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Does studying abroad help academic achievement?

Paul James Cardwell 

School of Law, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

ABSTRACT

Studying abroad as part of a degree has become commonplace for many students in European and other developed countries. Universities actively promote opportunities as part of internationalization strategies. Whilst research has looked into the 'abroad' aspect of study abroad, there is less literature on the 'study' aspect, and in particular, the effects that the period has on academic achievement. This article provides evidence that studying abroad has a beneficial effect on overall academic achievement. The article compares the final degree grades of students at Sheffield Law School (UK) who participated in a year studying abroad, with those who did not. Interviews with students across the period deepen the qualitative dimension to the research by exploring how students felt about their academic experience. Whilst few students opt to go abroad for the purposes of improving grades, most feel that the additional confidence and maturity, alongside deeper knowledge of their subject and a break in the pattern of their studies, contributes to their higher achievement.

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Introduction

Studying abroad has become part of the fabric of the higher education space in Europe, due in no small part to the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union (EU).¹ Now over 30 years old, Erasmus+ is the best known and developed multi-national exchange programme (see, e.g. Rodríguez González, Bustillo Mesanza, and Mariel 2011; Oborune 2013). Participation is heavily promoted by Universities and national agencies, though levels of involvement vary from state to state.² This article examines an institution in the United Kingdom, where the future participation in Erasmus+ has been thrust into the spotlight due to the June 2016 referendum decision to leave the EU.

The role of study abroad programmes has generated significant literature exploring aspects such as personal development, career and future trajectories and impact on employability. This article focuses specifically on the effects of studying abroad on academic achievement. The headline research question, 'does studying abroad help academic achievement?' is answered via two supplementary questions, each relying on a separate methodology. The first sub-question is, 'what is the effect on the academic grades of students who have studied abroad compared to those who have not?'. To answer this, the

degree classifications obtained by 1320 graduating students from the School of Law, University of Sheffield, UK, over a five-year period are analysed and compared. 361 of these students participated in a one-year exchange and 959 did not.

The second question, 'how do participating students perceive academic achievement as part of the study abroad experience?' uses semi-structured interviews with graduates ($n = 21$) from the five-year period above who studied abroad. The responses to the second question complement the data from the first, in helping to better understand whether decisions to study abroad were motivated by a desire to strengthen academic achievement and if they felt such an effect on themselves.

As common in most UK Universities, the majority of students depart under the Erasmus+ programme. Others depart to North American, Asian and Australasian universities under bilateral agreements. The number of UK students who participate in exchanges is lower than similar sized European countries (e.g. France and Italy). However, Sheffield Law School has vastly increased the number of participants per year to 90 (approximately one-third of the total cohort) since 2011 as part of an institution-wide internationalization strategy to ensure that as many students as possible benefit from available opportunities. In the competitive HE environment in the UK, Sheffield has made studying abroad a USP. Unlike many comparable institutions, *all* students are encouraged to participate, irrespective of prior academic achievement. Advice and additional support (financial and otherwise) is provided for students who might be discouraged from taking up opportunities. The high proportion of participating students allows for the capture of a considerable amount of data. Significantly, the year abroad does *not* count towards final degree classification, ensuring that variable performance whilst abroad does not skew the data. The great difficulties in appropriately converting grades obtained at a large number of partner universities across many countries is avoided.

The evidence from both the data and the interviews supports the conclusion that study abroad has a positive impact on academic achievement, and students who participate increase their chances of gaining higher overall grades in their degree. However, the evidence shows that this impact is less than perhaps expected *on overall average grades*, with an average of 2–3% differentiating those who choose a year abroad from those who did not. However, as explained below, the impact *on degree classification* is significant. The peculiarities of the UK marking scales and practices mean that the percentages need to be seen in context. The findings from the interviews complement the data. Most students see a direct connection between their experience in going abroad and their strengthened academic achievement. Students do not primarily undertake study abroad in the belief that it will help to achieve higher grades, but most see the opportunity to gain in maturity and life- and career-enhancing prospects as key.

Study abroad and academic success

A wealth of literature has examined the global patterns of student mobility, especially students who seek degrees outside of their countries (e.g. Gürüz 2011; Bhandari and Blumenthal 2011; Wei 2013). While the success of the Erasmus+ programme since 1987 has made its mark on the populations and cultural imagination of Europe (Mitchell 2012; Cardwell 2017), there is a lack of extensive evidence or data on how studying abroad feeds into academic achievement. This gap is surprising, given the assumed link

between spending time abroad for academic activity and the impact on overall academic achievement. Much of the literature focuses on aspects such as cultural awareness and future employability.

The literature on the impact of work placements overseas on academic performance consistently finds a positive impact on academic performance and skills. Reddy and Moores (2006) argue that a placement year leads to an increase in lecturers' perceptions of the acquisition of transferable skills. Mansfield (2011) has shown in her analysis of 417 graduating students from property management courses that students with year-long professional placements increased their final grades by a statistically significant margin. By contrast, Surridge's study (2009) of 236 graduates found that the increases were highest for students with lower second-year grades. Crawford and Wang (2016) find an overall positive effect on the academic achievement of 268 students who took a placement year. Gomez, Lush, and Clements (2004) found that a one-year placement for 164 bioscience students improved performance, independent of earlier measures of performance.

