

10 Embedding employability in year abroad preparation

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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 Weeks². 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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