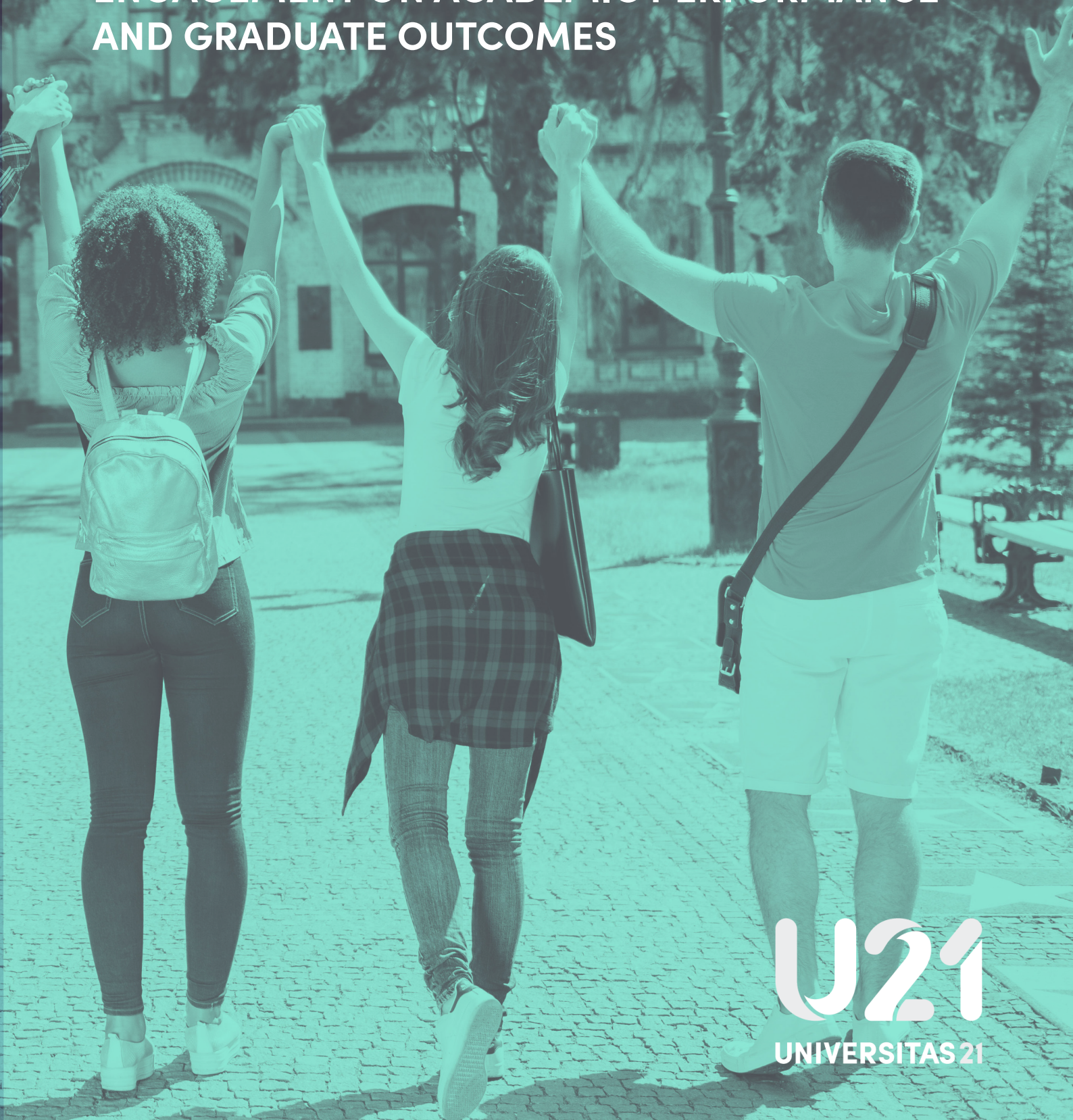


**EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF STUDENT  
MOBILITY AND EXTRACURRICULAR  
ENGAGEMENT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE  
AND GRADUATE OUTCOMES**



**U21**  
UNIVERSITAS 21

## **Research undertaken by Universitas 21**

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**Published April 2020**

**Research completed between November 2018 and January 2020**

### **Acknowledgments**

This project could not have been delivered without the support of the U21 network of universities, in particular all those who provided data sets and/or recruited interview participants. We are most grateful for your assistance.

### **Our special thanks to:**

Colleagues at the National University of Singapore for sharing their graduate employment study. Professor Barbara Dooley, Professor Ian Holliday, Dr Dino Willox and Professor Joanne Wright for their academic expertise and support with the reserach. University College Dublin for hosting the researchers.

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# Glossary of Terms

ERASMUS	European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students
Extracurricular/ Co-curricular activity	The term extracurricular activity, as used in this research, refers to activities that students voluntarily engage in that are separate from their programme of study. The term does not encompass internships or professional work experience that may be a mandatory, credited part of the students' curriculum, or paid work. In the literature, the terms extracurricular and co-curricular may be used interchangeably, but this study has chosen to use the term extracurricular throughout.
HEAR	Higher Education Achievement Report
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
IIE	Institute of International Education
NAFSA	Association of International Educators
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OME	Outbound Mobility Experience
SAP	Study abroad programmes
Study abroad programmes	Study abroad programmes (SAP) are negotiated arrangements between HEI, which enable students to study at an international partner university for up to a year

# Currency Conversions

Where currencies have been converted into US Dollars for the purpose of the comparison, the following exchange rate was used (unless otherwise stated):

Currency	Symbol	Exchange value on 26 August 2019
British Pound	£	1.00
Euro	€	1.10
US Dollar	\$	1.22
Singapore Dollar	S\$	1.70

# Executive Summary

## Rationale for Study

As part of the suite of initiatives and resources provided to its members, Universitas 21 (U21) supports the enhancement of both the quantity and quality of international mobility opportunities for students between member universities in its network. Study abroad has recognised benefits for the personal growth of students that can complement and enrich the disciplinary impact on their university education, not least improving their attractiveness to employers. There is also a growing need, both in the U21 network and across higher education in general, to identify and provide parallel opportunities for students who for a variety of reasons cannot or do not want to study abroad during their time at university, so that they too can graduate with broadly developed personal and academic attributes, preparing them for the world of work. The primary rationale for U21's development of this research has been to seek robust evidence of the impact on students' development and readiness for employment of both study abroad experiences and of home-based extracurricular experiences<sup>1</sup>. By exploring both of these experiences for students, the network hopes to use the insights gained in the research to fund and develop effective projects, shared initiatives and resources that will support the enhancement of the graduate attributes and competitiveness of its students in the workplace, whether or not they have been able to study abroad during their time at university.

## Reviewing the Existing Literature

As participation in higher education has grown, students have increasingly sought to differentiate themselves from their peers when entering the professional arena. Previous literature suggests that this is done in two main ways – by participating in a study abroad programme and/or by engaging in extracurricular activities. An advance review of the existing research in the area revealed key findings which informed the design and direction of the research.

Studying abroad is often portrayed as the frontrunner in improving student employability. With the need for graduates to view and market themselves as human

capital, participation in study abroad programmes may be seen as a significant personal and professional investment. Accordingly, there has been a proliferation of study abroad programmes, with a range of initiatives, from local to international, proposed or established to incentivise universities and students to participate. In tandem, there has also been a growing body of research on associated personal, academic and professional outcomes.

While research with study abroad participants has largely reported beneficial outcomes of studying abroad (for example, citing its perceived positive impact on securing employment and enhancing attractiveness to employers), studies with employers have had more nuanced findings. Rather than viewing the study abroad experience as inherently beneficial, employers have focused on what an international mobility experience signals about the candidate. To that end, they suggested that it may be indicative of particular desirable personality traits within job applicants. Most critically, they noted the importance of participants' ability to reflect on and reframe their experiences in order to make them relevant in professional contexts. The quantitative component of the present study was informed by the work of Lim et. al. (2016) at the National University of Singapore, which through analysis of Graduate Employment Survey (GES) data examined graduates' starting salary, duration of their first job search, and academic performance at graduation. Lim et. al. reported that engagement in study abroad programmes increased the monthly salary of graduates' first job in business, science, and arts and social sciences faculties. This was particularly pronounced when graduating grade point was included in analysis.

Though studying abroad may be advantageous when seeking employment, our literature review highlighted the selection bias that may occur among those who participate. Differences between those who study abroad and those who cannot or choose not to may relate to myriad factors, including socioeconomic status, health and familial circumstances. Reflecting this, previous research illustrates study abroad participants as a demographically unique group – one that is highly privileged, in receipt of higher academic grades, holds

<sup>1</sup>The term extracurricular activity, as used in this research, refers to activities that students voluntarily engage in that are separate to their programme of study. It does not encompass internships or professional work experience that may be a mandatory, credited part of the students' curriculum, or paid work. In the literature, the term extracurricular and co-curricular may be used interchangeably, but this study has chosen to use the term extracurricular throughout.

higher 'mobility capital' (for example, parents with higher education, parents who have lived abroad etc.), is younger than their non-study abroad counterparts and is disproportionately female. Accordingly, studying abroad may be simply inaccessible to many students.

These students may instead seek to use extracurricular activities, for example, participating in societies, clubs, sports teams or voluntary work as a way to stand out from their peers. While limited research exists regarding the impact of extracurricular engagement on employability, that which does indicate beneficial results; notably, high academic achievement and high levels of engagement with extracurricular activities have been positively linked to job suitability and employability attributes. However, despite these findings, studies suggest that extracurricular activities may be undervalued by students, particularly when compared to studying abroad. As a result, they afford them little weight when considering their contribution to future employability. This may impact their ability to reframe their experiences in order to make them professionally relevant.

Although studying abroad and extracurricular activities are described as beneficial for employability, the definition of 'employability' remains a much disputed concept. If employability is measured solely in terms of whether the graduate has secured employment, it provides only a vague indication of what the student has gained during university. Rather, employability is not merely about developing the experience to get a job, but instead, it emphasises the development of critical and reflective abilities with a view to empowering the learner to do a job. Under this framework, employability includes the capability of graduates to present their skillset and attributes to employers, recognising and demonstrating their human capital. This understanding of employability was adopted for the current project.

## Structuring the Research

The present study utilised a mixed-methods design, capturing both student voices and numerical data. This allowed the researchers to explore the nuances of studying abroad and extracurricular engagement, and

to gain students' perspectives, while also examining trends in large datasets. By doing so, it was possible to create a greater understanding of the issue and assess in which ways student perceptions align or fail to align with the quantitative outcomes. Further, as extracurricular activities are not monitored within quantitative data, the use of qualitative interviews allowed the researchers to address their impact.

## Quantitative Research

Informed by the research conducted by Lim and colleagues (National University of Singapore), the present study collected First Destinations Survey data from two U21 member universities. Using this data, the researchers examined the differences in salary, graduate pathway and academic performance between those who had studied abroad (study abroad cohort) and those who had not (non-study abroad cohort).<sup>2</sup>

## Qualitative Research

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 undergraduate, postgraduate and recently graduated students. Sixteen participants had studied abroad. Every participant had engaged in an extracurricular activity. To explore the impact of studying abroad and extracurricular engagement on graduate employability and academic performance, participants were asked open-ended questions, for example, what they considered to be the benefit of their respective activity. To make tangible the concept of employability, the present study referred to the CareerEDGE Model of Graduate Employability (Dacre, Pool and Sewell, 2007) as a means of analysing interview data. This model is built on the premise that several fundamental components must be present to achieve full employability potential. Among these, the model prioritises reflection and evaluation, echoing the earlier findings of employer-based research. The researchers examined whether participants discussed meeting each of the components within the model, and whether they demonstrated a level of self-reflection and evaluation when describing their experience.

<sup>2</sup> First Destinations data are self-reported at both participating universities; therefore, the terms 'study abroad cohort' and 'non-study abroad cohort' in this context refer only to those students whose data were available to the researchers, not all registered students or graduates from an institution.

## Research Findings

### Quantitative Findings: Employment and Initial Salary Levels

Using the First Destinations data, the researchers observed that the study abroad cohorts at both universities were more likely to be female, and to be living abroad post-graduation. These cohorts were marginally more likely to be pursuing further education, while a greater number of non-study abroad graduates reported being in full-time employment. Looking to the average annual starting salary of those in full-time employment, the study abroad cohort reported having a marginally lower salary on average in comparison to the non-study abroad cohort in both universities examined. This disparity became more varied when subject area was considered.

- In both universities, graduates of business, life sciences, and health sciences from study abroad cohorts showed a lower initial income in their first job post-graduation than the non-study abroad cohort.
- Conversely, graduates of arts and humanities from the study abroad cohort reported higher initial earnings than the non-study abroad cohort.
- In University A, graduates of social science and earth science from the study abroad cohort reported lower earnings than the non-study abroad cohort; conversely, in University B, graduates of social science and science reported higher earnings.
- In University B, engineering graduates who had studied abroad earned less than those who had not studied abroad.

The differences in earnings immediately post-graduation need to be viewed with caution, remembering in particular that First Destination data are self-reported and do not represent the position of all graduates in a cohort. It is also suggested that study abroad programmes may be selected by students in lieu of internships or work experience opportunities, which may impact on immediate post-graduation earning powers. Finally, the benefits of studying abroad on employment

may become more visible in longer-term outcomes, for example, how quickly graduates progress in their careers, or within their overall job satisfaction ratings. Without further longitudinal research, it cannot be definitely stated whether studying abroad impacts graduates' earning potential, positively or negatively in the medium- and long-term.

### Quantitative Findings: Gender Differences

The researchers explored whether gender may impact initial post-qualifying salary levels, having found a larger proportion of females in the study abroad group. A significant finding in this study is that, in both study abroad and non-study abroad cohorts at both universities, females in their first job post-qualification earned less than their male counterparts on average, across all disciplines. When discipline-specific differences were analysed, the differences between cohorts and genders were less clear-cut.

- In University A the researchers observed that across all disciplines, in the study abroad cohort initially earned less than males in the non-study abroad cohort.
- Among males at University B, graduates of social sciences and sciences from the study abroad cohort reported earning more than those who had not; however, in the fields of business, arts and humanities, engineering and health sciences, the reverse was reported.
- In all disciplines (with the exception of engineering) at University A, females in the study abroad cohort were earning less than those in the non-study abroad cohort. In University B, this was true only within health sciences and business, with the female study abroad cohort in social science, arts and humanities, science and engineering reporting higher earnings than the non-study abroad cohort.



## Quantitative Findings: Academic Performance

Looking to academic performance upon graduation, the data indicated that graduates who had studied abroad received higher qualifications on average. At both universities, graduates who had studied abroad were more likely to report receiving a first class honours award, while non-study abroad graduates were more likely to receive a lower second class honours, third class honours or pass award.

## Qualitative Findings

The semi-structured qualitative interviews gave the opportunity for the researchers to further explore in greater depth the meaning of the impact of both study abroad and/or extracurricular activities on the participants.

Although participants were not specifically asked about their definition of employability, they generally appeared to perceive studying abroad as having increased their appeal to employers. Participants opined that studying abroad demonstrated for them a motivation to step outside their comfort zone. Further, employability was also cited as an impetus when deciding to participate in a study abroad programme, and the researchers observed that many of the benefits discussed were addressed within the CareerEDGE Model of Graduate Employability. In contrast, there appeared to be less value placed on extracurricular engagement, with students regarding their mobility experience as providing them with superior personal and/or professional development. This suggests that extracurricular activities in general may be undervalued by students, and as a result, they may not fully 'market' the nature or the impact of such experiences during job applications and interviews.

Both participants who had studied abroad and those who had engaged in extracurricular activities spoke of wide-ranging benefits gained as a result of these activities. These included increased self-esteem and self-efficacy; a stronger sense of self; emotional intelligence; and generic skills such as adaptability and communication skills. Some study abroad students also spoke of gaining a new sense

of personal independence and autonomy, accompanied by an increased self-confidence, beyond that which they would have achieved had they stayed at home. Unlike studying abroad, employability was less frequently cited as a reason to engage in extracurricular activities (although, for both kinds of activities, some students realised the employability benefits retrospectively). Rather, a motivation observed in students choosing extracurricular activities was the desire to 'give back' and to support or contribute to causes they considered important. Some study abroad students also spoke of 'giving back' on their return from abroad, wanting to support other students considering studying abroad, or to become more involved with international students on their home campus.

Importantly, the research revealed differences in the participants' depth of perception of the benefits of their experiences. Indeed, varying capacities to reflect on and evaluate their experiences was a recurring factor throughout the interviews. Specifically, differences were observed in levels of personal awareness emerging between participants who had been encouraged/facilitated to recognise and appraise the personal impact and wider benefits of both study abroad and extracurricular activities, and those who had not.

Interestingly, although students who had studied abroad appeared to prioritise that experience, the benefits of extracurricular engagement were also seen by the researchers to address the employability components of the CareerEDGE model. Moreover, students who had undertaken extracurricular activities appeared to be very open and able to view their experiences through a reflective lens. To that end, the time spent by students reflecting on what they had learned and gained from their experiences emerged as a differential factor in the degree of merit that participants afforded to the respective activities. Where students had a clear understanding of what they had achieved, and judged that their self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy had been improved, their ability to apply their skills to a professional context appeared to be greater. In contrast, without this reflection, it appeared more difficult for a student, particularly a young student, to be able to assess

how much the life experience had impacted on them and enhanced their employability skills, and ultimately, how best to articulate this to an employer.

Looking to academic performance, engagement in extracurricular activities was described as supplementing academic learning and providing opportunities for experiential learning outside of the formal curriculum that may not have been otherwise available. Equally, study abroad experiences were lauded for allowing exposure to a new education system, new module opportunities, novel teaching styles and different classroom environments. However, study abroad participants often noted challenges when returning to their home university and reintegrating with home academics. Notably, difficulties arose when transferring grades between study abroad and home universities.

## Conclusions

The study concludes that most students who opt to undertake certain activities during their studies that place them into new, challenging and uncertain situations emerge with overall gains. As per the CareerEDGE employability model, this appears to be particularly true when students are supported to analyse and reflect on how these activities have impacted them personally and professionally.

The researchers posit that lower levels of reflection and evaluation during and following study abroad experiences may fail to maximise the students' awareness of the deeper beneficial outcomes of these opportunities. Opportunities for reflection and evaluation may be created in a number of ways, such as a planned re-introduction reflection workshop upon return from studying abroad, through the support of a peer mentor who has previously studied abroad, or directly with a skilled mentor in the international or career/employability offices. Critically, reflection and evaluation exercises must be a planned part of their development as students, rather than hoping that such reflection will happen spontaneously or by means of a un-mentored learning journal.

Conversely, extracurricular activities appeared to provide a space that may often inherently generate reflection and personal growth. While studying abroad may be assumed to result in employment benefits, students who participated in extracurricular activities appeared to be more confident in discussing tangible benefits and outcomes. As a result, the researchers found both study abroad and home-based extracurricular activities to be highly advantageous for the participants. For U21, this study offers much food for thought, not least how best to use these evidenced-based findings to support good practices across the network for both study abroad students and those who engage in home-based extracurricular activities. Most particularly, these results strongly support the development of informed approaches that ensure that students are provided with planned environments in which they can recognise, appreciate and assimilate the impact of their experiences. Building on this study, a reflective toolkit is in development within the U21 network as a resource that will facilitate greater reflection and evaluation among returning students from periods of study abroad.

The students' experiences of extracurricular activities is especially heartening as it points the way to alternatives approaches for creating transformative experiences for students who cannot travel abroad. It also suggests that further exploration should take place into how the collaborative power of the U21 network of worldwide universities could support online, virtual collaborations for these students, allowing them to share their home-based extracurricular experiences with other students, thereby giving their work an extra international dimension.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Academic qualifications are no longer the only guarantee of student success post-graduation, nor are they necessarily the primary focus of employers (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018). Academic grades may also be of decreasing significance, with employers suggesting that the grades achieved may reflect university leniency and are therefore not comparable across candidates due to varied standards across universities. Tomlinson (2012) asserted that as a result of universities' over-emphasis on academia and under-emphasis on practical learning, they fail to prepare graduates for the labour market adequately. Reflecting this, the QS report 'The Global Skills Gap In The 21st Century', reported that employers feel there is a gap between graduates' skills and those required on the workforce (QS, 2019a). Such a gap was visible in every country surveyed. The QS analysis (2019a) found that the five skills prioritised by employers were: problem-solving; teamwork; communication; adaptability and interpersonal skills. These results are broadly comparable with the Graduate Outlook Survey<sup>3</sup> (GOS; Matthews, 2016), which found that 58.3% of employers who recruited graduates in 2014 prioritised interpersonal and communication skills (written and oral) as the most important criteria<sup>4</sup>.

The participation of students in study abroad programmes is increasingly cited as a key to developing sought-after skills and enhancing employability (Di Pietro, 2019; Petzold, 2017). Indeed, studying abroad is frequently described as a front-runner in improving students' graduate prospects. However, for a considerable number of students, participation in a study abroad programme may not be a possibility, and these students will remain on their home campus for the duration of their studies. Therefore, alongside examining the impact of study abroad on students, the current study also includes students' views on the perceived impacts of extracurricular activities, such as participating in societies, clubs, sports teams or voluntary work (all traditional home-based options for students). Taking this focus has allowed the study to explore whether these home-based opportunities have the comparable capacity to enhance students' graduate capabilities, particularly their

readiness for the world of work, to those gained from study abroad.

While limited research exists regarding the impact of extracurricular engagement on employability, that which does indicate beneficial results such as increased confidence, communication skills and the development of social networks (Milner, Cousins and McGowan, 2016; Stuart et al., 2018). However, despite the shared proposed merits of these activities, extracurricular activities may tend to be perceived as a 'secondary option' to studying abroad, and there has been a paucity of research examining whether the benefits of extracurricular engagement are, in fact, comparable to those for studying abroad. The current research aims to address this deficit by exploring the impact of study abroad participation and extracurricular engagement on graduate outcomes.

Universitas 21 (U21) is the largest global universities network, representing research-intensive universities across 19 countries, with a total of over 1 million students. The enhancement of both the quantity and quality of international mobility opportunities for students between member universities is a key objective of the network. Accordingly, the primary rationale for U21's development of the current research has been to seek robust evidence of the impact on students' development and readiness for employment of both study abroad and extracurricular experiences. By exploring both of these experiences for students, the network hopes to use the insights gained in the research to fund and develop effective projects, shared initiatives and resources that will support the enhancement of the graduate attributes and competitiveness of its students in the workplace, whether or not they have been able to study abroad in their time at university.

The current research utilises a mixed-methods design. This design reflects Dacre Pool and Sewell's (2007) argument that to quantitatively measure post-graduate employability solely as the acquisition of a job provides only a vague indication of a student's learning and readiness for the workplace. A mixed-methods design enables the study to include student's voices through a

<sup>3</sup> Results taken from 2015 survey; no subsequent data available.

<sup>4</sup> Recruiters could nominate more than one selection criterion.

qualitative discussion of employability related skills (self-confidence, self-efficacy, reflection, etc.), and quantitative graduate outcome survey data on current employment status, salary, and academic performance. This report used data from approximately 50 per cent of the current 27 U21 universities, with qualitative data provided via semi-structured telephone interviews with students from ten U21 universities across a wide global spread. The quantitative component of the research used large First Destinations datasets from two U21 universities. Its design has been informed by a study conducted by Lim et al., (2016) at the National University of Singapore (NUS), another U21 member.

# Chapter 2: Reviewing the Literature

## 2.1 Introduction

Increased participation in higher education and the realisation that an academic qualification is no longer enough to secure employment has led students to seek to differentiate themselves from their classmates (Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch, 2018; Milner, Cousins and McGowan, 2016). There is now a greater pressure on students to gain additional employability and transferable skills while at university. Two such proposed ways to gain these skills and 'stand out' from the crowd are participation in a study abroad programme and engagement in extracurricular activities. Notably, participants in the QS 'Global Skills Gap' report (2019a) who prioritised employing graduates from highly ranked HEI were the most satisfied with graduates' skills. The second most satisfied group was employers who focused on graduates that had participated in demonstrable extracurricular activities. They were followed by employers who prioritised students with international experience. This chapter reviews the contemporary literature regarding study abroad, extracurricular activities, and graduate employability to provide an informed backdrop to the presentation and discussion of the research findings.

## 2.2 Studying Abroad

**"Studying abroad is an opportunity to access quality education, acquire skills that may not be taught at home and get closer to labour markets that offer higher returns on education. Studying abroad is also seen as a way to improve employability in increasingly globalised labour markets."** (OECD, 2018)

The participation of students in study abroad programmes is considered to be one of the most visible features of Comprehensive Internationalisation in higher education (Courtois, 2016; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011) and is increasingly cited as a key to enhancing employability (Di Pietro, 2019; Petzold, 2017). Study abroad programmes (SAP) are negotiated arrangements between HEI, which enable students to study at an international partner university for up to a year (Lim et al., 2016). Highlighting the perceived value of studying abroad, a range of local, regional, national and international initiatives have

been proposed or established to incentivise universities and students to engage in mobility programmes. These include the 'Generation Study Abroad' programme, launched by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in 2014 (Institute of International Education, 2019), and more recently, the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act, which was re-introduced to the United States Congress in April 2019 (NAFSA, 2019). In Europe, the ERASMUS (EuRoPean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) remains a major mobilising force for university students, uniting over 4,000 academic institutions and companies across 33 countries (Böttcher et al., 2016; Janson, Schomburg and Teichler, 2009). By 2020, the European Union (EU) aims to increase the proportion of EU graduates who complete study or training abroad to 20 per cent (Council of the European Union, 2011, as cited by OECD, 2018).

In response to the increased student engagement in study abroad programmes, there has also been a growing body of research on participation outcomes (Coelen and Gribble, 2019; Farrugia and Sanger, 2017; Potts, 2015; Streitwieser and Light, 2018). Longitudinal research is challenging as graduates enter a new phase of their lives and disengage from their university. However, large-scale tracer studies have reported benefits of study abroad participation in terms of 'self' attribute development and employment outcomes (Paige et al., 2009; Teichler, 2012; Teichler and Janson, 2007). In research conducted with former ERASMUS students, participants asserted that their study abroad experience had helped them to secure their first job; 87 per cent felt that it had enhanced their employability; 73 per cent stated that it had helped them to develop a skill set that influenced their career path; and 61 per cent noted that it had contributed directly to their current or previous employment (Nunan, 2006). Weirs-Jenssen (2011) also reported that study abroad participants felt the experience had eased their transition from university to work, placing them in a better position to secure employment quickly following graduation. In contrast, Teichler and Janson's (2007) research with former ERASMUS participants, carried out some years after their study abroad experience, found that this cohort did not believe, retrospectively, that studying abroad had been advantageous for their early career income, rather,

some considered it to be of declining professional value. This longer-term perspective points to the need for more longitudinal research in the area.

While the studies above suggest that study abroad is generally and inherently beneficial, research with employers has presented more nuanced findings. Results of the 2011 QS Global Employer Survey<sup>5</sup>, including over 10,000 corporate recruiters internationally, found that 60 per cent of employers award 'extra credit' for international experiences, and more than 80 per cent actively seek graduates who have studied abroad (Molony, Sowter and Potts, 2011). However, additional research suggests that these benefits are not specifically related to the details of the applicant's study abroad experience, but rather that studying abroad may act as a positive signal for employers, indicating particular desirable personality traits in applicants (Aasland and Wiers-Jenssen, 2001; Potts, 2015). With the need for graduates to market themselves as human capital, international experiences may be seen as a personal and professional investment, particularly in the development of emotional intelligence, self-confidence, and communication. These qualities may overlap with common recruitment criteria, as outlined in the CareerEDGE model of employability in section 2.5 (Crossman and Clarke, 2010; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Petzold, 2017; Potts, 2015; Weirs-Jenssen, 2011). Thus, students who study abroad are perceived to have a different skill set than those who do not and this distinction may be influential in the job market. Reflecting this, a study carried out by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute reported that studying abroad was seen to demonstrate the following desirable skills: independent working/autonomy; willingness to undertake unfamiliar tasks; inclination for taking risks; ability to apply information in different contexts; problem-solving skills; and the ability to work under pressure (Di Pietro, 2015; Gardner, Steglitz and Gross, 2009; TenHaken, 2014). Notably, these may reflect some of the generic skills listed in the CareerEDGE model of employability (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007).

