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5. Why Study Abroad at all? Informal Learning and International Experiences in Irish Higher Education (0072)

Programme number: A1.4

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

Discourses examining international study experiences have tended to focus on the cultural impact of exchange and the value of organised educational activities with enriching academic experiences, contributing to the overall development of the student and their international careers in the fields of business, science, and academe. This presents formal educational opportunities provided through institutions. In most cases, the students themselves create their own, informal, international education experiences through friendship networks, which they can rely upon to facilitate leisure aspects of their studies abroad, such as small excursions, providing a different kind of enrichment as the organised educational setting, equally important. By examining North American student experiences in Ireland, with seemingly few cultural or linguistic differences, and where students may already have family connections, we see how significant these individually organised experiences come to develop confident, international citizens in contrast to the impact of study within formal education settings.

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Paper

This research project challenges conventional understandings of international student experiences by highlighting the activities which students organise themselves, autonomous from their institutional and controlled educational settings, especially through self-organised tourism outside of the study activities designed by faculty. It examines how students become educational tourists, and how universities capitalise on this growing educational market in an attempt to provide authoritative and comprehensive tourist experiences through educational practices. Students can use short-term study abroad programmes for a variety of purposes, for example, while undergraduate students may experience temporary mobility during their summer school programmes as an example of temporal mobility, it does not suggest that the student is necessarily mobile from an academic standpoint. The postgraduate student uses educational tourism in order to access faculty and resources unavailable at home. The increasing criticism of neo-liberal universities as consumer driven is well-founded, but based on the premise that current curricula is necessarily insufficient for proper education. Students themselves are demonstrating a desire to choose from several academic providers, for their own interests, and necessitating higher education to fully understand this growing market if it is to meet increasing student demand for international education.

This research project aims to deconstruct the nature of these activities by contrasting the *student* and the *tourist* in order to demonstrate how these two terms cannot be compartmentalised in the discussion relating to the activities and motivations of international students. I conducted my fieldwork primarily at the University of Limerick, founded in 1972. Data used in this analysis was derived from several sources: online questionnaires completed by previous international students, participant observation amongst students pursuing their studies at the Centre for European Studies at the University of Limerick where I was a Visiting Research Fellow, interviews with international students, programme coordinators and faculty administrators at the University of Limerick, National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), University College Dublin, the Irish American University in Dublin, and the Queen's University, Belfast between July 2007 and April 2009. The data used in this analysis is based upon an online survey of international students studying in Ireland, conducted between April 1st and June 30th, 2009 using the 'Survey Methods' online survey software. This survey received 107 responses, of which 28 were selected for this analysis based on their nationality. Only North American responses from the United States and Canada were selected for inclusion due to participant consent to the use of information once the survey was completed.

Certain themes repeat throughout these responses: growth, learning, confidence, independence, self-reliance, discovery, self-sufficient, experience. Educational tourism offers students the opportunity to engage in an activity which they might otherwise find overwhelming or distressing through the provision of organised structure and supervision within a travel experience. Universities have been characterised as 'safe spaces' not only where students can share ideas, make mistakes and learn in a controlled environment, but also because there is a continuity among these environments. I would argue that while educational tourism is the consumption of education abroad through recognised and seemingly safe space, it is the experiences which students organise themselves, outside of the classroom, which has the greatest impact on students. These peer interactions allow students to consider alternative social models not as theoretical possibilities but rather as lived experiences through the eyes of those who lived communism, apartheid, dictatorships, and democracies.

Students now feel a sense of self-reliance which they did not believe possible before hand, where they learned about themselves, their preconceived ideas about the world, and what they are capable of accomplishing without outside support. This process of self-discovery is the greatest impact of educational tourism of the student, and is brought about outside of the formal, academic environment. It is precisely through the interaction with the *other*, whether they are students, local residents, or further travels, which offer initial challenges for students to overcome, and indeed the development of self-confidence after persevering in spite of these adversities independent of familiar support structures. It should be noted that these responses reflect a gendered experience of educational tourism as well, as 93% of the respondents included in this study are female, reflecting the unequal participation of women as educational tourists in Ireland, which is often their first independent foray into the world without direct family support.

In conclusion, many discourses examining international study experiences neglect the impact peers have on the overall development of the student. Their focus on educational outcomes, the transferability of credentials, and the development of international careers obscures the human, lived experience of international education. It is the experience, only possible through peer-interaction and successive trial and error that students develop their self-confidence, independence, and begin to become international citizens. As the market for educational tourism expands into lifelong learning strategies, higher education institutions, alumni associations, and tourism companies, international educators must take this into account, and develop strategies which foster independent student development. Through the creation of their own, informal experiences through friendship networks, they can rely upon peers to facilitate more social or leisure aspects of their lives, such as travel, which provide the same kind of enrichment as the organised educational setting. Students then use these informal networks of association to further their leisure and academic tourism throughout their lives. In light of this, educators must ask a difficult question as to the real value of educational tourism: should the emphasis be on the education or the tourism? Most critics of consumer higher education and the provision of international education would argue the students are getting something which they cannot obtain domestically in relation to their education. The findings of this study clearly indicate, however, that it is the personal experiences of the sojourn, the self-confidence and independence which students develop while they are educational tourists, which is the most valuable commodity which they take home with them.