Introduction

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The Year Abroad (YA) is, dare we say, a different order of experience from most years at university. It involves leaving the familiar structures in which a student has studied for (usually) two years to go and live in one or more foreign countries where a language of study is spoken. Students on a YA from a UK university can usually choose to study at a partner university, or work in an approved work placement, including an English-language assistantship. Undertaking these activities can be variously exhilarating and difficult for many students – and the range of possibilities means that the organisation of the YA presents diverse challenges and opportunities for both students and staff; and yet, despite its ‘exceptional’ quality, the activities and ambitions of those staff and students can be closely mapped onto current Higher Education (HE) pedagogical trends and goals, from the more practical or instrumental (internationalisation, employability, self-efficacy – Advance HE⁴; CBI⁵) to the epistemological or metacognitive (creative problem solving, cognitive disruption, and collaborative learning – Barnett, 1997, 1999, 2015; Bengtsen, 2014; Newton et al., 2019; Ryan, 2014) or even to the pastoral or affective (wellbeing, risk taking – Barnett, 2007; Henning et al., 2018).

The organisers of the Year Abroad Conference 2018 (YAC2018) therefore had several aims in mind. We wanted to initiate a meeting point (which we hoped would become an annual event) at which UK academics and professional services staff who administer the YA as part of a degree including modern

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languages could discuss common topics of interest and share good practice (thus promoting a holistic approach to YA curriculum design and delivery). We also wanted there to be a permanent record of the discussions at the conference; for 2018, this book is that record.

1. **initial notes**

In UK universities, the YA is a period of residence, usually compulsory, that a student normally undertakes as part of a degree including one or more modern foreign languages. It is usually the third year of a four-year degree, though in some cases it can be the second year. In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the YA therefore lengthens the degree to four years: in those countries, most Bachelors’ degrees with no modern foreign language component last three years. In Scotland, first degrees typically last four years anyway, so the YA does not lengthen them. In this introduction, for consistency, we will use the name YA for this period of residence, though its name does vary in different universities: some other names are *residence abroad*, *study abroad*, and *period abroad*.

Universities also vary in the names they give to each year of a degree. The schemas ‘first, second, third, final year’, ‘first, intermediate, intercalating, final year’, ‘Level 4, 5, intercalating, 6’ – using Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) terminology –, and ‘Stage 1, 2, 3, 4’, and no doubt others, all occur in different places. All these schemas are equivalent.

2. **Contributions to this book**

The chapters in this volume are organised into five topics, following the order of the conference from which they derive: *mental health*, *preparation*, *student perception*, *assessment*, and *employability*.

Most of our chapters treat the YA in EU countries, but there are also chapters on Japan and China. All papers show a diversity of approaches to their object of
study, and, with varying degrees of emphasis, these can be broadly summarised as practical/organisational, pedagogical/epistemological, and affective/person-centred.

This diversity speaks to the complexity and multivalency of the YA; in this introduction, we have thus chosen to review the contributions to this volume holistically through the lens of the student experience of the YA.

2.1. What the YA brings to students

To start on a positive note, many chapters underline the various benefits that the YA might bring to students, and consequently the possible motivations for doing one. Crawford, Gutiérrez Almarza, and McCormack; Leahy; Day and Hampton; Morimoto; Pérez Nieto and Nebot; Peng and Wright; and Zaher all review sets of benefits in the context of HE pedagogical scholarship touching on meta-cognition, epistemology, self-efficacy, transferable skills, global graduateness, and examine how well these benefits correspond with their students’ experience of doing the YA. An issue much treated, and to which we will return, is that of the degree to which students are able to perceive and articulate these benefits in the context of their own learning journey across their degree. Potter’s research shows that students do have the ability to identify quite subtle personal changes and their root causes in particular YA activities undertaken, whilst Pérez Nieto and Nebot point out the widespread perception among students that the YA is a challenge, and often an onerous one. As we will see, many contributors examine the space between these two points and showcase their strategies for endeavouring to bring students to the point of critical thought, critical action, and critical being that Barnett (2015) sees as essential to good university-level learning.

