Chapter 1 - Decision Making: *Spatio-temporal Contexts of Decision-making in Education Abroad*

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Highlights:

- A decision to study abroad is rarely an individual one; instead it is usually strongly influenced by the surrounding social context.
- Decisions are typically influenced by students' social characteristics, particularly their social class.
- The institutional setting and wider economic and political context can also often have an important bearing on decisions whether to study abroad at all and, for those who do go, their destination.

1.0 Introduction and Chapter Overview

On University College London's education abroad pages, students and staff are able to view the 'vlogs' of those who have returned from a short period (a term to a year) overseas, as part of their 'British' undergraduate degree programme. From Japan to Sweden, Singapore to Australia, a range of destination countries and 'equivalent' institutions are available to students wanting to experience some time living and studying in another country. The institution is able to convert, on students' return, the courses they took overseas into 'credit' for their British degree course. The students are effusive in their tales of excitement, fun, love and culture shock, captured in the vlogs. When difficulties arose, they were overcome, and the students emerged stronger and better able to cope with the world as a result. And yet, under a third of the college's total undergraduate student body (29.3% for 2017/2018) actually take this opportunity (open to all students with the necessary academic grades). This specific vignette leads us to ponder some interesting questions about the decision-making process underpinning education abroad[1].

An increasing number of students within the European Union and more widely are being given the opportunity, as part of a higher education degree programme, to study for a period (usually between one term and one year) abroad (Seal, 2018; Sidhu and Dall'Alba, 2017). These programmes include Erasmus, summer schools, 'study China' programmes and international volunteering partnerships arranged through home universities. These trends necessarily prompt various intellectually-driven questions about the decision for education abroad, and how it is realised. From the perspective of some students, in many ways, the decision may seem like no decision at all – the opportunity to spend some time overseas in an institution of roughly equal global standing, with often subsidised fees and living costs, seems too good to be true. However, it is clear that this ostensibly individual, individualised 'decision' represents, *inter-alia*, a longer (socialisation) process and a wider (social, political and institutional) context than the individual student (Brooks and Waters, 2011). As reflected upon by McCormack and Schwanen (2011):

> 'Despite the ease with which decisive moments can be identified and accounted for retrospectively, the decision remains a spectral event, difficult to pin down or isolate as a bounded moment. Equally, while often assumed to be taken by an individual, the decision is not so easily located within the limits of a self-contained, sovereign subject, emerging instead as a distributed, relational process…In this context it becomes all the more important to address the question of

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[1] The authors chose to begin this chapter with an example from a UK higher education institution because, over the past few decades, short-term international mobility has become an increasingly important priority for individual UK universities as well as the UK government more generally. The UK clearly has a long history of encouraging inward diploma mobility but, since the early 2000s, has also emphasised the importance of short-term outward mobility of UK students.

where, when, and how decision-making takes place and the practices and techniques that aim to facilitate this process towards different political and ethical ends. Equally importantly, it becomes imperative to examine how practices of decision-making are implicated in space-times–that is, to examine how decision-making takes place in particular spatio-temporal contexts….' (McCormack and Schwanen, 2011, p. 2801 - 2802)

This chapter focuses on the particular spatio-temporal contexts of decision-making around education abroad. It considers decisions students make about whether or not to engage in short-term international mobility and also, for those who *do* decide to study abroad, how they choose a country and institution. Reflecting the biases inherent in wider literature on which it draws[2], the chapter focuses largely, although not exclusively, on migration to the Global North and to Anglophone nations in particular.

2.0 Key Questions to be Addressed

There are many theories of decision-making that have informed work on international student mobility, such as: 'rational choice theory' (e.g. Lörz, Netz and Quast, 2016), 'expectancy theory' (Sánchez, Fornerino & Zhang, 2006), and the 'theory of planned behaviour' (e.g. Presley, Damron-Martinez and Zhang, 2010). These studies show that decision-making is not an unfettered process – an exercise in free will and agency - but, rather, it is embedded within pre-existing societal structures underpinned by fundamental inequalities (Brooks and Waters, 2011). In other words, the importance of the *socio-economic context* is highlighted in all of these studies. It is this *context* to decision-making in international student mobility that shall be the focus here, drawing in particular upon Bourdieu's theories of capital, which encompasses the notion of 'habitus' (a form of socialisation) – a fundamental determinant of decision-making amongst young people.

