



Residence Abroad: A modular approach to support students and document their progress

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Abstract: Internationalisation is a key thematic area which the Higher Education Academy in Scotland is seeking to develop. This study contributes to previous research on the benefits of studying abroad by demonstrating how students form graduate attributes whilst abroad and how these developments can be documented in a module set by the home university. The paper shows how this module has the additional benefits of preparing students for their study abroad and supporting their development whilst abroad. The research focusses on contributions made by language students of Edinburgh Napier University during their first three months abroad in 2012 and 2013..

Keywords: Internationalisation, Study Abroad, Year Abroad, Residence Abroad, Graduate Attributes, Student Support

Introduction

Many universities in the UK have recently outlined graduate attributes in an attempt to define general aims of Higher Education. These attributes describe the desired skills and abilities of university graduates beyond the disciplinary knowledge (Bowden et al. 2000, Barrie 2004). This paper aims to show how the year abroad contributes to the development of graduate attributes and how this process can be documented in a module. The study is based on the Edinburgh Napier University module “Studying and Living Abroad” (SLA).

Background

Internationalisation is a key element in current Higher Education policy in Scotland and one of the Thematic Areas in which the Higher Education Academy Scotland is engaging. Internationalisation is working well when considering the number of international students studying in the UK (16% at tertiary level in 2010, OECD 2012); however, the number of UK students studying and working abroad is far smaller. Recent trends, particularly in regard to Scotland, give some hope for optimism as the number of students from Scotland undergoing an Erasmus exchange rose by 9.7% from 2010-11 to 2011-12 (British Council 2013). Actual figures, however, show how this increase must be considered in relative terms: In Scotland 216.332 students were enrolled in Higher Education in 2011-12 (HESA 2013); 1.362 of these took part in an Erasmus exchange (British Council 2013). This is a far cry from the target of 20% outward mobility for members of the EU which was outlined by the EHEA in 2012. The low uptake shows that

further support is needed for students to study abroad and to realise the potential of this opportunity.

In 2012 the British Academy and the University Council for Modern Languages issued a joint statement „Valuing the Year Abroad“ in which they called on the UK government to recognise the strategic importance of the Year Abroad „delivering both competitive employability advantages for the students themselves and wider long term benefits for the whole UK economy“. Based on a survey of students who had undertaken a year abroad, the statement describes various areas of development which students typically undergo while abroad. These areas include not only linguistic, but also academic, cultural, intercultural, personal, and professional gains.

In a recent contribution to this journal Giraud-Johnstone (2012) reported on a module to critically assess the development of language students working as language assistants abroad. In a qualitative content analysis of students' work during this module and their end-of-year reflections the following topics emerged as recurring themes in which students had undergone development: improved language skills and cultural awareness, positive contributions to self-image and self-belief, and valuable teaching experience. These themes roughly overlap with the above mentioned areas of development outlined by the British Academy's statement paper „Valuing the Year Abroad“(2012).

In line with other universities in the UK, Edinburgh Napier University has composed a „conscious employability model“(2012), which describes desired graduate attributes to „help students identify what makes them unique and stand out from the crowd“ (Edinburgh Napier University, Graduate Attributes, 2012). Table 1 shows how these desired graduate attributes correspond to similar areas or themes of development as described by the British Academy and by Giraud-Johnstone (2012) in regard to the year abroad.

Table 1: Thematic overlap between areas of development abroad and desired graduate attributes

British Academy (2012) Areas of development during year abroad	Academic	Cul-tural	Inter-cultural	Linguistic	Personal	Professional
Giraud-Johnstone (2012) Themes of development of language assistants abroad		Cultural awareness		Language Skills	Self-image and self-belief	Teaching Experience
Desired graduate attributes in the „conscious employability model“ (Edinburgh Napier University, 2013)	Constructive reflection, self-review, evaluation, goal-setting	Working with others, respect for self and others, challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, recognition of diversity		Communication: oral, written and digital; professional standard of linguists	Proactive, self-reliant, resilient, personal networking	Commitment to continuous „learning to learn“

For language students at Edinburgh Napier University a period of residence abroad is a mandatory part of their programme of study, and students on other courses are also increasingly encouraged to study abroad as part of their university education. This is a crucial stage in a student's academic development and the module "Studying and Living Abroad" (SLA) was developed in order to support language students prior and during their time abroad. As will be argued in this paper the module has the additional benefit of documenting the process of students' development.

