Review of the assessment of the year abroad in the modern language degrees at Bath:

Assessment for experiential and autonomous learning based on the continuity model

Research Report

By Dr Gabriela Meier

University of Bath

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Contact:

University of Bath

Department of Education

BAY2 7AY

g.s.meier@bath.ac.uk

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List of content

LIST OF TABLES

List of Figures

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In the constructive and supportive fashion of the year-abroad conference, this report is made available to the general public. I hope this report and the conference website will be of use first of all for ESML, but also for colleagues elsewhere.

Executive summary and recommendations

This report summarises a study conducted to review the assessment procedures of the year abroad (YA), which is a compulsory part of a degree in the department of European Studies and Modern Languages (ESML) at the University of Bath (UoB). The study had the aim of examining the scope for improvements of this notoriously difficult area of assessment, and this report makes recommendations as to how the YA assessment procedure at Bath could be improved. It contains discussion and justifications for these recommendations based on interviews with staff and students at Bath and at other UK universities, as well as on an international conference organised for this purpose.

Findings

Based on the data collected, I found that students feel language gains are the most important outcome of their YA. Cultural and intercultural learning and social interaction with the local population has also been identified as important student and teacher expectations. Four areas have been identified as potentially problematic in terms of YA assessment.

- Social interaction with local people
- Managing expectations
- Embedding the year abroad in the degree programme
- Institutional support

Current and potential assessment instruments have been reviewed and I recommend concrete ways of using them at Bath to address the above domains. For this I created a new YA assessment approach: the Assessment for experiential and autonomous learning based on the continuity model.

'Assessment for learning' (Black and Wiliam 1998; Nuffield Reform Group 1999; Black, Harrison et al. 2002; Black, Harrison et al. 2003) describes how students can be supported through constructive feedback (formative) and graded (summative) assessment of work inside the classroom. Because this approach has been formulated for the use in classrooms, it was complemented with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb and Fry 1975) and autonomous learning perspectives (Broady and Kenning 1996; Benson 1997) to account for the independent learning experience abroad. The YA includes diverse options and outcomes are influenced by a multitude of factors. Thus, I tried to concentrate on factors that could provide continuity and a stable framework of reference that could support students during their diverse learning experiences abroad, and indeed during their entire degree. Based on this survey and on these theories I make 12 recommendations.

1) Reflective journal

The Bath log that is comprised in the current YA handbook is going in the right direction (see section 2). It asks students to formulate their own objectives. However, most students did not use the log. While the log encourages setting targets and charting achievements, it does not explicitly include notions of strategies and reflection. These may be implicitly contained, however, strategies are important, and especially weaker students should reflect on and review strategies. This leads me to propose an online self-reflective journal that facilitates experiential and autonomous learning.

Recommendation 1: Self-reflective journal

A self-reflective journal charting goals, strategies, reflection and modification should be made an integral part of the degree programme in all years.

In order to self-assess language skills, I propose that students base this on the descriptors formulated in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) that forms part of the European Language Portfolio, and its components, the Europass document. These are 'I can' statements that allow students to self-evaluate different languages skills such as speaking, writing, listening and reading.

Recommendation 2: Language benchmarks

Define benchmarks for language learning. Such benchmarks should be determined for every year, and students should self-evaluate their four competencies (reading, listening, speaking, writing) against these benchmarks as part of their initial self-evaluation.

2) Academic skills training

Objectives and training of the YA have to be aligned. First students need to know what they are supposed to learn and achieve and second they have to have the skills required to achieve those aims. Members of staff from various universities, including Bath, were of the opinion that some students were not prepared well enough to produce an academic assignment during their YA. Thus, I propose that students need academic training, so they are adequately prepared to face the challenges.

Recommendation 3: Essay based on interview with incoming student

Students should write an essay in year 2. Namely students should learn how to conduct research and analysis and how to write an academic essay in year 2, so they are prepared when they have to either write essay as part of their Erasmus courses, or if they have to embark on their independent study project. Another essay should be set in year 4 to allow for continuity and progress in academic work.

3) Preparatory sessions

Students need careful preparation, again so they are prepared in practical, emotional, academic and professional terms. Much information at Bath is imparted in a one-day YA preparation day, there appears to be too much information in one day for a student to take in and understand, thus I propose several smaller sessions with specific foci for which students have to prepare questions, and be more engaged.

Recommendation 4: Student-centred preparatory sessions

Make the information sessions student-centred and interactive and encourage students to see it as a resource that includes a forum for students to discuss expectations.

4) Oral presentation and debriefing

Debriefing has been identified as an important feature of the year abroad, since to a certain extent this activity can drive home what students have learnt. Students tend not to be aware of what they have learnt unless it is assessed. From this follows that students need assessment to learn what they learnt. Thus I propose that besides the self-reflective journal, students should summarise what they have learnt in an oral presentation.

Recommendation 5: Debriefing in oral session

Students should be given the opportunity to present aspects of their year abroad during the first few sessions of the oral classes in year 4. These presentations should be prepared as a group to allow peer-debriefing in a small group, before they present it in the larger group.

5) Written assignments

Written assignments play the role of summative assessment for which a grade is given. This continues to play an important part of the accountability of university assessment. However, I propose to bring the objectives in line with the training or vice versa.

Recommendation 6: Written work based on interview(s)

Based on their language self-assessment, students should decide whether they write 1x5000 or 2x2500 words, and choose a work- or non-work-based piece of work, based on at least one interview in the host country. All pieces should be academic and analytical. Students should submit a section plan online at agreed dates while they are away and receive feedback on this within a certain time. The final piece will be submitted at the end of the semester 1 and or 2.

Students should be given the opportunity to better prepare for their YA assignment. Thus I propose a checklist that leads to a proposal.

Recommendation 7: Write proposal for written YA assignment

Students should write one or two proposals based on a checklist in preparation of the written pieces they are planning to write abroad.

6) Language and culture student community

I propose to establish a YA abroad community that engages learners in supporting each other, and including incoming students from other Erasmus partner institutions. This support group would be available before, during and after the year abroad and would enable an exchange between students, teaching them to evaluate each others work and provide constructive feedback. The name should perhaps reflect that the community is not just for the year abroad but to support all learning inside and outside the classroom, thus I suggest to name it: Language and culture student community.

Recommendation 8: Establish a student support community

Bring incoming and outgoing students at Bath together to help and support each other in their preparation, coping and reflection of their learning outside the classroom in Bath and abroad.

7) Wiki-map

It is generally agreed that previous YA students are experts on the practical side of the YA. Any handbook or final reports on paper will be out-of-date as soon as they are printed. Therefore, I propose to establish a wiki-map with information that is up-dated continuously by students of all years. This activity would replace final year reports and blogs, and organise the information in a searchable database.

Recommendation 9: International wiki-map

Outgoing and incoming students jointly maintain wiki-maps with practical information on Bath and YA destinations. This allows an insider and an outsider view on each destination and may harbour potential for intercultural learning, and enabling awareness of learning outside the classroom.

8) e-platform

For students to be able to access and record course-related information, as well as their self-reflective journals and other documents, I propose to expand the functions of the current Moodle e-platform. In order to help students remember submission dates, and to relieve staff from having to send individual emails, this should be equipped with an automatic reminder function.

Recommendation 10: Expand e-platform

Establish an e-platform which students start to use at the beginning of their degree course. Indeed, there could be an introduction to this tool during induction week. This e-platform (moodle/wiki) would support self-reflection, dead-line monitoring, document upload, recording and review facility, practical help, email reminder function.

9) Accreditation

Based on university-wide regulations at Bath, the YA accounts for 8%, which is relatively low. This appears to be taken as a sign by some students that they can relax a bit. In order to ensure continuous motivation, I propose that the proportion accredited to the YA should reflect the importance assigned to the YA. If this is not feasible other ways should be found to increase the (apparent) importance of the year abroad

Recommendation 11: Increase importance of the YA

I recommend that more importance is allocated to the YA, either through increasing the proportion the YA accounts in view of the overall degree, or my making it modular, so that the final YA abroad mark incorporates several pieces of work, similar to other years of the degree.

10) Year abroad administration

It was found that contact between students, supervisors and personal tutors was not always judged as adequate, while the placement officer was appreciated by all. Thus, I propose that one person or a dedicated team should be a one-stop call point for YA issues, to build a continuous contact base. This means that students who do experiences in two different cries can carry on speaking to the same person before, during and after the YA. This person could also support administration, preparation and debriefing of the YA.

Recommendation 12: Have one YA officer (team) for all students

I recommend to have dedicated persons or a team who are the first port of call for all students in relation to their year abroad. This role would include preparation and debriefing, as well as support for autonomous and experiential learning throughout the degree.

Bringing it all together

The proposed model for Bath keeps elements from the previous assessment in a modified way. These are the YA preparation day and the written assignment. The current progress reports and log and the final year report, would be replaced by a self- and peer-reflected learning journal, and wiki-map that clearly separates reflection and practical information,

which is not so clear with current instruments. Thus the proposed model consists of two parts a formative and a summative part, both counting towards the YA mark. The new general YA officer would do an induction to the e-platform and support students in using it, starting in their first year. There are two ways of bringing the above steps together (Table 1):

- based on the current Bath practice, a YA mark is given for the performance during the YA only (one-year assessment),
- based on the Surrey model, a YA mark is given based on a module with several assignments before, during and after the YA (Modular 2-year assessment).

Table 1: Summary of proposed instruments

	Formative	Summative	One-year assessment	Modular 2-year assessment
reflective journal	x		x 1 year	x 2 years
peer feedback on reflective journal	x		x 1 year	x 2 years
wiki map	x		x 1 year	x 2 years
proposal for written work	x		x	x
plan for written work	x		x	x
YA essay in year 2		x		x
Erasmus marks and/or 1x5000/2x2500		x	x	x
presentation in year 4		x		x

To sum up, I reviewed current policy and practice and made recommendations on the basis of this. I would like to close with a quote by Pellicione and Dixon (2008:752) who argue that "formative learning activities such as ePortfolios shift the focus of the traditional higher education paradigm as students are encouraged to take responsibility for what and how they learn," and this is the aim of the proposed model.

1) Introduction

This report summarises a study conducted to review the assessment procedures of the year abroad (YA), which is a compulsory part of a degree in the department of European Studies and Modern Languages at the University of Bath (UoB). The study had the aim of examining the scope for improvements of this notoriously difficult area of assessment, and this report makes recommendations as to how the YA assessment procedure at Bath could be improved. It contains discussion and justifications for these recommendations based on interviews with staff and students at Bath and at other UK universities, as well as on an international conference organised for the purpose of learning more about the assessment of the YA.

Indeed, Kristensen (2004: 97) refers to the residence abroad as "something of a mysterious process" in the sense that students go away for a period and when they return, as Kristensen puts it, "something had happened to them. Most of the times this was something positive, but not always." In order to better understand what happens during the year abroad and how assessment can support learning, I drew on literature, student and staff interview data, as well as conference insights to gradually build the picture of an *assessment for experiential and autonomous learning based on the continuity model*, as suggested in the title. The important point that Coleman and Parker (2001) make with regard to achieving YA objectives is that the residence abroad experience is essentially based on the premise of autonomous learning, which will be a recurring theme in this report.

'Assessment for learning' (Black and Wiliam 1998; Nuffield Reform Group 1999; Black, Harrison et al. 2002; Black, Harrison et al. 2003) describes how students can be supported through constructive feedback (formative) and graded (summative) assessment of work inside the classroom. This approach relies on supported learning based on an exchange between teachers and learners in which learners steer their own learning. Because this approach has been formulated for the use in classrooms, it was complemented with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb and Fry 1975) and autonomous learning perspectives (Broady and Kenning 1996; Benson 1997) to account for the independent learning experience abroad.

The YA is so difficult to assess because it diverse options and outcomes are influenced by a multitude of factors. Thus, I tried to concentrate on factors that could provide continuity and a stable framework of reference that could support students during their diverse learning experiences abroad, and indeed during their entire degree, and termed it

the continuity model. Based on the findings from the study and on these theories I make 12 recommendations.

Given the current economic climate and cuts in university funding, I bore in mind that any assessment model proposed must take account of tutor and administrator's workloads. This was a theme that was identified in all the data collected.

Section 2 first charts the policy situation at a European, UK and institutional level that enables year abroad study through the Erasmus schemes or otherwise. It further looks at how these EU guidelines are interpreted in the UK and by the University of Bath (UoB) in particular. This section also includes YA objectives, as identified by Coleman and Parker and other relevant YA literature. Moreover, it reviews relevant evaluation theories, such as 'assessment for learning' and Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

Section 3 describes the methodology and research design adopted to review the assessment procedure at Bath, it also describes the samples.

Section 4 presents findings of what the students felt they learnt when abroad, which is followed by a discussion of the appropriateness of assessing particular year abroad outcomes.

Section 5 discusses support available to students before, during and after the year abroad that may support their learning, and points towards areas of improvement.

Section 6 evaluates formative and summative assessment instruments that are currently used at UoB or at other HE institutions, and in turn evaluates each of these with a view of including them in the model proposed in the last section.

Section 7 outlines an important theme that was identified in this study: the fact that social integration or interaction with members of the host community is a major personal and institutional aim of any year abroad. This finding highlights that students may not be adequately prepared to fully exploit opportunities. It draws on Coleman's concentric circle model and social capital theory to further analyse the types of social relationships that students build.

Section 8 highlights the importance of expectation management prior to the year abroad. This is argued on the basis of student and staff findings. It discusses ways forward that may enable students to better consolidate information provided and to formulate their own learning agendas.

Section 9 emphasises that the year abroad should not be looked at in isolation but in terms of what happens in degree programmes before and after. Thus, it builds an argument that there are a number of areas in which the YA could be better embedded in the overall

degree programme. It also looks at the overall learning philosophy promoted by UoB staff, and discusses merits of autonomous, independent or self-directed learning.

Section 10 proposes an *assessment for experiential and autonomous learning based on the continuity model* that embeds the year abroad in the degree programme and supports student learning more fully by enabling more autonomous learning in an experiential setting, based on tutor, self- and peer-administered assessment, and which makes formative and summative types of assessment integral parts of the overall YA grade.

2) Background

This section provides a policy perspective setting the context for the year abroad in UK language degrees.

EU perspective

Mobility as the hallmark of the European Higher Education Area

Based on the initial push to harmonise the post-secondary education sector by France, Germany, Italy and the UK in 1998 (Council of European Ministers of Education 1998), the Council of European Ministers of Education drew up the Bologna Declaration in 1999, initiating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to be completed by 2010. In 2007 this was opened up to all COE member states. Of these, 45 states have voluntarily ratified the Bologna declaration by 2007. What has started out as an initiative of four EU member states, now covers a large geographical area, reaching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and reaches well beyond what is considered Europe.

The Bologna declaration aims at creating "greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of higher education" and at increasing "the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education" (Council of European Ministers of Education 1999). The Bologna declaration thus anticipates the strategy formulated in Lisbon (European Union 2000) and Barcelona (European Union 2002) to make Europe "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion".

The Bologna Declaration emphasised higher education as "a key to promote citizens' mobility and employability" besides "the Continent's overall development" (Council of European Ministers of Education 1999: 1-2).

Thus, at individual level, the EHEA posits that student mobility is likely to increase employability, personal development, competencies and multilingualism, which is envisaged

to be achieved, in part at least, through student exchanges or mobility programmes. Based on a review of the bi-annual follow-up reports by the Council of European Ministers of Education (2009: 4), which has steered the construction of the EHEA in the last decade, the various communiqués recommend that, in order to meet these objectives, HE curricula need to integrate mobility options and offer appropriate recognition of achievements. Furthermore, these options should be available to diverse student populations. At societal level, the EHEA is envisaged to contribute to a socially cohesive society based on shared values. By 2009 an ambitious objective was formulated: "in 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad". The 2009 communiqué (2009: 1) further outlines requirements necessary to achieve the 2020 goals. These include increasing "mobility windows" in study and training, and "full recognition of study achievements, study support the full portability of grants and loans are necessary requirements". Although contributing to the *personal development* of students is mentioned as an important task of the EHEA in more than one communiqués, it is not specified what this may entail in detail.

Current EU frameworks relevant to student mobility

The current EU framework dealing with education, mobility and cooperation at higher-education level is the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) with 31, plus one associated, member states and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) which comprises 45 member states, based on the Bologna process. Both frameworks have formulated aims at European, economic, higher education, societal and individual levels, which are summarised in the following. I also summarise the European Quality Charter for Mobility, since this document is less generically about education, but specifically about mobility programmes, such as Erasmus. As far as objectives formulated at European supra-national level are concerned there are five main areas, each with subcategories:

- European dimension
- HE harmonisation
- Economic competitiveness
- Social cohesion
- Individual progress

From the above it becomes clear that EU objectives of student mobility, as enabled by the Erasmus programme, have a greater politico-economic reason, first of all to enable the EU to become the "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" by 2010. The follow-up Strategy 2020 has slightly more modest aims: "A

European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" (European Commission 2010). Their latest strategy includes one area that is relevant to the YA. The "Flagship youth on the move" aims to promote "student mobility and trainees' mobility, and improve the employment situation of young people" (2010:11), for which vehicles such as Erasmus are mentioned. Whereas the 2010 aims were expected to be met by building a highly mobile, flexible and multilingual workforce who adopted European values and are able to adjust to other cultures with ease, who are therefore able to move around Europe as an when the economy requires this. The 2020 strategy does not stress the cultural and multilingual flexibility, but mentions education as part of the smart growth strand: the "EU flagship initiative '**Youth on the move**' [aims] to enhance the performance of education systems and to reinforce the international attractiveness of Europe's higher education" (2010:34). Thus the linguistic and cultural adaptability of employees has given way to the more generic aim to develop "skills throughout the lifecycle with a view to increase labour participation and better match labour supply and demand" (2010:34), which forms part of the inclusive growth strand.

The EU political framework enables free movement of people across national borders, but it cannot interfere in national education policies, thus it makes recommendations but largely leaves the interpretation of individual learning objectives to the member states or the higher education institutions. This may be part of the success story of Erasmus since it allows flexibility when it comes to implementation at local levels, as mentioned by the European Commission (2006). The EU seems less particular in what exactly the students learn abroad, as long as they become more mobile and highly qualified citizens, who identify with the European Union, and not only with one member state or a region.

Evaluating and recognising the mobility experience

The EHEA framework pursues political, economic, social and individual objectives and student mobility is at its heart. At an individual level student mobility is expected to increase employability, personal development, competencies and multilingualism, and it highlights the importance of recognising achievements associated with mobility experiences.

The European Quality Charter for Mobility provides a framework for evaluation, which emphasises preparation, support during and after the mobility experience, as well as an individual learning plan, which should outline the aims, context and expected benefits for each student. Furthermore, the COE provides an evaluation and certification tool: the European Language Portfolio, which comes in three parts: a language passport, a language biography and a dossier, and is described in section 10 in more detail.

While the EU can enforce the removal of legal obstacles to student mobility, it cannot directly interfere with national education systems or prescribe implementation of educational measures, therefore the EU "**encourages** the use of the [European] Charter [of Mobility] by national agencies and other organisations working in the field of education and training and mobility" (European Parliament 2006, my emphasis). Thus, the Erasmus office in Brussels leaves the definition of learning content and envisaged outcomes to the national agencies or the higher education institutions.

UK perspective

The British Council has been the national Erasmus agency for the UK since 2007, and on their website[1] they list reasons why people should participate in the Erasmus programme. These can be categorised into eight reasons or possible outcomes.

Professional skills/advantage
- "Stand out in the job market – a great addition to your CV"
- "Language other than MT "critical" for business success overseas"

Personal development
- "Return more motivated, independent and confident
- "Return more confident, mature, self-reliant"
- "Learn a range of life-skills not taught in the lecture theatre"

Language skills
- "Improve your language skills"
- "Language skills improve employability"
- "Language learning skills that enable study of further languages"

Intercultural/multiperspectivity
- "Discover a different culture and gain an international perspective"

Academic advantages
- "It counts towards your degree –it's not a gap year"
- "Access a wider range of subject areas than in the UK"

Fun
- "It's really good fun!"

Social
- "Gain an international network of friends and meet your lifelong partner! (1 in 10 students do)"

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[1] http://www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus-benefits.htm

Other

- "Get a grant and have your tuition fees waived (if you go for the full academic year)"
- "Social and economic advantages for society"

Of course, **potential benefits** are not the same as **objectives**, however, these provide an indication of what the British Council expects students to learn, acquire or experience while they are abroad and of course this is part of their advertising to attract students to participate in the programme. At the same time, it may raise expectations that may not materialise. This could lead to disappointment should the YA not turn out to be fun, which is discussed further in section 6. Furthermore, the opportunity to make international friends is mentioned, without differentiating whether such friends would be other temporary migrants or resident L2 speakers. This study will show that this distinction is particularly important for language students on the YA.

As far as preparation for travelling abroad is concerned, the British Council directs the enquiring student to a Foreign & Commonwealth Office website concerned primarily with health and safety when abroad but not with learning objectives or processes. This includes links to a series of documents:

- **Support for British Nationals abroad**[2], mostly about consular services available abroad;
- **Going to live abroad**[3] including information on tax, pension and other welfare entitlements etc. This includes four lines on the usefulness of learning the locally spoken language;
- **Victims of crime abroad**[4];
- **Lonely planet travel safe**[5];
- **In prison abroad**[6];
- **World Wise**[7], including rudimentary information on culturally acceptable behaviour in a selection of regions, and a few polite phrases in several languages.

While these largely practical websites are aimed at all kinds of British travellers, holiday

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[2] http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/2855621/english-summary

[3] http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/2855621/going-to-live-abroad

[4] http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/2855621/victims-of-crime-abroad

[5] http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/2855621/travel-safe

[6] http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/about-kbyg-campaign/

[7] http://www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/pdf/2855621/world-wise

makers and emigrants, the British Council website has links to further websites designed especially for Erasmus students:

There is the student-designed thirdyearabroad.com, which provides information on locations of France, Italy, Spain and Germany. As objectives it also mentions fun, getting to know other cultures, and learning to speak a language fluently, besides becoming more confident and independent[8].

Besides a Personal Development Portfolio elaborated by the British Council, as described in section 6, there may be other internal policy papers that are not available on the internet. It may be worth interviewing British Council officers as to their role and their take on objectives and evaluation, but this went beyond the scope of this study.

The year abroad at the University of Bath

Degrees offered at Bath emphasise application of learning beyond campus. Study or work in order to improve professional, and in the case of the YA also linguistic and intercultural, skills is an important part of the university's applied and international agenda. Indeed, all students are offered the option of studying a language, alongside their degree course. Furthermore, besides joint honours in Modern Languages and European Studies, which are the focus of this report, students can also choose joint honours combining a language with management, politics or engineering. Indeed, most under-graduate courses are offered with an option of a placement year, and internship or a period of study abroad, and about 60% of under-graduate students spend a period of their degree outside of university on placements or studying at partner institutions. This includes not just placements abroad, but also in the UK. This means that a period of work or study abroad is the reality for many students at Bath from diverse disciplines. Thus learning outside the classroom is an important feature of UoB, and it is anticipated that some of the findings in that report may be useful also beyond language degrees.

As outlined above, supra-national and national policy largely leave the formulation of learning outcomes of mobility programmes to the institutions implementing them. Thus, it is down to the University of Bath, and the ESML department in particular, to establish objectives and quality assurance criteria for the YA experience. For this study I review YA literature aimed at students, starting with the programme specifications for MFL degrees, which do not deal specifically with the YA, but provide overarching objectives of the MFL

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[8] http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=128&Itemid=1&restore=1

degree course. Then, I look at information provided by the ESML department, which is aimed at all students of MFL, for whom it is a requirement to spend the third year abroad. Other material discussed in this section is aimed separately at work placement students, Erasmus exchange students, and at teaching assistants, the three options that are available to UoB students

Students of Modern Language and European Studies at Bath have to spend a compulsory year abroad. The MLES degree comprises European Studies and two languages (French, German, Spanish, Italian or Russian). Thus they have to spend at least three months in one country, and they should be away for overall 9 months. The ESML objectives and assessment procedure is described later in this section, under the relevant headings.

Year-abroad objectives

James Coleman and colleagues present a description of objectives of residence abroad (Coleman and Parker 2001: 137-141; Coleman 2005: 128-9). These are based on previous substantive UK surveys, namely the Oxford Brookes LARA (Bannister and Burell 2001), The Lancaster Interculture Project (2001) and the Portsmouth Residence Abroad Project RAPPORT, which led to a taxonomy of categories. Coleman and Parker (2001) summarise these as **academic, cultural, intercultural, linguistic, personal and professional** (in alphabetical order). In the UK year-abroad literature, these objectives are often cited. Course convenors and students need to be clear of the objectives. Since course objectives and assessment are intricately linked, I provide a description of their objectives adding other authors' opinions to the discussion where appropriate.

Academic objectives

Under this heading, Coleman and Parker (2001) include assessed academic tasks, namely any course work set by the host university, and dissertation projects set by the home university that requires research in the target country. They add "preparation for the final year, e.g. reading set texts" (2001: 137). Thus it considers conventional academic exercises, such as research projects essays and reading, set by host or home universities.

Cultural objectives

This relates to the above and is aimed at enhancing insights into institutional and societal way of life in the target culture (Coleman and Parker 2001). In 1996, Coleman (pp 65-6) differentiated between Culture with a big 'C', meaning the acquisition of knowledge about "museums, monuments, theatre, films, exhibitions" and culture with a small 'c' which refers

to cultural immersion. He reminds us, however, that gaining cultural insights is not an automatic process and "demands thorough preparation, reflection, training and application". Furthermore, cultural knowledge and intercultural competencies are hard to assess and a framework needs to be found that take into considerations these requirements.

Intercultural objectives

Cormeraie (1995: 61) points out that for two people from different cultures to understand one another "more than mere linguistic intelligibility is required", and Byram et al (1992) found that experiences abroad not necessarily change any ethnocentric attitudes per se; they can even lead to (increased) xenophobic views. Thus, this area is of great importance, given that one objective of student mobility at different policy levels is interculturality and social cohesion. Clearly, this area is also one of the most complex objectives to deal with in terms of the YA, and difficult to support and evaluate. Coleman and Parker (2001: 138) describe the intercultural objectives as an "amalgam of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, skills and behaviours" which forms part of a list of further sub-objectives. In their 2001 publication they refer to Byram and Zarate's (1997) model of intercultural competence, which divides these competencies into four *savoirs*: *savoirs*, *savoir apprendre*, *savoir être*, *savoir faire*. However, Coleman and Parker did not link the savoirs model to the objectives they identified, perhaps because they overlap a great deal and objectives do not fit neatly into the proposed grid of savoirs. Since then Byram widened this framework (Byram 2002) to include *savoir s'engager* and savoir *comprendre*[9]. This is illustrated below, where I list Coleman and Parker's 2001 objectives linking them with Byram's (2002) *savoirs* categories. I argue that the general *savoirs* applies to all of Coleman and Parker's categories whereas the other more specific *savoirs* apply to some categories more than others as illustrated in

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[9]

savoirs:	"the knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction".
savoir-être:	"the curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own".
savoir-comprendre:	"the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own"
savoir-apprendre/faire:	"the skill of discovery and interaction: Ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction".
savoir s'engager:	"the critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries".

Table 2: Byram's savoirs and Coleman and Parker's intercultural objectives

Coleman and Parker 2001	Byram 2002
Awareness of relativity of culture – including one's own	savoir être savoir comprendre
Recognition that culture is a social construct	savoir être savoir comprendre
Cognitive and affective learning, since it is concerned with elements of personal and social identity	savoir être savoir apprendre/faire
Ethnographic skills allowing observation without misunderstanding, objectivity free of ethnocentrism	savoir être savoir apprendre/faire savoir comprendre
Interpersonal skills allowing adaptation to multiple cultural milieux, respecting local values without abandoning one's own	savoir être savoir apprendre/faire savoir comprendre savoir s'engager
Work-related: ability to function in new linguistic/cultural environment	savoir apprendre/faire savoir comprendre savoir s'engager

In terms of assessment, interculturality as an objective causes problems since, even though there are various attempts to define them, there is no agreement on what intercultural skills actually are. Thus, it is questionable whether they can be assessed or measured at all.

Linguistic objectives

Evidence regarding the impact of the residence abroad on linguistic gains is described as patchy (Coleman 1995: 32-33) and linguistic progress by no means automatic (Coleman and Parker 2001: 139). However, "the intuitive belief in the importance of residences abroad for L2 improvement is justified by the evidence" (Coleman 1995: 32-33). While there is general evidence, Coleman adds that that it is not entirely clear in which area (grammar, vocabulary, fluency etc.) and student progress depends on many other factors. On the basis of the above, Coleman and Parker suggest that linguistic objectives should comprise the competencies of speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, register, and language learning strategies. Furthermore, these skills need to be evaluated and furthered on return to prevent attrition (Coleman and Parker 2001: 139). Literature makes clear that social interaction and linguistic gains are correlated (Regan, Howard et al. 2009). Aguilar Stewart sums it up as follows:

> "Although the grammar class played a key role in students' language awareness the more frequent interactions with the target language community appeared to provide increased opportunities for noticing language features, whereas a limited social network seemed to correlate with students reporting fewer incidences of noticing. Students should be encouraged, therefore, to engage in internships, conversation

partner groups, workshops, sports, and other extracurricular activities to cultivate a larger social network during SA [study abroad]." (Aguilar Stewart 2010: 154).

