

Does studying abroad pay off during recruitment?

Evidence from field experiments



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Rationale and background

The Erasmus Careers project stems from the idea that student mobility can enhance employability when both students and employers recognise the competences gained from the study abroad period. While the positive correlation “mobility-enhanced employability” has been confirmed in the Erasmus Impact Studies (2014 and 2019), students need to dive deeper into their mobility experiences if they want to maximise their employability. For this reason, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play an important role in supporting students learning before, during, and after their experience abroad and helping them unpack their gains. Therefore, the **Erasmus Careers project aims at ensuring that mobility contributes to the career prospects of Erasmus+ participants.**

The innovation of the Erasmus Careers project lies in its triple perspective - students, employers, HEIs - that allows us to gain a comprehensive understanding of how to bridge the mobility experience with the labour market. To reach this goal, the Erasmus Careers consortium carried out a **correspondence study to better understand if and how employers value and take into account mobility experience during recruitment processes, and to research if the way students represent their exchange experience makes a difference.**

This correspondence study, which is the object of this report - has been led by Tilburg University and implemented in four countries: Belgium, Greece, Spain, and The Netherlands. It will also inspire the creation of an employer-oriented manual to guide recruiters in the recognition and acknowledgement of mobility-driven competences.

Methodology and innovative approach

Correspondence studies belong to the broader paradigm of **field experiments**. In simple words: they are experimental studies where **researchers in a natural setting observe how a change in one variable (also called treatment) changes the outcome**. As these studies are conducted in the 'field' that is a natural environment, findings are usually more realistic and easier to apply and generalise to people outside of the sample (Alleen, 2017). **Correspondence studies usually measure (un)equal treatment between two persons that only differ in one aspect**. They are a well-established methodology to measure discrimination in the labor market and hiring decisions (Zschirnt, 2019), housing market (Verhaeghe, 2022), etc.

To execute the study, the Erasmus Student Network (Belgium), the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece), the Universidad Autonoma de Madrid (Spain), and Tilburg University (The Netherlands) **selected 700 real vacancies for starter jobs** in the four case countries in the period between February 2023 and June 2023. The selected positions did not require professional experience and were directed to graduates with a master's degree in economic sciences. The decision to use a business degree was justified by the wide range of possible career fields in, for example, administrative and commercial positions at the ISCED 5 level.

Prior to the selection of the real vacancies, Tilburg University constructed a fake CV and motivation letter, translated into different national languages and using common names in the national contexts. All resumes and motivation letters were identical, **except for the representation of study abroad, which systematically varied:**

- A.** A CV and motivation letter with no international student exchange experience (control group).
- B.** A CV that mentions the study period abroad and a motivation letter with no mention of the international student exchange experience.
- C.** The same CV as the second condition and a motivation letter that briefly stated that the applicant did participate in an international student exchange at the University of Innsbruck.
- D.** The same CV as the second condition and a motivation letter that elaborated on the international student exchange period abroad, with a short explanation as to how self-awareness, entrepreneurial skills, intercultural competencies, and cross-cultural skills were fostered through studying abroad.

Importantly, we **randomly assigned the experimental condition** (which version of the application is taken) to vacancies.

Most studies on the outcomes of international student exchanges and experiences rely on subjective measurements, namely self-reports by students about their career path. Next to this, a handful of studies exist on employers' perspectives, asking whether

employers take international experience into account when recruiting. However, these studies are prone to bias as employers generally know what the study is about. Our correspondence study overcomes these limitations, as it is a well-established tool to research differential and (un)equal treatment in labour markets (Verhaeghe, 2022). It is convincing for us because of multiple aspects. First, correspondence studies are **high in external validity, i.e. the ability to generalize**. In other words, we can be very sure that our findings are applicable to other students or recent graduates, which increases our legitimacy to give them tips and advice. Correspondence studies are also high in internal validity. Due to the random assignment of which version of the application is sent to which vacancies plus the constant repetition we can **causally interpret (un)equal treatment of applicants**. This is a clear advantage compared to other, for instance, statistical methods in the social sciences which often have to rely on fragile correlations instead of causations. Thus, via a correspondence study, we gain the most valuable and qualitatively best results and can be sure that our given advice will be useful and beneficial, which will be of high value to students, higher education institutions, policy-makers, and stakeholders.

Ethical considerations

Due to the experimental nature of the study, **employers are unaware that they are scanning and evaluating a fake application**. While this is an advantage because, unlike surveys or interviews, respondents are not susceptible to say what may sound

desirable and answers measure actual behaviour or treatment, employers have to invest time and resources in scanning applications that, unknown to them, are in fact fake.

Although the methodology is a standard methodology in scientific studies on discrimination in labour markets, and has been carefully and extensively reviewed by the Ethical Board of the School of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Tilburg University, who approved the methodological set-up of the study (ethical approval number TSB_RP763) taking into account these ethical considerations, the absence of employers' informed consent posed ethical concerns within the consortium itself, particularly, within the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, which finally followed a different methodology. This led the consortium to create a report divided into **two chapters: one for the Belgium, Spain, and The Netherlands case, and one for the Greek case.** Each chapter explores the reasons encouraging the adoption of one over the other methodology.

Does study abroad pay off during recruitment?



Does study abroad pay off during recruitment? Evidence from a field experiment in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain¹

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Abstract

It is a popular assumption that study abroad experience is valued by employers during the recruitment process. However, very few studies investigated this assumption through experimental methods. In this chapter, we present the results of the Erasmus Careers field experiment, whereby we submitted 2,100 fictitious applications to real job vacancies in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain, systematically varying between study abroad and no study abroad experience. **Our results indicate that for the three case-countries, the assumed positive effect of study abroad on a job application, does not hold.** This raises significant avenues for future research.

¹This chapter has been submitted to a well-established scientific journal for peer review on 13 September 2023

One-Sentence Summary: The popular assumption that study abroad is valued by employers does not hold in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain.

Introduction

Over the past years, our knowledge on the labour market outcomes of international student mobility (ISM) significantly improved, particularly when considering the impact of ISM on wages, transitions into employment and the ‘internationality’ of careers (see e.g. Di Pietro 2015; Iriondo 2020; Jacob et al. 2019; Kratz and Netz 2018; Netz and Cordua 2021; Oosterbeek and Webbink 2011; Parey and Waldinger 2011; Perez-Encinas and Berbegal-Mirabent 2023; Roy et al. 2019; Van Mol et al. 2021; Waibel et al. 2018; Wiers-Jenssen 2008a; Wiers-Jenssen 2008b; Wiers-Jenssen et al. 2021). However, very few studies so far focused on potential mechanisms that can explain observed effects (for an exception, see Kratz and Netz 2018), and also studies that investigate the value employers attribute to international experience during recruitment procedures are rather scarce (for some rare exceptions, see Petzold 2017a; 2017b; Ripmeester 2016; 2018; Van Mol 2017). Our paper aims to address this gap in the academic literature, through a field experiment whereby we submitted a fictitious application to 2,100 real job vacancies in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain. Throughout the applications, we systematically varied whether and how an international student exchange period abroad was presented in the student’s CV and motivation letter.

