

THE TIME ABROAD PROJECT – GERMAN AND BRITISH STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR STAY ABROAD

ABSTRACT. *In the UK the number of students studying for a language degree and spending an extended period abroad has been declining for some years. This trend has a negative effect on the number of incoming students too since student exchange is often based on bilateral agreements between institutions. In order to work towards overcoming the reluctance of UK students to go on a placement abroad, it is important to gain a better understanding of typical student profiles and their expectations of an exchange semester. Using a quantitative research approach this study looks at British and German students' expectations before their time abroad and their views after their return. The results show similarities between the two cohorts, but also striking differences. In particular, the expectations regarding students' main goals vary considerably.*

Keywords; Erasmus exchange; time abroad; language study; student expectations; profiles of exchange students, higher education

Título: Un proyecto sobre estancias en el extranjero -Las expectativas de estudiantes británicos y alemanes sobre su intercambio.

En el Reino Unido el número de estudiantes universitarios matriculados en grados de lenguas y posteriormente disfrutando de una estancia en el extranjero ha estado decayendo en los últimos años. Dicha tendencia tiene un impacto negativo en el número de estudiantes internacionales que recibe el país ya que dicho intercambio es un acuerdo bilateral y recíproco entre las instituciones de acogida. Para intentar superar la reticencia de los estudiantes británicos de ir al extranjero como parte de sus estudios, es importante entender mejor los perfiles de los estudiantes y las expectativas que tienen sobre dichas estancias en el extranjero. Haciendo uso de una metodología cuantitativa, este estudio analiza las expectativas que tienen un grupo de estudiantes británicos y alemanes previas y posteriores al intercambio. Los resultados muestran semejanzas entre los dos grupos de estudiantes pero también diferencias importantes, especialmente las que hacen referencia a los objetivos de los estudiantes.

Key words: intercambio Erasmus, estancias en el extranjero, aprendizaje de lenguas, expectativas de estudiantes, perfiles de estudiantes de intercambio, educación superior

1. Introduction

In Britain, students are less likely to study foreign languages in school as well as university, than in neighbouring European countries. One of the reasons for this phenomenon has been linked to the political decision in 2004 that made language study no longer compulsory in key stage 4 in schools (Lanvers and Coleman 2013). As a result, the number of students studying foreign languages at English state schools declined (CfBT Education Trust 2014) and fewer leavers from state schools have the pre-requisites to enter degree level language study in HE. Other reasons have also been identified to influence the individuals' choices not to study foreign languages (cf. Coleman 2011), for example that English is the de facto lingua franca and therefore native speakers of English may see less need to learn other languages (Coleman, Galaczi & Astruc 2007). Furthermore, British people often refer to themselves as a nation which is 'lazy to learn' other languages, and may therefore be in danger to become "a nation of monolinguals" (British Academy position statement 2011).

Students studying foreign languages at universities in Britain are expected to spend some time of their degree course among the target language communities abroad. The year 2012-13 saw the highest number of UK students participating in the Erasmus exchange scheme since the launch of it in 1987, but the numbers fell well below those of participants in the Erasmus exchange programme in France, Germany and Spain (Fact check 2016). The reluctance of students in one country, i.e., the UK, to go abroad can have a direct effect on opportunities for those in other

countries. The available number of study placements abroad is often determined by bilateral agreements between partner institutions. The declining number of British university students studying foreign languages (Coleman 2011) has a direct impact on the number of places for incoming students and contributes to the imbalance of supply and demand: The ratio of incoming to outgoing places in Britain is 2:1, the highest imbalance within the Erasmus scheme (British Academy 2012). For example, Nottingham Trent University (NTU) receives regular requests to increase the number of places for incoming students. Increasing the number of British students studying foreign languages and spending time abroad would therefore not only benefit bilateral agreements with partner institutions, it would also address the concern that Britain could move towards being ‘a nation of monolinguals’.

Against the background of this phenomenon, a mixed-method study was undertaken which aims to get a better understanding of student profiles of outgoing students at NTU and its partner institution, the University of Education (PH) in Freiburg, Germany. The study aims to discover potential national differences between the two groups, some of the expectations and fears students have towards sojourns, and whether students feel that their expectations and fears later materialized. It was anticipated that gaining a clearer picture of both cohorts, students’ socio-economic backgrounds, and their expectations and fears could theoretically inform future interventions and thereafter could potentially have an impact on the uptake of sojourns.

This current paper reports only on one part of the larger study, i.e., the student profiles and the students’ expectations, for which primarily a quantitative research method was used.

2. Study Abroad Research

It seems widely accepted that spending part of a university degree course abroad is very positive, for the individual student development as well as employment opportunities. Teichler (2015: 15) even states that “temporary student mobility seems to be “good” from all points of view”. The field of research into the benefits for students of spending time abroad is expanding, but can be viewed as “an ill-defined research domain, embracing related but disparate experiences” (Coleman 2013: 17). The following will sketch some key concepts in recent study abroad research, i.e., the positive effects on the individuals’ personal development, their language proficiency and intercultural communication, as well as the advantages for their future employment.

Increasing the employment opportunities after graduation through an international outlook is a cornerstone of current HE strategic plans. The internationalization agenda in higher education (HE) supports “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education” (Knight 2004: 9). This often takes the form of an exchange semester, which can improve foreign language skills and develop intercultural competence, two aspects which are recognized as enhancement factors for later employment opportunities (Jones 2011). Once language study is combined with study abroad, there appears to be a clear link to later mobility as well. A study of graduates from German universities by Parey and Waldinger (2007) found evidence of increased mobility within the labour market in Europe due to the Erasmus programme. Furthermore, it discovered that of “the students who study abroad in a European country and work internationally after graduation, two thirds end up working in a European country” (Parey and Waldinger 2007: i).

The majority of non-specialist language learners in HE in the UK are aware “of a close link between foreign language competence and employability, seeing language skills as a career advantage” (Canning 2011: 2). However, the employment-enhancing factor on its own does not appear to have led to any substantial increase in the number of British students in HE taking up serious language study and embarking on placement time abroad. The opposite seems to be the case, as elaborated above and reflected in the declining trajectory of foreign language degree students.

Other studies focus on the personal development and the individual experience. For example, Zimmermann and Neyer (2013) show evidence of the strong influence the experience of spending time abroad has on the development of the personalities of young university students. Forming new relationships with “international people” (2013: 527) has substantial formative effects on them. Zimmermann’s and Neyer’s study shows that spending time abroad not only leads to increased openness but also a decrease in neuroticism and they conclude that “hitting the road has substantial effects on who we are” (2013: 527). The lasting effects on individuals that sojourns can have are also demonstrated by Garbati and Rothschild’s collaborative auto-ethnographic research (2016). A promising line of enquiry relating to students’ personal developments focuses on relationships formed during the time abroad and maintained through social networks. The study of these social networks can provide insights into the level of engagement of sojourners with various groups (Coleman & Chafer 2010) and described by Coleman (2013, 2015) within a model of concentric circles.

Sojourns facilitate students to be exposed to other cultures, to gain confidence on a personal development level (Coleman 1997; Kinginger 2013; van Maele et al. 2016), and language students in particular have the opportunity to improve their language skills (Kinger 2013). The immersion in the L2ⁱ culture offers opportunities to improve the L2 proficiency levels, or as Coleman put it to “eat, drink and sleep” the studied language (2015: 34). While there is some debate whether there is a threshold when foreign language learning among the target language community is likely to be most valuable (Collentine 2009ⁱⁱ), it is generally assumed that it is beneficial to L2 learners to have access to rich and potentially continuous L2 input. The context of being abroad offers increased opportunities to interact with native speakers and to negotiate meaning, an occurrence which is associated with learning taking place (cf. output theory, Swain 1995). Furthermore, the stay abroad among the L2 community has been shown to improve L2 fluency in particular (Huensch and Tracy-Ventura 2017; Segalowitz and Freed 2004).

Closely related to the improvement of L2 proficiency is the enhancement of intercultural sensitivity, which is associated with sojourns (Anderson, Lawton, Rexeisen & Hubbard 2006; Gutierrez Almarza et al. 2015, 2017; Houghton 2014; Smolcic 2013; Williams 2005). Through the experience of living in and socializing within the L2 community, students gain a deeper understanding not only of the host culture, but also of their own, and learn to mediate between the two.

Research in the field of study abroad has expanded its focus from the study of what kind of gains students make, to students’ needs and how universities can facilitate better support and provide better preparation (Paige & Goode 2009). A related study by van Maele et al. asked students for their views about the three most important factors for a successful stay abroad with the objective that the results could inform the development of “teaching activities of intercultural education for Erasmus students” (van Maele et al. 2016: 385).

