

How private employers view graduates' qualifications and study-related stays abroad

1. Purpose of study

The Danish government has set the target that more young persons in Denmark should complete a higher education programme than is the case today. Moreover, the qualifications and experience that the students acquire in the course of their studies should lead to relevant occupation. This goes for the qualifications and experience that Danish students acquire during internships or studies abroad as well.

The Danish Agency for Universities and Internationalisation has asked private employers which experience, qualities and qualifications the companies are looking for, now and in the future, in the highly educated persons that they recruit for job vacancies.

The primary purpose of the study has been to uncover the occupational relevance of the qualifications and experience that Danish graduates acquire during study periods or internships abroad in the course of their studies. An important element of the study has thus been to clarify a potential connection between the qualities and qualifications that employers attribute to students with a period abroad on their resume and the qualifications that companies look for when they hire employees.

2. Study design

The study is the result of a cooperation between the Danish Chamber of Commerce, the Confederation of Danish Industry, the Danish Council for Internationalisation and Educations and the Danish Agency for Universities and Internationalisation.

The study is based on an electronic survey, which was sent to 1,076 private companies in Denmark. The companies were chosen with the assistance of the Danish Chamber of Commerce and the Confederation of Danish Industry.

In the selection process, it was emphasised that the survey should reach companies of different size and should secure a geographical spread.

334 of the 1,076 companies responded to the survey, which gives a response rate of 31 %¹.

The group of respondents covers all company sizes. However, there is a majority of companies with 50-249 employees and companies with more than 500 employees.

¹ This response rate is higher than in an equivalent Swedish survey of 2009: "Arbetsgivares syn på utlandserfarenhet", in which the response rate was 21 %.

The background questions used in the survey can be found in annex.

The key conclusions of the survey are summarised in section 3.

3. Key conclusions

The companies who have responded to the survey are certain. During study periods or internships abroad, students acquire highly relevant experience and qualifications which are in demand when companies recruit graduates. International outlook and intercultural understanding are important skills in today's labour market, but they will be even more important for private employers in the future.

The key conclusions of the survey are summarised in the table below:

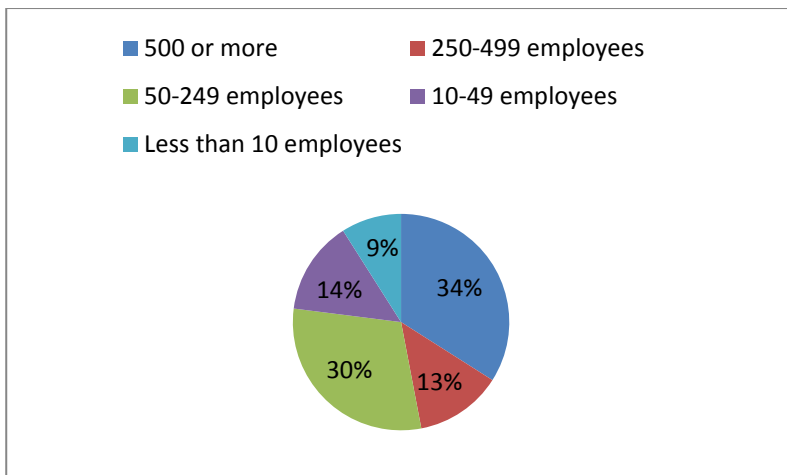
- *There is a clear convergence between the personal qualities that the employers look for when hiring graduates and the qualifications that employers state that students acquire during a study-related stay abroad.*
- *More than 70 % of the companies consider international outlook and intercultural understanding as very important or important skills when they recruit graduates from a higher education.*
- *More than 50 % of the companies predict that international experience, international outlook and intercultural competences will become increasingly important when companies recruit employees in the future.*
- *Relevant branch of study and good references from former employers are the most significant parameters when companies select applicants for job interviews. However, more than 30 % of the companies explicitly mention internships or studies abroad as important in the recruitment process.*
- *In an employment situation in which the choice stands between two otherwise equally skilled candidates, 55 % of companies would choose the applicant who has had a period abroad. Only 1 % of employers would choose the applicant who has not had a period abroad.*
- *42 % of the companies prefer an applicant with a Danish education who has been abroad, studying or working, as part of their education. 34 % express no particular preference, while 1 % of the companies prefer a candidate with a foreign education.*
- *The larger the company, the more significance is attributed to the applicant having a Danish education with parts of it completed abroad. Companies with less than 10 employees express less of a need for employees who have spent periods abroad in relation to their education.*

4. Results

4.1 Company characteristics

The 334 companies who participated in the survey represent a broad spectrum of private companies of various sizes. However, there is a majority of medium and large companies as 77 % of the respondents are companies with more than 50 employees. 34 % of the respondents represent companies with more than 500 employees, cf. figure 1.