Students are shaped by their social class and family background and gender, amongst other factors (Brooks and Waters, 2011). Students' attitudes towards education and travel clearly influence the decision to study abroad, but these attitudes are themselves the product of a familial habitus and a particular *milieu*. Furthermore, higher education institutions (HEIs) both direct and enable education abroad to a large extent, marketing particular destinations, and providing practical support (necessary 'support structures') to students. And then there is the essential wider economic and political context to study, including the role played by national and supranational organisations. Consequently, this chapter draws upon the extant academic literature and debates around student mobilities and higher education internationalisation to discuss 'decision-making' around education abroad in the fullest possible way. The following key questions are posed and at least partially answered:

- How do students' social characteristics impact decision-making around education abroad?
- How are students' attitudes towards education abroad formed?
- What is the role played by HEIs in enabling and directing education abroad?
- How does the wider economic and political context direct decision-making around short-term educational mobilities?

These questions provide a frame through which to understand that decision-making is rarely an individualised process and is, instead, often strongly influenced by the particular social contexts in which we live. The next section of the chapter provides a synthesis of the global literature on education abroad decision-making.

3.0 Review of the Literature

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[2] See Jazeel's (2018) piece on 'decolonizing geographical knowledge' for reflections on the biases in academic literature and citation practices.

3.1 Students' social characteristics

Extant research has provided clear evidence of the significant impact a student's social class and family background can have on a decision to move abroad for part of a degree programme. Within Europe, for example, this has been noted with respect to the 'Erasmus' scheme, in which students from more affluent backgrounds have tended to be over-represented (Findlay et al., 2006; Lorz et al. 2016; Bahna, 2018). Studies of short-term mobility among Chinese students have also emphasised the importance of family background. Those interviewed as part of Hansen's (2015) research in Denmark were all middle class and reliant on financial support from their families. Many have theorised such influences in terms of Bourdieu's 'capitals' noting the influence exerted by economic capital (e.g., through having enough money to be able to afford flights to and from the destination country, for example, or expensive accommodation), cultural capital (e.g., a familiarity with other cultures and previous experience of international travel that can help reduce the anxiety of studying abroad), and social capital (such as links to others, particularly friends and other peers, who have spent time abroad, who can offer advice and also reduce the 'fear of the unknown') (see, for example, Bahna (2018)). Research from the US has also highlighted the impact of students' social networks on a decision to embark on education abroad schemes (Luo and Jamieson-Drake, 2015). Moreover, scholars have argued that the deployment of these capitals is linked to a broader process of social reproduction, whereby more privileged groups in society use their advantages (the capitals outlined above) to access education abroad opportunities, in the belief that they will help to secure 'distinction' post-graduation, particularly when students are entering the labour market (Murphy Lejeune, 2003; Bahna, 2018; King, 2018). Here, there are strong similarities with studies that have shown how 'diploma mobility' (i.e. moving abroad for the whole of a degree) is often motivated by an equivalent desire to secure distinction (Prazeres et al., 2017).

However, the literature also provides examples of how these patterns can, in some cases, be disrupted. For example, practical and emotional support and encouragement offered by families can have a significant influence on decisions, but is not always obviously related to the possession of particular capitals (Seal, 2018). It also suggests that some decisions are not 'strategic' in this way, and prioritise travel, enjoyment and new experiences instead (Seal, 2018). Seal's (2018) work shows how educational institutions can increase participation in mobility schemes among traditionally under-represented groups – by, for example, giving them easy access to peers who have successfully completed a period overseas previously, and providing extensive information and support to those who show an initial interest. Moreover, Deakin (2014) has argued that the introduction of paid work placements as part of the Erasmus mobility scheme had a notable effect in widening access, particularly among those from low income families. The clear implication of this analysis is that students from less affluent families are not necessarily deterred by the idea of living abroad per se, but by the anticipated financial outlay of such a move. The literature provides examples of a small number of cases where institutions have sought to address some of the financial barriers experienced by students. At the University of Queensland, Australia, staff from the School of Nursing assisted students to raise funds for a group-based learning trip to Cambodia and work in a local health clinic. Here, the funds raised by students were matched by the School, reducing the financial barriers to overseas study (Sidhu and Daell'Alba, 2017).

