

‘Spreading Your Wings’ : International work placement research : Final report

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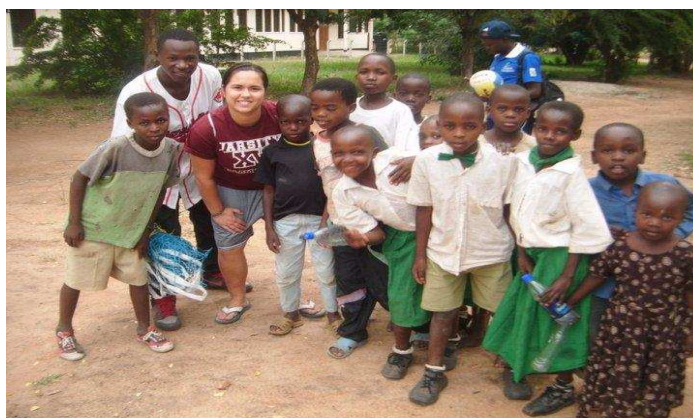
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‘Spreading Your Wings’
International Work Placement Research
Final report

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September 2017



Executive Summary

Research aim

The aim of the research was to broaden the horizons of undergraduate Academy students with regard to their placement and create additional opportunities for students to gain international experiences by living and undertaking their work placement abroad. In pursuance of this aim the research involved gathering insights into the experiences of Academy students who had completed an international placement during the period 2010-2015, and by consulting with Academy staff with leadership responsibilities for employability and undergraduate work placements.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was adopted comprising an online survey and semi-structured interviews. 111 former Academy students who had completed an international placement between 2010 and 2015 were invited to participate in the research along with 2 members of Academy staff. Data was collected in the following areas:

- Reasons and motivations for undertaking an international placement
- How the placement was secured
- Previous international experience
- Feelings and emotions prior to placement
- Placement activities and responsibilities
- Key learning experiences
- Influences on career and life decisions
- Placement advice and support received from the University
- Placement advice to other students
- Ideas for extending international placement opportunities in the future

Key findings

Over the past 7 years 162 Academy students have completed an international placement in 36 countries spanning 4 continents.

50% of students who completed the online survey stated that their placement had been extremely or very challenging.

94% of students who completed the online survey stated that their placement had been extremely or very enjoyable.

87% of students who completed the online survey stated that their placement had been extremely or very personally relevant.

88% of students who completed the online survey stated that their placement had been extremely or very professionally relevant.

78% of students who completed the online survey stated that their placement had been an extremely or very significant learning experience.

SHU sponsored placement students indicated substantially higher levels of satisfaction with the support provided by the University compared to students whose placement was self-sourced.

All students felt the Academy should encourage students to go on an international placement, with 78% of students feeling that SHU should be securing more international placement opportunities.

66% of students commented that their placement had 'very much' influenced their life choices, with 75% of respondents' stating that their aspirations for the future had changed as a result of their placement experience.

Specific competencies developed through international placements highlighted in the research included empathy, emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, adaptability, creativity and cultural awareness.

A substantial number of students cited increased motivation to study as a result of their placement experiences, as well as a stronger desire to pursue specific career paths, broadening of horizons and aspirations.

There was evidence in the research of significant perspective change and transformational learning amongst some students.

The staff interviewed identified a range of opportunities and challenges which need addressing in order to extend the benefits of international placements to more students in the future.

Recommendations

The report includes a series of recommendations for the University and the Academy designed to enhance the Academy's approach to international placements.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a research project conducted in the Academy of Sport and Physical Activity (hereinafter referred to as 'The Academy'). The research was undertaken by a project team comprising 5 members of the Academy staff supported by a small budget (£1k) which enabled the employment of 2 student research assistants who assisted with some of the data analysis.

Research rationale and aim

The aim of the research was to broaden the horizons of Academy students with regard to their placement and create additional opportunities for students to gain international experiences by living and undertaking their work placement abroad. In pursuance of this aim the research involved gathering insights into the experiences of Academy students who had completed an international placement during the period 2010-2015, and by consulting with Academy staff with leadership responsibilities for employability and undergraduate work placements.

The rationale was partly provided by the University's 2015-2020 strategy as well as the personal of interest of the principal investigator. The University strategy states:

“Our strategy has been developed against a backdrop in which today's universities are invigorated and challenged by international mobility and an increased emphasis on the importance of working across national borders.”

“We expand the horizons of our students connecting them to wider opportunities through partnerships.”

“As a student you can expect... global and professional perspectives in our courses.”

“We will equip our graduates to reach their full potential and be ready to make a positive contribution to a global society and economy.”

“Our academic programmes will reflect a global society and will provide a broad international and cultural experience that equips our graduates for the global work environment.” (see note 1)

Further rationale for the research was provided by the Academy's current strategy which states:

“We will work towards all Academy students having an opportunity to be involved with international sport experiences.”

“We will provide students and staff with a wide variety of real world experiences that reflect the global sport industry.”

Research design and methodology

The research was conducted using a mixed methods approach comprising an online survey and semi structured interviews. 111 former students were invited to participate in the research, all of whom had completed an international placement during the previous 5-year

period. Ethical approval was secured via the Academy's Research Ethics Committee and data was collected in the following areas:

- Reasons and motivations for undertaking an international placement
- How the placement was secured
- Previous international experience
- Feelings and emotions prior to placement
- Placement activities and responsibilities
- Key learning experiences
- Influences on career and life decisions
- Placement advice and support received from the University
- Placement advice to other students
- Ideas for extending international placement opportunities in the future

32 former students completed the online survey during March and April 2016 (a response rate of 29%). 9 semi structured interviews were conducted in July 2016 (4 male, 5 female) with the interviewees self-selecting based on their levels of interest and availability. All interviews were conducted in person or via skype, with each interview lasting approximately 1 hour. Regrettably one interview was lost prior to transcription so was excluded from the research. The interviewees provided a broadly representative sample of the different types of international placements undertaken in the Academy, namely a mix of developed and developing countries, SHU sponsored and self-sourced placements, 2 different undergraduate courses, and lone and group placements.

2 Academy staff members with strategic and operational responsibility for employability and work placements respectively were also interviewed as part of the research. The purpose of these interviews was to secure their unique perspectives on the issues, opportunities and challenges associated with international work placements in the Academy.

