

Internationalising the Curriculum

Promoting Employability Through a Year Abroad (Languages)

In considering models of an internationalised curriculum, Languages presents an obvious example of an area that has been developing and refining a range of experiences over a considerable period of time. Apart from “on-site” experiences, the Year Abroad between Stage 2 and 3 is a major component of the BA for Languages



students and accounts for 10% of the marks which contribute towards the Degree Classification. In recent years, Languages have added employability enhancement as a central skill, and this is built into core modules in Level 2. The experience of having to live and work abroad on their own promotes independence and inter-cultural awareness and understanding in a way that on-site learning cannot. It also equips the student to compete in a global society that values the graduate who can meet personal challenges, embrace change and confidently adapt to multicultural workplaces and social situations. Lecturers also benefit from the investment of their time in organising the Year Abroad as most students return to study (at Stage 3) demonstrating more maturity, showing increased levels of initiative taking and higher levels of motivation towards their studies.

Preparation for the Year Abroad has been developed to enable students to enhance and articulate their professional skills and employability profiles, as well as the linguistic competence which would be expected to be a central part of this experience. The promotion of employability has been achieved by encouraging students to work as opposed to study abroad (typically working as a Language Teaching Assistant) and including a requirement to provide documentation relating to their job application and complete an oral examination (in the target language) in the form of a job interview (at Queen’s) before embarking on their overseas experience. During their year abroad, students are also required to formally reflect on their personal development by maintaining a learning journal. On returning to QUB, they complete a 3000 word reflective report and have a 30 minute oral exam in which questions focus particularly on skills development in 4 core areas (linguistic competence, cultural/inter-cultural awareness, experience of the world of work, and personal development).

For most students, this compulsory activity is a major step in their personal experience of independent living and presents a significant challenge. It is seen as a transformational experience that allows students to appreciate other cultures and values, to enhance their language skills and to challenge themselves academically and personally in an environment that is often outside their comfort zone. Succeeding in doing this promotes maturity, problem solving and critical thinking skills among students. The preparation also provides a useful focal point for engaging students in wider developmental conversations with their Personal Tutor and it helps undergraduates to take a longer term view of their development beyond the next few months.

In January 2011, the British Academy released a position paper entitled “Language matters more and more” which points to the strategic importance of languages in an increasingly globally positioned economy at a time when the number of students studying languages at school is in decline.

“In 2010, 57% of pupils were taking no language at GCSE. While the total number of A-level candidates for all subjects has risen by 24% since 1996, the number of candidates for languages in the same period has fallen by 25%.....language provision (is) now mainly located in pre-1992 universities , and in the Russell Group universities in particular.”

Providing opportunities for undergraduates to enhance their employability and engage with experiences outside Northern Ireland is an important feature of Languages degrees at Queen’s. The increased emphasis on working abroad, as well as the cultural and linguistic development opportunities, helps to ensure that students are able to practise and receive feedback on their ability to communicate this experience effectively to others. Academics in the School believe that the experience has also proven to be a very effective tool in countering insularity and note that, having lived and worked abroad for 7 -9 months, it is common for their graduates to travel and work abroad during the year after completion of their Degree. They also benefit from the increased motivation that comes from the maturing and confidence building experience of the year abroad; students become more focused on their academic performance on their return in Level 3 and engage more effectively in tutorials and other teaching and learning activities.

References

British Academy (Jan 2011) Language Matters More and More, Available at:
<http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Language-matters-more-and-more.cfm> (Accessed: 24th March 2011).

Thanks to Dr Nigel Harkness and Professor Margaret Topping for their assistance in providing information for this Case Study.