
GLOBAL SKILLS: ARTICULATING THE INTERNATIONAL STUDIES SKILLSET AND ITS VALUE

*Natassia Bell, Anna Branford, Natasha Karner,
Julian CH Lee, Madeline McGarvey, and Kaye
Quek*

RMIT University

While the popularity of international studies as a discipline reflects the attractiveness of the field of study and its utility in an age of globalization, students of international studies can, like many social science and humanities students, struggle to articulate the suite of skills and competencies that they have developed during their tertiary level studies. Although concepts such as “soft skills,” “enterprise skills,” and “21st-century skills” have been of use, we argue that “global skills” as outlined by Douglas Bourn is a more comprehensive articulation of the international studies skill and competency set. In this collaborative article, we 1) describe the field of international studies and its virtues; 2) outline the problem of art students’ difficulty in articulating their skillset and professional value; 3) introduce Bourn’s concept of “global skills”; 4) contribute to the concept of “global skills” by elaborating on the need for critical self-reflection of one’s subject position and by outlining the value of systems thinking; 5) provide a reflective case study that illustrates how the global skills and the international studies skillset was highly valuable for one graduate’s cross-cultural engagement; and then conclude with final remarks on the value of international studies.

Keywords: *International Studies, Humanities, Global Skills, Employability, and Careers.*

Introduction

The field of international studies is one of considerable popularity for university students. It is an interdisciplinary field in the humanities and social sciences that holds an understandable attraction to students who are interested in world affairs. This includes those students who wish to make a positive contribution to the many

and diverse issues they read and hear about, and which impact their own lives and the lives of others near and far. However, like many students and graduates of the arts, humanities, and social sciences, those in international studies have sometimes found it difficult to be able to articulate the skillset they have developed during their degree. From the perspective of a career educator (as one of this article's authors is), the ability to articulate one's skill set is significant not only in terms of conveying the value of that skill set to potential employers, crucial though that is. It is also a matter of the student's or graduate's capacity to perceive their own professional identity and the unique and valuable assets they have to draw on as they consider opportunities, navigate challenges, and develop and evolve in their careers.

This collaboratively authored article highlights the personal and professional value of international studies and also commends the concept of "global skills" as outlined especially by Douglas Bourn as relevant to students and graduates of international studies. We believe that enabling students and graduates of international studies to be able to explicitly express their competencies will be of considerable value to them in their career journey, as well as enable them to personally appreciate what they have accomplished through their studies.

Section I briefly discusses international studies as a field of study and some of its virtues; Section II outlines the "problem" of humanities and social science students' common inability to appreciate their career-relevant skillset; Section III introduces Bourn's "global skills" framework; Section IV considers some of the potentially problematic elements of the concept of global citizenship which constitutes Bourn's global skills and advocate for a critical self-awareness of positionality and the value of systems thinking, and Section V looks at a case study of how one of the present authors undertook a thesis in international studies *in situ* in Indonesia and effectively made use of the international studies skillset.

I: International Studies

A degree in international studies can be regarded both as a "generalist" degree and yet also as a specialized degree. It is general in the sense that unlike some other degrees where there is a clear imagined career destination – such as if one were to study journalism, podiatry, law, or accountancy – the avenues for future work that international studies make possible is broad and seemingly unspecific. As alluded to in the previous section, this breadth and non-specificity can make the skillset developed in international studies seem diffuse and hard to articulate, and therefore be undervalued, even by students of international studies – a situation that this article addresses.

However, international studies can also be viewed as a specialized degree,¹ and seeing it as such is important to affirming its value. The fields of international

1 Des Cahill, "Celebrating international studies at RMIT: The First Ten Years," *Here Be Dragons* 7, 2020, 32.

studies and global studies – which this article will treat as synonymous² – are inherently interdisciplinary,³ and at some universities, subjects that contribute to an international studies degree are a bricolage of existing courses from other disciplines including (but not limited to) history, anthropology, political science, and gender studies. This may contribute to a sense that international studies is a diffuse and, in a sense, “undisciplined” science - an issue that is revisited in Section IV. But the key to international studies is the frame of reference it deploys. Whereas psychology’s frame is the psyche (of ostensibly the individual), and sociology’s frame is a society, international studies of course has an international and global frame of reference. This frame of reference is one that requires the cultivation of ways of thinking and cognitive dispositions that enable international studies students and scholars to competently grapple with the issues they have at hand.

The international or global frame requires an understanding that governments, policies, and laws can differ profoundly between countries, and that each country will have different relationships and histories with other countries, and these relationships can shift again depending on which political party is in power. And then, requiring perhaps an even greater level of sophistication is the appreciation of culture and cultural difference. Differences in worldviews, values, and cosmologies can be considerable and can be difficult to fully appreciate. However, an appreciation of such differences can just be the start, because a further layer of nuanced understanding is required to appreciate the fact that individuals from a given society rarely embody all the traits associated with the culture of that society.⁴

Even still, encounters with these differences can challenge deeply held beliefs about right and wrong, and even put into question things that seemed true in ways that, without the cross-cultural encounter, would never have occurred to a person that they could be put into question. Issues of cultural relativism can be difficult to navigate,⁵ even for scholars with decades of cross-cultural experience. And then, overlaid upon this is the issue of linguistic difference and the fact that foreign language competence is important in developing sophisticated insight into another society.

