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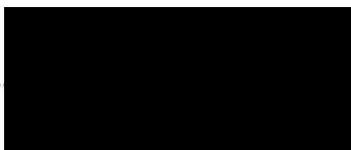
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**An exploration of Cross-Cultural Adaptation
in the Context of European Student Mobility**

by

Ana Maria G. Beaven

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Applied Linguistics

University of Warwick
Centre for Applied Linguistics

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DECLARATION

I declare that the present thesis is my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that its contents have not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma, or any other qualifications.

ABSTRACT

This study explores cross-cultural adaptation in the context of European student mobility. It shows how the individual journeys of sojourners can be extremely varied, and are affected by internal and external factors, such as motivations, expectations, personality, coping strategies, skills, characteristics of the environment, and chance, among others. This longitudinal qualitative study follows a cohort of 21 Italian university students from before their departure to a number of European destinations, to their return back home. The data collected was in the form of interviews and weekly “diary-tables”, used to create graphs representing the ups and down of the individual experiences.

In terms of the research findings, I have shown how the complexities of the adaptation process can be adequately understood within a model that caters for that complexity, while showing that this type of experience can be situated within the perspective of life changes. Anderson’s (1994) model seems particularly suitable in this context.

I have also shown that European student mobility has changed since it was set up in 1987, and that increasing numbers of mobile students, the rise of instruction through the medium of English in many HE institutions, globalisation and technology, have changed the landscape within which these students move. Finally, I have shown how residence abroad does not necessarily bring enhanced intercultural skills, although these can be encouraged by providing the students with the concepts and language to describe their experiences, and opportunities for reflection before, during and after the experience abroad. This is the area in which HE institutions in Europe can play a significant role.

ABBREVIATIONS

CMC	Computer mediated communication
ELF	English as a Lingua Franca
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ERASMUS	European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students
SLA	Second Language Acquisition

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

Over twenty years ago, when I was a language student at the University of Sussex, I had to spend my third year abroad. As I was studying for a joint honours degree, I had the opportunity to spend five months in France and five in Italy. The aim of what was then called a Joint-Study Programme was clear: during the time spent abroad we were to improve our linguistic skills and at the same time immerse ourselves in the culture of the country we were visiting. Courses at the university were optional, but we had to write a dissertation that would show that we had learned something about our host country's culture during the months we spent there.

Today, I teach English at the same university in Italy where I spent five months of my year abroad. Some of my students go abroad as part of their degree courses, but today the programme is called Erasmus. Many ask me for advice on a variety of topics. My experiences, but also those of my peers who went abroad with me, have helped me give guidance and understand some of the difficulties that my own students go through during their study abroad.

The year abroad was, for me, a life-changing experience. However, I also remember how, for our group of a dozen or so students spending ten months in France and Italy, the experiences turned out as varied as could be. Some returned home with little more than a higher level of linguistic proficiency, others with a feeling that they had been away from home for too long. Some went back mostly with memories of party after party and long trips to the seaside, or with thick photographic albums of all the cultural, artistic and tourist sights visited, as if returning from a very long holiday. Some again went home with better or worse opinions of the French or the Italians, or with a deeper understanding of the cultures in which they had lived. A small number, including myself, returned home only to leave again after graduation and perhaps move back to one of the countries visited during study abroad. When I later came across models of cross-cultural adaptation, like the U-curve and the learning-curve models, as well as the concept of culture shock, these did not quite ring true. Or rather, they seemed oversimplified, and did not quite reflect the variety

of experiences and processes of adaptation I had witnessed. True, a small number of my peers had suffered some form of culture shock. For others, it was more a question of bouts of irritation or frustration. Many had experienced ups and downs rather than anything resembling a simple learning curve. And later, in my professional life as a university teacher, I continued to see the same variety in the adaptation of my students to their life abroad.

These observations set me in the path to investigating adaptation during study abroad, with the aim of exploring longitudinally the rich variety of students' experiences, and at the same time investigating some of the factors that appear to affect these lived experiences.

Study abroad is not a new area of research, nor is it a modern invention. In the ancient world it was not uncommon for scholars to spend time studying in other countries. The same can be said about the late Middle Ages, when the first universities were founded in Europe. As the language of instruction was mostly Latin, there were few barriers to the mobility of scholars throughout Europe. However, this was far from a widespread practice, as there is a tendency to believe. Still more recently, starting from the 18th century, many wealthy families in Britain considered that no education was complete without a Grand Tour of, among other places, Italy. The Tour, which lasted anything from a few months to several years, was meant to teach young aristocrats about the politics, history and culture of the countries visited.

In recent times, the study of foreign languages, and particularly the communicative approach to teaching them, brought with it the idea that the best way to learn to "speak" the language was to spend time in the country where the language was spoken. Finally, the creation of the European Union and, more recently, the related attempts to create a European Higher Education Area, have led to the formalisation and spread of student mobility opportunities to all European countries and most higher education institutions.

However, the Erasmus Programme seems to have different connotations for the various stakeholders involved. For higher education institutions it is one of their means, possibly the most important, of realising internationalisation, one of the keywords of higher education policy throughout Europe, and one which contributes to the ranking system. For European institutions like the European Commission, Erasmus is the means by which future labour mobility may be encouraged, and possibly a European identity created in the minds of the younger generations (European Commission 2008, 2009a). For students taking part, the Erasmus Programme provides, on the one hand, a much hoped-for advantage over their peers in the job race, on the other a chance to travel, improve their proficiency in a foreign language, and build international friendships.

Judging from the amount of talk around the Erasmus Programme (and the coining of the expression “the Erasmus generation”), one would assume that it was more popular than it is in reality. The fact that only about 2% of university students in Europe take part in the programme would seem to imply that its effect is less significant than one would hope for. However, if the aim (both of single universities and of European institutions), is to increase the number of HE students taking part in the programme (Vossensteyn et al, 2010), it seems essential to understand better the different issues involved.

Some distinctions need to be made here. Student mobility in higher education is a somewhat vague term that includes a number of different categories of students. It is usually used to include those who study in a country other than their country of origin. Thus, it includes medium- and long-term mobility (longer than one year), such as students following whole degree programmes abroad, as well as short-term mobility (less than one year), which comprises those spending a few weeks abroad for language/cultural purposes and those doing a term, or a whole academic year, in a host university, as part of their degree programme at home. Even the phrase Study Abroad has different connotations on either side of the Atlantic. While in Europe it has almost become synonymous with the Erasmus Programme, the variety of offer in the USA is much greater, ranging from brief “Study Tours” lasting a maximum of

a few weeks, for which participants are not required to have a specific level of proficiency in the language of the country visited, to the “Short-Term Study” of up to 8 weeks, for which only limited linguistic proficiency is expected, home-stay being the most common form of accommodation, and lessons being carried out in the students’ language, often in a foreign-country branch of the home institution. Finally, what Engle & Engle (2003) term “Cross-Cultural Encounter/Contact/Immersion Programs”, lasting from a semester to a whole academic year, have greater similarities with the Erasmus Programme, in that students may be expected to enrol in courses organised by local institutions, and to live in rented accommodation with other local or international students. In this case, however, the programme may have an emphasis on cross-cultural leaning and the students may have received pre-departure preparation, and be expected to reflect and report on their experience abroad, in a way the European students are not. For further details on the characteristics of Study Abroad programmes in the USA, see Bolen (2007).

Thus, studies concerning student mobility have focussed on different aspects, depending partly on the type of programme concerned: higher education institutions have mostly been interested in how incoming students, particularly those staying for a whole degree programme – both undergraduate and postgraduate – adapt to the new academic environment, or on the evaluation of pre-programme initiatives for outgoing students. On the other hand, the concern of European institutions has mostly been to understand student mobility in terms of cost-benefit, and how European policy regarding student and labour mobility needs to change. The type of studies carried out by such institutions has therefore mostly been quantitative in nature, and has often taken the form of surveys, in order to illustrate the socio-economic backgrounds of the participants, or the effects of Erasmus on the participants’ future employability (Maiworm and Teichler, 1996; Teichler, 2004; European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2008; Beerkens and Vossensteyn, 2011).

Nevertheless, the individual experiences of the mobile students themselves, taking into account the academic and personal factors which may affect them, have rarely

been researched in detail, and in particular longitudinally. A number of studies concerning the international student experience, particularly in the US, Australia, and Japan, have focussed on the adaptation process, and add to the literature on cross-cultural adaptation. These will be discussed in the literature review. However, Erasmus students are considered to move within a radius very close to home, and therefore their experience, from an intercultural point of view, is often considered less worthy of attention.

Coleman (1998) has illustrated some of the differences between study abroad as understood in Europe and across the Atlantic. Clearly, there are parallels with other types of international study experiences, but some aspects are specific and need to be understood better: the expectations, academic hurdles, socialisation patterns, status and identity issues involved. All these are different from other mobility programmes, and they influence the experience in very specific ways. I believe that to concentrate exclusively on the academic aspects of the experience – as is often the case of the academic institutions responsible for sending the students abroad, whose main concern is the ‘learning agreement’ and the credits obtained abroad – is to ignore some crucially significant aspects of the students’ experiences, fundamental to the students themselves and to their future lives.

For this reason, the main focus of my research study is the lived experiences of a group of young Europeans – in this specific case Italians – spending a period of time studying in another European country as part of the Erasmus Programme. As a consequence, my main research question is:

- 1) How do the students experience adaptation to a different environment, in the context of Higher Education mobility today?

This broad question comprises a number of sub-questions:

- 2) What were the students’ overt motivations for taking part in the programme, and what were their expectations before departure?

- 3) What (social and academic) experiences did they have in their various destinations?
- 4) What (social and academic) obstacles did they encounter, and what strategies did they develop in order to cope?
- 5) Were these strategies successful?
- 6) What sense did the students make of their experiences, and how were outcomes articulated?
- 7) What seems to be the adaptation model that best describes this process and the variety of ways in which students adjust? Considering that Anderson's (1994) model of cross-cultural adaptation is built on the concept of obstacle and response, how suitable is it when attempting to describe the process of adapting to a new environment in the specific context of European mobility?

By attempting to answer these questions, I hope to contribute to the understanding of the process of adapting to a new environment in the context of short-term academic mobility, and what it means to be a European mobile student in today's globalised world.

The thesis is divided into ten chapters. Chapter 2 presents the Erasmus Programme, and provides a brief history and a selection of significant data, in order to understand better the specific context of the participants' experience. In Chapter 3, I shall review the literature on the subject of cross-cultural adaptation, particularly in the context of student mobility. I will look at different models of cross-cultural adaptation and will critically review a number of relevant empirical studies, in order to identify gaps and limitations in the knowledge, as well as clarify some of the options considered for this project. The methodological choices made for this specific study will be dealt with in Chapter 4, in which I also illustrate the pilot study. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 deal with the data analysis gathered before departure, during the participants' stay abroad, and upon their return home. I will be looking at the motivations and expectations expressed by the students, as I believe that these inevitably influence experience. In

Chapter 6 I will be analysing the themes which emerged from the data. I will also concentrate on two areas in which a number of students identified obstacles in their paths, analysing the strategies they used to overcome these problems. I will then look at how the participants articulated the outcomes of their experience in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 concentrates on the case of an individual student, Angela, in order to provide a longitudinal example of adaptation to a new academic environment. In my choice I have avoided extremes, in the sense of students who adapt perfectly or those who do not adapt at all. In this sense, Angela is exemplary of the majority of students, who fall between these two extremes. Finally, Chapter 9 provides a discussion of the main issues that have emerged from this study, in particular with regard to changes in the context of HE student mobility today, conceptual models to describe the processes of cross-cultural adaptation, and the implications on policy and practice within HE institutions. Chapter 10 provides a brief conclusion.

CHAPTER 2 – The Erasmus Programme

In this chapter, I shall provide an overview of the Erasmus Programme, its history, significant data, practical aspects, and finally the official goals of the programme, in order to illustrate the context of this particular research project.

The Erasmus Programme (the acronym for European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) takes its name also from the European scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam (1465-1536), a humanist and theologian who studied and taught in various European countries. Significantly, he also founded the *Collegium Trilingue* to encourage the study of languages –although in this case it was Latin, Greek and Hebrew. According to the official website,¹ “like the man, the Erasmus Programme places great importance on mobility and furthering career prospects through learning. By leaving his fortune to the University of Basel, he became a pioneer of the mobility grants which now bear his name.” According to the same website, around 180,000 university students take part in the Erasmus Programme every year, and recently celebrations were held for the two-millionth student to take part since its beginning in 1987.

2.1 History of the programme

Mobility within European universities is not new. Education, perhaps unsurprisingly, has always been an area in which mobility and exchange have been relatively common.

Although educational matters were not on the agenda of the founders of the European Community, attention began to be directed to such questions in the 1970s. Following the first Action Programme in the field of Education, adopted by the Council and the Ministers of Education in 1976, the Joint-Study Programmes were established for that same academic year, with the aim of encouraging inter-university cooperation. The grants allocated to the Programme were meant to “foster the lasting cooperation between institutions of higher education from different Member States

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc80_en.htm

with a view to the joint development of courses of study or parts of such courses” (European Commission, 1987).

In 1984, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe issued a Recommendation regarding the “situation of foreign students”. Taking into account that the “aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve a greater unity between its members, and that this aim can be pursued notably by common action in cultural matters”, and that “the practice of study in a country other than a student's home country is likely to contribute to a student's cultural and academic enrichment”, it encouraged its member states to promote study abroad as part of their educational policies, and to facilitate student mobility among countries (Council of Europe, 1984).

The Adonnino report, submitted to the Milan European Council the following year, was crucial to the development of the Erasmus Programme. It encouraged university cooperation and mobility in higher education by “(a) implementing, on the basis of the experience acquired, a comprehensive European inter-university programme of exchanges and studies aimed at giving this opportunity to a significant section of the Community's student population; and (b) examining the possibility of introducing a European system of academic credits transferable throughout the Community (European Academic Credit Transfer System). This system would be implemented by means of bilateral agreements or on a voluntary basis by universities and higher-education establishments which, by arrangement with one another, would determine the procedures for academic recognition of such credits”. The report also suggested “the possible introduction of a European Award which would be based on achievement in higher-education establishments in different Member States” (Adonnino Committee, 1985).

Thus, the Joint-Study Programmes were replaced in 1987 by Erasmus, one of the largest temporary student mobility programmes existing today, although it is still far from its initial ambitious aim of involving 10% of all European university students by 1992. The total number of students who took part in the programme in that initial

year were 3244 (220 students from Italy, 925 from the UK and 895 from France, among others).

In 1993, the Commission of the European Communities issued a green paper on the European dimension of education. In it, the authors expressed the concept that education should prepare young people to live and work in the wider European community: “in the new context afforded by the Single Market, education has as one of its aims the preparation of young people to exercise their responsibilities in a wider social and economic area. It is in this perspective that the development of a European dimension of education must be seen as an important factor in the adjustment of the educational process to the new economic, social and cultural environment. Indeed, the improvement of linguistic competence, the mutual understanding of the practices and cultures of other Member States, and even the ability to work with those of other nationalities or in another setting, are among the most important factors which help young people to become integrated into society and to accept more readily their responsibilities as European citizens. At the same time, the new possibilities available in the context of building the European Community, in particular the greater range of educational opportunities, are a bonus which Member States should recognise” (Commission of the European Communities, 1993, p.3).

From then on, education became an important element in the European agenda. Socrates, the European Union’s umbrella programme supporting also teaching staff mobility, as well as work placements for graduates, was set up in 1995. Among its responsibilities were issuing grants to cover some of the costs of the mobility programmes, but also that of developing the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

Four years later, the Bologna Declaration laid the foundations of a European Higher Education Area by beginning what is known as the Bologna Process, involving the division of undergraduate and postgraduate studies into two cycles (Bachelors and Masters, or “3+2”) and the widespread adherence to the ECTS credit system in order to facilitate student mobility.

In 2007 Erasmus came under the newly established Lifelong Learning programme² and now covers student mobility, higher education institution staff training and teaching abroad, but also participation in cooperation projects between universities and enterprises. Its more realistic target is now to reach three million Erasmus students by 2012.

A document issued in 2008 entitled *The impact of Erasmus on European higher education* (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2008) also points to the Erasmus Programme as the driving force behind the Bologna process of higher education harmonisation: “five out of six of the action lines of the Bologna declaration are directly drawn from the ERASMUS programme: easily readable and comparable degrees (diploma supplement), establishment of a credit system (ECTS), promotion of mobility (ERASMUS students), quality assurance (1998 Council Recommendation, ENQA), European dimension (joint and double degrees). Dozens of projects in these areas have been and are being supported through the ERASMUS programme” (p.4).

At present, practically all of the 46 countries adhering to the Bologna process are using the ECTS, although some also use a system of credits that predates the ECTS for home use.

2.2 Practical aspects of the Erasmus Programme

Study abroad is not a compulsory part of degree courses in most HE institutions in Europe. Although students studying languages are those most likely to take part in some countries, as they see it as a way to improve their language skills and learn about the country and culture whose language they are studying, students from any degree course can in fact become involved. However, particularly in scientific degree programmes, places remain vacant every year. At the university of Bologna, for example, the faculty of Agricultural studies offered 128 Erasmus grants for the academic year 2009-2010, but only 19 students applied (of which not all may have

² Lifelong Learning Programme, which includes Erasmus for Higher Education, Leonardo for vocational education and training, Comenius for school exchanges, and Grundtvig for adult education.

left). Similarly, of the 150 posts for Medicine, only 77 were taken up (although in this case there were more applicants than places for some of the destinations and courses). However, even looking at the data of students from the Modern Languages degrees in the same university, of the nearly 350 grants available, a good 155 remained unclaimed. Although the data for unclaimed grants is difficult to access, as it remains at a local level, according to Teichler (personal communication) the average at a European level is around 40%. Anecdotal local evidence, collected in the recent years in my own institution, on some of the reasons why students decide not to take part in the programme includes that they cannot afford it, that they do not want to take longer than necessary to graduate, that their teachers do not encourage it, that the courses they could attend abroad are not always recognised by the home institution. Some of these are confirmed at a European level (Beerkens and Vossensteyn, 2011).

In order to take part in the programme, higher education institutions must have an Erasmus University Charter, which aims to guarantee a high level of quality in mobility and provides a framework for the activities linked to Erasmus, which the institutions must follow.

Students who decide to take part in the Erasmus Programme can do so during their Bachelors' degree or during their Master's. As part of the procedure, they have to draw up a "learning agreement" together with the tutor responsible for the particular programme. This will specify what courses the student will take while abroad. The choices are made based on the list of courses available in the host institution in the previous year, and may have to be adapted if, once the new academic year begins, some of the chosen courses are no longer on offer. The selection is made so that the courses attended by the student in the host institution are equivalent – in terms of the content and of the credits attributed to the specific courses – to those that the student should have taken in their home university during that period. Once the student returns to the home institution, he or she will have to present the "transcript of records" issued by the host institution in order to validate the examinations taken abroad.

Students might find that their learning agreement has to be changed once they arrive in their host institution for the reasons mentioned above. This may cause some administrative problems, as any changes need to be approved by the home institution. In addition, in some countries like Germany, the number of credits attributed to a single course may vary. For example, it may go from a minimum of five credits given for attendance, to a maximum of 10 depending on the amount of work that the student has done, including work for continuous assessment. This means that a student may end up obtaining fewer credits for a particular course than what they had anticipated in their learning agreement. On the other hand, in other institutions all the credits are obtained through final examinations, and attendance may not even be compulsory.

One problem linked to the academic aspect of such a programme is the potential difference in the levels of performance expected from the student. If Erasmus students join classes organised for home students, they may find that their level of linguistic proficiency is not enough to perform as well as their peers in the same course. Whether allowances should be made by the tutor or examiner of the course is a matter of debate. Some students report such allowances being made, and that some teachers are more lenient towards Erasmus students than towards home students in examinations and assessment. This situation may be even more marked in institutions where specific courses are organised for Erasmus students (in countries in which courses are organised in the local language for home students and in English for Erasmus students). It is a widespread opinion among students that some Erasmus destinations are frequently chosen because certain examinations are easier to pass there than at their home institution, although to my knowledge no study has been carried out to ascertain the truth of these claims.

2.3 Data regarding the Erasmus Programme

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) comprises around 4,000 higher education institutions, with over 19 million students and 1.5 million staff. Undoubtedly, this offers a very wide range of possibilities for those wishing to take full advantage of what is available.

But what are the statistics behind Europe's flagship mobility programme? Recently, celebrations were held for its 2 millionth Erasmus student since the foundation of the programme, just over 20 years ago. Although this may be seen as a cause for celebration, in terms of percentage, the numbers do not look as impressive. Italy, for instance, had 2,033,600 university students in the academic year 2007/2008. Of these, those taking part in Erasmus outgoing student mobility (including studies and placements) were 18,364 – that is 0.9% of the total university student population (they were 220 in 1987/88). As a comparison, Turkey, which had the lowest percentage of students taking part in Erasmus in that same year, reached 0.29% of its university student population with just over 7000 students taking part. The country with the highest percentage was Liechtenstein, with 6.43% (45 students), and the second highest percentage was Austria, with 1.77%, with a total of 4,600 Erasmus outgoing students.³ This is indeed a far cry from the 10% that the founders of the programme had expected back in 1987, not to mention Romano Prodi's wish, expressed on occasion of the 20th anniversary celebrations of the Programme at the university of Bologna, when he was the Italian Prime Minister, that the programme be made compulsory for all undergraduates. However, if we take into account that, although EU citizens have the right to work in other European countries, only 2.2% of them actually do (European Commission, 2009b), the percentage of students choosing to take part in the programme may not be as surprising.

The three most popular destinations for Italian students are Spain, France and the UK. In 2007/2008, of the 17,562 Italian students who took part in Erasmus for study purposes (10.79% of all the students participating in Europe), 6,460 went to Spain, 2,748 to France and 1,364 to the UK (see Ballatore and Blöss, 2008, for a comparison between Italy, France and the UK).

In that same year, Italy received 14,983 students from the EFTA-EEA area, i.e. 9.2% of all the students taking part in the programme. Of these, 5461 came from Spain, 1656 from France, 1639 from Germany and 670 from the UK.⁴ In the twenty years

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/table208.pdf>

⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/table108.pdf>

since its creation, 208,858 Italian students have taken part in the Erasmus Programme, compared with 167,506 UK students and 288,713 students from France.⁵

The total funds allocated in 2008 for the LLP/Erasmus decentralised actions were 389,860,000 Euros, and around 90% of European universities take part in the programme.

2.4 Who are Erasmus students?

Who are, then, the students taking part in an Erasmus Programme? In a survey carried out in 2004/05 (Souto Otero and McCoshan, 2006), almost two thirds of the respondents had at least one parent who held an occupation as an executive, professional or technician, and a large majority of them reported the income status of their parents as being on or above the average income in their country. Although for 82% per cent of the respondents they were the first in their families to study abroad, around 58% of them had at least one parent who had experienced Higher Education. So, the authors of the survey conclude, “the occupational background of parents is not as important as their educational background in determining the participation of students in the programme. A very large proportion of ERASMUS students have parents with HE. Parents with HE may be more aware of the ERASMUS programme and its benefits, may be more encouraging in relation to the education of their offspring or may be willing to ensure that their children do “something more” than they did when they studied for their degrees” (Souto Otero and McCoshan, 2006, p.v).

From an economic point of view, 37% of the students considered their financial situation during the Erasmus period good or very good, 44% considered it fair and 19% considered it poor or very poor. However, 55% percent of students reported that the Erasmus grant financial contribution was insufficient for their mobility period abroad (the average grant per month per student in that academic year was €140). Undoubtedly, then, financial issues contribute to some students’ decisions not to take

⁵ <http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/table1.pdf>

part in an Erasmus exchange. The extent to which these issues constitute the determining factor, however, is indeed very difficult to ascertain.

According to the same survey, the large majority of Erasmus students (87%) felt very positive about their study abroad. They also “assessed facilities (IT, libraries), accommodation and social integration in their host institution positively”. As for language proficiency, which is one of the most commonly cited reasons for wanting to take part in the programme, the survey found that Erasmus students have a high level of linguistic competence (or, alternatively, a very high opinion of their proficiency): 97% of them self-reported speaking at least two languages, 75% declared they had “some competence in at least three languages” and 31% in four languages (p.4).

As expected, foreign language competence increased during study abroad, “with the proportion of students saying they had at least some proficiency in a third language increasing by eight percentage points during their mobility period, and by 14 points for a fourth language” (p.iii).

Finally, the authors also reported substantial changes in the attitudes and values of Erasmus students, “with between 65% and 95% of students reporting large changes or changes to some extent in their career-related attitudes and aspirations, the broadening of their general education, their personal values and their understanding of people from another cultural or ethnic background” (p.iii).

2.5 Goals of the Programme

In the initial section of this chapter, we saw how the official goals of the European student mobility programmes shifted from an initial and rather vague cultural and academic enrichment to a more specific one of encouraging student mobility in view of creating a more flexible workforce, ready to take employment in other European countries. A green paper issued by the European Commission in July 2009, entitled *Promoting the learning mobility of young people*, clearly defines the aim of the Erasmus Programme as that of paving the path to a greater mobility of the future

European workforce, in order to increase the competitiveness of the European market⁶. It also claims that employers value the study abroad experience and quotes a number of studies, one of which reports that 54% of former Erasmus students believe the period abroad was helpful in obtaining a first job.⁷ The report also maintains that “for the higher education sector this systemic benefit has been proved by a study entitled *The impact of Erasmus on European higher education: quality, openness and internationalisation*” (note 3, p.2) published in December 2008. However, interestingly, this study is much more tentative in making any claims in this direction: “at the individual level previous studies indicated that the ERASMUS experience has had an effect on the nature of graduates’ careers. However an explicit impact on the success in careers cannot be found. Nevertheless experiences abroad are said to be helpful in getting work after graduation and employers often indicate it as an advantage over other candidates. Students with international experience are more likely to persist in higher education and to develop stronger personal skills as well as better articulated job aspirations. The effect on academic development is detected, but particularly personal development (such as change in values, for example) is recognized by participants” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, 2008, p.10).

⁶ “Learning mobility, i.e. transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new skills is one of the fundamental ways in which individuals, particularly young people, can strengthen their future employability as well as their personal development. Studies confirm that learning mobility adds to human capital, as students access new knowledge and develop new linguistic skills and intercultural competences. Furthermore, employers recognise and value these benefits. Europeans who are mobile as young learners are more likely to be mobile as workers later in life. Learning mobility has played an important role in making education and training systems and institutions more open, more European and international, more accessible and efficient. It can also strengthen Europe's competitiveness by helping to build a knowledge-intensive society, thereby contributing to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs” (p.2)

⁷ The specific study quoted is Maiworm, F and Teichler, U (1996) *Study Abroad and Early Career: Experiences of Former Erasmus Students*, Jessica Kingsley publications, although the paper wrongly gives the publishing date as 2004. Other publications mentioned are: annual surveys of the Erasmus Student Network; Final Evaluation of the Community Programmes Socrates II, Leonardo da Vinci II and eLearning (2008); *Analysis of the Effects of Leonardo da Vinci Mobility Measures on Young Trainees, Employees and the influence of socioeconomic factors*, 2007; <http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/publ/impact08.pdf> . See also the Interim evaluation of Erasmus Mundus by CSES, June 2007, available from http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/mundus/doc/evalreport_en.pdf.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the issue of the benefits of study abroad on future employability is often cited is that workforce mobility has become a priority for European policy. As a recent article explains, “greater mobility by [EU] workers could ease unemployment and spur productivity, giving the economy a badly needed boost. The EU’s recovery plan identifies a more fluid and flexible workforce as a top priority. Asked why they are reluctant to relocate, Europeans cite concerns about the impact on family life or the difficulty of learning a new language and adapting to a new culture. They also worry about access to social services and getting their qualifications recognised abroad” (European Commission, 2009b). It would seem then, that Erasmus could partly solve this problem (learning a new language, adapting to a new culture, having qualifications that are recognised abroad), and might therefore have a positive effect on future workforce mobility and flexibility. In addition, the young are particularly vulnerable to the risk of unemployment, so, as King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003) point out, “the importance of mobility has been put across in a manner that appeals to this group, [...it] is ‘sold’ as an enriching and rewarding experience for the individuals who undertake it” (p.234)

The Erasmus Programme has also been seen, and not only by the institutions that created it, as playing a crucial role in the forging of a European identity. What this term is supposed to refer to, though, is not clear. In an article published in the International Herald Tribune in 2005 (Bennhold, 2005), Professor Stefan Wolff expressed the idea of an “Erasmus generation” which may bring with it a “profound cultural shift”, adding that “for the first time in history, we’re seeing the seeds of a truly European identity [...]. Give it 15, 20 or 25 years, and Europe will be run by leaders with a completely different socialisation from those of today”. Similarly, in 2003, Umberto Eco had observed, tongue-in-cheek: “I have always maintained that the Erasmus project has not only intellectual, but also sexual value, or if you prefer genetic value. I happen to know many students who, after a period spent abroad, married a local student. If the trend intensifies, considering that bilingual children

would be born, in thirty years we might have a European ruling class who is at least bilingual. And that would not be a small thing”⁸.

It would seem, then, that part of the process of creating a European identity has to do with the ability to speak more than one language but also with the type of experience acquired by living in a different European country, mixing with other Europeans, thinking “European” rather than “national”, being able to adapt, to feel “at home” in another country, being used to socialising and working with other Europeans. In this sense, the country of destination is not important. It is no longer the case that one chooses the country of the language one is studying, as many of the students who take part are not language specialists, and in many countries with less-spoken languages courses are often offered in English. But it is the experience of a different country, of getting students from different European cultures to study together, that seems to be the major aim. It is not so much the fact of learning to live in another country, as in a multicultural environment, such as is created in Erasmus communities (in class, in halls of residence, in apartments reminiscent of Klapisch’s film *L’auberge espagnole*, 2002). It is this multi-cultural experience which is so often talked about by returnees, and forms so much of the expectations of future Erasmus students.

2.6 Summary

The Erasmus Programme is different from most other study abroad programmes around the world, for a number of reasons. After providing a brief overview of the historical landmarks of the programme, I have explained how the three main stakeholders – students, HE institutions and European institutions – prioritise different aspects and outcomes of the programme. For students, the personal experience, as well as the linguistic aspect and the development of soft skills, which are seen as an advantage in the job race, seem to be the most important outcomes.

⁸ “Ho sempre sostenuto che il progetto Erasmus ha non solo valore intellettuale, ma anche sessuale, o se volete genetico. Mi è capitato di conoscere molti studenti e studentesse che, dopo un certo periodo trascorso all'estero, si sono sposati con una studentessa o uno studente locale. Se la tendenza s'intensifica, visto che poi nascerebbero figli bilingui, in una trentina d'anni potremmo avere una classe dirigente europea almeno bilingue. E non sarebbe poco”.

For HE institutions the programme is key to internationalisation policies. Finally, for European institutions, the emphasis is on providing an experience of mobility which will hopefully encourage a more mobile future workforce within Europe. At the same time, it is hoped that living and studying in a multicultural environment will bring about a more strongly felt European identity.

The aim of this overview is to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of the context of the present research. In the following chapter, I will review the literature on cross-cultural adaptation and student mobility.

CHAPTER 3 - Literature review

As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, I am interested in investigating the rich, lived experiences of Erasmus students, particularly in terms of the adaptation process they go through while studying abroad. First of all, I will review the existing literature in order to understand how this process has been conceptualised in previous research: in other words, how adaptation and adjustment have been defined, and what models have been constructed to represent the process or stages of adaptation. I will then review some of the more relevant empirical studies concerned with these aspects in the context of HE student mobility. I will therefore analyse the prevailing issues addressed in such studies, the claims made, but also aspects of the methodology chosen which may be relevant to this study. The aim of this review is to identify the gaps where my study will fit.

Study Abroad is a multidisciplinary field, investigated within the areas of cross-cultural psychology and sociology, and has also received contributions from applied linguists (particularly in the field of Second Language Acquisition), interculturalists and educationalists. This does not imply, however, that it has been researched from an interdisciplinary point of view; on the contrary, the studies have been conducted by scholars in the different disciplines with little cross-fertilisation.

At the same time, studies in cross-cultural adaptation have not just been concerned with student mobility, but have included all types of sojourners moving to a different culture, whether as economic migrants, refugees, students or professionals. In this literature review, I shall therefore concentrate on the area where these two broad fields overlap.

3.1. Theoretical framework

Before analysing the theoretical framework which underlies the study of cross-cultural adaptation in the field of student mobility, it is important to define some of

the key terms. In this specific case, what do we mean by ‘culture’, ‘adaptation’ and ‘adjustment’?

3.1.1 Defining the terms

3.1.1.1 Culture

Culture has been defined in many ways within the social sciences (Geertz, 1973; Hofstede et al. 2010; Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952; Smith, 2000; Schein, 2012). There is no space here to delve into the details of the different interpretations of the term. However, through their analysis of the definitions given by a number of scholars, Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) define culture as “a complex web of different types of regularities which can include one or more of the following interconnected key elements: orientation to life and beliefs; values and principles; perceptions of role relationships, including rights and obligations associated with them; behavioural rituals, conventions and routines (linguistic and non-linguistic); artefacts and products, including laws, regulations, policies and procedures” (p. 35). They also provide a useful list of common characteristics of the different definitions of culture:

- “Culture is manifested through different types of regularities, some of which are more explicit than others.
- Culture is associated with social groups, but no two individuals within a group share exactly the same cultural characteristics.
- Culture affects people’s behaviour and interpretations of behaviour.
- Culture is acquired and/or constructed through interaction with others” (p.15)

These four points have important implications, and are worth analysing one by one. The first is related to Shaules (2007a, 2007b)’s concept of “deep culture”, in other words the “unconscious meanings, values, norms and hidden assumptions that allow us to interpret our experiences as we interact with other people” (pp. 11-12). Deep culture, then, does not refer to specific behaviours, such as using chopsticks to eat food, which may be easy to notice when travelling to a different country (and which

may lead to overgeneralised comments such as Danish students prepare their food in the communal kitchen but then take it to their room and eat it there on their own; Spanish students are often late; Scottish students enjoy getting drunk). It refers to the assumptions and values which underlie such behaviours, which are much more difficult to grasp because they require becoming aware of one's own often unconscious assumptions and values.

The second point concerns the fact that meanings and values associated with a cultural group are not shared exactly to the same extent by all the members of the group. It is relatively obvious to all of us that we do not share all the values and meanings that characterise all the social groups we belong to. However, this self-evident truth seems to vanish when we consider other social groups we do not belong to, to the extent that we tend to expect that a member of a specific group automatically shares all the values and meanings (and therefore behaviours) associated with it (leading to the generalisations reported in the previous point).

The third point concerns the way in which our own values and assumptions affect our behaviour. Affect, not determine. It is an important distinction, at the centre of which is the concept of agency. As Phillips (2007) points out, it is common to attribute the behaviours of others to their culture, and view our behaviour, notwithstanding our own frameworks of meanings, as a matter of personal choice. When, in addition, the actions of members of other social groups are interpreted in relation to our own frameworks of meanings and assumptions, our conclusions may be entirely mistaken.

The fourth point regards the fact that the only way of acquiring shared meanings and values is through interaction. The initial acquisition of the framework of shared values, beliefs and attitudes takes place in early childhood through the acquisition of language which enables primary socialisation, when the individual becomes a member of the limited society made up of family and close circles of significant others. The process continues with secondary socialisation, which begins in early adulthood, when the social circle expands to include new sectors of society. This is the time when the individual needs to learn new roles, for example within

institutions. This is a time of identity expansion, as the individual becomes a member of new groups and networks. It is also a time when the individual comes across conflicts in the systems of values, beliefs and behaviours which coexist within a single society (Byram, 2008). However, it is the fact that those cultural frameworks are not only acquired, but also constructed through interaction with members of one's social groups that enable the individual to negotiate these conflicts and even change the frameworks themselves, for, as Phillips points out, "there are always internal contestations over the values, practices and meaning that characterise any culture" (2007, p.45)

If culture can therefore be broadly defined as shared meanings acquired through interaction with others, it is clear that as a concept it is not defined geographically – or at least not exclusively. Although the 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006) to which we claim to belong, and with whom we share such meanings, can indeed be defined locally, regionally or nationally, others, such as professional, academic, social and virtual communities, defy geographical borders. Cross-cultural studies have nevertheless tended to overemphasize the concept of 'national culture' with respect to other social identities, for the simple reason that the discipline deals primarily with humans crossing national borders. It is questionable whether in today's globalised world, in which social identities are more fluid and less permanent (Bauman, 2000) an emphasis on national cultures (or even the dominant national culture) at the expense of other social identities can help us understand the implications of mobility today.

In this study I have used the terms cross-cultural and intercultural. Although these can sometimes be used interchangeably, I have chosen to use cross-cultural when discussing the adjustments or adaptation of members of one cultural group to a different cultural context. On the other hand, I have used intercultural to refer to the skills and competences developed in order to deal with cultural differences.

3.1.1.2 Adaptation and adjustment

The literature on adaptation has seen the specific terminology used differently by the various authors. In the Oxford Dictionary, adaptation is tautologically defined as ‘the action or process of adapting or being adapted.’ However, its definition in the context of biology can help us understand the meaning also in (cross-)cultural contexts: the term refers to “the process of change by which an organism or species becomes better suited to its environment.” Adjustment, on the other hand, is defined as “a small alteration or movement made to achieve a desired fit, appearance, or result”, although when used as an uncountable noun, it is considered to mean “the process of adapting or becoming used to a new situation”. From these definitions there seems to be no distinct difference between the two terms, even though the word adaptation seems to imply a more profound, and perhaps potentially more permanent, change in one’s behaviour or cultural practice in order, for example, to fit better into the host culture. The term adjustment, on the other hand, seems to refer to smaller changes, sometimes only superficial or temporary, to facilitate life in the host culture. These appear to be the interpretations attributed by Linda Anderson (1994) when she states: “Adaptation is also more than the sum of the subadjustments that compose it” (p.293), and she quotes Shaffer and Shoben (1956, p. 56) “who defined *adjustment* as referring to the reduction or satisfaction of (short term) drives, whereas *adaptation* is that which is valuable for (long-term) individual or racial survival. Adaptations may be maladjustive in the short term whereas adjustments may be maladaptive in the long, but both terms refer to the achievement of a fit between the person and the environment, although the objectives and time frames differ” (p.300).

Matsumoto et al (2007) also make a distinction, though for different reasons: “on one hand we believe that adaptation is based in the sociocultural domain (Ward 2001); that is, it refers to the process of altering one’s behaviour to fit in with a changed environment or circumstances, or as a response to social pressure [...] On the other hand we define adjustment as the subjective experiences that are associated with and result from attempts at adaptation, and that also motivate further adaptation” (Matsumoto et al. 2007, pp.77-78). Other authors such as Ward et al (2001) employ the terms synonymously, using the phrases cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation in a seemingly interchangeable way.

In this study, the terms will be used with the meaning attributed by Shaffer and Shoben above, adjustments being the smaller and more short-term changes in order to solve immediate needs, while adaptation being the deeper and more long-term process of fitting better into another culture.

This study is concerned specifically with cross-cultural adaptation, although this can be understood better in the wider context of adaptation to change. Change is an intrinsic part of human experience, and adjustments within our own culture can be as demanding as those required abroad. Similarly, not all experiences of life abroad are comparable – the experiences of refugees from different continents being radically different from those of higher education students within Europe. In addition, individual responses to changed environments can vary enormously; they can be “cataclysmic, a minor disruption, or so routine as to go unnoticed” (Anderson, 1994, p. 301). But viewing cross-cultural adaptation in the light of more general experiences of change might make it, in the words of Bennett (1998), “more recognizable, more understandable, even more tolerable [...and] the similarities may provide us with confidence that we are not entirely without resources” (p.216).

In the specific context of HE mobility, Furnham and Bochner (1986) consider that, while lack of linguistic and cultural skills, prejudice and the pressure to conform to a role of “cultural ambassador” are difficulties specific to foreign students, other stressors such as changing to a new academic environment and difficulties relating to personal growth are common also to local students.

Indeed, moving from secondary school to university is an experience common to all HE students. This necessarily implies adjusting to a new academic system: in Italian universities, like in many other countries, lessons are usually in the form of monologic lectures; students take notes but do not usually contribute in any way (with the exception, occasionally, of a request for clarification). Teacher and student expectations and roles generally reflect those of high school: teachers are considered to be an authority in their subjects, their role being primarily to pass on information. Students, on the other hand, are expected to listen and be able to repeat the concepts presented in class (or in the textbooks). They are not required to show critical

thinking, nor are they expected to work in groups. Study is mostly individual and the only assessment is in the form of a final, often oral, examination (although some courses have a written component too). Examinations take place during two or three sessions in each academic year. If a student fails, they can re-take the examination in the following session. There is no particular penalty for falling behind with one's examinations, so in the second year of study a student may still have some first-year examinations to take. Falling behind with one's examinations may, however, jeopardise one's chance to take part in Erasmus. This new academic system therefore represents a change from secondary school practice.

In addition, as in other countries like the UK, some students leave home and move to a new city or region to study, and therefore have to get used to living on their own. This is the second important change they have to make, one that requires significant adaptation. Moving away from home, of course, implies needing to re-build local social networks, while maintaining ties with those back home.

While some of the Erasmus participants may have had other relevant life changes, we can presume that all will have experienced the first, and some the second. It would also be reasonable to expect that these changes, while triggering adjustments in those concerned, have also helped them develop transferable coping strategies, such as learning to adapt to the requirements of different teachers and academic systems, or to build new social networks, which may come in useful during their new life abroad. Cross-cultural adaptation can be placed within a continuum of life changes which, while having specific characteristics, will benefit from the coping strategies developed in other contexts.

What, then, are the characteristics of the Erasmus experience, which may be new to the participants? First, there is the new geographical setting in a different European country. In the case of this study, most of the students had travelled abroad before their Erasmus sojourn, though not necessarily to the country they chose for their study abroad. None, however, had lived abroad, even for a short time. Similarly, although all the students studied in Bologna, a city of half a million inhabitants, some lived at home in smaller towns and villages and commuted to study. Therefore, for

some of them the change implied not just moving to a different European country, but also moving from a village to a large metropolis, from a middle-size city to a small town or to a university campus. The opportunities to meet and interact with members of the host society (beyond fellow students) may be very different for those living in a city like Edinburgh, Copenhagen, Berlin or Granada, compared with those on a campus set outside a town or city, which can in itself be a small microcosm with its own practices.

The second major hurdle is, of course, having to function in a different language, or even two, depending on whether the language of tuition is also the language of the host community. When the level of linguistic proficiency is relatively low, this aspect requires a great deal of adjustment, as it affects both the academic and the personal experience. It is also the one that students often report as being the source of greatest anxiety and exhaustion, affecting self-esteem, and which can potentially make or break the study abroad experience.

Third, there is the new academic system. In some countries, like Spain and France, the structure of the courses has greater similarities with the Italian system, and in most cases the students in this study adjusted easily. Other systems are different, due primarily to the fact that they include seminars and tutorials, as well as essays, group-work and presentations. It is to be expected, therefore, that the latter will require greater adaptation for Italian students.

Finally, in the personal sphere, the most significant changes are likely to be having to become self-sufficient (particularly for those living with their parents), and having to rebuild social networks in a non-Italian environment.

3.1.2 Models of cross-cultural adaptation

Any major life change, whether positive or negative (changing schools, jobs, house, relocating to a new geographical area, changes caused by marriage, childbirth, divorce or bereavement) is a source of stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), and most of us have felt to some degree the sense of loss and feeling of confusion at having to

learn new rules or understand new practices; of frustration at having to adapt to and adopt ways that we may deem unreasonable, incomprehensible or even absurd; of worry and insecurity at having to make new friends and establish new relationships with those around us while missing our former friends, acquaintances and colleagues; of anxiety at having to (re-)establish our social and professional status in the new environment, or at having to re-define or renegotiate our identity.

When the change involves moving to a new country, the expected difficulties are likely to increase: the language may be different from the one we speak best, and we often assume we will be confronted by significant cultural differences. The length and purpose of the sojourn will also affect the experience: in relatively short sojourns, for example when we visit a new country as tourists, adaptation is seldom an issue. However, when we move for a longer period, to work or study, we often need to ‘fit in’ to some degree. Long term sojourners (such as immigrants) are likely to show greater motivation to adapt to their new life in the host society than those staying for a limited period of time, and host society members are also often more lenient towards short-term visitors, while putting greater pressure on long-term sojourners to ‘fit in’ and show more “culturally appropriate behaviour” (Kim, 2001, p.17). The process may have similarities with adjustment to other life changes mentioned above (like, for example, going away to university – see Beard et al. 2007), but some stressors will be different, including, as said above, a different language, but also unusual food, meal times, social practices, behaviours and values, among others. According to Arthur (2001), the fact that it is important for the sojourner to understand the host culture rapidly and to behave in a culturally appropriate way can accentuate the feeling of disorientation, and stress can produce psychosomatic symptoms (such as sleeplessness, anxiety, loss of appetite) and manifest itself as ‘culture shock’ (Furnham and Bochner, 1986). This phrase has been used (and misused – Bochner 2003) to encompass a wide variety of emotions, and although instances of culture shock have been reported in the literature, in some cases the terms discomfort, fatigue or simply culture stress (Weaver, 1993) may be more appropriate.

If adaptation is taken to mean the process by which we become better suited to our environment, then cross-cultural adaptation is the process by which a person sojourning in a new cultural environment becomes better suited to functioning in that new culture. The level of difficulty involved may depend on a number of environmental and personal factors: the type of sojourner and purpose of the stay (economic migrant, asylum seeker, international business person, tourist, lifestyle migrant, international student, etc.), the length of the sojourn (short-term, long-term, permanent) as well as other affective, behavioural and cognitive factors, such as cultural ‘distance’, type of psychological and social support available, knowledge of local language and culture, social status of the sojourner and expectations (for a systematic review of such predictors see Zhang and Goodson, 2011). As mentioned above, cross-cultural adaptation has therefore attracted the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines, such as cross-cultural psychologists and sociologists, who have made significant contributions to the field.

Much work in this area does not concern specifically student sojourners: in fact, the field developed originally in the context of Peace-Corps training, international relations and business studies. However, many of the models of adaptation can and have been applied also to the international student.

Some scholars have attempted to conceptualise this process by providing adaptation models. These can be broadly divided into two groups: those placed within a stress-and-coping approach, and those that see adaptation as a learning process.

3.1.2.1 Models within the ‘stress-and-coping’ approach

The first category was, at least initially, strongly influenced by clinical psychology, considering what came to be known as ‘culture shock’ as a primarily negative medical problem, an “ailment [which has] its own etiology, symptoms, and cure” (Oberg, 1954). Thus, in his empirical study of a cohort of Norwegian Fulbright grantees in the USA, Lysgaard (1955) claimed that the participants who had been resident for less than 6 months or more than 18 seemed to be better adjusted to their new environment than those who had been in the USA between 6 and 18 months.

From his observations, he claimed that “adjustment as a process over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve: adjustment is felt to be easy and successful to begin with; then follows a ‘crisis’ in which one feels less well adjusted, somewhat lonely and unhappy; finally one begins to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community” (1955 p.51, quoted in Berardo, 2006, p.2). This model came to be known as the U-curve hypothesis, which began with a period of optimistic excitement (also termed the ‘honeymoon’ period), followed by the typical symptoms of ‘culture-shock’ (dissatisfaction, anxiety, sense of failure) and ended with recovery from it and adjustment, in other words with the ability to function within the new culture. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) later developed this hypothesis by including the reverse culture-shock suffered upon re-entry into one’s original society, and proposed a W-curve as an extension of the U-curve hypothesis.

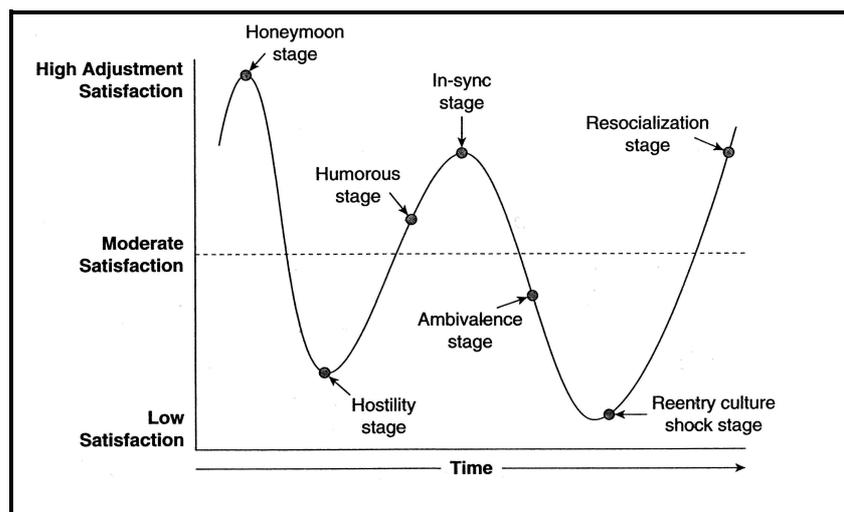


Fig. 3.1 – Gullahorn & Gullahorn’s W-curve model of cross-cultural adjustment.
(Source: Spitzberg and Chagon, 2009, p.23)

Adler (1975, 1987) developed further the concept of culture-shock by moving away from the idea of mental illness and of the negative effects of settling into a new culture. He suggested that these stress-provoking life changes, by eliciting coping strategies, could also be considered as opportunities for personality development: “implicit in the conflict and tension posed by the transitional experience lies the potential for authentic growth and development” (p. 14). This view gave rise to

research on the resources and strategies that facilitate or impede adaptation, linked to personality (Ward and Chang, 1997; Swagler and Jome, 2005; Ying and Han, 2006), social support (Furnham and Alibhai, 1985; Adelman, 1988; Hannigan, T., 1997; Tanaka et al., 1997), and social and cultural identity (Garza-Guerrero, 1974; Bennett, 1998).

The importance of agency in the context of coping strategies is discussed by Gezentsvey and Ward (2008). Recalling the studies by Chataway and Berry (1989) and Ward and Kennedy (2001), in which the authors claimed that the sojourners who disengage or withdraw in the face of difficulty are more likely to suffer from depression and feel less satisfied than those who are more proactive in their coping strategies, Gezentsvey and Ward emphasize “the positive consequences of direct or problem-focussed strategies and the negative consequences of emotion-focused strategies for reduction in perceived stress and depressive symptomatology” (p.220). This is a significant development from the initial clinical interpretation of culture shock that saw sojourners as victims of change, with little or no influence on the outcomes of their cross-cultural experience.

However, the U-curve hypothesis has received substantial criticism. Church (1982) claimed that there was little empirical evidence in its favour, and quoted, among others, Selby and Woods’ 1966 study of 68 non-European foreign students at Stanford University, which found that “both academic and social morale rise and fall with the stages of the academic year rather than in a U curve” (p.542). He concluded that support for this hypothesis was “weak, [...] inconclusive [...] and overgeneralised” (ibid.). He also saw the need for longitudinal studies of individual sojourners in order to define the specific shape of their adjustment curves. Similarly, Coleen Ward and her colleagues (2001) have pointed out that, although the U-curve and W-curve models remain “intuitively appealing”, their weakness lies both in their theoretical failings and in the lack of longitudinal studies to confirm them.

The theoretical deficiency comes primarily from two problems. First of all, Oberg and Lysgaard developed their theories in the context of cross-cultural psychology. Both Oberg’s “culture shock” and Lysgaard’s U-curve hypotheses describe the

psychological effects of moving to a new cultural environment, emphasising the affective components of adaptation. However, both theories have been generalised to describe the whole adaptation experience, particularly within training programmes (Berardo 2006). Thus, when Ward and her colleagues (Ward et al, 1998) conducted their longitudinal study of 35 Japanese students in New Zealand, using both the Self-rating Depression Scale “ZSDS” and the Sociocultural Adjustment Scale “SCAS” in order to assess their participants’ adaptation to the host culture, they concluded that psychological and sociocultural adjustment are two interrelated but distinct components of cross-cultural adaptation. “Psychological adjustment – they claimed – is largely influenced by personality, social support and life changing variables while sociocultural adaptation is more strongly affected by cultural distance, amount of contact with host nationals and cultural knowledge. Preliminary research also suggests that the two components of adjustment follow somewhat different sequences over time” (Ward et al, 2001, p.80). Thus, the authors concluded that, contrary to the U-curve hypothesis, in which the initial period of the sojourn in a new culture is always a positive one, this phase is in fact marked by the highest level of stress, as “the number of life changes is the highest and coping resources are likely to be at the lowest” (ibid.).

Another theoretical weakness of the U- and W-curve hypotheses regards an ambiguous use of the terminology. Lysgaard himself never actually illustrated the U-curve as such (Berardo, 2006), but he described both the initial and the end phases in terms of greater adjustment. Similarly, Gullahorn and Gullahorn described their W-curve in relation to a greater or lesser degree of satisfaction, implying that greater satisfaction meant greater adjustment. However, if adjustment is defined as those changes made in order to fit better into one’s new environment, the initial phase should perhaps more accurately be described as the pre-adjustment phase, with only the middle and later period being related to adjustment and adaptation. In addition, Lysgaard based his claims on his study of a very specific type of sojourner: the self-selected, educated scholar who might be expected to hold high hopes and clear objectives for his or her (limited) sojourn abroad. It is hardly surprising that many of them felt enthusiastic and satisfied at the beginning of their stay in the USA.

However, it would seem unlikely that all sojourners should enter a cross-cultural experience with the same optimism, and this does not only apply to labour migrants and refugees, but also to other types of international students, as has been confirmed in the studies examined both by Church (1982) and Ward and colleagues (2001).

An example of the consequence of such an ambiguous use of the term adjustment (as a synonym of satisfaction) can be applied to the cases presented by Murphy-Lejeune (2002) in her study of European student mobility. Here, she describes two students: Mathilde and Louis. The former “exemplifies a most advanced level of competence [...] her experience taught her about language [...], about otherness and what it means to be a stranger, and her self-knowledge was greatly enhanced” (p. 221). By any standard, she would be identified as someone who had adapted well to life in the new culture. The latter student was “happy with his stay [...] but he could have been anywhere. [...] His stay was a non-event: not much happened, he did not change, he did not discover anything and he did not regret his relative isolation from the local people” (p.221). Interestingly, he is quoted as having said that “he had no problem and *felt integrated* in Irish student life” (p.223, my italics). Where does Louis fit in the psychological adaptation models? A consideration only of his well-being and satisfaction would imply, in the context of the U-curve, an example of successful adaptation. But would it not be more correct to conclude that he had simply remained in the ‘honeymoon phase’? To anyone who has followed closely students in study-abroad programmes, Louis’ case will appear as a relatively familiar one. However, well-being alone cannot be considered as a synonym of ‘adjustment’, and living happily and unstressed on the periphery of a culture, whether temporarily or permanently, does not constitute an example of cross-cultural adaptation.

Some studies reported by Ward et al (2001) have also analysed the different factors affecting adaptation stress, among which are expectations. These “form the basis of cognitive appraisals of stressful situations” and “provide a yardstick against which experiences and behaviours can be measured” (p. 76). This implies that the more unrealistic the sojourners’ expectations are, the less they will be matched by the actual experiences, with negative consequences on the adjustment process.

According to the authors, “expectation-experience matches attest to the psychological preparation required to cope with potentially stressful life changes, and expectation accuracy may positively affect subsequent appraisals of stressful situations, build confidence and alleviate anxiety” (ibid.).

3.1.2.2 Models within the learning-curve approach

An alternative type of model to the U- and W-curves of adjustment was developed primarily by communication theorists and behaviourists: by assuming that intercultural problems were caused by the individual’s lack of the necessary skills to deal with social encounters, they saw adaptation more as a learning curve, that is as a process of gradually learning to function in a different culture (Gardner, 1952; Guthrie, 1975; Ruben, 1976; Hammer, Gudykunst and Wiseman, 1978; Ruben and Kealey, 1979; Pedersen, 1983; Bochner, 1986; Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Yoshikawa, 1988; Bennett, 1986, 1993). This learning is affected by different internal and external factors including, among others, culture-specific knowledge about the new environment, self-efficacy, language skills, type of residence abroad – short-term, long-term, permanent – and social networks and friendships, and a number of studies have concentrated on the factors that facilitate or hinder the acquisition of the necessary skills. In this approach, pre-departure training, by raising awareness of the issues involved and the strategies necessary to deal with them, is considered crucial (Brislin et al. 1983).

Yoshikawa (1988)’s developmental model of acculturation fits into this paradigm, and considers the acquisition of cultural awareness through a process of ‘contact’ (which, as opposed to the more simplistic U-curve hypothesis, can correspond to the ‘honeymoon’ period or be perceived as stressful and threatening, depending on the sojourner’s expectations), ‘disintegration’ (corresponding to the culture-shock phase of feeling disorientated and overwhelmed by the differences between home and host culture), ‘reintegration’ (the phase in which the sojourner’s attempts to adapt are characterised by judgemental attitudes and stereotyping, sometimes accompanied by a feeling of being “caught in two cultures”), ‘autonomy’ (ability to face cultural differences with greater flexibility) and finally what Yoshikawa calls ‘double-swing’,

that is the ability to be “independent, yet simultaneously interdependent” from both cultures (p.142).

Bennett (1986, 1993) also describes adaptation in terms of a progression in phases which involves the acquisition of greater ethnorelativism and self-awareness, and places the concept of intercultural sensitivity at the centre of this evolution. The different developmental stages in his model are identified as ‘denial’ (refusing to see the other culture, having a totally ethnocentric worldview), ‘defence’ (seeing difference in terms of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, either in order to idealise one’s culture, or the other’s), ‘minimisation’ (minimising difference, believing we are all the same, seeing the other as an extension of the self). ‘Acceptance’ is the first of the ethnorelative stages of adaptation (accepting the fact that one’s culture is one of many possible cultures), followed by ‘adaptation’ (being able to adapt to the values and behaviours of the host culture) and finally ‘integration’ (of home and host culture, to produce an interculturally competent person).

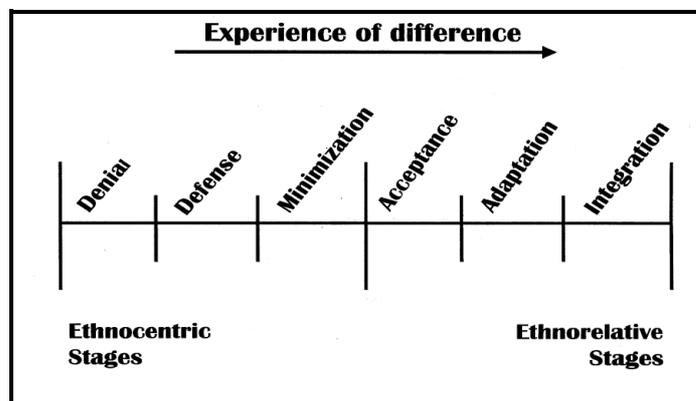


Fig. 3.2 – Bennett’s developmental model of intercultural sensitivity.
(Source: Bennett, 1986, p.182)

Although the initial model shown above presents development as a linear process, the author has more recently⁹ described the process as a spiral, in which there may be

⁹ Informal talk during the Forum on Intercultural Learning and Exchange, organised by *Fondazione Intercultura*, Colle di Val d’Elsa (Siena-Italy), October 3rd-6th 2009

a movement forward and backward through the developmental phases. In order to identify the stage at which a sojourner finds him or herself, Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2003) developed the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a tool used in cross-cultural training.

As mentioned above, the weakness of these stage models of adaptation has primarily been identified in the fact that they tend to be more descriptive than explanatory, and progress through the different stages is unclear (Church, 1982). How, or why, does a particular individual move from one stage to the next? Is the development through the different stages progressive, or can some of the stages be skipped? Does everybody start at the first stage and move in one direction? What causes this progression, and to what extent does the individual's agency influence the process?

In addition, these stage models seem to suffer from the same shortcoming as the U-curve model: that of being one-dimensional, and not taking into account the multiplicity of complex elements involved in adaptation, which may develop at a different pace. According to Arthur (2001), they also fail to integrate internal and external factors, intrapersonal as well as interpersonal dynamics, which affect the process: thus, research on this topic needs "to consider the specific nature of demands and the coping strategies that are integral features in the process of cross-cultural transition" (p. 43). In addition, the models above fail to account for agency on the part of the sojourner, for how his or her motivations and objectives affect the adaptation process, and how sojourners use strategies to adapt better or faster.

In the context of the present study, which seeks to explore the complexities of the lived experiences of the sojourners during their study abroad, the above-mentioned conceptual models seem unsatisfactory. Thomas and Harrell (in Brown and Holloway, 2008) suggest that, rather than having a single measure of adjustment, the different aspect of the sojourner's life can be represented by multiple curves which develop over time (p.234), a view shared by Gao and Gudykunst (1990). Although it would be naive to suggest that the different aspects of human experience could be described independently from each other, a representation of these "multiple curves"

may shed light on how the aspects they represent, while being interrelated, may develop at different pace.

3.1.2.3 Integrative models

Feeling that neither of the two above-mentioned approaches portrays the whole picture, some scholars (Anderson, 1994; Gallois et al., 1988; Gudykunst and Hammer, 1988; Kim, 1988, 1995, 2001; Searle and Ward, 1990; Ward, 1996; Ward&Rana-Deuba, 1999) have proposed integrative models, in the attempt to grasp more of the complexities of the adaptation process. Gudykunst and Hammer (1988), for example, take elements from both the stress-and-coping and from the learning process approaches, and describe adaptation as a struggle to reduce the tension produced by the anxiety and uncertainty regarding the interpretation or prediction of behaviour of members of the host culture. This uncertainty and anxiety management theory was later developed further by Gudykunst (2002) in order to include the development of ‘mindfulness’ (a similar construct to intercultural sensitivity) as a prerequisite of improved communication with members of the host society, which would lead to better intercultural adjustment.

As mentioned above, in rejecting the U-curve model, Ward and Rana-Deuba (Ward, 1996; Ward&Rana-Deuba, 1999) have suggested an alternative that combines psychological and sociocultural adaptation, where the former “is best understood and interpreted within a stress and coping framework, whereas the latter, pertaining to the ability to ‘fit in’ or negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture, is more appropriately placed within a social learning paradigm” (p. 424). The reason for maintaining the distinction between these two types of adaptation, according to the authors, is due to the fact that they are influenced by different factors: psychological adjustment is affected by “personality, life changes, and social support”, whereas sociocultural adaptation depends on “length of residence in the new culture, language ability, cultural distance, and the quantity of contact with host nationals”. The authors also argue that these two kinds of adjustment develop at different pace and follow different patterns. Although the first period in the foreign culture is usually characterised by a high degree of both psychological and sociocultural difficulties,

“sociocultural problems steadily decrease and gradually level off, whereas psychological distress is more variable over time” (p.424). (See also Ward and Kennedy, 1999).

For Kim (2001), cross-cultural adaptation is “the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments” (p. 31). She therefore suggests an integrative model of adaptation based on the stress/adaptation/growth dynamic, and on the concept of achieving a fit between the individual and the environment. Crucial to this process is communication, understood in the broadest sense: “all actions and events are communicative messages as soon as they are perceived by a human being” (p.32). Her spiral-like model sees the sojourner’s adaptation process as a series of withdrawals (caused by stress in the face of difficulties) and leaps forward, when the sojourner finds a more satisfactory way to interact with the environment and achieve a better fit. The transformations that take place as a result of this process are: “an increased functional fitness in the host environment, an increased psychological health vis-à-vis the host environment and an emergence of an intercultural identity that reaches beyond the perimeters of the original cultural identity” (p. 184). In other words, psychological well-being, which is central to the U-curve hypothesis, is only one aspect of the process. However, according to Kim, we cannot speak of adaptation if there is no “fit” into the host environment, and if the process does not entail change. To return to the example of Mathilde and Louis, reported on in Section 3.1.2.1 above, while in both cases there may have been a perceived “fit” into the host environments, in the case of Louis this did not seem to entail change or growth, which leads Murphy-Lejeune to question the extent to which we can talk of cross-cultural adaptation in his specific case.

Another interesting model that takes into account the complexities of adaptation, and which contains some of the elements identified in Kim’s model, is proposed by Anderson (1994), and is illustrated in Figs. 3.3 and 3.4. below. Drawing on extensive literature on cross-cultural adaptation, stress-and-coping models, learning-process

models, and critical life-events, the author sees culture shock as a frustration reaction syndrome, and suggests a model which locates at its centre the concept of obstacle, in other words the demands made upon us by the environment, which elicit emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses. The process is cyclical, in the sense that the sojourner might have to deal with the same kind of obstacle more than once, and that each new obstacle will trigger a new set of responses. The obstacles will depend on the goals and motivations of the sojourner as well as on the context: “if a goal is not perceived as a goal and an obstacle as an obstacle, no purposeful (goal-directed) movement and no obstacle-related (coping) behavior will occur” (p.302). For example, if a student’s objectives in going abroad are to obtain a specific qualification not offered at his or home institution, rather than to get to know a particular local culture, then the fact that he or she may not meet local students will not be considered a stress-provoking obstacle, and will not elicit coping behaviour. The student will not feel the need for adjustment with regard to this issue.

How different sojourners react when faced with obstacles that prevent them from fulfilling their aims will depend on each individual. Consequently, the same obstacle which may be insurmountable to one person, causing high levels of stress, may be seen as a stimulating challenge by another, or even almost imperceptible and little more than a bothersome hitch by someone else. Obstacles can be both outside (in the environment) or inside the sojourner (a state of mind, for example). Thus, the model can be applied to any cross-cultural adaptation context (and some aspects also apply to intra-cultural adaptation).

Anderson articulates her model around six general principles. First, cross-cultural adaptation entails adjustments to the differences in values, the loss of the familiar, and sudden social incompetence. Secondly, it involves, but is not limited to, learning. Indeed, “adapting to another culture requires more than learning the culture’s ways. It demands that their validity be accepted” (p.304). Otherwise, the psychological dimension of adaptation will lag behind the behavioural.

Accepting the validity of a system of values and behaviours does not necessarily mean sharing those values. Rather, it means understanding that behaviours which

may seem strange to us become comprehensible or logical when seen as part of a different system of values to our own. Thus, I may not share the value placed on acknowledged academic status in Italy or Germany, and sign correspondence using only my name and surname. However, by accepting the validity of the system in itself, which is made up of specific behaviours (using titles) that make sense when interpreted through the lens of supporting beliefs and values, I am able to fit into the system when necessary and sign myself as *Dottoressa* (which in Italy indicates the possession of a Bachelor's degree, not of a Doctorate) without considering the practice a sign of absurd snobbery or pretentiousness.

The third principle which characterises cross-cultural adaptation is that it implies a stranger-host relationship, with all the implications connected to status and identity. Fourthly, as illustrated in Figure 3.3, the process is continuous, interactive and cyclical “in a dual sense [...] of involving both ups and downs and repetitive sequences”, and this is true for adjustments to our everyday life situations. The fifth principle is that adaptation is relative, in the sense that “adjusters produce and create their own adaptation” (p.318) and that most sojourners adapt only to a certain degree, the two extremes of total failure or perfect adaptation being extremely rare – after all, Anderson points out, individuals do not wish to adapt to everything, and not everybody fits in the same way into their own home culture. The last principle articulated in her model implies, like Kim's model, some sort of personal development, in terms of identity and resocialisation.

