

“Talking just about learning languages and getting to know cultures is something that’s mentioned in very many applications”: Student and staff imaginaries about study abroad

Anu Härkönen & Fred Dervin, University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

There has been a strong financial and political support for mobility programmes during the last decade in Europe. Scholars and institutions alike have produced many studies about the short-term and long-term benefits of such mobility on the students. In this paper we want to approach the topic of benefits from a constructivist, postmodern and critical perspective (Piller, 2011). Examining motivation letters written by students at a Finnish University of Applied Sciences about why they want to study abroad, we are interested in their imaginaries about self and other and the act of mobility that they put forward. Student mobility has an undeniable relation to the polysemic and contested notion of the ‘intercultural’ and representations of the benefits of traveling (Dervin, 2011), which constitute part of today’s imaginaries on stays abroad. What do their writings tell us about how they imagine staying abroad? How do they (co-)construct its benefits? Our analysis is based on a linguistic discourse analysis of the data (Marnette, 2005).

Biodatas

Anu Härkönen is Deputy International Relations Manager at Turku University of Applied Sciences. She has worked in the field of international education for over 15 years and has a wide experience of coordinating and developing international activities in higher professional education in Finland. She is currently carrying out her PhD research at the University of Helsinki.

Fred Dervin is Professor of Multicultural Education at the University of Helsinki (Finland). He also holds other positions in Canada, Luxembourg and Malaysia. Dervin specializes in intercultural education, academic mobility and migration and the sociology of multiculturalism. He is the series editor of *Education beyond borders* (Peter Lang), *Nordic Studies on Diversity in Education* (with Kulbrandstad and Ragnarsdóttir; CSP) and *Post-intercultural communication and education* (CSP). His website: <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/dervin/>

Introduction

It has become a cliché to say that student mobility is now “systematic, dense, multiple and transnational” (Kim 2010). Every institution of higher education has to play the internationalization card today, with more or less success (Dervin & Machart, 2014). It is also a truism to claim that it is not a new phenomenon and that it has crossed the centuries. When one of the authors of this article was actively researching Erasmus students’ experiences in Finland, he checked the archives of the oldest university in this Nordic country and found at least 10 doctoral dissertations that had been written on the positive effects of student mobility in the 17th and 18th centuries (Dervin, 2008). Interestingly these dissertations, which were written in Latin, seemed to share a lot in common with the current discourses on student mobility. Though the words used differed (for example the notion of the ‘intercultural’ did not exist at the time), students are described as becoming more open-minded, being able to interact with the ‘culture’ of their hosts and to learn to speak the local language like a ‘native-speaker’. In current research on student mobility but also in the fields of applied linguistics and intercultural communication/education most of these elements are often questioned – though not coherently or systematically.

In this article we shall refer to these ideas as being imaginaries about study abroad. We thus wish to contribute to the discussions on the potential effects of stays abroad by shifting the attention to the idea of myths and imaginaries around student mobility (Dervin, 2008; 2013; Machart & Dervin, 2014). These imaginaries, as we shall see, tend to be shared by practitioners, decision-makers and researchers alike. Many of these elements can often be considered biased and create doxic, commonsensical and a-critical beliefs in students, who can be disappointed post-sojourn because they feel they haven't been able to meet many of the intangible goals set im-/ex-plicitly by e.g. institutions.

The lack of criticality and the importance of sending a different and more realistic image about the effects of study abroad can be illustrated by this anecdote. One of us was asked to give a talk on the benefits of student mobility at a Finnish university and suggested that the talk be entitled *Academic mobility: is it really worth it?* In response to this suggestion the organiser sent this message:

“I would like to ask about the title, why did you change it? The way it reads now is that you are skeptical about it being worthwhile to go do research or work abroad. Since internationality is high on the agenda at the moment, I would hope to see the programme promote a positive view towards international mobility.”

