

The Outcomes of Outbound Student Mobility

A Summary of Academic Literature

AIM Overseas

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1. Benefits of overseas education experiences to students

1.1 International Skills

Academic research, including long-term studies over a 50-year period, unequivocally shows that studying overseas significantly augments the 'international skills' of graduates.

Overseas study experiences promote the development of:

- Understanding of the complexity of global issues¹
- Applying disciplinary knowledge in a global context¹
- Ability, and comfort, to work with people from other cultures¹
- Intercultural awareness^{1,10}
- Adaptability and tolerance⁵
- Cognitive skills (in those who have not travelled previously)⁶
- Self-confidence and self-reliance¹⁰
- Open-mindedness and independence in students¹¹
- Both general and culturally-specific creativity.³⁴

Employers recognise this and relate the following with graduate candidates who have overseas experience: ^{23, 25}. See also 3.3 Employer Perceptions.

Adaptability	Initiative	Maturity
Cultural awareness	Leadership qualities	Global perspective
Confidence	Strong interpersonal skills	Cultural understanding
Independence (autonomy)	Teamwork skills	Resilience

1.2 Students Do Better Academically Upon Return

Even when controlling for things like academic ability, research shows that students who study overseas do better academically upon return than those that do not study abroad:

- Overseas study experiences can promote academic development in students evidenced by improved academic performance upon return and higher graduation rates^{2, 10}
- Overseas study experiences have been found to support the academic development of at-risk students leading to higher graduation rates of this group^{2,10,13}
- While controlling for gender, race and prior academic performance, graduation rates are up to 17.8% higher (or more) for participants than non-participants^{2,38}
- Studies also report that programs of mid-term duration (4-12 weeks) were associated with higher graduation rates^{2,38}
- Long-term overseas study (more than 1 year) is linked to postgraduate study. Students are twice as likely to obtain a PhD compared to short-term overseas study⁴
- Overseas study experience can foster a greater appreciation for learning. Students are more focused on academic study when they return.¹¹

1.3 Personal Perspectives and International Outlook

Unsurprisingly, students who have studied abroad have a far greater international outlook and personal awareness than those that have not:

- Overseas study promotes greater understanding of one's own cultural values and biases, and development of a more sophisticated way of looking at the world⁴
- Overseas study participants seek out a greater diversity of friends⁴
- One study showed 93% of exchange students made close friends in the host country⁵
- Overseas study programs can play a significant part in personal growth and the development of self-confidence.⁵ It promotes personal awareness and development of a positive self-image^{10,12}
- The impact of studying abroad can extend to the family and friends at home.⁵

1.4 Long Term Impact

Overseas study has a long term, if not life-long, impact:

- Several studies have found as many as 84% of respondents reporting a strong impact of study abroad on their lives up to 50 years after the experience^{3,4}
- Experiential projects overseas can successfully promote life-long learning skills⁶
- The high incidence of previous international mobility by parents correlates with high participation rates of their children in study abroad programs¹⁴
- Young people who study overseas set a precedent for future generations, encouraging their children to live and study abroad, and generally develop a high appreciation for international culture. There is an intergenerational effect¹⁴
- More than 90% of respondents in a study of ~250 former students, 10-15 years after their graduation, agreed that their overseas experience increased their independence, enhanced their self confidence, and increased their openness to new ideas¹⁵
- 10-15 years after graduation, 87% of students still reported that their overseas study experience 'has enhanced my overall employability'.¹⁵

1.5 Short Programs Still Have Big Impact

The amount of time one is abroad is *not as important as actually undertaking the experience*:^{8,9}

"Short-term international study programs, even as short as one month, are worthwhile education endeavours that have self-perceived impacts on students' intellectual and personal lives"¹⁶

International study experiences, even those of short-term duration, promote intellectual, social and personal development.^{8,9}

Students who participate in an international study program, even for a short time, are more confident in their intercultural awareness and knowledge of other countries. They are more engaged in internationally-minded activities and have a better understanding of the broader and non-academic learning they have gained from their degree than students who did not study abroad.¹⁶

2. Benefits of overseas education experiences to institutions

Successful study abroad programs have numerous benefits for universities.

