Professionalisation

A resource for studying abroad
Australian Learning & Teaching Council

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Student book 2012
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Instructions

The resources in this document are intended to accompany the Instructor’s Guide provided for the module, Professionalisation. This Student Book, however, may also act as a self-study workshop, especially when used in conjunction with the video clips that are suggested with each part of the workshop (and provided in a list at the end).

A much simpler ‘worksheet’ version of this material is also available if the instructor of facilitator will be conducting the Professionalisation workshop. That sheet has no instructions, however, so it will be inadequate if the students are expected to complete the workshop on their own. We recommend that, if the workshop will be conducted with a facilitator or instructor, you use the worksheet instead (also available for download at http://www.tlc.murdoch.edu.au/project/btlh/).

We believe that the Professionalisation materials are best presented in a workshop, especially because students gain quite a bit from hearing each other’s comments and questions, and from rehearsing some parts of the workshop with each other in pairs or groups. However, the BTLH team has provided this self-study ‘Student book’ version of the workshop because we have used the Professionalisation material as an entry point for the curriculum as a whole. In addition, students may be able to use these materials once they have returned from international exchange, even if their international office is not using the Bringing the Learning Home curriculum.
Module goals

- Orient students to potential professional and skills-based outcomes of study abroad prior to their departure so that they are more likely to achieve concrete gains in these areas from their experience.

- Assist students to leverage their study abroad experience into career opportunities, postgraduate education, and into greater expertise.

- Make students more aware of what they have learned and how to talk about these gains in terms that will make sense to other people, both in interviews and in job letters and other documents.

- Crystalise better and more explicitly for students the benefits of study abroad and exchange.

Rationale

The goal of the Professionalisation module is to encourage students to see the relevance of their overseas experience in educational exchange for their future goals, including employment, graduate education, and other opportunities. The workshop specifically works with students to articulate their experiences in formats such as résumés and job letters, to recast their overseas experiences and new skills in terms that potential employers will value, and to polish their self presentation skills. The re-entry workshop, especially, is built upon best practices and strategies adopted from human resources.
‘Professionalisation’ (and this book) is not just about getting a job – although that’s not a bad idea. You should also think about your future opportunities to travel, understand world events, ability to get scholarships, gaining greater facility in mixing with visiting colleagues, etc. All of these dimensions of your own personal ‘globalisation’ potentially will be richer because of overseas experience.

The advice on getting the most professionally from exchange that we give to students is virtually the same as getting the most academically, culturally and intellectually from your sojourn: expose yourselves to your new home as broadly as possible, get outside your comfort zone, soak up information, do things you wouldn’t do back home...

The difference will be in re-entry, when this book (or your international office re-entry workshop) will specifically discuss how to talk about this experience and leverage it into opportunity. However, there are some things that you might consider before going abroad in terms of strategies for getting the maximum effect out of international exchange…

**Study abroad to stand out**

Studying abroad makes you distinctive: less than 5% of Australian students do any sort of travel for education (exchange, language trip). By going on exchange, you have distinguished yourself in terms of courage, independence, curiosity, adaptability, versatility, ambition - appetite for adventure -- all things that employers will be looking for.

Studying abroad should be fun, exciting, and memorable, but it’s not just a vacation. Sometimes students can draw too firm a line
between ‘studying’ and ‘being abroad.’ You take courses that you could take back home (and some universities seem to encourage this) and then just go sightseeing on the side. Some of your most important learning will be outside the classroom and non-academic, but it can contribute directly to your résumé and ability to perform well in interviews and jobs. We encourage students to do things that you could NOT do if you stayed home; no reason to leave if all you want to do is to bring home along with you or recreate a semester’s curriculum while overseas (although, again, some universities and majors may make this a challenge because of tight constraints).

Having a memorable experience and building career credentials are compatible, even parallel goals, but not if your adventure is purely clubbing, drinking, and superficial travelling. Having once-in-a-lifetime experiences is part of what employers will want to hear about, if those experiences are truly exploration, growth, and reflect your best qualities.

**Placement-specific expertise**

Some of what you will gain while being overseas derives from what we call ‘placement specific’ factors; courses or experiences that are linked to your destination, such as learning the local language or taking a course that you can get there that you can’t get at home.

**Point 1. ‘Courses’:** If possible, while overseas, consider taking courses or units that cannot be taken back at your home institution; sometimes these courses can also leverage local advantages. For example, a Shakespeare course in England, where one can attend plays, is a much richer experience. A course on Chinese history in China, where one can see some of the key sites, offers ways of building greater academic expertise, but also makes sight-seeing and extra-curricular activities more engaging. Studying European Union politics or legal structure with European classmates, or development studies with students in Latin America or the Pacific, can be an invaluable aid to gain a deeper knowledge of your field. These sorts of courses make it easy to argue that study abroad is directly contributing to greater expertise in your profession.

