

The Language Scholar



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Edited by Clare Wright, Kazuki Morimoto and Ruba Khamam

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The Leeds Language Scholar Journal

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The Language Scholar is hosted by the Centre for Excellence in Language Teaching within the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds. It considers international contributions in multimedia formats, in and about any language (including ancient languages). It aims to provide a space for the development of scholarship in language education, and to provide a platform for pieces which highlight the potential of multimodality to enhance communication, including a supportive and developmental approach to peer review.

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Editorial

Clare Wright, Kazuki Morimoto, and Ruba Khamam

This special issue of the Language Scholar showcases work arising from the second Year Abroad Conference, held in Leeds in September 2019.

The newly created Year Abroad Conference series, first held in Newcastle in 2018, is a unique platform for academics and professional staff involved in YA, including residence abroad coordinators, study abroad officers, mental health, disability and student support colleagues. The Conference offers the chance to come together to share their expertise, experience and practice in all aspects of the YA, whether language-related or in other disciplines. Post Brexit, the benefits for students going on a Year Abroad (YA) is more valuable than ever to boost language and cultural skills, resilience and employability in a globalising world. Yet aiming for YA success creates many complex challenges for students and staff, particularly on compulsory language-focused YA (see Salin et al, 2020 for a helpful introduction and overview of key issues). The complexity of these challenges has also increased exponentially in 2020, given the current climate of uncertainty of access to Erasmus, precariousness of higher education funding, global slowdown and post-pandemic constraints on movement.

The event, hosted by Leeds' School of Languages, Cultures and Societies and Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence, focused on the theme 'Thinking Global'. Themes of the Leeds conference aimed particularly to focus on the longer-range span over the YA journey from predeparture to re-entry, including how students could be better supported in adapting to new settings, pedagogically, socially and psychologically. Handling students' mental health difficulties during YA was identified as an urgent area of concern, not least in areas where intercultural differences may impact on recognising and treating mental health issues. Other areas of interest included how to work more closely with students for clearer expectations over YA, how to better boost longer-term employability opportunities, and looking to wider horizons beyond Europe.

The conference was a great success with nearly 100 attendees from around the UK and EU. We had 32 presentations on a wide variety of topics, and a well-attended workshop dedicated to student mental health support. Attendees represented all aspects of the YA experience, spanning academic, professional, institutional staff and early career researchers. We were particularly grateful to our keynote speaker, Professor Ros Mitchell (University of Southampton) for her informative presentation and discussion about the longer-term impact of YA experiences on identity and future life choices.

The eleven articles presented here, carefully selected and peer-reviewed, represent the breadth of those presentations, including early career researchers through to seasoned established scholars. Nine are research studies, based on the authors' empirical research, addressing language-related themes as well as broader issues of cultural or disciplinary adjustment. We also have two shorter scholarbits, offering useful and practical insights into changing ways for working with students to help them make the most of their YA experiences. This special issue serves as a sister volume to that referred to above, published by Sandra Salin, Damien Hall and Cathy Hampton, the organisers of the Newcastle conference. That volume is highly recommended to readers and is freely available online here - <https://research-publishing.net/book?10.14705/rpnet.2020.39.9782490057573>

The contributions have been grouped as follows to highlight overarching themes from the conference:

- Mental health and emotional experiences - Takako Amano (UCLAN), Anne-Charlotte Husson and Damien Hall (Newcastle University), Emine Çakir and Julide Inozu (University of Oxford).
- Expectations, motivations and potential mismatches across the YA journey - Simon McKinnon (Durham University), Martin Ward and Mika Takewa (University of Leeds), Clare Wright and Ying Peng (University of Leeds), and Claire Reid (University of Portsmouth) (Scholarbits).
- Adjustments to local realities - Chloe Wallace (University of Leeds), Hahn Pho (Newcastle University).
- Student voices and mediators in YA prep and reflective learning - Fumiko Narumi-Munro and Mihoko Pooley (University of Edinburgh) and Siobhan Mortell (University of Cork) (Scholarbits).

We start with papers addressing students' mental and emotional states during YA, identified at the conference as a rapidly growing area of concern for YA staff, academic tutors as well as professional

support staff, and of course, students themselves. Takako Amano's paper sets the scene for discussions of mental health, taking a corpus-based approach on terminology and how institutions understand the terms. She finds gaps between home and host universities in how mental health concerns can be identified, and provides a useful worksheet to check common understanding of key terms, to help partner institutions across different cultures and settings work together more effectively to support YA students.

Anne-Charlotte Husson and Damien Hall's paper is a sensitive and insightful analysis of mental health problems found among students and staff as addressed in their workshop. They present a helpful synopsis of discussions and draw out several recommendations - including coaching students in strategies to handle the unpredictability of YA, and raising awareness of different cultural attitudes to mental health around the world. They also recommend ensuring better support and stability for YA officers, through longer-term appointments, investment in culture-specific training in mental health issues, and flagging up the possibility, if necessary, of removing the compulsory component of YA residence for some individuals.

Emine Çakir and Julide Inozu change direction, while staying on the topic of the role of emotion during YA. Their in-depth case study examines patterns of emotional behaviours that may affect the learning process while abroad. Using two detailed personal narratives of two learners of Turkish, they present evidence of the ways that emotions either enhance learning or could be detrimental. Using motivational theories of current and imagined selves, they draw out intriguing and nuanced insights into how the way we feel about how we see ourselves can impact on our language development.

In the next section, the papers look at the very varied nature of student expectations over the whole arc of pre-, during- and post-YA, as well as ways in which institutional preparation may do better at shaping expectations and outcomes for the YA. Simon McKinnon's paper looks at issues arising over perceived purpose and value of the YA. He presents data drawn from interviews with staff and students, as well as evidence found in institutional and national policy documents, identifying areas of mismatch between institutional and student priorities. He makes some helpful recommendations for taking the student perspective more into account, particularly in relation to design of support during the YA and academic assessment of YA outcomes, since he argues students will engage better with learning that better matches their priorities.

Martin Ward and Mika Takewa's paper looks at fluctuating motivation in studying non-European languages such as Japanese. They take an interesting long-term perspective on possible reasons for studying Japanese across the degree journey from application to graduation, e.g. whether instrumental motivation for work purposes, or more general interest for linguistic or cultural purposes. Comparing themes identified in UCAS application statements, against evidence from post-YA assessment reflections, and topics chosen for final year projects, the authors find little evidence of any clear long-term motivational decisions lasting over the whole degree cycle. While this may be a salutary warning against assuming students have fixed or strong motivations for studying a language from the start, their study also offers signs of students' growing perceptions of a richer range of benefits of language degrees as they progress through the YA and beyond.

Clare Wright and Ying Peng's paper also looks beyond European horizons, tracking Chinese-degree students' expectations and experiences during YA. Following on from their study of pre-departure students' perceptions of YA (reported in Salin et al, 2020), this study reports on students' experiences during YA and after returning home. The data suggest that students can adapt relatively successfully to YA and on return, contradicting the evidence of an expectation gap noted in their previous study, though Joint Honours students tended to want more extensive targeted support. However, students' capacity to engage fully in the local context, developing well-grounded authentic intercultural awareness, remained patchy, in view of evidence of lack of regular contact with local people for social or other activities. This suggests, in line with their previous study, that some students may tend towards a somewhat superficial "cultural consumption" view of YA life. Similarly, autonomy in maintaining language abilities on return, and awareness of the value of the YA experience to build future employability remained variable at best. They provide the questionnaire used as the basis for the study, inviting others interested in student YA experiences to use it by permission for further study in other settings.

Claire Reid presents a highly accessible and practice-based review of her institution's work on improving students' readiness for the YA, but here, this is not through adding thorough training in more and more minutiae about aspects of life abroad. Instead she promotes the value of "less is more", not least because of the evidence, from former students themselves, of the highly individually varied nature of each student's life during YA, and the enjoyment they had in finding things out for themselves. She emphasises the value her institution is now placing on moving away

from detailed briefings, and training students instead in developing more flexible and adaptable mindsets, independent problem-solving skills and confidence in communicating back to home support teams, so that they can better handle “being thrown in at the deep end”.

In the next section, the two papers home in on some of the detailed experiences of students adapting to local realities, whether in disciplinary or linguistic aspects. Chloe Wallace’s paper addresses very different levels of adjustments required during YA amongst Law students from the University of Leeds, comparing the experiences of Joint Honours students (Law with French) studying in France, and ‘ordinary’ LLB Law students taking a year abroad in Australia. From her survey of students in both settings, it seems that the value of the YA to students’ academic development depended greatly on the country visited and that experience may be more academically valuable where difference is more visible. Students in France felt they had to do more to adapt to the very different culture, but this was relatively rewarding as the intellectual level was not that challenging. Students in Australia felt the culture was less different so worked less hard, and may have missed chances to maximise the value of their YA opportunity. Efforts need therefore to be made to draw students’ attention to how to adapt appropriately in order to ensure that they get the most academically out of their year abroad.

Hanh Pho’s study explores the struggles that international students can face in early stages of YA in the UK, not least when they do not easily understand unfamiliar varieties of English speech. In interviews with newly-arrived students, she found positive evidence that socio-cultural adaptation to UK was not problematic, but that students felt great psychological pressure adjusting to the pace of academic work, allied to lack of comprehension of the variety of English accents they found, even for students with more advanced English language proficiency. She finishes with recommendations for much more training, pre-departure and on arrival at the host university, in helping to familiarise students with a greater range of English speech varieties they are likely to encounter, whether among international lecturers, or in local speakers, and for lecturers to show more understanding of the difficulties which unfamiliar accents can create.

In the final section, the two studies here forefront the student voice, whether as mediators in YA preparation, or by increasing opportunities for reflective learning. Fumiko Narumi-Munro and Mihoko Pooley (University of Edinburgh) report on an innovative and creative way of using final year students as language mentors to pre-YA students, in line with the Japanese concept of ‘Senpai-

Kōhai' support (senior-junior in Japanese). After observing limitations on previous practices based around unstructured, informal chats between returning students and outgoing students, the authors report on a more task-based structured approach, in which returning students deliver some YA-focused teaching activities to the pre-departure students, as part of a summatively marked language assessment. The activities, taught entirely in Japanese, provide useful 'information' on the year abroad as well as 'teach' useful expressions and phrases in the L2 target language. Narumi-Munro and Pooley emphasise the benefits to motivation and linguistic development for both student cohorts, while for post-YA students, the experience helps clarify how the YA impacts on their success both in their degree programme and beyond graduation. The authors finish with suggested ways in which the task-based approach could be further improved and adapted to other languages.

Siobhan Mortell concludes this special issue by presenting a useful pedagogic tool for fostering deeper student self-awareness of the value of the YA experience, which is then used to inspire the next cohort of YA students. She has developed a structured task-based module in which students produce a portfolio of reflective work through the cycle of arrival to departure, including dealing with hopes and fears, and focusing on future potential employability benefits. Two particular elements of the module provide innovative approaches to boosting the value of such student reflections. The module starts with tasks aiming to capture information which can easily be lost as the year goes on - by requiring students in the first couple of months to introduce the reader/listener to their location or university (task A) and give tips on how to make the most of the year abroad experience, or compare their home institution with the host institution (task B), the tasks can provide a wealth of local student-focused insight which no staff member can offer. And by offering a variety of digital formats such as writing a blog, creating a website or an online magazine, or using video or animation, to complete their tasks, the students develop new skills and creative talents. Mortell finishes with emphasising how this task-based approach shows the students the value of the YA - by making progress visible to students through the different tasks, and ensuring they have evidence of how they have handled potentially challenging or anxious situations, but giving them agency in how they present this, this can bring great satisfaction.

REFERENCE

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Papers



Communicating Issues of Students in Relation to Mental Health and Identifying Blind Spots of Support Networks of Year Abroad

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies students' mental health issues that are unique to the year/study/period¹ abroad programme to start and it draws attention to the interchangeably used terms that refer to mental health related concerns. By employing on-line corpora, it carries out quantitative analyses of terms used when mental health related issues are communicated between 1991-1994 mainly in Britain and as of 2017 in various Englishes. Based on these corpus analyses, not only the mostly used and diminishing terms but also emerging terms are identified. Whilst *mental illness* remains the most used term over the decades, it is found that *mental health issue/s* and *anxiety disorder/s* are rapidly increasing their usages. The study further explores *mental health crisis/crises*, the third fast growing term in terms of their usages, in the context of period abroad. Based on the clinical definition by the Joint commissioning panel for mental health (JCPMH), it examines the support network of students abroad who face mental health crises by suggesting a worksheet, which analyses the roles of period abroad coordinators and support staff of both home and host institutions by simulating a crisis case. The suggested worksheet identifies blind spots of an existing support network and varied roles that period abroad coordinators are expected to undertake. This study further supports the notion of the heavy reliance on period abroad coordinators who have been under a pressure to carry out varied and specialist roles at times of mental health crises of students on their period abroad.

KEYWORDS: mental health, crisis/crises, study/period/year abroad, student, corpus/corpora

¹ A period of studying abroad differ course to course: not all students spend an entire year abroad and it may involve work placement. Hence in this article *a period abroad* is used throughout thereafter.

INTRODUCTION

In the UK, the Mental Health Foundation reports “the declining state of student mental health in universities and the rapid increase of the total reported number of students who have *mental health problems*” (2018) and in the context of Higher Education (HE thereafter) sector, Broglia et al. (2018) also confirm the demand for the *mental health needs* of students is accelerating. Moreover, according to Royal College of Psychiatrists, when looking at the whole student population in the UK, it has to be acknowledged that the numbers of students in HE have expanded rapidly, and they are from more culturally and socially diverse backgrounds. Students are drawn from backgrounds historically low rates of participation in HE. In addition, social changes such as the withdrawal of financial support, higher rates of family breakdown and economic recession are all having an impact on the *well-being* of students (2011, p.7). These references support anecdotal statements by academic and service staff that they feel they have been attending to more and more students with mental health related concerns in wider and varied manners in UK HE and it is unavoidable to refer to studies by mental health support organisations and in the psychiatric field when discussing student mental health issues as the fields are clearly inter-linked. A question arises: are there any mental health related issues that are distinctively unique to period abroad programmes that have not been investigated yet? And are there any blind spots that have yet been noticed?

The figure of “One-in-four adults (...) experience *mental illness* during their lifetime” (National Health Service England, ND) or “Approximately 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a *mental health problem* each year” (Mind, 2013) have been often cited when discussing the large and growing numbers of the student population with issues related to their mental health in HE. It is noticeable that NHS England and Mind use the terms *mental illness* and *mental health problem* as if they are interchangeable. In addition, academic and administrative staff in UK HE who are directly dealing with students may have been using terms such as *mental wellbeing* or *well-being*, *mental illness*, *mental health issues*, *mental health concerns* and so forth as if they are synonyms. Have these terms been mainstream worldwide and interchangeable so that when communicating with colleagues at partner institutions abroad they are used under the same understanding?

This study firstly sums up what are considered unique to students’ mental health concerns in the context of the period abroad from available literature. It then examines various terms in literature that refer to mental health related issues by employing online corpora. Although when defined by

linguists, corpus may be considered mainly for a quantitative analysis for areas of linguistics, study of language or theories of language (McEnery and Hardie 2011), when it is combined with another area of study, it may further its potential as a means of research. This paper attempts to make a humble contribution by combining the widely available online corpora and references from the field of psychiatry in order to visualise blind spots in the support network for students abroad in crises.

WHAT IS UNIQUE TO A PERIOD ABROAD PROGRAMME IN RELATION TO STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES?

During their² period abroad, the student may get in touch to request their withdrawal from the programme as early as on the day of arrival at the host institution. Or their host institution may directly contact the coordinator requesting a withdrawal of the student based on their observation that the student's mental health is deteriorating but it is often without direct communication with or consent from the student.³ Receiving such communication puts the coordinator in an awkward situation in relation to the General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR.⁴

Based on a small scale of database, Hunley (2010) concluded that "students experiencing more psychological distress and more loneliness did demonstrate lower levels of functioning while studying abroad" (p.389). This reference makes period abroad programmes look high risk for students with mental health concerns. However, according to the Joint Commissioning Panel for Mental Health⁵ (ND), (JCPMH), perceptions of mental health crisis are highly individual. Students with mental health issues often believe or are advised that the current environment is the cause of their problems so a complete change of environment is encouraged for their condition, such as "Since arriving in Prague, both my depression and anxiety have significantly improved" (usatoday

² Gender free pronouns are going to be employed throughout this article.

³ For example, in Japan, university students are often regarded in need of guardian. On-site medical centre at the host institution or approved physician submit medical note of the student to the institution first before the student gets to see it and it is without a consent of the student. Such medical notes are sent to the coordinator at the home institution.

⁴ GDPR was enforceable from 25th May 2018 in UK.

⁵ Joint Commissioning Panel for Mental Health is co-chaired by the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Royal College of General Practitioners.

2016⁶). Furthermore, Bathke and Kim (2016) carried out a statistical analysis of the state of student mental health when they are abroad and they reached a positive finding that “studying abroad seemed to improve mental health in some areas” (p.11). Therefore, it is premature to conclude that proceeding to the period abroad programme worsens or risks student’s mental health.

NHS national services of Scotland (ND) lists a wide range of factors that are considered to disrupt stable mental health during travel:

- Separation from family and friends.
- Time zone changes and jet lag/sleep deprivation.
- Disruption of normal routines and travel delays.
- Unfamiliar surroundings and presence of strangers.
- Culture Shock and sense of isolation.
- Language barriers.
- Use of drugs and alcohol.
- Physical ill health during travel.
- Forgetting to take medication regularly.
- Type of travel; some forms have a higher risk e.g. business, family events (wedding/funeral) and volunteer/aid work.

In addition, Bathke and Kim (2016) listed culture shock, relationships, abuse of alcohol and other drugs, grief and coping with loss. Moreover, Oropeza et al. displayed more rigorous entries such as changes in status, expectations about academic performance, alienation, discrimination and miscellaneous stressors in addition to isolation, family related pressures and cultural shock (1991, p.280-1).

Period abroad coordinators know that it is not only during the period abroad but also at pre- and post-period abroad stages they are expected to deal with a variety of issues that are related to students’ mental health needs. In cases of the pre-period abroad stage, internal staff may be in

⁶ <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/college/2016/04/06/voices-studying-abroad-is-helping-me-cope-with-mental-illness/37415699/> This story originally appeared on the USA TODAY College blog, a news source produced for college students by student journalists. The blog closed in September of 2017. Published 10:00 AM EDT Apr 6, 2016

touch with the coordinator regarding a student who is aiming to progress onto their period abroad but is failing to submit assessments for core/compulsory modules, poor attendance, relationships with staff or peers, poor management of finance, insomnia and so on that may carry on during their period abroad. The student's host institution may also be in touch to enquire about unsettled bills, non-submitted reports or testimonials that had been the agreed conditions of institutional scholarship or students' social media posts that defamed the host institution at their post-period abroad stage. These varied issues involving partner institutions abroad are expected to be resolved by the period abroad coordinators hence they complicate the overall experience of coordinators who directly deal with the students.

HOW TO CALL IT

From directly cited references, *mental wellbeing*, *mental health problems*, *mental health crisis*, *mental health needs* or *mental illness* have been introduced so far in this article. But have they always been used and widely communicated by all concerned and shared the same understanding of such terms when they are used? In this section, by introducing how major health institutions such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), National Health Service (NHS) and American Psychiatric Association (APA), define mental health related terms, the boundaries of such terms are examined and quantify which terms are frequently used.

Mental Wellbeing, Mental Health Problems, Mental Health Crises, Mental Illness or something else?

In its action plan (2013) the WHO describes *mental health* as "an integral part of health and well-being" (p.7) and that *mental disorders* "denote a range of mental and behavioural disorders that fall within the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, Tenth revision (ICD-10)" (p.6). Or they define *mental health* as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community" (WHO 2014). *Mental disorders* are described as "generally characterized by some combination of abnormal thoughts, emotions, behaviour and relationships with others. Examples are schizophrenia, depression, intellectual disabilities and disorders due to drug abuse" (WHO 2019).

Whilst the APA explains *mental illnesses* as “health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these)” and *mental health* as “the foundation for emotions, thinking, communication, learning, resilience and self-esteem. *Mental health* is also key to relationships, personal and emotional well-being and contributing to community or society” (Parekh 2018).

When we turn our attention back to the UK, “*mental health* is treated on a par with physical health”(NHS England ND) and “*Mental wellbeing* means feeling good about yourself and the world around you, and being able to get on with life in the way you want” (NHS 2018). The charity organisation Mind repeatedly uses *mental health problems* but, in its subcategory, there exist names of disorders such as anxiety disorder, depression, phobias, OCD, panic attack, psychotic disorder, suicidal thoughts and so forth. According to the Mental Health Foundation, anxiety and depression are the most common *mental health problems* with around 1 in 10 people affected at any one time whilst between one and two in every 100 people experience a severe *mental illness*, such as bi-polar disorder or schizophrenia, and have periods when they lose touch with reality (2019b).

As seen, it seems boundaries of terms used have been left vague and there are preferred terms that have been used by each institution. In fact, “There is little consistency in how severe mental illness (SMI) is defined in practice, and no operational definitions” (Ruggeri et al. 2000, p.149). In addition, the phrases to refer to mental health related matters also seem to have been left to emerge amongst non-medical experts. In the next section such phenomena are depicted by employing English corpora.

The emergence of terms

The terms that refer to mental health issues that made appearances in various cited articles, *Mental Health*, *Mental Illness*, *Mental Disorder/s*, *Mental Health Crisis/Crises*, *Mental Wellbeing*, *Mental Health Issue/s*, *Mental Health Problem/s*, *Mental Ill health*, *Mental Health Concern/s*, have been analysed firstly with the Lancaster British National Corpus web. Lancaster BNCweb is based on 98,313,429 words out of 4,048 primarily British English texts between years 1991 and 1994. This particular corpus has been chosen in order to show what terms had been generally used in the UK before statistics of the student mobility by the British Council⁷ was made easily accessible that is from 1996 onward (British Council 2020). Table 1 shows that Lancaster BNCweb only picked up three

⁷ The data held by the British Council dates back as far as 1978.

such terms with significance, *Mental Health*, *Mental Illness*, *Mental Disorder/s*, whilst other terms only displayed a few or zero instances. It suggests the other terms were not regularly used in Britain at least during 1991-1994 and possibly before that period.

Samples	Mental Health	Mental Illness	Mental Disorder/s	Mental Health Crisis/ Crises	Mental Wellbeing/s Mental well being/s	Mental Health Issue/s	Mental Health Problem/s	Mental Ill health	Mental Health Concern/s
HITS (Out of 98,313,429 words)	927 hits	362 hits	154 / 37 hits	zero	Zero/ Zero/ 2/ zero	Zero/ 2 hits	4/ 78 hits	3 hits	zero

Table 1: Instances in the Lancaster BNCweb (Last accessed 10/July 2019)

Samples	Mental Health	Mental Illness	Mental Disorders	Mental Health Crisis/ Crises	Mental Wellbeing/s /Mental well being/s	Mental Health Issue/ Issues	Mental Health Problem/s	Mental Ill health	Mental Health Concern/s
FREQ (Out of 14 billion words)	333,291	77,574	7,918	1,821/ 233	3,074 / 1/ 727/ zero	2,044/ 22366	2,913/ 15,591	2	199/ 1,645

Table 2: Instances in the iweb (Last accessed 10/July 2019)

By unlimiting it to British English in early 1990's and using a much wider database, more terms that are related to mental health emerge. Table 2 displays the results for the same terms, but they have been analysed by the iweb. iweb is based on the database of 14 billion words in 22 million web pages in US, CA, UK, IE, AU and NZ Englishes as of 2017 and they claim to offer unparalleled insight into variation in English (English corpora 2017). Interestingly despite iweb 2017 being a much larger database, *mental ill health* remains a minority entry with only a couple of instances like it was found in Lancaster BNCweb. It is also noticeable that *mental wellbeings* is the only sample out of the entries that its plural form has less hits than its singular form based on the analysis.

Table 3 has been created to depict the significance of emergence and growing popularities of terms. The growth rates of various mental health related terms have increased more than that of the entire database to confirm that the references to mental health are growing in general. It is noticeable that *mental health issue/s* and *anxiety disorder/s* are the fastest growing entries. If it is assumed that Lancaster BNCweb kept on growing into the size of iweb over 23 years from 1914 to 2017, the

annual growth of instances over the same period for *mental health issue/s* and *anxiety disorder/s* are 53,054.34% and 49,267.39% respectively, whilst the calculated annual growth rate of the entire database size is only 614.79%. Furthermore, despite *mental illness* scoring the highest in both corpora, its growth rate remains only 359.49% and *Mental disorder/s* that were commonly used in the UK in 1994 score only 175.89%. Although these medical or blunt unequivocal terms are still growing but not at the rapid growth rate of *mental health issue/s*, which are overarching terms for more general reference. These results suggest that referring to mental health related concerns have been occurring more and more over the years in English and the favoured terms used are less blunt. When communicating with overseas partner institutions where English is not their dominant language, it is recommended to use more general terms instead of blunt terms and avoid random use of synonyms for the sake of appearance to confuse the recipients.

			Instances in Lancaster BNCweb (98,313,429)	Instances in iweb intelligent based (14 Billion) in 22,388,141 web pages from 94,391 websites	Annual growth rate for the instances over 23 years from BNCweb to iweb
mental	health	Issue/s	2	24,407	53,054.34%
anxiety	disorder/s		2	22,665	49,267.39%
mental	health	crisis/es	⁸ 0	2,054	8,926.08%
mental	wellbeing		2	3,073 + (well being=727)	8,256.52%
mental	health	condition/s	0	1,844	8,013.04%
mental	health	challenge/s	0	1,471	6,391.30%
mental	health	difficulty/ies	4	1,448	1,613.04%
spiritual	wellbeing		2	338 + (well being=261)	1,297.82%
mental	health	problem/s	82	18,504	976.77%
mental	illness		927	77,574	359.49%
mental	disorder/s		191	7918	175.89%
mental	ill	health	3	2	-1.44%

Table 3: Annual growth rate from Lancaster BNCweb 1991-1994 to iweb 2017 for each entry of term

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AND CRISES IN THE CONTEXT OF PERIOD ABROAD

Based on the analysis in the previous chapter, it is noticeable that the third emergent and growing entry, *mental health crisis or crises*, clearly implies urgency hence immediate attention is required

⁸ When growth rate is calculated for 0 instances in this column, 1 is used.

either medically or institutionally unlike other entries listed on the Table 3. What do *mental health crisis or crises* mean in the context of the period abroad? A student may face *crisis* or *crises*, or period abroad coordinators may have to deal with multiple *crises*. In this section, depicting the expectations of the period abroad coordinator at times of crises in the context of period abroad is attempted.

Clinical Definitions

There are a variety of descriptions similar to dictionary entries such as “A mental health crisis often means that you no longer feel able to cope or be in control of your situation” (NHS 2019). Charity bodies such as the Mental Health Foundation or Mind define a mental health crisis as “an emergency that poses a direct and immediate threat to your physical or emotional wellbeing. There is no one set definition of what a crisis entails; it is highly personal to each individual case and can be escalated by service users, their carers, or family/friends according to what they consider normal/abnormal” (Mental Health Foundation 2019) or “A *mental health crisis* is when you feel your *mental health* is at breaking point, and you need urgent help and support. ... Some people feel in *crisis* as part of ongoing *mental health problems*, or due to stressful and difficult life experiences such as abuse, bereavement, addiction, money problems or housing problems” (mind 2013b). The common key points here seem to be *who* are involved and their individual perspectives are expected and respected when dealing with crises. Having these points in mind, JCPMH (ND)’s definition gives a clearer perspective when defining crises:

- **Self-definition:** defined by *the person or carer* as a fundamental part of that *person* owning the experience and their recovery. Identifying potential crises is a skill that can be developed as part of self-management.
- **Negotiated or flexible definition:** defined as outside the manageable range for the individual, carer or society; to use *the crisis service*, a decision is reached between *the user* and *the worker*.
- **Pragmatic, service orientated definition:** defined by *the service* as a *personal or social situation* that has broken down where mental distress is a significant contributing factor. Crisis is a behavioural change that brings *the user* to the attention of *crisis services* and this for example might result from relapse of an existing mental illness. For *the team*, however, the crisis is the impact of the change on *the user* and the disruption it causes to their life and *social networks*.

- **Risk-focused definitions:** viewed as a relatively sudden situation in which there is an imminent risk of harm to *the self* or *others* and judgement is impaired – a psychiatric emergency – the beginning, deterioration or relapse of a mental illness.
- **Theoretical definitions:** where crisis is viewed as a turning point towards health or illness, a self-limiting period of a few days to six weeks in which environmental stress leads to a state of psychological disequilibrium. Crisis is defined on the basis of the severity, not the type of problem facing *the individual*, and whether any acknowledged trigger factors for a crisis are present.

Their definitions involve *who*: individuals and organisations/institutions. The next section explores the possibility of adapting this JCPMH's definition to the context of a period abroad programme to form a base of situational crisis analysis in order to visualise *who* are taking what kind of roles at times of student crises abroad and identify blind spots if any.

Who takes care of the crisis?

When the JSPMH definition is viewed in the context of a period abroad programme, it seems safe to presume that the interchangeable terms such as the person, the user, the self or the individual, all directly refer to the student. On the other hand, when attempting to assign responsibilities of the following roles, it suddenly becomes unclear *who* they could be, how much responsibility that they are expected to carry, when and in which situation at times of student crises abroad:

- the carer
- the crisis service
- the worker
- the team
- social network
- others

In order to analyse how these identified roles by the JSPMH can be distributed to all concerned who may be involved with the student with mental health issues in the context of a period abroad programme, a worksheet has been prepared. Table 4 is the created sheet for an attempt to examine a case of a student who had no pre-existing mental health issues prior to their period abroad. Because of an accident that they were involved in, they were carried into The Accident and Emergency (A&E) department at hospital and were placed in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). The coordinator arrived at the hospital with the student's next of kin from the UK. The coordinator firstly

met with the representative from the host institution and visited the student at the ward. The ICU syndrome, temporary but serious psychiatric symptoms, were observed that the coordinator coincidentally possessed a good knowledge of, therefore a meeting with the physician in charge was requested on the day and it was negotiated that the student to be moved to less harsh environment.

	the carer	The crisis service	the worker	The team	Social network	others
the student's next of kin or nominee	√ Priority ⁹ 1				√ ¹⁰	
Study Abroad Coordinator (Academic)	√ Priority 1	√ Not qualified psychiatrist but noticed the CTU syndrome	√ Spoke on behalf of the student whilst they were in critical condition	√	√	
Host institution staff who have direct contact with the student	√ Priority shift 1→2 ¹¹			√	√	
International Office and/or Student Service of host institution	√ Priority 1 →2	√	√	√	√	
Student services of originating UK institution		√		√	√	
Host institution's nominated psychiatric clinician	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Student services of originating UK institution nominated psychiatric clinician				√		
student's friends on the same course					√	
existing friends via the social media					√	
children and adults who the student has direct contact with such as host family, local community, work placements					√	
Any other: specify (A&E, physician)		√	√	√		

Table 4: A case study of a student who developed CTU syndrome with no prior mental health issues

⁹ Priority: numbered if the responsibility is shared by more than one agent.

¹⁰ √: indicates some involvement.

¹¹ Several staff at the host institution were taking the priority position until the arrival of the period abroad coordinator from the student's home institution.

