



# DEVELOPING SCOTLAND'S GRADUATES FOR THE GLOBAL ECONOMY: FROM HERE TO WHERE?



national union of students scotland



Scottish HE Employability Forum







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## Foreword

NUS Scotland starts from the premise that international mobility is a huge advantage for students, for our society and for Scotland's economy. NUS Scotland has had the privilege of working for a number of years now in this field, through our Scottish Government funded projects, and this research report is the culmination of much of that work.

The skills and confidence that international study can bring are hugely beneficial in themselves but we also know from recent surveys that UK employers are increasingly looking for global graduates when it comes to recruiting. With Scottish graduate unemployment and underemployment at incredibly worrying levels it has never been more pressing for students to enhance their employability.

In an increasingly competitive graduate market, the pressures on graduates to 'stand out from the crowd' have never been greater. We firmly believe that by widening access to study abroad to all students, particularly

for those from hard to reach backgrounds, we can help make Scottish graduates more employable and ready to get our global society out of our global economic downturn.

As the following report shows, there is a clearly identified need, from both students and institutional staff, to increase awareness, availability and uptake of opportunities to study abroad as part of the university or college package of a quality education. We at NUS Scotland firmly believe that this, if delivered in partnership with Scottish business, will enhance employability for our students in the 21st century, by helping to create culturally competent 'global graduates.'

Scotland has the lowest mobility figures in Europe bar two countries - with current study abroad figures of under 1%, compared to targets set by the European Higher Education Area for 2020 are 20%. Our low study abroad figures are a cause for concern, and show a need for urgent action.

However, it's not just about promoting opportunities abroad for Scottish students. As survey after survey testifies, many international students here in Scotland would like to integrate much more with home students. At a time of great uncertainty due to potentially damaging changes to the student immigration system, we need to ensure the international student experience is the best that it can be. By increasing study abroad uptake for Scottish students, and exploiting this symbiotic relationship fully, we can begin to make our campuses truly internationalised, and really begin to enhance that integration process.



I hope this report acts as a starting gun for all of our sector – and for Government and Scottish business too – to begin to internationalise our college and university education system. We must look at all the possible ways to encourage students from all backgrounds to get and to take the opportunity to study abroad and this report outlines a number of suggestions for doing so.

I'm very proud of this report and the work that's gone into it. The level of interest, encouragement and collaboration evident since the beginning of the Developing Scotland's Global Citizens project is incredibly promising. We look forward to working with everyone right across the sector during Scotland's Year of Study Abroad, beginning this September. Only by doing so, can Scotland hope to continue to punch above its weight on the world stage, generating beneficial links across the globe, in education and in business.

Robin Parker

President NUS Scotland



## Executive Summary

Given the current level of Scottish graduate unemployment underemployment, it has never been more pressing for students to enhance their employability. As graduates need to differentiate themselves in competitive labour markets, the potential benefits of engaging in study abroad opportunities to aid personal growth and development, build CVs and obtain greater competitive advantage in the jobs market, appear increasingly attractive. Indeed, in a recent British Council/Think Global survey, 79% of surveyed chief executives and board level directors of businesses in the UK think that in recruiting new employees, knowledge and awareness of the wider world is more important than degree classification.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the Scottish Government-funded Developing Scotland's Global Citizens project, this report explores the link between study abroad activity and subsequent impacts on graduate employability as viewed by FE and HE students, institutional staff and employers based in Scotland.

### Scottish Student Mobility In Context

Last year witnessed an 8% increase in Scottish Erasmus study abroad figures amongst students studying at Scottish HEIs (1,243 students in 2010/11 compared to 1,148 students in 2009/10).<sup>2</sup> While this increase is welcome it still means that fewer than 1% of students in Scotland undertake Erasmus study.

Furthermore, the actual number of Scottish students that study abroad (as opposed to students in Scotland) may well be fewer still. While last year's figures are not yet available from the University of Edinburgh, between 2005/6 and 2007/8 non-Scottish students made up 82% of their total Erasmus student figures. At the University of St. Andrew's, non-Scottish students made up 69% of all outgoing Erasmus students in 2010/11 and 67% in the previous academic year. At Heriot-Watt University, non-Scottish students made up 40% of all outgoing Erasmus students in 2010/11 and 43% in 2009/10.

A larger-scale study needs to be undertaken before we can properly assess this issue as the student demographic is considerably different depending on the institution but out of a total of 1,243 students studying in Scotland who went on Erasmus last year, we can safely say that a significant proportion of these were not Scottish.

### Mapping Mobility, Mapping Opportunity

Although there is a very real interest to centrally record all student mobility in many institutions, reflected in the feedback we received from Scottish HE and FE institutions upon enquiring into such figures, the major barrier cited is the incredibly labour-intensive nature of such an exercise, not least for international office staff. However, if figures provided by Glasgow Caledonian University, are indicative of the wider educational landscape in Scotland, doing so could have great benefits as a school by school census

1. The Global Skills Gap: Preparing Young People for the New Global Economy (British Council/Think Global, 2011), p. 3.

2. The biggest number of outgoing students originated from Spain (27,448) followed by France (24,426) and Germany (24,029). The annual growth rate was highest in Cyprus (38.2%), followed by Estonia (31.6%) and Turkey (15.8%). The annual growth rate of outgoing students was above 10% in nine countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Spain, Ireland, Latvia, Sweden, Iceland and Turkey. See Lifelong Learning Programme: The Erasmus Programme 2009/10 - A Statistical Overview (European Commission, 2011), p. 12.



of all student mobility for 2011/12 at the institution, showed that 81% of student outward mobility would not have been collated at institutional level if it were not for this innovative work.

### Student Findings

Out of 133 student survey respondents between February and March 2012 (65% from HE and 32% from FE institutions with 3% unknown), 86 students were from 11 different universities while 43 students were from 20 different colleges in Scotland. A significant number (39%) of students claimed they were not aware of any opportunities to study abroad. When this was broken down between college and university students, 58% of college students were not aware of any study abroad opportunities while 42% of university students expressed that they did not know of any opportunities for them to study abroad.

Despite the relatively low level of awareness of study abroad opportunities, only 3% of students thought that graduates with study abroad experience did not have a better chance of employment. 38% believed it made them more employable to some extent, 25% thought it did significantly so and 29% stated that it definitely made graduates more employable. Cumulatively, this infers that 92% thought that graduates with study abroad experience had a better chance of employment.

In response to being asked if they felt that a study abroad length period of 3-12 months was a barrier, 56% of the surveyed students did not think so, perhaps surprising given the low outward mobility figures for Scotland.

This indicates that students are more confident than previously assumed to study abroad but are prevented from doing so by the traditional barriers of cost, language and lack of awareness and opportunities to do so. 62% would be more inclined to go on a study abroad trip if it was of a shorter term with 26% stating that it would definitely make them more likely to study abroad.

### Scottish Institutional Staff Findings

Many students have received conflicting information from their institution regarding the feasibility of studying abroad while academics and support staff are unaware of the success of study abroad schemes in the same subject areas in other Scottish institutions.

The study abroad experience, even short-term, has positive impacts on graduate employability which is clearly recognised by staff across the sector that can appreciate first-hand the transformative effect it has on the students that undertaken them. In each of the 27 institutional interviews conducted, all participants were convinced of the positive impact of the study abroad experience on the student's future career prospects, not least because of the student's changed perception of their own potential.

Given the significant dearth of opportunity to study abroad in certain subject areas, whereby student demand is not matched by the availability, or feasibility, of mobility windows within their programme of study, project staff at NUS Scotland organised a series of four stakeholder days in the Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities and STEM subject areas.



## Scottish Employer Perspectives

When asked if graduate applicants with study abroad experience had a better chance of employment 40% of Scottish employers thought that it did to some extent and almost 1 in 5 employers (18%) thought significantly so while 7% thought it definitely did. This raises serious questions about the extent of internationalised strategies on the part of Scottish companies and the degree to which study abroad attributes are articulated by graduates and understood by potential Scottish employers. Less than a third (29%) thought that study abroad experience would not improve graduates' chances of employment.

In response to being asked if Scottish employers would recognise the benefits of transferable skills gained through a short-term study abroad experience, 50% of employers responded that they would, in varying degrees, recognise the benefits of transferable skills gained during a short-term study abroad period lasting 2 to 4 weeks.

In contrast to the latest research from the British Council on the importance of language skills in graduate employability and earning potential,<sup>3</sup> only 1 out of the 45 valid responses mentioned language skills as a possible study abroad graduate attribute in the open responses.



## Recommendations

### 1. Deeper Analysis of the Scottish-Domiciled Erasmus Demographic

Last year there was a total of 1,243 students studying in Scotland who went on Erasmus last year, making up less than 1% of the total student population in Scotland. Preliminary data provided by three Scottish HE institutions point towards a significant proportion of these students not being Scottish-domiciled. There needs to be a much deeper, coordinated analysis of the Scottish-domiciled Erasmus demographic, done through a national scale survey, in order to properly gauge Scottish-specific figures and track progress.

### 2. Centralised Data-Collection System

There needs to be a centralised data-collection system at institutional level to record all outward mobility opportunities and actual uptake. The research found that best-practice can often remain unknown even within the same schools and departments. This would serve to address the lack of awareness amongst students of the opportunities available, as evidenced in Chapter 1. Mapping mobility means mapping opportunities which can then be promoted within each discipline and included in course prospectuses to enhance an institution's profile and future attractiveness.

### 3. Inter-Institutional Collaboration

Identification and utilisation of existing collaborative partnerships will facilitate the creation and sustainability of study abroad. Existing institutional and academic relationships between Scottish and European institutions, and between academic staff themselves, need to be harnessed as the

necessary framework to facilitate the creation of mutual mobility windows, and relationships of trust, are already established.

### 4. Emphasis on Widening Participation of Study Abroad Opportunities

Due to reporting mechanisms, it is near impossible to extract Scottish-specific results. Despite this, however, there are still a number of common themes we can draw from existing sources which point to an imbalance within a number of key indicators, specifically: age; sex; ethnicity; socio-economic background; and prior educational attainment. Efforts to merely increase numbers with no thought to the underlying causes of non-participation may serve to reinforce the traditional demographic of white, female, middle-class students with at least one parent being a graduate from an HE institution.

### 5. Provision of Short-Term Mobility Windows

Not least because they often provide an entry point for longer terms of study abroad, a full investigation should be given to incorporating a short-term mobility window, with specific, measurable learning outcomes, into all programme curricula with an exploration of alternative funding or through student fundraising activities, exploiting existing collaborative partnerships wherever possible. This will serve to alleviate the more widespread development of the current two-tier graduate population – those who can afford to undertake study abroad and those who can't.

### 6. Student Mobility Statement From Accreditation Bodies

A definitive statement on outward mobility from each regulator/accrediting body in every subject area is needed to debunk prevalent student and staff myths about the feasibility



of study abroad and to demonstrate, in each instance where applicable, that there is nothing in the regulations that prevent students from studying abroad.

## **7. Increase Employer Engagement**

In collaboration with study abroad champions already identified within Scottish business, a much wider conversation should be had at a national level with Scottish employers, looking at exactly how industry could, and would like to, be involved. This should explore areas where industry, universities and colleges can ensure that the benefits to students - and to Scotland - are promoted. This can only be done however by institutions – and graduates – taking responsibility for competently articulating these attributes, not least to ensure that these graduates are commensurately valued in the Scottish labour market to avoid potentially damaging brain drain.

