

'It redefined my values': should you go on a year abroad? Kit Macdonald

For Sonya Barlow, now a BBC presenter, spending part of her business degree in Italy “made her who she is”. “I had never lived away from my family home but suddenly I was living alone in a different country. It redefined my values and allowed me to be me: I explored Italy, focused on studying, balanced that with fun and laid great foundations for moving into the world of work,” she says. By her second semester in Rome, Barlow was able to take her classes in Italian: “It was hard, but stepping out of my comfort zone set me up for success.”

Lots of students might think that the doors to study abroad closed after Brexit, as the UK had to leave the European Union’s Erasmus+ study abroad programme. But that’s not the case – it’s still a great time to study abroad, and thanks to funding opportunities it can be a cheaper way to see the world than a gap year. The UK government set up the [Turing scheme](#) to take the place of Erasmus+ when the UK left the EU. It has some differences: Turing is globally focused rather than just on Europe. Universities and colleges abroad are expected to give up on their fees under the scheme. “Losing Erasmus was a huge blow but I believe most feedback about the Turing scheme has been positive,” says Howarth, a study-abroad specialist. “On the upside, there is the widened geographical scope of the funding and opportunities,” he says. “One downside is that the Erasmus+ programme sets out its funding six or seven years in advance, while UK universities now have to apply for funding through the Turing scheme on a year-by-year basis, which can create a feeling of uncertainty.” This also means that UK and international institutions are forging new partnerships and exchange programmes.

While a year abroad might be seen as the standard, growing numbers of universities are offering shorter and more flexible options, such as summer schools and individual semesters. There are also huge numbers of courses taught in English in countries where English is not the first language – more than 28,000 of them worldwide.

“British students are desirable to unis abroad because the US and UK have the largest concentration of highly ranked universities, so it’s harder to entice them to move away with that on their doorstep,” Howarth explains. “Attracting a diverse range of foreign students also helps the foreign unis move up in the international rankings.”

Working abroad as a student or recent graduate and studying abroad are both valuable ways of broadening your life experience and making yourself more employable, and, according to Howarth, studying abroad is seen particularly favourably by employers. “It really changes the perception of somebody – it’s quite a brave step to take and is perceived as that. You will gain new academic perspectives, experience a different culture, and be viewed as more open-minded and better able to cope with change.”

Lots of students say that the opportunity to broaden their horizons and have new, unexpected experiences is their favourite thing about studying abroad – so if you go, grab the opportunity with both hands. (523 words)