On the basis of data drawn from the SLA module this paper will aim to further develop the research carried out by the British Academy (2012) and Giraud-Johnstone (2012) by discussing whether students' developments abroad contribute to the formation of graduate attributes. Additionally, the paper aims to establish how effective the SLA module is as a tool for supporting students and demonstrating the development of graduate attributes.

The findings will contribute to a wider discussion of the benefits of the year abroad and the usefulness of modules from the home university for enhancing the year abroad and documenting students' developments.

Description of the module and methodology

The SLA module was developed and first delivered in 2012. The language team had realised that students were often ill-prepared academically and personally for their stay abroad and this module had the dual aim of preparing students better for their time abroad as well as giving them an opportunity for reflecting on their experiences. Accordingly, the module is delivered in two parts. Part one takes place in the semester prior to students' departure and consists of a series of workshops and tasks designed to prepare students for their time abroad. The workshops include a training session for the electronic portfolio used as a platform for students' contributions, as well as intercultural workshops and practical briefings. Tasks are made up of an essay on culture shock, information research on the student's destination and current affairs reports. Part two takes place during the first 3 months abroad and consists of the final two tasks: Students write a reflective reportage on their personal and academic development and they analyse two current affairs showing how these have developed over time.

Seventeen students took part in the module during the first year of the implementation in 2012-13. Twelve students went abroad for a full year and five for only one semester. The destinations of these students included Belgium, France, Germany and Spain. All students used an electronic portfolio as a platform for their module content and 15 students completed a survey at the end of the year to evaluate the module.

The following analysis is based on the reflective reportage written by the students during the first months of their time abroad in 2012-13. As these reportages were written in the target language translations of the original texts are used. Extracts from the reportage have been chosen through qualitative content analysis. Categories were based on the areas of development described in table 1 (cultural and intercultural were

combined into one category) and extracts were coded according to these categories. The extracts were then analysed for evidence of graduate attributes.

All names and identifying features were changed to avoid recognition of individual students and ethical approval through Edinburgh Napier University was granted for this research. The contributions referred to in this article originate from students who had given formal consent for their work to be quoted.

Findings

The following section will examine the development of graduate attributes which was demonstrated in the reportage of the SLA module. It should be noted that students were self-reporting and, for this reason, there is no objective evidence of students' developments. It is possible that students, on occasion, wrote what they thought their lecturers were expecting to hear. However, many of the specific graduate attributes examined in this study were not explicitly mentioned to students.

Academic

While studying abroad in a new academic environment attributes such as constructive reflection, self-review, evaluation and goal-setting are of particular relevance. In the reflective reportage students on the SLA module were required to set up an action plan and critically evaluate their learning experience according to this plan.

Students commented on how they felt under pressure in the new learning environment, but managed to overcome this: „I think that I can now deal with a greater workload and I am more organised“.

In respect to goal setting one of the students wrote: “In order to improve my French, I have conceived an action plan: in general I try and practise my French as much as possible” and goes on to list the opportunities which she has identified for doing so (daily situations, reading of magazines, encounters with native speakers).

Other students were critical in their self-review: „My language learning didn't always go according to plan. I have only been to the cinema once and this wasn't a German film. I will have to make changes [...]. On the other hand I listen to German radio every morning and I find that I can understand much more than when I first came here.” A student based in France expressed disappointment not to have managed to see as many films or read as many books as she had originally planned due to practical constraints but ends her comment on a positive note: “but fortunately I can continue to watch French films and read French books when I am back in Scotland. I would also like to join the French Institute as they lend books and films!”

Students seemed prepared for their need for adaptation and were also aware of subsequent benefits:

“I knew there would be many good and bad surprises when I arrived in this new environment which was so foreign to me and I knew that I would need to get used to that environment.”

“[The need to prepare for examinations] helped me to improve my time management and consequently my learning strategies.”

These extracts demonstrate how graduate attributes linked to academic development were reported. Students reflected on their learning, often changing their strategies according to the situation and their needs, thus evaluating themselves critically and setting new goals for themselves.

