PERSPECTIVES ON: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

'Ready, steady, go!' How can business schools encourage mobility?

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Introduction

Globalisation of higher education encourages increased student mobility as part of the study experience, leading to gaining skills for world citizenship. Cross-cultural adaptation is a desired effect of mobility and internationalisation. However, decision makers at universities often fail to tap into this rich experience and benefits it offers to students. In an increasingly globalised higher education, with universities aiming to encourage student mobility (both inwards and outwards) through exchange and study abroad programmes (Sweeney, 2012), there is a need to examine the benefits of mobility, especially the complex cross-cultural learning involved. Additionally, it is important that Business Schools prepare to counteract possible negative implications of Brexit on student mobility by raising student awareness of its benefits, including intercultural skills. The development of targeted pre- and post- mobility support is proposed in order to ensure it enhances student experience and benefits all stakeholders involved.

This thought piece contributes to the discussion about the value of international student mobility and how it can be enhanced within Business Schools through long term benefits of cross-cultural learning, given the increased pressure to provide an excellent student experience and hit TEF targets, alongside high quality research for REF. The piece is informed by the results of a study which explored the impact of students' mobility on cross-cultural adaptation in order to produce a set of recommendations for Business Schools who wish to enhance their students' outgoing, international mobility. The study is significant in that it highlights the need to consider a more reflective approach to working with students in mobility and a shift away from a mechanistic focus on systems and structures towards developing practical intercultural skills.

International student mobility

The context for this piece is an increased internationalisation of learning and teaching in higher education worldwide (Knight 2006; Caruana and Spurling, 2007) and specifically the ambition to internationalise student experience (Hyland et al 2008). For higher education providers, internationalisation has presented some opportunities, such as diversifying the courses, bringing in a wider, global perspective in the curriculum and ensuring their graduates are equipped with desirable and up to date global citizenship skills. At the same time, internationalisation is not free from challenges such as an increased pressure to grow income by attracting diverse student populations and expanding the academic portfolio versus addressing the social integration needs of home and international students or their respective academic needs (Knight, 2006). A more inclusive view of internationalisation focuses on 'academic learning that blends the concepts of self, strange, foreign and otherness' (Teekens, 2006, p. 17). This view of internationalisation is also congruent with the perspectives of Haigh (2008) and Sanderson (2007) who foreground the value of personal awareness in intercultural encounters in higher education. Moreover, a student-centred approach reflects the goal of Knight's (2008, p.21) widely cited definition of internationalisation as a 'process'

"integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions (primarily teaching/learning, research, service) or delivery of higher education".

Linked to the dramatic rise of internationalisation of universities is the demand for internationalised courses and employers seeking graduates with competencies in international context and cultural awareness (Bennett and Kane, 2011). Higher education providers strive to provide students with culturally diverse environment through inbound and outbound mobility in order to attract students but also to develop the institution's international reputation and collaborative research and teaching links (Souto-Otero et al, 2013). International student mobility, defined as involving "students who cross national borders for the purpose or in the context of their studies" (Kelo, Teichler, & Wächter, 2006, p. 5) has steadily grown from the second half of the 20th century, with an accelerated rise from the start of 21st century. In 2004, more than 2.5 million higher education students studied outside their home countries compared to 1.75 million in 1999, which is a 41% increase (UNESCO, 2006). The Global Student Mobility 2025 report (Bohm et al, 2002) forecasts that the mobility will experience even further growth with 7.2 million students engaged in international education by 2025. The mobility's main flows were originally East-West but, more recently, they have expanded to East-West, West-East, South-North (OECD, 2007) to reflect the rise of South East Asia as the growing hub of international mobility. There are several types of mobility, including outgoing and incoming mobility of students from and to the host country, degree mobility, whereby students move from one country to another for a full degree, and credit mobility, whereby students spend a period (usually between 3 and 12 months) of their study in another country, then transfer their credits to a home degree (De Wit, 2008). Higher education providers value mobility, including incoming and outgoing students, as a sign of prestige and quality (Green, 2012; Wildavsky, 2010) and as a fulfilment of their ambitions to maintain their international education ranking (Hazelkom, 2011).

