

IATL Final Report

Project reference: 11-12/ST/Polezzi
Project Title: Intercultural Capabilities and Study Abroad: Student Perceptions and Experiences. A Comparative Project in Collaboration with Monash University
Grant recipient: Loredana Polezzi

1: Project Overview

The project focused on student experience of study abroad. It aimed to increase institutional knowledge, staff awareness and student engagement relating to best practice in the integration of periods of living and studying abroad within undergraduate programmes. The data collected and the pedagogic tools developed in the course of the project (e.g. Moodle platform applications) have the scope to inform reflection and practices relating to study abroad programming and implementation (from pre-placement processes to assessment and feedback methods) and, more broadly, to the internationalization of student experience, both for those constituencies which were directly involved in the project and for others who will partake in the same or similar programmes in the future.

The study was funded by an IATL Strategic Grant and benefited from collaboration from the Departments of History, History of Art, and Italian at Warwick University; students and staff in all of these units; the administrator of the Warwick Venice Centre; staff and students at the Monash Prato Centre, and especially its Director during the period covered by the study, Prof. Loretta Baldassar; and Dr Jane Mulcock, who carried out parallel research with Monash and Warwick groups. We would like to thank all of the above for their contributions and support.

The project ran from June 2011 (initial focus groups) to July 2012 (final student reports and exit survey for the Italian Department) and compared two models of undergraduate study abroad currently in operation at Warwick University: (i) intensive one-term programmes offered at the Warwick Venice Centre by the Departments of History and History of Art;¹ and (ii) participation in the European Erasmus programme by Italian Department students spending a year abroad. An additional dimension was provided by a parallel project focusing on the study abroad programmes run by Warwick's strategic partner, Monash University, at their Prato Centre (a separate report, produced by Prof. Loretta Baldassar and Dr Jane Mulcock, is also attached).

Building on the King's-Warwick Project² and on further work carried out by Warwick's Centre for Applied Linguistics, the focus of the study was on student

¹ Although the study focused on undergraduate students, interviews were also conducted with a small number of postgraduates who were present in Venice. Please see below under 'Student Interviews'.

² On the King's Warwick Project see:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/academicoffice/quality/categories/institutionalreview/evidencebase/index/6.03-1-134_kwp_-_creating_a_21st_century_curriculum_-_summary_report.pdf

experience, with particular attention to: (i) the role of students as active researchers and the development of academic literacy through self-reflective practice; (ii) student engagement with local cultures and communities as a way of increasing cultural literacy and intercultural communication skills; and (iii) elements of continuity and discontinuity between study at the home institution and abroad.

Research conducted as part of the project aimed to: (i) illuminate perceptions of study abroad among students and staff in the Departments involved; (ii) provide an ethnographic study of current study abroad programmes, foregrounding student perspectives on the subject; (iii) relate findings to existing programmes and develop recommendations for further enhancement of teaching and learning practice.

Student participants who were directly engaged in the research project were involved in a series of activities, including some or all of the following: self-reflective practice and student-to-student exchanges; introduction to key readings in intercultural communication as well as basic principles of qualitative research including participant observation, focus group theory and methods, qualitative interview design; survey design and use of web-based survey design tools (Survey Monkey). A core group of students were also engaged in the production of a self-reflective e-portfolio (using Moodle), focusing on the students' experience of their new environment and documenting their interaction with host localities and communities.

The 'Intercultural Capabilities and Study Abroad' project was inherently interdisciplinary and resulted from ongoing collaboration between researchers at Monash and Warwick with shared interests in areas such as mobility and migration studies, language, translation and intercultural communication. It was developed in line with broader strategic research directions at both universities (internationalization of the student experience, social inclusion) and, in Warwick, the 'Connecting Cultures' Global Priority Programme (now Global Research Programme). More broadly, its aims reflect contemporary tertiary sector internationalisation goals.

2: Activities

As described above, a number of the research activities undertaken for this project, namely online pre-departure and post-year abroad surveys, interviews, and participant observation, were designed to mirror the Monash Prato study,³ thereby providing comparative data. The practicum component and the Moodle journaling project were incorporated as additional strategies to actively engage students in data collection whilst also providing opportunities to explore new pedagogical approaches to reflective practice in study abroad contexts. We worked with three academic programmes and student cohorts.

and:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/academicoffice/quality/categories/institutionalreview/evidencebase/index/6.03-2-134_kwp-creating_a_21st_century_curriculum_final_report.pdf

³ See separate report, also attached.

Italian Studies Year Abroad

The Italian Department runs a range of four-year UG degrees (Single/Joint Honours) all of which include a compulsory study abroad year. Most students spend a period of approximately 10 months studying at an Italian partner university under the EU's Erasmus scheme (with a small number splitting the year between Italy and another European country). A distinctive trait of the programme is that the vast majority of students spend their second year of UG study abroad (rather than the third, as is more common in the UK). This, together with the fact that the department has established a large number of exchanges (approximately 20) and sends only small groups of students (usually 2-3) to each partner institution, makes the study abroad programme almost unique in the UK Higher Education sector. Students spending a year in Italy benefit from a double support network, provided by home and host institution. The objectives of the year abroad are complex and involve language, academic and personal development. The year abroad is generally maintained to be a core component of MLs degrees and a key factor in students' academic achievement and employability. However, data on best practice as well as on outcomes remains scarce. Student engagement with host localities and communities, and integration of year abroad within the overall UG experience, in particular, remain largely unstudied.

