

The 'graduate global citizen'? An examination of undergraduate Education students' reasons for non-participation in international placements.

Abstract

This paper considers the issue of international placements in Higher Education. It begins with a review of literature examining the benefits of such experience and the perceived barriers to participation. Taking a case study approach based on questionnaires and individual interviews, the research scrutinises the views of over a 100 second-year undergraduate Education students at a post-1992 UK university, where take-up of such overseas opportunities has been persistently low. The study investigates the students' declared reasons for non-participation, their awareness of potential benefits and suggestions for improving placement uptake. It concludes with a summary of recommendations for practice and future research in this area.

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Introduction

As the economic function of higher education (HE) becomes an ever greater focus of attention and expectation (Brennan, King and Lebeau, 2004), recent years have seen an increasing tendency for degree courses, regardless of subject discipline, to incorporate some element of compulsory work-related learning. The most visible manifestation of this is often student placements. At the same time, the discourse of the graduate global citizen (Bamford, 2009) permeates policy and university documents. These two aspirations meet in the growing provision of international placements (IPs) that students may opt to take as part of their university course.

This research study scrutinises the views of undergraduates on education-related courses at a university in the English West Midlands. Second year students on these non-ITE (initial teacher education) undergraduate courses within the School of Education are obliged to undertake a year-long placement module which offers IPs in the Netherlands and Finland (concentrated 2-week blocks), though relatively few choose these opportunities, and take up UK-based placements instead. The study investigates student views on this issue and is structured around the following 3 research questions:

1. For what reasons do students decide not to apply for IPs?
2. To what extent do students perceive an IP would offer them potential benefits?
3. What might be done to encourage students' participation in IPs?

The project is important for a number of reasons: an improved understanding of the barriers they perceive to this area of experience should signpost ways in which greater numbers of students can be encouraged to participate. This is an important consideration in terms of genuinely widening the student experience and extending opportunities. Confidential university data suggest that students attending the case study institution are predominantly local (86% of the sample), from lower socio-economic groups (78% of the sample from the lower three occupation categories), and from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds; as Findlay and King (2010) reveal, students from precisely these backgrounds are under-represented with regard to opportunities for mobility and travel within HE – and “if, as educators, we are truly committed to democracy and diversity, then the opportunity to study abroad needs to be opened up to more students” (Stroud, 2010:503). The study finds further justification in the fact that, as Edmonds (2010:548) points out, “to date, no published research studies have examined short-term study abroad programmes of two weeks or less, which would possibly open up the experience for many more students.”

Literature review

There is a fair amount of literature on student mobility in HE, though the vast majority of this focuses on study as opposed to placements abroad, examining students studying (sometimes as exchange students) for one or two semesters (so-called 'credit-mobile' students) or for the entirety of their studies (degree-mobile students). Specific literature on IPs in HE is more limited; much of the literature available looks at pre-university 'gap-year' experience, work placement in domestic contexts or at various forms of overseas volunteering. This review is thus based on an analysis of the small number of studies with a specific focus on overseas work experience in HE that are currently available, with references to the more general literature where appropriate. It will be organised in three parts, examining the potential benefits of IPs, the barriers to participation and possible ways of overcoming these.

The benefits of international placements

A reading of the literature leaves very little doubt that overseas experience of any sort is decidedly worthwhile and accrues a vast range of benefits. Many of these relate broadly to the notion of improved employability. Neill and Mulholland (2003) suggest that HE's role in preparing students for the world of work has been an increasing concern over the last 30 years, perhaps more particularly since the publication of the Dearing Report in 1997. Expanding neoliberal influence in many industrial economies has, as suggested in the introduction, served to sharpen this focus on universities' contribution to graduate employability. Discourses of globalisation have further intensified such views, not least among UK employers, the majority of whom (65%), as Brookes and Becket (2010) reveal, believe overseas work experience improves applicants' employability. They go on to note:

“HEIs are thus charged with the role of producing graduates to work within globalised economies and so support national economies.” (p. 375)

Fee and Gray (2011: 530) elaborate on the specific relationship between overseas experience and notions of ‘the global skills race’ and ‘global talent war’:

“With businesses (and workers) becoming more globally focussed and competition for talented staff increasing in intensity and scope (...)

International work assignments (IAs) are commonly used to develop workplace capabilities.”