Student mobility is the core international activity at European institutions of higher education and since e.g. the student exchange programme Erasmus was established in 1987 by the European Union, about three million students have participated in the programme. Annually about 250 000 Erasmus students either study or work in another European country and this number is expected to grow even bigger during Erasmus+, the new EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport for 2014-2020, during which mobility opportunities will be offered for more than four million people at different levels of education. (European Commission, 2014)

Erasmus is a massive programme not just in terms of student volumes: the budget for Erasmus+ is 14.7 billion euros, which means 40% increase in funding compared to the previous Erasmus education and training programme in 2007-2014 (Erasmus+ Programme Guide). The European Union's flagship mobility programme also has a large publicity and promotional machine behind it. European-wide campaigns are organized by the European commission in order to attract and encourage more students to participate in the programme. Also national agencies and HEIs actively promote Erasmus in their own countries with e.g. information sessions, events, printed materials and competitions. The discourse about Erasmus has regularly described the programme as 'the perfect example of a European success story'. In addition to a strong financial support there has been also a wide political, social and academic support for Erasmus during the last decade. (European Commission, 2013, Erasmus Student Network, 2014)

The Programme represents a big investment by the EU but also by European HEIs and individual participants. It is thus no wonder that there is more and more demand for some concrete results and proof of value-added benefits of the Erasmus experience. Scholars and institutions alike have produced many studies about the short-term and long-term benefits of such mobility on students. These studies are, however, often based on surveys or on uncritical analysis of qualitative data. Also several tools such as the memo©, Global Mindedness Survey and Intercultural Development Inventory® have been developed for measuring the change in students' knowledge, attitude and skills during and after mobility but these are usually based on students' self-reports and researchers still find it hard to capture the actual impact of study abroad. (CHE Consult, 2014; CIMO, 2013; IDI LLC, 2014).

In this study our focus is on the pre-departure phase of study abroad. The context is that of Finnish students currently studying at a university of applied sciences in a large city in the south of the country. These students have applied for study abroad by sending a letter to the international

officer. For the experience to be successful from the perspective of all stakeholders - students, HEIs and programme providers - we think it is crucial to pay attention to the expectations that exchange is imagined to live up to. Instead of outcomes and results after the study abroad experience, we explore imaginaries that both individual students have when applying for exchange and professionals working in the field have when selecting students for exchange. In our opinion, these imaginaries are very closely linked with the success of mobility programmes - such as Erasmus - but for some reason they have only been touched upon in passing in some previous studies on e.g. students' motivation for studying abroad (Living and Learning – Exchange Studies Abroad, 2013).

1. Imaginaries: a central notion to approach the effects of student mobility?

According to sociologist Michel Maffesoli (2013) the birth of Modernity, the nation-state and science as we know it today, in the eighteenth century led to the idea that people and institutions could do without imaginaries and count on solid scientific knowledge to help them to live a decent life with others (see Bauman, 2013). Supernatural beliefs, fantasy and even religion were deemed to be 'primitive' and thus not relevant for this new era. Yet with the current questioning of Modernity and the idea of e.g. positivism, and the emergence of postmodern thinking imaginaries have become important elements in research on globalization and today's societies. For Legros et al. (2006: 88):

“Imaginary is not a hidden, secret, unconscious social form that exists under the filters of the social fabric. It is not the reflection, the deformed mirror, the upside world or the shadow of reality, an underground society that digs the sewers of daily life: imaginary structures deeply human relations” (our translation).

For the sociologists (2006: 4) imaginaries help people to feel protected against reality and/or the unknown. They add that imaginaries also serve an anthropo-physiological function to fulfill human beings' need to dream. Finally imaginaries enable individuals and groups to be creative and to construct a sense of community and group identification (ibid.).

Like any postmodern phenomenon, student mobility – and discourses on student mobility – is based largely on the development and recycling of imaginaries. These imaginaries can be classified as *macro-imaginaries* (mobility as a global phenomenon) and as *micro-imaginaries* (related to individual experiences). In this article we are interested in micro-imaginaries since we examine individuals' motivations. Macro-imaginaries include amongst others (Welch, 2008) the ideas that mobility is not always a matter of choice; it is not neutral as it has cultural, economic and political dimensions; “A brain drain of the highly skilled does not necessarily represent an unrecoverable loss to the originating country”.