Achieving new skills while studying abroad is one potential gain from the experience, but persuading

potential employers of the value of those skills may be more difficult, and graduate applicants must have the ability to market themselves and their skillset (Gardner, Steglitz and Gross, 2009; Potts, 2015). In the absence of an adequate 'sales pitch' by graduates, employers may undervalue the study abroad experience. Gardner et al. (2009) suggested that the undervaluing of study abroad programmes by employers may reflect their limited knowledge of what studying abroad entails, as well as the poor presentation of the study abroad experience by job candidates. Graduate descriptions of 'travelogues' which highlight the non-academic sides of studying abroad, can also leave employers questioning the work-related substance or application of the experience. Indeed, Petzold (2017) reported that employers weigh good academic performance and relevant work experience more favourably than participation in a study abroad programme. This suggests that a disparity exists between an employer's actual attitudes toward studying abroad and its widespread perceived value in the employment market.

Most recently, Green, King, and Gallagher (2019) conducted interviews with 14 recent graduates who had participated in study abroad programmes or international internships (Outbound Mobility Experiences; OMEs)<sup>6</sup>, and eight employers of recent graduates<sup>7</sup>. They reported that both graduates and employers felt that OMEs propelled personal growth, developing adaptability, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, independence, and organisation skills. All graduates thought that OMEs had helped them to secure their current position and signalled the desirable qualities they possess. In contrast, some participating employers advised that OMEs alone did not guarantee employability, and felt it was more valuable for mid-career than early-career. Some feared that overseas experience diminished locally relevant knowledge and skills, while others viewed new OME graduates as 'flight risks'. All new graduates and employers described the OME as beneficial for employability once in the workplace, citing increased confidence, risk-taking, and a willingness to step outside one's comfort zone. However, employers added that the value placed on OMEs might vary across the globe. Neither employers nor

<sup>5</sup> Sampling employers in 116 countries across five continents.

<sup>6</sup> The present research did not include students who had completed international internships.

<sup>7</sup> Participants were based in Australia.

graduates prioritised studying abroad over international internships or vice versa; however, they suggested that longer periods abroad provided greater time, space, and opportunities to gain value from the experience. Of particular relevance to the current study, Green, King, and Gallagher (2019) asserted that the key to employability was graduates' ability to reflect on the experience and reframe their travel experiences to make them relevant in professional contexts.

### 2.2.1 Who Studies Abroad?

Participation in study abroad programmes may be significantly impacted by selection bias. If the underlying characteristics of students who study abroad differ systematically from those who do not, measuring outcomes for individuals within these programmes may be confounded by extraneous variables. Such differences may relate to socioeconomic status, health, responsibilities in the home, professional ambitions, personality traits, and attitudes to moving abroad (Lim et al., 2016; Petzold, 2017).

A comparative study of ERASMUS and non-ERASMUS students concluded that the decision to study abroad was impacted by the students' personal preferences and socioeconomic status (Böttcher et al., 2016). Similarly, a UK sample, among whom the study abroad cohort represented a highly privileged group, frequently used the opportunity to delay the onset of a career and prolong the student lifestyle (Waters and Brooks, 2010).

Weirs-Jenssen (2011) found that within a Nordic sample, study abroad students were on average, predominantly female and slightly younger than non-study abroad students. Students who had studied abroad had a higher 'mobility capital', meaning they were more likely to have parents with higher education or had lived abroad, or to have had previous experiences abroad (Ibid.). These students also had higher average academic scores when graduating from second-level education. This remained when controlling for university programme.

Reflecting these gender findings, Böttcher et al. (2016) reported that in a sample of 199,488 participants across 2,551 universities, female students were consistently over-represented relative to their numbers in higher education.

This was largely consistent across subject areas and countries. Similarly, Stroud (2010), reported that American students' intent to travel abroad was positively related to being female, attending university more than 100 miles from home, and expressing interest in improving intercultural competencies. Conversely, planning to pursue postgraduate studies, living with family during university and majoring in engineering and professional areas such as architecture and medicine had a negative impact on intent to travel abroad.

## 2.3 Extracurricular Engagement

For a great number of students, studying abroad may not be a possibility for financial reasons or because of familial circumstances; other students may want to complete their education entirely in their home institution. For many of these students, another way to enhance their overall university experience and/or their employability profile may be through extracurricular engagement, for example, participating in societies, clubs, sports teams, or voluntary work. This reflects the concept of 'life-wide/life-long learning', recognising that many experiences can contribute to students' skillset development and that learning can occur across a multitude of sites (Watson, 2011). Evidencing the increasing value of extracurricular activities in higher education, there has been a proliferation of non-academic award schemes at a national and university level (for example, the Higher Education Achievement Record [HEAR] in the UK). These awards recognise the additional activities that undergraduate students have undertaken throughout the university, recording academic performance, involvement in university clubs and societies, voluntary work, prizes, and employability awards (HEAR, 2019). In the increasingly competitive employment market, these awards act as a valuable resource for graduates, enabling them to distinguish themselves from their peer group (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Looking to perceptions of extracurricular awards, Watson (2011) reported that although students are likely to value the process and the final certificate product, employers are more likely to value the process of participation to enable students to articulate and evidence their skills and experience.

Limited research exists regarding the impact of extracurricular engagement on employability (Milner, Cousins and McGowan, 2016), however existing studies indicate beneficial results. Stuart et al. (2008) reported that participation in extracurricular activities impacted the development of confidence and effective communication skills for young students and the development of social networks for mature students. The authors concluded that increased university support for extracurricular activities would improve graduate employability, increase student satisfaction with university, and cultivate an enhanced sense of belonging within the university community (Ibid.). These findings were supported by Brewis, Russell, and Holdsworth (2010), who reported that 51 per cent of employed graduates under the age of 30 felt that their voluntary engagement had helped them to find a job. More recently, Pinto and Ramalheira (2017) examined the link between academic performance, gender, and extracurricular engagement on perceived employability. The effects of gender were insignificant; however, high academic achievement and high levels of engagement with extracurricular activities were positively linked to job suitability and employability attributes (Ibid.).

Similarly, to study abroad participation, Tchibozo (2007, as cited in Milner, Cousins and McGowan, 2016) reported that engagement in extracurricular activities facilitated graduates' successful transition into the working environment. Differences were also observed in the type of extracurricular activities that demographic cohorts became involved with. Younger and middle-class students were more likely to engage with their Students' Union, while older students were more likely to engage in career-related activities (Ibid.).

Milner et al. (2016) examined undergraduate perceptions of the role that extracurricular activities play in developing employability skills. Though extracurricular activities were viewed favourably by students in terms of CV building and enhancing employability, students reported challenges in balancing extracurricular commitments with academic workload. Again, this may result in extracurricular activities being limited to a specific cohort of participating students, with others, such as those who have paid employment, parental or caring duties or personal health

difficulties, remaining unable to access extracurricular activities. In acknowledgement of this, Milner et al. (2016) argue that future programmes which aim to develop student employability through extracurricular engagement must consider strategies for increasing inclusion and diverse participation. Of particular interest in this study is whether extracurricular engagement is valued as highly as studying abroad. Previous research suggests that extracurricular activities may be undervalued by students and consequently, they afford them little weight when considering their contribution to future employability (Watson, 2011). As a result, students may not document these activities when discussing their skills (Milner, Cousins and McGowan, 2016).

## 2.4 Employability

Higher education institutions (HEI) worldwide are under increasing pressure to produce employable graduates, who will ultimately contribute to the economic growth and development of their nation (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Cranmer, 2006; Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018). To that end, the onus is on HEI to send graduates to the labour market who are work-ready (Balta, Coughlan and Hobson, 2012; Courtois, 2019; Huang and Turner, 2018; Matherly and Tillman, 2020). Within an increasingly competitive global labour market, the relationship between education and employability has become a dichotomous and tenuous concept, with many graduates un- or under-employed (Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch, 2018). As a consequence, the employability agenda has become one of the most important developments in higher education in the past decade (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac and Lawton, 2012; Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018).

The work-readiness of graduates is an expected, demonstrable outcome for many degree programmes, with associated characteristics including knowledge and transferable skills specific to the chosen degree (Oliver and Jorre de St Jorre, 2018; Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018). Ultimately, the degree programme has minimal effect on a graduate obtaining a job, but a large effect on their ability to do the job; the most desirable graduate outcome sought by employers being employability. As such, employability has come to play a



key role in informing government labour market policies (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018; Tomlinson, 2012).

'Employability' remains a much-disputed concept that is open to myriad micro-interpretations (Milner, Cousins and McGowan, 2016). The UK Department of Education and Employment defines employability as:

**"The capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work."**  
(Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018, p. 149).

If employability is measured in the terms of whether a graduate has secured employment within a set-period of time since graduating, it provides only a vague indication of what the student has gained (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). This reflects Harvey's (2003) definition, which asserts that employability is not merely about developing the experience to get a job or to progress within a current career; but rather, employability emphasises the development of critical and reflective abilities to empower the learner to do a job. Under this framework, employability includes the capability of graduates to present their skillset and attributes to employers, 'selling', or marketing themselves as human capital.

The studies reviewed indicate that the nature of employability has shifted with increased participation in higher education, rising student debt, and the globally expanded labour market. While previous employment relationships reflected a 'job for life', new employment relationships are more akin to a contract-like economic exchange. As a result, employers are placing growing importance on an employee's capacity to respond to rapid change in the workplace. Now, national, organisational, and individual prosperity lies in individuals' capacities to take personal responsibility and initiative, continuously up-skill, and to be flexible and adaptable (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018).

## 2.5 The CareerEDGE Model of Graduate Employability

A challenge in defining employability is that it is a continuously evolving concept as more and more factors become relevant to employers. Additionally, Bowers-Brown and Harvey (2003) note that with the growth of employment related mobility (i.e., relocating to new countries for work), there is a growing need for a model of generic skills that are recognised internationally. Three primary models have been developed regarding employability: (i) the DOTS model<sup>8</sup> (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Law and Watts, 1977); (ii) the USEM model<sup>9</sup> (Knight and Yorke, 2002); and (iii) the CareerEDGE model (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). While the USEM model remains a well-known and respected model in the field, Dacre, Pool and Sewell (2007) suggest that it does not necessarily explain to non-experts (particularly students themselves) what is meant by employability. Equally, they opine that the DOTS model fails to account for job satisfaction – that a graduate may secure employment in their degree field, but be unsatisfied with the work. To address this, the CareerEDGE model (see Figure 1) aims to explain the meaning and suggested directions for interaction between the components, while noting that the removal of one will significantly disadvantage the graduate's employability. As the most recent model of the three, it draws on the DOTS and USEM models. The CareerEDGE model considers that when students address the bottom five components and engage in reflection and evaluation, they develop strong 'self' attributes – self-efficacy, self-esteem; and self-confidence. The extent to which they meet these criteria determines employability. The importance of reflection and evaluation is supported by the findings of Green, King, and Gallagher (2019).

<sup>8</sup> Decision-making; Opportunity awareness; Transition learning; Self-awareness.

<sup>9</sup> Understanding; Skills; Efficacy beliefs; Metacognition

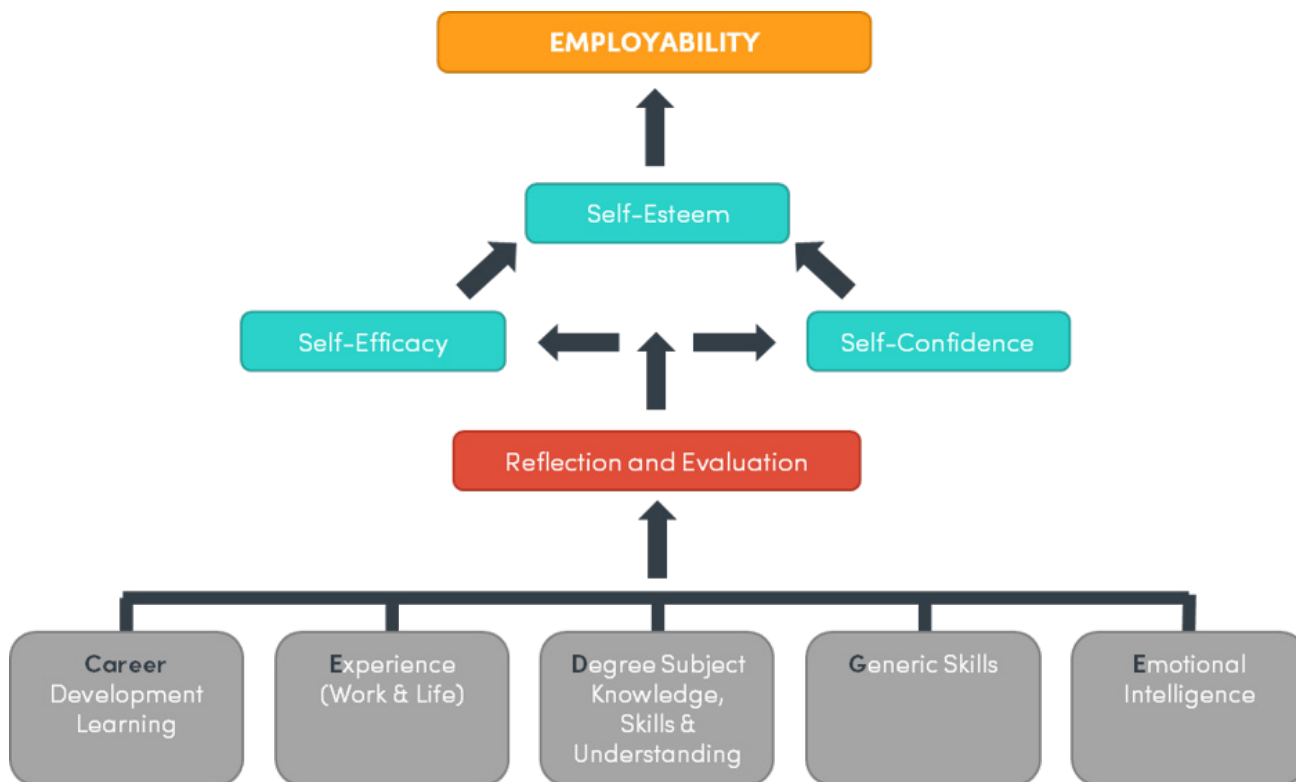


Figure 1: CareerEDGE Model of Graduate Employability (adapted from Dacre, Pool and Sewell, 2007)

In addition to work and life experience broadly, and knowledge, skills and understanding specific to the degree programme, the CareerEDGE model includes career development learning, which is a graduate's ability to 'market' their skills. Generic skills reflect the Pedagogy for Employability Group (2004, as cited in Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007), who compiled a list based on research carried out over the previous 25 years. The group suggest that employers expect to find the following generic skills in graduates: imagination/creativity; adaptability/flexibility; willingness to learn; independent working/autonomy; teamwork abilities; ability to manage others; ability to work under pressure; good communication skills (oral and written); numeracy skills; attention to detail; time management; assumption of responsibility; decision-making skills; planning/organising; and the ability to use new technologies.

While the CareerEDGE model prioritises reflection and evaluation as fundamental components in graduate employability, it fails to explicitly address interpersonal qualities. Although they may fall within the 'emotional intelligence' category, Small, Shacklock and Marchant (2018) assert that interpersonal skills should be a stand-alone component. In support of this argument, they note that recent research, (for example Matthews et al. 2016), has found that employers value interpersonal skills as an important recruitment criterion. Additionally, Small, Shacklock and Marchant (2018) question whether younger or less-experienced students will have fully developed emotional intelligence to achieve competitiveness in the labour market.

# Chapter 3: Analysis of Graduate Outcomes for Study Abroad and Non-Study Abroad Participants

## 3.1 Study Overview

The theory of human capital (Becker, 1964) views expenditures on education, training, medical care, etc., as ‘investments in human capital’: acquired and useful abilities for members of the society, which can raise earnings, improve health, or add to a person’s overall productivity over his/her lifetime. As such, if we regard studying abroad as an investment in human capital, it can be hypothesised that it should bring economic benefits in terms of employment and wages for those who study abroad. Further, as part of the signalling theory (Spence, 1973), it can also be hypothesised that studying abroad may signal strong candidate attributes to employers, potentially resulting in higher salaries for those who study abroad (Liwiński, 2017). Such a positive impact on salary level was observed in research conducted by Lim et al. (2016) with Singaporean graduates.

To examine the impact of studying abroad on graduate employability outcomes, Lim et al. (2016) analysed a dataset in excess of 3,000 National University of Singapore alumni who were undergraduates between 2007 and 2013. The sample was obtained by merging information about the students’ participation in study abroad programmes with Graduate Employment Survey (GES) responses. Three outcomes were examined: the

salary of the graduates’ first job following graduation; the length of time that they were searching for their first job; and their academic performance at graduation. Using Propensity Score Matching, wherein comparisons are made between like-for-like participants, the researchers found that engagement in study abroad programmes increased the monthly salary of graduates’ first job by an average of S\$190.40 (approximately €124; \$137; £112) in business, science, and arts and social sciences faculties. Salary increases were particularly pronounced for students graduating with a Cumulative Average Point (CAP) above 4.5 and between 3.5 and 4.0 on a 5-point scale. A moderate effect was observed for students with a CAP between 4.0 and 4.5.

The current study aimed to explore the differences in salary, graduate pathway (whether graduates were pursuing further education or in full-time employment, etc.) and academic performance between those who had studied abroad and those who had not. Self-report First Destinations graduate survey data from students who had completed undergraduate degrees was provided by two European member universities (termed University A and University B). This research received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at University College Dublin.

## 3.2 Respondent Overview<sup>10</sup>

In University A, 15.4 per cent of respondents<sup>11,12</sup> had participated in a study abroad programme (38.3 per cent male; 61.7 per cent female). Figure 2 illustrates respondents' current employment status based on study abroad participation. Considering graduate mobility, 51.5 per cent of those who had studied abroad were living abroad at the time of survey completion, compared to 25.1 per cent of those who had not<sup>13</sup>. The higher proportion of study abroad participants now living abroad was in line with previous research (Wiers-Jenssen, 2011).

In University B, 13.66 per cent of respondents had participated in a study abroad programme (44.58 per cent male; 55.42 per cent female). At the time of responding, 16.27 per cent of participants who had studied abroad were working outside their country of study (31.23 per cent were male; 61.76 per cent female). Of those who had not studied abroad, 8.82 per cent were working abroad; 48.21 per cent were male and 51.78 per cent were female. Figure 3 illustrates current employment status based on study abroad participation. The largest

percentage of study abroad participants comprised of Business students at 26.63 per cent; 25.84 per cent of participants studied arts and humanities, 18.34 per cent studied social sciences, 14.60 per cent studied health sciences, 10.06 per cent studied engineering and 4.54 per cent studied science.

In both universities, the percentage of study abroad participants pursuing further education marginally exceeded that of graduates who did not study abroad. Conversely, a greater number of non-study abroad participants reported being in full-time employment. This contrasts Stroud's (2010) suggestion that intent to engage in postgraduate study diminishes study abroad participation. In both universities, unemployment was higher among those who had not studied abroad, exceeding three per cent of respondents. The higher proportion of females visible in the study abroad sample may reflect higher participation rates, or may illustrate higher levels of female respondents to the graduate outcome survey. The limitations of analysing data gathered through a self-report method (as used in a First Destinations Survey) is discussed later in this report.

<sup>10</sup> No respondents identified as gender non-conforming, gender non-binary or transgender.

<sup>11</sup> Students may belong to more than one school.

<sup>12</sup> 2,584 respondents; out of which 398 had studied abroad.

<sup>13</sup> Filtered for students who were permanent residents in the country of study.

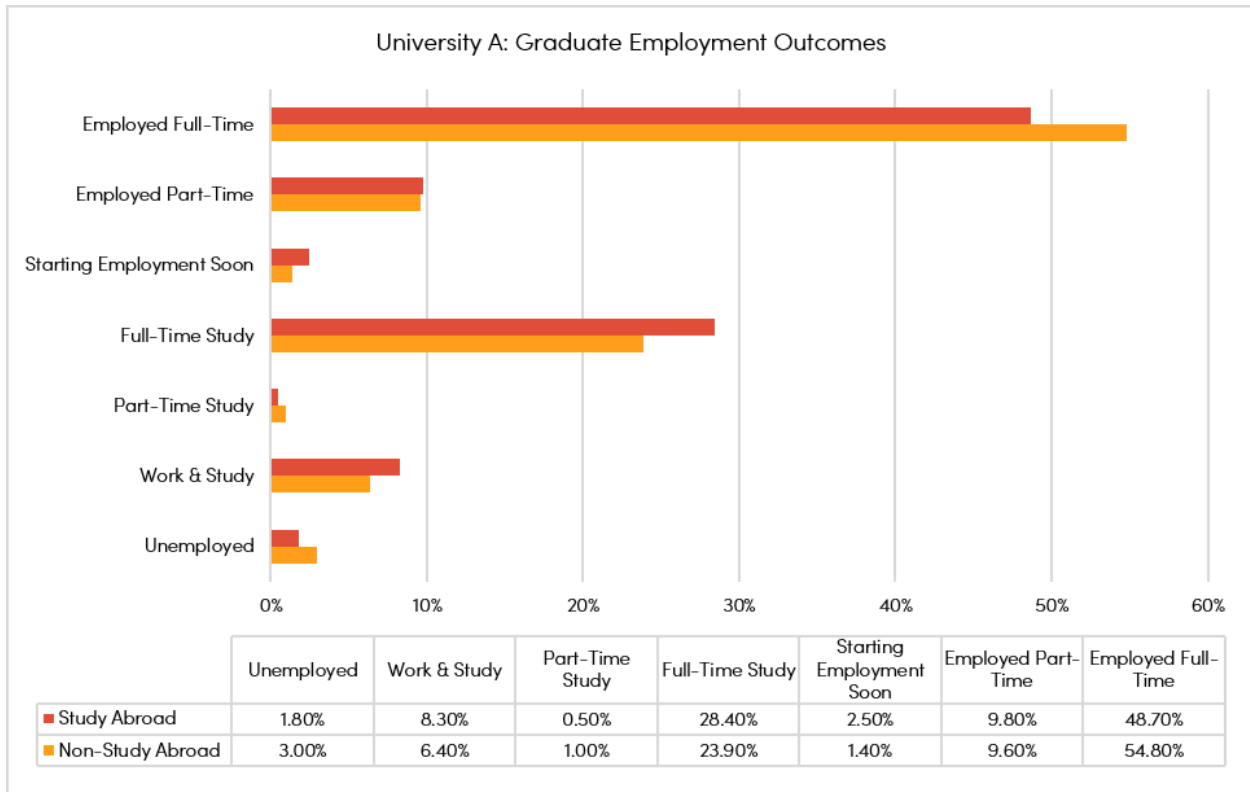


Figure 2: University A Graduate Outcomes for Study Abroad and Non-Study Abroad Graduates

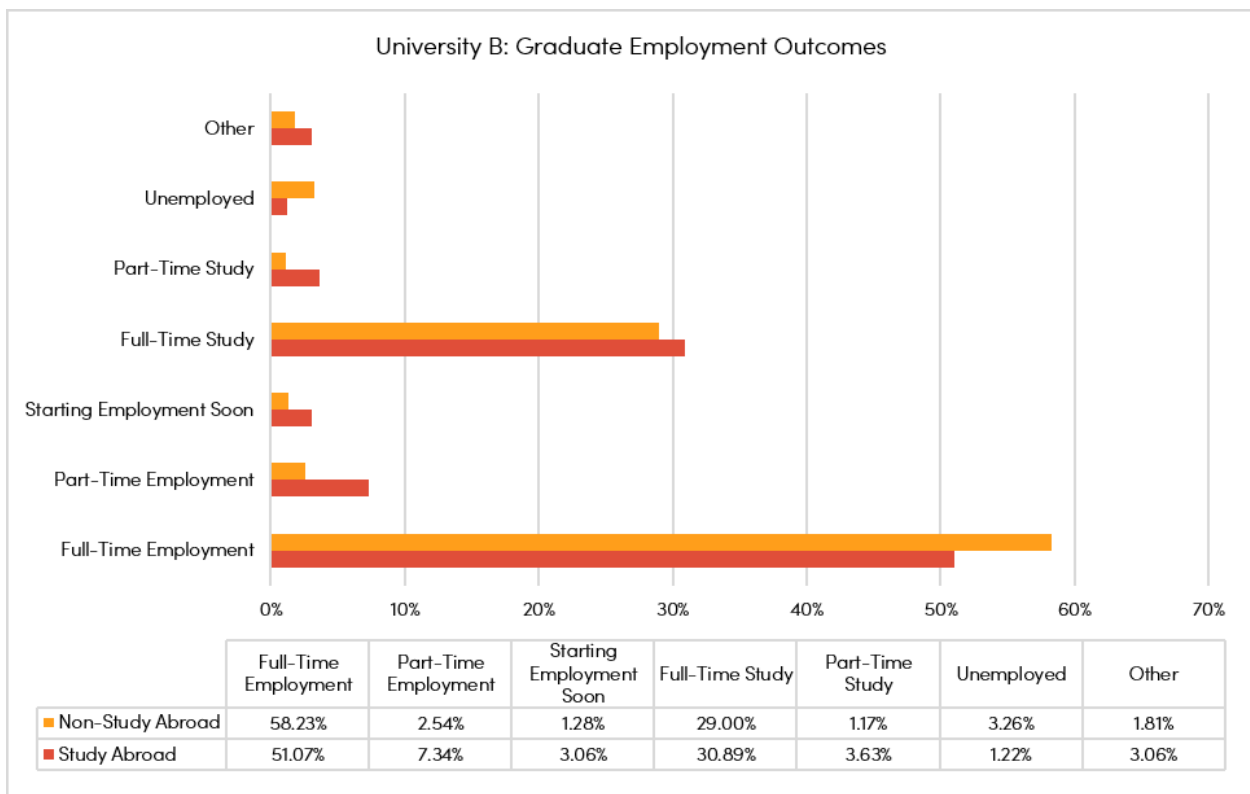


Figure 3: University B Graduate Outcomes for Study Abroad and Non-Study Abroad Graduates<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>'Other' includes (but is not limited to) home duties; retired from employment; unable to work due to disability or illness; travelling; and volunteering

## 3.3. Quantitative Data Analysis

### 3.3.1 Annual Salary: Study Abroad and Non-Study Abroad Graduates

Looking at the average annual salary of those in full-time employment, respondents who had not studied abroad reported having a marginally higher salary on average in both universities. In University A, graduates who had not studied abroad were earning an average of \$465.46<sup>15</sup> more than those who had; in University B, this difference increased to \$2,935.68 (Figure 4; Figure 5).

To further examine salary disparities between those who had studied abroad and those who had not, the researchers assessed the average salary per discipline<sup>16</sup>. In doing so, differences became more varied, with the outcome fluctuating across the subject area (see Figures 6 and 7). In both universities, business graduates who had not studied abroad were earning more than their study abroad counterparts. Salary disparity was particularly significant in University B, with a difference of \$6,766.41. In social sciences, trends contrasted between

the universities: in University A, those who had not studied abroad earned an average of \$5,339.15 more than those who had; in University B, those who had studied abroad earned an average of \$1,504.76 more.

In both universities, those who had studied abroad earned marginally more in the field of arts and humanities. This finding may reflect the inclusion of language schools within the discipline and students' participation in compulsory study abroad programmes. In University A, students who had not studied abroad earned over \$5,000.00 more in the field of earth sciences than their study abroad counterparts; however, in University B, studying abroad increased science graduate earnings by approximately \$5,000. While engineering graduates in both cohorts earned comparable salaries in University A, those who had not studied abroad at University B earned an average of \$4,491.60 more than those who had. Finally, across both universities, non-study abroad graduates in life sciences and health sciences earned more; \$5,041.32 and \$3,182.30 respectively.

