



The Changing Needs and Realities of Current and Future International Educators

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Introduction

As education abroad professionals, we play a critical role in shaping the minds and futures of young people in an increasingly interconnected world. The global response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a vivid example of the importance of cross-cultural and cross-border cooperation and understanding as every sector of society sought to contain and mitigate the virus while maintaining vital human functions and activities. The world that emerged demands from all of us, perhaps more than ever, cultural fluency skills such as cultural awareness and sensitivity, mutual understanding, respect for diversity, adaptation, and flexibility – all hallmark outcomes of education abroad experiences. It is not a coincidence that our enrollment numbers are rebounding quickly.

That same pandemic, however, brought human mobility to a virtual stop, reshaping the way we in global education, whether strategists, managers, or doers, performed our work and carried out our mission to provide students with meaningful, cross-cultural learning experiences. As we look to the future of international education, there are many dynamic questions to consider, not just about curriculum and pedagogy, but about the education abroad workforce. What are our greatest challenges in the field and how do we address them as a field and within our individual organizations and units? How do we move forward from the trauma of the pandemic work experience? What innovations are needed in the way we recruit, hire, and nurture our education abroad work teams? What skillsets are needed by current and future education abroad professionals and how do we ensure we all have what we need to be successful, if not to thrive, in our chosen vocations?

This white paper explores the current state of the education abroad workforce and the trends that are shaping its future. We examine the challenges and opportunities facing education abroad professionals and discuss how they can adapt, regardless of level or responsibility, to meet the changing needs of students, employers, and staff. We also hope this white paper serves as a resource and motivation for advocacy for education abroad professionals, as well as inspiration for further collaborative thinking and research around issues of importance to our resilient and rapidly evolving field.

Levels of Responsibility and Spheres of Influence

We've loosely organized our analysis and recommendations around three categories of professionals in our field based on their levels of responsibility and spheres of influence. These are:

- **Strategists:** The people involved in setting goals, strategizing on how to achieve them, and leading the decision-making around resource allocation. Often, but not always: Senior Internationalization Officers, Deans, Associate/Assistant Provosts, Vice Presidents, Executive Directors

- **Managers:** The people who supervise others, delegate workloads, and make tactical decisions to support the goals and strategic vision of the organization or unit. Often but not always: Directors, Associate Directors, Assistant Directors
- **Doers:** The people carrying out specific tasks to get the work done. Including, but not limited to: Program Managers, Coordinators, Advisors, Program Assistants, Enrollment Managers, Faculty

Of course, we acknowledge that in many office structures these lines are not so clear. Many people work in hybrid roles that cut across more than one of the categories above.

About This Project

This white paper is one output of the year-long initiative undertaken by the Changing Needs and Realities of Current and Future International Educators Working Group, which was convened by the Council of The Forum on Education Abroad in September 2022. The data that informed the position and recommendations that follow are derived from multiple data sources collected by that group, as well as from data collected from individuals who self-identified as international educators and voluntarily participated in the 2022 State of the Field: Survey of International Educators, which the working group contributed questions to and helped to interpret. The State of the Field Survey is conducted every two years by The Forum on Education Abroad to investigate current and emerging practices, trends, and priorities for individuals and institutions involved in the work of education abroad.

The 2022 State of the Field survey was opened in September 2022 and remained open for responses until December 1, 2022. Individuals were invited to participate via emails to listservs and The Forum's contact database, posting calls to action by The Forum and individual members of the working group on social media channels, including LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and personal outreach by members of The Forum staff and the working group. In response to this call, 613 individuals participated in the survey, with 444 of them completing it (as indicated by answering most questions and clicking submit at the end of the survey). The bulk of respondents said that they work in the U.S. (77%) and 14% work in Western Europe. The remaining participants identified a variety of other locations around the globe. The insights shared in this white paper focus on the 343 respondents who completed the entire survey and indicated that their work is based primarily in the U.S.