In some cases, you may not be able to do everything you want to do academically within the strict confines of your program or requirements back home. But don’t let your intellectual development be constrained by requirements. Ask to sit in on the lectures for a class, even if you can’t get credit for it, if it’s really something you want to know. Get on the mailing list for the host university’s department in your
major so that you hear if famous researchers or speakers are visiting. One lecture or presentation may be more valuable to you in terms of your own growth and development than a whole semester of a required course, so don’t let yourself be trapped by narrow thinking. Seize opportunities, even if they are not going to show up on your transcript, because you can make them show up on your résumé or in interviews.

Point 2. ‘Professional experience’: In some cases, you will have the opportunity to do an internship or work placement while abroad, and these experiences can be invaluable, not just for professionalisation, but also for helping you to become more deeply integrated into the host community.

Other, less demanding or formal options are possible, too: you can arrange to meet for lunch someone working in the field you want to enter, even an Australian or fellow expatriate who has taken a position in your host country. Or arrange to visit a workplace directly linked to your future occupation: an engineering student might arrange to tour an auto manufacturing plant and design firm while in Bavaria; a design student might take a tour of production facilities in Italy or a design museum. A student studying theology could visit different religious services, or a student of mine engineering arrange to tour a mine in Canada. These visits can be as interesting as any tourist activity – even more so – and you will have some lasting points of discussion that are directly relevant to your future occupation.

3. ‘Language skills’: Even just a smattering of a foreign language can be an advantage on a résumé in Australia and other countries where multilingualism is rare. By gaining basic language ability, you don’t just demonstrate knowledge of that particular place; you show your ability to take on a challenging skill. In addition, most students report that even attempting to learn some of the host country’s language can be a great ice-breaker and introduction to local people.

4. ‘Destination-specific expertise’: This point specifically refers to knowledge about local customs, culture, politics, or other relevant areas. Learning about the country in which you are doing your exchange can become a point of differentiation. You can become a kind of ‘expert’ in Portugal or Hungary or Chile or South Korea. Of course, you’ll always claim,
‘Well, I’m no expert, BUT…’ and if you have something intelligent to say about the difference in television advertising in your host country or how social services are supplied or educational policy, interviewers are liable to be impressed. Moreover, treating your destination as a field for research can simply make your experience much deeper and more engaging; local news will make more sense, local tourist sites will mean more, and you’ll feel like you’re doing more than having a superficial, tourist experience.

5. ‘Cohort-specific expertise’: Since most exchange students will come into contact with other international students, you have an opportunity to learn about people and cultures other than the host culture. In some cases, you will have quite strong relationships with fellow international students from other countries.

How will I get my first job ‘experience’?

Many of you will be asking later, ‘Every job ad asks for experience -- how am I supposed to get experience?’ The divide between university and professional life may appear yawning, especially if you’re afraid of what might be coming next.

International exchange is NOT the same as job experience, but it can answer many of the questions that employers and human resources people ask when they specifically look at your job experience. By getting the most out of your exchange, by taking advantage of opportunities and demonstrating your abilities, you will be providing evidence of the qualities that people look for in ‘experience.’

You may not practise a trade overseas, but you will demonstrate many of the qualities that make you stand out. Studying abroad is one way to stand out. You shouldn’t write ‘international exchange’ in the space on an application where they ask for job experience; but when it comes time for the job interview, your international experience will be invaluable. Employers may be looking for certain qualities that can be demonstrated with international experience: initiative, engagement in your occupation, knowledge of how the field works, ability to work with others and adapt. We will return to this in the re-entry portion of the Professionalisation program, after you’ve had more experiences overseas.

Understanding cultures other than our own has become necessary not only for personal enrichment and good citizenship but also for our very survival as a nation.

James Duderstadt, former President of the University of Michigan
When you return from overseas...

This workbook will focus on helping you to highlight five key areas in which your experience while on international exchange will help your professional career:

1. Placement-specific expertise: qualities or training that have to do with the specific university or site that you visited, such as language training, country expertise, an internship, strength in a particular academic program that is uncommon or unavailable in Australia.

2. ‘Soft skills’ and personal traits: General skills developed or refined by traveling to another place and living within a foreign culture. Soft skills also include personality traits that are demonstrated or even reinforced by study abroad (adaptability, independence, resourcefulness). These traits are especially obvious in exchange students because they can be illustrated in...

3. Developing ‘career stories’: Career stories are specific, concrete examples of the previous soft skills and personal traits in action. Good career stories provide evidence of otherwise hard-to-show abilities; they can turn a vague job letter or interview answer (e.g., ‘I’m adaptable’) into a more persuasive concrete example.

4. Cross-cultural skills: Gaining experience overseas specifically develops skills that help people to cross cultures and cooperate effectively, such as more versatile strategies for communicating, practise interpreting difference, and the ability to recognise your own Australianness or home culture orientation.

5. Building your portfolio: ‘Portfolio building,’ once used to talk about more specialised collections of exemplary work in the arts or creative fields. The concept is here used to talk about how, with reflection and preparation, study abroad can generate concrete, lasting elements that become part of your academic record or that you can use to document personal achievement. A ‘portfolio’ may be tangible objects, such as publications or websites, but it may also be a remembered repertoire of polished, pre-prepared answers, examples, and evidence that you can use in interviews or applications.