Discussion

Despite the next of kin being present, due to the emergency as well as cultural and language barriers it was the study abroad coordinator who acted for the best interest of the student. The worksheet also depicted the status of the host institution as *the carer* shifted from priority 1 to 2 as soon as the coordinator arrived. Furthermore, despite the coordinator not being a qualified medical expert or a social worker, the responsibilities that are carried out by the coordinator involved such roles amongst others because such positions were unoccupied and nobody else could fill them on behalf of the student when outside the UK. The coordinator became the key person on behalf of *the user* in English and Japanese to begin with, later between *the user* and the hospital/physician in charge and the host institution. Most importantly what the worksheet highlighted is this heavy reliance on the period abroad coordinator outside their trained capacities when dealing with crises abroad.

This worksheet and the method of filling it in are both at very early stages of development and are in need of improvement with further research with various case studies, but it has successfully identified blind spots and ambiguities of the division of responsibilities or roles in this particular case of crisis that previously were hard to visualise. It also has shown the potential that there may be other roles that the period abroad coordinator may have to fill in at times of crises at different situation, location and season abroad.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated terms that refer to mental health related concerns in various literatures using corpora. It confirmed that usages of many mental health related terms have grown significantly larger than the growth rate of the database. *Mental illness* remains the most used term over two decades but *mental health issue/s* have been identified as the emerging and fast-growing overarching term when referring to mental health related matters. Previously well used terms in UK, namely *mental disorder/s*, are found not to have grown much. The results suggest that while over the years users of the English language refer to mental health related concerns more and more, at the same time they come to favour more indirect and less harsh terms. This may be explained due to the culture of softening and chiselling the edges of expression off, in this case students' mental health, as well as the expectation of the use of synonyms to avoid repetition when writing formally in English. It would be ideal if mental health experts put together guidelines that define the boundaries of each term but as terms emerge and develop where the needs are, that may be an

unrealistic expectation. Therefore, when communicating with overseas institutions, staff from institutions where English being their operational language may want to choose terms generally referring to the condition of students instead of using unequivocal terms.

The third classified emerging entry from this investigation, *mental health crisis/crises*, although their growth rate is not as significant as that of *mental health issue/s*, this term stands out from the rest of the samples with their urgent implications. They were further explored in the context of the period abroad programme with the creation of a worksheet that is based on the JCPMH's clinical definitions. The worksheet depicted blind spots in the support network that is formed by the student's home and the host institution at a time of crisis. Multiple roles to support the student during the mental health crisis have been identified in this simulation and many of them are expected to be taken up by the period abroad coordinator despite some being specialist fields in the UK and the coordinator not necessarily having specific training for these. Although the worksheet itself and the methods of completing the form are still at their very early development stage and in need of further improvements, it has demonstrated its potential for an effective situational analysis or simulation of support networks prior to placing students with mental health issues abroad to identify blind spots in currently available support and take appropriate action in this regard. The worksheet may also be shared when discussing the placement of students between the home and host institutions to be better prepared for support networks.

The study at the same time has depicted the vulnerability, complication and high expectations of period abroad coordinators at times of students' mental health crises abroad. The managers of coordinators need to be made aware of such demands and arrange training and access to specialist support for the staff.

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Mental Health, Higher Education, and the Year Abroad: Challenges and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

In this article, after a brief discussion of the changing landscape around student mental health in universities, and the particular challenges that may be posed by a Year Abroad for language and cultural immersion, we present a series of mental health challenges arising from the Year Abroad, and make recommendations for overcoming them. We examine both issues that students may face when they are abroad, and the ways in which staff at universities can help those students. These challenges and recommendations arise from a workshop under this title which the authors led at Year Abroad Conference 2019.

KEYWORDS: Year Abroad, mental health, training, students, resources

INTRODUCTION

In the UK, mental health has become part of everyday discourse, but also political and institutional discourses. It has recently been at the centre of many news items, often in relation to education. Following the deaths of eleven students by suicide, the University of Bristol launched in October 2018 an opt-in 'Science of Happiness' course, the first of its kind in the UK. Lighter news coverage includes the rise of therapy dogs on campus, whose job is to provide psychological support to students. Other recent, more systemic, responses to the issue have come from a variety of actors,

from Universities UK's *Minding Our Future* report (UUK 2018) and 'stepchange' framework (UUK n.d.),¹ to Student Minds' *University Mental Health Charter* (Hughes and Spanner 2019) and *Co-Producing Mental Health Strategies with Students* (Piper and Emmanuel 2019).

Student mental health has recently become a prevalent concern in British Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and in the public sphere (even though there are debates around whether the prevalence of mental health difficulties among young people in HEIs is increasing, or whether difficulties that were always present are now simply more visible). The authors' experience in the School of Modern Languages at Newcastle University suggests that the compulsory Year Abroad (YA) can be a particular cause of mental health difficulties for our students, or at least that it can bring out previously latent difficulties. This is why we proposed a workshop on mental health and the Year Abroad for the Year Abroad Conference 2019 (YAC2019). This article presents a series of recommendations for universities helping students to deal with these problems, based on workshopped reactions to case studies (which are given in the Appendix to this article).

Figures from Newcastle University certainly suggest that students' use of university-provided healthcare is high. In calendar year 2019, 55% of YA students across all subjects were known to Student Health and Wellbeing Services; by the end of March 2020, three months into the year, 46% of YA students were already known to them. These figures include all areas of wellbeing, so not all students known to these services have mental health concerns; disaggregated figures are not available. Nevertheless, these overall figures do seem surprisingly high, and we do not think they are peculiar to Newcastle.

Wolff (2020) hopes to see in the 2020s 'better student mental health care' to answer 'the need for more and speedier action', while a survey conducted by an 'emotional fitness app' revealed that 95% of the students who were polled 'want universities to teach them how to look after their mental health and wellbeing' (Hall R. 2019). However, the idea that HEIs should include mental health care among their duties is not necessarily self-evident to the academics and others to whom students in difficulty turn for help. In generational terms, the students are often Generation Z, while HEI staff are usually millennials or older, not used to such a lot of help being available, and certainly unqualified to provide it. Most importantly, academic roles in the neoliberal university are in

¹ Revised in May 2020 and republished as *Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities* (UUK 2020).

constant flux, as workloads keep increasing and duties evolving (UUK 2015, Piper and Emmanuel 2019). Academics often feel a lack of control regarding such changes, which they may not necessarily understand, accept, or keep up with. This feeling of lack of control and understanding can be a contributing factor to mental health difficulties for university staff themselves (Gill 2010, Berg and Gutzon 2016, Analogue University 2019). Anecdotal evidence in the authors' own university suggests that such difficulties are more prevalent now than they were, and that the university is also taking more account of them (for example, by advertising a counselling service in staff lavatories).

MENTAL HEALTH AND THE YEAR ABROAD

The authors have both taken part in administering the academic side of the compulsory YA in the School of Modern Languages at Newcastle (Husson as Year Abroad Officer responsible for our students in francophone countries; Hall in that role, and then as Year Abroad Director, with overall responsibility for all our students abroad). Our experience certainly shows that the YA can bring out problems for students who, in a more familiar context, might have been able to cope with them better. We link this to reports of increasing mental health difficulties for young people in general, as discussed above. It is not that the YA itself is becoming harder, but students seem to be starting from a lower mental health base, as it were. If young people's mental health is more often fragile in general, there are correspondingly more latent difficulties that the YA could bring out.

While we must be careful not to overgeneralise (because there are many students for whom the YA goes without a hitch), our intuition about increasing YA-related mental health problems was confirmed by attenders at YAC 2018. As a consequence, helping each individual student with their particular difficulty (because problems are rightly individual and require tailored solutions) is taking up more and more time. This is true not only for dedicated professional services such as Newcastle University's Student Health and Wellbeing Service and its analogues in other HEIs (see the 2019 and 2020 Newcastle figures cited earlier, which seemed to indicate increased use of welfare services in 2020); it is also especially true for the lecturers and administrators who must administer the academic side of students' YA, and who are often the first point of contact when life becomes difficult.

For this reason, we proposed for YAC 2019 a workshop on Mental Health and the Year Abroad, on the model of the excellent workshop ‘Managing Year Abroad Crises: lessons learned’ put on by Ian Foster and Edith Li Ross (U. Bristol) at YAC 2018. In our workshop, participants were asked to divide into four groups; each group was given a difficult YA student situation to consider (fictional, but based on real cases dealt with by the authors). Each situation included a general description followed by an escalation. The groups were asked to make two types of suggestion:

- practical courses of action for the particular students in the fictional situations, and for those helping them (‘situational advice’)
- more generic advice about institutional provisions that could be considered, to make YA administration more responsive to the increasing importance of mental health, and to make it easier not to ‘reinvent the wheel’ for each difficulty, while always bearing in mind the need to treat individual situations individually (‘procedural advice’).

In this article, therefore, we will set out and motivate a series of recommendations for good practice in dealing with mental health difficulties related to the YA. We have formulated these recommendations as a result of discussions at our YAC2019 workshop. In these recommendations, the procedural and situational points of view are integrated in order to put forward some general principles which we suggest should guide our view of the relationship between mental health and the YA.

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AND THE MODERN YEAR ABROAD

Three main challenges emerge from the situations presented in the workshop (see appendices).

Challenge 1

HEI staff who deal with the YA (whether academic or administrative staff) are increasingly likely to be confronted with one mental health-related condition or another as part of dealing with students. As discussed above, there are challenges in the increasing quantity and range of mental health care needs among students; also, staff are not trained to respond to these needs. Although staff are not expected to act as mental health practitioners, their ability to leave mental health to the experts, so to speak, is increasingly challenged by the central role given to mental health in HE. For this reason, we chose to include anxiety, depression and self-harm, as well as autism, among the situations considered at our workshop. Mixed anxiety and depression is the most common disorder in the UK, ‘with 7.8% of people meeting criteria for diagnosis’ (Mental Health Foundation 2016). Self-harm in

young adults is also highly prevalent (Bailey, Wright and Kemp 2017). Although autism is regarded not as a mental illness but as a developmental disorder, it often goes hand in hand with anxiety (White *et al.* 2009). It affects one in a hundred British adults.

Challenge 2

Concerns the relationships of care established between the student, the YA support officer(s) and the home university's mental health and wellbeing team. Lees (2020) emphasises the necessity of a balanced relationship between YA students and university staff, in which students are actors in their own mental health care instead of merely passive; but it is also crucial to note that relationships established in the home country can be challenged or overhauled while the student is abroad, which means that the basis of this balanced relationship can change after the student has left for their YA. Students who had been able to negotiate university life reasonably independently when studying in the UK can find that life abroad presents challenges that they do not feel prepared for, and thus they can come to contact staff from their home university much more when abroad than they did when they were at home, and to rely much more on these contacts. The difficulties they encounter can run from dealing with familiar situations *but in a foreign language* to dealing with situations they had never encountered in any language (e.g. because they had never had to live quite so independently, dealing with bills and so on).

All in all, when talking about mental health and the YA, context is crucial, and staff who know a student and are then 'left at home' when a student departs for their YA should be aware that there can be changes in the way the student perceives their relationship with staff, once the YA has begun. Staff should be aware that this shift in student perception of them may be likely (depending on what they know of a particular student from before their Year Abroad), and the challenge is then for staff to help students maintain the balance, encouraging them to be active partners in their own mental health care, while not denying them university help if appropriate.

Challenge 3

Is also linked to the context in which the YA is happening, this time from a cultural point of view. Not only do some students abroad find it difficult to deal with cultural differences, but if and when the need for mental health care arises, culture-infused perceptions of mental health and the availability of care can themselves become an issue.

All three challenges put a spotlight on the changing role of YA academic officers, YA administrative officers and personal tutors, and on the response they can put in place to potential crises. This is why we offer in what follows a series of recommendations which, we hope, will help to anticipate and address such issues. Our recommendations should therefore make possible quick and effective reactions to potential crisis situations, based on good practice.

PREPARING THE YEAR ABROAD

What students can and cannot prepare for

One popular wellbeing tool among mental health professionals, which has spread more widely to the wellbeing community, is the formulation of a 'self-care plan'. This is a process which the academic YA officer is not qualified to guide; student wellbeing services are of course much better suited to this, though YA officers can of course assist. For young people presenting a history of mental health issues, a self-care plan may figure in the strategies they put in place before leaving for their YA (with or without the university's knowledge), strategies on which they are expected to rely once on their YA. Here is how the charity *Mindful* describes the self-care plan in its magazine:

A Self-Care Plan is an intervention tool that keeps you from being completely sucked into the vortex, saving you when you find yourself standing on the precipice gazing into the dark abyss. It's a fail-safe, created by you, and filled with your favorite self-care activities, important reminders, and ways to activate your self-care community.

(Tygielski 2019)

The rationale of the plan is therefore that it is a pre-made set of tools for moments of crisis. Taken at face value, this seems like an excellent way to help students become fully actors in their own care, instead of merely being on the receiving end of help from others. Such a shift is recommended by Lees (2020), who observed that post-YA students whose mental health made for a difficult experience abroad tended to blame their home institution, whereas students who reported a positive experience saw this as a personal success. However, planning for a mental health crisis cannot really take context into account, especially when it comes to the reality of life abroad,

because the context might well be unknown in advance. In other words, the context in which the crisis emerges is key. Relying on a strategy framed as a ‘failsafe’ might compromise the student’s ability to adapt to a new context, unless this strategy is regularly updated during the YA.

Recommendation #1: When preparing for the YA, students who present a history of mental health issues should be aware of the unpredictability of living abroad. Where wellbeing support is offered by the university, YA officers may want to work with such services in order to determine how to strike the right balance between alarmism and realism, and if necessary to adapt such discourses to individual situations by providing specific examples or advice.

Cultural contexts

The cultural context of the YA is crucial. (We define *culture* and *cultural* informally here, as ‘(relating to) a set of distinct social norms, which may be associated with a particular country, nation, or sub-national group’.) Discourses around mental health vary considerably between countries and cultures, as does the availability of mental health provision. While most UK home students are used to mental health being a normal part of everyday discourse, including in HEIs, they are often not aware of cultural differences in this respect.

Recommendation #2: Students should be made aware that attitudes to mental health difficulties differ around the world—especially students going to regions where mental health remains mostly taboo, such as the Arab world or East Asia. More importantly, cultural differences with regard to mental health should be discussed in detail with every student declaring a history of mental health issues. Although planning for medical care provision is important, it should always be done with an awareness of the general discourse around mental health in the foreign country in question.

Recommendation #3: Not all YA officers might have current, specific knowledge on this topic. One way to remedy this would be to **include culture-specific knowledge in the training provided to all YA officers** (see also recommendation #4). This could be done through the provision of culture-specific situations, like the ones in the Appendix to this article, for new YA officers to work through as training for the role.

THE ROLE OF THE YEAR ABROAD ACADEMIC OFFICER

The need for a well-defined, stable role

Recommendation #4: is that **it is crucial for a YA officer to be able to take on the role for a reasonable period of time - say, at least three years.** This might be a difficult recommendation to implement, and it is certainly a recurring issue at Newcastle when it comes to academic officers, although stability can often be provided by support staff. Beyond the recurring problem of the amount of information that a new officer has to learn, we believe that a stable, well-defined role can have a positive impact in at least three ways.

Benefits of long-term investment in the role

It is crucial for a YA officer to be able to invest themselves fully in the role, which takes time - precious workload time, but also, simply, the time needed to develop expert knowledge regarding the YA in a specific country. The need for stability is exemplified below by the transmission of knowledge regarding previous cases, which should constitute an essential part of the training of new YA officers. It is also crucial with regard to the relations established with partner institutions. Here at Newcastle University, the YA officer responsible for students going to China has been in that role for 20 years, and has thus been able to establish personal relations with a variety of actors in China, as well as a list of possible mental health professionals for students seeking help. This has proven essential in a country where mental illness is very stigmatised and universities might not offer any support.

The need for a well-defined role

Another aspect of this recommendation is one we are working on at Newcastle: the need to provide a full, clear description of the role of YA officer within their academic unit. This is less easy than it sounds, and one major reason is the way mental health issues tend to blur the lines between academic, pastoral, and medical support within the university. What is more, the YA officer role has grown 'organically' in the past few years, and now concerns many issues including mental health. It is tempting to say this is because of the evolving needs and expectations of students. Therefore, not only would a clear definition help new YA officers learn about their role, but it would also enable them to maintain clear professional and personal boundaries when student mental health issues arise.

Personal boundaries

The expansion of the YA officer role also has an impact on personal boundaries and the emotional investment which can be put into this work. Although academics are always strongly encouraged to leave mental health matters to the experts, it is not necessarily easy or possible to do so when you fear for the safety of a young person who is suicidal, or more generally when you are aware of the difficult circumstances of someone you feel in charge of. If a YA officer knows their exact place within a network of support, and has a clear sense of what their role does and does not entail, it could help preserve their own mental health.

The YA officer, one actor within a diverse support network

Recommendation #5: When it comes to mental health and wellbeing, the YA officer is necessarily one link in a long chain spanning home, visited country, partner academic institutions and YA employers, and involving administrative and academic staff, as well as in- or sometimes out-of-university wellbeing professionals. Besides knowing their role within this chain (recommendation #4), **YA officers should when possible maintain direct relations with other actors in the possible mental health care chain in their regions of responsibility.** Most importantly, they should keep up personal relations with actors based in partner institutions.

This implies knowledge of what kind of support is available to students abroad - an aspect that should be covered in prior training (see recommendation #6). The British Council, for instance, is able to offer very limited direct support for their language assistants. As for partner universities, support varies widely according to institutions and countries. While some limited support can be available in some European partner universities, this is not the case for instance in many Chinese universities, where mental illness is strongly stigmatised. As mentioned before, it is possible for a YA officer for China to find local help and build an address book over the years. Such relations might need to exclude some Chinese partner universities, who may not accept students with a history of mental health issues.

The network of support around students doing their YA should never, in our opinion, include other students. Emotional peer support while on the YA has proven to have possibly deleterious consequences for the mental health of those students supporting a peer. However, we do recommend facilitating informal contact among students already abroad, among students preparing

to go, and between these two groups. Microsoft Teams is one useful tool to enable such contacts while preventing users' data from being sold to third parties. The YA team at Newcastle University's School of Modern Languages facilitates a Teams group which links students preparing for their YA, and one which links these students with students preparing for their YA; staff only intervene, however, if a question remains unanswered or to correct erroneous information.

Training for YA officers

Recommendation #6: Participants in the workshop emphasised the need for **basic mental health training for new YA officers**. Although academics may have to deal with mental health-related issues in a variety of roles, including that of personal tutor, the YA presents its own set of issues. Distance, in particular, changes pastoral care in possibly challenging ways. We want to make it clear here that, if a student is having mental health difficulties, appropriate professionals in student health services should guide the care of that student as much as possible and as soon as possible. Academics and university administrative staff arguably already have too great a workload, and it is much more varied than 'what they signed up for'. However, it emerges from everything that precedes, that academics and administrative staff in students' home universities are often the first point of contact when a student is in difficulty. At a very basic level, therefore, these people, who are not mental health professionals, need to know what to say when that phone-call or e-mail arrives. Furthermore, since the YA is a very specific academic situation, it is almost always true that there are aspects of it where only the academic or administrative staff dealing with a student's degree can advise, and therefore it is these staff who will be asked for advice, not the mental health professionals. University-based mental health practitioners simply do not have the requisite knowledge of the YA, from either an academic or a practical point of view.

Our YAC 2019 workshop could serve as a basis for the basic mental health training that YA officers need, provided that mental health specialists can contribute to the workshop. The training should at least include:

- legal requirements regarding confidentiality
- templates based on previous cases (see Appendix)
- culture-specific knowledge of mental health discourse and provision in the assigned country or countries

- knowledge of who to contact for help within the home university, as well as available resources concerning disability, counselling, and international relations.

THE ROLE OF THE YEAR ABROAD IN THE DEGREE

Recommendation #7: Our last recommendation might also be the most controversial. It concerns the role granted by the unit/institution to the YA in a given degree. We suggest that, **for students in real difficulty, the YA should not always be compulsory**, even in Modern Languages degrees where it is woven into the very fabric of the degree.

We have come to this recommendation because, in the case of many students like Carys (situation 5 in the Appendix) or Kate (situation 4), the question of fitness to undertake a YA, and/or to study at all, arises. It can be very difficult to deal with students' perceptions of such situations - for example, Carys resents what she perceives as attempts to bar her from doing a YA, yet ends up self-harming in China. For a student like Kate, who found herself paralysed by anxiety, unable to do any paperwork, and therefore having to suspend her studies for a year, the question should also be asked whether a YA is the best option for her.

Many factors are involved here, including the home institution's safety and liability requirements. We want to emphasise that no student should be barred from doing their YA simply because of a history of mental illness; in any case, this would implicate too many students nowadays. However, at Newcastle, we have chosen to offer the possibility of a 3-year instead of 4-year pathway for all our Modern Languages degrees. In the School of Modern Languages the YA is usually compulsory, and this is made clear from the outset. However, if a student's mental or physical health in the year before their YA is such that a YA would be harmful, risky or extremely impractical, the Personal Extenuating Circumstances Committee can agree to a request to skip the YA and go straight to final year. This change of degree is permitted if medical and/or psychological evidence is satisfactory. The option was requested, for instance, by a survivor of sexual assault whose care team argued that a YA would set her back in her recovery (needless to say, the PEC Committee agreed).

CONCLUSION

Looking at the advice suggested for all YA mental-health situations considered at the workshop, it is apparent that good practice involves both addressing each problematic situation individually, and having in place a set of procedures making fast, efficient decisions easier. Obviously, administrative procedures are always partly based on situations that have occurred, and the need to react to them. But procedures should only be *partly* based on exact situations, since anything that follows a particular situation too closely will be less useful for other situations that are similar but different.

Although focussed solely on mental health, we hope these recommendations will help HEIs put into place better frameworks for the YA, and help YA officers in performing this challenging and constantly-evolving role.

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APPENDIX

Situations presented to the groups

Situation 1: Maya, France

Maya is in the second year of her degree in French. As Year Abroad officer for francophone countries, you are aware that she is on the autism spectrum. More precisely, she has Asperger syndrome, which means that she has difficulties with social interactions and nonverbal cues, and suffers from considerable anxiety.

Maya comes to see you early in semester 1 to express her concerns regarding her Year Abroad. She is particularly worried that she might need to go home suddenly to Darlington (in the North of England, not particularly easy to get to from France), and that she might be too isolated in France, without her usual support network.

Your university offers 3 types of placements: study, work, and British Council assistantship. Maya would like to teach in a French school, but is reluctant to choose a BC assistantship, because she is aware that she would not necessarily have a choice about the size of town she was based in.

Escalation: It is now April. Maya had found a work placement in a private school but it has fallen through. She is now panicking. She has a mental health advisor from Student Services, who has been following her since her first year. This advisor is concerned about Maya's wellbeing and would like to organise a three-way meeting to help her.

Situation 2: Alberto, Brazilian student in the UK

You are your School's YA Officer responsible for Latin America. Alberto is a student from one of your Brazilian partner universities, spending a whole year at your university. He had no problems until at least the end of Semester 1, but, in early April, your YA administrative team e-mails you to say that he has not been attending lectures for a few weeks. They have written him a couple of e-mails about it, but he has not answered. You therefore schedule a meeting between you and Alberto to discuss the situation, and you let him know, but he does not reply and does not turn up. You reschedule the meeting and let Alberto know, but he still does not answer and does not come to the rescheduled meeting.

Escalation: Since the events above, the Easter vacation has passed. As there has been no word from Alberto at all, you *have* written to his home university asking whether they know anything, and they have replied that, as far as they know, he should be at your institution.

Situation 3: Nick, Germany

Nick is a student preparing to go to Düsseldorf for a semester-long work placement. He has a history of mental health problems, and has occasionally self-harmed in the past. He has been helped by your university's Student Health and Wellbeing Services. Now, he is anxious about his Year Abroad, and you and Student Services are worried that this anxiety may cause him to self-harm again. You are going to have a three-way meeting (Nick, you and Student Services), specifically to discuss his Year Abroad.

Escalation: Nick is now in Düsseldorf, and the first few weeks of his placement seemed to go well, but he has now started to self-harm fairly regularly. His employer has come to know about it, and has been very supportive. Nick himself is also in touch with you occasionally, but is still in Germany.

Situation 4: Kate, Spain

You are your School's YA administrator for outgoing students. Kate, a very introverted, non-communicative student, is registered as doing a Year Abroad at the University of Salamanca (Spain). She has not filled in any paperwork regarding the YA and there has been no contact over the summer, despite multiple reminders from you. You are trying to find out whether Kate has actually gone to Spain at all. Nothing had been flagged previously.

On the 20th of October, you finally receive an email from Kate, informing you that she is still at home and hasn't prepared any of the necessary paperwork for the YA. She asks your advice on how to proceed. She doesn't give any further explanation.

Escalation: You have replied to Kate, asking for further information as to why she is still at home, as the YA team had been unaware of any specific issues (beyond knowing what Kate is like generally). Kate replies that she has been feeling very anxious about the YA for the last year and has found the application process so confusing and stressful that she avoided doing it. She also explains that she had felt so overwhelmed at the prospect of living abroad that she hadn't wanted to seek help.

Situation 5: Carys, China

You are your School's YA Officer responsible for China. Carys is a student preparing to go to China for a year of study, who has declared that she has a long-standing diagnosis of anxiety and depression. In China, there is little easily-available mental health care, which is of course not the situation Carys is used to in the West. Because of this, you call a three-way meeting between Student Services, Carys and yourself, to discuss how we can make sure that her Year Abroad goes as well as possible. Carys is very reluctant to engage with these attempts to help, though; she comes to the meeting, but is resentful because she feels that the university is trying to stop her having the same experiences as everyone else. She does not feel that counselling has helped her in the past.

Escalation: After the meeting with Carys, you have written to her with some advice about things she could do if she did start to feel bad in China, and also with some details about professionals who *are* available to talk to there (not on the scale of the West, but something as opposed to nothing). Carys has agreed to the conditions in your letter, including regular e-mail check-ins with people at your university, and letting you know by certain deadlines that she has got details of the emergency care services she *could* use in China. However, two of Carys' fellow students in China have got in touch to say that she has self-harmed while there, and has told them about it.

The Importance of Emotions in Year Abroad Language Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a case study that explores the emotional experiences the participants recollected and described regarding their year abroad foreign language learning. In addition to a range of linguistic factors that influence language development of learners in the host environment, there are also extra-linguistic variables including individual reactions of the students, such as emotional behaviors, that may affect the learning process while abroad. The emotional experiences of two British tertiary level students were searched examined through autobiographical interview research during their year abroad (immersion at a university in L2 context) after they completed a one-year intensive language course in the target language, Turkish, as part of their B.A. education. Taking into account the learners' emotional histories, which focus on the emotional responses of these two learners to the language learning process over the course of two academic semesters in the host country, this qualitative research makes the impact of emotions visible. The personal narratives of the two learners offer evidence of the ways that emotions either enhance learning or act as detrimental to foreign language learning and language use during year abroad. The emerging themes in the narratives shed insights into the outcomes of the emotional experiences that shape these learners' interpretations of their current selves and imagined selves as language learners. By doing so, this study provides us specific examples and information about how learners appraise their experiences in their foreign language learning trajectories. Implications for the role that emotions play in year abroad language learning programs are also discussed in the paper.

KEYWORDS: year abroad study, language learning, emotions

INTRODUCTION

In modern foreign language degree courses in the UK, periods of experiential learning have become institutionalized at higher education level (Bridges, 2000 in Meier and Daniels, 2013). Many universities include year abroad study as a standard component of the mainstream teaching in the related programs. During their year abroad, higher education (HE) language students are expected to improve their language skills as a natural outcome of their language learning experiences which extend beyond their formal teaching activities in their courses to natural authentic interactions with the social world in their daily lives in the host community. The year abroad programs, as mentioned by Aveni (2005), are designed to maximize communicative language use opportunities in culturally authentic environments. However, during their year abroad studies, learners encounter various types of social and psychological barriers, as an addition to the problems caused by poor language competence, that affect their use of the second language. According to Meier and Daniels (2013), there is little understanding of what is going on during the year abroad for language students partly due to the fact that the majority of research focuses on the product rather than on the process of year abroad. The researchers further add that much of the year abroad literature seems to view language acquisition in year abroad context as an accumulation of knowledge by the learner, and thus, it ignores the fact that learning is a socially mediated activity. However, the strength of the informal relationships contracted by the individual learner and the type of motivation the learners have in learning the target language in the host country are closely connected (Isabelli-Garcia, 2006). As put forward by Jakson (2008), “it is not the context itself that necessarily leads to linguistic gain and intercultural competence, but students’ actual experiences within the target culture”. In keeping with this idea, this study explores the issue of how students make sense of their emotional experiences while using the language in their social context beyond their formal education, and how the emotions emerged mediate their language use in their immediate context in specific, and their language learning in general. The rationale of this study rests on the following basic premises:

- It is well established in literature that emotions influence language learning (Imai, 2010; Lopez, 2011; Lopez and Cardenas, 2014; Ivaz, Costa & Dunabeitia, 2015; Aragao, 2015, Beseghi, 2018). Yet, in research (Swain, 2013), emotions tend to be viewed as the private, inner reactions of an individual. The researcher instead argues for a different perspective, that emotions are interpersonal, not private events. According to Swain (ibid), emotions are socially and culturally derived and, along with cognition, they mediate learning. In a similar

line, Imai (2010) also views emotions as socially constructed reactions emerging within communications and argues that they mediate language learning outcomes.

- Another argument concerning the role of emotions in second language learning relates to the interrelationship between emotions and learning. With regards to this issue, Swain (2013) states that in the individual differences literature in second language acquisition (SLA), emotions are seen as the independent (causal) variables and language learning is dependent on them (p.197). The researcher further adds that the reverse relationship, that language learning may influence emotions, is rarely considered (Swain, 2013).
- Thirdly, the research available focuses primarily on emotions experienced within the classroom, rather than in the daily lives of learners within various social contexts (Ross and Rivers, 2018). According to Ross and Rivers (2018), the focus placed upon emotions within the structured atmosphere of the formal learning environment, such as a classroom, is problematic as the target language experienced beyond the classroom has different dynamics.

So, in this paper, we will focus our attention on emotions experienced by our participants through interpersonal interactions in their social context. Also we will specifically focus on the impact of particular language learning experiences on the participants' emotions and how these subjective perceptions mediate their learning trajectories. Overall, this study aims to address the nature of emotional experiences and their role in shaping the participants' perception of themselves as language learners and users. It contributes to the relevant literature by investigating and providing insights into the actual experiences of learners studying abroad.

THE STUDY

Participants

Five tertiary level students from the University of Oxford participated in this study. They were studying Turkish in Oriental Studies program at the time of the study. The participants comprised of three male and two female students with the age range of 19 - 24. Due to the space limitations only the data coming from the two of the participants, who were randomly selected, were discussed in

this paper. They were referred to as P1 (22 year-old male) and P2 (21 year-old female) in the presentation of the findings. Both of the participants were British and they were studying Turkish with subsidiary Persian at the time of the study. As a narrative research of experience, our aim in this study is to include in-depth details about the individuals' emotional reactions and the setting or context of these experiences rather than making generalizations.

Context of the study

The 'Turkish with subsidiary language degree BA program' at Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford offers courses to give the students a sound foundation in modern Turkish. During the first year (three terms) of the program, the students are given an intensive Turkish course (8 hours a week), which aims to build the basic language skills for Turkish up to an upper intermediate level (B1 according to CEFR). The program also has a year-abroad component in the second year as a compulsory part of the degree. Before students set out on their year abroad, they have to attend pre-departure briefings organized by the Year Abroad Coordinator. In these briefings, the purpose of the year abroad regarding the academic objectives of the program is explained to the students. The students are also given some background to the countries to which they will be going. In order to enhance learning experiences, the Faculty encourages all students to spend more time in the country or region beyond just class attendance to immerse themselves in the culture of the country they are visiting. Upon return from the year abroad, the program continues at the third year level.

