



Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

Title: Transition through Collaborative Programmes at the University of St Andrews: Study Abroad Internship (Student Transitions)

Transition(s) the practice supports: To enhance the transition to and from semester or year-long Study and Work Abroad Placements for undergraduate students in the Faculty of Arts and Divinity and the Faculty of Science.

Abstract: Each academic year, the University of St Andrews sends over 200 students on Study or Work Abroad Placements to partner institutions in over 20 countries around the world. Studying or working abroad allows students to develop an international outlook, to enhance their employability, to broaden their academic experience and, in some cases, to learn a new language. However, the transition to a new academic culture or a work place environment overseas can prove challenging. At the end of the placement, transitioning back into to St Andrews can prove equally difficult. The aim of this internship is to enhance our pre-departure support and materials, and to improve the transition back to St Andrews at the end of the placement.

Description:

1. Background

The University of St Andrews is committed to enhancing our ‘internationally Scottish’ culture, enriching the student experience through Study Abroad and credit-bearing Work Placements. All of these opportunities involve students undertaking one or more academic transitions, as well as personal, social and cultural transitions. Opportunities are diverse, from spending a Junior Honours semester in Morocco studying Arabic; undertaking a lab placement in the US as part of a Biology degree; or studying English at the University of Auckland. In addition to Studying Abroad, students in Modern Languages have the opportunity to undertake a Work Placement in the target language country. Many UK students opt to do this through the British Council and work as Language Assistants. However, students also have the option to source their own independent work placement. Finally, students in Biology and Chemistry have the opportunity to complete a year in industry as part of their degree. This can be in the UK or Europe.

2. The Intern

The Collaborations & Study Abroad (CSA) team appointed Xara Bennett-Jones, a fifth year student who worked abroad in her third year in France, as our Study Abroad Intern (Student Transitions). Having sourced her own work placement in Paris, Xara has first-hand experience of the challenges that students may face when transitioning to an overseas placement.

3. Student engagement and consultation

As part of the Transitions through Collaborative Programmes Internship, Xara constructed a survey which she issued to returning Study and Work abroad students to ascertain how we could improve the transition to and from our partner institutions. The questions in the survey focused on academic and work place transition, visas, accommodation, and student support on return to St Andrews. Xara also collaborated with our Erasmus+ Intern to organise focus groups for returning Study Abroad students and with our BA (International Honours) Intern to review our academic pre-departure information for students attending North American institutions.

Some of the student comments and key finding from the survey are highlighted below:

- **Accommodation:** From a poll of 22 students, 18 said they would have benefited from having more information about accommodation before leaving for their year or semester abroad. It was also noted that CSA could have provided “more student stories from previous students on the same exchange.”
- **Visas:** From a poll of 13 people, 10 said they would have benefited from having more information about visas prior to departure.
- **Academic information:** some students commented that they would like more information academic culture abroad and grade conversion.
- **Bureaucracy:** some students, particularly those who studied or worked in Europe, commented that they would like more information about bureaucracy, bank accounts and social security.
- **Working abroad:** those who worked abroad commented that they would like additional support on how to source employment overseas.
- **Transition back to St Andrews:** several students commented that they struggled with the academic transition back to St Andrews. Others commented that they would like additional support in finding accommodation and on the grade conversion process.

4. Projects and student benefits

Following this student consultation and the feedback gathered, Xara has developed the following resources:

4.1 Web-based resources

- **‘Passports and Visas’ webpage:** feedback suggested that some additional information was required for our ‘Passports and visas’ page, particularly as there was no guidance for some countries where we have developed new partnerships. Xara updated and enhanced the existing visa information as well as adding information for students studying in New Zealand, Singapore and Morocco:
 - <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/studyabroad/outgoingstudents/passportsandvisas/>
- **‘Accommodation Aboard’ webpages:** the results of the initial survey indicated that students would benefit from more information about how to source accommodation overseas. Xara compiled a second survey focused solely on accommodation which she issued to returning Work and Study Abroad students. She used the results of this survey to create a new section for the CSA webpages which provides accommodation information by country and city, including links to university accommodation overseas and letting agencies that students have used previously. The webpage also contains testimonials, such as student recommendations on areas to live and attractions in the local area:

