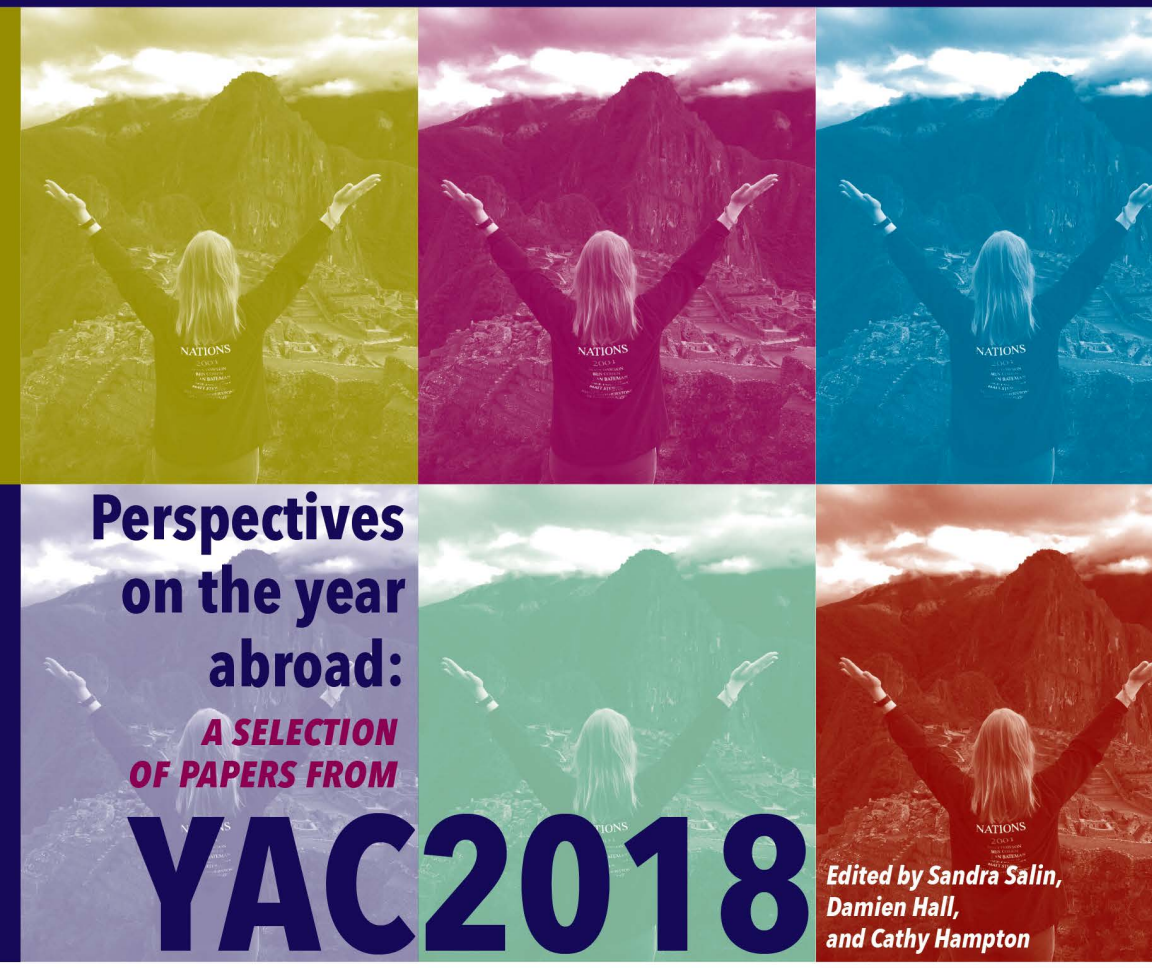

Perspectives on the year abroad:

A SELECTION OF PAPERS FROM

YAC2018

Edited by Sandra Salin, Damien Hall, and Cathy Hampton

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We would also like to thank all the authors who have contributed to this volume and the reviewers who provided feedback on chapter drafts. Finally, we are also grateful to Sylvie Thouësny, from Research-publishing.net, and her team, for their support, understanding, and patience.

Sandra Salin, Damien Hall, and Cathy Hampton

Introduction

Cathy Hampton[1], Damien Hall[2], and Sandra Salin[3]

The Year Abroad (YA) is, dare we say, a different order of experience from most years at university. It involves leaving the familiar structures in which a student has studied for (usually) two years to go and live in one or more foreign countries where a language of study is spoken. Students on a YA from a UK university can usually choose to study at a partner university, or work in an approved work placement, including an English-language assistantship. Undertaking these activities can be variously exhilarating and difficult for many students – and the range of possibilities means that the organisation of the YA presents diverse challenges and opportunities for both students and staff; and yet, despite its 'exceptional' quality, the activities and ambitions of those staff and students can be closely mapped onto current Higher Education (HE) pedagogical trends and goals, from the more practical or instrumental (internationalisation, employability, self-efficacy – Advance HE[4]; CBI[5]) to the epistemological or metacognitive (creative problem solving, cognitive disruption, and collaborative learning – Barnett, 1997, 1999, 2015; Bengtsen, 2014; Newton et al., 2019; Ryan, 2014) or even to the pastoral or affective (wellbeing, risk taking – Barnett, 2007; Henning et al., 2018).

The organisers of the Year Abroad Conference 2018 (YAC2018) therefore had several aims in mind. We wanted to initiate a meeting point (which we hoped would become an annual event) at which UK academics and professional services staff who administer the YA as part of a degree including modern

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languages could discuss common topics of interest and share good practice (thus promoting a holistic approach to YA curriculum design and delivery). We also wanted there to be a permanent record of the discussions at the conference; for 2018, this book is that record.

1. Initial notes

In UK universities, the YA is a period of residence, usually compulsory, that a student normally undertakes as part of a degree including one or more modern foreign languages. It is usually the third year of a four-year degree, though in some cases it can be the second year. In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the YA therefore lengthens the degree to four years: in those countries, most Bachelors' degrees with no modern foreign language component last three years. In Scotland, first degrees typically last four years anyway, so the YA does not lengthen them. In this introduction, for consistency, we will use the name YA for this period of residence, though its name does vary in different universities: some other names are *residence abroad*, *study abroad*, and *period abroad*.

Universities also vary in the names they give to each year of a degree. The schemas 'first, second, third, final year', 'first, intermediate, intercalating, final year', 'Level 4, 5, intercalating, 6' – using Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) terminology –, and 'Stage 1, 2, 3, 4', and no doubt others, all occur in different places. All these schemas are equivalent.

2. Contributions to this book

The chapters in this volume are organised into five topics, following the order of the conference from which they derive: *mental health*, *preparation*, *student perception*, *assessment*, and *employability.*

Most of our chapters treat the YA in EU countries, but there are also chapters on Japan and China. All papers show a diversity of approaches to their object of

study, and, with varying degrees of emphasis, these can be broadly summarised as practical/organisational, pedagogical/epistemological, and affective/person-centred.

This diversity speaks to the complexity and multivalency of the YA; in this introduction, we have thus chosen to review the contributions to this volume holistically through the lens of the student experience of the YA.

2.1. What the YA brings to students

To start on a positive note, many chapters underline the various benefits that the YA might bring to students, and consequently the possible motivations for doing one. **Crawford, Gutiérrez Almarza, and McCormack**; **Leahy**; **Day and Hampton**; **Morimoto**; **Pérez Nieto and Nebot**; **Peng and Wright**; and **Zaher** all review sets of benefits in the context of HE pedagogical scholarship touching on meta-cognition, epistemology, self-efficacy, transferable skills, global graduateness, and examine how well these benefits correspond with their students' *experience* of doing the YA. An issue much treated, and to which we will return, is that of the degree to which students are able to perceive and articulate these benefits in the context of their own learning journey across their degree. **Potter**'s research shows that students *do have the ability* to identify quite subtle personal changes and their root causes in particular YA activities undertaken, whilst **Pérez Nieto and Nebot** point out the widespread perception among students that the YA is a challenge, and often an onerous one. As we will see, many contributors examine the space between these two points and showcase their strategies for endeavouring to bring students to the point of *critical thought*, *critical action*, and *critical being* that Barnett (2015) sees as essential to good university-level learning.

Whilst making academic progress on the YA, particularly in linguistic terms, remains a big concern for students, the focus of many chapters here suggests an interest in its less quantifiable benefits. Chief among these is employability, one of the major strategic goals in HE currently (HEA, 2015), and, in terms of the attributes gained by students who have done a YA, something which

potentially sets them apart from their peers who have not. Several papers suggest that students are keenly aware of the 'employability capital' of the YA (**Day and Hampton**; **Zaher**) but require guidance in their assessment and articulation of their gains. Some papers thus describe pedagogical interventions intended to prompt awareness, whilst others examine students' own understanding of employability gains via surveys. **Archer**'s chapter considers the importance of strategic planning of interventions on employability, focusing on the opportunity that the University of Surrey's 'employability week' (an event for all first-year students, no matter what the subject of their degree) affords modern foreign language staff to situate the YA explicitly in this context from the earliest point in students' HE experience. **Zaher**'s survey of students abroad and returners at Durham University (in European and Asian placements) shows us that, once abroad, students are quite quickly able to align their YA activities with graduate soft skills identified as pedagogically desirable in current literature.

Crawford, Gutiérrez Almarza, and McCormack; **Day and Hampton**; **Pérez Nieto and Nebot;** and **Peng and Wright** explore ways to support the affective and metacognitive challenges students face in *expressing* and *critiquing* their learning gains. These discussions chime with Barnett's (1997) assertion that good HE pedagogy not only invites students to practise their subject in real-world situations, but also to be able to "articulate a rationale for what they are doing and for the discarded alternative actions" (p. 104). If one of the key benefits for the YA in both staff and students' eyes is a building of intercultural awareness (**Zaher**'s research shows that 90% cite 'intercultural skills' as a gain whilst **Morimoto**; **Franc**; **Crawford, Gutiérrez Almarza, and McCormack**; **Peng and Wright**; and **Potter** examine its importance), student engagement with cultural differences day-to-day is shown in several papers to be something of a two-edged sword: the source of significant struggle for some (**Lees**; **Franc**; **Day and Hampton**; **Pérez Nieto and Nebot**; and **Potter**) as much as it is a stimulus for others (**Potter**; **Morimoto**; **Day and Hampton**; and **Lees**).

We may perceive the YA as an incontrovertible good; do our students?

2.2. Student perceptions of the YA

Understandably, many students frame descriptions of their YA in terms of *difference* from their UK experience; several papers show that this difference tends to be conceived emotionally as either a deficit or a driver. **Lees**, in particular, shows that in general, students who perceive a given experience (or their whole YA) as negative feel that their university did not support them enough with it, whereas those who report positive experiences are also happy with the level of support they received. More YA-specific factors that students can react to positively or negatively include 'otherness' when in a foreign country (**Potter**), dealing with everyday experiences successfully (**Leahy**; **Morimoto**), and cultural differences either perceived as benefits (**Peng & Wright**) or as culture shock (**Pérez Nieto & Nebot**). Our papers show a concern to grapple with the reasons for this by interrogating students' perceptions in small-scale studies, in the context of current scholarship, revealing some very interesting tensions. **Morimoto** highlights that Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2009) 'ideal L2 self' can be a powerful motivator to learn or improve a foreign language; the students of Chinese surveyed pre-departure in **Peng and Wright**'s study reveal an enthusiastic readiness to tackle intercultural challenges. On the other hand, **Day**, the student analyst of the post-YA student data reported on by **Hampton**, expresses effectively the fact that most reflections (on the YA) revealed students' need to "'get something off their chests' in a personal and sometimes sensitive way". This paper was one of several that revealed a disjuncture perceived by some students between the presentation of the YA as 'the best year of your life' by returning students (often at peer information events) and the struggles many felt during residency (perhaps evidence of the 'ideal L2 self' acting unintentionally as a barrier to effective preparation for some outgoing students). A number of chapters in this volume identify an increasing disconnect between what staff – and enthusiastic returners – would like the YA to do for outgoing students, and what at least some students experience or fear experiencing. We would like them to focus on the opportunities; they focus on the risks. We would like them to be challenged but to enjoy themselves as well, but for some students the YA looms as a potentially-unpleasant pedagogical test. We would like the YA to be eye-opening and life-changing; some students

see it as an obligatory period 'out there' in their country of residence, which is implied to be peripheral, before a move back to the implied centre, where life can resume. **Pérez Nieto and Nebot** and **Franc** also note that, for today's students, who are used to having courses of study and other aspects of life mapped out, with some but comparatively little choice, the choices that need to be made for a YA – whether to work or study, where to live, etc – can also be a source of anxiety from the outset. **Franc** remarks that this can lead to a lack of engagement with the *preparation* process; from there, it is a common experience from which difficulties snowball.

2.3. Preparation for the YA and support during it

Interrogations of institutional and departmental systems and processes are, in many of our papers, the steps that follow the careful analysis of the student voice in surveys. **Lees** and **Potter**'s chapters address the issue of wellbeing head on: **Lees** argues (from Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012) that the relationship between the YA and wellbeing should be presented to students as a 'see-saw' which *requires* both challenges and the conscious acquisition of resources to overcome them, in order to have a better chance of positive results. Under this framework, emphasis should be placed on students' responsibility for their own wellbeing, as well as on their institution's responsibility. In this vein, **Potter**'s chapter (reviewing a survey of students' emotional responses to the YA pre- and post-residency) shows some encouraging evidence that the effect of overcoming linguistic and cultural challenges can produce a YA-related sense of wellbeing not attainable in a first-language context. **Leahy**; **Potter**; and **Morimoto** highlight that the successful navigation of everyday differences during the YA, often reported as causes for concern pre-departure, correspondingly improves perceptions of it.

Potter makes a proposal: we should ask whether, in order to facilitate positive wellbeing, we should better emphasise "the gains to be had from negative experiences" at the pre-departure stage. This proposal for evidence-based, scholarship led, structured interventions cuts across our papers as a response to the wellbeing conundrum (see especially **Crawford, Gutiérrez Almarza,**

& McCormack and **Archer**). **Archer**'s term 'intentional preparation' is a helpful one here: for students, good preparation is not just about being given information to digest, it is about formulating an engaged metacognitive response to it. To give an example, in her French language classes, **Franc** describes pushing pre-departure students actively to interrogate the different economic and philosophical models operating in the French and British HE systems, in order to give them 'an ethnographer's detachment' rather than the feeling of being a victim when they encounter different behaviours in France.

The aim to move students from factual and procedural knowledge to metacognitive knowledge (Armstrong, n.d.) in relation to the YA is also seen in the advocacy of carefully-scaffolded reflection and questionnaire activities in the work of all contributors to this volume. Student engagement with academic questions in real-world contexts, and student self-efficacy are now viewed as hallmarks of good graduate learning. Whilst the YA has long provided the platform for the active, embedded learning that this demands, our papers suggest that, as a community of practitioners, we are aware of the need to move from transmitting YA processes and facts to our students to cultivating a YA epistemology that is prepared for and built on at appropriate stages within modern language degrees, and that features as one of the signature pedagogies for our discipline.

3. Conclusion

On that hopeful note, we can conclude our summary of the issues raised in this volume. The way they have been analysed here is not intended to be final, of course; this introduction is simply meant as a presentation of what is covered here, and a suggestion as to how these ideas can apply in various spheres for people who are responsible for administering the YA. The odd reflection from the editors' experience is offered too, in the hope that they are also useful. Most of all, we hope that this entire book is a fruitful addition to the literature on the YA, and we look forward to future useful volumes in the same series, and future useful YA conferences.

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Section 1.

Mental health

1 An examination of student experiences of wellbeing during the year abroad

David Lees[1]

Abstract

This chapter examines student experiences of wellbeing during the Year Abroad (YA). Drawing on the responses to a student questionnaire by a cohort of language students at Warwick, this piece identifies the challenges to student wellbeing while abroad. Defining wellbeing as a 'see-saw' which requires a balance of challenge and resource to remain positive, the chapter argues for a framework for supporting students with wellbeing which places equal emphasis on the responsibilities of the student and of the home institution. It also argues that such a framework enables students to rise to the most common – frequently everyday – challenges to their wellbeing abroad.

Keywords: wellbeing, year abroad, mental health, preparation.

1. Introduction

Wellbeing is an increasingly significant concern across the UK Higher Education sector (Hall, 2018). Scant academic attention has been paid to date to the importance of student wellbeing during periods of study and work abroad as part of degree level courses. Yet that is not to suggest that students do not experience challenges to their wellbeing when on a YA placement. This chapter uses the responses to an online questionnaire completed by students from across the School of Modern Languages and Cultures (SMLC) at Warwick

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in the 2017-2018 academic year in order to examine experiences of wellbeing amongst students abroad. It draws on this qualitative data to extrapolate recommendations for the sector as a whole when supporting students with their wellbeing while abroad. The chapter argues that institutions can better support students through adopting a framework which places a joint emphasis on the responsibilities of both the institution and the student to act as resources for student wellbeing.

2. Examining wellbeing experiences abroad

While existing studies of student experiences of the YA have correctly focused on the positively transformative experiences of study abroad (Coleman, 2015; Hampton, 2015, 2016), comparatively little attention has been paid to the potentially negative impact of such experiences on students' overall wellbeing and how students have sought to overcome such difficulties. While this is implicit in Hampton's (2015) work around the necessary risk-taking of a YA and is mentioned briefly in Richart's (2015) work, there are no in-depth studies of students' management of their wellbeing while abroad, nor of the triggers for any negative experiences of wellbeing, nor indeed of students' perceptions of appropriate support for wellbeing abroad.

This chapter complements Potter (2020, this volume) in offering such an examination. It defines wellbeing as the state of being of an individual with particular reference to their physical and mental health; as Dodge, Daly, Huyton, and Sanders (2012) has argued, wellbeing is not a construct but a state. In terms of the YA, Dodge et al.'s (2012, p. 230) argument that positive wellbeing requires an even balance between challenge and resource, as with a 'see-saw', is of particular use. This study seeks to answer a number of key questions.

- What are the major challenges to students' wellbeing during a YA?
- According to students, what is the responsibility of their home and host institutions when it comes to support on the YA?

- What emphasis do students place on their own responsibility for supporting their wellbeing while abroad? To what extent do students view themselves as a vital resource for balancing the challenge of the YA?

3. Methodology

In order to respond to these questions, the chapter analyses the results of the compulsory online questionnaire completed after the YA by 127 students based in the SMLC at Warwick in the 2017-2018 academic year. The respondents to the questionnaire came from a range of degree combinations and YA activities, including teaching English with the British Council, undertaking a work placement, or studying at a partner institution.

