

## **Student destination choices in international education: exploring Brazilian students' attitudes to study abroad**

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### **Abstract**

Increasing cross-border education and student mobility calls for a better understanding of international student destination choice and the benefits of study abroad to the students. The study reported in this paper examined Brazilian students' attitudes to study abroad in the United Kingdom using a mixed method approach, including questionnaires and focus groups with undergraduate and postgraduate students at three universities in Brazil. The study aimed to explore the extent to which the students identify themselves with the barriers and benefits of study abroad, as discussed in the literature. The participants identify with some of the main barriers explored in the literature such as cost or homesickness, as well as the benefits such as improving English language and the cultural side of experience of study abroad. The study has also identified that the attitudes to study abroad vary between undergraduate and postgraduate students and between students from different institutions. Furthermore, the attitudes to study abroad seem to be influenced by strong family ties, opportunities to apply for scholarships and past institutional relationships between students' own universities and the UK universities. In order to enhance Brazilian students' interest in studying in the UK, it is recommended to focus on building positive family expectations of the benefits of study abroad, strong academic relationships between the UK and Brazilian universities, improving students' practical understanding of the realities of studying in the UK and recognising the diverse needs of the students from such a large country.

**Keywords:** Student destination choice, international education, Brazilian students

## Introduction

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the forces of globalisation have encouraged universities to look further afield to recruit students (Wilkins and Huisman, 2011). They have also prompted students to engage in growing student mobility. As a result, the transformative process of international education has seen universities engage in increased cross-border education, i.e. the movement of students to other countries to undertake their studies (Knight, 2004, 2006, 2009; de Wit, 2002) with a global student mobility raising by 52% over the period of 1998-2004 (King et al, 2010).

The main directional flows of the student movement for study have been east to west and south to north. Five countries host the largest numbers of international students including, in rank order, the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France and Australia (King Findlay and Ahrens, 2010). However, in the last decade, international education has seen new directions for student mobility emerge, such as Singapore and Malaysia (Knight, 2011). Further development of the new 'flows' of students is encouraged by the host countries who receive a range of economic, social, cultural and political benefits as a result of accepting international students. The United Kingdom has historically been second only to the USA in terms of the provision of education to international students (Binsardi & Ekwulungo, 2003). However, attracting international students has become ever more challenging, with universities from far flung nations competing against each other in an attempt to encourage these students to study within their institutions (Knight, 2011). Therefore, understanding students' attitudes to study abroad has become a priority in order for marketing strategies of higher education institutions.

The Brazilian government is presently committed to providing funding to enable Brazilian students to undertake periods of overseas study through programmes such as Science without Borders, which is expected to bring 10,000 Brazilian students to the UK over the next four years (UK Higher Education Unit, 2012). Just as the range of benefits that overseas study can bestow upon students is diverse, the motivations which underpin students' choice of destination and institution are complex and multifactorial. This paper investigates the attitudes of Brazilian students' towards study abroad in the UK. There is little literature available about Brazilian students' attitudes to studying in the UK, therefore it is hoped to fill the gap in the student decision making theory and to inform the strategy

and marketing decisions of higher education institutions. The first section of the paper reviews literature about benefits and barriers to study abroad. It then presents the findings from a study with undergraduate and postgraduate students at three universities in Brazil. The final section discusses the findings and implications for institutions seeking to enhance Brazilian students' positive destination choice towards study in the UK.

### **Students' motivations to study abroad**

Within the context of encouraging students' mobility, there is a growing debate about the benefits of study abroad for the students. A number of studies conclude on the main benefits such as expanding students' outlooks, making them more independent and confident, as well as having increased intercultural competencies (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Nunan, 2006; Vincenti, 2011). Furthermore, there is an abundance of research on international student destination choice, including factors playing a part in students making decisions where to study abroad such as personal reasons, perceived educational benefits, quality of teaching, finances, culture and social perceptions (Bodycott, 2009; Li and Bray, 2007; Maringe and Carter, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Padlee, Kamaruddin and Baharun, 2010; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011). Additional to this, new factors emerge in the recent literature including social networking and consumer websites (Wilkins and Epps, 2011).

Frequently cited in the literature, the *push-pull* model of international student choice (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) aims to capture the main barriers and enablers in a student choosing a particular study destination. This model encapsulates factors involved in students' decision making grouped as the *push* factors. These include a lack of capacity and opportunities to study in students' home countries, lower educational quality, employer preference for overseas education or political and economic problems in the home countries. The *pull* factors in the host country include the quality of education, reputation of country / institution, highly improved employment prospects and the opportunity to experience a different culture (Wilkins, Stephens Balakrishnan and Huisman, 2012).

Further on, the literature provides insights into a range of specific challenges and enabling factors playing a part in students' motivations to study abroad. They can be grouped into four groups of factors: cost, past social relationships, language and homesickness, each including barriers and enabling factors to reflect the push and pull model.

### **Cost**

The most commonly cited barrier to student mobility is cost (Brux & Ngoboka, 2002; Calhoun, Wildcat, Annett, Pierotti and Griswold, 2003; Doan, 2002; Hembroff & Rusz, 1993; Perdreau, 2002; Raby, 2005;). Studies amongst cohorts of African-American (Brux and Fry, 2010), Asian (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) and USA students (Evans, Finch, Toncar and Reid, 2008) report cost being a significant barrier to study abroad. A recent study of factors that inhibited or promoted uptake of study abroad among New Zealand students reported that 60% rated cost one of their top 3 barriers (Doyle *et al.*, 2010). Equally, although Binsardi and Ekwulgo (2003) reported that cost only ranked as the 4<sup>th</sup> most important factor to consider when studying in the UK, international students identified lowering tuition fees and providing more scholarships as being the two most important means of attracting greater numbers of international students. This suggests that in the same way that high costs constitute a barrier to study, lower costs can promote overseas study.