Figure 1. How many employees does the company have?



A quarter of the companies work primarily in production and manufacturing while around one sixth of the companies work with knowledge and consultancy. The remaining companies work in lines of business such as food, IT, energy and transport.

73 % of the companies state that they operate internationally in various ways. This can be in the form of import/export, offices or subsidiaries abroad, production abroad or outsourced tasks.

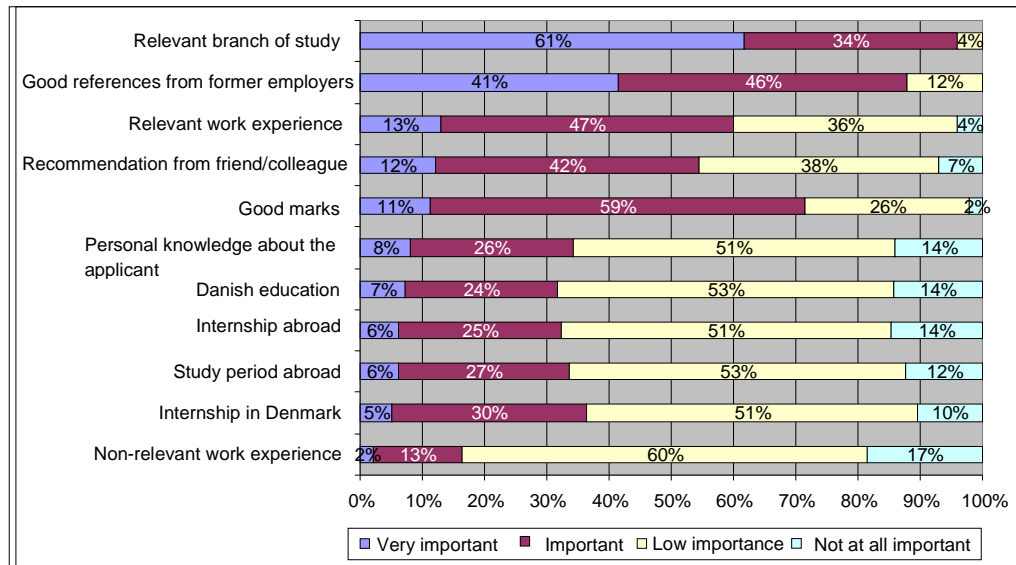
85 % of the companies communicate in Danish and other languages in connection with the day-to-day operations.

81 % of the companies have hired employees with a higher education within the last five years.

4.2 Important criteria for the companies when hiring newly qualified

Following the introductory questions about their profile and activities, the companies were asked to indicate the importance of a range of different qualifications which could be considered relevant when recruiting newly qualified. The respondents were asked to assess the importance of a total of 11 different qualifications. For each of the 11 qualifications, the respondents had five options to choose from: Very important, Important, Low importance, Not at all important and Do not know, cf. figure 2.

Figure 2. How important are the following 11 applicant qualifications when/if recruiting newly qualified higher education graduates?



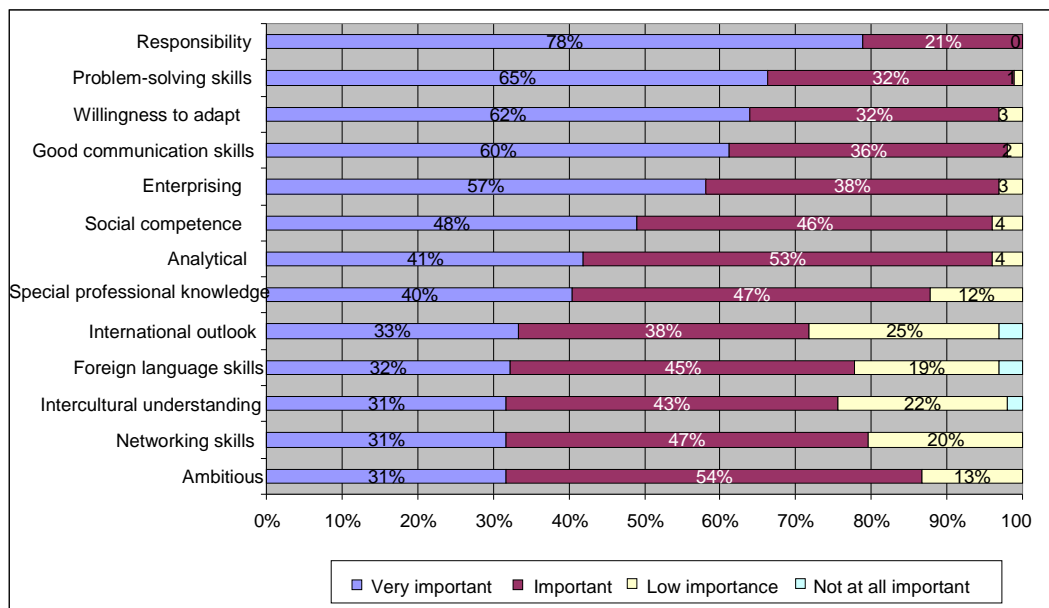
According to the companies, the three most important criteria when hiring new employees are a relevant branch of study, good references from former employers and relevant work experience.

