This project was supported by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training.
Acknowledgements

The research reported here would not have been possible without the support and efforts of staff and students at the seven participating universities. Students gave up two hours of their precious research time to attend focus groups and participate in lively discussions and their input is much appreciated. University staff contacted students, arranged focus groups, organised refreshments and provided encouragement throughout the project, all of which was invaluable.

Particular thanks go to Dr Ren Yi from Macquarie University who initiated the research and ensured that universities came on board and Steve Nerlich from the Australian Government Department of Education and Training which funded the research.
Executive summary

This report presents findings of a study of the international mobility of postgraduate research students enrolled at Australian universities. It is based on focus groups with sixty postgraduate research students at seven Australian universities and one focus group with staff from three universities who are involved in supporting research students. The report explores seven key topics and this section provides a summary of findings for each one.

Overall, the research indicated that the value of international mobility to research students, their supervisors, their institutions and to Australia more broadly was immense:

- **Students** gained access to invaluable resources, contacts with global experts and unique insights that significantly enhanced both the quality of their research and their employment prospects;
- **Supervisors** gained access to opportunities for collaboration with colleagues in other countries and were exposed to new contexts for fieldwork and data collection;
- **Institutions** had their international reputation enhanced and gained opportunities for building relationships with foreign institutions and opening up new markets to recruit students from overseas; and
- **Australia** gained kudos internationally as foreign researchers were impressed with the calibre of Australian research students, Australian researchers were able to share their expertise with other countries and Australian researchers gained expanded opportunities to engage in the international research arena.

Comments from two participants illustrate the value and importance of the international mobility of postgraduate research students:

When you are encouraging and helping and supporting postgraduate researchers to go overseas it’s an investment, you know, it’s a value added, not just for the student but it also goes beyond that in terms of benefits.

I think as a smaller country, 22 million people, we really should ask ourselves, what do we want our next generation of research to look like? We have 0.04% of the world population, we contribute about 3.9% of the world knowledge in the last two years. So can we sustain that? And if we don’t collaborate internationally or train our next generation of our researchers we will become irrelevant ... I think this should be on top of the national innovative agenda to train those people having international experience for the next generation of researchers ... I think this is critical for the future research community in Australia.
Motivations for undertaking mobility

Many of those students who undertook mobility during their research studies had a background of being mobile, including during Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees. Beyond this common characteristic, students raised a number of common motivations that led to their mobility:

- to gain exposure to a different context;
- to optimise career opportunities through building connections;
- to meet with, and be inspired by, expert scholars;
- to gain access to research resources or foreign research participants.

Organisation of mobility

Many students found that the practical arrangements involved in organising mobility were quite significant. Some had to do the organisation and funding themselves, whereas others had all arrangements taken care of, either under a scholarship scheme or a cotutelle\(^1\) arrangement. Critical elements mentioned by students in organising mobility were:

- awareness about opportunities for mobility;
- access to sufficient funding to cover costs of mobility;
- support with practical arrangements from institutions; and
- mentoring, support and connections of research supervisors.

Experiences of mobility

Most students had found that their experience of mobility had exceeded their expectations. But many encountered a range of challenges which needed to be overcome. Couched in terms of advice to future students the major themes raised were:

- perseverance and good planning are essential to optimise outcomes;
- be prepared for unexpected challenges and culture shock;
- ethics committees tend to lack understanding of overseas fieldwork contexts; and
- finding affordable accommodation is the biggest challenge during mobility.

Access to excellence

Many students reported that their mobility had given them access to expertise that they could not find in Australia. But the way in which ‘expertise’ was interpreted varied significantly. It included:

- meeting other scholars and exchanging ideas;
- discovering how research is conducted in different environments;
- using equipment and resources that are not available in their own country;
- engaging in face-to-face interactions with research participants; and
- experiencing different realities and perspectives.

---

1 A cotutelle is an arrangement where postgraduate research students have their doctoral studies supervised jointly by academics from an Australian university and a foreign university and gain a joint or double-badged doctoral degree.
Impact of mobility
Students were asked to suggest what impact they thought that mobility would have on their future careers. Most thought that this would be significant and multifaceted. Influences included:

- developing an international profile as a researcher;
- making connections with academic communities in different countries;
- increasing their awareness of international opportunities; and
- giving them confidence in their ability to live in a foreign country.

Institutional benefits
Beyond the impact which students thought mobility had on them, students were asked to consider what impact the mobility of students had on their institutions. Several key themes were mentioned:

- enhanced reputation for the institution among foreign academic communities;
- opening up opportunities to recruit new cohorts of students;
- instigating research collaborations between institutions and academic researchers; and
- exposing the institution to new areas of research focus.

Recommendations
Finally, students were asked to suggest recommendations for institutions and the government in encouraging greater mobility among research students. Key points addressed students, institutions and the government and can be found throughout this report.

Recommendations for students include:

- actively seeking out opportunities for mobility during research studies;
- integrating mobility into their planning at the start of their research studies;
- being prepared for the unexpected; and
- engaging in mobility even if they are unsure about it.

Recommendations for institutions include:

- relaxing the ‘three-year’ requirement for PhD candidature to enable mobility;
- establishing institutional relationships to provide students with access to low cost accommodation at institutions in other countries;
- providing pre-departure information to mobile students through linking them with previously mobile students and with students from their destination country; and
- encouraging mobility among academics to help them build international connections.

Recommendations for policy makers include:

- placing greater emphasis on the study of foreign languages in schools and universities;
- providing more scholarships to support international mobility of research students;
- undertaking further research about research student mobility to inform policy making; and
- encouraging greater linkages between researchers and industry.
## Contents

Acknowledgements ................................................................. 3  
Executive summary ............................................................. 5  
Introduction ............................................................................. 11  
Research Methodology .......................................................... 13  
   Limitations of this report ...................................................... 14  
Motivations to undertake mobility .......................................... 15  
   Lifelong mobility .................................................................. 15  
   ‘The world is just out there’ .................................................. 16  
   Career advancement ............................................................ 17  
   Access to expertise .............................................................. 18  
   Language enhancement ....................................................... 21  
Organisation of mobility ......................................................... 22  
   Knowledge of opportunities ............................................... 22  
   Support and encouragement ............................................... 23  
   The importance of funding .................................................. 25  
Experiences of mobility .......................................................... 28  
   Advice to other students ...................................................... 28  
   Unexpected challenges ......................................................... 29  
   Ethics .................................................................................. 31  
   Accommodation and practical support .................................. 32  
   Access to excellence ............................................................ 35  
   Meeting experts .................................................................. 35  
   Access to resources ............................................................. 36  
   Experiencing other realities .................................................. 37  
Impact of mobility ..................................................................... 39  
   Career opportunities ........................................................... 39  
   Self efficacy ......................................................................... 41  
Institutional benefits .............................................................. 42  
   Reputation .......................................................................... 42  
   Institutional connections ...................................................... 43  
Recommendations ................................................................. 45  
   Length of candidature ......................................................... 45  
   Funding ............................................................................. 47  
   Pre-departure information ................................................... 48  
   Academic mobility ............................................................... 50  
Conclusion ................................................................................ 53  
References .............................................................................. 55  

Appendix A – Student focus group questions ........................................... 56  
Appendix B – Facilitator focus group questions ............................................ 59  
Appendix C – Participant characteristics .................................................. 62  

Table 1: Student participants ......................................................... 13  
Table 2: Characteristics of case study participants .................................. 14
Introduction

Student mobility is becoming an increasingly common feature of contemporary higher education practices around the world. In 2011 the number of internationally mobile students was 4.3 million, twice that a decade before. This upward trend is likely to continue, with Knight predicting a total of 7.2 million mobile students by 2025. As student mobility is regarded increasingly favourably, new initiatives are being developed to encourage students to be mobile, with the New Colombo Plan perhaps the most visible in Australia.

The focus on student mobility remains, however, almost entirely centred on undergraduate coursework students. Most scholarships available for mobility, for example, are targeted at undergraduate coursework students and do not extend to research students. Almost all of the literature and data collections on student mobility omit research students entirely. Even where research student mobility is included, this only captures those who enrol for their postgraduate studies in another country and does not capture those who undertake research in one or more countries outside of where they are enrolled.

Some research has been done on the mobility of those who have already been awarded PhDs. Between completing coursework studies and gaining their PhD, however, research students seem to almost disappear from the focus on mobility. This is of concern because data is commonly used to inform policy decisions. Without empirical data on the mobility of research students they can easily become invisible in policy decisions around student mobility. This is problematic because there is evidence that mobility during research studies is essential to the development of global networks of academic researchers, establishing connections for ongoing collaboration and stimulating research outputs.

In 2012 it is estimated that more than 2,500 research students from Australian universities undertook some study overseas, often for a relatively short amount of time. Interestingly, this means that about 11 per cent of the postgraduate research student population was mobile against just 3 per cent of the overall student population. This statistic shows that postgraduate research student mobility is a significant component of higher education in Australia and suggests the importance of gathering data on students’ movements.

To overcome the dearth of information on research student mobility, research was undertaken with sixty research students who had incorporated one or more experiences of mobility in their research studies. All were PhD students enrolled at one of seven Australian universities. This does not mean that all were Australian residents or citizens. Indeed, the complex patterns of enrolment, mobility and the interaction of prior connections with place were quite dominant. For example it was not uncommon to find a student with dual nationality whose mobility was from Australia to their other country of citizenship and a third country.

The complex patterns likely reflect a number of factors and, taken together, make it difficult to disentangle the movements of students into neat categories:

- the high number of foreign students enrolled in postgraduate research studies in Australia - in 2013 17,917 of all 54,218 PhD students enrolled at Australian universities were foreign students;
- enrolment in Cotutelle programmes where students have a joint enrolment at an Australian university and at a foreign university, with a supervisor in each location; and

---

Australian citizens or residents who (also) held citizenship in, or had family connections with, another country.

The research focused on a number of factors to frame the experience of international mobility:

- motivations for undertaking mobility;
- how mobility was organised;
- an evaluation of the experience;
- the quality of the mobility experience;
- the anticipated impact that mobility would have on career goals and future plans;
- how universities can benefit from research student mobility; and
- recommendations for encouraging more research students to engage in mobility.
This project aimed to gain a first insight into the international mobility of research students enrolled at Australian universities. Funding was provided by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training and allowed for six focus groups with students and two with university staff who helped facilitate research student mobility. In total, seven focus groups with students were carried out in addition to one with university staff and a phone interview with another staff member.

Potential participants were identified by institutions and contacted by institutional staff, using an email with standard text, incorporating a permissions agreement. Institutional staff also organised a meeting room and refreshments for students. Each focus group comprised between six and twelve students. Some were done face-to-face but in others the researcher interacted with students via Skype. All focus groups were audio recorded and the recordings then fully transcribed.