### ***Past socio-academic relationships***

A number of studies deal with minority groups such as Hispanic students (Brux and Ngoboka, 2002) and African American students (Jackson and Moore, 2006) and consider historical patterns that can exert an indirect negative influence on these students' participation in study abroad. Due to established social views on study abroad in a specific country or for specific groups of students, helped by media influence, students can form a view of study abroad programmes being "something for other students, but not for me" (Burr, 2005:1). Study abroad can be seen as something elitist, with students failing to make a connection between study abroad and their future employment. As a result, students may filter out or ignore information about study abroad.

For this study's purposes, past socio-academic relationships between the United Kingdom and Brazil are of interest. They may affect indirectly students' choice of their study destination by affecting the tutors' perceptions which in turn impact on students' attitudes to study abroad. Canto and Hannah (2001) discuss historical factors posing barriers to student participation in study abroad. They use the case study of the collaboration agreement between the British Council and the Brazilian federal agency in 1988 to promote and facilitate academic collaboration, involving joint research and joint work between academics, as well as student exchange between universities in the United Kingdom and Brazil. It suggests that collaboration was built on the premise of the Brazilians taking a subservient role in the neo-colonial style relationship, which is in contrast with the 'horizontal partnership' characterised by a genuine partnership of equals, with reciprocity in research and exchange (Canto & Hannah, 2001). Furthermore, the language barrier proved problematic due to the UK academics' lack of Portuguese language expertise, which not only caused linguistic problems in terms of undertaking joint research work, but also in meeting expectations for the student exchange. Due to the language barrier, although a number of Brazilian students came to England to study, a reciprocal exchange was prohibited by UK students and academics' inability to speak Portuguese. Finally, even though the agreement seemed to have shared similar aims, 'the Brazilians hoped to benefit from the link by publishing in the United Kingdom, whereas the British hoped to recruit more (Brazilian) students to their postgraduate studies' (Canto & Hannah, 2001: 36). The neo-colonial aspect of this relationship may influence the attitudes of staff in some Brazilian universities towards academic relationships with the UK, including study abroad in the UK. This in turn may have influence on staff advising students about their options for study abroad.

### ***Language***

As has been noted in the previous section, the language barrier can be a major constraint for students considering study abroad, potentially further impacted by the language capability of staff. This means for any host country and/or institution wishing to increase student mobility they should foster the development of foreign languages among students and academics. Doyle *et al* (2010) highlights that people from English speaking countries, such as Australia, New Zealand and the UK, have become 'cocooned' by the fact that

English is the main language of communication within many contexts, such as business and internet etc, to the extent there is no need to become proficient in other languages. Interestingly, although this has resulted in a decline in the number of students choosing to study foreign languages in Australia, New Zealand and UK, most universities in the USA have foreign language competency as a requirement. Since the relationship discussed above, many universities in the United Kingdom offer Portuguese or cultural studies (<http://www.brazil.org.uk/education/portugueseinuni.html>), albeit there is still room for improvement.

Language improvement can be the main attraction for students considering study abroad. In case of international students choosing to study abroad, improving English is often quoted as one of the main reasons for their choice (Bodycott, 2009; Forsey, Broomhall and Davis, 2012; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011). In the increasingly competitive job market, foreign languages are a sought-after asset and developing languages such as English through study abroad has become one of the pull factors (Chen, 2008; Forsey, et al, 2012; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). However, a far more powerful factor can be the extent of students' awareness of the connection between language improvement and enhanced cross-cultural competency resulting in better employment opportunities, which contributes to their readiness for participation in study abroad.

### **Homesickness**

Despite the internet and improved communication opportunities in the last decade or so, homesickness, leaving family and friends behind and moving to a new learning environment remain major barriers to students' participation in study abroad. 17% of students within a study by Doyle *et al.* (2010) reported leaving friends and family to be the most important obstacle of studying abroad and 39% rated it as one of their top three obstacles. Similarly, from a psychological perspective, Rodriguez and Roberts (2011) concluded that if students were not in the correct frame of mind and aware of potential emotions associated with homesickness, student were less likely to be receptive to learning and exacerbate negative feelings of homesickness.

This idea falls into the framework of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) in which people learn within a social context as well as through the transformation of experience.

However, if there are certain worries or threats, either perceived or actual, they can impinge upon the experience as a whole. There are a number of studies which use Social Learning Theory within study abroad research (McLeod and Wainwright, 2009; Rodriguez and Roberts, 2011; Wildemeersch, Jansen, Vandenabeele and Jans, 1998). Rodriguez and Roberts (2011) suggest that study abroad programmes should widen their perspectives to include pre and post stages within a student's experience. Discussing emotions beforehand and airing any possible fears can alleviate their impact if they arise when abroad. Experiential learning also considers previous experience and stereotypes, as well as influences from other people, for example teachers.

## **Study Design**

This study took place in three Brazilian universities. They were selected as they represent students from varying academic and socio-economic backgrounds to ensure rich data. The universities were contacted with the help of the British Council Brazil and all three universities agreed to participate in this collaborative project with an interest to find out more about their students' views on possible future study in the United Kingdom.