International placement - Academy profile 2010-2017

Table 1 - number of students completing an international placement by year group and gender

Academic year	Male	Female	Total
2010-11	8	5	13
2011-12	14	4	18
2012-13	17	6	23
2013-14	16	6	22
2014-15	23	12	35
2015-16	20	5	25
2016-17	21	5	26
Total	119	43	162

Table 2 - countries visited and number of students

Country	Number of placements
Australia	14
Bermuda	1
Canada	5
China	7
Cyprus	1
Estonia	1
Fiji	3
France	1
Germany	2
Ghana	2
Hong Kong	3
Hungary	2
India	4
Ireland	3
Isle of Man	4
Italy	2
Jordan	1
Madagascar	1
Malaysia	1
Mexico	1
New Zealand	6
Poland	1
Qatar	3
Romania	1
South Africa	20
Spain	6
Sri Lanka	7
Switzerland	1
Taiwan	7
Tanzania	20
Thailand	11
UAE	7
Uganda	1
USA	11
Total	162

Figure 1 - global map of international placements destinations



Table 3 - International placements by Academy courses and year groups

Course	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	Total
Sport Culture and Society	3	2	3	-	-	-	-	8
Sport Development with Coaching	4	3	3	5	7	6	13	41
Sport Business Management	2	3	3	6	5	4	2	25
Physical Education and School Sport	4	2	2	3	8	2	3	24
Sport and Exercise Science	-	4	5	5	7	3	4	28
Sport Coaching	-	2	0	3	5	8	3	21
Sport Event Management	-	2	2	-	-	-	-	4
PAHES/PASH	-	-	1	-	3	2	1	7
SSPC	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	4
Total	13	18	23	22	35	25	26	162

Online survey - data analysis and discussion

Table 4 - Motivations for undertaking international work placement (n=32)

Motivation	Frequency (%)
To acquire new knowledge and skills	16 (50)
To acquire new knowledge and skills in an international context	24 (75)
To learn more about other countries and cultures	22 (69)
To enhance employability skills	28 (88)
To develop myself personally and professionally	30 (94)
An opportunity to travel	25 (78)
An opportunity to learn/develop another language	7 (22)
To help others	15 (47)
Other	6 (19)

Figure 2 - placement experiences - levels of challenge, enjoyment and relevance

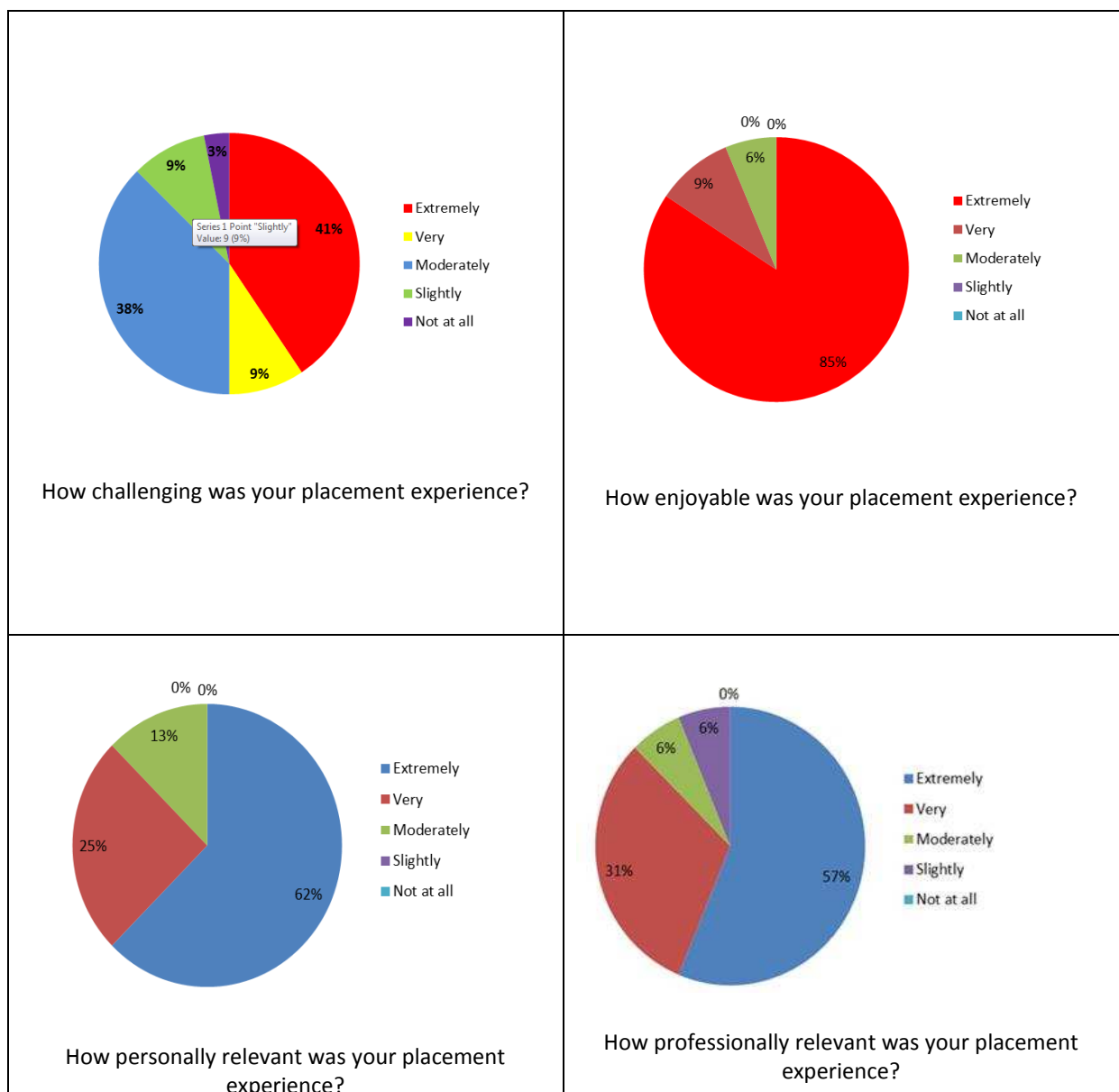
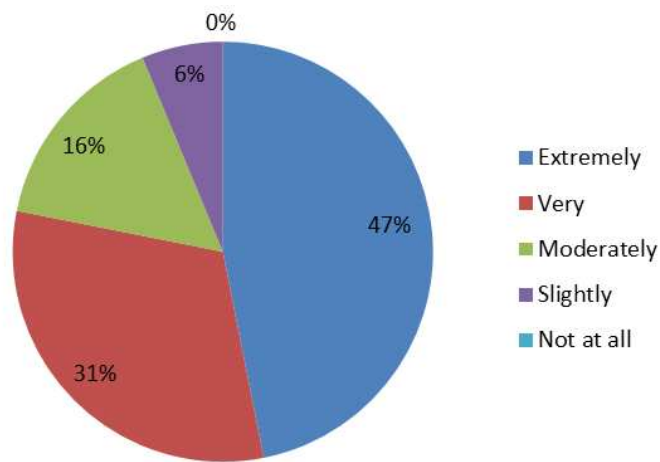


Figure 3 - How significant was the learning you gained whilst on placement?



