

Residence Abroad

Author: **Jim Coleman**
© Prof Jim Coleman

Abstract

Residence or study abroad can be the most rewarding element of a degree programme, bringing enhanced maturity, cultural insights and valuable transferable skills as well as improved language proficiency. This article traces the development of student residence abroad, summarises research findings, describes how best to implement a programme, and points to the many resources available to help staff and students involved in residence abroad.

Introduction

Residence abroad - spending part of one's degree at a foreign university or on an overseas work placement - is usually undertaken to improve foreign language proficiency. But it can bring other academic, personal and employability benefits. Best practice dictates, firstly, that the learning objectives should be clearly defined for - and with - each student; and secondly, that those objectives should underpin the preparation for residence abroad, its curriculum integration, the support, monitoring and academic work while abroad, the debriefing, follow-up and assessment on return, and related staff development.

Definitions

The term 'Residence Abroad' reflects the British practice of including within a Modern Languages or other degree an extended period of residence in a country whose language one wishes to learn. The phrase 'Study Abroad', widely used in the research literature, reflects North American practice, whereby students go abroad in groups, often accompanied by home-institution Faculty (staff), and follow formal study - including language study - in the target language (TL) country. Other labels (*séjour à l'étranger* , *Auslandsaufenthalt*) suggest a short and provisional immersion, whereas UK students typically have to deal with living for an extended period in circumstances akin to those of local native speakers.

Historical development

For most of the twentieth century, Modern Language degrees attracted an intellectual élite with a good command of the written TL, honed to provide an appreciation of great literary works in the original tongue. Practical, productive use of the TL was a by-product, but the

intuition that surviving alone in the TL community would develop both oral proficiency and a first-hand insight into the target culture led to the development of assistantship programmes, on an exchange basis which also brought native speakers to British schools and universities. Until the 1960s, the placement abroad was only as a language assistant (and even this was discouraged at Oxbridge as diluting the intellectual content of the degree for merely practical gains). However, in the last third of the century, work and study placements also became available. The 'year abroad' had become a standard feature of UK language degrees long before EU programmes were devised to attract other European countries, often with less structured degree programmes, to promote the mobility of students.

Thanks to the EU's successive Joint Study Programme (1976), ERASMUS (1987) and SOCRATES (1995, renewed 2000-2006), over a million European students have now spent part of their degree in one of over 30 participating countries (see [Socrates - Erasmus programme website](#)). Regular surveys by the University of Kassel ([Teichler 1997, 2002](#)) have provided insights into and evaluation of what has become the most widespread framework for residence abroad among students of Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies.

A 1994 survey of residence abroad in the UK ([Coleman 1996: 60-63, 87-89, 190-193](#)) shows the pattern at the height of Residence Abroad activity, before overall language student numbers dropped, fear of additional debt reduced the proportion going abroad, and skewed Government funding regulations nudged students towards SOCRATES-ERASMUS exchanges. A large majority of students had already visited the target country, often several times. More than half spent their year abroad on student exchanges, with up to a quarter going as assistants (especially from old universities) and most of the remainder on other work placements.

Research findings

Most research has focused on linguistic gains (for a review, see [Coleman 1997](#)). Generalisability of findings is reduced by the variety of Residence Abroad contexts, and while linguistic progress is on average faster than under home university tuition, there is considerable individual variation. Initially less proficient students make faster progress, and interacting intensively with native-speakers is more productive than simply attending classes: this may be why work placements appear more beneficial than university exchanges ([Coleman 1996](#)), and why learner strategy training is worthwhile ([Cohen 1998](#)). Progress is most notable in fluency ([Freed 1995](#)), oral-aural and sociolinguistic skills and in vocabulary, and less marked in reading, writing and grammar - although recent studies do show the importance of immersion for acquiring intuitive control of complex grammatical features. The work of Byram and Zarate within the Council of Europe has highlighted the need to acquire intercultural communicative competence.

