

The value of full degrees abroad versus exchanges – A presentation for the CRAC Decisions at 18 Conference, Sheffield, 25-26 April 2016

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the different experiences available to British students when looking to study abroad at undergraduate level.

There is common consensus that international experience is useful for British students. In spite of this, it is certainly true that they are not currently taking part in international opportunities to the same extent as their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. While there are some clear reasons why this might be the case (British students don't usually need to brush up on their English language skills, for example), there is compelling evidence that British students might be missing out on an opportunity that could give them not only a competitive advantage in the job market but also a greater understanding of the interconnected world they will live in.

While this paper might seem to pit exchanges against full degrees abroad, this is not my intention. There are clear benefits to both experiences but they are fundamentally different. It is my contention that a student would probably be better off pursuing either an exchange or a full degree abroad, and that advice about both of these options needs to be provided in British schools at an appropriate stage in the decision making process. There are clear practical reasons why one option might not be possible to some British students and I will address these. However, the main focus of this paper will be given over to students whom we have interviewed while undertaking their Bachelor's degree abroad, in countries as diverse as The Netherlands, USA, Czech Republic, Norway, Spain, Italy, France and Australia.

2. CQ or How to get a job at Google?

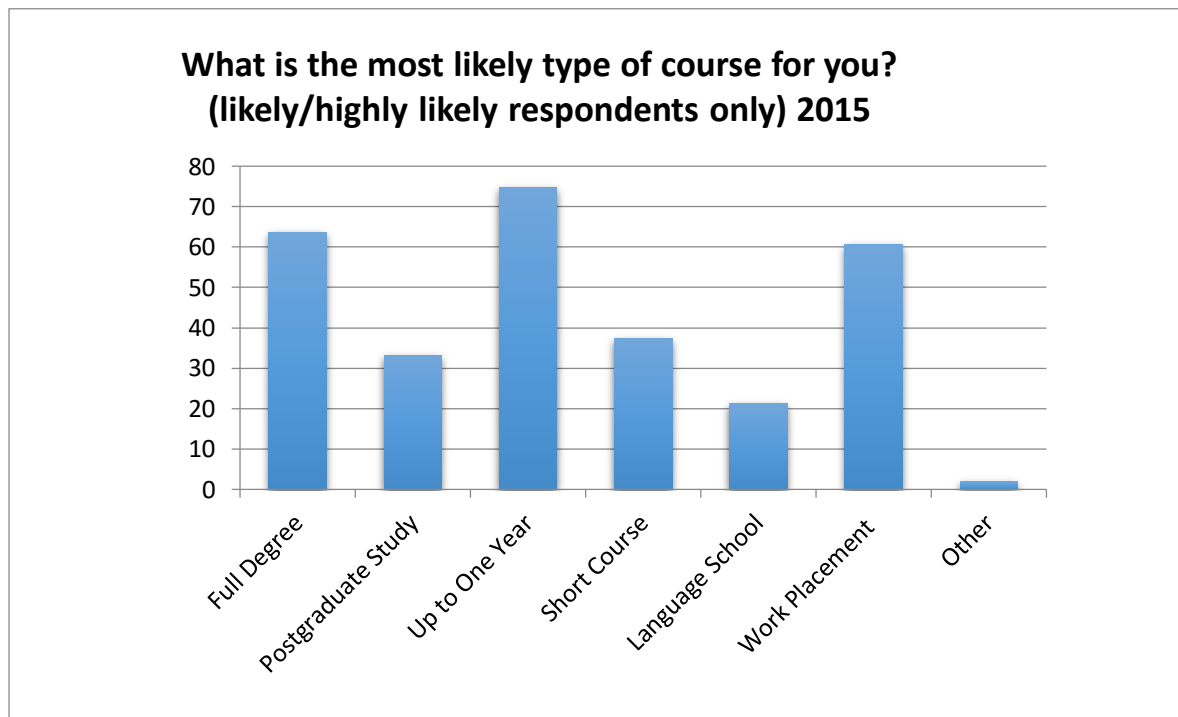
Google recruitment practices are often held up as an example of the way the job market is changing, particularly for young people looking for their first position in corporate life. While it is tempting to read too much into the applicability of their methods in all professions, there is a reason why they were chosen to contribute to the latest issue of the World University Rankings released by [Times Higher Education](#) last September.