Warwick Venice: History of Art & History

For more than 30 years, the Departments of History and History of Art of the University of Warwick have run a distinctive 'Venice Term': for a period of approximately ten weeks, UG students are based in Venice, where they are taught by staff from their home department. For the past five years this has taken place at the Warwick Venice Centre, based at Palazzo Pesaro Papafava. In recent years, the Venice Term has also benefited from growing collaboration with Ca' Foscari University, which administers Italian language courses for the Warwick cohort and also sends a limited number of its own students to follow the modules taught by Warwick staff. The goals of the Venice Term are both discipline-specific and more broadly aimed at developing academic literacy and intercultural skills. Students and alumni have commented positively on the impact of the programme, but more systematic data on student experience has not been available in the past.⁴

3: Influential Literature

Our approach to this study was informed primarily by the Monash study and by the observation that very little appears to have been published, in particular, about any negative experiences of studying abroad. Research on intercultural communication, language acquisition and cross-cultural encounters was consulted (e.g. Coleman 1998, Kline 1998, Jackson 2010 a and 2010b, Nash 1976, Stephenson 1999 and Rundstrom Williams 2005). The King's-Warwick project's findings were also taken into account, especially in relation to research carried out by the 'Global

⁴ Departments do monitor the programme, however, e.g. through student evaluation forms, SSLC meetings, informal conversations.

Connectedness' working group (see reports available at http://kingslearning.info/kwp/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=45&Itemid=79).

Murphy –Lejeune's (2002) narrative account of study abroad experiences amongst European students provided a useful starting point and was also a key resource for the online journaling activity. Literature on the value of reflective practice for maximising the benefits of experiential learning (central to the logic for all study abroad programmes) also informed our approach. The students participating in this part of the project were encouraged to read some of this material (e.g. Boud 2001, Hubbs & Brand 2005, Loughran 2002 & Spalding and Wilson 2002) to ensure that they understood the purpose and anticipated value of the exercise. Methodological literature was also recommended to the students participating in the practica (e.g. Bazeley 2002, Cisneros-Puebla, Faux & Mey 2004, Kawulich 2005, Mulcock 2001, Kitzinger 2005).

4: Methodologies

Pre-departure Survey: expectations and preparations

Three online surveys were developed for Italian Studies, History of Art and History in consultation with relevant Warwick staff from each department. These were based on the Monash Prato pre-departure surveys. The adaptation of the Italian Studies survey was also informed by a focus group discussion conducted by Mulcock at Warwick University in June 2011 with students who had already completed their Year Abroad. These surveys asked respondents to reflect on their expectations of their study abroad experience, and their preparations for their time in Italy.

Fifteen respondents completed the Italian Studies survey, 19 respondents completed the History survey and 29 respondents completed the History of Art survey.⁵

Post-year abroad Exit Survey

An online exit survey was also designed for Italian Department students and distributed at the end of their year abroad (June/July 2012). Twelve students responded to this survey.

Student & Staff Interviews

Mulcock conducted 19 interviews with students and staff on-site in Venice (18 recorded).⁶ Seven of these were with History of Art Students (undergraduate and

⁵ Response numbers for the History of Art survey are elevated due to an error that resulted in this survey link initially being circulated to History students as well as History of Art students. The correct link was later sent to History students and the mistake has been accommodated for in the analysis of responses.

postgraduate), three were with History students and three were with Italian Studies students. All undergraduate students in the History and History of Art programs were invited several times, by email and in class, to participate in interviews but only two students responded to these invitations. Three postgraduate students from History of Art also agreed to be interviewed in response to direct invitations. The remaining eight student interviews were conducted with individuals who volunteered to participate in the practica described below.

Participant Observation (History of Art and History)

Ethnographic research can provide additional qualitative insights into the study abroad experience that interviews and surveys do not necessarily capture. Recent studies in this field by Jackson (2010), Amit (2010), Barnick (2010) and Dyck (2010) demonstrate the nuanced and layered understandings that can emerge from incorporating elements of participant observation into the research process when documenting lived experiences of studying away from home.

Mulcock spent four weeks in Venice in October and November 2011 working with staff and students from the History and History of Art programmes. Three students from the Department of Italian, based at different Italian partner universities through the Erasmus scheme, also visited the Venice Centre for a week (see below).

During her time in Venice, Mulcock undertook participant observation (by attending seminars, lectures, site visits and other events held at Palazzo Pesaro Papafava). This experience allowed Mulcock to develop important contextual understandings of how students participated in site visits and how unit content and assessments integrated experiential elements. The opportunity to spend time at the Warwick centre in Venice also allowed Mulcock to participate in some of the extracurricular activities organised for the students studying in Venice.

Research Practicum & Alumni Survey (History of Art & Italian Studies)

Three 20 hour qualitative research practica were developed in consultation with teaching staff and offered to students as part of the IATL project. The student researchers collected additional data from their peers in the History of Art and Italian Studies programmes using interviews, participant observation, autoethnographic reflections and a focus group.⁷ This data was used to develop online surveys for the alumni of the two programmes. The three Italian Studies students travelled to Venice in November for five days specifically to participate in this component of the project. Two students also met with Polezzi and Mulcock again in Prato in February to discuss ongoing research and plan the student report as well as subsequent publications (a student-authored article has since been

⁶ Due to budget limitations interviews will not be transcribed as proposed; the possibility of providing transcription had been left open in the proposal, but finding additional funds has not been possible. Recordings will, nevertheless, remain available at the end of the study.

⁷ The History practicum did not proceed to completion because the student volunteers had other time commitments and were unable to attend briefing meetings.

submitted to the undergraduate research journal *Reinvention*). All three met again in Venice in March with Polezzi; they presented their findings to the full group of Italian Department students spending the year in Italy and carried out a final batch of peer interviews.