Whilst making academic progress on the YA, particularly in linguistic terms, remains a big concern for students, the focus of many chapters here suggests an interest in its less quantifiable benefits. Chief among these is employability, one of the major strategic goals in HE currently (HEA, 2015), and, in terms of the attributes gained by students who have done a YA, something which
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potentially sets them apart from their peers who have not. Several papers suggest that students are keenly aware of the ‘employability capital’ of the YA (Day and Hampton; Zaher) but require guidance in their assessment and articulation of their gains. Some papers thus describe pedagogical interventions intended to prompt awareness, whilst others examine students’ own understanding of employability gains via surveys. Archer’s chapter considers the importance of strategic planning of interventions on employability, focusing on the opportunity that the University of Surrey’s ‘employability week’ (an event for all first-year students, no matter what the subject of their degree) affords modern foreign language staff to situate the YA explicitly in this context from the earliest point in students’ HE experience. Zaher’s survey of students abroad and returners at Durham University (in European and Asian placements) shows us that, once abroad, students are quite quickly able to align their YA activities with graduate soft skills identified as pedagogically desirable in current literature.

Crawford, Gutiérrez Almarza, and McCormack; Day and Hampton; Pérez Nieto and Nebot; and Peng and Wright explore ways to support the affective and metacognitive challenges students face in expressing and critiquing their learning gains. These discussions chime with Barnett’s (1997) assertion that good HE pedagogy not only invites students to practise their subject in real-world situations, but also to be able to “articulate a rationale for what they are doing and for the discarded alternative actions” (p. 104). If one of the key benefits for the YA in both staff and students’ eyes is a building of intercultural awareness (Zaher’s research shows that 90% cite ‘intercultural skills’ as a gain whilst Morimoto; Franc; Crawford, Gutiérrez Almarza, and McCormack; Peng and Wright; and Potter examine its importance), student engagement with cultural differences day-to-day is shown in several papers to be something of a two-edged sword: the source of significant struggle for some (Lees; Franc; Day and Hampton; Pérez Nieto and Nebot; and Potter) as much as it is a stimulus for others (Potter; Morimoto; Day and Hampton; and Lees).

We may perceive the YA as an incontrovertible good; do our students?
2.2. Student perceptions of the YA

Understandably, many students frame descriptions of their YA in terms of difference from their UK experience; several papers show that this difference tends to be conceived emotionally as either a deficit or a driver. Lees, in particular, shows that in general, students who perceive a given experience (or their whole YA) as negative feel that their university did not support them enough with it, whereas those who report positive experiences are also happy with the level of support they received. More YA-specific factors that students can react to positively or negatively include ‘otherness’ when in a foreign country (Potter), dealing with everyday experiences successfully (Leahy; Morimoto), and cultural differences either perceived as benefits (Peng & Wright) or as culture shock (Pérez Nieto & Nebot). Our papers show a concern to grapple with the reasons for this by interrogating students’ perceptions in small-scale studies, in the context of current scholarship, revealing some very interesting tensions. Morimoto highlights that Dörnyei and Ushioda’s (2009) ‘ideal L2 self’ can be a powerful motivator to learn or improve a foreign language; the students of Chinese surveyed pre-departure in Peng and Wright’s study reveal an enthusiastic readiness to tackle intercultural challenges. On the other hand, Day, the student analyst of the post-YA student data reported on by Hampton, expresses effectively the fact that most reflections (on the YA) revealed students’ need to “‘get something off their chests’ in a personal and sometimes sensitive way”. This paper was one of several that revealed a disjuncture perceived by some students between the presentation of the YA as ‘the best year of your life’ by returning students (often at peer information events) and the struggles many felt during residency (perhaps evidence of the ‘ideal L2 self’ acting unintentionally as a barrier to effective preparation for some outgoing students). A number of chapters in this volume identify an increasing disconnect between what staff – and enthusiastic returners – would like the YA to do for outgoing students, and what at least some students experience or fear experiencing. We would like them to focus on the opportunities; they focus on the risks. We would like them to be challenged but to enjoy themselves as well, but for some students the YA looms as a potentially-unpleasant pedagogical test. We would like the YA to be eye-opening and life-changing; some students
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see it as an obligatory period ‘out there’ in their country of residence, which is implied to be peripheral, before a move back to the implied centre, where life can resume. Pérez Nieto and Nebot and Franc also note that, for today’s students, who are used to having courses of study and other aspects of life mapped out, with some but comparatively little choice, the choices that need to be made for a YA – whether to work or study, where to live, etc – can also be a source of anxiety from the outset. Franc remarks that this can lead to a lack of engagement with the preparation process; from there, it is a common experience from which difficulties snowball.

