

# Student perspectives on **going international**



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# Executive summary

The UK Strategy for Outward Mobility aims to increase the proportion of UK-domiciled students participating in a UK higher education (HE) mobility programme. It includes a research programme to enhance understanding of the impact of overseas study and work placements on student experience, academic attainment, employment outcomes and personal development.

The UK Higher Education International Unit and the British Council commissioned this research into UK-domiciled students' perspectives on the outcomes of outward mobility as part of a UK undergraduate degree. The research aimed to:

- Increase understanding of UK-domiciled students' perceptions of the benefits of outward mobility and barriers to participation in mobility programmes.
- Increase understanding of what factors influence the decision making process of UK-domiciled students when considering outward mobility
- Provide evidence for UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and policymakers who are developing and implementing initiatives to increase the number of students accessing international opportunities.

The findings are based on an online survey of 2842 undergraduate students in 37 higher education institutions, and focus groups in eight of these institutions. It included UK-domiciled students who had been abroad, who were considering going abroad and who had considered going abroad and decided not to.

The students surveyed nearly all perceived a positive link between mobility programmes of one year or less and academic, career and personal development. Developing independence and intercultural understanding, and an increased likelihood of working abroad long term were the most commonly reported realised benefits. Few long term negative impacts were reported.

Very short mobility periods resulted in similar impacts to longer periods of mobility, suggesting that it is the experience of being abroad rather than the activity undertaken that is critical. Almost all students who had been mobile wanted to experience further mobility. Funding very short visits such as summer schools and 'taster' visits could lead to increased participation in longer programmes as they offer similar impact to longer term mobility. Partial funding for mobility periods could have a significant influence on participation.

Students' motivations for participation in mobility are mostly consistent across study abroad, work experience and volunteering. The principal motivations were a desire for enjoyable and interesting experiences, to broaden horizons, and to enhance employability and career prospects. Other commonly reported motivations include developing intercultural awareness, independence and self-confidence, enhancing degree outcome and for some, improving language skills. The motivations cited were largely consistent whether the mobility period was a few weeks or a full academic year.

Key factors for students in deciding whether to go abroad were the availability of funding and total cost of the experience, personal safety and security, reputation or perceived quality of host and location. Duration and language requirements were also considerations for some students.

Barriers to mobility observed by students considering a period abroad included fear of isolation, insufficient funding, lack of knowledge of available opportunities, lack of language skills and language training options, and the potential impact on degree length. Personal barriers were less important for short mobility periods, although funding and lack of knowledge opportunities were more significant concerns for short mobility periods. Funding and lack of knowledge opportunities were also key concerns for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Services and information offered by institutions, such as help in choosing a destination and completing an application were considered to be the most valuable in decision making, in particular for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students travelling for very short periods need similar support to those travelling for a semester or longer.

While students value the experiences of previously mobile students and their peers when making a decision, the encouragement of academic tutors was a more significant factor. Advice and support from academic tutors is essential to legitimise and promote all types and durations of mobility to students.

## KEY MOTIVATIONS FOR STUDENTS TO SPEND TIME ABROAD:



**Interesting and  
enjoyable experience**



**Broadening  
horizons**



**Employability**

# 2 Introduction and context

The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) was commissioned by the UK Higher Education International Unit and the British Council to investigate UK student perspectives on outward mobility from a UK higher education institution. This contributes to the International Unit's Go International programme of research which aims to further understanding of the outcomes of different types of international mobility and, in particular, the impact of study and work abroad on student experience, academic attainment and employment outcomes.

Outward mobility means durations from a few weeks to a maximum of one academic year. Data in the next section specify durations of one year (medium term - the most common), one semester (short), durations between a semester and a year (short to medium), 6-12 weeks (shorter), and less than 6 weeks (very short). See Figure 2 in Section 3 for a breakdown.

The research is intended to:

- Provide evidence for UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and policymakers who are developing and implementing initiatives to increase the number of students accessing international opportunities.
- Increase our understanding of UK students' perceptions of the benefits of outward mobility and barriers to participation in mobility programmes.

## 2.1 Statistics on outward mobility

The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has reported on student mobility (including work placements) for a number of years and has become more precise in this reporting. Prior to 2013-14 the minimum period was three months (i.e. a semester, the duration of an Erasmus exchange); from 2013-14 onwards the data specify duration and destination and include periods of only a week.

According to HESA 2013/14 data, 1.2% of all UK undergraduate students were mobile. Among UK undergraduate second and third year students (when the majority of mobilities take place) the proportion rises to 2.5%. On average, the proportion of 2nd and 3rd year undergraduates going abroad per institution was also 2.5%. Of UK undergraduate students, 74.0% studied abroad, 23.5% undertook work placements and 2.5% volunteered abroad. 51% of these were through Erasmus, 40% were through institutional links (generally with institutions outside of Europe) and sandwich placements/other. Of particular relevance to this report, the top three most popular periods of mobility for study placements were 30 weeks, one week and eight weeks, while for work placements it was 30 weeks, 52 weeks and 35 weeks.

Recent reports by Joan-Anton Carbonell are based on a combination of HESA, Erasmus and institutional data for students going to non-European destinations. The most recent of these (Carbonell 2014) shows a continuing increase in outward mobility from the UK for both study and work placements. Carbonell (2013) also observed that Erasmus mobility is becoming less dependent on language students; this is a positive indicator of potential for increased participation. He also finds, however, that post-1992 institutions still have lower mobility rates than Russell Group and other pre-1992 universities.

The UK HE International Unit's 2015 report, 'Gone International', focused on employment and earnings outcomes in 2012-13. It found that:

- A lower proportion of UK graduates who were mobile were unemployed;
- A higher proportion of graduates who were mobile were working abroad, if in employment;
- On average, graduates who were mobile earned more across 11 out of 17 subject areas;
- Graduates who were mobile earned more if they remained in the UK to work;
- Graduates who were mobile were earning more in 40 out of 67 subjects (with available data), with disparities as high as £3,000 in some cases.

A 2004 HEFCE study found that student mobility was disproportionately – and increasingly – concentrated in pre-1992 universities. Such institutions accounted for half of all outward mobility in 1995-96 and two-thirds in 2002-03. Corresponding shares for post-1992 universities declined over those years (HEFCE 2004).

Not much had changed by 2010: 'credit-mobile students are disproportionately young, female, white and middle-class, and are academic high-achievers, compared to the total UK student population' (King et al. 2010: p2).

To achieve the UK Strategy for Outward Mobility's aim of increasing the proportion of UK-domiciled students participating in an international experience as part of their UK higher education, more students from underrepresented groups need to participate in mobility programmes. This report hopes to contribute to that aim by augmenting the evidence base on what factors influence the decisions of these underrepresented groups.

# 3 Research aims and methodology

This study aims to identify the benefits of a period spent abroad as part of a UK HE programme, as well as the barriers to doing so, as perceived by UK students. This includes study, work experience and volunteering abroad related to or part of a UK degree programme. The particular focus is participation in short-term outward mobility, which is defined as less than an academic year in duration.

The research themes and topics were agreed as:

- Motivations: why do UK students study, work or volunteer abroad during their studies?
- Barriers to participation in outward mobility:
  - What factors influence students' decisions whether or not to undertake an overseas experience during study?
  - How important are financial concerns, credit recognition, and academic and language requirements?
  - What role do institutions, families and peer networks play?
  - How do students find out about opportunities for overseas experiences?
- Perceived impacts:
  - What are the impacts of an overseas experience on students academically and in relation to employability and career trajectory?
  - What are the personal and other impacts (real and expected) of the overseas experience?
- How these issues vary for different types of outward mobility – study, work and volunteering – and for different groups of students;
- Identification of effective institutional promotion and support strategies.

It attempted throughout to maintain the focus on short-term mobility and to identify its distinctiveness through these student perspectives.

## 3.1 Research methodology

The research was designed as a phased mixed-methods study, with literature review, online survey of a range of participant groups, and a series of focus groups at universities. The literature review has been produced separately from this report. A brief summary of the methodologies for the primary research phases follows. It should be noted that these data are based on survey and focus-group participants and so may not always reflect the national picture of mobility participation as reported by HESA.

## 3.2 Survey-based primary research

The purpose of the online survey was to obtain perspectives from a broad cross-section of UK-domiciled first-degree undergraduate students and recent graduates about motivations, decision-making, experiences and impacts of a period abroad. These included:

- Current undergraduate students who were considering study, work or volunteering abroad;
- Current students who had returned from time spent abroad (i.e. 'post-mobile');
- Current students who were abroad at the time of survey
- Current students who had considered going abroad but had chosen not to or were not able to do so;
- Recent graduates who had been mobile during their first degree.

The online questionnaire contained mostly 'closed' questions and made use of scales in order to investigate the relative importance of particular issues. Some open-ended questions were included to provide opportunities

for detailed responses on key issues. HEI staff involved in managing outward mobility programmes were engaged through a range of networks and contacts and asked to forward email invitations to undergraduates and recent graduates to participate in the survey during March 2015.

### 3.2.1 Survey participation

In total 3010 responses to the survey were obtained, of which 2842 responses were from first-degree students. Three-quarters of students who provided their nationality were UK-domiciled; these 1588 respondents constitute the core response sample.

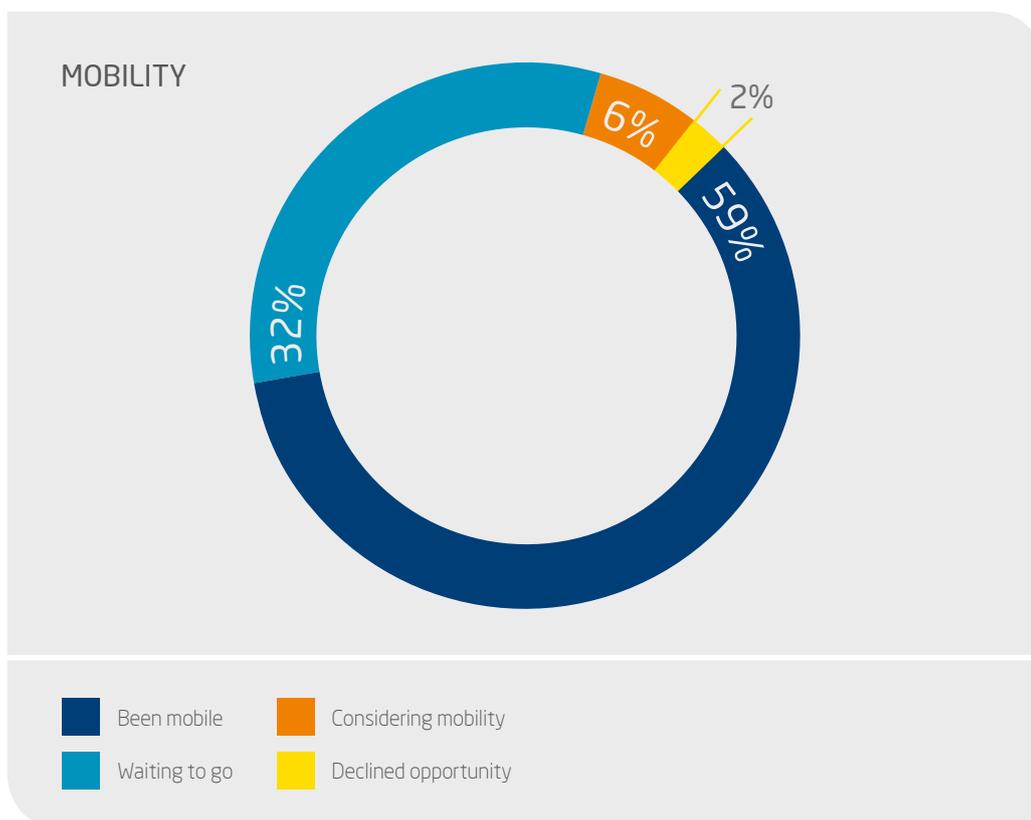
#### Profile of UK respondents

Key aspects of the profile of the core response sample are shown in Figure 1. 59% had already been mobile, 32% had applied and were waiting to go abroad, 6% were considering whether to do so, and 2% had already considered mobility but decided against. Many participating institutions reported that they found it difficult to reach the latter two target groups, as they were not always able to record contact details of these types of students.

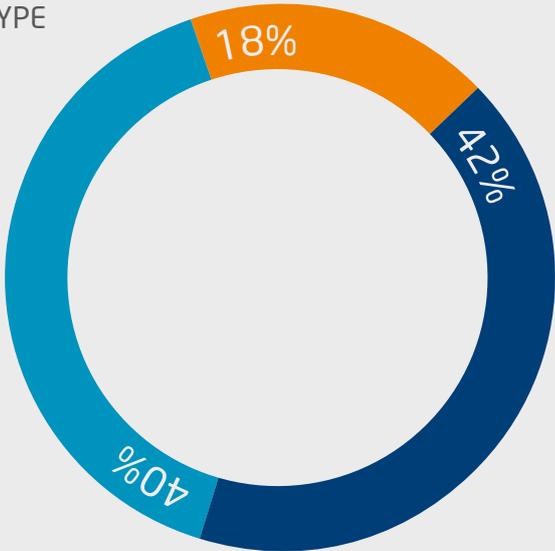
UK respondents were students at 36 HE institutions, listed in the Appendix. Most were in pre-1992 institutions, with 18% at post-1992 institutions. 87% of the core respondent group were in England, just marginally higher than the proportion of English in the UK population.

Respondents were split relatively evenly between those in study years 2, 3 and 4, with 13% being first-year students and a small minority (2%) recent graduates. Subjects of study are described in section 3.2.2.

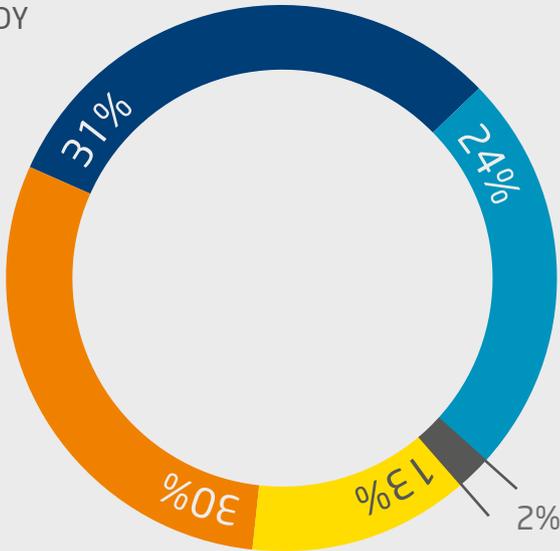
Figure 1 Profiles of UK-domiciled survey respondents (N = 1588)



UNIVERSITY TYPE



YEAR OF STUDY



94% were aged 25 or under. In order to obtain an idea of socio-economic background, respondents were asked to provide their parents' occupations (where appropriate). Categorisation of occupations as either professional or non-professional suggested that 80% of UK respondents had one or both parents in a professional occupation.

## Representativeness

Although not a random sample, its size in relation to the total number of UK students thought to participate in mobility (22,100 according to HESA 2013/14) suggests that it offers a valuable view of student perceptions.

Compared with Erasmus and HESA data, a higher proportion (73%) of this sample were female. This may reflect the sampling method, as women are more likely to respond to research surveys than men. The high proportion of those with a parent in a professional occupation is consistent with a continuing dominance of middle-class families in participation in outward mobility, as reported by HEFCE (2004).

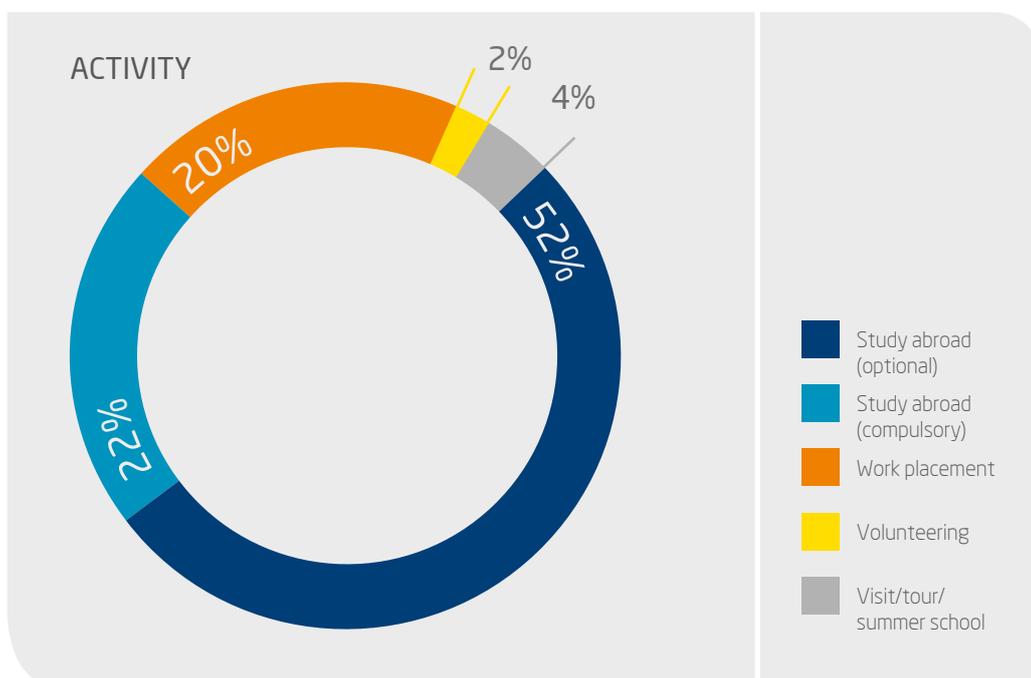
## Mobility profile

A key task for this study was to understand in some depth the types and durations of mobility about which respondents expressed perspectives (Figure 2). 74% of UK respondents referred to a period of study abroad or an academic exchange (hereafter described as ‘study abroad’), either compulsory within their degree (22%) or optional (52%). 20% of respondents were involved in a work placement, for around half of whom it was an integrated part of their degree (NB. this category included Erasmus traineeships). Much smaller proportions were involved in volunteering (2%), or a study tour or summer school (4%).