Personal objectives

This category refers to gaining "greater maturity, independence, self-reliance, self-awareness and confidence". Coleman refers to Inkster (1993) who sees YA experiences as character-building, especially if students are ill-prepared, while Dueñas-Tancred and Weber-Newth (1995) empirically confirmed gains in maturity. Noreiko describes the residence-abroad experience as a "watershed, a rite of passage, the ultimate emancipation" (1995: 195). Besides potential physical, personal and psychological dangers related to such a dramatic experience, as described by Noreiko, he emphasises that students primarily gain a great deal of confidence. Coleman and Parker (2001: 139-40) mention "independence and self-reliance, increased confidence, and enhanced self-awareness" as personal objectives of residences abroad. However, they point out that personal development is rarely made explicit or assessed.

Professional objectives

Coleman and Parker explain that employability is increasingly important for students and parents. This is also one of the European objectives as described above. According to Coleman and Parker these objectives comprise "generic transferable skills such as working independently and in teams, setting and meeting objectives, time management, problem solving, imagination and creativity" (2001: 140).

Convey (1995: 132) suggests that preparation of the YA experience should incorporate an examination of future employers' needs and how the YA can contribute to the development of relevant skills and knowledge:

- examine what employers are looking for
- acquire the tools necessary to operate in a professional context
- articulate the gains and the "added value" of the stay(s) abroad
- be aware of cultural differences

She also mentions the SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) as a possible tool to formulate objectives and to reflect on how to achieve them (1995: 134-5). She feels that, albeit controversial since it is an entrepreneurial technique, it is "a good way of developing self-awareness", and may perhaps be of use when thinking of reflecting on learning during the YA, which is important as discussed below.

Objectives relevant to type of YA experience

Opportunities to address the above objectives will vary depending on whether a student chooses to do a work placement, a university course or a teacher assistantship. Coleman and Parker (2001: 140-1) point out the different opportunities particularly for meeting and interacting with local people that are associated with different types of experience, and they emphasise that preparation and assessment have to reflect this.

Bath Objectives

The YA is an integral part of a degree, thus I started by reviewing the specification for the overall degree before examining specific YA objectives.

Programme specifications for the overall MLES degrees at Bath University (2006) set out clear aims for their degree courses. However, they would benefit from added titles. See Table 3 for my suggestions. This information was maintained unchanged in 2008.

Table 3: Objectives as stated in the overall MLES degree aims 2006-2008

Objectives	Sub-objectives
Knowledge and understanding (titles present in the original, my emphasis)	**linguistic knowledge**: a detailed grasp of the structures and registers of two European foreign languages **regional knowledge**: a detailed understanding of the cultures (in the broadest sense) of the principal societies in which these languages are spoken, and of European civilisation as a whole **conceptual knowledge**: an understanding of basic concepts and techniques of cultural and political analysis, drawn from a variety of disciplines **cultural awareness**: an appreciation of diversity and of the function of language as a gateway to understanding other cultures.
Intellectual skills (titles in bold are my suggestion, they are not mentioned in the original)	**critical thinking and problem solving**: conduct a critical analysis of sources and problems, identifying key issues and controversies **analytical skills**: think conceptually, grasping abstract concepts, synthesizing them where appropriate, and applying them to the resolution of problems **communicative skills**: use language with precision and in a creative manner **multiperspectivity and independent thinking**: exercise independent judgement and construct a reasoned argument supported by evidence in support of conclusions reached.
Professional/Practical skills (titles in bold are my suggestion, they are not mentioned in the original)	**Communication skills:** communicate effectively in the languages they study with native speakers in a variety of contexts **Translations skills:** translate between the languages they study and English **Research skills:** plan, undertake and report research of a non-quantitative character, making use of sources in the languages they study and in English **Flexibility/adaptability:** easily adapt to life in the countries they study if they wish or are required to move there

| Transferable skills

(titles in bold are my suggestion, they are not mentioned in the original)	**Research and problem-solving**: researchers and analysts of non-quantitative data, able to locate information in a variety of media and to identify and solve problems **Dissemination skills**: communicators in speech and in writing, including in electronic media, able to present information clearly and argue a position effectively, and also to understand the positions of others **Project-management and team working**: workers, able to manage their time, work independently to deadlines and to participate effectively in teams **Autonomous learning and flexibility**: learners, able to manage their own learning and adapt to new situations and demands

In the same programme handbook reference is made also to processes relevant to achieving these objectives (Table 3). They include the year abroad as a vehicle for learning. Interestingly, the teaching assistantship and work placements are not mentioned as a means of achieving any of the objectives mentioned. Even though "total immersion in the language and cultures studied" may implicitly include this.

Table 4: Processes to achieve objectives as stated in the overall MLES degree aims 2006-2008

| Linguistic knowledge

(my emphasis)	Linguistic knowledge is acquired through small group classes and private study, supported by computer-assisted language learning software and self-access facilities. Regional and conceptual knowledge is acquired in the "cultural studies", "politics and society" "national options" and "European studies" units which form part of the programme at every stage; these are taught through lectures and seminars, for which students prepare essays and presentations. Where appropriate, extensive use of foreign-language materials is made in these units and many are conducted in the target language, further advancing linguistic knowledge. Cultural awareness underlies all teaching in the programme. The **Year Abroad** provides total immersion in the languages and cultures studied, further encouraged by the opportunity either to study at a university centre or to undertake an independent research project. Linguistic knowledge is assessed by coursework and written and oral examinations. Regional and conceptual knowledge is mainly assessed by seminar presentations and essays, and by the Year Abroad assignments or ERASMUS marks, though there are examinations in some units in which a broad knowledge base is considered essential. These assignments will often be in the target language, in which case linguistic knowledge is also assessed. Cultural awareness is not directly assessed but students will not be able to demonstrate proper linguistic or regional knowledge without it.

Regional and conceptual knowledge (my emphasis)	in the "cultural studies", "politics and society" "national options" and "European studies" units which form part of the programme at every stage; these are taught through lectures and seminars, for which students prepare essays and presentations. Where appropriate, extensive use of foreign-language materials is made in these units and many are conducted in the target language, further advancing linguistic knowledge. Cultural awareness is acquired underlies all teaching in the programme. The **Year Abroad** provides total immersion in the languages and cultures studied, further encouraged by the opportunity either to study at a university centre or to undertake an independent research project. Linguistic knowledge is assessed by coursework and written and oral examinations. Regional and conceptual knowledge is mainly assessed by seminar presentations and essays, and by the Year Abroad assignments or ERASMUS marks, though there are examinations in some units in which a broad knowledge base is considered essential. These assignments will often be in the target language, in which case linguistic knowledge is also assessed. Cultural awareness is not directly assessed but students will not be able to demonstrate proper linguistic or regional knowledge without it.
Intellectual skills	These skills are developed throughout the programme, mainly in the regional studies units. The discussion of key issues and concepts and their application is central to lectures, seminars and private study assignments; linguistic concepts and use of language are of course also discussed in language classes. Students are encouraged to formulate their own conclusions and are given feedback to help them construct reasoned argument. Analytical skills, conceptual thinking, use of language and exercise of judgement are key criteria for assessment, as indicated on the cover sheet attached to all essays for feedback.
Professional/ practical skills (my emphasis)	These skills are developed throughout the programme, in units in language and regional studies and during the Year Abroad. Communication, translation and research skills are directly assessed in these units and during the **Year Abroad**, as described above. Adaptation is not formally assessed, but is an outcome inherent in a Year Abroad completed successfully.
Transferable skills (my emphasis)	These skills are developed throughout the programme. All units require written work to be produced to deadlines; most also require oral presentations. All units involve small-group teaching in which discussion and interaction is encouraged; all have a coursework element on which feedback is given. IT skills are largely developed through individual learning, supported by special courses where necessary. **Learning skills** are developed by being given special focus in the first year; through students regularly reviewing their progress with their personal tutor; and during the **Year Abroad**, in which a Log kept by students is an important tool. Effective research and analysis is an important criterion in assessment in all units, except those devoted purely to language learning. Effective communication is a central criterion in all units. Presentations by individuals or groups of students are assessed in most units. Learning skills and time management are not formally assessed but are essential to

In the MLES programme handbook for year 3 and 4 students (2008/09) the following

information is given on the year abroad:

> "The third year is spent abroad, divided (not necessarily equally) between two or more countries so that you have experience in both your languages.   The aim is to provide you with near total-immersion in your target languages and the chance to learn, from direct observation and experience, how other communities live and function.   It will also help you further develop academic skills, through courses at overseas universities and/or the writing of a **Special Study** or **Year Abroad Essay** on a topic related to one of the countries you visit.   You will also develop important personal skills, many of which should be of direct career relevance, through the experience of living and working or studying abroad.   You will be encouraged to take full charge of your own learning by defining personal objectives for the year and recording your progress in a **Log**." (original emphasis)

The YA Booklet, which contains information specifically relevant to the YA, starts with Ground Rules, explaining duration, types and places of YA experiences, and it summarises the YA objectives as follows:

> "In any case, part of the purpose of the Year Abroad is to gain experience in coping with everyday life in another country (finding a place to live, opening a bank account, etc). It may seem daunting, but you will come away with an immense sense of achievement and will impress potential employers enormously!"

In terms of objectives, this document states that the aims to be achieved by the time of graduation by students of Modern Languages and European Studies (MLES) and a European Language and Politics (LP) are:

- "read, write and speak two European foreign languages with proficiency; (MLES)"
- "read, write and speak their target language with proficiency (LP)";
- "understand the social, political, economic and cultural evolution of the principal countries in which their this language is widely spoken";
- "be employable in administrative, professional, or business positions requiring this understanding";
- "graduate-level intellectual skills, or qualified for postgraduate training, both in those countries and in the UK".

Furthermore, it is explained in what way the YA is expected to contribute to these aims:

- "near-total immersion in your target language(s)";
- "the chance to learn from direct observation and experience how other communities live and function";
- "further development of academic skills through the 'Special Study' (which develops research and presentation skills) and/or through taking courses at one or more overseas universities";
- "important personal skills, many of which should be of direct career relevance, through the experience of living and working or studying abroad".

The booklet also contains a section on Cultural Awareness, where it describes the phenomenon of culture shock and its symptoms, including their "cure", mostly through seeking conversation with people, such as family and friends, local people and other

international students. The website of the Lancaster Interculture Project[10] is mentioned as a source of information for intercultural preparation.

The Log forms part of the YA booklet and is described as "a very important part of the degree programme". Its aims are summarised as:

"You will find that it [the log] makes an enormous difference - to your spoken language fluency, most obviously, but also to your cultural awareness and general knowledge of your target countries, and to your confidence."

It gives instructions of how to use the Log: "this means thinking about what you need to learn, developing strategies for achieving it, and monitoring your own progress". The document reminds students of the private nature of the Log. First of all, personal objectives should be logged, based on Part One course results. For this categories are suggested:

- "language skills: do not rely on osmosis - study grammar, consciously build vocabulary expose yourself to as many different registers of written and spoken language as you can - read a newspaper regularly, watch TV, above all talk to people";
- "cultural learning: live as the natives do, take opportunities to meet people, play at being an anthropologist and observe what is different";
- "academic skills: work on your special study and any university courses, do some preliminary reading for your final-year units";
- "(MLES) language B: don't neglect it - subscribe to a newspaper, seek out native speakers especially other foreign students, check whether there are evening classes or a cultural centre nearby, use the vacations";
- "(LP) politics: don't neglect the other part of your degree programme but use the year to find out as much as you can about politics in your country of residence and its neighbours";
- "problem-solving: expect there to be problems and see them as a challenge and an opportunity";
- "career skills: savoir faire above all, but also career opportunities";
- "personal development: sounds pretentious but it will happen - and you can affect it…".

In fact, the YA booklet includes empty Log pages for the students to list objectives and chart their progress. There are two empty pages for the students to formulate their overall objectives for the year, and a few lines per day of the first two weeks. Further it provides space for the students to chart their progress separately for the four half-semesters during which students are abroad in terms of linguistic skills, cultural learning, academic skills, Language B (MLES), politics (LP), problem solving, career skills, personal development and other. These are followed by two pages for the Mid- and End-of-Semester Reassessment of Objectives.

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[10] http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/interculture/index.

Implications for assessment

Coleman and Parker (2001: 141) maintain that the objectives discussed above should guide "all the other aspects of quality assurance in provision: **curriculum integration, preparation, support and monitoring, debriefing and follow-up, assessment and accreditation**". Thus, I used these quality assurance criteria as an interview guide for the semi-structured student interviews.

The log offered in the Bath YA booklet points towards the process of achieving the objectives discussed. This is conceived to support the largely autonomous and experiential learning outside the classroom. The following section discusses whether and how experiential learning can be assessed.

How to assess experiential learning

Experiential learning is often associated with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb and Fry 1975). This cycle incorporates the four activities of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and testing new insights in new situations.

Figure 1: Kolb's learning cycle (adaptation)
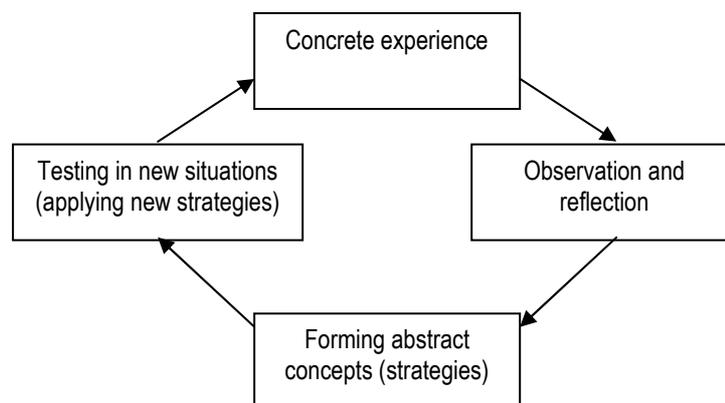
Thus experiential learning consists of experience, reflection, consolidation and testing. This model, even though criticised for its simplicity (Seaman 2008) and presentation (e.g. Bergsteiner, Avery et al. 2010), is useful in that it indicates that the experiential learning process benefits from reflection, which is also the idea of the log, discussed above. However, Quintoa and Smallbone suggest that students need to be taught how to reflect and that this should be an integral part of any degree, not just during the year abroad:

> "Teaching reflection needs to be planned and integrated into students' individual courses of study, so that there are numerous opportunities to engage with reflection and learn throughout their higher education. Feedback offers students an experiential base for reflection." (Quintona and Smallbone 2010:125)

Their paper focuses on classroom learning and does not include experiential learning

outside the classroom in an autonomous learning context such as the YA. Yet, there is the psychology-based argument that learner autonomy is associated with greater learning gains (Dickinson 1987; Broady and Kenning 1996). Thus, the year abroad allows for experiential and autonomous learning, which are both associated with greater learning gains. However, students need support in two ways: 1) how to be a reflective learner and 2) how to be an autonomous learner.

In recognition of both these requirements, the then University of North London[11] started a pilot project in 1995 with the aim to assess experiential learning. Dueñas-Tancred and Weber-Newth (1995: 117) describe the experiential learning profile, which provides the students with "an opportunity to become aware of their learning in a foreign environment and helps them to reflect on this process". Before students go abroad they were provided with a log book containing headings of transferable skills and qualities: Organisation and Initiative; Communication; Personal and Interpersonal; Cultural Awareness; Intellectual. Besides this they are given a "checklist of skills and qualities, and after discussion they identify which skills they feel they need to develop" (Dueñas-Tancred and Weber-Newth 1995: 118-9), i.e. they formulate their own learning objectives. Convey explains that "students assess the level of skills they already have and consider what level they might realistically achieve. They are also encouraged to think of strategies to improve these skills". Any progress made by the students is outlined in the Record of Achievement, which is a "formal statement of the students' view of their development during their year abroad" (Dueñas-Tancred and Weber-Newth 1995: 121). On their return, a draft of this document is discussed with YA tutors, before it is turned into a paper for assessment. The idea is that students have a formal record of their progress that can be used to evidence competencies and knowledge when applying for employment. Clearly, this approach supports both autonomous and reflective learning and allows for formative and summative assessment, concepts that are outlined below.

Assessment issues

The accreditation of the YA has implications on the assessment in that it may signal to students how seriously they should take learning. Convey (1995: 114-5) points out that the accreditation of the Year Abroad does often not reflect the importance that is ascribed to this experience. In fact, the YA assessment at ESML currently only accounts for 8% of the overall degree (up from 6% up to 2008/9). The final year accounts for 68% and the second

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[11] which has merged with the London Guildhall University to become London Metropolitan University in 2002

year for 24%. The first year does not count towards the final degree. At the former University of North London, i.e. the current London Metropolitan University, the YA accounts for 25% of the overall mark, the same as every other year of the degree. There, the YA mark consists of an academic and an experiential learning mark accounting for 50% each. The academic mark consists of the marks obtained at the host university or a YA dissertation project, and an experiential profile.

Parker and Coleman (1995: 11) report that the Standing Conference of Heads of Modern Languages working party on the year abroad[12] suggested that the year abroad should be awarded the same amount of credits as the other academic years of the degree, because "The year abroad is a full academic year's learning experience for the students and should involve:

- improved linguistic skills, both spoken and written
- an increase in the students' knowledge of the specialist subject studied for the degree
- cognitive benefits arising from reflective learning
- an increased awareness of cultural relativities
- the development of interpersonal skills"

Today London Metropolitan University continues to offer residence abroad to their language degree students, of half a year for the more intense three-year course and one year for the four-year course[13]. The London Met still accredits 15 points per semester abroad, which accounts to 25% for one year abroad, and 12.5% for six months abroad.

At UoB, there is an academic part to the assessment and a series of – what could be considered – experiential learning options, such as the log, progress reports, blogs and final YA reports. However, the experiential part is not taken into account when grading the YA, which seems to signal to students that they are optional, as is discussed in section 10.

The Bath YA booklet outlines the assessment of year three. There is either the Special Study, which is supervised, or the Long Essay which is a largely independent piece of work that counts together with Erasmus course grades.

All students other than Erasmus exchange students have to produce a Special Study (5000 words). This constitutes "the main evidence of satisfactory completion of the Third Year". The topic must relate to language, culture, politics or society (MLES) or politics (LP) of the country in which it is to be written, and it has to be written in the target language. The

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[12] this was set up in 1991

[13] http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/depts/hal/ug/placement-abroad/modules/modules_home.cfm

special study is to be prepared in Bath prior to departure insofar as the topic must be agreed and preliminary reading done. Once abroad, material is to be collected and the topic defined more precisely. Progress on this must be sent to the supervisor. The timeframe depends on the length of stay. However, a first draft should be finished before leaving the location, and handed in by 1 Sept before the final year.

As far as assessment of the year abroad is concerned, this experience is assessed on the merits of

- linguistic knowledge: by YA assignment or Erasmus marks
- Communication, translation and research skills: during the YA
- Learning skills: during the YA through a log kept by students.

The assessment of academic learning in the way of Erasmus tests assigned by the host universities or YA project work assigned by the home university is relatively straight forward, since it is a summative type of assessment in line with conventional essay marking that has been part of university culture. However, in the following it is argued that formative assessment may have to play a greater part in YA assessment structure.

Summative and formative assessment

Assessment is often either summative or formative. Based on Black and William (1998), summative assessment has two main components, namely to assure quality of standards; "judge the extent of students' learning" (Black and William 1998), and allow for accountability (Banta et al., 1996). This is an important function in an HE environment where a degree needs to give employers, for instance, an indication of the knowledge and skills that can be expected from a candidate. Formative assessment can include "'diagnosis, motivation, feedback and improving learning" (Falchikov, 2005), it can help students learn in a meaningful and productive manner (Athanasou & Lamprianou, 2002). Thus, formative assessment is central to experiential learning. The need for assessment of experiential learning has been emphasised by Wight (1970): "the assumption is that we seldom learn from experience unless we assess the experience, assigning our own meaning in terms of our own goals, aims".

This quote contains important points that need to be considered when assessing students. The central point is the learning experience, this however is shaped by expectations, goals and ambitions that students have prior to the experience and in an educational context the students expect assessment of their performance. In an experience such as the YA which enables multiple learning outcomes this poses a problem, especially because tutors are not there when the performance takes place. Thus an evaluative

framework has to be found that allows students to be aware of their expectations, formulate their own goals, foster their ambitions while it makes visible and qualifies diverse types of learning outcomes.

Student-led assessment

We established that in the YA abroad context students benefit from autonomous and experiential learning, which benefits from self-reflection. Thus there is the argument that students should also assess their own performance and draw conclusions for their next steps of learning as proposed by Kolb's learning cycle.

Documentation of reflective work to support learning is based on Dewey's (1933) seminal work "How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process." Little believes the tutor plays an important role in supporting autonomous learning, i.e. we cannot expect it to happen automatically. He describes the function of the tutor in autonomous learning as threefold (Little 2009:224):

- "we have to involve learners fully in planning, monitoring and evaluating their own learning"
- "we must help learners to reflect continuously on the process and content of their learning and to engage in regular self-assessment"
- "we must ensure that the target language is the medium as well as the goal of learning, including the reflective component".

It becomes clear that autonomous learning requires guidance and consists of three main stages: planning, self-reflection/monitoring and self-evaluation. Another important aspect of autonomous learning is that "the teacher must show her learners how to support one another in collaborative discourse", thus fostering peer-evaluation. Little suggests that all learners keep individual log books or journals, i.e. a written record of their learning, as a basis for self- or peer-reflection and assessment.

The current assessment process at Bath offers such instruments inviting students to plan, document and monitor progress (log, progress report, blog, and final YA report). However, there is currently no framework for self-assessment. Thus, I was interested in the students' attitudes towards these instruments, and I included the element of documentation and reflection in the interview schedule.

In the field of language learning, the European Language Portfolio has been used as a self-administered assessment instrument. González (2009:374) ascribes it two functions: a pedagogic and a reporting function. In terms of the pedagogic function he found that students "have realized the importance of learning outside the classroom as a part of the

process of continuous, independent language learning" (2009:382), and he felt that the students became aware of the 'invisible learning outcomes' as defined by Kohonen (2004). Little found that that there is evidence "beyond any reasonable doubt that the ELP can foster the development of language learner autonomy as I understand it, by supporting learners in goal setting, self-assessment and other forms of reflection on language learning and language use" (Little 2009: 231). However, both González and Little describe the use of the ELP in classroom contexts. There, are also electronic versions of the ELP, which may be better suited to YA self-assessment (e.g. Cummins 2009). The ELP and its components are discussed in section 10, as a possible way forward toward an autonomous learning model based on reflection and self-assessment.

Summary of the literature review

When considering a framework for the YA several issues need to be taken into consideration. These are:

- expected outcomes and processes
- experiential and autonomous learning
- formative and summative assessment
- tutor-, self- or peer assessment
- Documentation or portfolio activities

From the literature reviewed, I identified six topics (see below) that led my student interviews. And I invited the students to reflect on these dimensions with regard to their work/study place abroad, and with regard to their life outside work/study.

Before the year abroad
- Preparation: personal and institutional expectations, objectives and preparations

During the year abroad
- Experiences: better/worse than expected, surprises/disappointments, highlights, problems
- Support available: from institutions/work, from friends, family
- Achievements and feedback: Learning/progress achieved, feedback received
- Documentation and reflection: usefulness of documentation activity, other ideas

After the year abroad
- Expectations of the 4th year: Usefulness of acquired skills in year 4/future, assessment, accreditation, scope for improvement.

3) *Methodology*

The design of this study is an evaluation based on stakeholder data, i.e. by data collected from current students and staff. This enables the description of the current assessment processes and leads to programme developments that are likely to be acceptable to the people involved.

When evaluating programmes by talking to students, which is the main component of the present study Kiely and Rea-Dickins (2005:174) list factors that may influence students' evaluative comments in the HE environment. They summarise that students – as the main stakeholders – may seek to influence the level of difficulty associated with the programme, they "defend their stake, their view of what constitutes an appropriate program". Furthermore, the students see an evaluative exercise as an opportunity to convey their expectations of a programme and of the teachers' contributions, as well as mentioning positive aspects of the programme under review. In the present study, students are expected to be less concerned with the level of difficulty since they will not be affected by any resulting changes. Students may of course not all be self-centred and also think of future generations of peers for whom they may not want to make things more difficult. Students were expected, however, to air their views on where the UoB or partner institutions may have failed their expectations.

Stenhouse (1975:145) proposes that teachers should be involved in any educational improvement exercises. Thus, members of staff at Bath and other universities were consulted as part of this review. However, Weiss (1986:144) reminds us that this kind of stakeholder "will not ensure that appropriate relevant information is collected nor increase the use of evaluation results". Thus, it was an advantage that I, as the researcher who conducted this study, was no previous or current member of staff in the ESML department and was physically and intellectually located in the Department of Education at UoB.

This project is based on four data collection exercises (Figure 2), internally at the University of Bath (UoB) and externally gathering information from other Universities. I interviewed language students and staff from ESML, IMML and the International Office at Bath, and staff and students from different universities in the UK. Additionally, I organised a conference[14] to bring together academic and support staff who deal with the organisation and assessment of the year abroad in language departments from 34 universities, mostly from the UK but also from further afield.

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[14] http://www.bath.ac.uk/education/research/conferences/info.html

Figure 2: Research design of the YA review

internal data collection		external data collection	
students year 2: 12 year 3: 4 year 4: 18 PG:　　3	staff 10 lecturers and teaching fellows staff 5 support staff	other universities Aston Exeter Liverpool Kings College	conference 16 presentations 2 workshops 63 participants from 34 universities

Analysis

Report with recommendations
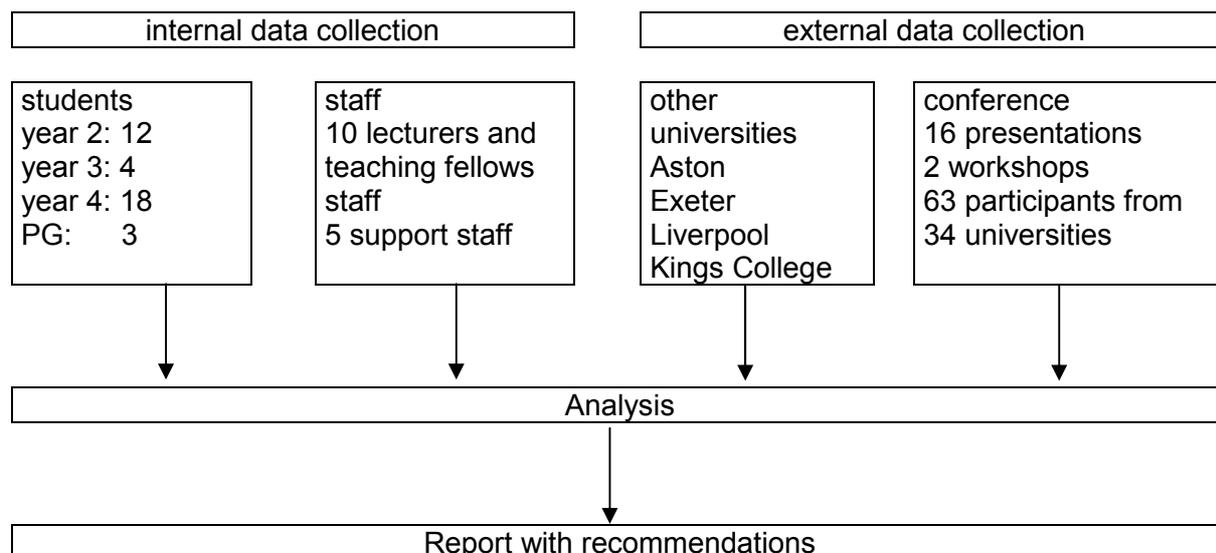
Internal data collection

The objectives and the quality aspects outlined above are taken as starting points for the interviews with staff and students at the University of Bath. Student' views on the YA assessment were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, nominal voting technique and group interview. Students were recruited through email and through personally going to language classes to invite participation. A prize drawer was established as an incentive for students in year 3 and above to participate (£50, £30, £20 prizes). Year two students were invited to a free lunch by email, with the idea that they have lunch while they participate in voting and group discussion.

The data collection among UoB staff was conducted through face-to-face interviews, and recruitment was done by email and knocking on office doors.

External data collection

Views from other institutions, were collected through telephone interviews (KCL, Liverpool), one-to-one interviews (Exeter, Aston) and group interviews (Aston). These contacts were established through email.

Further data were collected during a conference organised as part of this project. The conference had the purpose of exploring and sharing challenges, practices and solutions relating to the assessment of YA in modern language degrees, including a diverse range of experiences. Many conference participants welcomed the opportunity to share information and learn from one another, since there was a shared feeling that year-abroad coordinators often work in isolation in their respective universities. Some expressed the

need to have follow-up conferences or seminars on this topic. The conference took place over two half days on 25 and 26 June 2010 at the University of Bath. There were 61 participants (63 bookings from 34 institutions from the UK, the Netherlands, Spain and the USA). Prof. Jim Coleman gave a well-received key note speech, which was followed by 16 presentations and two workshops. Video and audio recordings[15], as well as short conference report[16] are available from the conference website. In the presentations, a series of assessment instruments were evaluated and discussed and general themes were identified that will be discussed in conjunction with empirical data in chapters 5 to 10.

Analysis

The method chosen to analyse the interview data was 'thematic analysis' as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), who claim that this method "should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis". It has the advantage that it is flexible enough to suit inductive as well as theory-based analysis, and to identify semantic (superficial) as well as latent (underlying) meaning. It allows for pre and post-coding. As can be seen in Table 5 all these aspects were useful for different themes identified in the data set.

