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Widening participation in outward student mobility: Successes, challenges, and opportunities

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Abstract

This article utilises data obtained through evaluation processes at Northumbria University to contribute to the emerging discourse on widening participation and outward student mobility. The rationale behind the study stems from the significant financial and non-financial benefits associated with higher education and the UK's ongoing efforts to enhance social mobility through increased access to higher education. The study draws on a questionnaire, reflective video diaries, and interviews with outward student mobility participants from diverse widening participation backgrounds. The questionnaire ($N=24$) was distributed before and after participation, while reflective video diaries ($N=28$) and interviews ($N=32$) provided subsequent insights. Data were analysed using a simplified template analysis of successes, challenges and opportunities. Findings show that outward student mobility fosters amplified personal and professional growth across students from widening participation backgrounds. Notably, participation in outward student mobility was not deterred by the COVID-19 pandemic or global conflicts, demonstrating the strong motivation and resilience of these students. However, financial constraints emerged as a major barrier, exacerbated by the need to balance part-time work and academic responsibilities. The study highlights the importance of enhanced communication strategies, detailed budgeting guides and tailored mental health services to support participants. Despite these challenges,

the resilience of students from widening participation backgrounds underscores the transformative potential of outward student mobility, suggesting that targeted interventions can further enhance its inclusivity and effectiveness.

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper addresses the successes, challenges and opportunities involved in widening participation in outward student mobility. It focuses on barriers faced by students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, highlighting financial constraints and the need for targeted institutional support to facilitate more inclusive access to international experiences.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The study demonstrates that outward student mobility significantly fosters personal and professional growth for widening participation students. However, pervasive financial barriers and balancing part-time work with academic commitments limit accessibility. Enhanced financial guidance, tailored communication strategies and targeted mental health support are recommended to improve inclusivity and effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education offers significant financial and non-financial benefits (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015). Individuals attaining a university education often enjoy higher salaries, occupy more prestigious positions and experience better health compared with those who do not (Black & Smith, 2006; Chevalier & Conlon, 2003; Groot & van den Brink, 2006). Consequently, increasing participation in higher education has become a policy imperative (Lumb et al., 2021). This is particularly evident in the UK, which ranks among the countries with the lowest levels of social mobility within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Sutton Trust, 2019), maintaining consistent disparities in and access to and participation in education (Hannon et al., 2017; O'Sullivan et al., 2019). The foundational 1963 Robbins Report laid the groundwork for the expansion of the UK's higher education sector, leading to a significant increase in the number of universities and the enrolment of students from diverse backgrounds (Younger et al., 2019). The 1997 Dearing Report built on this with a focus on widening participation (WP) initiatives (Archer, 2007; Thompson, 2019). This report advocated for substantial expansion of higher education opportunities for

individuals from non-traditional backgrounds and emphasised targeted efforts to enhance student recruitment from underrepresented groups. Subsequently, the UK Government implemented targets for the demographic composition of undergraduate university intakes, aiming to address disparities in access (Fernando & Kenny, 2021; Parker & Starkey, 2018). Over the last two decades, WP has evolved to encompass considerations of student success and progression. In recent years, concerns about student success have intensified with the introduction of higher student fees and the elimination of maintenance grants, leading to a broader understanding of success that extends beyond retention and completion to include differential attainment and graduate outcomes (Thomas, 2020). The current focus is on achieving excellent or at least equivalent outcomes for all students, with an emphasis on ensuring equitable outcomes across various equity groups (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Tham et al., 2023; Thomas, 2020).

Since the Office for Students was formed in 2018, institutions seeking to levy fees exceeding the standard amount must possess an Access and Participation Plan (APP). These plans set out the strategies through which higher education providers aim to enhance equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and advance from higher education. These publicly available documents articulate the provider's aspirations for change, the methodologies devised to achieve these goals, the delineation of set targets and the allocation of resources necessary to execute the plan and attain the set objectives (Thomas, 2020). The current guidelines for these plans underscore a robust emphasis on identifying and addressing differential outcomes concerning participation, continuation, completion, attainment and graduate progression (Office for Students, 2019). This is achieved through comprehensive interventions, involving activities such as outward student mobility (OSM), which provides students with international study or work experiences.[1] In operational terms, APPs encompass a range of initiatives aimed at fostering WP 'to ensure that all those who have the ability to benefit from higher education have the opportunity to do so' (Department for the Economy, 2024). Despite the considerable allocation of resources to WP initiatives set out in APPs, there persists a lack of evidence regarding their effectiveness, particularly at Level 1 or individual activity levels. This has prompted a recent focus on conducting in-depth evaluations to better inform future policy and practice (Moores et al., 2023).