Skills developed through the study of the above may well be conceptualized as “soft skills,” a term that speaks to their important capacities for adaptability

2 The authors are aware that some people will regard these fields as different. However, they are related and often treated as essentially the same fields by others.

3 Eve Darian-Smith and Philip C. McCarty, *The Global Turn: Theories, Research Designs, and Methods for Global Studies* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

4 As noted by Sjoerd Beugelsdijk and Chris Welzel, “Usually, it is impossible to replicate dimensions of cultural variation found at the aggregate level *across* countries in the same shape at the individual level *within* countries.” Sjoerd Beugelsdijk and Chris Welzel, “Dimensions and Dynamics of National Culture: Synthesizing Hofstede With Inglehart,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 49, no. 10 (2018): 1498.

5 Michael F. Brown, “Cultural Relativism 2.0,” *Current Anthropology* 49, no. 3 (2008): 363-383.

and flexibility across divergent careers, situations, and applications. However, the quality of “softness” can also seem to signify a certain amorphousness, a lack of tangibility, and an absence of rigor and strength. This second set of associations would misrepresent the value, and even the nature, of the international or global frame acquired through study, which is a complex, disciplined mindset that is both rigorous and informed. Another challenging aspect of its seeming “softness” is that it can be regarded as “unfixed”, though not because it lacks form, but rather because it is in a state of constant engagement and evolution. It even has aspects that are meaningfully characterized as modes of imagination (as in Orgad’s assertion that “global imagination is cultivated by a process of the ongoing construction of views, images, understanding, desires, and scripts about the world”).⁶ Compounding all of these challenges is the peculiar reality that these skills and capabilities, however strategically acquired and cultivated, may not be easily articulated or even fully perceived by those who can claim them among their professional assets. We consider this phenomenon in the Graduate Case Study in section V of this article.

Although the skills discussed in this article can sometimes be considered as nice-to-have rather than essential, we maintain that their utility cannot be seen as inferior to so-called “hard skills.” The evidence for this is to be found in the many failed ventures and projects that floundered not because the engineering blueprints were faulty, or the objectives ignoble, or technology inadequate. Rather, the failures speak directly to the need for a better informed and more nuanced engagement with the local context and the array of stakeholders needed to make a success of it⁷ – an issue also revisited in Section IV. Thus, although an international studies degree can seem general in the sense that the skillset is of use to an array of endeavors and areas of work, it is also specialized because the higher-order understanding and competence developed through international studies are focused on a real and important set of competencies.

And yet, as with other humanities and social science students and graduates, articulating this skillset for international studies students can be and has been, challenging. Although concepts such as “soft skills,” “enterprise skills” and “21st-century skills” have been important in filling that breach, students in fields like that of international studies have, as we will now see, sometimes struggled to understand the job and career-relevance of the skills they have developed.

II: Arts, Humanities and the Social Sciences: The Career (Dis)Connect

A 2013 study supported by the Australian Government’s Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) revealed that Bachelor of Arts (BA) graduates across Australia do

6 Orgad cited in Bourn, *Understanding Global Skills for 21st Century Professions*, 116.

7 Jill Anne Chouinard and Rodney Hopson, “A Critical Exploration of Culture in International Development,” *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* 30, no. 3 (2016): 248-276.

not appreciate their skillset and harbor concerns about their employability.⁸ Led by researchers at the University of Adelaide, the study gathered insight on the issue of BA graduates' employability from the perspective of the graduates themselves as well as the academics that taught them, and the companies that employ them. Among the discipline areas covered in the study were international studies, politics, history, and international relations, thus the report's findings are highly relevant to this article's discussion of interdisciplinary field international studies.

A significant finding of the study is that while BA degrees are designed to equip graduates with highly desirable skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication, the graduates themselves are not aware of these skills (or not adequately appreciative of them) and fail to highlight them to potential employers. Instead, the participating graduates in the study believed that employers prefer graduates of vocational disciplines whose training explicitly aligns with the needs of certain industries. The comparison was commonly drawn between BA graduates and engineers.

The study focussed explicitly on the perceived employability of individuals who possess an undergraduate qualification in the arts and, while it notes that an undergraduate qualification in the arts should not be just viewed as a "job ticket,"⁹ students, academics, and employers all noted that there are ways to address employability issues for BA graduates. The study sought recommendations from the three stakeholders – the students, their teachers, and their potential future employers - with a view as to understanding how best to enhance a Bachelor of Arts graduate's chances of attaining employment post-graduation. The recommendations include explicitly defining and assessing key graduate skills, providing training in CV writing and interview presentation, and democratizing professional practice opportunities, among others.

The employers surveyed in this study hail from the top three employer sectors of BA graduates: educational institutions, government departments, and retail or wholesale businesses. This list from which the study draws¹⁰ represents a variety of sectors that do not necessarily require employees to possess postgraduate qualifications. While some areas of work in international studies require postgraduate qualifications, and indeed this study indicates that a subset of BA graduates pursues graduate studies, this study seeks to address the relative employability of BA graduates based on the skills learned in their undergraduate qualification.