- **University 1** in Rio de Janeiro is one of the oldest universities and the largest federal university in Brazil where state-owned universities are the best and most qualified institutions. The students at University 1 are largely middle class. They do not pay fees but entry to the university is on a competitive basis, so majority of students are high performing.
- **University 2** is a public university in the greater Sao Paolo area. Some of its departments are fairly new, including the Linguistics Department. The profile of the students can be characterised as middle to lower-middle class. Most do not pay fees and receive government funded scholarships.
- **University 3** is a private, non-profit, high ranking university in Sao Paolo. It is one of the largest and most prestigious universities in Brazil. The university took part in the British-Brazilian initiative discussed above. Students at University 3 are middle

to upper-middle class and they pay fees. Some are on places funded by the government.

The participants in the study were students on Languages programmes (University 1 and 2) and students on Applied Linguistics programmes (University 3). These two subject groups were selected as they are likely to have higher than average levels of motivation to study abroad and some awareness of the benefits of study abroad owing to their language study backgrounds and motivation to further develop their skills.

## Research questions

This study seeks to explore to what extent the barriers and the pull factors or benefits of study abroad discussed in the literature apply to Brazilian students considering the potential of study in the United Kingdom. Thus, the research questions this study seeks to answer are:

- **Research question 1:** What are the key factors involved in Brazilian students' decision making about the choice of study abroad?
- **Research question 2:** What are the perceived benefits from study in the United Kingdom for Brazilian students?
- **Research question 3:** What are the perceived barriers for Brazilian students to consider study in the United Kingdom?

## Method

The study adopted a mixed-method approach, collecting both quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative data from focus groups. Employing two methods of data gathering allowed for the convergence of results (Golafshani, 2003). It also provided rich data, as the data from the questionnaires was further developed by the narrative from the focus groups, enabling the inclusion of the participants' perspectives and stories (Forsey, 2008).

Questionnaire design was informed by the outcomes of the literature review, the research questions and by helpful suggestions from colleagues in the three universities. The questionnaire had nine questions including a question whether the students would choose to study in the UK, followed by questions identifying the enabling factors such as getting a better job back home or in the UK, improving English language, networking, possibility of postgraduate study, having an experience of study abroad; and the barriers to choosing the UK to study there including being away from home, weather, food, cost, lack of scholarships and language issues.

Altogether 150 questionnaires were distributed amongst the Languages and Applied Linguistics students who were at the time enrolled at each of the Brazilian universities. A total of 117 respondents completed the questionnaire (78% response return rate) with the following spread of respondents:

**Table 1 – Questionnaire responses per university**

<b>University</b>	<b>Total number responses</b>	<b>Undergraduate responses</b>	<b>Postgraduate responses</b>
University 1	41	30	11
University 2	32	25	7
University 3	44	: 10	34

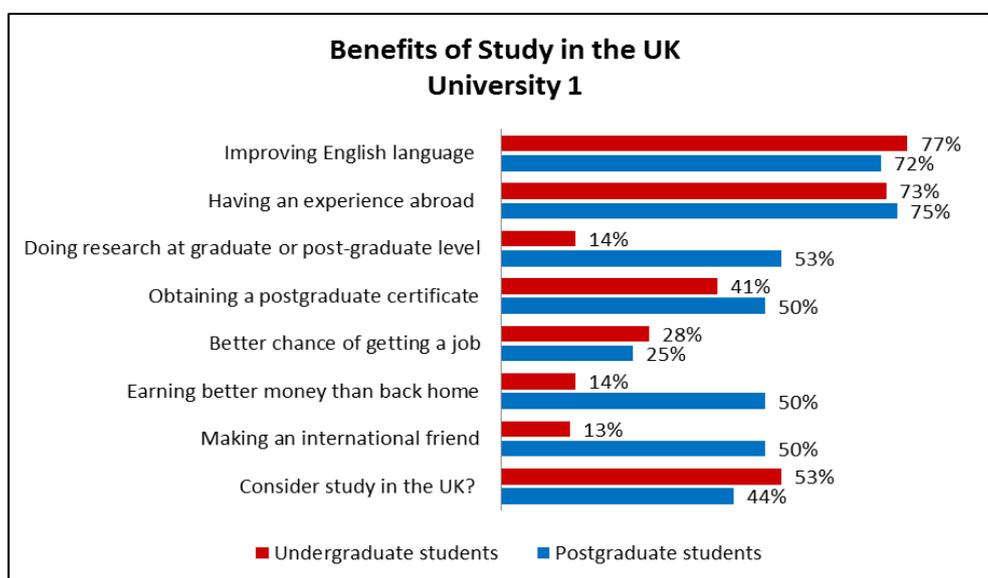
Following the questionnaires, two focus groups were held at University 1 and 3 in order to test the questionnaire findings and add greater depth to the data. University 2 could not participate for a practical reason as at the time planned for the focus groups there were strikes and the university was unsafe to work at. In University 1 more undergraduate

students took part in the survey and in University 3 more postgraduate students took part in the survey, hence it was decided to target these groups for the focus groups. From the undergraduate survey respondents in University 1 and postgraduate survey respondents in University 3, participants for focus groups were selected at random. They were asked for their consent to take part in the focus groups, and informed about what is involved as well as their anonymity. All selected participants agreed to taking part in the focus groups. The first focus group included nine undergraduate Language students from University 1, whilst the second focus group included fourteen postgraduate Applied Linguistics students from University 3.

### Survey findings

The results of the questionnaires are presented by the institution and differentiating between undergraduate and postgraduate student responses. Tables 1a, 2a and 3a present the results from University 1, 2 and 3 respectively and related to the perceived benefits of studying in the UK.

