



## Final Year Student Transition and E-learning Support for Academic Re-Integration Following a Period of Work Placement or Study Exchange

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### ABSTRACT

This research identifies issues surrounding transitioning final year students after work placement or study exchange, with the view to assessing the perceived need for a blended e-learning approach for dissertation preparation. Literature has identified that transitioning student experiences can contribute to an achievement gap compared to their static peer group: shifting social identities of students on return from placement year and feelings of alienation within their home institution (Auburn, 2007); the level of support experienced differing between home and host institutions (Raikou & Thanassis, 2007); and information gained from peers rated higher than from their own universities (Alfaro, Boulosa, Andreu-Besó, De Lamo, Sobrado, Sanz & Arias, 2009). To date, few studies identify transitioning student centred issues with regard to dissertation preparation. This study utilised an extended quantitative questionnaire, building on a previous exploratory study (Houston & Carey, 2014). Data from focus groups with students and relevant teaching staff was triangulated and thematically analysed to inform the quantitative questionnaire. This was electronically distributed over a two-year period to all relevant level 4 students. Preliminary results evidence a negative perception of being treated differently than their peers who remained on campus. The cohort also placed a high expectation on the home institution in ensuring a structured approach to preparation for their return, whilst also identifying confusion with the nature and aim of the communication received. A majority stated they would access an online resource whilst on placement or exchange only with an element of home staff interaction. However, some did not consider any preparation for their return to home studies to be appropriate. The most effective form of support would be a mixture of pre-placement/exchange support, contact whilst away and again at the placement/exchange end. Results also indicated a possible mismatch with the information provided and that sought during transition.

**Keywords:** student transition; e-learning; study exchange; student re-integration; research methods; dissertation

### Background

This research aims to identify issues surrounding transitioning final year students after work placement or study exchange, with the view to assessing the perceived need for a blended e-learning approach for dissertation preparation. Research has identified specific issues that can be experienced by senior level students on returning to their studies at university after, for example, an exchange period at a non-British university or as a result of a placement within a company environment. These can include a feeling of alienation from their university due to time away (Auburn, 2007) which can translate to a lack of focus on the students' proposed research topic for their dissertation. This can sometimes lead to students experiencing lower levels of confidence with their academic studies, which in turn translates to a disengagement with the dissertation process.

### Literature review

According to the British Council, there were a record number of students studying or working abroad from 2014–16, with 86,585 participants in Erasmus+ programmes moving outwardly from the UK (British Council, 2017). In the literature commissioned by the British Council, which engages with issues surrounding this type of mobility (King, Findlay & Ahrens, 2010; Carbonell, 2014), the focus is mainly on causal factors which would increase student mobility, such as good promotional information, a well organised credit transfer system and easy access to mobility grants. When institutional support is mentioned, it is usually in the context of outgoing support and there is very little research about institutional support on the transition back into the university environment for the final stages of an academic programme. Furthermore, the increase in the up-take of exchange initiatives has not always been met with an element of support from the home institution: "UK universities could do more to provide clear and accurate information to prospective students about studying abroad. This could include highlighting the support they offer and the benefits study abroad can bring" (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2010). There is also evidence that the level of support experienced by students differs between the home and host institution with Raikou and Thanassis (2007, p. 349) identifying that the majority of students would rate the provision offered by the host institution as "better" than that offered by their own. In terms of information

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related to work-based placements, it is difficult to estimate the figures of the students involved in this type of activity as it forms part of their university degree in the UK. However, work-based 'sandwich' type placements or internships are common at most UK higher institutions and can vary in length from a few weeks to a whole academic year. The literature in this area primarily relates to the accumulation of valuable practice based experience to facilitate entry into the workplace and the development of increased personal confidence, especially when applying for jobs following the completion of an academic course (Deschaine & Jankens, 2017). Given that employability skills are the focus for this body of research (Little & Harvey, 2006; Brooks & Kay, 2014), there is a paucity of research relating to the experiences of transitioning into the university environment following a period in the workplace.

