

Chapter 2

Counting Outward Mobility: The Data Sources and their Constraints

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines various sources of data available on outbound student mobility, noting the prevalence of two major mobility modes, either full degree mobility or credit mobility. The latter is commonly referred to as study abroad and involves students studying in another country to accrue credit towards a degree that will be awarded back in their home country. Using Australia as an example of a country embracing the opportunities of outbound mobility, while also being a popular study destination for students from other countries, this chapter investigates different types of outward mobility data collections and the methods used to populate them. Further, this chapter summarises research methods employed to measure the quality of outward mobility experiences and the return on investment that may be achieved by students and funding bodies, with respect to learning outcomes and graduate employability.

INTRODUCTION

The global international education industry of the 21st Century is remarkably data rich and data focused, with the release of a new data publication commonly accompanied by much public commentary across both traditional and social media. There is now significant global interest in tracking which countries are the top study destinations and which countries are the top sources of outbound students year-by-year, as well as which education institutions—principally universities—rank top against a range of criteria, including their popularity as a destination for international students and researchers.

Monitoring an outward mobility program starts with basic record keeping. In order to demonstrate whether recruitment and marketing strategies are working effectively, an organisation may decide to count all the study abroad records it has accumulated over a year, so that mobility activity can be tracked year-by-year. To more closely analyse trends and to estimate future demand, common items can be drawn from each record e.g., the study destinations of students and their particular fields of study. It is these strategic planning objectives that most commonly lead to the incidental creation of an outward mobil-

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ity data collection. It is much less common that an organisation voluntarily takes on the administrative burden of collecting and maintaining a data collection for its own sake. Data collections arise and then evolve in accordance with organisational needs.

Nonetheless, an organisation that has such a data collection finds itself with a powerful tool. For example, an outward mobility data collection makes it possible for an organisation to report on the performance of its student mobility program. It may also be possible for an organisation to benchmark its programs' performance against those of other organisations. Achieving this, however, may require all the organisations involved to agree to collect and report on a common set of data items. This may happen coincidentally or by formal agreement between the various parties, or by a third party drawing common information from publicly available sources and overlaying definitional rules that then enable valid comparisons to be made.

There is also a high level of interest in data of a more qualitative nature, drawn from surveys or interviews that may indicate the changing attitudes and needs of mobile students, notably the reasons why they chose a particular destination to study in and what their preferred mode of study is. As well as providing reassurance that students are satisfied with the quality of their studying and living experience abroad, such information can become a valuable marketing and promotion tool for an organisation's outward mobility program. In this respect, perhaps the most important area of measurement is the employment outcomes of graduates.

This chapter is intended to provide an overview of data collection and evaluation methods for outbound student mobility programs. As well as quantifying different aspects of outward mobility, methods to investigate the quality of students' experience, their learning outcomes and the contribution that studying abroad can make to enhancing graduate capabilities and graduate employability are considered. In this chapter, the importance of distinguishing 'degree mobility' and 'credit mobility' – terms commonly used in relation to Erasmus-funded mobility in Europe (de Wit, Ferencz, & Rumbley, 2013) – will be emphasised. Furthermore, the importance of collecting parallel data on students who are not outwardly mobile will be discussed, in the context that these students may represent disadvantaged groups for who targeted strategies to encourage outward mobility could be employed.

Australia—alongside a growing number of countries—now publishes data annually (since 2009) on outbound university students at a national level, as well as continuing to collect data on inbound international students, which it has done since the 1990s. In Australia and elsewhere there is a growing interest in measuring the benefits to be gained from outbound student mobility, a benefit that may accrue to an individual student, to their educational institutions and to the economy of their home country, through building a future workforce of globally-skilled and interculturally-competent graduates. Increasingly, this expectation is motivating governments to invest substantial funding in outgoing mobility through scholarships and larger scale support programs, in anticipation of long-term returns on that investment.

In this chapter, various methods of measuring outward student mobility have been investigated, drawing on data sources from different countries and a detailed case study of Australian data. The aim of this analysis is to identify reporting elements that may be most useful in measuring and monitoring outbound mobility. This chapter focuses on *how* data and targeted survey findings are used to measure the relative success of study abroad programs and the return on investment they can offer for students, institutions and governments.

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