Research into the international student experience in the UK 2015-16

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Identification of the key barriers to securing employment in the UK for international students at Bournemouth University

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Careers and Employability Service

Contents

1. Introduction 4
2. Research aim 4
3. Motivations for research 4
4. Summary of research outcomes 4
5. Background information and scope 4
6. Research methodology 5
7. Key research findings 6
   - 7.1 About the respondents 6
   - 7.2 Expectations 8
   - 7.3 Level of work 10
   - 7.4 Language skills 10
   - 7.5 Working in the UK 10
   - 7.6 Previous work experience 11
8. Conclusions and ideas for further research 11
9. How might the research inform enhancements to professional practice? How might it be applied? 11
10. Reflections on learning points for other UK institutions and links 11

Appendix 1 Secondary data sources 12

Appendix 2 Questionnaire 14

List of tables and charts

Figure 1: Overview of all BU Students 2015-2016 5
Figure 2: Top 10 Country of origin of both undergraduate and postgraduate international students at BU 5
Table 1: Age range (Question 2) 6
Figure 3: Nationalities of top 10 respondents in percentage (Question 3) 7
Figure 4: Career areas and study levels (in %) comparison (Questions 5 and 10) 7
Figure 5: Career clusters and EU/Non-EU 8
Figure 6: Difficulties expressed by students (Question 16) 9
Figure 7: Time spent looking for work (Question 17) 10

1. Introduction

Anecdotal evidence suggests that international students at Bournemouth University (BU) face a high level of difficulty in securing work experience whilst studying. This research seeks to investigate and gather evidence to either support or disprove this claim.

We collected primary data from small focus group sessions with international students. These helped to formulate an online questionnaire which was sent out to all the BU international student population. With nearly a 10% response rate we were able to use the data to gain greater insights into the expectations of our international students and perceived barriers. It also highlighted some differences between the experiences of both the undergraduate and postgraduate population at BU.

We concluded that managing the expectations of incoming students and building resilience in seeking work in the UK during their studies is paramount. We will continue to develop our services following the results of this research and hope our findings will be of use to other universities.

2. Research aim

To carry out primary research to understand Bournemouth University (BU) international[1] students' perspective on the issues facing them when trying to gain work experience in the UK during their studies, either as part of their course, personal development or a source of income. This research was carried out with the aim of adapting practices and services for international students.

1 Defined as Non-UK student

3. Motivations for research

At BU we have more students on work placements than any other university in Great Britain[2] and we believe that taking a work placement as part of your degree can help you stand out from the crowd. Some courses include mandatory placements, while on others they are optional. Mandatory placements can be anywhere from two weeks to 40 weeks (a full academic year) long. The shorter work placements are typically designed to fit in around modules of study.

2 According to HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013

With international student recruitment growing in countries such as America, Canada and Australia, and with the increase in the quality and accessibility of domestic education in Asian countries, it is essential that BU increases its competitive advantage. Increasing Global Mobility of all students is a key strategic drive for BU. Experience of work in the UK is perceived to be a huge advantage to international students to enable them to enter the global workplace. Previous focus groups organised by the International Market Research team at BU identified that BU international students face additional barriers to finding employment and work placements in the UK, over and above UK national students. This supports anecdotal evidence from individual students who approach the BU Careers and Employability staff for help finding work opportunities. Our research set out to explore these barriers in greater detail.

4. Summary of research outcomes

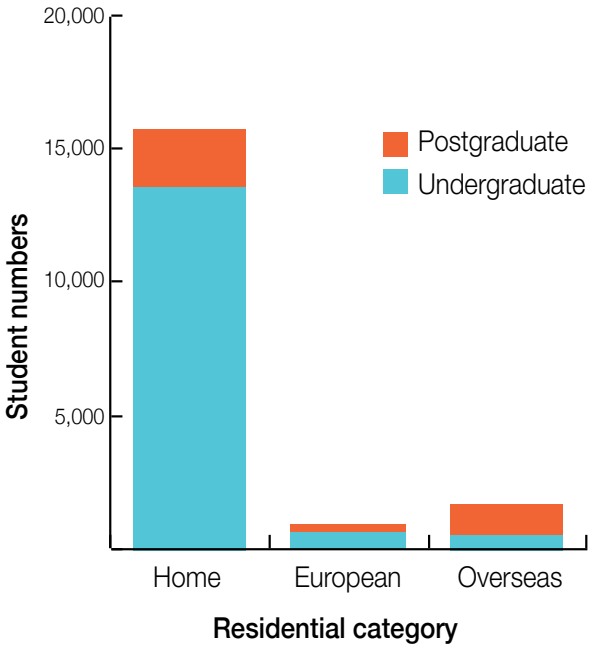
Our research identified the following key barriers for international students in gaining work experience in the UK:

- Lack of understanding of the UK job market, recruitment processes and practices
- English language difficulties
- Unrealistic expectations of the university placement process
- Lack of understanding of the amount of effort required to be successful in gaining work experience in the UK
- Lack of understanding of the value of transferrable employability skills gained from non-course specific work experiences

5. Background information and scope

Many students are attracted to BU because it offers all students the opportunity to complete a work placement during their studies. The university has a total student body of approximately 18,000, 11% of whom are international. (Figure 1 on page 33)

Figure 1 Overview of all BU Students 2015-2016



Our questionnaire was sent to the entire international student body (approximately 1,850 students). Figure 2 below illustrates the top 10 countries of all overseas students at BU for 2015-16 academic year. We received 292 responses to the questionnaire which was above our target of 10% and statistically reliable. The responses reflected a range of ages, nationalities and levels of study.

