

## The professional value of study and internships abroad

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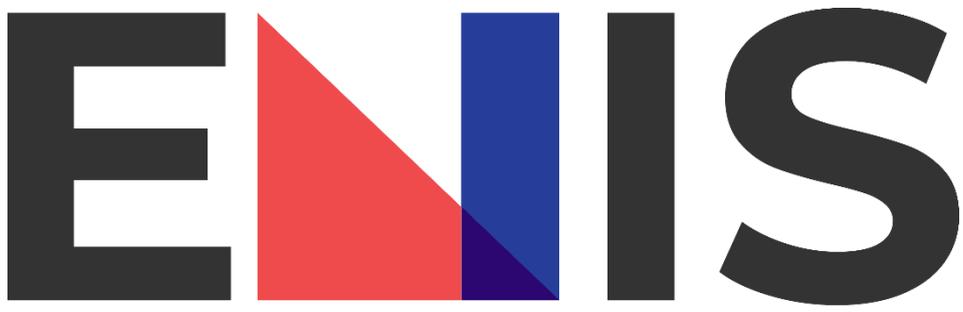
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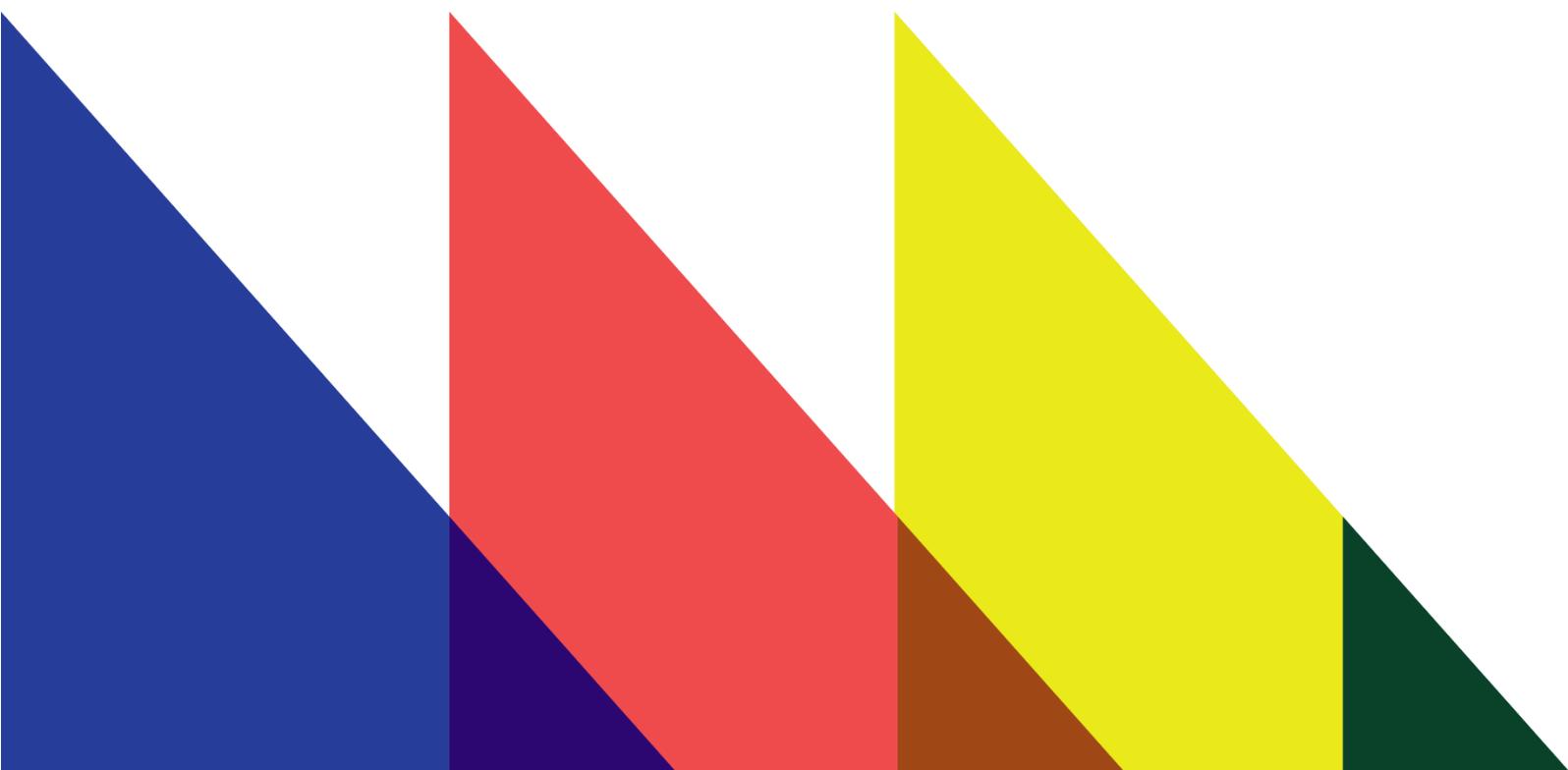


European Network on International Student Mobility  
**Connecting Research and Practice**

# The professional value of study and internships abroad

**ENIS Policy Brief 03/2023**

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## 1. Snapshot overview

Policymakers often promote international student mobility (ISM) by highlighting its potential for improving students' employment prospects. Importantly, the effects of student mobility for studies (SMS) and student mobility for internships (SMI) can vary strongly across different labour market contexts.

