

# Valuing the Year Abroad

The importance of the year abroad as part  
of a degree programme for UK students

## INTRODUCTION

1. The British Academy<sup>1</sup> and the University Council of Modern Languages<sup>2</sup> are concerned that changes to university funding may deter UK students from undertaking a year's work or study abroad within their degree. There is a need to recognise the benefits which a year abroad can have not only for the skills and attributes of UK graduates, but also for their employability and subsequent contribution to the UK economy, at a time of accelerating globalisation.
2. In a survey undertaken by ThirdYearAbroad.com<sup>3</sup> for the purpose of this statement, nearly 600 graduates submitted case studies illustrating the academic, cultural, intercultural, linguistic, personal and professional benefits derived from the year abroad. Of the respondents, two thirds estimated that their residence abroad was a significant factor in getting their first and subsequent jobs, while no fewer than 86% considered the year abroad to be the most valuable part of their degree.

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1. The British Academy is the national academy for the humanities and social sciences.
  2. The University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) represents university departments and professional associations in modern languages, linguistics, cultural and area studies throughout the UK.
  3. ThirdYearAbroad.com is designed by and for university students across the world to provide up-to-date information, help and advice about living, studying and working abroad during degrees.



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3. Student mobility today is rapidly expanding in response to the challenges of globalisation and the demand for well-educated, highly skilled graduates who are capable of living and working effectively in a variety of geographical, cultural and linguistic settings. In 2009, there were 3.7 million mobile students world-wide, an increase of 77% since 2000.<sup>4</sup> Of this 3.7 million, only 0.87% (or fewer than nine in every thousand) were from the UK.
  4. What are the benefits of studying abroad? The international experience has been shown to contribute both to students' individual experience and employability<sup>5</sup> and to their home country's national prosperity. In addition to academic learning and deeper cultural insights, students on a year abroad develop both essential skills which help them to observe without misinterpretation or ethnocentric judgment, and interpersonal skills which allow adaptation to complex cultural milieux. They learn to show respect for local values without abandoning their own. In non-English-speaking countries, UK students also improve the fluency, accuracy and appropriateness of their language competence faster than in the university classroom. Students typically grow in self-awareness and self-confidence as a result of the challenges posed by a new environment. Skills such as interpersonal engagement, individual initiative and team-working – together with an understanding of how different societies function and the advantage of direct work experience for those students on placements – endow graduates with a portfolio which enhances their value to employers and to the national economy.
  5. This statement comes at a time of significant change to the higher education landscape, when funding will be largely driven by student choice. Using the survey of year abroad graduates, this statement outlines the value of the year abroad as part of a degree programme for UK students, and in consequence makes recommendations to government, universities, employers and students.

## CONTEXT

6. A recent report, *Global Graduates into Global Leaders*,<sup>6</sup> asked multinational companies employing UK graduates what skills they required. For global graduates, over and above core graduate competencies such as teamwork, communication, presentation skills, time and self-management, and professionalism, employers want 'additional critical competencies'. These include: a global mindset, global knowledge, cultural agility, advanced communication skills, management of complex interpersonal relationships, team-working and collaboration, learning agility, adaptability, flexibility, resilience, drive and self-awareness.

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4. *Education at a Glance*, OECD (2011)

5. See HEFCE report, *Attainment in Higher Education* (2009) and HEFCE-British Council report, *International student mobility literature review* (2010)

6. The report was published in December 2011 for the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) and Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE).

