

2 On the year abroad experience and positive wellbeing

Hilary Potter¹

Abstract

This chapter examines the impact of the Year Abroad (YA) on mental health and wellbeing, arguing that whilst we tend to be systemically and culturally inclined to focus on and mitigate negative impact, we overlook the benefits. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from students surveyed on placement in Germany and Austria, and on mental health research, this chapter highlights the positive impact of the YA, even where students are faced with challenging situations. It suggests a correlation between a range of factors including linguistic competence and otherness, facilitating a sense of wellbeing not attainable in a first language setting. These findings are indicative, suggesting that further, in-depth longitudinal research is warranted.

Keywords: mental health, hedonice/udaimonic wellbeing, linguistic competence.

1. Introduction

The project originates from conversations with my students. In these conversations a number of YA-related factors promoting positive wellbeing became apparent, including increased student confidence in dealing with everyday life in another country. This pattern was reflected widely, and significantly by students who, prior to departure, had experienced mental health issues. Yet, they

1. Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom; hilary.potter@newcastle.ac.uk; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8160-3799>

How to cite this chapter: Potter, H. (2020). On the year abroad experience and positive wellbeing. In S. Salin, D. Hall & C. Hampton (Eds), *Perspectives on the year abroad: a selection of papers from YAC2018* (pp. 21-29). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.39.1048>

seemed to thrive on their YA, noting how even simple tasks they had previously found challenging were possible during their time abroad. These observations raised a number of questions which warranted further exploration, most notably whether this positive impact correlates with linguistic competence, suggesting that in speaking another language we have a second self and that this is a contributing factor in positive wellbeing. Other studies have indicated academic (Cardwell, 2019) and psychological (Costa et al., 2014) benefits; the latter work suggests that when working in another language we can be less inhibited, more analytical, and have greater reasoning ability than in our native language. This project asks whether the YA can similarly reinforce positive mental health, in the way that second language usage helps in analytical processing.

Existing academic research into the YA and its positive impact has focused on its lifelong, transformative function (Coleman, 2015; Hampton, 2015, 2016). However, research on the YA and positive wellbeing is lacking. Moreover, background research for this chapter yielded a curious paradox. Whilst at open days and at pre-departure stages the YA is discussed in positive terms, the YA experience simultaneously appears to be embedded in a culture of negativity, including raising awareness of suicide (The University of Sheffield, 2017). Such an emphasis is understandable, not least because higher education institutions have ethical and legal responsibilities for their students under duty of care, but this finding suggests that within universities and associated organisations, we may be inclined, culturally and systemically, to focus on the negative and fail to recognise the positive impact, thus overlooking lessons to be learned, and ones which may enhance not just the way we prepare students for this experience, but also our understanding of wellbeing (Colclough, 2016; Student Minds, 2017).

2. Methodology

The project is based on findings from a survey designed to assess the impact of the YA. It should be noted that the data set is based on one cohort (n=33), and as such the findings are indicative only. The scope of the survey was to assess the subject with a view to justifying further research.

Central to this project is an understanding of mental health as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2001), namely “a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (p. 1, quoted in WHO, 2004, p. 12), and an understanding of wellbeing in terms of being happy, comfortable, healthy, having a sense of purpose, and feeling in control (Michaelson, Mahony, & Schifferes, 2012). In order to measure this in relation to the YA, data was generated through a survey, which was underpinned by Westerhof and Keyes’s (2010) study. It utilises the two-continua model of mental health, namely hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. Hedonic focuses on feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and interest in life, and is complemented by eudaimonic, which is centred on wellbeing in terms of individual strivings, optimal functioning, and individual fulfilment. Concentrating on both types of wellbeing allows for a well-rounded insight into our subject.

This survey posed eight questions (see [supplementary materials](#)). Anonymity was maintained as far as possible, in an attempt to minimise ‘social desirability bias’, namely answering as respondents feel they should rather than what they feel (Michaelson et al., 2012); however, students were identifiable in some responses. There were seven questions on specific aspects of the YA, which asked about:

- wellbeing prior to departure;
- placement type;
- linguistic competence;
- otherness;
- dealing with everyday challenges;
- overcoming negative experiences; and
- socio-political changes in the host country.

These questions were scaled from positive to negative; Question 8 provided the opportunity for free-text comments, thereby providing greater contextual detail to the previous answers.

3. Findings

Following their YA, the majority of respondents judged their wellbeing as slightly (36.4%) or much better than before (45.5%), with negative and no perceived impact each at 9.1%. This suggests that, overall, the YA has a positive impact on wellbeing, which contrasts with the culture of negativity surrounding the YA and mental health which is perpetuated by universities and associated organisations. Yet, we still have no explanation as to the causes. Let us examine the factors in turn.

3.1. Placement

Placement type (work placement, study abroad, or teaching English abroad) proved inconclusive, indicating that it is not the overriding factor in regard to wellbeing in spite of the placement's centrality to the student experience. Where negative indication did occur, free-text comments suggested the issue lay with colleagues rather than the placement type itself.

