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Year Abroad (A Dialogue)

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
POST-PANDEMIC
PEDAGOGIES
FOR LANGUAGE
EDUCATION

ARTICLES –
DIGITAL MODERN
LANGUAGES

JAMES ILLINGWORTH (DIALOGUE LEAD)

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ABSTRACT

This article is the product of an exchange that took place over the course of two months between March and May 2023 and offers reflections on how the year abroad in Modern Languages has changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The four contributors each bring a distinct expertise in year abroad provision and represent different language areas and geographical regions of the United Kingdom. The core themes explored in the discussion are the need for flexibility and resilience in degree programmes, the importance of accessibility and inclusion, and the challenges and opportunities of digital developments in a mobilities context. As well as reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on year abroad provision, the contributors also dwell on how the UK's withdrawal from the European Union has altered the year abroad landscape.

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As a sector, we are still working through the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mobility. For Modern Languages in the UK, the year abroad is a fundamental and often compulsory element of degree programmes, during which students are immersed in the target language. As flights were grounded, borders closed and countries entered full lockdowns, supporting mobility became a significant challenge, and as the contributors to this dialogue emphasise, to begin to discuss a “post-pandemic” year abroad is still somewhat premature; we are not just beholden to the public health context in the UK, but to those of countries across the globe. China only recently “reopened”, and other countries remain more cautious than the UK in their policies and public messaging. This dialogue seeks, then, to begin a conversation about how student mobility in languages has changed since the start of the pandemic in 2020, but offers no concrete solutions. Instead, it scopes areas that might be usefully considered moving forward, and, in addition to dwelling on lessons learned from the challenges of the year abroad during the pandemic, it also identifies opportunities, drawing on examples of best practice and elements of mobility provision that might fruitfully be reconsidered.

The general consensus, which reflects the recommendations of the recently revised Quality Assurance Agency Subject Benchmark Statement for Languages, Cultures and Societies, is that periods of immersion remain extremely valuable for our undergraduate students, but that we need to carefully embed flexibility and resilience into our programmes. In particular, the pandemic has forced universities to think deeply about diversity and inclusion in a mobilities context, while also offering potential tools that we might use to better address Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) concerns. Indeed, one of the questions pondered here is whether the term “year abroad” fully represents the more diverse offerings available to students on current UK languages degree programmes.

A recurring theme in the dialogue is something not directly related to the pandemic, but which served to magnify and compound some of the issues for mobility that the pandemic was already causing: the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union. Given that the transition year ended in January 2021, the challenges of mobility during the pandemic can be difficult to separate from the challenges of Brexit, and this is reflected in our discussion.

The participants in the dialogue cover a broad language range, representing between them French, Spanish, Scandinavian languages and Japanese. They also bring distinct areas of expertise and responsibility in a mobilities context: I have coordinated the year abroad in French at Cardiff University and co-chaired the University Council for Languages’ (previously University Council of Modern Languages) Year Abroad Special Interest Group; Akiko Furukawa is Japan Year Abroad Coordinator at SOAS University of London and has published in the acquisition of Japanese as a foreign language, as well as leading the innovative Inter-University Support Programme in Japanese, which is discussed during our dialogue; Mark Gant is Head of Languages and Cultures at the University of Chester and has published work on language learning and transculturality; and Guy Puzey is Head of the University of Edinburgh’s Department of European Languages and Cultures and has written on language policy. As such, the four contributors bring oversight and expertise beyond their individual language area to the conversation.

The dialogue took place over six weeks and revolved around six questions:

1. Do you think the shape of the year abroad has been altered by the pandemic? If so, how?
2. What lessons, both positive and negative, has the pandemic taught us about Modern Languages mobilities?
3. What examples of best practice in languages mobility have emerged during/because of the pandemic?
4. How have digital tools allowed us to innovate in year abroad provision?
5. How do you feel the pandemic has impacted the way students experience the year abroad?
6. Do you think the way the year abroad is viewed (by students, by institutions, by the sector more broadly) has been changed as a result of the pandemic?

SHAPE OF THE YEAR ABROAD POST-PANDEMIC

QUESTION 1: DO YOU THINK THE SHAPE OF THE YEAR ABROAD HAS BEEN ALTERED BY THE PANDEMIC? IF SO, HOW?

James Illingworth

The immediate effects of the pandemic on Modern Languages mobilities are obvious. As international travel ceased and borders closed, the challenge was to find ways of minimising the impact this had on student progression, in terms of both their linguistic skills and also avoiding where possible the need to prolong their degree programmes. Since borders have largely reopened and residence abroad has once again become viable for the majority, the impact of these immediate issues has been reduced.

However, when discussing what the year abroad looks like post-pandemic it is difficult to disentangle the changes wrought by COVID-19 and those brought about by the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union in January 2021. The requirement for UK students travelling to European countries to obtain visas and the restrictions on their free movement through the Schengen Zone resulted in a scramble to best support students as they negotiate, simultaneously, the visa processes and public health restrictions of often two or even three different countries. In the short term this resulted in confusion and stress for students and staff alike, and it was certainly far from ideal to have to face the effects of Brexit while the pandemic was still having a significant impact on travel and daily life.¹

I think we can say that the dust has begun to settle since the 18 months immediately following Brexit. The residence abroad landscape has become clearer, and as a sector we are more fully cognisant of the kinds of placements that remain possible (or, at least, less complicated) in the various countries to which we send our students. In this new context, if the "shape" of the year abroad has changed, we might obviously point to the timelines and possibilities imposed by Brexit. At the same time, though, I wonder whether one of the main consequences of the pandemic for ML mobility is an encouragement for us to think more deeply about flexibility and resilience. What this looks like on the ground will vary from institution to institution subject to university policies and how the year abroad is integrated into the degree programme. But the pandemic has, it seems to me, exacerbated the long-existing challenges of the year abroad: pastoral support, culture shock and isolation.

