

FINAL DRAFT

British Students in the United States: Motivations, Experiences and Career Aspirations

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Introduction: Laura Spence and beyond

Twelve years ago, the British educational press, and indeed the mainstream media, were consumed by the story of Laura Spence, a super-bright pupil from a Newcastle comprehensive school who, despite having five straight-As at 'A level' (the final secondary school exams), had been refused a place to read Medicine at Oxford after an interview there. General outrage at Oxford's snobbishness ensued, with politician Gordon Brown, amongst others, weighing in with the criticism that Oxford favored applicants from the UK's fee-paying independent schools (which include the elite but perversely-named 'public schools'), thereby excluding excellent applicants from state schools like Laura – especially if they come from deprived parts of the country with strong local accents. Laura instead went to the US to Harvard on a funded scholarship, completed her biochemistry degree there and returned to do postgraduate medical training at Cambridge – the other UK university which constitutes the top duo known collectively as 'Oxbridge'.

How typical is Laura's story? Are there many British students who, as Oxbridge 'rejects', or fearful of being turned down for a place at the UK's two most ancient and prestigious universities, apply abroad to widen their chances of success at other globally recognized institutions? Brooks and Waters (2009a) argue that there are indeed those like Laura who apply to US universities as a 'second chance at success'; but our research suggests that there are many other explanations of the upward trend in favor of international study. Since the US is the most important destination for people from the UK studying abroad, the findings of this chapter are particularly important in producing a more robust understanding of the key drivers of international student mobility between one advanced economy and another. We suggest that there are some movers for whom study abroad is part of a carefully strategized plan of international career enhancement, while for others it is a product of their class habitus and family networks (see Bourdieu 1977). We would also argue that there are those who are looking for 'something different' yet, at the same time, desire a 'knowable' destination, familiar to them for example from film and television and without any great linguistic challenge.

In the next section we describe our research project and its aims and methods. The main body of the chapter is made up of three sections which correspond to our three key research questions: about motivations for study in the US, about experiences there, and about future career plans. The conclusion emphasises the motivational and strategic nature of UK student migration to the US, targeted especially at universities perceived to be of high international standing. In terms, of the linke

between study abroad and future career plans, fears about a putative British 'brain drain' are shown to be largely unfounded, since most students plans to return to the UK.

Survey and methods

We need to draw a distinction at the outset between two types of international student mobility: credit mobility and degree mobility. Credit mobility entails a period abroad of up to one year (a summer school, a semester, or a junior year abroad), the key feature of which is that the student then returns to his or her 'home' university and completes the program of study there, bringing back the 'credit' for the time spent abroad (course credit, grades etc.). Degree mobility (sometimes referred to as diploma mobility) is when a student goes abroad for the entire degree program – typically a bachelor's, master's or doctoral qualification – and stays abroad for a minimum of one year (e.g. on a one-year master's), but usually longer. Our study examines degree mobility only. Our previous research on credit mobility – mainly on the Erasmus student exchange scheme within Europe (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Findlay et al. 2006) – will be referred to only in passing, where it offers instructive comparisons with the results of research on degree mobility reported below.

The research reported on here was commissioned by the UK's Department for Business Innovations and Skills (BIS). Survey and field research took place over 18 months from March 2008 to August 2009, and the two reports to BIS – a main synthesis report (Findlay and King 2010) and a supplementary metadata analysis (Findlay et al. 2010) – were published in January 2010. These reports are quite brief and summarize key findings mainly for a policy audience. In the present chapter and in a recently published paper (Findlay et al. 2012) we delve deeper into our research findings and explore them in a way that is both more detailed and more 'academic'.

Behind the research lay two general concerns: firstly that not enough is known about the scale and characteristics of UK outward degree mobility. The second issue is how to interpret the significance of the outflow. Should the UK government be concerned that too many of the 'brightest and best' students are being 'lost' to overseas universities, from which they might not return, thereby constituting a 'brain drain' reminiscent of the loss of British scientists abroad in the 1960s? Or should the authorities be worried that not enough British students are going abroad, and thereby missing out on the added value that an international education and cosmopolitan outlook can bring, leading in turn to a loss of competitiveness on a globalized labor market where international experience and intercultural skills count for more and more?

Our survey methods were fourfold; only the third and fourth will be used extensively in this chapter.

