

The UK Outward Student Mobility Under the Framework of Internationalization of Higher Education

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Abstract

The outward student mobility has been recognized as an important instrument for the internationalization of higher education globally. However, it has not yet been put into the core of the UK political agenda for higher education. There is limited research about the UK outward students, and most of the research are about students' motivations, experience, academic and career development. This paper aims to give a critical account of the gains and losses of the UK outward students from the perspective of intercultural and personal development, during and after their trip abroad. It finds that the UK outward students develop their knowledge about the culture of the host and their own country, which helps them become more critical and tolerant to cultural differences. However, they experience reverse cultural shock, feeling a sense of loneliness. As for personal development, they are able to gain three abilities which include independence, better self-identities and expanded views of their home country, but are negatively influenced by the isolation from the local community and their social networks are changed. These two dimensions (intercultural competence and personal development) mutually affect each other and jointly promote UK students more international and intercultural.

Keywords

Internationalization of higher education; UK outward student mobility; UK outward students; intercultural competence; personal development.

1. Introduction

Internationalization of higher education (IHE) has been an important agenda at both the national and institutional levels for most countries in the world. It has two dimensions, the IHE at home and abroad/cross-border [11]. More attention has been put on the abroad dimension. The international student including both the *inward and outward students*, is regarded as a fundamental element of IHE over the past decades [20], and transforms the landscape of higher education globally. Specifically, for the UK, IHE has been key to its educational policy-making. The UK governmental sectors have realized the important role of students within this process; however, it chooses to invest more on attracting international students but neglects the outward student mobility. The UK outward student mobility is described by the Universities UK as the "Study, work or volunteer periods abroad undertaken by UK-domiciled students for two or more weeks as part of their UK higher education programme" [10]. The latest data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows that there were almost 530,000 foreign students from other countries studying within the UK for the school year 2020/2021. However, within the Covid-19 influence, the total number of UK students studying abroad was significantly lower at 14,000. These two numbers demonstrate that the UK is primarily a destination for international students rather than a source of such students. This action is

considered as being driven by economic benefits, meaning that IHE is an instrument for profit-making, especially for the UK and some English-speaking countries [19]. Nevertheless, it is suggested that more attention needs to be paid to outward student mobility because of concerns that a lower rate may hamper UK graduates' competitiveness within the global and European labour markets [22].

In fact, the UK students' participation of outward mobility remains low, thus, the research undertaken about them is limited. The existing investigations are mainly about their motivations, experiences, and performances. There is an insufficient exploration about the impacts of outward mobility on them. One way to recognize to what extent these students are affected by outward mobility is to examine their outcomes. According to the framework provided by Deardorff and Gaalen, the outcomes of IHE at micro/student level could be "acquiring 21st-century knowledge and skills, developing intercultural competence, personal enrichment, better labour market opportunities, and better job performance" [4]. In fact, we already know that outward students are more likely to have an advantage within the labour market. According to the data, they are within higher employment positions and with greater salaries [10]. In addition, they gain better academic outcomes over their domestic peers. Thus, my study no longer investigates the UK outward students' outcomes on their employability and learning further, instead it focuses on their intercultural competence and personal enrichment. Intercultural competence is defined as "effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations, which again can be further detailed in terms of indicators of appropriate behaviour in specific contexts" [3]. As for personal enrichment, also known as personal development. This study will analyse the impacts of outward student mobility on the UK outward students from these two perspectives. For data generation, an evidence base consisting of documents relating to the UK outward students will be constructed, including research articles, background papers, government reports, blogs, news reports, and reports from national or international organisations. One of the most important forms of data is the students' dialogue/words that are transcribed within some research or reports, as it directly reflects students' experience and true feelings.

2. Intercultural Competence of UK Outward Students

2.1. Critical Multicultural Awareness

Being exposed to a multicultural environment, UK outward students' multicultural awareness increases greatly as they know more about other cultures. Firstly, the UK outward students are enriched with first-hand knowledge of the host country on their arrival. As responded by a UK student in her blog published by THE, "Our visit to the US has enlightened us to many features of American life". Their previous knowledge of the host country was acquired through social media, which would not have been very comprehensive or even incorrect. Now though, they are able to get a more complete and clearer picture of this country, which will dispel their prejudices. Some students find cultural differences between the other nations and their own, and might learn from the foreign culture and reflect on the shortcomings of their own. This learning process leads them to develop their critical-thinking ability.