<sup>15</sup> All salaries have been converted to \$USD to facilitate comparison between the universities.

<sup>16</sup> The researchers endeavoured to match disciplines across the universities; however, some individual differences may be present in terms of specific subjects included in the discipline.

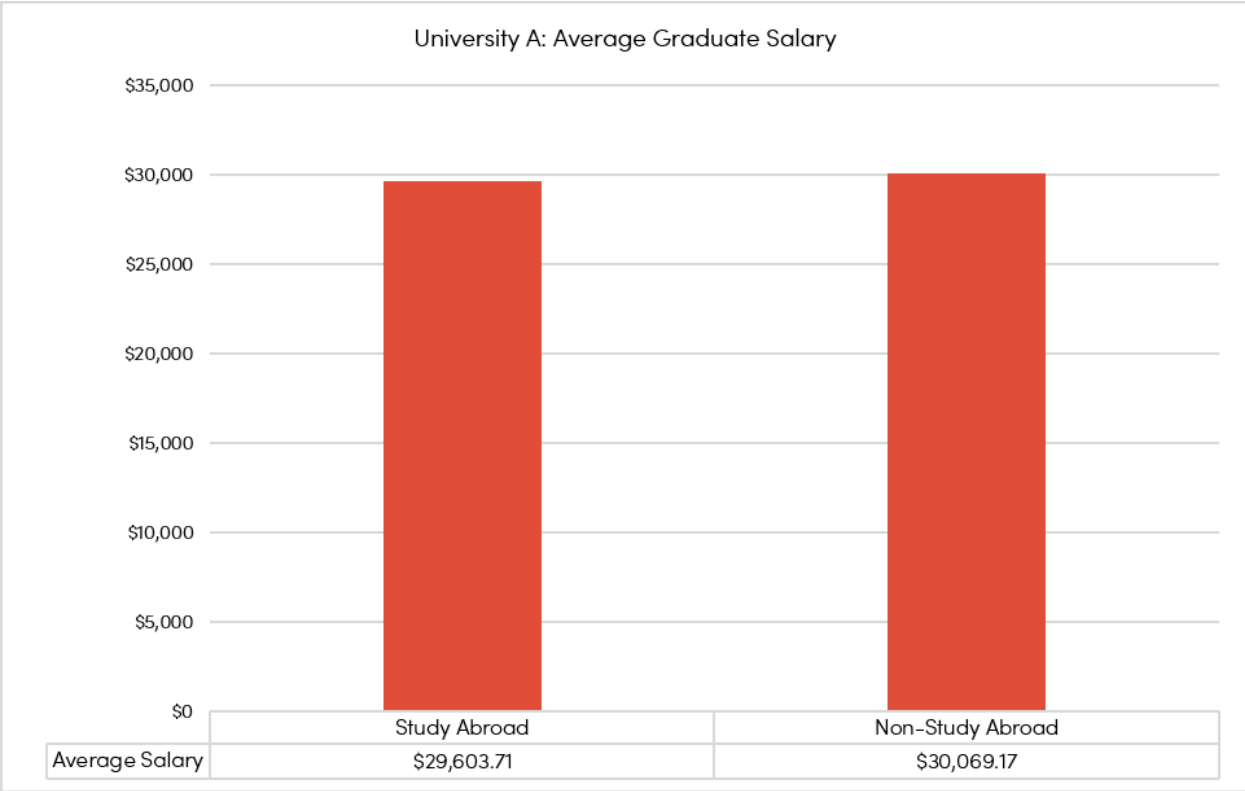


Figure 4: University A Average Graduate Salary

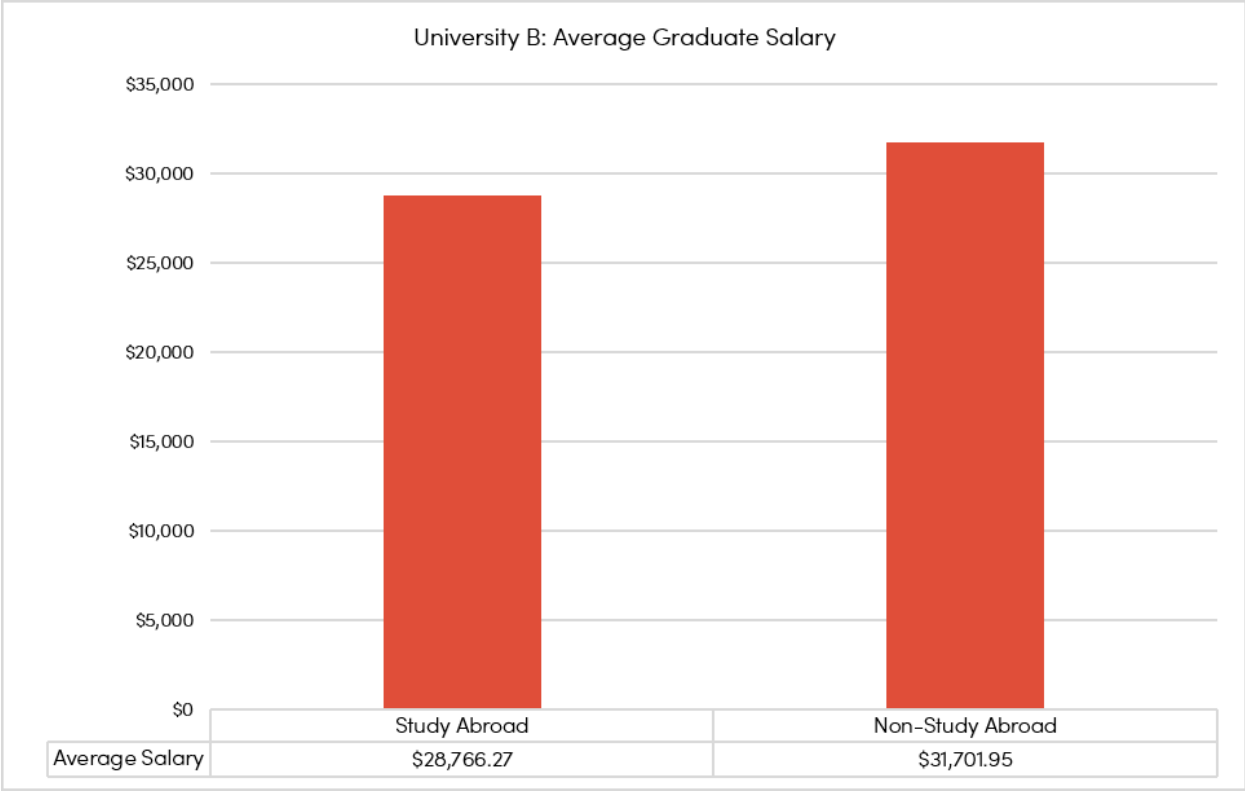


Figure 5: University B Average Graduate Salary

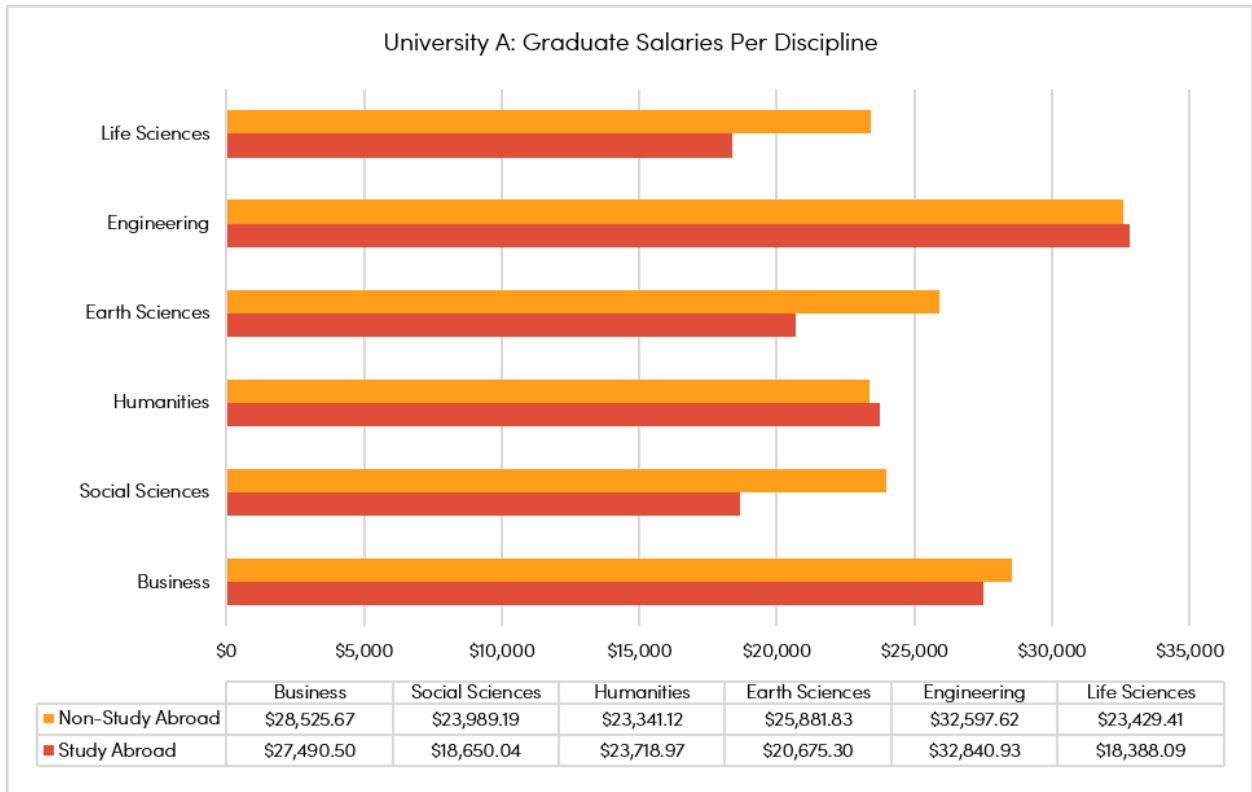


Figure 6: University A Graduate Salaries by Discipline

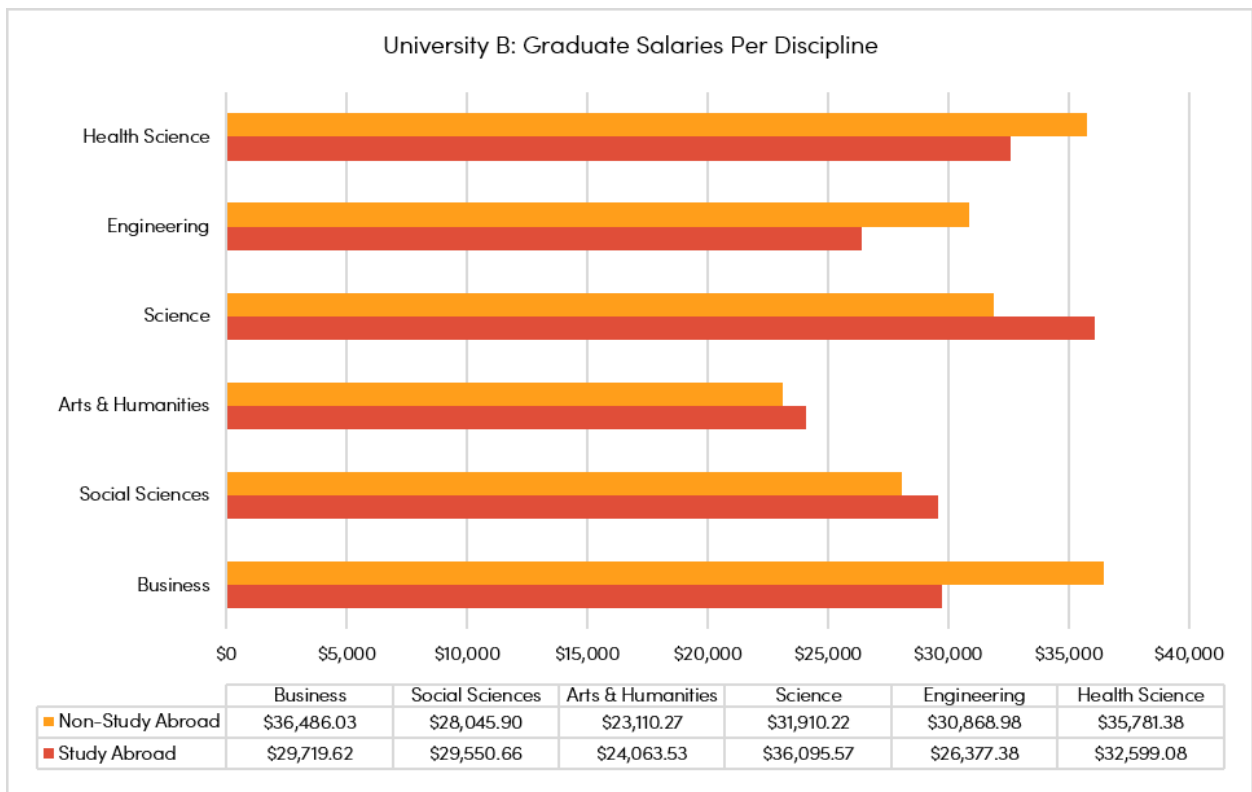


Figure 7: University B Graduate Salaries by Discipline



While these findings suggest that studying abroad may negatively impact salary, data must be interpreted with caution. As a greater number of study abroad participants stated that they are now living and/or working abroad (16.27 per cent, compared to 8.82 per cent of those who were not), salary disparities may reflect salary differences internationally. For example, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2019) estimates that the average starting salary for graduates in the USA in 2018 was \$50,004, while the recruitment agency, Bridgewater UK estimate it to be approximately \$24,500 for UK graduates (February 2019). Further, the current study explored whether the composition of study abroad and non-study abroad

cohorts might be impacting findings. As such, they sought to examine whether including gender as a variable impacted salary outcomes. In doing so, they observed significant disparities emerging between male and female graduates, with females earning less in both university cohorts. In University A, female graduates earned an average of \$4,015.26 less than their male counterparts. Similarly, in University B, female graduates earned an average of \$4,520.49 less than males (Figures 8 and 9). Females representing a higher proportion of students who had studied abroad may go toward explaining the overall differences wherein study abroad graduates appear to earn less than non-study abroad graduates (Figure 10).

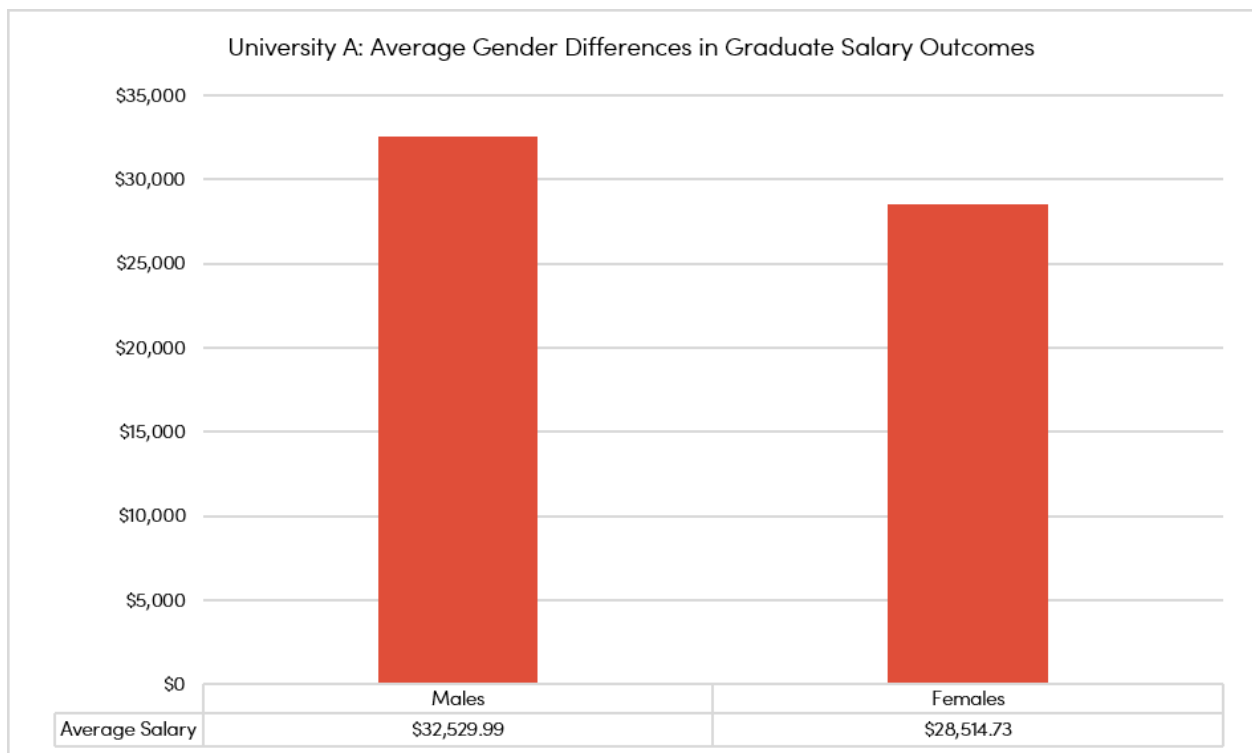


Figure 8: University A Average Gender Differences in Graduate Salary Outcomes

Following the observed disparities between male and female average salaries, the researchers sought to explore salaries per discipline by gender further. In doing so, they compared males who had studied abroad with males who had not, and females who had studied abroad with females who had not (Figures 11 and 12).

Looking to Figure 11, the researchers observed that across all disciplines in University A, males who had not studied abroad earned more than those who had<sup>17</sup>. The largest disparity was reported in social sciences, with males who had not studied abroad earning \$7,146.46 more than those who had. This was followed by earth sciences (\$5,451.61 more); business (\$1,530.69 more); life sciences (\$1,499.08 more); humanities (\$1,316.71 more) and engineering (\$305.17 more). Similarly, figure 12 illustrates the salary differences between females who had studied abroad and those who had not. In all disciplines, except for engineering, females who had not studied abroad were earning more than those who had. The largest difference was noted in life sciences, where females who had not studied abroad earned \$6,150.73 more than those who had. This was followed by earth sciences (\$5,923.37 more); social sciences (\$3,439.49 more); business (\$596.96 more) and humanities (\$279.64 more).

In contrast, findings were more varied in University B data. Among males, graduates of social sciences and sciences who had studied abroad<sup>18</sup> reported earning more than those who had not (\$1,076.50 and \$7,269.87 more respectively). However, in the fields of business, arts and humanities, engineering, and health sciences, males who had not studied abroad<sup>19</sup> were observed to earn more on average (Figure 13). The greatest difference was in business, with males who had not studied abroad

earning approximately \$9,492.35 more than males who had. In engineering, males who had not studied abroad earned \$7,295.45 more; and health science, where they earned \$5,168.69 more. The difference in was in business, with males who had not studied abroad earning approximately \$9,492.35 more than males who had. In engineering, males who had not studied abroad earned \$7,295.45 more; and health science, where they earned \$5,168.69 more. The difference in arts and humanities was smaller, with males who had not studied abroad earning \$955.58 more than their study abroad counterparts.

Similarly, among females respondents, differences between study abroad and non-study abroad participants varied by discipline (Figure 14). Graduates in social science, arts, and humanities, science, and engineering who had studied abroad<sup>20</sup> reported earning more than their non-study abroad<sup>21</sup> counterparts. The largest difference was in science graduates, with those who had studied abroad earning an average of \$4,654.14 more than those who had not. This was followed by engineering (\$3,919.94), arts and humanities (\$2,216.33), and social science (\$1,501.18). Conversely, students who had not studied abroad earned more in the fields of business and health science; \$3,199.28 and \$2,237.64 more respectively.

The higher pay for male and female business students who had not studied abroad across the universities and may reflect the benefits of prioritising at-home internships over study abroad participation. However in the current study, it was not possible to identify those who had engaged in internships within this data. The advisability of measuring the impact of internship participation on graduate salary levels in future research will be discussed later in this report.

<sup>17</sup> The number of respondents per category is not available for University A.

<sup>18</sup> At University B, the number of males who had studied abroad per discipline, and who provided salary data, was as follows: 24 business; 11 social sciences; 13 arts and humanities; 1 science; 3 engineering; 12 health science.

<sup>19</sup> At University B, the number of males who had not studied abroad per discipline, and who provided salary data, was as follows: 44 business; 38 social sciences; 60 arts and humanities; 66 science; 51 engineering; 142 health science.

<sup>20</sup> At University B, the number of females who had studied abroad per discipline, and who provided salary data, was as follows: 30 business; 17 social sciences; 29 arts and humanities; 3 science; 1 engineering; 15 health science.

<sup>21</sup> At University B, the number of females who had not studied abroad per discipline, and who provided salary data, was as follows: 20 business; 71 social sciences; 107 arts and humanities; 70 science; 17 engineering; 238 health science.



Figure 9: University B Average Gender Differences in Graduate Salary Outcomes

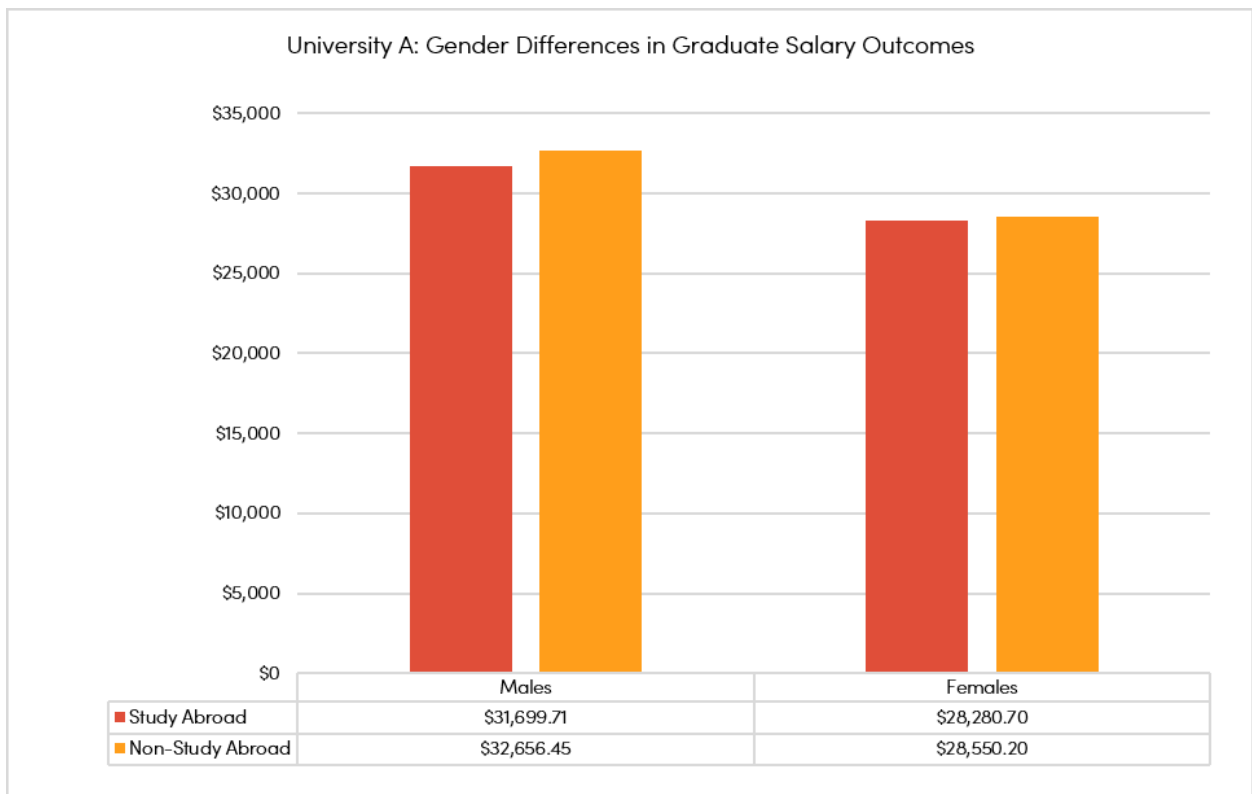


Figure 10: University A Gender Differences in Graduate Salary Outcomes

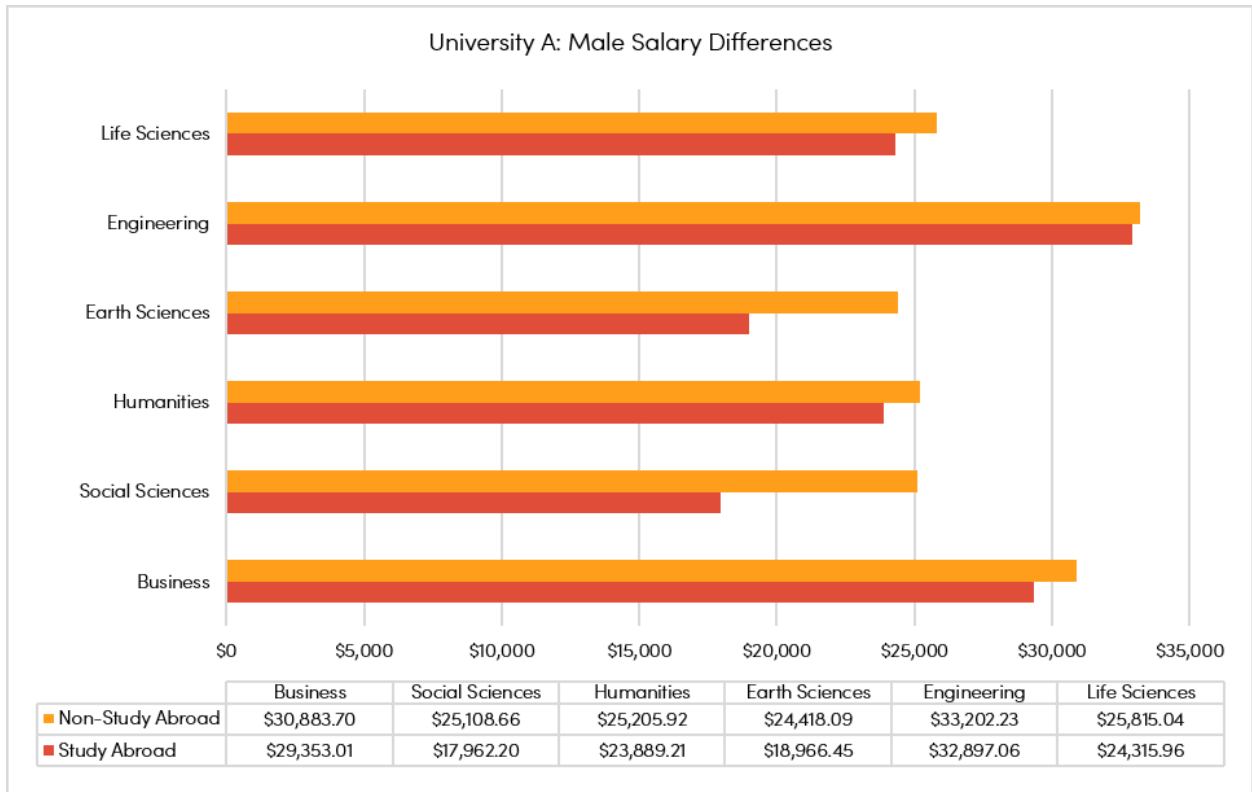


Figure 11: University A Salary Differences by Study Abroad Participation – Males Only