1. A metadata analysis of statistical sources on global and UK student mobility (see Findlay et al. 2010).

2. A questionnaire survey of the university application intentions of 1400 final-year pupils in two regions in England, with special reference to applications to study abroad (see Ahrens et al. 2010).
3. A questionnaire survey of 560 UK students) studying abroad for degrees at universities in the US (218), Ireland (200), Australia (108) and other European countries (34).
4. Face-to-face interviews with 80 UK students studying abroad, half of them in the US.

The survey of 560 UK international students was designed to draw the broad contours of the phenomenon of UK outward student mobility. It had five main sections: status at present (degree course, university, means of financing studies, prior international mobility); school background (type of school, exam results, languages learnt/spoken, help from school to apply abroad); decision-making to study abroad (respondents were asked to rate the importance of various factors, including future career plans); experience of studying abroad (perceived value, social contacts, problems etc.); and general information about the respondent (age, sex, ethnicity, parents' education and occupations). The face-to-face interviews covered a similar range of issues, but were more in-depth, as well as including 'softer' topics like shifting identity.

Before we discuss our main empirical results, let us briefly mention some secondary data which give an idea of the importance of the US as a destination for UK degree students, and the trend over time. Whatever definition of international students is used,¹ the US emerges as by far the most important destination, with four times the number of UK students compared to the next country, and about 40 per cent of the total 'stock' of UK students abroad. UK students in the US numbered 6744 in 1998, and have increased steadily to 8783 in 2010, according to data synthesized from OECD and UNESCO (Findlay et al. 2010: 6, updated). Looking at the International Institute of Education (IIE) figures for the decade 2000-10, 50 to 60 per cent of the UK students in higher education in the US are undergraduates, 28 to 33 per cent are graduate students (master's and doctoral), and the rest (8 to 15 per cent) are on 'other' programs of study, mostly postgraduate and vocational diplomas.

In the rest of the chapter we present a mix of questionnaire and interview data; we also draw on a recent comprehensive review on international student mobility which surveys and evaluates the relevant international literature (King et al. 2010).

Motivations and characteristics

Review of the literature suggests that the reasons why students choose to move internationally for their studies have remained fairly stable over time. One interpretation of this is that students and their advisors (tutors, parents etc.) are 'rational actors' looking for the best outcome in terms of study opportunities and the economic and career benefits deriving therefrom. 'Lifestyle' and 'experience' also play a role; however these factors are less amenable to economic quantification (King et al. 2010: 23-35).

Based on what the literature suggests and on our prior experience of researching credit-mobile students (HEFCE, 2004; Findlay et al. 2006), we presented our respondents (UK-origin degree-mobile students) with a list of six potentially relevant factors motivating their decision to study abroad and asked them to rate their importance on a four-point scale (very, some, or no importance and not applicable). Table 1 presents the results for the whole sample of respondents, and for the US subsample. The data show rather clear patterns. The top two factors in the table (the 'world-class university' and the 'unique adventure' factors) are of paramount importance for most respondents, and are of great or some importance for around nine out of ten respondents. Hence the combination of 'adventure' and a 'world-class education' seems to encapsulate the essence of studying abroad (especially in the US) for UK students. The third factor, career planning, also has considerable relevance, and we come back to this factor later in the chapter. The remaining three factors are of lesser importance although one can imagine that, had the questionnaire been sent out three or four years later, the fees issue may well have risen up the table, given that university fees are set to triple in the next academic year (2012-13).

Comparing the total survey findings with the US subsample shows that UK students in the US are more highly motivated on the first three factors, and less so on the other three, than the sample as a whole (which included students in Canada, Australia, Ireland and several other European countries). This indicates to us that British students in the US are *particularly* attracted by the desire to attend a world-class university and the prospect that this offers for an international career, as well as the 'life experience' of studying in the US.

