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Strategic escapes: Negotiating motivations of personal growth and instrumental benefits in the decision to study abroad

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Studying abroad is one way in which university students can develop personal capital and distinguish themselves in an increasingly congested graduate labour market. Data show that studying abroad indeed provides employment benefits, with evidence pointing to even greater positive effects for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. Focusing on a group of Canadian students about to embark on a study exchange, we find no evidence that career-instrumental reasons played a role in participants' decisions to study abroad. Rather, they sought personal growth and escape from the everyday frustrations of being an undergraduate student. We argue, however, that these motivations nonetheless have to be understood as strategic, since going on a study exchange abroad allows students to escape temporarily, while 'staying in the game' of becoming credentialed at home. We discuss the role of socio-economic status, as well as the policy implications of these findings.

Keywords: personal capital; studying abroad; socio-economic status; strategy; career benefit; personal growth

Introduction

University enrolment and completion have increased dramatically in the past two decades. In Canada, 54% of the adult population hold a tertiary qualification and 28% hold a university-level degree (OECD, 2015). University completion rates are similar in other predominantly English-speaking countries such as the UK, the USA and Australia. Without a doubt, expanding higher education to more people is a reason to celebrate. Yet, as Brown (2013) explains, an increasing number of university graduates is competing for a limited (and perhaps declining) number of good jobs, leading to what he calls social congestion. Since so many people now have higher academic credentials, differentiating oneself when applying for post-graduate programmes or jobs increasingly becomes a competition based on non-credential abilities.

Brown and Hesketh (2004) refer to the notion of *personal capital* to describe how studying at elite institutions, having completed career-related internships, or having studied abroad increases the employability of young people beyond the value of credentials. Importantly, however, the development of personal capital is classed, as it

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requires access to cultural resources and the dispositions necessary to convert resources into valuable capital. In the context of this paper, for instance, studying for a year abroad not only requires the financial means to do so, but also a level of comfort with travel and experience of other cultures, which has likely been developed growing up in a family in which travel of this kind is normal.

Bathmaker *et al.* (2013) have shown that although both working-class and middle-class students alike are aware of the importance of gaining personal capital, it is middle-class students who not only have the resources, but also know how to effectively deploy these resources in the development of personal capital. Lehmann (2012) suggests that because of widespread credential inflation, extra-credential activities and experiences now play an increasingly important role in differentiating which students will gain competitive advantages for graduate schools and careers. These extra-credential experiences, it has been argued, may make students appear more interesting and hard-working, and may also provide access directly to jobs in the future, for instance through internships and work placements. Studying abroad is an example of these kinds of extra-credential experiences that may result in career benefits for participants.

Studying abroad and employability

Although one may wish to approach some of the findings reported below with caution, as they are often from organisations with a stake in the positive outcomes of student mobility, they nonetheless do show evidence for the benefits of having studied abroad. For instance, students at UK universities who had participated in a programme abroad during their degree have been shown to have achieved higher academic averages in general (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2015). Furthermore, the same study shows that unemployment rates six months after graduation were lower for those who had spent some time abroad during their degree than for their non-mobile peers (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2015). Similarly, a study of Erasmus programme participants in Europe found that they are half as likely to experience long-term unemployment as their non-participant peers (European Commission, 2014). Interestingly, this benefit is especially apparent for those of low socio-economic status, who have been shown to have lower post-graduation unemployment rates compared to their non-mobile, low-socio-economic status peers (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2015). These lower unemployment rates for those who study abroad continue for years after graduation, as European data show that the unemployment rate of Erasmus students five years after graduation was 7%, compared to 9% of non-mobile students (European Commission, 2014, p. 118).

Those who have spent time abroad as students may be at lower risk of becoming unemployed for a number of reasons. Studying abroad may signal personal initiative that is attractive to employers in a modern, knowledge-driven, global economy, given the language skills, adaptability and intercultural skills that can be learned during these experiences, which in turn can contribute to obtaining employment and adjusting to different workplaces (Diamond *et al.*, 2011; American Institute for Foreign Study, 2013; Di Pietro, 2013). Others have argued that study-abroad experiences

may also simply help students to gain clarity on their career goals (Norris & Gillespie, 2008).

