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# Motivations of UK Students to Study Abroad: A Survey of School-Leavers

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## Abstract

This paper examines the attitudes and plans of Year 13 (final-year secondary school or 'upper sixth form') pupils towards studying at university abroad. Our main empirical base is a questionnaire survey of more than 1400 Year 13 pupils in a stratified sample of schools and sixth-form colleges, both state and independent sector, in two parts of England (Brighton and Sussex, and Leicester and Leicestershire). In addition, 15 face-to-face interviews were taken with teachers and HE advisers in the schools surveyed, and follow-up telephone interviews were made with 20 pupils from the questionnaire survey. The objectives of the research were, firstly, to discover the proportions of school-leavers who are applying to study at a non-UK university, or who had considered doing so but not actually gone ahead with the application, and which countries and universities they were attracted to. Against this orientation to (think about) studying abroad as the key dependent variable, the paper analyses several independent variables, based on quantitative data drawn from the questionnaire results and informed by insights from the qualitative interviews. These include pupils' academic profile, type of school, gender and ethnic heritage, parental socio-economic class, and family and personal links (prior residence abroad, travel experiences, friends or relatives who had studied abroad etc.). Results show that students applying abroad, or who considered this option, are academic high-achievers and high-aspirers, more likely to come from independent schools, have parents who are in the higher socio-occupational classes (managers, directors, professionals, teachers etc.) and who are themselves graduates, and have family links and extensive travel experience abroad. Females are slightly more likely to consider the study-abroad option. The relationship with ethnicity is not clear, except that foreign-domiciled non-UK nationals have a greater propensity to apply to non-UK universities, as do UK-nationals studying at international schools. Overall, however, and for all groups surveyed and interviewed, the study-abroad strategy appears to be supplementary to the dominance of what are widely perceived as the best UK universities, above all Oxford, Cambridge, and the other Russell Group research-intensive universities.

## Introduction

Within the global thematic map of migration studies – an interdisciplinary research field nowadays of burgeoning scale – the mobility of students has not been a major focus of concern. Rather, in this so-called 'age of migration' (Castles and Miller 2009), the main academic and policy interest has been concentrated on 'economic' migrants and on refugees and asylum-seekers. However, there are signs of a growing appreciation of the role of students in the evolving patterns of international mobility, not so much because of their numbers – at around 3 million they are a relatively small fraction of the overall 'stock' of 200 million international migrants (King et al. 2010: 84-85) – but because of their strategic importance as 'elite' migrants and as temporary sojourners who may 'convert' into long-term skilled immigrants after graduation in their chosen destination country.

Existing studies of international student mobility (ISM) tackle the phenomenon from a number of different angles. From a human and economic development perspective, the main analytical lenses are the 'brain drain' debate and the rise of international student migration as a multi-billion-dollar global business, where countries like the USA, the UK and Australia are the major beneficiaries (for introductory overviews see Castles and Miller 2009: 140-142; Skeldon 1997: 108-112; for more detailed treatments see de Wit et al. 2008; Hawthorne 2008; Varghese 2008). Within Europe there has been much interest in the 'Erasmus phenomenon' of student exchanges and the 'year abroad' (see Bracht et al. 2006; Krazklewska and Krupnik 2006; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Maiworm and

Teichler 1996). Other studies view ISM as part of a broader canvas of 'knowledge mobility' and the migration and circulation of academic and scientific talent (Ackers and Gill 2008; Byram and Dervin 2008; Gürüz 2008; Solimano 2008).

Attempts to theoretically frame ISM reflect some of the above perspectives (Findlay et al. 2005, 2006: 292-294). It is seen as part of skilled migration, either amongst highly-developed countries or (with links to brain drain) from lesser- to more-developed countries; as part of the globalisation of higher education; or as part of youth mobility and consumption cultures in which 'going abroad' is seen as a rite of passage and a means of accumulating 'mobility capital' (Murphy-Lejeune 2002). In their recent research on the international mobility of Hong Kong and UK students, Brooks and Waters have drawn attention to the way in which ISM is embedded within structures of social class reproduction and elite formation (Brooks and Waters 2009; Waters 2006, 2009; Waters and Brooks 2010).

Meanwhile, empirical studies (which include much of the literature already cited above) tend to focus either on students' mobility behaviour and experiences *whilst they are abroad* or survey their attitudes and experiences of mobility *post-graduation*. What is unique about the research reported in this paper is that we are surveying university applicants in their final year of school or sixth-form college, i.e. *before* they move into higher education. From the point of view of migration decision-making, such a move can be seen as a threefold choice: to stay in the parental home and go to a local university; to move to a university in another part of the country and hence move out of the parental home, at least during term-time; or to go to university abroad. As far as we are aware, no survey of UK school-leavers' attitudes towards and plans for study abroad has ever been carried out before.

Although the statistics suggest that the number of UK-domiciled students heading abroad to study is greatly outweighed – by at least ten times – by foreign students coming in, both flows are experiencing a long-term rise in numbers (Findlay et al. 2009: 4-5). However, we need to be clear about exactly what is being measured by such statistics. Migration abroad and in-migration for study purposes can include study at various levels, not just university. Especially within the higher education (HE) sector we need to further distinguish between *degree mobility* (students moving to another country to take their entire degree programme there) and *credit mobility* (or 'within-programme' mobility) whereby students move abroad for a shorter period (typically a term, a semester or a 'year abroad') which is contained *within* their degree programme. Earlier work by King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) and then by Findlay et al. (2005, 2006) focused on the credit-mobility experiences of UK undergraduate students; in the present paper were are concerned only with degree mobility, specifically the propensity of UK school-leavers to apply to study at a non-UK university or other HE institution. The research was commissioned by the UK government's Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).[1]

Two broad concerns drive public interest in UK students' degree mobility. One relates to the government's target of getting 40 rising to 50 per cent of school-leavers into higher

[1] The research was originally commissioned, via competitive tender, by DIUS (the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills), which became reconfigured into BIS during the period of the research contract (2008-09). The research team for the DIUS/BIS study was led by Allan Findlay at the University of Dundee and Russell King at Sussex: several other colleagues at both universities were also involved in various parts of the research (Alistair Geddes, Fiona Smith and Alex Stam at Dundee, Jill Ahrens, Máiréad Dunne and Ron Skeldon at Sussex). The DIUS/BIS project comprised three main elements: a metadata analysis of relevant statistics on UK ISM in comparison with that on other countries (see Findlay et al. 2010), a survey of UK school-leavers' attitudes towards study abroad, and a survey of UK students already studying at universities abroad – in North America, Australia and various European countries. In the present paper we explore the findings of the second of these three studies. The overall results of the DIUS/BIS research project were synthesised in Findlay and King (2010), but this was mainly devoted to the first and third of the three studies listed above.

education.[2] 'Leakage' of UK-domiciled students to non-UK universities, where they are 'lost' from the national figures, could therefore compromise achieving these targets. This is the *quantitative* concern. Second there is a *qualitative* component. This refers to the issue of selectivity: is it the 'brightest and best' of the UK's aspiring university students who seek to study abroad, or are there other selection filters?

### *Research questions*

This leads us to a more explicit statement of research questions, limiting them to those which can be realistically answered by a fairly large-scale questionnaire survey of 'Year 13' (final-year) school students who have recently applied to university or other form of HE. As we shall see, this statistical evidence is supported by interviews with sixth-form heads and HE advisers in a range of different institutions, and follow-up telephone interviews with a small sample of school-leavers. The following questions reflect those listed by the commissioning body of this research.

1. What proportion of school-leavers aspiring to enter HE are applying, or thinking of applying, to study abroad?
2. For those who are applying, or considering applying, to study abroad, which countries, institutions, and subject areas are they oriented towards?
3. Does the type of school hold an influence? The main contrast we wish explore here is that between state schools (comprehensives, sixth-form colleges etc.) and the independent, fee-paying sector. What kinds of information, advice and support are available within the school environment? What kinds of direct overseas linkages do schools have – school trips, exchanges, twinning arrangements etc?
4. What is the academic profile of those who wish to study abroad?
5. Are demographic factors relevant, such as pupils' gender and ethnic origin?
6. What is the role of parental educational and occupational background in framing the propensity to want, or be advised, to pursue studies abroad?
7. What is the role of personal and family links abroad? Here we aim to identify the possible relevance of prior residence outside the UK, travel and holiday experience, parents' foreign residential history, and other family members or close friends who have studied at university abroad.

When we come to the results and analysis part of this paper, we will revisit these research questions and restate them in more formalised hypotheses.

## Research design and methodology

The core research instrument was a questionnaire survey of 1400 sixth-form or equivalent pupils, backed up by in-depth interviews with 15 guidance teachers and advisers charged with managing their respective schools' applications to university. Most of the material in this paper is derived from these two principal research instruments. A third, relatively minor, part of the research design was 20 follow-up telephone interviews with Year 13 university applicants who had applied to study abroad, or thought about applying, and who had indicated on their questionnaire their willingness to be contacted this way.

We selected two parts of England to administer the questionnaire survey and the teacher/adviser interviews: Brighton and Sussex in the South East of England, and Leicester and Leicestershire in the East Midlands. Both areas consist of one medium-sized city with a constellation of surrounding smaller towns and rural districts. Brighton/Sussex was deemed

[2] These targets were those of the previous Labour government. The present Coalition government's commitment to attaining these targets may well be less.

broadly representative of the more affluent South of England, and Leicester(shire) of the Midlands and North of England with their heritage of industrial employment and postwar immigration. Whilst the population of Brighton and Sussex is predominantly White, that of Leicester (less so the county) contains substantial immigrant-origin cohorts, especially from the Indian subcontinent.

Within each region, our initial research design identified a mix of state and private-sector schools (with reserves in case of refusals) to administer the questionnaire: seven schools to be chosen in each area, with a target of 700 completed questionnaires, hence 1400 from the 14 English schools. The questionnaire samples were equally divided by type of school (700 state, 700 independent, 350 of each in each region) and by respondent gender (700 males, 700 females, 350 in each region).

Table 1 sets out this sample design, with the numbers of questionnaires collected.

The schools were contacted in the summer of 2008 in order to lay the groundwork for the surveys and visits during the upcoming Autumn Term (i.e. September to December 2008): letters and emails were sent, along with follow-up telephone calls. Response was patchy. Some schools agreed to cooperate straightaway; others did not respond; and some refusals were received. Whilst it was gratifying to get the first tranche of schools on board, the delays (especially from those schools which eventually said 'no') were frustrating.

For Leicester(shire) we carried out the questionnaire survey in five independent schools, one in the city of Leicester and four elsewhere in the county, and in two sixth-form colleges, both located in the city but drawing in some pupils from the wider county. Despite the imbalance in the numbers of the two types of school, we received more completed questionnaires from the state sixth-from colleges, due to their large size. Attempts to get cooperation from the wider-age-range comprehensive schools (11-18) were unsuccessful – all three schools contacted eventually declined to participate. Nevertheless, the requisite targets were well exceeded, for all subcategories.

In Sussex we needed to extend the sample of schools surveyed from seven to eleven. Eventually, the schools which agreed to collaborate consisted of six independent schools, two located in Brighton and four in the county of Sussex. For the state sector, five schools/colleges participated in the survey. This group comprised one further education college, two sixth-form colleges and one comprehensive school, all situated in Brighton and Hove, and another comprehensive located in Sussex. All contacted schools eventually agreed to take part in the survey; however, the rate of completed questionnaires was lower than in the Leicester sample, and the Sussex school sizes were on average smaller than their Leicester counterparts. This is why we had to enlarge the sample number of institutions to eleven rather than the original seven.

The questionnaire was drawn-up and piloted in such a way as to ensure that maximum relevant information could be collected with minimal imposition on the schools and their pupils. It took 15 minutes

Table 1 Target sample number for the Schools Survey

| | total | state | ind. | boys | girls | achieved |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Leicester schools | 700 | 350 | 350 | 350 | 350 | 1136 |
| Sussex schools | 700 | 350 | 350 | 350 | 350 | 853 |
| Totals | 1400 | 700 | 700 | 700 | 700 | 1989 |

to complete on average, with a range between 10 and 20 minutes. It was filled in on the hard-copy version, either in special sessions (such as morning assembly) organised by the schools with the researchers present, or distributed via tutor groups, and collected by the researchers on a later visit or posted back to the research team at the University of Sussex. The on-site methods worked very well on the whole, and we are extremely grateful to the schools for facilitating this exercise.