As the study clearly shows, individuals with a BA qualification possess the skills desired by their top three employer sectors and can obtain employment in these sectors without a postgraduate qualification. Importantly, this study highlights the disconnect between this reality and the students' perceived ability

8 Nick Harvey and Mosharefa Shahjahan, *Employability of Bachelor of Arts graduates*, report for the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, Canberra, 2013.

9 *Ibid.*, 135.

10 *Ibid.*, 204-205.

to obtain employment and, indeed, their employability in general. The study seeks to address the perceived unemployability of BA graduates by addressing some of their, and their potential employers', key concerns: namely skills recognition, skills demonstration, and performance in recruitment processes. It might be worth noting here that the notion that students should "study something else" was *not* one of the recommendations, indicating that the issue is not so much the arts, humanities, and social sciences, but how the degree and its graduates fit into the labor market or how they can articulate their relevance.

To understand how these recommendations might address the issue of BA graduate employability, it is first important to understand what the "issue" in fact is. The OLT study asserted that the term "employability" is loaded, inconsistently defined, and ever evolving. For this study, the researchers defined "employability" as:

*achieving and demonstrating appropriate knowledge, skills, and attributes to obtain initial employment, maintain employment, and move to new employment if required.*¹¹

A simple way to measure the employability of BA graduates is to consider the proportion of graduates employed. When doing this, the OLT study found that 77% of the participating BA graduates were employed at the time of the study.¹² This proportion of workforce participation paints a picture of a highly employable degree. Why, then, is the employability of graduates of degrees such as international studies periodically up for debate? The way graduate employment outcomes are reported can have a dramatic impact on how employable graduates from various disciplines look on paper. Two commonly used metrics are the proportion of full-time engagement among a cohort and the time elapsed between graduating and attaining full-time employment.^{13,14}

If the OLT study looked only at the proportion of graduates *full-time* employed, that 77 drops to just over 50%.¹⁵ Furthermore, the study neatly displays the issue of time: the longer after graduation one measures workforce participation, the greater the percentage of the cohort one finds engaged in full-time work.¹⁶ This points to

11 Harvey and Shahjahan, "Employability of Bachelor of Arts graduates", 21.

12 Ibid., 70.

13 Matti E. Lindberg, "At the Frontier of Graduate Surveys – Assessing participation and employability of graduates with master's degree in nine European countries," *Higher Education* 53 (2007): 623-644.

14 Alison Pennington and Jim Stanford, "The Future of Work for Australian Graduates: The Changing Landscape of Employment Transitions in Australia," The Australia Institute Centre For Future Work, Canberra, 2019, https://www.futurework.org.au/the_future_of_work_for_australian_graduates.

15 Ibid.

16 Harvey and Shahjahan, "Employability of Bachelor of Arts graduates," 71-72.

an important point: if a metric for employability is regarded as related to achieving full-time employment in the shortest possible amount of time post-graduation, BA graduates can sometimes not fare well. For a term with diverse definitions, discussions of employability can paint an unduly bleak picture for BA graduates. We believe this ignores the individual and social benefits of part-time and casual engagements, and the myriad reasons why a graduate might initially take these roles. It also says nothing of job satisfaction. Acknowledging these deficits in the concept of “employed” and “employable” acknowledges the changing world of work and the reality that full-time roles may not be available, cyclical, or, indeed, may not be initially desirable for many individuals.

The OLT study’s discussion of employability for BA graduates highlights an important variable: one’s ability to achieve and demonstrate the appropriate skills to attain, maintain, and change employment. Employers surveyed noted that, specifically, recruitment choices are made based on a candidate’s “fit for the role” but that, more broadly, there are several key skills that they desire in a candidate. The top desired skills are, among others: (1) oral and written communication skills, (2) problem-solving skills, and (3) teamwork¹⁷

Ideally, candidates would be able to articulate and demonstrate these skills to employers by undertaking work-integrated learning, having previous work experience, and studying two majors to enhance subject-matter knowledge.¹⁸ However, while the graduates were able to identify in themselves the same key skills that employers desire, they believed that the best way to demonstrate their employability is by undertaking further study, taking practical classes on employment provision, and integrating the subjects of their art with those from technical disciplines.¹⁹ This indicates that graduates (and probably their teachers alike), while aware of their skills, might be under-valuing them, and are not able to demonstrate them effectively to employers. This paper seeks to contribute directly to this problem.

The OLT study demonstrated what is quickly becoming common knowledge: that employers are looking for graduates with what has been often termed “soft skills.” Generalist degrees, such as that of international studies, are where these skills are taught in abundance. Soft skills have undergone several incarnations in recent times, with “enterprise skills,” “employability skills,” and “21st-century skills” gaining popularity as concepts that cover similar ground to soft skills. Philip Hanlon, the President of Dartmouth, advocates a rebranding of soft skills to “power skills” to demonstrate their true potential.²⁰ Semantics aside, soft skills are highly demanded.

