

# Mobility with quality: spreading best practice in student residence abroad [Table of contents](#) [en français](#)

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Of the world's eighty-plus million students, well over one million spend part of their university degree in a foreign country every year. Study abroad is a very old tradition: the Japanese have been studying abroad for nearly two millennia. In Europe, which claims to have invented the university eight hundred years ago, it was the norm for centuries that scholars, using Latin as a lingua franca, should learn and teach in several countries. ERASMUS is not only an acronymic source of funding for mobility programmes, but also a tribute to a native of Rotterdam whose academic life encompassed Paris and Basel, Cambridge and Turin.

In the modern era, the EU has led the way, through the Joint Study Programmes (1976), ERASMUS (1987) and SOCRATES (1995), encouraging student mobility as a route to foreign language proficiency, intercultural competence, and genuine mobility between member states. Progress has been dramatic: in 1987, 300 universities exchanged 3,000 students; in 1997, 1,500 universities exchanged 80,000 students. Half a million students have now benefited from the programme, and exchanges have also become more diversified geographically. Thanks to a decade of painstaking work by the team in Kassel, the operation of the programmes has been thoroughly researched.

Whilst in Europe student mobility is generally viewed as a reciprocal activity, North America adopts a different perspective. Incoming students are a source of revenue, they have to speak English, and their numbers support a huge testing industry. Typical Americans are less international in orientation: 95% of them do not possess a passport, foreign languages are little studied, and university exchanges often involve no foreign language competence. A typical study abroad program sees a group transplanted to foreign soil, but within the academic and pastoral structures of the US institution, whereas the European model concentrates on placing individual students in a totally foreign context, and often for a longer period.

Not that Europeans themselves necessarily concur on what student residence abroad means. The difficulties encountered by the European Credit Transfer System - and arguably the necessity of creating it - testify to the resistance in some individual institutions or national systems to recognising the value of study undertaken elsewhere. Even the widely used terms - *séjour à l'étranger*, *Auslandsaufenthalt*, residence abroad - are not directly equivalent, with the first two emphasising the brief, temporary nature of the experience while the English phrase stresses rather the duration and social integration of living in another country.

The present article describes a particular approach with its origins in the UK, but with relevance to current developments across the whole of Europe and beyond. Quality assurance, a central concern of industry and commerce for decades, is becoming a key issue in the universities of every country, in keeping with an agenda dictated by the globalisation of the economy. To maintain international competitiveness, a country needs both a highly educated workforce with up to half of an age cohort holding a university degree, and tight controls on public spending to encourage entrepreneurship and commercial dynamism. More students, less resources. In Anglo-Saxon countries - and the UK has learnt much from North America and Australia - the result has been, for individual students, a drastic reduction in direct and indirect financial support in the form of grants and subsidised fees, and, for universities, severe cuts in funding accompanying a simultaneous expansion in numbers.

The UK has always operated a double selection: candidates choose which universities to apply to, and the universities choose which applicants to admit. But once supply exceeds demand - as is currently the case in many subjects including modern languages - the balance of power changes. A university delivering unpopular courses loses students and therefore income, and in a free-market system such

as the British one, this means departments closed and jobs lost. Quality is a matter of self-preservation.

At the same time, of course, conscientious university teachers have always been concerned to provide good teaching, and they are nowadays supported by the recognition of a long-standing imbalance. For too long, university staff had rights, but students had responsibilities; increasingly, it is now recognised that each group has both.

In some countries, for example, it was until recently not difficult to find a senior Professor with a mediocre teaching record, little or no recent research publications, but a comfortable salary and a job for life. In others, many politicians have been drawn from academia, since academics had a guaranteed salary, job security and time on their hands. These abuses are being addressed.

Quality in higher education, then, is both externally imposed and internally motivated, as committed teachers seek to make the student learning experience - and not staff research specialisms or a fixed canon of knowledge - the central focus of university teaching. Two examples of current concerns among linguists are the topic of Quality Assurance chosen for Chris Candlin's plenary to the second ELC conference at Jyväskylä in 1999, and the theme adopted for the 19th Fremdsprachendidaktikerkongress in Dresden in 2001: *Fremdsprachen auf dem Prüfstand. Innovation - Qualität - Evaluation*.