**Table 1a Survey findings: Benefits of study in the UK, University 1**



**Table 2a Survey findings: Benefits of study in the UK, University 2**

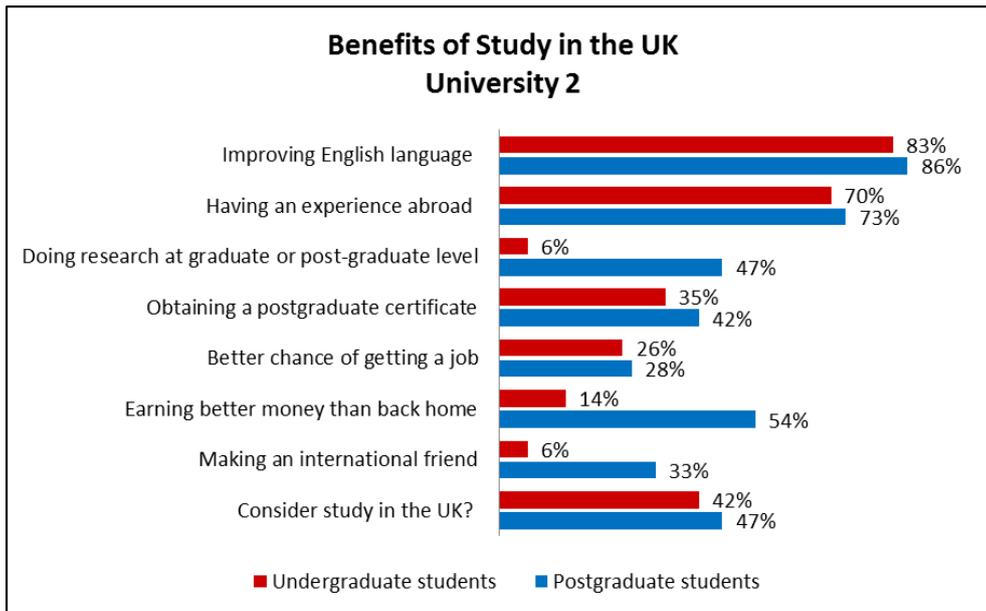
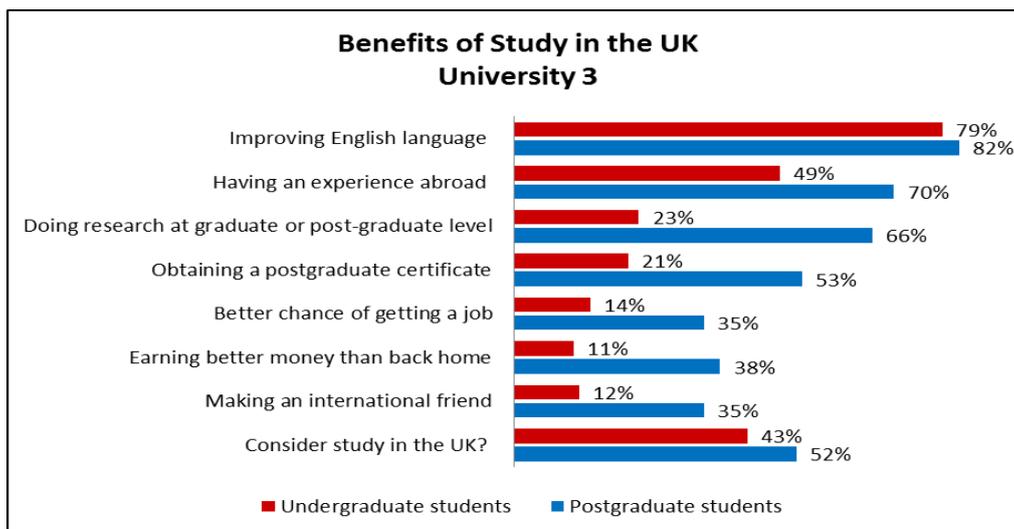


