up, there are different ways of internationalisation ranging facilitating a stay abroad to designing an international and diverse study environment at home. Let us call this claim proposition one for the purpose of the study at hand. Which of the methods is more promising is disputed in publications. That both ways of internationalisation have their value is, however, largely undisputed. But what concretely is the value of such internationalisation policies?

The Value of Internationalisation

Internationalisation properly understood should be a means towards an end. In other words, the real value of internationalisation must derive from something other than internationalisation itself. Accordingly, to design and implement the ways of internationalisation in a meaningful manner, be it internationalisation at home or a foreign experience, presupposes a sound understanding of its supposed valuable effect. What then is this supposed effect, the end of internationalisation?

As literature suggests, the value of internationalisation rests on the notion that an internationalised higher education provides students with a set of specific competencies – the competencies required in today's globalised world (Deardorff, 2004). What are these required competencies? As Coryell et al. (2012) state: "The sociopolitical and economic conditions of the world today beseech the global society to move toward an era of informed, culturally sensitive collaboration." Future global citizens will be faced with an increasingly diverse world, both in private matters and at work. But is this challenge one that everyone will face? One might object that this supposed importance of a specific set of competencies is exaggerated, given the fact that many citizens do not, and never will, travel the world for work or leisure activities? In other words, are the international competencies necessary for a global elite only?

The reply is that the challenging diverse environment in a globalised world is not only a matter for global players such as business men and diplomats. Instead, everyone will be exposed to the challenge of a diverse, international and intercultural setting. Zimitat (2008) points out that "even if domestic graduates never leave their own country, on graduation they will be forced to compete in international, or multinational, work and discovery environments". Webb (2005) adds that, "to act locally it is necessary to understand the global". This supports that the majority of graduates will work in some sort of international environment and will have to use some sort of specific competences in order to succeed.

So, the common view in literature is that internationalisation's value is that it equips students with the competencies they need as future global citizens. In other words, the objective of internationalisation policies is to prepare "faculty, staff, and students to function in an international and intercultural context" (Knight & de Wit, 1995). Besides scholars, also governments, employers and other stakeholders have clearly indicated the key role higher education needs to play in developing the competencies to function effectively in such an environment; in fact, such competencies are not only necessary for the individual to succeed, beyond the individual level, these competencies will also become a determinant for the well-being of national economies (Knight & York, 2003).

The rather broad claim that internationalisation is valuable because it prepares students to deal effectively with the challenges of a globalised, international environment, can be deconstructed into two distinct and implicit propositions. There is the underlying thesis that internationalisation policies in higher education facilitate students' acquisition of some specific set of competencies. This shall be named proposition two within this paper. Next, there is proposition three, that these specific competencies that derive from internationalisation would help students succeed professionally, meaning increase their employability. The following section will show how literature substantiates both propositions related to the value of internationalisation.



Internationalisation and its Value – International Competencies

Again, the first proposition that shows the value of internationalisation is that such policies provide students with some sort of specific competencies. Indeed, in terms of internationalisation meaning a study abroad or placement abroad, Crossman & Clarke (2009) found that such foreign experience stimulates the development of certain skills, such as language skills, cultural sensitivity and flexibility and conclude that “it would appear that international experience does enhance learning, the acquisition of competencies, [and] the development of critical soft-skills” (2009). Also internationalisation at home, such as an internationalised curriculum, can provide students with certain competencies. Leask, for instance, shows that internationalizing a curriculum means the “development of skills and attitudes within students (including the development of international and cross-cultural understanding and empathy) [...] and the development of knowledge of students” (2001, p. 104).

As for internationalisation generally speaking, Deardorff (2006) posits that internationalisation generally speaking results in the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes and calls this supposed outcome of internationalisation intercultural competencies. What makes these skills, knowledge and attitudes particularly international? In terms of attitude, it can mean to be able to display the openness and curiousness that allows to “challenge familiar and typical practices, norms, values and beliefs” (Caruana in Jones & Killick, 2013). In terms of knowledge, international competence can mean to have factual knowledge, for instance a “familiarity with specific other cultures, countries, and regions” (ACE, 2014). Finally, in terms of skills international competence entails the ability to observe, listen, interpret, analyse and reflect in a way that for example allows students to develop critical skills such as challenging accepted viewpoints (Zimitat, 2013). Thus, the first proposition targeted on this chapter is that internationalisation results in the acquisition of the aforementioned international competencies.

How international competencies are precisely defined differs. In fact, which definition is the most accurate might depend on the profile of the respective institutions of higher education. This study employs the definition as introduced at THUAS by the Research Group International Cooperation (off Hoven & Walenkamp, 2013). According to this definition the term international competencies entails five distinct sets namely intercultural competencies as defined above by Deardorff, but also international academic and professional competencies, foreign language competencies, world knowledge and country knowledge, and finally international interpersonal competencies.

