

SUSTAINING LEARNER ENGAGEMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH THE STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The study abroad, also known as Year Abroad or Period Abroad, has always been and remains a very important part of any language degree programme. Whilst abroad, students are expected to develop language, academic, cultural, intercultural, personal and professional skills; even though some providers' attention has been leaning on the development of foreign language skills.

Self-reported experiences have revealed that after the study abroad, many students fail to use productively acquired skills to cope with demands of the academic complex tasks, including independent major writing projects, various communicative encounters and the development of related soft skills. With an insight into the issues surrounding the curriculum provision, the learning support and the assessment of the study abroad in language programmes, the paper examines and challenges the way many students are prepared and supported to embark on the independent learning journey. The analysis of the findings suggests recommendations for effective learner engagement.

Keywords: Study Abroad, reflective learning, self-directed learning, critical thinking, learner engagement, collaborative learning.

1. Introduction

The period spent abroad as part of the learning opportunity scheme has always been perceived as a life-changing experience for many students across the world. It enhances learners' self and social awareness; and opens doors to new horizons, which expose students to today's competitive labour market of the global economy. Whilst abroad, students are expected to acquire and develop key language and transferable skills. They are also expected to start doing research for their major independent study dissertations, mainly focusing on information gathering, data collection and data synthesis. Although many of them seem to have an idea on the area of research interests, the main question is whether that experience spent outside the classroom settings is effectively planned, coordinated and evaluated appropriately to stimulate and support learners for an active engagement. It is therefore legitimate to investigate students' preparedness for a self-directed learning, in order to explore mechanisms of fostering a self-directed learning by empowering learners to be more adventurous and ready to undertake comfortably research and complex communication tasks.

To better understand some of the main contributing factors to the study abroad successes and failures, it is important to answer the following three research questions:

1. How effective is the level of student preparedness for the Study Abroad experience?
2. How do students feel about the support they receive and the ways they engage with learning during their study abroad journey?
3. What should be done to ensure the study abroad pathways provide meaningful opportunities for inclusive and sustainable self-directed learning?

In order answer these questions thoroughly, it is probably crucial to start with contextualising the study, exploring the arrangements in place to prepare students for independent learning. We look at the (dis)integrative curriculum planning, the (un)availability of inclusive learning through the learner engagement and the assessment practices, the range of independent learning opportunities at local and a global level, the effectiveness of the study abroad pathways in relation to their learning objectives and outcomes.

2. Literature and theoretical framework

2.1. Rationale

Recently some scholars have been researching the negative impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the transnational education in general and on the Study Abroad in particular (Gaitanidis, 2021). In the past, studies on the Period Abroad have focussed on seeking greater diversity in curricula (De Costa, Rawal, and Zaykovskaya, 2017), the advantages of the Study Abroad, (Tamas, 2014), intercultural competences (Berdan, Goodman and Taylor, 2013), the patterns of acculturation in transnational education (Jang and Kim, 2010), the relevance of the length of the study (Davidson, 2010), the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal processes (Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill, 2009), the development of global skills (Clarke, Flaherty, Wright and McMillen, 2009), the effects of reverse culture shock (Gaw, 2000, Sliwa and Grandy, 2006), the enrichment of the open-mindedness (Hadis, 2005), etc.

Generally speaking, the Study Abroad has always been associated with incredible success stories in different areas of education and development, often seen as a potential key to global citizenship and career success (Williams, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2012; DeJordy, et al. 2020). Nevertheless, even though the Study Abroad has been hailed as a potential game changer that could revitalise the independent learning, it is equally true that studies in this area have not paid enough attention to the interconnectivity and

correlation between the learning design in the home institutions and the Study Abroad aims and learning outcomes. The success of the Study Abroad provision has often been measured against the student's self-reported experiences based on vague and elusive expectations. The three stages of the Study Abroad or rather dimensions of the participative and inquiry-based learner engagement, such as the preparedness, the learning opportunities and support whilst abroad, and the attainment and achievement after the period abroad have been overlooked.

There have been cases where different learning programmes and international study arrangements have not produced expected results (Lu and Han, 2010). Fang and co-researchers (Fang, Clarke, and Wei, 2015) go even further to call the Study Abroad scheme they analysed an 'empty success or brilliant failure'. Some students do argue that the study abroad learning outcomes are based on assumptions, are very elusive, and are not informed by engaging learning opportunities and assessment practices.

The aim of this paper is to get an insight into the ways students are prepared for the study abroad, the available learner engagement opportunities during the period abroad and ultimately the use of acquired skills to carry out complex academic tasks after the year abroad. That understanding can facilitate the improvement of the Year Abroad design and delivery for a better outcome. Creating, evaluating and fostering a linkage gluing the three stages of the participative curriculum design and delivery can contribute to a better and sustainable learner engagement. By using primary and secondary research data, the paper has applied the Learner Engagement Framework and the Self-Directed Learning theory to investigate the students' response to the period abroad learning objectives and outcomes.

The evaluation of the Study Abroad management has been carried out through the lenses of academic, administrative and pedagogical dimensions. Looking into such dimensions intended to facilitate the understanding of pedagogical and administrative implications of the level of the students' preparedness for self-directed learning and the management of living, studying and working abroad.

2.2. Academic dimension

The academic preparation at level 5, which is a year before the study abroad, was mainly based on one module on *Languages and the World of Work*. This module explicitly stated that the content was, as appropriate, drawn from theoretical aspects of employability (including dimensions of cultural differences and identities, and the

principles of effective intercultural communications), and research methods, with a focus on secondary and primary data collection. The aim of the module was to provide students with a theoretical and experiential basis for the development of the academic and employability skills, which can subsequently be applied in the contexts of living, research, studying and working in a foreign country.

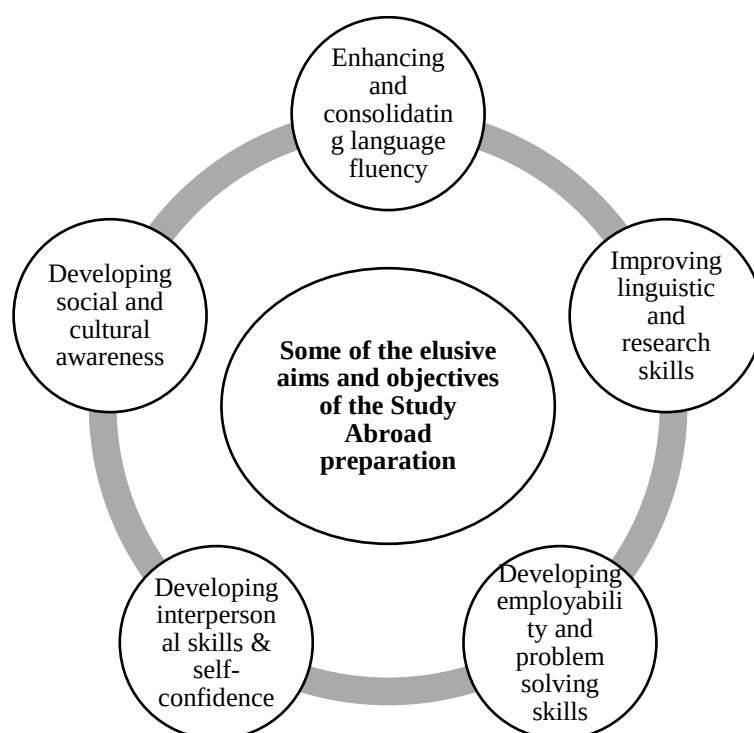


Figure 1. The aim of the Study Abroad preparation

Notwithstanding the good references to the development of research skills and project, the use of e-tools for learner engagement and reflection, the capitalisation to employability skills and the overall application of the academic studies to international and multicultural workplaces, the assessments fell short of such expectations. Even though the poster presentation and the individual reflection were used to lay the foundation of the Period Abroad e-portfolio, the research proposal was a simulation and lacked a contextualisation in relation to the individual destination.