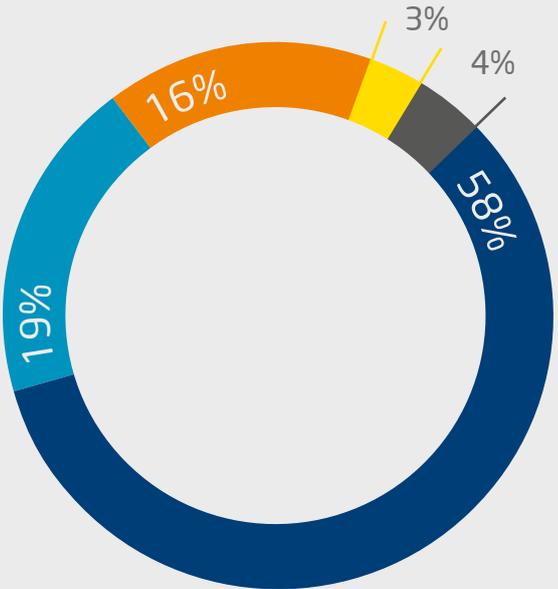
The focus of this study is on mobility of up to one year, though data were collected for mobility of a full year in order to facilitate comparisons. Mobility durations are shown in Figure 2: for over half (58%) it was an academic or calendar year, for 16% a single semester, while 18% fell between these two durations. For 8% the activity was less than a semester in duration.

For destinations, just under half (48%) went to other European countries, while North America (28%) and Australia/New Zealand (11%) were the next two most common regions. The most popular destination countries were, in order, the USA, France, Spain, Australia, Canada, Germany and Italy.

Figure 2 Characteristics of mobility activity of UK respondents (N = 1412)

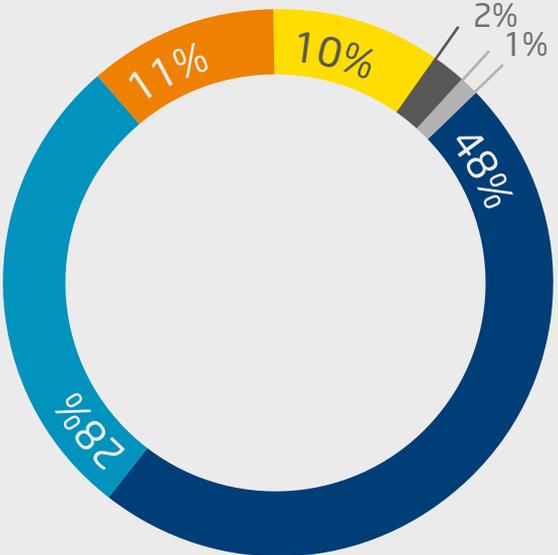


DURATION



- 1 Year
- Between year and semester
- 1 Semester
- 6-12 weeks
- < 6 Weeks

DESTINATION



- Europe
- North America
- Australia/New Zealand
- Asia
- Latin America
- Africa

### 3.2.2 Participation in different types and durations of mobility

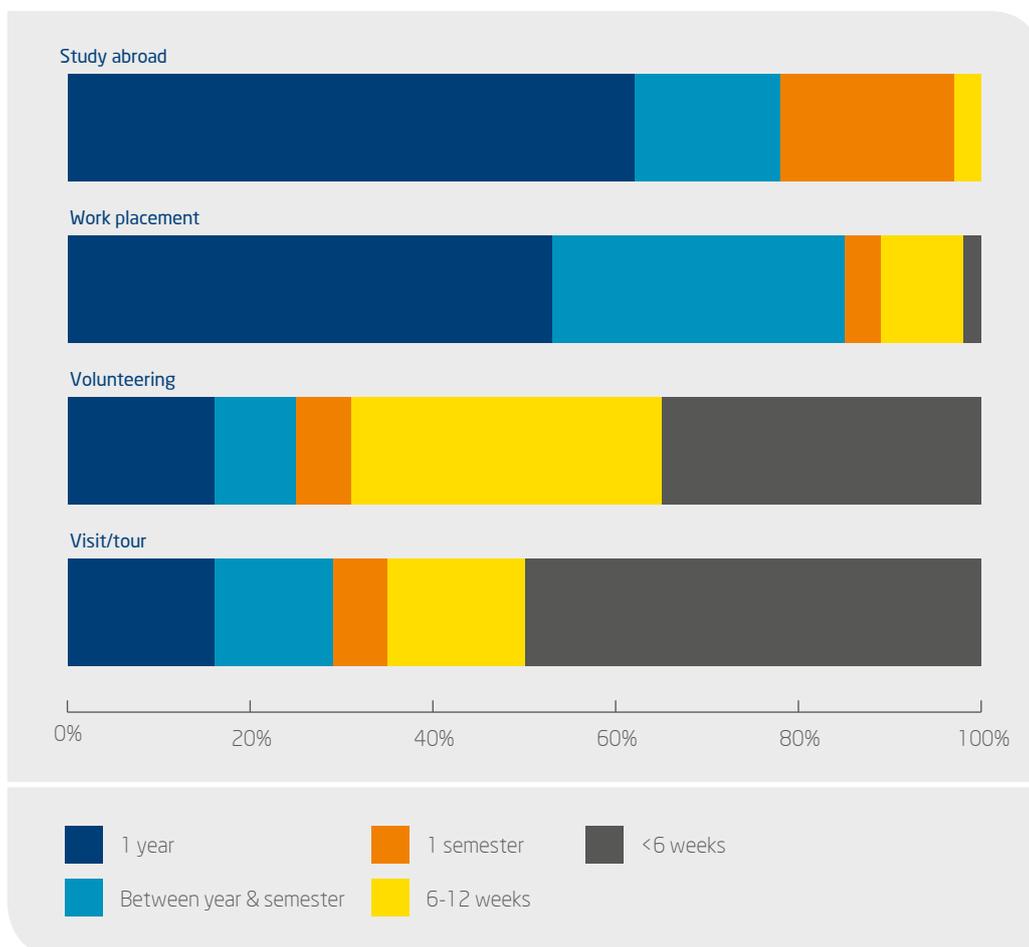
Analysis of duration and type data together confirmed that most very short mobility (less than 2 months) was in the form of a study tour or a summer school, or volunteering, though there were also some work placements of 2-3 months. Mobility of a semester's length was almost entirely (95%) optional study abroad, very often through Erasmus. Medium-duration mobility of more than a semester was usually a compulsory year abroad or work placement.

Relating these variations the other way around (Figure 3):

- 60% of volunteering experiences were less than 8 weeks in duration, with the most common lengths 3-8 weeks.
- 85% of work placements were longer than a semester; more than half were an academic year in length.
- Nearly two-thirds of study abroad or academic exchanges were an academic year in duration; 20% were a semester.

Half of the study visits/tours and summer schools were less than six weeks in duration. It is unclear whether the longer periods reported were due to respondents combining two or more study abroad experiences (which they interpreted as a 'tour') or having misclassified a study abroad experience as a study visit, but these seem likely interpretations.

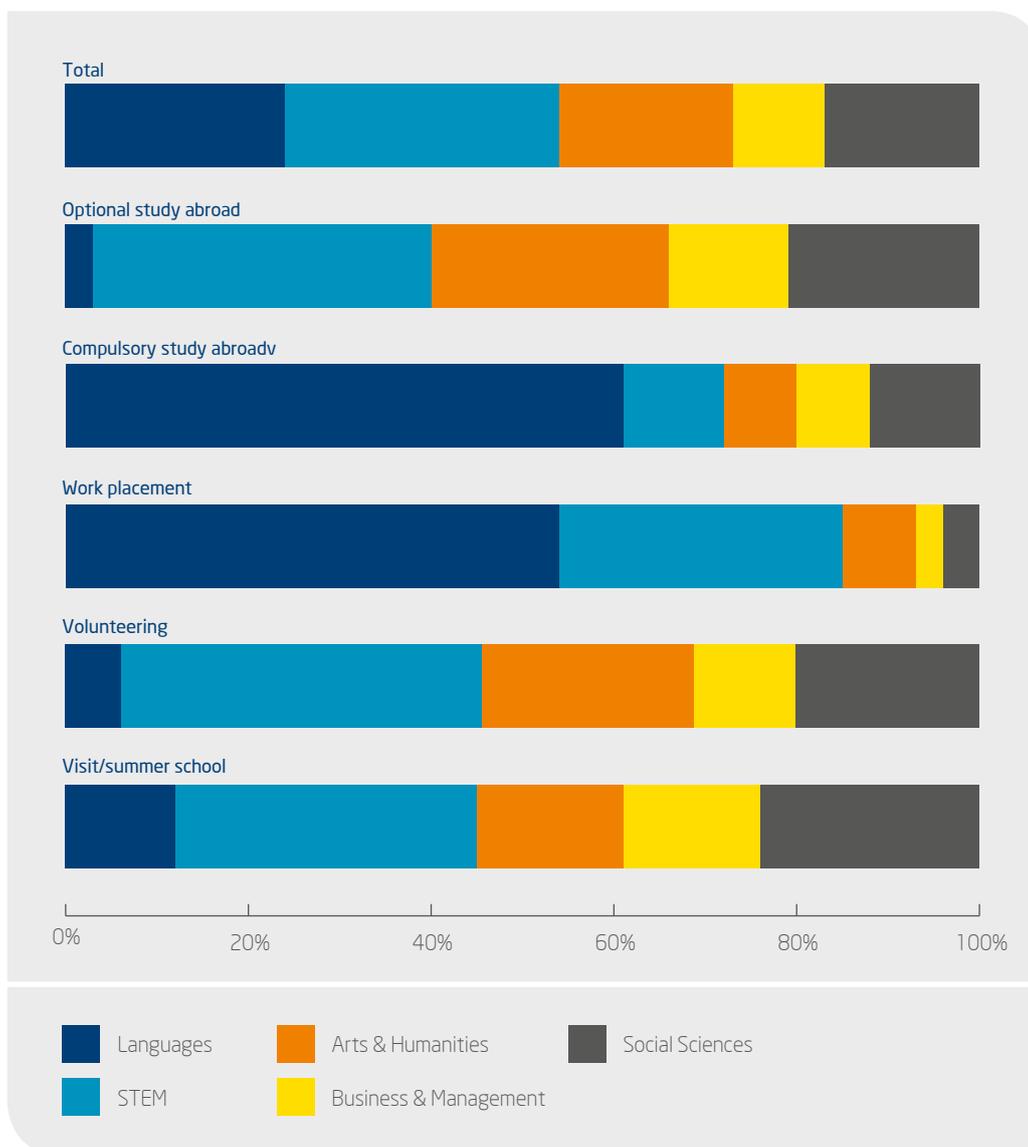
Figure 3 Duration of different types of mobility for UK-domiciled survey respondent.



There were no significant differences in the type or duration of mobility in relation to the gender of the UK respondent. However, slightly more respondents 'without a parent in a professional occupation' were involved in or considering very short periods of mobility, and slightly fewer of them were involved in or considering year-long mobility, compared to those with a parent in a professional occupation.

The overall respondent sample was relatively balanced across different subject areas, with more STEM<sup>1</sup> students (30%) than language students (24%). However, the subject profile for different mobility activities varied strongly (Figure 4). Language students were by far the largest proportion of those on compulsory study, and the largest group undertaking work experience (partly reflecting their participation in the Erasmus language assistance scheme). On the other hand, the subject profiles for optional study abroad, volunteering, visits or summer schools, were quite similar, with few language students taking part.

Figure 4 Participation in different types of mobility, by subject of study



<sup>1</sup> Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics - in this case including related subjects.

### 3.3 Qualitative primary research: focus groups

Focus groups with students were held to understand their decision-making and experiences in more detail, as well as how their institutions had promoted mobility and supported them.

A sample of eight universities was selected to include a range of institutional types, locations and forms of mobility. The sample comprised six HEIs in England and one each in Scotland and Wales. Three were pre-1992 institutions with high average entry tariff scores (of which two were Russell Group members), four were post-1992 institutions (one medium and three low tariff), while the other was a specialist arts institution.

Nine focus groups with a total of 91 students were held in March 2015. Groups contained a mix of students who had been mobile, who had made a decision to go (but not yet gone abroad), and who were considering it. They also covered a range of types and durations of mobility, but with a focus on durations of a semester or less. Each group aimed for approximately 10 participants, across a range of study subjects and personal characteristics.

An important subset of participants across all groups were a few who were 'serially mobile', i.e. had taken advantage of multiple overseas opportunities (a small number of these were non-UK nationals who had not been targeted but wished to participate).

Those who had been abroad were more able to engage with certain questions, as they had concrete experiences on which to base perspectives. However, when these students related motivations and decision-making, some post-rationalisation was likely to have been involved.

The most important information sources and influences during decision-making were:

- Information about funding opportunities and grants; Experiences of previously mobile students;
- Help choosing a destination and making the application, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Encouragement and support from academic staff;
- Evidence of potential impact on skills development – especially for very short periods abroad;
- Peers, for students living away from home.

Those from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be less confident and need help in convincing parents of the value of the mobility experience in order to obtain their support.

Help with finding funding was as or more important to those considering very short periods of mobility as those considering a longer period away.

In general, support and information provision for those considering a semester abroad was as effective as for those considering a full year of mobility, and typically originated with the study abroad office.

Support for volunteering, and for very short mobility of other kinds, was more varied and typically more reliant on faculty, while support for work placements was also departmentally based. Greater support from academic staff for mobility beyond established study abroad schemes and work placements would be welcome.

The hardest information to find varied according to the individual, but reflected issues such as financial support for those with more complex circumstances (i.e. with dependents), credit recognition or transfer, and practical issues such as accommodation.

# 4 Motivations to study, work or volunteer abroad

## Key findings

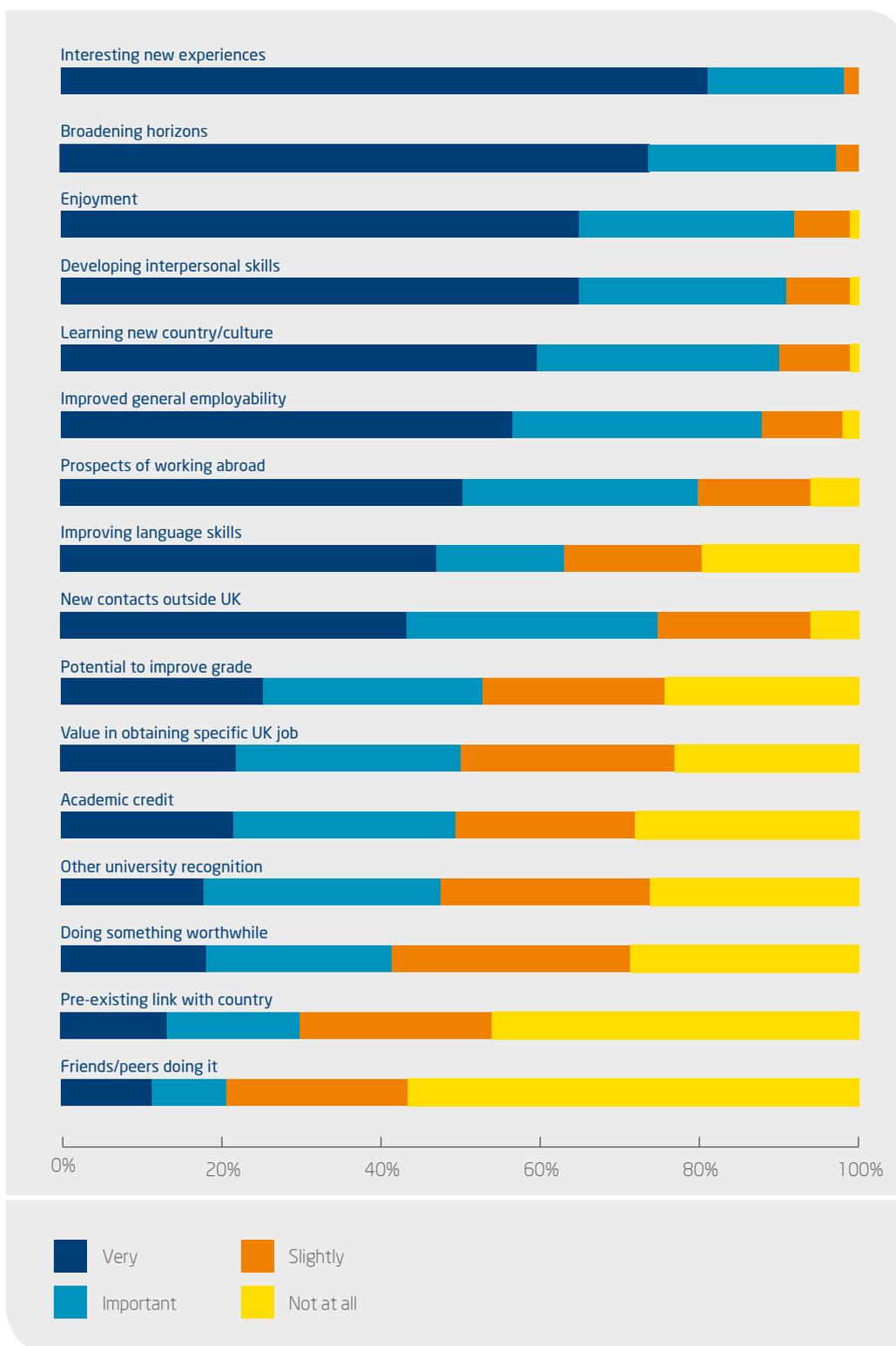
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- Key motivations for participation in short- to medium-term outward mobility were consistent across different types and durations of mobility:
  - To have an interesting and enjoyable experience;
  - To broaden horizons;
  - To enhance employability and employment prospects;
  - To develop intercultural awareness and a range of interpersonal skills, particularly independence and self-confidence;
  - To improve the prospects of working abroad in the long term;
  - To develop or heighten language skills, mainly for languages students;
  - To support or enhance their degree outcome.
- Those considering mobility were motivated by a combination of personal and external factors, with subtle differences in the balance of these, although many of the personal motivations could result in an increase in employability.
- The most important motivations were common to those considering study abroad, a work experience placement abroad or volunteering overseas. Those considering volunteering had additional important motivations.
- Students wanted to enhance their employability generally and to enhance prospects of working abroad in the long term, rather than to obtain specific experience to qualify for a particular job.
- Higher proportions of female students than males were motivated by external factors that would benefit them in the long term.
- Those from disadvantaged backgrounds tended to be more strongly motivated by the potential career-related benefits of mobility.