While the majority of studies that have considered the impact of students' social characteristics have tended to focus on social class and family background, some research has illustrated the role played by other variables such as age, ethnicity and gender, as illustrated in the next chapter of this volume. Subject of study can also impact education abroad decisions, with arts and humanities students more likely to avail themselves of opportunities to move abroad than their peers in other disciplines (e.g. Amendola and Restaino, 2017; Stroud, 2010). Furthermore, American research has suggested that studying at a university further away from the parental home is positively correlated with propensity to engage in education abroad (Stroud, 2010).

3.2 Students' attitudes, dispositions and interests

Alongside research on the social characteristics of students, and how they impact on decisions whether or not to engage in short-term mobility programmes, studies have examined the importance of students' attitudes[3] and/or dispositions. (It is important to note, however, that attitudes are often closely linked with social characteristics, and particularly social class.) Firstly, research has highlighted the, perhaps unsurprising, influence of a desire for travel, and personal and professional development (see, for example, Lai's (2015) study of Chinese students in Japan). In Dall'Alba and Sidhu's (2015) Australian study the most common reasons given by the research participants for studying abroad related to gaining life experience, such as travel, meeting new people and experiencing new cultures. Bartram (2013) has argued that there is sometimes a significant disconnect between students' positive attitudes towards *being* abroad and their less positive attitudes to *studying* abroad. In his UK-based study, respondents felt relatively under-prepared for the academic component of their education abroad, largely because their primary motivation had been to spend time abroad rather than study their degree subject in an overseas institution. Similarly, Polish research has highlighted the significance to students of what Bótas and Huisman (2013) call 'Erasmus tourism'. An interest in other cultures has also been shown to be positively correlated with intent to study abroad as part of a degree programme (Stroud, 2010). Thus, on the whole, research on education abroad has suggested that students are perhaps less motivated by the intention to secure 'distinction' from other students (see discussion above) than those who embark on whole-degree mobility. Indeed, students are often motivated by a desire to have fun and gain new experiences rather than anything more 'strategic' (see also Waters and Brooks, 2011).

Research has, however, highlighted that education abroad can be seen as a valuable opportunity to gain new skills and competencies, which may advantage students when they enter the labour market at the end of their higher education. On the basis of their analysis of the decisions of Erasmus students from 26 nations, Lesjak et al. (2015) argue that both professional and personal motivations are significant. The former include a desire to learn or improve a foreign language, develop new contacts and improve employment opportunities. In general, however, these were viewed by students as less important than more intrinsic motivations such as experiencing something new, personal growth, and learning about different cultures. Research conducted with Italian students also suggests that both personal and professional motivations are important; in this case, however, relatively greater emphasis was placed on the latter (Amendola and Restaino, 2017; see also Van Mol and Timmerman, 2013).

3.3 Higher education institutions

Students' decisions are also influenced by the institutional context in which they are located (Beerkens et al. 2016). At the most fundamental level, this relates to the extent to which opportunities for mobility are provided and/or integrated into the curriculum at their home higher education institution. Research has highlighted that there are important disparities here. Although HEIs may feel an increasing pressure to make such opportunities available to their students, in many nations, education abroad tends to be better supported and promoted within prestigious and higher status institutions (that are perhaps under more pressure to demonstrate their international credentials (see discussion below)). Hansen's (2015) study of Chinese exchange students in Denmark notes, for example, that all participants come only from high status institutions. The promotion of education abroad opportunities often falls to specific individuals within higher education institutions, typically located within international units or their equivalent. Research conducted in Poland by Bótas and Huisman (2013) demonstrates the ways in which these various institutional actors attempt to influence students' mobility decisions – in this case, in relation to the Erasmus programme. They argue