In his writings on the notion of the intercultural, Dervin (2008, 2012) has been critical of how student mobility appears to be systematically synonymous with increased intercultural awareness, leading to the creation of intercultural mediators. The notion, as Dervin argues (2012), is problematic for it is polysemic and an empty signifier at the same time, leading researchers, practitioners and decision-makers to use it automatically without always questioning it. Here are two examples that illustrate this kind of imaginary which we label *micro-imaginaries*:

“An Erasmus student is “an adult that will be able to act freely in the globalized world. S/he should be equipped with the skills to interact smoothly with people of various cultures as well as to “survive” in any intercultural environment.” (Krzaklewska (2007) – ESN)

“Studies show that a period spent abroad not only enriches students' lives in the academic field but also in the acquisition of intercultural skills and self-reliance.” (http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/llp/erasmus/public_en.html)

Based on an extensive review of research on the links between intercultural competences and student mobility, it is clear that researchers do not always agree with these statements (see e.g. Abdallah-Preteille, 1996, 2008). Dervin (2008) has thus identified the following *micro-imaginaries* related to interculturality and identity in students' discourses about their time abroad:

- Mobility allows students to find their identity;
- Mobility allows them to become like the Other (the French, the Finns, the Chinese, etc.);
- Mobility allows them to learn and meet other cultures;
- Mobility allows them to get rid of their stereotypes.

All these assertions are imaginaries in the sense that they contain very problematic elements such as the concepts of culture, the Other, identity but also a limited conception of the word *stereotype* (of which one cannot get rid of, cf. Abdallah-Preteille, 2008 and the rejection of the 'contact hypothesis' in mass by most researchers). There appears to be a *doxa*, i.e. common belief or popular opinion, about student mobility that needs to be defused.

One important aspect of these imaginaries is that they derive from many and varied sources which cannot always be identified. This non-exhaustive list of sources can be drafted: decision-makers and university staff who promote mobility, institutional discourses, the "subconscious" (positivity of mobility), word of mouth (former mobile students), artistic productions (*the Spanish Apartment*), advertising (campaigns by the EU available on most campuses in Europe), etc.

In this article we are interested in students' and staff's micro-imaginaries. We examine if and how students who are willing to go on an exchange make use of these imaginaries to justify their interests in applying. The perception of these justifications by staff involved in international mobility is also of interest.

2. About the study

Our study was carried out in Finland where HEIs consider student mobility as something that is positive in principle. The Strategy for the Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions in Finland 2009-2015 (Ministry of Education, 2009) emphasizes mobility and Finnish HEIs and the Ministry of Education and Culture measure the progress and quality of internationalisation with different kinds of quantitative performance indicators that provide information, amongst other things, about the number of mobile students. Part of the target funding of the Ministry to HEIs is rewarded on the basis of outgoing and incoming exchange students.

This has led to a situation where all Finnish HEIs have a large network of partner universities in Europe and often also in other parts of the world. It is no exaggeration to claim that if interested in study abroad, most Finnish university level students have been able to participate in exchange programmes during the last 10-15 years. Especially Erasmus exchanges and grants have been widely available and most Finnish students are also eligible for a study grant, a government financed benefit. Naturally the selection for the most popular HEIs and countries is always competitive and there are differences related to e.g. students' field of study and socio-economic background, but in general Finnish higher education students have relatively good possibilities to participate in exchange programmes. (Living and Learning – Exchange Studies Abroad, 2013; Siekkinen, 2013).

In addition to exchange programme guidelines, HEIs have their own application processes and selection criteria for study abroad. It is important to say at this stage that in many institutions the number of applicants often overtakes the number of exchange places. Our data consisted of 97 motivation letters from one campus of a university of applied sciences in South-West Finland. In order to apply for study abroad during the academic year 2012-2013, students were required to

return their application forms including their personal details and host university options, their transcript of records and these letters.