For study abroad, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) found that 75-80% of students who had undertaken a study year abroad obtained a 'good' (first class/second class upper division) degree, compared to 60% of students who did not study abroad (HEFCE 2009). However, this does not account for self-selection or the varying extent to which the credits obtained abroad are accounted for within the final degree class. Research has found that more privileged students may acquire prestigious credentials for their career prospects and signal that they are more 'internationalized' than their static peers (Gerhards and Hans 2013; Netz and Finger 2016). It must, therefore, be recognized that the relationship between academic achievement and study abroad is not necessarily straightforward or neutral and that social factors do feature.

Other studies have examined factors including the length of time abroad, with even short periods of intensive study abroad found to have value (James 2013). Dwyer (2004) has shown, via an extensive survey of 3723 US students, that a year is the optimum time to increase language ability, intercultural development, career impact and academic attainment (via further study). Teichler and Janson (2007) and Potts (2015) report that both students and employers value study abroad and that self-perception amongst participants about the value is high. Birch and Miller's Australian analysis (2007) of how a pre-university 'gap year' has a positive effect on academic performance suggests the additional year of maturity works as a motivating factor. A significant body of research has questioned some of the assumptions around the 'massification' of mobility and its benefits. Courtois (2018) critiques the institutional strategies of promoting mobility since the effect can be to reinforce existing social structures and privileges; a point which has also been made in other works on the phenomenon (Gerhards and Hans 2013; Netz and Finger 2016).

The discipline under examination in this article is Law. As an academic discipline, UK undergraduate/bachelor law degrees are not practice-based and should not be regarded as particularly different from social sciences or arts subjects in terms of study abroad. The globalization of legal study and the catalyst of the institutionalized structures provided by the Erasmus+programme has led to many courses and modules being offered in English (Jamin and van Caenegem 2016). Law is one of the most engaged disciplines for studying abroad (Ahn 2014), yet only a small percentage of UK law students opt to

do so (Platsas and Marrani 2016). Most depart under Erasmus+, though UK students often regard study beyond Europe as ‘more attractive, exotic and international’ (British Council 2016, 11).

In the discipline-specific literature, Jeanpierre and Broadbent’s analysis (2016, 218) of 57 pre-departure Law students found only a small percentage (5%) cite their primary reason as improving their grades. This was far behind discovering a new environment (22%), developing language ability (22%), moving away (18%) and discovering a new legal system (14%). Ahn (2014, 117) highlights some of the differences between law and engineering, her other case study, in Sweden. Law students tend to see study abroad as a ‘valuable, reasonable career choice’ in contrast to their engineering peers, suggesting a strong social context and the experiences of their peers are determinant factors in departing.

Other studies exploring the motivations for mobility amongst UK students show a similar pattern, with ‘potential to improve grades’ or ‘improving academic knowledge’ ranking relatively lowly in importance, but the risk of a negative outcome on degree classification also ranking amongst the barriers to mobility (King and Findlay 2010, 24; UK HE International Unit 2015, 18). Bell’s innovative study (2016) found accommodation was the greatest source of pre-departure anxiety, with ‘the different communication, teaching and assessment styles’ causing the most academic concern. Similar findings have been reported in other studies in the US (Dewald, Jimenez, and Self 2016; Pope et al. 2014), Australia (Dall’Alba and Sidhu 2015) and New Zealand (Doyle et al. 2010). Bartram (2013) found that in one particular aspect (student support) students cited the need for academic support with studying abroad was higher than for practical or sociocultural support.

National and internationally, policies which aim to increase mobility emphasize increasing cultural awareness and employment possibilities rather than academic attainment (e.g. Lunn 2008; Relyea, Cocchiara, and Studdard 2008). The acquisition of knowledge of another legal system is generally seen as a contributor to employability skills, cultural awareness or global/European identity/citizenship, rather than having a positive effect on grades (Smits 2011; Ahn 2014). Law degrees require a high number of compulsory subjects which could not be taken abroad, a factor which has been identified by James (2013) as a subject-specific barrier to mobility since it requires institutions to create specific pathways to add an additional year of study. ‘Dual degree’ models are used at some institutions, combining two legal systems (e.g. England/France) with two years in each, though few students are enrolled in such programmes (Bosch 2009). In short, the literature shows that despite the lower levels of participation than in other European countries, there are only a few distinctive characteristics for both UK and Law students in terms of study abroad experiences.

Comparing students who go abroad against those who do not necessarily involves accounting for selectivity issues, including self-selection. Exchange programmes are often undertaken by a highly selective group of students (Brux and Fry 2009; Salisbury et al. 2009) who are already achieving high marks. For King and Findlay (2010, 31), self-selection means that those who are academically stronger will decide to go. Therefore, we might expect to find that academically stronger students become even more strong as a result of participating in a year abroad. There is little evidence from previous studies to suggest that lower-performing students will opt to go, hence contributing to the self-selection bias and search for ‘grade insurance’ identified by Varela (2016) in his study of Spanish students. This is accounted for in the methodology of this study.