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7. These are precisely the skills developed by the year abroad and which the British Academy-UCML survey highlights. The top requirement, even more important than language skills, is ‘an ability to work collaboratively with teams of people from a range of backgrounds and countries’. Adaptability, excellent communication skills and the ability to learn in any culture or environment are also highly valued global competencies, meaning that ‘experience of working outside their home country and immersion in a different culture can catapult a graduate into being considered for rewarding and challenging roles’. The report urges the government towards ‘incentivising higher education institutions to offer affordable transnational exchange programmes and sandwich courses (such as Erasmus) and increase participation.’
  8. The world’s most successful student mobility scheme is the EU’s Erasmus programme, involving over 4,000 universities. Erasmus has helped over 2.3 million students to spend part of their degree programme in a different country, either in university study or a work placement. In the launch year of 1987, the UK was the largest contributor to Erasmus, with 28.5% of outgoing students; but by 2009/10, the UK had slipped to sixth, with just 5.5% of outgoing students. In many European countries, over 10% of graduates have some international experience, while the figure is below 2% in the UK.<sup>7</sup>
  9. Since 2000/01, aggregate Erasmus participation has increased each year, by a total of 88%. In the UK, however, numbers fell consistently to 2004/05 – but have since recovered to a level 33% higher than in 2000/01. A major factor in explaining the growth in the level of the UK participation figures in the past 5 years or so has been the inclusion within Erasmus, since 2006/07, of not only university study but also work placements in business and industry, including eligible language assistantships. The UK has a larger share of outgoing students on work placements than any other participating country, representing nearly one in three of all Erasmus placements. A likely additional factor in the increased enthusiasm for work and study abroad by UK students is the recognition of the employability advantage this will confer.
  10. But the fact remains that, within Erasmus, the UK has the lowest share of students on degree programmes other than Modern Languages. Across Europe these students have consistently made up around 85%. In the UK, they have represented approximately 60%; and since the inclusion of work placements, which are mostly taken up by language students, the proportion of students specialising in other fields has fallen to barely 50%. At a time when the market for graduates is increasingly competitive, and graduates from across Europe can offer international experience and fluency in one or two languages in addition to English, the UK is finding itself at a disadvantage in disciplines such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and also in Law, Economics and Management.
  11. Current financial incentives push students (and their universities) to choose European destinations rather than more challenging ones. They also encourage students to opt

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7. European Commission statistical survey of Erasmus: <http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/0910/report.pdf>

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for study rather than work placements. While every year abroad however spent adds value, it would be very much in the national and individual interest to level the playing field and ensure that the same funding arrangements apply to all types of year abroad.

12. Although the number of UK undergraduates spending a year abroad has grown in recent years, the total for 2009/10 was still only 17,314 (1.7% of all home and EU students). The total comprised 8,053 on Erasmus study, 3,670 Erasmus work placements, 100 studying in Switzerland, 4,910 non-European placements, 460 non-Erasmus assistants, and 121 Comenius assistantships.<sup>8</sup>
13. Within the Erasmus scheme, the UK has the highest imbalance between incoming and outgoing students, with twice as many incomers as outgoers. When looking at student mobility overall and taking both overall degree and credit mobility into account, the imbalance is more than eleven to one.<sup>9</sup> Not merely does this put a disproportionate burden on UK universities, it underlines just how disadvantaged UK graduates are in what is now a global employment market.
14. High-achieving white students from well-educated cosmopolitan families are over-represented among year abroad students. Study abroad participation by UK students shows a similar pattern to Modern Language provision and recruitment, with Russell Group universities well ahead of other pre-1992 universities and post-1992 universities well behind. Since Modern Language degrees admit a higher proportion of students from independent schools than any other discipline (at a ratio of about one in four), it follows that efforts to widen participation have been equally unsuccessful with regard to the year abroad, and this cannot be separated from the additional costs which a four-year degree entails.

## THE VALUE OF THE YEAR ABROAD

15. The value of the year abroad is significant both for the individual and for the graduates that the UK produces. This value extends beyond modern languages, facilitating the development of vital personal and professional competencies and understanding necessary for most, if not all, disciplines and careers. While measuring the skills developed as a result of the year abroad is not an easy task, the national need for these skills is multiple, falling under a variety of heads:
  - **Development of language skills.** To learn a foreign language well is to acquire a wealth of culture beyond textbook knowledge. And to learn a language outside of its spoken environment is to learn it incompletely. The 2011 CBI Education and Skills Survey<sup>10</sup> highlights language skills as particularly important in sectors such

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8. *Growing Numbers in UK Student Mobility (from 2005–06 to 2009–10)*, Carbonell (2011)

9. *International student mobility literature review*, HEFCE (2010)

10. *Building for growth: business priorities for education and skills* (CBI 2011)

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as manufacturing, banking, finance and insurance – reflecting the globalisation of organisations. Moreover, with only a quarter of businesses expressing no need for foreign language skills among their employees, the greatest demand is for a level of language skills that can help in building relations with overseas contacts. The development of language skills in the environment in which the target language thrives opens up a world of encoded and tacit knowledge that must be experienced – and not simply taught.

