



A Competitive Edge: Value of an international degree

Employer perceptions of university degrees earned in the UK

Spring 2012



The British Council commissioned research into the perceived value of a UK university education by employers in the US and Canada because we only had anecdotal evidence that an international experience was valued by Human Resource managers.

After polling nearly 800 employers in the US and Canada last year, we can now say, unequivocally, that employers put significant value on an overseas educational experience – especially in this challenging economic climate. The report highlights that this experience can help to enhance core competencies such as “good communication skills, team work and self motivation,” all essential characteristics that employers look for when hiring candidates.

We see this research as a useful contribution to the discussion on the significance of international education. We know international and transnational are becoming common terms in the student experience – not least because it provides students with a global framework that is applicable to their professional lives. We are proud to co-present this data with NAFSA given their key role in this field. We hope that this report and this summary publication will be a useful resource to encourage more people to internationalise their education.

Sharon Memis
Director, USA



NAFSA is pleased to join the British Council in communicating the results of its research. This kind of research, which informs international educators about the skills and experience needed by the private and public sectors, provides an important perspective to help us answer the question, “internationalization for what?”

While the report doesn’t draw straight lines between study abroad experience and employers’ needs, those of us in the field know that there are indeed relationships. Such research can get us close to articulating international education’s links to one of higher education’s objectives: development of a globally competent workforce. It is up to us, as international educators, to connect the dots and assist students in expressing their experience in ways that respond to what employers are looking for.

This British Council report focuses naturally on the relevance of study in the UK to U.S. and Canadian employers, and NAFSA encourages more broad research in this area based on this good example. The benefits of study abroad are many—intercultural understanding, adapting in ways to be effective in other cultures, developing independent thinking, and fostering thinking as a global citizen, among others. Many of these are concrete, equipping students to work in a globalized environment. We are pleased to help distribute the results of this report widely, and trust it will stimulate others to undertake similar studies.

With best wishes,

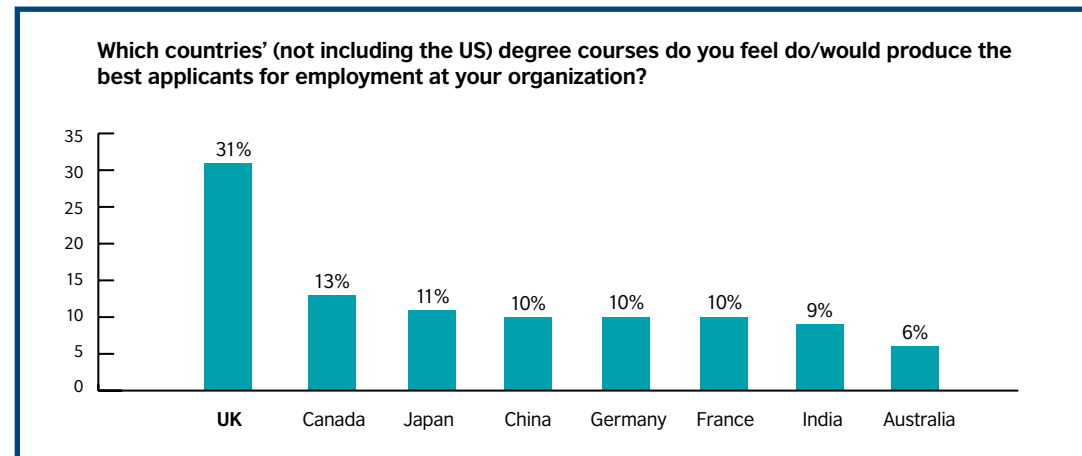
Marlene M. Johnson
Executive Director and CEO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The British Council commissioned Ipsos Public Affairs to research employers' perceptions of the value of undergraduate and advanced degrees earned by Americans and Canadians overseas, particularly those in the United Kingdom. The study was undertaken from February to October 2011 and consisted of a survey completed by over 800 Human Resource (HR) managers from the United States (411) and Canada (436).

Key Findings

- Most employers (73%) in the United States (US) and Canada consider degrees earned in the United Kingdom (UK) to be equal or better to those earned in North America.
- Employers are seeking candidates who have received a quality education, and they perceive this to be characteristic of Americans and Canadians who have studied at universities in the UK.
- While most employers are favorable towards UK degrees, they are not very knowledgeable about the UK higher education sector as a whole.
- Much of the positive response can be explained by the "halo effect" cast by the UK's top universities.



Key Recommendations

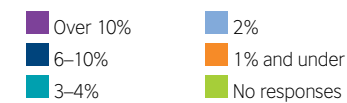
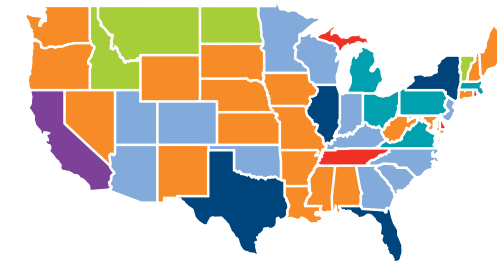
This research also has highlighted a number of areas where action can be taken to improve the ability of HR managers to assess candidates with UK degrees:

- *Students should:* emphasize the highly-valued characteristics of UK higher education, such as earlier subject specialization, independent study and the tutorial style of learning.
- *UK Universities should:* include a dedicated page on their website that provides information for employers to look at when assessing candidates' qualifications including: program details, university and course rankings, grading schemes and international equivalents.
- *Students should:* be aware of the importance of providing employers with additional information about their university and program. They should be prepared to tailor this information according to the organization size and sector of prospective employers.