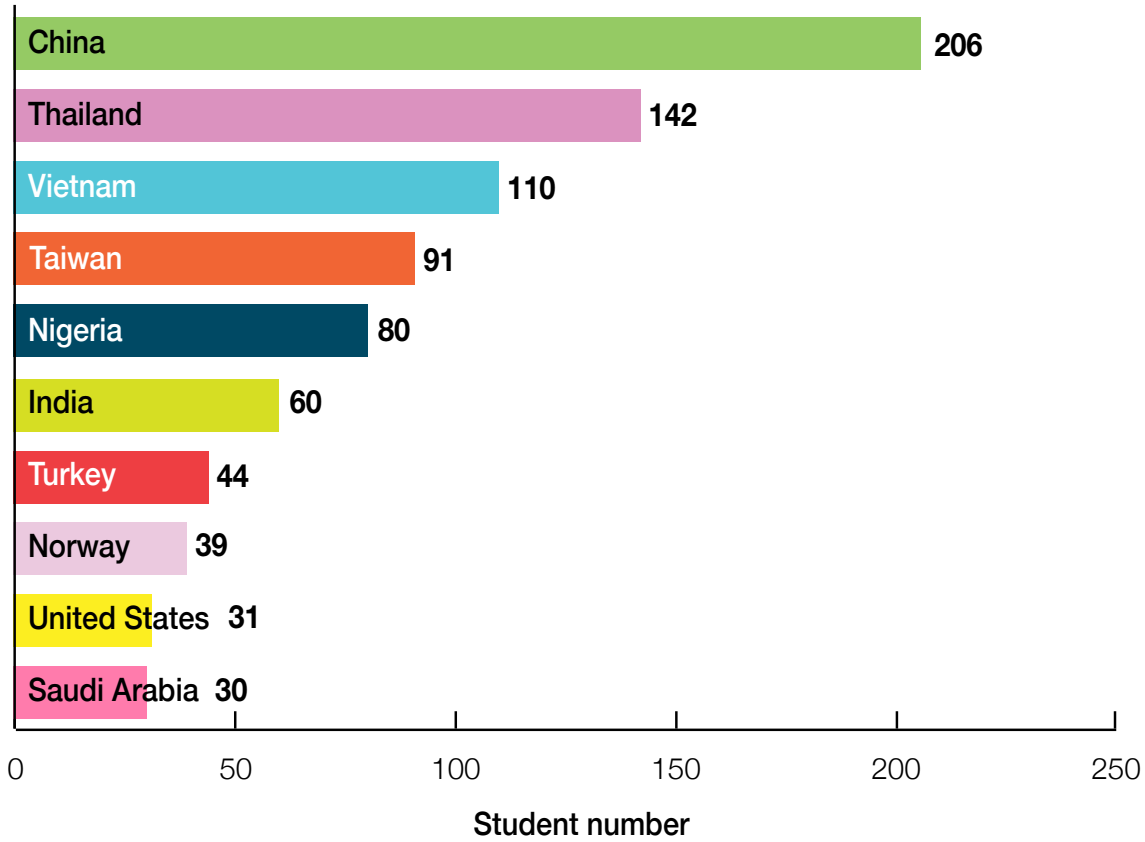
6. Research methodology

Employing the approach of grounded theory, we sought to gather as much data as possible before any attempts to theorise. (See summary of secondary research in Appendix 1). Focus groups and an online questionnaire were used to gather primary data.

All research was completed according to the guidelines set by our internal ethics policies. We employed a Project Research Assistant, who was a recent graduate and who had herself been an international student, and a current international student to help analyse and collate the data.

Initial data was collected via three focus groups with international students from a number of different subject areas and course levels. Based on the findings of these focus groups we devised an online questionnaire entitled “Opportunities for

Figure 2 Top 10 Country of origin of both undergraduate and postgraduate international students at BU



From left to right: Thuy, Project Data Assistant, Alexandra, Prize draw winner and Georgia, Project Research Assistant

and Challenges to Finding Work in the UK from the Perspective of International Students" (Appendix 2). The questionnaire ran from 14 April to 3 May 2016. Students who completed the questionnaire were entered into a prize draw for £100 of Amazon vouchers.

7. Key research findings

The following findings are arranged into key areas of interest, reflecting themes that recurred across the focus groups and questionnaire data.

7.1 About the respondents

The largest volumes of respondents were between 21 and 24 years of age (see Table 1).

By running a linear regression, we found a slight negative correlation between student ages and their intention to search for work during their studies. That is to say, younger students were more interested in finding paid work to either support their living costs or gain more experience/skills as compared to older students.

