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Preparing Students for the Year Abroad – The French Perspective

By Dr Claire Moran, Arts, English and Languages

In these bleak winter days, the possibility of spending a year in Guadeloupe, in Buenos Aires, or even closer to home in Paris or Lisbon, may seem quite appealing. Languages students at Queen's do just that and we currently have over a hundred students studying or working in French, Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries.



French and Social Anthropology Student, Lucy Ward spent her Year Abroad in La Réunion

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'Feeling on top of the world'. Year abroad photograph of Allevard-les-Bains by Stephen McKenna

optional modules, allowed us to design the course as a mini-module within the core language module. A curriculum review by staff in 2017 coupled with focus groups with students and input from questionnaires allowed us to hone the broader aims of this course and the way it sits in our portfolio. One of the primary goals was to have, as in all our courses, an emphasis on host culture and language, but also on the practical skills that students will need on their year abroad. We were also keen to

The Year Abroad is an integral and compulsory part of a degree in Modern Languages at Queen's, with all students, regardless of pathway (Single/Joint/Minor), spending their third year abroad. It has proven to be one of the most rewarding aspects of our degree programmes for students, not only academically, with students' linguistic skills improving dramatically; professionally,

with students gaining excellent work experience, as well as a host of transferable skills; but also, and arguably, more importantly, it has helped students to flourish personally. Because of the importance of this year from an academic, personal and professional perspective, all language areas at Queen's offer a tailored Year Abroad preparation class for their students. This article focuses on the experience of French Studies at Queen's in designing and delivering this multifaceted, team-led year-long programme to second-year students.

The flexibility of the French degree programme, which combines team-taught core language modules and individual research-led

make the course appealing to, and inclusive of, a wide range of students. We were conscious that the course was open to Law,



'Le premier arrondissement' from Paris, je t'aime by the Coen brothers

Management, Maths and Science students, who would not have studied literature or film since A-level. A key part of this endeavour was finding accessible texts and films that represented attractive aspects of French culture and still had a lot to teach our students. Learning about French culture through its humour seemed to be a good starting point, leading to a choice of three movies which could, in different

ways, get students interested in stereotypes (Paris, je t'aime); language and regional differences (*Bienvenu chez les Ch'tis*); and class (*Le Dîner de cons*). This central aim to engage students about the Year Abroad via French culture was linked to two other fundamental objectives. The first was to embed employability skills throughout the course in a meaningful way, while the second was to use this space to encourage students to become responsible for their own learning experience. The career focus followed on from the first year compulsory course on Professional French, which all students take. This course introduces students to French companies and business culture, giving them key skills in marketing and product design. It also complemented the existing Level 2 oral examination, which takes the form of a mock interview for a real job. In the Year Abroad course, we were keen to emphasise both practical work-place skills such as email correspondence, business meetings and using the telephone, as well as the subtler workplace issues that may emerge such as dealing with difficult situations. The choice of teaching format combining lectures, group discussions, pair work and, importantly, three dedicated weeks of role-plays with a native speaker each term would allow staff to cover a wide range of material, all the while keeping the course lively and engaging.



'In the Tuileries Gardens', Year Abroad photograph by Stacey Leckey

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To help make the students independent learners, we designed an assessment package in the form of a portfolio that focused on the students' personal experience and interests. It comprises a reflective report or poster on their aims, aspirations and concerns about the Year Abroad; a blog entry on a recent French film they



Current level 3 Joint French and Politics student, Jason Bunting presenting on his year abroad in Tours, France to level 2 students in October

have watched, and an independent project that could be on any aspect of French culture, from music to sport to regional specificities. Tailored sessions from Learning Development ensure that students are equipped with the necessary skills to embark upon their assignments, all the while adding new techniques to their portfolio. In a key session, Level 3 students come in to deliver the presentations they have

prepared for their Year Abroad oral examination (which takes place just after they return from their residence abroad). This has the dual impact of giving the Level 2s food for thought on the realities of the Year Abroad and allowing them to envisage final year assessment. In this session, the Level 2 students act as mock examiners, questioning the final years about their experiences. Liaising with the French Society, who provide Year Abroad information evenings and film screenings to complement the course is equally very fruitful, creating a seamless transition between life inside and outside of the classroom.

Together, these initiatives and collaborations have, we believe, created a holistic course, which is engaging and enjoyable for both students and staff. Academically, students have performed extremely well (attaining, for example, an average of 67% in 2017). The positive reception of the course by students is visible in comments on questionnaires such as ‘very informative, it covered a lot of possible situations and was very well structured’ and ‘covers practical vocabulary and gives me things to think about before I go; ‘I liked how relaxed it was and how I was able to speak with my classmates and have fun’, or ‘I feel much more more prepared than I would have been’. External



Dr Steven Wilson pictured with some current Year Abroad students in Paris (2018)



QUB French students at a Christmas Market in France

examiners have shown a keen interest in the development of this course. It was noted as part of our ‘*exemplary practice*’ in our 2017-2018 report, especially in terms of ‘*innovative assessment*’ and ‘*skills and attainment*’ where, together with the other level two modules, it offered ‘*exactly the right platform for studying and/or working abroad, as well as advancing the students through their programme*’.



QUB French students at the Sacre-Coeur, Montmartre, Paris (2018).

Languages students at Queen’s clearly have an advantage over students at other universities in terms of their Year Abroad, not only through their access to this type of course, but also in the support they receive from staff in planning their placement, as well as in the pastoral support they benefit from while on the Year Abroad. The variety of options available to our students, from British Council English Language Assistantships, to Erasmus study, to a work placement, means that we can cater for students from different backgrounds. Whatever placement they choose, they gain the transferable skills to enter a variety of professions, such as Marketing, Human Resources, Community Development and Journalism, as well as teaching. To further improve the learning experiences and career outcomes of all of these students, we plan to investigate the possibilities of more personalised placements by means of sharing resources and expertise across AHSS and throughout the University, more broadly.

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