



**Universities UK
International**

PHD STUDENT OUTWARD MOBILITY: PERCEIVED BARRIERS AND BENEFITS

**FINDINGS OF FOCUS GROUP
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Audience:

PVC International, Director/Head International, International office staff, outward mobility practitioners, Graduate Schools, Postgraduate administrators, Outward Mobility Network, Newton Fund Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Universities UK International (UUKi) conducted a focus group on PhD outward mobility¹ on 1 December 2016. The focus group participants were PhD students enrolled at UK universities, at different stages in their studies and with different mobility experiences. All of the students were considering mobility, or had already been mobile during their PhD programme.

The focus group discussion was structured around four broad themes: (i) motivations and perceived benefits of mobility; (ii) perceived challenges and barriers to mobility; (iii) attitudes to mobility; (iv) information, communication and support.

According to the focus group participants, the main motivations for PhD students to consider undertaking a period of mobility abroad are to expand their professional and academic networks; to exchange ideas and spend time in a stimulating research environment that would positively contribute to their research; and to improve their skills.

A considerable part of the discussion was focused on perceived challenges of and barriers to outward mobility for PhD students. Most of the participants agreed that the two main barriers to mobility are a lack of funding and a lack of information about mobility opportunities provided by the home institution.

In some cases, lack of clarity from the funding body and pressure to complete their PhD research within a specified time frame were also mentioned as barriers. The discussion also touched on other issues, such as pre-existing personal commitments and language and cultural barriers, especially in reference to outward mobility to non-European destinations.

The group did not perceive certain destinations to be more attractive than others and were not put off by the prospect of periods of mobility to developing or non-Anglophone destinations. Likewise, they did not perceive the EU as a less attractive or more difficult destination following the UK's vote to leave the continent.

They had very specific views on the best time within a PhD programme to be mobile, suggesting that mobility was easiest in the second year. Shorter-term mobilities such as conferences were viewed as being just as valuable as longer-term mobilities, for different reasons. Short periods of mobility still enable students to make connections and build their networks, which can lead to longer term mobility. Previous mobility experiences were also viewed as heavily influencing a student's willingness to be mobile in their current programme.

In conclusion the students reiterated their belief that more could be done by institutions to communicate and signpost opportunities to PhD students. For future activity they suggested using different channels of communication, including through Students' Unions, Graduate Schools and Postgraduate Units, and supervisors and Heads of Schools as trusted sources. They recommended the provision and communication of more short-term opportunities, particularly conferences, early on in a student's programme. Finally they suggested that clear procedures in place for tracking PhD students' mobilities would ensure that institutions are aware when these students go abroad; therefore institutions would provide more consistent and coordinated support to PhD students.

Note

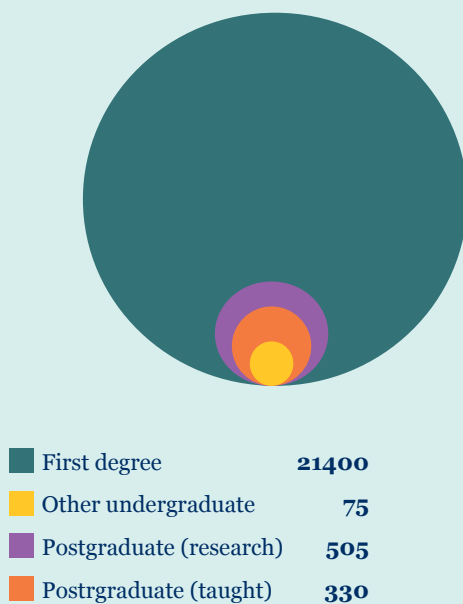
¹ By outward mobility we mean a period of time spent studying, working, researching or volunteering abroad for one week or more as part of a student's UK higher education programme.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Objectives

The main objective for this focus group was to better understand why PhD students at UK universities are heavily underrepresented in outward mobility figures. As can be seen in Figure 1, in 2014–15 only 1.3% of students across all levels of study were mobile. Out of those 22,000 mobile students, only 2.3% were doing any kind of postgraduate research programme.

FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF MOBILITIES IN 2014–15 BY LEVEL OF STUDY



BROKEN DOWN BY PROPORTION, 96.2% WERE UNDERGRADUATE, 2.3% WERE POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH AND 1.5% WERE POSTGRADUATE TAUGHT STUDENTS.

Teams within UUKi actively promote and support PhD mobility through their work on the Newton Fund, and through their work with universities implementing the UK Strategy for Outward Mobility. Findings from this focus group will feed into this work by providing a better understanding

of the barriers and challenges to PhD mobility from the students' point of view. These findings also aim to:

- Supply empirical data on the barriers to PhD mobility as potential reasons behind the low take-up of opportunities;
- Help shape future funding calls with an outward mobility element;
- Provide intelligence on postgraduate barriers to mobility for Universities UK International's Go International programme's activities.