In this article, we utilise the ongoing evaluation of the APP at Northumbria University to contribute to the emerging discourse on WP and OSM. Specifically, we contribute to the discourse on temporary mobility, involving short-term experiences or study abroad integrated with a student's domestic curriculum, juxtaposed with degree mobility, involving students pursuing full degrees abroad (Chien, 2013). Northumbria University describes itself as a WP Institution, with 90.1% of students reporting they have one or more WP characteristics, according to diversity monitoring enrolment data. These include characteristics prescribed by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, as well as underrepresented groups recognised by the University (Northumbria University, 2023). This encompasses students with caregiving responsibilities, LGBTQ+ students, first-generation students and commuter students. OSM constitutes one of the primary expenditures within activities outlined in the APP at Northumbria University, playing a significant role in reducing the gaps in student success. According to data from the Graduate Outcomes survey, students in POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2 (representing students from areas or backgrounds with the highest levels of socioeconomic disadvantage or underrepresentation) who engage in OSM exhibit the highest success rates, with 78.4% achieving positive graduate destinations (including working in high-skilled employment and pursuing further study) over 3 years (Northumbria University, 2024).

This laid out, we assess the successes, challenges and opportunities of OSM through the lens of WP. This is underpinned by the following objectives: to evaluate the impact of OSM on the personal and professional growth of WP students; to identify the barriers and

challenges they face in accessing these opportunities; and to explore strategies for enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of OSM programmes tailored to their needs. Through this, we address the nuances of WP and OSM focusing on the lived experiences and subjectivities of students from diverse backgrounds. By doing so, we respond to and contribute to the growing calls for a better understanding of the lived experience of WP in shaping educational outcomes (O'Toole et al., 2024; Rainford, 2023).

SITUATING AND UNPACKING OSM THROUGH THE LENS OF WP

OSM at Northumbria University offers diverse opportunities, from internships in Colombia and Vietnam to volunteer work across Europe and Asia, and scholarly engagements at partner universities in France, Spain, Canada and Japan. These programmes are supported both internally through the APP and externally via the Turing Scheme. Launched in 2020 as part of the UK's post-Brexit strategy, the Turing scheme was created in response to the UK's change of status in the Erasmus+ programme from participant to partner country. With a funding allocation of £110 million (Turing Scheme, 2021), the scheme emphasises shorter placement durations and focuses on students from underprivileged backgrounds (Brooks & Waters, 2023; Waters, 2022). The scheme embodies not just practicality but also wider geopolitical aspirations, seeking to address socioeconomic inequalities while nurturing a British identity (Fox & Beech, 2024). Aligned with APP principles, the Turing Scheme underscores the importance of WP, mandating that initiatives demonstrate clear support for access (Turing Scheme, 2024). Despite initial evaluation noting increased participation rates, particularly from students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the effectiveness of the scheme has been compromised by logistical challenges such as delayed funding decisions (Department for Education, 2024). The scheme has also faced criticism for providing less funding to disadvantaged students over the same period compared with the Erasmus+ scheme (British Academy, 2023). Moreover, administrative complexities and doubts about the sustainability of non-reciprocal relationships cast doubt on the scheme's long-term viability and its potential influence on international relations and social mobility (Fox & Beech, 2024; Guibert & Rayón, 2021; Waters, 2024). However, these constraints may be ironed out with time, and the scheme marks a questioned yet constructive juncture by bringing access in OSM into focus (Schnepf & Colagrossi, 2020).

While OSM is generally associated with positive outcomes, criticism exists. We break this down into four key areas: firstly, OSM is criticised for its environmental impact, challenging the notion of higher education institutions promoting sustainable development (Shields, 2019); secondly, volunteering programmes are scrutinised for perpetuating colonial power dynamics, reinforcing inequality rather than addressing it (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016); thirdly, some OSM schemes are accused of promoting nationalist agendas over integration initiatives (Fox & Beech, 2024); and lastly, concerns are raised about the effectiveness of short-term mobility programmes in providing meaningful cultural immersion and long-term benefits (Waters, 2022). Despite these concerns, the literature reinforces the consensus that OSM yields positive outcomes. Capturing the essence of this, OSM catalyses holistic development, fostering personal growth, life skills acquisition and increased knowledge (Asada, 2021; Haas, 2018; Leong, 2007; Maharaja, 2018; Trower & Lehmann, 2017; Williams & Johnson, 2011). Moreover, OSM facilitates cognitive shifts and value transformations, endowing students with a broader perspective and adaptability crucial for navigating an interconnected world (Dal Magro et al., 2020; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Simpson et al., 2010). These benefits extend beyond personal enrichment, significantly impacting future career performance by equipping students with valuable skills and experiences (Abodohoui &

Su, 2020; Morris et al., 2013). Crucially, OSM entails both the economic and intellectual contributions of students to host countries. These contributions include direct financial support through tuition fees and living expenses, as well as indirect benefits such as the provision of skilled labour and the promotion of technological advancements (Gribble, 2008; Levent, 2016). Even the cautious literature, which suggests studying abroad may slightly lower grades, recognises the benefits of OSM, including cross-cultural experiences and personal growth (Nwosu, 2022). Additionally, negative outcomes in this regard are partially attributable to the selective transfer of grades, thereby resulting in a misleading negative perception. In the same vein, the literature on barriers faced by smaller host countries, including ineffective competition, resource limitations and concerns about preserving national identities, acknowledges the sizeable contribution of international students to economic, academic and cultural development (Urbanovič et al., 2016).