Our results advance the academic literature in four ways. First, **our results expand our knowledge of the mechanisms as to how participation in international student exchanges potentially enhances graduates' careers, by focusing on the recruitment practices of employers**, which is an understudied perspective in the ISM-literature on career outcomes. Nevertheless, employers form the link between employability and employment, so understanding their practices is essential to understand how students can capitalize on their experience abroad. Second, and in contrast to previous studies, we do not only systematically change the CVs, but also the ways the international exchange is presented in the motivation letter. This allows also to gain practical insights that are beneficial to students. **By systematically changing the way the international student exchange experience is presented in the motivation letter, we aim to advance our practical understanding as to what strategies graduates can use best to present their experience when applying for jobs.** Third, **the adopted methodology in our study allows for a very precise measurement** on whether international experience matters during recruitment procedures, as we investigate the reaction of employers to real vacancies. This stands in contrast with existing research on employers, which often relies on survey methods (e.g. Van Mol 2017) or in-depth interviews with employers on their recruitment practices (Harder et al. 2015), which however are more prone to bias as they do not measure how things play out 'in the field'. To our knowledge, this is the first study using a field experiment to investigate the role of study abroad experience in recruitment practices for real jobs (for an exception focusing on the recruitment of interns, see Petzold 2017b).

Fourth, **our study advances our understanding of how international student exchanges might be valued differently depending on the national context wherein graduates apply for jobs.** Existing research on employers' assessment of international student exchanges mainly relies on national-level contexts (see the work of Knut Petzold, Petzold 2017a; Petzold 2017b). However, the work of Van Mol (Van Mol 2017), which was based on Eurobarometer survey data, indicated significant international variability in the value employers attach to international experiences during recruitment processes. The international comparative nature of our study allows us to verify whether these results are also confirmed in real-world situations.

Theoretical background

During recruitment processes, employers make hiring decisions under conditions of uncertainty. They do not know the applicant, and hence they have to infer the 'quality' of the applicant based on the information they receive in the curriculum vitae and the motivation letter. As such, **signalling theory** (Bangerter et al. 2012; Spence 1973; Stiglitz 1975) provides the theoretical starting point of our study. In signalling theory, it is expected that employers screen job applications looking for signals that the candidate disposes of certain desired skills, and as such infer applicants' personalities (Cole et al. 2009) and work-related knowledge, skills, and attributes (Chen et al. 2011). Through these inferences, employers will make predictions about the applicant's suitability and potential performance vis-à-vis the position, as well as the applicant's fit within the broader

context of the organization (Cable and Judge 1997; Cole et al. 2007; Tsai et al. 2011). From this perspective, we can expect that participation in an international student exchange signals specific skills (e.g. language skills and/or intercultural competences) and personal characteristics to employers (Wiers-Jensen 2008a). From the perspective of signalling theory, in a globalized world, employers would catch the signal of foreign credentials on a CV and value them during recruitment. The results of the field experiment of Knut Petzold in Germany whereby applications were submitted to real internship offers (Petzold 2017b), for example, indicated that studying abroad decreases the days until applicants receive a response, and it slightly increases the probability of being invited for an interview. The importance of certain signals such as international experience is likely also dependent upon the context. In some sectors and companies, foreign experience is more likely to be valued compared to others (Kratz and Netz 2018; Petzold 2017b). Furthermore, in countries where fewer students go abroad or where there are fewer places available on the labour market for graduates, foreign credentials might be more valued. After all, in the first case formerly mobile students might be scarcer and thus harder to recruit. In the second case, employers might have a wider pool of graduates to choose from, and hence provide more opportunities to students that show they distinguished themselves horizontally (through study abroad) throughout their studies. Building upon signalling theory and the previous studies discussed above, **we hypothesise that applications that include study abroad increase the probability of receiving a job interview invite (Hypothesis 1a)**. However, the study of Van Mol

(Van Mol 2017) indicated significant international variability in the value employers attach to international experiences during recruitment processes. Following the results of that study, **we expect employers in Spain to be the most likely to value study abroad experience, followed by Belgian employers, and Dutch employers to be the least likely to do so (Hypothesis 1b).**

To our knowledge, correspondence studies on employers' recruitment practices mainly focused on systematically changing the CV of the applicant (Lahey and Beasley 2018). In this study, however, we started from the idea that systematically changing the motivation letter could also be of relevance, particularly when considering the practical implications employer research could lead to. After all, motivation letters are one of the first steps towards securing a job interview. They most commonly present the candidate-selected (favourable) abilities, skills, and qualifications of the applicant (Henry and Roseberry 2001; James et al. 1994). Interestingly, it seems that so far no studies tried to systematically vary the part of cover letters in field experiments to investigate whether the way of presenting a certain experience or characteristic influences the chances of getting invited for a job interview. Nevertheless, it is highly plausible that the way a certain experience or characteristic is mentioned (or not) or described (or not) influences the decision to invite an individual to an interview or not. Linguistic analyses of cover letters, for example, suggest that the way people present certain information as well as the word count can matter during the recruitment process (Brandt and Herzberg 2020).

As such, it is also imaginable that the way an international student exchange is mentioned in a cover letter might play a role in such decisions. Consequently, **we hypothesize that the way study abroad is described might alter the probability of interview invite (Hypothesis 2).**

Materials and Methods

Experimental design

To investigate the effects of study abroad on recent graduates' employability, we conducted a correspondence study in which **2,100 fictitious job applications were submitted to real job vacancies in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain.** The advantage of correspondence study designs is their high ecological validity, as findings are usually more realistic and easier to apply and generalize to people outside of the sample as the fieldwork takes place in a natural setting (Allen 2017). It also allows the manipulation of treatment variables, by randomly assigning experimental conditions, which allows to infer causality (Shadish et al. 2002).

All resumes and motivation letters were identical, except for the representation of study abroad, which we systematically varied. Table 1 summarises the four experimental conditions and the number of observations across the experimental groups. In the case of type D application, the motivation letter included self-awareness, entrepreneurial skills, intercultural competencies and cross-cultural skills, and an explanation of how studying abroad contributed to developing those competencies.