The applicants were bachelor level students in degree programmes in Hospitality Management (18), Beauty Care (8), Life Sciences (14), Business Information Technology (5), Business (39) and International Business (13). Their average age was 22. About one third of the applicants were male students (31). Exchange or practical training abroad was a compulsory part of the curriculum for some students. At the beginning of their studies students had received basic information about different possibilities to participate in international activities during their studies (e.g. about international student tutoring and study abroad).

Students were asked to write a motivation letter, but they were not given any specific guidelines. They were told about the selection criteria which included their study success (grades, study progress), language skills, motivation letter and possible interview. In addition they were told that attention would be paid to courses available at the host university (and whether they were in line with their personal study plan) and that priority would be given for students who applied to partner universities of their own degree programme.

In addition to the motivation letters our data also includes comments from professionals – practitioners and academics - working in the field of international education. We selected three motivation letters and sent electronic versions of them to international relations coordinators and teachers of intercultural communication who were asked to tell which one of the applicants they would select for study abroad and why. We received and analyzed a total of 22 anonymous on-line answers.

3. Findings

3.1. Common beliefs about time abroad

Our findings about student imaginaries reveal some common beliefs – doxa – related to studying and living abroad that occur either explicitly or between the lines from one motivation letter to another. They are written as taken-for-granted, unquestioned truths and they do not usually seem to reflect students' personal expectations related to their possible exchange. In other words they resemble 'sayings' about study abroad:

- (1) "Living in a different country gives new perspective to life and your home country."
- (2) "If you spend time in a new country with new people it's grows you up."
- (3) "The knowledge of different cultures and customs is essential for today's business people."

As asserted in the first section of this article, these three arguments are problematic as the terms used (culture, customs, new perspective, etc.) are very much reminiscent of imaginaries. Furthermore there seems to be a consensus among students about the importance and general positive effects of study abroad as such. However, it must be taken into account that the letters were written by students who were applying for exchange of their own will and who naturally wanted to give a good impression about themselves and their motivation to study abroad in order to become selected as exchange students. Thus, students have probably been well aware that in this context any critical opinions would probably not be appreciated. Besides they probably expected their arguments to be well accepted by international officers.

What is noteworthy though is that the doxa mentioned in the letters visibly have an impact on students' expectations. When exploring the letters more in detail, we selected quotes related to imaginaries about study abroad. We used linguistic critical discourse analysis (e.g. Marnette, 2005)

to identify them and gathered them into three general categories: 1. A dream place, 2. A new me and life, and 3. A 'must'.

3.1.1. A dream place

Students often see study abroad as a way of having some time off from their everyday life. Getting to know another country or culture – to see the world – is among the most important motivational factors for students who participate in exchange programmes (de Grosbois, Kaethler and Young, 2010; Living and Learning – Exchange Studies Abroad, 2013). Thus, it was not surprising to find this same wish in our data. But students did not only express their dream to escape from what they consider to be the mundane life at home. They also seemed to know exactly what to expect from their host country and host university: something 'excellent' was waiting for them at their dream place.

(4) "The British culture is fascinating and the people are very polite. I also admire their social structure and their admiration of traditions. Education is also highly valued and teachers set higher expectations to students."

The expectations were often flying high and in addition to stereotypic thinking they sometimes included escapist and even xenophilic features (overly positive arguments about the other country, see Clermont & Eisenberg, 1996). Students imagined their dream places - such as France, The Netherlands, Spain, Poland or Austria –

- to have e.g. (5) "a perfect location" for exchange experience, (6) "lively towns full of life" and (7) "very exotic, easy-going, rich or magnificent cultures and traditions".
- These places would also have (8) "interesting, successful and wonderful people" and students who (9) "always faced challenges and new situations with open arms and open minds".
- In addition, students were looking for excellence in education at both host countries and host universities: these would have (10) "a really good level of education, lively multicultural atmosphere, successful modern teaching models and great teaching" that they would find (11) "amazing to be part of".

