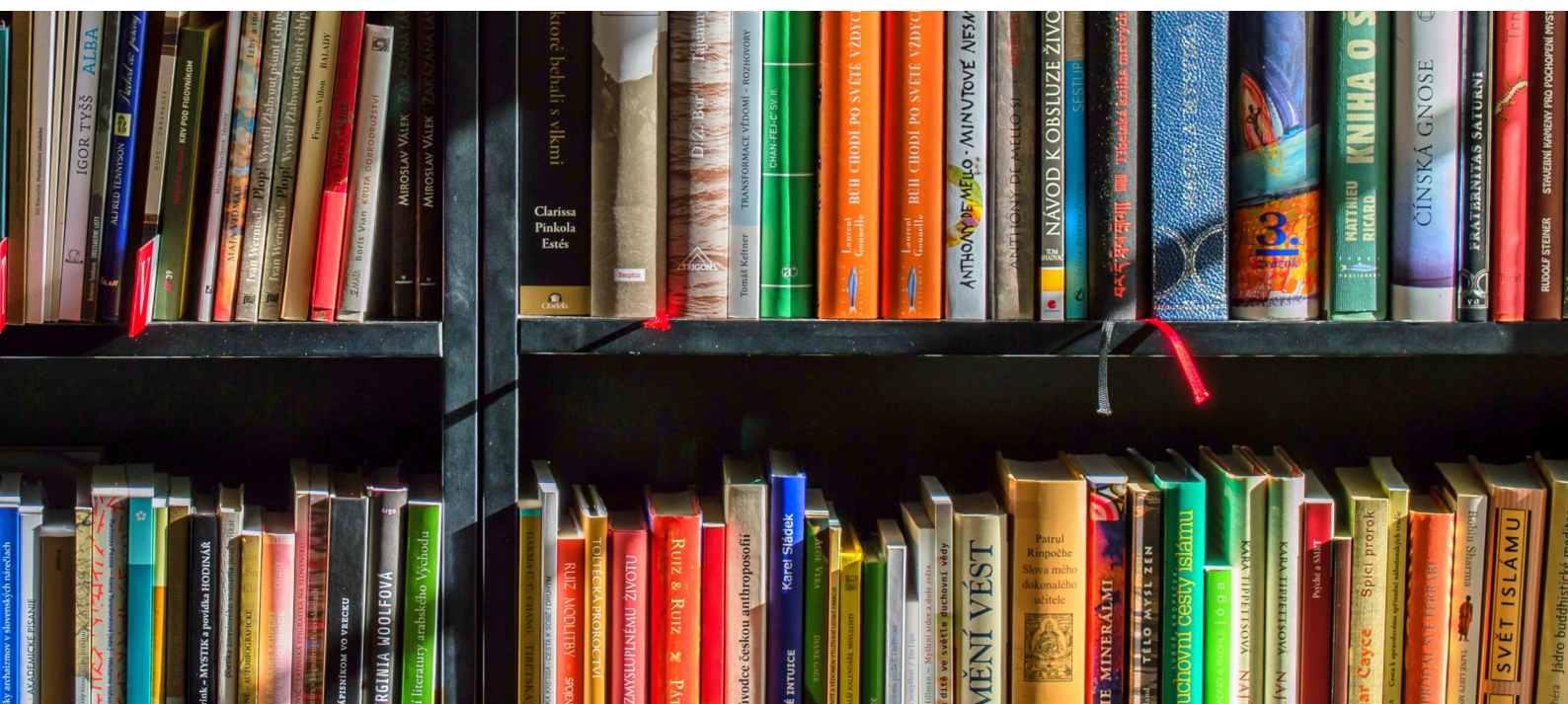


Development Education Research Centre

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Study Abroad and Student Mobility: Stories of Global Citizenship

Nicole Blum and Douglas Bourn

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Dr Nicole Blum and Professor Doug Bourn
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The UCL Study Abroad team, which leads on all aspects of student mobility at UCL from partnership management to student support, was also a key collaborator in the study. The team is working to implement the mobility target of UCL's Global Engagement Strategy and provide an international experience to 30% of the undergraduate cohort by 2020. Year on year growth of outward mobility culminated in a total of 29.3% of UG students going abroad in 2017/18, with the 2020 target in sight. The formal introduction of short-term mobility at UCL in 2017 has also had a significant impact on outgoing numbers, with increasing numbers of students taking advantage of a broader range of mobility options.

