

## **Intercultural capabilities and Study Abroad: Student Report**

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We are a group of three second year Italian Department students spending our year abroad at three different Italian universities, namely Pisa, Pavia and Bologna (Forli). Before coming to Italy, we had very varied knowledge of Italian, since Agata was a beginner in her first year at Warwick, whilst Marta and Tim had both studied Italian for a number of years prior to university. We also come from very different cultural backgrounds. Tim is British, Marta is Polish and Agata is Polish-Lithuanian. Therefore, for two of us the 'Year Abroad' is not our first study abroad experience, as we have already spent a year at Warwick. This means that, in theory, Agata and Marta were better prepared for the stay in Italy as they had already coped with moving to and living in a different country. On account of our very different backgrounds and prior experiences, it is not surprising that we had very different assumptions about the year abroad and this has been reflected in our monthly journal activities that were also part of the project.

We became involved in this project after seeing a departmental email about it just after we had arrived at our various Italian universities. We individually decided to volunteer because we thought it would be an interesting way both to gain experience and research skills, and because of the reflective element of the project. In particular, the idea of being able to reflect on our experiences abroad seemed like a good way to get the most out our time in Italy. Our research practicum was part of a larger project, with funding from Warwick's Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning. We were supervised by Dr. Loredana Polezzi and Dr. Jane Mulcock. Having worked on this project for the last seven months, we are currently in the process of extending the practicum to include the writing of a journal article.

As an introduction to the kind of research we would be conducting, we attended a series of meetings with Dr. Mulcock at Warwick's Venice centre, over the course of a week in November 2011. These meetings introduced us to various issues within quantitative and qualitative research, interview techniques, as well as the concept of autoethnography. We were able to consolidate what we learned from these meetings by reading a selection of articles on related topics provided by Dr Mulcock. The research practicum also prepared us for the interview component of our research project as we had the chance to experience the process first hand while we were each interviewed by Dr. Mulcock as part of the research project funded by IATL. During the practicum, we also managed to draw up the questions we used in the first round of interviews we conducted with our fellow Warwick students, and to discuss interesting themes for a potential research paper. This was also one of the very few instances during this project when we have had the opportunity to meet in person as our Italian host institutions are at a considerable distance from one another. It was very useful to be able to discuss the project in real time, and not through e-mails or instant messaging chat.

On the basis of our initial discussions in Venice, we were able to come up with a good idea of both what we wanted to investigate and how we were to go about it. Consequently, we decided on a series of broad objectives for the project. Firstly, we were generally interested in the great variety of ERASMUS experiences that our fellow students have. Secondly, we particularly wanted to investigate the relationship between terms that are used when the ERASMUS programme is 'sold' to prospective students and students' actual experiences. For example, on the British Council website ERASMUS is described as a means for students to stand out in the job market, improve their language skills and develop an international network of friends.<sup>1</sup> To a certain extent, this also required an examination of students'

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus-benefits.htm>

expectations and whether or not they corresponded with reality. Thirdly, we wanted to be able to compare what Italian department staff expected students to get out of the Year Abroad and the benefits they were actually able to derive from it. These areas of interest raised a number of specific questions – for example, the level to which students are able to ‘integrate’ into Italian culture or the extent to which they felt ‘at home’ in Italy – which we were later able to work into our interviews with students and staff.

As is usual in this kind of investigation, no single method for data collection is sufficient to get all of the required information. On account of this, we carried out a number of related activities, including interviews (both face to face and via email), monthly journal entries, and kept auto-ethnographic notes to record our experiences and observations. The main aim of the project was to develop an alumni survey for those who have studied abroad as part of their degree at Warwick. Eventually, we collected enough additional information about the topics that we had been researching for that purpose that we decided to use it as the basis of a journal article.

