

4 The Cardiff University buddy scheme: how to prepare outgoing students using the experience of the year abroad and final-year students

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Abstract

This article describes the extra support required for outgoing students on their Year Abroad (YA) journey. It highlights the increasing need for and relevance of peer mentoring of YA students in preparing them to deal with different structures and organisations where external support might be insufficient or even non-existent. It also outlines different approaches to establishing relationships with allocated ‘buddies’. It finally identifies the outcomes and benefits of the project, including personal development for all students involved in the scheme.

Keywords: year abroad preparation, buddy scheme, students’ experience, student’s well-being, employability skills.

1. Introduction

The benefits of learning languages in an immersion environment are clear. International education expands a student’s perspective, encourages interest in cultural differences and strengthens interpersonal and observational skills

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(Mulvaney, 2017). Yet, for prospective outgoing students, the anticipation of planning the exchange, the choice of where to go, and which study/work placement to choose, to name but a few issues, can lead to tension, stress, and a feeling of vulnerability which can lead to anxiety before departure. The idea of a buddy scheme began from our own struggle, as YA coordinators for the two largest language departments (French and Spanish) in Cardiff University School of Modern Languages, to help, advise, guide, and reassure not only the students about to embark on this tremendous opportunity, but also those already abroad. What better advocates than students on their YA and those who have recently returned?

2. Present context for languages and presentation of the project

2.1. Background

UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and their modern languages departments in particular, are currently facing a very challenging future. Policies leading to an increase in student fees, the pressure to recruit and retain students whilst “foreign language learning is at its lowest level in UK secondary schools since the turn of the millennium” (Jeffreys, 2019, n.p.), together with the institutional commitment to supporting and enhancing the students’ experiences, all highlight the pressure on HEIs to implement new strategies to address these issues.

One of the worrying aspects for HEIs is the transition of students from secondary schools to university and its impact on recruitment and retention. Some studies have been undertaken to explore different ways to guarantee a smooth transition, particularly in the fields of geography, environmental sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Hulme & De Wilde, 2014; Kouvola, 2015; Tate & Hopkins, 2013). However, little research has been conducted on transition for modern foreign languages students, taking into consideration that most of these students not only go through this transition once, from secondary schools

to university, but twice, from UK universities to foreign universities or foreign working environments.

Studying or working abroad as part of a student exchange programme can have tremendous positive outcomes in many areas, such as career planning, educational pursuits, internationally-oriented leisure activities, the opportunity to develop intercultural competencies, and spatial understanding of the host country. However, going abroad is one of the most challenging experiences for students in higher education, and our goal as YA coordinators is to ensure that we equip them with the necessary linguistic and cultural tools to overcome the challenge. From UK universities to foreign universities and foreign working environments, students must adapt to completely different structures and organisations in terms of the level of support and management that academics and administrative staff abroad can and are willing to provide. Students are equipped with the right language tools, but their understanding of different learning and professional structures can be non-existent. We believe that not enough emphasis has been put on this.

Exposure to a different environment and culture affects everyone differently. After the initial excitement of studying or working in a new place and becoming part of a different culture, some people start to have mixed feelings about having left their comfort zone ([Top Universities, 2018](#)). Throughout our years acting as YA coordinators, we have experienced first-hand the turmoil, upsets, anxiety, and challenges that the YA unveils.

Common reactions to culture shock, regardless of the country of origin, whilst studying abroad, include ([The University of Texas at Austin, 2019](#), n.p.):

- extreme homesickness;
- avoiding social situations;
- physical complaints and sleep difficulties;
- difficulty with coursework/inability to concentrate;
- becoming angry over minor irritations; and
- significant nervousness or exhaustion.

The first few weeks following the arrival of students in their host universities or working environments tax our personal and professional resources to the limit due to the different levels of help and support offered by Spanish/Latin American and francophone universities or by managers in the workplace. Despite the high level of care and advice provided, including school-wide, departmental, and destination meetings, some pre-departure students are still overwhelmed and unable to cope with the different practices and responses they get abroad. A solution had to be found. This led us to reflect on our own practice and how to have a real impact on the students' experiences by putting in place a new system involving the most important asset for a university: the students themselves. The answer to our struggles and dilemma was obvious: students at different stages of their degree would be involved, consequently a 'connection' would be made via a peer mentoring relationship which would establish itself throughout the students' university life, at home and abroad.

2.2. Why peer mentoring?

In considering ways to support students, we realised that peer mentoring would be the best system to introduce as it allows students to learn from each other in a manner that differs from the traditional university lecturing approach, and thus fosters an active, interactive, and dynamic learning environment. Peer mentoring provides an informal and easy way to obtain advice and support whilst students are studying abroad, where access to lecturers for help and guidance is more limited. Outgoing students might find approaching members of staff in the host institution challenging since they are usually total strangers; a 'returning student' might have the answer or the advice required.