The questionnaire was designed to provide useful data to answer, or at least shed light on, the research aims listed above. The questionnaire was divided into five sections that mainly involved closed questions, simple to tick or write a one-word response, with a few spaces for elaborations where it was thought necessary or useful. Section 1 documents the respondents' current studies: A2 and AS levels or other qualifications. Section 2 records past studies, mainly GCSE grades. Section 3 asks the important questions about plans to study at university, including universities applied for. The key question here is 3.3 which asks about applying to study abroad – whether respondents are actually doing this; or whether they considered applying abroad, but then decided not to. Other questions in section 3 elicit motivation for (not) applying to study abroad, levels of information and guidance available etc. Section 4 asks about pupils' previous links outside the UK (travel, holidays, residence abroad), and section 5 collects general demographic data, both for respondents and their parents, including the education and occupations of the latter.[3]

The second research instrument was a target-sample of staff interviews. We interviewed, in most institutions where the questionnaire was administered, the corresponding local 'key informant' – usually the head of sixth form, HE adviser or other such strategic person. These interviews, which usually lasted between 20 minutes and one hour, yielded useful insights based on the interviewees' accumulated experience of monitoring HE applications over many years. The staff interviews were recorded (permission was always sought, and granted in all cases) and subsequently transcribed. The interviewees were offered the chance to check the transcripts for accuracy, which a few respondents did, and the transcripts revised accordingly.

In order to conform to ethical approval guidelines and to undertakings to ensure individuals' confidentiality and school anonymity, we do not name interviewees or identify schools. In the analysis which follows, schools (and interviewees within each school) are coded in the following manner (L stands for Leicester(shire); S for Sussex, including Brighton):

L1 Independent day school, girls
L2 Independent day school, girls
L3 Independent day school, boys
L4 Ind. day/boarding school, mixed
L5 Ind. day/boarding school, mixed
L6 State sixth-form college, mixed
L7 State sixth-form college, mixed

S1 Ind. day/boarding school, girls
S2 Ind. day/boarding school, girls
S3 Ind. day/boarding school, mixed
S4 Ind. day/boarding school, mixed
S5 Ind. day/boarding school, mixed
S6 Ind. day/boarding school, mixed
S7 State FE college, mixed
S8 State sixth-form college, mixed
S9 State sixth-form college, mixed
S10 State comprehensive, mixed
S11 State comprehensive, mixed

The staff interview extracts will use the above codes. In addition, and in order to cover certain aspects of the situation in London, we interviewed one HE adviser at a large Inner-London sixth-form college. This interview is coded IL1. For the small sample of follow-up pupil interviews, we add 'p' to the code as follows: Lp1, Sp3 etc.

Referring back to Table 1, it will be seen that our target samples for schools in

[3] The questionnaire is available to *bona fide* researchers on request: please contact Russell King or Jill Ahrens.

England were 700 questionnaire returns in Leicester(shire), 700 for Brighton and Sussex, 700 state-school pupils, 700 independent-sector pupils, 700 males and 700 females, all subdivided into evenly-matched quotas of 350 and 175 – e.g. 350 state-sector respondents in Leicester, made up of 175 males and 175 females. The fact that these targets were exceeded by some margin meant that a random selection of completed questionnaires for coding was drawn from some schools where excessive numbers of questionnaires were filled in.[4]

At this point we need to spell out a crucial refinement which we make when presenting the results pertaining to the key question: 'Have you ever thought about applying to a non-UK university?' (question 3.3 in the questionnaire). Three responses are possible to this question: 'Yes, and I am in the process of applying'; 'Yes, but in the end I decided not to apply'; and 'No'. The refinement concerns the distinction between UK-domiciled pupils and non-UK-domiciled pupils. The latter group consists primarily, if not exclusively, of foreign-national pupils who have been sent to England as boarders or in the care of guardians in order to access British secondary and probably higher education. These students are, in a sense, moving in the opposite direction to the UK students considering moving to study abroad, who are the main focus of this research. We found that foreign pupils sent to schools in the UK are also aiming to access (good) British universities but, given their international background, are also more likely to consider applying to universities abroad as well.[5]

How to separate out these two categories of respondents was not simple. It was decided not to ask the explicit nationality question because of it potential sensitivity in certain cases – pupils may have been uncertain over their precise nationality, or be refugees or asylum-seekers. Accordingly we identified the non-UK-domiciled and foreign nationals indirectly by their answers to several questions: if they had been resident outside the UK for more than ten years (question 4.2), if they had been born outside the UK (question 5.4), their ethnic origin (i.e. other than White-UK/Irish, question 5.5.), their parents' residence (5.6), plus any clues given in 'open' answers to other questions (e.g. 'I may return to Hong Kong for university').

As a result of this refinement to our respondent categories, we have alongside the 'non-abroad-oriented' respondents (those who answered 'No' to question 3.3), two comparator samples. We term these as follows:

1. The 'standard sample' – this is the number of respondents in the overall sample (n=1400) who answered positively to the study-abroad question, either in terms of actually applying to study abroad (n=101) or of having thought about it but then not done so (n=182).
2. The 'narrow sample' – as above but minus those who are, on the questionnaire evidence, highly likely to be non-UK students (n=159, so the total narrow sample becomes 1241). This reduces the two 'positive' response categories to n=50 and n=154 respectively.

To clarify these two categories a little further: 1 is broadly representative of the Year 13 pupil population, with the caveat that the stratified sample division (50 per cent each for state and independent sector schools) does not reflect the real division between the two (which is actually more like 89 and 11 per cent); and 2 is broadly representative of the UK-national Year 13

[4] It was tempting to code up all completed questionnaires; however this would have unbalanced the carefully stratified nature of the total sample. For instance, we had a greater excess of questionnaires from Leicester than for Sussex, and for state schools than for independents.

[5] We were not alone in being surprised at the existence of this partially 'hidden' population of foreign students in UK schools. A recent *Times Higher Education* article commented on the discrepancy between estimates of overseas students in British universities according to whether the students are classified by nationality (513,570 in 2007-08) or by domicile when applying (389,330). The inference here is that almost 125,000 overseas students have applied from a UK domicile – as boarders or whilst attending a UK language or foundation course (Gill 2009).

population (subject to the same caveat). Our reasons for an equal sample stratification between state and independent schools, rather than a representative sample divide, will become apparent later.

## Results

We divide the presentation of our survey results into several subsections. We start with the basic questions, *how many and what proportions* of university applications are applying to study abroad, or have at least thought about this possibility? We then move on to examine the *characteristics* of the prospectively internationally mobile pupils/students and the potential *factors which discriminate* them from those, the vast majority, who do not have the same inclinations to pursue their university degrees outside the UK. Throughout the analysis, we mix questionnaire results with extracts from interviews with teachers and HE advisers in the schools surveyed and with occasional quotes from the telephone interviews with pupils.[6]

### *How many and what proportions?*

Table 2 sets out the questionnaire results for answers to the key question 3.3: 'Have you ever thought about applying to a non-UK university?' Responses to the two possible positive answers are tabulated for the two sample types described above, together with the percentage proportions, for both the Leicester sample and the Sussex sample, as well as the total sample. For the standard sample the totals are 700 each for Leicester and Sussex and 1400 overall; for the narrow sample, net of the overseas pupils, the totals are 636 for Leicester and 605 for Sussex. In other words, overseas pupils are more numerous in our Sussex sample of schools than they are in Leicester – 95 vs. 64.

Three trends can be noted from this table. First, there is a big difference between those who merely *thought* about applying abroad, and those who are *actually applying*. For instance, taking the total narrow sample, less than a quarter of those who considered applying abroad actually went ahead and did so or are in the process of doing so (50 out of 204).

Second, the proportions are much lower for the narrow sample (where the non-UK pupils are taken out) than for the standard sample. These inter-column differences are much greater for the first of the two positive answers (the 'pro-active' answer) than they are for the second. This means that non-UK pupils who are sent to British schools from abroad are more likely to be committed to applying to university abroad than are UK-domiciled pupils. And this is the case even though the precise purpose of many overseas pupils coming to UK schools or sixth-forms is to use this as a means to access good universities in Britain. We return to this point later on.

Thirdly, pupils from the Sussex schools are more oriented to the possibility of studying abroad than those from Leicester(shire). Taking the 'standard sample' data, twice as many Sussex respondents declared that they were applying to study abroad than Leicester pupils (67 vs. 34, or 1 in 10 compared to 1 in 20). However, these differences attenuate (but remain noticeable) when we look at the other answer ('thought about applying, but did not') and when we shift across to the 'narrow sample' columns. This is partly explained by the greater difference between the sizes of the two sample types for Sussex (standard sample 170, narrow 116) than for Leicester (standard 112, narrow 88), reflecting the already-noted fact that Sussex schools attract a higher number of foreign students into their sixth forms.

Beyond these three trends, the overall significance of these findings needs to be brought out. To have more than 7 per cent

[6] It has to be said that the telephone interviews with pupils did not work very well. Often it was difficult to find a time (either cold-calling or by prior emailing) to have the conversation, and their recollections of filling out the questionnaire were sometimes very vague. We attained the target of 20 interviews, but many of them were very short.

of our 1400 sample population saying that they have applied or are in the process of applying to study abroad is a remarkable finding, and fully vindicates the need for attention to be paid to the phenomenon. However, two important statistical qualifications need to be made which calibrate the percentage downwards. First, the narrow sample gives a much lower figure – 4 per cent or 1 in 25 school-leavers applying to higher education. Second, our sample design was stratified into equal numbers of state and independent-sector respondents. In reality, the independent sector accounts for a little over 1 in 10 sixth-form-age, A-level equivalent pupils, and so is greatly over-represented. As we shall see presently, pupils at independent-sector schools have a greater propensity to apply abroad than state-sector pupils.

Meanwhile, what do the teachers and advisers say? All 15 interviewees (seven in Leicester/shire, seven in Brighton/Sussex, one in London) replied that going abroad to university was a (very) small-scale phenomenon. We have to separate out here three levels of engagement: those pupils who express an interest in foreign universities, those who actually apply, and those who end up going. Our questioning was mainly geared to the last of these three levels, which therefore complements, rather than matches, the questionnaire responses.

Some HE advisers seemed surprised that we were even asking the question, and struggled to think of any of their charges who had actually gone abroad to study. In order to reinforce this point, it is tempting to list all their answers to this question – about the numbers who had actually gone abroad – but for the sake of brevity here are a selection of answers representing a cross-section of schools and colleges. First, the state sector:

> … what I can say straightaway is that there are very, very few students. We had one student last year for example who was interested in studying in America, mainly because his family was moving there. Previous to that in terms of the years I have been doing this job… I think that there can't be more than the odd one or two in let's say a period of ten years. So it's a very small number (L7).

The answer is that there are hardly

Table 2 Positive answers to the question 'Have you thought about applying to a non-UK university?

| | Standard sample | | Narrow sample | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | no. | % | no. | % |
| Leicester schools (n = 700 or 636) | | | | |
| Yes, and applying | 34 | 4.9 | 19 | 3.0 |
| Yes, not applying | 78 | 11.1 | 69 | 10.8 |
| Both answers | 112 | 16.0 | 88 | 13.8 |
| Sussex schools (n = 700 or 605) | | | | |
| Yes, and applying | 67 | 9.6 | 31 | 5.1 |
| Yes, not applying | 103 | 14.7 | 85 | 14.1 |
| Both answers | 170 | 24.3 | 116 | 19.2 |
| Total (n = 1400 or 1241) | | | | |
| Yes, and applying | 101 | 7.2 | 50 | 4.0 |
| Yes, not applying | 182 | 13.0 | 154 | 12.4 |
| Both answers | 283 | 20.2 | 204 | 16.4 |

*Note*: For sample sizes, the first n = standard sample, the second figure is the narrow sample.