## 4.1 Personal and external motivations

The perceived relative importance of different motivations for undertaking mobility abroad are shown in Figure 5. Both survey results and focus groups indicated that all students were motivated by both personal and external factors; this figure refers to the survey.

Figure 5 Perceived importance of motivations for mobility during study, for all UK survey respondents



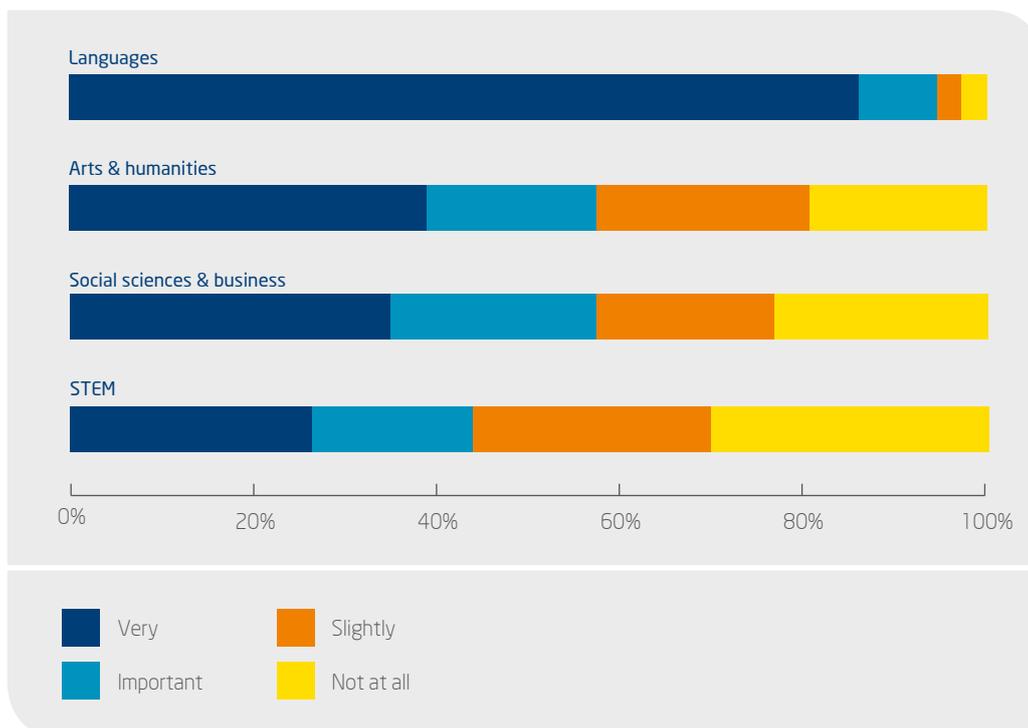
Personal motivations – including having interesting experiences and broadening horizons – were considered very important by three-quarters or more of respondents, and very important or important to over 95%. Enjoyment, developing interpersonal skills (such as confidence) and learning about a new country or culture were rated as very important or important by 90% of respondents. Focus groups participants confirmed the desire to travel, to engage in new experiences and to have fun, as well as developing an understanding of other cultures. For all those pursuing volunteering options, a charitable or humanitarian dimension was apparent.

Employability was the highest-rated external motivation, being ranked as very important or important by almost 90% of respondents. 80% considered that an improvement of prospects for long-term work abroad was very important or important, and gaining new contacts or networks abroad was only slightly behind. Far fewer were motivated by the value of mobility towards gaining a specific job in the UK, which suggests that more general career prospects were uppermost.

The importance of language skills varied very strongly with subject discipline. The majority (over 80%) of those studying language degrees reported that improving their language skills was a very important motivation, whereas for other students the proportion was less than a third (Figure 6). The relatively low importance attributed to language improvement for many types of student – many of whom reported it to be ‘not applicable’ – presumably reflects the large number of mobility opportunities now available in English-speaking countries or destinations where HE programmes are available in English.

Language students were also more likely to be undertaking a full year of study abroad (and formed a substantial proportion of all students doing that), resulting in apparent variations in the importance of language improvement as a motivation across different mobility types and durations.

Figure 6 Perceived importance of improving language skills as a motivation for mobility, with broad discipline of study



The focus groups confirmed many of the factors in Figure 5 to be very important, including the desire to gain experience overseas to support the goal of working abroad, or simply to bolster the CV in a competitive labour market.

Some students were motivated to go abroad before they arrived at university. These had either selected a programme of study in which an overseas experience was integrated or compulsory (such as a language degree) or chosen a university with a reputation for offering such opportunities, in general or of a specific type (e.g. through an international branch campus or work placements). Some universities had compulsory work placements or sandwich years in which overseas placements were an option.

A variety of other factors were considered important by up to half of respondents, but with lower proportions considering these as very important (and significant proportions thinking them unimportant). These included academic issues such as the potential to improve grade attainment, and the availability of credit or recognition towards their degree outcomes. Smaller proportions were strongly motivated by pre-existing links with the country concerned or the fact that friends or fellow students were going abroad.

### TOP 3 CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE DECIDING TO GOING ABROAD:



**Funding availability**



**Attractiveness of location**



**Total cost**

## 4.2 Motivation variations across mobility status, type and duration

The perceived relative strengths of importance of different factors were highly consistent across those with different mobility status, i.e. those who had been mobile, were waiting to go, or were considering it. There was also consistency between different durations of mobility, especially in the motivations most commonly reported as very important overall. This consistency was seen across personal motivations such as interesting experiences, broadening horizons and enjoyment, and external motivations such as employability.

There were only modest differences in the perceived importance of most different motivations by type of mobility, including key motivations such as broadening horizons, developing interpersonal skills and learning about a new culture. Significant differences were seen for certain other motivations: for example, higher proportions of those who had been considering study abroad or volunteering felt that interest or enjoyment were very important as motivations, as compared to those who were considering work placements; and the same applied to employability. As expected, a strong variation was seen in the perceived importance of 'doing something worthwhile for others'. This was very important to over 70% of respondents who had been considering volunteering, but for few others.

The importance of language improvement as a motivation varied with mobility type due to its very strong importance for those studying languages, most of whom were undertaking study abroad as an integrated part of their degree – and usually of a year's duration. The prominence of this sub-group within the overall sample, and their particular motivations, accounted for many of the apparent variations by mobility type and duration.

Differences between the perceived importance of motivations for mobility for respondents of different profile were mostly very slight. For example, somewhat higher proportions of female respondents cited potential improvements to their degree grade as very important (50% very important or important, vs. 38% of males), increased employability (88% vs. 83%) and development of interpersonal skills (93% vs. 85%).

# 5 Perceptions of impact

## Key findings

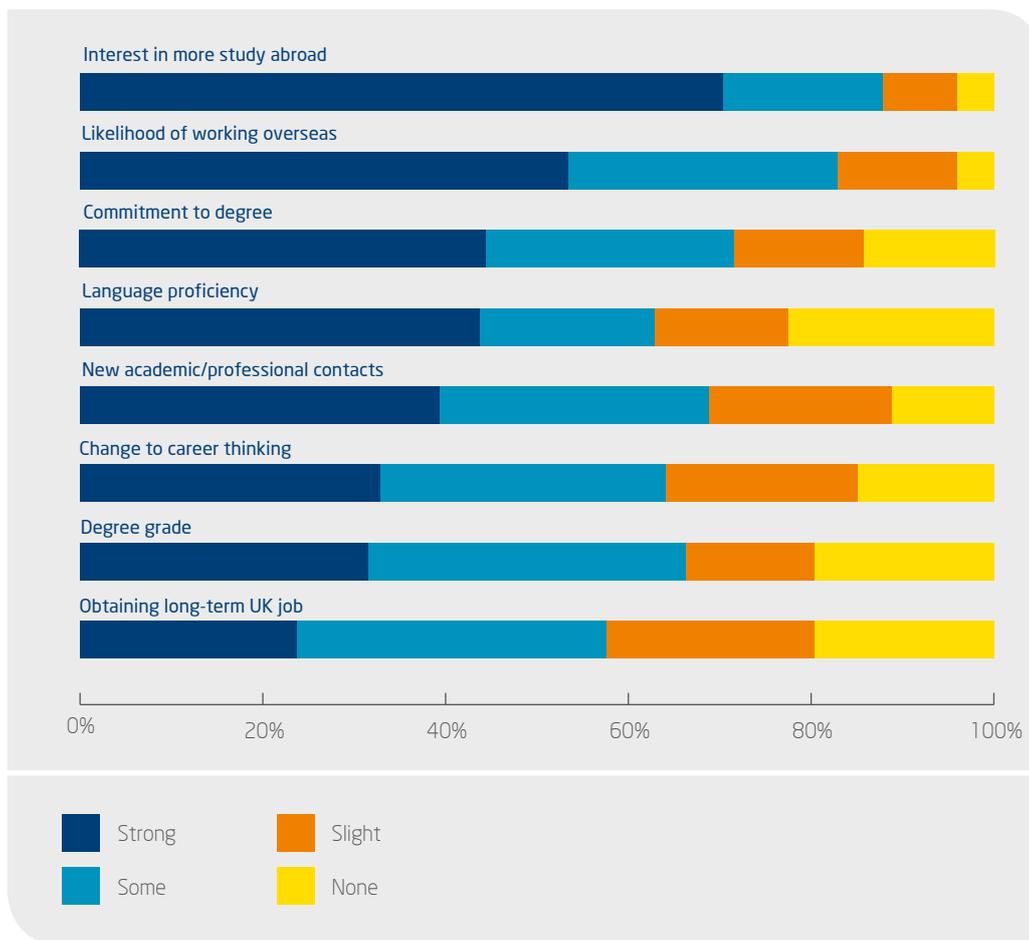
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- Perceptions of strong impacts on personal, academic and career development were held by most mobile students, many of which were consistent irrespective of whether the student had spent only a few weeks abroad or a full year:
  - Almost all students who had been mobile – for different durations and undertaking different activities – wanted further mobility;
  - The majority believed their experience would enhance their prospects of finding a job;
  - Significant positive impacts were perceived in relation to students' increased commitment to their degree studies, and for many there was an expectation that they would gain a higher degree grade as a result of their mobility experience;
  - Development of interpersonal skills, including greater intercultural understanding, and broadened attitudes about the UK were reported regardless of duration;
  - Key impacts for one semester or more abroad included development of independence, self-confidence and commitment to academic programme;
  - The strongest impacts on career were felt in terms of overall employability enhancement and improved prospects of working abroad, rather than specific experiences to qualify for a particular job;
  - Strong development of language skills was identified by certain types of student, but many studied or worked in English-speaking environments.
  
- The extent of most significant impacts was common to those who undertook different types of mobility – being abroad is more critical than the activity undertaken.
  - The types and extents of potential impact are well understood by those who make a positive decision to undertake mobility and are well aligned with reported motivations.
  - Negative impacts were rarely perceived – most difficulties encountered while abroad tended to be temporary and were later seen as challenges that had been overcome positively.
  - Changes to personal values while abroad and re-evaluation of views on the UK raised interest in international aspects of the curriculum after students had returned to study at home.

## 5.1 Academic and career Impacts

Mobile UK student respondents’ perceptions of the strength of a number of impacts are shown in Figure 7. The most commonly reported strong impact was to increase the student’s interest in future experiences abroad, with 70% reporting this as having strong impact and 95% some impact. This is essentially an endorsement from over 95% of mobile UK respondents that their mobility experience had been a positive one, and/or that they recognised positive benefit from it.

Figure 7 Perceptions of strength of potential academic- and career-related impact of time spent abroad, for UK survey respondents who had been mobile



Amongst academic benefits, 70% of those who had been mobile reported strong (44%) or some (25%) impact in regard to an increased commitment to their degree programme. Nearly as many reported some impact on their actual degree grade, although the proportion citing a strong impact was lower at 32%. A similar proportion, about two-thirds, related strong or some impact on their language proficiency. Within the potential career-related benefits, almost 55% reported that mobility had strongly impacted on the likelihood of them working outside the UK in the long term, and 95% some impact. Just under a third (32%) perceived a strong impact in terms of a change in their career thinking, and almost two-thirds perceived some impact of this type.

The proportion perceiving a strong direct impact in terms of obtaining a particular long-term job in the UK was lower at 24%, although a further 34% perceived at least some impact on this. It should be borne in mind that the majority of respondents were still students, so not all would have made job applications and many would only be anticipating an impact on getting a specific job. The balance of these career-related impacts reflects their motivations, as the strongest motivations were general employability and prospects of working abroad, rather than seeing mobility as a means to secure a specific UK job.

Focus group participants identified a similar range of impacts of study abroad on their future careers. Many considered that an overseas experience was intrinsically valuable in having something to put on their CV. It could also help them to stand out during a recruitment process, and in some cases it helped them to build a network for future employment. One student suggested that an international work placement had led to a different career trajectory than that originally planned.

The almost universal perception in the survey of high impact in relation to seeking further experiences abroad was reinforced by the 'serially mobile' in the focus groups. They suggested that mobility could be somewhat addictive; one student suggested that:

**“** You just have to help those who are scared to go in the first place, because once they've been abroad, that's all they'll want to do.”

Students who had been mobile could identify both 'hard' and 'soft' skills that had developed during their time away. Relatively few highlighted skills development directly related to their subject, although some recognised that an international work placement had provided them with experience of applying knowledge in a work context. Some students suggested that their knowledge of their subject had been enhanced by engaging with international perspectives, and some became much more interested in the international aspects of their home curriculum on return.

Students from one institution highlighted how the institution tried to encourage students to reflect on the impact of their overseas experience, and this was felt to focus strongly on employability. Methods included reflective blogs, debriefing sessions, posters and a credit-bearing course in intercultural skills, although students suggested that this level of reflection is hard once one becomes embroiled in final-year

studies. Some students voiced frustration that tutors were unwilling to provide opportunities for mobile students to provide reflections of overseas experiences in their final-year courses.

Many students did not consider that time abroad had significantly enhanced their language skills, especially those on work placements where the primary language was English. However, students did appear to make the effort to pick up basic skills in the host language that enabled them to undertake practical tasks in that country, and reported that although conversing in a foreign language was difficult at first, it helped them to engage with the local population and was appreciated by their hosts.

A significant number of students also suggested that their time overseas had motivated them to make the most of their studies to help them move on with the next stage of their lives – this often included an aspiration to work, study or travel overseas again in the future. One participant suggested that overseas experience may help to 'shorten the gap between studies and where you want to get to in your career' by making them more employable at an earlier stage.

Participants were less able to articulate the academic impact of their time overseas, perhaps reflecting that few had been motivated by such a potential benefit when deciding whether or not to study overseas, especially those undertaking work placements. The groups revealed mixed opinions around the impact of the overseas experience on their subsequent degree outcome, not all believing that the impact was positive.

For some students who were pursuing credit mobility the impact was negative – feeling, for example, as though they were falling behind in their studies as the overseas study method and assessment were viewed as having limited relevance for their UK-based studies. For students on placements outside their course programme, where the programme provided additional credits, there were some concerns about the extra workload this created.

Even where students noted negative impacts – for example, some did not like the approach to teaching and learning in their host country – there was a general sense that the overseas experience had had positive effects in other ways, such as personal development or employability. One student reflected that they had ‘yet to speak to anyone that regretted it.’ For others, a positive academic impact was a desire to engage more with their studies upon returning home, in order to get a good degree that could open up opportunities to get a good job and to work and travel overseas. In some cases, observations of ‘hard-working’ students in other countries made students realise that they were not engaging enough with their studies, and thus they worked harder and got better grades on their return.