2.3. Preparation for the YA and support during it

Interrogations of institutional and departmental systems and processes are, in many of our papers, the steps that follow the careful analysis of the student voice in surveys. Lees and Potter’s chapters address the issue of wellbeing head on: Lees argues (from Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012) that the relationship between the YA and wellbeing should be presented to students as a ‘see-saw’ which requires both challenges and the conscious acquisition of resources to overcome them, in order to have a better chance of positive results. Under this framework, emphasis should be placed on students’ responsibility for their own wellbeing, as well as on their institution’s responsibility. In this vein, Potter’s chapter (reviewing a survey of students’ emotional responses to the YA pre- and post-residency) shows some encouraging evidence that the effect of overcoming linguistic and cultural challenges can produce a YA-related sense of wellbeing not attainable in a first-language context. Leahy; Potter; and Morimoto highlight that the successful navigation of everyday differences during the YA, often reported as causes for concern pre-departure, correspondingly improves perceptions of it.

Potter makes a proposal: we should ask whether, in order to facilitate positive wellbeing, we should better emphasise “the gains to be had from negative experiences” at the pre-departure stage. This proposal for evidence-based, scholarship led, structured interventions cuts across our papers as a response to the wellbeing conundrum (see especially Crawford, Gutiérrez Almarza,
& McCormack and Archer). Archer’s term ‘intentional preparation’ is a helpful one here: for students, good preparation is not just about being given information to digest, it is about formulating an engaged metacognitive response to it. To give an example, in her French language classes, Franc describes pushing pre-departure students actively to interrogate the different economic and philosophical models operating in the French and British HE systems, in order to give them ‘an ethnographer’s detachment’ rather than the feeling of being a victim when they encounter different behaviours in France.

The aim to move students from factual and procedural knowledge to metacognitive knowledge (Armstrong, n.d.) in relation to the YA is also seen in the advocacy of carefully-scaffolded reflection and questionnaire activities in the work of all contributors to this volume. Student engagement with academic questions in real-world contexts, and student self-efficacy are now viewed as hallmarks of good graduate learning. Whilst the YA has long provided the platform for the active, embedded learning that this demands, our papers suggest that, as a community of practitioners, we are aware of the need to move from transmitting YA processes and facts to our students to cultivating a YA epistemology that is prepared for and built on at appropriate stages within modern language degrees, and that features as one of the signature pedagogies for our discipline.

3. Conclusion

On that hopeful note, we can conclude our summary of the issues raised in this volume. The way they have been analysed here is not intended to be final, of course; this introduction is simply meant as a presentation of what is covered here, and a suggestion as to how these ideas can apply in various spheres for people who are responsible for administering the YA. The odd reflection from the editors’ experience is offered too, in the hope that they are also useful. Most of all, we hope that this entire book is a fruitful addition to the literature on the YA, and we look forward to future useful volumes in the same series, and future useful YA conferences.
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References