The pattern of responses in Table 1 confirms students' awareness of a global hierarchy of universities, in which the elite universities are a relatively well-known group. Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale and other 'Ivy League' institutions seem to dominate most people's mental lists of world-class universities, and these rankings are confirmed (but also produced) by published rankings of universities nationally and worldwide. The 'world-class university' syndrome is seen to be the most important decision-making factor (see also Findlay et al. 2012), although we probably need to reflect on methodological issues of questionnaire design and auto-suggestion to fully appraise this conclusion.²

Abundant interview evidence confirms the importance of university reputation in UK students' decisions to go to the US. For many – especially at the undergraduate level – it was a matter of applying to the US alongside simultaneous applications to top UK universities like Oxbridge, Edinburgh, Durham and the London colleges; or at postgraduate level, combining an undergraduate degree from a top-tier (or 'Russell Group') research university with a highly-ranked US institution. Jake, now a final-year Harvard undergraduate, was interested in music and visual arts and applied to several places in the UK (Goldsmiths, King's, Surrey) and in the US (Georgetown, Harvard, Yale). When he was offered a place at Harvard, his reasons for accepting were clear: 'It was just Harvard; I couldn't justify turning it down... it's a top brand-name... so it was a no-brainer really'. Mansour had done his first degree at the London School of Economics (LSE), then an MPhil at Oxford, and became aware that the top doctoral programs in his field (Economics and Finance), which would equip him

best for an academic career or a fast-track position in the private sector, were in the US. Now on a funded five-year PhD program at New York University, he contrasted the intensity of the doctoral training there, 'where you get involved in writing joint papers with your professor', with the three-year UK PhD 'where you are pretty much left on your own'. Isabella had followed her undergraduate degree at Oxford with a master's at Yale and now a PhD at Columbia. She was aware of her good fortune in stringing together such a sequence of prestigious institutions. During her gap year after Oxford, when she was working in Bethlehem on the West Bank, she received 'the offer and a great funding package from Yale... the admissions officer emailed me... she even called me there to talk about the program'. And then she continued to a fully-funded PhD at Columbia in New York, 'which is such an amazing city to live in'. She went on to say: 'The universities in the US have incredible resources and you notice that in many fields... great libraries, well so does Oxford actually, but there is also a lot of funding for other things... (like) visiting speakers'.

There are obvious linkages between the motivations of students and their characteristics – whether they are undergraduate or postgraduate, their UK school history (state vs. independent etc.), parental background and prior mobility and contacts with the US. Brooks and Waters (2009b: 197) summed up the key characteristics of their interviewees thus: 'The vast majority of our respondents... came from high socio-economic groups, had attended private secondary schools and had achieved high levels of academic attainment'. They go on to argue (Waters and Brooks 2010) that such students are motivated to acquire the 'right' credentials and other embodied life and travel experiences which can subsequently be converted into confirmed or enhanced social status and economic capital. In this way, and following Bourdieu's (1986) 'forms of capital', students who study in an international arena, especially if they attend high-prestige universities, accumulate multiple and mutually-reinforcing forms of capital – including 'mobility capital' (Murphy-Lejeune 2002), human capital (in the form of a world-class education), social capital ('connections' and access to networks), cultural capital (languages and intercultural skills) and, career-wise, economic capital (high-income employment).

All this rings true for our own research subjects, with one exception – Brooks and Waters' statement that 'the vast majority' of their respondents had attended private sector secondary schools (but with no precise figures given). From our questionnaire results, we found that our sample (both the total of 560 and the US subsample of 218) divided roughly evenly into those who had attended private schools and those who were from the state sector. This equal division still represents an over-concentration from the private/independent sector which accounts for only 11 per cent of the UK's senior school pupils (Findlay and King 2010: 18, 25), but our data do not support the notion of the 'vast majority'.³ Instead, our findings suggest that degree mobility plays a role both in maintaining status, for students from privileged backgrounds, and in acquiring cultural capital for students from less-privileged origins.

School background aside, other aspects of the respondents match the above characterization of UK students in the US. High academic standards were confirmed by the finding that four out of five respondents had three or more A or B grades at A level, the key secondary-level qualification for

university entry. Most came from family backgrounds where their parents too were university-educated. Prior mobility history and connections to the US were indicated by several questionnaire variables. One in five respondents had been born outside the UK, and the same proportion (mostly the same individuals) had dual nationality. One in fourteen had studied at international schools outside the UK. More than half of the respondents had lived abroad for more than six months prior to moving to the US, and half of these respondents had lived in the US for more than six months before becoming university students there. Finally, one in five had family/relatives in the US.