While concepts such as enterprise skills and 21st-century skills have sought to outline more clearly the career-relevance of skills, some of which were captured

17 Harvey and Shahjahan, “Employability of Bachelor of Arts graduates,” 144.

18 *Ibid.*, 156.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Anant Agarwal, “Data Reveals Why the ‘Soft’ in ‘Soft Skills’ is a Major Misnomer,” *Forbes*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anantagarwal/2018/10/02/data-reveals-why-the-soft-in-soft-skills-is-a-major-misnomer/#7598c6446f7b>.

previously as “soft skills,” there has emerged another concept that captures even better the skillset cultivated during an international studies degree. In Section III, this article will present Douglas Bourn’s concept of “global skills” as a fitting articulation of the skillset of students in international studies degrees. Bourn’s work on global skills has the potential of enabling students and international studies teachers to understand and frame their competencies in more career-relevant ways and gain a better appreciation for an important skillset which is also easy for a student to take for granted and under-appreciated. While this articulation is particularly useful for students of international studies, it is not limited to them. Indeed, according to Oxford University, global skills are becoming “essential” for individuals and groups to have meaningful and productive engagement in schools, workplaces, and society in general.²¹ By undertaking a degree focused on developing expertise in global skills, BA graduates, and international studies students, in particular, are well equipped to succeed and serve in an increasingly globalized society. And it is to these global skills, and what constitutes them, that we now turn.

III: Global Skills

The use of terms such as “21st-century skills” or “soft skills” are often prescribed as competencies that can be effectively applied in a contemporary professional setting. However, globalization is not just economic; it has social, cultural, and political dimensions as well. Graduates are living in a world that requires them to meaningfully engage with the world around them. As Douglas Bourn argues, there is now a need to accurately locate skills needed “within the context of globalization.”²² Although other authors have discussed the concept of “global skills”, Bourn has gone furthest in articulating and promoting the term in recent years.²³

Bourn’s development of the concept and framework of “global skills” relies on the acknowledgment not only of the changing world of work, but the different economic, social, cultural, environmental, and technological phenomena that are interacting with one another. As global skills can acknowledge these interdependent global forces, they equip students with a broader awareness of what globalization entails and how they might respond to it. In the context of our discussion of the utility of global skills as a conceptual framework for articulating the competencies of international studies graduates, Bourn presents a framework for this in Chapter 6 of *Understanding Global Skills for 21st Century Professions*. The seven key abilities he describes as constituting global skills are:

21 Oxford University Press, “Global Skills: Creating Empowered 21st Century Citizens,” *Oxford University*, (2019): 6.

22 Douglas Bourn, *Understanding Global Skills for 21st Century Professions* (Switzerland: MacMillan Palgrave, 2018), 11

23 See Zlatica Kraljevic, *Borderless Leadership: Global Skills for Personal and Business Success*, (Milton: CRC Press, 2018).

- Ability to see the connections between what is happening in your community and the communities of people elsewhere in the world.
- Recognition of what it means to live and work in a global society, and of the value of having a broad global outlook which respects, listens to, and values perspectives other than one's own.
- Ability to understand the impact of global forces on one's life and the lives of other people, and what this means in terms of a sense of place in the world.
- Understanding the value of ICT (Information Communications Technology] and how best to use it, in a way that is self-reflective and critical, that questions data and information.
- Openness to a continuous process of self-reflection, critical dialogue, and questioning one's assumptions about the world.
- Ability to work with others who may have different viewpoints and perspectives, being prepared to change one's opinions as a result of working with others, and seeking cooperative and participatory ways of working.
- Confidence, belief, and willingness to seek a more just and sustainable world.²⁴

The present article cannot undertake the detailed elaboration of these traits that Bourn does in his book. However, it is likely that many international studies students, despite having accrued the abilities above explicitly and implicitly through their studies, would not realize that the above are valued by employers.

The concept of "global skills" is an advance beyond technical competencies or a code of conduct to be applied in a meeting room or workplace, although they are vital there too. They encompass "social forms of interaction" and the "ability to understand and make sense of the world around us."²⁵ As global skills embrace technical, interdisciplinary, and social skills, they essentially address more than just the "needs of employment" and address "all aspects of society."²⁶ Thus, not only will graduates be required to work under conditions created by globalization, but they will also need *to live* in and with those conditions. The incorporation of both *working and living* reinforces the need to understand one's role and position in the global environment.

Due to its emphasis on globalization, the development of global skills for international studies students and graduates is underpinned by a "global outlook." As students are encouraged to envision the world as a network of symbiotic relationships, consisting of people and practices in other contexts and locations, they adopt an approach to learning that seeks to understand the viewpoints of others and how they interpret their realities. Further, as international studies students who are better able to understand "what is happening in the world", they can consider their role and contribution within it, and indeed the appropriate role of their organization

24 Bourn, *Understanding Global Skills for 21st Century Professions*, 124-125.

25 *Ibid.*, 2.

26 *Ibid.*

of employment.²⁷ A result of this reflection can be the development of a sense of global responsibility or “global citizenship.” Crucially, this develops the ability to explore the complexities of the world and to see oneself as a member of a global society. As graduates encounter issues of social justice, equity, and environmental challenges,²⁸ they may well consider their wellbeing but can consider the wellbeing of their community (in whatever way they wish to define this), communities in other areas of the world, and global wellbeing for generations now and into the future.