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Introduction

The opportunity to study abroad is broadly hailed as a route for young people to develop a wide range of knowledge and skills, including intercultural understanding, interpersonal skills, and language learning, among many others. Universities around the world are investing significant resources in developing a variety of study abroad programmes, ranging from short or long term in duration, and from guided to independent study. These may have a number of aims, including to promote individual student learning and development and to enhance student mobility and employability, particularly in the context of a rapid and changeable global employment market. The terms ‘global citizen’, ‘global graduate’, ‘global skills’ and ‘global mindset’ have all taken on increased significance within this context, along with accompanying debates about their relative merits for higher education (Hammond and Keating, 2017; Bourn, 2018).

A vast body of research over the last 30 years explores both the short and long term impacts of study abroad programmes on participants’ personal and professional development (see Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich, 2002; Paige *et al.*, 2009; Tarrant, 2010). While this research reveals a range of impacts on student learning and development through study abroad experiences, significant questions remain about how and when this takes place. Braskamp *et al.* (2009), for instance, argue that study abroad can encourage development in three major domains: cognitive (epistemological, awareness, knowledge), intrapersonal (identity, attitudes, emotion), and interpersonal (behavioural, skills, social responsibility), although this can vary at the individual level. They also insert a note of caution about assuming which types of learning and development may actually occur:

‘We often hear that students enjoy being abroad and that they learned so much, but the instruction still may be focused on what they learned rather than on how they think. Knowing that differences exist may not have been internalized enough so that it impacts the way students regard knowledge. Thinking critically may not be stressed in comparison to knowledge acquisition’ (2009, p. 110).

Recent research also highlights the growing popularity of short-term study abroad programmes (ranging in length from one to eight weeks) which are often seen as a route to increasing access to international experiences (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004; Whatley, 2017). While there is growing evidence of the impacts of such short-term experiences on participants, questions remain about the relative value of short vs long term study abroad (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2004; Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Llanes and Muñoz, 2009; Mapp, 2012). In all cases, however, providing support for returning students to reflect on and integrate their learning is a significant factor in encouraging long-term impacts (Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus, 2011). This finding builds on the work of key theorists of transformative and experiential learning, such as Mezirow (1991) and Dewey (1997), who insist that deep learning and changes in perspective require reflection.

Between 2014-2018, undergraduate students on UCL's Arts and Sciences (BASc) programme have had the opportunity to spend a year abroad in which they participate in courses at their host institution, develop language skills, and complete a Study Abroad dissertation (5,000 words) on the themes of globalisation and global citizenship. The authors of this report have been tutors on the dissertation, and have noted that study abroad often has a profound impact on students' knowledge and skills, world outlook and sense of social and political engagement. To investigate these themes further, we set out to gather further evidence from the students in order to better understand where and how the learning they have gained resonates with UCL's global citizenship and student mobility strategies.

Key Concepts

It is useful to begin by setting out the key concepts and themes which are relevant to this research – study abroad, global citizenship and mobility – and the relationships between them. The literature on these areas is vast, so here we will simply highlight key points of discussion and debate.

As a starting point, UCL clearly sets out the role and potential outcomes of study abroad, with a strong emphasis on the benefits to participants' enhanced employability, new experiences and skill development (see Box 1).

Box 1: Why Study Abroad?

Studying abroad offers exposure to a different cultural and academic environment, and can be both challenging and rewarding.

Below is our list of the top 5 reasons to study abroad:

- 1. Add value to your degree**
- 2. Enhance your employability**
- 3. Hone existing skills and develop new ones**
- 4. Improve your language skills**
- 5. Experience new cultures**

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/studyabroad/why-study-abroad>

This perspective is mirrored by research evidence highlighting a range of drivers for individual choices to study abroad and the wider factors which can both promote and inhibit mobility (Findlay *et al.*, 2006; Caruso and De Wit, 2013; Van Bouwel and Veugelers, 2013). For individuals, this can include economic drivers such as the desire for increased employability (see Boden and Nedeva, 2010 for a useful critique of this concept), social drivers such as the desire for ‘international experience’, or to develop particular skills (e.g. language, intercultural communication).

Within higher education, an increasing emphasis on mobility through study abroad can be seen as part of a wider response to globalisation and internationalisation demands, which may be complemented by efforts to ‘internationalise at home’ and to ‘internationalise the curriculum’ (de Wit 2002 cited in Dvir and Yemini, 2017). Recent research has noted that opportunities to study abroad are increasingly valued as a kind of ‘passport to new professional, social, cultural and above all personal experiences’ (Pedro and Franco, 2016, p. 1630).