Theoretical foundations underscore these outcomes, with motivation theory shedding light on students' choices to pursue studies overseas and their subsequent adjustment (Ajzen, 2020; Deci & Ryan, 2000). For instance, Schnusenberg et al. (2012) apply planned behaviour theory to explore students' intentions for studying abroad. The study extends this by integrating cognitive, affective and economic factors as mediators, revealing the intricate influence of affordability, willingness to pay and perceived benefits on students' decisions. Specifically, the study finds affordability to be the most significant determinant of participation intention, with future job prospects and administrative support strongly impacting willingness to pay. Acculturation theory sheds light on students' adaptation processes in new environments, emphasising sociocultural and psychological adjustments (Berry, 1997; Searle & Ward, 1990). For instance, Cho and Morris (2015) discover that when students are given choices, they experience a heightened sense of empowerment, acquire more vocabulary and lean towards proposing solutions aligned with cultural norms. Furthermore, capital theory underscores the acquisition of valuable skills, knowledge and networks through international education, enhancing students' economic and social prospects (Bourdieu, 1987). For instance, Singh and Fan (2021) demonstrate that international education enhances human capital via overseas qualifications and employment-related skills, increasing graduates' attractiveness to employers. Additionally, they examine how psychological capital, developed through independent living abroad, provides graduates with adaptability crucial for competitive job markets. Moreover, the study investigates the cultivation of identity, cultural and social capital, empowering graduates to engage effectively with diverse workplace cultures and networks, thereby boosting their employability and career prospects upon their return. Collectively, these insights underscore the transformative impact of OSM observed at Northumbria University, highlighting the intrinsic value embedded in OSM.

Recognising this value, higher education institutions are striving to improve access to OSM, especially for WP students. After all, the benefits of OSM appear to be amplified for WP students. However, doing so is a multifaceted challenge, as highlighted by an extensive body of literature. A report by Universities UK International (2017) highlights the significant underrepresentation of disadvantaged groups in OSM. The report advocates for targeted interventions, collaborative efforts and transparent information dissemination to address socioeconomic disparities and promote WP. Expanding upon this, the literature delineates several prominent themes, including socioeconomic obstacles (Otero, 2008), institutional characteristics and practices (Singh & Fan, 2021; Whatley & Stich, 2021), motivational factors (Beerkens et al., 2016; Schnusenberg et al., 2012), as well as psychological and social dimensions (Cho & Morris, 2015; Heirweg et al., 2019; Sulejmanov et al., 2021). A recent report by Universities UK International (2022) highlights the difficulties arising from current issues, including prolonged border closures or restrictions in destinations such as China, alongside significant geopolitical events like Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, heightened financial constraints and a growing desire for on-campus social experiences

following an extended period of study online present hurdles. These issues may be especially discouraging for WP students, who may be more vulnerable, face greater financial constraints and have limited access to support networks. Raaper and Brown (2020) suggest that the latter may be especially pronounced as a long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these insights underscore the necessity of holistic approaches, including enhanced accessibility to financial aid, comprehensive support structures, collaborative efforts among stakeholders and strategic interventions tailored to address diverse barriers effectively. We suggest that institutional-level dialogue is particularly beneficial to the sector, contributing not only to the discourse on WP and OSM but also to evaluating APPs broadly (Moores et al., 2023).

METHODS

Our evaluation uses data from three sources collected between 2022 and 2024: an in-development questionnaire ($N=24$); reflective video diaries submitted by OSM participants ($N=28$); and interviews conducted with OSM participants ($N=32$). Using multiple sources enhances the reliability and validity of findings, enabling more robust conclusions (Bryman, 2016). It also promotes continuous reflection and refinement of interpretation, facilitating a more dynamic and iterative process of knowledge generation (Torrance, 2012). The questionnaire was distributed both before and after participation in OSM, while the video diaries and interviews were collected only after participants' overseas experiences, with participants having the option to contribute via either method. As such, we do not distinguish between the video diaries and interviews in our analysis. Owing to anonymity requirements, we cannot ascertain whether questionnaire participants also submitted a video diary or took part in an interview; however, there is no overlap between participants who submitted video diaries and those who participated in interviews. The sampling approach for the questionnaire followed a convenience-based pilot sampling method, whereas the sampling for the video diaries and interviews employed a maximum variation sampling strategy, focusing on heterogeneous WP backgrounds (Suri, 2011). In our sample, 42 participants reported facing socioeconomic and background challenges, such as low-income backgrounds; 26 identified as belonging to underrepresented identities and communities, including ethnic and racial minorities; and 29 indicated unique circumstances and experiences, such as caregiving responsibilities.[2] Approximately 62 participants completed an international short experience, lasting between 4 and 8 weeks, as opposed to or in addition to a semester or year-long placement. None of the placements involved paid work.

