



International work placements and hierarchies of distinction

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

International student mobility
Distinction
Employability
Work placements
Higher education
Sandwich year

ABSTRACT

Young people are facing uncertain futures. Neoliberal states place an onus on the individual to secure employment in order to provide for their own needs. In navigating their pathways to adulthood in the context of individualisation, an increasing number of young people are embarking on undergraduate degrees in order to secure advantage in the labour market. However, the proliferation of higher education means some students engage with activities which set them apart from others, securing positional advantage. Geographical interest in modes of distinction have explored volunteering and studying overseas as strategies for individuals to acquire capital. This paper provides a novel view of international student mobility to consider the International Work Placement (IWP), an institutionally sanctioned extended period during undergraduate study where students gain overseas work experience. We argue that IWPs are framed by the students who undertake them within a hierarchy of experience which enables the bearer an advantage over others. The IWP is perceived to inscribe upon the CV not only a formalised record of professional level work, but also intercultural skills and personality traits, conveying confidence, adventure and self-reliance. As outward mobility is linked to employability in a global labour market, international experience is framed as an ‘aspiration’ for all (UUK, 2017). Yet this paper draws attention to the inequalities which can be perpetuated by such initiatives, as some individuals are able to secure advantage through IWPs which others are unable to access.

1. Introduction

Education plays a key role in the policies of national governments. Its prominence is fuelled by a concern for national economic competitiveness and the development of self-reliant future citizens (Jenson & Saint-Martin, 2006; Mitchell, 2018). Research highlights the expectations placed upon young people in neoliberal states to progress from school to university to employment in order to perform as a successful citizen (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017; Cheng, 2016). Despite rapid transformations of the higher education landscape in recent decades (Holton and Riley, 2013), participation in higher education has grown exponentially (Brooks and Everett, 2009). The pathway from school to higher education has become normalised for middle-class, and increasingly working-class, young people (Grant, 2017; Marginson, 2016). This can be partly explained through government strategies towards widening participation in higher education as a means with which to pursue national economic development and ‘raising’ the aspirations of young people (Grant, 2017; Hinton, 2011; Thiem, 2009). University is increasingly presented as an individualised experience, whereby fees are construed as an investment from which students can expect to see substantial returns (Tomlinson, 2018).

The individualisation of education-to-work transitions places an onus on young people to secure employment and pushes individuals to

go to greater lengths to gain a competitive advantage over others (Holdsworth, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). Education, lifelong learning and the training of individuals are pursued in order to reduce welfare expenditure by enabling future adult-citizens to provide for their own needs through paid work, simultaneously enhancing national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. The self-reliant, entrepreneurial citizen-worker has become the epitome of the ideal neoliberal subject, as paid work has become a cornerstone by which social inclusion and successful citizenship are measured for those of working age (MacLeavy, 2008; Raco, 2009). Individuals are thus regarded as being responsible for their employment prospects, irrespective of labour market conditions (Waters, 2009). Traditionally, obtaining a university degree was viewed as distinctive, enabling individuals to gain an advantage over those who do not have a degree by developing, and coming to embody, forms of capital through formal qualifications and experiences (Tindal et al., 2015). However, with a growing proportion of the population holding degree qualifications, a degree alone is no longer seen as ‘enough’ to secure employment (Tomlinson, 2008; Brooks and Everett, 2009; Donald et al., 2018). This creates a growing sense of unease amongst graduates about their ability to secure professional employment upon graduation (e.g. Donald et al., 2018; Tomlinson, 2007). Consequently, young people pursue further

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.12.008>

Received 19 July 2019; Received in revised form 24 November 2019; Accepted 11 December 2019

Available online 23 December 2019

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strategies to mark themselves out as ‘distinctive’ in order to stand out in competitive job markets (Brooks and Everett, 2009; Waters, 2009). This creates a perceived necessity to enhance employability through activities such as work experience, internships, volunteering and travelling which will mark the individual out as distinctive to potential employers.

Starting with the context of education-to-work transitions, this paper explores how international work placements (IWPs) are utilised by young people to present themselves as distinctive within these challenging transitional contexts. Drawing on interviews with graduates who undertook an IWP during their undergraduate degree, we first provide a background to young people’s education-to-work transitions, framing IWPs amidst the pressures faced by young people seeking distinction. Second, we explore young people’s perceptions and motivations towards their IWPs. We argue that young people frame IWPs within hierarchies of distinction which enable them to stand out to employers in competitive graduate labour markets. We conclude by examining how hierarchies of distinction can further help us understand how access to CV building opportunities are uneven, with IWPs having the potential to compound existing inequalities.

2. Strategies for distinction

In much scholarship on geographies of education, youth employability is examined from the perspective of the acquisition of cultural capital. Previous research highlights a number of different methods that young people utilise to stand out, from those focused on education itself, such as institution attended or degree classification (Brooks and Waters, 2009; Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013); work experience (Holdsworth, 2017); and extra-curricular activities such as volunteering (Roulin and Bangerter, 2013; Thompson et al., 2013). These strategies are commonly understood through Bourdieu’s (1986) theoretical framing of capital and social mobility. Here we can see young people’s strategies as the acquisition of different forms of cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to knowledge and skills which can be embodied, objectified or institutionalised. This capital marks the young person as distinctive in comparison to their peers and can be leveraged to gain future financial advantage (Tindal et al., 2015). We contend that cultural capital accumulation strategies in the context of IWPs can be seen to place less of an emphasis on the development of skills (embodied cultural capital), but rather the collection of a distinctive experience in order to distinguish the self from others.

In this section, we will examine how both international youth mobility and work placements are used by students as a strategy through which to develop their capital and to enhance their employability. Addressing the dearth of research specifically on IWPs within geographical studies (with Deakin (2014) and Prazeres (2019) as an exception), it outlines how we can understand IWPs as a strategy for distinction.