### 5.1.1 Language proficiency

Figure 8 Perceived extent of impact upon language proficiency, for respondents in different broad disciplines

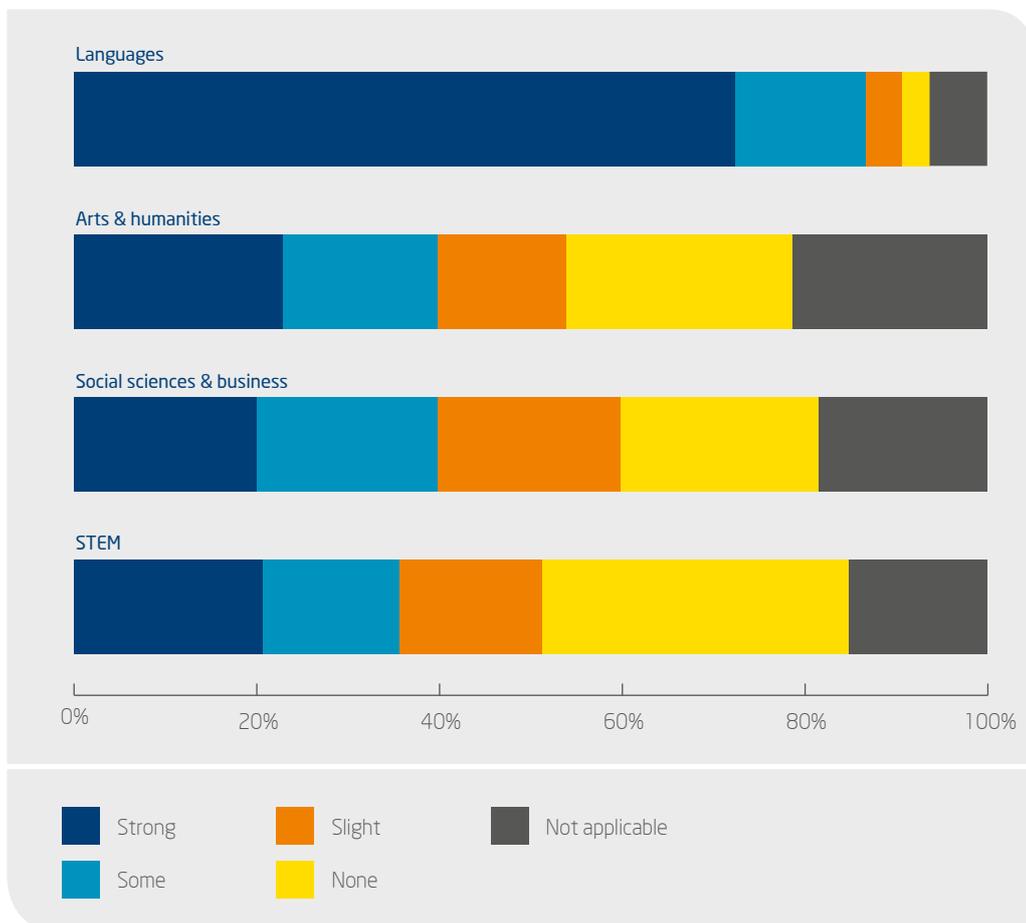


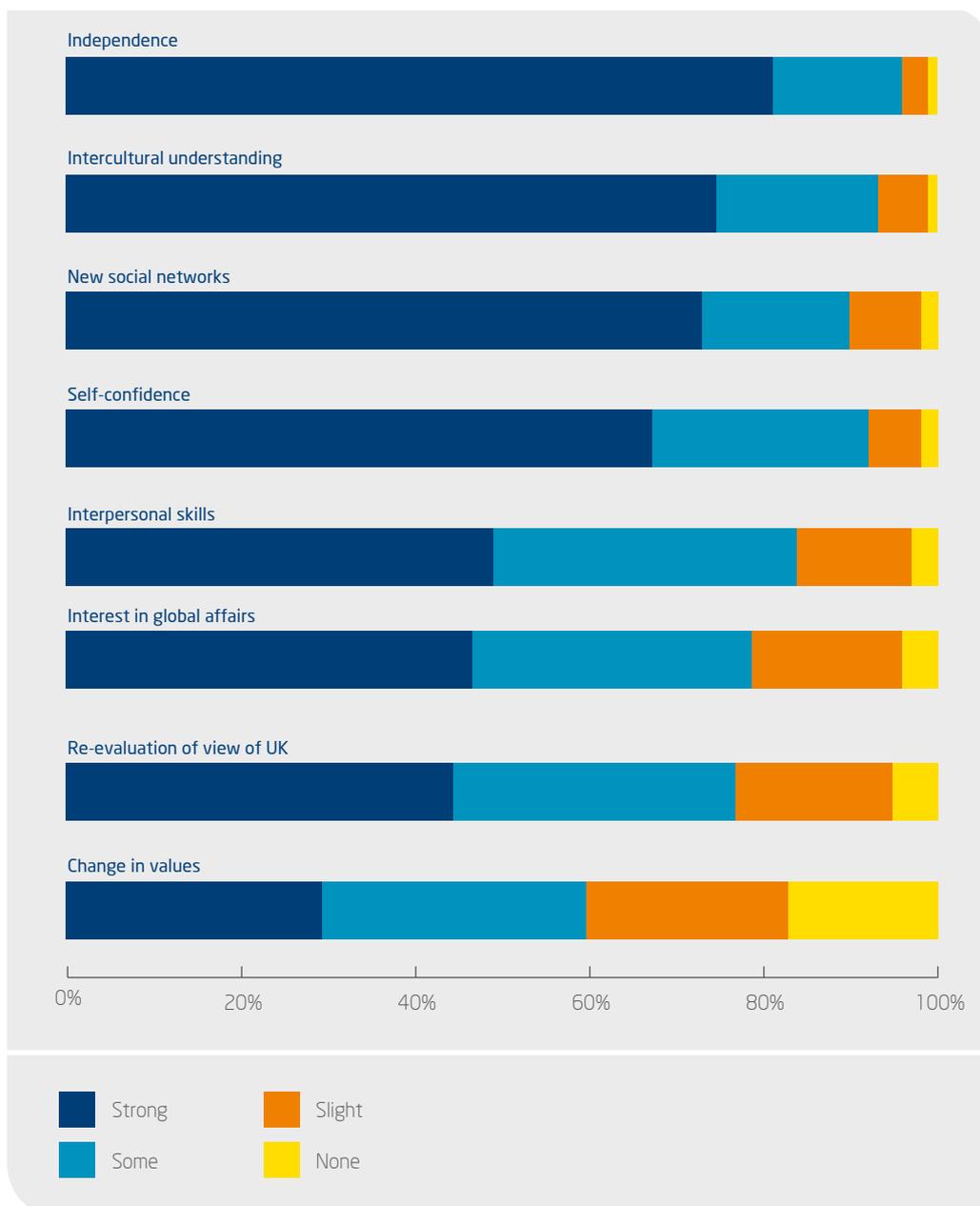
Figure 8 demonstrates that there were major variations in the extent of impact on students’ language proficiency. Almost three quarters (72%) of language students reported strong impact on their language proficiency, but much lower proportions of students of other disciplines. Half of STEM, humanities and other students found no benefit in terms of language skills, presumably reflecting that they were in English-speaking environments. Apparent variations in the extent of impact on language proficiency with either mobility type or duration were driven by the extent to which language students took part. Other variations due to mobility type or other student characteristics were almost certainly masked by this.

## 5.2 Personal development

Figure 9 shows the perceived extent of potential impacts on UK survey respondents' personal development. Overall, this suggests that the extent of impact of mobility in these developmental areas was perceived to be greater than on their academic or career trajectories. However, since many of these impacts have a bearing on employability, the two groups of benefits are inter-related.

Very high proportions (90% or more) of mobile UK survey respondents perceived increased independence and self-confidence, understanding and ability to engage with another culture, and development of new social networks. Over two-thirds of those who had been mobile perceived a strong impact in these areas.

Figure 9 Perceptions of extent of potential personal impacts of time spent abroad for UK respondents who had been mobile



Around half of those respondents who had been mobile reported a strong impact on development of interpersonal skills and many more reported some impact. Slightly lower proportions perceived strong impact in relation to developing greater interest in global or international affairs and re-evaluating views of the UK as a result of time abroad. Just under 30% reported a strong change in their values or ethical position.

Students in the focus groups identified a range of 'soft' skills that had developed overseas, including intercultural competence, increased confidence and self-reliance, open-mindedness, and enhanced maturity.

Mobile students' responses to an open-ended invitation in the survey to specify the greatest impact of their time abroad attested to its powerful influence on confidence and independence. Almost 500 respondents mentioned its impact on their confidence and over 300 on their independence. Over 300 mentioned the resulting increase in their awareness of another culture and/or how to engage with it. Interestingly, this was much more commonly mentioned than any increase in language proficiency, cited by over 100 respondents. This could, of course, reflect the relatively high proportion that had undertaken mobility to an English-speaking work or study environment. Individual comments included:

“An enormous growth in confidence and independence, a sense of achievement, and becoming aware of possibilities (both academic, career-related, and social) that were previously beyond my horizons.”

“My period spent abroad was a very enriching experience during which I learned that I can, as an independent and emancipated individual, realistically strive for an ambitious and successful international career. I also learned that social relationships abroad are very important and inspiring, providing me with new ideas about different lifestyles.”

Other benefits specified by significant numbers of respondents were the development of a range of transferable or employability skills (over 80 responses) and the creation or development of relationships with others, either professional or personal, and the gain of a different and broader perspective.

“The greatest impact of my exchange experience was gaining new communication skills. Whether it be with fellow students, of different cultures or ethnicity, or with university staff members. These communication skills, coupled with a new sense of confidence and independence, stand me in good stead for greater employment prospects on my return to the UK.”

“The greatest impact on me has been an increased understanding of global issues, learning about different culture and history for a non-UK perspective was extraordinary. In terms of my personal development, I feel a lot more confident and independent and applying for a job overseas doesn't faze me whereas initially I would have been more hesitant.”

The following example encapsulates a rounded set of positive impacts on a work placement abroad:

“The challenges of working in a foreign language and moving alone to another country are not to be underestimated and there were many times I considered giving up, but the self-confidence and pride that has come from sticking it out and creating a life for myself from scratch means I would recommend this experience to anyone. The improvement in my language and my confidence with it has seen my grades in my final year soar and allowed me to really take an interest in my course that I did not have before. The professional network I have gained, the skills I learned on the job and the benefit of real work experience before graduation have all given me an invaluable advantage in finding a full-time position post-graduation.”

### 5.3 Variations in impacts

Across the range of types of impact, the extent of impact as perceived by respondents was broadly consistent for different types of mobility. High proportions of respondents from all mobility types reported strong impacts in terms of independence, self-confidence, development of intercultural understanding and also on interpersonal skills. Those who had volunteered abroad tended to express even higher levels of impact of certain types, particularly as regards personal development.

Similarly, only very modest differences were seen in the extent of impacts perceived by survey respondents with different durations of mobility, with great consistency between the extent of impacts for a semester abroad and a year abroad. The extent of impact from very short mobility was somewhat lower in relation to the student's degree grade attained, commitment to their degree programme and also their likelihood of working abroad in the long term. However, for the other impact types, the extent of impact of very short mobility was as strong as for longer periods abroad. These included many of the personal-development-related impacts which are key to employability, including development of interpersonal skills and intercultural understanding. Perhaps surprisingly, those undertaking very short mobility perceived as much, or almost as much, impact in terms of re-evaluating their views of the UK or broadening their outlook, as for those on longer mobility. Those who had had a very short experience abroad were slightly more likely to want to undertake more experiences abroad, as compared to those who had been away for longer.

The extents of impact of different types anticipated by those waiting to go abroad compared closely with the perceptions of those who had travelled. The only significant exceptions related to the acquisition of new academic or professional contacts, the impact of mobility on gaining a specific long-term job in the UK, and changes to values and views on the UK, where those waiting to go abroad anticipated greater impact in these areas than was perceived or realised by post-mobile students.

### 5.4 Challenges and negative impacts

Impacts highlighted by participants in the focus groups centred around reflections on their feelings at different points of their overseas experience. Prior to travel, many students had felt trepidation in regard to what lay ahead and some had felt under-prepared for the challenges that they might face.

Many students highlighted the feeling of 'culture shock' and the challenge of being alone in a new environment, in strange accommodation and in some cases not speaking the local language. This translated into feelings of isolation and a desire to keep in regular contact with the UK. It could take up to six months to get over this transition period, but students generally felt that it was an unavoidable process. Some also had negative experiences abroad (e.g. problems with a working environment, crime, immigration issues, or the organisation of their studies) during work or study placements, but tended to reflect on this as a learning experience. It was felt that students who expect a holiday or who go abroad mainly for fun may be shocked by the reality of the experience – especially if they are working – and may have less time to travel and experience the culture of the country than hoped.

The issue of isolation was less of a problem for students who went abroad in groups or cohorts. These students faced different challenges, centring around the desire to break out of their comfort zone (and their group 'bubble'), to test themselves and make the most of their international experience:

An associated issue was the challenge of engaging with local students and the local population when students have no familiarity with the language. This is a particular problem when English is a 'lingua franca' and when mobile students of different nationalities tend to stick together, speaking in English and sharing accommodation. Some students noted that placements in large cities provided more opportunities to engage beyond the international student body.

“ Once you leave the comfort zone it's the best feeling you can get.”

“ There is a really weird adrenalin rush in going somewhere where you don't know anyone.”

Another issue highlighted by many students was the problem of 're-entry' to the UK. These problems usually dissipated fairly quickly – after a couple of weeks – as students got back into the rhythm of their lives. One student described this challenge as 'reverse culture shock', heightened by having had time and space to reflect critically on their own culture. One student who had been to an African country suggested that their overseas experience had provided them with a different perspective on their academic studies:

“ How am I meant to go from seeing someone fighting over a water bottle to writing 3000 words?”

Many survey respondents provided comments when asked to specify what, if anything, had been a negative impact for them. The most common response was that there had been no significant negative impact (from over 50 respondents). Otherwise, the most commonly raised issues were loneliness, isolation or homesickness (also by 50 respondents), while about 40 mentioned financial worries and a similar number a language barrier. It is notable that the majority of comments related to negative experiences while abroad and cannot be described as longer-term impacts.

“ Without enough support from others the year abroad can be extremely lonely and isolating. Especially those who choose not to do an Erasmus study placement, as friends and peers do not come [along] as easily, [it is] almost as if Erasmus students have potential friends already there and waiting for them.”

Smaller numbers (around a dozen) said that culture shock either on arrival abroad or on return home had affected a personal relationship.

For a small number there had been difficulties around accommodation or procedures at the host institution, and a very small number (fewer than 1% of those who commented) suffered racism or prejudice or expressed anxiety over potential violence in their destination.

Although the comments provided glimpses into the reality of mobility experiences of individuals, it should be remembered that 95% of survey respondents felt sufficiently positive about their experiences overall to report wanting to do more, and many post-mobile students reflected that their handling of negative experiences was valuable in developing character and independence.

TOP 3 IMPACTS ON  
**PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT:**



**Independence**



**Intercultural understanding**



**New social networks**

# 6 Decision-making factors and barriers to participation

## Key findings

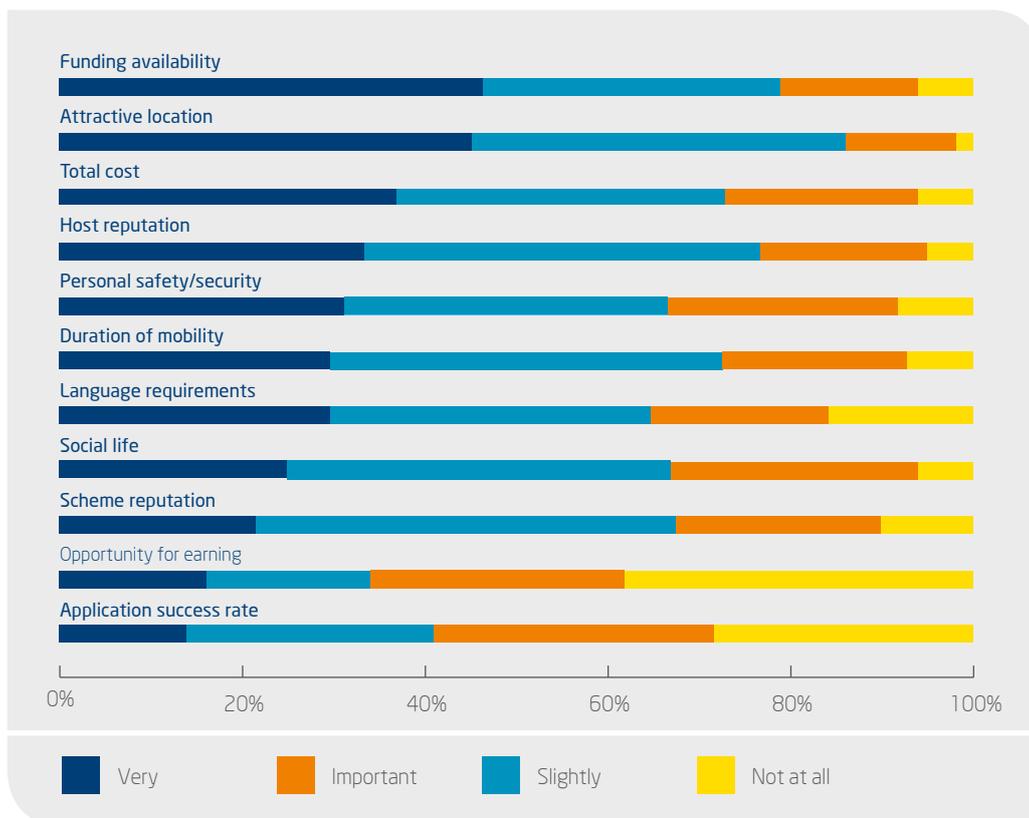
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- The most important factors in decision-making about overseas mobility varied relatively little across durations or types of mobility. Based on the perceptions of those considering mobility, they included (in order of decreasing importance):
  - Availability of funding and total cost;
  - Personal safety and security;
  - Host reputation or perceived quality;
  - Destination location;
  - Duration of mobility;
  - Language requirements;
  - Potential social life and earning opportunities while abroad.
- There were significant differences in perception of barriers between those considering mobility and those who had been abroad or were waiting to go. These are ordered in decreasing importance for those considering whether to go abroad:
  - Insufficient funding;
  - Lack of knowledge of opportunities;
  - Fear of isolation;
  - For some, insufficient language skills (and language training options);
  - Impact on existing friends and relationships;
  - Lack of relevant opportunities;
  - Financial implications of extending studies (e.g. additional debt);
  - Lack of information about funding opportunities;
  - Unawareness of institutional support;
  - Possible negative impact on degree outcome;
  - Issues of credit recognition and transfer, or rigid course structures;
  - Loss of potential to earn while abroad.
  - Some barriers – mostly personal – were lower for short periods of mobility.
  - Funding was seen as just as or more important a barrier by those considering very short-term mobility as those considering a semester or year abroad.
  - The complexity of application procedures, and persistence required to navigate them, could be offputting, but successful navigation of the process was seen by some retrospectively as a positive outcome of the mobility experience.

## 6.1 Factors when considering short-term outward mobility

Figure 10 summarises the perceived importance by all UK survey respondents of a range of factors when considering overseas mobility. The two most important factors were the attractiveness of the location (very important or important to over 85% of respondents) and availability of funding (just under 85%). Total cost and reputation of the host were also cited as very important or important by around three-quarters of respondents.