Akiko Furukawa

The impact of Brexit that James mentions is very true, and I can imagine how much stress this has caused to everyone involved. For the year abroad in the context of Japan, we already had the visa and other requirements before the pandemic and with the Turing Scheme (<https://www.turing-scheme.org.uk/>) students now have a kind of support they did not have before.

As for the shape of the post-pandemic year abroad, although the current direction is to return to the in-person year abroad as soon as possible, a small number of Japanese universities have adopted a mixture of in-person and online classes depending on the skill, week etc., real-time streaming and/or on-demand courses. However, the extent to which hybrid (in the sense of having both in-person and online audiences in the same session) or online classes are offered in Japan seems to be much more limited than at SOAS and other UK universities. According to the results of a brief survey I conducted, out of the 14 Japanese partner universities that responded, only four (28.6%) are offering online, on-demand, real-time streaming or a mixture of in-person and online sessions in 2022–2023, and the remaining 10 (71.4%) had returned to in-person classes in autumn 2022, with some previously allowing online participation for those students who were unable to enter Japan because of COVID-related issues. Although such arrangements were only made in reaction to emergencies, if they can be extended to other cases in the future, such as for students with disabilities or other health issues or those with serious financial issues, the year abroad will be more flexible and inclusive.

1 See, for instance, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/sep/01/thousands-of-british-students-in-limbo-with-post-brexit-visa-chaos>.

Whether or not the shape of the year abroad will change is something yet to be seen in Japan because the country is still rather cautious about returning to a “normal” life. For instance, wearing facemasks indoors only became a personal choice on 13 March 2023, with a recommendation to wear one at medical institutions, nursing homes, and on crowded trains or buses etc. A lot of people are still wearing a mask even outdoors. Thus, the process may be slow, but it is nevertheless interesting that some of the universities have adopted a more flexible approach to their year abroad programmes.

Also, both UK and Japanese universities seem to offer more online sessions than before the pandemic on topics including information sessions about the year abroad, orientation meetings, and discussion and other sessions for students. These invitations are extended beyond the students preparing to apply for the year abroad (Year 2 at SOAS). For first-year students, these events will be useful to be better prepared for their year abroad. The final-year students who came back from their year abroad will have opportunities to reflect on their year abroad and so on. In this sense, it seems to me that support for the year abroad has improved because of the pandemic.

Mark Gant

I agree absolutely with James that it isn't possible to separate the effects of the pandemic from those of Brexit. That very dark point just after Christmas 2020 seems to me in retrospect to have been the most challenging moment in terms of how we would navigate the known and unknown shoals of the next few months as far as both the individual student experience and strategic planning were concerned, precisely because the two issues had impacted us at the same time and the immediate and longer-term futures both required re-evaluation.

James has pointed out changes in entry to the Schengen countries where public health and visa considerations elided, and I would add to this that the two events may also have undermined, to a certain extent, confidence in language study and the role of the year abroad in it more broadly. The funding and bureaucratic challenge presented by the departure of the United Kingdom from the Erasmus scheme is one key factor, with the psychological effects of the pandemic being another. For increasing numbers of applicants, the year abroad, rather than being one of the great attractions of a language degree, might be perceived as a deterrent, so this might be one very important reason for considering carefully how we might provide a range of useful pathways through our degree programmes for those with differing needs and experiences.

Of course, Akiko brings a useful corrective to the risk of Eurocentric focus and I agree that, as far as allocations to individual institutions stretch, Turing funding has opened up significant support for placements outside Europe for the first time. Benefits are being felt by students on our shorter placements in the summer term of the second year as well as some on their year abroad with some supplementary benefits for Widening Participation students.

Akiko also mentions how the pandemic led to a step-change in online provision and our awareness of its potential to offer important new opportunities for some students with family commitments or financial or health issues. Some students with tight finances have studied intensive online courses in our shorter placement period at the end of level 5, and we are currently exploring an agreement with the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), the Spanish equivalent of the Open University, to open up virtual study with them as one way to take the year abroad, combined with shorter in-person visits, ideally including an intensive summer school.

I would say that James is also right to identify flexibility and resilience as the main issues that we have been grappling with through the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. Our assumptions and patterns of delivery and student support have been shaken up, we have learned new ways of working, with the consequence that the one-size-fits-all model of the traditional year abroad is being re-evaluated.

Guy Puzey

As the others have noted, the past few years have seen a quite dramatic convergence of events impacting on the year abroad for language students in this part of the world. I fully agree with the comments from James and Mark about the extremely significant challenges for student

mobility posed by the UK's withdrawal from the EU. While the pandemic-related restrictions created many barriers to travel, this was for a sound reason – to protect global public health – and those particular restrictions on travel have now largely subsided. As for the other new challenges related to the current hardness of Brexit, that is, the end of the UK's participation in Erasmus, at least for now, and the end of free movement for British citizens in the EU/EEA and Switzerland (and vice versa), these are going to continue to affect our students for however many years the respective situations persist.

As Akiko rightly highlights, visas or residence permits were already part of student mobility for British citizens in other parts of the world. Indeed, even while British citizens were also EU citizens, most of our students who were non-EU/EEA/Swiss citizens already faced similar restrictions or requirements when travelling to our main destination countries. This meant that some of our students knew from the outset that a study exchange might have been their only option in some countries, as they might not easily be able to get permits to work. What has changed is that this now applies to a larger proportion of our students. While that change had been on the cards – depending on the type of Brexit that happened – its extent was confirmed with very little advance warning and then coincided with a pandemic.

If we do try to disentangle the pandemic-specific disruption, we need to look back at the start of the pandemic, when the UK had just left the EU, but we were still in the transition period. The disruption caused by the first year of the pandemic was of course enormous. In some ways it became a leveller, as in the first half of the 2020/21 academic year students were generally not permitted to travel, although some did. But there was also unequal disruption.