Table 3a Survey findings: Benefits of study in the UK, University 3

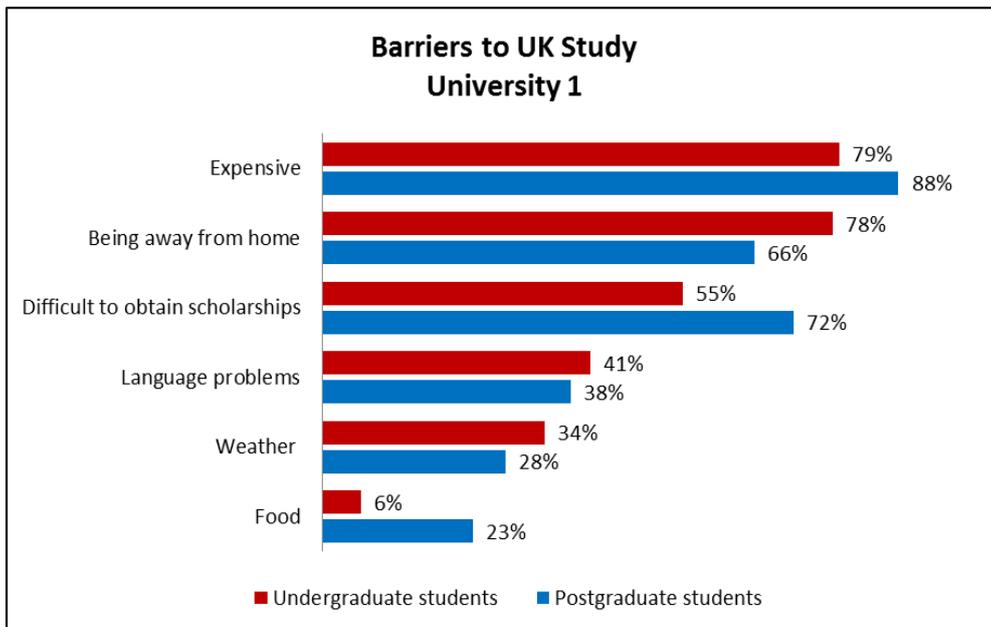


From the responses about the benefits of choosing to study in the UK, it seems that improving English is the number one motivator for both undergraduate and postgraduate respondents. It is followed closely by having an experience of study abroad, noted especially by postgraduate students at all three universities, who may be more mature and able to appreciate this advantage of study abroad. Just over half of the surveyed postgraduate students at University 1 and 3 pointed to the benefits of doing research at postgraduate level and to obtaining a postgraduate certificate, which may relate to the status of these institutions and research orientation of their students. Of interest, around

half of the surveyed postgraduate students in University 1 and 2 pointed to the benefit of earning better money in the UK than back home, which may be related to the socio-economic status (SES) represented by students at these universities, especially University 2. The least often selected benefit is making an international friend. In the world of the Internet and social networking, it seems less valued by the students as a pull factor in relation to study in the UK. Finally, just under half of the surveyed students, undergraduate and postgraduate, in all three institutions, would consider study in the UK which may reflect the slightly divided view on the above benefits of study abroad in the UK.

Tables 1b, 2b and 3b present the survey findings for University 1, 2 and 3 respectively, in relation to the barriers to study in the UK.

**Table 1b Survey findings: Barriers to UK study, University 1**



**Table 2b Survey findings: Barriers to UK study, University 2**

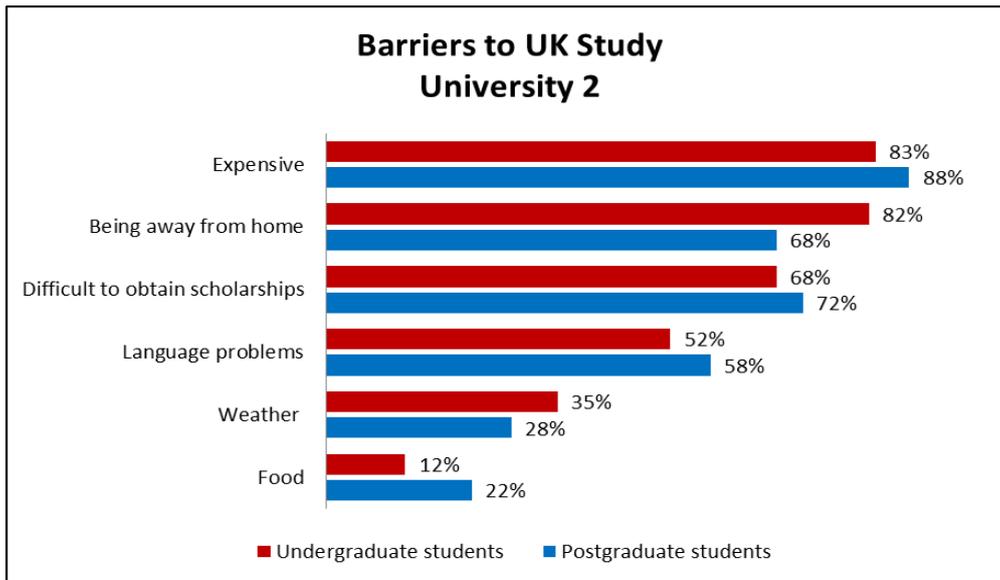
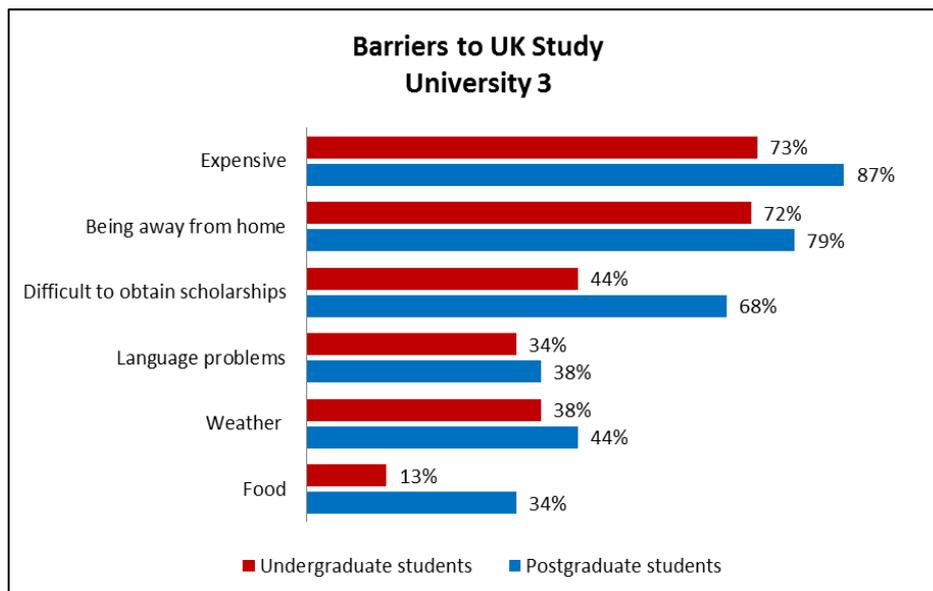


Table 3b Survey findings: Barriers to UK study, University 3



The results with regards to the barriers to study in the UK are topped by the cost of the study abroad which seems by far the most common concern for the majority of all surveyed students in all three institutions, slightly more for postgraduate students whose studies would be more expensive than the undergraduate studies. Being away from home is the next significant barrier pointed to by the students in all three institutions, although seemingly more of an issue for undergraduate students at University 2. More students from University 2, followed by students from University 1, pointed to the difficulty of obtaining scholarships, possibly reflecting opportunities available to students in University

1 and University 2. The language barrier is noted by more than half of surveyed students in University 2 but overall this is not a large issue probably due to the fact that most of the surveyed students are Languages students with a good command of English. Weather and food, though pointed to by some students, seem less of a priority to all surveyed students in the three universities.