Similarly, globalisation and internationalisation demands forge strong links between mobility, study abroad and the idea of global citizenship. While the term global citizenship is increasingly prominent in discourses of higher education, there continues to be substantial debate about its core meaning and aims. Scholars such as Caruana (2014), for instance, suggest a split between initiatives which tend to emphasise a more cosmopolitan or ‘soft’ approach to global citizenship (e.g. learning *about* global issues) and those that encourage development of more critical perspectives on global issues and concerns, with the first tending to be more common in practice. Although a few useful typologies have been proposed as a way of interrogating the concept more deeply (see Andreotti, 2006; Oxley and Morris, 2013), these have tended to be based on educational practice in schools and/ or informal education, with global citizenship continuing to be under-theorised within higher education.

One helpful exception to this is recent work by Stein (2015) which identifies three positions on global citizenship within contemporary higher education - entrepreneurial, liberal humanist, and anti-oppressive. While the entrepreneurial position focuses on the economic imperatives of preparing graduates with the skills needed to successfully engage in the global labour market, the liberal humanist position emphasises the need for young people to cultivate greater understanding and appreciation of difference, sometimes as a complement to entrepreneurialism. The anti-oppressive position critiques both of these as located solely within Western worldviews which are not sufficiently critical, politicized or historicized, and advocates instead ‘for more equitable distribution of resources, cognitive justice, and more horizontal forms of governance, and aspires to radical transformation of existing structures, up to and including their dismantling’ (Stein, 2015, p. 246).

UCL’s own definition of global citizenship – which was also provided to BAsC students in the instructions for the study abroad dissertation – suggests an approach which incorporates

elements of all three existing approaches in Stein's typology, although perhaps to varying degrees (see Box 2). This variation is also evident in practice within the university, with diverse initiatives and programmes adapting the concept to particular disciplines and student groups (Bentall, 2018).

Box 2: What is Global Citizenship? UCL's Definition:

Our world is now more connected than ever before. But it also faces challenges. Big ones. Like infectious diseases, rapid urbanisation, and sustainability. To solve these global challenges, we need global citizens.

We need people who:

- **Understand the complexity of our interconnected world**
- **Understand our biggest challenges**
- **Know their social, ethical and political responsibilities**
- **Display leadership and teamwork**
- **Solve problems through innovation and entrepreneurship**

www.ucl.ac.uk/global-citizenship-programme/what-is-global-citizenship

Research Strategy

Given the discussions above, key questions for this study, therefore, were (i) how students themselves see study abroad as an opportunity for particular types of learning and skills development, and (ii) their perceptions of the impacts of that learning on their personal and professional development.

More specifically, the aims of the research were to:

- Identify the impact of the study abroad experience on BASc students' world outlook and their views about being global citizens.
- Investigate the extent to which the study abroad programme enables students to develop new knowledge and skills.
- Consider the extent to which the study abroad experience has influenced students' plans for their future careers.

The research was framed around four key methods: a literature review, a questionnaire and interviews with study abroad students, and analysis of student dissertations. Our initial literature review explored the themes of study abroad, student mobility and global citizenship, as highlighted above. The literature and our previous research experience on related issues informed the design of an online questionnaire distributed by email to all BASc students who studied abroad between 2015 – 2017 (n=77). At the end of the questionnaire, participants were also asked for permission to analyse their study abroad dissertations and if they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview. All data collected was analysed thematically (Silverman, 2006) and a number of key themes emerged – a discussion of which is provided below.

The Participants

As this was a pilot initiative to explore student perspectives, our aim was to recruit only a small group of student participants. Eleven students completed the online questionnaire and three agreed to participate in a follow-up interview. Despite the small size of the group, both methods revealed a range of interesting perspectives and narratives of study abroad, learning, mobility and global citizenship.

Of the students who participated in the study, 10 had studied abroad for a full academic year in one country and one split the year between two locations, so all had spent substantial time overseas. The locations where they studied included Canada (3), China (1), Australia (1), France (1), Hong Kong (1), the Netherlands (1), USA (2) and Russia (1). All were between 20 and 24, and the majority were female (9). Students self-identified as UK (7), EU (3) or international (1) in terms of their student status at UCL.

Reflections on Study Abroad and Mobility

In line with the existing research literature, the questionnaire identified three key student motivations for studying abroad, including personal development, international experience, or learning a new language or area of study (see Figure 1 overleaf).

