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Working Away From Home–The Longer-term Option

BY SIMON BOXALL

IN MY LAST MISSIVE to this learned publication, I considered the positive benefits of vacation or short-term work experience abroad for undergraduates of ocean and earth science. But what about the more complex "year abroad" study? The two main differences from vacation work are that (1) the time scale is longer and (2) it counts towards a student's bachelor grade or master/PhD success. With vacation work, in the unlikely event things are not as a student hoped, he or she can either go home after a week or put it down to life experience. Even I can put up with a Days Inn for a week (well, maybe a day or two), but I wouldn't want to live in one! With the work forming a significant part of the student's degree program, it has to be right—academically and emotionally.

The advantage of study abroad as part of a degree program should be clear. It broadens the mind, introduces new and fresh ideas, and provides a new network of contacts (both peer and supervisory) that will be useful in future years. Unlike some vacation work, the additional costs for the student associated with the period of study are usually met by the system, with no extra cost to the student.

At the postgraduate level, we have never had a problem in getting students to participate in "exchange" schemes. They are much sought after and hotly contested, and only our top students get these opportunities. If your institution is part of the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), then exchange agreements are often already established. A main WUN objective is to foster collaborative research links through its Global Exchange Program (GEP) by increasing opportunities for young researchers early in their careers, and by engaging postgraduate students in international collaborative research and permitting them to experience different research environments. Students can gain access to specialized facilities around the world that might not otherwise be available to them in their own organization or country and, consequently, their research outcomes are all the richer.

There are also many regional opportunities. The European Union abounds with schemes, which change names on a regular basis; the European Exchange is one such program and stems from the Marine European Network for the Training Of Researchers (MENTOR). Countries bordering the Indian Ocean have a similar scheme with the catchy title of UMIOR (University Mobility in the Indian Ocean Rim). Then, there are bilateral agreements set up between partners, often formalized for both postgraduate and undergraduate study by formal agreements known as Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). At my school, we have an exchange with Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Princeton University has one with the University of Melbourne, and many schools seem to have one with the Bermuda Institute of Ocean Sciences—that's the one that faculty members are always willing to give up valuable research time to monitor. As time progresses and such exchanges grow in number, many organizations are now cutting back on new MOUs; there is a danger that they could lose all their students on exchanges and end up with a year of visitors.

These schemes are straightforward, there is an equal flow of students both ways, and the benefits far outweigh any perceived risk. Though students might attend a number of courses unique to

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the host organization, the measured outcome is in their theses and publications, not their ability to deal with those courses. It is here, however, that the issue of undergraduate exchange becomes more complex for both the student and the organizations involved.

An undergraduate course follows more prescribed routes—it doesn't lead to an exchange tailored to the individual student's research project. The potential benefits are just as great as for the postgraduate, but if it goes wrong, the effect on the individual's end grade can be dramatic. That being said, my experiences with our own student exchanges have been positive (both ways), and their end grades have always been enhanced by the experience.

Study time abroad gives students access to resources not available in their home university; Emily works on ISIS, the National Oceanography Centre deep ROV, with two visiting students.

The first problem is identifying where a visiting student fits into the degree program of the host institute. With the exception of France—where mobility between French universities has always been actively encouraged—there is no standard curriculum or setup for any subject, even within a country. Not only is it important to ensure that the time table for a visiting student gives the individual a selection of courses at the right level, covering new and relevant topics, but that the assessment metrics are compatible with the home organization, where the degree will eventually be awarded. Within Europe, there is the much debated and often controversial Bologna Accord. This process is supposed to create a common European university student market by making academic and quality assurance standards more compatible throughout Europe. It is due to be in place and operational by 2010—though the reality appears likely to be even more eleventh hour than my usual delivery of this column! The Bologna Accord still only looks at standards and levels, not curricula, which would be neither possible nor desirable to standardize.

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With this uncertainty, should students consider exchanges? Yes, most definitely, as long as they are able and outgoing; a bright student will thrive in any intellectually rich environment. So, how popular are the exchanges? Here, we come to an interesting trend, which tends to be a "UK/US" versus "the-rest-of-the-world" dichotomy. A few years ago, I coordinated the Erasmus scheme for my school. We set up exchanges with universities in France, Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden—all bilateral agreements. Total students into our school: 10, total out: 1. That one "out" didn't strictly count as she was a French national studying in the UK on an exchange to Germany—a Europhile's dream.

I well remember our first Erasmus student from France in the early 1990s. She appeared, having been picked

up from the airport and transferred straight out to a vessel in the Solent in a force 8 gale, with backpack and an apprehensive smile. Her English was "developing" and she had taken the decision to study in the UK for a year to broaden her experience. Did it work? She came back a year later having finished her undergraduate degree, did a PhD with me, and is now a very well respected senior scientist who has headed up a number of international programs. Her English, by the way, has now developed.

We now run a sought-after degree pathway of Master of Oceanography or Marine Biology with Study Abroad where students spend the third year of study in North America as a part of their four-year combined master's courses. Such courses are becoming popular the world over. To gain access to this pathway, students must have consistently high grades; applicants far outweigh places. In the first year the course ran, I tutored two of the successful students. As the third year approached, both got cold feet, with concerns about whether would they be okay, would they have problems adjusting to the US system, would their overall grades suffer as a result? In the end, one backed down and one went; the latter's grades went up and he described it as the best experience ever. It is worth noting that the five students from the partner universities in the United States were far more adventurous and took back similar benefits. I was in India earlier in the year discussing closer links with the National Institute of Oceanography in Goa, where they have had similar experiences setting up programs of student exchange around the world. Their students went abroad, and they received a steady flow in from France, Germany, Australia… but none from the United States and United Kingdom.

Why is there such resistance from students from some countries to study abroad? Language is cited as an issue for native English speakers—though it doesn't explain the reticence of US/UK exchanges while Australian and New Zealand students are enthusiastic to mobilize. Some might argue that the learning experience in such countries is so good students don't want to leave it. I don't think so. Getting learning experiences in different environments outweighs studying 100% at even the top university. I suspect that the issue is a cultural one, and while the world experiences US, and to an extent UK, culture through its media, the US/UK has a limited outlook on the world. All I can say is please give studying abroad a try—it will make your science better and, heaven forbid, you will enjoy it. As tutors, should your department or school be considering such programs? Not only do your students on the exchange benefit, but, from our experience, the host university students also benefit from the visiting students coming in with new and fresh ideas. You never know, some might come back one day as senior scientists or postgraduates.

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