Table 1. Four experimental conditions and observations across experimental groups

	Factor 2: Motivation letter		
	Study abroad not mentioned at all	Study abroad mentioned	Study abroad mentioned as well as its impact on personal competences
Factor 1: CV			
No study abroad experience	type A 525 applications	NA	NA
Study abroad experience	type B 525 applications	Type C 525 applications	Type D 525 applications

The fictitious applicant in all three countries had comparable qualifications and education trajectories. They were all male and recently obtained a Master degree in Economics. Furthermore, they all spoke fluent English, as demonstrated by the internationally recognized IELTS certificate in their resume. The only differences between the applicants across countries were related to the local context. For example, the candidate's first name and surname were frequently occurring names of a person of age 25 in each case country. The home institutions from which the applicant graduated (the UCLouvain, University of Maastricht, and University of Navarra) were comparable in terms of their ranking on the 2022 QS world ranking (respectively ranked 188rd, 233rd, and 266rd with scores of 45.6, 39.8 and 37.1) as well as on the 2022 Times Higher Education ranking on Economics and Econometrics (respectively ranked 4th, 3rd and 4th among the higher education institutions in the respective case-countries). All fictitious candidates went on exchange to the University of Innsbruck, which has a QS score that is a bit below the scores of the home institutions (36.2), but which also ranks as the second

Austrian higher education institution on Economics and Econometrics on the 2022 Times Higher Education ranking. In other words, we investigated ‘horizontal mobility’, whereby students move between higher education institutions with a similar reputation. According to Teichler (2017), this is the most common form of mobility for exchange students in Europe.

Vacancies sampling and data collection

We applied to 2,100 vacancies of different employers (700 per country) between February and June 2023 by using standardized keywords, e.g. junior, Master Economics, business graduate, on a major international job portal that operates across the three countries (Indeed.com). The decision to use a business economics degree was justified by the wide range of possible career fields, such as administrative, commercial, or analytical positions at the ISCED 5 level. Still, we filtered out a significant number of vacancies, namely those that required prior working experience, asked for particular skills such as another foreign language or submission of references, academic diplomas or any other documents different than a resume and motivation letter. Vacancies that did not allow for a motivation letter were also of no value in the experiment. Lastly, only applications in the native language of the country (French, Dutch and Spanish) were submitted, to avoid English applications signalling different levels of internationalisation. This decision resulted in the disqualification of those vacancies that only required the English language. To monitor employers' responses and avoid data loss (Mihut 2022), we

set up a phone number in each country for our candidate with a recorded voice message informing them that he cannot take the call. While the recruiters only used email messages to reject our applicant, the job interviews were often offered by phone.

Variables

Dependent variable

Our dependent variable measures employers' callback (0 = no; 1 = yes). Two situations were classified as a callback: a job interview invite or a request for more details, such as an inquiry about a possible relocation. Rejection or no reply within 30 days was classified as a no-callback.

Independent variables

Our first independent variable is the presence of study abroad experience in the application documents. This categorical variable indicates whether the fictitious applicant mentioned an exchange period abroad in any of the application documents (0 = no; 1 = yes). Our second independent variable represents the following four different experimental conditions:

1. A CV and motivation letter with no study abroad experience (control group).
2. A CV that mentions the study period abroad and a motivation letter with no mention of the study abroad experience.

3. The same CV as the second condition and a motivation letter which briefly states that the applicant did study abroad at the University of Innsbruck.
4. The same CV as the second condition and a motivation letter that elaborates on the study period abroad, with a short explanation as to how self-awareness, entrepreneurial skills, intercultural competencies, and cross-cultural skills were fostered through studying abroad.

Control variables

Based on our literature review, we include four categorical control variables in our analysis, namely (1) the size of the organization, (2) organization type (0 = profit, 1 = non-profit), (3) presence of international operations (0 = local, 1 = international), and (4) field of expertise of the position.

A descriptive overview of the variables included in our analysis is presented in table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	Range	Belgium		Netherlands		Spain	
		%	n	%	n	%	n
Call-back	0-1						
No		77.1	540	53.7	376	95.7	670
Yes		22.9	160	46.3	324	4.3	30

Experimental condition	1-4						
No international experience (ref)		25.0	175	25.0	175	25.0	175
International experience, but not mentioned in motivation letter		25.0	175	25.0	175	25.0	175
International experience, briefly mentioned in motivation letter		25.0	175	25.0	175	25.0	175
International experience, extended explanation in motivation letter		25.0	175	25.0	175	25.0	175
Size of the organisation	1-5						
<11		13.1	92	7.6	53	23.3	163
11-50		18.0	126	21.3	149	25.4	178
51-200		18.4	129	22.4	157	17.0	119
201-1000		17.7	124	14.9	104	14.0	98
>1000		32.7	229	33.9	237	20.3	142
Organisation type	0-1						
Profit		91.1	638	89.1	624	99.3	695
Non-profit		8.9	62	10.9	76	0.7	5

International operations	0-1						
No		35.4	248	61.7	432	57.1	400
Yes		64.6	452	38.3	268	42.9	300
Type of profession	1-5						
Administrative		35.6	249	27.6	193	31.3	219
Finance		12.4	87	24.0	168	20.4	143
Sales and Marketing		26.0	182	17.1	120	41.7	292
IT		7.7	54	11.0	77	2.9	20
Other		18.3	128	20.3	142	3.7	26

Ethical considerations

Correspondence studies are a well-established methodology to measure discrimination in the labour market and hiring decisions (Zschirnt 2020), or the housing market (Ghekiere and Verhaeghe 2022). However, it poses some ethical concerns related to the deception and misuse of recruitment time and energy. Due to the study's experimental nature, researchers cannot ask for informed consent from the participants. However, the benefits of the experimental approach outweigh those constraints. In case of an interview invite, we immediately informed the recruiters that the candidate was no longer interested in the position to save their time and energy. Moreover, at the end of the study, all employers who participated were informed about it and the research outcomes. **The Ethical Review Board of the School of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Tilburg University reviewed and approved the methodological set-up of the study (ethical approval number TSB_RP763).**

Analytical strategy

In a first analytical step, descriptive statistics give a preliminary insight into the relationship between study abroad experience and call-backs by employers. In a second step, binary logistic regressions are used to investigate this relationship controlling for potentially confounding variables. These analyses were conducted for each case-country separately, as we are interested in how study abroad experiences might be valued differently across countries.