When we employ the term *peer mentoring*, we refer, therefore, to a system in which students develop a reciprocal relationship, where more advanced students help second-year students during the pre-departure, departure, and time abroad stages in order to enhance the overall experience of students. This is achieved through a relationship based on equal distribution of power (Cropper, 2000). The advice provided by fellow students is better received and has a proven positive effect.

2.3. How does peer mentoring work?

2.3.1. All second-year students are allocated a 'peer buddy' in their first week

The buddy scheme is a voluntary programme in which only those students interested in taking part in the project are involved. When second-year students submit their YA preference form, they have the option to opt in or out of the programme. In the same way, students already abroad or in their final year can volunteer to be mentors. Peer mentoring partnerships are established by YA coordinators in the first few weeks after the university/work placement allocation process is finalised. Students are encouraged to develop this relationship through the whole pre-departure and YA process.

2.3.2. Time to listen on a one-to-one basis

One challenging aspect for coordinators is constraints on their time. Student peer mentoring has the potential to meet student needs in this area: mentors show a willingness and ability to spend more time on informal one-to-one meetings, acknowledging the angst and focusing on the needs and demands of the individuals, thus providing a sort of informal pastoral care.

2.3.3. Help with the challenges of mental health abroad

The students' wellbeing is of paramount importance. The 'overwhelmed generation' of students frequently makes use of mental health facilities provided on campus by British universities, and usage of these facilities has been increasing steadily for over a decade (Kinzie, 2005). The proportion of disabled students who declared a mental health condition increased from 5.9% in 2007 to 9.6% in 2012 (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013, p. 95). Even if a student has a history of mental illness, the study abroad officer will not know this unless the student volunteers the information. Encouraging a 'buddy friendship' could provide the student with the necessary trust and will to disclose the information helping the YA coordinator in placing the student in a university which could provide, where possible, the appropriate level of care.

2.3.4. *Mentor preparation*

YA coordinators supervise the project throughout the year to make sure the programme is fit for purpose. Mentees are encouraged to become mentors the following academic year and to use their existing peer mentors for help and support. In order to help mentors perform their role, the YA coordinators, the employability office, and student wellbeing offer them training sessions which take place at the beginning of the academic year and are recorded and distributed via the virtual learning environment to those students abroad who are unable to attend.

2.4. **Why does the buddy scheme work?**

Andrews and Clark (2011) have already studied the effectiveness of peer mentoring. Their study not only shows how this approach enhances students' successes in higher education, but also highlights why HEIs should promote it to enhance their students' experiences.

The main advantage of adopting a buddy system is that students are given the opportunity to learn from each other and that by doing so, mentors and mentees alike can benefit from being involved in the project. Mentees receive support and guidance from fellow students who have experienced the same type of difficulties when preparing for their YA and whilst abroad. The scheme also allows mentees to develop a sense of self-confidence that may lead them to help other students in the future. With regard to mentors, they are able to gain a whole range of transferable employability skills that are needed in the professional world; they are able to develop their communication, management, and leadership skills whilst gaining personal satisfaction.

The contribution to the programme is also recognised in more official ways, including a university certificate stating their participation in the programme and outlining the skills gained throughout the year, together with a celebration event at Graduation Day where mentees can nominate their mentors who can then be awarded a prize for best 'buddy'.

3. Discussion of outcomes

In total, 16 final-year students volunteered as mentors and 60 second-year students took part in the project, with a ratio of one mentor for four students. The majority of mentors were French and Spanish degree students and therefore, could support outgoing students in both departments.

3.1. Results of a survey conducted with mentees and mentors

A survey was conducted with mentees and mentors on the relevance and practicality of the project (see [Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#), and [Figure 3](#)).

Students taking part in the project highlighted the following positive aspects.

Mentors stated that the scheme allowed them to develop their sense of empathy and enhanced their communication skills. Furthermore, the willingness to help and reassure whilst sharing their own personal experience was mentioned. Interestingly, their desire to help YA coordinators was also a reason for taking part in the project.