When many students already abroad in 2019–20 had their time abroad suddenly curtailed, this came towards the end of the academic year, by which point most had spent some time in relevant countries for their languages of study. The picture was a lot more complicated, though, for students of two languages who were due to split the year between two countries. Most split the year more or less evenly, but some chose not to for a variety of reasons. Students with some language combinations are typically expected to split the year unevenly, due for example to different semester dates at partner universities, or for students on degree programmes combining languages taught by our Department of European Languages and Cultures (DELIC) with languages taught by Asian Studies or Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies.

This did mean that students inevitably had varying experiences, although that is true to some extent every year, since returning students will always have spent different amounts of time abroad. Out of our department's nine main degree languages (Danish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swedish), the biggest proportionate effect in these terms seemed to be for Spanish and Portuguese, where roughly 23–28% of students returning from the year abroad in 2020 had not spent our usual minimum requirement of eight weeks in the target-language country. The language proportionately least affected by this was Norwegian, where all students self-confirmed that they had spent more than eight weeks in Norway.

More recently, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been another source of major disruption for the year abroad. After of course ensuring the safety of any students who were in Russia or Ukraine at the time, we were then faced with massively altered year abroad provision for our students of Russian. Unlike the pandemic or the Brexit-related disruption, though, this is an example of disruption that largely affects only one of our languages.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PANDEMIC

QUESTION 2: WHAT LESSONS, BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE, HAS THE PANDEMIC TAUGHT US ABOUT MODERN LANGUAGES MOBILITIES?

Akiko Furukawa

Positive lessons. I think there are at least three positive lessons we have learned (so far) from the pandemic. First, it has taught us how vulnerable the year abroad can be. During the pandemic, Japan had very strict border restrictions and students could only enter the country in the spring of 2022. Due to the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, we did have experience of making alternative arrangements for students who could not stay in Japan, but the pandemic was much longer-term and the impact on students' degree programmes raised much concern. It

also soon became evident that we could not entirely rely on the online synchronous sessions offered by Japanese universities because of the time difference between the UK and Japan (9 hours/8 hours (DST)). This forced students to stay up through the night to attend the classes and, naturally, not everyone was able to complete the programme. All these issues have forced each UK university to implement a programme alternative to the year abroad and we are now much better prepared for the next pandemic or natural disaster, which is a good thing.

Secondly, the pandemic has speeded up the process of implementing the use of technology. We had already started to adopt more technology in teaching before the pandemic but there were individual variations among the teaching staff. The pandemic forced everyone to use various digital tools (not limited to arrangements related to the year abroad).

Finally, the pandemic has also opened up the possibility of a more inclusive year abroad that allows students to participate in the programme without travelling to Japan. This was already being discussed before the pandemic, but the process was slow. A more inclusive year abroad will allow students with disabilities, severe financial problems, etc. to participate in the degree programme. However, no online sessions will offer the same student experience as an in-person year abroad, and much work is needed if we are to develop a more inclusive year abroad. The feedback we have received from the affected students about a virtual year abroad can be used for further planning.

Negative lessons. More than anything else we have learned that alternative online arrangements to compensate for the year abroad do not necessarily meet students' expectations, which include direct participation in cultural events or activities such as traditional dancing in a festival, a tea ceremony where they can taste traditional Japanese tea and cake, a Karate match in a university club and so on. These are of course an important part of the current form of the year abroad, but they are also the first to be taken away from the students in emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We now clarify to our students in advance that their year abroad may be cancelled, but at the same time we need to reconsider what we can offer instead of a traditional form of the year abroad.

James Illingworth

You make some really valuable points here, Akiko. The year abroad, by its very nature, has always been vulnerable to geopolitical developments. Japan is a crucial example, particularly given the added complexity of time difference. We might also point to the Arab Spring in 2010/11. The pandemic differed in its indiscriminate nature: it affected all countries, and therefore all language areas. As such, it has emphasised to us all how easily the year abroad can be disrupted, but you are right to say that it has also helped us to better prepare for such events occurring again in the future, whether isolated to one language area or affecting us more broadly.

A post-pandemic example we might consider here is the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although the way this event impacted mobility is distinct from the pandemic, it did mean that immersive placements in Russia and Ukraine were no longer possible. One thing that we learned from the pandemic is the importance of ML departments working together and sharing information. I think these networks of sharing good practice and intelligence around alternative placements or different models of year abroad provision are crucial for us to maintain going forward. The ability to swiftly bring colleagues in Russian and Ukrainian together, from across the UK, in a virtual environment to share information has been an important means for the sector to mitigate the impact of the current instability on our students.

I agree, too, that online provision needs to be carefully prepared in order to meet students' needs and expectations. When the University Council for Languages (UCFL, <https://university-council-for-languages.org>) implemented a programme of support for departments during the pandemic, we were careful to collect student suggestions through focus groups in the summer of 2020. Putting something in place on a national scale, however, was logistically complex. We were able to make available three Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for students that focused on intercultural competence (<https://university-council-for-languages.org/year-abroad/ucml-mooc-project/>), but even though these were open only to Modern Languages students and were facilitated by the host departments (Cardiff University, the University of Southampton and the University of Leeds), I think the experience of broadly self-directed online study fell short of what students were craving.

Mark Gant

Yes, as James says, the pandemic isn't the only example of the vulnerability of placements and COVID and Brexit have certainly highlighted the need for contingency planning and risk management. In terms of geopolitics, placements in China spring to mind as a particular area of concern, with a range of current potential risks associated with placements in either the People's Republic of China or the Republic of China (Taiwan).

Sticking with the example of China, I agree with Akiko that UK universities and partners abroad are now much better equipped to manage future disruption with a digital pivot. It is also clear that there has been a step-change in the provision of appropriate technology for synchronous delivery and in staff and student familiarity with technology.

I also agree that we are now in a better position to consider and implement a more inclusive approach to residence abroad. The much-appreciated virtual year abroad resources curated by the UCFL team were an extraordinary piece of collaboration on a very significant scale and allowed smaller institutions in particular to draw on a rich set of resources in supporting student learning. Our students gave very positive feedback on the MOOCs provided and on the menu of resources and overall guidance, and as an emergency provision it worked very well. If there was a gap between self-directed online learning and student expectations, this was not unique to residence abroad, and I would want to contextualise it in the overall feedback at module level and through the National Student Survey in terms of the value that students place on in-person experiences.