Furthermore, many other factors can influence academic attainment, including social background, IQ, age, personal control and self-belief in academic capabilities (Smith and Naylor 2001; Cassidy 2012). This includes, therefore, the experience whilst abroad which might have a bearing on the academic achievement of students during and after their time abroad. This study also accounts for how students *felt* in terms of their self-confidence and other motivating factors via the second research sub-question, ‘how do participating students perceive academic achievement as part of the study abroad experience.’

Sample selection

A standard law degree in England and Wales is three years in duration. Sheffield Law School sends two categories of students abroad, all of whom must depart for a full *additional* year to a partner University in year 3, returning to complete their final year 4. All the students complete a full credit workload similar to what they are expected to do at Sheffield. A work placement abroad is not an option. Two types of student depart:

- (a) Students on a four-year degree who study law abroad in English. These students either begin their degree in the knowledge that they go abroad in two years’ time, or opt to transfer to the four-year degree during year 1 or 2. There is thus no minimum grade requirement for their placement abroad. Year abroad places are available at 30+ universities under Erasmus+ or worldwide.
- (b) Students who are registered on four-year LLB Law with French/German/Spanish degrees spend a year in the respective country, studying in French/German/Spanish at one of 20 institutions. These degrees were run in conjunction with the relevant language departments, and as such their curricula and method of calculation of the degree class differed. For this reason, they are *not* included in the results of this study.

UK degree classification processes differ according to the institution but generally obey the following principles.³ Each component is assessed according to a percentage scale, though in social sciences subjects marks above 70% are exceptional and those above 80% are rare. Bell curves are not used. Upon completion, a degree is ‘classified’ into first class (average 69.5%+), second class upper division (‘2:1’, with an average of 59.5%+), second class lower division (‘2:2’, 49.5%+), third class (45%+), pass (40%+) and fail (below 40%). These percentages are based on the regulations at Sheffield, but the classification system is common to all UK higher education institutions.

Here, classifications are based on grades obtained in year 2 and the final year, i.e. year 3 for students who do not study abroad, and year 4 for students who go abroad. The final year of study is approximately weighted at 2/3 and year 2 at 1/3: the grades obtained in the final year, therefore, are much more significant for final classification.

The year abroad is assessed on a pass/fail basis only. Grades obtained at the partner university are *not* taken into account in the degree classification. If students do fail, then they transfer to a three-year degree which does not recognize the year abroad: however, in practice very few are in this situation (0 or 1 per year in the five years examined here). Therefore, a direct comparison can be made between students who spent a year abroad, and the averages they achieved in the years immediately prior and after their year of study abroad, and to students who did not.

It is important to note that Sheffield Law School expanded the number of places to ensure that all students who wish to go abroad are able to do so. It has been a strong 'selling point' in the context of a market-driven HE environment in the UK (Tomlinson 2008, 2017). The discourse employed by the School and University relies heavily on sharing the direct experience of previous participants and their impressions as well as the (anecdotal) evidence of staff that returning students have gained in maturity and academic achievement.⁴ The possibility of better degree performance was not explicitly stressed, due to a lack of hard evidence. There is *no* selection of only the academically strongest candidates. Students are fully aware that the year abroad requires a high level of commitment throughout and they must 'pass' the year abroad. Students who have weaker grades are encouraged to apply as much as those with higher grades and there are multiple points of contact within the School/University to discuss issues of concern (such as health conditions, disabilities, lack of confidence or limited financial resources) to ensure appropriate additional help. The latter mitigates against some of the downsides to 'massification' of exchanges as identified by Courtois (2018) and the risk of reinforcing social inequalities (Marginson 2016).

It is recognized here that institutional discourse can be an important factor in structuring students' expectations and behaviour and that there is always a risk of 'self-selection' despite efforts to ensure all students, regardless of ability, background or personal circumstances, feel able to participate. The large sample size (in terms of numbers and the percentage of students involved) means that there is no 'type' of student who participates in a year abroad. It should also be noted that despite the relatively high cost of degree programmes in England when compared to other EU countries (£9000 per year for tuition), this fee does not apply for the year abroad. Most students depart to an European destination and therefore receive a grant of approximately £2500 from the Erasmus+ budget to help with costs for the year.

Methodology

There are two methodologies used here, to answer each of the research questions. First, to ascertain the difference in performance between the two groups of students in each year, individual degree classifications and overall averages for 1320 graduating students were compiled for 2011–2012 to 2015–2016. 2011–2012 is the starting date as the degree programmes on which these students were registered were reformed, ensuring comparability.

The grades of students who went abroad for a year and those who did not are analysed for year 2 (pre-departure) and their final year. As stated above, students' performance whilst abroad is not taken into account for the final degree classification. The main reason for this is the impossibility in ensuring fairness in converting grades from 30+ overseas institutions with vastly different grading systems and academic cultures.