Results

Descriptive analysis

In the first analytical step, we investigated whether graduates with study abroad experience are more likely to receive a call-back compared to graduates without study abroad experience. Our results indicate that this holds not true in all three case-countries Belgium ($\chi^2 = 0.00$, $p = 1.000$), the Netherlands ($\chi^2 = 0.00$, $p = 1.000$) and Spain ($\chi^2 = 1.16$, $p = .281$). In the next step, we investigated whether the different experimental conditions led to different call-back rates (see table 3). At first sight, the descriptive results indicate that in Belgium and the Netherlands, students who shortly mention their study abroad experience in their motivation letter are more likely to be invited for a job interview. Furthermore, Spanish graduates without study abroad experience seem also to have a higher propensity of being invited. However, for all case-countries these results are not statistically significant, which indicates once again that **study abroad experience might not lead to improved chances of securing a first job - in contrast to popular thinking.**

Table 3. Call-back (in percentages) per experimental condition

	Experimental condition A (no study abroad)	Experimental condition B (study abroad on CV)	Experimental condition C (study abroad CV + short description ML)	Experimental condition D (study abroad CV + long description ML)
Belgium	22.9	22.9	23.4	22.3
Netherlands	46.3	43.4	50.9	44.6
Spain	5.7	3.4	4.0	4.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 0.07$, $p = .996$; $\chi^2 = 2.25$, $p = .522$ for the Netherlands; and $\chi^2 = 1.25$, $p = .740$ for Spain.

Multivariate analysis

In the next step, we conducted a binary logistic regression on the relationship between study abroad experience and receiving a call-back in each case-country, controlling for possible confounding variables. These analyses are presented in table 4. As can be observed, **for the three case-countries our results indicate that studying abroad does not increase the likelihood of being invited for a job interview.**

Table 4. Binary logistic regression on the relationship between study abroad experience and receiving a callback (reference category = no, presented values are odds ratios)

	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>The Netherlands</i>	<i>Spain</i>
	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Study abroad experience (ref: no)	0.99	1.01	0.62
Organisation size (ref: <11)			
11-50	1.45	1.34	0.46
51-200	1.27	1.23	0.72
201-1,000	1.02	1.45	1.10
>1,000	1.11	1.44	1.06
Non-profit company (ref: profit company)	0.47	0.37***	0.00
Company has international activities (ref: no)	1.01	0.75	1.42
Type of occupation (ref: administration)			
Finance	0.73	1.29	4.74*
Sales and marketing	1.06	0.86	4.09
IT	0.47	1.63	0.00
Other	1.07	1.26	0.00
R-square (Nagelkerke)	.00	.00	.03
Observations	700	698	700

Notes: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

In a final analytical step, we investigated whether the different experimental conditions, that is the way study abroad is presented in the motivation letter, lead to different callback outcomes. As can be seen in table 5, **no differences are being observed between the different experimental conditions in all case-countries**, again contrary to our expectations.

Table 5. Binary logistic regression on the relationship between motivation letter type and receiving a callback

	<i>Belgium</i>	<i>The Netherlands</i>	<i>Spain</i>
	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>Exp(B) (SE)</i>
<i>Application type (ref: no international experience)</i>			
<i>International experience not mentioned in motivation letter</i>	0.97	0.92	0.57
<i>International experience briefly mentioned in motivation letter</i>	1.02	1.19	0.66
<i>International experience extensively mentioned in motivation letter</i>	0.98	0.94	0.64
<i>Organisation size (ref: <11)</i>			
<i>11-50</i>	1.46	1.34	0.46
<i>51-200</i>	1.27	1.24	0.71
<i>201-1,000</i>	1.02	1.45	1.10
<i>>1,000</i>	1.11	1.44	1.06

Non-profit company (ref: profit company)	0.47	0.38***	0.00
Company has international activities (ref: no)	1.06	0.76	1.42
Type of occupation (ref: administration)			
Finance	0.73	1.28	4.73*
Sales and marketing	1.06	0.84	4.09*
IT	0.48	1.58	0.00
Other	1.07	1.24	0.00
R-square (Nagelkerke)	0.00	.04	0.01
Observations	700	700	700

Notes: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

Conclusions

Study abroad is being promoted at many higher education institutions as providing a ‘plus’ on graduates’ CV, which would be valued by employers once they enter the labour market. However, very few studies used experimental set-ups to investigate whether this assumption holds true. In this paper, we addressed this gap in the academic literature through a field experiment, whereby we submitted 2,100 fictitious applications to real job vacancies in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain. Building upon the available and

theoretical and empirical literature, we hypothesized that graduates with study abroad experience would be more likely to be invited for a job interview. Following an earlier international comparative (survey) study (Van Mol 2017), we particularly expected Spanish employers to be most likely to value international (exchange) experience, followed by Belgian and Dutch employers. Finally, we also hypothesized that different ways of describing the study abroad experience in the motivation letter would alter the probability of an interview invite.

Our results consistently indicate that the popular assumption that employers take study abroad experience into account when recruiting is not supported by empirical evidence, at least not for our data, which focused on horizontal student mobility (international exchanges between higher education institutions of similar reputation) of Belgian, Dutch and Spanish master graduates in Economics. Furthermore, our results indicated that there is no advantage in describing the exchange period in a specific way in the motivation letter. As such, a practical recommendation for graduates in economic disciplines could be to simply indicate they spent some time abroad instead of extensively describing the impact of their exchange period on their skills. **However, given the scarcity of experimental studies on the subject, we highly recommend to replicate this study in other national contexts, with CVs of graduates who graduated in disciplines different than Economics, looking also to vertical mobility patterns, whereby students move to higher education institutions that are more highly ranked.** Such studies would contribute to

ta more fine-grained understanding of the heterogeneity in outcomes of study abroad, both across countries and within countries (e.g. depending on the discipline or institution of graduation). Finally, our study also makes clear that unfortunately researchers and practitioners in international higher education have not been focusing sufficiently on employers. However, such redirection of focus is urgently needed in order to understand how employers assess study abroad experiences, as well as in terms of getting employers acquainted with the professional value of graduates with study abroad experience.

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Funding acquisition: Author 1, Author 3

Project administration: Author 4

Supervision: Author 1, Author 3, Author 4

Writing – original draft: Author 1, Author 2

Writing – review & editing: Author 1, Author 2, Author 3, Author 4

Data and materials availability

All data are available upon reasonable request to the Erasmus Careers consortium.

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Do Greek employers value study abroad experience?