Data collection instruments

We designed our research as a qualitative study. Thus, we used the personal narratives of the learners collected via autobiographical written structured interviews. Swain (2013) states that it is in narratives – anecdotes and stories of learners' experiences – that the centrality of emotion and its connections to cognition becomes evident. In line with this argument, the data consists of the learners' emotional histories, which focus on the emotional responses of these learners to the language learning experiences in the host country. The interviews were conducted in accordance with the guiding research questions as listed below (see the appendix for the interview questions):

1. What experiences do the participants encounter with in their year abroad study in the host country?
2. How do the participants describe these experiences and the resulting emotions?
3. How do these emerging emotions affect their relationship and orientation to the target language?

4. How do the participants view themselves as a target language user over time in different contexts?

The interview questions were sent to the e-mail addresses of the participants two times, the first in mid-academic year, which roughly corresponds to the fourth month after the arrival of the participants in the host country, and the second at the end of the academic year. This gave us the opportunity to observe the changes in the emotions experienced by the participants throughout the academic year. During this period, there were also occasional WhatsApp or Skype communications in case of need by the participant students. Although such interactions were not meant to be a part of the data collection procedure planned in advance, yet emerged spontaneously in an unstructured fashion, the content of these communications were considered as data sources since they included relevant information which served well to the purpose of the study. Yet, it should be noted that the data that was shared in this paper mainly consists of the narratives collected through the interviews.

Data analysis

We analyzed the data collectively. That is, we treated it as a single collective case. Therefore, we conducted holistic-content analysis (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). Following the repeated reading of the narratives for content analysis, at the first level, any instances where the participants mentioned their emotions were identified and then, the emerging themes regarding the collected emotions were noted down. Then, considering their topics, the themes were grouped into two categories:

1. Themes referring to the emotions about how learners appraise their experiences in their foreign language learning trajectories
2. Themes referring to the outcomes of the emotional experiences that shape learners' interpretations of their current selves and imagined selves as language learners

We also examined the affective lexis that the participants drew on in expressing emotions. Because we express our feelings through words verbally, we took the terms used by the participants into consideration as reflections of emotions. The insights occurred from this aspect of the data made the impact of the emotions visible for us.

Trustworthiness

In order to achieve reliability in analyzing the data, we, as researchers, independently read the data coming from all sources and applied content analysis in order to categorize the themes emerged.

After analyzing the data individually, we came together to discuss our independently generated categories in a face-to-face session where we compared and contrasted with respect to the data, and finally, through consensus, we identified the two broad categories of themes.

Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed about the study and explained that the participation was voluntary, leaving the study any time they wished was probable, and that they could ask for access to the data and the interpretations. Later on, an informed consent form that outlined the main details of the study such as research aim, data collection procedures, and the use of data was prepared. After getting the oral consent of the volunteer students, we started data collection process. Also in order to keep the participants anonymous, we did not use their names in data analysis, but refer them as participants instead.

FINDINGS

Themes referring to the emotions about how learners appraise their experiences in their foreign language learning trajectories

As mentioned above, the first category of themes emerged in the data relates to the learners' appraisal of their subjective emotional experiences of language learning histories. The analysis of the data revealed that the participants encountered a range of emotional experiences, both positive and negative, as they conducted their daily lives in the host country. The participants described their emotional experiences in various ways ranging from commenting on their target language level to identifying the coping strategies they adopted for recovery. The analysis of the narratives collected in the first interview showed that in the early period of their year abroad experiences, the most dominant emotions identified by participants were frustration and disappointment. In relation to this point, P2 made the following comment:

My spoken Turkish was very weak. So frustration on not being able to communicate at all efficiently was frustrating. Moreover, I was frustrated at myself and at the process of language learning.

The authentic environment, which requires spontaneous language use for communication, caused a feeling of inadequacy in the learners. The comments also revealed that such negative emotions, like incompetency, resulted in boredom and decreased motivation in the participants:

I felt frustrated at times by the grammar points. I felt hindered in my progress. Sometimes I am wondering what I am doing here, especially as progress in Turkish isn't always concrete visible.
(P1)

I was boring myself and so had no interest in the study (P2)

The data also showed that although the setting provided the participants plentiful opportunities to use the target language, it was found out that the participants reduced, or sometimes rejected, their interactions with the locals in the host language and stayed in their comfort zone by speaking in their L1, namely English. This conscious avoidance in using Turkish is evident in P1's comment:

I did hang out more with Erasmus people. I am hoping to change this. I have hopes that my dorm experience would involve a lot more chatting with mates in Turkish.

In the later periods of their stay in the host country, unlike the beginning stages, the participant described their emotional experiences in a more positive manner. The emotions of enjoyment, excitement and pride were expressed the most by the participants:

Unlike the beginning of my time here, I am now better in grammar. It made me more excited and enthusiastic to learn and practice Turkish (P1)

I could ask for directions, or ask for a specific thing in a shop. These aided my courage to speak more frequently (P2)

The data also highlighted the importance of emotions in forming the participants' beliefs and attitudes toward target language. The participants' comments demonstrated that the more positive emotional experiences they encounter the more they invest in their own language learning endeavor. The following commentary shows P2's interest and thus investment in learning more advanced level Turkish. Having joyful experience in using Turkish in the daily exchanges, P2 decided to sign up for an advanced course in Turkish:

I took a more advanced Turkish course, which was very challenging. Whenever I learnt a fresh, new piece of grammar, it became an exhilarating experience.

The participants' emotional experiences appeared to be in harmony with their perceived progress in the target language. Being able to maintain their life using Turkish in the host community, P1 develops a positive attitude towards the target language and the subsequent emotion experienced was positive:

I am getting more emotionally attached to Turkish.

Themes referring to the outcomes of the emotional experience that shape learners' interpretations of their current selves and imagined selves as language learners

The second category of themes relates to participants' interpretations of their current selves and imagined selves as language learners and users. The findings presented a clear image of the emotional experiences and their place in participants' self-perception of themselves as language users. The analysis of the data has showed that the emotions the participants experienced when they were involved in interactions with the local people in social settings have important effects on their linguistic self-concept. The term 'linguistic self-concept', relates to the individual's 'sense of who they are as language learners and users, and their ability to negotiate personal identities through a second language' (Benson et. al., 2012, p. 184). Related to this issue, the following quote from P1 illustrates how he positions himself as a '*foreign*' in the host community:

I feel foreign insofar as I don't feel good enough to build a friendship on it. In a group of Turkish-speaking people I can't keep up with conversation.

Feeling like an outsider because of his lack of L2 proficiency seems to affect not only P1's linguistic self-concept, but also his perception as a confident and communicative person. Similar to P1, P2 also felt unable to express herself well in Turkish and portrayed herself as infantilized by her inability in using Turkish, as shown in the below extract:

My aim essentially is to speak less like a tourist and more like a Turkish child.

P2 positions herself as a '*Turkish child*' due to her feeling of inadequacy in using Turkish. But in her later narratives, we observed a change in her self-descriptions. She reconstructed her identity as a '*language learner*' within the process of development. She seems to develop an acceptance of her actual-self as a language learner/user with flaws:

I am a Welsh person learning Turkish and living in Istanbul. I am definitely a foreigner in the city, but I don't see it in any other way than I see my hometown. I know the streets of Istanbul reasonably well now and I have a decent mental map of the city. So I am completely at home here. I know that I am living in Istanbul to better my language.

The data demonstrated that this re-formation of linguistic self-concept led the participant to a vision of imagined future self who is able to communicate in Turkish, at least in her profession, as illustrated below:

I will be a Turkish-user in terms of my career in the future.

It can be said that for P2, the desire, as well as her hope, in relation to her use of Turkish in the future motivated her as a language learner. The emotion of enjoyment was another positive emotion expressed in relation to the self-image as perceived by the participants. The following extract illustrates the enthusiasm and joy experienced by P1:

I enjoy speaking in Turkish. It surprises people to hear me speaking Turkish in France. This makes me more enthusiastic to learn and practice Turkish.

For both of the participants, their confidence in their potential future ability to use Turkish, in other terms their vision of imagined selves, contributed positively to their actual self as language learners/users. Certainly, this might be only partly connected to their emotional experiences in year abroad. Considering the fact that the participants are still continuing their formal language education in the program at their universities, their positive future-self images might reflect their expectations from the academic language study as well.

DISCUSSION

Regarding emotions, Swain (2013) says everyone is aware of them but they reflect an unspoken truth: that they have a significant impact on what has happened in the past, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future (p.195). That is, learners perceive their language learning experiences through emotional lenses and make judgments of their achievements accordingly. To put in another way, emotional experiences of the language learners are very important as learners take them as references when self-assessing the success, or failure, of their past and present as well

as their future learning practices. Garret and Young (2009) argue that it is through experiencing the world and conducting an affective appraisal of these experiences that individuals develop their own unique preferences and aversions” (p. 210). This is valid for our participants too. For example, P2, being proud of herself as she could ask for directions in Turkish, decides to enroll in a more advanced course. This means that she, on her own will, challenges herself to learn more Turkish.

The emotional experiences are also important in learners’ perception of themselves as persons. Aveni (2005) states that to learn another language is to redefine yourself publicly, socially and personally. In relation to this point, Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) adds that language learning entails new thought processes, identity and values which can present a threat to learners. Following this line of argument, Aveni (2005) also claims if a learner perceive that L2 use will threaten her self-presentation, thereby increasing the discrepancy between the real self and the ideal self, he or she is less likely to use the L2 (p.18). The story of P1 illustrates this issue very well. P1 confessed that he spent almost the whole time during the first semester with Erasmus students, as it was more comfortable to converse in his first language. Coleman (1997) argues that students during their year abroad move within three social circles. First, their only social interaction is English-speaking peers. Then, they socialize with international groups and last with local native-speaking groups. P1 in our study is no exception. He consciously preferred to stay in his inner circle to avoid using Turkish. He stated that as he was not able to follow the conversations in Turkish, he felt himself foreign. Aveni (2005) uses the term ‘linguistic status’ to describe the feeling of inferiority in terms of linguistic abilities. The researcher argues that linguistic status, that is the status learners feel based upon their proficiency in the L2, can effect whether or not they are going to use their L2 (p.41). Namely, learners’ willingness to get involved in communications in L2 in the year abroad program is closely related to how they view and reframe themselves through their emotional filters.

The data also highlighted the interrelation between the notion of linguistic self-concept and emotional experiences. Ellis (2004) argues that the learners’ emotional experiences often appeared to work in harmony with their linguistic self-concept. In line with this view, our data reveals that as learners’ linguistic self-concepts are developed, they are able to perceive their ability and progress better within their context. In the beginnings, P2 portrayed herself more like a Turkish child due to her inadequacy in using the language. However, as she became more competent, she reconstructed her identity as a language learner as she thought that she was consciously monitoring her use of

Turkish to perfect her language. She described her learning, proudly and in full satisfaction, as a journey in constant progress.

Another aspect underlined by the study was the way in which the emotional experiences of learners affected their investment in the language learning and language use. In the initial periods of his stay in Turkey, P1 was disappointed with his progress in Turkish. He expressed that within the absence of concrete improvement in his language competence, he did not feel motivated enough. But following these first months, he observed a visible development in his knowledge of grammar. He noted that he was getting more emotionally attached to Turkish. Filling with joy, he decided to extend his language use beyond the courses he took at the university and with this aim, he coupled his new ambition with one of his hobbies, football. In the second academic semester, he joined the football club of the university with the objective of creating for himself a context where he would use Turkish while enjoying his time playing football. Namely, he invested in the target language. According to Norton (1995), investment in the target language is a bridge between the desire and the commitment to learning the language. It can be said that in the case of P1, the positive emotions experienced in language learning resulted in investment in language use. P1 took the initiative in setting a context, which he believes to be conducive to spontaneous language use. According to Meier and Daniels (2013), in year abroad programs learner agency, namely taking the responsibility of one's own learning, is very important as learning opportunities in social environment do not appear automatically but they require making an effort in an unfamiliar and complex social situations. In line with this thought, we can infer that the positive emotional experiences of P1 supported him in making the required effort to self-direct his own learning trajectory. Before we conclude, we would like to acknowledge the fact that the findings of our study are primarily interpretive in nature. But the interpretations are grounded on the triangulation of the multiple data collected through various tools. Also, as being a narrative study, our data consists of the participants' personal stories. Therefore, our findings cannot be generalized to other students in year abroad programs.

CONCLUSION

Coleman (2013) argues that as in other research fields, in study abroad research context too, the conceptualizations of the language learner have changed. The researcher summarizes this shift in perspective as moving from a view of learners as homogenous processors of linguistic input to a

conceptualization of the learner as a ‘whole person’. This new understanding of the individual learner and its reflection in research is also mentioned in the following quote by Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000). “At this time, the research began to focus on learners as ‘individuals, with intentions, agency, affect, and histories’ (p.157). The findings of this study also confirm the centrality of learners as individuals. The study revealed the remarkable effects of emotional experiences during year abroad. Thus, as teachers, we should direct our attention to the whole process of year abroad study including all dimensions from academic to socio-psychological factors in preparing the learners. Such advance preparation about issues such as identity construction when studying abroad or coping with negative emotions in the host environment can be valuable in helping learners to set more realistic expectations as to what they will experience in the host country. Also we should equip students with skills that develop their agency and raise their critical awareness of any barriers or constraints that might be encountered in the social context surrounding them. Therefore, we believe that, adding an emotional lens to interpret learners’ experiences abroad can help us understand why the time spent in the host country may either enhance or act as a detrimental to foreign language learning. Adopting such a perspective, this study makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of language learning abroad.

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APPENDIX

Dear All,

Just by looking back at your first year experience in Oxford and year abroad experience in Turkey, please answer the questions below. Try to answer them as in detail as you can, while your memories are still vivid and please send them back. Don't worry if you are not sure what to write. Write the first thing that comes to your mind.

Your help is very much appreciated and kept confidential.

Thank you

A. Your Turkish language learning experience (Past/Present)

1. How has your year abroad experience been so far? In broader terms.
2. Do you think you have improved your Turkish after completing the intensive one-year here in Oxford? Can you give specific examples?
3. During the process of developing your Turkish have you found anything interesting or challenging?
4. How did you make sense of the experiences in learning/improving/ using Turkish? Can you give specific examples?
5. Do you feel that you have improved your Turkish compared to last year?

B. Your relationship and orientation to Turkish

1. How do you see the Turkish language? Where does it exactly stay in your life? Has it become your language for education only, or language for life, entertainment, travel, shopping, football etc.)
2. Do you feel Turkish is still 'foreign' to you?
3. Do you see yourself as just learners of Turkish or users or both?
4. Have you started to 'feel' in Turkish? (speak to yourself, dream in target language, sing, react etc.😊)

C. Your view of yourself as a Turkish-user in the past, present and future

1. How do you see yourself as a Turkish-user over time in different contexts?
2. How do you view your identity within your current situation?

3. To what extent do you see or sense any conflict between you and any other people or situations? Do you sometimes feel what am I doing here (year abroad)?
4. How do you imagine yourself using Turkish in the future, and what kind of Turkish, in what context do you see yourself using it?

D. The emotions you experience

1. What emotions have you felt in your year abroad?
2. Which of the emotions you have mentioned above did you feel the most strongly?
3. Why did you feel this way? What are the reasons?
4. How did this effect your motivation to learn Turkish?
5. How did you cope with this problem(s)?

Please feel free to add anything you would like say. Kolay gelsin😊

Encouraging Students to Value What We Value: Recognising Student Priorities and Shaping Student Learning Abroad

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines differences between student and educator expectations and priorities for the year abroad and argues that such differences can be an obstacle to learning. Discussion is set within the context of the year abroad as part of a modern languages degree at a UK university. It is underpinned by a reading of the research literature, and draws on data relating to priorities for the year abroad from interviews with students and staff from the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University (UK), as well as statements about the purpose and value of the year abroad found in institutional and national policy documents. The paper makes the case for the importance of taking the student perspective into account in the design of programmes of year-abroad learning support and assessment, and argues that students engage better with learning that addresses their priorities. It presents a number of recommendations that are applicable to year-abroad programming and curriculum design more broadly.

KEYWORDS: study abroad; scope and aims of the year abroad, curriculum design in modern languages, optimising learning

INTRODUCTION

Students and their teachers do not necessarily share the same understanding of the purpose and value of the year abroad. Students' plans, objectives and priorities for the time they spend abroad as part of their degree (whether this be for ongoing university study, work as an English language assistant, or for some other work placement) may not always be fully aligned with those of their

teachers or their sending institution, and any resulting mismatch can be a source of frustration and demotivation. This paper argues that differences in the way students and teachers view the year abroad are not only frustrating and demotivating but can also be an obstacle to effective learning and teaching.

Set within the context of the year abroad as part of a degree in modern languages at Durham University (UK), discussion first focuses on a comparison of student and educator priorities through an analysis of data drawn from interviews with year-abroad students and with staff involved in the delivery of a programme of year-abroad learning support and assessment, as well as statements about the purpose and scope of the year abroad found in institutional and national policy documents. An attempt to bridge the gap between student and educator perspectives is then presented before a number of recommendations applicable to year-abroad programming and curriculum design more broadly are made in the conclusion.

The paper makes the case for the importance of researching student expectations and priorities for the year abroad and for taking the student voice into account in the design and delivery of programmes of year-abroad learning support and assessment. It argues that students are more likely to engage with interventions which give space to their own priorities as well as to the priorities set by their teachers or the institutions in which they study.

STUDY DESIGN

The study was designed according to the principle that students learn best when they are engaged with and motivated by their learning (Ushioda, 2003; Dörnyei, 2005; Willis Allen, 2013), and that learning abroad is often social (Meier and Daniels, 2011; Coleman, 2013; 2015), and experiential (Kolb, 1984; Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Passarelli and Kolb, 2012). Effective learning abroad is understood as being not simply something that ‘happens’ but rather something that has to be directed and scaffolded by interventions aligned to programme learning aims and outcomes, and which, at the same time, allow students to exploit their social contexts, experiences, and reflections, as well as their interests and motivations, before, during and after their period of residence abroad (Vande Berg, 2009; Bathurst and LaBrack, 2012; Vande Berg, Paige and Lou, 2012). The study design recognised students as ‘whole people’ leading ‘whole lives’, as individuals with personal ambitions

and concerns beyond simply achieving the learning outcomes of their degree programme (Coleman, 2013, p.17; 2015). It aimed to take account of the 'social turn' in study abroad research by acknowledging the importance of giving voice and listening to students' own lived experiences abroad (Howard, 2019, p.7; Kinginger, 2019).

The study was conducted in the context of a series of initiatives over several years to enhance learning support for and assessment of the year abroad in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLAC) at Durham. A number of changes were made to the system of assessment and to the learning support provision offered (McKinnon, 2017; Johnson and McKinnon, 2018). Inspired by the fact that some of these changes were better received than others, the initial aim of the study was to investigate a perceived gap between student and educator expectations of and priorities for the year abroad. As time progressed, attention focused on gaining a better understanding of student priorities for the year abroad in order to find ways of more effectively promoting engagement with all the learning opportunities a period of residence abroad provides.

The study uses interview and questionnaire data to gain insight into the student perspective, and data from interviews as well as an analysis of statements in institutional and national policy documents relating to the year abroad for the perspective of educators. A grounded approach was taken to theming and analysis of all the data (Strauss, 1987; Charmaz, 2000, Oktay, 2012).

The interview and questionnaire data covers the period during and after implementation of changes to the programme. It includes two datasets: first, more than five years of free-text comments in year-abroad module evaluation questionnaires, and secondly, a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with randomly-chosen year-abroad students (6 in 2015; 5 in 2016; 6 in 2018) and with staff involved in year-abroad support (5 in 2018-19). The questionnaire data was useful in helping us to build a general picture of the student body and to identify specific student priorities for the year abroad; however, comments made were sometimes limited in scope and, in some cases, could be read simply as a list of likes and dislikes. The interviews allowed us to dig deeper, to focus attention on thematic areas of concern or interest that emerged from the conversations, and to come to more nuanced conclusions about what the students were saying. The staff interviews focused directly on opinions about the scope and purpose of the year abroad.

Year-abroad related institutional and national policy documents reviewed include student-facing and staff-facing or administrative documents from Durham University, as well as documents published by UK government agencies, interest and advocacy groups, and other national bodies involved in the promotion of study and work-placements abroad, and modern languages more generally.

Institutional context

Students in MLAC study one or two languages chosen from Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian or Spanish (Durham University, 2019a). About 240-270 students take a year abroad through the School each year, in the third of four years of study. Considerable freedom is afforded in terms of placement location and type. Students can spend their year abroad in almost any country in which their language of study is used. Similarly, students are free to choose either to study at a partner university, complete a British Council teaching assistantship, or arrange a work placement themselves, though more limited arrangements are in place for Arabic, Chinese and Japanese (Durham University, 2019b). Since most students study two languages, they tend to do a combination of different types of placement in more than one country and often in a number of locations. Following the changes to our programme mentioned above, the MLAC year abroad is currently assessed through a 5000-word (one language) or two 2500-word (two languages) target-language essay based on an academic research project (on topics such as literature, culture, history, current affairs or linguistics), linked to learning elsewhere on the curriculum (Durham University, 2019c).

FINDINGS

Student priorities: ‘my objective was to improve my language as much as possible’

Language learning was the number one priority for most of the students in the study. Given that they are modern *languages* students, this is certainly a legitimate priority. However, for the most part, students defined language learning in simple terms such as ‘getting better at [x language]’, ‘practising my language’ or ‘improving my language ability’. Even those who developed this further tended to see language learning as being limited to building oral fluency in social, informal or transactional situations: making new friends, shopping and travelling, coping at work or university, finding a flat, agreeing a mobile phone contract, or opening a bank account. Few mentioned the written language or more complex ideas such as linguistic varieties and registers.

The importance given by our students to oral fluency can be better understood when its role as a motivator is taken into account. Many saw oral fluency as a motivating priority because its acquisition was perceived to be a necessary and easily noticeable marker of having completed a successful year abroad. Some described the acquisition of 'near-native fluency' as a watershed moment in their own language learning. It was perceived as being something very difficult to achieve without spending an extended period of time in the target-language country. For our students, oral fluency was seen as a prize uniquely offered by a period of residence abroad. They felt that it was what distinguished those returning from a year abroad from those who were yet to depart, even if many of them did not ultimately achieve the fluency gains they sought.

'I learnt quite a lot about the world of work. This is extremely useful'

Employability was another important priority for many of our students. This is evident not just in the questionnaire and interview responses but also in the fact that most of our students now complete at least one work placement as part of their year abroad. These students value the year abroad as an opportunity to build an impressive CV, gain experience of the workplace, test out possible future careers, and make useful contacts. Even students who did not complete a work placement were aware that the year abroad provided convincing evidence of exactly what employers are looking for in their future graduate employees: independence, personal autonomy and maturity, and, more specifically, communication, problem solving, and enterprise skills. As one student put it: 'you just acquire a lot of skills that you didn't have before.'

'The year abroad is about having experiences'

The interviews indicated that some of our students see the year abroad principally as an opportunity to travel and 'have fun'; they see it very much like a gap year and a time to be free from the academic pressures of university life; they seek out the perfect Instagram photos and videos in front of iconic sites, and to get as many likes as possible on their Facebook page. For these students, the year abroad is what Celeste Kinginger describes as 'globalized infotainment' (Kinger, 2008, p.206). This being said, the data suggested that most of our students were much more focused on the educational and developmental benefits of the year abroad, even though most did also see being based abroad as an opportunity for some travel, getting to know the local history and culture of the place where they were staying, meeting new people and making new friends.

‘Last on my list of priorities’

Students were much less clear about what their teachers expected of them while abroad and what the University’s priorities for their learning were. Some claimed that they were given mixed messages by different teachers or by year-abroad advisors, or they complained that what their teachers were asking them to do did not fit in with their own priorities. This was a source of significant frustration and, for some, ‘added a huge amount of stress to an already stressful experience’.

Such frustration was most evident in relation to assessment of the year abroad through the target-language extended essay. With its focus on research (often relating to cultural or literary topics) and the written language, many students perceived there to be little connection between the assessment and their own priorities and experiences abroad. Some felt that the assessment did not reflect what the University’s priorities should be. Students complained that the research project was ‘a strange way of assessing the year abroad’, that it was ‘last on my list of priorities’, ‘getting in the way’, and that it ‘ultimately took away from valuable time in my year abroad’. One student even commented that having to complete tasks related to the assessment was ‘a complete waste of time when trying to make the most of being in another country’.

Educator priorities

By educators, we understand teachers involved in study-abroad programmes, year-abroad tutors and advisors, curriculum designers, universities, national policy influencers and makers, and study-abroad researchers internationally.

Teachers’ and advisors’ priorities

The teachers and advisors interviewed did not all share the same view of the year abroad as each other and they did not all have exactly the same priorities for their students. Nevertheless, all the teachers and advisors in the study identified broad learning objectives and priorities for the year abroad that, alongside linguistic goals, also included explicitly academic, intellectual, and personal-development goals. Language learning was, indeed, prioritised but at the same time as the study of culture and society, and the development of intercultural awareness and competence, enterprise skills, and enhanced employability. The interviewees also stressed the importance of the integration of all year-abroad learning with learning elsewhere on the curriculum, noting, for example, the

importance of including preparation for the year abroad in class activities in the year prior to departure, or using student experiences abroad as the basis for some classes in the year after return. Some of the interviewees also stressed the importance of encouraging students to follow up on their learning in Durham by attending lectures, exhibitions, screenings and performances relating to their literary and cultural studies while abroad.

Moreover, teachers tended to problematise their approach to each of these objectives and priorities, and to present them as complex rather than simple. Thus, language learning included the written as well as the oral language; it covered mediation (stressing the student's position as '*cultural mediator*' (Council of Europe, 2018, p.122)) as well as production, reception and interaction; it involved an appreciation of different discursive strategies, styles, registers and contexts of use. Similarly, the acquisition of cultural knowledge included an emphasis on developing the students' own processes of intellectual enquiry, building key academic skills such as research skills, self-reflection, and critical thinking, and adopting attitudes leading to a questioning of received wisdom. In other words, using encounters with culture to develop life and thinking skills rather than for the acquisition of cultural knowledge for its own sake.

Institutional learning outcomes statements

Internal institutional documents at Durham give a similar emphasis to broad learning objectives for the year abroad. The statement of year-abroad learning outcomes notes that a period of residence abroad will 'contribute to the student's intellectual development, improve linguistic skills in the target language, develop intercultural competence, and enhance employability' (Durham University, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, 2016a). In the same vein, the programme specifications for the BA in Modern Languages and Cultures note that the year abroad 'enriches [the student's] linguistic competence and their contextual knowledge through engagement with speech communities and a variety of social, cultural and professional environments'. It goes on to say that students abroad 'acquire intercultural agility and sensitivity, emerging as truly global graduates' (Durham University, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, 2016b). It is, however, noteworthy that these documents are mainly intended to be read by teachers or by those responsible for accrediting programmes. Publicly accessible, student-facing documents, perhaps more likely to be produced for marketing rather than pedagogical purposes, are more limited in what they say about the year abroad, with the learning and teaching summary for the BA in modern languages and

cultures stating merely that the year abroad is key in ‘fostering the accelerated acquisition of language skills and expanding intercultural competence’ (Durham University, 2019d).

National policy

At national level, the year abroad has wide support, with various educational councils, academies, interest groups, and government agencies involved in defining its scope and promoting it to students, educators and the public. For example, Universities UK (‘the voice of universities’ (Universities UK, 2020a)) funds a project aimed at investigating and promoting student outward mobility (Universities UK, 2020b), runs a campaign calling for the protection of opportunities to work and study placements abroad post-Brexit (Universities UK, 2020c), and produces student-facing materials that spell out the broad range of benefits that such placements can bring (Universities UK, 2020d). Similarly, the British Council promotes a range of different work and study abroad opportunities on its website (British Council, 2020a), and lists benefits such as a stronger CV, ‘fluency in another language’, ‘communication, presentation, time management, organisation, teamwork and problem solving’ skills development, ‘cultural awareness’, and ‘professional confidence’ when describing its English language assistantship placements (British Council, 2020b). Indeed, students do not have to look far for inspiration, with the very popular globalgraduates.com providing ‘100 Reasons to study abroad’ (Global Graduates, 2016).

Increasingly, the year abroad has been promoted to non-linguists as well as linguists, with publicity materials and policy documents further stressing its broad educational benefits beyond the purely linguistic. A joint position statement in 2012 by the British Academy and the University Council of Modern Languages made the case for the year abroad as part of any UK degree programme. It noted the value to employers and to society more generally of qualities such as a ‘global mindset’, ‘global knowledge’, ‘cultural agility’ and ‘advanced communication skills’, qualities all fostered by a period of residence abroad (British Academy/UCML, 2012, p.2). It listed a range of specific gains associated with the year abroad, including benefits associated with academic learning, culture and interculturality, language acquisition and personal development (British Academy/UCML, 2012). And it maintained a broad focus when it noted that:

In addition to academic learning and deeper cultural insights, students on a year abroad develop both essential skills which help them to observe without misinterpretation or ethnocentric judgement, and interpersonal skills which allow adaptation to complex cultural milieux. (British Academy/UCML, 2012, p.2)

Finally, national benchmarking for the year abroad in modern languages is set by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in their *Subject benchmark statement: languages, cultures and societies* (2019). As might be expected, especially given the range of types of languages degrees offered in the UK, the approach here is also broad-based. Residence abroad as part of a modern languages degree is expected to develop 'linguistic and cultural skills' and 'international perspectives' (QAA, 2019, p.6) as well as contributing to the 'enhancement of [subject] knowledge, understanding and skills', and providing 'experiences and contacts that can be valuable in subsequent careers' (QAA, 2019, p.7). It should foster 'intercultural awareness and capability' as well as the 'qualities of self-reliance' that 'enable graduates to become mobile and transnational citizens in the global environment' (QAA, 2019, p. 7). It should provide for 'the development of cultural insight' and should 'enable students to reflect on their own language learning skills and techniques' (QAA, 2019, p. 15).

IMPLICATIONS

The study found significant variation within the views expressed in the student questionnaires and interviews. Nevertheless, a number of themes emerged and, overall, the students in our study tended to have a relatively limited set of educational priorities for their year abroad in comparison with the educators we interviewed and with the conceptualisation of the year abroad found in the institutional and policy documents reviewed.

For most students, language learning with a focus on informal use of the oral language was given as the main priority. Other priorities noted by the students included improving employability while abroad, making friends, navigating day-to-day living abroad, and making the most of opportunities for travel and tourism. Other, explicitly academic goals were rarely mentioned as a priority. In this respect, the study supported arguments found elsewhere in the research literature (see, for example, Coleman, 2013, p.22).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the data indicated that educators tended to have a less narrowly focused and instrumentalised view of the purpose and scope of the year abroad. The priorities mentioned by teachers and advisors in the interviews, and the expectations they had for their students tended to encompass a broad range of learning aims and objectives that included a variety of academic, personal development, and employability-related gains offered by residence abroad. This view

echoed statements found in institutional and national policy documents that also stressed the range of opportunities open to students on a year abroad.

This potential mismatch or gap between student and educator expectations and priorities for the year abroad raises two important questions. First, what can we do to encourage all students to share the perspective of their educators and take a broader view of the scope and purpose of the year abroad? Secondly, what can we do to better take account of student expectations and priorities for the year abroad, using them positively as a way of helping students to engage with all the learning opportunities that the year abroad provides?

Better communicating our priorities

If students do not share their educators' priorities for the year abroad then educators must ask themselves if they are doing enough to communicate these priorities to their students. The gap, identified in this study, between what can be found in student-facing documentation and what is found in staff-facing materials and broader year-abroad policy documents is telling. We cannot claim that students have misunderstood the year abroad if we do not do enough to fully explain to them exactly what the year abroad is about. A successful year-abroad programme will therefore be clear about its aims, objectives and the priorities students on it should have, and rigorous in the communication of this information. Moreover, it will also be ambitious in these aims, objectives and priorities, promoting broad learning that goes beyond an unproblematised conceptualisation of oral fluency and basic employability.