Lastly, as stated by James, we have so much to learn from each other, and the sharing of practice that the UCFL Year Abroad Special Interest Group (<https://university-council-for-languages.org/year-abroad/>) has facilitated has been an invaluable forum for gaining a sense of the mood of the sector as well as sharing specific actions and strategies. The accessibility of online fora is particularly valuable for those of us for whom there is little budget or time to make journeys to London for in-person meetings and who can now take part in discussion and share information much more easily.

Guy Puzey

The pandemic has surely highlighted the value of opportunities to study and work abroad to students and to our degree programmes in Modern Languages. In some ways, this was not exactly news, when we remember that a survey more than a decade ago reported that 86% of language graduates felt the year abroad was the most valuable part of their degree ([British Academy and University Council of Modern Languages](#)). Still, I think the pandemic experience threw this into sharper relief. It has probably made colleagues in other parts of our institutions more acutely aware of this too, at a time when so many other challenges have arisen for student mobility. While it has made us more familiar with tools that facilitate short meetings across great distances, I would also agree that it became even clearer that virtual experiences cannot fully replace the many benefits of a longer period spent abroad in person, although some online activities can certainly be a very useful supplement. As Mark stresses, the challenges of online learning during the pandemic were far from unique to our subject areas either.

Akiko and Mark are right to point to the need for the sector to consider other pathways for language study that might not require international travel, although this is not at all easy, and I would say that it is important for us to do all we can to facilitate travel for students when they want to travel, for example by advocating for better funding and support structures.

Speaking personally, the most inspiring lesson for the future was probably the experience that the others have mentioned of working together with other institutions through the UCFL Year Abroad Special Interest Group. It was the first time I had personally been involved in UCFL activities, and it was inspiring to see the whole sector come together in that way, with our Zoom meetings often including fifty or more universities. It has also been very useful to have contributions in that group from the British Council (both in relation to their English Language Assistants programme and in their role connected with Erasmus) and Universities UK International, not to mention the presentations we have had about the Turing scheme or the Welsh Government's Taith scheme (<https://www.taith.wales/>), which seeks to fill some of the gaps left after the UK's withdrawal from Erasmus.

QUESTION 3: WHAT EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE IN LANGUAGES MOBILITY HAVE EMERGED DURING/BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC?

Akiko Furukawa

For Japanese, one of the best outcomes of our effort to create an alternative arrangement for the year abroad in response to the pandemic is collaborative work involving Japan Year Abroad Coordinators from seven UK universities (Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Leeds, Newcastle, Regent's (later moved to Keele) and SOAS) to create a virtual year abroad for students whose year abroad was curtailed or cancelled.

This innovative programme called the Inter-University Support Programme (IUSP, <https://japaneseyearabroad.wixsite.com/jyap2/j-yap-inter-university-support-proj>) was created in March 2020 and ran over 260 online sessions to a cumulative number of some 760 students between July 2020 and March 2022. The programme offered both academic sessions such as Japanese language, Japanese Studies, Japanese cultures, group discussions and language exchange with students in Japan, and career talks with the help of volunteer speakers including graduates of the participating universities and employees of the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (for more information and some of the feedback from the students, see [Furukawa et al.](#)).

The IUSP received praise for its vision and much-needed support, not only from generous volunteer teachers and speakers for various sessions but also from the government and other organisations, such as the [British Association for Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language \(BATJ\)](#), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA) via the Embassy of Japan in the UK, and the Japan Foundation, London. MOFA funded the IUSP project as an undertaking commissioned to the BATJ from October 2020 to March 2022 and the Japan Foundation London for a BATJ project with an outcome of published online guidelines for UK teachers (Sakura Network BATJ Project grant in July 2020, https://www.batj.org.uk/images/batjproject/batjproject4jyapiusp_final9sep21.pdf). It must be emphasised that securing funding, administrative support and/or sufficient volunteers is essential for an undertaking of this kind.

Needless to say, each university implemented an alternative plan to reduce the negative impact of the cancelled year abroad, but the members of the IUSP felt that the students would still miss out on opportunities to study with students from around the world and be taught by new teachers. The involvement of graduates and professionals helped the students to look at their longer-term plans beyond their year abroad, and indeed some of them found a different way of going to Japan, such as teaching or acting as a Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) for the JET Program (<https://www.jet-uk.org/positions-3>), as recommended by graduates during the career talks.

We are currently developing further plans while at the same time being on standby for the next emergency such as a large-scale earthquake. It will be great if we can act as one possible model for other languages, too.

James Illingworth

The IUSP really is testament to what collaborative working to solve common problems can do. The speed with which it was established and the scale of the project are impressive. I look forward eagerly to the publication you mention, Akiko, and there is certainly a value for the sector to look at the feasibility of using this as a model of best practice.

Guy Puzey

The IUSP is a really impressive initiative. As a collaborative venture, it reminds me again of the extraordinary value of the UCFL Year Abroad Special Interest Group, with James and others in key roles, which has helped to keep institutions on the same page as we have dealt with all the major challenges to student mobility, as we have discussed elsewhere. In European languages at the University of Edinburgh, we launched several different initiatives to support students who were unable to fulfil all their year abroad plans during the pandemic, and the most successful were those with collaboration at their core.

eTandem Global was a project developed during the spring and summer of 2020 through close collaboration between the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures (including ourselves in DELC, as well as the departments of Asian Studies and Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies) and an excellent team from the University of Edinburgh's Study and Work Away service. It involved creating a system for pairing up students for online reciprocal language learning. This was to help students develop their language skills and to provide opportunities for cultural and social exchange during that period of disrupted travel plans.