We looked at the correlation between the countries of origin of the international population at BU (Figure 2) and the nationalities of the respondents to the questionnaire (Figure 3). Our findings revealed that whilst the largest population of international students at BU are from China, the largest group of respondents to the questionnaire were from Vietnam.

It can be seen from the graph in Figure 4 that undergraduate students were mostly looking for jobs in the Arts, Audio/Video Technology & Communications and Hospitality & Tourism, for 31% and 25% respectively. Regarding postgraduate students, most of them showed interest in Hospitality & Tourism and Marketing, Sales & Services, making up 25% and 18% correspondingly.

As can be seen from the graph in Figure 5, most EU students showed great interest in the area of the Arts, Audio/Video Technology & Communications (33%) as well as Hospitality & Tourism (25%). Meanwhile, we found that a considerable number of non-EU students were

Table 1. Age range (Question 2)

20 years and under	21 – 24 years	25 – 29 years	30 years and over	N/A	Total
67	111	69	37	3	287
Minimum age		**Maximum age**		**Average age**	
17		50		23	

Figure 3: Nationalities of top 10 respondents in percentage (Question 3)

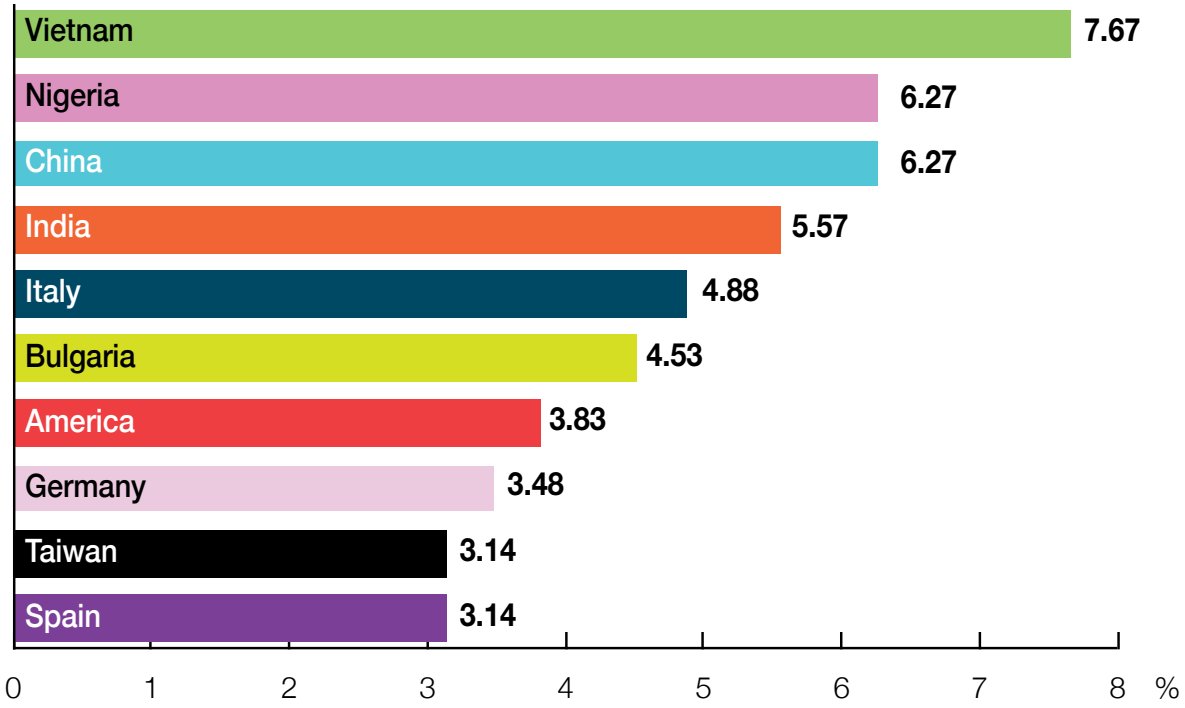


Figure 4. Career areas and study levels (in %) comparison (Questions 5 and 10)