The directions of flows of student mobility come under new spotlight in the aftermath of the UK decision to leave the EU as the implications of Brexit are likely to have long lasting effects on student mobility flows to and from the UK as well as worldwide. There are currently 150,000 EU students studying in the UK, bringing much needed income to the universities as well as international and intercultural benefits. According to Hobsons (2016), which surveyed over 1,000 prospective international students, Brexit has affected nearly half of those considering to study in the UK, of which 83% say Brexit has now made them less likely to study in the UK (more than a third overall). However, 61% of all those surveyed suggested that the weaker Pound made UK Higher Education more attractive and many students have made suggestions on what UK Universities could do to make studying in the UK a more attractive proposition. While Brexit may or may not seriously disadvantage student mobility, it may significantly change the availability of opportunities and the expectations of those students who, despite mounting challenges, undertake outgoing or incoming mobility. Brexit may provide opportunities for the emerging powers in Asia as international education hubs to challenge the dominance of the UK or Western higher education providers as students may find non-UK or non-European options more attractive. In the context of the likely changes to the size and flows of mobility, most empirical work examines one type of mobility only, usually incoming mobility. The present study addresses this gap by examining both outgoing and incoming credit mobility as it is deemed the most likely to add 'international/intercultural' value to their degrees (Knight, 2004).

The promotion of mobility by institutions and policy makers is driven by its benefits for the future citizens and professionals in an increasingly internationalised society. The purpose of going abroad can vary and includes learning about a different culture, broadening the mental horizon, extending professional knowledge at a different university, or improving language skills (Berndt & Porzerlt, 2012). Furthermore, for individual students, there are benefits which involve personal development and employability (Bracht et al, 2006), an ability to address more successfully a range of international dimensions at work (Teichler, 2007) and a valuable intercultural competence (Bracht et al. 2006). However, internationalisation does not need to occur through student mobility or exchange programmes. Aerden et al (2013, p.57) challenge the value placed on mobility and student exchanges, stressing that 'internationalisation at home', encompassing internationalisation of the curriculum, facilitating learning in mixed nationality study groups and equipping students with practical intercultural skills, can be equally valuable in the drive for internationalisation. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that student mobility, the associated cultural learning gains and the internationalisation priorities of partner institutions are not always given equal attention. Some of the inequalities due to funding shortages or diversity challenges such as language and cultures may constrain the efforts towards achieving the desired outcomes of mobility (Rachaniotis, Kotsi & Agiomirgianakis, 2013).

Cross-cultural aspects of international mobility – a new way forward?

The growing numbers of internationally mobile students have prompted studies concerning students' adaptation to the host culture, specifically the psychological journey of cross-cultural adaptation which includes 'changes to the sojourner's ways of behaving, thinking and feeling' (Yang et al, 2006, p. 487). The interest in the experience of cross-cultural adaptation is due to it being a predictor of not only the satisfaction with the study abroad experience but also the quality of relations between members from different cultural groups (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 2001). The development of an intercultural competence to deal with different cultural backgrounds and with diverging ways of working or communicating is the most profound of the competencies to be gained from mobility and well researched (Yang et al, 2006). However, there is little empirical research identifying learning cross-cultural adaptation of students in mobility to inform the decision makers at universities. This may lead to less emphasis given to the fact that intercultural learning does not automatically increase by simply being in a foreign culture and there are other factors that play a decisive role (Berndt & Porzelt, 2012).

Although there is a growing body of academic literature on student mobility, there is relatively little research on students' perspective in developing cross-cultural learning (Brooks and Waters 2011), which the paper seeks to address. The study referred to in this piece contributes to the body of literature on mobility by examining how short term, outgoing mobility impacts cross-cultural learning, especially the development of cross-cultural awareness and competencies, seen from the students' perspective. Using a mixed method approach and student led-data, the study achieves an insight into how students' learning approaches develop as result of student mobility.

Cross-cultural learning adaptation of international students

Studies have shown that studying abroad broadens students' outlooks, makes them more independent, and increases their intercultural competencies (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Nunan, 2006). However,

students often experience many challenges in adapting to new learning contexts, including a range of linguistic and academic challenges (Devos, 2003, Skymne, 2007) as well as socio-cultural adaptation, such as getting used to the new social customs and norms (Schwarzer, Hahn and Schroder, 1994), psychological adaptation due to the loss of their home social network (Yang and Clum, 1995) and adaptation issues due to target language proficiency and academic performance (Haynes and Lin, 1994). Additionally, whether a student succeeds in developing effective intercultural skills as a result of the study abroad experience depends to a large extent on the student's personal factors as well as the characteristics of the host culture, and the characteristics of the study abroad program (Stephenson, 2002). Furthermore, as Dwyer (2004) states, the length of time spent abroad is very important for the intercultural and personal development. A full year abroad can affect the student more significantly and long-lasting than shorter stays. However, above all, whether the study abroad experience is perceived as a positive one, depends to a large extent on the acculturation strategies and the extent of cross-cultural adaption experienced by the students (Berry, 1990).