Internationalisation and its Value – Employability

The second important proposition related to internationalisation and its value refers to the idea that internationalisation, or better the supposed outcome of internationalisation called international competencies, would increase the employability of students. Again, it is claimed that internationalisation prepares “students to function in an international and intercultural context” (Knight & De Wit, 1995, p. 13) and therefore make it more likely that they find job. Concretely, Jones (2013) postulates that trends related to globalisation have “intensified the demands for graduates capable of operating in culturally diverse contexts.” Furthermore, Crossman and Clarke (2009) conclude in their study that internationalisation, particularly a foreign experience, would not only lead to the acquisition of international competencies, but eventually also enhance the “overall employability” of students.

Before moving on, a brief note on the meaning employability. For some scholars employability refers “to the propensity of students to obtain a job” (Harvey, 2001). This sort of traditional definition measures employability first and foremost by the fact that someone has an actual employment. Others suggest a more nuanced usage of the term, criticising that the notion of employability as actual employment tends to focus strongly on graduates and their first position, disregarding the long-term perspective (Oria, 2012). Also, it is criticised that one needs to take into account that the time to find a job might vary depending on a graduate’s discipline (Purcell & Elias, 2002). Some go even farther

positing that “employability implies something about the capacity of the graduate to function in a job, and is not to be confused with the acquisition of a job, whether a graduate job or otherwise” (Yorke, 2006). One issue with the latter approach is that employability becomes again a concept related to someone’s capacities and in that respect related to international competencies. The second proposition to be discussed here, however, is not about whether international competencies as a set of skills, knowledge and attitudes results in employability being again another set of capacities. Rather, it needs to be tested whether there is evidence that international competencies result in something tangible related to finding a job. For that reason, the definition of employability here is similar with Harvey’s more traditional notion of employability as finding a satisfying job in a certain time.

Are there already studies substantiating the claim that internationalisation leads to an increased employability? The answer is yes, as previous research shows that the competencies addressed by internationalisation policies are highly appreciated by employers and hence increase the employability of graduates (European Commission, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2013). In other words, the proposition that internationally competent graduates find it easier get a job is supported by these publications.

Concretely, employers have emphasised the value of a foreign experience. Research among 100 human resource managers showed that employers greatly value interpersonal skills, or ‘soft skills’ and that they often assume that these skills are developed during an experience abroad (Doorbar: in Orahood et al., 2004). Furthermore, Janson et al. (2009) indicate that employers generally believe recent graduates with international experience are more competent than graduates without; a foreign experience is said to stimulate adaptability, initiative, planning skills and assertiveness and consider aspects like an international study experience in the selecting of job applicants. In a survey among 500 chief executives, ICM Research (on behalf of Think Global and The British Council, 2011) showed that employers strongly value staff members who are able to work in an international and multicultural environment. Similar results were found in Diamond et al. (2011), in which ‘multicultural teamwork’ was considered most important. A US employers survey conducted by Hart Research Associates (2013) found that intercultural skills were considered important by all but a few interviewed employers. Fielden et al. (2007) add that employers are looking for graduates with first-hand experience of living and working among other cultures. Finally, in a study of Australian employers, academics and students, Crossman & Clarke (2009) found that employers believed “understanding”, “knowing about”, and “appreciating the sensitivities” surrounding culture, religion, language, laws and economic issues to be important in today’s business practice. In other words, when looking to hire a new employee, employers around the world seem to consider some sort of international competencies important.

Besides employers, also students themselves seem to be positive about the impact of internationalisation on their employability. Former ERASMUS students surveyed by Janson et al. (2009) affirmed that their international experience played an important role during the recruitment process. Whether there is evidence for the underlying proposition regarding internationalisation as a means to increase employability will be, amongst other aspects, shown in the next chapter.

Results

The results will be presented following the order of the previously introduced three propositions. Thus, the focus will first be on the ways of internationalisation. Then, the data concerning internationalisation and its effect on acquiring international competencies will be analysed. Lastly, findings related to the link between international competencies and employability will be shared.

Ways of Internationalisation

An interesting question related to the different ways of internationalisation would be about the number of alumni that have experienced internationalisation? Let us start with one way of internationalisation, namely foreign experience. To begin with a comparison of the target group and the control group it can be said that both groups feature similar levels. Within the target group (alumni from THUAS) 12.3 per cent went on a placement abroad. This is less than the 17.3 per cent within the control group (alumni from all Dutch universities of applied sciences) stating that they have been interns abroad. In terms of studies abroad, the levels between target group and control group are almost identical. Some 10.5 per cent of THUAS alumni studied abroad, whilst 9.1 per cent of the control group went to a foreign country to pursue their studies.

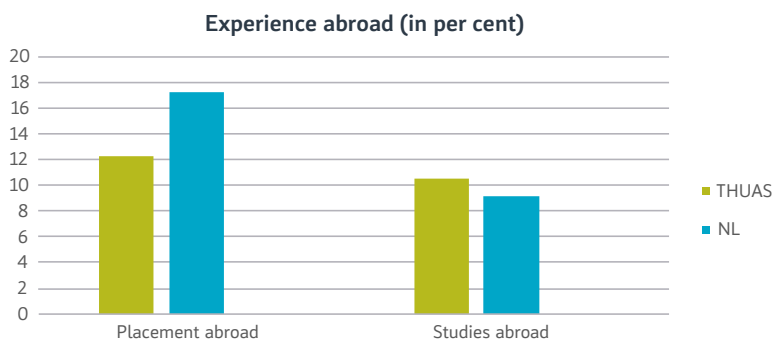
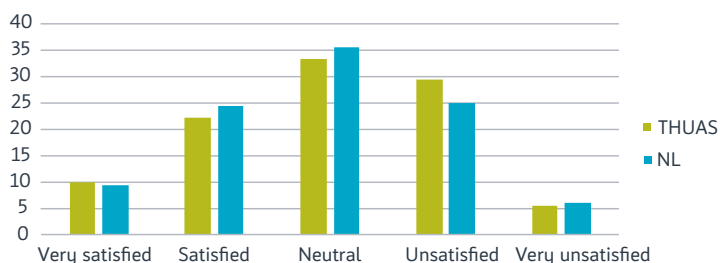