As shown, not all nationalities engage equally enthusiastically in opportunities for study abroad. While German university studentsⁱⁱⁱ expect to experience international sojourns (*Institut für Hochschulforschung: Studie Internationale Mobilität* 2013), there is a noticeable reluctance among British university students^{iv} to partake in exchange programmes (British Academy 2013). Such reluctance has been observed in other countries too, for instance in Japan (Houghton 2014), where it has been suggested that a contributing factor to “the inward-looking mind-set prevalent among young Japanese” might be “the growing complacency in an affluent society” (Tanikawa 2013).

Any attempt to increase the engagement of students with language study and sojourns would benefit from a deeper understanding of students’ expectations regarding time spent abroad. According to a British Academy position paper (2012: 7) it is recognized that the students’ “[p]ersonal objectives and outcomes have been among [...] the least studied in terms of the value of the year abroad”. The present study addresses this gap with the objective to gain insights, which can inform our understanding of student expectations and may thereafter inform future interventions.

3. The study

This study involved a British and a German university, NTU and the *PH*, and set out to gain insights into students' expectations and concerns relating to the time spent abroad at two moments in time: in advance of their stay abroad and after their return. It explores the participants' profiles, and identifies commonalities and differences between the British and German cohorts.

Student opinions were elicited mainly via two online surveys: one before their stay abroad, and a second one after the students had returned to their home institutions.

By contrasting views expressed in the two questionnaires, the study seeks to understand students' perceptions better. This article looks at their expectations prior to the stay abroad and reports to what extent the expectations were reflected in students' responses after their return.

3.1 Participating students – Course information

The British respondents were studying a BA course with at least one foreign language, combined with a second subject, for example international relations. In general, NTU students are strongly encouraged to spend their third year abroad, but may request to take a 3-year degree pathway instead, typically for personal reasons, as for example financial or family commitments. Students studying two foreign languages usually spend 1 semester in each L2 country: students with one foreign language spend up to 1 year in the L2 country. NTU's BA languages courses do not prepare students for a specific employment pathway, such as for instance a teaching career.

The German university students, on the other hand, were studying to become teachers of English as a foreign language. For most of these students, a stay abroad is recommended, but not obligatory. However, many German students expect to go abroad, as reflected in figures of a 2013 study on international mobility, which show that more than a quarter of students enrolled in BA and MA courses in Germany had already spent part of their studies abroad (*Institut für Hochschulforschung, Studie Internationale Mobilität* 2013).

As a result of the general imbalance of available exchange semesters alluded to above (British Academy, 2012, 2013), the places for study in England and Ireland for the German *PH* students of English are very much oversubscribed, and are therefore allocated on a competitive basis. This may mean that the German university students who succeeded in securing a study placement abroad may be more motivated than their NTU counterparts who do not need to compete for their placements.

4. Data Collection and Research Questions

In order to study student attitudes towards their sojourns and to explore potential reasons for the reported reluctance among British university students in general to embark on study abroad (British Academy 2012; 2013), three research questions were posed:

1. What are the student profiles in the two institutions?
2. What are the students' expectations before going abroad?
3. After their return, did students feel that their expectations had materialized?

The main body of data is based on a quantitative research approach, using an online survey sent to 809 foreign language students at NTU and the *PH* Freiburg. This part of the research looks at general student profiles and attitudes towards time spent abroad, irrespective of their target languages and L2 communities.

Additionally, qualitative data was generated through student interviews and individually written Erasmus reports which will be discussed in another paper. This qualitative data provided insights,

for example into the students' travelling while abroad, and is used here only to illustrate results gained through the questionnaire.

The survey questionnaires were accessible via a link embedded in an email. The participating institutions provided email distribution lists for the relevant student cohorts. Emails were then sent out inviting the students to participate in the research. Colleagues involved in student exchange at both institutions were asked to support participation through awareness raising, for example by mentioning the project to their outgoing students. Since the sender of the email, i.e. the researcher, was not known to the majority of the addressees, it was likely that emails could be otherwise ignored and therefore questionnaires not filled in and returned.

4.1. Questionnaire design

The questionnaires were divided into blocks of questions addressing major themes. This paper reports on (1) the student profiles and (2) the students' expectations.

In order to gain information about the students' personal backgrounds, questions posed included those aimed at their family's experience of higher education and the students' personal experience of living away from home and living abroad. These latter factors were hypothesized to serve as indicators of potential levels of student confidence and self-reliance.

The theme of the student expectations had been previously identified as important student consideration which could influence their decision regarding spending time abroad (Council of Industry and Higher Education 2007). Within the questionnaire, several questions per section explore these concepts further. Beyond straightforward questions to elicit specific information such as age and gender, the survey consisted of two main question types: open questions in which students had the opportunity to give any answers they felt appropriate, and prompts asking them to rank statements for preference or relevance following a Likert scale. The open questions were asked before the ranking questions in order to limit potential influence on the responses to the open questions. If open questions and ranking questions produced similar responses, this may be seen as supporting the importance of those statements for the students.

This study therefore investigates students' perceptions of key areas and compares the results before and after the study abroad. Furthermore, emerging differences and similarities between the British and German cohorts are looked at.

5. Results Research Question 1: Student Profiles

5.1. Participants in the study

Using administrative email contact lists, the pre-stay abroad survey was sent to a large cohort of modern languages students at Nottingham Trent University, enrolled in various languages at levels 1 and 2 of their study, i.e. before their scheduled time abroad during their 3rd year. 246 students received invitations to participate. The response rate was 18.7%, i.e. 46 valid responses^{vi} were received.

Responding students were studying French, German, Italian, Spanish or Mandarin. The surveys were not restricted to students studying German, even though NTU's partner institutions involved in this project were only those who receive NTU's outgoing students of German.

At the *Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg*, 563 students were included in the administrative email contact list and were invited to take part. The response rate was 10.48%, i.e. 59 valid responses were returned. Since this list included all levels, including some students who had already returned from their year abroad, the response rate could be expected to be slightly lower.

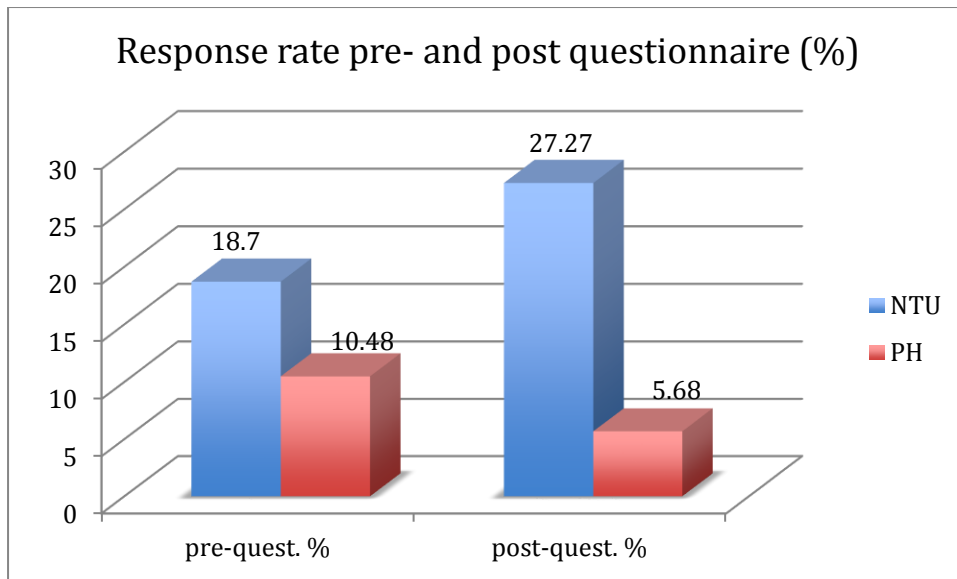


Figure 1: Response rate (pre-questionnaire NTU: $n=246$; PH: $n=563$; post-questionnaire NTU: $n=88$; PH: $n=563$)

The response rates of both institutions and the disparity in the response rates between the two institutions have an impact on generalizability and complicate comparability between the two contexts. Where tendencies are identified in the data, their interpretation is therefore to be read cautiously.

The post-stay-abroad questionnaire was sent to 88 participants, i.e. it was restricted to those students enrolled on NTU's modern languages degree course who actually went abroad during the year studied. With 27.27% (= 24 valid returns), the return rate was nearly 9% higher than in the pre-questionnaire, albeit based on a reduced number of participating students overall.

For the German cohort, the survey was sent to the same large email list of 563 students. 32 valid responses were received, a response rate of 5.68%, just over half of the return rate for the pre-stay questionnaire.

It had been anticipated that there would be a large number of students filling in both questionnaires, thereby allowing a direct comparison between their individual expectations and concerns before the stay abroad and to what extent they later considered them to have materialized. This would have facilitated the identification of representative individual case studies. However, the overlap was smaller than expected: Only 37.5% of the British cohort (9 out of 24 students) and 40.63% of the German group (13 out of 32 students) answered both questionnaires. As part of this study a direct comparison of results within this smaller group was not undertaken. Instead, any comparisons were based on the overall results.

