

Residence Abroad and its Practices

Report carried out on behalf of UCML 2017

1. Introduction

As part of its remit, the University Council of Modern Languages [UCML, www.ucml.ac.uk] is interested in exploring the various trends that relate to different aspects of the study of modern languages at all levels of education. In the last few years, our surveys have focussed on diverse issues relating especially to Higher Education [HE] which are of interest both to our members and to the sector at large. This latest survey sought to collect data on the Residence Abroad [RA] procedures in place at universities whose students complete a period of residence abroad, whether as part of a Single Honours [SH] or Joint Honours [JH] Languages programme or a Joint Honours degree which includes Languages in some shape or form (as a minor, as a joint honours subject combined with another subject e.g. Business, as a non-specialist degree with a Residence Abroad option).

Particular emphasis was placed on how the RA experience is measured in terms of credits and grade conversions nationally; potential language competence requirements; scenarios relating to the failure of the Year Abroad; and the allocation of grades, where applicable.

Responses reveal that, although practices may differ widely not only from one institution to the other but also from one language discipline to another within the same Higher Education Institution [HEI], some general trends can be highlighted.

Different HEIs refer to the period of time their students spend in the target-language [TL] country as 'Year Abroad' or as 'Residence Abroad'. Throughout this report the latter will be used for consistency of nomenclature .

2. The survey and its respondents

The survey was circulated in February 2017 and was open for two months. Initially, 43 universities responded but it was felt that a wider sample of respondents was needed in order to make the data as representative of practices in the sector as possible. The survey was therefore reopened after Easter and closed at the end of June. The first time round, the questions were circulated through our UCML representatives, who were asked to forward the survey to the relevant colleagues within their HEI. The survey was also sent to Subject Associations. In the second round, the survey was advertised through UCML's social media channels (Facebook and Twitter); this approach yielded an additional 4 responses.

The survey was created through Google Forms and circulated as a link. Its format comprised a series of yes/no questions with an additional area that gave respondents the opportunity to justify their

answer if neither option was applicable. Other questions were created as short or longer text answers and one question used the Likert scale system. At the end of the survey, respondents also had the possibility of writing additional comments on any aspect of the Residence Abroad experience.

In total, the survey was taken by 47 respondents. Although the survey asked respondents to reveal the name of the institution for which the survey was being completed, in order to limit the risk of data misinterpretation in the event that two or more people from the same HEI submitted answers, 10 of them did not disclose the institution they were representing. Of the identifiable institutions 4 responded twice and 1 three times. In the case of multiple responses, data was compared and a decision was made to use the first respondent's answers in the collection of data and highlight any differences in the analysis of such data within the study. What follows below is thus a report based on results obtained from 42 valid responses.

Of the 32 institutions that could be identified, an equal number of responses (16) came from Russell Group [RG] and non-Russell Group universities. The RG respondents make up for 2/3 of the whole RG grouping. Ten institutions remain anonymous.

3. Types of degree programme and languages represented

The first part of the survey aimed at highlighting the type of programme(s) represented by each institution answering the questions.

Interestingly, the figures obtained seem to support the upward national trend in the offer and provision of JH courses at the expense of SH programmes, as highlighted in articles from the Guardian in 2013 and THE in 2017.¹ In our survey, 39 of the 42 institutions (93%) offer programmes in JH in which one language is a named subject of the degree programme. Conversely, only 19 out of 42 HEIs offer Languages as SH alongside their JH programme, whilst only one HEI seems to be offering degrees in SH in modern languages (2 respondents did not answer the question), as the figure below highlights in percentages:

¹ "Only 12 of the [Russell G]roup's institutions still offer single-honours degrees in all four main European languages – French, German, Italian and Spanish. Cambridge and York do not offer any single-honours languages at all – all their language degrees are joint honours". <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/oct/08/modern-foreign-language-degrees-axed> [accessed on 03/07/2017]; "Ucas figures for 2015 show that they are chosen by only about one in 10 languages students. Almost as many students opt to study two or more languages together. The remaining eight out of 10 combine a language with another subject." <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/do-we-need-modern-language-graduates-in-globalised-world> [accessed 18/03/2017]