The above findings inform research question 1 (RQ 1) and indicate that to some extent the students in this study seem to recognise similar barriers (cost, scholarship opportunities, family ties) and benefits of study abroad (English language, experience of being abroad, work opportunities) as students in other studies (Brux and Fry, 2010; Doyle et al, 2010; Dwyer and Peters, 2004; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011). However, apart from the benefit of improving English, the participants, especially the postgraduate students in all three institutions, seem to note the benefit of the cultural experience of study abroad.

Additionally, there seems to be enough interest in postgraduate study in the UK as one of the main motivating or pull factors as in the Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) push-pull model. This could indicate a lack of opportunities for high quality postgraduate study at home and a unique view held by Brazilian students about the opportunities rendered by study abroad. Notably, participants from University 1 and University 3 were able to note the benefits of study abroad and were the most prepared to consider study in the UK.

The main barrier identified by the participants in all three institutions is the cost which seems to be in line with the results of other empirical studies (Brux and Ngoboka, 2002; Calhoun et al, 2003; Doyle et al, 2010) but here the results reveal some subtle differences between the participants regarding perceived barriers. It seems that students from University 2, closely followed by students from University 1, have a little less security about being away from home than other participants. Additionally, participants from University 2, and University 1, seem to be more concerned about the lack of opportunity to obtain scholarships and language barriers, than participants from University 3. This may be related to fewer opportunities before study abroad to improve English and to experience being away from home.

The above survey findings provide some evidence for research questions (RQs) 2 and 3. In order to further inform RQ 2 and 3, the information arising from the survey was further explored with two focus groups selected from the survey participants. Although University

2 could not offer assistance with the focus group due to strikes, it was hoped that the focus group from University 1 might represent similar views in terms of benefits of and barriers to study abroad. Additionally, University 1 represents a higher number of survey respondents than University 2. Furthermore, respondents from University 1 and University 3 were more ready to consider study in the UK which could provide more information about the enabling factors to study abroad.

## **Focus groups findings**

The two focus groups met at University 1 and University 3 respectively. They were asked to elaborate on the areas explored in the questionnaire in relation to the barriers and perceived benefits of study abroad. Following the transcription of the tape recordings using Audio Notetaker version 2.5, thematic analysis of the focus groups was performed using Nvivo software, version 9. The following four themes have been established, evidenced by a selection of comments from the focus group participants.

### **Cost**

The questionnaire results seem to point to cost as the main barrier to study abroad. This was reiterated within the focus groups but given a bit more insight as to the origin of this perceived barrier. Cost was also the first barrier mentioned by both focus groups and viewed through the prism of cost of study and cost of living and compared to the North American countries:

*Money, cost - it cost more than studying in Australia or Canada, for example. When you think about studying I think about cost first. (University 1)*

*When I think about studying abroad the UK is one of the last places I list and that's just to do with cost. Not just for fees, but for living too. It's a lot less expensive to go to America and Canada and you find pretty much the same courses there. (University 3)*

Students from both focus groups were under the impression that studying in either USA or Australia was cheaper than the UK. However, when the author explored the tuition fees

and living costs for universities of a similar academic standing, it has become clear that it is actually cheaper to study in the UK. For example, if we take an average post 1992 university in the United Kingdom, University of Miami and University of Toronto, the costs of study at a UK university are cheaper. This perception could be down to a lack of information about the cost of study and living costs in the UK. So, perhaps the barrier of cost is more of a perceived barrier which, if students were better informed, could become of less importance than it is now.

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) explored factors influencing choice of destination for overseas study and reported that availability of part-time work to support study was in fact of far greater importance than the tuition fees themselves. In this study, only the University 1 focus group discussed further the uncertainty of being able to find part-time work to give them financial security and also to consolidate their learning experience, as being a significant factor in destination choice for overseas study:

*What I think is that we also have to deal with the uncertainty about not knowing if we will be able to find a job or if the job is going to be able to support us while we study. One of the most successful programmes that I have seen lately is one in Ireland, where people left Brazil already knowing what they were going to do before they got there. So, they had a part-time study, part-time work already designed before they go. Also most of the work was related to the course they were doing so if you were doing a course in hotel administration then you got to work in a hotel. (University 1)*

At the same time, participants at University 3 were less concerned about the relevant work:

*There is plenty of work in the UK, right? So, we can find it easily if we need it. We need to think about doing well in our studies though. (University 3)*

And more about the scholarships:

*Scholarships that were being offered that covered at least tuition fees, for 3 months to a year, things would be easier for students to go where they could spend a good year. (University 3)*

This slightly different focus on study abroad priorities may reflect a more mature orientation towards the balance of study and work for postgraduate students who may have more opportunity to access scholarships. This is different to University 1

undergraduate students who may have less experience of scholarships and being away from home. The impact of socio-economic status on academic orientation for achievement is especially relevant in Brazil where the relationship between educational achievement and social position proficiency can be strong (Soares, 2003). This adds a unique view of how cost, a universal factor for international students' destination choices, applies to the Brazilian students' choices from different institutions and the opportunities they are able to tap into.