Throughout this project we have also had to become acquainted with studies already carried out on the ERASMUS programme in particular, as well as on long and short term study abroad programmes for European and American students. These readings have shaped our own research interests. For example, with reference to the study conducted by Cinnirella<sup>2</sup> on the capacity of study abroad to foster a sense of a ‘European identity’, we thought it would be appropriate to further investigate the relationship between the year abroad experience and the concept of European identity. By building on this and other previous research we hope to be able to make some small contribution in the growing field of Year Abroad studies. We also believe that the information we have already collected, along with that to be furnished by our alumni survey, can be of use to Warwick’s Italian Department, as well as to the Careers Service and the International Office as they advise students on how to get the most out of their overseas experience, both before and after graduation

Since the start of the project in mid-November 2011, we have been able to interview 15 students and three Warwick Italian Department staff members and although this may sound like a relatively small sample size, it must be remembered that in qualitative investigations such as this one, it is quite normal for study sizes to be relatively small. For example, the study by Wilkinson focuses on only two participants<sup>3</sup>, whilst the study of a year abroad of American students in Japan carried out by Iwasaki involved only five people<sup>4</sup>. It must also be remembered that this figure represents a substantial number of the University of Warwick Italian department students studying abroad under the ERASMUS programme this year - in 2011/12 there were only 23 Warwick students studying as exchange students at Italian universities.

Conducting the interviews was a constant learning process: with each interview conducted we became more familiar with the dynamics of both the roles of the interviewee and the interviewer. We have used different types of interviews: face-to-face, e-mail and instant messaging interviews in order gather data about the varying experiences of our colleagues whilst they had been studying at a variety of Italian universities over a wide geographical area. We also inquired about their language learning strategies. In addition, we investigated problems relating to cultural adaptation and culture shock, such as being away

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<sup>2</sup> Cinnirella, Marco, ‘Towards a European identity? Interactions between the national and European social identities manifested by university students in Britain and Italy’, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 36, (1997), pp. 19-31.

<sup>3</sup> The focus is on just two main research participants in Wilkinson, Sharon, ‘Emerging Questions about Study Abroad’, *Association of Departments of Foreign Languages Bulletin*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Fall 2000), pp. 36–41.

<sup>4</sup> Iwasaki, Noriko, ‘A Year Abroad in Japan. Participants’ Perspectives’. *Occasional Papers, Association of Teachers of Japanese*, Number 7, (2005), pp. 12-24.

from home, as some of the interviewees had never been outside of the UK for an extended period of time. The first interviews we conducted shortly after the research practicum in Venice were less specific and we used them to try to determine which themes were the most promising and should be pursued more thoroughly.

For the second series of interviews, which took place during our year abroad meeting in Venice in late March 2012, we tried to target our questions more towards the issues that had emerged from the previous interviews. We also used our own experience as Erasmus students, as well our broader reading on the subject.

The email interviews were the most convenient for both us and our interviewees, because they allowed us to communicate easily over considerable distance, but also because they created the possibility to respond to the questions at any convenient time. However, they also eliminated the element of surprise and spontaneity from the experience, while giving more time to reflect on the answer. We also found that with e-mail interviews there is quite often the possibility that the subject will give very short answers, which obviously tend to be less useful, even if this was not always the case.

The face-to-face interviews, although less structured at times and somewhat more demanding, had the advantage of being more open-ended. They also created the possibility to pick up on certain thoughts and expressions that could be elaborated on, in order to provide a fuller picture of students' experiences. Firstly, some of these were conducted at our host universities in Italy, with fellow Warwick students who were studying nearby. A second group of interviews were carried out during the compulsory Venice visit in March, as already mentioned; here we were able to re-interview people we had already talked to, as well as conduct additional interviews with many others who hadn't yet been involved in our project.

Both the interviews that we had carried out prior to the Venice visit and a review of the related literature allowed us to adopt appropriate interview techniques and also allowed us to identify more focused questions that better suited our particular research interests. For example, having read an interview with the Italian academic Umberto Eco which touched on the issue of a 'European identity',<sup>5</sup> we were able to tailor questions to investigate whether Eco's theories were born out by students' experiences. Similarly, following a previous study of friendship patterns between international and domestic students at one Oxford college,<sup>6</sup> we wanted to ask people about the relationship between who they lived with and who they socialised with, in the hope that this would shed light on their year abroad experiences.