Acknowledging the complexities and tensions of balancing participatory ideals with practical realities (Giannakaki et al., 2018; Papadopoulou & Sidorenko, 2022), the video diaries and interviews sought to engage participants in analysing and interpreting the existing evaluation data, thus granting them ownership of the resultant knowledge (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Furthermore, embedding participation underscores the importance of context and the inclusion of multiple participants in knowledge production (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). In practice, this involved participants sharing their insights and perspectives on the existing data. Through collaborative knowledge creation, participants were invited to prioritise insights crucial for decision-making, thereby nurturing a deeper understanding of findings with an emphasised participant perspective. This fosters empowerment and liberation among participants, nurturing a collaborative atmosphere conducive to organisational learning and informed decision-making (Patton, 2011).

The data were analysed using a simplified template analysis (King, 1998), with an a priori coding scheme of successes, challenges and opportunities. Secondary coding examined socioeconomic status, underrepresented identities and unique circumstances. Tertiary

coding then delved deeper into these factors, elucidating the differences and similarities among participants, thereby shedding light on the pertinent successes, challenges and opportunities. The simplified analysis was selected for several reasons. The predefined codes establish a structured framework for data analysis, focusing on the key aspects of successes, challenges and opportunities. This approach facilitates actionable insights by identifying areas suitable for replication of scalability, addressing challenges that require attention and highlighting opportunities for improvement or innovation. In addition, it streamlines the analysis process, enhancing efficiency and feasibility, particularly when dealing with ongoing evaluation that involves multiple data sources.

In the analysis, pseudonyms are used to ensure the anonymity and privacy of participants. This has an additional benefit: participants are less susceptible to being influenced by assumptions based on names in collaborative knowledge creation (Bryman, 2016). Consequently, this fosters a fairer and more impartial environment for exchanging ideas and viewpoints, thereby enriching the overall collaborative experience. Pseudonyms were chosen through a random name generator to mitigate any potential influence from researchers, ensuring a neutral selection process. This method enhances objectivity and reduces the likelihood of unconscious biases.

ANALYSIS

Successes

Our analysis supports the consensus that OSM yields positive outcomes. The questionnaire reveals measurable improvements in key areas of career readiness and employability. After participating in OSM, students showed a clearer understanding of their strengths, work preferences and motivations, helping them better define their professional identity, which is crucial for career planning and self-presentation. The data also highlights significant progress in workplace skills, including teamwork, problem-solving and leadership. Students gained confidence in applying these skills in professional settings, suggesting that the hands-on experiences offered by OSM were vital in their development (Singh & Fan, 2021). Given that WP students can face limited access to professional environments, this is particularly beneficial. Additionally, students developed a clearer understanding of potential career paths, probably owing to their exposure to new environments and networks, helping them plan more effectively for the future. The data also show that students became more confident in job hunting, including networking, using social media and preparing a curriculum vitae and applications, making them more adept at navigating the job market.

The video diaries and interviews reveal transformative experiences among students, highlighting significant personal growth, in line with findings from Asada (2021), Haas (2018) and Leong (2007). Students described building resilience through experiences like navigating uncooperative situations while teaching English in Spain, managing infectious diseases in Tanzania, adapting to new environments in Uganda, and living without access to technology in remote Fiji. These challenges fostered adaptability, a critical skill for students from underrepresented backgrounds. In terms of professional development, students emphasised the role of OSM in enhancing communication, teamwork and presentation skills, essential for the global job market, echoing Abodohoui and Su (2020) and Morris et al. (2013). Reflections on acquiring practical skills, such as managing infectious diseases, further support the value of OSM in developing competencies across diverse fields. For instance, Elena, a student from a low-income background, completed a healthcare placement in Tanzania and shared:

> I also got to learn loads of things about diseases, infectious diseases over there, how to, you know, assess them, how to manage them, how to manage complications, et cetera, which will be vital for my job, and it's made us think about going into things like infectious diseases and stuff.

Students reported a broadening of their perspectives on global issues and cross-cultural understanding, aligning with insights from Dal Magro et al. (2020), Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) and Simpson et al. (2010). Engaging in cultural activities exposed them to diverse local customs, fostering a deeper appreciation for global disparaties and social issues, consistent with observations on acculturation theory (Cho & Morris, 2015). Students expressed gratitude for the cultural immersion they experienced abroad, reflecting the broader economic and intellectual contributions of international students to host countries (Gribble, 2008; Levent, 2016). Their desire to continue contributing to these communities, such as through collaboration with organisations like Play Action International, underscores the lasting impact of OSM, supporting the notion of international education's societal benefits beyond individual enrichment.