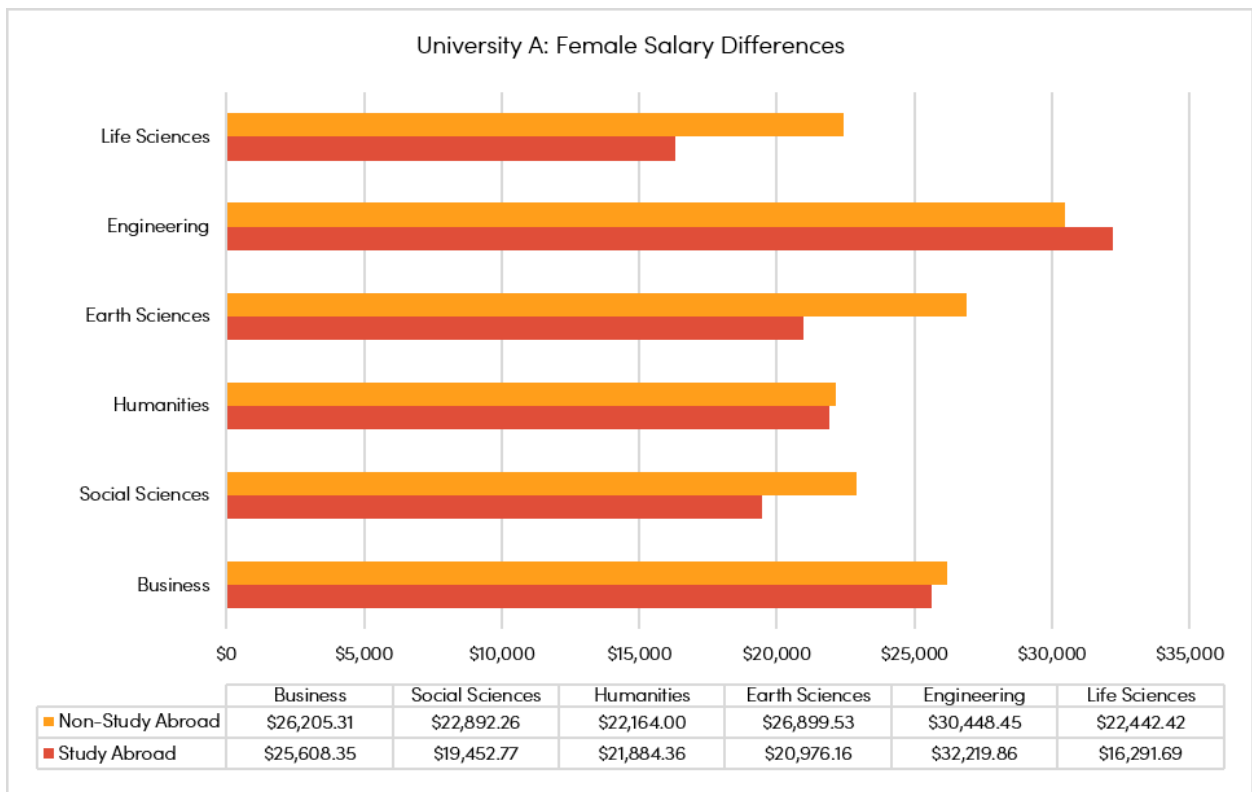


Figure 12: University A Salary Differences by Study Abroad Participation – Females Only

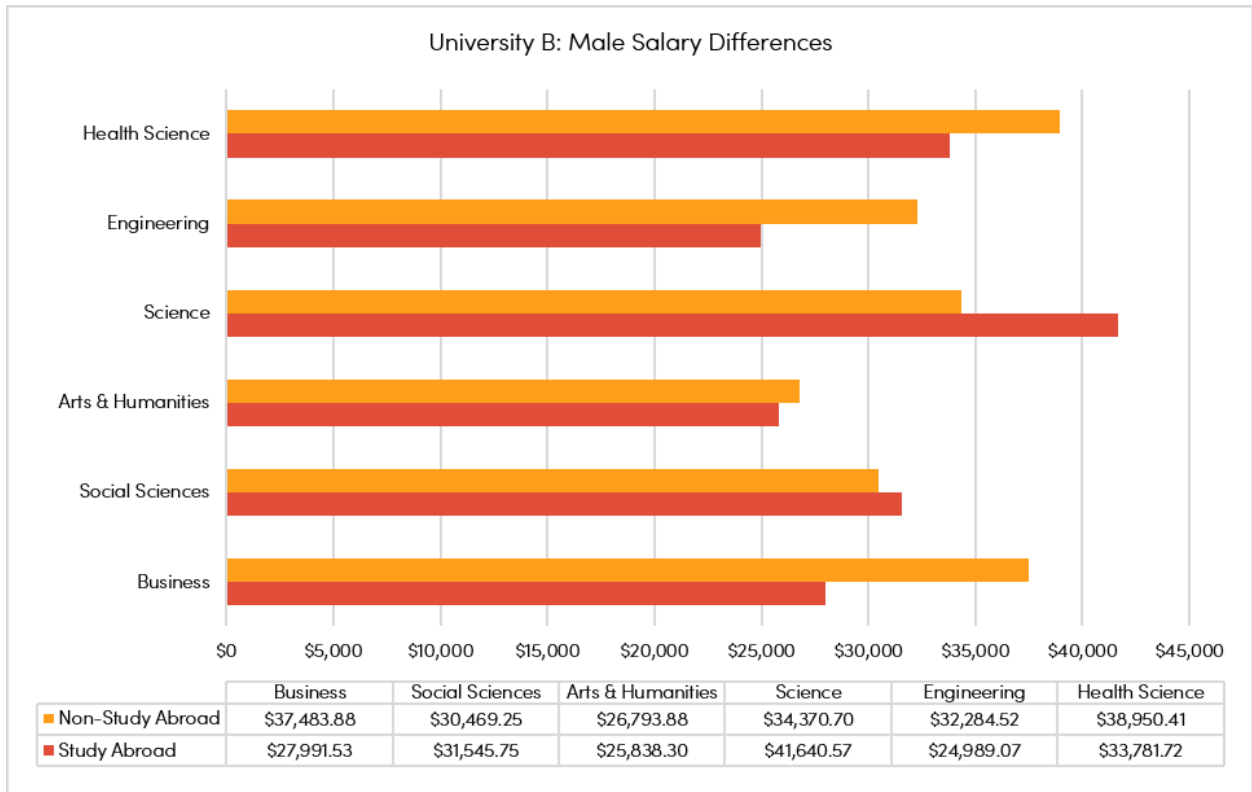


Figure 13: University B Salary Differences by Study Abroad Participation – Males Only

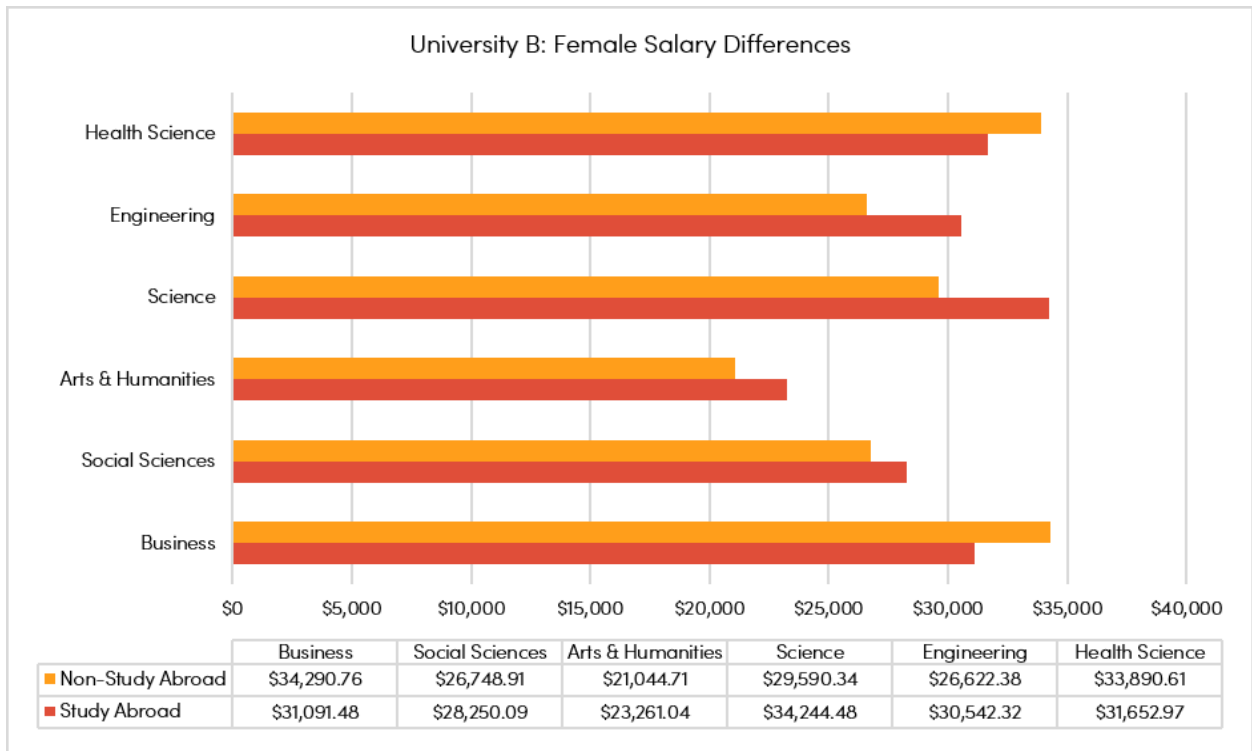


Figure 14: University B Salary Differences by Study Abroad Participation – Females Only

### 3.3.2 Salary Differences by Gender

Following the observed disparities between the average salaries of males and females, the researchers sought to ascertain whether this trend existed across all disciplines. To do so, they examined the average salary across each field by gender and by study abroad participation. On average, females in both universities, across disciplines and in both study abroad and non-study abroad participant groups reported earning less than their male counterparts.

At University A, females who had studied abroad earned less in all disciplines except social sciences and earth sciences (Figure 15). The biggest salary disparity was observed in the life sciences cohort, wherein females earned \$8,024.27 less than males on average. This was followed by business (\$3,744.66 less), humanities (\$2,004.85 less), and engineering (\$677.20 less). Conversely, females reported earning more in the social sciences and earth sciences fields, \$1,490.57, and \$2,009.71 more respectively.

Similarly, among non-study abroad graduates at University A, females reported earning less than males in all disciplines except earth sciences (Figure 16). The biggest disparity was observed in business, where females reported earning \$4,678.39 less than males. This was followed by

life sciences (\$3,372.62 less); humanities (\$3,041.92 less); engineering (\$2,753.78 less) and social sciences (\$2,216.40 less). Female earth science graduates reported earning an average of \$2,009.71 more than males.

At University B, studying abroad appeared to reverse some of the salary disparities between males and females (Figure 17). While all females who had not studied abroad reported earning less than their male counterparts, females who had studied abroad earned more than males in business and engineering. In these areas, females earned \$3,099.95 and \$5,553.25 more, respectively. However, females reported earning less in social sciences, arts, and humanities, science, and health science. The greatest disparity was visible in science, wherein females reported earning \$7,396.06 less than males. In social sciences, they were earning \$3,295.66 less; \$2,577.26 less in arts and humanities; and \$2,128.75 less in health science. Among graduates who had not studied abroad, females reported earning less in every discipline. This was most visible in arts and humanities, with females earning \$5,749.17 less. They earned \$5,662.14 less in engineering; \$5,059.80 less in health science; \$4,780.36 less in science; \$3,720.34 less in social science and \$3,193.12 less in business.

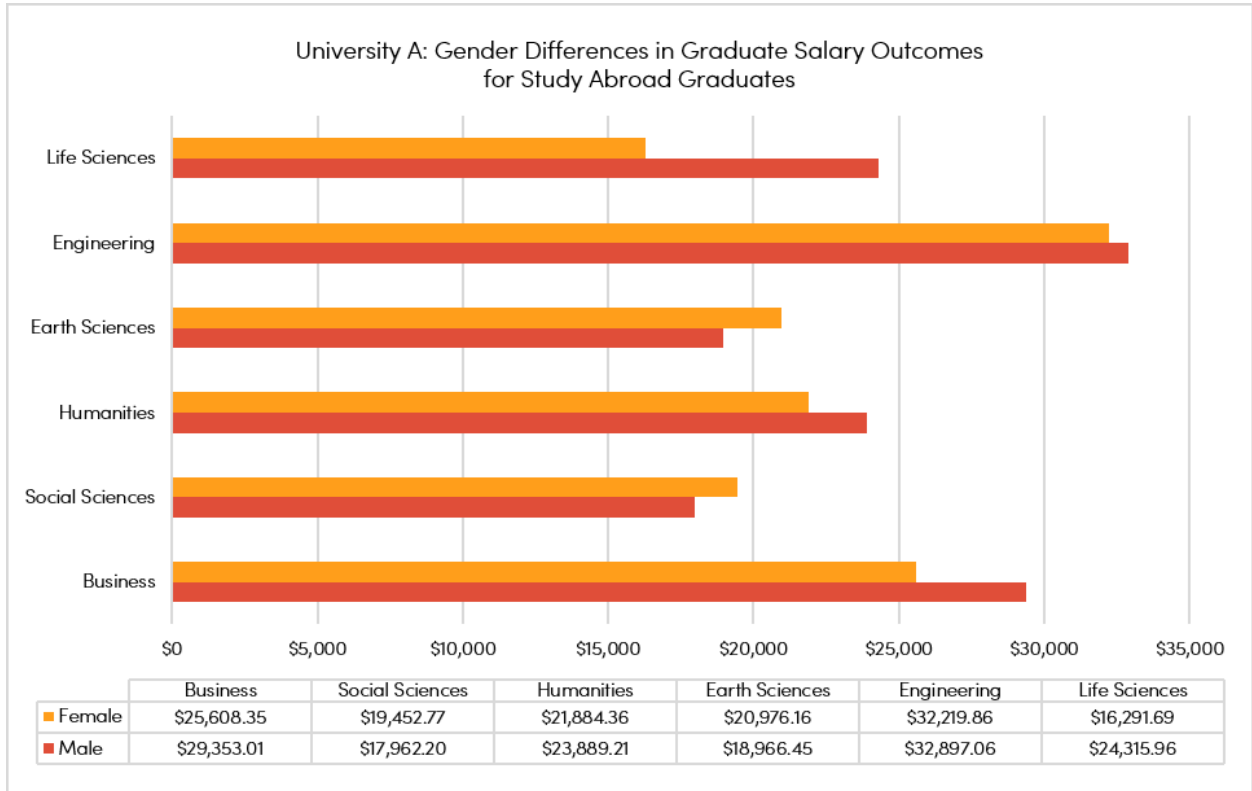


Figure 15: University A Gender Differences in Graduate Salary Outcomes (Study Abroad)

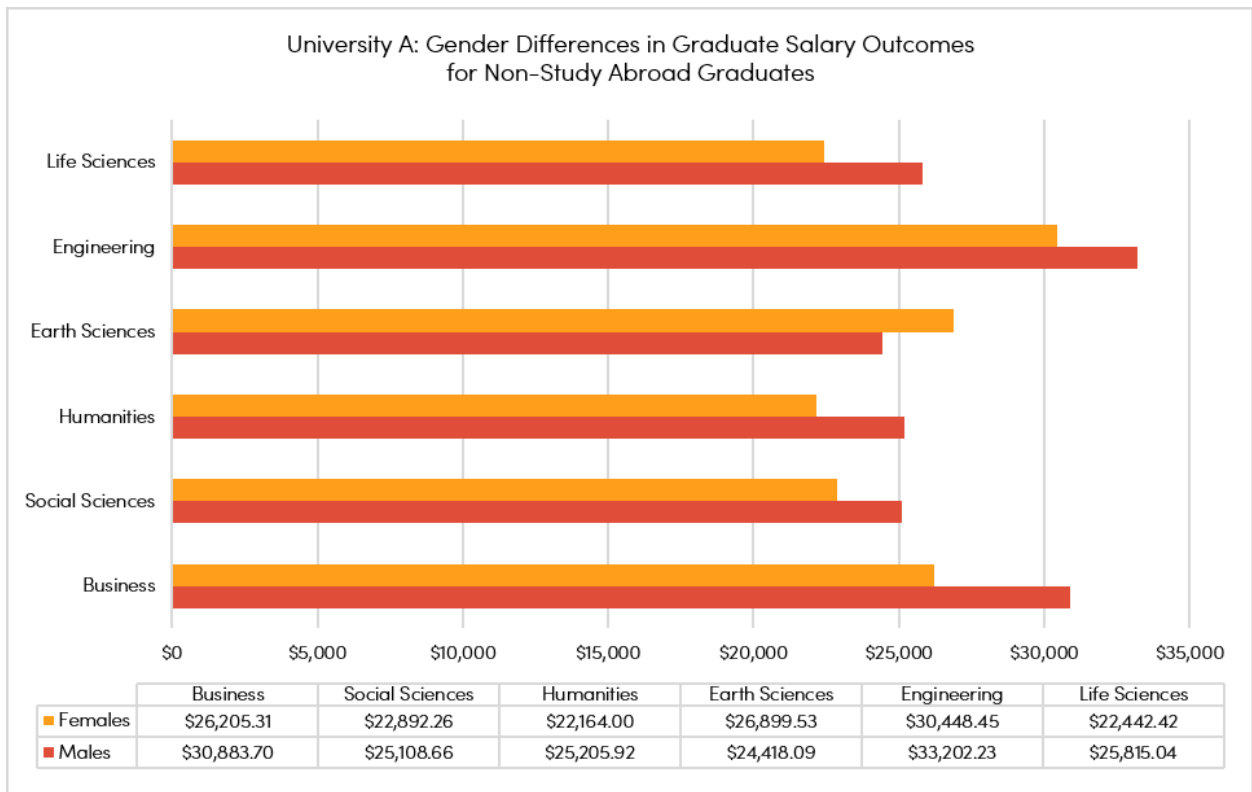


Figure 16: University A Gender Differences in Graduate Salary Outcomes (Non-Study Abroad)

Reflecting on how frequently these salary differences were observed between males and females, regardless of study abroad participation, the researchers propose three possible factors. First; Callaghan, Ivory and Lavelle (2018) reported that female employment differs considerably from male employment. For example, the most recent Census data in Ireland reveals low levels of female representation in sectors such as construction, agriculture and industry, and a high levels of female representation in education, human health and social work activities (Central Statistics Office, 2019). For example, 7.8 per cent of females stated that they were employed in 'Industry', compared to 16.7 per cent of males. Conversely, 21.5 per cent of females were employed in 'Human Health and Social Work Activities', compared to 4.9 per cent of males. Looking at the average salaries per week in these fields, industry workers earn an average of \$980.69, while employees in human health and social work activities earn an average of \$810.49 (Central Statistics Office, 2019).<sup>22</sup>

The second hypothesis reflects the higher proportion of females who report working and living abroad at the time of graduate survey completion. At University B, 61.76 per cent of those who had studied abroad and were now working abroad were female; 51.78 per cent of those who had not studied abroad but were now working abroad were female. As salaries vary geographically and may indeed be lower than that of their country of study, this may impact average salary rates. This pattern is supported by the average USA and UK salaries identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2019) and Bridgewater UK (2019).

The third possible factor acknowledges the differential recruitment process for males and females. It has been frequently asserted that males and females apply for jobs differently, with males more willing to apply even when they are under-qualified (Mohr, 2014). Flory et al. (2015) reported that young males are more likely to apply for a job in a competitive workplace than for the same job in a fixed-wage environment. Conversely, competitive workplaces can significantly decrease the likelihood of females to apply for a position, compared to that of males. Rather, females may favour fixed wages and greater job security. Further, Barbulescu and Bidwell (2013) cited women's increased likelihood to apply for jobs with a better anticipated work-life balance. Notably, Stevenson and Clegg (2012) reported that women frequently undervalue extracurricular engagement, and are more likely to be dismissive of these activities as they pertain to their employability. This may result in an 'under-selling' or poor marketing of their experience when compared to their male counterparts. These differences in job application and selection may subsequently impact on salaries.

Finally, this self-reported data must be interpreted with caution. The researchers acknowledge that some participants chose not to disclose their salary, which could have impacted the results. Further, it must be noted that the number of respondents in the study abroad cohorts were significantly lower than that of the non-study abroad participants. As such, future research should endeavour to explore the widespread salary disparity further using larger datasets.

<sup>22</sup> Salaries converted from Euros on 13 Jan 2020. £1 = \$1.30; £1 = €1.17; £1 = S\$1.75



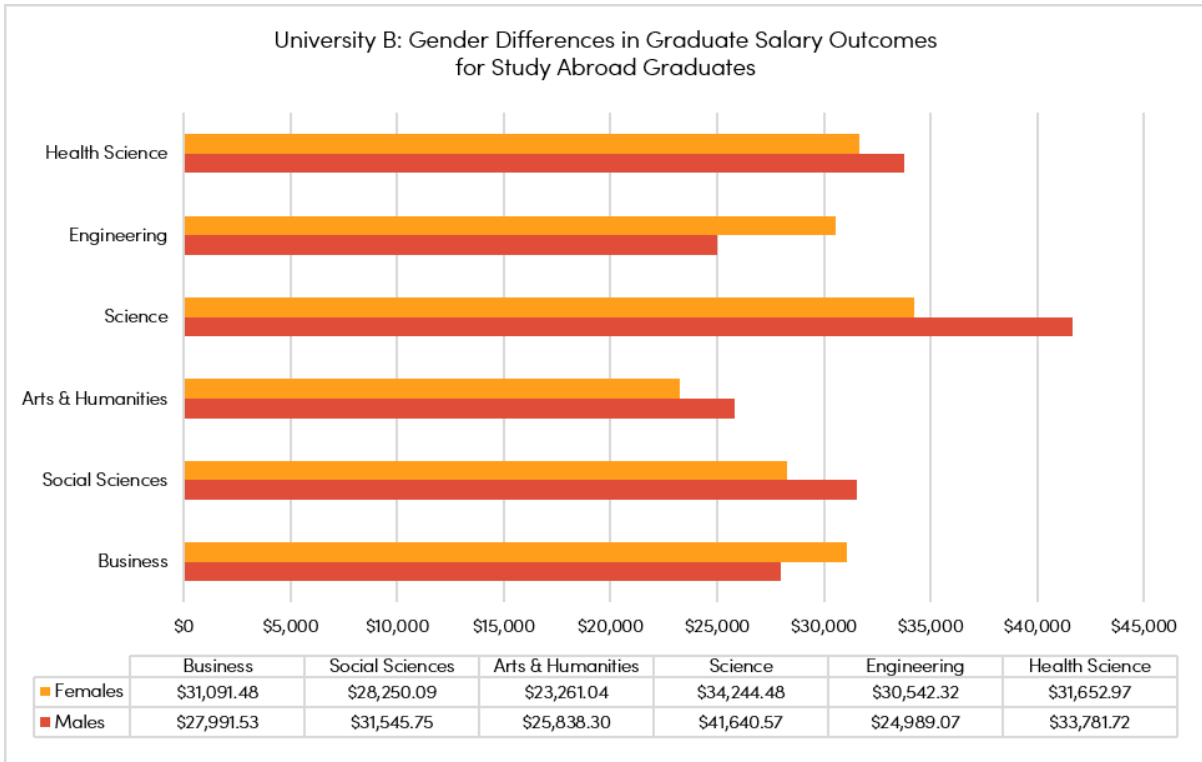


Figure 17: University B Gender Differences in Graduate Salary Outcomes (Study Abroad)<sup>23</sup>

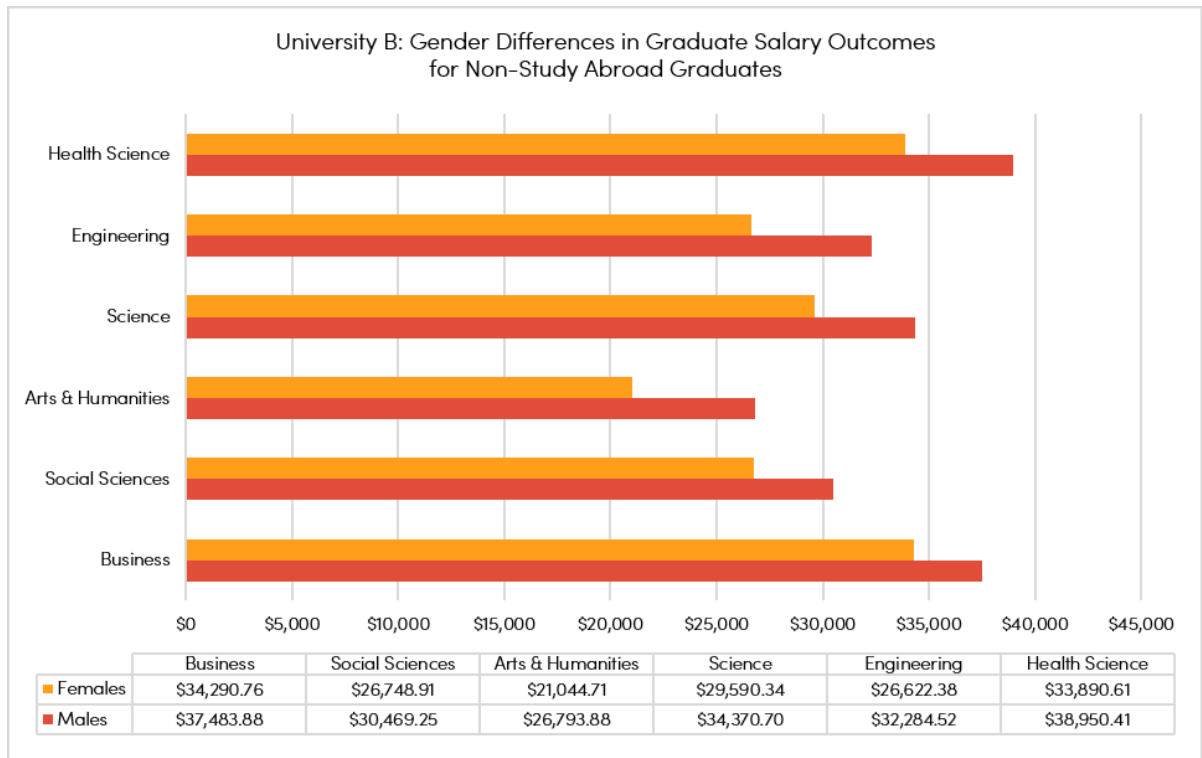


Figure 18: University B Gender Differences in Graduate Salary Outcomes (Non-Study Abroad)<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup>226 males; 281 females.

<sup>24</sup>1,527 males; 3,205 females.

### 3.4 Academic Performance

Previous research suggests that studying abroad may impact academic performance. The self-report academic performance data used in this study certainly indicated that graduates who had studied abroad received higher on average graduating qualifications. To that end, in University A<sup>25</sup>, a larger proportion of graduates who had studied abroad received first-class honours degrees in social science, humanities, engineering, and life sciences (Figure 19). No graduates who had studied abroad received third-class honours degrees; however, 1.7 per cent of non-study abroad graduates had (Figure 20).

Similarly, graduates who had studied abroad reported higher academic performance at University B<sup>26</sup>, with higher rates of first-class honours awarded (Figure 21). Conversely, non-study abroad graduates were more likely to receive lower second class honours or pass awards. The biggest disparity was observed in engineering, with 56.86 per cent of study abroad graduates receiving first-class honours awards compared to 11.11 per cent of non-study abroad graduates (45.45 per cent difference). This was followed by social science, wherein 32.26 per cent of study abroad graduates receiving a first class honour degree, compared with 10.56 per cent of non-study abroad graduates (21.7 per cent difference) (Figures 22 and 23).

To further ascertain whether additional variables may be impacting academic performance in study abroad and non-study abroad graduates, the researchers compared males and females who had studied abroad with those who had not. Among male respondents (Figure 24), graduates who had studied abroad reported higher academic performance. To that end, they received more than double the rate of first-class honours awards than their non-study abroad counterparts (30.53 per cent and 14.54 per cent, respectively). They also received a higher number of upper second class awards than those who had not studied abroad (61.06 per cent and 52.26 per cent, respectively). In contrast, males who had not studied abroad received lower second class honours and pass awards. Almost 3 per cent of those who had not studied abroad received a pass award, compared to 0.44 per cent of those who had studied abroad.