Table 5: Pre- and post-coding

Epistemological approach / Analysis	Essentialist/Realist (semantic meaning)	Constructionist (latent meaning)
pre-coded theory-based	Accreditation Achievements Assessment Debriefing Documentation Expectations (personal) Expectations (university) Experiences Feedback Preparation Support Year 4	
post-coded inductive		Measures for personal success Social integration Enjoyment language skills

In a first step, a preliminary analysis based on a summary transcription of 8 interviews showed that students see the main aim of the year abroad in improving their languages

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[15] http://www.bath.ac.uk/education/research/conferences/programme.html

[16] http://www.bath.ac.uk/education/research/conferences/info.html

skills, especially their oral language skills. Thus this finding was inductively incorporated in the following interviews. Where students did not mention language or oral testing as an alternative assessment method, their opinions on this particular assessment method was actively sought.

In a second step, the 24 interviews (22 English, 1 Spanish[17], 1 German) were transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVivo. This data corpus was thus coded based on pre-determined categories (pre-coding) and new categories (post-coding), which revealed further themes, such as social integration, enjoyment and language skills as an objective, (Table 5).

The conference video and audio recordings were reviewed and used mainly to suggest ways forward, benefiting from the wealth of different experiences made at different universities. Furthermore, it showed trends and emphasised issues that are of general concern.

Description of the sample

Internal one-to-one interviews

I interviewed 24 students currently enrolled in ESML degree programmes at the University of Bath. Of these 9 were male and 15 female, 5 were enrolled on a Languages and Politics course (with one language) and 19 in a European Studies and Modern Languages degrees (with two languages). They spent between three and 12 months in the following countries or regions (Table 6).

Table 6: Geographic and linguistic regions

French speaking	14
German speaking	12
Spanish speaking	9
Italy	5
Russia	2

7 of them did two Erasmus study placements, 6 did two work placements, 4 did one work placement, 4 did a British Council teaching assistantship, and one did a combination of study and work placement Table 7. One studied outside the European Union (Latin America) and was therefore treated differently to Erasmus students, i.e. they had to carry out a special study. Thus 16 of the interviewees wrote a special study, one was assessed based on an extended essay and a transfer of the Erasmus grades, while 7 were assessed

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[17] Three interviews were conducted in Spain by a colleague from ESML. Due to background noise only two could be used for analysis.

solely based on their Erasmus grades.

Table 7: Types of experiences

Type of experience	Assessment mode	N
Erasmus placements only	Transfer of grade	7
2 work placements	Special study	6
1 work placement	Special study	4
Teaching assistantship	Special study	4
Study outside EU	Special study	1
Combination of study (non-EU) and work	Special study	1
Combination of Erasmus and work in EU	Ext. essay and transfer of grades	1

The majority of the students in the sample were between 21 and 24 years old, and one was older. Five had international backgrounds, i.e. their first language is either not English (3) or English and another language (2), and they have grown up outside the UK. Thus for these students their studies in Bath are in fact a period abroad. Of the sample, 11 have lived abroad before with their families, while 13 had not been abroad for more than holidays before their year abroad. The majority of the students interviewed were in year 4 (17), 4 in year 3 and 3 were post-graduate students who are now enrolled in an MA in translation at UoB. In terms of socio-economic background I grouped them according to the Acorn category of their parents' postcode (Table 8). Obviously, I could not classify the international postcodes in socio-economic terms.

Table 8: Socio-economic background of sample (Acorn categories)

Acorn category/international	No of students
Wealthy achievers (1-12)	10
Urban Prosperity (13-23)	3
Comfortably off (24-31)	5
International (non-UK postcode)	6

I talked to two students who were enrolled in the Bath IMML programme (year 4). The students who volunteered were both international students and may not be representative. However, there was some useful data. In order to gather more representative opinions, more IMML students would have to be interviewed.

The study was based on BERA ethical guidelines, and students cited in this study were given pseudonyms to grant anonymity. Members of UoB staff are all referred to as 'tutors' followed by a letter of the alphabet.

Group session

I also conducted a lunch time session with 12 year 2 students who were preparing for their year abroad at the time. Of 15 2nd year students, who booked a place, 12 turned up to the seminar. In this session the nominal voting technique was used to establish the expectations that students had before they went away. I also gave them a questionnaire which was

completed by the students as part of the session. I had such information from 11 students, one student left without handing in the form. This sample is represented in Table 9.

Table 9: Year 2 sample

Age	MLES	LP	Lived abroad before	Mother tongue	Gender	teaching assistant	work place-ment	Erasmus
19-21	10	1	10 no 1 yes	9 Engl. 2 Other	9 F 2 M	7	4	1

The students were between 19 and 21 years old. Ten students were enrolled in an EMLS and one in LP programme. Only one of them had lived abroad before and for all others the YA was their first prolonged stay abroad. Seven planned to do teaching assistantships, four work placements and one chose to do an Erasmus study placement.

External paired face-to-face data collection

At Aston University, I talked to two students who had returned from their year abroad. This interview was conducted while the placement officer was present, which may have affected the responses by the students. The focus group, I conducted with language teachers there brought together different views and led to an interesting discussion about the topic under scrutiny.

Internal and external staff sample

Twelve members of staff were interviewed at the University of Bath. This included support staff from ESML (1), IMML (3) and international office (1), as well as junior and senior academic staff in ESML (10). Furthermore, eight academic members of staff and one member of support staff in four language departments were interviewed by telephone or face-to-face. During the conference 16 presentations were given, including mine on the assessment at Bath. These provided reports and evaluations from 14 further universities, and many informal conversations were had during the conference.

4) Perceived learning abroad

In this section I report students' perceptions of what they learnt. These are complemented with staff views based on interviews and conference discussions.

As can be seen from the table below, the achievements students felt they made in their year abroad were linguistic (n=22), personal development (n=21), having a good time and enjoy the experience (n=21) and cultural knowledge gain above all (n=12). The career skills students felt they developed are also important, since they felt their year abroad gave them direction of what they might want to do in the future (n=17), they felt their CV could be improved (n=16) and that they gained work skills (n=13).

Table 10: Perceived achievements

Achievements	Sources	References
Linguistic	22	53
Good time, enjoyment	21	63
Personal development	20	54
Cultural and intercultural	18	65
Integration, getting to know local society.	10	15
Practical things, life skills	8	11
Communication	7	8
Academic	6	8
Sticking it out/Perseverance	6	13
Networking	3	4
For the future	1	2

career development		
gave direction	17	46
CV	16	22
work skills	13	29
competitive edge	6	7
work experience	6	10
work culture	3	3
references for future work	1	1

Linguistic gains

Two strands of responses emerged from the data collected. One is language as an objective, i.e. improving the level of language skills, and the other is viewing language as a means to learn content and experience, i.e. applying the skills learnt in practice. It seems that the students were less aware of the latter and concentrated on the former.

Language gains as an objective

Through the interviews, perceived language gains were explored, and no language tests were conducted. The gains the students (22) in the sample reported spontaneously were mostly of a general nature (17) as can be seen from Table 11. Thinking of the traditional four skills (active: writing and speaking; passive: speaking and listening), students mentioned spontaneously that their oral skills (6) and their writing skills had improved (3). Passive skills, which are also expected to improve, during the YA, are – surprisingly – hardly mentioned: Only one student mentioned that listening comprehension improved.

Individual students were also aware of other benefits such as that they developed intuitive linguistic awareness of what sounded right and wrong (2), and they lost inhibition to talk (2). Further they felt they could learn professional jargon (1) and improve their grammar (1). However, reading skills or greater vocabulary was not mentioned by any of the participants.

Table 11: Types of linguistic achievements

	Sources	References
General	17	22
Oral	6	10
Writing skills	3	4
Intuitive use of language	2	2
Loose inhibition	2	2
Jargon	1	2
Grammar	1	1
Understanding/Listening	1	1

Furthermore, students reported that in year 4 the language skills between individuals in the group varied sometimes considerably. Some found this frustrating, since they found they had progressed but they felt it was not enough to be at the appropriate level on their return.

General

"My language has improved like incredibly really. " (Susanna)

"obviously my French and my Spanish have got much better." (John)

"my Spanish just went sky high" (Peter)

Oral

"Improved my oral skills" (Helen)

"Now when they say can you speak Russian, I say yes." (Charles)

"But I came back, um fluent pretty much, in Spanish" (Peter)

Writing skills

"the writing is more fluent" (Sally)

"I've seen a big improvement in my writing grades." (Jo)

Intuition

"you finally learn to hear inside your head what sounds like… with French like now if I say a sentence I know if it sounds right or wrong." (Jo)

Loose inhibition

"and not be bothered if you get something wrong" (Caroline)

Jargon

"the entire official jargon and all the email etiquette" (Nina)

Grammar

"I think um my language did improve and especially in like the grammatical and things" (Hannah)

Understanding

"you can understand exactly what they're saying." (John)

Comparing linguistic levels with other students

"I don't expect to be put in a lower class or anything, but I think they should be aware that some people are still going to be not as good as others. Like it just depends what you did with your year. Like there are some people that have really advanced in Italian and are really good, and other people who still struggle with it quite a lot, and I

think they need to be aware of that, that there are going to those people, and like look out for them." (Elisabeth)

"you can tell the people that… how long they spent in each country, you can tell that I haven't spent very much in Spain and it's not very nice, but I don't feel very confident about my Spanish because I was only there for 3 months. Yet in French it's completely the opposite game. And you can also tell those who did Erasmus and those who hung around with their friends and those who did Erasmus and hung around with foreigners, yeah. So you can definitely identify that anyway. So if the university identified that it would probably be better." (John)

"So particularly in Spanish there are people that are a lot higher level than I feel that I'm at, and that is quite frustrating. Because I feel that even though I had a good time in Spain and I learnt as much as I thought could, but I'm still not at a level that is… it's not competitive but I don't feel comfortable, if that makes sense." (Caroline)

Not surprisingly, language gains and greater cultural awareness are mentioned as the main expectations that staff and students have of the year abroad. However, one member of staff sees this emphasis on language as a problem, since language alone is seen as meaningless. Language needs to be applied to a context, and thus language generates meaning – as a tool to engage with contexts.

"I mean you know I think there is always a problem that our students focus entirely on language learning. Their entire degree for them, you know, whereas we see language learning as one tool to get them to reflect on other things. " (tutor B)

As far as the assessment is concerned, students may have to be made aware of potential types of language gains as part of the assessment. More probing on the part of the interviewer may have provided a more differentiated view. A pre-post language test would indicate to the students of how much they have progressed individually. Without an individual measure of progress the only way of judging their progress is in comparison with other students, which could lead to frustration and a feeling that the year abroad was not successful enough. The Europass based on ECFR (Council of Europe 2001), for instance, might be useful, allowing students to chart their own progress. Furthermore, students seem to welcome oral or other more language focussed assessments; these are discussed in section 10.

Language as a means for learning

Indeed, another member of staff described the year abroad as the stage where students can put theory into practice. The question that arises at this point is whether the students are aware of the fact that they should understand language as a tool to explore the world

beyond the inner and middle circle described by Coleman[18], and that they are expected to actively engage in this process. Some tutors feel that there is scope for students to take greater agency in their year abroad. The quotes below illustrate the opinion that students have enough cultural knowledge to understand or engage in the outer-circle social context. Indeed this knowledge is fostered through content courses during the first two years of their degree. The second point may not be so clear to students, since students do not always understand that they do not only practice their language at university, but that they are also expected to actively use and develop language in a social context, beyond formal education. One Bath tutor illustrated this point using an anecdote where some students were at a loss when their host university was closed due to strikes. Some of the students affected by this were more resourceful and took agency.

Language as a tool

> "it gives the students the opportunity of applying the theory and the knowledge they have to a practical context." (tutor C)

> "they know all about the history of the country in question and now they're in that country and not only are they seeing what's going on they're living in a new place so they need to adjust to that and they need to apply the things they've learned and use their common sense, and actually begin to take responsibility for themselves as adults, which I think is really important." (tutor C)

> "we had strikes a couple of years ago in France and then they had no teaching for two months or something stupid like that, I think it was two months. And they said, students were emailing me saying, I am having no opportunity to practice my French because I have got no lectures, without lectures how do I practice my French. And I was thinking, well you know, you have to go out and do stuff." (tutor J)

> "And some students actually were very good and they actually went into local schools and said, we have got no lectures can we come and help and they did. There are issues there with insurance but in a sense they were being very proactive in the way they were planning to speak the language, and I think that really was on the student themselves. (tutor J)

Personal development

The majority of the students interviewed felt that the year abroad had an important effect on their personal development (20). This includes gaining confidence (11), independence (8), learning more about oneself (7), growing up (5) and especially those who overcame difficult situations felt they gained personal strength (4). There seems to be a consensus that the YA has the effect of making students more mature, or more adult. Students, parents and tutors are often amazed at the outcome.

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[18] The concentric circle theory allocates social interaction in the host country to three groups: 1) people from the same (home) country, 2) international people, 3) local people (speakers of the target language).

Table 12: Perceived personal development

	Sources	References
Confidence	11	14
Independence	8	10
Knowing yourself	7	7
Becoming more mature	5	5
Become stronger	4	6

Confidence (11)

"Yes, it helped me be more confident person, because if you can survive in your year abroad then you can survive in this country, in your own country." (Lisa)

"but I'm unbelievably more confident now. [...] but confidence really, really improved, and just… yeah, just the confidence to talk to anyone about um, you know, informal or formally." (Claire)

Independence (8)

"I was independent before but now I'm a lot more independent and when I've got something to do I don't wait, I just get down to it." (Helen)

"Actually it turned out to be um… it had a lot to do with independence as well, because although I'd been living in Bath for two years you're definitely further away and making more choices and doing more things. So that turned out to be really, really important for me as well." (Claire)

Knowing yourself (7)

"Yeah, yes definitely I learnt a lot about myself, what I can cope with [laughs]." (Jo)

"You develop more and things, and you realise what you're capable of yourself as a person. Yeah." (Lisa)

Growing up (5)

"it sounds such a cliché, everyone says, oh you go on your year abroad and you change as a person. But I really feel like I did and I've really matured.[...] I guess it was quite a long time so you do mature, but we've all sort of come back quite mature. And the boys especially I've noticed have sort of grown up quite a lot, which is a good thing." (Susanna)

"On a personal level I think within two months of being here I'd grown up so much. I went home and my parents were like, where's my little girl? (Fiona)

Becoming stronger (4)

"when being thrown into the deep end learning how to work your way of it in a way. It was quite… I think it's made me quite strong as a person, whereas before I wouldn't have been able to deal with it, now I sort of feel like I've been through it so I could do it in a way, so that's an achievement, like a personal achievement." (Caroline)

"I think having to do everything by myself it's made me a stronger person and I've got through it all now so I'm a lot more capable." (Fiona)

Staff views

"Well no my opinion is that we find when the students come back they are transformed, they have matured so much. I think the year abroad for, you know, Italian students don't have a year abroad, but I think English students have and they are so lucky to have it, it is an amazing experience." (tutor A)

"And I think confidence, I think that's something that we often comment on, you know, they've been more confident and they've been able to survive abroad maybe in a country where they've not been before, sometimes very far away. I mean some of the students go to Russia and Latin America, and I think that's a great achievement. So when they come back generally speaking they come back more mature. I mean teaching year 4 is a joy, it really is because they are very motivated." (tutor H)

Many students felt they increased their confidence, gained independence, matured and became stronger persons through overcoming challenges. These personal attributes are of great value personally, but also to prospective employers. Thus students should reflect on their personal development on their return and document it, perhaps in the form of making a new CV. This would make the students aware of their development besides any linguistic and cultural gains they made. However, the question arises as to whether personal development can be seen as an objective of an ESML or LP course and whether it should form part of any assessment.

Enjoyment

From the interviews it became clear that nearly all students (22) reported that they enjoyed aspects of their year abroad, such as their work, their studies or their social life. Of these, 13 were very enthusiastic about their experience. Thus for most of them 'having a good time' and 'enjoying it' was a major outcome that the students were either proud of or at least pleased about. It may not be a learning outcome as such, but it could be seen as a motivator for learning, since a positive mindset can facilitate learning. Students often related 'having a good time' to their social life, sometimes in combination with activities. However, 'a good time' can be had without speaking or hearing the target language and without integrating into the local community. Students also realise that a positive mindset is related to the success of the year abroad. Two students did not particularly point out that they had a good time, or that the enjoyed things actively. They reported that some things were 'lovely', 'good' (Susanna) or 'nice' (Helen), so they did not have terrible experiences. From the outset both these students were particularly scared about their year abroad, and perhaps more reserved or sceptical than others. Both had a good experience however, especially retrospectively, they are proud of what they have achieved. While Susanna caught the travel bug and wants more, Helen is happy to stay in the UK in the future. However, being scared at the outset does not necessarily mean that students end up 'having a bad time', and many still positively engage with the experience at many levels. In the sample 12 students said that they were scared or worried at the outset. Only Peter and Claire decided to go for the 'safer' full Erasmus option. Thus, being scared does not seem to influence their choice. Of course, the memory of the time before the course relates to a time 18 months before they were interviewed. Talking to second year students and their worries and choices may be

more fruitful. However, this was not explored in this project.

Thrilled with experience (13)

"the best year of my life. (Sonya)

"in Paris was probably the best six months that I'd had in a very, very long time." (Rosa)

"I think the experience as a whole was a highlight of the degree" (Dominic)

It was perfect (2)

"Yeah, no it was 100% positive, I wouldn't have changed anything." (Jo)

"This is what I mean, I think I had probably the best time of my life. I wasn't actually… I couldn't really fault anything." (Tom)

A positive attitude is important (2)

"I think making the most of everything as well and enjoying, trying to enjoy everything because you don't always enjoy everything, you can't do." (Anna)

"I mean I wanted it to be good, I'm a positive person, but it was wonderful, I had an amazing experience." (Jo)

Scared at the outset (12)

"Um, personal, well I was, I've got to admit, petrified about being abroad. I think from the day I started university the idea of going on my year abroad was very scary." (Susanna)

"I didn't want to do my year abroad at all, no, I wanted to buy my way out of it. Emma was like, no you've got to do it [laughs] you have to do it. [...] I just… like I said I didn't want to go on year abroad. It sounded like a really good idea when I was applying to Uni when I was 17, but then I turned 20 and I thought, I don't want to do that anymore [laughs]." (Helen)

The achieved level of enjoyment appears to be a personal measure of how successful the year abroad was. The enjoyment factor appears to be linked to social interaction. Thus it might be important to make – especially Erasmus – students aware that extra-curricular activities are part of the learning experience so that they seek opportunities to 'have a good time' together with speakers of the local language. If extra-curricular activities were in some way or another considered in the assessment process, perhaps students might make more of an effort to be adventurous and step out of the secure international group. While enjoyment cannot be assessed, it aids motivation to learn, and may have to play a role in expectation management as discussed in section 6.

Cultural and intercultural learning

The students in the sample reported that cultural and intercultural learning (18) were further important outcomes of their year abroad. I divided references to relevant learning into a number of subcategories. The aspect most mentioned was a reflection on culture, or a comparison between known cultures or ways of being that could be defined by intercultural learning (11). Another category included references to cultural understanding (small 'c'):

getting to know how a country operates, including practicalities and university or work life (10). Some students reported that they travelled which led to cultural insights (8). Some mentioned that they managed to fit into society and adapted to the life (6). A few (5) reported that they visited places of interest such as museums, sights and exhibitions, or attended cultural events (capital 'C'), while a small number felt they benefited from content courses like history and politics to gain a better understanding of the culture (3).

Table 13: Types of cultural achievements

	Sources	References
intercultural, reflection	10	22
small c, understanding	10	20
seeing the country, travel	8	11
lifestyle, fit in	6	15
capital C	5	5
academic learning	3	4

In terms of the assessment, students report achievements in terms of gaining awareness of differences between countries and lifestyles, which means they reflect on differences and compare (*savoir comprendre*). This makes them understand their own culture better at the same time. Furthermore, they increase their understanding in terms of how a country operates on various levels, and how they can operate within this structure themselves (savoir faire). There seems to be an interesting dilemma for teaching assistants, since they represent their culture in their English classes, and as English teachers in the school, at the same time as they try to blend in and get to grips with the new culture.

Seeing the country by travelling around the country, as well as crossing borders, allows students to understand the geographical context and wider area of the region they are visiting. Eight students felt that the insights they gained from their travels was an achievement.

Intercultural learning (10)

 "quite consistently I had thoughts about the country where I was in and I was comparing it to Britain and also where I come from. [...] I think when I compare to when I first came t Britain it was a completely strange country and it was nice to know that when I came back it felt like coming home. Then I could see the negative things and the positive things about this country better than I did before. Even if I knew what they were or how to talk about [unclear – 00:44:13] you could definitely more clearly make the difference between France and Britain. (Sally)

"I mean when you're teaching people about Britain obviously you know where you're from and you understand your own culture, but in order to get very far in the other culture you have to be open to it. And I know that on the year abroad a lot of time I felt quite hostile towards British culture when you see the way things are done in other places. I think sometimes you think, oh hey my home country is more efficient in this respect, but I prefer the culture here. And that's kind of hard to balance both to remain passionate about your culture for the benefit of the children, but integrate enough to

function well in their society. Yeah I think it's definitely a learning process and I think by the time you leave you have understood it better than when you arrive. When you first arrive everything is a bit, you know, because you're immersed in their culture but you're still expected to um have input based on your knowledge of your own culture. (Dominic)

Small 'c', understanding (10)

"There's a strike going on at the Uni at the moment. People have been camping in the hallway since I got here, which I thought was just a myth about the continent that people didn't really strike. They do. " (Fiona)

"Yeah, just like learning… in France learning about how another system, another culture works. [...] Yeah, just experiencing different universities and getting an idea of how they work and things I think is the biggest achievement. (Hannah)

Seeing the country, travelling (8)

"Um, to go travelling every weekend all around the country and to Italy and to France, that was really wonderful, and I saw like all of Europe – I'd never been able to do that before." (Jo)

"In the second semester I managed to organise it that I had Friday and Mondays off, which was kind of a strategic move and which was very… it worked very well because what I would do, once I was more confident with my Russian I travelled a lot around western Russia. And in my second semester I don't think I was home for one weekend. [...] I went to Moscow two or three times and I went to a number of other Russian cities to visit friends or just to go and see what it was like." (Charles)

Many students reported that they became aware of cultural differences while they were abroad. In terms of the assessment, this analysis of and reflection on cultures which students appear to engage in any way could be used as a topic for a special study, or an oral exam. This may sharpen the students' analytical focus and structure their thinking regarding intercultural awareness and cultural difference. In the conference there was a general question mark over whether cultural and intercultural learning can be assessed. From this follows that it may make more sense to focus on critical thinking and evaluation skills rather than on intercultural skills or cultural knowledge.

Social integration

Students in year 3 and 4 reported social interaction with local people as an achievement (10). This included relationships in shared accommodation, work places, clubs and other situations where the students met members of the host society and gained access to new intercultural networks. Students in year 2 identified social integration as an expectation they had of the year abroad. In the conference it was a recurring theme, indicating that social integration or interaction with native speakers is in fact a major goal, since it is a means to practice language and gain insights into the host culture. While, I list it here under student learning I discuss this important point in section 7.

Building relationships as an achievement

> "Um, I made quite a few good friends as well from… mostly from France also I still keep in touch with some of my colleagues from Munich as well. Um, so ultimately I mean that's really been an important factor." (Andrew)

> "when we were together we got on most of the time, which I suppose maybe counts as inter-cultural, I don't really for two cultures getting on well [laughs]." (Dominic)

> "Um, and for my personal experience, my best memory of the year abroad is kind of integrating, not so much in Italy but a lot in Spain into kind of the cultural and society and all that." (Peter)

> "Um, I expected to make a lot of friends, I expected to learn a lot about the business that I went into, which I did, an incredible amount." (Hannah)

Social integration is linked to enjoyment and also appears to be a personal measure of whether or not the year abroad was a success. Social integration is further important for emotional and practical support as well as in terms of in linguistic and cultural gains. The former can be provided by an international or English-speaking group, whereas for the latter access to local-language speakers is required. Especially those on Erasmus study exchanges often find it difficult to find access to the second group. This could be referred to as the 'Erasmus dilemma'.

It appears that social integration or interaction is treated as an implicit objective that is however a necessary precondition for students to socially engage with the host population. This important issue also remains implicit in Coleman and Parker's list of objectives mentioned above. This will be a recurring theme in this report, and there may be an argument that it may need to take a more prominent role in YA preparation.

Research skills

Given that many students are expected to conduct a research project during their year abroad, it could be expected that in the process students acquire research skills, such as ethnographic, interview or archival skills, as well as critical analytical skills. However, the question arises as to whether students are properly trained to embark on this. In the conference, Munyangeyo[19] pointed out that retrospectively only 57% of students who embarked on a research project felt they were prepared for this. He further questioned as to whether making written material available to students may work, since students need time to consolidate information. Some universities have opted for research methods or ethnographic training. However, in Bath students seem to often embark on the year abroad with written guidelines on how to conduct research. Further views on written assignments

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[19] http://coursecast.bath.ac.uk/CourseCast/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=687093e8-df10-4e41-a92e-fd5a30856ec6

are discussed under assessment instruments in section 10.

> "And I don't know whether the students get enough training because we don't have anything like sort of how to write an essay, but kind of in pieces in each unit […] we haven't got anything, any units of sort of academic skills, we don't do anything like that. (tutor H)

Implications for assessment

From the above, it appears that we must continue to emphasise the commonly agreed objectives of linguistic and cultural gains. However, this alone may not suffice, and we need to stress how these objectives can be met. Thus, I argue that, additionally, the *processes* of how these outcomes can be achieved should be stressed with equal emphasis. These objectives and processes need to be clearly communicated to the students, and the students need to be adequately prepared. As discussed below, this may require students to take greater agency in that they could formulate their own goals and consider strategies of how they are going to achieve them.

5) Institutional support for learning

Student views on support, feedback and reflection

In the interviews students were asked about the preparation process before they went abroad, the support they received while they were abroad, any feedback they were given while or during their year abroad, and in what way they had opportunities to reflect on their year abroad in a formal or informal way.

Preparation

Some students were of the opinion that the preparation, or aspects of it, provided by UoB was adequate (16) and some thought that it, or aspects of it, were not adequate (8). Those who felt it was adequate were happy with the information they were given, and they were aware of a number of preparatory events, such as general and more specific meetings offered by the ESML department. Problems identified by the students included the opinion that they had not sufficiently developed their spoken language by the time they went abroad, and that country-specific seminars only covered EU countries but not areas outside, like Switzerland or Mexico. Furthermore, some students felt they had no adequate preparation in terms of practical things such as finding accommodation, registering with authorities, and enrolling in university courses. However, some of those who prepared to go on work placements (7) said how much they appreciated the placement officer as a source of information and help in the preparation process.

Those who did a teaching assistantship had preparatory seminars offered by the British Council that they found useful, and which appeared to include practical sessions, as well as discussions and English teaching tips.

General preparation was adequate

"And I found… so in general I found the support from the university was fantastic and led me to getting an amazing job through the website and having the best year of my life. So yeah… [...] I felt we did because we had like workshop – which you probably know about – which I can't remember but it was like half a day, or a few hours certainly and they really did outline everything. Everything was really clear and yeah, in both year 1 and 2 we had loads… I think university if very good outlining what they want." (Sonya)

"At the beginning of the year it was more general thinking about all the options, Erasmus and Introduction to work placement. And then you narrowed it down and I went to about three meetings about the assistantship, how to fill in the application forms and a bit more sort of general um tips and things. And then one I think towards the end of the year sort of just to say, right off you go sort of thing. Yeah, they were useful." (Susanna)

"so I think yeah, I think Bath did as good a job as they could have done to prepare us." (George)

Preparation by placement officer

"And um, I mean for when I did the work placement, Emma Searle is absolutely fantastic, really, really helpful. [...] I think there's the most help for work placements because you have a specific person, Emma Searle who you go to and she does her job very well." (Lisa)

"No, I didn't need it. But um when I was looking for my placements we had Emma Searle our placement officer, and she was a great help" (Hannah)

Preparation was not adequate

Um, I could have probably put more effort into the spoken language before I went, but I didn't find it very easy. Because we don't speak much at the university, we don't have many spoken language lessons. That would have been quite useful I think." (Sally)

"But they didn't help me at all with Switzerland. There was a seminar for people going to France, there was a Seminar for people going to Belgium and for people going to Canada, but not a single once for Switzerland. [...] Yeah, and in terms of the Spanish section, again I didn't receive any help. I said… well I'm only going to have time to spend three months there, and they kind of said do what you want. So I said it's voluntary work again, and I asked them for help with websites for finding a job in Mexico – they couldn't help me." (Jo)

"the university basically gave us absolutely no indication of where to live, what to do, what course we'd study, how to do anything in Rome. The university pretty much gave us no help." (Tom)

"But um, I wasn't expecting that. I was told it would be easy. And then um we weren't told anything about the bureaucracy of Germany. And when we got we had to run round to the Bürgeramt, to banks, to this, to our student Ausweis, none of this I knew about. I didn't realise when I got here I've have to pay for anything, I thought Bath had it all covered. So um the first few weeks were very expensive and very scary. I suppose that's to be expected." (Fiona)

British Council

> "Um, I found… I think with the assistantship the thing is the British Council are very much the organisation that you're on contact with, it's not really the university. And it's them who sent me all the tips and all the sheets with everything I should take and all that sort of thing. [...] Oh yes, definitely. I was very impressed with the way that it sort of… yeah the preparation and things." (Susanna)

> "No they were really helpful. We had two seminars in Zurich where the language assistants gather together and show material and discuss how it's going." (Jo)

Suggestions for improvement

Elisabeth volunteered for a church in an EU country, and she had a training week together with other people who went volunteering internationally, including in Africa. She felt this was largely useful and relevant for her work abroad and this format could serve as a model for preparation for the year abroad. She was of the opinion however, that parts of her training were not relevant since working in an EU country or Uganda required different kinds of cultural training and awareness. However, she suggested that a weekend of preparation before the year abroad might be a good thing, but she thought it should not be compulsory.