It follows then that what are considered necessary contemporary skills should no longer be measured against their “efficiency” in some form, but rather, how graduates “make sense” of the world.²⁹ International studies students and graduates become active participants in the experiences they encounter, can identify some of the broader processes at play, and reflect upon how a situation came into being. Drawing from Ulrich Beck, Bourn notes that global skills are not just *what* people learn, but *how* and *where* they learn too. To this point, Bourn argues that global skills rely on a shift “beyond interculturalism” and mere exposure to other cultures. By practically engaging with and reflecting upon intercultural experiences, students who develop global skills, which would include international studies students, can recognize that “cultural norms are not generic and context matters.”³⁰ Awareness of different beliefs, experiences, and perspectives, and identifying how these have been shaped by historical, cultural, or socioeconomic factors, are needed to contribute to authentic interactions. Developing the skills to engage with such diversity, such as the “unfamiliar” or the “other,” also positions the individual in the exchange and forces them to consider their role and contribution to the world. This process of self-reflection ensures that encounters with others are meaningful and equips graduates with the skills to collaborate well in diverse teams and environments.

As they reflect and challenge their knowledge, individuals who have developed global skills can develop and employ critical thinking. The significance of critical thinking as a global skill is amplified as technological advances driven by globalization begin to rely on new tools for communicating and sharing information - such as the Internet or social media platforms. Familiarity with ICT may be a requirement for most jobs in the contemporary world but utilizing such tools responsibly and ethically involves more than competency. Rather than focusing on “how” to use such tools, Bourn emphasizes that a significant consideration emerges on “how best” we might use them.³¹ By utilizing critical thinking, those competent in global skills can make assessments about the significance of digital tools, and ask questions about how and why we use them; what their effect is as a mode of communication; how are narratives constructed and framed; and how information may be received and what responsibility the author/user has in that process. Further,

27 Bourn, *Understanding Global Skills for 21st Century Professions*, 190.

28 *Ibid.*, 290.

29 *Ibid.*, 18.

30 *Ibid.*, 146.

31 *Ibid.*, 127.

when this process is guided by a sense of global justice, those who possess global skills can understand an issue in both its local and international contexts, and to appreciate the diversity of stakeholders who need to be engaged when addressing that issue.

Bourn's global skills uphold the values of global justice, which will align well with many international studies students. Global skills are not only set within a globalized world; they address the impact of global processes on people and societies. They rely on reflection, introspection, awareness of others, and acknowledgment of one's positionality. These are important regardless of whether the decisions under deliberation are focused on the self or one's place of work. Underpinning these skills is a "sense of visioning" on how to achieve a "more just and sustainable world."³² As students consider how to improve quality of life, their "ability to see" connections between the local and the global allow for a wide lens view of world issues. Ideally, this empowers graduates to effectively engage in society and feel confident about creating positive change.³³ Because it is the case that the only constant thing in life is change and that change is necessary in any sphere, from business to politics, and society, the next section tackles how international studies students and graduates can understand their place as an agent of change

IV: Global Citizenship, Positionality, and Systems Thinking

Understanding change and seeking to influence change positively in any organization requires a sophisticated understanding of the wider context. This in turn requires analytical tools to facilitate a systematic assessment of that context and the most important elements to consider, which may not necessarily be the most obvious ones. Also beneficial would be a disposition towards seeing oneself in a global context as a global actor.

One element of Bourn's exposition on "global skills" that can resonate well with international studies is the emphasis on global citizenship, a concept that has gained increasing traction with diverse organizations ranging from Oxfam to UNESCO.³⁴ Bourn writes, "If one term has become the symbol of this movement to promoting learning and engagement for global social change, it is global citizenship."³⁵ This term, he goes on to note, puts an "emphasis on new forms of citizenship that take account of our globalized multicultural world, in which people work across cultures and economies around the world."³⁶

However, "citizenship" can potentially be a problematic concept because within national contexts it has tended to revolve around questions of rights rather than rights *and* obligations. Reference to global citizens can also conjure images of

32 Bourn, *Understanding Global Skills for 21st Century Professions*, 189.

33 Ibid., 125.

34 Ibid., 4-11; 100-101.

35 Ibid., 271.

36 Ibid.

people of privileged categories and fortunate circumstances gaining access to the lands and cultural experiences of others, while those others have little in the way of similar opportunity, and indeed may face hostility should they seek entry as asylum seekers, refugees, or other kinds of migrant.

This paper does not suggest that Bourn advocates for a naïve conceptualizing of global citizenship. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that an important theme in an international studies education must be a critical awareness of what is often termed positionality, or one's subject position. Teaching this in any context will be challenging and potentially confronting.³⁷ In a context like Australia with a settler-colonial history and thorough-going displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands and both cultural and human destruction,³⁸ these important discussions can generate feelings of guilt among young people.³⁹ Where students aspire to make the world a better place, a critical exploration of the history and practice of international development can also confound and cripple those aspirations.