While it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this survey – it did not extend to students based in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics departments, did not extend beyond Warwick students, and did not focus exclusively on wellbeing – the sample size was large enough to provide a variety of YA experiences across Europe (Germany; Austria; France; Italy; Spain; Russia), the Caribbean (Martinique), and Latin America (Colombia; Puerto Rico; Chile). The questionnaire was also configured towards general experiences of the YA, with no explicit wellbeing questions. This chapter analyses responses to a subset of questions for different YA activities, along with responses to two questions asking students to reflect on the support they received from the home institution (Warwick) and on what they might have done to improve their YA experience.

4. Analysis of questionnaire results

A number of clear trends are discernible in students' responses to these questions. First, the most common issues faced by students in the course of their specific YA activity related to everyday issues, especially bureaucracy, administration, and

local support. Students who experienced these issues frequently noted that they had a detrimental impact on the way they viewed their overall YA experience. Second, students' overall experiences of their YA activities coloured their responses to the questions which asked them to reflect on the support from their home institution and on how they might have improved their YA experience. The more negative student experiences were, the more likely it was that the student would criticise their home institution and would fail to reflect on their own capacity to act as a resource for their wellbeing. Only a small number of students had a negative YA experience and did not argue for greater support from their home institution, and by the same token, only a small number of students had a positive experience and criticised the support from Warwick. This included criticism of the amount of contact between students and YA coordinators (and other staff, including personal tutors – students are expected to check in with their personal tutor every academic term) and criticism of the series of pre-departure workshops conducted around general wellbeing preparation and country-specific information. While some students with negative experiences – especially those on work placements and on the British Council assistantship programme, who tend to self-select a non-university setting – demonstrated a capacity to rise to the challenges of their individual YA experiences and reflect critically on their own contributions to their wellbeing, thereby affirming Coleman's (2015, p. 39) argument around the non-linguistic benefits of the YA, other students placed much greater emphasis on the need for more support from the home institution. In short, few students with negative experiences of their YA activity were willing to subsequently critique their own potential for acting, in Dodge et al.'s (2012) terms, as a 'resource' to counteract the 'challenge' of the YA.

4.1. Finding 1. The challenges of the YA for student wellbeing relate predominantly to everyday interactions

Students highlighted everyday concerns as the most significant in having a negative impact on their experiences of their specific YA activity. In the case of university placements, which accounted for 58% of the sample, and where there were five questions that invited reflections on everyday interactions at the host institution, the most frequent issues raised related to concerns around

accommodation, module choice, organisation of the host institution, and workload. This trend applied to a majority of these students (61%) and to every international context. Thus, a student in Italy who noted that "the organisation of the University abroad was questionable. At times I felt lost and like there were no teachers abroad that I could rely on", had much in common with the student in France who argued that "[the worst thing about the study placement] was having to deal with all the university administration, accommodation and course issues with very little support from the host institution". Students in Germany and Spain reflected these concerns. Indeed, perceived lack of organisation and 'different ways of doing things' provoked the most concern across all students undertaking study placements: as one student in France argued "the universities I encountered were nowhere near as well-organised as [my home institution], which led to serious disruptions to my YA".

In the case of work placements and British Council assistants (42% of the cohort), negative responses again arose (for 37% of these students) when students had encountered difficulties with bureaucracy or with their everyday working conditions. One student on a work placement in France, for example, suggested that the lack of support from their line manager and the perceived poor organisation of the business placed them under 'great pressure', while another student in Spain recorded virtually the same concerns around insufficient support and too much personal responsibility which had a negative impact on their YA experience. For these students, the challenges of their placements were not balanced by suitable resource from their host institutions; the very same students also argued that their home institution should have done more to support them during their placement.

However, it is interesting to note that the majority of students who undertook a work placement *did* recommend their placement for subsequent students, precisely because of the level of support available. Although a minority reported concerns around organisation and support which had a detrimental impact on their perception of their YA experience, work placement students frequently commented on the ways in which they had either risen to the differences in workplace etiquette or on the availability of mentoring and support in their work

placement. This suggests either that work placements and schools are better-equipped to support students than overseas universities, or that students who decide on work placements or the assistantship programme are more likely to be more self-starting and resilient as they have deliberately chosen to enter the world of work.

4.2. Finding 2. Students' perceptions of required support from their home institutions depend on their experiences of their YA activity; the more negative this experience, the more critical students become of their home institution

Students from all YA activities were much more likely to criticise their home institution if they encountered negative experiences. Criticisms ranged from a need for greater preparation before departure, through to more regular contact while abroad. Some students – who had negative experiences of their YA activity – explicitly mentioned wellbeing in these free-text comments. One British Council assistant in France argued that Warwick should have been more explicit about the kinds of support available for mental health issues, while another in Spain concurred that there "should have been more information about counselling services". Other criticisms related to specific issues such as bank accounts and accommodation. One student on a study placement in Italy reflected the views of other students, with similarly negative experiences of their YA activity: "I think Warwick should have provided much more support about how to find accommodation abroad".

4.3. Finding 3. Students place greater emphasis on their own responsibilities for supporting themselves with their wellbeing when they have a positive experience of their YA activity; students with a negative experience of their YA are less likely to view themselves as a resource to help with wellbeing

By contrast, students with positive YA experiences were much more likely to place the emphasis on their own responsibilities for rising to the challenge of

the YA. As one British Council assistant in France put it: "Warwick was nothing but helpful […] it was my own fault for being disorganised that I didn't find accommodation in time". Another student on a work placement in Germany, with a positive experience of their YA activity concluded both that they "felt completely supported by Warwick during my time abroad" and then that they could have improved their own experience by being "more confident at the beginning of the year to speak German". Indeed, this was a common trope for students with positive experiences – an emphasis on seeking out social networking opportunities sooner, ahead of any perceived responsibility on the part of the home institution. For these students, the challenge of the YA was suitably balanced by self-reflection and a sense of individual responsibility.

However, students with a more negative experience placed less emphasis on their own responsibilities: the British Council assistant in France who expressed a wish for more support with wellbeing reflected that they could have improved their experience more through "leaving [their] placement earlier" rather than through proactively taking steps to improve their experience *in situ*. Study placement students with negative experiences, who were also critical of their home institution, likewise recorded that they ought to have changed or withdrawn from their placement to improve their experience – only normally possible in extreme cases of serious wellbeing difficulties. Such students placed little emphasis on how they might have negotiated the challenge of the YA through their own initiatives.

5. Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated that the most common concerns faced by students relate to everyday, largely bureaucratic issues. When students face issues with bureaucracy, they are more likely to criticise the support they receive from their home institution and are less likely to critique their own responsibilities for dealing with these concerns. In Dodge et al.'s (2012) model, when bureaucratic challenges become too great, students require more resources to balance these.

Although there are some aspects of the YA that are beyond the control of UK universities, there are meaningful steps that can be taken by institutions in preparing their students for the YA. First, more emphasis needs to be placed on students' own responsibilities to act as a resource for their own wellbeing. This might come in the form of reflective pre-departure activities designed to ascertain students' current level of concern and how they might overcome these concerns, or through ongoing reflective dialogues with the home institution. One of the limitations of this study is the lack of any explicit question asking students about any pre-existing condition(s) which might impact on their wellbeing; further study is required in order to examine whether this has a direct bearing on how students perceive the support from their home institution and indeed reflect on their own responsibilities. Any pre-departure preparation should, ideally, consider the role of both the student and the institution in supporting students with pre-existing conditions. Second, UK institutions should develop a dialogue around reasonable expectations for bureaucracy and administration, drawing on models of best practice from work placements and the framework of support from the British Council. If we view the YA as a transformative experience about more than simply language learning (Coleman, 2015, p. 39), then to some extent students need to experience new ways of working and new systems. A continual dialogue around the importance of experiencing such new systems will help to enable a balance between the responsibility of students and of institutions, maintaining positive wellbeing.

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2 On the year abroad experience and positive wellbeing

Hilary Potter[1]

Abstract

This chapter examines the impact of the Year Abroad (YA) on mental health and wellbeing, arguing that whilst we tend to be systemically and culturally inclined to focus on and mitigate negative impact, we overlook the benefits. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from students surveyed on placement in Germany and Austria, and on mental health research, this chapter highlights the positive impact of the YA, even where students are faced with challenging situations. It suggests a correlation between a range of factors including linguistic competence and otherness, facilitating a sense of wellbeing not attainable in a first language setting. These findings are indicative, suggesting that further, in-depth longitudinal research is warranted.

Keywords: mental health, hedonice/udaimonic wellbeing, linguistic competence.

1. Introduction

The project originates from conversations with my students. In these conversations a number of YA-related factors promoting positive wellbeing became apparent, including increased student confidence in dealing with everyday life in another country. This pattern was reflected widely, and significantly by students who, prior to departure, had experienced mental health issues. Yet, they

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seemed to thrive on their YA, noting how even simple tasks they had previously found challenging were possible during their time abroad. These observations raised a number of questions which warranted further exploration, most notably whether this positive impact correlates with linguistic competence, suggesting that in speaking another language we have a second self and that this is a contributing factor in positive wellbeing. Other studies have indicated academic (Cardwell, 2019) and psychological (Costa et al., 2014) benefits; the latter work suggests that when working in another language we can be less inhibited, more analytical, and have greater reasoning ability than in our native language. This project asks whether the YA can similarly reinforce positive mental health, in the way that second language usage helps in analytical processing.

Existing academic research into the YA and its positive impact has focused on its lifelong, transformative function (Coleman, 2015; Hampton, 2015, 2016). However, research on the YA and positive wellbeing is lacking. Moreover, background research for this chapter yielded a curious paradox. Whilst at open days and at pre-departure stages the YA is discussed in positive terms, the YA experience simultaneously appears to be embedded in a culture of negativity, including raising awareness of suicide (The University of Sheffield, 2017). Such an emphasis is understandable, not least because higher education institutions have ethical and legal responsibilities for their students under duty of care, but this finding suggests that within universities and associated organisations, we may be inclined, culturally and systemically, to focus on the negative and fail to recognise the positive impact, thus overlooking lessons to be learned, and ones which may enhance not just the way we prepare students for this experience, but also our understanding of wellbeing (Colclough, 2016; Student Minds, 2017).

2. Methodology

The project is based on findings from a survey designed to assess the impact of the YA. It should be noted that the data set is based on one cohort (n=33), and as such the findings are indicative only. The scope of the survey was to assess the subject with a view to justifying further research.

Central to this project is an understanding of mental health as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2001), namely "a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (p. 1, quoted in WHO, 2004, p. 12), and an understanding of wellbeing in terms of being happy, comfortable, healthy, having a sense of purpose, and feeling in control (Michaelson, Mahony, & Schifferes, 2012). In order to measure this in relation to the YA, data was generated through a survey, which was underpinned by Westerhof and Keyes's (2010) study. It utilises the two-continua model of mental health, namely hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. Hedonic focuses on feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and interest in life, and is complemented by eudaimonic, which is centred on wellbeing in terms of individual strivings, optimal functioning, and individual fulfilment. Concentrating on both types of wellbeing allows for a well-rounded insight into our subject.

This survey posed eight questions (see supplementary materials). Anonymity was maintained as far as possible, in an attempt to minimise 'social desirability bias', namely answering as respondents feel they should rather than what they feel (Michaelson et al., 2012); however, students were identifiable in some responses. There were seven questions on specific aspects of the YA, which asked about:

- wellbeing prior to departure;
- placement type;
- linguistic competence;
- otherness;
- dealing with everyday challenges;
- overcoming negative experiences; and
- socio-political changes in the host country.

These questions were scaled from positive to negative; Question 8 provided the opportunity for free-text comments, thereby providing greater contextual detail to the previous answers.

3. Findings

Following their YA, the majority of respondents judged their wellbeing as slightly (36.4%) or much better than before (45.5%), with negative and no perceived impact each at 9.1%. This suggests that, overall, the YA has a positive impact on wellbeing, which contrasts with the culture of negativity surrounding the YA and mental health which is perpetuated by universities and associated organisations. Yet, we still have no explanation as to the causes. Let us examine the factors in turn.

3.1. Placement

Placement type (work placement, study abroad, or teaching English abroad) proved inconclusive, indicating that it is not the overriding factor in regard to wellbeing in spite of the placement's centrality to the student experience. Where negative indication did occur, free-text comments suggested the issue lay with colleagues rather than the placement type itself.

3.2. Linguistic competence

On the question of linguistic competence and wellbeing, no downturn was indicated. 18% indicated this was a neutral factor. Given that the desire to improve is a common aim at the pre-departure stage, this was an interesting and unanticipated finding, one which may cause us to question the correlation between self-fulfilment and eudaimonic wellbeing. However, the results may also indicate that the respondents were simply not as aware of the influence of linguistic competence on wellbeing as the question had assumed.

The majority of respondents noted that increased linguistic competence had a positive impact on their wellbeing to a reasonable (46%) or great extent (36%). This finding suggests that wellbeing and positive mental health correlate with striving and self-fulfilment. Yet, it also indicates that wellbeing is linked to communicative function, and that using another language impacts positively on wellbeing. It may also provide an explanation for why students who included

themselves in the category of slightly negative mental health pre-departure, seemed to improve on their YA. Whether consciously or not, that ability to communicate in another language, and possibly because it is a non-native language, engenders a sense of wellbeing. It is not, however, the sole defining factor.

3.3. Otherness

The responses to the question of otherness generated the largest spread of results. Nine percent recorded a considerably negative impact, with 18% a slightly negative one; 28% listed it as a neutral factor, whilst 18% opted for a reasonably positive impact, and a further 27% arguing it has a considerably positive impact. Even where one respondent indicated otherness had a considerably negative impact, they also noted that their sense of wellbeing following the YA was much better; conversely, where one respondent noted a slight downturn in wellbeing after the YA, they nevertheless indicated that otherness had had a reasonably positive impact. In part these findings need to be read against the socio-political trends in Germany and Austria at the time of the survey, namely the increase in racism and intolerance, most notably in Bavaria and in Saxony (see also responses to question seven). Nevertheless, whilst latent racism was a factor for some, this did not preclude them from having a positive overall YA.

Other factors cited in relation to this question appeared to be living costs in particular areas. Hence it is not necessarily otherness that is problematic in such instances; rather, if living costs are prohibitive, integration becomes more difficult, making otherness appear problematic when the issue is actually primarily financial. In addition, we may further speculate that the fact that 27% of respondents listed otherness as a neutral factor reflects their perceived level of integration into society, so that they did not have an acute sense of otherness.

The majority of respondents indicated that otherness impacted them positively, albeit to differing extents. This finding has parallels with Coleman's (2015)

study. Explanations provided via free-text comments indicated that otherness was liberating, allowing them to discover another self. This suggests that, in connection with linguistic competence, speaking another language provides a proxy, another version of you, one who is less inhibited, and thus 'otherness' in this sense feeds into positive wellbeing.

These responses tally with Costa et al.'s (2014) findings on the psychology of other language usage in the workplace, in which he argues that the greater emotional distance another language affords enables us to be less sensitive, whilst also more critical and analytical. The correlation between Costa et al.'s (2014) findings and those of this survey raises the possibility that the YA may have a similar effect in promoting positive mental health and a sense of wellbeing. In our second self, it appears, we may feel more detached from the anxieties that hold us back, enabling a more self-confident version of ourselves to emerge. If so, this suggests that further study into the impact of the YA on wellbeing is needed.

Place is a further factor for consideration, both distance from the UK and placement location. In the first instance, a sense of positive wellbeing may be linked to the fact that the respondents were not as fully exposed to the UK's Brexit-related political upheaval; the cohort who participated in this study were assured of their rights during the YA. Other possible considerations include distance from the pressures, particularly financial, of the UK's neoliberal university system.

3.4. Everyday challenges

Prior to departure, students indicated that the prospect of everyday challenges such as opening a bank account and dealing with bureaucracy were a cause of concern. Yet, the survey findings show this initial concern did not correlate with their actual experiences. If we break down the statistics, we see that 18% listed everyday challenges as negatively impacting on wellbeing. Conversely, those who opted for a neutral answer (27%) found the reality of dealing with everyday challenges was not nearly as difficult as they had anticipated. The majority

(55%) rated everyday challenges as having a positive impact. Anecdotal evidence suggested it was everyday activities that respondents found most challenging, yet subsequently felt dealing with them was truly rewarding, thus for the majority, dealing with matters out of their comfort zone yielded positive benefits for wellbeing in the eudaimonic sense.

3.5. Overcoming negative experiences

This question focused on the longer-term, rather than the immediate, impact of negative experiences. Since this varies by individual perception, the term was deliberately ambiguous so as to reflect the range of experiences that the respondents may define as negative. The results confounded expectations with 27% opting for either a neutral or a considerably positive impact, with the remaining 46% opting for reasonably positive. The results may be indicative, in part, of the pre-departure preparation and the repeated emphasis on the fact that the YA may not be an exclusively positive experience, which meant that realistic expectations were set. However, we can speculate that overcoming negative experiences in a second language and in another culture provides a means of realising one's potential in line with eudaimonic wellbeing. Although improving wellbeing may not be a stated YA objective, it does seem that it is an unintended but welcome consequence. Thus, we should ask whether, in order to facilitate positive wellbeing, we should emphasise at the pre-departure stage the gains to be had from negative experiences. This would encourage the idea that negative experiences should not be attached to failure or shame, but rather should be embraced, allowing individuals to recognise their own strengths.

3.6. Socio-political changes

On the question of the impact of socio-political change, the vast majority of respondents rated this as a neutral factor, with only 10% rating it as having a slightly negative impact. For the latter group, we note that this did not preclude an overall improvement in wellbeing following the YA. At the same time, respondents demonstrated an ability to rationalise these negative experiences, and turn them into issues to examine, which had a positive impact on intellectual

development. This serves as a reminder that, of their own accord, students can find coping strategies, and negative experiences will not automatically negatively affect them in the longer term.

3.7. Free-text comments

This question was optional. In addition to the points raised elsewhere in this chapter, respondents noted a number of other factors impacting on wellbeing, including relationships, a sense of community, a healthier lifestyle, cultural difference, more respectful people, and better job opportunities with better conditions and pay. One respondent described the YA as the best experience they had ever been given, noting increased language and self-confidence as well as independence, indicating a correlation firstly between perception of opportunity and what is made of it, and secondly between wellbeing and independence. Lastly, respondents noted feeling properly European, suggesting a link between wellbeing and identity. How this will develop in the future, in the context of Brexit, remains to be seen.

4. Conclusion

This examination of the YA and wellbeing has suggested a correlation between linguistic competence, identity, otherness, and challenging experiences, indicating that there may in fact be a psychological benefit to the YA. It further suggests that the issues we may consider potentially problematic do not necessarily prove to be so, and that a positive sense of wellbeing is gained and maintained through self-realisation. As a single case-study, the findings here can only be indicative, but they show the need for a larger-scale, longitudinal study across multiple languages and countries.