Researching the student perspective

It is difficult to take account of student expectations and priorities in the design of our programmes if we do not know what they are. Initiatives to enhance learning support for and assessment of the year abroad at Durham initially set out with the intention of aligning learning abroad and its assessment more closely with the research-led focus of the learning aims and outcomes of the Durham modern languages degree (Johnson and McKinnon, 2018). However, as we have seen, some students were frustrated by what they perceived to be a mismatch between the priorities implied in design of the programme and their own priorities. The pedagogic and research basis for the design was sound, but we had not sufficiently taken student expectations and priorities into

account in it. It was only by researching the student perspective through this study that we were able to more fully integrate it into later iterations of the programme.

Integrating student and educator priorities

We piloted a series of interventions that aimed to respond to what students had told us were their priorities for the year abroad, integrating these priorities with our own as educators by encouraging students to broaden their horizons and become more aware of ways in which aspects of learning abroad are interconnected and also linked to the learning objectives of their degree programme as a whole.

These interventions gave students resources to allow them to record and reflect on their experiences and achievements in a learning journal while also exploring basic theory relating to language use, culture, interculturality, and employability. Each intervention focused first on an area of learning seen by students as a priority (e.g. sourcing evidence of employability), but then went on to encourage exploration of related ideas (e.g. ways in which developing intercultural skills abroad enhances employability). Students were given tools to help them reflect on the communicative strategies involved in language use related to day-to-day year abroad activities, to get to grips with ideas such as linguistic variety and register, and to create a record of their language learning. Structured reflections on travel and experience of the local environment were used to help students build – and question – cultural knowledge and their own growing cultural expertise. Similarly, intercultural interventions exploited interest in social interaction or the desire for improved employability to help students understand interculturality conceptually and become more aware of their own intercultural competences (McKinnon, 2017).

The pilot was very well received by the students who had engaged with it. Interviews with these students indicated that they had developed a clearer understanding and articulation of broader year-abroad goals, that they had become more aware of their own learning abroad, and that they were able to see this learning as complex and integrated with learning elsewhere on the degree programme (McKinnon, 2017). Although, in the end, the interventions were too demanding in terms of staffing and resources to be rolled out to the whole cohort, many of the principles behind them, and, in particular, the importance of understanding and acknowledging student priorities for the year abroad, will be adopted in further iterations of the Durham modern language year abroad.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students do not have the benefit of ten, twenty, or more years of teaching, designing curricula or supervising year-abroad placements. In most cases, their year abroad is their first experience of living independently in a foreign country. As one student put it, they are 'learning what this experience is all about as they go along'. Quite naturally, then, student priorities for the year abroad are likely to be narrower and less complex than their educators'. It is our job, as educators, to help students to see the bigger picture and to encourage them to share our values and priorities.

As we have seen, alignment with the aims of the degree programme as a whole is laudable but not enough if it does not also take students' priorities into account. Knowing, as a teacher or curriculum designer, the value and purpose of the year abroad is not enough if this information is not also communicated to students in language they understand. Designing interventions that tick all of the institutional or policy-driven boxes is not enough if these interventions do not appeal to students and engage them actively in their learning.

To optimise learning, educators must first get to know their students well and get to know their priorities for the year abroad. They should also make sure that they are familiar with their institution's priorities for the year abroad so that they are in a position to communicate them unambiguously to their students without sending mixed messages. Educators should be unapologetically ambitious in their priorities but they should also make sure that these priorities are not only aligned to the learning objectives set by their institution but that they also respond to and exploit their students' ideas about what the year abroad is for. Learning abroad is most effective when it is ambitious and wide in scope and when it also takes place in a context of understanding and respect for the learner's own plans, objectives and priorities.

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From ‘Predecisional’ to ‘Postdecisional’: An Examination of the Fluctuation of Motivational Factors in Students of Japanese as Seen in Year Abroad Essays

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ABSTRACT

Factors contributing to student motivation for studying Japanese have in recent times received significant attention amongst HE institutions in the UK teaching Japanese. This study set out to identify to what extent fluctuations could be seen in motivational factors from the ‘predecisional phase,’ the initial decision-making stage, to the ‘postdecisional phase,’ the stage where motivation is implemented and sustained (Shoaib and Dörnyei, 2005) through the year abroad (YA) as a key period. The motivations evident at the predecisional phase for 41 students were analysed in relation to those evident at the postdecisional phase, with a particular focus on chosen topics for the year abroad essay assignment. The study found that there was no longevity of motivation for students displaying affective/integrative (Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2005) motivation at the predecisional stage, but there was some evidence for longevity of motivation for those who displayed instrumental motivation at that stage. Further studies are needed to examine whether for students showing instrumental motivation at the predecisional stage it can be said that motivation generally endures to the final pre-graduation postdecisional stage.

KEYWORDS: year abroad, Japanese, predecisional, postdecisional, motivation

INTRODUCTION

Factors contributing to student motivation for studying Japanese have in recent times received significant attention amongst HE institutions in the UK teaching Japanese. Efforts have been made to understand ‘the ‘hook’’ that ‘ignites students’ interest in Japanese studies and draws them into studying Japanese language and culture at University level’ to ‘(re)define and promote the field of Japanese Studies in the UK’ (Japan Foundation, 2018). A significant factor impacting students’ motivation towards studying foreign languages is said to be studying abroad (DuFon and Churchill, 2006; Harada, 2008) and students of Japanese at the University of Leeds also go on a compulsory year abroad (YA). Since students’ YA in Japan is arguably the pivotal time in their degree course, this study examines whether their interests and motivations fluctuate during the course of their 4 years degree. Paying particular attention to the YA essays students write about Japanese culture on a topic of their choice as part of their assessment, this study attempts to identify possible links between the YA essay topics and initial reasons/motivations for choosing Japanese stated in their UCAS forms, and their Final Year Project (FYP) topics.

JAPANESE STUDIES AND JAPAN YEAR ABROAD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Background information on the Japanese Studies programmes at the University of Leeds is offered here to provide the context for the present study. The number of students enrolled in the Japanese Studies programmes for the past five years has been constant at 50-60, including six to ten students who have a prior knowledge of Japanese and thus start at the Intermediate level each year. YA in Japan is an integral part of these programmes, and takes place in the second year, unlike the majority of UK universities which send students to Japan in the third year of their studies of Japanese. The YA programme at Leeds is exchange-based with 15 different universities across Japan, which means the students’ experiences can vary considerably dependent on which of the universities they attend. This may further impact each student's interests and motivation but specific examination of this aspect is outside the scope of the present study.

RELATED LITERATURE

L2 motivation, in particular various factors which may impact on students' motivation, started to receive attention in the 1990s, before which a focus had been predominantly on the 'initial motivation to pursue an action' (Dörnyei and Otto 1998, p.45). Pertinent to the present study is the view that motivation is not a constant state but a more dynamic entity that changes over time (Dörnyei, 2001, p.41) and that motivation consists of three aspects, which are 'the choice of a particular action', 'the persistence with it' and 'the effort expended on it' (ibid. 8). With respect to learning Japanese, research on motivation to date has largely aimed to uncover learners' motivation quantitatively, focusing on university students, using questionnaires (Takahashi & Hirayama, 2014). In addition, research on the link between motivation and study abroad in Japan appears thus far to have focused on the time the learners are in Japan (e.g. Harada, 2008; Hasegawa, 2016; Morimoto, 2016). Against this background, the present study explores students' motivation throughout their degree focusing on three specific points, namely when they apply for university, at the end of their YA, and at the end of their degree, bearing in mind that YA is a significant factor impacting students' motivation (DuFon & Churchill, 2006).

AIMS OF STUDY AND DATA COLLECTION

This study set out to identify to what extent fluctuations could be seen in motivational factors from the 'predecisional phase,' the initial decision-making stage, to the 'postdecisional phase,' the stage where motivation is implemented and sustained (Shoaib and Dörnyei, 2005) through the YA as a key period. Students' motivations at the 'predecisional phase' can be seen from their UCAS applications and those at the 'postdecisional phase' are observed from their YA essay topics and FYP topics. Data relating to themes on UCAS forms, YA essays, and FYPs was gathered and collated for a total of 48 final year students of Japanese at the University of Leeds from the 2017-18 and 2018-19 academic years. Seven of the datasets were discarded due to lacking data regarding YA essays. The remaining 41 were analysed for the existence of keywords/themes which connected UCAS forms to YA essays, YA essays to FYPs, or indeed all three elements, placing particular attention on YA essays in an attempt to highlight the importance of the YA which is likely to influence students' motivations.

MOTIVATIONS AT PREDECISIONAL PHASE

According to Shoaib & Dörnyei (2005) there are seven major dimensions of motivation. They are affective/integrative (attitudes towards the TL, LL & TC, mood), instrumental (current or desired Job, colleagues, further study), self-concept-related (confidence, satisfaction, acceptance of limits, debilitating factors, own decision), goal-oriented (learning for knowing, demonstrating ability, getting good grades, outdoing others, goal specificity), educational-context-related (teacher, classmates, curriculum, methodology, class size, essential), significant-other-related (parents, family, friends, partner), host-environment-related (L2 contact, inability to integrate, length of stay). Frequently stated reasons in the UCAS forms for wanting to study Japanese are anime, manga, literature, films or aikido (83%), which fall into the aforementioned 'affective/integrative' category. Other examples include familiarity with Japanese culture (24%), career in Japan (15%) or Japanese parent (7%), which are categorised as 'host-environment-related', 'instrumental' and 'significant-other-related' respectively. These dimensions of motivation at the predecisional phase will be compared with those at the postdecisional phase in the following sections.

MOTIVATIONS AT POSTDECISIONAL PHASE

Japan year abroad essays

Towards the end of the year in Japan, students are required to write a 1,200 word *sakubun* (composition) in Japanese and a 2-2,500 word essay in English. The former should describe how the student's views on Japanese culture have changed during their year in Japan, as well as clarify why they chose to write about the particular aspect of Japanese culture they selected for the English essay. Here 'culture' is defined broadly as 'the distinctive customs, achievements, products, etc. of a society or a group; the way of life of a society or a group' (Oxford English Dictionary), and further clarified with some examples, to show the students that their writing can relate to any aspect of Japanese life, culture, society, or customs which they may have observed. The English essay is entitled 'Japanese Culture: My View' and must be based on both academic sources (by this point students have already become familiar with academic writing during the first year of their studies) and personal observations and reflections. This will be the first, and for some the only, time in their academic career that they may have the opportunity to combine casual personal observations with a rigorous academic approach. Possible marks for the essay are fail, pass, and distinction and students

only receive specific formative feedback if they request it from the assessor. Should they fail because they have not followed the essay brief, they are required to revise and resubmit it. These essays have significant potential to indicate students' interests, e.g. pop culture, traditional society, or perhaps instrumental issues connected to their future careers. The above essays are together referred to as the year abroad (YA) essay.

Final year projects (FYP)

All students in the School of Languages, Cultures, and Societies, at Leeds are required to conduct a research project and write a dissertation of either 8,000 or 12,000 words, which should relate to their major field of study. Examining topics students choose to write about for their FYP can prove to be potentially indicative of any fluctuations in their motivation towards studying Japanese, and FYPs are arguably the last pre-graduation source of 'postdecisional' evidence of the nature of their motivation.

Classification of YA essays and FYPs

For the purposes of the current study, students' chosen topics for their YA essays and FYPs were classified into the categories given in Table 1. Anime, manga and fashion were assigned a separate category from 'culture' as it is a well-known fact that these aspects of popular culture are a distinct 'hook' for creating an initial interest in many students to study Japanese. Separating them helps to clarify how commonly these specific aspects featured in students' YA essays and FYPs.

Classification	Content
Politics & International Relations (P & IR)	Domestic politics, international relations and disputes
Economics (Ec)	Economics, working practices
Society (S)	Gender, social issues
Education (Ed)	
Literature & Language (L)	Literature, language acquisition
Aime, manga, cinema (A)	
Fashion (F)	
Culture (C)	Religion, etiquette, martial arts, food, music, social issues

Table 1: Classifications of YA essays and FYPs

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Classification	YA Essay	FYP
Politics & International Relations (P & IR)	4	5
Economics (Ec)	3	3
Society (S)	4	6
Education (Ed)	1	0
Literature & Language (L)	0	8
Aime, manga, cinema (A)	1	8
Fashion (F)	1	1
Culture (C)	27	0
No data/FYP related to other part of joint honours degree	n/a	10
Total	41	41

Table 2: Number of YA essays and FYPs classified under each category

Drawing to the end of their year abroad in Japan, it is evident that most students' interests were largely focused around 'cultural' elements (defined in Table 1) of Japanese society, which many of them had probably encountered for the first time during their year abroad (27 out of 41 students). When it came to FYPs, however, students' interests appeared to be much more varied, as is evident from Table 2. Remarkably for their FYP, no student chose to research 'cultural' areas, which had been prevalent in the YA essay topics, whilst several themes showed increases, most notably literature and language (increased from zero to eight students), and anime, manga and cinema (which increased from one to eight). The reasons for the different trends in prevalent themes are inevitably impossible to ascertain without asking the students themselves, however a number of assumptions may reasonably be made. These assumptions could be tested in targeted future studies after the context has been established by the present study.

Firstly, being no longer on their year abroad, students are also no longer faced with daily encounters with Japanese culture and are perhaps more likely to choose topics which they feel confident to engage with and write about in a more academic manner. Their focus now seems to have moved from enjoyment and/or reflection on Japanese culture, to more pragmatic concerns such as obtaining marks which will help them on their way to an acceptable class of degree. The FYP is also a

different type of assignment from the YA essay in that it is a purely academic/scholarly piece devoid of any casual observations from everyday life. Hence, it can be argued they are likely to select a topic about which they can confidently write and not necessarily something they have merely observed or in which they only have a shorter-term interest. Connected with this are the modules which are available to them during their final two years at Leeds, which arguably lend them confidence to approach different themes and disciplines with greater confidence and a more solid theoretical framework than starting out in a field with which they are entirely unfamiliar and have no support from a related module and its tutor.

The above is a useful snapshot of the general situation, but it is particularly pertinent to the purpose of the present study to examine the data and identify any trends within the motivations and interests of any individual students. Looking more closely it was found that six (15%) students displayed thematic links between UCAS forms and YA essays, as seen in Table 3 below. These are evidence of some students presenting a degree of continuity between predecisional motivation and the earliest form of postdecisional motivation-related data available.

Student no.	UCAS form	YA essay
20	Languages, linguistics	Honorific language
24	Japanese music	Japanese Brazilian pop music

Table 3: Examples of thematic links between UCAS forms and YA essays

In addition to this, four (10%) showed thematic links through all three fields of data, details of which are given in Table 4. It is noteworthy that in two of these cases the themes were arguably indicative of long-term instrumental (Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2005) motivation regarding economics or working practices. There is quite a distinction between this kind of motivation/interest and, for example manga and anime (which can be classified as affective/integrative motivations). Examples of longevity in affective/integrative motivations were not identified amongst the current samples. It can, then, be argued that the distinctiveness of instrumental motivational factors has been identified here, although more investigation is needed to support this interpretation more fully.

Student no.	UCAS form	YA essay	FYP
18	Economics & business etiquette	Working life and practices	Economy, growth and development
39	Economic development	Women in the workforce	Working conditions in Japan
7	geisha	Japanese fashion	Genderless fashion
36	films	Horror in Japanese culture	Wartime Japanese cinema

Table 4: Thematic links between UCAS forms, YA essays and FYPs

Apart from the above examples, one (2%) showed a thematic link between the YA essay and FYP only, suggesting the faint possibility of longevity between different postdecisional stages. Finally, all other students (73%) showed no apparent link between any of the three stages of sampling, which in itself implies significant fluctuations of motivation between not only the predecisional and postdecisional stage, but also the different postdecisional stages. In other words, the majority of the data points to there being little sign of longevity of motivation in the students of Japanese who were the subject of the present study.

CONCLUSION

In line with the aims of the study, the most significant findings include the lack of any generalisable trend in the longevity of motivation other than the lack of longevity itself. Whilst there is evidence that, for a minority of students, longevity of motivation is a reality, particularly with regards to instrumental motivation, the exact nature of, or reasons for, this longevity can barely be described. Further studies are needed to examine whether for students showing instrumental motivation at the predecisional stage it can be said that motivation generally endures to the final pre-graduation postdecisional stage.

Evidently, students who began their degree courses inspired by affective/integrative motivational factors did not experience longevity of motivation, which supports the arguments of Dörnyei (2001) that motivation changes over time. This study suggests that this is indeed the case, as students'

choice of topics in the above-mentioned assignments is an important indicator of their motivation. Also, YA essays revealed a clustering of interests/motivations (Table 2) but these had become greatly dispersed again by FYP stage.

Directions for further studies

Having begun to identify possible trends in the above study, further focused investigation is needed to identify any evidence of trends over a number of years, as well as examine more closely the nature of motivation itself in students of Japanese studies and how this fluctuates over time, for example through a longitudinal, questionnaire/interview-based study. Having identified the nature of motivation in students of Japanese studies, it will be important to take this further and survey graduates in their chosen careers to examine both how they now view the value and meaning of the year abroad for their personal and career development and any links which can be established with their predecisional motivation. Consideration should also be given to how to foster instrumental motivation during the year abroad. After all, it is fundamentally important to provide an enhanced student experience, as well as prepare students, through their studies of Japanese, for life in the world of work after graduation, both an institutional and a sectoral concern (University of Leeds, n.d.; QAA Subject Benchmark Statement, Languages Cultures and Societies (2015)).

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The Student Expectation Journey from Study Abroad Back Home

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ABSTRACT

This study follows up on previous work on UK-based student expectations of Study Abroad (SA) experiences in China (Peng and Wright, 2020) to address a current gap in how expectations may develop during the later stages of SA and on return home (though see Mitchell et al., 2017, Winke and Gass, 2018). The paper reports on students' experiences across linguistic, personal, cultural and academic perspectives, to see how their expectations matched the reality of life during SA, and how they found life on re-entry to their UK university. Using questionnaires completed by 25 students within a few weeks of their return to the home institution, we found some positive outcomes, in that reality often exceeded expectation, especially in linguistic and academic progress, and high levels of general satisfaction for the year overall. However, other expectations, e.g. hopes of making local Chinese friends, engaging with local culture, or developing future employability, had not always been fulfilled. Some specific pastoral and academic challenges were identified, such as mental health support, and providing sufficient targeted support for students on Joint Honours (JH) programmes. On re-entry, maintaining the language was identified as the major challenge. Interestingly, from an institutional point of view, the expectation that SA would lead to greater autonomy and initiative was not always met—particularly in how to find new ways of keeping language use going. Overall, we see that the notion of “expectation violation” (Bell, 2016,p198) is not necessarily maintained, that students can have very positive experiences of SA, but that students' capacity to engage fully and develop greater autonomy, intercultural perspectives or awareness of the SA experience to build future employability remain variable at best. We discuss the implications of how far such issues can be addressed by institutional support, or whether this variability is inherent within SA.

KEYWORDS: China, SA journey, re-entry, expectations, personal development

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies note the complex interaction of factors affecting students' very varied experiences during Study Abroad (SA) – see e.g. Mitchell, Tracy-Ventura and McManus (2015), particularly for western students going to linguistically and culturally distant SA host countries such as China (Yu, 2010; Peng and Wright, 2020). In light of the variety of such experiences, researchers, institutions and students alike can benefit from investigations that explore the interaction of factors impacting students throughout the SA cycle, including on students' return back home after the SA experience (Ingraham and Peterson, 2004; Ward and Masgoret, 2004; Sanz and Morales-Front, 2018; Devlin, 2020). Research has shown that different levels of social and linguistic interaction underpin most students' perceptions of whether the SA experience has been a positive one overall in terms of linguistic development (Mitchell et al., 2017; Sanz and Morales-Front, 2018). Similarly, other studies have identified that pre-departure expectations may not be fulfilled during SA, leading to frustration and "expectation violation" (Bell, 2016, p198). Researchers also note just how challenging it can be for international students to create opportunities for rich interaction and engagement, leading to loneliness and isolation, and call for both host and home institutions to do more to prepare and support students both academically and pastorally (e.g., Ward and Masgoret, 2004; Wright and Schartner, 2013).

Given these challenges, however, not many studies track student experiences in later stages of SA and on return, despite evidence that transition back to home country study can also be challenging (Winke and Gass, 2018). In general, very little research has attempted to follow students through the whole SA journey from pre to post SA (though see Mitchell et al., 2017), particularly in relation to western students' experiences when visiting China. In such cases, hopes and reality may be even more divergent than for SA in closer host countries, e.g. within the Erasmus programme (Wright, 2018). We thus believe the study discussed here is the first project to draw a holistic picture of UK students on a BA Chinese degree programme, pre, during and post-SA in China. The findings presented here are taken from the middle and later stages of students during SA and on their return to the UK. Due to limitations on time and resources, we have been unable to date to carry out the research on the same cohort, but see Peng and Wright (2020), for analysis of pre-departure expectations carried out with a previous cohort of students on the same programme. The two studies (Peng and Wright, 2020, and this one) thus aim to provide a coherent story of the student journey through SA, aiming to identify potential matches and mismatches between expectation and

reality. Our focus here is on students' levels of engagement during their stay in the host country, and perceptions of the challenges and opportunities they faced during SA and on re-entry back home to see how far they aligned the patterns of pre-departure expectations we had found in the previous cohort, reported in our 2020 paper. Such findings are key for researchers, students and institutions alike.

STUDY DESIGN

Based on previous literature, we focused on factors which could affect participants' linguistic development, socio-cultural adaptations and personal identity, and also their academic progress, employment prospects and the impact of the transition back home after SA (Mitchell et al., 2015; Sanz and Morales-Front, 2018). From existing findings (e.g. Wright, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2017), it is known that opportunities to engage and interact can strongly impact on measures of, for example, linguistic and academic progress. But increasingly SA research has also identified that social interaction has complex effects on students' perceptions of their identity and personal development, e.g. in growing cultural awareness, confidence and autonomy. It is also becoming important to see how far students' SA experiences may impact on their future employability opportunities, either directly by aiming for jobs which will use their language skills, or more broadly through applying relevant transferable skills, such as interpersonal communication, resilience and problem-solving among others (see, e.g., Ward and Masgoret, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2017). However, challenges in crossing the potential threshold of successful engagement can be found in many aspects of SA life (Wright and Schartner, 2013). Therefore, our research design focused on questions across the two main themes of i) levels of interaction and engagement, and ii) benefits or potential challenges.

A range of research methodologies are currently used in SA research, but here we use a survey-based approach to create a self-report questionnaire using a mix of closed and open questions. The questions were based on similar tools used in studies for a variety of global SA settings (Ingraham and Peterson, 2004; Ward and Masgoret, 2004; Wright and Schartner, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2017).

While subjective self-reports may be seen as having some limitations in how far they represent an accurate account of events (Kasper, 1999; Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005), we believe that students' own voices are an invaluable means of obtaining more depth of insight as to what actually happens there (Plews and Jackson, 2017).

There are two main themes in the closed question sections (Qs 1-10) of the questionnaire. All the statements are measured on a scale of 1 to 5 for comparability, although the themes differ between different themes and sub-sections. Theme A aimed to identify how far the students managed to engage with people in the host country during SA (following Wright and Schartner, 2013).

Theme A: Levels of interactions and activities

Q1 social interaction

Q2 academic interaction

Q3 initiating interactions in target language

Q4 cultural activities

Q5 employability-based activities

The questions in this section were designed to get a sense of the type and amount of interaction students had—how far they participated in different kinds of activities with different kinds of people, including local people or other international students, creating different opportunities for interaction and impact on the SA experience.

Theme B aimed to assess students' perceptions of challenges and development during SA and also at re-entry (following Ward and Masgoret, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2017; Winke and Gass, 2018). Topics including academic and linguistic experiences, but also social/personal issues which we know from past student surveys can cause challenges, such as making friends, finding suitable accommodation, coping with health issues.

Theme B: Perceptions of challenges and opportunities for development

Q 6 academic and social/personal adaptation during SA

Q 7 experience at host universities

Q 8 overall progress during SA

Q 9 personal/cultural development during SA

Q10 re-entry experience

The last question (Q11) was open-ended, encouraging qualitative comments to provide more depth of insight or highlight any broader issues not covered in the survey.

The questionnaire (see appendix) was distributed within 5 weeks of the students' re-entry to the UK in their next year of study following their time abroad. Out of the whole cohort of 49 students studying on a BA Chinese programme in a UK university in the sample targeted for this project, 25 participated in this study. Nine were single honours students, 16 were joint honours, either with another language or other area of study such as business or history. Participation was voluntary; data collection and analysis followed ethical procedures and protocols approved by the university's Ethics Committee.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative results – Theme A

We report here the outcomes of the quantitative parts of a self-report questionnaire investigating the quantity and quality of UK students' experiences during SA in China and on return, both outside and inside the classroom. Questions were scored on a scale of 1-5; for ease of reporting here, results are shown as group mean scores (out of 5).

Theme A looked at time spent on interaction and activities undertaken during SA. The five points of the scale ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (very often); to avoid the risk that participants would interpret these terms differently (Wright, 2010), explicit explanations were given.

- never = 1
- seldom (approximately once a month) = 2
- sometimes (approximately once a week) = 3
- often (3 times a week) = 4
- very often (every day) = 5

Q1 looked at the frequency of social interactions with various groups of people, specifically, home-country friends, other international friends and host-country friends. The home-country friends group (HFG) scored the highest with a mean frequency rating of 4.36, followed by the international friends group (IFG) - mean 4. The mean for the Chinese friends group (CFG) is the lowest (mean 3.06). The two means between HFG and CFG were statistically significantly different ($p < .05$).

Q2 asked a similar question in relation to academic interaction, to compare in-class activities with out-of-class activities. The same pattern was observed in Q2 regarding the frequencies of studying with the three groups of people. Again, the two means for HFG (3.48) and CFG (2.24) were significantly different. These students were thus significantly more likely to spend both their social and academic time with their compatriot friends, and to socialise with international friends more than with local Chinese people.

Q3 looked at the frequency of seeking opportunities to initiating conversations in the target language, as a demonstration of a sense of autonomy and self-agency in creating opportunities to develop their language and potentially make friends. Here the mean frequency rating of 4.16 was high; it is similar, for example, to the mean score of social interaction with HFG. However, noting the low levels of interactions with Chinese speakers, in Q1 and Q2 above, this high rating is possibly an artefact arising from speaking activities in class. It would be necessary to clarify phrasing for this question as a measure of social initiative-taking, if using this survey in future work.

Q4 and Q5 investigated the frequencies for the students to attend cultural activities, or activities relating to building employability skills, such as language teaching, volunteer work. As in Q3, these questions aimed to tap their ability to take the initiative in activities beyond academic language study, i.e. how far they saw that being in the host country and studying the target language was not just about doing lessons in a different country, but provided opportunities to improve their intercultural understanding and employability skills. The two mean scores (3.08 for Q4 and 2.92 for Q5), i.e. about once a week, were very similar. However, on all measures in questions 1-5 there were wide variations; particularly for Qs3-5, some students answered 1 (never), while others answered 5 (every day), highlighting the variability of experiences even within this relatively homogenous cohort.

Quantitative results – Theme B

Theme B looked at students' attitudes towards their experiences during SA in some detail, to triangulate against the reports of interaction and engagement identified in Qs 1-5 above. Questions here (6-10) were phrased as perceptions of level of challenge. In view of the greater number of sub-factors investigated in these questions, we present the data for these questions in graph form. The five points on the scale range from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely challenging).

Q6 focused on academic, and social/personal challenges. This was the broadest area, so the question was divided into 10 sub-questions:

- Academic challenges:
 - 6a. Understanding what was required by the host university
 - 6b. Understanding teachers/lecturers
 - 6c. Taking tests or exams
 - 6d. Making oral presentations
 - 6e. Managing your study workload
 - 6f. Thinking critically
- Social or personal challenges:
 - 6g. Interacting socially in Chinese
 - 6h. Making friends
 - 6i. Finding accommodation
 - 6j. Overcoming personal or health problems

Student responses are shown in Figures 1 and 2 below. Generally speaking, for academic challenges (6a-6f) the amount of difficulty reported was not marked - (overall mean 2.07). 6d (making oral presentations) was scored as the hardest (mean 2.32), but this was ranked as only slightly more challenging compared with other academic tasks. Similar findings were noted in students' social and personal experiences (6g to 6j), which were not seen as very challenging overall (mean 2.08). Overcoming personal or health problems (6j) was ranked as the most problematic (mean 2.32), though not significantly different to other sub-scores.

Q7 was designed to investigate how the students coped academically in more detail, in view of research that academic context is often the core of students' SA experience (Ward and Masgoret, 2004). Participants evaluated 6 areas of work at the host institutions and at the home university:

course content, feedback, teaching methods, assessment procedures, support from host, joint honours.

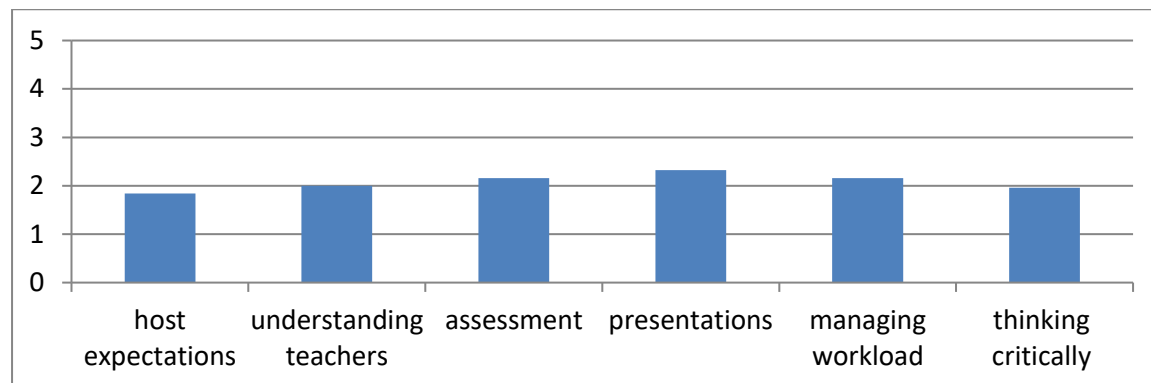


Figure 1: Question 6 a-f: Perceptions of difficulty in academic challenges

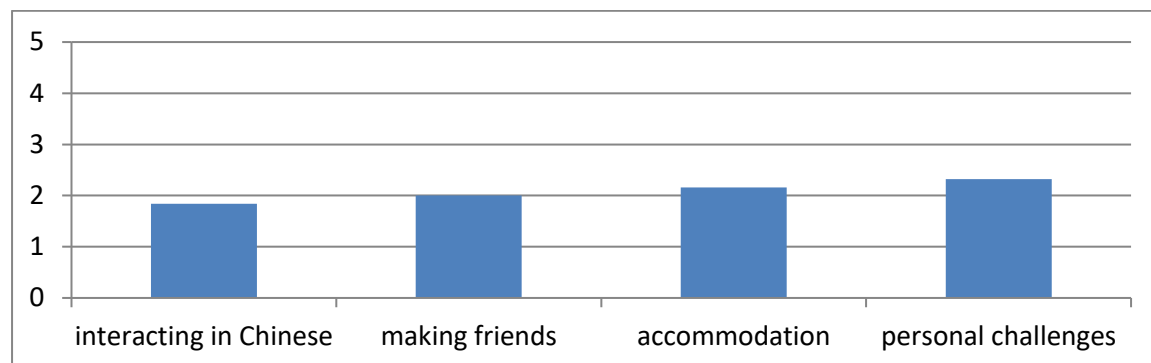


Figure 2: Question 6 g-j: Perceptions of difficulty in social and personal challenges

Students were generally positive about their host experience (mean 3.42). Answers are shown in Figure 3 below. They were most satisfied with the course content and teaching methods (mean 4.04). However, there was one major source of dissatisfaction - support for JH students. Out of the 25 participants, 16 of them were doing JH degrees. Keeping this factor within the group scoring for this question markedly reduced the overall mean (from 3.42 to 2.45). The low score on this sub-question identified difficulties in keeping up with the other JH subject, further echoed in students' qualitative comments which will be discussed later.

