

WORK ABROAD AS AN ACCELERATOR OF SOCIAL MOBILITY AND LIFE-LONG LEARNING

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Abstract

In the context of rapid social and technological changes, new qualification expectations of tertiary graduates are emerging. 21st century skills necessary to succeed in life after students leave their educational institutions have been defined in national as well as international strategy documents. Along with technical and foreign language skills, soft skills are a new set of competences accentuated as key prerequisites for industry 4.0 jobs. Practical training and experience, thus, gain meaning and importance.

Internationalization programs of higher education institutions (HEIs) providing opportunities for study and work abroad turn out to be ideal for developing the necessary skill set for the renewed job market. A study involving students from ŠKODA AUTO University (SAU) who had completed an internship abroad was conducted to find out potential benefits from international work experience. Critical incidents retold in writing and discussed through semi-structured interviews show that the situations students face, problems they address, responsibilities they bear and practical experience they attain provide them with a valuable head start compared to their peers. They not only receive highly competitive chances within the job market but boost their self-confidence, internal motivation, and learner autonomy.

Key words: internationalization, 21st century skills, critical incident technique (CIT), higher education institution (HEI), job internship

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Introduction

The rise of industry 4.0 opened a discussion about the shape of the future job market. While the OECD warns that digitalization, automation, and artificial intelligence may endanger up to 14% and substantially change a further 32% of jobs worldwide over the next 10–15 years (OECD, 2019, p. 3), studies indicate a shift from manual to people-oriented professions, going hand-in-hand with a shift from durable goods towards services (OECD, 2019, p. 14).

1 21st Century Competences and Higher Education

Such transformation unavoidably entails a need for a renewed set of skills (NVF, 2016, p. 6). Workers will have to be flexible and adaptive, creative and enterprising, people-reflective, and communicative. In order to cope with the speed of technological development, they will also need to be able to motivate themselves for life-long learning. This paper pursues the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in preparing the students for this reality.

While companies started investing into reskilling or upskilling programs in their strategic plans, HEIs make appropriate modifications in their curricula. Education strategy documents, including the White Paper for education (Kotásek et al., 2001) at the national level, and the General and School Educational Programs (NÚV, 2021) at the institutional level, back-up the so-called 21st century skills with STEM skills (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Furthermore, to adapt to the social changes in the highly volatile job market moving from machine- to people-oriented jobs, the so-called soft skills are gaining in importance, acknowledging the necessity of not only teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, language, or communication skills, but also a higher sense of personal responsibility and own judgement, ethical and moral standards.

1.1 HEIs Curricula and Internationalization Programs

To uphold to these strategies, HEIs are adapting their school curricula and course design (Pullin, 2015; Richards, 2017). Language centers, which prepare students for a globalized world, demonstrated this change first. In line with the strategic framework “1+2” aimed at the mastery of at least two foreign languages for each European citizen thus strengthening the economy, mobility and employability within the EU (Council of the EU, 2014, p. 1), language centers integrate various foreign language teaching programs into their curricula, covering the languages, communication or other soft skills, in order to achieve a targeted student profile.

HEIs also utilize a range of internationalization programs for students, academic or administrative staff that build competences through mobility or international cooperation. Study, teaching and work abroad, as well as international partnership research projects all provide participants with opportunities to gain experience, build social networks and enhance their language and communication skills (Velinov et al., 2021).

In addition, practical training features among the HEIs’ strategies. Part-time, distant or on-line programs achieve the desired work experience, competitiveness, and future job

opportunities necessary for coping with the challenges of the transition from study to work. This training can take the specific form of an internship.

2 Methodology

The study was conducted at the SAU, a private HEI in the Czech Republic. It aims at the following student profile: The graduate has a set of mutually interconnected theoretical knowledge and practical skills within his/her specialization and is able to apply them in professional contexts; has strong communication and social skills and is able to use them for cooperation in teams; has user knowledge of ICT and communicates in two world languages.