The 2022 State of the Field Survey of Individual International Educators included a question which invited participants to volunteer to be contacted by the members of the Changing Needs and Realities of the Current and Future International Educators Working Group for participation in additional information gathering on the topic of employment in the field. Upon completion of the survey response collection period, subgroups of the working group reached out to

colleagues to invite them to participate in focus groups and to submit job descriptions and organization charts to further contextualize and add nuance to the survey data provided. The Focus Groups subgroup conducted five online focus groups via Zoom and one in-person focus group at the Annual Conference in Seattle, totaling 35 people. Focus groups were led by two members of the working group, one who led the discussion and the other who took notes. Upon completion of all focus groups, the working group prepared a summary analysis of recurring themes that emerged from these conversations. The Document Review group gathered 60 primary source documents in the form of job descriptions from 29 different organizations, which they coded and cataloged to provide insights into common skills and requisites identified across positions of similar levels.

The observations and recommendations included in this white paper are informed by the data and perspectives of the hundreds of colleagues who have contributed their insights via these various methods over the past year, as well as the personal experiences and expertise of our own colleagues who comprise the working group.

Thank You

Everyone who participated in this work took the time out of their intense professional lives to participate. Many of them were very vulnerable and shared personal and professional struggles and challenges. We honor those contributions and we are very grateful for our colleagues' generosity of time and wisdom.

Background

As the education abroad field continues to recover from the aftermath of COVID-19, it may be helpful to trace back to the history of the international education profession to gain a better understanding of today's workforce challenges and opportunities for education abroad professionals. The first formal professional role that we know of—Foreign Student Advisor—began in the early 1930s when the Institute of International Education (IIE) formed a National Advisory Committee on the Adjustment of Foreign Students¹. Over time, international education as a professional field in the United States and elsewhere has further grown and greater demand for support for internationalization over time has led to the emergence of specific focus areas under the internationalization umbrella, including education abroad, international student recruitment, and international student compliance support. The emergence of these specialized roles has also led to the creation of an administrative/managerial career track with senior international officers (SIOs) at the top of the organizational chart. With a variety of working titles across different types of institutions, the role of the SIO has become more visible and important.

¹ Goodman, A., & Martel, M. (2023). A Brief History of Senior International Officers on U.S. Higher Education Campuses. Institute of International Education (IIE). <https://www.iie.org/publications/a-brief-history-of-senior-international-officers-on-u-s-higher-education-campuses/>

To respond to the evolving needs and responsibilities of international educators, the field established professional organizations such as NAFSA in 1948, the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) in 1982, and The Forum on Education Abroad in 2001. For decades these organizations have served the field through knowledge exchange, training, scholarship, and publications that not only improved and refined internationalization efforts around the world, but also guided efforts to organize and professionalize the workforce. Recent and notable resources aimed at decoding the roles and responsibilities of international educators include the Education Abroad Position Descriptions² developed by The Forum on Education Abroad and the NAFSA International Education Professional Competencies³.

The COVID-19 crisis created a pivotal moment for international education as a profession specifically in terms of the “people factor” or human resources. After many furloughs, layoffs, and organizational consolidations across the field, many of us find ourselves at a crossroads within our organizations and the profession as a whole. It is urgent to identify and pursue people-centered strategies to help rebuild and revitalize the education abroad workforce and come back stronger than before to future-proof the field⁴.

What Are Our Greatest Challenges?

Institutional Structures

The creeping scope of education abroad offices has, in many institutions, expanded to include other kinds of programming or opportunities such as domestic study away, internships, civic engagement, and volunteering. Restructuring of offices on campuses have put education abroad offices or departments in the position of reporting to new areas within institutions (e.g., career services or equity inclusion), encountering new responsibilities, priorities, and ways of working when they do.

Workload

With such reorganizations and expansions of the work, campus-based education abroad professionals are finding themselves with a wider breadth of responsibilities. Even where the scope of an office or division’s work has not expanded, the volume of work they are expected to do—in terms of numbers of programs in a portfolio or number of students served—has grown for a variety of reasons. We explore each of those challenges in more detail below:

² The Forum on Education Abroad. (2016). Education Abroad Positions: Job Titles and Descriptions. The Forum on Education Abroad. <https://www.forumea.org/uploads/1/4/4/6/144699749/job-title-project-print-friendly-version.pdf>

³ NAFSA. (2020). International Education Competencies 2.0. NAFSA Association of International Educators. <https://www.nafsa.org/nafsa-international-education-professional-competencies-20>

⁴ Ward, H. (n.d.) Coming Out Stronger from the Pandemic: (Re)Building your Team. Terra Dotta. https://go.terradotta.com/rebuild_your_team



Offices and organizations are understaffed.