Of course, the concept of eTandem in itself was nothing new, and we drew on lessons from a variety of studies on telecollaboration and virtual exchange (e.g., [Brammerts](#); [Cziko](#); [O'Rourke](#); [O'Dowd](#)). What was unusual about eTandem Global was the range of fourteen languages we sought to cover (English on the one hand, and on the other Arabic, Chinese, Danish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish). It was very popular too: over two semesters, I believe we matched up in the region of 800 students, half of whom were third-year Edinburgh students and the other half from our partner institutions.

The project took a lot of coordination and could not have been accomplished on that scale without the vital administrative team. As well as liaising with partner institutions to gauge their interest, there was also the job of surveying and then matching many hundreds of students. The team also facilitated online language café sessions and social media groups, as well as a vlog competition ([Edinburgh Global](#)).

On the academic side, we coordinated guidance material for all the students, covering some of the benefits and principles of the scheme, and including tips to keep things running smoothly. The academic guidance was supported by excellent resources already created by other international projects (e.g. [Methods](#); [SEAGULL](#)). We also ran introductory sessions outlining the scheme. Students were invited to keep reflective logs of their sessions, and if they logged at least eight sessions, they were entitled to a Certificate of Participation.

Some of our languages have their own eTandem schemes, and the Edinburgh University Students' Association has a long-standing in-person eTandem language scheme, but we have discussed the possibility of relaunching eTandem Global in future as a pre-departure initiative for second-year students in the run-up to their year abroad. It is likely that this could be coordinated particularly well within smaller inter-university alliances such as Una Europa, which includes the University of Edinburgh and ten other European universities. Some of the Una Europa partners participated in eTandem Global, and an article was published about the scheme on the alliance's website in the run-up to the launch ([Odenthal](#)).

Mark Gant

I agree that the IUSP is a really inspiring piece of good practice. I'm also really impressed by the eTandem scheme that Guy describes, though somewhat daunted by the challenge of replicating it with lower levels of academic and administrative resources. As a response to the paralysing levels of anxiety experienced by some students, we have experimented in the current academic year 2022/23 with a post-pandemic Virtual Year Abroad module drawing on the experience of the UCFL Special Interest Group shared resources. We devised a flexible portfolio of assessments including reflection on employability, research into a specific target-language-speaking location, evening classes in our non-credit bearing Languages for All evening classes, and MOOCs with the addition of short mobilities where possible. As part of engagement with the module, we encouraged students to find tandem learning partners using the lower resource-intensive routes of existing tandem platforms such as <https://www.tandem.net/>, <https://www.hellotalk.com/> and <https://www.italki.com/> recommended by past cohorts. Of course, this is very much a stopgap measure compared with a sophisticated initiative on the scale of eTandem Global, but this does represent a step forward in our fostering of transnational peer-to-peer learning.

Akiko Furukawa

Many projects and schemes of various institutions and organisations, including those not mentioned in this dialogue, are exciting outcomes that the pandemic has pushed us to develop. It will be great if we can see more collaborations in the future.

QUESTION 4: HOW HAVE DIGITAL TOOLS ALLOWED US TO INNOVATE IN YEAR ABROAD PROVISION?

Mark Gant

For us, the emergency pivot to online provision in the pandemic period normalised the previously patchy use of digital tools in residence abroad preparation and support, and familiarised us with their operation.

Similar to the enhanced online provision that Akiko refers to in her answer to Question 1, residence abroad preparation sessions using Microsoft Teams have been a very useful innovation for us, bringing logistical advantages by avoiding the challenge of timetabling in-person sessions across the whole cohort as well as allowing guest sessions from Student Support, the Sustainability Team and the Subject Librarian, and being easily integrated into the programme. Perhaps more fundamentally, students currently on placement and finalists have been able to provide peer support Q&A sessions for those at level 5 as they choose placements and prepare to go abroad, and placement partners can also join some briefing sessions with ease.

Through MS Teams, regular online tutorial provision is now embedded in our residence abroad modules. As we discussed in our responses to Question 1, the impact of Brexit and the pandemic have been overlapping, and in this case, online tutorials allowed us to mitigate the loss of in-person tutorial visits to students on placement in Europe, funded by Erasmus staff mobility, which had been a staple of our previous provision at Chester. We had used Skype tutorials for some students outside Europe prior to the pandemic and supplemented our visits in Europe with Skype or phone conversations, but Teams has provided an improved and more consistent experience, while saving resources.

At an institutional level, students now have simpler access to the Wellbeing Team via Teams than they did through phone calls before the pandemic and the university has contracted the services of a 24/7 online support service for all students, which adds to the support that residence abroad students are able to use.

Akiko Furukawa

I agree with what Mark has pointed out about the innovation of MS Teams. Students preparing for their year abroad now get more direct assistance from those currently on the year abroad. Students are also quite used to Zoom and/or MS Teams meetings and can proactively engage in these activities by organising meetings etc. without their teachers.

Digital tools have also made it much easier for us to have synchronous sessions with Japanese partners, students in Japan and so on, and indeed I have noticed a sharp increase in the number of suggestions for these online sessions.

Also, when the issuing of student visas was delayed, these online/hybrid sessions allowed the affected students to start attending classes from the beginning without being in Japan.

The positive lessons and good practices mentioned in Question 2 could have only been made possible by digital tools during the pandemic. It's amazing how much we could do while being stuck in front of our computers.

James Illingworth

I completely agree with you both that the pandemic implemented a kind of paradigm shift in our relation to the digital. We seem to keep coming back to the notion of flexibility, and the ready availability of Zoom, MS Teams and other means of virtual engagement have really assisted in this area. From my own perspective, students do seem still to engage better (or more substantially) when there is an in-person option. At Cardiff at least we have found that some virtual briefings have had lower attendance and students then miss crucial details, to a greater degree than when virtual provision was not on offer. There does seem to be a need to strike a balance.