Students' perspectives on the value of studying abroad

As outlined above, it can be argued that international experience and qualifications are an important mechanism used by students to develop personal capital (Brown & Hesketh, 2004) and thus to gain a positional advantage over their peers (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2015), but it is unclear whether most decisions to study abroad are actually made in such a strategic manner. Some studies in Europe do show that there is a normative pressure to study abroad (Petzold & Peter, 2015) or to learn a language (Teichler, 2004), and one New Zealand study found that outgoing exchange students considered CV-building as one of their top three motivations for going on exchange (Doyle *et al.*, 2010). However, many other studies have found that students consistently place more personal reasons for studying abroad ahead of strategic motivations. Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2005) found that when asked about the significance of their exchange, students ranked personal development far above career or academic relevance. Similarly, a survey of students in the Erasmus programme found that the decision to study abroad is primarily motivated by a general desire for personal growth (Lesjak *et al.*, 2015). Doyle *et al.* (2010) also found that students rank exposure to a new culture and language, and learning whether they would like to live and work abroad in the future, as the top motivations for studying abroad. Students who return from study-abroad experiences also seem to value the personal growth benefits of their exchange, such as learning about another culture, becoming independent and more confident, and clarifying their values, more than career aspects (American Institute for Foreign Study, 2013).

Interviewing UK students who took their entire degree abroad, Brooks *et al.* (2012) found that most of the students in their sample only had vague career plans and had not thought much about the impact of their decision to study abroad on their career. Some students even worried that UK employers would not see the value of a degree from a different country. If there is any strategic action surrounding the decision to study abroad, the authors argue, it is in choosing a specific destination. Lesjak *et al.* (2015) also outline many pull factors that draw students to study at a particular university abroad, such as the safety and attractiveness of a particular city, suggesting that such decisions may not be entirely instrumental, but driven by subjective opinions about destinations. For example, Canadian students seem to choose countries where one of the official languages of Canada is spoken and where the quality of schooling is thought to be as high as in Canada, making the UK, USA, Australia and France (for francophone or bilingual Canadians) the most popular destinations for exchanges (Knight & Madden, 2010). This finding reflects the highly uneven flow of international students into and out of Canada, as the most important source country for incoming international students is China (which is also the focus of most university partnership efforts), followed by Saudi Arabia and South Korea. This unequal flow of mobility is a key concern in a growing scholarship on the geography of mobility (see Brooks & Waters, 2013).

Barriers and limits to the benefits of studying abroad

Financial constraints, worries about academic standing and progress, personal responsibilities (for families or romantic partners) and worries about studying in a different language or cultural environment have been shown to keep students from considering the opportunity to study abroad (Knight & Madden, 2010; Salyers *et al.*, 2015). For many students, especially from lower socio-economic backgrounds, these factors are also likely to interact. Following our earlier discussion on the value of personal capital in highly competitive graduate labour markets (Brown & Hesketh, 2004), there is no shortage of evidence that the development of such personal capital is closely associated with young people's other forms of capital, such as economic, cultural and social capital (Lehmann, 2012; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013; Brown, 2013). In this context, studying abroad can be seen as an experience that results in academic and career benefits that end up perpetuating inequalities. Various research has indeed shown that studying abroad, especially for students who take their entire degree at foreign (often elite) institutions, is associated with social privilege (Waters & Brooks, 2010; Waters *et al.*, 2011). Even for more modest study-abroad experiences, such as spending one term on exchange, higher costs and the uncertainty associated with studying in an unfamiliar environment likely discourage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, especially considering that for first-generation students, being at university already means entering unfamiliar territory (Aries & Seider, 2005; Reay *et al.*, 2010; Lehmann, 2014). Lehmann (2012) further argues that studying abroad is not only expensive, but also requires a certain degree of cultural capital, such as comfort with travelling and other cultures.