Even if the measures now being adopted in France, Germany, Italy and elsewhere to guarantee quality course provision do not follow the British model, they may well learn from the UK experience, both in diagnosis and dissemination, and in definition of learning outcomes. What follows describes one way of defining and promoting best practice in any aspect of university teaching, and then describes its application to student residence abroad.

The Thatcher government's policy of openness and accountability for all public sector institutions led to the Quality Assessment (QA) of every UK university department. In 1995/96, teams of trained language academics conducted QAs of every language department, evaluating the student learning experience through observation, documentation and discussion, and awarding a grade from one (unacceptable) to four (excellent) on each of six "Aspects of Provision": Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation; Teaching, Learning and Assessment; Student Progression and Achievement; Student Support and Guidance; Learning Resources; Quality Assurance and Enhancement. The process was imperfect, but the published reports, by institution and by subject, are an invaluable source of objective information, highlighting both good practice and causes for concern.

The Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) seeks to build on the Quality Assessment process. In 1997, after two rounds of open competition, ten projects in modern languages were allocated three-year government funding totalling over two million pounds. The ten projects have addressed five themes: Residence Abroad, Independent Learning, Staff Development, Assessment and Transferable Skills. Through an intensive programme of surveys, workshops, websites, newsletters, conferences and institutional visits, the projects have been seeking to identify, describe, disseminate and promote best practice in their respective domains. All the stake-holders - government, parents, students, employers and institutions themselves - now have benchmarks against which the procedures and performance of any individual institution can be measured.

The Quality Assessments highlighted one issue above all as needing serious attention: student residence abroad. In the UK, spending one year of a degree programme abroad is compulsory for most language students, and a popular option for students in many other disciplines. The QA process identified some good practice in this distinctive and valuable experience, but a longer list of problem areas. In taking up this challenge, the Residence Abroad Project, a consortium which I have co-ordinated from Portsmouth University, has adopted a range of strategies. Our aim was defined from the start as identifying, evaluating and promoting good practices with regard to every aspect of student residence abroad.

The first essential is networking: the three FDTL residence abroad projects, sharing the banner RESIDENCE ABROAD MATTERS, together represented about twenty universities, and we have been working closely together, with the help of colleagues across the sector, to develop new approaches and models of good practice. And not just for language specialists: most UK university language students are not in modern language departments, but in Business or European Studies, Engineering, Law or another specialist discipline.

To **identify** examples of good practice, we

- drew on the expertise of consortium members
- established a searchable database of the 1995/96 HEFCE QA reports
- collected a library of materials used in different universities to prepare and advise students
- conducted a national survey of current practice in 1998, and turned it into a searchable, updatable online database
- conducted four regional Residence Abroad Matters workshops in 1998 to establish what the issues were, and four more in 2000 to discuss conclusions
- conducted continuing dialogue with colleagues via online discussion, website feedback, conference presentations and publications
- analysed existing research findings
- conducted a series of institutional visits in 1999/2000.

Many of these activities also contributed to evaluation and dissemination, but additionally, we

- surveyed the opinions of over 3000 students before, during and after residence abroad, using questionnaires, proficiency tests, interviews, focus groups, learner diaries, and on-line feedback
- adopted a corporate identity used in newsletters, posters, leaflets, etc.
- issued regular newsletters
- maintained regular contact with universities and subject associations.

