



**House of Commons  
Work and Pensions Committee  
Employment opportunities for young people**

**Written evidence from the British Council  
September 2016**

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## Summary

- This submission addresses what employers look for in their younger employees and what broader measures the UK should prioritise to improve the employment rates of young people. It argues that international experience gives young people the skills that employers need, benefitting both them and employers.
- Employers will be looking for employees that can navigate an internationalised workplace and global economy. As such, an international outlook and intercultural skills are becoming more important in ensuring UK citizens thrive in this increasingly complex and interconnected economic and social environment.
- Employers value foreign language skills and the ability of employees to work across cultures, as well as the soft skills that are developed through international experience, such as communication, critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills.
- Currently, employers do not feel that education gives young people the intercultural skills needed for the modern workplace. Intercultural skills are seen as important to bringing in new clients, working in diverse teams and supporting the brand and reputation of the organisation. The intercultural skills that are particularly valued are the ability to understand different cultural contexts and viewpoints, and knowledge of a foreign language.
- Young people in the UK need to be offered opportunities to develop the outlook, knowledge, skills and experience that enable them to take part effectively in an internationally connected labour market. International experiences are one in which they can build this skillset.
- Young people who participate in international opportunities not only return with increased foreign language and intercultural skills, but are also more involved in research, development, and innovation upon their return, giving them greater impact in the workplace and benefitting the economy.
- This is just as important for non-graduates as for graduates. Businesses seek the ability to innovate and communicate at all levels across their organisation.
- Participation in international experiences is lower amongst particular socio-economic and demographic groups, and other factors associated with young people taking up international experiences suggest there are large numbers of young people who are not being given access to these opportunities.
- Given the value of international experience in boosting skills for young people it is especially important that access is widened. It is important that international opportunities are accessible to everyone, regardless of their background, so that they can make the best choices for their future and are able to reach their full potential.
- While outside the remit of the JobCentre Plus, the British Council believes that young people in the UK should be offered international experiences, whether it be at school, university or through their workplaces.

## **1. The British Council and opportunities for young people**

1.1 The British Council was founded to create ‘a friendly knowledge and understanding’ between the people of the UK and wider world. We do this by making a positive contribution to the countries we work with, using the cultural resources of the UK such as art, sport, education, science, culture, language, innovation, creativity and the sharing of the UK’s values and ways of living.

1.2 Our work makes a lasting difference to the UK’s international standing by increasing the country’s influence and networks with key decision makers, influencers and the wider public globally. It increases UK prosperity by encouraging more trade, investment and tourism. It helps keep the UK safe and secure by reducing extremism and improving stability in strategically important countries. It also increases influence by growing the number of people who know and trust the UK.

1.3 We work in over 100 countries worldwide. These include all of the places of major importance for UK trade and security, from China, India, Brazil and Russia, to North America and the EU, the Commonwealth, the Middle East and North Africa. We are at the forefront of the UK’s international networks and soft power.

1.4 Each year we reach over 20 million people face to face and through our events, and more than 500 million online and via broadcasts and publications.

1.5 We are first and foremost a people-to-people organisation. We work with governments, ministries and cultural and educational institutions, but above all we seek to create opportunities for people and build trust between people.

1.7 The British Council offers a range of international experiences for young people. Under the umbrella of the ‘Study Work Create’ platform, young people have access to internships, scholarships, work placements, volunteering and a variety of creative opportunities. Partial funding is available for many of the programmes in order to help young people access the opportunities.

1.8 In 2013-14 the British Council enabled 36,734 UK students to train, study or work abroad through Erasmus+, and every year gives 2,500 Language Assistants from the UK the opportunity support English teaching at schools and universities in 14 countries through the Assistantship Programme. Between 2013 and 2020 the British Council aims for 80,000 UK students to have some form of international opportunity in China, and is working with partners to support up to 25,000 young people from the UK to gain experience in India between 2015 and 2020, through the Generation UK Programme. The British Council also provides specific vocational international experience as the UK delivery partner of the International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience.

1.9 Research conducted on behalf of the British Council has found that international experience enables young people to develop skills that employers value, leads to young people finding jobs that interest them, and to them taking on more responsibility in the workplace<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> LSE Enterprise and CFE Research for British Council (2015) A World of Experience. Available online <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/world-experience>

## 2. What employers look for in younger employees

2.1 Multinational organisations increasingly have a need for employees with ‘global competencies’ such as the ability to communicate and work collaboratively with people from a range of countries and backgrounds. Research by Think Global and the British Council found that 74 per cent of the 500 business leaders surveyed worried that young people’s horizons are not broad enough to operate in a globalised economy, and that unless we better support schools to teach young people to think more globally, “the UK is in danger of being left behind by emerging economies such as China, India and Brazil”<sup>2</sup>.