The mechanism by which these inequalities are reproduced, however, may be unconscious and unintentional. Waters *et al.* (2011) argue that although they may not be conscious of this, privileged students are able to focus on pursuing happiness because they do not have to focus on material concerns, which allows them to make decisions to study abroad based on personal motivations rather than strategic considerations; but in the end, these decisions often still result in strategic benefits.

Cost is a prominent factor in research identifying barriers to participation in study-abroad programmes (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014; Salyers *et al.*, 2015; Academica Group, 2016). Equally important are students' concerns about different teaching styles, marking expectations and, for those on exchange, whether credits obtained abroad can be counted towards degrees at home. Receiving credit for courses completed on exchange is especially important for timely degree completion (Knight & Madden, 2010). This is not only an academic concern, but also a financial one, as not receiving transfer credits would lead to the financial burden of an extra semester or year at the home university. Given the earlier discussion about socio-economic status, it is easy to see how these issues are of even greater importance to students for whom studying abroad reflects a greater leap of faith. Socio-economically disadvantaged students may be less willing to take the risk of studying abroad if they worry that their courses may not transfer, their grade averages might decline, or that their transition to another language or culture will be very difficult and thus lead to the loss of course credits. These students, then, may rationally weigh the benefits and disadvantages of studying abroad and decide not to go.

Based on the preceding review of the literature, we are asking the following research questions: Why do students go on exchange? Are they driven by instrumental goals, such as being competitive for jobs or admission to graduate or professional school? Lastly, what barriers and challenges do they encounter in making these decisions?

Methods

To answer these questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with students either getting ready to go on or recently having returned from exchange. The students were all in their third year of study at a large, research-intensive university in Southwestern Ontario. This university has made great efforts in recent years to encourage students to go abroad as part of their undergraduate degree, by offering study-abroad scholarships to students who maintain high averages and advertising study-abroad opportunities to incoming students. The university has a very active international office to facilitate exchanges and has exchange agreements with well over 100 universities in almost 40 different countries, although, according to publicly available data (which we will keep unidentified to guarantee anonymity), less than 2% of students participated in the type of formal exchange programme in which our study respondents were engaged.

Participants were recruited through the university's international office e-mail contact list, exchange student Facebook groups, at the international office's social events and through word of mouth. In total, 17 students participated in this study. Of our 17 participants, 11 were going to or had returned from English-language destinations (7 in Australia, 3 in the UK and 1 in the USA); the remaining 6 were going to study or had studied in Europe (3 in Germany, 2 in France and 1 in Denmark). These destinations are reflective of the choices made by exchange students at the local and other universities across Canada (Universities Canada, 2014).

Our participants, although not poor, were largely of modest socio-economic backgrounds. Six participants had parents who had not completed university, making them first-generation students. Of those, 5 can be identified as working-class students, as their parents have lower levels of formal education and work in non-professional (blue- and pink-collar) occupations. Moreover, we consider none of the 17 participants truly privileged, as the majority assumed some level of financial responsibility for their exchange.

Of these 17 students, 7 were preparing to leave for their exchange programme, while 10 had already returned from it. Given our emphasis on the reasons students study abroad, and the concerns and potential barriers they encounter, the analysis in this paper will focus on the experiences of those students getting ready to go on exchange. Although those who had returned from their exchanges were also asked about their motivations to go, their recollections of why they chose to participate in an exchange programme are likely to be affected by their actual experiences on exchange. Focusing our analysis on those who had yet to leave allows us to control for such effects of recollection. That said, both groups expressed very similar attitudes and motivations, which leaves us confident that restricting the analysis to the seven participants who had not yet left reflects the data overall.

Students who consented to participate were invited to an in-person interview, which occurred in classrooms and offices on campus. One student was unable to attend an interview in person, so participated in a phone interview instead. Interviews were conducted between November 2015 and early January 2016. All interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The transcribed interviews were thematically coded based on patterns observable in the data and our review of the relevant literature. In the following sections, we will be using pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of our participants.