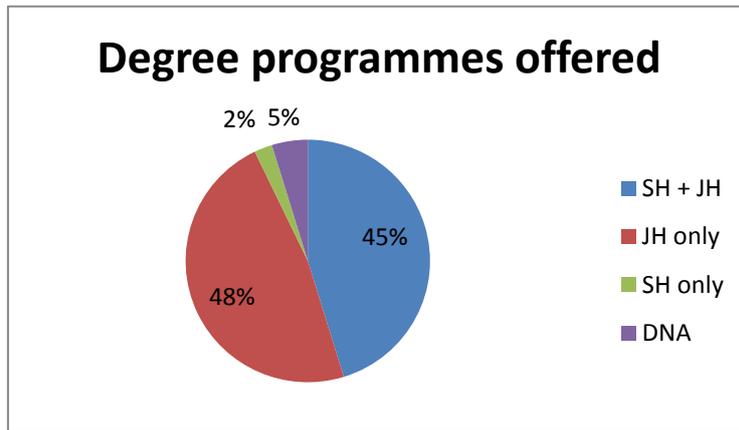


Figure 1: Degree Programmes offered

The next questions asked whether the respondents were filling out the survey for just one language or for multiple languages. Only 14 out of 42 institutions responded (33.3%). Of the 14 respondents, 10 represented single languages and 4 multiple languages. It is worth noting that within the 'Multiple languages' section, only French, German, and Spanish were represented.

It may be assumed that, in the cases in which only one language was mentioned (e.g. Italian), similar norms and regulations relating to the Residence Abroad period may by and large apply to other European languages (e.g. French, German, and Spanish) within the same department or School, as responses from 'Multiple languages' seem to confirm. The same may be assumed for non-European languages (e.g. Chinese, Japanese). The survey has also highlighted areas in which different languages (European and non-European) apply different practices within the same university.

The majority of answers were collected equally both from German as a single language and respondents who filled the survey in for 'Multiple languages' which included French, German, and Spanish. The second highest respondent field was French, followed by Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian with an equal number of responses. Indeed the highest takers' profiles mirror the national trend for the most-commonly taught European languages (with the notable exception of Spanish which did not reply as a single language but is represented in the 'Multiple languages' category). The chart below shows this:

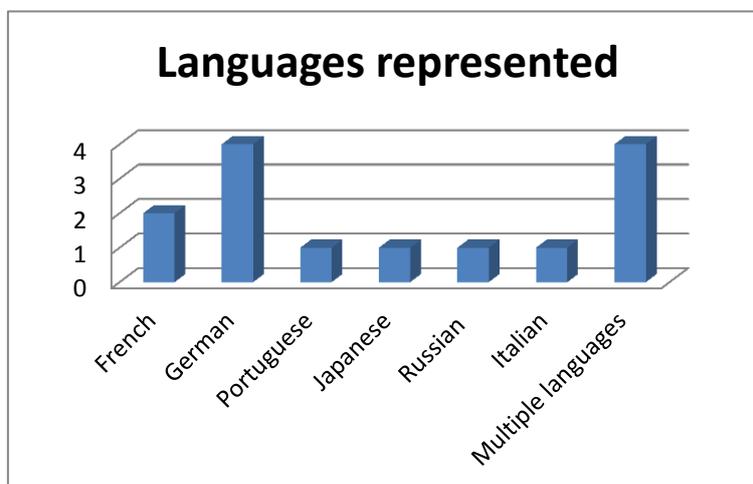


Figure 2: Languages represented

4. The period of Residence Abroad

Within this section of the questionnaire, different questions were asked regarding placement practice in terms of its compulsory nature, the year of residence, and number of credits attached to the RA.

4.1 Compulsory nature of Residence Abroad

When asked whether the RA was a compulsory component of the degree programme, the vast majority of the institutions surveyed (81%) replied affirmatively, with only roughly 1 in 5 institutions claiming that the period of residence is not compulsory. It is worth noting that one HEI stated that the compulsory nature of the Year Abroad depends on whether students decide to pursue Languages as major or minor components of their degree. In the case of the former, the RA period is compulsory; in the case of the latter, it does not constitute a mandatory requirement but is nevertheless highly recommended. One other institution also claimed that, despite lacking mandatory nature, the RA period remains highly recommended to their students. The chart below shows a breakdown of responses in percentages:

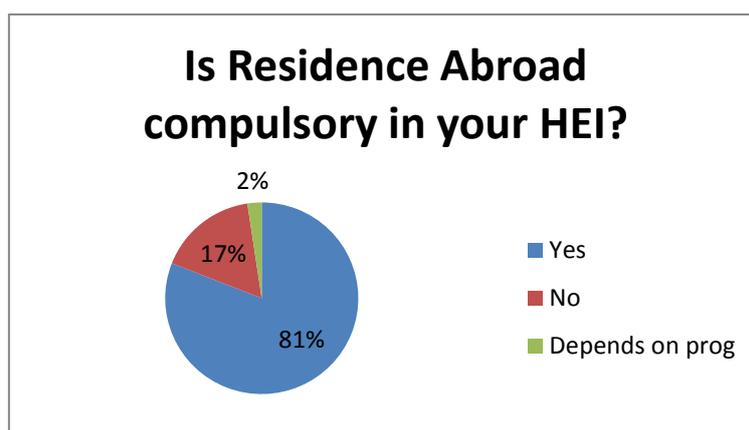


Figure 2: Languages represented

4.2 Period of Residence

A similar pattern of responses can be observed when considering what year of their degree programme students spend abroad. The vast majority of HEIs (38 out of 42, or 90% of the total) indicated the third year, whereas second year was selected by 4 institutions. Interestingly, and again depending on the degree programme selected, one institution for which a treble submission was received indicated that the Residence Abroad is usually carried out in the third year, whereas another response for a different language within the same institution indicated second year.² Another HEI also reported a similar arrangement for students studying two languages, whereas a

² For this institution, students “normally [go abroad in] 3rd year (SH and all JH with a non-language), [whereas] students on JH with another non-ab initio European language can spend a Term Abroad (3-4 months) at the end of their second year and then spend a year abroad in their 3rd year in the other language”.

Scottish university, alongside a full third year spent abroad, carries over the period of RA into the first semester of the fourth year of study for a five-year degree programme.

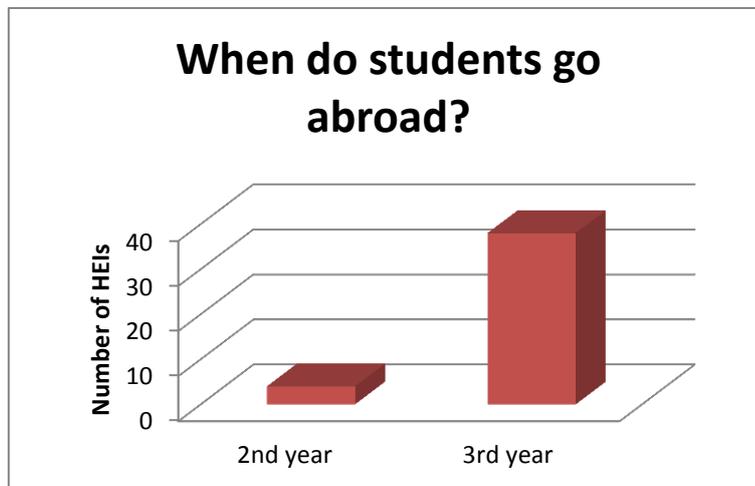


Figure 3: When do students go abroad?

4.3 Credits

The next area of the survey elicited data on whether HEIs attach credits to the period of Residence Abroad for their students and, if this is the case, how many credits are assigned to it. Again, the large majority of institutions attach credits to the RA (35) whilst only 7 HEIs do not, as the figure below shows.

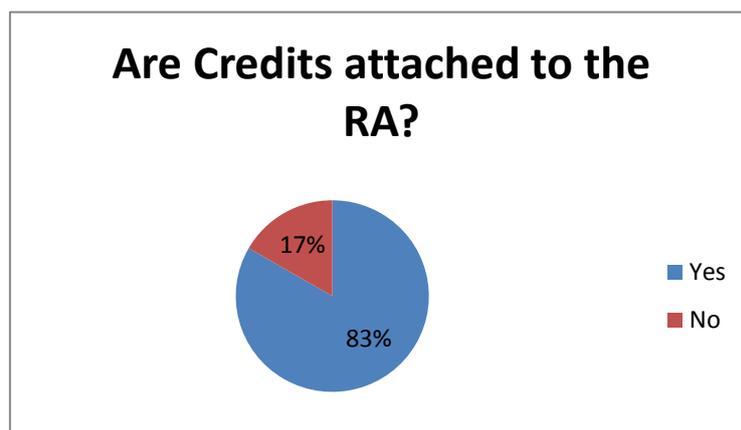


Figure 4: Are Credits attached to the RA?

The majority of HEIs (69%) assign 120 credits to the RA experience, which is the equivalent of one full year's credits for a four-year degree programme (totalling 480 credits).

It is worth noting that, amongst these, one HEI pointed out that from 2017 on the credit system will move towards a pass/fail system.³ For one other institution, the figure of 120 was selected because it relates to the Modern Languages programme (other programmes without a language seem to have a different system of credit allocation).