Some of these imaginaries may of course have been written in order to demonstrate applicants' knowledge of and academic interest towards his or her possible study destination, but one can still wonder about the correlation between some pipe dreams and the reality.

3.1.2. A new me and life

There seems to be an almost relentless quest to find proof about the (short-term and long-term) impact of study abroad on students: HEIs, programme organizers and researchers alike have been keen to try to find out about how and why students change during their exchange and the search for answers is ongoing (Byram & Feng, 2006; Coleman & Chafer, 2011; Kinginger, 2013). These studies and surveys focus especially on the development of intercultural skills and language skills and the emphasis is often on learning to meet the 'other'. Our findings reveal that students themselves seem to be much more interested in the positive impact of exchange on their inner self: there is a strong belief in study abroad as a tool for one's own personal transformation – a new me and life – as is demonstrated by this excerpt:

(12) "Exchange semester in a foreign country would be a life changing experience."

According to students living abroad would be (13) “a great lesson for personal growth and view of life” and a possibility to (14) “learn to know oneself better”, (15) “to develop oneself” and to (16) “widen one’s worldview”. The impact of study abroad is not limited to here and now. Students claim that study abroad would really (17) “inspire them to try their best” also in the future:

(18) “This wouldn’t be just about improving my language and social skills and getting international viewpoint to my studies and future career. Most importantly this is a journey I need to take to get to know myself better. That alone has a great effect on every step I take later in my life.”

Career-wise exchange experience is imagined be (19) “a huge advantage in the labour market” and (20) “a great benefit for future career”. Gaining international experience away from one’s own home country would turn out to be a (21) “very valuable asset in the future”, as (22) “employers will see it as a good addition in your job application”. In addition to this imagined career boost study abroad would bring opportunities (23) “to make good friends and contacts” with other exchange and local students and to create (24) “new and valuable networks and connections” which (25) “could have use later in life”.

Personal growth and enhanced future career possibilities are indeed among the top motivational factors of students applying for study abroad (Living and Learning – Exchange Studies Abroad, 2013). The problem is, however, how to measure changes in inner self without relying mainly on students’ own perceptions and self-reporting? Recent studies related to the impact of study abroad on graduates’ future career development are also somewhat conflicting. Even though students themselves consider their international experience to have value-added benefits in relation to their career direction, for example in Finland employers do not seem to pay much attention to international expertise in the recruitment process. (Demos Helsinki, 2014; Garam, 2005) Also some studies undertaken e.g. in Norway show that it is not possible to directly draw the conclusion that international experience would result in better employment opportunities or career prospects (Weirs-Jenssen & Sverre, 2005).

3.2.3. A ‘must’ for my generation

Study abroad in general appears to hold a promise of (26) “an exhilarating personal adventure” which would be one of the (27) “highlights” of students’ study years at the university. Exchange experience is something that they have (28) “been waiting for since the beginning of the studies”. According to one student he (29) “would be absolutely infuriated if the borders would in any way slow me down - not going to let that happen”. Or, for another student, (30) “I wish that I will have a good time on my exchange year, because that is the most important part in everything, to live your life to the fullest.” Enthusiasm for study abroad is highly noticeable in the letters.

In addition to finding study abroad as a positive ‘must’ of their generation, our data reveals also some sort of pressure to participate in exchange: e.g. Erasmus exchange seems to be an experience that a modern day university student should not miss.

According to students, leaving Finland - at least for some period of time - is (31) “absolutely necessary in order to achieve that hoped level of knowing and skills.”

(32) ”The knowhow that exchange will bring is essential especially in the field of marketing, because the development is usually a bit faster in other parts of the world than in Finland.”

Students feel that it is (33) “very crucial” to receive knowledge about other cultures and that it is time to network and create international connections (34) “at this age or in this phase in their life”: they (35) “have come to a point where they must gain more international experience, (36) “get new points of view”, (37) “learn a new language” and (38) “all in all adopt new skills and abilities”. Study abroad is seen as a great opportunity and students fear that if they do not seize it now they (39) “may not have the same opportunity again.”

