Breaking the Silence

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Breaking the silence: career guidance for self-initiated international placement students

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Abstract

Purpose – Self-initiated international placements by students have been largely ignored in the literature on outward mobility in higher education. The support given to self-initiated international placement students, if any, has received even less attention. This study aims to address this lacuna.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on insights from global mobility literature, we conducted a survey of UK university students who engaged in self-initiated international placements to various countries such as France, China, Brazil and Ghana. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic content analysis.

Findings – Findings reveal that these "voluntary" placements can improve language fluency, increase self-confidence, renew stress management abilities and enhance cross-cultural competencies and intercultural sensitivity. The study problematises the lack of support given to these students particularly in terms of career development.

Originality/value – Our paper is one of the first to bring this under-studied population to the attention of career guidance scholars. We propose that scholarly attention should be directed toward the agency of self-initiated international placement students and that targeted career guidance must be provided through more inclusive career services.

Keywords Global mobility, Self-initiation, Careers support, International assignments, Placements

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Universities are under growing pressure to internationalise their operations and increasing the outward mobility of faculty and students is a prevailing way to achieve this globalisation objective (Soliman *et al.*, 2019). It is well recognised that influxes of international students from foreign countries, particularly China, India and other parts of Asia have become important markets for enriching the financial portfolios and global trajectories of universities, particularly in the UK (Universities UK, 2023). However, the public health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic triggered border closures, travel bans and mandatory quarantine requirements, which restricted global mobility in the higher education sector. As such, there has been a rapid transformation in the nature of how work, the workplace and the workforce engage in global mobility. In this new normal, the uncertainties surrounding employment, employability and career paths, coupled with the unpredictable potential of technological advancements, have made student mobility and career guidance crucial for universities to prosper (Benati *et al.*, 2023).

Traditionally, universities have been ill-equipped to invest in conventional forms of internationalisation, which involve the outward flow of capital, particularly the cross-border relocation of human assets (Seeber *et al.*, 2020). Universities increasingly recognise that one way to address this limitation is through the relocation of students on international work placements or study abroad opportunities that are formally built into a programme of study – an embedded approach to increase employability (Roy *et al.*, 2019). Most universities use a

parallel approach to develop employability skills and provide career guidance via centralised career services (Bradley *et al.*, 2021). Unfortunately, student engagement with career services has been limited in many cases (Bradley *et al.*, 2021), despite evidence of a positive association between higher levels of participation in career guidance and higher levels of career readiness in certain populations (Kuijpers, 2019). However, recent evidence suggests that in some UK universities at least, career advisors are compelled to reduce the duration of guidance sessions (Reid, 2022), to accommodate a larger number of students with limited resources. Consequently, students may become disillusioned by the limited guidance they receive, which in turn leads to an increased demand for the service. The need for meaningful career guidance and support is increasing and there is evidence to suggest that such services are appreciated by students and that they contribute to reducing the gap between education and employability (Cobelli *et al.*, 2019).

Students who undertake "compulsory" placements have been studied extensively, in part due to the ease with which data can be collected from university services (Hooley, 2014). There is a wealth of knowledge on the advantages of university-initiated work placements (Brooks and Youngson, 2016), how these students are supported (Aamaas *et al.*, 2019; Jerez Gomez *et al.*, 2023) and their experiences in an international context (Conroy and McCarthy, 2019). However, pre-COVID-19 evidence in the UK suggests that students have also undertaken international work placements on their own initiative beyond their formal degree programme (Universities UK, 2023). This decision to voluntarily pursue international placements, despite the potential obstacles, raises interesting questions about why these students decide to go abroad on their own initiative and what challenges they face without university support. We refer to this phenomenon as *self-initiated* international placements. To our knowledge, there has been limited research into the motivations and strategies of students who pursue international placements without institutional support, despite the potential challenges of such endeavours compared to local or regional placements. Recent research has neglected to consider the perspectives and experiences of these students (Atfield *et al.*, 2011). Recognising the significance of self-initiated placements is a key step for universities in their efforts to adopt inclusive and student-centred approaches to education and student support. To address this gap, we draw attention to this overlooked phenomenon and the following research questions guided our study: (1) why do students choose to embark on self-initiated international placements and what encourages them to persevere? (2) what kinds of challenges do they face and (3) what support do students expect from career services to effectively navigate their self-initiated international placements?

The paper's originality lies in the use of global mobility literature to emphasise the importance of making career services more inclusive in universities. Jacklin and Le Riche's (2009) argue that student support in universities must be conceptualised as an ongoing process of proactively creating "supportive" cultures and contexts, as opposed to considering it as a reactive response to perceived student problems. Since careers service is one of the main departments for supporting students in improving their job readiness, and the ability to secure suitable jobs after graduation, we define inclusive student support as follows: a set of person-centred, proactive practices that continuously support all students to learn, develop, contribute to and participate in all aspects of university and society, during and after their studies so that they can become employable or entrepreneurial citizens.

By bridging two distinct research traditions of global mobility and higher education we bring fresh theoretical insights into creating more inclusive career services in universities. Our paper can help career guidance researchers and university stakeholders to develop a critical understanding of the issues faced by self-initiated international placement students.