Some of the reasons for taking up a university offer from the US depended on whether the student was moving there at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Our sample was distributed in three roughly equal proportions of undergraduate students (32 per cent), students doing Masters or other short postgraduate courses (37 per cent), and doctoral students (29 per cent). The broad 'liberal arts' approach of many US universities appealed to many undergraduate respondents wary of the degree structure of most British university degrees, requiring students to specialize at a very early stage. For Jake, this had been especially important:

I didn't know what I wanted to study. I did a fairly eclectic mix of A level subjects, Biology, Music, English and Geography, so a bit of a mix... So I didn't know what to study and I really could only apply to one subject [in the UK]... I hadn't really been to America, but I kind of liked the idea of going off to a new culture... But it was really just the subjects... I guess also the liberal arts system, the fact that I can do a lot of different courses unrelated to my subject... more than if I went to somewhere in Britain.

Megan, who was at the same Ivy League university as Jake, had a similar reaction:

The choice of courses is absolutely amazing, just ridiculous. There are... I don't know over 4000 courses you can take and you take four each semester. And the things you learn about... you learn to appreciate the fact that you are doing so many different things...

Funding, too, was important for undergraduates, especially those whose means-tested circumstances enabled them to secure partial or even full funding at top universities whose fees otherwise would have been way in excess of what they could afford, and much more expensive than the UK university fees (£3145 at the time of the survey, rising to £9000 currently). For doctoral students, scholarships and teaching assistantships were even more vital in attracting them to the US, with PhD funding so hard to obtain in the UK system. Table 2 shows the differential pattern of funding sources across the three respondent groups.

Several students wrote snippets of reaction to the funding issue in the 'open text' box on the questionnaire. The following two examples are from postgraduate respondents:

Yale pays me \$50,000 a year to go here – Oxford would give me nothing.

Although I was accepted as a PhD candidate by my first-choice university in the UK, I did not secure funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and was unable to take up my place.

The interviewees naturally went into more detail. Here is a fairly typical quote from Jake:

I am on fairly significant financial aid... and this year they upped the financial aid for everyone... So this year it costs the same amount to send me to Harvard as it does to send my sister to Leeds, if you factor in the housing, the food... it costs pretty much the same [...] I think the financial system [in the US] is very beneficial... because the way they work it out, you pay what you can afford. Theoretically it shouldn't be a barrier to anyone.

Whilst one might quibble about the precise figures and economic calculations in the quotes above, the key point is that funding for especially graduate programs in the US is more generous and readily available than in the UK.

Experiences

Students were very satisfied overall with the experience of studying in the US. This is clearly indicated by the data in Table 3, which is based on a question in the survey which asked respondents to rate the various benefits which they personally experienced, or perceived would be useful, from their study abroad, using a four-point scale (extremely worthwhile, worthwhile, slightly worthwhile, not at all worthwhile). The data are presented in two sets in Table 3. The first set gives the responses for all US-based respondents who regarded their experience as being 'worthwhile' to 'extremely worthwhile'. On this occasion there are no significant differences by level of study (undergraduate, Master or doctoral level) and so we have not disaggregated the data in this way. We observe from these data the extremely positive impression of the 'US experience' across the first four benefits: academic and personal knowledge, career enhancement (general and international), and personal development. On each of these elements, over 90 per cent of respondents scored 'extremely worthwhile' or 'worthwhile'. The second set of results in the table compares undergraduates in the US with the same group in Australia and Ireland (we limit this comparison to undergraduates because postgraduates are proportionally fewer in the latter two destinations). The result demonstrates that, on every single one of the six 'benefit' measures, students in the US score more positively. Some of the differences are marginal; but those which are clearest are, in a sense, the most important – enhanced academic, professional and career prospects.

We leave further discussion on career aspirations until the next section of the chapter, so let us now hear some students' voices about their experiences of other aspects. We heard before (from Isabella, above) about the great atmosphere of being in New York City, and others confirmed the special experience of living in one of the world's most iconic and vibrant cities. For instance Ali, doing a Master's at Columbia, said:

And that's the luck of being at Columbia, the access to things in New York... such a great city... For instance, there's a calendar of events every week that has people coming from the United Nations and people from financial institutions [...] And being in New York is really nice [laughs].

