



Internationalizing curricula

Needs and wishes of alumni and employers with regard to international competencies

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“Increasing globalization and the interconnectedness of multinational work environments have intensified the demand for graduates capable of operating in culturally diverse contexts” - (Jones, 2013)



1 Introduction

Internationalizing curricula. Needs and wishes of alumni and employers with regard to international competencies

Internationalization has become of great importance for universities across the globe. The labour market is becoming international, with international opportunities and international competition. Emerging markets such as India, China and Russia are gaining economic power. Global challenges demand world-wide solutions. Production and marketing networks span the globe and various forms of migration have resulted in a large cultural diversity within nations. As a result, societies and labour markets are changing as well. In order to deal with these societal changes adequately and to succeed in today's labour market, graduates need to be equipped with international competencies. In a survey among 500 chief executives, ICM Research (on behalf of Think Global and The British Council, 2011) showed that employers strongly value staff members who are able to work in an international and multicultural environment. Similar results were found in Diamond et al. (2011), in which 'multicultural teamwork' was considered most important.

The Hague University of Applied Sciences seeks to prepare its students adequately for the world of tomorrow. The University's development plans (e.g. *HogeschoolOntwikkelingsPlan, HOP 7, 2009-2013 and HOP 8, 2014-2017*) indicate that its vision is to train students to be globally-minded professionals with an international and multicultural perspective, who are world-citizens, interested in global issues and able to deal with diversity in a constructive manner. They are to be professionals, who possess the competencies to function well in an international and intercultural environment.

Internationalization is therefore high on the agenda of The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) which is illustrated by the fact that, as of 2014, new students in all academies have to fill 12.5% (30 ECTS) of their four-year Bachelor program with international activities. These activities can range from an internship or semester abroad (student mobility) to participating in full





programs of study or minors in which English is the medium of instruction, or an internationally themed minor (Internationalization at Home, IaH).

And this is only the beginning. Internationalization is a means, not an end. All THUAS courses are looking into ways in which they can internationalize their curriculum. And in doing so, they need to be innovative (Leask, 2009) and keep in mind the specific needs and wishes of alumni and their employers with regard to international competences.

The THUAS research group International Cooperation supports these internationalization policy objectives by investigating various aspects, such as:

- The acquisition and development of international competencies among students.
- The extent to which lecturers possess international competencies and what their needs and wishes are for further development .
- The international competencies THUAS graduates have acquired as part of their degree and how THUAS has stimulated this development.
- The international competencies that employers and alumni consider important.

Although international competencies and employability have received growing attention in internationalization research, existing studies have mainly focused on:

- The effects of study abroad on the development of international competence (cf. Hoven & Walenkamp, 2013).
- The effects of an experience abroad (study, internship, voluntary work) on employability.
- A more general analysis of the skills employers look for in prospective employees.









2 Research questions

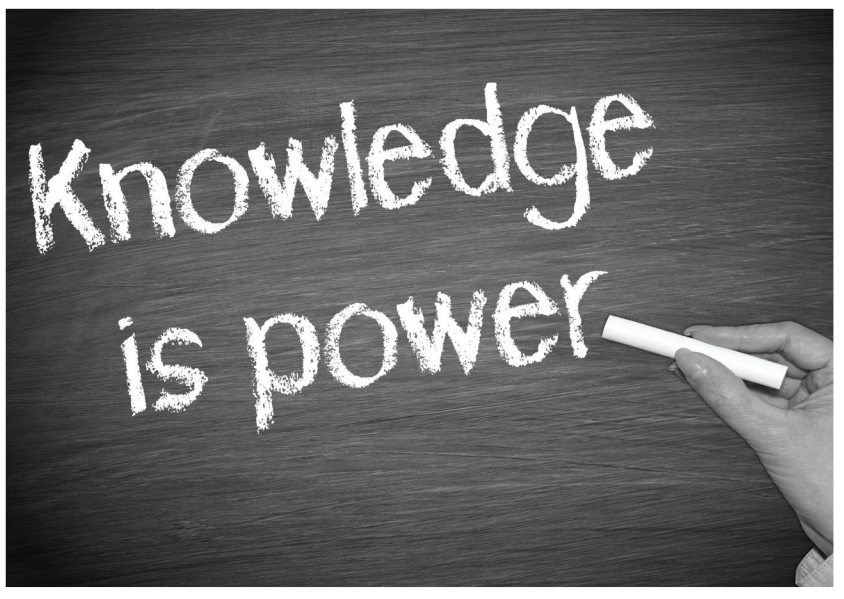
Even though these existing studies have led to some insights into the importance of international competencies for graduates and their employers, little research has been done into the needs of employers and alumni regarding international competencies, and the ways in which these needs are satisfied in curricula.

The present study sets out to answer the above raised questions, which are summarized in the following main question:

What are the needs and wishes of alumni and employers with regard to international competencies and to what extent does The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) contribute to the acquisition of these competencies among their student population?

The purpose is to identify the competencies that employers and alumni require and value, and the extent to which the curricula of THUAS develop these competencies. The outcomes of this study will help THUAS to get a better idea of what its focus points should be within the internationalization process in order to increase the quality and employability of its graduates. The following section first establishes a theoretical framework by introducing the key concepts of international competencies. Subsequently, the term employability is outlined and earlier studies on employers' perceptions regarding international competencies are discussed. Finally, attention is paid to the current status of internationalization in higher education.







3 Context

3.1 What are international competencies?

Existing literature uses a variety of terms to refer to the broad concept of international competencies, including international competence, cultural competence, cross-cultural competence, intercultural competence and global competence. These terms are often used interchangeably or share similar characteristics, but may also differ in certain aspects. Within the THUAS Research Group International Cooperation the decision was made to make intercultural competence part of the general term international competencies (Hoven & Walenkamp, 2013). The term international competencies adopted in this study therefore entails:

- Intercultural competencies
- International academic and professional competencies
- Foreign language competencies.
- World knowledge and country knowledge
- International interpersonal competencies

Intercultural competencies

The definition and components of intercultural competencies adopted in this study follow the framework set up by Deardorff (2006). Her intercultural competence model was designed on the basis of a study among 23 experts in the field of interculturalism and their consensus on what defines and characterizes intercultural competence. The study was the first of its kind in providing a grounded-research based framework of essential elements of intercultural competence, agreed upon by multiple leading experts and has since been widely applied in internationalization research.

In her intercultural competence model, Deardorff (2006) distinguishes several inextricably connected levels of intercultural competence that, as the competency develops, build up like a pyramid. At the foundation of this pyramid is the correct attitude, which can be described as respectful, open, curious and adventurous. In other words, on a personal level, an individual





needs to value cultural diversity, needs to be willing to interact with and learn from other cultures, and needs to feel comfortable in a new and unfamiliar situation. The second level comprises knowledge & comprehension on the one hand, and skills on the other. In short, knowledge & comprehension within this intercultural competence means an individual has a deep understanding of cultural elements that shape their own identity and world view, as well as those of others. Skills, such as the ability to listen, observe, analyze and relate as well as linguistic competence, are needed to process this knowledge. As Deardorff (2006) points out, the right attitude, solid knowledge and necessary skills will ultimately lead to the “desired internal- and external outcomes”. As a result of development in attitude, knowledge and skills, the desired internal outcomes (including empathy, adaptability and an ethno relative view) cause a shift in a person’s perspective. When desired international outcomes are achieved, a person is able to place themselves in someone else’s position and to see things from the point of view of another. The final level, desired external outcomes, is a visualization of internal outcomes; putting into practice all the previously covered levels. These outcomes are demonstrated by an ability to communicate and behave effectively and appropriately in an intercultural environment. The degree to which a person is interculturally competent depends on the extent to which these five elements have been acquired.

With regard to intercultural competencies, a US employers survey conducted by Hart Research Associates (2013) found that intercultural skills were considered important by all but a few interviewed employers. Fielden et al. (2007) add that employers are looking for graduates with first-hand experience of living and working among other cultures. Finally, in a study of Australian employers, academics and students, Crossman & Clarke (2009) found that employers believed “understanding”, “knowing about”, and “appreciating the sensitivities” surrounding culture, religion, language, laws and economic issues to be important in today’s business practice. In other words, when looking to hire a new employee, employers around the world consider intercultural competencies important.

International academic and professional competencies

International academic competencies comprise knowledge of other education systems and international scientific literature and textbooks, the ability to





do research with colleagues from other countries, the use of international subjects and case studies in teaching, the creative use of different international ways of teaching and learning in one's own classes and the awareness of the latest international developments in one's own discipline. International professional competencies refer to knowledge of and experience with the various ways in which one's profession is practiced in other countries and the ability to put that knowledge and experience to good use in one's work.

Foreign language competencies

As the term suggests, foreign language competencies describe an individual's ability to communicate in a foreign language. It is worth noting that being competent in a foreign language constitutes more than understanding general vocabulary or the ability to express oneself in a foreign language fluently. The term, as adopted in the present study, includes a variety of aspects including receptive and productive skills (listening and reading versus speaking and writing), as well as sub-competencies such as sociolinguistic competence (knowing and understanding how to use language with the appropriate social meaning, depending on the context), discourse competence (being able to communicate coherently and cohesively), and strategic competence (the ability to increase the effectiveness of communication or to keep communication going in case of a breakdown).

Due to the aforementioned globalization trend, foreign language competencies have received growing attention in European curricula. As Lasagabaster (2008) indicates: "All European educational systems are attaching increasing importance to the learning of foreign languages, since there is a dire need to educate multilingual and multicultural citizens in a context where the linguistic consequences of globalization are more and more evident."

In order to enhance transparency, and thus promoting international partnerships in the field of foreign languages, the council of Europe developed the Common European Framework of Reference for language learning, teaching and assessment (CEFR). This framework establishes a set of common criteria which enable educators to describe and compare foreign language learning and teaching as well as evaluate language competence. In this past decade, the CEFR has established itself as an important collective framework





for foreign language teaching in Europe, with many institutes of (higher) education, including THUAS, using CEFR levels to describe foreign language levels.