Self-initiated international placements

Research suggests that universities provide compulsory international placements with formal pre-departure support through a suite of intensive year-long training classes and workshops dedicated to helping students search for and secure placements (Conroy and McCarthy, 2019). Compulsory placements refer to "a year-long integrated period of work experience which is undertaken by students at many UK universities as part of their degree (often between the second and final year)" of an undergraduate programme, also known as sandwich placements (Jones *et al.*, 2017, p. 976). Although many of these programmes include industry placements, typically international business programmes promote international placements and offer support to students. This support involves continuous communication from the university throughout the placement through an assigned academic mentor, formalised repatriation workshops and recognition of the experience in degree transcripts (Aamaas *et al.*, 2019; Jerez Gomez *et al.*, 2023). In contrast, self-initiated placements are not formally integrated into the student's degree, meaning there may be limited resources to avail of before, during and after these placements. Self-initiated placement students choose to work abroad independently and may not receive any university provisions, severely hindering their ability to be successful in securing and completing international work. As such, we suggest that initiating and embarking on international placements voluntarily is a high risk and challenging endeavour for students. Despite the challenges, there is limited empirical research, if any, on understanding the experiences of students that embark on self-initiated international placements, as well as how universities cater for this overlooked group.

We draw on insights from global mobility literature to understand this phenomenon. We posit that self-initiated international placements are similar to the concept of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) (Doherty, 2013). SIEs are defined as individuals who undertake international work without the sponsorship of an organisation (Andresen *et al.*, 2020). Research in this space has focused on the motivations and experiences of SIEs arguing that these are in stark contrast to company-backed assignees (Brewster *et al.*, 2021). The impetus for SIEs to work abroad comes from the individual, as the desire for adventure and exploration motivates them intrinsically to build self-confidence, develop skills and personal learning (Doherty, 2013). A high level of personal initiative and individual proactivity, therefore, characterise SIEs, and they show self-reliance, information seeking, forward planning and an ability to cope with ambiguity and complexity (Andresen *et al.*, 2020). Global mobility studies further reveal how working abroad presents significant challenges for SIEs in adjusting to a foreign country. For instance, cross-cultural adjustment comprises a general adjustment to cope with living in a foreign country, interaction adjustment in establishing new relationships and work adjustment in a professional setting (Brewster *et al.*, 2021). There is considerable research on the formalised training and support that company-backed assignees receive, such as information briefings, interactive language and cultural classes and immersive short-term trips in the target country before relocating (Hou *et al.*, 2018). SIEs, however, confront significant adjustment challenges in the new location, but research suggests they will not receive any formalised scaffolding support (Froese, 2012). Although SIEs' motives and experiences are driven by their own initiative, free from the direction and guidance of an incumbent organisation, they are also lacking in any formalised support.

Comparing self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) with self-initiated international placements

Parallel insights can be drawn between arguments on compulsory versus self-initiated international placements (in higher education) and those on company-backed versus SIEs. In terms of assignment duration, for example, much of the work on global mobility focuses on long-term self-initiated assignments known as expatriation, where individuals spend over 12 months working internationally. Given the changing nature of the global mobility

landscape, more flexible voluntary assignments such as short-term (3–12 months), virtual assignments and self-initiated international assignments are becoming more widespread. Despite the growing prevalence of self-initiated assignments – i.e. those that are independently organised by the individual outside formalised company support, scholars (Andresen *et al.*, 2020) indicate that we have a limited understanding of why individuals engage in this process, how they experience these assignments and the challenges they confront. Career capital is another potentially important motive for working abroad independently, with an eye on future employment and building experience or skills through working with an international organisation (Richard and Mallon, 2005).

Research on SIEs is limited regarding the adjustment challenges they face and how they cope in this context (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2009). Building social capital through friends, family and work colleagues in a foreign country can help with interaction adjustment (Doherty *et al.*, 2011). Carrying out research prior to departure on where to live, undertaking language classes and learning about the culture may assist with general adjustment. Identifying a suitable role, post-arrival training and organisation support may help work adjustment. Importantly, the extent to which SIEs adjust is dependent on the personal initiative they show, whereas company-backed assignees will have provisions in place to manage their adjustment (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010).

Self-initiated international placements in higher education

In relation to the motivations for undertaking self-initiated international placements, we assume that students may exhibit high personal initiative with a desire for adventure, personal and professional development, and cultural learning, given they need to explore opportunities independent of the university. We submit that self-initiated international placement students may have more agency in their location decision as compulsory placements are usually more constrained in the location they can travel to (Conroy and McCarthy, 2019). Equally, we contend that these students may show greater agency in crafting their own international work experience as opposed to compulsory placements that are bounded by the degree they are enrolled in and the expectations of the sponsoring university. However, there is limited empirical work on this group of students, so we base our assumptions on the global mobility literature.