The pastoral care and support offered by the host institutions was the second lowest scored factor (mean 2.76), showing concerns in this area too, which also emerged in the qualitative comments.

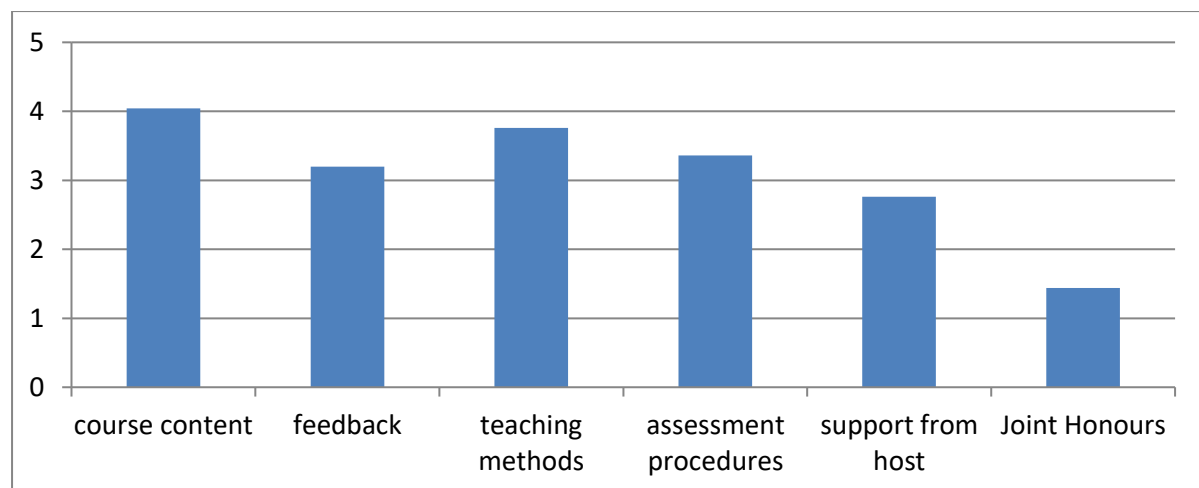


Figure 3: Question 7: Perceptions of satisfaction with academic experiences at the host institutions

Q8 examined students' sense of progress in relation to linguistic and academic skills, and whether they would like to have more linguistic preparation before SA. On the whole, students felt they had made good progress (overall mean 4.17), particularly in reading, speaking and listening (all mean scores were above 4). Overall, they judged that their language progress was good (4), higher than their academic development (mean 3.68). However, in relation to satisfaction with the level of preparation they had received, the mean score was 3.52, suggesting they may have preferred more pre-SA preparation in the linguistic domain.

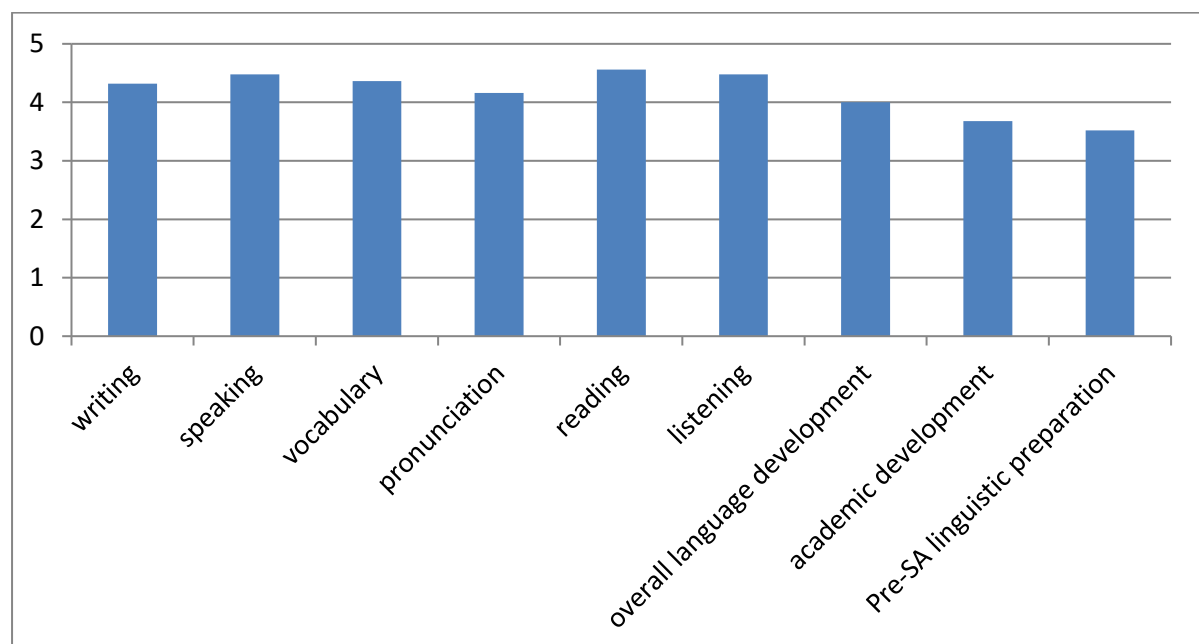


Figure 4: Question 8: Perceptions of levels of academic and language development/preparation

Question 9 related to personal and cultural development. The students were happy with the progress they had made (overall mean 4.12), including self-reliance (mean 4.56) and problem solving (mean 4.44). They reported that they felt happy with the levels of their intercultural development (mean 4.28) – however, this does not fully align with the reports of their actual engagement with Chinese hosts, as previously discussed in responses to Questions 1 and 2. It was also the case that the need for more pre-SA preparation in cultural and social knowledge scored fairly low (mean 2.4), despite this being identified as an area of concern for pre-departure students our previous study, Peng and Wright, 2020), and was lower than the need, noted above for Question 8, for more linguistic preparation.

Taken together, this suggests that there may be levels of personal cultural awareness (ie knowledge “about” local culture) which students can feel are fairly quickly achieved, but which develop separately from the actual experience of intercultural engagement. It therefore raises the question of how far development of cultural knowledge is well rooted in authentic experience and successful interactions or, perhaps, rather more interest in culture for consumption purposes (as we noted in our previous study, Peng and Wright 2020).

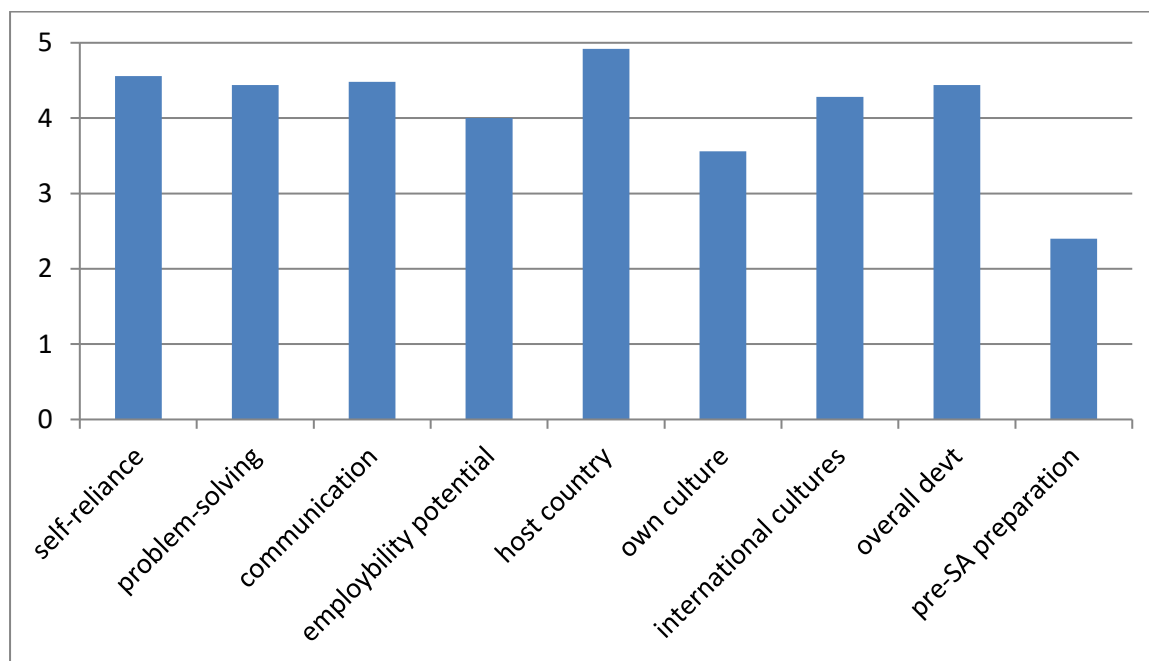


Figure 5: Question 9: Perceptions of cultural and personal development

Question 10 focused on student abilities to adjust to life after their return home, given the relative dearth of research noted earlier on the post-SA phase. Generally speaking, student re-integration

was reported fairly positively (mean 3.59), including in terms of managing language in class, and readjusting to their other academic work. These findings suggest that potential reverse academic or general culture shock was not a marked problem across the whole cohort (compared to other studies, e.g. Winke and Gass, 2018). Most students planned to keep in touch with their Chinese friends, and they could see themselves using Chinese in future work. However, all but one of the mean scores were below 4, which implies that the re-entry experience was not wholly satisfying on any of the domains we explored, and may have masked some greater problems for some of the cohort. Of particular interest was attitudes of students towards maintaining their language outside of class (mean score 2.8) compared to in-class (mean score 3.68). These two mean scores were significantly different ($p < .05$).

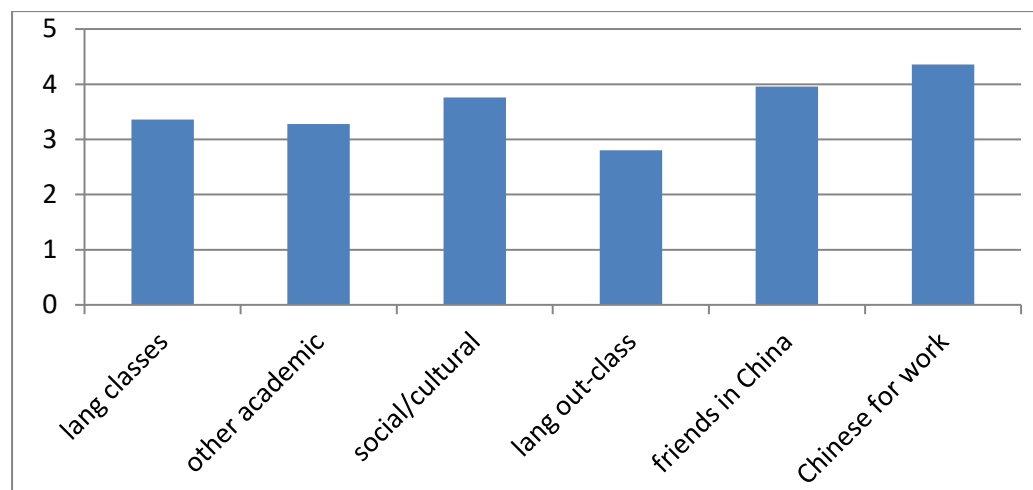


Figure 8: Question 10: Perceptions of adjusting at re-entry

Overall the quantitative findings show a generally positive pattern, including readiness to re-enter the home university setting, though with specific areas of challenge, such as opportunities for making local friends, providing support for Joint Honours students, and ability to maintain language engagement on return home. However, within such a small cohort, these remain exploratory findings and we do not aim to generalise these to wider populations. By exploring themes of academic, linguistic and personal sociocultural development in more detail, we were able to highlight just how variable and nuanced the students' experiences may be, particularly where perceptions and experiences do not always tally (e.g. in cultural development versus actual intercultural engagement). We turn now to the qualitative comments to see how far the quantitative patterns are borne out by themes emerging from the students' own words.

Qualitative findings

From the qualitative findings, we can see that, on the whole, students were voicing a positive experience - they had developed new perspectives and outlooks; they enjoyed their life in China and some did not even want to come back; they could picture themselves working and living abroad in the future, suggesting they have made a great deal of progress over the SA journey:

The experience has made me want to move abroad after University which I think is a great benefit - my eyes have been opened! (S17)

The first month of the year abroad was the most challenging, partly due to the visa requirements etc., and getting to grips with only Chinese speaking, but after this I felt like I settled in really well and to be honest I didn't want to come back. (S8)

Overall the predicted expectation gap did not seem to be problematic, as has been suggested in other literature (e.g. Bell, 2016). The challenges were not as high in reality as expressed in our pre-departure student survey, carried out with a previous cohort (Peng and Wright, 2020). The previous study revealed a strong belief that before SA they needed more preparation on linguistic knowledge; it was going to be hard to adjust academically to the Chinese way of studying; lots of help would be needed to adapt in cultural and personal terms. This cohort after SA felt that they were relatively well prepared, and their academic adaptation showed the least gap at all. Generally speaking, they were moderately satisfied with their adaptation, experience and development during SA. However, there were problems and issues too over how far adaptation and integration could be fully successful.

The first concern was evidence of the lack of interaction with native speakers, a finding supported by both quantitative and qualitative data. In the research literature on SA, the relatively low incidence of contact noted between SA students and local people has been a concern in many different contexts (Ward, 2001; Ward and Masgoret, 2004; Wright and Schartner, 2013), so it is not unique to China or to this particular cohort. In the pre-departure survey, the previous cohort of students expressed a strong desire to have a lot of contact with the local people, but it is disappointing to see that for the cohort in this study, in reality the association with native speakers was rather limited.

The most difficult and frustrating part of my year abroad was making Chinese friends, the opportunities to do so were surprisingly scarce. (S22)

I also felt like there were too many home university students here which made it difficult to make different friends... Only a handful of students made non-home university friends. (S17)

The second major concern is the support given to students with mental health issues. It was noticed that individual students with a history of mental health problems were more likely to have on-going personal issues during SA and at re-entry. The home university studied here tries to ensure that students do fulfil “fitness to study” requirements, and during SA, students noted that institutional support offered was helpful. However, in our findings, the students' feedback suggested this is not sufficient. The findings showed that on the whole, it was efforts made by individuals themselves or through their parental support network which made the difference between a student being able to cope with a year abroad or not.

No emotional support was given from the host university – the home university were as helpful as they could, but for students who have a history of mental health issues there should be something to help them out. If my parents could not have afforded therapy I would have left. (S7)

Whether this means that institution senders should counsel some students not to go remains a big question to be addressed. Furthermore, mentioning mental health complications is not always easily understood and accepted in a different culture. This is a wide question with complex intercultural issues, which are beyond the scope of this paper. However, we note in relation to this specific setting, that some host universities in China are now beginning to develop mental health support systems for international students, partly in response to growing understanding and awareness of the issue, such as providing counselling in English and organising seminars on mental health targeted at international students.

The third major issue relates to Joint Honours (JH) students over the support they could get during SA and their adaptation difficulties at re-entry. The quantitative data shows a very low satisfaction rate in this area, which was also supported by qualitative comments. Throughout the year abroad keeping up with the other subject area seemed particularly tricky for this cohort. If someone is a JH student and also has mental health challenges, that would make their experience even more complicated. As one student noted:

I came back after two years abroad and I felt disoriented. I struggle with anxiety and depression, and I am going to a counsellor to keep the situation under control. If it wasn't for my family and my personal tutor I would have dropped out of university. (S9)

However, institutions may be likely to have a majority of JH students in their SA cohorts. Where the other subject is another language, particularly if studied from scratch, such as Arabic and Chinese, this means students may have two consecutive years abroad. This group of students are likely to have a particular package of needs, and our research suggests that more tailored and specific journey support is necessary, depending on time and resources available. We would suggest ensuring some regular contact and guidance from a nominated tutor from the other language programme to help keep in touch; or attend classes or study groups at the host university to maintain knowledge of the other language.

The fourth problem was found in re-entry challenges, in terms of reverse academic shock and linguistic dependency. Qualitative comments from the participants were consistent with the findings of difficulties emerging in the quantitative data. In this cohort, some of them may have struggled to readapt; the main issue was finding it hard to maintain their language skills and manage the workload, particularly for the JH students, which suggests there may have been some evidence of reverse academic shock.

It is difficult to properly keep up language practice and reintegrate into academic work because there isn't enough time to properly devote yourself to Chinese if you are joint honours.

Especially as we've gone from being surrounded by Chinese to hardly hearing it. (S2)

The amount of work that needs to be done is too much and the pressure is too high. I don't feel ready to be back yet. (S9)

With these and similar comments in mind, it is important for institutions to allow students time to readjust and it would be worth looking into specific measures to support re-entry, such as orientation meetings before the start of the academic year, talks by students from higher level groups sharing experience on how to cope with re-adjustment, guidance on how to find language exchange partners after returning and other language practice opportunities.

Perceptions that students were returning to a heavy workload was interesting. During SA, students had typically had 3-4 hours per day in language classes, plus homework, so they had in real terms a fair degree of flexibility and spare time. From previous quantitative findings and qualitative comments, it is noted that they did not appear to be engaged very much with other activities e.g. to build their cultural or local knowledge - only two students mentioned learning Chinese skills such as tai-chi and calligraphy. During SA, 100% of students' study time and focus was spent on learning the

language; however, when they came back, only 30% of their formal class time is devoted to Chinese language study, while other study hours relate to other classes.

One speculation to be explored further is that within the SA environment, being more fully focused just on language, students felt less of an 'academic' identity and more in 'holiday mode'. This potentially aligns with their relatively low levels of actual activities to make local friends, and time spent invested in activities to boost intercultural awareness or future employability options. As noted in our previous study (Peng and Wright, 2020), there was some evidence of students' lack of interest in deeper cultural investment and making local friends, instead showing a focus on individualised 'cultural consumption'. This detachment from deeper engagement could add to the challenges found on return to fulltime academic work and in re-entering into a full-time academic identity on their return. We suggest that both students and institutions need to be realistic about this shift of focus, and clear about what would be appropriate measures to facilitate students' autonomy in handling the transition back into academic life.

The lack of autonomy was particularly marked in relation to maintaining language. Some students were worried about losing their language skills, so they wanted more intense learning experiences, including more speaking sessions, which they thought could perhaps be best provided by additional time with teachers inside and outside class.

I think it's easy to lose our language skills, especially speaking and listening, so I think it needs to be more intense when we get back from China. Perhaps there could be more casual opportunities outside of busy classes to chat to teachers in Chinese. (S23)

In speaking classes, there isn't the opportunity to speak that much as it is only an hour long. plus it is very strictly structured rather than just free conversation. It would be beneficial to talk with the teacher individually, maybe for 20 minutes. (S2)

Linguistic dependency and lack of self-motivation over how to maintain language was somewhat surprising. These points have not been widely reported in other literature on this topic, as far as we are aware, and suggest that some coaching is needed to shape student expectations that opportunities for practise are important but that students should find such opportunities themselves. Talking to teachers in the target language might be an effective way to improve speaking skills, but it would not always be possible or realistic for resourcing. One way of taking more ownership for language development would be to use opportunities to find language exchange partners—

particularly for Chinese, these abound as there are many Chinese students on many campuses; however, it seems that home students do not seem aware of how to take more advantage of this. More could be done to foster awareness of these options.

CONCLUSION

In tracking this small cohort of SA students going from UK to China and back, our mixed methods study found many trends which resonate with other findings about the overall positive nature of the SA experience, and do not in general echo studies which have pointed up more negative experiences, with high barriers to engagement and potentially acute expectation gaps. Four particular challenges have been identified as impacting on expectations and challenges, specifically contact with host language speakers, support for JH students, needs of students with mental health difficulties, and re-entry challenges. These challenges need further evaluation and discussions between institutions at home and as hosts, with students, so that solutions can be found which are realistic and appropriately managed on both sides. The issue of re-entry also raises questions over managing students' expectations on return - about maintaining their language more proactively and managing workload, to reduce the potential negative impact of 'reverse academic shock' on return home. To a certain extent, as institutions we need to check our own expectation gap - are we expecting students to jump relatively seamlessly back from immersion in the target language, where they may not self-identify as full time academic students, to the reality of academic life where only 30% of the time may be devoted to language study? Students clearly appreciate the support given by institutions to prepare for SA, though more can always no doubt be done. However, identifying and managing expectation gaps pre and post-SA are not necessarily just an issue for the students alone, but also for us as institutions. This is an area we aim to explore in more depth in further study.

The findings in this research have begun to show a rich sense of the nuances emerging from taking a longer perspective within SA research, which benefits both the rationale behind such research for students and institutions alike, as well as providing increasingly robust methods used to track the SA journey. We can learn more about the varied experiences affecting students during SA and impacting re-entry on return home; we also still need to learn more how students continue to reap any benefits in the short-term and long-term, for example how the SA experience can fit into employability, life choices, career transformation. Further tracking studies will also allow us to refine the tools we use to evaluate students' experiences, using both questionnaires and interviews, and to

compare findings on SA in China and non-European countries against other research, for example within the ERASMUS exchange programmes. As the future of language degrees themselves as well as levels of SA support in institutions remains challenging, clear stories of how to make the most of SA will be valuable to all.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

(AVAILABLE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH USE BY PERMISSION OF THE RESEARCHERS)

Section 1 - During YA:

Tell us about your living and learning experiences during your YA:

1. How often did you spend social time with the following groups of people?

(Seldom = approx. once a month, sometimes = approx. once a week, often = 3 times a week, very often = every day)

(Please tick one box only for each group of people)

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Very often
a. Chinese friends	1	2	3	4	5
b. Friends from your home country (<i>or home university</i>).....	1	2	3	4	5
c. International friends from other countries	1	2	3	4	5

2. How often did you study with the following groups of people?

(Seldom = approx. once a month, sometimes = approx. once a week, often = 3 times a week, very often = every day)
(Please tick one box only for each group of people)

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Very often
a. Chinese friends	1	2	3	4	5
b. Friends from your home country(<i>or home university</i>).....	1	2	3	4	5
c. International friends from other countries	1	2	3	4	5

3. How often did you initiate conversations in the target language?

(Seldom = approx. once a month, sometimes = approx. once a week, often = 3 times a week, very often = every day)
(Please tick one box only)

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Very often
1	2	3	4	5

4. How often did you attend events or classes to improve your cultural awareness?

(Seldom = approx. once a month, sometimes = approx. once a week, often = 3 times a week, very often = every day)
(Please tick one box only)

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Very often
1	2	3	4	5

5. How often did you take part in activities that would improve your employability skills (e.g. volunteering, tutoring)?

(Seldom = approx. once a month, sometimes = approx. once a week, often = 3 times a week, very often = every day)

(Please tick one box only)

Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Very often
1	2	3	4	5

6. How challenging did you find the following activities for you overall during YA?

(Please tick one box only for each activity)

	Not at all	Slightly (a little)	Moderately	Very	Extremely
a. Understanding what was required of you at the host university	1	2	3	4	5
b. Understanding teachers/lecturers	1	2	3	4	5
c. Taking tests or exams	1	2	3	4	5
d. Making oral presentations	1	2	3	4	5
e. Managing your study workload	1	2	3	4	5
f. Thinking critically	1	2	3	4	5
g. Interacting socially in Chinese	1	2	3	4	5
h. Making friends	1	2	3	4	5
i. Finding accommodation	1	2	3	4	5
j. Overcoming personal or health problems	1	2	3	4	5

7. To help us see how you feel about your progress during study abroad, please rate the quality of the following at the host university.

(Please tick one box only for each area)

	Poor	Weak	Average	Good	Excellent
a. The content of your course.....	1	2	3	4	5
b. The feedback you receive	1	2	3	4	5
c. The teaching methods	1	2	3	4	5
d. The assessment procedures	1	2	3	4	5
e. Available support from host university.....	1	2	3	4	5
f. Being able to keep up with other Joint Honours subject (if applicable).....	1	2	3	4	5

Section 2 – At the end of YA:

8. How far do you agree with the following statements about your target language skills and overall academic development?

(Please tick one box only for each activity)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a. My writing has improved	1	2	3	4	5
b. My speaking has improved	1	2	3	4	5
c. My vocabulary has improved	1	2	3	4	5
d. My pronunciation has improved	1	2	3	4	5
e. My reading has improved	1	2	3	4	5
f. My listening has improved	1	2	3	4	5
g. I'm satisfied with my language development overall	1	2	3	4	5
h. I'm satisfied with my academic development overall	1	2	3	4	5
i. I needed more help to prepare linguistically for study abroad	1	2	3	4	5

9. How far do you agree with the following statements about your personal and intercultural development?

(Please tick one box only for each activity)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a. My study abroad experience has enhanced my self-reliance	1	2	3	4	5
b. Study abroad has improved my problem-solving skills	1	2	3	4	5
c. Study abroad has increased my ability to interact effectively with people from different backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5
d. Study abroad has improved my general employability potential (ie not just in language)	1	2	3	4	5
e. Study abroad has contributed to my understanding of my host country	1	2	3	4	5
f. Study abroad has contributed to my understanding of my own culture	1	2	3	4	5
g. Study abroad has contributed to my understanding of other international cultures	1	2	3	4	5
h. I'm satisfied with my personal and cultural development overall	1	2	3	4	5
i. I needed more help to prepare personally/culturally for study abroad	1	2	3	4	5

Section 3 - Post YA:

10. How far do you agree with the following statements about your re-entry?

(Please tick one box only for each activity)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
a. My re-integration into the language classes at the home university has gone well so far	1	2	3	4	5
b. My re-integration into other academic work at the home university has gone well so far	1	2	3	4	5
c. My social/cultural re-integration has gone well so far	1	2	3	4	5
d. I am keeping up well with language practice outside class	1	2	3	4	5
e. I want to keep up my contacts with friends in China	1	2	3	4	5
f. I can imagine myself using my Chinese for work after I leave university	1	2	3	4	5

Please add any other comments you have, especially if there is anything you found particularly enjoyable or particularly challenging during YA, or on your re-entry (continue on another page if needed):

.....

.....

.....

.....

THANK YOU FOR TAKING PART IN THIS SURVEY!

Your answers will help us in making students' YA experiences as effective as possible.

Study Abroad and the Experience of Difference: A Study of Pedagogic Difference for Law Students in Study Abroad

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ABSTRACT

Study abroad is an experience which ought, ideally, to combine both academic learning and the ‘life-learning’ that is gained from adapting to life in a new country. However, the academic experience of study abroad is often deprioritised in institutional approaches to study abroad and in writing about it more generally. This paper considers research undertaken amongst Law students at the University of Leeds about their academic experience during their year abroad, examining the experience both of LLB Law with French Law students studying in France, and ‘ordinary’ LLB Law students taking a year abroad in Australia. It found that students studying in France tend to have to work hard to adapt to the French legal and educational system, but that they did not experience this work as being intellectually challenging, largely because of the adaptations made by host universities to help students adapt to a very different culture. Students studying in Australia, on the other hand, worked less hard and saw less need to adapt as the culture does not appear different, meaning they may not be learning as much as they could from the experience. Overall the paper argues that the academic experience of study abroad in the Law School depends greatly on the country visited and that experience may be more academically valuable where difference is more visible. Efforts need therefore to be made to draw students attention to difference in order to ensure that they get the most academically out of their year abroad.

KEYWORDS: Study abroad, law students, educational culture, pedagogy, diversity

INTRODUCTION

Study abroad has become a part of modern university life in the UK and elsewhere, albeit one that in the UK at least, is taken up by a minority of students.¹ Whilst once the preserve of students studying Modern Languages, study abroad is now available to students across the whole range of disciplines and, whilst linguistic development is often a key objective of study abroad, it also gives the opportunity for broader academic development: the study of subjects not available in the host university, or the consideration of issues that are culturally or nationally specific, or simply seen through a different lens. However, across the sector, most of the focus on the learning that happens in study abroad is on the personal development and transferable skills that come from living in another country. In this article, I report on a small-scale project undertaken in the School of Law at the University of Leeds intended to shift that focus, and instead pay attention to the learning experience of study abroad, the way in which students recognise and respond to pedagogic difference between their home School at Leeds and Law Schools abroad and the impact of that difference on their academic experience. After a discussion on the literature around pedagogic difference and an explanation of the nature of study abroad in Law Schools, I argue that the academic experience of study abroad in the Law School depends greatly on the country visited and that, perhaps counter-intuitively, that experience may be more academically valuable where pedagogic difference is greater. If this is the case, then, I argue, we need to reflect carefully on how we manage and in particular assess years abroad in order to ensure that the academic benefits, as well as personal development benefits, are obtained.

THE PURPOSE OF STUDY ABROAD

Typically, study abroad programmes focus attention on allowing students to experience cultural difference, in the sense of living and working in a different place and dealing with different cultural expectations and behaviours. Nørgaard (2014) presents the initial impetus for the Erasmus programme as one where students should be neither immigrants nor tourists, able to learn from

¹ According to UUK statistics (https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International/Documents/Gone%20International_expanding%20opportunities_digital.pdf) around 7% of students in UK universities have some sort of mobility as part of their university experience.

their encounter with another culture through being anchored within their host university, which should be a reasonably familiar environment. As far as academic study is concerned, Teichler (2004, p 402) refers to an aspiration of 'curriculum integration' which can be achieved either by similarity or complementarity of curricula: either studying the same material that would be studied at home, but in a different cultural context (and sometimes in a different language) or studying something that could not be studied at home, but which is of similar value. Whilst, for various reasons, this ideal is often not realised, Teichler argues that European study abroad programmes within the Erasmus programmes are seen as a means of 'academic enhancement', particular in cases where the academic standard in the host country is seen to be the same or higher than the home country. In contrast, the development of study abroad arrangements outside of Europe, often known as the Junior Year Abroad model, have traditionally focused more on language learning and general cultural experience, often by allowing students to study courses outside their main disciplines, sometimes especially designed for the study abroad experience and, increasingly for US universities, taught by travelling staff rather than local staff (Vande Berg, 2007).

Universities, individually and collectively, promote a number of benefits of study abroad, including what UUK refer to as 'intercultural competence and global mindedness', an improvement in academic performance, and improved employment opportunities (UUK, 2019) The extent to which these benefits can actually be evidenced empirically is variable and not unconditional.² Petzold and Peter (2015) have found that social background is more important to both personal development and career success than a decision to study abroad. As far as global outlook and intercultural competence are concerned, whilst study abroad can provide those benefits, research suggests that intentional pedagogy both before, during and after the sojourn, is necessary in order for the positive benefits to be experienced by students (Anquetil, 2008; Pedersen, 2010; Vande Berg, 2007). Concerning academic performance in particular, Cardwell (2020) found that a majority of Law students at Sheffield University who studied abroad improved their final grades, albeit by varying margins. The reasons for this varied from student to student, but growing confidence and maturity were common and dominant factors mentioned by his participants, leaving open the question of whether any period of time abroad (such as on a work placement) would have had the same impact.

² The UUK report, cited above, notes significant limitations in the scope of their work as being based on large national data sets; the data on academic marks, for example, does not correct for the selectivity of some study abroad programmes, and the data on employment relies on the DLHE figures, which only cover graduates six months after graduation.