5. Supplementary materials

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Section 2.

Preparation

3 Preparation for the year abroad in the second-year language module at the University of Manchester

Catherine Franc[1]

Abstract

Every year, around 120 students of French at the University of Manchester (UoM) prepare to go on their compulsory Year Abroad (YA). They are free to choose between different options: studying in France and the French-speaking world, working in diverse sectors throughout the French-speaking world, or becoming a language assistant. This wealth of choice can make pre-departure decisions difficult. Furthermore, once students are abroad, there seems to be a gap between their expectations and the reality of living abroad. This can result in anxiety and a lack of engagement with the target culture and language. This chapter presents the ways in which the Department of French Studies at UoM is helping students prepare for the YA by including specific activities and topics in its language module curriculum. It first examines the issues students encounter before and during their YA, then the solutions that have been implemented, and finally the impact of this programme.

Keywords: year abroad preparation, curriculum, intercultural competences, self-efficacy, employability, French studies.

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1. Introduction

There are around 500 students currently taking a degree in French at the UoM. This means that every year, around 120 students prepare to go on their compulsory YA. The UoM offers over 30 degree programmes with a major or minor French component, a majority of which are joint honours. Students have either obtained an A Level or equivalent in French or, since 2014, have followed an *ab initio* pathway. All reach B2 (CEFR, 2018) level before they go on this compulsory YA.

Students are free to choose between different options. They can study with one of 14 partner institutions in Belgium, Canada, France, or Switzerland. Approximately half of them choose to study, around 40% choose work placements in French-speaking countries around the world, and around 10% opt for an assistantship.

This wealth of choice can make pre-departure decisions difficult. Furthermore, once students are abroad, there seems to be a gap between their expectations and the reality of living abroad (Robson, 2015). This can result in isolation, anxiety, and a lack of engagement with the target culture and language (Heitlinger, 2015). This chapter presents one of the ways the Department of French studies at UoM has devised to help students prepare for this very special year, including preparation in the language module curriculum.

2. Presentation of the project

Students encounter a variety of issues before departure. Firstly, some students find it difficult to make choices, with the following questions coming up repeatedly in preparation meetings or individual consultations with the Residence Abroad (RA) tutors: where will I go? What will I do? Which course or work experience will benefit my French language, develop my knowledge of French society, give me useful professional experience and look good on my CV? Perhaps most importantly: will I enjoy myself? The pressure of preparing

for what students feel should be 'the best year of their lives' as well as a useful part of their degree, can be enormous. As a result, many feel anxious that they may make the wrong choice.

Fear of the unknown adds another level of anxiety for many. They worry about the differences they are going to encounter and think they may not cope. Dealing with some of these differences, such as experiencing difficulties understanding the French system (university registration, teaching style, life/work balance) can become a real issue during the YA and can lead to culture shock, which in turn can create social isolation for students. This may consequently mean that some students come back with erroneous information about the countries they lived in. They still have misunderstandings and even heightened prejudices towards the target culture (Coleman, 1998). They also say that they feel they have learned little.

For all these reasons, UoM French Studies language team[2] started by investigating the RA preparation UoM was already offering. Copious documentation from the International Programmes Office and the RA team (UoM, 2019a, 2019b) is available online via the My Placement platform, on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and on paper. Information meetings detailing the possible choices and requirements are organised in Semester 1 of the second year by the RA team, RA tutors and careers office (UoM, 2019c). In addition, the same teams run information meetings in Semester 2 to discuss the target culture, provide practical advice (safety, medical provision) and the required Erasmus documentation. Additional information is also available through peer advice, and via testimonies written by students on their experiences and posted on the VLE. All this is very useful but perhaps not enough: anxiety among students is a rising phenomenon nationally (Weale, 2019) and some find it very challenging to even think about going abroad (Ashenden, 2014).

2. Gaëlle Flower, Catherine Franc, John Hensher, Nathalie Lacroute, Clarisse Lejeune, Annie Morton, Olivier Perez, Johana Porcu-Adams, and Anne Simonin.

The solution we devised was to include YA preparation in the core language module. All our students take this 20-credit module (two semesters; two-hour writing seminar, one-hour oral seminar) as part of their degree in French. Moreover, it is the only French module some students have to take for the French part of their degree, in particular those on joint honours. To complement the sources of information mentioned above, the second-year core language module was expanded to include further help with decisions on placement type and destination; with practical skills (CV writing and interview techniques); and with more information on French culture and society in domains they are likely to encounter. Staff and senior peers also gave explicit encouragement to students preparing for departure, to boost their imaginal experience on the model of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) so that they felt they 'could do it'. We hoped that this language course would prepare students to be able to function in the 'outer circle' of Coleman's (2015) concentric circle model (i.e. not only with other native English speakers or foreign Erasmus students, but also with locals). Coleman's (2015) research indicates that students who come out of their close circle develop their language skills further and progress linguistically, culturally, and personally, leading to feelings of fulfilment.

A significant factor in the design of this module was that it had to be relevant to all students, regardless of their degree pathway and their plans for their third year. Despite the fact that this course is taken by all students studying French, not all go abroad. Since 2015, minor students join this course for their final year of French. They do not take a full YA but have to complete an eight-week RA period. Moreover, rising mental health issues are resulting in increasing excusals among students taking French as the major part of their degree. Therefore, preparation for the YA is intended to double up as a preparation for the world of work, as employability is very high on the UoM (2011) agenda .

The team also needed a certain variety in the themes chosen and tasks undertaken: looking uniquely at the YA can become boring. Other cultural and historical content needs to be studied in this course in order to provide key cultural knowledge, especially for the students whose programme requires that they take solely this 20-credit course in French. How much content should be included in

a language course, and how to include it, is an ongoing debate as each tends to be taught separately in higher education (Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991; Risager, 2007). However, one cannot teach language in a vacuum and content has to be used as a carrier for language activities. The prevalent issue was how to combine meaningful work with the four language skills and still have a solid content programme that would fit into three hours per week. The team also had to create adequate assessment at B2+ level in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2018).

In Semester 1, the aim was to develop skills in applying for work and/or study placements. In writing classes, students examine job or university course offers, CVs, and cover letter techniques; in oral classes, they prepare an oral examination in the form of a job or university entry interview based on their personal plans. This latter assessment was inspired by the work of Rachel Bower at Sheffield Hallam University who kindly shared her idea. The task obliges students to think of what they wish to do early enough to allow time to research companies or universities. Students are prepared with mock sessions every three weeks, during which they have to perform role-plays based on specific interview scenarios (work placements, English Language Assistantship, or study placements). These activities allow for the study of grammar and targeted lexical points, translation into French, and pronunciation issues.

To be able to give a context to these employment-based activities as well as a working knowledge of the world students will encounter on their YA, the same themes are studied in both the written and oral seminars. These are: the world of work (the 35-hour law; the Sunday work controversy); studying in French higher education (grants and fees; French education as a public service; lack of entry selection; 'redoublement'). Students are also invited to reflect on teaching and learning by discussing the roles of a language assistant and a teacher (what makes a good teacher; staff-student relationship in a hierarchical system).

These 'specialised' topics are scheduled from September to November of the second year, to help students decide what they want to do in their third year and prepare for real applications. The programme then concentrates on French

regional cultures and policies, especially regarding minority languages. This again helps students focus on where they would like to go on their YA.

The first semester ends with discussing accommodation alternatives, especially house sharing, in the hope that this will help students make an informed choice and encourage them to live with French native speakers the following year.

The second semester is slightly less YA-focused, but still contains useful topics such as the French language in France and around the world, looking at the case of Quebec and discovering African and Caribbean literature through literary extracts, press articles for reading comprehension, and free and argumentative writing activities. The aim is also to make all classes relevant to students' future experiences. For instance, when looking at the theme of sustainable development, examples from French cities where students may go are used. Volunteering is the last theme discussed, in order to highlight the importance of participation in the social environment of the host country, as a way to enter Coleman's (2015) outer circle. The terminology for these topics is also used in tailor-made grammar exercises.

3. Discussion of the outcomes

The success of a programme such as this is difficult to measure. Has the team helped students prepare for their YA? What is a successful YA (linguistic improvement; personal development; employment experience)? When do students realise the benefits they have gained? This can happen years later. However, various metrics are available. The first possible measure of success is before students go abroad, with the yearly course questionnaire. The questions are the same for all modules at UoM; the relevant one here is: 'I have acquired intellectual and practical skills which will be useful in further study or employment'. In the first year of the programme (2014-2015), 77% agreed; in 2015-16 100% agreed; in 2016-17 96.88% agreed; and in 2017-18 71.43% agreed. This last result could be due to the teaching staff strikes that took place that year, combined with a response rate from students that was lower than the usual 40%.

Students' comments also suggest positive results:

> "I appreciated that the work we covered this year was tailored to the YA next year which made it easier to relate to the work thus more enjoyable";
>
> "the first semester revolving around CVs, covering [sic] letters, email exchanges, etc. was a huge help, along with the January interview exam".

Moreover, the oral exams during which students have a personalised job interview are enjoyed both by students and staff. Students like talking about their own plans and skills, prepare well, and obtain high grades.

Semi-guided interviews were also conducted over four years (2014-2018) with more than 200 students before, during, and after their YA. They generally thought that the course had helped them decide which activity to undertake for their YA and to prepare for it. The CV, cover letter, and interview were particularly appreciated and some students mentioned that they felt well-prepared for the telephone or Skype interview they had with potential employers. Students also said they had become more aware of their surroundings once abroad, for example understanding the rather hierarchical lecturer-student relationship in French universities. They therefore felt that they had developed intercultural competencies easily, as they understood that other cultures work differently.

Preparation helped students adjust their expectations and generally be more content; it resulted in them being able to manage culture shock (Winkelman, 1994), feel less frustration, and go beyond prejudice. For instance, instead of getting frustrated with their lecturers for being unapproachable and hence putting themselves in the position of victim, understanding power relations in France (Hofstede, 1984, 2001), especially in education, helped give students an ethnographer's detachment. Understanding the principles and philosophies behind the facts and habits they encounter helps students become not only

knowledgeable (in view of their final year) but also more inter-culturally aware and inclined to think critically and thus become engaged citizens in an ever-changing world (Hampton, 2016).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the second-year language module provides a common framework for all students. It also offers a useful employability agenda, provides what Bandura (1997) describes as mastery experience , and prepares for self-efficacy with suggestions of coping behaviours when facing obstacles. We hope that the cross-cultural training we offer leads to successful adjustment in the host countries by boosting students' self-confidence in accepting differences and adapting successfully to life abroad (Winkelman, 1994). However, the module remains a foundation upon which students must develop their own autonomy. It cannot completely prepare students for social interaction in the host country: efforts are still necessary, and success will also depend on the student's environment abroad, their mental well-being, and their personality.

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4 The Cardiff University buddy scheme: how to prepare outgoing students using the experience of the year abroad and final-year students

Nazaret Pérez Nieto[1] and Nadia Nebot[2]

Abstract

This article describes the extra support required for outgoing students on their Year Abroad (YA) journey. It highlights the increasing need for and relevance of peer mentoring of YA students in preparing them to deal with different structures and organisations where external support might be insufficient or even non-existent. It also outlines different approaches to establishing relationships with allocated 'buddies'. It finally identifies the outcomes and benefits of the project, including personal development for all students involved in the scheme.

Keywords: year abroad preparation, buddy scheme, students' experience, student's well-being, employability skills.

1. Introduction

The benefits of learning languages in an immersion environment are clear. International education expands a student's perspective, encourages interest in cultural differences and strengthens interpersonal and observational skills

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(Mulvaney, 2017). Yet, for prospective outgoing students, the anticipation of planning the exchange, the choice of where to go, and which study/work placement to choose, to name but a few issues, can lead to tension, stress, and a feeling of vulnerability which can lead to anxiety before departure. The idea of a buddy scheme began from our own struggle, as YA coordinators for the two largest language departments (French and Spanish) in Cardiff University School of Modern Languages, to help, advise, guide, and reassure not only the students about to embark on this tremendous opportunity, but also those already abroad. What better advocates than students on their YA and those who have recently returned?

2. Present context for languages and presentation of the project

2.1. Background

UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and their modern languages departments in particular, are currently facing a very challenging future. Policies leading to an increase in student fees, the pressure to recruit and retain students whilst "foreign language learning is at its lowest level in UK secondary schools since the turn of the millennium" (Jeffreys, 2019, n.p.), together with the institutional commitment to supporting and enhancing the students' experiences, all highlight the pressure on HEIs to implement new strategies to address these issues.

One of the worrying aspects for HEIs is the transition of students from secondary schools to university and its impact on recruitment and retention. Some studies have been undertaken to explore different ways to guarantee a smooth transition, particularly in the fields of geography, environmental sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Hulme & De Wilde, 2014; Kouvela, 2015; Tate & Hopkins, 2013). However, little research has been conducted on transition for modern foreign languages students, taking into consideration that most of these students not only go through this transition once, from secondary schools

to university, but twice, from UK universities to foreign universities or foreign working environments.

Studying or working abroad as part of a student exchange programme can have tremendous positive outcomes in many areas, such as career planning, educational pursuits, internationally-oriented leisure activities, the opportunity to develop intercultural competencies, and spatial understanding of the host country. However, going abroad is one of the most challenging experiences for students in higher education, and our goal as YA coordinators is to ensure that we equip them with the necessary linguistic and cultural tools to overcome the challenge. From UK universities to foreign universities and foreign working environments, students must adapt to completely different structures and organisations in terms of the level of support and management that academics and administrative staff abroad can and are willing to provide. Students are equipped with the right language tools, but their understanding of different learning and professional structures can be non-existent. We believe that not enough emphasis has been put on this.

Exposure to a different environment and culture affects everyone differently. After the initial excitement of studying or working in a new place and becoming part of a different culture, some people start to have mixed feelings about having left their comfort zone (Top Universities, 2018). Throughout our years acting as YA coordinators, we have experienced first-hand the turmoil, upsets, anxiety, and challenges that the YA unveils.

Common reactions to culture shock, regardless of the country of origin, whilst studying abroad, include (The University of Texas at Austin, 2019, n.p.):

- extreme homesickness;
- avoiding social situations;
- physical complaints and sleep difficulties;
- difficulty with coursework/inability to concentrate;
- becoming angry over minor irritations; and
- significant nervousness or exhaustion.

The first few weeks following the arrival of students in their host universities or working environments tax our personal and professional resources to the limit due to the different levels of help and support offered by Spanish/Latin American and francophone universities or by managers in the workplace. Despite the high level of care and advice provided, including school-wide, departmental, and destination meetings, some pre-departure students are still overwhelmed and unable to cope with the different practices and responses they get abroad. A solution had to be found. This led us to reflect on our own practice and how to have a real impact on the students' experiences by putting in place a new system involving the most important asset for a university: the students themselves. The answer to our struggles and dilemma was obvious: students at different stages of their degree would be involved, consequently a 'connection' would be made via a peer mentoring relationship which would establish itself throughout the students' university life, at home and abroad.

2.2. Why peer mentoring?

In considering ways to support students, we realised that peer mentoring would be the best system to introduce as it allows students to learn from each other in a manner that differs from the traditional university lecturing approach, and thus fosters an active, interactive, and dynamic learning environment. Peer mentoring provides an informal and easy way to obtain advice and support whilst students are studying abroad, where access to lecturers for help and guidance is more limited. Outgoing students might find approaching members of staff in the host institution challenging since they are usually total strangers; a 'returning student' might have the answer or the advice required.

When we employ the term *peer mentoring*, we refer, therefore, to a system in which students develop a reciprocal relationship, where more advanced students help second-year students during the pre-departure, departure, and time abroad stages in order to enhance the overall experience of students. This is achieved through a relationship based on equal distribution of power (Cropper, 2000). The advice provided by fellow students is better received and has a proven positive effect.

2.3. How does peer mentoring work?

2.3.1. All second-year students are allocated a 'peer buddy' in their first week

The buddy scheme is a voluntary programme in which only those students interested in taking part in the project are involved. When second-year students submit their YA preference form, they have the option to opt in or out of the programme. In the same way, students already abroad or in their final year can volunteer to be mentors. Peer mentoring partnerships are established by YA coordinators in the first few weeks after the university/work placement allocation process is finalised. Students are encouraged to develop this relationship through the whole pre-departure and YA process.

2.3.2. Time to listen on a one-to-one basis

One challenging aspect for coordinators is constraints on their time. Student peer mentoring has the potential to meet student needs in this area: mentors show a willingness and ability to spend more time on informal one-to-one meetings, acknowledging the angst and focusing on the needs and demands of the individuals, thus providing a sort of informal pastoral care.

2.3.3. Help with the challenges of mental health abroad

The students' wellbeing is of paramount importance. The 'overwhelmed generation' of students frequently makes use of mental health facilities provided on campus by British universities, and usage of these facilities has been increasing steadily for over a decade (Kinzie, 2005). The proportion of disabled students who declared a mental health condition increased from 5.9% in 2007 to 9.6% in 2012 (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013, p. 95). Even if a student has a history of mental illness, the study abroad officer will not know this unless the student volunteers the information. Encouraging a 'buddy friendship' could provide the student with the necessary trust and will to disclose the information helping the YA coordinator in placing the student in a university which could provide, where possible, the appropriate level of care.

2.3.4. Mentor preparation

YA coordinators supervise the project throughout the year to make sure the programme is fit for purpose. Mentees are encouraged to become mentors the following academic year and to use their existing peer mentors for help and support. In order to help mentors perform their role, the YA coordinators, the employability office, and student wellbeing offer them training sessions which take place at the beginning of the academic year and are recorded and distributed via the virtual learning environment to those students abroad who are unable to attend.

2.4. Why does the buddy scheme work?

Andrews and Clark (2011) have already studied the effectiveness of peer mentoring. Their study not only shows how this approach enhances students' successes in higher education, but also highlights why HEIs should promote it to enhance their students' experiences.

The main advantage of adopting a buddy system is that students are given the opportunity to learn from each other and that by doing so, mentors and mentees alike can benefit from being involved in the project. Mentees receive support and guidance from fellow students who have experienced the same type of difficulties when preparing for their YA and whilst abroad. The scheme also allows mentees to develop a sense of self-confidence that may lead them to help other students in the future. With regard to mentors, they are able to gain a whole range of transferable employability skills that are needed in the professional world; they are able to develop their communication, management, and leadership skills whilst gaining personal satisfaction.

The contribution to the programme is also recognised in more official ways, including a university certificate stating their participation in the programme and outlining the skills gained throughout the year, together with a celebration event at Graduation Day where mentees can nominate their mentors who can then be awarded a prize for best 'buddy'.