A videotape of a presentation of this part of the workshop – an early variation – is available for viewing at: Overview Professional Development (5:13) http://youtu.be/sOf5DPJvEpk. This video shows team member, Alexandra Haaxman, presenting the workshop overview.
Significance of study abroad to an interviewer

In order to really gain professionalisation benefits out of your study abroad, you may have to shift your perspective. Instead of focusing on the memories, or what you hoped to achieve in terms of traveling and seeing the world, ask instead, ‘what are employers looking for?’ (Or graduate schools or research labs or any number of other things you might be applying to.) The odds are that NO job ad will say, ‘Looking for a former exchange student.’ So how does your study abroad experience fit into what most employers want?

In fact, it fits very well, but you need to see their experiences from the other side of the interviewer’s desk or from the point of view of the reader of your job letters or résumés. We have to consider what employers seeking to hire young people want to know about you. What are they looking for? What do they worry about? How can study abroad answer THEIR questions -- the employers’ questions?

The odds are that this person, the interviewer, will focus on a different set of issues to the ones that you focused on before making the decision to go on international exchange. Thinking through this other perspective, however, is one of the best preparations for going into an interview or putting in your résumé.

See the effects, not the fact of traveling...

This point is perhaps the most important one in this part of the workshop: employers will not simply be impressed by the fact that you studied abroad. Just putting, ‘I studied abroad in the UK,’ on their résumé will not really be persuasive; in fact, some employers may actually see it as a negative unless you explain yourself. They may be worried that you won’t stay long because you want to travel.

What WILL be persuasive is what you have done. You’ve lived alone, managed a budget, learned a completely new educational and social system, and a whole host of other things. Don’t focus too much on the privilege -- some potential employers may even resent the fact that you had it -- but instead focus on your skills, competence, initiative, etc. Rather than talk about partying and living like a college student, emphasise instead your coping, negotiation, initiative, and industry. Your interviewer may already realise that exchange is challenging; if he or she doesn’t know, however, be prepared to make the case based on specific examples and clear arguments.

This means that you are not selling the mere ‘fact’ of travel or study abroad, but the ‘effects’ of study abroad on you. You are more aware, cosmopolitan, independent, confident, competent, savvy, flexible, versatile, better able to work with diverse people, etc.
Exercise One

Placement specific expertise inventory

Take a few minutes to write down any ‘placement specific’ expertise below. You may not have too many examples, but if you continue to think about, you may realise that you have more than you initially realise.

Below, write down any skills that you specifically gained from your site overseas, especially if they were skills, classes, work-related placements, or other experiences that you would not have got had you stayed home in Australia during the semester. Did you learn any foreign language, even just a few conversational phrases? Did you take a class on the host country? Did you learn about your future industry overseas through any direct experience or conversations? List these experiences because we will use these later as we prepare our résumé entry for our international experience.

Examples:
- Conversational Swedish
- Prepared seminar for Dutch students
- Site visit to BMW plant
- Informal interviews with US parks officials in Colorado.
- Short-term laboratory assistant in UK
- Volunteer teacher’s aid in Manchester
- Played intramural rugby in Scotland
- Field research as part of ‘Development Studies in South Pacific’ while in Fiji
- Courses on economic regulation in the European Union
- Attended multiple lectures on art history while at Leeds.
- Took ‘Outdoor Education’ courses while in British Columbia
- Helped to organise international student activities while in Barcelona
- Prepared & conducted seminar on Australian politics to class in China.
- Took design & materials classes in Japan.

my placement specific expertise:
Soft skills

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (USA) asked employers, if applicants have the same qualifications, what are the most important skills or traits? The top ten items on the list in 2011 appear on slides 8 & 9 (on this page). The Bringing the Learning Home team suggests that eight of these ten skills are arguably demonstrated well in study-abroad experiences.

While studying abroad you’ve had to learn to communicate more carefully, to be aware of how you communicate. You’ve had to work with people who are different to you, so you should be better at teamwork. You can demonstrate your analytical skills when you talk about cultural differences, and use the experience of being overseas for leverage to better analyse the situation you’re in now and any student who went through the process to go abroad definitely demonstrated initiative by simply choosing to go outside your comfort zone.

Arguably, the traits ranked six to ten are even more readily demonstrated in study abroad (three or even four). Computer skills are the one item on this part of the list that is probably least relevant for international exchange, but if you have been blogging or communicating electronically, perhaps this would be applicable. Nevertheless, your stories of obstacles can be transformed into stories of problem-solving – after all, if you made it home, then eventually, no matter what you faced, you did find a way (we return to this point in the ‘career stories’ section below). You’ve been writing and communicating in writing, meeting the new expectations of your host university (which may have been confusing and unfamiliar). Your interpersonal skills have been tested overseas, and you’re probably more aware of the non-conscious interpersonal skills (learning out how to perceive
different communication styles, sense of humour, unfamiliar body language, interpersonal negotiation...). And probably most clearly of all, you’ve demonstrated a greater degree of flexibility and adaptability than your peers.