2.3. Administrative dimension

At level 5, students attended three meetings to discuss the available pathways and their pros and cons, the information about the support whilst abroad and learning opportunities. There were three options: study at a partner university; a work placement secured through institutional links with international companies or with jobs search by

students or via agencies and approved by the Study Abroad Coordinator; and a Language Assistantship at local schools under the British Council scheme. Students were broadly provided with advantages and disadvantages of each option in the following table.

PATHWAY	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
LANGUAGE ASSISTANTSHIP	✓ Payment by the school as a language assistant approximately €700 per month, plus the Erasmus grant ✓ Might be on your own with little chance to speak English (except in class!) ✓ Possible experience for a future teaching career	▪ Probably in a town or village with few English and few, if any, other students ▪ Having to prepare lessons
STUDY PLACEMENT	✓ Opportunity to study valuable modules ✓ Flexibility of timetable ✓ Support from local staff and placement co-ordinators ✓ ERASMUS grant paid ✓ Some short language courses normally available	▪ Discipline needed to attend classes and undertake assessments ▪ No work experience gained ▪ Modules in your specialist subject may not be available ▪ Can be difficult to engage with local students
WORK PLACEMENT	✓ Overseas work experience looks good on CV ✓ Discipline of work schedule imposed ✓ Learn office skills and commercial business ✓ May be paid - although not enough to meet your basic expenses ✓ You will also be able to apply for an Erasmus grant	▪ Difficult to find ▪ Type of work undertaken can be basic and quite boring ▪ Lack of flexibility - working every day, so little time for research ▪ Unlikely to be given much academic or professional training ▪ Wages low - or non-existent ▪ Difficult to keep up “second language” for those on Language studies degree ▪ Not many people of your age

Figure 2. Advantages and disadvantages of the Study Abroad pathways, adapted from *Period Abroad Module Handbook*

Students were informed that each of the above options was equally valuable as a way of meeting all of the Study Abroad objectives and learning outcomes. The key to

success was not whether they had a work, study placement or language assistantship, but rather how they would organise themselves and how they would focus on their personal development whilst in their target language country.

The preparation process involved talks by the international office, the Period Abroad academic lead across languages, the target language country coordinator and testimonies from students who had completed that learning experience.

Students were briefed on how life in another country can present different challenges compared to their home settings. They were therefore encouraged to attend the preparation seminars that were offered and pay particular attention to what was said about cultural differences and ways of life in the host country.

Whilst many talks were raising some issues related to feeling somewhat disorientated in a new environment, they were equally reflecting on how a good preparation can make integration smoother. Some of the key rewards of the study abroad were also explained, including learning to be more independent, to develop cross-cultural capabilities and global citizenship; and to be able survive socially and professionally on your own while abroad.

Finally, students were provided with the information related to the available support for the learner engagement, such as the placement coordinator, personal supervisors, the Period Abroad Academic Lead and the Link Person or Advisor based in the target language country.

2.4. Pedagogical dimension

The intended learning outcomes of the study abroad were developing communication skills through interactions with native speakers; optimising the opportunities for linguistic progress, the development of cultural insight and the academic and personal development resulting from extended contact with the target language environment; developing the skills of observation, investigation, analysis and assessment related to the topic of the undergraduate dissertation; and preparing for the final year assessments. Some of the expectations to fully engage with academic work were : creating individual learning plan and keeping records of achievements and failings; reflective placement reports and developing critical reflection skills, which are transferable to other academic areas, such as observing and reacting; engaging with available learning

resources, gathering information and collecting primary and secondary research data; identifying and experiencing the connection between the period abroad experience and academic tasks/studies by self-testing the ability to adapt written communication skills to a variety of documents in the target language; to become self-motivated learners who are adventurous and taking risks.

The holistic approach to the learner engagement was designed around the following skill areas:

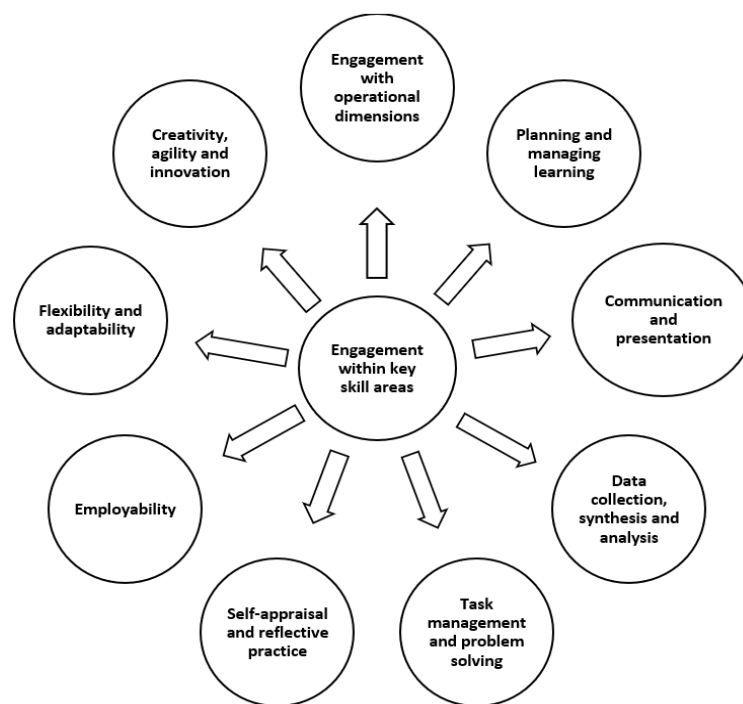


Figure 3. The framework of the engagement within key skill areas.

All students going abroad had to complete a reflective e-portfolio based on their learning journal. Whilst working under their personal supervisors' guidance, students were also required to undertake ethnographic research for their undergraduate dissertations of 10,000 words. Upon their arrival abroad, they were expected to start gathering information, collecting primary research data and whenever possible, start preparing their dissertation proposal. In fact, the presentation of the major project proposal as an oral examination counted for the study abroad formative assessment because students received and acted upon the guidance on working title, aims, outline plan and sources for their writing projects.

At the end of the period abroad, students had to submit a reflective and analytical account report, which was based on how they have reacted to unexpected situations or experiences, how their attitudes have changed (or not), how they have come to accept things they couldn't change, how they have coped with culture chock, how they have developed the language fluency, cultural awareness, their own personality, their confidence in self-reliance, etc. This report of about 3,000 words in length was written in the main foreign language and counted for a full final year module. Students received feedback on content and language fluency (written and spoken), which could be used to improve their dissertations. However, students who were enrolled on joint programmes did not have to submit this type of written reflection, which could lead to the questioning of the effectiveness of that academic task as part of the formative assessments. The other challenge was that the Study Abroad was not fully accredited. Even though one could argue that the placement report could be considered a summative assessment of the study abroad, the entire e-portfolio was nevertheless a required and yet non-assessed task. Furthermore, given the differences in learning opportunities that were catered for through different pathways, designing inclusive framework presented some challenges.