Do Greek employers value study abroad experience? Evidence from a field experiment²

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Introduction

The present paper explores the value that Greek employers attribute to the study mobility experience abroad during recruitment processes. By conducting a field survey, asking employers who had a job vacancy to evaluate a fictitious CV and motivation letter for that position, we analysed whether Greek employers value study abroad experience and what factors they consider when evaluating the application of a new economics graduate. Because of ethical considerations explored in the next paragraph, we contacted the recruiters for each of these vacancies and asked them a) to take part in our survey and b) to evaluate the CV and cover letter attached following the 4 different conditions (A, B, C, D, see p. 6).

²The results of the Greek study were presented in the [3rd INOEK Conference](#) "Greece- Europe 2023 Education- Research - Innovation, New Technologies, Institutions and Sustainable Development" and will be published soon.

Ethical Considerations

The correspondence study design raised ethical concerns within AUTH. As explained in the introduction of this report, based on the design of the experimental nature of the study, employers would have been unaware that they were scanning and evaluating a fake application. While this presents a significant advantage since the results then reflect recruiters' unbiased behaviour, a correspondence methodology implies that recruiters participate in the study without prior consent to evaluate a simulated application. Thus, employers would have to invest time and resources in scanning applications that, unknown to them, are in fact fake.

After careful ethical consideration, AUTH implemented a change in the data collection process for the Greek case. In this approach, recruiters and managers were asked to evaluate a mock CV and cover letter for their actual job opening. Also, they were asked to justify their answer, whether they would have invited the candidate for an interview or not. This decision was reached after extensive contemplation and consultations with representatives from AUTH's Ethical Committee, research team members, and project partners. AUTH's commitment to fostering connections between academia and the labour market, along with its professional affiliations with employers, led to the conclusion that the research could not adopt the same methodology as the other partners. Additionally, the ethical guidelines for research projects funded by the European Commission (2021) emphasize that researchers should make decisions regarding methodology based on their own ethical considerations.

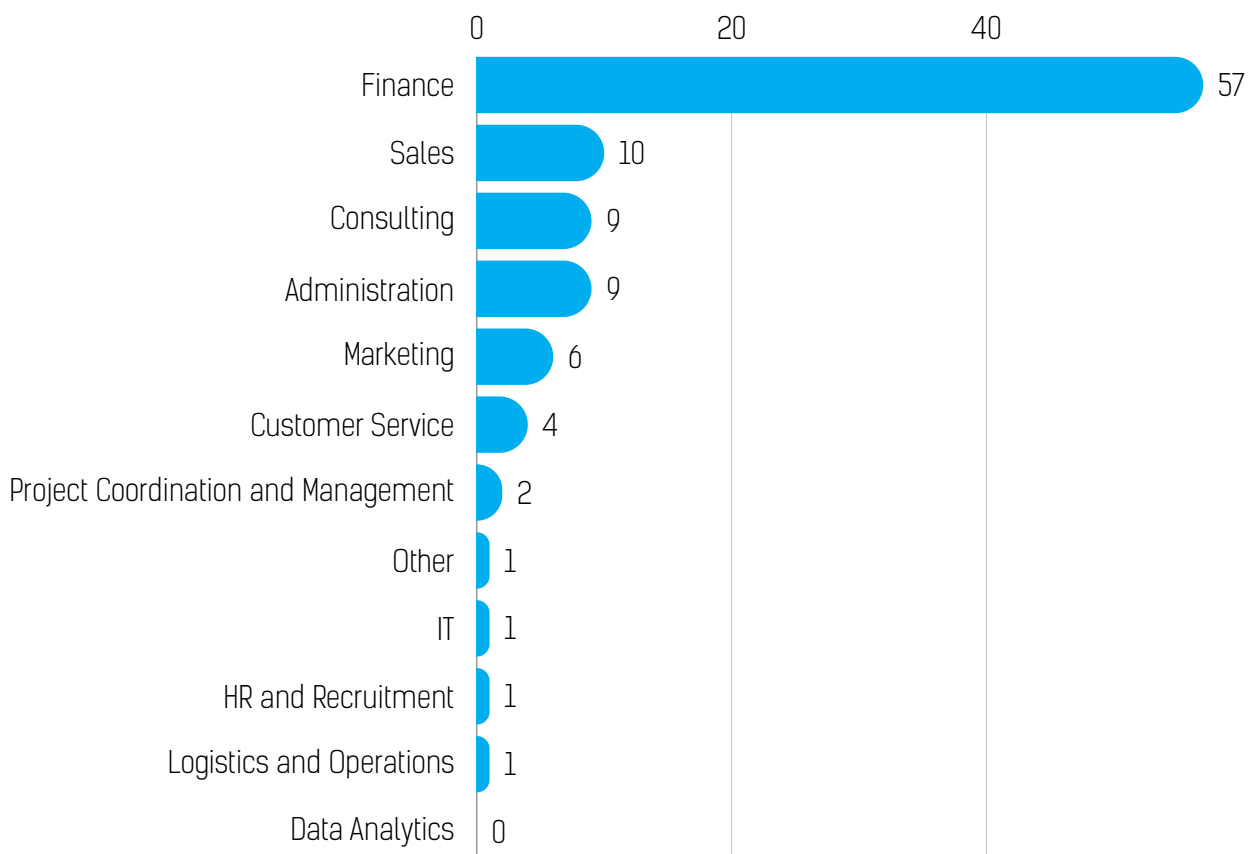
Consequently, the **methodology adopted in Greece** was as follows:

- Initially, 700 real job vacancies suitable for economic graduates with a maximum of one year of experience were identified through sources such as LinkedIn, job portals, and platforms like Skywalker and Indeed.
- Then, the relevant individuals (recruiters or managers) responsible for these job positions were reached via email, inviting them to voluntarily participate in an employer survey as part of the Erasmus+ project and evaluate the cover letter and CV specific to the job opening and randomly assigned them one of four alternative conditions. The CV's and cover letters were exactly the same as in other countries but translated in Greek.
- Subsequently, 175 CVs and cover letters for each of the four conditions were dispatched to the participating employers. For the email content sent to the employers, please refer to the attached annexe I, which includes both the original Greek version and its English translation of an indicative email.
- The response rate to these inquiries was 14.4%, with 101 out of the 700 contacted companies providing responses and explanations for their decisions to either reject or invite the hypothetical candidate for an interview.