Finally, given our small sample size, we wish to emphasise that it is not our intention to generalise from these data, but to offer productive insights and interpretations that will hopefully stimulate further study and investigation into the complex relationships between student mobility, social class and the development of personal capital.

Findings

Rejecting instrumental reasons for studying abroad

As studying abroad has been linked to improved academic achievement (UK Higher Education International Unit, 2015), higher levels of employability (European Commission, 2014) and, more generally, the accumulation of what Brown and Hesketh (2004) call personal capital, we wanted to know whether our study participants were aware of these benefits and whether they informed their decisions to study abroad. As we will show later, students did make decisions to study abroad in the context of credential and extra-credential inflation. Furthermore, they did agree that they felt considerable stress because of the competitive nature of education and job markets. Surprisingly, however, none of the participants mentioned resume-building, the development of employability skills or other overtly instrumental reasons as being motivating factors for going on exchange. Consider Ingrid's response to our question on whether she thought going on exchange would help her stand out in the competition for jobs:

> Um . . . maybe it will, but that wasn't . . . a reason I thought about at all when choosing to go. [. . .] Um . . . I don't know, I just wasn't really worried about it, I wanted to do it for the experience, not really for how it would make me look.

Moreover, many participants actually seemed unaware of the instrumental academic and career benefits associated with studying abroad. Consider, for example, Brooke's response to our question on whether she ever thought about going on exchange to build a stronger resume. Also note that the only benefit she sees is in making an application to graduate school more competitive, rather than helping with finding employment:

> To be honest, no . . . , but now that you bring it up, that's actually a good point . . . I honestly just did it because I wanted to go to England and like experience . . . like England while living there. But yeah, I hadn't even thought about that. Because I hadn't thought about applying to grad school probably, that's why.

Similarly, Emma stated that she was not motivated by the potential academic and career benefits of going abroad:

> That was never my motivation, like 'oh, this'll be good on my resume' or 'this makes me look more well-rounded' . . . for me it was always like . . . 'I want to travel' so it wasn't . . . like . . . I mean I could not put this on a resume, and I couldn't care less. I didn't even know you could, actually . . .

Although she did later explain that she thought going on exchange might make a student look more interesting to an employer, she remained rather ambivalent as to whether or not this would be a good thing:

> Especially because I want to work in some kind of international field, I could see it being maybe interesting to [employers] or something that maybe sets you apart from people [. . .] not apart as in better, but just like something different about . . . 'cause I imagine when I eventually have to go apply for jobs, everyone's application is probably going to look the same, 'has a degree in this' or you know 'was in this or this club', but I feel like an exchange is . . . [*Interviewer:* A way to just do something different?] Yeah, but for me the main motivation was just like 'oh, I want to go and travel' [laughs].

Students also tended not to see academic value in going on exchange. In fact, some students felt that going on exchange might be strategically unwise. For example George, a very high academic achiever, was worried that going on exchange could harm his academic performance as there are too many uncertainties and risks, reflecting findings by Brooks *et al.* (2012), whose participants expressed concern that UK employers would not see the value of a degree from a different country:

> I guess academically, I don't think, as far as my actual marks go and my actual courses go, that going on exchange is better, I think it's harder, because there's a lot more uncertainty on the teaching style, like how they mark—I know that in England, marks are lower by about ten percent on average, so it's hard in that sense. It's definitely a lot easier, if I was just concerned about marks, to just stay here and take courses because I know I'll probably do better if I did it that way.

These findings suggest that our participants were either unaware of or not interested in generating concrete academic and career benefits. In fact, as George's comment above shows, the most academically driven students may choose not to go on exchange as they worry that different teaching and marking structures may negatively impact their grades.

Personal growth

Rather than being instrumentally motivated, students were drawn to study abroad for the potential of personal growth, to get away from their everyday lives, to see somewhere new, challenge themselves to gain independence and have new cultural experiences. Sandy explains:

> I think it will make me a lot more independent, um . . . like force me to like go outside of my comfort zone, 'cause it does, it scares me a lot [. . .] so doing this by myself will like . . . I think . . . push me to be more independent and more like secure in my abilities to do things on my own, I guess.