Our findings were consistent across students facing financial constraints, educational disadvantages, ethnic and racial minorities, first-generation students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, care-experienced students and mature students. For instance, Shalim, a mature student from a low-income background who identifies as LGBTQ+, completed an internship in Colombia and shared:

> I grew from completing the programme, as well as gaining invaluable experience in the prosthetics field of study. I made some amazing friends and gained new professional connections.

Additionally, Vale, a mature first-generation student, studied abroad in Austria and remarked:

> Since returning from studying abroad, I am much more confident and outgoing. I believe my additional knowledge in business and finance will be useful in my career. I also have more clarity in what I'd like to do as a career. As a mature master's student, I think my previous experience at work helped me to strategically select modules that would be beneficial to my career.

Lastly, Siriporn, a student from Southeast Asia with multiple OSM experiences, shared:

> I think having experienced how to live in a completely different environment exposes you to new things that otherwise you would not have come to realise or know. My interactions and connections with people that I met during my study abroad year made me a more confident and outgoing individual, therefore a form of personal growth. Skills-wise, I improved my knowledge in the language department … Lastly, the subjects that I took taught me fascinating new things such as the history of the countries that I have studied.

Siriporn further explained that their contributions had a positive impact on the host country by improving English language skills among both students and the local community. Through direct interaction, they promoted the use of English, helping to develop a more effective curriculum for teaching English to younger students and addressing the demands of an increasingly globalised society.

While the benefits of OSM are valuable for all students, they appear to be particularly transformative for WP students. Students, like Shalim, Vale and Siriporn, face challenges associated with limited access to cultural and social capital—key resources for breaking into high-status

careers. For these students, OSM provides experiences that can reshape their habitus, exposing them to professional norms and behaviours that are often taken for granted in elite circles (Bourdieu, 1987). Shalim's internship in Colombia, for example, not only provided valuable professional skills but also enabled him to build connections in the prosthetics field, a sector that might otherwise have been difficult to access. This kind of social capital is critical for WP students, who may not have existing networks to support their career progression.

Similarly, Vale's ability to strategically select modules during his time in Austria demonstrates how OSM can empower WP students to make more informed and confident decisions about their careers. The exposure to international academic environments and networks gives students the tools to envision and pursue career paths they may not have previously considered. As seen in the questionnaire responses, students reported increased confidence in job hunting and career planning post-OSM, a critical shift for those who may lack access to professional guidance in their personal lives.

Furthermore, Siriporn's experiences highlight the habitus-transforming potential of OSM. Her contributions to English language education in her host country, coupled with her expanded cultural and professional horizons, reflect how OSM not only equips WP students with practical skills but also instils the confidence and global perspective needed to compete in high-status careers. These transformative effects are particularly amplified for WP students, whose barriers to elite professional environments are often more pronounced than those of their peers.

Students also consistently indicated that COVID-19 or global conflicts did not deter their participation in OSM. The most common responses to this question indicated either a clear negative or only slight concern. This suggests that the anticipated negative impacts of prolonged border closures or restrictions highlighted by Universities UK International (2022) did not significantly materialise for these participants. Instead, students viewed OSM as an opportunity to make up for lost experiences during the pandemic, indicating a strong motivational drive that overcame potential barriers. Furthermore, this resilience building among students could imply that institutions have successfully implemented effective support structures and communicated safe and flexible OSM opportunities, mitigating the concerns outlined in the literature. This successful adaptation contrasts with the emphasis on the discouraging effects of the pandemic and geopolitical events, suggesting that targeted interventions and institutional support can significantly buffer the anticipated negative impacts on the participation of WP students in OSM.

Challenges

Our analysis reveals that financial constraints were a pervasive barrier across the entire sample, impacting not only students who reported socioeconomic and background challenges but also those who did not explicitly identify financial hardship. This suggests that financial obstacles in OSM are more widespread and nuanced, with even students who do not consider themselves financially disadvantaged facing significant barriers to participation. This finding supports existing literature, particularly motivation theory, which underscores affordability as a central factor shaping students' decisions to engage in OSM (Schnusenberg et al., 2012). For example, Sabine, a student from a low-income background, studied abroad in Spain and shared:

> The financial challenges have been hard … I was not fully aware when I signed up to study in Spain just how expensive the visa would be. I wish this was made clearer. I was very lucky to have received Turing which was a very big help once I moved to Spain and allowed me to live more comfortably.

Similarly, Bryson, who participated in an overseas experience in France, reflected on their background and shared:

> The only challenging background I come from is a low-income, single-parent family.

When asked about their motivations for participating, Socheata, a student from a low-income, single-parent background who took part in an overseas experience in Germany, shared:

> I thought it would be an interesting experience but believed I would not be able to take part due to costs!

We also found that balancing part-time work with academic responsibilities presents a significant challenge for many students, further intensifying the financial constraints linked to OSM. For example, Ryan, who studied abroad in Norway, reflected on their background and shared:

> financial constraints, no external money given for my studies relied on working part-time, student loans and grants.