Overall, existing research reports only moderate effects of ISM on graduates' careers, and it highlights the variability in its outcomes depending on graduates' country of employment, field of study, host country, and type of mobility (study period vs. internship abroad). The estimated effects generally tend to be larger regarding horizontal career outcomes (e.g., the likelihood of working abroad after graduation and having an international job profile) than for vertical career outcomes (e.g., wages and job prestige). Employers seem to value SMI more than SMS.

## 2. Background

Every year, substantial numbers of students become internationally mobile. In 2019, for instance, the Erasmus+ programme alone enabled almost 240,000 students to study abroad, and about 75,000 students to complete an internship abroad (1). Although such international experiences are often promoted as benefitting graduates' career development, until recently there had been little sound research examining whether different types of student mobility pay off in the labour market.

Against this background, this policy brief summarises available evidence on the labour market outcomes SMS and SMI. It also develops ideas on how policymakers can contribute to enhancing the outcomes of these types of ISM for students, higher education institutions (HEIs), and employers.

## 3. Key findings

### 3.1 Labour market outcomes of student mobility for studies (SMS)

When asked directly, most graduates with international experience tend to report that studying abroad improved their career planning skills and helped them get their first jobs. However, studies comparing students with and without SMS experience suggest that it does not necessarily shorten their education-to-work transition (2), even though a moderate positive effect of SMS on wages is observable in several countries (2, 3).

Research also suggests that SMS has more positive effects on both wages and attaining higher service class positions in Eastern and Southern Europe than in other European countries (4). Cross-country differences in career returns may be partly explained by the quality of the attended HEI in the host country relative to the quality of the HEI in the home country. Other explanations relate to variation across countries regarding the internationalisation of national labour markets and the extent to which employers value the skills generated through SMS (4).

Students with SMS experience are more likely to work abroad after graduation (5, 6). However, this may be because those who study abroad are generally more inclined towards geographical



mobility (7). Moreover, students who return to their home country execute more international job assignments than graduates without SMS experience (6, 8).

### **3.2 Labour market outcomes of student mobility for internships (SMI)**

Existing studies on SMI report that intrapersonal skills (e.g., open-mindedness and self-confidence) are among the important skills gained through internships abroad, while cognitive skills and leadership skills appear to be acquired to a lesser extent (9).

Internships are also known to improve graduates' employability (9, 10, 11). Several studies indicate that longer internships lead to better language proficiency and cultural understanding than shorter ones (9). Furthermore, SMI translates to slightly higher wages than study periods abroad in Germany (12), but not in the Netherlands (13). In addition, SMI may shorten the transition to work (13), but – as with SMS – this effect may vary across country contexts (14).

Finally, in terms of the relative value of SMI and SMS for education-to-work transitions, studies on employers' perceptions of the value of ISM in 31 European countries show that employers value SMI more than SMS when hiring new employees (14, 15, 16).

### **3.3 Labour market outcomes of SMS and SMI in comparison**

Summarising the evidence on the labour market effects of SMS and SMI shows that:

- Both SMS and SMI can positively influence a range of labour market outcomes. While the impacts tend to be moderate on average, several methodologically robust studies support the conclusion that both types of mobility can moderately enhance graduates' career prospects under the right circumstances.
- Graduates with SMS or SMI experience are more likely to obtain jobs abroad and execute international job assignments.
- Long-term internships help students gain better employability skills compared to short term internships. This may also be the case with longer phases of SMS as compared to shorter ones, but there is a lack of research on this.
- There is suggestive evidence for some countries that SMI yield slightly larger wage benefits than SMS.
- Similarly, evidence from some countries suggest that SMI are more helpful for shortening the transition to work than SMS.



## 4. Recommendations

### 01 | For policymakers

Policymakers at national and international levels could create further economic and other incentives for HEIs and employers to increase ISM.

They could encourage longer durations of both SMI and SMS where feasible. Where longer stays are not possible, consideration could be given to combining shorter stays with hybrid work experience (online and on-site).

To make more students aware of SMI opportunities, policymakers could improve the visibility of the Erasmus+ online platform, which disseminates information on internships (<https://erasmusintern.org/traineeships>).

### 02 | For higher education institutions

HEIs should consider how they promote the benefits of SMS and SMI. HEIs can highlight ISM as a steppingstone for an international career, along with the numerous other potential benefits, including language skills, intercultural development, and personal growth. However, they should make clear that SMS and SMI alone do not guarantee a successful career.

With the support of policymakers and employers, HEIs should ensure that students from different underrepresented groups and in different fields of study not only have similar opportunities to study abroad, but also benefit equally from study abroad experiences. Information brochures and workshops on how to valorise study abroad experience, e.g., in the CV or in a job interview, could help students in this regard.

### 03 | For employers

Employers with interns from abroad should ensure that internships are designed with guidance from experts on SMI and SMS to ensure the greatest possible returns for both interns and employers. Best practice certificates could be created to this end. Such certificates could list the contents of the internships and the acquired competencies. In addition, employers could consider the possibility of offering blended internships (partially on-site and partially online) to enhance the flexibility of SMI and, thus, its attractiveness.

Employers hiring graduates should acknowledge that the extracurricular skills gained through ISM are not limited to country-specific cultural and language skills as well as knowledge of the labour market. Graduates with ISM experience may generally be culturally aware, open-minded, and cognitively flexible.



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