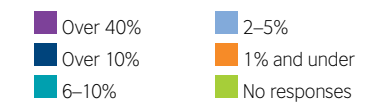
Respondent Profile

Location: The sample number of HR managers reflected the relative size of the states/provinces, and also the largest states/provinces as per the general population.

US



Canada



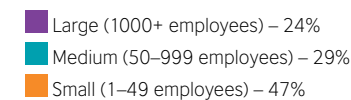
**“The ability to interact with a variety of people is invaluable...
Travel, studying abroad – it broadens the mind.”**

– Large transport business, New York

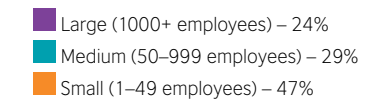
Organization Size

The surveys included HR managers from small, medium, and large organizations (based on the number of employees).

US



Canada



¹Statistics of US Business 2006, <http://www.census.gov/epcd/susb/2006/us/US-.HTM>

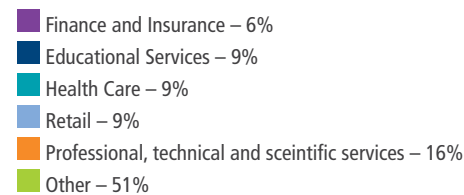
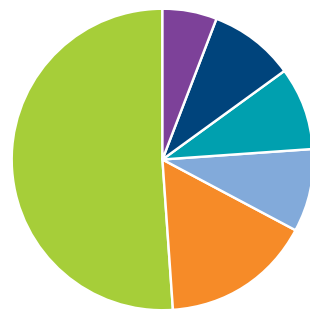
²North American Classification System 2007, http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/cis-sic.nsf/eng/h_00004.html

Business Sector

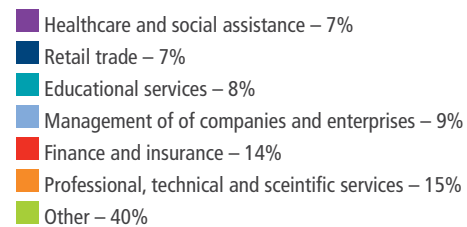
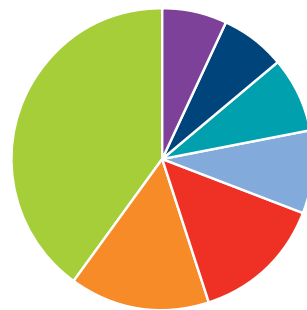
US: The top sectors according to the 2006 US Business Census generally have the highest representation in the survey respondent profile.

Canada: The top six sectors are reflective of the leading industries reported in the North American Classification System 2007.

US



Canada



US Qualitative Interviews were conducted with:

- Two large organizations, one medium organization & one small organization
- **Four Sectors:**
 - Healthcare
 - Retail trade
 - Educational Services
 - Professional, scientific, and technical services
- **Four States:** Virginia, South Carolina, Utah, and Michigan

Canadian Qualitative Interviews were conducted with:

- Two large organizations, one medium organization & one small organization
- **Three Sectors:**
 - Retail trade
 - Professional, scientific, and technical services
 - Healthcare and social assistance
- **Three Provinces:** Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report offers suggestions for the following:

Employers

Despite their favorability, US and Canadian employers have limited knowledge about UK higher education, so this positive connection is likely a result of the “halo effect” created by the UK’s top universities. Thus, employers should question their applicants about the advantage of their UK degree and be in contact with UK universities by viewing their websites and contacting them directly with questions.

UK Universities

To help employers evaluate UK-earned degrees more accurately and therefore increase the employability of alumni, UK universities should provide employers with detailed information that will help address the relevance and transferability of these degrees. In general, messaging should be tailored to highlight the fact that the skills employers seek in candidates align with the characteristics of the UK degrees. These include early specialization, the tutorial system of learning, the emphasis on independent study, as well as gaining the sought-after skills necessary to make a well-rounded employee.

In addition to this general messaging, universities should improve their websites so that they can assist US and Canadian employers in their assessment of a candidate’s UK degree. Ideally, a page created specifically for employers could include:

- Rankings – both UK and international
- Comparison between UK, US and Canadian programs, including grading schemes
- Assessments from accreditation bodies and organizations
- Professional qualifications related to degree programs
- Contact details for employers with additional questions
- Highlight existing links to industry

Students

Upon graduation and beginning a job search in the US or Canada, students should be ready to provide details of the degree programs as well as connecting their potential employer to their university for additional information. Students should also be made aware of the benefits of tailoring the information they present according to the particular type of business to which they are applying.

CONCLUSIONS

Both US and Canadian employers’ perceptions towards UK higher education are generally positive. Nearly 80 percent of US employers and 70 percent of Canadian employers are highly receptive to degrees earned in the UK.

In general, American and Canadian students who earn degrees in the UK and return to their home country to seek work are in a strong position when it comes to employment. However, the challenges that employers are facing when assessing applicants with UK degrees would be minimized significantly if universities and students provide employers with tailored information as discussed above. US and Canadian students can be supported by their UK universities via clear communications about seeking work and simple measures like providing information on their websites.

“For people who have a plan and know out of high school that they want to do something specific, the UK is a great option because you get to go right into it.”

– Large retail organization, British Columbia



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