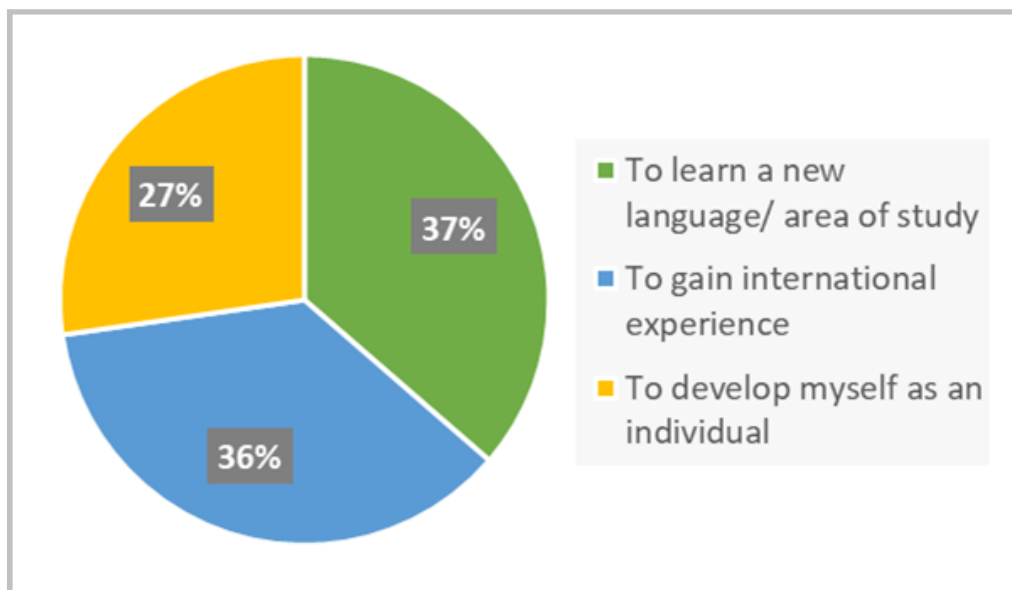


Figure 1: What was the main reason that you decided to study abroad?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the interviews students often identified a number of complementary motivations:

I definitely wanted to be studying in French, and so that left UDM or Paris. I thought, well Paris I can go to any time, and also I know that Paris is a lot more like London in the way it's a sort of fast paced, cosmopolitan city. So ... and I've never left Europe before actually, so I was like 'I want to go as far away as possible' (laughs) (S3)

I wanted to reinvent myself, I wanted to achieve academically.... I wanted to play sports, do debating... (S2)

While many hoped that studying abroad would help them to build particular knowledge and skills, others hoped for an even more transformative experience:

I came to McGill thinking I'm going to reinvent myself as a person, which was an expectation that from inside sounds very bold. It means that in a course or just changing the environment I'm going to change how I behaved for 22 years. Having strongly felt that it was kind of okay, and then turning into something completely different – I'm going to go to parties, and party and be outgoing and just like talk to people ... and that didn't happen because I didn't feel comfortable in doing that. And I just actually realised that that radical change of personality doesn't come easy. (S2)

When asked to reflect on the things they felt they had actually gained from the experience, a more complex view emerged: (see Figure 2 overleaf)

