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Transition to and from Study Year Abroad

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All of our undergraduate students have the opportunity to spend a year studying abroad, adding an international element to their degree programme. The benefits to students taking up this study are wide reaching including the opportunity to live and study in a new culture, meeting people and seeing new places; personal development through increased confidence; transferable skills development such as problem solving, communication, determination and self-motivation; experience of a different academic environment and way of teaching; and the opportunity to enhance their career prospects through demonstrating to employers that they are capable, independent, that they rise to a challenge and have something additional to offer. In fact all of the students interviewed for this section of the good practice guide said that their study year abroad had been an exciting and rewarding experience and “the best thing they had ever done”.

Student View

“It’s the best thing I’ve ever done and I want my final year [at Leeds] to be as good.”

“The returners talk was useful and made me feel prepared for the year ahead.”

“It can be hard to return to normality after an amazing year!”

“Coming back to Leeds was a reverse culture shock, more than going abroad.”

Thinking back, did you feel prepared for your move from Leeds to your institution abroad and do you think the School / University could have prepared you more fully for this move?

Students found the ‘Get Ready to Go’ guides produced by the Study Abroad Office to be particularly helpful and comprehensive.

Some of the students interviewed had been given the opportunity to meet students in upper years who had already studied abroad and this had been an invaluable source of support in terms of assisting with accommodation and other advice. The Student Education Service (School of Earth and Environment) had organised an event which had been held in the November prior to them commencing their year abroad and students had subsequently formed friendship groups over Facebook and were able to email queries to students before travelling abroad.

Students reported that the Study Abroad Fair had been helpful in assisting them with their choice of institution but they would have welcomed a further event in the few months before they travelled abroad for additional preparatory support.

The preparatory event organised in March by the Study Abroad Office had been helpful in providing general information and the opportunity to meet fellow students who were attending the same institution abroad. Students again reported forming friendship groups in Leeds ahead of travelling abroad.

What have you found to be the main differences between studying in your current year in Leeds compared with last year in your institution abroad?

Students reported that teaching styles are very different abroad compared to Leeds with most students having experienced longer blocks of teaching (up to three hours at a time), more frequent and continuous assessment and some classes taking place in the evening. The students interviewed all felt challenged to differing degrees but they all referred to Leeds as being a more 'academic' experience.

Students had experienced a variety of co-curricular activity at their institutions abroad ranging from those that were similar to Leeds through to an institution with no Student Union and few student societies.

Were you offered any academic support with your move back to Leeds? What worked well and what didn't work so well?

Students all referred to a reverse culture shock on their return to Leeds and that they had found this particularly challenging ie remembering how to undertake simple tasks such as printing.

They all talked about feeling less prepared for their return to Leeds but felt that it was their responsibility to 'get on with things' and they could not think of additional academic support that they needed. They had all been in contact with their Schools regarding planning for their final year dissertation. They did report receiving emails from their School informing them when to enrol for modules and other such tasks which they had found helpful. However, the students had found themselves still on email distribution lists throughout their study year abroad for events and occurrences in Leeds which were irrelevant and this felt strange to them as though the School had forgotten they were studying abroad. Similarly, personal tutors had been in

contact to arrange one to one tutor meetings seemingly not knowing they were studying abroad.

They had planned ahead and thought about which student societies they would like to be involved with but all of the students reported that they would have liked further support in helping them arrange their accommodation for their return to Leeds and could not recall being sent an email from LUU in the New Year specifically about accommodation.

There was a Welcome Event for returning Study Abroad students but none of the students interviewed had been able to attend due to other commitments.

What useful advice would you provide to students to prepare them for studying abroad and returning to Leeds?

Students recommended meeting up with other students who would be studying abroad before they left Leeds; being more strongly encouraged to learn the basic language of the country they were visiting to help get around when abroad and with completing of forms; and using the Study Abroad resources available online.

They recommended encouraging students to attend the School meetings at the beginning of the year for all returning students to help them to prepare for the year ahead.

Students said they would have liked a 'Welcome Back' email from their School including a few key reminders for the start of the academic year (arrange to see you tutor, reminder where to seek advice etc).

Resources

University of Leeds Student Education Service (Study Abroad Student site)

<http://students.leeds.ac.uk/#Study-abroad>

University of Leeds Student Education Service (Study Abroad Staff site)

http://ses.leeds.ac.uk/info/21910/study_abroad

Thirdyearabroad.com advice for staff – packed with information for students and staff

<http://www.thirdyearabroad.com/advice-and-tips/advice-for-staff.html>

Margaret Pusch is an expert in intercultural communication and has done much work around the stages of transition and the 10 re-entry challenges for students returning from study abroad, including the re-entry 'worm' model

<http://www.iesabroad.org/study-abroad/parents/re-entry>

World Learning SIT Study Abroad: After Study Abroad. A toolkit for returning students

www.worldlearning.org/documents/.../studyabroad-reentry-toolkit.pdf