A study period or internship abroad is valued as highly as personal knowledge about the applicant.

4.3 Assessment of personal qualities in recruitment of newly qualified

The employers were asked to assess the importance of a range of personal qualities of newly qualified higher education graduates that are hired to work in the company. The companies assessed 13 different qualities. For each of the 13 qualities, the respondents had five options to choose from: Very important, Important, Low importance, Not at all important and Do not know.

Figure 3. How important are the following personal qualities when the company is hiring newly qualified higher education graduates?



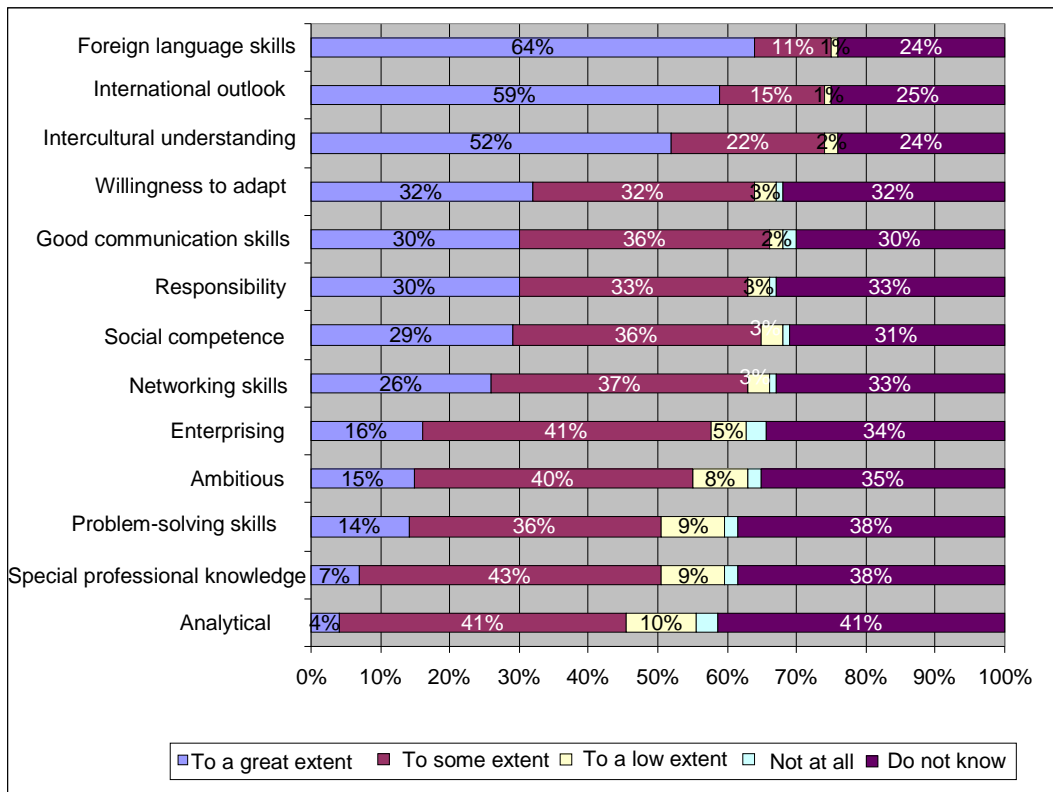
The companies assign very high value to all of the 13 mentioned qualities. The top scorers are responsibility and problem-solving skills, but more than 70 % of the respondents state that international outlook and intercultural understanding is important or very important. Approximately a quarter of the companies do not attach any special importance to international, language or intercultural skills.

4.4. According to the companies, which qualities do the students develop during periods abroad?

The companies were asked to assess which personal qualities students especially develop during a study period or internship abroad. This question was posed to the companies to uncover whether there is a degree of consistency between the qualities that the companies look for in the newly qualified and the qualities that a period abroad can help develop in a student.