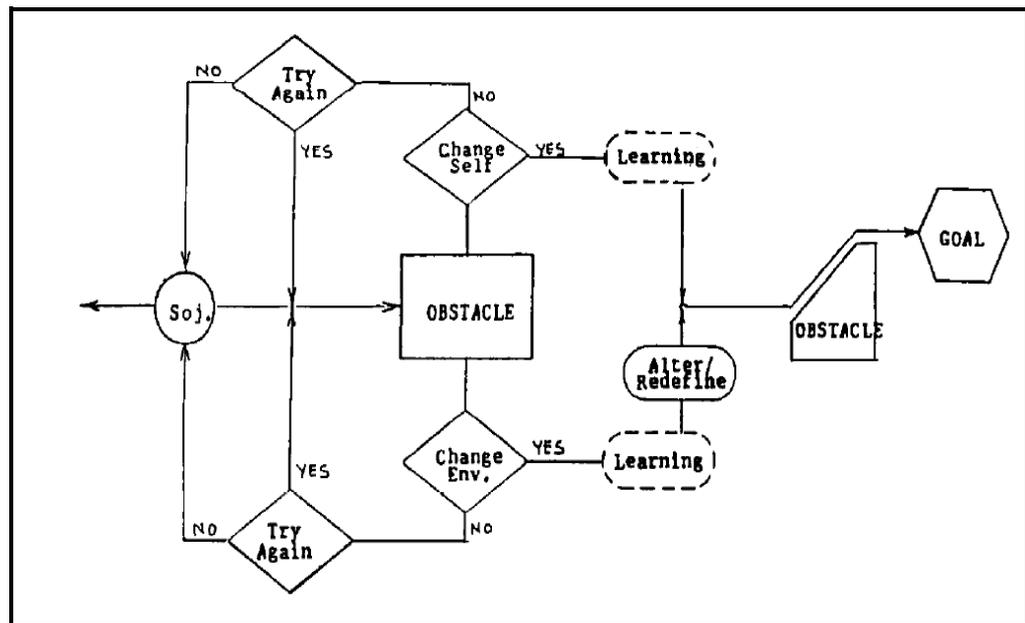


Fig.3.3 – Anderson's model of the cross-cultural adjustment process
(Source: Anderson,1994)

The model shown in Fig.3.3 illustrates how learning takes place as a result of having to deal with an obstacle. For example, the sojourner may wish to establish meaningful relationships with locals, but lacks the necessary language proficiency. In order to overcome this barrier, he or she can either try to change the environment (by resorting to an interpreter, or by communicating in his or her L1, or a lingua franca shared by the sojourner and the hosts), or try to change him or herself (by improving L2 proficiency). If neither of these two choices is acceptable (the use of an interpreter may not be possible, locals may be unable or unwilling to communicate in a different language, or the outsider may be reluctant or unable to learn the local language) the sojourner will inevitably have to face the same obstacle again. If no solution can be found, he or she will be forced to redefine or abandon the goal. Alternatively, if change is accepted, learning will take place, and the obstacle will be surmounted.

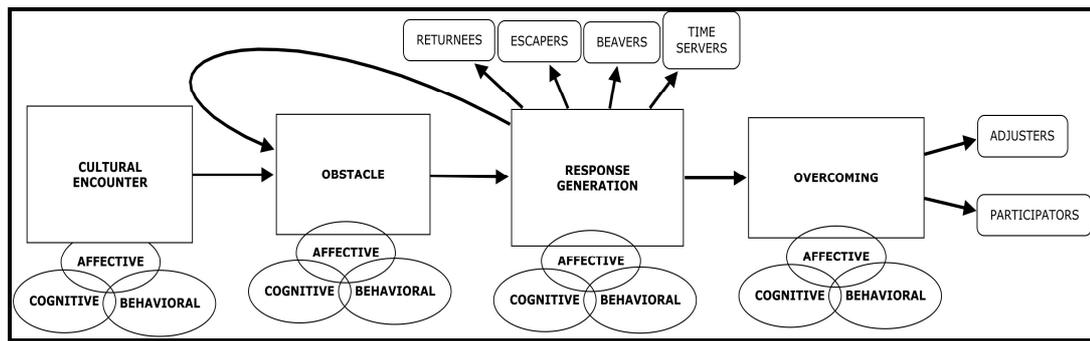


Fig.3.4 – Anderson's complete model
(Source: Anderson, 1994)

Figure 3.4 shows the different stages of the adjustment process in the model, starting with 'cultural encounter' and ending with 'overcoming', the stage when obstacles become rarer as a result of the sojourner's adaptation to the new environment. As can be seen, the affective, behavioural and cognitive aspects are present in every stage. Bochner (2003) claimed that the crucial domain in determining the outcome of the cross-cultural experience was the behavioural domain, as "affective responses are essentially retrospective evaluations of inter-cultural experiences, that is, behavioral episodes", while "the main function of cognitive responses is to rationalise these emotive reactions". The logical implication of this view is that culture learning, in the sense of learning the appropriate behaviour within a particular cultural setting, is the key to successful adaptation (pp.10-11). Anderson, on the other hand, stresses that it is the cognitive process (in terms of the appraisal of the situation and the decision regarding what must be done about it) that drives the individual's behaviour. In addition, she sees the three aspects as either developing synchronically, "one [aspect] mediating, potentiating, or accompanying the other" (ibid. p.308), or being in conflict with each other, as, for example, when a sojourner is capable, from a cognitive point of view, of adopting suitable behaviour in a cross-cultural situation, but may be prevented from doing so emotionally. A typical example is the student who knows that, in order to overcome the obstacle posed by limited language proficiency, he or she needs to study the language, but their negative emotions towards that particular language jeopardise their attempts to enrol on a course. This may produce an internal divergence which causes confusion and psychological

discomfort in the sojourner. Finally, a third possibility is that the three dimensions develop independently. Anderson points out that, “in cultural-contact studies, it has been amply demonstrated, for example, that behavioral change following cross-cultural exposure does not automatically go hand in hand with emotional, attitudinal, or cognitive change [...] The levels of adaptation observed vary greatly with the dimension of adjustment considered” (ibid. p.308).

The model proposed by Anderson differs from both the U-curve and the learning curve models in that it acknowledges the great divergence there can be in the process for different individuals. In this sense, development is not linear, but made of ups and downs, or backward and forward movements, and their frequency and intensity depends on the sojourner and how he or she reacts to the obstacles encountered:

Adaptation to life’s challenging situations is not only a cyclical process where ends fade out into new beginnings, it is also often a ferris wheel or roller-coaster ride, with depression and elation, successes and failures in overcoming obstacles providing the hills and valleys. It is cyclical in a dual sense, therefore, of involving both ups and downs and repetitive sequences. If the obstacles encountered along the way are perceived as small, they are likely to be surmounted uneventfully, swiftly, and perhaps even imperceptibly. If they are perceived as mountainous, their neutralizing might demand great effort, generating concomitant risks of “culture” fatigue, burn-out, or even what is usually termed shock. (p.307)

However, this model also differs from Kim’s cyclical model in that it caters for a number of parallel cycles, with different obstacles appearing at various times during the sojourn. Kim or Bennett’s models, while incorporating the idea of cycles, use the image of the upward spiral, implying an overall progress forward. Although Anderson’s model also has three broad stages (the initial contact stage, the obstacles stage, and what she terms “overcoming”), this final phase is simply the time when the sojourner notices the obstacles are rarer or the reactions less intense. It does not, however, exclude the appearance of new obstacles, nor the triggering of more or less severe reactions with which even the most well-adapted sojourners are familiar with.

In Anderson’s model, then, the first phase of the adaptation process, which she terms ‘cultural encounter’, has a linear development, and lasts until the sojourner perceives

an obstacle in his or her path towards the set goal. The next phase, which is cyclical and will be repeated as many times as there are perceived obstacles, is termed 'obstacle' and 'response generation'. Once the number of perceived obstacles decreases or the responses required become less demanding, adaptation has taken place, and the sojourner has reached the final stage, termed 'overcoming', which corresponds to the 'recovery', 'adjustment' or 'autonomy' stages in other models. How the sojourner moves along in this process, what responses or strategies they adopt, how long they spend in the obstacle phase, what they perceive as obstacles, and how soon, if ever, they reach the 'overcoming' phase, is ultimately determined by the sojourner's choices. No doubt, these are affected by factors and circumstances which may make certain choices easier than others, or some subconscious rather than intentional. However, it is significant that Anderson's model acknowledges the agency of the sojourner rather than seeing him or her as a victim of circumstance, as a passive spectator of his or her own adaptation process. This stance, however, is an exception rather than the rule, and Gezentsvey and Ward (2008) recently urged acculturation researchers to investigate the role of agency in a more systematic way, as it might help understand and explain culture contact and change.

Clearly, not all sojourners exit the adaptation cycle after the Overcoming phase. As has been said before, some individuals never adapt. Others adapt only to some aspects of the host culture, but not to others. For some the period abroad ends before they have had the chance to do much adjusting. Others choose not to adjust. Unlike developmental models that label sojourners according to their stage in the adjustment process at a specific time, Anderson's model (Fig.3.4) categorises them with respect to their exit point in the cycle. Thus, Returnees are those who, "cognitively, behaviourally and emotionally at odds with their surroundings", never move beyond the initial difficulties and abandon any attempt to cope early on in the process, and often return home early. Escapers may have attempted to find strategies to cope with initial obstacles, but in the face of failure choose avoidance, they "immerse themselves in activities that distract them from the need to cope and from the unpleasant reality outside", never moving beyond the role of the tourist or, at the most, of the cultural ambassador. Beavers, on the other hand, use the strategy of

“burying themselves up to the neck” in work and other activities in order to avoid adjustment issues. Although behaviourally Time Servers seem to function acceptably well in their new environment, from an emotional and cognitive point of view they are simply enduring their stay, “looking dimly ahead to the day they will return home”. Only the last two categories reach the Overcoming phase: Adjusters are “more or less satisfied with their experience, have come to an understanding of the culture and country intellectually, and are behaving appropriately”. The difference with the last category, the Participators, is that the former “are still trying to fit in”, whereas the latter are “cognitively, affectively and behaviourally [...] full-fledge participants in the society”. (pp.316-317). These categories, Anderson posits, are broad, and should be seen more as a continuum than as separate groups, with endless intermediate positions and variations in outcomes.

Having reviewed the most common models of adaptation used in the context of student mobility, Anderson’s integrative model seems particularly suitable to an investigation of the complexities of the sojourners’ lived experiences of cross-cultural adjustment during their period of residence abroad. While catering for the wide variety of experiences that we observe when dealing with student mobility, the model also sheds light on similarities and patterns. In comparison, the U-curve and learning curve models seem one-dimensional, and are built on the assumption that all sojourners follow the same pattern. Stage models such as Bennett’s can be useful in describing the phases of adaptation, although they fail to explain why and how different individuals move from one stage to the next. In the present research study, I will therefore use Anderson’s model to inform my analysis of the obstacles found by the participants and the strategies they used to overcome them. However, reference will also be made to the U-curve model, particularly when comparing it with the ‘curves’ produced by the data provided by the students, as I am interested in understanding the ups and downs that the individual sojourners go through when adapting to a new environment.

3.2 Empirical studies

In addition to the theoretical contributions reviewed in the previous sections, a number of empirical studies have analysed processes and outcomes of cross-cultural experiences in the context of international student mobility.

The phrase ‘international students’ includes a range of different categories: there are those who take a whole degree course (both undergraduate and postgraduate) in a country different from their own, and those who spend only part of their studies abroad, following courses that will contribute to a degree from the home institution. Some students study abroad independently, others have the whole programme organised by their home university. Some are language students with a compulsory part of their courses in the country whose language they are studying, others go for a multiplicity of different reasons. Some travel from distant countries, cultures and languages, others remain close to home linguistically, culturally or geographically.

Study abroad (or residence abroad), on the other hand, is a phrase that usually refers to a temporary period of study in a different country, usually as part of a degree course at home (for example, a year abroad as part of a languages degree). Traditionally, empirical studies in the field of Study Abroad have tended to be carried out by linguists and educationalists, and have therefore been concerned primarily with the area of Second Language Acquisition (Freed, 1995; Freed, 1998; Collentine and Freed, 2004; DuFon and Churchill, 2006; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004) or programme evaluation (Maiworm et al, 1991, 1993; Teichler 1996; Gillespie et al, 1999). However, a number of empirical studies have been concerned with the process of adaptation of students abroad, which is the focus of my study. For this reason, in the present review I will analyse these from different perspectives both in terms of the issues discussed and the findings they reported, as well as the methodological approaches, in order to identify better the gaps in the literature.

In a significant study, already mentioned in the previous section, Ward and colleagues (Ward et al. 1998) observed that the highest level of stress in international students is most often found in the initial phase of the sojourn abroad, when coping strategies tend to be at their lowest, and gradually decrease over time, thus contradicting the U-curve model. Although these findings are important for the

present study, Ward's research was quantitative in its approach, and concerned with patterns of adaptation of the group of participants, rather than with the lived experiences of the individuals. Would the same patterns be found if we looked at the individual curves? In addition, the questionnaires were given to the participating Japanese students at four points in time: upon arrival in New Zealand, and then 4, 6 and 12 months after arrival. While it can be argued, as the authors do, that "the longitudinal approach is clearly more appropriate to explore changes in sojourner adjustment over time" (p.279), it is also true that this type of quantitative study offers snapshots of four different stages of the process, rather than an understanding of the process experienced by the individual sojourners between one snapshot and the next: this would require qualitative methods that could provide much richer data. In their concluding paragraphs, the authors themselves call for longitudinal studies which would "examine temporal fluctuations in sojourner adaptation", which is one of the aspects explored in the present study.

Arthur (2001) also investigated the perceived stressors and the coping strategies used by participants during a cross-cultural immersion program. Instead of assuming that all participants would experience their sojourn in the same way, as suggested by traditional models of culture shock, Arthur endeavoured to "track both the common and unique experiences of participants, as well as their strategies for coping in a foreign environment" (p.43). The study involved Canadian undergraduate and graduate students taking part in an International study project consisting of a pre-departure seminar and a seven-week study tour in Vietnam. The students were responsible for individual projects which involved interaction with governmental and non-governmental institutions in the host country. Although the participants had no knowledge of the language, they had access to interpreters. Arthur used critical incidents to understand the participants' individual processes of adaptation and as a way of concentrating on experiences that were personally significant to them.

Arthur found that stressful experiences derived primarily from interactions with both other members of the cohort (over 50%) and with people in the foreign culture. Other stressors included feeling unprepared for the extent of cultural differences found, and

concerns about their own levels of cross-cultural effectiveness. Regarding the coping strategies used by the participants, accessing social, emotional and instrumental support were the most common. Debriefing opportunities, developing problem-solving skills, reframing the meaning of situations and learning to accept and adapt to situations which were deemed unchangeable were considered crucial strategies for managing stress.

The author concludes that sufficient information on the host environment, as well as expectation management, may help by providing what she calls “a type of stress inoculation”. But she also recommends “that pre-departure programs also assist sojourners to assess their existing repertoires of coping and ways of managing stress. While the usual resources may not be at hand in foreign environments, knowledge of the function and forms of coping may assist sojourners to select available resources and find effective ways to manage both personal and group needs” (pp. 50-51). Although Arthur’s study adopted a qualitative approach, her conclusions were similar to Ward et al.’s study (1998) mentioned above: no confirmation was found for the U-curve approach, as stressors were more frequent at the beginning of the sojourn abroad. In addition, the author feels that “the fact that participants had available support from co-nationals may have acted as a protector from deeper cross-cultural immersion” (Arthur, 2001,p.50). I will return to this point later in this study, but it is worth wondering whether support from co-nationals should always be considered as a “protector from deeper cross-cultural immersion”, or whether it can also have other positive functions in aiding adaptation.

A partial answer to this question comes from an interesting and recent study that investigates the link between expectation gaps and adjustment stress in short-term student mobility, carried by Pitts (2009). Using Kim’s (2001) model of cross-cultural adaptation as the conceptual background, she conducted an ethnographic study of a group of American students spending a semester (four months) in Paris as part of a study-abroad programme.

Pitts analysed the types of talk that students engaged in within their co-national networks (including giving advice, information sharing, humour, gossip, support

talk, complaints) and claims that such talk helped sojourners manage and redefine expectations (thus reducing the gap) and therefore adjust better. She provides three reasons why these types of talk were significant for the sojourners: first, they helped students to “evaluate, interpret, and modify their own experiences abroad” . Second, students were able to assess the appropriateness and ‘normality’ of their experiences by comparing them with those of their peers. Third, “through these types of talk, students were able to make minor and major adjustments to their norms and expectations across the sojourn and alter their behavior accordingly.” (p.459)

The implications of Pitts’ findings are that “within the co-national network, everyday talk provides sojourners [with] the agency to make the cognitive, behavioral, and affective adjustments necessary to succeed abroad.” Although this seems to contradict previous findings about the negative effects of resorting primarily to co-national support for long-term adaptation, Pitts concludes that “a co-national support system appears to be highly beneficial for adjustment in the short-term sojourn. Due to the abbreviated adjustment period available in short-term sojourns, the co-national support system aids in the immediate development of skills and confidence necessary for temporary overseas adjustment.”

Two studies by Jane Jackson (2008a, 2008b) also show the importance of finding ways to reflect upon, articulate and discuss difficulties during sojourns abroad. Her study deals with the adaptation of a cohort of Chinese students enrolled into a ‘Special English Stream’ programme that involves spending a 5-week study period in the UK after a three-month preparation course. The first combines an ethnographic approach with quantitative data in order to assess the participants’ intercultural sensitivity – as defined in Bennett’s (1986, 1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) – at three different stages: upon entry into the programme, after the three-month preparation, and after re-entry from the UK. Although the author presents this as a case-study, it is difficult to follow the development of the 14 students, and their comments seem to be used more to illustrate the various stages of intercultural sensitivity than to shed light on the individual trajectories. This may be due to space constraints (the study is analysed in

greater detail in Jackson 2008b). Jackson makes three concluding claims: the first is that the ‘developmental sequence of intercultural competence does not necessarily parallel linguistic competence’ (p.356). The second claim is that those in the ‘acceptance stage’ of the model revealed that they were more aware of cultural differences than their peers, [...] they tended to display more empathy for others and [...] appeared to be more flexible, open-minded and willing to try new things’ (p.356) than those who were at lower stages. This seems a predictable conclusion, as that was presumably the reason why their scores had placed them in that particular stage of development, so the argument appears to be somewhat circular. Unless Jackson was suggesting that the level of intercultural sensitivity of the participants measured with the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) tool was confirmed by other qualitative data. Finally, the author found that students tended to have an inflated perception of their level of intercultural sensitivity, as suggested by the literature on biased self-assessment.

A more detailed description of her study is given in Jackson (2008b). Through the narratives of four female students, the author analyses issues such as identity, linguistic development, expectations, adaptation to a new culture and personal development. Her choice of case-studies was dictated by the desire to represent different experiences and outcomes (Elsa and Niki “took more advantage of linguistic affordances in England and made greater strides in their language and cultural development, [while] Ada and Cori [...] were more resistant to cultural differences, language learning, and identity reconstruction” (p.69)). Although this may be an interesting and valid criterion for choosing case-studies, it could also be misleading in suggesting that they are representative of the majority of sojourners. Indeed, Elsa’s exceptional awareness of issues of identity construction is precisely that: exceptional. From much of the literature on adaptation, and specifically of participants in Study Abroad, it could be argued that the majority of sojourners fall somewhere between the two extremes depicted by Jackson. If Arthurs’ (2001) study illustrates the importance of debriefing in order to make sense of one’s experience, and Pitts (2009) emphasises the role that co-national networks can play in helping the sojourner to manage stress and redefine expectations, Jackson’s study (2008b) shows

how the tools provided by the preparatory course, particularly in terms of conceptual input, and the opportunities for self reflection offered by the diaries and the debriefing sessions, were essential in order to enable the participants to make sense of their experiences and to grow from an intercultural point of view.

A different type of study both in aim and methodology is Pearson-Evans (2006)'s case-study investigation of the dynamics of the adjustment process of six Irish university students in Japan, through the application of a grounded theory approach to the analysis of their personal diaries. By concentrating on three topics (social networks, food and language) she concludes that the integrative models proposed by Anderson (1994) and Kim (1988, 1995) are the most suitable in explaining fully the adaptation process. Pearson-Evans questions the usefulness of defining adjustment according to an objective and measurable scale. "Adjustment is subjective: it means different things to different individuals, and even to the same individual what is valid at one stage is unsatisfying later on" (p.53). Thus, she considers it is important to explore how individual patterns of adaptation take shape over time.

Although the study is undoubtedly interesting, it too raises a number of issues. First of all, the data was collected between 1994 and 1996, that is well before the technological boom that brought about the widespread use of mobile phones, technologically mediated communication, VoIP, as well as social media such as Facebook and the like. As will be discussed in chapter 9, technology has undoubtedly affected the experience of Study Abroad, and any study of cross-cultural adaptation today needs to consider these aspects too. Of course, many of these changes have taken place after the study was conducted, and well after the data was collected. However, the point I wish to make is that the rapid technological transformations that have taken place in the last decade mean that as researchers we need to be cautious when referring to studies or data which may portray a very different picture from that of today's world.

Another issue concerns Pearson-Evans' method of data collection, namely unstructured diaries. In her interesting discussion on methodological choices, she supports the use of diaries as a research instrument in that diaries appeared to be a

valuable way of accessing the participants' experiences from their point of view, and "minimising [her] influence on the students' thinking" (p. 57), thus avoiding the problem of reactivity. However, it could also be argued that a 'personal diary' that will expressly be read by another person will inevitably be influenced by what the diary-writer believes to be the reader's expectations (this, of course, is true also of interviews). Nevertheless, the author candidly admits that "the level of contact I had with the students was not close or regular enough to inspire the kind of trust and commitment necessary for this type of data collection" (p.57). Again, the technology available today, by allowing researchers to keep in touch with participants, can help build the necessary rapport despite geographical distance. These types of considerations will be explored further in the next chapter, when I explain some of the methodological choices I made for my own study.

The aspect of the students' subjective perception of their adjustment process is also analysed by Burnett and Gardner (2006) in the same volume. Using both interviews and visual representation methods, the researchers analysed the experiences of 40 Chinese students in the UK, concentrating especially on four of them. Two of these represented their experience as lines on a graph, which depicted well the ups and downs of the experience of adaptation to a new life in a foreign university. All four images depict the dynamic nature of the cross-cultural adaptation process. Although the authors offer a model of the students' experiences based on Bennett's (1993) and Yoshikawa's (1988) models, they too, like Pearson-Evans (2006), emphasize the subjective nature of adaptation, and claim that "any model can only offer a simplification of the individual complexities that constitute any sojourner's path of acculturation" (p.90).

Another more recent longitudinal study, this time analysing the experiences of 150 international graduate students in a British university, was carried out by Brown and Holloway (2008). Using an ethnographic approach that combined participant observation and in-depth interviews, the authors offer their model of adaptation, while making the same point mentioned above: that "the adjustment journey [is] an unpredictable and dynamic process, which is experienced differently among

sojourners, and fluctuates throughout the sojourn as a result of a host of individual, cultural and external factors” (p.232). Although the authors’ methods of data collection capture longitudinally the multi-faceted experience of the participants, Brown and Holloway caution that their findings could be generalised only to similar contexts, in other words “Higher Education institutions in the UK that recruit international postgraduate students, and also to similar actors, i.e. international postgraduates on a one-year intensive Masters programme” (p.237). Although such words of warning regarding generalisations are to be expected in this type of qualitative study, it would seem that some of her claims would also hold for other contexts of student mobility. What similarities and differences might there be with the experiences of other post- as well as undergraduate students studying in other European institutions?

A partial answer to this question comes from earlier work carried out by Murphy-Lejeune. In her qualitative study *Student mobility and narrative in Europe: the new strangers* (2002), the author offers a detailed analysis of the students’ narratives against the conceptual backdrop of the sociology of ‘the new stranger’. It focuses on the holistic experience abroad, delving into various aspects such as the students’ mobility capital, their motivations for wanting to study abroad, their expectations, their arrival into the new culture seen as a rite of passage, the concept and experience of culture shock in a European context, issues relating to space, social networks and the adaptation process that the students go through. The study offers a detailed insight into the complexities of the lived experiences of the participants. However, according to the author, the main finding was that, contrary to the experience of other migrants, “practically everything in the European student experience may be assessed as a benefit. In other words, even the negative or difficult aspects of the stay are eventually perceived as enriching, adding significantly to their life experience in the present and potentially beneficial in the future” (p.230). Why would this be so? What are the characteristics of European mobility that have the power to transform most negative experiences into positive outcomes? Could it be related to expectations, or to the support networks available? To the kinds of difficulties encountered?

Although this study is, among those included in this review, the closest in terms of context to my own research, the cohort in this case was made up of three distinct categories: language assistants, participants in a European business school programme, and Erasmus students who were mostly language majors. This last group reflects the fact that in English-speaking countries in Europe (UK-Ireland), a large proportion (about 40%) of those taking part in Erasmus are language majors, as for some of them it is a compulsory part of their studies. However, this figure is not representative of the rest of Europe, in which language majors count for about 15% of those taking part in Erasmus programmes. Any attempt to understand the Erasmus experience from the point of view of the majority of the participants would need to consider, perhaps even primarily, non-language majors.

Another observation concerning Murphy Lejeune's study is similar to the one made about Pearson-Evans' research of students in Japan: here, the data was collected in the years 1993-1996, and therefore well before the widespread use of technology and low-cost flights that we have today. As argued above, these changes have significantly transformed the experience of study abroad, by 'shortening' the geographical distance between destination and home, enabling participants to keep in touch with friends and family through email, VoIP (Skype etc.), mobile phones, and social media (Facebook, Messenger etc.) and to extend their social networks in ways that were inconceivable ten years ago. Thus, it has become necessary to understand, among other things, what study abroad in Europe means today, as opposed to what it meant in a pre-internet and pre-low-cost flights era.

It is clear from some of the above-mentioned studies that interpersonal relationships are an important aspect of the cross-cultural adaptation process, and these have been the focus of a number of significant studies carried out by scholars in the fields of cross-cultural psychology and sociology. Many such studies are quantitative in their approach, but their claims have implications also for qualitative studies. One of the most frequently mentioned is Bochner's study on friendship networks (Bochner et al, 1977) in which he claims that international students use their different social networks for a variety of purposes: co-nationals, the main source of friendships for

international students, provide emotional support and companionship; host national friends are less common but still significant, and are sought after mostly for instrumental reasons, as cultural informants (including academic help) and as providers of language practice; finally, in this study, other foreign friends were found to be less frequent, and were used for recreational purposes (see also Barker et al, 1991; Zheng & Berry, 1991; Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Brown, 2009d; Hendrickson et al, 2011; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Gareis 2000; Gareis et al 2011).

A recent qualitative study that deals with this aspect of international students' social networks in the context of their university experience is Montgomery's *Understanding the International Student Experience* (2010). In it she describes the social networks of a small group of international students in a British university, and makes a number of interesting claims. First of all, her (small) set of data contradicts Bochner's findings in the study cited above (Bochner et al 1977). According to Montgomery, international students still look to their co-nationals to find their most significant friendships. However, as a result of an increased internationalisation of university campuses, the second most important group, almost on a par with co-nationals (and for some more numerous), is that of other foreign friends. In addition, while in the past a deficiency in the number or friendships between international and local students was often attributed to a lack of interest on the part of the latter, it is arguable that today this may also be due to the fact that, for some foreign students, this is no longer a priority.

This has important implications in terms of the assumptions made regarding the category of international students. The image which emerges from this study is no longer of isolated helpless minorities that need to be socially included into the host community. According to Montgomery, local students have simply become one more group to be included – to a greater or lesser extent – in the multinational social networks forged by these international students. In fact, for some, the experience abroad is primarily a “means of preparing for life and work in an intercultural context” (p. xvi). In this sense, it would seem that these individuals “are benefitting

from the effects of internationalisation of HE possibly more than their home student counterparts” (xii), who tend to remain excluded from the international networks.

This study also touches on the crucial topic of how the technologies available today can help maintain social ties in spite of geographical distance. This is still a relatively unexplored issue, although the literature that exists tends to emphasise the disadvantages over the advantages in the case of international student mobility (Kinger, 2008; Kelly, 2010). Montgomery briefly mentions the importance attributed by her informants to the possibility of maintaining ties with friends and family back home, and how these can offer, particularly initially, the necessary psychological support for the students to persevere with their international experience. It also transpires that, for many of them, peace of mind also comes from the possibility of checking that their family and close friends are well. Unfortunately, the author does not enter into a much needed detailed discussion of the implications of these findings for understanding the process of adaptation.

There are a number of limitations to Montgomery’s study. First of all, her seven informants (from six different nationalities) were all members of a loose social network linked to the university’s chess-club, selected through a ‘snowball’ method (selecting one student who contacted some friends, who in turn contacted their friends). The author herself claims no representativeness of her sample in terms of the whole of the international student body. In addition, all the informants were studying at the same British university, so they may not be representative of other university settings in the UK, let alone in Europe or the rest of the world. Thirdly, the participants, like those in Brown’s study (2008, 2009a, 2009b, Brown and Holloway 2008) were taking a whole degree (in this case either undergraduate or postgraduate) in the UK, so it is reasonable to assume that their aims and motivations were different from those of students sojourning for a shorter period (such as Erasmus students). Finally, these students had already been in the UK for some time, had already settled in. This choice was taken “to avoid the focus on ‘settling in’ or ‘adjustment’ which often dominates studies of international students” (p. xiv). In any case, if on the one hand her claims have many (acknowledged) limitations, her study

still illustrates how some sojourners view their experiences of building social networks in a new environment, and challenges the assumptions often made about international students' friendship networks, and about their role as socially disadvantaged students. In terms of the specific focus of my research, both Brown and Montgomery leave open the questions of how the experiences of short-term mobile students (such as those taking part in the Erasmus Programme) may differ from those of students who choose to complete their whole degree courses in the UK.

Finally, a number of empirical studies have also tried to analyse some of the negative effects of Study Abroad. In a quantitative study on British returnees from their year abroad in European countries, Coleman (1998) found that many came back with a worse opinion of the host nationals than they had before departure. Similarly, following their study of Australian students in France, De Nooy and Hanna (2003) observe that, "whilst time in France undeniably encouraged personal growth and increased knowledge of aspects of French language and culture, striking intolerance and misunderstanding of French patterns of information distribution produced or reinforced a persistent negative stereotype" (p.75). And Brown (2009d) adds that "it is widely claimed that the international sojourn carries the power to produce the intercultural mediator, but this study found that this potential was fulfilled only by a handful of exceptionally motivated students" (p.16). Undoubtedly, these aspects need to be investigated further, in order to develop a more balanced view of the experience of Study Abroad.

3.3 Summary

The present review has shown how cross-cultural adaptation in the context of student mobility is a multidisciplinary topic of research, spanning from cross-cultural psychology and sociology, to intercultural communication, linguistics and international education. Reviewing all the literature available would have been impossible, so I have limited myself to presenting and critically assessing some of the most significant models of cross-cultural adaptation, including the U- and W-curves proposed by Lysgaard (1955) and Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963), the learning-curve (Gardner, 1952; Hammer, Gudykunst and Wiseman, 1978; Furnham

and Bochner, 1986 among others) and stage models (Bennett, 1986; Yoshikawa, 1988), as well as the integrative models (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 1999; Kim, 2001; Anderson, 1994). I have pointed out how the U-curve and learning-curve models fail to convey the complexities of the individual processes of adjusting to a new environment, while the stage models do not offer an explanation as to why or how individuals move from one stage to the next. Integrative models, on the other hand, seem better suited at explaining the complexities of the individual processes. Of these, I will be referring in particular to Anderson's, as it offers an interesting insight into the concept of obstacle and coping strategies, which are one of the aspects I will be looking at when exploring the varied experiences of the different participants. In addition, Anderson's model is process-based rather than outcome-based (in other words, that attempts to explain how the sojourner adapts, rather than the outcome of that process), and sees the sojourner as agent in his or her own development. Moreover, Anderson's model has remained relatively unexplored.

Regarding the empirical studies, some important findings are:

- Contrary to the U-curve hypothesis, stress levels tend to be higher in the initial period abroad, when coping strategies still need to be developed (Ward et al. 1998).
- Psychological and sociocultural adjustment are affected by different aspects: the former by personality, social support, expectations and “life changing variables” and the latter by cultural distance, contact with host nationals, cultural knowledge, mobility capital and the ability to be culturally effective in the host environment (Ward et al. 1998, Arthur, 2001; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002).
- At the same time, the sojourners' engagement with the host environment is influenced by motivation, linguistic proficiency and low levels of anxiety, and vice versa (DuFon and Churchill, 2006).
- Coping strategies may include accessing social, emotional and instrumental support while abroad. Particularly important are expectation management strategies built before departure (Jackson, 2008a, 2008b; Arthur, 2001),

opportunities to develop problem-solving skills, the ability to reframe the meaning of situations, and to accept and adapt to circumstances considered unalterable, as well as debriefing opportunities (Arthur, 2001).

- Experience abroad may exacerbate prejudice and reinforce stereotyping particularly of host nationals (Coleman, 1998; De Nooy and Hanna, 2003). Only a small minority of sojourners become cultural mediators (Brown, 2009d).
- Co-nationals may help in the adjustment process by offering support and helping to diffuse stress, as well as by providing opportunities to manage and if necessary redefine expectations, particularly in short-term sojourns (Pitts 2009; Montgomery, 2010), but also prevent deeper involvement with the host environment (Arthur, 2001)
- Adjustment is a dynamic and subjective process, implying different things for different people (Pearson-Evans, 2006; Burnett and Gardner, 2006; Brown and Holloway, 2008).
- For many students, study abroad is primarily seen as a way of preparing for future life and work in a multicultural context (Montgomery, 2010).

The review of empirical studies also reveals a number of gaps. First of all, although international students have been at the centre of much research, many of these studies are quantitative in their approach, or offer retrospective views of student experience. Some of the longitudinal studies also offer snapshots of the students' lives, showing where the sojourners are in the adjustment continuum at a given time, rather than explain how – or why – they got there, and how they make sense of their vicissitudes. In addition, much qualitative research on adaptation in study abroad contexts has concerned transcontinental mobility, particularly towards English-speaking countries (UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), and has concerned students who move for an entire course of studies (in particular postgraduate degrees). However, the experiences of these students presents two important aspects that differentiate them from intra-European mobility, and particularly the Erasmus Programme. One concerns the academic stakes and the motivations of those who choose to pay full-fees in order to obtain what they see as a

“passport” to high-powered jobs in the global economy; the other relates to the time-span concerned: these students tend to spend at least two if not three years in their new environment, while Erasmus students stay for a minimum of three and a maximum of twelve months in the host university (while still ‘belonging’ to their home institution). If adaptation is both time-dependent and motivation-dependent (Anderson, 1994), then these differences are bound to affect the process itself.

Finally, the experience of study abroad, particularly in the context of the Erasmus Programme, has been completely transformed in the last decade by a greater geographical mobility (thanks, partly, to low-cost flights), a widespread use of the Internet, in particular of social networking tools and VoIP, and an increasing globalised economy. This has implications for our understanding of cross-cultural adaptation to the local environment. The concept of ‘full-immersion’ into the host culture, which was once the prerogative of study abroad for language majors, may simply prove impossible to achieve. In addition, the great majority of European mobile students are not language majors, and may have very different motivations for studying abroad. The context of European student mobility has changed in the last decade, and it has become necessary to reconsider the concept of adaptation as experienced by these individuals.

Having identified the gaps in the knowledge regarding the current understanding of the lived experiences of cross-cultural adaptation of Erasmus students in Europe, I have shown how the present longitudinal study can attempt to fill some of those gaps by exploring the experiences of cross-cultural adaptation of a group of Erasmus students in various European countries in a period of global and technological transformations. In next chapter I will discuss the methodological choices made for this particular research project.

CHAPTER 4 - Methodology

Having illustrated the Erasmus Programme of student mobility in detail, and identified a number of gaps in the current understanding of the lived experiences of cross-cultural adaptation of Erasmus students today, in this chapter I will describe my paradigmatic and methodological approach to the design of my research project.

4.1. Ontological and epistemological stance

In their examination of the assumptions underpinning the views of what social sciences are and how they differ from ‘hard science’, Burrell and Morgan (1979) divide them into ontological and epistemological assumptions, and those relating to human beings and how they relate to their environment. They see these assumptions as having a direct influence on methodological choices, “since the contrasting ontologies, epistemologies and models of beings will in turn demand different research methods” (Cohen et al, 2007 p.8).

Ontology relates to the nature of reality, and what is considered accessible to knowledge, while epistemology concerns the nature of such knowledge and ways in which it can be acquired. It also relates to how this knowledge can be communicated to others.

The positivist paradigm assumes that there is an objective social reality, comparable to the reality of the natural world, and governed by universal and describable laws, and therefore applies the ‘scientific’ method to its investigation. This approach will therefore be based on experiments or quasi-experiments in controlled situations, and will attempt to demonstrate hypotheses and generate ‘evidence’ for generalisable rules. Advocates of this paradigm claim it is based on facts, not on values, and is therefore ‘value-free’. The researcher is an ‘objective’ outsider, whose role is to check that no external factors interfere with the experiment. Methodologically, this framework will normally use quantitative methods to gather data (Robson, 2002; Cohen et al, 2007).

A different view rejects this ontological assumption and considers that social reality does not exist outside of the individuals that are part of it – who construct frameworks of meanings within it – and is therefore relative and subjective. In addition, anti-positivists believe that “individuals’ behaviour can only be understood by the researcher sharing their frame of reference: understanding of individuals’ interpretations of the world around them has to come from the inside, not the outside” (Cohen et al, 2007:19). For this reason, it is considered an ‘emic’ rather than an ‘etic’ approach to inquiry. This view also assumes that social reality cannot be investigated in ‘laboratories’, but needs to be studied in naturalistic settings. The role of the researcher is therefore not that of an ‘objective’ outsider, but is part of the research process. Here too, methodological choices will be influenced by these ontological and epistemological views: qualitative methods, which “turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 3) will be preferred, and the data will usually be collected on a smaller sample of individuals.

According to Guba and Lincoln (2005) the three broad anti-positivist paradigms today are constructivist (also called constructivist-interpretative by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) in the same book), critical and participatory (p.195).

My research is inscribed within a constructivist-interpretative paradigm which sees reality as socially constructed by those involved. Thus, human behaviour is shaped by the cultural norms specific to the context and time in which it takes place. What we term ‘real’ can be different for each individual, and is therefore a subjective ‘reality’, although it can have elements in common with the ‘realities’ of other members of the same or other cultural groups. This paradigm acknowledges that individuals are sense-makers, i.e. that they interpret the world around them and themselves, and therefore takes into consideration their unique point of view. However, access to this subjective reality can only occur through the observer’s interpretation of the individual’s behaviour. Thus, this approach places the researcher well inside the research process (Gergen, 1985, 1999; Cohen et al, 2007). For this

reason, reflexivity is essential in qualitative research, as it helps researchers to “acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research, seeking to understand their part in, or influence on, the research” (Cohen et al, 2007, p.171). In the introduction to this thesis, I explained how my own experience of study abroad as a university student was at the origin of my interest in the topic. Clearly, my choice of focus was influenced both by the literature and by my own perceptions of what may be significant or interesting to look at. However, my own reflexivity throughout the research process meant that I was aware of my role during data collection – as interviewer, but also as recipient of the students’ comments in the weekly diary-tables (see 4.2.2.2.) – and of possible assumptions, made during data analysis, attributable to my experience of study abroad. This meant, for example, that I ensured that my conclusions were continuously checked against the raw data and findings from the literature to look for potential contradictions.

This choice of paradigm has methodological implications. Although “both qualitative and quantitative methods may be used appropriately with any research paradigm” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.105), I believe it is true to say that certain epistemological and ontological choices will necessarily lead the researcher to prefer the tools offered by one methodology over those available from the other. If the aim is to investigate the lived experiences of a group of individuals and understand how they make sense of their vicissitudes, a qualitative approach seems the most suitable: through the collection of unstructured data (yielded, for example, by semi-structured or unstructured interviews, personal diaries, observation, images, documents or objects), the researcher can attempt to understand and interpret the meaning of the information obtained (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Cohen et al, 2007; Creswell and Miller, 2000; Gay and Airasian, 2002; Mitchell and Jolley, 2006). This approach has implications for what is commonly termed ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’, although how these concepts are defined in qualitative research differs from the meaning attributed when using quantitative methods of inquiry. In fact, qualitative researchers often prefer to use different labels, such as trustworthiness, credibility, plausibility, transferability, confirmability, authenticity and fairness (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Schofield, 2007).

According to Creswell and Miller (2000), then, in qualitative research validity (trustworthiness) can be established through different procedures. First, the conclusions must seem reasonable, plausible and credible, to the person conducting the research. If necessary, inferences will need to be checked against other data or with others methods (triangulation). Secondly, the researcher will need to provide what Geertz (1973) termed ‘thick description’ in order to allow for what Goetz and LeCompte (1984) describe as ‘comparability’, in other words “the degree to which components of a study, concepts generated, population characteristics and settings – are sufficiently well described and defined that other researchers can use the results of the study as a basis for comparison” (p.228). Thirdly, researchers need to be aware of their own biases and assumptions, as well as the influence they may have had on the participants and on the context. These will need to be made explicit for the benefit of those who will read the account and assess its credibility (Creswell and Miller, 2000, pp.125-6).

4.2 Research design

Having established the ontological and epistemological paradigms that underpin my research, I will now explain the methodological choices I made.

4.2.1 Methodological choices

As explained in the introductory chapter, my aim was to explore longitudinally the complex, lived experiences of Erasmus students abroad. I wished to understand better how their motivations and expectations might affect their experiences; what kind of social and academic obstacles they encountered along their paths, and what strategies they developed in order to cope; whether these were successful and enabled students to adjust better; what outcomes they perceived and how they articulated them; and finally, how suitable is Anderson’s model to describe the individual adaptation processes of the students. In order to obtain the rich data necessary for this type of study, I decided to adopt a multi-method design. ‘Multi-method’ or ‘mixed method’ often refers to the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. However, it can also refer to the mixing of exclusively

qualitative (or quantitative) designs and techniques (Brannen, 2005). According to Collier, D. and Elman, C. (2008) multi-method research can have three different starting points: “the heterogeneity of qualitative methods, the interconnections between qualitative and quantitative research procedures, and the relationship with interpretative and constructivist methods” (p.783). It is the first of these that is at the origin of my choice.

A range of authors have insisted on the fact that a reliable and sound approach to methodology is achieved by choosing a suitable method for the particular research question(s) posed (Cresswell, 2003). If the research questions can best be answered with a mixture of strategies, then a multi-method design should be adopted. Mixing methods usually found in distinct research designs may promote the desirable practice of thinking ‘outside the box’ (Brannen, 2005).

In the specific study presented here, I decided to involve students going to a variety of destinations in order to understand the differences between students travelling to a country whose language they knew and those sojourning in countries where the shared language was a lingua franca. Similarly, I was looking to include students travelling to northern, central and southern Europe. Finally, I wished to incorporate students of humanities as well as sciences. This variety would have made it impossible to use an ethnographic approach, as the element of observation would be missing. I therefore decided to use interviews and monthly telephone (Skype) conversations with the participants throughout their sojourn. In addition, I was also interested in gathering longitudinal data that would provide a graphic representation of the curves of adaptation. Inspired by the “Mudls” study at the University of Nottingham (Gu et al, 2008a, 2008b) I devised a subjective tool that would enable me to obtain the data I needed – the monthly ‘diary’ table (see Fig.4.1 below. Further details on the use of the tables will be provided in section 4.2.2.2). Finally, for a number of students, I had access to additional longitudinal data through Facebook, a social networking tool. Each of the three strategies was selected in order to complement the other two. The idea was not so much that they could be integrated in order to provide a single picture of the individual experience, but rather that each of these methods would illustrate different aspects and give depth to the final picture.

In addition, by comparing the values and comments the students were providing in the tables with the data from the telephone conversations and their postings in the social networking website, these different methods would offer me the possibility of triangulation, bearing in mind that this is a research strategy “that offer[s] evidence to inform judgements, not [a technique] that provide[s] guaranteed truth or completeness” (Hammersley 2008, p35).

4.2.2 Choice of instruments

In this section I will illustrate the rationale for the different instruments that I chose: the interview, the diary table, and the social network.

4.2.2.1 Interviews

Interviews are, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2004) the favourite methodological instrument of qualitative researchers. Patton (1980, in Cohen et al, 2007), identifies four different types of interviews: 1) informal conversational interviews, in which questions are asked as they emerge from the context, with no prior definition of topic or wording; 2) interview guide approach, in which the topics to be addressed are pre-defined, though not the order or the wording; 3) standardised open-ended interviews, in which the exact questions, wording, and order are decided before the interview; and 4) closed quantitative interviews, in which both questions and possible responses are pre-defined. Although the latter types offer the greatest ease of comparison between respondents, the former enable the interviewer to acquire the unique, personal views of the interviewees.

One of the criticisms of the way interviews have been used by researchers is that, as Talmy points out, interviews have often been “theorized (often tacitly) as a resource for investigating truths, facts, experience, beliefs, attitudes, and/or feelings of respondents. Language tends to be conceptualized in referential terms, as a neutral medium that reflects or corresponds to objective or subjective reality [...]. Interview data are ontologically ascribed the status of “reports” of respondents’ biographical, experiential, and psychological worlds, with the interview thus conceptualized as the

epistemological conduit to those worlds: the interviewer reveals what “really” happened, or what participants “actually” felt through the technology of the interview, with closer approximations of reality depending on the interviewer’s skill at developing rapport, for example, or not asking leading questions” (Talmy, 2010, p. 131). Thus, several researchers, particularly applied linguists, have shifted the focus from “interview as research instrument” to “interview as social practice” (Talmy, 2010, p.128), and looked into the roles of both interviewers and interviewees, and into how reality is co-constructed during the interview process. Thus, according to this approach, the interviewee “not only holds facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms the facts and details” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2002 p. 115).

Another potential pitfall concerning the way in which interviews are used is that the interviewer may fail to consider the “potentially important asymmetries” created by differences between interviewer and interviewee regarding “institutional status, age, language expertise, social class, and more” (Talmy, 2010, p. 137). For this reason, it is essential that the interviewer exercise particular sensitivity to context and “heightened reflexivity” about “the role of the interviewer in occasioning interview answers, [...] the subject “behind” the interviewee, [...] the status ascribed to interview data, and [...] how those data are analyzed and represented, regardless of whether one opts to conceive of interviews as research instrument, or research interviews as participation in social practices”. (Talmy, 2010, 143)

Nevertheless, Talmy warns against the risk of engaging in what he calls “qualitative interview navel gazing”, i.e. of focussing too much on the ‘how’ and not enough on what is being said during the interview (Mann, 2011, p.21).

In terms of my own research, I became aware of the potential pitfalls of interviews already during the pre-departure phase. For example, the fact that I am a language teacher at the university where the participants were studying meant that my professional status within the institution could affect the students’ answers. In addition, being a native speaker of English meant that conducting interviews in English would also create a potential asymmetry. Finally, I was aware of the problem

of reactivity, in other words that the participants' responses could be affected by what they thought I wanted to hear.

I therefore decided to identify myself as a language teacher within the institution, although I specified that, for the duration of the research, I was a doctoral student in a British institution. That way I wished to avoid being seen as a representative of their home institution, from whom they might prefer to withhold information they did not want the institution to have (for example, that they were dedicating less time to studying than they felt they should, or that the exams abroad were easier and so they did not deserve a high mark at the moment of transferring the credits), and to avoid being used as a messenger for their complaints.

As for the language used during the interviews (and the monthly Skype conversations – see below), I decided to allow the interviewee to choose between English and Italian. Most chose to speak in Italian, their mother tongue, in which I am fluent. By accepting to speak in a language that is not my mother tongue, I felt I was partly redressing the imbalance of power they might have felt due to our different professional status.

4.2.2.2 Weekly tables

As mentioned above, the “weekly diary tables” were designed in order to obtain longitudinal data from the students which could be used to produce a graph representing visually the students' subjective perceptions of the ‘ups and downs’ they were going through as time went on. The idea was loosely based on a project carried out at the University of Nottingham by Gu, Day and Schweisfurth (see Gu et al, 2008a and 2008b) to explore the experiences of international students in the UK. In their study, they asked students to recall the ‘peaks and troughs’ of their experiences in the UK, identifying turning points and ways in which these ups and downs were (or were not) managed. In the case of the Nottingham study, the graphs were drawn retrospectively, at the end of a two-year period. However, I was not only interested in how experience was remembered retrospectively; I was also interested in how the ups and downs were perceived as they happened.

Below is an example of the table used.

	Week 1
	1 = very bad / 5 = very good
Personal issues	
friends and social life	
daily life (food, accommodation, weather etc.)	
Language	
Comments on personal issues	(text box for comments)
Academic issues	
Courses	
administrative issues	
Language	
Comments on academic issues	(text box for comments)

Fig.4. 1 – Sample weekly “diary table”

The weekly tables required the students to attribute a numerical value between 1 and 5 (1 corresponding to ‘very bad’ and 5 to ‘very good’) to a number of categories, according to how that week had gone for the student. The aim was not to gather some kind of ‘objective’ data: the numerical values (1-5) could easily have been substituted by more qualitative evaluations (very bad-very good) which would have made it clear that these were open to different individual interpretations (which meant, for example, that some participants gave 5 very frequently, while others attributed it only to exceptionally good weeks). However, by analysing the results qualitatively, the potentially different interpretations given to the numerical values by individual students were not deemed to invalidate the data. Rather, the tables would be helpful in revealing the importance that the individual participant gave to the different obstacles and difficulties they encountered. The commentaries added by the participants in the text box inserted in each table would also help clarify the numerical values given.

In the weekly tables, I considered it important to separate the ‘personal’ from the ‘academic’ experience, as I felt that these could easily develop at a different pace.

The ‘personal issues’ were divided into ‘friends and social life’ and ‘daily life’ (which included weather, food, accommodation etc) and the academic issues into ‘courses’ and ‘administrative issues’. Language was placed in both categories, as the language used for socialisation might follow a different development pattern to the language for academic purposes, all the more so if these are two different languages (in non-Anglophone countries where the language of instruction is English, for example). These sub-divisions were motivated by the literature on cross-cultural adaptation of students. In particular, in her study of Irish students in Japan mentioned in the previous chapter, Pearson-Evans (2006, p. 41) points out how “the main themes which emerged as significant in both reflecting and affecting the students’ cross cultural adjustment process [were] social networks, food and language”.

The data gathered through the tables was then used to construct longitudinal graphs representing the ups and down of the individual student’s adaptation experience. Below is an example from one of the students, as well as a sample of tables from three consecutive weeks:

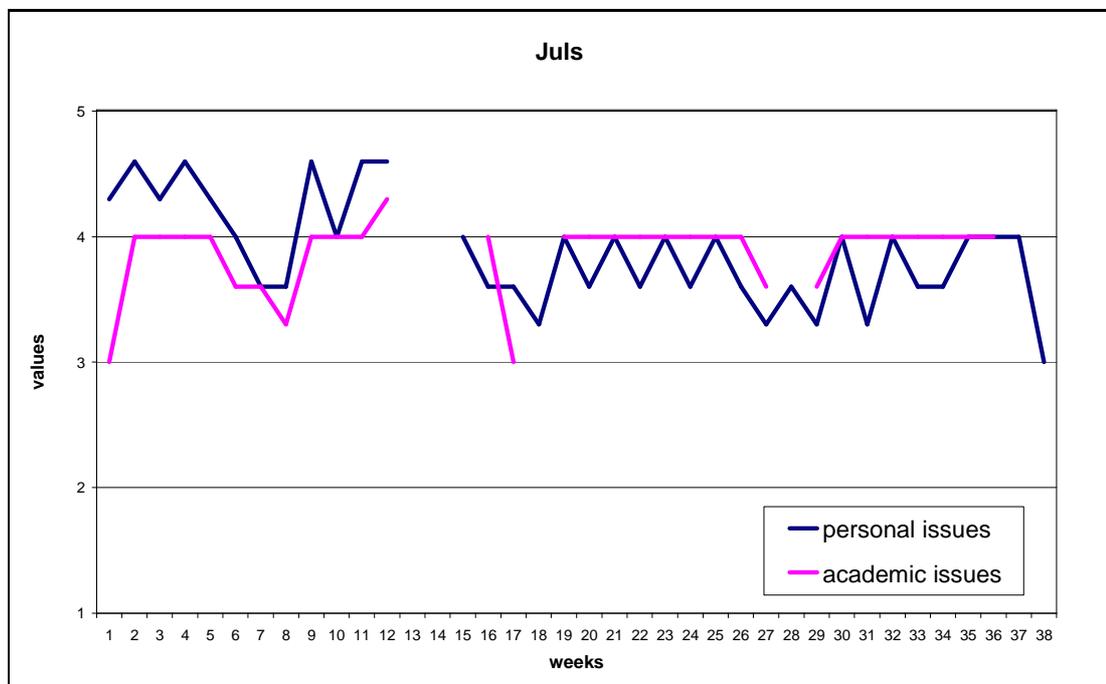


Fig. 4.2 – Example of graph

	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9
	1 = very bad 5 = very good	1 = very bad 5 = very good	1 = very bad 5 = very good
personal issues	3.6	3.6	4.6
friends and social life	5	4	5
daily life	3	4	5
language (social)	3	3	4
Comments on personal issues	<p>This week I enjoyed a lot, we celebrated Guy Fawkes night and I had 2 birthday parties. I put only 3 for language because lately I feel like I can't speak English properly, it seems that I am losing fluency and vocabulary instead of gaining them. It's quite frustrating!</p>	<p>This week has been very good. I had my first tea time with my English friends, and we'll probably repeat it next week. I went to the cinema and watch a movie without subtitles and I almost got everything. Moreover, and this is what makes me feel very happy, It seems that one of the English boy and I get on very well, more than a simple friendship. Let's see what happens!</p>	<p>This week has been particular, with a happy side and a sad side. My English friend and I are not friends anymore, but a couple! We found out to be in love with each other and now we are always together. Obviously, when you feel extremely happy something bad has to happen and my beloved dog died three days ago and what really upsets me are the absurd circumstances of its death.</p>
academic issues	3.6	3.3	4
courses	4	3	4
administration	4	4	4
language (academic)	3	3	4
Comments on academic issues	<p>Same problem with the language. Sometimes I feel like I don't know English at all. Hopefully it is just a phase, but I think it is. I think It's one of the stage of the cultural shock, or something similar. So, hope to recover soon!!</p>	<p>Eventually I finished my essay!! I'm not completely satisfied, but it was the best that I could do. Next week I am starting reading materials for next one. Courses are ok and I can get most of the topics.</p>	<p>I am working on my next essay that I am supposed to submit next week. The topic is not difficult, rather quite interesting, but I have some problems with my essay organization. Hopefully I will sort it out in a few days. Apart from that, courses proceed as usual and there are only three weeks left before Christmas break</p>

Fig. 4.3 – Sample of completed tables (Juls)

Graphs were produced for the two broad categories (personal/social and academic), as well as for the individual sub-categories (friends and social life/daily life/language for socialisation/course/administration/language for academic purposes).

In addition to these graphs, students were asked to draw a retrospective graph upon their return (before they were shown their longitudinal graphs), in order to compare the two. This offered me insights into how the participants made sense of their past experience.

4.2.2.3 Social network

The exponential spread of the Internet over the last decade means that “ ‘everyday life’ for much of the world is becoming increasingly technologically mediated” (Murthy, 2008, p.849), with people using technology “to communicate, to commune, to socialise, to express, and to understand.” (Kozinets, 2010, p.2). This means that the traditional dichotomy of on- and offline communities, relationships and communication has been blurred (Hine, 2005). It also means that it is becoming increasingly difficult to study how people communicate or maintain social ties without making reference to technology.

Facebook, like other social networking sites, has been used in qualitative social research, for example in ethnographic enquiry (Hine, 2008). It is a form of what has come to be known as ‘lifestreaming’, “a time-ordered stream of documents that functions as a [semi-public] diary of your electronic life” (Freeman and Gelernter, 1996) It is semi-public in the sense that it can be read by all one’s contacts, called ‘friends’. The postings can be in the form of comments (which can turn into conversations, as happens in a blog), photos, music and video files, as well as links to other pages or external sites. The instrument also provides a private ‘chat’ which can be used to communicate with a single ‘friend’, and functions as an email.

In the case of this study, Facebook was initially added as a way, suggested by the students taking part in the pilot study, of sharing photographs of their experiences (trips, friends, activities) with me and keeping in touch, as Facebook was checked

more often than emails. In the actual study I decided to let them find me and request my friendship, rather than the other way round, in order not to put any pressure on them to accept me as their ‘friend’. As a result, eight out of the 21 students taking part included me among their contacts.

Only after the first few weeks, the potential of this instrument to gather further data (in the case of this study, used for triangulation, in order to compare the feedback given through the weekly tables with the comments posted by the students on their ‘wall’) revealed also some of the ethical issues involved.

In social and educational research, ethics is concerned with protecting the rights to privacy and confidentiality of the participants, ensuring informed consent, and making sure that no harm is caused to them (or others concerned) through their participation in the research project. But the characteristics of online research make some of these aspects particularly complex. This issue is not new and, back in 1996 (and therefore well before the advent of social media such as Facebook) Waskul and Douglas (1996) addressed many of the issues which are still relevant, and claimed that “ethical considerations should entail an interplay between codes of conduct and an intimate understanding of the nature of the online environment and the experiences of participants (p.138). Similarly the AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) issued a set of guidelines in 2002 (Ethical decision-making and Internet research - Recommendations from the ethics working committee) that addressed these issues. Being aware of the fact that online media develop rapidly, the guidelines remain relatively general and are aimed at assisting those involved to make informed and responsible decisions. (Ess et al, 2002).

The fact that online environments develop continuously means that researchers themselves must take responsibility for understanding and addressing the ethical implications of using their chosen tools. In the case of this study, the consent form approved by the University Ethics Committee proved inadequate with the inclusion of social media methods of data gathering. Therefore, a new consent form (see Appendix II) had to be drawn up, which addressed the specific issues concerning Facebook (rather than generally those of online social media).

4.2.3 Design

The diagram below (Fig.4.4) shows the design of my research project. It included:

- a) Pre-departure semi-structured interviews. The aim of these was to obtain biographical data from the students, and explore issues related to their decision to take part in an Erasmus Programme, as well as to their expectations.

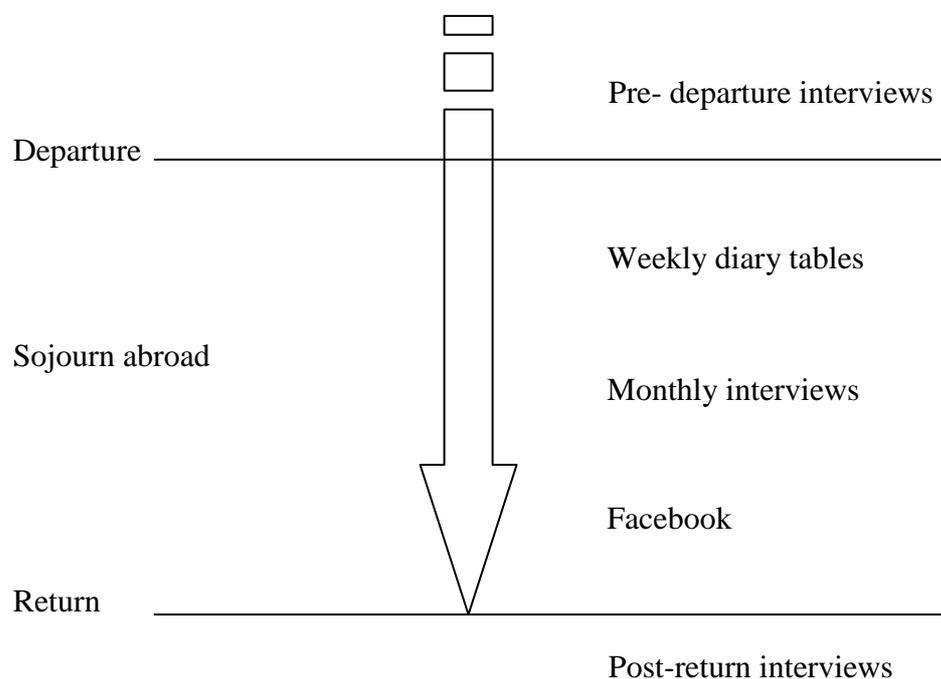


Fig. 4.4 – Research design

- b) Weekly “diary tables” to be completed by the participants throughout their sojourn. The aim was to obtain frequent and regular records of participants’ perceptions of their sojourn experiences in terms of both personal and academic issues.
- c) Skype conversations approximately once a month for the entire duration of the sojourn abroad. These were unstructured, although the previous weeks’ tables were used as springboards to ask for further clarifications, and understand better the experiences of the students.
- d) Facebook (for eight participants).

- e) Post re-entry semi-structured interviews. In this occasion, the participants were asked to reflect on their experience of study abroad, on the adaptation process they had been through, and on what they considered to be the most valuable outcomes. They were also asked to think about their initial expectations, how these had (or not) been met, and why. I also asked them to reflect on the meaning of adaptation. In order to allow them time to reflect and articulate their thoughts better, I told them they could write me an email if they preferred, which some of them did in the following days. Finally, they were asked to draw a retrospective graph that could visually represent the ups and down of their adaptation curve.

4.3 Pilot study

The pilot study took place between the beginning of March and mid-April 2009, for a total of six weeks. Three Erasmus incoming students at the university of Bologna took part in it. The reason for involving incoming rather than outgoing students for the pilot study was mostly practical – it was simpler to contact Erasmus students who were in Bologna at the time than those who were abroad. As the aim of the pilot was simply to verify the use of the data gathering methods (spreadsheet and fortnightly interviews during an intense study abroad period), the choice between incoming and outgoing students was considered irrelevant.

The three students had been in Italy since the end of January, and were attending the same elementary Italian language course at the University language centre. A. was a German medical student, and was doing practice at the hospital, M. was a Brazilian student of International Relations and L. studied Ancient History and came from Holland.

The methods for gathering data were:

- Weekly tables to be completed by the students.
- Fortnightly interviews with the students, to discuss the data in the tables.
- Final interview.

As the students had already been in Italy for about 6 weeks when I started the pilot, it was not possible to do the initial (pre-departure) interview included in the main research design.

The students were contacted through their language course at the University language centre. After explaining the project to them, obtaining informed consent and illustrating what the different categories in the tables entailed, they were sent the tables weekly, which they completed promptly. Initially, I had decided to interview the students by telephone every two weeks. Thus, we would have the chance to talk about the information contained in the table, and I would obtain significant longitudinal data. It was not easy to organise the interviews due to the students' busy lives, and an additional problem was finding a way of recording telephone conversations.

The final interviews were carried out at the end of week 7, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. I had opted for a semi-structured interview, as I had some specific open-ended questions I wanted to ask. These were:

- What were your expectations regarding your period of study abroad?
- Why did you choose Italy? What expectations did you have about the country? Had you been to Italy before?
- Do you feel that this Erasmus stay has changed you in any way, changed your attitudes, and if so how?
- What could you have done or not done to make things better or easier for you. If you were to start again, what would you do differently?
- What struck you as being different to how things are done in your country?
- Is there anything you haven't got used to? Anything you feel you don't understand?

I also showed the students their graphs and asked them to comment on them. As an experiment, I asked A. to draw the graph herself from her memory of the six-week period before seeing the longitudinal graph, as I was interested to see to what extent

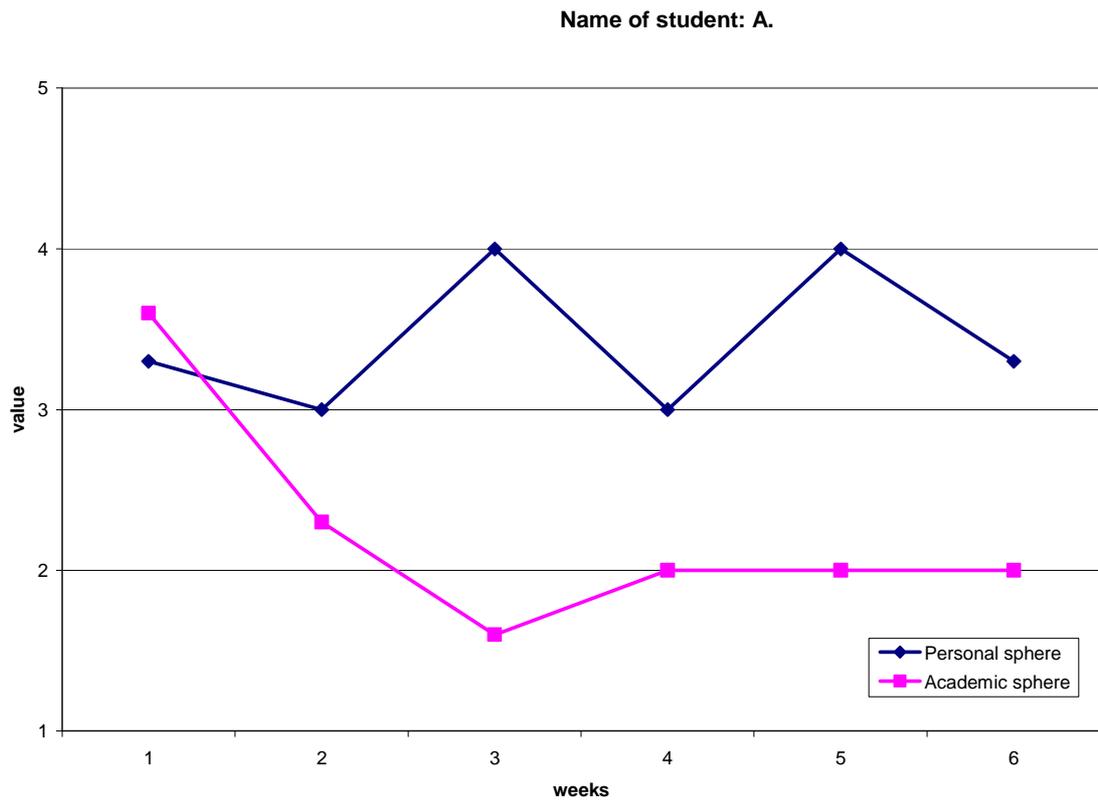
they were similar. In this particular case they were, although it would have been interesting to check correspondence in the case of a much longer period abroad.

As a result of the pilot study, the following decisions were taken regarding the main project:

- 1) Division into “personal issues” and “academic issues” was useful, as were the sub-categories. Although I always sent each student the new spreadsheet correctly labelled, often they would just use an old file and change the data. This was not particularly problematic with only three students, but potentially it could become a source of great confusion. In the future, each table would need to be checked as it was returned, in order to avoid confusion.
- 2) The students felt that the “comments” section was important in order to remember why a certain value was given, particularly after a few weeks.
- 3) Fixing telephone appointments every two weeks was problematic due to the students’ busy lives. Considering that the main project would involve between twenty and thirty students, I decided to interview the students every three to four weeks. The data gathered would still be frequent enough to grasp the ups and down of the experience, without getting lost in detail which might seem crucial at a specific moment but could be put into perspective within a slightly longer period.
- 4) It was important to establish a rapport with the students in order to motivate them to continue with the project. During the final interview (after six weeks) the three participants agreed it had been interesting and had helped them think about and understand their experience abroad better.
- 5) As explained above, having asked the students, if they so wished, to share with me some significant photographs of their period in Bologna, two of them offered to include me as a contact on Facebook, in order to give me access to their photographic albums. The methodological and ethical implications of this choice became clear only during the main study.

The pilot study was useful to test the data gathering methods. However, it was also useful to check the methodology chosen for the main project as the graphs plotted

(see Fig. 4.5 below) represent well the “ups and downs” of the students’ experiences, and the qualitative data collected during interviews added meaning to the graphs. Also, some of the issues discussed during the interviews (friendship, stereotypes, practical difficulties with administration, homesickness, academic differences) are those mentioned most often in the literature on study abroad.