Different allocations of credits pertain to the remaining institutions (31% of the total). In the table below, the figure of 80 credits was chosen out of two different responses given by the same institution in reply to this question (original answers were: 40 credits and 80 credits for one discipline and 80 credits for the other; for the latter, 40 credits are for the Residence Abroad and 40 for its assessment). Eight HEIs instead allocate 60 credits to the RA period. Within this figure, one institution assigns 60 credits for one semester's placement and a pass/fail for a whole year of stay; one other simply quoted that the RA equates to "4 course units" in terms of credits, which, based on a standard UK average of most-commonly taught 10- and 20-credit units gives an average of 60. The two, less common values of 30 credits seem to be the figure least often assigned, as the table below shows:

Table 1: Allocation of credits

Number of credits assigned	120 credits	80 credits	60 credits	30 credits
Number of HEIs	24	1	8	2
% of 35 responses	68.5%	2.8%	23%	5.7%

4.4 Academic work whilst abroad

The next set of questions enquired whether students are assigned any mandatory academic work that has to be completed in the target country during the period of residence. Most institutions answered affirmatively (37) whereas 7 did not require the completion of any tasks (1 HEI failed to provide an answer). Four institutions pointed out that, although work is assigned, it is not credit-bearing.

Data reveals that the landscape of academic work (and/or assessment) carried out whilst abroad is variegated. However, some common trends can be identified. For the majority of HEIs requiring the carrying out of compulsory tasks, a written assignment of varying length is the most common choice. Other universities require the completion of e-portfolios or blogs, and only a small minority of HEIs set oral tasks or exams upon the students' return.

It must be noted that about one third (14) of the surveyed HEIs rely on written assessment alone in its various forms (essay, short or long dissertation, translation or research projects); 16 institutions seem to opt for a combination of modes of assessment whereas only 8 rely on one single mode of assessment other than a writing exercise (portfolios; translations). Interestingly, the multiple responses received by one institution report different practices amongst the same School; it can therefore be assumed that, even within the same School / Faculty, languages may opt for different modes of assessment.

³³ For this institution, "credits will [continue to] be entered on [the students'] transcripts but will no longer count towards their degree classification".

For the written assignments, not all institutions specified in what language students are required to present their work (either in the target language or in English); a mix of the two can be observed.

Another common trend can be detected when looking at the number of HEIs (13) that require their students to take all assessments at the host institution either as a stand-alone package or in combination with other forms of assessment. Only one university reported that no academic work is required of students who only spend a term abroad. Below is a list of tasks, in alphabetical order, required by the 37 HEIs who answered affirmatively to this question.

Table 2: Academic Work Abroad

Types of academic work carried out abroad
• (e-)Portfolio (reflective; with or w/out blogs)
• Diary
• Examinations at partner institution
• Independent / Year Abroad Study project
• None for term abroad
• Oral exam upon return
• Reflective log
• Research abroad with essay upon return
• Research project (may include fieldwork)
• Translation project (7000-8000 words)
• Video assignment
• Work / British Council placement report
• Written assignment / Essay / Dissertation (1500-8000 words)

4.5 Options for the Residence Abroad period

In the next section, one question in particular focussed on the different choices students can make in terms of activities undertaken whilst abroad. Whilst most institutions (30) indicated that their students can choose from one of the three commonly available options (a. Study at a partner institution; b. Work in an approved environment; c. Work as English language assistants through the British Council), a smaller number of HEIs (5) seem only able to offer the opportunity to study at a partner university.

An additional 5 universities are giving their students the possibility of choosing from the three options mentioned above or choosing to undertake an additional activity such as: independent or non-Erasmus study (3 answers), the combination of a. and b., and the possibility of working as an English tutor at a partner university. A smaller number of HEIs offer students the opportunity to study at a partner institution or work (either in an approved environment [1 respondent] or through the British Council [1 respondent]).

It is not surprising to find out that all institutions offer option a., study at a partner institution, which stands at the core of the original Erasmus project. Interestingly, those institutions which provided multiple answers indicated different responses amongst themselves: whilst everyone offers the possibility of Erasmus study, others only offer combinations of specific options. This seems to confirm that the provision of the Erasmus+ programme varies from institution to institution and potentially from discipline to discipline within the same HEI, which may be linked to the kind of

arrangement each discipline has negotiated with work partners or partnering institutions. The chart below shows the above data in percentages:

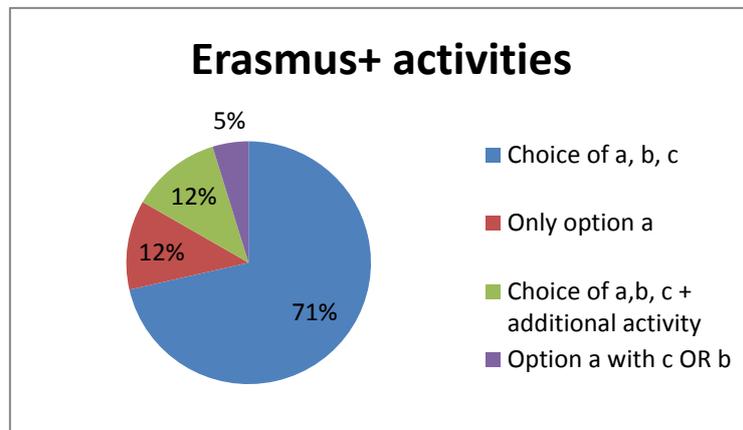


Figure 5: Erasmus+ activities

The next question asked whether students who undertake different study/work experiences attain the same number of credits for Residence Abroad. Again unsurprisingly, the great majority of HEIs (30) seem to allocate differing activities the same weight in terms of credits given. Five HEIs responded negatively (without providing further details), 5 did not reply at all and to the remaining 5 the question was not pertinent since they do not attach credits to the RA experience. The chart below shows such figures:

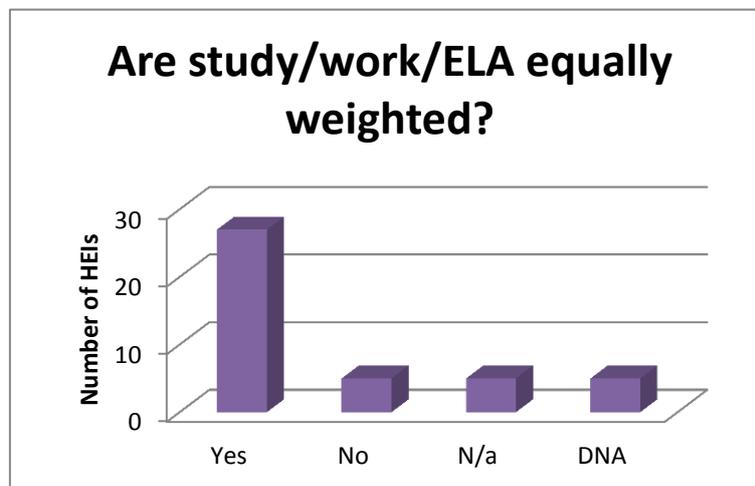


Figure 6: Are options equally weighted?

4.5 Compulsory nature of RA and progression

The next set of questions focussed on different aspects of the Residence Abroad experience. The first question asked whether the acquisition of Residence Abroad credits is compulsory for students to progress to the subsequent year of study once they return to the UK. Responses to this question were once again not surprising as most HEIs (30) answered affirmatively, 9 in the negative, 2

universities did not answer and 1 institution stated that if students fail the RA they may nonetheless proceed to the final year but their degree qualification will not bear the 'with Year Abroad' label. Other HEIs offer alternative exit pathways along the same lines, as discussed in a later section below.

It is also worth noting that one HEI that answered affirmatively added that if students complete the RA but eventually fail it in terms of credits awarded, they will not be able to continue with their original degree title and will only achieve a BA in European Cultural Studies. One other university in which the year abroad is not a hurdle for progression states that if a “student completes their YA but doesn't pass it, he/she can progress and resit while in their final year”, typically in the form of a written assignment.

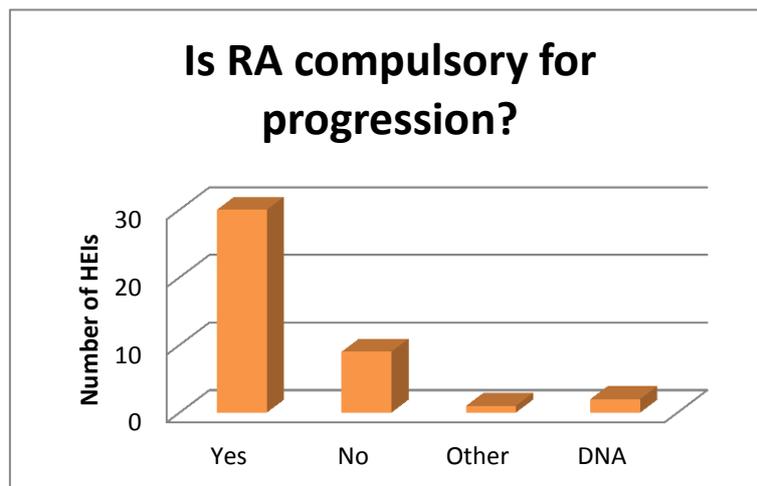


Figure 6: Is RA compulsory for progression?

4.5 Grades conversion

The next question asked whether, where applicable, institutions operate a system of grade conversion for examinations taken and passed abroad. In this instance results were remarkably even with 21 HEIs stating that they do and 19 who do not. One institution did not reply and one other is in the process of moving to grade conversion.