For the linguistic, cultural, intercultural, academic, professional and personal learning outcomes to be met, the Study Abroad required key actors to encourage, support and monitor active learning in a participatory manner.

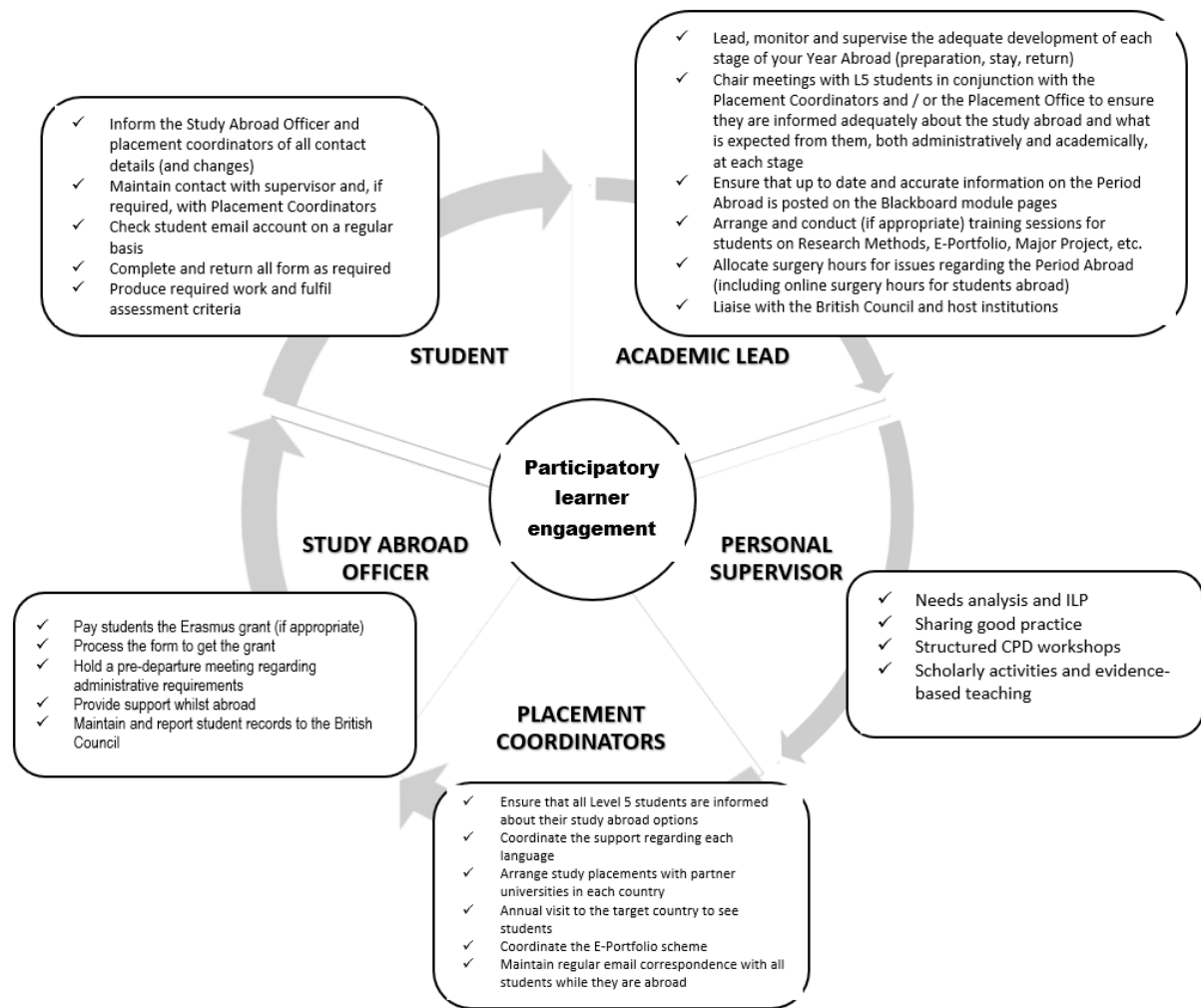


Figure 4. Key actors in the participatory learner engagement

For the participatory approach to be impactful, students were required to provide their personal supervisors with evidence of the engagement with learning. To this end, the period abroad academic leader created an online module designed to support and help students with using every opportunity in the target country to enhance linguistic and academic skills; and to maximise the development of cross-cultural capability.

Students received the information regarding the required activities in a form of e-portfolio to be carried out within a clear and manageable timeline aligned to individual pathway.



Figure 5. The structure of activities and deadlines adapted from the Period Abroad Module Handbook.

It was hoped that the integrated engagements onto the timeline would be an effective attempt to harmonise learning expectations out of different pathways. By creating a new web-based learning community using digital tools to enhance and assess the study abroad, the aim was to encourage students to take greater responsibility for the planning process so that integral part of their independent learning could be underpinned by both active and inquiry-based approaches. One of the expected outcomes was that the e-portfolio mode of learner engagement offering opportunities for oral and written reflection would promote independence, facilitate a meaningful assessment for objectives and strengthen the support to students whilst living abroad.

After the study abroad, students were commenting positively on their experiences. However, the main opportunity to collect such perceptions was through the evaluation of their reflective e-portfolio and the oral assessment where students were reflecting on their linguistic immersion, as well as their progress towards cultural adaptation through the intercultural experiences and challenges they have encountered.

Whilst it was clear that the e-portfolio was empowering students to record, evidence and reflect on their task completion using a variety of multimedia formats that the online nature of the project provided them with, they were struggling with the final year academic tasks that the Study Abroad should have prepared them for. With references to different frameworks, this study was designed to identify any discrepancies between the expected outcomes and the student performances, from the quality of the

preparedness to the active engagement, attainment, achievement, satisfaction and progression.

2.5. Conceptual frameworks

2.5.1. Action research

Action research is defined as a systematic enquiry into one's practice (Jonson, 2012); an action usually taken by teachers or any other individuals involved in education, which consists of gathering information about a practice with the aim to improve learning experience (Mills, 2011). The importance of action research in education resides in its pedagogical dimension of encouraging practitioners to 'examine the dynamics of their classrooms, ponder the actions and interactions of students, validate and challenge existing practices, and take risks in the process' (Mills, p. 46). In other words, 'action research involves going beyond the identification of the problem to try to understand why the problem appears in the way it does. In this respect, an action research project in academic settings has to be deliberate and could be a solution-oriented investigation of learners' perceptions of methods of delivery of learning materials' (Munyangeyo, 2010, p.53).

Given the data collected for action research 'are used to understand or inform theories and research related to best practice' (Johnson, 2012, p. 20), the process consists of four key steps: defining the focus area, collecting data, analysing and interpreting the data, and developing an action plan.