### ***Cultural perceptions of past socio-academic relationships***

Relationships were discussed quite extensively in the focus group from the private University 3 and past social relationships between Brazil and the UK seem to exert an even greater impact on students' decision making. The main comparison was with Americans and Australians and how successfully both countries built relationships with Brazil. The UK, however, was not seen in a good light at all. The students within that particular focus group considered the British to be pompous, speaking down to Brazilians:

*Normally people from the UK think they are coming to Brazil to teach and that we are going to be there to learn and there is not this relationship that believes that we Brazilians have something to teach as well, we have something to offer. This is something we have faced. (University 3)*

The aforementioned negative barriers do not seem to have anything to do with university course content or academic credibility, rather a perception which the university staff have held from past institutional relationships with universities in the UK. University 3 entered into a partnership with an English university in 1988, which turned out not to be so much of an equal partnership at all. As a result, this particular university's staff have been left with a negative perception of the UK as a whole which they may be passing to the students when they consider their possible study abroad choices. The group of students from University 3 seem to be a very close, tightly knit community which lasts way beyond the duration of their degree. As a result, cultural perceptions of past experiences and relationships which may be passed to the students seem to linger even though the students do not have any experience of staying or studying in the UK:

*We don't like cold weather... and cold people. (University 3)*

It seems that the past institutional relationships can contribute to perceived barriers but, with a better understanding of the opportunities current collaborations could offer and how the aims of all stakeholders could be achieved, this barrier could become less important to student choice. The participants are quite verbal about the need for more information on why and where to study in the United Kingdom:

*There is a lack of advertising... More information on the current opportunities in the UK would help. People choose to study at London, Oxford and Cambridge because of the cultural events, shopping and stuff but we don't really know what life is like for students in the UK and individual places.*  
(University 3)

The postgraduate participants from University 3 seem to be more reticent than undergraduate participants from University 1 who seem to be keen to experience the new culture, beyond the perceived barriers:

*I would like to work abroad for experience and get to know the country so, no matter what they say about the UK, I'd like to see what it is like.* (University 1)

Furthermore, the focus group from University 1 explored the benefits of new institutional relationships:

*We have a lot of relationships with other countries in Europe with projects and people are close to us, we become close friends and so on. It's always an exchange they believe that we can teach them as well. Can we offer teaching to the UK students not just learning, studying in the UK?*  
(University 1)

Similarly, the focus group from University 3 were of the belief that study abroad is a challenge but acknowledged it could also be an opportunity:

*I would consider studying abroad as a challenge and an opportunity if I had enough information.*(University 3)

The above comments show the power of the perceived past institutional relationships which can shape students' views of the benefits and/or barriers of study abroad. On the other hand, the comments highlight the potential to explore new relationships and the

interest in the new culture which are worth exploring to enhance Brazilian students' interest in study in the United Kingdom.

## **Language**

The overall consensus from both focus groups is that people in the UK do not speak Portuguese and therefore not likely to come over to Brazilian universities to study:

*The students from the UK should be encouraged to learn languages, Portuguese, then they could come and stay here as we do not teach in English, and benefit from the exchange. (University 3).*

This could be a contributory factor to the perception that British people feel they are superior and do not need to learn Portuguese. This barrier as cost and past relationships' barriers above, could well be addressed by the host universities promoting Portuguese language tuition and by raising awareness about the Languages programmes in the host institution.

On the other hand, due to the native language of the host destination, English is of interest to the students, despite the fact that generally speaking they have a good command of English:

*We all speak English but don't use it a lot in everyday lives so going to study to the UK would help us practice and become confident with our English. (University 1)*

Not only English language improvement is noted by the participants as one of the main benefits of study abroad. It seems that opportunities to explore learning Portuguese, if promoted as part of an exchange programme (i.e. an aim for UK students to come to Brazil to study in exchange with Brazilian students to come to the UK to study), could be an enabling factor in students and academic staff in Brazilian institutions keen to see a reciprocal aspect of an exchange or a study abroad scheme. It does seem then that language offers a benefit to study abroad and an area worth further attention for the UK institutions seeking to promote study abroad programmes with Brazilian institutions.

### **Homesickness/Family and Friends**

Another highly reported barrier in the focus groups was homesickness. Homesickness is an aspect which is not unique to Brazilians but it exerts a very specific barrier to student study abroad choices in Brazil, and in Latin America, which are based on family and kinship relations, more than European or Asian countries (Carlos and Sellers, 1972). Nearly all participants of the focus groups pondered on the feeling of being away from family and friends:

*Being so far away from your family is hard" and "In our class we are like family. If I don't go to a class then I can rely on help from the others. Being abroad is not like that. (University 1)*

However some students in the focus groups, especially in University 1, showed signs of recognising the need to developing independent skills whilst maintaining their family ties:

*It's not good to rely on others all the time. We can learn to be self-reliant from being abroad. (University 1)*

*My family, they think I'm crazy! I'm very dependent, I think, on people making decisions for me, but I also I like to go to places, experience and do new things so study abroad is perfect for me. Although I do like my family and them making decisions for me. I can think of doing a masters now because before I was like 'no'. Now I can open my mind. (University 3).*

This could reflect the new, globalisation forces, slowly exerting influence on the traditional perception of being away from the family countries in Latin America (Soares, 2003). As suggested by the literature (Beard and Wilson, 2006), using Experiential Theory could help anticipate homesickness within the pre-study stage, whereby anxieties and worries would be addressed before the student goes abroad. Experiential learning also considers previous experience and stereotypes. The fact that Brazilian students in the study had never worked with British students or academics, gives room to the UK universities to undertake a similar promotional drive.