These patterns were also visible within female respondents (Figure 25); 22.42 per cent of females who had studied abroad received a first-class honours degree compared with 14.24 per cent of those who had not. Similarly, 70.46 per cent of females who had studied abroad earned an upper second class honours award, compared with 60.79 per cent of females who had not. Conversely, students who had not studied abroad reported higher rates of lower second class honours (23.54 per cent, compared to 7.12 per cent of study abroad students). No students who had studied abroad reported receiving pass degrees in contrast to 1.43 per cent of non-study abroad graduates.

<sup>25</sup> At University A, a first class honours degree is awarded for a grade point average (GPA) signifying an A-grade average; an upper second class honours degree is awarded for a GPA signifying a B-grade average; a lower second class honours degree is awarded for a GPA signifying a C-grade average; and a third class honours degree is awarded for a GPA signifying a D-grade average.

<sup>26</sup> At University B, a first class honours degree is awarded for a grade point average (GPA) between 3.68 and 4.2; an upper second class honours degree is awarded for a GPA between 3.08 and 3.67; a lower second class honours degree is awarded for a GPA between 2.48 and 3.07; and a pass degree is awarded for a GPA between 2.00 and 2.47.

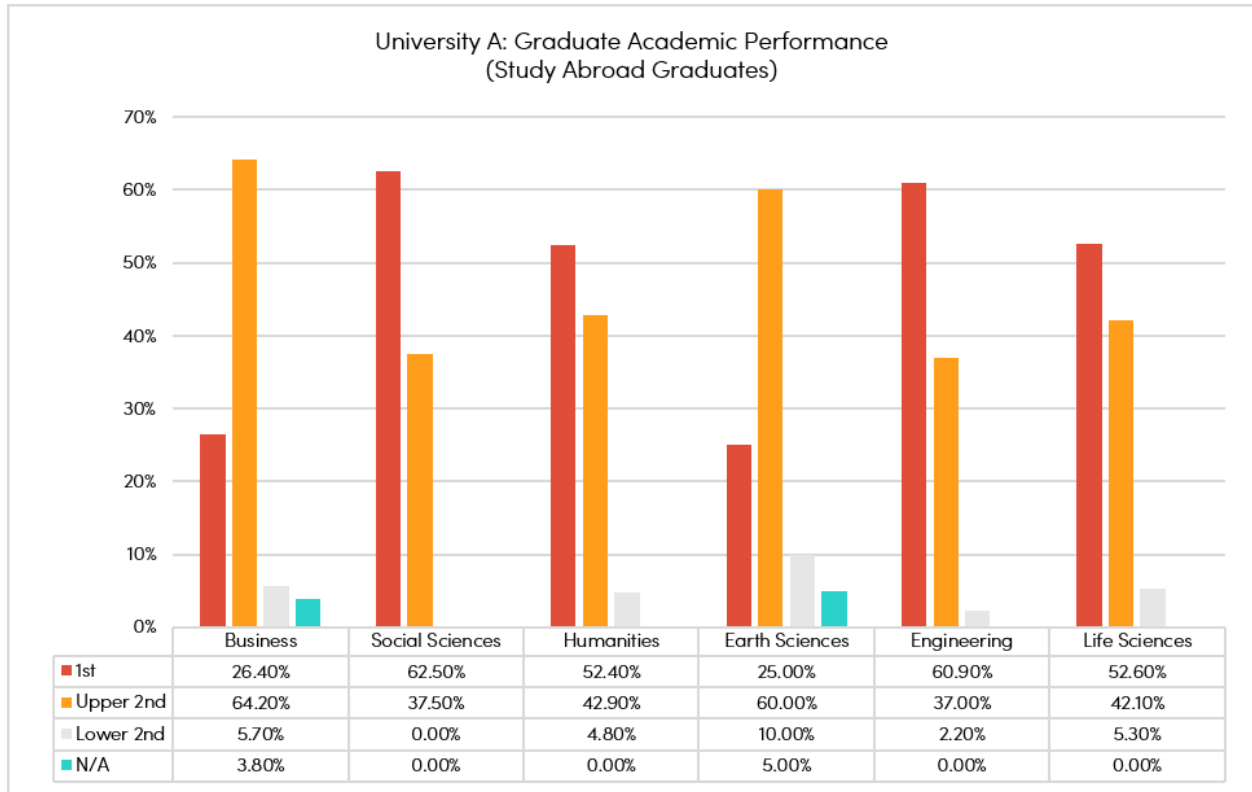


Figure 19: University A Graduate Academic Performance by Discipline (Study Abroad)<sup>27</sup>

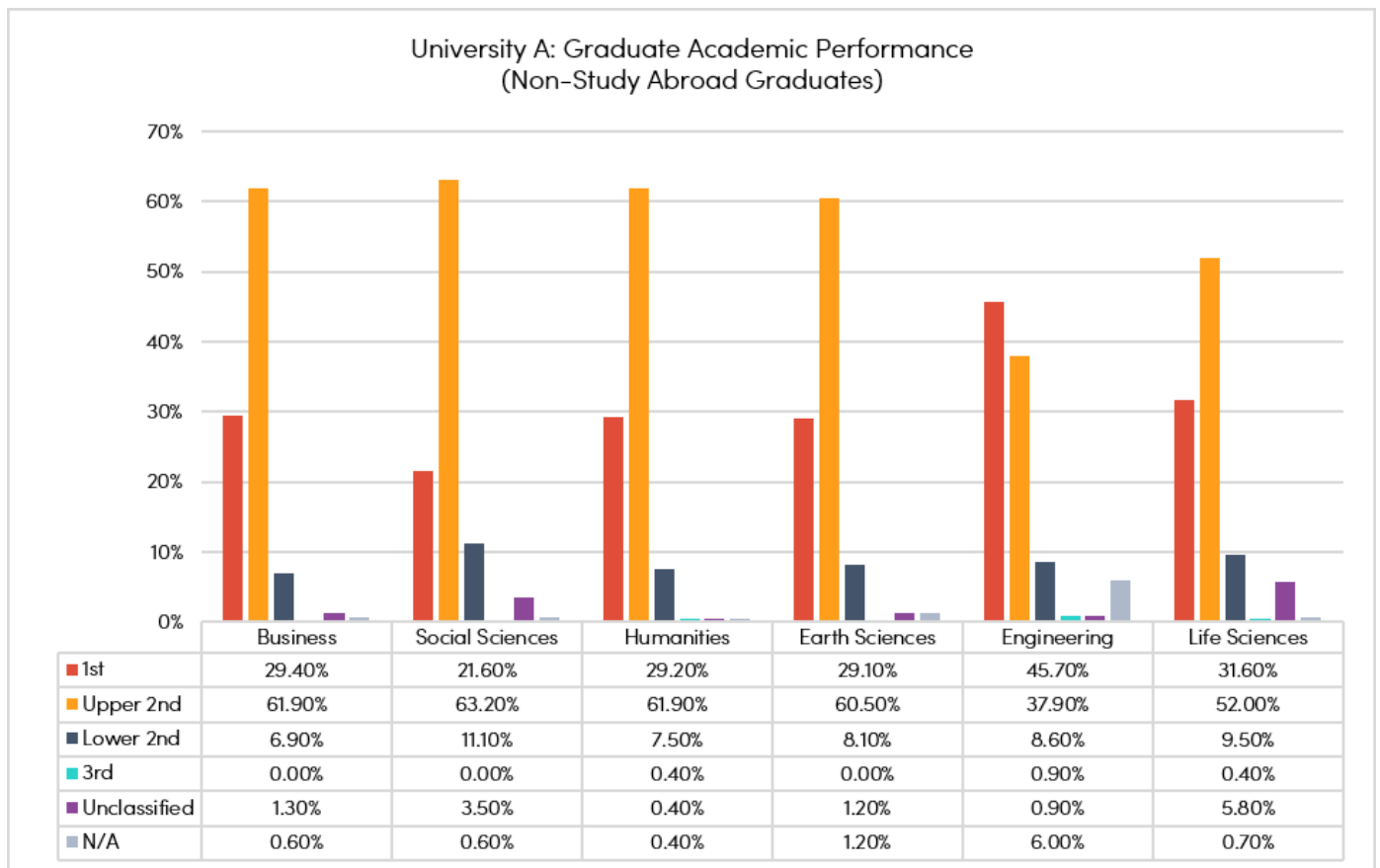


Figure 20: University A Graduate Academic Performance by Discipline (Non-Study Abroad)

<sup>27</sup> The number of students who had studied abroad per discipline, and who provided academic performance data, was unavailable at University A.

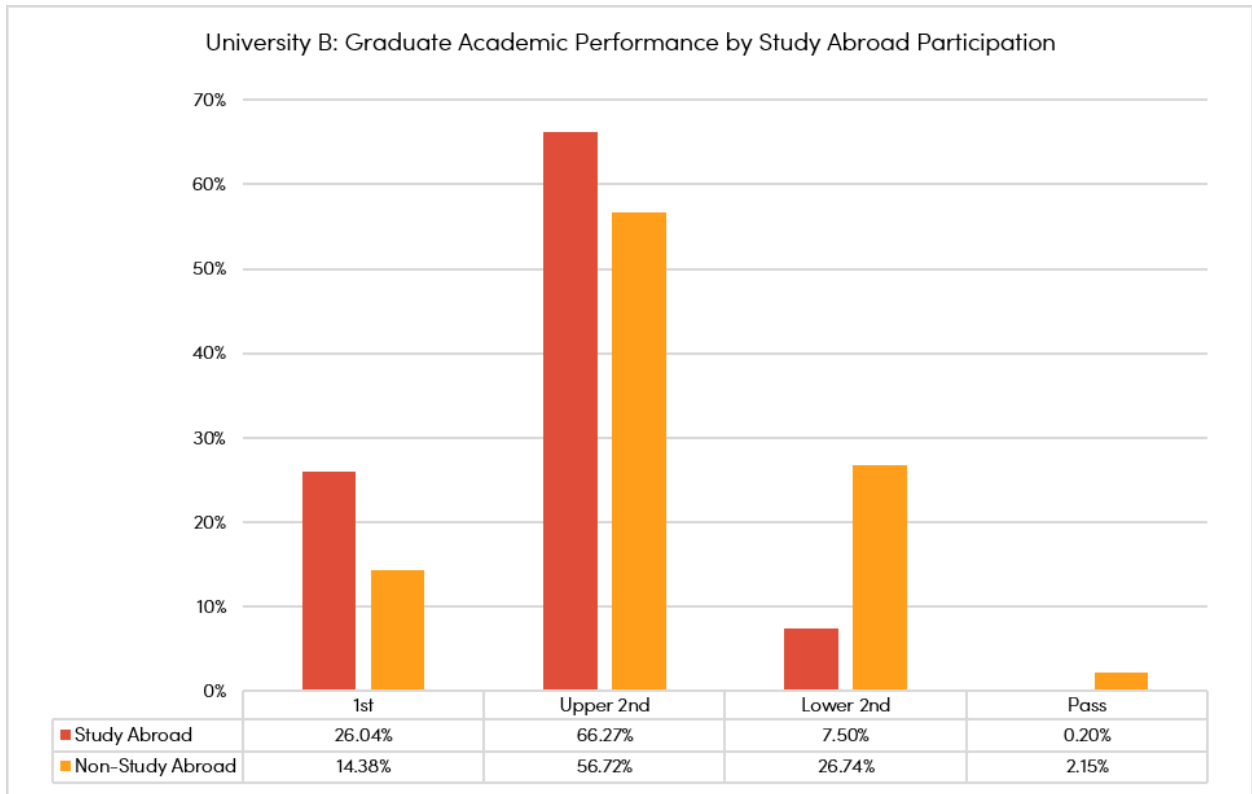


Figure 21: University B Graduate Academic Performance By Study Abroad Participation<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> 507 study abroad graduates; 3,205 non-study abroad graduates.

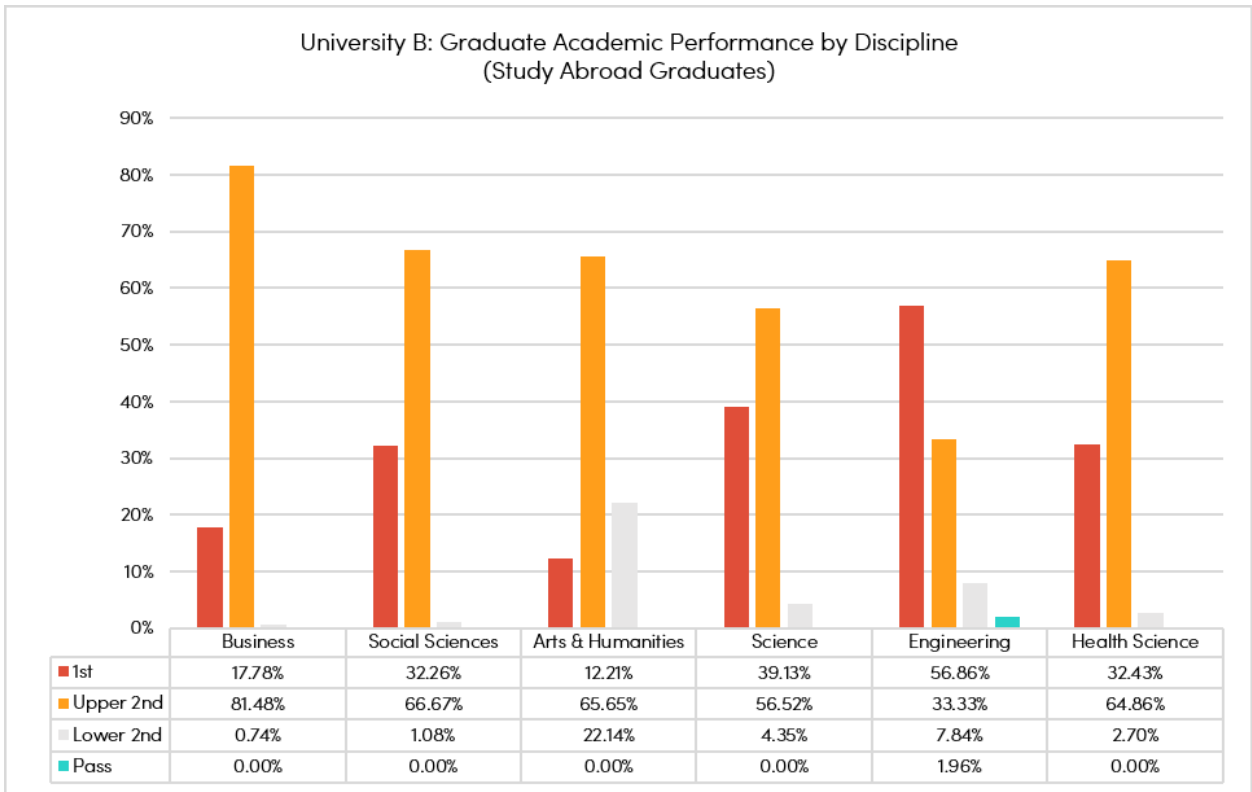


Figure 22: University B Graduate Academic Performance by Discipline (Study Abroad)<sup>29</sup>

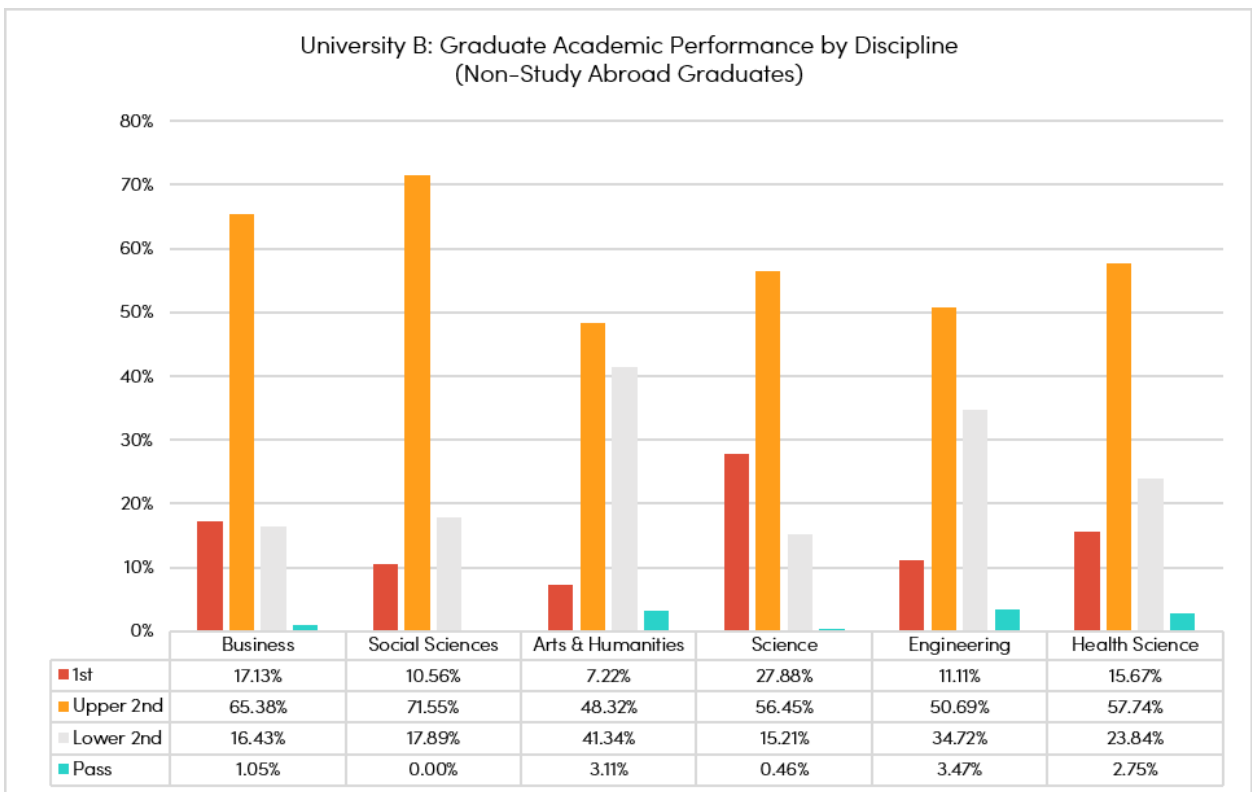


Figure 23: University B Graduate Academic Performance by Discipline (Non-Study Abroad)<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> At University B, the number of graduates who had studied abroad per discipline, and who provided academic performance data, was as follows: 135 business; 93 social sciences; 131 arts and humanities; 23 science; 51 engineering; 74 health science.

<sup>30</sup> At University B, the number of graduates who had not studied abroad per discipline, and who provided academic performance data, was as follows: 286 business; 341 social sciences; 803 arts and humanities; 434 science; 288 engineering; 1053 health science.

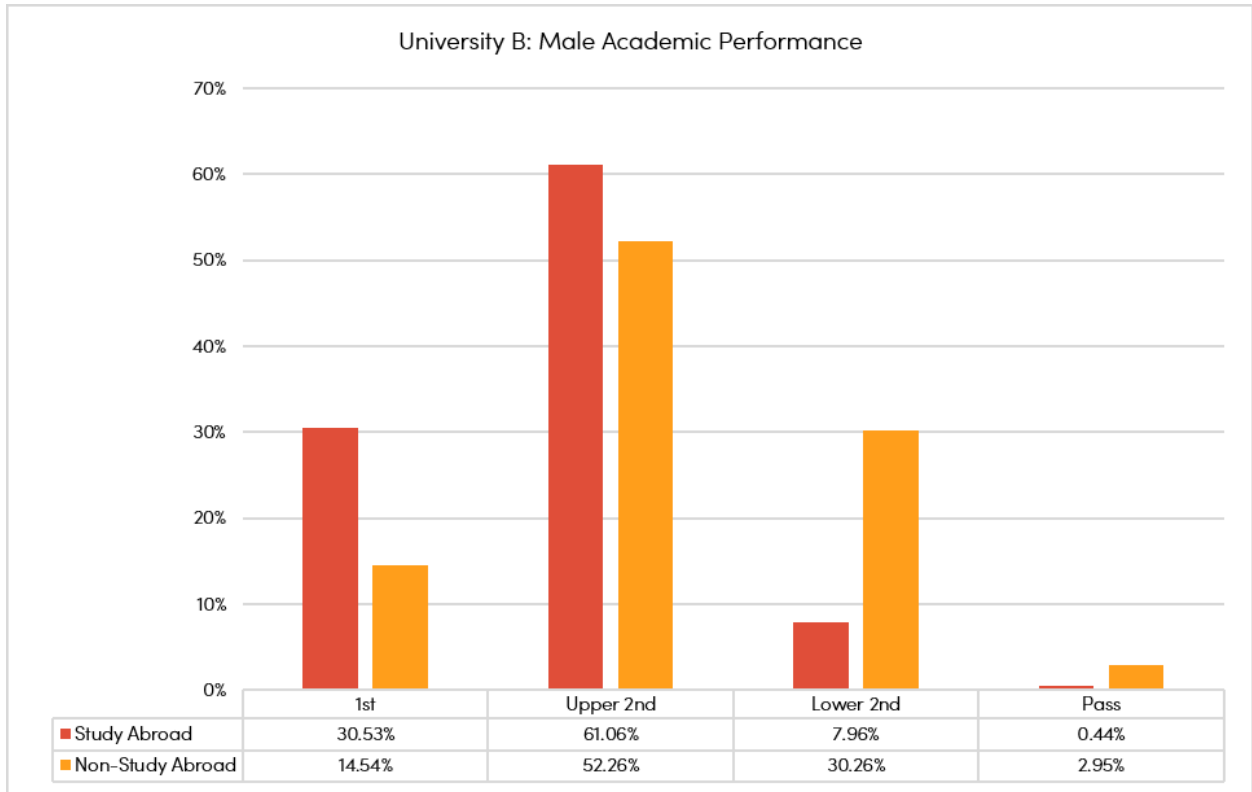


Figure 24: University B Academic Performance by Study Abroad Participation – Males Only

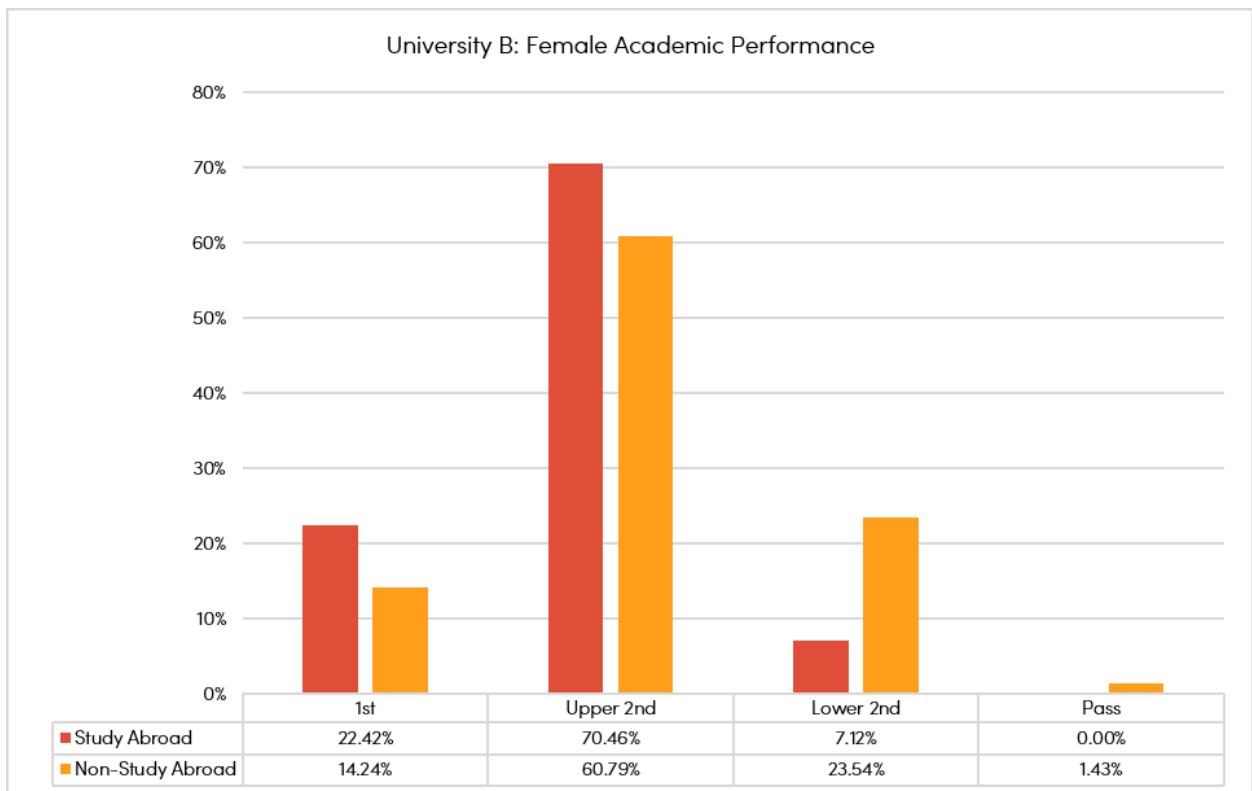


Figure 25: University B Academic Performance by Study Abroad Participation – Females Only

### 3.4.1 Gender Differences in Academic Performance

Salary disparities between males and females might be attributable to differences in academic performance between males and females<sup>31</sup>. Among study abroad graduates (Figure 26), males received a higher proportion of first class honours degrees than females (30.53 per cent and 22.42 per cent, respectively). However, looking to upper second class honours degrees, females received a higher number than males, while males received higher levels of lower second and pass awards. This trend

was also visible among respondents who did not study abroad (Figure 27); fewer females received first-class honours degree awards than males, but more females received upper second-class honours degrees and more males received lower second and pass awards. Further, the difference between the percentage of males and females earning first class honours degrees was marginal, at 0.3 per cent. This suggests that while males receive higher grades with marginally greater frequency, they also more frequently receive lower grades than their female counterparts.

<sup>31</sup> Academic performance by gender data was not available for University A.