2.1. International youth mobility

While there has been a dearth of research on IWPs, there has been a significant amount of research on other similar forms of youth mobility, particularly in recent years (Holton, 2015). In this section, we explore ways in which youth mobility has been researched as a strategy for distinction. Primarily, we examine how researchers have drawn upon Bourdieu’s (1986) theoretical framework to illustrate how youth mobility is framed as a strategy to gain cultural capital. Through this, we echo Prazeres (2019) argument that the ways in which young people seek to distinguish themselves from others is both complex and contextual. As the section will illustrate, a key component of discussions of cultural capital surround the different value placed on different experiences.

International mobility has long been portrayed as a youthful pursuit of self-development for middle class people in the ‘global north’ (Munt, 1994). In this sense, young people are exposed to cultures of mobility,

which frame how their mobilities are both imagined and practised (Prazeres, 2019). As a practice, international youth mobility is thought to result in the formation of embodied forms of cultural capital, particularly through the development of intercultural skills. For example, Baillie Smith et al. (2013) examine the multiple ways in which global citizenship is expressed by British faith volunteers. Other research explores how young people frame their experiences as the formation of embodied cultural capital through comparisons between experiences. In the context of volunteering, Jones (2011) argues that, due to its similarities with global work practices, volunteering ‘transcends’ travelling in how it can translate into cultural capital due to the development of cultural sensitivities. Munt (1994) examined the distinctions made between mass tourism and travelling to ‘third world’ destinations, to highlight how mobility is utilised as a form of cultural capital, class distinction and entry into middle class professions. In relation to international student mobility from Canada, Prazeres (2019) argues for a need to examine how students make distinctions between each other on the basis of location. Similar to the literature on backpacking (Desforges, 1998), the young people in her study create a hierarchy with ‘third world’ locations imagined as offering a more authentic experience in which to develop intercultural skills. In these example texts, place of travel is of central importance for young people to make a distinction in the formation of embodied skills, one which draws upon a postcolonial imagination of difference. However, in this research we illustrate that our respondents draw upon different comparisons to highlight distinction.

The area of youth mobility as capital acquisition that has received the most attention is through scholarship that explores the motivations behind international student mobility (ISM) (Beech, 2015; Findlay et al., 2012, 2017; Holloway et al., 2012; King and Raghuram, 2013; King and Sondhi, 2017; Prazeres, 2019; Prazeres et al., 2017; Waters, 2006; Waters et al., 2011; Waters and Brooks, 2010). This is a reflection of the rise of the number of students deciding to study abroad, although flows are far from even (Perkins and Neumayer, 2014). In this literature, studying in a different country is examined as an institutionalised form of cultural capital which is utilised for career advancement. For example, Holloway et al. (2012) illustrate that, similar to other research on ISM, a ‘key driver of international student mobility in this study [...] was the desire to obtain a qualification that would make them stand out from other graduates in their chosen labour market’ (p2285). However, like the research on youth travel, we can see how comparisons and distinctions are made within forms of international student mobility. For example, King and Raghuram (2013) highlight a difference in experience between credit-bearing and degree mobility. Courtois (2018) demonstrates that credit-bearing mobility is less likely to be utilised as a strategy of capital accumulation due to its ‘massification.’ Other geographical research in this context focuses on the importance of location. This draws upon a hierarchy of locations, with Waters (2006) highlighting the prestige that is associated with a British education in East Asia. Prazeres et al. (2017) build upon this, by examining student mobility from the UK, Austria and Latvia, illustrating that distinctions are made between place of study in terms of lifestyle, with some places being associated with a symbolic prestige. Moving away from a focus on location, Findlay et al. (2012) examine British students undertaking their degree outside the UK, and explore the role of institutional factors to argue that the decision to undertake their degree abroad was associated with the symbolic ‘world-class’ prestige and brand of the University. This body of work illustrates a complex layering of ways in which distinction is understood. While undertaking international study in itself can be recognised as cultural capital acquisition, hierarchies of value within this are created. For IWPs, we can see similar discussions, for example, in thinking about the symbolic prestige of employing organisation.

International youth mobility can also be constructed as a project of self-development as opposed to this simply being framed in terms of employment outcomes. Waters et al. (2011) highlight that for British students studying abroad, this is motivated by the pursuit of happiness

and the desire to escape neoliberal pressures and engage in adventure, as opposed to career building. Frändberg (2015) explores travelling more broadly and argues that for young people, travelling both acts as a way to realise independence as part of youth transitions, but also as a way to avoid pressures of adulthood. Prazeres (2017) similarly looks at ISM in the context of young people seeking to challenge themselves to leave their comfort zone as a method of self-discovery. In this way, youth mobility can be framed as a moratorium, a niche of time, which allows some young people the opportunity to suspend expectations in a break from perceived linear pathways in order to pursue self-discovery (Cuzzocrea, 2019; Vogt, 2018). This research highlights that what motivates young people to spend time abroad is not necessarily a strategy for the future, but also, fairly simply, a desire to travel and experience the world. This opposes dominant understandings of student motivations through the frame of employability and supports the notion that strategies cannot only be viewed in terms of identifiable motivations and outcomes, but also through less tangible, personal desires of fulfilment and enjoyment.

Drawing upon this previous research, we can divide the motivations for youth mobility loosely into two categories—the desire to acquire cultural capital and the desire to travel. A primary way through which cultural capital is highlighted and discussed is through the comparisons that are made between experiences, into which a hierarchy of value is expressed. Therefore, in the context of this research, it is important for us to question how young people who undertake international work placements distinguish their experiences, compared to UK-based work placements and international travel more broadly.