A weekend of preparation

> "it was a lot of things about culture and about… so it was a Christian organisation so there was a lot related to that, but it was also practical stuff about how to go about being in different cultures and stuff, which wasn't as relevant to me, as I said, because France is as different as Uganda. But they took us away for a week and did that. […] I don't know how you would actually do it [offering this to all students], because I think, you know, definitely I don't think it should be compulsory. But maybe if they offered like some time in August or something, maybe like a training weekend or something for us I think it could be good, I think some people would do it. I don't know how they would do it because everyone's doing such different things. (Elisabeth)

Based on staff interviews, shortly before the year abroad practical things outweigh concerns about cultural and linguistic learning, and there was a complaint that students find it hard to take in all the information they are given. Two members of staff were of the opinion that students are told, for instance, that they have to engage with the world around them, and that the students should know, but that the information does not seem to sink in.

Information does not sink in

> "And I wonder how we can actually instil that into them. Because I can tell them… telling something to someone it doesn't work." (tutor J)

> "I don't think most students are ignorant of what the opportunities are, I don't think most students fail to realise what they ought to be doing, it's actually achieving it that's difficult. And here you give advice and they just don't take it." (tutor E)

Thus, the question resulting from this is how to impart information to students and give them the chance to consolidate it. Perhaps the time immediately before the YA is best reserved for practical things, whereas general learning and problem solving skills should be fostered earlier during year 1 and 2 (see section 9) to embed the YA better in the degree course.

Another point raised during the conference was that students sometimes do not attend Fresher's week at the host university, they should be made aware that there are benefits in attendance in terms of practical and social terms.

Institutional support while away

Students reported that they had various people in institutions that supported them while they were abroad. Many students, at least in theory, knew that they could call on UoB if they needed support in emergencies. However, some students felt abandoned on their year abroad. Support structures available to students differed depending on the type of experience they undertook: For work placement students these were mainly the UoB placement officer (7) and potentially from colleagues at work, even though this cannot be expected in all cases. For BC teaching assistants this was the British Council, colleagues at work and other teaching assistants. For Erasmus students the support structure consisted of the host university, which was not always perceived as helpful, and other Erasmus students. While visits are not standard in all language sections, those who were visited by tutors appreciated this, but did not feel it was strictly necessary. The social networks built while abroad, and support available from this, is not discussed here, as this overlaps with section 7 on social integration.

Good support from placement officer

"Um, well um while I was there, so Emma keeps in contact, um really nicely, she sends emails and stuff, so how are you getting on da, da, da, da, that's fine. Um, that was lovely." (Sonya)

"having Emma Searle as the placement officer was particularly useful, and she would ring us up every couple of months just to make sure everything was going okay and if there were any problems." (Andrew)

Good support available from British Council

"So no I felt really supported by them. I got daily emails from British council." (Jo)

"I don't know, the British Council sent regular emails with support for lessons, things that other assistants were doing and you could add something, you could say, oh this is… I did this lesson and it worked really well. There was support if you wanted it, like that." (Dominic)

Varied support from the work places

"Um, so I expected a lot more support from my employer in my first six months than I actually received, which was completely the opposite in Paris, I received a lot more support. [...] The company was extremely supportive and I was not expecting that." (Rosa)

"Well my main support network I guess was the school. [...] And I had a mentor in each school, so that was my main sort of support. And one of them in particular was absolutely brilliant." (Susanna)

"Well my only main problem was with my 'responsable' who looked after me in the school, and he was an absolute [pause] horrible person [laughs]. [...] Settling into the

school amongst the teachers was fantastic and there I really felt like I was part of the team there, it was lovely, it was absolutely lovely." (John)

Varied support available from host universities

"Yeah, in Germany. But Germany was fantastic. Like the reason why I didn't mention is probably because I took it for granted, the German support structure was amazing. They've got a whole team set up to deal just with Erasmus students." (Tom)

"Um, in Spain it was much better. [...] And the university was really well organised, really good for Erasmus students. Like we knew exactly where we were. They said, there's a meeting on this day, come in and we'll introduce you, give you an induction and stuff. Like gave us loads of information and stuff – really helpful. (Caroline)

"Um, so yes that was good but the host university didn't do anything in Rome and were absolutely useless. And the Erasmus office was tucked away in a corner where no one could find it for six weeks; like no one knew where it was." (Tom)

"Um, especially in France because, you know, offices are open for two hours in the week and there are big queues and people aren't necessarily very friendly to you either." (Claire)

Varied support from personal tutor

"And as I said, the personal tutors don't really make a huge effort with you. [...] I think the problem is though they have so many students that they maybe forget, and obviously they've got their own life here at university and they're busy and they forget maybe what you… and my personal tutor a few times forgot what I was even doing and yeah. [...] Emma Searle actually called us; she was the only one who called us. I think really that would have helped as well maybe if um… if maybe your personal tutor would have called you, maybe that might be a help." (Lisa)

"we were told to contact our personal tutor once we were settled and had a house, so I emailed her like a month later, I've only just found a house blah-blah-blah and doing this. I didn't get a reply so it was like, oh okay." (Fiona)

Visits as part of a support structure

"Um, when we were in Italy one of the lecturers came to visit us, which was really nice. [...] Yeah, so that was good and we felt we could talk to him about anything that was going on. [...] Um, it was just everything, it was just a nice… it's nice that they are sending someone out to check that you're doing okay really, it was just nice to know they're kind of looking out for you a bit. And obviously we could tell them if there were any problems and stuff." (Elisabeth)

"She came to… because another intern was having a problem with her company, so she made an emergency trip out there. We just saw them for a drink but that was nice. But I didn't feel like we needed any official someone coming out seeing how we are." (Sonya)

Institutional feedback

Apart from the placement officer, the UoB provides little feedback to students. The students reported that the project mark (special study) is the only feedback they get on the year abroad, and they reported that Erasmus grades get sent to Bath without further discussion. The only people who received formal feedback appear to be those students on work placement who were given a reference. The UoB placement officer sends employers a form which, according to student reports, some employers discuss with the students with the

students in the way of an appraisal. Teaching assistants reported that the children they were teaching indicated whether or not they liked their teaching. Further, some were recommended for private lessons, which was taken as positive feedback. Some students who worked as teaching assistants realised during the interview that it might have been beneficial to ask for a reference.

Feedback from UoB

"it was not from my personal tutor it was from the placement officer, who relatively speaking had a lot less to do with me than my personal tutor." (Rosa)

"The only feedback is your mark for your project that you do." (Lisa)

Feedback from host universities

"I didn't actually. Um, they said, okay here's your exam results, that's about it. [laughs]. (Elisabeth)

"I got my grades sent back to Bath and that was it." (Tom)

Feedback from work and teaching placements

"She gave me a stellar reference [...] In Paris I actually… I did so well that they gave me a very, very large bonus at the end of my internship because they were really appreciative of my work" (Rosa)

"I think on my very last day, we were able to sit down and look… not only discuss personal progress but also look at statistics and information about the work that we'd managed to do [...] But it was good to see the improvements that you made and it's quite tangible and exactly what you've managed to do." (Andrew)

"So I think the school were happy with me, they thought I was a good teacher, I had a lot of very positive feedback from my students. A lot of the students that I had on courses in the first semester signed up specifically with me. " (Charles)

"In fact it would be helpful if the university said, don't forget to ask places for references, yeah." (Jo)

Reflection and documentation

It can be assumed that those students who volunteered to participate in this research project were happy to reflect on their year abroad experience. Thus in this way this may be a self-selected group, happy to reflect at least in the interview context.

At Bath, there are various instruments in place that help students reflect and structure their year abroad before, during and after the year abroad[20]. These are discussed in section 10 in more detail. Currently, all these are paper-based exercises and they are optional

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[20] It must be added, and this is an important point, that on the feedback form students are asked what the university could do to improve the YA, but students are not asked as to what they could have done to make the YA more successful. This feeds into a culture of customer-oriented teaching, rather than autonomous or self-directed learning. This may also affect student satisfaction ratings if they focus on the service provided only, but not on their contribution to their own learning.

insofar as none of these are assessed, marked or form part of the assessment process. Students are encouraged to engage with these, but there are no sanctions if they do not.

- Before: Year abroad questionnaire (work placement)
- During: Progress reports (for work placement 2008/9, from 2009 for all)
- During: Log as part of year abroad handbook (all)
- After: Final report (all)

The fact that these are either voluntary or not-assessed means that not many students use the log, and the 2009-10 cohort only completed a small number of progress reports. Some reported that they started using the log but stopped quite soon. I found from the interviews that students either keep a personal diary – which they are unwilling to share with tutors – or do not record anything in writing at all, because they had never done this. There is no agreement among staff, some members of staff find reflection important, and others feel that informal and more haphazard reflection is sufficient.

Positive about reflection

"we must ask them to reflect systematically because otherwise I think we risk diluting the learning aims and objectives of the year abroad." (tutor H)

"So I'm sympathetic to these ideas but I think it has to be done properly and it's a hell of a lot of work." (tutor B)

"Well I think the [progress] reports, that is this idea that they're reflecting while they're actually having the experience and then can look back on this written… and I think that's a very important thing that we've introduced. I think at the moment it's not working very well, but I think it could work well." (tutor J)

Reflection happens informally

"I imagine that the reflection process does happen sort of without formalising it in that talking about one's year abroad, I'm sure they will talk about their year abroad in their oral classes with each other, with their teachers" (tutor F)

Students are keen to talk

"I think generally they're very keen to talk about the whole process and we possibly don't give them enough time to do that in sort of classroom situation, I don't know." (tutor I)

Debriefing

In ESML there is no coherent debriefing process in place. When students come back from their year abroad those who did BC assistantships usually have debriefing sessions with the British Council. Those who did work placements have a debriefing session with the ESML placement officer, those on Erasmus have the option of discussing the YA with their personal tutors, but there is no requirement to do this. A group of students would have welcomed the opportunity to reflect on the year abroad on their return: 8 students felt positive about actual or potential debriefing after the year abroad. In contrast, three felt there

was no need for this. Some of those who had the opportunity of a debriefing session found it useful. Two students spontaneously mentioned that they appreciated the interview I conducted with them as an opportunity to think about the year abroad in a more structured way.

Reflection was useful

"but I know for work experience Emma Searle organised this herself and it was really nice to get together and really felt like you could speak about your experiences and everything. " (Lisa)

Reflection would be useful

"Um, and actually, and we talked about it quite a lot, like I said actually a debriefing would actually have been a very good idea to have something like that." (Claire)

Appreciating structured review

"it's the first time I've had a chance to actually talk about everything, yeah. […] you know, rather than just say, well I did this I did this, you're asking me questions and I'm… yeah I'm really thinking about it actually." (Jo)

"Yeah, it's strange I've kind of… I suppose it's stuff I've thought but I've never really um you know, sort of I didn't really think about it and talked about it." (George)

No need for debriefing

"Um, I mean I don't think it's necessary to have this formal debrief of your year abroad because I think everyone's aware of what they got out of it." (Sonya)

"Do we need a debriefing? I didn't feel like I needed a debriefing." (John)

Members of staff are of mixed opinions. As mentioned above those students on work placements have a debriefing session with the placement officer. This is done in groups of 15-20. They are invited to talk about any negative experiences, and the placement officer is of the opinion that this session renders such experiences more relative by discussing them in the group. The IMML programme was mentioned, since they do an afternoon debriefing session at the end of their YA. Indeed, one of the IMML students interviewed appreciated the debriefing session, and felt it brought the class together by sharing experiences, and that this shared experience helped to create a cooperative climate in the class. Thus, reflection may not only help individual reflection but also foster peer-support

Reflection as part of the 4th year

"And that forms quite a big part of discussion in the fourth year classes, so in terms of talking about things that are directly relevant to their studies that will happen anyway in their classes. You know, there will be an opportunity to do that. And in terms of talking about the kind of more personal stuff, I imagine… well I'm sure that they do, do that with their friends as well. So I mean, you know, I don't know whether it's really necessary to kind of formalise it like that. […] I'm not kind of entirely convinced that it needs to be implemented really." (tutor F)

IMML

"When you come back you're happy to share experiences, and you feel like you have something else in common. And this makes a class into a very good class […] Yes we

all get along, and I think the YA had a big role to play in that. [unclear 0:25:50] There is no competition and we always help each other" (Jacob IMML)

"when they come back there's a whole afternoon's debriefing where they're broken into groups and do various things. […] and maybe we need to contemplate something like that for MLES and language and politics. […] we started the IMML year abroad debriefing by inviting students to reflect upon that question before they went abroad and then to revisit it and then discuss it when they got back. And in those days it was quite low key and it was discussed with just the placements officers, whereas now it's a much bigger thing, and maybe we could look at taking that kind of model for the year abroad in MLES." (tutor C)

Organisation of year abroad

Students were not particularly asked about the organisational side of the YA, but a number of members of staff had opinions on this. As Jim Coleman said the only constant in YA research is variability[21]. This also applies to what tutors offer to students. One member of staff was clearly unsure as to what they are supposed to deliver, while others are very clear. There was also the view that personal tutors should not be involved in debriefing of the YA, because they may or may not be involved in the YA process. This leads to the suggestion that there should be a YA officer who is in charge, who would be the contact person for all year abroad students. YA officers find it hard to accommodate the YA work besides their other academic commitments. There is also the argument that students who do different types of experiences in different countries have to talk to different YA officers, this leads to duplication and requires much time-consuming communication between the officers. YA officers also do this job for a limited period. This means that once the process is made efficient and smooth, a new person takes over, who has to learn the ropes. There is the view that section coordinators should not be involved in ECTS conversions. And it is suggested that an administrative person, perhaps an overall YA officer, should take charge of this and the YA support.

Tutor responsibility

"I think they're probably quite unsure about the role that we play to be quite honest. Probably in the same way that we're a little bit unsure about what we should be doing for them as well." (tutor H)

"you can't rely on personal tutors to do it uniformly, whereas year abroad officers have a specific duty as it were, and in practice they're people who are best able to give advice on the practical things. […] Because effectively the placement officers act as personal tutors, they act as that.[…] I would want to see the year abroad officers doing this systematically, but that means they need to have more hours to do their jobs, so that's also a resource issue." (tutor E)

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[21] http://coursecast.bath.ac.uk/CourseCast/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=b0429c58-a331-494e-bde0-eedccbb1182f

"We need a year abroad administrator, we've been trying to get one and it's just not been happening. [..] but even a year abroad person would actually be a good idea, academic I mean, someone who is just in charge of the year abroad and make sure that everything… because it's not just about when they are on the year abroad, it's also before." (tutor J)

"And the thing is in my case it's only part of my job, it's not my whole job. If it was my whole job I could provide the support that she [the placement officer] provides, but it's not my whole job." (tutor J)

"the other problem that we've had is that Erasmus officers change every three years, I mean [unclear – 01:01:23]. And you know, every three years they've got someone new has got to learn the job, and the first year I didn't have a clue what I was doing." (tutor J)

"I don't see why section coordinators' time is taken doing that conversion, it's an administrative activity more than an academic activity – it's number crunching basically." (tutor C)

Another theme that emerged from the informal conversations with staff as well as in the conference was that all universities maintain year-abroad booklets or information for students. There is an argument that an interactive e-platform may be more suitable.

Implications for assessment

The difficult nature of the year abroad is that it is envisaged that learning happens through 24/7 immersion in a culture, rather than just in an educational context for a few hours of structured learning a day – as it has been the case for most of the students' educational career. During the YA, the private and public become blurred. This means that the year abroad is a unique learning context, which poses problems in terms of what the students are supposed to share with their home university and what are private experiences. To this end, students might have to be made aware of this blurred situation, and the benefits of maximising informal learning ought to be stressed. Perhaps students should decide which aspects of the year abroad should be assessed so as not to infringe on their privacy, since these boundaries may be individual.

The YA information day and the information imparted in EU country-specific session was welcomed by the students and helped a number of students to adequately prepare for their stay abroad. However, some members of staff felt that information given is not taken in. The placement officer is highly appreciated by many work placement students, and it would probably be beneficial if the services of a placement officer were available to all year-abroad students. Furthermore, two preparatory pieces of advice may help students find their feet upon arrival in the country. These are that they should establish individual contact with previous students prior to their departure, and that they should travel to their destination early enough to sort out practicalities, while they could take advantage of pre-sessional language courses where possible.

Among those who talked about support, there is a consensus that the UoB placement officer and the British Council offer reliable support, appreciated by all. However, all other support structures cannot be relied upon, since in some instances they work well and in others they work less well. It appears that Erasmus students have the least reliable support available, especially if the host university makes little effort to accommodate them. From this I conclude that Erasmus students should be offered a source of support they can rely on, such as the services of a placement officer. While visits by tutors may be welcome by students, they are not seen as essential.

While Erasmus students were given grades for assignments in the way of feedback, many work placement students could count on qualified feedback on their work progress, as well as on a mark for their special study. The students particularly appreciated feedback that was given in the format of a work appraisal with their employer, based on the form provided by the UoB placement officer. Teaching assistants had instant feedback on their work from the students and indirect feedback from colleague teachers. However, feedback other than that generated through university assignments were not taken into consideration for the assessment of the year abroad. Perhaps, work appraisals and British Council feedback should be integrated into the assessment process. It might be beneficial to find a way of incorporating the extra-curricular activities of Erasmus students or indeed all students into the assessment process.

6) Current and potential assessment instruments

This chapter discusses assessment instruments. They include formative and summative as well as tutor- and student-led assessment methods. The boundaries are not always clear and some methods are based on a combination of the above.

As discussed in section 2, summative assessment instruments are those that lead to a grade which informs the formal evaluation of the overall degree performance. There are usually one or two such assessments per module studied. This means that in year 1 and 2 students normally have 6 summative assessments a year (assuming they take 3 modules a semester). Formative assessment provides students with feedback on and direction in their development without counting towards a final mark.

First, I report problems identified by students and staff with the current assessment model at UoB, before I evaluate individual methods and what role they could play in an assessment for experiential and autonomous learning.

Problems associated with the current model

Some students (6) felt that the current assessment process is neither fair nor consistent. Some of them felt students can, if they choose to, take it easy on Erasmus study placements. While some find that to work fulltime and to write a special study at the same time is a lot harder. However, students also identified a difference between teaching assistance, which is fewer hours, and a work placement with a company. When comparing Erasmus with teaching assistants some students feel that doing both, teaching and writing a special study, cannot be compared to the requirements of Erasmus study, which is seen as a lot easier. When asked how they would like to be assessed, year two students agreed that they did not want to be assessed by a written assignment.

Assessment as a reflection of the learning outcome (18)

Ten out of 18 students who wrote special studies felt that this piece of work did not or only partly reflect what they have learnt. In contrast, some were of the opinion that the special study reflected what they had learnt (4). The latter felt it reflected what they learnt about the topic they chose, which reflects the cultural side of their year abroad. However, they found it did not reflect the work side. The assessment of their work placements is discussed in the section on the special study below. When asked about whether or not Erasmus grades reflected what students have learnt, some Erasmus students felt it did (4). It is notable, and perhaps not surprising, that those students who had good grades in the special study or in Erasmus study tended to find that the marks given reflected their learning. Students reported problems or raised questions regarding a number of aspects which are discussed in this section:

- Comparability of assessment methods
- Various problems with written assignments
- Question of creative assignments
- Assessment by Erasmus partner institutions
- Question of oral examinations
- Portfolio/reflection
- E-platforms

Special study does not reflect what I learnt (10)

> "Because my special study is not going to reflect in any way how I spent my year abroad" (Rosa)

> "I don't think an essay on that topic can really show how much I progressed in the year and how well I did and how hard I worked. " (Hannah)

Special study reflected what I learnt (4)

> "Well if you choose a subject that's related to your job then that… for me it definitely reflected." (Sonya)

> "well it's a good way of assessing how you… what you've learnt about a particular culture I suppose but on the other hand I don't think it takes into account the work that you've done." (Andrew)

Erasmus grades reflect what learnt (4)

> "In Spain I was happy as a result and I think um my language did improve and especially in like the grammatical and things the way they taught it, and I think that was reflected in like the marks I got I was quite happy with, so in that situation, yeah." (Caroline)

> "I think to be honest, I think it's a good way to do it to take the grades from here because obviously it's showing how we've adapted to university life here." (Fiona)

Comparability of diverse assessment practices

The special study is seen as a relatively difficult assignment, in which it is harder to get a good grade. In contrast, some Erasmus students reported that it is relatively easy to do well as an Erasmus student (3). Additionally, the exams taken at host universities are not necessarily in the local language but also in their second language. Furthermore, rigour in terms of exams may not apply to all Erasmus partner universities, since one student observed that it is easy to cheat. Furthermore, students reported that in Erasmus options it is possible to gain maximum points, which is perceived to be much harder when writing an essay at Bath. Some of them also admit that students can and do choose options because they are easy. Thus it is maybe not surprising that they perceive the system as fair or at least unproblematic, since they fared well with it.

There were other positive voices about the current assessment process. Two students felt the assessment process was fair, mostly on the basis that people knew in advance what they were expected to do and that students had a choice in what they wanted to do.

Staff agreed that there was an element of inequality to the assessment process, but that this could not be avoided to a certain extent. They also felt that some students focussed too much on fairness. The variability between programmes was also mentioned in the conference, but the choice was not questioned. Kings College London, however, strongly encourages all students to do a teaching assistantship or an Erasmus student placement based on the fact that they want the students to continue their academic development.

Not fair (6)

> "And in that respect I feel a bit sorry for the people who did work placement or assistantships who did this big essay, and really I think they probably worked a lot harder for that one essay than I did for my entire kind of year. And they… I think it's much harder…" (Emma)

"Just because I think it was unfair actually like to judge a whole year on 3,000 words, 4,000 words." (Hannah)

"the main issues are the assessment. The assessment needs to be so much more consistent, and it really isn't consistent." (John)

"The students are always obsessed with fairness […] But I'm fully aware that there are disparities. We have tended to brush this off by saying, look that's life; the students always have the exaggerated [unclear – 00:42:25], it's a child's view of how life must be perfectly fair. And it's one of the occasions where you realise life isn't perfectly fair and [unclear – 00:42:34]." (tutor E)

"You're getting a different kind of year abroad experience depending on whether or not you go and study in a university or whether you take a job. So clearly the way in which that is assessed academically has to differ because they're the activities that the people are undertaking. They might not like that but I'm afraid it's a fact of life." (tutor C)

Work placement is harder than assistantship (1)

"on a work placement there's a lot more work to do and I think it might be unfair that a work placement person has to write exactly the same study as a person doing a teaching assistantship." (Tom)

Teaching assistantship is harder than Erasmus study (1)

"oh, my best friend works as a language assistant, and they are working and have to do the special study or an extended essay, which is MUCH more than I have to do. Even though, yes I have to study but students have much less to do. I think it's very unfair. (Jerry)

Erasmus assignments are easy (2)

"Oh I know in my French, I did French, which was being a bit lazy doing a bilingual one. Um, but I thought why not why not. [...] in Germany for example most of our… there's one or two of us that because our Italian was much better most of our assignments in Germany were in Italian. So quite a lot of my um grades, all the grades that I got were from Italian lessons." (Peter)

"I haven't seen them divided so I don't know what I got in France and what I got in Germany, but I got an incredible mark, based on what I did because I would be the first one to admit that in the last… especially in my second placement I really did the bare minimum.[...] Um, and also I don't know if anyone's mentioned to you – probably not honest enough – how exams work in France. It's so easy to cheat, and everyone cheats. I couldn't believe it. (Emma)

Assessment is fair – students know in advance what is expected (2)

"Yeah, because you know before you go into teaching assistantships and before you go into work placement what's expected of you." (Tom)

"you obviously make the final decision, it's your choice. You know what you're going to do and we're all adults now so you know, just deal with it. I think it's all fair, I think, yeah definitely." (Peter)

Erasmus study grades and Bath essay grades cannot be compared (1)

"… I did my English literature exam and I got 30 out of 30, um, I revised a lot but I'm not you know, I was no professional on Wordsworth or whatever it was. Um, it was in Italian obviously, but um yeah just [unclear – 00:18:59] a bit too much but I'm not gonna complain. " (Peter)

Implications for assessment

There seem to be two major problems, one is that the assessment process is seen as unfair or not reflective of student learning, and that the different ways of assessing students do not provide consistency, since the assignments are marked by different institutions and present students with different degrees of challenges. However, the members of staff interviewed felt that the students focus too much on fairness. In the interviews some students felt that students had a choice and that this was fair. This indicates that if students are able to consider this choice as different opportunities between which they can choose the one that is most suitable for them, and which is most able to support their learning goals, the element of unfairness identified may not be ideal but acceptable.

It seems that some Erasmus students feel their learning takes place primarily at university – rather than also outside. This means that they treat their YA similar to their Bath student experience, where non-university related experiences are not necessarily considered learning, or at least not relevant to university. It seems that Erasmus students need to be aware that more learning can and should take place outside the classroom. Similarly, those on work placements, feel their learning in the work place is not relevant to their university course, since there is no formal recognition by the UoB, and the assessment is based on the written assignment only. The assessment structure may have to address this in one way or another. The language assessment through the ECFR may be one way of incentivising learning outside the classroom.

When asked how they would like to be assessed, one student spontaneously said: "not by written". One spontaneously suggested that an oral exam might be more appropriate. They felt perhaps a report by a native speaker in the country might be helpful, but others thought that this may be difficult in practice. The idea that the activities concluded abroad could be assessed was expressed, e.g. in the form of a work or study report. This was questioned by the view that people could lie about what they did in their YA dissertation if it was merely based on personal experiences. Another idea that was mentioned was a report system, where students would report regularly during their year abroad on the progress. It was mentioned that it should be compulsory, but not graded, this could be like a weekly blog on the internet. This however led to the comment that if it is not graded students might not take it seriously and not put any effort into writing it, and that some incentivising structure was required. In response to this one student said that "we're all over 18", meaning that students should be able to work without pressure of marks. The same student remarked that assessment of the year abroad was not really important, since outcomes of the year abroad become evident in the students' work in the 4th year.

Written assignments

Those students on work or teaching placements, as well as those on study placements outside the EU, such as Russia and Latin America had to write a special study (18) of 5000 words. The idea is that students decide their topics before they go away. However, many made up their minds while they were away or adapted their titles later. For the special study students have to identify a topic, formulate a research question and conceptualise and structure a research project from A-Z. This exercise can be compared with an under-graduate dissertation to a certain extent. However, they have to write this in the foreign language and while they are abroad, not in their customary study environment.

Students who spend one semester on work experience and another semester on Erasmus study are required to write a year abroad essay of 3000 words. This is normally guided by a number of set titles. The titles of the year-abroad essay had been changed for the 2009-10 cohort. Thus talking to those who wrote an essay was less relevant, since the cohort available as interviewees was assessed differently to subsequent cohorts.[22]

I included one student in the sample who wrote an extended essay. This essay appears not to have been guided by the 2008/9 essay titles, but more along the 2009-10 essay titles. Unfortunately, this single instance cannot provide guidance to evaluate the 2009-10 titles and their value in the assessment of the year abroad. But it can be said that the 2009-10 titles reflect the views of those who wrote a special study.

Themes identified in relation to the special study are listed here, these are discussed individually below.

- Aims and benefits
- Format and grading
- Topic choice
- Guidance and resources

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[22] Titles for from 2009/10:

1. What challenges doe the company/school/institution you work for face and what solutions can you identify?
2. What political issues have particularly affected your local community during your stay? How have local people dealt with these issues?
3. Have you come across a novel, film, play, work of art or exhibition during your stay that has proved to be controversial? Explain this controversy and offer an analysis of its national, regional or local significance.
4. Analyse the cultural differences between your host country and your own experience of the UK focusing on a particular area of your activity during your stay, for example communication in the workplace, attitudes to specific social issues or taboos, the role of the family, etc.

- Time management
- Academic vs reflective
- Quality

Aims and benefits

The students see the aims of the special study as doing independent written work that makes students engage with the foreign language and a topic that interests them. Benefits of the special study were that students felt they kept up with academia, reading and written language, while it provided them with an incentive to go out of their way to go to exhibitions, libraries, talks and discuss the topic with local people.

Aims

"of course they're assessing my language skills" (Sonya)

"I know that that was an individual project which I have to do by myself" (Susanna)

"it just gives you the chance to spend your own time focusing on one thing that you're interested" (George)

Integrational incentives

"so it meant that I had to go the libraries, I had to like get involved with other different people and work out what I wanted to do. So it kind of gave me some kind of guidance throughout the 9 months" (Helen)

"Yeah think I got um… I did interviews with some of the people I knew from church and a couple of others. [...] And so I went along there and got out some of their documents and stuff like that (Elisabeth)

"No I went to um a lecture given by um an author who I had been advised to read by my supervisor. So I didn't read his books but I went to this lecture. (Dominic)

Keep up academic work, including reading and writing

"if I hadn't done my special study I would have [done] no academic work. So I would have found it very difficult to come back to university and have academic work." (Lisa)

"So it kept up the academic side of things, but then also getting to grips with the language itself. [...] I went to the libraries and got more German sources and got really into the German that way. It's definitely helped my reading as well." (Helen)

Format and grading

As outlined above, language gain is seen as one of the main purposes of the year abroad, thus it is not surprising that some find it hard to understand that content is given more weight than language, when it comes to marking the special study. Furthermore, it was criticised by some that there was only one piece of work that constitutes the year abroad mark. The length of the special study (5000 words) was also an issue that was raised as problematic, since no longer pieces are set in the foreign language before students go a broad. So the special study is the longest written assignment in the foreign language with which the students will ever engage in during their degree course.