All students who completed the survey felt the Academy should encourage students to go on an international placement, with 78% of students feeling SHU should be securing more international placement opportunities. 66% of students commented that their placement had 'very much' influenced their life choices with 75% of respondents' stating that their aspirations for the future had changed as a result of their placement experience.

Table 5 - Advice and support received from the University

Criteria	Information and advice on international placement opportunities (n=32)	Encouragement to secure an international placement (n=31)	Planning and preparation advice (n=32)	Cultural awareness (n=31)	Legal and financial matters (including health and safety) (n=32)	Visa rules and procedures (n=31)
Extremely	7	8	4	2	4	6
Very	7	7	9	8	8	5
Moderately	8	8	9	10	5	4
Slightly	6	5	5	3	8	9
Not at all	4	3	5	8	6	7

SHU sponsored score (n=15) = Mean 22.1, SD +- 4.8. SHU non sponsored support score (n=17) = Mean 13.9 +- SD 5.6

Normally distributed so independent t test $P < 0.01$, i.e. SHU sponsored support score was significantly higher than non-sponsored meaning that SHU sponsored felt they received more support (see note 4).

Student interviews - data analysis and discussion

Placement motivations

The students cited a variety of motivations for pursuing an international placement including:

- A desire to do something different
- Challenge themselves and gain new experiences that took them out of their comfort zone
- Strengthen their CVs and do something which would enable them to gain a competitive edge in the jobs market
- An opportunity to travel and see the world

"My thing was that I wanted to do something a bit different because everyone in the end comes out with a degree... I wanted to be able to say 'I've got a degree and this placement for a bit of a 'wow factor'. So I was looking around - wasn't specifically looking at China - just somewhere a bit different and away from home."

"It was actually one of the reasons I came to Sheffield Hallam. Because I'm not the kind of person who just wants to sit still and get an average degree, I wanted to do much more than that. So this opportunity to go to Tanzania... it's important to know that I actually joined the university or that opportunity."

Securing the placement opportunity

The SHU sponsored placements involved a formal application and interview process which in most cases required the students to compete with their peers for the opportunity. For self-sourced placements the processes were less formal with the students making contacts and building relationships with potential placement hosts in various different countries in order to secure the opportunity.

"I emailed the same company twice, once at their African address and once at their UK address. I kind of did it off my own back and we had a meeting which I thought was kind of informal but it turned into an interview. And they were happy to take me."

"I got in contact with Jayne Wilson who works in the Research Centre because I knew she had a lot of international ties. We together went on LinkedIn and put an advert out for myself for a placement. We got a couple of bits of interest including the Shanghai Rugby Club which is where I eventually went, they hosted me and they have a charity running out of their facility which is Sport for All. So it all came from there."

Previous international experience

The students displayed varying levels of international experience. Some had travelled extensively with family and friends or as part of their formal education whilst others had much more limited international experiences, with some having very little. One student had undertaken football coaching in the USA the previous summer, gaining valuable experience.

"Travelling abroad was pretty limited for me. I grew up on the Isle of Wight where everything is so close... leaving the island quite a big deal. I'd only been abroad out of the UK once with my family to Spain. And then on a school trip I travelled to Italy but that was about it. I have never worked... or volunteered abroad."

Pre-placement feelings and emotions

The students experienced a range of emotions prior to undertaking their placement. Firstly, there were the initial reactions when the placement opportunity was secured which for most was a mixture of shock and nervous excitement. During the planning and preparation phase (often a period of several months) these feelings became more acute, depending on factors such as personality, confidence levels, previous international experience as well as the perceived challenges and cultural differences likely to be encountered whilst on placement. An additional factor was the level of advice and support provided by the University and the placement host which varied significantly between students.

<p><i>“Just really excited, a bit nervous because I think at first it was quite daunting going somewhere like that. I had never been to Africa before. I only knew it from the media and what I had heard and seen. I was a bit anxious as well as excited but keen to find out more and get ready to go.”</i></p>	<p><i>“It was still excitement until it got to about a month before, and then I realized that three months is actually a really long time to be away when you’ve not been away from home for more than 2 weeks. I was wondering if I still wanted to go... it was just nerves but I think that’s normal when you’re going to do something like that.”</i></p>
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Placement activities

The students interviewed undertook a variety of placement activities including sports leadership and coaching, delivering training workshops for local teachers, coaches and sports bodies, events organization, research, report writing and general administrative duties. Some students had very rich and varied placement experiences whilst others’ were focused on a more limited range of activities. Most of the placements evolved in response to local needs and/or as a result of the students’ proactivity in seeking out new experiences and challenges.

<p><i>“I think the main highlight for me was being able to go and meet lots of new people who I had never contemplated what they and their lives would be like. Getting a completely different perspective on how people live and work... I gained a lot of experience in things like how to run a business or charity on my own, leading myself and getting that kind of independence. I really loved visiting lots of schools, youth leaders and teachers who I could work alongside, support and train... I was also able to go to Kasese in the west of Uganda and one of the places I did some training was in a safari park. So I got to go on safari and because I was working with the local people they managed to show me a lot more for a quarter of the price of the safari. I saw lions, elephants and hippos - it was amazing.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Being part of the rugby programme... seeing how it developed over the time the time I was there. How it started as an under 11’s team, seeing more members getting involved... the other coach building himself and his contacts up as well, seeing how much the kids were enjoying it as a sport none of them were familiar with... seeing the development of the Arusha Rugby Club was my most enjoyable and memorable moment, seeing how much they were getting from it.”</i></p>
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Key learning experiences

All of the students confirmed that their **confidence** had grown significantly as a result of their placement experience. In some cases this confidence was task and context-specific, for example the development of coaching and sports leadership skills when working with specific cultural groups, overcoming language barriers etc., presenting and delivering workshops to large groups. In other cases the growth in confidence was more of a general nature and related to feelings of greater independence, self-belief and growing maturity.

7 out of the 8 students stated they felt their placement had made them more **resilient**, more able to deal with challenging situations and overcome adversity. Several students commented on how difficult and challenging situations they had encountered in the UK now seemed relatively trivial and easy to deal with as a consequence of the placement experiences.