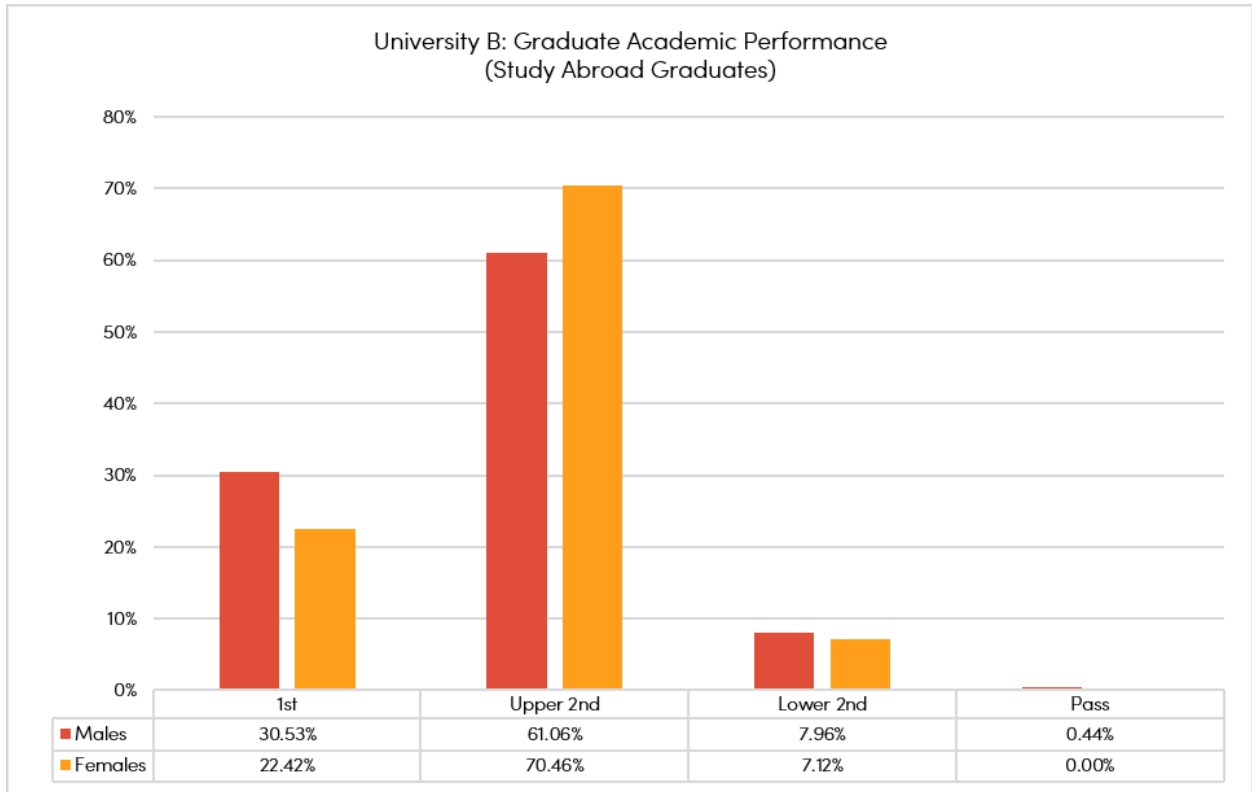


Figure 26: University B Graduate Academic Performance By Gender (Study Abroad)<sup>32</sup>

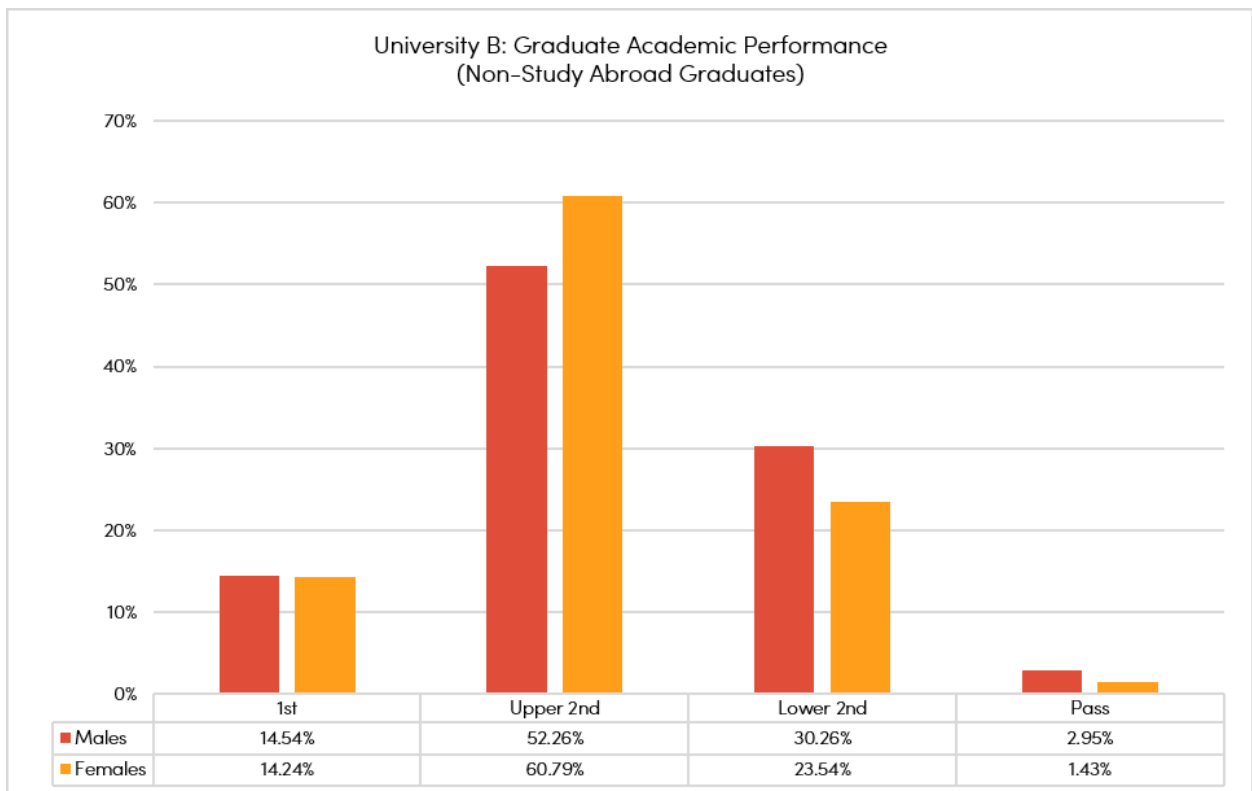


Figure 27: University B Graduate Academic Performance By Gender (Non-Study Abroad)<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> 226 males; 281 females.

<sup>33</sup> 1,527 males; 1,678 females.



# Chapter 4: Exploring Students' Experiences of Studying Abroad and Extracurricular Engagement

## 4.1 Study Overview

To explore students' perceptions of studying abroad and extracurricular engagement, qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews with students and recent graduates from ten U21 member institutions.

## 4.2 Methodology

### 4.2.1 Participants

Ten U21 member universities were selected to participate in the study to ensure representation in global regions where U21 universities are most represented – Europe, Asia, Australasia and the USA (Figure 28). Recent graduates and students in their final year of an undergraduate degree or at any stage of a postgraduate degree were invited to participate. Participants were required to be aged 18 or over, and to have studied abroad and/or engaged in an extracurricular activity. English language proficiency was also required as all interviews were conducted in English. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 undergraduate, postgraduate, and recently graduated students (6 males; 17 females; age range 19–36). Of these, 16 participants had studied abroad (Figure 30). Every participant had engaged in an extracurricular activity. Participants had academic backgrounds in business, science, social science and arts, and humanities (Figure 29). Participants were randomly assigned pseudonyms based on popular names in their country of origin (Figure 30). The most populous study abroad destination was Europe (seven participants), followed by North America (six participants). Three participants had studied in Latin America, Australasia, and Asia, respectively (Figure 31).

Over 60 per cent of study abroad programmes are one to eight weeks in duration; however, research suggests that longer durations of studying abroad (one semester or longer) result in better outcomes, for example in students' global-mindedness, intercultural competencies and international networks (Coker, Heiser and Taylor, 2018; Farrugia and Sanger, 2017). Based on this rationale

and to facilitate a comprehensive examination of employability outcomes, all participants had studied abroad for one semester or longer. Nine participants had studied abroad for a semester; seven participants had studied abroad for an academic year.

Students who had participated in international internships, as opposed to studying abroad, were not eligible to participate. The reason for this was that international internships aim to ensure that students are ready for employment, have professional connections in the region and can link their academic experience directly to career opportunities (Potts, 2015).

### 4.2.2 Procedure and Analysis

Interviews were conducted via Skype and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed to further explore the findings in the previous literature. The researcher preceded each interview with a brief introduction to the study. This ensured that participants had a clear understanding of the project and felt confident in their ability to discuss the topic. Following each interview, participants were debriefed, and the researcher's contact details were provided, should participants have any follow-up questions. Data were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2013). Thematic analysis is an empirically-driven method for identifying and analysing the most salient patterns of content in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2013; Nowell, Norris, White and Moules, 2017). Themes are identified by bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which are often meaningless when viewed in isolation, but provide comprehensive insights into the phenomenon under study when united (Aronson, 1995; Joffe, 2012). Thematic analysis can identify manifest content – that which is directly identifiable, for example through precise interview quotes, or latent content, for example implicit references in transcripts (Joffe, 2012). Participants received a non-credit bearing certificate of appreciation from U21 for their participation.



Figure 28: Participants' Home Region of Study

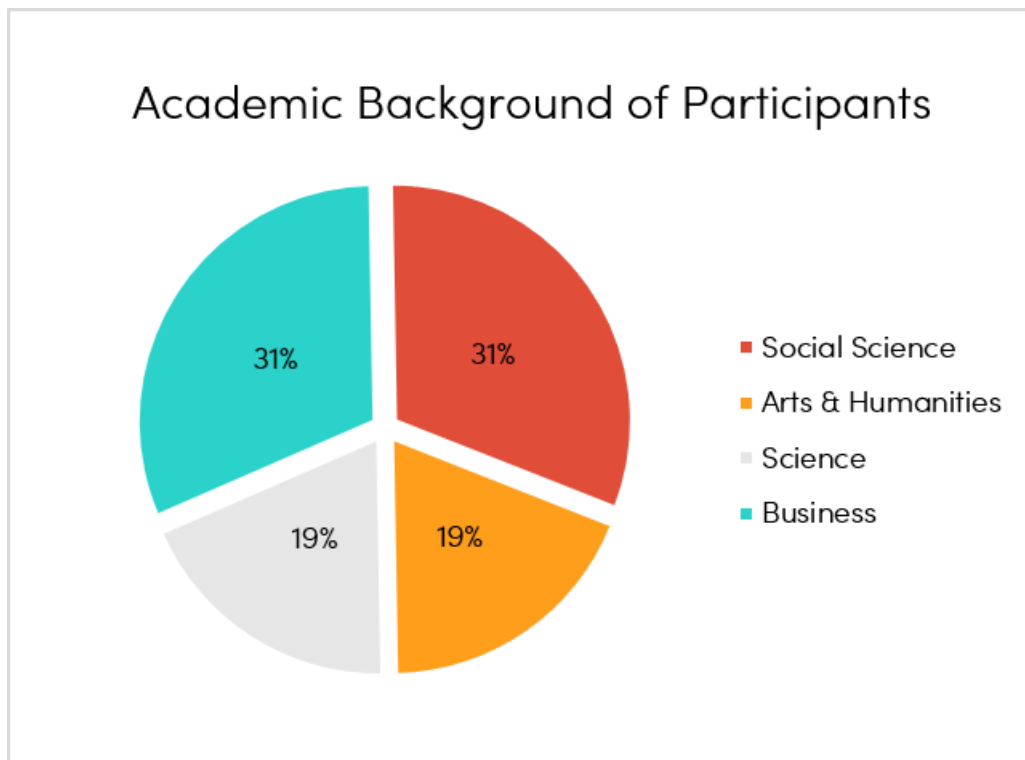


Figure 29: Academic Background of Participants

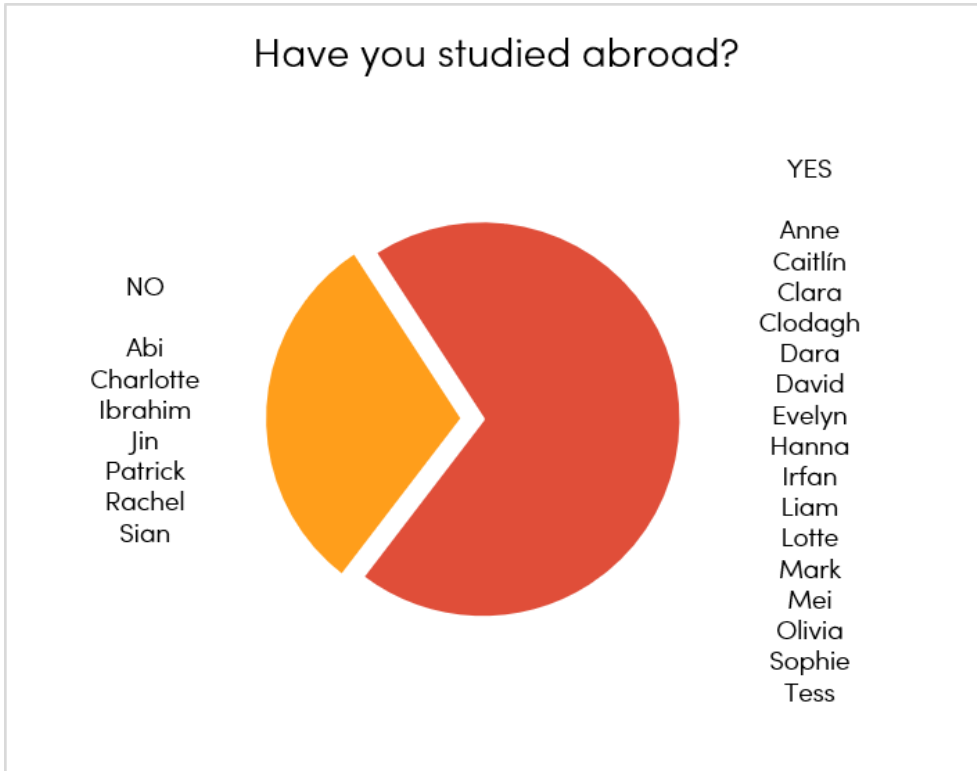


Figure 30: Participants Who Studied Abroad

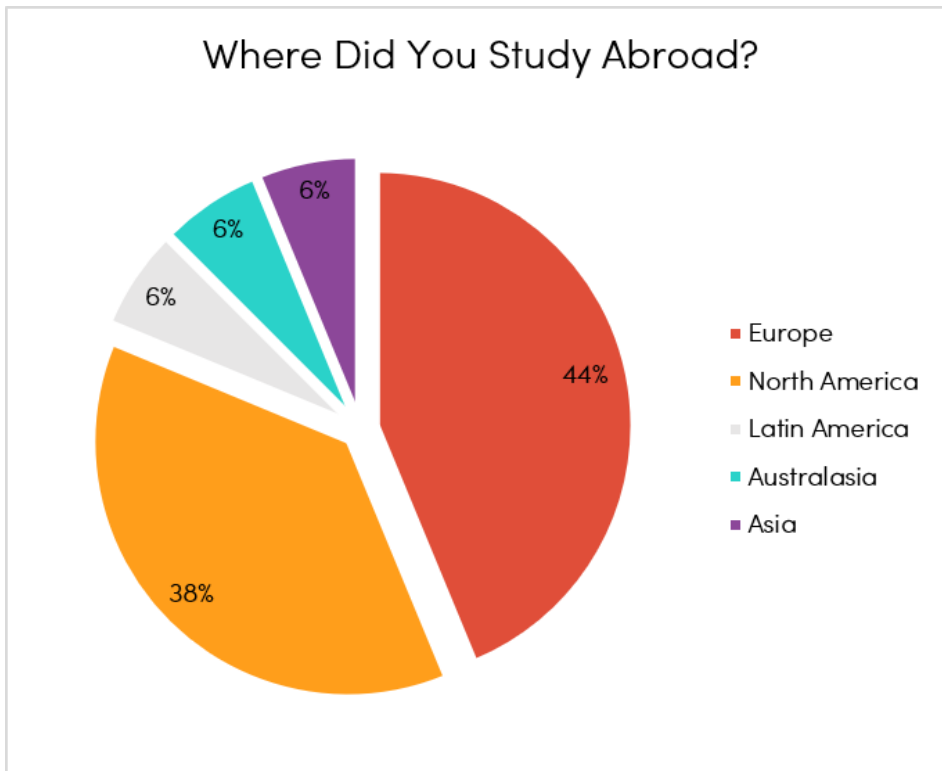


Figure 31: Distribution of Study Abroad Destinations

## 4.3 Findings

### 4.3.1 Why students choose to study abroad

The researchers first sought to ascertain students' rationale for participating in a study abroad programme. Figure 32 illustrates the distribution of justifications for studying abroad, as mentioned by participants during the interview. The three largest factors, opportunity, employability<sup>34</sup>, and academic benefits, have been further discussed below.

#### 4.3.1.1 The Opportunity

*"I knew from the start that I wanted to go abroad and I also chose my programme a bit based on that."* (Irfan)

Eleven participants cited having the opportunity as an impetus for studying abroad, acknowledging that it would be a fun experience and that the chance to participate would be unlikely to come again. Five participants had selected their degree programme based on having the opportunity to study abroad, citing a passion for travel, and the desire to step outside their comfort zone and gain a new perspective. Although Dara had been obliged to study abroad, she added that it was "one of the reasons I put down the course". This suggests that university application rates may be significantly impacted by the range of international opportunities available.

Participant responses also highlighted the impact of 'word-of-mouth' recommendations from students who have previously studied abroad. Abi and Rachel had been influenced by study abroad alumni, describing the encouragement of those who had travelled, and the perceived regret of those who had not. Similarly, Liam had been inspired to select his exchange university based on a previous student's experience.

#### 4.3.1.2 Employability

*"In this kind of global climate, I think you need to really have [studied abroad] or [completed an internship abroad]... It's good to show that you already have the experience of having to adapt to a new place."* (Anne)

In light of previous literature, the researchers were keenly interested in whether perceived employability benefits influenced students' decisions to study abroad.

Participant responses varied, with five acknowledging the fundamental role perceived benefits play in their engagement and others suggesting that the purported benefits only came to their mind in periods of reflection during or after their study abroad experience. Illustrating the findings in previous literature, Olivia and David felt that studying abroad would differentiate them from other job applicants, enhancing their professional experience and network. Olivia added that this was how her university attracted students to the study abroad programme, particularly those without an employment history: "They make it sound like it's a leg up like you get more jobs in the end if you do these extra things that put you out of your comfort zone.". David was more definite in his intentions to study abroad, stating that employability was "absolutely" a factor: "From a networking standpoint, being able to travel... allows me to talk about something during networking sessions or interviews... It's a great conversation point.". While employability had not been a factor in her initial decision to study abroad, Clara also viewed it as a way to separate herself from other applicants: "It would kind of give something a bit extra".

In contrast, Mark had not allowed the thoughts of future employability to impact his decision to study abroad: "I don't want to make a decision whose consequences, good or bad I'm going to remember for the rest of my life, based on what job I thought I could get a year later.". For Liam, employment seemed too far into the future to influence study abroad decisions: "I still thought graduation was so far away... I never really thought about employment". Sophie noted that while her family and friends were confident that studying abroad would benefit her career, "that wasn't something that ever really motivated me". Nevertheless, employability was heavily referenced as a perceived benefit of studying abroad, even if not an original impetus. This 'realisation' often emerged in times of reflection during or after the experience.

#### 4.3.1.3 Academia

Four participants cited academic factors in their decision to study abroad, and more specifically, where they chose to go. Tess and Anne selected their exchange universities based on their reputation in their subject fields. Anne

<sup>34</sup> Participants did not provide their definition or understanding of employability.



Figure 32: Factors Contributing to Study Abroad Programme Participation<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Participants may have stated more than one motivating factor; consequently, the total score will not add up to seventeen.

noted that employability was not at the forefront of her mind when deciding to study abroad, but rather that she knew other students who had benefitted within her discipline there. Caitlín and Dara wanted to experience different education systems; Dara opined that doing so would be advantageous to her employment prospects.

### 4.3.2 The perceived benefits of studying abroad

Participants were asked to describe what they felt were the benefits of studying abroad. Responses were explored in terms of alignment with the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability, in order to assess the impact of studying abroad on employability. Although at times, participants were not explicitly discussing their employability, many of the benefits cited were addressed within the model, including generic skills, emotional intelligence, the development of 'self' attributes, and improvements in academic performance

#### 4.3.2.1 Generic Skills

*"You get to know new cultures, new countries, and just being more able to adapt yourself to those different cultures."* (Lotte)

In line with generic skills as outlined by Dacre, Pool and Sewell (2007) (skills which can potentially be transferred to a range of contexts, in higher education or the workplace), the skills discussed in the current study included adaptability/flexibility and independence. Clara felt that studying abroad had made her more flexible and independent, and ultimately "go with things more". Similarly, Liam described "thinking on the fly" and increasing his agility. The exposure to new education systems had also made Tess and Mark more flexible and open to new things; Mark felt that this had, in turn, made Mark more fearless: "you have less fear about the future...[after] trying to study abroad, the more domestic terrestrial things that young people worry about won't phase you that much". For Evelyn, studying abroad provided an opportunity to demonstrate existing adaptability and flexibility. She proposed that it "reflects a lot about your capabilities and your skills and your adaptability". Sophie noted that these benefits were particularly associated with travelling alone, and were not

as substantially developed when studying abroad with a network of friends.

The ability to work independently and demonstrate autonomy is seen as a generic skill that leads to increased employability. While students did not discuss independence specifically in relation to employment, they described developing a more general independence when studying abroad. Although Lotte lived away from her parents while attending university, she described studying abroad as a new learning experience in independence. Similarly, Caitlín felt that a lack of an immediate social network cultivated her autonomy and increased her problem-solving skills; as a consequence, she asserted that "thanks to studying abroad, I've grown up and changed a lot". She asserted that her newfound independence would not have been possible had she stayed at her home university for the duration of their degree. Though Dara "was always quite mature", she described the unique benefits that come with studying abroad alone for an extended period: "The study abroad away from your family and friends for four months... definitely made me more independent". Similarly, Liam and Clara described a rapid independence and maturing that came from travelling, and Evelyn felt "forced to be more independent", describing the confidence that comes with self-reliance. As a result of this growth in autonomy, Olivia had a new sense of self-satisfaction: "I could do something independently and say for myself, you can actually do this."

#### 4.3.2.2 Emotional Intelligence

*"You understand the scale of the world... Now I see the whole of Europe, I see the whole world as sort of somewhere I could be."* (Mark)

Emotional intelligence is not concisely defined in the CareerEDGE model; however, Small, Shacklock and Marchant (2018) align it with interpersonal skills. In the current study, the researchers considered that interpersonal skills should encompass intercultural skills and competencies, self-awareness and the ability to communicate with social, cultural, and national groups. Participants in the current study described achieving increased cultural sensitivity and awareness and a greater ability to assimilate with different groups. Dara

and Caitlín felt “more aware of the different sensitivities and different issues that you don’t see when looking from an insular perspective”, while Liam felt that his horizons had been expanded by studying abroad.

“There’s so much in this world that needs to be explored and watching the news or going on Google won’t really fulfil that so actually being there completely changed the way I think about things and it expanded my horizons tenfold very easily.” (Liam)

As a result of a new social and cultural environment, participants reported improved intercultural sensitivities and communication. While living with other international students, Mei reported that she learned how to communicate with people from different cultures. Similarly, Liam shared that within his accommodation, there were 17 people from 17 different countries. He concluded that the biggest benefit of studying abroad was improved communication skills. This was echoed by Irfan, who reflected on his social anxieties before studying abroad; while he had previously “always approached people with this sense of uncertainty”, studying abroad had given him a sense of self-confidence in communicating: “The question doesn’t pop up into my head again, that doubt whether I can talk to them or not. It just comes into my head as, ‘let’s see what happens’”. While it is apparent that participants perceived growth in their intercultural competencies to be a significant benefit of studying abroad, the selection bias among those who study abroad must be noted. In cases where international students are housed together on campus, the researchers question the amount of significant interaction that participants had with local students, or students from differing socioeconomic or personal circumstances.

“There’s one thing to read about things in a textbook and try to get a deeper understanding and think you truly understand as opposed to actually living it... When I was travelling, I kind of reflected as to what I really needed... You learn a lot about yourself... I can honestly say with 100 per cent certainty that when I came back, I was much more self-aware about who I was as a person.” (Liam)

A heightened sense of self-awareness was also identified by several participants. Hanna felt “more aware of myself and who I am as a person” after studying abroad, while

Evelyn developed a greater sense of her likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses. David opined that he viewed the world “more holistically now”: “you develop a stronger sense of respect for differences as well as embracing new learnings... more self-aware in general, definitely”. Abi was completing her full postgraduate degree outside her country of origin. For her, a change in self-awareness was linked to being an ethnic minority in her country of study: “Self-awareness is so subjective. It was when I started travelling that I was forced to become aware that I was a Black person, that I was a Black woman”.<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that no specific question on the ethnic origin of the respondents was included in the current research and that Abi’s comments on her ethnicity were volunteered. In terms of independence, Lotte attributed much of her growth in self-awareness to travelling alone and relying on herself: “You’re going there and the only person that you know is you... I think it really raised my self-awareness just also because I really wanted to be independent like figuring everything out by myself and with the people that I met there”.

#### 4.3.2.3 Development of ‘Self’ Attributes

“In terms of confidence... going abroad little by little, then you become bold enough, confident enough to try to enter a space that... the culture is absolutely different... everything except that we are human beings.” (Abi)

In line with the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability, participants frequently cited self-confidence as a benefit of studying abroad. Also noted were increased self-esteem and self-efficacy. As reflected in cyclical aspect of this tier in the CareerEDGE model, these attributes often overlapped and interacted. Increased self-confidence was described by 12 participants as a key benefit of studying abroad. Caitlín, Anne, Dara, and Hanna reported that studying abroad was “a huge confidence booster”. So great was the confidence growth for Liam that he began to look for employment and long-term accommodation in his study abroad destination. Studying abroad allowed him to manifest traits that he knew he possessed, but had not yet demonstrated: “I was very confident in myself within that setting as well, which is something that I knew I may possess but it didn’t come out until exchange”. Notably,

<sup>36</sup> The issue of ethnicity arose in a different context with Mei, who, as a person of colour, had selected her study abroad destination based on perceived low levels of ethnic discrimination.

Liam described periods of self-reflection and evaluation when abroad.

Charlotte had not participated in a study abroad programme, but was completing her full undergraduate degree outside of her country of origin. She also noted the benefits of studying abroad for self-confidence: "Being able to move around, travel between cities, do things by yourself. It would obviously increase your confidence and engaging with so many different people on different levels would do the same". In line with this, Anne attributed an increased sense of self-confidence to socialising in a new environment: "You kind of are challenged socially like to make friends in a new place."

*"I became much more confident with myself because I felt like I got a new sense of maturity... That's something that really just comes from kind of fending for yourself a little bit and travelling will really mature you quickly"* (Liam)

Sophie and Hanna reflected specifically on their self-esteem. Sophie stated that she no longer worried about what other people thought about her, having realised the scale of the world and her place in it: "It really did boost my self-esteem because you get to see a whole variety of people and experiences and you're like, it's okay if I'm not what that normal is because that is such a small part of the world". Similarly, Hanna reported: "I value myself more because I have put myself in the situation that I wouldn't else do".

*"You become more aware of your own limitations, but also you become aware of what you're capable of and you sort of, you start to see yourself as having no limits"* (Mark)

Other participants looked to their self-efficacy, feeling that studying abroad had shown them what they were capable of: "My confidence has really soared because now I know what I'm capable of doing" (Liam). Anne had gone on to apply for an international internship, while Dara viewed her study abroad experience as an incentive to travel in the future: "I think I'm perhaps much more open and willing to go abroad". Following her study abroad experience, she had completed a Master's outside her country of origin. On a practical level, Mark and Clara considered that studying abroad

was something they needed to do to prepare themselves for leaving university: "I'm not sure that I was ready to be out in the world in the way that I am now if I hadn't done that".

For Mark, Irfan, and Dara, studying abroad was also a transformative experience and acted as an incentive to make changes when they returned home, building on 'self' attributes. Mark described a new lease of self-efficacy: "I came back and thought, 'ok, I've just had a really, really great experience... I'm such a different person, I want... to experience more things like that, so it's time to get on the ball.'" He considered that he was "less of a risk-taker" before studying abroad, and "much more of an operator" when he came back. Mark's experience reflects report findings by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute, which noted that studying abroad was seen to demonstrate an inclination for taking risks and a willingness to undertake unfamiliar tasks (TenHaken, 2014). Irfan experienced a shift in self-confidence while studying abroad: "Before studying abroad... I was kind of a dick myself. I feel as though, once I did study abroad, I knew how to channel my so-called 'dickiness', being a bit more of a better person in that sense". Dara noted that she became more extroverted, a change that had been pointed out by friends and family when she returned. Building on this, she noted that she then became engaged with the university community for the first time when she came home.