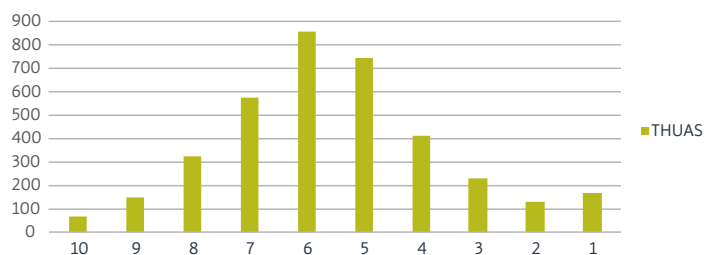
Figure 2

As introduced in the literature review, experience abroad is seen as an important part of internationalising higher education. Given the rather low numbers that had this experience, how do alumni feel about the international orientation of their study program? After all, the term international orientation covers more than a foreign experience and can also include ways of internationalisation such as an international classroom. The results are rather mixed. Almost 35 per cent of the respondents are indeed satisfied or very satisfied with the international orientation of their program. Here, the numbers amongst THUAS alumni resemble the numbers in the nation-wide dataset. Around one-third of the respondents gave a neutral assessment in terms of the international character of their study program, whilst little less than one-third pointed out to be unsatisfied or even very unsatisfied. Again, there is only a marginal difference between THUAS alumni and the control group.

Satisfaction with international orientation of the program (in per cent)**Figure 3**

More information on students' perception of the international orientation of their program reinforces this picture: students' evaluations of the international orientation of a specific program at THUAS are also mixed. Asked about their rating on the international orientation of the program, alumni from the Academy of European Studies and Communication Management at THUAS gave a mediocre overall assessment (see Figure 4). On a rating scale from zero to ten, the average rating is a 5.5. Most alumni gave sufficient marks between 6.0 and 7.0, but a remarkable number also evaluated the international orientation as insufficient. Latter point is worth considering, especially since the program in question is seen as one of the most internationalised ones, including a mandatory study abroad for Dutch students and a mandatory placement period (abroad or not).

In other words, even though the program in question facilitates or makes mandatory a foreign experience, students are not very positive about the international orientation – an aspect that might point to the importance of internationalisation at home. Unfortunately the secondary data used for this analysis does not provide data on internationalisation at home. However, some conclusions might be possible on the basis of a correlational analysis. For instance, to what extent is there a relation between the evaluation of the international orientation and the fact that alumni have experienced a stay abroad or not? If foreign experience raises the satisfaction of students with the international orientation significantly, that might allow for, at least, some speculation on the relative value of internationalisation at home.

How do students rate the international orientation of their program**Figure 4**

Indeed, the correlation between experience abroad and satisfaction with the international orientation of the program is worthwhile sharing, as there is a statistically significant link between both variables. More precisely, alumni that experienced studies or placement abroad are a lot more positive about the international orientation of their program. The clear difference is manifest in the figure below, comparing the responses of those with foreign experience to the overall dataset. In terms of impact, the difference between placement abroad and studies abroad appears to be marginal. What can be said, however, is that both sorts of experience are conducive to alumni's satisfaction with the international orientation of the program. Conversely, alumni that have not participated in either study abroad or exchange gave particularly low evaluations on the international orientation of the program.

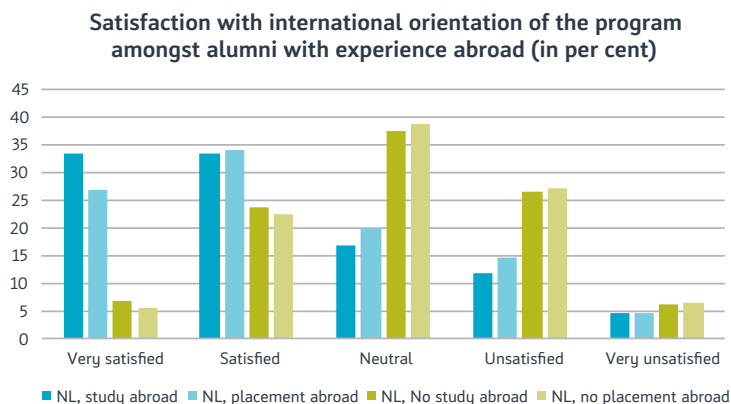


Figure 5

Apparently, to have had an experience abroad during the undergraduate studies results in a higher satisfaction with the international character of one's program. Is a similar trend noticeable in terms of the willingness to pursue foreign experience after the undergraduate years? Often, the undergraduate studies are not the end of a study career and the fact whether students are aiming for an international scope or not in their follow-up studies might be of interest.