3. Discussion of outcomes

In total, 16 final-year students volunteered as mentors and 60 second-year students took part in the project, with a ratio of one mentor for four students. The majority of mentors were French and Spanish degree students and therefore, could support outgoing students in both departments.

3.1. Results of a survey conducted with mentees and mentors

A survey was conducted with mentees and mentors on the relevance and practicality of the project (see Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3).

Students taking part in the project highlighted the following positive aspects.

Mentors stated that the scheme allowed them to develop their sense of empathy and enhanced their communication skills. Furthermore, the willingness to help and reassure whilst sharing their own personal experience was mentioned. Interestingly, their desire to help YA coordinators was also a reason for taking part in the project.

Figure 1. Second-year students' views on the buddy scheme

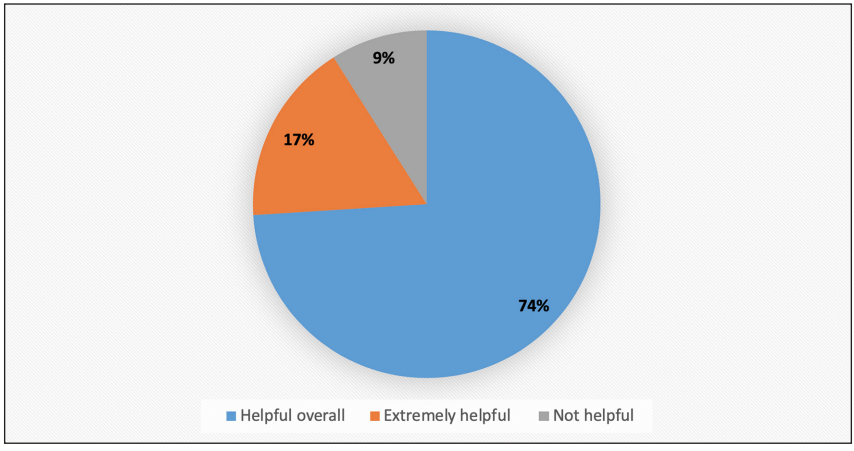


Figure 2. Second-year students' reasons to participate

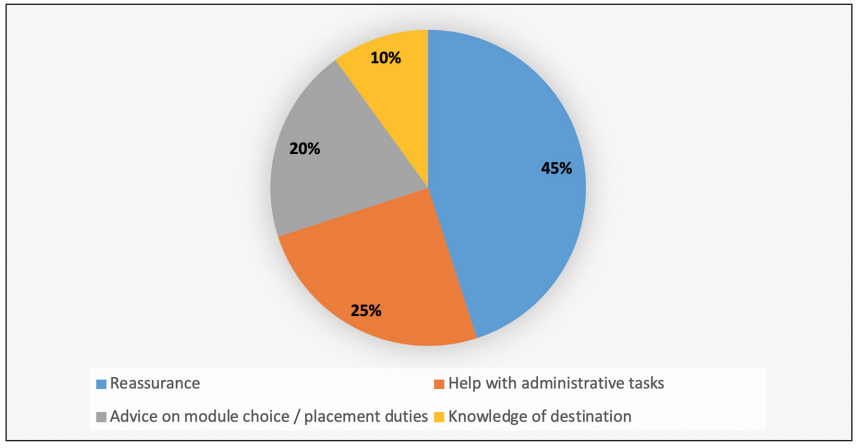
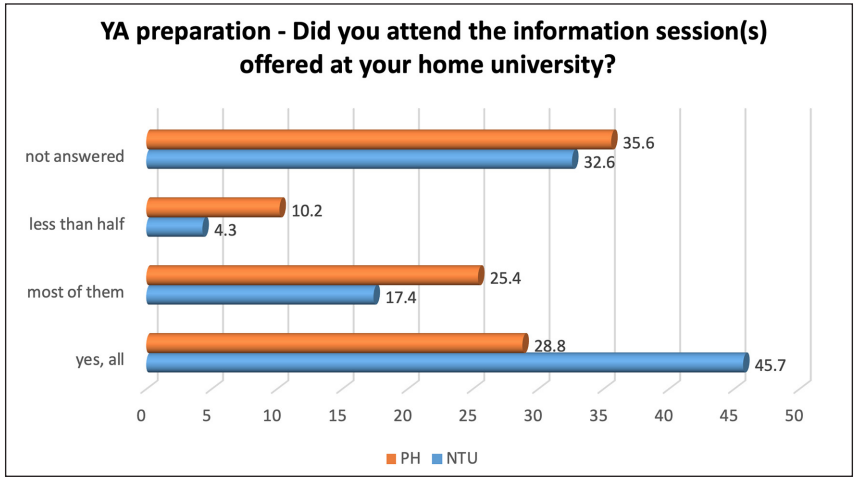


Figure 3. Mentors' reasons to participate



Second-year students stated that the scheme allowed them to gain a better insight about what to expect when abroad with concise and precise detail provided by the mentors. Mentees highlighted the practical elements dealt with (e.g. accommodation, cost of living, help with applications, opening bank accounts,

and pointing out the highs and lows of living abroad). The overall feeling was the reassurance of a positive outcome they obtained from their mentors.

Students involved in the project highlighted the following challenges: (1) mentors and mentees alike mentioned that time constraint was a challenge with regards to meetings and active communication; (2) finding a suitable time slot in which to actively engage with each other was not always a smooth process due to different commitments and deadlines; and (3) the lack of engagement of some mentees disheartened the enthusiasm of mentors when no reply to their offer of help was acknowledged.

4. Conclusion

Reflecting on the first year of implementation of the buddy scheme, it soon became clear that mentees and mentors alike benefitted from this initiative, bringing the student community together regardless of their year of study. Mentors who were until recently young 'foreign' students who had 'survived' this challenging experience reassured outgoing students in a manner that YA coordinators could not. On the other hand, whilst mentoring, present and previous YA students were able to reflect on their resilience and their personal development.

However, sustaining interest in the programme required a large amount of supervision, mediation, time, and dedication from both students and coordinators to ensure the viability of the scheme. Another challenge was the lack of engagement from some second-year students until deadlines were due, which had an impact on the communication with their mentors.

When properly cared for and supported, most students are likely to be capable of functioning on a YA programme and to experience first-hand the benefits that it provides. Intellectual, emotional, and social growth are among those benefits that will make our students the global citizens of tomorrow. These traits can be acquired through mentoring as it provides a perfect learning and

sharing environment and encourages students to explore their own personal development.

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Section 3.

Student perception

5 Student concerns about their stay abroad: a comparison between British and German student concerns before and after their time abroad

Christine Leahy[1]

Abstract

While an extended stay abroad is generally assumed to be a valuable experience, some students are reluctant to take up the opportunity. To understand this phenomenon better, this study looks at students' concerns before they embark on their time abroad (to undertake a study placement, work placement, or a language assistantship) and looks at returning students' perceptions, to see the extent to which their initial concerns materialised. The research is based on two questionnaires distributed to over 800 participants at two universities (one in the UK, one in Germany). Besides quantitative data, qualitative responses give additional insights into the students' perceptions. The results show marked differences between the two cohorts and also produce evidence of a considerable shift in students' perceptions after their return: a high percentage of students noted that their anticipated concerns were not realised. The results of this study are useful in shedding some light on students' concerns and can inform student support and Year Abroad (YA) preparation.

Keywords: stay abroad, Erasmus exchange, language study, student concerns, higher education.

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1. Introduction

Foreign language study in the UK has been declining for some time, not only in terms of numbers of students taking languages in schools, but also in universities (The British Academy, 2019). There are many reasons for this phenomenon (Lanvers & Coleman, 2013), which also has an impact on bilateral student exchange agreements between the UK and its partner institutions (Leahy, 2018): there is an imbalance in demand between students in the UK wanting to undertake Residence Abroad (RA) and incoming students. There are far more continental European students who would like to study in the UK than there are UK students prepared to study abroad.

This imbalance in demand is obvious to exchange coordinators who support their language degree students at universities in the UK as well as abroad. Conversations with Nottingham Trent University's (NTU) outgoing and returning students, as well as with colleagues at NTU's partner institutions, led to this research project, which set out to learn more about concerns students have in relation to RA. It was envisaged that a better evidence-based understanding of students' concerns could potentially inform preparation for such exchanges.

2. Presentation of the project

2.1. The project and research questions

The results presented here are only the most striking findings from a more wide-ranging project which focused on five anticipated areas of potential worry:

- finding suitable accommodation abroad;
- the ability to communicate successfully in L2 while abroad;
- missing social contacts at home, e.g. family and friends;
- financial concerns; and
- the potential lack of new social contacts abroad as well as potential dislike of 'the other'.

These areas of worry informed the survey questions, which sought answers to the following research questions.

- What are students' concerns regarding RA before they embark on the experience?

- What are students' perceptions after their return, and did their earlier concerns materialise?

2.2. Methodology

The research questions were addressed primarily through a quantitative approach, using two questionnaires which were sent by email to two universities, NTU in the UK and the Pädagogische Hochschule (PH; 'University of Education') in Freiburg, Germany. The first questionnaire (see supplementary materials) was sent out prior to the students' RA. At NTU, it was distributed to 246 students. 18.7%[2] responded. At PH, the pre-RA survey was sent to 563 students with a response rate of 10.48%. The post-RA questionnaire (see supplementary materials) was sent to 88 students at NTU (response rate 27.27%) and 563 students at PH (response rate 5.68%).

Both questionnaires presented students with (1) open questions which invited them to share their potential concerns in an unguided way, and (2) ranking questions with provided statements of potential worries which students either placed in order of importance to them individually (pre-questionnaire) or ranked using a Likert scale (post-questionnaire).

The open questions provided qualitative data which can be used in conjunction with the quantitative results to shed additional light on students' perceptions, something that cannot be fully captured in a survey with only pre-phrased stimuli.

2. Valid returns: NTU pre-stay (n = 46); NTU post-stay (n=24); PH pre-stay (n=59); PH post-stay (n=32)

3. Results

3.1. What are students' concerns regarding RA before they embark on the experience?

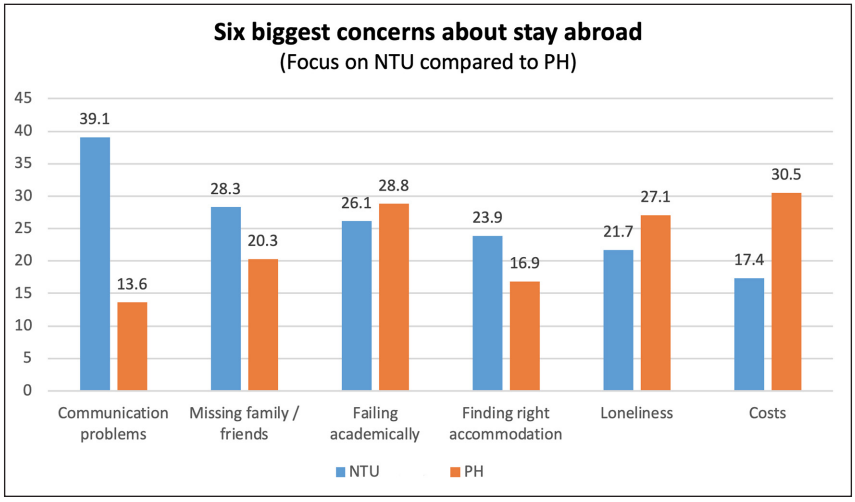
3.1.1. Open questions

According to the open questions, experiencing communication problems in the foreign language is the biggest concern for British students before going abroad (39.1%, Figure 1). To a lesser degree, they are worried about missing their families and friends, failing academically, and having problems in finding accommodation. Anxiety about being generally lonely (rather than missing specific people) was the fifth most named concern for British students, followed by apprehension about costs (17.4%).

The British students already have to pay an annual tuition fee of approximately GBP 9,000/year during the three years they study at home. For this reason, it had been anticipated that the financial implications of RA and a fourth year of study could have been experienced as a major worry for many NTU students. However, considerably more PH students expressed unease about costs (30.5%), which placed this in the first position of the open responses. Examples of the biggest concerns expressed by the German group were "spending too much money and losing control over […] expenses", "having to pay the high tuition fees at [name of UK] University", and being "afraid that I will have to lend a lot of money because for me spending a semester abroad is really expensive".

German students participating in the Erasmus exchange programme under the bilateral agreement do not themselves pay university fees. However, due to the very limited number of British study placements, some German students participated in the exchange on a self-paying basis in order to have the opportunity of a semester abroad. As members of the EU, these students had to pay UK home student fees, which, from a German perspective, are very high since education does not incur study fees in Germany.

Figure 1. Biggest concerns about stay abroad(% of students, NTU n=46; PH n=59)



3.1.2. Ranking questions

Pre-departure, the highest-ranked concerns among British students (Figure 2) are, in descending order: finding suitable accommodation (63%), not having enough money (58.7%), missing family (47.8%), and making new friends abroad (45.7%).

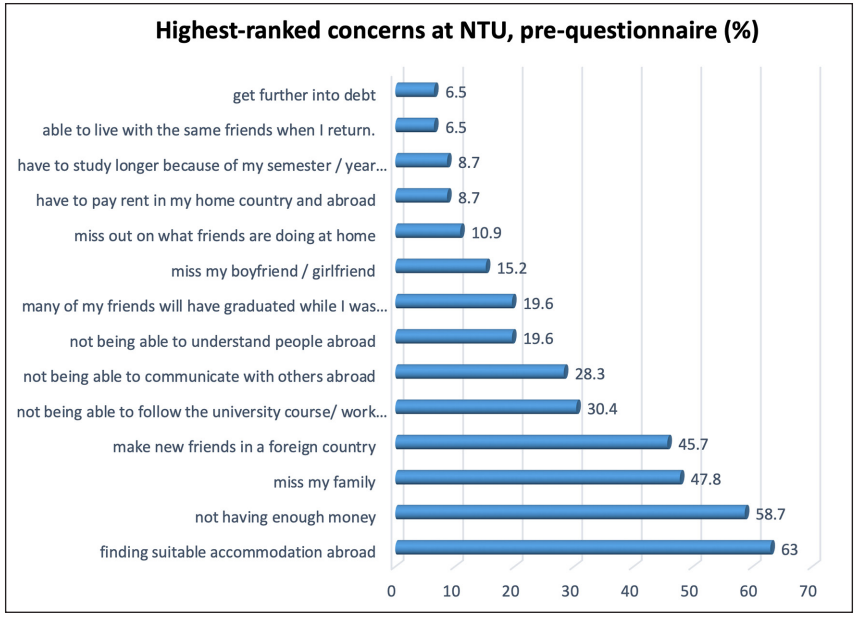
Different types of questions, i.e. whether answers were elicited through free text or by ranking predefined concerns, could lead to varying results. The concern about incurring costs exemplifies this difference starkly: in the open questions, 17.4% of the British participants expressed concerns about the financial implications of RA (Figure 1). They gave mainly very simple and short answers, for example that they worried about 'money', 'finances', 'running out of money', 'costs of living abroad, travel', etc.

In the following ranking question (Figure 2), prompted by the statement 'I worry about not having enough money', 58.7% of NTU students gave this a high priority (this was their second highest concern).

Worries rooted in the level of students' foreign language proficiency are expressed in statements referring to 'not being able to follow the university course, work placement, or assistantship' (30.4%); 'not being able to communicate with others' (28.3%); and 'not being able to understand people abroad' (19.6%).

Surprisingly, missing a boyfriend or girlfriend only ranks in 9th position of ranked concerns, at 15.2%.

Figure 2. Concerns at NTU (% of students, n=46)



3.1.3. Comparison of ranked concerns between institutions

Pre-RA, students were asked to rank their concerns by putting predefined prompts into order by the level of anxiety they caused, from most to least. Considerable similarities between the ranking of concerns at the two institutions emerged. The worry about finding accommodation abroad was named by 63% of NTU and 62.7% of PH students as the highest priority. Similarly, financial concerns

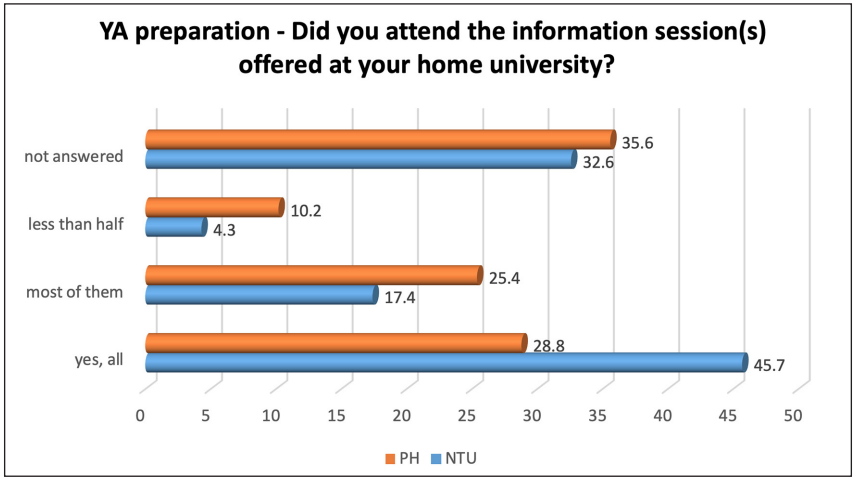
produced close results: 58.7% of NTU students, and 55.9% of PH participants. The results regarding concerns about missing the family show a larger difference between the cohorts: NTU 47.8% compared with PH 33.9%.

The greatest difference manifested itself in the worry about not being able to follow the course abroad (i.e. university course, work placement, or assistantship). This concern featured in 5th position for British students (30.4%), but represented the highest concern among the German group (78%).

3.2. Preparation for the residence abroad

Good preparation for the RA can help students to overcome some of their worries. The pre-departure question about whether students felt that they had received enough information was answered positively by about a 3rd of the participants (30.4% of NTU students, and 37.3% of PH students). A similar number did not respond to the question at all: 32.6% of NTU students, and 37.3% of PH students. Furthermore, the attendance rate at the preparation meetings was generally poor (Figure 3).

Figure 3. YA preparation (% of students, NTU n=46; PH n=59)



Only 45.7% of the British and 28.8% of the German cohorts claim to have attended all of the information sessions, while 32.6% (NTU) and 35.6% (PH) did not respond. The number of non-respondents to this and the previous question appears to be very similar. While a direct correlation between the answers to these two questions cannot be drawn from the data, it can be tentatively assumed that a considerably larger percentage of students would have felt well prepared, if only they had attended the information meetings. Should further research indicate that this finding is representative for more universities, it could indicate the need to reconsider the current format of institutional support for RA.

