



Student Mobility and Learning Abroad

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Defining Student Mobility and Study Abroad

“It can be taken for granted that there is a conventional wisdom of what student mobility means. An internationally mobile student is a student having crossed a national border in order to study or to undertake other study-related activities for at least a certain unit of a study programme or a certain period of time in the country he or she has moved to.” (Richters & Teichler, 2006) ”

International student mobility is commonly defined as either full-programme ‘degree’ or ‘diploma’ mobility and short-term (typically up to a year) or ‘credit’ mobility (e.g. study abroad and student exchange programmes). Diploma mobility is the simplest type of mobility since it usually only requires a relationship between a student and a university, whilst short-term mobility requires a partnership between an organisation in one country (a university or a study abroad agency) and a university in another – although in some cases institutions establish their own study abroad locations overseas (Woodfield, 2010). It is short-term mobility that forms the focus of this briefing paper.

Credit mobility requires the often complex transfer of credits between two institutions to count towards a qualification, necessitating a high degree of comparability between institutions and higher education systems. In most cases there is an exchange agreement between institutions in different countries in which partner institutions have reciprocal arrangements to receive agreed numbers of students, such as in HKU’s Worldwide Exchange programme which provides opportunities for HKU students to study abroad in 320 institutions in 40 countries, for either a semester or a whole year. These include: exchange programmes, summer institutes, winter programmes, visiting programmes, and special programmes (HKU, 2016a).

Intra-European credit mobility has been fascinated by the European Union’s Erasmus+ programme for over 25 years, supporting over 3 million students in this time. Non-European exchange programmes are usually arranged bi-laterally between institutions, in some cases as part of a broader strategic alliance. In some types of credit mobility the period of study is integrated into the formal curriculum (e.g. in language or area studies courses) such as in HKU credit-bearing experiential learning projects which can be pursued overseas, e.g. in Mainland China, and other parts of Asia (HKU, 2016b)

Recently, the Erasmus+ programme has expanded to include work placements recognising the multiple co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities for international experience during studies that now exist, that include, research visits, internships, summer schools, study visits and study tours, volunteering and service-learning.



Current Issues in Short-term Mobility and Study Abroad

Teichler (2008) suggests that the growing movement towards ‘internationalisation at home’ may have reduced the attractiveness of the cultural side of mobility, citing ‘the declining exceptionalism of mobility’, and argues that the value of study mobility could be overstated especially as some of its benefits, such as improved inter-cultural understanding and interaction with people from other countries, can easily be achieved through travel or work. Within Europe there are also concerns that short-term mobility schemes, such as Erasmus+, are not significantly increasing in size, and may in fact contract as a result of university reforms which have stimulated the growth of shorter, more tightly packed, university programmes. Although the reforms make credit mobility simpler, they leave less room for mobility and may ultimately make studying abroad for short periods less attractive.

In the UK (Fielden et al., 2007) and in some other English-speaking countries (e.g. Australia and New Zealand) there has been concern about students’ relative unwillingness to undertake international experiences. From a student’s perspective, limited language skills, high-quality study options at home and the lack of mobility culture are cited as the main factors in these countries. There is also a lack of consensus over whether an overseas study experience provides significant benefits to students from advanced economies compared with those from developing countries.

There has often been criticism that the benefits from international experience are under-researched, and are often assumed rather than underpinned by robust empirical research (Bridger, 2015). There is a particular

lack of longitudinal and experimental studies, compared with a preponderance of descriptive snapshot studies focused on perceptions from students, employers and other stakeholders (Jones, 2015).

Some typical assumptions around short-term mobility include:

- Normative bias – mobility is intrinsically a ‘good thing’, and provides ‘added value’
- Attitudinal – mobility benefits require significant student commitment
- Temporal – impact of mobility intensifies with duration
- Behavioural – students make rational, informed choices
- Cultural – deficit model for students’ ‘international’ skills
- Organisational – institutions facilitate rather than drive mobility
- Political – mobility is a vehicle for soft power or cultural diplomacy
- Economic – national competitiveness is enhanced by mobility
- Social – mobility broadens horizons and widens networks
- Academic – mobility (can) harm academic performance
- Labour market – mobility provides employment advantage(s)

Many studies on this topic are supported by policy agencies, rather than national research, academic research funding, and the mobility research landscape is generally dominated by applied rather than basic research. The current body of research on short-term mobility covers the following analytical themes (Table 1):

Theme	Key questions
Scale and scope	What is the mobility landscape?
Demographics	Who are the mobile students?
Motivations	What makes students decide to go abroad?
Awareness	How do students engage with mobility options?
Decision-making	How do they decide – what, where, etc.?
Barriers and enablers	Why do/don’t students go abroad?
Students’ experience	How do students experience mobility?
Stakeholder engagement	What is the role, and impact upon, employers, academics, peers, and families?
Impact on students	What is the impact of mobility on students?
Support	What is the institutional and policy context for mobility?

Table 1. Research themes related to short-term mobility

Summaries of Recent Research on Short-term Mobility and Study Abroad

Erasmus Impact Studies (Europe)

In 2014 the European Commission sought to understand the impact of studying abroad on participating students through a large-scale study that sought perceptions from students, academic staff and employers (European Commission, 2014). It found that employability and career development were both strong drivers for participation in mobility, and that 64% of employers viewed international experience as important for recruitment, an increase from 37% in 2006. An analysis of employment statistics also suggest that young people who study or work abroad via Erasmus are half as likely to face long-term unemployment than non-mobile peers five years after graduation, the unemployment rate of Erasmus students was 23% lower than for those who did not take part. In addition, the study found that 20% more Erasmus alumni hold management positions ten years after graduating than non-mobile graduates. In line with many other studies, the research found that students also perceive that studying abroad helps improve employability by developing transversal skills such as knowledge of foreign languages and boosting self-confidence, as well as developing entrepreneurship. Other benefits include enlarging and developing networks.