> any. I can't remember the last time we had an application to an overseas institution… it's so rare you would notice it (S7).

These answers are all the more significant because they are from informants representing large institutions – amongst the largest we surveyed.

From the independent sector the answers were a bit more varied. Whilst some, especially the smaller schools containing wholly or mainly day-pupils, reinforced the 'hardly any' picture given above, the private boarding schools have a slightly different story to tell. L1 is Head of Sixth Form in a small independent day girls school:

> In the seven years I have been here in post, none have gone. We have had experience of Erasmus years, but nobody has actually gone abroad to study (L1).

Other, larger independents, but still (mainly) day schools, were not much different:

> I would say that it is extremely small. I have one year 12 student currently looking into going to Art School in Bilbao in Spain. Her mother is Spanish and she is a fluent Spanish speaker and she is quite seriously looking at that… We have one or two pupils with an Irish background who look into the Irish universities but as yet I am not aware that any have gone. I usually in every year get one or two enquiries about American universities, but it doesn't materialise (L2).

> Well, very few in fact. We have a handful of overseas pupils who might look at going back to their home country. But in terms of UK born and bred pupils, some of them might be interested in going to America. Very, very few might be interested in mainland Europe or something like Australia, but apart from that they all go for UK universities (S3).

The schools where there does seem to be a stronger (but still very much minority-scale) interest in studying abroad are the more prestigious 'public schools', especially those with a strong presence of boarders. Four examples, two each from schools in Leicestershire and Sussex:

> OK, the general profile is that there are relatively few students that go… to overseas universities. There are usually half a dozen a year that express an interest in American universities. Last year we had someone go to McGill, that was partly because he had Canadian connections. This year we have somebody… who is actually half-Australian… and he is going to go to university in Australia (L4).

> … if I think about the last few years, America was their intended destination [of those who apply overseas] and they tend to be quite a broad range of universities, not just the ones we know; universities that I would never have heard of… The nations [of destination] tend to be America and the Irish Republic… but we are talking small, very small numbers (L5).

> We've had a fair number, obviously smaller than the ones that go to British universities. I would say 5 or 6 every year [to the United States] and we have had girls go to Australia and Canada. I think it is partly the make-up of the students we have, because they are all very international. So the idea of going abroad is already part of their make-up. But the American universities are obviously the second choice… not the second choice but the alternative to the UK universities. [As for European universities] very few, hardly any I think (S1).

> Not that many really… single figures. There are quite a lot of possibilities in America and really not any applications to any European universities… We have many talented sportsmen who could be applying to American universities with scholarships… but they are not doing that in significant numbers (S4).

Table 3 Study abroad by school type: state vs. independent sector

| | Standard sample | | | | Narrow sample | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | State (n = 700) | | Independent (n = 700) | | State (n = 655) | | Independent (n = 586) | |
| | no. | % | no. | % | no. | % | no. | % |
| Yes, and applying | 20 | 2.9 | 81 | 11.6 | 18 | 2.8 | 32 | 5.5 |
| Yes, not applying | 73 | 10.4 | 109 | 15.6 | 67 | 10.2 | 87 | 14.9 |
| Both answers | 93 | 13.3 | 190 | 27.1 | 85 | 13.0 | 119 | 20.3 |

*Note*: Percentages may not tally due to rounding

To round off this first series of interviews on numbers applying (and going) abroad, we can hear from the HE adviser to a large, ethnically diverse, sixth-form college in Inner London:

> Only a few end up going abroad. I would say out of a year group of 400 or 500 students we would get only a handful who would actually go ahead and apply… maybe one per cent… Usually [to] America, occasionally Canada. Occasionally we get the sports scholarship type student (IL1).

Although few of the staff interviewees were able to give precise percentages on how many pupils had applied (or had actually gone) to study abroad, we have the impression that the figures and estimates given ('hardly any', 'only a handful' etc.), when measured against the sizes of the schools' university-applicant cohorts, were less than 1-2 per cent, and therefore below the outcomes given on Table 2.

If there is a discrepancy, why might pupils have higher study-abroad inclinations than their teachers think they have? We suggest a number of reasons.

First, teachers were more focused on the relatively few cases of (former) pupils who had *actually gone* to study abroad, whereas the questionnaire respondents were replying on the basis of *thinking* of studying abroad. If we consider the 'middle ground' of those who had actually made applications, we can observe more congruence, although the teachers' evidence is mainly impressionistic rather than statistical.

Second, applications might be made without the teachers knowing. The teachers and advisers are mostly responsible for managing the UCAS system of applying to UK institutions of higher education. Pupils might be working with the help of their parents, friends or private tutors to make applications abroad, unbeknownst to their schools. Or, pupils might be planning a Gap Year and thinking of applying abroad at a later stage. A few of the teachers admitted to these possibilities:

> So when they go off and make their own research [referring to those looking for sports scholarships abroad], we don't know if they made the application. If it's not through the normal UCAS process we're not going to pick them up (S9).

> One thing I haven't mentioned so far… these medical schools in Prague that teach in English… We've had a few boys who haven't made the cut expressing an interest in them, so these would be post-A-level applications… A few boys looked into it and one boy applied and I know he didn't take up the offer because he was going to take a Gap Year instead. I have no idea if he is intending to re-apply (L3).

We are led to conclude that this factor of teacher/adviser ignorance must be very relevant. As the two quotes above indicate,

teachers' main task, and hence their socio-psychological (if not financial) 'reward', is to get their pupils into (good) UK universities. There is probably no reward for placing them abroad, and this is mainly outside their job remit as they see it.

Third, pupils may have inserted a positive answer to question 3.3 on a partial misinterpretation that it could also refer to UK degrees with a year or semester at a foreign university.[7] Certainly many teachers and advisers – virtually all of them in fact – mentioned that the 'Erasmus route' of studying abroad for up to a year within the framework of a UK degree was a more attractive proposition than doing the entire degree at a foreign university. Two typical quotes:

> They are interested in studying abroad, they are interested in universities that offer an Erasmus year… They like the idea of having a British base and of having a year in the middle and spending it abroad (L1).

> I think that those who have done Modern Languages are more likely to apply to a UK university that offers the Erasmus scheme or would be looking to a university that offers a one-year placement abroad as part of the degree course [than apply to do a full programme abroad] (L5).

Fourth, whilst recording students who have left to study abroad or who are actually applying to do so is a relatively objective measure, the notion of having 'thought of' studying abroad is far more imprecise, ranging from serious consideration and active research into the options, to a fleeting thought or passing whim. No doubt the relatively much greater share of students (around one eighth) who ticked the response 'I thought about it but decided not to apply abroad' embraces a range of depth of 'thought'. Teacher and adviser interviews again shed light on this process, stressing in particular that it is often a passing phase whereby interest dissipates when the actual form-filling stage arrives.

> … we start with the students in their first year here when they are doing their AS levels… we start doing some intensive work with them in January and February and at that stage you'll find quite a number of them that will say 'Yeah, I'm interested in the idea of studying abroad' – that is their first answer… [But] when they get to the nitty-gritty stage of actually applying… something seems to happen by the 9 or 10 months later when they start applying. Maybe it's just the realities of distance and families and things like that… I also think by the nature of the way the UCAS application timescales work, it dominates everything, so they have to sort it out… (IL1).

> You can certainly have students… I have students come to me and talk about applying to America, but usually nothing comes of it. It's all talk and they end up applying for home universities (S7).

Overall, we are unable to gauge the precise relevance of any of these four factors in boosting the pupils' feelings and actions towards studying abroad beyond what the teachers seem to be saying. However, it is our considered opinion that the main reason for the discrepancy is simply that the teachers do not know what is happening with regard to international flows. This is a disappointing finding in one sense, but it does have important policy implications. The key policy question is whether teachers should be encouraged to support international applications to non-UK universities. If this route saves the tax-payer money, and if it helps to train a British-national educational elite via study at the world's leading universities, then the answer is 'yes'. If, on the other hand, there is concerns about a 1960s-style 'brain-drain', then the answer might be 'no'. It is also regrettable that there is no national (or international) database which makes it possible to know how many school-leavers apply and finally go to study abroad.

[7] The questionnaire wording was quite clear that this is not what is being asked, but given the circumstances in which the survey was carried out – often in a crowded hall with limited time to think and concentrate – we cannot discount this possibility.

*State vs. independent sector*

Prior quotes given in the earlier sections of this report have indicated that applying to study abroad seems to be heavily associated with independent or private schools. Interviews with state-school staff often referred to the likelihood of greater numbers from the independent schools being interested in studying at university abroad, and these latter schools are also where the bulk of the overseas boarding pupils are enrolled.

Table 3 provides the statistical evidence. We can see that, for respondents applying abroad in the standard sample, the independent-sector rate is four times that of the state sector: 11.6 vs. 2.9 per cent. However, moving across to the narrow sample, where the non-UK pupils, who are far more numerous in independent schools, are filtered out, we can observe that this differential narrows appreciably to 5.5 vs. 2.8 per cent. For the other variant answer – 'Yes, I thought about applying abroad, but decided not to go ahead' – the inter-sector contrast remains clear, but the contrast is not so strong, especially for the narrow sample. However, given the fuzziness of the notion of 'thought about it' noted earlier, the key comparison should be those pupils who actually apply to study abroad; and here the differential is sharper, with independent-sector pupils about twice as likely to apply abroad as state-sector pupils in the narrow sample, and 50 per cent more likely to think about this option but not actually apply.

It is perhaps useful to include here a few comments on the patterns of university applications *within* the UK. Although this is outside the strict remit of our research for this paper, it provides useful context and furthermore brings out a different aspect of the contrast between the state and independent sectors.[8] The independent schools are very much geared to getting virtually 100 per cent of their pupils into (good) universities – after all, this is what the fee-paying parents have invested in. The key term which cropped up in every independent school interview, and in the more academically oriented sixth forms, was *Russell Group*, referring to the well-established research universities – generally large universities in big or medium-sized cities. Of course, Oxford and Cambridge are the prime targets for the best students, and the numbers getting in to Oxbridge are seen as a key indicator of a school's prestige.

We illustrate some of these characteristics by two interview extracts from the Leicester survey, one from an independent school one from a state-sector sixth-form college. Setting aside the small minority of pupils who apply abroad, these interview quotes exemplify the clear, but differentiated, geographical component that exists in application patterns.

For Leicester independent schools, the main targets, beyond Oxbridge, were the Russell Group universities ranging along the M1/A1 corridor, from the London University colleges up to Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds etc.

> … 100 per cent go to university. We are a small selective school and they are quite high achievers… Without it ever being stated it is part of the culture… part of the expectation of the school that you go to university… The majority are Russell Group universities… the most popular last year were Birmingham, Nottingham is very popular… Sheffield, Leeds… these are the universities… We also get every year three or four into Oxford or Cambridge, mainly Cambridge… four applied last year and three got in (L1).

For the state schools, the picture is more varied, dependent above all on the social background of the pupils and, especially in Leicester, their ethnic heritage as well. L6 is a large, socially and ethnically diverse, sixth-form college which draws students from the city of Leicester and beyond, and sends around 85 per cent of its school-leavers into some form of HE.

[8] On the changing patterns of 'going away to uni' see Christie (2007); Holdsworth (2009); and for the US case Mulder and Clark (2002).

> Somewhere in the region of 70 per cent of our students are of non-white-British origin… Asian and Black African, now more East European… [Some of] these students come to us not having been in the country very long… So the cultural mix is extreme and the social mix probably equally diverse… The higher socio-economic groups are definitely students who have come to us through the county schools… [Regarding universities] Midland universities, and that is culturally driven, it's about Asian students not moving away from home. So Leicester, DMU [De Montfort University], Coventry, Aston, Warwick and to some extent the Nottingham universities… and Birmingham and maybe I should add Loughborough as well… these are the main attractors… I mean it's nice that we are next to what was voted 'University of the Year' [Leicester University], so why would you want to move somewhere else if that is on your doorstep? It is the cultural expectation of these kids [referring to the Asian-heritage pupils] and it is particularly for girls to stay at home… [The white population] are far more diverse across the country and take the gap years… (L6).

