

**FIRST DEGREE COURSES INVOLVING A  
PERIOD OF STUDY ABROAD**

**GUIDANCE TO INSTITUTIONS**

January 2008

## **The Background**

Various institutions across the UK offer degree courses with the option of spending a period of study abroad. Courses of this type provide students with the valuable opportunity to experience education within a foreign environment, an experience which may be potentially helpful to their career prospects.

However, the successful conduct of such courses makes demands on departments and on the students over and above those resulting from courses conducted solely within a single institution.

This guidance, which certainly does not claim to be comprehensive, is based in part on the experience of the Committee for Accreditation and Validation, but more particularly on the results of consultations with academics responsible for organising such programmes within UK HEIs. The following information is based on good practice in various institutions.

Periods of study abroad will inevitably be spent in a different cultural environment in terms of both the national culture and the specific culture of the higher education system. Whether students spend time in a country where English is the language of the country, where higher education is largely delivered through the medium of English even though that is not the language of the country, or where the medium of instruction is the native language of the country students will experience a wide range of cultural differences. The latter two cases will make greater demands on students than the former; however they will benefit from learning/developing an additional language alongside experiencing education in a foreign environment.

## **Partner Institutions**

Partnerships between institutions in the UK and other countries have developed in a variety of ways. The most common routes have been via personal contact or approaches from institutions seeking to place their students in the UK, who usually wish such arrangements to be reciprocal. The latter is not always possible given that the number of students wanting to come to the UK usually exceeds those from the UK who wish to undertake studies abroad. However, the imbalance (at least in terms of “student-months”) is not as great as it might seem since UK students usually spend an academic year abroad, while reverse placements are more often three to six months duration. Thus across an institution as a whole, it may be possible to secure a broad balance between the number of out-going and in-coming placements. Institutions should consider

- limiting their total number of partner institutions in the light of the often small number of students seeking to study abroad in order to ensure a continuity of involvement over a period of years. However, the number of students placed in any one institution at any one time should be small, so as to encourage their interaction with the students of the host institution;
- as far as possible, engaging only in reciprocal arrangements since this is likely to enhance the mutual benefit and hence the success of a partnership;

- documenting the partnership arrangements carefully in order to minimise the possibility of misunderstandings arising and to make delivery less dependent on contact between particular individuals. However, the quality of any partnership arrangement will nonetheless be crucially dependent on regular contact between staff of the partner institutions on the basis of which they will gain an understanding of the respective institutional cultures so as to ensure that the needs of students are met and appropriate development strategies maintained.

### **Selection and Preparation of Students for Study Abroad – Language Studies**

The culture shock experienced by students studying abroad should not be underestimated. While its severity will vary, it can in all cases be minimised by the careful selection of students, by the extent to which they are prepared for the transition and by the help they receive from the home and the host institution once a placement has commenced.

Where their studies abroad are an integral part of the degree course and contribute to the classification of the award, students are likely to be anxious about their ability to cope with the chemistry which they are expected to master whilst abroad to an extent which fairly reflects their inherent ability and application. Such anxiety is likely to be particularly acute when instruction and assessment is carried out in a foreign language but, even without that, there is the need to cope with the often widely different approach in the education system of the host country. The Bologna declaration aims to alleviate these problems by providing consistency across Higher Education in Europe. Institutions across Europe are working towards a consistent framework for study with the aim of facilitating student mobility. More information about this process is available at [http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/bologna\\_process/index.cfm](http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/bologna_process/index.cfm)

Currently, in the case of placements in continental Europe, UK students are often likely to be some years younger and hence less experienced and mature than their fellow students. In the interests of the students themselves and indeed of the future of partnerships, it is advisable to offer periods of study abroad only to students of above average academic ability, who are well motivated, relatively mature and self-reliant.

Students going to study in non-English speaking countries need to have developed a competence in the language of the country in which they will be placed. This is true even if the language of instruction and assessment is English since they will need “to get by” in the language to ensure their social and domestic survival. If they are to be taught and assessed in a language other than English, then a measure of fluency will be necessary.