In order to achieve the aforementioned competences, SAU language programs provide intensive language training in mandatory English, and German, Spanish, or Russian as electives. They also offer competence-based courses, such as Business Communication, Academic Writing, or Media Literacy. Importantly, the students complete a mandatory job internship during their 5th semester of the bachelor's degree testing their theoretical knowledge in a relevant real-world context. Some combine their study with varied forms of employment through the school's WORK&STUDY program or distant study forms. SAU also provides varied internationalization programs, students can study abroad, participate in international cooperation research projects or enroll with an intensive summer school.

2.1 Critical Incidents Technique

This project aimed to dive into students' job experience abroad through the critical incidents (CI) they encounter. A CI means any situation that is significant, revelatory or otherwise decisive for the students' life, remains in their memory, and further determines their future behaviors, decisions and actions. A CI can be both, positive or negative experience, e.g., an emergency or threat, challenge, loss or gain, arousal, embarrassment, conflict or misunderstanding, or stepping out of someone's comfort zone. CIs usually lead to altered values, attitudes or beliefs, new learning or realization, or a change in self-esteem.

The critical incident technique (CIT) was first developed as a tool using behavioral data to solve practical problems of success and failure in job related procedures (Flanagan, 1954). Thanks to its potential to "effectively turn anecdotes into data" (FitzGerald et al., 2007, p. 299), it was later adopted in the health sciences to help future practitioners better cope with unpredictable behaviors of their patients through uncovering "existing realities or truths so they could be measured, predicted, and ultimately controlled" (Butterfield, 2005: 482). The

technique also found widespread use as a qualitative research method in the intercultural field, as it enhances “awareness and understanding of human attitudes, expectations, behaviors, and interactions”, and thus, facilitates communication, and expands knowledge and practical skills in an international dialogue (Apedaile & Schill, 2008, p.7; Reimann, 2019).

The CIs were collected from Master’s degree students in a Business English module specialized on management. As one of the course assignments, students were asked to recall and describe key moments of their lives significant in a positive or negative way which influenced their future decisions, behaviors, or actions. These included situations rousing their emotions, challenging their attitudes or beliefs, addressing problems or conflicts, leaving their comfort zone, requiring extra effort and the like. A general record form to write the narratives was used in which students described the participants, setting and actions, their roles, decisions made, including own evaluation of the incident and its lesson learned and outcomes.

Out of the 238 narratives written and submitted in English between 2017 and 2020 and 5 semi-structured interviews with newly returned students from their internship abroad in 2020, 38 CIs addressing the students’ job experiences from a foreign country were selected for a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in order to shed light on better understanding of how experience gained from practical training abroad influences the students’ further personal, study as well as professional development and growth. Adequate HEIs’ curricula readjustments will be proposed to better suit the conditions of the 21st century job market.

3 Critical Incident Analyses

The critical incidents retold in writing and by word can be categorized as follows: (1) situations having impact on the students’ carrier path, (2) situations having impact on the students’ personal growth, and (3) situations related to language learning.

3.1 Situations Having Impact on the Students’ Carrier Path

To receive an internship abroad is a prestigious issue which assumes to take part and succeed in the complete recruitment process as evident from the following quote: “*I sent my CV and motivation letter. Based on this they chose people for an interview. Then, two company representatives came who interviewed us here. It took three months until we learned the result*”. To get the job, therefore, also assumed adopting a professional approach to the recruitment procedures, as well as exercise patience or ability to deal with uncertainty.

Experiences from a company abroad seem to give the students a competitive advantage as they receive unique know-how and knowledge attractive to local employers, as noted by one of the respondents: *“We can better compare their processes with some processes at Škoda, which are better or worse”*. How this may be used in particular can be summarized by another respondent’s explanation: *“I was at the purchase department. The office is divided into a few teams by commodities, by what they sell. Apart from that, they have one special team which makes changes for the current and future car models. Recently, I learned that in Škoda, this is done at the logistics department.”*