Grades for content, language or none?

"But to make it weighted that heavily on content when the focus of the year abroad is supposed to be language, doesn't make any sense to me." (Charles)

"You can get anybody to rewrite it, so I didn't… I don't know how you could improve it, but I think there are a lot of flaws in it. Um, I'm not even sure that it should be marked if I'm honest." (Helen)

Assessment on a single piece of work

"I didn't think it was particularly fair to mark my whole year on an essay, and maybe it's because I had such a good year and I probably would have got a very high mark if we'd been marked on our placements. But I just think, you know, there should be another way of marking us, because I don't think an essay on that topic can really show how much I progressed in the year and how well I did and how hard I worked." (Hannah)

Length

"5,000 words was an enormous amount of work in Russian. I think it wasn't unrealistic because it was… you know, we all did it. If they told us to write 10,000 words we probably would have done that as well, but it's a lot considering the longest thing that Russian student writes in Bath before he leaves for his year abroad is around 200 words. [...] And so to suddenly write 5,000 is I feel far too much, I mean it's just too much. [...] If they need some written work then certainly not 5,000 words, this is too much. I just don't understand." Charles)

"With this special study for instance, I have never, well the last time I wrote something long was in grade 10, course work 2000 words long. […] And in the end, well now I find 5000 words relatively short, since I had already thought about how to divide it all up, what to write, and it is not that much. Well I think this is quite ok as it is. (Nina)

Topic choice

Some students found it difficult to choose a question for their special study. And one student felt that the freedom of the title meant that some students could choose easier topics and some could choose more ambitious projects. Some – LP as well as MLES students – enjoyed engaging with a political topic in their special study. In some instances the topic was political *and* related to the work (e.g. Sonya), which the student in question found an ideal combination. Some students felt the special study would reflect their learning better if it related more directly to their work or teaching experience. However, one student felt that the special study allowed engagement with a topic that was not related to the work place which appears to have broadened the experience.

Some members of staff at UoB felt that those students who chose a topic of personal interest were better motivated than other students. Members of staff were split between a more academic and a more reflective topic. Some feel that it is a university course thus students need to develop their academic skills, and others feel a more reflective account helps the students develop their understanding of their own cultural positionality.

Choosing a topic was difficult

"Um, I think my problem was at some point that I didn't really know what to do. We were given free hand on what to write, and I found it really hard to choose it." (Sally MLES)

"That's a bit difficult, because you're choosing your question yourself. So you can make it easier or harder for yourself. Well I know for example that some… well I made it a bit harder for myself, because I'm writing about something political. A friend for instance is writing something about Linz as a capital of culture. In my opinion this is a lot easier. (Nina MLES)

"well the special study had to be something political or social and I was struggling to find something that was appropriate to fit in there" (Anna MLES)

Political topic unrelated to work was interesting

"I did mine on how the political role of Germany has changed since the unification. Was it since the unification? No it wasn't. No it was since the end of World War II [...] So it was interesting." (Helen LP)

"My special study was about the disappearance of French in Quebec society [...] which made it very interesting. [...] So I guess it was interesting and it was a topic I was interested in and I really got into it. And when I sent it off I actually missed it." (John MLES)

"my topic was um… I know how to say it in German… um 'Warum sind die Schweizer so Europa-feindlich?' [...] And I really, really, really enjoyed the topic [...] and it was just a really good topic and I really enjoyed doing it." (Hannah MLES)

"German-Polish relations, and how they have changed after Poland joined the EU […] and that works out quite well really" (Nina MLES)

"I basically wrote 5,000 words about the Crimea and the situation in the Crimea." (Charles LP)

Would have preferred topic related to work

"I think so and I would personally have loved to have done so [...] yes I love the idea [laughs]." (Anna MLES)

"it is quite a big deal, you know, teaching children English, and I think that my assessment should have been more on that rather than a random cultural aspect of French language [...] maybe a project that was more linked to what I was doing at school would have been more beneficial. And also would have shown what I got out of it personally a bit more I think." (Susanna MLES)

Topic related to work was interesting

"Well if you choose a subject that's related to your job then that… for me it definitely reflected. And looking at other people who did their year abroad essays, I mean they were all somewhat related to um their jobs or an interest that they developed through the year abroad. So I think it's a good way of seeing what you got up to." (Sonya)

Work-related may not be better

"But maybe I should have done something more relevant, of the education system in Quebec or um the teaching of English in Quebec. [...] And I think if I'd done it on education maybe I'd have been a bit bored of education. If you do your essays on the same thing, the same topic will drive you insane. And if you're writing about something that you're doing at work it would be a bit boring I think." (John)

Motivation based on interest

"Because I don't think they're very motivated about it. The good ones are when they're interested in it […] And so I think it's to do with motivation, it's to do with not really knowing what to choose often, so they choose… yes they choose subjects which they're not interested in, which is a stupid thing to do when you've got total freedom of choice – well not total but you've got a lot of choice there." (tutor G

"There aren't any set questions there so that again you know, I suppose you expect that they choose something they're interest in. That element of engagement, it should be there." (tutor H)

Academic vs reflective

"the only thing is that it shouldn't be a diary type of thing about what they do at work […] if they work for a company in Germany let's say also write something about the culture of work, you know, what comes across in terms of in the personal relations or cultural… managerial cultures or things like that. So it still has to be an academic piece of work, that's the only thing I want to say, you know, it's not a kind of reflective report on their experience of work." (tutor A)

"I think one of the reasons we have the special study in place for those on work placements is that they don't lose contact with that academic side of things totally as well, that they do read a book during the year and things like that." (tutor G)

"What I've tried to do with those students is to encourage them to write what we call a special study on a topic which is related to their educational experience. […] The special studies on the whole, the ones I've supervised have been good pieces of work where the students, and I personally always as I said encourage students to do these whether they are assistants in a school or do other things, but I do always encourage them to do something which can be original, where you can put your own… you can have your own input where you talk to people, you interview people, you prepare a mini questionnaire that you distribute among fellow students or whatever, do something that taps into the way of life of that country, its culture, its politics, etc. And those are the special studies. Sometimes you know, we do find students go there and then they're a bit lost, and so, you know, the correspondence with us is important at that stage, you need to guide them, you need to say to them, what about trying to do this rather than that, if you haven't found enough material, if you haven't got ideas about how to proceed in this direction try this other way, and so on, and so encourage them. If you want to do something political go to the local sections of the local parties, talk to these people in the party sections. You get to know people as well like that, which is good." (tutor A)

Guidance and resources

Some felt that writing such a large piece of work without face-to-face contact with their tutors was a challenge, and some members of staff reported that students did not receive enough support to write the special study. There were students, however, who felt the contact with their tutors was beneficial and provided enough guidance to complete the task. Some had support from the work place or other local sources which did not just provide support for the writing task but also involved discussion with local people, who could also provide access to resources. Furthermore, students found resources through universities, especially those who studied in non-Erasmus countries. The latter had university libraries available to them, as well as time and the study environment to engage with such a project. Others struggled

to find resources due to the fact that they lived in a smaller town with small or no libraries, or that gaining access to university libraries was difficult as a non-student. A pragmatic approach taken by one student, when choosing a topic, involved consideration of the topicality of the subject in the society, of the knowledge that resources would be readily available and that it was based on personal interest or existing knowledge. Members of staff felt that students should use this as an opportunity to develop their research skills and that students should be prepared for this.

As regards research with people abroad, I have ethical concerns regarding this, since students appear to go off without training or awareness of any harm they could cause to participants, in terms granting anonymity, data protection, judging their way of life, etc. A quote from a student who wrote the special study on Latin American topic illustrates this concern. This student interviewed "peasant men and women" about gender roles. Without having investigated this particular case further, it appears that this student had a normative Euro-centric and perhaps middle-class stance with which she approached this research. It would have been helpful if he/she was more aware of his/her own cultural baggage and world view. However, closer inspection of this situation may show that the student has approached this situation in a culturally sensitive way. However, the fact that reference is made to "peasants" implies some stereotyping and judgements.

Remoteness of tutor was a problem

"So you formulate your own question and then you have to check that that's okay. And then you do all your research by yourself and um in contact with your tutor, who wasn't really helpful to be honest, um and then um you… [...] Um, especially the project tutor I would get, you know, one email, one line emails, yes it's fine, [unclear – 00:31:02] but then again they are busy. " (Lisa)

"Like it was… we didn't get very much guidance at all in what to do, but I mean it was there if we wanted it, but it's hard if you just think by email, like obviously you can't actually see them face to face. So it was only by email and there's only so much you can do really for that [...] well I had to do it all on my own and I didn't really have any support to do it" (Elisabeth)

"I think that the special study is a nice way because I think it's the one piece of longer work that they actually do but they're not getting enough supervision probably. They're not getting enough help." (tutor B)

Support from the tutor was beneficial

"I started it… I remember I initially thought about it and I remember emailing my supervisor a month into… just after having settled, a month into my time there. And it took a while for the title to evolve and to have a plan. There was a lot of communication between Peter Lambert and myself which I was very happy with again. He was very supportive. " (Anna)

" And then when I was writing my special study my tutor was the advisor for the special study and so I used to email her about three times a week from April onwards pretty much just asking her for advice, you know, check this bit, what do you think of this bit. " (John)

"Until it came to the year abroad essay and then I had constant support from my essay tutor which was really wonderful." (Jo)

Support from local people

"Yes, they also said they would be happy to help me. A colleague wrote his dissertation on how Germany and Poland work together within European regional policy. And that's great. Since this means that I've already got a book list, and this was my greatest worry." (Nina)

"And everyone was very interested in it. The company they were so many people who wanted to know about how my special study was going and if they could go through it with me. [...]And I had someone call me from Brittany to ask me about… to recommend any books because I had mentioned this, yeah that was really good. So that was useful. And that was another reason why it was useful to do it abroad." (Sally)

"And also I made a friend that went to, was it [unclear – 00:26:39] I can't remember what the university is, but then [unclear – 00:26:42] with her and then I got some university books out as well" (Helen)

Primary research including local people

"yes I had my… the experiences I could interview the locals and then with that you don't want to be rude, there's a cultural barrier, that's a lot going on." (Anna)

"Um, I also did a lot of work on the internet and I also did a survey among teachers." (Lisa)

Support was not necessary

"Well…yeah, we were recommended to be in contact with Bath, but I just got on with it and spoke to the tutor when I came back. I had it finished, yeah I was happy with it." (George)

Trouble finding resources

"And the practicality of getting, when the only library is in Montreal, isn't particularly practical. So um I guess that was the challenging part of writing a special study" (John)

"It was very difficult to write because I had no library and I had no books and it was… yes, not an easy job and something would have really rather not had to have done if it wasn't for the fact that it had to be done to fulfil the quota for the university, etc." (Anna)

"and they said I relied too much on internet resources, but how can you not like because you can't just… you haven't got a university close by, in which case you might have a town library but it's not going to have everything you want in it." (Elisabeth)

Support identified to gain access to resources

"Yeah. Um, I went to the library a lot actually. I went to the library, there are also a few media exhibitions." (John)

"That was just my project, and I used the resources there in the library and I talked to the lecturers. " (George)

"Um, just um because I wasn't at the university, I didn't really take the time to go to the university library, so all my books were um either ones that I'd happened to find through friends or ones that I'd bought. And um yeah, it was a bit haphazard" (Dominic)

"[the] board of films lent me lots and lots of films for free which were really appreciated, that was great." (Jo)

"Yeah. And I used the Bath… I used the Uni's library online sources, and that was useful." (Sally)

Choosing a topic based on feasibility

"It was something that I knew that motivated the people and I knew there was a lot of information available about, and I knew a little bit about already." (John)

Not adequately prepared

"But what we should try to be doing is to get them to use the year abroad as an opportunity for developing techniques in data collection above and beyond the simple going to the library or downloading it from the web. So it's about teaching them how to interact with people; it's about teaching them how to come up with a particular research question and apply it to a given case study within the framework methodology." (tutor C)

"I suppose it depends on the student and some of them, you know, don't have any clear ideas, they should have a topic and a supervisor before they go. It's not always the case, you know, they may have a vague idea of a topic but you know, they may have maybe a preference, I mean I'm not aware of that but they may have a preference for a supervisor, but I don't know whether they are equipped to choose really. I think it's the first time they can choose." (DM_10056)

"They have greater problems working independently I think and that's one of the problems, so you can see those students who can do a really good special study and the others are just lost, they have no idea how to structure it, even find a topic is a problem for them. […] I don't think they have… they're aware of the subject as an academic subject, they don't have any notion of what is culture." (tutor B)

Ethical

"I wrote it on the equality of the peasant man and the peasant woman, whether the peasant woman was… with, you know, us arriving in the 21st century, whether she was on a par with the peasant man. […] I could interview the locals and then with that you don't want to be rude, there's a cultural barrier, that's a lot going on." (Anna).

Time management

Many students reported that they found it difficult to juggle between, in some instances, full-time work of 40 hours a week and more, the social and cultural experiences and their special study. This is how many of them ended up writing their assignment either in the country of the other language, or at the end of their year abroad when they were back home. Some seem to be well organised and finished it while they were away.

Struggle to juggle work and special study

"at the time it's like the biggest step maybe that, you know, coping with all of your year abroad experiences as well as juggling that. I know some people felt that the whole idea of this essay should have been scrapped and maybe we should just have been, yeah, um… I don't know, maybe assessed in a different way. " (Dominic)

"So it's just so hard to dedicate any time at all to doing any kind of research. And I don't know anyone who started it before they came back from their placement. [...]I just… I was so involved in what I was doing there the last thing I wanted to have to do was write an essay of 5,000 words," (Sonya)

"So then I had to write it up in Germany, a different country, whilst I worked 40-odd hours a week, and that was really rushed at the end. Really, really rushed (Lisa)

Struggle to prioritise actual experience and study

"And I don't know, I always wanted… I wanted to do it to the best of my ability without a doubt, but I didn't want to leave it. And I wanted to do as much of it as I could while I was there, while I was living it, while I could see things for myself and draw upon experiences. (Anna)

"But I do wish I had done it earlier [laughs], like every single person I've spoken to says that, like if only I'd done it earlier, but I was having such a good time in Geneva I didn't want to write an essay [laughs]." (Jo)

Written when back home

"My true work really started I think when I was back at home here" (Andrew)

"And I don't know anyone who started it before they came back from their placement. (Sonya)

"I didn't write… no I did all my research, and I wrote about half of it while I was away, and then I came back to England and wrote most of it, well not most of it, but finished it off." (Susanna)

Writing while away

"I started that around February. [...] once I was in Mexico and I had free time in the evenings in Mexico so I went to internet cafes and I wrote it there. It was finished about two weeks before the deadline so it wasn't a rush." (Jo)

"I started work for my special study and research quite early on, so that gave me sort of something to focus on I guess in terms of Uni and things." (Susanna)

Quality of work

Quality issues were repeatedly raised by members of staff at UoB and during the conference. Speaking to teachers it emerged that students get different amounts of help with their writing from native speakers. While they are allowed to receive help with spelling and declinations etc., they are not supposed to accept other help with writing such as idiomatic language use, structure or content. According to teachers, some students produce work that they could clearly not have produced themselves. Thus currently language accounts for about a third and some teachers would like not to award any mark for language.

Quality

"I think my view is that it should be done differently and I think students should be given a list of questions […] they write something that's quite descriptive and empirical and not very analytical, which doesn't have that much scope for analysis. But it's not… it might not be that easy for the supervisor to realise that they're going to do that because, you know for example, I keep sort of stressing make sure it's an analytical project, but because they've got that kind of freedom I think it's quite easy for them to do a piece of work which is not really that, you know, it's not really what we want. Whereas if we were giving them a bit more guidance about the topics that they could do then it might be a bit easier to steer them into the kind of work that we want them to do." (tutor A)

"I suppose there are several problems, one is simply quality of stuff, it varies quite widely much more widely than other written work. the second is the problem of academic quality and students appreciating that it needs to be academic and they tend to write quite descriptive things which have little academic content and then get surprised that they don't get good marks for it. And the third is the cheating that goes on because of the difficulty of defining what help you can get and policing that. So there are very powerful reasons for us to abandon the written work altogether and once you [unclear – 00:34:12] I get inclined to say, we shouldn't be doing this. So written work is problematic. " (tutor E)

Written assignment for all

Some students (4) felt that one way of getting around the problem of the diverse assessment practices and the inconsistency associated with this might be a written assignment for all. Those students studying outside the EU attend lectures, do the assignments and write a special study or an extended essay. In this way their views may be of interest since their experience could be compared to that of Erasmus students, but they additionally have a written assignment. Of the students who suggested written assignments for all, two were Erasmus students (Claire, Caroline), one had been on a work placement (Helen) and one had studied in Mexico (George). In fact George who had been to Mexico was quite explicit in that for him/her the combination of university work and the special study worked well. Equally, Erasmus students can see benefits in pursuing a project while they are away to provide greater structure to their day and to provide opportunities to individually engage with members of the host society.

Staff at UoB felt that the additional workload would not allow for all students to write an essay while they are away. The argument is that tutors are dealing with incoming students and that the whole Erasmus idea is that the onus is on the host university. At other universities this is clearly less of a consideration.

The assessment at Kings College London, for instance, operates a complex assessment process, including exams on their return as well as oral exams and written assignments for all students. The written assignment include a press dossier 2-3000 words (synthesis of two texts), a commented translation (L1-L2 and L2-L1 of 600 words each) and for the teaching assistants an additional written assignment (2,500 words on a literary text). Students are also tested orally and aurally, this is described under oral examination.

Essays for all is fairer

"I would probably say that the most fair way would be for everybody to do the 3,000 word on a set title [...] I think probably that would be the easiest, the most fair way to assess it would be to do the 3,000 words for everybody." (Helen)

"I don't really see why… they [Erasmus students] surely should have to write something on Erasmus or maybe, you know, they should take one unit less and you know, spend the time they would have spent on the unit doing a special study. I think

everyone should really have to write either a special study or a short… at least a short one." (John)

Essays for all provides linguistic learning opportunities

"Um, how could it be changed? Um, I think I knew other people abroad who had to do about the same amount of credits or hours as I did, but also had to do a project for their university, and it wasn't huge but… and it sort of varied, it could be cultural or it could be… there was one university I think, I can't remember, who had to do a sort of grammar project, so it was very, very language focused. And I think… and they had to do it towards the end of their time there, so I think that was very good to sort of, yeah to focus their ideas and to focus their work on some language. Um, so I actually quite like that idea." (Claire)

Essays for all provides incentives for meeting people

"it would give you an objective to meet people. Because I think sometimes you just need a reason to meet some. So that might be a good idea, like doing some sort of project where you had to ask people." (Caroline)

"Because there's no reason why they [Erasmus students] couldn't do a special study. I mean you know, if you're at university you've got all the resources there you need to do it. […] yeah it's just the way the special study worked for me, I could just do it at my own pace and then in the meantime I had time to go travelling." (George)

Workload

"The Erasmus assessment again to an extent the Erasmus assessment was a way of reducing workloads for staff at this end, since the Erasmus students are generally swept up in what we're doing anyway." (tutor C)

Creative assignments

The special study leaves a lot of room to choose a topic. However, the form of an essay is prescribed. A couple of students mentioned alternative formats for a year-abroad project. Both were thinking of film, but one student also mentioned that creative writing, such as a diary-format. Domenici from Bristol University presented a creative element that was not assessed, but led students to explore the areas with open eyes. They organised a photographic competition for the best YA photographs and captions.[23]

Creative assignments

Well it's really hard. I mean I also thought couldn't there be something creative, but again that's hard to mark. Could I have done some creative writing perhaps that reflected my experience out there. Um, or made a film or documentary or something like that. But no it was you have to write a 5,000 word essay on something to do with your country. There wasn't any room there, but maybe that's a bit too creative for the lecturers to know how to mark because it's quite difficult to compare someone's 5,000 word essay and someone's documentary, by the staff. But that would have been nice to do something creative, I would have really enjoyed that. […] I would have loved to have written something, even a creative story about my experience, kind of making it into a little, I don't know, comedy or, you know, like a diary entry. But obviously it

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[23] http://coursecast.bath.ac.uk/CourseCast/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=ce5c36c6-63c6-4877-b62e-e17b92243e7d

would have to include my knowledge of the language and of the culture, but if that could be incorporated that would be wonderful, I think. (Jo)

Um, it depends how creative you would be. I know there was girl in France from Sweden and she actually made a film, like she was a film student and she made a film of her year abroad. Sounds crazy, but yeah. […] Maybe that could be the project rather than your special study. " (Lisa)

Implications for assessment

It seems that some students fare well with the current system and others do not. Any changes should support particularly those who are not able to identify a suitable topic, make not sufficient use of supervisor time, are not analytical enough or rush their work just before the deadline, rather than when they are in the country. In terms of quality there appears to be a problem with plagiarism and with accepting too much help from native speakers.

Based on the above, students should choose their topic on the basis that first of all they are enthusiastic about it and know that they can find resources and local support to write their study. It seems that some students thrive doing a political analysis, and others prefer a more empirically based analysis. It seems that students need a clearer understanding of what it means to be analytical, and what options in terms of data collection are open to them (archives, press, local people etc.). Thus a variety of topics could be chosen:

- **Work placements**: Political/cultural topics relating to their company or organisation.
- **Education sector**: evaluations of equality in the school system, working conditions for teachers, education policy, international exchanges;
- **Private industry**: work culture, trade union movements, working conditions, work-life balance, gender/race balance, role of EU other international contacts;
- **Voluntary work**: evaluation of development work, attitude to aid workers, problems addressed by aid organisations.

Especially politics students should be encouraged to choose a political angle if possible on their topic. Probably the open topic should be continued, but more individual guidance should be given to students to find a topic that suits their personal aims of what they want to get out of the experience, and they need to be clear about what is expected from them. The question arises as to whether it is appropriate for the students to write this long piece of work without direct access to a tutor.

One solution would be to have a research-based essay or presentation in L2 in the second year, so the students gain experience in writing an essay.[24] Perhaps this could be based on talking to students at Bath about cultural and political aspects in the way of YA preparation. This would have the added benefit that ESML students have to seek out Erasmus or foreign students at Bath and move out of their comfort zone, while increasing opportunities for foreign students and Bath students to meet. Further, the integrational aspect of the special study should be stressed, in that it has to be seen as an academic piece of work that makes students pursue a special interest of theirs.

From the above, I conclude that – if primary research with people is conducted abroad – training in social research methods may well be necessary before students engage in their special studies. A creative element may be a good idea but could perhaps not form part of a language degree.

ECTS grades awarded by host universities

Those students who do one or two semesters at one of Bath's Erasmus partner universities are assessed by the grades achieved through set course work at the partner institution. These get transformed into Bath grades and account for the entire year abroad, or 50% of the grade if only one semester was spent at one of those universities. In the latter case, the other half is made up by the year-abroad essay grade. This means that the final grade is made up by a number of assignments. If students choose to take more credits than required, tutors drop the worst results, and have the better ones count towards their final year-abroad mark. In this way the year-abroad mark is made up by a number of smaller essays and exams.

Those students who were pleased with their Erasmus grades felt the system is good and fair. As pointed out above, some felt fairness may not always be ensured, since they felt it is possible to achieve higher grades more easily through Erasmus study compared with written assignments set at Bath, such as the special study for instance. Some students managed to get the maximum grade, and some were a bit surprised by that. Some students had trouble taking their exams due to problems beyond their control, such as snow or illness. This means that their YA mark only consisted of the grades of one module, or were made up in some other way. There were also accounts of cheating, which appears to be customary, at least in one instance. Another point identified with the students was the apparently obscure process of transforming Erasmus grades into Bath year abroad marks.

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[24] I remember my own year abroad; I did not know how to write an essay and being in my 3rd year of my translation degree, and I was too embarrassed to ask for help.

In the conference, ECTS grades have been discussed controversially. On the one hand, the issue of comparability of academic rigour between partner universities has been raised. On the other hand, it was seen as a matter of trust between partner institutions that ECTS grades awarded are accepted and recognised by the sending institutions.

The University of Exeter has also recognised the problem of inconsistent marking across institutions, which does not allow meaningful comparison of achievements. Thus, they contemplated the introduction of a year abroad essay for all students. In order to make the assignment reflect their learning, Exeter requires the students to discuss one linguistic or cultural/intercultural aspect of their year abroad. It is felt that this discourages plagiarism, does not require resources and allows the students to reflect on their experience while they demonstrate their level of language or understanding of culture and their critical ability.

Higher grades can be achieved

"I did exams in Italy and they were… I don't know, it's weird, because I went to… I did my English literature exam and I got 30 out of 30, um, I revised a lot but I'm not you know, I was no professional on Wordsworth or whatever it was. Um, it was in Italian obviously, but um yeah just [unclear – 00:18:59] a bit too much but I'm not gonna complain." (Peter)

Exams not taken

"well a lot of our exams in January were cancelled, which is I guess it was snowing or something, so a lot of them were cancelled [...] I couldn't then do the exams that I was supposed to do in France, so I'd done like a couple in like during the semester which actually were for just one module but two exams, so in the end my average from France is just the average of those two exams." (Caroline)

"And Spanish I got 20 out of 30 and for the other exam I couldn't go because I was ill." (Peter)

Cheating in exams

"Um, and also I don't know if anyone's mentioned to you – probably not honest enough – how exams work in France. It's so easy to cheat, and everyone cheats. I couldn't believe it." (Emma)

Conversion of Erasmus grades

"Um, I've said it earlier, but I think it's interesting that our marks are sort of transferred without us knowing the process at all. So that would… if Erasmus marks carried on being a part of the assessment then it would be definitely good for us to be able to see how that happened." (Claire)

"So I don't know how these marks actually translated to the mark, the percentage mark." (Emma)

Benefits and problems of Erasmus study

Students enjoy having a different range of subjects they can engage with as Erasmus students. In this way they can study regional history or languages that are not offered by Bath, such as Chinese. Furthermore, they enjoyed the time they had besides their studies to explore and have a good time. For some, however, there was a bit too much unstructured

time perhaps, and some were even a bit bored. This meant in some instances that they stayed in international groups. One student did indeed take a job while he was away and had good experiences. While I did not investigate further why he took this job, and what benefits he derived from it, it was clear that getting a job in the first place created a sense of achievement, and allowed the student to gain an insight into German culture from a different angle. Furthermore, he/she was of the opinion that Erasmus students have enough time to pursue part-time work besides their studies.

Engagement with new subjects

"I was doing loads of lectures; I was able to study things which I wouldn't study here." (Hannah)

"In Berlin I did German language, French language as well and then one which was about the history of the DDR and one module which was um about Berlin history, which was really interesting." (Claire)

Time to do other things

"Um, I would say that we did have some time to like explore different places, so that was nice." (Caroline)

"But I think it's a really good idea that we didn't have to do quite so many because that gave us the time to do the sort of exploring and travelling and the meeting people as well as doing the work. So I was really busy but I actually really enjoyed having something that I was meant to be doing all the time. Um, and in Germany again um yeah, I liked um… I really used my time quite well in Germany I think because I had lectures in the morning and then I'd go off and explore Berlin or go to my rowing or do my work [laughs], so I think yeah… but I think it's definitely good that we didn't have too many… we didn't have to do too many hours in the university, so that gave me more of a chance." (Claire)

"We had 3 or 4 hours a day, 5 hours a day of lectures, and reading for it, but then we still managed to have a really good time afterwards." (Tom)

So obviously there were bits [study modules] that needed a lot of attention to, but if you did that over the course of the six months that I was there, like a bit a day you could… there was ample time to go out and party, wake up and then do a bit of work and then go out and party again, so… In Italy there seemed ample time to do everything. […] Um, the workload [in Germany] was slightly heavier probably because the expectation of the teachers was higher. Um, but again there was… most of the time there was ample time to do whatever you wanted to do and get your work done.

Too much time

"I like life as a student because I have a lot of free time, and even though I'm a bit bored at times, I have a lot of time to explore the area a bit." (Jerry)

"So we had a lot of free time actually, because the classes weren't that demanding and they didn't ask for that much work to be done, so we did what we had to do but it didn't really occupy a lot of our time, which in a way I guess is almost bad because the time that we didn't spend doing that or going to university we were just socialising amongst ourselves because we didn't really have anything else to do." (Caroline)

Prepare for PG study

> "doing a Masters did actually mainly come from my year abroad because I really enjoyed being in different universities and learning things in different ways and just learning more" (Claire)

Module choice

Subject choices are made by the students once they arrive at their host universities. MLES students are to engage in two language subjects, in each one of their languages, and in another module which is not of a linguistic nature. The students did engage with both languages while they were enrolled in host institutions. However, in some instances subjects of the other language appeared to dominate their choice, which meant that some only had little exposure to the local language at university level. Some universities run separate Erasmus courses specifically for Erasmus students. These are tailored for students whose first language may not be at the level deemed necessary to follow regular instruction. Thus some host universities appear to recommend that especially those students with lower levels of language enrol in such courses. Bath does not normally sanction these modules as non-language choice. In one instance, a student said that all the marks that counted for his Erasmus grade from Germany comprised Italian options. This gives rise to the question as to whether any of the three module options that are required (L1, L2 and content in L1) can be dropped in favour of any other course options, when it comes to making up the mark.

