

Exchange and internships abroad

**Inquiries into students' benefits
& recommendations for an intensified effort
in the area**

English version

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Introduction.....	3
The labour market	5
The students.....	8
The Danish Agency for International Education concludes	12
Appendix.....	14

Introduction

The world is more open than ever for Danish students to go on exchange or on internships abroad. Many students do, however, stay at home throughout their studies. Just below one third of all graduated university students has been out of the country to study or on an internship at some point in their studies, whereas the number is barely 8 % of all university college students and 4 % of the students at academies of professional higher education.

The number of Danish students who go on exchange (The word 'exchange' is here used to describe a study period abroad, which is part of a university degree in Denmark) or on internships abroad is currently increasing slightly, though far from sufficiently to match the high number of international students coming to Denmark. This indicates that new initiatives to increase the number of outgoing mobility could be wished for.

In a society of globalised market goods and services the importance of international competences has been strongly articulated through written documents and the spoken word, and politicians and representatives of the educational and scientific institutions as well as the business world point to the need for citizens and workers with international visions and skills in today's society. But what are the concrete benefits for the students when studying or taking an internship abroad? And why do students not seem to take on this message – why don't more students go abroad?

Students who don't go regret it

In 2008 and 2009 CIRIUS, now the Danish Agency for International Education, carried out a number of quantitative and qualitative surveys amongst students, enterprises, and educational institutions on the benefits of students' exchange visits and internships abroad. The outcome of the surveys also provided important information on why many students choose to stay at home.

The surveys include a number of interesting observations on possibilities and barriers for sending more students of higher educational levels abroad, and their outcome is thus a useful platform for the reinforcement of the current efforts in the area. Especially noticeable is the fact that 44 % of university students who chose not to go abroad regret their choice, whereas only 3 % of the students who did go abroad regret their choice.

A need for wide support to get more students on exchange and internships abroad

In 2009, during the Bologna Process, forty-six European educational ministers defined the common aim that by 2020, 20 % of all higher education graduates will have been on exchange or on an internship abroad. Furthermore, the final version of the green book by the European Commission, "Promoting the learning mobility of young people", which is ready in 2010, will provide inspiration and concrete ideas on how to strengthen outward mobility, e.g. through the establishment of partnerships as well as preparatory planning and follow-up of the students' exchange and internship activities.

It is important to get more students to go abroad on exchange and internships for various reasons: First and foremost, students will have the chance to get an experience for life that strengthens their professional and personal profile. Secondly, the Danish educational institutions will gain by sending more students abroad, since high student mobility strengthens the international profile of the institution as well as the quality of the tuition.

In order to get more Danish students on higher education programmes to go on exchange or on an internship abroad, educational leaders, teachers, tutors and the students' future employers on the labour market, need to actively support and promote the idea that exchange and internships abroad are both relevant and significant for students, in relation to the (education programme itself as well as a future job.

The labour market

International skills are in demand on the Danish labour market

“Is my experience from my studies abroad relevant at all when looking for my dream job?” Most students ask themselves this question when considering going abroad on exchange or as an intern.

The answer is “Yes” – according to 32 interviews carried out by CIRIUS, with directors, heads of human resources and employees in private companies, organisations and public authorities. In the interviews, the employers rate the effect of the students’ studies abroad and to what extent international skills are important in the recruitment process and have positive influence in the daily work tasks.

Rather internship than exchange

When asked about the students’ benefits of their stays abroad most employers do point to the development of personal skills as an important benefit, and their immediate preference in the recruitment process points to candidates who have been on internships rather than exchange. Employers find internships more useful because they provide the students with specific work experience as well as intercultural skills, which in combination are powerful tools on the labour market.

According to the employers, students who have been abroad seem to display more openness and flexibility toward work culture and organisation, as a result of their experience with foreign hierarchies, management styles and tuition.

The international competences of the employees who have been abroad are especially useful to the employers in situations of collaboration and dialogue with international partners, e.g. during visits from abroad, conferences, stationing abroad etc. Furthermore, the employers benefit from the employees’ language skills and innovative professional mindset. Likewise, a sophisticated critical sense is often the result of a stay in a foreign learning and working environment and is useful on a daily basis.

