

TRAVELLING TO LEARN: STUDENT MOBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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There has been a recent spate of newspaper articles bemoaning the fact that fewer and fewer British university students are choosing to take part in European exchange programmes like Socrates/Erasmus. Latest figures indeed show a dismal pattern of decline. Whilst more and more young people from outside the UK clamour to come here and study, very few of our own students appear to be sufficiently motivated to travel the other way. Last year, the number of UK students taking part in the Socrates/Erasmus programme was 8,481, down 5% on the previous year, which was already 10% down on the year before that. The scale of the UK student deficit can be seen in the imbalance of one bilateral exchange over two academic years:

UK-France Incoming/Outgoing Imbalance by host country

YEAR	UK OUTGOING	UK INCOMING	IMBALANCE %
1998/9	3,496	6,028	172
1999/00	3,468	5,700	164

(Source: UK-Erasmus Council, www.erasmus.ac.uk)

The Director of the UK Socrates/Erasmus Council has argued that this is '... a massive issue for us. If the UK, the fourth largest economy in the world, wants to have future generations of leaders who can compete in the world, they need to get international experience to enable them to work in a multicultural environment'. The problem, as he saw it, was primarily a cultural one in Higher Education: 'There isn't a culture that is saying, for example, in engineering faculties, that every student must have study experience elsewhere in the world. In Germany they say they expect every student to have that' (*The Independent*, 17 October 2002).

Other reasons advanced to explain the relative immobility of UK Higher Education students include structural and funding issues in the universities themselves. Universities may be loathe to encourage students to spend time abroad because they are more interested in filling their places with lucrative overseas students rather than fee-waiving EU exchange students. There have also been real obstacles within our Higher Education system for those wishing to gain recognition for student achievements awarded by a foreign institution. As they dice with increasing debt, a year abroad which doesn't actually 'count' towards their final degree could become less and less attractive to students.

However it would be quite wrong in this discussion, it seems to me, to suggest that UK students are inherently 'stop-at-homes', incurious about the rest of the world and uninterested in travelling. After all, a large number of them take the opportunity to travel or work outside the UK even before they go to university. It is difficult to get a precise idea of the actual number of these young people who take a 'Gap Year', but deferred entry figures for university places can at least give us some broad idea of trends, and here there is a gradual but definite rise.

Trends in deferred applicants 1994-2002

Deferring	No. of deferred applicants	percentage	Total no. of accepted applicants
2001 to 2002	28,195	7.9%	358,041
2000 to 2001	24,449	7.2%	339,747

1999 to 2000	22,522	6.7%	334,594
1998 to 1999	21,603	6.6%	329,788
1997 to 1998	20,681	6.1%	336,338
1996 to 1997	19,537	6.6%	295,807
1995 to 1996	17,134	5.9%	290,596
1994 to 1995	14,530	5.4%	270,898

(Source: UCAS).

The notion that students might choose to take a Gap Year has become largely normalised within the education world. The Chief Executive of UCAS is on record as saying that: 'The benefits of a well-structured year out are now widely recognised by universities and colleges and cannot fail to stand you in good stead in later life' (UCAS Chief Executive, 2002). Gap Year advice for first time travellers extols the value of the year outside the UK, detailing the kinds of skills which will be learnt: 'Independence, self-reliance, and the appreciation of people and the things around you' (Griffiths 1997: 3). These are precisely the sort of skills of course which employers value in graduates who have spent a year studying or working abroad as part of their degree course. As one former language assistant, now a recruitment manager for a large multi-national company, put it: The fact that you have adapted and managed yourself in a different and often challenging environment is viewed by employers as a very positive experience' (Hoggan, 2001,62).

A longitudinal survey of the extent to which residence abroad makes graduate linguists more employable has established a strong link between landing the first long-term job and the experience of the Year Abroad (Ltsn Report of Coleman's research). Out of 643 language students graduating between 1959 and 1999, 69.5% claimed that residence abroad had been a factor in landing the first long-term job. For 35.7% it had been a significant factor, and for 4.6% the determining factor. Asked whether the expense and time involved in residence abroad had been a 'good investment', an overwhelming 96% claimed that it was.