1.2. Profile of recruited participants

- Number of participants: 10 PhD students enrolled at UK universities participated in the focus group.
- Nationalities: Five participants were **British** nationals, three participants were **EU** nationals, and two participants were non-EU **international** students.
- Geographical representation: the participants are enrolled at UK universities based in three different regions: **England, Wales** and **Northern Ireland**.
- Subject of research: seven participants were conducting research in **STEM and Life Sciences** subjects, one in **Law**, one in **Business and Hospitality** and one in **Social Sciences**.
- Outward mobility experiences: the range of experiences that the participants brought to the focus group discussion was mixed. Two participants had no concrete plans but were open to the idea of undertaking a mobility experience as part of their PhD; three participants had been abroad to attend conferences and workshops; four participants had been abroad or were planning to go abroad on placements or internships; and one participant had planned to go abroad but was not allowed to because of Ethics Approval and security issues.

MOTIVATIONS AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF GOING ABROAD

Finding 1: Networking opportunities and increased employability

The group noted the opportunity to connect with their peers and with academics in other universities thanks to mobility experiences during their PhD studies.

Collaborative research and attendance of conferences and workshops both contribute to the generation and dissemination of ideas with researchers around the world and also to expanding professional networks, which is generally considered a critical reason for going abroad.

Finding 2: Impact on personal growth and development

Some of the participants mentioned the importance of a mobility experience for students to 'get out of their comfort zone' and be exposed to different cultures and research environments. This would not only contribute to the students' personal growth, but would have an indirect impact on their wellbeing. Some of the participants noted that 'breaking the routine' and exchanging ideas with international researchers could be beneficial for PhD students, who often experience isolation.

Finding 3: Impact on research and soft skills development

Participants noted that mobility experiences enable PhD students to gather new ideas and perspectives on their academic research and more generally improve their skillset. They mentioned that attending conferences or workshops abroad can have a direct impact on increasing their confidence, improve their networking and public speaking skills, whilst also contributing directly to their research. Participants agreed that this is especially true for qualitative research, which benefits from multiple and different perspectives.

'As you speak with other people you get new ideas; your brain functions a bit better, and you develop ideas as you talk to different people.'

'Sometimes you are in danger of being stuck in your own mind-set and unless you are being exposed to other ideas, there is a danger that you (and your research) will not be as objective as they could be.'

PERCEIVED CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO MOBILITY

Finding 4: Funding

The group unanimously agreed that the lack of funding was often one of the main barriers to outward mobility. Therefore, if students felt that the funding for undertaking mobility abroad was not enough or, even worse, absent, they would be discouraged from going abroad as part of their PhD. The charging of fees by the home institution, in some cases half fees, for their time abroad was also considered a deterrent.

Finding 5: Ethical and safety issues

One of the participants had planned a period of mobility in a country of the Maghreb region as part of their PhD research. However, the student's home institution did not approve the mobility request, due to political instability in this country and security concerns. Even when students are willing to go abroad, they may face additional barriers if the situation in the destination poses a potential threat to the safety and security of the student.

Finding 6: Lack of institutional support and encouragement

The group suggested that, on occasions, PhD students experience a lack of encouragement from their institutions and/or supervisors and/or funding bodies to go abroad. The relationship between the student and the different organisations involved in a PhD journey is therefore of vital importance when it comes to encouraging students to undertake a mobility period abroad.

Finding 7: Time constraints and pressure to complete PhD research

With some exceptions the pressure to deliver research outputs and to complete their programme of work within the allocated timeframe can be a big barrier to mobility. Participants observed that when there are external demands on their time these take precedent over the opportunity to undertake a period of mobility overseas.

Finding 8: Personal commitments

Existing personal commitments were identified as a barrier to outward mobility by some of the participants of the group who noted that personal circumstances were often a deciding factor. The main challenges in this respect were identified as: family priorities and dependants; 'double rent' commitment (paying rent/mortgage in the UK and for accommodation overseas); and being a full-time member of staff.

Finding 9: Language barriers and cultural attitudes

The group discussed the possibility that some students might not be open to the idea of going abroad because of language barriers as well as cultural barriers. They suggested this was particularly true when the relocation was in a non-European country, where navigating a cultural system is seen as more challenging.

Another consideration was around the students' past experiences - where they lived and whether they had been abroad in their previous studies. Students who had not been mobile within the UK were considered less likely to undertake mobility internationally.

Finding 10: Barriers toward mobility to non-European and/or developing countries

When asked about the perceived challenges of mobility to non-European and developing countries, such as China and India, some of the focus group participants cited concerns and uncertainty about completing the necessary processes and procedures in order to enrol at an overseas institution. Examples include: applying for a student visa; arranging accommodation; opening a bank account; accessing suitable facilities; and the quality of the research facilities and supervision in the destination country.

Finding 11: Ease of conducting research abroad

The group perceived challenges in conducting research abroad including that different regulations, processes and working practices are not always compatible with UK practice. This can result in a decreased research output. This was of particular concern in countries where labs and facilities at overseas institutions are not always up to the same standard as those used in the UK.

The students also gave examples of complications related to obtaining project licences, and ethical approvals when conducting their PhD research overseas.