As eluded to above, the disparities in the response rates as well as the differences in the responding participants complicate comparability between cohorts. However, some trends can be identified and are presented cautiously.

5.2. Participant information gained through the pre-stay questionnaireⁱⁱⁱ

The average student participating in this study is white, female, and between 19 and 22 years old.

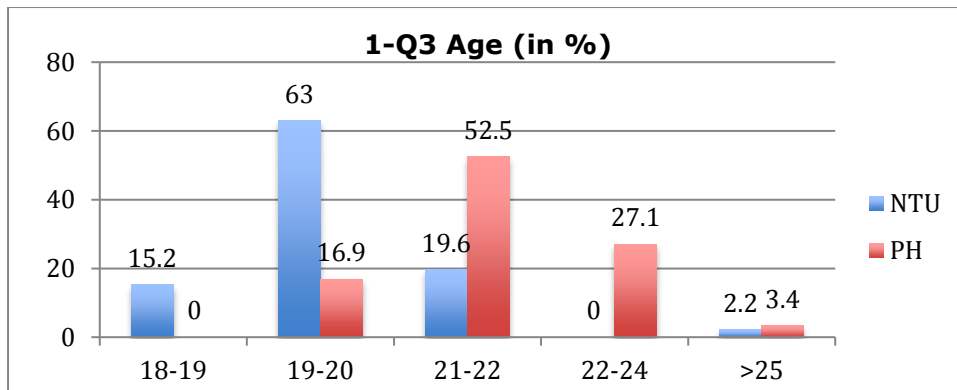


Figure 2: Age of participants (N=105; NTU: n=46 + PH: n=59)

British participants are noticeably younger with 63% falling into the 19-20 year old age group, while the majority of German students (52.5%) are 21-22.

A good 15% of the British university students are only 18-19 (0% in the German cohort), and only a very small number of students older than 22. Of the German participants nearly 17% are 19-20, and 27% are 22-24 years old.

Overall, 81.9% of the participants were female and 18.1% male, with a higher representation of males at NTU (23.9%) than at the PH (13.6%).

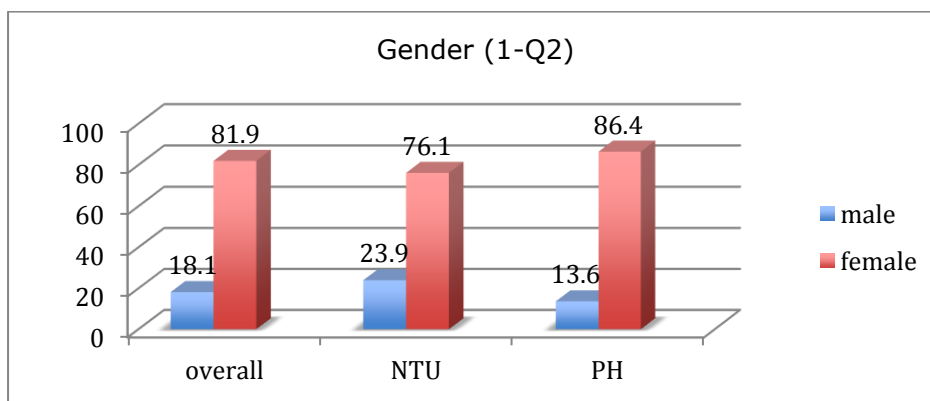


Figure 3: Gender (N=105; NTU: n=46 + PH: n=59)

5.3 Indicators of students' level of independence and confidence before their stay abroad

Living away from the parents, in their own household, can be seen as a step to potential independence. A large majority of the students surveyed (90.5%) were studying and living away from their hometown. Nearly 90% of all students had also been abroad before the university exchange, usually on holidays with friends and family, but some had also worked or attended a school abroad.

Before starting university life, 64.4% of the German students, but only 21.7% of the British students had lived away from home.

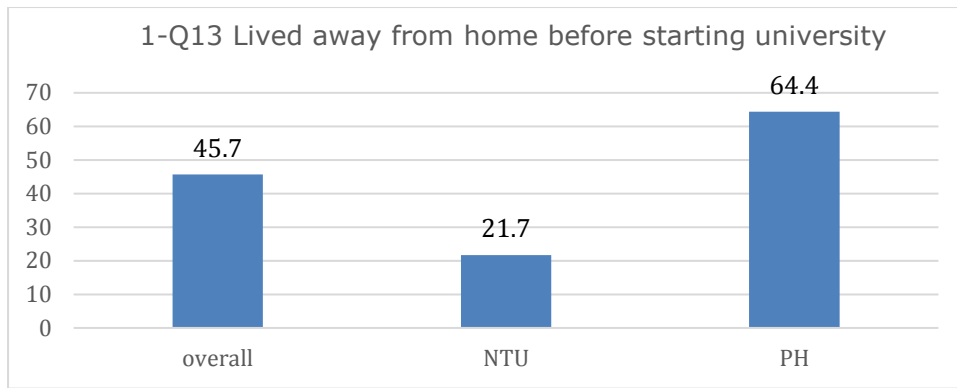


Figure 4: *Living away from home* (N=105; NTU: n=46 + PH: n=59)

Belonging to a family in which other family members have attended or are attending HE may be seen as an indicator of students potentially developing their personal confidence. Growing up in a household in which siblings or parents attended university, and had perhaps also taken up the opportunity of an exchange semester, may instill more confidence to go abroad. Students were therefore asked whether they were the first member of their family to attend higher education. About half of all respondents are trailblazers in that they are the first person in their family to go to university. This is true for a larger proportion of the British students than in the German cohort.

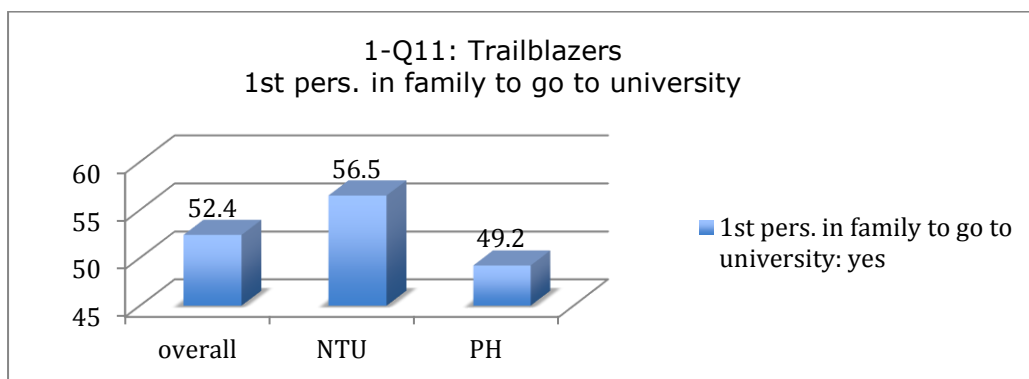


Figure 5: *Trailblazers* (N=105; NTU: n=46 + PH: n=59)

In summary, indicators of students' level of independence and confidence prior to going abroad point towards a noticeable difference between the two cohorts. Unlike the German university students, the majority of British university students live away from home for the first time when they start university life. The majority of them also represent the first member of their family to study at university. These two findings may point towards a potentially lower level of confidence present among the British students before their stay abroad, an interpretation which appears to be underscored by the student perceptions after their return: NTU students rank "feeling more independent" as their most important gain of the experience (70.8%, figure 14), an outcome which is rated in 5th position among the German students (37.5%, figure 15).

5.4 *Emerging student profile*

The overall student profile prior to the stay abroad seems to suggest that the German students may be more independent and confident than their British counterparts. The German students tend to be a little older, they are likely to complete their third year of study before they go abroad, they are less likely to be studying in their hometown, and are three times more likely to have lived away from home before they started their university course. They are also considerably more likely to have worked abroad as volunteers.

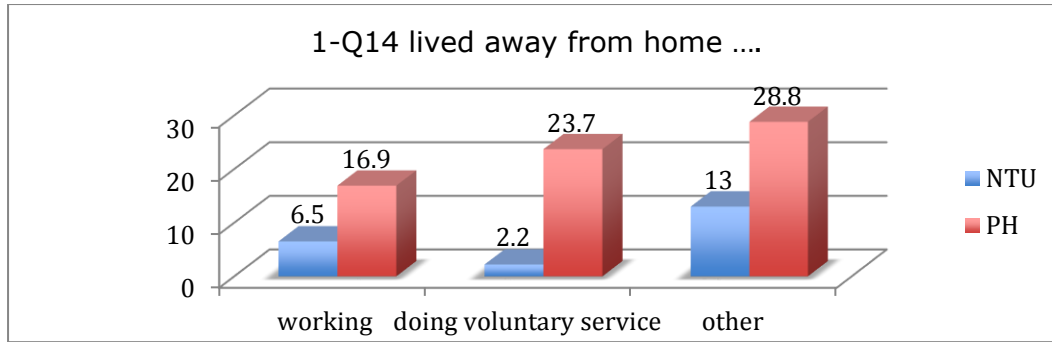


Figure 6: *Activities before the start of university* (NTU: $n=46$ + PH: $n=59$)

Furthermore, the German university students are more likely to have other family members who attend/ed higher education.