Week	Personal Aspects	Academic aspects
1	I changed my room, because my last roommate was really bad (played all night x-box and smoked all the time). My new roommates are really nice and quiet, they don't disturb me and also my room is much better!!! Amici: I have to make some new friends because I only hve one wich I really like!	I really like 'MY' dott. Da S. and I also think, that he likes me as well: I can do a lot of thinks and I have fun in the hospital!
2	I went to germany at teh week-end to	I was getting a bit bored in the hospital,

	celebrate the birthday of my boyfriend! That was really nice because we haven't seen each other for quite a long time!	because I was only in the endoskopia for now 3 weeks!
3	I had a wonderful weekend in Geneva at my aunt's house: my parents were also there. We also discovered "new" family members in Geneva and spend a nice afternoon with them!	I skipped language course on Monday and there was also no course on Wednesday, so I had no course all week! I also had a free week in the hospital, so there was not really a lot of academic things to do. Aspetti amministrativi: I really hate the Italian way of dealing with bureaucratic things and they are always very slowly!
4	My boyfriend visited me and we spend a day in Ravenna, which was really nice but rainy, on Sunday I felt really homesick. I really don't like this rain, depresses my mood.	I'm at the heart surgery now and it's really boring because in the morning it's only 3 hours of visits! The patients are all the same and there is nothing practical to do for the students! Really, really bad: I don't like to do nothing and just stand around and waiting for the time to leave again!
5	I went to Ferrara at the weekend and I really liked it!!! I also had a lot of fun with other friends this week!	This tirocinio [<i>placement</i>] is really annoying and on top my white chamicia [<i>overcoat</i>] was stolen :- (There's no hope for a change anymore!
6	I went home for Easter and it was wonderful: also my boyfriend came to my parents home, my brother was there, we had the first barbecue this year, I met a lot of old school friends...	This week was only one day of tirocinio, nothing changed!!!

Fig. 4.5: graph and comments of A.'s six-week period. The original spelling has been kept.

4.4 Main project

4.4.1 Participants and data collection

When selecting a group of participants to take part in a project, the researcher always needs to consider the possibility of a number of informants dropping out. Although

dropout rates can vary depending on a multiplicity of factors, I was aware that in my project, which required students to provide me with data on a regular basis for the entire duration of their sojourn, initial enthusiasm could wane. In addition, the fact that the students would be abroad could render my attempts to keep them interested and involved more difficult. A further worry stemmed from the fact that the large majority of Erasmus students leave once a year, in September. A substantial dropout among the initial group of participants would imply having to wait a whole year before I could involve new informants, and would significantly set back my entire project. As a consequence, I decided to involve between 25 and 30 students, to ensure I would still have a large enough group should half of them withdraw from the project.

The initial group of participants was a cohort of 28 Italian students from the university of Bologna, a large public university in northern Italy, who were starting their Erasmus study period in August/September 2009, for a period of between 4 to 12 months.

Initially, 120 students were contacted by e-mail from the lists of those who had been selected to take part in Erasmus. The criteria used in the selection were first, to have as many European destinations as possible, and second, that the students should come both from science and from arts disciplines. Thus, between five and twelve students were selected randomly from the faculties of Agricultural Studies, Architecture, Industrial Chemistry, Heritage Conservation, Economics, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Law, Engineering, Humanities, Modern Foreign Languages and Literature, Medicine, Veterinary Sciences, Psychology, School of Education, Mathematical, Physical and Biological Sciences, Political Sciences, Translation.

In Italy no difference is made between Bachelor's and Master's degrees for Erasmus application purposes, so the lists of admitted students do not differentiate between them. The University of Bologna, one of the oldest universities in Europe, has more than 90.000 enrolled students, 23 faculties and 69 departments. The number of students taking part in Erasmus each year is around 1200. The initial 120 students

constituted therefore around 10% of the total number of students taking part in Erasmus in 2009-2010. In order to take part in an Erasmus programme at the University of Bologna (and generally in Italy), the students have to subject themselves to a selection process, particularly for destinations with more applicants than places. The students' grades, their language proficiency, as well as their motivations, are taken into account. However, no preparation is provided in terms of the cross-cultural experience that awaits them, and no support, except in administrative terms concerning their "learning agreement", is provided during their sojourn abroad. There is no provision for debriefing sessions either.

Of the 120 students contacted, 39 expressed an interest in taking part in the research project. Of these, 28 ended up volunteering and attended the pre-departure interview. Ethical issues were addressed through the standard procedure required at the University of Warwick (see appendix II). The students were handed the project description in English and Italian, were given time to ask any questions, were informed that they could withdraw from the project at any time without needing to justify their decisions, and were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. They were asked to provide me with a pseudonym by the end of the data-collection period, which surprised most of them. In fact, the majority insisted at the end of their study abroad that their real names should be used in my thesis. Only three offered a pseudonym, which was the nickname they had been given by their friends while on Erasmus. Two were also given pseudonyms to avoid confusion with homonyms in the group. It is my opinion that this different approach to anonymity depends on the cultural context: I have come across many research studies in Italy where the participants were identified by their names, and the fact that the participants in this study expressly requested their real names be used confirms this impression. Clearly, the fact that the project was perceived as carrying no risks for the participants was probably a determining factor in their choice to maintain their real names.

As mentioned above (section 4.2.2.3.) , soon after the beginning of the project, when Facebook was introduced as a data-gathering method, a new ethics form had to be

drawn up and approved by the university Ethics Committee, to take into account the specificity of this medium.

All the participants agreed to sign the consent form. The pre-departure interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, explored some of the issues affecting the students' expectations. The interviews were semi-structured, with some prompt questions such as:

- What are your expectations regarding your Erasmus exchange?
- Why did you choose to go? Why that destination?
- Have you been abroad before? Do you speak any foreign languages?
- How are you preparing for you period of study abroad?
- What do you think will be the greatest difficulties you will encounter? What do you hope will be the greatest gains?

Of the initial 28 students, 7 withdrew from the project fairly early on. The data regarding the destinations and duration of the programme for the remaining students are summarised in the table below. The names of the students correspond to those provided by them for use in my study.

	Student	Destination	Duration
1	Daniela	Norway (Agder)	6 months (returned 1 month early)
2	Ilaria	Denmark (Copenhagen)	6 months (returned 1 month early)
3	Pina	Sweden (Gotheborg)	4 months (extended to 6 months)
4	Lorenzo	Czech Republic (Prague)	6 months
5	Petra	Germany (Trier)	6 months (extended to 9 months)
6	Angela	UK (Glasgow)	6 months
7	Francesca	Cyprus (Nicosia)	8 months
8	Valentina	Sweden (Falun)	8 months
9	Silvia	France (Paris)	9 months
10	Paola	France (Paris)	9 months
11	Emanuela	Spain (Cadiz)	9 months

12	Chiara	Spain (Granada)	9 months
13	Jack	UK (Warwick)	9 months
14	Margherita	UK (Durham)	9 months
15	Miriam	UK (Edinburgh)	9 months
16	Gioacchino	UK (London)	9 months
17	Juls	UK (Swansea)	10 months
18	Giulia	Finland (Helsinki)	10 months
19	Claudia	Germany (Berlin)	10 months
20	Marina	Denmark (Aarhus)	11 months
21	Federico	Spain (Oviedo)	12 months (returned 2 months early)

Table 4.1 – Participants and destinations

After arrival in their host institutions, the students were sent weekly blank ‘diary tables’ which they completed with numerical values and comments. As explained previously, the data gathered was used to produce a visual representation of the student’s subjective perception of the ups and downs of their experience.

In addition, the participants were interviewed approximately every four weeks using Skype, in order to discuss the tables sent and obtain more detailed feedback on their experiences. It was considered that four weeks was a suitable length of time to obtain, on the one hand, rich longitudinal data, while on the other ensuring that the participants would not get lost in the details of events which could seem important on the day they happened, but might rapidly lose significance. The conversations were recorded to facilitate transcription.

Finally, as explained above, a number of students chose to include me as one of their Facebook contacts, which gave me access to very different data, including photographs and videos, as well as “chats” between the students and their other contacts (mostly friends back home and new friends made abroad).

By the end of the data-gathering period (November 2010), the following data had been collected:

Student	Pre-departure interview	N° of weekly tables	Interviews while away	Post-return interview
Daniela	✓	15	3	✓
Ilaria	✓	16	4	✓
Pina	✓	29	6	✓
Lorenzo	✓	24	4	✓
Petra	✓	42	6	✓
Angela	✓	27	6	✓
Francesca	✓	14†	4†	✓
Valentina	✓	29	4	✓
Silvia	✓	37	6	✓
Paola	✓	38	6	✓
Emanuela	✓	42	5‡	✓
Chiara	✓	39	6	✓
Jack	✓	39	9*	✓
Margherita	✓	36	6	✓
Miriam	✓	10†	7	✓
Gioacchino	✓	38	6	✓
Juls	✓	38	8	✓
Giulia	✓	46	6	✓
Claudia	✓	40	7	✓
Marina	✓	47	9	✓
Federico	✓	38	6	✓

Table 4.2: Data collected from participants

† Francesca stopped sending tables and taking part in interviews, but wished to take part in the post-return interview. Miriam stopped sending tables but wished to continue being interviewed.

‡ no internet connection between January and March 2010

* including one interview face-to-face, not recorded (only written field-notes)

One last word needs to be said here about language: as mentioned above, most of my interviews were conducted in Italian, the students' mother tongue, while three of them volunteered to speak in English (the same applies to the longitudinal data collected through the tables). The original language was kept throughout the data analysis, and I decided to translate into English only the verbatim quotes used in the final version of the thesis, leaving the original words in footnotes. This choice was dictated by two principles. First, it meant that I could continuously go back to the original data even while I was writing the thesis, without concern for the additional interpretation I might have imposed on them through translation into English. Secondly, I was aware that, by translating the words of the students into English, I was having to face dilemmas with which all professional translators are familiar: notwithstanding the fact that all translation involves a certain degree of interpretation, what was the best strategy to maintain the 'authenticity' of the individual voices which had expressed themselves in Italian? Should I 'foreignise' the quotes, maintaining the linguistic and cultural differences the words pronounced in Italian, "sending the reader abroad", or should I 'domesticate' them by reducing "the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home" (Venuti, 1993 p.210)? If I opted for domestication, the risk was to have the quotes originally in English sounding different from those by the same participants which had been translated from Italian. At the same time, it seemed to me that research that involved cross-cultural communication would sit more comfortably with a foreignising approach to translation. In any case, I decided to leave the original quotes in footnotes as a way of adding to the validity of the translation by providing the original for scrutiny by potential readers. If no Italian is provided, the words were in English in the original.

4.4.2 Data analysis

4.4.2.1 Weekly tables

The weekly tables were used to draw graphs that would represent the subjective, longitudinal ups and downs of the adaptation process of the individual students, in other words a personal set of curves which might help illustrate the individual

experiences. The comments included in the tables facilitated a better understanding of the values given and of the trends produced.

Graphs were drawn for the six individual aspects, as well as the two broad categories of personal and academic experiences. Greater detail is provided in Chapter 6.

4.4.2.2 Interview data

The interview data was explored using a thematic analysis approach. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” (p.79). The authors also emphasise the necessity to make explicit the researcher’s active role in identifying and selecting themes, rather than implying that the themes simply emerged from the data, or were embedded in the data waiting to be discovered. “If themes ‘reside’ anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them.” (Ely et al .,1997: 205-6).

Following Braun and Clarke’s steps to thematic analysis, the first phase involved transcribing the data from the pre-departure interviews and telephone conversations. This was done mostly shortly after the interviews had taken place, although some conversations were transcribed after the sojourns abroad were over. I then read and re-read across the data set in the search for patterns of meanings, of issues relevant to the research focus on the process of cross-cultural adaptation. Once this initial phase was completed, the initial codes were collated into overarching “potential themes” around the six broad categories defined by the weekly tables: “friends and social life”, “daily life” and “language for socialisation” for the personal aspect of the experience, and “courses”, “administrative issues” and “language for academic courses” for the academic side of the experience. The repeated move backward and forward between initial codes and potential themes ensured that nothing significant was being left out simply because it did not fit into a theme. As a result of this process of clustering codes and refining key themes, a thematic map was generated. This was then divided into six maps in order to facilitate the insertion into the study (see chapter 6).

Although the choice of key themes was partly linked to their prevalence throughout the data, frequency in itself was not crucial in that my aim was to investigate the variety of the sojourners' experiences. I therefore felt that themes that appeared in the data of a small number of participants could still be considered key if they revealed an important aspect of the adaptation process. In the words of Braun and Clarke (2006), "the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question." (p.82) Although the transcriptions of the interviews and the codes were uploaded onto an NVivo8 project in order to facilitate the analysis of the themes (the programme allows the researcher to view all the extracts coded under the same theme together) I worked as much on the computer transcripts as on the printed versions, as I was aware of the risk of becoming too concerned with computer coding and not engaging enough with the data (Baugh et al., 2010). I also felt that I worked better with hand-produced thematic maps.

The monthly telephone conversation transcripts were also read against the longitudinal graphs and the comments on Facebook, in order to obtain a richer and more multifaceted picture of the individual experiences.

Appendix I shows an example of the initial coding of a Skype interview.

4.4.2.3 Facebook

The data collected through Facebook was initially meant to provide a means for triangulation, in other words for checking the information provided by the students during the interviews against what they were writing on Facebook. Occasionally, for example, the postings on their walls provided greater details of events mentioned in the interviews. It was also interesting to read the kinds of comments the participants wrote which illustrated well some significant periods – for example posting written at all times of day or night from the library during exam periods. However, the tool also provided an insight on support mechanisms, friendship patterns, and use of different languages (including but not limited to the native and target languages).

A final word needs to be said about how the data is reported in this thesis. Although I could have approached my research as a case-study (see for example Jackson, 2008a and 2008b), I was more interested in understanding the variety of the Erasmus student's experiences, of obstacles encountered and strategies resorted to. This led me to choose initially a fairly large group of participants, in order to ensure that, were I to lose some along the way, I would still be left with a varied selection of informants. Luckily (or unfortunately) fewer students than I had expected dropped out, which meant that I ended up with a huge amount of data. Notwithstanding the difficulty of analysing them, they did offer insights into the multiplicity of experiences I was attempting to portray. In the central chapters of this thesis (6, 7 and 8) I have used the data to support my discussion of the prevailing themes spanning across the experiences of the 21 informants. However, I was aware that, by presenting the data in such a way, it was difficult to convey the feeling of the longitudinal aspect of the process of adapting to a new environment. For this reason, I decided to include, in chapter 9, one case, that of Angela, which would serve as an example of this process.

According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p. 322), a case study has a number of defining characteristics: it presents a rich and vivid description of the events related to the case, presenting them chronologically; the events are analysed at the same time as they are described; it focuses on individual actors or groups of actors, attempting to convey their perceptions of the events; it focuses on relevant events; it sees the researcher as an integral element of the study; the case is reported in such a way that it conveys the richness of the situation.

Angela's case is what Stake (2005, p. 445) identifies as an *instrumental* (as opposed to *intrinsic*) case study, that is one which "is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalisation. The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else". Had the entire research been designed as a case-study (or multiple case studies), Angela's might have had a more central role and the data and analysis may have been more

substantial. Here, I believe it fulfils its ‘supportive’ role in aiding our comprehension of the process of adaptation.

In the present chapter I have presented my methodological choices and illustrated the instruments used, discussing some of the implications and issues identified. In the next three chapters I will present and analyse the data collected, in relation to my research questions. In attempting to understand better how students experience adaptation to a different environment in the context of Higher Education mobility today, I will address my first sub-question in chapter 5, by exploring the students’ motivations for taking part in the Erasmus Programme, as well as their expectations before departure. Chapter 6 will present the longitudinal data, and will analyse the social and academic experiences of the participants, and in particular the social and academic obstacles they encountered, as well as the coping strategies they developed. I will also assess how successful those strategies were for the individuals’ adaptation to their new environments. Chapter 7 will address the question concerning the ways in which the students made sense of their experiences, and how they perceived the outcomes of the programme once they had returned home.

CHAPTER 5 – Before departure: motivations and expectations

5.1 Introduction

Whatever decision we make in our lives, whether it be to go to university, change jobs, get married or move to a different area, there are always motives behind such choice. Similarly, when university students choose to spend part of their studies abroad – whether by taking part in the Erasmus Programme or organising it independently – there are always motives and objectives behind the decision. These are crucial, as they will impact on the process itself. If we wish to explore the individual experiences of the participants in terms of their adjustment to the new environment, it is therefore central to understand in the first place why students decide to take part in the Erasmus Programme, and what specific goals they set themselves before they leave.

5.2 Motives for going abroad

The reasons given by the students participating in this research for choosing to take part in the Erasmus érogramme cluster around the expected broad themes: language improvement, academic opportunities and personal development. These are common to other studies on motivation, both quantitative and qualitative (King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Teichler, 2004; Thissen and Ederveen, 2006; Chirkov et al, 2007; Caudery et al. 2008). The order in which such motives are expressed does not necessarily reflect an order of importance. It may simply be determined by what is most obvious and easier for the individuals to articulate. At the University attended by all the participants in the present study, candidates are interviewed as part of their application process in order to assess both their language skills and their motivations for going abroad, therefore it is to be expected that applicants offer the motives they consider most likely to guarantee them a place on the programme. These same motives are liable to then be offered to anybody who asks, including teachers, parents, friends, but also researchers (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). In other words, the motives initially provided gradually become part of the student's rationalised personal narrative, which answers the need to make sense of

one's choices: "I did it because...". The majority of research participants – in other studies (Teichler, 1996, 2004) as well as this one – justify their decision to do an Erasmus not only in terms of the linguistic opportunities it offers and the value added for their future career in a globalised world, but also in terms of living an "experience", a kind of rite of passage, which they would not be able to obtain at home and which will certainly broaden their horizons and help them become mature adults:

I'm hoping to bring back home something that I could not have found over here, in terms of my studies, of friendships, of having seen a new country, new places I don't know. (Petra)¹⁰

Many of them are also aware of the fact that it is a chance in a lifetime, one that will be impossible to repeat once the individual enters the world of employment. Working abroad is a possibility, of course, but it is considered a completely different experience.

In order to explore how the participants articulated their motivations for taking part in this programme, they were interviewed after having completed their selection process, around three months before their departure. Their reasons fell into three broad categories: language improvement/learning about a new culture; academic/careers opportunity; and personal development.

5.2.1 Language improvement/ learning about a new culture

Linguistic factors are, and have always been, understandably important to students majoring in languages, and the participants in this project were no exception. Chiara, who wants to become a secondary school teacher of Spanish, hoped to immerse herself in the language and the culture which she loves.

Chiara: "I think that, living in a place for a certain time, this can help me enter the culture and the language, which I love, and

¹⁰ *Portare a casa qualcosa che qua non avrei potuto trovare, sia in termini di studi, sia in termini di amicizie, sia in termini di aver visto un paese nuovo, posti nuovi che non conosco.*

which I really hope to learn very well. I will really take advantage of every opportunity for conversation”.¹¹

Her enthusiasm and initial determination are typical of language students about to spend some time in the country of the language they are studying, but non-language majors are also aware of the instrumental value that a foreign language, and particularly English, has in today’s globalised world. It is the reason why Miriam, who hopes to get a job in publishing after graduation, chose to spend six months in Scotland. Emanuela, a business student, would also have preferred to spend an Erasmus sojourn in Ireland, but there were too many applicants, so she was offered Spain, her second choice, while for Federico, an engineering student with very limited proficiency in foreign languages, Spanish seemed more accessible than English. For Daniela and Valentina¹², both students of Anthropology, who hoped to improve their English during their Erasmus exchange, Scandinavia seemed only marginally less appropriate than the UK or Ireland.

All these students shared the widespread belief that spending a period in the country of the target language is the most efficient way to learn the language, although the students tended to be rather vague about what aspects of language in particular they expected to improve while abroad. Murphy-Lejeune observes that language specialists have an advantage over their non-language majors due to the fact that the former have a greater awareness of “the intricate process of foreign language learning” (2002, p.83). However, it was mainly language majors who expressed upon their return a slight feeling of disappointment regarding the improvement of their linguistic skills during study abroad, as a result, perhaps, of (unexpressed) unrealistic expectations, or possibly due to a feeling of regret at not having invested more energy in finding occasions to practise their target language.

¹¹ *E penso che vivendo sul luogo per un certo periodo, questo mi possa aiutare ad entrare nella cultura e nella lingua che mi piace moltissimo, e che ho veramente desiderio di imparare molto bene. Sfrutterò veramente ogni occasione di conversazione.*

¹² Valentina: ... essentially for the language. I have always considered languages difficult, and I wanted to deal with this problem / *essenzialmente per la lingua. Ho sempre considerato le lingue difficili, e volevo affrontare questo problema.*

Eight participants (Valentina, Francesca, Daniela, Marina, Lorenzo, Ilaria, Pina and Giulia) went to countries whose language they didn't speak (Scandinavia, Cyprus, Czech Republic). None of them expressed particular concerns, as the language of tuition was English:

Look, all those who've been to Copenhagen have assured me that Danish isn't necessary, in the sense that everybody, from children to old people, speaks English. I imagine that even the cashier at the supermarket speaks English, so there shouldn't be any big problems with everyday interaction in public places. (Ilaria)¹³

Although some considered it 'second best' to sojourning in an English speaking country, they felt relieved that the experience would consequently be less challenging from a linguistic point of view.

With regard to language difficulties, I'm not worried, on the contrary, I'd be more concerned if I were going to England. There [in Denmark], it's an English spoken by Danish people, more international and therefore more accessible to foreign people... it's not real English, though. (Marina)¹⁴

For these students, the choice of destination had less to do with the specific country, than with the fact that their host institutions were perceived to be English-speaking academic environments. This is a very different perspective on study abroad, no longer seen as a chance to immerse oneself in the local language and culture of the country, but rather as an opportunity to spend time in an international academic environment where English is the *lingua franca*, and where the country's language and culture fade into the background. How will this affect the sojourners' adaptation?

¹³ *Guarda, mi hanno assicurato tutti quelli che sono andati a Copenhagen che il danese non è necessario, nel senso che tutti sanno l'inglese, dai bambini agli anziani. Sì, io mi sono immaginata che anche la cassiera al supermercato parla inglese, quindi non ci dovrebbero essere grandi problemi nell'interazione quotidiana nei vari luoghi pubblici.*

¹⁴ *Per le difficoltà linguistiche non sono preoccupata, anzi, sarei più preoccupata se andassi in Inghilterra. Lì è un inglese parlato da danesi, più internazionale e quindi più accessibile per gli stranieri... non è il vero inglese, però...*

And perhaps more importantly, what exactly will they be adapting to?

In any case, study abroad was not only seen as an instrumental opportunity to improve language skills, but also as a way to learn about other cultures. This was a priority for Federico, an engineering student, who simply wanted “to see other places, what the culture of a different place is like”.¹⁵ For Angela, a linguist, studying languages opens you up to ‘otherness’, to difference, and going abroad meant she could come across people from many different countries. The possibility of meeting students from all over Europe (and beyond) is considered the defining character of the Erasmus Programme, regardless of the specific destination. In the case of Federico, going to a small town in the north coast of Spain, with a small campus linked to the main university in the region, would have been ideal for a full immersion programme fifteen years ago. Today, even in such a remote destination, the Erasmus group made up the core of Federico’s friendships during study abroad.

5.2.2 Academic/careers opportunity

Some students see the Erasmus Programme as an academic opportunity. For Lorenzo, it was a chance to carry out the practical component of his Master’s degree in one of the few laboratories in Europe that did research in his particular field. Similarly, Pina, Valentina and Ilaria saw it as an opportunity to study subjects that were not offered at their home institution.

One day my mother called me, she says “I’ve watched a programme about Sweden, they are very advanced in engineering, go, you must go”, and so I said to myself : “No, I can’t postpone this” and I went ahead... (Pina) 16

There, the Centre for African Studies is much more specialised with respect to what I do in Bologna. You also want a change, or

¹⁵ *Innanzitutto perché volevo vedere altri posti, e come è la cultura di un posto diverso.*

¹⁶ *Un giorno mia madre mi ha chiamato, e mi fa "ho visto una trasmissione sulla Svezia, e in ingegneria sono molto avanti, vai, vai assolutamente" e quindi da lì ho detto "no, non posso più rimandare" e l'ho fatto...*

give added value to what you're doing, when you do a Master's.
(Valentina)¹⁷

The main attraction was due to the academic opportunities, more ample and varied, because there, there is a Department of Anthropology, whereas here it's a degree course within the History Department. (Ilaria)¹⁸

This is a very different motivation from what is usually considered the main reason to study abroad: to learn a foreign language and immerse oneself in a different culture. For these participants, the academic experience was paramount. Predictably, it would also be an important element in their adaptation process.

Similarly, Gioacchino, a law student, was aware of the reputation of his host institution in his field. He therefore saw his period of study in London as an opportunity to improve his CV as well as his chances of finding future employment there with an international legal firm. He was also hoping to build a network of contacts which could eventually prove useful at the beginning of his career.

5.2.3 Personal development

Finally, the area of personal development was perhaps the most varied. There were those who saw their Erasmus exchange as a chance to become independent from their parents, with whom they were still living.

So, I'm an extremely shy person, who likes to be in places he knows. And I think for me it would be a really new experience, being in another... I am an only child, too. To be in a different country, on my own, having to manage, pay bills, live with other people... I live with my parents. And undoubtedly, to begin with it will be really hard, I will miss my parents, my friends. But I think

¹⁷ *Li il Centro di studi africani è molto più specialistico rispetto a quello che faccio a Bologna. E poi hai anche voglia di cambiare o dare un valore aggiuntivo a quello che fai quando fai la specialistica.*

¹⁸ *L'attrazione è stata dall'offerta formativa, più ampia e maggiormente variegata, perché là c'è un dipartimento di antropologia, qui è un corso di laurea, ospitato dal dipartimento di Storia.*

that, having overcome all this, I will own something that I will carry with me for the rest of my life, I hope. So from a social, personal point of view, I think it's really worth it, in addition to the cultural and academic aspects. (Jack)¹⁹

Others, like Paola, Silvia and Angela, felt it might help them overcome their insecurity and shyness, or encourage them to become more open-minded.

I try not to have any preconceptions, because they can...but obviously, everybody has some expectations, because you hope to learn new things. I hope above all to... I really like this word, 'open-minded', which we don't have in Italian, there is 'open', but it's not the same... I'd like to see other points of view... I think it would really help me to grow, also from a personal point of view, I think I really need it... (Angela)²⁰

For Claudia, who had been thinking about the Erasmus Programme ever since she decided to go to university, it was a chance to see if permanent residence abroad, away from home, was what she wanted for her future.

I enrolled at University with the idea of doing an Erasmus exchange, because I've always wanted to go abroad, it's a way to put myself to the test, to see if that is my path, to live abroad, far from everything, from parents, family, friends, everything. Which right now, I'd say I can do. But when I find myself in that

¹⁹ Allora, io sono una persona estremamente timida, alla quale piace stare nei propri spazi che conosce. E credo che per me sarebbe un'esperienza nuovissima essere in un altro... io sono figlio unico, d'altronde. Essere in un'altra nazione, da solo, arrangiarmi, quindi pagare le bollette, vivere in casa con altre persone... vivo con i miei. E sicuramente all'inizio sarà una grande sofferenza, una grande mancanza, per me, i miei genitori, i miei amici. Però credo che, superato questo, riuscirò a possedere qualcosa che mi porterò avanti per tutta la vita, spero. Quindi a livello sociale, mio personale, credo che ne valga davvero la pena, oltre che a livello culturale e tutto quello che riguarda lo studio.

²⁰ Spero soprattutto di... mi piace molto questa parola, 'open-minded', che in italiano magari non c'è, c'è 'aperto', ma non è così... mi piacerebbe vedere altri punti di vista... penso che mi aiuti molto a crescere, anche da un punto di vista personale, penso che ne avrei proprio bisogno...

situation, I'll see how I react.²¹

Her friends had advised her against moving to such a large city as Berlin from her small provincial home town, but she was determined to go ahead with her choice, the only one that would offer her everything she was looking for. These participants saw the experience abroad primarily a challenge, but were also aware that there was a safety net, that home was not far. Those who had already moved away from home to go to university viewed study abroad as a step further, requiring similar adjustment strategies to those they had already put into place.

I wanted to do something new, to start an endeavour I had honestly never thought myself capable of facing, because I have always been very scared of setting off. I came to Bologna, but the initial years were difficult... now I'm fine, obviously, but it was a difficult choice which, with hindsight, I would make again, but which made me suffer all the same. And so the idea of going abroad scared me a lot, but I was going through a phase in which I told myself 'I really must do something'. (Silvia)²²

The Erasmus Programme is therefore seen as a chance to change routine, to try something different, even, as Silvia remarked, as “a window, a new possibility, a source of new incentives”, an opportunity “to break with a familiarity sometimes apprehended as restrictive or ponderous, when it no longer ‘motivates’ and does not function as a generator for action” (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, p.88). It offers the chance to try out a new, alternative life, which can provide the participant with a wealth of experience and knowledge, and many expressed, in a more or less

²¹ *Io mi sono iscritta all'università con l'idea di fare l'Erasmus, perché comunque è da sempre che volevo andare all'estero, è un modo anche di mettermi alla prova, di vedere anche se quella è la mia strada, stare all'estero lontano da tutto, da genitori, famiglia, amici, tutto. Che per ora mi viene da dire che è una cosa che posso fare. Però quando mi troverò nella situazione vedrò come reagirò.*

²² *Avevo voglia di fare qualcosa di nuovo, e di cominciare un'impresa che io sinceramente non avevo mai pensato di essere in grado di affrontare, perché ho sempre avuto molta paura di prendere e partire. Sono venuta a Bologna, ma i primi anni sono stati difficili... adesso sto bene, ovviamente, ma è stata una scelta difficile che, se tornassi indietro rifarei, ma che ho patito comunque. E quindi l'idea di andare all'estero mi spaventava tantissimo, però c'è stato proprio un periodo che ho detto, bisogna assolutamente fare qualcosa.*

articulate manner, their fascination with the Other, the unknown. For Federico it was a chance “to fulfil what until then had only been a potential”; not going might imply future regrets at having missed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, as Pina observed:

And another thing, as I said before, I don't want to leave anything untried, I don't want to look back in ten years' time and say “I could have done that, but I was too lazy”. So usually, when there is something I don't know, I throw myself into it, and live the experience... I might not enjoy it, but at least I can say I've done it.²³

Linked to the idea of personal development is that of having a taste of ‘life abroad’, in order to check, as Claudia said, whether they were cut out for permanent residence in another country. Most, however, seemed to be toying with the exotic idea of foreign living, rather than expressing a concrete possibility. The Erasmus experience would provide a real, tangible experience, a lens through which the possibility of permanent residence abroad could be judged with a greater awareness of what the choice might entail in reality.

As was said above, the students' motivations for going on an Erasmus Programme cluster around three main themes: language improvement, academic opportunities and personal development. However, the specific goals of each individual are relatively varied. With regard to language improvement, they range from learning a totally new language (Federico), to improving one's level in a language in which the learner has had substantial difficulties (Silvia, Daniela, Valentina); from learning English as an international language in a non-English speaking country (Ilaria, Marina, Daniela, Valentina, Pina, Giulia, Lorenzo), to improving one's knowledge of the language and culture (Angela, Chiara, Juls, Claudia, Paola, Francessa, Petra), or learning the language in a country where it is spoken, but primarily for instrumental reasons (Jack, Margherita, Miriam, Emanuela,

²³ *E l'altra cosa, come ho detto prima, non voglio lasciare niente di intentato, non voglio fra dieci anni guardarmi indietro e dire "avrei potuto fare quello, ma per pigrizia non l'ho fatto". Quindi, di solito quando c'è qualcosa che non conosco, mi butto, faccio l'esperienza... poi magari non mi piace, ma almeno posso dire di averla fatta.*

Silvia). As for academic opportunities, they range from exploring new areas of study (Ilaria, Marina, Pina, Claudia, Valentina), new methods and approaches (Chiara, Margherita, Jack, Petra), to obtaining knowledge which will be useful for future careers (Gioacchino, Miriam), or even carrying out practical work in a different environment (Lorenzo). Finally, the area of personal development includes goals such as becoming more independent and autonomous (Jack, Angela, Chiara, Federico), escaping from a stifling environment (Claudia, Silvia), trying out life abroad in view of future employment opportunities (Gioacchino, Emanuela, Claudia), getting to know new cultures (Juls, Francesca, Valentina, Federico, Chiara, Ilaria, Margherita).

How will these goals affect the individual adaptation processes of the participants? More specifically, how will the combination of these goals with the specific demands made by the different environments in which these students will be spending part of their studies influence what each individual will have to adjust to? What expectations did the participants have in terms of the difficulties (or lack of them) they would have to face abroad, in order to fulfil their objectives?

5.3 Expectations

Expectations, as opposed to motivations, require us not so much to imagine outcomes, as to visualise the future, to represent in our mind's eye our daily life in the new context. According to Murphy-Lejeune, "travel is constructed in the potential wanderer's imagination before its actualisation. Desire is fed through indirect or direct contacts with destinations which are fantasised, so that the traveller already holds a certain representation of the object as content (country, culture, people, studies or work) and a process (adapting to a different life, going, leaving)" (2002, p.77). A significant contribution to this representation is given by stories told by friends, former Erasmus students, who almost without exception tell of wonderful – possibly idealised – experiences.

All those I have met who have been to Copenhagen were very enthusiastic. They've said that the teachers are really good, all

young, easygoing, they even go out together in the evening... it's an idyllic situation. (Ilaria)²⁴

Some participants had the opportunity to communicate with those who were spending their Erasmus sojourn at the time in their chosen destination, and who reported back on the country, university, courses, weather, friends.

... and the girl who decided to stay in Norway, who sends me a mail every day, even though I've never met her ...and so it's a bit like... not like being there, but really... and every day she sends me a tearful mail because there's too much snow, because she'd met a Norwegian guy and of course it's all over, because one day she writes "I'll stay here for the rest of my life", and the next day "no, I'm coming back home"... (Daniela)²⁵

These stories undoubtedly contribute to how the participants imagine their stay abroad. Daniela could already see herself having a Norwegian boyfriend, Silvia imagined returning to Italy with a "full command of French"²⁶, while Ilaria pictured herself going to lessons and meeting people from all over the world (rather than locals):

When I imagine myself there, I imagine myself going to lessons every day, I then imagine meeting people from all over the world, not only Danes... actually, not many Danes, rather people

²⁴ ...tutti quelli che ho incontrato che sono andati a Copenhagen erano molto entusiasti. Hanno detto che i professori sono bravissimi, tutti giovani, alla mano, si esce anche la sera magari... è una situazione idilliaca.

²⁵ ... e questa ragazza che è rimasta in Norvegia che, nonostante non l'abbia conosciuta, mi manda una mail al giorno dandomi...e quindi è un po' come.. non come esserci,ma sicuramente... e ogni giorno mi manda la mail piangente perché c'è troppa neve, perché aveva conosciuto un ragazzo norvegese e naturalmente è finita, perché un giorno mi scrive "io rimarrò qua per tutta la vita", un altro giorno mi dice "no, io torno a casa"...

²⁶ Beh! Sicuramente ho scelto di fare l'Erasmus soprattutto per avere ancora più padronanza della lingua, perché comunque è l'unica lingua, perché l'inglese non lo so bene, è l'unica lingua che riesco a gestire, e quindi mi piacerebbe avere proprio piena padronanza. E quindi mi sono detta, andare proprio là 9 mesi mi aiuterà a ritornare qui con la capacità di parlare tranquillamente senza problemi e quindi poterla usare nel mondo del lavoro, usarla come una cosa in più che ho rispetto magari a qualcun'altro.

from Asia, from America, because I've read there are many overseas students... I imagine spending the day together with those people... I like the idea of sharing my studies with others, talking about them, exchanging views... yes, that's the idea I have.²⁷

What will the effect be of such a detailed anticipation? Will it help Ilaria to start thinking about the problems she might encounter, and to start activating her adjustment strategies? Or will it have the opposite effect, of making her feel disappointed and inadequate if she is unable to fulfil those expectations? In fact, a number of participants mentioned their anxiety about holding unrealistic expectations and idealising their destination:

I have many expectations, perhaps too many. I'm leaving full of enthusiasm, and I'm really worried I'm idealising the whole thing. (Claudia)²⁸

You can't stop yourself from idealising the place ... at the beginning there is always the enthusiasm for new things. (Valentina)²⁹

Expectations are also partly linked to the specific destination, and to the reasons why the particular host institution or country was chosen. For example, Claudia chose Berlin because, coming from a small town, she was fascinated by the opportunities that she believed a large cosmopolitan city could offer her, in terms of entertainment, culture, but even of urban diversity. Marina, Daniela and Pina were attracted to

²⁷ *Io quando mi immagino lì, mi immagino ogni giorno a lezione, poi immagino di conoscere persone da tutto il mondo, non solo danesi, anzi, pochi danesi, ma anche persone dall'Asia, dall'America, perché ho letto che ci sono tanti studenti overseas... immagino di passare la giornata insieme alle persone... mi piace l'idea di condividere lo studio con gli altri, parlarne, confrontarmi con gli altri... sì, ho ques'idea...*

²⁸ *Io ne ho, di aspettative, e forse anche troppe. Parto veramente molto entusiasta, e ho paura veramente di idealizzare troppo la cosa.*

²⁹ *Scappa sempre il meccanismo di idealizzare il posto... all'inizio c'è sempre l'entusiasmo per la cosa nuova.*

Scandinavian countries for their contrast with Italy: countries that they primarily perceived as being more efficient, with a more relaxed lifestyle and less chaotic environments. Marina and Ilaria, two Masters students, had great expectations regarding the quality of the courses, the teaching and learning environment offered by their host institutions, as this was a priority when choosing to do an Erasmus exchange in the first place. In addition, those going to countries in which the study methods in higher education are based on seminars and tutorials as well as written assignments expected to find some difficulty in getting used to the change, as in Italy methods are primarily based on lectures and final – mostly oral – exams, and attendance is not compulsory. Their concerns regarded in particular their linguistic skills, i.e. their ability to understand the tutors and take an active part in the discussions, and secondly their ability to take exams in the foreign language. However, all of them felt positive about trying what they perceived to be a better and more engaging system. As previously mentioned, these expectations too stemmed from feedback given by former Erasmus students, with whom the tutors responsible for the particular programme had put their candidates in touch.

Finally, the participants also described their expectations with regard to personal growth. Those who embarked on the Erasmus Programme in order to experience life away from their family expected to feel homesick and miss family and friends, and Pina, Juls, Lorenzo, Ilaria and Federico were all leaving partners behind. However, they all held significant expectations concerning their social life in their new environment. All of them hoped to make many friends from all over the world (in some cases, local friends were seen as less important, confirming Montgomery's (2010) findings), as this is, in the collective imagination, perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of the Erasmus experience. This is clear in the following extracts:

A friend of mine went on Erasmus and knows people from all over the world. Wonderful. Wonderful. (Federico)³⁰

³⁰ ... *ho visto un mio amico che è andato in Erasmus e conosce gente da tutto il mondo. Bello, bello.*

In any case, the idea of making friends from all over Europe, even from all over the world, is another aspect I like. (Claudia)³¹

For me, perhaps one of the most important things is getting to know lots of people from all over the world, because that's how you get a richer experience, through dialogue, and you understand how things work in other places, how you study in other places, so it's wonderful to get to know different types of people. Perhaps it's the most important thing about Erasmus. (Valentina)³²

My cousins made friends both with local students and with other Erasmus students. In fact, all three of them are still in touch with the people they met there, and either they come to Italy, or my cousins go abroad... they're always travelling. (Paola)³³

I would like to create a group of friends, with whom I can share my plans for the future. I'd like to find people with my problems and aspirations for future. (Giacchino)

The image that emerges from these words is not so much of immersion into the local culture, of negotiating entrance into a local community, as one of developing a sense of cosmopolitanism, of international networks that will enable the sojourner to feel at home anywhere and everywhere. The result both of globalisation (with cheaper air travel, social networks defying geographical borders, the spread of English as a lingua franca) and of the increased and more organised structure of HE student mobility, these expectations may represent a crucial conceptual change in

³¹ *Ma comunque l'idea di riuscire a crearmi alla fine degli amici un po' da tutte le parti d'Europa, se non del mondo, è un altro aspetto che mi piace.*

³² *Per quanto mi riguarda, forse una delle cose più importanti per me è fare tante conoscenze di gente da tutto il mondo, perché questo è il modo in cui ci si arricchisce, i confronti, e capisci come funziona da altre parti, come si studia da altre parti, e quindi è bellissimo poter conoscere ogni tipo di persona. Forse è la cosa più importante dell'Erasmus.*

³³ *Le mie cugine hanno fatto amicizia sia con studenti del luogo che con altri Erasmus. Infatti tutte e tre si sentono ancora con le persone che hanno conosciuto là, e o vengono in Italia, o loro vanno all'estero... sono sempre in viaggio*

researching study abroad today as opposed to twenty years ago.

5.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have attempted to answer the first of my research sub-questions: what were the students' overt motivations for taking part in the Erasmus Programme, and what were their expectations before departure? The answers largely confirm those reported in the literature (Teichler, 1996, 2004; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002), and cluster around the broad themes of language and cultural learning, academic and career opportunities, and personal development. I have also examined some of the expectations held by the students before their departure. These can be positive, such as discovering new things, meeting friends from all over the world, learning to look after oneself and becoming more autonomous. At the same time, most of them also expected to find difficulties in adapting to their new environment. Most of the anticipated problems were based on the participants' past experiences of life changes, or on feedback from former Erasmus students. However, they lacked concreteness mostly because the informants did not have the necessary knowledge of the host environment, and of the concrete demands it would make on them. Once they arrived in their destination, the process of attempting to decipher the new environment, of understanding the requirements made upon them, of identifying the obstacles that emerged along the way, of reframing expectations accordingly, would put to the test their strategies, but also their goals. These aspects will be analysed and discussed in the following chapters, in order to understand how the theoretical representations of the adaptation process translate into concrete experiences.

CHAPTER 6 – While abroad

Having reviewed the main reasons stated by the participants for going abroad, as well as their expectations, both positive and negative, of the Erasmus experience itself, I will now turn to the data collected during the sojourn abroad. The research questions I will address here are: what (social and academic) experiences did the students have in their various destinations? What (social and academic) obstacles did they encounter, and what strategies did they develop in order to cope? And finally, how successful were these strategies?

In order to answer these questions, I will first examine the graphs obtained from the weekly tables, and then analyse the comments made both in the tables and during the monthly interviews, in order to identify the prevalent themes and issues raised by the students. Finally, I will take into consideration one social and one academic obstacle identified by a number of students in order to analyse the different coping strategies used by them and appraise their success in the context of the individual processes of adaptation.

6.1 The graphs

As explained in Chapter 4, the weekly tables were used to plot individual graphs that could visually represent the subjective, longitudinal experience of the students. Of the 21 students who reached the end of the project, two stopped sending the tables within the first three months (Francesca and Miriam). While Miriam agreed to continue with the interviews at regular intervals, Francesca was too busy and agreed simply to be interviewed upon return. The graphs were therefore only plotted for the remaining 19 participants. Each sub-category was presented on a different graph to facilitate comparison between aspects as well as between individual students.

The three sub-categories for the ‘Personal Issues’ and for the ‘Academic Issues’ were also averaged in order to generate, for each student, a graph showing the two broad categories together. Although this produced some interesting data, which will be

commented on below, we need to be aware of the potential pitfalls from a methodological point of view.

The search for trends is important when attempting to understand a phenomenon such as cross-cultural adaptation. These general trends within a group can only be identified through the use of averages, as in this last type of ‘aggregate’ graph. However, we also need to bear in mind that similar-looking graphs may conceal very different experiences. A sojourner indicating, for example, 1 (very bad) for friends and social life, 3 (neither good nor bad) for daily life, and 5 (very good) for language, will show the same trend as someone indicating 3 (neither good nor bad) for all three categories. The same would apply to somebody attributing 1 to language, 3 to daily life and 5 to friends and social life, although this individual’s experience would presumably be very different. Although the graphs for the broad categories might help to detect possible similarities with the U-curve or learning-curve hypotheses, some scholars reported in the literature review (Gao and Gudykunst, 1990; Thomas and Harrell, 1994; Pearson-Evans, 2006; Brown and Holloway, 2008) point out that the adaptation process is a much more dynamic and unpredictable process, which can vary enormously from one person to the next. As mentioned previously, this is the aspect I am most interested in exploring. Nevertheless, I will begin by providing a brief overview of the data produced in the ‘broad categories’ graphs.

6.1.1 ‘Broad categories’ graphs

Appendix III contains the complete set of graphs for the 19 students who completed the weekly ‘diary tables’. Eleven of these show what could be considered a learning curve in at least one of the two broad aspects (Emanuela, Chiara, Silvia, Angela, Claudia, Petra, Pina, Marina, Valentina, Paola and Giulia). Figure 6.1 below shows Paola’s graph, one of the clearest examples of this curve (the missing sections correspond to holidays and other breaks).

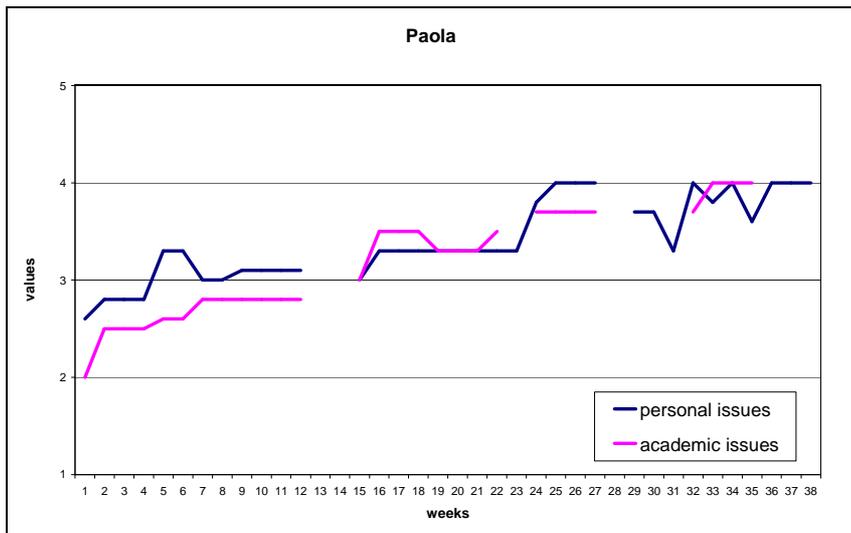


Fig. 6.1 – Paola’s graph for personal and academic issues.

However, there are also other graphs in which the trend is less clear, as in Jack’s graph below. The personal issues remain approximately between 3 and 4 for the entire duration of the stay, and the academic issues, after a slight decrease in the first three weeks, remain stable at 3.

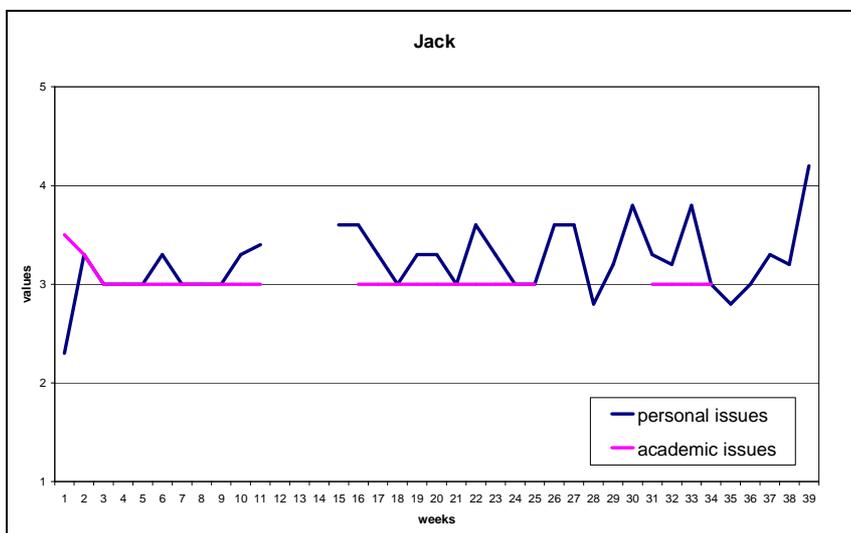


Figure 6.2 – Jack’s graph for personal and academic issues

Similarly, in Angela's graph below, the 'Academic issues' curve clearly shows a U-curve trend: it is, however, the only apparent example of such a curve in the 19 graphs.

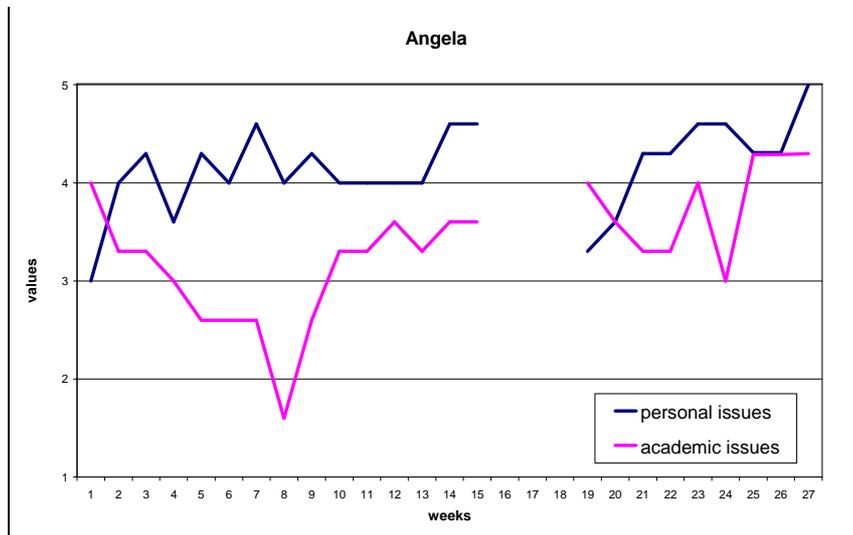


Figure 6.3 – Angela's graph for personal and academic issues

Finally, Juls' graphs seem to show a very slight downward trend, at least in the 'Personal Issues'. In any case, except for the very last week, in which the drop is caused by the sadness at having reached the end of her sojourn abroad, it remains relatively stable between 3 and 4, which still shows overall satisfaction with the experience.

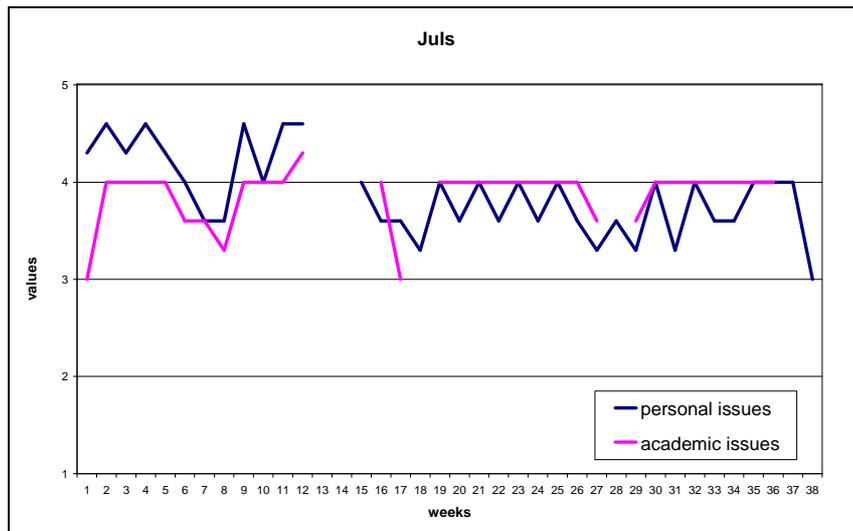


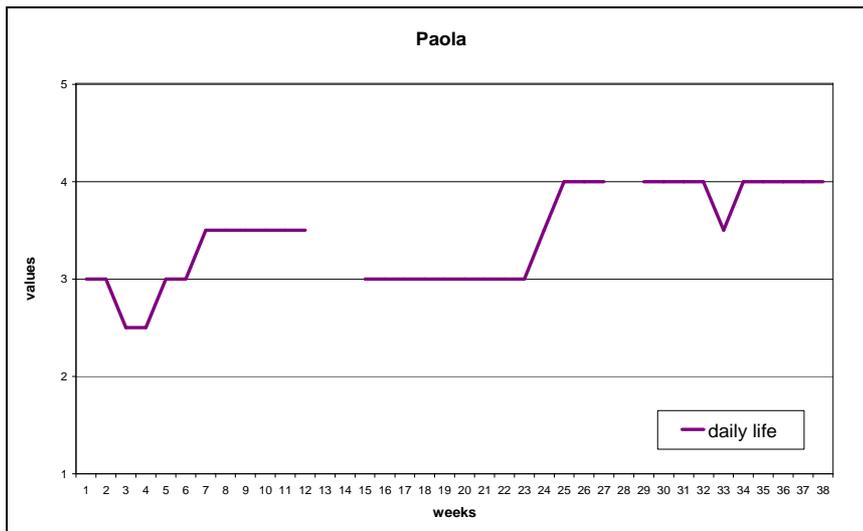
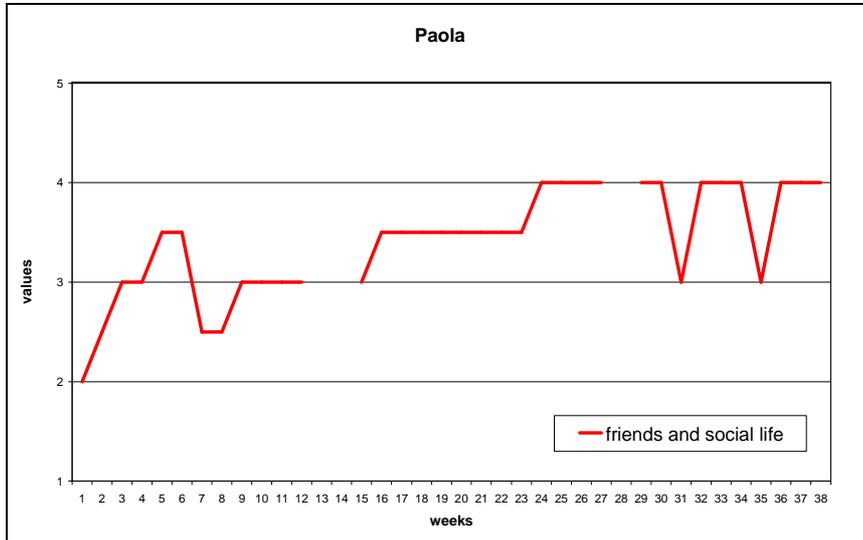
Figure 6.4 – Juls' graph for personal and academic issues

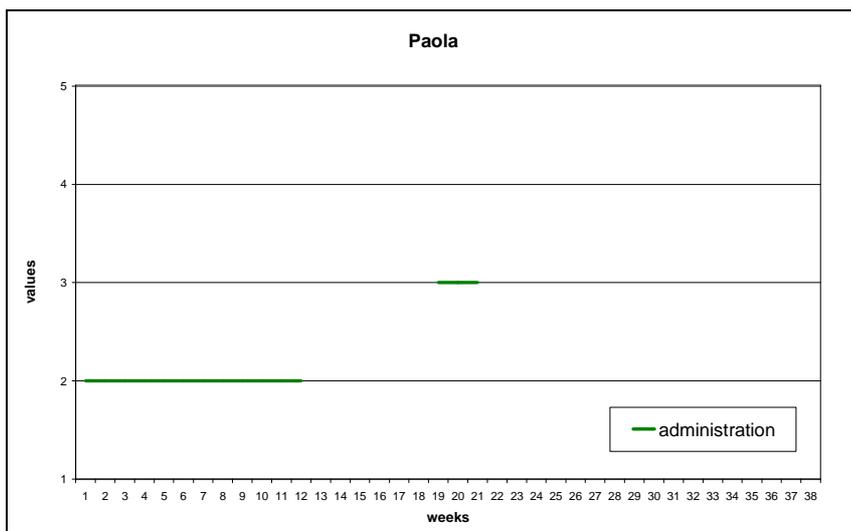
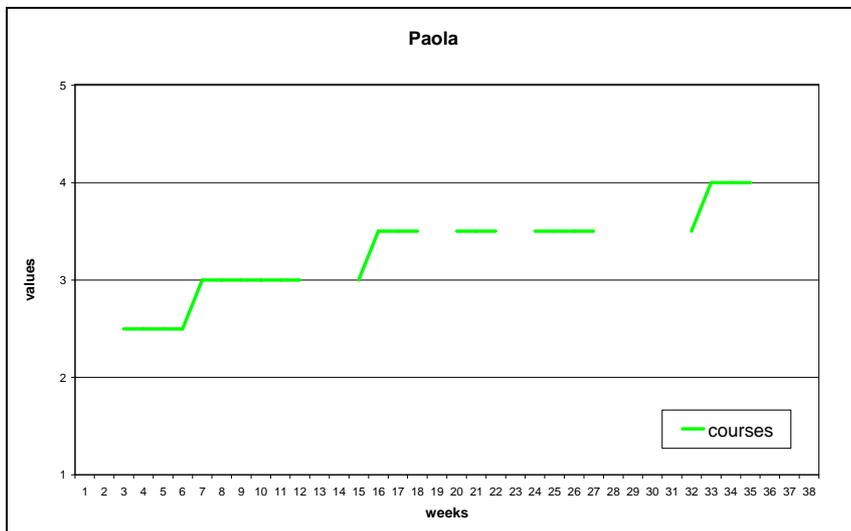
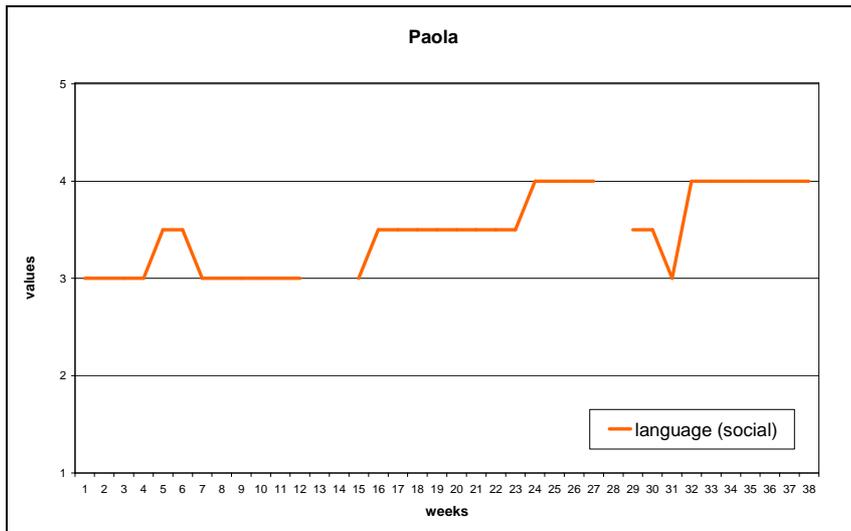
What is clear from all the graphs is that, far from being smooth curves, they all show more or less prominent ups and downs. Some of these could be incidental (a fall could be due to a bout of flu, a difficult assignment, a fallout with a friend or partner back home, a lost identity card or stolen bag, to mention some examples among those reported by the students). In terms of the adaptation process, what we need to consider is whether these crises reveal obstacles in the student's paths, which require an adjustment of some kind. In any case, single-curve representations are one-dimensional and do not take into account the multiplicity of complex factors affecting adaptation. So rather than having a single measure of adjustment, a set of multiple curves, representing different aspects of the sojourner's life, may help us unpack those ups and down, and understand better the subjective experience of life abroad (Brown and Holloway, 2008).

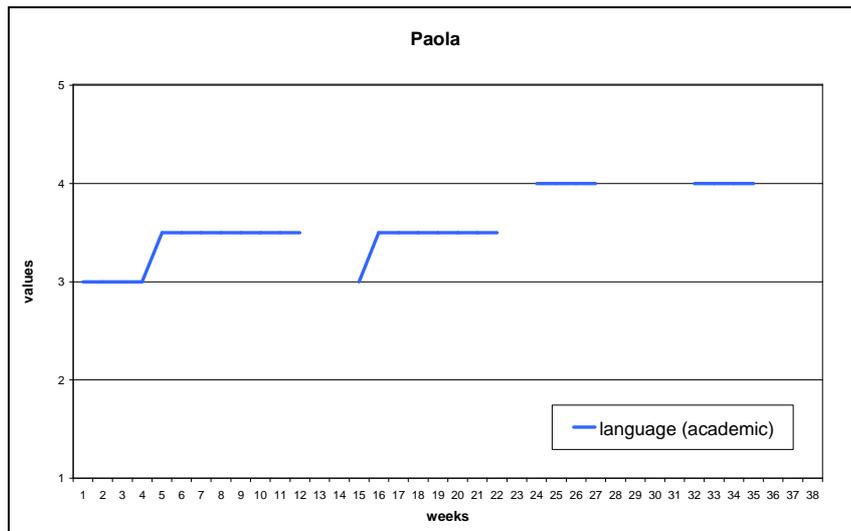
6.1.2 Graphs representing single aspects

Let us therefore examine the six different aspects into which the tables were divided (Personal issues = friends and social life; daily life; language for socialisation; and Academic issues = courses; administrative issues; language for academic purposes). If we take two of the examples mentioned above and observe the single aspects, we

can appreciate the diversity in the evaluations made by the individual participants of their own experiences.







Figures 6.5 to 6.10 – Paola's graphs for single aspects

As can be seen from Figs.6.5 to 6.10 above, belonging to Paola, the single aspects all show the same 'learning-curve' trend evident in the 'broad-categories' graph. The interruptions in the tracing of the curves were due to the values being given only when Paola was abroad, or when there was academic activity. Administrative issues were only taken into consideration during the initial months (arrival, enrolment in courses, changes to learning agreement) and in the middle period, with the start of the second semester.

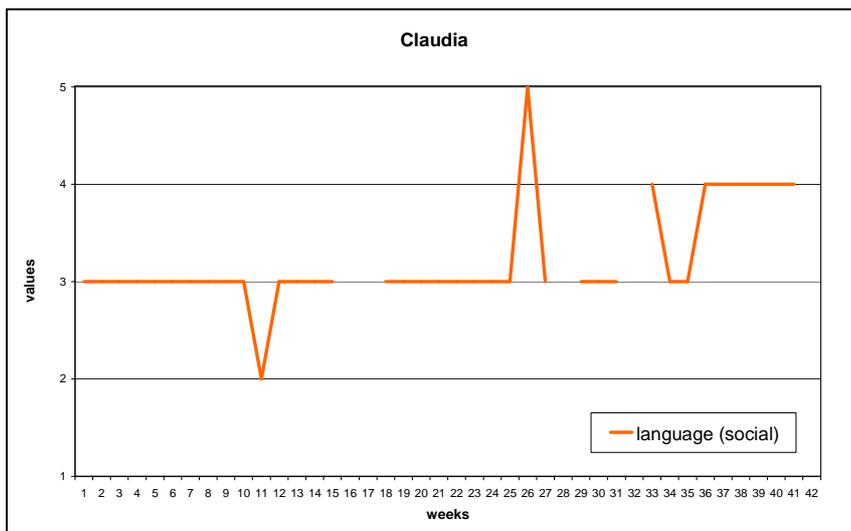
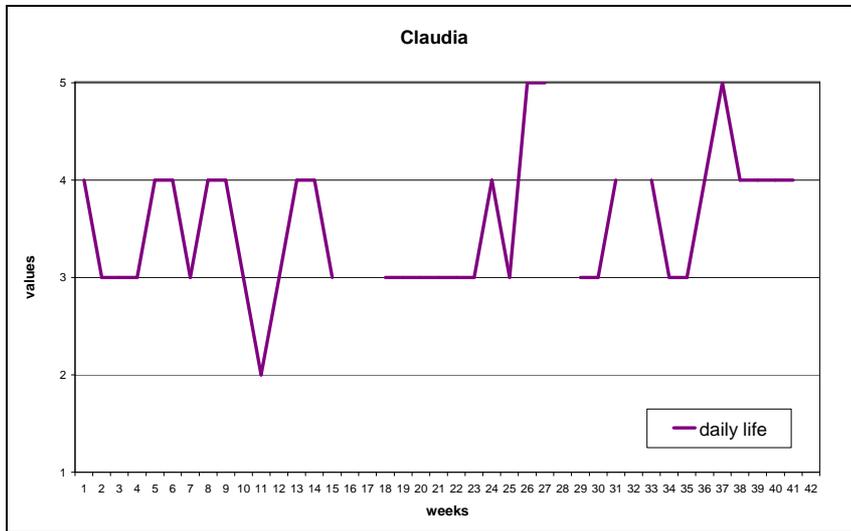
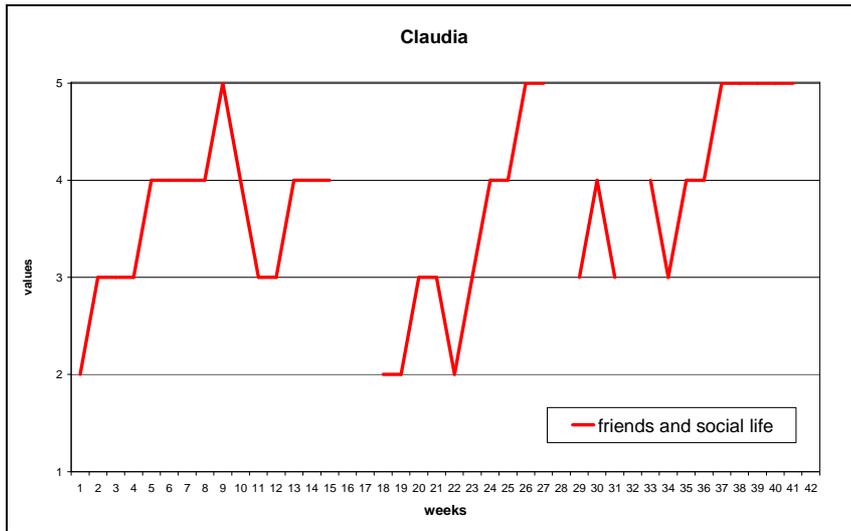
Paola, a shy and anxious young woman, majoring in Foreign Languages (French and English) chose Paris as her destination. Her parents had arranged for her to stay with a family friend, a woman in her 60s, who lived one hour away by bus from the city centre. What Paola hadn't realised was that the institution she had chosen for her Erasmus stay was not only one hour away by public transport from the centre of Paris, but also from her new home. Her disappointment and difficulty in finding her way around, and concerns for her own safety going home alone late in the evening, were the cause of the slight dip in the 'daily life' curve in the initial weeks. The fact that she had left her boyfriend in Italy made her feel particularly homesick too. In addition, she experienced a great deal of difficulties concerning administrative issues, which explains the low value given to this aspect. Once administrative issues are out of the way, though, they disappear from the graph.