## **8. Creation of a National Mobility Agency**

Too often the reason for students failing to take advantage of study abroad opportunities is due to a lack of information, advice, and guidance. A national mobility agency could serve as a central repository for all institutional data collection, and one stop shop, for students, parents and institutions who want to know more about study abroad opportunities, practical advice and tips. Also, it is clear that across the sector there is much good practice which exists, but too often remains in silos, or is never spread more widely.



## Definition of Key Terms\*

### **Bologna Process**

The main objective of the Bologna Process since its inception in 1999 was to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA was subsequently launched in March 2010, during the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference with the overarching goal of ensuring more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe with the next decade focused on consolidating the EHEA. The borderless mobility of students in the EHEA is one of the political aims of the Bologna Process.

### **Credit Mobility**

Mobility of up to one academic year which takes place in the framework of ongoing studies at a home institution. After the credit/temporary mobility phase, students return to their home institution to complete their studies. In the context of this study, all mobility discussed in the report lies within the remit of temporary mobility, those mobility periods that consist of a period of study abroad with the intention to have the mobility period recognised towards the degree at the home institution.

### **Erasmus**

The European Union's flagship programme for mobility and cooperation in higher education across Europe.

### **Mobile Students**

Students who cross national borders for the purpose or in the context of their studies. The opposite of a mobile student is a non-mobile student.

### **Mobility Windows**

Periods of international mobility that are embedded in the curriculum. These phases can be either compulsory or optional, and can take different forms, from a semester abroad integrated in the curriculum, to joint/double degree programmes.

### **Short-Term Mobility**

Mobility of a shorter duration (less than three months) which takes place in the framework of ongoing studies at a home institution. After the short-term mobility phase, students return to their home institution to complete their studies. In the context of this study, mobility periods that consist of a period of short-term study abroad may or may not have the intention to have the mobility period recognised towards the degree at the home institution.

\* As defined by the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC), of the European Commission



## Introduction

*“My whole approach is a relentless and bold and ambitious focus on opportunities... and the overwhelming thing about how you transform Scotland – and that is my obsession – is all about creating a global ambition and a global mindset.”*

Lena Wilson, Chief Executive, Scottish Enterprise (Scotsman, 10 April, 2012)

*“Tongue-tied Britain needs to learn the right lingo: UK trails France and Germany in emerging markets, catching up will require improvements in speaking the local language.”*

Dan Milmo (Guardian, 12 April 2012)

## Project Overview

This research is part of the Developing Scotland's Global Citizens project, funded by the Scottish Government, and led by NUS Scotland, which complements and enhances existing work on student outward mobility carried out as part of the previous Students Without Borders project. This report is intended to act as a basis for future research based on its findings and recommendations and will also inform forthcoming project work. The research aims to add something new to the much needed debate about Scotland's place on the global stage, and the future role Scottish graduates will play on that stage.

The overarching objectives of the project, which began in September 2011, are to increase student outward mobility opportunities and encourage greater uptake of study abroad programmes by Scottish students. Given the increased competition for fewer graduate vacancies, there has been an increased interest in the education sector in

the role international experience may play in the enhanced employability of students. This is reflected in the widespread support NUS Scotland received from across the sector, including from the British Council, HEA, Universities Scotland, Scotland's Colleges, sparqs, Scottish Funding Council, QAA and Young Scot with IBM and SDI on the project steering group.

The project has four strategic themes: raising the profile of European mobility opportunities; fostering graduate attributes through mobility; supporting the international learning experience at institutional level; and, encouraging a partnership approach across the Scottish educational sector. These themes are particularly relevant to the next Enhancement Theme – Developing and Supporting the Curriculum. Consequently, this is a wonderful opportunity for students' associations, as well as all involved in learning and teaching at colleges and universities, to help us address two of the main barriers to student outward mobility during the forthcoming academic year: lack of short-term mobility windows within the curricula and the low provision of mobility windows in key subject areas. It is anticipated that this work will culminate in Scotland's Year of Study Abroad in September 2012.



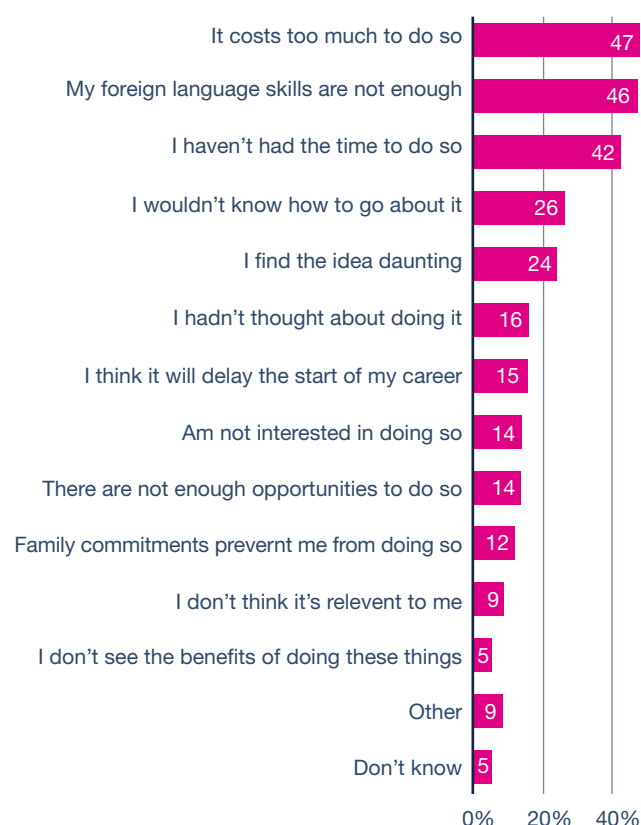


## Research Rationale

As a result of a variety of educational reforms at both the national and pan-European level, employability has become of increasing interest to institutions and students alike. This is confirmed by the European Universities Association, which noted in 2007 that 67% of institutions viewed employability as very important; up from just 11% in 2003.<sup>4</sup> The same report, however, found that employer engagement had remained static over the same period (though below we will examine the UK-specific situation). Within the UK, there are clear signs that employers are keen to recruit graduates with study abroad experience: a report from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in 2010 found that 55% of employers warned of ‘shortfalls’ in British students’ international cultural.<sup>5</sup> In a recent British Council/Think Global survey, 75% of surveyed chief executives and board level directors of businesses in the UK think we are in danger of being left behind by emerging countries unless young people learn to think more globally, and 74% are worried that many young people’s horizons are not broad enough to operate in a globalised and multicultural economy.<sup>6</sup> This is symptomatic of the fact that despite attracting very high numbers of international students to Scotland, the process is far from reciprocal.

Equally, students are increasingly seeing value and benefit to the notion of employability, and how it can help to distinguish them within the graduate labour market. Some argue that we are seeing the emergence of an “economy of experience”,<sup>7</sup> centred on students increasingly attempting to make themselves stand out in an ever more competitive field of graduates with similar degrees and results, borne out by the expansion of higher education over the past decade.

Despite this, UK students remain far less mobile than their European counterparts. The main reasons for low student study abroad uptake are well documented and the most recent research findings, by the British Council and YouGov, illustrate the barriers to undertaking international experiences. The following diagram, taken directly from that research, was in response to the students being asked why they had never worked, lived or learnt abroad:<sup>8</sup>



Base: all without a significant international experience (364)

However, NUS Scotland project staff discovered during the course of four stakeholder days that some of these barriers are in fact perceived, rather than real, and should be debunked in

4. Trends V: Universities shaping the European Higher Education Area (EUA, 2007)

5. Ready to Grow: Business Priorities for Education and Skills (CBI, 2010), p. 23.

6. The Global Skills Gap: Preparing Young People for the New Global Economy (British Council/Think Global, 2011), p. 4.

7. The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy (OUP, 2004), p. 220.

8. Next Generation UK: Research with UK Undergraduates Aged 19-21 (British Council/YouGov 2011), p. 52.



order to increase student uptake. As can be seen in Chapter 2, subject areas included the Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities and STEM with participants from 7 sector bodies, 11 institutions and 3 student associations, a complete list of which can be found in the acknowledgements. The findings from the group sessions explored the real and perceived barriers preventing greater study abroad uptake in Scotland. The following were found to be the most common barriers as perceived by the participants:

### **Perceived Barriers**

Lack of language skills – former exchange students have stressed that the lack of knowledge in the host language was not a major problem, and less so given the increasing number of courses in Europe provided in English.

Low student demand – evidence from the British Council debunks the myth that students do not want to go abroad as student demand outstrips availability.

Financial – short-term mobility windows are far more feasible for the overwhelmingly majority of students and this is evidenced by those students surveyed for the purpose of this research.

Accreditation – there is often nothing in the regulations that prevents students from studying abroad and clarification is needed.

### **Real Barriers**

Lack of short-term/intensive study mobility windows – these continue to be the exception rather than the rule and often run on an ad hoc basis by individual staff mobility champions rather than embedded in the curricula.

Institutional support – this can be varied and is often down to enthusiastic members of support/

teaching staff rather than embedded within the programme of study.

Lack of sharing best-practice case studies – information on the opportunities and benefits are not filtering through at all levels nor are shared mobility blocks common to several institutions.

Existing collaborative partnerships not being exploited to create exchanges despite the presence of strong foundations in terms of institutional relationships, trust and familiarisation of course content.

Lack of opportunities for the exchange of support/teaching staff - returning staff often serve as enthusiastic mobility champions upon their return, taking a proactive role in the creation of mobility windows.

### **Widening Participation**

In this economy of experience, there will clearly be winners and losers. One of the most recent, and interesting, studies to date has come from HEFCE who carried out a detailed survey of those students who had undertaken a placement and/or study abroad period during their studies. This showed that students who had undertaken neither a study abroad period nor a placement could expect to receive a lower median and mean salary than those who had.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it pointed to a slightly enhanced potential for being either in further study or employed six months post-graduation for those who had been abroad, compared to those who had not.

Due to reporting mechanisms, it is a near impossible task to extract Scottish specific results when they have been undertaken. Despite this, however, there are still a number of common themes we can draw out from existing sources and which across the UK point to an



imbalance within a number of key indicators, specifically: age; sex; ethnicity; socio-economic background; and prior educational attainment.

Of the major studies undertaken, all have shown that women are more likely than men to study abroad. In a UK context, HEFCE put the average number of women undertaking some form of study abroad period at 56%,<sup>10</sup> with the highest proportion of women studying on Erasmus, where 68% of participants were female. The only form of study abroad where men made up a higher percentage was that of placement years (45% v. 55%), which may be due to the fact that the bulk of placements are undertaken on engineering degrees, where women are traditionally underrepresented. These findings have been replicated on a pan-European level by Otero and McCoshan who found that across Europe, 60% of participants in Erasmus were women, compared with 40% men.<sup>11</sup> As they note, whilst this (and the HEFCE results) do to some extent reflect the overall higher levels of participation in higher education by women, the results still exceed any OECD average of male/female participation.

Similarly, with age, HEFCE found that on average, across all forms of study abroad, only 14% were classed as mature students, and just 6% of Erasmus students were classed as mature. Again, at a European level, Otero and McCoshan found that 60% of Erasmus participants were between the ages of 21 and 23. At the other end of the scale, just 4% were aged 27 and over when they undertook their Erasmus placement.

Within socio-economic indicators, results show us that those from more deprived backgrounds are less likely to undertake study abroad. Once again, using HEFCE statistics, we see that of those undertaking a study abroad period, 82% were from NS-SEC 1-3 (highest three social

classifications), with the remaining 18% being from NS-SEC 4-7.