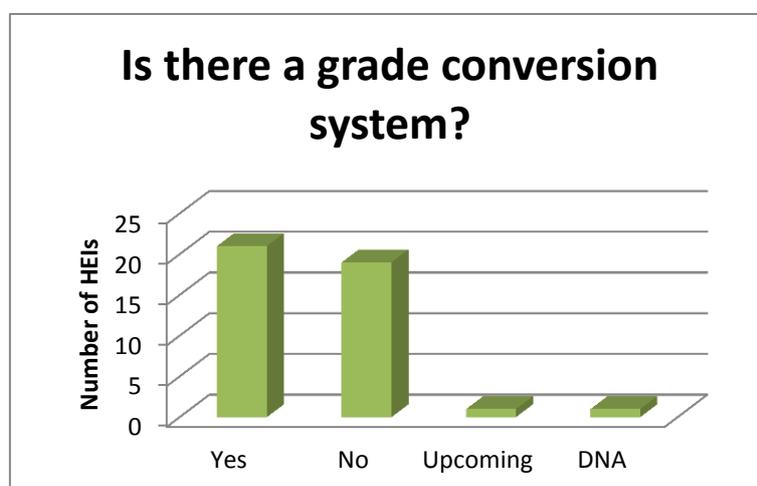


Figure 7: Is there a grade conversion system?

Further details relating to how grade conversion systems work were received from four institutions, three of which belong to the RG. Below is a summary of the procedures in use. Despite the fact the sample presented is statistically small, some general trends can be highlighted, potentially suggesting that diverse HEIs use grade conversion systems which are similar in their weighting and scope across the UK.

- Institution A: there is a 'Grade Conversion' group made up of specialists in different countries across different schools or departments whose role is to look at all the conversion tables in use across the college and to harmonise those which deal with the same countries to ensure consistency and fairness of practice. In the creation of grade conversion tables, research was carried out into the conversion grades used by other British HEIs. Grades obtained at the hosting institution are converted using a table mapped against the home institution's marking system.
- Institution B uses institutionally approved tables of grade conversion. Deans are responsible for the overseeing of the conversion of RA grades. Conversion tables follow a standard format, showing the host institution's grading scale against the home HEI's reporting scale. Marks obtained abroad cannot usually be altered upon return.
- Institution C: exchange marks cannot usually be altered upon return and those grades will, generally, be taken as they stand as the basis of conversion. In cases where hosting partners use the same grading scale as the home institution, marks will not normally be translated. In cases where RA partners do not use the same grading scale as the home HEI, the grades will normally be translated using the university's approved grade conversion tables.
- Institution D: uses conversion tables that have been agreed in collaboration with both the Year Abroad team and partner universities. The conversion tables vary depending on countries and grade systems used in each country. A revision process in grading conversion for East European languages is currently under way.

The grade conversion tables used by three of the four institutions look remarkably similar and similar UK weightings have been assigned to the translation of marks from one country (e.g. Spain or the US) within the different HEIs mentioned above. Conversion tables usually display the UK's classification system, the marking scale for the host institution, the conversion into ECTS using the lettering system and, in some cases, the equivalent mark (firm or suggested) or numerical band used in UK HEIs.

4.6 Language proficiency and RA

The next question of the survey asked whether HEIs have set language requirements students have to meet upon their return from the period of Residence Abroad. 37 out of 42 institutions answered in the negative (88%), whereas 5 HEIs claim that their students have to have achieved a set standard of proficiency (12%), as the table below shows:

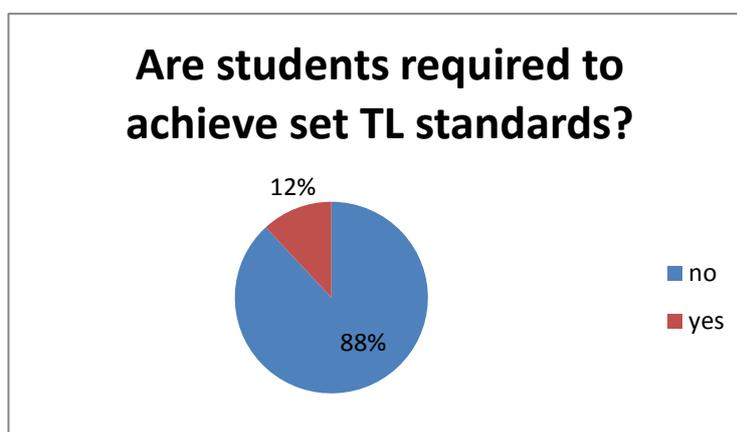


Figure 8: Are students required to achieve set TL standards upon returning from RA?

For those institutions that measure the language proficiency obtained by their students, this is carried out mainly through set examinations at the home university upon the students' return. Such exams can be a mixture of language tests and written exams, which may or may not be integrated with an oral component. Additionally, three of these HEIs base their assessment either on the handing in of a translation/dissertation or on the successful completion of a 'Research Project' in the target language.