The system describes what language learners have to learn in terms of language, knowledge and skills in order to communicate and act effectively, also taking into consideration cultural context. It makes use of 6 language levels in speaking, listening, reading, writing and conversational skills, ranging from breakthrough (A1 - lower beginner level) to mastery (C2 - proficient user). In higher education, the level achieved on graduation depends on the respective language as well as study program, but will usually range between B1 (for languages with no pre-existing knowledge) to B2 or C1 (for more familiar languages such as English or Spanish). Lecturers are expected to have at least a C1 level of proficiency when using English as a medium of instruction.

This study adopts the broader definition of foreign language competencies as described above and operates under the assumption that THUAS graduates on average have a B2 level of the modern foreign languages they were taught as part of their degree

World knowledge and country knowledge

Children gain knowledge of the world by interacting, directly or indirectly, with their environment. For highly educated professionals world knowledge, or global knowledge, is defined as the knowledge and awareness of, and even involvement in, the wider world. They need to understand the changes the world is going through: shifting economic, political and military powers, climate change, environmental degradation, world governance, armed conflicts, the rise of non-state actors - such as multinationals, religions, civic and criminal organizations and interconnected citizens -, energy provision, natural resources, global public goods, international finance, the world economy, the billions of poor and hungry people, demographic developments, information and communication technology, and what all that means for their lives and professions.

Preliminary interviews with employers in the pilot phase of this research suggested that they also put stock in specific country knowledge with regard to culture, customs, legislation, networks and the local language.





International interpersonal competencies

Interpersonal competencies generally constitute the ability to interact with others positively and effectively. These competencies can include a variety of behavioral aspects ranging from communication and listening skills to taking initiative and showing flexibility. Interpersonal competencies are not exclusive to international contexts and can be necessary in every context, national, international and even regional. The present study, however, only looks at interpersonal competencies in international contexts, therefore giving rise to the term: international interpersonal competencies.

What should be noted is that in this research, a distinction is made between intercultural competencies and international interpersonal competencies, even though some skills and characteristics may be similar and could be exemplary of either competency. The reason for doing so stems from the fact that the terms 'international' and 'intercultural' are considered two separate concepts. An international environment is not necessarily intercultural and vice versa. To illustrate, the competency 'flexibility' can be an element of both intercultural competencies and the international interpersonal competencies. Yet it presents itself differently depending on the context. An example of flexibility on an international level could be interacting with a company in a different time zone. This time difference is not a result of a cultural difference, but more a situational, international difference. In contrast, flexibility on a cultural level may occur when the same Dutch employee has scheduled an appointment with a colleague from a culture with a different concept of time in which punctuality less important and 30 minute delays should not be a surprise.

3.2 International competencies and employers' perceptions

Similar to the concept of international competencies, the term 'employability' is also a difficult one to define and a variety of definitions are applied. Earlier research tends to connect the term 'employability' to individuals' chances of getting a job. This idea is also put forward in Harvey (2001), who states that "in all cases the core notion relates to the propensity of students to obtain a job". He goes on to explain that within this core notion variations may occur in terms of:





- Job type; does the term employability imply getting any job, or should it be specified to a particular type of job (*e.g. graduate job, fulfilling job*)
- Time; should employability be measured by how quickly an individual can gain employment after obtaining their degree or before they need to upgrade their subject-knowledge?
- Attributes on recruitment; should a candidate be able to demonstrate all the desired skills on recruitment or do they need to show the ability to acquire new skills quickly?
- Further learning; should the emphasis be placed on an individual's degree or is it more important that someone illustrates the readiness for further learning and development?
- Employability skills; which specific set of skills do employers value and require from candidates?

It appears that these earlier definitions focus mostly on an individual's capabilities of gaining employment, thus measuring employability by actual employment. There are multiple issues with a 'narrow' definition such as this. First of all, they tend to be based on more short-term employment outcomes, focusing on recent graduates and the first positions they obtain in particular (Oria, 2012). Given the fact that the more traditional concept of 'employment for life' is disappearing, graduates need to possess skills that make them more appealing to multiple employers across multiple work contexts and disciplines. This notion is also emphasized in THUAS' policy plans (HOP7, 2009-2013): 'THUAS wants to educate Bachelors with a broad perspective. A Bachelor is able to step outside the boundaries of their profession, can work together with other professions, is able to operate on a multidisciplinary level and can transfer to other professional domains'.

In addition, the more narrow definitions focus mostly on a limited set of individual characteristics and do not take into account the disciplinary background of a graduate or external factors, such as economic volatility and competition. The time needed to find a 'graduate job' may vary depending on a graduate's discipline (Purcell & Elias, 2002). Brown et al. (2002) highlight the fact that an individual's employability depends on the level of supply and





demand on the labor market stating that “employability will vary according to economic conditions”. In other words, in different times, different graduates may have problems finding employment. This does not necessarily imply that these graduates are less employable in general; they might just be less employable at that particular moment.

Finally, narrower definitions also fail to take into account one’s suitability for a position. As Lees (2002) states, “employment and employability are not the same thing. Being employed means having a job, being employable means having the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace”. This notion is also put forward by Yorke (2006): “employability implies something about the capacity of the graduate to function in a job, and is not to be confused with the acquisition of a job, whether a ‘graduate job’ or otherwise”.

Besides, employability should not only be measured by one’s ability to gain initial employment, but also one’s ability to perform their job successfully and to change professions if necessary, in other words “remaining employable throughout their lives” (Crossman & Clarke, 2009).

In his various studies on employability, Yorke (2006) has taken into account these multiple factors in his definition of employability: ‘a set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the community and the economy’. His definition of employability has been applied in various other studies within the field of internationalization and employability (Oria, 2012, Tariq et al., 2012, Jameson et al., 2012) and it is also the definition adopted in the present study. It is worth noting, however, that the main aim of this study is to analyze employers’ and alumni perceptions on the necessity of international skills in the work environment and their opinions on the usefulness of THUAS study programs in developing these necessary skills. In other words, it investigates the extent to which international competencies affect employability and the degree to which these employability factors are represented in the respective study programs of THUAS alumni.





3.3 International competencies and higher education

The current social and political environment requires graduates to be internationally competent. Or, as Coryell et al. (2012) put it: “The sociopolitical and economic conditions of the world today beseech the global society to move toward an era of informed, culturally sensitive collaboration.” Higher education institutions have a significant role to play in preparing graduates for this international work environment as “governments, employers and other stakeholders have come to expect higher education to contribute to the development of a variety of complex ‘skills’, which – they argue – enhances the stock of human capital and makes for national economic well-being.” (Knight & Yorke, 2003).

International skills are no longer of importance only to those who are aiming towards a career abroad. As Zimitat (2008) indicates: “even if domestic graduates never leave their own country, on graduation they will be forced to compete in international, or multinational, work and discovery environments.” Webb (2005) adds, “to act locally it is necessary to understand the global”. The majority of graduates will work in an environment with some form of internationalization and will have to use international competencies in order to succeed professionally. As a result, institutes of higher education have put internationalization high on the agenda (Coryell et al., 2012; Jones and Wit, 2012).

Embedding international competencies in the curriculum

In order to use internationalization to provide students with the desired international competencies it is crucial to have clear internationalized learning outcomes. These will guide the further internationalization of the curricula. Leask (2009) describes internationalization of the curriculum (IOC) as: “the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning arrangements and support services of a program of study”. This definition stresses the importance of not only a change in content, but also a change in pedagogy. It also emphasizes the need for dedication among stakeholders (faculty, staff, students), a point also made by Coryell et al. (2012) and Childress (2010).





The fact that a change in teaching and learning is required in order for internationalization of the curriculum to be successful, and that changing curriculum content alone is insufficient, is also pointed out by Zimitat (2008). His study argues that IOC “requires changes in pedagogy to encourage students to develop critical skills to understand forces shaping their discipline and challenge accepted viewpoints”. Similar results were found in Leask (2008) who concludes that “an international curriculum will therefore need to utilize a wide variety of teaching and learning strategies which have been carefully selected and constructed. It will focus on both “what is taught and learned” (that is, on both content and outcomes) and “how it is taught and learned” (that is, on what both teachers and learners do)”.

It is this importance of adapting teaching methods and learning practices as well as content that leads Leask (2013) to conclude that the opinions of the practical profession are important, but that the decisions involved in internationalizing the curriculum need to be made by academic staff in disciplinary teams. The reason being that they are familiar with assessment methods, learning outcomes and curriculum design. In order to make and implement these decisions, faculty and staff need to be adequately prepared and supported. This is also concluded by Jones & Killick (2013), who state that one of the critical success factors for embedding IOC is to “offer a wide range of staff development and course development support and be prepared to engage in open, constructive professional conversations; use these as opportunities to identify and disseminate good practice from within the institution.”

Leask (2013) researched practical implications of curriculum internationalization and the means of support and preparation necessary for staff to be engaged in internationalization. Her extensive research involving stakeholders and experts on both a national (Australia) and international level, ultimately led to the development and testing of a five-stage “Process of IOC” and supporting resources, which is shown in figure 1:



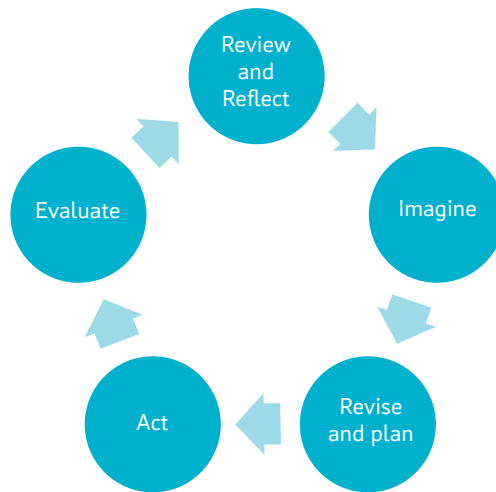


Figure 1: The process of IOC

The first stage, Review and Reflect, investigates the extent to which the current curriculum is internationalized. Stage two, Imagine, revolves around generating new ideas and coming up with new approaches. Revise & Plan, the third stage, focuses on deciding what exactly to change within the current program. In stage 4, Act, the plans formulated in the previous stage are implemented and provisions are made to evaluate these changes. The final stage, Evaluate, entails the actual evaluation and an analysis of the extent to which the previously set goals have been achieved. Leask (2013) highlights that “the most difficult and rewarding stage for academic staff was when they were prompted to imagine new ways of thinking about their discipline”. The process enabled academic staff to take on an active role in reviewing and redesigning the curriculum, making them “collaborative partners” as opposed to having “outside experts coming in to take over the curriculum review process, thereby disempowering the academic staff”, taking away some of the resistance towards internationalization.