Student motivation for studying abroad is unaccounted for in the data but is an important aspect in answering the research question, which can best be served by the use of interview data to answer the second research sub-question of how participating students perceive academic achievement as part of the experience. The interviews ($n = 21$) explored the extent to which academic achievement factored into their decision to study abroad, and how (if at all) they reflected on this aspect of the experience. 20- to 30-min telephone interviews were conducted in early 2017 with students who graduated in each of the five

cohorts.⁵ The graduates responded to a call sent through alumni networks. A representative sample was based on balancing year of graduation, destination, gender and final degree classification. Participants were not informed of the findings of the statistical data before the interview.

Participants were asked ten questions about their reasons for studying abroad, including whether strengthening academic achievement and grades formed part of their motivation. They were asked about how they felt about their academic achievement and approach to study before, during and after their year abroad. Graduates were asked to recall how they compared themselves to students who had not studied abroad, and invited to identify any other factors related to their approach to study.

Results and analysis

Figure 1 demonstrates the size of the respective samples. The total number of students in graduating cohorts between 2011–2012 and 2015–2016 has fluctuated between 242 and 307, but the number of students taking a year abroad grew every year (with one exception in 2013–2014). The sample size of students *not* going abroad is larger by 2/3. The high proportion of students who have opted to spend a year abroad allows for a comprehensive overview of trends.

Figures 2 and 3 show the final classification of students who completed their degree in three years, and those who went abroad, returning to complete their degree in year 4. Students who went abroad outperformed the students who stayed in each year, with over 80% gaining their degree in the top two classes (first and 2:1) compared with only 65–81% for those who did not study abroad. The graphs show a steady increase in the number of students gaining first-class degrees for both groups. The increase over time is more marked for those students who studied abroad. There were no students in the third (lowest) class for those who went abroad for four of the five years.

The final averages (Figure 4) show a similar trend to the classification findings. Over five years, overall averages have increased for both groups, but students who have studied abroad consistently performed better overall. This trend helps to explain why

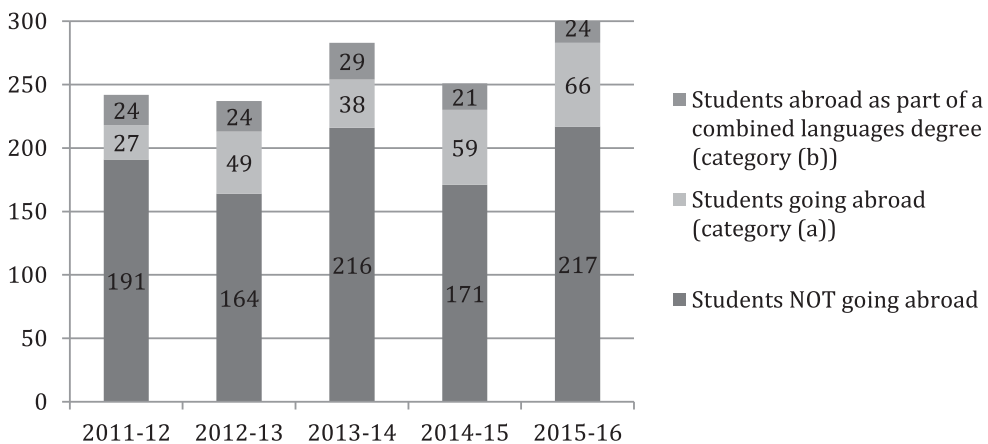


Figure 1. Total number of students going abroad.

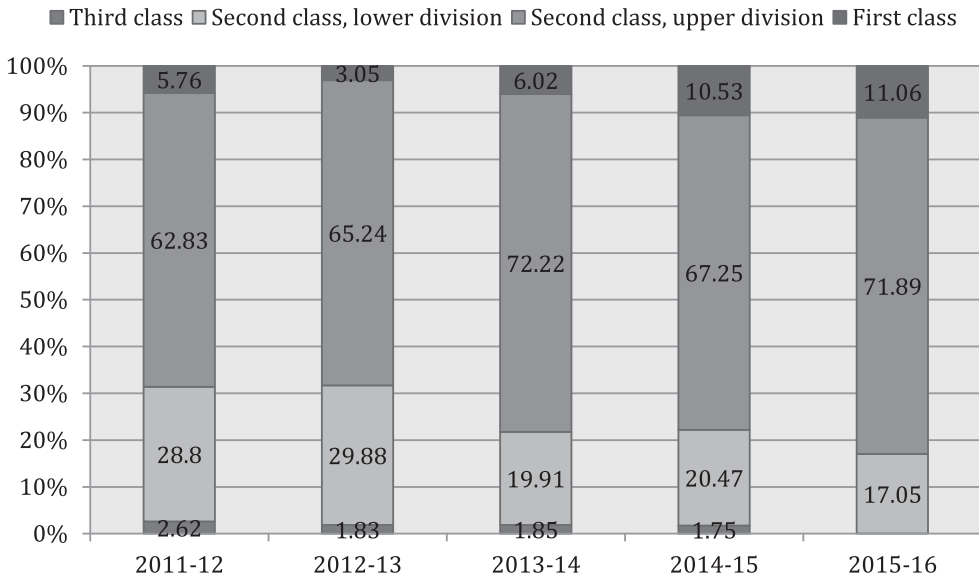


Figure 2. Final degree classification: students NOT going abroad (%).

the number of students obtaining the top two highest classes is higher in [figure 3](#) than [figure 2](#).