Nevertheless, we have found new ways to use the digital in support of the year abroad. Although not as ambitious or wide-reaching as the IUSP you discussed in Question 3, Akiko, at Cardiff I have repurposed a virtual exchange project I was a part of when I worked at De Montfort

University (DMU) before moving to Cardiff. The project began as a partnership between DMU, the National University of Ireland Galway and the Université de Bordeaux. Over a two-month period, student participants work in small groups (half Francophone, half Anglophone) to prepare a podcast on a cultural theme in their target language. This includes virtual interviews and conversations with their project partners. The idea is that the project enables both linguistic and cultural exchange. Each university has different priorities from the project, and for DMU, where languages are offered only as a minor pathway, there is no compulsory year abroad. This project therefore gave students an opportunity to interact with peers in their target language that they would not have otherwise necessarily had without the year abroad. When I moved to Cardiff, I made the project available to students in the second year, with a view to helping them prepare for their year abroad a) with a small-scale intercultural awareness project and b) by (hopefully) reducing their anxiety around interaction in the target language. Indeed, some students have since chosen Bordeaux as their French year abroad destination since they would already know *someone* in the country. One of the anxieties I often hear from students is precisely around making “native” friends, and my hope is that the experience of this project will go some small way towards reducing that anxiety. It is a project, however, that would have felt like a bigger “ask” of students pre-pandemic.

Guy Puzey

What the others have already said about technological solutions such as Zoom and MS Teams is certainly true. Most of us had to get up to speed with using these tools very quickly, and the way we use them even now has transformed our working lives, with mixed consequences. This extends to our year abroad provision in ways that the others have already outlined. The eTandem project outlined in my response to Question 3 was entirely dependent on similar digital tools.

I would also add that, with the panoply of visa regulations that the majority of our students now face, the opportunities for online sessions outlining respective countries’ rules still need to be fully realised, and this is something I would like to see the sector doing more, in collaboration with representatives of the diplomatic and consular corps, as universities are usually themselves unable to offer much in terms of specific guidance on such regulations in other countries. While writing this I have just heard that our students of French and Spanish will this year be offered visa information webinars by Campus France and the Spanish Consulate General in Edinburgh, which is extremely welcome news. These are going to be open to students at other Scottish institutions, and I hope similar initiatives may emerge for other destinations too. I am also aware of positive experiences, for instance, in cases where representatives from a partner university abroad have been able to deliver visa-related briefings for pre-departure students online, as our partners were able to provide some advice about requirements in their own country.

I would agree with James, though, that students seem to engage better overall with in-person options when these are available. In my experience, the viewer statistics on certain vital pre-departure briefing videos suggested that students did not engage with that essential information to nearly the same extent as they did when such meetings were only held in person. For the main purpose of the year abroad, too, nothing can entirely substitute the full experience of spending time in the country of study, with all that might entail. That said, we can and should think about what can realistically be achieved without travel in cases where that is either not possible or where a student may prefer not to go abroad.

James Illingworth

As I was reading your comment, Guy, I too received an advert for a visa webinar with the Spanish Consulate organised through Universities UK International. You are absolutely right to point to these types of initiative as instances of best practice, inconceivable perhaps pre-pandemic. I share your hope that other destinations will follow suit.

Mark Gant

On the subject of webinars, I am not sure if there is a direct link with the pandemic, other than the step-change in the use of digital tools that we have already discussed, but it might be

worth mentioning that I have just attended a multiplier event for the Compass Project (<https://compass-youthmobility.eu/>). This is a new peer-to-peer platform which engages students planning mobility with those currently abroad or who have returned from abroad. This has the potential to add reassurance to the nervous through a very extensive network of students providing support and advice concerning specific destinations and drawing from a much wider pool than our current peer-support networks within the institution. The project is currently limited to Europe as it is funded by Erasmus+; however, students studying at UK institutions do have full access.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF THE YEAR ABROAD POST-PANDEMIC

QUESTION 5: HOW DO YOU FEEL THE PANDEMIC HAS IMPACTED THE WAY STUDENTS NOW EXPERIENCE THE YEAR ABROAD?

Mark Gant

First of all, it would be a mistake to think that in 2022/23 the *status quo ante* of full mobility has returned. For example, some of our current year abroad cohort are still studying online. This applies to those who had planned to study in person in China and who were not able to travel for the year due to visa restrictions. They have the potentially discomfoting experience of watching their friends studying other languages spend time abroad while they are renting hall rooms and spending several hours per day in the virtual classroom. Interestingly, one student combining Chinese and Spanish asked to go to Spain for the second semester so that he could experience living abroad while simultaneously continuing to study his online modules in Chinese, and is now living a full Erasmus experience in Huelva with a very active social and academic life.

Aside from this particular subset, I would say that we are still at a particular stage of the post-pandemic phase in all our experience, in which some of the impacts are still quite fresh and experienced by individuals in quite varied ways. For example, I was surprised to hear one of my level 5 students ask in a Residence Abroad preparation session what would happen if there was a lockdown while they are on placement. In my scale of concerns about students travelling abroad this is now very low, but the impact on some of our students' lives at a formative stage of their teenage years is clearly very significant as they are left with an ongoing sense of insecurity about when such emergency measures might return. So, at one extreme, there are those with the almost post-traumatic effect of fear of sudden change and even of being stuck far from home. Of course, there are also those students who throw themselves into the experience without any evident qualms, and for whom, like the abovementioned student in Huelva, the effect of the pandemic may even have been to impress on them a mentality of *carpe diem*, with a motivating force of not wanting to miss out on the social and travel opportunities that were denied them for a prolonged period over the transition years between secondary education and university.

Then, there are all those on the spectrum between, many of whom have developed social anxieties, and even where this is not the case, have not necessarily learned how to grow in confidence in meeting new people and entering social settings. One result of this is an increased number of students who have needed extra tutorial support and guidance as to how to establish local networks in the initial months abroad; for example, a student in Bordeaux who appeared to have a small but active social circle in the UK, but who found it too intimidating to join any group activities for incoming exchange students and was quite isolated until a new flatmate moved in and he met a friend from another UK university. We have also noticed a growth in the number of those for whom the year abroad represents a step too far. Two of the latter group interrupted their studies for a year, knowing that they were not ready to travel, feeling that they needed a staged approach by taking a year working in the UK first; and another, this time a commuter student, despite spending a month in Costa Rica in our placement period in the third term of the second year and taking a two-week summer job tutoring in the Canaries, felt that she couldn't spend more than a month away from home. Despite these cases, I wonder if this academic year and perhaps the next are a particular staging point at which some of the psychological effects of the pandemic are more acute?