Such notions are of course contentious, and Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) provide a persuasive critique of these assumptions, suggesting that traditional orthodoxies of knowledge-driven economies supporting social and professional mobility among ‘Western’ workers will struggle to survive in a changing world order that increasingly sees skilled workers from low-cost countries at a professional advantage. Indirectly supporting Brown, Lauder and Ashton’s argument, Heath (2006: 92) discusses how such positional competition encourages some students to “seek new ways of gaining distinction in a world where educational qualifications are no longer sufficient in themselves to guarantee success.” She suggests that overseas gap year experience, for example, is often sought by students precisely because it is perceived to afford them a distinction that enhances their employability. She goes on to argue that participating in such schemes thus “contributes to the creation of an attractive ‘personality package’ within the overall economy of experience” (p.100).

Heath frames this notion of positional competition within a discussion of social closure, whereby elite groups strive to safeguard their advantage by monopolising opportunities. This analysis certainly resonates with the majority of research studies

on student mobility from a number of different countries that identify white female participants from higher socio-economic groupings as significantly over-represented (Heath, 2006; Doyle et al, 2010; Edmonds, 2010; Sherraden, Lough and McBride, 2008; Stroud, 2010; Bartram, 2012). Altering this participation balance looks likely to be a particular challenge in the current UK context of rising HE tuition fees (Brookes and Becket, 2010).

Alongside such widely perceived instrumental benefits of increased labour market value, commentators also identify a broad set of more intrinsic personal and socio-cultural benefits that can be derived from overseas experience, whether in a placement or study context. There is some debate, however, on the extent to which these benefits may depend on the amount of time spent abroad. Brookes and Becket (2010), for example, acknowledge that short-term placements are regarded by some as incapable of yielding wide-ranging benefits, though Stroud (2010: 494) argues “that the duration of study abroad has no significant impact on participants’ global engagement.” Stroud - like many others, in fact: Neill and Mulholland, 2003; Edmonds, 2010; Busby and Gibson, 2010 - points to a range of attitudinal and dispositional gains, including greater individual autonomy, self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility, sociability, inter-ethnic tolerance and world-mindedness. Others add benefits relating to improved cross-cultural communication and an enhanced ability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty (Fee and Gray, 2011). Eraut (2004) provides a detailed model which merges a blend of eight intrinsically and extrinsically inflected benefits, conceived as learning outcomes, that can be achieved through overseas experience. The outcomes relate to:

- Personal development
- Decision-making and problem-solving

- Cultural skills
- High-level communication skills
- Strategic understanding
- Self-awareness
- Role performance
- Domain-specific knowledge and skills

These ideas are widely rehearsed and reiterated throughout the literature, and a strength of Eraut's model is arguably that it integrates instrumental and personal gains. Reflecting on Heath's ideas discussed earlier, it is interesting to note Stroud's ideas on the ways in which intrinsic gains can in fact be extrinsically re-construed and re-presented:

“...development of intercultural communication and global understanding have become an economic commodity with high value in the global marketplace.” (Stroud, 2010:504)

The perceived barriers to IP

Despite the varied benefits discussed above, the literature also reflects an equally wide range of factors that are implicated in students choosing not to participate in overseas experience. Some of these factors relate to institutional matters. Doyle et al (2010) refer to the ways in which inflexible university curricula and workload demands can make it difficult for students to absent themselves for periods of time. Furthermore, if institutions lack an integrated approach/policy to overseas experience, this is unlikely to encourage greater numbers to avail themselves of such opportunities. The same authors discuss how in some institutions prioritising

the recruitment of incoming students for financial reasons might even inhibit approaches that encourage flows in the opposite direction.

The majority of studies additionally refer to the cost of travel and subsistence as financial disincentives, and this factor may be particularly important in the current UK HE context of rising tuition fees and student debt, as mentioned above. Elsewhere, attention focuses on practical and socio-emotional barriers and challenges that may be involved in students negotiating time away from part-time employment, friends and the responsibilities of family (Edmonds, 2011).

In their study, Doherty, Dickmann and Mills (2010) differentiate between two groups of students – the ‘natives’ (disinclined to overseas experience) and the ‘boundary crossers’. Their analysis of the factors which limit boundary crossing focuses primarily on student psychology, noting risk aversion, fears for personal safety and a lack of confidence as key aspects. These issues may naturally be of greater significance for students who have less experience of travel (Edmonds, 2011).