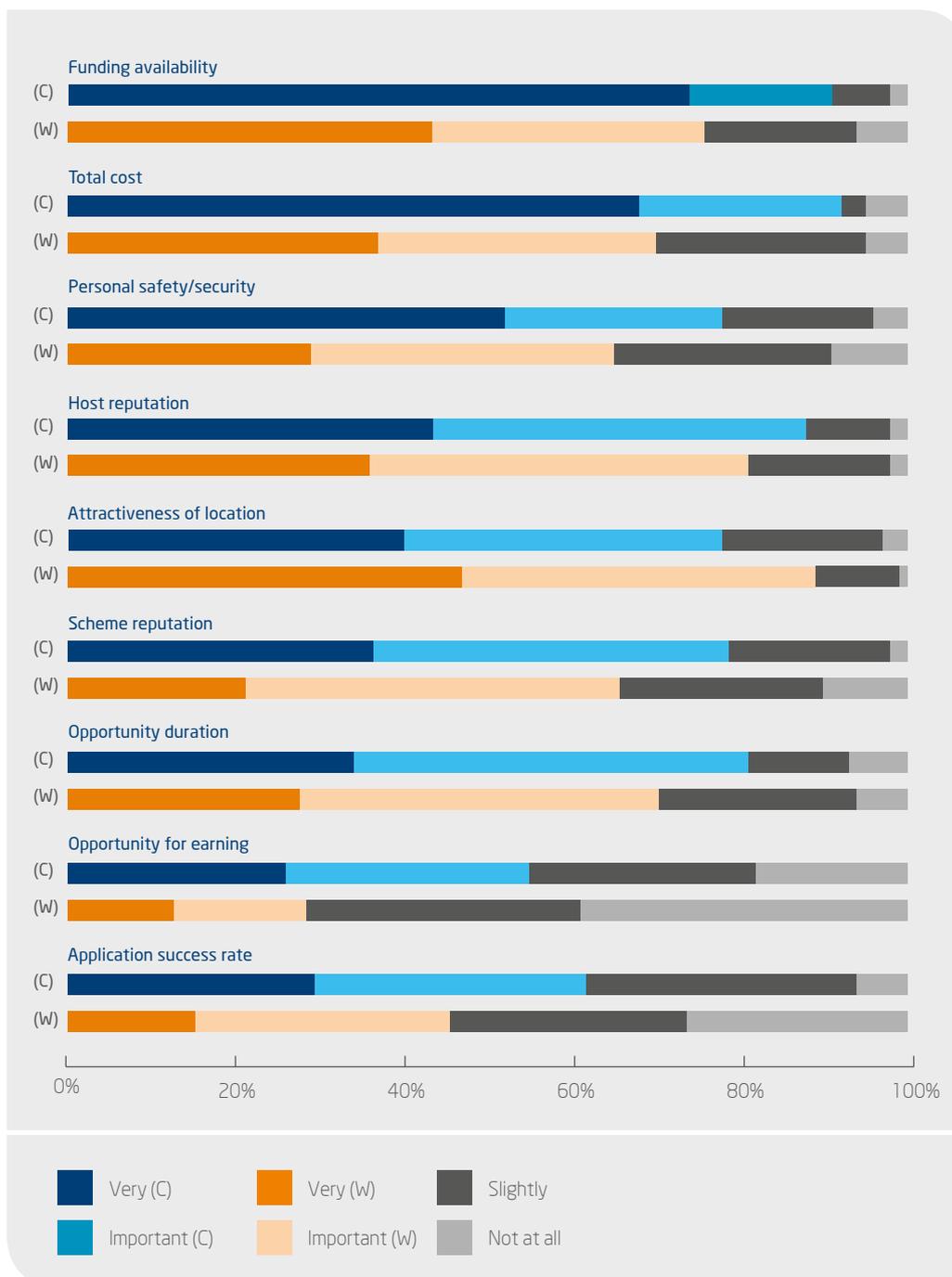
Figure 10 Perceived importance of factors by UK survey respondents when considering mobility



A wide variety of factors, including safety, prospects for a social life, language requirements, duration of opportunities and reputation of the mobility scheme itself, were also seen as very important or important by around two-thirds of respondents. There were significant variations in the perspectives of those of different mobility status. Broadly, the views of post-mobile and pre-mobile students (who had decided to go abroad) were mostly very similar, but the views of those still considering mobility were somewhat different. The latter is potentially the most important respondent group when investigating this area.

Figure 11 sets out the differences in perceptions of importance of factors between those considering mobility (C) and those who had decided and were waiting to go (W). The latter were selected as the comparator group as they had made their positive decision more recently. The factors are shown in descending order of importance for those considering mobility, which reveals a different ordering from that of the total sample in Figure 10. For this key group, funding, cost and safety issues are now the most important.

Figure 11 Extent of importance attributed to a range of factors by UK survey respondents considering mobility (C) and those who were waiting to go abroad (W)



Over 90% of those considering mobility rated funding availability and total cost as very important or important (of which two-thirds very important). This supports findings in studies such as Broadening Horizons (British Council 2014, 2015).

Those considering mobility also rated many other factors as more important than those who had made positive decisions, including host and scheme reputation, and practical issues such as application success rate and opportunities to earn while abroad – although these were less important than the finance-related factors.

## 6.2 Variations across mobility type, duration and other characteristics

There was overall consistency between those considering study abroad and those considering work experience placements, whereas greater importance was placed on certain key factors by those considering volunteering – namely, personal safety, the reputation of the host and the reputation of the scheme they were considering. On the other hand, attractiveness of the location was very important to a higher proportion of those considering study abroad than amongst the other groups.

Differences between the views of those considering different durations of overseas activity were also minor. There were some variations in perceptions between different sub-groups. The largest difference was in relation to safety or security, with 73% of UK female respondents saying that this was very important or important, compared with 50% of males.

In summary, the factors that those considering mobility thought important were consistent across different types and durations of mobility, with finance-related factors uppermost.

Institutional factors that influenced decisions could also be crucial, and can be broadly grouped into administrative and academic issues. The former related largely to the timing and publicity of overseas opportunities and the extent to which there was support to help students navigate the bureaucracy involved in planning for it. The complexity of the process (especially for large-scale mobility schemes) and the organisational skills required should not be under-estimated, and they proved overwhelming for some students (even if appearing straightforward to staff). One student suggested that there was ‘too much DIY in the process’. It should be noted, however, that those who successfully navigated the process reported that this itself was one of the most important learning outcomes from their mobility.

## 6.3 Barriers to mobility

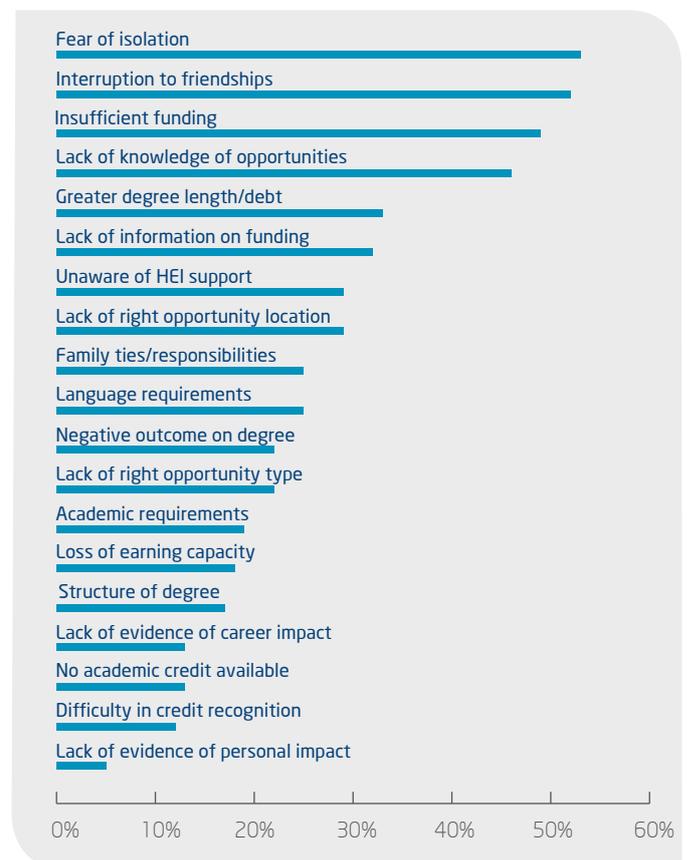
UK survey respondents’ perspectives on the most significant barriers to overcome when considering mobility are shown in Figure 12.

The most commonly cited barriers were personal (the fear of isolation and interruption to friendships or relationships), financial (insufficient funding), and a lack of knowledge (about mobility opportunities, but also about funding). Very few cited lack of evidence about the potential impacts of mobility, suggesting that most felt reasonably well informed about potential benefits. It was the more practical issues that concerned them.

Overall, personal and financial barriers – including the impact of lengthening HE study – appeared to be critical to more respondents than language or academic requirements, or related issues of credit or recognition.

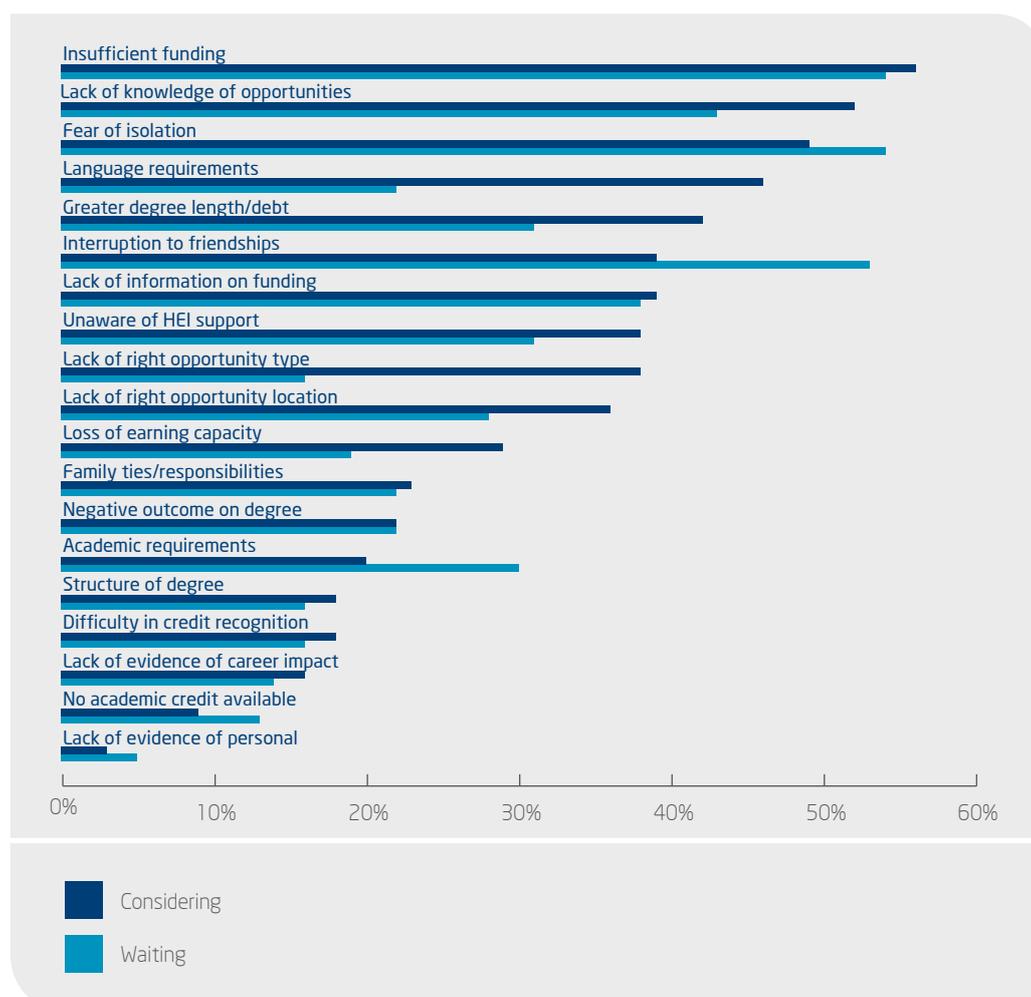
Differences in the perceived importance of different barriers between those who were considering mobility and those who had opted to undertake mobility could prove crucial in understanding decision-making. Figure 13 therefore illustrates the perceived importance of the same barriers specifically for those considering mobility, compared with those who had decided and were waiting to go abroad. The relative ordering of the barriers in this chart is potentially more valuable than that in Figure 12.

Figure 12 Most important perceived barriers to mobility, for all UK survey respondents considering a period abroad



This comparison shows some barriers to be of equal importance to both groups, although funding and a lack of knowledge about opportunities are the most important barriers for those still considering mobility, slightly above the fear of isolation. Fear of damage to friendships is less prominent. Worries about language proficiency, loss of earning potential and lack of opportunities also emerge as more important for those considering mobility than for the overall survey cohort.

Figure 13 Most important perceived barriers to mobility, reported by those considering mobility and those who had applied and were waiting to go abroad

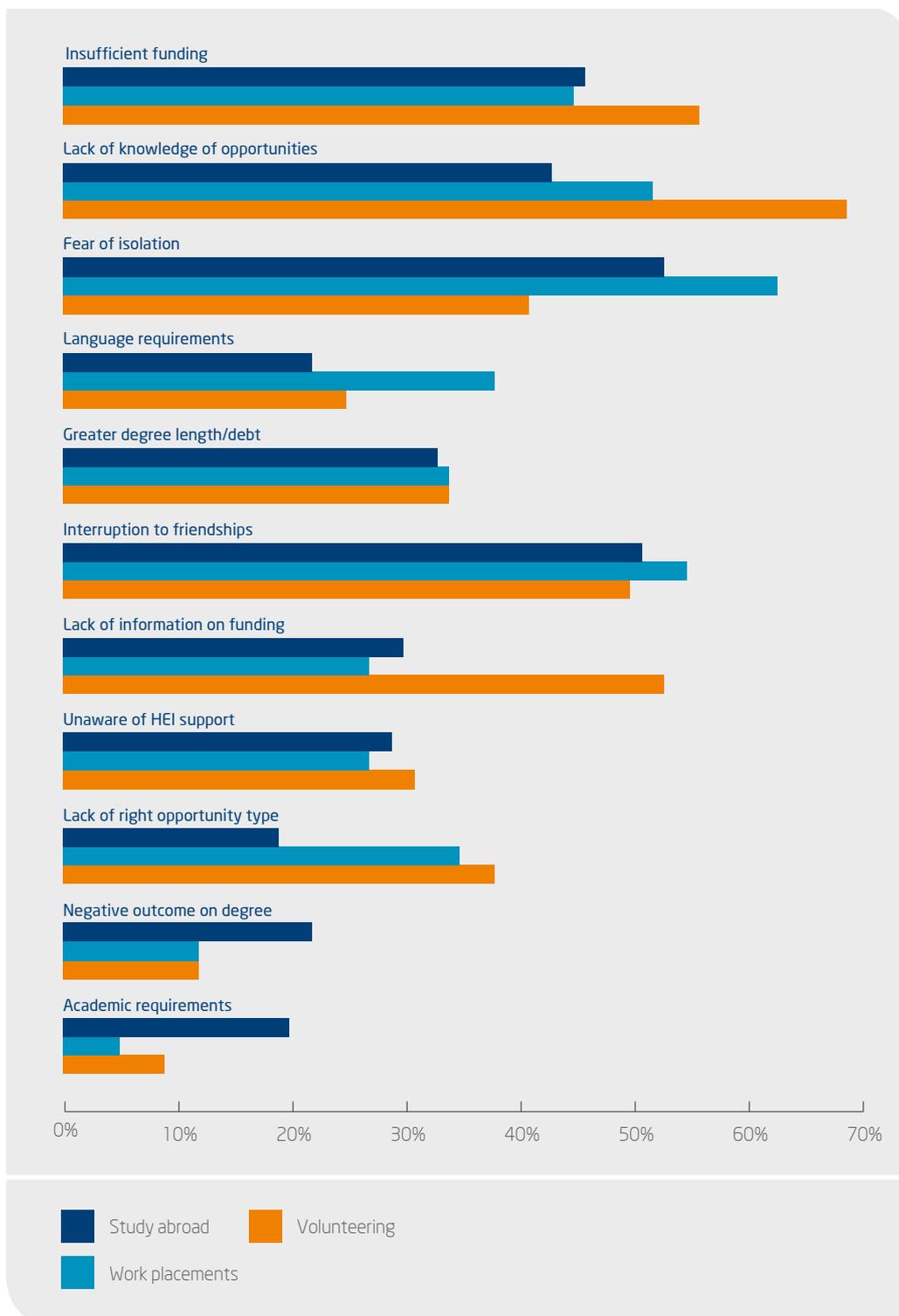


### 6.3.1 Differences in barriers across types and durations of mobility

There were some differences in barriers reported by those considering different types of mobility. The most significant difference was that more of those considering volunteering reported that they lacked knowledge of opportunities and funding, and had insufficient funding (Figure 14).