<p>Researcher: Did you become a more confident and resilient person as a result of your placement experiences?</p> <p><i>Student: "Yes without doubt. I think because I was completely out of my comfort zone for 3 months. I'd never been around people who were from completely different cultural backgrounds, I was by myself. Even going into the townships, interacting with so many different cultures and backgrounds, so many personalities and situations. Overall I met so many amazing people and I definitely improved myself for the better."</i></p>	<p><i>"When we came back from Tanzania we had a meeting and one of the biggest questions that people asked was 'what do you think you have learnt from Tanzania?' Now everyone was going on about what they had learnt. But I personally don't think I learnt loads. What I think happened was I began to trust my own abilities more... I think Tanzania was about trust development than skills development. I think it was knowing that I had the ability to deal with pretty much any situation that came up in Tanzania. ...For me it was a lot more about self-belief.. I think Tanzania taught me that you don't need to panic about things, you've done this before, you know how to do it. It could have been the same for a lot of mother people, but at that point after the placement I was the only one who sort of viewed it that way."</i></p>
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Several students spoke about how their placement experiences had developed their **empathy and emotional intelligence**.

<p><i>"One of the main challenges we had as a group was Jess lost her purse when we were there. So we had to figure out how to deal with that, how to comfort her. Dan was away from his child, so comforting him, something I had never done before. I had to make sure I was aware of their issues every time I spoke, be aware of their emotions. They (the girls) wanted to have time out in the evenings just to chill out, whereas I'm an energetic person. I didn't want to potentially speak to them too much... I had to be aware of what the other people wanted to achieve, it wasn't a one-man effort, we were a team."</i></p>	<p><i>"But because we were in poverty nobody had any money and because we were international they thought we all had money which wasn't the case... Those who lived in the townships, 1 in 4 had HIV which was very upsetting. I met children there who unfortunately passed away which I had never experienced before. I learnt about drugs and about AIDS in the community, in the townships, it was all new to me... But as I spent more and more time with the locals - I was with them in the evenings - I was understanding their point of view of living there. It was definitely an eye opening experience to see that side of things... I felt like I couldn't help them because it seemed to be a vicious cycle. But some of them, children and adults, turned to sports and they were so happy because they were focusing on something else. So there was that side of it but I still knew about all the troubles and issues that were happening to people. It was hard to find a balance, I just wanted to help everyone."</i></p>
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Dealing with personality dynamics and living in group situations was also a significant learning experience for at least 2 students, enabling them to develop their **interpersonal relationship skills**.

<p><i>"And one guy I lived with, he was English, he really tested me. He got there towards the end of my time and I remember thinking I'm going to have to go early, I can't live with this. But everybody was the same (about him) and in the end he left because I think he fell out with everybody in the house. He was very difficult to live with."</i></p>	<p><i>I'd never worked abroad and by myself but I learnt to cope being with myself. I lived with coaches who were German and Dutch. In terms of lifestyle it was quite different; getting used to that, being in another country, surrounded by people from other countries, learning to be around that (was challenging)."</i></p>
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Several students stated that they had developed their **adaptability and creativity skills** during placement, particularly in practical coaching and sports leadership situations.

<p><i>"We got chucked in the deep end... there was myself and a couple of boys from the Gaelic Football Association who had gone out there because Shanghai were organizing a Gaelic football team. So we got grouped together on a lot of tasks, one of which was with a group of 30 Chinese kids to go to Gaelic football. Prior to the lesson we had learnt to say 'run', 'bounce', 'kick', so everything was done through demonstration... it was quite good, they would do everything we asked them to do and they laughed and smiled the whole time because it was something new."</i></p>	<p><i>"It was meant to be netball coaching really, but they had hired a netball coach that they had there, so I would go with her to coaching sessions. She spoke the language to them and I didn't understand... so that was hard. Then she left me to coach on my own... there was a massive language barrier... I had to change my coaching style because I had to adapt to coach them, very physical instead of verbal. And I started to learn a few words from listening to what they were saying. I learnt netball positions so if I was giving out bibs I could give them out to each position, and words like 'play'. I had to adapt because they didn't really give me the support I needed."</i></p>
<p><i>"The big one (challenge) was the language barrier, being able to communicate with people out there. Some of them did speak English and were really fluent, but some didn't know any English.... It took a while but I realized that football is kind of a universal language, so using hand signals to point at them rather than speaking. Even if they're speaking another language you can get what they're saying because they're pointing and using their heads."</i></p>	

All of the students felt that their **cultural awareness** had developed as a result of their placement experiences. For some students these experiences were quite profound.

<p><i>"The racial issue was really bad. We lived in a white community surrounded by 2 townships, the black community and the coloured community, that's what they described themselves by. Everybody had an issue because of colour. I thought white people used to look down on people who lived in the townships just due to their colour... I ended up going to a restaurant and bringing some people from one of the townships. And the white people looked at them like they should leave. I was thinking it was disgusting but they were saying 'it was normal - we belong in the townships'. I didn't understand why people who were of a different background weren't treated the same. For me that was an eye opener."</i></p>	<p><i>In Tanzania the good and bad thing about it is everything is different, so you face lots of different challenges every day. You learn not to take things for granted. I would say it's something I learnt a lot, I sat with their culture. In the UK you can just walk down to the shop but in Tanzania you've got to walk a mile or be squished like sardines for ages. But my development was mainly probably cultural awareness. I had to associate with African lifestyle every single hour of every single day I was there."</i></p>
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Several students interviewed demonstrated significant **perspective change**, as a result of their placement, citing of experiences which had prompted them to think differently about certain issues, their relationships with others and their place in the world.

<p><i>"I think... it does make you grateful for what you have got, being in and around that culture and seeing what they have, and reflecting on how my life is here. It made me really appreciate everything that I have... I feel like my outlook on the world, and on humans in general, is a lot more culturally... I have a lot more of a humanitarian approach to things. Especially with recent events, things like the Syrian crisis, I have a view influenced by my influences of Tanzania, of they're a human being, they could have been born anywhere. It's the circumstances that you end up with that you can't control. I would support any human being regardless of their circumstances, because I've been in different cultures and seen. I've got to know people who were from completely different backgrounds and areas, and they're still people... I think it's made me have that different outlook whereas if I'd stayed in England all my life..."</i></p>	<p><i>"And the common thing to think is that it's a materialistic view of this country compared to Tanzania, we have a lot more possession based luxury. I think you are definitely ore appreciative when you realize what you don't have when you're abroad. Like in Tanzania you realize not that things are missing, but just how difficult everything was. Like our lives here are so much easier, everything is so much more convenient, it's so much easier to get from a place, to get an object... In Tanzania you have to work a lot harder to get the equivalent... I think Tanzania has taught me... that things here aren't as big a deal as they seem. ...if you're having a stressful day, if something goes badly, before like you'd get wound up, you'd be short tempered about it, but once you've been to Tanzania you realize it doesn't really matter, it's not a big deal. It just made you more aware of what actually has a value in life."</i></p>
<p><i>"Yeah, I think I understood so many different outlooks and opinions. For me it was just a learning experience regarding people. I think before I didn't have a clue what was going on in the world, I think I must have been wrapped in cotton wool. I actually didn't understand that all these issues were going on until I was there.... As a person I definitely changed, the way I look at things, my views, never to take anything for granted...I put myself in so many situations, and learnt so much about different people and places."</i></p>	<p><i>"It definitely taught me a lot about myself and taking things for granted when I saw kids who don't have electricity or water but they're still happy to play."</i></p>

Several students commented on how they had been able to **apply specific aspects of their formal learning at university whilst on placement**. Others stated that they felt **more motivated to study** on their return to university.