One of the key points is that, given equal credentials between two candidates, all ten of these items were ranked by employers as more important than either the candidate’s grade point average or the quality of the university that the student attended – even though the survey was conducted in the United States, where the reputation of universities are even more important than in Australia. That is, although we tend to refer to these as ‘soft skills,’ which may make them sound less important than ‘hard skills,’ we probably should refer to them as ‘essential skills’ or ‘communication skills.’ Most employers are convinced that technical skills can be taught on the job; the ten qualities on this list need to be present to give you an advantage even getting the position.

Exercise Two

**Hard examples of ‘soft skills’**

The BTLH team suggests that you stop at this stage of the workshop and think of two or three examples of times that you demonstrated during your exchange program one of the eight qualities sought by employers. These should be written in note form (just to remind you) by the large ‘1 example,’ ‘2 example,’ and ‘3 example’ below.

The word ‘example’ is to remind you that simply saying vaguely, ‘I have initiative,’ or ‘I am a good problem solver,’ is not as persuasive as having an example when you demonstrated these qualities. At this stage, we are simply asking you to think and make notes as we return to crafting ‘career stories’ later in this module.

We strongly encourage you to make ‘soft skills’ into hard examples; that is, we encourage you to show a trait in your experience or in what you accomplished rather than just tell an interviewer that you have a particular trait. For example, rather than saying, ‘I have good interpersonal skills,’ it is more effective to say, ‘The greatest challenge I faced to my interpersonal skills was working on a group architecture project while in Canada with group members from four different countries, two of whom did not speak English as a first language.’ The example shows that you have good interpersonal skills.
Take a few minutes and try to fill in a few examples when you showed one of the qualities on the list from the NACE survey (above), or, if these don’t occur to you, you might also consider the soft skill terms to the right. The most important thing is to think of concrete times when you have demonstrated the qualities as you will have a much easier time talking vividly about these traits given a situation that you can recall.

1 EXAMPLE: 

2 EXAMPLE: 

3 EXAMPLE: 

‘Career stories’ are a way to think about how you will need to reframe or reorganise your ‘travel stories’ in order to use them in professional contexts. That is, the same stories of drama, bizarre encounters, or funny misunderstandings can often, with a bit of thought, be transformed into stories about learning, skill improvement, problem-solving, and other positive traits of the student.

In particular, you need to ‘reframe’ travel stories to shift the emphasis away from the dramatic set up and creating the comic or dramatic tension that makes the story a good travel story, and concentrate instead on an after-the-fact assessment of what you learned, the traits you demonstrated in confronting a challenge, or the strategy you used. Be warned: ‘career stories’ are not as fun to tell as ‘travel stories,’ and they probably don’t work as well for entertainment value. But, career stories can be valuable if you follow this advice:

**Prepare in advance** — a bit of rehearsal will not make you seem too well-rehearsed or overly polished (some students mistakenly fear this). A bit of preparation can decrease the likelihood of freezing or being unable to answer basic questions, or think of any examples.

Most travel stories are ‘front-heavy’, whereas career stories are ‘back-heavy’. That is, travel stories focus on the set-up: how things were strange, how you got into trouble, the first half of the story... Career stories cut down on the set-up of the story and focus, instead, on the solution, learning, or outcome. For example, a travel story version will elaborate upon getting lost, the scary parts, the drama... A career story will do the set-up in one, non-dramatic sentence, and then discuss how you got out of the situation.

By de-emphasising the frustration, failure or bizarre, you use your post-success frame of mind rather than highlighting your ‘in-the-moment’ stress or confusion.

These stories then give you concrete examples that you can use to answer the very difficult job-interview questions; ‘Tell me about a time that you dealt with a challenge...’ ‘Can you describe how you’ve used your communication skills?’
Cross-cultural skills

Although ‘intercultural competency’ or ‘cross-cultural competency’ are difficult to define specifically, students invariably gain increased skill in interacting with diverse people and navigating cultural difference when you spend long periods abroad. Because the BTLH team believes that the skills people use to adapt when travelling internationally are themselves variable, we try to take an open approach to discussing ‘cross-cultural skills.’ What you learned as an ‘intercultural skill’ may be quite different to someone else learned; for example, if you’re really outgoing, you may have developed a different set of techniques for getting by than someone who is much more retiring or shy.

For this reason, we think you need to assess what skills you think you’ve developed. The list was provide here has many different examples: ‘accustomed to navigating cultural difference,’ ‘able to accommodate local norms,’ ‘aware of my own culture,’ ‘savvy,’ ‘tolerate ambiguity,’ ‘negotiate well,’ ‘versatile communication skills,’ ‘tolerant,’ ‘open-minded,’ ‘can establish rapport,’ ‘cosmopolitan.’