The above observations are supported by the interviews with the employees, who emphasise internships as a means of acquiring concrete and professionally grounded skills useful on the job. 10 of 12 employees estimate that their prior stay abroad has been of positive influence when obtaining their current position.

International competences – a short cut to the dream job

When recruiting new personnel the employers are generally positive towards international skills, these do, however, rarely determine if people get the job – unless it is an international position. A student position in Denmark is perceived to be as relevant as a stay abroad. Thus, it is absolutely crucial that the applicant is able to show how the international skills acquired abroad are relevant to the specific position at stake in order to make it a decisive factor in his or her recruitment.

In the survey carried out by CIRIUS, the employers were asked to rank the most significant general qualifications when recruiting recent graduates. Three of the four qualifications most often mentioned proved to be 'collaboration skills', 'good networking skills' and 'receptive to change', which are also amongst the personal qualifications that the employers believe to be most descriptive of students who have been abroad. Surprisingly, the employers do not seem to be conscious of this overlap.

Increasing demand for international competences

Even though few of the questioned employers consciously prioritise applicants who have previously been abroad, it is worthwhile for such an applicant to describe his or her international skills in the job application and CV as these improve the chances of getting the job. Most employers emphasise the fact that there is an increasing demand for employees with international competences, within the welfare sector, in export and import business as well as in enterprises moving their production out of the country. Both public and private enterprises are increasingly looking for employees in Denmark as well as internationally, who are able to navigate internationally and interact smoothly with persons of different cultural backgrounds.

Aiming for a personal and cultural experience

Why go on exchange or on an internship abroad? CIRIUS has asked close to 4,800 university students and approximately 1,800 students at university colleges and academies of professional higher education about their views on and experience with studies and internships abroad. The response is the same across educational institutions and fields of study. The personal and cultural experience of being abroad is key.

Though the intercultural experience plays a central part in the choice to go abroad, often students have closely considered other potential advantages of their choice, such as improved language skills, a more highly developed professional understanding and other competences useful in a future professional life. A professionally related motivation is generally strong amongst students who have been abroad towards the end of their studies.

When students choose to go abroad they also have their CV in view. The prospects of improved career opportunities both in Denmark and abroad motivate quite a few students to go, and especially remarkable are the university colleges and the academies of professional higher education, where three of four students wish to go abroad to work at some point in their future career.

Improved academic skills when coming back

By and large all students who have been abroad on exchange or on an internship, are very content with their academic yields and have no doubt that their stay abroad has improved their chances on the labour market in the long run. The experience of being abroad and interacting in a foreign culture has given most of them a personal boost as well as beneficial experiences with studying or working in a foreign educational or commercial environment.

The majority has achieved better language skills and practical work experience within their academic field. Thus, the outcome of their stay corresponds very well with their expectations prior to departure.

A significant observation is that the vast majority of students who have been abroad state that their academic level was improved, and three quarters of these students have been able to employ the academic skills gained while abroad at a later point in their studies. Especially students who have been on internships have benefited significantly in terms of methodological know-how, while students who have been on exchange have been able to apply their improved language skills in their further studies.

Credit transfer - more rule than exception

There is a prevalent concern amongst students who choose to stay in Denmark throughout their studies that a stay abroad could prolong their studies. The survey shows that this fear is often groundless; the majority of students who go abroad get credit transfers for their internships or studies abroad. Studies abroad are credited more often than internships, and 96 % of students who have been on exchange through the Erasmus or Nordplus Programme got full credit for their stay abroad.

For the students who were not granted full credit transfer for their stay abroad, the positive experience of being abroad nevertheless often does outweigh a potential extension of the course of study. The students generally take this question into account before making the final decision whether to go abroad or not.

Students usually report to their educational institution on their return to Denmark, but apart from this only few students pass on information on their personal and professional gains from their stay abroad during lectures or information meetings about exchange studies or internships abroad. Instead, the information is mainly passed on verbally from student to student.

The students

Personal relations keep students at home

When many students choose to stay at home after all, it is most often because of personal relations, such as family, partners or friends. Seven of ten of those who stay at home primarily mention personal reasons. However, economical issues can also be of considerable importance. Moreover, lacking guidance and information from the Danish educational institution can make it difficult to organise the stay abroad. In this context, it is noteworthy that approximately one third of the students at university colleges and academies of professional higher education that stayed at home have not been informed about the possibility of going abroad on a credited internship, and more than half were not aware of the possibility of going on credited exchange abroad.