Several factors contribute to this different profile, many of which are rooted in the different socialization and educational system in Germany. German children start school later and are therefore older when they leave school and enter higher education. Additionally, military or civilian service was required for men until 2011, and continued to be taken up on a voluntary basis thereafter. Many female school leavers also commit to other activities such as voluntary work in the social sector before going to university.

While Germany does not have such a long tradition of taking gap years spent travelling as Britain does, there is a developing culture of working abroad for some time, before committing to further or higher education (figure 6).

In this study, 64.4% of the German students did indeed live away from home for up to one year before they started their university course (figure 4), for example attending education abroad or working as an au pair. 20.3% name working as an au pair in places like the UK, Australia, Italy, the US. Others spent time in Romania, Africa, South America, Canada, China, New Zealand.

In comparison, only 21.7% of students at NTU, a post-1992 university, had lived away from home prior to entering higher education, for example attending a boarding school^{viii} or a language school abroad.

Young people who work abroad expose themselves to a new culture and a foreign language community. The German university students in the study were likely to use English abroad, as indicated by the high number of English-speaking destinations. These factors are likely to have contributed to the German students feeling more confident and independent before they embarked on the exchange semester. It is therefore not surprising that the expectation that they hope to achieve independence and confidence is named less frequently by the German cohort (28.8%) than by their British counterparts (41.3%, figure 13).

Many of the German university students in this study benefited from longer and more intense exposure to their studied language than the British cohort, for example during the pre-university time spent abroad, as well as exposure to English through pop culture, advertisement and the media in Germany. German students therefore had an opportunity to gain a high level of L2 fluency prior to going on study-placements which is likely to have had an influence on their perception of how much their L2 skills improved during the semester abroad: while 50% of the NTU students agree strongly that their L2 skills have improved, only 21.9% of the PH students agree strongly with this statement (figure 7). However, both cohorts agree that their language skills improved during the time abroad (NTU: 91.7%; PH: 78.2%; figure 7).

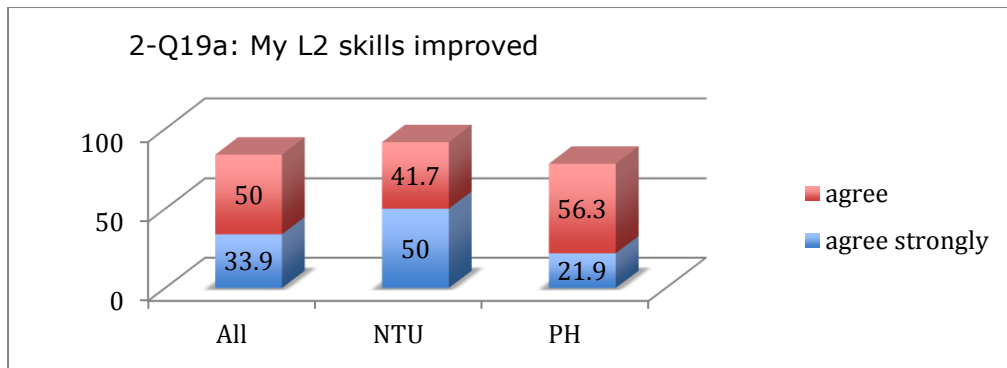


Figure 7: Agree (strongly) to have improved L2 skills (N=56; NTU=24; PH: n=32)

6. Results Research Question 2: Student expectations

6.1 Student expectations before going abroad

The student expectations towards a stay abroad were elicited through open questions and via statements to be ranked according to the individually perceived level of importance. The ranking statements were based on anecdotal evidence and common assumptions: They include statements such as: “My main aim in going abroad is to improve my language skills, to meet people from the host country” etc.

In the open questions, students were asked to name the three most important expectations they had for their stay abroad. The open questions were placed before the prompts students were asked to rank in order to minimize influencing the students’ answers. Some overlap between given prompts and free answers occurred, possibly confirming the importance students attached to these points.

6.2 Ranking potential expectations

The ranking questions allow students to prioritize the given prompts in relation to one another. Several prompts were provided, covering a number of areas relating mainly to instrumental motivation, e.g. to enhance career prospects and also to improve the ability to deal with people from different cultures. These ranking questions showed similarities between the two groups as well as differences.

As anticipated, a frequent expectation concerning time spent abroad relates to a gain in the level of proficiency in the target language. About two thirds responded that their highest priority was to improve their foreign language skills. The distribution between the two cohorts was similar with 76.1% (NTU, figure 8) and 78% (PH, figure 9)^{ix}.

The expectations of the British students seem to express a higher degree of instrumental motivation as their highest driving factor. Besides language improvement, their main aims in going abroad include the enhancement of their career prospects and the fulfillment of a course requirement (figure 8). However, the second-most frequently ranked main aim is to enjoy themselves, suggesting a more intrinsic than instrumental motivational factor. Surprisingly, curiosity towards the host culture does not feature among the four most important aims in going abroad for NTU students (figure 8).

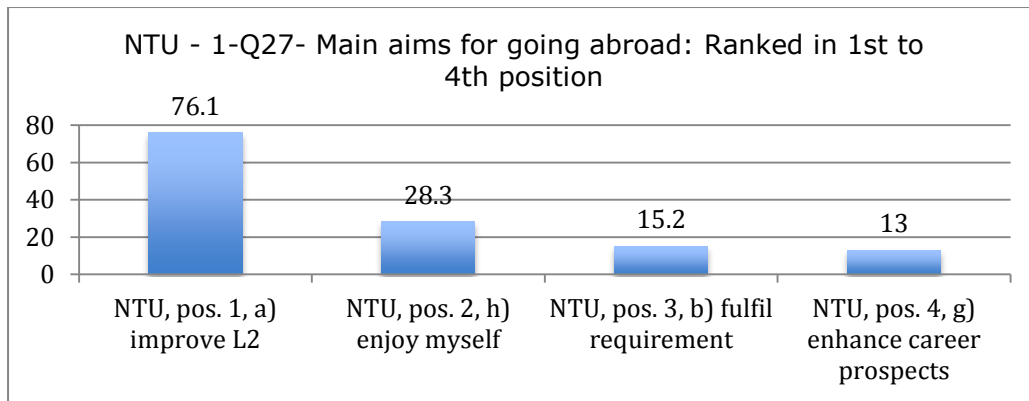


Figure 8: NTU - My main aims in going abroad are ... %age figures combining rank 1+2 as highest priorities (n=46)

German students value the gain in language proficiency similarly in position 1 (figure 9). However, thereafter, the following three important aims in going abroad reflect an awareness of the potential otherness of the host culture and an interest to explore this further: in positions 2 to 4 of main aims, they name meeting the people of the L2 community, travelling and seeing the L2 country, and learning how things are done differently.

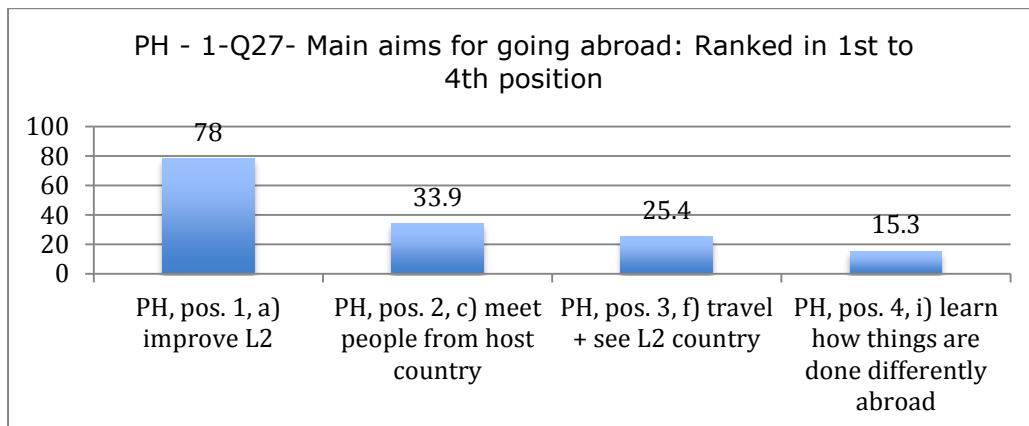


Figure 9: PH - My main aims in going abroad are ... %age figures combining rank 1+2 as highest priorities (n=59)

Comparing the results in more detail reveals noteworthy differences between the German and the British students in relation to their actual interest in other cultures and in meeting others, i.e. people from the host country and other international students (figure 10). Only 4.3% of NTU students consider meeting people of the foreign language (L2) community as a high priority^x, and 8.7% rank this at the bottom end. Similarly, the interest in meeting other international students is low amongst the British cohort (6.5%).