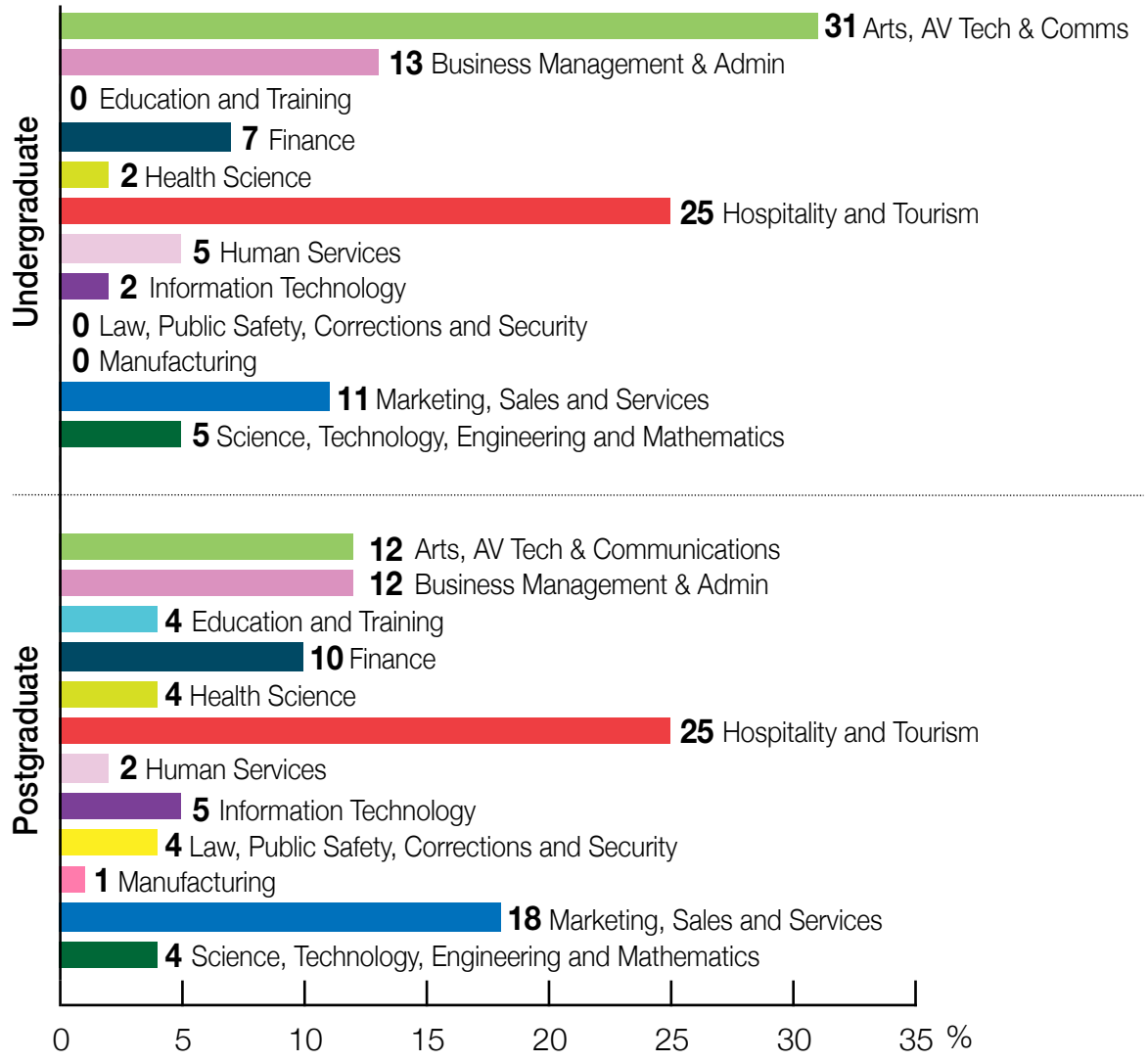
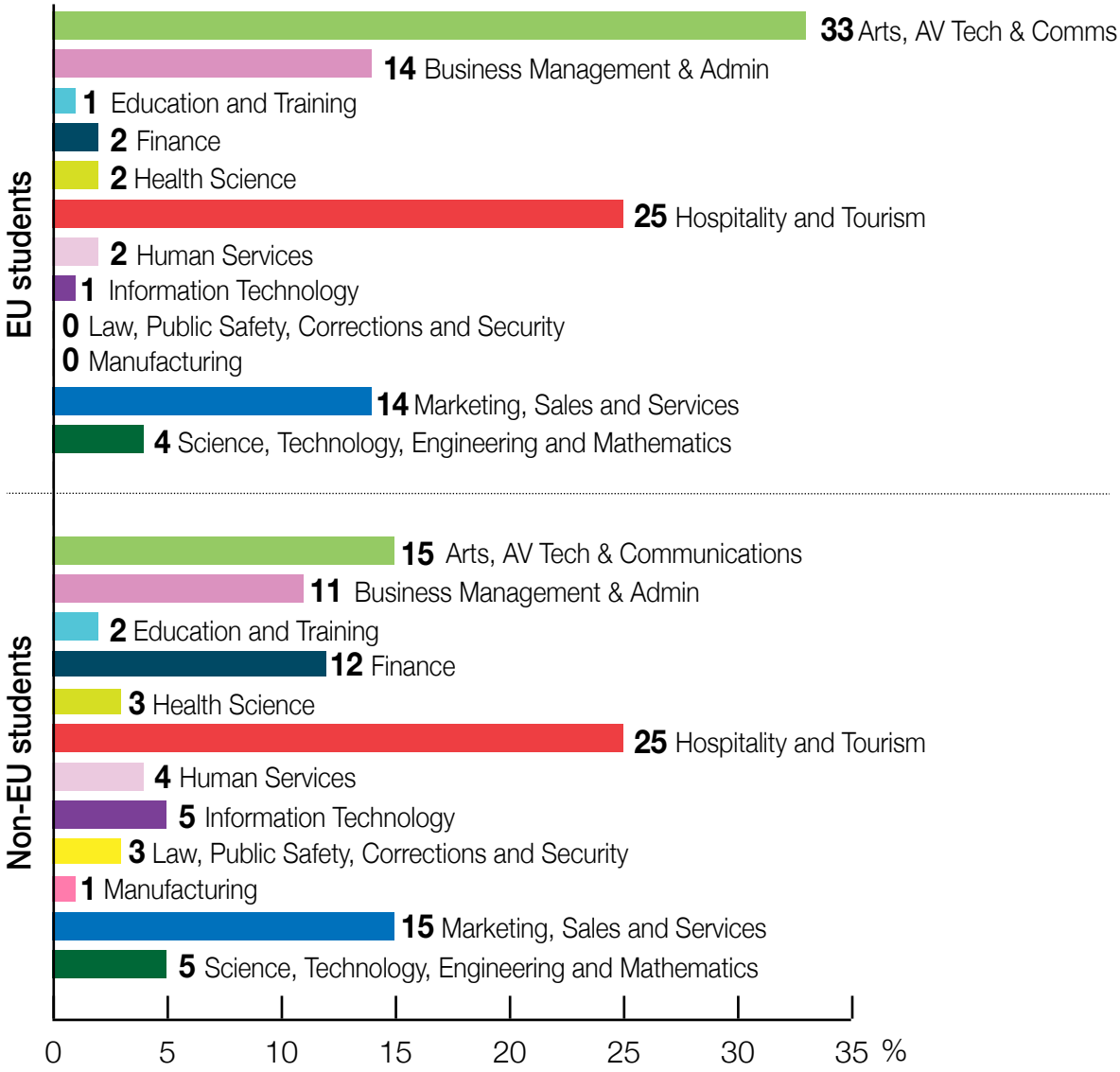