### Table 1: Student participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 February</td>
<td>Queensland University of Technology</td>
<td>Video conference</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 March</td>
<td>Macquarie University</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 March</td>
<td>University of Western Sydney</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 March</td>
<td>University of Canberra</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 March</td>
<td>University of Newcastle</td>
<td>Video conference</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 March</td>
<td>University of Technology Sydney</td>
<td>Video conference</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 May</td>
<td>University of South Australia</td>
<td>Video conference</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students were all postgraduate research students enrolled in PhDs at their respective institutions. Some students were also jointly enrolled at institutions in other countries. Students were a mixture of Australian students participating in outbound mobility and foreign students participating in inbound mobility (often with mobility back to their country of origin). Due to the multicultural nature of Australian society, some felt that they were both Australian students and overseas students at the same time. As a student who was a joint Finnish-Australian citizen explained:

> I’m a Finn and I have lived in Finland for my whole life ... [but] my perspective is as an Australian but ... the opportunity came to me do research residency in Finland.

In total, students came from, or undertook mobility to, one of 35 countries, with this information shown in Appendix C. Other characteristics are summarised in Table 2.
Table 2: Characteristics of case study participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD progress</td>
<td>First year</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Final year</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>68.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolment</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint enrolment</td>
<td>Cotutelle</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that foreign students were over-represented among focus group participants (60.0 per cent) compared to the entire PhD population (33.1 per cent). It is not known if this is because few domestic PhD students were mobile at some of the institutions included in the study.

Students enrolled in cotutelle programmes were enrolled at both an Australian university and an overseas university. Eight of the foreign universities were in China or Germany, with others in France, Russia, Sweden and the USA. Students were distributed across a whole range of disciplinary areas from Astronomy to Visual Arts, Architecture to Robotics, Civil Engineering to Sustainable Development and Economics to Resource Management.

At the start of each focus group students were informed of the ethical conventions being used, that the interview would be audio-recorded, provided with a plain language statement and asked to sign a further ethics waiver. At the conclusion of the focus group students were provided with a $50 gift voucher to acknowledge their contribution. A staff member from the university was present during most focus groups but this did not appear to impede student contributions. One focus group was held with staff from the postgraduate research office at three Australian universities, with other staff interviewed individually. This provided context to what students were saying. Focus group questions can be found in Appendices A and B.

The data reported by participants was emphasised by the application of a naturalistic coding process. This started with reading all responses and then developing categories using a constant comparative analytical scheme. The categories that arose under each research question are recorded in this report. Quotes from students are used extensively in this report. It is important to note that these are produced verbatim without any attempt to massage their expression. Many students spoke English as a second, third or fourth language and the individuality of their spoken expression can be seen throughout the report. To preserve the anonymity of students, all references to their institution, their specific area of study and other defining features have been removed from the comments given in the report.

Limitations of this report

This report is based on focus groups with students at only seven of Australia’s forty universities. Thus, it would not be accurate to infer that the findings in this report are representative of the experiences of all mobile postgraduate research students attending Australian universities.

Further research is required to present a full picture of the mobility of research students. This would need to include a survey in order to capture research students who were not available to participate in a focus group.

---


Motivations to undertake mobility

I consider myself a nomad and not sitting type person. I have this drive to escape … I had the drive for exploring curiosity … just de-root yourself and just go.

During focus groups students were asked to characterise their main motivations for undertaking mobility during their research studies. This generated extended discussions in each focus group with students comparing and contrasting different factors. In most cases more than one of the following themes had influenced students to undertake mobility. It is thus not possible to rank these themes in order of importance as most of them were relevant to most students.

Overall, many students pointed to having a combination of intrinsic or extrinsic motivations to engage in mobility. Many referred to having a ‘travel bug’ and that the mobility during their research studies was a continuation of mobility in previous studies or in other activities. Others simply had a desire to gain exposure to a different context. Beyond personal interest, a desire to optimise career opportunities was an important motivating factor for many students. Some regarded international exposure as essential if they wished to move into an academic career while others simply saw it as an opportunity to broaden their networks.

A further major area of motivation was to gain access to expertise. ‘Expertise’ was interpreted in a number of different ways. The ability to interact with leading researchers in their fields was hugely advantageous for some, whereas for others the motivation was to access resources or technology that would otherwise not be available to them. For a third group the ‘experts’ were people living in countries in which their research was focused and their desire was to learn about everyday lived experiences in different parts of the world. Each of these themes is explored in more detail below, drawing on the explanations given by students.

Lifelong mobility

A common theme about the motivation to engage in mobility which arose in focus groups was that it was a natural extension of students’ previous activities. A number of focus group participants could be regarded as ‘hyper-mobile’. Several had done a Bachelor’s degree and Master’s degree in two different countries and were now embarking on higher education studies in a third country, often arising out of pre-existing connections. Two accounts illustrate this pattern:

I did my Bachelor and Master in Italy … I participated in two mobility programmes while I was doing my Master. I studied for a year in Amsterdam, in Netherlands and then I had another scholarship to go to China to do my thesis … I had some connection with some of the professors here, that’s why I came to Sydney.

I travelled a bit when I was younger, as a Bachelor student, I studied in Amsterdam and I lived in Ireland for 8 months … I went to Vietnam and travelled around for 3 months and just fell in love with the country … then I got an opportunity to apply here for a grant … well it was a no brainer for me.

In other cases students had led professional lives which had taken them all over the world, and this had informed the international character of their research interests now that they had returned to study.
I’m originally from Iraq and I went to live in UAE in 1998. From there I worked in India ... with Brazilian company in Colorado ... And also I went to study in ... France and also attended conferences in France, in Malaysia and across UAE ... I worked in Libya

These ‘hyper-mobile’ students commonly referred to the pre-destined nature of the mobility that they had incorporated into their research studies. They felt that their multiple prior experiences of mobility had instilled in them a perspective that mobility was an intrinsic element of any activity. As a Mexican student recalled:

I started doing mobility in Mexico when I was maybe 22 and since then ... I thought yes, I can move, why not? And when I got the European grant, it was great. For two and a half years I was out of Mexico and then I came back ... but I felt the necessity of going out again. ‘Okay, what is going to be the next adventure?’ And now I am here, I’m not sure if I want to go back or maybe I’ll go back for a while ... I am just going to move around again.

An Australian student reported that an experience of mobility in Europe almost 20 years ago had given her a lifelong interest in mobility and a strong desire to incorporate this into her research studies, despite her changed life circumstances in the intervening years.

I always think of my year in 1997 as being the best year ever in my life and I think about how the opportunities, the experiences I had both in France and Switzerland in that time ... I’m now married, I have a mortgage and a dog and even though my life has changed entirely I want that journey, I want that experience again.

Listening to how many of the students in their focus group reported a similar outlook, one student thought that it raised an interesting research question.

It would be interesting to ask if it would be a particular kind of person who would be studying overseas anyways, because I kind of feel like with all of this, we were doing stuff even before we started the PHD that involved mobility and moving away and that probably won’t change afterwards ... that’s just because we like travelling and being overseas rather than being stuck in one spot. So it will be interesting to talk to someone who has never left their home town but did go overseas for PHD experience and then finding out, if that’s changed anything.

‘The world is just out there’

Many students, whether they had previously been mobile or not, had a desire to experience more than they could by staying in their home country. For a number of students this was a reflection of the way in which life in the contemporary world was evolving. As one suggested:
Motivations to undertake mobility

The world is just out there and it’s part of every day and the fact that you travel to other countries is just a natural extension of the way we live our lives now.

A number of those who had not travelled before had made a specific decision to use their research studies as a way of breaking out of the confines of their own country. This was particularly the case for the Chinese students who participated in the focus groups as the following comment illustrates:

I wanted to know the western world better with my own eyes and as the saying goes, to see is to believe, so just want to participate, just want to be involved in a western life and to see things with my own eyes.

In other cases mobility was an unexpected bonus of their research degree.

I think being a student gives you a really good opportunity to travel, once you get a travel bug ... it’s like ‘wow’, why not?.

Career advancement

Beyond a desire to travel, another important motivating factor for students was to use mobility to enhance their career prospects. For some the international mobility was something they regarded as giving them a competitive edge over others competing for the same positions. In particular, students from countries other than Australia expressed their perception that having an international experience had become an essential prerequisite to gaining an academic job in a reputable university, as the following comments from Iranian and Chinese students suggest:

That is the idea in Iran after you get your Masters, if you want to get a good PhD you have to go to the United States or Canada or Australia. If you want to go to study, you should go to the United States and if you want to go to heaven, you should go to Australia, if you want to go to hell, you have to go to Canada because of the weather.

In China if a person wants ... if you want to be a teacher in good universities, you are required to have an international experience. For me I’d like to be a professor, teacher in a college and if I want to obtain this objective I need to have international experience. That’s why I applied for this.

For others, it was the best way to ensure that once in an academic career they could secure research funds:

A relation to multiple alumni association is very important ... because if you’re going to apply for an international funds or research funds ... you have at least two or three different universities or different research institutes from different countries ... you have to build the rapport with different people.
Other students viewed incorporating an international experience into their research studies as opening up opportunities for work in the international arena:

---

*I wanted to deploy myself as an expert in this field so that I can help my country in negotiation, in other policy making ... so that my country need not to be deprived or lacking in the capacity or knowledge ... I wanted to represent my country in international forum in United Nations ... that organisation is going to be crucial in future and I want to work there.*

---

Much of the benefit generated by mobility for future careers was regarded by students as arising from face-to-face contact with those undertaking research in the same area. Beyond networking for future careers, students also felt that having direct contact with other researchers around the world enabled them to test out their research ideas. They referred to a number of components such as the feedback and dialogue generated when they presented their research to peers overseas, and the importance of positive feedback in giving them the confidence to continue with their research, as one termed it *you get there and show people and you get those big smiles.*

---

*Updating with the current issues, especially in our field, it is always growing ... it is important to update with the current issues, I need to go out and see what’s going on.*

---

We check, we talk to others and we share ideas and thinking. This is how civilization develops, maybe what I’m thinking now, someone else has already done that, so I should start my journey after that, otherwise everybody will do the same invention and civilization is not going to go ahead. That’s why we need mobility.

---

**Access to expertise**

While a desire to travel and to enhance career prospects was deemed important by many students, an interest in accessing specialist expertise was another important motivation for students in being mobile. ‘Expertise’ incorporated people and equipment, with the category of ‘people’ extending to renowned experts in their field as well as those with a first-hand experience of the topic of their research.

---

*I got an understanding historically of what went on there ... that I wouldn’t have if I hadn’t made those site visits. So I think that’s something that people often don’t realize how important it is particularly for historical researchers just to tread the ground that they’re researching.*

---
I think that it’s helpful for post PHD as well because when you are meeting these people who are in your field because there aren’t that many, definitely not in this University and not many who publish the stuff that I am writing about in Australia. They are mostly in US or in UK. So it’s quite beneficial just for your growth to do that.

For some Australian students going outside Australia, mobility was regarded as a way of compensating for the relative geographic isolation of Australia, something which both limited the number of experts who visited and also led to a narrow focus of research.

Australia is so far away from the rest of the world and you can easily be a very big fish in a small pond here and I think it’s important to have that international experience to realise that the world is bigger and places with different issues, it’s more complex. I just think, there is a richness in getting out of the geographical confines.

The people I’m talking about are in information systems are based around Europe and America but very seldom come to Australia.