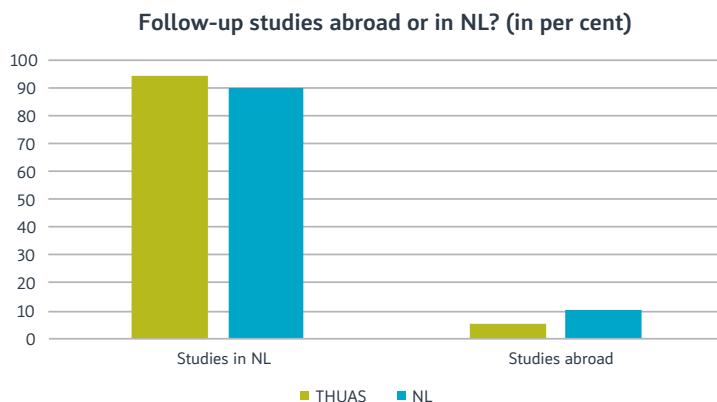


Figure 6

Figure 6 shows an overwhelming majority of alumni did not consider studying abroad after their undergraduate years at a Dutch university of applied sciences. Of all alumni that did a follow-up study, 89.8 per cent decided to stay in the Netherlands. Amongst the target group of THUAS alumni, the number is

even higher, with 94.4 per cent following a follow-up study at a Dutch university. Comparing the result between alumni that participated in a stay abroad as undergraduates and those who did not, one can again detect a correlation. In fact, the willingness to do a follow-up study abroad is significantly higher amongst those who already have some experience abroad. Concretely, the number of alumni that went for follow-up studies abroad is four times higher amongst those who have already been studying abroad during their undergraduate studies than amongst those who did not (30.8 per cent versus 7.1 per cent). Similarly, those who have been on a placement abroad more likely register for a follow-up study abroad than those who did not (26.1 per cent versus 5.7 per cent).

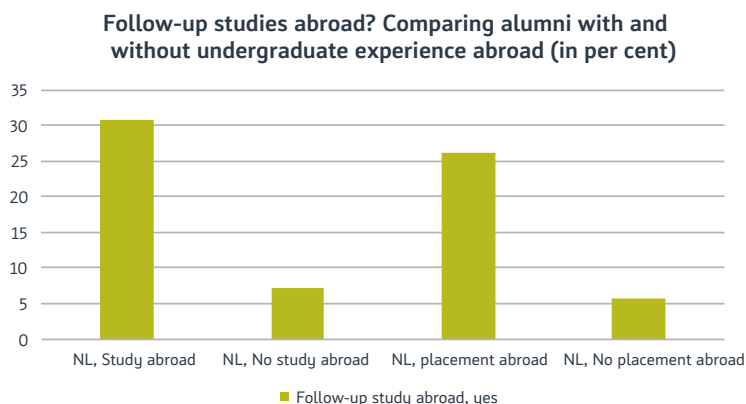


Figure 7

Hence, there is a clear indication that a foreign experience, be it placement or study exchange, triggers the willingness of alumni to go for another foreign experience or possible follow-up studies.

Summing up this part of the results, it can be stated that the number of alumni that experienced internationalisation policies is not yet very high (both at THUAS and in NL). Whilst there is no hard data on policies concerning internationalisation at home, it is apparent that foreign experience increases the rating of the international orientation remarkably. Also, foreign experience appears to be linked to an increased motivation to do follow-up studies abroad.

Internationalisation and International Competencies

The second proposition to be scrutinized here is that internationalisation is valuable since it helps develop international competencies. But first: To what extent do alumni feel they have acquired the so-called international competencies? And are there significant differences between the competencies?

Asked whether they feel to have acquired international competencies during their studies at THUAS, alumni come up with mixed answers. In terms of international professional and academic competencies, 37.2 per cent of the students answered with a 'yes'. For intercultural competence, the score is almost identical with 36.3 per cent. Slightly less than one-third of the respondents (29.3 per cent) feel that they have acquired foreign language competencies at THUAS, whilst only 15.4 per cent felt that they gathered knowledge of countries. For interpersonal competencies the result is outstanding as a large majority of 85 per cent of alumni is positive about acquiring this sort of competency during their studies at THUAS.

