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Outward Mobility from UK HE institutions: Who goes? What to do they do? And where do they go?

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Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract: The EU, the UK HE sector and the UK government are all strongly supportive of increased (and widened) participation in 'outward mobility' or 'credit mobility'. Research has highlighted significant personal and employability benefits for students from mobility, as well as labour market benefits and support for national foreign policy goals. This paper expands upon a detailed analysis of HESA data from UK institutions in 2016/17 that profiled mobile students and their mobility experiences that was undertaken as part of a recent project for the Department for Education. It compares mobility experiences for different types of students (disadvantaged, BAME and international) and identifies diverse mobility profiles across the UK university types. It concludes by discussing the quality of current UK mobility data and how it could be used to creatively to inform policy and practice in a febrile context where a significant facilitator of outward mobility, Erasmus+, is under threat.

Paper: Introduction

The UK HE sector has developed a national strategy to support increased (and widened) participation amongst UK-domiciled students in 'outward mobility' or 'credit mobility' - i.e. studying, working or volunteering abroad within a student's degree programme. Increasing mobility is also an objective of the new UK government international education strategy (DfE and DfIT, 2019). However, UUKi (2019) reports that only 5.6% of students from low-socio-economic backgrounds spent time overseas compared to 9.5% of their more-advantaged peers, based on analysis of UK UG students who completed their degrees in 2016/17.

In 2018, the Department for Education (DfE) in England commissioned CRAC to provide up-to-date intelligence on the outward mobility of UK students in higher education (HE). The scope of this research included both 'credit' mobility (outward mobility within a degree programme studied in the UK) and 'diploma' mobility (a degree undertaken entirely overseas). As part of this project, secondary

data on credit mobility from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2016/17 academic year was used inform primary research with UK full-time first-degree students on their motivations for mobility, their decision-making including barriers and choices, their experiences, and the impacts they derived. This paper provides a broader analysis of this data that considers all mobile students.

Research context

There is a growing body of knowledge and research about the credit mobility of students. Many studies have identified the potential or realised benefits of this type of mobility, including personal, academic, skill-related and career impacts. UUKi (2017) suggested that UK students undertaking an overseas experience were more likely to gain a first-class or a 2:1 degree, and less likely to be unemployed after university. There is increasing evidence that employers are seeking skills associated with mobility; for example, the Erasmus Impact Study (2014) found that 92% of employers are seeking these 'transversal' skills.

Mellors-Bourne et al. (2015) in their study of UK student perceptions on outward mobility found that short-term mobility could enhance the development of employability skills and intercultural competence to almost the same extent as a full year of mobility. It also found that that a short period of mobility substantially increased interest in further international mobility.

Research questions

The following research questions guided this research reported in this paper.

1. What is the nature of mobility activity undertaken by students studying in UK HE institutions?
2. In what ways, if at all, does the profile of mobile students differ from the profile of the wider student population studying in HE institutions?
3. What are the differences, if any, between the mobility activities undertaken by:
 - UK and international students?
 - White and BAME students?
 - Students studying in different types of HE institution (Russel Group, other pre-92, university alliance, other post-92)?

Methodology

The research used a bespoke dataset drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student Record for the 2016/17 academic year. The dataset included variables focused on prior education; socio-economic background; demographics (sex, age, ethnicity); degree courses; and subject. For mobile students who went abroad for one week or more during an academic year the following additional data was included; mobility type (e.g. work, study, volunteering); mobility scheme (e.g. Erasmus+, provider); destination; and duration (in weeks).

Since HESA collects mobility-related data about mobility instances - where appropriate - data was aggregated for analysis at the student level. The student and mobility sets were data were blended using Alteryx software and then imported into Tableau for data visualisation and descriptive analysis using graphs and tables.

Findings

In 2016/17 UK HE institutions reported a total of 46,745 instances of outward international mobility to HESA, undertaken by 42,330 students. There were 31,740 UK-domiciled students and 11,060 international students who were mobile that year.

Amongst UK students, mobility is more prevalent amongst those from more advantaged backgrounds and amongst white students. Credit mobility is rare amongst part-time students, for whom access to opportunities appears to remain challenging, and it is much less common within PG programmes (5%), although 35% of mobility amongst international students is at the PG level.

The subject profile of mobile students is distinct - language students (primarily in Russell Group institutions) distort the figures for UK students. They comprise 17% of UK mobile UG students but less than 2% of all UK UG students. Ninety per cent of UK language students go to Europe, whereas over half of those on study mobility go somewhere other than Europe (over a third to North America or Australasia). Half of all mobility amongst UK undergraduate students is to Europe and 38% of mobility for this group is supported by Erasmus+

Around three-quarters of outward mobility is directly related to study. Most mobility is of an academic year in duration, although very short mobility is more prevalent amongst disadvantaged students.

Conclusions

Since HESA's changes to its mobility data collection in 2013/14, the dataset has become more robust. There remains some under-reporting of data, particularly for very-short term mobility and work placements (Carbonell, 2017), but the dataset provides a useful basis for future research and analysis. Currently, there is no 'ranking' of institutions based on their volume of outward mobility, but this could produce some surprising and provocative results.

Mobile students differ from the wider student population and participation is strongly influenced by subject choices available in different institutions. The primary research related to this analysis suggests that other barriers to participation remain, particularly around finance and the type opportunities available to students.

The significant amount of mobility undertaken by international students in the UK is not widely understood, and this merits more investigation through primary research on student motivations and any academic and personal impacts.

The majority of outward mobility is to Europe, and a significant proportion is funded through Erasmus+. At present, it remains unclear whether the UK will participate in Erasmus+ from 2020, so mobility opportunities may be restricted in the future, and different options may be needed. This changing context could significantly alter the profile of outward mobility, and further analysis will then be required.

References:

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