Think about the skills or qualities that they may have most used when adapting abroad: for some, stoicism might have been crucial; for others, a sense of humour. Some of you might be likely to talk about learning to communicate better so that you can clearly articulate what you want; others have adapted by observing closely and imitating local behaviour. In other words, you need to think about your overarching strategies for coping and how these might transport to other settings. These abilities, whatever they might be, are your distinctive set of cross-cultural skills.

Cultural skills can be portable; they are not necessarily culturally specific, if you can think about them generally. That is, going to Japan or Norway or Canada doesn’t just mean that you know better how to get around in those countries, but that you also become better in general at operating within an alien context. We might call them ‘meta-skills’ or ‘cross-cultural skills’ in that you’ve learned better how to learn and adapt better.

In a new setting, you’re not going to be caught unsuspecting. You know what to expect better, can describe it, cope with it. You’ve figured out better your own personal coping strategies,
including coping with both the exhilaration and stress. You’re probably more open-minded, observant and adaptable, because you’re better practised at these tasks. You’ve possibly dealt with culture shock before, and you know how to deal with the frustration when it feels like everything has suddenly become harder.

You’re also probably a bit more streetwise, savvy, and capable of handling a system in which you’ve got to suss out the rules. You can spot cultural differences and figure them out, not just stand there shocked by them, like you might have been the first time. In addition, you’ve got a better sense of your own strengths, your cultural biases and quirks, and can use this self-knowledge while interacting with others.

**Exercise Three**

**Cross-cultural skills**

Below, we provide space for you to write down your ‘Cross-cultural skills.’ Write down any skills, abilities or strategies that you specifically used while overseas, that you think you could use if you went off for another exchange at a new host country. There are a number of examples to get you started. List these examples on the worksheet. Try to have a concrete example of what you mean or a time when this ability came in handy because you’re quite likely to get asked about it.
Cross-cultural skills:

(What have you learned about working with other sorts of people that you might be able to generalize to other situations? What is an example of a time when you used this skill or strategy, if you can recall one?)

1.

2.

3.

4.

‘accustomed to navigating cultural difference’ ★ ‘able to accommodate local norms’ ★ ‘aware of my own culture’ ★ ‘savvy’ ★ ‘tolerate ambiguity’ ★ ‘negotiate well’ ★ ‘versatile communication skills’ ★ ‘tolerant’ ★ ‘open-minded’ ★ ‘can establish rapport’ ★ ‘cosmopolitan’
Portfolio Building

Portfolio building focuses specifically on translating skills, experiences and achievements into forms that are recognised on résumés, in job letters, and during interviews. Now let’s try to turn these skills and experiences into lines on your résumé, a more powerful job letter, and things you can use in interviews.

Don’t be confused: ‘Portfolio’ is a metaphor as well as a physical object. The idea is that you create some coherent, evidence-filled account of what you can do, your passions and interests. Key is memorability, coherence, achievements... We don’t actually want you to make a physical object like a portfolio (although, of course, some of you may be in fields like design, marketing, photography or writing where you do need an actual portfolio).

In this portfolio, you don’t want to just repeat buzzwords without some concrete proof to back them up, or for your profile to sound so tailored to each offering that you appear to be a completely blank slate. The enemy of a good application or interview is being forgotten, unmemorable, faceless or overly vague, and that’s what we specifically want to address in our discussion of your portfolio.

First ingredient – résumé

We encourage students to specifically pull out their international exchange or study abroad as a separate entry under an ‘Education’ heading on their résumé or, when appropriate, to even create a special section below ‘Education’ with its own title. The separate section can highlight the exchange experience, especially when it is particularly significant. On the example we provide below, we have created a category, ‘international and cross-cultural experience.’

INTERNATIONAL and CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Danish School of Media and Journalism, Denmark

Photojournalism

- Conducted research into visual story telling using new media technologies.
- Compiled a report for presentation to industry picture agency “SCANPIX.”
- Presented a seminar on “Women in the Media” events conducted in Western Australia to Danish academics and students.
- Additional skills acquired: Digital magazine production
  Designed a PowerPoint presentation in Danish
  Industry liaison and business development
  Cross-cultural communication skills
Exercise Four

Your résumé, international experience included

We encourage you to think about three different elements that might help you to highlight your international accomplishments on your résumé: projects, skills and soft skills. The example above has all three, although they are put into a single entry. In the work space below, we want you to try to think of examples of all three so that you can polish them and put them on your résumé.

First, projects: What concrete class projects or assignments that you did overseas that might be examples of the kind of work you can do? We don’t need every assignment, but what were the major ones, especially if they were ‘international’ in any way? Did you give a presentation in class? Did you do locally-based research? Did you organise an activity? Did you put on an event of any sort? Not every one of these will be appropriate for your résumé – if you organised the ‘booze cruise’ on which everyone got food poisoning, maybe leave that off – but if you can think of a couple of examples, this will make your résumé more concrete.