Acquiring international competencies is a time-consuming process and requires a well-established program, adaptable to meet the specific requirements of students. An economics major will often need different





international competencies from a student majoring in dermatology because academic and vocational competencies need to be taken into account. As a result, faculties and departments need to decide which international competencies to focus on while keeping the needs of the labour market in mind. As the job market is continuously subject to change, it is also important that this establishing of desired learning outcomes remains a flexible, ongoing process. After international learning outcomes have been introduced in the curriculum, which can be quite an innovative process, regular assessment and evaluation should result in fine-tuning of the targeted competencies. In other words, internationalization is a continual process, requiring commitment from all parties involved.

In addition, research by Janson et al. (2009) states that experts' advice regarding an international curriculum is not aimed towards making significant changes in the international experience itself, but state more towards improving the conditions surrounding the experience, such as more extensive preparation, more academic, administrative and financial support while abroad, better assessments and methods of capitalisation and decreasing the gap between education and the labour market.

Barriers in internationalization

As Green (2007) indicates, "the major barriers to internationalization are both institutional (...) and individual (...)". Barriers on an institutional level include lack of strategy and lack of funding. Individual barriers include lack of capacity and expertise among faculty staff, or a lack of interest regarding internationalization. This is also supported by Childress (2010).

In other words, higher education institutions and their staff are not always fully equipped to deal adequately with the changes necessary for successful curriculum internationalization and to maximize the learning outcomes of their students. Paige & Goode (2009), for instance, found that many education professionals involved in internationalization lack a theoretical background and therefore understanding of intercultural variables that influence the learning process of a student. Supervision tends to be insufficient and the responsibility for the development of intercultural competence is passed on to the student. Students without proper supervision can be overwhelmed with





the intensity of an intercultural experience and under those circumstances adapt an ethnocentric vision when looking at another culture. The importance of proper supervision of the learning process is emphasized by various authors. Vande Berg & Paige (2009), for instance, explain: “immersing students in another culture is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for achieving what Lou and Bosley call the transformative experiential learning potential’ of study abroad, intervening in student learning, (...) is the sufficient condition”.

In order to engage faculty members, Green (2007) suggests offering the opportunity for staff to develop international experience first-hand or providing more budget-friendly internationalization workshops. According to Green (2007), “an investment in faculty development pays off in faculty support for international education, in the enthusiasm they communicate to students, and in their own teaching”. Adding to this, Childress (2010) found several key enablers of engagement of IOC in academic staff, which show similarities with the previously mentioned suggestions, but adds that using international experience as a criterion for recruitment and promotion could also increase engagement.

Ways of internationalization

Coryell et al. (2012) identify four ways of internationalization among higher education institutions: conducting research on an international level, attracting foreign students, internationalization at home through an internationally themed curriculum and studying abroad. Given the nature of the present study, the following section will go into more detail on the latter three, particularly in relation to their contribution to the development of international competencies and the extent to which they affect employability.

Study or internship abroad

Many studies have found that international experience, and studying abroad in particular can be an important vehicle in acquiring international competencies and reaching institutional internationalization objectives (Coryell et al., 2012; Crossman & Clarke, 2009; Hoven & Walenkamp, 2013). As Coryell et al. (2012) indicate, study abroad programs allow students to expand their knowledge of the world, broaden their perspective and develop intercultural skills. This can be either in short- or long-term experiences,





as both can help develop intercultural and interpersonal competencies to a significant extent (Dwyer, 2004). Employers have also emphasized the value of a foreign experience. Research among 100 human resource managers showed that employers greatly value interpersonal skills, or 'soft skills' and that they often assume that these skills are developed during an experience abroad (Doorbar: in Orahood et al., 2004). In addition, Janson et al. (2009) conclude that employers generally believe recent graduates with international experience are more competent than graduates without; a foreign experience is said to stimulate adaptability, initiative, planning skills and assertiveness. Crossman & Clarke (2009) found that international experience stimulates the development of language skills, cultural sensitivity and flexibility, therefore making graduates more likely to find employment.

“It would appear that international experience does enhance learning, the aquisition of competencies, the development of critical soft-skills and, potentially, overall employability” - (Crossman & Clarke, 2009)

“...The main benefits of international experience included the potential for networking, the opportunity for experiential learning, additional language acquisition, and finally the development of soft-skills.” - (Crossman & Clarke, 2009)

Students themselves also expect study or internship abroad to affect their level of employability positively. As Leggott & Stapleford (2007) have shown: students consider international experience valuable for future endeavours. Some experienced personal growth, such as independence, confidence and dependability. Others developed more practical skills, such as time management, organisation and planning. Former ERASMUS students surveyed by Janson et al. (2009) affirmed that their international experience had a positive influence on their job prospects. Half of the alumni believe their time abroad played an important role during the recruitment process, a finding which is confirmed by one third of the employers: “As compared to





other studies, international experience, among it the ERASMUS experience, is in the process of gaining importance when employers select among applicants” (Janson et al., 2009).

Internationalization at home, the international classroom and attracting foreign students

Despite the proven benefits of an international experience, not all students can afford to study abroad and not all students have the desire to do so. However, as has been previously mentioned, international competencies are relevant even to those students who do not have the ambition to work abroad. This notion led to the rise of an ‘Internationalization at Home’ (IaH) movement (Crowther et al., 2000; Nilsson, 1999), which is focused on designing ways for local students to develop international competencies without having to go abroad. A variety of alternatives are available for those students who do not have the means or the inclination to leave their home institution: following a minor on an international topic, participating in an ‘international classroom’ or completing an internship at a company that conducts business internationally. As Mak & Barker (2013) also indicate, higher education institutions are increasingly using cultural diversity in the institutions and in the community to create opportunities for students to broaden their intercultural perspectives, appreciate sociocultural variability in professional practice, and improve their cross-cultural awareness and interpersonal skills.

Veldscholten (2013) researched alumni satisfaction regarding international competencies among alumni of the Dutch Bachelor International Business & Languages. Interviewed alumni were satisfied with the curriculum offered; all material was relevant. Depending on future employment, some alumni did experience knowledge gaps. These were mostly related to the specificity of the target group, which makes it an impossible point to improve within a more general curriculum. Lecturers participating in the same study recommended adding Asian languages to the curriculum in view of market trends.

Opinions are mixed when it comes to the effectiveness of IaH compared to a foreign experience concerning the development of international competencies. Leggott & Stapleford (2007) state that “for those unable to spend a period of time abroad, similar employability skills can be developed in their home-university through the firm embedding of employability and cross-cultural





capability into the curriculum and the creation and implementation of a suitable internationalization strategy”, equalizing the experience of laH to an experience abroad. Jones (2013), also sees laH as a suitable alternative for study abroad: “A group of students in a contemporary university is likely to include people from differing national, religious, ethnic backgrounds, of different genders, sexual orientation or with physical disabilities. Any of these might offer creative intercultural opportunities in a domestic curriculum and one route to enhancing intercultural competence”. On the other hand, research by Crossman & Clarke (2009) shows that, despite the fact that internationalization at home is educational – “Interacting with other students, an internationalized curriculum, intercultural friendships, hosting international homestay students, being migrants or children of migrants, intermarriage or voluntary work for student exchange organizations.” - this type of internationalization does not deliver the same results as study or internship abroad.

Employers appear to prefer candidates with an international experience for a variety of reasons. But whatever internationalization means are used, it is crucial that they are aimed at clear learning goals and that they are implemented in a professional way by competent and motivated lecturers.







4 Methodology

4.1 Target group and mixed-method-approach

In order to investigate the needs and wishes of alumni and employers with regard to international competencies and the performance of THUAS, this study focused on insights from two particular groups that constitute the overall target group, namely alumni of The Hague University of Applied Sciences and employers that employ such alumni or hosted THUAS students during placements.

Aiming for representativeness and a detailed analysis, data were collected among alumni from various academies and from employers from different sectors. More precisely, the research targeted Dutch and international alumni from different academies at THUAS and working for organizations active in the public or private sector, large, medium-sized or small and national or international.¹ Differences between these clusters will be indicated in case they are statistically significant; mostly, however, the trends were identical between the clusters or the differences could not be measured due to the size of the relative cluster.

4.2 Methods

After pilot runs, the data collection started in 2011. Between April 2011 and March 2014, 21 interviews were conducted with employers, and 44 interviews with alumni. In these semi-structured interviews, the questions focused mainly on the sort of international competences that were acquired during their study period at THUAS and the international competences that were required in the working field. Further and beyond the semi-structured design,

1. For the online survey the clusters are not equally well represented in the data. Most of the 54 alumni came from the Academy for Accounting & Financial Management (9.3 per cent), Academy for Governance, Justice and Security (3.7 per cent), Academy for European Studies & Communication Management (24.1 per cent), Academy for Health (7.4 per cent), Academy for ICT & Media (9.3 per cent), Academy for Marketing & Commerce (9.3 per cent), Academy for Social Professions (9.3 per cent) and the Academy for Technology, Innovation & Society (9.3 per cent); one-third of the alumni are internationals, two-thirds are Dutch. Employers that filled out the survey represent organizations from the public sector (29.8 per cent), the private sector (47.1 per cent) or are self-employed (17.3 per cent). These organizations are partly nationally oriented (67.9 per cent), partly internationally oriented (32.1 per cent) and are large (47.9 per cent), medium-sized (25 per cent) or small (16.7 per cent).





participants were encouraged to share their thoughts, for example on possible adjustments of curricula with regard to international competences. Interviews were analyzed by means of a coding and the labels derived from the interview guides (Boeije, 2005).²

To ensure comparability of the results, the online survey design largely resembled the structure of the interviews. Hence, by means of Likert-scales, respondents were asked to express their views on the international competences taught during the studies and the international competences relevant to their profession (Bryman, 2008). Alumni ($n_{\text{survey}}/\text{Alumni} = 54$) and employers ($n_{\text{survey}}/\text{Employers} = 49$) who participated in the survey had the opportunity to provide open answers and suggestions. Beyond the initial invitation, three reminders were sent to participate in the online survey. The online survey was open between September 2013 and April 2014 with a final response rate of $r_{\text{survey}} = 11.9$ per cent.³

Further, a set of questions on international competencies placed in the HBO Monitor 2013 by the THUAS Research Group International Cooperation was analyzed to enrich the survey and interview data. The HBO Monitor is an annual survey conducted among alumni of Dutch universities of applied sciences. More than 56,000 alumni participated in the HBO Monitor, of which 900 are former students of THUAS.