*"You become more humble, but you also become hungrier... You're aware of how small you are... You're a speck of dust in the universe, but you become hungry for more."* (Mark)

As noted for Lotte, many students had sought to study in countries where they knew nobody, suggesting an existing level of confidence and independence among those who study abroad. This was expressed by several participants, for example, Olivia remarked that she is an extrovert who likes to be independent, and David stated that "entering into study abroad, I was a person who was really confident anyway. I wasn't really scared of going to a new country". Sophie's attitude toward studying abroad in a country where she knew nobody was indicative of her approach to new activities generally: "I do tend to like, just throw myself into things that most people would



be like, 'why have you done that?'... I quite like going off and just starting something again and being like, 'ah, let's see what happens here'". This could be illustrative of a potentially selective group who choose to study abroad, and should be considered when exploring the benefits of studying abroad.

#### 4.3.2.4 Employability

Participants who had studied abroad unanimously felt that it had increased their employability. Anne asserted that this was a largely accepted truth: "In general people agree that no matter what [study abroad programme] you do...it enhances your degree". This was supported by Clara, who suggested it would be particularly beneficial if she wanted to work abroad. Tess felt that being outside her comfort zone would be advantageous for her employability, while Liam discussed the role of globalisation in hiring decisions:

*"I firmly believe that travelling and studying internationally is definitely a benefit because companies are all looking global now so if you can kind of have an understanding of different cultures, you're definitely an asset"* (Liam)

Beyond simply stating that studying abroad had inherently increased their employability, participants often suggested that the benefits lay in what it signalled to employers about them and their personalities. This reflects findings of previous research, as discussed in the literature review. Anne felt that "the kind of competencies that I've shown by [studying abroad] would be very attractive to an employer". This signalling was stated even more explicitly by Mark.

*"I wouldn't say it's down to [studying abroad] as such, so much as what it says... about me as a person I guess or at least, not that it says anything definitively, but what you might perceive it says about me. That, you know, I try and get involved, that I take chances, I take risks, you know?"* (Mark)

Some participants offered anecdotal experiences of job-hunting and interviews, to highlight the success they attributed to studying abroad. Mark had more success in finding a part-time job when he returned from studying abroad, though he added that the economy

has begun to improve following his return: "I struggled to get a part-time job before I went on ERASMUS... When I came back and started handing in CVs, I just started getting calls after calls". Dara stated that "I don't think there's been an interview I've done since then that it hasn't come up in", adding that the experience was looked upon "very favourably" when she secured a job working with international students. Echoing this, Evelyn felt that because her employer "is quite a global firm", they "valued [studying abroad] and people from different cultures".

Conversely, Olivia felt that her extracurricular engagement had taken precedence in her job interview, with the study abroad experience indicating her willingness to travel as part of the role, but not directly illustrating a particular skillset:

*"It was more just saying that, yes, I put myself out of my comfort zone. If there's an opportunity to go do work for this company, in a different city or on the other side of the country...they know that I'm capable of doing that. But it wasn't really the focus of the interview at all".*

Notably, Olivia also felt that studying abroad had not impacted her confidence ("I kind of came in and came out at the same level") or her self-awareness ("my self-awareness was pretty much the same"). This may indicate that Olivia had not fully evaluated and reflected on the gains of studying abroad and thus, did not 'sell' it as a significant experience of growth or training in interview. This may be illustrative of employers undervaluing study abroad participation in the absence of the applicant effectively marketing the experience. This supports Dacre, Pool and Sewell's (2007), suggestion that employability relies on the capacity to reflect, evaluate and identify specific skills gained in alignment with recruitment criteria. Building on this, a risk of assumed employability following studying abroad may be due to a lack of adequate reflection on the part of the student, and instead, the assumption that it will naturally lead to a job with no further effort required on their part.

Participants were asked whether they would consider working abroad in the future. Although Clodagh, Sian, and Clara specified that they would only work abroad for short-term periods, all participants expressed an

interest in working abroad in some capacity. There was no significant difference in response rates between those who had studied abroad and those who had not.

#### 4.3.2.5 Academic Performance

There has been limited research conducted on the impact of studying abroad on academic performance; however, that which exists suggests that it may produce positive benefits (Cardwell, 2019). The quantitative findings in this study support this thesis. Further, the interview participants frequently cited exposure to a new education system as a significant benefit of studying abroad, describing new module opportunities, novel teaching styles, and different class environments. Anna and Clara referred to the benefits of a new education system as gaining new perspectives and learning material that they would not have learned at home. For Olivia, studying in a new environment had reignited her passion and interest in learning:

*“Just not seeing or hearing the same things that I’m so used to routinely seeing and hearing. I think it just gave me a newfound excitement for education.”* (Olivia)

Several students felt that the experience had improved their academic confidence, particularly with regard to in-class interaction. Mei, who was being taught through a second language while studying abroad, described the benefits of interacting with and learning from other students. The cultural differences between participants’ home countries of study and their study abroad destination were also discussed. Dara and Sophie were not used to students actively participating in class; their experiences abroad challenged their traditional learning style and resulted in attitudinal shifts that they brought home: “the people in the class were a lot more engaged, they were willing to kind of talk to a lecturer and ask questions, answer questions... When I came back, I was definitely more confident”. In addition to this growth of in-class participation, Sophie added that as a social sciences student, the experience of studying abroad had given her a greater confidence in discussing socially sensitive issues.

Participants also described the benefits of taking new and diverse modules while studying abroad. David had taken

“risks with the courses I took because I knew they were counted as pass/fail”. Clara and Dara considered that their study abroad experience had shaped their current doctoral research projects. Mei and Dara also considered that studying abroad was instrumental in their successful Master’s applications: “They like people who kind of have travelled and seen different ways of working”. Mei noted that many of her postgraduate classmates had studied abroad, positing that it was a valuable point on her application.

Participants were asked whether they felt studying abroad had improved their academic performance. Many felt that it had had a positive impact, improving their focus, skillset and academic engagement.

*“I actually became a better student because I associated different idea with different location and I was really open to learning a lot of new things.”* (Liam)

Dara, Sophie, and Lotte asserted that studying abroad had not impacted them either positively or negatively, perhaps reflecting the already high academic standard required to participate in study abroad programmes. Dara and Sophie stated that they had been consistently successful students, thus the studying had little to no beneficial impact. Similarly, Lotte felt that she “didn’t learn that much if you really focus on the academic part. I think more personal development”.

Additionally, participants noted significant challenges regarding the transfer of courses and grades from their study abroad university back to their home university. David noted that to obtain his professional qualification, he must complete specific modules that are not widely available elsewhere and do not transfer easily back home. He posited that to study abroad “takes a lot of pre-planning and a lot of pro-activity”, potentially discouraging students from applying. Liam and Tess noted that they had been unaware that the grades they earned overseas did not transfer home accurately, causing difficulties upon their return. Liam had “worked really hard when I was away to make sure that [my grades] were strong enough to apply for a Master’s programme”, and was disappointed to realise that they were “just a pass or fail” when transferred to the home university. Similarly, Tess “found out a little bit too late” that

her grades would not transfer home: "I did a lot of effort to get high grades but then I found out that we just get a pass or a fail". This suggests that universities may need to better prepare students for the intricacies of academic grades when studying abroad, for example, offering academic advice sessions to students before studying abroad or engaging in peer mentor schemes.

Conversely, David, Evelyn, Sophie and Clodagh had used the limited transference of grades as an opportunity to prioritise play over work. David "put more of education on the back burner and more of experience and cultures and certain things as my priority while I was on exchange", while Evelyn felt less pressure when studying abroad. Clodagh acknowledged that students "were kind of taking it a bit easier than we would have at home if it counted". Sophie used the opportunity to learn academic skills, without fear of poor grades. This may have been particularly prevalent within the sample, several of whom were in receipt of academic scholarships at their home university. These participants noted that their scholarship obligations were lifted for the period of studying abroad.

*"I was able to learn more skills in an academic environment in terms of how academics like you to write and how to read things quickly and efficiently, and kind of just a basic expectations for academics, with like no skin in the game almost because the graduates didn't count. So, not only just having a year off for my mental health, also improving academically without feeling that there was something to lose"* (Sophie)

Although no students indicated that their grades had worsened in the long-term upon returning to their home university, several spoke of the challenges of re-adjusting to an academic environment in which grades counted. Sophie initially feared that she had made a mistake in studying abroad when her first assignment upon return received a low grade. She attributed this to the "different standards" at home and abroad, adding, "there wasn't really a nice reintegration into the academics over here". While the lack of grade standardisation across universities is inevitable, the researchers propose that students may require academic re-integration supports upon return. Again, the current sample were notably high academic achievers; challenges may be even greater among the wider cohort.

### 4.3.3 Barriers to studying abroad

The researchers sought to explore why students may not participate in study abroad programmes. As most of the current participants had studied abroad, this presented the opportunity to explore disparities between what they perceived to be reasons for lack of participation, compared with those who did not study abroad. Notably, Dara was the only participant who acknowledged familial or employment barriers might prevent study abroad participation. This suggests that students who can study abroad may not fully understand the nuanced reasons why others do not or cannot participate. Nevertheless, participants discussed three main obstacles: financial, academic, and personal fear.

Eleven participants identified finances as a significant issue, reporting that monetary supports for students studying abroad were limited. Clara acknowledged that although ERASMUS students received some financial assistance, "it wasn't a lot at all". Irfan and Rachel asserted that financial constraints were a major factor and Charlotte noted that the financial burden had meant she "just didn't consider" studying abroad. Irfan candidly described the financial implications for his family. He was required to have a satisfactory sum to cover the cost of living in his study abroad destination, and his family were left struggling financially based on the standard wage in his country of origin. Financial barriers associated with studying abroad may also contribute to the selection bias among those who participate, as students studying abroad interact predominantly with each other.

Some participants identified academic performance as a barrier to participation. Patrick, who did not study abroad, reported this as a reason he did not apply to an exchange programme: "I was concerned that my GPA wasn't quite high enough". Clara, Liam and Sophie also offered this as a barrier, with Clara stating that students who felt their grades were not high enough "wouldn't even bother applying".

Both participants who had studied abroad and those who had not described fear as a barrier to participation. Sian, who had not studied abroad, described feeling unprepared: "I didn't feel I was sort of ready to go off on a year...I wouldn't have done it on my own". Similarly,

Clara considered that the year-long study abroad might be daunting to some: "Some people...would be too homesick to go away for a year. I think the fact that it was a year was a big thing". These findings contrasted starkly with comments from participants who wanted to gain a sense of independence, or because one prexisted. Mark asserted that some students lived a "sheltered life" and were simply "very content with where they were". He added that "a lot of people just thrive on having normality". Tess posited that some students favour familiarity: "I would say it can be quite challenging... 'scary' [is] not a good word, but... some people really prefer staying at home and just doing familiar things"

#### 4.3.4 Why students choose to engage in extracurricular activities

##### 4.3.4.1 Giving Back and Paying Forward

In contrast to studying abroad, the impetus for which was largely employability or opportunity based, participants cited 'giving back' as a significant reason for extracurricular engagement. For some, this meant taking the reins in a society or club they had previously benefitted from. Patrick began a senior role in a student society, describing it as "a giving back almost to people that had made my college experience so interesting". Similarly, Caitlín joined the committee of the sports club through which she had formed her main friendships in university: "To...give back to the club what I'd gotten out of it". Mark wanted to "make a contribution to the student body", while David strove to;

"[enhance] the student experience for other students as well", adding, "we understand that we are all part of the same community. We are all in this together. We are all fighting for the same goals...I don't see why we wouldn't be helping each other make out [undergraduate] experience the best as possible".

In line with this, Ibrahim established a society to represent a minority group within the university.

"I felt that some of our students were not represented properly... we still did not have an adequate platform to communicate with the university management and society at large... I wanted to give my community a platform". (Ibrahim)

Clara, Dara and Abi had pursued voluntary activities outside of university. Clara acknowledged that her voluntary work had "personal benefits", but that it also felt good to give back. Dara had begun volunteering with their family as a teenager and felt an affinity with it, while Abi focused on organisations that "had a greater cause than ourselves. They all served people in some way".

For those who had studied abroad, the desire to give back included mentoring for international students. Mark recognised the difficulties he experienced when returning home and sought to provide support for other students going through the process: "I wanted to try and help people ease through that transition". Hanna and Olivia acknowledged the benefits that they had experienced by having a peer mentor when studying abroad and sought to 'pay it forward': "I felt like I wanted to give something back to all the students coming [here]" (Hanna). Olivia posited that "somewhere you have to give back from the experience you've had", adding that joining the international mentoring programme supported this. Notably, engagement with international offices was also seen as a way to prolong the study abroad experience. Sophie "wasn't really too happy to be back" and welcomed "any excuse to talk about my year abroad", while Hanna felt that the period of time spent away seemed to disappear when she returned home. For her, "keeps me having this feeling of valuing my exchange and that it's not totally gone yet. That I've still got something out of it".

##### 4.3.4.2 Employability

Perceived employability benefits were cited by some participants as a contributing factor in their extracurricular engagement. Caitlín stated that employability impacted her choice of activity as it offered her relevant hands-on experience: "I was very interested in going into [career] so getting kind of hands-on experience and involvement in the university of running the club really helped.". Similarly, the extracurricular activities undertaken by Clara aligned with her area of study: "I'd pick ones that are relevant to careers that I'd like to pursue so that it would be relevant experience that I can talk about.". These activities provided tangible examples that are easily evaluated and reflected upon during interviews.

**“The knowledge of the organisations that you associate with, the work that they do and maybe some of your achievements while with them, after a while that becomes part of your skillsets, the competencies that employers look for... I realised, ‘oh, you need to make sure that my involvements are more pointed’, that would be more specific toward say a career direction that might appeal to potential employers.”** (Abi)

Jin joined a club to develop the strong communication skills necessary for her future career: “Communication is the fundamental skill for people to cooperate with others and [the extracurricular activity] is a platform for people to practice, to improve and to gain some improvements”. Liam also joined a club with employability benefits in mind, valuing the additional skills that he would develop: “I would not have said yes to that aspect of the club unless I thought it would add a skill to my toolbox so I definitely, definitely am looking more for employability now than I was before”. Looking at skills development, the employability benefits of training offered within certain extracurricular activities was discussed by Tess and Caitlín. Tess stated that “you also get a lot of trainings and a lot of activities with [relevant] companies to get to know them”.

**“I suppose the areas that I’ve been drawn to volunteer with are kind of the areas that I would, I suppose, care about and want to influence in my career”.** (Clara)

Reflecting the pressure placed on HEI to produce employable graduates, participants also noted that the perceived employability benefits associated with extracurricular engagement were promoted by universities. Charlotte suggested that employability benefits are “how [universities] usually sell participation” in extracurricular activities. As a result employability was at the forefront of her mind. Anne had not been thinking about employability, but noted that;

**“when you’re going to college, you get a lot of career development advice and people say that it’s good to be involved in, just to show that you’ve been involved in volunteering or like different, organising different events and stuff.”**

Though studying at a different institution, the encouragement by universities was confirmed by Olivia; for students without work experience, extracurricular activities were seen as a way to increase attractiveness for employers:

**“They were really pushing that. They were saying your extracurricular activities matter, especially if you don’t have any work experience. This is the only thing that they will employ you on, or they will look at you, or when they’re considering you for the interview stage, if you have things to say”.**

As with studying abroad, the assumption that engagement automatically increases employability is problematic. As per the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability, in the absence of evaluation and reflection on the experience and skills gained, there may be little difference in employability between those who participate and those who do not. This reflects Watson’s (2011) finding that students are likely to value the certificate of extracurricular participation, while employers are more likely to value the process of participation as a means to enable students to articulate and evidence their skills and experience in relation to employment.

Five participants explicitly referenced their résumé/ CV<sup>37</sup>, describing the extracurricular activity as a way of improving their profile. Sian and Mei selected activities that they knew would fit well within their CVs. Rachel had not initially engaged in the activity with employability in mind; however, she was confident that it would be advantageous on her CV. David was also confident that extracurricular activities would increase his attractiveness to employers:

**“There is a very competitive job market out there and not necessarily having real professional work experience in a corporate setting, that kind of is a disadvantage for a lot of us. So, by being able to participate in extracurricular activities, we can build those skills and have things on our résumé that kind of reflects the job responsibilities.”**

Dara had received an extracurricular recognition award from her university and knew these would be beneficial, adding: “It sounds a bit selfish but I think as much as I love doing the work and enjoying it, an added benefit is then

<sup>37</sup> Due to the international profile of participants, these terms were used interchangeably.

having that recognised when you go for jobs and things like that”.

Abi reflected on her experience in job interviews. With employers’ desiring a well-rounded applicant, she asserted that extracurricular activity cultivated this diverse profile.

*“I’ve found that they really, they really want to see... colour in your personality, in your character. And those shades only come from having broad experiences.”* (Abi)

She asserted that employers were not so much interested in what you did or where, but rather “how you can demonstrate or explain that you learned, that you grew, that you believed you contributed while you were participating in those projects or extracurricular activities”. The acknowledgement of the importance of reflection and the ability to ‘market’ the skills gained during extracurricular activities was crucial.

While Patrick stated that employability “wasn’t a primary reason” for his activity, he conceded that “it’s always in the back of your mind”. In contrast, Ibrahim and Rachel stated that employability did not determine their extracurricular engagement, and Mark was “a believer in the idea of experience as opposed to employability” and “[did not] really think that you should do things guided purely by how employable it makes you”.

#### 4.3.4.3 Social Aspects

*“It was something about finding a group of people that also shared that common interest was something that I found really appealing, and it was an opportunity to sort of get involved”.* (Patrick)

The perceived social benefits of extracurricular activities served as encouragement for participants to join clubs, societies, sports, and voluntary organisations. This contrasted with studying abroad, for which several participants sought to go alone without a network of friends. When Caitlín arrived at university, she did not know any other students and joined a sport. She noted that “societies and clubs are one of the most useful ways for making friends when you first come to university”. Ibrahim, who had established a society on-campus, he opined that students get involved for a sense of

belonging: “There was a sense of belonging for them... we were a small community, but then they saw they had a platform, they could come on, they could showcase their talents, they could learn more, they could develop themselves”. Patrick and Sophie also enjoyed the experience of finding a group with whom they shared much in common. Anne and Sian joined clubs following friends’ influence – “peer pressure at its finest”. Anne also noted that “the social aspect...was kind of what drew me to [the society]”.

Interestingly, Olivia saw these activities as a way to “be more social, be more out there”, but also a way to “get to know people from different perspectives of life, different walks of life. And not necessarily segregate myself to only people who have lived the same type of privileged life that I have”. As extracurricular activities may be accessible to a wider demographic of students, some of the homogeneity associated with the study abroad cohort may not be as prevalent among extracurricular clubs, societies and sports teams.

#### 4.3.4.4 Personal Interest

*“I thought it was a good fit for my area of interest.”* (Sian)

As with studying abroad, personal interest was a common factor when deciding to participate. For some students, extracurricular activities were a means of achieving life-long goals. Liam had dreamt of playing sport at a university-level and joined the club administration. This fulfilled his personal ambition, allowing him to travel with the team: “My dream was to play college sport...it was kind of my way of living that dream”. Sophie saw her engagement in an international society as a progressive step toward studying abroad: “When I got to the second year I knew I was applying for a year abroad...so I volunteered with the exchange students and I thought that would be a really nice way of kind of setting myself up for a year abroad”.

Extracurricular activities also aligned with students’ personal ideologies. A second activity taken by Liam “piqued my interest because it had so many offerings and it didn’t really exclude anybody”. Similarly, Tess was passionate about the sustainability focus of her club: “It has a lot of focus on personal development and sustainable development goals... that’s what I’m very

interested in". Sophie was also invested in sustainability and travelling: "I would get to go abroad and it was a cheaper option for travelling".

### 4.3.5 Perceived benefits of extracurricular engagement

As with study abroad participation, the researchers examined participants' responses in line with the CareerEDGE model of employability. To that end, they sought to compare the benefits of studying abroad with those of extracurricular activities in relation to employability.

#### 4.3.5.1 Generic Skills

In contrast to studying abroad, extracurricular engagement did not appear to benefit levels of autonomy or independence but rather time management, networking and teamwork abilities. This may be because, unlike study abroad, extracurricular activities do not normally take place in environments which are very far removed from the students' more familiar home culture. As discussed in the rationale for joining clubs and societies, participants described developing friendships, networks, and teams through their involvement. Patrick, Hanna, Dara and Rachel emphasised the opportunity to meet like-minded people and cultivate strong friendships. Sian felt that she was a part of a unit when participating, something that she welcomed while living away from her family. Abi considered that the bonds created through teamwork in extracurricular activities and unlike any others in the academic environment: "When you work along with someone to make a project happen, you create a bond that is different from the group you work with to produce an assignment in a sense".

"I didn't have a large enough friend group as I thought I would... [Extracurricular engagement] opened up opportunities and it really increased my satisfaction with the school just because all of a sudden I had numerous groups of friends that were all very like-minded and motivated individuals and they really inspired me to do better. I see them every single day, and I just made some of the strongest friendships I ever had in my life, and that's due to these extra-curricular clubs within school."  
(Liam)

Participants also described cultivating better time management skills as they balanced extracurricular commitments with academic work. For some, this non-academic activity acted as a respite, both motivating them to work harder so that they could enjoy the time off and providing them with an escape from the pressures of university. Ibrahim described this duality: "This was something I really looked forward to during my time, and while I was studying I knew, ok I was focused because I knew this much time I had to spend there, so I have to finish all my study in this much time". Similarly, Abi and Rachel were "forced to become more organised". Rachel noted that: "It does force me to when I have free time, focus entirely on classes and make me very productive". Dara found that the activity "was a nice way to kind of structure... the university experience". Abi surmised that half of her skillsets came from her extracurricular involvements.

Interestingly, Jin suggested that some extracurricular activities may inherently lend themselves to reflection and self-evaluation. She joined a sports club, and described it as a great opportunity to relax and "to reflect, to rethink my future and it also gives me a chance to organise my life".

#### 4.3.5.2 Emotional Intelligence

"Getting involved locally is where you really make an impact. Some people want to donate their money to foreign countries and think that, 'oh, if I see a poor child suffering in Africa, if I send them money or if I go away for two weeks to do a "voluntour"<sup>38</sup> project then I'm a global citizen'. But I think wherever we are, if we contribute where we are... I know that there are skills and talents that I can offer to different groups of people here, I try to get involved with that. So, for me, 'glocal citizenship' is a recognition that every single action, judgement, every decision we make in our local space, wherever we find ourselves, does have and can have a global impact." (Abi)

Emotional intelligence by way of interpersonal skills and increased self-awareness was cited as a key benefit of extracurricular activities. Patrick stated that he was "more self-aware of my environment, more caring about social causes that I wouldn't have had a strong understanding of beforehand... just more understanding of people".

<sup>38</sup> In contrast to 'volunteering for development', 'voluntourism' is a for-profit activity in which companies invite students to visit developing nations for short-periods of time to participate in small-scale community projects. The labour carried out by 'voluntourists' is predominantly unskilled and may include physical work, for example in building projects, maintenance or the installation of water tanks. Engagement with local communities often comes in the form of interaction with children in a classroom setting (McGloin and Georgeou,

Similarly, Olivia was “more self-aware and more... empathetic towards certain things or certain people”. Ibrahim also felt that being involved in society had given him a greater perspective on people. Dara considered that extracurricular activities had presented a greater personal benefit than studying abroad, recognising that she would “have a much narrower view of the world if [she] hadn’t been involved in all that stuff”. Similarly, Rachel thought that she had “learned a lot about the world”. Considering improved communication skills, Mark felt that he had gained a new understanding of how to work with people: “Professional networking is one aspect of it. But also just learning how to deal with people, negotiate with people”. Similarly, Irfan felt that it had “helped me learn how to speak to very different people”.

#### 4.3.5.3 Development of ‘Self’ Attributes

**“It has given me a lot more confidence, and it has helped me to create a vision of the person I want to be as someone who is an activist and continues to fight for other people, and it makes me feel like I have a lot of power in my community that I can meet with all these people and run all these things and I can do it really successfully. And it has really pushed me to go out there and do a lot more.”.** (Rachel)

Participants frequently cited self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy as a benefit of extracurricular activities. Fifteen participants described feeling a greater level of self-confidence as a result of their engagement. Jin, Sian, Liam, Ibrahim and Patrick described their respective experiences as a “confidence boost”, while Liam added that it was “a platform to grow and strive”. David confirmed that “when it comes to confidence, [extracurricular engagement] definitely has a positive impact”. Greater self-confidence encompassed the ability of participants to stand up for their beliefs. As a result of their extracurricular engagement, Mark and Olivia felt better able to speak up for their beliefs: “You learn to stand up for yourself against, against other people who want to go a certain way. You learn to sort of advocate for your own position”. Similarly, Clara found that it “showed me where my kind of values lies”. Building on increased confidence, Irfan had also developed greater self-esteem and value for himself, noting that “without a doubt...

without the [extracurricular activity] I would not be as confident as I am right now” – “I like who I am right now”.

For many participants, self-confidence was linked with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction they attained through giving back to their community. For example, Patrick experienced a “sense of accomplishment when you finish organising a big event”. Mei stated that her voluntary work gave her a sense of accomplishment as she was able to help others, and similarly, Dara found “something really satisfying about being able to... make a positive impact”. The link to self-confidence was noted most explicitly by David, who enjoyed the positive reputation that he had gained within the university community as a result of his activity:

**“When it comes to self-satisfaction and self-confidence, the fact that people on campus understand like ‘oh, that’s David, he’s the lead for this’, and it’s kind of like, that type of environment is really positive on my kind of experience in university”.**

Reflecting growth in self-efficacy and evidencing the inherently interactive nature of these ‘self’ attributes, participants reported that extracurricular activities increased their self-confidence by showing them what they were capable of. Abi felt that her engagement had enriched her skill-set and allowed her to cultivate a more risk-taking attitude, showing her what she was capable of doing:

**“The non-academic areas of my student life I believe really enriched me and allowed me to become a more confident speaker. I feel that I’ve grown into a little bit of a daring person not afraid to try and to believe that I can access an international network if I only try”.**

Similarly, Charlotte got to see other sides of herself, challenging her boundaries and seeing “how far I could stretch”, while Tess felt that her extracurricular engagement “made me more open-minded that if you are motivated for things, that you have the right support, that you really can do it as long as you like what you’re doing”. Jin and Rachel were forced to confront their fears through extracurricular activities, utilising the non-academic nature of the experience as an opportunity to push themselves. For Jin, this allowed her to expand her learning of a second language: “I’m not afraid of losing



face and I just stand up and try to push myself to speak more, to participate more. And little by little I can feel that, I'm more confident than before".

Despite the widespread growth in self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy among respondents, Charlotte noted that this was determined by individuals' existing willingness to get involved: "I think your confidence will increase if you allow yourself to experience other things... a lot of people come here and... they don't actually get involved, they don't try and explore all the activities that they can. And so, you wouldn't be far off from where you left when you came." While this is a reasonable assertion, it must be noted that this study represented a specific cohort of students willing to be involved. As in the case of those who studied abroad, it is difficult to ascertain whether such growth occurs because of extracurricular engagement, or whether those who choose to participate are naturally more self-confident and willing to try new activities.

Additionally, Liam reported that extracurricular engagement had not benefited his self-awareness to the extent of his study abroad experience. Though he conceded that one specific activity had some impact, he concluded that others had not "because it was stuff that I was pretty comfortable doing". Conversely, he noted that "it was the exchange part that really brought it out in me because I was forced to do things that I've never done before and bounce back quickly from them". With many participants saying that personal interest or previous experience inspired their participation in certain extracurricular activities, it should be considered that without trying something new, significant growth of 'self' attributes may be limited.