Part of the process of working through this is a critical reflection on our "good intentions," where they come from, at whom are they directed, and the shape they take.⁴⁰ But while this reflection needs to be critical, it should not imply that the result of this reflection is to dispense with them, as implied by the idiom that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." In cross-cultural and development contexts, what is intended as beneficence can be characterized, often quite fairly, as being paternalistic, patronizing, and depending on the ethnic and national background of the person, possibly stemming from a "white savior complex."⁴¹ For those with the desire to be of service but who have become aware of the problematic dynamics of "international development," and the need to be self-aware of one's privilege and the importance of avoiding contributing to problems, finding a route through this fraught terrain can be very difficult. This is especially the case when admonitions – the need for which is not being doubted here – outline *only* what is problematic and seldom give directions on what can be positively accomplished.

37 Katherine B. Hankins and Robert A. Yarbrough, "Positionality and Active Learning: Confronting Privilege in Field-Exercise Design," *Journal of Geography* 107, no.4-5 (2009): 186-193; Gina C. Torino, "Examining Biases and White Privilege: Classroom Teaching Strategies That Promote Cultural Competence," *Women & Therapy* 38, no.3-4 (2015): 295-307.

38 Julian Lee, Hariz Halilovich, Ani Landau-Ward, Peter Phipps and Richard J. Sutcliffe, *Monsters of Modernity: Global Icons for our Critical Condition* (Leeds: Kismet Press), 47-70.

39 Michael J. Halloran "Indigenous Reconciliation in Australia: Do Values, Identity and Collective Guilt Matter?," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 17 (2007): 1-18.

40 Leigh Mathews, "Kent Goldsworthy: The Commodification of Good intentions," *The Good Problem*, podcast audio, 4 April, 2020, <https://www.leighmathews.com/podcast-episodes/kentgoldsworthy>.

41 Robtel Neajai Pailey, "De-centering the 'White Gaze' of Development," *Development and Change* 51, no. 3 (2020): 729-745.

While there is some virtue in a “solutions-focused” approach to some problems, the increasingly popular phrase does reflect the common linear equation:

problem + intervention = solution and better situation

The straightforward fix to complex situations (that can *appear* simple) is deeply ingrained in many people and is the basis of many industries and companies whose products are framed and sold as fixing life problems and is also to be found in the good intentions behind aspirations to fix other nations’ problems. In an article titled “Western do-gooders need to resist the allure of exotic problems”, Courtney E. Martin writes that, “There is real fallout when well-intentioned people attempt to solve problems without acknowledging the underlying complexity” and meanwhile domestically in the US “we’ve got plenty of domestic need.”⁴² But Martin’s conclusion is not that young people should not engage with others beyond their national borders:

*...I’m not arguing that staying close to home inoculates kids, especially of the white, privileged variety, like me, from making big mistakes. But don’t go [overseas] because you’ve fallen in love with solvability. Go because you’ve fallen in love with complexity. Don’t go because you want to do something virtuous. Go because you want to do something difficult. Don’t go because you want to talk. Go because you want to listen.*⁴³

An enlightening exposition that addresses issues around the apparent solvability of other people’s problems is Clare Talwalker’s chapter “Fixing Poverty,” in which she describes her experiences in teaching students at UC Berkeley. She notes that many of her students have arrived “at college having already taken up arms for a particular cause.”⁴⁴ Concerning her class on poverty, Talwalker writes:

*What can it mean for a student to care about poverty as a general and global problem and to seek ways to redress it? Care of this kind—the kind that comes from the embrace of universal problems and generalizable moral positions—is itself a sort of power and privilege, and it tends to lead people to solutions—utilitarian solutions—that are not attentive to the things that are distinctive about a place and a people.*⁴⁵

42 Courtney E. Martin, “Western do-gooders need to resist the allure of ‘exotic problems’”, *The Guardian*, April 23, 2016, www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/apr/23/western-do-gooders-need-to-resist-the-allure-of-exotic-problems.

43 Ibid.

44 Ananya Roy, Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales, Kweku Opoku-Agyemang, and Clare Talwalker, *Encountering Poverty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 122.

45 Ibid., 124.

As part of her class, Talwalker emphasizes an engagement with issues of “power, place, and history,” and she seeks to draw students’ thinking and focus away from utilitarian ways of thinking about “fixing poverty”. Instead, she focuses students on developing a deep engagement with a community and its history. She also ensures students reflect on their positionality. She finds that when students do this, they imagine more sophisticated ways to engage with communities where poverty was prevalent. “In each case,” writes Talwalker, “this meant backing away from a programmatic approach and a concrete goal and instead opening up to the unpredictability of what other people think and do.”⁴⁶

A framework that seeks to guide users away from linear utilitarian thinking is systems-thinking, which Bourn commends.⁴⁷ Systems thinking is a methodical approach to conducting a holistic inquiry into a phenomenon and which attempts to open up the focus to include the wider context in which it occurs, and to also shift thinking away from entities and towards the *relationships* between entities. For international studies, the ability to think broadly and holistically is relevant, and a methodical approach to doing so is of great value. Systems thinking and the related field of complexity theory⁴⁸ also have the advantage of being part of a tradition of academic thought that students and teachers in international studies can connect with if they wish. At the same time, systems thinking is also commended by those seeking practical ways to approach international projects involving diverse stakeholders.⁴⁹ The theme of practicality in systems thinking brings some groundedness and inclusion that the concept of global citizenship can often seem to lack.