The students also claim that during the internships abroad, they receive more responsibilities than in local placements: *“I gained a lot of new experience, because I got into interesting projects, which would for sure not be the case if I stayed in Czechia.”* They report taking direct part in implementation of new projects, negotiating conditions for cooperation with suppliers, leading crisis management in a team of upper management or assuming greater responsibility: *“The degree of responsibility was very high. If I omitted something it might have later on stopped production or bring some large problem.”* Likewise, being given a high degree of trust from their supervisors is indicated in another student testimony who shares her story about taking over responsibilities from her boss during his absence for vacation: *“His position was quite high, and then, suddenly, he told me that he was leaving for vacation that I would manage, I shall not worry. They really are so easy-going. They believe that everyone can manage anything. I like that so much.”*

Despite being given a high degree of responsibility, the students still foster protection from their student status: *“I sometimes made a mistake. But everything was taken in a positive spirit, no one was angry, they knew I was new there.”* As students, they enjoy unique conditions for concentrating on their work, quality, and certain tolerance for mistakes as indicated in the following quote: *“Since it was a full-time internship, I could give all my time to work, I didn’t need to bother about studies, it was easier to focus both at work and after.”* What is more, they have enough time for clarifying their areas of interest and talent and direct their carrier path. They confirm both, what they want (*“The main thing I realized, I clarified. I now see myself somewhere abroad”*); *“I clarified some things about my future. I used to doubt my choice of my study specialization... but when I was there, I enjoyed it, I realized it was great... I ensured myself I wanted to continue working in and studying logistics.”*) or what they do not want (*“I am not the type of a person who needs to travel all the time. I would like to work in product management, but in our company, designers spend four days a week abroad. But I already lived abroad a number of times so I think that’s enough.”*).

Another important benefit the students draw upon from their work abroad are professional social networks. They develop valuable contacts for the future which not only generally widen their chances within the job market (“*I worked with all the purchasers. I am still in contact with many*”; “*He gave me good references. I think if I need a new job ..., [my boss] could help me a lot, with references, feedback.*”) but they may also be a possibility for a job after they graduate (“*Although it’s been a year and a half, I am still in contact with people I met, and they keep talking me into returning, so the door is open*”; “*For example, my boss then asked me if I couldn’t come for another internship again... or if I needed something or even wanted to move abroad in the future, I can contact him*”).

The power of the reference from a company abroad is one of the aspects the students seem to be quite aware of, as they mention their CVs in many of their stories (“*... if you worked for a multinational company and used foreign languages, it always shines in your CVs*”; “*It’s definitely a good reference. Employers take it into account, and that is exactly the reason why I wanted to go there - to have it in my CV*”; “*And, of course, the attractiveness of the employer and gaining foreign experience, which I think is fairly fundamental today.*”). As a result, the students, after successfully completing their internships, become more ambitious, as one student admitted: “*I started to put a lot of effort into study and work. I tried to do everything professionally, quickly. Perhaps even more than that. Two years after my return, I devoted myself only to school and work. My achievements were much greater*” and reiterated by another: “*And the biggest value in my personal development is that I became more ambitious because I got into attractive projects in an attractive company, and I think I did a good job, based on feedback from manager, and colleagues. It made me work even harder.*”

3.2 Situations Having Impact on the Students’ Personal Growth

Growing student ambitions lead the discussion to the students’ personal growth. A realization dominating the testimonies is their enforced self-esteem and confidence, as implied by the following quote: “*It meant a huge advancement for me – not only in terms of experience, but also my ego. I realized that if I want to accomplish something, I can. If someone believes in you, you reach it faster. My boss’ vacation showed me that I could do anything.*” Boosted self-confidence repeats. One student points out: “*I think I accomplished something not many people did*”. Another one does not hesitate to admit for herself: “*I am great that I made it*”. Some of the students confirm their progress in self-confidence by comparing with how they felt about themselves before and after their stay: “*Everyone agreed, even in my family, that I am more self-confident. They mentioned that I seemed more mature and confident to them*”; “*I*

always occurred too sheepish to them, now they probably think it's getting better"; *"It moved me on, I realized my values and began to believe in myself, which was not the case before."*

Besides self-confidence, the students also value the acquired independence, pointing out every day routines they have had minimum experience with, such as housing and the reality market, banking, or social security. The degree of stress it caused to some of them is indicated by one student who, after arriving at the destination at night, faced a problem of getting access to her rental apartment: *"I must say it was tough, I even felt like giving up and flying back home."* Another student confirms: *"only arriving and dealing with social security and other stuff around insurance and real estates, all this was very complicated"*.