<p><i>Researcher: So you were a researcher. Had you done Research Methods? Student: Yes I did research methods in first and second year I think. Researcher: Did you draw on that learning? Student: "Yeah definitely had to draw on a lot of those things. There wasn't much time for doing the reports because I had my assignments to do at the same time. I just did what I could really but it worked really well, it really helped with my dissertation in my third year. It gave me the grounding, I knew where I needed to start. This was like a baseline assessment, it gave me a framework of where to go from."</i></p>	<p><i>Researcher: I get the sense that when you got back from your placement you were more motivated and engaged with your studies. Student: I'd say so yeah. In the first few years I tried to find the balance between coaching for experience and trying to do the university work, whereas in my final year I think I found it a lot easier to find that balance, that point where you've got to do study, not just for grades but for what you're learning in modules. I've definitely used a lot of the modules in America since - modules like creating curriculums, multi-sports. I've definitely used those, so I found it really useful."</i></p>
<p><i>"It (office based sport development duties) was good for me. I was still a student, learning these things in modules, hadn't actually put it into practice. My line manager was really fantastic, talking me through everything step by step,</i></p>	<p><i>Student: "A lot changed for me in third year. I think I was more organized than I had been, probably a knock on from placement. My dissertation ended up being about motor skill development and its impact on children's</i></p>

<p><i>going through the process they normally go through for Football Foundation. I was definitely learning a lot from my line manager, doing all the planning."</i></p>	<p><i>confidence and self-esteem. Although it doesn't completely relate to my placement I think I became interested in children and sport because of my placement."</i> <i>Researcher: Were you more motivated to study do you think?</i> <i>Student: Yes, probably because I had seen how my study could relate to an actual working environment, whereas previously it was just theory for theory's sake."</i></p>
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At least 2 students commented on how their placement experiences had **broadened their horizons and aspirations for the future.**

<p><i>"Yeah I would love to travel more, it's on my list. I want to see more of the world. I've done quite a lot of America and a bit of Africa, but yeah I would like to do the other areas, I would like to go to Asia. I have family in Bangladesh that I have never met, I'm half from there so I would love to go there for my understanding of where my family is from. I always wanted to go to Australia, New Zealand, South Pacific and Hawaii."</i></p>	<p><i>"The biggest thing that comes from it (placement) is that you have the confidence. I had the confidence to go back to China and it makes the world seem like a smaller place because you know how comfortable you can be going off to China. If I wanted to I'd have no problem going off to Africa or anywhere anymore."</i></p>
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Significance of the placement learning experience

All of the students considered their placement to have been a highly significant learning experience, with several affording it even greater prominence.

<p><i>"I would say that there were 2 points of university where I learnt more than the rest of university - they were the placement and doing my dissertation... And I think for me, placement in Tanzania is what made my university life. Every time I think about university I think of Tanzania, what I achieved and what I did. I think that I've been very lucky that the university I have come to have been able to provide something like that and it's an incredible platform for teaching such an enormous amount in such a, realistically, short period of time. 2 months is not a long... in terms of development, but I've learnt more in those 8 weeks than I might do in the rest of my life."</i></p>	<p><i>"Just that it was an amazing experience, I'm really grateful for the experience and that I got to do it... I still use it in my life... I'm 25 now and I still talk about it and use those experiences and probably will do for years to come. It's still very prominent in my memory even though it was 5 years ago. I still remember everything about it, they are experiences that will stay with me throughout life."</i></p>
<p><i>"It was probably the most significant part of my whole degree - the essential element... I think obviously theory and learning academically is really important, but for me that experience gave me more in terms of preparing to work than any amount of report writing or essay writing or lectures could. So I could actually then say to people, 'this is what I've done and this is what I've learnt'. It was the most essential part of my degree."</i></p>	<p><i>"The placement is the first thing, when someone says 'what was the best thing about university?' I say, the placement. Because it has led to the rest of my life and it has opened doors that I didn't know were there."</i></p>
<p><i>"Really significant in terms of benefitting me and helping me through the course, definitely... It's definitely one of my fondest memories at</i></p>	

university... It's given me a springboard to leap 10 steps ahead."

Influences on career and life decisions

All students indicated that their placement had influenced their career and life decisions, with the nature and extent of the influences varying between individuals.

<p>"I really felt my experiences at university helped me to get that job, but once I had the job that compassion I had from placement experiences has really helped fuel that and made it as good as it was."</p>	<p>"Even before I started university I wanted to go into teaching... I also did that placement because I wanted to go into teaching. But it (the placement) made me lose my love for it really... I remember coming home and thinking: 'I don't want to go into teaching anymore...' But I stuck at it and I went into a few more schools in England and I am going to stick with it. Now I'm on a PGCE course and everything."</p>
<p>"I don't think I would have got the job offer from the university if I had not gone there on placement. I think it got posted to me specifically because people knew that I had been there in the past and thought I would like to go on the same lines again."</p>	<p>"That experience in South Africa has just made me more focused and wanting that drive to be in sport development."</p>
<p>"Obviously being in America now I know I can work abroad and I can work independently or as part of a team. ... It's definitely made me more confident to try new things and find a way to make things work. I don't think I'd be here now if it wasn't for the South Africa placement."</p>	<p>"So I've always wanted to get myself out of my comfort zone. I now live in London because I've never lived there before and I wanted to experience it, living around lots of people in a big city environment. The career choice I've made, I always wanted to be around people."</p>
<p>"That I'm a people person, that was reinforced. And that I can be a leader, that I can facilitate and help people. I knew that I could achieve, like in my degree and that really got brought out on placement."</p>	<p>"I think I'm a bit more appreciative of the route of something whereas before it was like, how do I get from A to B, B being what I want. Now it's more like: 'What can I learn on the way from A to B rather than how do I get there.'"</p>

Placement advice to other students

The students provided some fairly consistent advice to students considering their placement options.