Evidence that, despite the financial support offered by the Erasmus programme, study abroad is still the preserve of the better off, means in addition that what benefits there are are not evenly distributed (Netz and Finger, 2016; Courtois 2018).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the emphasis within study abroad policy remains on the personal, social and cultural elements, rather than on the 'value-added' which study in a different institution or a different country can give to the grasp of the discipline (Courtois, 2017). This may explain why very little concrete attention is paid to these differences in works aimed at preparing students for study abroad.³ There is ample evidence, however that these differences exist; learning styles and pedagogy are cultural and thus expectations and approaches vary from country to country. Taillefer (2005), for example, highlights differences in expectations about wider reading among French, British and Spanish Law and Economics students, and Babault and Faraco (2008) have shown differences in note taking practice.

Courtois (2019) has argued that there is a devaluation of academic capital within study abroad; a tendency to emphasis learning outside the normal academic frameworks and often to denigrate academic learning at the expense of learning through 'real life.' Study abroad programmes within her study of Irish Universities, she finds, have over time moved away from disciplinary focus, other than in a small number of specific programmes, towards a 'gap year' model, where the courses studied and the university attended are not the priority, and where emphasis is placed on new experience. Similarly, Sidhu and Dall'Alba (2017) suggest that short-term mobility can be constructed as a form of educational tourism, with students not seeking out different experience and institutions not supporting them to do so. This devaluation makes it less necessary for students to overcome cultural differences in pedagogy and learning, because what they learn in the classroom and library is not the point of study abroad at all. This article seeks, in response to these concerns, to foreground that academic learning which has been deprioritised within discussion of study abroad, and discuss whether such a consideration of cultural aspects can lead to proposals that might improve the student academic experience of study abroad, and strengthen the learning which takes place during study abroad.

³For example, Lidstone and Rueckert (2007) devotes five pages out of 268 to academic adjustment. The popular Global Graduates website (www.globalgraduates.com) has no headings that relate to academic study and experience.

Study abroad in Law Schools

In theory, study abroad in Law programmes ought to be more resistant to this devaluation than in other disciplines. Law, and thus legal education, is jurisdictional, and therefore the opportunity to study a different legal system can be seen as an additional concrete advantage of study abroad. This advantage may connect with the non-academic benefits of study abroad: experience of more than one legal system, for example, may be beneficial as legal practice becomes increasingly cross-national. In addition, as Husa (2018) has argued, the study of more than one legal system adds exponentially to one's overall understanding of the general principles, rather than the specific rules, within the law, which is beneficial intellectually as well as vocationally. Nevertheless, what literature there is shows little sense that students studying abroad as part of Law degree programmes have a substantially different motivation to those from other disciplines: they want to experience living in another country and, often secondarily, to improve their employment prospects (Cardwell, 2020; Jeanpierre and Broadbent, 2016).

What is different, however, is the model of study abroad programmes which are typically adopted within Law Schools. There are three dominant models of study abroad within Law Schools. The first, and often the most visible, is the Law and Language/Foreign Law model. Here, students apply for programmes through UCAS, called things like Law with French, or Law with German Law, which require A level or equivalent attainment in the relevant foreign language. They then study a programme which is mostly Law, but contains language study, sometimes some study of the literature or culture of the relevant country, and often some introduction to the foreign legal system or civil law legal systems more generally.⁴ They then spend a year in the relevant country, usually a European country through an Erasmus exchange, studying law courses integrated with local students, before returning to the UK to complete their degree. In some cases the year abroad is a pass/fail year, in others the marks are translated and count towards the degree or assessments are written for the home university based on the study abroad. Courtois (2017) refers to this type of programme, where the year abroad is an integral part of the degree programme and the purpose of the year abroad is to acquire disciplinary knowledge, as an 'elite programme', in the sense that it

⁴ Comparative lawyers traditionally classify European, and European-derived legal systems as forming two groups: common law (including England and Wales, Ireland, most of North America, Australasia, India and others) and civil law (including most of the rest of continental Europe and Latin America, amongst others). Like all taxonomies, this one is flawed in many and varied ways, but the fact of distinctions in terms of legal method and reasoning and sources of law between these systems is grounded in reality. For a classical exposition, see David and Brierly (1985) and for application within legal education see Nollent (2002).

speaks particularly to those with international career aspirations. However, because of the declining number of students studying a language to A level/Higher level in the UK, in practice it is often easier to gain a place on such programmes than ordinary LLB programmes.

The second model is the double degree model. On this pattern students spend two years studying in a UK university and two years in another (usually French) university, and are then awarded degrees from each jurisdiction. The manner in which these are organised varies from programme to programme (for one example, see Nollent, 2002) but in general these are also 'elite programmes' which require high intensity study, place high academic and linguistic demands on students and, as a result, deliver two awards rather than one. They are relatively rare because of the complexities of organising them and thus entry standards are frequently higher than standard LLB programmes. Leeds University does not offer such a programme and thus they are not part of the research project reported here.

Finally, study abroad is also offered to European and worldwide destinations on the same model as other disciplines. What distinguishes Law here is the fact that different law is studied, either in the form of a different legal system or in the form of specialist courses in International or European law. As a result, some Law schools treat the programme content as sufficiently distinct from a standard LLB programme to recruit directly onto these programmes, as with the Law and Languages programmes, rather than the more common model of requiring students to apply for study abroad in their second year. Even where this is not the case, students participating in this type of study abroad tend to be awarded a degree with a name that recognises the legal aspect of their study abroad experience (often something like Law with International Legal Studies), thus acknowledging that the law studied abroad adds a different dimension to the degree. However, in practice the rest of the degree usually remains the same: no language learning or preparation for studying the foreign legal system is included in the programme. In principle, this looks like the original Erasmus model, in that participation is voluntary but that there is some level of curriculum integration in the form of complementarity (Teichler, 2004). However, I shall argue in this article that in fact the experience can be more like Courtois's (2017) gap year model, in that these students in particular can decentre their academic experience. This may pose a problem if programme titles and learning outcomes assume specific learning about foreign or international/European legal systems, rather than the focus on cultural understanding and personal development typified in the gap year model.

THE STUDY

In order to learn more about the experience of students studying law abroad on these different programmes, I conducted a small-scale investigation within the School of Law at the University of Leeds.⁵ The study was carried out by means of a questionnaire that was sent in March 2018 to 3rd and 4th year cohorts of Leeds LLB students who were either coming towards the end of their year studying abroad, or who had returned to Leeds. Given my prior relationship with these students as lecturer and, for some, personal tutor, general anonymous questionnaires were the only ethically feasible research approach; interviews would have been too difficult to manage given limited resources. The questionnaire was designed following a literature review which had highlighted areas where the educational experience may be expected to vary from country to country. The questions covered time spent on independent reading (defined as reading primary or secondary sources to prepare for or follow up class work, as distinct from working to improve a set of class notes), strategies taken when material is not understood, and what students believed was needed in order to do well. These questions were asked both of their time at Leeds and their time studying abroad, and had a choice of answers with a write-in Other option. Questions also asked for information about assessment methods in their host university, perceptions of gaps in their local or cultural knowledge, and a final open question asked them to characterise the main differences in learning, teaching and assessment between Leeds and their host university.

The study was limited to students who had studied in France and Australia. The students studying in France were enrolled on the LLB Law with French Law degree, a Law with Foreign Law degree as described above, and had studied French Language and an introduction to French Law as part of their degree prior to going to France.⁶ The students studying in Australia had opted to undertake a study abroad year in their second year, and had no specific academic preparation for studying Law in Australia.⁷ There is thus a contrast in programme types. There are also legal and pedagogical

⁵ The study was given ethical approval by the Faculty Ethical Approval Committee reference AREA 17-0633.

⁶ Our two partner Law Schools in France are the Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3, and the Université de Lorraine at Nancy.

⁷ The students studied at a range of Australian universities through Leeds University partnerships. The small size of the project and the range of universities has meant that it is not possible to evaluate any differences between students' experiences in different types of university within Australia, and particularly the difference between Group of Eight and other universities, although such differences may exist.

contrasts: the French educational system and legal system are culturally very distinct from the English systems (see for example Nollent, 2002), whereas both the Australian educational and legal systems are very similar to England. Finally, France and Australia are the two most popular study abroad destinations for Law students at Leeds, which meant there were a reasonable number of responses to work with.

There were eight responses from students studying in France, out of a possible 13 (a 61.5% response rate) and 10 responses out of a possible 25 from students studying in Australia (a 40% response rate). In addition, a questionnaire was sent to all incoming exchange students from France and Australia in semester two of the 2017-28 academic year, with a view to identifying any contrasting views as well as checking any reported differences. The small size of the project means that results of the questionnaire analysis should not be treated as generalisable to other Law Schools or other cohorts, but the response rates suggest that the study can be treated as a good snapshot of the experience of those cohorts of Leeds Law study abroad students.

The questionnaire responses were analysed thematically to see, firstly, what elements of expected difference in learning or pedagogy students experienced and whether those experiences were different in France and Australia; and secondly, whether any unexpected differences were seen. Expected differences were those which can be found either in academic literature, or by means of a review of study skills books from the country concerned, and around which much of the questionnaire was designed. The analysis that follows will focus on two issues which were particularly prominent in the responses: workload and expectations of independent study, and the issue of what counts as good work.

Workload and Independent Study

It was expected that the amount of independent study, outside of timetabled classes, undertaken would differ between England and France. Taillefer (2005) had identified significant differences between expectations of private study in England and France, partly because of the increased number of class hours in France, leaving less time for private study, but also because of a broader cultural attitude. In Australia, the expectation of wide reading looks very similar to that expressed in England: for example, Brogan and Spencer (2014) advise law students in Australia that they will have

to do more independent reading than students of other disciplines because of the nature of primary sources: case reports and statutes. In comparison, for French students, Defrénois-Souleau (2016) prioritises explaining how to *apprendre le cours* (learn the course⁸), not in the sense of memorising lecture notes mindlessly, but in the sense of understanding and analysing the material presented in lecture courses, rather than engaging in broader independent study. This created an expectation that students would do less independent study in France than in either England or Australia. The questionnaire asked students how much independent study they did in Leeds and in their host university, and whether they thought they were doing more or less than expected and, if less, why that might be.

The majority of the students studying in France did fewer than five hours independent study, with two outliers doing more than ten. All of the students studying in France did less independent study than they did in Leeds. Three out of the eight students believed that this was what was expected; the rest thought either it was less than expected or that they did not know what was expected. On the other hand, most students believed that there was a greater expectation of independent study in Leeds than in France. This was confirmed by the respondent incoming students from France, who tended to do less independent study in France. They explained the difference either by different expectations or by the fact that they had fewer class hours in Leeds than in France. In free text, both Leeds and French students identified expectations of independent reading as a key difference between the two educational experiences:

Here in France, you go in the many lectures and seminars and you don't need to read because the teachers teach you all what is expected you to know. (Incoming student from France)

Learning in France compared to Leeds is very different. Lectures are more of a dictation whereby students write exactly what the lecturer says, and in the exam we are just expected to learn the content of the lectures therefore not much extra reading is required. Whereby (sic) at Leeds, knowledge from the lectures will not suffice for a high mark in an examination, extra reading is always necessary. (Outgoing student to France).

⁸ The French word *cours* means course but also, as a shortened version of *cours magistral*, lecture, and the two meanings are interchangeable here.

In Australia, the majority of students did between five and ten hours of independent study, and the rest did fewer. Eight out of ten thought they were doing less than was expected, and most were doing less than at Leeds: the only two students who said they did roughly the same amount of independent study at Leeds and in Australia had done very little independent study at Leeds. Most explained the difference by saying that they had chosen to do less independent study in Australia because they had other priorities. The same was true of incoming students from Australia, who were doing less reading in Leeds because of other priorities. No respondent referred to this issue in other open question about differences between the education systems. The clear implication here is that students chose to work less hard than they had done in Leeds.

How to do well

Further questions asked students what they thought they needed to do well in their host country and sought to identify if they perceived differences between what was needed to do well in France and in Australia. There were substantial expected differences in relation to students studying in France: the fact that there is rarely a choice of examination topics; the fact that assignment tasks are usually expressed as topics (*sujets*) rather than questions, which points to a valuing of the ability to give a detailed account of a broad range of areas, rather than the more selective approach to content found in a typical English law degree; and the constraining of analysis within a particular structural framework, known as the *plan juridique*. (Nollent, 2002; Defrénois-Souleau, 2016). Prior research indicted no major expected differences in relation to students studying in Australia: there is a reliance on problem solving, a broad range of assessment types and, in essays and exams, an emphasis on analysis and answering a particular question set with an analytical argument (Brogan and Spencer, 2014).

Students studying in France thought that to do well required either repetition of the views of the professors, or knowledge of facts and details, and contrasted this with Leeds, where they all thought that to do well required one to make one's own arguments and interpretations. One participant was particularly dismissive of the intellectual ability needed to do well in their French examinations, stating that:

At my host university, what was most important was learning all of the content we learned in lectures and simply repeating this back in exams. There were a lot of simple facts and details to

learn. From my experience there really was no legal analysis involved, or looking at the law in a social context.

Another referred to inconsistent marking for Erasmus students:

The marking policies are extremely subjective for the Erasmus students, as teachers mark you on the spot often. One particular teacher actually examined three of us at once. We only got asked a few questions each, before he gave us marks. Whereas another teacher thoroughly grilled me on the topic and marked slightly more harshly.

Finally, reference was made to the importance of memory and understanding:

Having a good memory is much more important here even if you don't understand the material you can still pass whereas in Leeds I think a combination of those skills is needed as you need your own knowledge to build your arguments upon and if you lack understanding that will be obvious to the marker.

An incoming participant was able to frame the emphasis on knowledge and memory in a more positive and less culturally-centric way:

The French system is more about acquiring knowledge about the Law and we have mandatory modules such as History of Law or philosophy of Law that only require learning hundreds of pages and recite what we have learned. We also have exams that included critical thinking through practice questions and commentaries of legal cases and statutes.

On the contrary, in Leeds I feel like the objective is not to learn details but to know how to apply the Law and they try to develop our critical thinking. The lecturers said several times that the objective was not to learn an impressive amount of details but to be able to apply the relevant law.

I think we have too much things to learn in France but not enough in England!

The perceptions of students studying in Australia were a great deal more mixed. Most, but not all, participants considered that doing well in Leeds required one's own interpretations and some believed it was the same in Australia, but a number considered that doing well in Australia was different, in that it required repeating the views of your professors. However, notably, their open question responses did not focus on this issue nearly as much as for the students studying in France. In the main, students studying in Australia noted differences between types of classes and

assessments, with varying levels of student engagement in lectures and a wider range of assessments, but this differed from institution to institution, and students expressed preferences in much the same way they might be expected to in Leeds when comparing different modules. However, two respondents did comment that they thought that it was easier to do well in Australia than in Leeds, one saying: 'A lot more content heavy here. All open book exams...and far easier to do well', and another: 'I found it easier to achieve high marks in assessments in my host university than at Leeds. I work a lot harder at Leeds.'

Incoming students from Australia had a similar perspective and did not identify substantial differences. Interestingly, however, one student (originating from the university that one of the students cited in the previous paragraph was visiting) said:

I would say it was easier to do well at Leeds than at my home university, however my academic aims while at Leeds were significant lower than at my university because I planned to travel etc while at Leeds.

This respondent was the only one to state this explicitly but the lack of reflection on what is required to do well, combined with the findings about independent study time reported in the previous section, suggests a group of students for whom doing well academically is not a priority during their year abroad.

DISCUSSION

The fact that students studying in France and in Australia have very different experiences, and that learning in Australia is experienced as more similar to experience in the UK is not as of itself surprising: the French education system and the legal system are radically different from those of Australia and of the UK. However, the differences of experience are more complex than one might expect. In terms of the French experience, students typically found that, whilst the pedagogy and assessment was very different to what they were used to, the learning itself was intellectually easier than that in the UK. In part, that may derive from different emphases in the systems themselves: at least in the early years the principle purpose of a French legal education is to give students comprehensive mastery of a wide range of foundational areas of law, which means the pedagogy tends to emphasise breadth and content rather than critical thinking. Notably, the finding that study

in France is intellectually less challenging than in England contrasts with that within Nollent's (2002) study of students on a 2+2 double degree programme, where students found studying in France more challenging.

The difference here may well be that Nollent's participants were undertaking two full academic years in France, whereas Leeds students were doing fewer ECTS credits than French students would be doing. Whilst French universities have, in principle, adopted ECTS credits and module systems, in practice the pedagogy still aims at a comprehensiveness of legal knowledge. In addition, there is a particular approach to analysing the law not found in other legal education systems (Defrénois-Souleau, 2016; Bonnard 2018). This makes curriculum integration within a study abroad programme difficult, and, as a result, Erasmus students in France do not typically undertake the full set of intellectual exercises. At Lyon III, for example, a decision was taken some years ago that Erasmus students would not be allowed to take *travaux dirigés* (TDs) - the 'small group'⁹ classes where students undertake analyses of concepts, problems and cases. This means that their assessment is largely by means of MCQs and oral exams, where the emphasis is squarely on mastery of the subject (Defrénois-Souleau, 2016), rather than written work requiring the use of a *plan juridique*, which is where the intellectual work of analysis and critique takes place (Bonnard, 2018). The reason for this was that Erasmus students were struggling to do well in written exercises and written examination, partly because some were arriving with very low levels of French, but also because it takes time to learn how to undertake those exercises correctly. As a result, students were regularly failing written exams and TDs and this was causing problems for them. In fact, Leeds students over the years studied did get permission to take TDs, but still took few written exams and often did not pass them. In addition, the Leeds year is a pass-fail year, students are not required, by Leeds University Law School, to pass all courses, and if they fail badly there are opportunities to recoup the mark at Leeds. All of these measures are in place precisely because of the high propensity of students to fail, in particular more complex written exams.

The problem, however, is that this de-emphasising of the intellectual and critical rigour of written exercises leave students feeling as though they work hard but that, once they have mastered the linguistic challenge of understanding and learning lectures, they are not intellectually challenged.

⁹At Lyon III, the 'small' group size can be up to 50 students.

Courtois (2017) refers to significant teaching and learning quality issues encountered by Erasmus exchange students in her study, including work being far too difficult to do for linguistic and other reasons, with no support being given to exchange students and, conversely, special courses for Erasmus students being put on which were far too easy, particularly for fluent speakers of English. Lyon III have taken an exemplary approach in terms of the amount of extra support offered to exchange students¹⁰ but still encountered problems such that removing a significant amount of difficulty from the learning and assessment diet was the only solution open to them if their exchange problems were to remain functional and popular. Consequently, however, students come away with a negative experience of the French legal educational system, believing it to reward only rote learning.

The most notable aspect of participants' experiences in Australia was the fact that they tended to work less hard in Australia than in Leeds in terms of hours worked: most of them reported having about the same number of class contact hours as they had had in Leeds, but did less independent study, due to having other priorities. Other than one participant who referred to having to do paid work, they did not say anything about those other priorities. Forsey, Broomhall and Davies (2012) and Sidhu and Dall'Alba (2017) have argued that there is a low level of attention given to academic learning within study abroad programmes at Australian universities and the same seems true of the Leeds Law students going to Australia. Indeed, Forsey, Broomhall and Davies (2012) refer particular to a phenomenon similar to an example given earlier: that their respondents (Australian students who had studied abroad in a number of countries) typically reported having found their study less challenging than they were used to, and characterised the level required as easier. This was, of course, also seen amongst Leeds students studying in France, once they had overcome the technical and linguistic challenges, but not in Nollent's (2002) students, who were more integrated into a programme of study and for whom the marks on their year abroad were more important.

It would be unfair, however, to assume that student participants studying in Australia did not learn and did not engage at all with their studies. Most of them gained reasonable to very good marks, a few questionnaire responses referred to interesting and engaging subjects, and, anecdotally, it is

¹⁰ This includes a special programme that includes French legal methodology, an introduction to the French legal system and language support: <https://www.univ-lyon3.fr/deuf-diplome-d-etudes-universitaires-francaises>

quite common for students to come back to Leeds and pick up subjects which they have learned about in Australia as a focus of their final year dissertation. Participants in Cardwell's (2020) study suggested that an important reason for doing better in their final year after a year abroad was that the year abroad had involved less stress, and that the disconnect between their study and their grades was positive in changing their attitude towards study and in particular in building their own confidence. However, whilst too much emphasis on the part of students on grades and assessment can be a hindrance to learning, the pass/fail model gives little evidence of whether students are simply surface learning at a pass mark level, or whether they are learning more deeply and actively at the level normally expected by their course of study. If students are not feeling challenged by their work, are they learning as much as they could?

Some indications of the kind of learning that Law students may gain from their study abroad come from responses to a question about what local knowledge they felt they were expected to have and didn't have. References were made by students studying in Australia to cultural issues (particularly aboriginal issues, but also to Australian sporting culture) and also to the Australian legal and federal systems. One student referred to doing a lot of research in order to improve their understanding here, whereas another said that their lack of understanding had not hindered them. Similar answers were received from students studying in France, particularly concerning the French Revolution, but it is notable that they did not refer to the French legal system in general. The French law module which students had undertaken before going to France had covered both the legal system and some level of constitutional history, and one student referred to having an existing basic understanding (presumably from this module and/or from other informal learning) which could be supplemented by keeping up with current affairs.

This suggests that it is important as part of study abroad programmes that we identify and flag to students what is likely to be different in terms of the context in which they are learning and encourage them towards curiosity about it. This is done reasonably effectively in Leeds with students studying Law with a Language, in that the academic side the year abroad is more foregrounded in their degree and they undertake some preparatory study for it. In Sidhu and Dall'Alba's (2017) work with Australian students, they suggest that Australian students wishing to study in the UK may be seeking an environment without much difference to their own, and the same may be true of Leeds students wanting to study in Australia. However, whilst they may not be

expecting difference once they are in that context some at least can identify more clearly what is different about the legal and political system and the underlying culture, and how that might relate to the legal system. This is important learning, but we do not know how effectively it is happening, because it is not assessed. We can perhaps extrapolate from Vande Berg's (2007) work on learning intercultural competence that this kind of learning too needs to be supported and scaffolded: just as living in a different place does not by itself increase intercultural competence, studying within a different legal system does not by of itself provide comparative insight. This is probably true for many academic disciplines, but particularly so within law, where specific claims, explicit as well as implicit, are made in course descriptions and learning outcomes about the learning which takes place during the year abroad.

Placing greater emphasis on marks obtained abroad has pitfalls, however. Exchange programmes have been understood as built on principle of trust as to the academic standards of partner universities (Nørgaard, 2014). However, as this paper seeks to demonstrate, the issue is not one of academic standards, but of cultural difference within pedagogy as well as underlying content. Assessments of the same level of academic rigour will be more or less challenging to students depending on whether they are used to the pedagogic culture in which they are based. Anecdotally, a range of practices exist within Law Schools at least which may seem to challenge the principle of mutual trust but which address the wider issues of cultural adaptation, including assessing the year abroad by means of work submitted to the host university or making such work supplementary. Modern Languages departments, given their emphasis on linguistic and cultural learning outcomes, often also do this. It may be time for more universities in relation to all disciplines to move way from a simple focus of gaining credits via pass marks think about more innovative, albeit resource-intensive, forms of assessment of the year abroad in order to encourage, support and reward the deeper and more creative learning that happens when you study your subject in a different educational and cultural environment

CONCLUSION

Study Abroad is usually, and rightly, seen as a positive element of an academic curriculum: the cohorts who participated in this study referred to it in surveys as a highlight of their degree. However, this small-scale study supports findings elsewhere that the academic experience is not

what it could be. Whilst the students who went to France worked hard, the measures which had to be taken to make it possible for them to gain pass marks meant that they were unable to practice and develop their analytical and critical skills during their year. It is not clear how much they applied those skills to what they were learning and they came away with a view that their learning was unchallenging. Students studying in Australia, whilst experiencing a welcome relief from the pressure to gain high marks, lose out by their, and our, failure to pay attention to the full range of what they might learn from the experience and focusing on the, relatively easy to obtain, pass marks. This is not about a bad student attitude – far from it – but it reflected in how we design study abroad programmes, how we scaffold learning throughout them and how we choose to assess them. My interpretation of the findings of this study suggest that we need to consider a more explicit articulation of the ways in which students should be exercising their analytical and critical skills as part of the learning in study abroad, rather than relying on partner university approaches designed for students undertaking a full degree programme rather than visiting students from different learning cultures.

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'Am I Gonna Understand Anybody?!': International Students and Their Struggles to Understand Different 'Englishes' in an International Environment

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ABSTRACT

This study explores struggles that international students encounter in the early-sojourn stage when studying master's programmes in the UK. The study is important since it is one of the few studies in the cross-cultural transition field that examine the early stage of the sojourn. It contributes to enhance understanding of educators and higher education institutions about this stressful and crucial phase in which the students freshly arrive in the host country yet need to quickly adjust to a new environment. The research was conducted at a British higher education institution from October to November 2017 when the students had arrived in the UK for less than three months. Qualitative interviewing was employed (N=23). All interviews were conducted in English and then transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was applied. Research findings suggested that although the students experienced no major difficulties in the socio-cultural adaptation and adjustment in the early-sojourn stage, most of them encountered psychological stress and struggled to adapt to the variants of 'English' in the international academic environment. It is therefore suggested that more pre-sessional courses and workshops should be provided to develop language skills for international students. Seminars should focus on giving clear instructions and guidance to the students to increase their comprehension of lectures and to support them with their assignments. Psychological well-being helplines, as well as support from university staff and personal tutors, are highly recommended.

KEYWORDS: adaptation and adjustment, student voices and student support, internationalisation in higher education, academic challenges, psychological well-being, language issues

INTRODUCTION

There is an exponential increase in the number of international students¹ pursuing higher education (HE) in foreign countries, from nearly a million in 2002 (Forest and Altbach, 2006). The figure doubled, reaching 2.1 million in the following year, and in 2017, there were over 5.3 million (UNESCO, 2019). The UK is the country with the second largest population of international students; after the USA (UUKI, 2019). In 2017/18, international students accounted for 35.8% of the total population of postgraduates in the UK (UUKI, 2019). International students have become one of the major financial funders for HE institutions (Gil, 2014), and support the research base in sciences, technologies, engineering and mathematics in the UK; and sustain thousands of education-related jobs in colleges and universities as well as non-education related fields in the local area where they live (UKCISA, 2016).

The growing population of international students has resulted in increasing research interest in the related areas such as cross-cultural transition, adjustment and adaptation. The sojourning experience marks a significant transition event in the life of international students (Cushner and Karim, 2004). However, because of many challenges in adjustment and adaptation to the new environment, international students usually encounter stressful and arduous experiences during their overseas stay, some of which are the acculturative stress (Berry, 2005; Kim, 2008), culture shock (Oberg, 1954; Furnham, 2004) and language shock (Agar, 1994).

However, research about their adjustment process in the early-sojourn stage remains relatively scarce. A study of the challenges that the students may face during the early phase of the sojourn is, in fact, crucial as it is within this phase that these students need to quickly adjust to a new academic, psychological and sociocultural environment. This is especially true for students undertaking a one-year taught master's programme in the UK, due to their relatively 'short' time overseas. This study, therefore, focuses on examining the adjustment and adaptation of international students in the early stage of the sojourn.

¹ The term "international students" is used in this paper to refer to those who move to an overseas country for education purpose. In this case, it includes both EU and non-EU students in the UK.

Theoretically adjustment is defined as a *process*, whilst adaptation is an *outcome* of this process of ‘modifying cognitions and behaviours’ to improve interactions and experiences (Sussman, 2000, p. 360). However, in this study, adjustment and adaptation are used interchangeably, as often done by many researchers and scholars, for instance Ward and Kennedy (1992); Leong and Ward (2000); Pitts (2016).

Current studies of cross-cultural transition identify two domains of adjustment: 1) *psychological* (referring to the well-being and life satisfaction of individuals in a new culture) and 2) *sociocultural* (relating mainly with the performance of individuals in daily social life in the new culture) (Ward and Kennedy, 1992; Ward and Kennedy, 1994; Berry, 2005; Schartner, 2014). International students are distinguishable from other sojourner groups since they experience not only the change in the cultural environment, but also in the academic environment. Thus, in this case, it is necessary to examine the third domain of adaptation: 3) *academic* (associating with the academic achievement and performance of student sojourners such as GPA or class of the achieved degree). These three domains interact and connect closely with each other, one domain can impact the others and vice versa (Ward and Kennedy, 1994; Wright and Schartner, 2013; Schartner, 2014).

To provide an all-inclusive and thorough image of the experience of international students in the UK, this study examined all three domains of adaptation. In the study, topics related to the social and daily life, such as travelling around the local city, going shopping, eating out and meeting local people, were regarded as socio-cultural adaptation; while topics concerning about the study and issues emerging on the campus of the host university, such as going to lectures, doing assignments and befriending classmates, were categorised as academic adaptation. Based on research findings, recommendations and implications to improve their sojourning experiences are suggested.

METHODS

As part of a doctorate study, this research was conducted at the beginning of the academic year (October to November 2017), when the students had arrived in the UK for less than three months. Semi-structured interviewing was applied since this method gave participants freedom and comfortable atmosphere to express their viewpoints and perceptions. Some questions in the interview guide were originally developed for this research whilst some were designed based on

previous qualitative research such as the studies of Sandel and Liang (2010); Schartner (2014); and Pitts (2016) (see Appendix).

Twenty-three students undertaking one-year taught MA programmes at a higher education institution in the northeast of England participated in the research. There was, however, a small number of male participants in this study (N=3). More than half came from East Asia and Southeast Asia (N=13), which reflected the demographic nature of the population of international students in the UK in general. All participants achieved a minimum IELTS of 6.5 or equivalent, which is the English language requirement of the master's course in the UK. Interviews were conducted in English and there was one conducted in Vietnamese, as requested by the interviewee since her native language was the same as the researcher's. Each interview lasted for around 45 minutes, which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

All transcripts were input into NVivo and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006). Key words and phrases were highlighted and coded with a label. Frequency and occurrences of codes were then compared within and across interview to identify themes and patterns which emerged across the sample. An inductive approach was used, and themes were data-driven, which allowed new findings to emerge from the data.

As most of the interviewees used English as their second languages, when categorising key words, for instance words with positive and negative meaning, the words were examined in the contexts when they were spoken. Statements that preceded or followed the words were also considered. For example, some participants used the word 'silent' to describe the host city. The context, the preceding and following statements, such as 'I like the city. It's a silent and peaceful city', were considered to decide that participants used the word to indicate positive meaning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Two findings emerged from this study. First, in the early stage of the sojourn, most of participants in this research appeared to encounter more challenges in academic adaptation than socio-cultural adaptation, which resulted in psychological stress and pressure. Second, the unfamiliarity to the

variants of English was often counted as the main reason for their struggles in both socio-cultural and academic adaptation.

Adaptation of international students in the UK across three adaptation domains

Most of the interviewees in this research shared that they had little difficulty adjusting to the sociocultural environment in the UK (i.e. the host city and local people). The majority felt that the hardest period was the first few weeks of arrival when they were trying to settle in. Overall, the adjustment happened quite smoothly, and any difficulties were gradually overcome after a few weeks. In the first three months of arrival, nearly half of the students showed positive feelings (i.e. excitement and contentment) with the socio-cultural environment.

For example, words or phrases such as ‘modern city with colourful nightlife’ (Interviewee 9, from China) and ‘silent and peaceful city’ (Interviewee 10, from China), were often used to describe the local city. For some students, it was the ‘easy-to-adapt’ life and atmosphere in the UK in general and the city in which they were living in particular that created a sense of contentment and erased the pressure of adaptation within the students. As Interviewee 4 (from China) explained: ‘[...] I just started it here, so I find it quite relaxing.’

Local people were mentioned with positive comments such as ‘friendly, nice, welcoming’ (Interviewee 3, from Hong Kong). Interviewee 20, from Germany, was surprised when being helped by local people when she first arrived in the UK.