There is a specific need for home institutions to offer a continuity of support prior to the start of a final year of studies, especially for those re-entering. A particular issue for this group of students is the identification of a realistic and valid dissertation topic for completion of their degree during their final year. Some authors have identified this support as a necessary element of the supervision process stating: "As we have noted elsewhere, in order to best facilitate students' progress through the waves of 'chaos' and 'cosmos', it is imperative that they are not left to flounder alone and that they receive adequate supervision, making the transition from dependence to self-directed learning smoother" (Todd, Smith, & Bannister, 2006, p. 5). Although academic literature on work placements and study exchange initiatives regularly addresses such issues as language difficulties in the exchange partner institution (Camiciottoli, 2010); funding (Raikou & Thanassis, 2007); and the positive effects of these experiences on finding post study employment (Brandenburg, Berghoff & Álvarez 2014; Brooks & Kay, 2014), there have been few recent studies which seek to identify student centred issues which may affect the period following the placement/exchange year and adjustment back into the home institution. For example, Alfaro et al. (2009) investigated the motives and evaluations of students with regards to the available information sources related to exchanges and found that for their sample of Spanish students, the majority rated the importance of the information they gained from friends or classmates higher than that from the official and internal sources of their own universities. Auburn (2007, p. 123) also identified an issue with the "shifting social identities of students" on return from their placement year and feelings of alienation from their home institution and their previous peer group. This research suggests that the separation between practical and academic arenas was re-enforced by the academic staff in the home institution. This may be emphasised for students who have been on exchange as they would still be operating within the confines of an academic arena. Much research related to the effect of a period away from the university on placement or exchange relates to the influence of this experience on academic attainment. Naughton and Naughton (2016) and Mansfield (2011) suggest that a placement closely aligned to the academic discipline from which the student emanates will have a positive effect on overall academic achievement. However, Jones, Green and Higson (2015) further contended that better achieving students would be more likely to elect to do an industrial work placement. Therefore, the effect of the work experience on the final academic classification could be considered as minimal. In terms of the effect of a period of study exchange, highlighting the positive experience (Parey & Waldinger, 2011) and an increased desire for international mobility (Kuhn, 2012) are topics favoured in available research. This is in contrast to the part the study exchange played on the final academic classification achieved by the exchange student.

Transitioning back into the academic home institution is not at the forefront of research in this area. Additionally, within higher education as a whole, there is an identifiable shift from 'reactive support' to being 'supportive' (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009) which this research will seek to address. Therefore, the gap in research within the area of support for re-entry to the home academic environment following a period of work placement and/or study exchange is addressed in this investigation.

### Methods

The focus of this research is an institution where pre-departure advice and support is offered to students by staff through a series of chalk-and-talk, face-to-face preparatory sessions. Issues identified include: cultural issues when living abroad, requirements of working environments and the necessity to identify a dissertation topic prior to their return to the final year of study. An introduction to the dissertation process at this stage is an attempt to engage students and encourage the possibility of using an element of either their work placement or study exchange within their final year dissertation. All face-to-face pre-departure sessions are supported by an institution run virtual learning environment (VLE), utilising Blackboard, to which students are referred for their on and off campus information needs. The site contains a range of information on study exchanges, work placements and also an introduction to research methods and dissertation topic selection. Students are encouraged to use this site when away from the home institution as up-dated information is posted throughout the academic session by various staff. Students are also contacted by e-mail whilst they are off campus. Sometimes this method is used to convey a specific message with regard to, for example, deadlines for paperwork for their degree programme, or to sign-post them to the Blackboard site for further information. The site, which also contains relevant staff contact details, was intended as a 'one-stop-shop' for students away from the home institution. However, in the first year of its use, its effectiveness was unclear.

Therefore, this research aims to identify issues surrounding transitioning final year students after work placement or study exchange with the view to assessing the perceived need for a blended e-learning approach for dissertation preparation. Therefore, the study addressed the following objectives:

- To identify the formative learning requirements for a VLE to support students on placement, exchange and/or Erasmus with regard to research methods and dissertation studies.
- To identify the learning and pastoral support requirements of students involved in placement, exchange and/or Erasmus with regards to research methods and dissertation studies.

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- To establish the contents of a VLE which addresses the needs of all users and identify the criteria on which its effectiveness should be based.