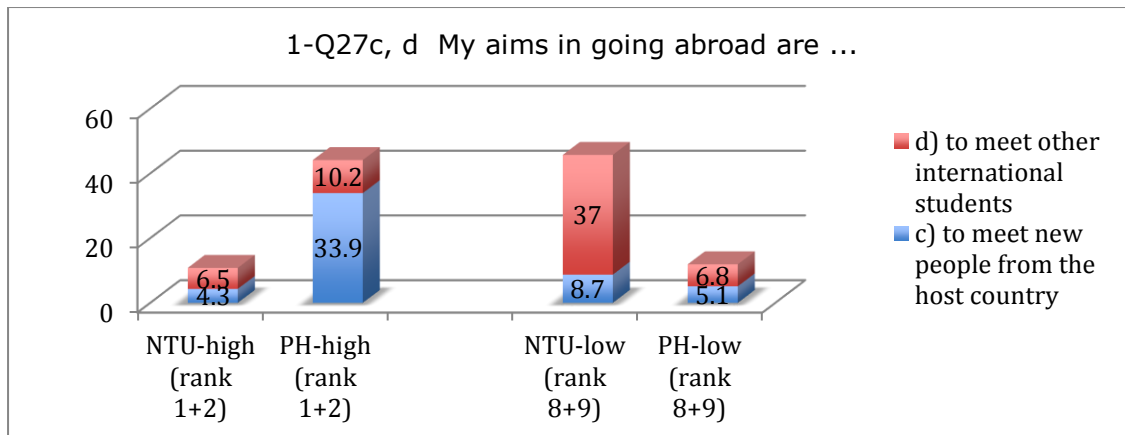


Figure 10: 1-Q27 c, d - My aims in going abroad are ... (N=105; NTU: n= 46; PH: n=59)

While the notion of traveling and seeing the L2 country creates interest amongst *PH* students (25.4%), only 6.5% of *NTU* students^{xi} rank this as a high aim. To learn about how things are done differently in other countries is only a goal for 4.4% of the British group, compared with 15.3% among the German one (figure 11).

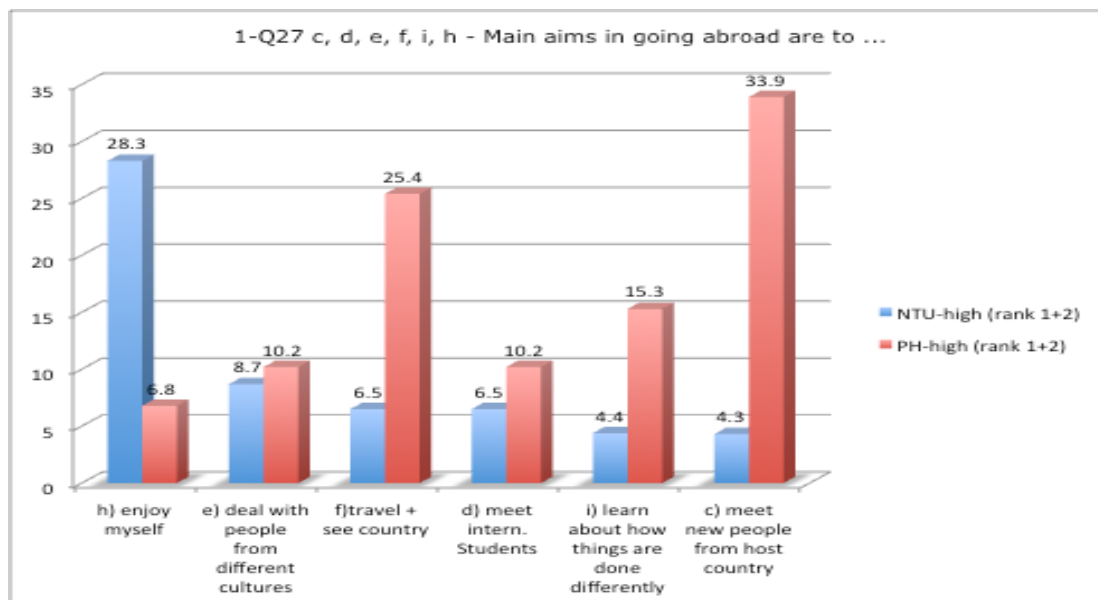


Figure 11: 1-Q27 c, d, e, f, i, h - ranking statements between 1 (high) and 9 (low); N=105; NTU: n=46; PH: n=59

The same trend is reflected in the answers to open questions (figure 12), where learning more about the L2 culture, its people, the wish to make new friends, and getting to know life in the L2 country, all feature highly among the German cohort. *PH* students lead in these categories considerably, putting a much higher emphasis on the expectation of gaining a better cultural understanding of the L2 society than that expressed by the British participants in this study.

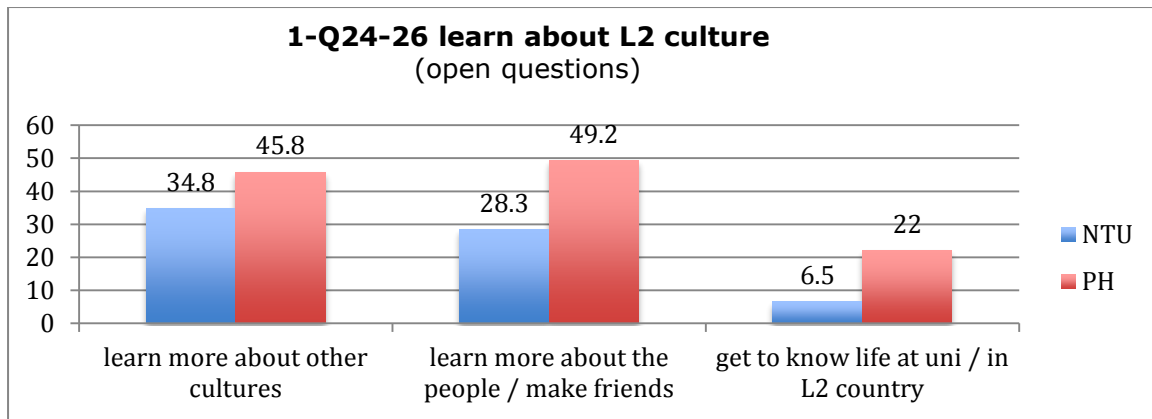


Figure 12: 1-Q-24-26 (multiple answers possible); N=105; NTU: n=46; PH: n=59

While these responses reflect the trend of the ranking questions, it is still surprising to find such a marked difference between the two cohorts with regard to their interest in the other culture and its people.

When grouping the answers to the ranking and the open questions, the following themes emerge as the most important expectations before going abroad (figure 13): For the British cohort, the highest priority with 80.5% is to improve the foreign language. This position is confirmed in their responses to the ranking question, albeit with the slightly lower score of 76.1%. For British students, a very common and standard response to the value of the year abroad is the improvement of their L2 skills. Within these two types of questions British responses show consistency.

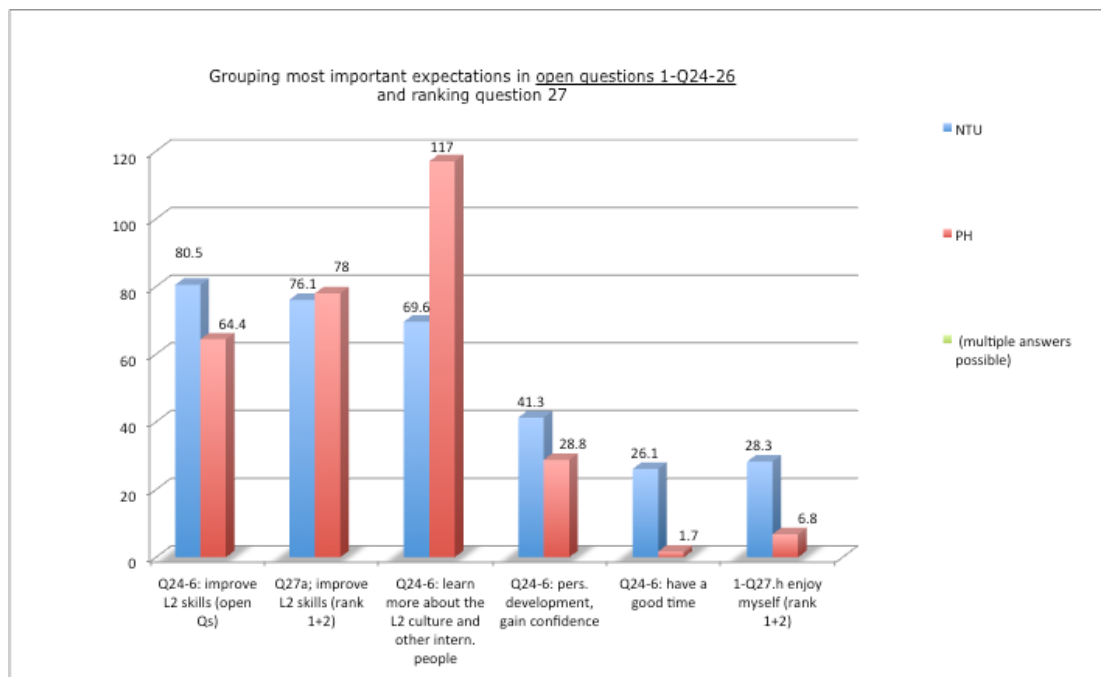


Figure 13 - Most important expectations prior to going abroad (grouped and ranked answers. The percentage figure of the grouped answers can include multiple entries, i.e. the occurrences of the item in all three fields that asked for student expectations^{xxii}); N=105; NTU: n=46; PH: n=59

Thereafter, their next highest expectation expressed in the open questions constitutes the wish to learn more about the L2 culture and people of other nationalities (69.6%).