More than the indigenous culture of the destinations, it finds that UK outward students have an expanded awareness of other foreign cultures. They are directly exposed to a multicultural environment by living and communicating with other international students from different nations or cultural backgrounds. Dan Lucasa, was a UK outward student that studied in the University of Florida and participated a UK national campaign, the Go International: Stand Out campaign which was launched in November 2017 and designed to help the sector to deliver on the national target for outward student mobility. Dan mentioned that, "I lived in a set of dorm

rooms allocated especially for international students, which meant within days I had made friends with people from all over the globe. I was fascinated in their cultures and stories”.

Some UK outward students also show a high degree of curiosity and are open-minded towards various cultures when living in a foreign country. With this open-mindedness, they are more open to new experiences, tolerant to cultural differences, and delighted to encounter people from diverse cultures [8; 28]. As a student in the research of Allison et al. mentioned that, “The expedition itself taught me a lot too about being a member of a group and particularly about showing tolerance to others and dealing with individuals in awkward situations” [17].

This open-mindedness is obtained primarily through interacting with people from different cultures and acting as a leader when dealing with multicultural affairs [12]. Thus, a multicultural environment is the key for students to be able to develop their multicultural awareness. However, for some UK domestic students, especially from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, they are unable to engage in a multicultural environment so that their open-mindedness remains lower than their outward counterparts. Thus, one implication I want to highlight is, in order to help home students to learn with open-mindedness without leaving the campus, the UK institutions shall develop domestic curriculum by adding more international and intercultural elements into it.

Noticeably, the above positive impacts are long-term, as it further stimulates students’ intercultural awareness until they re-enter to their home country (the UK). As mentioned by a UK student interviewed in the research conduct by Gallarza et al., “It is a unique experience, the perceived experience value of the programme is important and remains even when we will be back home” [16]. This lasting impact assists students to be better prepared to address the different cultures within the UK. Having cultivated a multicultural perspective, the UK outward students would become more receptive and embracing to different ethnic groups, and respectful to different cultural values in the UK. This inclusive attitude is actually an important skill set for all western citizens, especially young people preparing to enter the workforce, within the increasing diversity in the western society [21].

2.2. Refreshed Understanding of Their Home Culture

Besides gaining knowledge of diverse cultures, the UK outward students are also reported to develop fresher views about the culture of their own country after their journeys abroad. According to the data from Findlay et al. in 2010, a number of UK student participants think that living abroad contributes to how they would think differently about the country of origin (the UK), as 44.8% of undergraduates highly agree while 74% agree [8]. This finding is consistent with another study, in which 71% out of 150 respondents directly addressed the question of how studying abroad affected the way they see their own culture [6]. Their updated understandings about their home culture are generated from their communications with foreign friends. After knowing the advantages of other cultures, some students start to reflect on their domestic culture and see it from a new perspective, finally, they would find disadvantages existing within it. Hazen and Alberts describe this disadvantage as “restrictive cultural practices in the home country” [7]. Furthermore, they mention one specific practice that is realized by the UK outward students as being gender inequality (for instance, restrictions on employment opportunities for women). This finding confirms the results reported by Kartoshkina in 2015 by indicating that 68% of respondents said that they developed negative attitudes towards their home culture [25].

Conversely, my research finds that some students are reported to have a better appreciation of their own culture. “...during my time there I became a little patriotic to my British roots. Since I have returned I have come to appreciate a lot of things about living in the UK such as free health care and student loans”. These students have become more aware of the uniqueness and advantages that British culture offers.