## **Discussion and recommendations**

The study indicated that the participants' attitudes to study abroad are affected by some of the factors identified in other empirical studies (RQ 1). However, there are also some unique areas of barriers and benefits displayed specifically by the participants in the study which are worth attention when considering enhancing positive attitudes to study abroad among Brazilian students.

The key *pull* factors or benefits of study abroad are improving English, having an experience of study abroad and, for postgraduate students, doing research at postgraduate level (RQ 2). The latter is of interest as studies at postgraduate level were highlighted by the postgraduate participants as the key potential pull factor or benefit of study abroad. There is also an underlying interest in learning about the host country's culture at national and regional level shared by all participants. This would not only help reduce the negative stereotypes but add an important value to the study abroad for any Brazilian students considering study in the United Kingdom.

Finally, language issues seem to be a very important aspect of students' decision making. English language improvement for Brazilian students is clearly seen as the main benefit of study abroad while Portuguese is a barrier to fostering UK students exchange with the Brazilian universities. Any universities looking to enhance student mobility might wish to consider these factors by promoting opportunities to develop both languages respectively and stress the benefits of doing so for professional and personal purposes.

The main barriers identified in the study involve cost, past institutional relationships and homesickness (RQ 3). Past institutional relationships seem to influence academic staff who in turn may influence the participants' attitudes to study abroad. The participants from University 3 were more vocal than other participants about this aspect, most likely due to their university's experience of collaboration with the United Kingdom universities in the 1980s, which could contribute to the perceptions of staff, which in turn could influence the students.

Furthermore, the study revealed that the barriers, particularly those pertaining to cost, although seemingly exerting a very strong influence, appeared to have been founded upon perceptions and assumptions, which may not only have some link to opportunities available to the participants at the time of the study and their impact on the academic orientation of the participants, but are also very loosely related to the reality of studying in the UK. This may indicate that the reason Brazilian students have historically tended not to choose the UK to study has been based upon the lack of information about the opportunities offered by study abroad in the UK as opposed to, for example, the United States (RQ 3). It highlights the timely necessity for awareness raising and information campaign to help limit the perceived barriers and foster the enabling factors. In terms of the academic collaboration history, there is a need to create opportunities to enter into new collaborations based on joint agreement with shared aims which are acceptable and fulfilling for both sides.

Potential differences in prioritising the availability and relevance of part time work (University 1 focus group) versus availability of scholarships (University 3 focus group) may be linked to the social opportunities available to the students in those universities. These subtle but important differences may suggest a need for adopting differential approaches to the recruitment of students from different profile higher education institutions in Brazil. It would appear practicable to emphasise the financial support, availability of scholarships and relevant part-time work when attempting to attract students from the University 1 profile of higher education institutions. Conversely, postgraduate students from University 3 type higher education institution may be more receptive to aspects of UK institutions that relate to their academic merit, such as high quality postgraduate study research.

Finally, both groups should be encouraged to consider study abroad in the United Kingdom as an opportunity to develop their independent skills for professional purposes. The careful wording of this advice should recognise the students' strong family and social ties and stress that good independent, working skills and strong family ties, quite representative of the Brazilian society, can complement each other. Independent skills together with experiencing new culture and developing a sound inter-cultural knowledge should be promoted to the families as the major benefit of study abroad.

## **Study Limitations**

Although this study involved participants from three institutions with a diverse ranking and student profile, Brazil is a large country with a spread of institutions far more complex than that represented by the institutions in the study. There is a need to include a wider spread of institutions across Brazil and Latin America to further investigate the key factors shaping students' decision making about study abroad. It can be suggested that the negative experience of the past academic collaboration for University 3 could influence the study's results. Other institutions with previous experience of academic collaboration with the UK universities, as well as those without it, could contribute to a more objective view of students' motivations to study in the UK.

It is also acknowledged that the study and the discussion of the findings were driven by the research questions that were asked. Although the questions aimed to filter the most relevant information with regards to the literature, the selection and use of the research questions could have limited the range of factors considered. A further study drawing on a wider set of research questions and looking at a range of factors is needed to further inform the discussion.

Additionally, further studies with students representing a selection of disciplines are required to achieve a spectrum of views about the motivating factors and barriers, including the role of language and culture in the study abroad decision making.

Finally, further studies with other stakeholders, such as staff, parents and government institutions such as the British Council, and the Brazilian Ministry of Education, could further inform this study's findings and contribute to a better understanding of the complex factors involved in students' motivations to choose to study abroad.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Brazilian students' attitudes to study in the UK seem to be driven to some extent by the universally acknowledged barriers and benefits, however, they also seem to be affected by a set of factors characteristic to the Brazilian and Latin American society,

including past institutional relations and family ties. Additionally, the barriers and benefits of study abroad seem to be viewed differently by undergraduate and postgraduate students, and this diversity needs to be acknowledged and addressed in marketing strategies designed for different levels of study. The barriers may be reduced not only by a greater focus upon building strong academic relationships, but also by recognising the characteristics of different cohorts of students and their families' expectations in order to better target their individual motivations. Further study is recommended in order to determine whether these findings can be extrapolated to other Brazilian universities.

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