- <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/studyabroad/outgoingstudents/accommodationandlivingabroad/accommodationabroad/>
- **'Tips for Working Abroad' webpage:** following consultation with Work Abroad Coordinators in the School of Modern Languages and returning Work Placement students, Xara created a new webpage with advice for students working abroad for the first time. Many students reported problems with the transition from university to the work place, such as dealing with difficult colleagues and managing workloads. Xara surveyed returning Work Placement students to see what 'top tips' they would offer to future students.
 - <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/studyabroad/outgoingstudents/opportunitiesabroadandhowtoapply/workingabroad/modernlanguages/topstipsforworkingabroad/>
- **'Returning to St Andrews' webpage:** feedback suggested that some students struggled with the transition back to St Andrews, such as the transition to Honours Level study. Xara has developed a new webpage with information for students returning to St Andrews with a particular focus on those who have only been away for one semester. This page includes information about Centre for Academic, Professional and Organisational Development (CAPOD), Grade Conversion and Student Services:
 - <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/studyabroad/outgoingstudents/returningtostandrews/>

4.2 Student guides

- **Study and Work Abroad Pre-Departure Guide:** through the initial survey conducted by Xara and email enquiries to the CSA Team, it became apparent that many students were unaware of some of the key pre-departure information, despite the extensive information provided through our Pre-Departure Briefing and online resources. To overcome this difficulty, Xara developed a 'one stop' Study and Work Abroad Pre-Departure Guide. Following our Pre-Departure Briefing in April, all outbound students will be issued with a copy of the Pre-Departure Guide. This Guide also addresses some of the concerns that the initial survey highlighted such as opening bank accounts and bureaucracy overseas.
- **'Welcome to the North American Classroom' - A Guide for Students Studying in North America:** each year, the CSA team, in conjunction with academic staff, runs an Academic Culture Session for students who will be attending a North American institution. However, there were no written materials to accompany this event. Xara worked closely with our BA (International Honours) Intern to develop a 'Welcome to the North American Classroom' guide to act as a reference for this cohort during their abroad experience. Following consultation with and approval by academic staff, this resource has been made available online and will be issued to all students following the Academic Culture session.
- **Pre-Departure Guide for Students Studying in Australia and Singapore:** the CSA team also organises an Academic Culture session for students studying in Australia and Singapore. This is normally a much smaller cohort and we did not have any written materials which we could issue or talk through. Unlike with the North American session, it is harder to find an academic member of staff with knowledge of the Australian and Singaporean university systems. Xara surveyed returning students to gather information for a guide which can be used to support students studying in Australia and Singapore.

- **‘A Guide to Studying and Living in Europe’**: feedback from the focus groups suggested that students would like to be better prepared for the European academic environment, particularly as the large university environments can be difficult to navigate. Students also commented that bureaucracy in Europe was difficult to negotiate. Using this feedback from the focus groups and survey, Xara has designed a guide to studying and living in Europe.

These academic culture guides are available on webpages: <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/studyabroad/outgoingstudents/academicinformation/academicculture/>

4.3 Facebook Group

Xara has worked closely with our Erasmus+ Intern to develop a closed Facebook Group for all outbound Study and Work Abroad students. This group allows students to speak to each prior to leaving St Andrews and find out which of them will be in the same geographical area. It has also proved a great tool in terms of managing accommodation. Students are not only able to use the group as a means of finding accommodation overseas but also as a way to private source accommodation on their return to St Andrews by pairing up with other students who are only studying abroad for one semester.

5. Implementation Timeline

To ensure that students are able to access all of these new resources, we have developed a timeline of when and how they should be promoted:

Resource	When	How
‘Tips for working abroad’ webpage	October (as students will begin their search for a placement at this time)	Email to Work Abroad Coordinator in Modern Languages
Access to closed Facebook Group	January/February/March (depending on School), once Study or Work Abroad Placement has been confirmed	Email to students
Issue Pre-Departure Guide	Following Pre-Departure Briefing in April	Email to students
Academic Culture Guides	Following Academic Culture Sessions in late April/early May	Email to students
‘Visas and passports’ webpages	April	Email to students and post in Facebook group
‘Accommodation Abroad’ webpage	April	Email to students and post in Facebook group
‘Returning to St Andrews’ webpage	August and January (for semester 1 students)	Email to students and post in Facebook group

Contact details: Bronagh Crosse, Collaborations & Study Abroad Officer, University of St Andrews, bc94@st-andrews.ac.uk, 01334 462128