41% of jobseekers in our survey cited organizational culture and support, including workload issues, as the main strategy a manager could use to make them stay. Staff-to-student and staff-to-responsibility ratios are high, and changes in student needs and anxieties post-pandemic have international educators reporting heavier workloads due to more “high-touch” students throughout the advising and pre-departure phases and while abroad.

“*Today’s students are not comfortable with ambiguity, not knowing what’s going on. There is not enough time in a day to provide this level of service. Students don’t see themselves as adults or capable of making decisions.*” – Focus Group participant

Hiring is inefficient or ineffective.

Colleagues in open-ended response questions on the survey and in focus group conversations report higher rates of failed searches and quicker turnover among new colleagues in the field. Our research points to some clues as to why this may be happening. Our review of position descriptions reveal many inaccurate and out-of-date job descriptions across the field. 47% of colleagues report having job responsibilities that they haven’t received education or training for. Educational and experience requirements listed in job ads don’t match what is needed to perform the job. Salaries are not competitive and do not match job responsibilities or required educational levels.

Retaining talent is a struggle.

Over half of all survey respondents said they have been seeking new employment in the past year. When broken down by years of experience in the field, colleagues with 7-20 years of experience—presumably those who bore the most managerial stress through these tumultuous recent years—had been looking for new positions at a rate of 63%, compared with 49% for colleagues with less than 7 years experience and 42% for colleagues with more than 20. The percentage of folks working at institutions (57%) who have been seeking new work is higher than at provider organizations (47%). Open-ended question responses and focus group conversations point to workplace morale, salary stagnation, heavy workloads, lack of training for broad responsibility areas, and unclear pathways for advancement within organizations as reasons people are dissatisfied with their positions or the field in general, leading to high turnover.

“It’s hard [to consider leaving the field] when you are focused on a mission you love and support. But I wonder if it’d be easier to maintain a better work-life balance if it wasn’t a job I cared so much about. Would being in a different field be a little less demanding?”
– Focus Group participant

Salaries are not competitive.

One of the challenges for today’s education abroad professionals is securing competitive salaries. Our field, especially in the university/college segment of education abroad, has not kept up with increasing base salaries to meet the ever growing demands of cost of living. 30% of survey respondents with 0-6 years of experience in the field report making less than \$50,000 USD salary per year. For context, researchers at MIT estimate that the average living wage for a family with two working adults and two children is just about twice that.⁵ Among survey respondents with 7-20 years of experience in the field, only one colleague employed at a program provider organization reported earning less than \$50,000, but about 10% of colleagues at colleges and universities did. A decade ago, arguably the preferred profile of an entry-level education abroad professional was someone with an earned master’s degree who had studied abroad, spoke a second language, and had 1-2 years of professional experience. While education abroad hiring managers at universities still hope to hire this type of entry-level candidate, the harsh reality is that our field has not been able to advance the base salary of entry-level positions to attract a candidate with such a background. Education abroad professionals at the early stage of their careers have to either choose to work for a program provider organization, which usually offer higher base salaries than universities and offer flexible remote work options, or play the stressful game of job searching for a counteroffer to get a higher salary within their institution.

How Do We Address Those Challenges?

Design a strategy when all things are uncertain.

The economic downfall of the COVID-19 pandemic hit education abroad offices at universities, provider organizations, and professional organizations for international education. As all of us continue to recover, it has never been so crucial to be strategic on how we use our scarce time and resources. But how can today’s education abroad teams design a strategy when higher education itself hasn’t fully recovered from COVID-19? How can a director draft a strategic plan

⁵ Glasmeier, A. (2023). NEW DATA POSTED: 2023 Living Wage Calculator. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). <https://livingwage.mit.edu/articles/103-new-data-posted-2023-living-wage-calculator#:~:text=An%20analysis%20of%20the%20living,in%20the%20United%20States%20is>

for education abroad when the strategic plan of their institution has expired or there is no mention whatsoever of international education in the institutional goals? How can a regional manager of a provider organization feel job security when their organization has merged or restructured significantly, sometimes with little warning? How can education abroad advisors feel inspired by their work when the more seasoned colleagues in the office are exhausted and barely meeting the demands of their roles?

