

CASE STUDY

SAPAR (Study Abroad PAR) in American and Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham, April 1997 - June 1999.

Background

Students in American and Canadian Studies are currently required to spend the first semester of their second year in an American or Canadian university. [NB from 2000 this will change : students will apply for either a 3 year degree with no compulsory study abroad element, or a 4 year degree with a whole year abroad.] Because of the large number of institutions involved and the range and different levels of courses on offer, it is not practicable for marks gained in America or Canada to count towards the Nottingham degree, although they are required to pass all their courses. Students are thus required to undergo an experience, which they, and the department staff, consider very important, without being given any tangible credit for it.

Before the SAPAR was devised, students were asked to submit one report on their return. The main aim of the SAPAR, which has been, in effect, a two year pilot, was to capitalise on the insights and increase of self-awareness which the students' comments reveal, by encouraging them to use what they had learned more consciously, both in their academic work and in planning their careers or further study.

The Pilot

Phase One, 1997-98

(i) Before departure

After consultations between the staff responsible for Study Abroad, a group of Second Years who had returned from their time abroad and the PADSHE Internal Evaluator, the department devised a Study Abroad Personal and Academic Record (SAPAR). This was an email-based scheme which required students to reflect on the personal and academic aspects of their experiences in the foreign country and to communicate these at key points to the department. The department were careful to explain to students that this was to be a semi-public form of writing which would be useful to students later on when they came to compile a CV, and useful to staff when they were writing references. Any real problems or confidential issues could also be discussed by email, but as a quite separate communication. As usual, a number of meetings were held with the First Years to prepare them for the semester abroad. As well as dealing with practicalities, these meetings were also used to introduce the SAPAR scheme and explain its pilot nature. Students were aware that their emails would be read by the PADSHE Evaluator and that their views on the process would be sought on their return.

(ii) The time abroad.

Before devising the SAPAR the department had always asked students to write a summative report on their time away after their return; the difference between that and the series of emails now required of them was that the SAPAR process offered students the opportunity both to document impressions while they were still fresh and to review and add to these while they were still away from Nottingham.

(iii) Re-entry

On their return to Nottingham in February many students clearly expected that something would happen as a result of the writing they had done. In fact, the member of staff who had always run the Study Abroad programme, including a general debriefing meeting, was ill and away from the department at this time, the person who had been most involved in devising the SAPAR was now on sabbatical, while a third member of staff, deputising for her absent colleague, was concentrating on preparations for *next* year's SA students. As one student observed later, "It was hard to go *and* hard to come back." For the 97/98 SA cohort, the situation was particularly acute: the SAPAR process had raised expectations, in that more had been expected of the students while they were away, and, because of staffing problems, less than usual had happened when they returned.

(iv) Evaluation of Phase One of the pilot.

During April and May two evaluation activities took place. Time was provided in a lecture for all SA students to complete a short questionnaire and a group of nine students volunteered to discuss their experiences and reactions in a lunchtime meeting.

In response to the questionnaire, just under two thirds of the students were positive about the gains of going through the SAPAR process. Some of the benefits named were

"time to pause and think"

"a sense that you were experiencing something different"

"an opportunity to share experiences and tell the department about your progress"

"having to write one before I left England helped me to think about what to expect and avoid a panic later"

"good to consider you experiences on a more coherent level writing brings up ideas that might otherwise remain in the vagaries of memory"

They were much less positive about the summative usefulness of the scheme. It was still too early for most of them to be interested in reflecting on their own skills and experiences for CV purposes. Since no member of staff had made any reference to anything they had written, there was no real incentive to place any academic importance on the exercise, and the personal gains expressed above seemed less significant now that they were grappling with the demands of a new semester and

adjusting to being back in Nottingham. Many were driven to conclude that the main purpose of the entire exercise had been to provide a kind of informal "Rough Guide" for future SA students.

In discussion with the Evaluator several of the students returned to this idea and questioned the frequency of the emails: if the main beneficiaries were next year's students, surely they might have been able to choose when and how often to write; they were not clear about how the writing could be of any use to the writers themselves once the experience was over.

Some, however, had enjoyed the opportunity to produce a different kind of writing - but, again, the absence of an audience for this writing was problematic. There is an irony here: the SAPAR was devised in the first place partly to validate an important experience that received no formal credit within the degree, yet its very format now seemed to have reproduced that sense of compulsory yet officially unvalued activity. There was some confusion about whether accounts that were particularly detailed and perceptive might be used by the department in their favour if they were later on a degree borderline, as had been suggested in the pre-SA documentation. Several students would have liked the opportunity to work the accumulated emails up into a piece of extended writing that might count towards their degree in the same way that seminar contributions count in certain modules. [In fact, neither of these suggestions turned out to be viable.]