Choice of Erasmus modules

> "But in Germany for example most of our… there's one or two of us that because our Italian was much better most of our assignments in Germany were in Italian. So quite a lot of my um grades, all the grades that I got were from Italian lessons." (Tom)

> "in Italy I did Roman history, English literature and um Spanish. And in Spain I took like the history of Andalucía um with French and Italian I took and French literature I think, something like that." (Peter)

> "And I also took up Chinese which I'd also wanted to do, and it was an option in French." (Emma)

> "So we went to see our tutor and said, oh have you got any idea of what Erasmus students normally take, what kind of things, and she asked us what level we were and when we told her she just kind of said, oh you'll really struggle in these classes if that's what level you are, so I recommend you take these courses which are for Erasmus students. They were content courses but they were for Erasmus students, so I had Berlin history module, a Berlin literature module, which to us seemed okay, because they were content, they weren't language classes. " (Emma)

Study outside the European Union

Those students who study outside the European Union enrol in modules at the host university, do all the respective assignments set by that course, and have to write a special study or an extended essay, depending on whether they are away for one or two semesters.

Students assume that the grades given by the partner institutions in Mexico and Chile, for instance, are not compatible with the grades given in Bath, and they accept that they have to do a special study, which some feel is a good thing, because it makes them freer in their subject choice at the host university, i.e. they can choose subjects of study they are interested in without having to think whether they will be able to achieve a good mark.

Free to study based on personal interest

> "So um… I think… just personally I think it was a good way to assess the year because it just gives you the chance to do something that you really want to study and I think that's what the year abroad should be about instead of just doing more exams." (George)

Implications for assessment

From the student interviews it seems that some Erasmus students are instrumentally motivated when it comes to choosing study modules abroad, based on likelihood that they can get a good grade in the assignment. Erasmus students also appear to judge their learning outcome by the marks achieved. It seems that Erasmus students need a greater awareness of the learning potential of their experiences outside their university lectures and seminars. Perhaps Erasmus students should be encouraged to volunteer or take a part-time job while they are away.

Oral examinations

The students were asked as to whether they had any suggestions as to how the assessment of the year abroad could be improved. A number of students suggested that improvement of the language, including oral skills, which are discussed below, was the main aim of the year abroad and therefore this should be tested.

Four students spontaneously suggested that oral exams would be a good way of assessing the year abroad, recognising that it may provide an incentive to making an effort seeking out opportunities to speak the language. After the first two mentioned that oral exams may be an appropriate type of assessment, I asked those who did not spontaneously mention it as to what they thought about an oral exam after the year abroad. Of the 11 students thus prompted, seven felt this was a good idea to some extent.

When asked as to what they thought about oral tests after the YA, members of staff are generally not against the idea. However, they worry about extra work that could not be accommodated, since exams require two people of the right language and an otherwise busy time. However, one University of Bath teacher suggested that such an assessment could be done as part of the oral module in the first terms after the YA. This is a model that would minimally infringe on time and workload and second year students could be invited to

those sessions if the timetabling allows this (see UCLAN). There is also the argument that the oral performance of some students may deteriorate in the 4th year, and this could cause problems, but the model just mentioned would not cause problems in this respect.

There are several other universities that have an oral exam of some sort at the beginning of the final year, and reports are positive. This is not an exhaustive review of all universities, but it shows that they have adopted different models or testing oral ability on return.

- University of Exeter: viva on YA project and reflection of YA
- Aston University: viva on YA project and reflection of YA
- King's College London: critical analysis of texts (given as part of exam)
- Lancaster University: students prepare a news/political event (aim to make students engage with news abroad)
- University of Durham, University of Bristol: viva on portfolio including YA project
- UCLAN: Presentation to 2nd years in pairs

Language should be tested

> "I feel, they say they want us to learn languages, why don't they assess us on our language." (Elisabeth)

Spontaneous suggestions of oral exams

> "a lot of universities then had to go back and have an oral exam at the end of their year abroad. So even if… and I think with that, that would shock the Erasmus into doing a bit of work possibly if we knew we had to go back and do an exam. […] I think something like an oral exam would definitely separate, because I mean I just feel like I kind of did nothing for a year and I got away with it with a very good mark. Whereas if I'd had an exam at the end of it I wouldn't have got that mark and I probably would have got a mark which was more towards… which would reflect the small amount of work that I did. " (Emma)

> "Like I say, for myself I think a spoken, an oral exam would have been more representative of my Russian skills. I would have enjoyed it more. I was quite proud when I came back and I was very excited about speaking to my Russian lecturers and I wanted feedback, you know, do you think my Russian improved." (Charles)

Positive about oral exams (with reservations)

> "So yeah I think that's… actually in think that's a very good idea." (Claire)

> "That would be an excellent idea. Yeah, I think that would be an excellent idea just to see how much the language has improved." (Hannah, George)

> "I'd like to have an oral exam, I'd really like that. […] I think it's a great idea because I think we'd really be in a position to explore both their… I see it as a sort of support to written work personally, that's the way I would like to see it certainly, they do a written piece and then they have to present it orally. […] I think that [a viva on the special study] would be a great one, because somebody to actually assess their oral skills just after they come back, and also assess and have the written element also. And I think that would be great. Because one of the issues that we have with special studies is plagiarism, it's a big issue, and I think in an oral exam… maybe in a way just an oral exam, then you don't have that issue at all." (tutor J)

"We don't have oral exams when they will talk about it as well when they come back maybe, one way of assessing would be an oral exam. And really, I mean I think they did in other places I understand but I don't know what they are asked to present. And I think because we have too many presentations I think staff might be reluctant to go for that, but I don't think it's a bad idea because you'd be assessing their linguistic competence. And again, you know, all kinds of gains like skills, changes in attitudes, the whole reflective process, you know, could be done that way. But then you could be fake as well, you know, you could make up… it could be abused." (tutor H)

"well I can't see staff willing to do it. And then you know, the option would be to get the TF's the teaching fellows maybe to do them, but they would have so many that we couldn't possibly handle so many numbers, just two members of staff per section." (tutor H)

"To be honest with you I really don't think we have the capacity to put that on as an extra oral exam – impossible. Because it would have to be at the beginning of the final year and then they have their oral at the end of the final year. I personally would not be averse in having the oral exams at the beginning of the final year instead of at the end of the final year, but as well as we don't have the capacity." (tutor A)

Implications for Assessment

There seems to be positive attitude towards some sort of oral testing of students on their return. Oral testing at this point may serve as an incentive for students to work on the oral language development and seek opportunities. Furthermore, such exams could be used as a vehicle to either enable a viva on any written work, a reflection of learning and/or further incentives for learning (e.g. engagement with people, media). A presentation in pairs or larger groups may give students a structure for peer-debriefing in a small group as part of the preparation, and in a larger group as part of the presentation. At the same time this could be used as preparatory lessons for year 2 students. It could even be part of a portfolio for year 2 students. Furthermore an oral evaluation for all would increase fairness in terms of YA assessment. Questions that could be dealt with in presentations, if it is no viva or has no other topic, could include:

- what have they learnt and how did they do it?
- language and culture, social integration
- tips for future students
- how are they going to keep and develop what they have learnt?

An oral exam could be based on a portfolio as is explained in the next section.

Portfolio/reflection

Bath students have a range of reflection tools available as mentioned in section 9. They are not compulsory at the moment, and they could serve as components of a portfolio. Based on the Personal Development Portfolio developed by the British Council, I presented a number of students with the idea of a portfolio as a possible basis for an oral exam. I suggested

these could include progress reports and references (work/teaching placements), the list of study modules (study placements) and a CV displaying skills and knowledge acquired during the year abroad. While the students feel that the burden should not increase, they felt that this kind of documentation made sense, if it was to be used for the oral exam. Tying progress reports or any documentation and reflection into an assignment such as an oral evaluation would provide instrumental motivation and a summative closure to complete a formative and reflective piece of work. In the conference a range of documentation models were presented. These included:

- University of Durham: a portfolio including one 1000 word written task (fair copy)[25] per language and a bullet point summary of linguistic and cultural learning outcomes (self-reflection of learning). This forms the basis for the oral exam. If the portfolio is not submitted before the oral exam, 10% will be taken off the oral grade.
- University of Bristol: 4 personal reports (online submission).
- University of Ulster: Dissertation portfolio
- Leeds Metropolitan University: E-portfolio including an action plan, ECFR descriptors (should be B2 at beginning and C1 at end of YA – see European language portfolio below), activities (immersion and placement activities), major project proposal, primary research, checklist.

Progress reports and logs

Progress reports, which allow a repeated evaluation of the learning situation, are viewed in varied ways. Some students find it useful as an instrument of reflection and structuring thoughts. Others did either not know what the purpose of the progress reports was, and feel it was a useless exercise, since they did not receive feedback, or that they are not marked. Or they were of the opinion that they did not benefit them and that they were for the benefit of the home university or future year-abroad students only.

Some students see the progress reports as a means to update the university of their activities and welfare; others found it useful as a tool for reflection. From this point of view, if this instrument is kept in its present form, the purpose of the progress reports need clarifying, pointing out their function (check-up on students or work placement, personal reflection on learning etc.). Progress reports seem to be valuable especially if they are used as part of the assessment process, so they are given a purpose.

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[25] This is a year abroad written task. A draft is submitted to a tutor, feedback is received, and a final document (fair copy) will be included in the portfolio. Topics: e.g. changing places, local heroes, You're the critic

Diaries are private

"That's the only time in my life I've ever written a diary. Um, but I did for that whole year, every day I would write a diary and that was really good. I'd really advise people to do that. [...] it's for me mainly. I had like…my family have read it as well so… but yeah it was personal to me." (Lisa)

I'm not the type (11)

No, I've never been someone to write a diary anyway, I don't keep my thoughts that way. Um, and I think it was something from my childhood, I remember a teacher used to force me to write a diary, therefore I'm not writing for anybody unless it's marked. So I didn't keep that [a log]. Blogging, I'm not really into that either. (John)

No personal benefits of documentation

"Yeah it is, and you know we'd submit it [final report] on Moodle with the point of it being read by second years who can then know more about their plans. So yeah all the university documentation that we were supposed to do didn't really benefit me." (John)

Progress reports are useful

"Well obviously you get that with the report that you do at the beginning and the end and I think that covers that, the reflection when you do your report at the end on what you have learnt, and comparing it to your report at the beginning." (Sonya)

"Um, yeah I feel like I wrote three similar ones because I didn't… yeah the third one was a bit hard to write because I didn't really know what else I could say. But it was quite useful because you could reflect on your experience and organise your thoughts and everything." (Sally)

The purpose of progress reports is unclear

"I wrote reports. I didn't get any feedback from my first report and I should probably ask why because it was a very negative report." (Rosa)

"We had to write a progress report every… I think it was every 2 or 3 months. I sent them off and never really heard about them again, so I don't know… but I don't know if that really matters quite so much to me. I think the idea was just to update the university on what was going on." (Andrew)

"I mean as far as progress reports, yeah, two progress reports, I mean I think that's what I did anyway, that's probably a good idea. It's probably rather important so the university can see if there are any drastic problems, you know, please get me out of here I'm in dire straits, please help me. I think that's fine to keep the progress reports." (Charles)

European language Portfolio

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is an instrument based on self-assessment which has been adapted for junior and adult users in different contexts and been validated by the COE (see section 2). Thus, there is a multitude of similar versions in diverse languages. An evaluation of the ELP by Wright (2006)[26] found that some adult learners found the ELP useful to reflect on the language learning experiences, some felt that it was too long and

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[26] http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/2569

complex to be worthwhile. However, one part of the ELP, the Europass may have potential in terms of the YA assessment. The Europass, which forms part of the ELP, is again divided into five parts.

- **Europass Curriculum Vitae**: This is a personal document filled by the person concerned.

- **Europass Mobility**: This document is designed to record educational or work-related mobility experiences throughout Europe. This needs to be stamped and signed by the host institution/organisation.

- **Europass Diploma Supplement**: This document is for use in HE, and is completed by the HE institution in combination with a degree or diploma. It gives information about the degree achieved in order to allow qualifications to be compared EU-wide.

- **Europass Certificate Supplement**: In the same way as the above, this document provides information on vocational qualifications.

- **Europass Language Passport**: This is a self-assessment document, where individuals can chart their language skills based on the Common Framework for Languages developed by the COE.

In terms of the assessment of the year abroad, the CV, Mobility and the Language Passport may be of use. Considering the CV includes a self-assessment of language skills based on CEFR descriptors[27], this seems to be the document with most potential for use as part of the assessment process. Indeed, at Leeds Metropolitan University the use the CEFR descriptors, and in Newcastle they seem to use the Europass or parts of it in their assessment process.

E-platforms

Bath students are aware of Moodle the Bath-maintained e-platform. Currently, Moodle contains practical information on countries, the YA and on course requirements. It allows students to upload YA blogs and final YA reports. Bath staff felt the existing Moodle site could fulfil a wider role however: it could include tutor information, practical support, frequently asked questions, language exercises and generally serve as YA gateway.

A number of universities use e-platforms maintaining more or less sophisticated websites to support student learning.

- Leeds Metropolitan University: submission of the portfolio items (see above)

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[27] http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/LanguageSelfAssessmentGrid/en

- University of Sheffield: Year Abroad community[28]

- University of Liverpool: The Ning Thing

- Nottingham Trent University: Wikimap and e-upload of YA dossier

- University of Bath: Moodle

At Sheffield for instance a virtual community was created, based on an e-platform similar to the Moodle pages at Bath. The difference between Bath and Sheffield is the use of the blogging site. At Bath blogging is voluntary, students can, if they wish, make a blog entry and they can write on anything they like. However, they are aware that 2nd year students read them as part of their preparation. In Sheffield the blogs are a requirement, i.e. all students have to write two blogs while they are away, and they have to be written as guidance for second year students. The interesting aspect of the Sheffield project is that final year students monitor and comment the blogs as they unfold. Davies and Louwerse illustrated, for instance, the virtual discussion that unfolded based on a blog condemning Germans and Germany in a stereotypical manner. They illustrated that final year students take a moderating role engaging in an analytical discussion, and no further tutor involvement was necessary.

The University of Liverpool used a free software called NING to support students writing. They felt that it made the support process more structured, but that it required greater staff involvement. Given staff concerns about increasing the workload this may not be a suitable way forward for Bath.

At Nottingham Trent University, wiki technology is used for two purposes, one is self-reflective and the other one practical in nature. The first use ok wiki is to upload the self-reflective year abroad dossier. This is a time-based document that lists all the pieces of work that need to be submitted and automatically sends a reminder a week before the submission is due. Good experiences were made insofar as students largely met the deadlines without to much staff intervention, thus there may be some potential when thinking about a revised Bath model. The language evaluation consists of 5 parts:

- a self-evaluation of competence at the beginning

- goal setting

- reflection on strategies.

- progress evaluation

- final appraisal and summary

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[28] http://coursecast.bath.ac.uk/CourseCast/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=06c2eda2-fb0e-43c3-981a-7d9e44f72324

The other purpose is to share and keep up-to-date practical experience relevant to the host institution and place. This in turn has six categories and it is kept in the L2, thus providing the opportunity for writing in the L2, which seems a suitable instrument to organise practical YA information. The categories in the case of Erasmus study are:

- courses recommended
- accommodation
- how to get there/get around
- things (not) to do
- useful contacts
- other information

Similar to the Sheffield model the practical wiki supports year-2 students in their preparation. Year 4 involvement is a little different, since final-year students are expected to revisit the pages and tidy them up, i.e. review their use of language and self-correct their entries. Thus, the quality improves and becomes more useful and improves the quality of the entries. The question is how this emerging dossier is monitored and to what extent teachers provide feedback at which points.

Use and potential of Moodle

"Yeah it is, and you know we'd submit it [final report] on Moodle with the point of it being read by second years who can then know more about their plans." (John)

"Or failing that, with the ubiquitous Moodle is get each member of staff to put up a little five minute thing about these are the kinds of area I work in and these are the kinds of projects I've supervised in the past." (tutor C)

"But one of the things that we've done which I think is a really helpful improvement is the Moodle site, there's a lot more we can do with it, and one of the things I'm going to do is frequently asked questions. It's always the same thing that comes up." (tutor J)

 "The best you could hope for is that there is more e-learning that could be done remotely, and there is no reason actually that staff shouldn't just put large numbers of exercises and other things onto Moodle for students to do in their own time." (tutor E)

 "in developing Moodle we've gone part of the way towards this because we have much better online push. There's still a lot we can do with using Moodle as a gateway." (tutor E)

Accreditation

When the survey participants were abroad, the YA accounted for 6% of the overall degree. For the subsequent cohorts it has been 8%. There were six students who felt that 6% was an appropriate proportion, three thought it should be more and two thought it should be less. Similar to assessment, those Bath students who did well thought the YA should account for more than the then 6%, and those who did not do so well wished it accounted for less. Thus the student voices may not be so useful in this respect. However, it was interesting to find

that five students felt that the knowledge that the YA accounts for 6% only, meant that they allowed themselves to relax more and maybe take it a bit less seriously. There seems to be the opinion that they would have worked harder if it accounted for more. Thus, it could be argued that low proportions could signal to the students that it is not so important. In one interview, the student was asked about making the YA account for 25%, and Claire thought that it would be problematic with the current system, since this would mean that one written assignment, such as the special study, would count 25% of the degree. Other universities have varied percentages:

Table 14: Accreditation per year of degree

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 (YA)	Year 4
Aston University	--	20%	10%	70%
University of Bath	--	24%	8%	68%
University of Liverpool	--	20%	10%	70%
University of Exeter	--		12.5%	
London Metropolitan	25%	25%	25%	25%

It seems that the rationale for the low percentage of the YA is in recognition that the assessment of the YA is so difficult given the variability of a multitude of factors, and that for some there is only one piece of assessed work. Members of staff seem to think that 8% are incentive enough to motivate students into taking the YA seriously.

Reduced motivation due to low percentage (6%)

> "academically speaking the marks don't really count, there's no… I mean the actual being abroad only counts for 6% of the degree itself. (Andrew)

> "then I thought, to be honest for the amount of marks that it actually translates to each of these exams doesn't mean much at all. [..] I also know some universities over there who weren't getting anything for it. So for them they had no motivation whatsoever. [...] but as I said it's 6% and we kind of thing well, it's not going to completely destroy my degree if I, you know, have a couple of days off here and there. It was very easy to think like that when you're there. […] It is quite easy to be very relaxed about the whole study thing, with 6% especially. " (Emma)

> So people from other universities have told me that their year abroad is worth like 20% of their degree, so they actually have to work. Whereas with it being worth 3% it's very easy for me to think, well this year is kind of a waste of my time, why bother with the work when I can be doing this instead. So it's a good method but I think it should count for more of our degree, otherwise what's the point in coming out here – I think. (Fiona)

Low percentage (8%) is justified

> "well it's still on the low side but we decided to up it a little bit in recognition of the fact that it's one year of their degree. But we were reluctant to go higher for the reasons we have explored because you know, we know, we are aware of some of the concerns of the students and we think, you know, if we go higher then we will need to maybe, you know, maybe this issue about the exams abroad we will need to take them much more seriously into consideration, and yet there is nothing we can do. Because, it's true here isn't it as well to an extent, that if you take… the students talk to each other and they say, oh you know, I am going to do such and such a course

because I think it's easier than such and such a course, that lecturer marks higher. I mean it goes on all the time. And so abroad is the same. " (tutor A)

"Incentives – well in the end the students are rational creatures and they know that this is counting actually for more of their mark this year, 8%. In their expectations they do expect to get significant benefit from it. And they ought to be [unclear – 00:31:12] enough to see that that feeds directly into their final year work, so they shouldn't need to have more marks assigned to the third year." (tutor E)

Implications for assessment

Jim Coleman mentioned how virtual networks and new technologies have changed the year abroad compared to a decade to two ago. Now students can be in constant contact with families and friends at home, which can have the effect that they do not fully engage with their host community. However, the preference for virtual platforms for communication could be used to keep in touch with the home institution, and to support what are in effect distance learners, and could take on new functions of support for learning and perhaps even networking through virtual networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace or other network preferences such Bebo in Germany.

The advantage of the Nottingham Trent model is that it allows students to be clear about deadlines and it sends automatic reminders. An advantage of course would be if this technology was introduced already in year 1 and 2, so students would be used to using it while they are abroad, providing continuation. Considering that Bath students write lots of small pieces of work throughout their first two years at university, this may be useful technology for all formative pieces of work, not just those produced during the YA.

Judging from the data collection, none of the people in the sample felt really strongly about the proportions accredited to the YA. This includes students, staff, tutors at other universities and conference participants. There is an argument, however, that the incentive to work seriously in the YA may be limited due the low percentage assigned to the YA. Thus a 0 : 25 : 25 : 50, or a 12.5 : 18.75 : 18.75 : 25 model might balance this out and integrate the YA more adequately in the overall degree programme. However, the structure would have to be changed insofar as no single assignment should make up the YA mark.

7) *Social integration as a key to learning*

Social integration or interaction with native speakers was something students were clearly concerned about before and after the YA. When I discussed expectations with year-2 students, social integration was in place 3 after linguistic and cultural learning. A second year student succinctly remarked that social integration is key to improving language skills and gaining cultural insights and understanding. To come back with a series of friends abroad appears to be an expectation and a personal measure of success.

It was not only the students who were concerned about this but this theme was also identified in staff data and during the conference, where Jim Coleman's concentric circle theory was frequently referred to. While especially Erasmus students find it easy to socialise in the first two circles (co-nationals and international peers), interaction in the 3rd circle (native speakers) is for many more difficult to achieve. Students may need some guidance, or at least awareness that interaction with the 3rd circle is an objective that they should actively pursue while they are away. If this is treated as an explicit objective, the question arises in what way it could be included in the assessment structure, if at all.

This theme was identified in the course of the project, which required adding a new dimension to my analysis. Below I map the reported student experiences according to strength of social ties, borrowing from social capital theory, and Coleman's circle theory. I also report how some students overcame social barriers, and how it is considered a personal measure of success.

Types of social ties

There are two dimensions to friendships: intensity and choice of contacts. Social capital theory deals with the intensity of social networks that people establish. This theory differentiates between acquaintances (weak ties) and family and friendships (strong ties). Jim Coleman[29] explains that contacts that students build in their year abroad can be divided into three social circles: the inner circle (co-nationals), the middle circle (internationals) and the outer circle (locals or native speakers). De Federico came to the same conclusion, namely that Erasmus students build "three types of friendship ties characterised largely by the nationality groupings of friends: local people, compatriots, and people from other countries" (de Federico 2008). There is an argument that there is a 4th circle: the virtual network of family and friends at home or elsewhere. This also plays a role; some argue maintaining these virtual contacts may prevent students from making real contacts. However, this circle is not considered in this analysis.

As can be seen from the Figure 3, contacts were divided into weak and strong ties to aid understanding the nature of the contacts. Students reported that they had contacts to inner and outer circles but less so to the middle circle. Contacts in the inner circle are reported to be strong rather than weak, since 14 out of 24 students depended on strong inner-circle relationships, i.e. with co-nationals, while only 4 mentioned weak inner-circle ties. In the outer circle the picture consists of both weak and strong ties being mentioned by

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[29] http://coursecast.bath.ac.uk/CourseCast/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=b0429c58-a331-494e-bde0-eedccbb1182f

an equal number of students (n=16). As expected, or at least hoped, many students mention contact to the outer circle: 22 out of 24 indicated that they had some contact to the outer circle.

Figure 3: Weak and strong ties reported in different circles
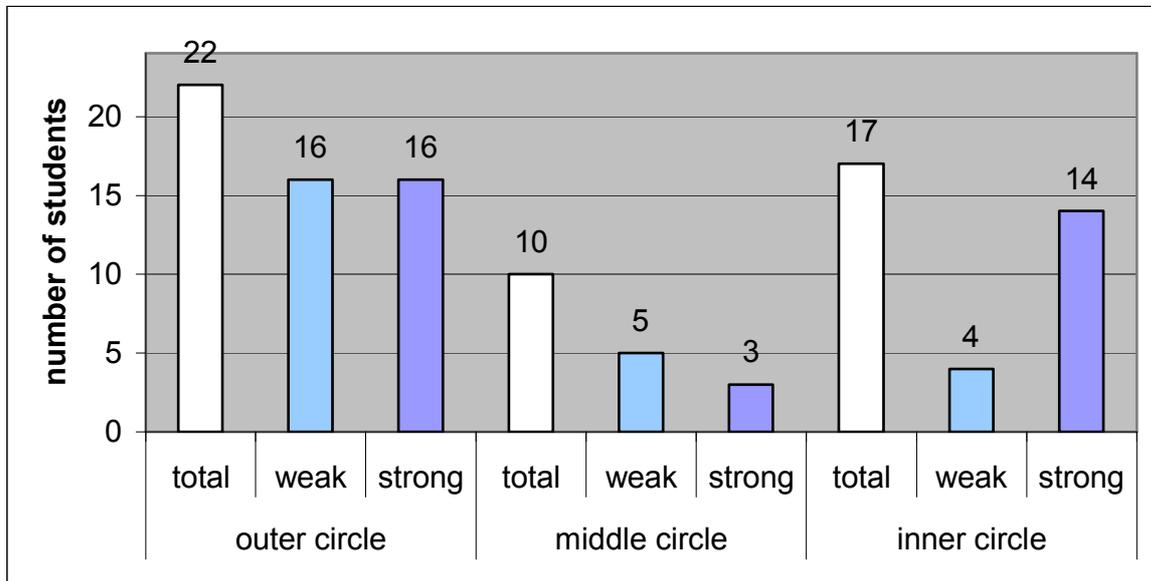
Figure 4: Weak and strong ties by type of experience
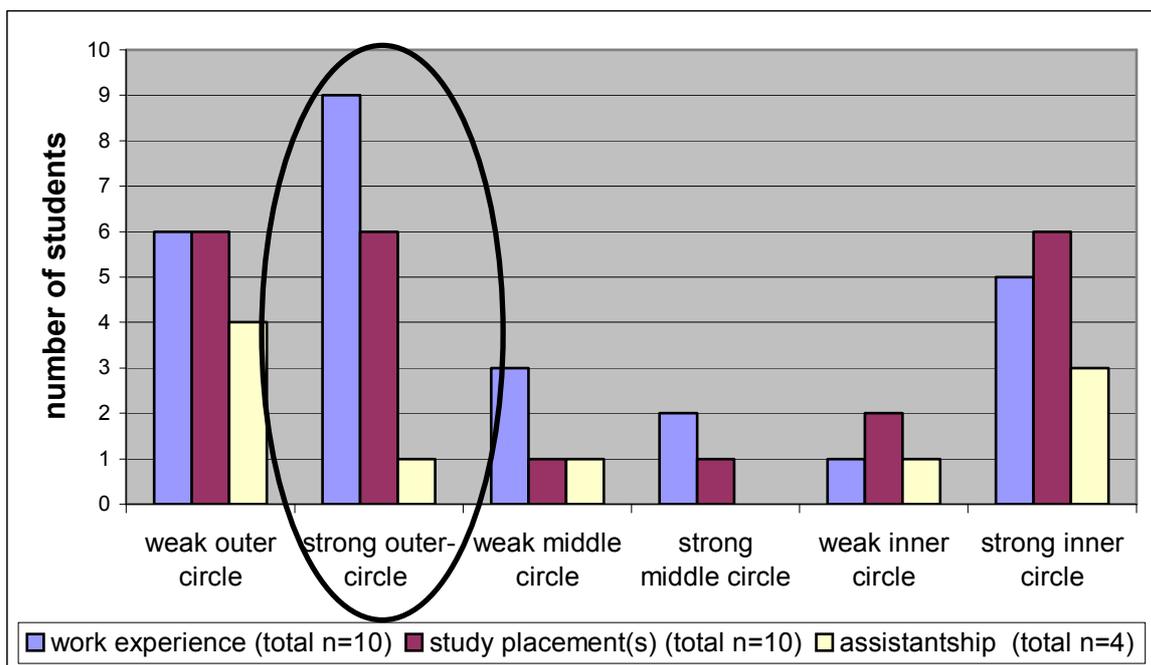
It was found that the type of experience may be related to the type of social ties that students report (Figure 4). Thus, out of the 10 people who did a work experience 9 reported strong outer-circle ties. The one work experience student who did not form strong ties to the outer circle worked in Brussels, and moved in the middle, or international, circle, where she established strong bonds. However, all the others managed to build the ties students hoped

for to some degree. Thus, there is an indication that work experiences are more likely to lead to strong bonds in the outer circle. In study and assistantship placements strong bonds seem a little less likely, at least in the sample studied. However, this is in line with de Federico de la Rúa's (2008) observation that it is a commonly held view that Erasmus students find it harder to integrate into the host society. The type of social ties related to different year abroad experiences are illustrated in Figure 4. Forming strong bonds despite difficulties

Student reports confirmed that work placements offered opportunities for social interaction in the local language. I examined the quotes relating to strong outer-circle ties by type of experience. In the group who was on work experience, there were basically three different patterns of contacts: the most frequent is with (young) work colleagues. Another way of establishing strong ties was by being taken under a senior person's wing. Others met people through their housing.