Results

Only the data from the 101 companies that responded are presented. The profile, through descriptive statistics, of the 101 companies that replied to the applications are presented in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1. Area of expertise of the involved firms (N=101)



The job positions' areas are presented below, in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2. Location of the position (N=101)

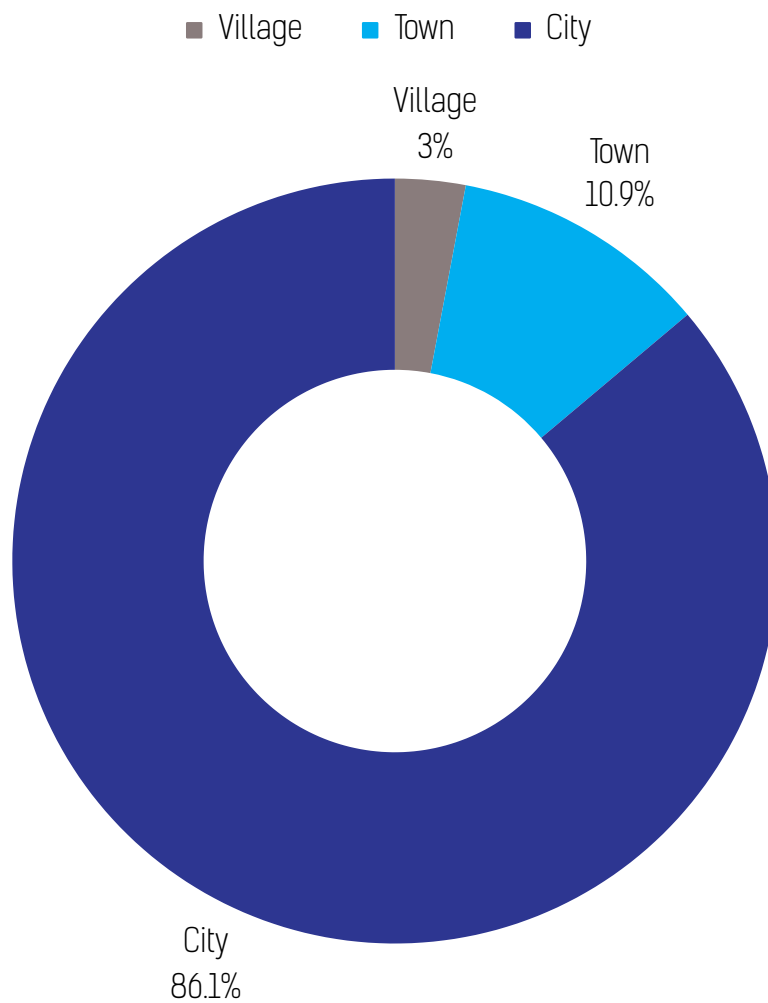
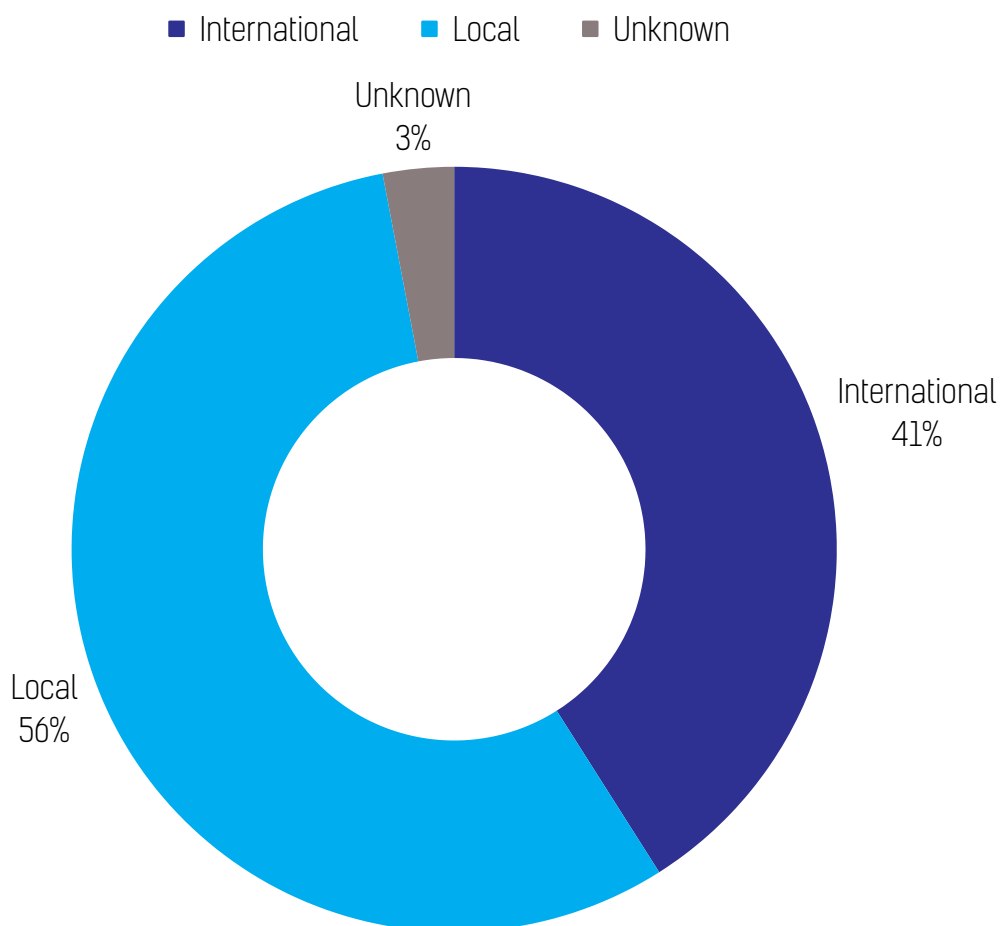