Lessons from Phase One of the Pilot

Material from the evaluation of the Pilot formed the basis of a full discussion between the Evaluator and those members of the department responsible for Study Abroad. As a result of this discussion the following recommendations were offered to the full department for consideration.

- Instructions for the reports need to be more precise: students should be reminded of the importance of keeping hard copies; topic headings would be helpful.
- The third report (Thanksgiving) should be eliminated and reflections based on the time between the second (Week 3) and Christmas should be incorporated in the final report.
- Instructions for this final report should make it clear that it will form the basis of an important meeting with the Personal Tutor on the student's return.
- Tutors should hold a small group (3/4?) tutorial focusing on academic and personal aspects of the semester abroad, to replace the debriefing meeting, which was inevitably general and/or problem centred, because of the numbers involved.
- These meetings should have a clear agenda, prepared in advance by the students.
- Students should be encouraged to understand the potential within the SAPAR process for helping them to reflect on skills development and setting themselves academic targets. [Might this help the department to address the question of Progression within a modular degree]
- The involvement of the Careers Service would be useful in encouraging students to see a practical purpose for articulating what they had gained through their study abroad

Second year of the SAPAR, 1998-99

Evaluation of this second phase was as follows:

- (i) A discussion with four students took place as soon as they returned to Nottingham at the start of the second semester. The tutor and the administrator responsible for SA also attended this meeting.

Much of the discussion, as it had the previous year, centred on *practicalities* and many of the same points arose again.

- The idea was good but its implementation lacked conviction (a point that was echoed by the SA Tutor and administrator; from their end the difficulty had lain in those students who simply chose to send no emails, in spite of reminders, throughout their stay.)
- Some careers input before and after the period abroad would have been useful.
- IT based systems need reliable technology/easy access (two of the students suggested setting up one's own web-based email address before departure; this led to a further suggestion of students' having a distribution list of their peers, which might be little used but could help to minimise initial feelings of being a long way from all the usual support networks; a SAPAR bulletin board might also be useful here.)
- More structure, in the form of prompts, would make the whole exercise more purposeful and less of a chore.
- One student felt that some sections of the reports could be made available to students who were going abroad the following year (a form of mentoring). "You don't know what you want to know before it's too late and this might help you imagine it."
- The students had no sense that their reports were being read; it felt like a one-way correspondence. (Tutor and administrator agreed to revisit the question of how to clarify still more precisely the purpose and audience for the reports. All tutors need to be made more aware of their role during the students' absence; a default response to the students' first communication from abroad, for instance, would not be time-consuming.)

The discussion also dealt with the *students' perception of their academic development* while abroad and *an increased interest in learning styles*.

- The potential for clarifying your thinking about module choice and further study (on your return) needs to be formally developed.
- A tutorial needs to take place on your return based around an agenda arising out of your emails. If one-to-one tutorials are too time-consuming, these could be held in small groups.
- The final report (free prose at present) on return feels repetitive. This could be more firmly linked to action planning and to using your experiences to improve future learning.
- Discussion about differences between the English and American systems of HE revealed a heightened awareness about preferred learning styles and a wish to find a context for maintaining this increased self-awareness in their subsequent studying.

There was a general feeling that the chief lesson all had learnt was “nothing *has* to be the way it is.”

- While agreeing that there were strengths and weaknesses in both systems, the students were agreed that their time at an American university had raised their expectations in two important areas: they liked the more interactive lectures and felt that “lectures there were sometimes more lively than seminars here” because students were more active listeners and more engaged participants; they felt that they would benefit from more specific assessment criteria.

(ii) A questionnaire for the Y2 Study Abroad cohort was completed in March 1999 (26 replies). Their responses are summarised below.

What information did you receive about the purposes of the SAPAR before you left?

- It would help in the future. (3)
- Useful in helping us to evaluate our progress. (4)
- Might be used if we were on a degree borderline. (1)
- Helpful for tutor references/identifying skills. (1)
- Personal record/aid to reflection. (4)
- Encourages cultural analysis. (1)
- We had clear information about the content required in each email (10)
- but the full information arrived at home addresses after I had left for America (1)
- The department wanted to monitor our progress, as a group/as individuals. (2)
- It could help us in applying for jobs later on. (1)
- Plenty of information about its purpose, but not enough about its practical application. (1)
- It was about skills. (1)
- Not enough information.

What further information could have been relevant?