Given then that young people do not seem averse to travelling, and that there are demonstrable employment advantages later down the line, we might be advised to look more carefully at how an international experience at university can be presented as a positive selling- point to students choosing degree courses.

Residence abroad: add-on and sandwich?

As the figures below suggest, the largest number of UK Socrates/Erasmus participants comes, unsurprisingly perhaps, from Modern Languages degrees.

UK Erasmus student numbers by subject area, 1995/96 – 1999/00

Subject	1995/6	1996/7	1997/8	1998/9	1999/00
Agriculture	113	106	66	63	33
Architecture	232	146	165	181	200
Arts	613	569	568	587	610

Business	2517	2207	2212	1958	2023
Education	338	300	321	267	241
Engineering	804	632	549	494	432
Geography	191	176	149	134	144
Humanities	318	310	275	236	257
Languages	1356	2650	3314	3227	3303
Law	915	871	875	850	921
Maths	276	195	203	203	184
Medicine	245	210	229	272	224
Science	485	477	364	399	365
Social Science	1186	1016	1104	908	913
Communications	163	145	127	172	152

(Source: www.erasmus.ac.uk/institutions/stats/numsubj.html).

In fact though historically, the relationship between the language degree and the Year Abroad, between learning the foreign language at an UK university, and the actual experience of living and working in the country, has been problematic. Way back in the 1960s, Stern described university attitudes to students studying abroad as casual and slightly dismissive: 'It is usually regarded as academically rather a waste of time, but a necessary feature of a course to enable a student to 'pick up' the language' (Stern, 1964: 91). The country was the context for language learning, seldom seen as central to the concerns of a degree course - a slightly irritating, if necessary, add-on. By the late eighties, there was a more general agreement that the 'Year Out' in the foreign country was basic to the practical experience of the degree, rather like the sandwich placement in a business studies course:

'A degree in Modern Languages is a sandwich course and the meat is the year abroad. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that no other degree, no other subject, offers this opportunity. Only students in vocational subjects like Law, Medicine or Engineering have such an intensely formative experience built into their programme of studies and of these only Medicine in its later stages offers anything like the same human challenge' (Evans, 1988: 42).

By the mid-nineties however, when university language departments were being inspected and assessed, it was evident that, whilst the Year Abroad was the norm in all language courses, it was seldom actually integrated into the degree curriculum. The anomaly seemed to be that residence abroad was perceived by students as the key experience of their degree, but still perceived by staff as something largely extraneous to the main work of the course. The Inspection Overview Report for French degrees for example stated that only 30% of institutions in the UK had successfully integrated the experience of the foreign country into the HE curriculum, despite the fact that:

'Final-year students attached great value to this part of the course; many saw it as pivotal, helping to develop independence while providing a focus for the latter stages of their studies' (HEFCE, 1996, section 10).

Ethnographic approaches

Partly in response to these criticisms, the past six years have seen a major reassessment of the value of the period spent abroad, with consortia of universities working together to examine different approaches (CILT/FDTL Information Sheet). In these developments, the country itself, and our observations of it, are the chief focus of study, rather than simply a context for language acquisition. The work which has resulted from these studies, which we might broadly classify as ethnographic and intercultural, provides material which has not only changed student attitudes in HE, but can also offer additional resources for colleagues in secondary schools and colleges.

Let's take the ethnographic perspectives first. These approaches, borrowing from anthropology and ethnography, encourage students to look in a systematic and rigorous way at the ordinary and everyday in the foreign country, carefully observing a small group in order to see life from the perspective of the 'other'. The university consortium based at Oxford Brookes University, the LARA group (Learning and Residence Abroad) has produced a complete course in ethnography for language learners, with detailed written units and a host of supporting material. This lays down the basic principles, introduces anthropological/social concepts, provides tools for data-collection and analysis, and gives guidance on writing up an ethnographic project. In the course, separate (and detachable) units look at non-verbal communication and social space, at national and ethnic identities and local boundaries, at language and social identity, local level politics and discourse, gender and power. As introductory examples, the course quotes two projects recently completed by students (LARA, 2000, Unit One, 9):