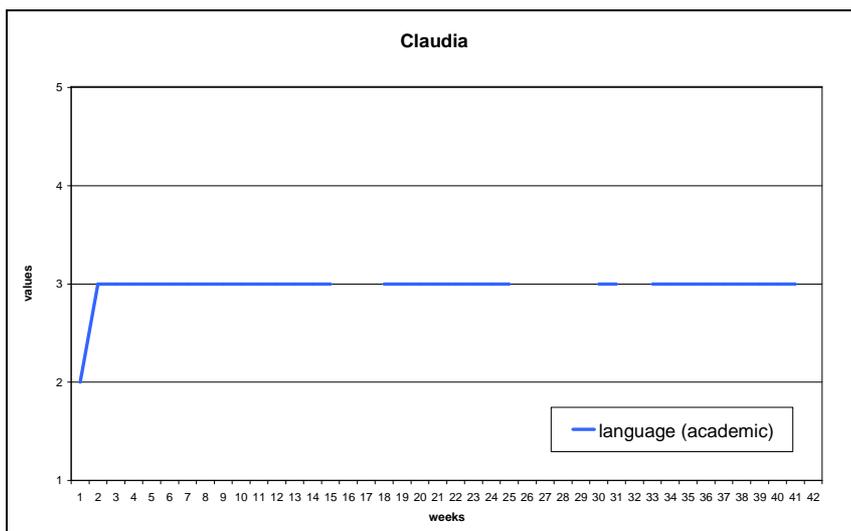
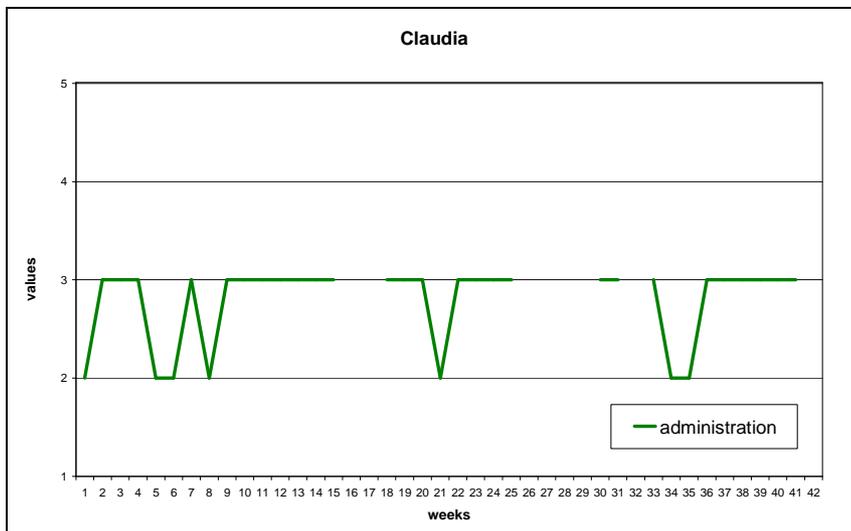
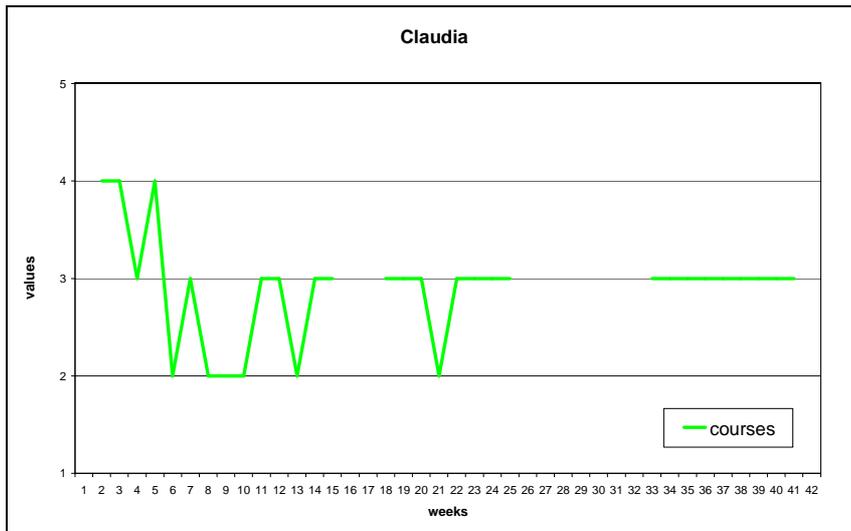
The academic side of things was far from easy, and Paola was attending courses in French, English and Spanish. However, the English course proved too difficult, and had to be dropped from the learning agreement. This, on the one hand, undermined her already fragile self-confidence and sense of adequacy, but at the same time allowed her to concentrate on her other courses and removed one of the sources of stress in her experience. In any case, it seems that adjustment in this respect was time-dependent. As Paola got used to the new system and settled into her academic routine, her satisfaction grew gradually and reached 4 by the end of the sojourn.

As for language, the social/personal curve shows slightly more variation than the academic curve, but both confirm the same overall trend. On week 5 Paola remarked “I think I’m improving, I often realise that for a whole day I’ve been speaking only French, and I’m satisfied because finally I can explain things with greater ease”. As is common in language learners in study abroad contexts, this confidence was shaky: two weeks later she wrote “I don’t think I’ve made any progress”.

Although she gradually got used to her life in France (a recurring comment was “usual life, no news”), she found returning to Paris quite hard after the Christmas break. However, the second semester witnessed an overall improvement, particularly after Paola moved to the centre of Paris with a friend of hers. By the end of her sojourn, she was fairly satisfied in all six aspects of the personal and academic experience.

Nevertheless, not all graphs show such a clear learning curve. Most of them, in fact, confirm the claim (Brown and Holloway, 2008) that experience of life abroad is varied and multi-dimensional, with sequences of ups and downs rather than a smooth upward curve or an unambiguous U-curve. For example, in Claudia’s case below, which is representative of the type of variance shown by most participants, maintaining that the “personal” aspect shows a positive trend would be reductive and rather meaningless.





Figures 6.11 to 6.16 – Claudia's graphs for single aspects

Although it is true that the curves in the first three graphs end at a higher point than they began (thus confirming that the experience, from a personal point of view, seemed positive), the last three, pertaining to the ‘academic’ sphere, show a neutral, if not negative trend. The main reason for this seems to lie in the fact that Claudia’s motivations for going abroad, as reported in chapter 5, were to experience life away from her home village, to improve her language skills (for personal rather than academic reasons), and to reflect on whether life abroad was something she could consider for her future. At the same time, her expectations regarding the academic aspects of the experience were high, as German higher education was associated, in her mind, with high efficiency and a challenging academic environment – neither of which she found in her host institution. Her daily life, however, was affected by her difficulty in finding a room in a shared flat with German students (she had refused to apply for accommodation in a student residence), a problem that was only solved in the second semester. This inevitably affected her social life, and caused a dip after the first couple of months, and again after her return from the Christmas holidays. At the same time, it influenced her perceived linguistic abilities, for which no improvement was reported until almost the beginning of the second semester. In week 11 she commented: “It seems rather difficult to build a friendship with German people, and this is a problem above all for language learning”.

As for the academic aspect of the experience, Claudia’s disappointment is clearly visible from the respective curves, although there is a certain degree of stabilisation in the second semester. Hers could be seen as a clear case of dissatisfaction caused by the expectation gap between what she had imagined and what she experienced within the initial period abroad, and the process of redefining her expectations in order to adjust to the new environment (Pitts, 2009). She was dissatisfied with the choice of courses offered at her institution, and in week 8 she found out that some of the ones she had included in her learning agreement had been cancelled. In week 10 she noted “It’s still difficult to find the right courses, the organisation at the university is far from ideal”. Later on she reported that those she has chosen were not stimulating, although she acknowledged that some of the problems derived from a different academic system and teaching style. Some weeks later (week 22) her only

comment concerned the unhelpfulness of her teachers. The long spring break (nine weeks) meant she felt slightly out of touch with the academic experience, although she took advantage of it to travel. Her limited satisfaction with her linguistic progress remained stable throughout the sojourn – she felt neither happy nor unhappy with her development. Claudia’s perception of administrative issues reflects a certain degree of dissatisfaction due to the problems mentioned above.

A report on the entire set of graphs relating to the 19 participants would be too lengthy for the purposes of this thesis, and the two examples shown here have been selected to exemplify the variety of responses. The remaining graphs can be found in Appendix III. In any case, these two examples show that students’ perceptions of their experiences abroad can be very different. The personal and academic spheres can develop at roughly the same pace, as in Paola’s case, and show something resembling a learning curve, or progress almost independently from each other, as in Claudia’s case. What seems clear is that only a longitudinal, qualitative study such as this can show the multitude of experiences different sojourners can go through, a variety which is inevitably lost in quantitative studies, or studies that do not include multiple points of data collection.

In order to understand the students’ experiences better, the graphs and weekly comments need to be analysed together with the rest of the data collected, namely the transcripts from the interviews and Facebook postings.

6.2 Other data: interviews and Facebook. Identifying themes

As explained in the methodology chapter, the interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis. As a result, a number of themes emerged from the data. These were grouped around the six main categories selected for the weekly tables, in order to facilitate comparison with the graphs and the comments to the weekly tables. These six categories inevitably affected the student’s responses in the monthly interviews. However, the semi-structured format of the interviews allowed the students to provide answers across these broad categories. As will be seen in the tables below, some of the issues they discussed, anecdotes they recounted, and

comments they made, were linked to themes that spanned across categories (for example, the difficulty in understanding native speakers was related to language for ‘academic’ and ‘social’ purposes, as well as to ‘friends and social life’). In fact, it is very clear from the data that, for example, academic system and language are intricately linked, and it is difficult at times to decide whether an observation relates more to the former or to the latter topic, as will be seen in the discussion about the issue of actively contributing to seminars.

In the context of higher-education mobility, it is perhaps to be expected that academic difficulties – and particularly language problems – feature prominently, confirming previous studies (Chataway and Berry, 1989; Opper et al. 1990; Brown 2008). Table 6.1 below shows the most prevalent sub-themes relating to the social and to the academic side of the students’ experience.

	Daniela	Ilaria	Pina	Lorenzo	Petra	Angela	Francesca	Valentina	Silvia	Paola	Emanuela	Chiara	Jack	Margherita	Miriam	Gioacchino	Juls	Giulia	Claudia	Marina	Federico
SOCIAL/PERSONAL EXPERIENCE																					
organising social life	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
obtaining emotional support	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
meeting local students	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
relationships with co-nationals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
relationships with other Erasmus students	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
international environment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
befriending classmates	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Accommodation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Weather	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
food and eating habits	✓		✓			✓		✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
new environment (city, campus, etc)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
feeling comfortable in the target language	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
instrumental use of language	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
lingua franca	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
speaking mother tongue	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
language as a barrier	✓				✓	✓		✓		✓			✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE																					
understanding the structure of lectures and seminars	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Workload	✓			✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
writing essays and other assignments, doing presentations and group work		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
relationships with teachers		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
understanding the credit system	✓				✓	✓				✓			✓						✓	✓	✓
learning agreement					✓	✓				✓	✓			✓				✓	✓		✓

	Daniela	Ilaria	Pina	Lorenzo	Petra	Angela	Francesca	Valentina	Silvia	Paola	Emanuela	Chiara	Jack	Margherita	Miriam	Gioacchino	Juls	Giulia	Claudia	Marina	Federico
Examinations	✓				✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓			✓					
content and level of courses	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
understanding the teachers and fellow students	✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			
actively contributing to seminars	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	
note taking					✓				✓				✓		✓	✓				✓	
different administrative system					✓				✓						✓	✓	✓	✓			
assistance and support from home institution			✓		✓										✓	✓					

Table 6.1 – Thematic prevalence

Although the table above indicates the issues mentioned most frequently by the students, it is important to remember that the individual differences in terms of how problematic these were, how long the difficulties lasted, the strategies used to overcome them, and the extent to which they affected other aspects of the experience or the students' ability to adapt to the new environment were significant. In any case, the focus of this study is not so much the frequency of these problems or of the obstacles presented to the participants, but rather the individual variations in how these difficulties were perceived and coped with.

The aim of this thematic analysis was to understand better the participants' experience of life and study abroad. These themes, together with the data obtained from the graphs, could then be read against the conceptual backdrop of Anderson's model of cross-cultural adaptation in order to shed light on the process of gradual adjustment that the students went through, identifying the obstacles that got in their way and the strategies they used to overcome these. I will therefore first provide a brief overview of each of the main themes that were derived from the data, which broadly correspond with those reported in the literature on student mobility (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Pearson-Evans, 2006). What I am interested in, initially, is to understand how the participants describe their experiences, what issues they bring up (both positive and negative), the problems they face but also the aspects that, in their opinion, do not constitute a difficulty. Following this overview, I will concentrate on two particular subthemes, one from the academic and one from the personal sphere, in order to identify some of the obstacles encountered by the students, as well as their response strategies. Although these are only two examples, I believe they illustrate well the concepts of obstacle, response and adjustment (Anderson, 1994) as understood in this study.

6.2.1 Themes relating to academic experience

6.2.1.1 Academic system

The three diagrams in this section (Academic system, Language and Administrative issues) illustrate the prevailing themes that emerged for the academic side of the experience.

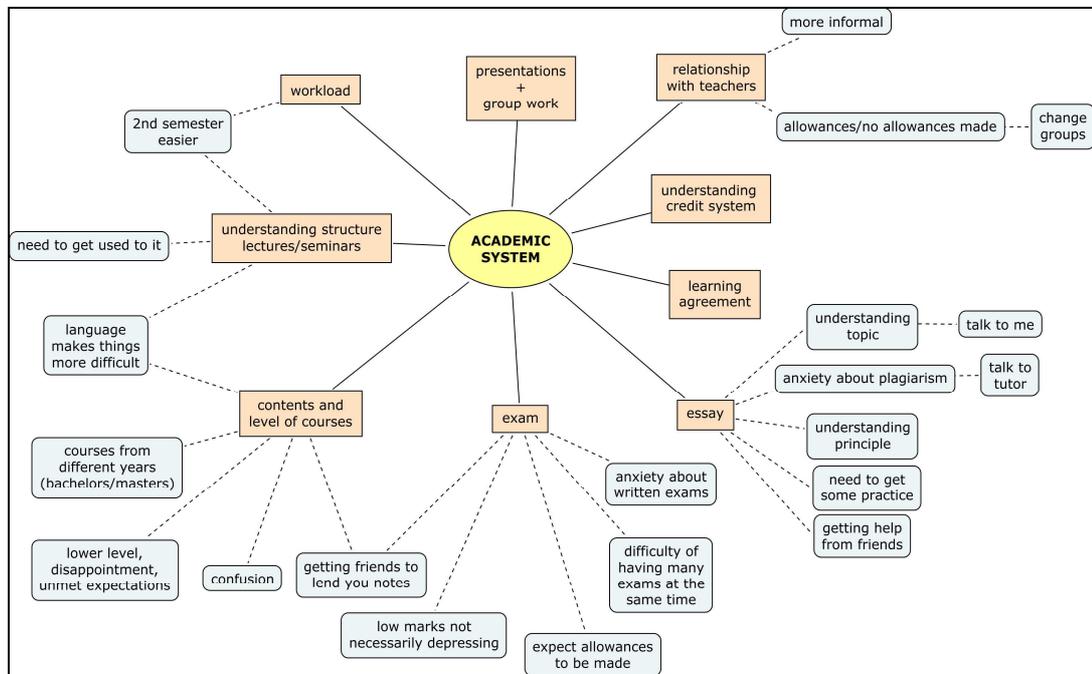


Fig. 6.17 – Academic system

Figure 6.17 shows those relating specifically to the academic system and the courses, and include:

i) Content and level of the courses

The choice of courses to be included in the learning agreement took place before departure, and was based on those offered by the host institution in the academic year preceding departure. This caused problems to a number of students, as they found that some of their choices had been cancelled and needed to be substituted.

Another important issue raised was the fact that the students were only allowed to choose courses on the basis of content rather than level as, in most cases, they had to be as similar as possible to the courses the students would have taken had they stayed at home. Therefore, some Master students had to choose options from

the Bachelors' curriculum, or were not allowed to opt for modules that were not offered in the home institution, which seemed to defeat the purpose behind the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), that of widening students' academic choices. Pina explained this problem very clearly:

I regret a little that for me the choice of courses was limited, because I had to take exactly the same as those offered in Italy. In fact, these two courses [the two she has chosen] were nothing special, I was forced to choose them, I can only pick one of my own choice, because I didn't find one exactly like the Italian one, and so I was free to choose what I wanted, just for my own interest. [...] Here there are a lot of courses, there is an entire degree course on renewable energy, *Sustainable Energy*, which of course isn't offered in Italy. But I can't pick those courses because in Italy they won't recognise them, because there isn't a similar course in Italy. So I do it for my own personal interest. This is a huge drawback of Erasmus as we understand it [i.e. in Italy], because I've heard that other students from other parts of Europe come here, they do a whole year and what is important is the number of credits achieved, not the subjects studied (14 Oct.).³⁴

Others were initially disappointed with the level of the courses offered, although some still enjoyed the work they were asked to do. A few found that limited linguistic proficiency impeded understanding of content (Paola, Angela, Daniela, Valentina, Petra, Federico). Although this relates to language issues, it is evident here how complex it is to attempt to divide themes into separate categories.

³⁴ Mi dispiace un po' che per me la scelta di corsi sia stata vincolata perché dovevo prendere esattamente uguali a quelli italiani. Infatti questi due corsi sono andati un po' così, ero obbligata a sceglierli, uno solo posso scegliere come voglio io, perché non ne ho trovato esattamente come quello italiano, e quindi per uno ero libera di scegliere quello che voglio, solo per piacere personale. [...] qua ci sono un sacco di corsi, c'è un intero corso di laurea sulle energie rinnovabili, *Sustainable Energy*, e in Italia naturalmente non c'è. Io comunque non posso prendere quelle materie perché in Italia non me ne riconoscerebbero, perché non c'è un'analoga materia in Italia. Quindi lo faccio per piacere personale. È un grossissimo neo dell'Erasmus come la intendiamo noi, perché comunque ho sentito che altri ragazzi in altre parti d'Europa vengono, fanno un anno intero e quello che è importante è il numero di crediti ha raggiunto, non le materie che fanno.

As emerged in Chapter 5, a number of participants had high expectations regarding courses. The disappointment felt when these were unmet can be seen as an obstacle in the process of adapting to the academic environment abroad.

ii) Understanding the structure of lectures and seminars

The structure of lectures in most host institutions was similar to that of lectures in Italian universities, so these posed no problems for the participants. However, the seminar, which is today a common feature of most HE systems, both in the UK and in continental Europe, is still rare in Italy. Many participants approached seminars with some apprehension, and were surprised that their own opinions were valued. This will be discussed in greater detail below, but difficulties in this area were tied to the students' lack of confidence in their ability to express their own views in the foreign language.

iii) Workload

Italian university students often concentrate their study in the period just before finals. Having to spread their workload throughout the course, prepare for seminars and write regular assignments required new time-management strategies, or rather the application of approaches until then used only at school. Many felt that the workload was heavier in the first than in the second semester, which may indicate simply that they had learned to organise better their time and work.

In the previous chapter, the issue of time-management was never mentioned among the students' expectations. This may be an area in which awareness-raising before departure may help Erasmus students to anticipate some potential problems and develop strategies before these are needed.

iv) Preparing presentations and doing group work

The difficulties here were similar to those mentioned for seminars and workload. These are types of work students in Italian universities are seldom, if ever, asked

to do, and entailed, first and foremost, an understanding of what was required of them. In any case, all of them felt positive about these experiences, as Pina observed:

A very different style. Also, here they rely heavily on group work, on projects, all those things which in Italy we absolutely don't do, so I've taken it as a new stimulus, I'm glad because I'm experiencing new things, which was the reason which I came here ... Yes, not to do the same usual lessons that I could have done in Italy (23 Sept).³⁵

When it came to group-work, a practice that Italian students are not particularly familiar with, as it is not a requirement at any level of education in Italy, the presence of other foreign students was perceived positively. When required to get into groups, students generally tend to be drawn to fellow nationals, and these participants were no exception. Even when co-nationals made a conscious effort to work separately, they seemed perfectly happy to work with other foreign students. If the target language was used as a lingua franca by the group members, the fact of not having local students in their groups was not necessarily perceived as a drawback. It could be argued that, for those with a lower level of proficiency, this situation may prove more productive, as these students feel the context to be less challenging, while it still offers them the chance to develop their language skills through collaboration with more capable peers. According to Vygotsky (1978)'s concept of ZPD (“Zone of Proximal Development”), learning takes place if what needs to be learned is relatively close to the level of development of the learner. In this sense, then, from a linguistic point of view, the choice by less proficient speakers to work with other foreign students rather than with native speakers may indeed be a successful strategy.

v) Relationship with teachers

³⁵ Uno stile molto diverso. Poi qui si basano molto sul lavoro di gruppo, sui progetti, tutte queste cose che in Italia assolutamente non abbiamo, quindi l'ho preso un po' come uno stimolo nuovo, mi fa piacere perché vedo qualcosa di nuovo, che era poi la ragione per cui ero partita... Sì, non fare le solite lezioni che avrei potuto fare comunque anche in Italia.

In different countries the relationship with teachers shows varying degrees of formality which requires understanding and sensitive management. The students who sojourned in the UK, Scandinavia and Spain were generally pleasantly surprised that the relationships with their tutors were more informal than in Italy. Some felt that this had a positive impact on the atmosphere of seminars and tutorials. A small number had problems with teachers, whom they accused of being unhelpful.

vi) Issues around the credit system and learning agreement

These occurred mostly in the initial weeks – or even months – of the sojourn, and were caused mostly by courses being cancelled and learning agreements having to be altered, as well as by the fact that the credits given to the courses in the host institution were different from those required by the home university.

vii) Essays and other assignments

The issues here were similar to those raised under the “presentations and group work” heading. As mentioned above, not only is the discussion of personal opinions not required in Italy, but it is even viewed with disapproval by teachers in general, whether in secondary or higher education. For this reason, some students were unaware, at least initially, that in some countries this was a requirement, and were disappointed with their results, which they attributed to their inability to paraphrase correctly the authors they had studied, rather than to their failure to provide their own evaluations of those authors or of the issues discussed. Once they understood what they were required to do, these students were positive about their experience.

viii) Examinations

The main difficulty here was associated with written examinations, seldom done in Italy, particularly in the arts degree courses. As mentioned previously, at university level most end-of-course examinations are oral, and these are generally considered easier than written ones, as the candidate is able to respond to the

examiner's feedback. Linguistic difficulties were seen as the chief source of the problems, although these also affected oral examinations, causing in some cases an emotional block.

6.2.1.2 Language for academic purposes

The themes relating to language are illustrated in Fig. 6.18 below.

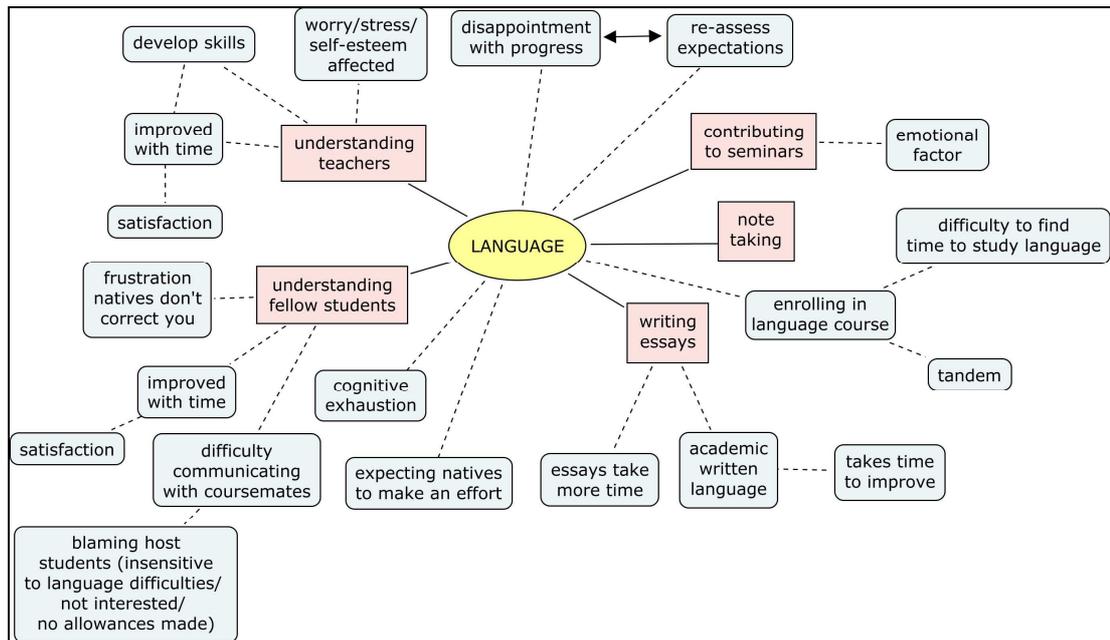


Fig.6.18 – Language for academic purposes

The issues mentioned by the participants included:

ix) Understanding teachers and fellow students

The main problems mentioned here were understanding spoken language, particularly of local peers, who tended to show less communicative awareness than their teachers. While some of the participants had anticipated difficulties understanding teachers during the pre-departure interviews, none had expected the same problems with peers, probably because students do not usually speak during lessons in Italy. This caused anxiety in some students, such as Valentina, as they were worried of losing face if they had to ask for repetition too often. Few students felt that their teachers were not ready to make an effort to be understood,

and Petra attributed this to a characteristic of the Germans rather than of a single teacher:

In another course, we Erasmus students don't understand anything. So the teacher has established rules for the exam of Erasmus students, but at the same time, it seemed that she didn't care that we were there ... Yes, I regret not being able to understand more. The Germans have the mentality that if you want to participate, you need to adapt (12 Feb).³⁶

However, for all the participants, comprehension greatly improved with time. As mentioned above, this is another area where expectation management may help students anticipate linguistic obstacles and plan strategies that could help them adapt better to the new environment.

x) Actively contributing to seminars

The main difficulty reported by the students was, at least initially, a concern resulting partly from the previous point: when students were intent on deciphering what was being said, they were unable to concentrate their effort on gathering their ideas and finding a suitable way of articulating them. These difficulties will be analysed in greater detail below.

xi) Note taking

As above, note taking was particularly problematic due to the linguistic difficulty of either having to take notes in the foreign language, or having to translate what was being said in order to take notes in the L1. Jack, for instance, explained the problem from his point of view:

³⁶ In un altro corso, gli Erasmus non capiamo niente. Quindi l'insegnante ha stabilito regole per l'esame degli Erasmus, ma allo stesso tempo sembrava che a lei non interessasse che noi fossimo lì... Sì, mi è dispiaciuto non riuscire a capire di più. I tedeschi hanno la mentalità che se vuoi partecipare, devi adeguarti.

The beginning was difficult, not so much due to my level of English, because I understand. The problem is to understand, write, memorize, and synthesise in English (12 Oct.).³⁷

In some cases the students succeeded in convincing classmates (both Erasmus and local students) to share their notes with them (Jack, Silvia, Paola), though a few complained that local students were reluctant to lend their notes:

German students are very competitive, they won't lend you their notes. And they're not particularly sensitive towards those who have difficulty with the language (Petra, 17 Dec.).³⁸

In any case, all the participants agreed that their note-taking skills improved with time, and none mentioned the problem in the second semester.

xii) Writing essays and other assignments.

As emerged in the previous chapter, written assignments were expected to be challenging from a linguistic point of view, and the less proficient participants found academic writing very time-consuming (which made good time-management all the more crucial). The main issues raised concerned understanding the question as well as the structure of the essay, being aware of register, and having the necessary specific lexis. Although the participants were familiar with essay writing (a requirement at secondary school level, but not at university), they were not used to critically assessing a view or stating their own opinions on a topic, as this is not a requirement in Italy. Some, notably those spending their Erasmus exchange in the UK, also mentioned the problem of understanding what exactly constituted plagiarism. Jack summarised these points in the following comment:

³⁷ L'inizio è stato difficile, non tanto per il livello di inglese, perché capisco. Ma è capire, scrivere, memorizzare, e la difficoltà di sintetizzare in inglese.

³⁸ Gli studenti tedeschi sono molto competitive, non ti prestano gli appunti. E non hanno una grande sensibilità verso chi ha difficoltà con la lingua.

I don't understand the idea of writing essays at home, you could ask someone to correct them for you [...] They have terrorised us about plagiarism, but for me bibliographic references are something new, because I have always done oral exams, so essays are new for me. [...] Back home our opinion is not required, on the contrary, it's considered that you're going off the track, and the teacher stops you (12 Oct).³⁹

In most cases, the problem was dealt with by seeking information and advice from teachers and peers, and by trial and error. Most students felt their ability to write essays and assignments improved with time, and results seemed to confirm this view.

6.2.1.3 Administration

Finally, Fig. 6.19 illustrates the themes relating to 'administration'.

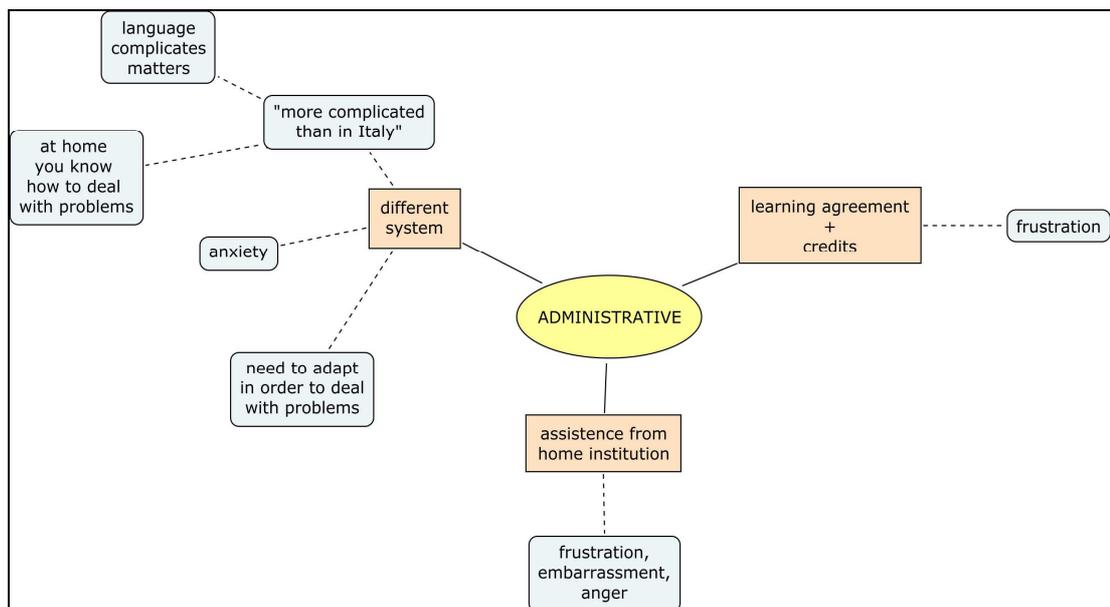


Fig. 6.19 - Administration

The main difficulties mentioned concerned:

³⁹ Non capisco gli essay scritti a casa, potresti farteli correggere da altri [...] ci hanno fatto del terrorismo sul plagio, ma per me I riferimenti bibliografici sono una novità, perché io ho sempre dato esami orali, quindi l'essay è nuovo per me. [...] da noi la propria opinione non è richiesta, anzi si considera che stai andando fuori pista, e il prof ti blocca.

xiii) Learning agreement and credit system.

The issues raised here had to do primarily with difficulties completing or changing learning agreements, particularly when courses were cancelled or were different from the previous year (the LA is completed the previous academic year based on the courses offered at that time). Another topic discussed concerned the non correspondence of the number of credits obtained by similar courses in the home and host institutions, which jeopardised the chance of exams being validated back home.

Petra and Claudia were particularly confused by the German system:

Petra: I've had a lot of problems - and so have other students - understanding how the university system works here. In the sense that they don't have CTS (Credit Transfer System).

Ana: In fact, I was told by another girl who's in Berlin, that they have credits that start from a minimum, and depending on what you do ...

Petra: That's right, that's right ... if you attend classes, if you participate actively, it's all pretty vague. And above all it's quite difficult to find out how many credits you'll manage to get. So I've also had a lot of trouble changing the learning agreement. In my choices, I followed my nose, so to say (20 Oct).⁴⁰

And a month later (12 Nov.) she concluded bitterly: "I hate to think that I won't be able to take some exams not because I don't have the skills but for bureaucratic reasons".⁴¹

⁴⁰ Petra: ho avuto invece un sacco di problemi – e anche altri ragazzi comunque – nel capire come funziona l'ordinamento universitario qui. Nel senso che non hanno i CTS.

Ana: Infatti, mi ha detto un'altra ragazza che è a Berlino, che hanno questi crediti che partono da un minimo e a seconda di quello che uno fa...

Petra: Esatto, esatto... se frequenti le lezioni, se partecipi attivamente, è tutto abbastanza labile. E soprattutto è abbastanza difficile scoprire quanti crediti si andranno a fare. Quindi anche a modificare il 'learning agreement' ho avuto tanta difficoltà. Ho scelto un po' a naso, se vogliamo.

⁴¹ E' brutto pensare che non potrò dare esami non perché non ho le capacità ma per questioni burocratiche.

xiv) Different administrative system

Having to deal with a different system in a foreign language caused difficulties particularly in the initial period, and a few participants gave vent to their frustration when they felt that staff in the host institution were being unhelpful. Petra again expressed her views on this issue:

According to them, they are extremely efficient, but they can't understand anything that diverges from type [...] it's frustrating, because we are treated like the German students, but they have no difficulty ... (12 Nov)⁴²

These views were expressed by a number of participants, although the opinion of the majority was that the administrative systems of the host universities were in fact more efficient than that of their home institution.

In this area, the role played by other Erasmus students in the same institution in terms of sharing information was crucial.

xv) assistance and support from home institution

As mentioned above, many of the administrative difficulties were perceived by the students as deriving not so much from the host institution, as from a lack of support from the home university. Some participants felt they were in a kind of limbo, and didn't belong to either institution. Shortly after arrival in London, Gioacchino complained during his first monthly interview:

The problem is that when I arrived in London I discovered after the enrolment I had a clash between the ... my timetable. So they automatically... they changed me an exam, and gave me another one. So now I'm dealing with this problem. And the problem is that now in Bologna there is no-one who is following me in any

⁴² Secondo loro, sono il massimo dell'efficienza, ma non concepiscono quello che esce dai loro schemi [...] è frustrante, perché siamo trattati come I ragazzi tedeschi, ma loro non fanno fatica...

way. I'm really, you know, upset about this. When I come back... I go back in Italy I will speak with the teacher who is in charge of this Erasmus exchange, because it's not the behaviour to have with a person who is going to study for an year abroad, because, you know, not even an e-mail just to know if everything is going all right, nothing at all, but at the same time he's earning more because he is in charge of this Erasmus exchange. [...] It's not acceptable behaviour, even though also the other people who attended the Erasmus last year told me the same thing, you know – that this teacher is not a good one. And you know, this is the kind of thing... this stuff make me really embarrassed in a kind of way because, you know, when I speak here with the teacher everything is so clear, they are really friendly, they try to solve every kind of problem, this is the most... the bigger difference that I realise between the Italian and the UK universities...(6 Oct)

As can be seen from the brief list above, the sub-themes relating to the academic experience often fitted into more than one category: for example, in the participants' opinion, actively contributing to seminars was affected by their understanding (or lack of it) of a different academic system, of what is expected from them in terms of preparation for the seminar and of the type of contribution that is considered valuable, as well as by the ability of the tutor, and of peers, to make a particular student feel valued in the group. However, the students' participation is usually also affected by language issues: the ability to understand peers as well as the tutor, the student's linguistic skills and confidence to make valuable oral contributions to the discussion, the anxiety deriving from the awareness that their participation will count towards the final assessment. This example will be discussed further below.

When analysing the issues raised by the students, it becomes clear that not all are specific to study abroad: some relate in fact to the experience of entering a new academic environment (similar, therefore, to the experience of moving from secondary school to university), of leaving home and of moving to a new city. Others, on the other hand, are specific to a cross-cultural situation (Furnham and

Bochner, 1986). This, however, does not imply that the students do not draw from previous experiences of change in their home environment in order to cope with difficulties abroad. Later in this chapter, when I analyse the strategies used by the participants to overcome adjustment obstacles, I will discuss this point further.

6.2.2 Themes relating to social/personal experience

In the sections above, I have presented the main themes relating to the academic experience of studying abroad that resulted from the thematic analysis to which the data was subjected. Here, I will turn to the personal/social side of the experience, which has been divided into the three broad categories that appear in the weekly diary-tables: friends and social life; daily life; language for socialisation. These will be dealt with in turns, and summarised in the three different graphs included in this section.

6.2.2.1 Friends and social life

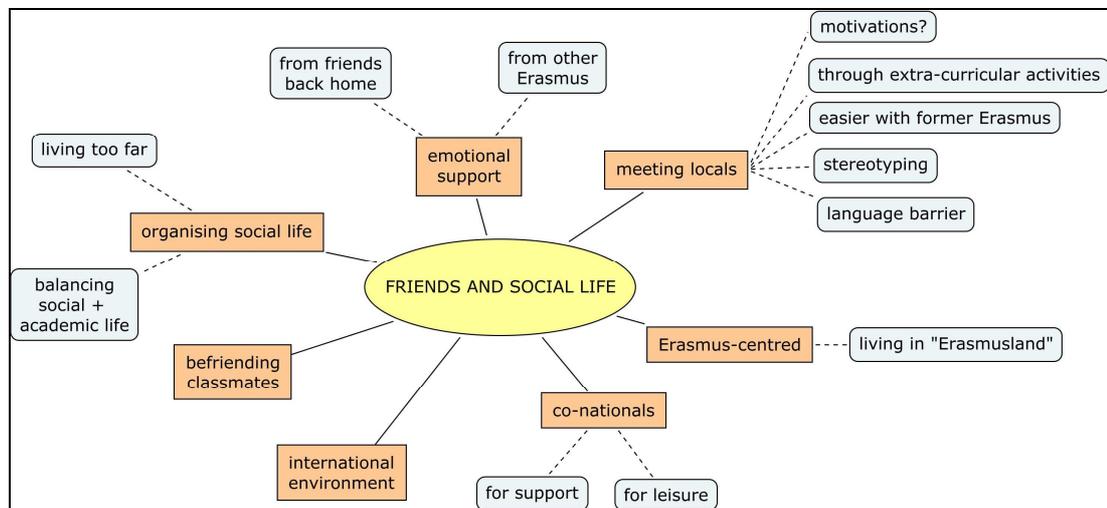


Fig. 6.20 – Friends and social life

Figure 6.20 shows some of the issues mentioned by the participants that affected their friendship patterns and social lives. These were:

- xvi) Organising their social life

Organising one's free time is not a problem limited to Erasmus students, but one which concerns most young people moving away from home to university. This new independence, combined with environments especially designed to encourage meeting people (shared accommodation, campuses, student societies and sports clubs, etc.) place socialisation at the centre of the student experience.

For Erasmus students, the initiatives organised by associations such as the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) or by the International Offices in host universities, ensure that, from the day of arrival into the new environment, the students can start building their new social networks.

Here, the university has a welcoming committee for international students, which for the first month, so from the week I arrived, August 25, until last week, organized events aimed to get us to know the city and what it could offer, and enable all the exchange students to meet each other. So every time I met new people, even people who are in the same courses as me, actually, mostly people who are in the same courses, but that, when I walk across the campus, I meet and greet, and that's very nice because ... well, you can stop and talk to someone for ten minutes as you pass by, it's very pleasant (Pina, 23 Sept).⁴³

Jack also pointed out how, for a shy person like him, organised events were very helpful. And Marina, echoing many of the participants, observed: "You are alone, without a family and you need to create a new family for yourself." Although many of the participants reported moving away from the original Erasmus group they joined in the first days, and organising their own entertainment as the sojourn progressed, the social aspect remained central to the study abroad

⁴³ Qui l'università ha questo comitato di accoglienza per gli studenti internazionali, che per tutto il primo mese, quindi dalla settimana che sono arrivata, il 25 agosto, fino alla settimana scorsa, hanno organizzato eventi che miravano a far conoscere la città e ciò che poteva offrire, a far conoscere tutti gli studenti di scambio tra di loro. Quindi ogni volta ho conosciuto persone nuove, anche persone che non fanno i miei stessi corsi, anzi, soprattutto persone che non fanno i miei corsi, che comunque quando cammino per il campus incontro e saluto, e quindi è molto carino perché... insomma, ti puoi fermare a parlare con qualcuno anche solo 10 minuti così passando, fa piacere.

experience. For all of them there was a sense of a chance in a lifetime which had already emerged during the pre-departure interviews, and some felt they were almost on a long holiday abroad – a study holiday, perhaps – or a period of detachment from ordinary life, which needed to be experienced to the full.

This, of course, required that students learned to manage their time well. The expression “mi devo dare una regolata!” (I have to get my act together) was particularly frequent in the first few weeks, and gave an indication of the students’ awareness that they could not carry on at the same pace for the rest of their sojourn. Quieter times corresponded to pre-exam weeks, when most students – both foreign and locals – concentrated on their studies. However, judging from Facebook postings, in some cases socialisation simply moved from the bar or club to the library.

xvii) Obtaining emotional support

The main function of the new social networks was to obtain emotional support. Many participants commented on the ease with which friendships were formed at the beginning of their stay, due to the fact that everybody felt the same need (see also Papatsiba, 2006 and de Federico, 2008). Although initially many relied on co-nationals for help and support, the majority of the participants primarily turned to other international (mostly Erasmus) students – either flatmates or coursemates.

I am very angry, because the [academic] credit system here is incomprehensible [...] You ask the teachers for help, but everyone tells you something different ... I found comfort talking to other Erasmus participants. (Petra, 12 Nov) ⁴⁴

Within a few weeks, half of the participants had developed meaningful friendships with non co-nationals, mostly other international students.

⁴⁴ Sono molto arrabbiata, perché il sistema dei crediti qui è incomprensibile [...] chiedi aiuto ai prof, ma ognuno ti dice una cosa diversa... mi sono confortata con gli altri Erasmus.

But social and emotional support can also come from pre-existing social networks, thanks in particular to technology and low-cost flights. Many students reported ‘Skyping’ family and friends back home on a regular basis, as often as several times a week, particularly in the initial period. Jack remembers the first night in his new room:

“On Friday I packed my things to move into the new house, it was horrible. In my room there was a bed with only a mattress, and two cupboards. It was evening, I was tired ... so I called my mother. That made me feel better” (12 Oct.)⁴⁵

But rather than it being a drawback, they all felt positive about this possibility, as it enabled them to obtain the emotional support they needed while they found their bearings in the new environment. In addition, several of them returned home regularly, for a friend’s birthday party, a wedding, or simply to ‘touch base’. Again, none of them felt this prevented them from settling in the new environment, and some even admitted that they would not have been able to adjust without this support. At the same time, they also felt more relaxed by being able to reassure parents and friends back home that they were well. The comment by Jack and Ilaria below echo those of the majority of the participants.

I don’t miss Italy [...] I’ve got used to being here. I’m in touch with my friends almost every day on Skype and Facebook, so don’t feel the distance, I don’t feel nostalgia perhaps of Bologna, of the square, of Via Indipendenza, the porticos ... all those places. (Jack, 11 Nov.)⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Venerdì ho fatto le valigie per andare nella casa nuova, è stato brutto. In camera mia c’era il letto col materasso e basta, e due armadi. Era sera, ero stanco... e quindi ho chiamato mia madre. Dopo sono stato bene.

⁴⁶ Non sento nostalgia per l’Italia [...] Mi sono abituato a essere qua. Gli amici li sento quasi tutti I giorni su Skype e Facebook, quindi non li sento distanti, non ho nostalgia.... Forse di Bologna, della piazza, di Via Indipendenza, dei portici... quei luoghi lì...

There have been a few problems along the way. But just the fact that with Skype I can be in touch with my family every day, I can see my boyfriend [who was doing an Erasmus exchange in Paris] almost every day, I don't feel lonely ... (Ilaria, 21 Sept)⁴⁷

Emotional support can also come in the form of parcels sent from home (Penman & Omar, 2011), with warm clothes, food, a coffee-maker. Surrounding oneself with familiar objects is also a way of making one's new surroundings familiar, of defeating the feeling of "spaesamento", literally of feeling lost in a new country.

xviii) Meeting local students

Although this point will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, it is important to remember that the difficulty of meeting local students has been the focus of much literature on adaptation (Bochner et al, 1977, Barker et al, 1991; Zheng & Berry, 1991; Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Brown 2009d; Hendrickson et al, 2011; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Gareis 2000; Gareis et al 2011). In the case of this cohort, expectations were varied: some anticipated problems, mostly due to lack of confidence in their linguistic skills, while others were positive about their social skills and the belief that Italians were generally seen as friendly people abroad. The initial impact was hard for most of the participants, and the responsibility for this difficulty was placed primarily on the local students, who were varyingly categorised as shy and reserved, uninterested, cold or even arrogant and xenophobic. However, as the sojourn proceeded, friendships with local students became relatively frequent, and several of them (Chiara, Emanuela, Petra, Claudia, Jack and Juls) built meaningful friendships with local students.

xix) Relationships with other Erasmus students

As mentioned above, the functions of the local Erasmus group were to provide support during the initial period, but also entertainment and companionship.

⁴⁷ Ci sono stati parecchi incidenti di percorso. Ma solo il fatto che con Skype riesco a sentire I miei tutti I giorni, riesco a vedere il mio moroso [who was doing an Erasmus in Paris] quasi tutti I giorni, non mi sento sola...

Another important role was to provide language practice in what was felt by some to be a safer context, that of the lingua franca. For some, like Jack, this was the first experience of the use of L2 (in this case English) as a lingua franca:

The other day I went out with a German guy. It felt strange, but I was very satisfied [...] I was surprised that he wanted to talk with me, as I don't speak English as well as him (12 Oct).⁴⁸

By the end of the sojourn, most participants numbered foreign students among their closest friends (Miriam, Angela, Ilaria, Daniela, Pina, Jack, Gioacchino, Valentina, Marina, Juls and Margherita). As mentioned in the previous chapter, for many of them this, rather than meeting local students, was one of their objectives in going abroad.

xx) Relationships with co-nationals

Although most of the participants were aware of the negative effects of remaining in a group of co-national friends, one is almost inevitably attracted to people who speak one's own language. Valentina recalled, for instance, the relief she felt at finding other Italians in the hostel where she had to stay for the first night, before she was allowed into her room in the student residence. It suddenly made her feel "at home", while being over 2000 km away from it.

Gradually, however, most of them moved away from their co-national group (while perhaps retaining one or two closer friends), mainly for practical reasons: they were not getting enough language practice. Jack's comment, made three months after his arrival, is representative of this:

At first I could not tear myself away from the group of Italians, but in the beginning it is normal. After a month, I said: "I am not speaking in English, I need to get my act together and stop

⁴⁸ L'altro giorno sono uscito con un ragazzo Tedesco. Mi faceva strano, ma ero molto soddisfatto [...] Mi sono stupito che lui volesse parlare con me, che non parlo inglese come lui.

worrying.” Otherwise, you keep procrastinating and you don’t get anywhere, you only postpone the problem (11 Dec.).⁴⁹

Limiting one’s contact with co-nationals can be easier if one does not share accommodation with them. A small number, including Ilaria, shared a house or lived in the same corridor as other Italians. For her, however, this was not a disadvantage: if on the one hand it limited the amount of L2 she used, this was well compensated by the emotional support and friendship she received from her housemate:

In a different situation I wouldn’t have wanted to share a house with an Italian, because you use the language less, more Italian and less English, but we had problems with the landlords, so having someone with whom you can express yourself well and understand each other straight away was easy ... and better. And I'm happy because we’re building a beautiful friendship [...] I’ve never wanted to go back home, but I wish I had ended up in a different house. But now things are better, by being able to share with another person, we laugh about it a lot, we need to in order to defuse the tension. It’s crucial (21 Sept).⁵⁰

Valentina made a similar comment about the only Italian student living in her corridor at the university residence:

In any case, I got on well with that guy, he’s almost a point of reference, when you're tired or you feel discouraged, having a

⁴⁹ All’inizio non riuscivo a staccarmi dal gruppo di italiani, ma all’inizio è normale. Dopo un mese, ho detto: “non sto parlando in inglese, vediamo di darci una scrollata e fregarcene.” Se no si tende a procrastinare e non risolti niente, spostati solo il problema più avanti.

⁵⁰ In una situazione diversa mi sarebbe dispiaciuto stare con un’italiana a casa, perché si parla meno la lingua, più italiano e meno inglese, ma abbiamo avuto problemi con i proprietari di casa, per cui avere una persona con cui poter esprimermi bene e capirci subito è stato facile... e meglio. E sono contenta perché sta nascendo una bella amicizia.[...] Non ho mai desiderato di tornare a casa, ma sì di essere capitata in un’altra casa. Ma adesso va meglio, col fatto di poter condividere con un’altra persona, ci ridiamo molto sopra, ci serve per sdrammatizzare. E’ fondamentale.

person on whom to rely, with whom you can speak and who can understand you ...⁵¹

...although she continued:

...however, lately I've also become good friends with a Chinese girl who lives on the same floor, very friendly. A few evenings ago we had a sushi night, so to say, and this evening we ate together, the Sardinian guy, the Chinese girl and I. (7 Oct)⁵²

For her, co-national and international friendships were not mutually exclusive.

xxi) Living in an international environment

From the pre-departure interviews, the idea that emerged was that most students expected to find in their host university an international environment where they could meet people from all over the world. Although for a few the priority was to get to know the local country and culture, for the large majority of them the international dimension was crucial (Montgomery, 2010). This was an aspect that all the participants were satisfied with. The implications of this finding will be examined in detail in the discussion chapter.

xxii) Befriending classmates

The last issue under this first heading regards the relationship with classmates. Although this point was briefly discussed under the academic experience, classmates can also become friends, and therefore come under the social/personal aspects of the

⁵¹ Comunque mi sono trovata bene con questo ragazzo, è quasi un punto di riferimento, quando sei stanca o ti senti scoraggiata, avere una persona su cui poi fare affidamento, con cui poi parlare e farti capire...

⁵² comunque ultimamente ho legato anche molto con una ragazza cinese che sta nello stesso piano, molto simpatica. Comunque l'altra sera abbiamo fatto serata a base di sushi, per dire, e questa sera abbiamo mangiato insieme io, questo ragazzo sardo e la ragazza cinese.

sojourn. As mentioned above, getting to know peers seems to be easier if these are other Erasmus or international students:

My group is composed of five persons, all classmates. What has brought us together is the problem with the rest of the group.
(Silvia, 1 Dec.)⁵³

Only Marina succeeded in turning her group of classmates, consisting of international non-Erasmus and local Danish students, into her group of friends.

I no longer frequent Erasmus students, but only the course group. Our group remains the same throughout the day, one class after another. It's also important that in the group there are two or three people who are very active. I think I'm the only Erasmus student to have this relationship, though! (12 May)⁵⁴

This partly confirms De Federico's findings (2008) regarding the difficulty of Erasmus students in finding friends among coursemates, compared with the context of the students' accommodation.

6.2.2.2 Daily life

In terms of the daily life (Fig. 6.21) many difficulties were typical of students who move away from home for the first time and need to get used to looking after themselves, while others were specific to international students.

⁵³ Il mio gruppo è composto da cinque persone, tutte compagni di corso. Ci ha unito il problema con il resto del gruppo.

⁵⁴ Tendo a non frequentare più gli Erasmus, ma solo il gruppo del corso. Il nostro gruppo rimane lo stesso durante tutta la giornata, una classe dopo l'altra. E' anche importante che nel gruppo ci sono due o tre persone molto attive. Penso di essere l'unica Erasmus ad avere questo rapporto, però!

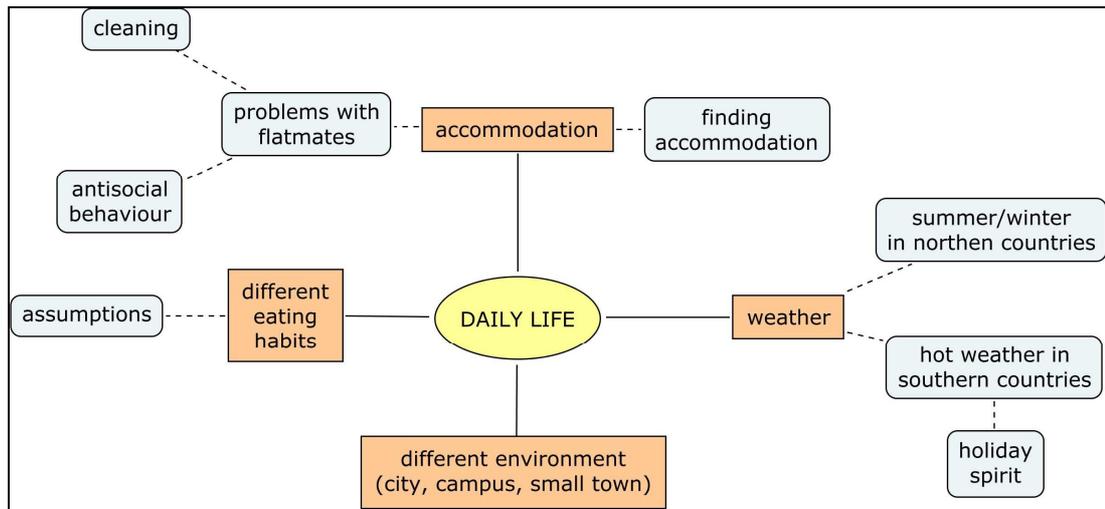


Fig 6.21 – Daily life

In this section, the prevalent themes regarded:

xxiii) Accommodation

Understandably, this was one of the topics mentioned most frequently. The type of accommodation ranged from shared houses and flats, to university accommodation in hall of residence with a varying mixture of host and international students.

The hall of residence with a shared kitchen was undoubtedly the setting that most encouraged socialisation, while reducing the chances of conflicts typical of sharing a house. In this setting, the kitchen often became the hub of the residence, particularly at mealtimes.

Valentina recalled her first impression of the kitchen:

The initial impact of the student residence was great from the first evening, as I had to have dinner ... because here there are 15 rooms in each corridor with a common kitchen ... The impact was arriving in the kitchen, and the first people I met were a Pakistani, a Pole ... so it was strange, one thing is to imagine such a scene, another thing is to actually experience it, because I expected there would be situations like that, but obviously it feels strange ... it was great because I found immediately a friendly

atmosphere, gathering together around a table for tea, cakes, a chat ... the way the hall is structured is brilliant, because, as there is a kitchen on each floor, often crowded with people, there is the opportunity to meet people from the other floors, and that's nice. Often in a day I spend no more than five minutes in my room, or I just go there to sleep, because either we're around, or in the kitchen. For example, if you have to prepare yourself lunch, instead of one hour you end up spending two, because in the meantime you chat with one person, then with another, and it takes you twice as long to express yourself in another language. (7 Oct.)⁵⁵

The kitchen then becomes the meeting place par excellence, partly due to the importance attached to food and eating rituals. And nowhere do these rituals become more evident than when others don't respect them. Coming from a country where meals are almost sacred, many of the participants sojourning in northern countries felt puzzled by some students' behaviours. Pina expressed it well in the exchange below:

... let's say there is no communication, in the sense that, like, I never see the Swedish guy, he never leaves his room, and the two Chinese are clearly a couple ... in short, they are always together and speak in Chinese, so it's particularly difficult to interact. And the concept of home here is very different from the way I see it. The kitchen is shared, but it's used only to prepare the meal, after

⁵⁵ il primo impatto dello studentato è stato bello fin dalla prima sera, perché dovendo cenare ... qui ci sono 15 stanze per ogni corridoio con una cucina comune... L'impatto è stato arrivare in cucina, e le prime persone che ho incontrato sono state un pakistano, un polacco... quindi è stato strano, un conto è immaginarsi una scena del genere, un conto è proprio viverla, perché già supponevo che ci sarebbero state situazioni del genere, però ovviamente ti fa strano... è stato bello perché ho trovato fin da subito un ambiente conviviale, trovarsi intorno a un tavolo a prendere un tè, dolci, parlare,... per come è strutturato studentato è geniale, perché comunque, col fatto che c'è una cucina per ogni piano, spesso affollata di gente, c'è la possibilità di conoscere gente anche degli altri piani, e questo è bello. Molte volte, in una giornata entro solo cinque minuti in camera, oppure solo per dormire, perché o si sta in giro, oppure in cucina. Per esempio se ti devi preparare il pranzo invece di un'ora ti vanno via due ore, perché nel frattempo hai da parlare con uno, con l'altro, e hai bisogno del doppio del tempo per esprimerti in un'altra lingua.

you've prepared your food, you take it to your room and eat it there. So there are no moments of sharing, of being together...

Ana: So you don't even eat together ...

Pina: No. In fact, that's something that, the first few days, left me really confused, I... well, it's unheard of, really! (23 Sept)⁵⁶

Petra pointed out the same habit in her student residence in Germany, which resulted in foreign students eating together.

Our group in the student residence is Italian, German and French. But the Germans cook and then eat in their room, so it's just us foreign students who eat together... (12 Nov)⁵⁷

Other problems concerning the daily management of the accommodation were related to household chores, and primarily to doing the cleaning, with different standards of hygiene, and with noisy neighbours. Many of these issues are common to students moving away from home to go to university, even if they stay in their own country.

xxiv) Weather

Although the weather was a frequent topic of conversation, both for students who were sojourning in colder regions like Scotland or Scandinavia, and for those who were enjoying much warmer environments (Southern Spain, Cyprus), none of those who suffered most from severe weather were so affected as to jeopardise their sojourn abroad.

⁵⁶ Pina: diciamo che non c'è alcuna comunicazione, nel senso che, tipo, lo svedese non lo vedo proprio, non esce mai dalla sua camera, i due cinesi chiaramente essendo fidanzati ... insomma, se ne stanno sempre tra di loro e parlano in cinese, quindi diventa ancora più difficile interagire. Poi qua la casa è molto diversa da come la intendo io. La cucina è in comune ma solo per preparare il pranzo, dopo una volta che uno si è preparato il piatto se lo porta in camera e se lo mangia lì. Quindi momenti di condivisione non ce ne sono.

Ana: Quindi non si mangia neanche in comune...

Pina: No. Infatti, è una cosa che a me i primi giorni ha lasciato veramente stranita, ma io una cosa del genere non si è mai vista, voglio dire!

⁵⁷ Il gruppo, nello studentato, è italo-tedesco-francese. Ma i tedeschi cucinano e poi mangiano in camera, quindi mangiamo insieme gli stranieri.

xxv) Different environment

As happens when one moves to any new environment, getting used to moving around, learning where to go and what places to avoid in order to stay safe, or the potential and limitations of the place take time. Consequently, Paola, Silvia and Angela felt concerned for their safety when they had to return home in the evening, Valentina and Daniela learned the limitations of a small campus in Sweden or Norway when winter set in, Juls had to get used to going out in spite of the rain in Wales, Petra learned to enjoy a small provincial town in Germany which offered the advantage of easily bumping into people she knew, Claudia gradually accepted the chaos of a city like Berlin, which on the other hand offered her the cultural and social experiences she had dreamed of in her small provincial hometown, and Ilaria and Chiara understood that an unpleasant experience like having one's bag stolen or losing one's identity card can be emotionally much more challenging in a new environment than back home.

For most students, the stay was too short for the new environment to stop being “new”. Some reported that they “felt at home”, in the sense that they were familiar with the town or city, that they could find their way around. But “home” has a different meaning, which, according to Silvia, takes much longer to build.

“Bologna is 'home', this is not my home, I came here to study” – she reported in December. And in February she added – “I like it here, but it is not my home, I don't feel at home [...] I lack a daily routine, it's like being on holiday [...] For those who are elsewhere, in small towns, it's is different, they recognize people around. Here when we go out, we always go to different places [...] If I worked here, it would be different. I have settled, but it's not a city where I'd like to live.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Bologna è ‘a casa’, qui non è casa mia, sono venuta a studiare. Mi ci trovo bene, ma non è casa mia, non mi sento a casa mia [...] mi manca una routine quotidiana, è come stare in vacanza [...] Chi sta fuori, in cittadine piccole, è diverso, riconosce gente in giro. Qui andiamo sempre in posti diversi [...] Se lavorassi qui sarebbe diverso. Mi sono ambientata, ma non è una città dove vorrei vivere.

Like the participants in Murphy-Lejeune (2002)'s study, it seems that the present cohort use the concept of 'feeling at home' to refer to the impression of having reached, at least some of the time, what Anderson (1994) calls the Overcoming stage, when sojourners have increased coping skills, have found a *modus vivendi*, expectations are more realistic and most of the tension has disappeared, rendering the experience more satisfactory.

xxvi) Food and eating habits

The topic of food has already been partly discussed above, under the heading accommodation.

Generally speaking, food did not present particular problems, as today it is relatively simple to find international food in shops and restaurants all over Europe. Many participants had cooking facilities, which meant that they could continue to cook Italian food while abroad, although some enjoyed tasting the local food, in particular those sojourning in Spain. However, food remained an item that was strongly linked with the feeling of home (Penman & Omar, 2011, Brown 2009c): Gioacchino went to have dinner at his Italian friend's house when he needed to feel a little at home, Juls found Sundays particularly difficult as they made her think of her grandmother's Sunday lunches, and Ilaria even took food with her when she moved to Denmark, and cooked together with her Italian flatmate:

I came by car, so my mother made me bring hand-made pasta, coffee, milk, so I'm living off that. We try not to eat out often, because it's too expensive ... and the food's very heavy. So we cook together with my flatmate. (21 Sept)⁵⁹

No doubt, food is "a crucial cultural signifier", used to distinguish one's culture of origin from the new one, "potentially marking both belonging and exclusion" (Kamler and Threadgold, 2003, p.148). And it was precisely Juls who, after starting a

⁵⁹ Sono venuta in macchina, quindi mia madre mi ha fatto portare pasta fatta a mano, caffè, latte, quindi sto vivendo di quello. Cerchiamo di mangiare poco fuori, perché costa tanto ed è molto...pesante. Quindi cuciniamo insieme con la mia coinquilina.

relationship with a local student, began regularly cooking with him traditional British recipes.

6.2.2.3 Language for socialisation

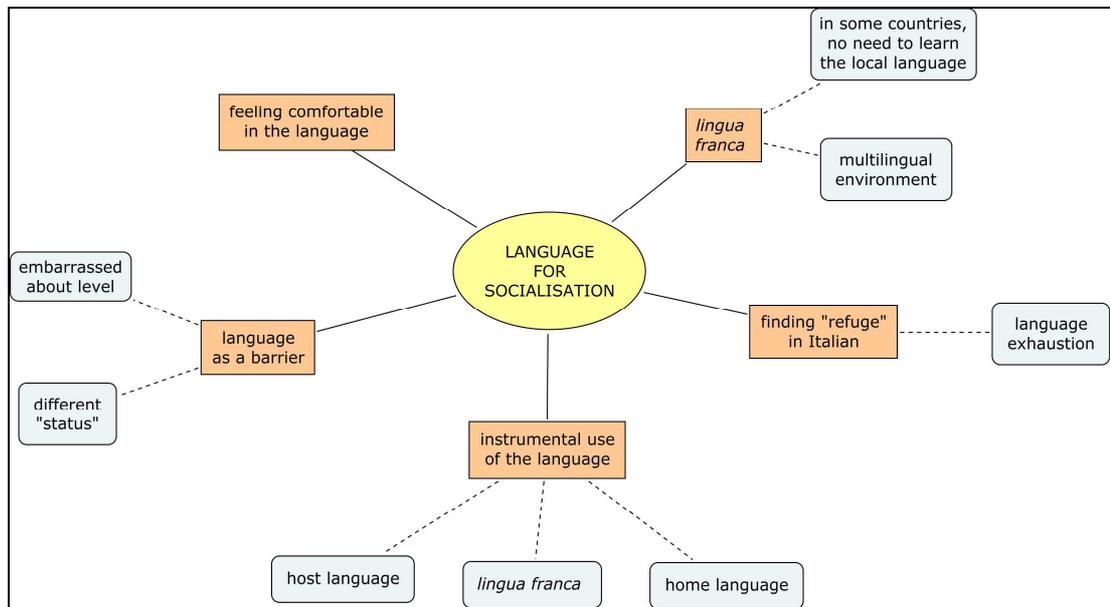


Fig. 6.22 – Language for socialisation

Finally, the category of language used for socialisation purposes (Fig.6.22) contains different themes from those present in the category “Language for academic purposes” (Fig. 6.18). Although some of the issues mentioned by the participants could fall into both categories, the focus is somewhat different. The main topics mentioned were:

xxvii) Instrumental use of the target language

The target language was primarily seen as a tool to move efficiently in the new environment, and to establish new social networks. For all the participants, this was the first time they were sojourning abroad, excluding brief holidays with family and friends. Their linguistic abilities were therefore put to the test, and opportunities to use the language were seen first and foremost as opportunities to practise and improve their skills. By the same token, it was considered unnecessary to learn the

host language in countries in which English was the language of tuition as well as the lingua franca, like Scandinavia, Cyprus and the Czech Republic.

xxviii) Language as a barrier

If the target language was the means to communicate with others, it was also seen, even by the most proficient students, as a barrier. First of all, the situation of being a non-native speaker meant that the students felt the risk of losing face and making fools of themselves much more acutely. A recurrent comment was “Che figuraccia!” (What a fool [I made of myself]!). Although this difficulty had been anticipated by many students during the pre-departure interviews, many had expressed expectations of improving their language skills more rapidly than they actually did. Lack of confidence in one’s linguistic abilities was seen as a major reason for preferring to socialise with co-nationals than with host nationals, particularly initially. Jack, for example, explained how when he first arrived, he tried to avoid looking other students in the eye when travelling on the bus for fear they would start talking to him, or even avoided ordering a coffee in a bar.

At first I wouldn’t go to the bar to get a coffee because I was afraid that they would ask more questions after I had ordered the coffee. Or if an English person tried to chat me up, I prayed that he wouldn’t ask me any more questions. But now I have no problem answering. (6 Feb)^{.60}

There was also a perception on the part of some of the participants that, by not mastering the target language, they had a different status from the native students. Silvia, for example, accused the French of feeling they were a cut above the foreign students simply because they mastered their own language, and attributed to this the reason for not being able to establish positive relationships with them.

xxix) Feeling comfortable in the target language

⁶⁰ All’inizio non andavo al bar a prendere un caffè perché avevo paura che mi facessero altre domande dopo che avevo chiesto il caffè. Oppure se c’era un inglese che provava ad attaccare bottone pregavo perché non mi facesse altre domande. Invece adesso non ho problemi a rispondere.

If, particularly initially, language was often perceived as a barrier, most students reported feeling increasingly more comfortable speaking the target language as the sojourn proceeded, irrespective of the actual improvements of their skills. By December, for example, Jack reported enjoying (rather than simply being capable of) having telephone conversations in English:

I really enjoy having telephone conversations in English. At the beginning, when people spoke to me, I needed to look at their faces. But now I can follow the conversations on the phone. (11 Dec)⁶¹

Initially, Angela also reported ‘not feeling herself’ when she spoke in English, although after the first six weeks she was clearly much more comfortable. The widespread opinion among Italians that they are among the worst language learners in the world undoubtedly contributed to the initial feeling of discomfort and of not wanting to lose face.

xxx) Using a lingua franca

This section would probably deserve a whole chapter, but I will limit myself to describing the main issues.

The lingua franca was used in two distinct situations. The first was in countries in which tuition took place through the medium of English (Scandinavia, Czech Republic, Cyprus). The participants were given the chance to follow pre-sessional intensive language courses in the local language, and some, though not all, took up the opportunity. However, none felt they had acquired a level sufficient to enable them to use the language in their everyday life. In any case, the widespread opinion

⁶¹ Mi piace molto avere conversazioni in inglese al telefono. All’inizio, quando le persone mi parlavano, avevo bisogno di guardarle in faccia. Ma adesso riesco a seguire le conversazioni al telefono.

was that the local language was unnecessary, particularly in the context of such a short stay:

Learning Danish if you want to live in Denmark, ok, but if not, you don't need to – remarked Ilaria, although then she added – [...] Not knowing Danish prevents me from establishing relationships with Danes in many everyday life situations. [...] If I were here for a year or two, I'd learn the language. (21 Sept)⁶²

Like most of the other participants, Ilaria was not a language major, and had chosen Denmark because the courses she was interested in were taught in English. She was aware of the limitations of not knowing the local language but considered that learning it was not worth the time and effort it would take.

At the end of her own sojourn in Denmark, Marina regretted not having learned more Danish, as she had come to realise it would have been a sign of respect towards her hosts:

The Danes prefer to stay together, because they prefer to speak Danish. In fact, now I regret not having studied Danish [...] I also feel guilty towards them. [...] They had told us back in August that Danish people don't expect you to know Danish, they don't feel offended. But if you know it, it's a bonus point, they are pleased when I say that I like the Danish language. (12 May)⁶³

One of the advantages offered by the lingua franca (in this case, English) is that, by being a foreign language both for home and host students, it partly redresses the power imbalance associated with the different status of the native and the non-native

⁶² Imparare il danese, se vuoi vivere in Danimarca, ok, ma se no, non ti serve [...] Non conoscere il danese mi preclude I rapporti con I danesi in tante situazioni di vita pubblica. [...] Se fossi qui per uno o due anni, imparerei la lingua.