Our time spent in focus groups and presenting *State of the Field* data at conferences over the past year has reinforced for us that this field is creative, resilient, and ready to work hard to make international education better for ourselves, our students, and our future. We have been reminded time and again that this is a field whose commitment to student learning and well being, even before a global pandemic, had us constantly refining our strategies for anticipating challenges, operating with limited information, and reacting calmly to unexpected issues that arise. We know how to do this already. So while our challenges feel great, we believe that we are up to them. Here's how.

Build trust first.

A key strategy that colleagues at any level of responsibility—senior, middle, and entry-level—can pursue is building trust. Team culture and communication were reported as the top factors that keep people in their roles among those who said they weren't seeking a job in the past year (37%). Regardless of your role in the education abroad ecosystem, you have a responsibility to be a trustworthy professional and teammate. Ideally, you work for an office where leadership sets the tone for high-trust relationships. But even if you do not work for an organization where trust is a core organizational culture, you can still make a positive difference by exhibiting a trustworthy attitude and behavior towards students, faculty, and colleagues. Pursuing trust in the education abroad office does not mean that you give up boundaries or avoid conflict. Instead, pursuing trust means that you commit to be a forthright and fully engaged professional who gives others on your team the benefit of the doubt and can press towards the goal of serving students even when things are uncertain.

Learn how to say “No”... more often.

As education abroad offices and organizations are still facing challenges with filling vacancies and/or retaining staff, one powerful tool that professionals have is to say “no”... more often. In times like this, we no longer have the luxury to perpetuate inefficiencies and redundancies. There are effective and appropriate ways to say “no.” Data informed and mission centered “no(s)” can help education abroad professionals be strategic and earn the respect of university/organizational leadership. Of course, that's easier said than done. It can be difficult or impossible to say “no” to “pet projects” that a donor or senior leader at your organization may want your team to pursue, but colleagues, especially those at the strategist and manager level who have oversight responsibilities for staff workloads, should keep this tool in their toolkit and exercise its use thoughtfully.

Inventory your staff's strengths.

Education abroad professionals at all levels would be well-served by cultivating an awareness of their strengths and skill sets. In particular, strategizers and managers should be fully aware of the strengths of the individuals on their teams so as to effectively navigate the complex and fast-paced current state of the workforce in our field. Access to professional development opportunities didn't rank highly among jobseekers as a retention strategy, so upskilling or retraining may not be enough to build productivity and job satisfaction among already overworked international educators. Strategists and managers are instead encouraged to pursue goals and assign staff projects and workloads based on individual strengths to be able to reach strategic goals and retain staff by giving them work that is achievable and builds job satisfaction.

“Does growth mean just being a manager, or how does growth look at the mid-level or growth in other ways? This is a continuing challenge in this field – how to grow without putting people in management if that's not what they want/need.” – Focus Group Participant

Recruit and hire thoughtfully.

Our exploration of current job titles and descriptions revealed how many position titles and descriptions have not been updated and do not reflect the current realities of staff's individual and collective work. As offices seek to hire new positions or reorganize existing ones, we encourage managers and strategizers to think about building teams for the future. Create specialist roles rather than expecting one person to stay abreast of the evolution of best practice across a wide variety of areas and skills. Update existing staff position descriptions to reflect current realities and sensible divisions of labor before writing the job ad for a new position so that the new position can fill gaps strategically and set a new colleague up for success and to be welcomed onto the team.

“We revamped our hiring process, by necessity due to the pandemic application pool but also by design, to be as inclusive of nontraditional experiences as possible. We are also asking the question 'how does this person add to our culture' as opposed to 'how will they fit our culture.'”
– Survey respondent

Pay people salaries commensurate with their professionalism.

The number one strategy survey respondents indicated would help them stay in a job they were thinking about leaving was being compensated competitively and fairly (58%). Strategists and managers should use data about required skill sets, comparable fields in and outside of the

university, and international education salary benchmarking surveys to advocate for higher leveling and pay increases for education abroad specialists.