According to Shuva Saho, Director of Google’s Digital Academy, the most important indicator of talent is “Cultural Intelligence” or “CQ”. The most successful graduates already demonstrate high CQ but he believes employers should actively recruit and nurture students with these qualities.

“CQ is about having a thirst to learn from people who are not like you,” according to Mr Saho. Students with high Cultural Intelligence demonstrate the ability to embrace and thrive off uncertainty. Those graduates who are motivated by “our brave new world and its contradictions” and manage to find direction in ambiguity are exactly those who will come out on top. By working together in diverse groups at university, it is likely that students will develop their sense of the importance of connections, collaboration and flexibility.

While cultural intelligence is not always about crossing geographic borders (it can be as much about gaining experience in additional industries or academic disciplines) I believe that the students whose interviews are the main focus of this paper will show that international higher education could be one of the very best ways to develop this attribute and prepare for the challenges of the future.

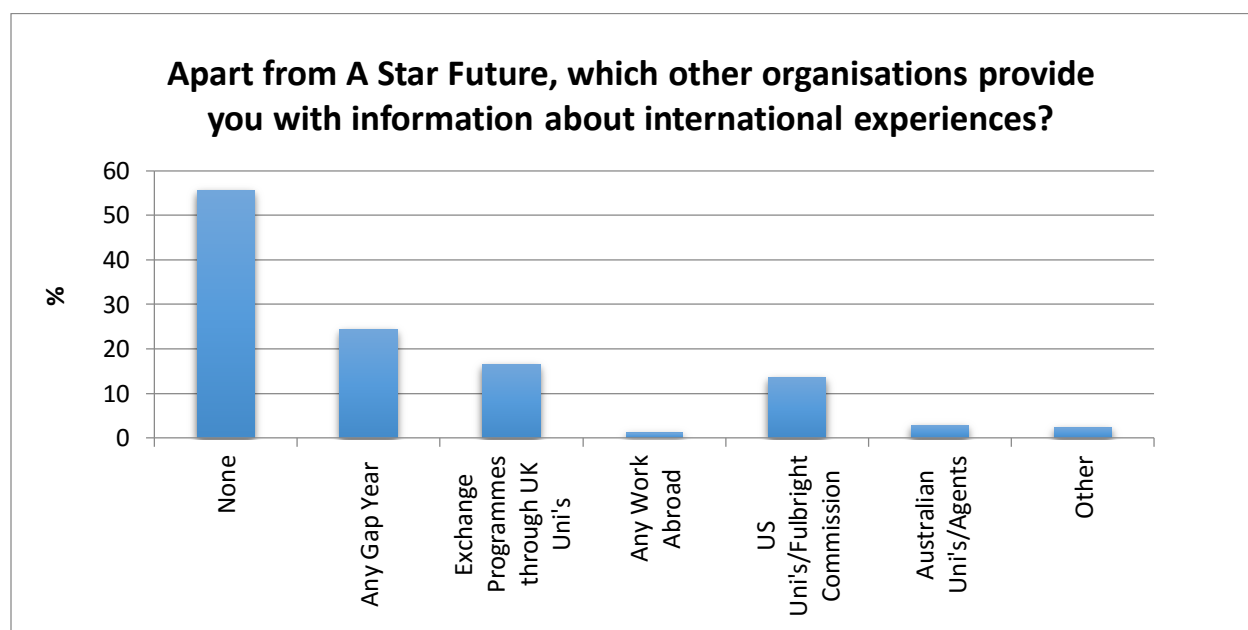
3. What do British students actually want to study abroad?



The above chart is taken from our student attitude survey in 2015 and shows only the responses of the 58% who indicated that they were likely to study abroad after leaving school. The respondents in our survey were predominantly in Year 12 at English secondary schools at the time. It is this particular cohort who will form the bulk of university admissions in autumn 2016.