#### 4.3.5.4 Employability

*"Your employers, those who invest in you, they want to know that they're investing in a whole person. And unless their particular goal is merely academic, which is unlikely, they want to know that you will grow and that the space you will join will benefit from your presence"* (Abi)

As with studying abroad, the development of skills that are perceived to enhance employability was cited as a widespread benefit of extracurricular engagement. On

a practical level, participants described gaining unique training and the development of useful skills. Caitlín had received, "great training in conflict management, resolution, mediation, emergency medical training, assault, and mental health training and report writing", describing them as "a lot of very, very useful skills to have going forward". Rachel recognised that the opportunity to develop these skills would not have come within a classroom environment: "[The extracurricular organisation] have all of these trainings that we can go to all of the time...I have been able to really work on honing these skills in the way that I would not have been able to do just in a classroom setting". Most notably, Irfan had found such enjoyment in the training he received through the extracurricular activity that he was considering changing his career path. The activity involved the utilisation of new technologies, reflecting one of the generic skills listed by the Pedagogy for Employability Group (2004, as cited in Dacre, Pool and Sewell, 2007).

Participants also viewed the extracurricular activities to have provided a valuable professional experience. Patrick had gained "a huge amount of career experience for the future". Specifically, his role had allowed him to cultivate extensive and tangible evidence of leadership, something which he felt would be advantageous in job interviews. The value of leadership experience was also noted by Irfan. Clara had used the experience to gain insight into her career path: "It gives the experience of working with people directly...It lets you kind of be out in the field...I guess it potentially gives me an idea of the types of careers I'd like to do". This insight was particularly beneficial for students who did not have internships within their academic programme. When reflecting on the limited number of internships available within her field, Sophie noted that "[the extracurricular activity] was a way to kind of show practical knowledge of my subject": "All of that kind of contributes to if I ever want a job in that... shows kind of diverse abilities".

As with studying abroad, extracurricular engagement was also seen to act as a signal for employers. To that end, participants felt that involvement with extracurricular activities had a connection with elements of their personality and that ultimately, what it said about them as was important as the activity that they undertook.

Mark considered that extracurricular activities “help kind of prove you are a person who gets involved. You know, as opposed to someone who just shows up to lectures and then goes home”. Building on this, he asserted that his involvement afforded him an advantage over other students:

**“My involvement with that proved that I was able to organise...I think a lot of students, they kind of phone it in during their time in university, I suppose, and [the School] could see from my extracurricular experience, they could see that I wasn’t one of those people”.**

Mark’s perspective was echoed by Rachel, who felt that her extracurricular work makes her “stand out from other people”.

Notably, Abi again acknowledged the importance of reflection and evaluation: “I developed in myself as I mentioned before about the confidence, about the awareness, about holistic sort of thinking. Then those, of course, help me in my later position, in my postgraduate, in my employment as well.”. Abi was the oldest participant in the group, with considerable ‘life experience’. This may suggest that the ability to adequately reflect and evaluate experiences increases with age and growing life experience and there is an argument that reflective capacities may not be a naturally occurring tendency for all students aged between 18–23 (Houghton and Bagley, 2000). If this is the case, then some younger students must be provided with planned, focused opportunities in order to facilitate genuine reflective activities.

Mei and Dara had already seen employers’ interest in their extracurricular activities. Mei “went to the career fair in my home university and the employers they seemed very interested in my exchange programme experience and interested in my voluntary work”. Dara considered that her diverse experience had also been well received in interviews: “I think that’s perceived quite well in kind of interviews and stuff. Again it just shows I guess kind of commitment and ability to work in an adverse environment”.

#### 4.3.5.5 Academic Performance

**“I feel that there should be some sort of positive correlation with the involvement in co-curricular activities and academics as well. And apart from academics, if you look at the holistic picture, many of the things that we’re using to work are related with our experience rather than our technical study.” (Ibrahim)**

Extracurricular roles were seen to supplement academic learning, providing students with the opportunity to develop practical skills and apply academic lessons to real-life situations. Looking to the theme of ‘supplemental’ learning experience, Patrick felt that it gave him a “wider education compared to if I’d just stuck with my programme”, and as such, it had positively benefitted his academics: “It sort of like supplemented my learning almost”. Clara echoed this, noting that her work with a relevant charitable organisation “kind of supplements the academic side”. Based on this, she asserted that it helped her academic performance because she is “hearing first hand, [specific] issues, and you don’t get to read that in a textbook”. This was also noted by Irfan: “I can actually bring in more information than just the books tell me”.

Extracurricular roles also allowed participants to apply academic learning in a practical setting, or alternatively, utilise the practical skills that they had gained within an academic environment. Reflecting on this, Olivia found that “it also shows you that not everything you read can actually be implemented. So, we shouldn’t take everything from face value, we need to start adapting to things”. She concluded that “just because a textbook or something that you’ve learned in class says to do this, is not necessarily what you have to do in real life.”. Clara found that her activity gave her “kind of more practical examples of how I can put my academic learning into practice in these roles”. The application of this experience was particularly beneficial for Patrick, who was completing postgraduate study in an area that necessitated skills he had gained through his extracurricular role. He felt that this gave him “an edge” over other students. Similarly, Ibrahim was inspired to pursue his postgraduate programme following his involvement with a student society and the practical skills

he had developed during it: "I feel that that experience I had by leading that society was very interesting and has provided me a unique sort of perspective, a unique understanding of...the dynamics of leadership...I feel that that position or those experiences have also aided me in my current [job] as well as my postgraduate studies". Jin had joined a club with the goal of improving her public speaking skills, with a view to directly benefitting her academic work in the coming semester: "We will have presentations on some courses...I think I'm much more competent than before because I know when I lost my words, I know how to overcome the barrier and how to cope with that".

**"My university experience wasn't limited to just looking out of a textbook and just going to class... There is more to school than just hitting the textbooks."** (Olivia)

For some participants, extracurricular involvement was a transformative experience, changing the way they engaged within the university and their level of satisfaction. Liam experienced a significant change his perspective regarding academia following his involvement in a student society: "That really changed the way I thought about myself in an academic environment.". The networking associated with a subject-specific extracurricular society improved Patrick's relationship with his academic department. He posited that this may have improved his grades, as he felt more comfortable discussing work with his lecturers: "I'd say it definitely did improve my grades because it was also an ability to sort of get to know my lecturers...it made it easier to approach them if I was having difficulty with something or I wanted sort of to understand something a bit more". Liam, Mark, David and Jin stated that extracurricular engagement had increased their satisfaction with their university experience. Society membership gave Sian "a more rounded experience because...it's not all about going to class"; this was reiterated by Rachel: "I feel classes are a really small part of [university experience]...It feels like I am a really big part of the community on campus and I am involved in so much that it's become- I know everybody and I have all of these awesome things that I am doing, and it has really made it a lot more fun and a lot more meaningful".

**"It might have because I was happier in college. So, I was happier in college so I might have felt more ingratiated and that kind of thing and more involved."** (Sian)

Dara stated that her extracurricular work had neither benefited nor hindered her academic performance as she did not engage in it regularly enough to detract from studying. Charlotte did not think that there has been "a direct link between my extracurricular and my studies"; however, she noted that it had improved her satisfaction with the university experience, making her "feel like I have done my fair share of things". David did not know if extracurriculars had a "direct impact" on his academic performance, but acknowledged that he had gained "so many different skills that I didn't think I would get out of my undergrad". Sophie felt that her extracurricular engagement had had mixed impacts on academic performance: "I think it has helped in some ways but not in other ways".

#### 4.3.6 Whether extracurricular activities promote internationalisation

Some respondents perceived that there were poor levels of integration between local and international students: "What tends to happen with international students in study abroad, they tend to stay with international student groups and never really assimilate" (Caitlín). However, in cases where frequent interaction was occurring, it appeared to be through shared extracurricular activities. As such, extracurricular societies, clubs and teams may be an important resource for encouraging internationalisation on campus.

Irfan reported that there were significant cultural differences between his country of origin and study abroad destination. He felt that for many students, this might cause difficulties in making friends. In particular, he noted a prevailing theory that the only way to make friends at their study abroad destination was through the night-life scene – an environment that they did not wish to partake in. Instead, Irfan used extracurricular activities as a way to connect with local students. Subsequently, these activities helped him to get through a period of depression when he was studying abroad. However, Abi posited that if students have not engaged

in extracurricular activities at home, they may be less likely to do so when they travel abroad: "If you have not practiced your involvement at home, if you are not willingly participating in issues of concern at home...it is unlikely that you will go to another place and become involved because you're not experienced in just jumping in".

"There's this word-of-mouth that goes around with any student that goes for exchange from [country of origin] that if you go to [study abroad location], the only way that you'll meet people, that you'll make friends there is to go to a pub and have drinks with them...But as far as I found, there are other ways. One of them being getting involved with these societies. It is arguably a better way because you connect on a more- you connect on common ground, like common interests sort of thing." (Irfan)

For four participants who had studied abroad, extracurricular activities served to help them settle back into their home campus, but also, to continue their international experience by way of working with the international office and peer mentoring for incoming international students. This not only kept their experience in the present, but also afforded them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Highlighting this, Sophie noted that "it was nice to just talk to other people who had done it and think about our own experiences and how it might help us and what skills we learned and just funny stories and things like that". Similarly, Olivia felt it cultivated a greater level of intercultural competencies: "Meeting people who were culturally very different than I was beforehand, kind of helped me in how to approach other people who are not of my same ethnicity or have my same type of background".

For universities seeking to increase opportunities for internationalisation on their own campuses, the experiences above suggest that there is considerable potential to involve incoming international students in local extracurricular activities. Not only can this further improve the integration of international students, providing opportunities for them to mix with the wider local community, it can also enhance opportunities for international and 'home' students to mix and add a

wider international dimension to their extracurricular experiences.

#### 4.3.7 Are extracurricular activities undervalued?

"It's either, you do an exchange, or you do cocurriculars in order to fill that void of not doing exchange... I think for people who are financially burdened... filling their time with extracurricular activities and saying that they got to do this, this and this instead... I guess it makes them feel better." (Olivia)

While students perceived there to be benefits associated with both studying abroad and extracurricular activities, the researchers sought to explore whether students placed these opportunities within a hierarchy, i.e. studying abroad was perceived to be of greater value than extracurricular activities or vice versa. Almost unanimously among students who had studied abroad, their exchange experience was said to have been more beneficial than their at-home engagement. For example, Caitlín asserted that "study abroad made a much more meaningful impact", Anne "probably benefited more" from studying abroad, and Mark stated that "you couldn't put [studying abroad and extracurricular activities] on the same scale".

As postgraduate students, Clara and Dara felt that both study abroad and extracurricular activities had been beneficial in different ways and perhaps at different times of their lives. Clara considered her ERASMUS experience to be more beneficial during her undergraduate programme, but that as a postgraduate student, her extracurricular activities were providing more value: "I think just different things at different times. So with the postgrad, I think my extracurricular stuff is potentially more beneficial. But whereas when I was younger and when I was an undergrad, definitely the ERASMUS". Similarly, Dara stated that "if we're talking about kind of academic and like going for jobs and things...the study abroad experience might have more benefit, more merit... but I think the volunteering experience...benefitted me personally a bit more", adding "they're both considered beneficial but in slightly different ways".

These comments suggest that extracurricular activities may be undervalued by students, and as a result, may not be fully 'marketed' during job applications and interviews, representing a disservice to the skills gained during these experiences. As discussed later, the researchers assert that the recognition of extracurricular engagement on university transcripts would be a positive step towards ensuring that students place full value on their non-academic achievements.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

Working within the parameters of the U21 network of universities, the present research has aimed to explore the impact of student mobility and extracurricular engagement on student academic performance and graduate employment outcomes. For U21, the rationale for this research was to test the validity of the assumption that a period of study abroad has an intrinsic set of benefits for students, to explore the nature of such benefits and how the network might contribute to their maximisation from both a quantitative basis and also from the students' perspectives. U21 also wanted to explore how students who are not in a position to study abroad can achieve similar benefits through engagement in other home campus-based activities, the ultimate goal being to use data to support evidence-based U21 initiatives that can enhance academic, personal and employability opportunities for students across the network.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the research investigated students' perceived benefits of both study abroad and extracurricular activities, and the quantitative results in a large graduate outcome dataset. While interview participants spoke of the benefits of studying abroad, particularly concerning employability, the quantitative findings indicated that studying abroad may have a mixed impact on starting salaries at graduation. Conversely, while academic performance was not overly emphasised by participants, quantitative data reported that study abroad graduates had a higher academic performance than those who stayed at home for the duration of their degree. Quantitative data did not capture extracurricular engagement as a variable; however, interview participants described its positive impact on their confidence, connection with the university community, self-efficacy and overall satisfaction with the university experience. Nevertheless, extracurricular engagement appeared to be undervalued when compared to studying abroad both by students and by universities in general.

## 5.2 Employment Outcomes

Though interview participants were not asked about their precise understanding or definition of employability, there appeared to be a consensus that studying abroad increased their appeal to employers. Notably, many in the study found that studying abroad to be a positive signal to prospective employers, highlighting their ability to step outside their comfort zone and tackle new challenges. This perception is in line with previous research (Asland and Wiers-Jensen, 2001; Potts, 2015), which notes that the specific details of the study abroad experience may be superfluous, with employers instead viewing the act of studying abroad as indicative of applicants' desirable personality traits. Looking at the graduate pathways of the First Destinations survey respondents, those who had studied abroad were more likely to be engaged in further study, while those who had not were more likely to be employed in a full-time capacity. This contrasts with previous research (Stroud, 2010), which reported that study abroad participants were less likely to pursue further education. However, it should be remembered that, in many countries, national economies and job markets have changed significantly in the last decade, which may have impacted on the ability and the desire of individuals to return to postgraduate education.

The most notable disparities in this study concerned salary levels at graduation. From the perspective of the human capital theory, the researchers hypothesised that those who had studied abroad should be likely to be earning higher salaries than those who had not studied abroad. However, analysis of graduate outcome data at two universities revealed that graduates who had studied abroad were frequently earning a slightly lower average salary than those who had not studied abroad. While the findings were more varied at a discipline-level, graduates who had studied abroad were frequently earning less.

In discussing these findings, three factors may have impacted the results. First; study abroad programmes may be selected by students in lieu of internships or work experience opportunities. To that end, interviewee David was of the opinion that studying abroad often impeded students' access to internships as the application process coincided with periods abroad. If employers value work

experience and academic performance more highly than studying abroad, this may go towards explaining the differences in salary between those who have studied abroad and those who have not. A second hypothesis addresses the demographic of study abroad participants. As study abroad participants are on average younger than those who do not study abroad, it may be argued that older or mature students with previous employment history are included in non-study abroad data and thus, impacting the results. This age difference may be further compounded by the greater likelihood for older students to engage in career-related extracurricular activities. In the absence of age or employment history data, the researchers cannot further determine whether this is a possibility. Third; the benefits of studying abroad may become more visible in long-term outcomes, for example, how quickly graduates progress in their careers, or within their job satisfaction ratings. Without such longitudinal research, it cannot be definitely stated whether studying abroad impacts graduates earning potential, positively or negatively in the medium- and long-term. This will be further discussed in the strengths and limitations.

### 5.3 Gender Salary Differences

Perhaps of most significant note in this study, the researchers observed worrying disparities between the starting salaries of males and females, both by discipline and by study abroad participation. The researchers compared the starting salaries of males who had studied abroad with males who had not, and females who had studied abroad with females who had not, finding that, on the whole, both males and females who had studied abroad initially earned less than those that had not. Across all disciplines at University A, males who had studied abroad were earning lower average salaries than males who had not; in all disciplines with the exception of engineering, females who had studied abroad were earning less than those who had not. At University B, males who had studied abroad were earning less than their non-study abroad counterparts in four of the six disciplines reviewed; females who had studied abroad were earning less in two of the disciplines reviewed.

Within the confines of the current datasets, the researchers are unable to identify a cause for these

disparities definitively; however, it may be possible that salaries are impacted by the unequal proportion of males and females in the study now living abroad; differences in the types of employment that males and females are engaging in; differential recruitment processes of males and females; and finally, the self-report nature of this data. These figures also have to be put into the context of the more general income gender pay gap which still exists on an international basis. Whatever the reasons, this finding gives rise for concern in terms of gender equality and needs further monitoring.

### 5.4 Academic Performance

Analysis of quantitative graduate outcome data suggests that studying abroad improves academic performance upon graduation. Arguably, this may encourage students to opt for study abroad if they have the intention of pursuing postgraduate education – indeed, this was the case in this study with study abroad graduates in both Universities A and B who were found to be more likely to be currently in full-time study. However, for those who opted to enter the job market immediately, the academic benefits of studying abroad do not appear to be inherently advantageous in terms of employment outcomes and salary. The researchers posit that this may be due to the undervaluing of academic grades, with employers placing motivation and interest, goodness-of-fit with the organisation, skills, and work experience higher than academic performance on the list of desirable employee criteria. This may also be associated with the perceived non-standardisation of grades internationally. As a result, the benefits of studying abroad in academia may have limited impact beyond university.

Further, results should be interpreted carefully in terms of academic performance. As participation in study abroad programmes typically requires students to have reached a certain level of academic performance at the time of application, study abroad participants may represent higher achieving students overall. As such, studying abroad in itself may have limited bearings on outcomes. The qualitative findings also indicate that studying abroad may, at times, be detrimental to academic performance, for example, if students have to struggle to transfer grades between universities or find it harder

to remain engaged in academic work while abroad. Where study abroad programmes appear to have the most impact is in recruiting students on to academic programmes. Qualitative findings in this study indicate that students often select their degree programme based on opportunities to study abroad; the effective marketing and execution of such programmes may be highly fruitful in university recruitment.

In terms of extracurricular activities, activities are largely perceived to strengthen academic performance among the participants. Participants described their extracurricular involvement as supplementing their studies, cultivating practical skills, providing hands-on experience and, ultimately, giving a real-life element to their academic work. Such visible and tangible results of extracurricular engagement may appeal to employers, outweighing academic awards. Unfortunately, as engagement in extracurricular activities is often not documented by universities, quantitative data examining its benefits on academic performance is not available.

## 5.5. The Importance of Reflection

As per the CareerEDGE employability model, reflection and evaluation are key steps in attaining the self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem deemed as valuable attributes in seeking and succeeding in employment. Without these steps it is more difficult for a student, particularly a young student, to be able to assess how far any life experience has impacted on them, enhanced their employability skills and how best to articulate this to an employer. It is thus essential that students have opportunities to reflect on and evaluate their learning experiences.

Lower levels of reflection and evaluation during and following study abroad experiences may fail to maximise the students' awareness of the deeper beneficial outcomes of these opportunities. Participants described feelings of isolation and pressure when returning home; for example, feeling unable to process the experience as they had to return quickly to academic work, or feeling that nobody around them was able to relate to their

time abroad. Looking to the impact this can have on employment, interviewee Olivia felt that her study abroad experience had not been fully valued in her job interview. However, in her research interview, she herself did not attribute significant merit to the value of the experience, stating that it was not relevant to the job that she was seeking and that it had not impacted her confidence or self-awareness. This suggests that she may have not fully evaluated and reflected on the gains of studying abroad, and thus, could not effectively 'sell' the experience or how it has increased her human capital.

As study abroad participants are typically younger than those who do not study abroad, and undergraduate students are not always capable of extensive or independent reflection, the provision of guided reflective opportunities for students may be particularly beneficial. This can be done in a number of ways, such as a planned re-introduction reflection workshop upon their return, through the support of a peer mentor who has previously studied abroad, or directly with a skilled mentor in the international or career/employability offices. Notably, participants who had gone on to become peer mentors for other international students on returning home described it as a positive way for them to reflect and process the experience. Furthermore, it is also clear that the interviews in themselves provided opportunities for some of the students to re-appraise what they had gained from their study abroad. Put simply, taking time with a student to guide them through their experiences and asking the right questions to prompt self-reflection can be a very powerful way to give students a greater level of self-awareness. However, it may need to be a planned part of student development, rather than such reflection happening spontaneously or by means of a un-mentored learning journal.

Conversely, the data suggests that deciding to engage with extracurricular activities may, in itself, be an inherently more reflective process. For example, Jin explicitly described her activity as providing her with the chance to reflect and take time away from her busy academic schedule. New skills gained may be more visible and tangible, for example, Irfan's experience with new technology; this may aid graduates in explaining



what they have achieved through their extracurricular activities. In line with this, the researchers encourage the formal recognition of extracurricular activities by way of an extracurricular awards programme. Examples of these include programmes at University College Dublin (UCD Advantage Award), University of Queensland (Employability Award) and University of Birmingham (The Personal Skills Award). A number of these schemes require students to provide well-constructed reflective statements on their personal and disciplinary gains as part of the application process.

Finally, in terms of extracurricular activities, it should be noted that not all activities are the same and this study is not suggesting that any extracurricular activity will have the level of transformative impact. The activities described by most students involved experiences that considerably stretched and challenged them. Finding an extracurricular experience that will offer this degree of challenge is personal to each individual and their course of study. Many universities now have centres for extracurricular activities that offer a range of experiences to students and assist them in choosing one best suited to their personal and academic development.

## 5.6 Strengths and Limitations

While this research provides new findings and perspectives on a complex topic, some limitations are present. Graduate outcome survey data alone may fail to provide a full picture of student employability, i.e. the impact and usefulness of the skills that they have gained through higher education. First destination statistics do not take into account the fact that some graduates may take lower-level jobs in order to deal with financial pressures, particularly if they have incurred student debt. It is impossible to ascertain which graduates have been employed in relevant roles to their training, and those that remain under-employed. Increased information about the types of employment graduates are engaging in may go toward explaining the repeated salary disparities between males and females.

A second limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the data. Longitudinal research regarding study abroad outcomes can be challenging as graduates move abroad

and lose contact with their university. However, the researchers argue that it would be of great benefit to truly ascertain the long-term benefits of studying abroad and/or extracurricular engagement. As the interview participants in the present research were final year undergraduate students, postgraduate students or recent alumni, it was not possible to accurately examine whether studying abroad had significant long-term benefits. This point is also relevant for graduate outcome data, which accounted solely for the class of 2018 undergraduate respondents. As such, we cannot definitively state whether studying abroad ultimately increases salary or impacts career progression. Future longitudinal research is therefore necessary to explore benefits fully. Such research should endeavour to collect quantitative data and conduct interviews at the time of graduation, and at 5- and 10-year points post-graduation.

A third limitation of this research is the absence of quantitative data relating to extracurricular involvement. As such, this research could not explore the impact that engagement with societies, clubs etc. are having on academic performance and employment outcomes. To create a full picture of alumni, universities should endeavour to explore what students participated in beyond curricular activities. This may be measured most effectively through recognition of extracurricular activities on academic transcripts.

A significant challenge for researchers qualitatively investigating the impact of studying abroad and/or extra-curricular activities on employability is the need to account for additional confounding variables, not least the personality traits of the respondents. Those who are willing to participate in qualitative research as a whole may already represent a distinct cohort of more confident or extroverted students. Similarly, students who study abroad or engage in extracurricular activities may also represent a homogenous group of students, in that they may be less likely to have additional duties at home and/or they may not need to undertake long hours of paid work while studying. Such variables may correlate with subsequent employment outcomes but remain invisible in quantitative data. To address this, the researchers utilised both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, facilitating the input of the students' voice and allowing

them to observe shared traits among participants. Lastly, the researchers recognise that, as interviews were conducted solely in English, this could have discouraged participants who were less confident in speaking a second language. Future research may wish to conduct qualitative interviews in multiple languages to ensure greater participant representation.

In terms of the quantitative institutional data, the use of self-reporting in such data sets as First-Destinations surveys means that those who were satisfied with their academic result or current employment situation may be more likely to respond. Others may opt-out or decline to provide certain data with which they are less happy, and there tends to be a generally higher response rate from females in such surveys (Cull et al., 2005). For example, if more females than males decided to provide their current salary for a relevant First Destinations survey, then this could have confounded the results of the current study.

Despite these limitations, the researchers note a variety of strengths within this research and have sought to minimise limitations where possible. The use of mixed-methods is significant in capturing both the student voice and the numerical data. This triangulation of methods allowed the researchers to explore the nuances of studying abroad and extracurricular engagement, and to gain students' perspectives, while also examining trends in large datasets. By doing so, it was possible to create a greater understanding of the issue and assess in what ways student perceptions align or fail to align with the quantitative outcomes. Telephone interviews may have been neglected in the qualitative research literature; however, they were a significant strength in the current research, allowing the researcher to interview students with minimal geographical restrictions. This ensured that the research was not Eurocentric, but rather provided a range of perspectives from across global regions.

## 5.7 Future Directions

In line with previous research, the present qualitative findings suggest that studying abroad is perceived to be a positive signal for employers, indicating certain personality traits or intercultural competencies. To delve more into the topic, future research would benefit

from including those involved in hiring decisions in the workplace, examining their perspectives studying abroad and extracurricular activities.

The researchers advocate for increased planned and guided reflective opportunities, particularly for undergraduate cohorts. While extracurricular activities appear to have some innate reflective opportunities, students who return from studying abroad often appear to struggle with re-assimilation and would benefit from help to make sense of what they have gained in their time away from home. In addition to the improved transference of academic results, re-orientation supports may be beneficial in both helping the student to adjust, and in promoting reflection and evaluation of the experience. This will ultimately allow students to maximise the employability potential of studying abroad.

The researchers recommend that longitudinal research is required to accurately examine the wider, long-term impact of student mobility during higher education. Additional categories within graduate outcome data would also be advantageous, for example, noting whether graduates participated in internships, engaged in extracurricular activities, or had a previous employment history.

In the absence of institutional data regarding extracurricular activities, the researchers suggest that interviewees may have initially undervalued their experience in terms of its positive impact on employability. This tendency appeared to be particularly prevalent among the undergraduate cohort of interviewees. While graduate outcome data indicate that students who have studied abroad receive higher academic awards, findings must be interpreted with caution and may be attributable to the selective nature of those who participate in study abroad programmes.

Finally, this research found that studying abroad was held in high regard by students, but may have less benefit on their level of initial graduate salary than was initially expected. However, this research has only looked at the initial salary reported by students post-graduation, and there would be great value in gaining a longitudinal view on how student earnings and indeed job satisfaction

evolves over time. In particular, it would be important to take a longitudinal perspective to see if these graduates' longer-term employment trajectories showed other characteristics associated with their time abroad, as they moved further into their careers.

## 5.8 Conclusion

The study concludes that most students who opt (and who are in the position to opt) to take up opportunities such as study abroad and/or extra curricular activities during their studies encounter new, challenging and uncertain situations, and that they emerge from these situations with overall gains. This is particularly true when they are supported to analyse and reflect on how these 'uncertain' situations have changed them. In some cases in this research, the gains were not what was necessarily expected; for example, in the amount of salary those who studies abroad earned in their first job.

The current study's quantitative graduate outcome data suggest that studying abroad improves academic performance upon graduation. However, for those immediately entering the job market the academic benefits of studying abroad do not appear to translate into parallel improvements in employment outcomes and salary levels. This may be due to a general undervaluing of academic grades by employers; it may also be associated with the perceived non-standardisation of grades internationally.

A positive finding is that most students found both study abroad and home-based extracurricular activities can transform them, as Irfan said in the research, into becoming "a better person". For U21, this current research offers much food for thought, not least how best to use these evidence-based findings to support good practices across the network for both study abroad students and those who engage in home-based extracurricular activities. Results in the current research particularly support the development of planned environments in which students can recognise, appreciate and assimilate the impact of their experiences. Building on this study, a reflective toolkit is in development within the U21 network as a resource that will facilitate greater reflection and evaluation among returning students from periods of study abroad.

The students' experiences of extracurricular activities are especially heartening as it points the way to alternatives approaches for creating transformative experiences for students who cannot travel abroad. It also suggests that further exploration should take place into how to use the collaborative power of the U21 network of worldwide universities could support online, virtual collaborations for these students, allowing them to share their home-based extracurricular experiences with other students, thereby giving their work an extra international dimension.

The researchers are most grateful to the two U21 universities who shared their large-scale graduate student data with them and to the National University of Singapore, which also advised on their previous research in the area of study abroad and subsequent improbity. Most particularly, the researchers owe a great debt of gratitude to the students from ten U21 universities across the world for their generosity in sharing their experiences of studying abroad and also engaging in extra curricular activities.

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