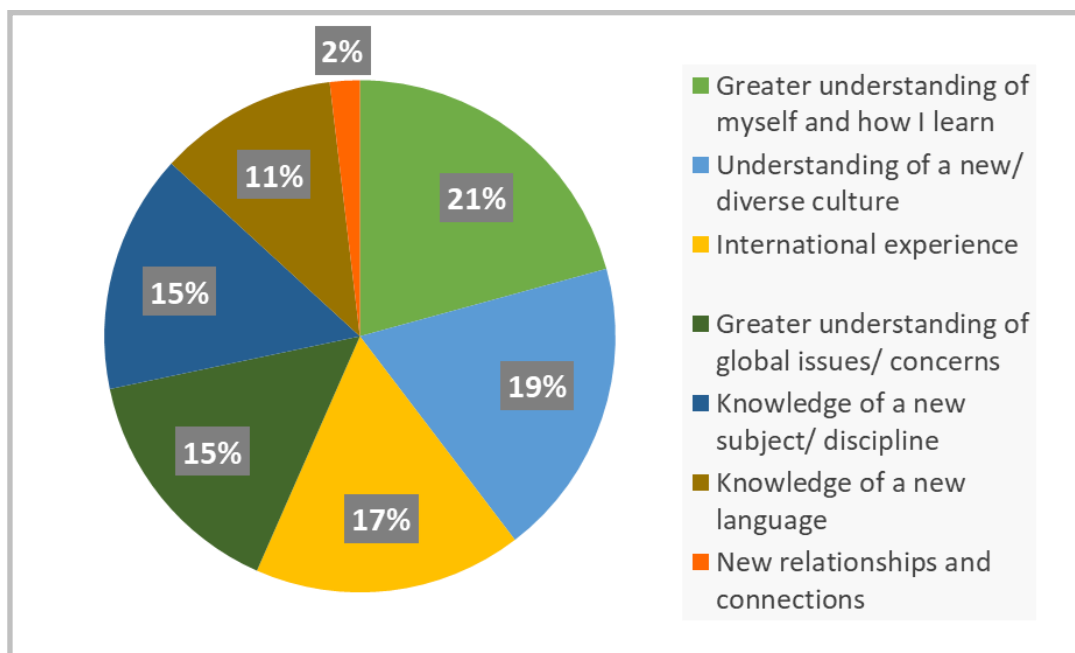


Figure 2: What do you feel you gained from studying abroad?

Related to this, each of the interviewees reflected how they had undergone significant personal changes through their experiences abroad:

I'm actually probably more open now to going and working in other countries or studying in other countries, and it doesn't feel impossible, it doesn't feel like this huge ordeal, like this huge challenge, because 'Oh I've done it now'. (S3)

... unfortunately, bad things usually come from places with good intentions - that was me years ago.... because I want to save the world, I see myself as the saviour, right? Now thankfully since I'm in university and [have] resources to read about these things critically and see what other people say and how they conceptualise it, I've come to understand how possibly harmful these kinds of perceptions about myself are. (S2)

Relatively few of the student participants noted, however, that they expected these personal changes to result in any changes to their career plans, although two did outline some very concrete changes:

The experience of studying abroad had a significant impact on my BAsC dissertation in final year, as well as on choice of further studies (a MSc in Law & Anthropology, where questions related global citizenship are often discussed and challenged). (Questionnaire respondent)

I really thought I was just going to learn French, but actually I got a lot out of it academically. I did new subjects, so I did sociology, and actually my dissertation I'm

now doing on Environmental Sociology which I'd never encountered til I'd been there. So that's pretty cool. But then also I took quite a lot of creative ... studies in sort of creative art, so video games and the cinema and comic books. And there's a huge industry, there's a huge games industry out there but also the arts are quite strong in Montreal. And it sort of convinced me that that was a legitimate career choice. I think before then I'd sort of seen that as ... you know creative industries is kind of a pipe dream, or it's something you do if you get lucky. But actually, out there [in Canada] there are people writing scripts for video games or films or ... and the fact that I could study it as an academic discipline made me realise that this is a legit thing ... it's not just this fanciful dream. So actually, I'm now hoping to go into radio. (Interviewee S3)

Reflections on Global Citizenship and Study Abroad

Both the questionnaire and interviews indicated that participants were often thinking deeply about the world and their place in it, and saw clear relationships between their study abroad experiences and the idea of global citizenship. All were familiar with the concept of global citizenship through their studies at UCL (often the study abroad dissertation), while three also noted that they had participated in the UCL Global Citizenship Programme. Two others had some previous experience of international volunteering. In their own words, they explain:

I really do think my sense of history has changed and sense of international politics has changed, and also a sense of what an English person is had changed. (S3)

Studying abroad was the first time I felt like I could call myself a global citizen. Before this, I had some awareness and interest in international issues, but had never left Europe and only travelled for brief periods of time. On returning, I found I had a reverse culture shock, and could relate better to international students studying in the UK. (Questionnaire respondent)

I think for me it's a concept that resonates personally with my study abroad experience because I'm myself from a mixed cultural background. I was able to explore just how my personal identity worked in that kind of conception. I think that a lot of people who are in my position who come from a mixed background - and I

think there are a lot of BASc students who are like that - we do see ourselves as people who are global citizens. We do see ourselves as part of different areas in the world. (S1)

Learning about colonialism and racism in the Netherlands taught me to reflect more on my own country's issues and ugly history. Thus, making me think more globally about the lives of individuals who have suffered as a result of colonialism. (Questionnaire respondent)