Online Reflective Journaling Project (Four Italian Studies students)

During this stage of the project Polezzi and Mulcock also set up the reflective online journal project for Italian Studies Year Abroad students. The Moodle learning environment was established with technical assistance from other Warwick colleagues using the Moodle platform developed by Dr Teresa Mackinnon (Language Centre), and introductory resources and activities focused on intercultural capability were developed. Again, the model proposed in the application was adapted to fit with preexisting academic course requirements. The online journal was trialed by four student volunteers over the full course of the academic year.⁸ Given the small size of the group, Polezzi and Mulcock were able to provide written feedback to the four students on each journal reflection.

Some of the key outcomes of each of these activities are summarised below.

5: Outcomes

The activities described above led to the collection of a significant amount of data. The analysis of this material has provided important insights in a number of areas and also suggests opportunities for further research.

Online Surveys

Responses to the pre-departure surveys across the three student groups indicate that the opportunity to study abroad was a significant factor for many in their choice of course. Approximately 60% of respondents felt that they were well prepared for their time in Italy.⁹ All three groups of respondents suggested that their expectations of Italy were shaped primarily through discussions with other people who had already visited the country and through their own research.

Respondents from History and Art History report that the Venice term is 'easier' and 'more convenient' than undertaking an Erasmus programme – but it still offers an opportunity to learn and speak another language and to study in a different country.

Art History:¹⁰

⁸ Three of these volunteers also participated in the Italian Studies research practicum.

⁹ Please note the question asked for a personal self-evaluation, rather than a comment on training and other forms of preparation offered by departments/the University.

¹⁰ General trends, rather than specific numbers, are cited here because it is impossible to extract the additional responses from History students (see footnote 5). We focus on qualitative responses instead, which clearly indicate the respondent's enrolment in Art History.

The majority of the survey respondents had visited Italy before, speak languages other than English and Italian, and have previously lived away from home for extended periods. The majority of respondents also believe the Venice experience will give them a professional advantage and will look good on their CVs (e.g. evidence of language skills, personal development, cross-cultural experience). One respondent writes, for example, that 'going abroad, even for a short period, illustrates a certain amount of independence and determination and ability to adapt to different environments.' A number of similar responses emphasise the value of simply being in Italy and having experiences that will lead to increased confidence and independence. Many specifically identify the cross-cultural experience as a key benefit. Responses to question 6, which asks participants what they expect to enjoy about living and studying in Italy, include: 'experiencing a different culture'; 'enjoying another culture with friends'; 'the complete difference in culture'; 'embracing a different culture'; 'discovering about the Italian culture'; 'would love to learn more about the culture in Italy'; and 'breathing in the culture that is on our doorsteps'.

Only a small minority of respondents report, when asked directly, that they actually intend to return to Italy to work or expect to use their Italian language skills or experience of Venice in professional contexts. Just under 50% intended to continue studying Italian after Venice, even though the written responses to this survey specifically emphasise the value of the experience for language acquisition.¹¹

Predictably, the opportunity to study Venetian/Renaissance art and architecture on site was also significant for History of Art respondents.

Potential language barriers and financial costs are the mostly commonly identified difficulties that respondents to this survey list. The practical challenges of shared accommodation and time management are also listed, usually as secondary concerns.

History:

Similar to the History of Art cohort, the majority of the History respondents had already lived independently (59% - although only 29% had lived or studied abroad before embarking on the Venice programme), had visited Italy before (76%) and were multilingual (65% speak languages other than English and Italian).

Responses suggest that the opportunity to improve Italian language skills over the Venice term was a high priority for many of the students who completed the survey. Fourteen out of 17 (82%) respondents planned to study Italian at Ca' Foscari while in Venice. Many also identified the 'experience of living and studying abroad' as valuable for building confidence and independence and developing communication

¹¹ This apparent contradiction could be explained by the fact that only half of the respondents provided written comments. It is possible that those individuals who took the time to write extended answers are the same ones who intended to continue studying Italian after Venice. Responses may also be related to the fact that many students, at this stage in their studies, have not yet taken a decision as to what career they will follow.

skills. Both of these factors were often linked to the perceived professional benefits of studying abroad. Respondents contributed the following comments, for example: 'employers like to see skill in language and experience of other cultures'; 'living abroad will show that I have independence as well as the ability to adapt, and language skills are often sought after ...'; and 'it shows that I can be adaptable to a new country and culture and apply all those skills to a job'.

History respondents also indicated that the opportunity to increase their familiarity with Italian culture was a significant benefit of participating in the Venice Term. These expectations were evident in comments that referred to developing 'an understanding of the Italian culture'; having the chance 'to immerse myself in a different culture'; 'to learn much by living amidst a completely different culture'; and to achieve an 'expansion of cultural awareness'.

The experiential benefits of studying 'onsite' were also identified in the survey responses. For example, undertaking a unit on Renaissance history in Venice, for one respondent '...offered the excitement of learning about the subject from the setting in which it all actually happened'. Another believed that '... studying history in such a historical environment would greatly enhance my studies'. One described 'being able to see history in its physical form rather than just as words in books... actually seeing first hand buildings, statues etc. that we've been taught about!' as an anticipated highlight, and another stated that 'being immersed in the history which we are studying is going to be inspiring'.

The difficulties most commonly identified (again, very similar to those anticipated by the History of Art students) were language barriers and management of money and study time.¹²

Italian Studies:

Of the respondents to the Italian Studies survey, 78% had already lived away from home for extended periods, 28% had lived or studied abroad before, and all of the respondents had visited Italy before. The group was also quite multilingual, with 64% of respondents speaking languages other than English and Italian.