However, the key tool in our work has been, and continues to be, the RAPPORT (Residence Abroad Project at Portsmouth) website at <http://www.hum.port.ac.uk/slas/rappport>. Launched in February 1998, and with over 4700 hits in the past two years, the website, which has been made fully accessible to users with a range of visual impairments, targets three different audiences - students, staff, and "others" (parents, employers, etc., with an interest in residence abroad). Students have, as well as practical advice on a range of subjects, a huge number of links including websites for European universities and their most useful pages. We foreground student-sourced data because we know that advice from students has much more credibility than our own handbooks. One innovation is the electronic postcard: students can pass tips about a particular destination online to others about to go there. Staff meanwhile can get practical advice on all issues, with examples in the form of sample lesson plans and materials. There is a searchable research bibliography, and a description of the "virtual visit" - web-based videoconferencing used in an evaluation of how far electronic links can enhance staff-staff, staff-student and student-student contacts. We particularly hope that it will help to bridge the "generation gap": at present, those-who-are-about-to-go often get to talk to those-who-have-just-returned, but neither speaks to those-who-are-actually-there.

### **Quality assurance and residence abroad**

There is no single model of student residence abroad which is suitable for every institution. Many alternative solutions have equal validity. However, to meet quality standards, certain issues must be seen to have been addressed, including outcomes, preparation, support and monitoring, curriculum integration, assessment and accreditation, and staff development. The key to our staff advice, and indeed to quality provision in residence abroad, lies in the clear definition of objectives. We have developed a comprehensive taxonomy, six categories into which, we believe, all learning objectives or outcomes of student residence abroad can be fitted. In alphabetical order, they are:

- academic

- cultural
- intercultural
- linguistic
- personal
- professional.

Academic learning objectives typically include

- a course at an L2land university (whether with a prescribed curriculum, a free choice, or - more frequently - a core + options timetable subject to approval by the home institution)
- a dissertation or project, to be handed in at the end of the residence abroad, or else to be researched during residence abroad and written up back in the home institution; such projects, if they have a local focus, can serve the additional purpose of obliging students to make personal contact with the host community, and thus facilitate their insertion into local society
- preparation for final year, e.g. reading set texts.

Cultural objectives may often overlap with academic objectives, particularly if the course has an "area studies" focus. They embrace the enhanced insight into institutions and the way of life in L2land which most students achieve through residence abroad.

Perhaps most important is the acquisition of intercultural competence. The intercultural objectives of residence abroad have received a good deal of theoretical and research attention in recent years, partly through the work of the Council of Europe, the series of Cross-Cultural Capability conferences held at Leeds Metropolitan University, and the recently formed International Association for Language and Intercultural Communication (IALIC). Intercultural competence is an amalgam of knowledge, attitudes, skills, beliefs and behaviours. For this reason, and because it involves personal and social identity, the acquisition of intercultural competence has both cognitive and affective components. Living and studying abroad should help students appreciate the relativity of all behavioural conventions - including their own - and how every culture constructs its values through social interaction. Ideally, students will acquire the ethnographic skills which let them observe without misunderstanding, the inter-personal skills which let them respect and adapt to new ways without abandoning their own, and the open-minded objectivity which stops them judging everything against parochial norms. There is also a work-related aspect to intercultural competence: the ability to function in new linguistic/cultural environments is a skill highly prized by international employers, many of whom will not consider graduates without experience of living and working outside their native land.

The linguistic objectives of residence abroad are too often taken for granted. In many cases, of course there are none: students going to the USA, or to a Scandinavian country where all teaching is in English, will not expect any new language skills to be formally assessed. But even where L2 acquisition is the principal reason for including residence abroad in a degree programme, there is research evidence that linguistic progress is very uneven in such circumstances.

- Overall proficiency improves faster through L2land residence than through L2 tuition in L1land, but
- Initially less proficient students make faster progress
- Students have false expectations, believing they will integrate easily and their L2 proficiency will increase automatically
- Students who rely on formal language classes do less well than those who are less assiduous but socialise a lot with L2landers
- Interactive contact benefits lower-level learners more than advanced-level learners; receptive contact (TV, radio, books, newspapers, films) the opposite
- In order of average benefit, work placements are preferred to assistantships, with university study least beneficial
- Preparatory training can help by developing students' learning strategies, underlining the need to seek out interactive contact with L2landers.

Certain language skills improve more than others:

- little or no morpho-syntactic gain
- big vocabulary gains
- little gain in reading, still less in writing
- big gains in oral-aural skills
- big gains in fluency - speed, self- correction, articulation rate, phonation/time ratio, phonology, communication strategies, filled or reduced pauses
- increased sociolinguistic skills.