Social ties established abroad

"there were lots of other young people working there as well and lots of us lived together as well, so um that was automatically a way to make friends". (Andrew)

"And they became like… and his wife who taught in the school where I ended up teaching at the end of my time there, with their son they were like my second family and they were so good to me." (Anna)

"High points, I think in my second place that I moved into it was kind of like an 11 person house but there were different levels. You don't really see everyone, but the floor that I was on I got on really well with those girls, we kind of went out and then I met more students and things like that." (Helen)

Only two of the work experience students mentioned only their accommodation in terms of their strong outer-circle ties, all the others established them through work. One student was from Germany originally, and so during her semester in Germany she just slotted back into her old friendship and family network.

When examining quotes by students who studied at universities or worked as teaching assistants, it is found that the pattern is a bit less clear. There are those who lived with local families, again those who became friends with a senior person or with students in schools where they were assistants. When looking at the Erasmus group, one Erasmus student joined a sports club, actively seeking social interaction, and one shared accommodation with local students, as discussed below. There were two Erasmus students who reported that they managed to establish strong social links in Italy and Spain, but there is no evidence in the data as to how they initiated these contacts. Unfortunately, post-interview invitations by email to illuminate this mystery, remained unanswered.

Implications of social capital

Based on the above, it can be said that students on their year abroad may depend on their inner circle, or bonding capital, for emotional comfort and support, while their aim is (or should be) to develop contacts to outer circles to practice and develop their language skills and make for a more fulfilled experience. For some students it may seem morally wrong to engage in friendships with native speakers for instrumental reasons. This is exemplified by a student in the sample, who explained that he was told that he should find a girlfriend in Spain, since this would be the best way to improve his Spanish. He felt that this was wrong towards the potential Spanish girlfriend (as well as towards his girlfriend at home…). Another student felt that friendships should happen 'naturally' and that friendships cannot be forced, as illustrated by the quotes below. However, the types of relationships students are referring to here are strong ties. Students may feel more comfortable if they aim to build weak ties first, perhaps with instrumental intentions. This has shown to be easier in the work place where relationships are expected to be weak at least at the beginning; this of course does not exclude the option of forming friendships and closer bonds with time. Thus, those students who have not got more formal or weak relationships to start with, such as with work mates, might have to look for this kind of relationships if friendships do not happen naturally, perhaps in sports clubs as is discussed below.

Overcoming barriers to social integration

Social integration with local people or native speakers was something that many students interviewed (17) found difficult during their year abroad. There are some Erasmus students who feel they were segregated from native speakers in their respective universities. However, many felt it is just natural to first get to know other Erasmus or international students, and it seems that once these groups have formed, students have to make a conscious effort to meet people outside this circle. The phenomenon of finding it hard to connect with local people was not limited to Erasmus students though. Some found that locals were less approachable or not their age group which they felt made it harder to form a local circle of friends.

Despite the difficulties, a number of students (15) reported that they succeeded to form relationships with local people that went beyond superficial acquaintances, either they became part of a circle of friends or they made individual friends. They accomplished this, either through work or through other activities that they actively sought out besides their work or study. Falling in love also helps to gain access to circles of native speakers (1). Even though it is a commonly held view that Erasmus students find it harder to integrate into the host society (de Federico de la Rúa 2008:89-105), four students in the sample did the

full Erasmus experience and reported that they forged local friendships (Tom, Peter, Claire, Fiona). Those who went to Mexico (George) and Russia (Charles) may not belong to this group, even though they were enrolled at a university, since these students had a different status at their respective study places compared to Erasmus students. Further interviews, especially with the Erasmus students would illuminate how they managed this process. I analysed these Erasmus students separately, in terms of what they said about their social integration experiences.

Social integration was difficult (17)

"Um, I'd say with regard to… not to Bath specifically on English Unis, but with regard to the Erasmus programme, I think universities segregate Erasmus students way too much." (Fiona)

"But at the time I found it hard to make friends and yeah, maybe that can affect your language if you're not socialising a lot." (Dominic)

With hindsight, I could have made an effort

"I could have made more effort, maybe that's… some of my English friends had like Italian buddies, like who they would meet up with and speak Italian and English. I could speak it if I had one of those. I went to a church there where they were full of Italians and I could have probably made more effort there to get to know people." (Elisabeth)

"You have to make more of an effort if you do an Erasmus placement to make sure you don't speak to English people all the time." (Lisa)

"Um, and as it happens in most Erasmus experience I think if you're in a foreign country unfortunately if you're with people who speak your language you're going to end up speaking your language again. […] Um, so yeah the challenge was to find somebody from one of the locals to make friends with him to – or her – to improve your Italian, yeah. But as I say I didn't really manage that in Italy." (Peter)

"I think if you were on your own you would need other people to interact with so you would go to find people. Whereas if you have your own groups you sort of settle down and it's more comfortable so you don't really put as much effort into it really. (Caroline)

People were not approachable

"I don't know if it was just Sienna, people seemed to be quite cold and I didn't… I didn't meet many Italians. I met a few, I spoke Italian… I suppose I spoke it on a day-to-day basis in the city, you know, but not really like full conversations with good friends or anything." (Peter)

"I did try and speak to people but um it became clear quite soon that you didn't just go and make friends, especially in France, they've already got their group of friends. Most of them are living at home still so they've got all their friends from school, they're not really interested in having an English friend unless they want their homework marking for them." (Emma)

"I didn't make as many friends as I probably could have done. The company where I worked was fairly small and there were only about 20 people who worked there and they were all […] quite a lot older than me. " (Andrew)

Social integration through work

"and there were lots of other young people working there as well and lots of us lived together as well, so um that was automatically a way to make friends. " (Andrew)

"Um, and as well as that I then when onto… because I made quite a few friends among colleagues." (Lisa)

Making an effort pays off

"And in Berlin um because I knew that it had been hard to meet people in France I um, I joined lots of societies… well I joined two, so I've learnt to row and I did yoga as well, and the rowing was excellent because I was the only English person and you had to speak lots of German." (Claire)

"I got involved in something called um… it's basically like the young people's organisation in France […] And through that I met quite a lot of people, so that was really a good thing." (Susanna)

"well a few of us managed to break down in Italy the circle around family and friends. They've got a really tight knit circle and if you can break that you've done really well. And I managed to get an Italian girlfriend and have a lot of friends who were Italian – which was a surprise." (Tom)

Social integration as a personal measure of success

While some students were disappointed that they had not made local friends abroad, some students are clearly proud of their contacts to native speakers. Thus, contacts abroad appear to be kind of a personal measure of whether or not the year abroad was a success.

Proud of contacts abroad

"Yes, I'd say certainly I mean if you think from the beginning say of just effectively being with a group of English people, you know, socialise, and then now moving into more Spanish people, that's certainly progress I'd say, you know." (Steve)

"Um, I made quite a few good friends as well from… mostly from France also I still keep in touch with some of my colleagues from Munich as well. Um, so ultimately I mean that's really been an important factor." (Andrew)

"my best memory of the year abroad is kind of integrating, not so much in Italy but a lot in Spain into kind of the cultural and society and all that. [...] because I managed to integrate with Spanish youth and um that was certainly a very important point. Yeah, that was the thing which made my Spanish so good I think, just integrating with the locals from the same language or whatever. And um, I think that was one of the most important part of Erasmus for me, more than anything else." (Peter)

Implications for assessment

It can be said that most students had wished they slot into a foreign circle of friends to improve their language and to feel they are part of the community they are visiting. Thus it seems to have lead to disappointment if this aspect of their year abroad had not been successful. Those who did well in terms of social integration with local people are proud of this achievement, and appear to consider it as a measure of success with regard to their year abroad. Since many reported disappointment or difficulties related to social integration, students might need some guidance, structure or incentives to support this aspect of the year abroad, since this seems to be a pivotal point to maximise extra-curricular learning opportunities, enjoyment and decide over the perception of success or failure of their year

abroad. Thus, consideration should be given to this aspect and the assessment structure should stress that social interaction with outer-circle groups are at the same time an objective and a means to achieve objectives during the YA. While friendships cannot be evaluated and assessed, students may benefit from three points of action: 1) students should be aware of the fact that social interaction with local people is an aim of the year abroad, 3) they should be aware of the fact that meeting locals is not automatic and requires pro-active behaviour and strategies, and 3) they should be given tasks that incentivises and supports proactive engagement in finding social opportunities. Such tasks in turn could form part of formative or summative assessment, enabling assessment for learning in an experiential setting.

8) Managing expectations

This chapter discusses the importance of expectation management. This is based on the group discussion with year 2 students while they were preparing for their year abroad, and on conference discussions. It covers the following themes:

- reflection of expectations before students go away
- type of information provided by staff
- method of providing information

Expectations held by students

In the lunch-time seminar with year 2 students, nominal voting technique (Chapple and Murphy 1996) was used to elicit and rank what expectations students have of their year abroad. Students offered dimensions to the plenary based on expectations they wrote down individually first. On the basis of this voting took place and a list was created and the points were allocated as follows:

Table 15: Expectations ranked

	Points
Improve fluency/speed of language	31
Experience living/working abroad	11
Social integration/making friends	10
Insight into the culture	5
Experience of being independent	4
Broaden written/spoken language	4
Improve CV	3
Language complexity and confidence	2
Gain work experience	1
Experience in teaching	1
Gain familiarity with colloquial language	0
Find out whether teaching is right for me	0

In the discussion that followed, the students did not express surprise at the fact that 'improve fluency/speed of language' scored the most points (31). One of them said that there is little emphasis on oral development in the first and second year (1 hour a week), and the students felt that they are expected to develop this side on their year abroad. They were also not surprised at the fact that 'experience living and working abroad' (11), and 'integrate/into social society' (10) also scored highly, since one of the students explained that the aim of the degree was twofold, to learn the language and gain knowledge about culture and society, and integration was necessary to practice the language and gain cultural knowledge. Thus, the students agreed that social integration or interaction with L2 speakers in the host country was crucial to meet the aims of the YA.

Table 16: Expectations prior to the discussion

fluency of language increased knowledge of country's culture/way of life become familiar with idioms/colloquial language of country meet new people gain confidence
some experience of living in France + Germany Improvements to my language ability through immersion Experience of teaching English as a foreign language Experience of culture in France and Germany
I hope to improve my spoken and written language, whilst gaining work experience at the same time. I hope that my confidence in speaking improves. I also want to experience living and working abroad; gaining an insight into the culture.
To improve my language ability is the main target. Other targets are to improve my CV, gain experience of office work and to integrate into other cultures. Also have a good time!
I expect my language to improve in terms of my fluency and confidence. Equally importantly, I hope to feel comfortable living in a foreign country, and expect to adapt to a different culture, routine and traditions, and feel like a member of society in France.
Greatly improved language skills An idea of work in different industries and more of an idea of what I'd like to do Good friends in different countries Good work experience for the CV
Fluency in the language of the country I'm living in A greater understanding of the culture of that country And idea of what it is like to live abroad and to have to do things on your own without too much help.
Improve the quality of my spoken language, particularly my Spanish, Discover whether or not I would like to teach after university.
To become more fluent in the language and experience the culture of the country. I hope to be far more confident in my language use.
language (Italian) friendship experience (study in Italy – how does the education system work)
Mainly and most importantly to improve my knowledge of spoken and written language. To work on fluency and sounding natural & getting to now the area/country through participation in the community. I hope to join sports teams, local societies etc. to integrate.

As mentioned above, year-2 students noted down their personal expectations prior to discussion. These are summarised in Table 16. Social integration was considered an important expectation for year-2 students, but the type of experience (study, work or teaching placement) was not deemed to be indicative as to whether or not students will pro-actively seek social opportunities. A larger study would be required to determine any such patterns. One student felt that it depended on the personality and some may appreciate the safety ("fall back") that a known network of English friends can provide in the framework of a study place at a university, but the students rejected the idea that all students who chose Erasmus study made the choice because of safety considerations. Indeed the one Erasmus student present felt he specifically sought the university experience. The participants felt that you have to be more confident to break away from an English or and international group, and that work in a large company may also lead to an international or English speaking set of friends. When asked about whether the confidence required would need to be of a linguistic or social nature, several students felt, both are needed. In response to the question about how limited confidence could be overcome, they felt that joining groups may be a good idea, where members have naturally something in common, so again make contact to weak-tie groups. One student also said that being English can be an advantage in meeting people because many people in France for instance are learning the language and want to practice their English.

The feedback questions indicate that the students welcomed the 45-minute session. Currently, no session is offered where the students can discuss their expectations, concerns etc. The comments are given in Table 17:

Table 17: Helpfulness of seminar on expectations

1	Helpful and interesting to hear of other people's expectations + reinforce my own expectations of the year abroad.
2	Very enjoyable and useful!
3	I found it interesting to see other people's expectations for the year abroad.
4	Useful and interesting to have different views. Thank you very much!
7	Very good
9	Very helpful
10	Good to get points [strategies to engage with local people]
11	Interesting, helpful, made me feel safe to know others share my ideas and worries.

From this follows, that year-two students may welcome a session where they can discuss their expectations and strategies that may help them to meet their expectations.

Staff views on expectation management

This area emerged as an important dimension, a number of members of staff felt that

managing student expectations before the YA is crucial, and the conference discussions identified the needs to pay attention not just to practical but also to emotional and social expectations. Thus, interviews with members of staff indicated that expectation management is an important part of the preparation process.

Staff views

> "we therefore need to manage their expectations before they go abroad by telling them actually what does happen and what it's about and what it's for and they should do with it." (tutor C)

> "Well I think expectations is an interesting thing because one of the things that we have to do is to manage their expectations. " (tutor J)

In the conference, it was identified that students should be made aware that the year abroad offers a unique learning opportunity, but that it is up to the students to make the most of it, reiterating the emphasis on autonomous learning. Furthermore, there was an argument that the year abroad should not be advertised as potentially 'the best time in someone's life' since this may lead to disappointment if the students are less satisfied with their stay abroad.

Implications for assessment

Preparation offered by UoB, includes a year-abroad information day. The information imparted in EU country-specific session was welcomed by a number of students. However, teachers felt students do not take in what they are told during this or other events. Thus, the format may benefit from changes. The University of Surry have introduced a modular approach, which includes assessed sessions on YA- and country-specific sessions including practicalities and health and safety in year 2. This requires students to engage with material in more depth.

The ESML placement officer is highly appreciated by many work placement students, and it would probably be beneficial if the services of a placement officer were available to all year-abroad students. Based on student interviews, two preparatory pieces of advice may help students find their feet upon arrival in the country. These are that they should establish individual contact with previous students prior to their departure, and that they should travel to their destination early enough to sort out practicalities, while they could take advantage of pre-sessional language courses where possible.

It follows that, students should be encouraged to seek and use all formal and informal opportunities to speak one or both L2s. This exercise has two benefits, first the students become aware that learning also happens outside the formal university lectures and tutorials, and that they need to take responsibility for their own learning. However, as established in section 2, they may need support to do this which goes beyond 'telling them'.

It follows that expectation management should form an integral part of the preparation procedure. Preparation is discussed separately in section 9.

9) Embedding the year abroad in the overall degree

From the conference discussions it emerged that the status of the year abroad has changed in recent decades, from an intercalary or gap year to an integral part of a language degree. One of the conference workshops[30] was dedicated to the topic of embedding the YA in the degree. Murray Pratt, who led the workshop, emphasised among other two important points relating to the integration of the YA into the degree programme:

- the alignment of training students for what we expect them to do on their YA, i.e. aligning training, processes and objectives;
- using year-4 and incoming Erasmus students as a resource in preparation and reflection of the year abroad.

From the discussion that followed further important points were made:

- expectation management of students and parents;
- linguistic progress cannot be guaranteed, perhaps pragmatic competence should be fostered;
- preparatory and reflective exercises may go beyond the ability of tutors, since language tutors are no psychologists;
- students should be given greater ownership of the YA;
- The structure has to be adaptable to suit ab-initio students;
- There is a tension between flexibility, standardisation and consistency of YA assessment;
- If partner institutions are not trusted to apply rigour to marking, it sends out the wrong signals to students.
- The YA is not only about language.

During the conference, learning in the different years was discussed. In the first two years and the final year learning is largely guided by module specifications and tutors, while the year abroad requires self-guided autonomous learning competencies.

Smith from Lancaster University[31] described their preparatory intercultural module in year 2, in which they ask students to interview international students on the home campus.

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[30] http://www.bath.ac.uk/education/research/conferences/resources/Workshop_1.mp3

[31] http://www.bath.ac.uk/education/research/conferences/resources/Birgit_smith.mp4

This may sensitise students for the challenges they face, while it generates contacts and social interaction with international students who are in turn on their stay abroad.

Self-directed learning

A number of conference presentations touched on self-directed learning or students taking responsibility for their own learning. Additionally, the conference dedicated a workshop to the topic of self-directed learning or students helping themselves[32]. There was a general consensus that this is an important aspect of the year abroad – not only for the students themselves but also to decrease the burden on staff.

There is an argument that students need to be agents in their own learning, which resonates with the literature summarised in section 2. Indeed, a number of tutors are aware of this, but some find that the university culture does not foster independence and that there is a consumerist attitude on the one side and a customer-oriented attitude on the other to a certain extent. There appears to be a concern among some teachers that students are not just treated as customers but also as children, not only by university but also by their parents. This means that the arguably customer-oriented, (over-) protective attitude emphasising the duty of care towards young people in education may be a wider societal phenomenon that is reproduced at university and to a certain extent supported. This may be an explanation why 'telling them' alone may not enable students to adopt an identity that allows them to take agency in exploring an unfamiliar context (see section 10).

Doing too much for students

"It's about telling them from the outset, this is what it is about, this is what you are suppose to get out of it, this is how we will help you to do that. But you have a responsibility as adults to engage in this process in an active way and you have to be proactive and not reactive." (tutor C)

"I think no favours are done to students by encouraging them in this customer service ethic. " (tutor C)

"I don't know, I could get very conservative and say that you know, I suppose it's the student's personal responsibility. Maybe we have to tell them that. " (tutor B)

"it's their call essentially, you know, but to prepare them beforehand I think it's a very worthwhile effort." (tutor H)

Some parents foster dependency

"what I find which I think is worrying is that their parents go with them to settle them in, to help them find housing, and I think it's a shame because they need to be independent, and that's what they need to do by themselves, they need to go and be adults. And I had this other mother ringing me saying, these two 20 year old girls on their own in Rome, and I said, well yes, they're adults, you know. […] I nearly said

[32] http://www.bath.ac.uk/education/research/conferences/resources/Workshop_2.mp3

children, I'm sorry [laughs]. But I do see them like that sometimes, and I shouldn't because they are adults." (tutor J)

Some students are aware that they need to take responsibility for their own learning, and some enjoyed the responsibility they were given by their employers abroad. Students also realised that taking responsibility is an advantage in terms of future employment. Thus, self-directed learning may have several advantages, 1) it puts the students more in control, 2) students are more able to seek and use opportunities presented by the YA, 3) it may reduce staff time required to support students, 4) it may help their employability.

During the conference there were discussions on ways of empowering and enabling students to formulate and review their own objectives and achievements, as well as to assess their own performance and that of others may need further exploration. This would make students more responsible for their own learning while reducing the teachers' workload. This topic was also explored with Bath staff who felt there was a tension between control and autonomy. Among Bath staff, there are those who feel freedom from university strictures is a good thing, and there are those who feel there needs to be control to a certain extent. However, due to the different positions and increasing workloads, a system that relies too heavily on staff involvement is seen as less feasible. Some members of staff find it regrettable that students tend to be supported to an extent which does not help their taking responsibility. It is also argued that students have little scope for decision making before the go away.

Some students also did take it on themselves to prepare in various ways, some did a TEFL or CELTA course before they went on an assistantship, which they mostly found useful as a preparation of their work as English teachers. Others felt it was useful to arrive in the host country a couple of weeks or more before their studies or work began, so they had time to deal with practical issues, such as accommodation, bank accounts, authorities and orientation. Some also enrolled in pre-sessional language courses, which they found useful.

In the sample studied, two students in particular demonstrated this type of creative agential behaviour on their year abroad. Being aware of the danger of socialising exclusively with English speakers, one work-experience student decided to consciously avoid English speakers, or to regulate frequency of contact with them. He was, however, very aware that meeting up with English speakers was important to him in emotional terms, thus he did not cut off contact completely. Another student on an Erasmus university placement, who chose to do two study placements in different countries, adjusted her approach after her first experience.

These students demonstrated awareness of pitfalls and successfully adopted strategies to gain access to the outer-circle world. In the latter case however, during the first

placement the linguistic expectations were not met. Had these students been trained to creatively seek opportunities prior to the YA, she might have been more successful in her first placement. Both of them were found to have strong ties in the outer-circle and felt their language benefited from it.

Student views on taking responsibility for their own learning

"But at the same time it's the responsibility of us, you know, you have to take responsibility for your own learning of the language, regardless of the circumstances, you've got to find a way" (George)

"And I mean that company is really good for interns because they gave me responsibility from the outset. I had quite an autonomous like job, like I was responsible for my own tasks, I felt like a proper member of the company, not just an intern I was a proper member of staff." (Sonya)

"So I think that's the… yeah, main thing to realise, and all the responsibility that I had looks great on my CV, it's really like… before that my CV was, you know, still a bit… but it's given me that edge." (Sonya)

Control versus autonomy

"I think the year abroad is also about, you know, freedom from us in many ways, and I think that's the beauty for them, so I wouldn't want to sort of intrude anymore, you know, they've got to write those progress reports, two per semester which I think is the absolutely maximum, you know. In fact I'd be happy with one per semester but you know, it's been agreed two." (tutor H)

"Yes, so in that case we have to give them structured strictures, we have to make it very clear what it is about. It's about telling them from the outset, this is what it is about, this is what you are suppose to get out of it, this is how we will help you to do that." (tutor C)

"So I would be very sceptical of any system which required an awful lot of people to be doing things in a systematic way." (tutor E)

"But you have a responsibility as adults to engage in this process in an active way and you have to be proactive and not reactive." (tutor C)

"And I think the British culture prolongs that [behaving as children] very much I think, the way the university behaves towards students. It's the idea of duty of care that does not exist in French universities" (tutor J)

"I think no favours are done to students by encouraging them in this customer service ethic. They're not customers they are registered students of the university. (tutor C)

"while they're actually here they have too little choice and too little decision making, so when they're faced with Berlin they suddenly have a crisis because they can study anything they like." (tutor B)

Students' own preparation

"I think also the fact I did TEFL in my second year, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, that was very much looking to what I would be doing in the third year, and that really helped. I was really glad that I did that course." (Susanna)

"I did a Spanish course of two weeks before I came here, and I would recommend to all students to do something like this too." (Jerry)

"I went to Rome about two or three weeks after I finished semester 2 in the second year [...] it sort of helped me find out where I wanted to live, where I didn't want to live,

how much house prices actually cost [laughs], and the different travel arrangements to get to… and also where I wanted to live in terms of amenities and shops and so forth. [...] and the language course that was offered by the university was good, it helped us a little bit, helped bring a lot of Erasmus students together." (Tom)

Examples of students taking control

"I was a little bit extreme I think by trying to… I didn't cut off my relations to my British friends, but I did spent as little time as possible with them just because I knew it wasn't helping my Russian." (Charles)

"And in Berlin um because I knew that it had been hard to meet people in France I um, I joined lots of societies… well I joined two, so I've learnt to row and I did yoga as well, and the rowing was excellent because I was the only English person and you had to speak lots of German and you had to make friends with people so they'd fish you out of the water when you fell in [laughs]." (Claire)

Peer-supported learning

Some year-4 students felt that being in touch especially with previous year-abroad students was useful. Students reported three different ways in which previous students helped them prepare: through individual contacts, through talks during the year-abroad information day, and through reports available online or in hardcopy. All of these were deemed useful, but it appears that students who had individual contact with previous year-abroad students benefited most, while the talks during the information day were more general perhaps.

The University of Sheffield has established a YA community in which year 4 students play an important and effective role.[33] This formed part of a project that had the goal to empower students to take control of their year abroad. In one of the conference workshops, participants reported that in situations of crisis, students could do with the support of other students, especially 4th year students[34].

It emerged from the workshop discussions that students do listen to former students. This is something that I noticed during the year abroad day held at Bath for 2nd year students. When former YA students came to the podium to talk about their experiences or to answer questions all students were quiet and concentrated on what they had to say, even at 4.30pm in the afternoon. Much more so than during the entire day when lecturers and tutors talked about the YA.

Preparation through individual contacts with previous students (4)

"Yes there was someone from Bath University and she emailed me a lot as well and told me what it was like. [...] Because you can ask things… you can ask things that

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[33] http://coursecast.bath.ac.uk/CourseCast/Viewer/Default.aspx?id=06c2eda2-fb0e-43c3-981a-7d9e44f72324

[34] http://www.bath.ac.uk/education/research/conferences/resources/Workshop_2.mp3

you wouldn't ask the future boss because he might think it's sort of a bit cheesy, too much to ask. Like about things like money, how do you get by with the money that they pay you, or what do you have to wear in the office? You have to wear casual but smart. Or um getting an apartment, yeah." (Sally)

"as soon as I applied for the job I had exchanges of emails saying, oh what do you think of the job, the work, you know. So she gave me loads of information. And when I got the job, you know, over the course of the months before I started my placement we had email exchanges, she told me all about it, made it sound really exciting, so that was great. And then also I carried on that tradition of, you know, really trying to keep contact with them before they start and after they start. Like she knows she can contact me if she has any questions. So that was good." (Sonya)

"I think so yeah. and they gave… they put me in contact with other people that had been to the same places that I was going to which was really helpful, because I obviously emailed them before I went asking them about accommodation and stuff and courses to choose, so that was useful" (Caroline)

Preparation through talks by previous students (3)

"The only transfer of information from the previous interns, people on their placements was when we were doing workshops and you know, 4th year kindly came along – I know they're trying to get us lot to do it this year – and said about their experiences, which was really useful." (Sonya)

"Um, I think I listened to some talks by people who had been assistants, so that's kind of some preparation." (Dominic)

Stress contact to previous year-abroad students

"Um, I think something good that the university did was they did the tutoring system I think, they gave you details of past students and you could contact them if you wanted. Um, maybe they could maybe focus on that aspect a bit, because they didn't really stress that enough and people weren't very aware of it. Um, and so I know I didn't really use that sort of option. Maybe I would have if it had been more emphasised. But um, I think that that would be a really… a better way f preparing yourself because the teachers can give you advice, but best advice from the people who have been there." (Lisa)

Implications for assessment

It seems important to set way markers or mile stones along the course of the degree that language students ought to achieve or head for. In order to achieve these mile stones they could be given opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge. This would enable a student to assess their own achievements against the benchmarks, and seek opportunities of how to achieve these goals. These mile stones would have to be clearly communicated to the students, as well as formal and informal opportunities that are available to them to achieve these mile stones.

From the quotes I conclude that students should be consciously eased into taking agency in their own learning, in appreciating the learning opportunities, and in exploring the world beyond formal university education – and this process should start early, perhaps in year 1.

Thus, there is the argument that student should be clear about their learning aims, and learn to gradually take responsibility for their own learning from year one, monitor and reflect on their own learning in view of the defined aims, and that they should increasingly learn to make their own decisions. Furthermore they should become clear that learning happens in and outside of university, and that they should seek out learning opportunities. By the time they go on their year abroad, they should ideally have acquired an autonomous approach to their learning, making considerate and responsible use of learning opportunities that are presented to them and creatively seek opportunities where they may not be readily available. The aim of shifting more responsibility for learning onto the students would have the benefit of giving control to the students while potentially reducing the teachers' workload. Based on these findings, ways of empowering and enabling students to formulate and review their own objectives and achievements, as well as to assess their own performance should form part of a YA assessment model. Virtual networks may be a format for constructive peer support while students are away.

Besides year-4 students, peers in the same year may also be able to support each other. Students reported the emotional and practical support provided by first-circle peers when they are abroad. There is an argument that this circle of friends could also be instrumental in supporting its members to reflect on group dynamics, which may lead to relevant actions. For this to be effective, however, students would need to understand Coleman's three-circle theory. Perhaps knowledge of social-capital theory might also help students question their own position when abroad. This would enable reflection of the group dynamics and give students the tools to discuss this with their friends and find ways of taking greater responsibility for their learning, for instance, by increasingly engaging with the third-circle.

10) Assessment of experiential/autonomous learning based on the continuity model

One member of staff gave a metaphor of how we should prepare students to take greater responsibility and gain autonomy in terms of learning:

> "we've given them the water wings and we're gradually letting the water wings down so they're having to swim for themselves" (tutor C)

To continue this metaphor, for a number of students the current model works very well, and they can swim well enough and succeed during the YA. However, at least some students feel that they had been thrown in at the deep end: some students feel abandoned; some do not know how to make contacts to native speakers, conduct a research project and write it up, or how to continue their learning outside of university or work. Thus, as indicated in the

title of this report, I propose a new way forward for the YA: **assessment for experiential and autonomous learning (AEAL) based on the continuity model**. AEAL is an assessment model that aims at equipping students with knowledge, skills and learner autonomy they require for a successful YA, while providing sustainable support. Given the YA is such a complex and varied experience, the continuity model concentrates on providing continuity to provide a stable and safe base as a framework of reference while students are away. This approach is described in two parts. First AEAL is described followed by the continuity model. The section following these make concrete recommendations of how to use and adapt current or new instruments to enable AEAL based on the continuity model. The last and final section will explain two ways of implementing all this into a degree framework.