The Sussex staff interviews generally backed up the trends noted above, except that the county's geographical location (less centrally placed within England than Leicester) and its much smaller numbers of minority ethnic origin students tended to dampen down the 'local effect' in the pattern of applications. For the independents, Oxbridge and the rest of the Russell Group once again reign supreme:

> About 10 to 12 per cent of the year group would go to Oxbridge… And the rest would aim at the Russell universities… Warwick, Bristol, London – UCL, KCL and Imperial are popular, York to some extent, Edinburgh is quite popular, Bath, Loughborough, UEA, a little bit of Leicester, Leeds… So, a fair spread (S3).

And as regards the Sussex state-school perspective, here is a typical quote from one of the Brighton sixth-form colleges:

> The majority [referring to the last few years] went to London and the South East… one or two going to Scottish universities, not very many. Another year there was a move towards Leeds, Sheffield, Liverpool and Manchester, so it varies a bit from year to year… [However] I think there was a shift to more local universities after the finance changed [referring to the introduction of fees]… Ethnic minorities want to stay in Brighton… but that would be only a few students [since they are not numerous at the college]… (S8).

Having sustained the hypothesis that orientation to studying abroad is stronger amongst pupils in the independent sector, and having explored some aspects of the contextual geography of applications to UK universities, it is clear that there are further relationships between propensity to look abroad to study and other factors of an academic, cultural and socio-economic nature. These are dealt with in subsequent sections of the report; for now we round off this discussion on state vs. independent schools by returning to the all-important numbers question.

To do this we combine the statistical findings from Tables 2 and 3, and re-balance them by the proportionate national (English) data on 16-18 year-old pupil enrolment in state and independent school/colleges. Table 2 showed that 7.2 per cent of the standard sample and 4.0 per cent of the narrow sample were applying abroad, but these figures were based on a 50:50 sample split between state and independent schools. Table 3 separated the standard and narrow sample findings on 'study abroad' into state and independent sector. Table 4 provides a revised set of estimates for the proportions applying abroad (and also 'thought about it'), taking into account the ratio of state vs. independent pupils aged 16-18 and taking one or more A-levels or A-level equivalents in England in 2007-08. This ratio is 89.1

Table 4 Study abroad: revised estimates (all data %)

| | Standard sample (n = 1400) | | | | Narrow sample (n = 1241) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | all schools | state sector | indep. sector | weighted average | all schools | state sector | indep. sector | weighted average |
| Yes, and applying | 7.2 | 2.9 | 11.6 | 3.8 | 4.0 | 2.8 | 5.5 | 3.1 |
| Yes, not applying | 13 | 10.4 | 15.6 | 11.0 | 12.4 | 10.2 | 14.9 | 10.7 |
| Both answers | 20.2 | 13.3 | 27.1 | 14.8 | 16.46 | 13.0 | 20.3 | 13.8 |

per cent in the state sector and 10.9 per cent in the independent schools.[9] These percentages are used to weight the re-calculation of the combined averages of the state and independent sector responses – see the final column under 'standard sample' and under 'narrow sample' in Table 4. These 'weighted averages' represent our final estimate of the 'real' proportions of English pupils who are applying to study abroad (3.8 per cent for the standard sample, 3.1 per cent for the narrow one), or who thought about applying and did not go ahead (11.0 and 10.7 per cent for the two samples respectively).

The data in Table 4, particularly the final-column weighted averages, are critical as they enable us to make broad estimates of the absolute numbers applying abroad (though not those who actually go, which is unknown). Moreover such a calculation demonstrates that many more apply from the state sector than from independent schools. True, the independent sector has an application rate to study abroad which is twice that of state schools (5.5 vs. 2.8 per cent for the narrow sample, i.e. excluding overseas pupils); but the fact that the state sector contains eight times the number of 16-18 year-olds means that the absolute numbers are likely to be four times greater from the state sector. Using the DCSF data referred to above, dividing the 16-18 years cohort by two, and assuming that all pupils are potential university applicants (but of course a minority are not), we arrive at the following figures, based on the narrow sample. For those actually applying abroad, the overall ballpark figure is 5000, made up of slightly less than 1000 independent-sector pupils and slightly more than 4000 state pupils. For those who merely thought about applying and did not do so, the estimates are around 17,700 overall, comprising 15,000 state and 2700 independent sector pupils. The standard sample results are somewhat higher, but they are compromised by the distorting effect of the overseas pupils.

### *Overseas pupils at UK schools and UK nationals domiciled abroad*

One of the surprising outcomes of the survey research in schools was the scale of the presence of foreign students who had been sent to Britain by their foreign-resident parents to study for secondary-level qualifications, especially A-levels, in order to gain entry to UK universities. As noted earlier, this group also tends to have higher rates of application to non-UK universities, usually alongside UCAS applications; and this group constitutes the 'difference' between the standard and narrow samples of our questionnaire analysis.

As non-UK nationals, these pupils do not fit within the strict remit of the research that we were commissioned to undertake by DIUS and then BIS. Indeed, in one sense they are migrating in the opposite direction to UK students who go abroad for their

[9] These data refer to '16-18 year-old candidates entered for level 3 qualifications at least equivalent in size to one A level'. The data do not filter out A-level pupils who do not apply for university, who are likely to be more numerous at state-sector institutions. These pupil statistics are from DCSF: GCE/VCE/Applied A/ AS and Equivalent Results in England, 2007/08 (Revised). Source: http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000827/index.shtml (accessed 27 April 2009)

university education. But they are worth saying a little bit about, for several reasons. First, they are a significant presence in A-level cohorts, especially in independent boarding schools (although their presence is not restricted to this type of school). Second, their disproportionate presence amongst those who answered some form of 'Yes' to question 3.3 complicates the statistical picture. And third, for the UK's graduate labour market, their passage through the second- and third-level education system in Britain, especially if they stay on after graduating, acts as a compensating flow for the 'loss' of UK-nationals who opt to study abroad. So, one country's 'brain drain' is another's 'brain gain'; and in the case of the UK, brain drain and gain might be occurring simultaneously. For the time being we do no more than signal this phenomenon as one worthy of further research, and make a few summary points based on evidence from the interview material. In fact, teachers and advisers had more information about these overseas pupils and seemed more interested in talking about them than they did about what they saw as the more tenuous issue of local students applying to study abroad.

Although many foreign nationalities are present in Britain's schools (school S1 claimed to have pupils from 54 different countries!), four groups stood out as the main ones reported by the interviewees: Chinese, East Europeans (mainly Russians), Germans and Nigerians. These pupils generally come from wealthy and privileged backgrounds in their home countries, and are sent to often expensive independent schools in England in order to use these as stepping-stones to the best universities, above all Oxford and Cambridge, but also the LSE. But they may 'hedge their bets' by also applying to the top Ivy League universities in the US. And some will return to universities in their home countries, especially where there are good universities to fall back on.[10]

[10] Such as the University of Hong Kong, the National University of Singapore, and the top German universities.

The following interview extracts, selected from a much larger volume of insightful information, give some pointers about the non-UK students and their application strategies for university.

> We have a small boarding community of about 30 boys… The profile of the boarders is primarily Far Eastern – Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, Korean. They have come into the country with the aim to go to a British university. So they are all looking to go to Oxford, Cambridge and the London colleges. There is an obsession with the LSE – they have quite a narrow view of British universities… But we have had in the past… candidates from either Africa or the Middle East who have come here to do A-Levels and then go to American universities. Last year our only candidate that went abroad was a Middle Eastern candidate – he is from Dubai – who went to study Medicine in California (L3).

> We have got an international community. We offer a British education and that is why the international students come… on the last count we had students from 54 countries of the world. Quite a number from Asia; a growing number from Europe, particularly from Eastern Europe. They used to be from Russia exclusively, but now they are also from the Ukraine and places like Latvia… Let me think – when I say Asia, there are quite a variety of Asian girls from a variety of countries. We get a couple from America and quite a large number from Nigeria and other places in Africa… a few German girls because it ties in with their German system… [For the overseas pupils] I am thinking American universities… actually there is also Hong Kong. For some it is because they are from that part of the world. Quite a lot of them would choose the American universities because of the Liberal Arts approach… they see that as attractive. A lot of them have the Ivy League… or their parents have the Ivy Leagues in their heads, it is just a strong appeal. Particularly for girls that

> wouldn't get in [to Oxbridge]… nearly all of them would put in a British application at the same time. They do it dual, and if they don't get into Oxford and Cambridge, they want them to get into Harvard. The Hong Kong Chinese are slightly different, because again they put in dual application and if they don't succeed over here, their fallback is to go to Hong Kong (S1).

Intriguingly, the overseas pupils studying in English schools have their mirror-image in the form of UK-nationals studying at international schools abroad. Yet in some respects the behaviour of the latter group is quite different. Questionnaire data from a small-scale survey of UK-nationals at international schools in Europe (107 pupils responded) reveals that 93 per cent were in the process of applying to study abroad (i.e. outside the country where they are currently studying); of these, two-thirds were applying to UK universities (not necessarily exclusively).[11] Only 3 per cent of the international-school sample had thought about applying abroad but did not go ahead, and only 4 per cent had not contemplated foreign study. The general picture from the international schools is that the best students academically are those who are set on getting into UK universities, using other countries' universities as a back-up. Nevertheless, despite this UK-orientation, international schools' UK-national pupils do have a higher tendency than UK-resident pupils to apply to non-UK universities, so this channel of higher education international mobility should not be ignored.

### *Countries targeted*

The interview extracts from the teachers and advisers quoted earlier give a clear indication of the range of countries which are targeted by pupils aspiring or thinking to move abroad for their higher education. Summing up from the various quotes already given, the English-speaking countries loom large, above all the United States, Canada, Australia and Ireland. Additionally, some of the foreign students will return to their home countries for their university education, either as a fall-back to not getting into world-class universities, such as the Hong Kong Chinese (see the quote immediately above), or as part of their planned educational progression, such as many of the Germans.

Question 3.3 on the main questionnaire asked those who are applying to study abroad and those who thought about applying, to name their preferred country. Table 5 sets out the answers for the two samples. The United States is the dominant destination accounting for half of the narrow-sample responses and four in ten of the standard sample. The main difference between the standard and narrow samples, apart from the aggregate numbers responding (211 vs. 147), is the German and East Asian (mainly Chinese) effect: the narrow sample has far fewer respondents for these countries. Filtering out the non-UK respondents reveals the dominant Anglophone nature of the top destinations: in order of importance the US (51.0 per cent), Australia/NZ (13.6 per cent), Ireland (11.6 per cent) and Canada (5.4 per cent). Note that Ireland attracts more than half of those opting for a European destination. Our data indicate very little UK-domiciled student movement to continental European countries such as France or Germany. This, in turn, suggests that secondary data, which do report some continental European destinations, are potentially flawed, perhaps by conflating Erasmus-like credit mobility in the statistics.

### *Academic performance*

Here we investigate the hypothesis that those who might go abroad to study, or at least consider the possibility, are the academic high-flyers seeking 'world-class' universities – most of which are in the United States.

[11] This survey was administered by Allan Findlay and his colleagues at Dundee, who sent the questionnaire to a small selection of European international schools where there were significant numbers of sons and daughters of British 'expats' attending.