Both groups (i.e. compulsory placements and self-initiated placements) will confront significant adjustment issues, such as cultural, personal and work adjustment, but the former will have the benefit of ongoing university support (Aamaas *et al.*, 2019; Jerez Gomez *et al.*, 2023; Roy *et al.*, 2019). Universities are likely to overlook how self-initiating students are prepared in advance, the challenges they face while on placement, and how they are leveraged as important sources of knowledge upon their return (Auburn, 2007; Goodwin and Mbah, 2019). Self-initiated placement students will have to apply for financial support outside of their degree programme whereas fees will usually account for financial costs incurred on compulsory placements. Indeed, some universities will not formally recognise self-initiated international placement students and they often require them to register officially on a part-time basis or take a leave of absence for the period they are abroad, meaning they have no access to university resources. Equally, placement organisations are usually under no contractual obligation to induct and train students that do not benefit from a triadic agreement between university-company-student, inherent in compulsory placements (Conroy and McCarthy, 2019).

We suggest that, given the lack of supporting infrastructure, self-initiated international placements are extremely precarious and may significantly affect the overall value of the student learning experience. Yet, students that embark on these journeys are likely intrinsically motivated and exhibit a high degree of proactiveness. In the context of pandemic-related lockdowns and border closures, we aim to unpack why these students undertook self-initiated

placements, what kinds of challenges they faced and what lessons can be learnt from their mobility experiences so that more inclusive career support could be developed.

Method

This study employs a cross-sectional descriptive survey design to understand the experiences of students on self-initiated international placements by gathering information at a single point in time. In this section, using the checklist for reporting results of Internet E-surveys (CHERRIES) (Eysenbach, 2004), we summarise the study procedures.

Survey design and questionnaire tool development

Our target population was registered undergraduates at a research-intensive university in the UK, during the academic year 2019–2020. Our sampling was the list of students who embarked on self-initiated international placements and returned to their home institution by March 2020, when the governments imposed travel restrictions. We used a descriptive survey instrument to collect data on important factors associated with self-initiated international placements, such as participants' demographic, attitudes, experiences and knowledge, challenges faced, and support received. Although several bespoke instruments such as the transition coping questionnaire (TCQ) developed by Schlossberg (1993) and the cross-cultural adjustment questionnaire created by Chen (2019) are found in the literature, they were intended to measure transitions of a more permanent nature, experienced by specific target groups (e.g. athletes and coaches); and very little, if any, focused on the short-term, temporary experiences of students. Therefore, based on a review of the literature on SIEs, we developed a 16-item questionnaire tool for the study (See Appendix).

Questionnaire design

Our tool consisted of Likert scale statements, ranking and open-ended questions, along with demographic questions on their age, gender and the number of dependants respondents may have. We included the following five topic areas.

(1) General information about the international placements (location, type of industry, job role, length)

(2) Motivation to undertake international placements (motivational triggers). We adapted the 12 motivational factors identified by Brewster *et al.* (2021) (See Table 1 below).

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1. Opportunities for travel and adventure
2. Career development
3. Economics (the financial costs and benefits of living and working abroad)
4. Personal relationships (partner, family or friends)
5. Quality of life (factors that improve the way you are able to live); and
6. The political environment (factors relating to the politics of the home or host country)
7. Location (perceptions of the host country location and the individual's perceived ability to adapt)
8. The desire for a foreign experience (adventure, challenge, opportunities to travel and work abroad)
9. Host country reputation
10. Benefits to the family of working abroad
11. Home–host relations and the opportunities for networking; and
12. Push factors (incentives to leave the home country)

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 1.
Motivating factors identified by Brewster *et al.* (2021) – adapted in this study

(3) The types of adjustments students must make and the challenges they faced (General-, interaction- and work-adjustment, and the related challenges during and after placements)

(4) University support (during and after placements). Drawing inspiration from the work of Aamaas *et al.* (2019) and Kuijpers (2019), which suggests that substantial support from key stakeholders like universities and employers is crucial for students to maximise the learning potential of international placements, we included this item in our questionnaire.

(5) Benefits gained and student advocacy (what is learnt, the likelihood of recommending the placement to peers)

The purpose of each of the items in the survey was to give students an opportunity to express their opinions and subjective experiences of undertaking self-initiated international placements.

Pilot study

We created an online version of the tool in Qualtrics software. Saunders *et al.* (2023) suggest that the number of people researchers choose for pilot studies "should be sufficient to include any major variations in [their] population that [they] feel are likely to affect responses" (p. 548). Since we do not know the size of the total population of students who voluntarily undertook international placements in the university, we relied on the two senior students who were available during the COVID-lockdown period, and who also had completed their international placements in previous years, in addition to our own expert judgement, to determine its face validity. Based on their comments, we removed two questions (the one on their placement start date and the other on whether they liked the placements) that did not enable us to get rich data, before administering it to the sampled population. The questionnaire contained a welcome message, followed by a consent form, and each topic had an open text box for free-text entry that helped gather students' explanatory stories. This allowed us to gather richer qualitative accounts of why they answered questions in a certain way and to elaborate on the nuances behind their responses.

Snowball sampling strategy

On obtaining approval from the host University's ethical review board, we commenced the data collection process. In the absence of a comprehensive database of relevant records on self-initiated international placements, we did not know how many participants could be reached, how many would return our questionnaire and if the returns would be of sufficient size to find meaningful associations, if any, between variables of interest. Therefore, we used a snowball sampling strategy to identify potential participants for this study. We began the process by distributing the questionnaire to two students who we knew had completed voluntary placements and encouraged them to pass it on to others who may be interested or eligible. In line with the literature (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018), we found that prior personal contacts were helpful in enhancing the sample's diversity. To further expand our reach, we sent the questionnaire to international placement office and to student union ambassadors and requested them to disseminate it among students who might be potential participants. When interested participants contacted us for more info and possible inclusion, we requested they assist us in identifying at least one more potential respondent.