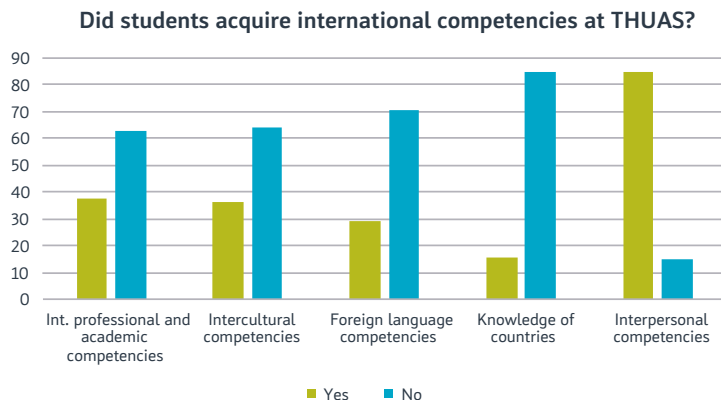


Figure 8

To focus now on the supposed impact of internationalisation policies on the acquisition of international competencies, does the data suggest a correlation? At first, some numbers on the subjective perceptions of alumni on this question. Do alumni believe that internationalisation policies were conducive to developing international competencies? Less than 10 per cent find a stay abroad, placement or studies abroad, unimportant for acquiring international competencies. But 69.4 per cent perceive studies abroad as quite important or very important for developing international competencies. Even more, precisely 74.3 per cent of the target group, point out the importance of a placement abroad. Hence, a high number of respondents perceives the internationalisation measures, at least internationalisation abroad, as having a positive impact on acquiring international competencies.

How important do you think is a stay abroad for acquiring international competencies

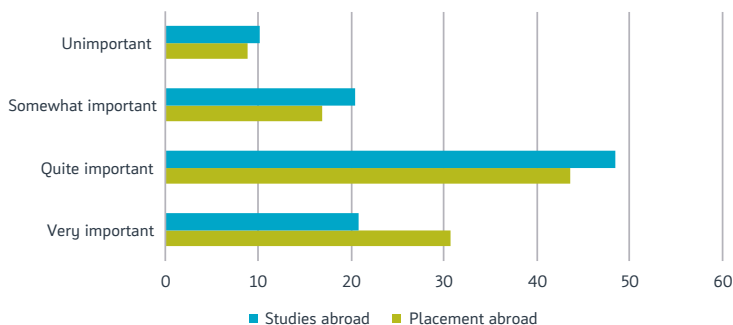


Figure 9

Putting aside for a moment the perception of the alumni, is there any objective evidence in the data for the relation between stays abroad and acquisition of international competence? Or to rephrase it, is there a correlation between the fact whether alumni had a foreign experience and the self-assessed acquired competencies?

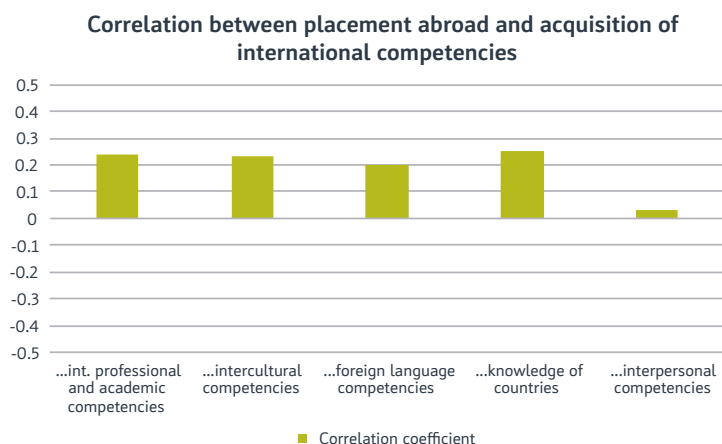


Figure 10

Data shows that there is a statistically significant correlation. Alumni who have been on a placement abroad are more positive about the development of the international competencies during their studies than alumni who were not abroad. The most remarkable correlation occurs concerning knowledge of countries and international professional and academic competencies – a result that seems plausible since a placement abroad offers obvious opportunities to develop on both of these fields. The lowest correlation, in fact one that must be considered absent, occurs in relation to the interpersonal competencies. This means that alumni that have done a placement abroad are not more positive about their interpersonal competencies than others.

Do we get the same picture for the alternative way of a foreign experience, namely studies abroad? Again, there is a clear correlation on four of the international competencies. And again, whether alumni have studied abroad or not does not affect their self-assessment of acquired interpersonal competency.

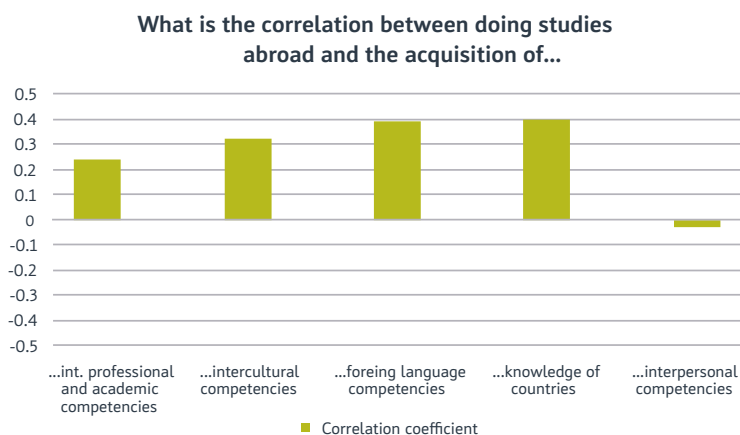


Figure 11

In relation to the placement abroad, the correlation for the study abroad are slightly higher. In particular the link between study abroad and the increased acquisition of foreign language competencies is more manifest. But also the knowledge of countries, at least in the self-assessment of respondents, is higher amongst those who studied abroad than those who did not.