3.3. What are students' perceptions after their return; did their earlier concerns materialise?

3.3.1. Concerns viewed retrospectively (NTU)

A high percentage of students in both cohorts recognised that their concerns either did not materialise or, in the end, had a positive effect on them; 87.5% of the British students acknowledged this. The following statements exemplify such reflective responses[3].

> "I was scared about working in a school with so many people speaking a different language to me but I have enjoyed working in the school and I feel I have been successful".

> "I was concerned about living in a studio on the campus, thinking maybe it would not be as social. However I was wrong about this, there are many students/Erasmus students also living here so it has definitely been social enough. Transport is also very good in Bremen so it is easy".

> "I was concerned about '[b]eing home-sick and feeling like I was missing out as a lot of my friends [who did not study modern foreign languages] were going into their 3rd (final) year. I met some amazing

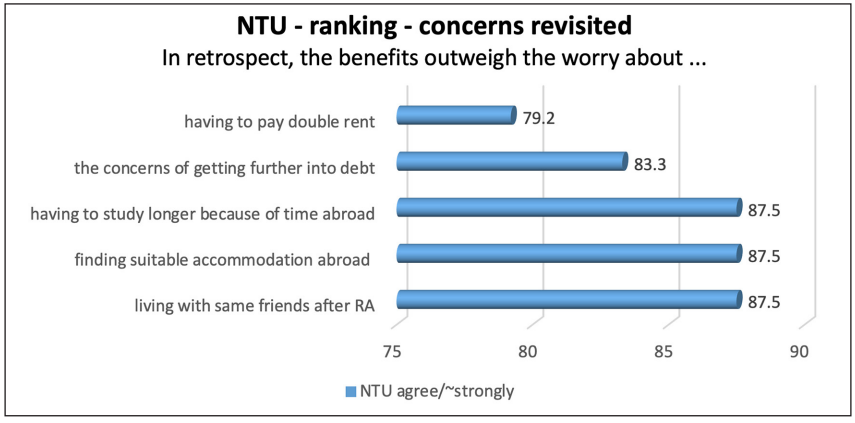
3. Multiple coding per student response was possible.

people in Avignon and I visited other home friends who were doing a similar thing. I rarely missed home and I'm grateful that now I am going into final year rather than missing out on the year abroad. I was fortunate that different members of my family visited throughout the year. All in all, it's an invaluable experience that you can't say no to".

3.3.2. Benefits outweigh previous worries

The majority of British participants agreed/strongly agreed that, in retrospect, the benefits of RA outweighed any worries they might have had before leaving home (Figure 4); 87.5% of NTU students agreed with this in relation to worries about (1) being able to live with the same friends after their return, (2) finding suitable accommodation abroad, and (3) having to study longer because of the time spent abroad; 83.3% considered the concern of getting further into debt as being outweighed by the benefits of time spent abroad.

Figure 4. Concerns revisited (% of students, NTU n=24)



3.3.3. No negative effect on progress and enjoyment (NTU)

Similarly, students disagreed/strongly disagreed that their progress and enjoyment was affected negatively because of:

- missing what friends were doing at home (83.4%);
- not being able to communicate with others while abroad (79.1%);
- not being able to follow the university course (79.1%);
- missing friends at home (75%);
- missing boyfriend/girlfriend (75%);
- missing their family (62.5%); and
- not being able to understand people abroad (54.1%).

In other words, the majority of responses rejected the suggestion that the time abroad had had a negative impact on them as had been feared before leaving.

3.3.4. Concerns viewed retrospectively (PH)

The majority of PH students (56.3%) also stated the fact that their concerns did not materialise as they had anticipated, as exemplified in the following quotes:

> "I was concerned about '[p]roblems with the English language: in the beginning I sometimes had problems in articulating myself and I was very shy when I spoke English, but after a while it got better and now I feel comfortable in speaking English".

> "I was worried about being homesick, which I of course became one or two times. Nevertheless as the end of my stay came closer and closer, I was becoming sad about leaving Belfast, which felt like home".

4. Discussion

YA researchers and returning students highlight the many advantages of RA. This study shows that returning students perceived that a lot of their initial worries had not only been unnecessary, but also were outweighed by the benefits of going abroad. This finding underpins the anecdotal evidence known about the effects of time spent abroad (e.g. Global Graduates, n.d.). It would therefore seem to be useful to integrate the returning students' experiences into

the preparation of outgoing students. However, there are at least two problems related to the preparation sessions, i.e. only roughly a third (NTU 30.4%; PH 37.3%) of the students felt that they had received enough information. Secondly, only a small number of students (NTU 17.4%; PH 25.4%) claimed that they had attended most of the preparation sessions (Figure 3). If the attendance rate is low, the opportunity to disseminate information and to overcome student worries is limited. Further studies are needed to research reasons for the poor take-up of the preparation sessions, and to consider ways in which this problem could be addressed.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study show the difference between the initial student concerns before RA, and students' retrospective evaluation of whether their concerns actually materialised.

There are limitations to the study. Not many students returned both questionnaires. Therefore, it cannot be stated with confidence that the same students changed their views between the pre- and post-RA surveys. However, the qualitative data in the form of students' comments does provide information about actual changes in individual participants.

It therefore seems fitting to conclude this paper with a free comment made by a student on a matter they considered important and felt had not been fully addressed in the questionnaire.

> "If you're serious about your degree in languages and you want to do everything to push yourself, (to improve your competence conversationally, grammatically and generally as an independent person) the year abroad is the best thing you'll do! It's not an exam, it's an experience that you mould to suit you. A lot of people would do anything to have this kind of opportunity. Living in another country is a big deal and you'll thank yourself for it later" (NTU student).

6. Acknowledgements

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7. Supplementary materials

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/kbw12i44u72vx3zwrdphubknvpvg92el

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6 Minding the expectation gap – student expectations pre-study abroad in China

Ying Peng[1] and Clare Wright[2]

Abstract

Study Abroad (SA) can be expected to promote personal growth, future employability, greater intercultural awareness, adaptability, and efficacy, alongside language improvement. However, students can encounter high thresholds to meeting their own expectations, and may struggle with personal and academic transition into and on return from SA. This study reports on the initial stage of a longitudinal survey-based study of the whole SA experience for a group of UK-based students of Chinese – presenting here students' pre-departure expectations and goals. Participants had high positive expectations of linguistic gains, adaptability, and knowledge about life in China, but were less aware of broader personal gains in employability, while cultural gains for some suggested a focus on individualised 'cultural consumption'. We discuss implications for support offered pre-SA to better shape student expectations of realistic benefits and probable challenges, particularly for less familiar SA contexts such as for anglophone students in China.

Keywords: study abroad, student expectations, China year abroad, YA preparation and challenges, linguistic development, sociocultural adaptation.

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1. Introduction

Personal, cultural, and academic transition pre- and post-SA can be very challenging (Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura, & McManus, 2017; Paige et al., 2009; Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018). Many students' experiences of SA are highly varied, and expectations may rarely be met (Kinginger, 2011; McLeod & Wainwright, 2009), often with demotivating results (Wright & Schartner, 2013), or even a sense of 'expectation violation' (Bell, 2016). Questions of personal, cultural, and academic transition pre- and post-SA become particularly challenging for students going to more culturally and linguistically distant countries, such as China.

Despite the explosion of UK student numbers now studying Mandarin, not much research has been done on expectations of such learners during SA (Wright, 2018). We assume that such students should be highly motivated both by the personal challenge in taking on what is considered to be a hard language, and by the chance to learn about China's society and culture, aiming to gain employability opportunities as China plays an increasingly central role in global affairs (Jiani, 2017).

Yu (2010) has stressed the importance for students of "careful psychological and academic preparation for their overseas study and life before coming to China" (p. 317). Hence, we are conducting a small-scale longitudinal project on students' experiences of SA in China from one UK university, tracking student expectations and motivations from pre-departure through to their re-entry back into the home university, aiming to explore matches and mismatches between expectations and realities.

2. Presentation of our study

Here we report on the first stage of our study, tapping students' pre-departure motivations, expectations, and concerns about different aspects of their SA experience.

2.1. University context for data collection

In this study, students at the home institution start Chinese *ab initio*, and do compulsory SA after one year of study, choosing one of three optional destinations. In terms of contact hours and workload, the Year 1 (Y1) study is very intensive, aiming for high pre-departure language proficiency (approximating to the third level of the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, A2/B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages equivalent) to aid linguistic integration and academic and socio-cultural adaptation, in line with research suggesting that "the better-prepared students are often the ones that gain most from study abroad" (DeKeyser, 2010, p. 89). Three SA introduction workshops are laid on during students' Y1; post-SA students are invited to attend two of these to give advice from their point of view. Students are given a departmental SA handbook and three guides relating to academic practices, accommodation, and life in China, written by the post-SA students. Pre-SA students are expected to be proactive in reading the handbook and student guides, and asking questions in the third (final) workshop, to help develop autonomy even at the SA preparation stage.

2.2. Participants and data design

All Y1 students (n=60) from a single cohort were invited to take part in our study, via an online survey or a face-to-face interview. Recruitment was carried out at the end of that cohort's Y1 (2017-2018), so survey/interview replies were based on knowledge students had gained during university SA preparations up to this point. Full ethical protocols for informed consent were followed in line with university research requirements; all participation was voluntary.

We recruited 16 participants (ten survey respondents, six interview participants), a mix of UK and EU students, including both single-honours courses (Chinese only) and joint-honours courses (e.g. Chinese with Management Studies). Participants were asked five open-ended questions, based on the literature (e.g. Kim et al., 2015; Sanz & Morales-Front, 2018). The questions were as follows.

- What are your motivations for studying abroad?
- What are your expectations in academic/linguistic gains?
- What are your expectations in socio-cultural and personal gains (including career benefits)?
- What are your expectations of teaching methods?
- What concerns and apprehensions do you have?

The individual interviews were recorded and transcribed, then collated with the online survey responses. All data were reviewed by both authors for consistency in thematic analysis. Data was coded to anonymise participants (Interviewee 1=I1, Interviewee 2=I2, Survey respondent 1=S1, etc). To some extent, motivations, expectations, and concerns all overlapped in the participants' comments, but we present the data in relation to the separate headings, as detailed below.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. General motivations relating to studying abroad

Participants expressed a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational goals, but were all very positive in relation to both general and China-specific SA expectations – they looked forward to a good overall SA experience, broadening their horizons, meeting other international students, gaining first-hand experience of the country and improving their language abilities through immersion rather than being limited to the classroom. They highlighted the value of experiencing life somewhere new and exciting, making Chinese friends, wanting to learn more about life in China, and 'seeing China in action'. Such a positive orientation was good to see, but we are aware it could lead to a mismatch with reality, so the next stages of our surveys (during and post-SA) will address this issue carefully.

3.2. Expectations in linguistic gains

In general, most participants wanted to improve their confidence in the language and expected to be able to make significant progress. There was some desire to expand vocabulary, mainly relating to learning everyday expressions, or more natural/colloquial vocabulary so that they could handle a wider range of topics.

> "I am keen to make the most of every opportunity. For me I especially just want to feel confident in my own language ability and not constantly doubting myself over what I know" (S2).

> "I think every skill will be improved, especially listening – the thing I lack most right now. And also fluency in speaking – speaking more confidently" (I2).

> "I expect to be very fluent by the end of the year, to be able to maintain a conversation about general topics and able to understand Chinese people as they speak" (S8).

3.3. Expectations of social-cultural and personal gains

Many participants claimed they wanted to expand their cultural experience; they were curious about Chinese culture and society, and expressed a desire to see the art, try the food, and travel around. Closer examination of comments revealed to some extent a perspective of being a consumer of cultural difference, rather than a wish to develop greater intercultural awareness and empathy; this aspect is not yet, to our knowledge, widely reported in current literature, so will be monitored throughout our study. However, a small number of participants specifically mentioned improving intercultural communication skills, a greater open-mindedness, and a sensitivity towards different cultures. Delving into China's history would help them understand its impact on modern-day China. By spending time with Chinese people of all ages and background, they expected to appreciate Chinese culture better, with more understanding of how life works in such a 'vast and diverse' country.

> "I think that it will allow me… to appreciate the differences between Chinese and British cultures and the issues facing them both" (S7).

> "I expect to get to know Chinese people's habits and traditions and appreciate them, learn how Chinese people live, how they perceive their country and their point of view" (S8).

SA was also perceived by many participants as an opportunity for personal growth and development, though often expressed in relation to general SA-based challenges (see below). Most participants talked about the values of adaptability and of developing as a person, expecting to have to go out of their 'comfort zone', which would help them be more confident.

> "The experience of being away from home for a prolonged period of time and in such a different culture will be challenging, but hopefully it will be rewarding in the end by providing skills such as resilience, tolerance, and perseverance" (S10).

Relating to employability, only two explicitly identified SA with career prospects, e.g. using their degree to get work in a Chinese context (S8) or building personal connections to help employment options (S6). Several participants were still undecided as to what they would like to do after their degrees, so had not thought about the employability aspect of SA.

> "I probably won't think much about employability when I am in China, but mostly when I come back, because in China I will focus on studying the language" (I5).

3.4. Expectations of academic environment and teaching methods

Participants clearly expected there to be some differences between home and host universities. Teaching in China would be more repetitive than in the UK, with fewer chances to interact with teachers or other classmates. There would

be a heavier workload, and more rote learning – drilling and memorisation; overall the experience would be similar to being back at school. Teaching staff were expected to be caring and efficient, but stricter and more critical, e.g. over homework or exam preparation. However, participants seemed to be ready for this style of teaching. Some mentioned that they thought this more traditional way of teaching suited them better personally.

> "Even if the classes might be slightly boring, we are very lucky that we can go and practise skills like reading and speaking just by walking around the city… So actually we will be using lots of different styles of learning which I think will add diversity and excitement to the way we learn" (S2).

> "I'm not overly worried about the teaching methods being too hard as I know the teachers will definitely want us to succeed. However, I do expect to experience quite a lot of culture shock when first experiencing the new teaching methods first hand" (S3).

> "I do quite like the Chinese style, because you can just take in the information. I am not worried about that" (I1).

3.5. Concerns and apprehensions

Pre-departure concerns revealed the extent of perceived challenges and barriers felt by participants before the SA started, though it seemed these were more about SA in general rather than being very China-specific. Participants expected that culture shock would be extreme, and that having enough language for effective communication would be the biggest challenge. Many felt they lacked confidence in managing the natural context abroad when speaking to locals or encountering local dialects.

> "I expect that initially there will still be some sort of language barrier… however I think that this will be resolved by just persevering and taking any opportunities to speak… I think coping with this will involve

> having the support network of other students from the home university but also trying to get involved in activities outside of class and perhaps even outside of the university" (S7).

Despite these perceived challenges, participants also expressed a degree of self-efficacy, resolving to overcome any language barriers by engaging and interacting with local people and speaking Chinese as much as possible. There was also evidence of self-coaching and being realistic – admitting 'it's OK to ask for help' and not being harsh on themselves.

Overall, participants seemed relatively realistic, suggesting that in terms of academic and personal experiences, they were aware of likely challenges but also felt reasonably empowered to handle them. Expectations of linguistic and cultural benefits appeared high, and we will track how far these were met in reality in our further surveys.

4. Conclusions

This study aimed to gain some insights into motivations, expectations, and perceptions of challenges during SA in China, in a group of UK students after one year's *ab initio* study. Through thematic analysis of pre-departure questionnaires and interview data, we saw that participants generally felt aware of both benefits and difficulties, including differences in academic environment, and a perception of wide language and culture gaps, though these were to some extent generalisable to any SA experience rather than to China specifically. Participants seemed to be mostly positive and realistic about how to handle these, suggesting that, at least in this cohort, there may be less risk of 'expectation violation' than found elsewhere (Bell, 2016). There were high expectations of linguistic and cultural gains, so these may be the areas most at risk of not being met during SA. There seemed to be less awareness of broader gains from learning about Chinese people and culture, treating this aspect of SA to some extent as individualised 'cultural consumption'; participants also lacked understanding in how personal development could lead to wider employability benefits. Further longitudinal

data in the next stages of our study will shed more light on the extent to which expectations and reality converge or not for students' experiences during and post-SA.

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7 The words to say it: student-led exploration of students' written responses to the year abroad experience

Michela Day[1] and Cathy Hampton[2]

Abstract

This chapter examines a student-led internship project to repurpose a Residence Abroad (RA) reflective survey in order to achieve better meta-cognitive self-analysis and more productive communication between outgoing and returning students and staff. Evidence from the project and from scholarships pointed to the limitations of free-text reflective reports in prompting effective articulation of lifelong learning skills, despite the RA being viewed as transformational. The interns, recent RA returnees, became peer researchers, analysing survey data and consulting staff experts (a careers consultant, learning technologist, RA co-ordinators, and pastoral care co-ordinators) to produce a more user-friendly and pedagogically-helpful questionnaire. The project permitted an effective two-way sharing of stakeholder needs and allowed the voice of student experience (itself becoming progressively insightful in the course of the project) to critique staff assumptions. New, more cognitively-demanding question sets tied explicitly to employability, wellbeing, intercultural awareness, and personal motivation are now producing much more usable data for staff and students.

Keywords: questionnaire, reflective peer learning, collaboration, employability, year abroad.

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1. Introduction

In 2017, the University of Warwick School of Modern Languages and Cultures created an extensive online RA questionnaire hosted by our virtual learning environment to promote student self-dialogue and peer dialogue. The questionnaire covered every aspect of the RA experience (not simply the year abroad, but all vacation placements undertaken across three years of study). Students responded to questions on practical aspects of their stays (merits of place, accommodation, activities undertaken, etc.) to gather data for the benefit of outgoing students, and reflected on their personal journey via a 500-word report. The report was compulsory (along with other written tasks) in order to progress to the next year of study. Analysis of the questionnaire's first iteration revealed that the practical data gathered from RA returners was too detailed to be meaningfully transmitted to future students, and that many reflective reports lacked coherence. Perhaps we were asking the wrong questions. We turned to the Warwick Student Internship programme, appointing two summer interns who had themselves undertaken an RA (a finalist – Jonathan Cook – and a recent RA returner – Michela Day, who has subsequently co-authored this paper) in order to consult student voices (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018)[3].