ATTITUDES TO MOBILITY

Finding 12: Relative attractiveness of destinations

Although they identified language and cultural barriers as a potential challenge, the group viewed European and Anglophone countries, and non-European and non-English speaking countries as equally attractive destinations. They did however, suggest that parents might be more concerned about travel to non-European and non-English-speaking countries. They also suggested that collaboration should be ‘outside of the political context’ and that they were not deterred by the negative reports and characterisation of certain countries in the media.

When asked if leaving the EU would impact mobility to the continent, there was a suggestion that it could impact the logistics by requiring visas – but that there still would not be a language or cultural barrier in the way there was with other non-English-speaking destinations. The group agreed that they were more familiar with navigating systems in Europe and that leaving the EU would not change the ease of mobility to these more familiar societies and systems.

Finding 13: Optimal time within in a PhD programme to be mobile

The group agreed that year 2 of a PhD programme is the best time for any potential mobility to take place. They advised that by year 2 a student would know the background of their research and so the impact of an exchange would be greater. Specifically, they suggested that year 1 should be used for conferences, year 2 should include outward mobility, and year 3 should focus on the write-up, with the caveat that, if gathering data, outward mobility could take place at the end of year 1.

Finding 14: Duration of outward student mobility

It was suggested that students were more likely to undertake a longer placement if they had attended conferences in year 1. The group pointed out that conferences build connections and identify ‘doors to knock on’ for potential collaboration or placement opportunities; and that conferences let you know ‘who is out there and who is interested in your research’. There was a perception that the more you travel the more likely you are to find opportunities for collaboration. One student in the group attended a conference and made a contact who later offered them a four-month mobility placement that they went on to complete.

The group perceived short-term mobility to have value as a mobility experience that is more inclusive and accessible and more likely to spur more and longer mobility experiences. They recommended that short-term mobility be undertaken by all and promoted and supported more by institutions.

Finding 15: Importance of previous outward student mobility experiences

The group agreed that experiencing outward mobility as an undergraduate made you more likely to be mobile as a postgraduate. One member of the group linked their Erasmus experience during their BSc and their international internship during their MSc to their acceptance of an international placement as part of their PhD.

INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT

Finding 16: Lack of information and communication channels

The students felt that there is a lack of information and lack of openness from institutions around outward student mobility opportunities available to PhD students. The group did not recall being contacted by their university's Study Abroad Office or the Graduate School (or equivalent units) about mobility opportunities. They also noted that students' unions provide circulars advertising funds and placements which could be a communication channel. That said, they discussed that different outlets, offices and departments compete for students' attention and that there was a risk of 'information overload.'

Finding 17: Signposting to information

There was a perception that universities do not always support students in signposting information and opportunities. In one case a student was signposted to the opportunity by their supervisor. In two other cases the students found and administered the placement themselves. In another case a period of outward mobility was previously agreed with their funding body and the student spent part of their PhD with an industry partner.

The group was not aware of mobility opportunities for PhD students through the Newton Fund or through the Erasmus+ programme.

The group suggested induction sessions as a forum for institutions to communicate opportunities for outward mobility to students. They were clear that while PhD students expect to be independent, they need to be informed of how to access opportunities and that institutions should consider timeliness in signposting opportunities and provide clarity about what is available and what is required in order to access them.

Finding 18: Pre-departure support and support on placement

The group agreed that while there is a range of practices across institutions, there is in general a lack of information and communication in supporting the students' pre-departure. There was a perception that academic staff at institutions forget what it is like to be new to the sector and what may be obvious to them is not obvious to a new student – e.g. when going abroad you may require a research licence.

When asked if they were provided with support while overseas, some participants confirmed there had been little support offered and in some cases the home institution was not aware that the student had undertaken a mobility period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For providers of scholarship schemes:

- Exploration of using other channels of communication: Students' Unions, postgraduate units, Graduate Schools. For some students, if the information comes from a Head of School or their supervisor, it is deemed more trustworthy.

For UK universities:

- Communication and marketing campaigns targeted at PhD students that highlight the benefits of outward student mobility for these students in particular. These benefits should include the expansion of their professional and academic networks and the opportunity to enrich their research through the exchange of ideas and time in a stimulating research environment.
- More initiatives such as inductions and short courses with a cross-cultural communication element that can both work as information sessions on funding opportunities for new PhD students and help them to meet other people, increase their confidence, and feel part of a community within the institution.
- The provision and signposting of more short-term opportunities including attendance of conferences, which are inclusive and offer important networking opportunities.
- Encourage travelling to conferences and other short-term opportunities early in students' programmes in order to introduce and normalise outward student mobility early on.
- More consistent and coordinated support for students who are conducting a mobility period overseas. This should include making sure that the students are receiving appropriate support and advice by the host institution and that there are recognised procedures in place for tracking mobile students so that the institution is aware when PhD students are abroad.
- Circulation of outward student mobility opportunities by the Graduate School (or equivalent unit), the postgraduate unit (or equivalent team), and administrative members of their department/faculty including their supervisor.