⁶³ I danesi preferiscono stare tra di loro, perché preferiscono parlare danese. Infatti, adesso mi sono pentita di non aver studiato il danese [...] mi sento anche in colpa nel loro confronto. [...] Ci avevano detto ad agosto che I danesi non si aspettano che tu sappia il danese, non si offendono. Però se lo sai è un punto in più, a loro fa piacere quando dico che mi piace il danese.

speaker. Although many participants felt intimidated by more proficient speakers, they generally felt less anxious than those who had to deal with native speakers in their target language.

The second context in which the lingua franca is used is with other foreign students in the target language country, and this includes face to face as well as online communication. Although English is the lingua franca par excellence, the national language was usually used as the lingua franca when it was the target language of the participants. As mentioned above, many mentioned how they felt less intimidated by other foreign speakers (such as other Erasmus students) than by natives. In this context, Silvia made the point mentioned above about the difference in status:

My language proficiency has improved since I started going out with non-Italians, because we help each other. There is a spirit of collaboration that is lacking with the French. (1 Dec)⁶⁴

She attributes this to a linguistic rather than a cultural problem: in other words, it is not a question of cultural misunderstanding, but of the different status accorded to the fact of being a native speaker:

It's a matter of language rather than culture. Because all in all, we don't come from such different cultures. So it's language, we can't have a dialogue because I will always be one step behind you. (1 Dec)⁶⁵

xxxii) Finding refuge in Italian

Regardless of individual student's level of proficiency, the efforts made to speak the target language sooner or later led to what some termed language exhaustion, a familiar feeling to any person who has spent even a brief period in a context of full

⁶⁴ Il mio livello linguistico è migliorato da quando esco con persone non italiane, perché ci aiutiamo a vicenda. C'è uno spirito di collaborazione che manca con i francesi.

⁶⁵ E' una questione linguistica più che culturale. Perché tutto sommato non veniamo da culture tanto diverse. Quindi è linguistico, non possiamo avere un dialogo perché io sarò sempre un passo indietro rispetto a te.

immersion. Miriam and Valentina recalled the relief of walking into a room with Italians, and many mentioned the same feeling when they landed back in Italy for their Christmas holidays. And Gioacchino resorted to visiting an Italian friend he had met during a previous sojourn when he needed to speak Italian:

Gioacchino: Yes, the social life, there are no problems, I met lots of new people, stuff like this, so the good thing is that I really met few Italians. And I don't live with Italians, so it's perfect.

Ana: Yes, but as you said, it would be nice occasionally to have somebody to talk to in your own language...

Gioacchino: Yes, but sometimes, when I really would like to have a laid-back chat with someone, I go to my ex-flatmate's house. And it's happened twice a week. Just for dinner, you know, to have an Italian dinner, Sunday dinner, or Sunday lunch. You know, to stay with an Italian person (6 Oct).

Having very briefly reviewed the prevalent issues discussed by the participants during the monthly interviews, in order to understand better the different factors that contribute to the individual experiences abroad, I will now turn to adaptation process itself and will address the following research questions:

- What (social and academic) obstacles did the students encounter, and what strategies did they develop in order to cope?
- Were these strategies successful?

6.3 Dealing with obstacles

In the next two sections, I have chosen to analyse two problematic areas for the participants, one taken from the academic area and the other from the personal/social experience, namely taking an active part in seminars and tutorials, and befriending local students. Although these were by no means the only problematic areas, they have been chosen because they showed a variety of obstacles and response strategies, rendering them suitable as examples. As has been explained in the methodology chapter, in thematic analysis 'keyness' of themes is not necessarily synonymous with

frequency – a quantifiable measure (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Indeed, it would be beyond the scope of this work to provide a complete list of all the obstacles encountered by the students and relative coping strategies used by them, or to quantify the occurrences of each of these. Were this feasible, the actual significance of each obstacle would not necessarily be revealed, and it would be difficult to distinguish between two instances of the same obstacle and two very similar obstacles. However, it is also true that the two illustrative obstacles discussed in the following section were chosen because they were mentioned – to a greater or lesser degree - by several participants, and triggered a variety of responses.

These two types of obstacles have been amply discussed in the literature on student adaptation (Ramsay et al, 1999; Brown, 2008; Brown 2009d; Bochner et al, 1977; Barker et al, 1991; Zheng & Berry, 1991; Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Hendrickson et al, 2011; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Gareis 2000; Gareis et al 2011). However, I believe that the longitudinal data collected in this study will enable us to move beyond the problems themselves, to see what specific strategies were used by the students to overcome (or not) the obstacles they encountered in order to adjust to their new environment.

6.3.1 Academic obstacles – contributing to seminars and tutorials

In the area of academic experience, attending lectures was seldom mentioned as an obstacle either during the interviews or in the weekly tables, except in terms of whether they were interesting or not. This was due to the fact that the lecture is the standard form of tuition in Italy and was therefore not out of the ordinary. The students therefore felt it did not deserve special attention in the feedback they provided on their experience. Seminars and tutorials, however, were more problematic, particularly during the initial weeks of the sojourn, as they are very rare in the Italian university system, particularly at undergraduate level. Here too, the large majority of students knew about these types of lessons from former Erasmus students, and had formed expectations with regard to this new teaching format. This may be one of the reasons why none seemed confused by the different approach, and many had expressed positive views before departure. At the same time, the majority,

even those who were more confident about their language abilities, were worried at having to take an active part in tutorials and seminars, not so much because they were expected to contribute with their ideas, but because they had to do it in a foreign language. Added to this was, for some, the anxiety deriving from having been warned (by former Erasmus students) that their contributions would count towards their assessment, and that not contributing could be considered by some tutors as equivalent to not being present. Two weeks into the academic year, Angela observed:

this week I spoke also with the Comparative Literature teacher because... yes, also because some friends of mine, some Erasmus friends, told me that in some tutorials if you don't speak they... they... how can I say... they write as you weren't at the tutorials - you were absent. So I was a bit worried because of this (18 Oct).

This was echoed by Gioacchino during the same period:

This is a problem, because everyone I met said to me, “be careful, when you are in a seminar, try to speak as much as you can, because then the tutor understands that you are doing well”. But now, at the beginning, for me it’s tough to say anything... (6 Oct)

Obstacles affect the cognitive, behavioural and affective spheres, and adjustment can involve any combination of these (Anderson, 1994). In the case at hand, generally speaking, the students identified participating in seminars as problematic in the initial weeks, or sometimes months, of their stay. From a cognitive point of view, the participants’ feedback revealed that understanding what was expected of them, improving their language skills (both receptive and productive), and familiarising themselves with the contents of the course, were time-dependent factors that tended to improve as the year advanced. The affective development, however, was less linear. Psychological factors such as self-confidence (particularly linguistic), subjective perceptions of fitting into the group, or the ability to cope with stress and anxiety, accounted for some peaks and troughs throughout the academic year.

Fig. 6.23 below shows the four main difficulties, or obstacles, identified by some of the participants as affecting their participation in seminars and tutorials. These are primarily of linguistic origin, insofar as they are triggered by the students' lack of the necessary language skills (receptive and productive) which in turn generate affective obstacles (anxiety due to lack of confidence, fear of losing face, reduced self-esteem). However, the aim of actively participating in seminars is primarily academic rather than linguistic.

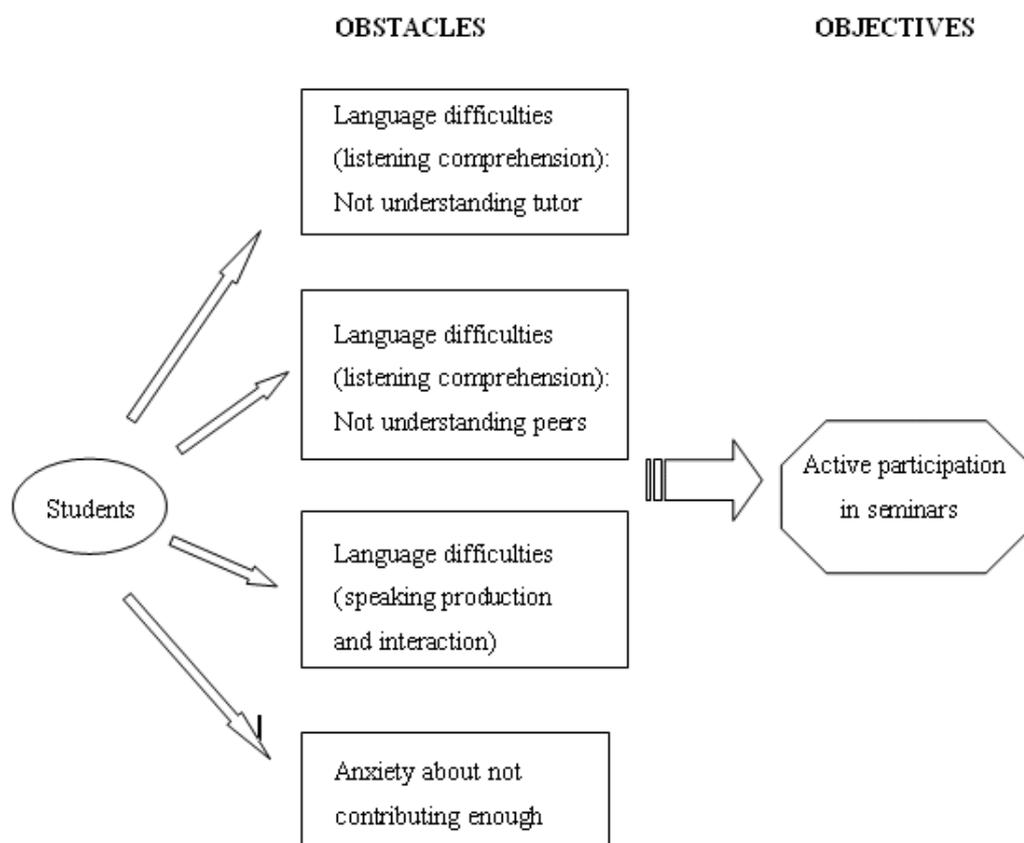


Fig. 6.23 – Active participation in seminars: obstacles perceived by participants

In what terms, then, did the students articulate the problems they encountered? And what strategies did they use to overcome these problems and adjust to the demands made by their new environment? In the next sections I will discuss each of the four obstacles illustrated in Fig.6.23 above.

6.3.1.1 Language difficulties (listening comprehension): not understanding the tutor

The main problems reported by the participants, particularly in the initial weeks of the academic year, concerned linguistic difficulties, rather than problems with the contents of the courses. As the Erasmus Programme is not compulsory in Italy, these were self-selected students who, in order to gain a place, had to demonstrate above-average results in their exams. It is not surprising, then, that content did not, in general, present difficulties. Language, however, is a requirement only for certain destinations, and the level usually varies between A2 and B2 of the Common European Framework for Languages. Federico, for example, had never studied Spanish, and had only completed a three-week intensive language course provided by his host university before starting his engineering courses in Spain. But even Angela and Chiara, both language majors, had to deal with strong local accents (Scottish and Andalusian) which took time to get used to.

Productive skills (speaking and writing) are generally perceived by learners to be more difficult than receptive skills (listening and reading). Perhaps it is not surprising then that seminars, which require students to participate, are deemed to be more problematic than lectures from a linguistic point of view.

Research has also shown how self-esteem can affect language learning (Brown, 2006; Oxford, 1999), and in the case of the participants concerned, losing face in front of tutors and peers was a major reason for refraining from participating when they were not certain whether they had understood. In the third week of the first term, Miriam remarked:

the point is that...that understanding is hard work...particularly if you have something to say, for example during tutorials, how embarrassing can it be when you start speaking, in front of everybody, apart from the accent, but with all the English completely wrong, but nobody else speaks, what can you do?... Sometimes I'm afraid to say something that the others have

already said, but that I haven't understood...this is one of the main fears, you know...Or somebody else says "I don't agree" or "this is my opinion", another one asks you something, and you don't understand...you don't understand. In short, there are many reasons to be fearful...(12 Oct)⁶⁶

Similarly, Valentina explained how answering "I don't know" to her tutor's questions seemed "the easy way out" when she had not understood. However, this attitude may have the undesired effect of making the tutor who will be assessing them regard the foreign students as uninterested or unprepared.

6.3.1.2 Language difficulties (listening comprehension): not understanding peers

The difficulty of understanding peers was much greater, and perhaps also less expected, than understanding teachers. This tended to be more of a problem with local students who spoke their native language than it was with other foreign students: according to the informants, the former often spoke too fast, made no allowances for the difficulties that some foreign students had, and generally lacked communicative awareness. Miriam expressed her frustration during the first interview, three weeks into the first term in Scotland:

"Because... I mean, I was expecting... I mean, I know that it's cold here, but I was expecting people to be a little bit more open. But really they're not very open. Particularly in lessons, I was hoping to get to know other students quite easily, because, come on, usually with Italians it's "how nice!" etc., but actually they're very closed. I mean, they find it really hard, even if you just ask them for some information, you say "look, I'm foreign, I didn't

⁶⁶ "il punto è che...che fai fatica a capire... soprattutto se hai qualcosa da dire, tipo anche ai tutorial, metti, hai qualcosa da dire, ché figura è che quando inizi a parlare, davanti a tutti, al di là dell'accento, ma con tutto l'inglese sbagliato completamente, ma nessuno parla, come si fa? qualche volta ho paura di dire qualcosa che hanno già detto ma io non sono riuscita a capire... questa è una delle paure principali. Capito?... O tu dici qualcosa e un'altro dice "io non la penso così" o "la penso così", un altro ti fa una domanda, e tu non capisci ... cioè, tu non capisci. Insomma, le paure sono molteplici..."

understand, would you mind telling me again?”... [Ana: But are you referring to the students, or to the teachers?].... No, no, to the students. That’s how it is. So I hope it gets better. Because, actually, I’m finding the language really hard, because with Scottish people you can’t understand anything, the others so so... I mean, they’re not very patient generally. I don’t know, for instance the tutorials, for me, but also for the other Italians, they’re disastrous. They’re wonderful, the idea is wonderful, it should be imported into Italy... I mean, hearing young people discussing things is wonderful, but we don’t understand anything. I mean, they speak extremely fast, each one with their accent... it’s impossible. Some tutors, I mean those who organise these groups, haven’t even asked us whether... they haven’t asked us to introduce ourselves, so they didn’t even know we were foreign... just imagine! (12 Oct)⁶⁷

The dissatisfaction felt by Miriam is tangible, aggravated by the fact that her expectations were not met. She had expected a certain ease in building a rapport with her peers, justified, in her opinion, by the fact that she considered Italians to be popular abroad, so she had felt this to be an advantage. In the initial phase, the affective reaction was so strong that she was unable to see the problem from the point of view of her local peers.

⁶⁷ “Ma perché... diciamo che mi aspettavo... cioè, so che qui è freddo, però mi aspettavo che la gente fosse un pochino più aperta. Però in realtà non è molto aperta. Soprattutto a lezione, speravo di riuscire a conoscere qualcuno abbastanza facilmente, perché dai, di solito gli italiani, che bello, di qua e di là, però in realtà sono molto chiusi. Cioè fanno proprio fatica, anche se li chiedi solo un’informazione, li dici “guarda, sono straniero, non ho capito bene questo, non è che me lo puoi ridire”... [Ana: Ma stai parlando degli studenti, o dei professori?].... No, no, degli studenti. E così. Per cui, no. Spero che vada meglio. Perché, oggettivamente, faccio una gran fatica con la lingua, perché tra gli scozzesi non si capisce niente, gli altri di qua e di là... diciamo che non hanno molta pazienza in generale. Cioè, non so, ad esempio i tutorial, per me, ma anche per gli altri italiani, sono un disastro. Sono bellissimi, l’idea è bellissima, sarebbe da importare anche in Italia, però... cioè, sentire dibattere i ragazzi è una cosa bellissima, però noi non capiamo niente. Cioè, parlano velocissimo, ognuno con il suo accento... è un casino. Alcuni dei tutor, cioè quelli che tengono questi gruppi non ci hanno neanche chiesto se ... non ci hanno fatto neanche presentare, quindi non sapevano neanche che noi eravamo stranieri... figurati!

When linguistic difficulties combine with difficult course content, the students can feel very discouraged. Angela, for example, found her Comparative Literature course very demanding:

Well, the other one is a bit worse, because this week we started studying ... “Thus spoke Zarathustra”, you know, it's philosophy ... and it was really difficult for me, first to read the book, because philosophy in English... philosophy is difficult in Italian! [...] and then... during tutorials I understood nothing, because there are some students who speak... especially male students speak really fast. Maybe there are some girls who try to look at me when they're speaking and understand that I'm not understanding, so they speak slowly, and so on. But also they are different because at the end they go home without wait for a chat, so...(18 Oct)

For her, the problem of not understanding both the course content and her peers was exacerbated by the fact that they did not stop for a chat after lessons: this, she felt, could have eased the tension by enabling her to express her difficulties to them informally, to get to know her peers outside the classroom and perhaps start building a rapport of trust that might improve her self-confidence.

6.3.1.3 Language difficulties: speaking production and interaction

While the previous difficulties regarded mainly oral comprehension, oral production can be even more challenging, particularly in the initial weeks of the sojourn. For most, being able to follow the discussions, gather their ideas, find a way of expressing them, and then feel confident enough to contribute to the discussion was much harder than anticipated. Angela, for example, perceived her difficulty in terms of not being quick enough:

Also because I spend most of the time trying to understand what they're saying, and then maybe (laughter) maybe if I understand

something I want to say something, but they've changed... the subject (laughter), because I'm too slow! (18 Oct)

Pina, who claimed to have no difficulty understanding both tutors and peers (she was in Sweden, studying through the medium of English), remarked that she often avoided speaking:

... it doesn't come as natural to me, or rather perhaps I decide to keep quiet because I would like to say some really complicated sentences in Italian, but in English I wouldn't even know where to start. [...]...In Italian I use a lot of phrases when I speak to people, and I can't find them in English, I don't know how to say the same things, so I end up keeping quiet, when if I were with other Italians I would speak...(23 Sept)⁶⁸

The improvement of language proficiency (in particular fluency, subject-specific lexis, and oral comprehension) during the sojourn was crucial in facilitating contributions to seminars. The difficulties that remained were all attributable to affective aspects. As Marina put it, “it is not your language proficiency that goes up and down, it's your self-esteem”.

6.3.1.4 Anxiety about not contributing enough to seminars

Anxiety about the linguistic and academic hurdles that the students face at the beginning of their sojourn abroad, including the negative effect of stress on their ability to study, has been widely discussed in the literature on cross-cultural adaptation (Ward et al, 2001). Although a few of the participants expressed their concerns, the level of stress did not seem as severe as reported in some of the literature (Brown and Holloway, 2008). One of the factors influencing anxiety levels felt by international students could be the stakes involved, and the personal and

⁶⁸ “non mi viene così naturale parlare, o meglio magari decido di stare zitta perché avrei delle frasi supercomplicate in italiano e in inglese non so neanche da dove partire. Un modo di dire che in italiano... In italiano uso moltissimi modi di dire quando parlo con le persone, e questi non li trovo in inglese, non so come si dicano le stesse cose, quindi finisco per stare zitta, quando magari se fossi con un altro italiano parlerei...”

financial investment made by the student. It would be safe to say that for the respondents in the present study, these stakes were not too high: they did not have to pay for the courses, failed exams could be retaken in Italy upon return, and the (small) Erasmus grant is dependent on the applicant passing one single exam. Even abandoning the programme and returning home early does not entail particular academic consequences (even though the psychological effects can be more serious). It seems reasonable therefore to expect stress levels related to the academic side of the experience to be lower than those reported in some of the literature (Brown, 2008; Brown and Holloway 2008) and mostly concerning international postgraduate students studying whole degree courses abroad, as a consequence of lower stakes.

Nevertheless, Gioacchino expressed some concerns that his inability to participate in discussions might have negative consequences on his assessment, and Paola felt overwhelmed by the requests made by her English teacher, to the extent that she felt a sense of panic in class. Marina too was concerned that her natural shyness (“I’m more of a listener”), exacerbated by the new foreign context, would be interpreted as lack of enthusiasm by her tutors, and Valentina was apprehensive about seeming less intelligent than her peers.

6.3.2 Strategies for dealing with these obstacles

Having construed problems as obstacles in the sojourner’s path, Anderson’s model (1994) sees four possible responses, or strategies, to deal with them: the first is to do nothing instrumental, hoping that the problem will disappear (which it may do). Sometimes, the frustration felt may push the sojourner to attack the obstacle (verbally or physically) or those felt to be responsible for it. Alternatively, adopting the role of ‘ambassador’ for their own culture may enable the sojourner to remain in the host environment without needing to adjust to its demands. This strategy can be successful in that it may buy time at a moment when, for example, the necessary skills to overcome the problem are not developed yet. The second possibility, which may be result from the inability to move beyond the obstacle, is to withdraw, psychologically as well as physically. This may imply abandoning a course, or even returning home before the end of the sojourn. The last two strategies are the only

ones considered by Anderson to be adaptive. The first, as mentioned above, is changing the environment, either objectively or conceptually (by redefining the problematic nature of the experience), in order to eliminate the obstacle. The last option is changing oneself, so that the obstacle can be overcome, at least partly (Anderson, 1994, p. 313). What kind of strategies did the students use to deal with the obstacles described above, and how effective were they in helping them to adjust better to their new environment?

For most of the participants, the first step in dealing with all of the issues mentioned above was to talk about their problems. Talk can help sojourners interpret better their experiences, assessing how ‘normal’ these were by comparing them with those of others, and reframe their expectations and adjust their behaviour accordingly (Pitts, 2009). The first people the students turned to were other Erasmus students, as more often than not they shared the same concerns and feelings of frustration. Articulating and discussing problems also helps reflection, by moving the focus away from the affective and onto the cognitive sphere.

Some students also turned to their friends back home, perhaps less for advice and more for support. Words of encouragement on their Facebook pages, which were very frequent in the initial weeks, made them feel supported.

A number of participants, including Paola, Miriam, Gioacchino and Valentina, also consulted me, either during the monthly interview, or through emails, asking specifically for advice, as they saw me as more experienced in matters of life abroad, a former Erasmus student as well as a university language teacher.

Ultimately, though, they turned to their own teachers to discuss their difficulties. The purpose was to inform them and to seek advice, but also to obtain reassurance from them. In other words, the decision to speak to the tutor was dictated by both cognitive and affective needs, and the most satisfactory responses were those that addressed both of these, by providing information and relief. Angela’s comment illustrates this well:

Also on Tuesday I spoke with the teacher because sometimes I feel a bit embarrassed because when we're all together maybe I try to say something, and I feel embarrassed about my accent and all these things. So I went to the teacher, who is really young, and I said "Oh!, I'm so sorry about my English, because I try to speak, but..." and he said me "Oh! It's not a problem - I think my Italian is really worst". (Laughing) Yes, but it was nice...(18 Oct)

Miriam too felt more confident after her Philosophy teacher, a native Greek working in Scotland, told her that he too occasionally had difficulty understanding his own students. Similarly, Gioacchino's tutor reassured him that he was familiar with the difficulties common to many Erasmus students. For these students, the solution of talking to the tutor was effective in that it allowed them to relax more during seminars, in the knowledge that they would not, at least initially, be penalised for their lack of participation. By being provided with a "buffer zone" during which they could improve their language skills and get to know the other members of the group, the students were able to overcome the obstacles and participate more actively in the seminars. Only in three cases did this particular strategy not work: Petra, together with her fellow Erasmus students, asked their tutor to speak more slowly in class. The request received a curt reply: the tutor felt this type of accommodation to the foreign students would result in the native students getting bored. In her case there was only one other alternative to overcome this particular obstacle – to improve her language skill as quickly as possible, which she partly did by actively choosing to socialise primarily with German speakers. In spite of her initial reservations regarding the aloofness of German students, she started taking part in sports activities mostly frequented by locals, and by December most of her friends were Germans. The other two cases in which the strategy did not work were Paola and Angela's. In the case of the former, she was told that no allowances could be made for her, as the course was in a foreign language (English) also for the local French students. As a result, after the initial month, Paola abandoned the course. "I'm not proud of myself", she admitted the following day. This strategy may have removed the obstacle, but Paola experienced it as defeat. Emotionally, she would have to find a

way of salvaging her self-esteem. Angela, on the other hand, had attempted to stay on the course after speaking with her tutor. However, when she was unable to complete the first assignment, she realised that her difficulties were too great. As she was still in time to replace the Comparative Literature course with an English language certificate course in her Learning Agreement, she opted for that solution. In her case, then, removal of the obstacle implied a slight change in her objectives. As a strategy, it worked.

As mentioned above, awareness that language skills are likely to improve with time needs then to be accompanied by the readiness to be patient, to keep at bay the instinct to flee (Anderson, 1994). Regulating the emotions responsible for stress, frustration, panic or loss of self-confidence, in order to enable the necessary cognitive processes to take place, is a challenge faced to a greater or lesser degree by all sojourners. Maintaining one's confidence is not easy, though, and small incidents can unsettle the balance, as Gioacchino explained:

... I don't know about my English, because sometimes I realise that I'm improving, but then I'm so... when I go to a lesson and there's a person who speaks really fast, I think maybe I'm forgetting lots of stuff, you know [...] I don't think that going to lessons every day like this, in two or three weeks I'm going to understand everything during my lectures... (6 Oct)

In a potentially challenging environment such as the seminar or the tutorial, the presence of other Erasmus students can be crucial. Knowing that you are not alone, that other students share similar difficulties, feel just as lost, confused or incompetent as you do, that you can ask fellow Erasmus participants for clarifications or even to share notes can help dispel anxiety, and many participants emphasised this. Angela recalled how, incapable of understanding her tutor who spoke in 'Scottish dialect' (sic.) during the first seminar, she was able to laugh about it with her Erasmus peers and downplay what, for an isolated student, might have been an unsettling situation. Marina, on the other hand, explained how, being the only Erasmus student in her class, she felt even more reserved than she usually was:

I don't speak much, but I wouldn't speak much in Italian either. Perhaps it's an emotional issue, because I'm the only Erasmus student in class. (26 Oct)⁶⁹

Silvia also pointed out that fellow Erasmus students provided support in moments of difficulty. So, while the French students tended to go straight home after lessons, the Erasmus participants lingered on:

“They go to lessons, and then each goes their own way. On the other hand, we are obviously a bit more... I mean, we have a greater need to speak together, because we're in a difficult situation, so...we have a different way of dealing with the course, we try to stay together, we keep close to each other...” (14 Oct)⁷⁰

If on the one hand, having other foreign student in the class can be reassuring, especially at first, being able to build a rapport also with the local students can be crucial in order to feel more confident during seminars. As mentioned above, the difficulty of understanding native speakers derives partly from a lack of communicative awareness on their part: in other words, not understanding the linguistic difficulties that a foreign student may find, or not being willing to do anything about it. Most of the participants complained that students speaking their first language spoke too fast, tended to mumble, avoided eye contact and did not use any strategies to check understanding on the part of the foreign listeners. This clearly reveals the expectation on their part that the home students would, or even should, accommodate to the needs of their foreign peers. This is an example of what Anderson sees as the four different ways of dealing with a new obstacle : change the environment, change oneself, do nothing or walk away (Anderson, 1994, p. 305).

⁶⁹ Intervengo poco, ma interverrei poco anche in italiano. Forse è un fatto emotivo, perché sono l'unica Erasmus in classe.

⁷⁰ “Cioè, vanno a lezione, seguono, escono, e poi ognuno va per i fatti suoi. Noi ovviamente siamo un po' più... cioè, abbiamo più bisogno anche di parlare tra di noi, perché comunque siamo in una situazione particolare, quindi...è diverso il nostro modo di affrontare i corsi, cerchiamo di stare abbastanza insieme, ci teniamo vicini...”.

The assumption that the environment should change to accommodate the needs of the foreign student may prevent the individual from taking action. If the assumption remains but the home students' behaviour does not change, the foreign student may withdraw, give up any attempt to fit into the group, or even drop out. Alternatively, he or she may attempt to change by improving their listening skills. Finally, acceptance that the initial assumption may be unfounded (in the sense that the home students may not feel they have a reason to attempt to adjust to their foreign peers) may help the foreign student find other strategies. For example, Angela found that building a rapport with the native students in the group can have a positive effect on their awareness of and willingness to accommodate to the linguistic difficulties of the foreign student:

It's difficult to understand the students above all, they speak so fast! Yeah, sometimes... for example, for Scottish literature it's better, because I found a friend before than in the other tutorials, for Comparative Literature, and [...] so Scottish Lit it's a bit better, because they understand I'm foreign so they ask me, the students I mean, they ask me if I understand, if I have some problems. (18 Oct)

Marina too found that, by socialising with her classmates outside the classroom context, she became more accustomed to their accent, and was able to discuss informally some of the issues that had come up in the lessons. The same was true for Ilaria, who found it easier to discuss complex arguments in an informal setting:

... I can't intervene. I struggle to speak in Italian, even more so in English [...] I'm quite emotional, so I become anxious, I think about how to say things, so I find I can't ... it's still a little difficult for me to speak about complex issues in English, but I also realize that in everyday life I can do it. With those two Greek friends, he studies anthropology with me, and we really get into discussions about philosophical questions related to anthropology, and so I get really frustrated, because I say, "Why?". It's always the same problem, when there are only a

handful of us I feel comfortable and then I can talk about anything, even in English I can manage much better, but when there are twenty people, all focusing their attention on me, I get in a tizzy [...] that is a problem I need to solve. I hope that in the next few months ... because actually, where else, if not here? Here they really encourage you to contribute, and also to relax in class [...] so I would like to feel [...] but it is not easy, it also depends on your classmates ... Because the teacher is very open, she told us "No contribution is stupid, no question is stupid", and this is important, to hear that. But yes, actually, it's partly the classmates who inspire fear. (21 Sept)⁷¹

From the words above, it was clear that she was aware of the problem, was determined to find a solution, and knew that it partly depended on being able to establish a trusting relationship with her classmates, and partly on overcoming her own shyness and making the effort to contribute. A month later, her strategy had worked:

This week I had the impression of feeling at ease, during the lessons I was really aware of the difference with Italy, with Bologna. There's a really friendly atmosphere, where you can contribute, you can discuss things with your classmates or the teacher, who sets himself on a par with us [...] it took me a while to enter, to engage in this atmosphere, but these last weeks I've made several contributions, I've put into practice my academic

⁷¹ ... non riesco ad intervenire. Io faccio fatica a intervenire in italiano, e quindi a maggior ragione non riesco ad intervenire in inglese [...] sono un po' emotiva, quindi mi agito, penso a come dire le cose, quindi non riesco... è ancora un po' difficile per me parlare di alcuni argomenti complessi in inglese, e poi invece mi rendo conto che nella vita quotidiana lo riesco a fare. Con quei due ragazzi greci, lui studia antropologia con me, e facciamo di quei discorsi su questioni anche filosofiche legate all'antropologia, e quindi mi viene anche rabbia, perché dico: "Perché?". E' sempre il solito discorso, quando siamo in quattro gatti io mi sento al mio agio e quindi riesco a dire tutto, anche addirittura in inglese me la cavo meglio, e quando invece si è in venti persone e tutti puntano l'attenzione su di te io vado in palla [...] quello è un problema che punterei a risolvere. Spero che in questi mesi... perché appunto, dove se non qua? Qui ti incentivano tanto a contribuire, e anche a rilassarti a lezione [...] quindi vorrei sentirmi [...] ma non è facile, dipende anche dai compagni di classe che hai... Perché la prof è molto aperta, ha detto "Nessun intervento è stupido, nessuna domanda è stupida", e questo è importante, sentirselo dire. Ma poi sì, sono un po' i compagni di classe, che incutono timore.

English, and I must say I'm happy ... [Ana: Why did you find it difficult to engage?] ... partly because I wanted to understand the extent to which people were ready to intervene, the extent to which they actually gave their true opinions, but also because, to say the truth, I had to immerse myself in the language. (11 Oct)⁷²

Undoubtedly, preparing for seminars is a general requirement for all students. However, for foreign learners it is all the more important, as it allows them not just to familiarise themselves with the topic of the lesson, but also with the specific language necessary to articulate and discuss their opinions. For Valentina, whose linguistic proficiency was quite limited, this was the key to overcoming her initial difficulties and to participating more often:

... the fact is that I have noticed that, when I'm faced with that type of situation, and I have had the chance, for instance, to read a book or reflect on what has been said, I am able [to contribute]. Given that during the seminars we talk about what we have read, I am able somehow to express something. Obviously, not having the necessary vocabulary... but also with their help, like maybe they tell me what a little word means, I find a way to make myself understood, to say what I want, because I have the concept in my mind, I have understood the concept, and in one way or another, I manage to express myself, to say what I think. But for example in the lectures with the teacher, I have noticed that I find it much harder, because I don't know what the teacher

⁷² Questa settimana ho avuto la sensazione di trovarmi al mio agio, durante le lezioni ho proprio sentito la differenza con l'Italia, con Bologna. C'è proprio un'atmosfera amichevole, dove tu intervieni, discuti con i tuoi compagni di classe o col professore che si propone come alla pari [...] ci ho messo un po' ad entrare, ad ingranare in questa atmosfera, ma queste settimane sono proprio intervenuta più volte, ho messo in pratica un po' del mio inglese accademico, e sono stata devo dire contenta...[Ana: Perché, difficoltà ad ingranare?...]... Volevo anche capire fino a che punto si spingevano le persone ad intervenire, fino a che punto dicevano fino in fondo le loro opinioni, poi anche perché, ti devo dire la verità, mi sono dovuta immergere nella lingua.

will talk about, and so it is much harder to understand what he says. (7 Oct)⁷³

According to Valentina, then, a well-prepared seminar is comparatively less of a challenge than a lecture for a student such as her, with limited language skills. In addition, knowing what the seminar will be about means that students can sometimes prepare their contributions beforehand, as did Miriam:

...now I am planning something, because I have to speak, so I am planning to write down what I want to say, so that's what I'll do... the second year course is very structured, in the sense that there are questions you have to answer, so... you can answer at home, and then read what you've written, and that's what I'll do. But the first year courses are not like that. (12 Oct)⁷⁴

Finally, preparing for seminars also requires that Italian students adjust to a different study rhythm: in Italy it is common to study mostly in the weeks before the exams, students only attend lectures and are not given assignments during the course. For this reason, few of them expected the amount of regular work required throughout the year in other countries, which necessitates a more structured time management. Margherita wondered whether the local students did all their assigned reading before the course started, as she found it impossible to go through her reading lists during term time. Doing work regularly throughout the course should not in itself be a new skill that the students need to learn, for it is the system used throughout primary and

⁷³ ...fatto sta che ho notato che se mi trovo di fronte una situazione del genere, e ho avuto modo per esempio di leggere un libro e di riflettere su quello che ha detto, riesco, dato che parliamo durante il seminario di quello che abbiamo letto, riesco in qualche modo ad esprimere qualcosa. Ovviamente non avendo il vocabolario... però anche con il loro aiuto, che magari mi dicono quella parolina cosa significa, trovo il modo per farmi capire, o comunque per dire quello che voglio, perché ho in mente il concetto, ho capito il concetto, e vuoi o non vuoi, riesco ad esprimermi, quindi a dire quello che penso. Però, per esempio, nelle lezioni normali che teniamo col professore, ho notato che faccio molta più fatica, perché non so di che parlerà il prof e di conseguenza è più difficile capire quello che deve dire.

⁷⁴ adesso sto progettando qualcosa, perché in effetti devo parlare, e quindi sto progettando di scrivermi già quello che dirò, di prepararmi degli interventi, e quindi farò così... quello del secondo anno è molto strutturato, cioè, nel senso, ci sono delle domande e tu devi rispondere, per cui... tu puoi rispondere a casa, e quindi poi posso leggerla, e lo farò. Però quelle del primo anno non sono così"

secondary school (in fact, many feel that, from this point of view, higher education in other European countries resembles more high school than university in Italy). Once they realised this, adjustment to this particular aspect became relatively unproblematic, and issues of time-management were not mentioned by any of the students in the second semester.

In the sections above, a particular type of academic obstacle – namely taking an active part in seminars – was described, and some of the strategies used by the participants were discussed: these ranged from talking to the tutors in order to inform them of the problems and obtain reassurance, to finding emotional (and practical) support in other foreign students in the class. Other strategies involved raising the communicative awareness of local students by building a rapport with them outside class, or improving language proficiency as quickly as possible by frequenting local students. The last resort, chosen by a few of the participants, was to abandon the course in the face of what were deemed insurmountable difficulties. This meant having to re-assess objectives and, in more practical terms, change the learning agreement.

In any case, adjustment in this specific area of the academic experience seemed to be time-dependant. Probably as a result of a better understanding of what was required, improved language skills, rapport-building with other students and with tutors and increased self-confidence, taking an active part in seminars was not mentioned as problematic by any of the participants during the second semester, which seemed to confirm that the different strategies used (including re-assessing objectives) were ultimately successful.

6.3.3 Social obstacles – building friendship networks with local students

From the testimonies of Erasmus students themselves, the social aspect of the experience is as important as the academic side. Already in the pre-departure interviews, the participants mentioned building international friendships, becoming more independent, learning to look after themselves, as crucial motivations in making them consider applying for an Erasmus placement.

Building a new social network – “getting to know people” – is a crucial step in settling in a new environment (Bochner et al, 1977). In the case of Erasmus students, some arrive in their host destination in the company of friends or acquaintances, but many travel on their own. However, the infrastructure put into place by HE institutions in Europe, including International Offices, the Erasmus Student Network, Erasmus and International Societies, Residences for international students, to mention but a few, with their welcome parties, Orientation weeks, intensive language courses, will ensure that the newly arrived students will meet as many people as possible within the first few days, even hours. However, most of these initiatives are designed for foreign students, so it is not surprising that the first acquaintances made tend to be fellow Erasmus participants, or at the most other newly arrived international students. This will inevitably affect the friendship patterns of these individuals.

As remarked in the literature review chapter, the friendship patterns of mobile students fall into three distinct groups: with co-nationals, with other foreign students, and with members of the host society (Bochner et al, 1977; Hendrickson et al, 2011). Although this sub-topic would provide enough material for a whole new thesis, I analyse one particular aspect, namely the difficulty of building friendship networks with local students. Below is a representation of the main obstacles identified in the data with regard to this specific problem.

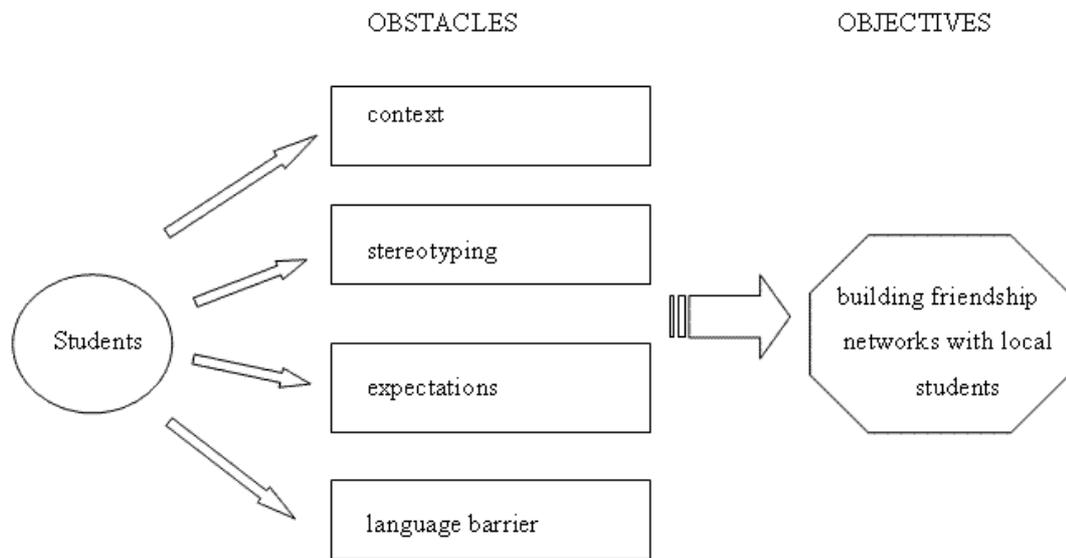


Fig. 6.24 – Building friendship networks with local students: obstacles perceived by participants

The first thing that needs to be clarified is that, as was reported in Chapter 5, meeting local students was not an objective for all the participants (or at least not a primary one). This will inevitably have consequences when we analyse the friendships of these students, as not all those who have few or no local friends will identify this as a problem.

How, then, did the students articulate the obstacles they found in their attempts to build friendship networks with local students?

6.3.3.1 Context

Paradoxically, the greatest barrier to getting to know local students may be the Erasmus context itself. The widespread nature of the programme, with the more or less formal infrastructure, ensures that Erasmus students are never left on their own. Orientation weeks, intensive language programmes, the Erasmus Student Network social events, student residences of shared flats reserved primarily for international students, specific courses for Erasmus students, all these ensure that the first acquaintances made soon after arrival are likely to be other foreigners. Even before they leave their country, many participants joined specific Facebook groups of European students planning to do their Erasmus exchange in the same host institution

(such as the Aarhus University Erasmus group, “For all the people who stayed, stay or will stay in Århus as part of the Erasmus/Socrates-exchange program”, which in January 2012 numbered 876 members). The group is open, so a short browse is sufficient to get an idea of the kind of exchanges future students have. The example below, begun by a student requesting information about accommodation, receives two replies which are likely to lead to face-to-face encounters once the student arrives in Aarhus.



Sandra Kubiljanski

Hi! I´m going to Aarhus for spring semester and i would like to know if somobody has some experience with STOCKHOLMSGADE accomodation?

Thanks

5 December 2011 at 21:16



Mark Wenna uu, you are from MUP ;-) looking forward seeing you here!

5 December 2011 at 21:55



Ivo Aarhus I lived there last semester! Short way to university and business school. Ok house, big rooms, but not very noce kitchen. Aarhus is amazing, enjoy your stay!! :D

14 December 2011 at 18:48



Ivo Aarhus nice*. Thats is if you are staying in the IC-house in Stockholmsgade..

14 December 2011 at 18:49



Sandra Kubiljanski thank you ;-) and how about the internet? is there any wifi or i have to pay some different way of connection?

15 December 2011 at 23:07



Fig. 6.25 – Facebook extract 1

Such groups exist in practically every HE institution that receives Erasmus students, and shows one way in which these students take it into their own hands to access and provide information about their destination even before departure.

Considering that Italy is one of the countries with the highest number of outgoing students, the likelihood of meeting co-nationals abroad is also relatively high. This, too, can constitute an obstacle to meeting local students, as there is a tendency to draw towards people from one's country, particularly in the initial period. As Valentina put it,

... without doubt, this can be both a positive and a negative factor. Negative because of the language, obviously, but positive because somehow you don't feel completely lost [*spaesata*], you feel relaxed, because you're at...you feel at home, in any case...

you feel that you are surrounded by a more familiar environment, you don't feel the separation that you might feel if you were on your own, or with very few Italians, right? (7 Oct)⁷⁵

Surrounding oneself with co-nationals is a way of feeling at home, even when, as Pina observed, these are people you would not particularly befriend if you were at home. It was not just the shared language, but also the shared culture, experiences, connotations, behaviours etc. that enabled Francesca (and several others) to say she “felt at home” after travelling three thousand kilometres to a country she had never been to and whose language she did not speak. In addition, co-nationals were a source of information free from the risk of misunderstandings.

However, none of the participants felt happy about frequenting only, or mostly, co-nationals, as they had all expressed an interest in meeting people from other countries: this, to them, was the defining characteristic of the Erasmus programme, and a crucial motivation for taking part in it. Meeting other international students was, in any case, inevitable. Some participants, for example, took part in the intensive language courses specifically organised by the host institutions for Erasmus students. Claudia explained how important the course was to help her make friends in a metropolis such as Berlin:

Claudia:... I don't know to what extent it can improve my German, but it's very important because it's a class of 30 people, 30 Erasmus, so we're all in the same situation, we come from all parts of the world, and so it's very useful in order to meet people, because the first two weeks were the hardest, precisely because I really didn't know anyone, so I was alone a lot of the time.

Ana: I see. So now you've managed to find a group of friends ...

Claudia: Yes

Ana: And what are they, mostly Italians?

⁷⁵ ... sicuramente questa cosa può essere un fattore sia positivo che negativo. Negativo per la lingua, è ovvio, però positivo perché in qualche modo non ti senti completamente spaesata, ti senti comunque tranquilla, perché sei comunque a...ti senti comunque a casa, in ogni caso... Senti che intorno a te c'è in qualche modo un ambiente più familiare, non senti tanto lo stacco che forse potresti sentire se fossi tu da sola o comunque con pochissime persone italiane, no?

Claudia: No, no, I didn't want that.

Ana: (laughing) You avoided Italians ...

Claudia: Yeah ... I was lucky because in my class there is only one Italian girl. And everyone else ... there are lots of French, in fact it's made me want to learn French again [...]

Ana: And they've organized activities for you?

Claudia: We've been for a walk around Berlin with the group, and was very nice....(24 Sept)⁷⁶

Claudia was not alone in considering that the most useful aspect of the intensive language course was meeting other Erasmus students, with whom to share not just the initial difficulties, but also the discovery of the new environment.

Another aspect of the Erasmus context which could present a barrier to friendships with local students are student residences or shared flats almost exclusively reserved for Erasmus or international students. Thus, Marina's flatmate was Portuguese, Daniela's was German, Ilaria's and Paola's were Italian, Pina shared with a Chinese couple, Jack with a German, a Chinese and a host of other students who kept to their rooms and whom he never met, Miriam with two female students, one American and one French, and a Scottish man who, perhaps unsurprisingly, was never around. Only Claudia, Chiara, Angela and Federico, who had not arranged their accommodation through the host university, made an effort to look for a shared flat with host nationals.

⁷⁶ ...non so quanto possa far migliorare il mio tedesco, però è molto importante perché lì siamo in una classe di 30 persone, 30 persone Erasmus, quindi siamo tutti nella stessa situazione, veniamo da tutte le parti del mondo, e serve veramente tanto per conoscere qualcuno, perché le prime due settimane sono state le più pesanti, appunto perché non conoscevo veramente nessuno, quindi ero molto tempo da sola.

Ana: Ho capito. Quindi adesso bene o male ti sei fatta un giro di amici...

Claudia: Sì.

Ana: E cosa sono, soprattutto italiani?

Claudia: No, no, non ho voluto questo.

Ana: (ridendo) Hai evitato gli italiani...

Claudia: Esatto...sono stata fortunata perché nella mia classe c'è solo una ragazza italiana. E tutti gli altri... ci sono tantissimi francesi, infatti mi è tornata la curiosità di studiare il francese di nuovo [...]

Ana: E hanno organizzato attività per voi?

Claudia: Abbiamo fatto un'escursione con il gruppo del corso, un'escursione per Berlino, ed è stata molto bella.

For the small group of students sojourning in destinations where English was the medium of instruction, another barrier took the form of courses organised primarily for foreign students. In Daniela's case, for example, the course she attended was organised in Norwegian for the local students, and in English for Erasmus participants. This meant that she was unable to meet any local students during lessons. Valentina, Ilaria, Pina, Giulia, Francesca and Marina also attended courses through the medium of English, and although they all had some local students in their groups, the number of international students was substantial, often exceeding 50% of the total.

The Erasmus context of student mobility today is very different to study abroad programmes thirty years ago, when it was still possible for a foreign student to be surrounded almost exclusively by host nationals, both in lessons and halls of residence. Of course, the context does not necessarily determine friendship patterns one way or another, but it is likely to have a significant influence on them.

6.3.3.2 Expectations

If, on the one hand, the ease with which friendships were established with other foreign students exceeded expectations, getting to know host nationals fell short of them.

Expectations, both positive and negative, can hinder contact. Miriam, for example, openly admitted that she had expected to find this easier, as she was aware of the general popularity of Italians abroad. However, she was disappointed to see that the local students were not particularly interested in her or in other foreign students, at least not *per se*. She was not the only one to feel disappointed at the lack of interest on the part of locals. Daniela and Giulia had also somewhat idealised the Norwegians and the Finns. Daniela believed that, as a student of Anthropology, she had learned to understand that different cultures have different customs and values, and she was attracted by what she believed to be the prime characteristics of Norwegians: being efficient, able to make everything work, relaxed and closer to nature, leading a life whose rhythm was dictated by the seasons.

Chiara had imagined herself becoming part of a close group of Spanish and foreign friends, in which the locals would reveal to the newcomers the city's secrets, and together they would discover the less trodden paths. She also saw Andalusians as closer culturally to Italians than, for example, people from Madrid ("in terms of traditional values, the importance of the family, etc."). However, when she moved into her new flat, which she shared with two young women, she found she could not keep up with the habit of having dinner at 10.30 in the evening, going out at midnight and returning home in the small hours after having been to a *botellón*, a get-together in a public square (Emanuela soon found, to her dismay, that in Cádiz there was an especially-designed *botellódromo*) with the sole aim of consuming large quantities of cheap alcohol. This was clearly not what she had expected in terms of "traditional values". In addition, she complained that, although she often asked them about their culture, habits, likes and dislikes, they never asked her similar questions, and actually seemed uninterested in her "Italianness".

Petra too expected to meet mostly Erasmus students in her residence, and was looking forward to becoming part of a multicultural group straight away. However, she also knew that meeting locals depends on one's motivation and willingness to make the effort and create the right opportunities, and she was ready to put in what it took.

6.3.3.3 Stereotyping

Generalisations about groups of people are in a sense inevitable, as it is the basis of our knowledge and understanding of cultures and societies. Stereotyping, that is assuming that all members of a particular group possess a number of (positive or negative) ascribed features (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009), such as the fact that all Germans are hard-working, can be one of the barriers to cross-cultural encounters, not least in the context of study abroad.

In the previous section it was clear that several of the participants had (mostly positive) expectations about the people from the countries where they would be sojourning.

The initial impact with local students was, for most of them, more difficult than expected. In order to make sense of these difficulties, many resorted to the type of generalisation often reported in similar studies:

...the Swedish are very helpful when you ask for help, but otherwise they are very introvert. (Pina, 23 Sept)⁷⁷

...the English... they don't involve you at all... they prefer to hang around together... (Jack, 12 Oct)⁷⁸

... I expected that (Scottish) people would be a little more open. But in reality they're not very open. (Miriam, 12 Oct)⁷⁹

[The Danes] are very proud of their language, their culture [...] they have a very different attitude to their culture, and perhaps this makes them a bit more reserved. But I'm always very reluctant to make definitive judgments. But I'm a little ... confused. Because I get some messages from them ... and then some completely different messages. (Ilaria, 21 Sept)⁸⁰

... having relationships with Germans [...] is rather difficult. First, because they are rather... cold. They find it really hard to speak. To say 'hello'. (Petra, 20 Oct)⁸¹

These generalisations were often legitimised by adding to the speakers' own opinions, those of fellow Erasmus students, as Silvia (and Lorenzo below) did when she talked about her experience of the French:

... the French [...] are not very... open to talk. I think in general they don't even socialize with each other. They lead very

⁷⁷ ... gli Svedesi sono molto gentili quando gli chiedi aiuto, ma altrimenti sono molto introversi.

⁷⁸ ... gli inglesi... non ti coinvolgono per niente... preferiscono stare tra di loro...

⁷⁹ Mi aspettavo che la gente fosse un po' più aperta. Ma in realtà non sono molto aperti.

⁸⁰ Loro sono molto orgogliosi della loro lingua, della loro cultura [...] hanno un'attitudine molto diversa alla loro cultura, forse questo li rende un po' più chiusi. Ma sono sempre molto restia a dare giudizi definitivi. Ma sono un po'... interdetti. Perché un po' mi hanno dato dei segnali... un po' dei tutt'altri segnali.

⁸¹ Avere rapporti con i tedeschi [...] è piuttosto difficile. Prima, perché sono abbastanza... freddi. Fanno veramente fatica a parlare, a salutarti.

individual lives, in the sense that they don't speak to each other ... I mean, they come to class, follow lessons, finish, and then everyone goes about their business. So ... okay, no problem, that is ... but it's something I've noticed. I'm not the only one to have noticed, all the other guys who are here have noticed this thing...(14 Oct)⁸²

Lorenzo too felt that there was even a sense of hostility on the part of the locals (Czechs) with respect to foreign nationals:

the group where I am are from all over Europe except the Czech Republic, because we're all Erasmus. And with Czech people it's a little problem [...] Most of them doesn't know English and speak English. I don't know why, maybe because they didn't study... [...] and among the new generations people, the most of them are not speaking as a choice. Because, well, they are a little closed and...how can I say... xenophobic, they want to underline that they are... that they are Czech and you are foreigners, so they don't want to speak with foreigners people. But it's not only me, if you ask every other guy, or the people in my Erasmus group, and they all say the same (28 Sept).

Would the knowledge of a few words of Czech, or a greater interest in getting to know some local students, and understanding their point of view on this matter, have helped Lorenzo to modify his opinions? Could he have been better prepared before departure, in order to make this one of his objectives for his sojourn abroad?

⁸² Ovviamente i francesi, sì. Però sono molto poco ... aperti alle chiacchiere. Secondo me, non socializzano in generale neanche tra di loro. Vedo che fanno molto vita individuale, nel senso che tra di loro non parlano...Cioè, vanno a lezione, seguono, escono, e poi ognuno va per i fatti suoi. Noi ovviamente siamo un po' più... cioè, abbiamo più bisogno anche di parlare tra di noi, perché comunque siamo in una situazione particolare, quindi...è diverso il nostro modo di affrontare i corsi, cerchiamo di stare abbastanza insieme, ci teniamo vicini...
...non hanno molta voglia di...avere relazioni personali all'interno del...io penso che sia per il fatto che noi parliamo un po' male la lingua [...] poi i francesi sono un po'... non so se sono condizionata da tutto quello che si dice tra francesi e italiani, però in effetti c'è un po' di questo...astio nascosto verso di noi... cedo che c'è...almeno nei miei confronti sono tutti sempre molto distaccati, non hanno piacere ad avere conversazioni, o ad aiutarmi in qualche modo, ecco. Quindi...va bene, non c'è problema, cioè...però è una cosa che ho notato. E non sono l'unica ad averlo notato, tutti gli altri ragazzi che sono qui hanno notato questa cosa...

6.3.3.4 Language barrier

The issue of language constituting an obstacle for communication was discussed above with regard to the academic context, and again regarding the aspect of native-speaker and non-native-speaker status. That language should be a barrier in foreign students' attempts to forge relationships with local students is not surprising, particularly when the latter's level of proficiency in L2 is low. When the sojourner is not a language major, there may be a lack of motivation to learn the language well enough to overcome the problem. In addition, there may be a sense of expectation that the host students should be the ones to make the effort to accommodate to the foreign students' more limited linguistic skills. This was, among other, Silvia's case:

The French don't relate to us. They have problems with the fact that we speak language badly. [...] They dislike hearing French which is not excellent. On the other hand I understand them, if we were in Italy I would notice an Erasmus student who doesn't speak well.(1 Dec)⁸³

6.3.4 Strategies

Having analysed the participants' explanations for their initial difficulties in establishing relationships with local students, what strategies, if any, did they use for overcoming these obstacles?

Changing the above-mentioned situations required, on the part of the participants, the ability to suspend judgement. In the sections above, it was clear how resorting to generalisations and stereotyping seemed triggered by a thwarting of expectations. According to Anderson (1994), the initial stages of adjustment are dominated by the affective components of personality, while cognitive aspects are more evident in the latter phases. Indeed, Miriam's outpouring about her Scottish classmates being cold and uninterested, or Daniela's irritation below about Norwegians preferring to speak

⁸³ I francesi non hanno rapporti con noi. Loro hanno difficoltà col fatto che noi parliamo male la lingua.[...] Hanno fastidio a sentire un francese non eccelso. D'altronde li capisco, anch'io se fossimo in Italia noterei un Erasmus che non parla bene.

their language rather than English were more signs of frustration than reasoned arguments:

... Because actually we had been told that the Norwegian language was becoming extinct, but that's not true. In the sense that I'm aware of a great sense of pride on the part of the Norwegians - I think anthropology helps you to understand these things - I see that they have absolutely no desire to speak English. [...] (16 Sept)⁸⁴

Did these students succeed in overcoming their frustration and take initiatives to surmount the problems barring their way?

Daniela seemed the most unsuccessful from this point of view. Perhaps through lack of time, or actually because she knew her stay was temporary, she seemed increasingly entrenched behind negative stereotypes, which in September, after the first few weeks, concerned the Norwegians' inability to interact, to their excessive consumption of alcohol, their stubbornness in not wanting to give up their national language:.

So if you ask me what the Norwegians are really like ... I recognize them because when I go dancing they are so drunk they become... how should I say... expansive. The problem is that during the day they're incredibly shy, and interacting with them is difficult, because actually they speak in Norwegian, so ... in the canteen, for example, if you're sitting at a table with people who speak in Norwegian, it becomes difficult to join in, because you speak a completely different language, and they have the attitude of hanging out together, they're very shy. Certainly, they drink like fish, so in the evening they're unbearable because they're all over you, it's the opposite. It's a bit strange, because

⁸⁴ ... perché in realtà ci era stato detto che 'sto norvegese era una lingua in estinzione, in realtà non è così. Nel senso che io percepisco un grande orgoglio da parte dei norvegesi - penso che antropologia un po' aiuti a capire queste cose - io vedo che loro non hanno assolutamente voglia di parlare l'inglese.

during the day I think that Norway is a paradise, where everything works, but nothing works in the evening. In the sense that ... I don't know how to explain ... probably because the rules are so strict, with no exceptions, that's how it is. If in Italy they probably make a lot of exceptions for Erasmus students, even during exams, here they don't make exceptions. And so during the evening they drink like mad....(16 Sept)⁸⁵

Two months later, however, the generalisations had extended to other areas of the local culture and what she considered to be Norwegian characteristics:

We tried going to the theatre, but it's in Norwegian. [...] My opinion is a bit anthropological, I've been thinking ... to me this seems a country that is delighted to be outside the European Union, delighted to have nothing to do with Europe, it organizes activities to benefit the Norwegians, and doesn't care at all that there are foreign tourists, etc. [...] it remains very attached to its traditions. My course "Norway Society and Culture" often takes the form of those damned outdoor activities which are no longer fun for us foreigners, because we're not used to running in the rain like idiots. But they want to keep their traditions alive, teach you how to make a fire ... so the fact that it's raining or snowing, to them it doesn't matter. And so my feeling is this: this is perhaps the least anthropologically developed country in the world, but it doesn't care. It's very rich, it's fine on its own, it doesn't need people from abroad ... so they organise those

⁸⁵ [...] Quindi effettivamente se mi chiedi i norvegesi come sono... io li riconosco perché quando vai a ballare sono talmente ubriachi che diventano...come si dice... espansivi. Il problema è che durante il giorno sono di una timidezza bestiale, e interagire con loro è difficile, perché comunque loro parlano in norvegese, quindi... c'è la mensa, per dirti, però se sei seduta ad un tavolo con gente che parla in norvegese, che diventa difficile intervenire, perché parli una lingua completamente diversa, e loro sono comunque improntati sul stare tra di loro, sono molto timidi. Certo è, bevono come delle spugne, quindi di sera sono invece intrattabili, perché diventano appiccicosi, l'opposto. È un po' strano, perché di giorno penso che la Norvegia sia il paradiso, dove tutto veramente funziona da Dio, la sera niente funziona [...] nel senso che... non so come spiegarlo... probabilmente sono così restrittivi nelle regole, non si fanno eccezioni, è questo anche il fatto. Se in Italia probabilmente per un Erasmus vengono fatte un sacco di eccezioni, anche nell'esame, qui sono un po' spaventata perché loro sono improntati sul non fare eccezioni. E durante la sera bevono in una maniera paurosa.

activities [i.e. theatre], which we would like to attend to pass the time, but they don't involve us because they're only in Norwegian. And what drives me mad is that they speak perfect English. It's not like in Italy, where they don't know English, so the activities are in Italian, we have no excuses. They know English perfectly, but they don't want to use it. It's a different approach. (9 Nov)⁸⁶

Needless to say, Daniela never succeeded in establishing relationships with Norwegian students, and was happy to stay in the company of her German friend until her return to Italy in December. In terms of Anderson's model, she was "Returnee" in that her responses to obstacles brought little success, she immersed herself, in the company of her German friend, in activities that distracted her from her difficulties (a behaviour also characteristic of the "Escaper"). She never moved beyond the role of the tourist, and returned home a month early.

However, Daniela was the exception. The other participants attempted to find, to some extent, strategies for overcoming these obstacles. For example, Petra, Angela, Federico, Juls and Margherita realised that host nationals could be met through sports activities: Petra began playing tennis and volleyball, Angela and Juls joined dance classes, Margherita the fencing club, and Federico organised football tournaments for Erasmus and local students. These findings contradict De Federico's (2008), who claims that sports and leisure activities do not play a role in choice of friends among Erasmus students. In the present study, it was found that, in such contexts, nationality

⁸⁶ Abbiamo provato ad andare a teatro, ma è in norvegese. [...] La mia opinione è un po' antropologica, ci ho pensato... a me sembra un paese che è felicissimo di essere fuori dall'unione europea, felicissimo di non avere niente a che fare con l'Europa, e quindi organizza attività per far star bene i norvegesi, se ne frega assolutamente che ci siano stranieri, turisti, tutto [...] rimane molto legato alle sue tradizioni. Il mio corso di "Norway Society and Culture" spesso si concretizza in queste benedette attività all'aperto che ormai non è più divertente per noi stranieri fare, perché non siamo abituati a correre sotto la pioggia come imbecilli. Però loro vogliono mantenere vive le loro tradizioni, insegnarti come si fa un fuoco... quindi piove, nevicca, per loro fa lo stesso. E quindi la mia sensazione è questa: come paese antropologicamente sviluppato è forse il minore al mondo, e sta bene. È molto ricco, sta bene da solo, non ha bisogno dell'estero... quindi hanno queste attività, che noi cerchiamo per far passare il tempo, ma non ci coinvolgono perché sono esclusivamente in norvegese. E fa rabbia perché parlano un inglese perfetto. Non è come in Italia, che comunque non lo sanno, l'inglese, le attività sono in italiano, non abbiamo altre scuse. Loro l'inglese lo sanno da Dio, ma non hanno voglia di parlarlo. È diverso proprio l'approccio.

and language fade into the background, and team spirit or simply enjoying an activity together can be critical in helping establish meaningful relationships with local students. In spite of her initial opinion that “Germans are a bit cold”, by December she observed “You create a circle together, something like a big family”⁸⁷ and towards the end of her stay she concluded

[...] The majority of the people I spend time with are German, but it takes a lot of determination ... you need to find the key to get in, the mechanism. (12 Feb)⁸⁸

Other strategies concerned turning one’s assets to one’s advantage: Miriam and Angela used their language interests and skill to join respectively a Tandem language exchange scheme and the university’s Language Café, where once a week those interested in practising their foreign languages could meet speakers of their target language. After a few weeks, Miriam observed:

...I’ve met a few people, because here, really, Italian is either an obstacle, or it’s the reason why you get to know people!(12 Oct)⁸⁹

In addition, she joined the Catholic Society and met some local students through activities organised there. Finally, she used what she knew was a sought-after skill, being able to cook Italian recipes, to organise an Italian cookery class that met once a week in her flat, attended among others by some local friends. Below is an exchange on Facebook regarding one of these occasions:

⁸⁷ Si crea un circolo, una specie di grande famiglia.

⁸⁸ [...] La maggioranza delle persone che frequento sono tedesche, ma ci vuole molta volontà... bisogna trovare la chiave d’ingresso, il meccanismo.

⁸⁹ ... ho conosciuto un po’ di persone perché qua, veramente, o l’italiano è un ostacolo, oppure è il motivo per cui conosci la gente!



Fig. 6.26 – Facebook extract 2

All these strategies gradually led to success, and by the end of her stay, Miriam had formed a network of local and international friends of which she was highly satisfied.

Jack too was determined to get to know some local students, in spite of his initial opinion that “friendship as we understand it doesn’t exist among the English”.⁹⁰ Once he had overcome his initial shyness, and built his confidence in English, he succeeded in establishing some meaningful relationships with two British students, with whom he enjoyed sharing this impression about his experience in the UK and which he used as “cultural informants”, as well as with one of his flatmates, a German Erasmus student. “I’m more into individual friendships than into groups”, he observed in one of the last interviews.

Finally, one last strategy adopted by some of the students consisted in changing their goals. This meant giving up their attempt to get to know host nationals. Indeed, few

⁹⁰ L’amicizia come la intendiamo noi non esiste tra gli inglesi.

students succeeded in befriending host-national classmates (one notable exception was Marina), although none of them seemed particularly concerned: they did not seem to consider the classroom as the context in which friendships were developed, and in any case they were more likely to socialise with other Erasmus participants in the group. Even sharing accommodation was no guarantee in itself that friendships with host nationals would be forged. Considering that for many of them, getting to know local students was strongly related to their instrumental need to practise the target language, some participants felt that in any case this goal was achieved in the classroom, and outside it with other foreign students. If, by the end of their sojourn, some felt disappointed at not having befriended more locals, it was more to do with their feeling that they might have learned more from mother-tongue speakers than from other foreign students.

In any case, removing this as a goal did not imply refusing offers of friendship from local students. These, according to the informants, were more likely to come from former Erasmus participants or, generally, students who had previously sojourned abroad.

Actually, I socialise much more with Erasmus students than with Finns. The Finns we know are the ones who approach us themselves, because maybe they want to learn the language, or because they like to hang out with Erasmus students, or because they too have done an Erasmus exchange. But not all are like that. The others are a little... reserved. (Giulia, 10 Nov)⁹¹

Lorenzo, who had reported his perception of a certain degree of xenophobia from the Czechs he had met in the initial weeks, also noticed a greater openness in locals who had experienced life abroad:

The only people ... young people who speak English is the one who had foreign experiences, who had some study period abroad,

⁹¹ Poi io frequento molti più Erasmus che finlandesi. I finlandesi che conosciamo sono piuttosto loro che vengono, perché magari vogliono imparare la lingua, o perché gli piace uscire con gli Erasmus, o perché hanno fatto un Erasmus anche loro. Ma non sono tutti così. Gli altri sono un po'... chiusini.

for example in Italy or Spain... former Erasmus students are more communicative, they try to communicate in every languages they know. And some of them knows Italian, because they have been in Italy...(28 Sept)

For these participants, if no local student offered to join their group of friends, it was not a great loss, as Angela and Valentina admitted:

... as I told you, I am interested also in meeting local people, but I feel perfectly comfortable in my group, so ... (Angela, 27 Sept)⁹²

Valentina: two Swedish students live on my floor, a male and a female student. The second evening after I arrived, we chatted with this Swedish guy. The situation was pleasant, we were having fun, we talked and joked, as well. Since then, I haven't spoken ... I haven't seen him since. In the morning, he takes his things for breakfast and goes back to his room. For lunch it's the same, he comes into the kitchen, takes his stuff to cook, and eats in the room. The only words we say are "hi", "hi" and "bye" "bye". Stop. And I can't understand this thing. In fact, we have wondered, how can it be...?

Ana: but have you tried asking him if he wants to eat with you, maybe one day when you're eating together?

Valentina: Oh ... well, you see ... really, the last time I had thought of at least asking him "how are you?" But he seems so ... absorbed ... I don't know ... I feel he might get annoyed, I don't know, maybe I shouldn't think that. The point is that [...] maybe some people have the habit of doing so [eating in their room] and perhaps it would annoy them to have to change what they do... so I could ask, but ... And then, you know what? we have created a

⁹² : certo, come ti dicevo, mi interessa anche conoscere gente locale, però io nel mio gruppo mi trovo benissimo, quindi...

kind of group ... and we feel comfortable the four of us together,
so in the end ... there's just the four of us... (7 Oct)⁹³

6.3.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have addressed my main research question:

- How do the students experience adaptation to a different environment, in the context of Higher Education mobility today?