Stroud (2010) adds concerns about foreign language competence, in cases where placements involve travel to non-English-speaking countries. Demographic factors are likely once again to be important in this respect, and though she does not use Doherty, Dickmann and Mills’ terminology, she does echo a similar distinction in identifying a group of students who are male, mature, and/or from lower socio-economic/ethnic minority groupings, and under-represented when it comes to travel abroad, compared to an over-represented group of ‘boundary crossers’, who – as well as being from dissimilar groupings – are also more likely to live on campus, away from home and have fewer familial obligations. In this way, it is likely that the psychology of ‘natives’ – and indeed boundary crossers - is chiefly a function of classed realities. This is not to diminish the important part these psychological

constructs may play in acting as disincentives and barriers – across the literature, there is wide agreement that such ‘affective hurdles’ can be significant obstacles. The question inevitably arises as to how these might therefore be tackled in a bid to extend opportunity and improve participation. Doherty, Dickmann and Mills (2010) unsurprisingly suggest that institutions should attempt to work with students to help them deconstruct and dismantle such psychological barriers, while others (e.g. Edmonds, 2011) point to the need for subsidising arrangements and financial help. In this respect, Edmonds suggests that short-term placements of around two weeks may well be more attractive to more students, given that they constitute a more affordable option. Along with Brookes and Becket (2010), she also indicates that involving (former) placement participants in recruitment and information activities is key, while others such as Doyle et al (2010) emphasize the provision of effective emotional counselling and support, and arranging small group placements which offer more potential for social/peer support once abroad.

Research design

The case study is based on data generated from questionnaires and interviews. The paper-based questionnaire itself consisted of two types of questions – a set designed to establish key background features (gender, age, ethnicity, previous experience abroad) and a number of closed and open-ended questions inviting the students to identify and elaborate on their reasons for not choosing an IP. As mentioned in the introduction, the sample consists of second-year undergraduate students on education-related courses (Education Studies, Childhood and Family Studies, Special Needs and Inclusion Studies) at a modern university in the West

Midlands, who were all obliged to undertake a placement as part of their degree. They had been given the additional option of applying for two-week placements organised in conjunction with institutional partners in the Netherlands and Finland – two countries where English is commonly spoken and understood, thereby minimising the potential for communication difficulties. Students had been informed of these international possibilities at course and module induction, and invited to attend a specialised information briefing session on these options.

The questionnaire (after trialling with colleagues) was administered mid-module, post-dating the point at which students needed to declare their intention to participate or not in the IP. It was handed out to willing participants at the end of a taught session on the module. Students were fully briefed on the nature and intentions of the research, informed that completing the questionnaire was entirely voluntary, and given assurances of anonymity. From an ethical perspective, these points were particularly important – given my involvement in the module as a member of staff teaching and assessing some of the students, it was imperative that I made clear to them that their decision whether or not to take part in the study would have no bearing whatsoever on their progress and success on the course. The idea and importance of voluntary participation was therefore highlighted. In an attempt to preserve the anonymity and dignity of those wishing to opt out, it was suggested they may wish to remain seated for a few minutes so that their non-participation was not made obvious, unless of course they were comfortable to leave. In the end, a total of 106 students agreed to participate (11 chose not to). Of these 106 volunteers, 96 were female, and 93 were aged between 19 and 23. In terms of ethnicity, 80 were white, 11 Asian, 11 black and 4 reported a mixed-race background. Only 11/106

declared that they had never been abroad before. This question was included as it was considered that never having travelled abroad may have been one reason for the low take-up of the overseas placements (from this year cohort, 1 student opted for Finland, 2 for the Netherlands).

At this stage, students were additionally asked to indicate their willingness to take part in follow-up interviews by adding their email address to an attached post-it note that they could hand in separately to preserve their anonymity in the questionnaire. Only 7 students (all female) expressed agreement for this, and all 7 were subsequently interviewed two months after completing the questionnaire. Although data generated by the case study emanates from a single institution, it is hoped that the reasonably large sample and methodological triangulation involved will go some way towards supporting credible impressions that are relatable to other similar-sized urban institutions in the UK and elsewhere.

The questionnaire responses were analysed using a spreadsheet package so that responses could be isolated and interrogated against background variables. This was useful in identifying overall patterns that were later followed up in the individual interviews. The thematic analysis of the interview responses was based on coding using the research questions listed at the start of the paper. In cases of overlap, segments of data were multiply coded as and where appropriate. This approach served to regroup the data into the key areas of interest underpinning the enquiry. Findings relating to each question will now be examined in turn.

Findings and discussion

Reasons for non-participation

In the questionnaire, students were asked to tick any number of items from a list of reasons for their non-participation. The reasons listed related to factors identified in the literature and were arranged in random order. Table 1 below shows the number of responses per item, and presents the reasons in rank order.

(place Table 1 here)

Students also volunteered additional reasons – a perceived lack of information on what the placements would involve (7 responses), a desire for more interesting placement destinations (5) and perceived difficulties being absent from their studies and/or part-time jobs (5) (cf. Doyle et al, 2010).