Assessment for experiential and autonomous learning

Assessment for learning (Black and Wiliam 1998; Nuffield Reform Group 1999; Black, Harrison et al. 2002; Black, Harrison et al. 2003) describes how students can be supported through constructive feedback (formative) and graded (summative) assessment inside the classroom. This type of assessment is based on five premises, I quote from the Nuffield Reform Group pamphlet (1999: 5-6):

- The provision of effective feedback to pupils;
- The active involvement of pupils in their own learning;
- adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment;
- a recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning;
- the need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve.

Based on evidence, Black and Wiliam (1998) maintains that observing these premises when teaching children in classrooms leads to gains that are "likely to be even more substantial for lower-achieving pupils". Clearly, in the YA abroad context we are dealing first with adults and second we are dealing with out-of-class learning. Thus the 'assessment for learning' model as described above needs to be adapted. However, the possibility that lower-achieving students may benefit more from this assessment model than high-achieving ones would lead in the right direction, helping those most who might otherwise feel they ended up in 'the deep end'. I feel that combining the 'assessment for learning' approach with Kolb's experiential learning cycle and autonomous learning perspectives (both introduced in section 2) make this a suitable way of thinking about the specific requirements of the YA assessment. Similar to the 'assessment for learning idea' Kolb's experiential learning cycle depends on reflection of experience and adaptation of approach and renewed application.

This perspective is not specifically dealing with assessment, but with the experience and how to learn from it. Thus any assessment should encourage students to apply their knowledge to a new experience, reflect on it, review and adapt strategies and try again. Since teachers or mentors are not present and in many instances not so easy to contact, students have to largely rely on themselves and act as autonomous learners. However, we cannot expect students to become autonomous and reflective learners from one day to the next: as the water wings metaphor implies, this should happen gradually. I identified five concrete instruments that allow the assessment of experiential and autonomous learning:

1. self-peer evaluated journal starting in year 1
2. academic skills training
3. spread-out preparatory sessions
4. oral language evaluation and debriefing
5. Written assignments

The Bath log that is comprised in the current YA handbook is going in the right direction (see section 2). It asks students to formulate their own objectives in terms of language, cultural, academic learning (MLES), politics and economics/international relations (LP), problem solving, career skills, personal development and other. However, most students I interviewed did not use the log, and none of the students actually kept up with the log for longer than two weeks. While the log encourages setting targets and charting achievements, it does not explicitly include notions of strategies and reflection. These may be implicitly contained of course, however, strategies are important, and especially weaker students should reflect and review strategies. Otherwise there may be the impression that achieving objectives may be automatic, or due to outside factors, rather than a process steered by the student him- or herself. This leads me to propose an online self-reflective journal that facilitates experiential and autonomous learning (see point 1 below).

As outlined by Murray Pratt in the conference workshop, objectives and training of the YA have to be aligned. First students need to know what they are supposed to learn and achieve and second they have to have the skills required to achieve those aims. While the objectives are stated in the YA handbook (see section 2), only one point relates to assessment, namely academic skills. It is outlined that students would "work on your special study and any university courses" (Handbook 2010/11: 8), i.e. on their summatively assessed performance. All the other objectives are therefore not assessed. This leads me to propose the inclusion of formative assessment of certain objectives as discussed below. As to the alignment of training and objectives, members of staff from various universities, including Bath, were of the opinion that some students were not prepared well enough to produce this special study, or how to conduct research or analyse material. Thus, I propose

that students need academic training (see point 2) so they are adequately prepared to face the challenges.

Students need careful preparation, again so they are prepared in practical, emotional, academic, and professional terms. Much information at Bath is imparted in a one-day YA preparation day, there appears to be too much information in one day for a student to take in and understand, thus I propose several smaller sessions with specific foci (see point 3).

Debriefing has been identified as an important feature of the year abroad, since to a certain extent this activity can drive home what students have learnt. Jim Coleman mentioned in his key note speech that students tend not to be aware of what they have learnt unless it is assessed. From this follows that students need assessment to learn what they learnt. Thus I propose that besides the self-reflective journal, students should summarise what they have learnt in an oral presentation (see point 4).

Written assignments play the role of summative assessment for which a grade is given. This continues to play an important part of the accountability of university assessment. However, I propose to bring the objectives in line with the training or vice versa (point 5)

The continuity model

With regard to the present study, an adequate assessment framework has to allow for the fact that students have different personalities, different skills and knowledge bases, and different learning goals. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge that some tutors are more committed to providing student support than others, partly because student numbers in French for instance are high, whereas in Russian they are smaller and hence relationships are more personal. Additionally, we have to strive for a solution that does not increase staff workload considerably, on the contrary less tutor involvement in the support and assessment of the year abroad would be an advantage. As mentioned above, the only constant in the year abroad is variability (Coleman). Bearing this in mind, I was interested in focussing on aspects of the YA that may offer consistency or potential continuity, and base YA support and assessment on more stable factors. The continuity model that I propose in this section is based on the idea that the YA should be better embedded in the degree programme, as discussed in section 9. As you will see in the next section, this partly overlaps with the assessment for experiential and autonomous learning approach, described above. It affects especially the self-reflective journal, since I propose that this should be used in each year of study, not just during the YA. Based on my survey, I identified four areas that I feel are important in terms of building continuation:

6. YA community including year 1, 2, 3, 4
7. e-platform
8. accreditation
9. YA administration

These areas are concerned with building a stable and continuous base for learning, on which students can continue to rely when they are away. Such a continuity model could address a number of points raised in this report:

- students need to understand that learning happens not only in but also outside of the classroom;
- students should take more agency in their own learning;
- introduce systems or structures applicable to the YA well in advance, so students are familiar with them when abroad;
- students internalise and consolidate processes, so they do have to learn less new things shortly before departure;
- teach students skills that they will need during the YA over a period of time.

I propose to establish a YA abroad community that engages learners in supporting each other, and including incoming students from other Erasmus partner institutions. This support group would be available before, during and after the year abroad and would enable an exchange between students, teaching them to evaluate each others work and provide constructive feedback. The name should perhaps reflect that the community is not just for the YA but to support all learning inside and outside the classroom, thus I suggest naming it: student support community (point 5).

For students to be able to access course-related information, as well as their self-reflective journals and other documents, I propose to expand the functions of the current Moodle e-platform. In order to help students remember submission dates, and to relieve staff from having to send individual emails, this should be equipped with an automatic reminder function (point 6).

Accreditation is currently quite low, which appears to be taken as a sign by some students that they can relax a bit. In order to ensure continuous motivation, I feel that the years of a degree should be either all equally important, or gradually be weighted more to signal the importance of the YA (point 7)

The final point that I propose relates to the administration of the YA. As reported above, it was found that contact between students, supervisors, and personal tutors was not always judged as adequate, while the placement officer was appreciated by all. Thus, I propose that one person or a dedicated team should be a one-stop call point for YA issues,

to build a continuous contact base. This means that students who do different experiences in two different countries can carry on speaking to the same person (point 8).

1) Self- and peer-evaluated journal, including linguistic benchmarks

The journal would give students the opportunity to evaluate their competencies, and organise their own learning. This would enable students to see their own progress, and not just base their evaluation on comparison with others, which can sometimes impact on students' self-confidence. Furthermore, it would allow for peer-feedback, teaching the students to help each other. The students would reflect on categories listed below, which are based on the current log, and think how these objectives could be achieved, i.e. also think about the process and strategies:

- Language learning based on the CEFR (see appendix 1)
- Cultural/intercultural learning
- Employability gains
- Academic learning
- Social integration
- Problem solving

Personal development is included in the Bath log, for instance, and it is a generally expected and valued outcome of the YA. The question arises as to whether the inclusion of personal development in a university self-assessment grid would trespass ethical boundaries. If students focus on strategies they may be encouraged to think about personal issues, such as overcoming shyness perhaps. Thus, I did not include this personal domain in the list above.

Recommendation 1: Self-reflective journal

A self-reflective journal charting goals, strategies, reflection and modification should be made an integral part of the degree programme in all years.

In order to self-assess language skills, I propose that students base this on the descriptors formulated in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001) that forms part of the European Language Portfolio, and its components the Europass document. These are 'I can' statements that allow students to self-evaluate different languages skills such as speaking, writing, listening and reading.

Table 18: Proposed language benchmarks based on ECFR

	post A-level	Ab initio
Beginning of year 1	A2	0-A1
Beginning of year 2	A2-B1	A1-A2
Beginning of year 3	B2	A2-B1
Beginning of year 4	C1	B2-C1
End of year 4	C2	C2

Leeds Metropolitan University have defined ECFR descriptors required before (B2) and after (C1) the YA. However, this table would have to be determined by ESML staff for the individual languages. I used their descriptors to propose a table of benchmarks, taking into consideration that ab-intio and post A-level students need different benchmarks.

As to frequency of use, based on the Nottingham Trent model, I suggest that students make 3 entries per semester.

- Beginning: evaluate language competencies, set goals, and think of strategies
- Middle: evaluate progress and set new goals and revise strategies
- End: evaluate progress and reflect on strategies utilised, and draw conclusions for the following semester.

This model would be repeated each year, so that the students are used to A) take control for their learning, and B) self-evaluate their learning. Furthermore, these self-reflective journals could be peer-assessed, by randomly allocating peers to (anonymously) comment on all or on summary submissions. I recommend that the exercise of self-reflection and giving peer-feedback should account for 10-20 credits each year as part of a formative learning self-assessment. This peer-assessment would continue during the year abroad. During the year abroad, however, all (not just summary) entries should be peer-reviewed so that strategies can be adapted and modified more quickly. This may lead to greater engagement with the year abroad. Apart from the initial set-up investment this would not cost any money and would allow reflective, self- and peer-directed learning with a minimum of staff involvement.

Recommendation 2: Language benchmarks

Define benchmarks for language learning. Such benchmarks should be determined for every year, and students should self-evaluate their four competencies (reading, listening, speaking, writing) against these benchmarks as part of their initial self-evaluation.

2) Academic skills training

Staff and students largely agree that if there is no opportunity to write academic texts in the L2 during the year abroad, students should practice this in a separate piece of written work. Issues have been identified with the current model, namely that students are ill prepared to

engage in research work with an analytical focus during their year abroad. Thus, I propose that students in year two should learn how to write an essay in their writing class. Based on the Lancaster model, I propose that students interview an international student, preferably from the L2 region, regarding their YA situation in Bath and analyse the interview. I propose that the theoretical framework for this study is social capital (weak and strong ties) and Jim Coleman's concentric circles (discussed in section 7 above). The students could find out in the interview, what kind of ties the international students has established and how these fit into the concentric circle model. The student could establish the respondents' objectives and strategies and weigh them up in an analytical way. This could lead to recommendations for the respondent and conclusions for their own study abroad. This measure would have six possibly more outcomes: 1) students would familiarise themselves with research, analytical and essay writing techniques before they embark on a larger and more independent piece of work; 2) it would prepare students for the YA abroad by thinking about the situation that is ahead of them; 3) give students the confidence to individually make contact with unknown people and get to know something about them; 4) it would help integrate international students into the resident student community or even establish first contacts to the host country; 5) students may learn about the practical and social issues related to being abroad; and it would help the incoming student reflect on their experience, especially if the recommendations were fed back to them. In order to provide continuity, year 4 could include another essay as part of the writing practice, so that students would have the opportunity to use what they have learnt in year 2 and 3 also in year 4.

Recommendation 3: Essay based on interview with incoming student

Students should write and essay in year 2. Namely students should learn how to conduct research and analysis and how to write an academic essay in year 2, so they are prepared when they have to either write an essay as part of their Erasmus courses, or if they have to embark on their independent study project. Another essay should be set in year 4 to allow for continuity and progress in academic work.

3) Preparatory sessions

Currently a year abroad day is held towards the end of year 2. As discussed above, this tends to overload the students with verbal and paper-based information of which they appear to retain only a proportion. Based on what Confucius said around 450 BC: "Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand", I propose to conduct this day in smaller groups and make it more student-centred, because I believe less might be more in this instance, and students need to be involved more. To this end, I suggest that the students should prepare for this event, which makes the students

more self-reliable and more able to build on knowledge they have already acquired. Students should treat the YA abroad day as a *resource* to help their preparation efforts. It is their opportunity to get their questions answered by staff and year 4 students. Students should prepare for this day as follows:

- read the wiki-map entries (see point 5 below) on the destinations chosen and note down questions;
- read the information on how to do the written assignment and fill in one or two proposals (as outlined above) if applicable;
- complete the self-reflection journal and bring the last entry.

I propose that the YA day should consist of a number of sessions:

- **Practical orientation 1** (plenary): minimum of information on insurance, academic requirements etc.
- **Practical orientation 2** (by language cohort): a panel of staff and year 4 students provide answers to student questions. Students need to bring their questions based on wiki-map, and their self-reflection journal.
- **Theoretical orientation** (plenary): information on Coleman circle theory (aim = arriving at outer circle), and social capital theory (aim = building lots of weak ties). Discuss findings from interviews conducted in Bath.
- **Erasmus orientation**: questions and answers by staff and year 4 students.
- **Work orientation:** questions and answers by staff and year 4 students.
- **Teaching orientation:** input by tutor, then questions and answers by year 4 students.
- **Discussion of written assignments**: Potential supervisors run surgeries for students. The booking of a surgery slot should be done over the e-platform. Students bring their proposal. Tutors can download the same from the internet in advance.
- **Discussion of expectations**: Group discussions in groups of 25 or so brainstorming expectations of the year abroad and strategies of how to meet these expectations.

Recommendation 4: Student-centred preparatory sessions

Make the information sessions student-centred and interactive and encourage students to see it as a resource that includes a forum for students to discuss expectations.

4) Oral language evaluation and peer-debriefing

Students and staff largely agree that an oral exam on return would be a good idea, and many universities have them. However, the main concern at Bath is the workload that oral exams entail, given the large cohorts in some languages and that two people would need to be present to conduct exams. Thus, the models adopted at Exeter or Aston is unlikely to be

feasible at Bath. However, at Exeter as well as Aston the oral exams do not only provide an evaluation of language but also a way of facilitating debriefing and closure to the YA. Since formal exam are too time-consuming, another model is considered which emerged from the discussion with staff. This entails presentations on the YA in the oral module in year 4. I propose that these should be group presentations by 3-4 students at the time, since the preparation process would bring students together to discuss the year abroad, allowing peer debriefing. I propose that each student group prepares a different topic based on their self-reflective journals, so that the presentations are not repetitive and allow all students, as a group, to reflect on different aspects of their own YA in a structured way.

- Language learning
- Cultural/intercultural learning
- Employability gains
- Academic learning
- Social integration
- Problem solving
- Maintaining oral skills in year 4

It would be useful for year 2 students to attend these sessions where possible. Logistically, year 2 students are unlikely to be able to attend all of them. Places would need to be booked (on the e-platform, see point 6 below) and it could be a compulsory requirement. Students could use this to start thinking about questions for the preparatory sessions. Furthermore, incoming students could be invited to these sessions as part of the student support community (see point 5 below).

Recommendation 5: Debriefing in oral session

Students should be given the opportunity to present aspects of their year abroad during the first few sessions of the oral classes in year 4. These presentations should be prepared as a group to allow peer-debriefing in a small group, before they present it in the larger group.

5) Written YA assignments

As pointed out above, it is generally agreed that keeping up academic writing is important and students largely accept this. Some students feel an academic piece of work suited them better, while others preferred a work-related piece of work. I argue that both types can be tackled as academic pieces of work, given students are trained in analytical work, as outlined above. In order to enable contacts to the local population (see section 7 above), the written assignment should be based on at least one interview. The respondent could be from work or another context. Thus, I propose that students should choose whether they

want to write a work or non-work-based piece, but all work should comply with academic standards. Thus it is important that students are clear about the difference between a descriptive and analytical piece of work.

The length of the special study has been acceptable to most students and staff and the current format of 5000 or 3000 words could be maintained. However, I feel that the 3000 word essay complicates the issue, and I propose to offer all students who are on work or teaching placements for a whole year to write either 1 x 5000 words or 2 x 2500 words. And those who combine work or teaching with Erasmus study to write a 2500-word piece; thus, getting rid of the essay. I propose that based on the student's self evaluation they should decide whether they would like to write one larger piece in one language or whether 2 x 2500 would be more beneficial for their language development. This would have the effect of making the written YA work more student-centred and would give the students more control over what they want to develop during their year abroad.

This piece of work would be tutor assessed in three stages. First the students would provide an outline proposal, as outlined below. Towards the middle of the first semester students would have to submit an interview transcript or a voice file, and a plan, outlining each section of the proposed work. The University of Durham has adopted the model that students have to hand in a draft of their study during the year abroad on which they get feedback from their tutor. They then take on board the feedback and produce a 'fair copy' of their YA project. However, I feel to provide feedback on the entire draft is too much of a burden on the tutors, therefore, I propose that the tutors provide feedback on the section plan only. Thus, I argue that all studies should be academic, in the way that they take an analytical and critical stance, and that the year abroad essay in its current form should be abolished. The new options available would be longer or shorter pieces of academic work (see point 6 below). This would streamline the process, and it seems illogical that some need to write academic pieces and others more descriptive pieces. Assessment criteria for this piece of work should be content, language and critical ability. I propose that students would submit all parts on the YA e-platform.

Recommendation 6: Written work based on interview(s)

Based on their language self-assessment, students should decide whether they write 1x5000 or 2x2500 words, and choose a work- or non-work-based piece of work, based on at least one interview in the host country. All pieces should be academic and analytical. Students should submit a section plan online at agreed dates while they are away and receive feedback on this within a certain time. The final piece will be submitted at the end of the semester 1 and or 2.

Preparation for written assignments

In terms of preparation, students should write an online proposal for their written work based on a checklist. This would have the aim to make students think not only about interest but also in terms of feasibility:

- topic/research question
- Where can I find interview partners? Where and how am I going to find them?
- Explain why you are really interested in this subject.
- Where am I going to find written work on this topic: websites, libraries (membership?), work placements, other contacts? (attach 3 important references on the topic and say where you are going to find them)
- Do I know how to write an analytical essay? Where can I find information on this? Websites/books/study guidance on Bath website etc.
- Preferred supervisor, second-choice supervisor

This checklist would be filled in before the YA preparation day towards the end of year 2, and this will be discussed with a tutor during preparatory sessions (see point 3 below). The interests of the supervisors available for each language will be available in a searchable database as part of the e-platform, and the students would nominate suitable first–choice and second-choice supervisor.

Recommendation 7: Write proposal for written YA assignment

Students should write one or two proposals based on a checklist in preparation of the written pieces they are planning to write abroad.

6) Student support community

As described in section 6 e-platforms support YA communities, for instance, in Sheffield. This has shown to be a useful tool for students so support each other in terms of practical information as well as in terms of reflection and out-of-class learning about language and culture. It showed that students are capable of supporting each other, even of moderating challenging views. Thus, I propose to establish a student community that engages learners in supporting each other. It has been pointed out in the conference, that we should not forget about the resource that incoming students from other Erasmus partner institutions or from overseas represent. They could provide first-hand accounts of what it is like to be abroad, and help outgoing students to gain awareness of issues related to this. Ideally, such a support group including incoming and outgoing students would provide a continuous support structure not just during the year abroad. Ideally, it would enable an exchange between incoming and outgoing students, between years 1, 2, 3 and 4, and between

students of each year. As pointed out the name should perhaps reflect that the community is not just for the year abroad but to support all learning inside and outside the classroom, thus I suggest to name it: student support community.

Recommendation 8: Establish a student support community
Bring incoming and outgoing students at 'Bath together to help and support each other in their preparation, coping and reflection of their learning outside the classroom in Bath and abroad.

7) Wiki map

It is generally agreed that students, who recently returned or who are abroad, are the experts on the practical side of how to live abroad. Any handbook or final reports on paper will be out-of-date as soon as they are printed. Therefore, the Nottingham Trent model to maintain a wiki-map with information that is up-dated continuously is a constructive idea. This activity would replace final year reports and organise the information in a searchable database. Considering that the model proposed here, expects students to self- and peer-evaluate their learning, write essays and study/work, I do not propose that students need to submit a certain number of items or words. But the idea of a wiki-map where students are asked to share information with year 2 and other year 3 students is important. In order to allow continuity and gain familiarity with the facility, students could start contributing in year 1. They could make a wiki of Bath/Bristol and the wider area, when they are new to Bath, perhaps in terms of opportunities to practice L2, including perhaps films, societies, parties, etc. Incoming students, especially those from partner institutions could also be invited to add to the Bath and the host destinations. I propose that no language is prescribed, and that students should be able to use English or L2 for this. Again this would need minimal involvement of staff once it is set up. During the YA students would contribute to the YA destination sites, and in the 4th year students could re-engage with the Bath page and use/adapt opportunities to engage with L2 locally. This has the effect that students learn to seek learning opportunities outside the classroom while still in Bath, so it will not be new to them when abroad. Based on the Nottingham Trent model, I suggest that the practical information would include the following categories, included a sixth dimension, not including in the NTU approach, to make clear that finding opportunities to engage with the language is important.

- Evaluation/recommendation of courses (Erasmus), work placements or schools (teaching assistants)
- Accommodation

- Things to (not) to do
- Useful contacts
- Sources of information
- Strategies to engage with the language
- Strategies of how to meet L2 speakers

This would also have the advantage of strengthening ties between partner organisations and allow for a student-centred support network, where also practical and other issues could be discussed. It would have the aim to generate awareness of learning opportunities outside the classroom in Bath and abroad, as well as act as a social networking site for the student support community

Recommendation 9: International wiki-map

Outgoing and incoming students jointly maintain wiki-maps with practical information on Bath and YA destinations. This allows an insider and an outsider view on each destination and may harbour potential for intercultural learning, and enabling awareness of learning outside the classroom.

8) E-platform

A new e-platform should be installed; technicians would have to decide whether this could be Moodle based. The idea is that there is a one-stop website where students can store all the elements of their reflective and formative learning, and upload and record their YA writings. The following will summarise the functions of this website.

Currently, much information is available on Moodle. Students are used to using it, and they are generally used to organising their life using an internet facility. The e-platform proposed would combine practical information and the creation of the student support community. Resources available from this website would be:

- Course specifications
- Link to wiki-map
- Individual grid with dates that generates automatic reminders, where material can be uploaded. The dates when something is uploaded will show on the website too.
- Self-reflection journal and time-sensitive submission grid
- Information on Coleman's circle theory
- Information on social capital theory
- A forum for the student support community to discuss issues

Table 19: Functions of proposed e-platform

		year 1		year 2		year 3		year 4	
	Semester	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
self-reflective journal	Self evaluation, goals, strategies	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
	progress and strategy review	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
	Summary and self-appraisal	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
peer feedback	Random peer-feedback	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
y4 pres	booking of 2 presentations			B					
Written assign-ment	introduction and section plan			M					
	Final assignment			E					
	Outline proposal				E				
	Introduction and section plan					M	M		
	Final piece					E	E		
Wiki	Bath/UK	Edit	Edit	Edit	Edit			Edit	Edit
	Host destination			Read	Read	Edit	Edit	Read	Read
Forum		Edit	Edit	Edit	Edit	Edit	Edit	Edit	Edit

B = beginning, M = middle, E = end of semester

Recommendation 10: Expand e-platform

Establish an e-platform which students start to use at the beginning of their degree course. Indeed, there could be an introduction to this tool during induction week. This e-platform (moodle/wiki) would support self-reflection, dead-line monitoring, document upload, recording and review facility, practical help, email reminder function and a forum.

9) Accreditation

In order to provide continued motivation and engage students in making maximum use of their learning opportunities, especially during their year abroad, the proportion the YA contributes to the overall degree should be increased. King's College London, for instance asks students to take the YA very seriously, and consequently assesses it thoroughly. Thus there appears to be a correlation of proportion accredited to the YA and how seriously students are expected to take it. Clearly, there is a problem if a large part of a degree qualification is based on one single piece of work, as is the case in the current model where some students are assessed based on one piece of work, the special study. A modular approach such as adopted at the University of Surrey may support such an increased percentage (see concluding section below). They designed a YA module that includes assessed preparatory and debriefing sessions, besides YA-specific assignments.

Currently the accreditation of the YA is regulated university-wide at Bath (8%), which means that increasing the proportion may not be possible. However, other ways should be sought to attribute greater importance to the year abroad, so all students understand that the YA should be taken seriously, and make them engage fully with the learning opportunity offered.

Recommendation 11: Increase importance of the YA

I recommend that more importance is allocated to the YA, either through increasing the proportion the YA accounts in view of the overall degree, or my making it modular, so that the final YA abroad mark incorporates several pieces of work, similar to other years of the degree.

10) Year abroad administration

The staff interviews identified a number of issues with student support currently provided by staff at Bath. Tutors' commitment and dedication appears inconsistent. The placement officer, whose support is widely appreciated, efficiently supports work placement students. However, other students would clearly benefit from a similar contact at Bath. In staff interviews, it was emphasised that personal tutors are not a solution, because they are not necessarily involved in the YA, and thus may again provide inconsistent support. Furthermore, it was criticised that section coordinators are in charge of translating ETCS grades into Bath grades, which is considered an administrative and time consuming task. Thus in staff interviews it was suggested that it would be an advantage to have one person, or a team, in place who is the first stop call for all YA students, and who deals with ECTS grades and other YA related tasks.

Based on the above, I recommend that there should be a placement officer or an officer team similar to the one in IMML, or at Aston University, where one or more placement officers are responsible for all students who are going abroad. In Aston, this role also includes preparation in the form of intercultural training and debriefing sessions. Additionally, this person or team could familiarise the students with the e-platform, YA portfolio requirements, and monitor compliance with the self-reflection journal.

Recommendation 12: Have one YA officer (team) for all students

I recommend to have dedicated persons or a team who are the first port of call for all students in relation to their year abroad. This role would include preparation and debriefing, as well as support for autonomous and experiential learning throughout the degree.

This is the only recommendation that would require more money. The question of finances also emerged in the staff interviews, and raising student fees for ESML degrees was

mentioned as an option. However, I did not survey financial implications, or views on current student fees, and I can make no recommendations in this respect.

Bringing it all together

The proposed AEAL based on the continuity model for Bath keeps elements from the previous assessment in a modified way. These are the YA preparation day and the written assignment. The current progress reports, log and the final year report, would be replaced by a self- and peer-reflected learning journal, and wiki-map that clearly separates reflection and practical information. This is not so clear with current instruments. Thus the proposed model consists of two parts a formative and a summative part, both counting towards the YA mark. The new general YA officer would do an induction to the e-platform and support students using it, starting in their first year. After the first semester students should be familiar with its use.

There are two ways of bringing the above steps together, based on the current Bath practice as a YA mark for performance during the YA only, or as treating YA assignments as part of a longer YA module spanning two years as is in operation at the University of Surrey for instance.

The single YA approach would mean that the essay based on the interview with an incoming student written in Year 2 would be incorporated into a year 2 writing class, and the oral presentation on return would be part of a year-4 oral class. In Surrey preparatory and debriefing assignments are treated as integral components of a YA module. Thus a conventional one-year YA assessment grid is represented in Table 20.

Table 20: One-year YA assessment grid

Formative Portfolio 40 credits:

Assessment by	self	peer	tutor	admin
Learning journal online	X			
Peer feedback given on learning journal		X		
Proposal for written work			X	
Chapter outline			X	
Contribution to wiki-map	X	X		
Presentation in year 4		X	X	
Completion of all components				X

Summative work 80 credits:

Assessment by	self	peer	tutor	admin
Erasmus grades				X
5000, 2x2500 or 1x2500 word essay			X	

This model means that the YA grade is still made up by Erasmus grades and/or YA projects only. Although the formative part is compulsory no grade is awarded for this.

A possible modular approach is represented in Table 21. This means that the YA grade is made up of three different marks. This emphasises the importance of preparation and reflection, and does not lead to the situation where a single piece of work informs the YA grade. The formative part would also be a compulsory part of the YA assessment.

Table 21: Modular YA assessment over two years

Formative Portfolio 30 credits:

Assessment by	self	peer	tutor	admin
Learning journal online	X			
Peer feedback given on learning journal		X		
Proposal for written work			X	
Chapter outline			X	
Contribution to wiki-map	X	X		
Presentation in year 4		X	X	
Completion of all components				X

Summative work 90 credits:

Assessment by	self	peer	tutor	admin
Preparatory essay in Year 2 (15 credits, 16.66%)			X	
Erasmus grades (60 credits, 66.66%)				X
5000, 2x2500 or 1x2500 word essay (60 credits, 66.66%)			X	
YA presentation (15 credits, 16.66%)			X	

This second model would make the assessment process more consistent and perhaps fairer, since all students would have at least three elements to their summative assessment, plus formative assessment. Furthermore, those who do a written assignment have the option of splitting their grade into two smaller pieces of work. In terms of grade calculation I propose that the formative part is a requirement and if this is not fulfilled 10% is deducted from the YA grade. This is a practice used at the University of Durham. Some universities award a distinction if this reflective or formative part has been taken particularly seriously. A reward structure, leading to a higher mark, could provide an even greater incentive to do well on this part. Thus, alongside a distinction, 5% could be added to the overall YA mark. This idea is not based on a practice elsewhere, but I feel there should not just be punishment but also reward.

In conclusion, I reviewed current policy and practice and made recommendations on the basis of this. I would like to close with a quote by Pellicione and Dixon (2008:752) who argue that "formative learning activities such as ePortfolios shift the focus of the traditional higher education paradigm as students are encouraged to take responsibility for what and how they learn," and this is the aim of the proposed model.

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