Interestingly, two of the four universities providing multiple returns did not answer univocally. Noteworthy examples are Institutions 1 and 2, in which one language department does not require their students to have achieved a set standard of proficiency whereas another discipline within the same School requires their students to submit a 'Year Abroad' project or the passing of a language component.

Should students fail to pass the above-mentioned language exams or components, some HEIs put in place what could be called 'recovery measures' to allow them to make up for their credit loss. One institution requires students to take an extra language module; another asks their students to take resit examinations at the host institution. Two additional HEIs noted the following: in one, failure to pass the RA assessment "would have an impact on [the students'] final grade for their degree" (in which results are based on a system of points accumulation); in the other students may proceed to the final year but would lose the 'with Year Abroad' label in their degree transcript. One other institution stated that students could be barred from accessing the next stage of study, adding that this measure is hardly ever employed.

Multiple respondent departments in institutions 1 and 2 also offer a mixed approach to assessment failure, with HEI A asking students to take a resit examination for a capped mark of 40 and HEI B allocating a fail mark for 15% of their core language module at level 2.

4.7 Failing the Residence Abroad

The next questions asked about the various scenarios universities make available to students who fail the Residence Abroad period altogether. The question did not ask respondents to outline the reasons for failure, since this section was meant to be as open as possible in order to reveal the

different practices in place nationally. Data reveals that a number of institutions offer their students some form of ‘repair assessment’, in the shape of a resit examination (either *in situ* or abroad during the summer, sometimes for a capped mark or a pass/fail); the submission of additional ‘make-up’ work; or the submission of an essay. Some other HEIs do not provide these options and transfer their students on to an exit-pathway degree (in some cases without Honours or without reference to the Residence Abroad on the student’s transcript). A smaller number of universities allow their students either to carry outstanding credits over to the last year of study or to take up extra modules in that same year. Three institutions offer students the chance to repeat the RA year.

A smaller number of different institutions opt instead for different practices altogether. For example, students may be prevented from attending core modules in their final year; they may have to take a *viva voce* examination; they may still progress into final year; they may be asked to attend a hearing with the Year Abroad tutor and Undergraduate manager. One university mentioned that the measures adopted vary according to the type of failure. Other HEIs are in the process of changing their practices and two did not answer the question. In the chart below, the lowest number of responses (as outlined in this paragraph) has been grouped under the heading ‘Other’:

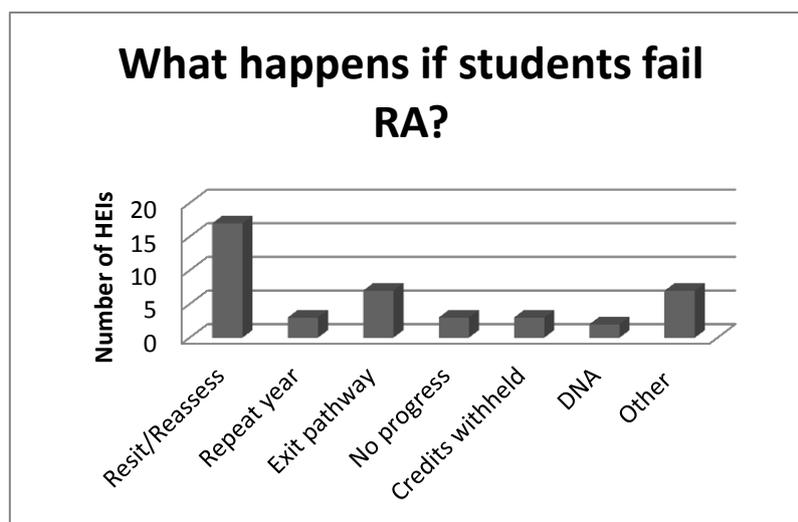


Figure 10: What happens if students fail RA?

4.8 Importance of Residence Abroad

The last question in the survey asked respondents how important they think it is for students of Modern Languages to have the opportunity to spend at least a term/semester abroad, in terms of target language acquisition and development. The answers were measured through a 0-10 Likert scale in which 0 equalled ‘not at all’ and 10 ‘essential’. As the chart below shows, all the results leaned towards the higher end of the scale, with three quarters of respondents (74%) believing that RA is essential for TL acquisition and development. This find substantiates the claims made by A. Klaus and S. Mentchen in ‘Why we cannot afford to lose Erasmus+’, especially when considering that the scores 8-10 account for 96% of all replies.