The attractiveness of both full degrees abroad and exchanges (“up to one year of my degree” is the precise category in our survey) is clear. While respondents were able to choose more than one option, it is quite clear that some students will be more interested in one of these two types than the other. It is worth noting that British students are also increasingly attracted to work placements abroad and this is the one area of Erasmus outbound mobility that is showing clear growth among British students.

The need to advise students on all of these opportunities appropriately is clear but this is not always the reality. In the same survey, we asked students to tell us how they received information about international higher education and from whom:



There is a case to be made that the one year abroad opportunity is not being presented to British students in a meaningful way while they are at school. While there are many aspects to the choice of one British university over another, it seems that any reference to international opportunities is likely to be made as an aside: “oh, and we also have exchange opportunities...” We are quite often asked about year abroad opportunities through British universities in questions at the end of our presentations about studying abroad but it is difficult to give too much clear advice about this in the time available. Also, schools will regularly receive visits from universities far better qualified to offer this advice. However, it would seem that this opportunity is not being fully realized.

4. And, before they go, what are the main reasons they give for pursuing a full degree abroad?

We conduct an annual survey into British student attitudes towards studying abroad and the chart below gives the factors that Y12 students in 2015 told us would be important to them if they were to choose to study abroad. We will contrast these motivations with the reasons given by students who actually took this step, and perhaps therefore have a more mature understanding of the realities of international experience, in the next section.



These factors were chosen not only to get a sense of British students' attitudes but also to compare them with other nationalities. It is certainly fair to say that the reason British students give for studying abroad are not always the same as those encountered elsewhere.

The single most important factor (sum of important and very important responses) is clearly the ranking and reputation of the chosen university abroad. There is a very strong sense that British universities are good and that it takes something special to tempt students abroad. Obviously, the need for a degree to be taught in English is very important to the majority of students but it does not have to be in an English-speaking country. This is definitely a major shift in attitude from previous years and probably the result of greater awareness of English-taught options elsewhere, predominantly in Europe.

While financial concerns around tuition fees and availability of scholarships are clearly important, they are outweighed by the impact that higher education will have on students' future employability. There is a very clear belief that international experience will improve employment prospects.

Finally, it seems there is a significant proportion of young people in the UK who are motivated by the desire to leave the country anyway. It could well be that some students are choosing university abroad primarily as a means of leaving the UK and considerations of an academic nature might be of secondary importance.

5. Why would a British student choose to take their full degree abroad?

We have conducted over 100 interviews with British students abroad during the last five years and, based on these interviews, we can draw some interesting conclusions. While many of these objectives could also be achieved through studying abroad for a shorter period of time, some of them quite clearly require a longer exposure to another culture. While some of these factors clearly will not have occurred to students while they were thinking about going abroad, we can certainly conclude that this is the advice they would give future mobile students.

5.1 Choice of Course

One of the biggest motivators of full degree mobility anywhere on the planet is the belief that different countries' education systems can offer better educational opportunities, most often in terms of quality but also in terms of content. Not every subject is necessarily offered to the highest global standard in the United Kingdom. It may be that geography alone means that some students should consider seeking their higher education elsewhere.

"The course I'm doing now is unique to my university and I couldn't have done anything similar in the UK."

"I chose to study in the Netherlands because the country has an innovative and progressive mentality particularly towards environmental issues..... and the course I chose balances a theoretical and practical approach."

"I wanted to study international business and in order to get the most out of the course you simply have to do it in a different country. Communicating on a daily basis to people from various countries and cultures is essential."

Many students also point out that the process of choosing a university abroad is actually exactly the same as the research they have conducted into their British options, just with a different outcome.

"When I speak to anyone about this subject, I first emphasise it is not a choice between studying abroad or not - it is ultimately a choice between universities – if you're not happy at university you might become even unhappier as a result of being abroad. There was a point when I moved from having a general notion of liking the idea of studying abroad to focusing on and applying to a course, university and city, which I had all properly researched. Those who are motivated to go through this transition will be the ones most likely to go abroad and be happy there too. I was well aware that I was doing something different to everyone else at school but I was 100% certain that I was making the right choice."