The qualities that the companies could choose from were identical to the qualities that appeared in the former question (cf. figure 3: “How important are the following 11 qualifications of an applicant when/if recruiting newly qualified higher education graduates?”)

Figure 4. Which qualities do the company assess that students especially develop during a study period or internship abroad?



The qualities that the companies believe students especially develop during a study period or internship abroad can be divided into two categories:

1. International qualities understood as international outlook, intercultural understanding and good foreign language skills
2. Personal qualities such as willingness to adapt, good communication skills and responsibility.

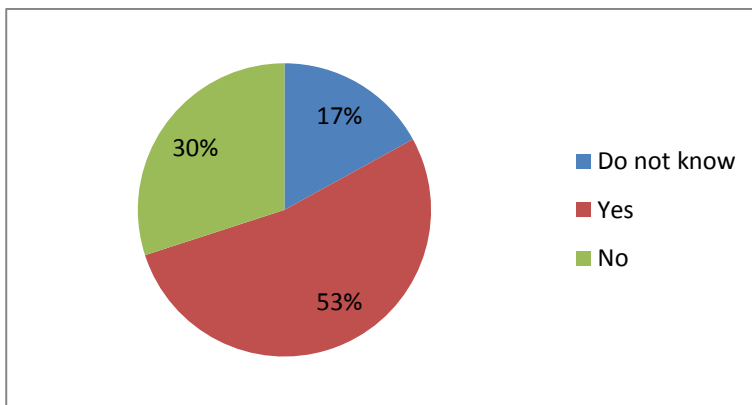
There was a clear convergence between the personal qualities that employers look for when they are hiring newly qualified (figure 3), and the qualities that the companies expect students to develop during a period abroad (figure 4). This convergence is especially clear when it comes to developing personal qualities such as willingness to adapt and good communication skills.

4.5 Expectations to future qualification needs

The companies were asked whether study or work experience abroad will be valued higher in the recruitment process in the future than it is today.

53 % of the companies stated that study or work experience abroad will be of greater importance in the future. On the contrary, 30 % of the companies do not think that international experience will be of greater importance (cf. figure 5).

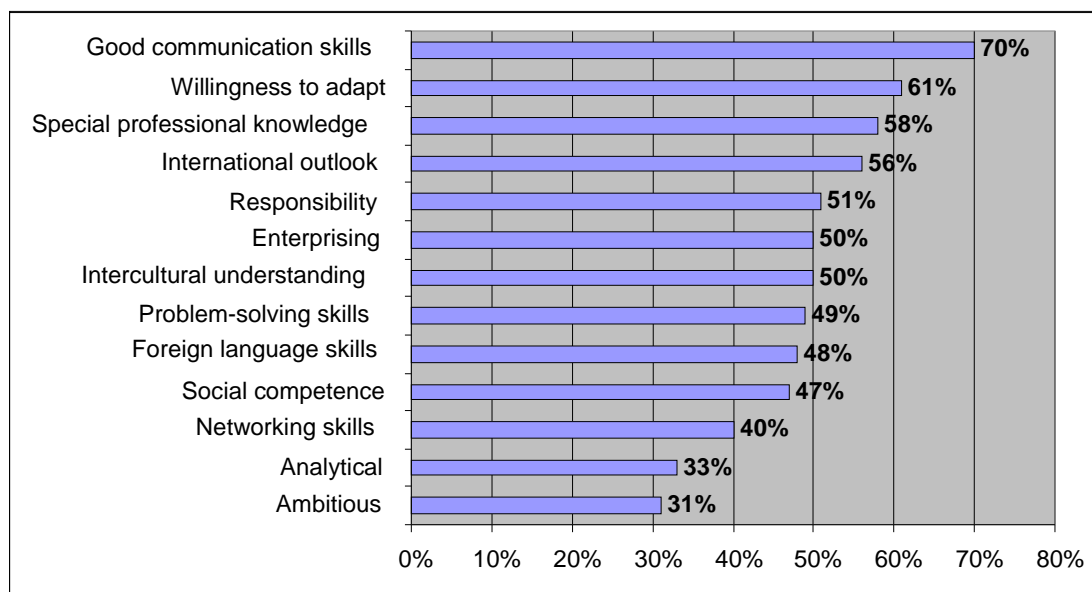
Figure 5. Do you expect that study or work abroad experience will be valued higher in your recruitment of new employees with a higher education in 10-15 years?



Furthermore, the companies were asked to predict the future by identifying the personal qualities that they expect will become of greater importance when recruiting employees in 10-15 years (cf. figure 6).

The companies could choose to tick one or more boxes in a form with 13 different qualifications.

Figure 6. Which personal qualities do you expect will become of greater importance when your company is to recruit employees in 10-15 years?