It seems that many students believe that ‘everybody’ studies abroad when actually only a small percentage of students in higher education are mobile. In 2012, a total of 10 014 students from Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences studied or worked abroad during at least three months. This figure represents 3.3 % of the total student population and about 24% of the annual intake at the Finnish HEIs in 2012. (Ministry of Education, 2012) Study abroad is also perceived as the only possibility to gain international experience even though HEIs offer many other possibilities through activities related to internationalization at home.

These first analytical sections looked at students’ imaginaries in letters written to motivate their interests in study abroad. Three kinds of imaginaries – in the sense that the arguments put forward have not been convincingly demonstrated by research and practice – emerged from the data and were related to interculturality, identity and the globalization of mobility.

3.2. Do staff share similar imaginaries?

In this section we examine how staff involved in internationalization perceive the expectations and motivations of three of the students who were part of the previous analysis. The instructions that we sent through snowballing our contacts read as follows:

“Dear colleagues,

Thank you for opening the link for this study on international student mobility. You will find below three authentic but anonymized letters of motivation that were written by students in Finland who want to study abroad. Let’s imagine that only one of them can be selected. Which one would you send abroad? Why? You can comment on the student you have chosen but also tell us why (if you have time!) you would not send the other ones.”

First we need to note that this exercise is a bit unusual and in a sense artificial as the respondents would not have any impact on the ‘fate’ of the students. It is important to note at this stage that even if each institution has some sort of criteria for deciding on who can go abroad, at the European level there does not seem to be an agreement in terms of criteria. This thus has an impact on our data as contradictory and opposed positions are bound to emerge. Yet we felt that by asking these individuals to tell us why they would choose one of the three candidates could also inform us of their own perceptions and thus imaginaries in relation to student mobility.

The three letters represent three different kinds of candidates (the letters are reproduced in the appendix):

- The first candidate has a lot of experience in terms of internationalization; she wants to go to France to learn about its culture and learn the language.
- The second candidate only talks about his professional goals and does not mention at all other aspects of study abroad.
- The third candidate concentrates mostly on the improvement of her language skills as her motivations.

In what follows we examine how the students fare in the staff’s judgements. Surprisingly the first student who has had some international experience and who seems to be highly motivated to go to

France is rejected by most respondents. For some respondents the fact that this student already has some international experience plays against her: they would prefer to send someone who is new to internationalisation. While one respondent criticizes the student for not being (40) “really interested in interculturality”, other respondents claim that (41) “This student is talking too much about France”, (42) “because being so country specific I would rather choose the one with more wider view about exchange studies”. In other words her clear focus on one country is considered to be a negative point. Most of the criticisms that the student receives are related to the fact that she does not seem to be interested in either academic or professional motivations: (43) “Not good, we emphasise academic reasons”, (44) “he/she has not considered the exchange from the viewpoint of his/her professional career”. As said earlier only one participant would have sent the student abroad. She justifies her choice by writing:

(45) “In his/her application is most underlined the mixture and interaction between cultures and people. (...) This exchange students would at his/her best be a tiny Finnish ambassador of sorts, who would not only get to know and adopt the host culture, but also teach the hosts about the Finnish culture”.

In sum what the respondents seem to look for in this candidate is someone who is interested in developing their academic and professional skills rather than in inter/cultural imaginaries. However the link between mobility and increased chances of getting a good job has not been convincingly demonstrated until now (see 3.1.3.). Institutions keep repeating that the two go hand in hand.

Let us now move on to the second student. As a reminder, this student did not mention anything about his expectations in relation to study abroad. All he explained was what he would like to learn and improve in relation to his field, information technology.

Unlike the previous students the respondents are divided. Half of them would definitely send this student abroad for the following reasons:

(46) “Good to see the student hasn’t made a choice of his/her study abroad destination.”

(47) “The student links his motivations to his professional needs.”