2.2. Employability & international work placements

As the previous section illustrates, there has been significant academic attention given to the relationship between youth mobility and cultural capital acquisition. What has received less focus is how students utilise work experience as a mechanism for distinction. This is surprising given a context in which it is argued that a degree alone is not sufficient to secure employment; rather work experience is seen as ‘essential’ to get a job (Tymon, 2013). A growing emphasis on ‘employability’ has received attention in the past decade both academically (Baruch et al., 2015) and within higher education institutions (Holmes, 2013). Employability can be defined as “a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke, 2006: 8). Acquisition of a portfolio of experiences which give rise to these qualities is represented as the responsibility of the individual, as employability is couched as “the rock upon which the next job or career can be built” (Trought, 2017: i). Narratives surrounding accountability for making oneself attractive to employers, mean that young people feel under pressure to use their time at university to develop their ‘employability’ – in other words, to take part in activities and cultivate skills to enable them to secure employment more readily (Brown et al., 2011). For example, Cheng (2016), drawing upon the biopolitical, looks at private degree students in Singapore in how they articulate and contest neoliberal ideas of employability by value-coding their experiences. However, Holdsworth’s (2018) work on the acquisition of distinctiveness uncovers a paradox: in the promotion of particular forms of distinction to students whilst at university through employability, the initiatives, skills and experiences which were once scarce, become increasingly profuse.

The proliferation of year-long work placements as part of undergraduate degree courses represent an extension of university employability narratives, acting to foster employability in a worthwhile and ‘correct’ way (Snee, 2014). A work placement is where a student undertakes a structured programme of graduate-level, professional work as part of their studies. In the British context, the work placement usually takes place as part of a ‘sandwich year’, a year between their second and final year of studies. Statistics illustrate that 11.1% of first-degree

undergraduate students undertook a sandwich year in 2017/2018 (HESA, 2019). As a formalised part of university study in some institutions, the student receives an extra qualification upon the completion of academic work related to the placement. However, the geography of universities offering work placements as an integral part of a degree is uneven (Clark and Zukas, 2016), for example, they are more likely to be widespread in ‘new’ Universities and offered only to select courses such as Engineering in the Russell Group. Work placements are offered as part of degrees in other countries around the world. In Australia, participation in work placements is also common, and often an integral component of certain degrees and their accreditation (Jackson and Collings, 2018). Work placements are built into many degree courses across Europe and often linked to project work, as well as other countries such as the United Arab Emirates (Griffin and Coelhuo, 2019). Work-based learning is seen to offer a range of benefits to students, both in terms of personal development, the acquisition of social networks and capitals, and the ability of students to more effectively integrate into working environments after graduation (Jackson, 2015).

International work placements, by extension, provide extra motivation for students: both the chance to live and work abroad for a year, and a means by which to illustrate the skills required to work in a global labour market. More broadly in the ‘global north’ labour market, working internationally is becoming seen as the norm among the current generation of graduates (Human Resources, 2019). Short-term international work assignment are often vocationalised as a way in which individuals can develop a ‘global mindset’—competencies which enable individuals to work effectively within the international teams of transnational organisations (Cranston, 2016). The development of cultural competencies through immersion in a variety of cultures has been viewed as an opportunity for people to enhance their employability in both national and international labour markets (Webber, 2005). With students feeling the pressure to be ‘work ready’ (Tymon, 2013) when they graduate, doing an overseas work placement is therefore a method of both developing and demonstrating the skills required for the global workplace (Van Mol, 2017). Of all the UK students who went abroad as part of their degree programme in 2015–2016, 22.7% undertook work placement as opposed to studying or volunteering (UUK, 2018). The rate for IWPs remains lower in the UK than other European countries, which experience higher rates of students travelling abroad to undertake a placement (Forder and Fowlie, 2017). Yet this is an area of active growth, with the Universities UK’s ‘Go International’ strategy arguing that “it’s important that our graduates are globally-engaged citizens with the skills our economy needs: attributes which are fostered by outward mobility” (UUK, 2018, p44). Other European countries also place an, albeit uneven, emphasis on outward student mobility in which IWPs play a part (Brooks, 2018). Critically, by combining both the opportunity to gain work experience and travel, this paper argues that IWPs can be viewed within a hierarchy of experience, in which IWPs both demonstrate an individual’s employability, but also their ‘global mindset’ and ability to work in different national contexts.

To date, there has been little research in geography specifically on how international work placements act as a strategy of distinction. The gap in research is surprising, given a focus on how international student mobility acts as a form of capital accumulation strategy for young people. Within this, student mobility is viewed from the lens of study as opposed to work. A notable exception is Deakin’s (2014) research on work placements as part of the Erasmus scheme, where she identifies employability as the main driver behind undertaking an IWP. However, Deakin’s research focused on students who had undertaken their placement before 2010. The context of IWPs has changed considerably since 2010 in the United Kingdom due to the marketisation of universities, the introduction of £9000 fees and consequent higher levels of student debt. As such, we argue that the motivations behind IWPs are significantly more complicated than just employability. Developing work-readiness is important, yet the forms of employment opportunities available to students are framed within a hierarchy of experience.

The international nature of their work placements imbues the CV with value, derived from its perceived scarcity. Through the IWP, overseas travel is formalised and legitimated, becoming a codified asset which can be presented to prospective employers.

In the next section we explore how this research has been designed to address the gap on IWPs and to explore young people's motivations towards undertaking this strategy for distinction.