A patient, inclusive, and dynamic approach to engaging with others on projects and plans is of course not easy⁵⁰ and would likely frustrate the desires of some people and organizations to “just get on with it.” However, the long history of failed and misguided endeavors in international development and other realms is a testament to the need for another route which systems thinking and global skills can help cultivate, and which can make significant contributions to the field of international studies. The need for this is hard to doubt in a self-evidently global world where even intra-national and highly local issues are inevitably impacted by global forces and currents. Thus, cautious and critical international and global competencies are much needed in a context where bilateral and international engagement, cooperation, and sophisticated mutual understanding are crucial in so many domains, ranging from

46 Roy, Negrón-Gonzales, Opoku-Agyemang, and Clare Talwalker, *Encountering Poverty*, 144.

47 Bourn, *Understanding Global Skills for 21st Century Professions*, 246.

48 Jean G. Boulton, Peter M. Allen, and Cliff Bowman Cliff, *Embracing Complexity: Strategic Perspectives for an Age of Turbulence* (Oxford: OUP, 2015).

49 Duncan Green, *How Change Happens*.

50 Kimberly Bowman, John Chettleborough, Helen Jeans, Jo Rowlands and James Whitehead, *Systems Thinking: An Introduction for Oxfam programme staff* report for Oxfam, GB, <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/systems-thinking-an-introduction-for-oxfam-programme-staff-579896>.

international security to business and trade, to human health and welfare, to name but a few.

V: Graduate Case Study

How the global skillset and the competencies developed in an international studies degree come together to enable students and graduates to sensitively navigate a globalized and culturally diverse world is of course tested when applied in contexts outside the classroom. To illustrate this, this article will explore the experience of one of the present authors, Madeline McGarvey, who in 2019 received an Australian New Colombo Plan (NCP) Scholarship to undertake a research project in Indonesia.

As an NCP Scholar, McGarvey completed a semester at a university in West Java, wrote an Honours thesis on medical pluralism, interned at a maternal health clinic in Bali, and studied Bahasa Indonesia in several islands across the archipelago. McGarvey recalls needing to draw on the skills that she cultivated throughout her international studies degree, both during the application rounds of the scholarship program and whilst in-country.

To obtain the competitive NCP scholarship, McGarvey needed to have a clear understanding of her skills and the capacity to clearly and convincingly convey these skills to panelists. In essence, she needed to have the terminology and the language – as advocated by Bourn⁵¹ – to express her core competencies. She remembers struggling with this at first as so many of the skills that she had developed were acquired both subtly and incrementally; they had become such a part of the self that she could barely recognize them, nor remember a time without them. McGarvey recalls the utility of revisiting a journal-based assignment she was required to submit as part of a long-term internship, which constitutes a mandatory component of her international studies degree. This assignment and the compulsory internship *per se* had helped McGarvey to become an “active” and reflective learner and to engage in practices of deep, critical, and formative self-reflection, whereby the tacit knowledge she acquired was raised to a more conscious and explicit level.

McGarvey notes that in both her application process and several similar application processes that McGarvey has coached people through, there is a notable temptation for students to prioritize hard skills over soft skills. Students often name subjects that they have studied or essays that they have written, as a way of conveying their explicit knowledge, whilst neglecting to mention their implicit knowledge. If soft skills are mentioned, it is usually a passing reference to “written and communication skills,” which fails to concretely capture their high-order processing and nuanced critical thinking abilities. Within McGarvey’s peer group, there is a failure to articulate the value of what can be seen as a generalist degree; this is something that has been seen by McGarvey’s employers as a tangible advantage and who recognize – even if not explicitly – the value of global skills. These skills have allowed her to pivot between organizations, topics, and geographies. Before

undertaking her program of study and research in Indonesia, McGarvey was not well versed in maternal healthcare nor did she have an established knowledge of Indonesian culture. For McGarvey, although this caused initial apprehension, she gradually realized that being work-ready (and research-ready) is less about *what* one already knows, and more about *how* one thinks. She brought into her Indonesian program fundamental competencies regarding culture, language, and society which she could readily leverage to become a sensitive and effective participant in her program of work, study, and research in Indonesia.

Being a generalist can come as a competitive advantage, especially in the complexity of the 21st century, where information, organizational needs, community desire, and evidence-based practices are rapidly shifting, and where both employees and leaders need to be able to integrate new knowledge, quickly and meaningfully. The ability to handle the uncertainties of late modernity, and to act decisively yet thoughtfully in the face of ambiguity is a key global skill. It also dovetails neatly with another global competency: the ability to understand complexity theory and engage with systems methodologies. McGarvey was able to work on innovative, health care initiatives only because she was primed by her degree. Having spent three years considering the complex interplay of factors that contribute to intractable social problems allowed her to recognize and map place-based determinants and systemic barriers to community wellbeing, alongside her team in Indonesia.