<p>"Think outside your comfort zone for a minute and try to jump as far out as possible. If you don't you're not going to learn as much as someone who has... You need to do something different, you need to put yourself aside and be that person people look forward to interviewing. Be the person who has put themselves through challenges so you can talk about them."</p>	<p>"I think you've got to choose a placement that is going to benefit you in the future, not just one because at the time it's fun or it's going to get you by. The best thing to come from that module is the experience itself. It's a long placement... you'll learn a lot. I've taken so much from my placement and used it since."</p>
<p>"Look abroad. Honestly the list that Sheffield Hallam provided was fantastic... Definitely take advantage of the placements they provide because it's a one in a lifetime opportunity."</p>	<p>Just try to think outside the box. There's nothing that's out of reach these days.. you need to be confident, sit down and think 'where's different, what's nobody done before.' For me it was literally one message on LinkedIn which has put my life in a different direction."</p>
<p>"Don't go for the easy option. You'll be surprised to see what opportunities are out there if you look. Find out what those options are, do some</p>	<p>"I would say if you get the opportunity to do a placement abroad, definitely take it. Because it's an amazing once in a lifetime opportunity that</p>

<i>googling. And if you don't ask you don't get... Don't make money an issue, there are ways round it, there are things you can do to fund trips. And at the end of the day the experience you will get from it for going out of your comfort zone will outweigh any money issues."</i>	<i>you're not going to get. Obviously it's not for everyone but I think for the majority of people it's going to be a positive experience, it's only going to better you and give you additional learning than just doing a placement at home."</i>
<i>"Make sure its something that is going to be worthwhile. Choose something that's beneficial to you and will definitely help with your CV. You won't get another 6-8 weeks solid to work within your course - it's also a great opportunity to see whether or not it's the right career for you."</i>	<i>"For me there were 2 options: there was something that would secure a job and there was something that would change my life and give me an experience. And I think you should always go for the experience... You're never going to get the chance to have this experience again."</i>

Placement advice and support received from the University

The students who had completed a SHU sponsored placement generally felt well supported by the university, with one exception whose placement did not go according to plan and who received very little support from the university or her placement host. The IDEALS Tanzania students were particularly positive about the support received prior to and during their placement.

One student expressed disappointment concerning a perceived lack of flexibility by the university's Student Support team regarding assessment deadlines, suggesting that the a better understanding of the unique challenges experienced by students undertaking placements in developing countries was required.

All students were very accepting and generally positive regarding the placement systems and processes they were required to follow, recognising their importance in ensuring a safe and successful placement experience.

Ideas for extending international placement opportunities in the future

The students provided a range of ideas for extending international placement opportunities in the future. A summary of these is provided below (S = student).

Table 3 - idea for extending international placements opportunities in the future

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Earlier advertising and communication of placement opportunities	✓	✓	✓					
Provide more international links and placement opportunities			✓	✓			✓	✓
Better funding advice and support			✓	✓			✓	
Mentoring and buddying opportunities					✓			
Post-placement support (culture shock returning to the UK)					✓			
Closer liaison and				✓				

communication with placement host								
More encouragement to students to consider an international placement						✓		
University to maintain contacts with placement hosts for self-initiated placements						✓		
More student presentations		✓						

Staff interviews - data analysis and discussion

The staff interviews provided further insights into the opportunities and challenges relating to international placements. Discussions focused at 3 levels: University, Faculty and Academy. A summary of these discussions is provided below.

University and Faculty issues

Both interviewees broadly welcomed the University's evolving approach to employability which focuses on job and career-related competencies as well as life skills and a renewed focus on graduate attributes. However, some scepticism was also expressed about the substance of these changes, resource implications and the extent to which they would lead to significant changes in policy and practice.

Both interviews highlighted a lack of clarity on the extent to which academic staff are empowered to promote international placements to students. Currently the onus appears to be more on students taking the initiative to organise international placements for themselves rather than a concerted and coordinated institutional approach. Key factors highlighted were institutional concerns for health and safety and a perceived risk averse culture of the university relating to international placements. (See note 2)

Funding was also a key issue and constraint which emerged from the interviews. Whilst the university does operate bursary schemes, some of which can be accessed by students for international placements, demand currently far outweighs supply resulting in high levels of competition for funding. The interviews highlighted a need for clearer policies and procedures to ensure a fair and equitable approach to bursary funding, including any related funding conditions. The interviews also indicated scope for the University and the Academy to improve the information, advice and support it currently provides to students regarding placement funding.

Both interviewees commented on the inflexibility of current placement policies and procedures, most of which are determined at University and Faculty levels, resulting in them not always being fit for purpose for the specific needs of the Academy, for example (**add examples**)

The uncertainties surrounding Brexit were also highlighted by the Employability lead.

Academy issues

Both interviews highlighted the inconsistency of approach across the Academy with regard to international placements. It would appear that significant variations exist in the attitudes and motivations of course teams and individual staff, with some being more inclined to encourage and support international placements than others.

Both colleagues expressed a desire to increase the number of international placement opportunities available to students, suggesting that this requires a coordinated Academy-wide approach. Several suggestions were offered including exploiting new and existing international partnerships, maintaining contact with placement hosts established by former placement students, and improving the information, advice and support available to students considering an international placement.

Both interviewees commented on the lack of flexibility of the Academy's current placement model. Greater flexibility was requested to better reflect the needs of individual courses, placement hosts and students (see note 3).

The idea of Academy students being allowed to undertake placements which falls outside the remit of their subject discipline was also discussed. Both colleagues were supportive of this in principle subject to certain conditions, notably students being able to provide a strong rationale related to their personal and professional learning goals.

The placement lead highlighted her role in deciding whether to allow individual students to pursue an international placement. Currently this decision is her sole responsibility, albeit a decision which is informed by information provided by the student and, where necessary, consultations with relevant staff members, i.e. academic and professional advisors and course leaders. The process appears to be sufficiently robust as evidenced by the fact that there have been very few instances of international placements going wrong (only 1 during the time period covered by the research). An alternative approach was suggested involving the creation of a placements panel which would enable the final decision to be shared, thereby reducing the burden of responsibility for decisions which are very important, both for individual students and the University.

Placement development ideas

A variety of suggestions were provided for extending and improving the Academy's approach to international placements, including the following:

- Exploiting new and existing international business opportunities
- Providing more consistent international placement information, advice and support to students
- Earlier communications to level 4 students on international placement opportunities
- Cultural awareness training to support placement preparations (see note 4)
- More flexible placement models/options - different types of placement, placement hosts, length and timing of placement
- Internationalisation at home placements focussed on targeted communities and placement hosts
- More students encouraged to share their placement experiences with other students
- More concerted efforts to mobilize international placement alumni

- Mentoring and buddying initiatives - pre and post placement
- Maximize marketing opportunities at open days and other recruitment activities
- Appropriate performance measures to facilitate and support developments

Summary and conclusion

The majority of students confirmed that their placement has provided a very significant learning experience which had enabled them to develop a wide range of knowledge and skills. Specific competencies highlighted in the research included empathy, emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, adaptability, creativity and cultural awareness, with a substantial number of students also citing increased motivation to study and to pursue specific career paths, broadening of horizons and aspirations and, in some cases, significant perspective and transformational change.