Figure 5: Career areas and study levels (in %) comparison (Questions 5 and 10)



interested in Hospitality & Tourism (25%), Arts, Audio/Video Technology & Communications (15%) and Marketing, Sales & Services (15%).

7.2 Expectations

The graph in Figure 6 relate to the responses to question 16 (Appendix 2) about the difficulties faced by the students. There is a discrepancy between expectations and reality regarding work in the UK for international students. From our research it appears that many international students assume that a work experience opportunity will be provided for them by the university.

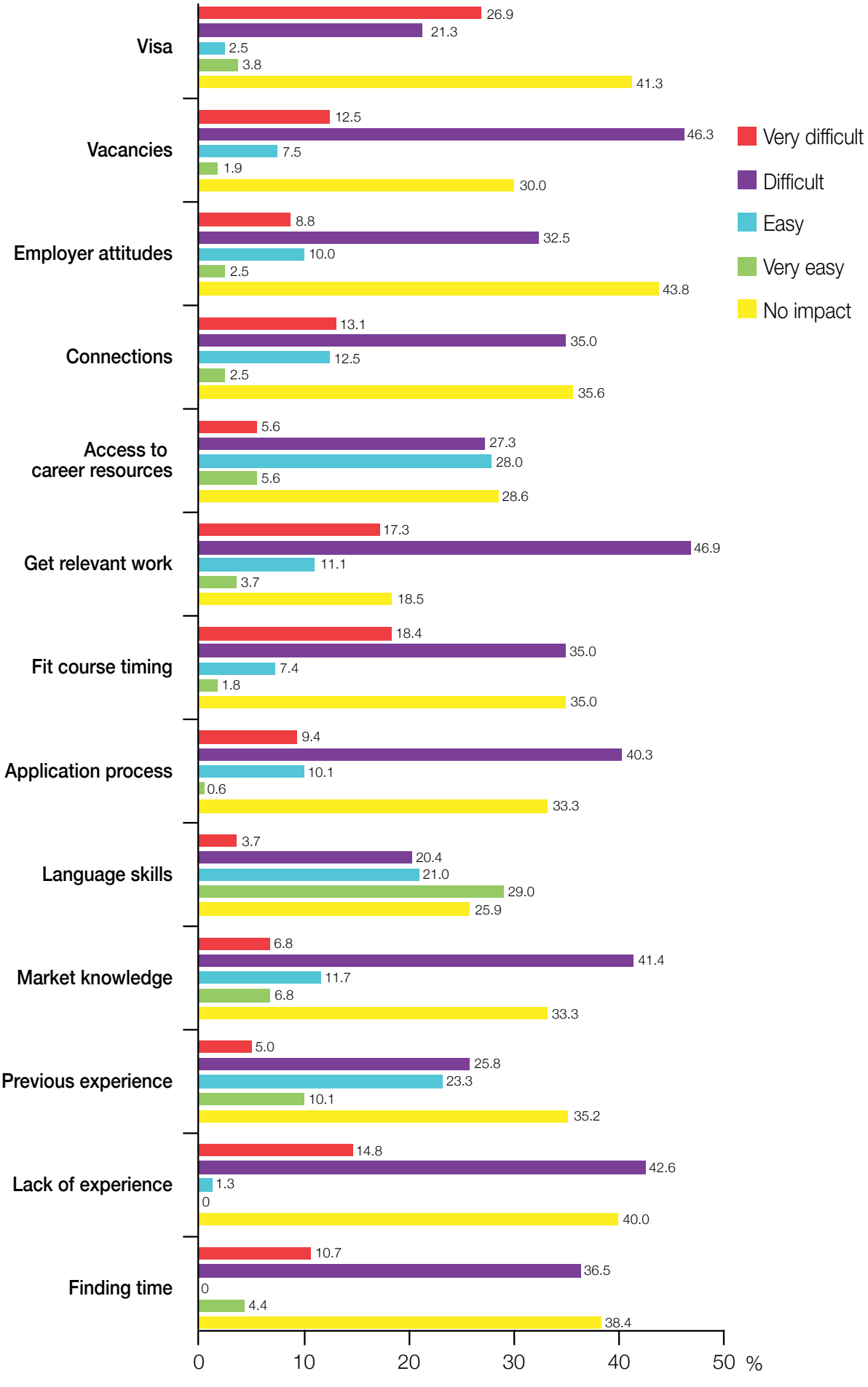
Hearsay among students may lead to international students not bothering to look for work, or to give up too easily, believing the process to be unfair to international students.