Why is it that whilst some grow more critical of home culture, others grow more appreciative? Kartoshkina notes that there are several factors categorized into three dimensions that would influence outward students' perceptions of their home culture [25]. The first is the personal level as students' preference might be influenced by their ages, genders, personality traits, etc. The second one is the situational level (length of stay), meaning that the longer time spends overseas, more possibility of developing negative attitudes towards home culture. The last one is the cultural factors which are students' previous intercultural experiences or the cultural distance between home and host culture. Students are more likely to see their own culture from a critical perspective if they have richer intercultural experiences. Besides, their different perspectives depend upon the economic and social development of the host country [7]. If they are given better jobs, higher standard of living and greater academic freedom in the host country, they are more likely to grow negative notions towards their home culture.

Noticeably, the awareness of advantages and disadvantages of their home culture is important in developing students' intercultural competence, also known as cultural identification. The UK outward students will bring their own cultural prejudice, values, and beliefs when they communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In order to overcome the influence of their home culture and respect the differences of others, students with strong cultural abilities should analyse and maintain a high degree of self-awareness for their own cultural background [15]. Therefore, self-awareness becomes the basis of an effective cross-cultural social relationship, as outward students should first be aware of their cultural identity in order to control their cultural influence. Self-awareness is a kind of pre-intervention activity, through which students examine their own culture and their perceptions of other cultures. In other words, intercultural learning contributes to the reconstruction of participants' self-identity through interacting with others from different cultural backgrounds.

2.3. Reverse Cultural Shock

2.3.1. Source of Reverse Cultural Shock

The first source of re-adjustment difficulties is the alienation from close ones, more specifically, the indifferent attitudes and responses of their families and friends. Outward students expect that their families and friends would be highly receptive to listen to their experiences abroad and continue further discussion of this topic. However, family and friends tend to be dismissive of these students' experiences, letting students feel the sense of isolation. As said by a student in the study of Allison et al., "I met most of my friends the day after I got back ... Nobody asked me how it was; nobody was really interested when I told them where I'd been. The big news was all about who 'got off' with whom the night before" [17]. UK outward students reflect that their abroad experiences are unfamiliar to families and friends, thereby setting them apart from these people, making reintegration at home difficult and illustrating reverse cultural shock. However, some students start to change their patterns of interaction as suggested by an interviewee "Now I want to know what everyone thinks, even if it leads to arguments over differences of opinion". They are positively affected by the practices of readjustment and become more tolerant.

Another main source of students' reverse cultural shock is their assimilation of living and studying abroad. Some of them become accustomed to the lifestyle over their abroad destinations so that they cannot quite fit in the ways of their own countries. They may have difficulties of assimilating into an environment where a familiar language is not spoken, and where dress, food, and religious customs are all different. Also, the level of reverse cultural shock relates to the length of the students' visit, meaning that the greater the length of time overseas, the greater the likelihood of severe culture shock. Notably, reverse cultural shock increases when students highly appreciate the life and culture of the host country. For these students, life was totally different while living abroad. A variety of factors relating to the culture

of the host country, such as food, weather, religions, clothing, and so on would be unforgettable to many students and further deepens their inadaptability back into their native surroundings. As a UK outward student mentioned in the blog published by Universities UK that, "I missed the food and over the few months of my return as I watched back videos and smiled at pictures I started to miss the people ... It was hard to appreciate these moments while they were happening, especially in the second semester, because I finally started to feel like a part of Pitzer college" [10].

Furthermore, some of them even became hostile to their native culture. As said by a UK student who studied in Seoul, "During the first two months of my recent return to Europe from Seoul ... I experienced a real desire of urgency to return to Seoul as quickly as I could and discovered my own native customs alien, insensitive, uninspiring or simply annoying".

2.3.2. Impacts of Reverse Cultural Shock

Knowing that some UK outward students may experience reverse cultural shock, how does this affect them? Firstly, reverse cultural shock changes students' social networks. For students who have trouble of re-adjusting to their native environment, they prefer to communicate with other students who share similar experiences, especially those participating in the same international education programme. Having a lot in common, they could mutually understand each other. A response by a student participating in a UK expedition education programme, "I have spoken to someone from the expedition every week and seen someone virtually every other week. I think that we all needed to talk to each other because it is so difficult to talk to people who didn't go on the expedition".