Institutions should consider:

- offering an appropriate range of language studies from the bases of A-level, Scottish Highers, GCSE and beginners;

- making all, or at least a substantial part of the language study a required and integral part of students' programmes so as to avoid overloading students and to demonstrate to them the importance that the institution itself attaches to the language study. (The Committee for Accreditation and Validation recognises that language studies are a necessary preparation when chemistry is to be studied in a foreign language);
- when possible, teaching languages to groups of students from science and engineering courses so that some technical terminology can be included in the courses;
- providing a brief introduction to the culture of the host country and to its approach to higher education together with written guidance on the practical aspects of life in the foreign university and country. Research students drawn from the countries in question are often able to provide guidance about the more practical aspects of life in foreign universities; Assigning a "buddy" from the host university will make it easier for a student to learn about the culture of the host country and institution and settle in to their new environment.
- encouraging the host university to provide supplementary language studies during the placement, or at least a short intensive course at the beginning of the placement to build on students' prior language studies;
- further enhancing students' language competence when they return to their home institution by making available opportunities for advanced studies in the language.

### **Programmes of Studies Abroad**

In cases where a period of study abroad is an integral, contributory part of a student's degree course, ensuring a good match between those studies and the rest of a student's programme is of considerable importance. The coherence of the totality of students' programmes of study, wherever undertaken, should be a primary consideration especially in terms of the core content. While the quality of the match may be enhanced by making arrangements for the study of units selected from different years or levels in the host institution's courses, some mismatch will be inevitable. This may be minimised by prior or post-placement adjustments to a student's programme in the home institution. The making of such adjustments obviously requires a detailed knowledge of studies undertaken abroad. In the case of institutions participating in the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS), relevant information is available in a standardised form, though its accurate interpretation is not always easy particularly with respect to level of study.

Responsibility for a student's programme of studies inevitably, and rightly, rests with the student's home institution, which must be able to document, in some detail, the nature of the studies undertaken elsewhere. (Such documentation or extracts from it should form part of the submission to the Committee for Accreditation and Validation when accreditation is sought for a course.)

Institutions should consider:

- seeking to incorporate a substantial proportion of practical and/or project work into the studies undertaken abroad since these studies are less dependent on language skills than attendance at lectures and provide a good opportunity for fostering language skills in a relatively informal setting;
- limited repetition during the initial stages of studies abroad of some chemical material with which students are already broadly familiar in order to boost their confidence in their ability to cope while their language skills are developing before they move on to the study of material which is new to them;
- taking advantage of courses in fields of chemistry which constitute options in the student's programme rather than essential core material required for progression to a further stage in the course.

Generally, the period of studies abroad occurs in the penultimate year of the course, however a small number of institutions give students the opportunity of spending the final year of an MChem/MSci course at a foreign institution. As with any model, such a structure has both advantages and disadvantages. Among the advantages of the second model is that students are better prepared and more mature before commencing their studies abroad. As is usual in the final year of such courses there is a substantial project element and the other material studied is in any case not required for progression. Among the drawbacks are that there is an absolute deadline for the receipt and moderation of marks for submission to the final board of examiners meeting in the home institution for which students may have to be brought back to the UK to be available for a possible oral examination. In addition, some students have expressed concern that they may be disadvantaged in seeking employment or postgraduate training places if they are abroad at the time of their application and may require reassurance in this regard. Ultimately, the benefits of such an experience vastly outweigh the negative aspects listed here provided the students study period is managed appropriately by their home institution and that adequate support is given.

### **Monitoring Students' Experience**

In establishing and maintaining a successful partnership between academic departments for the placement of students, it is essential that personal contact be developed between the key staff involved. While good documentation is important, the real ethos of a department can only be understood through periodic personal contact by means of visits. Visits will also serve to keep both parties informed of developments in each other's courses and how these need to be reflected in the programmes of students in both the home and host institutions. Institutions should consider:

- identifying a particular individual in the host institution as the first point of contact for both students and staff from the home institution;
- making at least one visit to students during their period abroad, something which students have a right expect. Experience suggests that this is best done about a month after the commencement of the placement. At that

point students' morale is sometimes at relatively low ebb so that a personal demonstration of a department's care for individual students is likely to be appreciated. If any problems have been encountered in respect of the programme of studies to be undertaken, a visit at that time means that difficulties can be resolved without significant loss of time;

- encouraging students to use e-mail and the telephone to keep in frequent contact with the staff member responsible for placements abroad. This is especially useful in dealing with any problems that may arise before they assume major proportions;
- having a well-defined system of intermediate reports from both the students and the host institutions, detailing the progress made during the placement;
- ensuring that reports of collaborative activity are part of the quality assurance procedures and are acted upon as necessary.