“Make sure you compare all the different courses (in detail, subjects they include, credits etc.) that each university offers, so you can be certain that the course, which you will spend three years of your life doing, is the right one for you.”

Choice of course can also be a limiting factor on choosing university abroad. It is quite possible that British students may express a desire to study abroad but find that their subject is not offered in their preferred destination. This is particularly true of subjects that tend to have a national character, such as history.

Beyond choice of course, it is also the case that the way students learn at university abroad may not be comparable with the UK university experience. This might be seen as a reason for only studying abroad for a short period of time. On the other hand, it might take some time to adjust to the learning style of an international university as well as the expectations it places on students and this might reward a longer stay abroad. Some things seem to be the same the world over, as shown in our first quote.

“In my experience, the lecturers in this university come in one of two types. Either incredibly well experienced, passionate teachers, with an excellent grasp of English, if not a native level. Or a lecturer who is deeply in love with the text on their PowerPoint and doesn't seem to particularly care about you or the subject.”

“The course is rigorous and challenging, which is what I expected. There is a lot of work from the outset and regular testing. The teaching style is direct and the English tuition is good, as are the facilities, library and e-learning aids. It has been very interesting interacting with other International students, many of which are from Europe.”

“The only thing that really surprised me was how intense the university workload is in your first year. The total opposite to England!”

This is a common sensation that British students seem to report wherever they go to pursue their studies. It might even be a fair comment to say that this is actually the biggest culture shock they experience when they go abroad.

5.2 A desire to see more of the world

The students who tend to be most suited to taking their full degree abroad are those who make a conscious decision to travel and experience life elsewhere.

“I had always been very ready to move on and try something new and studying abroad was a great way to do that.”

“Originally it was not my intention to study abroad, however, after visiting Norway I fell in love with the country and decided that I just had to move here.”

“I always ask myself 'why stay here if there is a whole world of opportunities out there to explore'. Sure, moving abroad is not an easy choice and will require some determination during the first weeks of arrivals, however it is an investment for your future, it makes you stand out from your friends who stay in the UK and it teaches you essential attributes for life. It is the right step in the right direction for those students who aim to have a successful international future.”

5.3 Learning a new language (or not)

It might seem surprising that language is mentioned very rarely by British students abroad. This is perhaps because full degree seekers are less likely to be language students than might be assumed. UK university language degrees are designed for A-level students. The standard required in the UK is usually far removed from that required to study a language where it is spoken as a mother tongue. We would contend that learning a language alongside a degree taught in English is a fantastic opportunity but it is not one that appeals to the majority of British students.

It is quite clear that English-speaking destinations are still the most attractive overall but, as illustrated above, this is not as pronounced as it once was. However, it is also fair to say that the definition of an English-speaking country is now perhaps more fluid, particularly in the case of northern European countries. In spite of this, I would argue that pursuing a full degree abroad might be better than an exchange simply because of the amount of time required to learn a language and the likelihood that a student will find himself outside the international bubble.

"It's amazing to have people representing nearly every country in the world in one auditorium. My large friendship group consists of at least 13 nationalities. Ranging from Dutch Natives, Germans, Brazilians, Tanzanians, Greeks and Chinese! The cultural differences are interesting; meeting fellow course members who are full of ideas, stories, and experiences. I was amazed at the standard of English of those on my course; some are far better than me."

"I am hoping to improve my Spanish by living out of Halls next year. (It takes longer than a few months.)"

"The Dutch are also very impressive with their level of English, many of them speaking it better than many English people I know, so don't worry about it being a foreign country and things getting lost in translation."

I think it is safe to say that most British students in The Netherlands consider it to be an English-speaking country. If this encourages some of them to understand that bilingualism is not only possible but also commonplace, that will be a lesson that they are unlikely to learn if they stay in the UK for their education.