3.2. Linguistic competence

On the question of linguistic competence and wellbeing, no downturn was indicated. 18% indicated this was a neutral factor. Given that the desire to improve is a common aim at the pre-departure stage, this was an interesting and unanticipated finding, one which may cause us to question the correlation between self-fulfilment and eudaimonic wellbeing. However, the results may also indicate that the respondents were simply not as aware of the influence of linguistic competence on wellbeing as the question had assumed.

The majority of respondents noted that increased linguistic competence had a positive impact on their wellbeing to a reasonable (46%) or great extent (36%). This finding suggests that wellbeing and positive mental health correlate with striving and self-fulfilment. Yet, it also indicates that wellbeing is linked to communicative function, and that using another language impacts positively on wellbeing. It may also provide an explanation for why students who included

themselves in the category of slightly negative mental health pre-departure, seemed to improve on their YA. Whether consciously or not, that ability to communicate in another language, and possibly because it is a non-native language, engenders a sense of wellbeing. It is not, however, the sole defining factor.

3.3. Otherness

The responses to the question of otherness generated the largest spread of results. Nine percent recorded a considerably negative impact, with 18% a slightly negative one; 28% listed it as a neutral factor, whilst 18% opted for a reasonably positive impact, and a further 27% arguing it has a considerably positive impact. Even where one respondent indicated otherness had a considerably negative impact, they also noted that their sense of wellbeing following the YA was much better; conversely, where one respondent noted a slight downturn in wellbeing after the YA, they nevertheless indicated that otherness had had a reasonably positive impact. In part these findings need to be read against the socio-political trends in Germany and Austria at the time of the survey, namely the increase in racism and intolerance, most notably in Bavaria and in Saxony (see also responses to question seven). Nevertheless, whilst latent racism was a factor for some, this did not preclude them from having a positive overall YA.

Other factors cited in relation to this question appeared to be living costs in particular areas. Hence it is not necessarily otherness that is problematic in such instances; rather, if living costs are prohibitive, integration becomes more difficult, making otherness appear problematic when the issue is actually primarily financial. In addition, we may further speculate that the fact that 27% of respondents listed otherness as a neutral factor reflects their perceived level of integration into society, so that they did not have an acute sense of otherness.

The majority of respondents indicated that otherness impacted them positively, albeit to differing extents. This finding has parallels with [Coleman's \(2015\)](#)

study. Explanations provided via free-text comments indicated that otherness was liberating, allowing them to discover another self. This suggests that, in connection with linguistic competence, speaking another language provides a proxy, another version of you, one who is less inhibited, and thus ‘otherness’ in this sense feeds into positive wellbeing.

These responses tally with [Costa et al.’s \(2014\)](#) findings on the psychology of other language usage in the workplace, in which he argues that the greater emotional distance another language affords enables us to be less sensitive, whilst also more critical and analytical. The correlation between [Costa et al.’s \(2014\)](#) findings and those of this survey raises the possibility that the YA may have a similar effect in promoting positive mental health and a sense of wellbeing. In our second self, it appears, we may feel more detached from the anxieties that hold us back, enabling a more self-confident version of ourselves to emerge. If so, this suggests that further study into the impact of the YA on wellbeing is needed.

Place is a further factor for consideration, both distance from the UK and placement location. In the first instance, a sense of positive wellbeing may be linked to the fact that the respondents were not as fully exposed to the UK’s Brexit-related political upheaval; the cohort who participated in this study were assured of their rights during the YA. Other possible considerations include distance from the pressures, particularly financial, of the UK’s neoliberal university system.

3.4. Everyday challenges

Prior to departure, students indicated that the prospect of everyday challenges such as opening a bank account and dealing with bureaucracy were a cause of concern. Yet, the survey findings show this initial concern did not correlate with their actual experiences. If we break down the statistics, we see that 18% listed everyday challenges as negatively impacting on wellbeing. Conversely, those who opted for a neutral answer (27%) found the reality of dealing with everyday challenges was not nearly as difficult as they had anticipated. The majority

(55%) rated everyday challenges as having a positive impact. Anecdotal evidence suggested it was everyday activities that respondents found most challenging, yet subsequently felt dealing with them was truly rewarding, thus for the majority, dealing with matters out of their comfort zone yielded positive benefits for wellbeing in the eudaimonic sense.

3.5. Overcoming negative experiences

This question focused on the longer-term, rather than the immediate, impact of negative experiences. Since this varies by individual perception, the term was deliberately ambiguous so as to reflect the range of experiences that the respondents may define as negative. The results confounded expectations with 27% opting for either a neutral or a considerably positive impact, with the remaining 46% opting for reasonably positive. The results may be indicative, in part, of the pre-departure preparation and the repeated emphasis on the fact that the YA may not be an exclusively positive experience, which meant that realistic expectations were set. However, we can speculate that overcoming negative experiences in a second language and in another culture provides a means of realising one's potential in line with eudaimonic wellbeing. Although improving wellbeing may not be a stated YA objective, it does seem that it is an unintended but welcome consequence. Thus, we should ask whether, in order to facilitate positive wellbeing, we should emphasise at the pre-departure stage the gains to be had from negative experiences. This would encourage the idea that negative experiences should not be attached to failure or shame, but rather should be embraced, allowing individuals to recognise their own strengths.