- **Intercultural understanding and openness.** There is no substitute for having to live in, cope with, and ultimately learn to function successfully within the rules and unwritten conventions of a foreign culture. This includes a great deal more than learning its language: it means living its culture, and understanding its history as the lived experience. This can only really be learnt through a substantial period of residence and work in the foreign environment. This provides a life experience unobtainable in the classroom. Furthermore, students are potential ambassadors for the UK in foreign countries, acting therefore as intermediaries for and between cultures and societies often returning with a more nuanced and critical understanding of their own.
- **Personal confidence and development.** As illustrated by the enthusiasm displayed in our case studies, the experience of living, working and studying abroad has a transformative effect, making students more reflective, self-reliant and self-confident individuals.
- **Skills for competitiveness, professional development and employability.** The 2011 CBI Education and Skills Survey found not only that over 58% of employers expect to increase their demand for higher-skilled employees, but also that a majority (52%) are not confident of meeting their need for high-skilled employees. The year abroad provides a foundation not only for basic skills in working life, but also for those which enhance competitiveness, providing the edge for UK graduates in a way that allows them to compete internationally.

## CASE STUDIES

“The attitude to social issues, such as education and employment, and to global problems, such as third-world debt and climate change, are broader, more informed, and more nuanced among those of us who had the opportunity to see another culture in depth and from the inside. The insularity that is represented by not speaking a foreign language is indicative of the narrowness of vision that comes with having known only a single place and culture in which ideas are expressed: it is not just important linguistic competencies which are threatened by failing to support year abroad programmes, but the UK’s engagement in a generation which looks across borders, in its policies, research, and debates.”

**Katie Ritson, Modern and Medieval Languages, University of Cambridge, 2003. Now an Academic Editor and Translator at a research institute in Munich.**

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“The year abroad obviously significantly improved my language skills; it is true that you do not properly learn a language until you are living among those that speak it. It is the perfect way to put the theory you learn during your years studying to practical use and it really does all start to fall into place. In University you are speaking with University lecturers and fellow students, whereas when you are on your year abroad you are forced to speak with people at all levels...My career has taken me into the translation industry... Translation involves a certain degree of cultural awareness which can only be achieved by living in the country and a knowledge of the regional variations in the language which again can only be achieved by experiencing it firsthand.”

**Emma Roome, French and Spanish, Cardiff University, 2007. Now Translator and Project Manager at Wolfestone Translation.**

“As a person of English and Caribbean heritage, growing up in the 1990s in post-industrial Newcastle upon Tyne, I was very unhappy with my lack of strong connections to the world beyond Tyne and Wear. On my year abroad I made some good friends from Spain and some other international friends who found themselves in Madrid at the same time as me. This broadened my perspectives phenomenally, both academically and personally... At a personal level, I feel that, thanks to my year abroad, I am increasingly a global citizen. I am much more aware of and able to discuss international political issues, such as universal human rights, Britain’s participation in the EU and the extent to which the US should instigate democracy abroad, than I ever was before my year abroad.”

**Stephen Tobin, Modern and Medieval Languages, University of Cambridge, 2003. Gained an MA in Linguistics at the University of Southern California, and due to complete a PhD in Language and Cognition at the University of Connecticut in May 2012.**

“The year abroad helps to shape our graduates into mature, knowledgeable adults who have experience in a challenging environment, something that sets us apart from other graduates. We experience different approaches to our subject of interest which is just one of the ways it opens our minds to the real world.”

**Megan Sweeney, French, Spanish and Marketing, University of Ulster, 2011.**

“Even though I was applying for training contracts with commercial law firms, I found that many of the skills which I had developed during my teaching placement were highly relevant – namely the skill to communicate effectively in a range of different spheres, and the ability to manage my time well. More generally, however, I think that the whole experience of living and working in a culture that is different to your own is an extremely attractive prospect to potential employers, since it displays self-confidence, pro-activity and determination.”