Data collection process

As we identified the participants, we sent out a mail that contained a web link to a voluntary, open-access survey hosted on the university's Qualtrics platform. We asked the respondents

to give online consent, before being able to view the questions. We made all questions optional and presented them in the same order for all participants because the questions were thematically grouped under the five topic areas mentioned earlier. The pilot study revealed that asking *general* questions before *specific* questions was sufficient to minimise any potential ordering effects. Since our tool does not contain any "ranking" questions, randomisation was not required in this case. Respondents filled in the questionnaire between March and June 2020 in their free time, within three months of returning from international placement. We provided no incentives for participating in this study. We anonymised all responses for data analysis.

Data analysis process
Using Qualtrics' cross-tabulation functions and reporting features, we processed and analysed the data. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the response to questions about their perceptions of placement challenges and university support provisions. Respondents' words, phrases related to the five topics mentioned above and explanatory narratives found in the open text boxes formed additional sets of data. We imported text-based responses collected via free-text entry boxes into an Excel spreadsheet and analysed them using thematic content analysis procedures, employed by Hunter and Devine (2016). The first author initially coded them into themes through numerous iterations of the data, and then grouped them as categories, for each research question. The second author evaluated the first-order themes and groups and checked the distinctiveness of the categories before finalising them. For example, the theme *"desire for an international experience"* included interests to have global awareness, the desire to learn about international markets, travelling across borders, meeting new people during travel and working in international teams. The theme *"experience of a foreign culture"* included responses related to desires to learn about new sets of beliefs, attitudes, morals, customs, traditions and language used by a group of people living in a country other than their home country. During this process of categorisation, disagreements were resolved by consensus. To minimise confirmation bias, we continually re-evaluated respondents' answers, iteratively challenged each other's pre-existing assumptions about self-initiated placements and documented our decisions. We selected relevant quotes that accurately reflected students' experiences.

Findings
We designed this study to attain a better understanding of the motivations and challenges of the students who choose to embark on self-initiated placements and to draw lessons for post-pandemic career services. Our sample ($n = 35$) contained male ($n = 13$) and female ($n = 22$) students, studying a range of disciplines and subject specialisms. They were relatively young (18–24 years ($n = 33$), and 25–34 years ($n = 3$)) and most of them had dependants or family members (with parents and siblings ($n = 28$), and with spouse or partner ($n = 7$)) (See Figure 1 for a summary). Participants worked in twenty-two industry contexts while on international placement; they were placed in six countries within the EU, and in five countries, outside the EU. None of the respondents has previous international placement experience. They performed various roles that ranged from entry-level roles such as administrative assistants, interns and language assistants to mid-level roles such as software/hardware engineers, programme managers and lab technicians; and had varying lengths of placements (Mean = 5.16 months, standard deviation (SD) = 6.33).

Next, we present the empirical findings. We highlight (1) that these students are highly intrinsically motivated, (2) that the benefits of self-initiated international placements are varied and transformational, (3) that the challenges they face "during" the placement and
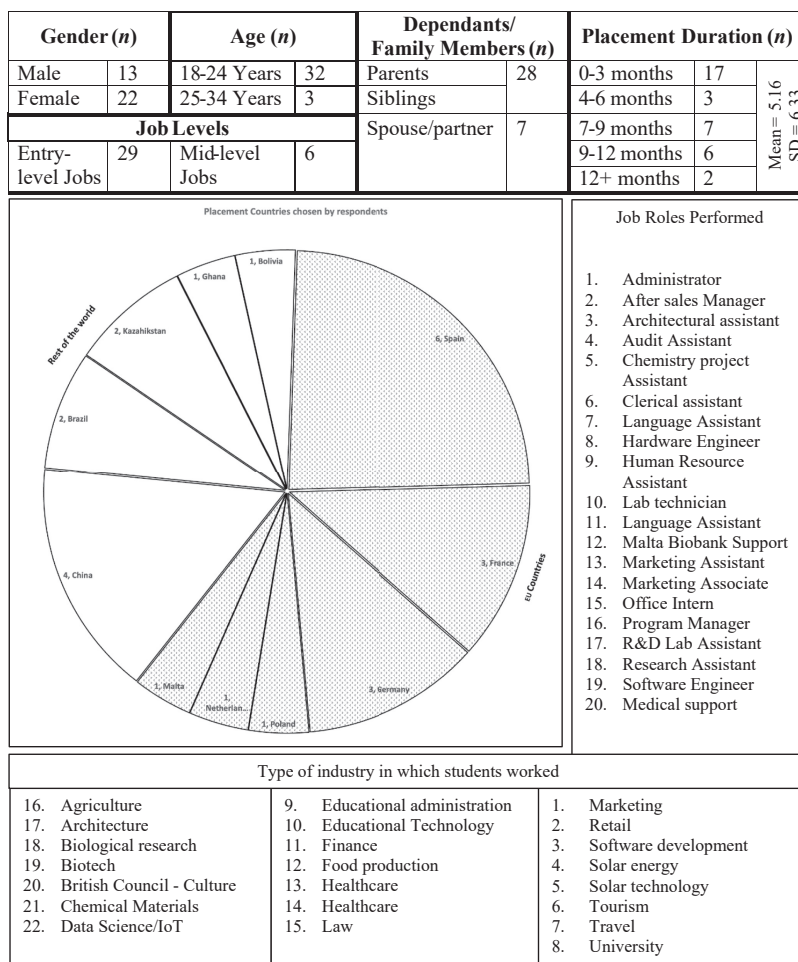
Gender (n)		Age (n)		Dependants/ Family Members (n)		Placement Duration (n)		
Male	13	18-24 Years	32	Parents	28	0-3 months	17	Mean = 5.16 SD = 6.33
Female	22	25-34 Years	3	Siblings		4-6 months	3	
Job Levels				Spouse/partner	7	7-9 months	7	
Entry-level Jobs	29	Mid-level Jobs	6			9-12 months	6	
						12+ months	2	

