

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

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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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How to cite this chapter: Zaher, A. (2020). The year abroad and employability skills for language students at Durham University. In S. Salin, D. Hall & C. Hampton (Eds), *Perspectives on the year abroad: a selection of papers from YAC2018* (pp. 121-130). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.39.1057>

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.

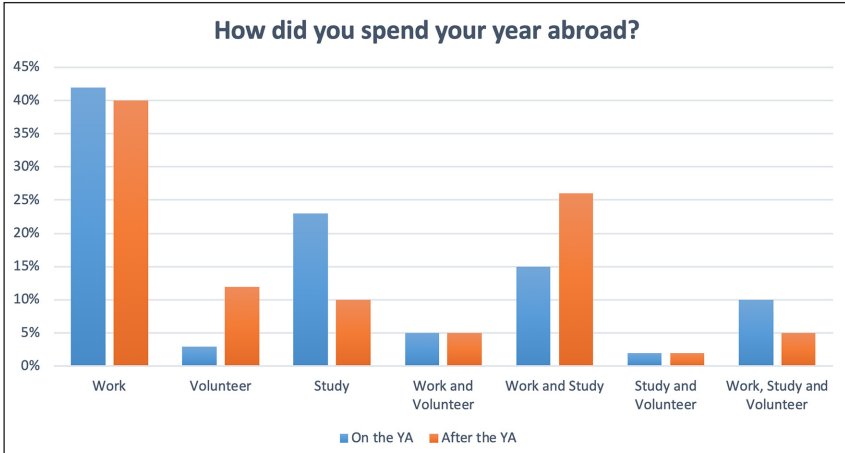
5. Discussion of outcomes

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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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
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Perspectives on the year abroad: a selection of papers from YAC2018
Edited by Sandra Salin, Damien Hall, and Cathy Hampton

Publication date: 2020/03/16

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ISBN13: 978-2-490057-57-3 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-58-0 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-56-6 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mars 2020.