Intercultural

The following graduate attributes are linked to intercultural development: Working with others, respect for self and others, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, recognising diversity. Unsurprisingly, students made a lot of contributions in this area demonstrating their reflections on cultural differences: “Before I left Scotland and came to Germany I had many expectations about my life there. I think some of these expectations were correct, but I also think that many were completely wrong.” At the end of the first semester abroad, another student concludes that “the difficulties experienced [in academic work and daily living] have enabled me to understand better French culture and the way of life.” The same student emphasizes her eagerness to return to the institution and meet more challenges in the Spring.

Previous research has warned against the problem that students’ stereotypes might even be enhanced when they feel they have personal evidence of a cultural difference (Tusting, 2002). Tusting particularly warns against putting students into a situation where they feel they are being encouraged to stereotype and this might be a problem with tasks where students are specifically asked to describe cultural differences. However, most extracts were balanced or showed how students were reflecting on their own culture as well. An example of this is the following extract where a student elaborates on an aspect of culture which she had initially found irking:

In a conversation [...] I tried to ask why people aren't annoyed with the „queues“ in Germany. I was told that it just isn't important as everyone will get on the bus, so it doesn't matter. This was so simple and refreshing to hear. She is right, of course, everyone will get on the bus, so why should it matter whether you are 1.2. or 3. Maybe this works better in Germany because when the bus is full the driver will still let more people board it – in contrast to Great Britain with its „Health and Safety“ rules. - [...] it was interesting for me to see this under a new perspective.

A student based in France elaborates on a similar pragmatic issue (annoyance with long queues in supermarkets) and issues of politeness related to time-keeping before moving on to the following reflection, which indicates some distancing from her pre-Erasmus perceptions:

I had been told by my friends and family that a number of French people are rather impolite and rude, especially towards foreign students! I was pleasantly surprised to find out that most people in France are pleasant and have helped me with my French when I get it wrong. However, there are sometimes people who are not friendly, who don't even say 'thank you' or 'please' or who don't even smile.

In the following extract a student demonstrates awareness of the longer-term benefits of her intercultural competencies: "I have met many people of different nationalities. These are useful skills to have when I have to go to job interviews or start a new career. I will be more aware of different cultures and feel I will adapt better to new situations."

Most students reported that they felt well prepared for the cultural differences and experienced less of a culture shock than they had expected. This might well be due to their preparation during the first part of the SLA module. Their contributions demonstrated that they were reflecting on intercultural awareness and recognising diversity without resorting to stereotyping.

Linguistic

Communicating effectively is a desired graduate attribute even in one's native language, and being able to do so in a foreign language is an added advantage to a student's employability as well as their outlook on life. For linguists this ability is a vital part of their education.

While this paper is reporting on a variety of themes, linguistic progress in the target language is still a key motivator for language students to study abroad. It should be noted that oral language gains were mostly self-reported in the reportage and, for this reason, usually not specifically demonstrated (though students had the option to include videos and audios). However, most students wrote their reflections in the target language, thus demonstrating their written level.

Many students commented on the fact that they were feeling more confident when speaking. However, some students were unhappy as they were not speaking the foreign language as much as they had hoped: „It is a disadvantage that the majority of my friends come from Great Britain, Ireland or Australia (and they don't speak German!), so I nearly always speak English in my free time. I hope to find German friends during my second semester. I also hope to find a job which will help financially and linguistically!“ The opportunity to reflect on these difficulties during the first semester seems to have been a real incentive for this student to make plans for improvements in the second semester (similar to the above described reflections on the action plans).

The reportage showed that not all students were aware of their language level and the written text sometimes demonstrated a lower level of progress than realised by the students. In these cases, self-awareness of the students was lacking. It should also be mentioned that while most students outline plans for future linguistic improvement there is no evidence whether these plans were subsequently carried out.

However, most students will be expected to have made considerable progress during the full year abroad, enhancing their ability to communicate (though this will vary across the student group).

These language gains all contribute to develop another important graduate attribute - the professional standard of linguists.

Personal

Graduate attributes in regard to personal development can be described as being proactive, self-reliant, resilient, and able to engage in personal networking. In the reportage students reflect on their self-development. Their contributions describe how they have become more self-reliant for instance by learning to budget and understand new concepts, such as local transport. The new situations required students to move outside their comfort zones and overcome barriers, such as self-doubt or shyness. They learnt to persevere and this resulted in considerable gains in confidence: „I was worried about making friends before I came because I am quite shy. However, this was not so difficult. I am now more confident about meeting new people.”