Building on a previous exploratory study (Houston & Carey, 2014), this present study employed an extended quantitative questionnaire distributed to level 4 students transitioning back to their home institution. The initial exploratory study, designed as a pilot study, employed a mixed methods approach to capture views of both students and relevant university staff. Two separate focus groups were undertaken – one with a small group of self-selecting students (n=5) and a separate group of relevant university staff all of whom had a responsibility for level 3 and 4 transitioning students (n=5). The data from both focus groups was triangulated and thematically analysed to inform the quantitative questionnaire. A paper copy of a quantitative questionnaire was then distributed during class time to those final year business students who were transitioning from either a work placement or study exchange. This method returned 30 completed surveys from a population of 45 students (66.7%). Results evidenced that although students were aware of formal e-mailed communication from their home institution (63%), many would trust their peers for information on returning from a time away (40%) with a university facilitated Blackboard site only being used by a minority in the first instance (16%). Therefore, the study identified a need to further explore the factors which were important to students for the format and content of a VLE to support dissertation topic selection and transition back to the host university.

The results from this exploratory study were then used to inform the present study with regard to both data capture tools and distribution. In order to reach a larger population of students, the extended survey was distributed using Survey Monkey to all business related programme students who had recently transitioned into level 4 from study exchange or work placement over a two year period. The extended survey utilised a majority of closed questions and an increased number of 4-point Likert scaled questions to expand some of the original dichotomous responses (the scale identified 1=strongly agree and 4=strongly disagree). An e-mail request from the researchers was sent directly to the sample's university e-mail address, inviting them to complete the survey. In order to increase awareness of the survey, an announcement to check their e-mails was also made at the start of relevant research methods classes. The survey instrument investigated areas such as general preparation for return to the host university; preparation for return with specific reference to their dissertation topic; use of their experiences to inform their dissertation choice; their perception with regard to the support they sought from the home university and more general issues of their experiences whilst away from the home university.

This process was undertaken with two separate cohorts who were in the early weeks of transitioning over a two year period. The survey was unchanged in distribution or content over this two year period to ensure comparability of results. Responses were received from a total of 85 full-time final year transitioning business related students (response rate of 65.4%). Internal ethical approval ensured that all data received through the questionnaires was anonymous, with an assurance to respondents that no individual would be identified either through their work placement or study exchange institution. The quantitative results were analysed and used to identify themes which reflected the issues of most importance to the respondents themselves.

### Results and discussion

Although an extensive module based VLE resource existed for those students when they returned to Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), it was primarily focused on resources which aided with the practical aspects of research design and methods required to undertake a dissertation. Therefore, the survey results identified the resources students believed to be necessary to specifically address their needs when transitioning, whilst allowing staff to benchmark the pedagogical nature of the content. The following themes were identified from the results which indicate a possible mismatch between the students' presumed learning needs and the format of support sought.

#### *Student confidence*

The majority of respondents (98.8%) agreed to some extent that they undertook a programme of study abroad as they "want[ed] to study abroad to try new things" with "gaining employability skills" the second most popular reason (80% agreed to some extent). Less than half (44%) agreed to some extent that they had undertaken the study exchange to improve their language skills, a figure which does not reflect the diverse nature of international destinations. Interestingly, a key academic outcome of undertaking these types of learning programs was reflected by the respondents with the unanimous key perceived benefit of the time away being that the "experience has helped development of personal confidence" (100%).

Conversely, previous research identified that some students who have been away from their host university can perceive themselves to be at a disadvantage on their return to final year studies compared to their peers (Houston & Carey, 2014). Although 77.3% identified this was the case on their return, a majority (71.6%) also identified "[I] felt it difficult to get back into studying at [home institution]". Therefore, further qualitative investigation may identify the reasons for this perceived disadvantage and those related specifically to returning after an experience of extended work placement or living abroad. This issue could also be highlighted to outgoing students at the initial pre-departure face-to-face presentations in order to identify effective facilitation approaches to address these fears earlier.