Some students explain that they chose to stay home because they did not wish to leave out any elements of the Danish education, but there are also other important reasons, for instance the possible loss of a good student job in Denmark.

Among those who would have liked to go abroad, many lost courage because it was difficult to organise. 'Difficult to organise' covers different aspects, such as subletting the home, obscure admission rules, insufficient guidance, confusion about pre-approval and credit transfer. Furthermore, students at university colleges and academies of professional higher education have been held back by the fact that they individually had to create contact and get admission to the relevant educational institution abroad, due to the limited number of exchange agreements between the Danish and foreign educational institutes.

Students are the best ambassadors

When many students do not go abroad because they find it difficult to organise, it seems relevant to ask about the guidance from their educational institution. The students show to be most satisfied with the guidance from their co-students and secondarily with the guidance from the international office.

The students who stay at home can be roughly divided into four different types:

Type A would have liked to go abroad and believes that studies or an internship abroad would have added to his or her education, but ended up not going for different reasons, e.g. due to family obligations in Denmark.

Type B has deliberately chosen not to go abroad during the studies because he or she believes that a stay abroad is not serious work and involves too much partying.

Type C thinks that a stay abroad does not lead to anything that he or she would not be able to achieve at home through other study related activities such as an internship or a student job. In addition, some believe that a stay abroad is irrelevant because their studies are directed towards the Danish labour market.

Type D has never considered going abroad on exchange or on an internship, nor come across information about it.

The students' recommendations on how to increase outward mobility

- Strengthen the teachers' interest in studies and internships abroad. Employ students who have already been abroad, in a more formalised sharing of knowledge, for example during lectures and on the intranet.
- Involve students who have already been abroad in information meetings about exchange studies and internships abroad.
- Establish an interactive information portal where different educational institutes are able to exchange ideas and experiences. This can also be used for students to blog about their stays abroad and thereby inspire others to go.
- Organise competence assessment courses on the educational institutions in order for the students to find out how a stay abroad can be useful in the future.
- Get more international students to Denmark. They will make way for more contact to foreign educational institutions and inspire Danish students to go abroad.
- Establish more exchange agreements with an easy and transparent credit transfer system.
- Establish brief internships abroad, for example during summer vacations, for the shorter higher education programmes.
- Always seek to improve information, administrative issues and guidance.
- Introduce a simpler and more flexible procedure concerning pre-approval and credit transfer.
- Do not place the internship module in the last semester just before exams, because those who go abroad will then have no time to find a partner for the final thesis.
- Increase the possibilities of financial aid when going abroad, for example through loans and scholarships.
- Produce more information on the universities in non-English-speaking countries that offer enough courses in English to piece together a whole semester.

The educational institutions

Strong agreement with the students

Educational institutions and their employees undoubtedly play an important role when it comes to strengthening the international dimension of the students' education. But how are internationalisation and students' studies and internships abroad regarded by employees, who normally do not work directly with international issues in the institution? CIRIUS has sought to answer this question through a questionnaire survey with the participation of more than 1,500 lecturers, leaders and Vice Chancellors on the Danish university colleges and academies of professional higher education.

Easy for students to go abroad

The 1,500 respondents are generally under the impression that it is easy for students to organise a study or exchange visit abroad, and most of them assume that students get the best information about their options from their co-students. Furthermore, there is a general agreement that students who have already been abroad are best at motivating other students to go.

When questioned about the benefits of a stay abroad most employees give the same answers as the students who have been abroad, which is that students achieve improved personal, intercultural and language skills. Similarly, many respondents also think that students often get an overall benefit of a stay abroad through the strengthening of their academic skills.

When looking at the lecturers separately in the survey, one out of five answers no to the question if they themselves would recommend their students to go abroad. This does, however, not necessarily mean that they have a negative perception of studies and internships abroad, for some respondents it can simply mean that they believe it to be a task for other personnel groups.

Like the students, the employees were asked what they perceive to be the major obstacles for the students to go abroad, and their answers were very similar to those of the students. One remarkable difference, though, is that they perceive the most significant barrier to be 'the lecturers' limited international experience', and subsequently 'personal relations like family, friends and partners'.