In addition to conducting interviews, we have also been involved in an online journal activity which consisted in submitting monthly journal entries in English on the Moodle platform. It is a pilot activity and it is possible that in the future this will become a way of assessing the year abroad within the Italian Department. It can potentially be a way for students to understand and identify, more efficiently, what the benefits of the Year Abroad are on personal, linguistic, academic and cultural levels. Reflecting on those themes can be a very useful tool for monitoring one's progress during the time in Italy, because it requires us to reflect on issues that may not usually be given too much thought in everyday life; as such, this is often an introspective and very personal activity.

Each month we produce entries on different themes linked to our time in Italy, for example accounts of whether and how we have managed to adapt and integrate into the Italian lifestyle and culture, and how the year abroad affects our opinions on issues such as national and European identity. Usually, the entries consisted of our responses to ethnographic

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/26/umberto-eco-culture-war-europa>

<sup>6</sup> See Botchner, Stephen, 'The friendship patterns of overseas and host students in an Oxford student residence', in *Journal of Social Psychology*, 125:6 (1985:Dec) pp. 689-694.

material produced by other similar studies of ERASMUS students<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, for each entry we are given a set of questions which we can use as guidance, and that also give our answers more structure. The journal entries have also helped us identify the potential career benefits of the year abroad, as they provide us with tools to better reflect on the many skills that we have gained throughout the year. We have also been asked to discuss our language learning strategies and our overall experience of being an exchange student, as well as a student at an Italian university. Besides focusing on our personal experiences, we were also required to elaborate on how we perceive some of the social, cultural and political issues regarding Italy, for example the economic difficulties the country is currently facing, or the stereotypes about Italian gender dynamics.

In order to augment the observations on Italian society in our Journal entries, we also made some auto-ethnographic notes, which in practice meant keeping track of our regular social activities and noting down anything that stood out. For example, for Tim, who was living in a shared flat with other British ERASMUS students, this meant observing not just Italian culture but also the culture of study abroad participants.

One of the most interesting aspects of our colleagues' time abroad that emerged from our research is that every Erasmus experience is very different. Generally speaking, all of the students interviewed said they felt more confident speaking Italian and this was not limited by prior knowledge of the language. However, there were great differences in students' perceived language acquisition and the degree of integration with Italian students in particular and Italian society in general. Prior language ability was not always a predictor of how people will get on during their year abroad. While some students have felt to make a very conscious effort to limit their exposure to English, they were not always successful in this undertaking due to a variety of factors including the nature of Italian student housing, the Italian and other Erasmus students' to speak English and the lack of extra curricular activities offering possibilities to meet Italian native speakers outside of class. At the same time, some students have been able to make the most of their Erasmus experience in terms of improving their spoken Italian by meeting many native speakers through their Italian housemates.

In fact, one of the things that we discovered is the existence of an ERASMUS culture which, though sometimes influenced by Italian culture, is largely independent of it at the same time. Indeed, it seems that it can be quite common for foreigners who are struggling to integrate into Italian culture to associate with one another out of their very 'shared foreignness' itself<sup>8</sup>.

Although the existence of an Erasmus culture is perhaps unsurprising, it, too, varies from place to place, and it can sometimes impede Italian language acquisition, many students have expressed positive views on the Erasmus Student Network and Erasmus society within Italian Universities because of the role they play in helping people to settle in. However, it seems that some students, sometimes because they are struggling with language acquisition or to integrate into Italian society, or sometimes because they feel that speaking English is a good way to relax. They therefore prefer to socialise with English-speakers in their free time. The tendency of ERASMUS students to associate with one another might be explained by a feeling of 'shared foreignness' i.e. the desire to spend time with people who are going through similar situations such as moving to another country and trying to learn to speak a foreign tongue.

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<sup>7</sup> Murphy – Lejeune, Elizabeth, *Student mobility and narrative in Europe: the new strangers*. London: Routledge. (2003, Taylor & Francis e-Library).

<sup>8</sup> See Bochner, Stephen, p. 690, where the concept of 'shared foreignness' is mentioned but not developed. This idea is useful and we believe that it has potential to be developed.

The effect of the many nationalities of ERASMUS students on placement in Italy was cited by some students as giving them a better perspective on Europe and other European cultures, even if this did not necessarily translate into a sense of feeling truly 'European'. People who seem to have been most positive about their integration in Italy were those who successfully got involved in extracurricular activities, sports teams, film clubs etc.