In addition to having a “generalist” or versatile skillset and being able to understand systems thinking and complexity theory, being able to critically analyze is an indispensable global skill. McGarvey’s thesis investigated the ways that global and local forces have shaped the discourses, beliefs, and practices of a 21st century medically plural health setting. To capture the creative, reflexive, and the idiosyncratic manner in which local forces had accepted, integrated, and rejected particular global flows, McGarvey needed to be able to watch, note, challenge, and dissect that which was in front of her, and to filter her findings through an analytic lens.

She also needed to be acutely aware of her positionality and privilege, which was emphasized in the previous section, especially when operating in cross-cultural contexts. McGarvey knew that to make a valuable contribution to the literature and to uphold her research commitments to justice and beneficence, she needed to scrutinize her privilege and regularly examine her biases and their implications. She needed to continually question the reasons for, and implications of, her research findings, asking herself whether her research accurately represented the community she was working with, and how her conclusions could, or could not, affect other people. Having taken subjects that explored issues of colonialism, ethnocentrism, and the problematization of development, meaning that – although one can always be better informed – McGarvey was better equipped than she would otherwise have been to challenge her assumptions and consider the assumptions of those around her. McGarvey is adamant that she would not have been able to exercise this level of self-reflexivity had it not been modeled to her by lecturers, tutors, and peers throughout her international studies degree.

McGarvey also sees emotional intelligence as a key skill in all spheres of global professional and personal life. This includes the ability to understand one’s inner world and the inner worlds of those they work with; the capacity to be sensitive to

other people's needs; to listen deeply; and to communicate constructively. McGarvey found this skill invaluable when broaching emotionally charged conversations, navigating sensitive issues, and creating a sense of psychological safety with her colleagues, research participants, and supervisors. It is what allowed her to receive invitations to conferences, to witness the work of midwives, to be invited to culturally significant events, and ultimately, to be gifted personally and professionally transformative experiences in Indonesia.

Finally, McGarvey says that the adoption of a growth mindset was an invaluable asset for her, both whilst in Indonesia and upon her premature return home. She notes that the ability to frame experiences as opportunities for development, coupled with a commitment to staying open, curious and receptive to new ideas, is key to staying adaptable, resilient, and employable in our dynamic, global era. This case study exemplifies how international studies degrees – with their emphasis on critical thinking, self-reflexivity, and 'active' learning – can equip students to face the complexity and ambiguity of working life in the 21st century.

Conclusion

This article outlined the importance of articulating and appreciating the particular skillset developed and championed by graduates of international studies. More specifically, it highlighted Bourn's concept of "global skills" as a framework for capturing the competencies cultivated in students of international studies, and further, have sought to contribute to the understanding of "global skills" by identifying systems thinking and critical self-reflexiveness as additional core components of such a skillset.

For the authors, the value in naming, describing, and indeed, celebrating the abilities and skills of international studies graduates go beyond the more immediate and perhaps, material benefits of doing so (i.e. in supporting and enhancing the employment outcomes of our graduates). The argument comes at a time when, in the current local context of Australia (in addition to elsewhere), the value of humanities and social science degrees is under siege. In Australia, at the time of writing in late 2020, the federal government has passed legislation to "reform" tertiary education by substantially increasing the cost of degrees that (in its misguided view) lack career relevance. By contrast, degrees that are seen as "job-relevant" (largely "STEM" courses) will have their fees significantly reduced. In announcing the new policy, titled "Job-Ready Graduates," the federal Education Minister Dan Tehan (himself a humanities graduate) was quoted as saying that the government wanted to "incentivize students to make more job-relevant choices."⁵²

The rhetoric surrounding the shift in policy in Australia speaks to the impoverished understanding of what it means to be 'job-ready' consequent of

52 Anisa Purbasari Horton, "Why Australia is doubling fees for Arts degrees", *BBC*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200728-why-australia-is-charging-more-to-study-history>.

university education, a perspective that is apparent in many countries today. Referring to the US tertiary education environment, Tim Marshall points out that, “A strictly technical education may carry a short-term promise (a job), but it also carries a long-term peril of not being well prepared for ongoing change. Instead of teaching students narrow skills, we need to prepare them with the skills to think, communicate, collaborate, design, and make their—and our—futures.”⁵³ As Marshall notes, in a world increasingly shaped by the transformative dynamics of emerging technology and innovation, what is needed are not only graduates who can develop such technologies but in addition – and perhaps even more so – those who possess the skills to critically understand and reflect on the meaning of these developments across local and global contexts.

In asserting the specificity of what may appear general, and in articulating the “global skills” needed for a globalized world, this paper offers a much-needed counter-narrative to that currently being advanced by some in positions of political (and financial) power about the value of programs such as international studies. In a world where even the most localized challenges are affected by the global and imbued with added complexity as a result, the skills of a culturally competent, critically engaged, and justice-focussed workforce are worth investing in.

53 Tim Marshall, “STEM may be the future-but liberal arts are timeless”, *Quartz*, February 28, 2018, <https://qz.com/1215910/stem-may-be-the-future-but-liberal-arts-are-timeless/>.