In addition, three focus group meetings were conducted.⁴ Focus groups are useful to gain feedback on research findings and interpret results; furthermore, the interactive nature is a quality feature of focus groups and can add breadth to the overall research results (Gilbert, 2009; Seale, 2010). To have a first impression of the link between the research findings and the internationalization of curricula, lecturers were an important part of the focus groups. Hence, for the two group sessions at THUAS, a purposive sample of employers, alumni, education professionals and lecturers was selected.

2. About the references for the interviews: During the coding process, relevant fragments were given an identification number, for instance 14.3. These numbers have also been added to citations in this paper. The first number refers to the personal identification number of the interviewee. The number after the decimal point refers to the corresponding fragment.

3. The response rate does not include the 15 respondents who filled out the survey during an alumni conference.

4. The sessions were held at The Hague University of Applied Sciences on 26 and 27 March 2014 and during the workshop 'World Citizens as employees' (Wereldburgers als werknemers) at the annual conference of the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences held on 17 April 2014 in Den Bosch, The Netherlands.





Participants in the workshops at the 2014 annual conference of the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences included administrators, government officials, policy makers, lecturers and students (approximately 50 persons). Participants were encouraged to discuss the key findings of the research to enable the researchers to identify themes, issues, and areas of disagreement or agreement. Each session started with a presentation of the key findings of the interviews and survey, followed by a more detailed discussion of the five international competencies involved. After identifying the key aspects for each competency, participants were asked to explore ways in which these aspects could be implemented in Higher Education. Particular emphasis was placed on English language competencies and intercultural competencies, because these two competencies proved most important in the previous two sub-studies.







5 Findings

5.1 Interviews and survey

The findings of the interviews and survey were analyzed based on the following three sub-questions:

- Which international competencies do alumni need in their current jobs?
- Which of these competencies did alumni develop and/or acquire as part of their degree at THUAS?
- How could THUAS improve its curriculum with regard to international competencies?

Which international competencies do alumni need in their current jobs?

The vast majority of interviewed alumni (35 out of 44) works in an organization which is international in one way or another. Forms of internationalization most frequently listed were: cultural diversity among clients and/or employees (18), having foreign subsidiaries (14), and cooperation with organizations abroad (9), the latter mostly included outsourcing, and finally export (8). Only 9 out of 44 alumni indicated that their organization was not at all internationally active. It appears that THUAS alumni are often employed in fairly international organizations. This could result in a stronger need for international competencies.

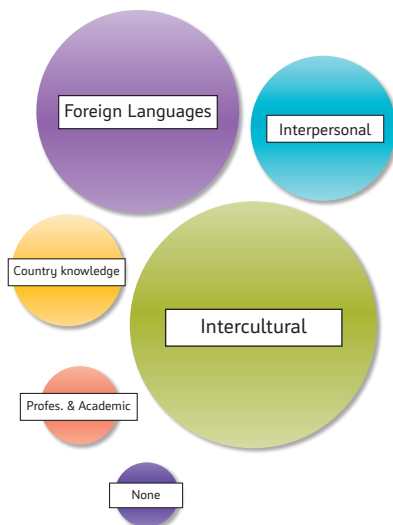


Figure 2: International Competencies needed by Alumni at work floor (Based on interviews).





As can be seen in figure 2, alumni make most use of *intercultural competencies* (14) and *foreign language competencies* (13). The foreign language alumni most frequently make use of is English. As far as *intercultural competencies* are concerned, alumni primarily require *knowledge* (culture-specific information such as habits and customs) and the capacity to interact with people from other cultures effectively (*external outcomes*).

“ We also have to interact with other cultures on a regular basis: Moroccan, Iraqi, Turkish, sometimes it’s difficult to communicate with these people because you know little of their culture. In that case, I try to look up information on the internet”. - 9.13, Personal interview alumnus, 24 July 2013

What should be noted here is that for several alumni-interviews an answer could not be extracted from the responses. These were mostly pilot-interviews which were less elaborate. The previously mentioned scores are therefore based on 26 interviews. This means half of the interviewed alumni indicated the need for *intercultural and foreign language competencies* at the workplace. Only 3 alumni indicated they did not need any of the international competencies in their current job.

The necessity of *intercultural competencies* and *foreign language competencies* is also reflected in the perceptions of alumni regarding employer requirements: alumni interview results point out that more than half of employers value or require at least one international competency. *Foreign language competencies* was listed most frequently (19), with a particular emphasis on English (16). In the eyes of the alumni, this is also the competency most often required by their employers; out of the 15 organizations that hold any of the international competencies as a prerequisite, 10 require English language skills . In addition to *foreign language competencies*, alumni indicate that, considering the 5 international competencies, their employers mostly value or require intercultural competencies (12): to be more precise, a combination of attitude (openness, curiosity, respect) and knowledge of different cultures.





The perceptions of interviewed alumni are consistent with the findings of the employer interviews. Out of 21 interviewed employers, 19 consider *foreign language competencies* important in a prospective employee (English in particular), followed by *intercultural competencies* (16) and *knowledge of other countries* (8).

“The ability to interact effectively with various cultures is important, both at the office as well as in the contact with foreign clients. As far as languages are concerned, English is most important.” - 48.5, Personal interview employer, 22 april 2013

“In any case, your level of English needs to be good, both spoken and written. It’s also good to have some knowledge of intercultural issues. In this job, you encounter a lot of foreign patients and doctors, so it’s good to know how to approach these people.” - 25.10, Personal interview alumnus, 7 January 2013

Foreign language competencies and *intercultural competencies* are equally prominent in the survey results. As can be seen in figure 3, 81.7 per cent of the respondents perceive *foreign language competencies* as important for their current jobs, and even 89.4 per cent finds intercultural competencies relevant at their workplace; the highest score together with *international interpersonal competencies* (also 93.3 per cent). The remaining two international competencies are by no means unimportant: even though the survey scores are slightly lower, a majority of respondents still considers academic and professional competencies (62.5 per cent) and *knowledge of countries* (63.5 per cent) important in their jobs. Statistically, there was no significant difference between the answers of employers and the answers of alumni.



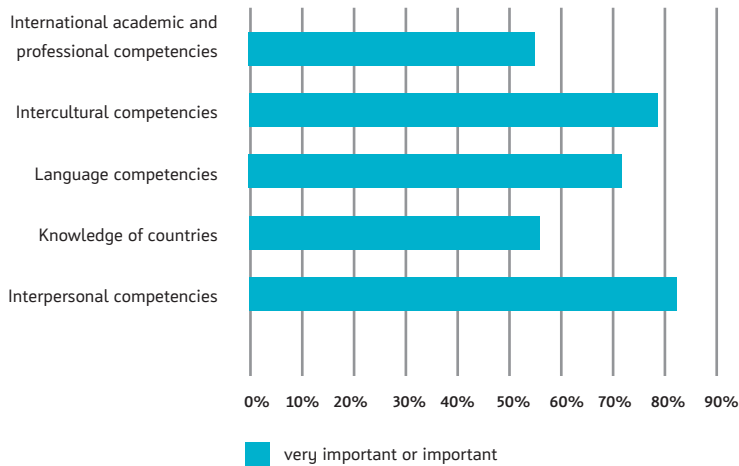


Figure 3: The extent to which international competencies are important in the current position (Based on online survey).

It is worth noting that these competencies have been considered important at the workplace regardless of the respective sector. Generally, respondents occupied in the private sector, the public sector or those who are self-employed have assessed the importance of international competencies to a similar degree, albeit with one exception: *knowledge of foreign countries* appears to be of less importance to those working in the public sector (51.6 per cent) than to those working in the private sector (67.3 per cent) and the self-employed (83.4 per cent).

The survey results show a remarkable difference when comparing the perceptions of international respondents with those of the Dutch respondents. *International academic and professional competencies*, intercultural competencies, and foreign language competencies have been assessed by international respondents as being significantly more important than by Dutch respondents. Both groups outline a similar view concerning *knowledge of countries* and *international interpersonal competencies*.

Although both the interviews and the online survey show that international competencies are, to a significant extent, needed in the contemporary working





environment, employers appear to pay little attention to these competencies in the recruitment process: 27 alumni noted that their employers do not ascertain whether new employees have sufficiently acquired the necessary international competencies. One alumnus even commented that their employer strictly requires English language competencies, but that candidates were not screened for them in the job interview.

One reason for the lack of attention to international competencies in the recruitment process could be that employers value other competencies over international competencies: half of the alumni interviewed indicated that their employers find international competencies less important (8) or unimportant (15) compared to other competencies. Another reason could be that many employers assume a candidate possesses certain competencies:

“They assume you speak English. They do not specifically test your knowledge.” - 37.12, Personal interview alumnus, 17 october 2012

“It’s an advantage if someone can speak foreign languages. Apart from this, the company focuses more on general competencies, not necessarily international competencies. Your degree and work experience are most important.” - 29.10, Personal interview alumnus, 10 december 2012

Surprisingly enough, results from the employer interviews suggest that the majority of interviewed employers (18) does specifically focus on international competencies during the selection process. In particular, to what extent the candidate has knowledge of foreign languages (11), as can be seen from figure 4:

“Yes, we always pay attention to the level of English, and we try to assess to what extent the candidate is interculturally competent.” 53.6, Personal interview employer, 29 june 2011





The few employers that did not pay attention to international competencies in the recruitment process did so because their companies aimed at the Dutch market. The results of the survey confirm these findings; according to the respondents of the questionnaire, foreign language competencies, along with international interpersonal competencies are an assessment criterion in the selection process.