Dealing with practical life issues in most of the cases requires students to step out of their comfort zone, a task that students see as having a positive impact on their personal growth. They mention not only dealing with challenges or problems: *"I must say that after the first two or three weeks I felt my comfort zone was expanding, many things that used to make me nervous stopped bothering me"*; *"to experience the feeling when you do not speak the language perfectly, when you face some stressful situations and resolve them"*, but also varied communication issues: *"I challenged my comfort zone a lot because I faced new situations... sometimes I felt like keeping quiet, but I had to get over and start communicating... I knew that one day during those five months I have to start, so I decided that the sooner the better."*

Similarly, the students, while living and working abroad, experience, learn how to deal with, and ultimately draw from diversity. While usually working in multinational companies, they learn about cooperation in multicultural teams (*"Many foreigners work there, Germans from Porsche, or Indians in engineering positions."*). Based on this, their horizons widen as they can compare life and work approaches (*"although they say English people are rather reserved, my experience is quite the opposite. They manage work-life balance well, they work, then they have fun. They also have fun at work, they leave for an hour for breakfast, then they return and work again... I enjoyed it more than at home - I was in an open office with 83 purchasers. I worked directly with my supervisor, this also helped me a lot, we had a very friendly relationship, not only at work."*). And they also report own personality adjustments (*"When I was there, I was very open, I adjusted to the local culture, I made jokes and I managed work-life balance, I knew that I was free, that I could smile at everyone, that felt great... And when I returned, I returned to my old habits, I readjusted to the culture here."*).

Facing diversity, furthermore, the students develop critical judgement and activate interest for social events, as seen in their ability to think and evaluate varied work, society, and personal issues critically. Those living in Great Britain formed their judgement on Brexit

“During our travels, we were told not to talk about Brexit, because it divides people a lot. We tried to avoid this topic, but people discussed it anyway. It was interesting to hear the opinions from different parts of the country, because they are more or less the same. So, one wonders where they got the majority.”) or compared social attitudes between their host and home culture (*“We agreed that Britain has always been isolated, both historically and geographically, so they are used to accept strangers. They do not refuse new things or people, and after a while they get out of their shells, trust and open up to people more. Here in Czechia, it's the opposite, opening up to someone is a long-term run.”*).

Last but not least, most of the students also report changes in their relationships at home, whether it is family, friends, or current life partners. They figure out their relationships (*“I had time to reevaluate some relationships with friends or in my family. I started seeing some situations differently”*); *“While in Germany, it quickly became clear who was a real friend and who was not.”*) or realize functional (*“my relationship with my girlfriend survived, so that's good”*) or dysfunctional partnerships (*“I had a boyfriend before I left, but after a month I was gone, enjoying myself, going to work, on trips during the weekends, without worrying about things, no problems to solve, it started occurring to me that my boyfriend was pulling me back to Czechia... So, after some time we broke up. But I do not see it negatively, I obviously wanted it that way, be present in England and enjoy my time.”*). Some of the students also admit that their experience from life and work abroad had changed them to the point they became estranged from previous friends (*“I cannot discuss this with my childhood friends. We have to choose different topics. This is a problem. When I returned, I felt foreign. Because when you reunite with your peers, it simply does not resonate anymore.”*).