Improving fluency and confidence with language were the most commonly identified goals for this cohort. Eighty seven per cent planned to participate in language studies in Italy, 93% felt they would accrue a professional advantage by completing a Year Abroad, 79% expected to use their Italian language skills in future employment and 43% expected to return to Italy to study or work.

The professional advantage was frequently linked to the personal development component of the experience. For example, one student wrote that 'a year abroad will make my future employer think that I am independent and capable of overcoming difficulties.' Increased independence, adaptability, confidence, and

¹² It should be noted here that the University offers an interest-free loan to students undertaking the Venice term, to be repaid before graduation.

ability to overcome fears were also listed as personal goals. One respondent wrote: 'the year abroad makes you a more independent and confident person which will translate into useful skills in the future'. Another wrote: 'I would also like to learn more about myself and discover new interests ...'.

A number of these respondents also expressed high expectations about their ability to fit into Italian culture. One states 'my aim of this year is to live like an Italian not like an English person in Italy' and another writes 'I'm also hoping to feel less like a person from abroad and more like a person who is actually living in Italy'. One describes her/his desire to '... become as integrated into Italian culture as possible.'

The Italian Studies respondents anticipated that they would experience the greatest difficulties during their Year Abroad from dealing with bureaucracy, language barriers, culture shock, separation from family and friends, and costs associated with living in Italy.

The responses to the Italian Studies Year Abroad exit survey were overwhelmingly positive. All these respondents indicated that they felt well prepared for their Year Abroad. Most emphasised the value of the experience in terms of personal development and language acquisition. Critical feedback was limited to relatively minor logistical issues.

Student Interviews

The postgraduate History of Art students interviewed had studied abroad as undergraduates. They reflected extensively and articulately on the many ongoing benefits of their early experience of living abroad. They acknowledged that these were important times of personal change, of learning to accommodate new cultural models, even if they had spent a lot of their time in bars and pubs. They also identified their undergraduate study abroad experience as the inspiration for their desire to continue travelling and reported that the insights they gained then were still valuable many years later. These older students linked the primary benefits of their current Warwick Venice experience to their course content, especially in terms of the privileged access to places, people and knowledge that the lecturers were able to provide.

The key themes that emerged from the interviews with the undergraduate students related to language skills, opportunities to interact with Italians, and the challenges of managing heavy workloads whilst also trying to take advantage of 'being there' in Venice.¹³

History of Art students commented that although they had to complete Italian Language modules to come to Venice, the course only involved a limited number of contact hours per week and focused on reading and written skills and vocabulary for Art Historians, rather than conversational Italian. Although a significant proportion

¹³ It should be noted here that the workload of students in Venice is equivalent to the workload of those who remain in Warwick.

of students intended to take up the Italian lessons offered by Ca' Foscari University, many found this difficult once they arrived in Venice due to competing priorities. Some commented that it was hard to concentrate on an additional two hours of language study at the end of the day, suggesting that morning classes would be better. Another reported that the cost of the classes (100 Euros in total) was a deterrent for some students. Students who attended the course provided mixed reports on its usefulness.¹⁴

Several of the students referred to the limited opportunities they had to interact with Italians / Venetians, a situation one interviewee attributed to Venice's 'tourist town' identity. For some this was a source of frustration and disappointment. Some students felt that there should have been more formal support from faculty to encourage them to attend local events. Some acknowledged that the pressure of coursework requirements and the importance of achieving good academic outcomes limited their capacity for socialising. The high workload was seen as 'a barrier to the "being there experience"' because it meant that students had to prioritise work over meeting people and exploring the city. One interviewee suggested that an additional barrier and/or time constraint was introduced as a result of visits to Venice of the family and/or friends of students during the term.

Students offered mixed comments on the on the buddy system organised through Ca' Foscari. Some felt they did not want to participate because it was a very awkward way to meet Italian students, it was 'not a natural connection'. Others said they did want to participate in the Buddy programme but found that the online registration process did not work. One student observed that 'the Warwick Venice experience is a bit like a bubble'. She felt that it was like 'being a tourist for 10 weeks' and that the buddy system offered 'an opportunity to get outside the bubble'. Individual students who did manage to meet up with Italian students found that the latter preferred to practice their English than to speak Italian with foreigners. We can note here that the Year Abroad Italian Studies students also report on the challenges of building relationships with local students, even though they stayed for a much longer time and regularly attended university. These interviewees attributed this partly to the pressures of the Italian educational system and negative perceptions of the Erasmus programme, which does not require significant academic achievement at the host university.

The vast majority of the Warwick Venice students were female and several interviews included references to confronting encounters with Italian men. The challenges of shared accommodation also came up in most interviews. Site visits and travel week were identified as highlights of the programme by a number of students.

Students reported that there was no specific focus on cross-cultural experience in orientation sessions but a number argued that cross cultural education happens informally by going out at night, going to shops and using Italian to communicate.

¹⁴ Italian language provision was under review at the time in the case of History of Art and Italian language teaching at Ca' Foscari will be considerably enhanced in the future, with costs covered by the Department.

For some, the opportunity to share accommodation with other Warwick students from different backgrounds was also a significant cross-cultural learning experience. An international student who had already been 'Studying Abroad' in England summed up her experience by reflecting that 'all visits abroad have potential to trigger personal change, no matter how long'. She pointed out that all 'new input' allows people to 'grow culturally'. This interviewee also offered a positive perspective on the groups' lack of Italian language communication by pointing out that without language people are forced to improve other communication skills.