In doing this, I have also attempted to answer the following sub-questions:

- What (social and academic) experiences did the students have in their various destinations?
- What (social and academic) obstacles did they encounter, and what strategies did they develop in order to cope?
- Were these strategies successful?

In order to answer these questions, I have analysed and described the longitudinal data collected during the sojourn abroad. The weekly diary-tables were used to draw graphs that could visually represent the ups and down of the individual subjective experiences. The graphs were compared with other graphic representations of the adaptation curve, namely the U- and learning curves. It was seen how, while the graphs of some participants could resemble one of these curves, those of the majority showed great divergence, which illustrated well the great variety in the patterns of

⁹³ Valentina: nel mio piano abitano due svedesi, un ragazzo e una ragazza. La seconda sera che ero arrivata, c'è stato uno scambio di parole con questo ragazzo svedese. Era una situazione anche divertente, era una serata in allegria, e quindi si parlava e scherzava, così. Da quel momento in poi, non ho più parlato... no l'ho più visto. La mattina prende le cose per fare colazione e se ne va in camera. A pranzo idem, entra in cucina, prende la sua roba per cucinarla e se la mangia in camera. Le uniche parole che diciamo sono "hi", "hi" e "bye", "bye". Stop. E questa cosa non riesco a capirla. E infatti ci siamo chiesti in più di una persona com'è possibile questa cosa... (Ana: ma avete provato a chiedergli se vuole mangiare con voi, magari una volta che state mangiando insieme?)

Mah...guarda... veramente l'altra volta avevo pensato di chiedergli almeno "how are you?", però mi sembra così... tra le sue... che non so... mi sembra che potrei scacciarlo, non lo so, poi magari sbaglio a pensarla così. Il discorso è che [...] magari alcuni hanno l'abitudine di fare così e magari probabilmente scoccerebbe fare in un modo diverso...quindi si può fare, ma boh... E poi sai cos'è? che abbiamo creato diciamo un gruppo... ma un gruppo relativamente, che stiamo bene tra noi quattro, quindi alla fine... stiamo noi quattro

adaptation of sojourners to life abroad. The graphs also showed how different academic and social aspects can develop at a different pace.

While the graphs provided an overall picture of the individual patterns of adaptation, the interview data revealed the details of the problems encountered and the strategies used to overcome them. After providing an overview of some of the prevalent themes that emerged from the data, I concentrated, by way of examples, on two particular aspects which presented obstacles for these students. The first, pertaining to the academic experience, concerned the difficulty in actively contributing to seminars and tutorials. The second, taken from the participants' social/personal experiences, related to the problems in establishing friendship networks with host nationals. After analysing in what terms the informants articulated the problems they encountered, I discussed some of the coping strategies that emerged from the longitudinal data collected, and in particular how successful they were in helping the sojourners overcome the particular obstacles and proceed along their adaptive path. In some cases, combinations of strategies were used, which makes it particularly difficult to assess the efficacy of a single strategy in any specific case.

In the next chapter, I will address a further research question: what sense did the students make of their experiences, and how were outcomes articulated? In order to do this, I will analyse the feedback that the participants gave me on their sojourn once they returned home. In chapter 8, I will present the case of one student, Angela, in an attempt to show longitudinally how, for one single individual, different obstacles elicited a variety of coping strategies, and how all of these can be viewed as adjustments to the new environment.

CHAPTER 7 – Back home

7.1 Outcomes

In Chapter 6, I analysed and discussed the participants' experiences of study abroad, concentrating primarily on the demands made upon them by the new environment. These were conceptualised, with reference to Anderson's (1994) model, as obstacles, or thwarting conditions, that present themselves in the sojourners' paths towards their objectives. These in turn are determined by the individual's motivations: if the latter change, the goals will inevitably be altered. I therefore analysed the participants' perceptions of the new environment, the assessment of the obstacles it presented, and the coping strategies used by the sojourners to adjust to these demands.

As a result of this process, most participants adjusted with time to their new context. Almost the totality were satisfied with the experience, and felt they had gained from it. What exactly did they feel they had achieved as a result of their study abroad? In what terms did they articulate those outcomes? And finally, to what extent were the outcomes affected by the sojourners' ability to adapt to the new environment they found themselves in? These issues will be discussed here, drawing from the interview data obtained within three months of the participants' return to Italy.

Although much research on outcomes of student mobility have tended to concentrate on measurable academic results, including language acquisition (Coleman, 1995; Freed, 1995, but see also Hadis, 2005 for more general academic gains, among others), here I am more interested in the perceived effects, and how the participants made sense of their experiences of study abroad.

During the final interview, which took place in the weeks following re-entry, I asked the students to talk about the outcomes of their study-abroad period. I also reminded them of what they had told me before departure regarding expectations, and asked them to comment of the extent to which these had been fulfilled. I have divided outcomes into linguistic, academic, professional and (inter-)cultural, partly reflecting

the motivations mentioned before departure, and partly the taxonomy suggested by Coleman (2007). As mentioned in the chapter dedicated to motivations, the degree of importance given to each aspect may reflect the ease with which the students were able to articulate it, as well as to the more “tangible” quality of particular outcomes. Thus, linguistic or academic outcomes tended to be mentioned first, whereas the personal and inter(cultural) seemed to require greater reflection.

7.2 Linguistic outcomes

In the same way that linguistic motives for going abroad were not limited to language majors, neither were the linguistic outcomes, although language specialists like Juls or Chiara mentioned them first. The great majority of the participants felt satisfied with the improvements made, and drew gratification from being able, on the one hand, to use their target language in academic contexts and, on the other, to feel competent in their use of it to socialise, both with native speakers and with other international students. Both of these aspects exceeded the initial expectations of most of the students.

In terms of the language used for academic purposes, those with a lower initial level understandably found the demands made on them more challenging, as we saw in the previous chapter. These included having to follow lessons in the foreign language, contribute to class discussions, give presentations and write essays and assignments, as well as more generally having to get used to a new academic system. The ultimate academic challenge, though, was being able to pass their exams, which they all did. Pina’s comment below is representative of the boost that this gave to their self-confidence.

... I experienced it as a challenge, to be able to talk about somewhat more complex issues in English... we made two presentations, and actually at the end, the last exam I did was

oral. And that made me ... I was at peace with myself, I said "I know how to do it, I'm able to do it." And it was great.⁹⁴

Although some commented on the slight drop of their average overall mark as a result of their Erasmus exchange (a reason given by some for *not* taking part in it) they all felt it was an inconvenience that was amply compensated by the value of the entire experience.

Linguistic outcomes were not limited to the academic context. Most felt that they had reached a level of proficiency they could not have attained back home partly thanks to the fact they had to use the foreign language outside the classroom. Silvia, who had great difficulty learning French at school due to a slight problem of dyslexia, which had undermined her confidence as a language learner, went so far as to express the feeling that French had become part of her, not just a foreign language she 'mastered'.

I left with the wish to improve, especially regarding language [...] and the greatest satisfaction was to realize that I finally master a foreign language in a way I didn't before, and I still don't for any other language, except French. But for me it was a great testing ground because it made me realise that if there is ... I mean, this experience has really helped me. Because, basically, despite all my years of study, I got there and I didn't know French. Instead, living there and having to deal every day with people who speak another language to you helped me a lot, and now I'm coming back... I mean, I've come back with the awareness that I have mastered the language, I can use it, it's mine, in a sense, which before it absolutely was not, I mean, I didn't even believe it

⁹⁴ ...l'ho vissuto come una sfida, di poter far discorsi un po' più complessi in inglese, abbiamo fatto due presentazioni, e addirittura alla fine, l'ultimo esame che ho fatto è stato orale. E quello mi ha... mi sono appacificata con me stessa, ho detto "lo so fare, sono in grado di farlo". Ed è stato molto bello.

would be possible, to go there and come back knowing you can use it comfortably. But actually, that's how it is.⁹⁵

Valentina, on the other hand, felt disappointed with her level of English, and blamed her initial linguistic difficulties, and the constant temptation to use her mother tongue when she felt tired and wanted to relax, for slowing down the process of language acquisition.

... But I certainly didn't reach the levels that I would have wanted, or that one hopes to arrive at, because the dynamics were such that ... too many Italians, and so too many opportunities for laziness to creep in ... and to take over. So you say, "Okay, I'll speak in Italian because I'm so tired that I don't think I can manage .. I find English too difficult, so today I want to speak in Italian, who cares ...". But it's the wrong attitude, because if you go there you still need to engage in certain situations in order to constantly have the opportunity to speak in English. It's hard, though, because in any case you know that you don't have the skills to do it, you come up against difficulties daily, because you know you can't even say "give me a glass for the water," for example... so finding a person who can understand you, it's like a lifeline to which you cling. But maybe this at first, and anyway perhaps it's ok because later... I think it was important for me to listen a lot, and even if at first I didn't talk, I didn't join in, at least I listened and listened, and now I've reached the point where at least I can discuss something or even speak in English when I'm angry (*laughs*) ... so in the first stage, listening helped

⁹⁵ Ero partita con la volontà di migliorarmi, soprattutto su tutta la questione linguistica [...] e la soddisfazione più grande è stata rendermi conto che finalmente ho padronanza di una lingua straniera che prima non avevo, e non ho di nessun'altra lingua, solo del francese. Però per me è stato un grandissimo banco di prova perché mi sono proprio resa conto che, se c'è... cioè, questo tipo di esperienza mi ha proprio aiutato. Perché nonostante tutti i miei anni di studio, sono arrivata lì e il francese non lo sapevo, praticamente. Invece, vivere là e avere tutti i giorni a che fare con persone che ti parlano in un'altra lingua, mi ha aiutato tantissimo, e ora torno, cioè sono tornata con la coscienza che questa lingua la padroneggio, la posso usare, che è mia, in un certo senso, cosa che assolutamente prima no, cioè non ci credevo neanche in realtà, di andare e di ritornare sapendo di poterla usare tranquillamente. Invece poi in effetti è così.

me, and I've definitely seen some progress. But I don't know if they really reflect my expectations, I don't mean that I ever imagined that I could speak perfect English in eight months, this I definitely didn't believe. But at least I thought I would get there first, in a different way, more effectively.⁹⁶

Valentina was aware that her approach to the language was problematic, that giving in to the temptation to speak in Italian would jeopardise her chances of improving her language skills, but she justified herself by implying there was something inevitable about the “dynamics” of the context in which she found herself. She admitted that she had expected to reach her objectives faster and more effectively, but didn't seem aware of the fact that this would have required a more conscious strategy on her part.

On the other hand, the students who used strategies in this respect (avoiding co-nationals, networking with host-nationals or other international students with whom they used the target language as a lingua franca) all reported being very satisfied with the level reached, and the greatest perceived improvements concerned the spoken language, in particular aspects such as fluency, lexical development, pronunciation and the use of idiomatic language. Two of them had also taken certified language examinations while abroad.

⁹⁶ ...Però sicuramente non sono arrivata ai livelli che avrei voluto, o che comunque uno spera di arrivare, perché comunque c'erano delle dinamiche tali per cui... troppi italiani, e quindi troppo possibilità di far sì che la pigrizia venisse... prendesse il sopravvento, quindi tu dici "vabbe', parlo in italiano perché sono così stanca e magari non ce la faccio.. ho troppe difficoltà in inglese quindi oggi voglio parlare in italiano, non me ne frega niente...". Però è l'atteggiamento sbagliato, perché se tu vai comunque lì ti devi impegnare in determinate situazioni per continuamente poter parlare in inglese. Ma è dura, perché comunque sai che non hai le potenzialità per farlo, ti riscontri con le difficoltà di ogni giorno, perché comunque sai di non poter dire neanche "dammi un bicchiere per l'acqua", per dire... e quindi, il fatto di trovare una persona che ti può capire, è come un'ancora di salvezza a cui tu ti aggrappi. Però magari questo all'inizio, e forse va anche bene perché comunque dopo... e penso sia stato fondamentale per me ascoltare moltissimo, e se anche all'inizio non facevo discorsi, non intervenivo, quanto meno ascoltavo, ascoltavo, ed adesso sono arrivata alla fine che un minimo riesco a fare un discorso o addirittura a parlare in inglese se mi arrabbio (ridendo)... quindi nella prima fase l'ascolto mi è servito e quindi ho riscontrato sicuramente dei progressi. Però non so se veramente rispecchiano le mie aspettative, cioè non nel senso che io immaginassi che in otto mesi potevo parlare perfettamente inglese, questo sicuramente non lo pensavo. Però quanto meno pensavo di arrivarci prima, in una maniera diversa, più efficace.

As for the national language of countries where teaching took place in English used as a lingua franca, only Francesca, a linguist, had taken the trouble to study Greek during her stay in Cyprus. The rest, who had sojourned mostly in Scandinavian countries (except for Lorenzo, who went to Prague) had not gone beyond a few basic sentences. Their feeling that English was sufficient in order to spend a year studying in those countries had not changed.

7.3 Academic outcomes

As with the previous category, the majority of the participants expressed satisfaction with the academic outcomes of their experience, confirming quantitative studies in the literature (Teichler 2004). This primarily stemmed from having been able to do the work required and having passed all of their examinations. Those who succeeded in attaining good results were particularly pleased, but even an average mark was considered an achievement by most, as mentioned in the previous section. The second reason was the value attributed to having had the chance to experience a different academic system, as the following extracts show:

To see the world of higher education abroad, the teachers, obviously everything is so different, so I think it's worth trying this out. Otherwise, you stay five years in Italy, or in the country you come from, you fossilize, you say "ah, I have to hurry, I have to finish as soon as possible. And over there things are worse than here." Maybe you'll find worse things, but you can also find plenty of other things, and anyway you'll be able to say "it's better where I come from" or "it's much better over here" or "Well! I've tried two [systems], why not try a third," we are in the European Community, why not take advantage of this?
(Pina)⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Per vedere come il mondo dell'università all'estero, i professori, chiaramente è tutto diverso, quindi ne vale la pena, secondo me, di provarlo. Se no, rimani cinque anni in Italia, o nel paese da cui vieni, ti fossilizzi, dici "ah! Devo sbrigarmi, devo finire, il prima possibile. E là stanno peggio di qua". Magari trovi di peggio, ma comunque trovi moltissime altre cose, e comunque potrei dire "da dove

So, I don't know where to start ... it has given me ... in any case one's horizon, one's view is widened. I had already travelled, so I'm not too closed, I couldn't wait to go and I love travelling, but ... it's actually studying in another place, seeing a different higher education system, and the students themselves, how and what they study, which is very different from us. (Miriam)⁹⁸

The students felt this had opened up their minds, shown that things can be done in different ways, and for many it gave them the chance to try practices which are rarely found in Italian higher education institutions: students of sciences like Lorenzo and Pina experienced the possibility of doing practical work in labs, and group work when preparing a presentation or working on a problem. Humanities students like Marina, Jack, Miriam, Angela or Chiara enjoyed attending seminars and tutorials, learning to express critical views and argue their opinions, doing group work, and having others listen to their presentations.

Oral contributions and personal work are requested much more often. In short, it's considered as something important. Of course, it's difficult at first, but then it gave me great satisfaction, because initially these works, these oral presentations, I mean, the first one was a terrible experience for me, I struggled because I didn't have a clue. But then, as I went on, feeling comfortable with my group mates, I started moving away from my usual ways of working alone, and it's proven very positive ... (Chiara)⁹⁹

vengo io è meglio" oppure "qua e molto meglio" "beh! Ne ho provati due, perché non provare un terzo", siamo nella comunità europea, perché non sfruttarlo?

⁹⁸ Comunque non so da dove partire... ma mi ha dato... comunque l'orizzonte, lo sguardo si apre molto di più. Io avevo già viaggiato, quindi non è che sia una molto chiusa, non vedevo l'ora e mi piace viaggiare, però... proprio studiare in un altro posto, vedere un altro sistema universitario diverso, proprio gli studenti come, cosa studiano, che è molto diverso rispetto a noi. Quindi la vita dello studente là piuttosto che la vita dello studente qua.

⁹⁹ L'intervento, il lavoro personale è molto più richiesto. E' messo in evidenza, insomma, come cosa importante. E' certo faticoso all'inizio, ma poi mi ha dato grandi soddisfazioni, perché questi lavori, queste esposizioni all'inizio, cioè il primo l'ho vissuto proprio male, ho fatto fatica perché non ne avevo mezza. Ma poi andando avanti, trovandomi bene coi compagni di gruppo mi sono staccata dai miei soliti modi di lavorare da sola, è stato molto positivo.

The term ‘satisfaction’ is mentioned frequently by most informants, as was the concept of a new experience such as this generating motivation to continue studying and increasing their confidence in their own skills and abilities. Some students also regretted that the university system in Italy did not have some elements of other European systems:

I really enjoyed dealing with the university in a different way from what I was used to previously, I was a bit fed up, in fact. Maybe it was good that I went. Studying as I did here is tiring. Instead, there it's a bit more stimulating, you need to take the initiative more, I liked it and I did it more willingly than I would have done here. (Silvia)¹⁰⁰

Definitely positive, it has given me the desire to study. [...] it has made me ready again to make sacrifices to get ahead, while here I was demoralized. I feel more assertive than before. (Valentina)¹⁰¹

From the point of view of the university, I really enjoyed the courses. I also loved the way things are taught in England. In the sense that they allow students to think, and this really unsettled me at first, because basically Italian students are not inclined to think and communicate their ideas, but rather to report what they've read in a book. While there, it's completely the opposite, in the sense that they give you a topic and you have to develop it, analyse it critically, and give your own ideas. So initially I found it hard, but then I found that it was a system that I liked a lot. And I was worried about having to go home and return to the old method. I loved the essays, in the sense that you had a plan, but

¹⁰⁰ Mi è piaciuto affrontare l'università in modo diverso da come ero abituata finora, ero un po' stufa, in effetti. Forse è stato un bene che ci sia andata. Studiare come studiavo qui, è faticoso. Invece là è un pochino più stimolante, devi essere tu più intraprendente, mi è piaciuto e l'ho fatto più volentieri di quanto lo avrei fatto qui.

¹⁰¹ Sicuramente positiva, mi ha dato voglia di studiare. [...] Mi ha ridato voglia di sacrificarmi per andare avanti, mentre qua ero demoralizzata. Mi sento più grintosa di prima.

the essay then took its own path as you wrote, and I would realise that maybe I was trying to follow a path then I would take a book, and then another, and I would start writing so many other things ... it was very dynamic, very complex and innovative for me. That, I liked. I find it strange that there were no oral exams, because here I was used to having them all oral. In any case, all the exams went very well, so I'm extremely pleased. (Jack)¹⁰²

At the same time, the academic experience abroad made some students aware of the positive aspects of the Italian system, so often publicly criticised for requiring students to learning a large amount of information by heart, rather than fostering the ability to synthesise and think critically. The large majority felt that their academic background had proved more than adequate and, in terms of knowledge, often proved better than that of their peers:

In any case, academically I have learned to study with a different method, which certainly is more effective in combination with the Italian one. The English system in itself is not effective, because the gaps that English students have are really shocking. Which I think come from high school. But actually, the English system, if you have a base that comes from a system like the Italian one, in my opinion it's much better ... the problem is that the English have gaps at the base that are not filled. So it's useless, because they have nothing on which to build. But if you

¹⁰² A livello universitario i corsi mi sono piaciuti tantissimo. Anche il modo in cui viene insegnato qualcosa in Inghilterra mi è piaciuto molto. Nel senso che permettono agli studenti di pensare, e questa cosa all'inizio mi aveva sicuramente spiazzato, perché lo studente italiano di base non è portato a pensare e a comunicare le proprie idee, bensì a riportare quello che ha letto in un libro. Mentre là è completamente il contrario, nel senso che loro ti danno un argomento e tu devi svilupparlo, criticarlo, dare le tue proprie idee. Quindi all'inizio mi sono trovato in difficoltà, ma poi ho trovato che era un sistema che mi piaceva tantissimo. E mi preoccupava già il fatto di dover ritornare a casa e tornare al metodo antico. Mi sono piaciuti molto gli *essay*, nel senso che avevi una traccia, ma l'*essay* prendeva la propria strada man mano che scrivevi, e mi rendevo conto che magari io cercavo di impostarlo ma poi prendevo un libro, prendevo un altro, e incominciavo a scrivere tante altre cose... era molto dinamica, molto articolata e innovativa per me. Quello mi è piaciuto. Mi fa strano che non ci siano stati esami orali, perché qua ero abituato ad averli tutti orali. Comunque, gli esami sono andati tutti molto bene, quindi sono estremamente soddisfatto.

come from there, it helps a lot, in terms of the method, not of research, but of processing things. (Margherita)¹⁰³

The different relationship with teachers, found in some countries in particular, was another aspect appreciated by most students. Valentina, Marina and Ilaria enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere this created in the class, and appreciated the possibility of discussing what they considered to be more private matters, like plans for their future, with their tutors.

My educational goal was achieved at a good level, because the university, in the sense of the classes and the environment, was one of the highlights of my experience, I liked it very much, and I had the chance to have a very direct relationship with my teachers, something which doesn't exist here, which I really enjoyed. And the system is quite different, so I was able to understand well the differences and similarities. In short, as I told you many times, you have to put yourself on the line much more over there. I felt much more challenged... (Chiara)¹⁰⁴

With the teachers we had a different relationship, there was the coffee break, but maybe it was because we were Masters students. Once we had a meeting for our dissertation, it was nice to discuss things with other people, to ask questions and get advice, with the teachers who give you advice. There was an informal atmosphere, though not excessively so, relaxed, very

¹⁰³ Comunque sia a livello accademico ho imparato a studiare con un altro metodo, che sicuramente unito a quello italiano è più efficace. Non è efficace quello inglese in sé, perché gli studenti inglesi hanno delle lacune veramente allucinanti. Che secondo me vengono dalle scuole superiori. Però ecco, il sistema inglese, se alla base uno ha un sistema come è quello italiano, secondo me è molto migliore... il problema degli inglesi è che hanno delle lacune alla base che non vengono colmate. Per cui è inutile, perché non hanno niente su cui costruire. Però se uno viene da là aiuta tanto, proprio come metodo, non di ricerca, ma di elaborazione delle cose.

¹⁰⁴ L'obiettivo scolastico è stato raggiunto a un buon livello, perché l'università in quanto lezioni e ambienti è stato uno dei punti forti della mia esperienza, mi è piaciuto veramente tantissimo, e ho avuto possibilità di avere un contatto molto diretto con gli insegnanti, cosa che qui non esiste, e mi è piaciuto veramente molto. E il sistema è piuttosto diverso quindi ho potuto capire bene differenze e somiglianze. Insomma, come ti dicevo sempre ci si deve mettere molto più in gioco là. Io mi sentivo molto più chiamata in causa...

pleasant. There you can talk to the teacher, he's not on a pedestal, they are called by their first name, you can say what you think, then if necessary you can discuss things. In Italy, though, this is not possible. There, you are a student that is treated as an individual, not as a number. The talks with the teacher can also relate to personal issues. There is a more humane attitude. (Valentina)¹⁰⁵

The students following Master courses were generally those who had invested more in the academic aspect of the experience, and who therefore attributed greater importance to these particular outcomes. Marina, Ilaria and Gioacchino all chose their destinations after consulting the list of available courses from the host university's website, whereas for undergraduate students like Chiara, Emanuela or Claudia, the choice was dictated more by a wish to spend time in a particular destination. It is therefore understandable that for the former three, the academic outcomes of their Erasmus sojourn were predominant in their feedback.

Finally, another benefit of the Erasmus mobility was the possibility to study subjects which were not part of the participants' degree courses in Italy (Teichler, 2004). Pina, for example, was happy to have attended engineering courses on renewable energy, for which Sweden was renowned, and which were not available in Italy. Silvia found interesting new material for her dissertation in one of the courses she would not have attended in her home institution, and Federico did the practical work for his engineering thesis in one of the few European laboratories specialising in his field.

The Erasmus experience also gave me the topic for my dissertation, I am very happy... marketing and social

¹⁰⁵ Coi professori c'era un rapporto diverso, c'era il coffee break, ma forse era perché eravamo studenti di master. Una volta abbiamo fatto un incontro per la tesi, è stato bello confrontarsi con gli altri, ricevere consigli e poter fare domande, con i prof che ti consigliano. C'era una situazione informale, ma non troppo, rilassante, un ambiente bello. Lì si può parlare col professore, non sta sul piedistallo, vengono chiamati per nome, tu puoi esprimere quello che pensi, poi se mai si discute. In Italia invece questo non è possibile. Lì sei uno studente che viene considerato come un individuo, non come un numero. I colloqui con il professore possono anche riguardare questioni di vita personale. C'è un atteggiamento più umano.

communication. I was in the faculty of sociology, so I did a course in social psychology. This gave me the edge over those who didn't go [abroad]. (Silvia)¹⁰⁶

Doing subjects which, at the beginning of my first 'learning agreement', I hadn't taken into consideration, and different from language, literature, philology, I had the chance to come across a lot of very useful material from a linguistic and communicative point of view, it was very fruitful. (Chiara)¹⁰⁷

I had left already knowing that the subject was a little different, a branch of Linguistics closer to Cognitive Sciences, while in Bologna Semiotics is part of Communication Sciences, and so it also analyses media content, it's closer to the traditional Communication Sciences, so it was something else. I knew I was going to do something different, I knew it was not exactly my degree course, but yes, I liked it, although some things are just not my interests, among those I studied. Some things I liked a lot, others I was a little more sceptical, particularly in terms of approach. But anyway it was nice because there was always a debate among the participants [...] But as a university experience, it's definitely unique. (Marina)¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ L'esperienza Erasmus mi ha dato anche il tema per la mia tesi, sono felicissima - marketing e comunicazione sociale - ero nella facoltà di sociologia, quindi ho fatto un corso di psicologia sociale. Questo mi ha dato un'arma in più rispetto a chi non è partito.

¹⁰⁷ Facendo anche materie che all'inizio del mio primo 'learning agreement' non avevo preso in considerazione, distaccate da quello che è la lingua, la letteratura, la filologia, ho avuto la possibilità di incontrare un sacco di materiale linguistico e comunicativo molto proficuo, è stata una cosa molto proficua.

¹⁰⁸ [...] io poi ero partita che già sapevo che la materia era un po' diversa, cioè più linguistica vicina alle scienze cognitive, mentre a Bologna semiotica è Scienze della Comunicazione, quindi fa anche analisi di contenuti media, più vicina a Scienze della Comunicazione classica, quindi era un'altra cosa. Sapevo già che andavo a fare un'altra cosa, sapevo che non era proprio il mio indirizzo, però sì, ecco, mi è piaciuto, però alcune cose non sono proprio i miei interessi, quello che ho studiato. Alcune cose mi sono piaciute molto, altre un po' più scettica, anche come impostazione. Ma comunque era bello perché c'era sempre un dibattito, tra compagni [...] però come esperienza universitaria sicuramente è unica.

For these students, Erasmus was the gate into the European Higher Education Area which, ideally, should significantly expand the choice of courses available to university students all over the continent (Prague Communiqué, 2001; London Communiqué, 2007).

7.4 Professional outcomes

None of the participants did an Erasmus placement during their residence abroad, and only one obtained a job (a one week internship). The professional outcomes were therefore more in terms of future potential than of work experience. For Gioacchino, the internship in a law firm during the Easter break gave him a taste for the kind of work he wanted to do in the future, for which his Erasmus sojourn was a stepping stone. For others, like Margherita or Juls, it was a taste of life and work abroad, as well as an experience in the UK, which they believed to be a valuable asset in their CV.

So, regarding my academic English, [the Erasmus exchange] has shown me that I'm capable of doing something abroad. Experiences abroad, especially in England, are highly valued in the world of employment. So it has certainly helped me a lot academically. (Margherita)¹⁰⁹

Although the majority had mentioned the possibility of moving abroad after graduation during their pre-departure interviews, upon their return the informants seemed to consider this possibility with a more realistic attitude and a better understanding of what it would entail.

7.5 (Inter)cultural outcomes

In the same way that “meeting people from other countries” and “learning about other cultures” were two of the motives given for going abroad, these were also

¹⁰⁹ Quindi sull'inglese accademico [l'Erasmus] mi ha dimostrato di essere in grado di fare qualcosa fuori. Le esperienze all'estero, soprattutto in Inghilterra, nel mondo del lavoro, sono ipervalutate. Per cui sicuramente a livello accademico mi ha aiutato tanto.

mentioned as outcomes. Some of the comments the participants made showed an attempt to understand better the country they had resided in during their Erasmus sojourn. For example Chiara had expressed, during her pre-departure interview, the view that she didn't expect to have difficulties adapting to life as a student in Granada because "Italy and Spain are very similar". After her sojourn, she qualified her opinions based on her personal experience:

Ana: And the fact that it was a very similar culture to the Italian, has it been confirmed?

Chiara: Yes, but with reservations. Like I said, I saw in the oldest generations that they are one generation behind, I saw the parents of my classmates, and they reminded me so much of what could almost be the grandparents of us, young Italians from up here [i.e., the north], right? Because Andalucia is still quite rural, and even people who have jobs in the city live outside and continue their activities in the countryside. Many families are structured in this manner. The young ... I met young people who are very similar to the Italians, but different from the kind of Italians I hang around with, so more inclined to having parties.¹¹⁰

Personal experience provided a way of legitimising their views of host country nationals (Tusting et al., 2002), including stereotypes: if before departure these were based on hearsay or popular images of certain nationalities, upon return they were founded on 'firsthand experience'. The two examples below concern the issue of alcohol consumption in Denmark and Scotland:

They [the Danes] are polite, formal, but ... as soon as they drink a little at parties, a friendship sparks up just for that day, but then ... interesting conversations ... "Oh, that's great, tell me about

¹¹⁰ Ana: E sul fatto che era una cultura molto affine all'Italia, è stato confermato?

Chiara: sì, ma con riserve. Come ti dicevo, io vedevo nelle generazioni più grandi che sono indietro di una, vedevo i genitori delle mie compagne e mi ricordavano tanto quello che potrebbero essere quasi i nonni di noi giovani italiani di quassù, no? Perché ancora l'Andalusia è piuttosto rurale, e comunque anche persone che hanno un lavoro in città abitano fuori e continuano la loro attività in campagna. Molte famiglie sono strutturate in questa maniera. I giovani... io ho incontrato i giovani che sono molto simili agli italiani, ma diversi dal tipo di italiani che posso frequentare io, quindi più festosi.

Italy" ... they really want to know. But then the day after, "hi", "hi" and nothing else. (Marina)¹¹¹

It didn't take me long to realize what the Scots are like [Ana: What are they like?] (laughing) Oh! They're drunkards. I lived with a Scottish girl, who then left [...] And so I got to know them, I understood what they were like, because those were university residences. When I met my friend who was half Italian half Scottish, I told him "the Scots are like this and like this ...?" And he said, "Exactly." So I had understood what they were like, he just confirmed my opinions. But they are simple to understand, those of my age, I mean. [...] They're very reserved, very formal, but then the English too are formal in the sense that they are polite to the point that they seem formal to us. In the sense that they don't ask you for a favour even if they need something, because they're afraid to disturb you. (Miriam)¹¹²

Stereotypes, as mentioned in the previous chapter, regarded mostly host-nationals, and were frequent particularly among those who had found it difficult to establish friendships with members of the host society. According to Stoebe and Weiner (in Budke, 2008), self-esteem is protected by attributing success to internal factors (one's actions and abilities), while placing the blame for failure on external causes. In this way, people like Miriam seem to justify their lack of contact with locals by resorting to negative stereotyping and placing the blame on them (see Budke's 2008 study of French Erasmus students in Germany). If participants like Chiara avoid making negative comments in their generalisations, or use mitigating phrases, those

¹¹¹ Sono gentili, formali, ma ... invece appena bevono un po' alle feste nasce anche l'amicizia del giorno, ma poi...conversazioni interessanti... "Ah, che bello, parlami dell'Italia"... vogliono anche sapere. Però poi il giorno dopo "hi", "hi" e basta.

¹¹² Non c'ho messo molto a capire come sono fatti gli scozzesi [Ana: e come sono fatti?] (ridendo) Ah! sono degli ubriaconi. Io vivevo con una ragazza scozzese, che poi se n'è andata [...] E quindi li ho conosciuti, li ho capiti, anche perché erano residenze dell'università. Quando ho conosciuto quel mio amico metà scozzese metà italiano, gli ho detto "Ma gli scozzesi sono così così e così...?" E lui mi ha detto "Esattamente". Per cui li avevo capiti, lui mi ha dato solo conferme. Ma sono semplici da capire, quelli della mia età, intendo. [...] Sono molto riservati, molto formali, ma questo anche gli inglesi sono formali, nel senso che sono educati a tal punto che ci risultano formali a noi. Cioè nel senso che non ti chiedono un favore neanche se hanno bisogno, perché hanno paura di disturbarti [...]

most disappointed, like Miriam, Daniela or Silvia, tend to have worse opinions of host-nationals. Petra, who was perhaps the most successful including local students in her friendship networks is a clear example of this mechanism: while at the beginning of her stay she placed the blame for not being able to meet German students on their coldness and unfriendliness, once she had succeed in this respect, the blame was transferred to the Erasmus students themselves:

There will certainly be cases where maybe some people are closed towards strangers, but I must say that from my personal experience of students I knew, Erasmus students, who complained that the foreigners [The Germans] didn't accept them, they were the first to have really huge prejudices. So when they saw a German they complained about their food, they complained about the climate, they said that in Italy it was better ... so a German who hears these things after a while gets fed up, of course. In other words, it was the Erasmus students who were close-minded [...] ¹¹³

On the other hand, Valentina, who had admitted on a previous occasion that her Erasmus group felt comfortable together and did not need to include a Swedish student living on the same corridor, was ready to make allowances for one “friendlier” local student who incidentally “was more Italian than Swedish”:

And if there was a Swede... only one was friendlier, in the sense that... compared to others who stuck together much more, but there were very few of them compared with the rest of the students in the residence... there was just one, who by the way wants to do his Erasmus exchange in Bologna, he was much nicer, more sociable, one could say more Italian than Swedish, he

¹¹³ Ci saranno sicuramente dei casi in cui magari ci sarà una chiusura di alcune persone rispetto allo straniero, però devo dire che, per esperienza personale di ragazzi che ho conosciuto, Erasmus, che lamentavano il fatto che gli stranieri [I tedeschi] non gli accettassero erano i primi ad avere dei pregiudizi veramente enormi. Per cui, vedevano un Tedesco e si lamentavano della loro cucina, si lamentavano del clima, dicevano che in Italia era meglio... per cui un Tedesco che si sente dire queste cose dopo un po' si stufa, ovviamente. Era una chiusura mentale dell'Erasmus, insomma... [...]

was so rowdy ... and in the end it was nice to talk, he also told us that ... when the Swedes speak, they breathe in to say ‘yes’, so I finally understood, I thought how nice that I’ve discovered something Swedish, but it happened only once. (Valentina)¹¹⁴

It is interesting that, after her own group of Erasmus friends excluded a Swedish student who shared the same kitchen, Valentina was unable to see the contradiction when she blamed the Swedes for “sticking together”. In addition, in one of the few occasions when she learned something about the Swedes (related to their way of saying ‘yes’, something that had been puzzling her for some time) she attributed it to herself having “discovered” it, rather than the clarification having been provided by her Swedish friend. The disappointment that this “only happened once” reveals her belief that the responsibility for her own learning about the host culture(s) rested somehow on the hosts rather than on herself.

It seems from the students’ contributions that those who felt some regret at not having met more local students saw it primarily as a missed opportunity to obtain more frequent practice in their target language, rather than to gain intercultural insight. In other words, the Erasmus experience seems to be, almost by definition, an opportunity to meet people from all over Europe (even the world), and the local culture is simply one of the many cultures one may come across (Montgomery, 2010). In the following comment, Silvia makes this point clearly:

I was sorry not to have relationships with the French, because I always thought that, going to France, it would perhaps be more beneficial for me, regarding the language, to speak with the French, that is, to integrate myself a bit more into the French world. On the other hand, over time, after an initial moment of... let’s call it sadness, at not being able to communicate much with

¹¹⁴ E se c'era qualche svedese... giusto uno era quello più simpatico, nel senso che, rispetto ad altri che sono molto più tra di loro, ma comunque erano molto pochi rispetto a tutti quelli dello studentato, ce ne stava uno, che poi vuole fare l'Erasmus a Bologna, lui era molto più simpatico, molto più socievole, se vogliamo molto più italiano come svedese, nel casino che faceva... e alla fine è stato carino parlare, ci ha anche detto che...quando gli svedesi parlano, aspirano per dire yes, finalmente l'ho capito, ho pensato che bello una cosa svedese che scopro, ma è successo solo una volta.

them, when the rest of the world opened before me, I said, never mind, if the French aren't part of it, it's their problem ... I actually realized that they just don't want to have to do with us. We have tried, because we tried to include some people in our study groups, to do something together, go out together in the evening, things like that. But ... they had no intention, so after a moment of discouragement, we said, okay, maybe on the one hand we're losing out, because if I hadn't had the opportunity to have the French person with whom I lived, who helped me so much with the language, perhaps I wouldn't know French so well, because if you talk to other people who know it less than you do, you don't improve... yes, you're more fluent, but you speak a mediocre French. But maybe if you had the possibility of having to deal with a French person, you'd definitely improve your French. That is something I feel sorry about, but on the other hand the rest of the world really opens up in front of you.

Ana: So you see the Erasmus sojourn ... more as an international experience.

Silvia: ...than a local one. Yes, definitely.¹¹⁵

For those having studied in countries whose local language they did not speak (Scandinavia, Czech Republic) the 'local culture' was often limited to what can be seen by travelling to different areas of the country. Marina admitted she had learned

¹¹⁵ A me è dispiaciuto non avere rapporto con i francesi, perché ho sempre pensato che andando in Francia avrei avuto forse più benefici, per la questione della lingua, a parlare con i francesi, cioè ad integrarmi un po' di più nel mondo francese. Dall'altra, col tempo, dopo un primo momento di ... diciamo tristezza, di non riuscire tanto a comunicare con loro, quando poi tutto il resto del mondo mi si è aperto davanti, ho detto, pazienza, se i francesi non ne fanno parte, è un problema loro... io mi sono resa conto che loro proprio non volevano avere a che fare con noi. Noi ci provavamo, perché alcune persone le abbiamo cercato di inserire nei nostri gruppi di studio, di fare qualcosa insieme, di uscire insieme la sera, così. Ma proprio... non ne avevano intenzione, quindi dopo un primo momento di sconforto, di dire, va bene, da una parte che forse potrebbe mancarci, perché se io non avessi avuto la possibilità di avere una persona francese con la quale abitavo, che mi ha aiutato tanto con la lingua, forse non lo saprei così, il francese, perché parlare con altre persone che lo sanno meno di te, non lo migliori, sì, sei più fluido ma parli un francese mediocre, mentre magari se uno avesse avuto la possibilità di avere a che fare con un francese, sicuramente il suo francese migliora. Quello è un aspetto che un po' dispiace, ma dall'altra parte veramente ti si apre tutto il resto del mondo.
Ana: Quindi tu l'Erasmus la vedi più come un'esperienza internazionale....
Silvia: che locale. Sì, decisamente.

little about Denmark, and both Valentina and Pina expressed the feeling of having been in some kind of “international Erasmusland”, a microcosm of the globalised world, where students from all over the world live in the same hall of residence, isolated from the rest of the country.

[...] that is, we were physically in Sweden, but we weren't necessarily in Sweden, we could have been anywhere else in the world ... (Pina)¹¹⁶

Because you end up doing the same things, and you end up being, ultimately, in a global world, because there is everything, from Asia to America, so it's really an ideal place for getting to know many cultures at the same time, but in such a routine context, so similar, that in the end I think these cultural differences in a way fade away. (Valentina)¹¹⁷

For Valentina, living together with other people from other cultures does not in itself constitute ‘intercultural exchange’: by being enclosed in such a small and fixed environment, you notice only a number of what seem at first sight significant differences (like the fact that the Chinese student eats with chopsticks, or that, when cooking, some use spices that you have never used).

I don't know, that's the impression I got. Perhaps I can see the Chinese student eating with chop-sticks, but he's still a Chinese person who's staying in that student residence, who does the same things [as everybody else], who goes to the kitchen to prepare food and eats it, either in the kitchen or in his room, and that's it. About his culture I know little, aside from seeing him eat in his own way. So I say "yes, but to what extent was there

¹¹⁶ cioè, noi eravamo in Svezia fisicamente, ma non eravamo necessariamente in Svezia, potevamo essere in qualunque altra parte del mondo.

¹¹⁷ Perché si finisce per fare sempre le stesse cose, e si finisce per essere alla fine in un mondo globale, perché c'è di tutto, dall'Asia all'America, quindi è veramente un posto, se vogliamo ideale per conoscere tantissime culture tutte in una volta, però in un contesto talmente abitudinario, talmente uguale, che poi secondo me queste differenze culturali in qualche modo si abbattono.

cultural exchange?" I didn't ... I wouldn't say I noticed much of it. (Valentina)¹¹⁸

Valentina seemed to give much more importance to difference than to similarity. In other words, intercultural exchange needs to reveal what is different among people. However, the routine of student life in the same university seems to bring out more the similarities between them, and this was construed by Valentina as “flattening out the differences”, which she found disappointing:

With regard to student life, in terms of what I expected at the level of knowledge of other cultures and all that stuff, it's strange, because ... ok, it's certainly interesting to be living every single day with 15 people who potter about in the kitchen, it may also be interesting to smell the scent of someone's cooking, you find yourself explaining the recipe for one of their typical dishes, or you make comparisons between ... But you find that it also creates routine situations, so that even the conditions for conversation and socialization were always the same, in the sense that it happened once [...] we had deeper conversations than at other times. We talked about economics, politics, or even music, in a much lighter way, of course, but it was the first evening that I said "How nice." It was what I wanted. But it happened one evening, two evenings at the most, not more. So I wonder, why? But I also understand that I couldn't talk in a relaxed way, spontaneously, as it were, as you can when you know your language, when you have a relationship with your friends, but in this case... I don't mean that you couldn't talk naturally about certain things, but it certainly was more difficult

¹¹⁸ Non so, a me questa impressione mi ha dato. Io potrò anche vedere il cinese che mangia con i chop-sticks, però sarà sempre un cinese che sta in questo studentato, che fa le stesse cose, cioè va in cucina a prepararsi le cose e se le mangia, o in cucina o eventualmente nella sua stanza, e finisce lì. Io di questa cultura ne so ben poco, a parte vederlo mangiare nella sua maniera. Quindi dico "sì, ma fino a che punto c'è stato lo scambio culturale?" Io non l'ho... non mi sento di averlo avvertito tanto.

because you are dealing with a Swede, a Chinese, a German ...
(Valentina)¹¹⁹

These ‘routine situations’, where every day seems to be the same, after the initial excitement about being in a multicultural context has waned, the “tiredness of being together” mentioned by Dervin (2009), seem more a state of mind due to the specific context of the isolated Erasmus student residence. Juls, for example, felt very differently:

Even being in contact with people ... for example, I’ve never had many dealings with foreigners. In Forlì, the city where I live, there are some, but I've never had personal relationships with them. Sharing a flat with girls from four different continents helped me to understand the relationship with other cultures, to have respect for other ways of living, of doing things, and I loved all that, that cultural exchange.¹²⁰

For Pina too, the international dimension of the experience was paramount: for her, similarities prevailed over difference to the extent that she felt a member of an extended family, in which language and culture are not obstacles:

¹¹⁹ Poi, per quanto riguarda la vita in studentato, quindi quello che mi aspettavo a livello di conoscenze di altre culture e blablabla, è strano, perché vabbe', sicuramente è interessante trovarsi a vivere ogni giorno con 15 persone che ti trafficano in cucina, può anche essere interessante perché ti trovi a sentire i profumi della cucina di uno, ti trovi a spiegare la ricetta di una cosa a loro tipica, o comunque ti confronti su... però ti crea anche situazioni abituarie per cui anche le situazioni di conversazione e di socializzazione erano sempre le stesse, nel senso che è capitato una volta che [...] abbiamo fatto conversazioni un po' più intense di altre volte. Abbiamo parlato di economia, politica, o comunque di musica, in maniera molto leggera, ovviamente, però è stata la prima sera che ho detto "Che bello!". Era quello che io volevo. Ma è capitato una sera, al massimo due sere, non di più. E quindi mi chiedo, perché? Però capisco anche che non potevo fare discorsi molto tranquilli, molto, come dire, spontanei, come ti possono venire quando tu conosci la tua lingua, hai un rapporto con i tuoi amici, invece in questo caso comunque.. non che non ti venisse spontaneo fare certi discorsi, ma sicuramente era più difficile perché hai di fronte uno svedese, un cinese, un tedesco, quindi...

¹²⁰ Anche stare a contatto con persone... per esempio, io non ho mai avuto tanti rapporti con persone straniere. A Forlì, la città dove abito, ce ne sono ma non ho mai avuto rapporti personali. Essendo in casa con ragazze provenienti da quattro continenti diversi, mi ha aiutato a capire il rapporto con le altre culture, il rispetto di altri modi di vivere, di fare, e quello mi è piaciuto molto, questo scambio culturale.

I appreciated being able to understand that I could live in an environment like this, in which the language and the culture aren't an obstacle to being able to live well with other people. To be away from home and still feel part of a family, that I liked most of all [...] it's been a wonderful adventure, I've learned how living in a foreign country is not difficult.¹²¹

In any case, as mentioned in the previous chapter, most participants succeeded in including at least one local student in their social network, often a former Erasmus student or one who had an interest in other languages and cultures.

7.6 Personal development

Personal development was mentioned by all the students, and the majority considered that it was the most significant outcome of their Erasmus sojourn. Particularly for those who had never been abroad for a longer than a holiday, or who still lived with their parents, this was expressed in terms of increased self-sufficiency, maturity, independence, as the extracts below indicate:

So on a personal level there has been considerable growth and development, starting with living alone, using a washing machine, or managing my own life and talking to my mother by phone in the evening and that's it. So it was all on my shoulders. And this I really liked. I also liked having difficulties, not for sadistic reasons, but because I knew that I would have to face them and that it would be an achievement once I'd overcome them. So I saw them as challenges, and I really wanted to succeed to be able to say I did it, and this is certainly a wealth of experience that I will always carry with me. So ... I must say that

¹²¹ Mi è piaciuto capire la possibilità di vivere in un ambiente così, in cui la lingua e la cultura non possono essere un ostacolo per vivere bene in mezzo agli altri. Andare lontano da casa e sentirsi comunque in una famiglia, questo mi è piaciuto più di tutto [...] è stata un'avventura bellissima, ho capito come vivere in un paese straniero non è difficile.

on all sides, from every point of view, it was a wonderful experience, really wonderful. (Jack) ¹²²

It's definitely been an experience that has made me mature, from many points of view. [...] Although I've always had the experience of living away from home [...] so the whole process of living away from home for me was a given thing, but I'd never had the problems I encountered in Paris, ever. So it really toughened me, now I feel I can do anything. Because really, getting over the initial first few months was really tough .. many times I thought about going home. Because I was really stressed out ... But then, perhaps because I'm so stubborn, so I couldn't accept having to say "I couldn't make it", and so I stayed and slowly everything started going well. But ... it's an experience that really made me mature. It made me understand many things, it has ... it has given me confidence from a certain point of view because I wasn't aware of being able to face such a thing, a whole series of difficulties like the ones I dealt with, and. .. and a situation in which I started out, in my opinion, with the disadvantage of being certain I could not learn the language. Instead, the language slowly fell into place, and when I felt confident in that aspect, then slowly everything went well. But ... Yes, I'm happy, in the end the overall judgment is very satisfactory. (Silvia) ¹²³

¹²² Quindi anche a livello personale c'è stata una maturità e una crescita non indifferente, a partire dal vivo da solo, al mi faccio una lavatrice, al mi gestisco io la vita sentendo mia madre la sera per telefono e basta. Quindi tutto era sulle mie spalle. E questa cosa mi piaceva molto. Mi piaceva molto anche dover incontrare difficoltà, non per una motivazione sadica, ma perché sapevo che le avrei dovuto affrontare e che sarebbero state una rivincita una volta superate. Quindi le vedevo come sfide che volevo assolutamente vincere per poter dire ce l'ho fatta, e questo sicuramente è un bagaglio di esperienza mio che mi porterò sempre dietro. Quindi... devo dire che su tutti i fronti, tutti i lati, è stata un'esperienza magnifica, decisamente magnifica.

¹²³ Sicuramente è stata un'esperienza che mi ha molto formato, sotto tanti punti di vista. [...] nonostante io abbia sempre fatto l'esperienza di vivere fuori [...] quindi tutto il processo del vivere fuori per me era una cosa data, però non ho mai avuto le difficoltà che ho incontrato a Parigi, mai. E quindi mi ha molto temprata, adesso mi sento di poter fare di tutto. Perché veramente superare i primi mesi iniziali è stata durissima, e... molte volte ho pensato di tornare indietro. Perché ero proprio provata... poi sarà che io sono un po' testarda, e quindi non accettavo la cosa di dire "non ce l'ho fatta",

It gave me so much confidence in myself, because [...] I already lived alone with my sister, so I was already independent, I know how to manage a home and everything. However, being in another country, in a city you don't know, with a language that is not yours, has given me so much confidence in myself, I've never been afraid to ask for information, I never felt lost, so it's helped me gain a lot of self-assurance, and be more confident with the language. (Juls) ¹²⁴

Yes, I've definitely come back stronger, with less apprehension and more willing to try out more things, both in terms of the relationship with others, of socialising with others, and in terms of my university studies, and of the language. I heard that many of my friends who have graduated have been going to interviews in English. While, before leaving, I would have been scared of this, now I'm not afraid, because I say, maybe what I say won't be perfect, but I feel stronger. Even living alone, the little things that you realise you can do ... very nice. (Pina) ¹²⁵

There is also an aspect of personal development which has more to do with self-discovery, with understanding oneself better. In the extracts below, the students

e quindi sono rimasta e pian piano è andato tutto bene. Però... è un'esperienza che mi ha molto formato. Mi ha fatto capire molte cose, mi ha ... cioè mi ha tranquillizzato da un certo punto di vista perché non ero assolutamente cosciente di poter affrontare una cosa del genere, tutta un serie di difficoltà come quelle che ho affrontato, e... e una situazione in cui già partivo, secondo me, svantaggiata dal essere sicura di non riuscire ad apprendere la lingua. Invece la lingua pian piano è andata a posto, e quando ho sentito che sotto quell'aspetto ero tranquilla, allora pian piano è andato tutto a posto. Però... sì, sono contenta, alla fine il bilancio è sicuramente soddisfacente.

¹²⁴ Mi ha dato tanta fiducia in me stessa, perché [...] io vivevo già da sola con mia sorella, quindi sono già indipendente, so gestire la casa e tutto quanto. Però, essere in un altro paese, in una città che non conosci, con una lingua che non è la tua, mi ha dato comunque tanta sicurezza in me stessa, non ho mai avuto paura di chiedere informazioni, non mi sono mai sentita persa, quindi mi ha aiutato ad acquisire molta fiducia in me, ed essere più sicura con la lingua.

¹²⁵ Sì, sono tornata sicuramente rafforzata, col meno timore e più voglia di provare sempre di più, sia in campo del rapporto con gli altri, di socializzare con gli altri, sia in campo universitario, sia della lingua. Adesso ho sentito che molte mie amiche che si sono laureate sono andate a fare i colloqui in inglese. Mentre questo, prima di partire, mi avrebbe fatto paura, adesso non mi fa paura, perché dico, forse non riuscirò a fare un discorso super corretto, ma comunque mi dà più forza. Anche vivere da soli, le piccole cose che capisci che riesci a fare... molto bello.

explained how the new context had provided them with the opportunity to put themselves to the test and observe how they reacted. It had opened their eyes to what aspects they considered important in friendships, to how they reacted in the face of difficulty or, as Gioacchino put it, it had made them aware of their own potential:

... a lot of satisfaction on a personal level, in the sense that it was a completely new experience, which I embraced immediately, from day one, I discovered many sides of my character, which I think is a wonderful thing, to discover new things about oneself every time [...] I am very particular when it comes to friendships, and I found this out over there. [...] In a situation like that, where you are in a completely new context, you have to deal with completely different situations, with every different kind of everyday experiences, which allow you to discover traits of your character of which you weren't aware, or which you thought maybe you didn't have. (Jack)¹²⁶

... you meet a lot of people, it's is an experience that makes you much more confident, because it puts you to the test, always, every day, and every day there is something new to learn, but every day it's still you, you in a context which is not your natural environment, it's always a challenge, but it brings you a lot of satisfaction, a lot of fun, of course, and maybe lets you discover an aspect of yourself that previously wouldn't have interested you. Like, for example, in the past I never went to the disco to dance, but there I went a lot of times and I found that I liked it, so ... or else, I was a very lazy person and needed to be taken out by

¹²⁶ [...] a livello personale la soddisfazione tantissima, nel senso che è un'esperienza completamente nuova, che ho abbracciato subito, fin dal primo giorno, mi ha fatto scoprire molti lati miei caratteriali, che penso sia una cosa stupenda, di conoscere se stessi ogni volta [...] io sono molto difficile nelle amicizie, e me ne sono accorto anche là. [...] In una realtà del genere, dove sei in un contesto completamente nuovo, devi far fronte a realtà completamente differenti, a esperienze quotidiane di qualsiasi tipo, ti permettono di scoprire lati tuoi caratteriali mai scoperti o che magari pensavi di non possedere.

the scruff of my neck, but there, despite the 20 ° below zero, I would go out. (Pina)¹²⁷

It was a very, very interesting experience, due to so many things. Well ... I think I've changed a bit in terms of ... yes, of being a little more open, ... of understanding that there are other ways of living, ... even of eating, of having fun, of studying ... that's right, maybe ... particularly of studying. (Marina)¹²⁸

Ana: So what has Erasmus given you?

Gioacchino: The awareness that I can do more than I was thinking before. More and in a different place, in a different environment. So in a kind of way Erasmus has given me the awareness of my potential.

I found myself to be less trusting and open than I thought, but only in the beginning. Then, when I managed to break the ice I let myself go more. And so the loneliness I felt at the beginning began to wane. The only thing is that ... maybe it's a flaw, I don't know, but maybe I was trying to reproduce the friendships patterns [I had before] with new people, and I wasn't always understood. I am very playful, very affectionate, very cuddly, outgoing, and maybe I think my way of being is always appreciated and accepted, but maybe it isn't. And so I was forced to call myself into question from this point of view, because we're all different from each other in our experiences and ways of being. And secondly, I don't know, maybe compared with my

¹²⁷ ... conosci un sacco di gente, è un'esperienza che ti rende molto più sicura di te stessa, perché ti mette alla prova, sempre, ogni giorno, ogni giorno c'è qualcosa di nuovo da imparare, ogni giorno comunque sei tu, te stesso comunque in un contesto che non è il tuo contesto naturale, sempre una sfida continua che però ti porta un sacco di soddisfazione, un sacco di divertimento, chiaramente, e che magari ti fa scoprire un lato di te stessa a cui prima non saresti stato interessato. Tipo, ad esempio, prima non sono mai andata in discoteca a ballare, ma lì ci sono andata un sacco di volte ed ho scoperto che mi è piaciuto, quindi... anche, io ero un una persona molto pigra che se non la tiravano per il collo non usciva, ma là, nonostante i 20° sottozero, uscivo.

¹²⁸ E stata un'esperienza molto molto interessante, per tantissime cose. Mah... secondo me sono anche un po' cambiata a livello di... sì, un po' più di apertura, di...capire che ci sono altri modi di vivere, di... anche solo di mangiare, di divertirsi, di studiare... ecco, quello, forse... soprattutto di studiare.

friends over here, there I found more people who cared much more about their independence, so the visceral attachment that I was looking for, also with my flatmates, just didn't happen. It's a matter of ... I missed it a bit [...] I had to work on myself. But I wasn't always able to solve... because there were so many unexpected situations, which continue to happen here, and I'm not able to react better, so there. So I still have to work a lot on this. Instead, from the point of view of relationships I feel I have grown and become more independent, as I said, and be less dependent on the reactions, the moods of other people. I've grown up from this point of view [...] I feel more ... I've understood that I can take care of myself, and can do so without problems, and I've grown up in my relationships with people and. .. I've also realized that ... not that I didn't know it, but ... that there can be difficulties and I have to try to be tougher, and not behave like a little girl ... (Chiara) ¹²⁹

When, talking about expectations, I mentioned becoming more open-minded, actually, it's true, because when you're in contact with difference you become more tolerant. Because you understand that some things are just so, you have to accept them. And also, going abroad, perhaps, comparing the culture of others

¹²⁹ Mi sono vista più diffidente e meno aperta di quello che pensavo, ma in principio. Quando poi sono riuscita a rompere il ghiaccio mi sono lasciata più trasportare. E quindi quella solitudine un po' interiore che sentivo all'inizio è andata scemando. L'unica cosa è che... forse è un difetto, non lo so, è che forse tentavo di ricalcare il mio schema di amicizie in quello che erano delle persone nuove, e non sempre ero capita. Io sono molto scherzosa, molto affettuosa, sono molto coccolona, estroversa, e magari penso che il mio schema sia sempre apprezzabile e accettabile e invece magari non lo è. E quindi mi sono dovuta mettere in discussione anche da questo punto di vista, perché ognuno è diverso dall'altro per le proprie esperienze e i propri modi di essere. E due, non lo so, forse rispetto alle mie amicizie di qua, là ho trovato persone che tenevano maggiormente alla loro indipendenza, quindi questo attaccamento così viscerale che io volevo avere, anche con le mie coinquiline stesse, non c'è stato. E' una questione... mi è un po' mancato [...] è stato un lavoro su me stessa. Poi non sempre sono riuscita a risolvere... perché di imprevisti ci sono stati tanti, ma continuano qui ad esserci, e io non so reagire meglio, per dire. Quindi su questo devo ancora lavorare un bel po'. Invece dal punto di vista delle relazioni anch'io sento di essere cresciuta e di essere più indipendente come ti dicevo, e di essere meno dipendente di quello che sono le reazioni, gli stati d'animo delle altre persone. Sono maturata da questo punto di vista [...] Mi sento più ...ho capito di saper badare a me stessa, e di poterlo fare senza problemi, e sono cresciuta nel relazionarmi con le persone e... ho capito anche che... non che prima non lo sapessi, ma... che le difficoltà possono esserci e devo cercare di essere più tosta possibile, non devo fare la bambina piccola...

with your own, I left feeling [...] depressed, I was happy to leave, because I was unhappy in Italy. Instead, coming home I'm glad to be Italian, I'm glad about our characteristics, about what we are like ... (Angela)¹³⁰

Margherita: For example, I have changed my perspective on immigrants here in Italy. Because I've realized that there's so much unjustified xenophobia, and that it's difficult. And you know, I realized this, and I hardly had any problems. But you feel it. Even about stupid things. I mean, you don't know how to send a letter. And it's traumatic. That is, you go to the post office, but it's different, because they have different systems. You don't know how to send packages or how much they cost. You don't know where to buy cutlery. They are just little things, but they make you do feel the difference ...

Ana: In the sense that they make you feel lost ...

Margherita: Exactly. And you feel it all the more about silly things. That is, it's not so much the big things, you see particularly with stupid things. So I can imagine what it must be like for people who come from totally different contexts, because that's something else that you have to bear in mind: that I came from a European country, so there is no longer ... you see social differences, but the culture is the same, in general. So a person who comes from a totally different country from a social, civil, economic, cultural point of view, where you don't know the language or barely know it, with people who frown at you regardless, because your skin colour is slightly different from everyone else's, you try to look for work and either you get an under-the-table job or you don't get one at all, you have a lot of problems with your visa and residence permit, you don't have

¹³⁰ quando dicevo nelle aspettative di aprire la mente, infatti, sì, è vero, perché a stare a contatto con le differenze si diventa molto più tolleranti. Perché capisci che certe cose sono così e basta, bisogna accettarle. Poi anche, andando all'estero, forse, confrontando la cultura degli altri con la propria, sono partita molto [...] abbattuta, ero contenta di andare via, perché ero scontenta dell'Italia. Invece tornando a casa sono contenta di essere italiana, sono contenta delle nostre caratteristiche, di come siamo...

relatives abroad who are not allowed to join you and with whom it's difficult to keep in touch ... I mean, I really hadn't realized how difficult it could be.¹³¹

It seems, from the selection above, that the students considered the Erasmus Programme as a kind of catalyst which began a process that would inevitably continue in the future. Many mentioned becoming more tolerant of difference, more flexible in their outlooks. Above all, the experience proved to them that they could cope abroad, and therefore took away the fear of living in a different country. What before departure was a vague possibility for the future seemed to have become a more concrete and realistic option, and some have already taken the first steps to move abroad.

Well, I came home, apart from with the language, with more confidence in my abilities, a little more self-esteem, which I've never had much of, and certainly ... overcoming a kind of prejudice I had about life abroad. I never wanted to go, but now I like the idea, I like the idea of going back, not to Paris, but somewhere else. It wouldn't scare me any more. (Silvia)¹³²

¹³¹ Margherita: Come ad esempio mi è cambiata la prospettiva di vedere gli extracomunitari qua in Italia. Perché mi sono resa conto che c'è tanta xenofobia ingiustificata, e che è difficile. E dico, me ne sono resa conto io, che non ho quasi avuto problemi. Però lo senti. Ma anche solo sulle cavolate. Nel senso, non sai come si spedisce una lettera. Ed è un trauma. Cioè, tu vai alle poste, ma è diverso, perché hanno sistemi diversi. Non sai come si spediscono i pacchi o quanto costano. Non sai dove comprare le posate. Sono proprio piccole cose, però ti fanno sentire la differenza...

Ana: Nel senso che ti fanno sentire spaesato...

Margherita: Esatto. Che si vede tanto di più sulle cose sceme. Cioè non si vede sulle cose grosse, si vede proprio sulle cavolate. E quindi io mi immagino quello che può essere per quelle persone che vengono da realtà totalmente diverse, perché poi anche quello c'è da dire: che io venivo da un paese europeo, per cui, oramai, non è che... la differenza sociale, civile, si vede, ma poi la cultura è quella, in generale. Per cui una persona che viene da una realtà sociale, civile, economica, culturale totalmente diversa, in un paese in cui non sai la lingua o comunque la sai a malapena, con persone che a prescindere ti guardano male, perché hai il colore della pelle leggermente diverso da quello che hanno tutti gli altri, provi a cercare lavoro e o te lo danno in nero o non te lo danno, hai un sacco di problemi con il visto e il permesso di soggiorno, hai parenti fuori che non ti fanno arrivare e con cui è difficile tenersi in contatto... cioè, io veramente non avevo realizzato quanto potesse essere difficile.

¹³² Mah, sono tornata a casa, oltre che con la lingua, con una maggiore sicurezza nei miei mezzi, un po' più di autostima, che io non ho mai troppo avuto, e con sicuramente un... superare un certo tipo di pregiudizio che avevo sulla vita all'estero. Io no avevo mai voluto andare, invece adesso mi piace l'idea, mi piacerebbe l'idea di tornare, non a Parigi, ma da un'altra parte. Non mi spaventerebbe più.

Because it no longer.. well, it scares me a bit, but I don't feel terrified, no. Since I managed extremely well Yes, when I was there, if there was something wrong, I didn't feel demoralized, I didn't say "I want to go home", in short, I did it, it went well. And so I realised that it is possible, in fact, I loved it. In some respects, actually, I was better than at home ... also as a way of life, the perception of states of mind, because in Bologna they're all neurotic ... there, I don't know, I felt that people were much more relaxed, also with such a strong welfare state, it seems that there are no major problems ... I mean, there is a fairly homogeneous level of well-being, so that's something you feel a bit too. I don't actually know what it is, but we always said, especially among Italians, that they are all much more relaxed ... yes, in fact, I also realised that in some respects you live better in countries ... in a country like Denmark. There are many Italians who are doing their doctorate there ... There is also a girl who was with me on an Erasmus stay and now wants to move there. I mean, she doesn't have a specific project, but she says "I'm fine over there, very well indeed, in Turin I have big problems with the university, I don't want to stay there any longer, I'll build myself a new life in Aarhus". (Marina) ¹³³

So first of all I feel myself more confident, I feel myself able to find a job and to have a future even abroad. I feel myself able to have friends even though they are not Italian and even though they can't speak my language. And as I told you during the weeks

¹³³ Perché adesso non mi fa più... magari un po' di paura sì, ma non mi terrorizza, no. Visto che me la sono cavata benissimo.... sì, quando ero lì che c'era qualcosa che non andava non mi demoralizzavo, non dicevo "voglio tornare a casa", insomma, ce l'ho fatta, è andata bene. E quindi ho visto che è possibile, anzi, che mi è piaciuto molto. Per certe cose, poi, sono stata meglio che a casa... anche come stile di vita, la percezione degli umori, perché a Bologna sono tutti nevrotici... lì non so, mi sembrava che la gente fosse molto più tranquilla, poi con uno stato sociale così forte, grossi problemi sembra che non... cioè, c'è un livello abbastanza omogeneo di benessere, quindi anche quello si percepisce un po'. Non so poi cosa sia, ma lo dicevamo sempre, soprattutto tra italiani, sono tutti molto più rilassati... sì, infatti, ho visto anche che si vive meglio per certi aspetti in paesi... in un paese come la Danimarca. Sono tanti gli italiani che fanno il dottorato lì, che... c'è anche una ragazza che era con me in Erasmus e adesso si vuole trasferire lì. Cioè, non è che ha un progetto ben definito, però dice "io là sto bene, anzi benissimo, a Torino ho dei grossi problemi con l'università, non ci voglio più stare, mi faccio una nuova vita ad Aarhus".

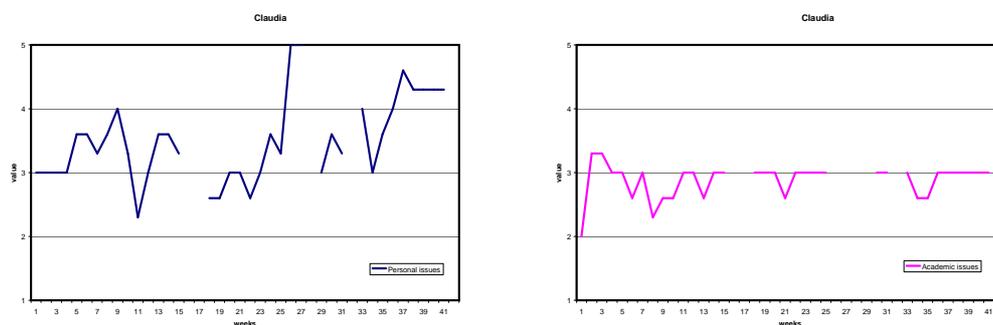
we were speaking together through Skype, I feel myself just at the beginning of a bigger experience in my life, just as if the Erasmus is just a first step. (Gioacchino)

In most of these observations, the development which constitutes one of the principles of Anderson's (1994) model can be clearly perceived, particularly as a process that goes beyond the sum of the single adjustments to the demands of the environment, and that produces much more significant outcomes.

7.7 Making sense of the process

Having provided a summary of the effects of the Erasmus sojourn abroad from the viewpoint of the participants, it is perhaps necessary, in order to understand better how the students made sense of their experience, to go back to the graphs, and compare them with those the students were asked to draw with hindsight, one the sojourn was over.

As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, the students were asked to sketch one graph for their academic experience, and one for their personal/social experience. Below are two examples, Claudia's (Fig. 7.1) and Silvia's (Fig. 7.2), compared with the graphs obtained with their longitudinal data. It is interesting to note that, although there are some parallels between the corresponding graphs, there are also significant divergences.