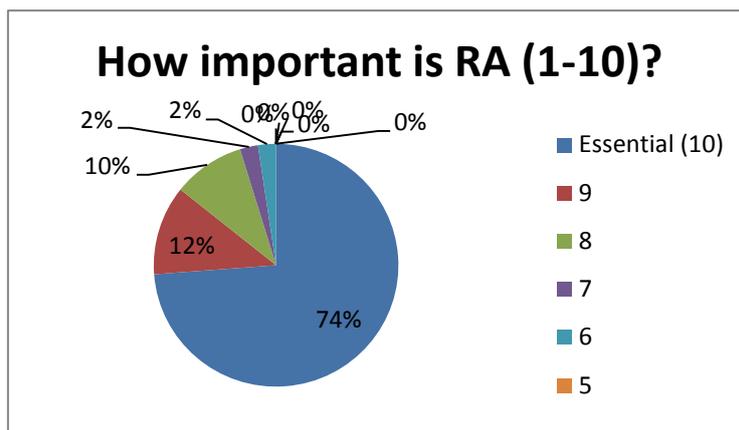


Figure 11: How important is RA?

The very last area of the survey gave respondents the opportunity to add any additional comments on the RA experience. Most of the comments related to the previous question (How important is RA for student learning), as respondents justified the rating given to the RA experience. It is not at all surprising that these comments reinforce the view that the RA is, and should continue to be, an essential part of the degree of any student who studies Modern Languages alone or in combination with other disciplines. The comments below highlight, and further reinforce, both the view expressed in Klaus and Mentchen’s publication about the importance of the Residence Abroad and the inextricable link between the RA and employability:⁴

“Participation in a year/semester abroad is essential, not just for the students’ linguistic development but for the opportunity to gain [the] intercultural insights it provides”.

“Yes, important for language development and confidence, and for some students this is a very formative experience”.

“The Year Abroad is an essential part of any language programme”.

“In addition to the language acquisition abroad, students' confidence gained abroad also has a very positive effect on their learning in the final year”.

“In all the surveys we have conducted among the employers, [the] period abroad has been on the top of what make[s] a graduate employable”.

“The University is committed to continuing a full year abroad for our Language students. The language knowledge and cultural experience the students gain cannot be replicated in the classroom. In addition the students gain so many invaluable life skills which amongst others help with employability”.

“It is simply not possible to study a language at university level and not have the chance to study and live in the country of the target language”.

⁴ For data concerning Erasmus+ and its direct, positive effect on employability, see Klaus and Mentchen and the 2015 report from the University of Cambridge, *The Value of Languages* (<http://www.languagesciences.cam.ac.uk/national-languages-policy/report-the-value-of-languages>).

4.9 Additional comments

The same respondents also put forward views on the assessment of RA. A representative from one HEI, for instance, believes that the RA experience is currently over-assessed whilst another colleague claims that it is often difficult to organise assessment around RA experiences which are inherently very different (i.e. studying or working abroad). Having said that, five other institutions are currently working on, or have been working towards, the simplification of their grading conversion systems and/or the attainment of a more harmonised form of assessment across various languages.

Two institutions also remarked on other challenges that are faced by both HEIs and students alike. One respondent in particular highlighted that “more and more students opt against a degree that lengthens their programme through a mandatory study abroad element”, potentially because “Erasmus+ require[s...] that students take the same workload as local students [which has resulted in] a sharp increase in demands we make on our [home] students, making study abroad less attractive for them”. This view can be substantiated by the words of another respondent, according to whom “students sometimes find the year abroad challenging” and therefore require additional support. Another arguable explanation is that students are becoming more conscious of the increase in the financial cost of studying at an HEI for four years and are perhaps now more than ever disinclined to spend additional money on their education.⁵

5. Conclusion

This survey has sought to collect data relating to the different practices concerning the RA and was open to all higher education institutions which include such a period of residence for their students within their degree programmes (for Languages SH or JH programmes or a JH degree which includes Languages).

Results show that general trends can be observed across the nation, such as the growing number of HEIs offering Modern Languages as part of a JH degree (with a consequent decrease in programmes with SH in languages), the mandatory nature of the year abroad, the period in which the residence takes place, the various opportunities of study and work offered, their weighting, the allocation of credits to the RA experience and, last but not least, the formative importance, both personal and academic, of such experience for our students.

It is hoped that this report will be of use to the modern languages sector and its HEI practitioners.

⁵ Cf. an article in the Guardian in which Sir Peter Lampl, chair of the Sutton Trust education charity, said the government’s planned fee increase “will add to student debts that we have shown to be by far the highest in the English-speaking world. A real concern is that the removal of maintenance grants will almost certainly deter poorer students, who now face debts of over £50,000 on graduation.”
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-36856026> [accessed 19/07/2017]

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