

# **MARKETING YOUR INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

*A self-directed workbook for students preparing for the job interview process*



Dear Study Abroad Alumni:

Congratulations. You have set yourself apart from other U.S. undergraduates by having studied abroad; only about 10% do so according to the most recent Institute of International Education's Open Doors Survey (2016). Now you need to put that experience to work; it doesn't suffice to simply say you were abroad – you need to be able to show that you have realized some benefits.

By having this workbook before you, you have just taken a key step in your career exploration and job-seeking process that very few students take the time to do. From working with students for many years, we know that after studying abroad, you report that it was a significant learning experience – about the world, about a specific culture, about yourself. So now is the time to examine just what you acquired, blend it with examples from your other life experiences, learn how to explain it to potential employers, and show how it demonstrates your skills and knowledge.

An international experience is often ripe with good examples of learning to appreciate difference, showing you are open to new situations and deepening your cultural sensitivity. If examples don't come to mind right away, it's normal to need some time to think about it. But better to take several days to reflect on your experience than to be caught without anything to say in the actual interview.

This workbook is only one of the steps in the job search process, but an essential one: it will provide you with the 'content' for your interviews.

With wishes for much success –

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# MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Many employers do not realize that studying abroad is an opportunity to gain skills that will be valuable in the workplace. Your job is to reflect on what you learned so that you can explain the skills gained from your experiences abroad. Transforming your learning into stories that show how you successfully managed difference and challenges will say a lot about you as a person and as a potential employee.



## TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

are those which are **applicable to any position or profession**. They may also be called **people skills, soft skills** or **career skills**. Examples are *flexibility, self-awareness and respect for others*.

**Employers** report that they **highly value these types of skills in recent graduates**. They do not expect you to know everything about the industry you are seeking to enter, but *they do expect that you have acquired transferable skills from your life experiences* – including academic and work settings, personal challenges and learning abroad.

## COMMON TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Strong communication skills (verbal, written)  
 Self-awareness  
 Adaptability  
 Take initiative  
 Respect  
 Resilience



Flexibility  
 Problem-solving  
 Open-mindedness  
 Work in diverse teams  
 Time management

## INTERCULTURAL SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

**Intercultural intelligence (or competence) is a skill set that is applicable across all work sectors and positions and valued by employers.** Reflect upon what you are learned abroad from exposure to different people, ideas, attitudes, and ways of knowing. *Intercultural skills include: Curiosity, Cultural Self-Awareness, Respect, Empathy, Creativity, Problem-Solving, Flexibility, Adaptability.*

**Cultural intelligence** is not specific knowledge of a single culture, but rather **knowing what it takes to effectively communicate across cultures** – knowing where the differences lie and ways to learn about and manage them.

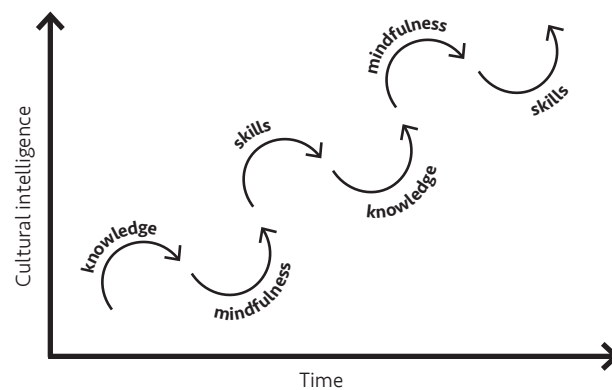
## EMPLOYABILITY

[əˈm.ploɪəˈbɪlədē]

noun



1. a broad range of skills and competences necessary to function in a working environment and to enable one to succeed in the workplace (*Erasmus Impact Study, 2014, European Commission, p. 29*)



In this model, 'mindfulness' points to the need to reflect on what we have learned (knowledge) and how we can apply it (skills).

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## **WARM-UP REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

Your responses to these questions will help to set your mind in the right direction. These questions are a 'warm-up' and will help you hone in and further identify specific skills and qualities.