Second, skills: Certainly, foreign language acquisition belongs here, even if only conversational. If you already have a section on your résumé for your foreign languages, especially if you are in a field like international studies where they are very important, you can still list a specific course like ‘Spanish for Business’ or ‘Intensive Polish Conversation.’ Even if the job does not specifically ask for foreign languages, mastering a language demonstrates that you can learn difficult skills and are up for a challenge. List other skills here as well: technical courses, computer programs, work that you did while an intern (although put the internship separately as well – this is just for any skills that you acquired overseas). In the example on the slide, skills like ‘digital magazine production’ and ‘designing a Powerpoint presentation in Dutch’ are concrete skills. Even if the interviewer doesn’t care about Dutch or magazines, the evidence shows you can up-skill for diverse demands.

Finally, soft skills: here is the opportunity to put down – sparingly – your cross-cultural or soft skills, but be very selective. The trick to putting them here is to realise that, especially if they’re vague (like, ‘good cross-cultural negotiator’ or ‘adapts well to new environment’), the candidate is begging to be asked about them. That is, if someone from human resources reads a claim like ‘cross-cultural communication skills,’ he or she is quite likely to ask, ‘What do you mean by “cross-cultural communication skills”?’ You should be ready with a good answer.

This means that you may also be able to seed an interview question here, to say something that gets the interviewer to ask a question about a trait that you want to talk about. So being
selective can mean channelling the interview into a direction that shows you in a very good light. For example, if you have a really stand-out achievement organising other international students or have really powerful experience from a home-stay or other relevant material that you cannot get into the résumé elsewhere, creating an obvious opening in the résumé, a provocation for a question, can be a way to make sure that the issue gets raised in an interview.

The bottom line here is that more is not necessarily better: don’t list every possible skill or cross-cultural skill you can think of. Focus on the most relevant and the ones that show you in the best light. An unfocused résumé can be hard to follow on from in an interview, especially if the student makes claims that cannot be backed up with specific examples.

**PROJECTS:**

**HARD SKILLS:**

**SOFT SKILLS:**

**Cover Letter**

Along with your résumé, most of the time that you submit an application, you will also submit a job letter. A job letter is a cover letter that goes with your résumé that introduces you, demonstrates your awareness of the opportunity, and generally – you hope – gets the reader intrigued to see your credentials. Whereas your résumé tends to be standardised; job letters, instead, can specifically talk about the firm or employer, how you see yourself fitting in, and your experience, tailored to the nature of the opening.

In some situations, you may NOT want to use your international experience, or use it less. For example, if the job specifically says that there is an overseas affiliate or clients, you definitely can bang the drum harder about international experience.

Especially if the job description lists desirable qualities in the applicant, try to use an example or two that illustrates a time when you’ve demonstrated those qualities. You don’t
usually have to cover every desirable trait on the list, as long as you convince us that we can be confident in you as a candidate. When possible, instead of using a rhetoric of ‘I am...’, try to shift to talk about your experiences, what you’ve learned, or challenges you faced. As the example on the slide shows, if you can clearly articulate something you’ve learned and how it will apply to the position that they are seeking to feel, a human resources officer is more likely to find your international experience an advantage in your application.

**Summary advice on the portfolio**

1 paragraph, 1 sentence, 1 word: Many people who work in the area of personal branding or seeking employment talk about preparing in advance a short synopsis of your biography or philosophy. The task can be daunting for many new graduates as you may feel you don’t have much to say; fortunately, not having much to say is less of a disadvantage when time is tight and impressions have to be made quickly. Although the idea that any person could be described in a single word may seem absurd, in fact, even the candidates for the Republican Party’s nomination for US President in 2012 got asked in a debate in 2012 to describe themselves in a single word. So be ready for the question.
Although the exercise may seem simplistic, it can be helpful. Clarifying who you are, what makes you distinctive (as we’ll discuss below) is probably far more important than putting ‘what I seek’ or something else like that on your résumé.

Show, don’t tell (or avoiding adjectives)...: In general, showing or demonstrating a trait in one’s experience is more important than claiming it. Examples tend to trump self descriptions. A lot of your intangible qualities will come through better from examples of them in action than from saying, ‘I’m ambitious. I’m determined. I’m hard-working.’

Differentiate...: One of the hardest things to deal with from the other side of the table, that is, from the perspective of the interviewer, is that applicants start to seem alike. Even if an applicant has something that doesn’t quite fit the job description, if it’s memorable, it may still be an advantage. One does not differentiate by conforming to expectations.

Get ‘testimonials’: Testimonials are times when other people have clearly found you strong, effective, dependable. We tell students to think about times when they’ve been trusted, put in charge, promoted, assumed leadership -- these are ‘testimonials.’ Slip them into an interview or letter because they suggest that people who know you well count on you or recognise your strengths.

‘Easy to read is hard to write.’: The point is to edit and polish, not to send in a first draft. Students think that they are 90% finished when they have a first draft; they’re probably closer to 50% finished.

