

## **Identification of barriers to international student mobility.**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

International experience provides students with significant academic and employability benefits. Internationally mobile students are more likely to achieve a good degree and to graduate with first class honours, and are more likely to enter graduate-level employment or further study than their non-mobile peers. Despite institutions promoting international mobility, participation remains low, particularly among the student groups who would most benefit from the experience. Our project focussed on identifying barriers that prevent university students from going abroad, with the long-term aim of reducing these obstacles to participation. An online survey and focus groups gathered quantitative and qualitative data from over 500 respondents in three academic Schools. We identified recurring concerns and which issues are perceived as most important by respondents. In addition to the expected financial concerns, we identified other factors that prevent students from engaging with international opportunities and that may be easier to address, thereby increasing participation.

### **Full paper**

### **Introduction**

International student mobility as it pertains to higher education is any crossing of a national boundary in the context of a programme

of study. A mobility period can span from several days to a full degree, and participants might engage in study, research, work, or volunteering. International experience has significant academic and employability benefits for individuals, in particular for under-represented student groups (UUKi 2017), and consequently contributes positively towards their institution's graduate employability statistics. Within the UK, bodies such as Universities UK International (UUKi) advocate for increased mobility opportunities and promote widening participation. Individual institutions include mobility in their internationalisation strategies, and devote resources to assisting students before, during, and after their travels.

The Erasmus Impact Study (EIS) is a comprehensive EU-wide analysis of mobility in relation to individual skills enhancement, employability and institutional enhancement (European Commission 2017). The EIS demonstrated that students' employability and competencies were enhanced during their period abroad (reviewed in Standley 2015). UUKi analyses outward mobility statistics specific to the UK, and has investigated obstacles to participation (UUKi 2017). Although many thousands of UK students gain international experience annually, in percentage terms participation is still a minority pursuit. Only 5.46% of UK students graduating in 2015 completed at least eight weeks experience abroad; participation from Wales being lowest at 4.68% (Carbonell 2017). The value of short mobility periods has been recognised in recent years (UUKi 2021) and is now included in reporting: 9.7% of graduates from Welsh institutions who responded to the 2017 DLHE survey reported at least one week abroad (UUK 2019). Despite improved participation from all demographic groups, a participation gap still exists between students from more and less advantaged backgrounds (UUKi 2019). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mobility, and the rate at which participation recovers to pre-pandemic levels, is yet to be fully documented.

Cardiff University aimed for 30% of our home undergraduate population to study, work or volunteer abroad for at least three weeks during their programme of study, although our ambitions were necessarily scaled down during the Covid-19 pandemic (Cardiff University 2021). While large studies such as EIS are enormously valuable, their breadth and sheer volume of data mean that local

issues and concerns can be masked. Students benefit from tailored guidance, and staff similarly require immediately applicable information. Interestingly, students are more receptive to encouragement from academic tutors than from peers, so 'advice and support from academic tutors is essential to legitimise and promote all types and durations of mobility' (British Council 2015). Cardiff University is fortunate to have a Global Opportunities team dedicated to supporting mobility.

Our project aimed to identify barriers that prevent or discourage students at Cardiff University from engaging in mobility opportunities, whether credit-bearing or voluntary. This information would be used to create resources for students and staff, to gauge interest in introducing further international partner programmes, and to inform strategies for reducing barriers and thereby facilitating participation.

## **Methods**

We designed an online survey to gather student feedback on factors that would encourage or prevent them from participating in mobility. Over 500 respondents across three academic Schools completed the survey, providing quantitative and qualitative data. Additionally, we conducted focus groups within each School to gather detailed qualitative data. The free text survey responses and focus group comments were analysed to identify recurring concerns and to determine which factors were perceived as most important by respondents.

## **Results and Discussion**

Financial concerns are an obvious barrier, but we identified a range of other factors that may be easier to address: problems over student accommodation; not having access to authentic testimonials from previously mobile students; the academic benefits of international mobility not being made clear; and a lack of clear and timely information on the intranet or from academic staff.

Accordingly, the outputs from our project were a list of targeted recommendations for Global Opportunities about reducing barriers to student mobility; and a School-specific card for personal tutors with

essential information on international opportunities (made available to all Schools, with ten taking up the offer and over 1000 cards distributed).

Our data collection was prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, so tracking the impact of our resources was unfeasible as travel was greatly curtailed. The UK's exit from Erasmus+ also complicates the funding picture, although Turing and other schemes are anticipated to compensate. Nonetheless, the fundamental drivers and barriers are likely to remain broadly similar as mobility recovers, and this research has the potential to inform a revitalised and more inclusive post-pandemic mobility strategy.

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