Good communication skills are considered to be the most important future quality followed by willingness to adapt, special professional knowledge, and international outlook. There is no noticeable difference between respondents from small or large companies when it comes to their assessments of the future.

It is worth noting that there are considerable differences between the qualities that are in demand today and the expectations to future qualification needs. Today, the companies especially value responsibility and

problem-solving skills, whereas these are replaced by good communication skills and international outlook when the companies assess the future qualification needs.

As mentioned above, the companies consider international outlook (33 %) and intercultural understanding (31 %) to be very important qualities in the newly qualified that they recruit today (figure 3). These qualities will be even more important in the future. As is evident from figure 6, more than 50 % of the companies predict that the significance of international outlook and intercultural understanding will increase, which implies that possessing these qualities will be vital for future newly qualified applicants.

Furthermore, the employers expect that the qualities that a student especially develops during a period abroad will be greatly in demand in the future. These qualities are international outlook, willingness to adapt, good communication skills, and responsibility.

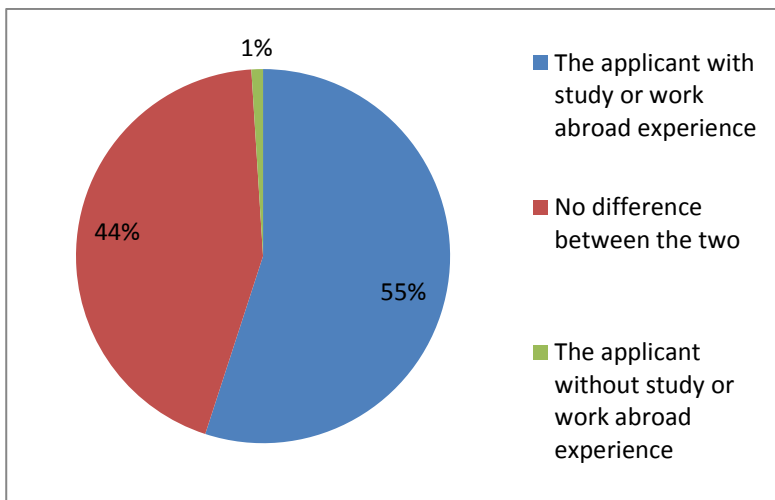
53 % of the respondents expect that study or work abroad experience will be valued higher in future recruitment processes than they are today (cf. figure 5). These respondents expect that especially four personal qualities will become increasingly important: international outlook, intercultural understanding, good foreign language skills, and good communication skills.

When looking at the 30 % who do not expect that study or work abroad experience will be valued higher in the future, they expect that other qualities such as willingness to adapt, responsibility, social competence and problem-solving skills will be in higher demand in future recruitment processes. It is interesting to note that these are the same qualities that the companies assess are especially developed during a study or work abroad experience. This could indicate that companies from this group could actually come closer to meeting the company's future needs if they hire a newly qualified who has studied or worked abroad in the course of their studies.

4.6 Companies prefer applicants with study or work abroad experience

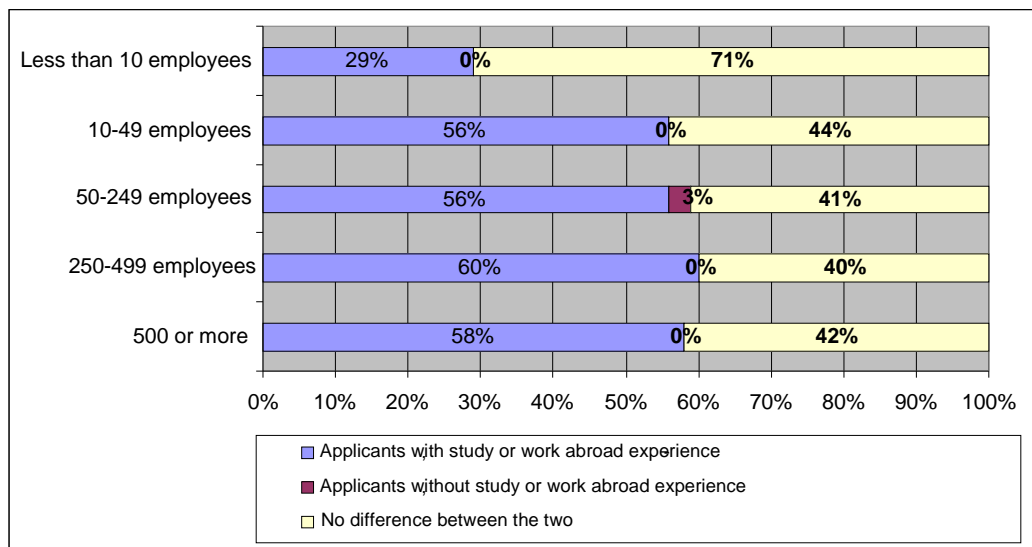
The respondents were asked to imagine a recruitment situation in which the choice stands between two candidates where one has studied or worked abroad during his/her studies and the other has not. The two candidates are otherwise equally skilled. 55 % of the companies state that they would choose the person who has studied or worked abroad. Only 1 % of the companies will choose the person who has not studied or worked abroad (cf. figure 7).