For many of our students, studying abroad was simply something that they had always wanted to do, as Emma's comments below show:

> I think just the idea of . . . I've always loved the idea of going new places . . . and living in different places? Like I am not someone who is content with the idea of just living in [the same place] for my whole life.

Moreover, they also thought of going on exchange as a 'now-or-never' kind of experience that allowed for a form of extensive travel that might not be possible again once they graduate. Here, Sandy explains how this consideration was more important to her than any potential employment benefit:

> I know everyone always says like 'employers like people who've gone on exchange' and stuff, like that's always a benefit, but I just think that getting to Australia later in my life might not happen, so . . . I don't know . . . and like to meet new people and experience a different kind of lifestyle for a longer period of time.

Similarly, Marlena explained the attraction of travel for personal growth and independence before entering employment, marriage and parenthood:

> I guess really gaining independence, because you're going to be there by yourself, but there's no parents. If things get tough, then I mean you have to learn to deal with it, so I guess it really . . . it helps you to grow up in a sense, and you're experiencing another culture, and you're experiencing something else in the world, and if you really think about it, you're never going to get another chance at this again, to go live in another country and do some traveling, and just kind of like live in this bubble for a few months . . . because afterwards, I mean you have a job, you have a family . . . you're never going to have this little free-for-all 'I'm going to run off to Europe for five months' . . . so . . .

As the interview progressed, it appeared as if Marlena saw her life unfolding in front of her and she didn't always like what she saw. She said:

> I mean the typical student works for four months, and that's your life. You do eight months something and then you do four months something, and I don't want my university experience just to be that. I want to do something more, and with this, I mean, I can study and I can go to another country for the weekend. [. . .] Basically [in Canada], like, you're stuck. Because, I mean I'm not going to lie, I had a great job in the summer [. . .], but you know it's . . . it was kind of like a glimpse into my future, the typical 8 to 4 and then you go home and . . . you know and like that is what life is going to be, so if I can have this adventure now when I'm young, then why not take it?

This emphasis on personal growth and adventure is reminiscent of findings by Waters and Brooks (2010), whose participants were less concerned with the instrumental value of studying abroad and instead were motivated by fun, excitement and delaying entry into adulthood. A key question remains, however: if the focus is on adventure, fun and escape, why did our participants decide to study abroad rather than simply travel during their relatively extensive summer break or during a gap year once they completed their degree? In fact, recent data from a Canadian survey show that the majority of Canadian university students are interested in travelling abroad, but only after they complete their post-secondary education and not during it, leading the authors of the study to conclude that students might be discouraged from exchanges as they would rather see the world without the added burden of having to work and study (Academica Group, 2016). A more careful look at our data offers insights into the complicated relationship between instrumental and personal reasons for going on exchange, and how students negotiate these conflicts.

Strategic escapes

We propose that our participants' decisions to go on a study exchange are a form of strategic escape, despite their assurances that they were driven by personal growth rather than purely instrumental motivations. We consider these decisions strategic as they need to be understood not only within the context of knowledge economies and precarious labour markets, but also participants' socio-economic status.

Young people are consistently exposed to a pervasive public discourse about living in a knowledge economy in which personal and occupational success is contingent upon achieving high levels of formal education (Lehmann, 2009, 2012; Brown *et al.*, 2011). This has led to unprecedented levels of university enrolment in Canada and elsewhere (OECD, 2015). University enrolment is therefore no longer an expression of scholarly interest, but perceived as a necessity. Our participants were no different in that they, at least occasionally, explained their reasons for being at university as something they felt they needed rather than wanted to do. Throughout the interviews, many expressed frustrations with university, such as being stressed or being worried about post-graduation employment prospects. Given this sometimes pessimistic or at least fatalistic outlook on their academic life, many saw in their decision to participate in a study exchange the opportunity to break out of their everyday drudgery, but in a way that would not set them back in their overall effort to gain academic credentials.