3. Methods

The research is based on 20 semi-structured interviews with graduates (12 male and 8 female) from a university in England who had graduated between 2015 and 2018. All students at this university are offered the opportunity to undertake a work placement as part of a sandwich year if they can secure one. Around 60% of undergraduate students in 2017–8 were registered on a sandwich year. Of those students who secured a placement, roughly 10% of these are taken outside the United Kingdom. In some subjects, the majority of students do work placements, for example, in Creative Arts and Design. In other subjects, the proportion of students undertaking a work placement is smaller, for example, in Social Studies. The proportion of students opting to take a work placement has also increased between 2010 and 2018. As part of their placement year, students pay reduced tuition fees, undertake a supported programme of academic work related to their placement and receive an additional qualification. Students were responsible for finding and securing their own placements, although they receive the support of the institution to aid in their search and preparation. For example, students have access to careers fairs, mock assessment centres and one-to-one support with careers staff, all of which promote placements as part of employability narratives. Some students also use personal connections to help them acquire a placement, as is reflective of the placement and labour market in general (Klein and Weiss, 2011). However, the use of personal connections was often in response to a lack of success in securing a placement on their own and was constructed as a 'back-up' option. Whilst this aspect will not be explored in depth in this paper, it is important to knowledge that social capital shapes the experiences of some students and their ability to take part in IWPs.

To recruit respondents, we utilised a variety of channels, such as university alumni newsletters, social media and snowballing. To obtain a varied sample, we recruited students who received Erasmus funding and those who did not. We also attempted to recruit participants across a variety of subjects and across different geographic regions. 70% of respondents did their IWP in Europe and the remainder completed placements in Asia, Africa and South America. Participants were also required to be a UK citizen and to have undertaken an IWP for a minimum of 6-months.¹ In order to preserve the anonymity of our respondents, we identify only the HESA JACS Subject Area² of degree programme, the geographic region of the IWP and have given all respondent's pseudonyms.

The wider project looked at the motivations behind, aspirations following, and support offered to students who had undertaken an international work placement. Participants were interviewed using a peer-peer interview method, in which there was a reciprocal relationship between students and the interviewer (Dowling, 2010). This was a particularly useful dynamic when interviewing participants, as shared experiences can make it easier to build a rapport with interviewees and can produce more detailed responses (Valentine, 2005). For example, topics of shared interest and experiences were sometimes discussed prior to the interview, which helped to create a more informal and relaxed atmosphere.

¹ Those undertaking an IWP of less than a year would typically do a work placement or study exchange to fulfil the full year requirement of the university.

² The Joint Academic Coding System is a way of classifying academic subjects, see <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs/jacs3-principal>

Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' formal consent to allow for greater focus on the discourse of the interview (Dunn, 2010; Longhurst, 2016) and were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed and coded using NVivo, making it easier to form cross-linkages and over-arching themes across the 20 interviews. Descriptive codes were drawn out based on recurring themes and categories discussed by participant, and analytic codes were developed to link the themes identified to the wider conceptual framework (Cope and Kurtz, 2016).

4. Placing the international work placement in a hierarchy of experiences

In the following sections, we examine the motivations behind our respondents undertaking international work placements. The section illustrates first, that the IWP is articulated within a hierarchy of work experience and second, that they are discussed within a hierarchy of international experience. By looking at the different ways in which these young people articulated why they specifically did a work placement abroad, we can see how the IWP acted as a mechanism through which their international work experience is codified onto their CV and translated into potential value for future employers.

4.1. International work placements in a hierarchy of work experiences

A key motivating factor for the majority of the respondents undertaking an international work placement was the gaining of work experience. The respondents had a choice between undertaking a work placement in the UK or overseas, study exchange or continuing with their final year of university, but actively applied to spend at least half of their year undertaking an IWP instead. The decision to do this was often couched in terms that distinguished work experience to university study. For example, in the quotes below, both Jake and Ryan compare their placements to 'just' studying:

'I always wanted to do a placement, I thought it was...you learn a lot actually working than just studying I feel' (Ryan, Creative Arts and Design, Europe).

'it's only going to make your career opportunities far more...far better than you would if you had just done 3 years of just studying' (Jake, Biological Sciences, Europe).

This echoes research that looks at the employability agenda, for example, where students no longer viewed a degree as 'enough' to secure graduate employment (Tomlinson, 2008). Deakin (2014) highlighted that, among her respondents, employability was the key driver to undertake an IWP, in reflection of "a feeling amongst the students that they needed something 'extra' in order to be successful in the job market" (p30). Both Ryan and Jake viewed a work placement as offering both themselves and potential future employers with additional marketable skills than those developed through university study. Therefore, work experience, like a degree, is an experience which can be collected and added to the CV. It acts as an institutionalised form of cultural capital, which can be translated into future economic capital.

The importance of work experience through the university degree can also be seen through discussions of the difficulties that some respondents had in trying to secure a work placement. For example, both Hannah and Nicholas spoke of their panic about not being able to find a placement:

'I had been applying to a few places and probably not been applying quite right and erm, getting a bit panicky about the need to find a placement.' (Hannah, Creative Arts and Design, Europe).

'it basically got to around April/May time and I was just running out of options and I was panicking' (Nicholas, Social Studies, South America).

Both Hannah and Nicholas were motivated to do a work placement because they felt that this would give them the skills and experience of

employment to help them secure a job upon graduation. The panic that they felt can be read as an internalised feeling of failure for not being able to secure a position, which in turn, means they felt they would not be successful upon graduation. This sense of failure is heightened by neoliberal discourse, in which success in the labour market is individualised and unemployment is deemed to be a personal failure (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017; Worth, 2019). The panic that Hannah and Nicholas suggested shows the importance that is placed on work experience as a strategy for distinction. By not securing work experience, this was perceived as a way in which their future employability would be negatively impacted.