5.4 CQ: Culture Shock is a learning opportunity, not something to be avoided.

It is without doubt that British students really benefit from exposure to other cultures and, mostly, they embrace this experience and see it as the greatest learning opportunity of their entire international experience. Students perhaps learn more about themselves and their true capabilities from the overall experience than in the classroom.

"... it helps develop one's independence, confidence and open-mindedness. It is interesting living and working with people who are all from different upbringings and backgrounds which makes you step out of your comfort zone, and it also makes you easily adaptable and culturally intelligent."

"With AUP I saw the opportunity to immerse myself in a new culture allowing me to familiarise myself with a different lifestyle, which ultimately would help me to navigate new international environments. I have not been disappointed. My interactions with the local community and

above all my fellow students at AUP have deepened my understanding of other cultures and heightened my social awareness under different conditions.”

“I think you have to grow up a bit quicker here too, as, although everyone can speak English, coming here is a big step. You can’t go home often or see school friends each weekend and simple things like going to the shops when done here are just not as simple as at home. But this isn’t a negative, I think it moves you out of your comfort zone, which means you’re able to cope with more situations and makes you more rounded as a person.”

“Moving to a new country is quite a big step I understand, and I myself was very nervous before I came. But honestly, I do not believe that I would have received the same quality of education and opportunities anywhere else. Moving abroad during your studies is a safe way to try something different, and in an age where going to university is becoming the norm, doing something different can really set you apart.”

“Over the past year I have learnt so much about myself and achieved things I never thought possible. Living in another country increases your independence and completely opens your mind to new ideas and experiences.”

“Studying abroad provides a unique experience, along with getting you out of your comfort zone. Working alongside people of different backgrounds and cultures I’m sure will prove invaluable wherever you end up working.”

It is encouraging that students see the benefit of studying and living in an international environment. However, there is some debate about the length of time required to really understand and cope with difference rather than have a superficial grasp that other places are not like home. We will return to this point in more detail later in this report.

5.5 Money, but this is never usually a primary consideration

While it has not escaped the attention of British students that [average tuition fees at English universities are now the highest in the world](#), it is doubtful that this can be seen as the main reason students are leaving the country. As seen in our earlier analysis of the reasons why students consider going abroad, money is not the decisive factor. This is borne out by the way that our interviewees describe their relationship with money. The following quotations have not been edited at all because I believe that they illustrate the importance that students place on tuition fees and financial considerations.

“I chose to study abroad because I felt like I needed a challenge and to push myself out of my comfort zone. Additionally, with the fees for university and the living costs in England skyrocketing in recent years, I felt the need to search for alternative opportunities that would not involve such a huge debt.”

“For me it was almost killing two birds with one stone, because I have always wanted to travel and attend university. So studying abroad enabled me to do both. Plus, have you seen the study fees in the UK?”

“It makes you stand out from the crowd. The teaching style is a lot more practical and the numbers of different nationalities and cultures is incredibly interesting and enlightening. A much

more unique experience rather than studying an hour away from home ... and there is an element of being 1/6 the price!"

"I decided to study abroad because I found the exact course I wanted to study at a university that had higher league rankings than the UK universities I had applied to, and they charged much lower tuition fees."

Money is clearly an important issue when deciding to study abroad but rarely because it is cheaper than studying in the United Kingdom. A quick analysis of the financial realities of seeking a full degree abroad reveal a completely different picture to the impact of studying in the UK, usually resulting in the apparently contradictory conclusion that it is cheaper to study abroad but also costs most students more. We will investigate the role of money more fully when looking at the reasons why students might choose an exchange versus a full degree abroad.

6. The downsides: What students don't like about studying abroad?

While students are generally incredibly positive about their experiences abroad there are some issues that arise. Even the most intrepid explorer and self-sufficient individual is likely to experience homesickness at some point or to miss home comforts. Here are some of the more negative comments students raise about their experiences abroad.

"far fewer official holidays"

"There are fewer holiday breaks than the UK universities which is a little annoying but I am here to work, not to be on holiday."

"The lack of shops being open on most Sundays was a big shock and it took me a while to get used to!"