These arguments seem to corroborate the ‘criteria’ put forward for the previous student. We could actually qualify this to be a counter-imaginary, a ‘modern’ wish for the students to develop quantifiable skills rather than ‘meaningless’ elements such as human relations and/or intercultural competencies.

Interestingly one participant who seems to like the candidate falls into the trap of imaginaries, not in relation to what is to be learnt during the stay abroad but in relation to the type of candidate. The imaginaries relate to the intersection of gender, age and profession:

(48) “The applicant is more likely male than female. Odd that she/he does not imply to his/her international online connections and experiences or language skills gained in his/her (very likely) hobby of computer game playing! In other words, there is relevant information missing in this application. Obviously an older student... I would choose this student. She/he would be among much younger Erasmus students which could be a challenge. Or not! She/he wants to learn something new and fresh. She/he would be (maybe more than the other two) interested in the actual STUDIES - assuming that "evolve to a next level" refers to programming and design”.

The respondents who do not wish to send this student abroad resort to far more imaginaries related to the imagined benefits of study abroad, which corroborate the students’ imaginaries identified in 3.1. Some criticize the fact that the student does not seem to be interested in international affairs:

(49) “shows little foresight to what international experience might mean to them, possibly ill prepared”

(50) “It seems that student 2 is just looking for something new, and has not really thought about what exploring new cultures means and what he/she would gain from the experience.”

(51) “I would not choose this student, because he has no ideas about the internationalization and the benefits of that. He is concentrated only to IT in his application. On the other hand I was thinking, if he would benefit the most of the exchange, to get him understand different cultures and so on. But few words about the idea of going abroad would have made all the difference.”

What one finds in these assertions is contrary to the arguments that most of the respondents answered for the previous student: while they accused her of being too much interested in ‘otherness’ and language, this student is rejected for not sharing the doxa of ‘learning about other cultures’, ‘understand different cultures’, ‘gaining through learning about cultures’.

The final student seems to be the most popular student amongst the research participants. She seems to have the qualities that one would expect from a motivated mobile student to be:

(52) “She has realistic goals, with a strong orientation towards academic and working life”

(53) “She shows motivation”

(54) “S/he has a vision of what the exchange opportunity could be valuable for”.

(55) (compared to student 1) “student 3 has much more clearer career goal for future. He understood the meaning of exchange program and the letter seems more professional.”

The respondents who would not have chosen the third student condemn her for emphasizing too much the learning of language skills and/or culture:

(56) “Study abroad should not just be about language learning”,

(57) “Learning languages is not a good reason to study abroad in our field”,

(58) “Going abroad is not all about the language. If one doesn’t use English or other languages at school or work, it is of course one of the biggest points. But talking just about learning languages and getting to know cultures is something that’s mentioned in very many applications. Even though the motivation should be there, it gets monotonic”.

This last comment is interesting as it represents some sort of fatigue for language/culture as a motivation for studying abroad. In a sense it may also indicate that staff find these elements to be potentially meaningless or imaginary. The phrase “it gets monotonic” might also hint at the idea of doxa.

Conclusion

This article represents a first attempt to grasp the pre-departure expectations of students through the idea of imaginaries. Our results show that the students seem to share up to a point similar imaginaries. These imaginaries often point to unreachable and unrealistic elements such as the creation of a new identity (identity is a process not a state so it cannot be created anew, see Bauman, 2013), the learning of a new culture (national? institutional? regional? etc.). Though it is impossible to identify the origins of these ideas, one can easily draw a parallel between their discourses and what some practitioners, decision-makers and researchers have to say about these

topics. In terms of how staff perceive and evaluate the three letters that were presented to them it appears that their approach to mobility is a bit less imaginary than the students. Of course it would be unfair to judge the students based on a simple letter of motivation. Power differentials between the applicant and the 'judge' must be taken into account. While students will try to please the reader of the letter to get the opportunity to study abroad, the 'judge' is free to comment on what the students have to say. For staff it appears that professional and academic arguments seem to matter more than imaginaries that have appeared again and again in the letters. Interestingly, as we noted, one member of staff even referred to this as "monotonic". Though staff didn't refer to these elements as imaginaries or unreachable goals there could be some indications of these in the data. To be fair let us bear in mind that a minority of staff wished some of the students had said more about the 'intercultural'. As the survey was anonymous it is hard to say much about the profiles of the respondents. Based on our informal discussions with colleagues we know that both administrators and lecturers answered it. It would be interesting in another study to compare these two populations.