### **The Assessment of Studies undertaken Abroad**

The assessment of students' studies abroad is of great significance when the grades obtained contribute to the classification of the final award. A significant contribution to classification clearly signals that such studies are an integral part of the course distinct from an optional, though valuable, "extra". It is important to recognise that the countries in which students are placed have their own well-established Higher Education systems with traditions which will display both similarities and differences from that of the UK. Just as across the UK, there may also be differences between individual universities. Nowhere are these differences more apparent than in the arrangements made for the assessment of students and the grading of the results. For example, there are significant differences of approach in France, Germany and the USA to name but three common destinations. In practice this is an area where there is no substitute for experience and the development of a body of case law over a period with a limited number of partner institutions. Clearly, the more detailed the transfer of information that takes place between institutions with regard to the assessment of individual students, the better the mutual understanding achieved.

Institutions should consider

- that especially in the early stages of a partnership, it may be that the contribution of marks to classification (typically those derived from years other than the first year of an MChem/MSci course) are distributed in a different way for those students who undertake study abroad compared to those who do not. Ideally the "year abroad" should carry a lower weighting than the equivalent year of the course in the student's home institution;
- making project work a major element of study abroad since the substantial report of that activity can be assessed and moderated by the students' home institution upon their return;
- including an element of distance learning from the student's home course in the programme undertaken abroad, as this can be subject to assessment on the student's return;

- in the case of institutions participating in the ECT Scheme, ensuring that the results of assessments are transmitted by the host institution using the ECTS grading system. This clearly has much to commend it, even though the information will have to be interpreted with care to ensure comparability of standards of assessment.
- the participation of staff from partner institutions in each others' assessment processes. The scrutiny by staff from the home institution of the scripts of examinations taken abroad when such scripts are available is likely to provide valuable insights.

### **The European Chemistry Thematic Network**

The European Chemistry Thematic Network (ECTN) is an EU-funded initiative that brings together institutions from most European countries. It has its origins in student exchange networks. It has produced reports on core curricula, transferable skills and practical work. Details are available from [www.ectn-assoc.org](http://www.ectn-assoc.org). This website also provides details of the Eurobachelor® and Euromasters chemical science degrees. These qualifications, introduced in 2003 and 2005 respectively, adhere to the guidelines set down in the Bologna Process.

### **The European Credit Transfer Scheme**

The ECTS is one of the key objectives of the Bologna Declaration. It attempts to provide a transparent system for institutions to compare the learning achievements of higher education students across Europe with the aim of facilitating transfer and progression.

European Credits are awarded for the successful completion of studies. One academic year – two semesters – is equivalent to 60 ECTS credits and can be subdivided as necessary.

ECTS credits are obtained based on learning outcomes and the successful completion of work required. Students will achieve these aims through a range of learning activities such as lectures, seminars, independent study, project work, and examinations.

Student performance is assessed using the system of each specific country however the addition of an ECTS grade enables easy comparison between systems. Grades are assigned as follows:

A best 10%

B next 25%

C next 30%

D next 25%

E next 10%

FX – fail, some work needed to pass

F – fail, considerable further work required

A series of key documents are required by the ECT scheme

The *Information Package* published in both the national language and English this describes the course syllabus, level and assessment profile. Exchange students and their tutors select an appropriate curriculum from this source.

The *Learning Agreement* highlights the courses to be taken and the ECTS credits to be awarded for each. It is a formal document signed by the home institution, the host institution and the student, agreeing the proposed curriculum. Changes can be made, but only with the signed, recorded agreement of all three parties.

The *Transcript of Records* formalises student achievement and displays the credits achieved. It is transferable across Europe and is given to the student and the home institution at the end of their period of study.

More information is available at

[http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/socrates/ects/index\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/socrates/ects/index_en.html)