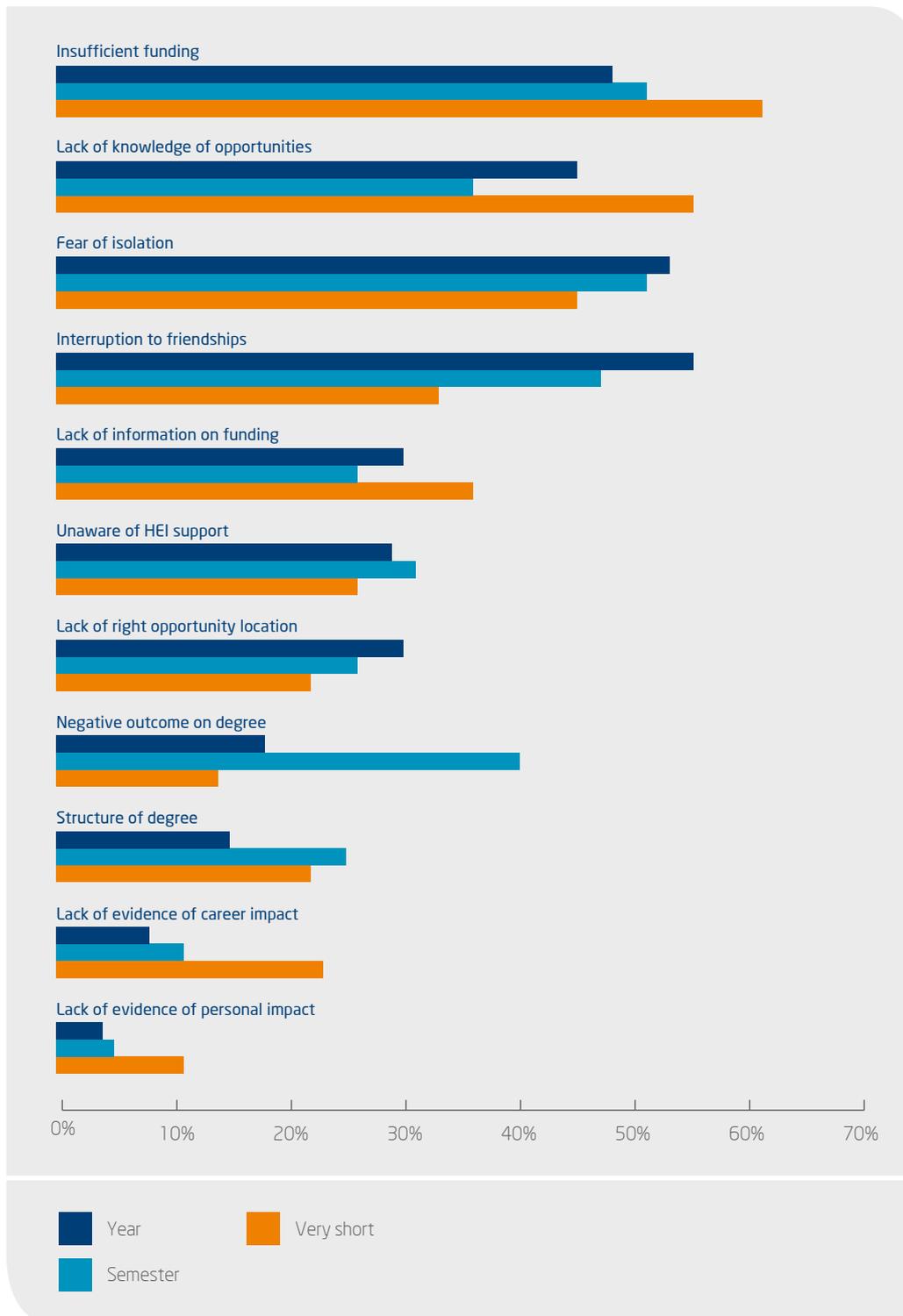
While many barriers were common to all types of potential mobility, such as unawareness of local support or the potential impact of a longer period of study on debt accumulation, worries about isolation and language proficiency were slightly higher amongst those considering work experience. Figure 20 shows the barriers where there was a difference between mobility types.

Figure 14 Most important perceived barriers to mobility, reported by those considering different types of mobility



Some differences in perspectives on barriers were also evident in relation to the duration of mobility experienced or being considered (Figure 15). These suggested better knowledge of opportunities and funding – and fewer worries about lack of opportunities or funding – for those considering a semester or a year away, whereas these were greater barriers for more of those thinking about very short mobility.

Figure 15 Most important perceived barriers to mobility, reported by those considering different durations of mobility



This parallels the results in the last section, where funding was seen as a significant issue for all durations of mobility but even more so for those considering very short mobility. This may reflect that semester- and year-long mobility are the most established durations, and that students are more confident about obtaining funding through the well-known schemes which support study abroad of these durations.

Other differences in relation to duration included lower fear of interruption to friendships for those considering short mobility. It seemed that worries over the negative impact of mobility on degree outcome were highest amongst those considering a semester abroad, with twice as many in this group (40%) citing this as the other groups. Those considering short mobility worried more about whether it fitted into their degree structure.

In terms of differences between other sub-groups, differences by gender were generally not substantial. However, more of those without a parent in a professional occupation were concerned about funding (and lack of knowledge about it), as well as about family responsibilities, language requirements, and whether there was support from their institution, while somewhat fewer of this group were concerned about securing a particular location or, especially, interruptions to friendships.

### 6.3.2 Further insights from focus groups

One issue identified in the survey that resonated across many focus groups was lack of awareness of the opportunities available; this often related to how – and when – information was provided to students. For example, some received information early on in their studies, when they were overwhelmed and unable to take it all in. Other students suggested targeting first years to give them enough time to plan and organise an overseas experience. This was reflected in an open-ended response in the survey:

“ Some students went to Hong Kong, Germany, Czech Republic but I never considered it seriously until it was too late. ... some better signposting or promotion of the ability to spend a year abroad within the first or second stage would be beneficial, especially just a 5 minute reminder at the end of a lecture for those doing a ‘normal’ three year degree. Getting a few students who spend a year abroad to describe their experiences could be useful.”

Students at one institution felt that volunteering and work placement opportunities were not ‘pushed’ as much by academic staff as the established study-abroad schemes because the staff did not know much about them. In that group and others, some felt that these ‘other’ options abroad could be more attractive to particular students as they offered more destinations outside Europe with

different lengths of mobility. Similarly with duration: students with less confidence about going overseas for a long period were likely to find very short ‘taster’ study visits more accessible. There was a consensus across the groups that there should be a diverse range of mobility options to suit all needs.

Academic barriers related to concerns around the synchronicity of timetabling, assessment requirements, the reputation of the overseas institution, and the quality of its courses. This was even an issue at overseas campuses, where timings within academic programmes do not always align with the programmes in the UK. Many group participants felt uncertainty about the academic environment they were entering. In some cases mobility opportunities provided access to what students considered to be ‘better’ universities than their own; in others they felt the reputation of the host institution was inferior to their own.

These were important concerns for some; to offset such concerns, respondents placed high value on encouragement and support from their peer group, previously mobile students and academic staff in their departments.

A small number of students highlighted the crucial support and encouragement that they had received from academic staff members who had been abroad, or from the study abroad office, which enabled them to overcome worries about impacts on their studies. The fact that mobility is usually targeted at second-year students was sometimes viewed as a problem, because students at this point become increasingly concerned about studies and may be less willing to – in their eyes – jeopardise grades by going overseas. This appeared to be less of a problem for students in Scotland, whose four-year degrees offer greater flexibility.

Other barriers raised in the groups included practical concerns over political instability, health and visa issues in their destination countries, and difficulties in securing accommodation upon returning home.

The groups were asked specifically about the role that financial considerations played in their decision-making. Those having participated in Erasmus schemes, with their attendant financial support, had not considered money to be a major factor, and some institutions had also provided funding directly. Although funding might be relatively easier to acquire in these established schemes than for very short mobility, there was an indication that very short

study periods could be preferable for very cost-sensitive students. Some students considered the cost of living in the USA, Australia and elsewhere as prohibitive, but most destinations were seen by those who had been abroad as cheaper options than staying in the UK. Many of those yet to travel appeared to have very limited awareness of the true costs of their overseas experience.

Those who had been mobile were aware of costs and some had experienced financial hardship, although all had overcome this challenge, sometimes supported by parents. One participant pointed out that while some students are well supported either by their families or by bursaries, middle-income students do not have access to additional finance:

“ I’m from one of the squished middle families that can’t apply for support, but equally my parents can’t afford to fund my travel.”

Participants who had struggled financially tended to take the approach that the short-term pain was worth the long-term benefit from the experience and one noted that:

“ You have the rest of your life to earn money”.

Most participants across all groups suggested that greater financial support would be an important motivating factor in deciding whether to go abroad. This was based on real experience of the full costs of studying abroad – but it is important to remember that many students claim to be unaware of the true costs before they travel, and it is an open question as to how transparent this should be made, since highlighting financial aspects could create a barrier for some students. Information on living costs was believed to be available for students who choose to seek it out, but this needs to be balanced with information on financial support. Some participants on paid work experience placements were actually financially better off than they were at home, although this was dependent on the destination.

### 6.3.3 Views from non-mobile students

A number of further insights into barriers were available from students who had considered mobility and not gone abroad or did not expect to. For those who had been successful in their original application, the most common reasons given for declining the opportunity were personal (which were not always specified), although substantial

numbers also indicated that they had not found sufficient funding or that they had not reached the academic requirements. A significant proportion of this group had not been successful in their applications for mobility opportunities.

For most of those who had chosen not to go abroad, the most significant reasons behind their decision related to practical issues including funding or finances. Some of these were related to risks they perceived around issues with their UK accommodation:

“ My course had incredibly poor options to go abroad and the institutions I wanted to go to had about 3 places university-wide, and I thought it wasn’t worth the time and risk of not having a house for my second year here in case I failed the application process.”

“ Money – I should have looked further into funding but decided that because I was renting a house in [ ] and had to pay for that while I was studying abroad that financially it wasn’t possible.”

A distinct but smaller group had either been unsuccessful in their application or said the reason was that they thought they would have insufficient grades (i.e. academic requirements) or language requirements:

“ The knowledge that my offer would be based on obtaining a 60% average grade. Having found this out midway through my 2nd semester, there was no way I could improve my grades from Semester 1 (where I had been following my tutors’ advice with essay-writing and trying new things ‘See what you can do, experiment, because your grades don’t count in first year.’”

A similar number cited personal issues such as being unwilling or unable to loosen family ties or interrupt social relationships, although impact on potential professional relationships figured as well:

“ The fact that I would interrupt my three-year stay in London was crucial. I want to establish connections, both for personal and professional purposes, and studying abroad simply ruins these. I would have met more people but would not have connected with them on a deep level.”

Another small group cited lack of information as the key reason, including more specifically the lack of key information at the right time:

“ I was not provided with enough information by my University course in order to feel confident about taking on a placement abroad. We were expected to arrange the whole placement ourselves with little to no input from the University.”

The focus groups were used to probe more deeply into why some students were not willing to engage in overseas experiences. These revealed a perception that the prevailing mentality of some UK students is not to feel the need to travel, but to prefer to engage with other cultures through interactions with those who come to the UK to study and work.

The general lack of foreign language skills amongst the UK population was cited both as evidence of unwillingness to engage with other cultures, and as a barrier to choosing an overseas experience. Participants suggested that their peers were often worried about the level of challenge and their ability to survive overseas, which could prevent an interest from becoming a commitment to go abroad:

“ Going abroad can be a step too far for some students: moving away to uni is quite a big step anyway, and then they have to make the next step.”

“ [That] is an emotional barrier that governments and universities cannot do much about.”

Retrospectively, some students noted that overcoming some of these challenges provides one of the positive impacts of mobility.

**TOP 3 PERCEIVED BARRIERS:**

-  **Fear of isolation**
-  **Interruption to friendships**
-  **Insufficient funding**

# 7 Information sources and influences during decision-making

## Key findings

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- The most important information sources and influences during decision-making were:
  - Information about funding opportunities and grants;
  - Experiences of previously mobile students;
  - Help choosing a destination and making the application, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds;
  - Encouragement and support from academic staff;
  - Evidence of potential impact on skills development – especially for very short periods abroad;
  - Peers, for students living away from home.
- Those from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be less confident and need help in convincing parents of the value of the mobility experience in order to obtain their support.
- Help with finding funding was as or more important to those considering very short periods of mobility as those considering a longer period away.
- In general, support and information provision for those considering a semester abroad was as effective as for those considering a full year of mobility, and typically originated with the study abroad office. Support for volunteering, and for very short mobility of other kinds, was more varied and typically more reliant on faculty, while support for work placements was also departmentally based. Greater support from academic staff for mobility beyond established study abroad schemes and work placements would be welcome.
- The hardest information to find varied according to the individual, but reflected issues such as financial support for those with more complex circumstances (i.e. with dependents), credit recognition or transfer, and practical issues such as accommodation.

## 7.1 Information sources and influences

Respondents were asked to specify the support or information that they had found particularly useful when considering mobility by selecting three types from a list of options (Figure 16). The experiences of previously mobile students and information on funding opportunities were most commonly selected. Support from the institution was also reported as being very useful, as were help in choosing a destination and host institution, support with the application, and support from parents. Encouragement from academic staff and the study abroad office was rated highly by significant numbers of respondents. Positive experiences of exchanges while students had been at school were important to a modest proportion of respondents.

Figure 16 UK survey respondents' views of most useful sources of information or support when they were considering mobility (three options allowed)

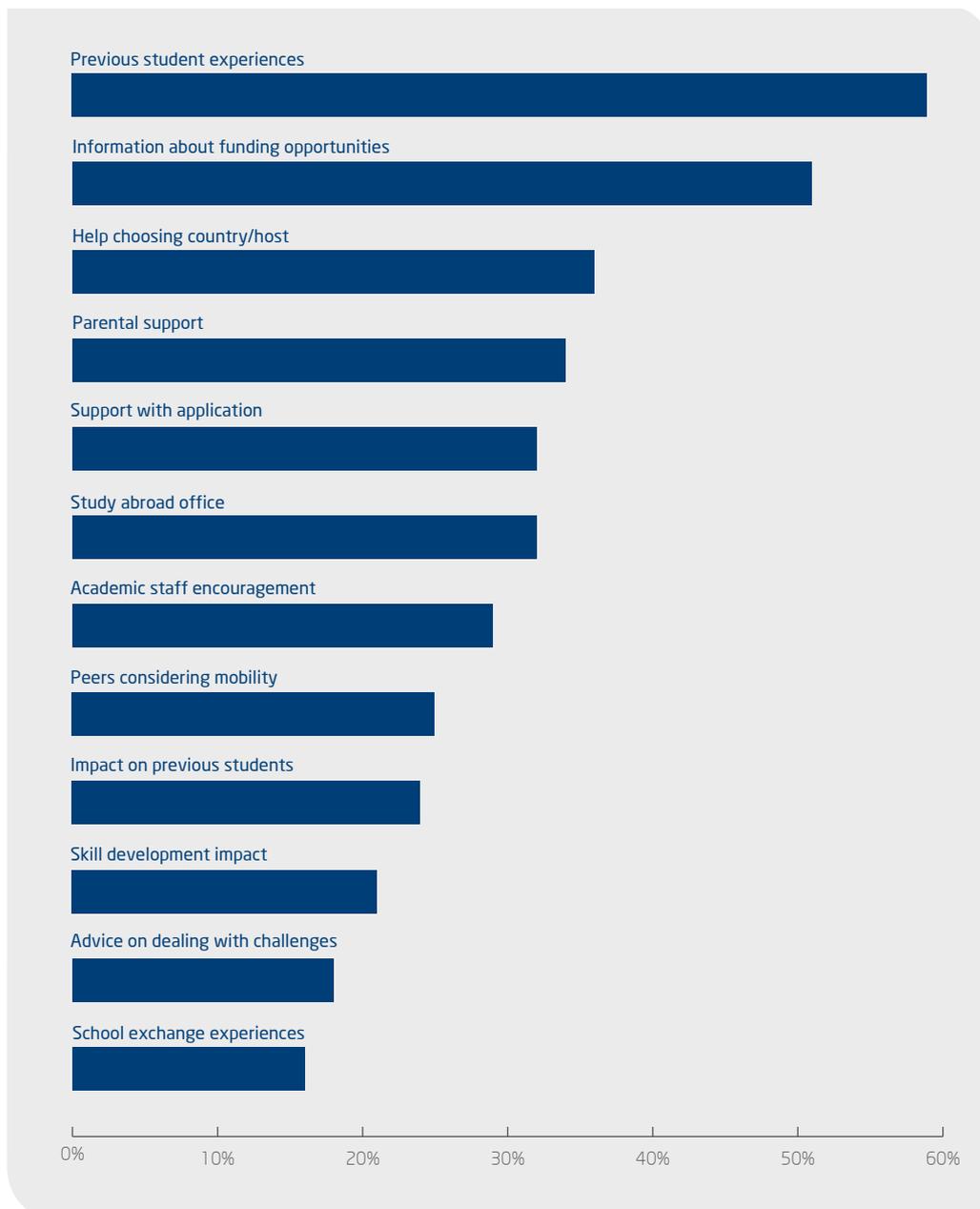


Figure 17 UK survey respondents' most useful sources of information or support, according to their study abroad status