Overall, students tend to become more fluent and more acceptable to native speakers, but do not always improve their grammatical competence. Progress is linked to attitudes, strategies and behaviour. Objectives should therefore ideally be couched in terms of discrete competences - speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, sociolinguistic (register), fluency - and of language learning strategies. It may well be necessary to arrange additional work if written and reading skills are to be significantly enhanced.

Personal objectives include independence and self-reliance, increased confidence, and enhanced self-awareness. They are the gains which every residence abroad co-ordinator or tutor has seen innumerable times. They confirm residence abroad as a learning experience in the deepest sense, yet they are as yet rarely made explicit. Professional objectives include all work-related skills acquired through residence abroad. As well as narrow skills appropriate to the future profession, they embrace generic transferable skills such as working independently and in teams, setting and meeting objectives, time management, problem solving, imagination and creativity. Actual work experience and intercultural competence are important outcomes, as are career management skills ranging from recording evidence of one's own skills to researching aspects of work conventions in L2land.

Defining the outcomes for a particular course inevitably determines the other features - preparation (which must of course also embrace practical preparation), support and monitoring, debriefing and follow-up, and assessment - and their integration into the curriculum. Preparation, for instance, may be matched to the six headings, with academic preparation in the form of research methods, study of L2land universities, cultural preparation in studying L2land institutions and behavioural conventions, etc. Peer contact, involving departers, students abroad, returners and L2landers (especially incoming exchange students), should be a central part of preparation, since students take in more from peers than from academics.

Debriefing too can cover all the outcomes or objectives, which may have been defined in a learning contract and traced through a learner diary while abroad. Debriefing may well contribute to the essential peer contact through presentations, meetings or joint realisations (booklets, videos) by returners. Debriefing validates the students' experience by confirming the importance which staff at the home institution attaches to it, helps advance the process of reflection and making sense of experience which completes the learning through residence abroad, helps provide strategies for students to consolidate and retain the linguistic and professional gains made, can contribute to assessment (especially, in conjunction with a diary), of personal gains which are hard to access otherwise, and informs future institutional practice by providing feedback on what aspects of preparation and support need modification.

Good practice suggests that the achievement of each specified outcome or objective should be assessed, where this can be done equitably and practically. The assessments, their purpose, their form, and the criteria to be used must all be clear to students. Given the diversity of student experience during residence abroad - in a university or work placement, in one country or two, over differing periods of time - and given the different individual objectives which may be embodied in a learning contract, it makes sense to match the assessment to the individual, and to draw on as many sources of information as possible to increase the validity and reliability of the assessment. For example, contributory marks might be awarded on the basis of an oral exam, a written project, an employer's report, ECTS grades from the host university, the learner diary, the debriefing, etc. The weighting given to the six different categories might vary according to the particular form of residence abroad, so that all students earn 10% for each of cultural, intercultural and personal objectives, and

20% for linguistic gains, but the allocation is 40%/10% for academic/professional outcomes for an ERASMUS student, and the opposite for a student on work placement.

As far as staff development is concerned, we have adopted a novel solution which feedback suggests is highly effective both in helping colleagues grasp the immensely complex issues involved, and bringing about actual change in institutional practice. The Residence Abroad Project offers, within an MA in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, an accredited course unit on Supporting Residence Abroad, delivered entirely online, using the virtual educational environment WebCT. We already have successful course completions in the UK and Ireland, and will this year take on university staff in France and elsewhere, in a quest to ensure that students, wherever they are in Europe, can make the most of residence abroad.

Our most recent - and as yet unpublished - research underlines the importance of student residence abroad. In a survey of over 700 graduates, two-thirds said residence abroad helped them get their first job, an even higher proportion said it helped them in subsequent job moves, and over 96% said that residence abroad is a worthwhile investment!

Projects such as ours offer a model of how universities can share best practice and work together to improve the education they offer. It is a model which could usefully contribute to both quality and mobility throughout Europe.