Further clarification is needed on the validity of comparing the final year results between the two groups. In their final year of studies, students have a range of optional modules to choose from and there is no segregation between students in year 3 or year 4 (if they been abroad) within these classes. Anonymous marking for assessments

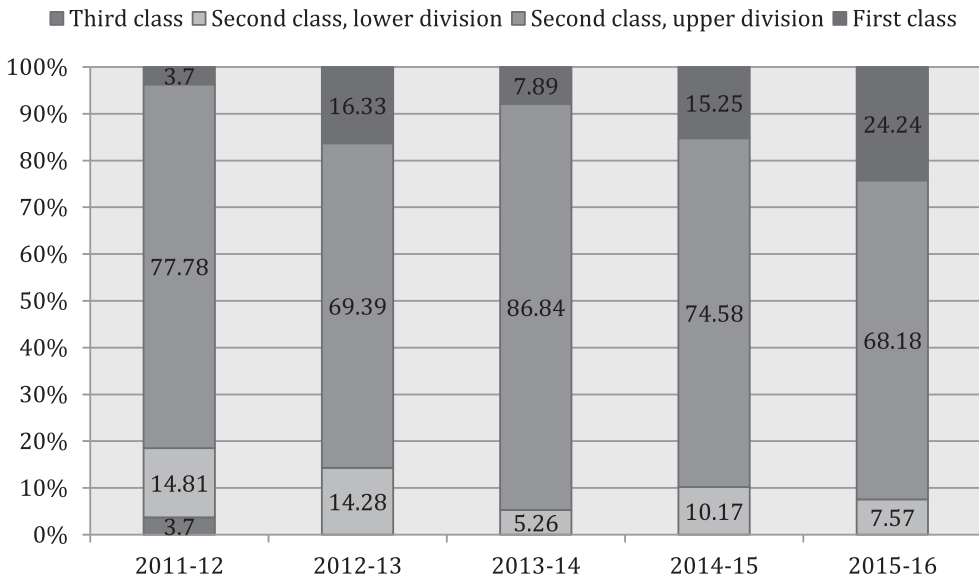


Figure 3. Final degree classification: students spending a year abroad (%).

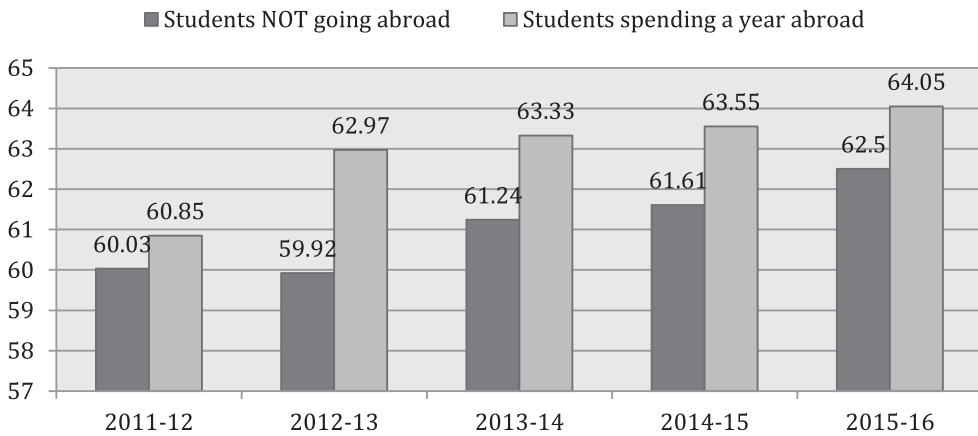


Figure 4. Final weighted average of total grades of students upon classification.

means that those who went abroad could not be favoured (or vice versa) in the marking process. There is, however, one caveat, insofar as the grades obtained were completed in different academic years. For example, the graduating cohort in 2013–2014 includes students who did not go abroad and completed their penultimate year in 2012–2013, and those who did go abroad, whose grades under examination were obtained in 2011–2012. However, there is no significant difference in modules on offer or any changes to assessment patterns which would affect the data. Their respective performances are, therefore, comparable.

This data supports the finding that students who study abroad complete their degree with better overall results. However, it does not account for any self-selection. That is to say that students who go abroad tend to already be academically stronger and thus their final classification and average is merely a reflection of this (King and Findlay

