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

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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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11

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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