A number of students commented that an international placement may not be suitable for all students. Much depends on their levels of confidence, maturity and resilience, as well as their motivations for wanting to pursue such a placement experience, all of which need to be carefully considered and assessed by the University.

Regarding the placement support provided by the University, there was a significant differences between the levels of satisfaction displayed by students undertaking a SHU sponsored placement compared with students whose placement was self-sourced.

The majority of students felt that the Academy should be doing more to encourage students to undertake international placements. Many also felt the Academy should be extending the range of international placements that are currently available, suggesting a variety of ways in which this could be achieved.

The staff interviewed identified a range of issues which need to be addressed in order to extend the benefits of international placements to more students in the future.

Recommendations

University/Faculty

1. Clarity is required on the extent to which academic staff are empowered to encourage and support students to pursue an international placement.
2. University/Faculty placement policies and procedures require greater flexibility in order to meet Academy needs.

Academy

3. Greater consistency is required with regard to the Academy's approach to international placements, including clarity of roles and responsibilities of functional leads, placement/professional practice module teams and academic and professional advisors.
4. The current Academy placement model is inflexible and therefore is unable to meet the multiple stakeholders needs. It needs reviewing as a matter of priority.

5. Improved information, advice and support is required for Academy students regarding international placement opportunities, including a reduction in the current inequities in the support provided for SHU sponsored and self-sourced international placements.
6. A coordinated approach is required to extending the range of international placement opportunities available to students, including exploiting international partnerships and consolidating relationships with placement hosts established by former placement students.
7. Opportunities for internationalisation at home placements and placements beyond subject disciplines should be actively explored.
8. Procedures for final placement decisions may need to be reviewed, including the option of establishing an international placements panel.
9. Other placement development ideas identified by students (page 16) and staff (pages 18/19) should be prioritized and developed as appropriate.
10. The resource implications of this work should be fully quantified and reflected in Academy business and work planning.

Note 1

During the period covered by the research the University strategy has been refreshed which gives added significance to this research. The strategy states:

Shaping futures, transforming lives:

“Our students will be confident, creative, resilient and responsible, prepared for whatever they decide to do. Our commitment is that students will leave us as world-ready citizens with skills and knowledge which reflect cutting-edge understanding in their subject, and able to use them creatively to solve tough problems. Our students will be inspired and enthused by the transformative learning experience that we provide through the consistently excellent provision of an innovative and applied curriculum. They will have an edge in a rapidly changing world, able to thrive in their work and to make constructive contributions. They will understand the importance of integrity and responsibility and the value of cooperation and respect for others. We will be inclusive, supporting students from a wide range of backgrounds and giving all students the best opportunity to succeed during and after their time at Sheffield Hallam.”

Leading locally and engaging globally:

“Our place at the heart of this city and region, and our international connections, are fundamental to what we do. Our commitment is that we will be a beacon for what a university can do for and with its community. We will be a creative and constructive partner, enhancing economic growth, educational health and the quality of life in our region. We will extend and deepen our global engagement - linking “Sheffield to the world and the world to Sheffield. We will work with like-minded partners locally and globally to enhance our impact and reach.”

Note 2

During the period covered by the research the University has enhanced the level of insurance cover provided to students undertaking international placements. Whilst this is an improvement on previous policy, nevertheless it still does not cover all scenarios and students undertaking an international placement are still advised to take out their own insurance cover.

Note 3

During the 2016/17 academic year the Physical Education and School Sport course has piloted a new approach to placement supervision, including staff visits and closer liaison with placement hosts. This approach, which was supported by Academy management, suggests a willingness to consider alternative placements models/options in the future.

Note 4

During 2016/17 a bespoke 1-day induction was provided for 6 students undertaking their placement in Tanzania. There is scope to extend this induction to other international placement students in the future, thereby addressing some of the inconsistencies in levels of placement advice and support highlighted in this research.

Appendix 1 - Project proposal

Project aim

The overarching aim of this cross-disciplinary project is to broaden the horizons of students in the Academy of Sport and Physical Activity and create new opportunities for students to live, study and work abroad.

Strategic context

The project directly supports the University and Academy strategic priorities, as highlighted below:

SHU Strategy	Academy strategy
<i>"Our strategy has been developed against a backdrop in which today's universities are invigorated and challenged by international mobility and an increased emphasis on the importance of working across national borders."</i>	<i>"We will work towards all Academy students having an opportunity to be involved with international sport experiences."</i>
<i>"We expand the horizons of our students connecting them to wider opportunities through partnerships."</i>	<i>"We will provide students and staff with a wide variety of real world experiences that reflect the global sport industry."</i>
<i>"As a student you can expect... global and professional perspectives in our courses."</i>	
<i>"We will equip our graduates to reach their full potential and be ready to make a positive contribution to a global society and economy."</i>	
<i>Our academic programmes will reflect a global society and will provide a broad international and cultural experience that equips our graduates for the global work environment."</i>	

Academy - current position

The Academy currently provides a small number of opportunities for students to undertake an international work placement through existing international partnerships, for example UK Sport's IDEALS/International Inspiration Programme in Tanzania and The Premier League/Football Foundation in South Africa. However, in recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of students choosing to organize their own international placement - see table below.

Year	Number of international placements
2011-12	16
2012-13	23
2013-14	32
2014-15	37

Project methodology

The project aim will be achieved by gathering insight on the learning experiences of undergraduate students who have completed an international work placement during the past five years. Current and former students will be engaged via an online survey, semi-

structured interviews and/or focus groups which will enable data to be collected on the following:

- Motivations for pursuing an international work placement
- How the placement was secured
- Key learning, personal and professional development experiences and challenges
- Advice and support received from the University and from elsewhere
- Ideas for extending similar opportunities to other students and broadening student horizons

Opportunities will also be explored for students to assist with the project, for example via interview transcribing and analysis, multi-media, including possible links with the Venture Matrix team.

The project will include a literature review relating to the following topics:

- Employability and work placement in an international/global context
- International mobility and exchange
- Transformational learning

Project outputs

Project outputs will include:

- Audio-visual case studies - promotional video
- Full written report
- Summary report and resources to be used in professional skills and employability modules
- Published articles in academic and/or professional journals

Project team

Chris Cutforth
Harvey Anderson
David Broom
Esther Kent
Rosemary Leach
Fiona Phoenix

Appendix 2 - Student Online Survey

Thank you for giving up your time to complete this online survey. Your responses will enable us to understand more about your placement experiences, as well as helping us to determine how Sheffield Hallam University might support other students with international placements in the future.