I realized Australia is an enthusiastic late starter in my field of interest whereas other countries have been doing this for decades.

For those students who were inwardly mobile, however, the opposite perspective was expressed. They felt that Australia provided resources and expertise that their own countries did not and opened them up to new opportunities for accessing information from around the world.

In Mexico that’s not really known now, it’s only beginning and here in Australia all the tools are well developed so I’m learning that ... I can bring back to my country at some point, I can show them the new tools and new things that have been here.

Everyone knows that we don’t have access to Google back in China, we lack in academic resources, so we come here we get access to amount of books and many sources for my research.

Some students were researching topics which demanded the use of advanced technology that, due to its expense, was not available in all countries, including Australia. This inevitably meant that they needed to be mobile during their research studies to gain access.
This particular field is quite specialized, it’s very expensive ... therefore it was clear early on that other countries would be the place to do [research] ... I think this applies to a lot of fields, because Australia is a relatively small country and economy.

Rather than ordering material and going for the customs and everywhere, you just actually can move somewhere else and work, collect the data and come back so, that’s why I moved to Europe where I actually could get the instrumentation and material readily, completed the work and came back.

I was doing a PhD in Science ... [the discipline] wasn’t, it wasn’t much here and I was aware that this was done a lot in India ... I got in touch with this facilities from India ... I had an opportunity to visit India and take it up on a one to one basis which was very useful for my research.

That university in China would be a joint research centre ... using a wider range of sensors which are not available in our labs so I’m going back to China to that university to use their sensors to collect data.

While experts are often regarded as senior researchers, some students noted that the expert insights that they were looking for came from the local people in overseas communities:

I also want to hear the voices of the people from the Pacific because too often they are criticized but we don’t hear their stories, we don’t hear their side of the situation, hear their perspectives so for me they know to grab those stories, incorporate them, publish them, get the knowledge known.

The reason why I’m doing field work in Indonesia is that, my field is international development and I purposely chose the Asia region because that’s my main interest.

For other students there was the opportunity to do something that nobody else was doing and undertaking innovative projects.

In my case, it was just lack of programs, health programs in Lebanon. For patients, here in Australia there are many disease management programs, but in Lebanon, mine was first so that was the main drive.
I develop clinical education and then this will be first model because no one used it before and my intention is to use this model in Indonesia which is my original country, to improve the education in Indonesia.

Language enhancement

A number of students – both Australian students who were outwardly mobile and foreign students who were inwardly mobile pointed to the desire to improve their existing language skills or add to them. For non-native English speakers the desire to enhance English language skills was regarded as essential to be able to have a professional career, suggesting English can bring you further in your career.

In Germany, you have to publish in English, you have to write in English and that easier in English speaking environment.

For other students, the desire to gain another language out of an intrinsic motivation to be multilingual was important.

I would like to learn at least one more language apart from English ... I would like to work in other countries

The biggest motivation for me has always been the language issue and I guess I have always been interested in kind of tracking how my identity can change and transforms all its life … And what I found by moving and living abroad was that by putting myself in a context where I’m not linguistically in my comfort zone, some parts of my identity will emerge that I would not normally have the chance to realise

For others, learning a language was a useful bi-product of the international experience, even if it hadn’t been considered in advance.

So I ended up being able to learn Portuguese as well.
Organisation of mobility

Pretty much everything is done in academia, I feel it is based on connections, it is based on people you meet in conferences and supervisors, and people your supervisors know.

Students were asked to discuss the organisation of their mobility, in particular who had made the practical arrangements and how it had been funded. Students related experience from two extremes - those whose mobility had been almost entirely self funded and self organised and those whose mobility had been almost entirely funded and organised by an institution or scholarship body. But these two categories were indistinct, with many students experiencing something in between the two. Students raised a number of key issues.

Many had found it difficult to find out about mobility opportunities, often because the university staff they had contact with, particularly their supervisors and staff in the international office, had little awareness of the options available to research students. Those students who had overcome this had done so by persistence and through ‘cold-calling’ potential supervisors, or when they were specifically approached about opportunities.

Unsurprisingly, students explained that supervisors are a critical component in organising mobility for research students. When this worked well, supervisors recommended research students to colleagues in other countries, pointed students in the direction of funding and assisted them with a number of other practicalities of mobility, including the labyrinth of administrative requirements in institutions.

The ability to engage in mobility largely relied on access to appropriate funding for most students, although many had had to supplement the funds on offer with their own resources. Each of these themes is explored in more detail below with comments from students to illustrate their nuanced experiences.

Knowledge of opportunities

Many students reported that their institutions were very poor in promoting opportunities for research students to engage in mobility, with international offices in institutions focusing almost entirely on undergraduate students. Moreover, many found that their supervisors had little knowledge of opportunities overseas and that by the time the student had determined that mobility would be possible it was often late in their PhD candidature, hence putting pressure on timelines. Students predicted that a lot of their peers failed to engage in mobility simply because they didn’t know that it was possible. As students explained:

You just fumble around for a while. When you are finding your topic, you fumble around, you have this idea and then you ... don’t understand the process of PhD so well, so it’s up to other people to guide you what they think it might be.

If you want us to actually go, it’s a little bit of awareness as well. Just letting us know that, ‘yes you can do this’.
I wasn’t even aware of necessarily possible links with others that could have helped me in the beginning ... once you kind of get in and then you are on stage 2, then your confirmation running, you just have to get the thing done.

Overall, research students reported finding it difficult to get information on mobility opportunities unless someone had approached them with a particular suggestion. Some students had been directly targeted by someone in their institution or by a funding agency and asked if they would like to go overseas.

In my country nobody had ever taken the overseas scholarships, they actually physically came to my country and went to different departments, to say here this scholarship, why isn’t anybody taking it? And so I checked the brochure and was qualified ... and I applied and here I am.

But others had simply relied on their own initiatives to find out about opportunities and to line up everything that was required, literally emailing potential supervisors to see whether they were interested and then trying to find funding to match.

I organized the whole thing by myself from the first contact to overseas to every single thing ... I think for me it went well because I travelled a lot before independently but I think it might be different for other students who have trouble.

Support and encouragement

A critical element in the mobility of many research students was encouragement from their research supervisor. Students felt that it was not enough for supervisors to encourage international mobility but that they should also be able to recommend colleagues overseas to host students for research and should also be aware of funding options. Thus, prior mobility of research supervisors appears to be a strong predictor of research student mobility, as these accounts from students suggest:

My supervisor in Germany worked here in [an Australian organisation] before he moved back to Germany and therefore he had the link and the [Australian organisation] had the link to [the Australian university].

The Director of that area is outwardly focussed, he really pushes this ... [students] get funding, they encourage to look for funding. I think it’s more about the encouragement.
I wouldn’t have made it over to the U.K. without him. [My supervisor] was the main reason that I could convince the University to send me there. And when I was working in the UK, I got a job living in Tanzania actually and I got that job because I kind of knew the professor who was advertising.

The importance of supervisors in encouraging research student mobility was echoed by postgraduate research coordinators who felt that supervisors’ own experiences of mobility were an important component in research student mobility. One gave an example:

I find the academic staff who are driving these projects tend to be the staff that have had mobility experiences themselves ... [the] two most recent E.U. mobility funded Master’s projects have both been with a researcher who is from Germany originally, he’s being collaborating with colleagues in Germany throughout his academic life ... his team that’s working with him are early researchers who he has pulled from various parts of Europe and around the world. They know that they need to be mobile and they are working to create new colleagues through these mobility courses who will be able to join their way of working.

Support from the university was another critical element emphasised by students. Some students reported that the university was very supportive in organising their mobility and others that there had been no support from their institution at all. Others reported that their mobility had been actively discouraged by their institution. The following comments give an indication of the range of experiences.

The university gave me some documents which said that ‘we encourage our students to go out because it not only gives them the experience and helps them in their career but the can also bring their experience back in the university’.

It’s like luck of the draw ... there’s nothing that the university does in there, there’s no systems at all. There is no connection between universities.

No one from our University actually knew that an international student travels for the research purpose or what was the requirement like.

There was a doubt whether I would be able to get my application through ... I felt that I was not being encouraged as much as I would have liked ... I felt much disappointed ... that was [regarded as] a bit of nuisance.

Postgraduate research coordinators suggested that international offices of institutions were not the best placed to support research student mobility. They felt that international offices had a short term focus with a desire to recruit as many international students as possible whereas research student mobility was a longer-term strategy. As a consequence, in some institutions the role in supporting research student mobility fell to
postgraduate research offices. But this could only occur if postgraduate research offices were appropriately resourced. If not, support for research student mobility fell into what the coordinators termed a ‘black hole. As one coordinator remarked:

 We can’t leave it to the international office to run the things because first, they have no knowledge, second, they have no interest. So for us, we as a graduate school equivalent, we have to drive this ... most of the universities, this is a vacuum. Like the graduate schools don’t have the resources to organize anything.

Many students discussed the administrative complications they had had to deal with in order to organise their mobility. Students reported that unsupportive institutions caused big delays in application processes. As a number of students related, the level of difficulty was quite off-putting and acted as a disincentive to engaging in mobility.

From the day I handed in my documents here till the day I got the offer, it took me 9 months.

Lack of support from an institution also had an impact on students when they were conducting research overseas. Those who had received support from their supervisor and/or institution generally went to other countries with ready-made contacts and support. Those who had received less support did not and found that this caused complexities. As one student explained:

My experience was not having formal institutional identity, more or less I was lone wolf ... that was really challenging ... So if I had an institutional partner, you have a support, you have a network, you have a kind of identity over there ... if an institution bring you, they bring a bit of clout and it’s nice to have that.

Postgraduate research coordinators were impressed with the initiative shown by students to organise their mobility.

They received very little support whether they were going out of Australia or coming in and it took a very gutsy character in some instances to actually get there. It was very much self-investigated, self-researched, just to get themselves there ... quite extraordinary stories, a level of motivation drive that they had to get up and go.

The importance of funding

Inevitably the presence or lack of funding to support mobility was a significant topic for students in focus groups. In general students on Cotutelle schemes felt that they had sufficient funding to support their mobility but other students found that the funding they had been able to find was inadequate to fund mobility. Comments from students indicated that most institutions included in the study provided approximately $3,000 for foreign travel, such as to attend conferences, during a PhD candidature, but in some institutions this figure rose to $3,000 per year.
Many students used their own resources to fund some or most of the expenses incurred from mobility. This has clear equity implications as it requires students (or their families) to have spare economic resources to make mobility possible. The following comments illustrate the degree of variation in student experiences:

---

The Cotutelle, it just gives you lot of resources ... it was really impressive for all the people who come in here and how much support you receive.

---

The three odd thousand dollars that they give, doesn’t pay for everything.

---

I was given a small amount of money from the faculty for field work, about $1,000, and I also managed to get a paper and a conference in Ireland ... so it was another couple of $1,000 ... but in fact I would have stayed longer if I had extra money and I feel that I had to cut my research short a bit.