As yet unpublished findings (Coleman, in preparation) confirm the employment value of the skills acquired through residence abroad, both in obtaining first and subsequent jobs and in daily work (cf. [Jahr & Teichler 2002](#)). Virtually all 1117 respondents felt the investment in residence abroad was worthwhile. Indeed, for most language graduates - and especially recent graduates - the experiential learning during a year abroad is more highly valued than the cognitive, content learning of three years in the UK university.

Good practices

The flawed but instructive Quality Assessment process of 1995/96 found that residence abroad was the area of UK university language provision which raised more problems than any other. Subsequently, three projects supported by the Fund for the Development of Learning and Teaching from 1997 to 2001 sought to identify, evaluate and promote best practices. They were Learning and Residence Abroad (LARA), Lancaster's Interculture Project and the Residence Abroad Project (coordinated from Portsmouth University, hence the acronym RAPPORT).

RAPPORT developed an alphabetical taxonomy of learning objectives, applicable to residence abroad of any duration, in any country, in any subject discipline, and described in full in [Coleman & Parker 2001](#) (137-141):

Academic Objectives

- a course at a foreign university, which may have a defined curriculum, core plus options or a free choice
- dissertation, project and/or language work for the home institution
- preparation for final year including reading and researching

Cultural Objectives

- insight into institutions, way of life
- can overlap with academic outcomes

Intercultural Objectives

- amalgam of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, skills, behaviours
- awareness of relativity of cultures - including one's own
- recognition that culture is a social construct
- cognitive *and* affective learning
- ethnographic skills allowing observation without misunderstanding, objectivity free of ethnocentrism
- inter-personal skills allowing adaptation to multiple cultural milieux, respecting local values without abandoning one's own
- work-related: ability to function in new linguistic/cultural environment

Linguistic Objectives

- speaking
- listening
- reading
- writing
- grammar
- vocabulary
- sociolinguistic (register)
- fluency
- language learning strategies

Personal Objectives

- independence and self-reliance
- confidence
- self-awareness

Professional Objectives

- transferable skills
- work experience
- intercultural competence
- awareness of L2 and work conventions.

Once these objectives or outcomes have been established, they underpin all decisions relating to preparation, curriculum integration, support, monitoring and academic work while abroad, debriefing and follow-up on return, assessment and accreditation, and related staff development.

Depending on the objectives, preparation may focus on any or all of familiarisation with target-culture institutions and education systems, research methods, practical advice, CVs and letters of application, language learning strategies, EFL teaching, briefings on assessment, etc. Since residence abroad represents highly autonomous learning, a self-directed or experiential approach can be more appropriate than traditional pedagogy, especially since affective as well as cognitive learning is involved, for example in laying the groundwork for intercultural learning (see also the Good Practice Guide article [Intercultural issues in foreign language learning and ethnographic approaches to study abroad](#)). Most institutions hold a series of meetings from year 1 or the start of year 2 (careers advice, choice of assistantship, work placement of studentship) to the end of year 2 just months from departure (agreeing personal objectives, learning contract, check that work contract and insurance policy are in place). Regrettably, most also find that it is not only desirable to integrate the preparation with normal coursework, but also essential to make attendance compulsory: students who would not dream of undertaking competitive sports or even going clubbing without intensive preparation need convincing that residence abroad works better if they are ready for it. The credibility of preparation is enhanced if a major role is played by students still abroad or recently returned, by graduates, and by exchange students.

Though budgets enabling staff to visit students have shrunk, in these days of email, instant messaging and webcams, it is inexcusable not to maintain contact with students abroad. The year abroad is all about students becoming independent' is an unacceptable excuse for neglecting them, especially now that fees are paid to the home university while students are away.

Equitable, valid, practical assessment of progress towards the six categories of objective is complex but essential. One widespread practice is for assessment to be based on personal objectives set by agreement before departure, embedded in a learning contract, tracked in regularly-submitted learner diaries while abroad, and evaluated through a project report and oral debriefing on return. The learning contract will determine different percentages for academic, linguistic or professional outcomes depending on whether the student has been on

an exchange or a placement. Debriefing, whether or not part of assessment, is vital to allow returners to contribute to the preparation of departers, to validate the students' experience by showing the importance the home university attaches to it, to help them begin the process of reflection and making sense of the experience they have lived, to provide them with strategies for maintaining the linguistic and other gains made, and to enhance institutional arrangements for future cohorts.