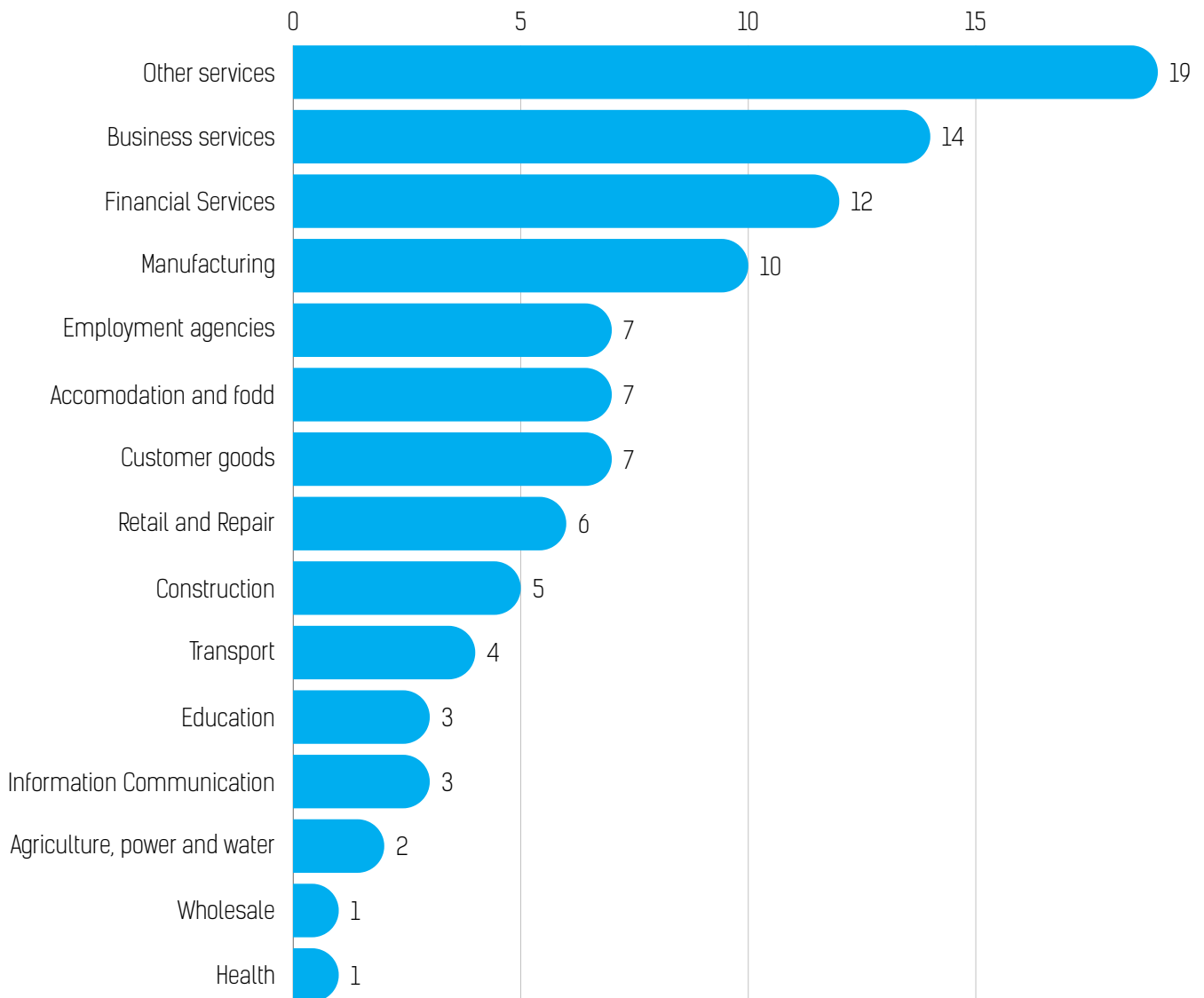
Diagram 3 below provides an illustration of the operations level of the companies.

Diagram 3. Firms' operations level (N=101)



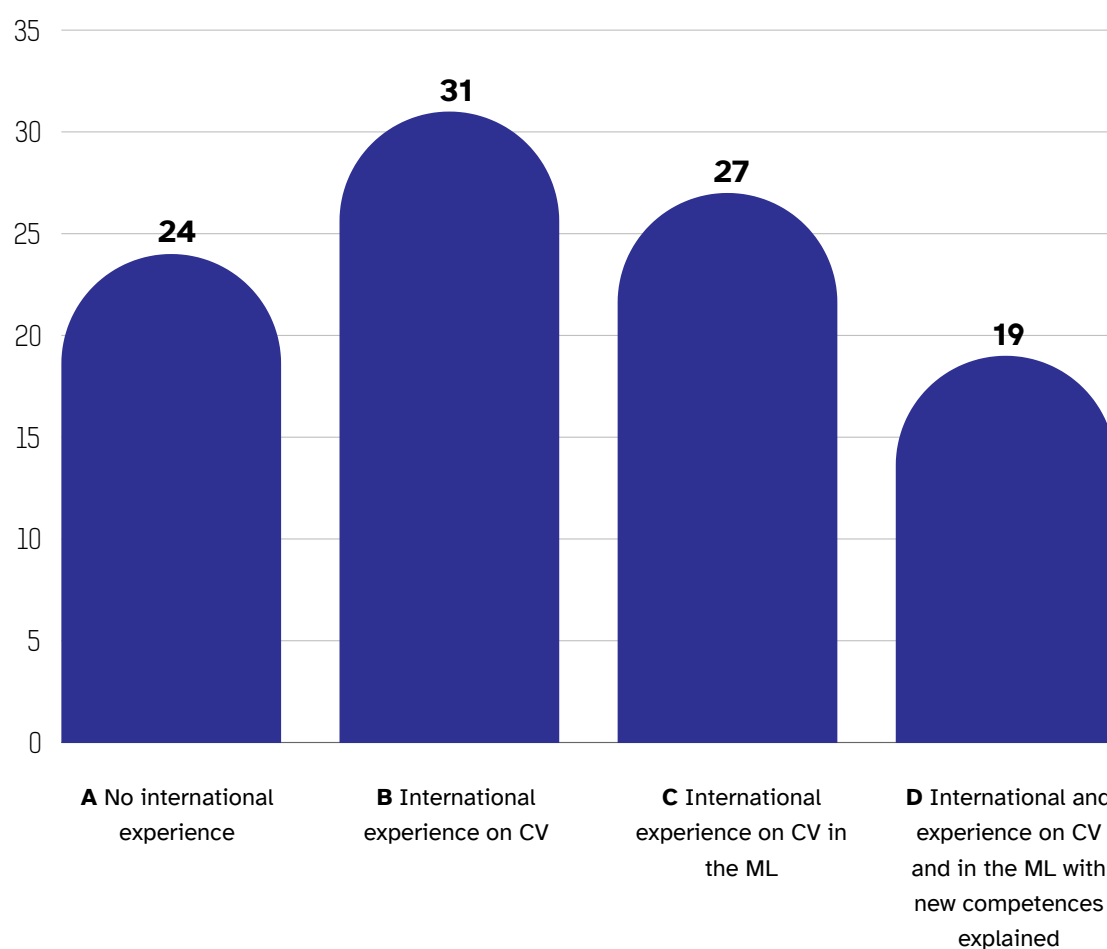
While, in Diagram 4, below the activity sector of the involved companies is presented.

Diagram 4. Activity sector of the involved companies (N=101)



Furthermore, Diagram 5 below showcases the number of replies received to each of the 4 different application forms (A, B, C, D).

