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Introduction

It is widely accepted that international experience adds value to degree programmes in offering enhanced opportunities for personal development. The opportunity to live and work in another country has been suggested to provide numerous benefits: to enhance the development of resourcefulness, self-confidence and inter-personal skills; to increase awareness of one's own ethnocentrism and cultural awareness; to improve employability and to provide motivation towards an international career. In spite of this the proportion of UK students, particularly from the Sciences, benefiting from such international exchange programmes is disappointingly low. This is exemplified at Newcastle University by the fact that only 2% of outgoing Erasmus programme students at Newcastle University are from the Faculty of Medical Sciences or the Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering.

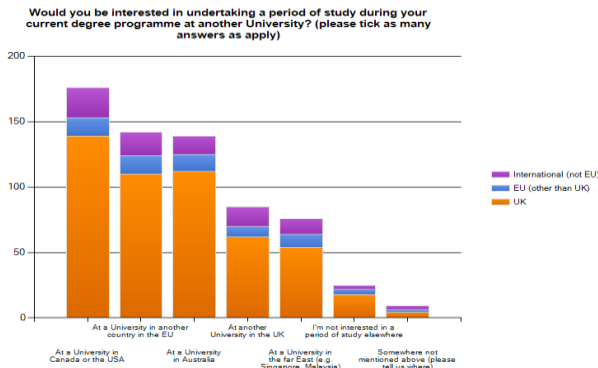
Aims

To explore the barriers to study abroad amongst undergraduate students in the school of Biomedical Sciences at Newcastle University .

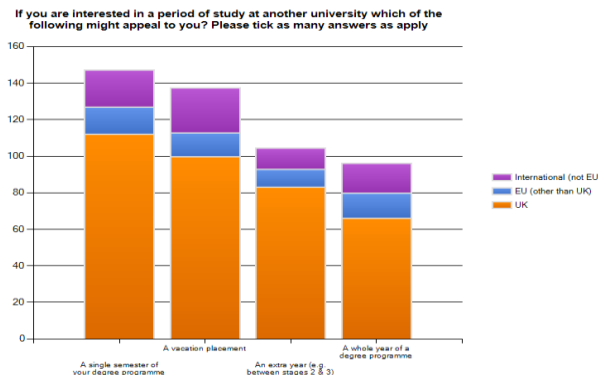
Methods and Results

We asked 750 students across all stages, studying on all of our 11 undergraduate programmes, to complete an online questionnaire regarding their perceptions of the benefits of undertaking a period of study overseas and the barriers that our students perceive in undertaking such study.

251 students responded to the questionnaire with similar proportions (about 1/3) of our first, second and third year students answering. The majority of respondents were female (66%) and from the UK (76.5%) although a higher proportion of the responses than would be expected were from EU students (10% respondents vs. 5% on our programmes). 12% of our UG students are international students (non-EU) and this was reflected in the proportion of these students that responded to the questionnaire (13.9%).



A very small minority of students (11%) answered that they were not interested in a period of study abroad. The majority (76.2%) said they would like to study in the USA or Canada with 61.5% and 60.2% saying that they would like to study in another EU country or Australia. The most important consideration here seemed to be that the programme of study would have to be taught in English.



The majority of students wanted to study for either a semester abroad (69.3%) or would consider a vacation placement in a research laboratory (64.6%) with less than half (45.3%) interested in studying for a full year overseas.

Benefit	Percentage
It would increase my self-confidence and independence	86.3%
It would increase my chance of getting a good job	82.7%
It would give me exposure to a different national culture	80.5%
It would give me the chance to study in a high class international university	79.6%
It would give me the chance to study something that is not part of my course at Newcastle	61.9%
It would increase my chance of getting a good degree	54.5%
It would allow me to develop my skills in another language	54.2%

Table 1: Perceived benefits of study abroad: percentage of students answering 4 or 5 on a 5-point ascending scale of importance

Barrier	Percentage
It might be too expensive	76.7%
I'm very happy at this University	23.7%
It would separate me from my friends	18.7%
It would separate me from my family	17.2%
It might reduce my chance of getting a good degree	15.0%
I have a partner and/or children who could not easily go with me	8.9%
I can't see any advantage in a period of study abroad	3.1%

Table 2: Perceived barriers to study abroad: percentage of students answering 4 or 5 on a 5-point ascending scale of importance

The major benefits of such international placements were seen to be that it would increase a student's self-confidence and independence, increase a student's chance of getting a good job when they graduated and also give exposure to a different national culture.

Quite clearly from our results in this study the major barrier to students studying on such an international placement was perceived to be the cost.

Discussion

Our data show that undergraduate Biosciences students are very interested in being offered the opportunity to study abroad. These results will be further explored, in depth, by the use of student focus groups and we will also explore the attitudes of staff to exchange programmes to see if this influences the decision of students to study overseas. Informed by these findings we plan to develop a number of clearly defined opportunities for students to benefit from a period of study overseas.