'Studying with a child: an ethnographic study of student single mothers in Berlin. This German project was a study of a small group of single mothers studying at the Humboldt or Free Universities in Berlin. The account focuses on three main aspects: 'studying and bringing up children', 'daily routine' and 'social contacts'. Early morning and sleeping times are crucial concepts around which students organise their and their children's lives. Although the Federal Ministry for Youth and Women concluded in a report that single mothers were isolated and lonely, this project demonstrated that this group of women had many social contacts and did not feel lonely.'

'Code switching as a marker of identity in Barcelona...The phenomenon of code-switching – in this case switching between Castellano and Catalan – was observed and commented on by informants as a symbolic resource for giving messages about and managing their identity. In Barcelona, the majority are Catalan speakers... However, there is a substantial minority of Castellano speakers who are internal migrants from Southern Spain. This project was concerned with how the use of the two languages in contact came to be markers of social identity and how these markers related to other aspects of identity and boundary maintenance'.

The results of the LARA project suggest that focusing in such a systematic way on the country itself can produce marked, and often lasting, effects on the students concerned:

'It had never occurred to me before the project to look at things from other people's point of view. That's one thing I overcame through this ethnography project, not to use your own vision, your own terms to describe things as a first resort ...'

'I've always held in the back of my mind what a marvellous thing to pass myself off as a speaker of another language. I suppose I must have learnt from the ethnography thing, as well, a more neutral way of being so that I can, to an extent, be taken for a Spanish person through things that I've absorbed – posture, body language ... (Ethnography) sparked off a huge curiosity – an interpenetrating of the culture and me – such that I behave feel and act to it like members of that group – like Spanish people but not fully.' (LARA 2000, Why Ethnography for Language Learners? 4,5)

Intercultural approaches

Another way in which university consortia have focused on the period abroad has been by developing material - databases, quizzes, diaries - which can help students to gain intercultural awareness and understanding. These projects start from the premise that being prepared to identify and address intercultural issues is key to getting the best out of living outside the UK. The Interculture Consortium (Interculture) for example has produced a remarkably useful database of interviews with students, and diaries that young people have kept during their 'stage' abroad. At Homerton College, Cambridge, Barry Jones has put on the Internet quotations from the diaries of French and British PGCE and Maîtrise students, which reflect on the learning experiences in the two countries and compare what has been discovered. From the wealth of first-hand observations collected, the Project has developed a useful Interculture Taxonomy which allows students to key into intercultural issues that particularly interest them and see what others have experienced. The broad categories such as: 'How did I meet other people? What were they like? What was the culture like? How did I react? How did I spend my time?' enable students to read about the first hand experiences of their peers in a range of countries. The quizzes and the searchable bibliography, available on the Interculture website, are tools which could be used at a variety of levels to bring the actual experience of visiting or living in a foreign country within the grasp of a broad range of students.

The contemporary economic importance of this intercultural dimension incidentally is reinforced by recent research investigating some of the major problems in transnational business mergers. More than half of such attempted mergers fail, and it is lack of knowledge of the partner's culture, the research argues, which is very frequently at the root of these problems (Trouille, 2000).

A different languages population in university?

Intercultural and ethnographic approaches to student residence abroad are particularly timely today in view of the changing population of language learners in Higher Education. To begin with the numerical balance of those studying degrees in languages has shifted dramatically away from single honours degrees (BA French, for example) towards joint degrees (a language and another subject), and within this category, towards a language with a non-language subject.