Figure 4: Do you pay particular attention to a candidate's international competencies when hiring new employees? (Based on interviews)

Nevertheless, a minority of interviewed employers (9 out of 21) finds international competencies of equal importance or more important than other competencies; findings which are fairly similar to the perceptions of interviewed alumni. However, the survey results show that international competencies *do* have quite a considerable importance in the considerations of employers. A large majority (63.5 per cent) of the respondents perceive international competencies of equal importance compared to other competencies; 15.4 per cent even value international competencies over other competencies. Interestingly, this percentage is higher among those respondents that are internationals or work in an international environment. It appears that international competencies are a contributing factor for initially getting a job as well as later job performance.



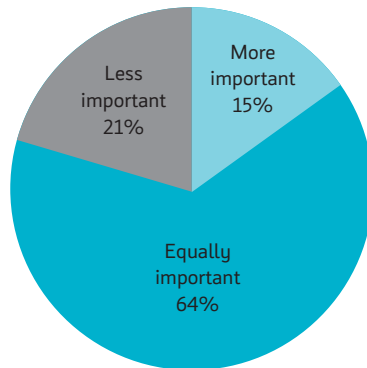


Figure 5: How important are international competencies in relation to other competencies? (Based on interviews)

It is worth noting that, despite the value and importance that is placed on international competencies, 72.1 per cent of the respondents in the online survey state that their organization does not offer professional training courses regarding international competencies. Whereas foreign language training was listed several times in the survey, other international competencies seem to be largely neglected. These findings are congruent with the results of the alumni-interviews. Interviewed employers, on the other hand, generally state that other international competencies are also part of their on-the-job training, in which training sessions are said to focus on intercultural competencies and foreign language competencies, and to a minor extent on international professional and academic competencies.

Which of these competencies have alumni acquired and developed during their studies at thuas?

Table 1 ranks the 5 international competencies based on the extent to which alumni claim to have developed them while studying for their degree. It also includes the most frequently listed dimension within these competencies.





Core label	Number	Dimension	Degree	Example
Foreign language competencies	28	English	Variable	<p>“Some English; one hour a week for two years, or only in the first year. In hindsight this is not enough. I would have my children study English more.” - 6.13</p> <p>“I learned technical English while studying, which was very useful. We didn't do anything with regard to the other international competencies” - 16.9</p>
International interpersonal competencies	18	Communication	Frequently	“We focused a lot on the development of personal & social competencies. For instance, conversational competencies and role plays.”- 7.10
Intercultural competencies	17	Knowledge	Little	“We also did something with intercultural competencies; one lesson or a few lessons about culture. But I don't recall what exactly, so it was probably not a significant part of the curriculum.”- 9.11
Int. Prof. & Academic competencies	7	Practising profession	Knowledge international profession	“As far as international professional & academic competencies are concerned, we did get a lot of English theory, based on the situation in other countries. “ - 2.12
Experience abroad	5	Study trip		<p>“we also had a study trip to Dublin and Switzerland where we visited community centers and cultural institutions. “ - 2.13</p> <p>“students are very interested in internships abroad, but there are too many barriers; it's expensive, students have to organize a lot themselves. Adding more organized internships could be an option, but finances will remain a point of concern. That's why student exchange would be interesting..” 3.26</p>

Table 1: Competencies acquired and developed by alumni while studying for their degree and the most frequently given answer per core label (Based on interviews).

Interview findings suggest that alumni have particularly acquired *foreign language competencies* (28), *international interpersonal competencies* (18) and *intercultural competencies* (17) during their studies at THUAS. English was by far the most frequently listed language when asked about foreign language competencies. Unfortunately, the interview results are inconclusive when it comes to determining whether alumni have acquired these competencies sufficiently. For instance, the experiences of interviewed alumni regarding





their English curriculum vary greatly: some were only administered a diagnostic test in year 1 or occasionally made use of English course materials. Others underwent two or even three years of English language teaching. Whether the amount of English taught was sufficient also differs per alumnus; there were alumni who had only received a diagnostic test, but who deemed this sufficient. On the other hand there were also alumni who received two or three years of English language teaching, but who indicated this should be extended.

Within the category *international interpersonal competencies*, alumni primarily worked on communicative competencies (9). In contrast to *foreign language competencies* and *intercultural competencies*, *international interpersonal competencies* are the only competencies which alumni specifically stated to have acquired to a large extent while studying at THUAS.

What should be taken into account is that some alumni (6) indicate that they did not see interpersonal as particularly international competencies. Even though they were specifically asked to relate these competencies to an international setting, it is possible that alumni answered this question from a general perspective as opposed to an international perspective.

As far as intercultural competencies are concerned, alumni indicate that their degree work primarily focused on *knowledge and comprehension* (culture-specific information and deep understanding and knowledge of culture in general), as well as *external outcomes* (appropriate behavior and effective communication). Out of the five competencies, the largest number of alumni felt that *intercultural competencies* were not sufficiently developed during their time at THUAS.

The survey brings out rather mixed findings: respondents of the survey were not particularly negative about the acquired *foreign language competencies*: only 35.2 per cent feel they did not develop these to a sufficient degree while studying. A similar picture results in terms of the *international academic & professional competencies* and the intercultural competencies, with 38.9 per cent and 31.5 per cent of the alumni finding the acquisition at THUAS insufficient. *Knowledge of countries* whilst studying for their degree was seen as insufficient by 48.1 per cent of the alumni, while the most positive score relates to the *international interpersonal competencies*; only 13.0 per cent of





the alumni feel they have achieved these to an insufficient degree during their studies.

A closer analysis shows that this negative perception is stronger among Dutch respondents than among the international respondents. Interviews have indicated that the degree to which international competencies have been acquired depends on the study program; what the survey results add is that students' backgrounds also seem to be a contributing factor. International respondents are to a statistically significant degree more positive about the acquired international competencies than Dutch ones. Survey results also suggest that employers have a more negative perception of the acquired competencies than the THUAS alumni themselves.⁵ These results certainly indicate room for improvement and encourage the development of education policies that enable all students to acquire international competencies to a higher degree. But what could be concrete suggestions to improve the curricula in that respect?

How could thuas improve its curriculum with regard to international competencies?

According to the interviewed alumni, foreign language competencies fell short the most. Out of the 23 alumni who answered this question, slightly more than half (13) stated that they had missed these competencies or that they were unable to acquire them to a satisfactory extent. As in previous answers related to language competencies, English was most frequently listed (10). Out of these 10 alumni, half did not acquire any English language competencies while studying at THUAS. The other half had 'some' English, but deemed it insufficient. Some indicated Spanish (2) and non-western languages (1) could receive more attention.

"I think more time should be spent on studying English. It is a good starting point, but if I have to conduct more serious conversations, I do notice that there are some things I don't know. The number of hours spent on English language teaching should be extended." - 26.13, Personal interview alumnus, 4 december 2012

5 Here, due to small n, it is not possible to speak of a statistically significant difference.





A third of the alumni felt their degree work did not offer enough opportunities to develop intercultural competencies and within these competencies alumni felt knowledge of other cultures was lacking the most.

“This is one of the recommendations to the curriculum: I would have liked to have spent more time on morals and values within other cultures; what kind of situations can you encounter in practice? If you know the idea behind certain customs, it’s easier to respect and appreciate them.” - 12.10, Personal interview alumnus, 16 July 2013

The experiences of interviewed employers are varied when it comes to the international competencies alumni are equipped with. Table 2 illustrates the extent to which employers are satisfied with the international competencies of alumni:

Core lable	Number	Example Statements
Unsatisfied	8	"In general I would say: No. I think that teacher training spends enough time on foreign language competencies and personal- and intercultural competencies. This is less so for Social Professions. Nevertheless, these disciplines also lack foreign language teaching. Besides this, I find the general knowledge of alumni disappointing. They know little about what's going on in the world. - 45.15, personal interview, 29 August 2013
Satisfied	8	"Based on our experience with interns of THUAS, we believe that prospective graduates are well-equipped when it comes to international competencies. They are generally very open, have often spent some time abroad or intend to do this, have good English speaking and writing competencies and are interested in other countries and cultures." - 58.9, personal interview, 21 June 2011
I don't know	6	"I can't really answer this question. It varies greatly per candidate and it's very much related to experience abroad. I don't know whether this is an accomplishment by the school or whether this is the alumni's own initiative." - 49.14, personal interview, 23 May 2011

Table 2: Employer satisfaction with international competencies of THUAS alumni (Based on interviews).

The reasons why employers are unsatisfied with the international competencies of alumni vary from insufficient foreign language competencies







“I think it would be a good idea for THUAS to stimulate its students more to undertake international activities. I would definitely stimulate an internship abroad, and I would also offer more modules with English as a medium of instruction so that students can increase and expand their English language competencies.” - 15.18, Personal interview alumnus, 13 march 2013

The suggestions listed above correspond with the findings of the survey, although they do appear in a different order: almost 95 per cent of respondents consider increasing knowledge of other cultures important. This perhaps somewhat broad concept is specified in recommendations such as ‘an international classroom’, putting cultural differences on the agenda or inviting guest lecturers with various cultural backgrounds.

The second suggestion, made by 88.2 per cent of respondents, is the encouragement and facilitation of studies or internships abroad. Some respondents go as far as to suggest making a foreign experience compulsory. However, this is not supported in the interviews: although the majority of interviewed alumni believe an experience abroad is either very important (21) or important (15) for the development of international competencies, the vast majority (36) strongly believes THUAS should not make a study or internship abroad a compulsory part of the curriculum. Mostly for reasons related to the student (20), such as financial limitations (8) or a lack of international ambition (9), but in some cases also for reasons related to the faculty such as badly organized semesters/internships abroad, or because foreign experience is considered irrelevant for a particular discipline or profession.