To conclude the section on the link between internationalisation and acquisition of international competencies, whilst the self-assessed acquisition of international competencies is rather moderate (except for interpersonal competencies), there is clear evidence that those alumni that experienced internationalisation in the form of a foreign experience assess their own international competencies significantly higher than others (again, with the exception of interpersonal competencies). This is supported by the fact that a majority has the perception that a foreign experience was conducive to becoming more internationally competent. Interestingly, this does not mean that alumni favour a mandatory stay abroad. Rather, as the figure below shows, a large majority is against making a foreign experience a mandatory part of the curriculum.

Should THUAS make a stay abroad mandatory part of the curriculum?

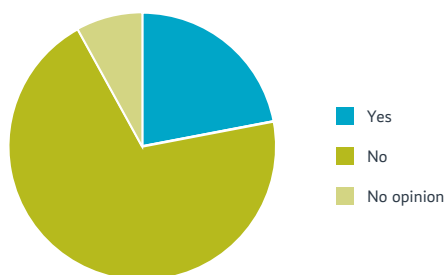


Figure 12

Internationalisation and Employability

Moving to the third proposition related to internationalising higher education, the reasoning that internationalisation, or rather the outcome of internationalisation namely international competencies, is improving the employability of graduates. To clarify, as introduced in the Literature Review, it has been argued that those who have acquired international competencies are more sought after on the job market. To what extent can this view be substantiated with the HBO Monitor data?

Alumni were asked about how important in their opinion the acquisition of international competencies is for finding a job or making a career. Not more than 9.1 per cent of the alumni find international competencies very important in that respect. The remaining answer options receive almost identical percentages. 30.2 per cent feel that international competencies are quite important for either finding a job, making a career, or both. A little less, precisely 27 per cent, state that international competencies are somewhat important for career options. Lastly, around one-third (33.8 per cent) perceive the acquisition of international competencies as unimportant for finding a job or developing their career.

How important do you think was the acquisition of international competencies for finding a job or making a career? (in per cent)

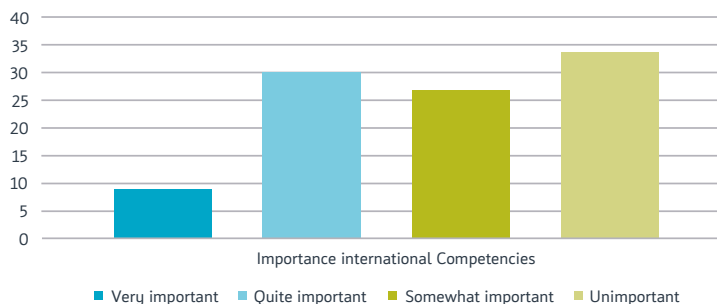


Figure 13

Next to the subjectively perceived impact of international competencies on employability, do the data deliver some further, more objective insights? One opportunity would be to correlate the level of international competencies acquired with the employment status after graduation. A positive and significant correlation, showing that more international competencies are linked with a positive employment status, would support proposition three. The data analysis, however, allows no such conclusion. But first, a look on the employment status comparing the target group (alumni of THUAS) with the control group (alumni from all Dutch institutions of higher education).

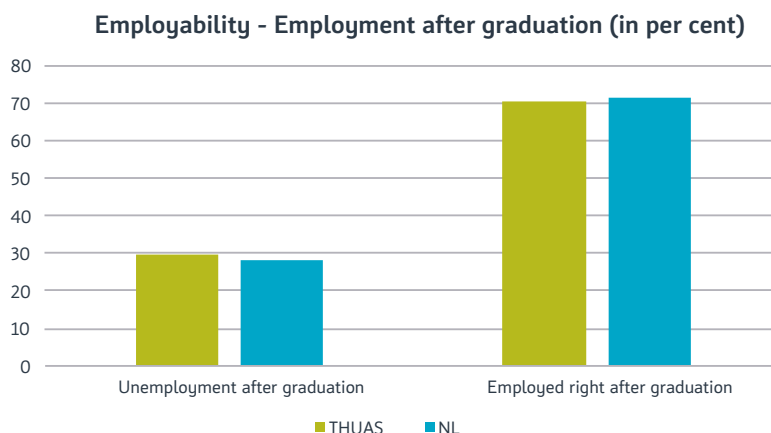


Figure 14

As the graph shows, there is no remarkable difference between both datasets. Around 70 per cent of the alumni from THUAS were employed right after graduation. The percentage for the nation-wide dataset is almost identical. Further, as hinted before, there were no significant correlations between the acquisition of international competencies and the employment status after graduation. More precisely, for none of the five different international competencies was the correlation coefficient with employment higher than 0.1; what this means is that the dataset at hand does not allow any prediction for employability based on the acquisition of international competencies. Or, in short, the claim that international competencies matter in that respect cannot be substantiated on the basis of this analysis.

Some variations of the above-described correlation were tried, with the same result. First, there was also no relevant correlation between having a foreign experience during the studies and employability. Second, also the link between possessing international competencies and the duration of unemployment brought out no significant correlation. Hence, the dataset does also not support that international competencies make graduates find a job more easily. Moreover, there is no evidence that the internationally competent alumni have higher incomes or a higher job satisfaction. Again, there is no relevant correlation to be found on these variables.