---

Academic staff confirmed that arrangements such as the Cotutelle were extremely helpful for students in funding mobility during research studies:

---

Different institutions can share those resources and give more to the students. Say for example, our mobility students can get access to our funding here but some of them can access to the funding overseas as well. So that really helped them with the resources.

---

A particular challenge was encountered by students who undertook mobility in the first year of their research studies when institutions tended to provide fewer funds. This was problematic for those inductive methodologies such as grounded theory.

---

I did my pilot of study in pre-confirmation and I went to Finland, so I had to fund them myself ... I got $500 only because I was on pre-confirmation. But I was doing grounded theory, so, really the importance of doing a pilot study really early on is so important.

---

To ensure that they had as much funding as possible to support their mobility several students talked about ‘working the system’ at their institution to make sure they were able to access as many sources of funding as possible. In some cases this meant spreading their PhD across more than one department, or even extending their candidature.

---

University wide has a policy of $2,000 a year for research funds, for all things like conferences and with an additional $1,000 if you do field work overseas. So some schools have written to me that for your three year candidature, you can get $7,000 but there are other schools that also say that well if you stay for 4th year, that means you get $9,000. So it depends on the school, depends on how they interpret them, really play the policy.
Students suggested that funding of mobility was not only important to enable them to be mobile but also in the message it sent to potential host institutions. Students reported that other institutions appeared to regard a student with funding more favourably than one without. In their experience this had influence not only the willingness of an institution to host them for research, but also the level of support they received from the foreign institution.

I think it made it much easier for me to contact potential host in the US when I could say I had some funding from back home ... because they feel like ‘OK, here is someone who already has the money coming in and we could provide some local support’, money leveraging concept and I think that works well the other way round as well.

When I went to the UK, I was self-funded ... and I found that it was interesting the way I was treated by the university. I got very ill when I was studying over there ... so I didn’t know what to do ... I expected far more support ... so I went to live in France and Switzerland ... I found that support I got from the French was superb and from both the universities and my fellow students was amazing.
Experiences of mobility

Students were asked about their experience of mobility and, specifically, how their actual experiences had differed from, or coincided with, their expectations. On the whole many students had found that their experience overseas exceeded their expectations. But some encountered uniquely difficult circumstances from political unrest to significant delays caused by the local context. Particular challenges were encountered in finding accommodation and dealing with ethics processes.

Despite the challenges they had to overcome, students were unanimously positive about their mobility experiences, noting in particular the beneficial impact they had had on the quality of their academic work and the relationships that they had been able to develop. The following comment illustrates these themes:

---
It kind of even surpassed my expectations. I was expecting it to be more alone, isolated, more being forced to care for myself ... I received some incredible amount of support from my supervisor, from other people at the department, form other Ph.D students as well.
---

Moreover postgraduate research coordinators agreed that most mobile students were really happy with their experiences, despite facing challenges. As one explained this came down to the determination of the students themselves:

---
I haven’t heard anyone disappointed and say ‘I really regret I did that’. So far, we don’t have that kind of experience, touch wood ... most of the students are very satisfied ... [they] take pride to get this done, take a long time to negotiate, to organize, to do all the things and if they’re not determined, they would stop them in the first place ... they think seriously about what they’re doing.
---

Advice to other students

Many students couched their experiences in terms of advice they would give to other research students who were considering mobility during their research studies. Those who had experienced mobility were unanimous in their encouragement to others to try the same thing. They felt that it was important that others engaged in mobility even if they were uncertain or nervous about it, due to the benefits they would gain.

---
I would give the advice to do it, even if there are some fears or worries that you don’t know how things will end. But not to reject the idea only because there are some potential negative issues which might turn out to be wrong in the end. I think you shouldn’t wait until that moment when you are 100% convinced but you should wait until you are 70-75% convinced.
---
Experiences of mobility

You really need to hang in there and you need to know that it’s always you who is making the next step and to keep pushing it like you always keep pushing, I think otherwise it’s just that it’s never going to come to you ... even if it doesn’t work, like it’s worth a try ... I think there’s so much potential coming out of it.

Students also felt that others should be aware that achieving benefits from mobility required a degree of persistence and a large amount of planning. Students also felt that it was important to ensure that they had support structures in place.

I think planning is important as well, there goes a stage in PHD, you are planning of doing this because it’s a great experience but it does take time away from your actual thesis.

It’s about how quickly you want to finish and thinking realistically about what is that going to add to your thesis ... For me, I chose to do a research project over a year which is almost tantamount to academic suicide but, I mean I’m getting on with my writing now but it’s six months longer in the field than academics are supposed to spend.

Work out the logistics, how it can work with the timing of the PHD and also funding. And make yourself all the connections that you need, like all the people you get to know or try to get to know as much people as possible.

I think it’s important that you are expecting something, if you have a plan of what you are going to do there, because then you can follow your plan and get results ... you might say, ‘well I will just see what happens. They might provide something interesting for me’ ... you either ought to know what you want or be lucky.

Get somebody there, not necessarily who has gone through it but like somebody there, you can emotionally rely on without feeling guilty, but using and pragmatically using that relationship as something for which you just can throw all your frustrations ... Mentorship, I think, is important.

Unexpected challenges

Several students encountered unexpected difficulties during their mobility experience. On the whole these related to the environment in which they were living, working or studying rather than anything closely related to the research. Many students had not been fully prepared for what they would encounter and the impact that it would have on their research activities.
Students found a big difference between doing research in a university library and then heading out into the site for their field research, somewhere which was often chaotic. Several students remarked that the circumstances they encountered required them to be flexible in the focus of their research. The following comments sum up a number of these issues:

I expected it to be much easier in a way ... I think it really didn’t match my expectations obviously. It turned out to be much more intense than what I had expected.

I did my literature review in Australia and then I go to Indonesia and I start doing research there on the ground and I found out that, of course, the situation is a lot different than I expected which means that I had to change my research question, my research approach and in the end my ethics (approval).

... political protests from the end of 2013 until the Coup ... some key informants they didn’t have time to give interviews because they were busy dealing with the protestors ... and every day you have to turn on your TV and see where the protestors would go today and ... find alternative routes to the interview places.

Students who had been mobile felt that it was important to warn future students considering mobility to expect the unexpected and to be ready to adapt if conditions on the ground differed to expectations. But this latter point was, as several students remarked, something that was poorly understood by universities.

Doing research in a context when things operated in a different pace and there are always crazy things that go wrong over there and happen over there and then still trying to get things done ... sometimes there is a disconnect between more reality and what was expected at the University ... people understood my challenges over there but people here in Australia were able to understand less and less.

One student also found that they had been caught up in a political situation between Australia and their home country which resulted in their PhD being cancelled after eighteen months and their having to start again with a new topic. As they explained:

Please, please don’t mix politics with academics ... I studied one year and eight months, the [Australian Government] wrote a letter to the Vice Chancellor and they asked them to stop me from doing my PhD thesis. After one year and eight months. Because I’m from [Country X] and they made a new sanction for [Country X] and my thesis was overlapped with that sanction ... I started a new thesis.

Even when students were undertaking research from the perspective of ‘locals’, for example people who had enrolled at an Australian university and then returned to their home country to do research, they found
they encountered unexpected complexities. This was something which they thought their local status would protect them from as the following comment indicates:

**When I am as a local so I think it is easy to get the data in my country but when I was there, it is very difficult because of authoritative power, they didn’t allow me to collect data in the villages. Instead of different levels, I got the local authorities, the village level were able to allow me to collect data, that’s how I got data, but it took two weeks or more than I expected.**

Other students found that what they had encountered during their mobility had been quite confronting and distressing, which had added to the challenge of completing their research. As one student recalled:

**I was researching images of atrocity ... so there was a bit of an issue there around dealing with my emotional response to the material I was looking at while I was over there and I was feeling quite isolated because I was on my own for quite a long time.**

**Ethics**

Students who were mobile during data collection for their theses reported encountering a number of issues in relation to the ethics process. For some this was due to a lack of understanding of ethics committees of the complexity of collecting data in a different context where, for example, they were dealing with vulnerable populations or where they were unable to proceed as they had planned. In those cases students often encountered huge delays in amending ethics from overseas, waiting for ethics committees to respond, as the following comment illustrates.

**I think ethnics is a barrier ... my experience was that I’ve got to this place where there was no possibility for me to really understand what I’ve got to do when I get there, I got all necessary approvals ... [you] write documents based on what you think and ... it takes months for the committee to get back to you with their response ... that’s all at a financial cost to me and it’s a time cost as well.**

Others found that other researchers they were working with on the ground were unable to understand the Australian approach to research ethics, leaving them in a quandary.

**I spoke to two academics I know them from Brazil and they said 30 years of working in university and I’ve never heard that (ethics) and I was like ‘OK, what do I do here?’ So I was in a real grey area there not knowing kind of how to conduct myself.**

Other students also felt that some of the demands of the ethics committees were excessive. As one student recounted:
They wanted me to get a copy of every single standard operating procedure from Osaka University, send it through the ethics committee in Australia so the Australian Government could approve it.

Most of all, however, students felt that there was no awareness among ethics committees that ethics requirements were different in other countries, and they were unable to provide students with any information prior to departure. As one commented:

PhD students, you know when they go certain country, the university should know these are the ethics in those countries ... it will be lot easier to get the information on your table in the university that is readily available and you save lot of time.

As a solution, students felt that at least one member of each ethics committee should have experience of undertaking research in a foreign environment where the structures and systems that are taken for granted in Australia are not in place. This would enable them to provide mobile research students with advice. As students suggested

Having some understanding of what was actually required in international collaboration.

It does have to be a designated person for students going out. So many issues.

Accommodation and practical support

Some of the greatest challenges experienced by students in the focus groups in relation to mobility related to practical issues, particularly accommodation. In some cases this came down to unmet (and sometimes unrealistic) expectations about the responsibility of institution in providing what students needed. This issue was raised by both outbound and inbound students and was brought up so many times in focus groups that it appears to be a significant issue.

Accommodation is the worst issue for international students when they come here after they land, it is so hard, to find ... if university can provide some more facility it would be much better.

In China every student is arranged a dorm on campus and air condition is also very cheap. But here we have to apply for university accommodation and it is also very expensive. ... [or] we have to try every means to rent a room, off campus, which is also very expensive.
Experiences of mobility

For many students the most expensive part of their mobility was accommodation and a number were surprised that their institution did not have reciprocal agreements in place with institutions overseas which would enable them to access cheap student accommodation. This element of a funding was a particular concern for students who undertook fieldwork in big cities such as New York or London.

The cost of staying if you imagine in London, is really expensive ... if there has been a linkage between [my institution] and universities overseas where I know, for instance I knew they offer cheaper accommodations to people who are coming from overseas in studying.

In some cases students self-organised in order to support newly arriving research students from their own countries and to help them with the practical challenges of arriving in a new country.

When I got here, I have a Columbian colleague, she was really helpful. She told me ‘you can just go to Westfield and do this and that and if you really have your bank account, that’s it. You don’t need anything else’.

When we first came to Australia ... we knew nothing ... we had to find our way by ourselves to settle down, from opening bank accounts, to finding accommodation ... after we settled then we organized a group of Thai students ... we have the website, some website for Thai students about Australia ... and when they come I help them to settle down.