The lectures could be more international

A part of the questionnaire survey amongst university colleges and academies of professional higher education has brought into focus other aspects of internationalisation than student mobility, and the lecturers have, amongst other things, been asked whether they bring international perspectives into their lectures. A large majority utilise English material in the classes, whereas only approximately one fifth includes international guest lecturers in the classes. When asked whether they actively involve the students' international experiences from abroad in their lectures, only approximately half of the lecturers answer affirmatively. Of-

ten, the students' knowledge is applied through their contribution of new academic viewpoints in the discussions, though more rarely through actual presentations in class. Interestingly, the lecturers who have been abroad in relation to their own studies or work are far more inclined to include international perspectives in their lectures.

Outward student mobility is prioritised highly

At university colleges and academies of professional higher education internationalisation is largely defined as inward and outward mobility, and the survey shows that by and large all institutions view the work with students' and lecturers' mobility as an important strategic stake area within international collaboration. Generally, student mobility is prioritised higher than the mobility of lecturers- an observation confirmed by the employees. Furthermore, many institutions prioritise the participation and attraction of both international students and lecturers in international contexts. In addition, more than half of the participating institutions will concentrate on virtual educational collaboration and summer schools in the future.

The Danish Agency for International Education concludes

How to make more students go abroad?

All surveys by CIRIUS show that there is a lot to gain for students, educational institutions and future employers every time a student chooses to go on a study related stay abroad.

Part of the reason why the number of students going abroad nevertheless has not increased appreciably the last many years can be found in the lack of continuous effort to elucidate the need for international competences in Denmark.

In order to really move forward in the work with outward mobility, there is a need for a combination of initiatives that are formulated and implemented by the responsible ministries as well as the educational institutions. The initiatives will be directed toward the labour market, students and educational institutions, and will thus vary in form and content. It is however, important to coordinate the work and thereby secure a common sense of direction.

Examples of possible future work areas are listed below.

Stronger awareness amongst employers

CIRIUS' findings show that the questioned employers often fail to see that applicants who have been on exchange or on an internship abroad have acquired some of the key competences that are in demand in the recruitment process, also regarding jobs with no direct international profile. Accordingly, it is particularly important to make employers aware of the benefits of study related stays abroad, and thereby motivate them to support and promote an intensified effort in the area.

In addition, there is a need to continuously develop stronger documentation that a stay abroad is of relevance and value to the students' future professional life.

Academic benefits must be documented

The surveys show the need to emphasize and document the academic benefits of going abroad. Academic benefits have a low ranking on the list of factors that motivate the students to go abroad. However, when asked about the actual academic benefits of their stay abroad, students answer that their academic skills have been strengthened significantly. Therefore, there is a need for better documentation of the academic benefits in order for these to reach a ranking equal to personal reasons on the list of motivation factors in the future.

A first step on the way could be that students who have already been abroad pass on their academic experiences to their fellow students to a greater extent than today, and that lecturers include the students' academic experiences in class in order to strengthen the international perspective of teaching.

Innovative thinking in information efforts

Moreover, there is a need to strengthen and renew the institutions' guidance and information on the possibilities of exchange studies and internships. This primarily means a varied information effort, for instance with point of departure in the four types of students identified through the surveys.

The educational institutions should secure a certain variation of options of exchange studies and internships abroad, that accommodates all types of students, while at the same time to the greatest possible extent ensuring that their strategic educational alliances make exchange studies and internships abroad possible.

The efforts toward the large group of students who, due to family issues or other personal matters, do not seek information on the possibilities of studying or taking an internship abroad, deserves special attention, e.g. by making brief stays abroad possible.

The lecturer as inspirer

The employees at the educational institutions generally agree that there it is an asset that students go abroad on an internship or exchange, yet the surveys carried out by CIRIUS show that many employees at the educational institutions do not see it as their responsibility to inform about and call attention to the potential benefits of a stay abroad. Thus, there is a particular challenge in motivating all employees – especially lecturers – to pass on information about exchange studies and internships abroad. Moreover, the survey shows that most employees regard the lecturers' lack of international experience as a significant reason why many students stay at home. For this reason, it will be important to get more lecturers to work with international projects or go abroad in the future.