...the day I came here, I came with a large suitcase and there is someone coming straight to me and helping me with the suitcase. (Interviewee 20)

Generally, positive feelings and words were often expressed towards the daily life in the UK, for instance, ‘convenient’ (Interviewee 3, from Hongkong), ‘relaxing’ (Interviewee 4, from China), ‘easy to adapt’ (Interviewee 6, from China) and ‘not so difficult’ (Interviewee 21, from Germany).

In stark contrast, students often expressed negative feelings towards academic adaptation in the early stage. ‘Intensive’ (Interviewee 1, from Vietnam), ‘overwhelming’ (Interviewee 5, from Kuwait) and ‘busy’ (Interviewee 6, from China) were repeatedly used to describe these first three months. International students were often overwhelmed by the intensiveness of the one-year master’s programme. Although the students were fully aware of the duration, modules and formats of their

chosen programmes, they could not anticipate the workload; thus, were unprepared for the intensiveness of the programmes.

So, before I came here, I thought I can handle that, no big deal. But when I really experience it, I realise that 'OMG! It's so much more intensive than I've imagined. (Interviewee 1, from Vietnam)

The interview data suggests that students' dominant concerns were mainly around academic adaptation, rather than sociocultural adaptation, which strongly influenced the psychological adaptation. Three months into the programme and many students had already been stressed out, due to the unfamiliarity with the workload. In fact, when being asked about their feelings and thoughts about their experiences then, some students even regarded this period as nothing 'except the anxiety and the stress' (Interviewee 5, from Kuwait). As Interviewee 5 expressed:

It's actually the first time in my life, I feel so stressful [...] yeah like the workload is a lot, I'm not used to that much workload. (Interviewee 5)

As Brown and Holloway (2008) explain, in the first few weeks of arrival, student sojourners are usually thrilled by 'the new culture' and 'the unknown future', which explains the optimistic feelings of many interviewees in this study about their socio-cultural experiences. On the other hand, the strong influence of the academic adjustment on the psychological domain has been highlighted in numerous quantitative and qualitative studies in the field (c.f. Brown and Holloway, 2008; Doble and Supriya, 2011; Zhang and Goodson, 2011). The academic assignment overload remained a significant concern for international students and has been identified in many previous studies as one of the key challenges (c.f. Abel, 2002; Misra and Castillo, 2004; Korobova and Starobin, 2015).

Other challenges in academic adaptation that are frequently documented in the literature, such as different teaching and learning styles (Pedersen et al., 2011) and the transition to a higher level of academic study (i.e. undergraduate to postgraduate programme) (Hussey and Smith, 2010), were not reported by participants in this study. This, by no means, indicates that the students would not struggle with these issues during the sojourn. It might be that in the first three months into the programme, the students had yet to encounter these problems which could possibly arise later in the sojourn.

Although the extent of impact of these stressors vary depending on individual differences, with international students usually being suggested to experience higher amount of academic stress than

local students (Chen, 1999). In general, academic stress could negatively influence the students' quality of life and is the main reason for the imbalance in their study life (Doble and Supriya, 2011). This imbalance could, in turn, negatively influence psychological well-being (Pookaiyaudom, 2015). Despite the awareness of the importance of maintaining the study life balance, usually university students neither have the ability to manage stress and pressure (Pookaiyaudom, 2015) nor the time-management skill (Matinez et al., 2013) to balance their academic and social lives.

Among many issues identified by international students as key challenges across three adaptation domains, the variants of English were found to be the most influential issue to their academic and socio-cultural adaptation. The next part will discuss this issue in detail.

Variants of English as the most challenging adaptation issue

Firstly, in socio-cultural adjustment, English spoken language, particularly the local accent, was frequently identified as the biggest challenge. In the first few weeks of arrival, 17 out of 23 students revealed their worry (or 'fright' for some students) about a challenging future awaiting them ahead since it seemed impossible for them to understand local people.

I just arrived, I was new here, so I didn't get used to the accent. I just guessed what he said.
[...] I can only get the first and the last part of the sentence. I just keep guessing what they say.
(Interviewee 1, from Vietnam)

Even students who used English as their first language struggled to understand the local accent, as Interviewee 14, from the USA, recounted her experience on the first day in the UK.

We were in the taxi travelling from the airport to the hostel in the city centre, my taxi driver, the cabbie, I can't understand a word he said. [...] So, I was like "Am I gonna understand anybody?"

Some students expressed their disappointment, resulting from the gap between their expectation of the 'posh accent' seen in movie and the reality of the challenging local accent.

I've only been accustomed to the culture beforehand in the media, the posh English accent, as opposed to the X accent. (Interviewee 14, from the USA)

However, within the first three months, the students' life appeared to be framed within the academic environment where they would normally go to class and get back home. Besides the daily

chores (e.g. grocery shopping), they rarely participated in social events or socialised outside the campus. For example, Interviewee 5, from Kuwait, shared: 'I've been here for like a month and I haven't gone out with anyone...' The difficulty in academic adaptation, particularly the intensiveness of the master's programme, might partially contribute to this, or as Interviewee 18, from Italy, confirmed: '...the problem is that the master's [programme], it takes so much time from your free time...' This limited experience in socialising outside the campus could explain why despite having difficulty understanding the local accent, many international students still perceived socio-cultural adaptation to be not as challenging as academic one.

In academic adjustment, the unfamiliarity with variants of English was, again, referred as the main issue impeding their study early in the sojourn, even though all of the students satisfied the English language requirement of the master's degree at the researched university. Nine students referred to unfamiliar accents and language uses of lecturers as the largest obstacles that reduced their understanding and comprehension of the lecture. It's worth noting that these students from Business School which had a very international team of teaching staff.

[...] for example, a Slovakian lecturer, German or Indian one, it's extremely difficult to understand them. I think everyone in my class is struggling... like the same [...] For example, the Indian lecturer has the habit of speaking extremely fast and with his accent, no one can understand what he's talking about. (Interviewee 1, from Vietnam)

Some of the professors they've got quite weird accent, it's not Geordie, it's not Scottish, I think it's some European accent. (Interviewee 3, from Hong Kong)

For some students, it was the 'specialised' vocabulary (e.g. jargons and technical terms in their fields of expertise) and the speed of the spoken English that they worried about rather than the accent. For instance, Interviewee 4 (from China) shared: 'Some words are kind of very specialised words.' Meanwhile, Interviewee 10 (from China) found it difficult to follow the lecture since:

I think it must be difficult for me to follow my lecturer in class because most of them... their first language is English, so they speak rather fast.

The unfamiliarity with the accent also hindered these students' participation in class (i.e. expressing and discussing ideas with others), as Interviewee 15 (from China) mentioned below.

You have to pay attention to what other students say... and sometimes the other native students, when they talk... I just understand 50% of what they are saying because they speak

really fast. So [...] if the class has 40 students and some of them are native speakers. Ok, no speak, just listen!

These difficulties in in-class participation and comprehension seemed to 'haunt' international students, throwing doubt upon their abilities and magnifying their anxiety, even though it was still early in their sojourns.

I didn't write the essay before in English, I did it always in German, [...] but I don't feel pressure so much [...] (Interviewee 20, from Germany).

In general, international students experienced difficulty in coping with the variety of different 'versions' of English in the host country's socio-cultural environment and the international academic environment (i.e. spoken English and different accents of 'English'), as opposed to the expected 'posh' English heard in media. They struggled with the variants of English (e.g. the host local accent and different accents of international teaching staff), the colloquial language (i.e. slangs), specialised vocabularies and the speed of speech. As Rosenthal et al. (2006) and Sawir (2005) explain, since the previous English learning of student sojourners focuses extensively on grammars and is generally for scholarly skills (such as reading, writing and passing exams), student sojourners experience great difficulty in the colloquial use of English and its numerous variants.

However, since during the early stage of the sojourn, most of the international students rarely socialised or went to social events outside the campus, the students did not experience much trouble with socio-cultural adjustment. Their life generally revolved around their study and their concerns were, therefore, predominantly about academic adaptation (i.e. issues with their study, such as understanding lecturers). Many studies also support this finding and report that the life of international students is often framed within the campus. They generally have limited interactions with local people and students (c.f. Harrison and Peacock, 2009; Pho and Schartner, 2019; Schweisfurth and Gu; 2009; Wu and Hammond; 2011).

Moreover, many studies about international students in English-speaking countries have questioned the reliability of the current language test. Particularly, despite being the most popular test to determine English language proficiency of international students, research show that students who meet the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) entry requirement still have low English proficiency (Pantelides, 1999). The relationship between IELTS and academic performance of

student sojourners is still in dispute (Sawir et al., 2012), with some studies reporting the negative correlation between the two (Dooley, 1999).

This study shows that although all of the students satisfied IELTS entry requirement of the host university, this did not guarantee that all would experience no difficulties in using English in the host country. Even students with higher IELTS scores could struggle to comprehend lecture and understanding new vocabularies in their fields of study.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present research shows that due to the intensiveness of the study programme, academic adaptation appeared to be of the biggest concern of international students in the early stage of the sojourn. Socio-cultural adaptation, meanwhile, happened quite smoothly during this early period even though most international students struggled to understand the local accent. This was because international students tended to have limited interactions with local people and did not frequently participate in social events outside the campus.

The three domains intercorrelated closely to each other, in so far that international students often experienced mixed feelings in the first few months of arrival: positive emotions (i.e. excitement and contentment) to their socio-cultural experiences (i.e. travelling around the host city and enjoying its atmosphere), and negative feelings for the intensive academic workload. Academic adaptation could therefore negatively influence psychology adaptation in so far that many international students suffered from psychological stress and anxiety early in the sojourn.

More training workshops and seminars should be provided for the students to improve their skills in stress management. Teaching staff should be trained to identify and support students with issue in the study-life balance, such as directing them to counselling services (Doble and Supriya, 2011). During this early period, academic tutors are advised to pay extensive care to international students so that symptoms of psychological stress could be recognised early, and intervention and treatment can be given to the students timely. It is necessary for educators and institutions to consider the work capacity of the students before designing the course. Assessments and students' workload could be determined by both teachers, students and administrators (Clift and Thomas, 1973).

The unfamiliarity of the variants of English intervened with both academic and socio-cultural adjustment of international students (e.g. difficulties in understanding different English accents of international lecturers and of local people). This issue with language, in general, could influence psychological adjustment of international students as it may diminish their confidence.

It is, therefore, important to offer training workshops or seminars for student sojourners in the early stage to enhance their proficiency and their confidence in the host language. Educators can facilitate academic adaptation of the students during this crucial period. For instance, lecturers may slower their speed when giving lectures and provide explanations (e.g. definitions and examples) for key complicated vocabularies. It may be useful if different English tests are used in combination with IELTS as English language requirements for master's programmes.

In sum, the author hopes that this paper has provided a glimpse into the life of international students in the UK and offered some useful suggestions to improve their academic sojourns. The author acknowledges the qualitative research design, such as the limited sample size and the generalisability of findings. Future research is, therefore, highly recommended to apply a range of methods to explore this complicated experience of international students when living and studying overseas.

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APPENDIX: Interview Guide

Questions in IGs	Sources
1. Expectations and motivations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why do you choose to study abroad? Your motivations? - Why do you choose the UK? - <i>What did you expect your life in the UK to be like?</i> 	Adapted from Schartner (2014) <i>Originally developed</i>
2. Experience in the UK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Your experience so far?</i> - <i>Is it similar or different to what you expect? In what perspectives?</i> 	<i>Originally developed</i>
3. Social contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tell me about your social life. Who do you often keep in touch with? - How do you contact them? - <i>Compare the types of contact sources you have. Rank them in terms of:</i> <i>Number of people you know</i> <i>How often you meet people from that country</i> - Can you describe the nature of the relationship you have? - Your impression with people from (explain for each): The UK Your country Internationals - <i>Do you feel satisfied with your current social life? Please explain</i> 	Adapted from Schartner (2014), Pitts (2009); Pitts (2016) <i>Originally developed</i> Adapted from Sandel and Liang (2010) Adapted from Schartner (2014) <i>Originally developed</i>

Nurturing Interaction between Pre- and Post-Year Abroad Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and evaluates a novel approach to peer support within the context of a compulsory year abroad for students of Japanese Studies. The project discussed in this paper had the aim of fostering a sense of peer support between pre-year abroad students preparing to go on exchange programmes at host institutions in Japan and students returning from Japan. This project was based on the concept of 'Senpai-Kōhai' (senior-junior in Japanese), an aspect of Japanese culture regarding the relationship between people at different levels of seniority or authority. This project was carried out in various phases with improvements being made based on learner feedback after each phase. It was found that students yet to embark on their year abroad faced the most difficulties with regard to the difference in language competency between themselves and the students returning from their year abroad in Japan. Taking into account learner feedback and combining peer support with assessment allowed teaching staff to create a novel form of learning that was found to benefit both intermediate and advanced learners of Japanese. In the most recent iteration of the project, returning students teach Japanese to pre-year abroad students using the Direct Method, teaching using only the target language, so that returning students are able to gain awareness of the importance of levelling down their language to the target audience. This paper discusses the planning, implementation, and benefits of this project in relation to the linguistic and cultural development of learners' competencies with regard to pedagogy, employability, and interpersonal skills.

KEYWORDS: Japanese language, year abroad, peer support, employability, pre-year abroad resources

INTRODUCTION

Importance of preparation for the year abroad

The year abroad is a crucial part of language degree programmes for the development of language competency, general academic ability, and enhancing intercultural awareness (Freed, B.F., 1995; Regan, Howard & Lemée, 2009; Kinginger, 2013; The Quality Assurance Agency, 2019), and for many students it can be the highlight of their degree programme. The experience also aids in the participants' personal development (Coleman, 1997). However, the year abroad also has various issues, such as difficulty adapting to intense use of the target language and culture shock, which can cause social isolation, leading to a negative attitude towards the culture and society of the target language. This in turn can cause limited or unexpected progress in the target language (Freed, 1995; Iwasaki, 2010; Maultsby & Stutts, 2019). To address these year-abroad issues, what kind of support should be offered and when?

As Coleman stated, 'preparation is all important' (1997, p.15) for the year abroad. Pre-year abroad preparation is an essential form of support that can ease pre-year abroad nervousness and minimize foreseeable challenges and problems that may be experienced by students on their year abroad. One valuable resource for pre-year abroad preparation is year abroad returnees. These returnees know what the year abroad is like through their own experience. As role models (Ryder, et al, 2017), the returning students can give advice based on their own experience, and the pre-year abroad students can easily relate themselves to the returnees. Peer support / tutoring has a long history with various forms such as peer assessment (C MacAlpine, 1999), learning community (Tosey, 1999; Skalicky & Brown, 2009), learning skill support (Adam, Skalicky & Brown, 2011), PAL (Peer Assisted Learning) (Edwards & Bone, 2012; Keenan, 2014) and non-academic support (Spielman, Hughes and Rhind, 2015). It is seen as particularly effective in cross-year small group tutoring (Toppings, 1996; Ramsden, 2004; Biggs & Tang 2011; Colver & Fry, 2016; Rees, et al, 2016). Pre-year abroad students tend to want to speak with year abroad returnees in order to get as much information and advice as possible. However, returning students' input has a big influence on the pre-year abroad students' choice of host institution and geographic location, or perception of the year abroad in general, in both positive and negative ways. Their information can sometimes be biased- based on their own personalities and their experiences, both positive and negative, which may not be the same for their juniors. In order to alleviate these biases, a screening and monitoring process, carried out by the teaching staff, was needed in order to ensure that returning students did not unduly influence pre-

year abroad students, particularly negatively. In order to offer a space for returning students to give information and support to pre-year abroad students, the teaching staff involved in this project devised two credit-bearing courses, one for each level of student, which took place in the same classroom as a joint class. The returning students were required to give a formal presentation on their year abroad experience to the pre-year abroad students.

Importance of post-year abroad stage

We have regularly found that our pre-year abroad students say the joint class sessions are very useful for getting information on the year abroad before they go and we have also observed that these sessions help the pre-year abroad students to gain a clearer picture of year abroad life. But do the returning students gain anything from this practice?

There has been a great focus on pre-departure preparation, and some pastoral support for the in-country stage, but little focus on the post-year abroad stage in our subject area. The year abroad experience is not only during the period in the country. It has already started from the pre-departure guided preparation, and the learning process 'preferably continues with a reflective and interpretive project drawing on SA [Study Abroad] experience' (Isabelli-García et al, 2018, p.466). This reflection can take place in post-year abroad debriefing and courses (Jackson, 2013), which revisit their language and intercultural learning strategies to form their metacognitive strategies (Coleman, 1997).

As an informative output from the returning students' information and advice through their experience works as a reflective and interpretive project, this joint class practice can be an essential part of their learning process of the year abroad. They can see themselves two years ago in these junior students, and this helps them realise how much their language and cultural awareness have improved since their pre-year abroad stage. To make it more obviously related to the returning students' year abroad language learning, they would have to give such presentations in Japanese as a part of the fourth-year language course assessment. By attaching this practice as a part of the fourth-year language assessment, all the returning students will participate so that the pre-year abroad students can have the maximum opportunities not just to meet the returnees but also learn from a wider range of experiences.

Experiencing Japanese culture and society through ‘*Senpai-Kōhai*’ system

The joint class also provides a real sense of ‘*Senpai-Kōhai*’ (Japanese: Senior-junior) relationship experience, which is observed widely in Japan, from educational institutions such as schools (Cave, 2004) and universities (Arai, 2004), to workplaces in offices (Bright, 2005). Seniors have a responsibility to look after their juniors, and juniors show respect to their seniors. This hierarchical relationship is very strict and regarded as important in Japanese society (Nakane, 1970; Benedict, 1989; Qie, et al, 2019), and according to a Japanese recruitment information service company, foreign workers in Japan found that this is one of the most different areas between Japan and their home countries (My Navi News Release, 2019). Without this knowledge, students will find it hard to adapt themselves to Japanese culture and society while on the year abroad, and the same applies to those who will work in Japan or Japan-related fields after graduation. Based on the experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984; Kolb, A & Kolb, D, 2005), the joint class and year abroad offer three learning cycles of ‘*Senpai-Kōhai*’ system in the pre-year abroad, year abroad and post-year abroad stages. Students experience a miniature version of Japanese society in class - senior students provide support to juniors, and junior students show respect to seniors, followed by their reflection on the experience and learning the concept of ‘*Senpai-Kōhai*’ culture. First, the pre-year abroad students experience the ‘*kōhai*’ (junior) stage in class. By the time the pre-year abroad students go on the year abroad, they will be able to adapt their knowledge to the real situations in Japan, thus they are better prepared. The year abroad, which naturally offers a full experience for their language and cultural experiential learning (Moreno-López, et al., 2017), is also the second cycle of learning ‘*Senpai-Kōhai*’ culture. Finally, the returning students, who were ‘*kōhai*’ (junior) two years ago, act as ‘*senpai*’ (senior) with responsibility this time. It gives them a better understanding of ‘*Senpai-Kōhai*’ culture since they completed all three cycles of the ‘*Senpai-Kōhai*’ experience before they graduate, and they will be able to adapt themselves to Japanese working culture more easily.

BACKGROUND AND THE ORIGINAL FORMAT

Group presentation on Japanese culture and societal topics in Japanese

In Edinburgh, the joint class project started in 2007, with returning students' group presentations in the L2 target language on L2 culture and society for the pre-year abroad students as assessment, followed by Q&A and discussions in English in small groups of both pre-year abroad and returning students. At the end of each session, all students wrote a short summary on what they learned and overall impressions on what they thought about the returning students' presentations, and these

were used for evaluation of this practice. The presentation was a part of the oral exams for the returning students, assessing their oral skills in Japanese in a group presentation format, so on top of the areas of their language abilities, presentation skills, contents and organization were also included in the marking scheme. The presentation topics were from the 'Japanology' field and included '*Tate-shakai*' (vertical society), '*Uchi to Soto*' (in-group and out-group), '*Amae*' (dependency) as well as Japanese working culture and gender inequality issues, so this presentation activity also tested the returning students' understanding of Japanese culture and society.

In comments from the students and our observation, joint class sessions were well received by not only the pre-year abroad students, but also the returning students in general as they enjoyed helping the junior students and reflecting on their own year abroad experience. One of the major problems with this practice was that most pre-year abroad students could not understand the returning students' advanced language, especially with advanced level vocabulary for describing abstract concepts of Japanese culture and society. Although this could work as a mini-culture shock to 'immunise' the pre-year abroad students before they faced a real-life example of language-induced culture shock, one or two students always expressed their strong negative view on this practice as they just sat in class without understanding anything. Returning students also found it hard to lower the level of the language for the audience and that made them feel unchallenged, not realising that the ability to talk flexibly to meet the audience's needs is an advanced level skill (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2020). To address these issues, a foreign language teaching element was introduced to develop a learner-centred approach, to level-down the language for the pre-year abroad students.

REVISED FORMAT

Teaching the target language and culture in Direct Method as useful pre-year abroad resources

This new format started in the year 2017-18, with 22 returning students and 29 pre-year abroad students in the joint class. The number of the students in both the pre-year abroad and returning groups dropped in 2018-19 to 11 and 14, followed by a big increase in 2019-20 (27 pre-year abroad students and 22 returning students). The biggest change with the new style of joint class is the format of the product of fourth-year groups. They are now in charge of giving language lessons to the pre-year abroad students. They provide useful 'information' on the year abroad as well as 'teach'

useful expressions and phrases in the L2 target language, in Direct Method (all teaching is done in the target language). This change required a modification of the existing marking scheme for the previous group presentation. Their oral skills in Japanese are assessed as before, but now particularly in the areas of description (explanation of grammar, vocabulary, culture, etc.); giving instructions (for tasks such as games, roleplays, listening etc.); and interaction (communicating with the pre-year abroad students using the appropriate level of the language) - they were reminded that using 'difficult' or 'high-level' Japanese words and expressions can have a negative impact on their performance. The most important thing is how they can communicate with the pre-year abroad students and adjust their level of the language for them.

Returning students are divided into groups (3-6 students each), and in these groups, they teach the pre-year abroad students Japanese language and culture, particularly things that are useful to know for living in Japan as year abroad preparation. Each week has a different theme such as shopping, hospital, part-time job etc., and each group is in charge of teaching a 45-minute class in one of 4 weeks of the joint class. When the pre-year abroad students are a large cohort, they will be divided into 'tutorial' groups, and in that case, a returning student group will also be split into two subgroups so that each subgroup teaches one 'tutorial' group for pre-year abroad students on the same topic. Each group can choose either to teach one 45 minute-class as a team, or for each of them to be in charge of one of the class activities for 10-15 minutes to make up a 40-45 minutes class, as long as they stick to the same theme, and don't repeat the same type of activity in one class (see the table below). They also assist one of the other groups in another week, as the class assistants, as well as filming the class so that the videos can be shared among the second- and returning students as the year abroad preparation resources later (see Table 1).

Group 1's theme: shopping	Pre-year abroad students	Pre-year abroad students
	Group A (15 students)	Group B (14 students)
Returning student	Subgroup 1.1	Subgroup 1.2
Teaching group	Student 1: Mini lesson 1 (Vocabulary) Student 2: Mini lesson 2 (Listening)	Student 4: Mini lesson 1 (Vocabulary) Student 5: Mini lesson 2 (Listening) Student 6: Mini lesson 3.B (language game)

	Student 3: Mini lesson 3.A (Roleplay)	
Returning student	Subgroup 2.1	Subgroup 2.2
Assistant group	Student 7, 8, 9: Teaching Assistant and filming the Group 1.1 lesson	Student 10, 11, 12: Teaching Assistant and filming Group 1.2 lesson

Table 1: Example of joint class structure

In the first joint class, pre-year abroad and returning students brainstorm year abroad-related topics that the pre-year abroad students think will be useful, and the returning students found important, for the year abroad (see Figure 1). Then they pick up the most common topics among both pre-year abroad and returning students, one or two for each group. Over the three years since this practice started, the popular topics chosen for the joint class teaching are as follows: 1) how to look for a part-time job and job-related expressions; 2) banking; 3) how to make (local) friends / extracurricular activities at university; 4) medical and mental health; 5) Public transport (trains); 6) Mobile phone / SIM cards. However, there have been some topics that the returning students thought important to know but the pre-year abroad students didn't realise are so important while on the year abroad (e.g. how to get a haircut at a hairdresser, Japanese speech politeness levels and how and when to use them).

Once the topic is chosen, each group begins their preparation. In the first year of this practice (2017-18), both pre-year abroad- and returning students had teaching Japanese as a foreign language classes so that the returning students could practise teaching the pre-year abroad students a few times and work out their language level. However, the returning students wanted separate practice sessions before they felt comfortable teaching the pre-year abroad students (see Evaluation for more details), so from the second year of the project (2018-19), a few specialised teaching Japanese as a foreign language workshops have been offered to the returning students, covering topics from how to level-down their language level to the audience level to how to write a teaching plan, all taught in Japanese.



Figure 1: Brainstorming topics for the year abroad joint class sessions

As a part of the preparation for the group teaching, each student submits a draft teaching plan via the University's Virtual Learning Environment. Feedback on the draft is given to them in the following week. Each group has three pre-teaching sessions (practice, rehearsal and preparation), and they receive feedback on site. In the preparation session, they also prepare class handouts for all the pre-year abroad students, teachers and teaching assistants.

One group (or subgroup if the student number is large) of two to three 'teacher' returning students delivers a class to 12-15 pre-year abroad students. There are also two to three 'teaching assistant' returning students, who take roles such as filming the teaching session or assisting the 'teachers' (handout distribution, roleplay practice, pair work etc.). The two examiners are also in class, marking the 'teaching' students' spoken Japanese. Each teaching session is also followed by writing their comments on the class activities by all the participants, both pre-year abroad and returning students, and the comment sheet scores are also included in the returning students' oral exam

assessment, though they comprise a very small amount of the overall assessment. The pre-year abroad students are assessed on a participation basis, by writing a short piece of feedback on the joint sessions.

EVALUATION

Students' written comments and feedback in each joint class session and the course feedback (see Appendix for the mid-course feedback questions), as well as the observations of the examiners of the joint class teaching sessions from 2017-18 to 2018-19, were used for a qualitative evaluation of the new approach to the joint class.

Feedback from the pre-year abroad students

Pre-year abroad students appreciated the practicality of useful, relevant information and a hands-on approach, and valued the opportunity to meet the returning students and their approachability and helpfulness. They praised their seniors' advanced language skills as well as their 'fun' and engaging teaching. Although the majority of pre-year abroad students found the returning students' sessions engaging, there were a few comments from the pre-year abroad students that they still feel that the returning students spoke too fast, and that their vocabulary in their speaking and the contents of their teaching were too difficult. It seemed hard for the returning students to remember what they were like as pre-year abroad students. However, the examiners observed that the pre-year abroad students participated in the class activities more confidently, were more engaged and interacting with the returning students, which can prove that the new format of the joint class has contributed to lessening the difficulty of communication between the pre-year abroad and returning students caused by the language level gap, when compared to the previous one-way presentations.

Feedback from the returning students

In the middle of Semester 1 in 2017-18, 15 out of 22 of the returning students filled in the departmental mid-semester course feedback questionnaire with two questions in class (see Appendix). 4 out 15 students expressed the view that the new form of joint class is challenging but better than the previous presentation format as there is more interaction in the sessions and the practical topics are more relevant to the year abroad compared to the previous, more abstract ones about Japanese culture and society. It is very important to know that they see the new practice as

better, as it is hard to judge whether there is any improvement from the previous presentation style to teaching style only from the pre-year abroad students' feedback, considering that they have no experience of the previous practice.

However, as this change affected the format of the exam, they reacted to the change quite negatively. They felt the teaching the target language is not relevant to the oral language class and teaching skills shouldn't be assessed, and they expressed the view that they were not interested in teaching at all and didn't see why they had to do it, and that they get more nervous in front of the pre-year abroad students when they 'teach' them than when they 'present'. After a conversation and discussion with them in class, with a detailed explanation of the reasons for the change, such as the Direct Method in language teaching being introduced to address the issue of language level gap, how levelling down the language to meet the audience needs is actually an advanced skill at the highest level (C2 in CEFR), as well as how the skills needed for 'teaching' and 'presentation' overlap so that they can gain transferable skills for their future career even if they have no plans to work in education after graduation, they started to see the benefit of the new practice. They also felt that there was not enough teaching practice and they said practising with the pre-year abroad students made them more nervous, so from the following year (2018-19), more teaching sessions for returning students only were added. In 2018-19, nine in Semester 1, and ten in Semester 2 out of eleven returning students answered the departmental mid-course questionnaire. Since the teaching sessions / exam were moved forward to Semester 2 to have time for more teaching practice workshops in Semester 1, they gave more positive feedback on the whole process and the joint class teaching module. They appreciated having teaching experience and mentioned it would be helpful for their future. None of them gave negative comments on it.

CONCLUSION

In the new format of the joint class as 'teaching' the L2 target language and culture in Direct Method to the pre-year abroad students as the year abroad preparation, the obvious improvement is that the sessions have become more interactive and hands-on, with their chosen topics from the students in both pre-year abroad and post year abroad stages, and the returning students' sessions are valuable pre-year abroad preparatory resources for the pre-year abroad students. The returning students also enjoyed the interactive nature of teaching more than presentations, with a more learner-centred approach as they had chance to contribute to teaching topic choice. This new

format also gives a clearer sense of peer support and/or peer-assisted learning with awareness of Japanese '*Senpai-Kōhai*'.

Another benefit is that providing an opportunity for the returning students to experience some foreign language teaching can enhance their 'employability', since language-teaching jobs, both in the target language and English, are one of the most common careers for language degree graduates. It also helps them to reflect on their year abroad experience, as well as their own metacognitive language and intercultural learning strategies on the year abroad and their language degree programme. Although the new format managed to lessen the issue of language level difference and helped the pre-year abroad students prepare for the year abroad better, there still are areas for improvement.

As a future plan, there should be a revision of the format and contents of teaching workshop for the returning students to tackle the issue of the language level difference and the returning students' preparedness for the joint class teaching. Additionally, an introduction in the form of a preparatory session for the pre-year abroad students before they face a mini-culture shock given by their seniors and for introducing useful strategies on how to handle it might also help to ease the problem. It is also necessary to address returning students' perception of this activity, by guiding them from a negative view on this practice as a time-consuming burden of looking after their juniors with no gains, to a more positive insight of the experience as an essential reflective post-year abroad stage as well as a real peer support / mentoring experience through the '*Senpai-Kōhai*' system to enhance their future employability.

In terms of sustaining the resources for pre-year abroad preparation, materials and input from the current 'in-country' students can also contribute to them on top of those from the returnees. The in-country students can provide more 'fresh, real-time' information as they are in the middle of 'in-country stage'. Although there have already been some 'during the year abroad' language tasks to provide the pre-year abroad preparation resources, more articulated tasks bridging the gap from pre-year abroad, to post-year abroad to make the students aware of the three stages of the year abroad cycle would be desirable in the future. By a careful planning of pre-, in- and post-year abroad tasks, it is easier for the students to reflect during all three stages, so that they can see their year abroad experience is continuous and that the post-year abroad stage is as important as the in-

country stage. In this way, they can maximize their opportunity of the year abroad, and transform their experience into valuable resources for their degree programme and beyond graduation.

Although this practice works well for the students on the same language degree programmes, scalability may be an issue for non-language degree or optional year abroad students. However, we believe it is still possible to arrange practical year abroad workshops with less focus on the language by the returnees as their post-year abroad reflection on their experience and create a sense of peer support in a wider year abroad community.