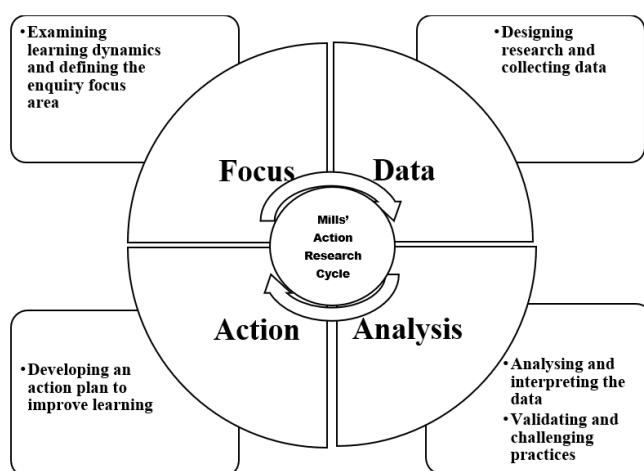


Figure 6. The basic process of conducting action research through four steps, adapted from Mills (2011)

The aim of this action research is to study a specific curriculum provision to better understand and improve the quality of the learning experience and henceforth enhance satisfaction and achievement through independent learning that the period abroad is expected to provide.

2.5.2.Student Engagement Framework

According to Bowden and co-authors (2017), student engagement consists of four distinct and yet interrelated dimensions: behavioural, affective, cognitive and social. The consideration of those dimensions whilst designing learning contributes to fostering inclusivity.

Inclusive teaching has brought into its stride many learning approaches and support mechanisms. For many scholars (Kearsley and Shneiderman, 1998; Baron and Corbin, 2012; Kahu, 2013; Bundick, Quaglia, Corso and Haywood, 2014; Kahn, 2014; Zepke, 2014; Ashwin and McVitty, 2015; Fredricks, Filsecker and Lawson, 2016; Almarghani and Mijatovic, 2017; Kahu and Nelson, 2018); Bond and Bedenlier, 2019), Learning Engagement Frameworks have hence been regarded as the source of and the engine for participatory curriculum design and delivery. The following framework by Bond and Bedenlier (2019) highlights the role of an effective curriculum design can influence on the learner engagement.

Curriculum/activities and their influences on student engagement:

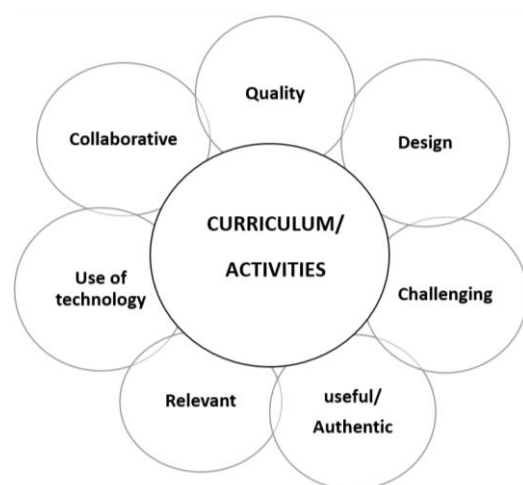


Figure 7. Engagement curriculum attributes adapted from Bond and Bedenlier (2019)

This framework can be a useful reference point for the evaluation of the study abroad preparation, management and learning experience.

2.5.3. Self-directed learning theory

Malcolm Knowles has defined Self-Directed Learning in the following terms: ‘In its broadest meaning, self-directed learning describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes’ (Knowles, 1975, p. 18).

Merriam et al. (2007) have described 3 main goals for Self-Directed Learning: to enhance the ability of learners to be self-determined in their studies, to foster transformational learning and to promote emancipatory learning and social action as an integral part of SDL.

Many studies in self-directed learning (Boyatzis, 2002; Brockett, 2006; Goleman, 1998; Long, et al., 2002; Scott, 2006) have shown that intrinsic motives have more enduring impact on a person’s behaviour than extrinsic ones. Taking ownership of learning is a purposeful enterprise that requires a multidimensional approach to reach the ideal-self ladder through self-actualisation. In his *Unleashing the Power of Self-Directed Learning*, Richard Boyatzis (2002) has discussed a learning process that allows intentional changes from one discovery to another. He presented the self-directed learning framework as a process that follows four key stages. The following diagram shows those learning stages:

1. Our Ideal Self: “Our Ideal Self is an image of the person we want to be. It emerges from our ego ideal, dreams, and aspirations” (Boyatzis, p.10).
2. The Ideal-Self or the Boiling Frog Theory or Syndrome: The ‘boiling frog syndrome’ is that if one drops a frog into a pot of boiling water, it will jump out with an instinctive defence mechanism. But if you place a frog in a pot of cool water and gradually increase the temperature, the frog will sit in the water until it is boiled to death” (Boyatzis, 2001, p.11). It means that changes made dramatically are not tolerated, but slow adjustments to changes may be acceptable.

3. Mindfulness through a learning agenda: creating own personal learning plan
4. The metamorphosis: continuous improvement' process
5. Relationships: relationships create a 'context' within which we interpret our progress on desired changes.

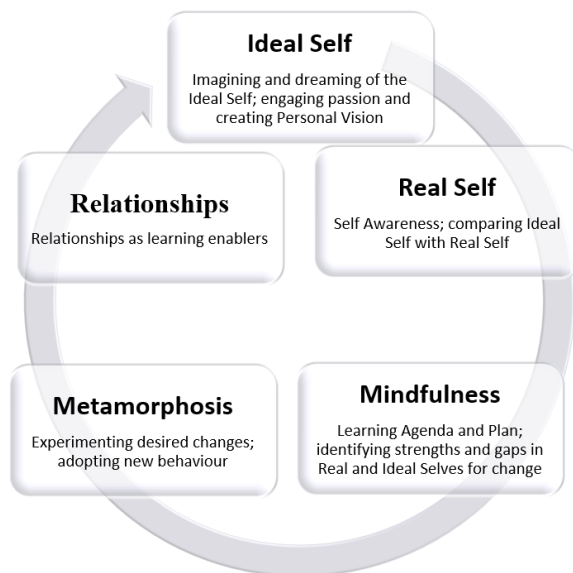


Figure 8. Self-directed learning key stages designed using the content from Boyatzis (2002)

Boyatzis' argument is that from the imaginations and dreams of positive changes to reaching the ideal-self requires taking the unlocking actions using intrinsic motives. This means the desire to learn has to come from the learner. The challenge is that learners are like icebergs. The attitudes they display are much less informative than the hidden assumptions, which are driven by the degree of real self and multidimensional awareness and traits. The traits relate to their non-conscious patterns that influence behaviour and henceforth affect their performance.

3. Methodology

This small-scale study involved 58 full-time undergraduate students in their final year as participants from Leeds Beckett University, United Kingdom. Those students were studying French, German and Spanish. Their study abroad destinations were France, Germany and Spain. They were enrolled onto different programmes, including language studies combining three languages, the major language with/and either business management, global development, events, hospitality, international business,

international relations and tourism. They had spent their period abroad through one of individual chosen three paths: language assistantship, studies in one of the partner universities, work placement in various business settings. For ethical reasons, the students' names have been anonymised using codes.

This mixed method research is exploratory, descriptive and explanatory in design. A questionnaire of 8 closed and open questions collecting both qualitative and quantitative data from before, during and after the Study Abroad was administered. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Likert rating scale was utilised to measure the satisfaction rates and the thematic content analysis was used to identify and interpret qualitative data. The key frameworks that have been used were the Learner Engagement Framework (Bond and Bedenlier, 2019), the Self-Directed Learning theory (Boyatzis, 2002) and the Mills' Action Research Cycle (Mills, 2011).

4. Results

Questionnaire results summary

4.1. Study abroad pathway

Q1. What was your Study Abroad pathway?