We hope to develop these themes in our forthcoming research paper, entitled 'Shared Foreignness: Student experiences of social inclusion and exclusion during study abroad'.

A further aim of the project was to draw up an Alumni Survey, which might serve several purposes. First of all, it is worth mentioning that the benefits of the year abroad experience can sometimes be hard to express. Even in our earliest interviews it became clear that the degree to which students were conscious of the potential benefits of and uses for the experiences gained during the year abroad varied greatly. Whilst some students were very clearly conscious of the benefits to be drawn from their their Year Abroad experiences, there were also some who were less aware of these. This was also highlighted by the staff members whom we interviewed. For example, in Dr Polezzi's interview she said that 'A lot of returning students tell us they know they have just had an amazing, and amazingly important, experience - but they struggle to verbalize precisely what was so valuable.' She also wondered whether it became easier to vocalize the benefits of study abroad a significant amount of time after the fact. Therefore, the Alumni Survey would be a crucial means of drawing together more data on the benefits of year abroad experience from people who have already had an opportunity to apply them in real life situations. In addition to this, we think that it would be interesting to see how students' perceptions of study abroad vary over time. That is to say, we want to investigate whether people still feel much the same about their experiences a number of years after they graduated or not. This goes hand in hand with examining how and why alumni perceptions change, if indeed they do.

The survey should also show the extent to which graduates are aware of the impact that the year abroad experience has had on their personal and career development. It might also illustrate the benefits of the year abroad in terms of employ-ability and career advancement. As a result, the data collected could provide staff members in both the Italian department and other language departments, as well as the Careers Service with the first hand thoughts and experiences of those who have already been able to take advantage of the benefits of studying abroad, e.g. the skills they acquired and how these affected their own personal growth. This, in turn, will allow University staff members to analyse, compare and draw conclusions from the findings of the survey, thus enabling them to adjust the current year abroad programmes and/or the preparation associated with them to benefit the students and to provide them with guidance as to how to make the most of their ERASMUS experience after graduation.

In conclusion, since the start of the project in November we have been able to fulfill the objectives that we have established for ourselves in conversation with Dr Polezzi and Dr Mulcock - since this investigation is part of a larger one and has been partly informed by the larger overall project. The interviews we have conducted have provided us with enough qualitative data about the year abroad experience to draw up questions for an alumni survey which will later be distributed to Warwick graduates, with the objective of obtaining information about how their year abroad experience has helped their personal and career development. The data collected will also serve as means of helping the Italian Department (and potentially other areas of the University) to better prepare the students for the year abroad in the future, and to compare their expectations with the students' actual experience. The journal activity has proven to be a very useful and interesting tool to use during our stay in Italy and it has given us a better insight into our own time in the country and the way we

are benefiting from our year abroad. With topics ranging from language development through cultural immersion and the way our views on European identity change as we live in and interact with groups of other ERASMUS as well as Italian students, we have been encouraged to re-examine many of our own expectations, assumptions and experiences

All of this contributed to our interviews, as many of the themes that emerged in our personal reflective journals later found their way into the questions we asked our fellow students. The project has been an interactive process and the activities we have engaged in have all been complementary to each other, letting us look at the year abroad from many different perspectives, and helping us identify the key themes for the research paper we intend to write based on our findings. For example, Marta and Agata were originally intrigued by the possibility of investigating the 'double' year abroad experience, i.e. the experience of those Warwick students who were not normally residents in the UK and as such are studying abroad both whilst they are at Warwick and whilst studying in Italy. They wanted to look at how having already been through the experience of living in a different culture and in a foreign-language environment this had affected their expectations and attitudes towards moving to Italy for an academic year.

Tim's research interests were initially orientated more towards the different gender dynamics within Italian society. These have been interesting avenues to go down and, although we have decided to take a more general approach in our research paper, these themes still raise very important questions and will have a significant bearing on our final article.