Others preferred the more informal atmosphere of certain institutions on the West Coast. Emily described her choice to go to Berkeley rather than MIT in Boston in the following way:

The whole atmosphere is phenomenal, it's incredibly driven, incredibly motivated and intelligent, and also supportive because I applied to a couple of schools... MIT is the biggest one where everyone I spoke to was... like a gladiator going into a ring every day, where you have to fight and fight because the egos are so immense. Whereas at Berkeley you call everyone by their first name, everyone is allowed to talk to everyone, it's really nice.

Emily's comment about the high-pressure work environment was echoed in practically every student interview we carried out. Here are two quotations from many we could have selected. The first is from Megan, an undergraduate at Harvard and a keen swimmer:

Now I'm pretty much adjusted, but in the beginning there was a lot [of pressure]. The time commitment was ridiculous... it felt like a 24-hour job... I would have 10 or 12 hours of lectures or classes a week and then loads of training and swimming competitions... so the time commitment is just ridiculous. It's just tiring and you do a lot of running around, and you don't have any down-time basically. That is a big adjustment and on top of that you are 4000 miles from home, which doesn't help the situation. But you do get used to it.

Sally had done a year of History at Cambridge but then took a break before transferring to Columbia for the rest of her degree because she wanted a broader training for her intended career as an international affairs journalist:

The workload is just insane... This is a lot more work than I ever, ever remember there being at Cambridge... So the downside is the quantity of the work but... I love the work but... I don't have any time to eat or sleep!

The intensive work schedule and consequent lack of social life – especially for undergraduates, it seems – stand in contrast to the impression gained from Waters and Brooks' (2010) research, which argues for understanding degree-mobile British students as 'accidental achievers' for whom the desire to prolong a 'carefree student lifestyle' was often a key factor. These authors (2010: 226) see the tension between deliberate 'strategy' and the 'accidental' accumulation of capital (in its various forms) as part of the 'aesthetic disposition' and 'taken-for-grantedness' of the habitus of the British (upper) middle class. Such a view sees 'excitement' and 'adventure' associated with studying abroad as merely expressions of the reproduction of privilege which is firmly grounded in the social networks of family and friends (Brooks and Waters 2010). But, delving into the school and family backgrounds of our student interviewees, we see at least some of them acting more independently, without much parental social capital back-up, or help from school tutors. Ben, another of our Harvard interviewees, described his secondary school in Bedfordshire as 'just a state school... my local school... we had no history at the school of any students applying outside the UK'.

The pressure-cooker study environment of the Ivy League colleges was appreciated by many as a rite of passage with considerable personal development and career-building potential. Ben said that 'it made me a lot more confident, because I have been pushed outside my comfort zone... Because I had to take all these different courses, now I am more willing to try different things'. Sally continued her statement above as follows:

I look fondly back at my days at Cambridge when I had less work to do, and I think that the work regime goes a little too far the other way here. I think that you can't perform your best in every subject, because you are just trying to do too much in one semester... But I don't regret it, it's the degree I wanted to do. Most of the time I love it, except for the exam in Chinese!

At less elite universities, however, some of the reactions were a bit different. Charlotte, at a university in California, remarked on her study program as follows:

In England when you are going to university you are already specializing in one subject. Over here they don't do that, you are spending the entire first year doing science, English and history etc., it's like high school. You have to do a language, and sciences, which I don't like, because I've already done that, I'm wasting my time doing it again. I'm a sociology major and I have to take so many credits to graduate and only so many of those can be sociology and the rest have to be other things, like it has to be a well-rounded education, which is a bit weird.

Slanting now towards the more limited and attenuated negative experiences, we note two other aspects which some interviewees raised. One was the financial squeeze on those who had little or no scholarship or institutional support. In most of these cases the slack would be taken up by parental or other family support. But the specific issue here was the difficulty of accessing part-time paid work and the incompatibility of this with the usually intense study plan. The second comment was a certain disillusionment with the quality of some teaching. Mansour remarked that 'Here they couldn't care less about teaching, it's just 100 per cent research.' Ali, a Master's student at Columbia, was a little less direct:

The teaching is not as good as I thought it would be. The impression I had before coming here was that the teaching would be leaps and miles ahead of UK education, but it is not.