2.3 In the UK, 91% of employees interact with colleagues from other countries, whilst 65% interact with international clients<sup>3</sup>. 70% of UK employers believe intercultural skills to be ‘very important’. Amongst those cited as the most important ‘intercultural skills’ were understanding and accepting cultural differences, adjusting communication and adapting to different cultures.

2.4 Knowledge of other languages is cited by employers as an important element in intercultural skills<sup>4</sup>. However, a study commissioned by the British Council suggested that only three quarters of the UK public are able to speak the ten languages of most long-term strategic importance to the UK<sup>5</sup>.

2.4. Extensive research has suggested a mismatch between the abilities of young people leaving education and employers’ requirements, with young people lacking ‘real-life’ and soft skills<sup>6</sup>. Only 16% of UK employers questioned were happy that the education sector met their intercultural skills needs<sup>7</sup>.

2.4 Young people hoping to enter employment need a range of generic and transferrable skills to thrive. These skills, often known as ‘soft skills’, include communication skills, team-work and problem-solving. International experience is one way in which young people can develop these abilities which enable their full access to and participation in the labour market and ease the transition from education to employment<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Think Global and the British Council (2011) *The Global Skills Gap: Preparing Young People for the Global Economy*. Available online: <http://think-global.org.uk/resources/item/6404>

<sup>3</sup> Booz Allen Hamilton and Ipsos Public Affairs for British Council (2013) Available online. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/culture-work-intercultural-skills-workplace>

<sup>4</sup> Booz Allen Hamilton and Ipsos Public Affairs for British Council (2013) Culture at Work. Available online. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/culture-work-intercultural-skills-workplace>

<sup>5</sup> Alcantara communications and British Council (2013) Languages for the Future. Available online: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/languages-future>

<sup>6</sup> Branine, M. (2008) *Graduate recruitment and selection in the UK: A study of the recent changes in methods and expectations*, Career Development International 13(6) and Docherty, D and Fernandez, R. (2014) *Career Portfolios and the Labour Market for Graduates and Postgraduates in the UK: A Report to the Higher Education Funding Council of England*, London.

<sup>7</sup> Booz Allen Hamilton and Ipsos Public Affairs for British Council (2013) Culture at Work. Available online. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/culture-work-intercultural-skills-workplace>

<sup>8</sup> LSE Enterprise and CFE Research for British Council (2015) A World of Experience. Available online <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/world-experience>

## 2. International experience and young people's employability

2.1 Research undertaken by CFE Research and LSE Enterprise on behalf of the British Council explored how international opportunities help to build skills in young people. Those with international experience felt it had helped them to develop a number of skills considered important to the contemporary workplace<sup>9</sup>.

2.3.1 *Flexibility, adaptability and direction*: Our research found that 82 per cent of individuals with international experience were confident in their ability to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations. The vast majority felt that their international experience was an important factor, with 73 per cent of those that had studied abroad scoring a four or five. The proportions were even higher for those who had travelled extensively and worked abroad at 86 per cent and 90 per cent respectively. Respondents with international experience were also more likely to describe themselves as resilient.

2.3.2 *International Communication and Collaboration*: Those that had spent time abroad believed that they were more confident in their ability to communicate with people from other countries and cultures and to deal with linguistic barriers (71 per cent compared with 45 per cent in the group without international experience). Those with international experience were also more likely to be open or willing to listen to others' ideas (92 per cent and 87 per cent respectively for those with and without international experience). Over half of individuals who had international experiences reported that these activities had allowed them to expand their network of professional or personal contacts.

2.3.3 *Problem solving*: Some 68 per cent of those that worked abroad also attributed the development of strong problem-solving abilities to their international experience. Respondents with international experience were more likely to report that they had strong analytical and critical thinking skills (73 per cent, 13 percentage points higher than those without such experience), problem-solving skills (83 per cent; +11 percentage points), and a creative mind-set (66 per cent; +9 percentage points).

