



Whitaker Institute Policy Brief Series

Policy Brief No.: 88

September 2021

Cluster: Centre for Economic Research on Inclusivity and Sustainability (CERIS)

Theme: Sustainable and Inclusive Societies

Further Reading: Cullinan J, Flannery D, Palcic D (2021) [Study Abroad Programme Participation and Subsequent Academic Performance: Evidence from Administrative Data](#). *Education Economics*, DOI: 10.1080/09645292.2021.1978936.

Contact:
john.cullinan@nuigalway.ie

Read More About: For more information about CERIS, visit <http://www.nuigalway.ie/ceris/>

The content and views included in this policy brief are based on independent, peer-reviewed research and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Whitaker Institute.

Sign up to the Policy Brief Series [Here](#)

Study Abroad and Subsequent Academic Performance: Evidence from Administrative Data

There has been a growing trend in recent years towards third level students studying abroad for a semester or more as part of their degree programme. For example, in Europe, around 2 million students participated in the EU's Erasmus+ exchange programme between 2014 and 2020. Numerous benefits have been linked to study abroad, including improved language skills, increased intercultural awareness, greater labour market mobility, and enhanced confidence and communication skills. Nonetheless, research on the relationship between study abroad and subsequent academic performance at the home institution is extremely limited. In fact, despite the significant public investment directed towards study abroad schemes, there is considerable uncertainty surrounding the short-term academic benefits of programme participation. In this context, this research analysed administrative data on business studies students at an Irish university to examine this issue.

Key Findings

Overall the research found no independent association between study abroad and subsequent academic performance on average after controlling for a wide range of personal, education, and socioeconomic characteristics. However, it did find some important differences across student groups. Most notably, the research found important differences in the relationship across the performance distribution, with evidence that study abroad is independently associated with better (worse) subsequent academic performance for higher (lower) achieving students. In addition, there was also a positive relationship between studying abroad and subsequent performance in language subjects for language students. While previous research had found that studying abroad was linked to improved language skills using self-reported language proficiency scores, this is the first study that examined subsequent performance in language tests.

Policy Implications

The results from this study have a number of policy implications. First, even though there was no relationship between study abroad participation and subsequent academic performance on average, the fact there was no overall negative association is reassuring for exchange programmes, particularly in light of the wide range of other benefits attributed to participation. Second, the analysis highlights the academic benefits to language students who study abroad in terms of exam performance in their language subjects and this could be used to help encourage more language students to undertake exchange opportunities, something envisaged in the recently published Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2021-27. Third, the findings suggest that consideration of the potential heterogeneous effects of exchange participation on academic outcomes, as well as the reasons underpinning these, is important. For example, if the benefits of participation differ depending on academic ability, as the results of this research suggest, this is something that needs to be addressed. In particular, tackling such issues could be used to enhance the experience of different groups that may not be realising the full benefits of exchange, another key aim of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2021-27.