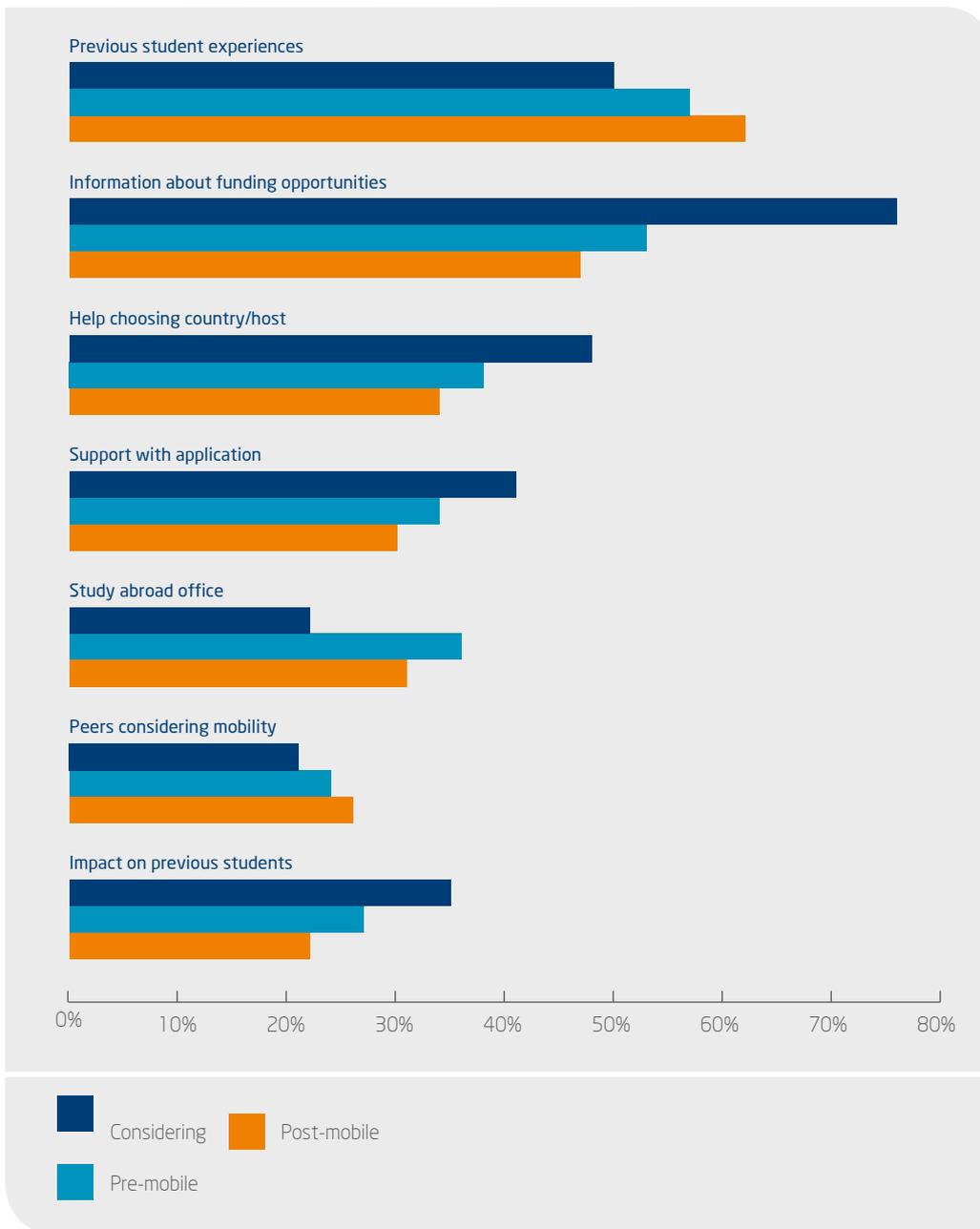
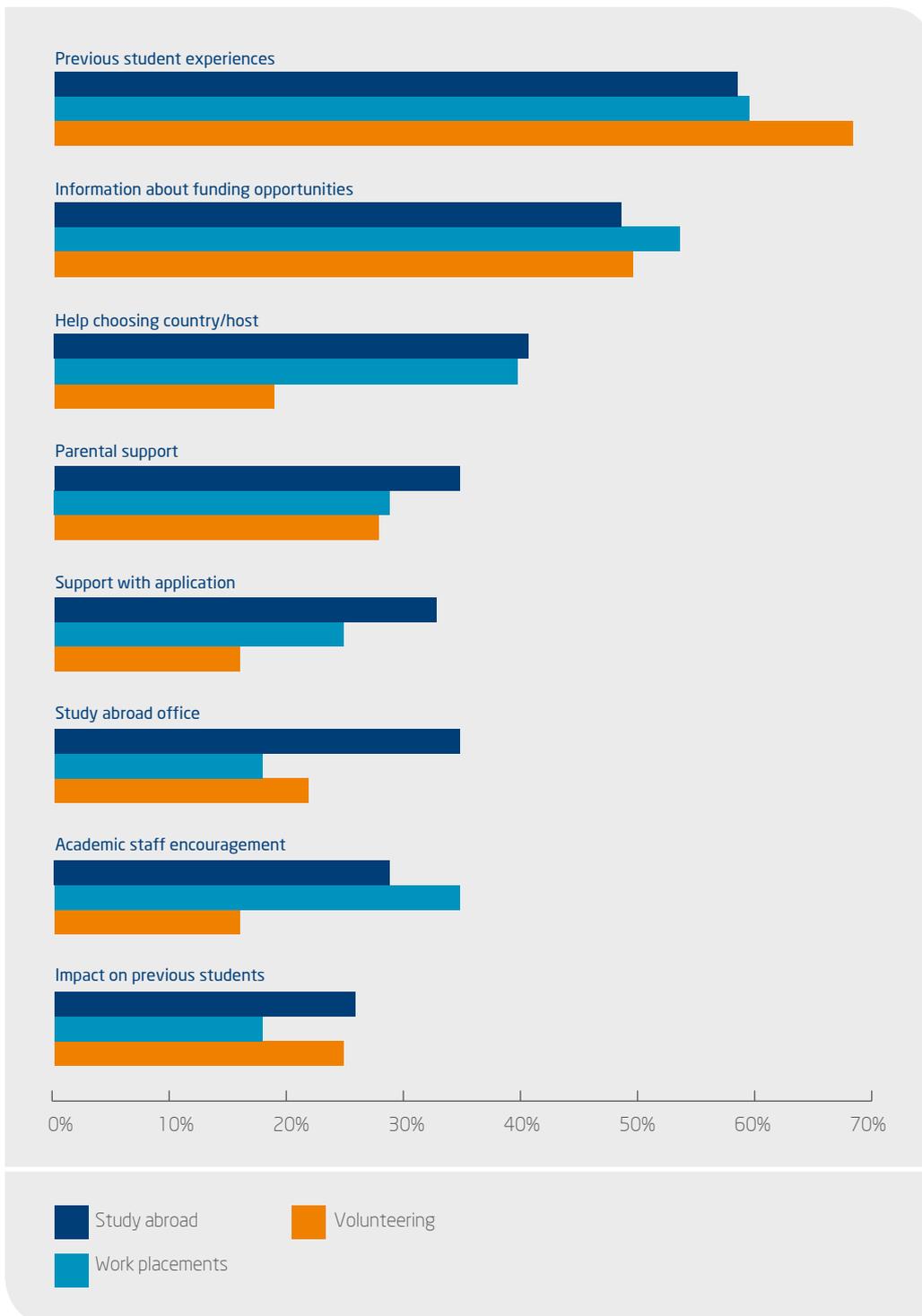


Figure 17 demonstrates the variation in usefulness of information with mobility status, with information about funding, in particular, being considerably more highly rated as useful by those actually considering mobility (compared with pre- or post-mobile students reflecting back on having done so).

Some differences also emerged between respondents who had been considering different types of mobility (Figure 18). More of those who had considered volunteering, for example, had found previous student experiences to be the most useful type of information (by far), than those considering other types of mobility, while fewer of the potential volunteers appeared to have benefited from help in choosing a destination or completing the application, or had received strong encouragement from academic staff.

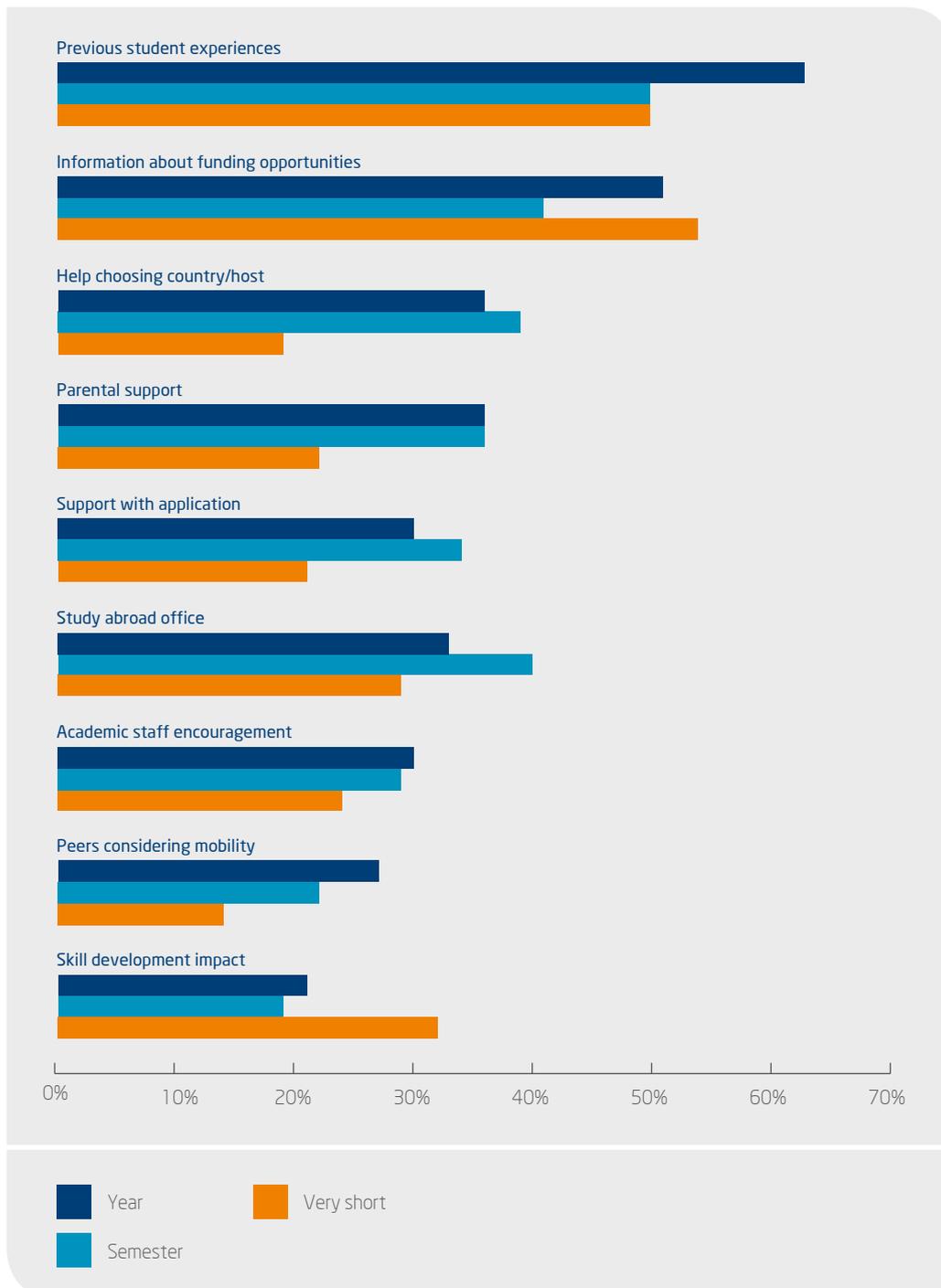
Figure 18 UK respondents' most useful information or support while considering different types of mobility opportunities



It was also notable that students considering a work experience placement were less likely to cite the support of their study abroad office than those considering study abroad, and were more likely to report academic staff as being useful. This presumably reflects the departmental nature of arrangements for and support with finding overseas work placements.

Analysis by duration of mobility being considered also revealed differences in the proportions of respondents who found aspects of information or support the most useful (Figure 19). A general finding was that fewer of those who had been considering very short mobility reported the information or support open to them as very useful, in comparison with those considering a semester or year abroad. This was particularly so in relation to help in choosing a host and help with the application. It also seemed to apply to the usefulness of support from parents or peers.

Figure 19 UK survey respondents' most useful information or support while considering different durations of mobility



Just as many – or indeed more – of those who had been considering very short mobility found information on funding opportunities to be very useful. The same applied to information about skill development impacts and help from the study abroad office. It is tempting to infer that information and support provided by institutions for opportunities to spend a semester or a year overseas was relatively well established, while the support for very short experiences was more variable but extremely helpful in specific areas for a minority of respondents. This concurs with the known focus of study abroad offices on schemes for longer-term mobility, while many shorter types (such as study visits, fieldwork trips, short work placements and volunteering schemes) are mainly organised at faculty level.

Perceptions of the most important information and support did not vary significantly by gender. On the other hand, it was noticeable that more of the group without a parent in a professional occupation rated several of these information types as very useful. This included information on funding, parental support, and help with their application (all more than ten percentage points higher than for UK respondents overall). This could suggest that those from disadvantaged backgrounds could benefit from more assistance and support from institutions.

## 7.2 Hard to find information

A large number of responses (almost 900) were provided to an open-ended question in the survey which asked which type or types of information were particularly hard to find. These could be grouped under the following headings, with the most commonly reported themes uppermost in the list:

- Funding and cost-related matters
  - Availability of funding
  - Value of Erasmus and other grants and scholarships
  - How that value changed for those with different circumstances (i.e. with dependents)
  - Feasibility of earning while abroad
- Course and credit issues
  - Course structures and whether they could be matched
  - Extent to which course classes were provided in English or host language
  - Selection of classes or modules during study abroad
  - Timetable issues
  - Extent to which credit could be transferred
- Accommodation and practical issues
  - Specific listings of available accommodation
  - Logistics of securing accommodation abroad
- Visa regulations and processes for countries ‘off the beaten track’
- How to liaise with other current study-abroad students
- Extent to which English was spoken outside the host university

### TOP 3 SOURCES OF INFORMATION MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO GO ABROAD:



**Previous students'  
experiences**



**Information about  
funding opportunities**



**Help choosing  
country/institution**

## 7.3 Further insights on decision-making

For those students who decided to undertake an overseas experience after beginning degree study, the different ways in which they were made aware of the opportunities could be crucial. The focus groups revealed that some of these were based on established communication via established brands such as Erasmus and International Student Exchange Programs (ISEP), whilst others relied on institutional channels.

Group participants reported that key factors for them included the type of information provided, the channels used (e.g. website, posters, lectures, seminars) and timing. Given the time required to organise an overseas placement, many participants suggested that the earlier you find out about the opportunities available, the better. Some students received information passively as part of an awareness-raising process (particularly in institutions where mobility is expected and encouraged) whilst others had to seek it out actively. A clear theme across the groups was that mobile students tended to be strongly self-motivated to study abroad, especially those on programmes where overseas experiences were not embedded. Some participants found out about opportunities too late, missing a deadline or triggering a scramble to put in applications.

Lectures or specific sessions which raised awareness about study abroad appeared to be a popular approach, although it seemed that – at least in the experience of group participants – members of academic staff with mobility experience, and students who had been abroad, were relatively infrequently invited to such sessions in order to encourage students. One participant suggested that academics tended to ‘stand to the side’ and leave it to study abroad coordinators when mobility was discussed. For some students who considered mobility but did not go abroad, lack of support from their academic department was reported to be a factor in that decision.

One area of questioning in the focus groups centered on the importance of existing ties and networks for students when considering whether to go abroad. For students living at home during their studies, families were expected to play an important role, whilst for those living away from home during their degree, friendship groups provided important inputs into the decision-making processes.

Students living at home reported that they had had less confidence about going overseas. Some felt that the schemes available were more suitable for students with more life skills and travel experience beyond family holidays, who would be better able to deal with a transition to a new environment and culture. They also found it a challenge to convince parents of the value of mobility, the safety of the destination and the return on investment.

Those who had been mobile appeared less concerned about leaving peer groups and networks. Whilst friendship groups were important to students, the motivation to gain an overseas experience for focus group participants represented a strong pull factor which could override the desire to remain at home. In some cases, friends had actively encouraged students to go away and provided advice on destination countries. In others, groups of students went abroad at the same time, providing students with the comfort that they could return to their original friendship group upon return to the UK.

Focus group participants also perceived that study and work placement schemes did not cater well for students with dependents or childcare responsibilities, citing specific examples. Although such students had investigated the possibilities of going abroad, the logistical difficulties and lack of support made the barriers to mobility largely insurmountable. Particular issues pertained to the additional financial support required to support a family and the difficulty in finding school places, although some students had managed to find ways to overcome this barrier. One participant reported an example of a disabled student struggling to adapt to a new culture where the approach to disability was a particular challenge.

There was also one comment from a participant who had not enjoyed the experience, although this was an isolated example within the groups:

“The university only had previous students who had enjoyed their experience talk to us. We got there and all of us hated it, consequentially we’ve never been asked to speak to potential study abroad students.”



## Other findings

### Key findings

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- Most mobile UK students maintained their student loan as a means of funding their time overseas, while around 45% had some other external funding.
- The majority of students reported that they were at least partly financing their mobility from their own sources, as their loan and external grants did not cover all costs.
- More of those spending a full year abroad had managed to find higher levels of external funding, suggesting that existing funding sources cater better for longer periods of mobility than short periods.
- In principle, short periods abroad would seem to be more achievable with relatively lower proportions of funding (and of a lower total cost) than longer duration mobility.
- Around two-thirds of mobility was reported by participants to be credit-bearing, although up to a fifth was believed to be neither credit-bearing nor recognised in any formal way by the institution, although this is thought to reflect an imperfect understanding by students.
- Not all students claimed to be aware of institutional pre-departure support, particularly amongst those undertaking mobility of less than a semester duration.

This chapter reports a number of other results from the survey and focus group research which add further perspectives in relation to funding, support and recognition of mobility.

## 8.1 Funding mobility

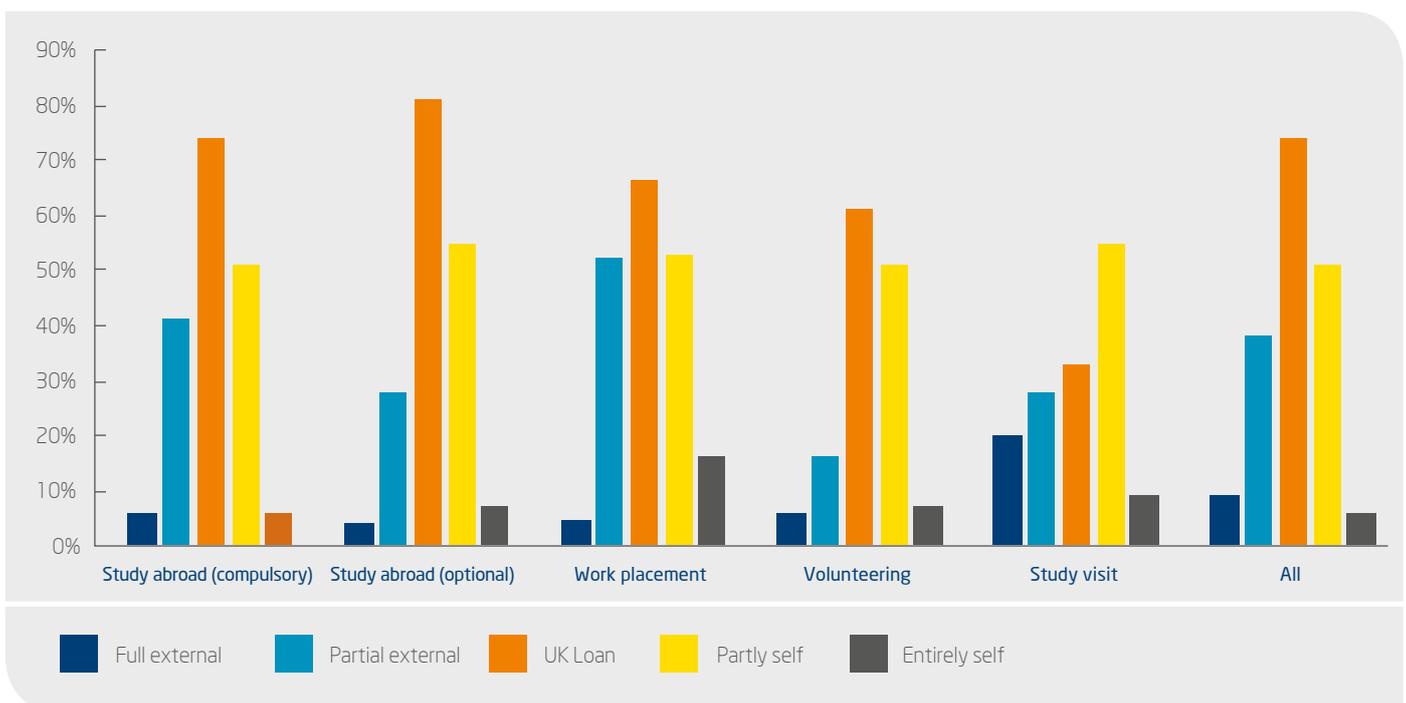
Most UK respondents who had been mobile or were about to go abroad reported that they had made or would make a financial contribution towards their overseas experience. Only 7% said their study abroad or placement was fully funded by a scholarship or other external funding, while 35% said that they had obtained some external funding (Figure 20).