Interviews were also conducted in Venice with the three Italian Studies Year Abroad students who participated in the practicum. These students, based in three different locations, all had a specific interest in languages and were very conscientious about their study of Italian. They had all spent time travelling in Italy and two had completed high school exchanges there. Two of these students came from other European countries and were, therefore, already studying abroad at Warwick. They spoke (with varying levels of confidence) six different languages each, and expressed strong interest in learning about other cultures. These three interviewees offered insightful reflections on their experience, but they may not have been especially representative of the overall cohort.

Good Italian language skills meant that these students were able to access a lot more information about things happening around them. Participating in language tandems and other ongoing interactions with Italians which they had become involved in also allowed them insights into candid conversation. Two issues that were raised by all three of these interviewees related to gender relations and attitudes to foreigners. They felt that Italians seemed to be 'closed' to foreigners, with the exception of those who had, themselves, spent time studying abroad and/or were interested in learning English. They also talked about the stereotype of foreign women as sexually promiscuous, which they felt was widespread amongst the Italian men they had encountered. All three students reported that, in their experience, Italian men were more attentive and responsive to female foreign students. All reported that it was harder to connect with Italian women. The male interviewee also reported conversations that led him to believe that Italian men were often unwelcoming of foreign men. These observations, if confirmed, may have some implications for the social experiences of students who visit for short periods and do not speak Italian.

A focus group was also conducted at the beginning of the project with five Italian Studies students who had just returned from their Year Abroad. These students agreed that increased personal independence and confidence was the biggest benefit of the year abroad for them. They also made some similar observations to the three Italian Department students interviewed in Venice about the difficulty of connecting with local students from Italian universities, Italian gender relations and the Italian attitudes to Erasmus students and to foreigners. They related some of these difficulties to the absence of a 'university life' equivalent to that in the UK and stressed the importance of choosing accommodation shared with Italians. Students were also aware of their own preconceptions: two felt some negative stereotypes about Italy were true and spoke in a very critical way about gender relations and

organizational models. Two others, however, challenged these statements and pointed out (indirectly) that the perceived 'disorganisation' was another form of organization. Further discussion concerned different models of language learning and the implications of prioritizing language acquisition over development of intercultural competency. All agreed on the importance of having a clearly identified Warwick support network (e.g. maintaining contact with personal tutor and/or international office, local university contact). The focus group also included some discussion of the differences between the Venice Term study abroad model and the Erasmus Year Abroad model, leading one student to suggest that it was not valid to compare the two programmes because of how different the goals of each are. A number of the questions that were incorporated into the pre-departure online surveys emerged from this focus group discussion.¹⁵

Staff Interviews

The ideal student outcomes that academic staff described were very similar to the student expectations expressed in the pre-departure surveys. Staff on the Venice team emphasised the benefits of studying 'on site' in terms of experiential learning and of being exposed to another language as a way of 'stimulating curiosity' and 'broadening cultural horizons'. The specific relevance of the location for the course content being taught was also significant. One staff member described Venice as 'a Renaissance city, relatively unchanged', therefore offering both History and History of Art students a unique opportunity to learn through looking and 'seeing'/discovering things for themselves. Staff also referred to the 'Venice Effect', a pattern of strong academic performance amongst students following on from their participation in the Venice term, however some observed that this could also be linked to the type of student who chooses to take up the challenge of studying abroad in the first place.

Staff aim to maximise the benefits of being on location by scheduling in frequent site visits, so the itinerary is tight, especially for History of Art. Time management is therefore a significant pressure for all involved, though there was no suggestion that this was a problem. As also reported in the Monash study, the necessity of meeting normal academic teaching requirements during contact time with students also limits the amount of time available for formal discussion of cross-cultural experience in Venice. Staff acknowledge that one of the underlying goals of study abroad is to develop intercultural competencies, though they also report that this is not something that is made explicit to students on a regular basis before, during, or after the Venice term. Language acquisition is also focused on the academic benefits of reading key texts in their original language, rather than on facilitating other kinds of intercultural learning. Staff report that the Buddy system offered by Ca' Foscari University is effective for overcoming potential language and cultural barriers if Warwick Students and Ca' Foscari students meet up regularly.

¹⁵ Please note that further comments on Italian Department students' interviews are included in the separate report produced by the three students involved in the practicum.

Staff also talked about the benefits of living in another country for building confidence and independence as students are forced to grapple with a new environment. They acknowledged that the Venice term also provides students with the added familiarity and security of Warwick support as part of their study abroad experience, but that there is a delicate balance between equipping students for the future and providing too much support. Staff reported that they observe changes in student behavior as a result of the Venice experience. One lecturer reflected on how these changes could be translated into career skills, to be emphasised in job references written for students who complete the Venice term.

Although having a permanent Venetian administrative staff member based at the Palazzo to assist with administrative tasks and student enquiries lessens the pressure on academic staff, the teaching and organizational load is still considerable – though balanced by the absence of other departmental and University-wide commitments. There are also inevitable personal and professional disruptions for staff associated with being required to spend extended periods away from home each year, yet staff are also clearly positive about the opportunities provided by the Venice term. Provision of pastoral care for Venice students is also significant, although as the student profile has changed over time to encompass a more upper-middle class cohort, staff report that numbers of emergency calls have decreased. As reflected in the results of the online pre-departure surveys, staff report that students are now more widely travelled than they used to be and therefore more accustomed to being abroad. Increased use of social media and mobile phones also means that ‘home’ and ‘away’ are much closer and homesickness is less of an issue. Nonetheless, social tensions in groups continue to create challenges, especially in the context of shared accommodation and intense academic pressure. One staff member reflected on the potential for all anxieties, illnesses and discomforts to be ‘magnified in the foreign context’. Staff must regularly provide support with translation, sometimes in hospitals and police stations. Alcohol abuse has resulted in a series of incidents to the point that students are now required to sign a code of conduct before they leave Warwick. They are also required to attend an Occupational Health and Safety briefing. Staff noted the value of Warwick’s personal tutor system, as a means of monitoring student wellbeing and helping to avoid major pastoral care crises.