Appendix

The following appendix includes a selected range of tables from the Danish report on university students' benefits from and views upon exchange studies and internships abroad. It offers more detailed information on some of the most significant findings of the survey and the background of the above text.

Table 4.5 Percentage of respondents who have received funding from the following sources to go abroad.

Source of funding	Pct of respondents
The Erasmus programme	38%
The Nordplus programme	5%
Other scholarship schemes (Applied for through home university)	35%
Private grants and scholarships	52%
Other sources of funding	23%

Table 5.1 Reasons for going abroad.

Reasons	Pct of respondents
Interesting to study or work in a foreign environment	95%
It would be interesting to live in another culture	89%
A need for variation in the studies	77%
Better career opportunities in Denmark	75%
Better language skills	74%
Better career opportunities abroad	60%
Specific academic competences unavailable at home university	36%
Recommendations from friends and family	34%
Recommendations from teachers	29%
Better quality in the education	18%
Family or relations abroad	7%

Table 6.3 Percentage of respondents, who experienced language problems during their stay abroad. (subject to the language of study/work)

		To a Great Extent	Somewhat	Little	Not at All	Total
Problems concerning the ability to learn/study or to do satisfactory work	English	1%	12%	27%	60%	100%
	Other language than English	5%	26%	40%	29%	100%
Problems concerning everyday communication	English	3%	11%	23%	63%	100%
	Other language than English	2%	14%	38%	45%	100%

Table 7.2 What are the three most important outcomes of your exchange period abroad?

	Exchange period abroad as an undergraduate student	Exchange period abroad as a post-graduate student
Study or work experience from a foreign environment	47%	54%
Intercultural skills	55%	40%
Better language skills	53%	37%
Confidence in managing life independently	41%	35%
Travel experiences	37%	27%
Practical knowledge within my field of study	8%	33%
Good friends	26%	18%
Theoretical knowledge within my field of study	13%	18%
Larger academic network	6%	21%
A new view on my own line of study	14%	17%

Table 7.11 Students' assessment of the academic yield of their stay abroad compared to their assumed academic yield in Denmark. (according to field of study)

	Social Sciences	Humanities	Natural Sciences	Technical Sciences	Health Sciences
Higher academic yield than in Denmark	38%	39%	35%	34%	41%
Same academic yield as in Denmark	33%	32%	49%	44%	30%
Lower academic yield than in Denmark	28%	29%	16%	22%	30%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 7.13 Students' assessments of the personal competences and benefits gained from their stay abroad.

	To a Great Extent	Somewhat	Little	Not at All	Total
My stay abroad has made me more independent	55%	37%	7%	2%	100%
My stay abroad has improved my intercultural competences	54%	37%	8%	1%	100%
My stay abroad has improved my language skills	56%	31%	9%	3%	100%
My stay abroad has helped me expand my social network	42%	35%	19%	4%	100%

Table 8.4 Did students have their credits for their stay abroad recognized by their home university? (according to type of stay)

	Study period	Work placement	Other
Full credit transfer	77%	53%	53%
Partial credit transfer	17%	14%	15%
No credit transfer	7%	32%	32%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table 8.9 How have the students utilized their experiences from abroad in their studies in Denmark? (according to type of stay)

		To a Great Ex- tent / Some- what	Little / Not at All	Total
Has the general knowledge you have gained through your exchange period abroad been useful to you in your subsequent studies in Denmark?	Study period	82%	18%	100%
	Work placement	82%	18%	100%
Has the academic knowledge you have gained through your exchange period abroad been useful to you in your subsequent studies in Denmark?	Study period	73%	27%	100%
	Work placement	73%	27%	100%
Have the methodological competences you have gained through your exchange period abroad been useful to you in your subsequent studies in Denmark?	Study period	42%	58%	100%
	Work placement	58%	42%	100%
Have you made a presentation regarding the academic yields of your exchange period for fellow students and/or teachers?	Study period	12%	88%	100%
	Work placement	22%	78%	100%
Have you passed on your experiences to fellow students who are planning one going abroad?	Study period	52%	48%	100%
	Work placement	46%	54%	100%
Have your teachers showed interest in what you have learned?	Study period	16%	84%	100%
	Work placement	26%	74%	100%
Have your fellow students showed interest in what you have learned?	Study period	49%	51%	100%
	Work placement	64%	36%	100%
Has the stay abroad strengthened your academic skills?	Study period	71%	29%	100%
	Work placement	77%	23%	100%

Table 8.12 Has the stay abroad been an obstacle in your further studies?