Figure 7. In a recruitment situation, please assume that the choice stands between two otherwise equally skilled candidates. Which candidate do you choose?



Among the companies with less than 10 employees, 71 % state that there is no difference between the two types of candidates. This significantly differs from the rest of the companies which generally prefer the candidate with study or work abroad experience (cf. figure 8).

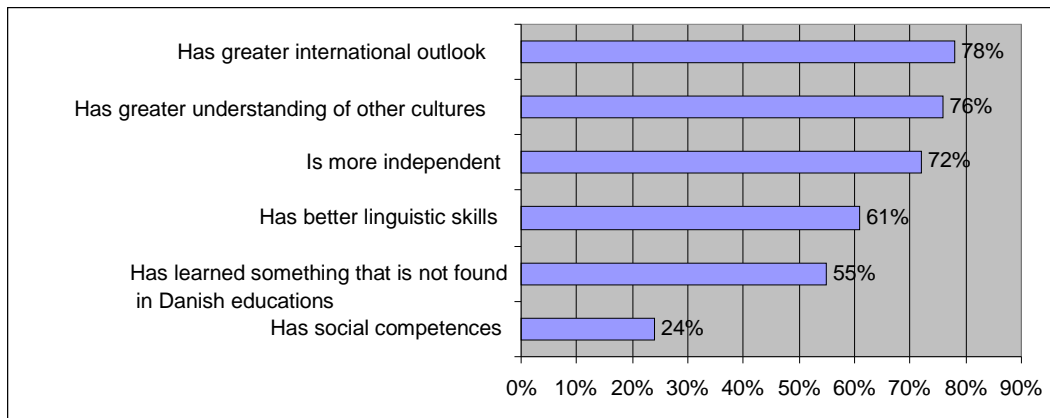
Figure 8. Recruitment of employees with or without study or work abroad experience – which type of company chooses which candidate?



In order to better understand why companies attach greater value to the candidate with study or work abroad experience, the companies were asked to answer the question: “Why would you choose a person with study or work abroad experience rather than a person without that experience?”

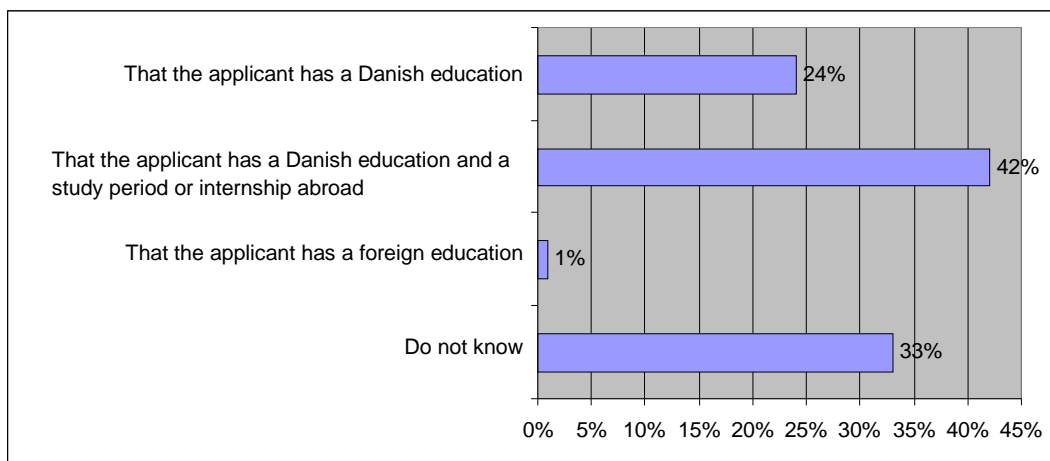
The companies had six options to choose from and most answered that during a period abroad one achieves greater international outlook, greater understanding of other cultures and becomes more independent (cf. figure 9).

Figure 9. Why would you choose a person with study or work abroad experience rather than a person without that experience?



Following the question of why the companies prefer a person with study or work abroad experience, the companies were asked to state whether they prefer an applicant with an education from Denmark or an applicant with an education that has been undertaken in part or completely abroad.

