

## Internationalisation: cui bono?

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### Abstract

*Many universities are striving to internationalise, each with its own rationale. To benefit students, these efforts must go beyond the recruitment of international students and the development of transnational education, even though these bring their own fiscal and cultural rewards. Here we examine the value of the other strands of the international agenda – student and staff exchange and internationalising the curriculum – as the aspects that most directly benefit the student experience.*

### Keywords

internationalisation; study abroad; curriculum development; student experience; globalisation

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### Internationalisation: cui bono?

*Travel and change of place impart new vigour  
to the mind.*

– Seneca

The posts of LJMU's Associate Deans (Global Engagement) were established in 2015/16 to work within Faculties and, in partnership with LJMU's International Relations team, to deliver outcomes across the internationalisation agenda. This includes: transnational education, facilitating research links and networks and promoting international student recruitment to our programmes. With more than 70 per cent of our student body coming to us each year through UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service), the advantage of these activities to our core business (full-time home undergraduates) is mostly indirect and linked to institutional ambitions and outcomes. The areas that most directly influence home students' experiences and outcomes are student exchanges and internationalisation of the curriculum. Not only do these factors affect the students while they are with us, but there is evidence that the benefits of these international experiences have impact beyond their undergraduate careers.

Research demonstrates that outward mobility does bring benefits to home students. A recent Universities UK International (UUKi) (2017) report examines outcomes for 2014/15 UK graduates responding to the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE). There is growth in the numbers experiencing a period of mobility over the previous year, but still less than one in ten undergraduates (7.2 per cent) benefits in this way. The UUKi research, using the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) classifications, found that more than one in

ten students from the most advantaged socio-economic classification (SEC) group experienced mobility whereas the lowest mobility, slightly more than one in 100 of the DLHE respondents, came from the least advantaged SEC group. A 2018 report for the Irish Universities Association found similar mobility participation rates overall (five per cent) and for disadvantaged or minority groups (one per cent). It is worth noting that uptake of student exchange in the UK lags behind that in other European countries. In Germany, for example, 16 per cent of students 'studied abroad' in 2016 (Fowlie and Forder, 2018).

The threshold for mobility in the UUKi report is very modest (one week) but graduates who had this experience were less likely to be unemployed (3.7 per cent to 4.9 per cent) and more likely to achieve a First or upper Second Class honours degree (80.1 per cent to 73.6 per cent). Correlation is not causality, and more research is needed to understand other factors that may be relevant as part of the important widening participation and social/economic mobility agenda. Nonetheless it's a powerful suggestion.

Recent research for the US-based Institute for International Education (2018) found that study abroad had a positive impact on a range of job skills including: flexibility, confidence, problem solving and tolerance for ambiguity. Our own anecdotal evidence is that undergraduates find potential employers at job interviews focus on international experience and its benefits, and that these experiences are one of the things that help applicants 'stand out' in a crowded field of graduates. The relationship between international experiences and employability is all the more topical with the establishment and passing into operation in England of the

Office for Students. The first words on its website are, “We want every student to have a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers”; the evidence is that an international experience makes positive contributions to both of these.



As a university in the top ten for widening participation, it is part of our educational mission to understand these data and their relevance to our own context because the UUKi research identified that the apparent benefit was greater for students from the HESA defined disadvantaged backgrounds. LJMU has been on a journey to internationalise, one element of which was intended to improve our students’ access to international opportunities. It has been an institution-wide effort, involving all staff and students in the realignment of our academic framework to make it more amenable to inbound and outbound student exchanges, in term time and out. Modules were semesterised and their credit weights were decimalised to bring us in line with other universities worldwide. Both the academic calendar and our course offering have been changed; the cohort, now in its final year (in 2017/18), will be the last graduating under the old regime. In parallel with this, the University has created and promoted international opportunities and supported these financially with student travel grants and additional staffing resource.

The changes to the academic framework facilitate single semester and whole year study abroad for credit, with the same changes supporting inbound exchange mobility. Study abroad for credit can be viewed at the more ambitious end of the mobility spectrum, but we recognise that in our home context more research is required. We need to understand the issues affecting the general accessibility of significant time away from Liverpool to our students, particularly for the large proportion of our undergraduates who are from the North West of England.

At LJMU, to facilitate engagement and interest, we offer funded organised, staff-led overseas summer schools and competitive scholarships towards individually organised summer activities. There is also funding available to support students who undertake semester- or year-long academic exchanges. The demand for these opportunities is increasing geometrically year-on-year. The students who have had these experiences are their most powerful advocates, and they do formal and informal peer-to-peer outreach to promote the opportunities and encourage others to apply.

Internationalising the curriculum has benefits for students who can undertake exchanges themselves, but also for those who find it more difficult to get away. By ensuring that staff consider issues in an international context, giving more examples from overseas or even discussing the home countries of themselves or researchers, students can get a glimpse of non-UK contexts and picture the possibilities these offer. It can be a fruitful way to get the conversation started, and staff who have researched or studied overseas are an important gateway and example of the benefits of studying abroad. When this practice is embraced in the classroom by

international staff, it improves the environment for them and for others who might otherwise feel like outsiders.

As academics we don't routinely monitor the outcomes of each individual student who is touched by internationalisation or an international experience, but anecdotal evidence is that these experiences are life-changing, as suggested by the research trends. Discipline-based experiences, such as collecting project data overseas or having a relevant work based experience abroad can really energise the returning student and give them the drive and confidence to explore further possibilities. For many, they have had experiences which may inspire them to work or study abroad further, but many will find their educational outcomes enhanced even when returning home. This is as good a benefit as we need to advance the internationalisation of our institution.

*Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colours. And the people there see you differently, too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving.*

- Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky*

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