Table 5 Destinations for those who are applying, or considered applying, abroad

| | Standard sample | | Narrow sample | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | no. | % | no. | % |
| France | 8 | 3.8 | 7 | 4.8 |
| Germany | 9 | 4.3 | 2 | 1.4 |
| Ireland | 17 | 8.1 | 17 | 11.6 |
| Spain | 2 | 0.9 | 2 | 1.4 |
| Other Europe | 11 | 5.2 | 4 | 2.7 |
| Europe subtotal | 47 | 22.3 | 32 | 21.8 |
| USA | 89 | 42.2 | 75 | 51.0 |
| Canada | 11 | 5.2 | 8 | 5.4 |
| North America | 100 | 47.4 | 83 | 56.5 |
| Australia | 21 | 10.0 | 20 | 13.6 |
| Latin America and Caribbean | 6 | 2.8 | 5 | 3.4 |
| East Asia | 28 | 13.3 | 2 | 1.4 |
| Middle East | 2 | 0.9 | 1 | 0.7 |
| Africa | 4 | 1.9 | 3 | 2.0 |
| Other | 3 | 1.4 | 1 | 0.7 |
| Total | 211 | 100.0 | 147 | 100.0 |

*Notes*: 'Other Europe' includes many cases applying to Charles University in Prague; in the category 'Latin America and Caribbean' are several students applying to St George's, Grenada (both usually for Medicine). Percentages may not tally due to rounding.

Several questions on the questionnaire allow us to explore this relationship.

First we look at actual or predicted academic grades: A-levels and GCSEs are the logical indicators.[12] Table 6 gives these results; we deploy the standard sample which gives more robust results. The narrow sample results yield the same general picture, but with lower frequency counts throughout. For A-levels we checked any grades already obtained, plus the predicted grades (as reported by the students from the information on their UCAS forms or told to them by their tutors). There is obviously an element of imprecision here: some students did not know their predicted grades: this helps to account for the fact that the sum-total of respondents (1219) is substantially lower than the survey total (1400), although the IB students also contribute to the sample shortfall. It is also possible that respondents remembered their predicted grades incorrectly (fairly unlikely) or that schools over-graded their predictions (possible but probably unlikely on a large scale). We divided the A-level grades into three more-or-less equal classes – 3 As or better (i.e. including AAAA, AAAB etc.), 3 or more B grades or better (e.g. AAB, BBB), and outcomes below this. The figures show that high-flying students with (predicted) grades of at least 3 As are more than twice as likely to apply for university abroad compared to those with lower (predicted) grades. However we also find a less marked tendency for the lowest-performers to apply abroad more than the academically middle-ranked; and this relationship is also present in the narrow sample. This may be a 'hedging bets' strategy for those who fear they may not make it into a (good) UK university.

[12] We exclude the IB (international baccalaureate) from the analysis because of the small sample size (35 for the standard sample, of whom 23 gave predicted points). Whilst the sample was not sufficient to yield any robust indication of the relationship between going abroad and predicted performance, it is worth noting that just over half the IB pupils (19 out of 35) are applying (8) or had thought of applying (11) for universities abroad.

Table 6 Answers to the question 'Have you thought about applying to a non-UK university?' by academic performance: standard sample

| | Yes, and applying | | Yes, not applying | | No | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | no. | % | no. | % | no. | % | |
| A-levels (n = 1219) | | | | | | | |
| 3 As or better | 49 | 10.1 | 77 | 15.8 | 360 | 74.1 | 486 |
| 3 or more A or B | 11 | 3.7 | 37 | 12.4 | 251 | 83.9 | 299 |
| less | 25 | 5.8 | 47 | 10.8 | 362 | 83.4 | 434 |
| GCSEs (n = 1254) | | | | | | | |
| 7+ at A* and A | 36 | 6.9 | 82 | 15.8 | 401 | 77.3 | 519 |
| 7+ at A or B | 12 | 2.8 | 46 | 10.8 | 369 | 86.4 | 427 |
| less | 8 | 2.6 | 31 | 10.1 | 269 | 87.3 | 308 |

We tested the association between A-level predicted performance and applying to study abroad for both the standard and the narrow samples. In order to simplify the analysis, we collapsed the two answer columns 'Yes, but not applying' and 'No' into one, 'Not applying'. Table 7 sets out the revised data and the chi-square test for this association, and shows that the results are significant, more so for the standard sample than the narrow version.

Given the conjectural nature of A-level predicted grades, we feel we are on safer ground with GCSEs since these represent actual, rather than projected, grades obtained. Again we have a threefold division of scores (see Table 6, bottom half). The results here are as predicted by the hypothesis that the academically gifted are most likely to apply abroad or to consider this option. The contrast is particularly abrupt between the top performers (7 or more A and A* grades), who are two and a half times more likely to apply abroad and roughly 50 per cent more likely to think about applying abroad (but then not do so) as the lower performers. This time, evidence of the 'hedging bets' strategy of the lowest performers is absent. Table 8 parallels Table 7 in its presentation of chi-square results; again more significant for the standard sample.

Next, with Table 9, we look at another potential correlate: that it is the most aspirational students, in terms of their UK university choices, who also apply abroad. This hypothesis too appears to be clearly supported by the questionnaire evidence. We looked at the universities applied for via UCAS (up to five choices) and coded them into two systems of classification. The first categorisation we adopted was by 'type' of university. We checked for any pupils who had applied for Oxford or Cambridge. Then, by looking at the overall balance of five choices, we determined whether the majority (three or more) was for pre-1992 universities (mainly 'Russell' and '94' groups), or for post-1992 universities (the former polytechnics and colleges of higher education). This gave us the three 'prestige-ranked' university categories shown in the top half of Table 9. The second categorisation looks at whether three or more of the allocated five UCAS choices were from a top-10 list of UK universities (Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial, UCL, King's, Edinburgh, Manchester, Bristol, LSE, Warwick).[13] As with Table 6, Table 9 opts for the more robust numbers from the standard sample.

The questionnaire data broadly confirms the hypothesis about the link between those applying to prestigious universities in

[13] This list comes from the 2008 World University Rankings published in the *Times Higher Education*, 9 October 2008, i.e. around the time our research with schools was being carried out.

Table 7 Applying to university abroad by predicted A-level scores

| | Standard sample | | Narrow sample | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A-levels | Applying | Not applying | Applying | Not applying |
| 3 As or better | 49 | 437 | 27 | 398 |
| 3 or more A or B | 11 | 288 | 4 | 271 |
| less | 25 | 409 | 13 | 373 |

Chi-square for standard sample 13.229; df 2; $p < .001$. For the narrow sample 11.026; df 2; $p < .01$

Table 8 Applying to university abroad by GCSE results

| | Standard sample | | Narrow sample | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| GCSE scores | Applying | Not applying | Applying | Not applying |
| 7+ at A* and A | 36 | 483 | 25 | 460 |
| 7+ at A or B | 12 | 415 | 9 | 395 |
| less | 8 | 300 | 7 | 271 |

Chi-square for standard sample 12.689; df 2; $p < .002$. For the narrow sample 6.637; df 2; $p < .05$

the UK and a propensity to consider applying to study abroad. The small difference between the percentages for Oxbridge and pre-1992 universities means that the chi-square statistic for the top part of Table 9 is not significant. For those who are actually applying, the Oxbridge and pre-1992 categories are close; the gap comes with the post-1992 type – 7.8 down to 3.2 per cent.

For those who considered applying, but did not follow that through, the percentage scores are more evenly spaced across the three categories. A clearer contrast is evident for the Top-10 group of universities: those who had at least three of their UCAS choices as top-10 ranked universities were more likely to consider also the foreign option. Table 10 verifies the significance, following the model of Tables 7 and 8.

The dual or linked hypotheses that propensity to apply, or consider applying, to study abroad, are correlated with academic high-performers and with applicants to the top UK universities are supported by interview evidence, both teachers and pupils. Here is an interview extract from the Assistant Principal of S4, a Sussex independent boarding school:

> We had for example a guy from here… actually he had dual nationality and he got offers from Oxford and Yale and somewhere else in America… and he chose Yale over the others. But I mean that is a very unusual case not just because he was very talented but because we don't have many applications [from British pupils] to America. So, yes, we track them [the applications abroad], but it isn't difficult because there are so few and they tend to be outstanding… outstandingly good.

A not dissimilar story surfaced in the pupil interviews where the 'Oxbridge types' or those who had failed to get into Oxbridge first time round thought about the United States:

> Yes, we [classmates] talk about studying overseas. Obviously while we've been applying [for UCAS] we've been talking about it quite a lot… especially now that we're getting our offers. One of the guys in the year above us has just gone to an American university. So the people that haven't [got their main offers] this year or those who are re-applying to

Table 9 Answers to the question 'Have you thought about applying to a non-UK university?' by type of university applied for: standard sample

| | Yes, and applying | | Yes, not applying | | No | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | no. | % | no. | % | no. | % | |
| UK university type (n = 1192) | | | | | | | |
| Oxbridge | 13 | 8.1 | 33 | 20.5 | 115 | 71.4 | 161 |
| Pre-1992 | 55 | 7.8 | 94 | 13.3 | 556 | 78.9 | 705 |
| Post-1992 | 7 | 3.2 | 22 | 10.1 | 188 | 86.6 | 217 |
| Top-10 universities (n = 1158) | | | | | | | |
| Yes | 27 | 17.1 | 28 | 17.7 | 103 | 65.2 | 158 |
| No | 51 | 5.1 | 126 | 12.6 | 820 | 82.2 | 997 |

*Notes*: Post-1992 includes other institutes of HE which are not universities. Percentages may not tally due to rounding

Table 10 Applying to university abroad by 'top-10' status of UK universities applied for

| Applied to 3 or more | Standard sample | | Narrow sample | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| top-10 UK universities | Applying | Not applying | Applying | Not applying |
| Yes | 27 | 131 | 10 | 109 |
| No | 51 | 946 | 30 | 876 |

Chi-square for standard sample 31.049; df 1; $p < .001$. For the narrow sample 7.273; df 1; $p < .01$.

Cambridge are thinking about re-applying as well, because it sounds quite exciting. But I think that most people, if they are not applying for a languages degree where you have a year abroad… I think most people think about travelling rather than going abroad… or the couple that are thinking about applying abroad are going to English-speaking universities in America or wherever… So yeah there is quite a lot of awareness of opportunities out there… [but] everyone is just more willing to stick in their comfort zone [laughs] (Sp6).

I think that [applying to America] is just for the Oxbridge kind of people – maybe they are told 'Why don't you apply to the Ivy League?' (Sp10).

### *Educational and occupational background of parents*

This is the hypothesis on which there is already plenty of published and other recent survey evidence, much of it linked to wider questions of broadening access to HE amongst pupils from lower socio-economic family backgrounds. For instance, the recent Sutton Trust report on intergenerational mobility and access to HE in the UK found that there was no evidence of improving intergenerational mobility and, moreover, the UK remains low in international comparisons of social mobility when compared to other advanced nations (Blanden and Machin 2008). HEFCE-sponsored research on Erasmus and Year Abroad mobility found a correlation between international mobility and social class (based on linking the HESA and Erasmus datasets), and a further

Table 11 Answers to the question 'Have you thought about applying to a non-UK university?' by parental education: standard and narrow samples

| | Yes, and applying | | Yes, not applying | | No | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parents university-educated? | no. | % | no. | % | no. | % | |
| Standard sample | | | | | | | |
| Both | 46 | 10.4 | 65 | 14.7 | 332 | 74.9 | 443 |
| One of them | 25 | 6.9 | 42 | 11.6 | 296 | 81.5 | 363 |
| Neither | 28 | 5.1 | 72 | 13.1 | 450 | 81.8 | 550 |
| (n = 1356) | | | | | | | |
| Narrow sample | | | | | | | |
| Both | 22 | 6.0 | 49 | 13.2 | 299 | 80.8 | 370 |
| One of them | 14 | 4.2 | 38 | 11.5 | 280 | 84.3 | 332 |
| Neither | 14 | 2.8 | 64 | 12.8 | 423 | 84.4 | 501 |
| (n = 1203) | | | | | | | |

correlation between credit mobility and parental education – in terms of whether the student's mother and/or father had a degree (HEFCE 2004; also see Findlay et al. 2006: 303-304). There is also a wider literature on the intergenerational transfer of educational and cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986; Findlay et al. 2006; Reay et al. 2005).

