

‘Learning’ Transitions in International Student Mobility – The Voices of UK Higher Education Students

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In a context of increasing internationalisation within higher education, this paper draws on the findings of an HEA funded project that explores why UK students decide to study abroad as part of their undergraduate degree programme within the UK. Whilst a significant body of research has focused on international students who travel to the UK in search of higher education, there remains little research on UK students who have travelled abroad as part of their studies. The research that has been completed on UK students who choose study abroad, however, has largely focused on students who travel abroad for the whole of their degree (See Waters and Brooks, 2010, Brooks and Waters, 2009, Brooks et.al, 2012, Findlay and King, 2010, King et.al, 2010). For this reason, there remains little research that explores the decisions and experiences of UK students who travel abroad for study placements, work-placements, or dual-degrees that contribute towards their UK degree (often called credit mobility). I argue that with the recent introduction of work-placements and dual-degrees, it is important to explore and understand the reasons why some UK students are choosing these types of mobility programmes. The findings from this study therefore seek to address this gap by specifically focusing on the motivations and aspirations for UK students who chose to study abroad as part of their UK degree.

The discussion I present through this paper draws on 40 semi-structured qualitative interviews that were conducted with undergraduate students (across 11 different UK HEIs) who had returned from a period spent abroad. Interviews lasted between an hour and two hours and sought to explore, in considerable depth, the backgrounds, life stories, and possible futures for these young people. A number of interesting and significant themes emerged from the data that furthers our understanding of youth travel and mobility. For many of the students interviewed, international travel had been a frequent and ‘natural’ activity that was, more often than not, a coveted value and aspiration throughout their life-course. ‘Study Abroad’, for these young people, represented an opportunity to continue gaining access to new cultures, new experiences, and widening social networks.

The theme that this paper primarily explores though is the ‘learning experience’ and its relationship to the future career aspirations of the young people in this study. Whilst the opportunity to experience a new academic learning environment was not the primary motivation for the majority of participants *per se*, I outline how participants viewed the ‘experience’ of simply going and living abroad within itself as a significant value in ‘learning’. Drawing on the work of Brown and Hesketh (2004), I suggest that, with the demand for skilled knowledge workers increasing, ‘learning’ whilst abroad constitutes an important component of ‘personal capital’ (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). This is achieved, I argue, through developing so called “soft currencies” (Brown and Hesketh, 2004), such as adaptability, initiative, and independence. The ongoing learning process that occurs in the lives of internationally mobile students does not therefore represent two separate motivations characterised by ‘fun/adventure’ and ‘career building’. Instead, I argue and outline how the ‘study abroad experience’ is part of a wider biographical project that shapes the identity of

students into flexible transnational workers that are capable of continuous learning ‘as they go along’.

Within the final section of the paper, I explore a small, yet important theme that developed from students who had studied in North America. Many students who had studied in this continent felt a perceived freedom and flexibility in academic learning that was not achieved in their UK studies. Participants who studied in either US or Canadian HEIs frequently reported that their sense of learning was heightened through the teaching staff who “brought ‘it’ to life”. Similarly, opportunities to take elective modules not related to a student’s major or minor subject, whilst being assessed through smaller, ongoing modes of assessment also contributed to an enjoyment of learning. These points are discussed in relation to students who travelled to other countries and remarked that their experience had established a view that UK higher education offered ‘better quality’ in terms of teaching and learning. Student engagement and a ‘heightened’ sense of learning, in this sense, is explored in the paper as a ‘...psycho-social process, influenced by institutional and personal factors, and embedded within a wider social context’ (Kahu, 2013: 768). This discussion therefore explores new ways in which the student experience both in and outside the classroom can lead to deeper levels of engagement.

References

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