This underscores the precarious financial situation many students face, often relying on a mix of part-time work and financial aid to fund their education. Terry, another student who participated in an overseas experience in the Netherlands, shared:

> having to work part-time alongside my studies. Both excited and apprehensive about navigating a new culture and potentially different social norms in Amsterdam.

This quote reflects the dual nature of excitement and anxiety that financial constraints can impose on students, potentially dampening their enthusiasm for international experiences. The necessity of working part-time not only limits the time and energy students can devote to their studies but also impacts their ability to fully immerse themselves in the cultural and academic experiences offered by OSM.

Beyond these challenges, students reported other characteristics that posed difficulties during their OSM experiences. For instance, some LGBTQ+ students reflected on the potential challenges of fitting into local cultures. However, the consensus was that this challenge was more about anxiety than an actual negative impact on their experience, with one saying, 'The only worries that stayed were financial'. This highlights how, for WP students, the overwhelming burden of financial constraints often eclipses other concerns tied to their identities, such as navigating cultural acceptance as LGBTQ+ individuals. Similarly, while mature students voiced concerns about fitting in with younger peers, their primary challenge was also financial. This suggests that while students from diverse backgrounds may encounter different identity-related anxieties, the pressing issue of financial stability becomes the dominant concern, overshadowing other potential difficulties. Reflecting on this, Catherine, who participated in an overseas experience in the United States, shared:

> I first assumed I would not be able to afford it. After looking into the programme, I thought that I could manage it. I realised too late that I could not afford it, that this programme is for students with wealthy parents to support them. As a mature student, it was tough living in a student dorm! But this I had also anticipated.

From the perspective of socioeconomic obstacles, students like Sabine and Bryson illustrate the unique challenges faced by those from low-income backgrounds, particularly when navigating opportunities like OSM, which often fall outside their usual habitus. For many WP students, the financial expectations associated with OSM, such as unexpected costs like visa fees, may seem insurmountable if not communicated, highlighting how unfamiliar this experience can be for students without prior exposure to international travel or study. This reflects Otero (2008), who observes that financial barriers are a primary obstacle for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, restricting their ability to participate in OSM. Additionally, institutional characteristics and support mechanisms play a pivotal role in either easing or exacerbating these challenges. While Sabine was able to alleviate some financial strain through the Turing Scheme, Catherine's experience underscores how inconsistencies in institutional support can leave WP students feeling underserved. For students whose financial realities are far removed from those of their more affluent peers, the variability in institutional financial aid can either help bridge the gap or deepen the divide. As Singh and Fan (2021) and Whatley and Stich (2021) argue, equitable access to OSM is heavily influenced by the effectiveness of institutional policies and financial support. Inconsistent or insufficient aid can significantly worsen the financial challenges faced by WP students, who may already perceive OSM as an opportunity that lies beyond their sociocultural frame of reference.

Motivational factors offer deeper insight into the complexity of WP students' decisions to participate in OSM. For WP students like Socheata, financial concerns play a particularly influential role, often leading to initial hesitation, as seen in her concern about covering costs. This highlights a critical distinction: for WP students, financial considerations are not just one factor among many but are often the primary determinant of participation. Beerkens et al. (2016) and Schnusenberg et al. (2012) underscore that financial affordability and the perceived return on investment are key drivers in the decision-making process, and this holds even greater weight for WP students, who may already lack the social capital to feel confident in navigating OSM opportunities. The promise of enhanced career prospects and personal growth might attract students to OSM, but financial barriers disproportionately impact WP students, often deterring even the most motivated from fully engaging. For this group, the risk of financial burden may outweigh the perceived long-term benefits, reflecting the socioeconomic challenges that are particularly salient for WP participants in accessing and committing to OSM experiences.

The psychological and social challenges associated with financial constraints are especially pronounced for WP students, who often experience heightened anxiety when participating in OSM. The dual emotions of excitement and anxiety, as expressed by Terry, illustrate the significant mental toll that financial worries can impose on these students, who may already feel out of place in unfamiliar sociocultural settings. Financial stress for WP students is not merely a logistical concern but a pervasive psychological burden that can impede their ability to fully engage in and benefit from the OSM experience. As Cho and Morris (2015) and Heirweg et al. (2019) suggest, financial strain can affect mental well-being and hinder students' ability to integrate into new cultural environments, a challenge magnified for WP students owing to their limited exposure to such opportunities. Furthermore, the additional necessity of balancing part-time work with academic and social obligations, as noted by Ryan, exacerbates these challenges, limiting WP students' social engagement and immersion. This financial strain may diminish the overall effectiveness of OSM, as the time and energy spent managing economic responsibilities detract from the programme's transformative potential. The persistent anxiety surrounding financial stability can overshadow the personal and professional growth that OSM promises, preventing WP students from fully realising its benefits.