A related problem was the assessment system (especially at undergraduate level) where 'everything counts', including seminar contributions. On this latter point some interviewees remarked how their American classmates spoke up 'just to be heard' even when they had nothing really to say. One interviewee even spotted the seminar tutor, a teaching assistant, putting a tick against each student's name when they spoke.

Career aspirations and future plans

Reference back to Table 1 (item 3) and Table 3 (items 2 and 3) leaves us in no doubt that career aspirations are one of the main driving forces and perceived benefits of studying abroad, especially for British students in the US. From Table 1 we see that more than three-quarters of the questionnaire respondents rated studying for a degree in the US as either 'very important' or 'important' in developing an international career. In Table 3 we can observe that 90 per cent of respondents saw studying for a US degree as 'extremely worthwhile' or 'worthwhile' in developing both general career prospects or an international career. And the 'career pay-off' was seen as considerably stronger by US-based respondents than by those studying in Australia or Ireland. These comparative findings are based on reasonably robust sample sizes and so can be regarded as significant.

The general value of an international education from a prestigious overseas university for the student's CV and attractiveness to employers was nicely summed up by Donna, an undergraduate at Columbia:

There is so much talk in the newspapers of the devaluing of degrees, so I think this is a way of making your CV stand out a little more. You didn't just get a degree, you went halfway round the world to get a degree.

The lack of credence given to 'strategy' among degree-mobile British students discussed by Brooks and Waters appears different not only from our own findings but also from studies of other degree-mobile groups. For example, earlier work by Waters (2006, 2009) on East Asian students in Canada suggests that these students (and their families who often are also very much involved in the decision-making process) are in fact engaged in careful strategizing with regard to their choice of university and program, geared to attaining 'positional advantage' in a crowded but increasingly 'credentialized' graduate labor market. We can see strong echoes of this in our research on UK students – especially postgraduate students – in the US. Earlier we heard how Mansour had elected to go to NYU, following LSE and Oxford, because a 'good' American PhD was, in his view, the best way to cap off a prestigious series of universities for an academic career or high-level private sector position in his field. Later in his interview he set out his preferred pathway:

I want to pursue an academic career and my first preference would be to get into the academic job market here [in the US]. So I will apply to a bunch of Assistant Professor type positions at some good schools and if I can get into a top-50 research university that would be an interesting start to a career.

But, like many students studying abroad, Mansour was keeping other options open too, like returning to the UK to either find an academic job there, or using his qualifications for a remunerative post in the private sector, which he thought would yield a higher income but not the less regimented lifestyle that came with academia.

In addition, across our entire sample of UK-origin students, not just those in the US, we also found that the group who had been internationally mobile before going abroad to university was also more likely to link their mobility as a student to the prospect of an international career after graduation (Findlay et al. 2012: 128). In other words, 'mobility capital' reproduces itself. Mansour's case illustrates this well. Mansour is of Persian-Indian-Zoroastrian origin, with extended family links to Mumbai and to California; and although he was brought up and school-educated in the London area, he had been born in Australia and had often visited relatives in India. Unsurprisingly then, Mansour felt he was 'already quite international' before he moved to New York. His 'open geographical vision' for his future career reflected his earlier life experiences of travel and residence – as well as those of his father who had himself moved from India to the UK to do his PhD.

Other interviewees, more essentially 'British' (or 'English', 'Scottish' etc.) in their self-identities, saw a return to the UK as inevitable. They linked their future geographical mobility to their continued identification with Britain, although they appreciated the special value of their US academic and social experience. Typical of this group was Megan:

My friends [back home in Wales] would joke and say 'Oh you sound really American' and stuff. But in terms of identity I consider myself British, strongly. I have never considered myself changing into American... if you know what I mean [...] At this point, I

strongly believe that I wouldn't consider staying in the US because... I don't know... as I said, I haven't travelled around a lot, but as a country I know what it stands for and I know what the UK stands for. And the UK is my home and the US is definitely not my home... I am comfortable here and I am very happy here, but it is not my home. I am not saying I feel like an outsider... I just feel very affiliated with my Britishness [Interviewer: And your Welshness?]. More my Britishness, because I consider myself first British and then Welsh.

But even the outwardly cosmopolitan Mansour, with his international background and his love of New York, felt occasionally 'detached' from the 'British' side of his identity:

I can't wait to hear the British accent... I always fly back with British Airways and it's such a pleasure to hear the accent... Another big thing I miss, probably the biggest thing I miss... is the British sense of humor... It's very different here and people can be very serious... so dreadfully serious here.