However, understanding how work experience acts as a form of distinction is complex as individuals make comparisons between their experiences and those of others on a micro scale (Prazeres, 2019). Although students who undertook IWPs distinguished themselves from others who ‘just’ studied for their degree, it would be simplistic to suggest that this was the only form of comparison. In discussing their work placements, our respondents articulated a hierarchy of types of work experience by making distinctions between types of work. Luke, for example, compared a placement year to other types of work such as part-time service sector jobs:

‘I thought it would look like really good on the CV, it would give me like a full year’s work in a, like a proper job, as opposed to like bar tending or working in a restaurant or a shop or something’ (Luke, Social Studies, Europe).

Another similar comparison that respondents made was by comparing a work placement to an internship.³ This comparison was often made through the discussion that their placement role did not involve what was imagined as a ‘typical’ intern role: ‘it was not sort of the typical internship where you are just kind of photocopying and making coffee... so the actual work you are doing is meaningful work’ (Sarah, Social Studies, Europe). The emphasis on graduate-level work as epitomising ‘meaningful’ work for both Luke and Sarah is reflective of the pressure on young people to secure professional level jobs when they graduate as an appropriate return on their investment (Tymon, 2013; Snee, 2014; Tomlinson, 2018). Hierarchical value coding occurs through discussions of work experience, with graduate-level placement years placed at the top and routine service occupations placed at the bottom. For these respondents therefore, professional level work was the valuable experience, as opposed to simply experience of work in itself.

Therefore, for some respondents a key strategy for distinction was the work placement itself. However, this does not consider why these respondents specifically did an international work placement. While research on international student mobility suggests that the location of study was a form of distinction, participants in our research did not discuss the location of the work placement in the same way. Instead, comparisons were made between placement roles themselves, which adds another layer of complexity to the hierarchies of work placements. This operated differently depending on the degree subject that the respondent studied. For our respondents, there were two ways that a hierarchy between work placements was discussed—through the brand of the organisation worked for and by doing a work placement abroad.

A key form of distinction between placements that students sought was having the brand of the organisation that they worked for on their CV. Harry described his motivations as having the ‘big name’ on his CV: ‘and a big company name is never a bad thing to have on your CV. So, it’s kind of – it’s always been the main thing on my portfolio that’s kind of jumped out to people I think’ (Creative Arts and Design, Europe). Similarly, Jessica highlighted the response she thought employers would have in response to seeing the organisation that she worked for on her CV: ‘And yeah, they’ll see [company] and be like ‘she’s impressive’

(Creative Arts and Design, Europe). Findlay et al. (2012) illustrated that for British students undertaking their degree outside the UK, attending a ‘world-class’ institution was the primary motivation, where a central importance was placed on the recognisable reputation of the university. In the case of the work placements, the recognisable brand of the organisation was seen to operate in a similar way, capturing the attention of potential future employers by signalling a sense of the individual’s ability to work for larger organisations. Or as Jessica suggested through her use of the term ‘impressive’, working for the ‘big-name’ organisation was seen to give their work experience a form of legitimisation. In our sample, this form of symbolic capital was more important for students studying for a degree which had a larger proportion of students undertaking a work placement, which meant that ‘just’ doing a work placement was not a form of distinction in itself. However, even among subjects where a lower proportion of students undertook a work placement, this was still emphasised by some: ‘we thought if I have [company] on my CV, it would look great. Erm, so it was more, it was kind of an investment’ (Benjamin, Social Studies, Asia). For these students, it was the brand of the company that formed a deliberate strategy for distinction in addition to doing a work placement. To stand out, these young people wanted to utilise the symbolic prestige of a well-known company on their CV as a form of cultural capital.

Some placements therefore were clearly seen as having a higher value than others by enabling the respondent to have the brand of recognisable organisation on their CV. Thus, for these students, doing their placement abroad was not necessarily a strategy to acquire cultural capital. For example, Georgia felt that she would not even include the overseas location of her placement on her CV as she felt employers would just focus on the brand:

‘I think they see the name [of company] and they kind of like, that’s kind of it! Because I don’t think neces ... they don’t really look at where you did it because obviously that’s not really, you don’t really need to put that on your CV as such’ (Creative Arts and Design, Europe).

Sarah’s international placement attracted her due to the role and company, rather than the fact that it was overseas, and it was the only placement that she applied for: ‘it was more the actual job. Yeah I wouldn’t have taken anything just because it was overseas—it had to be something that was worthwhile’ (Social Studies, Europe). This means we can argue that for some students the fact that their placement was international was not part of a deliberate strategy for distinction, but rather happened through circumstance and was driven by the search for a ‘worthwhile’ placement. This further illustrates some of complexities within hierarchies of seeking distinction. For Sarah, going abroad was the length that she had to go to secure the ideal placement, as opposed to it being international as a strategy in itself. This illustrates that we cannot simply understand the motivations behind undertaking an IWP as a singular strategy; rather students quest for distinction was multifaceted.

For other students, the choice of an international placement was, like the brand of company, a way of distinguishing themselves from other students who had done work placements. For example, Lauren and Andrew compare an international work placement to a ‘normal’ or even ‘bog standard’ job. For them, a normal or bog-standard job was a graduate-level placement role in the UK:

‘I wanted it to be more of a challenge than just working in a bog-standard job, like because you can do that experience any time’ (Lauren, Creative Arts and Design, Asia).

‘It will look better on your CV and I think it will stand out more than just normal work placements’ (Andrew, Creative Arts and Design, Asia).