Figure 10. In a recruitment situation, what do you generally prefer?



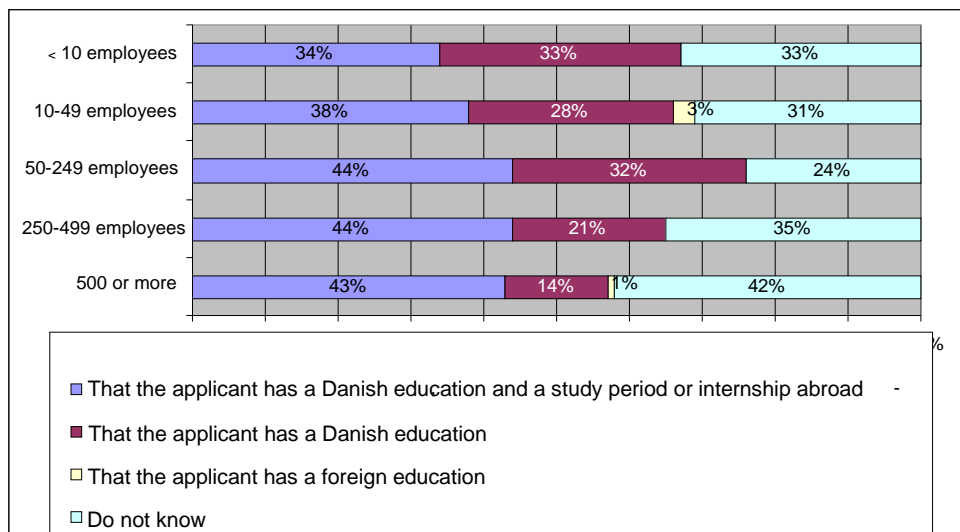
42% of the companies prefer a candidate who has a Danish education and a study period or internship abroad (cf. figure 10).

Only 1 % of the companies prefer a candidate with a foreign education.

33 % of the companies answer “do not know” to the question of whether they prefer one type of education or the other. As a whole, the “do not know”-category is chosen more often than the category “that the applicant has a Danish education”. The only exception is companies with 50-249 employees.

Companies with less than 10 employees are more inclined than other groups to prefer candidates who have completed their entire education in Denmark. The larger the company, the larger the inclination to choose a candidate who has a Danish education and who has studied or worked abroad during his/her studies (cf. figure 11).

Figure 11. Recruitment preferences according to company size.



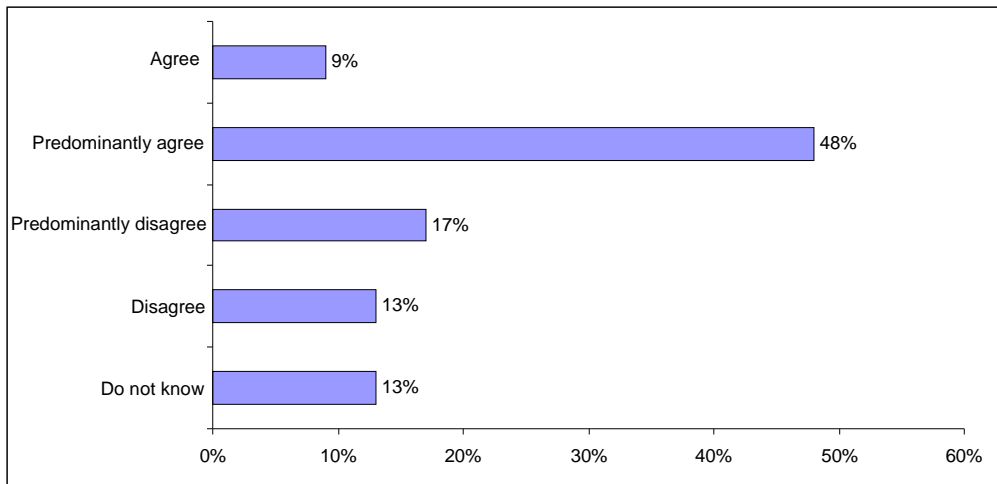
As a control question, the companies were asked to determine how well they know Danish degrees (Danish diploma) and foreign degrees (foreign diploma) respectively. 94 % of the respondents either agreed or predominantly agreed that they have a good knowledge of Danish degrees whereas only 34 % answered the same about foreign degrees. 37 % agreed or predominantly agreed that they can make a simple comparison between Danish and foreign degrees.