As suggested by Presbitero in 2016, reverse cultural shock can also be argued to relate to both psychological and sociocultural adaptation [1]. Psychologically, various negative emotions including "not belonging; loneliness; isolation; inferiority feelings; depression; and general anxiety" and further "shyness and speech anxiety" are identified by Gaw as the problems related to the readjustment difficulties of returning students [13]. From the sociocultural perspective, the likelihood of establishing a sense of identity and having overall life satisfaction is low, as well as the likelihood of coping with the day-to-day stresses of social life being low when an individual experiences high levels of reverse cultural shock.

However, it is no by means that all outward students, after returning back to the UK, would experience reverse cultural shock. For instance, in the research conducted by Koskinen and Tossavainen in 2004, some students reported that they had experienced no significant reverse cultural shock and readjusted well after returning [14]. The level of adjustment is influenced by students' self-efficacy (the level of confidence that individuals have in their ability to accomplish tasks), the environment of both host and native countries, the social support students gain, and the duration of studying abroad.

3. Personal Development

3.1. Increased Personal Abilities

My research observes that the UK outward students are with increased three abilities after the outward mobility. The first ability is *independence*, this is gained as students move out of their 'comfort zone' and start facing and tackling challenges individually. As a student mentioned, "This is the first time actually I'm doing something for myself. Now I'm here and I do everything all by myself" [16]. One dimension of outward students' independence has been explained by Benson in 2001, he states that students move to independence when they operate with autonomy to control their own learning [18]. One UK student think the outward mobility could help them moving away from dependence through independence to interdependence on studying. Some outward students had no autonomy in their studies and needed to rely greatly

on the help of their teachers at home, but they gradually grow as independent learners during studying abroad. Importantly, the ability of independent learning has been a key concept within higher education, whose positive influence is lifelong [24]. Moreover, for some UK students, the outward mobility is an experience which is more about gaining independence than learning in an academic sense. It means that the daily problems that students may have to deal with are not solely academic, but rather part-time job or some other practical issues including cooking, washing and shopping for groceries, and all these are conducive to increase their overall independence [23].

The second ability is an *expanded view of students themselves*. UK outward students know better of themselves and develop clearer life goals, for instance, the outward mobility experience gives students a clearer future career plan. "It has helped me to determine the sector I would like to work in and the type of HR I hope to specialize in in the future." "I think that my perspective on life changed over the summer. I now look on life as a mass of opportunities and challenges rather than a narrow route that has to be followed to the university, get a job, etc." The expanded view of self is also described by Gill as a 'reconstruction of identity' [23]. The first identity they get is *global citizenship*, as they are engaged in issues and actions beyond their local context. This cultivates them with a sense of global citizenship, meaning that they are more international and multicultural. UK outward students do not limit themselves to English people during the outward journey, as they identify their sociocultural belonging more broadly [5]. In other words, they regard themselves as global citizens who are closely connected with the multicultural world rather than single individuals. The second identity is a sense of the *European citizen*. For some UK students participating in the exchange programme within Europe, such as Erasmus, they feel a greater sense of belonging, and their European identity tends to increase significantly.

The last one is the *awareness of the state of country*, which is a political consciousness. The overseas experience helps UK outward students better understand the political views, recognizing political problems arising in their home country and changes their views about the global state of their home country. As mentioned by a UK outward student that studied at a US university, "Studying abroad has given us a unique perspective on the current state of affairs in both the UK and the US. We are living in a time of political turbulence; in most of our classes our American friends ask for our opinion on Brexit and then compare it to President Trump". It is not solely their home country students have a changed attitude towards, they show a changed attitude towards the host country they have been to. Another student, Abolarinwa who had participated the outward mobility expressed in the blog published by the Universities UK that "I had no desire to become Americanized during my year abroad ... Once a die-hard America fan, a year abroad helped me to take off my rose-tinted glasses and see America in a way that I had never perceived before a nation that operates in extremes".