Lauren and Andrew therefore cast the work placement itself as being a common experience, something normal. A work placement becomes the baseline from which they feel that they need to distinguish themselves. Like the discussion of brand of company above, these

³ Internships are typically of a shorter duration and are not accredited by the university.

respondents come from subjects where doing a placement was a more common experience amongst their cohort. For them, doing an IWP serves as a differentiating factor, something that helps them stand out from the crowd. For example, Chloe highlighted that going abroad to do a work placement acts as an unusual form of differentiation: ‘for the employability side afterwards, I thought it would be something that would be something that would be quite rare, that someone’s worked abroad’ (Creative Arts and Design, Europe). These respondents therefore clearly articulated a hierarchy, in terms of an IWP looking ‘better’ to employers than a UK one, offering a level of distinction that is ‘rare.’

Therefore, although some students considered that doing a work placement alone is a sufficient form of distinction, others felt that they needed to add further distinction to this experience through the brand of the organisation worked for or by undertaking their placement abroad. The number of students electing to undertake a work placement is increasing. Within the sample University, there are differing proportional uptakes of placement years by subject area. In disciplines where the majority of students go on placement, doing a UK-based work placement becomes the normal experience against which some students feel they have to distinguish themselves. This is clear evidence of what Holdsworth (2017) describes as the ‘cult of experience,’ where young people feel compelled into “doing something different and doing more than everyone else” (p297). The international work placement, like the brand of organisation, becomes placed at the top of a hierarchy of experiences, a way through which to achieve ultimate distinction. Jake articulated this in travel terms: ‘It can basically become the sort of vocational equivalent of an all-inclusive.’ (Jake, Biological Sciences, Europe). That is, the IWP combined the cultural capital of work experience with the gaining of international experience, all in one go.

4.2. International work placements in a hierarchy of international experiences

The previous section examined how students frame the international work placement as a mechanism through which they can gain distinction through work experiences. This section explores how the IWP is discussed within a hierarchy of international experiences. As highlighted earlier, Waters et al. (2011) have questioned the framing of international student mobility solely in terms of the acquisition of cultural capital, highlighting that for some, international student mobility is driven by the pursuit of happiness and self-discovery. While our respondents highlighted distinction as a motivation, in some cases, this was intangible from a desire to travel and to experience other cultures. This echoes previous research that looks at the links between youth and international travel as an experience in itself. However, we will illustrate that our respondents still codify this experience within neoliberal terms that frame the IWPs as the ‘right’ way to travel.

A number of respondents discussed the motivation for their overseas placement as being travel. This was the reason that some respondents actively sought an international work placement and why others took the opportunity when this was offered to them. For example, Liam highlighted that: ‘I’ve always, always wanted to explore outside of the UK’ (Creative Arts and Design, Europe). Actively seeking an IWP, Liam suggested that ‘the reason I wanted to go abroad was to experience something new, that I couldn’t get in the UK.’ Similarly, Aaron framed his application process around the wider desire to travel to other countries: ‘I applied mostly to international placements because I knew I wanted to do some sort of travelling and see what other countries were like’ (Aaron, Computer Science, Europe). Jamie, on the other hand, was not actively pursuing a placement (international or not), but saw the opportunity advertised through his university and thought:

‘I’ve always wanted to travel – this is a great opportunity to travel and work in another country. It was mainly the sort of travelling and living in a different environment that pushed me to [...] apply’ (Computer Science, Asia).

Liam, Aaron and Jamie were all looking for an experience, a chance to travel and explore, ideas which highlight a narrative of adventure not distinction. For them, the IWP was the opportunity to have an international adventure during their University degree.

Waters et al. (2011) suggest that a similar narrative of adventure among British young people undertaking study abroad was linked to the desire to prolong a feeling of youth by escaping or suspending life at home, what can be described as a moratorium (Cuzzocrea, 2019). Our respondents linked their international work placement to the life course drawing on the perspective that this was the right time to travel:

‘I think I have always wanted to go abroad, and I thought ‘this is my opportunity’. Erm, you are not really going to get an opportunity to do this again. Erm, and after uni, probably going to have to find a more serious job. So I was like...yeah, I just really wanted to go abroad’ (Rebecca, Creative Arts and Design, Europe).

Rebecca therefore saw an international work placement as an opportunity to go abroad. She associates graduation with adulthood, the obtaining of a serious job and thus the work placement was at an appropriate time before she had to settle down. Similarly, Ryan, discusses his ability to undertake the experience of an IWP in terms of other markers of adulthood: mortgage and a family:

‘I’ve had a wealth of experience in different cultures and different environments and opportunities have arisen that I’ve felt that I have had to take because I’m in a position where I’m still young, I don’t have a family or a mortgage or anything else that’s holding me down, so I should utilise it.’ (Ryan, Creative Arts and Design, Europe).

These respondents therefore position the IWP as an opportunity to travel before they reach adulthood, taking advantage of a moratorium which was institutionally sanctioned. Others saw the IWP as an opportunity to engage in a youthful travel experience that was supported by the University, requiring help as opposed to exhibiting independence. This enabled them to travel as part of an institutionally supported year abroad. Lauren, in the quote below, suggests that students can have the experience of working in a different country at any time, but doing an IWP enables young people to do this with assistance:

‘you can do that experience any time, but with having uni’s like backing and having the support of the uni, it’s much easier to do like a leap into a placement for a year somewhere else, as opposed to doing it when you graduate and you’re all on your own’ (Lauren, Engineering and Technology, Asia).

Lauren discusses various aspects of support, such as securing the placement through university links to helping ensure that she was on the correct visa. For her, this was important to her confidence in doing the placement in a location that was out of her comfort zone. Other students discussed the support network of undertaking their placement alongside existing friends from the university which influenced their decision to do their work placement abroad. Therefore, there were multiple ways in which our respondents discussed IWPs in terms of the ‘right’ time to travel, linked both to independence, transitions to adulthood and support. The IWP in this respect acts as a vehicle to have a youthful yet appropriately timed and supported experience of travel.