2. Methodology and values

The interns were encouraged to consider themselves in co-creative leadership roles on the project. They were furnished with training in Moodle (the virtual learning environment used at Warwick), data collection, and the Qualtrics survey platform by Warwick IT Services, and given an overview of recent theoretical frameworks relating to personal development and RA. We drew attention to the conception of the RA as a liminal space for personal, social, and intellectual growth within the higher education curriculum (Hampton, 2016), stressing its importance in the context of current pedagogical endeavours to nurture a "personal epistemology" in students (Ryan, 2015, p. 9), which is viewed as a core feature of critical and

3. In the UK, most RAs take place during the third year of a four-year degree. A variant of this that operates at Warwick is the possibility for ab initio students to undertake RA in the second year in order to consolidate language knowledge.

lifelong learning skills fundamental to 21st-century graduateness – defined in Wharton (2017) as "scholarship, moral citizenship, lifelong learning and reflective thinking" (p. 2). This is set in the context of the current marginalisation of modern foreign languages as a discipline in schools, particularly in the state sector (Hampton, 2016). In a "world of the boundaryless and protean career" (Lengelle and Meijers, 2014, p. 52), we discussed the notion that students need more than ever to recognise the potential of RA, to galvanise the cognitive insights produced by its disruptive nature, and to communicate what they have learned to themselves and others. Academic staff hoped that the interns, with their recent RA experience, would examine the questionnaire as both respondents and researchers. Through interrogating their own reactions to the questions posed, we anticipated that they would approach the data with different eyes to academic staff. We were particularly keen to know how far they considered the reflective reports to have demonstrated RA students' capacity to interrogate "their own capabilities and motivations *in relation to*, and *as a response to* the changing social conditions and expectations of the[ir] work or learning environment[s]" (Ryan, 2015, p. 3), and whether they discerned barriers to meaningful reflection that we could not see.

3. The intern experience: Michela Day's analysis

This section of the paper reflects on the project stages through Day's eyes as she moved forward through the processes below (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Project stages

In her words:

> I came to the internship keen to advocate for my fellow RA students and to improve the experience of future outgoing students. There was

a great deal I wished I had known more about before embarking on my RA, and ways in which I felt I could have been better prepared. This, and the greater maturity and cultural awareness that I felt after the RA (Tracy-Ventura, Dewaele, Köylü, & McManus, 2016), had given me the confidence to apply for the position. My vantage point as a student or 'insider' (Wharton, 2017) meant that I was able to recognise the importance of a more effective dialogue between stakeholders. Our initial aim was to create a more complete feedback cycle: the School wanted to gain better quality reflection from students for pedagogical reasons and to better prepare outgoing students; my goal was to make students aware that the School had taken their responses on board.

Cook and I analysed 94 reflective reports, organising data under the following headings, chosen in consultation with School stakeholders (careers consultant; senior and personal tutors[4]; RA co-ordinators; outreach and widening participation officer):

- wellbeing;
- employability and careers;
- personal development;
- academic and linguistic development;
- cultural awareness and internationalisation;
- outreach.

In the process of analysing the reports, I observed that most reflections revealed students' needs to 'get something off their chests' in a personal and sometimes sensitive way. It became clear that students' expectations and needs were diverse: some students felt over-supported, and others not supported at all. The difference often seemed to lie in how students reacted when faced with adversity and difficulties abroad.

4. At Warwick, the senior tutor and personal tutors oversee the pastoral care of students. Each student has a dedicated personal tutor.

I also came to realise that every student reflection was only a snapshot, if that, of many RAs; my response included. When I was answering the questionnaire, my responses barely touched the surface of my ten month RA: there were many other experiences I could have recorded. The knowledge that students made choices about what and what not to include was key to understanding that these responses were not necessarily a comprehensive, once-and-for-all picture of their RA (Fairfield, 2017; Tamas, 2014)[5]. This made me question whether the reflective reports could really capture the value of the RA as a rite of passage.

We were also tasked with reviewing the questionnaire structure as a whole. With over 300 possible questions in a format which was not user friendly and which did not direct respondents to give sufficiently structured answers[6], many responses were not coherent or detailed enough, particularly in qualitative questions. There was also a danger of questionnaire fatigue (Ben-Nun, 2008). To tackle these difficulties, we spoke to a learning technologist (to consider question design), and the School careers consultant and senior tutor (to consider question content). The learning technologist encouraged us to opt for a question style which would provoke more reflective responses (Tamas, 2014). So, the following:

- were you happy with the university you went to? YES/NO; and
- comments/recommendations about your institution (with a free-text box for the answer);

was replaced with:

- please rate your […] institution out of six (one being very poor and six being excellent); and

5. Typically, students wrote more negatively just after the completion of their RA. However, upon returning to Warwick, I witnessed my peers sharing more positive narratives than in those captured in the questionnaires, highlighting how distance from such experiences may change the process of reflection.

6. The questionnaire had a display logic, so students were led to question sets that applied to their RA pathway.

- please briefly explain your answer to the previous question (with a small free-text box).

Requiring respondents to give a numerical value was intended to focus their judgement; giving a choice of six values makes it impossible to 'sit on the fence' because they cannot pick a value exactly in the middle of the scale; asking respondents to justify their response increases the likelihood of a more reflective answer.

Our discussions with the careers consultant revealed that returning students are often quite poor at articulating the graduate skills developed during their RA because they do not deduce the relevance of the softer skills they have had to build to survive the year. The consultant introduced us to the Context – Action – Result – Evaluation (CARE) methodology[7] and suggested that the reflective reports could be structured in a way that encouraged students to use these criteria in their responses. Our discussions with the senior tutor revealed his desire to develop students' resilience in relation to challenges rather than seeing their problems as something the university has to solve. These conversations led us to the decision to break down the reflective report into smaller questions and responses as below.

- Think about a challenge from your time abroad. How did you overcome it and what did you learn from it? Use the CARE framework to articulate your experience.

- How have you changed as a person over the course of the year?

- To what extent has your year abroad made you more employable? Please name some of the skills you gained and explain how they will be useful.

7. The CARE criteria in question are a variant on the STAR technique outlined here: https://help.open.ac.uk/using-star-technique-in-a-job-interview

- How did you immerse yourself in the culture of your host country and what were the results?

- Describe a moment in which you had to take a risk on your year abroad. What did you learn? Use the CARE framework to articulate your experience.

- As a result of your experiences this year, would you consider living abroad in the future? If so, why?

- Is there anything more Warwick could have done to support outgoing students? If yes, what?

- What could you have done to improve your year abroad experience?

The 2018-2019 RA cohort will trial this new questionnaire format. Finally, drawing on personal experience, we warned the School that using returning students to present the RA to outgoing students is not without problems. We found a mismatch in the accentuation of negative or worrying elements in many reflections and the overtly positive selling of the RA as 'the best year of your life' in preparatory meetings. To enable students to better anticipate and deal with challenges, and to increase their awareness of how to tap into improved support systems, we worked with the senior tutor to redesign personal development review forms so that the questions personal tutors put to students before and during the RA are more targeted in order to provoke reflective answers and effective dialogue.

4. Conclusions

The collaborative efforts between the interns and the Warwick RA team to create a dynamic, co-designed feedback and feedforward cycle for RAs has

built particularly on Tracy-Ventura et al.'s (2016) research showing growth in the emotional stability personality trait following the RA. Our reflective reports also showed that facing emotional challenge was the most pressing concern of RA students, but our interns found that the ability to move from emotion-focused descriptions of experiences to critical engagement with them eluded students. Their findings echoed closely Wharton's (2017) study of the language choices made by students tasked with writing personal reflections, who readily discuss "a hurdle which they have overcome", but tend to present their transformations as "to do with behaviour" rather than as "transformations of ways of thinking" (p. 12).

The interns' decision to replace the free-text reflective report with scaffolded questions relating to tangible actions offers the promise of increased metareflection according to current thinking on the use of reflective tasks. Ryan (2015, p. 6) describes the need to make the "deliberations" of the learning journey "more visible and self-conscious" and to "foreground performative self-analysis" (p. 8); Lengelle and Meijers (2014) link "insight" with "clearly structured exercises" (p. 57). To date, 36 of 159 students have completed the new questionnaire. Whilst at this stage observations can only be anecdotal, three positive elements stand out:

- the questions on risk and challenge, perceived by one respondent as an 'unusual question', have pushed students to 'dig deep' for ideas ('the best example I can think of is…'), and this cognitive effort has produced a rich array of responses;

- the CARE criteria have helped some students classify their reflections more systematically (using a 'job application' style and lexis, for instance); and

- the highly searchable nature of the new platform produces targeted data that speaks much more precisely to the requirements of individual RA co-ordinators working in nine different languages, as well as wellbeing, careers, and skills and widening participation officers.

Mindful of Day's concerns that students should present a rounded picture of the RA to their peers, we introduced a poster presentation exercise at our year abroad fair (Autumn 2018), asking students to provide images and a short text under such headings as 'main challenges and what they taught me' and 'my advice for students: how to prepare/what to expect/what not to expect/dos and don'ts'. This in turn led some students to develop their poster message into short videos in which they spoke directly to the camera about proactively building a positive RA mindset ('be fearless' 'take risks', 'it can feel daunting [being away from friends]; if you don't do anything about it, it will stay daunting').

Of course, it is impossible for either staff or students to construct narratives about the RA that offer 'failsafe' guidance. As Day's image of the 'snapshot' reminds us, distilling the experience is a labile process contingent upon context, audience, memory, and many other things. In honing our questionnaire, we wanted to increase the chances of purposeful reflection, in the interests of returning students – through transformative self-analysis – and outgoing students – through hearing a more considered viewpoint from 'near peer learners' (Murphey, 1998). On both fronts, this has entailed finding a way to help students notice the stages that reflection passes through (Fairfield, 2017) in order to help them develop a greater awareness of whom they are writing for and why they are writing. Through the internship, Day developed a kaleidoscopic perspective on stakeholder needs – she moved from a student-focused emotional response to a multi-stakeholder-focused critical response. That was very useful for our project, but for her lifelong learning skills, her ability to articulate the cognitive shift she underwent is paramount. We hope that the new questionnaire will help students to re-examine the transformative potential of the RA in the same way.

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Section 4.

Assessment

8 The assessment for the year abroad programme: how to incorporate language, culture, and personal development

Kazuki Morimoto[1]

Abstract

This chapter will discuss how a Year Abroad (YA) assessment can incorporate language progress, cultural understanding, and personal development by showcasing the Interim Self-Reflection Evaluation Report (ISER), which was introduced in 2017-2018 as a piece of assessment for the YA in Japan at the University of Leeds. At the end of their first semester, the students were required to write a reflective report on their progress and challenges related to their academic, linguistic, intercultural, and personal development, using both Japanese and English. Keyword analysis of the content revealed what aspects the students primarily focused on. Further qualitative analysis also shed light on their successful endeavours to enhance their confidence, on how they viewed their own weaknesses, and on changes in their self-perception.

Keywords: Japanese, assessment, year abroad, self-evaluation, personal development.

1. Introduction

Recent studies have shown that Study Abroad (SA) not only promotes learners' target language skills (DuFon & Churchill, 2006), but may also affect their

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cultural understanding (Deardorff, 2006; Watson & Wolfel, 2015), identity (Block, 2007; Jackson, 2008), belief (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), and motivation to study (Irie & Ryan, 2015; Isabelli-Garcia, 2006). Furthermore, Dwyer (2004) claims that SA, a full year abroad in particular, has productive effects, such as increased self-confidence and maturity, a lasting impact on world view, and a tolerance for ambiguity.

The Japanese degree programme at the University of Leeds includes a YA, but the outcomes of this differ considerably in terms of students' experiences both in their university and outside it, and in their motivation to study Japanese. Therefore, in order to assess and monitor students' personal development, as well as their language and academic progress and intercultural awareness, a new piece of assessment, called the ISER, was introduced in 2017-2018.

This chapter will discuss some of the possible benefits of ISER, and analyse what students mainly wrote about in their report in terms of progress, challenges encountered, and changes in their views.

2. Presentation of the project

2.1. The YA at the University of Leeds

The Japanese degree programme at the University of Leeds includes a one-year compulsory YA at a Japanese university in the second year. Students are allocated a place in one of 15 exchange partner universities across Japan. A series of pre-departure meetings is provided both before and after their allocation. Whilst we highlight language and academic progress, cultural understanding, and personal development as principal objectives, up until 2017-2018 our YA assessment did not place much emphasis on students' personal development, such as improving self-confidence, enhancing motivation, and becoming independent learners. Therefore, the Japan YA team reviewed the assessment method and decided to introduce ISER, which gave students an opportunity to reflect upon their own development.

2.2. ISER

ISER requires students to write a self-evaluation of their language and academic progress, cultural understanding, and personal development, reflecting upon their experiences in their first semester in Japan. This self-evaluation is written in Japanese. Students are also asked to write a summary and an action plan in English at the end of their report. There is no specific word limit but the total length of the report should not exceed two A4 pages. The first set of ISERs was submitted in mid-December 2017 as a formal assessment, and marked as either a pass or a fail by the Japan YA tutor. The outcome, together with brief feedback on content and use of language, was sent to each student by email in January 2018, approximately three weeks after submission.

The rationale for introducing ISER was to provide students with a chance to reflect on their progress, including their personal development, which was missing in the previous form of assessment. ISER also aimed to encourage students to use Japanese in a real and meaningful context, whilst giving them the opportunity to clarify in English the things they could not explain well in Japanese. Furthermore, it was hoped that ISER might promote students' autonomous learning by encouraging them to consider how well their current study and social skills were developing and what action plan might be needed to achieve their goals. Since this new assessment was implemented at the end of the first semester/term in Japan, it was also expected that ISER would be a good monitoring tool for the tutors to assess their students' progress and wellbeing.

3. Analysis and discussion

Thirty-four students submitted their ISER in December 2017 as part of the assessment for their YA in Japan in 2017-2018. In order to find out what the students focused on in terms of progress or lack of progress, the content of ISERs was analysed based on the frequency of keywords appearing in them. Since the primary purpose of the analysis was to understand tendencies among students, any keyword was counted only once per student, even if the student used it more

than once. Also, 'positive' (i.e. achieved progress) and 'negative' (i.e. lack of progress) usages were not distinguished in the keyword analysis, as the reports often included the same keywords – e.g. speaking (skills), (making) friends – in both positive and negative contexts. Instead, however, further qualitative analysis was undertaken to find out how the students reflected on their successes, their problems, and the changes in their self-perception.

With regard to language and academic progress, 25 students (73.5%) wrote about their *speaking skills*, the most mentioned topic by far, followed by *grammar* (64.7%), *Chinese characters* (47.1%), and *listening skills* (41.2%). This is not surprising, as most students wanted to improve their oral/aural skills more than any other skills during their YA. Although this section of ISER was not limited to the progress made in language skills, and although most students were studying non-language subjects in their Japanese universities, hardly any students discussed their general academic progress, such as research methods and essay-writing skills.

In terms of cultural understanding, there was no common topic to which the majority of students referred. The most recurrent topics were *Japanese people* and *traditional culture* (both 38.2%), and the second most mentioned topics were *human relations/politeness* and *social customs* (both 32.4%). Other topics found in the reports included *dialects*, *work ethics*, *food*, *places*, *language*, *lifestyle*, and *environment*. Interestingly, despite the fact that recent studies (Fujino et al., 2018) show learners' general interest in Japanese popular culture, none of the students wrote about popular cultures or subcultures.

As for personal development, the majority of students (55.9%) discussed at least one issue related to their *friend(s)* or to *friendship* in general. Furthermore, 44.1% and 32.4% of the students mentioned their *confidence* and *independence/autonomy* respectively. It is worth noting that over one-fifth (20.6%) of students specifically referred to their experiences in *clubs* or *circles*, whilst a smaller number of students wrote about their *work* and *volunteering* experiences (11.8%). Although these results themselves may not prove their actual personal development, they seem to confirm Benson's (2007) claim

that "(a)utonomy is clearly relevant to (study abroad programmes)" (p. 26). Other keywords relating to students' personal development included *time management*, *financial management*, *out of comfort zone*, *life balance*, and *identity*.

A further look into ISERs shows what the students perceived as difficulties or challenges to their progress during the first few months of their stay in Japan. Ironically, the most commonly observed challenge for the students was *insufficient opportunity to speak Japanese* (26.5%) despite the fact that they were living and studying in Japan. However, this may be closely related to other issues, such as *isolated location* (5.9%) and *making friends with Japanese people* (5.9%). For instance, one of the universities where three students were studying is located in a rural area of Japan, and those students may have had limited access to off-campus life. Also, a few students specifically commented on how difficult it was to make friends with Japanese students:

> "tomodachi ni naruno wa nagai jikan ga kakaru. tabun nihon de ichinen iru ryugakusei dakara nihonjin no gakusei wa watashitachi to tomodachi ni naru noga chucho suru" (*It takes a long time to become friends [with Japanese students]. They may probably hesitate to become friends with us, because we are exchange students who will stay in Japan only for a year*).

Not surprisingly, *fear/shyness* (8.8%) was also one of the biggest challenges for students to overcome. Understandably, they felt anxious in a country where both language and culture are significantly different from those of the UK or their home countries. However, the fact that they went to Japan in their second year, as opposed to the third year, when most other Japanese programmes in the UK have their YA, may also have contributed to their fear or shyness. Another problem the students experienced was to do with their workload. Whilst a few students found *too much workload* and *lack of time* impeded their overall YA experience, one student felt that *less intensive teaching* in their Japanese university than in their home university was problematic for their academic progress.

Beyond those keyword analyses, ISER has also revealed some successful episodes where the students' confidence was enhanced:

> "gesuto hausu o sagashiteita toki, michi ni mayotte shimaimashita. […] kanzen niwa kaiwaga wakaranakatta noni, gesuto hausu ga mitsukeraremashita. […] jisin ga fuemashita" (*I lost my way when I was looking for the guesthouse. […] Although I couldn't fully understand the directions the person gave me, I was able to find it. […] I gained confidence*).

> "jibun de isha to meisha ni ikimashita. Sono toki nihongo o renshu shimashita. kono kekka watashi wa jishin ga tsukimashita" (*I went to see a doctor and optician by myself. This gave me the chance to practise my Japanese. As a result, I have gained confidence*).

As those examples show, small successful experiences in the students' day-to-day life, such as asking for directions and going to see a doctor using the target language, can be a confidence booster for their use of the language. Conversely, there were also cases where students reflected on their lack of progress with a detailed analysis such as the example below:

> "nihon no gakusei to hanasu toki ni machigaeru koto ga kowakute, watashi ga iou to shiteiru koto ga hanashite iru hito ni tsutawaranai koto wa hazukashii desu. kore wa jikoseicho ni warui eikyo o oyoboshi mashita" (*I am afraid of making mistakes when talking with Japanese students and feel embarrassed when I cannot convey what I want to say to the person. This has had a negative effect on my personal development*).

Furthermore, ISER has provided some good examples of students' changing their views about themselves, as shown in the example below:

> "At the start of the year I was adamant that I'd never want to live in Japan for a long period of time. This was because I want to live in a

> place where I can be treated like a resident and not always seen as a foreigner. […] I can now realistically see myself living in Japan in the future".