- Student at Higher Education Institution (HEI)
- Language Assistant
- Work placement

20
26
12

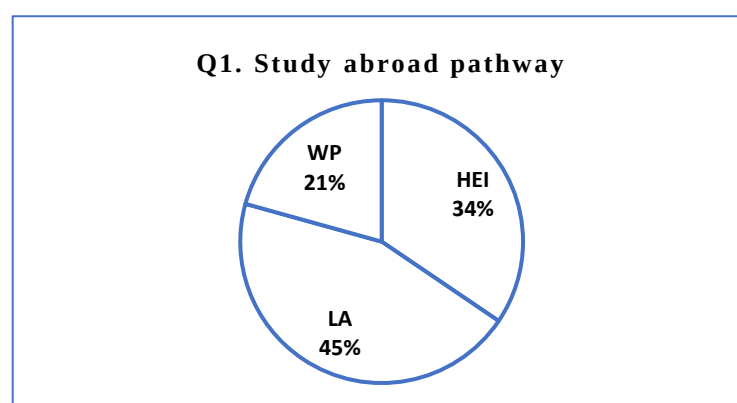


Figure 9. The Study Abroad pathway choices

A high number of students were choosing language assistantships. The reason could be the remuneration benefits of being paid by the British Council and keeping the ERASMUS grant. It could equally due to having ambitions of language teaching in

future. Whilst the economic benefits could have been the influential factor behind the choice of work placement, the lack of partnerships between the home institution and the target country industry was not allowing many students to find suitable jobs abroad. The fair share in the numbers of students choosing the study at the university, which did not provide any extra income, could be associated with urban life where most universities are usually located, as well as expectations of keeping the continuity of learning experience and henceforth sustaining the academic development.

4.2. Before going abroad (preparedness)

Q2. Did you find informative, relevant and adequate the preparation sessions held prior to leaving for your Study Abroad? **YES** **NO** **ABSTAINED**

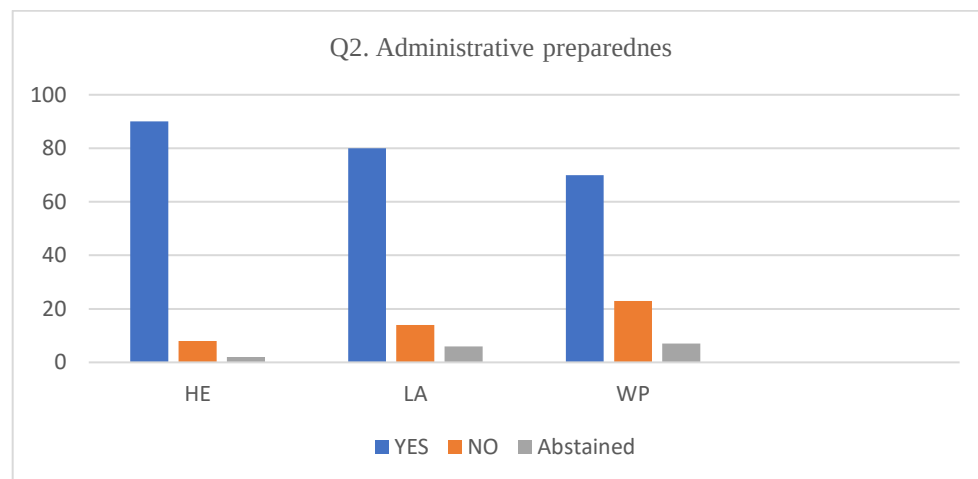


Figure 10. The quality of administrative information as a preparation to embark on the Study Abroad.

On one hand, the highest number of students feeling satisfied with the amount and the quality of information provided in the preparation of the study abroad was that of those joining higher education institutions. Since this pathway was facilitated by the partnership agreements, it is obvious that the quality of information would be effective. On the other hand, students feeling unsatisfied with the quality of information were more than those from the remaining other two pathways. It is clear that the lack of links with the labour market was a hindrance to the student preparation.

Q3. Which of the following module assessment(s), if any, has (have) prepared you academically, culturally and linguistically for the Study Abroad? Please rate the assignment(s) from 1 to 5 (1 being poor and 5 being excellent)

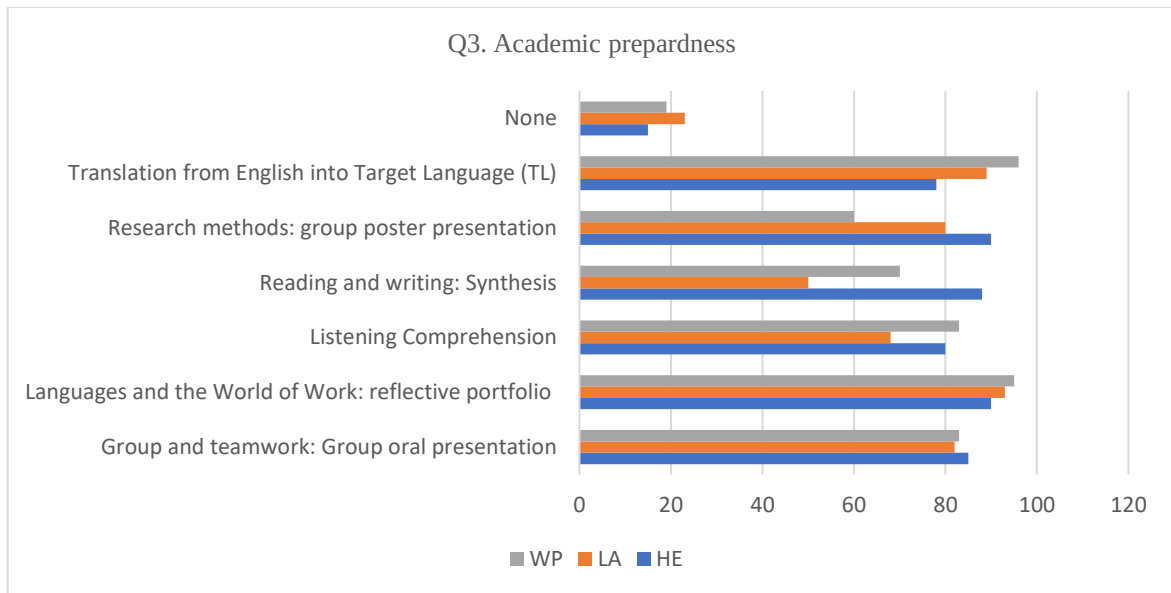


Figure 11. The quality of academic preparation to embark on the Study Abroad.

The above scores have highlighted discrepancies between the pathways and module components that were expected to prepare students for the study abroad. Translation scored high, as well as work placement, probably because students were asked by employers to do translation work. Research methods and group presentation have scored high by the students studying in partners universities, because they were able to engage with similar tasks whilst abroad. However, reading and synthesis assessment components have scored low among the language assistants, because of the task was not part of their daily activities. One surprising score is the one from students on the language assistantships who did not think any of the modules on the list had prepared them for the study abroad.