An experimental study by Jacobone and Moro (2015) measured Erasmus students' perceptions of personal development and found evidence of the development of 'self-efficacy' (Bandura, 1977) skills as a result of mobility via Erasmus, compared with non-mobile students. Both studies also highlight significant benefits in inter-cultural understanding and international competences (e.g. language skills, the use of subject-based knowledge in other contexts) from short-term mobility experiences.

Student Perspectives on Going International (UK)

In 2015 the UK Higher Education International Unit and the British Council commissioned research into student perspectives (Mellors-Bourne et al, 2015) of the benefits of and barriers to having an international experience as part of a higher education degree. The UK has a national strategy focused significantly increasing the amount of students undertaking going abroad from around 6% currently to 20% by 2020. It found that UK students were primarily motivated by desire for an enjoyable experience and to enhance employability and career prospects rather than academic outcomes, although support of academic tutors was a significant facilitator of mobility alongside administrative support and guidance from other students.

Key decision making factors related to a positive decision to study abroad included the availability of funding, personal safety and security, and perceived quality of host and location. It found that the majority of pre- and post-mobile students surveyed perceived a relationship between

spending time abroad during their studies and their employability, academic success, and personal development. It also found that the experience of being overseas generated these benefits, rather than the precise content or nature of the international experience. These findings apply to students across all socio-demographic characteristics. Significantly, the study found that UK students perceive very short mobility periods to result in similar impacts to longer periods of mobility of one semester or a full year.

Academic Outcomes of Mobility - GLOSSARI Project (USA)

Alongside personal and employment benefits, short-term mobility is also widely considered to impact positively upon students' academic performance during their studies. However, to date, there has been very little empirical research into this topic, since this is difficult to measure due to its medium- and long-term effects (Jacobone & Moro, 2015) and because higher-achieving students tend to be the most mobile. Most studies are based on student and staff perceptions (Bridger op cit.) and demonstrate positive academic impact, and can be undermined by accusations of attribution bias. One exception is the GLOSSARI project undertaken in the USA in the 35-institution University System of Georgia and reported on in 2010 (University of Georgia, 2010). This project used a robust longitudinal methodology looking at pre- and post-mobility performance and behaviour, controlling for prior performance. The findings demonstrate a correlation between outward mobility and degree outcome (including for disadvantaged students), although the study does not provide conclusive evidence on the reasons behind this improved performance. It also provides evidence of enhanced inter-cultural learning through overseas study, compared with home campus based study.

Some Issues for Institutional Practice

There appears to be a positive link between mobility and personal development and gaining transversal skills that are valuable in the workplace, and which therefore make mobile students more employable, such as self-efficacy, self-reliance, and inter-personal, inter-cultural skills. This finding should be promoted to students considering mobility, and also to employers who report that they value such skills in addition to subject knowledge. Major employers are now seeking to recruit 'global graduates', which have been defined by Diamond et al. (2011) as potential employees that understand and can manage international and inter-cultural relationships and who understand the increasingly global nature of the workplace. Mobile students should also receive assistance in better articulating these skills and attributes to employers during the recruitment process.

There is evidence that providing a wider range of mobility options, from short-term study visits at one end of the spectrum to a full-year abroad, can help to widen participation in mobility. Work placements and internships

are of particular attraction to disadvantaged groups since they provide opportunities to fund their mobility period, and also to gain important work-based experience and develop their social capital. Shorter experiences can also lead to further periods of study and work overseas.

The academic impacts of short-term mobility are still not well understood, but there is some evidence that mobile students do perform better academically than non-mobile students, often due to increased commitment to their studies. They can also gain important transferable skills that can support their studies. This evidence should be used to help better inform academic staff who may perceive that mobility negatively affects degree outcomes since academic support is a key factor in student decision-making around whether to go overseas. Academic staff should also develop approaches within the curriculum which enable mobile students to apply their knowledge and skills gained from mobility into their learning upon their return, and to effectively build on their experience during the remainder of their studies. This will help to enhance institutional approaches to developing 'internationalisation at home' and could also help to develop ways of enabling the non-mobile majority of students to benefit from mobility.

Students without a family history of mobility can find it difficult to organise their international experience. There is often a perception that self-reliance and initiative are an important part of the mobility experience, despite the fact that some students may lack the required confidence and skills to make the leap to being mobile. Therefore institutions need to provide timely and appropriate levels of information, advice and guidance throughout the mobility process, including during the period overseas, to prevent feelings of isolation and to ensure that the host organisation is providing adequate support.

Finally, it would also be beneficial for institutions to undertake their own institutionally-focused studies on the academic and employability benefits of mobility for their students. This could include experimental cohort studies, longitudinal and cohort tracking studies, detailed demographic analysis comparing the performance of mobile and non-mobile students, case studies which analyse good practices, and linking mobility to data on employment outcomes. Emerging findings could also potentially be compared with findings from other institutions through benchmarking studies.

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The photo on p.1 is courtesy of photolib@hku.hk

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