The things that are easiest to read are NOT what you write most quickly. REREAD everything you will send in. Be formal, not informal – it’s always okay to overshoot on politeness, but may be fatal to undershoot. Reduce, reduce, reduce – delete extraneous words. Often removing unnecessary or convoluted writing REALLY improves what you say. The harder you work at getting it right, the more effortlessly your readers will get through your work.

Exercise Five

The ‘why?’ questions

As you prepare for professional life, there are some obvious questions that you may be asked about your study abroad experience in interviews. It’s a good idea in advance to write answers or notes on the three ‘Why?’ questions that appear below. Of all the questions you might be asked about international exchange, these three are probably the core that you should feel comfortable discussing.

The bottom half of this slide contains a list of four of the competencies that students may be asked about in an interview that have direct relevance to study abroad and exchange.
irony is that a single example or career story may actually work well from several of these competency questions.

For example, you might have an example of cross-cultural negotiation and communication that you can pull out to talk about working in teams, negotiation skills, group-work skills, or how you might deal with people unlike yourself. A story about flexibility or adaptation might also be a good story about problem-solving or resourcefulness or creative problem-solving. In other words, the exercise just gets you in the habit of accessing your memories as career stories.

The WHY? questions:

Why did you choose to study abroad?

Why & how did you choose your study location?

What do you think you got out of your study abroad experience?
The ‘Elevator speech’

Imagine you take an elevator ride with someone in your field and he or she asks, ‘hey, I think we’re hiring. What’s your background?’ Or you’re at a conference and meet a potential mentor and this person says, ‘Tell me about yourself.’ What will you tell them?

The answer is the ‘elevator speech,’ a quick presentation of yourself that only lasts the time it takes to travel in the elevator -- about one paragraph, or a minute. Practising an ‘elevator speech’ is a great exercise just for you to clarify where to start. You can cut it short -- the one-sentence version -- or you can elaborate, but the elevator speech is your outline of key points.

The basic structure for an ‘elevator speech’ is simple, identifying the questions that you needs to answer in a brief presentation. The format is borrowed from a widely circulated exercise in personal branding, but it is adapted for the situation of many students, which often includes little prior experience to draw upon in their answers.

Some of the questions are straight-forward: you needs to let the other person know who your are. The fourth question is difficult to answer except in context. So in the space below, we ask you to make notes for an answer to four of the six questions: 2) What do you want to do? 3) What’s your motivation? 5) Differentiation; and 6) Your hook, passion or mission.

What do you want to do?: Many students do not have a clear sense of a career that they desire. In an ideal elevator speech, you convey to the listener that you want to do a particular job rather than just collect the pay check and benefits. Employers want to give jobs to people who want those jobs badly, so you should convey a clear sense that you want an occupation, an opportunity, and a career. Lukewarm will not do.

What’s your motivation?: We are more likely to believe a person wants a position and will do well if we understand his or her motivation. What is it about the occupation that attracts you? What do you like to do? What is it about the industry or the position that’s exciting?
Have you already had a taste of a particular profession and want more? Expressing a passion helps the hearer believe that you have sufficient motivation to overcome the challenges that will invariably lie ahead.

**Differentiation:** How is the applicant different? In a pile of eighty résumés, what makes you stand out? Differentiation is an opportunity for you to say something about yourself that is distinctive, but it’s a bit of a tightrope: exceptional is great; odd is not. Do you have a strong passion that is related to the occupation, or that demonstrates a trait that’s important, but in a different activity? Are you an accomplished athlete, musician, artist, or writer? Have you won an award?

In our Prezi version of this workshop, we discuss one of our students who was an accounting and business major, but also a passionate food blogger, almost an amateur restaurant critic. In a pile of accountants, his point of differentiation could be his passion for Asian cuisine and writing; at least he would be less likely to be forgotten when the interview was over. The one topic we would counsel avoiding, however, is stories of triumph over illness, tragedy or other personal problem; although these can be very powerful, they can leave an interviewer cold.

**Your hook, passion or mission:** Deciding on a final ‘hook’ can be a challenge, but it’s a last bit of information or thinking that ‘hooks’ the person hearing it, leaving them wanting to learn more about you. Some personal marketing literature talks about selling the applicant’s ‘mission,’ but this may be off-putting or too challenging for students about to graduate. Instead, we ask you if there is something that you can say that might make the interviewer want to learn more. Are you working on research and the results aren’t all in yet? Is there a major project in the works like an honours thesis or final screen-writing project? Are you waiting to hear back about an article you have submitted to the university’s student magazine on exchange to the Czech Republic or Ireland?

The ‘hook’ shouldn’t be an artificial ‘cliff hanger’ – ‘*Invite me back to the next round of interviews, and I’ll tell you my Big Secret… but only if you invite me back.*’ Rather, the hook should be a natural extension of what you are doing and hope to achieve. This kind of open-ended discussion can give the interviewer a sense that you are not just inert and waiting for something to happen. Don’t force it; if there’s nothing like this in your repertoire, that’s okay. But think about how you can leave an open question or get someone wanting to know more. When the interviewer does follow up, there is already a question waiting to be asked in round two of the interviews.
The elevator speech: first draft

(The questions in parentheses probably do not need advanced preparation.)