In other cases scholarship schemes provided students with pre-departure information on practicalities and accommodation.

The Government has contracted an agency to administer the fellowship and one of the things they have done is sent us a copy of the Lonely Planet guide of the country that you’re going to and I think that’s a great idea - it’s at least a starting point for people to think about the experience.

Many students had to work things out for themselves on the ground and several mentioned experiencing a degree of culture shock.

I knew nothing about Japan ... I even didn’t know where Osaka was, so it’s like ... culture shock ... and Japan’s just crazy.

Students coming from Islamic countries, we face extremely high culture shock, when we are here, everything is changed, everything.
I flew from Sydney to Bangkok and I had to get a flight from there to China to meet the only contact there and at every point, I would say to myself, ‘okay, when I get off the plane at China, I guess I’ll get a tuktuk to the office’ but in the process of my entire saying this, the streets really didn’t have names, numbers and stuff like that and you don’t know where you’re going.

Some students felt that Australian institutions should learn from the lessons of institutions overseas in terms of the support provided to mobile research students, and which outgoing Australian students had experienced in other countries. This encompassed support with language, accommodation, opening bank accounts and other practical matters. Germany was mentioned by numerous students as a prime example.

Germany is that, they’re perhaps one of the world’s best in providing support like that in institutional and structural level essentially you have access to six months or a year of German language courses and the first day you get there, essentially the first week, you don’t enter your office, they organize because all forms have to be filled in German, they organize your social security forms, your medical forms, your bank account through the institution itself, now that makes a significant difference.

Finally, some students experienced significant problems in obtaining visas, causing delays to their research activities. While acknowledging that there was little that universities could do about visa processing, several students felt that they should be in a position to provide advice to students. But supervisors tended to be happy to work around delays.

The French embassy in Sydney they did not know because I’m not a permanent resident, neither an Australian citizen, how to provide a visa for me for the research purpose in France ... so they actually kept my visa pending for seven weeks without processing it and that’s how I missed my conference ... the university just raised their hand ... our university did not have any person who had experience.

I wait six months for getting student visa to come to Australia, I postponed my degree for one year and after one year I got my scholarship to study ... so bad, I don’t know why but ... my supervisor helped me, he postponed my project for six months and for the other six months.
Access to excellence

Taking myself outside my head and just putting myself in another fresh context and then come back with a little bit of more fresh perspective.

Rather than thinking of it as you are going to a better place than where you are, it is more a case of can you leverage the strengths of both places.

Students were asked to comment on what they gained from their experience of mobility in terms of access to excellence. From their responses it was clear that they interpreted excellence in a number of ways, from the opportunity to meet with some of the leading lights in their field, to the ability to access research materials that would not otherwise be available, to having the opportunity to experience a different way of life, something which then impacted on the way they regarded their own research. All of these elements are discussed below and illustrated with student comments.

Meeting experts

Many students referred to the possibility of meeting experts during overseas fieldwork or at conferences. They reported that they found these interactions to have significant benefits and a positive influence on the way in which they thought about their research. Students found that the opportunity to go overseas to a conference gave them a window on research which was happening around the world, stimulating them in their own research.

When I went to America to attend the conference, I am lucky enough, it is a big incident in my life. I met lots of people, lots of authors, scholars, juries and judges in courts and tribunals attending there ... My view has been changed and I was engaged in core decision making process ... that made me think again about my thesis and the way I’m trying to focus and contribute in that field.

I think that attending the international conferences for example connects you with the level of research that is international, that kind of measure up to, to be able to talk to these people. So I think that’s really important just to see what the level is in your field to focus on, conferences or workshops that are specifically in your area to kind of see what the level is what other people are doing.

Those students whose mobility had led them to spend extended periods of time overseas in foreign universities further reported gaining an insight into different ways of doing research. They also found that they gained a new set of academic networks, expanding the way in which they approached their research and opening up new opportunities for the future.
The people here have the knowledge, how their working is different ... it was really nice to see other people how they’re working and also other labs.

One of the significant benefits of this Cotutelle programme is the growing network, in the sense it’s just the second university and you double the number of people you know ... this growing network, from my perspective is the most significant benefit ... this growing network helps to improve my science, my work.

Moreover, students who had engaged in mobility were very impressed with the supervision they experienced, particularly when this was across more than one university and with academics who had an established working relationship. For some students this had opened up a wealth of opportunities in terms of connections and the ability to publish.

I have two great supervisors and it turns out that they are excellent ... my supervisors have I think yearly published at least two or three [journal articles] ... this will be my second year and we’re planning to publish at least three.

Access to resources
Beyond opening up the opportunity to meet with experts, students also reported that mobility had given them a chance to access laboratories, materials, databases, places and equipment that they would not have otherwise been able to access. This was the case for students in both natural science and social science disciplines. For some this was a case of compensating for what they were unable to do without mobility. But for others the emphasis was more about drawing on the strengths from both locations to enhance their research overall.

For natural science students, it was often not the equipment or laboratory itself that was important so much as experiencing different approaches to conducting research, or special knowledge in how to optimise what is available. Students also reported that mobility gave them an insight into different research environments and an ability to weigh up the pros and cons of each.

Research now is very international ... in terms of how things are done, what methods do we use, even for studying the same thing. So just going abroad and seeing other small labs that do similar topics that face the same problems, see how they deal with these problems it’s just both methodological, technical and also on psychological level, it supports you a lot.

In Australia we often have state of the art instruments, but they’re under subscribed, they’re not used as much as most other places ... despite that I was looking at going overseas because there is the people aspect there and those people aren’t in Australia to support your use of that instrument ... it is sort of using the excellence for both the parties to benefit.
The research environment is different in different countries, so the speed at which the research is done ... the Germans are really efficient in doing research for example, or the US can do big research programs because of the manpower they have and so I think it would help in the scientist to experience that because we have a slightly different research culture in Australia and to be exposed to that and maybe see if that works better for you or not.

For social science students, mobility enabled them to engage with their research participants face-to-face, allowing deeper engagement than that which would be available at a distance. Some students also felt that the ability to experience the environment that they were researching gave them a new level of understanding and a new perspective which they would not otherwise have gained. This was true even if many resources were apparently available online.

I’m going to be undertaking, semi-structured interviews of Government officials and banking officials in different countries ... given the sensitivity of my topic, I think that this is going to be something that they will be more open to being having the topic discussed if you’re there in person as supposed to doing over via Skype ... you need to develop that rapport ... there’s a lot to be gained from talking to people face to face.

In Thailand, the situation is a little bit different from Australia. Many people do not check their emails every day, you can wait for long, long time to get the responses but if you can find a way to contact him and ask for interviews face to face it would be easier.

It’s highly kind of beneficial to at least getting a glimpse of other realities ... just trying to describe how it feels to walk in the main thoroughfare of a city ... to realise the colonial past about the city ... when I came back I started to look at neighbourhoods in Sydney in a different way.

One of the interesting things I think about Imperial War Museum where I did much of my research is that it does have a huge online collection but once you get there, you realize that it is actually only a small fraction of what’s there ... there could be no substitute for going there.

Experiencing other realities

Beyond gaining access to excellence of resources, people, contexts or insights, many students commented on the value of the intangible benefits gained from their mobility. Some of these related to the physical contexts in which they found themselves, while others were more about the alternative ways of thinking they encountered. Students felt that this alone was a convincing reason to encourage mobility among
research students. Students reported that what they had gained from realising that there were multiple approaches to anything was incredibly valuable and had broader benefits than for individuals alone.

The reason you are going to international is to get a variety of opinion. Unfortunately disciplines tend to push us down a particular approach of thinking and doing and you can be just as ingrained in your way of thinking … So I think the encouragement should be to look at a different perspective ... I think the quality is going to be as much in the variety and being exposed to the surprises.

Personally and culturally I learnt a lot being in different cultures, in Germany, especially in Africa. Totally different perspective and also the academia work, how it is to have a job at the university in different countries.

There’s a huge amount of international research effort going towards looking at innovative technology solutions for different communities in Africa and less so here with, I mean, Indigenous communities ... I was really interested to see what I could learn from the overseas context and then bring back home.

I think those programmes will enable more Australians to go out there ... that is quite important for the nation as such, despite having multi-cultural society, to have the conventional Australian going out also experiences how it is to live abroad.
Impact of mobility

As students’ comments in earlier sections of this report have shown, many students had experienced mobility prior to commencing their research degrees. It appears that prior mobility influences future mobility. Thus it was interesting to find out if students anticipated that the experiences of mobility gained in their research studies was likely to influence their future lives.

Most students felt that they had been profoundly influenced by the mobility they had experienced, with their comments falling into one of two categories. First, particularly given that many of the research participants were nearing the end of their PhD studies, many were considering career options. The overall consensus in focus groups was that mobility during research studies would inevitably lead them to consider further mobility in their careers.

In addition, several students touched on the improvement in their self-efficacy that they had gained from their mobility. They had gained confidence in their ability to problem solve, to overcome challenges and to achieve goals.

From their perspective, postgraduate research coordinators were positive about the impact which mobility had on students but were not sure if these would have eventuated anyway due to the international orientation of the student. As one suggested:

I suppose the question is whether or not they, whether this particular experience is the defining one, whether it’s just the tendency of particular people to be more oriented towards travel ... they all really enjoyed the experiences and are very positive about it and that would lead them seeking international opportunities into the future.

Career opportunities

A number of students had chosen to engage in mobility specifically due to their awareness that this was essential to their career in academia. Some of these students had deliberately set out to create opportunities for themselves to network with those who could influence their career in the future.

I’m almost using it as a pathway to gaining a specialisation which will allow me to have an international focussed career.

With academia, a lot of it, if you want to stay, you have to be willing to move because jobs are not necessarily going to be in the city that you want to live in.

It’s almost an unwritten role that ... you will have to go overseas to prove yourself or to better ... science is a global thing, it’s not a country specific thing, so often mobility post PhD is dictated by where you get your first job.
I deliberately tried to design my projects so that I would be able to meet a lot of people and make a lot of ... in my two papers that I wrote, the few contacts that I made in UN and other major NGOs ... and I’ve presented at Oxford, so I think that international experience actually make contacts and helped me be recognized more internationally.

Students were very clear about the importance of making connections with academics around the world in order to provide them with opportunities for employment after finishing their PhDs.

I have got to spend time in other universities and meet lot of different researchers and also being in Europe for some time and also in Australia for some time ... you just meet more people doing different things ... I think if I want to do a post doc, I will have lots more opportunities through connections.

Either you build your own network in one small place, and meet everyone all in small piece or you just multiply all the possibilities. I personally prefer the second option ... we do improve our chances of finding a better career.

Postgraduate research coordinators were impressed at how strategic some students had been about mobility during their research degrees and the way in which they were using it to get an edge when competing with other research graduates. As one reflected:

Part of their research experience is that they articulate it to a potential employer ... I think several of the students were being so smart in thinking ‘later in my career, I would really like to be working in X country and I need that language to do it and so I’m going to target that experience to prepare that bridge for my future’.