Figure 1.
Respondents' profile: countries, job roles and industries that are self-selected by undergraduates (n = 35)
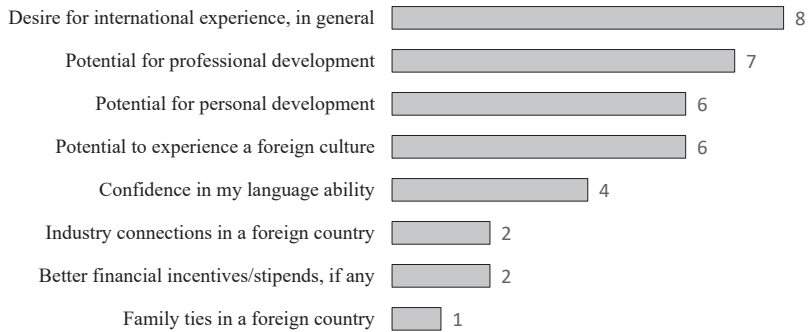
Source(s): Figure created by authors

"after" the placement are considerably distinctive and, (4) that universities need to be innovative in their career support solutions.

(1a) Why do students choose to embark on self-initiated international placements?

When asked about what encouraged them to embark on self-initiated international placements, intrinsic motivation stood out as the strongest influence (See Figure 2). Specifically, what motivated respondents was an inherent desire for an international experience (n = 8). Others placed importance on their recognition of the placement opportunity's potential for professional development (n = 7). Students also acknowledged the importance of experiencing a foreign culture (n = 6) or for personal development (n = 6), and confidence in their language ability (n = 4), among other reasons that motivated them to take up international placements.

Factors such as valuable placement offers, being influenced by other students who returned from international placement, lack of choices in the home country, industry

Desire for international experience, in general — 8
Potential for professional development — 7
Potential for personal development — 6
Potential to experience a foreign culture — 6
Confidence in my language ability — 4
Industry connections in a foreign country — 2
Better financial incentives/stipends, if any — 2
Family ties in a foreign country — 1

Type of industry in which students worked		
38. Agriculture	31. Educational administration	23. Marketing
39. Architecture	32. Educational Technology	24. Retail
40. Biological research	33. Finance	25. Software development
41. Biotech	34. Food production	26. Solar energy
42. British Council-Culture	35. Healthcare	27. Solar technology
43. Chemical Materials	36. Healthcare	28. Tourism
44. Data Science/IoT	37. Law	29. Travel
		30. University

Figure 2.
Motivation to
undertake self-initiated
international
placements

Source(s): Figure created by authors

connections or family ties in a foreign country, better financial incentives/stipends or willingness of others to move with them to a foreign country were cited as drivers by one or two respondents respectively. This low score shows extrinsic factors played a relatively less significant role as motivators for self-initiated international work placements for our respondents. It is interesting to note that the respondents are motivated by their own self-determination, proactiveness and personal choice, steered both by their desire to have international experience and the learning potential that arises from such experiences ($n = 31$).

(1b) What encourages them to persevere until completion?

Transformative outcomes: positive change in knowledge, skills, mindsets and values. Respondents experienced a range of benefits in undertaking these placements. Some outcomes include improved language fluency, increased self-confidence, new friendships, renewed abilities to cope with stress, broadened cultural awareness, renewed understanding of national cultures, people's attitudes towards hard work, education, public transport and proactivity. The following comments show these views:

I did not know what to expect in Kazakhstan. Now I would like to go back, learnt about different social structures, and living in a different economy. Learn about views on women. I appreciated the Kazakh nature and their attitude towards sharing everything

How to integrate with any type of community. Patience, hard work, Brazilian, pro-activeness

Cultural awareness- more appreciation of the Chinese language, experiencing the different foods and speaking with local people has opened my eyes to others way of life. Also, I had never lived in a city before, so it was good to use public transport when getting to and from work

Importantly, 75% of respondents agree that their international placement helped them clarify what type of career they would like to pursue. When asked to explain their answers further, respondents cited additional sets of benefits including a renewed appreciation for linguistic

diversity and friendships, the courage to choose to study a different programme, to work in a different country or to select alternate career paths. Below are some representative quotes in relation to this point:

> I am more confident as a person in general. My Spanish skills improved greatly. I came away with a clearer sense of what I wanted to do with my life post-uni (teaching). I made friends with locals and with others from across the globe. I strengthened friendships with other Spaniards that I knew before my placement. I grew to have a deeper appreciation of the friends I have at home

> It allowed me to experience the main type of work available for my degree and reflect on this as a career. Because of this international placement and my participation in the Global Leadership Programme, I have identified an alternative career path and am currently studying a different master's programme than what I intended to study before the placement

Overall, students experienced transformative outcomes in undertaking self-initiated international placements. The experience challenged their beliefs and broadened their minds. Consequently, all thirty-five respondents said that they were "extremely likely" to recommend an international placement to anyone if they wanted to gain from similar experiences or benefits.

(2) What kinds of challenges do they face?

Adjustment challenges "during" the placement. When we asked the respondents to rank the challenges they experienced during international placements, only 14 respondents answered this item and the data showed very little variability among the three adjustment challenges (i.e. general, interaction and work) they faced. It may be that all students faced all three types of general, interaction and work adjustment challenges. However, a granular analysis of their rankings reveals that six of the respondents ranked the "interaction adjustment" (which refers to students' efforts to establish relationships with locals) as the number one challenge, when compared with the "general adjustment challenges" (i.e. which involve how students cope with living in a foreign culture), and "work adjustment" challenges – which refers to how students fit into the workplace (ranked as number one by 5 and 3 respondents, respectively) (See Figure 3).

Considering the smaller sample size of this understudied group of students ($n = 35$), we are unable to draw any generalisable conclusions for the population. In the text boxes, they identified a range of practical challenges triggered by language barriers, ambiguous signage in public and transport services, the lack of opportunity to make friends outside work, the Internet censorship in some countries leading to isolation, cultural differences and traditional transactional practices. Students' perspectives on these experiences are shown in the following quotes:

> A real challenge is working in a foreign country where your workplace offers little opportunity for friendship, and it can be a real challenge to find this friendship outside of work. I have to be extremely confident in taking part in events and activities where I go alone

> I was very shy at the beginning when speaking French, as I realised there was a vast difference between learning French in a classroom environment and learning French in the actual country. My team were super encouraging and understanding though, and so gradually I became increasingly self-confident in my ability to speak the language

> Firewall of China- Not being able to access common sites such as google, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, made it difficult to connect home as the VPN was unreliable- this was difficult as it was frustrating not to have a proper conversation with family back home . . . I found that cash was not commonly used, it was difficult to pay with items with cash as they mostly used their phones to pay for things- I could not get phone payments as they had blocked international cards from joining

Adjustment Challenges	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Number of respondents	Mean	SD	Variance
General adjustment (which involves the manner in which students cope with living in a foreign culture)	35%	50%	21%	14	1.93	0.70	0.49
Interaction adjustment (which refers to students' efforts to establish relationships with locals)	43%	29%	29%	14	1.86	0.83	0.69
Work adjustment (which refers to the way students fit into the workplace)	22%	21%	50%	14	2.21	0.86	0.74
	100%	100%	100%				

Type of industry in which students worked		
60. Agriculture 61. Architecture 62. Biological research 63. Biotech 64. British Council-Culture 65. Chemical Materials 66. Data Science/IoT	53. Educational administration 54. Educational Technology 55. Finance 56. Food production 57. Healthcare 58. Healthcare 59. Law	45. Marketing 46. Retail 47. Software development 48. Solar energy 49. Solar technology 50. Tourism 51. Travel 52. University

Figure 3.
Interaction adjustment challenges are perceived as relatively more difficult ($n = 14$)

Source(s): Figure created by authors

Students' lives were not without challenges when they returned from their international placements. In particular, they face a different set of challenges when they re-start their degree programme at their home university. Salient challenges include financial challenges ($n = 18$) reverse culture shock ($n = 10$) and adjusting to student life and studies ($n = 7$).

(3) What support do students expect from career services to effectively navigate and optimise their self-initiated international placement experiences?

Our data reveal that there is a need for inclusive and responsive support "during" placements. Our respondents received no formal support from their universities during their placements. Although respondents managed and survived the general adjustment challenges by reacting to them on an ad-hoc basis, twenty-eight of them (80%) highlighted that the university could have prepared them in several ways. Such support could include creating a space for students to build networks before departure, maintaining regular communication with them during the placement, helping them create connections with other students and alumni in their respective countries, teaching spoken language, providing information about traditions, technological tools and paying their maintenance loans on time. These quotes show respondents' perspectives on this issue:

[Help] placement students get to know each other prior to departure in 1st and 2nd year. I feel this would help set up a social support network once abroad

Keep better contact either by a weekly or monthly email, I felt this wasn't the case

Link you up with other students who are currently in the city

Clear guidelines and open communication line with the placement offer

Give more information on VPNs and what apps to use/not to use

We acknowledge that, at the time of this study, the university did not have a formal process for knowing if someone wanted to do a self-initiated placement. Since the institution has data,

processes and procedures for supporting those who undertake compulsory placements, much support has been offered to those students, while paying less attention to self-initiated placements. In a similar vein, it should also be noted that seven respondents had limited or no expectations of their university helping them. It is possible that they believed in their ability to manage the challenges by themselves and may not desire help from the university – a testament to their intrinsic motivation and commitment to learning.