As above, these UK-based results are backed up with the results from Otero and McCoshan's European wide survey. Just 14% of Erasmus students reported that their parents had a below average income – 48% considered it average, 31% more than average, and a further 6% considerably above average.

It is clear that increasing the numbers of Scottish-domiciled students studying abroad could lead to short-term and long-term benefits for students, the country and Scotland's economy. This research report looks at the student, staff and business experience of studying abroad and comes to recommendations for action.

This report should form the basis of future work but must act as a catalyst for change, galvanising our sector – students, staff and institutions – to engage with Scottish business to promote studying abroad as a key way to improve the employability of our graduates.

Where institutions have internationalisation strategies, they must look at internationalisation in both directions, not just focussing on welcoming international students to Scotland – as important as that is – but also in promoting international mobility among home students too. These documents must be living and breathing, placing international mobility at their centre, matching rhetoric with reality.

Our overriding belief is that if we can get international mobility we can improve the quality of our student experience, of our graduates and of Scotland's ability to compete globally. That is what makes this report timely and what makes its impact incredibly important for the future of our graduates and the future of our country.

10. Ibid., p. 17

11. Survey of the Socio-Economic Backgrounds of Erasmus Students (European Commission, 2005), p. 4.



# Chapter 1

## Study Abroad Experience and Graduate Employability: Before and After Perspectives

### 1.1 Introduction

Despite the ambitious mobility goal set as part of the Bologna process - for 20% of all young people to spend part of their educational pathway in other European member states by 2020 - less than 1% of students studying in Scotland currently study abroad as part of their programme of study, according to official EU figures.

Despite the fact that Scotland sends a higher percentage of students on Erasmus placements than the rest of the UK, this is not enough to adequately address Scottish graduate unemployment in an increasingly globalised labour market. In terms of both language ability and study abroad experience, Scottish students remain at with a disadvantage to their bilingual and trilingual European counterparts. For example, over 30% of German students (24,029) undertook part of their study abroad in 2009/10 and these figures are expected to rise with a target of 50% set by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Taken in the wider context, during the academic year 2009/10, 32 countries took part in the Erasmus programme (the 27 EU Member States, Croatia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey). Only two of these countries – Croatia and Romania – had fewer Erasmus students in proportion to their overall graduate numbers in 2009 than the UK.<sup>12</sup>

Although last year witnessed an 8% increase in study abroad figures (1,243 students in 2010/11 compared to 1,148 students in 2009/10) amongst students studying at Scottish HEIs, these figures mask the actual number of Scottish students that study abroad within this. There is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that a significant number of these students are not Scottish but are studying in Scotland from elsewhere in the UK and Europe. Figures provided by several institutions for the purpose of this research reinforce this assessment. While last year's figures are not yet available from the University of Edinburgh, between 2005/6 and 2007/8 non-Scottish students made up 82% of their total Erasmus student figures. At the University of St. Andrew's, non-Scottish students made up 69% of all outgoing Erasmus students in 2010/11 and 67% in the previous academic year. At Heriot-Watt University, non-Scottish students made up 40% of all outgoing Erasmus students in 2010/11 and 43% in 2009/10. Evidently a larger-scale study needs to be undertaken before we can properly assess this issue as the student demographic is considerably different depending on the institution, but out of a total of 1,243 students studying in Scotland who went on Erasmus last year, we can safely say that a significant proportion of these were not Scottish.

While this paints a more challenging picture than the Erasmus figures offer at an institutional level, it must be noted that official figures only take into account study abroad undertaken through the Erasmus programme. Throughout the course of the research we found that a great deal of work is being done by 'mobility champions' at a departmental and institutional level to provide students outside of the Erasmus study abroad programme. However, as there is no centralised system to record these figures annually, either at institutional or national level, it is impossible to know how many Scottish students actually

12. Erasmus – Facts, Figures & Trends: the European Union support for student and staff exchanges and university cooperation in 2009/2010 (European Union, 2011), p. 25.



spend time abroad as part of their programme of study and much of the great work undertaken by these mobility champions goes unrecognised.

Although there is a very real interest to centrally record all student mobility in many institutions, reflected in the feedback we received from Scottish HE and FE institutions upon enquiring into such figures, the major barrier cited is the incredibly labour-intensive nature of such an exercise, not least for international office staff. However if figures provided by Glasgow Caledonian University are indicative of the wider educational landscape in Scotland, there could be great benefit in doing so. Following a school by school census of all student mobility for 2011/12, conducted by international office staff members in GCU, the extent of 'hidden' mobility became clear. Whilst Erasmus study abroad numbers consisted of 103 students, the total mobility numbers for the academic year are currently at 556 students, illustrating that 81% of student outward mobility would not have been collated at an institutional level if it were not for this innovative work.

The following research has consciously not replicated existing research on students' perspectives on study abroad at a UK-wide level, but builds upon this work. The main reasons for low student study abroad uptake are well documented. The most recent research by the British Council and YouGov - of over 1000 UK students including 129 studying in Scottish institutions - published in December 2011, reinforce previous findings.<sup>13</sup> Out of 364 students who self-defined as being without significant international experience, when asked why they had not worked, lived or studied abroad, almost half were concerned about the cost (47%). A similar proportion were concerned that their foreign language skills were not good enough (46%) and that they had not had the time to do

so (42%). Significantly, very few (9%) felt that it was not relevant to them.<sup>14</sup>

While existing research to date has overwhelmingly focused on university-level students, the following research expands upon this, and is the first of its kind to also include student views from those currently based in Scotland's colleges. To explore possible ways of overcoming the most common barriers, NUS Scotland conducted a survey, open to all students studying in Scottish HE and FE institutions. The survey explored student perceptions of study abroad and its link to employability, together with the reception to, and perceived value of, shorter-term mobility periods. The aim was to get an indication of whether shorter mobility windows would encourage greater uptake and widen the traditional demographic of study abroad students, and ultimately level the playing field in terms of subsequent graduate employability.

## 1.2 Research methods

Survey respondents were asked four closed questions relating to study abroad activity. Responses were sought via a Likert scale with five options presented, from 1 for 'Don't Know' to 5 for 'Definitely'. Additionally, there was an option at the end of the last question for open comments on that question. Respondents were sought using NUS Scotland student networks to complete an online survey as well as encouraging student delegates to the NUS National conference to complete a hard copy version which were collated with the online results.

In addition, all FE and HE international offices in Scotland were asked to assist in identifying current students with study abroad experience and several responded with lists of willing student participants who had undertaken study abroad for varying lengths of time, ranging from one week

13. See Next Generation UK: Research with UK Undergraduates Aged 19-21 (British Council/YouGov 2011).

14. Ibid., p. 52.



to a year, and in various destinations within and outwith Europe. These interviews were arranged through international office staff, apart from one instance whereby the student association facilitated, and conducted at the host institutions between January and March 2012.

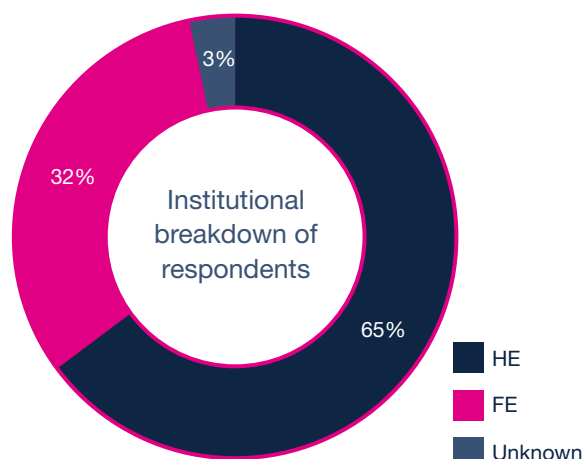
### 1.3 Research results

This section presents the participating student responses to the survey questions.

#### 1.3.1 Survey results

#### Student views on the benefits and relevance of study abroad experiences to employability and short-term mobility periods

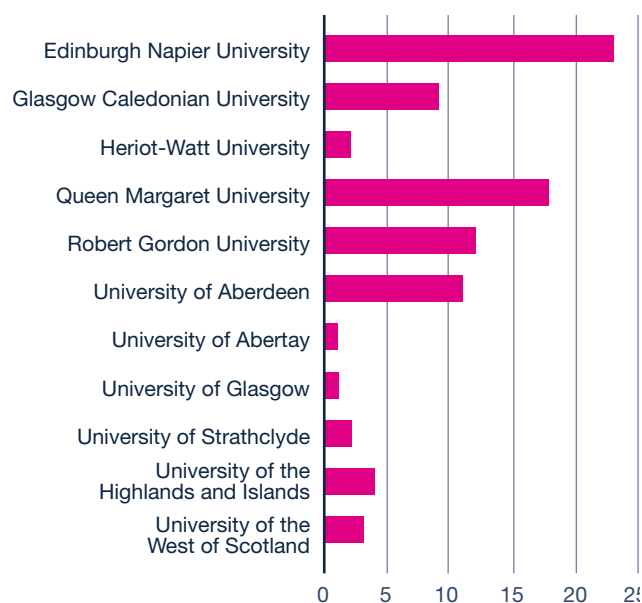
In total, there were 133 student survey respondents between February and March 2012. 65% from HE and 32% from FE institutions with 3% unknown.



Breaking this down further, four students did not make clear their institution and were consequently not included in either the college or university breakdown. In total, 86 students were from 11 different universities while 43 students were current students at 20 different colleges in Scotland.

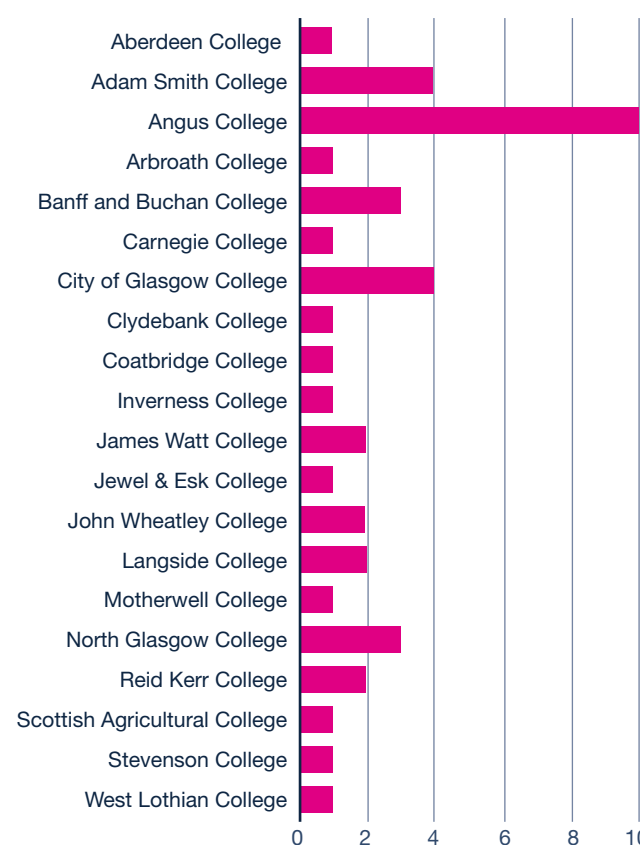
#### University Student Breakdown

Total number of students: 86



#### College Student Breakdown

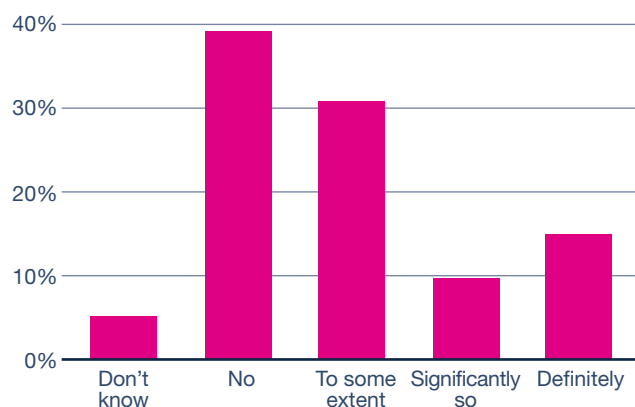
Total number of students: 43





### Question 1

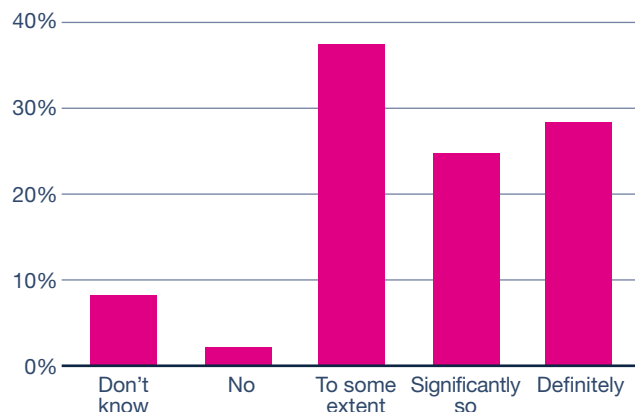
Are you aware of any opportunities to study abroad as part of your programme of study?