The German university students, however, place their highest expectation on the interpersonal and cultural dimension of the time abroad, far above the instrumental function of skill improvement. As their highest expectation in answer to the open questions, they name learning about the target culture and other people, i.e. the L2 communities as well as people of

other nationalities. For them, the L2 skill improvement also features highly, with 64.4% in the open questions and nearly 14% more when presented with a list of prompts, but this is still far behind the cultural and interpersonal aspect.

For both groups, the third most important expectation (of this combined table presented in figure 13) relates to students' personal development, self-discovery, gaining self-confidence, autonomy, and independence. In position 4, British students expect to have a good time during their stay abroad. 26.1% explicitly name this expectation in response to the open questions and 28.3% confirm this when prompted in the following ranking question. In comparison, German students do not class having a good time as a very high expectation (in the open questions, this was only named by 1.7% and by 6.8% when prompted in the ranking question). The difference in expectations between the British and German cohorts regarding fun abroad is remarkable and will be revisited below.

7. Results Research Question 3: Did students feel that their expectations had materialized after their return?

The following results contrast the expectations of the cohorts before their stay abroad with the perceived gains after their return home. This is done on two levels, firstly within the country-specific groups, and secondly between the groups of the two countries. Section 5.1 above reports on the response rates and highlights that the respondents are not necessarily identical between the pre- and post stay abroad questionnaires (even though there is overlap). The results below do not make claims of changes in individual students, but compare the results between the groups of respondents.

7.1 *Expectations / gains in retrospective view*^{xiii}

After their stay abroad the participants considered if and how their previous expectations had materialized and named any additional gains. Several statements about potential expectations followed these open questions, in which students indicated how much they agreed with them, using a 5-point Likert scale.

The statement NTU students agreed with most (figure 14), their biggest perceived gain, refers to feeling more independent and self-confident (70.8%), followed by having learned more about the culture they visited (66.7%). Position 3 of the perceived gains is shared by the statements of having got to know international students well, and having learned about how things are done differently in the host country (each 62.5%).

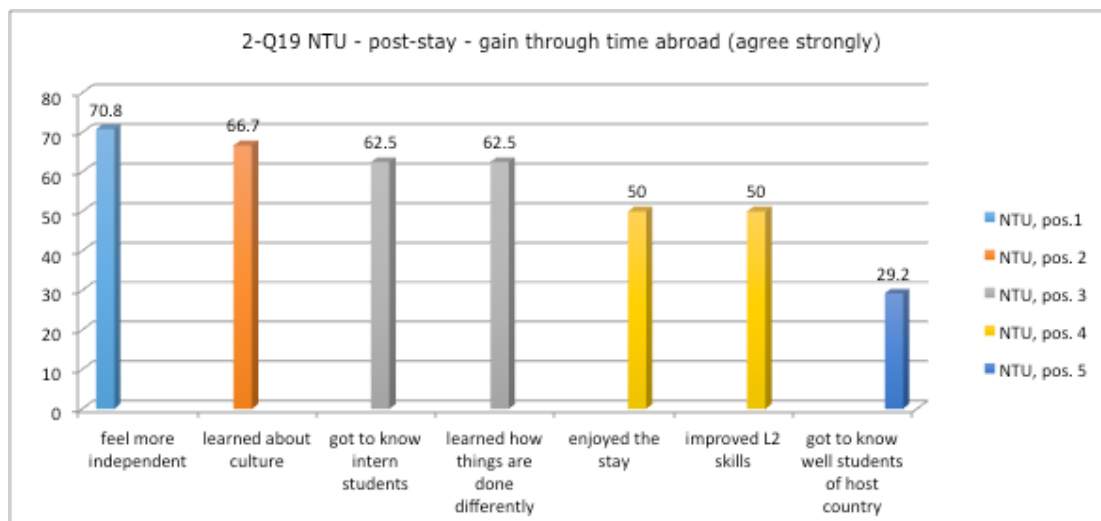


Figure 14: NTU - post-stay - main gains through stay abroad (n=24)

Similarly surprising are the results for the German group (figure 15): Their results also show gains in areas that they had not necessarily expected. German university students agree strongly that they enjoyed the stay abroad (81.3%), they got to know international students well (68.8%), and they learned more about the host culture (59.4%). These students also feel strongly that they got an insight into how things are done differently in the host country (53.1%).

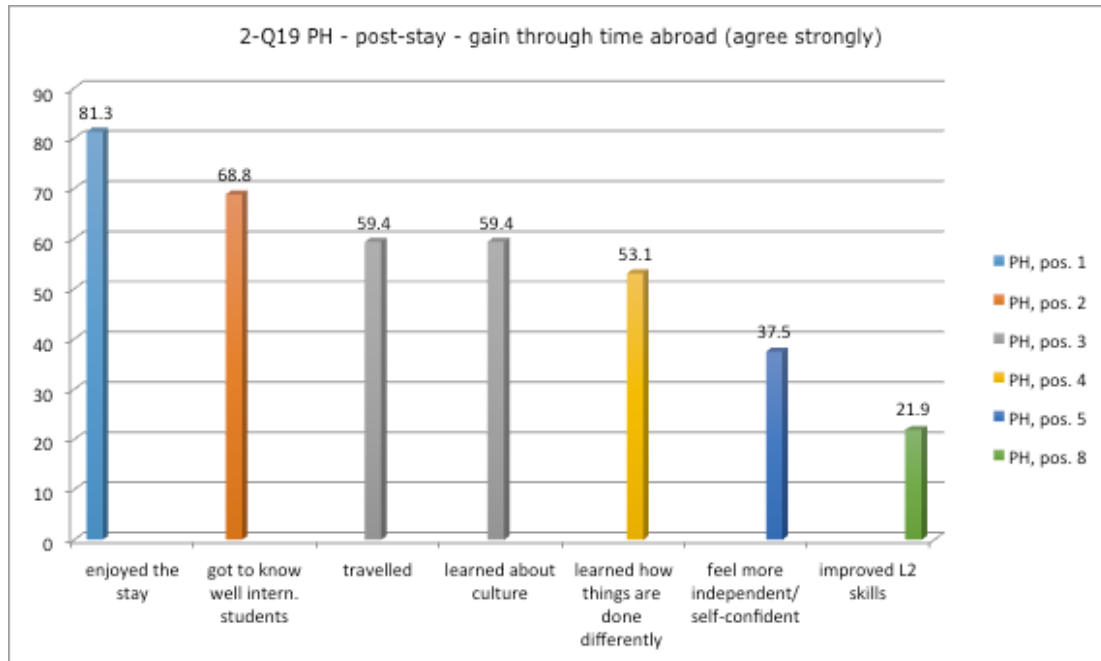


Figure 15: PH - post-stay - main gains through stay abroad (n=32)

7.2 Comparison within cohorts between pre- and post-stay

While both cohorts clearly recognize the fulfillment of their expectations and view the experience positively, there is a noticeable shift within the two groups regarding the degree of fulfillment: as their four most important expectations prior to the time spent abroad, the British students named improving their L2 skills, enjoying themselves, fulfilling the course requirements, and enhancing their career prospects (figure 8).

After their return, the British students agreed strongly that they had made gains, but these are quite different (figure 14) from their previously named expectations (figure 8). In particular, the majority perceive themselves as having become more independent, having improved their understanding of the L2 culture, and having got to know international students. 50% each strongly agreed that they enjoyed the stay and improved their skills in the language they study. However, the perceived improvement in their foreign language skills is considerably lower than they had expected before their stay: Before the stay abroad, 76.1% stated that improving their L2 skills was their highest expectation. However, on return, only 50% agreed strongly that this expectation had been fulfilled. Also, rather surprisingly and perhaps worryingly, less than 30% of them confirm having got to know their fellow students in the host country well. Twice as many students report that they got to know international students well.