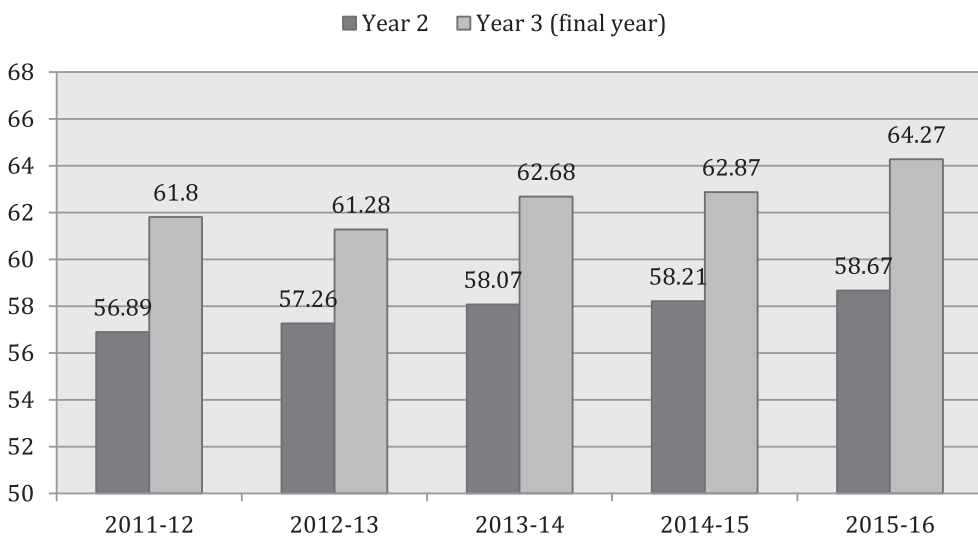


Figure 5. Year 2 and final year average grades (students NOT going abroad).

2010). To investigate this, Figures 5 and 6 show the average grades obtained by students in these respective years. Each student's average percentage increase or decrease of their performance between year 2 and 3/4 was calculated, and then a total average for each group.

The tables show that, on average, students improve their grades between their second and final years. The figures show that the averages of the grades achieved in year two by the two groups of students reveal very little difference between them.⁶ Self-selection here appears to be limited on the basis of academic achievement: students who decided to go abroad were only marginally more able academically than those who did not. There is no available data on the financial circumstances or backgrounds of the participants, and whether self-selection might be due to other factors. But the data shows there was a clear difference in their achievement in their final years of study when looking solely at the grades achieved.

In all years under examination, the students who spent a year abroad improved to a greater extent. The average increase for students *not* going abroad over the five-year period is 4.74%, compared to 6.48% for those who do. Whilst this might appear to be only a slight difference, the peculiarity of the UK marking system means that it is likely to have a much greater effect than the figures suggest. This is because, as explained above, although a percentage scale is used, in reality, the vast majority of grades given fall within the 55%–65% range and grades above 75–80% are rare. The consequence is that students who are already achieving grades at the top end (70%) are unlikely to experience the same average level of increase, but rather remain stable.

Since the 'cut off' between the crucial 2:1 and 2:2 classifications (i.e. 59.5%) is in the middle of where the majority of students (approximately 60–70% of the total) are clustered, a higher increase will significantly amplify the chances of achieving a higher class for many students (10–15% of the total cohort). It is, therefore, most crucial for the students who are achieving grades at the average level overall (around the 55–57% mark).

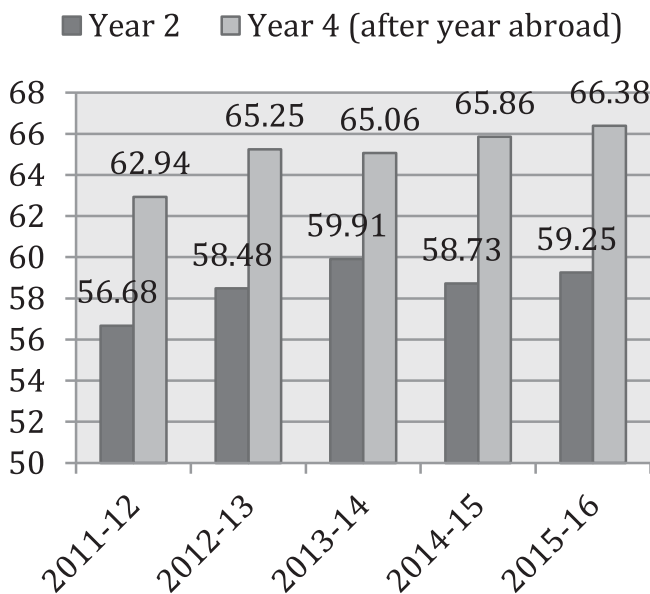


Figure 6. Year 2 and final year average grades (students who went abroad).

Therefore, unlike in the findings of Surridge (2009), there was no discernible pattern of increasing grades amongst students at a certain level: high increases of 10%+ were recorded for students completing their studies at the high, middle and lower ends of the scales. But because of the general reluctance to award grades above 70%, this only generally (and somewhat counter-intuitively) applied to students already at the highest end of the scale already. In other words, only a very small number of students (fewer than 10 of the 51–90 departing students per year) failed to improve their final year grades by some degree, even if this was only slight.