**Tom Besant, Modern Languages (French and Italian), University of Oxford, 2011. Now doing his legal training contract.**

“Having lived in a non-English speaking country, I feel that I can better relate to foreigners that I come across as a Police Officer. I feel that my experience living overseas gives me a better understanding of the possible confusion or complications faced by foreigners living or visiting the UK. I believe my time living abroad makes me a better Police Officer. I am also a French speaking volunteer at work, meaning that I can be called on to assist with any situations where a French speaker is required.”

**Lisa Gillard, French studies, Oxford Brookes, 2007. Language Assistant in France, now a Police Officer.**

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“A degree in languages with the year abroad as its backbone has remarkable similarities to joining the army as an officer, ultimately being sent away to different countries where understanding local culture can mean life or death... Defence attaché jobs, Liaison officer jobs and even on the battlefield fighting as part of NATO forces would all require language skills. As I write this, I am presently serving on operations in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. My ability to deal with local nationals on a daily basis and understand the mechanics of a foreign society, I attribute directly to my degree and specifically to the lessons I learned on my year abroad. Finding oneself in the midst of a counter insurgency, which has all to do with understanding one’s environment, is not so different from living, working and socialising in a different country, which is also all about understanding your environment.”

**Peter Robert Gordon-Finlayson, French and Spanish, Newcastle Upon Tyne University, 2009. Studied in Ecuador and worked in France. Now an Officer in the British Army serving on operations in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.**

“I am currently preparing for an Assessment Centre to become a Lawyer-Linguist at the Court of Justice of the European Communities in Luxembourg. It is simply inconceivable that I should have reached this stage in the recruitment procedure without the skills and experience gained from my year abroad over ten years ago.”

**Mary Guy, Interpreting and Translating with French and German Language (Dutch ab initio), University of East Anglia, 2001. Studied in Switzerland and Germany, now a Lawyer-Linguist in Luxembourg.**

“Now working in recruitment I see graduates who have done a study year abroad; they are generally good problem solvers, good at working on their own initiative and have good communication skills. Whether they worked or studied it gives them something interesting to talk about at interview and they (often unconsciously) demonstrate exactly the qualities that the employer is looking for as they talk through their year. They are also typically more confident in their spoken language ability.”

**Katherine Leopold, German and Linguistics BA, University of Manchester, 2001. Erasmus student in Germany, and now a Senior Recruitment Consultant.**

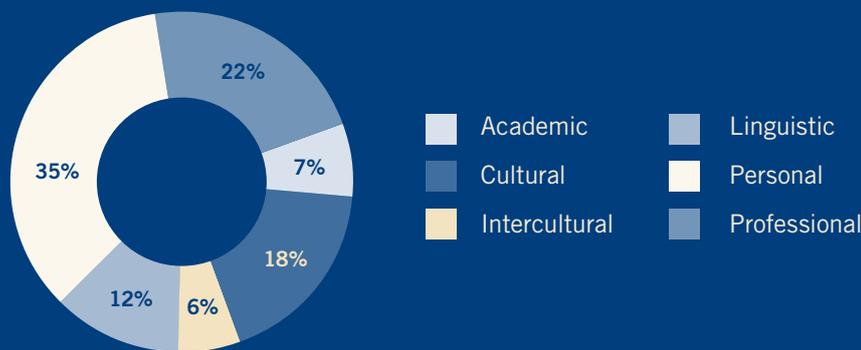
## GRADUATE SURVEY

16. Respondents had undertaken a year abroad as part of widely different degrees, ranging from Economics to Computer Science, History to Accounting, Law and Tourism to Mathematics and English Literature. Two-thirds had studied one or more of seventeen languages, from French and German to Arabic, Chinese, Portuguese and Thai.
17. The diagram overleaf outlines the principal learning outcomes<sup>11</sup> of the year abroad according to the surveyed graduates. While there are significant overlaps in the outlined categories, graduates gained most in personal terms, followed by employment-related skills. Personal objectives and outcomes have been among the most widely recognised but least studied in terms of the value of the year abroad. Professional, employment-related skills often overlap with other skills – such as linguistic and intercultural competence.