A significant number (39.4%) of students claimed they were not aware of any opportunities to study abroad. When this was broken down between college and university students, 58% of college students were not aware of any study abroad opportunities while 42% of university students expressed that they did not know of any opportunities for them to study abroad. The lack of awareness by university students is surprising given the availability of Erasmus for all students studying higher education since its inception in 1987.

### Question 2

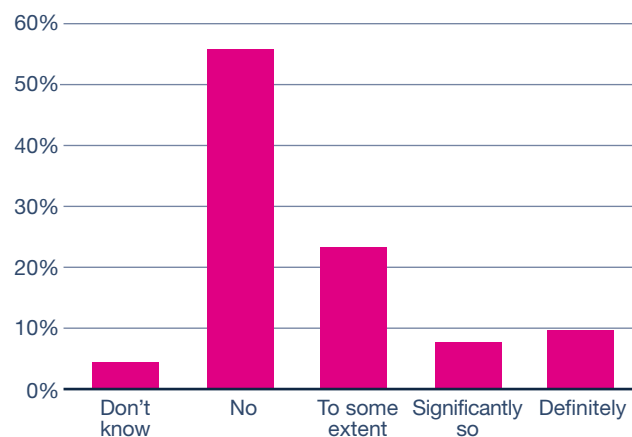
Do you think that graduates who have study abroad experience have a better chance of employment?



Despite the relatively low level of awareness of study abroad opportunities, only 3% of students thought that graduates with study abroad experience did not have a better chance of employment. 38% believed it made them more employable to some extent, 25% thought it did significantly so and 29% stated that it definitely made graduates more employable. Cumulatively, 92% thought that graduates with study abroad experience had a better chance of employment. This begs the question, if so, why do so few Scottish students study abroad despite believing that it makes graduates more employable?

### Question 3

In Scotland the most popular study abroad programme is Erasmus which must be between 3 -12 months in duration. Do you feel this length period is a barrier for you?



Over half of respondents (56%) thought that the length of the study period was not a barrier to studying abroad. This is perhaps surprising given the low outward mobility figures for Scotland and is in contrast to the YouGov figures (mentioned above) which showed that 42% of UK students surveyed said they had not had the time to study abroad. This may indicate that students are more confident than previously assumed to study abroad but are prevented from doing so

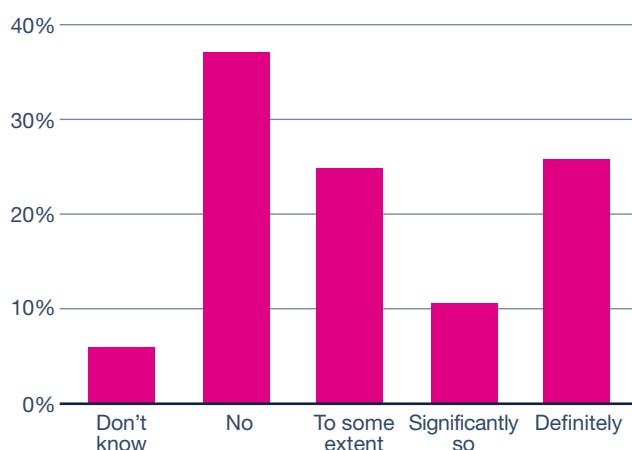


by the traditional barriers of cost, language and lack of awareness and opportunities to do so. Also, given that Erasmus programmes are only possible for higher education students, thus excluding many students currently studying in Scotland's colleges. These figures suggest a genuine level of interest amongst college and university students for study abroad opportunities of three month periods or more as part of their programme of study.

#### Question 4

##### Part 1: Closed Question

Would you be more likely to go on a study abroad trip if it was of a shorter term, say an intensive study abroad periods of 2-4 weeks?



A cumulative 62% of our respondents would be more inclined to go on a study abroad trip if it was of a shorter term with 26% stating that it would definitely make them more likely to study abroad. A selection of their arguments can be found below.

Conversely, the significant no response here (37%) reinforces the finding of the previous question whereby 56% of students did not feel a length of 3-12 months was a barrier for them

indicating that there are other barriers which prevent them from doing so. While 37% would not be inclined to study abroad if the period was shorter, this indicates that for many of those who are interested in going, the longer the study abroad period the better, as can be seen in the open responses below.

##### Part 2: Sample Open Responses

**Why would you be more likely to go on a study abroad trip if it was of a shorter term, say an intensive study abroad periods of 2-4 weeks?**

*“It would be far more possible to get time off work.”*

*“I have a small child and going away for a long period of time would not be possible whereas 2-3 weeks may be possible for me.”*

*“Because the short bursts is better for my disability.”*

*“My third year elective is a relatively short one so a short intensive placement would be perfect.”*

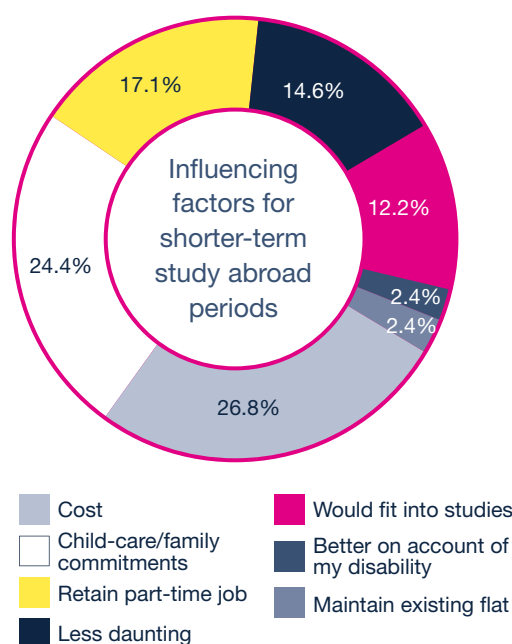
*“A shorter period would make me feel more secure in that if for some reason I didn't enjoy it, there wouldn't be too long to wait until I return home.”*

*“Because leaving for between 3-12 months means I would have to leave my job, and also means that I would be paying rent on a flat that I am not living in which is a waste and I would miss my friends and family.”*

*“Some students such as mature students have responsibilities which prevent them from being able to leave home for long periods of time. Plus the cost of studying abroad is very much a barrier for poorer students.”*



**“ Sometimes it is hard to get away for months leaving all duties such as work or family behind, therefore a 2-4 weeks programme might be suitable for someone who has got other obligations as well apart from being a student. ”**



For those who provided comments on why they would be more likely to study abroad if it were for a shorter period, with an example given of 2-4 weeks, the above chart outlines the various real or perceived barriers they believed they could personally overcome, to undertake study abroad for a short period.

**Why would you not be more likely to go on a study abroad trip if it was of a shorter term, say an intensive study abroad periods of 2-4 weeks?**

**“ It wouldn’t give me enough time to experience the culture another country has to offer. ”**

**“ 2-4 weeks is not a long enough period to fully experience different culture and tradition and to face the challenge of living abroad. ”**

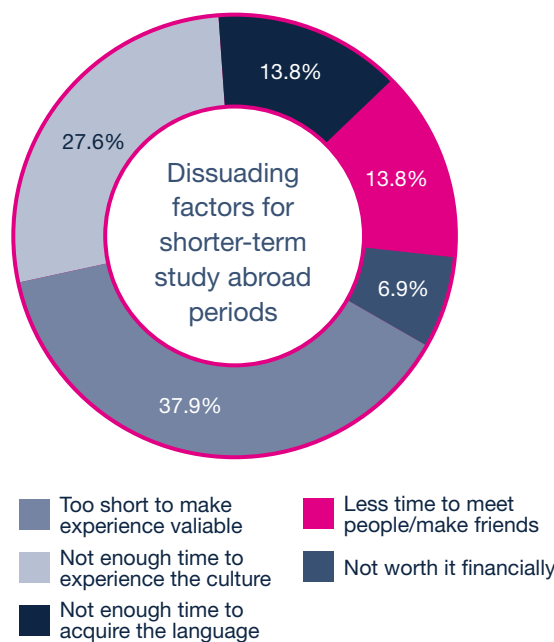
**“ You don’t get to know the country enough in that short a period. ”**

**“ If I was able to study abroad, I would prefer to go for a longer period. I feel that a longer stay in a different country would increase learning and give me to time to understand the differences and practices abroad. I also feel it would give me more time to embrace a new culture and get to know a new country. ”**

**“ Depending on where the placement/study was a shorter period of time might not be worth the cost of the travel expenses. ”**

**“ That is not enough of an experience - you really need at least a term of study in order to benefit from a different teaching style/curriculum. ”**

**“ Longer period gives more possibilities to practice language, experience culture and work in different environment. Short term may give a kind of holiday feeling. ”**



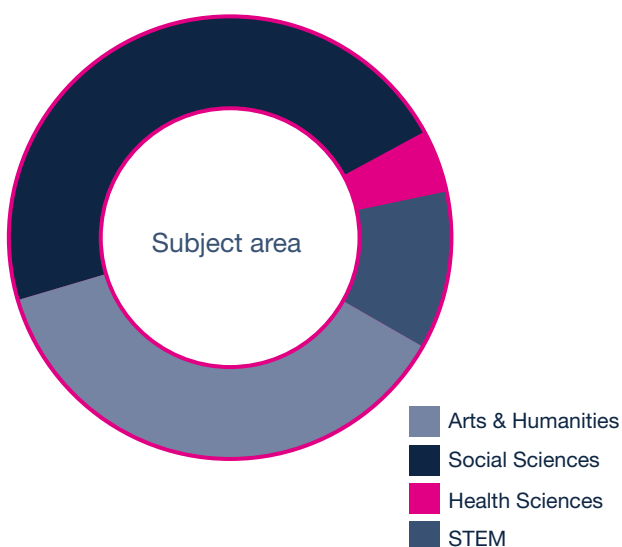
As can be seen from the above graph, almost 38% of students felt that an intensive shorter-term study abroad trip of 2-4 weeks was too



short to make the experience valuable, while almost 28% felt this would not be enough time to experience the culture of the host country or institution. However, as can be seen from the following interviews, all students, regardless of study trip length, felt that it was of significant value to their personal growth, inter-cultural competencies, and in their employment upon graduation.