Staff report that the Venice community welcomes students, but at the same time, the student experience of ‘being there’ in Venice is inevitably shaped by the extended tourist season and predominance of visitors. Students can’t necessarily differentiate Venetians from other Italians and must also negotiate the stereotypes and expectations that Italians carry about tourists.

The three Italian Department students taking part in the practicum also undertook interviews with academics in their own department at Warwick. All staff involved in the process had personal experience of study and work abroad. They all stressed the importance of language learning, academic development, as well as personal experience and the development of inter-cultural skills as core elements of the year abroad experience. Two put cultural learning and personal growth above all other

outcomes. Academics also stressed the importance of individual engagement with the experience of living and studying abroad and the crucial role played by the effort to forge local links. Two underlined the need for personal independence and a proactive stance on the part of the students. It is notable that similar observations can also be found in student data (see above, and also the independent student report). Differences between individual locations (i.e. the different cities and institutions where students are based during the year abroad) were considered largely irrelevant by all.

The assignments currently submitted by Italian Department students (reports on modules followed in Italy, plus a 'cultural essay') were deemed important especially for language and academic development. Only one member of staff mentioned reflection on cultural experiences as a possible benefit of the assignments. All the Italian Department academics who were interviewed welcomed the idea of an alumni survey which would gather data on personal attitudes (both positive and negative) and on the long term impact of study abroad (as well as test common assumptions about these).

Participant Observation

The opportunity to undertake participant observation with staff and students during the Venice term allowed Mulcock to gather additional data to triangulate with formal interviews and online surveys. Attendance at site visits made the challenges for staff of logistical issues, such as time management, and the benefits for students of experiential learning simultaneously evident. For example, History of Art students were required to give presentations on site in a public location, an experience which inevitably saw them negotiating a variety of uncontrollable factors that they would not encounter in a classroom (e.g. building renovations, curious tourists, noisy crowds). Site visits also tended to stimulate a lot of questions directed at staff as students were guided to look around and notice things for themselves. This level of group engagement with sites was balanced by the focus on relationship building between students, rather than with Italians. Informal discussions seem to include a lot of talk about home and visits from family and friends. These observations tended to confirm the idea of the 'Bubble' effect mentioned in some of the student interviews.

Attendance at extracurricular events such as the weekly Circolo Italo-Britannico meetings of British expatriates and Italians with an interest in British culture, and the alumni event organised for past Venice term graduates, also demonstrated that, with the exception of postgraduates, and a few very conscientious undergraduates, there was minimal student participation in organised opportunities to extend their local networks. These observations reveal some of the gaps between ideal outcomes and behaviours identified by students and the actual behaviour outcomes once in Venice, especially in terms of language acquisition and cross-cultural interaction.

Research Practicum

Time limitations made this activity difficult for the Venice students who already had many competing priorities to manage. Nonetheless, four History of Art students successfully completed the practicum. They met several times with Mulcock, allowed themselves to be interviewed individually, organised a student focus group, undertook and documented 1 or 2 interviews each with staff and/or students, produced field notes based on a participant observation exercise and also wrote reflections on their own research experience. The data collected by these students reflected that collected by Mulcock and contributed to the overall project. For example, students who participated in the focus group reported that they wished they had studied more 'practical Italian' in their university course prior to arriving in Italy so that they had more 'everyday vocabulary' to work with. One of the student interviewers also recorded the following comments, consistent with other data:

- Highlights for the interviewee included the fact that Italian night life focused around bars instead of clubs, and on-site seminars, which changed how he thought about the artworks he was already familiar with through previous study.
- If the interviewee could change something in retrospect, he would have practiced more Italian during the summer and he would have used the buddy scheme offered by Ca' Foscari. He felt that the buddy scheme should have been compulsory, to make students immerse themselves in the Italian culture.
- The interviewee described Venice as 'a theme park... stuck in time' that only continues to exist because of tourists. However, he 'did not live in a very touristy area, so for him Venice did not feel too touristy'. The street he lived on was full of locals who went out to talk on the street, so he felt part of a community. He also commented on a strong sense of community with other Warwick students because they socialised, lived and worked together.

The research practicum undertaken by the Italian Studies students was most successful, partly because they had much longer to work on it given the length of their stay in Italy. The dedication and motivation of the individual participants was also a key factor to its success. The outcomes of this work are discussed in detail in the attached student report and student journal submissions.

Online Journals (Italian Studies)

The reflections that students presented in the journaling exercise were guided by a series of topics relating to expectations and first impressions of Italy, culture shock, Erasmus culture and local culture, cultural diversity within Italy, career benefits of studying abroad and the experience of returning home at the end of the Year Abroad. This material provided the most revealing evidence of the benefits associated with language competency and long term stays for developing an understanding of the study abroad location that moves beyond the superficial perceptions of Italian culture often evident amongst students who have visited for much shorter periods.

Please note that details on this part of the project are also available in the independent report produced by students. The process has already led to significant outcomes for the students involved in the activities. The three Italian Studies

students who participated most fully in the practicum experience over the course of their year abroad produced some substantial collaborative work including:

- a co-authored report;
- a survey for Year Abroad Alumni;
- a co-authored paper based on their research which they submitted to the online journal of undergraduate research, *Reinvention*.