Opportunities

Our analysis highlights several emerging opportunities driven by student voices. Firstly, there is a significant issue with the widespread misconception that OSM is predominantly accessible to students from middle and upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, both Socheata and Catherine mentioned that they initially thought they would not be able to afford to participate in OSM. This perception may limit the aspirations and applications of students from diverse and low-income backgrounds. This is particularly relevant given the increasing popularity of short-term programmes among WP students, as these are often seen as more affordable and accessible options. To address the ongoing challenge, it is necessary to develop enhanced communication strategies that showcase the inclusivity and accessibility of the Turing Scheme. Targeted marketing campaigns should highlight the success stories of students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds who have benefited from these shorter-term programmes. By featuring these stories prominently, institutions can demonstrate that OSM opportunities are open to all students, regardless of their financial situation. Highlighting diverse role models in these campaigns can inspire confidence and ambition among underrepresented students, showing that financial constraints should not be seen as insurmountable barriers to participation. For instance, Bryson shared:

> I believe it is already advertised well, but maybe highlighting it can be affordable for everyone would allow those in my situation to see the potential opportunities without immediately shutting them down.

Furthermore, leveraging social media platforms and student testimonials can help create a more relatable and inspiring narrative. Personal experiences and achievements from students of diverse backgrounds can challenge the notion of exclusivity, which often stems not just from financial barriers but also from the habitus associated with certain socioeconomic groups. By sharing these testimonials through engaging content on platforms popular with students, institutions can reach a wide audience and foster a sense of community and belonging. Additionally, targeted outreach efforts, including informational sessions and workshops specifically for low-income students, can provide practical guidance on application processes and available support, helping to break down both financial and cultural barriers to participation.

A relevant consideration is that while our analysis focuses on measures that can be implemented within the current system, such as improving communication and outreach efforts, more may be done to address the real financial needs of WP students. The suggestion of needs-based international study grants, for example, could offer a more direct solution to the financial barriers that many students face. While enhancing the promotion of existing schemes like Turing is important, exploring additional financial support mechanisms could make OSM truly accessible to all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Secondly, ensuring the provision of detailed budgeting guides and transparent information on financial support is necessary to mitigate financial constraints, a significant barrier identified by many students. For example, Owen, a first-generation student who participated in experiences in both Thailand and Croatia, shared:

> I think if there are some realistic financial figures viewable more people might be interested as I assumed it was going to be a lot more expensive than it was.

Along the same lines, Bayley, a student with dyslexia who participated in experiences in Poland, shared:

> leading with that it can be accessible to students from lower-income families is important, as I think the financial worry puts a lot of students off whereby the combination of turning grants and increased student loan makes it very achievable.

Taking this onboard, developing comprehensive guides that meticulously outline all expenses associated with OSM—such as visas, travel, accommodation and daily living costs—has the potential to empower students with the knowledge to plan their finances effectively. These guides should include practical tips, budgeting templates and thorough cost breakdowns to aid students in anticipating and managing their expenses. In addition to written resources, conducting financial planning workshops may further empower students to confidently handle their finances. These workshops may cover essential topics such as managing money abroad, understanding currency exchange rates and optimising financial aid opportunities. Through interactive sessions and practical advice, these workshops can clarify the financial intricacies of participating in OSM. Moreover, providing clear guidance to financial aid resources and offering personalised one-on-one financial counselling sessions would be beneficial. Tailored advice based on individual financial circumstances can provide students with the support they need to make informed decisions and alleviate financial concerns associated with OSM. These initiatives can assist students in navigating the complexities of funding their international experiences.

Thirdly, ensuring the promotion of mental health and counselling services tailored to the specific needs of OSM participants is necessary for their overall well-being. For example, Xochiquetzal, who participated in an experience in the Netherlands, reflected on ways to improve accessibility and shared:

> Significantly more mental health help … there was barely any even the staff admitted this. More check-ins would have been good considering it's such a big change.

In light of this, it is essential to thoroughly inform students about these services both before they embark on their international experiences and throughout their time abroad, ensuring they know where to seek assistance if needed. Providing readily accessible contact details and straightforward booking procedures, alongside actively encouraging students to use these services, has the potential to significantly alleviate the anxiety often associated with OSM. To maintain a robust support system for students, regular check-ins, virtual counselling sessions and peer support groups may be established. These initiatives play a crucial role in maintaining a continuous connection between students and the institution, fostering a supportive environment even while they are overseas. Additionally, virtual workshops focusing on cultural adjustment, stress management and coping strategies may further equip students with essential skills to thrive in their new environments. By prioritising these comprehensive support mechanisms within the constraints of available resources, institutions can effectively address students' mental health needs throughout their OSM experiences. This proactive approach not only enhances students' well-being but also significantly contributes to their overall academic and personal success abroad.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the absence of reflections from students with certain WP characteristics, such as those with caregiving responsibilities, limits the comprehensiveness of the findings. These students often face unique challenges that can significantly impact their participation in and benefits from OSM.