Cross-cultural adaption in its broadest sense tends to be discussed in the literature from the host community perspective or incoming mobility point of view, which is a traditional way of perceiving mobility, as illustrated below. The desired objective of mobility, an increased students' cross cultural awareness and sensitivity, is not always achieved as a result of student mobility as illustrated in the outcomes of the empirical study with students at home university in Australia by Forsey, Broomhall and Davis (2012). In an empirical study, they explored what students expect to learn and really learn from the university study abroad program after the study abroad experience. The difference between expectations and the real learning achieved may be due to the fact that cross-cultural adaption is affected by a number of factors including target language proficiency and communication competence, which in turn relates to a better interaction with members of the host culture, which leads to fewer socio-cultural adjustment problems (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Masgoret & Ward, 2006). The other important factor in cross-cultural adaption is an extent of integrative motivation which involves a positive disposition towards the host community and the desire to develop a sense of belonging to the host community (Lightbown & Spada, 1999) and in turn leads to a regular contact with the host community which improves their cross-cultural adaptation (Masgoret & Gardner, 1999).

Further factors can affect cross-cultural adaption including the cultural fit or a fit between one's internalised cultural framework (e.g. personality, affect, cognition and behaviour) and cultural norms of the society in which one begins to reside as a result of mobility (Ward and Chang, 1997; Ward, Leong & Low, 2004). Related to this is another variable which can affect cross-cultural adaptation – a self construal or a conceptualisation of the self and behaviour shaped by the primary culture. It was examined by Yang et al in a questionnaire study with international students studying in Canada compared with Canadian-born students (2006). The outcomes suggest that, apart from personality traits, developing linguistic and communication skills may contribute to a better match between individuals' internalised attributes and the characteristics of the host society. Finally, based on Pusch's (1979) cross-cultural learning continuum, which starts at ethnocentrism and develops to awareness, understanding, acceptance, appreciation, to some form of selective adaptation (either assimilation, adaptation, biculturalism or multiculturalism), Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) conducted a qualitative study and found that language skills, academic issues and social interaction

were the most difficult adjustment areas for the incoming international students. To sum up, there is an abundance of literature on cross cultural adaptation factors, however it is largely based on either theoretical conceptualisation or empirical evidence achieved from researcher-led and quantitative studies with a focus on, mainly, incoming /host adaptation, with little evidence arrived at from a student perspective and in an outgoing mobility context.

The study

A study in the Business School and Design School adapted a new and innovative approach to exploring the impact of mobility on students' cross-cultural adaptation, using students' owned multi-media records of experiences of outgoing mobility. The study examined the learning experiences of nine UK students on a six month exchange with a partner institution in China and nine Chinese students studying for six months in the UK Business School. Specifically, it examined students' evolving perceptions of their own culture of learning and that of the host, as they go through the experience of study abroad. Following the university ethical procedures, students were asked in advance to give their informed consent to participate in the study. The sample size reflects the small number of students in outgoing mobility but it has also enabled a thorough analysis of the development of students' cross-cultural adaptation skills.

Given the increased mobility of students across cultures, it is likely that patterns of influence may become increasingly mutli-dimensional, rather than unidimensional, so requiring researchers to adapt ever more complex conceptions of cultural difference and interdependence (Greenfield, 2003). To achieve this, qualitative data was generated through a mixed method approach. This included three methods: in-depth interviews at the start and at the end of their study abroad informed by the two further methods that are students' video diaries and reflective journals, which were undertaken longitudinally in parallel with the students' study in the host countries for four months. The self-collection instruments, video diaries and reflective journals, were included in the methodology to account and minimise power-dependant relations with participants (Hague, 1997, Mertens, 2005).

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Using creative interventions, including cultural probes such as photos, videos (Gaver et al 2004) - a design-led approach to understanding others, stressing empathy and engagement using evocative tasks to elicit inspirational responses - the study was not only student-driven but it enabled a first-hand capture of the key experiences in outgoing student mobility, such as the video clips produced by students as part of the video diaries they kept.

A careful analysis of the seven themes emerging from the data and corresponding to the key features of cross-cultural learning conceptualisation proposed by Cortazzi and Jin (2013) reveals some thought provoking results. In **Theme 1 Teacher central to the adaptation process**, it is clear from the interviews (both rounds) that the role of the

tutor is central to students' cross-cultural learning adaptation process in both outgoing and incoming mobility. The participants reported the "caring and helpful" attribute as one of the characteristics of "good teachers/lecturers' they looked for during their study abroad. The reflective journals further stressed this aspect but it was discussed less in video diaries, probably because students tended to focus their video diaries on more immediate aspects of their adaptation and reflecting on more personal themes and more holistic issues in reflective journals.