32% of respondents claimed that the attitudes of employers made finding work difficult, and 9% claimed this made it very difficult. International students, who were aware that finding work experience is difficult for all students, and who thus put extra effort into the search were reported to be more successful.

When asked "what advice would you give to a student from your home country looking for work in the UK?" (Q.20) 15% recommended perseverance, suggesting an awareness of the difficulties of the process, but optimism that it is a worthwhile process.

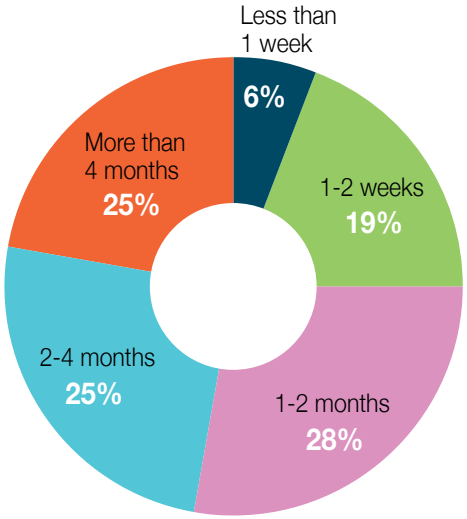
When asked "is there anything else you would want to tell us about your experience of looking for work and/or working in the UK?" (Q.21) 12% gave positive feedback about their experience. In the focus groups students did not seem to be aware of how early they must begin their job

Figure 6: Difficulties expressed by students (Question 16)



search. Question 17 asked them about the amount of time they spent looking for work experience (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Time spent looking for work (question 17)



Using binary logistic regression run through SPSS Statistics, a software package used for statistical analysis, we looked at the data effects of age, time spent looking for jobs, EU/Non-EU students and whether the students were attending undergraduate or postgraduate courses. We found that postgraduate students spent less time on searching for work than undergraduate students. Comparisons against nationality, career clusters, access to information and attitudes of employers were found to be insignificant to the level of study.

7.3 Level of work

International students often want a very specific type/level of work experience, and will reject offers that they feel do not meet these requirements. They are less willing to take a placement which they do not perceive to be directly relevant to their career path. Although these students recognised the value of a placement in the UK, they did not feel this value outweighed the expense if the job is seen to be low paid or low status.

- *"If there was a good placement I would definitely take it, but if there was one I wasn't sure about – I still have to pay fees and everything – so I wouldn't take one that isn't worth my time, even if it is experience."* (Quote from focus group).
- 64% of respondents struggled to find work or a placement that was relevant to their course. (Q16)

Postgraduate international students often have industry experience in their home country, and may not be willing to take a placement that they believe will not further develop their skills.

- One student interviewed said; *"I'm a Masters student with eight years' experience in the industry, why would I take a waitress job? It isn't worth my time."*

Some students felt that work experience opportunities were out of sync with academic workloads in postgraduate courses.

- One MA student interviewed said; *"The placements being offered aren't in sync with the timing of my course – employers want a one year placement when you only want one for 10 months."*
- 53% of respondents said that finding work or a placement that fit with the timing of their course was difficult or very difficult (Q16.8). Of these, 57% were postgraduate students.

7.4 Language skills

Language problems can confront even those students with a high level of English. A student may have an excellent level of English within their subject area, but may have a low level of social English and so may struggle with interviews.

- *"You use technical English every day, but trying to communicate to higher-ups, there's no experience of that for me."* (Quote from focus group).
- 20% of respondents claimed that their language skills made finding work difficult, although only 4% claimed that it made it very difficult. (Q16.1)

7.5 Working in the UK

When asked to list any other problems they faced (Q.16.a) 16% stated lack of knowledge about the UK job market was a major problem.

Students reported a lack of clear, easy to find and well-publicised information about National Insurance numbers, visa-related working restrictions, the employment process and UK work culture.

- 48% of respondents claimed that their lack of knowledge of the UK job market made finding work difficult or very difficult.
- 48% of respondents said that not understanding the application process for work in the UK made finding a job difficult or very difficult.