Supporting students "after" placements. Students received no formal training or reintegration to the university post international placement. Participants proposed a range of support-options for consideration by lecturers and universities. These options include "assessment holidays," "switching modules" and "early start of a semester" as illustrated in the quotes below:

> Reschedule assessments so students can have a "holiday" upon returning

> Semester 1 was more intense than Semester two, so if possible, reverse this

> Not having such a long gap between returning from placement and starting back to classes

Some participants highlighted the need for financial help and language classes to strengthen their linguistic capabilities;

> Support in returning- costly to move . . .. Stick to your promises to funding

> Offer classes to perfect the language

Thus, the data highlight the need for university support-provisions to be responsive, targeted and aligned with students' positions on an international placement. Taken together, the data suggest that those who voluntarily embark on international placements enjoy a range of benefits, despite having experienced various challenges both during and after their placements. Students considered how undertaking self-initiated international placements, even without the university support, provided them with a unique, valuable and meaningful experience to enhance their future careers. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings next.

Contributions and implications

In this study, we sought to explore students' experiences of self-initiated placements and make two impactful contributions to research, policy and practice.

First, by drawing on conceptualisations of SIEs in global mobility studies, we have tapped into a conceptual domain that is useful for understanding the unique characteristics of, and challenges for, students on self-initiated placements. Unlike those who improved proactivity after attending a bespoke training programme (Green *et al.*, 2020), our participants showed a high degree of intrinsic motivation to voluntarily embark on international placements, despite the significant challenges involved in this process. Similar to SIEs, students who go abroad voluntarily are likely highly proactive in shaping their own learning and risk-takers in search of an international adventure and personal development (Froese, 2012). Our findings reveal how factors such as a desire for international experience, a recognition of the placement opportunity's potential for professional development, an interest in experiencing a foreign culture, a thirst for personal development and confidence in one's ability to learn and use a foreign language motivated them to partake in such placements. In this sense, students in our study exhibited similar characteristics to SIEs with a high level of personal initiative and individual proactivity (Doherty *et al.*, 2011), demonstrating self-reliance and an ability to cope with ambiguity and complexity. Our participants also demonstrated how their placement experiences, somewhat similar to the experiences of those who undertook unpaid

work, "are intricately interwoven with biography, relationships, location and resources over time" (Cunnigham *et al.*, 2022, p. 647).

To our knowledge, there are no studies that specifically explore the characteristics and challenges of students who embark on self-initiated international placements. This seemingly unexplained silence on this topic stands in stark contrast to the extensive discourse on mandatory work placements and study-abroad programmes (Aamaas *et al.*, 2019; Brooks and Youngson, 2016; Jerez Gomez *et al.*, 2023; Roy *et al.*, 2019). The individual proactivity of these students in searching for and embarking on their voluntary placements should be studied and examined further as it is their personal drive that influences their learning experience. Despite the significant challenges they face in this unique placement process, these students remained motivated to learn and returned with resilience to continue their studies. Fuelled by their own interest, they developed a set of goals, for personal learning, employed goal-directed actions, overcame the challenges and adjusted their actions to ensure success. These findings suggest that the university career services must celebrate and appreciate these self-regulated learning behaviours and recognise these experiences for their instrumental learning value. We believe that their self-monitoring, self-instructing and self-reinforcing practices must be promoted among other students who might lack the same personal drive and internal motivation. We also found that these placements helped clarify the types of careers students would like to pursue, developed personal and professional confidence, increased linguistic abilities, and built resilience to adversity and stress. Consequently, in line with the views of Toiviainen (2022), we acknowledge the significance of contextual factors and societal structures that contribute to their agency. Therefore, we argue that those who undertake self-initiated international placements should be supported by career services staff more so than they have been to date.

Second, we draw inspiration from existing work on SIEs to unpack the distinctive challenges that self-initiated international placements present to students, as well as how they may be supported in this process. Studies suggest that compared to company backed assignees, SIEs that operate outside the wider support structure face unique adjustment challenges while based on and returning from their international assignments (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010; Roy *et al.*, 2019). We find that, similar to SIEs, students on self-initiated international placements receive limited support and are left to navigate their working abroad experiences by themselves (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2009). This precarious context stands in contrast to students on compulsory international placements that benefit from an abundance of university support prior to, during and after international placements (Aamaas *et al.*, 2019; Auburn, 2007). Yet, given their high degree of proactivity, students in our study were extremely pragmatic in managing the adjustment challenges they experienced and proposed a number of important scaffolds that would help in traversing this process. We also illuminate the general adjustment challenges students face "during" their placements, and the challenges associated with their re-adjustment to student life, along with the financial pressures they face "after" placement.