These ideas about the ‘right’ time to travel are important to note in the context of how they frame the ‘right’ way to travel. This was highlighted in terms that coded the experience of travel itself within a neoliberal logic of experience. For example, even though the primary motivation for Rebecca was to travel while young, she still discusses her placement in terms of what this displays on her CV:

‘More about the travel than the actual work placement, if I am being honest with you! Yeah. I was more keen on going to a new place, living in different cultures, and I thought it would look really good on my CV as well – showing that I had lived in different countries’ (Creative Arts and Design, Europe).

Ryan also clearly made a distinction between types of travel: ‘There’s different ways to travel, so...there’s...there can be right ways and wrong ways’ (Creative Arts and Design, Europe). By this, he was making a distinction between travelling for a work placement and what he described as ‘dead-end jobs’ such as working a ski season, similar to the service work discussed above. Therefore, Ryan also re-codes the experience of travel as part of an international work placement into a hierarchy of experience where some international work experiences are ‘right’ and others ‘wrong’ for future employers. Thus, the IWP undertaken by these young people is infused with expectations about the right way to gain international experience, which is through institutionally-sanctioned professional level work that can be translated on the CV.

Regardless of their motivation to undertake an international work placement, when directly asked about what they thought employers would value about an IWP, many respondents found this difficult to answer. Through their interviews, some respondents highlighted intercultural skills in terms of developing their ability to understand other cultures derived from their experiences living and working abroad. The acquisition of embodied cultural capital was also discussed in terms of willingness or ability to step out of their comfort zone and the associated flexibility that this was associated with. Jamie, for example, discussed how doing an IWP illustrated adaptability: ‘you are able to take risks. You are not, you can adapt to working in another country and a different culture’ (Jamie, Science, Asia). Luke also articulated ideas of flexibility in terms of resilience, in terms of how he thought an employer would perceive him:

‘I’d like to think that they see me as a sort of person that could, well someone that’s done a placement abroad as the sort of person that is able to be put into sort of any situation and get on with it and do well from it’ (Luke, Social Studies, Europe).

Resilience and adaptability both suggest flexibility as a skill, all acting as articulations of what skills are seen as required within the neoliberal labour force (Cheng, 2016). Liam also directly discussed the formation of skills in relationship to the employer, suggesting that the employer will understand the soft skills gained from living in a different culture:

‘because maybe they look at the softer skills that you have from... what it says maybe about the person if they go to a different country. So, the – I thought it would benefit me – whatever happened, I thought it would be a benefit to do it’ (Liam, Creative Arts and Design, Europe).

Holdsworth (2017) suggests that in the race to collect experiences, young people see these less about the shaping of the self, but about the selling of the self on the CV. As Jones (2013) highlights, there is an increasing pressure for graduates to display intercultural competence and the ability to work in a variety of different cultural contexts due to the interconnections between working environments across the globe. By undertaking an IWP, these students could directly identify the cultural capital associated with living in different countries on their CV, without necessarily being able to identify what skills they had gained.

For other respondents, the fact that their placement was international meant that they felt employers would see them as a more interesting person. This is a different way in which international work placements are seen as the acquisition of cultural capital, where international travel becomes associated with certain personality traits alongside the soft skills acquired. For example, there is a perception amongst some students that if they study or work abroad, they are more likely to be perceived as confident and adventurous by employers, providing them with a competitive advantage against other candidates (King and Sondhi, 2017). Amongst our respondents, this acquisition of cultural capital was most clearly discussed in relation to IWPs as marking you as adventurous, interesting and cultured:

‘I thought it would ... show a certain type of characteristic of the person. Be a bit more independent, a bit more adventurous maybe,

and [... Subject] is very er... shallow, and they always want ... you’d have to like describe yourself’ (Jessica, Creative Arts and Design, Europe).

‘well employers will see that [IWP on CV] and then make a pre-judgement of what you are like as a person, and that that pre-judgement will probably sway more towards being more adventurous and interesting and outgoing, and cultured, rather than those who didn’t’ (Andrew, Creative Arts and Design, Asia).

Jessica and Andrew discuss personality traits that they think employers will value. They are motivated to travel through the IWP so that they can provide evidence of their character on their CV, which will help them distinguish themselves from others. Therefore, even if the respondent had previous experience of international travel, for example, through a gap year or by living outside the UK as a child, doing an IWP is a way through which embodied cultural capital can be clearly expressed on a CV. This further illustrates how the IWP can be portrayed as the ‘right’ way to travel as it can be codified within neoliberal education-to-work transitions.

However, it is important to note that for these respondents the location of their placement was not discussed in terms of capital acquisition in relation to intercultural skills. As examined earlier, the international student mobility literature highlights the importance of location to distinction, in particular with developing countries being viewed as more difficult and therefore of higher value (Prazeres, 2019). In our research, the location of the work placement was not discussed as a form of distinction, rather our respondents discussed the acquisition of cultural capital in other ways. While most of our respondents undertook their placement in Europe, others did their placement in places like China, Colombia and Kenya and discussed the day-to-day challenges that they faced living in different cultural contexts to the United Kingdom. Likewise, we might expect graduates to discuss the acquisition of language capital. However, the majority of the placements that our respondents undertook were in English and the language skills acquired by those students whose placements were not in English were not discussed as distinction. Both points are perhaps a reflection of English as the international language franca. Therefore, the way in which distinction was framed was in terms of a dichotomy between ‘international’ or ‘not-international’ with the rest of the world been Othered in the same way. Distinction derived from an international work placement was produced through embodied cultural capital, which could be codified on to the CV.