On the questionnaire, a question asked if the respondent's parents had university-level education. Possible answers are 'both', 'yes, my father, 'yes, my mother', and 'neither'. Parents' level of education split the sample as follows: 40.6 per cent had neither parents with education at university level; 32.7 per cent had both parents; and 26.7 per cent had one parent university-educated, made up of 18.3 per cent fathers only and 8.5 per cent the mother only.[14]

Table 11 shows a clear relationship, especially for the more affirmative answer ('Yes, and I am applying'); the trend is less obvious for the other positive variant of thinking about, but not applying abroad. When the two samples (standard and narrow) are compared, nothing much changes beyond a reduction in the numbers and percentages applying abroad. The chi-square statistic is significant for the standard sample (12.714; df 4; $p<.05$) but is not significant for the narrow version.

Moving now to socio-occupational class, we refer to another question on the schedule, which gave 12 categories to tick one or two (i.e. for mother and father). Given the dispersion of responses across so many options, we collapsed the occupational classification to five: manager/director, professional, clerical/sales, manual, and 'other'. We made one further modification which reacted to the fact that an unexpectedly large number of respondents only checked one option (i.e. for one parent, not two). Whether this was because these were pupils from single-parent families, or if there was some other reason for this, we do not know. Therefore, in order to standardise the results, we took the 'highest' socio-occupational class indicated for each respondent.

Table 12 cross-tabulates socio-occupational class of respondents' parents against the by-now three familiar answer options to question 3.3. There is a clear gradation in the percentage likelihood of responding positively across the class hierarchy from manager/director through professional/ teacher to clerical etc. and then to manual worker. This gradation is repeated for the first two answers; and then goes the other way, as expected, for the third option, 'No'.

[14] These figures are based on the standard sample for those who answered this question (n = 1356); percentages do not tally due to rounding. University education was more prevalent amongst Sussex parents: 37.1 per cent of Sussex respondents had both parents university-educated, compared to 28.3 per cent for the Leicester sample, whereas the cases with neither parent university-educated were 46.3 per cent for Leicester and 34.9 per cent for Sussex.

Table 12 Answers to the questions 'Have you ever thought about applying to a non-UK university?' by socio-occupational class of parents: standard sample

| Parents' socio-occupational class | Yes, and applying | | Yes, not applying | | No | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | no. | % | no. | % | no. | % | |
| Manager/director | 47 | 10.0 | 76 | 16.2 | 345 | 73.7 | 468 |
| Professional/teacher | 30 | 6.6 | 61 | 13.3 | 366 | 80.1 | 457 |
| Clerical/sales/admin. | 8 | 5.8 | 16 | 11.7 | 113 | 82.5 | 137 |
| Manual worker | 8 | 4.5 | 16 | 9.0 | 154 | 86.5 | 178 |
| Other | 7 | 6.1 | 9 | 7.8 | 99 | 86.1 | 115 |
| (n = 1355) | | | | | | | |

*Notes*: 'Other' comprises housewife/husband, retired, students, unemployed. Percentages may not tally due to rounding.

Table 13 Applying to study abroad by parental socio-occupational background

| Parents' socio-occupational class | Standard sample | | Narrow sample | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Applying | Not applying | Applying | Not applying |
| Manager/director | 47 | 418 | 21 | 376 |
| Professional/teacher | 30 | 431 | 16 | 405 |
| Clerical/sales/admin./ manual/other | 23 | 406 | 13 | 369 |

Chi-square for standard sample 8.132; df 2; $p < .05$. For the narrow sample not significant.

The 'Other' category is by nature heterogeneous and so stands somewhat apart, especially for the 'applying to study abroad' answer. From this, we can deduce that parental occupational class, which comprises both financial and cultural capital, correlates well with pupils' tendency to consider, and apply, to study abroad. This also accords with findings from prior research on Erasmus and Year Abroad mobility (Findlay et al. 2006: 303-304) where parental occupation/class was found to be strongly related to actual mobility abroad in much the same way.

However, when we run the chi-square tests, the results are not so conclusive. In order to operationalise the tests, which we do for both the standard and narrow sample, we collapse the occupational categories further to just three: manager/director, professional/teacher, and clerical/sales/ admin./manual/other. This yields a significant value only for the standard sample: see Table 13.

### *Demographic factors*

Here we examine whether two demographic factors, *gender* and *ethnicity* of pupils, have a bearing on their thinking about studying abroad. We also collected birth-dates, but there was little variation to be noted here, since virtually all were born in the 'expected' cohort year for school year 13 for the academic year 2008-09, i.e. 1990-91.

Previous research on Erasmus mobility revealed that credit mobility students from the UK are disproportionately white, female and of higher socio-economic background when compared to the university student population as a whole (HEFCE 2004: 81-90; 2009: 22-27; Findlay et al. 2006: 303-304). To a certain extent this is bound up with the fact that much Erasmus mobility is linked to language degrees, or degrees with a language component; and language students also have these characteristics. However, Findlay et al. (2006) also show that these forms of selectivity are equally statistically relevant to non-language

Table 14 Study abroad by gender of respondents: standard and narrow samples

| | Yes, and applying | | Yes, not applying | | No | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | no. | % | no. | % | no. | % | |
| Standard sample | | | | | | | |
| Males | 41 | 5.9 | 79 | 11.4 | 575 | 82.7 | 695 |
| Females | 60 | 8.7 | 103 | 14.9 | 528 | 76.4 | 691 |
| Narrow sample | | | | | | | |
| Males | 23 | 3.6 | 68 | 10.8 | 540 | 85.6 | 631 |
| Females | 27 | 4.5 | 85 | 14.2 | 485 | 81.2 | 597 |

students who engage in international study for credit.

Unlike the female-dominated Erasmus flows with their strong association with foreign-language degrees, our questionnaire data exhibit only moderate sex-selectivity. Table 14 shows that there is a greater tendency for females to apply, and consider applying abroad; however, this difference is at the margins of statistical significance (based on chi-square values applied to dichotomised 'applying' and 'not applying' columns). At least as far as the standard sample is concerned – where p = .057 – the male:female ratio is slightly more marked for those actually applying to go abroad; for the narrow sample this gender difference is rather less evident.[15]

The situation with ethnicity is much more complex. Whereas sex is a dichotomous variable, ethnicity is not (except in an artificial and simplistic division into 'white' and 'non-white'). Leicester is a particularly emblematic place to examine for ethnicity-related research because of the city's now-exactly-equal division between its white population and the 'non-white' population, which is predominantly Indian. But there is a rather specific geography to this division, which reflects itself in a particular way in enrolment. The city itself is very 'Asian' and therefore all secondary schools in the city and its suburbs have large shares of Asian-heritage pupils. This applies also to the private schools which have significant shares of the Asian-heritage pupils who come from the wealthier segments of the Asian population: many elements of these groups are business people and professionals who came to Leicester from East Africa, especially Uganda. However, the Asian pupils, and other minority-ethnic pupils, are more heavily concentrated in the city's state schools, especially those which are close to, or draw on, inner-city residential areas. Out in the county, the ethnic mix of the general population is different and predominantly white, and this is reflected within the schools. However, the picture even here is not clear-cut. Independent schools within easy reach of Leicester recruit heavily from the city – both Asian pupils and, especially, white pupils. This suggests a form of 'white flight' to these independent schools which particularly reflects the shortage of this type of school in Leicester itself. County boarding schools – which are more in the mould of traditional public schools – are overwhelmingly white; their minority ethnic pupils are more likely to be overseas students than drawn from locally-resident non-white minority-ethnic populations.

Brighton and Sussex, by contrast, are predominantly 'white' areas of the country, especially the county areas. The city of Brighton and Hove has small minority ethnic communities originating from the traditional postwar countries of immigration in South Asia and the Caribbean, and refugee groups from the Horn of Africa, notably Sudan. Parts of Brighton have substantial estates of social housing (or former social housing now in private

[15] Our interpretation of this difference is that foreign-national pupils sent to study in Britain are more likely to be males than females – partly, perhaps, because boys' education is prioritised over girls' in some cultures, and/or because of the perceived need to 'protect' girls by not sending them away.

ownership), mainly inhabited by working-class white people. Otherwise the city and its adjacent rural areas and small towns (Lewes, Haywards Heath, Horsham etc.) have a predominantly middle-class population, with managers, directors, professionals and teachers over-represented vis-à-vis the country as a whole.

Having set out in some detail the necessary background context, let us turn to the questionnaire data. Table 15 presents the full 'raw' data for 'apply abroad' and 'thought about applying but did not' cross-tabulated with ethnic origin, for the standard sample. Several things to note here. First is the numerical dominance of two groups of respondents: 'White-UK/Irish' and 'Indian'. At 840 and 234 respectively they make up 80 per cent of the sample who answered the 'ethnic' question (n=1347). Second, we note from the 'total' column of the table that the ethnic groups are unequally distributed between the two regions: to facilitate this comparison, the Leicester data (as the most 'ethnic') are put in brackets. Leicester accounts for 227 out of 234 of the ethnic Indian respondents, or 94 per cent, and 13 of the 16 Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic-origin respondents. On the other hand, Leicester accounts for below-par proportions of most other groups, including White-UK/Irish (42 per cent), White European (37 per cent), Chinese (25 per cent), and Black-African (42 per cent). Third, even from the raw figures we can observe that there are certain groups which are more abroad-oriented than others, notably the categories 'White European' and 'Chinese'. Table 16 selects out of the main ethnic groups and presents the relevant data in percentage form to bring out this comparison more clearly.

The results show that both the White-UK/Irish and South Asian groups have very low propensities to apply to study at a foreign university (3.6 and 4.0 per cent respectively), whereas the White European and Chinese rates are, at 30.0 and 41.7 per cent, around ten times higher. When we look at the second option on Table 16, three ethnicities, the two 'White' groups and Chinese, all post similar rates of 12-15 per cent, whereas the South Asians are much lower at 5.6 per cent. The two groups which are by far the most oriented to the possibility of moving to university abroad – the White European and Chinese – are, however, precisely the two groups which are more likely to be 'non-British'. This is clearly revealed when we check the 'narrow sample' figures (those in brackets in Table 16), which show that the vast majority of these respondents are not long-term British

Table 15 Study abroad by ethnic origin: standard sample

| Ethnic origin | Yes, and applying | Yes, not applying | Subtotal | No | Total | (Leicester) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| White-UK/Irish | 30 | 125 | 155 | 685 | 840 | (335) |
| White European | 18 | 8 | 26 | 34 | 60 | (21) |
| White Other | 2 | 2 | 4 | 9 | 13 | (7) |
| Mixed Heritage | 1 | 5 | 6 | 46 | 52 | (30) |
| Indian | 10 | 12 | 22 | 212 | 234 | (227) |
| Pakistani/Bangladeshi | 0 | 2 | 2 | 14 | 16 | (13) |
| Chinese | 25 | 7 | 32 | 28 | 60 | (15) |
| Other Asian | 1 | 7 | 8 | 21 | 29 | (16) |
| Black-Caribbean | 0 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 6 | (4) |
| Black-African | 2 | 4 | 6 | 18 | 24 | (14) |
| Black Other | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | (2) |
| Other | 1 | 2 | 3 | 8 | 11 | (9) |
| Total | 90 | 175 | 265 | 1082 | 1347 | (693) |

residents. For the South Asian groups there is an interesting gender dimension – the majority of who are applying or thought of applying to study abroad are male. We enlarge on this, and other ethno-cultural aspects in the interview material.

Most of the interviewees in the Leicester schools highlighted the issue of the Asian pupils when asked to describe their pupil populations; the only two schools where this element did not feature were L4 and L5, the two 'county' boarding schools in this region's sample:

> I would say it's overwhelmingly kind of… white middle class (L4).

> If you saw our school assembly, we are predominantly a white school… very middle England (L5)

More typical of the Leicester situation are the following quotes which also allude to Asian family practices of preferring (making?) their children, especially daughters, to live at home when they go to university, and certainly not to go and study in a foreign university. First, two quotes from independent schools which draw predominantly from the Leicester city catchment area.

> We are an all-girls school and we have got a high percentage from the Asian population, Asian background… pupils whose parents are successful doctors and lawyers, professionals in the city of Leicester. They see the English higher education as the way forward and that is what they are aspiring towards… and their daughters seem to aspire towards Medicine, Pharmacy and Law, those are the main areas they are interested in (L1).