Two approaches to staff development are described in [Coleman & Parker \(2001\)](#). Two final observations are appropriate. Firstly, in order to despatch its duty of care, the home institution must always take all reasonable steps to ensure the security of students abroad (including checking that they have adequate insurance). Secondly, that parents, in their role as investors, increasingly seek to involve themselves in residence abroad issues: it is worth remembering that the Data Protection Act prohibits you from discussing things with them, and that your best plan is to encourage them to support their offspring but to let them fight their own battles.

Bibliography

Cohen, A (1998) *Strategies in learning and using a second language* . Harlow, Essex: Longman.

Coleman, J. A. (1996) *Studying Languages: a survey of British and European students. The proficiency, background, attitudes and motivations of students of foreign languages in the United Kingdom and Europe* , London, Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, 1996.

Coleman, J. A. (1997) Residence abroad within language study, *Language Teaching* , 30, 1:1-20.

Coleman, J.A. & Parker, L. Preparing for residence abroad: staff development implications, in J. Klapper (ed.) *Teaching languages in Higher Education. Issues in Training and Continuing Professional Development* , (London, CILT, 2001, pp.134-162).

Freed, B. (1995) What makes us think that students who study abroad become fluent? In B. Freed (ed.) *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context* . Amsterdam: John Benjamins: 123-148.

Jahr & Teichler (2002) Employment and work of former mobile students, in U. Teichler (ed.) *The ERASMUS Experience. Major findings of the ERASMUS evaluation research* . Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Community: 117-136.

Teichler, U. (1997) *The ERASMUS Experience. Major findings of the ERASMUS evaluation research* . (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Community).

Teichler, U. (ed.) (2002) *ERASMUS in the SOCRATES Programme. Findings of an Evaluation Study*. (Bonn: Lemmens).

Related links

[Language Assistants](#)

www.languageassistant.co.uk

The British Council's Language Assistants website is for all assistants and anyone going abroad; the linked [English Language Assistants Abroad](#) website even contains materials and lesson plans.

FDTL Projects

The three FDTL Projects, although completed in 2001, still provide a wealth of information on good practices in support of student residence abroad:

[The Interculture Project](#)

www.lancs.ac.uk/users/interculture

[Learning and Residence Abroad](#)

www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/lara

[The Residence Abroad Project](#)

www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/materialsbank.aspx?resourceid=626

The website has partly moved to the Subject Centre but [Rapport \(Residence Abroad @ Portsmouth\)](#) is also still live (though not maintained and with some broken links).

Generally relevant and useful

[UNESCO \(United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization\) Studying Abroad](#)

www.unesco.org/education/studyingabroad

A rich and helpful site.

[UKCOSA \(The UK Council for International Education\)](#)

www.ukcosa.org.uk

Primarily designed for students wishing to study in the UK.

[StudyAbroad.com](#)

www.studyabroad.com

A commercial, US-based but global operation.

Advice on safe travel and a lot more:

[The Worldwise Directory](#)

<http://w01-0943.web.dircon.net/worldwise>

Produced by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, the leading authority on personal safety.

[Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#)

www.fco.gov.uk

[Lonely Planet](#)

www.lonelyplanet.com

Travel guides

[Rough Guides](#)

<http://travel.roughguides.com>

Travel guides

Education systems

[HERO \(Higher Education and Research Opportunities in the United Kingdom\)](#)

www.hero.ac.uk/about_hero/index.cfm

The portal for information on the UK HE system.

[Eurydice: The information network on education in Europe](#)

www.eurydice.org

Education systems in Europe, complemented by:

[INCA: International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks Internet Archive](#)

www.inca.org.uk

Wider country coverage but only up to the end of secondary.

[CILT, the National Centre for Languages](#)

www.cilt.org.uk

As ever, much relevant information.