Going on exchange as a specific form of study-abroad experience is thus not truly an escape, but instead offers dissatisfied and frustrated students an opportunity, at least temporarily, to engage in a more rewarding alternative while 'staying in the game' and still working towards their degree. For example, Emma discussed how university was something she felt pressured to do. Going on exchange opened up an opportunity to add more enjoyment to university while still working towards finishing her undergraduate degree:

> I'm getting both, yeah. So it's kind of like I get something towards my degree, um . . . and I get the opportunity to travel, which I love about an exchange, like it's kind of a combination . . . and it just makes school more appealing for me, for sure.

Similarly, Sandy found her previous year stressful and hoped that the gap between semesters and also the ability to combine travelling with university would help make school more enjoyable:

> I found this semester really challenging and overwhelming . . . so um, I really needed this break, so I'm hoping that [going on exchange] will make me more like . . . enjoy second semester.

These findings are reminiscent of other research that has identified that push factors may be what initially prompt students to go on exchange (Lesjak *et al.*, 2015). This desire to use a study exchange as a form of strategic escape, however, also needs to be understood as situated in the specific context of students' socio-economic realities. Although none of our participants were from low-income families, all expressed varying degrees of concern about the financial burden associated with travelling abroad. Earlier, we mentioned the findings of a recent Canadian survey (Academica Group, 2016) showing that most Canadian students preferred travelling without also having

to study, but that this was especially the case for students from higher-income families. Indeed, all our participants agreed that leisure travel to distant locations or for longer periods of time would not be within their financial realm. Consequently, most participants felt that travel combining fun and adventure with academic progress was their only opportunity to experience distant travel and a lengthy period of time living abroad. Moreover, they talked about their decision to go on exchange as having to have some strategic benefits to justify the costs of the experience. Kate 'in fact' expressed concern that the relatively high financial cost associated with studying abroad might not be worth it in the end. She relied on her parents to support her financially, but felt guilty about this. She said of her parents:

> Whenever I talk to my parents about financing it, they're like 'oh, don't worry about it' like 'we'll get it', like 'don't worry'! But I know it's draining. You know, like it's definitely going to put an impact on their pockets. But they're very like 'your experience is the most important thing' and like they're very 'we'll be in debt for you'. [. . .] I feel bad. [. . .] I have to do a lot of long-term thinking, like how it will benefit me in the long-term and if I'll be able to . . . you know, outweigh it [financial costs].

While she is worried about the costs, this seems to be balanced by the fact that her parents were exceptionally supportive and felt that the cost of going abroad was worth the financial sacrifice. Marlena's parents, by contrast, were not as sure of the benefits and therefore not initially supportive of going on exchange. These problems were exacerbated by the fact that Marlena studied International Relations and her immigrant parents were concerned about the value of such a degree. This led Marlena at first to question her plans, but also required a fair amount of convincing her parents of the merits of studying abroad once she had made up her mind to go.

> Well, I told them it was going to look really good on my resume and how . . . because it's one of like the top good schools, so they see this more as, like . . . maybe I'll have better prospects of getting a job with this degree because my mom was very against me going into this degree . . . my dad wasn't . . . and my mom was just kind of like 'go into nursing because you'll get a job' and like 'what are you going to do with this degree?'

It is also worth noting that Marlena is one of the first-generation students whose parents are employed in working-class occupations. For Kate and Marlena, being able to say that exchanges would benefit them in future careers, or when applying to graduate school, was what allowed them to justify the experience, both to their parents and themselves.

Even more significantly, given the relatively high cost, all agreed that getting academic credit for studying abroad was a crucial aspect of the programme and that without this, they could not consider going on exchange. Kate explained it this way:

> *Kate* I don't have the money or time to not benefit academically from it . . . or . . . financially. Do you get what I mean? Um . . . with the exchange, because I have academic credits that will transfer back, that . . . that's the . . . I don't know how to explain it . . .'
>
> *Interviewer* So if you weren't going to get any benefits from it, it would probably also be harder to maybe justify it to your parents.