### **From My International Experience...**

I can identify a change in myself – my values, outlook, attitude and/or abilities:

I experienced new cultures. One strategy that was really helpful in learning how to interact with people from another culture was:

I have clarified what is important to me – who I am, who I want to be, and what I want to accomplish. For instance...

I had to learn how to adapt. One change that was really hard for me to adapt to in my host culture was:

I gained a greater perspective on global issues. One social issue (local or global) that I learned more about is...

# WHAT HAVE YOU GAINED FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE?

Use this list to put your experience into words – about knowledge and skills that you learned, gained, and developed. Go through this list first and check everything that you believe applies.

Then go back and review, and select what you think the top three traits; you may wish to focus on these in the exercises to follow.

## Cultural Understanding and World View:

*As a result of my international experience(s), I have developed:*

- A greater knowledge about another culture
- Awareness of political, economic or social events around the world
- My interest in global or transnational issues
- My involvement with a global issue
- My involvement with a civic cause
- A definition of my political views
- My ability to speak a foreign language

## Personal Growth and Values

*My international experience(s) have helped me to grow and develop:*

- My desire for more diverse friendships and social networks
- My desire to further my education (e.g., postgraduate degree)
- A better understanding of myself and my values
- My sense of confidence in new situations or when meeting new people
- My ability to accept differences in other people
- My ability to empathize with people, especially those who are different from me
- My ability to be more flexible and open-minded
- My tolerance of ambiguity in a variety of situations
- An understanding of my own strengths and weaknesses
- My ability to be independent
- My ability to take initiative

*And, I have:*

- Become more aware of the way I use and structure time
- An increased capacity to profit from my mistakes
- Strengthened relationships with my family members
- Strengthened relationships with my friends
- A clearer notion of what I will do with my life

*Additionally:*

- I am more capable of solving life's day-to-day problems
- I think more critically: I am more discerning and analytical
- I have improved observation skills
- I can appreciate time to be alone, disconnected from social media, etc.
- I am more confident about the decisions I make
- I recognize the importance I put on developing my skills and talents
- I have an increased willingness to work hard and sacrifice in order to do well in school or in my job

## Professional & Career Development

*Studying Abroad contributed to:*

- My ability to formulate my career goals and clarify my professional aspirations
- Greater awareness of the opportunities in life that are open to me.
- Developing skills and intercultural competencies which will aid in obtaining my first job after graduation
- My increased willingness to take on roles and tasks to which I am unaccustomed
- The importance I place on working in a field that I find interesting
- The importance I place on having personal fulfillment in my work
- My ability to speak a foreign language in the workplace
- Developing my ability to understand an organization's culture
- My ability to adapt in diverse workplace environments
- Other things you want to list:

# POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF AN INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Review these lists of skills and qualities to help you articulate the skills you may have developed studying abroad.

## SKILLS

- Establish rapport quickly
- Function with a high level of ambiguity
- Achieve goals despite obstacles
- Take initiative and risks
- Manage time and multiple tasks
- Identify and solve problems
- Accept responsibility
- Communicate despite language & cultural barriers
- Ability to compromise
- Learn quickly
- Handle stress/difficult situations
- Manage/Organize
- Lead formal and/or informal groups
- Cope with rejection, criticism, constructive feedback
- Capacity to ask for & receive help
- Adapt to new environments
- Understand an organization's culture
- Learn through listening and observing
- Foreign language skills

## QUALITIES

- Self-reliance
- High energy/enthusiasm
- Appreciation of diversity
- Perseverance
- Tolerance/open-mindedness
- Assertiveness
- Self-confidence
- Self-knowledge/Self-awareness
- Independence
- Inquisitiveness
- Flexibility



## CROSS-CULTURAL SKILLS

This list shows a skill set students often report is the result of an international experience. These comprise a set of key transferable skills.