1. Who are you?
2. What do you want to do?
3. What’s your motivation?
4. Your interest in the other person.
5. Differentiation.

After you have had a chance to write your notes on the elevator speech, you’ve got to edit the work. In our experience, students are often reluctant to edit written work, seeing something that is written as done (whew! on to the next thing!).

In fact, you’ve got to refine and improve, especially by making the core structure as lean and concise as possible, cutting out all unnecessary parts. When presenting the ideas in an elevator speech, you will always be able to expand or extrapolate, if you know well your key points. You can always take a lean and efficient structure and add as you go, but you can’t start with a flabby, vague structure and hope it will improve when you’re under pressure.
If possible, try our your elevator talk on someone, or even give it out loud to a mirror. Hearing the answers to the questions, out loud, may help you to hear when you are not getting to the point as clearly as you need to.

We can offer some basic advice for refining and practising the ‘elevator speech’ so that the presentation works well across audiences. Remember that some of the language that you may use in academic settings may not work well with other audiences; some of the people who interview you, for example, may be your parents’ or even grand-parents’ ages and may not be caught up on current technical language, specialised jargon or slang. Part of what you demonstrate in a good interview is how you communicate well, adapting to your audience.

**Prepare in advance** – don’t mislead yourself that answers will be ‘better’ or ‘fresher’ if you haven’t rehearsed. What’s more likely to happen if you don’t prepare is that you forget something important that is obvious as soon as you walk out of the interviewer’s door, or you start with an answer that you regret as soon as it’s half out of your mouth, or you’re simply caught flat-footed, unprepared for an obvious question.

Even though we think study abroad stories are great for professionalisation, however, two pitfalls are possible:

**Don’t accentuate your own foreign-ness** – job interviews are the place to show that you fit in, that you can wear your newfound cultural skills on the inside, if necessary. Don’t wear jewellery or clothing that is obviously from overseas; some interviewers might love it, but some will find it off-putting. One of the most important questions that the interviewer is asking him- or herself is, ‘How well will this candidate fit into our firm or workplace?’ If it turns out that your boss is a former globe-trotter with international credentials, you can demonstrate your multiculturalism later.

**Follow your interviewer’s lead**. Use one or two stories from study abroad; don’t answer every question by talking about your host country. If the interviewer asks, sure, tell them about it. You may run into an interviewer that is tired of talking about advertising or law or the hospitality industry after thirty or forty interviews, and they may want to swap stories about Copenhagen or their year on exchange in Quebec. Let the interviewer signal where the conversation should go.
Suggested additional readings


Hachey’s book is, in the words of one reviewer, ‘monumental,’ and the resource is invaluable. The target audience is primarily North American, but so much of the work is useful that it makes a great investment, especially for students to use through their study abroad offices.


**Videos**

Videos of BTLH workshops run by team members and other presenters.

- Overview Professional Development (5:13) [http://youtu.be/e2F5DPlyEpk]
- Placement Specific Expertise (3:31) [http://youtu.be/Hl7_solek_A]
- Placement Specific (2:08) [http://youtu.be/IFWjuWdrS1U]
- Soft Skills (4:15) [http://youtu.be/QBvO1ag-6q4]
- Soft Skills and Personal Traits (1:59) [http://youtu.be/Idbx_7inrlc]
- Cross-cultural Skills (5:49) [http://youtu.be/MRlmF6ZBvAU]
- How to Talk About Yourself (3:32) [http://youtu.be/9GIQ_j2YH6i]
- Talking About Your Experience (4:34) [http://youtu.be/t-BU-WUbsFc]
- Career Stories 1 (5:28) [http://youtu.be/f0S2wkdVWYE]
- Career Stories 2 (1:43) [http://youtu.be/lvgBvp2juZg]
- Portfolio building (2:46) [http://youtu.be/BrgpWm8QlNA]
- Writing a Cover Letter (1:34) [http://youtu.be/C3L8Y7FLl_M]
- What next (5:09) [http://youtu.be/K3VfDb-vLl]

The videos are provided to help you to work through this module. Especially if you find it difficult to think of answers to one of the Exercises, consider watching the video clips. They are all short (except the first on ‘What Employers Want’), and thus can help you to quickly get back on track for thinking through all the material.
Cover photos by Sharyn (snow in Sweden; left) and Thomas Nolan (white party in Sweden; right); Sharyn's photo is available at http://tiny.cc/8w3lq.

Photo of students touring by the Pyramids, Egypt, by Thomas Nolan.

Photo of shark float in street parade from Barcelona, Spain, by Greg Downey.

Photo of the sea with jetty near Aarhus, Denmark, by Emily Merrick.

Photo of camping by Simone Anderson at Glastonbury (after exams were completed!).

Photo of her friend Gus on the beach at Clam Gulch, Alaska, by Lisa Redwood.

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