Kate Yeah, yeah, yeah! And even . . . I wouldn't even be able to justify it to myself. I mean like I'm not . . . like we discussed, I'm not rich!

Although the students did not seem to expect academic or career benefits from the experience, these comments suggest that their reasons for going abroad contained elements of strategic decision-making, as they did require that the exchange would at least not set them back in these aspects. Furthermore, responding to pervasive public discourses about the need for higher education to succeed in a knowledge economy, going on exchange allows students to 'stay in the game' while also temporarily escaping frustrations, stress and boredom at their home university.

Discussion

Our data show that participants did not discuss going on exchange as a strategy to gain a positional advantage over their peers, but rather saw academic exchanges as a unique opportunity for personal growth. It is possible that appearing unconcerned about instrumental benefits is socially more acceptable than being crudely upfront about the desire to develop personal capital to gain advantages in the search for employment or further education. We are confident, however, that our participants were genuine in this respect, as nobody raised employment benefits when we broadly discussed the reasons for studying abroad, and many seemed truly unaware of or indifferent to them when we asked more pointedly. In fact, some of our participants actually felt that going on exchange may have an adverse effect, as the uncertainty of the outcomes of studying abroad might negatively impact their academic standing.

Rather than seeking instrumental and positional gains, our participants spoke of their intentions to study abroad as driven by a desire to experience something new, exciting and fun, to get away from the humdrum existence of a third-year undergraduate student, escaping their university bubble and gaining more independence in the process. Waters and Brooks (2010) have made the same argument for students who, unlike our participants, were socially privileged and completed their entire programmes abroad, often at elite universities.

Yet, we argue that these seemingly non-instrumental decisions are still highly strategic, albeit unintentionally, and embedded in the context of a credential-inflated knowledge economy. Although none of our participants explicitly talked about going on exchange to be more competitive for getting a job or admission to post-graduate education, they were still keenly aware of the demands of a competitive labour market in which increasingly high levels of formal education are required to be successful. Knowing that they need to have a university degree, that further education is likely required and that other responsibilities of adulthood are soon to catch up with them, going on exchange was a way to have fun while still advancing their education, not falling behind and working towards the overall goal of becoming credentialed. This is similar to the young people on gap years in research by Snee (2014), who also emphasised doing something worthwhile abroad while developing new skills and having fun, although Snee points out the close alignment of these benefits with more instrumental forms of personal capital.

Furthermore, we need to understand these decisions as strategic escapes in the context of our participants' socio-economic situations. For nearly all participants, going on exchange involved some financial 'sacrifice', either in the form of foregoing consumption, working extra jobs during the summer or the term, taking on personal loans, or feeling guilty about asking parents for support. None felt that they could simply take off and travel for three months in the summer or after finishing their degree. Neither could they justify to themselves or their parents the financial sacrifices made if studying abroad would actually set them back in their programme at home. In this respect, our findings align with Brown's work on the uneven development of personal capital (Brown & Hesketh, 2004) and the limits for social mobility (Brown, 2013).

Social class does matter in the decision to study abroad. The fact that most research on international student mobility has focused on relatively privileged students can be seen as evidence of this (see e.g., Brooks & Waters, 2013; Deakin, 2014). Moreover, research on the development of personal capital more broadly has shown that students from lower-income families are less likely to have access to or take advantage of such opportunities (Lehmann, 2012; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2013). It is also important to note that, at least in their narratives, our participants were not concerned with developing a cosmopolitan identity [see e.g., Snee's (2013) work on gap years] or other unique and valuable forms of distinction, but rather with finding an engaging way of staying in the game of becoming credentialed. Perhaps the relatively non-stratified nature of Canadian universities makes our participants less concerned with the development of personal capital. It is also possible that the relative geographical isolation of Canada makes young Canadians less worried about developing cosmopolitan identities (see e.g., Power *et al.*, 2013) as a way to set themselves apart from others and find success in the Canadian labour market. None explicitly expressed any plans to work abroad in the future, which is different from other research on student mobility. For instance, Cairns (2014) and Collins (2014) have shown that the lack of employment opportunities at home motivates less-privileged students to become mobile. We also argue, however, that the relatively modest class background of our participants may mean that they are less concerned with the distinctions and advantages that arise from cultural and personal capital and still trust the value of human capital, in the form of high educational achievement, which is why they mostly see their exchange as a way to re-engage with their studies at their home university.