One of these students participated in the project because he was specifically interested in pursuing an academic research career. Another developed a greater interest in research as a result of participating in the project. This led her to successfully apply for a job as a student research assistant following the completion of her Italian Year Abroad. All three students were highly motivated by the opportunity to submit a journal article for publication and clearly developed a strong sense of ownership over the research they were asked to undertake as part of the practicum.

Further Outcomes

Project findings are also currently informing the process of re-thinking year abroad practices in the departments involved in the study and beyond:

- Alumni surveys/questionnaires are being discussed at departmental level as well as with the Careers Services of the University (Ms Fiona Kent) in view of possible implementation.
- In the Department of Italian, findings of student-led research were outlined first in SSLC meetings and outcomes of that discussion will be examined in Staff meetings with a view to revising practice on year abroad preparation, implementation and assessment, as well as discussing the impact of the research on recruitment strategies and alumni-related activities.
- Dr Polezzi has already presented aspects of the study at two Warwick-wide events (Teaching and Learning Showcase, 19th June 2012, presentation available, please see below; Window on Teaching: Year Abroad, Keeping in Touch, 24th October 2012, video available, please see below)
- The present report will be circulated to all interested parties, including the Departments of History, History of Art and Italian at Warwick.
- Beyond Warwick, the report will also be circulated, together with the one prepared by Prof. Baldassar and Dr Mulcock, to Monash colleagues in Melbourne and at the Prato Centre.
- The possibility of further conference presentations and publications relating to the study is currently being explored.

6: Implications

'Being There'

Both the Monash Study (Baldassar & Mulcock 2012) and the Warwick study found that the experience of just 'being there' was regularly cited as a key benefit - and pleasure - of studying abroad. This is also a core concept in anthropological methodology (e.g. Watson 1999, Bradburd 1998, Hannerz 2003). 'Being there' refers to the learning that occurs through first-hand experience. In the study abroad context this means learning through direct exposure to new environments and the challenges of actively negotiating across linguistic and cultural differences. It is closely linked to common sense and taken for granted ideas about the general benefits of travel. The experience of 'being there' is often glossed as 'having fun' in the promotional material about study abroad. The reality, however, is that the study abroad experience also incorporates difficult, challenging moments that are not (always) 'fun' at all, but which are an integral part of the overall 'value' attributed to the experience.

Commonly encountered rhetorics about the value of studying abroad often seem to imply that simply 'being there' - in another country - automatically guarantees intercultural learning outcomes. While the findings of our study confirm that students do benefit from 'being there', this glosses over and erases different ways of 'being' and different types of 'there', as well as the variety in content and forms of study that students participate in. While it is clear from our data that no single model and mode of study can be ranked above others, the impact of these differences was very clearly highlighted in the differences between the Warwick data collected from Italian Studies students participating in the Year Abroad and from the History and History of Art students following the Venice Term. The presence of a close network of support and the interaction with a specific community, on the other hand, were among the strong positive elements of the Venice Term.¹⁶ The opportunity to track the experiences of the Italian Studies students over the course of a year, for instance, revealed the extent to which length of stay and the acquisition of language impacted on the development of intercultural understanding. This was especially evident through the online reflective journaling process, which provided a supportive 'scaffolding' for that development.

Scaffolding

'Being there' is a taken for granted, common sense notion that deserves to be carefully unpacked. It is true that 'being there' has enormous potential to deliver intercultural learning, yet student learning from 'being there' is likely to be more complex and in depth not just the longer the 'being there' but, especially, if the experience is scaffolded with formal and informal curricula. The need to make explicit the goals of study abroad, as well as its potential pitfalls, is attested within all groups which took part in the study.

Scaffolding, while not offering an entirely guided and 'sheltered' experience (similar, in many senses, to the cocooned experience of elsewhere which has its model in mass tourism), can provide students studying abroad with strategic tools to both

¹⁶ The contrast with Monash data is also significant in this respect. See separate report attached.

understand and manage their experience. Crucially, these tools will need to take into account negative as well as positive aspects of study abroad, including its potential to reinforce stereotypes, misunderstandings and essentializing models of identity. In particular, opportunities for guided reflection that encourage students to question their experiences and challenge their interpretations are key to personal development and group interaction.

Institutional and personal objectives

One of the most interesting findings from our research, also supported by the Monash study, was that while the institutions and staff are mostly focused on the highest standards in academic and intercultural learning outcomes, the students often have a separate set of learning outcomes and objectives linked to global youth culture, developing peer group networks and having fun, even when study abroad is clearly integrated within the curriculum. At the same time, many quickly develop an awareness of the risks involved in what some of the Italian Department students (negatively) qualified as the 'Erasmus scene'. This was a turning point for them, as they started to actively look for strategies which would allow them to both broaden and deepen their modes of contact with local realities.

'There and Back Again': The Interconnectedness of the Student Experience

A further key finding from our study is the tendency for students to see year abroad study as a self-contained element of their experience, often only partly connected to their overall perception of academic and personal development. While clearly the question of interconnectedness is markedly different for students from Modern Languages spending a year away from their home institution and the History and History of Art students spending ten weeks in Venice while continuing to focus on a Warwick curriculum, in all cases the question of how study abroad impacts on the students' overall experience of university life (and on their personal development beyond university) remains a core issue. This aspect of student perception was thrown into sharp light by comments made by the two international students who took part in the reflective journaling experiment. In contrast to other students, they made explicit connections between their first year in Warwick and their subsequent period spent studying in Italy, comparing and contrasting two experiences of being abroad. For example, these students were confident about their ability to successfully negotiate the challenges they would face in Italy because they had already developed effective coping strategies for independent living in a second language during their first year of studying abroad, in Warwick. This in turn resulted in an ability to project the year abroad experience backwards, into their time in the UK, and forward, towards their return to Warwick for a further two years of study.