Without their insights, the evaluation may overlook crucial barriers and support needs specific to this group, potentially leading to incomplete or biased conclusions about the effectiveness of WP initiatives. Secondly, the lack of longitudinal data restricts the ability to understand the long-term impacts of OSM on students' academic and professional trajectories. Longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into how initial gains from OSM experiences translate into sustained outcomes, such as career advancement and personal development over time. The absence of such data means that this study can only capture immediate or short-term effects, which may not fully represent the lasting benefits or challenges associated with OSM. Moreover, the institutional specificity of this study may limit the generalisability of the findings to other higher education contexts. While the focus on Northumbria University provides detailed insights into the implementation and outcomes of WP and OSM within this setting, it may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and practices across different institutions. However, this institutional-level dialogue remains particularly beneficial to the sector. By contributing evaluative reviews, institutions like Northumbria University play a crucial role in informing broader discussions on WP and OSM. Such contributions help to evaluate and refine APPs across the sector, promoting more effective and inclusive policies and practices. Through sharing their experiences and findings, institutions can collectively enhance the understanding and implementation of WP initiatives.

DENOUEMENT

This study aimed to investigate the successes, challenges and opportunities of OSM through the lens of WP. In response to the first objective of evaluating the impact of OSM on the personal and professional growth of WP students, our analysis revealed several key successes. While the benefits of OSM, such as personal development and enhanced career readiness, are evident across all participants, WP students appear to gain even more profoundly from these experiences. For WP students, who often face structural barriers tied to limited access to social and cultural capital, OSM serves as a powerful tool to expand their habitus and unlock new opportunities. By immersing themselves in unfamiliar environments and professional networks, these students acquire valuable skills and insights that reshape their perspectives and enable them to navigate spaces traditionally closed off to them. This aligns with data showing high success rates among students from POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2 who engage in OSM. The resilience demonstrated by WP students, particularly in the face of financial challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic and global conflicts, underscores the importance of institutional support, including the Turing Scheme, in fostering access and success. These findings emphasise the unique and amplified benefits of OSM for WP students, reaffirming the value of targeted interventions to ensure equitable participation and outcomes across the UK higher education landscape.

In response to the second objective of identifying the barriers and challenges faced by WP students in accessing OSM, our analysis highlighted several critical obstacles. Financial constraints were the most significant challenge, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. Many WP students faced difficulties in covering the costs associated with OSM, including travel, accommodation and additional expenses such as visas. Furthermore, the necessity of balancing part-time work with academic responsibilities exacerbated these financial pressures, leaving little room for students to fully engage in and benefit from the OSM experience. This balancing act often restricted their ability to immerse themselves in the cultural and academic opportunities abroad, thereby limiting the transformative potential of OSM. In addition to financial barriers, WP students faced social and psychological challenges, such as anxiety about fitting into unfamiliar

environments, though these concerns were frequently overshadowed by the overwhelming financial strain. These findings underscore the unique and multifaceted challenges WP students face in accessing OSM, highlighting the need for sustained institutional support to mitigate the impact of these barriers.

In response to the final objective of exploring strategies to enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of OSM programmes for WP students, our analysis revealed several opportunities for improvement. Enhanced communication strategies are essential to ensure that OSM is perceived as accessible and inclusive, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. Many WP students may initially assume that OSM is financially out of reach, so institutions must actively promote the availability of financial support, such as grants and scholarships, while showcasing success stories of students from diverse backgrounds who have participated. Additionally, providing detailed budgeting guides that clearly outline the costs involved in OSM, alongside transparent information on financial support options, would help students plan effectively and alleviate concerns about affordability. Beyond financial considerations, promoting mental health and counselling services tailored to the specific needs of OSM participants is crucial. These services can play a vital role in supporting students as they navigate the emotional and psychological challenges of living and studying in unfamiliar environments. Regular check-ins, access to virtual counselling and peer support networks can help foster a supportive atmosphere, enabling WP students to thrive both personally and academically during their OSM experience.

To conclude, this study provides valuable insights into the multifaceted impact of OSM on WP students. While the successes highlight the significant personal and professional growth facilitated by OSM, the challenges underscore the persistent financial barriers that need to be addressed. By capitalising on the identified opportunities for improvement, institutions can further enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of OSM, ultimately benefiting a broader range of students.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data for this study cannot be shared.

ETHICAL APPROVAL
Ethical approval for this study was granted by Northumbria University. All research adhered to the BERA Ethical Guidelines.

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Endnotes
[1] Although international student mobility is a commonly used term, it can be unclear whether it refers to international students or home students studying abroad. To avoid this ambiguity, we adopt the term OSM, as favoured by UK Universities International.

[2] NB, The totals do not sum to the overall sample size because participants may identify with more than one WP characteristic, reflecting the intersectionality of their identities and experiences.

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