3.3 Situations Related to Language Learning

A significant part of the student testimonies relates to language learning. The respondents mention not only developing foreign language skills but also improving their listening skills due to local accents (*“At the beginning, I had a slight problem with the local accent, it was hard to understand the words and the intonation, but after two to three weeks this stabilized”*; *“Near Manchester they have a very specific accent there, I must admit that I struggled at the beginning ... It took about two months to get used to it, then it was fine”*). They enhanced their general and professional vocabulary (*“I went there to correct my mistakes, but what I learned was new vocabulary and to talk more to the point”*; *“I had to learn all the professional and technical stuff”*). But most importantly, they enhanced communication skills,

as concisely summarized in one of the narratives: *“I had to make phone calls, plus we had regular meetings where we presented what worked well and what did not. Then of course the ability to convince others about what I thought was the right solution, because others had theirs. And then for sure to demonstrate logical thinking, because that's priority, without logical thinking in this area, one can hardly arrive at something that makes sense.”*

Many of the work situations also required developing proper interactional skills. This is implied in an incident experienced by one of the students after he shifted from English to Czech during a company meeting to ask his Slovak colleague for help: *“But switching to a foreign language, in front of top managers was unprofessional... So, people commented mainly about us speaking a foreign language, which they do not understand.”*

A special attention needs to be paid to grammar issues. Rather than aiming at grammatical precision, which many of the students did before they left abroad (*“I went there to correct my mistakes, but no one was correcting me.”*), a shift in the students' attitudes to mistakes and general precision is evident from most of the testimonies (e.g., *“I used to be shy to speak. But now, this problem is gone, I am not afraid anymore. I do not mind making mistakes, that happens, what matters is that I speak.”*). When asked if the native speakers corrected the students' precision issues, they all respond negatively, as implied in one of the remarks: *“I had an interesting conversation with a colleague from my team about it, but she explained to me that she would not correct me because she found it offending for both of us.”*

While relishing progress in language and communication skills (*“But then I was really very satisfied with my English, I made a sharp progress during those few months. I can speak, I can express everything, and although I do not yet have the vocabulary I would like to, I can switch to and speak English easily.”*), which permeates all the student narratives, the students also see their foreign languages skills as an advantage mainly for their future job market competitiveness and an accelerator of their carrier path which, indeed, helped them obtain their current job placement (*“I think that the fact that I study a university, know languages, have a basic knowledge of logistics, was what mattered. So, it was more my specialization that played a role, and aspects like being able to speak English, a little German”; “And then it paid off in my current job as a recruiter. I communicate a lot in English and German with foreign candidates... And it's true that I got this position because of the languages I know.”*).

Conclusions and Discussion

To conclude, the students' CIs show practical training abroad as a potent accelerator of professional and personal growth. They achieve unique experience, expand their professional

skills, and receive a know-how attractive for employers. They also develop valuable social and professional networks enforcing their future carrier chances. What is more, their student status allows them to test their abilities, blossom ambitions and direct their professional path. Personally, they mature faster, as they get independent, become more self-confident, resilient to stress and uncertainty, flexible and daring when getting into the unknown. They also seem to become more engaged, tolerant, open-minded, and compassionate citizens.

From the perspective of HEIs, the findings yielded from this study also confirm that experience from international internships helps students develop the key 21st century skills. It boosts foreign language and communication skills, cooperation, critical thinking and problem solving to the graduate profile. Students develop flexibility, willingness, and motivation to become life-long learners, grow self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as cultivate personal responsibility and engagement, which all give them competitive advantage in the job market.

This study indicates important implications for HEI strategies, their curricula, practical training programs, and teaching methods (Pullin, 2015; Richards, 2017). First, HEIs' internationalization programs should seek out opportunities for not only academic but also professional exchanges. Second, the foreign language programs should open to adaptations of their syllabi so they better reflect the needs of the professional sphere. Developing practical intercultural, communication, and interactional skills rather than language issues should be the main focus of language training (Cogo & Dewey, 2006; Firth, 2009).

Finally, the potential of the CIT for teaching and learning practice toward the students' experiences and competence development should not be forgotten. As Apedaile and Schill put it: CIs help engage the students "at a meaningful, personal level" while showing them how to analyze their "attitudes and behaviors that might be critical to their effectiveness in the roles they are already performing or preparing for (in the workplace, in educational settings, and in society at large)" (2008, p. 7). Indeed, giving students autonomy and ability to analyze their everyday encounters on their own is the best avenue to internal motivation and success.

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