“I would not force people who do not have the ambition to work internationally. If someone really doesn’t want to, it’s useless. You really only learn from spending time abroad if you open yourself up, and are pro-active. In many cases, students who have to study abroad, will not do this, and as a result will not reach the intended learning objectives.”- 36.15, Personal interview alumnus, 10 december 2012





Finally, almost 90 per cent of survey respondents consider emphasis on foreign languages important. These results are consistent with interview findings. English is considered most important (97.8 per cent), followed by Spanish, German and French, which were each listed by not more than 30-40 per cent of the respondents. Furthermore, the survey shows that learning Asian languages, Chinese in particular, is worth considering.

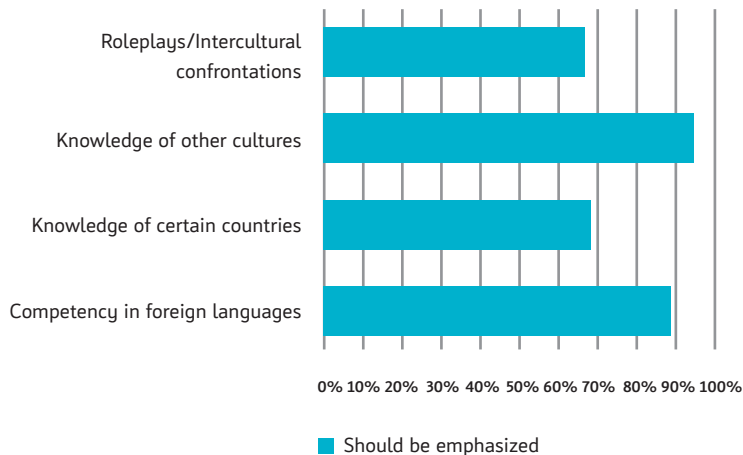


Figure 7: Suggestions regarding curricula at THUAS (Based on online survey).

Another important suggestion for the improvement of curricula is knowledge of certain countries (69.0 per cent). Employers consider this aspect far more important than alumni (92.9 per cent as opposed to 55.8 per cent). On the other hand, alumni are more interested in suggestions such as role play activities and intercultural confrontations than employers (66.7 per cent versus 35.7 per cent).

Course-specific international competencies

In the interview analysis several course-specific trends surfaced:

Nursing alumni (3) showed very little to no interest in developing foreign language competencies and studying or doing an internship abroad. Mostly because they felt it was of little relevance to the profession.





The majority of interviewees who had completed a degree in primary school teaching (4) was dissatisfied about the amount of English offered in the curriculum. They also felt the curriculum was lacking in knowledge of countries, which is the international competency they need most in their profession.

Opinions of Marketing & Commerce alumni (9) were mixed as far as the level of English is concerned: some found the level too low, others deemed it sufficient, and one alumnus even considered it too high. Surprisingly enough, an alumnus who indicated foreign language competencies were not necessary in his current position still indicated THUAS should offer more English language teaching. Conversely, an alumnus working in an international organization believed the level of English was too high:

“I learned English while studying marketing & commerce. In hindsight I feel the level required was very high. I was advised not to pursue a career in an international organization, but in my experience my level of English is more than sufficient.” 37.6, Personal interview alumnus, 17 december 2012

5.2 The hbo monitor

The HBO Monitor is an annual evaluation of Dutch universities of applied sciences HBO administered among alumni. Its main objective is to gain insights into the employment perspectives alumni and their relation to the competencies they have or have not acquired. The HBO Monitor approaches alumni from all Dutch universities of applied sciences, and as such provides valuable data to validate the afore-mentioned results of alumni.⁶

Which international competencies do alumni need in their current jobs?

Only 13.4 per cent of the alumni state that they do not need any of the international competencies in their jobs. Around one-third of the respondents

⁶ The number of respondents varies for all relevant questions between n=306 and n=938.





report that international academic and professional competencies (34.4 per cent), intercultural competences (31.8 per cent) and foreign language competencies (38.2 per cent) are needed at their workplace. The highest score occurs for interpersonal competencies: 82.6 per cent of the alumni confirm that these competencies are needed, whereas only 13.2 per cent feel that knowledge of countries is relevant for their job.

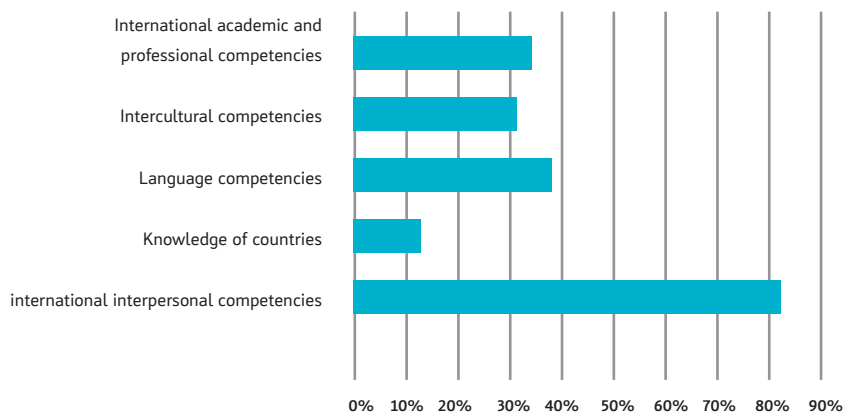


Figure 8: Which of these competencies are needed in the current job? (Based on HBO Monitor)

Additionally, around one-third of the alumni that participated in the HBO Monitor feel that their employer values international academic and professional competencies, intercultural competences and foreign language competencies. Again, for international interpersonal competencies this score is significantly higher (70.6 per cent) and at the same time not more than 12.6 per cent of the alumni think that knowledge of countries are valued by their employer.

Interestingly, besides providing information on the importance of international competencies for job performance, the HBO Monitor data also give insights in the relevance of these skills for acquiring a job and making a career. Here, 33.8 per cent of the respondents think that international competencies were of no importance, 27 per cent feel they were of minor importance. By contrast,





39.3 per cent state that international competencies were of importance or great importance with regard to getting a job or making a career.

Which of these competencies have alumni acquired and developed in their degree work at university?

Asked which of the international competencies they have acquired during their studies, respondents emphasize the acquisition of international interpersonal competencies: 85 per cent confirm that they have acquired or developed this competency during their studies. Not more than 40 per cent are positive about having learned international academic and professional competencies (37.2 per cent), intercultural competencies (36.3 per cent), and foreign language competencies (29.3 per cent). Not more than 15.4 per cent report about the acquisition of knowledge of countries during their studies.

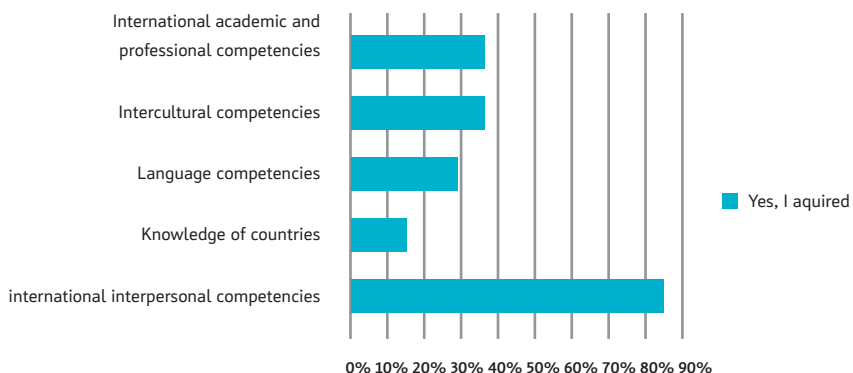


Figure 9: Which of these competencies did you acquire during your HBO degree work? (Based on HBO Monitor)

That programmes of studies are essential in acquiring international competencies is pointed out by the following results: generally not more than 30 per cent of the alumni state that they were able to develop one or more international competencies outside THUAS or after education. The only exception here are international interpersonal competencies, where slightly more respondents (39.8 per cent) confirm to have acquired these beyond their studies.





How could Dutch universities of applied sciences improve their curricula with regard to international competencies?

The HBO monitor allows making statements on possible improvements of the curricula to promote the acquisition of international competencies. For example, alumni were asked which aspect they missed during their studies. At the top rank are the international academic and professional competencies, missed by 36.2 per cent, followed by foreign language competencies (32.8 per cent), and intercultural competences (25.4 per cent). Only 18.8 per cent missed the development of knowledge of countries during their degree and not more than 9.5 per cent think that international interpersonal competencies were missed out.

To acquire international competencies, a large majority of alumni feel that an experience abroad is helpful. Some 10 per cent find a study abroad or a placement abroad not conducive to developing international competencies, whereas 69.4 per cent think that studying abroad, and for placements abroad even 74.3 per cent, is important or very important for the acquisition of international competencies. This can be read as an encouragement for curriculum designers to give more prominence to experiences abroad. A majority of alumni (70 per cent), however, does not agree that a study abroad or a placement abroad should be made compulsory for all students.

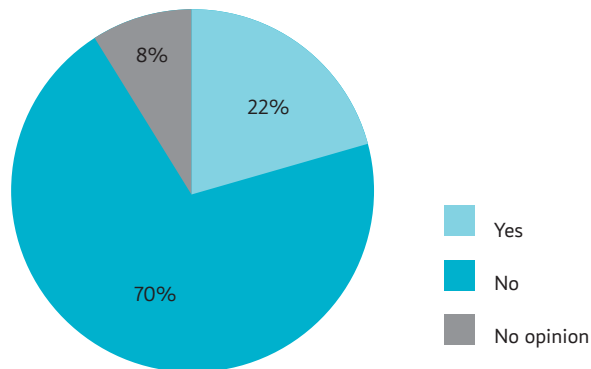


Figure 10: Should a study or internship abroad be made compulsory? (Based on HBO Monitor)





5.3 Validating and enriching the findings - focus groups

The three focus group sessions started with an introduction describing the research and outlining the findings. Thereafter, the participants were asked to discuss the following five questions:

- How can we involve alumni and employers in curriculum internationalization?
- How can we motivate and equip teaching staff for internationalization in higher education.
- How can we get students more interested in expanding their 'global knowledge'.
- How do we stimulate students to show interest in and respect for foreign cultures?
- How can we make adequate use of an international or multicultural classroom.