Having established that the majority of students who went abroad improved their performance, the final part of this article uses the findings of the graduate interviews ($n = 21$) to help connect the data to the students' perceptions on studying abroad. The findings on the students' motivation for studying abroad are broadly in line with the smaller-scale study by Jeanpierre and Broadbent (2016) insofar as the 'academic' dimension lagged behind other reasons, or at the very least was embedded in a general desire to experience another place, i.e. a means to an end. Almost half of the interviewees cited living in another country as their primary reason, with over a third believing the experience would strengthen their CV or future job opportunities. This ties in with Ahn's (2014) observations of Law students as career-minded. The opportunity to take different substantive modules was mentioned by only a minority (3) of respondents. This quote is typical of the reasoning of most students:

it was really important to me to travel and to meet different people from different backgrounds; I thought that would be beneficial to my University education as a whole and not just studying Law specifically. I really was interested in that kind of experience, and also that it would look good on my CV. (2011–2012 cohort)

None of the interviewees identified obtaining a better degree class as one of the reasons for taking part. When prompted specifically whether academic achievement came into their thinking, three-quarters replied 'no', with the remainder saying this was not a factor or unable to recall. Only one student identified 'better grades' as a reason. As one student said,

The prospect of going abroad was being able to feel far more confident about my academic ability, [with a] more far-reaching and broader focus on the law. (2011–2012 cohort)

Therefore, the assumption for most of the interviewees was that their increase in personal confidence and life experience would contribute to academic achievement. When asked, 'Whilst abroad, how did you feel about your academic ability: becoming stronger, weaker, or no difference (or don't know/can't remember)?', almost all (19 of 21) of the interviewees responded 'stronger'. Those that did not cited personal issues or organizational problems at the host university.

The reasons given by students who felt they were becoming academically stronger varied. One-third cited the challenge of modules offered at a higher level (since many courses in English are offered at Masters' level). A similar figure noticed their improvement in study skills stemming from adapting to a new environment. Only a minority (20%) felt that their increased knowledge of Law specifically was a strengthening factor, with a similar percentage noting that engagement and collaborating with students from different backgrounds helped them feel academically stronger. However, when asked specifically, 'Did you think that *what* you were studying would directly help you achieve better grades in your final

year?', 80% responded positively. 30% said that they strategically chose subjects which they thought might help their knowledge base in the final year, whilst a quarter felt that it enriched their wider or comparative awareness of a subject. Therefore, the interview findings suggest that whilst some students were engaged in strategic thinking about their academic potential, for most this was an indirect consequence of studying abroad.

There were a variety of responses to how students felt that their approach to studying had changed. Only a small minority (10%) felt that their approach had not changed. For those who did feel a change, increase in confidence/self-esteem; increased motivation and work ethic; better organization skills and an ability to study differently were the most common reasons.

Self-confidence in ability emerged as a key factor. When asked, 'Did you feel more or less confident about getting higher grades after returning?', three-quarters said they did. For some students, the gain in confidence was not necessarily linear:

at the very beginning it was a shock to the system, and then I think improved my confidence in my own abilities to take control ... [So it took a] bit of a dip at first, but my confidence improved. (2013–2014 cohort)

When asked how they compared themselves to other students in their year group who had *not* studied abroad there were a wide variety of responses (with multiple answers allowed). Almost all perceived differences between the students who had been abroad versus those who had not. The development of a culture of self-confidence amongst students who have been abroad applied both in the academic and the social context. 'More confident' and 'mature' were the most common answers (35% each), followed by a perception that they managed time/workload better (30%), being more positive about career prospects (20%); less prone to stress or panicking (particularly around exam time) and more ambitious or competitive (15%). Therefore, their individual self-confidence and perception of self-confidence compared to others, and the impact of being part of a larger cohort of students with a shared experience is paramount. As one interviewee said:

if you went abroad, you seemed happier. I'm not sure if it was actually true but there was an aura, a vibe of happiness or something. People who didn't do the year abroad were a little bit bitter, as in 'we could have done that but we didn't'. (2015–2016 cohort).

The common thread amongst the interviewees was an increase in confidence in approaching their studies as an explainer for their better overall performance, rather than a belief in increased academic achievement. Several students made this type of comment, suggesting (as for their self-reflection on ability) that the link between study abroad and grades was more indirect.

The other thread which emerged was a feeling that being part of a large group who had a shared experience allowed them to be more positive, refreshed and more relaxed about their studies. For example;

we had more of a laid back but positive attitude. We just approached life very differently. For those who stayed, it was a little bit more bland, plodding along. I remember coming back and being excited. (2013–2014 cohort)

Partly this can be attributed to the requirement to pass the year abroad, but that the grades obtained would not be incorporated into the degree classification. More than half of the

interviewees (55%) suggested that this structure allowed them to 'stress' less about their performance whilst abroad. Some students made a link with using the experience to acquire new or different skills. Skills appeared as often in the interviews as gaining legal 'knowledge' in terms of strengthening ability. This is neatly summed up by one graduate as follows:

I changed my approach to study. I felt that perhaps by being more relaxed and also more looking at things from a completely different perspective, which I then transferred to my fourth year. I think that's what made the difference for me. (2014–2015 cohort)

The interviews therefore reveal that an increase in self-confidence and maturity were seen as key to increased academic achievement, with study skills and subject-specific knowledge having only a limited effect. The Waters and Brooks (2010) study of UK students who undertook full degree programmes overseas characterized many students as middle-class and privileged, whose decisions to study abroad were not due to strategic planning but the search for 'adventure'. They were therefore 'accidental achievers' in accruing cultural capital. The findings here do not fully align with these findings since most of the interviewees made the link between gaining skills which would contribute to academic achievement, as well as the excitement of living abroad. As neither the statistical nor interview data questioned the background of the students, it is not possible to investigate this point further.