In **Theme 2 Adaptation of the learning process**, during interviews and in video diaries, the majority of the participants reported developing their approach to the learning process as self-study-focused. There was a fair amount of comments made about the pace and organisation of the learning process, the participants commenting that the timetable and programme structure were more erratic and unpredictable.

Theme 3 Interaction with tutors was represented mainly in reflective journals and video diaries. A preference for face-to-face communication was reported. Due to the language issue, more so for the outgoing participants in China, they depended to some extent on the help of translators so they found it very difficult to use email or mobile phones to speak with the tutors.

n **Theme 4 Perceptions of good learning** a number of references were made to the evolving perceptions of what it means to achieve good learning. An individual responsibility and a strong self-motivation were the key drivers to the approach to learning in outgoing mobility.

Theme 5 Role of peers in learning adaptation process examines fellow students acting as helpers in the participants' cross-cultural adaptation to the new learning environment and runs strongly through the interviews, reflective journals and video diaries.

In **Theme 6 Assessment and learning,** interviews generated some discussion about the role of assessment in the process adapting one's learning, viewing assessment as the priority for their study.

Theme 7 Preferred form of assessment captures practical and especially oral assessment types were discussed by participants at interviews and in reflective journals. Presentations were reported to be the favourite type of assessment.

A rich picture of students' interaction with the new academic environment emerged with two striking findings. The first was the richness captured by the students through a self-selected lens of a video or a blog, and the second was that students' experience of the new academic culture is complex and evolving over time. This made them explore their own culture of learning, and therefore becoming more mature and focused learners. It was revealing to find how much the students enjoyed and embraced the innovative ways and recording their experience using social media. This shows that students interact with the new environment in creative ways and this can be a powerful promotion tool for those considering outgoing mobility as part of their studies.

Based on the study outcomes, a number of recommendations can be offered to effectively promote outgoing mobility to students in the Business Schools. Pre- and post-mobility intercultural skills training is recommended to first prepare the students for the experience and then to ensure the insights and experiences serve as a platform for consolidating students' intercultural skills – a much sought after employability skill. Pre-mobility intercultural skills training and workshop how to capture experiences. Guidelines for systematic, pre-mobility, intercultural skills development are suggested to ensure maximum benefits from study abroad to incentivise students through creative and student driven assessments based on mobility experience, perhaps being able to explore as a theme for dissertation.

Where next? Concluding perspective

For education providers wishing to increase student mobility, or just to maintain current levels of student mobility in the face of post-Brexit potential difficulties with study abroad for inbound or outbound students, it seems necessary to ensure students are provided with effective preparation for mobility. Apart from the necessary travel arrangements, which may involve visa restrictions for EU students or UK students wishing to study in Europe, raising students' awareness of their own culture of learning and preparing students for the intercultural encounters prior to engaging in student mobility is recommended. Moreover, in case intercultural awareness needs to be achieved without opportunities for physical student mobility, developing strategies for 'internationalisation at home' such as workshops in intercultural awareness, celebrating diversity of student population and working actively with students to enrich the curriculum, may need to be given new and more focused attention by the higher education providers. Furthermore, higher education institutions may need to consider being more resourceful in generating opportunities to share more widely the benefits experience of student mobility beyond processes and structures and towards developing cultural meanings. This can be achieved by asking the returning exchange students to present a short video/slideshow describing their experiences studying and living on exchange to prospective exchange students. Another way institutions can prepare students would be through a buddy up scheme with European students. Finally, students should be equipped with sound independent study skills and this can provided through workshops for students on intercultural awareness and developing intercultural intelligence for the global environment.

As motivating students to take part in increased mobility often relates to how they perceive long term benefits from mobility (Brooks and Waters 2011), it is recommended to maximise capturing learning from study abroad experience through a number of mechanisms including ensuring students know how to record the experience of developing intercultural awareness and use it to enhance assessments from study abroad and enhance their curricula vitae. Another way could be through sharing the experience online with other students and visiting exchange students when they are abroad. Student assessment and moderation of marks as students return from mobility is an area which needs to be given attention, as well as the cross-cultural adaptation of students on an incoming mobility to the UK Business Schools. This can be addressed by breaking up clusters of students from the same university and integrating them in to a broader international student cohort (see Foster and Anderson, 2015).

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Author biography

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