4.3. During the period abroad

Q4. At your host institution or workplace, please rate from 1 to 5 the kind of help you were provided with (1 being poor and 5 being excellent)

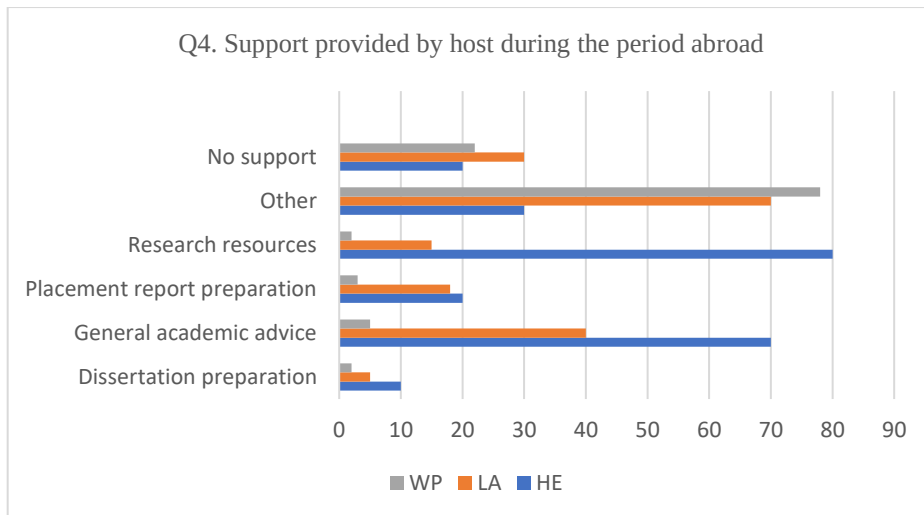


Figure 12. The quality of support during the Study Abroad

The above data underline three issues: (1) lack of access to research resources and academic advice for both language assistants and students on the work placement, (2) poor academic advice during the work placement, and (3) a high support related to other types of help outside the expected areas.

Q5. Please indicate by percentage the level of your engagement in learning opportunities/activities as part of the self-directed learning.

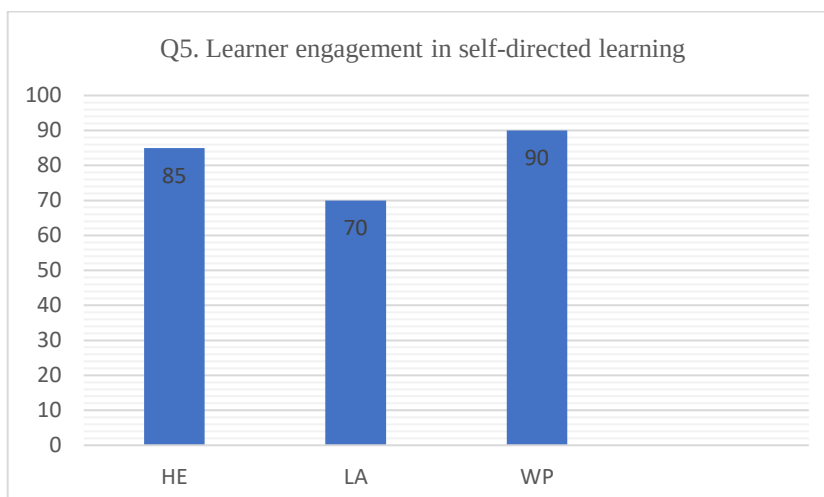


Figure 13. The level of learner engagement in self-directed learning

Whilst the three pathways seem to display relatively balanced scores for self-directed learning engagements, one would wonder the extent to which students have perceived their various efforts as genuine self-directed learning initiatives.

4.4. After the period abroad

Q6. With reference to the various aspects of language competences listed below, please rate from 1 to 5 (1 being poor and 5 being excellent) your preferences regarding the competences that you have improved during the period abroad.

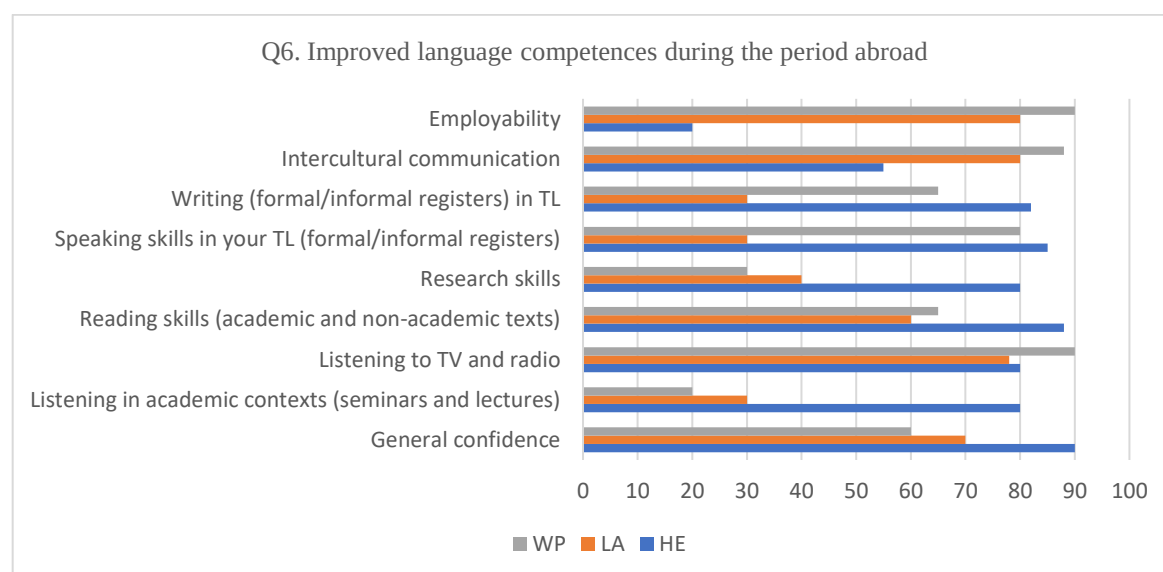


Figure 14. The level of the linguistic immersion and the development of language competences.

Students studying at partner universities have given high scores to general confidence, listening in academic contexts, reading skills, speaking and writing in the TL. For the students on the work placement, they have scored high the development of employability skills, intercultural communication, and listening to TV and radio. Listening to TV and radio could have been the main hobby for those living outside the urban environments. Language assistants have not scored any competence with the highest rate, probably because they had a very limited exposure to the target language (TL) as they were expected to speak English in, and to some extent, outside the classrooms.

Q7. Do you feel you have been provided with enough support from your university to meet your academic plans and other developmental expectations?

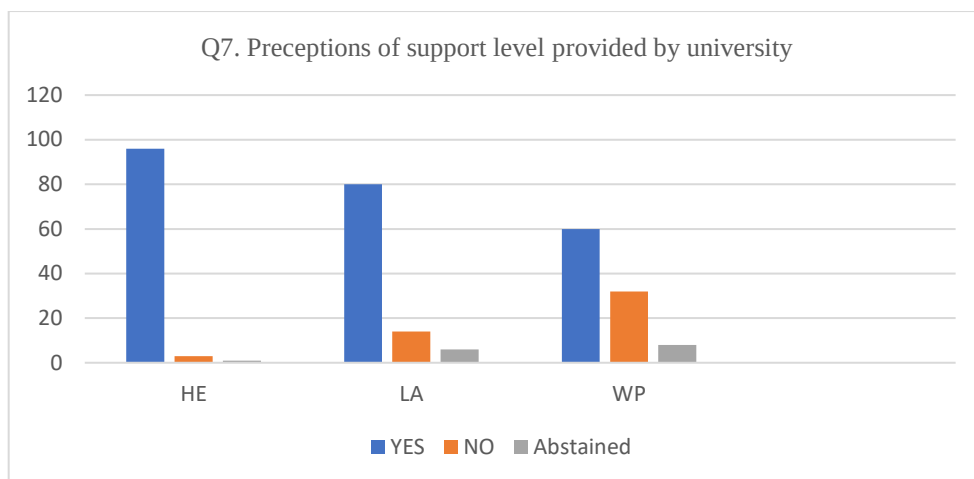


Figure 15. The quality of support provided by the home institution during the Study Abroad.