- Flexibility
- Self-awareness
- Empathy
- Sense of humor
- Perspective-taking (or perspective-shifting)
- Open-mindedness
- Strong communication skills
- Motivation
- Work effectively in diverse teams
- Foreign language skills
- Curiosity
- Resourcefulness
- Respectful
- Creativity



## GENERAL SKILLS DESIRED FOR ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS

Here is a list of skills that employers report they expect to see in recent graduates. These are included here since, while perhaps not as often reported by students who studied abroad, they are worth recognizing. Employers expect recent graduates to have the ability to:

- Work in a team structure
  - Make decisions and solve problems
  - Plan, organize and prioritize work
  - Obtain and process information
  - Analyze quantitative data
  - Create and/or edit written reports
  - Sell or influence others
  - Verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization
- And possess:*
- Technical knowledge related to the job
  - Proficiency with computer software program

# **FOCUSED INTERVIEWING**

## **(ALSO KNOWN AS BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEWING)**

Use the STAR technique to build concise, descriptive responses.

Employers most often ask questions such as: "Tell me about a time when you had to problem-solve" or "Tell me about a time that you were part of a team and talk about the role you played and what you contributed to the group."

If you are able to respond with a STAR, your responses will be descriptive and relevant -- and will be more credible.

### **What is a STAR?**

**S** – Describe the specific setting or **situation** for which the experience took place.

*Example: While studying abroad in Germany, I found that my coursework was extremely different from what I was accustomed to. I was used to having assignments due throughout the semester, but for my German courses the entire grade was based on the final with no accountability beforehand.*

**T** – Describe the specific **task** or project related to the skill sought.

*Example: During that semester, I was taking a full load of coursework for my major, and I was motivated to do well during my semester abroad. I had to figure out a way to stay on top of it all because it would be impossible to do well at the end of the semester if I left studying all to the end.*

**A** – Describe the specific steps or **actions** you took to complete the task or project.

*Example: I had to act as a self-starter, and I set out a structured study plan for myself for the entire semester. I formed small study groups with a few classmates for each of my classes, and we'd meet once a week.*

**R** – Describe the **results** or outcomes resulting from the actions taken.

*Example: I developed strong time management skills because of the new type of academic setting I experienced in Germany. Because I kept up with my study plan throughout the semester, I ended up succeeding, and I was able to keep my stress level down before final exams.*

This is a typical STAR answer. It could be the answer to, "Give me an example of an accomplishment you are proud of." If someone asked, "What's your greatest skill?" you might answer, "I believe I can set goals and meet them," and then give a story like the one above. Or, if the interviewer says, "Why should we hire you?" you can begin with "I am a good problem solver, for instance..." and continue with an example like the one above.

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Having a specific example gives you much more credibility that if you merely say "I can set goals and meet them" or "I am a problem-solver."

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*The STAR technique is widely cited by career specialists; its origin appears to be unknown. An online search will result in many additional resources about this interview technique.*

# BUILDING YOUR STORY AS A "STAR"

Think now about putting your study abroad to good use in your job interviews. You will want to craft your examples in ways that employers will appreciate – and that takes some preparation.

*It's common to first be thinking:*

**"Studying abroad changed my life."**



*Then, compose a general statement, such as:*

**"I had to adapt to different customs while abroad."**



*Next get more specific; for example:*

**"There are situations when I don't understand what the right manners are in Italian shops & restaurants."**



## THE FINAL STEP IS TO ADD EVEN MORE DETAIL.

Use the STAR format by stating the:

**Situation** - a brief explanation of what was happening. Maybe it was one day, maybe it was something happening over time.

**Task** - What needs to be solved?

**Action** - What did you decide to do about it?

**Result** - Explain your success!

- (S) I walked into a gelato shop in Rome and saw that customers were to take a number to be served. I did so, but after 10 minutes, I realized that they weren't actually using the number system.
- (T) I had to decide what I was going to do if I was going to get ice cream, but it did not feel right being so assertive; in US culture it would be considered rude to advance without honoring the number system.
- (A) I decided that I would follow what I saw others doing. I realized that if I observed how others were advancing, I could follow along.
- (R) I never would have guessed that something as simple as ordering a gelato would be such a chance to learn. But it taught me that good observation skills are key and that it's not only OK but essential to shift your thinking sometimes and do things differently than you are used to. Before this, I may have said that Italian culture was unorganized or chaotic, but I learned there are just other ways of doing things. I recognize that I can apply this lesson to my life and my future work environment.