The German students' responses also reflect a shift between their initial expectations (figure 9) and the perceived gains on return (figure 15). This shift manifests itself in the order of priorities as well as the degree to which the expectations were fulfilled. For example, while their main aim for going abroad was the improvement in their foreign language skills (78%), only 21.9%

agreed strongly that they actually improved these while abroad. After their return, the highest gain mentioned is the enjoyment of the stay (81.3% compared to 6.8% who named this as an expectation in the pre-questionnaire). In position 2 to 4 of main aims for going abroad (figure 9), *PH* students named meeting people from the host country, traveling and learning how things are done differently. While travelling is represented among the top 5 positions of gains they agree with strongly, meeting people from the host country only appears in position 10 (12.5%). Meeting other internationals features in position 2, with 68.8%.

A further marked difference could be observed between the cohorts in their perceived gain in independence and self-confidence. 91.6% of *NTU* students and 78.1% of *PH* students agreed^{xiv} that they had gained independence and self-confidence (figure 16).

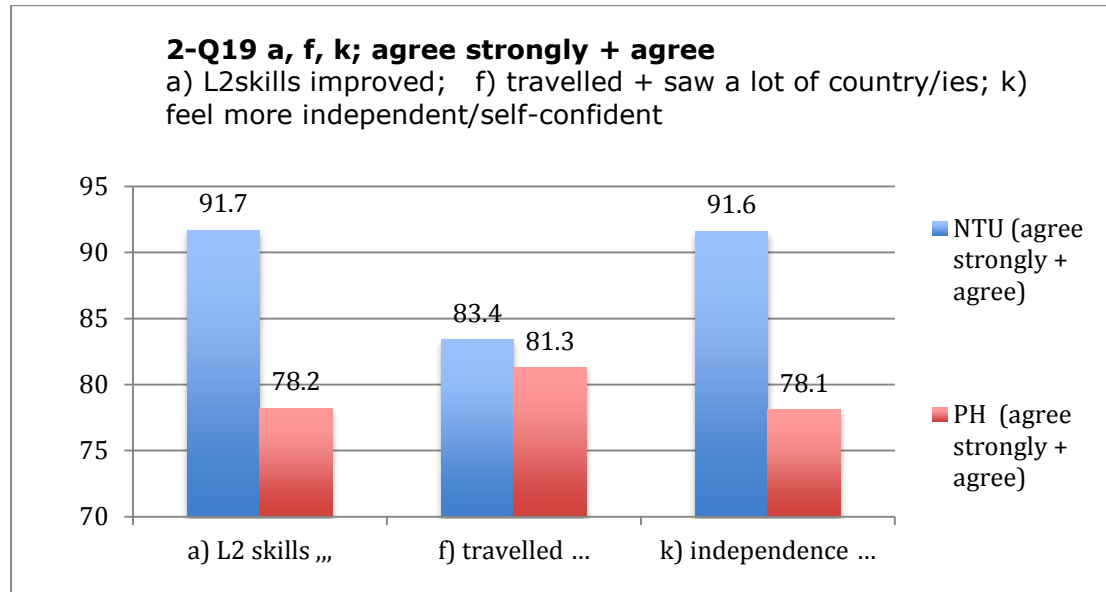


Figure 16: 2-Q19a, f, k (NTU: n=24; response rate: 96%, PH: n=32, response rate: 97%)

The difference between the two cohorts, rating the gain in confidence and independence either in position 1 (*NTU*) or 5 (*PH*)^{xv} can probably be contributed to German students being a little older and already more mature and confident by the time they go abroad, as elaborated above. The additional gain in confidence through this short stay in another country, i.e. one semester for *PH* students, may not have had the same impact on them as the longer stay had on British students^{xvi}. The latter group probably started from a lower level of confidence in the first place, as suggested by the indicators named in the student profiles above.

From the outset, prior to the stay abroad, travelling did not feature as a high expectation among the British group. Nobody named this as their highest priority, and only 6.5% as their second highest. It could therefore be argued to be a positive, but not pre-planned outcome that 83.4 % of this cohort stated that they travelled a lot in the host country.

German university students responded in a similar way, 81.3% agreed that they had travelled and seen a lot of the country/ies they visited (figure 16). This supersedes their expressed expectations prior to the stay abroad when 25.4% of them named this goal as their third most important one (figure 9).

The importance German students attribute to travelling is also reflected in their Erasmus reports written after their return. They talk about many visits to various cities and regions, which were in part organized by their host institution, and in part through their own initiatives.

For example, one report highlights that every weekend which was not taken up by family and friends visiting was used to get to know the host country and its people through trips

to Stonehenge, Manchester, Liverpool, Oxford, Bath, York, London, Cardiff, Warwick Castle, the Peak District, as well as Dublin and other parts of Ireland.

The stay abroad appears to be a catalyst for engaging more with other cultures and has a very positive effect on getting to know other international students well. 62.5% (NTU) and 68.8% (PH) respectively agreed with this statement strongly (figure 17). This also has a positive effect on the perception of being better able to deal with people of other cultures (NTU: 58.3%; PH: 31.3%). However, this positive effect does not extend equally in terms of getting to know people from the host countries. After their stay abroad, only 12.5% of the German students (NTU: 29.2%) feel strongly that they know the people in the host country better than before. In other words, students abroad seem to mix better with other international students than with students of the L2 community. This would suggest that there may be room in both countries to improve contact and communication between the host communities and the incoming students.

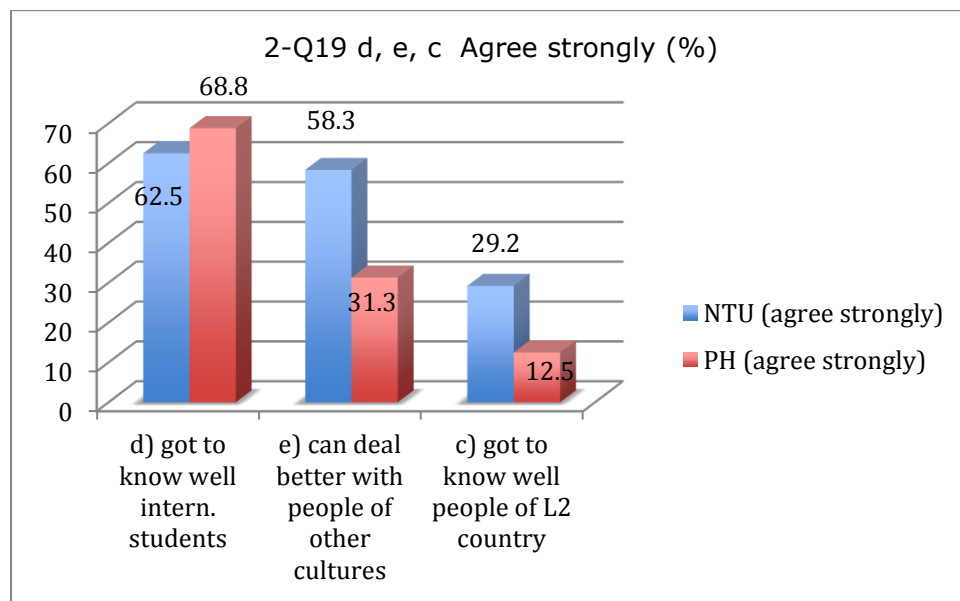


Figure 17: 2-Q19d, e, c; agree strongly (N=56 ; NTU: n=24; PH: n=32)

While students on the exchange programme do not always seem to get to know people in the host communities well, students feel that they gain a better understanding of the culture in general and the way things are done differently abroad.

8. Discussion of results

The study set out to gain a deeper understanding of foreign language students' expectations towards the stay abroad, a little studied area (British Academy 2012; van Maele et al 2016). By contrasting the results of the cohorts, i.e. those based in the UK with those based in Germany, similarities and differences emerge, which help to shed some light on the observed reluctance to spend time abroad among UK students (British Academy 2012, 2013) compared with the much higher expectation of going abroad among German university students (*Institut für Hochschulforschung: Studie Internationale Mobilität* 2013).

The 1st research question focuses on the participants' profiles. The profiles of NTU students differ from those of the students based in Germany. NTU students are younger and appear less independent and confident prior to their stay abroad. Few of them have lived or worked away from home before starting university (figures 4 + 6), and many of them are the first members of their families to enter higher education (figure 5). On the other hand, several of the German PH students had spent extended time abroad earlier, which offered them an opportunity to mature.

Zimmermann and Neyer's study (2013: 525) shows that irrespective of whether they are short- or long-term sojourns, "international mobility experiences [can be seen] as a life event that expedites personality maturation in young adulthood". It can therefore be expected that the older German students, of whom many have some prior experience of living abroad, will approach the study placement differently than the younger NTU students.