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[3] Here, the authors are using 'attitudes' in a broad sense, and not in the narrower way it may be used in social psychology or political science, for example.

that, in their interactions with students, local international officers and Erasmus co-ordinators emphasise primarily the positive impact participation is likely to have on the students' human capital and their 'market value'. The framing of the mobility experience is thus, in Poland, mainly about the development of professional advantage rather than the 'fun' alluded to above.

Another example of how education abroad opportunities are marketed to students by their institutions is provided by Sidhu and Dall'Alba (2017) with respect to the University of Queensland in Australia. Reflecting some of the themes that are touched upon in the Polish study, Sidhu and Dall'Alba argue that studying abroad is promoted largely as what they call a 'strategy of distinction'. They note that the materials accessed by students about education abroad opportunities tend to be characterised by unclear academic objectives and competing institutional priorities, arguing that this ambivalence is shaped by the particular Australian context 'in which international study has been regarded, on the one hand, as a revenue source or, alternatively, as an elite project of self-improvement' (p.481). Despite this ambivalence, they contend that mobility is closely related to the labour market, and that more progressive outcomes (such as learning from those from the Global South, and rethinking one's own cultural habitus) are thus not explored. They contend that the strategies for outward mobility in place at the University of Queensland are typical of those in numerous other national contexts, which 'have focused on training for global entrepreneurs through a series of instrumentalist, disembodied pedagogies' which, at best 'produces banal cosmopolitanism in students; at worse, it creates the conditions for cultural misrepresentations and exploitative relations with the planet and its people' (p.481).

While these wider discourses are important in framing the way in which educational mobility is discussed and understood, research has also highlighted the impact of more practical interventions made by HEIs. Local support structures, for example, can be important to students – both while they are making a decision about whether or not to study abroad, and then once they are in their destination country. Bartram's (2013) survey of UK students, based at a range of different higher education institutions, engaged in education abroad, indicated that only about two-thirds believed that their academic, practical and socio-cultural needs had been met. Moreover, the majority of students reported trying to meet their needs themselves, rather than drawing on systems in their institution (or even the resources available in their social networks) (ibid.). More work appears necessary here to ensure that students are supported in their mobility decisions. As noted above, local financial aid can also facilitate mobility and open up opportunities to traditionally under-represented groups, whether this be at a regional level (in the example of the paid work placements introduced as part of the Erasmus scheme (Deakin, 2014)), or local schemes targeted at specific course groups (in the example of the nursing students at the University of Queensland (Dall'Alba and Sidhu, 2015)). Curriculum innovations can also facilitate short-term mobility, including the development of joint master's programmes, where students are required to spend part of their programme at one or more partner institutions (see Papatsiba (2014) for an examination of joint master's programmes within Europe).

3.4 Wider economic and political context

Decisions about whether or not to move abroad for part of a higher education programme are also informed by the wider economic and political context in which both institutions and individuals are situated (Rodríguez González et al., 2011). The increasingly globalised market for higher education has put pressure on HEIs to indicate their international credentials, promote a global image and engage in student mobility programmes (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Demonstrating an 'international profile' is deemed important, within this context, as a means of attracting both home and international students and signalling the status of the institution (Daella' Alba and Sidhu, 2015). This can then have a material impact on the decision-making processes of students. Moreover, as many graduate employers are now recruiting from universities across the world, rather than from national markets – what Brown et al. (2011) have called the 'global war for

talent' – higher education leaders feel increasing pressure to prepare their students to work in companies based outside their own nation-state and to compete with graduates from universities worldwide. Spending a period abroad, as part of a degree programme, can be seen as an effective means of developing the inter-cultural competencies believed to be required by such graduate recruiters.