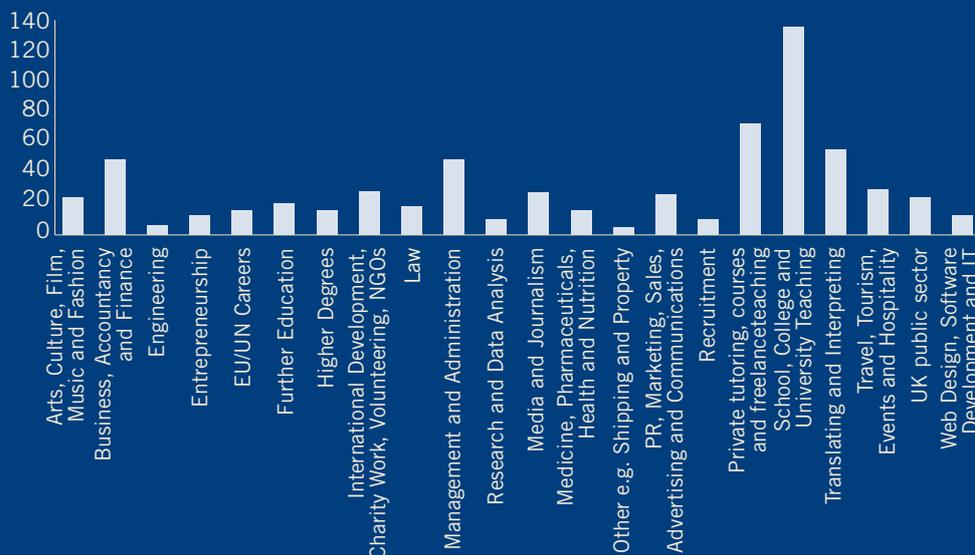
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11. The taxonomy used to categorise learning outcomes was developed by the Residence Abroad Project.

## PRINCIPAL LEARNING OUTCOMES



## CAREERS OF RESPONDENTS



18. One in four respondents have already followed an international career – a higher proportion than the 10.4% recorded by the AGCAS 2011 survey,<sup>12</sup> but underlying its conclusion: “The success of language graduates in obtaining a good level of employment may substantiate the assertion that graduate employers do set a premium on graduates with languages.” The diagram above illustrates the range of the careers of our surveyed graduates, 86% of whom considered the year abroad to be the most valuable part of the degree, with 66% estimating the role of residence abroad to be a significant factor in getting their first and subsequent jobs.

12. Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS)

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19. Although respondents were self-selected and aware of the purpose of the survey, the results are in line with a 2001 survey of over 1000 language graduates.<sup>13</sup> Taken together with other research, they confirm that the experiential learning of a year abroad is increasingly significant in today's international job market.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

20. We welcome the explicit recognition in the Government's *Innovation and Research Strategy for Growth*<sup>14</sup> regarding the need to increase mobility in the interests of UK employers:

*"British undergraduate students are less likely to study abroad than their mainland European counterparts, for reasons such as lack of foreign language skills or the relative inflexibility of courses. However, international exposure while at university provides students with skills that employers have said are in short supply. [...] We continue to support outward mobility and are keen that study abroad becomes an integral and accredited part of a wider range of courses, and to increase student mobility. We are working to ensure the recognition of study and qualifications undertaken overseas. We are also working with the higher education sector to encourage universities to credit other mobility activity so that overseas activity contributes to their degree."*

21. The recommendations made here by the British Academy and UCML address two underlying issues that have been identified in this position statement:

- **Explicit recognition and active communication of the value and importance of the year abroad:** A December 2011 YouGov survey for the British Council found that UK graduates 'did not make an explicit connection with the potential career benefits of getting involved in international experiences such as living, volunteering, working or studying overseas.' A unified strategy involving all stakeholders is necessary to monitor developments in, and recognise and communicate the value of the international experience and student mobility overall. This must involve students, universities, government and employers.
- **Investing in a highly skilled workforce in order to match supply and demand:** Recognising the costs to home institutions and students, it is vital that government moves to ensure there are short-term financial incentives for the longer-term benefit of the UK. Particularly in the current funding climate for higher education, there is a real danger that students who already expect to have substantial loans to repay after graduation will be deterred from all four-year courses and from undertaking a year abroad, while universities will be deterred from supporting a year abroad for their students.