The survey also asked about where students intended to go after completion of the US degree. Fewer than one in five intended to stay outside the UK more or less permanently; the majority intended to return to the UK, either at the end of their program of study, or after a period of work or further study elsewhere (either in the US or in another location).

We leave the final word in this section to Jake. The quotation below is long because we want it to exemplify the many factors that can influence an individual's decision about what to do next and where to go at that complex juncture occurring at the end of a first degree.

I can tell you what I can't do: I can't get a job [here in the US], it just can't happen. It's an absolute nightmare. Especially if you are not a science person. If you were in the sciences, it's a lot easier now – they have just extended the amount of time you can stay, up to two years now. You need employment, authorized employment. If you are doing anything else other than sciences, it is 12 months and there is a lot of paperwork. And your bachelor's degree is not that valuable, because obviously you need to justify it... your employer needs to justify it. So I won't be working here, although I would like to [...] I have a girlfriend, she's British... she doesn't like it here and wants to go back... So that's another factor. Other than that I am applying to MIT, in two departments there, computing and technology-related... So if I get into that, I would do that. I really like Boston, I think it's a lovely city and just right for me. So that would be another two years. After that I would consider going back to Britain. I mean... it is lovely here and I wouldn't mind working in either country. Ideally I would like to work for a company that works in both countries, so I could continue to come here. Eventually I will go back... it's just that

I quite like it here... and the Master's would be fully funded. If I don't get in... [I may] get a job in Britain. So it's all up in the air, so fifty-fifty at the moment.

As well as epitomizing the uncertainty of future plans for many UK students studying abroad – even those like Jake in the final year of their program – the above testimonial highlights the many factors at play in such decisions. There are several sources of uncertainty: to go straight into employment or continue studying; to stay in the US or return to the UK; the key role of financial considerations, such as the difficulty of getting work in the US after a bachelor's degree and the lure of a fully-funded Master's place; and last but not least, the influence of personal factors such as family ties and intimate friendships. While Jake seems to prioritize the MIT Master's over the wishes of his girlfriend, others might react differently, making (return) migration a love-related move (cf. King 2002 on 'love migrations'). Different countries also have different admission and retention policies towards international students. Some want to attract and retain talented foreign students for their own labor market after these students have graduated (notably Australia and Canada); other countries are not so keen, although certain preferential provisions may be put in place, as Jake points out, for areas like science, technology and medicine (see Suter and Jandl 2008 for a full comparative analysis).

Also important to bear in mind here is the broader picture whereby the UK is a huge net importer of international students – second only, globally, to the United States. In fact, the incomers outnumber the outgoers by at least tenfold. UK students studying abroad represent less than 2 per cent of those in the UK higher education system (Findlay and King 2010: 9). The policy issue, then, is not so much how to dampen down a brain drain that hardly exists outside a few high-profile academics and scientists who have moved to the US, but rather how to encourage more UK students to enrich their talents by embarking on an international intellectual adventure. With UK student fees set to rise by a quantum leap, the market-place might prove to be the most effective driving-force for this to happen. More certainly the majority of UK students interested in degree mobility will continue to look to the USA and other major English-speaking destinations, although they may also face increased competition for places from students from other countries. Moreover, the effect of such competition is not limited to students, but is also being felt by institutions themselves. Lack of supply of suitably-qualified applicants is rarely an issue for universities of high standing, such as many of those in the US included in the present study. Nonetheless, interviews which we had with the international student officers in these institutions (Findlay and King 2010) made clear that issues around recruiting the best student talent from anywhere in the world, re-thinking global position and reach, and student diversity and the 'student experience' are all attracting much attention.

Conclusion

Our chapter has highlighted several key areas in which we have contributed new information and fresh perspectives, including themes for further study. First, we have presented up-to-date secondary

data on UK outward flows, with particular reference to the US, which is by some measure the principal destination for degree mobility.⁴ Second, our research illustrates the way in which international student mobility, driven by a search by some students for a world-class university, is embedded in complex relations linking globalisation, pedagogy and society (Findlay et al. 2012: 119). The US case, more than any other location where we have studied the phenomenon, illustrates the power of these forces in driving students to seek out a university they perceive to be of high global standing.