> The ethnic mix of the school would be… I think it is 1 in 4 of our boys are from the… they are English but they are first or second [sic: he means second and third] generations… their families are originally from the Asian subcontinent […] One observation I would think about our Asian students is… I have to be careful not to over-generalise… but a lot of them don't want to venture that far from home. So a lot of the Leicester University applicants would be from the Asian community, so they would stay in the parental home… (L3).

The two Leicester state sixth-form colleges surveyed had more 'local fields' as far as the general target-universities were concerned: this was noted earlier as being closely related to the 'ethnic' or 'cultural' factor. Regarding the low proclivity of Asian students to think about studying abroad, L6 put it as follows:

> [Their potential interest in going abroad] is limited and it is not something that the college has ever taken a huge amount of interest in – that may be because we are surrounded by some high-performing universities. And it is also about the needs of the students – if they are not

Table 16 Study abroad by main group of ethnic origin: standard sample (narrow sample in brackets)

| | Thought about applying to a non-UK university? | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes, and applying | | | Yes, not applying | | | Total |
| | no. | | % | no. | | % | |
| White-UK/Irish | 30 | (30) | 3.6 | 125 | (154) | 18.5 | 840 |
| White European | 18 | (3) | 30.0 | 8 | (4) | 43.3 | 60 |
| South Asian | 10 | (9) | 4.0 | 14 | (21) | 9.6 | 250 |
| Chinese | 25 | (2) | 41.7 | 7 | (3) | 53.3 | 60 |
| All ethnicities | 90 | (46) | 6.7 | 175 | (197) | 19.7 | 1347 |

*Note*: 'all ethnicities' figures differ slightly from the data in Table 2 because of different totals (Table 2, n = 1400; Table 13, n = 1347 because 53 respondents did not answer the 'ethnic question'). Percentages do not tally due to rounding.

> going to choose Bristol [because it is too far away] they are not going to study in Brussels (L6).

Finally, it is worth listening in to part of the long interview with IL1 which gives an Inner-London perspective which certainly replicates some of the Leicester issues of university application patterns from ethnic-minority pupils (especially Asian-heritage), but also raises other important factors, such as finance and the emotional concerns of single-parent families.

> We are a London sixth-form college that has 1400 students… and a number of them will go to university… 75 per cent of them [who go to university] will stay in London… There is a diverse ethnic mix… about two-thirds are from ethnic minority groups, from a whole range of backgrounds […] We have a lot of students who aren't very mobile, often due to their background finances which come into that – there is no doubt about that […] I think there are emotional implications as well… I am increasingly thinking that when I think about our students […] I had a student in here earlier today who's got an interview at Cambridge coming up soon. She's from a white working-class family and her mother – she just lives with her mother, single-parent family – I had her mother sat here saying 'Look, she's not going to university; I went to work at the age of fourteen'. I mean, it's a fantastic chance to actually say this is possible [for the student] and she [the mother] is actually going to go with her to the interview, which is great. But what I'm saying is that a lot of students – it's a lot of girls actually – a lot of students don't want to leave their mother behind. I think it is often when they've only got their mothers and the father is not on the scene, and they can't… they mustn't do it [go away to university], you know (IL1).

This lengthy and insightful quote also cautions us against laying too much emphasis on 'culture' and 'ethnicity' when, especially in the current economic climate, wider structural issues of financial constraints and social class are also relevant. We should also avoid stereotyping Asian students as inherently immobile. Furthermore, we should remember that Asian and other migrant-origin pupils are often part of transnational families with extensive mobility histories – for instance, the Ugandan Asians who are numerous in Leicester. Family links within and beyond the UK may also facilitate secondary and university education, via a pattern of staying with relatives.

### *Disciplinary orientation and languages*

Earlier research into Erasmus-type mobility demonstrated the strong connection to foreign-language degrees, especially as regards credit mobility to Europe – typically to countries like France, Germany, Spain and Italy (HEFCE 2004; Findlay et al. 2006). What is the role of foreign languages in degree mobility?

We tried to answer this question by looking at the A-levels being taken. Looking at the A-level combinations, we classed them into five main sets: science student, no language (n=382); science student, with language (n=47); arts student, no language (n=622); arts student, with language (n=99); other, i.e. mixed arts/science, no language (n=170). The enumeration is for the 1332 students who gave codable answers to the relevant question.[16]

Table 17 gives the picture for the standard sample, with the narrow sample in brackets. The table shows a higher proportion of science students applying to study abroad, especially the science-language combination. However, these science students are disproportionately overseas pupils (compare the figures in brackets for the narrow sample).

[16] This subject classification was based on the predominant balance of the A-levels being taken. For instance someone taking Maths, Physics and Economics would be classed as Science; but Maths, History and Economics as Arts. Some rather arbitrary allocations had to be made, e.g. Geography as Arts, Psychology as Science.

Table 17 Answers to the question 'Have you thought about applying to a non-UK university? By A-level combination and language: standard sample (narrow sample in brackets)

| | Thought about applying to a non-UK university? | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes, and applying | | | Yes, not applying | | | Subtotal | | | Total |
| | no. | | % | no. | | % | no. | | % | |
| Science, no language | 28 | (16) | 7.3 | 46 | (36) | 9.4 | 74 | (52) | 19.4 | 382 |
| Science, with language | 10 | (2) | 21.3 | 9 | (4) | 8.5 | 19 | (6) | 40.4 | 47 |
| Arts, no language | 31 | (17) | 5.0 | 79 | (74) | 12.7 | 110 | (91) | 17.7 | 622 |
| Arts, with language | 13 | (9) | 13.1 | 19 | (16) | 19.2 | 32 | (25) | 32.3 | 99 |
| Other/mixed | 11 | (5) | 6.5 | 18 | (15) | 10.6 | 29 | (20) | 17.1 | 170 |
| Total | 93 | (49) | 7.0 | 171 | (145) | 13.0 | 264 | (194) | 20.0 | 1320 |

Overall, the situation portrayed is one of few students taking one or more languages at A-level: only 146 out of 1320 or one in nine. Two-thirds of these are Arts students. These small numbers limit the statistical analysis: all we can say with confidence is that, for Arts students, doing a language (or two) at A-level approximately doubles the chances of considering studying abroad. For Science students the problem of small numbers makes comparison even more difficult.

The background to this is the well-known long-term decline in the uptake of languages at A-level (and GCSE) in English and UK schools. This drop-off is especially the case for the 'traditional' European foreign languages, French and German; Spanish and Italian are holding up better.[17] The downturn in languages was noted in several of the staff interviews. For example:

> We are part of a national trend, I think, that languages are being studied less. However, we have some very high-achieving boys, and some of our best students go off to do languages. A big factor of that is the excitement of the Year Abroad… because I talked to them about the process and UCAS and advising and so on, and they are abuzz with it (L3).

> There aren't that many applications [for university] in Modern Languages. I mean they do fall through the school right from Year 9 onwards… [We have] French, German, Spanish and Italian – so you know in that sense it's a healthy state. But we don't have that many applications. What we do have is people applying for a dual course somewhere… often the degrees have a Year Abroad (S4).

> Languages, I am afraid to say, are no longer part of our programme here. Having said that, many of our students speak two or three languages fluently… and English is not always their strongest language… It is, I suppose, the best word to use is ironic; there is a linguistic richness in the college… But in terms of Modern Foreign Languages… there is a little bit of Spanish going on here, connected with Tourism and Travel at advanced level. But we don't have French on the curriculum any more… We have an arrangement with a couple of students who want to study French and they do it at [names another Leicester sixth-form college] for example (L7).

The second contextual element is that foreign language study at degree level is

[17] On the other hand, the increasing ethnic and national diversity of the UK's school population does bring in pupils with varying knowledge of many other languages. Amongst those mentioned were, in Leicester state schools, Dutch (from Somali refugee families onward-migrating from the Netherlands to the UK), Arabic and a variety of Asian languages (above all Gujerati); and in Leicester and Sussex independent schools, Chinese and Russian. From the interview and questionnaire evidence, however, none of these languages has much relevance to university destination choice.

generally combined with credit mobility – a year or semester abroad at a foreign university or some other form of 'foreign experience' such as a work placement. This is commented on by L3 and S3 immediately above and also earlier interview quotes. A prospective Erasmus student summed it up like this:

> Actually, because I am doing Politics, Philosophy and Economics, you can also take German on the side. That is what I am planning on doing. And then you can organise… I don't know what it's called, it begins with an E… type of scheme (Sp6).

### *Personal, family and school links abroad*

The final set of hypothesised factors for pupils who are applying or consider applying abroad are what might be generically called network and information factors – personal, family or schools links, including prior mobility history. These cover a wide range of variables deriving from questionnaire responses as well as more impressionistic and anecdotal evidence highlighted in the staff and pupil interviews. We take the relevant questionnaire data first.

Table 18 displays six indicators pertaining to these themes. We put all the variables into one table, and we set the standard sample alongside the narrow sample (in brackets). We do this because the trends are fairly consistent, if not always statistically very robust, and in order to avoid too much detailed and repetitive description of results.

Three further points about the interpretation of Table 18 should be made. First, the percentages – which are the key measure since they record relative propensity to apply, or consider applying, to university abroad – are based on the standard sample. Previous tables have consistently shown that this sample gives statistically more significant results. Second, the comparison of the standard and narrow sample frequencies is easy since the two sets of figures are side-by-side and therefore the highly variable influence of the difference between the two (which represents the 'overseas' pupils) can be seen at a glance. Third, we feel that the most important answer to focus on is the first ('I am applying to a non-UK university'), for two reasons – it represents a greater commitment to the idea of studying abroad than merely thinking about the possibility, and secondly, on most of the factors analysed it gives a clearer statistical contrast or gradation in the percentage columns.

The first indicator, language, picks up one of the themes of the previous subsection. The results in the first column-set show that pupils who speak foreign languages are more likely to consider applying to study abroad than those who speak none. However, the evidence is based on quite small numbers, and the relationship does not hold when we switch to the second column-set, on those who considered, but did not apply, to go abroad.

Next, Table 18 looks at whether parents have ever lived abroad for more than six months. Here again there is a positive relationship only for the first column. Very probably, we are mixing here two types of situation: 'white' pupils whose business and professional-class parents may have lived and worked abroad as expats; and pupils of immigrant heritage whose parents may well have lived abroad before coming to Britain as migrants or refugees. As we have seen, the latter group has a tendency to 'keep' their sons and daughters at home when they go to university.[18]

Third, we look at family holiday patterns. Pupils who are widely travelled (visiting seven or more different countries on holiday or other family trips) are almost twice as likely to consider studying abroad, and to apply, compared to those who have visited no, or only one, foreign country.

The overall message of Table 18 is that most of the 'network' factors *are* important,

[18] However this generalisation needs a caveat, especially amongst more wealthy, cosmopolitan and 'westernised' migrant-origin families.