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STARS should show specific skills -- that you have thought about how you developed them and what that means for your performance in the workplace.

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# SAMPLE STORIES

## SAMPLE STORY #1 An Italian in the U.S.

- (S) I had heard that the U.S. system would be different than Italian university, but I didn't realize just how much until I got there.
  - (T) We received a syllabus that overviewed every week of the semester, with specific reading assignments for each day and there was work to turn in nearly each week. Our grades were dependent on many different assignments as well as class attendance and participation. This is so unlike the Italian system where it is up to each student to do the reading and be prepared when it's time to sit for the final exam.
  - (A) I had to make a plan and be very disciplined to complete all of the assignments well and on time. I realize that may seem obvious, but it took careful planning and motivation to complete work at stages in the semester where I had never before been required to do so. I wasn't used to having so many assignments or being graded on how much I contribute to class discussions.
  - (R) At first this new system felt very overwhelming. But, what I learned is that I myself learned well and succeeded. I not only learned a lot about literature, but I learned how I learn and what I prefer but that I can be flexible and adapt as well.
- .....

## SAMPLE STORY #2 A U.S student in Spain

- (S) In my homestay in Spain, I learned how to consider and respect different viewpoints. I grew very close to people with very different opinions than my own – and all of this was accomplished despite the fact that my Spanish was not quite yet fluent.
- (T) My host father wanted to engage me in discussions on world politics, especially about U.S. foreign policy. He wasn't happy about the U.S. influence in the world and asked me questions that honestly, I wasn't prepared to answer. I felt so ignorant with my limited language skill and by not knowing the specifics about the foreign policies of my own country.
- (A) I faced this challenge head-on: I made a point to read the Spanish newspaper each day so that I could acquire both the knowledge and the vocabulary.
- (R) Over time, I got pretty good at being able to engage in discussion with him. We had quite different viewpoints on a number of things, but his approach was not to insult but to challenge me. I respect him for this, and I am grateful for the opportunity to see political discourse as an exercise in learning and not demeaning anyone. I learned so much about the value in considering other viewpoints and shifting my perspective.

*Note: Carefully consider whether you think it's a good idea to reveal your political party preferences in a job interview. This story does not 'call' either point of view by name. While perhaps the listener could speculate on the political orientation of the storyteller, it still leaves room for ambiguity.*

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## SAMPLE STORY #3 A French intern in India

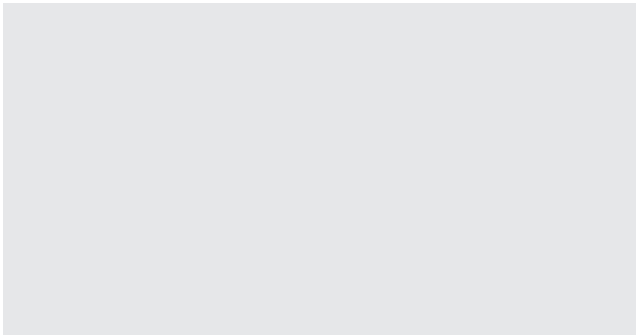
- (S) I was interning in India with a team who were all Indian. I quickly realized that they said 'yes' to everything I asked of them when in reality, they had not done the work I asked about.
- (T) I needed to find a way to understand why they told me they were willing to do the work but did not deliver.
- (A) I sent up a meeting with each of them and talked about our roles. They explained that they were willing to do the job but did not always understand what was required of them and were not comfortable telling me, nor did they want to respond with a 'no' for fear that I would think I was being unreasonable.
- (R) By working more closely and creating a relationship with each of them -- so as a manager but in an understanding kind of way as well – we were able to get everything done, avoid problems and even find innovative solutions together.