Admissions to language degrees

Single Honours (Total for French, German and Spanish)	Joint : Two languages	Joint : a language and a non-language subject
1,393	2,369	4,222

(Source: UCAS, 1999 figures)

Even more radically however, the widespread modularisation of UK degree courses has led to an enormous growth in students doing one or two modules of a foreign language as a credited part of a degree in another subject. They are voting with their feet and choosing in effect to continue their school-study of languages or taking the opportunity offered to learn a new language. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures for the total of languages modules being taken in Higher Education institutions in any one year suggest that the overall numerical balance has now shifted to the latter group. For 1998/99 for example, out of 124,000 modules of languages recorded by HESA, it appeared that 63,000 were being taken by these less specialist (one or two module) students (Marshall /UCML). The opportunities for involving a much broader range of students in studying/working abroad are therefore a good deal greater now than they have ever been. Many universities are indeed capitalising on this to offer courses in which a period abroad is an integral and attractive part of a 'non-language' degree subject.

An LLB English and French Law degree for example provides students with their English law qualification, but also with a university 'certificat' or 'licence' in law from a French University, all within the space of a four year degree. As the course leader at the Kent LLB put it: 'The opportunities of careers which span both countries are ever more widely available. Many of the larger firms of UK solicitors have branches on the continent... They appreciate that the graduates will be bilingual, will have knowledge of a second legal system, and - importantly- will have demonstrated their openness towards other cultures and peoples and their capacity to cope with, and enjoy, different life experiences' (Millns, 2001, 72).

In Engineering, a student can take the opportunity of spending a year in a foreign country, getting to see how French or German universities teach the subject of Engineering. One recent graduate of a Mechanical Engineering with French degree, enthused about what it had been like to study in the UK and then at the *Institut des Sciences Appliquées de Lyon*:

'The project I had to do (in the UK) eventually led to me sitting in the driver's cab of a TGV at 300km/h... The year abroad was fantastic. I was in a new environment, with new friends, new activities and new opportunities. I got myself involved in helping local school kids with their homework, in the departmental students' association, and in the campus rock'n'roll dancing club! ...and I passed almost all of the exams despite the challenge of different teaching and examining methods' (Lucas 2001:39).

In business studies and public administration, of course, there has been a longer tradition of valuing and integrating international experience. At postgraduate level, some institutions have even developed international *Euromasters* courses, where universities in five different countries can co-operate to produce a fully integrated course, with students moving between two or three of the separate sites during the course of the programme. 'Their employability', says the *Euromasters* course leader at Bath, 'is in no doubt. The Alumni Association reveals that *Euromasters* graduates occupy positions of significance ... the largest single contingent of graduates (around 35%) take up jobs in the private sector'(Howarth 2001:67).

Travelling and conjugating the differences.

The opportunities then for young people at university to study/work outside the UK have never been as great. There is exciting material which helps students to see that living/working abroad is a valuable experience in its own right, rather than simply a context for language learning. There are a variety of different ways in which languages can be studied at university, so that the possibility of a 'Euro-semester' can now come within the grasp of students from a wide range of disciplines. But there is still a lot more to do if international student mobility is to become the norm for UK students.

Nationally, we have to examine what the financial and institutional barriers may be which prevent young people at the moment from taking this route, and it is at least a hopeful sign that one of the Funding Councils is embarking on a major study of these mobility issues (HEFCE, 2002). For those of us who teach languages at university, school and college, the opportunity of living abroad as a credited part of a variety of degree courses is a 'positive plus' for languages that we should be publicising a good deal more. Just as the 'Gap Year' has been presented as a life-changing experience for the young, so the 'Euro-semester' should be seen by potential students as a life-changing experience, and one which will pay dividends for their CV. Even more importantly, student mobility must be seen as a vital means of understanding what being a citizen in the twenty-first century is really all about.

I recently carried out a survey with Members of the European Parliament, across 12 countries (Footitt, 2002), asking them how they understood European citizenship. The responses overwhelmingly described citizenship as an ability to travel between and across identities, an ability to identify difference and diversity, and face all this with enjoyment and confidence:

'We can travel across Europe ... We don't even need to show our identity card. If we compare this present situation to the dramas in the past when we crossed frontiers...'
(Portuguese MEP).

'What's interesting ... is conjugating ... all these differences ... a mosaic of cultures ...'
... (British MEP).

Travelling between identities, and conjugating the differences: not a bad summary of why we need more student mobility!

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