### 1.3.2 Interview results

In total, 43 student interviews were conducted in eight different institutions in Scotland.<sup>15</sup> Students were asked in each case if they thought their study abroad experience made them more employable. The four subject areas used in the statistical analysis adhered to the current HEA discipline breakdown: 1) Arts and Humanities, 2) Health Sciences, 3) Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and 4) Social Sciences.<sup>16</sup> The social science section includes four Jewel and Esk college students who were studying access courses in this subject area.



The subject breakdown, according to student participants, is a wider reflection of the traditional study abroad student demographic. Arts and Humanities students, particularly those studying languages, are traditionally those who make up the majority of study abroad students, along with Social Science students.

The following are a selection of those responses, arranged according to the length of their study abroad experience, illustrating that all study period lengths were seen as adding to the student's employability.

#### Duration - 1 week

*“It’s taught me how to act in front of other cultures and if you’re working you need to meet people from all over the world.”*

*“It has made me more employable because I have experience with people from different nationalities—that helps in a global job market.”*

*“Comenius is a really good thing to have on my CV.”*

*“The confidence [you gain] helps you speak to other people.”*

#### Duration - 6 weeks

*“It’s made me more employable because I will have another language I can speak. I would like to pursue a career in international organisations, like the European Union or the UN, where you will be required to prove that you are flexible, can work independently, and be confident enough to go to different places... Yes! It definitely improves your employability!”*

15. The participating institutions included: University of St. Andrew's, University of Edinburgh, University of Aberdeen, University of Strathclyde, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, Glasgow Caledonian University and Jewel and Esk College.

16. For the full discipline breakdown within these subject areas, see <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/disciplines>



### Duration - 1 semester

**“** I think it's something that's unique on my CV and different to the majority of other OT graduates. It's given me something to talk about in interviews as well. **”**

**“** I think many employers look for someone who's open and quite brave... It shows that you're more independent and more able to push yourself and go after something that you want. **”**

**“** Employers will see that I can take risks. **”**

**“** I think that an employer is always after a person who flexible and adaptable and that's what I cultivated during my experience. **”**

**“** Yes! I think it's made me more employable. When I went in for interviews a lot of employers asked about times when you've had challenges or when you've had to accommodate to new situations and talking about when I arrived in Canada covered those questions. It gave me a lot to talk about there and they always seem to build on the answers that I gave. **”**

**“** It shows you're able and willing to adapt to new situations and that's something employers are looking for. I have experienced it first hand—employers have been impressed by me studying abroad and, thus, said they are more likely to employ me. **”**

**“** In the climate right now, there are not many jobs available, it makes you stand out. In the interviews I've been to already they have been very interested in my travel abroad experience and what I can bring from it. **”**

**“** Employers will look at you and know that you're willing to travel—it'll make you stand out. **”**



**“** It looks like I am mobile and open to new things. The opportunities I had in terms of work experience has added to my CV. **”**

**“** I know it's very important right now for the employees to speak other languages and have experiences abroad. **”**

### Duration - 5 months

**“** It has given me something else to speak about to employers. Having been on a foreign experience means I can adapt to different cultures—with a large company, it's a good highlight to have. **”**

### Duration - 6 months

**“** It does give you an edge in the midst of a very tough employment environment. **”**

### Duration - 9 months

**“** It's made me more resourceful, willing to take on new things and organise my time better. Of course, my languages have improved a lot which is invaluable. It's made me better at communicating with other people. **”**



*“...as a person, you come across better during interviews because you have constructive and positive things to talk about.”*

## Duration - 1 year

*“I do think studying abroad has made me more employable...Having been in Paris gave me an extra edge...Now I have a graduate job lined up with CitiBank, which is a global bank. I think the fact that I now speak fluently in another language and had university experience in another country is a huge asset.”*

*“I actually got a job because of my year abroad. I’m working in an NGO in Hong Kong next year. They said the reason they hired me is because I can prove that I can work in an environment that was very different and because I was willing to throw myself into something that wasn’t comfortable... It puts another language on your CV, which is invaluable at this point in time.”*

*“It puts you away from the crowd, it stands out. It shows you’re not scared of facing a challenge, you’re independent, and you can rely on yourself... It improved my problem-solving skills.”*

*“Employers are scrutinising people a lot more closely. You really need things to make you stand out. Showing that you went away, adapted to a completely new way of learning, and thrived in a completely different environment really shows them that you are adaptable, motivated, and a better understanding of a wide range of people.”*

*“It’s definitely helped me in terms of job opportunities because, not only do I have foreign language skill, but not that many people have studied an Asian language and it’s definitely made me a niche candidate for certain jobs.”*



*“It has given me more confidence when it comes to interviews and group projects. The transformation I went through has benefited me and better equipped me for the job search. From an employer’s point of the view, the fact that an employer can see that I’ve been away studying for a year at a business school in a foreign language helps advance your skills...My appreciation for alternative business practices and other cultures is only going to help me in the future to become global.”*

*“Nowadays, it’s a very competitive market. People are looking for something different, something extra the person can bring...Being abroad gives you a chance to develop your own self-confidence...”*

*“It’s definitely made me more employable in terms of confidence and different perspectives I’ve come back with.”*

*“If you have gone abroad, I think people will see that you are able to cope with more situations, are more outgoing and confident.”*



*“In the current market, as we all know, anything that differentiates you from the crowd is a definite help...It’s also helpful to talk about all the international experiences and international people I’ve met when I’m applying for international institutions.”*

*“It shows that I can be comfortable in different situations...It’s made me more self-reflective...Going abroad makes you think about who you are and that helps you self-develop.”*

*“I’ve been told that employers look for something special on CVs—something that sticks out. I think that definitely sticks out, especially if you’re studying in another language.”*

*“I’ve become more confident in approaching people you don’t know, being more confident about myself and presenting myself...You learn cross-cultural communication which is really valuable in a globalising world...You become a lot more interesting to employers.”*

In every case, regardless of the length of time abroad, the student interviewee voiced the transformative nature of their study abroad experience. Most considered this self-development, in terms of increased confidence, independence, and adaptability, as the main factor that made them more employable. Some, but not all, cases mentioned second language attainment, in conjunction with personal growth as improving their employability.

## 1.4 Conclusions

It is not enough to simply aspire to increase study abroad numbers for students studying in Scottish institutions. Awareness of study abroad opportunities still remains an issue, even at university level where Erasmus is available to all students, and we must work as a sector to improve that. Equally, we urgently need to begin collecting more precise figures for Scottish-domiciled students before we can hope to increase, and track the progress of, the number of Scottish students who partake in study abroad opportunities.

Crude efforts to merely increase numbers with no thought to the underlying causes of non-participation may serve to reinforce the traditional demographic of white, female, middle-class students. Increased participation needs to be achieved with an emphasis on widening the traditional study abroad student demographic.

Short-term mobility windows with defined learning outcomes must be explored as a way to include students who are unable or unwilling to undertake the traditional 3 – 12 month study abroad period. This is imperative if we are to avoid the more widespread development of the current two-tier graduate population – those who can afford to undertake study abroad and those who cannot.

Finally, as GCU’s innovative census illustrated, with its ‘hidden’ mobility figures of 81%, information on non-Erasmus student mobility remains siloed, at school or departmental level, and consequently not sufficiently promoted at the institutional level and in recruitment materials. A Scottish-wide mapping exercise of all student mobility would be of much benefit and could be facilitated through the establishment of a centralised system, fed into a national mobility agency in Scotland.



## Chapter 2

# Mapping Mobility, Mapping Opportunity: Institutional Staff Perspectives and Sector Best Practice

### 2.1 Introduction

While the Erasmus Programme remains most popular amongst Scottish language students, it is clear that a targeted, sector-wide approach is necessary to increase overall outward mobility figures and encourage the creation of, and participation in, short-term mobility periods within Scottish universities and colleges. This is necessary to demystify the exchange process to encourage non-traditional students and students from the 'hard to send' subject areas to study abroad, ensuring equality of opportunity, not only as part of their student experience but as global citizens entering the increasingly competitive labour market following graduation. This would also require work at the institutional level to ensure that study abroad experiences, regardless of length, are turned into competencies, and that all mobility windows have clear measurable learning outcomes.

As evidenced in the preceding chapter, many students are deterred by having to commit to a significant time abroad. This is due to financial limitations, part-time work commitments or those who have family commitments such as carers or parents, a lack of language skills and confidence issues. However, students are often able, given the opportunity, to undertake a shorter period of study abroad. Yet this is too often not matched with institutional capacity. It is also believed that this 'taster,' will consequently have an impact on outward mobility figures in the longer-term, serving to increase uptake of longer study abroad periods amongst some of these students who first

undertake a shorter-term period abroad not least because of the chance to gain basic language skills and overcome real or perceived barriers. Subsequently, this domino effect, as discussed later in this chapter, could potentially have a very real and positive impact on Scotland's ability to reach the Bologna targets by 2020.

Given the significant dearth of opportunities to study abroad in certain subject areas, whereby student demand is not matched by the availability or feasibility of mobility windows within their programme of study, project staff at NUS Scotland organised a series of four stakeholder days in the Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities and STEM subject areas, hosted respectively at Europa Building (Glasgow), University of Abertay, University of Edinburgh and Glasgow Caledonian University. The rationale behind the stakeholder days was to locate and identify the work being done by 'mobility champions' at college and university departmental level, and across the sector, and to share best practice.

In addition to these four stakeholder days, interviews were conducted between January and April 2012 with institutional staff members, with an emphasis on the link, as they perceived it, between study abroad and employability. This was done to help increase fellow staff, student and employer awareness and recognition of the value of study abroad. Six universities and one college took part in the interviews.<sup>17</sup> Twenty seven interviews were conducted at the host institutions and interviewees included international office staff, academic staff with responsibility for international study abroad programmes, and career advisors.

### 2.2. Scottish Mobility Champions and Best Practice Case Studies

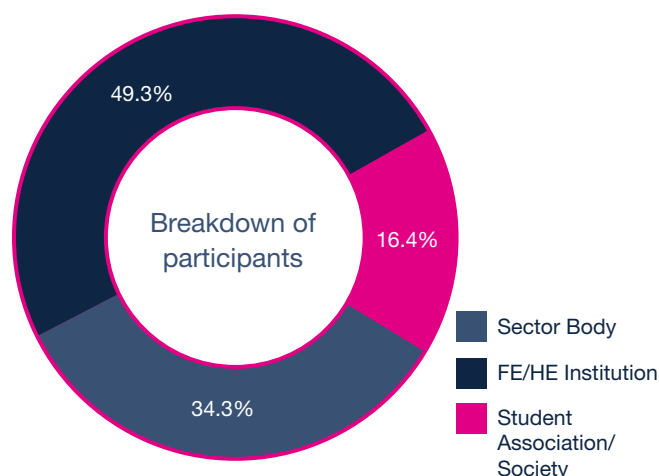
Participants at the four stakeholder days included Scottish Government and NUS Scotland project staff, staff who work at a sector and institutional

17. The participating institutions included: University of St. Andrew's, University of Edinburgh, University of Strathclyde, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, Glasgow Caledonian University and Jewel and Esk College.



level to encourage greater uptake of existing European Commission programmes such as Erasmus, and those who have established their own study abroad trips. Although primarily aimed at sector and institutional staff, the student perspective was reflected by elected student representatives and those with study abroad experience actively involved in promoting these opportunities through international societies on campus.