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### Communication

When asked “what general preparation have you had for your return to GCU”, the most popular avenue was “self-research” (69.3%) with “communication directly from home institution by e-mail” a close second choice (68%). This relative importance on their own research compared to that provided by the home institution was also reflected when asked to rank methods of communication in order of their effectiveness. Self-research was ranked highest (26.9%) and e-mail from the home institution second (25.5%) with information directly from peers third (12.9%). This last statistic appears to contradict Alfaro et al. (2009) although it is reflective of respondents who did not seek dissertation discussions with their fellow peers at home (73.1%) or abroad (68.7%). The perception that e-mail is the most effective mechanism for information from the home institution could be problematic for dissertation preparation given its limitation as a learning tool. This result could be linked to the lack of student expectation of any requirement to undertake work for the transition back into the final year whilst away from the home institution. Therefore, using the home institution Blackboard site which is predominantly utilised as a module based learning resource in the early years of study, may not have been viewed by the respondents as necessary when away. This finding also indicates a potential lack of engagement with the pre-departure face-to-face sessions which emphasised the importance of engaging with the home Blackboard site whilst studying or working elsewhere.

### Preparedness for transition and entering the dissertation process

A majority believed that their home institution did not offer sufficient support with regard to their final year studies prior to them starting their study exchange or work placement (83.6%). Conversely, most did not expect to undertake any preparatory study work for their return whilst away from their home institution (58.2%), with most agreeing to some extent that they did not consider their dissertation topic at all whilst on exchange (53.7%). This indicates that the efforts of staff during pre-departure sessions to encourage students to engage with their dissertation topics prior to leaving the home institution, did not have the desired impact. An unfortunate result of this miscommunication is that some students (26.9%) only consider the possibility of linking their dissertation topic to either their work placement organisation or an element of their exchange on their return to the home institution. Therefore, a learning point for staff is that 58.2% of respondents agreed that they, “considered the relevance of their exchange whilst away but were unsure how to use the experience within their topic selection”. This is coupled with a minority (17.9%) who identified that they, “sought help from [home institution] staff with regard to identifying my dissertation topic whilst away”.

As the survey was undertaken within the early weeks of the students return to the home institution, the result that a minority of respondents (43.3%) felt, “confident in my choice of dissertation topic now I have returned to home institution” is a figure which may be positively impacted with earlier and clearer communication between all parties.

The results also indicate a requirement to increase the sign-posting to the pre-departure dissertation related information for those starting a time away from university. As respondents rated e-mails from the home institution as an effective means of communication, this medium could be utilised more successfully to sign-post students to the resources on Blackboard, including the relevant staff contact details.

### Experiences of returning to home institution

A majority of respondents (67.2%) felt, “quite strange to be back at [home institution] and adjust to the routine” whilst a minority (34.3%), “feel like I never left”. These feelings could be linked to the specific experiences whilst away. Although the only negative factor identified by the respondents was those who agreed to some extent (59.7%) that they had “experienced worry about money whilst away”.

## Recommendations

The results from both the initial pilot study and the full survey identify that there is little evidence that respondents perceived they translated their new and enhanced personal skills from their exchange or placement into academic confidence on their return to the home institution. This is also reflected in the experiences of staff who identify these students as having increased personal confidence on their return but less academic confidence than their peers. Therefore, further studies could identify and assess how best to facilitate students to self-identify how to utilise their enhanced personal skills to positively impact their academic confidence and skills. This focus could also assist students in identifying how to apply and evidence these transferable skills into future employability skills.

There is also an identifiable mismatch of student expectation of the use of e-mails and Blackboard and staff perception of the most effective method of information dissemination. Therefore, the initial terms for evaluation of a VLE for dissertation preparation appear to be secondary to the requirement to further understand why students away from their home university perceived e-mail correspondence and peer information as most beneficial to their needs. This finding could suggest a change in approach and emphasis to communication at the pre-departure stage. This could therefore facilitate a change in student perception that the most relevant information from their home institution will be delivered to them by e-mail. Further qualitative research could then permit a fuller understanding of the apparent mismatch of the use of communication channels between the home institution and student. This would include why students appear to identify a need for information when away from their home institution, but also a lack of awareness as to where to turn beyond their peers, even after being introduced to the VLE and its purpose at a pre-departure stage.

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Biographies

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