It could be argued that the realisation or re-discovery of themselves has the potential to change their motivation to study Japanese. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) argue, the "ideal L2 self" or "a representation of personal hopes, aspirations or wishes [can be] a powerful motivation to learn the language, because of our psychological desire to reduce the discrepancy between our current and possible future selves" (pp. 3-4).

4. Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the importance of incorporating the process of assessing students' language progress, cultural understanding, and personal development with a particular focus on ISER. ISER was an effective assessment tool which brought together the students' initial goals and their perceptions of their own attainment in terms of language and academic progress, cultural understanding, and personal development. The keyword analysis has revealed that the students focused primarily on speaking skills and grammatical knowledge in language learning, whilst turning to Japanese people and traditional culture for cultural understanding. In terms of personal development, the majority of the students discussed the pleasure and difficulty of making friends, whilst being aware of changes in their confidence and independence. It was also found that insufficient opportunities to speak Japanese was the students' major concern, which seems to be closely connected to other perceived difficulties, such as fear/shyness, isolated location, and making friends with Japanese people. A further analysis of ISERs has shown evidence of students' successful experiences, and also evidence that they can examine their own weaknesses and can change their views of themselves.

Although the student feedback at the end of the YA was positive on the whole, some students found the timing of ISER a little too early for them to engage in

significant reflection, whilst others felt more specific feedback would have been helpful. Therefore, the assessment needs further review in terms of timing and the giving of effective feedback, including a possible change of medium to a blog or something more interactive and continuous in nature. With regard to the analysis of the content, it cannot be denied that the author's subjectivity may have had an impact on the way the keywords were selected and identified and on the outcome of this study.

Despite those limitations and challenges, however, this study has also suggested how pre-departure guidance could be improved by focusing on some of the aspects the students found particularly motivating or challenging. For instance, recurrent issues related to their perceived lack of opportunities for, and lack of confidence in, speaking Japanese could be discussed in groups among outgoing students based on some of the actual experiences reported in ISER. Furthermore, it might also be useful for YA tutors to discuss ways of improving the exchange programmes with the partner universities in Japan.

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9 The year abroad – a process of reflection

Ruth Crawford[1], Gloria Gutiérrez Almarza[2], and Jo McCormack[3]

Abstract

The Year Abroad (YA) is one of the most valuable parts of our language degree programmes. Here we discuss some of the elements that constitute the assessment Nottingham Trent University students carry out to earn a YA diploma. More specifically we compare the two elements (blog and dossier) that we think contribute most to reflective practice, by analysing examples from students of French, German, and Spanish. Although at this point the analysis remains impressionistic, we compare which of these two elements helps students to reflect more deeply and meaningfully while achieving the YA objectives. The main findings indicate that both types of text help students to reflect on their experience and consequently to develop their Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Notably, the use of the target language does not appear to determine the level of reflection while the intended audience plays an important part in the style and accessibility of students' work.

Keywords: year abroad, reflection, intercultural communicative competence, blogging, dossiers.

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1. Introduction

The YA experience is a key part of the modern language provision at UK universities and sets modern language graduates apart from many of their peers both during their studies and after they graduate. There is the expectation within our institution that reflection is a very important element of student development, particularly during the YA. The more students reflect, the deeper their engagement with the host culture is and the better their ICC develops. In the context of ICC, both Ushioda (2009) and Dervin (2011) stress the importance of students' ability to reflect about themselves and their experiences. This paper will discuss a project undertaken at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) to analyse the process of reflection during the YA. Specifically, it will report on an impressionistic comparative analysis of dossiers and blogs written by French, German, and Spanish students during the academic year 2017-2018.

2. Presentation of the project

The project examines how blogs and dossiers, which form part of our YA assessment, encourage a reflective culture, by helping students move from simply 'recording unexamined experiences' to 'shifting perspectives' (Savicki & Price, 2017).

2.1. Theoretical background

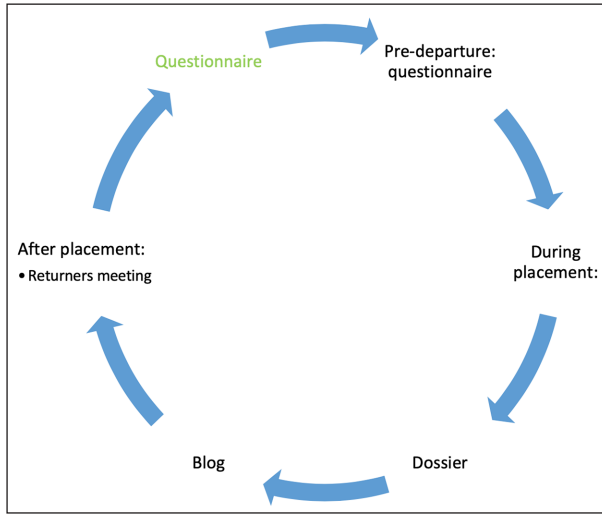
There are two main concepts that underpin the learning process during placements abroad: ICC and considering students as 'liquid strangers' (Dervin, 2011). Although there are many definitions of ICC and different research models based on it, for this research project we took our inspiration from Jackson's (2012) and Ushioda's (2009) understanding of the concept, as it encompasses clearly how students are engaged in a process of reflection. They see "ICC as a process based on and at the same time conducive to dialogic engagement, cultural bridging, reflection on cultural action, and whole-person development" (Gutiérrez, Durán, Beltrán, & Martínez Abad, 2016, p. 339).

In this process, students are bound to become "self-reflective, intentional agents [immersed in a] fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, and multiple micro- and macro contexts" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 20). This is also complemented by Dervin's (2007) understanding of students abroad as "liquid strangers", "strangers in a new culture who should be given the opportunity to look at themselves and others, as well as to reflect on their own discourse and attitudes" (p. 120).

2.2. Context: NTU circle of reflection on YA

Below we present the different activities students going on the YA are invited to participate in, with the aim of helping them develop a reflective attitude (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Circle of reflection on YA



The **questionnaire** is the first opportunity that students have to think about their own communication and intercultural skills. It offers a framework for reflection but also appropriate vocabulary for the later items.

Students submit a 5,000-word **dossier** by the end of their YA. This is a dynamic document which allows them to reflect on past and present experiences but also take those reflections forward in both their final year and in post-graduation employment. We want them particularly to reflect critically on challenges and achievements during the year. Dossiers must be completed in the target language, to ensure that they maintain their writing skills, develop the specific vocabulary in the target language, and appreciate their own progress.

Students should also reflect in a **blog**, which is a public document and a useful resource for future students. Students have the choice of writing this in the target language or in English and the majority choose English. The blog may also form a valuable piece of evidence to show to employers or tutors in the future.

When students return to NTU they are invited to a **meeting** where they can discuss their experiences with their peers and members of staff. At the meeting they are given a **questionnaire** to fill out.

3. Discussion of outcomes

3.1. German

Student 1, who was a teaching assistant near Düsseldorf, completed the assignments to the bare minimum standard. The blog was patchy, and the student noted that it was completed at the end of, rather than during, the placement. As such, the reflection was almost entirely externalised, focusing on the placement and how it fitted the student, rather than on how she had had to adapt. There is little evidence here of Jackson's (2012) 'dialogic engagement'. In her dossier, there is more reflection. It would seem in this case that the structured questions of the dossier prodded the student to reflect in more depth. The student admitted to having grown up during the YA, but even this was a little superficial: although she writes about maturity, challenges, and finding things out about herself, the writing lacked examples and a deeper investigation of how this helped her develop.

Student 2, on a study placement, achieved a much higher standard of reflection. The blog was regularly updated, with at least one new post every month, and each post was long, personal, and visually interesting. There were posts about the university, travels, cultural experiences, and the student's own personal journey. Stylistically, she also directly addresses her reader – the student approaching the YA – and starts a dialogue about the initial concerns and fears and how they have been overcome:

> "You will become more compassionate and understanding towards other people and cultures when you come back home, that's for sure. […] But I never really considered what people must go through when they move to another country, with limited or barely any language skills and managed to cope in a foreign place by themselves – that was until I came to Germany" (Student 2).

This student discusses her changing perception of the world and recognises that the experience may have taken away her sense of 'permanence', but that it has also imbued her with compassion, understanding, and an appreciation of her own achievements. This student's dossier is similarly reflective, discussing how the experience has made her a different person.

The student who engaged most with the tasks was the one who displayed the most characteristics of substantial reflection on and critique of personal development over the course of the YA.

3.2. Spanish

One of the two Spanish students did a full year placement at the University of Valencia, the second student a placement at the Universidad Chileno Británica in Santiago de Chile followed by a work placement in Spain. Both students engaged in the dossier and blog in very reflective and engaging ways, although with very striking differences in their choices of style. Both students emerge as the 'liquid strangers' previously mentioned and in the process of reflecting they develop a deeper sense of their ICC, although in different ways. The use of the

target language did not seem to be a barrier for their reflection. For example, Student 1's dossier is mainly about the new culture (her engagement with Spanish friends, with the university, with the modules, and with the town), but it is also about herself (about how she was changing, her linguistic, personal, and intercultural learning and about her feelings and emotions). Her blog is very different. She is one of the few students who chose to write in Spanish. She made it very clear that her blog serves a clear purpose. It is her purpose and the perceived audience that dictates the style of the blog. There is no reflection. It is completely descriptive, with advice, very much like a tourist guide. The text is accompanied by very attractive photos.

Student 2's dossier is personal, she reflects on herself and her own culture and how she needs to adapt to the host culture, clearly developing her ICC while she engages in a dialogue between the target culture and her own. Following this emphasis on the personal, her blog is very much about her, for a clear intended audience, written in very informal language showing more evidence of her fluid sense of identity. It takes the form of a story with titles for every entry, like a TV series with episodes, *Friends*, with her being the main character: 'the one where Rachel gets on the plane', 'the one where Rachel goes back to work'. The tone is intimate and reflective:

> "leaving Chile was only the first of many big decisions I have done so far this year, the second being that I have decided I want to study medicine" (Student 2).

> "this is the kind of learning that makes me want to get up in the morning… So, to actually set alarms in order to learn something new about a part of the body is a totally foreign concept to me and I LOVE IT" (Student 2).

3.3. French

The two students were undertaking teaching placements, and therefore in France for a whole year.

Both students seemed to have difficulty engaging with the dossier and the blog simultaneously, and their engagement with each exercise varied throughout the year. Student 1 did submit the 'formative' sections of the dossier (in October, February, and June respectively), but then they had relatively few blog entries. Two of the five entries were in March. Student 2 seemed much more engaged with the blog earlier in the year, with many entries until the end of February, when that work suddenly ended. The dossier was not completed in a formative way, but the final submission was received, and the dossier seemed in Semester 2 to have taken over the main role of reflection and replaced the previously strong blog work.

Each piece of work feels quite different. For Student 1, the blog certainly included more about feelings and emotions. The audience was different, written for future students ('you'). It was a more multimedia piece of work (photos). It was more colloquially written ('I was never down for', '#') and a good mixture of topics (learning and teaching; but also transport, Sundays, etc). The dates of entries make what is being considered and compared, and when, clearer. It was encouraging to see this student write a blog about her time in La Réunion. The final blog entry is particularly reflective, concluding and summing up learning and development from the year. The dossier included more about professional life and followed the structure we recommended: objectives and strategies, progress, and successes. The dossier improved as it developed, both in terms of content and language.

For Student 2, the blog was very creative and seemed to dominate work in Semester 1. Again, there is very colloquial language ('coming back a baller'[4]), multimedia (video, gifs, photos, music, mood boards). Interestingly, there are comments on this student's blog from followers, which makes it quite an interactive piece of work. Although Student 2's dossier lacks structure and has no sections, it does cover a wide range of issues, almost 'taking over' from the work of the blog in Semester 1. Perhaps here, too, professional rather than

4. A very competent, successful person.

personal life has a greater place. The language is more formal and scholarly in the dossier.

> "If you had asked me before I came to France what my life here would be like, I probably would've been imagining living it up in the hotspots of Paris with the young and sexy but that really isn't exactly how it has turned out. The kinda ugly truth is I haven't made a crazy amount of friends as was promised on the YA tin. I touched upon this issue in another post and it's not a woe is X kind of situation; I think for me, this experience has been focused around my independence and self-growth which has been amazing" (Student 1).

4. Conclusion

The main conclusion we arrived at is that by giving students the possibility of writing these two types of text we are maximising the opportunities that they have to reflect and to develop their ICC. Each type of text complements the other in giving students the best chance to help them reflect and in that process develop a better sense of who they are in relation to both the host culture and their own culture. More specifically, in their journey towards their development of ICC, we found that while the use of the target language does not seem to constrain the students in their reflection and expression, the audience, whether real or perceived, does seem to be one of the deciding factors in the style and accessibility of the text produced.

There are a series of limitations that make these results difficult to generalise. The small sample size is the most important one. However, this project does open opportunities for future research: for example, it would be interesting to investigate the impact that the reflection during the YA has on a final year reflective assessment and on students' own personal development in the future. Further investigation into the creation of a 'persona' in the blogs within the model of the 'liquid stranger' would also be interesting. Future research with a larger sample size will further investigate the link between reflection and

development of ICC and will particularly look at the role of motivation in student engagement.

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Section 5.

Employability

10 Embedding employability in year abroad preparation

Leona Archer[1]

Abstract

UK universities are increasingly focusing on employability and internationalisation strategies, resulting in the promotion and integration of an optional or compulsory Professional Training Year (PTY) within degree programmes. The University of Surrey encourages students to undertake a PTY in the third year of undergraduate study, either in the UK or overseas. This is optional for most subjects but compulsory for language students, and corresponds to their Year Abroad (YA). As a consequence of the popularity of the PTY across all faculties and an emphasis on work experience, the vast majority of language students at Surrey choose to work abroad rather than study during their third year. In this chapter, I discuss some of the challenges and opportunities presented by work placements abroad and outline a range of strategies for embedding employability skills in YA preparation sessions and language modules.

Keywords: year abroad, employability, professional training, placements, languages.

1. Introduction

UK universities are increasingly focusing on employability and internationalisation strategies, resulting in the promotion and integration of an optional or compulsory PTY within degree programmes. The University

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of Surrey encourages students to undertake a PTY during the third year of undergraduate study, either in the UK or overseas. This is optional for most subjects but compulsory for language students (excepting those with extenuating circumstances) and corresponds to their YA.

Our programme structure within the School of Literature and Languages (and specifically within language degrees) comprises the integration of professional skills in language modules and the provision of dedicated employability and YA preparation sessions for Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) Level 4 and 5 students. The following article presents our programme aims and discusses some potential advantages and challenges of embedding employability skills within YA preparation.

2. Presentation of the project

Professional training has long been recognised by the University of Surrey as an important component of students' development alongside their academic study, especially for those embarking on the PTY, and the university has won awards attesting to its professional partnerships (University of Surrey, 2019). Furthermore, a growing body of research on professional training stresses the importance of embedding employability skills within the curriculum, including a number of studies and reports produced by the Higher Education Academy (Norton, 2016).

Bray, Gill, and Randall (2011) identify employability as a key factor that influences students to study French (and other modern foreign languages) at UK universities. Presenting a case study from the University of Westminster, they highlight how employability can be integrated into degree-level French studies through the following strategies: career management skills (comprising workshops, prizes and networking events), employability within the curriculum (a degree pathway entitled French in Action), and professional placements abroad in the third year. A similar approach has been deployed by the University

of Surrey for many years and our current model in the School of Literature and Languages has been in place since 2016.

In my role as Senior Professional Training Tutor for the School, my aims include: enabling students to take responsibility for their YA through subject-specific preparation integrated into the curriculum; supporting students to identify and reflect on their professional skills and how these may be applied and enhanced during their YA; empowering students to feel capable of succeeding in their preferred YA environment, be it study exchange, work placement (i.e. British Council Assistantship), or a combination of work and study.

I suggest that creating a dialogue between concepts of professional training and YA preparation prompts students to take responsibility for and ownership of their YA planning, with subject-specific guidance from academic and professional services staff. Another of my objectives in combining professional training and the YA is supporting students to think critically and reflectively about their professional skills and goals, and how these skills may be applied and enhanced during their time in the target language culture(s). It is important for students to be aware of all the options available so that they are able to choose the best one for them and consequently to experience an enriching and rewarding YA.

To assure positive outcomes for students, it is essential that academics work with colleagues in professional services to reinforce the message that academic and professional skills are interlinked. Faculty (module lecturers, personal tutors, YA coordinators) can have a tangible impact on students' preparedness alongside input from colleagues in professional services such as international offices, student finance, study abroad administrators and so on. I would suggest that effective collaboration of this nature also enhances students' experiences of the employability skills-based training often provided by Careers services, and of the YA preparation usually delivered by a combination of academics (i.e. departmental YA/study exchange coordinators) and colleagues within international offices.

Language students at Surrey can undertake joint degrees in a language either with another language, or with Business Management or English literature. Students of two languages (e.g. those doing a Bachelor of Arts in French and Spanish) are required to spend half of the YA in one target culture and half in the other.

As a consequence of the popularity of the PTY across all faculties and an emphasis on gaining work experience, the vast majority of language students at Surrey choose to work abroad rather than study during their third year. Of the 2018-2019 cohort, 79% opted to work, with 10% combining work and study (one semester of study followed by a semester in a work placement or vice versa), and 11% studied for the duration of their YA. In 2017-2018, 75% of the cohort undertook a full year of work while abroad, and in 2016-2017 this figure was 95%.

Since most of our students currently opt for work placements, the blending of employability skills training with YA preparation focused on the students' target language culture works effectively to equip students with a better knowledge base of intercultural competencies. Acquiring these competencies, alongside the academic and transferable skills required to excel in a professional role, helps placement students to integrate into a workplace. I would suggest that accomplishing a successful work placement hinges predominantly on two factors: how well-prepared the student is to experience a new country and its language, and how well-prepared they are to fulfil the operational requirements of their role.

We have therefore created a programme that develops professional skills alongside language learning, by embedding employability within core language modules and timetabled sessions during the School's Employability and Placement Weeks[2]. Employability Week is held during Semester 1 and all Level 4 and 5 students attend a series of talks and information sessions centred

2. The first Employability and Placement Weeks were held in the School of Literature and Languages (then called English and Languages) in 2016-2017. The concept of a dedicated week of sessions relating to professional skills and placement year preparation was designed by Dawn Marley and Marga Menéndez-López. My former colleague, Marga Menéndez-López, convened and implemented the pilot weeks in 2016-2017. Since then I have coordinated and run these events as Senior Professional Training Tutor for the School, in collaboration with colleagues.

on the themes of professional skills and options for the PTY. This is then followed up by Placement Week for all Level 5 students who will undertake a PTY, featuring content which, for language students, refers directly to the practicalities of preparing to embark on a work placement or study exchange in the target language culture. This format provides students with two weeks of focused preparation dedicated to the YA and to employability more broadly.