For some students the experience of engaging in mobility during their PhD was something which had impacted on their view of the future, opening up new horizons.

All country….. It opened that up for me ... it opens up, that’s something I wouldn’t have had before the PhD. I think it is the idea that actually post PhD you can work anywhere in the world ... I hadn’t contemplated before.

I think that having spent that amount of time overseas, it’s more likely that in my future career it will lead me to spend some time working overseas which was not something I really considered before doing this PhD ... I’m actually completely open now to moving and basing myself somewhere else.
I want to stay in academia, it wasn’t my goal when I started my Masters but when I started my PhD, I really liked, liked the environment … you are meeting people, travel a lot, so for me it was getting into this work … my goal would be not to go back to Sweden.

Other students had been influenced to develop very concrete ideas for their future lives after they completed their PhD, sharing what they had gained with others in their home countries.

Actually I have a plan to go back to Thailand and set up the Australian study Centre … because I know that in some other countries like Japan or even the US, there are something called Australian Study Centre at many universities.

My experience here will definitely have huge impact upon my future career. I think the most important point is that, I was thinking differently before I came here, I think in a Eastern way. When I go back to China from here I will think both Eastern and Western way … And also my experience here at [the institution] has enriched my future career including my future research and most probably to teaching and I’ll share my experience at [the institution] with my future students.

Self efficacy

Beyond boosting their career prospects, a number of students discussed the way in which the experience of mobility had benefited their self efficacy. They felt that they had gained not only a new perspective but also a new sense of what they could achieve in the future.

I think it just opens up something in you, you see things differently, you believe in yourself, you’re more welcome to do this … yes you can do that maybe … It’s all very general, broad but it’s very … it’s true.

I’m really proud of me having taken this initiative to go overseas and get this training myself.

Now, sometimes, I just think outside the box and definitely it means a lot to me … I think since then I was not afraid to move to the other place … I used to be very shy, I was so afraid to talk in front of other people and I just couldn’t have eye contact with others. Now, I felt much better after I travelled to so many places and I have talked to so many people from other cultures.
Institutional benefits

*I think the international experience benefits the students and the research will benefit, so I think the university can benefit from that.*

While much of the research focus on student mobility considers the ways in which individuals benefit from the experience, it is also important to think about broader benefits. Students were asked to consider how their university could benefit from the mobility of research students and raised a number of key elements.

Students felt that universities gained an enhanced reputation from having research students undertake mobility, and that this was particularly important for institutions without a strong international standing. Moreover, students suggested that their universities gained connections with other institutions in different countries, giving access to new approaches to research and opening up opportunities for collaboration. These themes are illustrated with student comments.

Reputation

Students felt strongly that when they went overseas they acted as ambassadors for their university and helped to raise its profile internationally. Many students found that overseas contacts were previously unaware of the existence of their university. They felt that research student mobility could thus make an important contribution towards raising the international standing of universities and contributing towards their performance.

A lot of the people that I met over in Africa had never heard of [my Australian university] ... so I guess putting us on the map could be one thing as well.

*I think any student that goes overseas ... they are an ambassador for their University, it really raises the international profile of the University so it's very much in the University's interest.*

I think one of the performance measures at the university is their status within the research communities ... when you are providing papers and your citations, that's a reflection on the university itself ... I think the benefits of the university is in that, it's the, this is a necessary component of getting its status in the research world.

Students further felt that by raising the international profile of their university they were opening up marketing opportunities for that university to reach out to new markets of potential international students, enhancing institutional income.
If the university advertises that it is internationally open to not only international students but also to providing a lot of exchange programmes, they might be attracting more students, more paying students as well.

If you want international incoming students, and Australia probably wants that because it’s the second or third most important Australian export good, you need to have a reputation among other universities, and you need to have it through students. And this you have through students who have been here and had great experience

Students further felt that through encouraging research students to be mobile a university would enhance its attractiveness to foreign academics, both for employment as well as for research collaborations. Those who were enrolled at two universities suggested that their dual-enrolment increased their research output, adding to publications for the university.

I think for Australian Universities, the benefit is getting, producing international standard research, you can then fill positions in Australia … English, South Africans, Americans to be employed in Australia at the highest level.

Universities get their names on all papers … In my personal case I would say I’m more productive now with two institutions I guess that I’d have less papers at the end of my Ph.D without that, you just count the number of papers published by, all that definitely increases.

Institutional connections

Beyond enhancing the reputation of their university, students also felt that their mobility provided a whole new set of institutional connections. Many were able to provide tangible examples of their mobility leading to the establishment of formal relationships between their home universities and universities overseas.

You, as a research student, become the conduit for collaborations that can become funded collaborations down the track … there are lot of examples in engineering where that happens.

There is something to be said in bringing back some knowledge to your university or some contacts to your university. I have been able to make contacts for my supervisor that she might not have had … so there’s definitely value for the university in the contacts that I made.
When I go to interview some people … senior leaders in the Ministry of Education in Thailand, they don't know [the Australian institution] ... then I tell them ... and after I come back they ask ... and then go to [the university] ... and make sign MOUs.

Postgraduate research coordinators also emphasised the benefit of mobility among research students for institutions, suggesting this contributed to the overall institutional strategy:

From a university perspective, we are hoping that that becomes a way of us extending our research network and strengthening the ties that we have with partners overseas and that the experiences of those students really enrich the research outcomes both in terms of immediate publications, on-going connectivity and a sense of our students that these opportunities exist.

In several cases the mobility of a student had opened up mobility opportunities for their supervisor as well, laying the groundwork for future connections and collaborations. As a student suggested:

The supervisors from [the Australian university] being invited to also come to the faculty, to the department and then also, have meetings there, senior academics ... it's like team building and that might be potentially quite fruitful depending on how the terms are. I think that's a big benefit.

In other cases the mobility of a student had given their university something that they had not had before, such as introducing them to new expertise or new insights from previously un-represented groups.

Nobody from my country had ever studied here and so it brings a whole new dimension looking at the current climate change ... this whole new area opened up ... here we have somebody who is doing this research and what is happening in the world and so I think it just enhances the university's work and the scope of the climate change program.

Some students, however, found that their Australian university was less interested in building international connections than they had expected.

One of the things that I was really hoping to do because of the amount of time that I spent over in the university in South Africa was to be able to formalize the relationship between this university and that university and on that side they were really interested but over on this side it was kind of challenging, I ended up giving.

Postgraduate research coordinators felt that this could be overcome by focusing attention on the research priorities of the university and ensuring that research student mobility aligned with these.
Recommendations

Do you want us to just churn out a PhD in 3 years and get it out of your hair or do you want us to actually be properly trained researchers by the end of this with international connections and experience?

In the final part of the focus group, students were asked to consider what they would recommend to both their institutions and to the Government in terms of increasing the participation of research students in mobility. They put forward a number of ideas.

At the institutional level, they felt that the greatest challenge was significant tensions between the encouragement of mobility and pressure to complete a PhD in a short period of time. They suggested that institutions needed to adopt a degree of flexibility about the length of candidature if they wished to support mobility.

While many students had struggled financially they did not request more funding for mobility per se from their institutions, instead suggesting that institutions place emphasis on developing reciprocal arrangements with overseas institutions to reduce the cost of mobility, particularly in relation to accommodation.

Incoming research students strongly felt that Australian institutions should do a great deal more to give them access to affordable accommodation. Students also felt that there should be greater transparency and fairness in the allocation of existing travel funds across institutions and greater flexibility about when students choose to spend them.

At the national level, however, students felt that there should be a lot more encouragement through policy and practice to support mobility among research students, with a greater number of scholarships available to facilitate mobility.

The dearth of knowledge provided to students before departure was regarded as something that needed to be overcome. This could be achieved through putting mobile students in touch with each other and also through the provision of information packs on countries they were going to.

Finally, and returning to the central role played by supervisors in stimulating mobility, several students referred to the need for academics to have worked in more than one country, suggesting that this should be a pre-requisite for an academic career.

Length of candidature

Many Australian students who were mobile during their research studies commented that this placed enormous pressure on them in terms of completing their candidature on time. Students felt that this was a problem that was worsening as institutions tried to reduce the length of PhD candidature. A similar situation arose with APA scholarships, which were also restricted in time.

Students reported that in the majority of cases mobility added to the length of their research studies. They suggested that if mobility was to be encouraged then the length of time available for candidature and APA scholarships should be re-thought. Without this, many felt that mobility was actively discouraged, and that they were forced to turn down opportunities to stay longer overseas due to the constraints placed on them.
Get people to finish in 3 years because that’s what the University is pushing for ... you can’t do that actually do that in 3 years if you are spending 6 months in field work.

Action research is entirely based on academic methodology. 6 months would not have been conceivably long enough for me to do that.

This 3 year finishing thing which everyone seems to be pushing and the student mobility thing, I think those two aims clash because ... there’s not enough time to do both.

Everything took longer over there and my research also completely changed direction ... everything took longer and I’m not sure how accommodating or understanding University is going to be about that.

But some had found creative solutions to the pressures caused by the length of a candidature. One had agreed with their supervisors not to write a thesis:

From the very beginning of my study, I discussed with my supervisors that this would be an issue because I would have to spend a lot of time in Indonesia and we agreed with that, I could do a thesis by publication to make it easier hopefully to start writing in the beginning of my PhD.

Another had been able to commence their data collection earlier than normal. But this is something which depends on having the institutional connections in place to be able to set up the mobility to fit within university timelines.

I started data collection quite early, before the end of the first year so I had time, so I could afford this extra six months in my data ... that was okay, that was still within the three year limit.

Postgraduate research coordinators acknowledged that there were tough choices to be made in determining whether mobility could fit in with the length of a research candidature.

I think from the supervisor’s perspective, there is increasingly pressure to ensure the students complete in the timely way, so they have to really think through how the experience, the international experience is going to blend in with ensuring that.
But other postgraduate research coordinators felt that this came down to thorough planning from the beginning of a PhD on the part of students and also the support they received from their institution if they encountered challenges.

---

*Our students in the mobility, the Cotutelle and joint Ph.D. group, their on-time completion is much higher than the student who don’t participate in this program ... the institution really has to have to have a system put in place so when the student’s going half of the time overseas it should be enhancing for their completion rather than to stop them completing ... they all have to plan from very, very early stage even before they come to PhD or the first year of their PhD candidature ... we just reinforce what they’ve agreed ... if they have any difficulties or issues they alert us at a very early stage, so they seem to take more ownership in this group of people than the other group.*

---

**Funding**

Several students suggested that the Australian government should follow the example of governments in other countries who regarded research student mobility as a key part of national strategy, building up valuable connections with knowledge workers in different locations. Many felt that there should be more emphasis placed on reciprocal arrangements with countries which were enthusiastic to exchange research students.

---

*From my experience from UAE, from Dubai, they have a good cooperation with Australian government. They are keen to increase this cooperation ... they are keen to extend their experience with others, especially with Australia. So why not use it?*

---

Other students felt that there should be more opportunities at the national level available for students to engage in mobility, beyond what was offered by institutions.