Table 18 Study abroad by various personal, family and information factors: standard sample (narrow sample in brackets)

| | Thought about applying to a non-UK university? | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Yes, and applying | | | Yes, not applying | | | No | | Total |
| | no. | | % | no. | | % | no. | % | |
| How many foreign languages do you speak? (n = 1386) | | | | | | | | | |
| None | 9 | (9) | 2.5 | 38 | (37) | 10.4 | 318 | 87.1 | 365 |
| One | 31 | (18) | 6.0 | 76 | (65) | 14.8 | 406 | 79.1 | 513 |
| Two | 34 | (15) | 9.9 | 45 | (36) | 13 | 266 | 77.1 | 345 |
| Three + | 27 | (8) | 16.6 | 23 | (16) | 14.1 | 113 | 69.3 | 163 |
| Have your parents lived outside the UK for > 6 months? (n = 1371) | | | | | | | | | |
| Yes | 75 | (32) | 9.8 | 98 | (76) | 12.8 | 592 | 77.4 | 765 |
| No | 26 | (18) | 4.3 | 81 | (75) | 13.4 | 499 | 82.3 | 606 |
| No. of countries visited on family holidays outside the UK? (n = 1188 ) | | | | | | | | | |
| 0 or 1 | 9 | (4) | 4.8 | 20 | (14) | 10.8 | 157 | 84.4 | 186 |
| 2 - 6 | 38 | (23) | 5.8 | 77 | (69) | 11.8 | 536 | 82.3 | 651 |
| 7 or more | 30 | (15) | 8.5 | 63 | (54) | 17.9 | 258 | 73.5 | 351 |
| Do you know anyone studying or who has studied at a non-UK university? (n = 1370) | | | | | | | | | |
| Yes | 92 | (42) | 16.5 | 101 | (75) | 18.1 | 366 | 65.5 | 559 |
| No | 8 | (8) | 1.0 | 80 | (78) | 9.9 | 723 | 89.1 | 811 |
| Have you been on a school trip to another country? (n = 1348) | | | | | | | | | |
| Yes | 46 | (27) | 8.9 | 86 | (76) | 16.6 | 387 | 74.6 | 519 |
| No | 45 | (20) | 5.4 | 89 | (74) | 10.7 | 695 | 83.8 | 829 |
| Have your school staff provided information about non-UK universities? (n = 1352) | | | | | | | | | |
| Yes | 56 | (21) | 11.8 | 76 | (66) | 16 | 344 | 72.3 | 476 |
| No | 43 | (29) | 4.9 | 100 | (85) | 11.4 | 733 | 83.7 | 876 |

*Note*: Percentages may not tally due to rounding

but three other interpretive remarks are in order. First, the picture is somewhat muddied by pupils of immigrant background, for whom foreign languages proficiency and prior residence and travel abroad may have more to do with family migration history than with the kind of more cosmopolitan experience that might logically lead to study in, say, North America, Australia or France. Second, the differences in frequencies between the standard and the narrow samples should be kept in mind. In most cases, these differences attenuate the relationships observed. This attenuation is generally more evident in the first column, on actual

applications abroad, than it is in the second option, on merely considering the possibility of studying abroad (where, for the first two factors in Table 18, there is no relationship anyway). Nevertheless, on all first-column relationships, the ordering of the percentages remains unchanged for the narrow sample. The final observation is that many of the factors measured in Table 18 are expressions of socio-structural processes already commented on earlier, notably the occupational (and therefore wealth) background of the parents, and the type of school. To cite one example, school exchange trips, history/culture tours or sports trips are far more frequent in the independent sector schools, where parents are more likely to be able to afford such educational 'add-ons'.

On this last point, consider the following four quotes from interviews: the first two are effusive accounts of a range of trips offered by two independent schools, the last two recount the more modest endeavours of two state schools operating in inner-city environments:

> …the school runs countless trips, countless sports tours. Every single holiday will involve some overseas trip… The trip I am always involved in every year is the debating trip to Germany, because a former colleague is now teaching at a German-British School in Berlin. So we take the debating team, myself and the Head of English… And they are always hugely impressed with Berlin and walk around and enjoy Humboldt University and so on… and how wonderful Berlin is. But none of them speak German to a sufficient level that they would think of studying there (L2).

> If I look back to the summer, we had a group that went out to Nepal… a mixture of hiking and community service. Our sports people toured. Our musicians went to South America… (L5).

> There is one [exchange] link that… [was]… set up in 2001, a school near Petersburg in Virginia. We have since that time taken three groups of students… to give them an experience of education in a different environment. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to stump up the money… [At the beginning] we did it with the 'Excellence in Cities' money, which helped us to provide a grant if someone wanted to attend the programme. That is no longer existing and we are asking for £400-500 which is just beyond what the majority can afford (L7).

> No… certainly not… no formal trips abroad at all… The only contact in this college abroad would be the fieldtrips in Geography where they go to Morocco… (IL1).

Regarding information, most schools appeared not to do much pro-actively to market overseas universities and destinations. In most cases it was a matter of receiving books and promotional leaflets, placing them in the library or on display in the careers office, and letting the students do the rest. Three typical quotes:

> Some information we get from some very sexy destinations. I get information from very expensive medical schools in the Bahamas… very plush brochures which are functionally useless because they [the course fees] are so expensive… St. George's always writes to me, but none of the boys could afford to go there… though their entry requirements are substantially lower (L3).

> I get sent a completely random collection of stuff from American Universities. We get stuff from Lehigh… Washington… I don't know why, it just appears, it must have cost them a fortune. Also some medical schools… St. George's in the West Indies… To be honest, I don't think anyone looks at it… And I don't know if we have sent any people to these places in particular, certainly not in my time (L4).

> We do get students that come in and ask about studying in America and Australia. And of course there is

> Erasmus and we tell them about that… so we do highlight that to them. But we don't chase people up at all; they would have to come and talk to us about it (S9).

These rather off-hand remarks by three staff tend to support our earlier interpretation that teachers and advisers are not well-informed about HE options or highly motivated to get their pupils to consider applying.

One of the key elements in stimulating interest in going abroad to university seems to be personal and family links. In the words of one staff interviewee:

> I can't think of anyone who has considered that option [of applying abroad to study] who hasn't had that sort of reason in their family (L2).

And from a student interviewee, over the telephone:

> I am not sure yet [about applying abroad] because I was thinking about a gap year. In my gap year, I might do that… I am interested in America, I have family there – uncles and aunts, my godfather is there and a bunch of cousins… Miami, Florida and Florida State [those are the universities I might apply to], that is where they [family] are, so I can acclimatise (Lp6).

Inevitably each story is individual, and so it is hard to generalise, but the kind of stories brought to our attention in the staff interviews were cases where the pupil's parents had separated and one had gone to live in another country (the USA, Canada, Australia, etc.), second-generation Irish pupils drawn by family links to Ireland and especially to Trinity College Dublin, and migrant-origin pupils with relatives in other migrant destination countries – typically, again, North America. These transnational family linkages were alluded to earlier and are exemplified in the following two quotes which hint at alternative study-abroad channels:

> We have a number of students – I couldn't put a number on it – who live with their relations and not with their parents. Parents are often abroad. For instance I have just been dealing with a student who had to return to Toronto because his mother is seriously ill there. He has been actually staying with his aunt and uncle in Leicester… [but] his family origins are in the subcontinent of India and in Uganda (L7).

> I can think of several Afro-Caribbean students who have relatives in America… and often they would say that they could go and live with their aunt and uncle in Chicago or New York (IL1).

## Key findings and conclusions

This paper has presented a fairly detailed analysis of the material collected from a school-leavers' survey of attitudes towards studying at university abroad. It is based on questionnaire data from 1400 pupils in Sussex and Leicestershire; interviews with 15 teaching and advisory staff in the institutions surveyed; and a small input of the 'student voice' from the 20 telephone interviews. The key findings and conclusions are highlighted as follows: we sequence them in response to the seven research questions posed in the early part of the paper.

1. Based on a sample of 700 state-school pupils and 700 independent-school pupils, 7.2 per cent of respondents were in the process of applying to study abroad, mostly alongside UCAS applications for UK university admission; and a further 13.0 per cent had thought about the 'foreign option' (to what depth, we cannot say), but not gone ahead. Taken together, these figures suggest at first glance that one in five Year 13 pupils intending to proceed to higher education consider the possibility of applying abroad, although only one in fourteen actually make an application. If these seem unexpectedly high figures, then we need to make it clear that they are weighted upwards by two distorting

factors. One is that independent schools have much higher rates of application abroad (11.6 per cent as against 2.9 per cent for state pupils), and we know that pupils at independent schools are only a small minority (around 11 per cent) of total sixth-form pupils in England and the UK. Second, our standard sample included a proportion of pupils who were not UK-nationals but overseas students sent to English schools as a stepping-stone to UK (and foreign) universities. Taking these students out of the questionnaire results, creating thereby a 'narrow sample' of predominantly UK-domiciled UK-nationals, lowers the percentage considerably: overall, 4.0 per cent apply to study abroad (2.8 per cent for the state sector, 5.5 per cent for the independent sector), and 12.4 per cent think about applying abroad, but do not in fact do so (10.2 state, 14.9 independent). Bearing in mind that around 89 per cent of Year 13 pupils in England are in state schools and only 11 per cent in independent schools, the final ratios become 3.1 per cent of HE applicants are applying to study abroad, and 10.7 per cent consider the possibility but do not act on it. This translates into approximately 5000 Year 13 pupils in England applying to study abroad, plus a further 15,700 who consider the option but do not make an application.

2. Foreign study is mainly targeted at North American universities, often but not always the premier institutions, seen as alternatives to the top universities in the UK. After the United States, Australia and Ireland are the next most frequently applied for, but a long way behind. All are Anglophone countries. Science-oriented pupils have somewhat higher rates of applying abroad, and language has some influence.

3. As noted under 1, above, the independent sector has a much higher tendency for its pupils to consider applying abroad. This in turn is related to other factors such as parental occupation and education, level of information and support available within the school, frequency and range of school trips, all of which are analysed separately in the paper but which in reality are likely to be strongly interrelated.

4. There is a clear relationship between propensity to consider studying abroad and academic performance, as measured by (predicted) A-level scores and (achieved) GCSE grades. A similar correlation exists with applicants who apply to the (perceived) 'best' UK universities – Oxbridge, the Russell Group, etc.

5. Regarding demographic correlates, females have a greater tendency than males to consider studying abroad, although the contrast is barely statistically significant. Ethnicity works in more complex ways. Pupils who are the offspring of 'traditional' immigrant minorities in the UK (South Asian, Afro-Caribbean etc.) have low propensities towards the idea of studying abroad; however Chinese and 'White Europeans' have higher-than-average rates, although these are partly explained by their presence in the schools with boarders.

6. There is a relationship between orientation to study abroad and parental social class, measured here on the basis of broad occupational categories. This is highly likely to be causally linked with the previous factor, given that socio-economic class is known to be a key determinant of academic attainment.

7. In the last analysis, personal and family links are often decisive at the individual level; the most typical and robust indicators here are history of personal/family travel abroad, friends and family members who have studied or are studying abroad, and school trips and exchanges.

To conclude, we affirm that this paper represents the first study on English school-leavers' attitudes and plans of studying at university abroad. It is of relevance to government debates on internationalising the student experience through increased mobility, as evidenced for example in the UK's participation in the Bologna Process of creating a 'European Higher Education Area' and the Prime Minister's Initiatives of Tony Blair (PMI 1 1992; PMI 2 2006) which also favour enhanced international student mobility (Gürüz 2008: 192-195). At a different level, this paper contributes to the still small geographical and social-science literature on student migration. We highlight the essential character of student mobility as spatial, life-style and educational processes which have local, regional, national and international expressions. Here, our focus has been on (potential) international moves, but we have seen how they are embedded in a choice matrix of other university destinations open to school-leavers.

While economic, cultural and technological globalisation sets the general context for the internationalisation of HE and thus ISM (de Wit 2008; Gürüz 2008; Varghese 2008), it also seems to have the effect of sharpening the perceived differences in prestige between national HE systems, and individual universities within them. Increased information about universities and the reputations of the research activities and teaching programmes, nowadays codified in national and international ranking lists which are widely available, creates a global hierarchy of universities in which few are in doubt as to which are at the top (Hazelkorn 2009).

But there are other inequalities which in a sense are more disturbing. Our school-leavers' survey data leave little doubt about the selective nature of international mobility. We observe, in the tables and the associated discussion, a series of overlapping dimensions of privilege interacting with and reinforcing each other: state vs. independent schools, North vs. South, university-educated parents vs. parents with no higher education, high vs. low socio-economic status. Such patterns in our survey data link to academic performance and network factors which directly shape decisions and thoughts about studying abroad. In sum, the socially and economically more powerful groups – the business-owners, professional and managerial classes, those with inherited wealth – see international mobility as a way of strategising to enhance the educational capital of their offspring beyond the national to the global. Whilst this may ultimately help to produce a globally competitive cadre of UK-origin internationally-educated graduates, it clearly works against any socially inclusive HE agenda of widening participation in international mobility for students.

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