The stakeholder events functioned as an opportunity for all attendees to showcase and share best practice and encourage collaborative work. The group sessions explored how the case studies may be applied within the same discipline area elsewhere by addressing the real and perceived barriers faced in establishing and maintaining such programmes.



As the above pie-chart shows, the majority of participants were from college or university. However, it is clear that there is also real interest across the sector to explore best practice in outward mobility which is very encouraging. In total, 18 examples of best practice were presented in the four subject areas. While a full analysis of best practice in outward student mobility is outwith the remit of this report, and shall be dealt with in greater detail at a later stage of the Developing

Scotland Global Citizen's project, many of the participants' comments, videoed on the day, are indicative of the widespread support for study abroad in terms of enhanced employability and touched on several common themes:

### Personal Experience

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the mobility champions identified had undertaken study abroad as a student themselves, and recognised the impact it had on their career as the following stakeholder statements illustrate:

*“My own experience when I went for my first substantive role, the interviewer afterwards told me the main reason I got the job was because of my overseas experience as an Erasmus student and the ability to speak a foreign language and that directly influenced getting my first full-time job when I graduated.”*

*“I didn't appreciate all of the learning and skills I developed until years later.”*

### Professional Experience

Some stakeholders cited the tangible impact as evidenced by their students upon returning to their home institution following a study abroad experience:

*“I would say that the thing I observe in the students is their ideas and understandings of themselves, and what they can achieve, where they can go in their life, [and their] changes. For my students, because it shows that they were willing to try something new, and the skills they get, I can evidence that when I write references for them and it's some thing I always put in because it's very, very important.”*

### Institutional Responsibility

For others, their belief in the value of the study abroad experience was based on a sense of institutional responsibility to their students:



*“We have an institutional responsibility to be offering our students mobility opportunities in as many forms as we can possibly find...different students have different needs...the quality of the students that we create at the end of their degree is an indicator of the standard of the institution and mobility should be part of that.”*

## Employer Demand

Others cited the necessity of graduate attributes, developed through study abroad, in the present and future global market place:

*“Increasingly employers are calling upon students to have more than just traditional academic knowledge. Employers are increasingly looking to students to be able to contribute creatively to their organisations. That doesn’t just mean having a technical master of knowledge...looking for more flexibility, adaptability, creativity so that they can bring these things to work related problems.”*

*“Arguably, the world doesn’t need another iPad, what it needs is people who are capable of and rounded enough to be able to address some of the bigger social issues, global issues that we face today. The period spent abroad can contribute meaningfully to producing graduates who are capable of grappling with subtle, social, global, cultural questions.”*

## Support From Accrediting Bodies

Although it has been assumed by some members of academic staff that accreditation prevented some students from studying abroad, this is not necessarily true, as evidence by a representative from the Health Professions Council:

*“From HPC’s perspective, Erasmus exchange is entirely possible. There is nothing to specifically prohibit Erasmus exchange either in our guiding legislation, standards or processes. There are approved programmes currently running that participate in the exchange programme. However,*

*Erasmus exchange across the professions we regulate is not that common and education providers appear to have a preference for practice placements to take place outside the UK rather than academic modules and even then that is relatively uncommon.”*

Much more work needs to be done to ensure that all accrediting bodies, in all relevant discipline areas, make clear statements about where they stand in relation to student mobility to avoid ambiguity and misinformation.

## Increasing Employability Through Short-Term Mobility

In discussing how to increase outward mobility numbers, short-term periods were seen as a potentially valid way for students to overcome real or perceived barriers, potentially having a domino effect, making students less risk-averse in terms of undertaking longer periods of study abroad. This was seen as important at a secondary school level to encourage greater uptake in FE and HE.

*“Giving people the opportunity to go just for a week or so to build that confidence...it is intimidating to go abroad for the first time so I think that’s really important so things like school exchanges...so many of the students that I’ve read applications from have been inspired by school partnerships or school exchanges, or school trips and that’s really led them forward so the more people that can get involved the better.”*

This is supported by the recent YouGov poll of over 1000 UK students (129 from Scotland) which discovered that those who had gained international experience earlier in their lives were significantly more likely to think that international opportunities and programmes were “for people like them” – 63% compared to 46% of those that had not. 65% of those at Scottish universities felt likewise.<sup>18</sup>

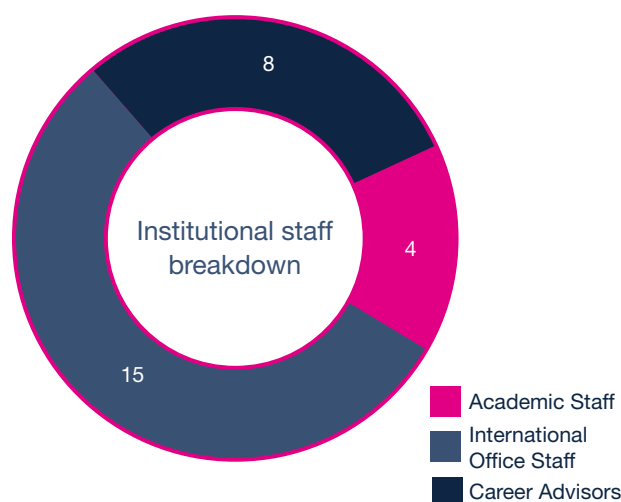


The transformative effect of short-term mobility - for example, two-week intensive study abroad trips - were considered as having significant value for those with direct experience:

*“You can’t actually diminish the benefits that come from that [fortnight]...To say that you have to go for a certain length of time to have a valid cultural experience I think is quite naïve, even a very short-term experience can actually derive a lot of benefit for the student.”*

## 2.3 Institutional Staff Interviews

Six universities and one college took part in the interviews. Twenty seven interviews were conducted at the host institutions and interviewees included international office staff, academic staff with responsibility for international study abroad programmes, and career advisors.



Question: In your experience, do you think study abroad makes a student more employable?

Based on their professional experience, all interviewees answered that they believed studying abroad had a positive impact on the employability of students. The following are a selection of the answers, illustrating both the soft and hard skills gained, as they perceived it, as a direct result of the study abroad experience.

### Academic Staff

*“The job market has changed massively in the last 10 years. Companies are looking for people who may start locally but move to one of their sites in the Far East, Asia, etc. They probably are going to look for people who have demonstrated that they’ve no hesitations. I think it’s so important that all degree programmes integrate mobility...Students will end up being better prepared for the real world—the global environment.”*

*“As a graduate coming out of university in a very competitive environment, on anyone’s CV, it’s extremely important...Businesses operate in a global economy, so clearly graduates coming out from university must have the skill-set to negotiate and understand the culture of diverse economies. It gets them thinking outside of their box. That enhances the skill-set of the Scottish economy in terms of internationalising our ability to say that we are open for business.”*

*“During my time at the Scotsman, I used to get dozen of CVs all the time wanting to be journalists. They would say similar things of why they want to be a journalist and I would go down to the bottom and see if they have managed to go experience life outside of Scotland. That was really the sway to whether I interviewed them or not. It shows a young person with a bit more ambition.”*

*“For any employer, if I were looking to hire someone, I would prefer to have someone who has been exposed to different experiences. Architecture is dealing with international competition; we generally work as a team. If your student has this experience of working with other students and institutions, they will be more adaptable in different working environments.”*

*“When they come back to the UK it enhances their employability with the understanding of a different culture, different people, different perspectives of health care, I think it is invaluable for them.”*



“Students can become more confident in themselves and their skills and abilities—that enables them to present [themselves] better. Employers will have a sense of someone who can go into difficult and stressful situations and manage that stress and be flexible and creative in how they communicate and achieve tasks.”

“Students who have completed the ERASMUS programme definitely say it enhances their CV. During an interview they can highlight their ability to use coping strategies, their cultural awareness, transferability of skills, and the general willingness to take a few risks.”

“Going abroad on exchange definitely makes them more employable. They have a much broader experience of how different cultures work. They will often be able to do things like internships, access to practical equipment and experience they may not be able to access in their home institutions for any number of reasons.”

“In terms of networking, increasing your ability to socialise with different kinds of people in different kinds of environment, all those things contribute to make people more rounded. Employers look at that and say: They’ve travelled, they’ve got a spirit of adventure, they like a challenge, and they can tackle it and come back and understand how to interact with people so much better.”

## International Office Staff

“Employers recognise the importance of having accommodation of the language, the business understanding and experience overseas. They’ve recognised that the student has a perspective at a global level where other students will only have a national perspective. They are international businesses; they need people who think at that level.”

“In terms of even undertaking a job interview, they are able to talk with much more confidence.

They bring that together with all their other skills: social skills, communications skills, language skills, skills related to academic studies. That as a package provides them with an extra ‘je ne sais quoi’ which might be what an employer is looking for. Certainly we’ve been told by employers that they love talking to students who’ve been on exchange just because they’ve got that extra dimension.”

“There is very good anecdotal evidence of students who have gone abroad being more employable. Students who have gotten jobs have said that employers are very interested in that experience abroad. One of the things we are trying to do is to assist the students to articulate that experience in the most beneficial way.”

“There are so many universities, so many students studying the same courses. If you’ve got a class full of 40 graduates and there’s one student that’s been abroad, which is the student that has done something a bit different, if I were an employer, I would go for the student [who] went on to do something different.”

“Employers like to see that someone’s willing to get out of their comfort zone and see what else is available during their degree. It shows that they are quite brave and able to face new challenges.”

## Career Advisory Staff

“There are all the usual skills that are developed: transferable skills, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, analytical, communications without a doubt. Many students talk to me about working in a multicultural environment - students who are interested in international careers. It can be difficult for some of them if they have no real evidence of international experience. If they have studied and/or worked abroad, there is no doubt from the employer’s perspective that this is more value added. It does set themselves apart from competitors.”



*“Part of my role involves checking students’ CVs to make sure that they are appropriate... seeing something like international study definitely puts them above the rest. It shows that they are independent...Also, in today’s multicultural world, having international experience means they will be able to interact with customers much better as a result of being culturally aware... Right now, Scotland is becoming a global hub for international businesses.”*

*“Individual students will only stand out from the crowd if they have stopped and thought about what they did during that experience: “What did I gain from it? How will I describe it to other people? How am I different? Do I see things differently? If they simply go, do the coursework, meet a few friends, visit a few cities as a tourist, and come back, they won’t be more employable... it’s about what you do with the experience and how you are then able to make sense of it, how confidently you are able to talk to employers about the benefits.”*

## 2.4 Conclusions

The study abroad experience, even short-term, on graduate employability is clearly recognised by individual staff working across the sector and at an institutional level that can appreciate first-hand the evidently transformative effect it has on the students that undertake them. As the interviews show, all participants were convinced of the positive impact of the study abroad experience on the student’s future career prospects, not least because of the student’s changed perception of their own potential, and the possibilities opened up to them through what is clearly a uniquely transformative experience for students, as evidenced in the student interviews in the preceding chapter and staff testimonials above. Staff mobility is also seen as a key catalyst in encouraging student mobility.