The practical implications of these findings are varied. In problematising the limited university support, we highlight the need for more inclusive career services and student support systems in universities. Since challenges faced by students "during" their placements and "after" returning to university are different, we echo others by suggesting that career advisors need to tailor their services in meaningful ways to cater to the unique challenges that these students confront (Benati *et al.*, 2023; Brooks and Youngson, 2016). Our findings identify how, by making modest but proactive changes, career services could enhance the value of students' experiences in this context. Career advisors could organise pre-departure social gatherings, create online networks with current and alumni students, provide financial incentives and routinise communications with students during placement. Similarly, upon return from international placement, universities could change assessment schedules and

spread the cognitive load of learning more evenly across the academic year, including social links and collaborative learning opportunities within instructional practices. Such support starts from, for example, offering a "choice" to undergraduates to take up self-initiated international placements, or encouraging them to pursue such options considering the potential benefits to personal learning and professional development. Within departments, and across institutions, online networks must be created to facilitate social learning, mentoring relationships, and communities of international placement seekers. Creating such online communities could help undergraduates develop higher self-efficacy for undertaking international placements and help improve self-regulation, motivation and achievement. In summary, universities could provide tailored career services, flexible assessment and academic support and institutional-level promotion of these opportunities to help students maximise the benefits of these experiences.

Conclusion

Self-initiated international placements are challenging, yet valuable learning contexts. Considering the many positive impacts experienced by these students during their international placements, we join others (Mello *et al.*, 2020) in emphasising the pedagogical value of international experiences. When these are voluntarily undertaken by students, they must be endorsed, resourced and promoted in higher education institutions. It is important for career services to emphasise that the international placements, when voluntarily taken, could give students opportunities to enhance their professional skills and cultural experiences. Although it is important for students to be proactive, this should occur alongside a systematic approach from career advisors on how best to take advantage of these opportunities. Thus, we argue that encouraging self-initiated placements may be a critical component of a post-pandemic recovery strategy that universities should adopt for business continuity and sustainability. Despite the unique challenges for career guidance practitioners and their operational context of "professional turbulence" (Christie, 2016), they need to be upskilled to see the potential of these self-initiated placements.

There are several limitations to this study. First, our work relied on a small sample of students ($n = 35$) from a single university who completed placements prior to March 2019 when the pandemic disrupted teaching and learning. The sampling frame is inherently small, which contributed in part to this population being overlooked in earlier studies and also restricted our ability to do more granular analytical tests. Future studies could use a larger, maximum variation sample in terms of age, personality characteristics, subject specialisms and nationality, and look at the effect of these variables on experiences and learning. Second, we examined the experiences of students who successfully returned from international placements, and it is possible that they were more likely to be enthusiastic about such placements, at the outset. Future research could investigate the experiences described from different perspectives, for example, from those who did not seek these placements, from those who did but failed to secure international placements or non-completers. In this vein, it would be interesting for others to explore the ambassadorial roles this group enact. As ambassadors they may be crucial sources of informal and practical advice for other students seeking a similar path. Career services should look to leverage this group and organise group discussions to feedback important lessons learnt with prospective placement students. Third, our work was cross-sectional in its design. It was beyond the scope of this study to explore how motivations change over time and students' attitudes toward how their career choices changed upon completing the degrees. Viewing the self-initiated international placement as a holistic process of studying, travelling and working in networks across borders is also important.

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Appendix
Self-initiated international placements survey

Introductory Message

Consent

1. What country did you carry out your international placement?
2. What type of industry was the company you worked for?
3. What type of role/function did you work in while on international placement?
4. How long was your international placement?
   - 0-3 months
   - 3+months - 6 months
   - 6+months -9 months
   - 9+months -12 months
   - 12+ months and more

5. What motivated you to opt for an international placement? (Select ALL that apply)
   - Desire for international experience, in general
   - Attractive placement offers
   - Family ties in a foreign country
   - Industry connections in a foreign country
   - Lack of choices in home country
   - Willingness of others to move with you to a foreign country
   - Potential to experience a foreign culture
   - Influenced by those who returned from international placements
   - Better financial incentives/stipends, if any
   - Potential for personal development
   - Potential for professional development
   - Confidence in my language ability
   - Other (please specify)

6. On the challenges you faced during your international placement:
The literature identifies that there are three types of adjustments one might have to make during an international placement, as explained below. In the order of difficulty you experienced
   - General adjustment, which involves the manner in which students cope with living in a foreign culture
   - Interaction adjustment, which refers to students' efforts to establish relationships with locals.
   - Work adjustment, which refers to the way students fit into the workplace.

7. When adjusting, could you please give us an example of a significant challenge you faced? How did you overcome / manage it?

8. What could your university do to help managing the challenges you mentioned, while on international placement ?

9. When you returned from international placements, what kinds of challenges do you face?

	Yes	No
Financial challenges	○	○
Adjusting to studies	○	○
Adjusting to student life	○	○
Reverse culture shock	○	○
Other	○	○

10. What could your university do to better support international placement students, when returning from placement?
11. What benefits have you gained from international placements? (Please describe)
12. How likely are you to recommend an international placement to anyone if they wanted similar experience or benefits?

- ○ Extremely likely
- ○ Somewhat likely
- ○ Neither likely nor unlikely
- ○ Somewhat unlikely
- ○ Extremely unlikely

13. What advice will you give to other students who might consider an international placement?

14. Has this international placement helped you clarify what type of career you would like to pursue?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ May be

15. Could you please explain your answer?
16. Looking back, did your international placement experience match with your expectations you had before leaving?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Demographic Details
Thank you note.

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