Third, we have added to the still-limited literature which links student mobility to ongoing mobility patterns after graduation (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Carlson 2011; Findlay et al. 2012). Theoretically, therefore, we argue that the study of student migration/mobility should not be confined to a framework that separates study abroad from the wider life-course aspirations and plans of students. This is an area of future research, employing longitudinal surveys or, failing that, in-depth interviews of mature-aged respondents tracing their movements back through time.

Fourth, we have shed useful light on the vexed question of potential British brain drain by collecting data on rates of intended future mobility. Although it should be firmly borne in mind that migration intentions often do not match outcomes, worries over brain drain are unfounded. For the US, less than a quarter of British students intend to stay abroad long-term. Many plan to return after further study or work experience abroad. Hence, when they do return, they will have further enhanced their human capital, to the overall benefit of the UK's economy and society.

Notes

¹ Foreign students can be recorded on the basis of citizenship, birthplace, or country of prior domicile or prior education. Most countries use the citizenship criterion, but in certain cases this can be highly misleading for instance in countries like Germany where citizenship for the second-generation locally-born children of immigrants has until recently been denied. Further problems arise with dual citizenship. For details see Findlay et al. (2010).

² The suggestion (in the questionnaire) of being at a world-class university may trigger enhanced positive responses, as may the universities' own self-promoting publicity internalized by students after they have arrived, rather than being perceived as such before arrival. Against these concerns, there was abundant interview evidence which suggests that the perception of world-class status was a real and meaningful part of the decision-making at the time of the application.

³ Moreover the division between state and independent is not a simple dichotomy. For instance, 'grammar schools' can be either state or independent, some state schools are selective, and individual students may have had experience of both sectors. For instance Megan, one of our interviewees at an Ivy League university, had been to a comprehensive school for most of her secondary education, but then moved to an independent boarding school for the two 'sixth-form' years.

⁴ The US is less dominant for UK outward credit mobility, for which complete statistics are not available outside the Erasmus data on intra-European exchange flows. Our own earlier research on credit mobility did derive estimates based on primary survey data collected from UK higher education institutions, and these show that the US is by far the main non-European destination (HEFCE 2004; Findlay et al. 2006).

Table 1

Determinants of the decision to study abroad
(figures are percentages of responses to each question)

	Overall sample (n=560)		US subsample (n=218)	
	very important	some + very important	very important	some + very important
1. I was determined to attend a 'world-class' university	55.0	88.7	71.9	91.6
2. I saw studying abroad as an opportunity for a unique adventure	50.4	87.9	56.7	92.6
3. I saw this as the first step to an international career	33.8	68.7	42.6	77.4
4. There were limited places for my desired course at UK universities	24.1	42.5	20.3	37.3
5. I was worried about rising student fees in the UK	18.6	33.9	10.6	25.0
6. My family encouraged me to study outside the UK	11.6	27.3	8.2	21.6

Source: Authors' survey 2008-09.

Table 2

Main source of funding studies in the US
(all data are percent)

	Undergraduate (n=69)	Postgraduate taught (n=81)	Postgraduate research (n=63)	Total (213)
Self-financing	5.9	24.4	1.6	11.6
Parental support	58.8	23.1	0.0	27.9
Grant from host institution	19.1	15.4	85.5	36.7
Bank loan/employer/other	16.2	37.1	12.9	23.7

Source: Authors' survey 2008-09

Table 3

Perceived benefits of studying outside the UK
(all data are percent)

	US sample: all respondents (n=218)		UG only: extremely worthwhile		
	extremely worthwhile	extremely ww + worthwhile	US (n=69)	Australia (n=51)	Ireland (n=150)
1. Enhanced academic and professional knowledge	82.5	96.2	80.3	66.7	56.0
2. General career prospects	71.0	93.8	68.3	60.1	43.5
3. Relevance to developing an international career	65.1	91.4	62.3	51.9	28.5
4. Maturity and personal development	57.3	90.5	55.5	50.9	46.5
5. Knowledge and understanding of another country	41.7	78.2	40.4	32.4	30.5
6. New ways of thinking about the UK	40.8	71.6	39.4	38.0	38.5

Source: Authors' survey 2008-09

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