While the stakeholder days allowed participants to highlight best-practice and encourage collaborative links, until there is a centralised data-collection system at an institutional level to record all outward mobility opportunities and actual uptake, best-practice will often remain unknown even within the same schools and departments. A centralised system would serve

to address the lack of awareness amongst students of the opportunities available, as evidenced in the previous chapter. Mapping mobility means mapping opportunity which can then be promoted within each discipline and included in course prospectuses to enhance an institution’s profile and future attractiveness. Many European countries have already reached the Bologna target of 20% and many others have already exceeded this figure. A national mobility agency could serve to monitor progress and facilitate the streamlining of data collection at an institutional level.

The positive impact placed on study abroad by those who work most closely with such students – academic staff, international office staff and career advisory staff - warrants a concerted effort at institutional level to ensure mobility windows are available to suit an increasingly diverse student body. Furthermore, the stakeholder testimonials confirm the latest authoritative UK-wide employer research findings, as discussed in the next chapter, which show that study abroad experience can enhance employment opportunities in an increasingly globalised political economy.



## Chapter 3

# Study Abroad Experience and Graduate Employability: Scottish Employers' Perspectives

### 3.1 Introduction

With graduate unemployment at incredibly worrying levels, it is clear that Scottish graduates will be competing in an incredibly tough jobs market. Recent figures released by the Centre for Economics and Business Research showed that 52% of last year's university-leavers were unemployed or under-employed six months after graduating.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the personal, academic and professional benefits for students who undertake study abroad opportunities take on an added, more urgent importance. This is clearly evidenced in the preceding two chapters with a clear awareness of enhanced employability on the part of returning study abroad students and reinforced by the views of institutional staff who are engaged with such students.

A number of recent reports have looked at global employability skills. A recent British Council/Think Global report stated that "global employability skills are emerging as one of the crucial determinants of business success and economic growth".<sup>20</sup> If one of the key benefits of producing global graduates is to maintain and improve Scottish competitiveness on the global stage, it is all the more important to determine the views of Scottish employers.

A recent survey of UK business leaders, conducted by the British Council and Think

Global, found that 75% of board- and director-level executives and CEOs think that the UK is "in danger of being left behind by emerging countries unless young people learn to think more globally".<sup>21</sup> We built on this UK-wide work by conducting a small-scale study, funded by the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF), to tentatively explore the link between student outward mobility and graduate employability in a Scottish-specific context. The research originated as part of a two-pronged employer survey which explored outward mobility and co-curricular activity and their links to graduate employability as perceived by surveyed employers. The research was intended to serve as a stepping stone for further work by providing a preliminary snapshot of Scottish employers' perspectives on the potential benefits of study abroad activity. The aim was to highlight these initial findings to institutions and student support agencies to assist in the development of further study abroad opportunities to enhance graduate employability and competitiveness in the globalised labour market.

This chapter presents the research aims, methodology and outcomes whilst the findings, together with those from the two previous chapters, inform the report's recommendations outlined in the following chapter and deal specifically with the need to improve the interconnectivity between study abroad experiences, employer recognition and graduate employability.

### 3.2. Research methods

The study surveyed employers on their perspectives of the benefits, impact and relevance of outward student mobility upon graduate employability. The survey targeted a diverse range of graduate employers across

19. Degrees of Doubt: Is University Worth the Investment? (CEBR, 2011), p. 11.

20. The Global Skills Gap: Preparing Young People for the New Global Economy (British Council/Think Global, 2011), p. 4.

21. Ibid.



Scotland in order to gauge their opinions, and determine the extent to which they value and recognise study abroad experience as part of a potential employee's profile. In total 46 organisations responded with 45 valid responses; a break down by size, sector, and industry is provided as an appendix to this report and a full list of the employer participants can be found in the acknowledgements.

Similar to the student survey, respondents were asked four closed questions relating to study abroad activity. Responses were sought via a Likert scale with five options presented, from 1 for 'Don't Know' to 5 for 'Definitely'. Additionally, there was an option at the end for two open responses around a number of common themes. Respondents were sought using an email invitation to complete an online survey with the range of organisations was primarily drawn from membership lists of CBI Scotland and the Federation of Small Businesses.

For these purposes, employers were given a definition of study abroad as a period spent in Europe, undertaking studies, which would receive equal academic credit to having stayed in the home country.

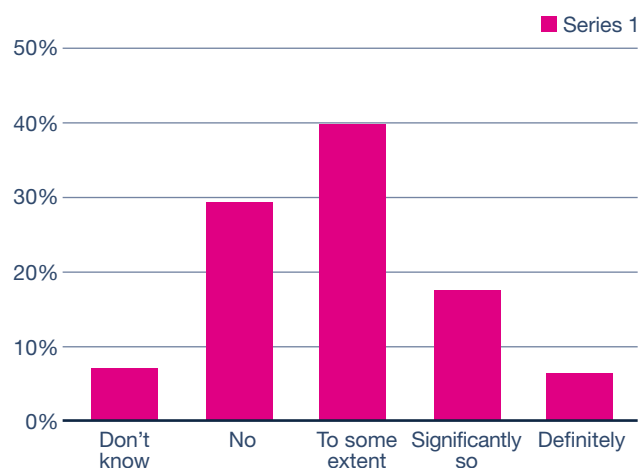
### 3.3 Survey results

This section presents the participating employers' responses to the survey questions. The open ended responses are interspersed to contextualise the quantitative findings.

### 3.4 Employers' views on the benefits and relevance of study abroad experiences to employment

#### Question 1

In your experience, do you feel that graduate applicants who have study abroad experience have a better chance of employment?

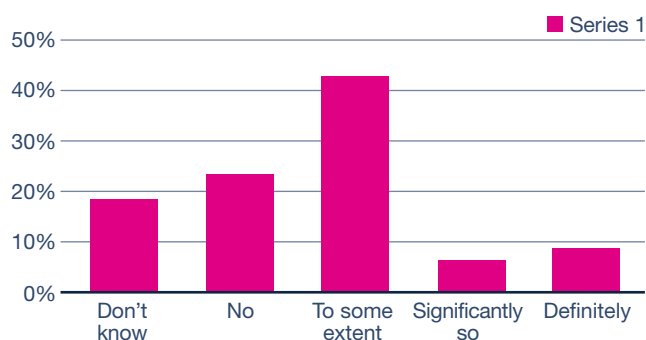


Almost two thirds (65%) of the employers we surveyed stated that they thought studying abroad would improve an applicant's employment prospects – 7% stated it would definitely do so, 18% significantly so, and 40% stated it would to some extent. Less than one third (29%) of our respondents stated that they thought studying abroad would not improve a graduate's employment chances.

Interestingly, even this level of no response runs counter to the findings of the most recent UK-wide employer surveys and the comments of all surveyed Scottish-based students and institutional staff. This could raise questions about the extent of internationalised strategies on the part of Scottish companies and the degree to which study abroad attributes are articulated by graduates and understood by potential Scottish employers.

#### Question 2

In Scotland the most popular study abroad programme is Erasmus which is between 3 -12 months in duration. Given that student uptake of this currently stands at only 1% of the Scottish student population, would you be supportive of shorter term, intensive study abroad periods of 2-4 weeks when recruiting graduates?



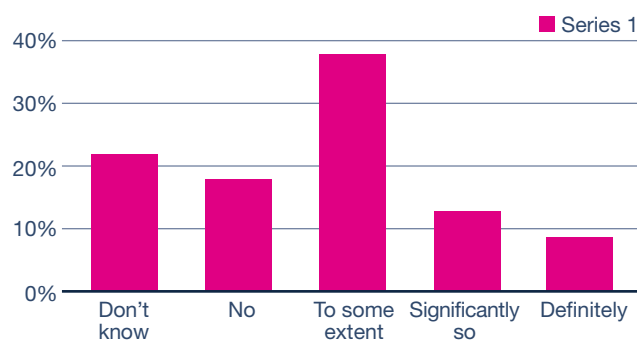
Employers were overwhelmingly supportive of shorter study abroad windows, with 58% of respondents supporting such moves, stating that they would definitely (9%), significantly so (7%) or to some extent (42%) support such moves. Less than a quarter (24%) would not be supportive with 18% responding that they didn't know.

From the above we can gather that, on the whole, Scottish employers would appear to be at best ambivalent towards shorter mobility periods with the majority saying only to some extent, and the no option gathering more responses than the combined significantly so and definitely responses.

This was replicated in responses to the second open question dealing with future company vision, with one respondent stating that what was key was demonstrating “get up and go”. The worry could be that employers may feel that, with shorter mobility periods, this may be lacking to some extent, and that it represents an easier choice. However, for many students, this choice is often far more accessible for them, particularly for those with dependents, disabilities and part-time jobs.

### Question 3

If a potential graduate employee had a study abroad experience of 2-4 weeks, would you recognise the benefits of transferable skills gained during this period?

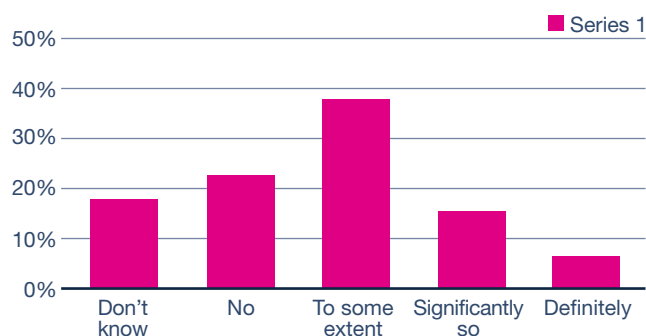


We can see from this table that, on the whole, employers would recognise, even if only to some extent, the benefits that shorter mobility could bring. Whilst 18% of respondents said no, the combined significantly so and definitely response was 22%, which goes along with a 38% to some extent response.

The 22% that indicated don't know implies that a deeper understanding of study abroad attributes is needed, perhaps in conjunction with a greater articulation of these relayed to employers in the recruitment process.

### Question 4

Do you feel that graduate employees with study abroad experience enhance your company's global competitiveness?



As above in Question 1, the employers we surveyed seem to be fairly torn over this issue. The combined significantly so and definitely response was 23% - just 1% point higher than the no response. However, the “to some extent”



response was 38%, meaning over 60% of respondents were positive about this possibility.

### 3.5 Open responses

The open responses raised interesting questions about the value placed on mobility periods and show the diversity of opinion on their value.

*“In my experience, those with foreign study experience do not have any advantage over those who do not. Co-curricular activity is far more important. Through this I have found students who have gained a commercial awareness, improved team working, motivation and self-confidence.”*

Others valued mobility but not necessarily those of shorter periods:

*“...the thing that differentiates graduates is the fact that some of them have the skills, the motivation, and the application to seek out and obtain experiences such as Erasmus...simply sheep dipping every student into a 1 – 4 week placement won't change that in the slightest.”*

The increase in cultural awareness was cited frequently and several others responded that these graduates had:

*“a better sense of where they fit in to the world, confidence organisation, team work, working with other types of people.”*

*“increase[d] interpersonal skills including ability to see issues from a range of perspectives including cultural sensitivities.”*

*“broader outlook and attitude. Possibly better able to work independently and deal with challenges.”*

*“Greater vision, independence, experience.”*

In the open responses, several mobility champions were identified:

*“We are constantly pushing for students to have increased international study experience. We consider this important for the growth of the Scottish economy and feel Scottish business could benefit from improved international connections.”*

*“Given that we participate in a number of schemes whereby we are providing international experience to graduates coming from abroad, we know first-hand the difference it can make to the employment prospects of the graduates involved. To some extent it is all about demonstrating that you have the ‘get up and go’ that employers are looking for...”*

*“We are constantly pushing for students to have increased international study experience. We consider this important for the growth of the Scottish economy and feel Scottish business could benefit from improved international connections along with the host of added skills students gain abroad.”*

These are extremely strong responses, and ones that we would no doubt intuitively expect to be more commonly found in the comments but were not. This is also played out above in the statistical findings. As we saw previously, one reason for this could be that employers simply view study abroad as enhancing personal attributes, and do not see the link with employability.