3.2. New Social Network

After reviewing the evidence of self-reports from students, one significant emotion they experience whilst studying abroad is loneliness. It is commonly accepted that when emerging into a native environment, students are likely to encounter and contact the native community, which helps develop their new social networks. In fact, as reported by the UK outward students that participated in the Erasmus programme, the chances for them to interact with local students remain limited, even if in the school [2]. It is because the two groups of students live separately and have limited shared social space in which they can encounter with each other. As reported by one UK graduate who studied overseas, who had observed that local students returned to their families in the evenings, limiting the possibilities for social contact [20]. Due to the different cultural backgrounds, many domestic students within the host country are unwilling to accept UK outward students into their social groups. Domestic students obviously "don't really want to hang out with Erasmus people", which leads there to being "...no

interaction at the university". UK outward students "can't understand everybody" and may "feel distinctly separated from where we're at". This insufficient integration into the local context makes UK outward students feel isolated from the local community. Actually, the lack of sense of community poses adverse effects upon UK outward students, since they would become less proud of being a student in the host country.

The language barrier is regarded as another main source of loneliness, since it is a constraining element for intercultural communication between the UK outward students and local students from the host country. In fact, insufficient language skills are a result from the students' general reluctance to study (or interact socially) in any language other than English. In order to avoid learning a foreign language, some UK students choose English-speaking countries, or European countries where English is widely spoken as their destinations for studying abroad. In fact, one of the most commonly recognized advantages of studying abroad for many students is the guarantee that it provides a proficiency in a foreign language, notably English [20]. However, that is unlikely to matter the UK outward students. Their decision-making for choice of overseas destination conceals some sort of bias. As native speakers of the most dominating language worldwide, UK outward students are reluctant to learn 'inferior' languages. However, this propensity to study and socialise only in English inevitably limits the international nature of students' encounters [20]. One student said, "So, like, that would be a barrier if I couldn't speak the language with, like the people I was going to work with".

This period of feeling loneliness seems to come at a time when many students are seeking out people with whom to establish friendships with. After failing encountering locals, students report that they tend to reconstruct their social networks and communicate with individuals that are of the same nationality or in the same exchange programme. It is much easier for them to communicate with those who have things in common, including their nationalities or experiences [2]. In addition, they prefer to get along with other UK students who have been international students themselves once. As said by a respondent, "Tomorrow I am going to the pub ... meet British students and others [9]. They are people who are open to this context because they are themselves going to ERASMUS or have been there so they understand this". However, the narrowed social network constrains against the UK outward students' open-mindedness as discussed within 2.1. They lose chances to be more inclusive to the different cultural norms and values, which is harmful to their intercultural competence.

4. Conclusion

This research explores the influence of outward mobility on the UK students' intercultural competence and personal development. It finds that the effects are two-sided, meaning that the UK students gain benefits and losses within their journey abroad. From the cultural perspective, being exposed to foreign cultural environments, they are given more chances to promote their understandings of local culture. Furthermore, when touching with international students from other nations, they are emerged within a multicultural environment which will enable them to know diverse cultures globally and become more tolerant to cultural differences. This assists them better integrate into the western society with increasing cultural diversity. Significantly, it notices that this cultural influence is lasting until the students return to the UK. Students also gain fresher insights towards their home culture, and may view it from a critical perspective. However, there is one adverse effect that students would experience reverse cultural shock. They feel isolated by their friends and families who do not react as they expected when sharing their experiences. Thus, some of them are delighted to make friends with people who also have the same experiences of studying abroad. It is worth mentioning that not all UK outward students would experience reverse cultural shock, as they have a high level of readjustment. From the perspectives of personal development, the UK outward students are equipped with

three abilities, independence, an expanded view of the self, and an awareness of the state of the world. However, outward mobility is occasionally an unpleasant experience for some UK students. They feel a sense of isolation and loneliness because of two factors, the language barrier and reluctance from native students, which both deter them to integrate into the local community. Consequently, these negative emotions enable students turn to make friends with other students who are from the same country, participating in the same exchange scheme or simply just being international students. In conclusion, through outward mobility, the UK outward students better recognize themselves and further reconstruct their multicultural identifications in becoming global citizens. Also, their psychological development helps them narrow social networks, which is conducive to relieving stress during and after the journey abroad, however it limits their multicultural development.

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