

Collaborations and Partnerships Committee

Revised Language Attainment Guidelines for Schools wishing to offer students the opportunity to undertake a period of study or a work placement abroad

Background

1. In line with the aspirations of the University's Strategy to 'provide students with outstanding education, opportunities for all-round personal growth and a life-changing experience; to graduate global citizens who are prepared for the future and ready to make a difference', the University wishes to encourage as many of its students as possible to undertake a period of study or a work placement abroad.
2. The University has a wide variety of opportunities open to students to spend a period of time abroad. The University has a duty to take reasonable care for the health and safety of all those undertaking a period of study or work placement abroad and ensure students are properly prepared and supported in advance of this period. The question of a student's linguistic competence is an important element to be considered as part of the preparation process. Following requests from Year Abroad tutors, this paper is designed to offer guidance to Schools as to the level of linguist preparation that might be necessary. Reflection on this issue will be a requirement on all new study abroad agreements.
3. It is recognised that the decisions taken by Schools on the level of linguistic competence required can be complex and Schools need to demonstrate that they have considered the academic learning context of the study/placement, the country to be visited and risks involved. Schools also need to ensure that language requirements are communicated to students prior to departure. If there is no possibility of language learning in the student's programme of study, a School should consider how a student will access language training if necessary. It is suggested that where appropriate Schools include requirements within learning agreements.

Level of Language Competence

4. The level of language competence required will vary according to the learning context. The highest level would be required for those students taking academic modules involving the precise use of language where students will be assessed alongside native speakers in the country of study (for example some placements organised by the School of Law). The Council of Europe's 'European Common Reference Framework for Languages' suggests that the level required is 'C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency). This corresponds to an IELTS score of 6.5 and would typically be achievable only after a period of study of 1000 hours (this might also be represented by successful completion of an A-level or FLTU module at upper intermediate/advanced level).

The minimum level required for everyday communication abroad is set at B1 (Threshold level), a level that allows students to cope with common situations and to make themselves understood. In some learning contexts it might be judged that this is a level that could still allow students to gain a substantial benefit from such a learning experience while also allowing them to cope with life in a foreign country. Students would normally be expected to meet this minimum standard before they begin their placement. This may require

students to be made aware of the opportunities for a period abroad very early in their programme, ideally during induction, though it may not be possible for students to take electives due to the structure of their programme. In such cases it may be possible for students to show that they had made other suitable provision. For example, they could prove that they had registered on a pre-session intensive course in the host country (within the EU this can often be supported by Erasmus framework funding for students to take advantage of language training in-country before starting their course). In some cases students may have prior language experience which might be equivalent to B1 competence, through family background, previous residence in the country, AS/A-level qualification, or successful completion of a lower intermediate level module in the Language Centre (post-GCSE study).

5. There may be situations when a student is taking practical modules, for example in studio art or music, with little or no written work or lectures, or where they are studying in English and their chosen country is one where English is widely spoken (Holland, Norway for instance). In some cases students may have elected to have a short-term observational or supernumerary experience abroad but are not assessed in-country as part of that experience. In these situations the School would be expected to make an informed decision on the level of language competence required.
6. There might be a need to consider the level of language competence with particular care in cases where a student is undertaking a work placement abroad. There might be additional responsibilities or requirements due to the nature of their workplace which would necessitate specialist training or induction.

Study Abroad Office
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studyabroad@leeds.ac.uk