Diagram 5. Number of firms answered each candidate form (N=101)



In the last step of analysis, the main reasons for acceptance or rejection of the applicant are presented. 52 out of 101 companies (51.5%) answered they would invite the candidate for an interview, while the rest 48 out of 101 (48.5%) would reject him. The main reasons provided by companies that accepted the candidate are presented below, in Table 1.

Table 1. Acceptance reason and relative number of companies

Acceptance Reason	Application form	Number of companies
Excellent studies and relative experience	A	1
	B	2
	C	6
	D	0
Meets all the required skills or knowledge (language skills, Programming, specific software)	A	2
	B	2
	C	1
	D	2
Good and accurate cover letter or/and CV	A	2
	B	1
	C	0
	D	2

The main reasons provided by companies which rejected the candidate are presented below, in Table 2.

Table 2. Rejection reason and relative number of companies

Rejection Reason	Application form	Number of companies
Not having relative experience	A	2
	B	8
	C	10
	D	10
Not having required skills or knowledge (language skills, Programming, specific software)	A	3
	B	4
	C	0
	D	1
Not good enough or inaccurate cover letter or/and CV	A	2
	B	0
	C	0
	D	0
Other reasons (willingness to move to another place, no house next to the company, position no more available)	A	0
	B	2
	C	2
	D	0

Based on the above, we could understand that **Greek employers value mostly the previous work experience that they considered relevant to the job and prefer short and tailored CVs rather than extensive cover letters.** The small number of answers limits the accurate interpretation of the data but pictures the situation: Greek employers

mostly rejected the candidate when they considered him inexperienced and this was mainly when they had received type B, C and D type of application.

Lastly, we examine how the possibility of acceptance of the candidate is associated with the application type itself. The dependent variable is dichotomous, so we choose to use binary logistic regression to answer the abovementioned research question.

No statistically significant results were found. The results are presented in Table 3, below.

Table 3. Logistic regression results for Application type, baseline category: A

Variable	Coefficient B	Exp(B)	p-value
Application type (A)	-	-	-
Application type (B)	0.442	1.556	0.475
Application type (C)	0.170	1.185	0.771
Application type (D)	0.031	1.032	0.958

Dependent variable: Application status: 0 for rejection and 1 for acceptance

Conclusions

The results reveal that only a minority of Greek employers take international experience into account when making recruitment decisions. **The existence of previous relevant work experience and well-structured self-presentation tools (tailored CV and cover letter) are considered the most important.** In addition, based on the characteristics of the open job vacancies, useful data regarding the Greek labour market in the

Finance/Economics discipline were revealed and are presented, such as the size and location of companies, the main sectors and the major field of expertise, as well as the qualifications considered valuable for a young graduate of Economics who tries to find a relevant job in Greece.

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Common Conclusions

Although the methodology used in the two studies was different, the results are substantially similar: **our findings indicate that studying abroad does not increase the likelihood of being invited for a job interview**, in contrast to common thinking, and there is no advantage in describing the exchange period in a specific way in the motivation letter, at least for recent graduates in economic disciplines.

The Greek case might help us interpret this result as employers were asked to justify their evaluations: they mostly value previous relevant work experience and short and tailored CVs, rather than participation in an Erasmus student exchange *per se*. However, as this is only the first experimental study on the subject, we strongly encourage scholars and practitioners to replicate the experimental study design in other national contexts, in different disciplines, looking also at vertical mobility patterns (students move to HEIs that are more highly ranked), or presenting skills acquired from Erasmus differently.

Moreover, studies focusing on the skills gained through Erasmus+ internships might give different results as this type of experience is by definition more skills-oriented. Further studies could in fact shed light on how recruiters assess applicants' profiles, what they look at, and if they are acquainted with the professional value of graduates with study abroad experience. This aspect is particularly important as almost all scientific studies on employment outcomes of study abroad, as well as strategies and interventions of higher education professionals focused predominantly on students, neglecting the employers' perspective. If the latter do not value studying abroad, as our findings seem to suggest,

it might be due to their unawareness of the value of study abroad for students' development. In this respect, our findings also suggest that next to better understanding the employers' perspective, informing them about the benefits of study abroad might be urgently needed. The employer-oriented manual of the Erasmus Careers project, with the wider goal of contributing to a better connection of the Erasmus+ Programme to the labour market, will be a first step in this regard.

Annex I

Καλημέρα σας,

Ονομάζομαι Κατερίνα Παπακώτα και είμαι σύμβουλος σταδιοδρομίας στο Γραφείο Διασύνδεσης του Αριστοτελείου Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλονίκης. Επικοινωνώ μαζί σας για να σας ζητήσω να συμμετέχετε σε μία έρευνα εργοδοτών στο πλαίσιο του Ευρωπαϊκού Προγράμματος Erasmus Careers. Η συγκεκριμένη έρευνα διεξάγεται σε 4 χώρες (Ολλανδία, Βέλγιο, Ισπανία και Ελλάδα).

Το μόνο που θα χρειαστεί από εσάς είναι να δείτε την εικονική συνοδευτική επιστολή και βιογραφικό σημείωμα που σας στέλνω, σε σχέση με τη θέση εργασίας "Junior Business Operations Associate" που έχει ανακοινωθεί στο [indeed](#) και να μου στείλετε μία απάντηση, αν θα καλούσατε το συγκεκριμένο υποθετικό υποψήφιο για μία πρώτη συνέντευξη.

Σας ευχαριστώ πολύ και θα χαρώ να έχω την απάντησή σας. Μπορείτε να δείτε περισσότερες πληροφορίες για το συγκεκριμένο πρόγραμμα στην ιστοσελίδα <https://project.erasmuscareers.org/>

Με εκτίμηση,
Κατερίνα Παπακώτα
Γραφείο Διασύνδεσης ΑΠΘ
email: *omitted for privacy*
webpage: [career.auth.gr](#)

Good morning.

My name is Katerina Papakota and I am a career counsellor at the Career Office of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. I am contacting you to ask you to participate in an employer survey in the framework of the European Programme “Erasmus Careers”. This survey is being carried out in 4 countries (Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and Greece).

All I will need from you is to look at the mock cover letter and CV I am sending you attached, in relation to the job post "Junior Business Operations Associate" advertised in indeed and send me a reply if you would invite this hypothetical candidate for a first interview.

Thank you very much and I will be happy to receive your reply. You can find more information about this project at <https://project.erasmuscareers.org/>

Yours sincerely,

Katerina Papakota

Career Office of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

email: *omitted for privacy*

webpage: career.auth.gr