2.3.4 *Language Skills*. The majority felt their time abroad had helped substantially in achieving this level of confidence in speaking a foreign language. Fewer than one in ten with no international experience felt they were proficient in a foreign language. 70 per cent of those that had worked abroad believed their international experience was a significant factor in helping them to develop a creative mind set, rating it four or five out of five in terms of importance.

2.3.5 *Professional Impact*. Once in work, those who had participated in international opportunities were more likely to be involved in innovation. 46 per cent of individuals with international experiences were involved – or had been involved in a previous role – in research and development (R&D), compared with 25 per cent of individuals without experience. A difference was seen in terms of those involved in introducing new or improved goods and services to market (44 per cent of those with international experience compared

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<sup>9</sup> LSE Enterprise and CFE Research for British Council (2015) A World of Experience. Available online <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/world-experience>

with 28 per cent of those without) and the implementation of new or improved designs or sales methods (34 per cent as opposed to 20 per cent)<sup>10</sup>.

2.4 It could be argued that it is difficult for young people to gain these skills once in employment. Only 48% of employers actively encouraged the development of intercultural skills in the workplace<sup>11</sup>, and just 11 per cent of UK companies indicated that managers need to brush up their skills in this area, placing areas such as improved management ability above languages<sup>12</sup>.

### **3. Barriers to international experience for young people**

3.1 Awareness of international opportunities appeared to increase with socio-economic status, and there were striking gender differences in both awareness of international opportunities and participation rates. Given the additional benefits gained by individuals participating in international activities, this poses important questions regarding equity and social mobility.

3.2 Young people today, especially in the UK, find that they are competing for jobs with the brightest and best from around the world. Many of these will have language skills and international experience. It is important that international opportunities are accessible to everyone, regardless of their background, so that they can make the best choices for their future and are able to reach their full potential.

### **4. Conclusion**

4.1 Employers value intercultural skills such as understanding and accepting cultural differences, adjusting communication, knowledge of foreign languages and adapting to different cultures. These skills are seen as important to bringing in new clients, working in diverse teams and supporting the brand and reputation of the organisation.

4.2 Young people who benefitted from international experiences indicated that as a result of the experience they had developed a number of skills considered important to the contemporary employers, which could be difficult to obtain once in the workplace.

4.3 There appear to be differing levels of participation in international experiences by different social groups, which given the benefits that can be derived from these experiences, poses important challenges for equity and social mobility.

4.4 It is important that more young people from all backgrounds are given the opportunity to participate in these experiences in the future. This research suggests that increasing and widening access to these opportunities could make an important contribution to future UK prosperity.

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<sup>10</sup> LSE Enterprise and CFE Research for British Council (2015) A World of Experience. Available online <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/world-experience>

<sup>11</sup> Booz Allen Hamilton and Ipsos Public Affairs for British Council (2013) Culture at Work. Available online. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/policy-insight-research/research/culture-work-intercultural-skills-workplace>

<sup>12</sup> UKCES (2014) *Employer skills survey 2013*. Available online: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/327492/evidence-report-81-ukces-employer-skills-survey-13-full-report-final.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/327492/evidence-report-81-ukces-employer-skills-survey-13-full-report-final.pdf)

## **9. Recommendations**

9.1 *Recognise and promote the benefits of international experience:* Policymakers and employers should consider the importance of international opportunities and experience. This could include working together to develop educational policy that supports increased ability for young people to learn languages and participate in international programmes within the curriculum and employers enabling international experience as part of their development planning for staff. They should also consider whether participation in third-sector programmes for young people that have an international component could be further publicised, supported or incentivised to enable an increase in participation.

9.2 *Encourage participation from an early age:* Individuals with international experience are more likely to seek out similar opportunities in future. Policymakers and education institutions should, where possible, facilitate exposure to positive international experiences from an early age, particularly working to support a revival of school exchanges, which have declined in recent years.

9.3 *Increase opportunities for work placements:* Employers should consider investing in programmes that give individuals opportunities to gain work experience overseas at all stages of their careers.

9.4 *Widen access to international opportunities:* There are important variations in participation in international opportunities across different socio-economic and demographic groups. Policymakers should consider ways in which access to such programmes could be widened to promote social mobility.

9.10 *Seek to understand the barriers to participation:* Research has found evidence of lower participation in the UK than in other countries and amongst particular socio-economic and demographic groups. Outside of the Higher Education sector, there is limited understanding of the relative impact of barriers to participation in international opportunities. Further research on this issue is required to help tackle important issues of equity and social mobility.