---

*There is a lack of awareness of government level support to encourage this. In Australia, the two big programs are Fulbright and the Endeavour. They on average support five students nationally at the postgraduate level, that’s nothing.*

---

They further suggested that this support should be tailored by broad discipline as student mobility was very different according to the topic of research.

---

*My recommendation will be to look at the disciplines ... If we are doing a physical science then mobility might mean something very different and a very different kind of experience than if you are doing social science ... you can’t put it in some generalised category like now.*
A number of students placed emphasis on encouraging reciprocal agreements between institutions to minimise the cost of accommodation, something which had proven to be a big challenge for both outwardly and inwardly mobile students.

At an under-graduate degree there are specific exchange partners that the graduates are encouraged to approach and that I don’t see is happening at the PHD level. And that’s despite the fact that there are already the connections.

Make a lot more reciprocal co-operation between institutions ... because it will make it very easy for students to go mobile ... if they can make lot more reciprocal co-operations, the funding can also be diminished because both have global co-operation that can reduce the cost.

Staying overseas is very expensive so if it wasn’t direct funding, it could be linkages with other institutions where perhaps you could go there and you could have the accommodation at the university so that you cut cost rates and things like that and also the linkages for sort of academics support overseas.

One postgraduate research coordinator acknowledged that support for research students from abroad in Australia was less than students would receive at partner institutions overseas.

In terms of housing, our partners have more resources than we do ... we don’t have apartments or anything ... our partners in Europe, in Asia, in South America, they have much better schemes to look after the students than we do.

A further topic in relation to funding that was raises was the need to enable supervisors to determine when it was suitable for students to use their travel funding during their research studies, rather than abiding by inflexible institutional policies

Give more possibility to the supervisors and the funding of the research ... if you look at the rule in [this institution] that you’ll only have $500 in your first year, I think most of the supervisors will say, ‘Ok you can take more money in your first year because its justified by your research’. And he is actually, he or she is actually the person who has the most information and takes the decision..

**Pre-departure information**

Many students referred to the need for institutions to provide students with pre-departure information. They felt that this should focus on the expectations of the research environment in different countries as a number had been quite challenged by the contrast they found. They also felt that it should encompass basic health and safety briefing to avoid students falling into common pitfalls. And they further felt that other research students would be best placed to provide this information.
Students, especially those coming from the Asian countries, they have different expectations about the research involvement and about the supervisor-student relationship ... I think it would be a strategy to try and make explicit to some extent ... the way to address that would be is the engagement events where they’re meeting other students who have been through that experience.

I think they should write a advice like we talk about ... if you go to this country, what you should do, what you should be careful of ... The first problem they don’t know not to drink tap water and they go to hospital for that..

This is the first time I’ve met other students who have done research overseas and actually one thing that would be nice is if the university provided some kind of connection, access to each other and speak to each other and share our experiences ... really nice to hear, share experiences, it’s really helpful but before this I kind of felt lonely. I was doing something different and I wasn’t able to talk to anyone about it.

You can make a contact between students, there could be a line, if Australian students want to go to Thailand, you can contact me and if I go back to Thailand, you can give my contact email, or phone number and call me.

Alternatively, some students suggested that the country briefings available to those who work for the Australian government should be made available to research students.

Country briefing, like the ones, they give to Australian government employees going overseas, a perfect source of, that sort of information, if we could make them available ... so you knew what you could, couldn’t do and what you’re going to be in for basically.

Pre-departure information was something which postgraduate research coordinators acknowledged happened at some institutions but not at others. In a positive example one reported

We’re doing the pre and post departure, post arrival assessment for them ... we basically give them a lot of information and then we have a lot of those information to give to them ... We have a bit of a training program in place before they go. I think that really help them, so we try to do as much as we could before they go and also ask people to come back and to talk about those experiences as well.
Another area which generated discussion referred to language preparation. Opinions were split on what assistance institutions should provide students. Some felt that students should have the opportunity to learn another language while at university (although they were divided on whether this should be compulsory at the Bachelor degree level) at a low cost.

_Australians should be encouraged to study more foreign languages especially if the government said, we are in the Asian century or something, then Asian languages should be studied more by Australians_

_Maybe, make it a part of a under graduate degree, people to have study another language._

_I really wanted to learn Bahasa Indonesian, I had to be there to actually learn it and if I had to pay for it here, it’s way too expensive and much cheaper there. Yes, simply if [the Australian university] had a language course, it would be great._

Alternatively, other students felt that it would be sufficient to simply ensure that students have a list of commonly needed terms in another language, and written in another script where required, to help them deal with complexities they faced when participating in mobility.

_Maybe it would be great to write some basic words in those languages especially what we are most concerned about is when you get sick … How can you say what happened to you, which doctor is best … then you can bring that piece of paper with you and then you can go to any hospital and say I have this one and everybody understands what you are suffering from._

Postgraduate research coordinators also felt that it was important to try to reduce the ‘transaction cost’ of research student mobility. This would involve having processes and practices in place to support students in organising mobility, making supervisors familiar with the schemes on offer to research students and the criteria involved in accessing them and getting institutions used to cooperating on student mobility. As one postgraduate research coordinator suggested:

_How we as the management side of things look after the logistics of those mobility programs at the institution is critical._

**Academic mobility**

The final recommendation from students reflected the essential role that supervisors play in encouraging and enabling mobility among research students. Students felt that this was much more likely to occur if supervisors themselves had engaged in overseas mobility and many were surprised that this was not a pre-requisite for an academic career.
When I was in USA for a training program, one thing, is that they have a got a policy like academicians, like teachers, professors, even the policy makers in World Bank, it's mandatory for them to work outside ... for their own promotion, for their own safety ... their scholars, thinkers, the think tanks, they have to make outward connections, out connections and this is one thing that Australia can do.

On the need for academic mobility, postgraduate research coordinators agreed that the mobility of supervisors was an essential ingredient in encouraging student mobility among research students. They further argued that international engagement was an essential component of an academic career. As one suggested:

I would say in the current research environment, it is harder and harder and harder to just to say ‘I’ll sit in my Ivory Tower in Australia and be effective’. It’s very, very difficult to not be a good global citizen. I would say a lot of academic staff are aware of it but some of them are far more savvy about the funding that’s available and the options that they can do, maybe a little bit braver about getting their students engaged.

Students also felt that is was important to encourage greater connections with foreign institutions through a dynamic exchange of academic staff. Students felt that this would both open up opportunities for collaboration on research and also provide students with a better sense of the global academic community and insights into where they could go during their research studies.

I strongly believe that institutions should encourage more of guest lecturers from overseas in collaboration with better universities because I can see there is limited number of guest lecturers which pour in, so if there is an influx or increase in flux of guest lecturers pouring in, the students would get better insight of what’s happening outside Australia and what better technologies could be a part of their research projects.

A further element touched on by postgraduate research coordinators was the need for recognition of research student mobility at the institutional level, and support for mobile research students from the senior management of the institution. As one argued:

Just a bit more of a recognition and ... a concerted push within the university to encourage, support, the funding, it just all wraps up nicely to basically address what we should be doing really ... it would come from the top, it would come from our Deputy Vice Chancellor, the Vice Chancellor.

Postgraduate research coordinators also felt that it was important to share knowledge about what opportunities were on offer to students. They felt that this needed to involve communicating opportunities to students and having mobile students share their stories with others. But beyond this they suggested that postgraduate research offices needed guidance and information sharing on how to support student mobility, particularly in order to minimise some of the risks involved. As one postgraduate research coordinator explained:
We need to keep pushing the mobility schemes that are available and what their criteria are and how to get involved in them ... more stories from people who have been involved in those schemes. More scaffolding around how it works, the dos and don’ts ... it’s a whole of Australia approach and obviously the more opportunities are available and more funding is available, the better but ... without the appropriate scaffolding so that the student landing in another country is being attended to it can be quite a high risk endeavour.
Conclusion

This report presents findings of a study of the mobility of postgraduate research students enrolled at Australian universities. It is based on seven focus groups with staff and postgraduate research coordinators at a small number of Australian universities.

As the report has made clear, research students choose to undertake mobility for a variety of reasons. Common reasons include the desire to access expertise – researchers, resources or research participants –, the desire to enhance career opportunities and the wish to gain exposure to different contexts. Postgraduate research coordinators also suggested that mobile research student were self-selecting. As one commented:

_There’s a maturity that comes with a travel option and there’s a, I think, the very fact that they have to, I think, the quality of the student that is able to get the grant and do the travel is inevitably higher than the student isn’t able to do that. They are more motivated, they are more driven by the whole process and just a richness of exposure to other research, other environments._

Some mobile research students were funded and had their mobility arrangements made for them but many had to find their own funds and made the arrangements themselves. In the former case, the support from a research supervisor with connections overseas and who understood how to navigate the bureaucracy was invaluable. Support from institutions more generally was also reported to be extremely valuable for research student mobility, particularly in informing research students about the opportunities available to them.

Students found that their mobility experiences were incredibly valuable but recounted a number of challenges to be overcome. They advised future students to persevere and plan carefully, to expect the unexpected and to be prepared for culture shock. Students also reported that two of the greatest challenges of mobility were finding affordable accommodation and dealing with ethics committees who lacked an understanding of overseas fieldwork contexts.

While the ability to access excellence was an important benefit of mobility, so too were the new perspectives gained. These included seeing how research was conducted in different environments, exchanging ideas with international colleagues and experiencing very different realities.

Students felt that their institutions benefited significantly from the mobility of research students. They felt that it opened institutions up to opportunities for research collaboration and to recruit new students. They also suggested that their mobility enhanced the reputation of the institution among foreign academic communities and exposed their institution to new areas of research focus.

Despite all the positives students and postgraduate research coordinators noted a number of areas which required further attention. Students expressed surprise that fare more research students came to Australia than went out from Australia and felt that this was partly due to national support for research student mobility. As one reflected
I mean the irony in [institution name] is that there are so many international PhD students and yet the domestic PhD students are so hamstrung in their ability to become international PhD students ... there’s lot of Iranian students coming, lot of Chinese students coming to gain some expertise and then take it home and that’s really being driven by the government and their home institutions.

To overcome this, students felt that there should be significantly more support available to encourage research student mobility. Postgraduate research coordinators agreed that this was required, with one suggesting:

Perhaps, in other countries the push is far more formal and far more directive and there’s more generous funding available ... particularly within the EU community, it’s almost, there is very much an expectation you’re going to do this and there are other countries where it’s just a really, really big urgent push and it’s major responsibility of the student to do this and there’s more support for them to prepare.

Beyond funding and strategic support, students suggested that institutions needed to relax the ‘3 year’ push for PhD completion to enable mobility and that institutions should establish institutional relationships, particularly to provide access to low cost accommodation but also to ensure greater mobility among academics so that they would be well informed to advise their research students.

The need for national policy to support research student mobility was raised by both students and postgraduate research coordinators. They felt that this should follow a similar pattern to the support available for coursework students, such as the New Colombo Plan. One postgraduate research coordinator argued:

When was the last time we had any policy and direction from the Federal Government to encourage high degree research student go overseas and doing more international research collaboration work? ... There is lack of funding, lack of national funding, lack of a policy and lack of direction for that.
References


Appendix A – Student focus group questions

These questions are designed to direct and prompt discussion during focus groups with higher degree research students who have been, or are planning to be, internationally mobile during their studies.