	To a Great Extent	Somewhat	Little	Not at All	Total
I have lacked specific knowledge from a course that was available while I was abroad.	3%	9%	12%	77%	100%
I have had to follow extra courses in Denmark, in order to keep up in classes.	1%	3%	5%	91%	100%
My academic network in Denmark has diminished as a consequence of my stay abroad.	2%	7%	11%	80%	100%
My social network in Denmark has diminished as a consequence of my stay abroad.	2%	7%	14%	78%	100%
I have had difficulties obtaining a relevant student job as a consequence of my stay abroad.	1%	2%	3%	94%	100%
I have experienced that teachers have not found the knowledge that I have obtained abroad useful.	2%	4%	12%	82%	100%
Participating in group work, I have experienced that fellow students have not found the knowledge I have obtained abroad useful.	1%	2%	6%	91%	100%

Table 9.1 Reasons why students choose to stay at home during their studies (Multiple answers allowed).

Reasons:	Pct of respondents
Family, friends and other personal relations	74%
Lack of financial resources	44%
Lack of information or guidance from home university	29%
Did not want to miss the studies at home university	28%
Had a relevant student job, and did not want to leave it	25%
Did not feel like living in another country for a longer period	23%
Could not make an exchange fit into the curriculum, and receive full credit	21%
Could not find a relevant course/work placement	10%
Language competences not sufficient to study/work abroad	9%
Would not risk a lower grade than expected at home university	6%
Heard negative stories about going abroad from other students	5%
Teachers/counsellors advised not to go abroad	1%

Table 9.2 Reasons why students, who had already started planning a stay abroad during their studies, did not go. (Multiple answers allowed)

Reasons:	Pct of respondents
It was difficult to organize	62%
Family, friends and other personal relations	42%
Lack of financial resources	41%
Lack of information or guidance from home university	38%
Could not make an exchange or internship fit into the curriculum, and get full credits	32%
Changed my mind in the last minute	21%
Did not want to miss the studies at the home university	19%
Could not find a relevant course/work placement	15%
Had problems getting pre-approval for my stay abroad	12%
Had a relevant student job, and did not want to leave it	12%
Was not granted the internship position I had applied for	11%
Was not admitted by the university I had applied to	8%
Was not admitted / did not receive a scholarship	6%
Language skills not sufficient to study/work abroad	6%
Did not want to risk a lower grade than expected at the home university	5%
Heard negative stories about going abroad from other students	3%
Did not feel like living in another country for a longer period	3%
Teachers/counsellors advised not to go abroad	2%

Table 10.2 Comparing yourself with fellow students who have not been abroad, how do you rate the final outcome of your studies abroad?

		Myself	Fellow students with/without an exchange period abroad	The same	Don't know	Total
Who have obtained the best academic coherence in their studies?	Mobile students	29%	9%	45%	17%	100%
	Non-mobile students	20%	4%	42%	34%	100%
Who have obtained the best language skills?	Mobile students	84%	0%	6%	9%	100%
	Non-mobile students	2%	57%	15%	26%	100%
Who have obtained the best understanding of alternative learning methods?	Mobile students	72%	1%	12%	15%	100%
	Non-mobile students	3%	26%	29%	42%	100%
Who have obtained the best theoretical knowledge?	Mobile students	13%	19%	49%	19%	100%
	Non-mobile students	24%	2%	37%	37%	100%
Who have had the best student jobs?	Mobile students	26%	9%	33%	32%	100%
	Non-mobile students	26%	6%	25%	44%	100%
Who have the best long-term job opportunities?	Mobile students	50%	1%	24%	25%	100%
	Non-mobile students	5%	15%	34%	45%	100%

Table 10.3 Have you, during your studies, regretted not going abroad?

	To a Great Extent	Somewhat	Little	Not at All	Total
Students who have been abroad	0%	3%	5%	92%	100%
Students who have not been abroad	12%	32%	27%	30%	100%