Whilst those studying in partner universities believed they have had enough support, probably because of working under the supervision of a liaison tutor and academic staff from the host to complement the sending institution's monitoring arrangements, students on the work placement have expressed the highest rate of unsatisfaction with the help they had expected.

Q8. Do you have any further comments to make on any area that should be improved to make the Period Abroad experience a true and successful learning journey?

#	Participant	Statement
10	P1	'Teaching in a school with challenging pupils was very difficult. Nothing had prepared me for the teaching job. We should probably have been attended some teaching classes from the school of education or attending classes with ELT students. I did not know how to prepare lessons and the school where I was teaching expected me to be an English teacher instead of the language assistant. On many occasions, I replaced the English teacher when she was not at the school. After that experience, I have decided that teaching is NOT the job for me'.
3	P4	'I was teaching English in a remote village and I felt really lonely. I was only talking to my pupils in English, and I didn't have chance to speak the target language with the locals. Even other teachers wanted to practice their English with me'.
7	P8	'More feedback on placement report at early stages would have been useful in the preparation of the major project dissertation'.

2	P9	‘General competences have significantly improved (listening, handling successfully social situations, general confidence, reading skills), but I found the dissertation writing task very difficult, as I never received any tuition on academic writing in the target language’.
15	PA	‘Writing the dissertation was a big challenge. I never had to write such a big piece of work and I actually had no previous experience of collecting primary research’.
8	PB	‘More focus could have been placed on reading and writing skills in preparation of the dissertation’.
12	PD	‘The study abroad as a whole is assessed through the placement report but even though the entire e-portfolio is assessed, it is yet not accredited, which affects motivation. I was told I should do all immersion activities to pass the Period Abroad in general and the e-portfolio in particular, but there was no clear penalty for non-compliance or failure’.
14	PF	‘We needed more information on how to do research and classes on how to go about interviews and questionnaire structures’.
9	PJ	‘No research skills were developed before the year abroad; only the theory was taught’.
1	PM	‘At university abroad, there was no single module that matched my course back in the UK in semester 1. I had to attend courses in philosophy, psychology and even physics. Has this been anticipated? The hardest thing was that everything was taught in the target language’.
5	PN	‘It’s not fair to have three pathways as they don’t provide the same opportunities to students. I was doing the work placement and I feel I was forgotten’.
6	PR	‘More classes on reading long and complex texts would have been useful for academic writing’.
4	PT	‘It would have been useful to have much more information/classes about how to compile research information before the year abroad. The level 5 module on research and ethics was a simulation and not helpful’.
13	PW	‘The study abroad expectations were too high to fulfil. We were expected to do research and our placement and dissertation supervisors were not given enough time to supervisor us properly’.
11	PX	‘The level 6 module component of text commentary should also be taught at level 5 before going abroad’.

Figure 16. Suggestions to improve the Study Abroad experience

Qualitative data have revealed that students have made comments on key areas of this study that constitute or relate to the research questions, such as the quality of their preparedness, the level and the relevance of the support they have received whilst abroad, the learning opportunities that were provided, the pedagogical relevance of developmental activities, and what could be done to make the study abroad experience a genuine independent learning pathway.

Students have expressed their dissatisfaction with the development of linguistic, social, reading, writing and research skills (P9, PT, PR, PJ, P4, PB) as a holistic approach to the preparation for the challenges that the study abroad reflects. They have also highlighted the unfairness of the pathways in relation to providing unequal learning opportunities. Students who have attended classes in partner universities have found the learning opportunities and support relatively appropriate, except the challenges associated with using the target language for all instructions and the mismatches between their courses in the UK and the available modules in the host institutions (PM). However, students on work placements have not seen themselves as being fully part of the learning arrangements. They have rather felt “forgotten”, and it was “not fair to have three pathways as they don’t provide the same opportunities to students” (PN). Language assistants (PA, P1) have described three big issues that prevented them from developing themselves: the pedagogic requirement to speak English in the classroom settings has hindered their linguistic immersion; their lives away from urban areas have not opened doors to networking opportunities with people of their generation; and the host’s wrong expectations of using language assistants for English teachers have stretched them to the limit, leaving them with less time for independent learning and research.

In general, students have appreciated and challenged in a balanced manner the ambitious aims and objectives of the Period Abroad. The planned activities were appropriate and could lead to substantial improvements in many areas of the academic growth. But among the main issues they have identified, they challenged the relevance of the mandatory nature and the assessment of e-portfolio without linking it to any credit-bearing reward (PD). Furthermore, ‘The study abroad expectations were too high to fulfil’ due to insufficient support from placement and major projects supervisors (PW, P8). To this end, students have suggested many ways of improving the Study Abroad provision (PX, PF), including the revision of the modules distribution across

the provision for a better preparation for the Period Abroad. The focus would be on developing critical thinking and reading, academic writing and research skills.

5. Discussion

Whilst the empirical data have revealed that through the three pathways the study abroad in general has contributed to the improvement in communicative expressiveness using the target language, listening Skills, handling successfully social situations, some transferable skills and general confidence, the study has equally confirmed many shortcomings of the Period Abroad.

5.1. The preparedness

The readiness to embark on the Study Abroad was based on the assumptions that the administrative preparation regarding pathways and shared responsibilities among staff and students would increase the level of awareness of expectations and challenges. However, the shortfalls in learner engagements resided within the failure to consider and acknowledge disparities that the pathways offered in relation to learning opportunities. The preparation has failed to consider the multidimensional aspects of the preparedness, such as academic, linguistic, employability, independent learning, personal and social growth.

Researchers (Bowden et al., 2017) argue that the learner engagement is underpinned by four dimensions: affective, cognitive, social and behavioural. The three period abroad pathways were offering disproportionately learning opportunities that meet the fundamentals of the Bowden's learner "engagement valence".

Furthermore, the self-reported experiences have confirmed that the continuity of academic activities was the determining factor for engagement and satisfaction. For two main reasons, the curriculum design for the study abroad did not prepare students adequately for independent learning. The blended learning mode did not play a significant role in reflective practices. With references to the work by Appleton et al. (2008), Kahu (2013) and Quin (2017), Bond and Bedenlier (2019) argue that "Engagement does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is impacted and influenced by many contextual factors, and it is vital that these wider influences be considered when exploring student engagement" (online). To ensure that students are equipped with necessary engagement tools, the Period Abroad preparation and design should have

applied constructivist and integrative, as well as collaborative, reflective and inquiry-based learning approaches.

5.2. Learner engagement for self-directed learning

An active learning framework should be underpinned by the intentional change model that empowers students for critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In support of the intentional change model by Boyatzis (2002), other self-directed learning theorists, such as Gallwey (1999) argue that we all possess a Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA) and a Negative Emotional Attractor (NEA). Both PEA and NEA constitute the fundamentals of the inner game that triggers or hinders motivation to learn. For the PEA to function, we need to engage in a psycho-physiological state of being open to new ideas and changes. The subliminal discovery of the learning gaps and needs puts us into the state of desire to replace the NEA with the PEA and challenge assumptions. If the main purpose of this inner game, which consists of replacing patterns of mental behaviour with new and more positive ones, any attempt to engage students in self-directed learning should recognise how they can be more curious and feel excited about trying new avenues to sustain the development of knowledge and skills. Notwithstanding the necessity of the excitement to trigger PEA, the research data have shown that students were excited about going and living abroad; but were not provided with enough opportunities and strategies that could facilitate extrinsic motivation. Reflecting on the self-directed learning theory has led to questions of knowing whether the Study Abroad was, in fact, offering students the necessary opportunities to reflect on their strengths, set up self-development plans, approach challenges with curiosity and excitement and achieve independent learning goals. The lack of formal assessment and the non-credited bearing mode were hindering initiatives to engage with linguistic immersion, the development of cross-cultural capabilities and the academic activities.