Studying abroad gives you the opportunity to understand a different culture and way of life. In this way, it is one of the most effective ways to cultivate global citizenship. An understanding of other people's way of life is crucial to developing global citizenship, and this can only be done by spending a considerable amount of time in a foreign location. (Questionnaire respondent)

There was, however, also some strong critique of the idea of the concept of global citizenship:

There might be some obvious connections - such as exposure to new cultures/societies - that can help one be more empathetic to 'global' issues that influence some societies, but not one's own. On the other hand, I do feel that any links between global citizenship and study abroad should be pointed out as they are not self-evident. This is especially the case if one travels to culture similar to one's own, or if one travels to high-income countries which might have the same blind spots as the UK when it comes to 'global' citizenship. (Questionnaire respondent)

There was also some critical commentary about UCL's approach to global citizenship, although it is not clear whether this related to the term as it is formally outlined in UCL's overarching definition or more generally in discourse around the university:

[I have gained] a better idea of the diversity of cultures around the world, but also of the very limited scope of 'global citizenship', as a very 'UCL' idea. I have never heard of it anywhere except UCL and struggled to write my year abroad dissertation about it because I felt it had no relevance to my study abroad. In my experience, it is not a concern in France, where being a good citizen is being a good citizen of France. I struggle with the idea that being a 'global citizen' is the 'right' way to be, because this is a concept, as far as I am aware, that was made up at UCL. (Questionnaire respondent)

This discussion suggests that students would welcome more opportunities to explore the concept of global citizenship through their studies abroad, as well as during their time at UCL. Themes related to global citizenship could be introduced during Study Abroad pre-departure events, for instance, as well as providing more spaces for reflection on these issues for returning students.

Support for Students

Given the range of different experiences and learning that students are likely to experience during their time abroad, the types of support available to them during their time away and on their return to the UK is also important. A number of students praised the BASc team for their support by email – especially when difficult situations arose overseas (e.g. illness, personal/ emotional concerns). Although all students are offered support from the team when they return, and many took this up, they also often expressed a desire for more opportunities to reflect on their learning with their peers:

I do think there should be some more structure for meeting with other people and sharing experiences. Because the other thing is, we're all suddenly ... the first time we all met up again as a year was when we were choosing our projects for the Knowledge Economy module. So suddenly... we haven't seen each other for a year, and we've all gone off and had really different experiences, and we want to talk about that, but we're trying to choose these projects... It would be really nice to hear other people's experiences. Because I think that would help you solidify and keep hold of some of what you've learnt out of it. (S3)

Concluding Remarks

The data from this study and the existing research literature highlight a range of push and pull factors which influence young people's study abroad decisions, as well as a wide range of ways in which the experience encourages (or does not) reflection on global issues and on students' sense of themselves in the world.

The evidence also suggests that a number of different kinds of learning take place during study abroad, including about particular topics/ issues, experiences of particular places and/ or exposure to new ideas. While these experiences can be highly significant for individuals, it is important to recognise that transformative learning may not happen without support. Students in this research clearly recognised the value of their study abroad learning and experiences, but also the need for more ways to reflect on this with

programme organisers and with peers, particularly if they are to be able to take their learning forward. As Caruana writes (2014, p. 89), 'the norm of mobility provides such a powerful underpinning for the values and assumptions of global perspectives, that it has become an almost exclusive frame of action, perception and identification of the global citizen'.

More research is needed, however, to more deeply explore how students themselves understand their experiences of study abroad and the ways in which their learning informs their lives in the future. This is perhaps particularly important in the context of increasingly diverse student groups as well as a rapid and changeable world. The students in this small-scale study, for instance, already had experience of interdisciplinary thinking through their studies on the BASc programme, which may have influenced their perspectives and experiences of both study abroad and global citizenship. Further research with students from a range of other disciplinary programmes could help to tease out alternative perspectives. Similarly, a larger scale study would provide an opportunity to explore any relative differences in perspectives and experiences related to diverse students' status at the university (i.e. home/ EU/ international). Another potentially rich area of exploration is the issue of how different types of mobility might impact upon perceptions of global citizenship. Would differences be seen, for example, between students studying, working, researching or volunteering abroad, or between those who studied abroad long-term versus short-term? Further research with UCL students currently involved in a diverse range of mobility opportunities through the university could provide highly useful insights in these areas.

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Development Education Research Centre (DERC)
UCL Institute of Education
33 Bedford Place
London WC1B 5JU