Professional training or employability is also embedded in the language module curriculum to complement the sessions delivered during these dedicated weeks. In the Semester 1 language modules of the first year, students learn about university culture and higher education in the target culture(s). In Semester 2 of their first year, students take a module entitled 'French/Spanish/German for Professional Purposes'. In this module, students learn how to write cover letters, emails, make phone calls, conduct interviews, write reports etc. in the target language(s). This course provides FHEQ Level 4 students with the skills, confidence, and knowledge they need to start applying for placement opportunities at Level 5.

In addition, students acquire a deeper understanding of the target culture more broadly, which can help them integrate, adapt, socialise with colleagues and friends, be aware of loci of potential challenges, and assist them to anticipate and manage culture shock. Returning students subsequently bring their new knowledge and skills to bear in seminar discussions during the final year of their degree and are afforded opportunities to talk to pre-departure students and impart advice, from which the second-year students benefit.

3. Discussion

Yorke and Knight (2008, p. 8) assert that communication (inclusive of the acquisition of modern language skills) must be regarded as a core employability skill. According to a Gallup Organisation (2010) survey on graduate employability funded by the European Union, employers in the United Kingdom ranked the importance of communication skills more highly than any other

member state (63%), yet less than a third of UK employers claimed to be 'very satisfied' with graduates' skills in this area (pp. 20-25). Professional training with a focus on communication is of particular importance for language students, all of whom undertake a compulsory PTY in the third year of degree study (the YA), and has clear implications for student employability beyond graduation given the extent to which employers value these skills.

Our objective is to ensure that the content of our language modules enables students to engage critically with the course content and effectively apply their subject knowledge while on placement. Among other activities, these modules include: studying French work culture; how to write a cover letter in German; and taking part in a job interview in Spanish. This is crucial for the creation of what Trigwell and Prosser (2013) term qualitative variation in the 'constructive alignment' framework as put forth by Biggs (1996). 'Constructive alignment' is a pedagogical framework with which educators can devise teaching and learning activities and assessments that directly address learning outcomes (Biggs, 1996). Trigwell and Prosser (2013) argue that a weakness in the initial constructive alignment theory may be that an insistence on alignment alone is insufficient, and that higher learning is best achieved by centring teaching "around the idea of self-directed learning through group work based on a real-world holistic problem project in the field of study that exemplifies relations between concepts" (p. 143).

The integration of professional skills applicable during the YA into advanced language learning in first- and second-year undergraduate modules allows for precisely this kind of exchange and highlights the relationships between concepts studied at university and scenarios that will be encountered on the YA. For example, academics can refer to previous students' YA Final Reports, which detail challenges encountered while on work placements overseas. In identifying recurring challenges that numerous students have had to overcome, academics can create learning activities that problematise these scenarios and allow students to anticipate potential issues and consider how they might be resolved, before they depart for their own YA. By integrating these tasks into a language seminar rather than as part of the professional training programme, students can also acquire the vocabulary to confront such challenges in the target language.

Alongside institutional support from academics and careers and employability services, students aiming for a specific work experience are also empowered to research and develop their own links with organisations. Support that academics can provide in this area is through the integration of professional skills in language modules, for example by equipping students with the skills to apply for jobs in the target language culture. Students who find their own work placements often pass the contact details to future YA students, thereby establishing new placement connections. Taking French at Surrey as an example, there are currently four companies with whom we have had a longstanding partnership (in one case for over 25 years) and a handful of other opportunities that students themselves have established and then passed on to the next cohort.

I have observed that a significant advantage of our integrated format is that first- and second- year students have ample opportunities to interact with final-year students. At the School returners' fair held during Employability Week, these cohorts have responded positively to being able to talk to returners about their placements and very often these conversations have helped the pre-departure students to identify what they want to do during their own YA.

In terms of what academics can do to support successful work placements, sustained contact with both PTY students and companies is essential. By fostering long-lasting relationships with companies, we can ensure that students are given excellent mentoring opportunities, since these companies have acquired a greater understanding of students' academic programmes and language levels during years of collaboration.

4. Conclusion

Our YA preparation programme has been running since 2016 in its present form and is reviewed and enhanced yearly. Nevertheless, some tentative conclusions may be drawn with regard to the opportunities and potential challenges presented by taking an approach to YA preparation that includes professional training of some kind. Students should be able to express the ways in which their YA has

enhanced not only their linguistic ability in the target language or languages, but also their transferable and professional skills, regardless of whether or not a student has worked or studied. Substantial scholarship on the YA has established that in order for the YA experience to be considered as effective (in line with the ideas of Global Citizenship or Intercultural Competence), it is not enough for students to spend a period of time overseas without intentional preparation and forms of evaluation focused on the outcomes of the placement or study exchange (Pedersen, 2010). One of our placement year assessments, the Final Report (written in the target language), includes a section that encourages self-evaluation and reflection from students.

Yorke (2010) claimed in his research on employability that the best way for academics to approach employability training is by recognising and exploiting any alignment with our own values. This concept can be applied by academics during the Placement Week activities that prepare students for their YA. By recognising the value of Intercultural Competence and the benefits of spending a period abroad to improve language skills and subject-specific knowledge (based on prior experiences), academics can signpost to students the opportunities created by the YA that they will be able to take advantage of during their time abroad. Example sessions that highlight this alignment of academics' values and employability could be country-specific information sessions, talks on intercultural communication and culture shock, among others. Almost all academics working in modern foreign language departments will themselves have undertaken a period of study or work abroad and can speak to the value of a YA. Aligning our own understanding of the manifold benefits of student mobility with an approach that also considers professional development, may be the best starting point from which to integrate employability and YA preparation for our students.

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11 The year abroad and employability skills for language students at Durham University

Aziza Zaher[1]

Abstract

This chapter deals with the year spent abroad by language students and its impact on their employability skills, with a focus on students at the School of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLAC), Durham University, who spend the third year of their four-year Bachelor of Arts programme abroad. The chapter reviews selected studies on Study Abroad (SA) and employability skills and considers the context for Durham University students. The results of a questionnaire completed by students about the activities undertaken during the Year Abroad (YA), the employability skills that they developed, and how they present these skills to employers are then described. The analysis of their responses reveals that the great majority of students find the YA useful for employability, during which time they develop a wide range of transferable skills.

Keywords: year abroad, languages, employability skills, Durham University.

1. Introduction

Employability is a hard concept to define, and there have been many attempts to define it. For example, it may be seen as "the propensity of students to obtain a job" (Harvey, 2001, p. 98) or "being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work" (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 3). Employability is a crucial concept for

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Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as it affects their image, ranking, and ability to recruit students. Moreover, it is central to the Teaching Excellence and student outcomes Framework (TEF). Therefore, HEIs place great emphasis on employability.

The YA is an integral component of language degrees in most UK universities, and it is believed to equip students with much more than language proficiency. For example, Coleman (2015, p. 35) emphasises the importance of residences abroad for the subsequent employability of graduates. This chapter deals with the relationship between the YA for language students and their employability. It presents a review of selected research on SA and employability, and then discusses the results of a study by the present author on this topic.

2. Review of selected studies

Several studies of the relationship between SA and employability skills have been carried out, some of which are large-scale projects funded by international organisations, including the UN and the EU. Studies have been conducted in different contexts, including the USA and Europe.

The Institute of International Education Centre for Academic Mobility published a study entitled *Gaining an Employment Edge: The Impact of Study Abroad on 21st Century Skills and Career Prospects* (Farrugia & Sanger, 2017). In this study, the researchers surveyed over 4,500 alumni of HEIs who had studied abroad between 1999 and 2016, and interviewed a sample of respondents on the relationship between SA and employability prospects. The study found that SA has an overall positive impact on the development of a wide range of skills needed for jobs in the 21st century, such as communication skills, confidence, curiosity, flexibility, and adaptability. Moreover, SA expands career possibilities, and the skills gained during it have a long-term impact on career progression and promotion. The study also found that longer periods of SA and the choice of less familiar destinations were positively associated with skills development and career impact.

Brandenburg et al (2014) surveyed nearly 79,000 alumni, students, staff, institutions, and employers participating in the Erasmus programme across 34 countries. Over 85% of the participants stated that their wish to enhance employability was a motivation for their SA. The study found that students with international mobility are half as likely to experience long-term unemployment than students without. The survey also revealed that 92% of employers look for traits that are enhanced by SA, including self-confidence, problem solving, tolerance, and decisiveness, among others, and Erasmus students exhibited an increase of around 42% in the expression of these traits compared to students who had not studied abroad.

In *How Study Abroad Shapes Global Careers: Evidence From the United States* (Norris & Gillespie, 2009), researchers surveyed 17,000 participants in the programmes of the Institute for the International Education of Students between 1950 and 1999 to determine the impact of SA on participants' careers, abilities, and personal development. It was found that SA enabled two-thirds of the respondents to gain skills that influenced their career choices. Nearly half of the respondents reported working or volunteering in an international capacity after graduation, and alumni who worked in the international arena were three times more likely to change career plans following the SA experience (Norris & Gillespie, 2009, pp. 5, 7, 13). Furthermore, SA was considered to be the key to open global career doors for up to a third of the participants.

The findings of these three studies confirm that SA has a positive impact on the development of employability-related skills and opportunities for employment after graduation. In the following section, I describe a small-scale study relating to the YA and the development of employability skills for language students at Durham University.

3. Presentation of the project

Students in MLAC at Durham University spend the third year of their degree in one or more places where the languages they study are spoken. MLAC

students enjoy a large degree of freedom in deciding where to travel and how to spend their YA. Students of non-European languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Russian, are required to spend the main part of their YA in a study placement, yet they are encouraged to volunteer or work alongside or after their study placement to further their contact with the host culture. The majority of students of European languages, such as French, German, Italian, and Spanish, choose to work during their YA, and fewer students choose to study; those who do study, do so mainly through the Erasmus programme.

Most MLAC students split their YA between two or more placements. Moreover, they often combine more than one activity during their YA; for example, they could work in one placement and study in another. According to MLAC statistics, in 2017/2018, there were 262 YA students, of whom 93% completed at least one work placement, 28% completed Erasmus study placements, 32% completed non-Erasmus study placements, and 18% completed English language assistantships with the British Council.

4. Aims and methodology

The aim of this study was to identify the perceptions of MLAC students concerning the impact of the YA on their employability skills and the skills they developed during this time. A questionnaire was distributed to MLAC final-year students (in the fourth year of their degree, the year after the YA) and to students on their YA, to enquire about the activities they undertook during their YA, the skills they developed, and how they presented these skills to employers. After obtaining approval from the MLAC ethical committee, the questionnaires were distributed to students both electronically and in print format. Two questionnaires were used, one for finalists and one for students on their YA; both asked the same questions (see supplementary materials).

The questionnaires enquired about the languages the students studied and where they spent their YA. They were also asked about the activities they undertook during their YA and whether they found the YA useful for the development of

employability skills. They were also asked to choose from a list of skills that they might have developed. At the end, they were asked whether or not they had updated their CVs or thought about how to present the skills they developed on their YA to employers. Sixty-six YA students, representing around 24% of the recipients in their year, and 60 finalists, representing around 23% of the recipients in their year, responded to the questionnaire.

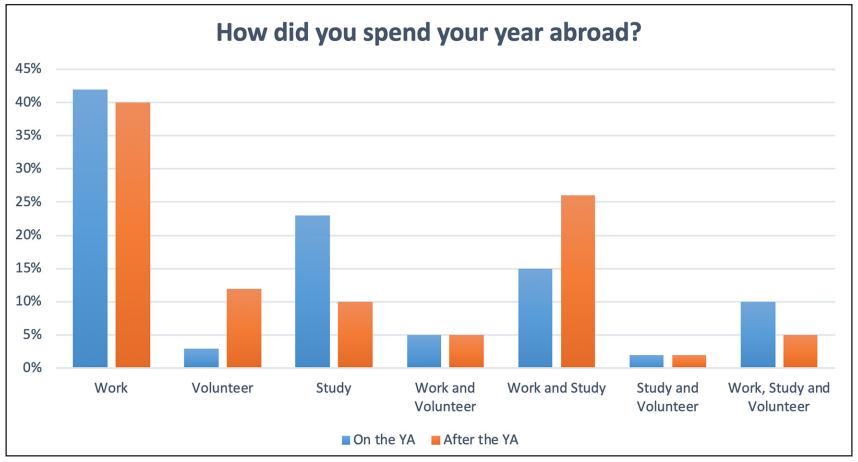
5. Discussion of outcomes

Responses were received from students who studied all of the languages taught at MLAC. More than 60% of the respondents studied two languages and split their placement between different countries. Many students who studied one language also split their placement between two different locations. Responses were received from students who studied in Argentina, Belgium, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Peru, Russia, Spain, and Switzerland. This shows the variety of locations to which students travel on their YA.

Responses to the question about activities undertaken during the YA were somewhat similar between YA students and students who had completed their YA. Students undertook a range of activities, including work, study, volunteering, and a combination of these. The main activity undertaken by the respondents was work, and most of them combined more than one activity; either study and work, work and volunteering, study and volunteering, or all three. Responses to this question are presented in Figure 1.

In response to the question of whether or not the respondents found the YA useful for employability, 90.5% of the students who had completed the YA found it useful, in comparison with 87.8% of those who were on their YA. These results show that the majority of respondents found the YA useful for future employability. It is worth noting that many of the students who did not work on their YA also chose ‘yes’ in answer to this question.

Figure 1. Activities undertaken during the YA



In response to the question about the skills developed during the YA, respondents cited a wide range of skills, and there seemed to be a consensus about the skills most likely to be developed on the YA, which included intercultural skills (90%), confidence (86%), interpersonal skills (78%), communication (78%), and adaptability (77%). The skills that fewer respondents chose included being result-oriented (11%), commercial awareness (23%), career motivation (24%), creativity (25%), initiative and enterprise (31%), and decisiveness (35%). In the middle, there were many skills that participants agreed that they developed to varying degrees, such as a positive attitude (65%), flexibility (63%), problem solving (60%), responsibility (59%), willingness to learn (53%), and relationship management (44%). It is noticeable from the results that respondents were aware of the skills they developed during the YA. There was similarity between the responses received from YA and final-year students in most instances. There were however some differences; returning students seemed more aware of the skills they developed than YA students. Table 1 below summarises the responses.

It is interesting to note that the results of this small-scale study are consistent with the results of Farrugia and Sanger's (2017) large-scale study, in which

"[the] majority of respondents reported that [SA] helped [them] develop or improve intercultural skills, curiosity, flexibility, […] adaptability, confidence, and self-awareness to a significant degree. [Moreover, a]bout half of respondents felt that [SA helped them develop] interpersonal skills, communication, problem solving, language skills, tolerance for ambiguity, and course or major-related knowledge to a significant degree. [Participants also reported developing] teamwork, leadership, and work ethic […] to a lesser degree" (p.12).

Table 1. Skills developed in the year abroad

Skills developed	**On the YA**	**After the YA**
Ability to work under pressure	35%	46%
Adaptability	77%	77%
Career motivation	35%	14%
Commercial awareness	23%	23%
Communication	75%	82%
Confidence	86%	87%
Creativity	33%	18%
Decision-making	42%	50%
Decisiveness	47%	23%
Flexibility	62%	64%
Initiative and enterprise	35%	28%
Intercultural skills	88%	91%
Interpersonal skills	70%	86%
Leadership	37%	46%
Negotiation and conflict resolution	37%	50%
Networking	28%	46%
Organisation	47%	50%
Positive attitude	61%	68%
Problem solving	56%	63%
Receptiveness to feedback	33%	32%
Relationship management	33%	55%
Responsibility	63%	55%
Results orientation	12%	10%
Self-awareness	65%	55%
Self-confidence	63%	68%
Self-motivation	36%	73%

Showing appreciation	23%	28%
Time management	37%	50%
Tolerance for ambiguity	42%	41%
Trustworthiness	16%	32%
Willingness to learn	37%	68%
Work ethic	21%	36%

The Erasmus Impact Study focused on the impact of mobility on specific personal traits which are positively linked to employability skills, and showed that students engaged in Erasmus study improved their confidence, followed by curiosity, tolerance for ambiguity, serenity, decisiveness, and vigour. This also seems consistent with the findings of the current study for the most part, even though the current study did not examine serenity or vigour in the same way.

In response to the question about whether or not participants had updated their CVs to reflect the skills developed on the YA or had thought about how to present their skills to employers, 90.5% of the respondents who had completed their YA confirmed that they had done so, in comparison with 49% of the respondents who were still on their YA. This reflects the fact that most final-year students would be applying for jobs or postgraduate study, and they needed an up-to-date CV in order to undertake these activities.

The results of the questionnaires demonstrate that the students were aware of the value of the YA for their employability skills. In fact, these results are confirmed year after year by the success stories of students who secure employment after graduation, thanks to the work and volunteering activities they undertook during their YA. Moreover, data on graduate destinations gathered through the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) survey show that destination figures for 2016-2017 MLAC leavers were excellent, with 91% of leavers securing employment and/or going on to further study within six months of graduating, which is higher than the average for Durham University (Durham University Careers and Enterprise Centre, 2018). Moreover, unemployment rates for MLAC leavers are well below the university average. Although the DLHE survey shows no direct correlation between these positive employment

figures and the YA, one could argue that the YA is likely to be one element that contributed to such success.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the YA presents a great opportunity for students to develop a unique set of skills that can improve their employability prospects. Most students are aware of this, and they plan their YA in ways that will maximise their benefit from it. However, for this to happen, students need to plan carefully with the help of their institutions to avoid facing potential problems during their YA. Institutional support can take many forms: careers services can provide induction for students prior to the YA to help them make the best of their placements; institutions can assist students in securing placements with partners who provide quality work placements for students. Institutions should also have legal requirements, such as contracts with work placement providers, that help guarantee that students' working conditions are positive and fair. In addition, students need to be conscious of the skills they have developed during the YA abroad and present them clearly to employers.

7. Supplementary materials

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/htlaaoueihozomb5ljfxyh8iy2nad60u

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Author index

This volume draws together a selection of papers from YAC2018, the first meeting in the annual Year Abroad Conference series, which took place at Newcastle University in September 2018. The contributions collected here examine some of the opportunities, gains, and challenges the Year Abroad brings for both students and staff. They are presented around the five broad themes around which YAC2018 was organised: mental health, year abroad preparation, student perception of the year abroad, year abroad assessment, and employability.

This volume will be of interest to academics and professional services staff involved in the preparation, administration, and management of the year abroad.

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