One respondent stated that “as an international business mobility could be an advantage, depending on the position applied for”. This is possibly indicative of a wider-held view that some Scottish companies do not see the holistic benefit to someone with international experience and consequent greater inter-cultural awareness.



### 3.6 Conclusions

The results present an interesting challenge to all in the sector. Employers are generally supportive of international mobility, including shorter mobility windows, and can see the benefits to their business of having employees with experience of studying abroad. Among those surveyed, there are evidently several Scottish employers who are ‘mobility champions’ in key industries. However, there is a significant minority who are less enthusiastic. The findings therefore present a number of opportunities for all stakeholders to work more closely in highlighting the role of study abroad experience in the future competitiveness of Scottish industry. This can only be done however by institutions

– and graduates – taking responsibility for competently articulating these attributes, not least to ensure that these graduates are commensurately valued in the Scottish labour market to avoid unnecessary brain drain.

Undoubtedly, this is an area which merits further attention within a Scottish specific setting. As outlined in the following recommendations, it would be of great benefit to undertake much wider qualitative and quantitative research, looking at exactly how industry could, and would like to, be involved. This should explore areas where industry and universities can ensure that the benefits to students - and Scotland - are promoted.



## Concluding Remarks: From Here to Where?

Since the adoption of the Bologna declaration, Scotland has made impressive strides in being a standard bearer for its aims and purposes – leading the way for the UK, if not Europe writ large. Despite this, however, it is clear there are still a number of areas for improvement; chief among them, ensuring that we markedly increase our outward mobility, and ensure the provision of a study abroad opportunity for all who wish to undertake one, regardless of academic circumstances, or background in order to create global graduates fit for an increasingly competitive and complex labour market. Moreover, the challenges that face Scotland in terms of barriers to mobility are not exceptional:

*“The notion of ‘information’ (lack thereof and/or keen need for) stands out as a fundamental issue almost everywhere [in Europe]. The same can be seen in terms of funding and other basic resources. Insufficient information and tangible support for students and programmes is widely recognised as both a key problem and a crucial element for successful expansion of the mobility agenda moving forward. In a similar vein, another common theme of much of the literature on this topic has to do with the perceived need to align rhetoric and reality, particularly when it comes to providing effective support to encourage increased participation, and to synchronise efforts in a meaningful fashion to the extent possible.”<sup>22</sup>*

Yet too often, study abroad periods are not taken up by those who face difficulties in accessing education in the first instance. Given the impact on employability, as evidenced in the preceding chapters by those working

directly with students, institutions must ensure the provision of a study abroad opportunity for all who wish to undertake one, exploring short-term study abroad as an ‘entry point’ for students who would not otherwise be able or willing to undertake study abroad.

Leaving it until a student enters the doors of a university or college, for too many students, is leaving it too late, and that is why at NUS Scotland as part of the Developing Scotland’s Global Citizens project, mobility ambassadors will form a crucial part of the project, using their own experiences to inspire secondary school students to explore study abroad opportunities as they choose their future education and careers.

NUS Scotland believes the recommendations, based on the research findings contained in this report, are feasible – and necessary. They point toward the development of centralised data-collection of student mobility at every Scottish educational institution and the creation of a national mobility agency working to facilitate this and serve as a national data depository; an information hub for parents and potential students; and a forum for staff to showcase institutional best practice and facilitate inter-institutional collaboration at a time of belt-tightening.

This report has focused on the positive impacts that come from studying abroad and recommendations for increasing opportunities to do so, in general and to people from all backgrounds. As strong as the findings are, there can be nothing stronger than the voice of students themselves. It is perhaps, therefore, most fitting to end with some quotes from student success stories, including young entrepreneurs, ones we all wish to hear more of in the news, and why we need to ensure that study abroad is open to all, to every student



studying in Scotland. It is clear that studying abroad may not be for every student but the opportunity needs to be.

*“I would really recommend study abroad as it really opens up who you are as a person...I think I’m much more employable and I can see that from companies who have been in touch with me already...20,000 people got involved in World Whisky Day in over 140 countries and it was a worldwide trending topic on Twitter... hopefully when my business gets bigger and bigger in the next few years – I’ve got Scottish government funding to help with that – I want to employ internationalised people because I want people to be involved in this company all over the world, by having international horizons they’ll realise this [importance].”*

Blair Bowman, Hispanic Studies Student,  
University of Aberdeen  
Founder of World Whisky Day

*“I think if I’d have known that there would have been a year abroad when I was younger I would have been a lot more focused but I didn’t know until I first studied a language at university that I could study for a whole year in Italy. It completely changed my life...I found when studying abroad I had set hours at university but also lots of free time to go out and explore... think about things and learn a lot of new skills... That really opened up my eyes to try and incorporate these new skills into my career. I have managed to turn my hobbies into my career...In creating a website, I can be creative, I can speak the languages which I love and I can travel, bringing all of my hobbies into one.”*

Lizzie Fane, Humanities Graduate,  
University of Edinburgh  
Founder of ThirdYearAbroad.Com and  
Smarta100 Company Winner

*“Going abroad was a huge development opportunity for me...I studied French and Spanish at the University of Strathclyde and as part of my course I had to live in Madrid for a year. Before that I’d never lived away from home so I wasn’t very confident when I left but coming back I was self-assured, I knew how to manage myself, I knew how to be effective, I was far more outgoing. I think the whole experience of seeing another culture and living in another culture really opened me up to new ideas and new ways of thinking which have been really useful in my career.”*

Marie-Claire Padden,  
University of Strathclyde Graduate  
HR and Training, Hilton Worldwide

## Get Involved!

For further information about the Developing Scotland’s Global Citizens project and to find out how to get involved in Scotland Goes Global: Year of Study Abroad, contact Helen O’Shea at: [helen.o’shea@nus-scotland.org.uk](mailto:helen.o’shea@nus-scotland.org.uk) or Catherine Thwaites at: [catherine.thwaites@nus-scotland.org.uk](mailto:catherine.thwaites@nus-scotland.org.uk)



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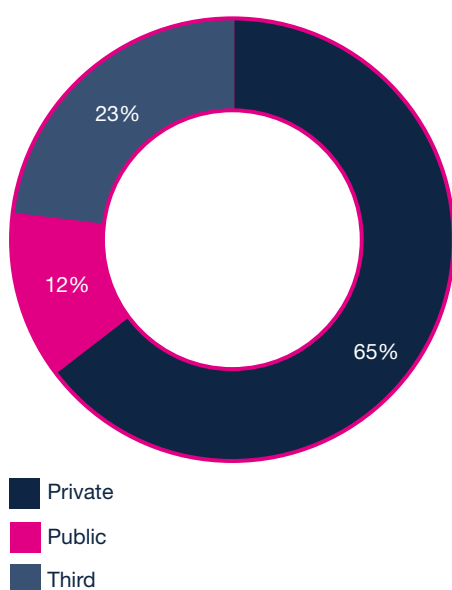
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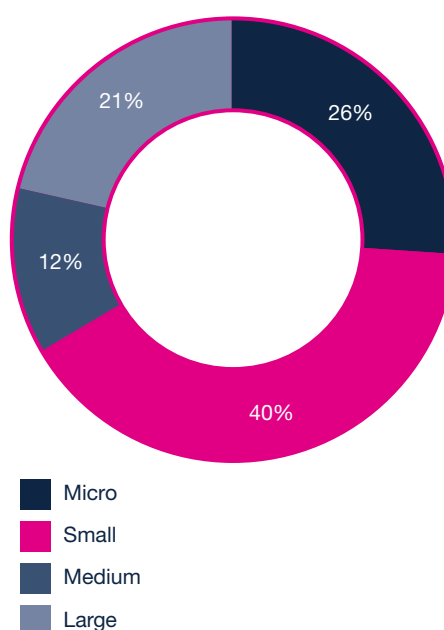
## Appendix

### Breakdown of Employer Respondents

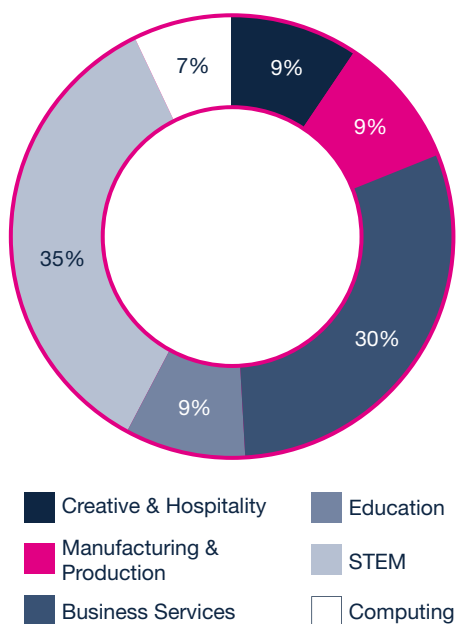
i. Breakdown of respondents by sector



iii. Breakdown of respondents by size<sup>23</sup>



ii. Breakdown of respondents by industry



23. For these purposes we have used EU definitions, wherein: Micro = up to 10 employees; Small = up to 50; Medium = up to 250; and large = over 250.



## Acknowledgements

### Research Interviews and Surveys

NUS Scotland would like to thank every student from over 20 colleges and 11 universities who took the time to share their views with us and the following institutions and associations for facilitating the research interviews:

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Jewel and Esk College  
Queen Margaret University  
Robert Gordon University  
St. Andrews Students' Association  
University of Edinburgh  
University of St. Andrews  
University of Strathclyde

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#### Sector Bodies

British Council  
Health Professions Council  
Higher Education Academy  
Saltire Foundation  
Scotland Europa  
Student Awards Agency for Scotland  
Universities Scotland

### Institutions

Edinburgh Napier University  
Escola Superior de Saúde do Alcoitao  
Glasgow Caledonian University  
Jewel and Esk College  
Perth College UHI  
Queen Margaret University  
Robert Gordon University  
University of Aberdeen  
University of Edinburgh  
University of St. Andrew's  
University of Strathclyde

### Student Associations & Societies

Aberdeen University Student Association  
Edinburgh University Students' Association  
Edinburgh Napier's Nurses and Midwives International Society (NAMIS)

### Employer Survey Participants

NUS Scotland and SHEEF would like to thank the following companies, employers and individual members of staff who took part in this survey:

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Cisco  
Company Name:  
Controlled Therapeutics (Scotland) Ltd  
Covert Group Security & Cleaning



Cultural Enterprise Office  
Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce  
Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce  
Edinburgh International Science Festival  
Flexitricity  
Forth Dimension Displays  
Future Balance  
HR Consultancy  
Hydro Group plc  
IBM  
International Fish Cannery (Scotland) Ltd  
Inverness Chamber of Commerce  
LOGICALWARE  
LUX Assure  
New Park Management Ltd.  
Precision Photometrics Ltd  
Reactec  
Redpath Construction Ltd  
Renishaw plc  
Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen  
ScienceDirect  
Scottish Chambers of Commerce  
Scottish Enterprise  
Shanks Ltd  
sparqs  
Stafffinders  
STEMNET  
Taylor McKenzie Research & Marketing Ltd  
TBDA (Scotland) Ltd  
The Lovat  
Totseat Ltd  
URS Scott Wilson  
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