*Note how this story doesn't log any complaints about having to deal with difference. It speaks of the challenges, but focuses on being successful in communicating.*

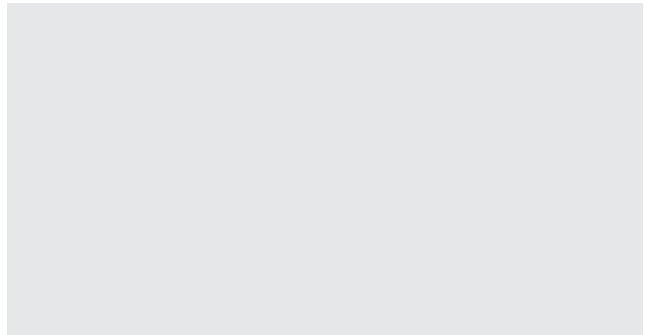
## **LEARNING MOMENTS ABROAD**

What new situations and challenges did you face in these areas? Make notes here and use them to build your STAR's

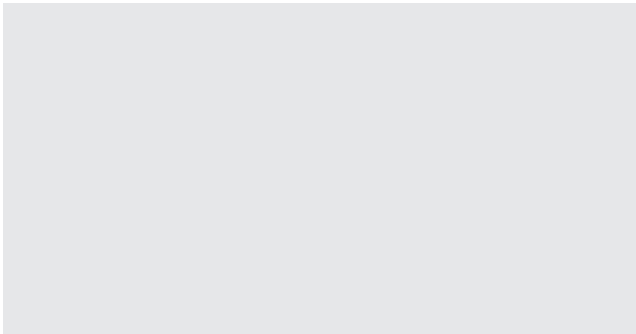
Academics, in/out of classroom:



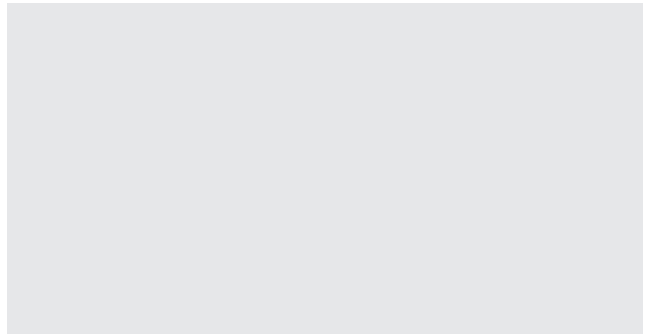
Preparing to go abroad (visa applications, account & financial arrangements, etc.):



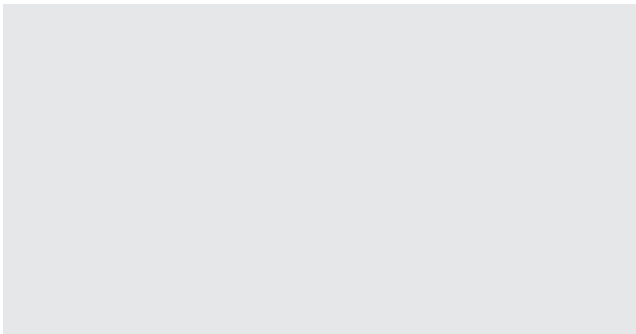
Engaging in local culture - Housing, Daily Life:



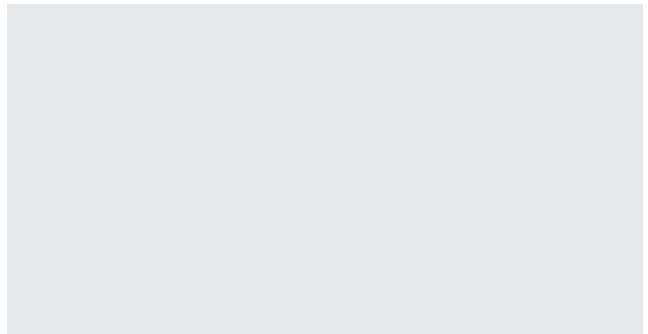
Traveling, Exploring, Site visits:



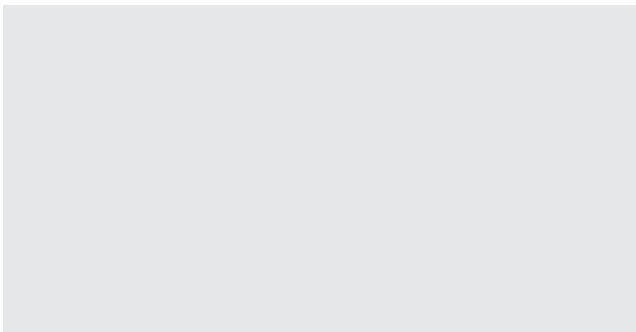
Meeting new people (of host culture, other cultures, my own culture):



On my own, learning about myself and my own culture:



Internship, volunteering, other:



# PREPARING "STARS" FOR YOUR INTERVIEW

Prepare a collection of 4-5 'STAR's in advance for your interviews. Map out the skills and qualities below so that you can speak about them in full sentences.

**Skill/Trait**

EXAMPLE:

Problem-solving, initiative, adaptability

**STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result)**

**S:** Academic system abroad was different, challenging

**T:** I needed to have a plan to succeed

**A:** Set up weekly study groups, set schedule for myself

**R:** I did well, and I enjoyed learning in a very different system

**Skill/Trait:**

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**S:**

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**T:**

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**A:**

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**R:**

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**Skill/Trait:**

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**Skill/Trait:**

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**T:**

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**A:**

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**R:**

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It is predicted that 47% of today's jobs will become automated in the next 25 years. It may seem counter-intuitive, but an Oxford study reports that this will require workers to acquire strong creative and social skills.

<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21594298-effect-todays-technology-tomorrows-jobs-will-be-immenseand-no-country-ready>

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## **STAR STRATEGIES**

- Have 10-12 stories ready when you go into any job interview. Use real-life experience stories from which you:
  - » learned or accomplished something with relevance to your personal growth, etc.; or
  - » acquired a new or reinforced an existing skill or positive quality
  - » It is important to focus on the behaviors you displayed (for example, conflict, problem-solving, creativity, communication, teamwork, etc.) and to develop stories around these.
- Keep your answers succinct. Response time to an interview question is from 30 seconds to 2 minutes maximum (if you exceed that, you may start losing your audience)
- A common interview technique is Behavior-Based Interviewing. The interviewer will ask you “Tell me about a time when [you were part of a work team]” or “Tell us about your experience in [problem-solving].”
- Include at least a few stories from your semester or travels abroad, but don’t over-do it.
- Profound learning from challenging situations and the unique experiences make great examples.
- Your time abroad has a certain ‘shelf life’ for greatest relevance, and you should use it to your advantage. Stories are highly relevant upon your return and for at least awhile after graduating.
- Don’t have all of your stories be from your time abroad! You don’t want the interviewer to think that you can speak only about your study abroad experience; you should develop examples from other life experiences (summer jobs, student clubs, volunteering, athletics, etc.). Diversify your examples, stories and experiences. Again, interviewers are less concerned of which experience and more interested in the actual behavior, skill or competency

## **IN SUMMARY...**

By having studied abroad, you have set yourself apart as a U.S. undergraduate, but you must also be able to say something substantive about your experience to potential employers. Global Career consultant Martin Tillman says “It is no longer enough to simply say that you studied abroad; you must be able to show that you developed skills.”

Remember that learning can happen outside the classroom. Most students claim that the most learning abroad took place outside of the classroom.

Consider your audience. Undoubtedly you have many stories from your time abroad. Remember that the stories you share in an interview setting need to be workplace appropriate.

Capitalize on the fact that your time abroad was a rather recent life experience. If you studied abroad as an undergraduate and you are now a recent graduate or slightly beyond, it is important that you capitalize on the fact that this experience wasn’t too long ago, and bring its relevance to light. (Twenty years from now, your study abroad experience probably won’t have as much relevance in a job interview!)

The study abroad experience should allow you to focus on intercultural skills and sensitivity – a highly transferable skill set that is applicable across all work sectors and positions.

Know how to prepare for your interview. It is always imperative to prepare for interviews, both in terms of knowing about the employer and position but also in terms of preparing examples and stories you can tell to ‘substantiate your claims’.

It is nearly impossible to be over-prepared! Some students think that they might seem too prepared if they have a set of examples in mind as they enter the interview.