Introduction

Hello, my name is [NAME] and I am a researcher from the Australian Council for Educational Research, or ACER. ACER has been asked by the Department of Education in Canberra to talk to higher degree research students about their plans for, and experiences of, international mobility.

This is an issue which is seen as really important in preparing research students for a career which is very likely to involve collaborating with colleagues overseas.

You are here today as expert informants and I would like to thank you all very much for giving up your valuable time to contribute to this project.

You have all signed an ethics form and so you will know that what you say today will be totally confidential – your name will not be used in any reports of this research and neither will any information which could identify you. I’d encourage you to be as frank and open as possible.

Can we start by going around the table – I am interested in finding out who we have here today. I would like to know your name, area of study, what stage you are at in your studies and a brief summary of your plans for or experience of international mobility.

[RESPONSE]

That’s great – thank you very much for that. What I would like to talk to you about today is seven key topics:

- first, your motivations for undertaking international mobility;
- second, how your international experience was organised;
- third, for those who have completed the experience, how you would rate it;
- fourth, the level of excellence of your international experience;
- fifth, any impact that you think it will have on your career goals and future plans;
- sixth, the ways in which your university benefits from research student mobility; and
- seventh, any recommendations for encouraging more research students to go overseas.

This should take us about 90 minutes. Does that sound OK? Does anyone have any questions at this stage?

Motivations

OK, so let’s get started with your motivations for international mobility.

What made you decide to do it? What factors supported your decision? Have you worked or studied overseas before? What made you choose to go to that country in particular?

What did you or do you expect to get out of the experience? What differences to study in Australia did you or do you expect to find? What benefits for your research career do you expect to gain? How do you expect your mobility to benefit the university you attend in Australia?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – it sounds like [relevant comment based on participant responses]
Appendix A – Student focus group questions

Organisation

Now let’s move on to thinking about how the international experience was organised. I’m interested in things like:

Did you receive any support from your university to make the arrangements? Did you receive any financial support or did you have to fund it yourself? If you did receive financial support, did this cover all your costs or was there a gap which you had to make up yourself?

Did you have previous contact with people in the country? How easy was it to get a visa?

Did you get support in the country (e.g. from a local institution)? Was there anything which made going overseas difficult? And do you have any other comments about how your international experience was organised?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – what I’m hearing is [relevant comment based on participant responses]

Experience (Only for those who have already been)

So, thinking back to what you expected to gain from international mobility, can you tell me what your experience was like? Did you achieve what you thought you would? Was it what you expected?

What was unexpected or different to your expectations? What were the big differences to Australia?

Would you recommend a similar experience to other research students? Why? What would you tell them in advance?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – so what it sounds like is [relevant comment based on participant responses]

Excellence (Only for those who have already been)

OK, so one of the reasons why international mobility of research students is seen to be so important is because of the excellence which can be accessed in other locations.

Thinking about your international experience, what can you tell me about the quality of the research resources you were able to access? By ‘resources’ I mean things like facilities, libraries and laboratories. Have these had an impact on the methodology you are using in your research?

Also, what was the calibre of the people you came into contact with? This includes supervisors, colleagues, other research students and other staff. Would you have been able to make contact with the same people without going overseas? What gains did you take from interactions with researchers in other countries?

A third area is excellence of thinking: can you tell me about any ways in which your international experience has challenged the way you think, the approach you are taking in your research and the theoretical approaches you are using?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – so what you are saying is [relevant comment based on participant responses]

Impact

One of the reasons which international experiences are thought to be really important is for the impact that they can have on future choices.
I realise that it is still early, but thinking about what you might do in the future, I would be interested in knowing about any way in which you think your future activities might be influenced by your international experience.

Things like, do you expect to have ongoing research connections from your international experience? Has it made you think about research differently? Have you become aware of different options for your future? Do you see yourself working overseas in the future?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – so it seems like [relevant comment based on participant responses]

**University benefits**

OK, so we have been talking about your experiences and the benefits you gain or expect to gain from your international experience. Let’s also think about your university.

How do you think your university benefits from having research students go overseas? How valuable do you think the connections you have made with researchers in other countries are to your university in Australia? In what ways are they valuable?

Apart from connections, what are some other ways in which universities might benefit if their research students go overseas?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – what I’m hearing is [relevant comment based on participant responses]

**Recommendations**

In the future it would be great if more research students could have an international experience and so I’m interested in finding out from you about what you think would help this happen.

What barriers do you think prevent more research students from heading overseas? What kind of support do you think would help to overcome these barriers?

What things currently encourage research students to have an international experience? What did you find most important in supporting the decision to go overseas? How could this be expanded to benefit other students?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – so what you are saying is [relevant comment based on participant responses]

**Conclusion**

Great – the discussion we have had today has been really useful and will really help with informing how research mobility can be encouraged.

Before we finish, does anyone have any further comments which were not covered by our discussion?

[RESPONSE]

Great – well that concludes the session. It was lovely to meet you all and to thank you for giving up your time to come along today, I’d like to give each of you a voucher and hope that you find it useful.
Appendix B – Facilitator focus group questions

Introduction
Hello, my name is [NAME] and I am a researcher from the Australian Council for Educational Research, or ACER. ACER has been asked by the Department of Education in Canberra to talk to university staff who help higher degree research students to have international experiences during their studies.

This is an issue which is seen as really important in preparing research students for a career which is very likely to involve collaborating with colleagues overseas. It is also seen as providing important benefits to universities.

You are here today as expert informants and I would like to thank you all very much for giving up your valuable time to contribute to this project.

You have all signed an ethics form and so you will know that what you say today will be totally confidential – your name will not be used in any reports of this research and neither will any information which could identify you. I’d encourage you to be as frank and open as possible.

Can we start by going around the table – I am interested in finding out who we have here today. I would like to know your name, job title, which part of the university you work in, your involvement with research students and the way in which you facilitate their international experiences.

[RESPONSE]

That’s great – thank you very much for that. I would like to talk to you about seven key topics:

- first, the **motivations** which research students have in undertaking international mobility;
- second, how students’ international experiences are **organised**;
- third, how students who return from overseas evaluate their **experiences**;
- fourth, the level of **excellence** of students’ international experiences;
- fifth, any **impact** that international experiences have on research students’ career goals and future plans;
- sixth, the ways in which your **university benefits** from research students going overseas; and
- seventh, any **recommendations** for encouraging more research students to go overseas.

This should take us about 90 minutes. Does that sound OK? Does anyone have any questions at this stage?

Motivations
OK, so let’s get started with students’ motivations for international mobility.

What do you think are the main factors which cause students to want to go overseas during their studies? What kind of encouragement do they have to gain an international experience? Do they tend to have worked or studied overseas before? What makes them choose a particular country?

What do you think they expect to get out of the experience? What differences to study in Australia do they expect to find? What benefits for their research careers do they expect to gain? How do they you expect their mobility to benefit the university they attend in Australia?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]
Thank you for that – it sounds like [relevant comment based on participant responses]

**Organisation**

Now let’s move on to thinking about how the international experiences of students are organised. I’m interested in things like:

- Do students receive support from the university to make the arrangements for their international experience?
- Do they receive any financial support or do they have to fund it themselves? If they do get financial support, does this cover all their costs or does is there a gap which they have to make up themselves?
- Do students tend to have previous contact with people in the country? Is it easy for them to get a visa?
- Do they get support in the country (e.g. from a local institution)? Is there anything which makes it difficult for research students to go overseas? And do you have any other comments about how the international experiences of research students are organised?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – what I’m hearing is [relevant comment based on participant responses]

**Experiences**

So, thinking back to what research students expect to gain from international mobility, can you tell me what their experience tends to be like? Are they able to achieve what they expected to? Was the experience similar to what they thought it would be?

What tends to be unexpected or different to their expectations? What are the big differences they tend to find between their overseas destination and Australia?

Would you recommend a similar experience to other research students? Why? What would you tell them in advance to help them prepare for the experience?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – so what it sounds like is [relevant comment based on participant responses]

**Excellence**

OK, so one of the reasons why international mobility of research students is seen to be so important is because of the excellence which can be accessed in other locations.

Thinking about the international experiences which students have, what can you tell me about the quality of the research resources they are able to access? By ‘resources’ I mean things like facilities, libraries and laboratories. Do you think this exposure has an impact on the methodology which students use in their research?

Also, what is the calibre of the people students come into contact with when they are overseas? This includes supervisors, colleagues, other research students and other staff. Do you think that students would have been able to make contact with the same people without going overseas? What gains do you think students take away from interactions with researchers in other countries?

A third area is excellence of thinking: are you aware of international experiences having an impact on the way in which students think, such as challenging their assumptions? Does an international experience seem to have an impact on the approaches which students take to research and the theoretical approaches they use?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – so what you are saying is [relevant comment based on participant responses]
Impact

One of the reasons which international experiences are thought to be really important is for the impact that they can have on future choices.

I realise that it could be hard for you to tell, but thinking about what you research students go on to do in the future, I would be interested in knowing about any way in which you think their future activities might be influenced by their international experiences.

Things like, do you think that they will have ongoing research connections from their international experiences? Does it make them think about research differently? Do they become aware of different options for their futures? Do you think they are more likely to work overseas in the future?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – so it seems like [relevant comment based on participant responses]

University benefits

OK, so we have been talking about the experiences of research students who go overseas and the benefits they gain from their international experiences. Let’s also think about benefits for the university.

How do you think the university benefits from having research students go overseas? How valuable do you think the connections that research students make with researchers in other countries are to the university? In what ways are they valuable?

Apart from connections, what are some other ways in which universities might benefit if their research students go overseas?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – what I’m hearing is [relevant comment based on participant responses]

Recommendations

In the future it would be great if more research students could have an international experience and so I’m interested in finding out from you about what you think would help this happen.

What barriers do you think prevent more research students from heading overseas? What kind of support do you think would help to overcome these barriers?

What things currently encourage research students to have an international experience? What is the most critical factor in supporting students’ decisions to go overseas? How could this be expanded to benefit other students? What additional support should they be given?

[RESPONSE FROM EACH PARTICIPANT] [Follow up questions as necessary]

Thank you for that – so what you are saying is [relevant comment based on participant responses]

Conclusion

Great – the discussion we have had today has been really useful and will really help with informing how research mobility can be encouraged.

Before we finish, does anyone have any further comments which were not covered by our discussion?

[RESPONSE]

Great – well that concludes the session. It was lovely to meet you all and to thank you for giving up your time to come along today, I’d like to give each of you a voucher and hope that you find it useful.
Appendix C – Participant characteristics

This table shows where the sixty postgraduate research students who participated in this study came from (often representing dual nationality/identity) and where they went to for mobility (often more than one country). In many cases students from country X who came to study in Australia were returning to country X to undertake fieldwork, but this should not be assumed in all cases where numbers match.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country name</th>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antigua</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islands</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>