Many students felt that employers did not know that international students who are doing a work placement as a component of their course, are able to work full time without the need for sponsorship from the employer.

- 47% claimed that visa restrictions made their search for work difficult or very difficult.

7.6 Previous work experience

When asked "what advice would you give to a student from your home country looking for work in the UK?" (Q.20) 12% replied that having prior work experience was helpful.

International students often do not have experience of work in the UK, and feel that experience in their home country is often rejected by potential UK employers.

- 54% of respondents stated that lack of experience made finding work difficult or very difficult. Of those who were able to secure a job or work placement in the UK during their studies, 23.3% said that they needed work experience outside of their home country in order to get this job.

8. Conclusions and ideas for further research

In summary the main issues confronting international students appear to be:

- Unrealistic expectations of the job-searching process in UK
- Students do not start their job search early enough, do not consider enough different options and lack resilience when faced with rejection

Ideas for further research:

- The questionnaire could be used by other institutions in order to gauge a national view on the issues addressed
- Carrying out a similar survey targeting UK students at BU would highlight if these issues are pertinent to international students alone
- Conducting a survey with key graduate employers to gather views on providing work experience for international students

9. How might the research inform enhancements to professional practice? How might it be applied?

Managing the expectations of incoming international students is crucial. Students need to be aware that finding work can be an extremely difficult process. More information on the difficulties of the job-hunting process, advice and a proposed timeline for job-searching could be provided for international students before they begin their studies, so that they arrive in the UK with more realistic expectations.

Information on working in the UK needs to be clear and easily available in a range of formats. Several students said they would rather receive it in an online format.

BU has good links with a wide variety of employers who provide placements for students. These could be targeted to improve their awareness of the issues which face international students and how to mitigate these. Aspects such as timescales and specific work experience could be discussed – particularly for postgraduate students.

10. Reflections on learning points and links to further information

Conducting this research as a professional service has been a very useful process. The internal research ethics process has had minor amendments as a result of our project to reflect that we were not part of an academic faculty. Having guidance from an experienced research staff mentor has been invaluable. Time and effort was devoted to finding suitable candidates for the Research and Project Data Assistant positions.

Conducting focus groups and the questionnaire has provided a lot of rich data to influence the practices to support international students within BU beyond this research project. Further information on secondary data referred to is summarised in Appendix 1.

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Appendix 1
Secondary data sources

1

Balta, Coughlan and Hobson's 2012 study "Motivations And Barriers in Undergraduate Students' Decisions to Enrol in Placement Courses in the UK"[1] noted that while previous studies have extensively discussed the benefits associated with work placement experience for students' future employability, limited work has been undertaken on the problems students face in the process of attempting to secure a placement. Their study sought to identify the motivations and barriers for undergraduate students in the UK choosing between placement and non-placement courses. They identified a number of issues, including:

- Unrealistic expectations on the part of the students, who often expect to be placed in big multinational firms, where there is high competition and limited opportunities
- Many students are reluctant to undertake a placement in an area that is not related to their studies
- Financial restriction is an important barrier, as students continue to pay fees and accommodation though their placement year.
- Many students stated that the time and energy necessary for the pursuit of a placement was problematic (12% of respondents), and many feared that their academic work would suffer (27% of respondents)
- Fear of rejection also proved to be an important factor

Our research at BU sought to continue this work, focusing specifically on international students (both Undergraduate and Postgraduate), in order to discover whether they felt that they faced additional barriers over and above those faced by UK students, and if so what these were.

2

The Department for Business Innovation & Skills October 2013 research paper, "Working while Studying: a Follow-up to the Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2011-12"[2] noted a number of problems that UK national students claim they face when searching for employment in the UK during their studies. In particular, the survey noted that:
"Generally students appreciate the opportunity to undertake a work placement but not all students take up placements because they are not interested and feel placements would unnecessarily extend their course and delay graduation, they may feel that placements are not appropriate for their career goals, or they feel they already have sufficient work experience" (p. 9)

This research focused on the question of why students decided not to pursue a placement, classifying this as a matter of free choice.
In our research we sought to understand why students who wanted to undertake a placement or part time work were unable to do so.

3

Marcellus Mbah and Kelly Goodwin's CEL (Centre for Excellence in Learning) funded project on "The Placement Experience of International Students at BU"[3] in 2015, explored the experience of international students during their time on placement.

- With regards to the process of finding a placement they reported that while there was excellent support for CV and cover letter writing, students did not seem to understand what a placement entailed, and how it related to visa work restrictions.
- Further, they found that there were a number of cultural differences which proved

problematic for international students looking for a placement in the UK, particularly the need for proactive self-confidence and self-promotion during the interview stage.