This section has looked at how the IWP is discussed within a hierarchy of international travel experience. It echoes previous research that highlights that young people see travel as a youthful experience (Waters et al., 2011), however, young people frame this through a neoliberal lens which places a value of the international part of their IWP to their future employer. International travel experience is thus formalised and commodified into an asset which is sold to future employers, making the IWP a ‘worthwhile’ form of travel.

5. Conclusions

This paper illustrates the need to broaden the focus of research on international student mobility in understanding the relationship between education-led mobility and distinction. In illuminating young people’s motivations for undertaking international work placements as part of their undergraduate degrees, this paper draws attention to the multiple and complex motivations which are layered through students attempts to distinguish themselves from others. The IWP clearly functions within a neoliberal discourse of employability agendas which contribute to a ‘cult of experience’ (Holdsworth, 2017). Young people are encouraged to engage in ventures to increase their employability under the mantra of self-improvement, where some experiences are perceived as higher value than others in three overlapping ways.

Firstly, international work placements feature within a hierarchy of experiences which are acquired in order to stand out from other

graduates in a credentialised labour market. The IWP acts as a form of differentiation from other students who ‘just’ study or undertake part-time service sector employment alongside their degree, regardless of whether the ‘international’ element of the placement was intended or not. As sandwich years become increasingly normalised across UK undergraduate degree programmes, the comparative scarcity of an IWP in a graduate level role represents a route to distinction for some students. Students are thus running faster in order to stand still (Holdsworth, 2017).

Secondly and relatedly, the inclusion of an international work placement on the CV is imbued with symbolic value. The presence of certain multinational corporations on the résumé of an individual is deemed to convey the proven ability to work for some of the world’s leading firms. Moreover, the inclusion of an extended period of international experience is seen to project soft skills, including intercultural understanding and resilience, as well as certain personality traits such as being interesting to potential employers. The IWP becomes a way to demonstrate these skills and traits to employers on paper, before the job hunter has met the would-be employer. Narratives therefore suggest a need to go to greater lengths to bolster employability and remain competitive in the graduate labour market. By combining the ability to demonstrate a ‘global mindset’ and the acquisition of practical work experience, the IWP is assessed by many students as being at the ‘top’ of a hierarchy of experience. The IWP thus becomes a scarce, formalised and commodified asset which can be packaged through the CV to appeal to future employers in a bid to stay ahead of the crowd.

Thirdly, even for students who highlighted a desire to do an international work placement as a means to travel, they still articulated the experience of travel in the context of distinction through gaining cultural capital. Thus, whilst Waters et al. (2011) suggest that not all international student mobility can be understood in the context of securing credentials, this research demonstrates that pressures of employability still pervade young people’s rationales for doing IWPs. In this way, participants codify the opportunity offered by the IWP experience within neoliberal terms that frame the IWPs as the ‘right’ way to travel. The IWP represents a form of institutionally approved moratorium (Cuzzocrea, 2019), occurring at the ‘right’ time in the transition from education to work by offering a time-limited, purposeful space in which young people can test drive careers, develop their CV and employability. As a form of institutionally approved travel, the IWP is articulated as a worthwhile way to travel.

Crucially, the perceived advantages gained in the eyes of students by doing an international work placement raises questions over who is able to access these capital-generating activities (Beech, 2015). International mobility is often perceived as a strategy to gain advantage in the labour market but is often limited to those from middle-class backgrounds (Forsberg, 2017). IWPs, amongst other forms of distinction, can be utilised by those with privilege to gain further advantage, thus perpetuating inequalities and reproducing the class system. In a quest for “a higher education culture in which international opportunities are an aspiration for all students” (UUK, 2017: 2), UUK is looking at ways to widen participation and increase the accessibility of university to those from non-traditional student backgrounds. Yet the simultaneous pressure experienced by students to go beyond their degree acts as a further disadvantage to those who may not have access to the same levels of financial and cultural capital to compete. Discourses around the ‘right’ time to travel for the students in our study highlighted the draw of IWPs at a time in the life course associated with fewer commitments and greater flexibility. However, this is not open to all students. Those with caring responsibilities, for instance, are often disadvantaged when it comes to being able to balance both university commitments and family life (Wainwright and Marandet, 2010) and thus taking part in IWPs can be problematic. Additionally, the reliance on social capital resources in securing an IWP can put students without these networks at a disadvantage. The inequality of access to IWPs therefore has important implications for the ability of students to

cultivate their employability. Access to IWPs has the potential to perpetuate inequality as select individuals are able to translate the cultural capital conferred by working overseas into advantages at the expense of others. Research is needed to explore how IWPs may reproduce these inequalities, particularly in the context of wider actors seeking to increase participation.

Additionally, beyond discussions of the implications for students from the same national context, we need to think about the consequences that these hierarchies of experience have for creating competition in overseas labour markets and the impact that this may have on graduates there. IWPs are formed through complex understandings of mobility, prestige and cultural capital, and how these may alter or exacerbate global power relations needs to be considered. The ability for students to take part in IWPs is geographically uneven (Perkins and Neumayer, 2014), such as mobility being restricted by the ability of students from certain countries to obtain a visa (Alberts, 2007). As more students compete for domestic work placements across the neoliberalised ‘global north’, it will be vital to explore how young people’s participation in IWPs will change in the future and how these strategies may not only be affected by wider context such as an increasingly complicated global labour market and borders, but also how they may themselves shape local and global labour market outcomes and inequalities.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sophie Cranston: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis. **Helena Pimlott-Wilson:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Formal analysis. **Emma Bates:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - review & editing, Formal analysis.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the editor and reviewers for their constructive feedback, as well as to participants at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference, Geographies of Education, Students in a Changing Higher Education Landscape conferences for comments on an earlier version of this paper. The research for this project was enabled through an ASET research bursary.

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