3.6. Socio-political changes

On the question of the impact of socio-political change, the vast majority of respondents rated this as a neutral factor, with only 10% rating it as having a slightly negative impact. For the latter group, we note that this did not preclude an overall improvement in wellbeing following the YA. At the same time, respondents demonstrated an ability to rationalise these negative experiences, and turn them into issues to examine, which had a positive impact on intellectual

development. This serves as a reminder that, of their own accord, students can find coping strategies, and negative experiences will not automatically negatively affect them in the longer term.

3.7. Free-text comments

This question was optional. In addition to the points raised elsewhere in this chapter, respondents noted a number of other factors impacting on wellbeing, including relationships, a sense of community, a healthier lifestyle, cultural difference, more respectful people, and better job opportunities with better conditions and pay. One respondent described the YA as the best experience they had ever been given, noting increased language and self-confidence as well as independence, indicating a correlation firstly between perception of opportunity and what is made of it, and secondly between wellbeing and independence. Lastly, respondents noted feeling properly European, suggesting a link between wellbeing and identity. How this will develop in the future, in the context of Brexit, remains to be seen.

4. Conclusion

This examination of the YA and wellbeing has suggested a correlation between linguistic competence, identity, otherness, and challenging experiences, indicating that there may in fact be a psychological benefit to the YA. It further suggests that the issues we may consider potentially problematic do not necessarily prove to be so, and that a positive sense of wellbeing is gained and maintained through self-realisation. As a single case-study, the findings here can only be indicative, but they show the need for a larger-scale, longitudinal study across multiple languages and countries.

5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/kuueihng3b5wqiyykbwa3j52hpn487m>

References

- Cardwell, P. J. (2019). Does studying abroad help academic achievement? *European Journal of Higher Education*, Early View. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2019.1573695>
- Colclough, L. (2016, August 22). Why it's ok to hate your year abroad. *Global graduates*. <https://globalgraduates.com/articles/why-its-ok-to-hate-your-year-abroad>
- Coleman, J. (2015). Social circles during residence abroad: what students do, and who with. In R. Mitchell, N. Tracy-Ventura & K. McManus (Eds), *Social interaction, identity and language learning during residence abroad* (pp. 33-52). Eurosla.
- Costa, A., Foucart, A., Arnon, I., Aparici, M., & Apesteguia, J. (2014). 'Piensa' twice: on the foreign language effect in decision making. *Cognition*, 130(2), 236-254. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2015.05.013>
- Hampton, C. (2015). Meeting in the virtual middle: blending online and human resources to generate a Year Abroad community. In R. Mitchell, N. Tracy-Ventura & K. McManus (Eds), *Social interaction, identity and language learning during residence abroad* (pp. 223-239). Eurosla.
- Hampton, C. (2016). Cultural discovery as a post-year abroad agent of change for UK modern languages students. *Comparative and International Education/Éducation Comparée et Internationale*, 45(2), Article 3. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1384&context=cie-eci>
- Michaelson, J., Mahony, S., & Schifferes, J. (2012). Measuring wellbeing: a guide for practitioners. https://b3cdn.net/nefoundation/8d92cf44e70b3d16e6_rgm6bpd3i.pdf
- Student Minds. (2017). *Resources: year abroad*. <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/yearabroad.html>
- The University of Sheffield. (2017). *Mental wellbeing: I am going on a year abroad*. <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/mental-wellbeing/year-abroad>
- Westerhof, G. J., & Keyes, C. L. M. (2010). Mental illness and mental health: the two continua model across the lifespan. *Journal of Adult Development*, 17(2), 110-119. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10804-009-9082-y>
- WHO. (2001). *Strengthening mental health promotion*. World Health Organization.
- WHO. (2004). *Promoting mental health: concept, emerging evidence, practice*. World Health Organisation. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42940/9241591595.pdf>



Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

© 2020 by Editors (collective work)
© 2020 by Authors (individual work)

Perspectives on the year abroad: a selection of papers from YAC2018
Edited by Sandra Salin, Damien Hall, and Cathy Hampton

Publication date: 2020/03/16

Rights: the whole volume is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence; **individual articles may have a different licence.** Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the volume is freely available online (<https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.39.9782490057573>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net

Cover layout by © 2020 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Photo cover by © 2020 Joely Clark (j.a.clark@newcastle.ac.uk)
Logo YAC2018 by © 2020 Damien Hall; this logo is licensed under the [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) licence.

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-57-3 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-58-0 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-56-6 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mars 2020.