Work currently being undertaken for several Australian universities has shown that every dollar an institution invests in outbound mobility generates a return on investment of between 4 and 8 times.³⁵

One of the primary reasons for this is that study abroad programs improve academic performance, particularly amongst at-risk students.^{2,10,13} Outbound student mobility programs also improve graduation rates^{2, 10, 13}, thus reducing attrition and creating significant savings for universities in terms of reducing lost tuition fees, recruitment and administration costs.

Overseas study opportunities can be used as a valuable marketing tool for institutions⁴. A number of Australian universities are already actively marketing outbound study experiences as part of the institution's overall 'pitch' to new students.³⁶

Given that students who have studied overseas are far more likely to progress to further studies^{4,18} (particularly postgraduate studies), there are significant advantages for institutions that have strong mobility programs to benefit by 'retaining' students through to further degrees. This bolsters both revenue (from fees) and research (by gaining additional, skilled postgraduate researchers).³⁵

University internationalisation strategies that include study abroad programs, along with courses with international content and contact with international students, can have a greater impact on student learning in many areas. This includes foreign language skills, knowledge of specific regions and countries, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours towards international awareness, and greater cross-cultural skills. This supports greater global-mindedness.¹⁹

For academic departments there are benefits too.

Through having to provide better information to future mobile students, departments improve information available to all students.¹⁸ Likewise, international student mobility can bring new insight to academic departments, which may improve the curriculum and administration for all students. Networking with partner institutions to solve credit issues for students can create new disciplinary networks, with benefits for research collaboration.¹⁸

3. Graduate outcomes

Studying overseas produces exceptional outcomes for graduates. This is in terms of both the international skills they acquire (see 1.1 International Skills) and the way that employers perceive their experience.

The experience helps to clarify future directions for participants (such as career choice) and also leads to significant improvements in many aspects of their career.

3.1 Graduates' Perceptions

More than half the graduates surveyed in one study perceived that their international study experience had made a positive impact upon their long-term career prospects and obtaining their first job.¹⁸

This is reflected in the findings of other studies:

- 95% of students reported the exchange experience as useful with regard to their future career plans⁵
- 60% reported that their overseas study experience changed their plans for the future⁵
- Studying overseas can help better understanding of international career options and clarify career choices¹⁰
- 10-15 years after graduation, 87% of students still reported that their overseas study experience 'has enhanced my overall employability'¹⁵
- A major European study asked students if their overseas study experience had had a positive impact on the following areas:¹⁸

Area	Students reporting positive impact
Type of work task	39%
Long-term career prospects	53%
Obtaining your first job	54%

16% of respondents in this study also believed that their overseas experience had led to a higher salary.¹⁸

3.2 Job Search and Work Impacts

Overseas study has the effect of clarifying future career directions for students/graduates.

Graduates with an international study experience in most industries have a shorter job-search time than other graduates. Graduates with an international study experience are paid a premium in the early career stage of employment (in some national contexts).²⁰

Graduates who have studied overseas are also more likely to be promoted and advance faster in their careers.^{25, 26}

Studies have found:

- Overseas study can help students find their future career direction. Of previous participants in international programs, one study found that 74% of graduates who are pursuing a global career direction attribute that decision to interests ignited during their time abroad

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- Graduates with international study experience are “better able to build relationships and conduct business interculturally given their knowledge and capacity for cultural sensitivity”⁶
- Students who study overseas are highly likely to espouse voluntary simplicity, be civically engaged in international issues, participate in social entrepreneurship and undertake further education beyond their bachelor degree³
- Participating on student exchange has a significant effect on the likelihood of having an international job, including when other variables are controlled for.²⁰ This is by up to 15-20%²¹
- International mobility is *sticky*, meaning that graduates have a propensity to return to their country of study abroad for later work opportunities²¹
- For students in a general degree, an international internship can supplement their academic studies by providing an opportunity for important skill development in an academic area. For students in a professional degree area, an international internship can help them to clarify their areas of professional interest for a future career¹⁷
- International internships are just as important for determining which areas NOT to pursue as a career as for determining future career direction.¹⁷