- More about its relevance. (2)
- More detail about what exactly was expected. (2)
- How much importance the department put on it. (2)
- What exactly it counted for.(2)
- More help with how to write the first one. (1)
- More about skills/how it might relate to job applications. (1)
- More stress on PARs/ NRA in general and how the SAPAR fitted in with these. (1)
- Examples of the “genre”.(1)

The kind of writing you were asked to do in the SAPAR is unusual in an HE context, i.e. it blurs the borders of academic and personal writing somewhat. How useful/ easy/tiresome did you find it?

- Helped me assess the experience. (11)
- Helped me document that experience.(4)
- Found it an effort to do (though most added that it was still worthwhile). (4)

- Particularly useful before leaving: sorting out expectations; being clear about goals; anticipating difficulties.(2)
- Particularly useful to look back on. (4)
- Difficult because I was unsure about how publicly I was writing. (1)
- Difficult because neither entirely academic nor entirely personal. (1)
- Writing helped me focus on objectives/be objective about difficulties. (3)
- Saw it as a new challenge. (1)
- Reviewing your own learning is hard; we are not really taught to do it. (1)
- Found it useful. (6)
- Used it to reflect on cultural differences. (2)
- Used it to voice problems.(1)
- Not especially useful for me, but justifiable because I can see its use for future students. (1)
- Too much writing. (1)
- More feedback from my tutor would have made it seem more worthwhile. (1)

Would you have liked more suggestions about what each email should contain?

- Yes. (12)
- No. (14)

Logging your thought about the semester abroad was intended to be useful to you during the rest of the course and beyond.

(a) Can you give an example of a way in which you have already found a use for this?

- Personal benefit. (1)
- It has enhanced academic/cultural study. (3)
- Encouraged more formal evaluation of experience. (1)
- Made me more aware of my strengths and weaknesses.(1)
- Found it positive to write (and later re-read) about difficult experiences – helped keep them in perspective. (1)
- Setting myself objectives. (1)
- Made me aware of a learning curve. (1)
- I feel my tutor might know me better.(1)
- Potential contribution for a CV. (2)
- Enhanced careers awareness. (1)
- Improved management of money/time (2)
- Encouraged reflection after my return. (1)
- Improved my motivation. (1)

(b) Can you give an example of a way in which you might use it in the future?

- Building a CV/applying for jobs. (12)
- Personal reminder. (2)
- Improving learning. (1)
- Extending awareness of the scope of my area of study. (2)

- Increased awareness of the benefits of the experience/ skills/capabilities. (5)

Do you have any suggestions for other uses/further modifications for the SAPAR?

- To evaluate how helpful the department was when we were away. (1)
- Make greater use of it for future students (c.f. mentoring). (3)
- Encourage more of this kind of reflection.(1)
- Use it for further writing/for a wider audience, e.g. in the departmental newsletter. (1)
- Incorporate creative writing within the degree, e.g. in relation to the genre of autobiography (currently some in the Introduction to Canadian Studies module). (1)
- Trouble shooting. (1) [NB It was made clear in the Briefing and in the documentation that any problems should be emailed separately to tutors and that this was not within the remit of the SAPAR.]
- Evidence for continuing with/de-selecting an American or Canadian university. (1)
- Send email reminders when reports are due, not just when they don't appear. (1)
- Emphasise its benefits and then leave it optional. (1)
- Make it less formal. (1)
- Make it more specifically useful for future students. (1)
- Provide more guidelines/prompts. (1)
- Explain its importance more deliberately. (1)
- Use it more when we come back .(One big meeting is not helpful.) (10)
- Find ways of incorporating it into a wider PAR. (1)

(iii) Finally, as part of the overall evaluation of the PADSHE Project at Nottingham, the Y2 students were asked to complete the standard questionnaire used to collect student views on the usefulness of Personal and Academic Records. This was presented to them with the caveat that the SAPAR was more limited in scope than the kind of PAR assumed by this questionnaire, making some questions difficult to answer. The areas they were asked to consider were

- one-to-one meetings with a personal tutor
- record keeping
- a resource for CV building
- progress review
- career review
- skill development
- contributing to the improvement of your learning

Their responses are fully documented in the project Evaluation. What is interesting is how positive the students were about the usefulness of the SAPAR in the majority of these areas. This would seem to suggest that, although it still requires further modifications, the Pilot had met a number of its original objectives and would be a strong basis from which the department could move towards designing a more all-embracing PAR.

In particular, the students seemed capable of making greater use of the study abroad element of their degree in the areas of

- becoming more conscious of and more articulate about the wide range of skills it had helped them to develop
- taking a broader view of the scope offered within their degree area
- understanding that institutional practices are constructed and not inevitable and learning how to operate more effectively within them
- understanding the role of reflection in successful learning
- thinking about their own preferred learning styles
- considering the contribution that their experiences abroad might make within the department as a learning community
- preparing to begin career planning.