Possibly, the greater confidence and independence displayed by the German university students can be attributed to their age, to the fact that they had lived away from the parental household and had experience abroad before embarking on the university course. They seem to show resourcefulness in handling and overcoming problems they encounter and deal quite independently and with confidence with the challenges the sojourn brings, as also described in their Erasmus reports.

The 2nd and 3rd research questions address the students' expectations towards their time abroad. A striking disparity between initial expectations and the perceived gains after the return can be observed, as well as a distinctly different approach between the two cohorts. NTU students seem to have less of a clear concept of their main expectations beyond improving the language, the latter representing a common response among sojourners (Coleman 2003; van Maele et al 2016). They also seem to have less curiosity towards the L2 community and country (figure 8) compared to the German university students (figure 9). Nevertheless, after the stay abroad, NTU students agree strongly that they gain considerably in these areas (figure 14), even though they do not feature at all among their first four expectations. Only 50% agree strongly that they also enjoyed the stay. These findings may point towards the need to create more curiosity towards the L2 community and culture from the outset and to prepare NTU students more for the cultural differences they can expect. One way of doing so is the introduction of awareness-raising tools in the preparation material as suggested by Gutierrez Almarza et al (2015) and other teaching materials focusing on intercultural learning (IEREST project; van Maele et al 2016). Having positive expectations towards the L2 culture can have an impact on the outcome of the stay abroad and may lead to a lasting impact (Garbati and Rothschild 2016). For example, the *PH* students name as part of the four main aims for going abroad, to meet people from the host country, to travel and see the L2 country and to learn how things are done differently (figure 9). They also confirm a considerable gain in these areas after their return (figure 15). In their case, the initial expectations seem to match the gain they report after their return. It may be that this match has a positive influence on the students' perception of enjoyment of their stay abroad which is considerably higher than that of their British counterparts (*PH*: 81.3%; NTU: 50%).

The highest expectation of all students relates to the improvement of their L2 proficiency (figures 8+9), a reasonable expectation supported by year abroad research (Kinginger 2013). Both cohorts agree that their L2 skills have improved during their stay abroad (figure 7), however, the percentage of students agreeing strongly with this statement varies considerably between the two groups. Half of all NTU students perceive a strong improvement in their target language, but only just 22% of the *PH* students do. The perception of not having improved their L2 as much as previously expected could be influenced by at least 2 factors. Firstly, the exchange students appear to have been more in touch with other international students, and thereby exposed primarily to non-native speaker English. This fact can be perceived as having an impact on the learning opportunities of authentic L2, as commented recently by an Erasmus student at the end of the stay in Nottingham. They had a lot of exposure to English as spoken by other international students, with for example Italian, French, German accents, but could not distinguish between Welsh and Irish pronunciation when visiting Cardiff and Dublin. While they had a lot of contact to other international students, they did not mix much with NTU's home students or other native speakers of English.

This phenomenon has been described by research on social networks among students abroad. Coleman's concentric circles model (2013, 2015) describes sojourners as socializing with three distinct groups: their co-nationals (Coleman's inner circle), other outsiders (who often use

English as lingua franca, Coleman's middle circle), and locals, i.e. speakers of the target language (Coleman's outer circle). If the middle and outer circles involve the same language for communication, i.e. in the context of the incoming *PH* students English, these students have more opportunity to practise their L2, albeit often among other L2 learners. The outgoing British students, however, would need more determination in order to move from the inner circle of their co-nationals and middle circle of other outsiders, in both cases speakers of English^{xvii} (their L1), to the outer circle of locals, who speak German and with whom they can practise their L2. It is therefore likely that outgoing British students have far less opportunities to practice their L2 if they remain in social networks of the inner and middle circle. Furthermore, British students face the additional difficulty that many Germans are quick to switch into English if they notice that their conversation partner is a non-native speaker of German. This can further reduce the British students' opportunities to practise their L2, German. Incoming students to Britain do not encounter the same problem among British native speakers.

Secondly, several German university students had spent extended time abroad in an English speaking country before they began their university studies. From the outset, they may therefore have had a higher level of proficiency and fluency in their L2, i.e. English, which had then been the primary language in their circle of outsiders and their circle of locals while they lived for example in the UK, Australia, Canada, the US, or Uganda. Once these students arrived in the UK for their placement, their proficiency levels in their L2 were probably already higher than those of their UK counterparts. This could explain the German students' perception of less improvement in their L2. Similarly, it could be argued that far more British students perceive L2 improvement facilitated by the stay abroad because of a lower level of confidence and proficiency from the outset, as indicated by the student profiles.

There are limitations to this paper. The return rates of the questionnaires limit the generalizability of results. For this article, a comparison of results at the level of individuals' responses before and after the stay abroad could not be undertaken since this would have reduced the data base considerably. The overlap of identical respondents in the pre- and post questionnaire was only 37.5% in the British cohort and 40.6% in the German cohort. Working with all valid responses (instead of concentrating only on the number of respondents who answered both questionnaires) facilitated cautious interpretation of trends within the groups and across groups. These give valuable insights into students' expectations before their time abroad and perceptions as to how far those expectations actually materialized. An additional qualitative analysis of actual change within individuals' perceptions would exceed the framework of this article.

9. Conclusion

This study looked at profiles of exchange students from the UK and Germany, who spent their sojourns in each other's countries. The students' profiles, their expectations and the degree to which they felt these to have been met, showed some similarities and also marked differences. The benefits students perceive reflect some attributes of graduates for a globalized world, as for example independence, better understanding of other cultures, and learning how things are done differently in other countries. Nevertheless, the findings of this study also appear to suggest that the cohorts would benefit from specific preparation for their time spent abroad which incorporates their needs. Student needs seem to have common factors which can be identified by the students' background, e.g., age, type of university, length of education before embarking on a sojourn, prior extended stay abroad etc, indicating different levels of personal maturity, confidence, and independence. Follow-up qualitative studies may be able to shed more light on the potential impact of these factors on the readiness to spend time abroad, particularly among the British students. Furthermore, it would be useful if future research explored whether preparatory material for time abroad may need to be conceptualized differently for different countries, acknowledging

the factors identified above. This study concentrated on one university per country, its findings would need to be tested against larger groups from more universities before clear policy recommendations on a country-specific level could be contemplated.

Secondly, the participants of the study report getting to know other international students more than people of the L2 communities. Relating this to Coleman's concentric circles model (2015) they have more contacts in the middle, rather than the outer circle. If future research verifies these findings, it would seem beneficial to incorporate more activities into the preparation for the time abroad which creates curiosity towards the L2 communities, and then to facilitate better integration of incoming students with the host student communities. More research into student integration into the L2 community using Coleman's concentric circles model (2015) seem to be a promising line of enquiry.

Thirdly, participants in this study name as their highest expectation improving their L2. In order to achieve this goal and to have as many opportunities as possible to practise their L2, British students need to make more efforts than their German counterparts, since the inner and middle circle of their social networks communicate in their L1.

Concluding, more research is needed to address the evolving themes and to follow up emerging questions, as e.g. how to raise more curiosity toward and ease with sojourns among British students in particular, and how to best support all students in order to maximize the opportunities offered by the time abroad.

Acknowledgement

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ⁱ L2 refers to the foreign language studied, irrespective of it being the first, second, or even n^{th} foreign language; L2 country, L2 community and L2 culture refer to the country / community / culture in which the studied language is spoken.

ⁱⁱ Collentine (2009) provides a useful overview of research on language acquisition in the context of study abroad.

ⁱⁱⁱ The terms 'German university students' and 'German students' are used interchangeably without making a reference to the students' actual nationality.

^{iv} The terms 'British university students' and 'British students' are used interchangeably without making a reference to the students' actual nationality.

^v For the purpose of ease of reading, the terms *Pädagogische Hochschule (PH)* and university are used interchangeably when referring to both institutions generically. Beyond the fact that the two types of institutions may attract different kind of home students in Germany, the difference in their educational approach is irrelevant in the context of this project.

^{vi} Only those responses with explicitly expressed consent were included in the results.

^{vii} In the pre-questionnaire $n=105$ overall, i.e., NTU: $n=46$; PH: $n=59$.

^{viii} Children of military personnel often attend boarding schools since the frequent posting of their parents to various bases could otherwise disrupt their education too much.

^{ix} The figures represent a combined reading of the highest and second highest priority (out of 9).

^x In rank 2 only, with 0 entry for rank 1, i.e. the highest importance.

^{xi} Rank 2 only, with 0 entry for rank 1, i.e. the highest importance.

^{xii} 1-Q24-26 "In your own words, please name the three most important expectations you have for your year abroad" followed by three fields for student responses.

xiii In the post-questionnaire, n= 56 overall, i.e., NTU: n= 24 and PH: n= 32.

xiv Combined result of agree and agree strongly.

xv Figure 15 and 16, here: agreeing strongly

xvi British students stayed 2 semesters abroad, in either 1 or 2 countries.

xvii Events organized for international students at German universities mainly use English as lingua franca.

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