As I mentioned above, it may be too soon to predict the impact of the pandemic on the year abroad in Japan, but if more universities decide to adopt online/on-demand sessions for the year abroad, it will be more flexible and inclusive. Students may have more options as a result.

With virtual platforms we now use regularly, we are more closely connected to students and exchange partners in Japan than before, with increased video meetings, online sessions introducing partner universities' year abroad programmes, and so on. This has resulted in closer communication between staff and students in the two countries and thus an improved support system while students are abroad.

Mark makes a very important point about the need for care for students with anxiety. For Japanese, there has always been a certain degree of anxiety related to natural disasters, especially after the large-scale earthquakes in Kobe in 1995 and Tohoku in 2011, but we need to be more explicit than we are now about what to expect and what support students can get.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE YEAR ABROAD POST-PANDEMIC

QUESTION 6: DO YOU THINK THE WAY THE YEAR ABROAD IS VIEWED (BY STUDENTS, BY INSTITUTIONS, BY THE SECTOR MORE BROADLY) HAS BEEN CHANGED AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC?

Akiko Furukawa

Currently, the preference of students and staff seems to be an in-person year abroad in Japan. There is so much a virtual year abroad cannot offer, and it has the same limitations as online teaching, such as a lack of personal contacts and difficulty in creating an online community. These comments were made by some of the students who participated in the IUSP mentioned above (Furukawa et al.).

Thus, students might still consider an in-person year abroad to be a default, but having seen in their first year the second-year students not being able to go to Japan in the first term because of the border closures, they seem to be much more conscious of the vulnerability of the year abroad in the current shape and are probably more flexible in their expectations than the 2020/21 and 2021/22 cohorts that were seriously affected by the pandemic. They may be more prepared for a partially virtual and partially in-person year abroad if we are hit by another pandemic or a natural disaster.

Staff are also much more aware of the need to be flexible. However, flexibility comes with difficulty in managing both academic and administrative aspects of the year abroad. Having some 27 BA Japanese (single and joint) Year Abroad partner institutions as we do at SOAS, with their own policies and regulations, is already very complicated, and we must review the requirements of the courses to be taken, assessments and so on, considering the objectives and the intended learning outcomes of the year abroad, as well as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Subject Benchmark Statement: Languages, Cultures and Societies (2023, https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/sbs/sbs-languages-cultures-and-societies-23.pdf?sfvrsn=3c71a881_8), which now includes sections on "Equality, diversity and inclusion" and "Accessibility".

Institutional policies are yet to be reviewed, but as suggested above, I feel that transformation is needed for a more flexible and inclusive year abroad, both at the institutional and the national levels.

Mark Gant

I agree with Akiko that the preference for in-person mobility as a default still holds, and I would also say, as she implies, that as a result of the experiences of the last three years, the nature and form of the year abroad is being questioned much more broadly than hitherto. Like her, I'm conscious that my own awareness of the need for flexibility in response to the needs of a diverse student body has changed considerably through the experience of the pandemic, since for some, the psychological and financial barriers to mobility have undoubtedly increased, and concurrently our capacity for providing alternatives to full year mobility, aided by digital technologies, has increased. It is also the case that there have always been some students for whom alternative provision has been necessary, due to mental health or family commitments,

and I would see the current situation as a growth in the size of that group rather than the development of an entirely new one. It is hugely positive that we are now able to help these students to develop a range of learning outcomes associated with residence abroad in innovative ways. As she says, in re-evaluating our provision, we need to balance the requirement for experience of target language settings with our responsibilities to ensure equality, diversity and access, and we also have to navigate institutional regulatory frameworks and the very helpfully revised March 2023 QAA Subject Benchmark Statement. The wording “typically require a period of immersive learning” in paragraph 1.8 provides a welcome degree of flexibility in interpretation, and the paragraph also makes reference to considerable variability of length and also to the use of digital space. Section 1.21 under the Accessibility heading also makes a very helpful reference to the financial and personal barriers to participation in international placements and alternative forms of immersive study. However, we are now highly aware of the challenges of developing even partial immersion in virtual provision, but the extent of immersion experienced by most students in face-to-face placement is also highly debatable. Perhaps the term could be reconsidered in the next iteration of the benchmark statement?

Taking our own provision as an example of an evolving approach to flexible alternative provision to the classic year abroad, until the current year we have used an alternative three-year version of the degree programme as a safety net for students unable to undertake the year abroad and, in parallel, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning provision for first language speakers. Having experimented with a Virtual Year Abroad module this year, in the light of changes in the student body and provision of three-year BA programmes from the point of application elsewhere in the sector, we are now proposing a programme modification to bring these three routes together into a fast-track three-year BA Modern Languages with a flexible 60-credit summer school or placement module between the second and final years, taking advantage of summer schools run by partners and summer work placements, but also open to virtual mobilities. We have the advantage of a 20-credit placement module in the third term of the second year which makes it possible to undertake two shorter mobilities focused either on the same language or two different ones.

One challenge that I have recently become aware of through a student who needs to undertake a virtual 20-credit placement this year is that many summer schools, such as those run by the Universidad de Salamanca or the Centro de Lenguas Modernas at the University of Granada, have withdrawn the online option that had been developed in the pandemic, presumably due to low take-up following normalisation of travel from China, since it was advertised earlier in the year. The Instituto Cervantes AVE provision (<https://ave.cervantes.es/en/content/what-ave-global>) is not ideal in terms of not being based in a specific cultural and geographical target language location, but does provide a financially accessible alternative if supplemented by tandem learning and independent research.