3.3 Employers' Perceptions

It is fair to say that a majority of employers value highly an overseas study experience on a graduate's resume. Globally, a majority of employers look for graduates with international study experience when recruiting new employees.²⁷

A major study of more than ten thousand employers worldwide found that 62% of employers worldwide answered 'yes' to the question “do you seek or attribute value to an international study experience when recruiting?”²⁷

Especially in the case of small companies, employers are very impressed with the competencies of internationally experienced graduates.¹⁸

International study experiences are associated by employers with the development of key employability characteristics such as tolerance, open-mindedness, creativity, initiative, and the ability to take on responsibility, empathy and respect.²⁶

Employer ratings of graduate competencies extend beyond the obvious, international-related competencies that one would expect to be superior. They include general knowledge and generic skills.¹⁸

Professional competencies of graduates, as rated by employers (n=312) European students¹⁸

Competency	With international experience	Without international experience
Foreign Language proficiency	88%	48%
Knowledge/understanding of differences in culture and society	76%	28%
Ability to work with people from different cultural backgrounds	76%	40%
Professional knowledge of other countries (economy, social, legal)	59%	16%
Field-specific knowledge of methods	64%	54%
Adaptability	81%	57%
Initiative	79%	67%
Getting personally involved	79%	67%
Assertiveness, persistence, decisiveness	75%	57%
Analytical competences	70%	59%
Problem-solving ability	70%	58%
Written communication skills	70%	58%
Planning, coordinating, organising	67%	50%

Other research findings include:

- Asian language skills are very highly regarded amongst employers because of current trends in Asian trade opportunities²⁶
- Graduates that have studied abroad have a high propensity to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations, making them ideal employees for companies wishing to expand into new geographic markets²⁴
- 81% of employers agreed that graduates who had studied overseas return to Australia with enhanced skills that are applicable to the workplace²⁵
- 72% of employers agree that knowing a second language adds to the appeal of a prospective employee²⁵
- 61% of graduate employers agreed that an overseas study experience is a positive on a resume.²⁵

4. Barriers to participation

Students with higher grades, better-educated parents, and stronger engagement in the first year are more likely to participate in study abroad.^{8, 9} Students who are more open to diversity and challenge are more likely to choose to study abroad.²⁹

All of these factors suggest that multiple promotional strategies are required to encourage study abroad.

Predictors of study abroad include:

- Female
- High academic achievement
- Arts, humanities and social science majors
- Not first generation students
- Participation in multicultural activities in high school.

Policymakers can increase participation in study abroad by focusing on cultural and co-curricular activities at the high school level. Exposure to different kinds of activities inside and outside the classroom contributes to the development of social and cultural capital for students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds.²⁹

Students from diverse backgrounds are underrepresented in those participating in overseas study experiences.³¹ Familial obligations, inflexible course requirements or an unsupportive faculty member can impede the desire to undertake an overseas study experience.²⁸

The most commonly cited barrier to participation in overseas study programs – cost - is perhaps more complex than it seems. Students are not only concerned about the direct costs, such as plane tickets and living expenses, but they are also concerned about the indirect cost of extending their degree program if credit transfer arrangements are not clear.³⁰ The loss of income while abroad [for example, loss of pay from a part time job] is one of the most significant factors discouraging participation in overseas study experiences.³³

When deciding whether or not to participate in an overseas study experience, students carefully weigh the costs against the perceived benefits. If the outcome of the equation is not clearly positive, more risk-adverse students, particularly those from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds, often choose to stay home.³⁰

Participation could also be improved by providing clearer guidance on credit transfer, by simplifying the process and providing more support in the form of academic and administrative advising for applicants and through better promotion of overseas study opportunities to students.³²

Murphy-Lejeune (2002) developed the concept of "mobility capital" referring to the high incidence of previous international mobility of parents and/or the participant of study abroad programs. Exposure to foreign environments, living abroad, integration in a multicultural community can predispose a young person to studying abroad at university. There is an intergenerational effect.¹⁴

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