Looking at the reasons identified and reflecting on the sample demographics and previous studies, it is perhaps unsurprising that financial concerns and certain practical difficulties attracted large numbers of responses. A closer analysis of responses revealed that financial concerns in particular were common across all sample sub-groups. Of those interviewed, nearly all referred to the cost deterrent, the difficulty of arranging time off work, and three students reflected on their situation as single parents and the childcare challenge involved. As one commented:

“Having a three-year-old daughter to care for and being on my own, I mean, it’s just not doable. I wouldn’t and couldn’t really leave her with anyone.”

As suggested in the literature (e.g. Doherty, Dickmann and Mills, 2010, etc), the classed realities of these students may partly be responsible for the fairly large number of collective responses relating to affective and psychological concerns expressed above. When analysing responses against background variables, the only

distinctive association to emerge related to some of these items and age – all of those who ticked a lack of confidence and a fear of the unknown were under 20, suggesting thus that younger students may be – perhaps unsurprisingly again - particularly susceptible to such anxieties. Two interview respondents mentioned a lack of confidence as the primary reason for their non-participation, admitting to feeling very daunted by the prospect of dealing with new people, new situations and unfamiliar environments:

“It just all seems very scary, I don’t think I could cope, I’m not sure that I’d be ready for that sort of thing yet. I don’t think I’m confident enough to be able to present myself professionally.”

Given that many students had indicated such ‘affective hurdles’ in the questionnaire, interviewees were asked to share their views on what might be done to overcome these obstacles. Without exception, all 7 respondents struggled to identify any possible solutions. However, one student offered an intriguing account of how attributing non-participation to a lack of confidence might in some cases be an attempt at impression management by masking an underlying lack of motivation, seen as difficult to admit:

“To be honest, I think if you really want to go, then it’s a thing that you sort of have to get over and will get over. But if you’re not bothered, I think some will just say they haven’t got the confidence as an excuse ‘cos that sounds better than saying you’re not bothered.”

Perhaps more surprising are the fairly large numbers of responses indicating somewhat negative views of the benefits of IPs. As shown in the table, 23 (almost a quarter of respondents) expressed the view that IPs were not an interesting option, and a sizeable minority appear to believe that IPs offer few benefits in terms of

improved employability/CV enhancement. Once again, these responses cut across all sample sub-groups, and were explored further in the interviews. Most of the interviewees expressed surprise that so many of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they were just not interested in IPs – “I find it hard to believe that people wouldn’t be interested at all – there must be other reasons.” During these discussions, several students revealed a clear awareness of the benefits that taking part would offer. Some students framed these within a discussion of personal and social benefits (“it’d be a really fun thing to do,” “it’d be nice meeting different people, seeing different things and getting to know people from a different culture”) whilst others referred to the potential for such “experience to enhance my learning.” Some also alluded to credentialist benefits in terms of improved employability and CV enhancement:

“With the areas I’m interested in, early years and SEN, I think it’d be good to go to an employer armed with first-hand experience of international approaches to these issues.”

Two others expressed the view that taking part in overseas experience like IPs would be useful in persuading employers that candidates possessed certain desirable attributes such as flexibility, broader experience and dedication, “things that the average candidate might not have”:

“Some might be ‘wowed’ and think you’re more confident, open to opportunity, enjoy different experiences and are interested in the wider world.”

Clearly though, awareness of these potential benefits had not been enough to incentivise these particular students, and one student interviewed revealed a rather different view resonating more strongly with the questionnaire responses:

“Part of me wonders really how useful going would be for my future because I’ll be working in Britain... I think employers will be looking more at what experience you’ve had in this country.”

Incentives

The questionnaire invited students to consider what might have made them more inclined to participate. Their suggestions are shown below in Table 2 in rank order of response numbers.

(place Table 2 here)

Perhaps the most surprising finding here is the large number of responses (over 50% of respondents) suggesting that nothing could be done to encourage their participation in IPs. Again, this issue was explored further during the interviews. Several interviewees echoed this rather despondent view – 2 suggested that universities should not attempt to persuade students – “we’re adults, and it’s the individual’s choice to go or not.” Others were simply at a loss to envisage what could be done to encourage greater uptake, and had great difficulty articulating any possible incentives. One student expressed the view that students may have chosen this response in the questionnaire because of difficulties in conceiving of practical strategies at short notice:

“At first, I thought the same, nothing could be done – but maybe if you had a compulsory stand-alone lecture about the overseas placements, informing people as fully as possible, perhaps more people would see the benefits and

change their mind. I say that because I really haven't looked into it either, I just dismissed myself straight away and didn't go to the information session that was organised, but maybe I would have been persuaded to go regardless of some of the family inconvenience and the cost."