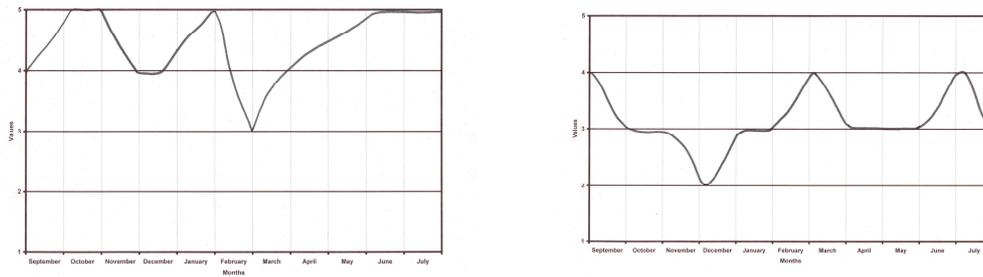
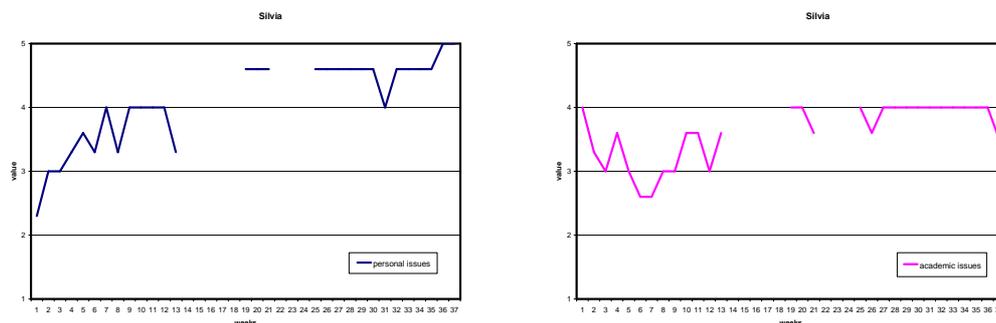


Fig. 7.1 – Comparison between Claudia’s longitudinal and retrospective graphs for the personal and academic aspects

Claudia, for example, remembered the social side of her experience in much more positive terms, with most of the period between 4 and 5, except for a slight dip around the end of November, due to the difficulties she had finding a room to rent, and a deeper trough after Christmas, attributed again to the problem of finding permanent accommodation and the bad weather. In the longitudinal data, the “diary tables” of the first months contain recurrent comments about the difficulty of finding accommodation (“I’m beginning to settle in this big city, even if there is a bit of frustration because I can’t find a fixed home (like many other Erasmus students)” – week 2) and befriending Germans (“It seems rather difficult to make friends with people from Germany, and this is a problem especially for language learning” – week 11). The same is true for the academic side, which remained below average in the longitudinal graph, but mostly above in the retrospective one.



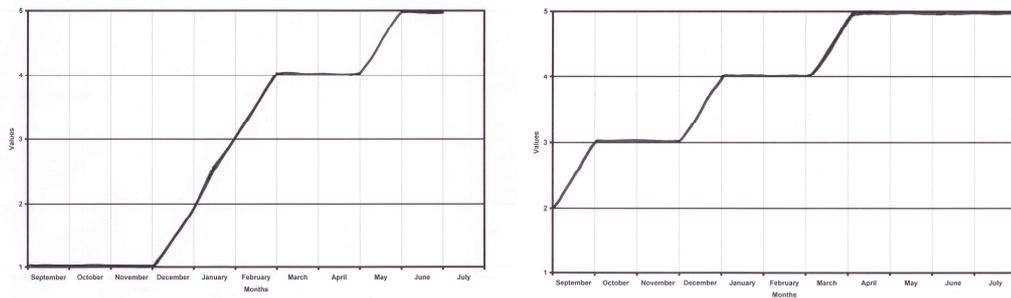


Fig. 7.2 – Comparison between Silvia's longitudinal and retrospective graphs for the personal and academic aspects

Silvia's graphs (Fig. 7.2) are also interesting because the retrospective diagrams show a much greater variance (in terms of the minimum and maximum values) than the longitudinal ones. In fact, looking back on her experience, she remembered the initial months as being extremely negative, particularly from a personal/social point of view, due mostly to her difficulty in finding an acceptable room in the centre of Paris. During week 1 the comment written in the "diary-table" had been "First week difficult, especially due to the fact that I live far from the centre and therefore I can't go out as I much as I'd like to. I had classes, so I spent the week virtually alone, except for Friday and Saturday, when I saw some Italian friends I already knew". However, by week 2 she had already met other Erasmus participants in her lessons, and things were improving. The one problem that remained until week 19 (30 January) had been the accommodation. However, retrospectively, it seems that Silvia had written off the first three months in Paris, claiming it was not until the second semester that she had finally settled down and began to enjoy her time there. The academic experience followed a similar trend, although the first few months were not as negative. "If I had only stayed for the first semester, I would have returned to Italy really depressed", she said.

Similar observations can be made about the rest of the participants, and Appendix IV contains their retrospective graphs. In them, it is still possible to recognise the main events and phases of the students' lives abroad, as they were reported longitudinally. Although the aim here is not to embark on the analysis of these students' narratives, it is still interesting to consider how they make sense of their experiences by

highlighting particular aspects and leaving out others, or by explaining events as the result of others, in an attempt “to find meaning in an overwhelmingly crowded and disordered chronological reality” and give their experiences “a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly” (Cronon, 1992, p.1349). Can we say that one graph is “truer” than the other, or represents what happened more faithfully? Or do they represent two ways of interpreting reality, the first as it unfolded, and the second retrospectively, through the lens of the entire experience? These issues would no doubt be worthy of further research.

7.8 Adaptation

The previous sections have attempted to shed light on the individual, lived experiences of the students who took part in this research project. Before moving to the discussion of the main issues relating to the adaptation process which have arisen from the data analysis, it is interesting to examine how the participants themselves have defined the concept of cross-cultural adaptation in the light of their recent experiences as Erasmus students.

For Juls, adaptation is “the final stage of a process of discovery, experimentation, internalization and personalization of a new situation, both environmental and mental”. She felt she had adapted to her new environment although, echoing Lazarus’s remarks about it being “a two-way interactive process” in which “environments make demands but also can be used to satisfy individuals’ needs” (in Anderson, 1994, p.301), Angela saw it too as a reciprocal process, of fitting in but also tailoring the environment to make it fit her needs and to render it familiar (the italics are mine throughout this section):

I personally believe that during my Erasmus experience I 'adapted'. In Wales I discovered a new world, a culture and a context which, though not too significantly, are different from mine. I experienced this new world, with its positive and negative sides (as you know from my comments, almost none). *I internalized this world, made it be part of me, in order to*

understand it and then tailor it around my character and my needs. I can give you many examples, like the weather, food, social life, language. I've adapted because all these aspects have come into my life and *have become an integral part of me.* I no longer lived as an Italian Erasmus girl in Wales, but as an almost Welsh girl in Wales. When one talk about adaptability, I think that is what it means, *the ability to understand and shape a new situation around you so that it becomes as familiar as possible;* to deal with novelty with a flexible and open attitude, so as to recognize the positive aspects of the experience and make them useful for the future. Obviously not everybody adapts in the same way and to the same degree as I managed to (some would not adapt at all, I'm thinking about my sister) and I think for the most part this is due to character and personal background. I managed to adapt well and immediately to my Erasmus stay because in the past, unfortunately, I had to adapt early on to a difficult family situation, and I think that this bad experience taught me to be responsible, independent, receptive and determined. With my character I adapt very easily to a new environment and situation, also facilitated by the fact that I love to launch into new adventures. (Juls)¹³⁴

¹³⁴ [...] secondo me l' 'adattamento' è il lo stadio finale di un processo di scoperta, sperimentazione, interiorizzazione e personalizzazione di una nuova situazione, sia ambientale che mentale [...] credo proprio che durante la mia esperienza Erasmus mi sia 'adattata'. In Galles ho scoperto un mondo nuovo, una cultura e realtà che, per quanto non troppo marcatamente, sono diverse dalla mia. Ho sperimentato questo mondo nuovo, con lati positivi e negativi (come sai dai miei racconti quasi nessuno). Ho interiorizzato questo mondo, l'ho fatto entrare dentro di me, per capirlo e per poi personalizzarlo attorno al mio carattere e alle mie esigenze. Si possono fare tanti esempi, come il tempo, il cibo, la vita sociale, la lingua. Mi sono adattata perché tutti questi aspetti sono entrati nella mia vita quotidiana e sono diventati parte integrante di me. Non vivevo più come una ragazza erasmus italiana in Galles, ma come una ragazza quasi Gallese in Galles. Quando si parla di spirito di adattamento credo che si parli di questo, della capacità di recepire e modellare una situazione nuova intorno a te in modo che diventi il più familiare possibile; di affrontare novità con spirito flessibile e aperto, in modo tale da recepire gli aspetti positivi dell'esperienza e renderli utili per il futuro. Ovviamente non tutti si adattano allo stesso modo e stesso grado come sono riuscita a farlo io (qualcuno non si adatterebbe affatto, mi viene in mente mia sorella) e credo che per buona parte sia dovuto al carattere e al background personale. Sono riuscita ad adattarmi bene e subito in erasmus perché in passato sfortunatamente ho dovuto adattarmi presto a una situazione familiare difficile, e credo che questa brutta esperienza mi abbia insegnato a essere responsabile, indipendente, ricettiva e determinata. Con questo mio carattere l'adattamento a un nuovo ambiente e situazione mi è molto facile, facilitato poi dal fatto che adoro lanciarmi in nuove avventure.

For Miriam, on the other hand, the outsider is an ‘unnecessary’ component of the new environment, which functions and will continue to function undisturbed by his or her presence. So the sojourner needs to adapt (or adjust) to the difference by finding strategies which do not imply changing the environment itself.

Thinking about it, I have reached the conclusion that adaptation has to do with the concept of adjustment. In what sense? Simple. You, an Italian, Bolognese, twenty-two year old college student in your third year, go off and arrive in a new country, with a different language, a different mentality, a different culture in general. You arrive, full of expectations, and you don’t build a world, *you arrive in a world that is already there and doesn’t need you in order to exist*. You are additional, you’re an added value. In your everyday life, you have to deal with this new experience. It’s all new to you, but it’s been there for centuries for all the others, for the world. Experiencing an Erasmus exchange is all about establishing a relationship with this “old novelty”. That’s why it’s adaptation, adjustment, you don’t invent anything, it’s all there, you just fit in, in the sense that you don’t try to change what isn’t there or what you don’t find convincing, you try to understand it and try to get it in another way. A very concrete example: as soon as I arrived, I thought it would be easy to get to know fellow students due to the fact that the Italians are well liked in the world, but it didn’t happen. After an initial week of complaints, *I adapted in that I didn’t try to change their mindset* – which remains so – *but I tried other ways to make friends*, such as student societies offered by the University or the experience of Tandem language learning. (Miriam)¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Pensandoci un po' su sono arrivata a dire che adattamento ha a che fare con il concetto di adeguamento. In che senso? Semplice. Tu, italiana, bolognese, ventiduenne, studentessa universitaria al 3 anno, prendi e parti e arrivi in un nuovo stato, con un'altra lingua, un'altra mentalità, una diversa cultura in generale. Arrivi, piena di aspettative, e non costruisci un mondo, arrivi in un mondo che c'è già e che non ha bisogno di te per esserci. Tu sei in più, sei un valore aggiunto che vivendo si deve

For Angela, a salient indicator of adjustment is the ability to suspend judgement, itself one of the components of intercultural competence as defined by, among others, Byram (1997), and critical incidents contributed to the development of this skill:

I think that I have adapted, in the sense *that I have learned to wait before passing judgement on situations and people*, and that most likely my point of view was not the correct interpretation. I don't know if there was something that helped me, because it wasn't easy. *What helped me was the clash with other cultures and the misunderstandings* that can arise even in the small daily decisions to be taken. (Angela)¹³⁶

Claudia saw cross-adaptation as something inevitable, part of being alive in the world – as if the sojourner cannot help but adapt to the new environment – although it could also be the case that this generalisation derived from the fact that she herself could not conceive of the possibility of *not* adapting. And her own success persuaded her to take off again – to the USA for another year – soon after her return home.

I think we can talk about the process of adaptation, *actually it is inevitable*, in the sense that, coming from a small provincial village and moving to a capital city overnight, and this also applies to the language and the rhythm of life, requires a change

confrontare con questa nuova esperienza. E' nuovo tutto per te ma è lì da secoli per tutti gli altri, per il mondo. Vivere l'Erasmus è un continuo rapportarsi con questa novità vecchia. Per questo è un adattamento, un adeguarsi, tu non inventi nulla, c'è già, semplicemente ti adatti nel senso che non provi per forza a cambiare ciò che non c'è o che non ti convince ma cerchi di capirlo e provi ad ottenerlo in un altro modo. Un esempio molto concreto: appena arrivata pensavo che fosse semplice conoscere i compagni di corso anche grazie al fatto che gli Italiani sono benvenuti nel mondo ma così non è stato. Dopo una prima settimana di lamentele mi sono adattata cioè non ho provato a cambiare la loro mentalità (che rimane tale) ma ho provato altri modi per fare amicizia (come ad esempio le associazioni studentesche offerte dall'Università o l'esperienza del Tandem linguistico).

¹³⁶ Per quanto riguarda la tua domanda, io penso di essermi adattata nel senso che ho imparato ad aspettare prima di giudicare le situazioni e le persone, che molto probabilmente il mio punto di vista poteva non essere l'interpretazione giusta. Non so se c'è qualcosa che mi ha facilitato, perché non è stato facile. Mi ha aiutato lo scontro con le altre culture e le incomprensioni che possono crearsi anche nelle piccole decisioni quotidiane da prendere.

and therefore adaptation to something new. But I would point out that it was the very idea of 'adapting' to something new which made the experience so interesting to me right from the start and it was precisely *the success of this adaptation that motivates me to go away again* to learn to adapt to another situation! (Claudia)¹³⁷

Silvia went further with her idea of adjustment, or adaptation, which she saw almost in terms of a survival strategy, without which it is impossible to function in an alien society, and the experience becomes unsustainable. But adjusting is not enough if the aim is to obtain something positive from the sojourn: the outsider needs to “integrate” as much as possible into his or her new environment, something which requires great effort and motivation, but which epitomises the essence of what an Erasmus exchange should be about.

I think of adaptation as a way of being able to fit within a "new" situation. In general, it should be a good thing, since fitting in also means being able to take part in all those processes we may not be familiar with, but in which we can still take part and feel good. As far as my experience is concerned, for me adaptation was, at least to begin with, *a question of reaching a condition of "least bad"*, i.e. trying to feel good even though there was very little to be positive about. But if you then consider the second part of my Erasmus stay, I think *I didn't just adapt, in a sense I integrated into the new situation* I was living. So I would distinguish between the concept of adaptation and integration, as I believe that the former is inevitably also the first chronologically. *It's the first strategy you adopt in a strange situation. I'd say the only viable strategy if you want to get*

¹³⁷ ritengo che si possa parlare di processo di adattamento, anzi è inevitabile nel senso che comunque venendo da un paesello di provincia e trapiantarmi in una capitale da un giorno all'altro, così come per la lingua e per il ritmo di vita richiede un cambiamento e quindi un adattamento a qualcosa di nuovo. Vorrei precisare però che è proprio l'idea di 'adattarsi' a qualcosa di nuovo che rendeva l'esperienza così interessante ai miei occhi fin dall'inizio ed è proprio l'esito positivo di questo adattamento che mi motiva ad andare via di nuovo per imparare ad adattarmi ad un'altra realtà!

something positive from the experience that you are living. Not fitting in, or at least not trying to fit in, is likely to lead to a great emptiness, a feeling of loneliness that I don't think you can sustain. If I hadn't adapted to the situation I was facing, even to the worst situation, probably the only alternative would have been to go home. So I think that I have adapted, at least initially it was the only thing I could really do. But I also think that only adjusting is not enough: in order to live well and fully an experience such as Erasmus, it is crucial to try to integrate. I say try because I think that you don't always succeed completely. Integrating into a situation different from that in which you are accustomed to live, not only in terms of the culture but also the traditions, language, way of dealing with things, climate (why not), in short, full integration is not always possible. You encounter some limits. But in my experience I have seen that integration is not an impossible dream, it's a real possibility. *As with all things, you have to work at it.* I too worked on it, working hard, for example, on my use of the language, getting used to their eating habits (which can often be very different from ours). In short *it's a long process*, which may not be completed in nine months of an Erasmus exchange. But just the fact of getting involved at a level higher than simple adaptation can be an indicator of our openness to new experiences, and the accomplishment what is the essence of Erasmus. (Silvia)¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Posso risponderti direttamente qui: io penso all'adattamento come al modo di saper inserirsi all'interno di una situazione "nuova". In linea generale, dovrebbe essere una cosa positiva, in quanto l'adattarsi significa anche riuscire a entrare in quei meccanismi che magari a noi non sono familiari, ma nei quali riusciamo comunque a stare bene. Diciamo che per quanto riguarda la mia esperienza, per me l'adattamento è stato almeno all'inizio raggiungere una condizione di "meno peggio", cioè cercare di stare bene anche se di positivo c'era davvero poco. Ma se poi considero la seconda parte del mio Erasmus, credo che non mi sono limitata a adattarmi, mi sono in un certo senso integrata alla situazione nuova che avevo davanti. Quindi io distinguerei il concetto di adattamento a quello di integrazione, pensando che il primo è inevitabilmente anche il primo in ordine di tempo. E' la prima strategia che si adotta in una situazione estranea. Diciamo l'unica strategia possibile se si vuole trarre qualcosa di positivo dall'esperienza che si sta vivendo. Non adattarsi, o per lo meno non provarci neanche, rischia di portare ad un grande vuoto, un sentimento di solitudine che non credo si possa sostenere. Se non mi fossi adattata alla situazione che avevo davanti, anche a quella peggiore, probabilmente l'unica alternativa sarebbe stata tornare a casa. Quindi ritengo di essermi adattata, all'inizio almeno era l'unica cosa che potevo realmente raggiungere. Ma penso anche che il solo

Finally, Federico considered his adaptation to two different aspects of the experience of study abroad: the first to life in the host country, Spain in his case, and the second to the Erasmus context, that is to a multi-cultural, multilingual higher education environment. This is an issue which will be discussed in chapter 9, one which requires a re-thinking of the implications of cross-cultural adaptation in the context of European higher education mobility.

Let's say first of all that, *in addition to the customs of the foreign country, one has to adapt to life on an Erasmus sojourn*, among countless activities and events. Living abroad is not the same thing as living abroad on an Erasmus exchange (I think). So *adaptation not only to the host country, but also to the fact of being among young people from many different cultures*. As for the customs of the host country – Spain in my case - I think I adapted pretty well, both because in the end it is not so different from Italy, and because they have a very sociable culture, open and full of vitality (from what I saw, of course). Without doubt, an effective way to "adapt" to life in a foreign country (even if just to familiarise yourself with it, without necessarily having to make it you own) is to spend time with locals. One thing that particularly struck me and fascinated me is being able to compare the different habits or different ways of thinking: I "adapted" to

adattamento non basta: per vivere bene e pienamente un'esperienza come l'Erasmus, è cruciale tentare di integrarsi. Dico tentare perché ritengo che non sempre ci si riesca in modo completo. Integrarsi in una realtà comunque diversa da quella in cui sei abituato a vivere, non solo per cultura, ma anche per tradizioni, lingua, modo di affrontare le cose, anche clima (perché no), insomma integrarsi pienamente non sempre è possibile. Qualche limite si incontra. Ma per la mia esperienza ho visto che l'integrazione non è un sogno proibito, è una possibilità concreta. Come per tutte le cose, bisogna lavorarci. Anch'io ci ho lavorato, impegnandomi di più, per esempio, nel mio uso della lingua, avvicinandomi ai loro modi di mangiare (che spesso possono essere davvero molto diversi dai nostri). Insomma è un processo lungo, che forse non può essere fatto completamente in 9 mesi di Erasmus. Però anche solo il fatto di mettersi in gioco a un livello più alto del semplice adattarsi, può essere un indicatore della nostra apertura verso esperienze nuove, esplicitando quindi quello che è l'essenza dell'Erasmus.

some of them, while in others (especially sports) I kept my position. (Federico)¹³⁹

As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, the students were asked to reflect on what adaptation was and were offered the opportunity to write down their thoughts rather than discuss them during the interview. It is likely that the only ones who responded to this request (quoted here), were the most reflective students, those most ready to engage with the concepts and attempt to articulate their thoughts. In any case, what seems to emerge from these extracts is an awareness of having been through a transformative process, a willingness to reflect on the implications of their sojourn abroad, and finally an attempt to make sense of, and learn from, their experience.

In the next chapter I will provide an account of one specific case, that of Angela, as a longitudinal example of adaptation. In chapter 9, I will then discuss the main issues that have emerged from the data I have presented, in relation to my initial research questions.

¹³⁹ Allora diciamo innanzitutto che oltre che alle usanze del paese straniero occorre adattarsi alla vita in erasmus, tra mille attività ed eventi. Vivere all'estero non è la stessa cosa che vivere all'estero in erasmus (almeno credo). Quindi adattamento non solo al paese ospitante ma allo stare in mezzo a ragazzi di tante culture diverse. Per quello che riguarda le usanze del paese ospitante -nel mio caso spagna- credo di essermi adattato abbastanza bene, sia perché alla fine non è poi tanto diverso che in Italia, e perché hanno una cultura molto socievole, aperta e con molta vitalità (per quello che ho visto, ovvio). Sicuramente un modo efficace per "adattarsi" alla vita in un paese estero (ma anche solo conoscerla senza dover obbligatoriamente farla propria) è passare del tempo con gente del posto. Una cosa che mi ha particolarmente colpito e affascinato è appunto confrontare i diversi usi o diversi modi di pensare: in alcuni mi ci sono "adattato", in altri (soprattutto sportivi) ho mantenuto le mie posizioni.

CHAPTER 8 – Case

In the previous three chapters I have offered an overview of the motivations and expectations expressed by the participants before departure, with regard to their involvement in the Erasmus programme; the longitudinal data collected during the period of study abroad; and finally the feedback provided by the students concerning the perceived outcomes of their sojourn, and views on the meaning of adaptation, with reference to their experience. Before moving to the discussion of the issues raised, I will present here the case of one participant, Angela, who spent seven months in a Scottish university. In my choice of the individual, I was guided by a wish to avoid exceptional cases – those who adapt perfectly, and those who do not adapt at all. From this point of view, Angela fell between these extremes, and her experience can be considered fairly typical, notwithstanding the fact that adjustment processes vary significantly between individuals. In addition, I chose her because the data she provided was rich – the comments to the weekly tables, the monthly interviews and the postings on her Facebook page – which will enable me to illustrate her case in detail from a longitudinal point of view.

8.1 Angela

In September 2009, Angela was in her third year of a Bachelors' degree in Modern Foreign Languages, majoring in English and Spanish. When she left high school, she had contemplated training to be a teacher, but after two years at university, she was beginning to consider alternatives in the field of translation or the performing arts.

Being from Bologna, Angela was still living at home with her parents, in a small town close to the city. Her friends who had done an Erasmus exchange had convinced her of its value, and during her pre-departure interview she revealed she was hoping to become more independent and self-reliant, more mature and open-minded. The main objectives for her therefore seemed to be related to the personal growth aspect of the experience. Being a language specialist, the linguistic aspect was another important motive for going abroad, although she was hoping to practise her Spanish as much as her English in Scotland. As a result, the three subjects she

had chosen to include in her Learning Agreement were Scottish Literature, Comparative European Literature, and Spanish. Although she was the only one from her group of friends who was travelling to Glasgow, several of them were also going to be studying abroad during the same period.

During her pre-departure interview, Angela seemed a talkative, friendly young woman, who felt excited and enthusiastic about her forthcoming sojourn in Scotland. She anticipated her greatest difficulties to be linguistic, although she hoped her level would increase rapidly as a result of being in an English-speaking environment. She had never been to Scotland before, and the main source of practical information had been her host university's website. During her study abroad, she was hoping to be able to join a drama club through which she could also meet local students.

8.2 Graphs

Before analysing in greater detail Angela's experience in Glasgow, it may be useful to observe the individual graphs built from the weekly tables. In Angela's case, the 'overall' graphs, obtained by averaging the three values given to the 'personal' aspects and the three pertaining to the 'academic' experience, show two distinct trends: while 'personal' experience seems to follow a 'learning curve' (with a slight dip following the Christmas break), the academic curve resembles more a 'U-curve', starting at 4 (good), decreasing in the first eight weeks to less than 2 (bad), and then increasing all the way to the end of the sojourn, to slightly above the starting point.

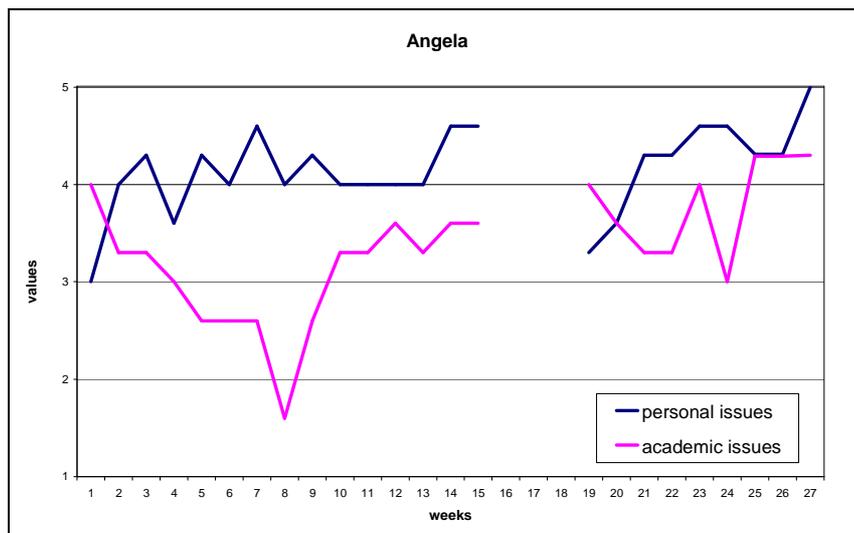


Fig. 8.1 – Angela's 'Overall' graph

In order to understand better the reasons for these ups and downs, we can analyse the graphs for the single aspects that contributed to the overall 'personal' and 'academic' experiences. These, together with the weekly comments and monthly interviews, can shed light on the problems encountered, the strategies used to overcome them, the adjustments made and the overall adaptation process of this participant.

If we observe the graphs (Figs. 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4) of the three 'social' aspects (Friends and Social Life; Language for Socialisation; Daily Life), we notice that the 'friends and social life' category seems to show the most positive trend. After a sharp rise within the first month, it remains at the highest value (5=very good) throughout, except for a slight dip upon returning to Glasgow after the Christmas break. Although this might seem like a typical trend among Erasmus students, the graphs produced by the rest of the participants (see appendix III) show that there is significant variety also in this aspect from one individual to the other.

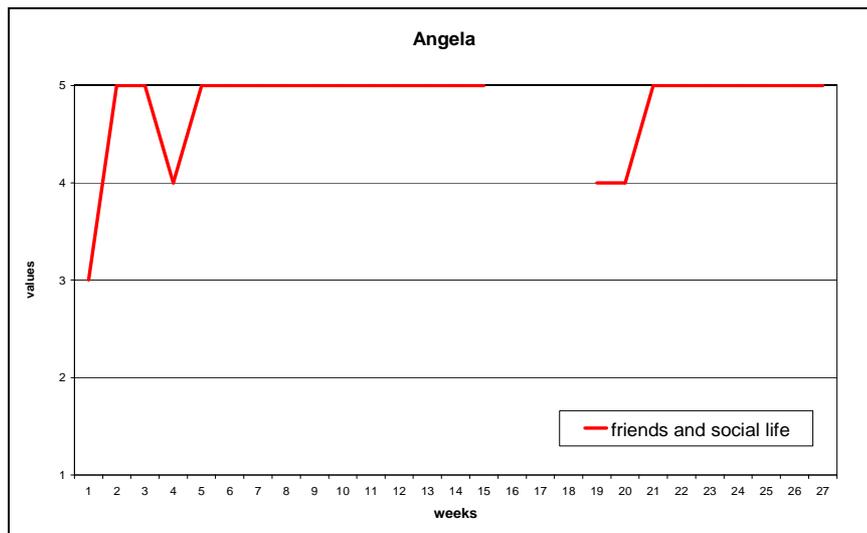


Fig.8.2 – Angela - Friends and social life

Another aspect contributing to the ‘social’ part of the experience was language. Although Angela had anticipated language in general to be the source of the greatest difficulties, the trend here seems to be relatively smooth and positive. On the other hand, the graph corresponding to language used for academic purposes (Fig.8.6) seems to reflect better the difficulties anticipated by Angela. The reason for this difference lies in the fact that Angela socialised mainly with other foreign students, with whom English was used as a lingua franca. Her level of proficiency was approximately in line with those of her friends, with the exception of her flatmate, who was Scottish. Unsurprisingly, linguistic difficulties were mentioned when talking about her, more than about her other friends (her closest friend was French). At the same time, English was the medium of study, and was soon identified as the greatest academic barrier. A difference in her perception of difficulty in these two areas was therefore to be expected.

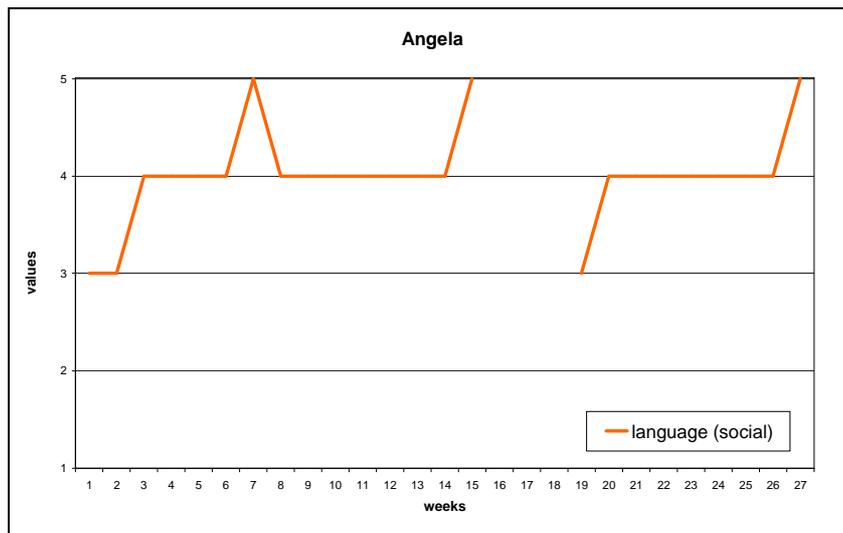


Figure 8.3 – Angela - Language for socialisation

The aspect of daily life was generally positive throughout (3 or above), although it seems less smooth than the previous two curves. Here the period of adjustment lasted longer, until just before the Christmas break. For someone who had lived at home with her parents until then, it is perhaps not surprising that adjusting to an independent life would have presented some difficulties, even in her own country.

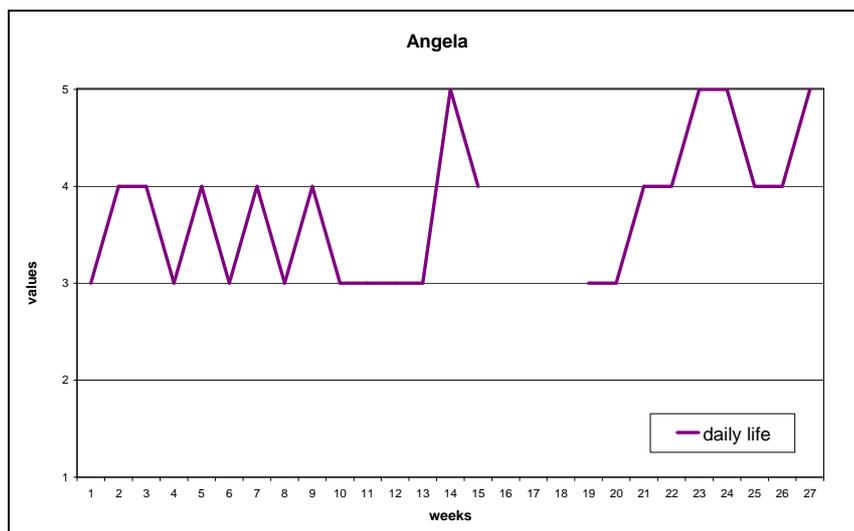


Figure 8.4 – Angela - Daily life

Moving to the academic side of the experience, we can see that the three graphs (Figs. 8.5, 8.6 and 8.7) reflect the same ‘u-curve’ identified in the ‘overall’ graph (Fig. 8.1). As has already been discussed, the difficulties encountered with language used for academic purposes seem very different from those when English was used for socialisation purposes.

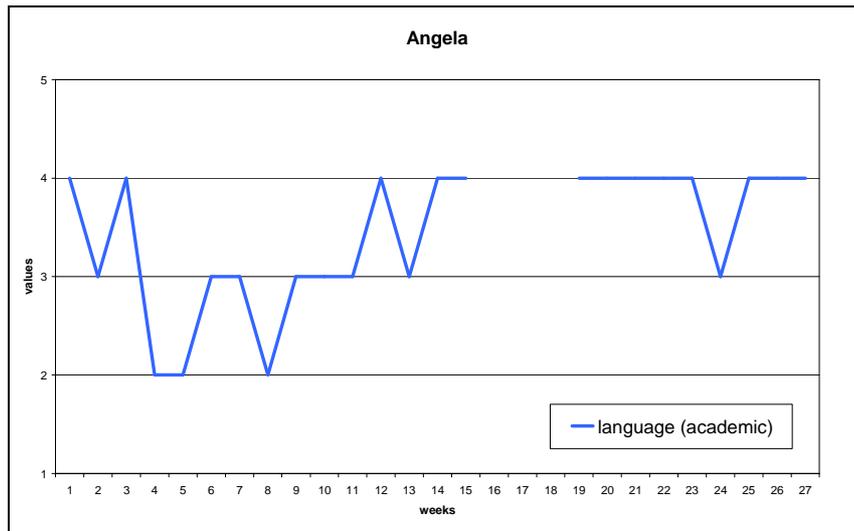


Figure 8.5 – Angela - Language for academic purposes

The curve above is very similar to the one related to courses (below), although the latter shows more extreme responses, ranging from 1=very negative to 5=very positive. This reflects the fact that linguistic difficulties strongly affected Angela’s perception of the courses themselves, and were identified by her as the main academic barrier: like many of the other participants, she found it hard to understand her course mates, had difficulties expressing her views in English, her language proficiency affected her self-confidence, and she had considerable difficulties getting through the readings assigned from one seminar to the next. In addition, this graph shows a slight dip also in the second term, indicating that the difficulties were still present, although there had been considerable improvement.

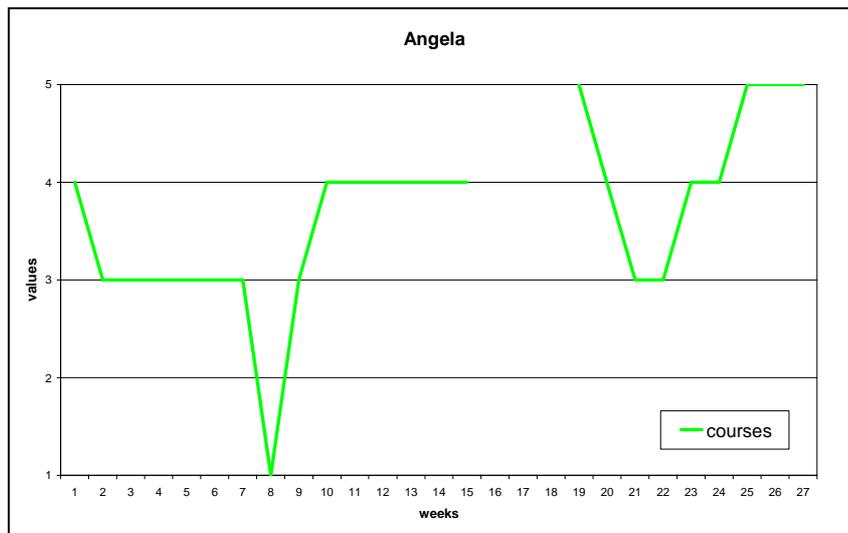


Figure 8.6 – Angela - Courses

The graph related to courses shows two “u-curves”, one in each term. The first is much more pronounced, ranging from 4 down to 1: although this would seem to indicate that Angela was entirely dissatisfied with her academic experience, from the interviews it is clear that the main problem concerned one out of three courses. However, the psychological effect of being unable to understand both her fellow students and the contents, which meant that she could not write one of the essays assigned and felt she had to abandon this particular course, was significant, as will be discussed later.

The last aspect to be evaluated was ‘Administration’ (Fig. 8.7). Here too the same trend was shown, with a dip during the middle period of the sojourn. Interestingly, though, Angela’s difficulties were not so much with the host institution as with her home university. This is relatively common among Erasmus students (Teichler, 2004), mostly due to the red tape attached to the learning agreement, and with the fact that these students seem to live in a kind of ‘limbo’ during their study abroad. Many observed that they felt they didn’t belong to either the host or the home institution, and much of the difficulty derived from what they felt to be a lack of support from their home institution.

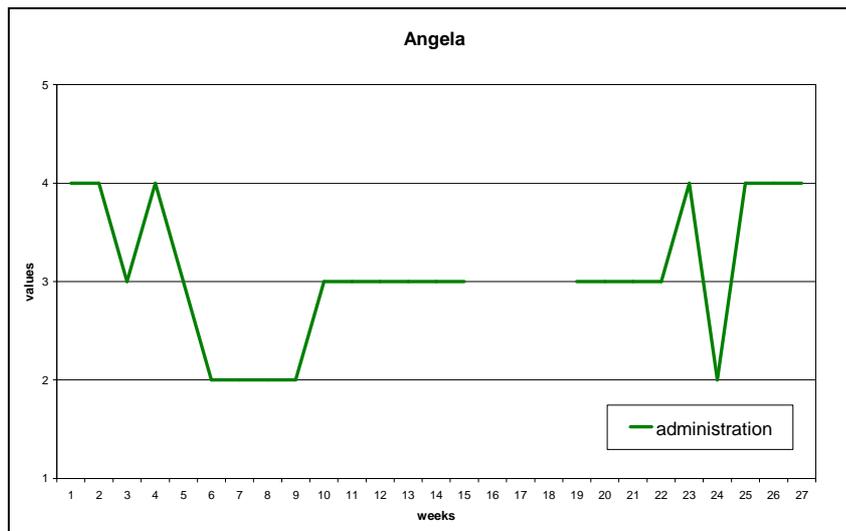


Figure 8.7 – Angela - Administrative issues

The seven graphs above provide an overview of the general trends of Angela's adaptation process in the social and academic areas. However, we need to turn to the comments in the weekly tables, the monthly interviews and the Facebook postings if we wish to understand better what specific problems Angela encountered, and how she dealt with them.

8.3 Angela's social experience

Angela arrived in Glasgow, a city she had never visited, at the beginning of September. She had found a room in a house through the internet, sharing with her landlord's daughter, a first year university student. The first two weeks were taken up by the Orientation Programme organised by the host institution for incoming Erasmus students. This is usually a time of intense socialisation, in which the students get to know each other, form groups, share information and advice, and spend leisure time together. Most are inevitably drawn to co-nationals, with whom communication at a time of need is much simpler (Brown, 2009d). Many are also attracted to other foreign students, particularly other Erasmus participants, met through parties organised by the local ESN (Erasmus Student Network). In this, Angela was no exception. However, her comments at the end of the first week were mixed: she was pleased with the opportunity she had to meet students from other

countries (this was one of her stated objectives), but at the same time she was finding it hard to “be herself” in a different language, in the sense of feeling contrived, unnatural when she spoke in a language different from Italian. This unfamiliar feeling, in spite of having studied English for many years at school and at university, was relatively common also in other participants.

In addition, most of her friends were living near the university, while she was the only one living in the city centre. This made her feel isolated, and concerned for her own safety when travelling back home in the evening. As a result, she had opted for taking taxis, an expensive solution. “The Erasmus experience is not easy, actually”, she remarked. However, it was precisely the fact that she was living in the centre that enabled Angela to appreciate city life (as opposed to village life back home):

I’m not used to living in a city, because at home I live in a small village. But it’s much nicer. Every day I walk past theatres, the university, shops, people... it’s really nice. And then there’s always somebody playing an instrument in the streets, the bagpipe (laughing) or other instruments. It’s really nice.¹⁴⁰

One of the first difficulties Angela found in the initial period was associated with the strong need to meet people and start forming friendships, which characterises arrival in a new environment (Hendrickson et al, 2011). Host universities are aware of this, and usually organise initiatives so that newcomers can meet as many fellow students as possible. However, this intense period of socialisation leads many to mistake acquaintances for friendships. As another participant put it, “you end up hanging around with people you wouldn’t even speak to back home, just because you feel you’re on the same boat”. These short-lived, “cloakroom communities” (Bauman, 2004, p. 31), last only for as long as the members are involved in the same activity, in this case their Erasmus sojourn, and are held together by the individuals’ common

¹⁴⁰ Io non sono abituata a vivere in città, perché a casa vivo in un paesino. Ma è molto più bello. Ogni giorno passo davanti ai teatri, l’università, i negozi, la gente... è veramente bello. Poi c’è sempre qualcuno che suona per le strade, le cornamuse (ridendo) o qualsiasi altro strumento. È veramente bello.

needs. Angela, like a few other participants, went as far as identifying this new group of friends as her new family:

considering that you only have those friends, practically your...
“family” is that group, so you also want to be with the friends who
are there with you.¹⁴¹

This psychological urge to form a new “family” is at odds with the time usually required to build meaningful friendships. After the initial weeks, Angela felt frustrated and emotionally confused. Faced with these difficulties, she turned to her close friends back home, with whom she was in touch through Facebook and Skype. By discussing the problems with them, she succeeded in making sense of her feelings, obtained the emotional support she needed from ‘significant others’, and was able to overcome this initial malaise fairly rapidly:

At the beginning of this week I was a bit depressed because I didn’t feel comfortable in the group of friends that I had found. I can’t be myself when there are people who don’t respect others. But after talking to some of my friends at home, I am convinced that the problem is only mine, because I am the one who shuts up and stops myself from getting to know others better. In fact I can say that from mid-week so far things have gone much better! I’ve got to know some people better and I’ve tried to be myself. I’ve also discovered that some people in the group actually have some great qualities, which I was refusing to see.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ “Col fatto che hai solo quelli amici, in pratica la tua... “famiglia” è quel gruppo lì, quindi hai anche voglia di stare con gli amici che sono con te lì.”

¹⁴² All’inizio di questa settimana ero un po’ in crisi perché nel gruppo di amici che ho trovato non mi trovavo troppo bene. Io non riesco ad essere me stessa quando ci sono persone che prevaricano gli altri. Però parlando con qualche mia amica a casa, mi sono convinta che il problema è solo mio, perché sono io che mi chiudo e mi impedisco di conoscere gli altri in questo modo. Infatti posso dire che da metà settimana fino ad ora è andata molto bene! Ho conosciuto meglio alcune persone e ho cercato di essere me stessa. Ho anche scoperto che alcune persone del gruppo in realtà hanno delle bellissime qualità, ma io non le volevo vedere.

In this specific case, Angela's identification of her feelings of discomfort as an obstacle in establishing supportive friendship networks, and her resulting coping strategy of turning to her old group of friends back home for advice, resulted in a positive outcome.

As mentioned above, Angela also commented on her inability to "be herself" in a different language. This difficulty was only mentioned when she talked about her social life. Inside the classroom, her language problems seemed related primarily to her inability to understand spoken interactions or articulate her thoughts fast enough so as not to lose her turn. On the other hand, outside the classroom, the main problem seemed to be linked to identity, to communicating in such a way that she felt she was still "being herself". This was not so much related to her level of proficiency, but rather to the fact that it was an entirely new experience for her. The realisation that it was a common feeling among foreign students, coupled with sufficient time to get used to it, seemed to help her overcome the problem, to the extent that by week 5 she was already feeling that something had changed, some of her "apprehensions" had begun to disappear:

This week, the highest score!!! It's been really great. I've met even more people and I really felt myself . I think now something has changed. In the beginning I was more apprehensive, I was afraid of the opinions of others. But now I feel just fine. Probably because I've met people who are not pretentious, who are simpler and are usually the type of people I prefer.¹⁴³

When talking about this initial period during the monthly interview at the end of September, Angela reflected on how she had not anticipated this problem, believing that communication in a different language was just a matter of "grammar and accent", but not identity and sense of self:

¹⁴³ Questa settimana, punteggio massimo!!! E' stato davvero bello. Ho conosciuto ancora più persone e mi sono sentita veramente me stessa. Credo che ora sia cambiato qualcosa. All'inizio ero più timorosa, avevo paura del giudizio degli altri. Ora invece mi sento proprio bene. Probabilmente anche perché ho conosciuto persone che non hanno pretese, sono più semplici e in genere sono il tipo di persone che preferisco.

... initially, there was the problem of the group, in the sense of the language, because it's strange, you have to speak in another language and it's not so straight forward, you say "ok, I know a little...", but there is also the problem of being oneself in a different language, and this is something I had never experienced. At the beginning I found it difficult, now it's a bit better, because it's like that for everybody. At the beginning I had a few sad days, I wrote to you, actually...

Ana: That's right. But do you think it was due to the fact that you had difficulties with the language, or was it more, as you say, that you feel a bit strange speaking a language that is not yours, regardless of the level you have in that particular language?

Angela: In my opinion it was more that I felt a bit strange. Because maybe some things I couldn't express in the same way, and so I couldn't convey the same meaning, I found it really hard. Because at the end of the day, accent, grammar, all those things don't count, because there are people who... one of our Spanish friends, he's really difficult to understand, but he has no problem being himself in another language... (27 Sept)¹⁴⁴

As with her initial difficulty fitting into her group of friends, Angela turned to her other friends from Bologna who were also doing an Erasmus exchange in other European countries to share her feelings about her experience. In her case, technology offered the possibility of obtaining emotional support before she had had

¹⁴⁴ "... all'inizio c'era un po' il problema del gruppo, così, della lingua, perché è strano, devi parlare in un'altra lingua e non è così immediato, dici "vabbé, qualcosa lo so", ma c'è anche il problema di essere se stessi in un'altra lingua, e questo non lo avevo mai provato. All'inizio ho fatto un po' di fatica, adesso va un po' meglio, perché è così un po' per tutti. All'inizio ho avuto qualche giorno un po' triste, ti avevo scritto, poi...

Ana: Infatti. Ma secondo te era per il fatto che avevi delle difficoltà con la lingua, o era più, come dici tu, che ti senti un po' strana a parlare in una lingua che non è la tua, al di là del livello che tu abbia in quella lingua lì?

Angela: Ma secondo me è più che mi sentivo un po' strana io. Perché magari certe cose non riuscivo ad esprimerle nello stesso modo, e quindi non riuscivo a dare lo stesso significato, facevo molta fatica. Perché non conta alla fine l'accento, la grammatica, e tutte queste cose qua, non contano perché c'è della gente magari che... c'è un nostro amico spagnolo che si fa veramente fatica a capire, ma lui non ha problemi ad essere se stesso in un'altra lingua, così.

time to build up local friendships. When asked the extent to which social media such as Facebook were helping or hindering her sojourn, she remarked:

This is an important question, I think. Because actually I'm doing the Erasmus in a period when there is Facebook, maybe other guys some years ago, maybe just three years ago, didn't have this. So...it's different. I think Facebook is really important, because actually at the beginning, but also now, I did an email message on Facebook, you know... between me and some Italian friends, and above all at the beginning when it was more difficult for me, I wrote a lot of things, quite everything I was doing, so yes, it's really useful. Now I use it less with them [...] sometimes I write them to tell them my news, and they tell me theirs (9 Nov).

Facebook has a “private messaging” tool that allows the user to exchange messages with selected recipients and continue adding exchanges to the sequence. With this, Angela built a kind of interactional “diary” with different friends back home or in other European destinations, their “story” which she enjoyed reading again and again.

Angela: So I have all the story from the beginning in one message. [...] And I have one with them [her friends back home], and one with two girls. One is Chiara, who's in Granada, and the other one is a friend, V., who's in York. And we write sometimes. And it's nice, because we are in Erasmus all of us, so we write our experience. I was the first one, and then Chiara left Italy, and then Viola. So we can compare...(laughter) [...]

Ana: That's nice. It's nice to know you can be in touch with friends who are going through the same experiences as you... perhaps at different moments, as you left first...

Angela: Yes, at the beginning when I was sad for something, I wrote them and they...they cheered me up, and I did the same when they left, because maybe I understood better their difficulties, because I passed it. No, it was a really nice thing. Yes.

Ana: So it enables you to have almost daily contact with your friends. Is that a good thing, or a bad thing? Does it make you feel more nostalgia, that you miss them? Is there also the risk that you depend too much on that daily contact with your friends back home? Did it stop you, particularly in the initial phase, did it stop you from going out and meeting friends?

Angela: No, no. This not.

Ana: So it was only beneficial you think.

Angela: Yes, because... well, actually, I called with Skype just maybe... four times... with my best friend, three times maybe. Another friend just one time. So... well, I wrote on this...'email story'...I can call it so...well, just when I was sad, I wrote. But if I didn't have this, I would have written my own diary. So... because in Italy, when I'm sad, I write my diary.

Ana: So it substituted your diary...

Angela: Yes. I like to write when I'm sad, and write to my friends it's better, because also I need someone to tell me something, so...

Ana: So you think it's even better than having a diary, because there is somebody who can read it and who can answer?

Angela: Yes... Well. But not at the level of stopping my own activity here and to go out... (9 Nov)

This online exchange had become a substitute for her private diary, a place of reflection in the company of friends back home as well as friends doing their Erasmus project in other destinations, with whom she could discuss experiences and even reframe her goals and expectations. As her language proficiency increased and she became used to speaking in English outside the language classroom, Angela was able to relax more, and by mid-October she was beginning to adjust to this aspect of her life abroad:

At the beginning I remember it was difficult also to socialise in English, because I didn't feel comfortable to speak in English and be myself in English, it was really strange, because I haven't ever thought about this kind of problem. But now it's better because I

can talk without problems, or well, I do some mistakes but it doesn't matter (18 Oct).

Interestingly, from then on Angela chose to conduct the interviews for this study in English rather than Italian, and added in her weekly comments (week 5):

hahaha the language! It's wonderful because I'm "opening my mind". We speak in English, Spanish, Italian, French... haha everything! It's really great, now it's a bit easier for me to change from one language to another.¹⁴⁵

Her increased comfort using English seemed to have affected also her enjoyment of the cosmopolitan environment in which she found herself. In fact, it seemed that what Angela enjoyed most about her Erasmus sojourn was not so much being in Scotland, as being surrounded by students from many different countries:

How I love this international atmosphere! It's so interesting to have discussions with people of different nationalities. You have to explain everything, even the simplest things. I like it a lot! (Week 7)¹⁴⁶

And on 21st December, she wrote on Facebook: "Angela... is so proud of all her friends...italian, french, spanish, german...everybody!!!" (sic.). No English and no Scottish friends to be proud of, though.

By November, Angela had also built a close friendship with a French Erasmus student, and had written in her weekly diary table:

Now I have a French friend that is really nice, C., it's one of the friends which I speak more and is a kind of confidante here ... it's

¹⁴⁵ ahahah la lingua! E' bellissimo perchè mi sto "aprendo la mente". Parliamo inglese, spagnolo, italiano, francese..ahah tutto! E' troppo bello, ora mi riesce un po' meglio il cambiamento da una lingua all'altra.

¹⁴⁶ Quanto mi piace quest'atmosfera internazionale! E' troppo bello confrontarsi sempre con persone di diversa nazionalità. Devi spiegare tutto, anche le cose più semplici. Mi piace proprio un sacco!

difficult because the first week, yes, you have friends, but not really confidante, so sometimes I missed my friends in Italy, because I couldn't tell what I feel here to a friend. But now that you maybe trust someone more, it's better. And she's a really good friend (9 Nov).

This was a significant change in Angela's adaptation process, in the sense that she had found a close friend to "replace" the lost friends back home. She herself saw this as the beginning of a new phase:

... well, now I'm... when you start relations with people, you start having real friends, not just people you meet and you think are nice or not. You start having friends ... (9 Nov)

However, her "confidante" was another foreign student who, like Angela, was in Glasgow for a limited period of time, rather than a local student. Does this mean that the adjustment was less significant? This is an issue that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Although using English as a lingua franca with her Erasmus friends had become easier within the first two or three weeks, understanding her Scottish flatmate proved a more challenging task. Angela sometimes found being in Rhona's company quite demanding, particularly if she was tired, but she also appreciated her flatmate's attempts to talk to her and spend time together at home watching television, which provided some insights into cultural differences she had never understood, like humour:

Angela: Sometimes she spends a lot of time to explain me something that maybe it's really ironic for her, that makes her laugh, but for me... I think... I feel the different culture, because maybe something that for me it's amazing...funny, for her it's not...and the opposite.

Ana: what kind of things?

Angela: sometimes when she's watching TV, a program called ... "argumental" something... they are funny programmes with a kind

of actor, with some speeches improvisation, you know. Well, maybe I don't understand also because they speak fastly. She always puts subtitles for me, so she's really kind, but sometimes I don't understand. So when she laughs she starts explaining the meaning, but maybe it's not so funny for me. (laughter)

Ana: Ok, so sometimes you notice there is a difference in your sense of humour...

Angela: Yeah, yeah... Sometimes in Italy they say its "English humour", but I've never understood about it. And actually I'm starting understanding that we laugh about different things, it's true (laughing) well, maybe... Maybe she notices in me when I don't understand, because sometimes... well, we were looking a film one of these nights, and she always starts saying "Oh, but this is impossible, well... blablabla", like this. And sometimes, or I don't really listen because I'm concentrating on the film, or because I don't understand. (Laughing) So I just smile and... and she tells me "Oh sorry, I don't want to disturb you", and I say "Oh, no, nothing" (laughter). Maybe she notice it (18 Oct).

These linguistic difficulties were never seriously problematic, probably due to the fact that both young women were relaxed, good humoured and ready to make allowances. Had Angela been more anxious, or her flatmate less accommodating, the atmosphere at home could have been very different.

However, the main difficulty with her flatmate actually concerned household chores. This is a common problem in shared houses, and certainly not limited to foreign students. But Angela, who felt she was doing most of the work, was unsure about how to address the issue, how to explain in English without offending her flatmate. "I must find a way of making her understand", she wrote in week 2 and the following week added: "perhaps we have a different approach to house cleaning". Two months later, when an Indian student rented the spare room, Angela felt supported by the other foreign tenant, and together they succeeded in establishing a rota. This did not put an end to the problem (Angela still complained that her flatmate left her stuff

around the house and didn't always do her share of chores) but at least it circumscribed it and made easier to handle.

Yeah, we had some problems because she became really messy, and... I know she was really busy with ... because she do orchestra stuff but... well... at a certain point with the other flatmate we were a bit annoyed because... all the stuff... because she has two rooms, and... but in the end the other flatmate spoke to her, so...now it's better, yes, now it's better. The problem is that different persons have different standards of tidiness...(17 Dec)

The flexibility and understanding shown by Angela in the way she handled this problem was undoubtedly crucial to its successful resolution. In other cases, this type of problem would result in an exacerbation of national stereotypes regarding cleanliness or respectfulness for others.

Angela's positive attitude may have been the reason why many difficulties were relatively short-lived. Another example of this took place when her new Indian flatmate arrived. Her adjustment to this change can be followed in weekly tables 8 and 9:

Week 8: As for the house, a new flatmate arrived on Sunday. She's Indian and speaks all the time! For the moment living together is a bit more difficult because we need to get used to being three of us and also because it's difficult to understand each other, coming from such different cultures.

Week 9: This week a new flatmate arrived [note: she had arrived the previous week]: she's Indian and is 26 years old. Initially I found it a bit hard, because she doesn't know how to use many of the appliances in the house, and also because I was writing my essay and didn't have much time to dedicate to her. But now things

are much better. I'm happy because on Saturday she went out with me, and she's much more sociable than Rhona.¹⁴⁷

In the weeks running up to the Christmas break, friendships seemed to strengthen, in spite of (or perhaps thanks to) intense study in the library, which became a place for social gatherings:

This week went very well! Despite studying for exams, it was a really good week. I spent every day from morning till evening in the library studying, but it was nice because I was with some friends and so we talked during breaks and "comforted" each other. It was great to see my friends from another perspective, not only when we go out. In my opinion these opportunities are very helpful for cultivating friendships, in fact I got to know better some of my friends. Even at home things are better, we're becoming friends.¹⁴⁸

The Christmas break was a chance to 'touch base' by returning home. However, this time Skype and Facebook were used to keep in touch with her new Erasmus friends. As airports were closed following snow storms across Europe, Angela was anxious that her return to Glasgow could be delayed: knowing she only had two months left there, she wanted to make the most of them and not waste a single day "away from her friends".

Her return home set her back a little with her English. Again, the problem was unexpected but short-lived.

¹⁴⁷ Week 8: Per quanto riguarda la casa, domenica è arrivata una coinquilina nuova. E' indiana e parla sempre! Per ora è un po' più difficile la convivenza perché dobbiamo abituarci a essere in tre e anche perché è difficile capirsi tra culture così diverse.

Week 9: Questa settimana è arrivata una nuova coinquilina; è indiana e ha 26 anni. All'inizio ho fatto un po' fatica, perché non sa usare molti elettrodomestici della casa e anche perché stavo scrivendo il mio essay e non avevo molto tempo da dedicarle. Però ora va molto meglio. Sono contenta perché sabato è anche uscita con me ed è molto più socievole di Rhona.

¹⁴⁸ Questa settimana è andata molto bene! Nonostante lo studio per gli esami, è stata davvero una bella settimana. Ho passato tutti i giorni dalla mattina alla sera a studiare nella library, ma era bello perché ero con alcuni amici e quindi nei momenti di pausa si parlava e ci si "confortava" a vicenda. E' stato bello vedere i miei amici anche da un'altra prospettiva, non solo quando si esce. Queste occasioni secondo me aiutano molto a coltivare le amicizie, infatti ho avuto modo di conoscere meglio alcuni dei miei amici. Anche a casa va meglio, stiamo stringendo amicizia.

In the beginning it was a bit more difficult to start speaking in English again. It took me a while before I could understand as well as before. Not that I always understand everything, but for sure before Christmas it was better. (30 Jan)¹⁴⁹

As she was returning to a familiar destination, she was able to join extra-curricular activities that would enable her to practise her English: she began attending a salsa course organised by the Students' Union, frequented also by local students. Life at home fell quickly into a routine, and the three students were spending time together, going shopping together or watching films in the evenings. They no longer had to follow the chores rota:

... before Christmas we did some... table... timetable... for the houseworks. But now we're not following it, because we're... going pretty well, I think. Sometimes one wash the bathroom, sometimes the other one, so...[...] I think now, when you start knowing the people, then it's better, because the timetable... if I have time I can do that, we can arrange without the timetable (30 Jan).

However, Rhona remained her only Scottish friend. When asked about the reason for this, Angela attributed it to the fact that the locals were not particularly interested in foreign students, in her opinion partly due to the fact that the latter were there only for a short time, so it was not worth investing in them and trying to build friendships. She also felt that sharing social activities, rather than attending the same classes, was the best way to befriend locals, as some of her foreign acquaintances had met Scottish people through joining football or rugby clubs. Not her, though. Why was that? One of her comments may shed light on what constitutes another major factor in friendship patterns: motivation.

...yes, I don't know...I mean, there is no ... I mean... it's not a nice thing to say, but perhaps it's not necessary to get to know someone local... in the sense... perhaps Erasmus is just that, an

¹⁴⁹ All'inizio è stato un po' più difficile tornare a parlare inglese. Ci ho messo un po' prima di capire bene tutto come prima. Non che capisca sempre tutto, però sicuramente prima di Natale era meglio.

international experience, not necessarily in order to get to know local people, well, it's nice to get to know people from all over Europe. In fact, this is one of the best things, in my opinion. (4 March)¹⁵⁰

Her slight embarrassment reveals that she was aware that building friendships with local students constituted an important part of the study abroad rhetoric, and an expectation placed upon her by friends, teachers and family. In fact, being part of an international community may be one of the defining characteristics of Erasmus, one that differentiates it from the year abroad programmes in which the primary objective is to familiarise oneself with a local culture through its language and inhabitants.

8.4 Angela's academic experiences

With regard to the academic side of Angela's experience, the initial phase was characterised by trying to understand the new system, which required completing homework from the very first lesson, a substantial change from what she was used to in Italy. In week 2 she observed:

We've done the enrolment and I've already got homework for two courses!! Noooo... I don't really feel like studying because in Italy we usually follow lessons and start studying close to the date of the exam. Here, on the other hand, we need to have read the book we'll be discussing in the next lesson! I'm bound to make a fool of myself if they ask me something...¹⁵¹

During the following weeks, her comments were very similar, and regarded the workload, the need to organise herself, her difficulty in understanding her

¹⁵⁰ ...sì, non so... cioè, non c'è neanche... cioè...è brutto da dire, ma forse non c'è bisogno per forza di conoscere qualcuno del posto... nel senso... forse l'Erasmus è solo così, un'esperienza internazionale non per forza per conoscere la gente del posto, insomma, è bello conoscere gente da tutt'Europa. Anzi, questa è una delle cose migliori, secondo me.

¹⁵¹ Abbiamo fatto l'enrolment e per due corsi ho già dei compiti!! Noooo... Non ho molta voglia di studiare perché noi di solito in Italia seguiamo le lezioni e cominciamo a studiare vicino alla data dell'esame. Qui invece bisogna già aver letto il libro di cui si parlerà nella lezione successiva! Mi sa che farò un bel po' di figuracce se mi chiedono qualcosa...

classmates, writing essays and preparing presentations. She appreciated the principle of participating in seminars and tutorial, which is different from the Italian system of lectures. However, she found the workload extremely demanding, a problem exacerbated by her linguistic difficulties:

yes, because it's difficult to understand the students above all, they speak so fast! Yeah, sometimes... for example, for Scottish literature it's better, because I found a friend before than in the other tutorials, for Comparative Literature... so Scottish Literature it's a bit better, because they understand I'm foreign so they ask me, the students I mean, they ask me if I understand, if I have some problems. We started studying "Thus spoke Zarathustra", you know, it's philosophy, and it was really difficult for me, first to read the book, because philosophy in English... philosophy is difficult in Italian! (18 Oct)

Angela not only had difficulty understanding what students discussed during the seminars. She also found that her level of proficiency did not allow her to intervene promptly:

I spend most of the time trying to understand what they're saying, and then maybe (laughter) maybe if I understand something I want to say something, but they've changed... the subject (laughter), because I'm too slow! (18 Oct)

However, when asked by their tutor to meet after class to do some group work, Angela claimed to be the one to take the initiative to be communicative. The difference between Angela and other participants was that she did not automatically jump to conclusions and generalisations about her classmates being cold or unfriendly; rather, she attributed their silence to shyness and to the fact they were first year students (three or four years younger than Angela). In other words, despite her lack of linguistic confidence, she had greater social skills and was able to empathize with her peers and acknowledge their lack of self-confidence.

Also with the Scottish students it's really difficult, because for example in the first meeting, for the homework they told us to work in groups, so we have to meet after class sometimes, and the first two or three meetings they didn't speak, and I was the only one asking "how was your day?". And they were all silent, so it was a bit difficult, but now it's better, because they are also then they are more confident and they speak, so... I think it's probably difficult for them because they are in their first year. (18 Oct)

Being a language student, the only course in which Angela felt to be on par with her classmates was Spanish language and Literature. Clearly, for her the Erasmus sojourn was not just the chance to practice her English in an English-speaking country, but also her Spanish, and even her French. This she did by attending the Language Café on Friday afternoons, as well as the International and Hispanic Societies. In fact, her interest in meeting local students seemed to derive primarily from instrumental reasons linked to language practice. However, these same reasons were frowned upon when she and her other Erasmus friends perceived them in the local students, interested in meeting them for precisely the same motive. Even to somebody as perceptive as Angela, the contradiction was not apparent.

There are some Scottish people who come to the International Society with the purpose of meeting students from other countries, but, yes... it was... the Hispanic Society once sent an email to all the Spanish Erasmus students to... well, to go out. Go out one evening and chat... Some of my friends went and said: "Yes, but I felt exploited!" (laughing) because they all wanted to speak in Spanish, and only with the purpose of speaking in Spanish, not to...(4 March)¹⁵²

¹⁵² ci sono degli scozzesi che vengono alla International Society apposta per conoscere studenti di altri paesi, però, sì... è stato.. la Hispanic Society che una volta aveva mandato una email a tutti gli studenti Erasmus spagnoli per... uscire, insomma. Uscire una sera e parlare....Dei miei amici ci sono andati e hanno detto "Sì, ma io mi sono sentito sfruttato!" (ridendo) perché tutti volevano parlare in spagnolo, e solo per parlare spagnolo, non per...

Despite her efforts, Angela felt that her language acquisition was not fast enough. In her weekly comments, there was a feeling of growing anxiety and of being overwhelmed by difficulties in the academic sphere, which was reflected in the corresponding graph. The extracts below, taken from six consecutive weeks, clearly show the increasing anxiety that Angela felt at not being able to cope with one of her courses, and how the linguistic and academic factors contributed to the problem:

Week 4: We started the seminars. The Scottish literature one was very nice, because our tutor is very helpful. Comparative Literature rather less so. In any case, both are complex, because it's difficult to understand and talk about complex issues in English. Spanish was better than last time. In the end I don't think it'll be as bad as I thought. Anyway, the workload is really too much! I hope to be able to keep up with the pace [...] In the academic sphere I feel the problem of language much more now. Working in the seminar groups I found it hard to understand what my classmates said. I already have a hard time understanding the set books, and on top of that it takes me twice as long to understand what others say, so once I'm ready to articulate my ideas on a topic, maybe they've moved on to something else. But okay, I'm not worried for now...

Week 5: ... the deadlines for the assignments and for my presentation are approaching... next week I'll have to work on them. The fact is that they overload us with homework! By the time I've caught up, I'm already behind again! Ugh! ... it's a bit frustrating ... But I hope I'll make it. It's also very difficult, because I have to read a 400-page book and it's not in contemporary English .. it's from the 19th century ... so it takes more time. Some say that they can keep up with this pace because Scottish students read all their books in August so they can then sustain the pace of two books a week. But I don't know how true it is. LANGUAGE: This is another sore point. The Scottish students I work with in the group speak quickly, softly and have a Scottish accent!! It's a problem all of us Erasmus students have. We don't

understand why they speak so softly! In any case, the group work is very difficult, because I struggle to understand what others say and I'm sorry to have to ask them to repeat.

Week 6: Ugh ... I have to study ... We have a lot of books to read and they are difficult. In some seminars I understood very little. The only positive thing is that I spoke with the tutors and they were very understanding and kind, which was nice. LANGUAGE: I think my speaking has improved, but I still find it hard to understand the students in my groups. They talk too fast!

Week 7: COURSES: a sore point ... I tried not to think about it during the weekend, but now I must get down to doing some work. I have two essays to hand in on November 2nd, so I have a week to get them done. I don't have classes so I have more time, but I'm very worried. For Comparative Literature I wasn't able to finish reading Thus Spake Zarathustra because it's too difficult, I don't understand it. It's difficult in Italian, let alone in English ... I'm very depressed about it and I don't know if I can do that essay. I think I'll write an email to the tutor to see if she can help me, she seemed very helpful when I spoke to her last. I'm also very worried about the other essay, despite having understood a little better. I don't know if I can write 2000 words ... ugh! Hope for the best .. LANGUAGE: A bit better, I think the presentation went well. I really like the Scottish Literature group. The other students understand that I'm struggling and help me, as does the tutor. I'm very satisfied with that group.