Being placed in a different context enabled some students to discover new aspects about themselves, as commented by the following student who studied a trimester in France: “Retrospectively I am pleased to have had the opportunity to live alone for a limited period of time as I know now that I prefer to live with other people.”

Enhanced self-knowledge takes many other forms: “I think that I am more proactive than before. I have discovered new things which interest me; for instance, I have tried a Zumba class in French, which was a funny way to learn the language.”

However, students were also shown to be struggling with their situation: „I don't really feel integrated in the German society. I don't live with Germans and most of my friends here are international students. I think I ought to join a sports club next semester to meet more Germans. “

This extract demonstrates the student's self-awareness. Once more, the reflection gives the student the opportunity to develop strategies which could improve her situation.

Professional

Arguably, the most valuable graduate attribute is the skill of „learning to learn“, which is vital for any professional route. The tasks of the SLA module are intended to encourage self-assessment amongst the students in order to develop “the capacity to be an assessor of learning” (Boud and Falchicov 2006, p402). If students realise that they constantly have to work on their skills and reflect on the strategies they have chosen they will be extremely well equipped for their future life.

The last extract is an example of how one student reflects on the necessity to continue learning: „My foreign language classes are good for the first semester, but if I really

want to improve my German I have to challenge myself more all the time. Only then can I say that I have received the best learning experience during my time abroad“.

Summary of findings

The above findings show that the SLA module is effective in demonstrating how valuable graduate attributes are being formed. (Clearly, the depth of self-development will vary amongst the student group and the fact that students are self-reporting should be kept in mind). It might well be argued that studying abroad, in itself, would lead to considerable self-development. However, the module gives students the opportunity to become aware of and critically reflect on their development. As the reflective reportage takes place during the first three months of the year abroad, students still have the opportunity to develop strategies where necessary and lecturers gain an insight into the situation of the student. Furthermore, the documentation of experiences will come in useful at a later time when students prepare for interviews or simply remember their time abroad.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how students have self-reported the development of valuable graduate attributes whilst abroad and that the SLA module is an effective instrument for demonstrating these developments. The graduate attributes were formed on academic, intercultural, linguistic, personal, and professional levels. On a practical level the SLA module prepared students for their residence abroad by giving them pre-departure tasks, and it supported their academic progress by encouraging them to compile and reflect on an action plan and by asking them to write part two in the target language.

In order to evaluate the module students were asked to fill in an anonymous survey after they had completed the module and received their marks. In general, the feedback was positive: In response to the question „What did you think of the new module? “ 13 of 14 students regarded it as “useful” or “very useful”. Students felt that the module prepared them well for their time abroad and they enjoyed the tasks. Based on students’ feedback in the survey the authors recommend that students have some contact with the module deliverers during their time abroad to ensure they understand all tasks and have the guidelines, marking criteria, and due dates readily available. It would also be useful to discuss the benefits of documentation with the students, making them aware that they are gaining graduate attributes which will be beneficial for their future.

The authors are hopeful that this module or a similar version will be of interest to students from other courses who are embarking on a year abroad. At Edinburgh Napier University requests from other schools have been made to accept their students on the module. This will call for some adaptation, such as writing part two in English for non-language students.

The authors are confident that the SLA module and similar modules (such as the version presented by Giraud-Johnstone, 2012) will serve to demonstrate to students, educators and other stakeholders how a period of residence abroad can support the development of graduate attributes. This will show that internationalisation has real advantages for the students, enriching their personal and professional lives as well as contributing “to their home country’s prosperity” (British Academy, 2012, p2).

Coleman (2013) recently described the long-term benefits of students who studied abroad between 1985 and 2010. All former participants of a Senegal placement were sent a questionnaire and 47 (82.5%) were returned. Of these „all respondents without exception viewed their semester(s) abroad as a good investment, virtually all found the skills learned valuable in their employment, and more than three-quarters were in a job requiring cultural mediation“ (Coleman 2013). Further research should give more evidence on the long-term benefits of residence abroad and trace how the attributes gained abroad can benefit students in their further lives and careers.

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