Scaffolding can once again provide suitable strategies through which all students can be encouraged to draw similarly explicit links. This is crucial if we expect students to make the most of time spent abroad in terms of their academic development (the ability to bring back crucial skills, including those relating to independent learning, variety of learning strategies, etc.), their personal growth (e.g. in relation to self-confidence, problem-solving skills, adaptability), their career development (e.g. the ability to present a full and coherent profile to future employers and also to use

intercultural skills in contexts other than those directly linked to their year abroad experience). After all, intercultural communication both begins and ends 'at home'.

7: Additional Material and Resources

- Surveys (summary reports, x 3)
- Discussion topics for interviews (History and History of Art)
- Research Practicum Handouts (x4)
- Ethics forms (for Research Practicum)
- Online journal modules (Moodle)
- Alumni surveys developed by students (x2)
- Monash Prato Report
- Interim report available at:
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/strategic/polezzi/
- Student report (Italian) available at:
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/strategic/polezzi/
- Teaching and Learning Showcase Presentation by Dr Polezzi available at:
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/teachinggrid/teaching_and_learning_showcase_2012/1-1/
- Video of Dr Polezzi's presentation at Window on Teaching event available at:
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/teachinggrid/exchange/recent_events/20121024
- Video report made by Dr Polezzi and two of the Italian Department students involved in the practicum part of the study available at:
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/strategic/polezzi/

8: References

Amit, V. 2010. 'Student Mobility and Internationalisation: Rationales, Rhetoric and 'Institutional Isomorphism''. *Anthropology in Action*. 17(1):6-18.

Baldassar, L & J. Mulcock 2012. 'Monash Prato Study Abroad Research Project: Final Report.' Monash University.

Barnick, H. 2010. 'Managing Time and Making Space: Canadian Students' Motivations for Study in Australia'. *Anthropology in Action*. 17(1):19-29.

Bazeley, P. 2002 Issues in Mixing Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches to Research Presented at: 1st International Conference - Qualitative Research in Marketing and Management University of Economics and Business Administration, Vienna 10th April, 2002 (Published in: R. Buber, J. Gadner, & L.

- Richards (eds) (2004) *Applying qualitative methods to marketing management research*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, pp141-156.)
- Boud, D. 2001 Using Journal Writing to Enhance Reflective Practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 90: 9-17
- Bradburd, D.1998. *Being There: The Necessity of Fieldwork*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Cisneros-Puebla, C.A., Faux,R. & Mey, G. 2004 Qualitative Researchers—Stories Told, Stories Shared: The Storied Nature of Qualitative Research. An Introduction to the Special Issue: *FQS Interviews I* . Forum: *Qualitative Social Research*. 5 (3): Art. 37
- Coleman, J. A 1998 Language Learning and Study Abroad: the European Perspective *Frontiers : The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. 4: 167-203.
- Dyck, N. 2010. Going South : Candian's Engagement with American Athletic Scholarships. *Anthropology in Action*. 17(1): 41- 54.
- Hannerz, U. 2003. 'Being There... and There... and There!: Reflections on Multi-sited Ethnography'. *Ethnography*: 4(2):201-216.
- Hubbs, D.L. & C.F. Brand 2005 The Paper Mirror: Understanding Reflective Journaling. *The Journal of Experiential Education* 28 (1): 60 – 71.
- Jackson, J. 2010a. *Intercultural Journeys: From Study Abroad to Residence*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jackson, J, (ed) 2010b. *Handbook on Intercultural Communication*. Oxford, UK: Routledge
- Kawulich, B. B. 2005. Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. 6 (2): Art. 43. <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/466/996>
- Kitzinger, J. 1994 The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 16(1):103-121.
- Kline, R.R. 1998 Literacy and Language Learning in a Study Abroad Context. *Frontiers : The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. 4:139-165.
- Loughran, J.L 2002 Effective Reflective Practice: In Search of Meaning in Learning about Teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education* 53 (1):33-43.
- Mulcock, J. 2001 Ethnography in Awkward spaces: An Anthropology of Cultural Borrowing. *Practicing Anthropology* 23(1): 38-42. (re-published in In W. Haviland,

R. Gordon & L. Vivanco (eds) 2005 *Talking About People: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, 4th Edition, McGraw-Hill, Illinois, Ch 8.)

Murphy – Lejeune, Elizabeth 2002 *Student mobility and narrative in Europe: the new strangers*. London: Routledge. (2003, Taylor & Francis e-Library)

Nash, D. 1976 The Personal Consequences of a Year of Study Abroad. *The Journal of Higher Education* 47(2):191-203.

Spalding, E. & A. Wilson 2002 Demystifying Reflection: A Study of Pedagogical Strategies That Encourage Reflective Journal Writing. *Teachers College Record* 104(7): 1393–1421.

Stephenson, S. 1999 Study Abroad As a Transformational Experience and Its Effect upon Study Abroad Students and Host Nationals in Santiago, Chile. *Frontiers : The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. 5: 1-38.

Rundstrom Williams, T. 2005. Exploring the Impact of Study Abroad on Students' Intercultural Communication Skills: Adaptability and Sensitivity. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 9: 356-371.

Watson, C.W. (ed) 1999. *Being There: Fieldwork in Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.

9: Contact Details

Dr Loredana Polezzi
Associate Professor (Reader), Department of Italian
Director, Warwick Venice Centre
University of Warwick
Coventry, CV4 7AL
UK
l.polezzi@warwick.ac.uk