Figure 1. Second-year students' views on the buddy scheme

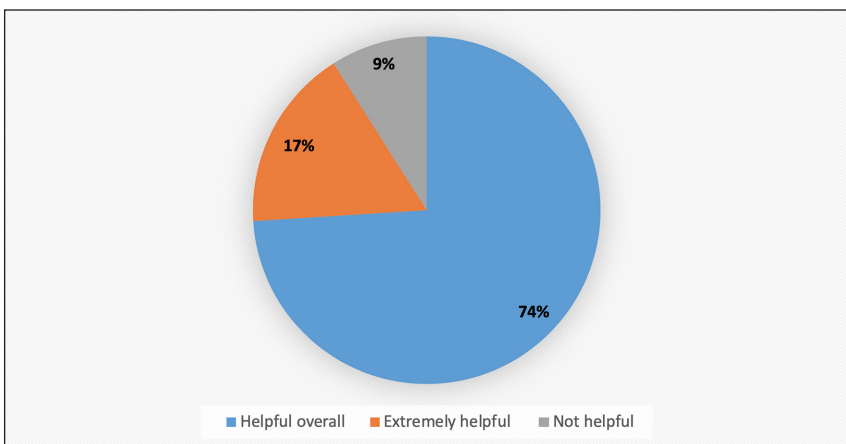


Figure 2. Second-year students' reasons to participate

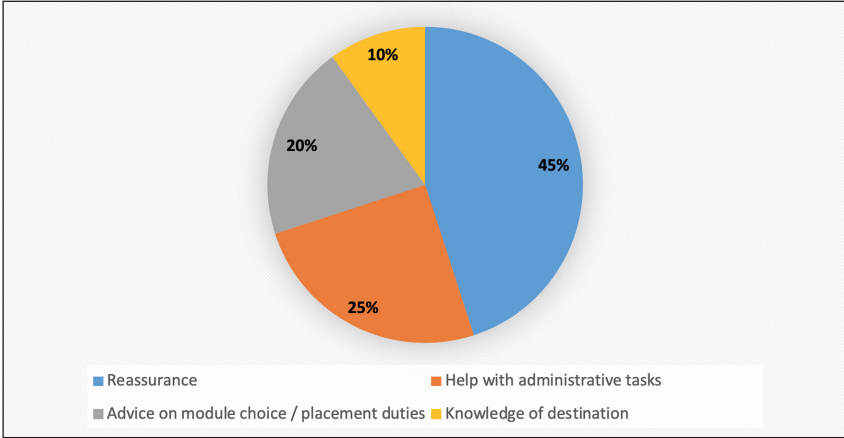
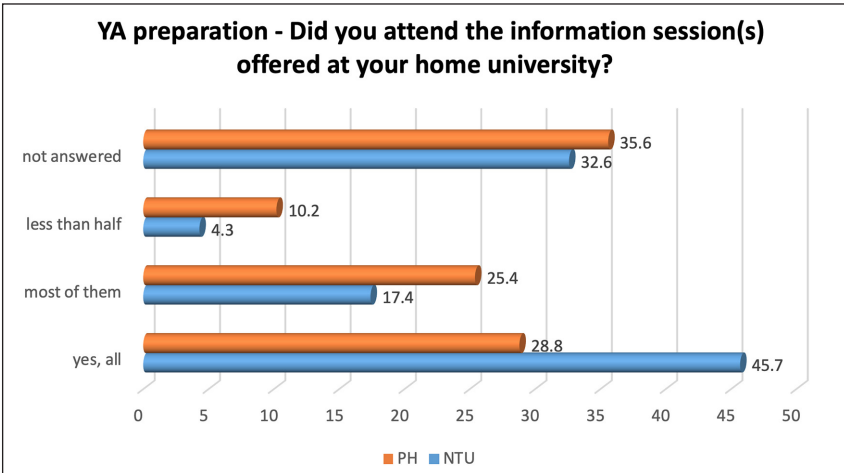


Figure 3. Mentors' reasons to participate



Second-year students stated that the scheme allowed them to gain a better insight about what to expect when abroad with concise and precise detail provided by the mentors. Mentees highlighted the practical elements dealt with (e.g. accommodation, cost of living, help with applications, opening bank accounts,

and pointing out the highs and lows of living abroad). The overall feeling was the reassurance of a positive outcome they obtained from their mentors.

Students involved in the project highlighted the following challenges: (1) mentors and mentees alike mentioned that time constraint was a challenge with regards to meetings and active communication; (2) finding a suitable time slot in which to actively engage with each other was not always a smooth process due to different commitments and deadlines; and (3) the lack of engagement of some mentees disheartened the enthusiasm of mentors when no reply to their offer of help was acknowledged.

4. Conclusion

Reflecting on the first year of implementation of the buddy scheme, it soon became clear that mentees and mentors alike benefitted from this initiative, bringing the student community together regardless of their year of study. Mentors who were until recently young ‘foreign’ students who had ‘survived’ this challenging experience reassured outgoing students in a manner that YA coordinators could not. On the other hand, whilst mentoring, present and previous YA students were able to reflect on their resilience and their personal development.

However, sustaining interest in the programme required a large amount of supervision, mediation, time, and dedication from both students and coordinators to ensure the viability of the scheme. Another challenge was the lack of engagement from some second-year students until deadlines were due, which had an impact on the communication with their mentors.

When properly cared for and supported, most students are likely to be capable of functioning on a YA programme and to experience first-hand the benefits that it provides. Intellectual, emotional, and social growth are among those benefits that will make our students the global citizens of tomorrow. These traits can be acquired through mentoring as it provides a perfect learning and

sharing environment and encourages students to explore their own personal development.

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