Training and education for mobility is often said to be essential. At least two positions can be adopted: either we let students do what they want and 'make mistakes' or we try to assist them to make their stays more 'useful'. Many institutions in Finland and elsewhere have opted for the latter and proposed courses on 'intercultural communication' to outgoing and incoming students. The quality of these courses often depend on the lecturers and there does not seem to be an agreement on what should be taught. In a recent study Dervin & Tournebise (2013) show that most lecturers in the Finnish context teach the 'intercultural' from a culturalist, solid and imaginary viewpoint. Based on our study, we feel that a pedagogy of imaginaries for study abroad students would bear its fruit. We believe that it is important for students to reflect more in depth on their goals and to deconstruct ready-made discourses on the experiences of mobility. Besides discussions around well-known imaginaries might help students not to be so disappointed if they can't reach goals they have been 'forced' to believe in. This kind of training would necessitate questioning and reflecting on the words culture, language, otherness and practising critical analysis of media, political and institutional discourses on the benefits of mobility. The idea is not to draw swift negative conclusions on the act of mobility but to help students to develop a more realistic and critical perspective on today's world and encounters.

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Appendix

Student 1

Life is about challenges both facing and winning them. I currently intern in (*name of country deleted for anonymity*) and while my stay I have made many great French friends. They have told and thought me about their culture and country, even the smallest cities. Then again, everyone I know, who has been to France, either visited or studied there, say afterwards that they abominate France, French and everything that has something to do with the country or its inhabitants

explaining it by saying how no other language except French is spoken there which, I think, is a poor reason in a that conservative way. My point in this case is to do an Erasmus exchange program in France and face all the challenges it brings as the language challenge on of them with a great interest and passion. At the same time, it would be new and challenging but also familiar and safe since I have a network of friends around the country already. To be honest, I have never been to France before so it would be an exquisitely tempting challenge indeed to discover the language and to break the stereotypes of France and French. I have also heard that French universities, a school system and studying methods in general in France are very different compared to the Finnish ones. Talking and teaching a hint of Finnish habits would be an honor within my studies in this country of baguettes and lovers.

Student 2

My name is ***, I am 27 years old. At the moment, I study Information Technology for the second year; I also work as a project manager for small or medium sized website projects. I have been playing with computers since I was a teenager, so it's like 10 years for now. I started my programming career with simple homepages, then some larger homepages and finally websites with PHP and MySQL. I am not quite sure about my future, one thing is for sure, I am somehow connected to Information technology. I like working with the websites, but I think I want to learn something new and fresh. Now that I already know something about programming, different platforms and some basic design I think it's time to evolve to a next level.

Student 3

Language skills are very important in now days in business world. Almost every Finnish company has collaboration with other companies abroad, or they have employers from other countries. That's why English has become very important in every day working. Also other language are important because is always better if you can speak customers own language, when you are trying to make new business deals or trying to maintain old customer relationships. So when I graduate from University of Applied Sciences I would be able to manage all kinds of situations in English. When you are in other country as an exchange student you have to use all the time so it would be good practise for the future. I want to study abroad because I want to improve my language skills and challenge myself to be able to study and use English in everyday life, because I think that the best way to learn languages is to speak them and use them all the time. I would like to go in central Europe, to The Netherlands, Germany or Austria. I would like to learn to speak German but The Netherlands is also very interesting choice because I haven't been there before. So I would like to get to know new culture and completely new language. Then I would get much more experiences about other cultures, not only from one country. In Germany I would be able to learn German which is important language in business world and Germany is a big industrial country. Also I might get some contacts from the country so in the future I might also get a job there or internship place.