

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

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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?

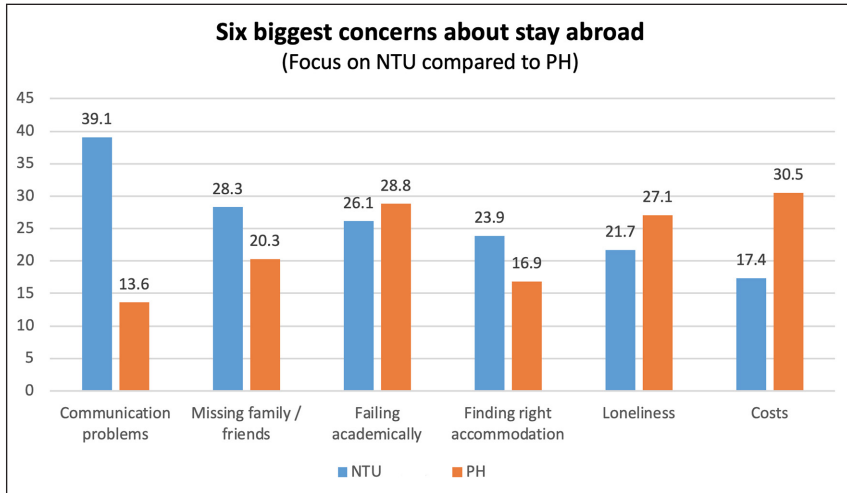
3.1.1. Open questions

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%).

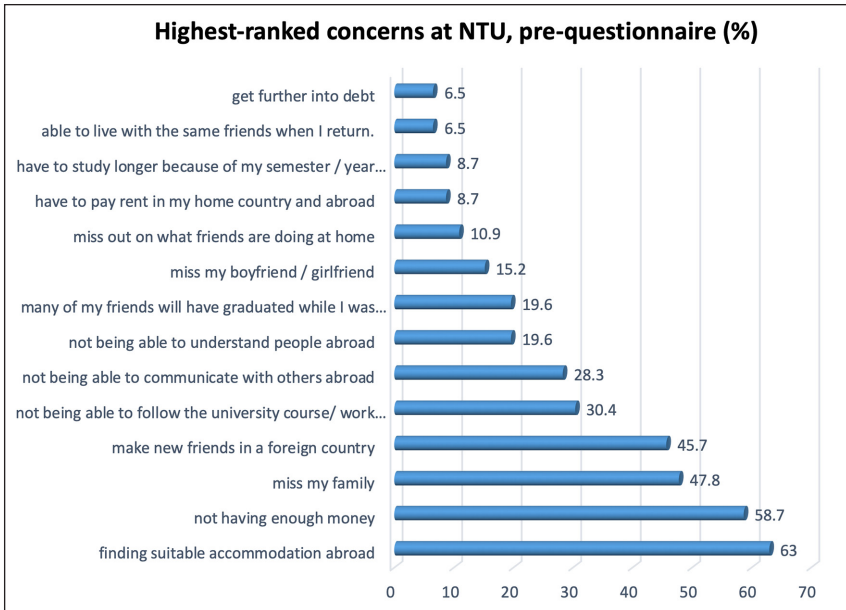
Different types of questions, i.e. whether answers were elicited through free text or by ranking predefined concerns, could lead to varying results. The concern about incurring costs exemplifies this difference starkly: in the open questions, 17.4% of the British participants expressed concerns about 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

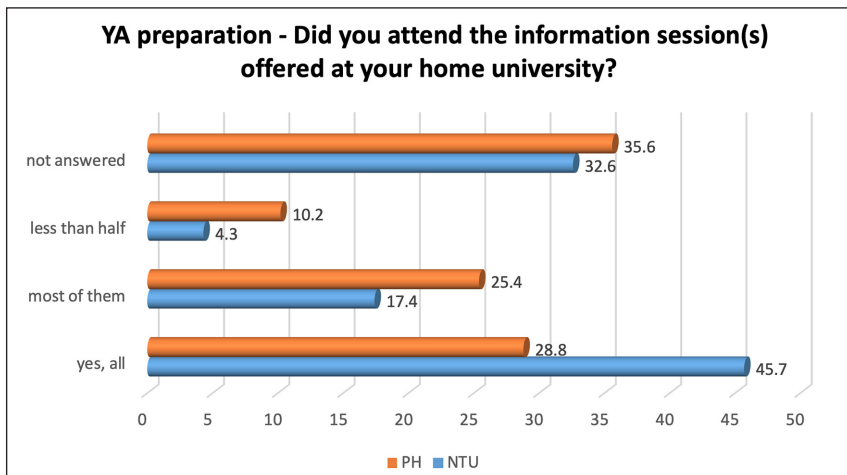
produced close results: 58.7% of NTU students, and 55.9% of PH participants. The results regarding concerns about missing the family show a larger difference between the cohorts: NTU 47.8% compared with PH 33.9%.

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 responses³.

“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

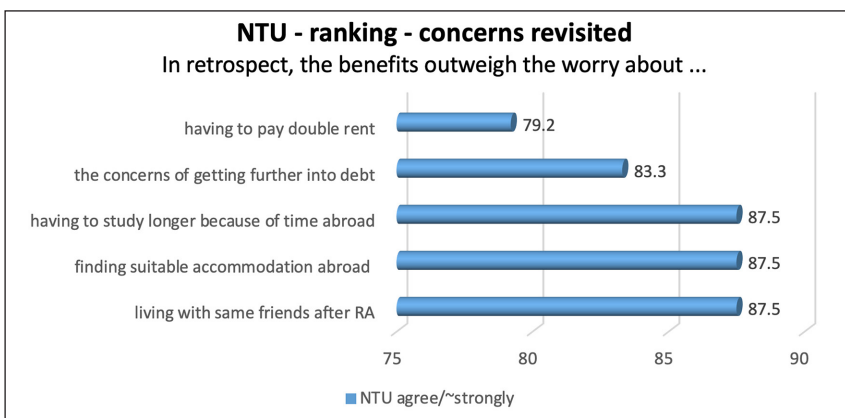
3. Multiple coding per student response was possible.

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/kbw12i44u72vx3zwrphubknvpvg92el>

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