Plan for the future.

A meaningful subset of jobseekers (19%) indicated that a clear path to promotion would help them stay in their job. The lack of opportunities for advancement were also cited frequently in focus group conversations. This isn't just good for individual professionals' satisfaction and peace of mind. Succession planning is also good practice for high-performing organizations such as education abroad operations facing high turnover in the current market.

Make work work for people and families.

Our focus group data show us that people aren't just job hunting in search of their desired salary increases or better company culture. People are also in search of more inclusive types of working modalities. This is especially true for parents and caretakers, and even more true for mothers and other primary caretakers. Mentioned repeatedly in the focus groups was the desire for flexible working modalities, such as hybrid work from home days and more fully remote options. The word 'flexibility' came up often as a thing that could increase retention or sway jobseekers to take a new job.



"If we want more women leaders, we need to allow work from home and fully remote work options. – Focus Group participant

Gaining the Skills We Need as Education Abroad Professionals

International education involves a journey or movement of people, minds, or ideas across political and cultural frontiers. Given the diversity, scope and expanding reach of international education, the education abroad professional is expected to be equipped with a broad skill set, which ranges from operational delivery to strategic thinking, risk and financial management to marketing, partnership development, and program management.

The role of the education abroad professional has evolved significantly over the last number of years, but most prevalently during the peak COVID-19 years, 2020-2022. During the pandemic, the role of the education abroad professional became one of the most important roles in higher education, as we were required to pivot at a very fast pace to respond to the volatile, high risk environment we found ourselves operating in. We were even often asked to bring our risk management and crisis response expertise to bear on other areas of institutional operations who were less prepared. The modern education abroad professional is now expected to demonstrate strong familiarity with current trends and issues in international education and an

organization’s missions, vision, and values. Additionally, education abroad professionals are required to continuously acquire and develop skills and competencies that enable us to respond to global challenges. The development of cross-cutting competencies, which describe shared skills and knowledge, are essential for the survival and continued success of the international educator in a world where they are required to work across multiple domains of international education. Tangible skills, combined with the ability to sit with and interpret competing data and ambiguity in our work are key components of the skills matrix of the modern education abroad professional⁶.

Table 1: Significant Skills Required for Education Abroad Work

Responsibility	% Out of Total Responses (343)
Education Abroad program development	65%
Education Abroad program management	64%
Outreach and marketing	64%
Strategic management and planning	62%
Advising	59%
Program evaluation	55%
Crisis Management	55%
Orientation	55%
Risk Management	55%
Personnel management	53%
Enrollment management	52%
Finance/Budget management	51%
Legal issues, including working with agreements	49%
Department/Unit Leadership	47%
Student selection	44%
Faculty development & support	43%
General Office Support	42%
Curriculum integration	42%
Re-entry programming	39%
Academic records processing	35%
Billing and accounting	34%
Information technology development or support	27%
Financial aid	23%
Other responsibilities outside of education abroad	16%
Teaching courses	13%

⁶ NAFSA. (2022). International Education Competencies 2.0. NAFSA Association of International Educators. <https://www.nafsa.org/nafsa-international-education-professional-competencies-20>

Table 1 illustrates the results from the 2022 State of the Field: Survey of International Educators. Responsibilities and skills needed for positions in education abroad feature a combination of operational, strategic, and cross-cutting competencies, further demonstrating the complexity of the role of an education abroad professional. In our focus groups, participants also noted that a 'generalist' skill set seemed to be more important than a 'specialist' skill set, which many felt was a notable change from when they first began working in the field. Furthermore, based on job descriptions submitted, skills in the areas of health and safety, diversity and inclusion, and competency in the use of technology platforms, are identified as being 'new' but essential to the role of the education abroad professional. From an educational perspective, participants also identified that a bachelor's degree is viewed as the minimum education requirement, with a master's degree being desirable.

Nearly half (47%) of respondents also specified that there was a broad range of skills they felt they had not been adequately trained for, which had evolved over the lifespan of their employment. These included, but were not restricted to, the following: ability to adapt to new technologies, financial, legal and human resources management, and partnership and business development (see chart below). Additionally, respondents identified that risk and crisis management and academic content creation/curriculum design have become essential skill requirements in job descriptions for all stakeholders (HEI, Providers etc), which is supported by the primary source data (job descriptions) acquired in the data acquisition phase of the Changing Needs and Realities of the Current and Future International Educator Working Group.