"Make sure you have a good bike lock and don't pay more than €60 for a bike, it won't be worth the money for how long it lasts. (On my second after just 2 months, I now have a solid lock and I'm more careful about where I lock it, fingers crossed!)"

7. Conclusions based on British students' experience

We have reproduced a comprehensive range of comments from students already in this report but I would like to conclude with two others: one which sums up all the reasons why international higher education should be an essential component of the student experience in the 21st century; and one which neatly sets up the argument about full degrees abroad versus exchanges.

"I chose to study abroad because of the low tuition fees, to live and experience a different culture, to become more independent, to challenge myself, to work with students who are enthusiastic and motivated to work hard, and to work with other nationalities in a diverse environment."

"I would recommend it 110%! It has been a life changing experience so far, and it keeps getting better! Life as an international student is excellent. Whether you get the chance to do it for one semester, or for three years like me, go for it! If anything, you get to make friends from all over the world, who you can go and visit for cheap holidays!"

8. Is it better to study abroad for a full degree or go on exchange from a British university?

As already indicated, I don't think there is a correct answer to this question; students should do whatever is most appropriate for them. All I would suggest is that they be made aware of all the issues around studying abroad before it is too late for them to make a decision. There is plentiful evidence that students who go abroad for an exchange will typically go on study abroad for a longer period later in life as well as examples of students who go abroad intending to study a full degree who, for a variety of reasons, do not complete their studies.

I will now address some of the key practical issues that might lead a student to take their full degree abroad rather than an exchange or vice versa.

8.1 Is an exchange long enough to gain true cultural intelligence?

How long does it take to understand a different culture or learn a language? Is an exchange long enough to appreciate fully the differences between countries? It might even be argued that studying a full degree in one country might not be long enough, particularly if students are completely engrossed in their own international bubble. This is particularly prevalent in students of medicine or dentistry in central European countries where there is typically little interaction with the local culture.

If we look at employability benefits that international mobile students might expect to acquire, there is some evidence that studying abroad for longer is better. One Head of Human Resources was quoted in 2007 as saying, "The value of any study would depend on what was studied and where and for how long, but most importantly, the value that employers will put on it depends on how the graduates themselves articulate the added value that overseas study has given them". So, in general, there is a bias towards longer being better but ultimately if a student is able to express the benefits of their experience, this will be of most importance to an employer.

Another argument in favour of spending longer abroad is that students often do not fully appreciate difference, and the difficulty of handling difference, until they have been abroad for a while. A study conducted in 1988 (Hansel) shows that students who studied abroad for one semester thought they understood more of different cultures and showed greater increases in adaptability than students who spent a year abroad. This might seem to suggest that a shorter period of time abroad is actually of greater benefit. However, the accurate conclusion to draw would perhaps be that students who spend longer in a new culture have become less certain in their assumptions and as a result rate their understanding and adaptability lower than those who have had a more superficial interaction. When travelling to a new country many students will experience a 'honeymoon phase' that might lead them to believe that they have adjusted to life in a new country long before they actually have (Hofstede 2003).

8.2 Do some subjects lend themselves better to full degrees abroad or exchanges?

This is undoubtedly true even if we assume that all universities teach all subjects equally well. As already pointed out when discussing language degrees, it is unlikely that a good A' level student of French, for example, is likely to cope with a full degree in French at a French university. A far higher level of prior knowledge will be expected in France than would be the case at a UK university. As such, a language degree in the target-language country is perhaps only to be recommended to a student who is already functionally bilingual.

Degrees that are country-specific, both in the sense that the curriculum is likely to be skewed towards national concerns (eg. history and literature), or where national standards will impact upon recognition and the ability to practice (law, accountancy), might be better studied at home. Having said that, there are exceptions in all subjects and there could still be compelling reasons why it might sense to study law abroad.

The biggest constraint on full degree mobility is the availability of courses in other countries. Not everything is taught in English in every country and considerations of quality and cost might rule out many of the options that might at first glance appear feasible.

This table shows the courses most commonly found in English at European universities as of March 2016. This list is taken from the A Star Future website database of courses.