Please confirm that you have read the information sheet and that you consent to participating in this study.

Yes

No

Please state your full name.

Q1. Please state what year you went on international placement

Q2. Please confirm your gender

Male

Female

Transgender

Q3. Please confirm your year of birth

Q4. Please confirm your ethnicity

White

Black

Asian

Mixed / Multiple (Please state)

Other (Please state)

Q5. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

Yes

No

Q6. Please confirm if you were undertaking paid work alongside your studies in the year of your placement

- Yes full-time
- Yes part-time
- No paid work

Q7. How did you cover the costs of your placement?

Self-funded

Family support

Bursary or sponsorship

Other (please specify)

Q8. Please state the country where you undertook your work placement

Q9. What were your motivations for undertaking your work placement abroad? Please tick all that apply

To acquire new knowledge and skills

To acquire new knowledge and skills in an international context

To learn more about other countries and cultures

To enhance employability skills

To develop myself personally and professionally

An opportunity to travel

An opportunity to learn/develop another language

To help others

Other (please specify)

Q10. How challenging was your placement experience?

Extremely challenging

Very challenging

Moderately challenging

Slightly challenging

Not at all challenging

Q11. What was the most challenging aspect of your placement?

Q12. How enjoyable was your placement experience?

Extremely enjoyable

Very enjoyable

Moderately enjoyable

Slightly enjoyable

Not at all enjoyable

Q13. What was the most enjoyable aspect of your placement?

Q14. How relevant was your placement experience to you personally?

Extremely relevant

Very relevant

Moderately relevant

Slightly relevant

Not at all relevant

Q15. What was the most relevant aspect of your placement to you personally?

Q16. How relevant was your placement experience to you professionally?

Extremely relevant

Very relevant

Moderately relevant

Slightly relevant

Not at all relevant

Q17. What was the most relevant aspect of your placement to you professionally?

Q18. How significant was the learning you gained whilst on placement?

Extremely significant

Very significant

Moderately significant

Slightly significant

Not at all significant

Q19. What was the most significant learning gained from your placement?

Q20. If your confidence improved as a result of your placement experience, how and in what ways?

Q21. How helpful was the support you received from the University in relation to your placement?

Criteria	Extremely Helpful	Very Helpful	Moderately Helpful	Slightly Helpful	Not at all Helpful
Encouragement to secure an international placement					
Information and advice on international placement opportunities					
Planning and preparation advice					
Cultural awareness					
Legal and financial matters, including health and safety					
Visa rules and procedures					
Other (please specify)					

Q22. To what extent has your placement experience influenced your career choices?

Very much

To some extent

Not at all

Q23. In what ways has your placement experience influenced your career choices?

Q24. To what extent has your placement experience influenced your life choices?

Very much

To some extent

Not at all

Q25. In what ways has your placement experience influenced your life choices?

Q26. To what extent have your aspirations for the future changed as a result of your placement experience?

Very much

To some extent

Not at all

Q27. In what ways have your aspirations for the future changed as a result of your placement experience?

Q28. To what extent do you think the University should be actively encouraging students to secure an international work placement?

Very much

To some extent

Not at all

Q29. Please comment why the University should or should not encourage students to secure an international placement

Q30. Please comment on any significant barriers or constraints that might discourage students from securing an international work placement?

Q31. Which of the following do you think the University should be actively considering in relation to international work placements? Please tick all that apply

Establishing more international work placement opportunities

Putting more time and effort into encouraging students to pursue an international work placement

Providing more opportunities for international placement students to share their experiences with other students

Providing mentoring opportunities for students

Improving the quality of information, advice and support for international placements

Improving the international work placement processes and procedures

Other (please specify

Q32. Have you undertaken any further international opportunities since completing your placement?

Yes

No

Q33. If you answered Yes to question 32, please state where you went, the nature of the opportunity and comment if your international placement encouraged you to undertake further international work

Q34. Please provide any other general comments that you feel may be relevant and helpful to the research

Q35. Please indicate if you would be willing to participate in a follow up interview to share your work placement experiences in more detail and depth. The interviews will take place in June and July at a mutually suitable location and will last no longer than one hour.

Yes

No

Thank you for completing this questionnaire, your participation is greatly appreciated.

Please note: you have the right to withdraw from this research at any point.

If you answered Yes to question 35 please can you provide your mobile phone number and/or email. N.B. These details will not be given to a third party.

Appendix 3 - Student interview questions

1. Where did you go on your work placement?
2. How did you secure your work placement?
3. What experience did you have of travelling, living or working abroad prior to your work placement?
4. What were your feelings in the weeks and months leading up to your work placement?
5. What were your main professional activities whilst on your work placement?
6. Can you say more about some of your most significant learning experiences whilst on work placement?
7. What did you learn about yourself from your work placement experience?
8. In what ways have you grown in confidence as a result of your work placement experiences?
9. To what extent and in what ways have your work placement experiences influenced your career and life decisions?
10. What advice would you like to give to current students in relation to their work placement?
11. Is there anything you feel the University could/should be doing to encourage and support students to pursue an international work placement?
12. Any other general comments?

Appendix 4 - Staff interview questions

1. How do you feel international work placement currently 'fit' with University, Faculty and Academy policy and strategy?
2. Can you please describe the processes and procedures that Academy students need to follow in order to undertake an international work placement?
3. How do these procedures differ from the placement procedures for other students?
4. What observations do you have on the Academy international work placement data?
5. Can you please describe how the University/Academy currently enables and supports students to secure and complete a successful international work placement?
 - Information and advice on international placement opportunities
 - Encouragement to secure and international placement
 - Planning and preparation advice
 - Cultural awareness
 - Health and safety advice
 - Legal and financial advice
 - Visa rules and procedures
 - Other..?
6. On a 1-5 scale, to what extent do you feel the University/Academy should be encouraging students to undertake an international work placement?
7. Are there any barriers or constraints that might discourage students from undertaking an international work placement? How can these be overcome?
8. What more could/should the University/Faculty/Academy be doing to support students with international work placements?
 - Creating more international work placement opportunities
 - Encouraging more students to pursue an international work placement
 - providing more opportunities for international placement students to share their experiences with other students
 - providing post-placement mentoring opportunities for international work placement students
 - Improve the quality of information, advice and support given to students
 - Improving the international work placement processes and procedures
9. What more could/should the University/Academy be doing to expand the horizons of students in an international/global context?

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