4

Crawford, Wang and Andrews' 2016 paper "Exploring the influence of individual and academic differences on the placement participation rate among international students"[4]

- The purpose of this paper is to investigate the low placement participation rate among international students compared with UK students, by examining the impact of individual factors such as gender and domicile and academic achievement such as prior academic qualification, prior academic results and subsequent academic results on students' choices of degree programmes as well as their graduation status.
- They found that UK students on entry are 35% more likely than international students to choose a degree programme with a placement module after controlling for individual and academic differences. Among females, international students who switch to a degree without placement following entry significantly and statistically underperformed their UK counterparts who complete a degree with placement from the first year onwards. This trend is not observable among male students. Instead, male students who select and graduate with a degree without placement are the worst performers, regardless of their nationalities.
- They suggest that international students need to know more about the benefits of undertaking placements on their academic performance and the development of generic skills before entry. Moreover, UK universities need to provide more assistance to international students, especially females about how to secure placements and how to widen their search for potential placements.

In contrast with this research, our project sought to explore what other issues might be causing the low participation rates of international students in work experience in the UK. We wanted to understand why a student who was aware of the value of a placement for example, and who did wish to undertake one, might nevertheless be unable to do so.

End notes

1. Available at: http://bit.ly/2jv3HPG

2. Available at: http://bit.ly/2il4hc6

3. Available at: http://bit.ly/2k0AWv7

4. Available at: http://bit.ly/2j4iAFn

Bournemouth University
Appendix 2
Opportunities for and challenges to finding work in the UK from the perspective of international students

1 Participant consent

- ☐ I understand that participation in this questionnaire is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time.
- ☐ I understand that the information I provide may be used in future academic research.
- ☐ I understand that any information that I give will be used anonymously.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this questionnaire.

2 Age

3 Nationality

4 Name of your course

5 Level of study

6 Is a work placement compulsory for your course?

7 How important do you feel work experience or a work placement is to your future career?

8 Have you so far tried to find a job or work placement in the UK during your studies?

☐ Yes ☐ No

8a If yes, was it:

- ☐ Part-time job
- ☐ Work experience
- ☐ Work placement
- ☐ Other

8b If not, why?

8b1 If you selected Other, please specify:

9 When did you begin to look for work?

- ☐ October-December
- ☐ January-March
- ☐ April-June
- ☐ July-September

10 Which industry did you want to get a job within? (tick all that apply)

- ☐ Accountancy
- ☐ Administration
- ☐ Animation
- ☐ Archaeology
- ☐ Communication
- ☐ Design
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Engineering
- ☐ Events
- ☐ Finance
- ☐ Forensics
- ☐ Health care
- ☐ Hospitality
- ☐ IT
- ☐ Journalism
- ☐ Law
- ☐ Leisure Management
- ☐ Marketing
- ☐ Media
- ☐ Medical
- ☐ Nursing
- ☐ Nutrition
- ☐ Politics
- ☐ Psychology

☐ Retail ☐ Science ☐ Social Care
☐ Sport ☐ Tourism ☐ Other

10.a If you selected Other, please specify:

11 Did you find a job or placement in the UK during your studies?

☐ Yes ☐ No

12 Which of the following statements describe the job role (tick all that apply)

☐ Casual (related to my course)
☐ Casual (not related to my course)
☐ Professional (related to my course)
☐ Professional (not related to my course)

13 Was the job relevant to your course or career plans?

☐ Yes ☐ No

14 Did you need to have any work experience to get the job? (tick all that apply)

☐ Experience in the UK
☐ Experience in the EU
☐ Experience in home country
☐ No experience was needed

15 Did you face any difficulties when you were trying to find work in the UK?

☐ Yes ☐ No

16 If you answered yes, please indicate what impact the following factors had on your search for work.

16.1 My language skills

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.2 Knowledge of the UK employment market

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.3 Previous experience

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.4 Lack of previous experience

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.5 Finding time for applying

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.6 Access to careers resources

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.7 Getting work relevant to my course

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.8 Getting work that fits with the timing of my course

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.9 Application process

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.10 Visa restrictions

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.11 Number of job vacancies

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.12 Employer's attitudes

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.13 Making connections with employers

☐ It made it very easy ☐ It made it easy ☐ It made it difficult
☐ It made it very difficult ☐ It did not have any impact

16.a Please list any other problems you faced

17 How much time did you spend looking for work?

☐ Less than 1 week ☐ 1-2 weeks ☐ 2-4 weeks
☐ 1-2 months ☐ 2-4 months

18 Which of the following did you do in order to get a job or work placement?

☐ Considered a range of job roles
☐ Sent a targeted application or
☐ CV to employer
☐ Sent targeted covering letter
☐ Sent follow-up email/made follow-up phone call to employer
☐ Visited employers in person
☐ Used social media to connect with employers
☐ Used the University Careers Service
☐ Used department connections
☐ Attended conferences
☐ Attended career fairs
☐ Talked to my Tutor
☐ Talked to my Academic Advisor
☐ Used the University Placement service
☐ Other

19 Did you receive any further support from the University?

☐ Yes ☐ No

19.a If yes, what was the further support you received?

20 What advice would you give to a student from your home country looking for work in the UK?

21 Is there anything else you would want to tell us about your experiences of looking for work and/or working in the UK?

22 Thank you for completing our questionnaire! If you would like to be entered into a prize draw to win £100 of Amazon vouchers, please enter your email address below.

The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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