Based on the three focus group sessions, the following can be concluded: As far as English language competencies are concerned, oral- and listening skills, more specifically the ability to hold a conversation and follow a meeting, proved to be the most important aspect:

“The pace in English meetings is too fast for a beginner. You need to learn how to deal with the language, practice, practice in real life.” (Employer)

The desired approach would be to use English as a medium of instruction. This, however, would not be without implications for teaching staff, who are often considered the weakest link when it comes to English language competencies:

“Language competencies are also very important for teachers. Their level of English needs to be satisfactory, otherwise it conveys the wrong impression to students.” (Lecturer)

When asked about ‘intercultural competencies’, participants considered





empathy, understanding and open mindedness the key aspects by far:

To put it simply, understanding each other, not just in terms of language.”
(Lecturer)

A way to put this in practice is to bring people with different backgrounds and foreign experiences together, to learn from intercultural conflicts, to stimulate students to go abroad and for educational institutions to be of as much assistance as possible when students do:

“I went to Korea on exchange. You need to know what is acceptable and what isn’t: for instance, looking your manager in the eye. If you don’t (know this), you’ll make mistakes and get fired.” (Alumnus)

Participants also indicated that acquiring knowledge of specific countries is not essential in higher professional education, as companies tend to prepare their staff adequately for a stay abroad themselves.

“Companies usually take on the task of preparing their staff for specific countries as they also need to prepare the partner. Soft skills are important, as are language skills. Also important: knowing what’s going on in the world, business acumen, flexibility. In about 20 years, the Netherlands will have played out all their cards. Unless we come up with some creative ideas, in which case we’ll be able to prevent this.” (Employer)

What *is* considered important, however, is instilling students with a sense of global awareness and knowledge of international trends. The recommended approach would be to make use of case studies and best practices, as well as encouraging students to read newspapers and to follow (international) current affairs and (international) politics. Role play activities and guest lectures





are also good ways to expose students to a more global perspective. The teacher / instructor plays an important role here: they should be a source of inspiration for students.

In the eyes of the participants, The Dutch do not score high on academic/ professional competencies on an international level. On the contrary, they will never be able to surpass the Chinese, Koreans, Americans and the population of other growing economies. However, that doesn't imply there is no point in trying to further develop these competences. The recommended approach would be, again, to use best practices and case studies. Students should be made aware of their relatively advanced social and foreign language skills, which gives them a competitive advantage in comparison to other nationalities.

The ability to reflect on one's own behaviour is considered an essential competence and one that already receives a great deal of attention in higher professional education. One needs to be able to put aside one's own frame of reference and understand why another person may react differently.

"Other countries – Germany in particular – have already developed multiple methods to motivate teachers for these kinds of activities. However, the Netherlands very rarely looks at what other countries are doing."

What was evident from all the sessions held is that teachers play a crucial role in acquiring international competencies. They should be stimulated to gain international experience on a regular basis. These experiences should then be exchanged among colleagues. In addition, readily available methods to increase teacher motivation should be explored in more detail.







6 Discussion

6.1 The importance of international competencies for employability

International competencies are needed in the current work environment. Both, alumni and employers have emphasized the importance of such competencies. Interestingly, it seems to have little influence whether the respective work environment is located in the public or in the private sector; in particular foreign language competencies and intercultural competencies are seen as crucial in any job.

This apparent importance of international competencies for employability stands in contrast to two further insights: First of all, as the interviews outline, many alumni do not feel that employers focus on these international competencies in the recruitment process. Here, the findings resemble insights from a previous study indicating that managers do consider intercultural competencies of added value, yet international competencies assessment is not part of the selection process (The British Council, 2013). Secondly, it has been repeatedly stated that employers do not offer on-the-job training regarding international competencies.

One explanation could be, and indeed this has been raised in this study, that employers see competencies such as language skills or intercultural competencies as something that can be assumed and does not need to be explicitly stated or tested during recruitment. In other words, the fact that there is no explicit question on international competencies during a job interview does not necessarily indicate that the respective employers do not look for them; they might simply assess them without referring to them specifically. Further, it must be highlighted that the relevance of international competencies for employability is not limited to recruitment; beyond getting a job, international competencies are conducive to employability as they help to perform the respective occupation successfully (Yorke, 2006).





The second point, the apparent absence of on-the-job training in international competencies, shows how crucial the role of higher education is in this field. As international competencies are unambiguously seen as important, and since there is a strong indication that these competencies are usually not developed in on-the-job training, they need to be developed during education; institutions of higher education, consequently, should consider this by putting emphasis on the acquisition of international competencies as has been argued by others before (Coryell et al., 2012).

6.2 The role of higher education in developing international competencies

What then is it that institutions of higher education can do to promote the acquisition of international competencies? To start with the reflections of alumni and employers on the current policies: as the survey data uncover, international alumni are more positive about the international competencies they have acquired than Dutch students. Whether this is a matter of different perceptions or in fact reflects that internationals simply acquire more of these competencies might be an interesting subject for further study. Whether alumni felt to have acquired international competencies during their studies at THUAS also depends on the respective study program; again, a finding that encourages follow-up studies into the specifics of different study programs.

It is interesting that employers are less positive than alumni when asked about whether they feel that higher education has helped students to develop international competencies. Even though the perceptions differ between alumni and employers, international and Dutch respondents, the data clearly point out that there is room for improvement in terms of the acquisition of international competencies in higher education.

As the findings are univocal when it comes to the relevance of foreign language competencies, it can be important to provide specific language electives next to a mandatory education in English in higher education. Moreover, two elements were mentioned prominently across all methods, namely promoting the acquisition of intercultural competencies as well as encouraging and facilitating a foreign experience. Similar studies have pointed





to these competencies as well. Asked about their recommendations for curricula in higher education, the human resource managers studied by The British Council (2013) pointed prominently to the importance of mastering foreign languages and of international (research) partnerships.

Although employers generally consider an international experience, such as an internship or study abroad or international work experience, as an indicator of intercultural competencies, the findings do not present a clear picture on whether an international study or work experience should be made a compulsory part of the curriculum. A promising policy could be to make such an international experience more prominent in the curricula, without making it a compulsory element.

The acquisition of international competencies does not only depend on internationalized curricula. As Leask (2013) states, teaching staff must also be trained accordingly. This aspect was also prominent in this study. In particular, the focus groups have shown that motivation and skills of lecturers play a crucial role in terms of the success of internationalization policies; a key point that must form part of a coherent internationalization approach for institutions of higher education.

Internationalization is a means to an end, not an objective on its own. The objective, acquiring international competencies, must be part of the regular process of curriculum-design, which starts with a complicated and extensive process of making international competencies an integral part of existing learning outcomes rather than adding separate international learning outcomes. Consecutively, an iterative course stipulates how the specific competencies should be acquired.





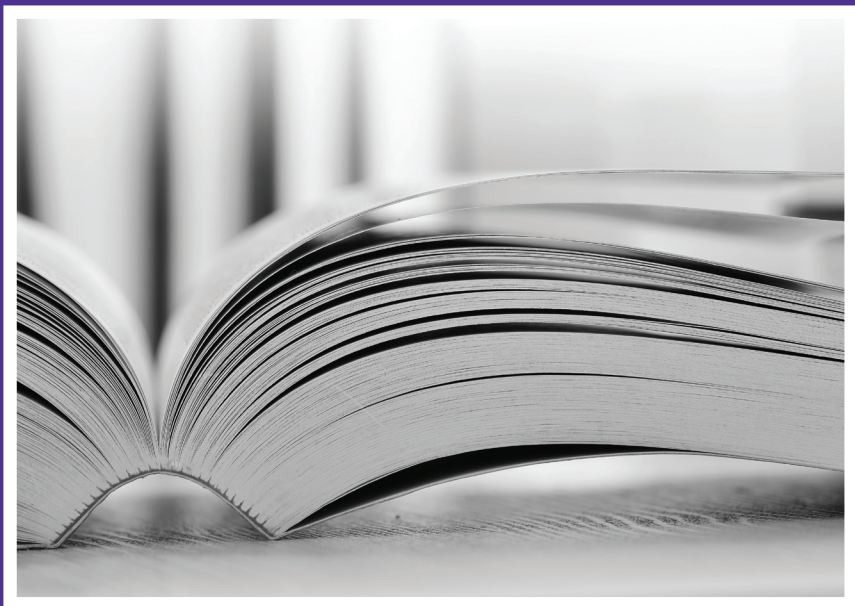


7 Conclusion and recommendations

Employers value international experience in prospective employees, and rightly so: many students, who go abroad gain self-confidence, self-reliance, creativity and more knowledge and understanding of other people. If higher education institutes wish to take internationalization seriously, however, much more needs to be done for many more students. In this publication some indications are given of what that would entail. Deardorff (2011), Deardorff et al. (2012), Childress (2010), Leask (2009, 2013) and Walenkamp (2013) provide substantial material to develop a comprehensive internationalization policy and indicate the various ways in which to implement such a policy plan, including support of the leadership, proving adequate funding and organizational backing, engaging, facilitating and developing an ever increasing number of staff members, internationalizing learning outcomes and innovating curricula, developing new and goal-oriented ways of teaching and learning, enhancing the effectiveness of study and internships abroad, as well as of internationalization at home, profiting from both multinational and multi-ethnic student groups, by better preparation and guidance through competent lecturers, recruiting the right mix of foreign students with the required background and assisting them in what is their international experience, developing ways of assessing the attainment of international competencies and indeed increasing the number of lecturers and students with international experience.

This study looked at the needs and wishes of alumni and employers in quite general terms. Further research needs to be done into the specific requirements of international competencies for each and every course in our universities and translating them in realistic and measurable learning outcomes. May this publication be a useful starting point for such investigations







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9 Appendices

Interview guide

Alumni Interview

Organisation:

Name:

Position within company:

Date interview:

Short description company:

1. How long have you been working at this company?
2. Can you briefly describe your current position?
3. How long have you had your current position? Can you tell us something about your career progression?
4. What degree did you take at THUAS? What year did you graduate?
5. Can you indicate the extent to which your company is or could be internationally active (investments, import, export, partnerships)? Are they planning on becoming internationally active?
6. How would you define 'international competencies'?
7. Our definition of 'international competencies' includes:
 - I international professional and academic competencies
 - II intercultural competencies
 - III foreign language competencies
 - IV knowledge of countries
 - V interpersonal competencies
8. Which of these competencies did you acquire/develop as part of your degree at THUAS? Which have you needed at your current job? Which haven't you? Which do you feel are underdeveloped?
9. Which of these international competencies did you acquire/develop outside THUAS or after graduation? Where and how?