Of course, this does not mean that proposition three can be rejected, as will be shown in the discussion. It merely means that the findings do not provide further support for the supposed impact of internationalisation on employability. Hence, a modest interpretation of the results seems crucial here, which is also suggested by the fact that, asked about whether international competencies are needed in the job, a good number of respondents answer with 'yes'.

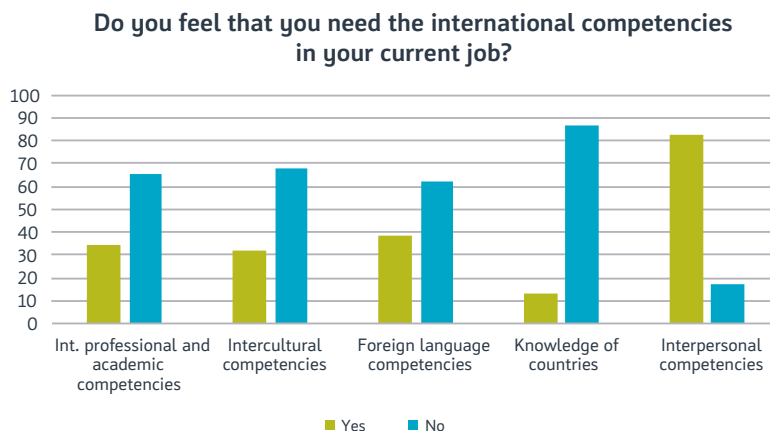


Figure 15

The highest score goes to interpersonal competencies. Almost 83 per cent agree that this sort of competencies are needed at their current job. Also international professional and academic competencies, intercultural competencies and foreign language competencies are indicated as necessary in the working field by around 35 per cent. Only knowledge of countries scores rather low, with only 13.2 per cent of the alumni stating that they need these competencies on the job.

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Concluding the findings on proposition three, one must carefully distinguish between two aspects. On the one hand, the data brings out no evidence for a correlation between internationalisation or the possession of international competencies and employability. On the other hand, there is an indication that a good number of alumni need international competencies in their current job.

Discussion and Conclusion

While most data findings do not require interpretation, some results stood out and deserve further discussion. The next section centers on some of the most surprising aspects in the results and elaborate on them in dialogue with existing literature, followed by a brief conclusion.

Comparing Internationalisation at Home and Foreign Experience

The relative effectiveness of internationalisation at home compared with foreign experience is a subject of lively discussion in literature. As there is no rich data on efforts belonging to internationalisation at home in the HBO Monitor, this paper cannot make strong statements on this matter. Still, some findings can be interpreted with regard to this debate. What is clear in the results is that the satisfaction with the international orientation of the program is much higher amongst alumni that had a foreign experience built into their studies. Would it be too fast to infer the reverse statement? Namely that the quality of the international orientation or a program rests largely on whether a foreign experience was part of it or not?

To be sure, whilst some argue that internationalisation at home can deliver the same experience as a stay abroad (Leggot & Stapleford, 2007), the abovementioned results rather support the view that a foreign experience is, if not irreplaceable, at least a main contribution to the internationalisation of a program. Hence, based on the findings the argument of Crossman & Clarke (2009) can be supported. They find internationalisation at home valuable in its own way, through facilitating “interacting

with other students, an internationalized curriculum, intercultural friendships, hosting international homestay students, being migrants or children of migrants, intermarriage or voluntary work for student exchange organizations”, but also posit that this type of internationalisation does not deliver the same results as study or internship abroad (Crossman & Clarke, 2009).

The Salient Position of International Interpersonal Competencies

One stunning result of this research is the unique position of interpersonal competencies. As described in the previous chapter, interpersonal competencies, amongst the other international competencies, stand out in some respects. First, in the self-assessment of alumni, interpersonal competencies receive a significantly higher score than all the others. A large majority has indicated to have acquired interpersonal competencies during their undergraduate studies. Second, in terms of the impact of foreign experience on the acquisition of international competencies, interpersonal competencies stick out. There is a remarkably smaller correlation than with all other competencies, meaning that the developing of interpersonal competencies, unlike the other international competencies, is not related or even dependent on having a foreign experience or not. Such irregularity in the results trigger question on the underlying reason.

To be sure, in the existing literature no evidence was found on the outstanding position of interpersonal competencies within international competencies. One attempt to explain the salient position refers to the possibly unclear meaning of the term. Possibly respondents do not clearly recognise the specifically international character of the category called international interpersonal competencies – as opposed to the obviously international character of, for instance, knowledge of countries. Rather than as an international competence, respondents might read interpersonal competence as something broader and related to their development as a person. This would explain why there is no link between internationalisation policies and the acquisition of international interpersonal competency. Here, more information is needed as well as reflection on whether the term as such is sufficiently clear. In any case, it seems reasonable to focus on the overall result that internationalisation appears conducive to the acquisition of international competencies. The odd position of interpersonal competencies should not blur this, apart from that, clear picture. Instead, the irregularity might rather be interpreted in the aforementioned manner and therefore at this point be disregarded.