“I have not received formal training for most of my career since there were no courses / degrees in travel risk management in higher education. The job and growing in the field has been the education thus far!”
— Survey respondent

Chart: Top 10 Skills Required but Not Trained For

1. Technology; database management, software, websites, computer systems, IT
2. Finance/Accounting; budgets
3. Legal; Contracts, agreements
4. Human Resources
5. Outreach & Marketing; social media, events/programming, communications
6. Partnerships; business development
7. Risk management; e.g., COVID-19 mitigation, insurance
8. Crisis and conflict management
9. Student Affairs: Advising, Counseling, Student Wellness, e.g., mental health/psychological support, parent relations
10. Data analysis, especially assessment

Strategizers in an organization need to possess the essential skills of strategic thinking and change management to lead their teams through periods of change and volatility. Leaders that lead are essential, and the disruptive leadership⁷ management style and the concept of respectful disruption⁸, in particular, should be encouraged and embraced by all stakeholders. Leaders and managers should not be afraid to disrupt inequitable practices and systems, but they should have the skills and competencies necessary to do so respectfully, to achieve positive change through effective communication and collaboration.

The State of the Field Survey noted that 56% of respondents have been seeking new positions in the past year, which is a huge issue for managers. Managers need to be advocates for their teams and create opportunities to support the retention of staff who want to stay and develop in the field. Retention was cited as a demonstrable issue for focus group participants. The field has experienced a high degree of turnover combined with an inability to recruit staff quickly. This leads to employees wearing multiple hats, which in turn leads to an increase in conflicting pressure on their time and capacity to deliver a good level of service. Managers need to have the capacity to influence, negotiate, and seek resources in the form of financial support and people, to help underdeveloped and understaffed teams and address skills-gaps, some of which may require specialist support to navigate the complexity of education abroad in a post-COVID world. Additionally, managers need to continuously advocate for and create professional development opportunities, funded and non-funded, in addition to on the job training opportunities to support staff in adapting and responding to a rapidly changing work environment. Mentoring opportunities internal and external to the organization should be explored and encouraged.

“My supervisor allows me to work on projects that I feel passionate about, and she has been pivotal in ensuring that I participate in professional development opportunities.” — Survey respondent

Broader Recommendations for the Future of Our Field

Over the course of the past year, our work together and our many interactions with our colleagues across the field have led us to identifying gaps that we hope will be considered by the broader field to continue the work we have explored here.

Our profession needs better benchmarking of job titles, position descriptions, and salaries so that doers have the information necessary to advocate for themselves and managers and

⁷ Fast Company Executive Board. (n.d.) Disruptive Leadership and Disruptive Innovation: Risks and Benefits. Fast Company. <https://board.fastcompany.com/blog/disruptive-leadership-and-disruptive-innovation#:~:text=Disruptive%20leaders%20put%20tendencies%20toward,emphasizes%20thinking%20outside%20the%20box>

⁸ GoAbroad.com. (2022). Defining Respectful Disruption. GoAbroad.com. <https://blog.goabroad.com/defining-respectful-disruption/>

strategizers have information to help them advocate and make the right decisions around hiring, raises, promotions, and succession planning.

With such fast-paced work, the unpredictability of global events, and many competing demands for upskilling, organizations offering professional development opportunities should *focus on designing flexible, accessible training for high-demand skills.*

Our community is the make-it-or-break-it factor to retention and job satisfaction. Compassionate leadership, healthy, inclusive organizational cultures, and a commitment to reflecting and improving on these over time are essential components to creating an environment where education abroad professionals can thrive and respond to the intense and varied demands of their jobs.

In Conclusion

Education abroad work is, for many of us, not just a job, but a calling. A passion. The last few years have made many of us realize that passion is not enough to sustain us through the hardest of times. And yet, there is a lot of grace and optimism to be found amidst the burnout. We hope the insights in this white paper offer the hope and the tools we need to reflect, regroup, reassess, and advocate for the individual and collective advancement of our work and our profession.