We can also conclude from our current analysis, however, that study exchanges, rather than exacerbating class differences, have the potential to open up opportunities for students who might not otherwise be able to seek out such international experiences. The finding that exchanges allow less-privileged students to travel abroad and for longer periods of time is especially significant, considering that Di Pietro (2013) has found that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds experience the biggest career gains from studying abroad. He argued that the experience of going abroad may help these students develop important skills like intercultural communication, cultural awareness and language skills that they might otherwise not be able to gain. Moreover, Deakin (2014) has shown that paid international work placements, taken up by UK students as part of the Erasmus programme, were attractive and accessible to less-privileged students, who were also more explicit in seeing the employment

benefits of participation in such programmes. This highlights the complex interplay between economic, social and cultural capital, and the development and eventual deployment of personal capital.

Offering financial assistance to low-income students would be a step in the right direction. The university at which this study was conducted has made internationalisation a key strategic goal and has introduced a range of financial support programmes to lighten the financial burden for students. These scholarships and bursaries, however, can only offset a small portion of the extra costs associated with going on exchange. Also, they are usually achievement-based rather than needs-based, and may therefore miss this target group. Moreover, many first-generation and working-class students may self-select out of this opportunity, as being at university is already a relatively risky transition. Going on exchange may therefore simply be outside the realm of what they consider possible.

We have also shown that credit recognition is an essential requirement for students, especially low socio-economic status students, to consider exchanges, as they cannot afford the cost of spending an extra term or year to complete their degree. Although we did not discuss this here in any detail, receiving credit approval for the courses they intended to take abroad was a difficult, highly bureaucratic and uncertain process for many of our participants. This is an issue that needs further attention.

Future research should also consider the specific roles played by education systems and spatial conditions. The political mandate of mobility and the relatively close proximity of countries in Europe create very unique conditions for programmes like Erasmus. Furthermore, the highly stratified nature of the UK or US education systems more strongly structures educational experiences by social class. Canada offers a different case. It has a strong commitment to public education and a relatively non-stratified, egalitarian education system, both at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Canada also has one of the highest participation rates in post-secondary education in the world (OECD, 2015), which puts studying abroad at least within reach of a more diverse group of young people. Conversely, English-speaking Canadian students may see less of a strategic benefit to going abroad because there is less of a need in Canada to learn another language, given the dominance of English worldwide and the fact that most (anglophone) Canadian university graduates find employment in English-speaking countries.

Rather than seeking opportunities abroad to develop personal capital for distinction, students in our study continue to trust in the human capital value of their degree and thus viewed their exchange as a way to make their undergraduate education more meaningful and enjoyable while 'staying in the game' of becoming credentialed. Although they seemed sceptical or even largely unaware of many of the reported academic and career benefits of studying abroad, our findings suggest that exchange programmes may actually be a way to even the playing field, to an extent, by allowing some students to travel who would not otherwise be able to do so. In other words, studying abroad unintentionally contributed to the development of personal capital, although it remains unclear whether and how it will be used. Collins *et al.* (2016) caution, however, that the portability of international degrees (or mobility more generally) continues to be constrained by structural factors, such as access to social

networks or having studied at elite institutions in specific countries. Following the logic of the inflation of credentials and different forms of personal capital, it is also likely that a growth in participation in international experience will lessen its value for employment or further education. Clearly, more research is needed into how students make decisions about studying abroad, and we hope that we have made a contribution to understanding that non-instrumental reasons are still based in strategic considerations about becoming credentialled and thus remaining competitive for future studies and careers.

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