Subject	Number of Courses	%
Business	474	22
Engineering	196	9
Art & Design	100	5
Hospitality	78	4
Communications & Media	73	3
Economics	62	3
ICT	62	3
Politics & International Relations	45	2
English	41	2
Psychology	31	1

Subjects for which we receive the most requests but with perhaps far fewer opportunities are shown in the following table, also taken from the A Star Future course database.

Subject	Number of courses
Medicine	48
Dentistry	26
Veterinary Medicine	9
Maths	18
Physics	16
Biology	20
History	9
Geography	3

The following table shows all full undergraduate degrees taught in English at universities in the most attractive European and Asian countries, along with the number offered at public and private universities. This will have a significant impact on general affordability but we have also included tuition fees at public universities.

Country	Public	Private	US-campus	Total	Average Public fees (€)
Netherlands	315	26	7	348	1,984
Spain	23	182	35	240	1,695
Denmark	182	0	0	182	0
Germany	48	4	80	132	0
Italy	24	63	25	112	1,525
France	0	81	29	110	200
Switzerland	14	63	29	106	2,278
Sweden	36	4	0	40	0
Belgium	12	7	0	19	890
Norway	13	1	0	14	0
Japan	18	35	10	63	5,890
South Korea	40	35	0	75	3,241

8.3 Are there financial implications of studying abroad for a full degree versus an exchange?

Yes. If students go abroad for their full degree they will not be eligible for any support from Student Finance England. We are only aware of one exception for English students (University of London in Paris) and five additional exceptions for Scottish students (Rhein Waal University, Malmo University, University of Southern Denmark, Maastricht University and University of Groningen – this is a pilot scheme that may already have expired).

While the table above gives a very clear indication that degrees elsewhere in Europe and Asia are likely to be significantly cheaper students will have to pay for their studies themselves. The existence of scholarships can ease the burden at private universities but it is extremely unlikely that any EU citizen will get a scholarship to pursue a Bachelor's degree in any EU member state.

Exchanges have the advantage of being an integral part of a UK university degree, thus eligible for student funding on exactly the same basis as an equivalent period of time at a British university. Additional grants and funding may be available depending on the destination.

While exchanges are not a good way of avoiding tuition fees at UK universities (although these will often be significantly lower or even waived for the time spent abroad), they may certainly be the most cost-effective way of spending time abroad. This is particularly true for English-speaking countries outside the European Union where tuition fees for British students would otherwise usually be in excess of £9,000 a year. It is unambiguously true to say that exchanges to the USA or Australia are cheaper than studying a full degree in either of these countries and I think it is safe to assume this would still be the case in the USA even with a generous scholarship.

9. Conclusion

Studying abroad for a full degree is not the same thing as taking an exchange abroad. Different approaches to international higher education need to be presented to students with an appropriate understanding of their differences. While international experience might seem like a sensible string to be added to any young person's bow, it is important that advice and guidance takes into account the pros and cons of all the possible ways this experience could be acquired. In this report I have restricted my remarks to a straightforward comparison of full degrees and exchanges but this does not fully reflect the reality. Internationalisation is generally perceived as a good thing not only for students but also for universities and there will be more and more models of international experience, including double degrees, triple degrees, gateway programmes and grand tours not to mention semesters at sea. While I haven't investigated shorter periods of study abroad, or work experience opportunities in other countries, these could also play a more important role every students' passage through higher education in the future and it is vital that advice and guidance is able to keep up with these developments.

I think the final word should belong to a student and if there is one piece of advice I think we can give all young people it is this: *"Whether you get the chance to [study abroad] for one semester, or for three years like me, go for it!"*

(All quotations from students in this report have been taken from [testimonials](#) on the A Star Future website.)

About A Star Future

A Star Future provides an advisory and support service to British careers professionals. We can assist you with information about international higher education. Every year we visit approximately 250 schools and colleges, speaking to groups of Year 12 students and/or parents.

Please contact us at info@astarfuture.co.uk if you would like to schedule a visit or if you have any queries with which we may be able to help you.

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