James Illingworth

The comments provided by your students in response to the IUSP, Akiko, chime with the feedback received from students participating in the UCFL virtual provision. Further research may be required to explore more fully the student perception of the year abroad, in particular their expectations and concerns in a post-pandemic context. I would also add that there are questions around funding for virtual mobility, which, for instance, Turing does not allow (though Taith, the Welsh mobility scheme, does, provided that a case can be made to justify a virtual placement over a physical mobility).

Your suggestion, Mark, that perhaps “immersion” might be reconsidered in future iterations of the Subject Benchmark Statement is a provocative one. I had noticed that the statement itself calls into question even the use of the term “year abroad” to describe mobilities, in a gesture towards the flexibility and inclusivity we have referred to so frequently over the course of our conversation. Whether, in this post-pandemic context, the very concept of a “year abroad” is dubious (when most placements are not in fact a year long) is a question for debate.

Mark Gant

Reflecting on my questioning of “immersion”, I wonder if “intensive experience” might be a possible alternative? I also agree that there is less (if any) funding available for virtual mobilities,

but this is, of course, in a context in which not all in-person placements are funded. As for the use of the term “year abroad”, I’ve long felt that “residence abroad” is a more inclusive term for in-person placements. Further research into student perceptions sounds spot on to me, James, as a really productive project to help us to go beyond the anecdotal evidence and observations that we are currently working with. Maybe we could also ask their view on the terms we use?

Akiko Furukawa

In my previous university (University of Reading), we used the term “period abroad” because, as James points out, not all students spent a whole year in the country. However, if we are to incorporate a virtual element to “study abroad”, it will not be just “studying abroad”, so I also feel that a new term is needed. Also, we need to reconsider the objectives and intended learning outcomes of such a programme. I think the latest Subject Benchmark Statement has a number of interesting and important concepts, such as “equality, peace and social justice in specific contexts and globally” (p. 7). Perhaps we can reconsider the role of “study abroad” in students’ degree programmes and beyond. I would also be interested in further research. The paper I mentioned in my response to Question 3 is more of an introduction of the IUSP and some of the students’ reactions. We are currently planning to write a research paper based on the data we have collected that consist of students’ comments and evaluation of the IUSP, but perhaps we can also collect the kind of data James and Mark have mentioned and develop a new concept of “study abroad” (but with a new name!) for languages.

Guy Puzey

When I think about how views of the year abroad have changed for European languages, I cannot help going back to the inseparability of the pandemic and the other, ongoing, major challenges for student mobility here (both inbound and outbound). With the visa requirements that now apply to British citizens for study or work placements in the EU/EEA and Switzerland, might this mean that student mobility for languages in European destinations could, over time, start to take on characteristics more typically associated with year abroad travel to non-European destinations? For instance, we are already seeing many more difficulties associated with students seeking work placements, unless they are fortunate enough to be EU/EEA/Swiss citizens themselves, so work placements are diminishing as a proportion of year abroad activity for European languages.

With the end of Erasmus funding and more fluctuating levels of support through the Turing scheme too, might we need to give greater consideration to non-university study options on the year abroad? In Edinburgh, we have tended to focus on university-based exchanges as generally offering an experience that feeds more directly into the final year of study back here, with “content”-based courses as well as language courses. These also offer a straightforward way of counting students’ work on the year abroad towards their degree classification back here, by converting grades awarded by the partner university through the ECTS system. This direct recognition of study undertaken abroad is appreciated by students.

All this might point us towards a likely need for increased flexibility, as others have mentioned, but we should not let this reduce our ambition when we are advocating for the greater funding and support that students might need to embark on time spent studying or working abroad. While we should consider whether in future we could accept shorter periods of residence in cases where visa requirements make longer stays inordinately difficult, we need to avoid unintentionally obliging students to abandon their hopes for travel due to financial barriers. Instead, as a sector, we should be beating on every door we can to help students fulfil these aspirations, calling for better and more dependable support schemes, not to mention calling for a return to the free movement we used to enjoy in the EU, although I realise that may be a long shot in the short term.

James mentioned the Taith scheme, and I admire the Welsh government’s resolve in trying to plug the Erasmus gap. I am optimistic that the Scottish government’s mooted Scottish Education Exchange Programme may be a major boost too. Apart from our requirements for outward mobility, our learning environment gains so much from the insights of inbound visiting students from all parts of the world. This reminds us that studying or working abroad is

also about developing an international outlook, and fostering it in others that students might encounter.


The others have already made excellent points about the 2023 QAA Subject Benchmark Statement. It is also important to note its emphasis on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and other similar frameworks, as ways of setting standards for typical language-proficiency levels at the end of degree programmes. This is very welcome as it sets expectations for those seeking degrees in named language subjects, for their prospective employers, or their places of further study. While it is absolutely right to consider alternative pathways for language study for reasons of inclusivity, we also need to recognise that it is rarely feasible to consistently reach the same CEFR target levels at the end of, for example, a four-year degree without a year abroad, unless we are able to make a significant extra investment in our teaching capacity for students not travelling.


Mark intriguingly queried the notion of “immersion”. In addition to researching student perceptions, as James suggested, more research would also be welcome into how intensive periods of residence abroad, of varied duration, contribute to language acquisition and intercultural skills, in a context shaped by the pandemic and by a rapidly changing geopolitical scene. Over the last few years, for instance, many students suddenly had to become expert navigators of bureaucracy, but what other skills are they acquiring, and how can we best help students to reflect on their learning experiences? These are not new questions, but the answers may well be different in 2023.

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USEFUL RESOURCES

- <https://ave.cervantes.es/en/content/what-ave-global>
- <https://compass-youthmobility.eu/>
- <https://www.hellotalk.com/>
- <https://www.italki.com/>
- <https://japaneseyearabroad.wixsite.com/jyap2/j-yap-inter-university-support-proj>
- <https://www.jet-uk.org/positions-3>
- <https://www.taith.wales/>
- <https://www.tandem.net/>
- <https://www.turing-scheme.org.uk/>
- <https://university-council-for-languages.org/year-abroad/>

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