The Missing Link between Internationalisation and Employability

Whereas two of the essential propositions related to internationalisation can be supported on the basis of this data analysis, the situation on the third proposition is more complex. To be sure, that an internationalised education or curriculum is conducive to the employability of graduates is more than a side-aspect of its supposed value. Rather, the employability thesis makes up a significant part of the appeal of internationalisation and appears prominently in the corresponding literature (Crossman & Clarke, 2009; European Commission, 2014). For that reason, it seems necessary to look deeper into the results at hand and discuss their meaning.

As a preliminary remark, it is crucial to point out again that the results do not lead to reject the employability thesis. By no means would it be legitimate to infer that internationalisation generally speaking does not enhance employability. The findings of this study are not detailed and rich enough to make such a strong statement. Further, the findings clearly indicate that subjectively, a good number of alumni perceive that they need international competencies in their job – an aspect that seems to partly moderate the doubt cast with regard to the employability proposition. Still, it is also true that there is no evidence that derives from objective variables in this dataset that would encourage the common sense view. There is no correlation between international competencies and either the employment status of alumni, or their job satisfaction, or their income.

A possible explanation that leaves intact the claim that internationalisation enhances employability would be that the interpretation of latter in this study is too narrow. For example Crossman & Clarke suggest that employability should not only be measured by one's ability to gain initial employment, but also one's ability to perform their job successfully and to change professions if necessary, in other words "remaining employable throughout their lives" (Crossman & Clarke, 2009). This, admittedly, cannot be done on the basis of the dataset available.

A second possible explanation refers to the manifold determinants that might influence one's employability. For example Brown et al. (2002) highlight the fact that an individual's employability depends on the situation on the job market and hence varies according to macroeconomic conditions. Hence, it could well be that internationalisation positively influences the employability, but that this impact is not always noticeable in the data as other, for example, macroeconomic determinants are overriding. Concretely, large parts of the dataset used for this study cover the time of global and financial crisis and possibly this is the true reason for some alumni employment status, indeed regardless of whether they have acquired international competencies or not. More information on this will be available with new datasets showing whether post-crisis international competencies will have a major impact on employability.

To conclude, the objective of this study was to target three propositions at the core of literature in internationalisation. By means of analysing data from the HBO Monitor, it was intended to test these propositions. For proposition one about the ways of internationalisation, it can be confirmed that a foreign experience enhances the students satisfaction with the international orientation of their program. Also, the experience abroad, either as a study abroad or placement abroad, seems to trigger students to go for further internationalisation experiences, such as follow-up studies abroad. Unfortunately, the dataset does not offer information on internationalisation at home and its effects – a point that will be targeted in the next edition of the HBO Monitor. More emphasis on internationalisation at home seems important also because the results show that in fact a rather small number of alumni have participated in foreign experiences.

For proposition two that concerns the link between internationalisation policies and the acquisition of international competencies, the analysis of the HBO Monitor is providing further evidence. Alumni that experienced internationalisation in the form of a foreign experience assess their own international competencies significantly higher than others (not interpersonal competencies). Generally, foreign experience is perceived as being helpful for developing international competencies.

Little support derives from the HBO dataset concerning proposition three. That internationalisation (or the thereby acquired competencies) lead to an increase in employability is not evident in the dataset. What can, however, be upheld is that a good number of alumni confirm that international competencies are needed in their current jobs.

In terms of future research, the Research Group International Cooperation decided to set up a longitudinal study on internationalisation at THUAS and its impacts. The idea is to evaluate on a yearly basis to what extent the internationalisation policies at THUAS show an effect, versus older data and versus national data. For that purpose, the questions bloc in the HBO Monitor has been revised to target the this research scope more effectively. The results will be published annually on the website of the Research Group International Cooperation at THUAS.

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REFLECTION

The study “Internationalisation, International Competencies and Employability: Lessons from the HBO Monitor” presents a clear effort in measuring the effectiveness of internationalisation on graduate employability, and shows the challenges international educators face in substantiating their claim that international competencies enhance graduate employability.

One of the lessons to be drawn from the study is that we need to provide our students with the language they can use to reflect on their international learning. In international literature a wide range of terms can be found in discussing students’ international learning; concepts like global competences, international competences, intercultural competences are much debated examples alongside notions like cultural intelligence, global citizenship and cultural effectiveness. It is estimated that as many as 25 different terms can be found in this field. Moreover, even if an institution or a department has reached agreement on using one specific label, those concepts are hard to translate into clear sets of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Have we equipped our students with the tools and language to be able to see and discuss what an international dimension of a degree programme implies? Have our graduates ever been told how interpersonal competences differ from intercultural competences? Do we ourselves as educators have a clear understanding of those concepts? Those questions show how diffuse and obscure our internationalisation practice can be at times and makes clear that there is a need for deep collegial discussions. Once we have been able to clear the mist from our own minds and have formulated clear internationalised learning outcomes in our modules, internationalisation@home becomes more transparent and employability of graduates can then be addressed more intentionally and internationally.

Eveke de Louw

On behalf of the European Studies iTeam

The European Studies iTeam is a platform of seven lecturers with a keen interest in all things international. Their mission is to facilitate and professionalise internationalisation of the curriculum by sharing knowledge, developing new insights, and engaging students and staff.