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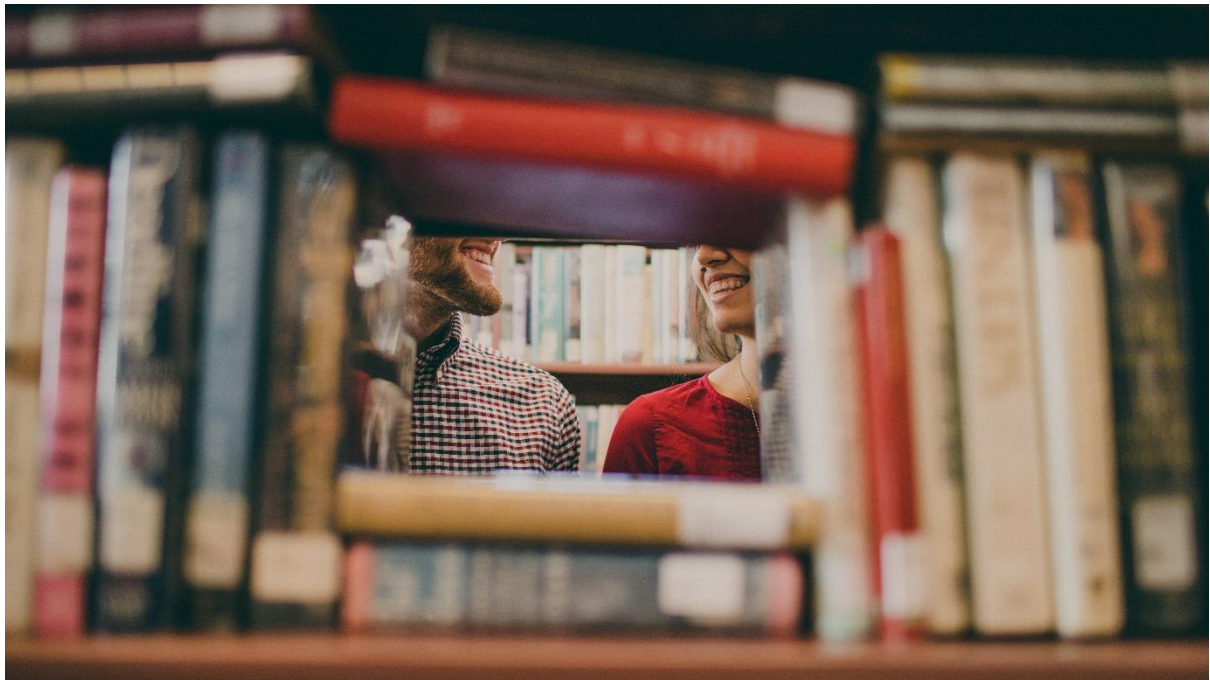
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APPENDIX

Questions in the Mid-Course feedback form:

1. How is your learning on the course so far?
2. What do you think would help you learn better on the course?

Scholarbits



How to (not) Prepare Students for the Year Abroad

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INTRODUCTION

Preparing students for their compulsory Year Abroad at the university of Portsmouth has been one of my primary responsibilities as Mobility Coordinator since 2014, and one I have thoroughly enjoyed. Having inherited a fairly efficient and successful programme of information sessions, a handbook, Moodle sites and website, I initially continued with previous practices, as students' overall satisfaction appeared to be good. However, over the years, I have been noting an increase in comments from students regarding gaps in their pre-departure briefing and understanding of the challenges they would meet whilst abroad. In addition to this, more recently, we have seen an increase in students experiencing difficulties whilst on their year abroad, or prior to departure, resulting in more and more students opting out of the year abroad, curtailing their placement abroad or asking to return to the UK after the minimum period required.

From the discussions I have had with colleagues at other institutions, this trend appears to have developed in most programmes with a compulsory year abroad, and is linked to an increase in students facing wellbeing issues in Higher Education. An article from *The Guardian* newspaper dated December 2014 suggests that students going on their Year Abroad do not receive sufficient information and that "Universities are ignoring the plea of anxious students" (Ashenden, 2014). Several universities responded to the article pointing out that programmes and infrastructures were in place to assist students both prior and during their period abroad. Rightly or wrongly, it seems that the perception amongst students is that they are not sufficiently prepared for the challenges of the Year Abroad. In this paper, I will present how we, at the University of Portsmouth, currently prepare students for their Language year abroad and explore the aspects academics should prioritise in designing Year Abroad preparation activities.

PRESENTATION OF THE LANGUAGE YEAR ABROAD AT UOP

At the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the University of Portsmouth, students on four different degree programmes must spend a year abroad (Applied Languages, Modern Languages, International Relations & Languages and International Development & Languages). Depending on the size of the cohort, this amounts to around 75-100 students each year completing one year-long or two semester-long placements, depending on language combinations or preference. Students may choose to study at one of our partner universities in Europe or beyond, undertake a work placement anywhere in the world, or work as Teaching Assistants as part of the British Council scheme. Helping students decide the type of placement and destination is the focus of five preparation sessions held in the first semester. These sessions provide information on the support available to source suitable work placements, funding and testimonials from returning students. By the end of the first semester, students are required to make a decision regarding their destination and placement type.

During the second semester, sessions in smaller groups are organised with students to brief them on the specificities of their chosen destination, to help them complete their registration or application, and provide further information on the Erasmus scheme. Two plenary sessions cover matters related to risk assessment and insurance, as well as academic requirements (year abroad assessment). This programme of predeparture preparation reinforces the information provided on a dedicated Moodle site which covers all aspects of the compulsory year abroad, from the aims and objective of the year abroad, to tips on how to find accommodation abroad.

All of the students on this programme are language students. The main languages taught at Portsmouth are French, German, Italian, Mandarin and Spanish. Throughout the first and second years, Language classes are very much geared towards preparing students for their period abroad. In line with Sandra Salin's *Better French Living Project* (2018), independent learning and student-produced activities help students develop a better understanding of the target culture by taking an active part in their learning. We cover topics such as CV writing and applying for a job in the target language, the education, health and social infrastructures of the countries in which the language is spoken, how to complete day-to-day tasks, such as signing a contract, making enquiries over the telephone, etc. Lecturers also share cultural knowledge, which help prepare students for the culture they will experience; social dos and don'ts, food habits, societal attitudes, etc. In addition to this,

second-year students are partnered with incoming exchange students to encourage them to not only improve their linguistic skills, but also learn more about the country they will be visiting the following year, as well as find out about what it is like to be an exchange student.

Every year, we request feedback from returning students to find out where there may be gaps in our practices, what works and what does not work. Although the vast majority of students are satisfied with the level of preparation, some appear to struggle and feel that they did not receive a sufficient amount of details on what to expect.

With this in mind, it is tempting to keep developing more and more workshops covering the minutiae of living in a different country: opening a bank account, dealing with a difficult landlord, making new friends... Returning students help us target those areas they felt ought to have been covered.

INVESTIGATING PRIORITIES

In May 2019, in a desire to keep improving the provision to students, I organised a series of focus groups to help identify how academic could better support mobilities. The intention was to present the findings for a workshop during the University's Learning and Teaching conference to spark discussions amongst academic staff. I received the assistance of one of our final year Applied Languages students. She had completed her year abroad the previous year, spending one semester at a French University and another working in Spain. She enjoyed the experience so much she wanted to share it with as many as possible, but also felt others would benefit from some predeparture tips and advice. For those reasons, she published a book, *Brit Abroad: How to survive a Year Abroad* (2018), which she hoped would help answer questions students may ask. During her final year, she became an Erasmus ambassador and was highly motivated to help students preparing to go abroad. She helped me find participants, prepare questions and discuss the findings. Although there is existing literature and research on the subject of year abroad preparation, notably Parker & Rouxville (1995), or more recently, Goldoni (2015), we felt it was important to collect data locally in order to ensure that any conclusions we would draw would be specifically relevant to our own student population. The focus groups included students from the School of Languages, but also students from other Schools and Faculties who had participated in an exchange or placement abroad

programme. We felt that comparing the experiences of students who received varying levels of preparation (students from the Faculty of Business & Law undergo a thorough predeparture programme, whilst other Schools and Faculties offer limited preparation) would help us assess the efficacy of such programmes. Surprisingly, those students who had not been offered extensive predeparture preparation all agreed that; 'In terms of preparation, less is more'. They enjoyed discovering new cultures first-hand. One student, who had done extensive research before going on a study exchange in Belgium, even said she wished she had not done so because she would have preferred to discover the place with new eyes. Admittedly, this was from a small sample, moreover a group of students who had enjoyed their placement abroad and were keen to discuss it with others. However, hearing these students talk about their experience and what they felt they gained from having received little preparation, got me thinking about the purpose of our current predeparture arrangement.

IS THOROUGH PREPARATION NECESSARY?

The experiences of young people today are not comparable to that of twenty or thirty years ago, but it can be useful to reflect on personal life lessons. I was lucky enough to go on study abroad programmes twice, first as an Erasmus undergraduate student in Oxford in 1992, and later as a Language assistant in Ireland in 1994. On neither occasion had I received any kind of predeparture training, and although I had previously travelled to England and Ireland, life as a student in the first and as a teaching assistant in a small town in the second, was drastically different. These were the days before the Internet, so communication with home was less easy, and travel and accommodation were arranged over the telephone or in person once in situ. Were there teething problems? Of course, there were. Many issues arose at different levels, and solving them was not always easy. I am not suggesting that we ought to send students thirty years into the past and experience going abroad without today's tools and information. What I am wondering, however, is whether spoon-feeding students information about their forthcoming Year Abroad can be counter-productive. Indeed, there is a wealth of resources available online and from University libraries with tips and advice on how to prepare for your year abroad (for instance the aforementioned *Brit Abroad* (Nobes, 2018), which is particularly relevant for our own students, or Lidstone & Rueckert's *The Study Abroad Handbook* (2007), and a plethora of websites providing advice to students), but even though students are directed to those resources, there is an ever-increasing demand for students to dedicate more time to help them prepare for their period abroad.

It seems to me that the more information we give, the more students ask for. The more details we give, the more we are likely to set expectations for those students of what their year abroad will be like. However, the unanimous view of students returning from their year abroad, is precisely that each experience is unique, shaped by the specific setting, interactions and opportunities each will have. Over-planning may help some cope with the anxiety associated with uncertainty, but it also deprives them of spontaneity, and the ability to develop new coping mechanisms. The problem-solving skills students are meant to develop during their experience abroad, and which make them all the more attractive later in the workplace, risk being spoilt by our reluctance to let students find out for themselves what it is like to be thrown in at the deep end. Indeed, the literature on the benefits and the enhanced employability of students who have studied abroad emphasise real-life management problems (see Steers, Nardon & Sanchez-Runde (2013)). It could therefore be argued that providing ready-made solutions to students risk compromising this valuable experience.

Over the past few months, whilst I have in practice been developing a more systematic programme of predeparture briefings and liaising with colleagues University-wide to establish an institutional approach to preparing students for their mobility, I have personally been questioning the purpose and the content of these preparations. Ad-hoc evidence collected from debriefing regularly point to students asking for further preparation and more information. However, if we compare the feedback received from departments who do not spend as much time as our School of Languages on year abroad preparation, the feedback indicates that those students felt they did not require further preparation. With this in mind, I wonder (and at this point, it is merely a hunch), whether less is, in fact, more.

Intercultural awareness or 'preparing students to be global citizens' (Highum, 2014) is undoubtedly an essential element of the predeparture preparation for studying or working abroad. For Language students, the view is generally that the study of language, translation, area studies, intercultural communication, etc. will contribute to preparing students for a possible 'culture shock'. At the University of Portsmouth, a review of predeparture requirements for students has indicated that this would be an area that all departments should be developing.

In my future approach to predeparture briefing, I intend to focus on the skills to carry out the necessary predeparture research, to solve problems independently and to communicate effectively whilst abroad rather than on fact-based information. Our first attempt to try and include this in the

preparation programme, in September 2019, we asked students departing for their year abroad to write a short paragraph entitled *My Aspirations*. The aim was to get students starting to reflect on their own experience and trying to identify what it is that they intend to gain from their period abroad. As this is relatively new, it is too early to comment on its success, but an initial read through the students' submissions suggest that many had set themselves personal objectives beyond linguistic skills and academic performance. Students talked about wanting to push their own limits, striving to adapt to a different environment and culture, to become more accomplished, to learn more about themselves. It will be interesting to compare how this little predeparture reflection will impact (if at all) debriefing next September, and whether students will feel that they met these ambitious personal objectives.

Ideally, I believe the preparation of the Year Abroad should ensure that students are equipped to face the challenges that it may present and make the most of their experience. I am wondering if the best way to achieve this may be not through the delivery of information-packed lectures, handbooks and web content, but perhaps through activities that help students develop attributes such as open-mindedness, resilience and self-confidence (for instance via reflective workshops and student-led activities). We know that these are the attributes a successful experience abroad should provide or increase, but we need to ensure that students start off with an adequate disposition, so that they can nurture these qualities.

Ultimately, it is important that staff supporting students' mobility consider the experience abroad holistically: it is not simply about developing language skills, or discovering a new culture, or gaining valuable experience in the workplace. All these aspects are important, but they need to be considered alongside the 'soft skills' students will acquire and develop throughout that experience (see Dwyer & Peters (2004)). In times when there is growing concerns for the mental wellbeing of young people, it is important that the year abroad preparation is not limited to practical aspects, but also equips students to make better decisions, develop coping strategies and reflect on the benefits of all experiences – good or bad.

As such, I am wondering whether a year abroad preparation that focuses too much on details, on an overload of information, may be a disservice to both the institution and the students. Perhaps the key is to refocus the preparation so that students leave the UK with an open mind, ready to learn

new skills and discover new people and cultures, a strong, resilient mindset with a full understanding that the experience ahead will have ups and downs, rather than leaving with lists of dos and don'ts.

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Facilitating Reflection on Year Abroad Learning: Digital media and Portfolio Module

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BACKGROUND

The Department of German at University College Cork has three international programmes, including the BComm International, for which I coordinate the Year Abroad. All students going abroad do so during their third year of study, are required to spend two semesters in Germany/Austria, and take a mix of courses in language and business, as well as one literature/culture module. They are also given the option of completing a tandem learning module, and a portfolio module, as presented in this paper. The Department of German offers two preparatory modules for year abroad during their second year, of which students may choose one, and of which neither is compulsory. One of these deals with postwar history and culture (*Political and Social Culture since 1945*), the other with intercultural learning (*An Intercultural Journey: Preparation and Reflective Writing for the Year Abroad*). Students are guided by their respective coordinators with regard to processes and bureaucracy before departure, and are given a handbook outlining academic requirements, timelines, some guidance on how choose courses, doing a work placement, housing, and much more. All students on international programmes must spend two semesters abroad, and some of them have the option of doing a work placement in their second semester, which they organise in liaison with staff of the department.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone who works on Year Abroad matters knows what a transformational experience it can be. Students themselves, however, often seem unaware of what benefits they have gained or cannot articulate these. When asked in class on return what benefits the year abroad brought, common answers are making friends from many countries, travel, and language improvement. While

these are all worthwhile outcomes in themselves, over several years, the students I asked seemed unable to reflect on any deeper learning from their year abroad. Based on these observations, I designed a portfolio module consisting of five mostly reflective tasks which require students to present these reflections using different forms of digital media, such as blog, online magazine, or animation, among others. Students complete this module during their time abroad. I piloted this module with 21 participants in 2017-18, 15 participants in 2018-19, and four participants in 2019-20.

The portfolio module is optional. Students are sent all tasks in one attachment to an email before they leave or very early during their study abroad. Submission dates are spread across the academic year from November to July and the five tasks (see Appendix A) are timed so that students have experienced enough to engage in meaningful reflection for them. For example, the third task, with a submission date in the spring, requires reflecting on the pre-departure goals and fears when they have already completed a full semester and settled in their location and university. Each task has a choice of at least two options, of which students choose one. In the first two runs of this module, submission was done via a shared folder in google docs. Subsequently, due to GDPR concerns, each student now submits to a folder in google docs which is shared only between the student and the lecturer. This module is graded on a pass/fail basis only. Given the reflective nature of tasks and the fact that they are based on individual experience and can therefore sometimes be very personal, I look for appropriate length and level of reflection in deciding on pass/fail. The module has five main aims. The first is to capture information for outgoing students that is often lost. The second is to encourage and enable deeper and more structured reflection on their learning from their time abroad. Graduates consistently report informally that in job interviews, selection panels often spent more time probing the graduate's year abroad experience than anything else. This led to the third aim of exploring the year abroad experience with reference to their future professional life. A fourth aim was born of the awareness that people express themselves differently in different media (using words, images, sound, etc.) and that digital skills are increasingly important in today's world. A fifth aim developed after the completion of the first module run when it became clear that students found it useful to look back at their pre-departure fears and goals.

In some cases, students' work far exceeded expectations and the best examples of student work are disarming in their honesty and self-awareness, and are often beautifully done. They have opened my eyes to new facets of the students themselves and have reinforced for me the enormous

benefits of study abroad. It has been satisfying to see students progress in their personal development, reflect on their experience, and to see them become aware of their own individual progress also. Feedback from students has, to date, been largely positive. Minor issues have arisen in terms of the organisation of the module and clarity of instruction, but these have been easily resolved.

While the module was created for language students, it can be applied in any context, for example people who spend time in foreign locations but where their home language is spoken (e.g. Irish students studying science in Australia). Equally, it could be given to young people going abroad as an au-pair or teaching assistant, or any other longer stay in a foreign environment, irrespective of language.

FIVE AIMS

1. Capturing location-specific information for future students

Since 2002 I have been coordinating the Year Abroad for students of Commerce with German at University College Cork. This includes allocating places at host universities, practical aspects of preparing them for study abroad, for example giving information on the types of teaching offered at their host university (lecture, seminar, tutorial) and guidelines on choosing courses for their year abroad. It also includes monitoring them while abroad, and the examinations and approval process at their home university on return. In preparing them and allocating places, I have listened to the questions outgoing students ask, the worries they have about their study abroad, and the kind of information they feel they need before departure. In addition, I have listened to returned students informally report on their study abroad experience, and comment on these. It became clear that useful, sometimes even crucial information bypasses me as a staff member. Tips about specific locations as well as general year abroad tips are usually lost when students leave university without passing it on to outgoing students. Whether this is passed on seems purely coincidental. What gets lost is information, along with the benefits this may bring for future outgoing students, and includes information such as in which locations it might be easier to find part-time work (useful for students with financial pressures), or how to deal with a multiplicity of complex methods of registration for academic modules at host universities (saving a lot of stress during an already pressured initial settling in period).

With this in mind, one of several aims of this portfolio module is to capture information for future students going abroad using tasks that require them to introduce the reader/listener to their location or university (task A) and give tips on how to make the most of the year abroad experience, or compare their home institution with the host institution (task B). An example of Task A work submitted has been depicting a day in the life of the student at their host university, using film or cartoon media. Other students have given a tour of the town or city using photographs with text, or by creating a blog. (see appendix C for an example of student work for this task). Still others have described a central monument or feature of the city or area and its significance using photographs or film. Examples of Task B work submitted has included film, blogs, audio and text, and included topics such as overcoming fears and making friends. (see appendix B for an example of student work for this task) Much of the information captured to date has already been made available to outgoing students, with the consent of the students whose work is being shared. Consent comes in the form of an opt-out given in the module description. For a limited period outgoing students are given read-only access to a shared folder in google docs containing this information. By collecting information from former Year Abroad students and making it available, current outgoing students can read and digest this, which may help to allay any fears (Li, Olson and Frieze, 2013) they may have and give them tools to plan their experience and gain more benefit.

2. Encouraging deeper reflection on year abroad experience and benefits

The main aim of this module is to enable and encourage a deeper reflection on students' year abroad learning experience. In constructing the tasks for the module, I was interested in what their challenges were, how they overcame these, what they learned about themselves, and why this is of value. By reflecting and writing not after they returned (and probably through rose-tinted glasses), but as they were going through the year, in the process of coping with challenging times while settling in, my aim was to make them more aware of the personal development they were gaining through their experiences abroad, and which immediate as well as future benefits these were bringing.

Knowing ahead of time what each task requires them to think about, participants had to filter their experiences day by day. For example, one option for task C requires them to reflect on 'triumphs, satisfactions, challenges,' for which submission is in Spring following the first semester spent abroad, thus giving them time to settle at the university and the location, complete initial bureaucracy, get

to grips somewhat with the living language, make friends and live one semester of student life in a different country. For this they had to monitor their experiences each and every day, and consider what personal triumph, satisfaction, challenge meant for them, and why. For one student, it was a triumph to master using the washing machine, for another it was to pass a difficult exam. For one student satisfaction meant seeing incremental improvements in language and communication skills, for another, it meant standing their ground in a discussion in the foreign language. For one student, challenge meant overcoming homesickness, for another it meant explaining to the doctor what ailed them. In thinking about what they had experienced, deciding what these triumphs, satisfactions, and challenges meant in their lives and describing these in words for another person, students have told me they became aware of how far they had come in only a few months. The benefits became more tangible to the students.

Another option for task C requires them to reflect on their best or their worst day. In completing this task, students had to first consider what a 'good' or 'bad' day meant for them, monitor their experiences of good and bad, and then choose the best or worst of these. One student, for example, made a very poignant and beautiful four-minute film about her worst days, which for her were all the days when she had to say goodbye to the friends she had made. Another student wrote a longer text as a blog entry with photographs. She described spending a day visiting a rural Italian vineyard owned by the family of a friend she had made and weeping hysterically on the seven-hour bus ride home, overwhelmed by the beauty and simplicity of her experience.

3. Learning for future professional life and career

A third aim is to relate personal development during study abroad to future professional life, specifically, skills students can relate in a job interview, such as learning from mistakes, communication, intercultural competence (of lack thereof), or problem solving. For this task (task E) one student, when writing about learning from a mistake, realised that being abroad had taught her to:

put aside pride and ignorance and open up more to the fact that I don't actually always know everything. I'm definitely much more likely to seek guidance or help now - that's why we are given academic coordinators and mentors, after all. (Student 34, Year Abroad 2018-19)

Another student, writing about intercultural competence for the same task, described a project team situation where she gave polite instructions to local students using (English) language

commonly used for this in English-speaking cultures, but which was not interpreted as an instruction by the local students. This led to some confusion and some adjustments to the assignment not being completed. (Student 33, Year Abroad 2018-19)

4. Overcoming fears and achieving goals in a study abroad period

Students' entries to task D clearly show that pre-departure fears such as homesickness, not being able to understand or be understood, not making friends and social isolation are common. Goals for the year abroad frequently include travel and improving language skills. However, strategies to overcome fears and achieve desired goals are consistently vague. Having read these perceived fears and potential goals, I wanted to support students, and thus the fourth aim of this module became the capturing of information which can potentially be used to help future outgoing students streamline their strategies in both areas (overcoming fears and achieving goals) and make them more concrete and achievable. Students were asked to articulate their fears and goals before they depart for the host university and reflect on them once more the following spring. One student, who had been neither particularly confident nor struggled with the idea of going abroad, in hindsight, described her fears as 'faintly laughable', and expresses part of her progress as follows:

Reliance breeds complacency and unfortunately before this year, while I would have always viewed myself as an independent person, I rarely planned or organized myself enough to back up this assumption. However, I feel as though I have acquired maturity through some rather steep learning curves, which stemmed from coordinating my various college modules into a complementary timetable, navigating life in another country and travelling. (Student 23, Year Abroad 2018-19)

Other students expressed similar sentiments. They felt that reflecting at a later point enabled them to see the progress they had made and found this very satisfying.

5. Developing digital media skills

The final aim is to facilitate the development of new skills in the digital area, as well as creativity in presenting the information and reflections. The five tasks in the module challenge the students to explore unfamiliar digital media such as writing a blog, creating a website or an online magazine, or using video or animation. Students are given some media options, but they are not limited to these. To date they have used variations on all the above. They are not given lists of specific tools, nor any training in digital skills. The results have been mixed. For example, some students put

immense thought and preparation into creating a film or animation that appropriately reflects their thoughts and experience: backdrop, music, choosing and sequencing clips, subtitles, voiceover. Others put more into the reflection itself and less into the presentation of it.

PORTFOLIO MODULE AS A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION ON YEAR ABROAD LEARNING

This module provides students with a framework by which to structure their reflections on their experiences and consequently their personal development. In my experience, general questions (What was the high point/low point of the year? What would you change if you could?) tend to elicit general answers and all students experience significant personal development during this time, but participants doing this module answer very specific questions aimed at making their development more visible to them.

STUDENT FEEDBACK ON THE PORTFOLIO MODULE

Feedback was gathered anonymously from one group (2018-19) after completion of the module and using google forms. Participants answered two questions, namely, what benefits they saw and how the module could be improved. Of the 15 who completed the module, 12 responded. In the feedback, students mentioned the following benefits: tracking progression, reflecting on mistakes and learning for the future, recording experiences (a form of journal), benefit to future students, and that it served as a series of marking points for their time abroad. Suggestions for improvement included different/later submission dates, answering in the foreign language, more emphasis on using different media, more on 'what we had learned from the year, in terms of developing ourselves personally as well as our notable improvement in language proficiency.' (anonymous feedback 2018-2019)

BENEFITS AND AMENDMENTS TO PORTFOLIO MODULE

In the absence of more structured research on its outcomes, the module appears to enable deeper reflection on development and learning during study abroad, as well as increasing media competence to a degree. It also appears to generate higher awareness of one's own experience and

the processing of it. Insight gained from portfolio entries and feedback can be used to better prepare outgoing students so they can avoid pitfalls and benefit more and sooner from the study abroad. Students have displayed what I consider to be significant talent and creativity, for example photography, film making and animation, writing and humour, introspection, and charisma in front of the camera. Minor problems have arisen in terms of file compatibility and features being lost. One group of students tended to type all their entries into a word document and seemed to dispense with media creativity, although feedback indicated that instructions were not clear. How to organise submission of portfolio entries has required some thought, as uploading to a common folder (google docs) to which all participants have access may lead to privacy and GDPR issues. However, students have said they enjoyed reading what their peers were experiencing and this would be eliminated by not sharing. Using a shared folder, I had also wondered whether copying from peers whose entries they had had temporary access to would be an issue, but this did not appear to be the case. They did, however, seem to get inspiration from each other concerning media for future entries.

INTEGRATING LEARNING FROM THE PORTFOLIO INTO YEAR ABROAD PREPARATION AND THE WIDER CURRICULUM

There is a clear need for gathering more structured and detailed feedback, as well as finding a way to measure the benefit and learning from the portfolio module. This could be compared to those who studied abroad without completing the module. Insights could be fed into improving the module itself and year abroad preparation work. Another area could look at translating student reflections on year abroad experiences into concrete insights into where each student progressed in their development, e.g. became a better communicator etc., and how this is of value (DeGraaf et.al., 2013).

It is possible that realisation of the real benefits and learning of such experiences as the year abroad come only later. One could potentially gather feedback from participants three to five years after completion and develop this. The insights into fears, goals and strategies around these could be used to construct a pre-departure workshop, encouraging students to think them through more carefully, streamline them, and facilitate students to begin operating more 'effectively' at an earlier point during their study abroad. Students could then potentially go further towards achieving the goals

they set for themselves. Finally, future research could analyse whether the information captured by previous students and made accessible to outgoing students is of use to outgoing students.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PORTFOLIO MODULE IN ITS CURRENT FORM

One study found that ‘many students felt they increased their confidence, gained independence, matured and became stronger persons through overcoming challenges’ (Meyer, 2010, p.46). Part of becoming stronger, more confident, and more mature is working through one’s fears and learning that one can in fact get through difficult situations, they are perhaps not as difficult to overcome as one thought, and that one has (or can develop) personal resources to do this. Another part of this might lie in the achievement of one’s goals, or the realisation that the goals needed adjustment, or the strategies one had set out to achieve them needed more thought. Perhaps fears about study abroad can never fully be allayed without going through the experience in person, but if progress can be made visible to students through reflecting on fears and goals from before departure, the satisfaction this can bring could be considered one of positive outcomes of the module.

It is also possible that some of these aims are not achievable – one student, when asked informally what she would change if she had her time again, said: ‘Nothing. It was imperfect, but I wouldn’t change any of it.’ (Student 32, Year Abroad 2018-19) The courage to accept imperfection is a valuable lesson indeed, and one which outgoing students and those who prepare them could often benefit from.

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APPENDIX A: Skeleton version of portfolio module including tasks only.

Pre-departure task
This can be the same or different to your reflections during GE2106 <i>Intercultural Journey</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> List your three top fears concerning your year abroad and briefly why you fear these things. AND List your three top goals for your year abroad and briefly how you intend to achieve these (list strategies & actions you intend to take)

Group A – choose one of the below
Showing us around. Comparing the university/the town/student life in Ireland and Germany/Austria.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A day in your life as a student of the Host University. Compare student life at your host University with those at UCC. Photo of a visit to a recognisable building or monument of the place you are studying or a place you travel to. Talk/write about the cultural significance, history etc. of this building or monument and why you chose it. Create a website showcasing the city/town where your host university is located. Create a website showcasing your host University

Group B – choose one of the below
Location Choices and Getting Established
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Pros and Cons of your host University – include academic and practical aspects. Year Abroad Tips –What do you wish someone had told you before you went? What advice would you give the second year group going abroad?

Group C – choose one of the below
Reflecting on your current Year Abroad experiences
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> “My Best Day/My Worst Day” – what made this your best or worst day? What were the causes for this? “Triumphs, satisfactions, challenges.” Talk about one personal triumph and how you achieved it, one thing that gave you great satisfaction and why, and one challenge you had and how you overcame it.

Group D – choose one of the below
My Fears and Goals
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Reflect on the fears you listed before you left – what would you say now? Reflect on the goals you listed before you left – what progress have you made?

Group E
Written Report 1500 Words or 20 min online presentation - Tying together personal learning from year abroad and how it relates to your future. Tell your stories! Include a piece on each of the topics given, overall word count 1500.

- A story about a time you saved the day
- A story about a time you had to work with a difficult person.
- A story about a time you learned from a mistake.
- A story about a time you stepped outside your comfort zone/pushed your boundaries
- A story about a time you demonstrated intercultural competence

APPENDIX B

Example of student work (excerpt), task B2, Year Abroad Tips, online Magazine. Here the student has given insight into how tiring it can be when you try to make the most of all the opportunities to learn and meet people.

Instructions:

Year Abroad Tips – getting established & making friends, making the most of your learning experience, overcoming fears & stepping outside your comfort zone. What do you wish someone had told you before you went? What advice would you give the second year group going abroad? This should not be location-specific, but pertain more generally to the Year Abroad experience as a whole.

In retrospect

TIME

Students are always told about how exciting it is to constantly go out and meet new people, form new relationships and socialise but I don't think it is stressed enough how tiring that can be. There have been times on Erasmus that I've felt burnt out from constantly being switched on and on-the-go, more than I ever would have been back home in Ireland. Therefore, I wish it had been instilled in students more, even though it may be obvious to some, that it is okay to have 'no' days to, to just relax in the comfort of your own room with a cup of tea made from a Barry's tea bag smuggled into the country in your checked baggage. 'Me' days are just as important as social events. It is important to unwind and take some personal time for some self-care too, even though it can be hard when the fear of missing out hits you while scrolling through Instagram stories of the night out.

It is important to look after yourself, take it easy sometimes and be mindful of your wellbeing to ensure that you don't feel fatigued, burnt-out and spent for long periods of time. Sure, your time is limited but your well-being is more important than that DJ.



DID YOU KNOW?

The Erasmus+ exchange program recently celebrated 30 years of service and has provided opportunities for over 4 million Europeans to study since its start in 1987.

APPENDIX C

Example of student work, task A3, website showcasing host city (landing page). Here the student has created a short introduction to Passau, a section on her own experiences, and a section on the experiences of other students new to Passau.

Instructions:

Create a website showcasing the city/town where your host university is located. Include three personal aspects e.g. my favourite place to go for a walk/my favourite bookstore/where to get the best view of the lake etc.