As to further research, we plan first of all to examine closely all the interviews that we have already carried out, since we aimed to record as many of them as we possibly could. On this basis, we hope to be able to publish a research paper in an undergraduate research journal, such as Warwick University's *Reinventions*. In addition to this, we may wish to carry out several follow up interviews with the few Warwick students currently abroad whom we have not been able to interview, although the vast majority of projected interviews has already been completed. Finally, we have been in touch with several Australian Undergraduate Italian Studies students from Monash University, who have studied at Monash's Italian base at Prato.

Our meeting with the Monash students in Prato (February 2012) provided us with a new perspective to look at our year abroad. We could compare and contrast their short-time stay in Italy with our own experience, lasting a whole academic year rather than just six weeks. During our meeting, we compared our living arrangements and also discussed our feelings about the role of spending time abroad with regards to language learning progress, as well as social activities. We also discussed our respective motivations for choosing a course which requires study abroad. We are interested in the possibility of working with them to gather further data about the experiences of studying abroad, perhaps with a view to contrasting this with the experiences of the many Warwick students that we have already interviewed.

## Appendix 1: Alumni Survey Draft

1. When did you study abroad?
2. Which Italian city did you stay in?
3. Do you have Italian heritage? [y/n] If yes, please give details.
4. How would you describe your knowledge of Italian prior to University?

Absolute beginner [ ]      Post-beginner [ ]      Intermediate [ ]  
Advanced [ ]      Fluent or near-native [ ]

5. Do you still regularly use the Italian language? [y/n]
6. Which industries have you worked in since graduation?

- [ ] Marketing & advertising      [ ] Public Relations      [ ] Publishing  
[ ] Journalism      [ ] Teaching      [ ] Sales/buying  
[ ] Tourism      [ ] Government work & policy  
[ ] Translation/interpreting      [ ] Other (please specify):

7. Have you lived abroad since your Year Abroad placement? [y/n]
8. If yes, where? And why?
9. How did you prepare for your year abroad? Were you able to draw on any resources provided by Warwick Italian department? (e.g. talking to students who had already been abroad)
10. Were there any problems or issues that you experienced during your year abroad that you were not prepared for? Did you have any unexpectedly positive experiences? Have you been able to use these experiences to help yourself in later life?
11. Do you feel that your year abroad changed you as a person? If so, in what ways? Were these short term or long term changes?
12. Did you have any particular expectations of the year abroad? If so, did your time in Italy live up to these? Did you have any specific goals that you wanted to achieve during your year abroad and did you manage to?
13. How was your year abroad assessed? Do you feel that this contributed to your learning experience during your time in Italy?
14. With the benefit of hindsight, what do you see as the benefits of the year abroad? Were there any disadvantages?
15. Which strategies did you use to try to improve your language skills whilst living in Italy? If you continued to study Italian, or any other languages after your Year Abroad, do you think that this experience helped you in later language acquisition?
16. Do you think your year abroad changed the way in which you approach language learning? Did your year abroad change your view on the relationship between language and culture?
17. What do you think it means to be integrated into a culture? Did you expect, or want to become integrated into Italian culture during your year abroad?
18. To what extent do you feel you integrated into Italian society during your year abroad? Who did you socialize with the most – Italians or other foreigners? What effect did this have on your language skills? Were you happy with this outcome?

## **Appendix 2: Second Round Interview Templates**

1. Describe your prior connections with or interest in Italy and Italian language (e.g. Do you have Italian heritage?)
2. Describe the Italian university where you studying... what do you like most? What do you like least?
3. Who do you live with? How did you find your house mates?
4. Do your living arrangements motivate or discourage you to make efforts to improve your Italian?
5. Who do you socialise with? How did you meet your social group?
6. Describe the main social activities you take part in (e.g. going to parties, communal dinners etc.)
7. What languages do you find yourself speaking on a regular basis? Are you aware of different feelings associated with the use of different languages?
8. What are your views on the concept of European identity? Do you think that this has been affected by your year abroad experience so far? If so, how?
9. What would being 'integrated' look like for you? (i.e. what are your expectations around integration?)
10. Was this what you wanted from your Year Abroad?
11. According to what you have said about integration is, to what extent do you think you have been able to integrate with Italians and Italian culture?
12. How does this match up with your expectations of the year abroad?
13. What are your views on the concept of European identity? Do you think that this has been affected by your year abroad experience so far? If so, how?