2 students re-stated financial support as possible strategies, mentioning the idea of support from educational charities, the possibility of paying by instalments or creating a special fund. The same students acknowledged the challenges of universities providing fully supported placements in the current financial climate, and another questioned whether free placements might in some ways be counter-productive:

"I think if people really wanted to go, they'd find a way to afford it. If it was free, there probably would be a lot more applicants, but some would go for it for the wrong reasons, they'd see it as a bit of a free holiday, so having to pay might at least sort out the serious from the not so serious."

Conclusions

To conclude, it is worth summing up what the study has revealed in answer to the three research questions set out in the introduction. With regard to the first question, it would appear that non-participation results largely from predictable financial concerns and negative affective reactions associated with fears, anxieties and a lack of interest. In terms of the students' views of the benefits of IP, it is clear that there is some awareness of potential personal, social and career advantages. However, this awareness appears clouded in many cases by a fair degree of doubt and reservation - the study shows that many students in the sample question the relevance, usefulness and value of the IPs offered. As discussed, this may relate to the demographics of the sample – it is well known that 'boundary crossers' tend to come

from more 'traditional student' backgrounds. The classed realities of these students may be such that they are simply less disposed to the idea of IP, and some of the students' comments reveal the ways in which they are constrained by their embeddedness in social and professional networks more oriented to the local/national than the international. Few of the perspectives here suggest understandings of IP as a route to greater positional advantage in the 'economy of experience', as discussed by Heath (2006). One response to this finding could simply be to acknowledge and respect this position as an expression of these students' lived realities and local aspirations – as one of the interviewees commented, these are adult students who know their own minds and preferences. Bridges (2006), however, invites us to consider an alternative response in his analysis of adaptive preferences in the context of HE. He discusses how individual choice is influenced, filtered and often constrained by the social contexts in which we operate:

“[...] people come to adjust their aspirations, preferences and choices to the circumstances in which they find themselves, to the realistic possibilities which are open to them, to learned expectations about what their role and place is in society and what they may expect from life.” (p. 21)

Bridges' analysis is useful here, since it highlights that in the interests of social justice, institutions recruiting larger numbers of 'non-traditional students' may need to be much more pro-active in helping students construct, appropriate and internalise a view of IP that is more directly persuasive of its potential contribution to 'the personality package', career enhancement and personal/social development. Without more active support and interventions, students from more elite institutions will no doubt continue to monopolise such opportunities, thereby safeguarding their

own positional advantage and maintaining the social closure Heath (2006) refers to in this connection. This clearly brings us to the issue of solutions raised in the third question. The students' own views suggest a degree of despondency in this respect, given the large numbers indicating that there is little to be done, and the acknowledgement by some that financial support will remain hard to come by in the current climate, and which may be something of a flawed incentive in any case. Bridges' discussion is again useful here and leads us away from defeatism by underlining once more the importance of developing strategies and interventions that support students in developing more convincing and credible understandings of the varied instrumental, intrinsic and humanistic benefits of IPs – understandings which mesh more effectively with student identities and reconfigure perceptions and platforms of choice. Further research on precisely such approaches and possibilities would be both valuable and timely.

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Table 1: Reasons for non-participation

| Reason for not applying for IP | Ranking | Number of student responses |
|--|---------|-----------------------------|
| Financial concerns | 1 | 71 |
| Lack of interest | 2 | 23 |
| Lack of confidence | 3 | 20 |
| Anxiety about leaving friends/family | 4 | 19 |
| Childcare difficulties | 5= | 18 |
| Fear of the unknown | 5= | 18 |
| Anxiety about language skills | 5= | 18 |
| Anxiety about travel | 6= | 12 |
| Not perceived to enhance employability | 6= | 12 |
| Anxiety about being abroad | 7 | 11 |
| Perceived lack of relevance | 8 | 9 |
| Not enhance CV | 9 | 8 |

Table 2: suggested incentives for participation in IP

| Suggested incentives | Numbers of responses |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| No incentives possible | 54 |
| Financial help | 22 |
| More information | 11 |
| Placement during summer | 2 |
| More encouragement from staff | 2 |
| Talks by past students | 2 |
| A wider range of destinations | 2 |
| Shorter placement | 1 |
| Longer placement | 1 |
| Accompanied by tutor | 1 |