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13. *Study/work abroad and employability*, UCML (2011): <http://bit.ly/zJTSDB>

14. *Innovation and Research Strategy for Growth*, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (December 2011): page 65.

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22. The British Academy's 2011 Position Statement, *Language matters more and more*, urged universities – in line with the recommendations of Sir Drummond Bone's report on the internationalisation of higher education – to ensure that senior management and governance structures reflected the importance of long-term collaborative partnerships by putting internationalisation at the heart of their missions and strategies. With this in mind, there is much that can be learnt from the ways in which national student mobility functions overseas. With a target of a 50% overall international mobility rate among its graduates, the ongoing student mobility campaign 'Go out' of Germany's Academic Exchange Service is exemplary.

23. Addressing the challenges outlined here in an effective and sustainable manner, which ensures the UK's ability to compete internationally, requires both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. We therefore make the following recommendations to government, universities, employers and students:

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT

Government is urged to:

- Acknowledge the exceptional contribution of work and study abroad to the pool of highly skilled UK graduates, and also the return for UK plc on investment in the year abroad;
- Recognise that over 99% of the world's mobile students are not British, and that the UK must expand outgoing numbers of students across all disciplines, in order to reduce the deficit with our economic competitors;
- Minimise financial disincentives for the small but currently growing number of students who wish to undertake a year abroad, recognise that the cost of a year abroad is the greatest disincentive to students, and that the market alone may not attract enough UK students to take a year abroad;
- Level the playing field between Erasmus and non-Erasmus, European and Non-European, work and study placements;
- Help reduce language obstacles to the mobility of specialists in other disciplines by supporting university-wide language programmes;
- Recognise the challenge to Equal Opportunities and Widening Participation posed by current year abroad statistics in which ethnic minorities and students from disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS TO UNIVERSITIES

Recognising the strategic importance of, and need for, internationalisation at the heart of their agendas, universities are urged to:

- Recognise the competitive employability advantage conferred on their graduates by including a year abroad in the degree programme;
- Recognise the attraction which year abroad provision represents for the brightest and best qualified students, provided costs are within market expectations;
- Moderate, through central funding, the fees charged to students for their year abroad;
- Make targeted bursaries available to students of modest means;
- Support and encourage Departments across all disciplines to make a year abroad available at reasonable cost.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO EMPLOYERS

UK employers are urged to:

- Acknowledge explicitly in their recruitment and publicity materials the competitive advantage which a year abroad adds to a candidate's CV;
- Acknowledge explicitly the added value which employee skills gained during the year abroad bring to the company;
- Make targeted bursaries available for disadvantaged students to undertake a year abroad.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO STUDENTS

Students are urged to:

- Recognise the great potential benefits of a year abroad for their future employability, and for a satisfying graduate career in an increasingly international job market;
- Explore all available sources of funding to enable them to undertake what is likely to be the most challenging, most rewarding and most fun year of their lives.

**March 2012**



# BRITISH ACADEMY

In 2011, the **British Academy** was awarded Government funding to run a four year programme to support Languages and Quantitative Skills (L&QS). Through a targeted programme of research support, partnerships and interventions, the **L&QS Programme** is seeking to build capacity to address these deep-seated challenges and strengthen skills in these vital areas. The British Academy, established by Royal Charter in 1902, champions and supports the humanities and social sciences. It aims to inspire, recognise and support excellence and high achievement across the UK and internationally. The British Academy is a Fellowship of over 900 UK scholars and social scientists elected for their distinction in research. Views expressed here are not necessarily shared by each individual Fellow.

**The University Council of Modern Languages**, founded in 1993, is the overarching national organisation representing the interests of modern languages, linguistics and cultural and area studies in higher education throughout the United Kingdom. UCML's members include virtually all UK schools and departments of modern languages, together with professional and scholarly associations and organisations concerned with study, teaching and research.

**ThirdYearAbroad.com**, founded in 2006, is the UK's largest information and support network for students who work, study or volunteer abroad during their degree course. The website also provides case studies, useful articles and a forum, while promoting the study of Modern Languages in the UK to students of all ages, alongside the Routes into Languages programme.



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