10. To what extent does your employer value or require international competencies?
11. In your opinion, are there international competencies that your employer should value and make use of, but doesn't?
12. When hiring new staff, does your employer assess whether a candidate sufficiently possesses international competencies? If so, which ones? Did it play a role in your own job interview?
13. Can you indicate how important your company believes international competencies to be in comparison to other (more generic) competencies.
14. Does your company have HR guidelines/policy regarding international competencies?
15. Does your company offer professional training courses aimed at developing international competencies? If so, which? If not, why not?
16. To what extent do you consider internship or study abroad important for the development of international competencies?
17. Do you think THUAS should make internship or study abroad a mandatory part of the curriculum?
18. Do you have any suggestions for the THUAS curriculum in terms of international competencies?



**We have the following suggestions;
which ones would appeal to you and why?**

1. Knowledge of countries
2. Course on Dutch culture
3. Knowledge of other cultures
4. International skills training courses: listening, observation techniques, analytical skills, relating skills, self-awareness and reflection and planning.
5. Role-plays intercultural confrontations
6. Preparing for trade missions
7. Foreign language skills: French, public speaking, presentations, essay writing, business communication, vocabulary, CV and letter writing
8. International trade (incoterms)
9. Facilitating and stimulating internship or study abroad.



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10. Knowing where to find rules and legislation
 11. Basic understanding of European legislation
 12. Developing interpersonal competencies (based on an analysis of strengths and weaknesses.
 13. Conducting Business abroad. PISA training courses (preparation for Internships and Study Abroad)
 14. Systematic and THUAS-guided contact with foreign students
 15. Guest lecturers / alumni
 16. International job market
 17. Projects in multicultural communities / Chinatown
 18. International entrepreneurship
 19. Who in your company is responsible for HR policy and enforcement?
Could you bring me in contact with them?
 20. Do you have any further questions or comments?

Employer interview



Organisation:
Name:
Position within company:
Date interview:
Short description company:

1. Do you employ recent graduates from Universities of Applied Sciences?
Have you employed them in the past?
2. What generic attitude, knowledge and skills (competencies) do you require in a new employee?
3. How would you define 'international competencies'?
4. Our definition of 'international competencies' includes:
 - I international professional and academic competencies
 - II intercultural competencies
 - III foreign language competencies
 - IV knowledge of countries
 - V interpersonal competenciesWhich of these do you consider important in an employee?





5. When hiring new staff, do you assess whether a candidate sufficiently possesses international competencies? If so, which ones?
6. Can you indicate how important you believe international competencies to be in comparison to other (more generic) competencies?
7. Does your company have HR guidelines/policy regarding international competencies?
8. Does your company offer professional training courses aimed at developing international competencies? If so, which? If not, why not?
9. Do you believe graduates of Universities of Applied Sciences to be sufficiently equipped with international competencies? If not, which ones are they lacking?





Online survey

Dear respondent,

With this research we address the question: What are the wishes and demands of employers and alumni with regard to international competencies? Your wishes and demands are important for adjustments of our curricula. Based on the results, the Hague University of Applied Sciences can get a better understanding of what is needed in the working environment and so improve the employability of its students.

The results of this study will be anonymized and treated strictly confidentially.

1. I...
 - a. ...work in the public sector.
 - b. ...work in the private sector.
 - c. ...am an entrepreneur/self-employed.
 - d. Other:
2. Your organization's activities are...
 - a. ...nationally oriented.
 - b. ...nationally and internationally oriented.
 - c. ...internationally oriented.
 - d. Other:
 - e. I do not know.
3. Your organization is a...
 - a. ...large enterprise (>250 fte).
 - b. ...medium-sized enterprise (50-250 fte).
 - c. ...small enterprise (10-49 fte).
 - d. ...micro enterprise (<10 fte).
 - e. I do not know.
4. Could you describe the function that you currently hold:
5. Have you been educated at The Hague University of Applied Sciences?
 - a. Yes, I am an alumnus from THUAS.
 - b. Not, but I have been educated at another 'HBO' institution.
 - c. No, I have an education other than 'HBO'.





6. What is the year of your graduation?
7. At which Academy did you study at THUAS?
8. Could you briefly describe your notion of international competencies?

We define the following as international competencies:

- International academic and professional competencies (How education is designed in other countries; How a subject matter is performed in other countries).
 - Intercultural competencies (How do behave properly from the viewpoint of other cultures and avoid intercultural conflicts).
 - Language competencies (Understanding and using a foreign language).
 - Knowledge of foreign country (for example habits, practices and legislation).
 - Personal and social competencies(for example taking initiative, being flexible and emphatic).
9. How important do you consider the five international competencies for your work/organization?
 - a. I consider international academic and professional competencies...(very important/important/rather important/rather unimportant/very unimportant).
 - b. I consider intercultural competencies...(very important/important/rather important/rather unimportant/very unimportant).
 - c. I consider language competencies...(very important/important/rather important/rather unimportant/very unimportant).
 - d. I consider country knowledge...(very important/important/rather important/rather unimportant/very unimportant).
 - e. I consider international personal and social competencies...(very important/important/rather important/rather unimportant/very unimportant).
 10. Could you indicate how important you consider these international competencies in relation to other competencies?
 - a. More important than other competencies.
 - b. Equally important as other competencies.
 - c. Less important than other competencies.





11. Does your organization offer trainings/seminars for employees on the field of international competencies?
 - a. Yes.
 - b. No.
 - c. I do not know.
12. Could you describe the sort of trainings/seminars your organization offers on the field of international competencies?
13. Based on your experience in the working environment, do you think 'HBO' graduates have acquired international competencies during their education?
 - a. I think 'HBO' graduates have acquired international academic and professional competencies...(to a very large extent/to a large extent/to a sufficient extent/to an insufficient extent).
 - b. I think 'HBO' graduates have acquired intercultural competencies...(to a very large extent/to a large extent/to a sufficient extent/to an insufficient extent).
 - c. I think 'HBO' graduates have acquired language competencies...(to a very large extent/to a large extent/to a sufficient extent/to an insufficient extent).
 - d. I think 'HBO' graduates have acquired knowledge of foreign countries...(to a very large extent/to a large extent/to a sufficient extent/to an insufficient extent).
 - e. I think 'HBO' graduates have acquired personal and social competencies...(to a very large extent/to a large extent/to a sufficient extent/to an insufficient extent).
14. Which international competencies do you consider important for finding a job and/or pursuing a professional career?
15. Which of these competencies do you think graduates at THUAS have to a (at least) sufficient degree?
16. And which of them do graduates not have to a sufficient degree?
17. Would you like to share suggestions for the adjustment of THUAS curricula in terms of international competencies?
18. There are several ideas on how to improve the education with regard to international competencies; which of these aspects do you consider important?
 - a. Knowledge of certain countries (Important/Not important)





- b. Knowledge of other cultures (Important/Not important)
 - c. Training in international skills: listening, observing, analyzing, comprehending, reflecting and planning (Important/Not important)
 - d. Role playing intercultural confrontations (Important/Not important)
 - e. Preparing int. trade/business missions (Important/Not important)
 - f. Language competencies (Important/Not important)
 - g. Facilitating and/or encouraging of studies/internships abroad (Important/Not important)
 - h. Making business abroad (Important/Not important)
19. Which language(s) do you consider of particular importance?
- a. English (Yes/No)
 - b. French (Yes/No)
 - c. German (Yes/No)
 - d. Spanish (Yes/No)
 - e. Italian (Yes/No)
 - f. Other:
20. Do you have questions or would you like to share further suggestions?





Questions HBO monitor

International competencies comprise:

- a. international professional and academic competencies
- b. intercultural competencies
- c. language competencies
- d. knowledge of foreign countries
- e. personal and social competencies.

1. Which of these five competencies did you acquire during your education at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (hereafter THUAS)? (more than one answer possible)

- ☐ international professional and academic competencies
- ☐ intercultural competencies
- ☐ language competencies
- ☐ knowledge of foreign countries
- ☐ personal and social competencies
- ☐ none of the above

2. Which of them have you needed or do you need in your present occupation? (more than one answer possible)

- ☐ international professional and academic competencies
- ☐ intercultural competencies
- ☐ language competencies
- ☐ knowledge of foreign countries
- ☐ personal and social competencies
- ☐ none of the above

3. Which international competencies do you miss and would you have liked to have acquired? (more than one answer possible)

- ☐ international professional and academic competencies
- ☐ intercultural competencies
- ☐ language competencies
- ☐ knowledge of foreign countries
- ☐ personal and social competencies
- ☐ none of the above





4. Which of the international competencies have you acquired outside your studies at THUAS or after graduation? (more than one answer possible)
 - ☐ international professional and academic competencies
 - ☐ intercultural competencies
 - ☐ language competencies
 - ☐ knowledge of foreign countries
 - ☐ personal and social competencies
 - ☐ none of the above
5. Could you indicate the importance of international competencies for you to get a job and pursue your career?
 - ☐ very important
 - ☐ important
 - ☐ little important
 - ☐ not important at all
6. To what extent do you consider a study abroad important for acquiring international competencies?
 - ☐ very important
 - ☐ important
 - ☐ little important
 - ☐ not important at all
7. To what extent do you consider a placement abroad important for acquiring international competencies?
 - ☐ very important
 - ☐ important
 - ☐ little important
 - ☐ not important at all
8. Could you please indicate the study programme you followed at THUAS?
9. Do you have advice or suggestions to make to The Hague University of Applied Sciences with regard to international competencies (e.g. concerning internationalising the curriculum, international classroom, study or internship abroad, a compulsory second language)?