Both national and regional governments, and supranational organisations have encouraged movement in this direction. For example, the European Union has currently a target in place that, by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education students within Europe will have spent a period studying or training abroad, and various national governments in the region have incorporated this target into their own national plans. Similarly, wealthier Asian nations such as Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and Korea have recently sought to increase participation in short-term mobility programmes, while Japan, Korea and China have worked together to develop a framework for standardising assessment of student work and certifying credits to help facilitate student mobility within the region (Dall'Alba and Sidhu, 2015). The US also implemented a short-term mobility target in the early years of the 21st century (to have one million American undergraduate outward mobility participants by 2017) although this was subsequently adversely affected by domestic financial problems (ibid.)

Similarly, the national and/or international economic context – in which many graduates fail to secure 'graduate-level' jobs, and top companies engage in an internationally-focussed 'war for talent' (Brown et al., 2011) – can impress upon students themselves that they need to do all they can to improve their economic position. From this perspective, education abroad can be seen as a means of differentiating oneself from other graduates, and developing intercultural skills and other competences thought to be valued within the workplace. Van Mol and Timmerman (2014) also argue, on the basis of their research with participants in intra-European mobility programmes, that students' motivations are influenced by economic factors and, specifically, the comparisons they draw between the macroeconomic situation in their own country and that in the possible destination countries. For example, in countries where employment is precarious for many graduates, spending a period abroad can be viewed as a strategy to minimise future labour market risk (ibid.) (see also Cairns (2014) in relation to the educational mobility decisions of young people from 'economically peripheral' countries within Europe). As noted in the previous discussion, this perception that education abroad will enhance one's employability is commonly reinforced by those individuals (from international offices, for example) promoting such experiences (Bótas and Huisman, 2013) as well as often being engrained within the institutional discourse. There is less clarity, however, on the actual impact on employment of a period spent studying abroad (see Wiers-Jenssen et al., this volume, chapter 9).

3.5 Where to go and what to study

The final part of this section turns to decisions about institution and host country. Although many short-term mobility schemes within higher education institutions emphasise the wide variety of possible destinations, scholarship in this area has consistently pointed to the very circumscribed geographies of education abroad (see, for example, Rodríguez González et al., 2011). Students tend to choose between a limited range of countries, frequently privileging those that are larger, richer and Anglophone. In many cases, they are also restricted to the countries with which their institution has a prior agreement. In relation to intra-European mobility, for example, research has shown how students typically move from countries that have a more marginal position within Europe – both economically and politically – to nations that have long been part of the European project and which tend to exert more political power. Thus, the most popular destination countries within Europe are Germany, the UK, Italy, France and Spain whereas the countries that send the largest proportion of their student population abroad include Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Lichtenstein (European Commission, 2015). Recent research by Balaz et al. (2017) has shown, further, how 'connectivity factors', such as language, spatial proximity, and established flows of labour, trade and knowledge underpin dominant patterns of intra-European mobility.

Caruso and de Wit's (2015) analysis of patterns of short-term mobility within Europe for the period 1998-2009 has suggested that country choice is affected, primarily, by the amount spent on higher education students (i.e. students are likely to choose countries where higher education services are adequately funded). Secondary influences include: the perceived level of safety within the destination country; its degree of openness; and its Gross Domestic Product (Caruso and de Wit, 2015; Lesjak et al., 2015). There are clear links here to the points made previously about the impact of the wider macro-economic context. Studies have indicated that the culture of the destination country can also be influential. Indeed, Lesjak et al.'s (2015) analysis of the motivations of Erasmus students suggests that some of the key reasons given by their respondents for choosing particular countries for education abroad included the perceived richness in cultural attractions and sights, an interesting history, and the variety of public events on offer. The destinations of students beyond Europe are also limited. Despite some growth in regional credit mobility with Asia (discussed above), the international literature indicates that students still tend to prefer moving to nations in the Global North, while patterns of movement often continue to be shaped by previous colonial relationships (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Börjesson, 2017; Franca et al., 2018; Sidhu and Dell'Alba, 2017). It should also be noted that students' choices are very often constrained by the prior arrangements for exchanges developed by their particular HEI and cannot simply 'choose' a destination. Educational mobility thus remains far from worldwide in its geographical scope.