The majority (75%) continued to use their UK student loan funding while abroad. On this basis, 60% of UK respondents considered that they were either fully (6%) or partly (54%) self-funded. 13% of non-UK students reported that their mobility was fully funded, but the proportion that were entirely self-funded was also higher (24% of other EU respondents and 48% of non-EU).

Analysed by type of mobility, the most common type of mobility that was fully funded were very short study visits. Higher proportions of those undertaking work placements or compulsory periods of study abroad were able to obtain partial external funding for their mobility, compared to other groups. For all mobility types, just over half at least partly self-funded their period overseas.

Around two thirds of those who had undertaken work placements had continued their student loan during this period, in addition to any remuneration that they received from the employer. The activity which was most commonly entirely self-funded (31% overall) was volunteering.

Figure 20 Funding of mobility for UK respondents

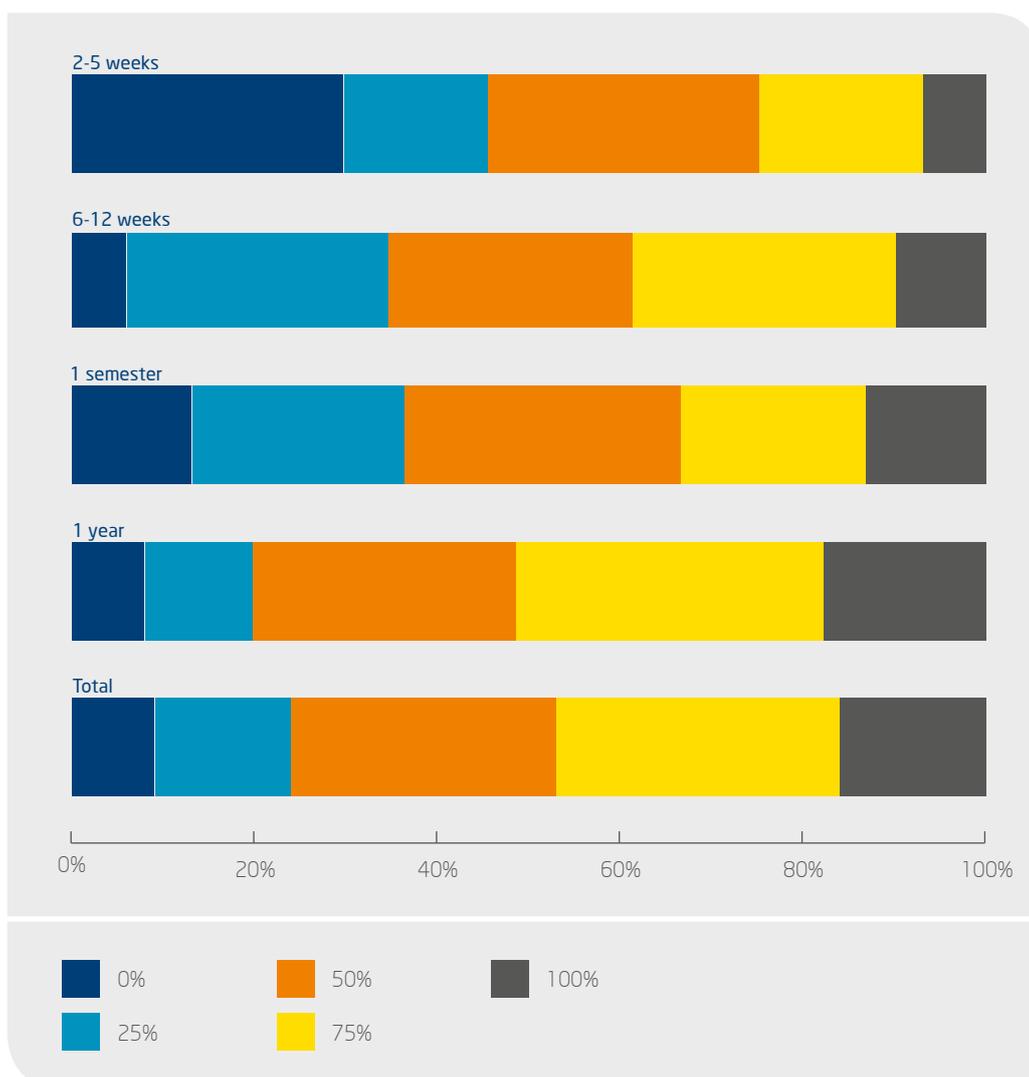


When analysed by duration of mobility, the pattern of funding for the most common mobility periods (one semester, a year, and between a semester and a year) were broadly similar, although slightly fewer of those going abroad for a semester (35%) received full or partial external funding compared to those going abroad for a full year (40%). The funding of very short term activities was much more varied and likely to depend on the type of activity (this subset of the sample was too small to analyse by both type and duration).

### 8.1.1 Level of funding required

In a separate survey question, respondents were asked to state hypothetically the proportion of the total cost of a mobility experience (including fees, travel and subsistence) that they would have needed to secure from external or institutional sources in order to undertake the activity. It is assumed that this excludes student loans. Overall, 9% of respondents would have been able to travel without any funding, 24% with a quarter funding, 53% a half, and 84% three-quarters funding, while the remaining 16% required full funding (see the bar marked 'Total' in Figure 21).

Figure 21 UK survey respondents' stated requirement for funding as a proportion of total mobility cost, with duration of mobility



When analysed by duration of mobility, some differences were apparent, as seen in Figure 21. Higher proportions of short mobility respondents would have been able to travel with partial funding compared to those spending a year abroad. Perhaps a useful yardstick is the proportion that could have taken part if they had obtained funding to offset half of the cost, which can be seen to vary from 75% of those on the very shortest mobility, two-thirds of those on a semester, but under a half of those undertaking a full year abroad.

Although this does not negate the survey findings that funding availability is very important for most of those who are considering mobility of all durations, it offers some insight as to how levels of partial funding, for different durations of mobility, might influence participation.

Analysis of these responses by type of mobility provided some further insights, suggesting that higher proportions of volunteers would undertake their activity with either zero funding (20%, compared with 9% overall) or a quarter (41%, compared with 24% overall). Volunteers may account for some of those considering very short term mobility who required little or no funding. A somewhat similar pattern, i.e. higher proportions needing less funding, was seen for those considering study visits, which again could be respondents who considered the shortest-term travel, whereas those who had considered work experience or study abroad (in fact the large majority) reported rather similar funding requirements, and in both cases would have been dominated by longer periods of mobility.

## 8.2 Credit and recognition

Just under 60% of UK respondents reported that their participation in overseas mobility was credit-bearing towards their degree (7% did not know). The same proportion believed that the activity was formally recognised by their university through a certificate or a named recognition scheme. When analysed further, around a third of mobility that was not credit-bearing academically was formally recognised by the institution in another way, while around one-fifth of respondents' experience was neither credit-bearing nor recognised. Beyond this study, it is thought that 70% of mobile students transfer to a 4-year structure with 480 credits. It is also recognised that many students on Erasmus schemes do not recollect or understand the credit recognition available to them, and consistently under-report their acquisition of credit and recognition.

Analysed by type of mobility, a similar proportion (60%) of survey respondents completing study abroad reported that it was credit-bearing. This was the case for 65% of those reporting a work placement but lower (44%) amongst volunteers and summer schools or study tour/visit (35%). On the other hand, university recognition was slightly more common for study abroad (62%) and study tour/visits (40%), and slightly lower for work experience (56%) and volunteering (34%) than credit bearing.

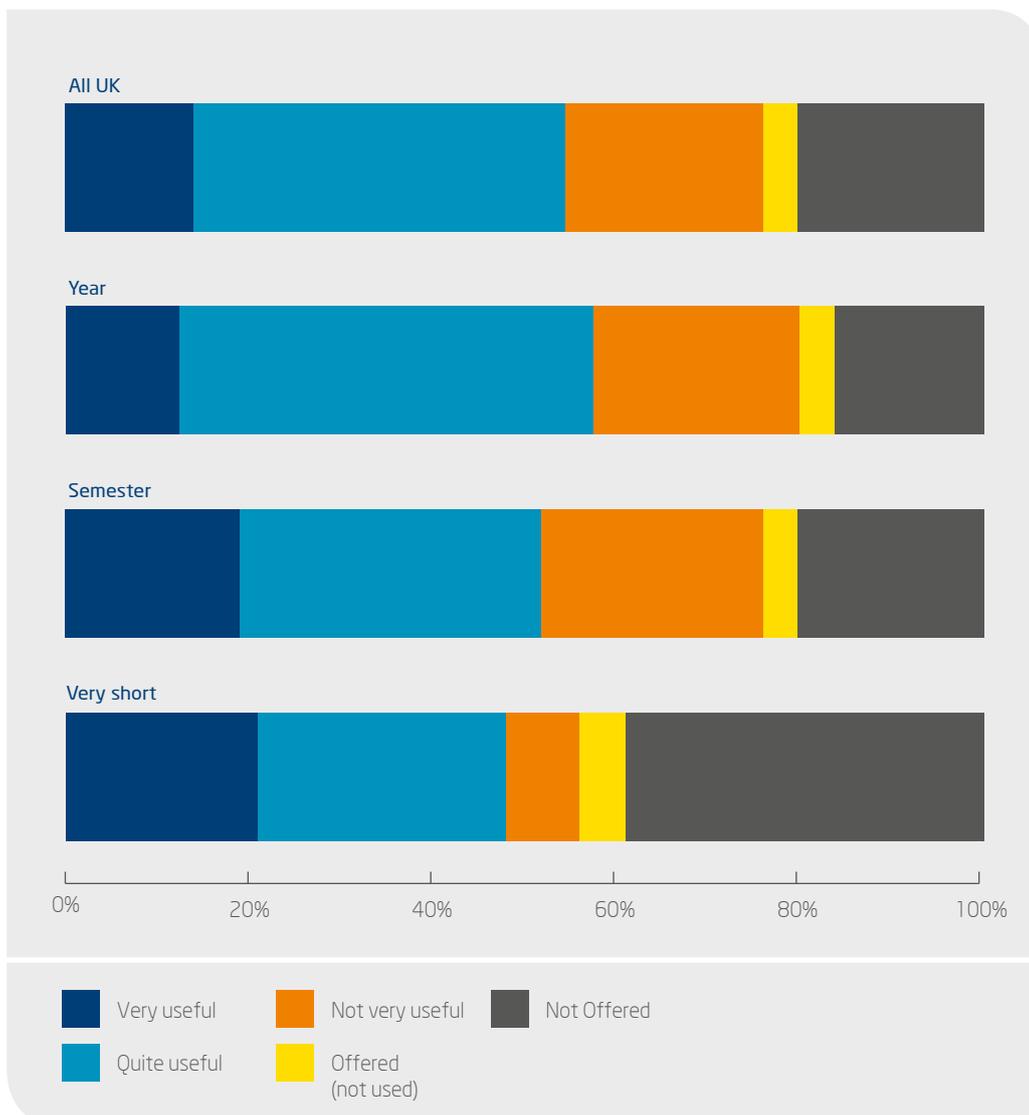
There was a marked contrast in whether mobility was credit-bearing according to duration. Over three-quarters (78%) of those abroad for a semester reported that it was credit-bearing, which was higher than amongst those abroad for longer period (59%), while far fewer on the shortest-term mobility reported it to be credit-bearing (some of whom were volunteering). On the other hand, fewer universities appeared to be recognising one-semester mobility (52%) than year-long mobility (66%), while it was significantly lower (around 30%) for the shortest forms.

### 8.3 Pre-departure activity

When asked about pre-departure activity provided by their institution, 80% of UK students for whom this was relevant were aware that this had been offered, although a few did not take it up. Within the 75% who did participate, 15% believed that it had been very useful and 40% quite useful. Slightly fewer of those involved in going abroad for a semester were aware that pre-departure activity was available, compared to those going for a whole year, but proportionally more of them found it very useful (Figure 22). This difference appeared to be more acute in relation to the shortest forms of mobility, although this may have been affected by the different pattern of types of mobility within this sub-group, with less pre-departure activity available to volunteers, for example.

It should be noted that pre-departure activity is compulsory at most institutions, and students' engagement and participation may affect their interpretation of whether such support is offered.

Figure 22 UK survey respondents' awareness and reporting of perceived usefulness of the pre-departure activity provided by their institution



# 9 Key findings and implications for UK higher education

## 9.1 Key findings

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### 9.1.1 Motivations for participating in outward mobility.

The students surveyed are motivated by personal factors, in particular enjoyable and interesting experiences, and external factors, such as enhanced employability

Improving language skills is very important for almost all students studying languages, but for far fewer students of other disciplines.

Motivations are mostly consistent irrespective of the duration and type of mobility experience, although many students considering volunteering had additional ethical motivations.

### 9.1.2 Perceived and realised impacts of mobility

The most significant perceived impact is personal benefit, including the development of independence, self-confidence and intercultural awareness, together with new social networks. Many perceive that it is these interpersonal skills that enhance their career prospects.

Students are more likely to perceive an academic benefit from mobility than fear a negative impact on their degree outcome and many students who had been reported increased commitment to their degree programme.

The range and level of personal impacts reported are consistent, irrespective of the type and duration of mobility.

The extent of most impacts is relatively consistent across different types of mobility, with some minor exceptions, which suggests that it is the overseas nature of the experience that is key to many of the benefits, rather than the activity undertaken.

The type and extent of impact anticipated by those who had applied for mobility and were waiting to go abroad are very similar to those perceived by students who had been mobile. This suggests that students are well informed about the likely impact of mobility.

### 9.1.3 Factors when considering mobility

The most important factors in deciding to participate in outward mobility are the availability of funding and total cost of the experience, personal safety and security, the reputation or perceived quality of the host, and its location.

These factors do not vary greatly in relation to the type of mobility being considered, but some do vary in importance according to the duration of the mobility. For example, funding is perceived as just as important, or even more so, by many of those considering very short term mobility as compared to those considering longer periods abroad.

The greatest barriers to participation reported by those considering mobility are:

- financial concerns,
- personal concerns, such as fear of isolation and potential impact on existing friends and relationships, and
- lack of knowledge of opportunities.

Some concerns are not as significant for those considering short periods of mobility. However, funding concerns were as important to students considering very short term mobility as those considering a semester or year abroad. Other financial concerns, such as interruption to part-time work in the UK, are more important to students considering very short term mobility.

#### 9.1.4 Information and support

Students considering mobility found information on previous student experiences of mobility to be the most valuable, followed by details of funding opportunities. Information on funding was particularly helpful for students considering very short periods of mobility.

Many students valued the help they had received from their institution in choosing a destination or host, and in making the application. This type of support was particularly valuable to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students considering very short periods of mobility need similar support from their institution to those spending a full year abroad. The support of academic staff was also important in influencing students to make a positive decision on mobility.

Around 45% of UK students reported receiving external funding for their mobility period. Most students believed that they were partly financing their mobility from their own sources, as their student loan and external grants did not cover all costs.

## 9.2 Implications for the UK higher education sector

Almost all mobile students surveyed wanted further mobility experiences, and reported valuable outcomes for very short and short term mobility programmes. Funding very short duration visits (or tasters) could be a means to increase the demand from students to participate in more substantive periods of mobility as well as provide a valuable international experience. As current external funding sources cater better for longer periods of mobility than short periods, institutions may need to develop alternative funding sources for this type of mobility.

Early engagement with students is also key, not just to give students sufficient time and information to make a decision about going abroad, but to allow them to access as many mobility opportunities as possible during their higher education.

Shorter term mobility requires a similar level of resource from the institution in terms of information, advice and guidance and this needs to be taken into consideration when developing shorter term opportunities for students.

The research reiterates the crucial role that academic staff play in legitimising and promoting outward mobility to students. Institutions need to engage academic staff further in outward mobility programmes of all types.

# 10

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# Appendix

## HE institutions participating in the survey and focus groups

Responses were received as a result of the following universities' promotion of the online survey to their students. Their assistance in circulating survey invitations is gratefully acknowledged.

- University of Aberdeen
- Leeds Beckett University
- Abertay University
- University of Leicester
- Aston University
- University of Manchester
- Cardiff University
- Manchester Metropolitan
- Coventry University
- Middlesex University
- University for the Creative Arts
- Newman University, Birmingham
- Durham University
- University of Nottingham
- University of East Anglia
- University of Oxford
- University of East London
- Oxford Brookes University
- Edinburgh Napier University
- Queen Margaret University
- University of Essex
- Queen Mary, University of London
- University of Exeter
- Regent's University London
- Imperial College London
- Royal Holloway, University of London
- University of Kent
- University of Southampton
- King's College London
- University of Staffordshire
- Kingston University London
- University of Stirling
- Lancaster University
- University of Surrey
- University of Leeds
- University of Sussex
- University of York

The following institutions hosted student focus groups for this research. Their efforts in pulling together these groups are much appreciated: Aston University, Cardiff University, Coventry University, University for the Creative Arts, Edinburgh Napier University, Leeds Beckett University, Newman University Birmingham, University of Nottingham.





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