The interviews revealed that the experience of living abroad was both the primary motivation factor as well as the contributor to their increase in confidence. Few students felt that the *knowledge* acquired abroad would directly help in the subjects taken upon returning. This suggests that doing a 'useful' activity whilst abroad is paramount. Many of the participants found that the fact the year abroad did not count towards their degree classification, though they were obliged to pass, meant that they could explore different means of study. This exploration and the accompanying reflection/comparison with previous study habits could account for improvements in academic achievement. Participants were quick to underline that the year abroad was not a 'holiday', characterizing it in terms of a 'break' from their regular pattern of study was identified as a contributing factor towards returning home refreshed and able to better focus on the demands of their final year. Therefore, we do not know whether taking a leave of absence from studies for a year might have a similar effect. But the reasons cited by the students in *reflecting* on their performance suggests that the change in environment and the challenges this posed explains their better performance.

Conclusion

This article considered whether studying abroad helps academic achievement. Two supplementary questions on the effect on the academic grades of students who have studied abroad compared to those who have not and how participating students perceived academic achievement were also asked. The first sub-question is answered by the use of extensive data from Sheffield Law School. The data demonstrates a clear impact on the academic achievement of students who study abroad. Students who do so can be expected to achieve overall higher grades and, crucially, degree classes. Although the extent to which average grades can be expected to improve by students returning compared to those who remained appears to be rather modest, this highlights the peculiar nature of the UK marking system in humanities/social sciences, in which marks 'bunch' around the 55–65 range. The data shows that students who went abroad increased the likelihood of

graduating with a first or 2:1 class. With the importance of the overall classification into broad bands at the end of a degree, and the 2:1/2:2 being the most crucial, the increased trajectory is likely to have a significant impact for many students who would not have achieved the same class had they not gone abroad.

The findings to the second sub-question can be summarized as follows. Academic achievement is not understood to be limited to grades by the participants, but a wider education experience, which the majority of respondents felt went hand-in-hand with increased confidence and skills acquisition. The statistical evidence shows that students who study abroad are, on average, already achieving slightly higher grades. There is, therefore, an element of self-selection and the study does not take into account the individual circumstances of students who opted to spend time abroad or not. Nevertheless, the experience of doing something different for a year, including engaging with different aspects of their discipline and in a new environment is strongly suggestive of a 'we' feeling amongst the growing number of students who opted to study abroad, upon their return. The large cohort of returning students allowed them to reflect on a shared and collective experience that may not have been apparent to them before departure.

Both the statistical data and interview responses demonstrate that study abroad generally does help academic achievement. Nevertheless, some significant caveats to this finding are required. There is a distinction to be made between the nature of academic study as contributing to a greater knowledge base, the acquisition of skills relevant to study, and the increase in maturity and self-confidence which the experience of living abroad facilitates. All of these factors play into examination results. It would be extremely useful to look into the circumstances where additional maturity, gained through work placements (whether or not these take place abroad; or whether they are undertaken prior to a degree or during it) or other activities, would lead to similar findings. It also needs to be underlined that this article examined one department of a UK institution, which did not employ selection for participation or require the 'conversion' of grades from abroad due to the impossibility to achieving fairness with results from 30 + overseas destinations.

In the UK context, the ongoing process of leaving the EU, which implies leaving the Erasmus+ scheme, means that greater emphasis is needed on the importance of studying abroad for academic achievement as much as cultural ability and the acquisition of skills. This study demonstrates the importance of studying abroad on academic achievement which should not be underestimated and should, therefore, be part of the ongoing debate. Although beyond the scope of this study, the marketization and costs associated with higher education in the UK and the effects these have on students from different socio-economic backgrounds needs to be more fully explored. The headline finding of this study, however, is that the possibility of strengthening academic achievement can, and should, be considered part of the educational benefits of undertaking study abroad.

Notes

1. The programme has undergone various changes in name and scope since its inception. However, the 'core' is the exchange of students between HE institutions in different participating states (28 EU members, plus certain others including Norway and Turkey) for a period of 3-10 months.

2. For example, the UK national agency website for Erasmus+: <https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/what-can-i-do>
3. The regulations for classification are set by individual universities in the UK. The full Regulations used by the University are publicly available: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.422820!/file/XV_general-regulations-for-first-degrees.pdf. For more general information, see Universities UK (2017).
4. For further details, see <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/law/exchange>
5. Telephone interviews were selected as it would not be possible to meet face-to-face, as few graduates live in Sheffield. Semi-structured interviews allowed deeper exploration of the motivation for studying abroad than a survey.
6. As the data covers average grades for each student, it is not possible to show whether the different groups of students had a similar preponderance of first class grades.

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Notes on contributor

Paul James Cardwell is Professor of Law and Associate Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Until 2017, he was Reader at the School of Law, University of Sheffield. He is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (PFHEA). His area of research is EU law and policy, but he has a particular interest and expertise in the internationalization of higher education in the UK and is currently researching the impact of Brexit on the sector.

ORCID

Paul James Cardwell  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7485-3474>

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