

Work and study abroad: a briefing from the University Council of Modern Languages

Work and study abroad, often called the year abroad, are a distinguishing feature of language degrees, and a highly desirable element of all UK degree programmes. David Willetts said in 2010: ‘Businesses say there aren’t enough students with experience of languages, different cultures and the wider world. British companies want to export abroad but one of the problems they raise with us is that British students don’t have foreign languages and an experience of living in another country. One of my aims is to try and encourage our undergraduates and postgraduates to study abroad and the best way to do that is to ensure it counts towards a British degree. There has to be time overseas doing a programme which a British university recognises and validates. It would enrich the outlook of British students and make them more employable’.

Globally, student mobility is expanding fast, with numbers up 75% since 2000, reaching 3.43 million in 2009 (UNESCO data). But too few UK graduates currently undertake work and study abroad. The following table shows how, for example, the number of participants in the EU’s ERASMUS student exchange scheme continue to expand, while UK participation, with the exception of 05/06-07/08 when existing work placements were incorporated into the ERASMUS scheme, has consistently fallen.

| | 00/01- 01/02 2 | 01/02- 02/03 3 | 02/03- 03/04 4 | 03/04- 04/05 5 | 04/05- 05/06 6 | 05/06- 06/07 7 | 06/07- 07/08 8 | 07/08- 08/09 9 |
|-------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Total | +4.52% | +6.79% | +8.61% | +6.23% | +7.21% | +3.18% | +2.12% | +3.38% |
| UK | -6.06% | -6.16% | -5.25% | -4.30% | -1.15% | +1.46% | +3.97% | -1.25% |

Across the ERASMUS programme, non-specialist language students represent 85% of participants. Only in the UK do specialists in other disciplines make up only 60% of ERASMUS participants: such is the lack of language skills among UK students generally, and their lack of recognition of the benefits of work and study abroad.

There is robust evidence that work and study abroad deliver not just improved language skills, but enhanced academic knowledge, cultural insights, intercultural and personal skills. Work and study abroad also enhance employability: skills gained abroad are a factor in landing first and subsequent jobs for over 70% of language graduates, a significant factor for over 30%, and the determining factor for about 10%. Skills gained during work and study abroad come in useful at work for nine out of ten language graduates.

Employers value highly the skills acquired during work and study abroad:

'We prefer the courses that include some time spent living abroad... we do prefer that they have had some in-country experience certainly before they come here.' [*Labour Market Intelligence for the Qualifications Strategy for Foreign Languages and Intercultural Skills*, London, CILT, 2008, p.69.]

These [intercultural] skills are considered important by all employers [...] there is always a need to work effectively with clients, customers and/or suppliers in different countries. [...] It is more often preferred that employees will already be able to demonstrate evidence of having acquired these skills previously, such as through having spent time living abroad as part of a university degree. [*Labour Market Intelligence for the Qualifications Strategy for Foreign Languages and Intercultural Skills*, London, CILT, 2008, p.97.]

Language skills are also important in an increasingly globalised workplace. Students should be striving to develop these skills which, alongside their academic qualifications, are not an optional extra. [*Stronger together: Businesses and universities in turbulent times*, CBI Education and Skills Higher Education Task Force report, 2009, p.6.]

Language skills and an ability to work in a multi-cultural environment are also valuable in an increasingly globalised workplace. Foreign language proficiency adds significantly to a candidate's portfolio of skills, not just in terms of conversational ability, but also general cultural awareness and sensitivity. [*Stronger together: Businesses and universities in turbulent times*, CBI Education and Skills Higher Education Task Force report, 2009, p.12.]

UCML is working to assemble this evidence into a single dossier. In the new tuition fee regime, it is feared that four-year courses will be less attractive because students will accumulate greater debt, both for fees and for other costs. This is a major threat both to specialist language degrees and to the participation of other students in work and study abroad. UCML wants the Government to protect and promote the benefits brought to the UK economy through graduates who have undertaken work and study abroad.

Specifically, UCML wants the Government to consider

- Continuation of the fee waiver funded by HEFCE beyond 2011-12
- Extension of the fee waiver beyond Europe and assistantships to embrace all destinations, notably China, Japan, India, the Middle East, Russia, Africa and Latin America
- An increase in the proportion of fees covered for students abroad by the fee waiver, so that fees during stays abroad do not rise as fast as general tuition fees
- A freeze on interest on student loans during work and study abroad.

The cost would be modest, given the small numbers involved. We do not have precise data on total numbers undertaking non-Erasmus work placements, or studying in countries such as China, Japan, Russia or Jordan, but since outgoing Erasmus students (all disciplines, all UK nations) numbered just 10,826 in 2008/09, and British Council assistants just 2,385 in 2009/10, numbers are unlikely to exceed about 15,000 in all.

Additionally, UCML is encouraging HEIs to continue to charge their own students reduced fees to encourage participation in work and study abroad programmes, and to support fully

the administration of placements and exchanges. UCML applauds the decision of the University of Essex to charge nil fees to students for the year they spend abroad, whether in Europe or the wider world, and hopes to see other universities follow suit.

The only funding solution which will not be a disincentive to students and/or to English universities is one which keeps the contribution of both to about the current level. Anything else could influence student choice away from four-year language degrees – something the country, in a globalising economy, simply cannot afford.

Note Current Fees for work and study abroad within a degree programme in England

| Semester 1 | Semester 2 | Proportion of Fee student pays to UK HEI | Proportion of Fee HEFCE pays to UK HEI |
|---|----------------------------|--|--|
| Erasmus study | Erasmus study | 0% | 100% Band C + 50% student fee |
| Erasmus work placement | Erasmus study | 0% | 50% Band C + 50% student fee |
| Erasmus work placement | Erasmus work placement | 0% | 50% Band C + 50% student fee |
| British Council assistantship in EU | | 0% | 50% Band C + 50% student fee |
| Non-Erasmus work placement | Non-Erasmus work placement | 50% or less | 50% Band C |
| Non-EU study | Non-EU study | 50% or less | 100% Band C |
| Any study or work placement | Non-Erasmus work placement | 50% or less | 50% Band C |
| Erasmus or non-EU study or work placement | Home HEI | 100% | 100% Band C |

Costs to Home University

Administering work and study abroad programmes requires a lot of academic and administrative time. Pastoral and site visits are needed while students are abroad, despite increased use of electronic communications (Facebook, dedicated websites, forums, email, skype, wikimaps...). Departments which arrange work placements for students incur substantial additional costs. Some Departments pay enrolment fees for their students in countries such as Jordan, Russia, Japan or China. Some Departments offer a vacation grant for students to take a summer course in addition to/in lieu of residence abroad, e.g. a double-language student spends a full year as an assistant in France and a summer in Germany.

For exchange programmes such as Erasmus, the Home University must also oversee teaching and supervision of incoming students.

HEFCE funding goes to the University as part of its block grant; reimbursement of student fees is retrospective; in neither case does money automatically transfer to the department responsible for study abroad.

Student income while abroad

Students on Erasmus study or work placements receive a small monthly grant (€200-400). English language assistants receive €700-€1000 a month in Europe (and may also get the Erasmus grant), \$1700 in Canada, 3000-4000RMB in China. Work placements are often unpaid, but may include accommodation and subsistence. Studying abroad entitles students to higher rate student loan, but work placements, even unpaid, to lower than standard rate loan. Lower-income students may apply for Local Authority support for travel and insurance.