4.0 Implications for Practice

Given the close relationship between education abroad and social-class status, the findings with respect to possibilities for *widening access* to education abroad opportunities are important. They relate to questions about how educational systems can be transformative (enabling students to *improve* their social positioning/class standing), not merely reproductive and, consequently, regressive (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). The Erasmus scheme has been notable in the financial incentives and support it provides (potentially) to less wealthy students (and, as noted above, the extension of Erasmus funding to work placement schemes has had a positive impact on the participation of students from lower socio-economic groups (Deakin, 2014)). However, it is also necessary to recognise that the type of higher education institutions (more elite) supporting education abroad programmes themselves tend to be accessed by already more privileged students. There are limits to the kinds of social transformation mobility schemes can effect when they tend to be offered within already 'elite' institutions with circumscribed student intakes.

Nevertheless, the goal of governments and institutions should be to try to widen access along class lines to short-term mobility schemes, not least for the cultural and social capital that such mobility would seem (overwhelmingly, according to the literature) to provide. The literature would also suggest that mobility begets mobility (Weichbrodt, 2014) – young people undertaking short-term mobility programmes were far more likely to engage in future mobility for study or work. Short-term mobility, and the opportunities it provides, are almost always advantageous for young people. Offering support for students, therefore, is crucial: whether that is financial support (through scholarships and bursaries), logistical support (with arranging flights, finding accommodation and providing insurance) or more general institutional support with the whole process of applying for and securing overseas placements. The literature suggests that students are often having to rely on their own social networks and this can only result in disadvantaging less privileged individuals. Support for outward mobility can also involve curriculum innovation (such as joint degree programmes) to facilitate exchanges, and policy intervention to ensure that institutions more usually accessed by less privileged students are themselves set up to support outward mobility. Moreover, it is important to note that supporting students in this way is rather different from the marketing-led approach to education abroad often seen at governmental- and institutional-level. The marketing of the (sometimes only assumed) benefits of studying abroad is clearly not the same as actually supporting students in taking an informed decision about whether and, if so, where to study abroad.

5.0 Directions for Future Research

This review of work on decision-making to education abroad has drawn our attention to the fact that further research is needed on the particular socio-temporal contexts within which decisions to study (or not to study) abroad are made. These contexts have a decisive influence in determining who goes abroad and the social inequalities that may result. Other questions also arise about the amount of time spent abroad during their mobility experience and whether this is, in fact, important in students' experiences and subsequent outcomes. How does the period spent abroad impact upon the *value* of that experience? Ackers (2010), for example, has considered short-term mobility (as opposed to longer stays abroad) and how it influences the academic careers of scientists, with a particular focus on gender (there is an often held assumption that women, as primary carers of children, find it more difficult than their male counterparts to undertake longer periods of academic work overseas). She argues that there was, in fact, great value to be had in shorter stays, contrary to the expectation that only longer stays were of any benefit. Consequently, in the context of a wider academic literature on programme or longer-term mobility, short-term mobility should not be dismissed as insignificant or somehow less important. It might be easier for some students (those with fewer resources, caring responsibilities etc.) to undertake shorter periods of study overseas than studying for a whole degree, and yet the benefits might be equivalent.

Other areas that would benefit from further research include diversifying the focus on age and source/destination countries. A small amount of emerging research on younger students participating in short-term mobility programmes (e.g. Weichbrodt, 2014, on high-school exchanges in the US) suggests that more research is needed on the mobility of both younger students (pre-higher education) and more mature students (about which little is known when it comes to short-term mobility experiences). A more explicit focus on emergent south-south educational exchanges (see Waters and Leung, 2019) and, with that, an attempt to diversify geographically the academic literature on student mobilities (e.g. Jazeel, 2018), would also be hugely welcomed.

Further Reading

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