4.7 Companies believe that persons with study or work abroad experience have better qualifications

The companies were asked how much they agreed with the following statement: “All things being equal, a person with international experience in the form of a study abroad and/or an internship abroad has better qualifications” The options were: Agree, Predominantly agree, Predominantly disagree, Disagree and Do not know.

57 % of the companies either agreed or predominantly agreed with the statement that all things being equal, a person with international experience in the form of a study abroad and/or an internship abroad has better qualifications. 30 % of the companies declared themselves in disagreement or predominant disagreement with the statement.

Figure 12. All things being equal, a person with international experience in the form of a study abroad and/or an internship experience abroad has better qualifications.



Of the 55 % who (cf. figure 7) would choose a candidate with study or work abroad experience, 73 % declare themselves in agreement or predominant agreement with the statement that all things being equal, a person with international experience in the form of a study abroad and/or an internship abroad has better qualifications.

Appendix

Background questions

In this section, the background questions that the companies were asked before they were asked to respond to the relevance and value of periods abroad etc. will be presented. The purpose of the questions was to identify the relevant companies that hire employees with a higher education from universities, business schools, university colleges, and business academies.

Figure A. Has the company hired employees with a higher education within the last five years?

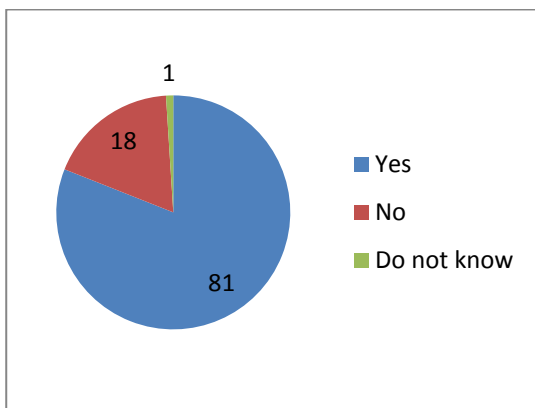


Figure B. How many employees does the company have?

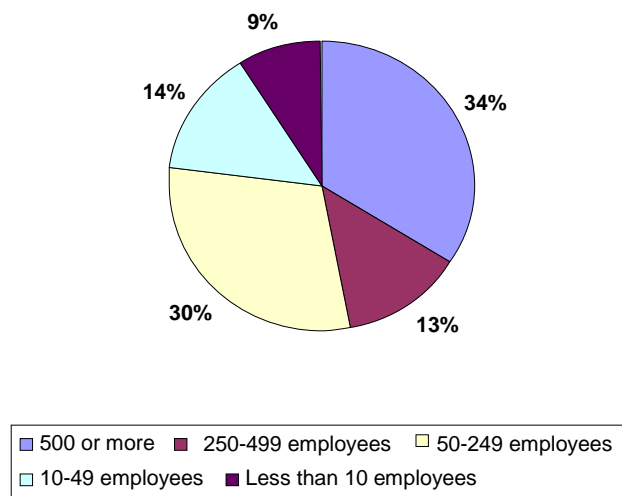


Figure C. Employees with a higher education in proportion to company size

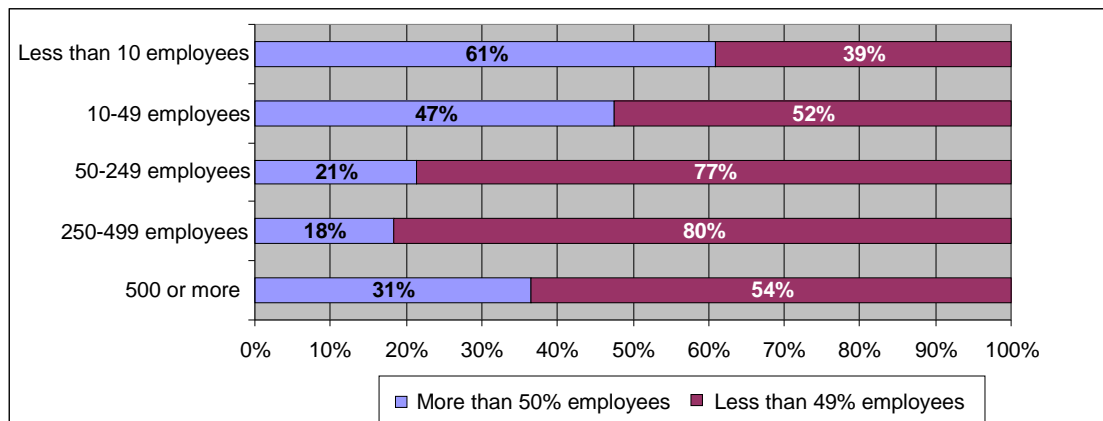


Figure D. The international focus of the company