5.3. Reading for research and conventional writing

Sustaining learner engagement in reading for research and conventional writing requires three elements that I call the 3Ps in academic writing: purpose, practice and planning. Developing writing skills does not only go hand in hand with editing capabilities, but also and mainly with critical thinking. This enterprise has always been one of the core aims of language learning applied to academic and professional communication contexts.

In the academia, classroom experiences have put more emphasis on reading and academic writing in tandem with applying communicative and linguistic conventions to various genres. In this regard, the conventional writing has often been defined in accordance with the perceived audience interests. This has raised the question of flexibility in optimising learners' choices and autonomy.

Reading and writing skills and opportunities through the classroom experiences can hence narrow the applicability of skills and conventions in any language, including L1. Understandably, if learners in L1 classrooms can struggle with developing such demanding skills, how can L2 learners improve reading and conventional writing, using argumentative language on complex issues, which are often beyond their reach? How the limitations of testing as means of language learning can be mitigated to enhance learner engagement in L2 complex skill such as reading and conventional writing? How can a blended and flipped learning approach can improve student engagement in reading and producing argumentative writing compared to the teacher's direct-instruction approach? What are the learner's attitudes and perceptions towards the flipped learning approach? What are the affective factors that can harness learner engagement in self-directed learning? The results of this study have confirmed that for students to be able to read, research and plan the writing of major project dissertations whilst abroad, they should be immersed first into the 3Ps approach, using the "boiling frog theory" (Boyatzis, 2002). Through the reading and writing practices prior the Study Abroad, this theory can optimise individual choice and autonomy in reading, research and information management; optimise relevance, value, and authenticity of independent learning; and contribute to meeting learners' individual needs in sustaining the development of reading, research using complex sources and conducting major writing projects in the target language.

Some students have suggested a revision of the curriculum to integrate and reinforce the reading and writing skills into the preparation for the Study Abroad. The following framework based on the reading and written commentary can facilitate the application of the boiling frog theory to the development of critical thinking and research skills.

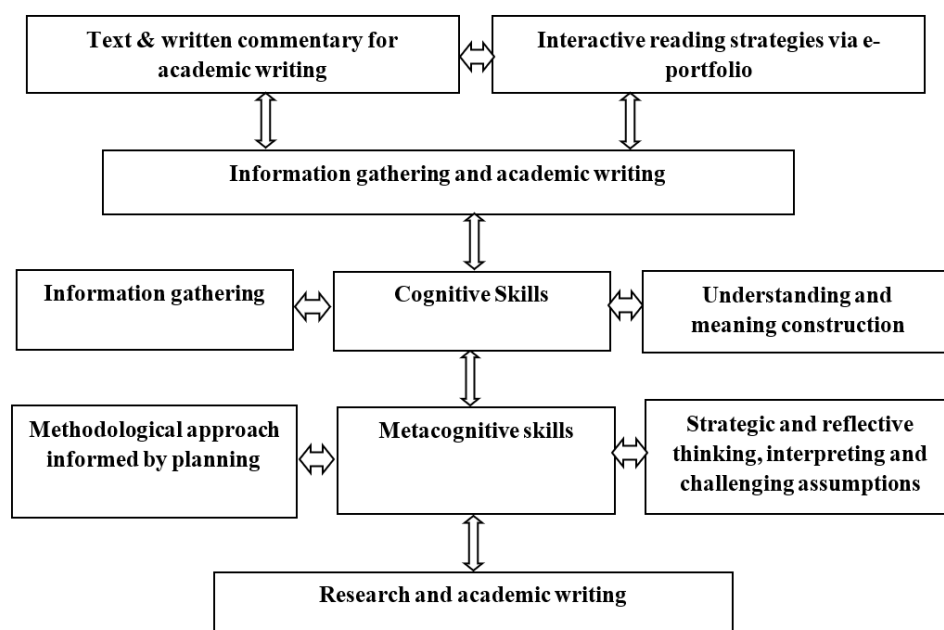


Figure 17. Study Abroad reading and writing training framework

6. Implication to research and practice

It has been clear that efforts to promote, reinforce and maximise the development of transferable skills have failed to equip students appropriately for the information management and academic writing skills. In this regard, the recommendations should include ensuring the study abroad preparation process focusses on the student-led activities; using effectively the returning students to plan realistic expectations; integrating the learning paths better into the curriculum design and delivery; developing employability skills in a fair and inclusive manner and without compromising the academic objectives; and applying the active, collaborative and inquiry-based learning approaches to fully engage students.

The results from this action research project have confirmed that the end of the period abroad continues to signal poor improvement in academic skills, mainly relating to research and written communication. One of the main contributions of this research is to propose the Study Abroad reading and writing training framework (figure 17) that bridges the pedagogical gaps between the three dimensions of the Period Abroad learner engagement for self-directed learning. Further longitudinal studies recording entry behaviour, testing the framework and evaluating its pedagogical impact can be useful.

7. Conclusion

In her *Student Engagement Literature Review*, Vicki Trowler rightly states that ‘student engagement is the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students’ (Trowler, 2010, p.6). The aim of this research was to answer the questions related to the effectiveness of the students’ preparation, the learner’s perceptions of the learning support and the potential initiatives to improve the Study Abroad. It was revealed that for the Study Abroad to be an effective learning experience that facilitates the learner engagement for a meaningful achievement, it is vital to fully embed the period into the entire degree course in terms of teaching, learning and assessment. All pathways should be an integral part of the planning and the implementation of the independent learning strategies that provide students with collaborative means. This requires determining the type of activities, support and assessment arrangements that are carried out in tandem with the learning outcomes, regardless the individual choice of a pathway. Period Abroad pathways should reflect fairness by setting up a more transparent and inclusive approach in providing independent learning opportunities and assessments. Assessments should be put to the Critical Success Factor (CSF) test of validity, fairness, realism, reliability, consistency, clarity, accessibility, transparency, inclusivity, flexibility and equity.

8. Future Research

This study has revealed that whilst the Study Abroad planning has successfully encouraged students to reflect on their expectations before going abroad and to critically think of their learning opportunities during their time abroad, it has equally underlined the poor facilitation of self-development. The limitations of this study might relate to the lack of data giving details on destinations. Given the diverse nature of social and cultural practices in different parts of the world, it might have been a good idea to know whether there were any discrepancies between the types of support and learning opportunities that were provided within the specific target language countries. Furthermore, students’ perceptions of the accomplishments have overwhelmingly pinpointed the negative feelings. This is understandable since the exploratory design of this research was underpinned by the hypothesis that the institutional Study Abroad was

not fit for the purpose and the study aimed at finding out the determining factors of the failure. However, having a specific question requiring the identification of the positive areas of the provision could have provided a broader view on priorities for future improvements.

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