Week 8: This week has not been that great from an academic point of view. I had to hand in two essays yesterday but I only managed to write one. With the one about Nietzsche, I was stuck, so I didn't do it. Now I'll have to see how to solve the problem. I think I'll replace it with an English language test, but I have to find out, because here you can take the IELTS certificate, but it has a

different assessment scheme, not A, B, C, like the European one. I must also ask whether it'll be acceptable or not.

Week 9: I'm a bit sad because I had to get rid of comparative literature. Now I'm doing English in its place, but it doesn't appear in the learning [agreement], because I'm doing the IELTS certification. At the same time, though, the Scottish literature course fascinates me and I'm happy to be able to study it in greater depth, since the English exam will be in January.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Week 4: Abbiamo cominciato i seminari. Quello di scottish literature è stato molto bello, perché il prof ci segue molto. Quello di Comparative Literature invece un po' meno. Sono complessi comunque entrambi, perché è difficile capire e parlare di questioni complesse in inglese. Spagnolo è andato meglio dell'altra volta. Alla fine credo che non sarà poi così male come pensavo. Ad ogni modo il carico di lavoro è veramente tanto! Spero di riuscire a mantenere il ritmo [...] Nell'ambito accademico il problema della lingua si sente molto di più ora. Lavorando nei gruppi dei seminari facevo fatica a capire quello che dicevano i miei compagni. Già faccio fatica a capire i testi, in più ci metto il doppio del tempo a capire quello che dicono gli altri, quindi quando riesco a formulare un'idea mia su un argomento, magari stanno già parlando di altro. Ma va beh, non sono molto preoccupata per ora..

Week 5: ...si avvicinano le consegne e la mia presentazione...la prossima settimana dovrò lavorarci su. Il fatto è che ci riempiono di compiti! Io non faccio in tempo a mettermi in pari che sono già indietro! Uffi...è un po' frustrante.. Però spero di farcela. E' anche molto difficile, perché devo leggere un libro di circa 400 pagine e non è inglese odierno..è dell'800...quindi ci vuole più tempo. Qualcuno dice che hanno questo ritmo perché gli studenti scozzesi si mettono avanti ad agosto leggendo tutti i libri così dopo riescono a sostenere il ritmo di 2 libri a settimana. Però non so quanto sia vero. LINGUA: Anche questo è un tasto dolente. Gli studenti scozzesi con cui lavoro in gruppo parlano velocemente, con accento scozzese e a volume bassissimo!! E' un problema che abbiamo tutti noi erasmus. Non capiamo perché parlino così piano! Mah..cmq i lavori di gruppo sono molto difficili, perché faccio fatica a capire quello che dicono gli altri e mi dispiace farglielo ripetere

Week 6: Uffa...devo studiare.. Abbiamo un sacco di libri da leggere e sono difficili. Ad alcuni seminari ho capito poco. L'unica cosa positiva è che ho parlato con i prof dei seminari e si sono dimostrati molto comprensivi e gentili, il che mi ha fatto piacere. LINGUA: Io credo di essere migliorata nel parlato, ma faccio ancora molta fatica a comprendere gli studenti nei miei gruppi. Parlano troppo veloce!!

Week 7: CORSI: Tasto dolente... Ho cercato di non pensarci in questo weekend, ma ora devo proprio mettermi sotto. Devo consegnare due saggi per il 2 Novembre, quindi ho una settimana per lavorare. Non ho lezione quindi ho più tempo, ma sono molto preoccupata. Per Letterature compare non sono riuscita a finire di leggere Così parlò Zarathustra perché è troppo difficile, non capisco. E' difficile in italiano, figurati in inglese.. Sono molto abbattuta per questo e non so se riuscirò a fare quel saggio. Credo che scriverò una mail alla tutor per vedere se mi aiuta, si era mostrata molto disponibile quando le avevo parlato. Anche per l'altro saggio sono molto preoccupata, nonostante abbia capito un po' meglio. Non so se riuscirò a scrivere 2000 parole...uffa, speriamo bene.. LINGUA: Un po' meglio, la presentazione credo sia andata bene. Il gruppo di Scottish Literature mi piace davvero molto. I ragazzi capiscono che faccio fatica e mi aiutano, e lo stesso fa il professore. Sono molto contenta di quel gruppo.

The strategy used by Angela consisted in giving herself time to see if her English improved, speaking to her tutor about her difficulties, and finally removing the problem by eliminating the most difficult course from the point of view of the content, which was also the one in which she seemed to have the greater linguistic difficulties in understanding her peers. This strategy may seem like a sign of failure. However, in Anderson's terms, Angela's decision can be interpreted as adaptive: once she realised that she risked failing the course and not obtaining the credits she needed, she decided to change her objectives by replacing the literature course with a language course. This change allowed her to overcome her anxiety and concentrate on the courses which she really enjoyed. The fact that changing one's "Learning Agreement" half way through the year is possible in the Erasmus programme offered Angela an alternative to failure. Angela's positive character meant she felt 'sad', but her self-esteem did not seem to be affected. On the other hand, Paola, another participant who opted for the same strategy and dropped an English-language course because the level was too high, gloomily observed "I'm not proud of myself for having done this": the same strategy can be experienced very differently by two individuals, and therefore be effective for one and not for the other.

In the same way that technology provided the platform for obtaining emotional support in the initial weeks, Angela's Facebook page shed light on her academic problems, and the support she obtained from her friends. The following exchange, with the times and the geographical location of the respondents, is a telling example. It took place the night before her essay deadline:

Week 8: Questa settimana non è stata un gran che dal punto di vista accademico. Dovevo consegnare due saggi per ieri, ma sono riuscita a farne solo uno. Quello in cui c'era Nietzsche non sono proprio riuscita a sbloccarmi e non l'ho fatto. Ora vedrò come risolvere il problema. Credo che farò l'esame di lingua inglese al suo posto, ma devo informarmi perché qui si può fare la certificazione IELTS, ma ha un differente sistema di valutazione, non A, B, C come quello europeo. Devo chiedere se va bene ugualmente o no.

Week 9: Sono un po' triste perché ho dovuto eliminare comparative literature. Ora faccio inglese al suo posto, ma non compare nel learning, perché farò la certificazione ielts. Nello stesso tempo però il corso di scottish literature mi appassiona un sacco e sono contenta di poterlo studiare in maniera più approfondita, visto che l'esame di inglese sarà a gennaio.

Angela [Glasgow – 00:24]... prepares herself for a sleepless night... :(

Gloria [Italy, 00:25] No!!! Do you have work to do??

Angela [Glasgow, 00:26] yes...an essay... ☹ what a drag ... anyway...I'll be free tomorrow at 4 o'clock!!! :D kisses! Smack

Sara: [York, 00:32] c'mon, angiiii! Keep going!!!! You know that a few km away a friend is in your same situation...☺ keep going, we will never give up... never! Ok!?!? You hear me, angi!! Write down a few sentences... then the rest will come by itself... you'll know how to continue and finish your essay!! C'mon, c'mon!... and if you have cookies by your side... all the better!!!

The three friends went on to exchange memories of spending nights studying together and eating chocolate chip cookies before exams, and by the end of the conversation, Angela seemed to have cheered up and was ready to continue with her essay. The fact that the support came from two friends who were in geographically distant locations, but together in a virtual environment, would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

In Angela's case, week 9 seemed a turning point. Having removed the anxiety caused by the difficulty of the Comparative Literature course, she was able to enjoy the academic experience much more. The comments in the weekly tables during the following three weeks were much more positive – Angela used the phrase I'm happy in all of them (weeks 10 and 11 in Italian, week 12 in English in the original):

Week 10: I'm preparing an essay for Monday, Scottish lit. It's difficult, but at least I have some ideas. I've sent the learning agreement and I hope they'll approve it. During lessons I always find it difficult to intervene, but overall I'm happy.

Week 11: I've just finished my essay for tomorrow and I am very happy! I think I did a good job, or at least I tried hard. In any case I'm satisfied with what I wrote, so whatever happens, for me it'll

still be a success! The tutorials are going well, although I still can't speak much. Partly because I feel embarrassed and partly because it's difficult, because we have recently done some poems in Scottish which are very difficult for me. Anyway, I'm happy.

Week 12: In the last tutorial I spoke more than usual, so I'm happy about it! Now we have to study, because there are just about 10 days before the exams!

After that, Angela remained positive about her academic experience, and her difficulties were limited to language, and to the need to organise her work before exams. She also expressed some dissatisfaction with the Spanish course, due to the fact that she found it boring rather than demanding. She felt that she had adapted to the new academic system, and this was confirmed by the marks she obtained in her assignments and exams.

8.5 The experience seen with hindsight

When asked to evaluate the experience of the first term during the Christmas break, Angela reflected mainly on the social aspect, on her initial difficulty to build meaningful friendships, and to “feel herself” in the foreign language :

I think friends and personal relationships, now I can say that the first month was difficult. Maybe at the beginning I described it like I liked it because we were partying a lot, but actually for the relation with people it was difficult. Now I have some friends that I can say suits me... can I say that? That I feel really myself with them. But at the beginning it was really hard. Also for language, because now I think I don't have problem with English, in the meaning that I feel myself, so also if sometimes I don't find the right word, but I can explain myself... and without feeling strange. Well, at the beginning it was difficult also because of this. (12 Dec)

She also felt that, had she taken part in extra-curricular activities, she might have met more people, particularly local students. However, the academic difficulties she

encountered prevented her from getting involved in other activities, except for the Language Café once a week. In any case, Angela felt that the most valuable aspect of the academic experience were the transferable skills she had built: learning to organise her work, to write essays and do the necessary research in the library autonomously, which was not a requirement in Italy.

There is no doubt that Angela had adjusted well to her new environment in Glasgow. However, it was a temporary sojourn, which did not require complete adaptation. When asked whether she felt at home there, Angela replied:

yes, well, I feel comfortable¹⁵⁴. The only thing is, maybe, not at home in the sense that in the end ... our family are the other Erasmus students, so in my opinion...[...] at the end of the day, I haven't become friends with the Scots, I don't feel like I could say...that you feel the place is part of you, because you don't know the people who live here, so ...(4 March)

For her, the temporary aspect stops one from settling down, “you live each day as if it were the last”, conscious that the end of the sojourn is fast approaching. This is a different approach to the one she had in Bologna, because that was where she lived, where more long-term plans were made. During the Erasmus experience, one cannot but feel a little on holiday. Had she decided to take a two- or three-year degree course, things would have been very different, “you would say, ok, I have to live here, this will be my city, and you would try to fit in a little better”.

During the post-return interview, Angela was asked again to evaluate her experience abroad. She recalled her difficulty with the language, which she had expected to last for a shorter period, and how she had not expected the problems of “being herself with that language”. Part of her also regretted not having improved her language skills as she might have, although that would have required spending more time with

¹⁵⁴ sì, no, mi trovo bene. L'unica cosa che magari, non a casa mia nel senso che alla fine... la nostra famiglia sono gli studenti Erasmus, e quindi secondo me [...] però alla fine io con gli scozzesi non ho fatto amicizia, non mi viene da dire ... da sentirla come tua, perché magari non conosci gli abitanti, così” ...

“mother-tongue speakers” and less with other foreign students. At the same time, she felt that the best thing about the Erasmus was the experience of being in an international environment, not the chance to improve one’s language.

Without doubt, the best thing was to be with people from different cultures, different countries, to learn about the differences, and also to experience those differences, it’s not easy. One thing is when you’re home and you say “yes, yes, we must be tolerant, we must understand that we are different.” When you’re there, there are things that, as you experience them, make you notice the differences with other cultures. For example, when we went out and had to make arrangements, if you spoke with the French or the Germans, okay, you’d be used to arranging specific times. If you go out with the Spanish it’s completely different. They arrive in their own time, always at the last minute. Also, they use much less their mobile phones, they are less important, less valuable, people are not always attached to them. And so you have to have patience. The first time you might think “no one is answering, I’ve been waiting for hours ...” But you must understand that’s what they’re like, there is nothing you can do about it. But also many other things, for example, with my French friend. We Italians get upset easily. For example, if I don’t tell you that I’m going somewhere, and that you could come along too, you get upset. Not them. If they want to come with you, they’ll tell you, if not, they won’t. Small things which, when you are there, are important, because the things that we take for granted, perhaps for others they are different.

Of course, this can lead to stereotyping, and Angela had been reflecting on this issue. She had come to the conclusion that generalisations are necessary in order to understand and accept diversity, bearing in mind that individuals can be different. Would she have been able to internalise this concept if she hadn’t experienced it directly?

Her sojourn abroad had also made Angela more aware of her own culture, and happier to be Italian. She did not feel Scottish, nor more European, for that matter. And she recalled how, while in Scotland, she had bought an Italian flag (something she had never done in Italy), as many of her friends had acquired their own national flags. The European flag? No, she didn't remember ever seeing one.

8.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have reported the case of one of the participants, Angela, in order to show how different factors can contribute to the overall experience. It is clear from this case, that any attempt to represent an experience of cross-cultural adaptation as a single curve, be it a U-curve or a learning curve, can be reductive, and miss the significant variety between individuals.

The graphs above show how the academic experience can be very different from the social experience, but each of these will be the result of a combination of a myriad of different factors and experiences. The longitudinal qualitative data has also shed light on how different issues may be problematic and hamper adjustment, and on how the individual can find strategies to deal with these difficulties and move closer to their objectives. It has also become clear that these objectives are crucial in determining the outcomes of the adjustment process, as are individual factors determined by the sojourner's character, but also by external, unpredictable circumstances.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings and relate them to the wider literature on cross-cultural adaptation.

CHAPTER 9 - Discussion

In chapters 5, 6 and 7 I presented and analysed the longitudinal data collected from the participants in the form of interviews, weekly tables and comments on Facebook, while chapter 8 consisted of an illustrative case study. The data and themes analysed, which enabled me to address my initial research questions, brought to the fore some important issues concerning the participants' experiences of adapting to a new academic and social environment. In this final discussion chapter, I will discuss the insight in relation to three broad questions: 1) in the context of European HE mobility today, when we talk about cross-cultural adaptation, what exactly we are expecting the students to adapt to and for what purpose? 2) To what extent are the conceptual models of adaptation discussed in the literature review suitable to this particular context, and to describing the lived experiences of individual students? And in particular, with reference to my final research question mentioned in the introductory chapter, considering that Anderson's (1994) model of cross-cultural adaptation is built on the concept of obstacle and response, how suitable is it when attempting to describe the process of adapting to a new environment in the specific context of European mobility? Finally, 3) in what ways can students prepare for the experience abroad and what are the implications for the various stakeholders, including HE institutions and policy makers? These issues will be used as a frame for this discussion.

9.1 European mobile students today: adaptation to what and for what purpose?

9.1.1 A changing landscape

The representation of the adaptation process in the context of student mobility which emerges from this study is a highly complex one, with a great variety of contributing internal and external factors, confirming the findings of many of the more recent qualitative literature (Brown and Holloway, 2008; Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Budke, 2008; Burnett and Gardner, 2006; De Nooy and Hanna, 2003; Ehrenreich, 2006; Gezentsvey and Ward, 2008; Montgomery, 2010; Papatsiba, 2006; Pearson-Evans,

2006; Pellegrino Aveni, 2005; Pitts, 2009). The specific case of European mobility has also seen a gradual change in the last twenty-five years, in terms of type as well as numbers of students who study abroad. Whereas in the past, small numbers of language majors used mobility programmes as a way of immersing themselves in their target language and learn first-hand about cultural aspects of the country they had chosen to visit, today language specialists are a minority – around 15% of the total Erasmus population¹⁵⁵. Numbers have grown exponentially in part thanks to the internationalisation policies of higher education institutions throughout Europe, in part because of the way in which globalisation, the rise of English as a lingua franca, the widespread use of technology, and the huge increase in low-cost flights within Europe have blurred the concept of geographical distance and brought about a sharp growth in the demand for tuition in English in an increasingly wide range of subjects.

These changes have had an effect on the motivations that drive students to adhere to a mobility programme. At an institutional level the rhetoric revolves around the development of global skills, intercultural competences and a European identity (rather than learning a specific language and the ‘culture’ of a country). Judging not only from the present study, but also from previous research (Teichler, 2004; Papatsiba, 2005), both language specialists and non-specialists also see the development of language skills as providing an advantage over peers in terms of employability, and before travelling abroad they often mention an interest in getting to know people from other cultures. Expectations about outcomes, however, tend to be expressed by the students in relatively vague terms. On the other hand, the effects of mobility are retrospectively articulated in more specific terms including, among others, experience of living in a different country, of becoming self-sufficient and being able to look after oneself away from home, or study in a different academic context, rather than in terms of developing intercultural or global skills as such.

This is not to say that there was no development on the part of the sojourners from this point of view. In the post-return interviews, there were glimpses of intercultural skills, such as withholding judgement, becoming more tolerant towards people with

¹⁵⁵ <http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/stat/table207.pdf>

different habits or values, or even changing views regarding one's own beliefs. Miriam, a fervent catholic, was forced to consider issues which she had never taken into consideration, like attitudes towards homosexuals within the Catholic church, or the value of celibacy and an all male clergy, once she was confronted with other faiths of the Christian church and more liberal views within the Catholic church outside Italy. Although these inputs were not enough to radically change her opinions, they seemed to have shaken up her certainties. Margherita, on the other hand, found that her experience of having to deal with strange practices had heightened her awareness of what foreign people must go through when they arrive in Italy. In these and other cases, change was perceived, but seemed extremely hard to articulate. Since it is likely that taking part in this research study provided the participants with more opportunities to reflect on their learning than they might have had otherwise, the fact that they still had difficulties articulating their development and change underlines the challenge of self-awareness in this area.

9.1.2 Adaptation in ELF contexts

The issue of non-language specialists choosing destinations where courses are taught through the medium of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) raises particular problems relating to the concept of cross-cultural adaptation. According to Coleman (2006) “the recruitment of international students and international staff, which English facilitates, leads to enhanced institutional prestige, greater success in attracting research and development funding, and enhanced employability for domestic graduates” (p.4). This has led to an increase in courses taught through the medium of English particularly in countries with lesser-taught languages (Scandinavia, eastern Europe, but also some institutions in other larger European countries). For some students whose primary aim is to develop their language proficiency in English, these destinations are often second choices, taken as a result of the limited number of places in the United Kingdom and Ireland. For others, the destinations become appealing precisely because there is no need to learn another language. ELF brings about the idea of a European Higher Education Area, where students can choose courses regardless of the country where they are offered. These conditions are seen

by some as having a serious downside: European institutions become more homogeneous, local languages and cultures fade into the background, students feel they are in “Erasmusland” rather than Finland, the Czech Republic or Cyprus.

There is no doubt that this aspect of mobility has consequences for the degree of commitment the sojourner may feel to adapting to the host society, since the study of the local language is considered unnecessary, and the destination may have been chosen only for academic reasons. Even when pre-sessional intensive language courses are followed, there is often little sense on the part of the participants that this will help them adapt to the country.

This raises an important question: can the experience still be considered valuable from a cross-cultural perspective? Is the experience of adapting to multilingual, multicultural environments such as those found on many campuses throughout Europe second-best to that of adapting to the more homogeneous culture one may find, for example, in a small rural town in central France? Is cross-cultural adaptation synonymous with learning about a specific (usually dominant and traditional) version of a ‘national culture’ by ‘immersing oneself in it’? If the quality of the adaptation is judged according to the number of contacts with “locals” that one has per day, or the number of “host nationals” that one succeeds in befriending (Hendrickson et al, 2011), or how often one eats the traditional food of the host country, there is a risk of prioritising aspects of a certain culture, rather than the relationship between people with different cultural backgrounds. These are the assumptions behind the belief that a small provincial university town in northern Spain enables the sojourner to immerse him or herself in a culture (“Spanish” or “Asturian”) much more than a campus in Sweden or, by the same token, that a small French village is more “French”, and therefore a better location for an intercultural experience, than the Parisian *banlieues*. However, that these diverse contexts are likely to affect the adaptation process of sojourners in different ways does not imply that the benefits of one will be more valuable than those of another.

9.1.3 Problems with the concept of ‘culture’

The main problem with much of the literature on cross-cultural adaptation, particularly in the area of student mobility, is precisely that it is founded on the concept of ‘culture’ (see 3.1.1.1.). It is not so much because of the difficulty in agreeing on the definition of the concept, but rather because of the assumptions the word can carry with it. As was discussed in the literature review, cross-cultural adaptation studies often refer, implicitly or explicitly, to concepts of “national” culture (French, British, Norwegian...) and in this particular context, cross-cultural is almost invariably synonymous with cross-national. However, this raises questions about the nature of such a monolithic view of culture, which inevitably leads to the assumption made above regarding the ability to “immerse” oneself into a specific geographically-demarcated culture (usually national or local), while undermining other spheres (youth, student, professional, academic ‘cultures’), which transcend ‘national’ identities. In Agar’s words (quoted in Shaules, 2007a, p.118) “for almost anyone today, the ‘cultures’ that affect him/her at any given moment are multiple, local and global, partial and variable in their impact.” This is not to say there are no shared values, behaviours and meanings among for example, the majority of Italians, which contribute to the construction of a more or less well defined Italian identity. Nor am I suggesting that this concept of ‘Italianness’ has no differences with the concept of ‘Frenchness’ or ‘Irishness’. What I am questioning is the usefulness of these distinctions. The concepts of national culture and identity, which dominate so much cross-cultural adaptation literature are, as Dervin suggests, “misnomers, as they suggest singularity and unicity” (2009, p.121). The phrase ‘cross-cultural’ assumes the existence of two distinct groups: insiders and outsiders. Either one is or is not a ‘local’. Non-locals are outsiders, strangers (‘international’ students). In this duality there are no grey zones, no hybrids, no second generations, no dual nationalities, no mixed families. These are practical choices of terminology, necessary for much quantitative research based on surveys and questionnaires, in which participants are defined according to country of residence, nationality, ethnic background, destination, questions for which only one choice is possible. However, much qualitative research also assumes this duality, regardless of the fact that it is at

the root of stereotyping, for it is only a small step between the thought of adapting to ‘the British culture’ and the conclusion that ‘the British’ are cold, and therefore difficult to adapt to. Interestingly, when participants met host nationals who did not fit into the general (and stereotyped) idea of their particular culture, they invested their new acquaintances with different identities (“My new English friend is not very English, because he’s very sociable” or “The Swedish student we met was very “Italian”, because he loves chatting and is quite loud”). The awareness that individual members of a cultural group may not share all the defining values, behaviours and attitudes of that group seems to require a level of reflection which does not always take place.

Of course, we may ourselves identify with stereotypical views of our own culture (“Friendship as *we* understand it doesn’t exist among *the English*”¹⁵⁶, claimed Jack), which provide rough-and-ready explanations to complex problems of communication, particularly with people from other countries. Indeed, residence abroad also tends to draw out an acute sense of belonging to one’s original group (see Jackson, 2008b), and it is common to observe exaltations of national cultures (with displays of flags, traditional foods or music) within groups of international students. However, we are also aware of our culture’s fragmentariness, its heterogeneity, its elusiveness, its kaleidoscopic nature, particularly when we attempt to define who ‘we’ are, what ‘our’ values or beliefs are, what meanings we share and with whom. How would Jack, for example, unpack his claim regarding “friendship as *we* understand it”? Who are *we*? Even he would admit that not all Italians share the same understanding of what friendship is or should be (except in very broad terms). In addition, cultural meanings change, as do values and behaviours. As Phillips points out, “people draw on a wide range of local, national and global resources in the ways they make and remake their cultures (so culture is not bounded). There are always internal contestations over the values, practices and meanings that characterise any culture (so cultures are not homogeneous)” (2007, p.45). It may be useful to bear in mind these observations when attempting to conceptualise the experience of cross-cultural adaptation.

¹⁵⁶ L’amicizia come la intendiamo *noi* non esiste fra *gli inglesi*. (My italics)

9.1.4 Local vs. multicultural environments

To return to the main question posed at the beginning of this section: in the context of student mobility, what exactly are we expecting students to adapt to when they travel abroad for study? What ‘culture’ or ‘cultures’ should they fit into? How should outcomes be defined? When we consider the composition of the student body in the host universities, who exactly are the ‘local’ students? Was the Australian student who had lived in London for ten years, or the second generation Pakistani student, whom Gioacchino befriended in London, ‘local’ students? Miriam’s American friends, who were doing their entire degree in Edinburgh, were crucial in helping her adapt to her new life abroad, but could they be considered ‘local’? And would ‘local’ students have done a better job of it? Could it be claimed that there are various degrees of ‘localness’ and, if so, what would the advantage of one be with respect to the others? To return to the issue discussed above, is our definition of the intercultural experience oversimplified in suggesting duality rather than multiplicity? I would argue that it is. In her study of the social support mechanisms of international postgraduate students in the UK, Brown states that, “to international student dissatisfaction, a low incidence of bonds between international and local students has been long and widely documented [...] Thus international students are denied the optimal route to improving language and host cultural knowledge” (2009d, p.185). Referring to Bochner’s model of friendship networks (Bochner et al., 1977) she maintains that “the bicultural bond [is] the most important link as the host national friend acts as a cultural informant, whereas segregated friendship groups act to obstruct host culture learning by entrenching sojourners’ attachment to the origin culture” (ibid.). The first problem with her argument is that cross-cultural relations are seen to have almost exclusively an instrumental function: host nationals provide language practice and information about the host culture. Of course, these two aspects are significant when adapting to a new environment, but friendship is more than that. Perhaps Brown misses the point that the reason why ‘bi-cultural’ bonds are important is because they offer much more than language practice and cultural information. By investing in the experience not only from a cognitive but also from an affective point of view, they offer the opportunity to question stereotypes and

assumptions, to grasp the limits of cultural generalisations on both sides, to learn to respect the right of others to comply or not with those generalisations and to build their identities with elements supposedly belonging to different cultures. These outcomes may be more in line with the desired effects of student mobility in terms of development of intercultural skills and personal growth.

The second problem with Brown's claims are that, by insisting on the duality of host vs. original culture, she assumes that the aim of international students is to become members of the host society. Although this may be true in some cases, in others the community of which those students seek membership may be different. Ryan (2006) argues that an increasing number of language learners choose to learn English in their attempt to construct an identity as members of a global imagined community, rather than for instrumental motives of being able to communicate with a specific target language community. Montgomery's study (2010), mentioned in the literature review, also seemed to share this view. Similarly, it could be claimed that the participants in the present study chose to study abroad not so much in order to settle into a new society, but as a way of entering a pan-European Erasmus community ("once an Erasmus, forever an Erasmus", wrote Angela on her Facebook wall some days after returning from her sojourn in Scotland). The effects of this identification with a community of Erasmus students may outlive the individual friendships forged during the period of study abroad, in the same way that, after graduation, one may identify with a particular university's group of alumni without being in contact with any of one's former classmates. In this sense, the EC's objective of forging a European identity through the programme may be partly met. Not because the students feel more 'European' (articulating what this could mean has been one of the difficulties of the various stakeholders, as was explained in Chapter 2), but because they identify, and not only for the duration of their specific programme, with a European imagined community of Erasmus and former Erasmus students (rather than with other categories of Europeans).

It is also the case that HE institutions themselves are not culturally homogeneous. The various individuals that frequent them, whether staff or students, may adhere to a

greater or lesser extent not only to the dominant culture of the country, but also to the corporate culture of the institution. Some universities in Europe pride themselves for being multicultural environments, and have a long tradition of so-called international students, with the UK taking the lion's share thanks partly to a linguistic advantage (the university of Warwick, for example, attracts around 18,000 international students every year). For others is it a more recent – and very noticeable – transformation (the universities of Granada (Spain) and Aarhus (Denmark) also succeed in attracting, respectively, 2500 and 900 students from abroad per year). Similarly, internationalisation policies in HE institutions are also affecting the number of teaching staff from other countries. It seems clear, therefore, that higher education institutions are far from culturally homogeneous. In addition, the figures mentioned above show us only part of picture, as “international” is an administrative label, based on permanent place of residence, or on nationality, and is meaningless in terms of cross-cultural studies. And if internationalisation policies are to continue in the future, with an increased promotion of courses being taught through the medium of English throughout Europe, the consequent increase in the body of international students (including short and long term mobility) and staff will inevitably be significant enough to impact on the perception of European universities as multicultural and multilingual environments. As a result, one of the most significant objectives of internationalisation may be to enable all those involved to understand that the shared knowledge and languages (in the broader meaning of language, not only of “national languages”) required in order to communicate across cultures (in the broad sense of cultures, including national, academic, professional, generational etc) are not geographically bounded.

Adaptation to the cultural references and practices of the wider society is also a problematic issue in the context of HE mobility, as students may have relatively little contact with whole sections of the host society, including professional spheres, social services, younger or older generations, or geographically distant areas. Students (not only foreign students) may find themselves living on a campus that provides all the necessary services, making it unnecessary for them to come into contact with the world outside the campus. When they do leave those boundaries, it is often as

tourists, to visit the sights. In this sense, a local friend may offer the opportunity to widen the experience by inviting sojourners into their family, as happened to Marina, Juls, Silvia or Emanuela. Windows into the wider society can also be offered by a work placement (as in the case of Gioacchino, who spent the Easter break working in a Law firm in London, or Emanuela who did some voluntary work for a charity, teaching ICT skills to immigrants). In these cases, the adaptation cycle may start all over again as the changed environment makes new demands on the sojourner. As was clear from the data in the previous chapters, students express their agency, in other words their ability to understand what they want and to act on that understanding, in their motivations, and take into account what mobility can offer them specifically. The fact that they all felt they had adapted to some extent to their new environment means that they succeeded in reaching their objectives as HE students spending a short period of time in a European university. Nevertheless, some of them pointed out that their aims would have been different had they moved permanently to the host country for work or to start a family. In the words of Kim (2001), “unlike immigrants, most short-term sojourners tend to limit their contacts with their host cultures to peripheral areas – they have crossed cultures primarily to pursue a vocation, obtain a degree, or enhance their prestige in the eyes of the folks at home. Their reasons for sojourning are specific and narrowly defined, requiring less commitment to the host environment” (p. 4).

Adaptation therefore needs to be analysed in its specific context, in the sense that it is circumscribed to the specific environment and the particular needs of the individual in a precise moment of his or her life. If the circumstances change, as they are bound to do in one’s life, the individual will need to adjust to those changes. This implies that the individual’s permanence in the ‘Overcoming’ phase in Anderson’s model (or the equivalent in other models) will last only as long as there are no significant new life changes in his or her life. A particular individual’s cross-cultural adjustment to an academic environment in Norway, in which English is used as a lingua franca in courses mostly attended by Erasmus students may have to start almost from scratch if he or she decides to stay on and look for employment in a local business.

According to Dervin, “there has been an overemphasis on the role of fixed cultures in intercultural communication in stays abroad” (2009 p.119), particularly in the case of short-term mobility, which has tended to describe adaptation processes through this monolithic concept of culture (host-culture vs. home-culture). Jackson (2008b) warned that it is necessary to “look much more closely at the complex, multifarious nature of SA environments and their impact on language and cultural learning” (p. 10). Although there is a rising awareness of the complexity of the issues involved, it seems particularly hard to break the mould on which the traditional idea of student cross-cultural mobility is based. The implications of this for the way in which academic institutions need to prepare students to go abroad will be addressed in the final section of this chapter.

9.1.5 Effects of computer-mediated communication on study abroad

A further significant issue that emerges from this study, and which needs to be taken into account in the attempt to understand the cross-cultural adaptation process of Erasmus students today is related to the effects of globalisation, of low-cost flights and above all of computer mediated communication (such as through Skype or Facebook). Some of these issues have already been touched upon, but is it worth recalling here the main points.

Study Abroad has traditionally been seen as the best way to learn a foreign language and the culture of the host country. The implicit (and often explicit) precondition for such an outcome has been the possibility of immersing oneself into the new society while cutting ties with the home environment. The additional outcomes of study abroad – academic experience, personal growth, development of intercultural skills – are also considered to be proportional to the degree of full-immersion achieved by the participant.

As mentioned above, while total immersion may have been possible in the pre-internet and pre-low-cost travel era, the experience of Study Abroad has changed dramatically in the recent years. An increasingly globalised world, cheaper air travel, and the advent of social media and computer mediated communication have

undoubtedly transformed the experience of students spending a period of time abroad, particularly with respect to social networking and support.

The use of computer mediated communication has grown proportionally to the expansion of the technology itself, and increasing attention has been paid to the topic of how young people, and HE students in particular, are using both synchronous and asynchronous technology to communicate (Cheung et al, 2011). At the same time, HE institutions as well as Study Abroad providers have tapped into the potential offered by CMC in order to stay in touch with their students abroad, and provide both information and support (Murray and Waller, 2007).

Although communication technology includes a wide variety of instruments, those used most commonly in a study abroad context include VoiP (Skype, etc.), email, blogs and micro-blogging (Twitter), chat (msn, etc.), social networks/lifestreaming (Facebook, MySpace, etc.), photo-sharing (Flickr, Picasa) and of course the use of mobile phones and sms (text) messages.

CMC is regarded with ambivalence in the context of Study Abroad. To some it seems a curse, in that it impedes full immersion in the host culture. Recently, in a posting entitled “*How the Internet Screwed Up Study Abroad*” in the blog *Insidestudyabroad.com*, Brooke Roberts (2010) voiced the concerns of many: “...Does that lessen the value of the experience? Are we concerned that students will be less willing to give in to complete immersion, the disconnection of sinking deep into a culture, a people, a place? It's hard to do that when one hand is tethered to a twitter feed”. This observation brings out the assumptions associated with study abroad which we mentioned earlier in this chapter: first, that it is possible to ‘disconnect’ and ‘sink deep into a culture, a people, a place’; and second, that – should this be possible – it is also desirable.

I have already discussed how the first of these suppositions presupposed the existence of a single, monolithic culture, uncontaminated by other cultural influxes, into which the outsider can sink as if in a ‘cultural bath’ from which he or she can emerge as an ‘intercultural person’. However, if we attempt to unpack what lies

behind this assumption, we will still find the basic principles related to understanding the values, behaviours and meanings of different social groups, to which we consider we do not belong – because they live in a different country, speak a different language, eat different food, socialise in different ways, teach or learn with different methods. The assumption that a putative ‘mono-cultural’ context, rather than a multi-cultural one like those found in all of the higher education institutions visited by the participants, is more likely to offer a fruitful cross-cultural experience still needs to be demonstrated.

The second assumption is that ‘disconnecting’ is desirable. Although many would find the possibility of enjoying a long week-end with no mobile phone, no internet, no work, even no family highly desirable, severing all social connections with those we know for a long period of time is quite another thing. Undoubtedly, this is a condition that refugees have to face, although nobody would consider it desirable. We are social beings, and our psychological well-being depends on our ability to maintain social ties. Why is it that we all feel inexorably attracted to co-nationals (even to those we would never approach in our own environment) when we are abroad, particularly in distant and strange lands, for more than a short holiday? Why do we try to recreate a family (a concept frequently expressed by the students in their monthly interviews) from total strangers? Why is the initial period abroad, when social ties have not been formed yet, the hardest moment from a psychological and emotional point of view? And why do we assume that being thrown in at the deep end (the “sink or swim” approach) is the best way to learn to survive, either in water or in a foreign land?

The answer is simple. Because we believe that armbands are addictive, that the learner will never have the courage to abandon the safety they provide and learn to swim unaided. Similarly, we believe that the mobile students will cling to their social networks back home because it is the easiest choice, that they will lack the necessary determination and self-discipline to build social networks, and that easy contact with home “might prevent students from learning how to situate themselves fully into a new environment and how to become emotionally self-reliant in a foreign setting”

(Kelly, 2010). Even Kinginger (2008)'s account of the American student Deirdre's withdrawal from her French experience only shows that Internet is yet another way of alienating oneself from one's physical context.

Also in distinct contrast to other participants in the study, Deirdre claimed no intention to develop social links to her temporary place of residence. The fact that she was living alone for the first time in her life certainly compounded the problem of her isolation and alienation. So, too, did her ready access to constant communication with friends and family at home via the Internet. It was remarkably easy for Deirdre to avoid situations in which communication in French would be necessary and for her to find daily solace in computer-mediated interactions. In a sense, Deirdre stayed "home" during her semester abroad, focusing much of her commentary on longing for familiar places and people. She barely detached herself from home-based emotional ties long enough to notice her new surroundings. This phenomenon is not uncommon [...] some students, particularly young women with boyfriends at home, remain attached to their communities of origin by an electronic umbilical cord throughout their study-abroad experience. If Internet-based communication has dramatically changed the array of options open to sojourners abroad, Deirdre's case illustrates that these options may include support for limited engagement in local reality and for remaining "virtually" at home.

From this account, it seems that Deirdre had decided fairly early on that she would not develop social links in the host community. Having chosen to isolate herself, she found 'daily solace in computer-mediated interactions', in the same way that others may find it in novels, satellite television or DVDs. Accounts of students who, for one reason or another, are unable or unwilling to engage with the foreign context and withdraw by befriending exclusively co-nationals, refusing to learn the local language and ultimately, simply cutting the study-abroad experience short and returning back home are not uncommon (Talburtt and Stewart, 1999). It could be

argued then that isolation through the use of Internet, and more specifically of CMC, may not always be the cause, but rather the symptom of the student's inability or unwillingness to engage with the local environment. Kinginger observes that Deirdre was the only participant in the group to behave in such a way – was she also the only student to resort to CMC and the Internet in general? Or were the others, like the participants in the present study, able to make the most of their time abroad while remaining in touch with home?

Of course, CMC and social networking sites such as Facebook are real 'time-eaters', whether at home or abroad, and students should be made aware of this potential risk, in order to avoid feelings of regret at having 'wasted' precious time while they were away (Kelly 2010). In the case of this particular study, none of the participants reported such feelings, and some, particularly those who had left behind partners or frail relatives, claimed they would never have chosen to take part in study-abroad had it not been for the combined effect of the Internet and low-cost flights.

The ambiguity with which the internet is looked upon in the context of study abroad is clear: on the one hand, it is seen as a potential curse in preventing students from settling in their new environment. At the same time, it is considered as a potential blessing if the technology can be used to enhance learning. Academic institutions are therefore tapping into the possibilities of using CMC to maintain contact with their students abroad, in order to provide the latter with materials or platforms on which they can show what they are learning. In other words, the message seems to be: the use of the Internet is acceptable only on the condition that some kind of formal leaning under the auspices of an academic institution is taking place.

There is no doubt that the Internet, CMC, and low-cost flights have shortened geographical distance. This is perhaps one of the most common remarks made by students who go abroad, and the aspect that stands out as most different from study abroad a few decades ago. Coleman (in Coleman and Chafer, 2010, p. 3 of manuscript version) recalls his own experience of his year abroad in France:

“...communication with friends and family in the UK was by letter. With correspondence taking a few days in each direction, obtaining an answer to a question could easily take a week or more. Telephoning [...] was expensive, inconvenient, and hence rare. Travel between Besançon and Cardiff, using the means available on a student budget, namely trains and cross-Channel ferry, took more than 24 hours. British books and newspapers were expensive and difficult to get hold of. British radio reception was very poor, and television unavailable. There were no computers, no Internet, no public telephones in the street, no mobile phones, no faxes. Forty years ago, ‘abroad’ meant total immersion and little contact with home”.

No doubt, times and circumstances have changed. However, it seems that the pre-suppositions concerning Study Abroad have not, and that we still assume that it is possible to put the clock back, to make do without the technology offered by today’s globalised world. This also ignores the fact that mobile students must “negotiate transnational social fields or networks that cross national boundaries and develop social networks of associations that maintain social, familial, economic, religious, and political relations with contexts of origin” (Gargano 2009 p.337). Expecting students to temporarily break ties with the personal, social and academic contexts back home, in the name of a deeper and faster adaptation to the host environment, is both conceptually dubious and practically unfeasible. The ease with which ties with home can be maintained does not only mean that students abroad can keep in touch with friends, family and academic institution. It also implies that many of them are expected to do so: non compliance may lead to the disturbance of social equilibriums which may be difficult to put right, even upon return to the home environment. After all, no professional today – whether a visiting academic spending a year in a foreign university, or a manager working in a multinational firm – would be expected to sever ties with their relatives, friends or colleagues back home by refusing to answer emails or talk on Skype – or keep in touch through Facebook, for that matter. In addition, the affordable cost of European air travel today also means that students may be expected to return home not only for Christmas and Easter, but also for a

sister's birthday or to visit frail grandparents. This was not an expectation students had to meet thirty or forty years ago.

That technology can reduce geographical distance is a truism we have all experienced even simply by speaking on the telephone with people far away. This is even more tangible with video-conferencing tools such as Skype, or through the instant messaging afforded by social media. It is however important to remember that, by fraying the concept of geographical distance and border-crossing, tools such as Facebook have contributed to creating a virtual space of real (not virtual) social networking. Through Facebook, contacts among students locally are facilitated, but so are those between new friends and old friends, and social support in difficult times comes as often from the former as from the latter. In addition, much social networking that takes place online also happens offline, and online friendships often continue off-line.

In addition, in virtual spaces geographically distant communities can become one, code switching and mixing are common, and an outsider would find it impossible to distinguish between co-nationals, other international students and local friends, as in the following example:



Miriam Caselli cooked Bolognese sauce (Ragù) for 30 people with Karen's help!
17 novembre 2009 alle ore 20.29 · Commenta · Mi piace

A 7 persone piace questo elemento.

Britta Caselli wowwowwowowwowowwow...mi raccomando fai conoscere bene lo splendore della cucina bolognese!)
17 novembre 2009 alle ore 21.07

Maria Caselli miammm!
17 novembre 2009 alle ore 21.41

Karen Caselli it was loads of fun! :D thanks for teaching me.
17 novembre 2009 alle ore 23.43

Federica Caselli Brava miri!
18 novembre 2009 alle ore 11.17

Valentina Caselli Bravissima!!
18 novembre 2009 alle ore 13.47

Letizia Caselli Grande!!! fatti valere! basos
18 novembre 2009 alle ore 19.14

Gianfrancesco Caselli Uno dei pochi vanti dell'Italia all'estero è la cucina, se ci distruggi anche quella...
19 novembre 2009 alle ore 22.22

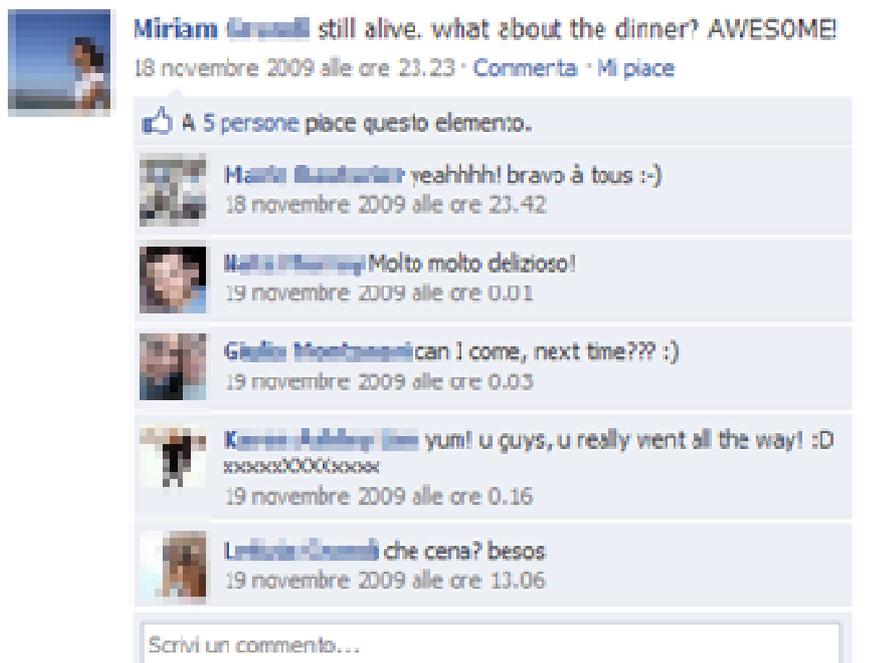


Fig. 9.1 – Facebook extract 3

Identifying the geographical location of the different contributors is almost impossible, and the use of language is clearly not a clue. In these transnational social fields (Gargano, 2009) new identities can be negotiated, bridging between the old and the new, the far and the near, the ‘virtual’ and the ‘non virtual’. Facebook, as a form of lifestreaming, with its conversations, postings, photos, music files, hyperlinks, leaves behind a trace of these fleeting social events, of these identity constructions and reconstructions.

Coleman and Chafer (2010) quite rightly points out the importance of defining the context in which research on student mobility takes place. Much research in this field places together findings of studies carried out in the pre- and post- Internet-and-low-cost-flights era. However, it is clear that the experience of study abroad today, particularly in the European context, has been radically transformed. Coleman identifies the need to focus on how the increasing ease of communication with home affects “the degree of immersion, acculturation and integration” into the host community. However, it may also be as important to consider whether the concept of full-immersion, taken to mean a radical cut-off from family ties and home networks,

needs in fact to be modified. CMC is here to stay, and it may, in time, be seen as beneficial. Indeed, the fact of having to mediate within ‘transnational social fields’ may be another way of developing the intercultural skills needed to live and thrive in our increasingly multicultural societies. In addition, the ability to stay in touch with friends met during study abroad may offset the issue of the non-permanent effect of this type of mobility.

In this section I have discussed various issues in an attempt to understand what exactly we are expecting students to adapt to in the context of European HE mobility. I will return to some of these in the last section of this chapter, when I will discuss the implications for stakeholders, and in particular for HE institutions preparing their students to spend a period of their studies abroad. First, however, we need to consider the implications if the issues raised in terms of research on cross-cultural adaptation.

9.2 Research implications: conceptualisations of adaptation

What implications then do these observations have for the conceptualisations of cross-cultural adaptation presented in the literature review?

The picture of the adaptation process which emerged from the longitudinal data was one of complexity, variance, multi-dimensionality. This is very different indeed from the U-curve model which implies that all sojourners experience the same feelings of initial elation, followed by a period of dissatisfaction, anxiety, or culture shock, and gradually recover with time. It is not so much the pattern that does not seem to reflect the lived experiences of the travellers – some of the graphs included in Appendix III could be interpreted as U-curves – as the fact that this model emphasises homogeneity, telling us very little about the real experience of these sojourners. In addition, it seems to imply that each new sojourn in a different ‘culture’ will trigger a new U- (or W-) curve, and no mention is made of how past experience (and therefore development of coping strategies) may affect successive sojourns in the same or different locations, or contexts. The same applies to a certain extent to the learning-curve model, which limits adaptation to the learning of new sociocultural

frameworks. Here too, the data confirmed that, for some students, elements of their sojourn did follow a learning curve. However, as stated above, what strikes in the graphs is the degree of variety rather than the common patterns.

Developmental models such as Bennett's (1993), discussed in the literature, offer perhaps a better representation of this variability, insofar as the individual can move back and forth in the continuum of different phases (and presumably enter the scale at any point). However, stage models assume that the individual is affectively, behaviourally and cognitively at the same stage (in other words, that these dimensions develop at the same pace) in all domains of the experience (academic, personal, social, linguistic). The longitudinal data gathered in this study contradicts this view, and suggest the possibility that these dimensions "may be in synchronization in the adjustment process, one mediating, potentiating or accompanying the other", but also that they may be "at war, producing dissonance and conflicts within the individual" (Anderson, 1994:308). Even models such as the one suggested by Ward and colleagues (Ward et al, 1998), which separates the psychological from the sociocultural dimension, seem artificial. Although the authors rightly point out that the former is affected by "personality, social support and life changing variables" while the latter depends on "cultural distance, amount of contact with host nationals and cultural knowledge", the qualitative data in this study suggest that these dimensions affect each other more than the model implies. Even attempting to separate domains (personal, linguistic, academic), as was done in this research, can be problematic. Although these separations can help unpack the various components of adaptation, the risk is to give the impression that they act independently of each other. Indeed, it was clear that, for an emotional person such as Marina, increased language proficiency was inextricably linked to feeling more self-confident, which was achieved once she established a rapport with her peers outside the classroom. Vice-versa, the ability to establish meaningful relationships with local students, (and in some cases also with international students) was, according to other participants, strongly influenced by their (perceived) level of proficiency. In this sense, integrative models of adaptation may indeed render better the complexity of the process.

In addition, models such as Bennett's seem to imply a stability within each stage which appears to be in contrast with the oscillations in the graphs. This does not mean that there is no evolution in the individual's competence in dealing with the new environment over time, but rather that this evolution is less linear than these models imply. For example, it was common to notice how individuals who could be considered to be in one of the ethnorelative stages still expressed ethnocentric views (for example, references to stereotypes) particularly when they felt frustrated, or vice versa students who could be considered in the initial stages of development behaved, in given circumstances, in more ethnorelative ways. People do not adapt to everything in their new environment. Thus, Miriam was able to appreciate that people could hold different values with regard to significant aspects of her faith, but found other cultural differences, such as attitudes to alcohol abuse, unacceptable. The human psyche seems to resist attempts to pigeonhole it, and perception of threat, or even simply of disrespect, can trigger mistrust and hostility in individuals who would otherwise behave in a more considerate way.

At the same time, while these models may describe the different stages that take a sojourner from a strongly ethnocentric stance to a more ethnorelative one, they tell us very little about what factors may contribute to (or impede) this progression. In the words of Shaules, "an important difficulty in understanding the process of intercultural learning is that every intercultural situation is different and individuals differ widely in their responses to apparently similar situations" (2007b, p.11). So how does one become more adaptable? Is it simply experience, or does it need to be accompanied by an element of reflection? Are some contexts more likely to promote development than others? And how suitable are HE student mobility programmes such as Erasmus for providing opportunities to develop in this sense?

Admittedly, the data gathered were not analysed in terms of developmental stages of adaptation, so claims about this particular model are beyond the scope of this study. What is of interest, however, are the outcomes of this process. In Bennett's model the two most developed phases are "Adaptation" and "Integration". The former can take the shape of empathy, which "involves a temporary shift in frame of reference such

that one construes events “as if” one were the other person” (1986:185), thus producing behaviour which is viewed as appropriate by the member of the other culture. Alternatively, it can also take the form of what Bennett terms ‘cultural pluralism’, that is the ability to move within two (or more) cultural frameworks on a more permanent basis (p.186). Acceptance of difference is therefore the first step towards adaptation to difference, the last being integration of difference. A person who has reached this final stage “is one who can construe differences as processes, who can adapt to those differences, and who can additionally construe him or herself in various cultural ways.”(ibid.)

In the context of this study, are the descriptions of these stages useful? I believe they are, as long as they are not seen as watertight compartments, but rather as descriptions of tendencies in the individual’s attitudes and behaviours within specific contexts. In other words, acceptance of difference may occur more easily in certain contexts than in others (towards, for example, behaviour rather than values, within a certain limit of difference but not beyond). Cultural differences that are evidenced in terms of behaviours, in a sense, are easier to notice and perhaps to adapt to. They were the differences first noticed by the participants, like the Chinese student eating with chopsticks, or the dishes cooked with different spices, or the group-work approach to learning, to mention but a few. Nevertheless, noticing different behaviour is not the same as understanding that behaviour, in other words understanding the values and assumptions that trigger it. This is the “deep culture” that Shaules (2007a, 2007b) refers to, and which constitutes a more problematic type of cultural learning. Similarly, adaptation or integration of difference may be limited to certain aspects of experience but not others. Adaptation to differences in the academic context may be easier to achieve than that to other aspects of a host society. Ultimately, the individual’s aims will also affect the degree of adaptation attained.

Anderson’s model also contains different “exit points” in the cycle but, as was illustrated in the literature chapter, it is built around the process rather than the stages of development, and is therefore more suitable to this type of study. Her model sees

adaptation as the process of reaching an ecological balance between the environment's demands and the individual's objectives. In this sense, it caters for variety in the process itself: the model works for different contexts – and not only those of HE student mobility – from adjusting to very similar cultural environments, to adapting to much more unfamiliar and challenging ones. However, the model does not assume that the former will be easier to adapt to. Adaptation is a function of both the environment's demands and the objectives, motivations and expectations of the sojourner. The obstacles he or she will find along the path – in terms of quantity and size – will depend, among other things, on these objectives. As was discussed in the previous chapters, two sojourners in very similar contexts may encounter very different obstacles, depending, for example, on their linguistic, social, academic and personal objectives. For Angela or Miriam, proficiency in the target language (English) was an important aim, and many of the obstacles they encountered, at least initially, were a result of their language difficulties. On the other hand, Lorenzo's primary aim was to carry out research that would have been impossible to conduct in Italy. Practicing his English in a Lingua Franca context was a bonus (while learning Czech was not an objective at all), but he was perfectly happy to have an Italian supervisor, as this prevented misunderstandings when discussing his research. Lorenzo adjusted relatively well to his context – a university biology laboratory in which English was used as a Lingua Franca. Undoubtedly, this is a very different context from Juls', a language major studying in Wales, who had a local boyfriend and spent week-ends with his family. By concentrating on the individual's aims, the obstacles they find and the strategies they use to cope with them, Anderson's model facilitates the understanding of the process of adaptation to the new environment. The fact that it conceptualises it as cyclical rather than in consecutive stages means that the cycles can be repeated as often as it takes the individual to adapt, in other words, to find a balance between the environment's demands and the individual's objectives. A change in context may require a new balance to be sought, triggering a new adaptation cycle. This can also happen once we return home, and find that we, too, have changed. Adaptation, then, "is a fundamental life goal for all humans, something that all of us share and do naturally and continually as we face challenges from our environment" (Kim, 2001, p. 25). By placing cross-cultural adaptation in

the perspective of lifelong processes, Anderson's model may indeed be better at taking account of the variety of individual experiences, and allowing for different internal and external, affective, cognitive and behavioural factors to contribute to it, as well as for different patterns or "exit points" in the adaptation cycle.

9.3 Implications for policy and practice

Finally what are the implications of this study in terms of student mobility policy and practice?

The first concerns the aims of HE short-term student mobility today. At the beginning of this chapter I discussed how the landscape in which students move today has changed due to rising numbers of mobile students (partly thanks to the Erasmus programme), the spread of English as a Lingua Franca, the increasing number of courses taught through the medium of English, the widespread use of technology and low-cost flights. In Europe, these changes have also implied a shift in the general aims and outcomes attributed to student mobility, although the rhetoric of policymakers remains at the level of developing linguistic and intercultural skills in order to become more competitive in the employment market, as well as a more strongly felt European identity. The EC's Green Paper of 2009 "Promoting the learning mobility of young people", which paved the way to the recently approved programme "Youth on the Move" hosting the Erasmus sub-Programme until 2020, expresses these ideas, and points clearly to the desired effects these skills should have in terms of a more mobile workforce.

"Some of the key competences to be acquired through learning mobility are foreign languages and intercultural skills. Living, studying and working in a foreign country provides an opportunity for total immersion in another language and culture. Foreign language skills and intercultural competences widen an individual's professional options, upgrade the skills of the European workforce and are essential elements of genuine European identity." (European Commission, 2009a)

However, experts in the field have been insisting for years that first-hand experience of living in a different country is not a sufficient condition for the development of intercultural skills (Abdallah-Preteille, 2008), or even for the fostering of a European identity. Indeed, in spite of the fact that “meeting people from other cultures” is one of the most common reasons for wanting to take part in the Erasmus programme, many seem to return with reinforced stereotypes, particularly of the members of the host country, and few seem to question their own preconceptions. Notwithstanding ample evidence that 'residence in a foreign country does not of itself produce positive representations of that country' (Byram & Zarate, 1995: 9), there is still a utopian view of student exchange that equates ‘contact with otherness’ with ‘understanding of otherness’. The 2009 EC green paper mentioned previously is an example of such logic. In addition, students do not travel abroad as blank slates. Nor do the rest of us, for that matter. Whether we share them or not, we are all aware of the popular stereotypical representations of our neighbours. Even if we have never met a person from a different country, we know that the French are usually represented as arrogant, rude and defensive about their language, the Germans as hard-working, serious and punctual, or the Spanish as friendly, lazy and unreliable. Even positive stereotypes can have a negative effect as soon as they are disproved, sometimes even by a single example. As was mentioned earlier, resorting to stereotypes is a handy defence mechanism to cope with the frustration we feel when we cannot find something to eat that we like (the British have no sense of taste), when we cannot make ourselves understood (the Germans are unfriendly), when we feel linguistically inadequate (the French are pedantic). In the case of this study’s participants, some came back after their study abroad with fewer stereotypical views and a more nuanced understanding of their host country. Others used their own first-hand experiences to validate their claims (Tusting *et al*, 2002), rather than to refute or relativise them. On the other hand, individual friendships with students from other countries seemed to counteract such generalisations. Valentina’s closest friend was Chinese, Daniela’s was German, Ilaria’s was Greek, Angela’s was French, despite their residence in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Scotland, respectively. None of them had expected to make friends with students from those nationalities. These students did not develop sympathy towards or understanding of those cultures. They

befriended individuals, who happened to be from those countries. Why them and not others? Perhaps because of their similarities (the shared interests, temperaments, sense of humour, etc), because of the understanding between them as individuals, rather than as a result of an understanding of each other's culture. It may well be that, in such cases, it is the friendship that facilitates the cultural understanding. This may be one aspect that institutions need to accept: no pre-planned initiative will guarantee the budding of friendships. Meetings between host and home students can be encouraged, but meaningful relationships will not necessarily result from them.

Another aspect which seems to help the adaptation process and intercultural learning are opportunities for self-reflection. Although these happen even when unplanned, they seem to depend very much on chance. Occasionally, in fact, the participants explicitly discussed critical incidents, either with members of the host country, or with friends back home, or with other Erasmus students. However, multi-cultural groups of Erasmus friends are mostly there for entertainment and companionship, rather than as catalysts for self-reflection. In addition, often the students seemed to lack the linguistic and conceptual tools to interpret and articulate their thoughts about their experiences.

Internationalisation has become a distinctive policy of HE institutions in Europe, and the Erasmus programme provides the means to reach planned objectives in this area. However, it seems that the focus has been mainly on numbers, which reflects a similar emphasis at the level of European policy. However, mobility is not of value in itself. HE institutions also have a duty to turn mobility into a valuable educational experience, and this needs to be reflected in their policies. In addition, if the number of students taking part in the programme is to increase, the participants will need to understand in what way exactly they can benefit from the programme, beyond the improvement of their linguistic skills and the obtainment of credits. The European Commission's rhetoric around vague concepts such as the development of intercultural or global skills may not be convincing enough. This outcome may need to be accompanied, at a local level, by concrete actions. These could take the form of structured opportunities, before, during and after the sojourn, to reflect on their

experiences. At the same time, they also need the concepts and frameworks to aid that reflection, and to help them interpret and articulate their thoughts (see also Ehrenreich, 2006, for similar issues in the context of foreign language assistants). The result of these types of initiatives, as shown by Jackson (2008b) can be extremely effective, although they would need to be clearly integrated into the students' curriculums. Some such initiatives already take place, but the experiences are few and uncoordinated, mostly due to a lack of clear policy and sufficient funds. It is nevertheless crucial that policymakers and practitioners come to understand that good intentions are not enough, and that learning can be facilitated by providing participants with the right tools, which go beyond the provision of practical information on the host country, or language training. Similarly, some institutions are beginning to look into the possibility of developing "internationalisation" at home, and the emphasis seems to be changing from expecting "international" students to fit into the host environment, to considering these students as a potential resource to educate home students to otherness and cultural diversity. In the words of Abdallah-Preteille, "it is therefore for researchers and practitioners to analyze the conditions of an education to otherness and to diversity likely to rid mobility of its saccharine ideology in the sense that good will and good intentions are not enough to ensure the intellectual and human effectiveness of the experience of mobility. This must be dusted from myths like those of agreement, spontaneity, genuine communication, mutual sympathy, friendship among peoples, dialogue between cultures, because these myths sterilize relationships and especially locate them in the realm of the unreal, of elsewhere, and not in everyday life which is often less exciting and less idyllic. It is not enough to bring together individuals to make a group, let alone force them to mix in order to make them accept each other." (2008, p.217).¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Dès lors, il revient aux chercheurs et aux praticiens d'analyser les conditions d'une éducation à l'altérité et à la diversité susceptibles de sortir la mobilité de son idéologie sirupeuse au sens où la bonne volonté et les bonnes intentions ne suffisent pas pour garantir l'efficacité, intellectuelle et humaine, de l'expérience de la mobilité. Celle-ci doit être dépoussiérée de certains mythes comme ceux de l'entente, de la spontanéité, de la communication authentique, de la sympathie mutuelle, de l'amitié entre les peuples, de dialogue entre les cultures, car ces mythes ne conduisent qu'à aseptiser les rapports et surtout à les situer dans l'irréel, dans l'ailleurs et non dans le quotidien qui est souvent moins enthousiasmant et moins idyllique. Il ne suffit pas de réunir des individus pour faire un groupe, encore moins de les obliger à se côtoyer pour s'accepter.

9.4. Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the issues that emerged from the data collected. These were divided into three broad themes: first of all, I attempted to unpack what exactly we are expecting students to adapt to in the context of European student mobility today. The landscape in which such mobility takes place has changed dramatically, cultural frameworks have been affected by globalisation, trans-national and trans-cultural social fields have changed the way we see ourselves as members of multiple communities of shared frameworks of meaning, which technology helps maintain.

The second section concerned the conceptual models of cross-cultural adaptation: I discussed why I felt that Anderson's model offered an effective representation that allowed for multiplicity and diversity in the adaptive responses of different individuals in a variety of intercultural situations, while setting this specific type of adaptation in the broader conceptual framework of adjustment to life-changes.

Finally, the issue addressed in the last section concerned implications on student mobility policy and practice. In agreement with other researchers, I argued that institutions – both at a local and European level, need to move beyond the rhetoric that sees mobility in itself as a way to promote cross-cultural understanding. Institutions need to devise ways to provide both those taking an active part in mobility programmes, and those remaining at home, with the necessary tools to reflect on, interpret and articulate their experience, and to understand and value cultural diversity.

CHAPTER 10. Concluding remarks

Cross-cultural adaptation is a highly complex process. This study has shown how the individual journeys of the sojourners can be extremely varied, and are affected by a large number of internal and external factors, such as motivations, expectations, personality, coping strategies, skills, specific characteristics of the environment, and chance, among others.

In addition, the context of European student mobility has specific characteristics which make it different from other experiences of study abroad: although the structure of the programme imposes a praxis which is similar for all students, there is a high degree of autonomy in the choices that the students make, and the responsibility for planning their sojourn and completing their individual programme is placed on the student. At the same time, Erasmus students move within European space which is increasingly familiar to them, and where they easily find themselves surrounded by fellow Erasmus students, who can provide practical and emotional support during the sojourn abroad.

In terms of the research findings, I have shown how the complexities of the adaptation process can be adequately understood within a model that caters for that complexity, while showing that this type of experience can be situated in the context of life changes. Anderson's (1994) model seems particularly suitable in this context.

I have also shown that European student mobility has changed since the setting-up of the Joint Study Programmes in the 1970s, and that increasing numbers of mobile students, the rise of instruction through the medium of English in many HE institutions, globalisation and technology, have changed the landscape within which these students move. At an institutional level, the emphasis is now on developing linguistic and intercultural global skills that will encourage a pan-European mobile workforce, and a more strongly felt European identity.

Finally, I have shown how residence abroad does not necessarily bring enhanced intercultural skills, although these can be encouraged by providing the students with

the concepts and language to describe their experiences, and opportunities for reflection before, during and after the experience abroad. This is the area in which HE institutions in Europe can play a significant role.

In terms of the direct effects of this research on the participants, I have mentioned earlier how it is likely to have offered them many opportunities for self-reflection, particularly during the monthly Skype conversations, as well as the final interviews upon their return home. It can be argued that, for a researcher, it would be important, to counterbalance the benefit he or she has obtained from the participants' contributions, that they too benefited from their involvement. However, it may be difficult to assess such often long-term benefits once we, as researchers, have left the field. In my case, I have remained in contact with some of the participants, and therefore have some knowledge of what they have done since their Erasmus sojourn. I can see in the variety of paths they have followed a similar pattern to that found among the individuals who shared with me a year-abroad experience over twenty years ago: some returned home to finish their studies and find employment more or less locally, having understood that this is the country where they wish to live. Others seemed to have returned with a clearer idea of what they wanted to do with their lives, and embarked on further studies. One returned only to leave again almost immediately, this time with an Overseas Programme, for a destination further away from her small home town, in the USA. Four of them have undertaken complete courses of study, either at Master's or doctoral level, in other European institutions (one of them at the same University where he did his Erasmus stay). Recently, I ran into one of them during a conference where I was presenting some work relating to my research: she was studying for a Master's degree in Intercultural Communication, and was delighted to be able to listen to and discuss my presentation, this time, as she put it, from "the other side", that of the budding researcher. In my mind, I hoped that my own research had, to some degree, helped her in her choice.

The effect that my research has had on me has been twofold. First, it has provided me with enough material for further research and publications on the topic of student mobility within Europe. As I mentioned earlier, I was acutely aware, throughout the

entire process of analysing the data and writing up this report, of the many facets I could be exploring in greater detail, relating to language, identity, social networks, technology and development of intercultural skills, to mention but a few. I hope that these will be topic for future research.

At the same time, my work has had an effect on my practice as a university language teacher. I have become much more aware of ways in which future Erasmus students can be helped to make the most of their experience, through providing them with the concepts and tools, as well as opportunities for reflection, so that they can make sense of their experiences and become aware of their own role, as individuals with agency, in their adaptive process. It seems to me that the foreign language classroom is the ideal place for this to happen.

10.1 Limitations

This study has a number of limitations, which I would like to state here. Here, I have concentrated on the cross-cultural adaptation of a relatively small group of undergraduate and Master's students from the University of Bologna in a number of European destinations. There are therefore no implied generalisations to other contexts, including other students at the University, other HE institutions in Italy or in Europe, and other destinations. At the same time, my aim was to provide a variety of instances of motivations and aims, problem appraisals and coping strategies that can be found in the varied experiences of mobile students in Europe. I also hope that, by providing a rich description of the students' vicissitudes, the readers will be able to judge the extent to which findings can be generalised or transferred to their own contexts.

I am also aware that, as a researcher, my own past experience of study abroad, as well as my professional status as a language teacher, and my multicultural background will have inevitably influenced my interpretations of the data, and therefore my claims. Similarly, the research instruments used, in particular the weekly "diary-tables", have also had an effect on the type of data collected, and have emphasised some aspects more than others. Had I not subdivided the students'

experiences into those particular six categories, the findings might have been different.

It is also true that the project produced a huge amount of data which, for obvious reasons, needed to be selected for inclusion in this thesis. This selection therefore entails the impossibility to fully render the richness and variety of the participants' experiences.

10.2 Future research

Throughout the thesis, I have indicated some areas that could be investigated further with the data I collected. Future research which could also be undertaken in this area may involve:

- Extending similar studies to other groups of students from different European countries in order to understand ways in which their experiences may resemble or differ from those of the present cohort. This may help HE institutions in other European countries cater more specifically for the needs of their outgoing and incoming students.
- Another area which needs further research includes empirical, qualitative, longitudinal studies such as this one to better understand how other theoretical models of adaptation, such as Kim's (2001) or Bennett's (1993) translate into the real, lived experiences of the students.

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APPENDIX I

Sample of initial coding: Angela 30 January 2010

<p>[...]</p> <p>Ana So how're things going, then?</p> <p>Angela: Oh... it's all ok. I was writing...the other table that you sent me and... I was writing that.. yes, maybe now is better, because when I came back from holiday... it was a bit difficult to speak English and stuff, because I have to get used again to speak, so... but no, now it's better.</p> <p>Ana: Good. So ...did you have a nice holiday?</p> <p>Angela: Yes, nice. But... I couldn't wait to come back, actually [laughter]</p> <p>Ana: Really? [laughter] And why was that?</p> <p>Angela: I don't know... well ... it's just two months, so I feel it's just so few time that I wanted to come back [laughter]</p> <p>Ana: So you want to make the most of your time in Glasgow...</p> <p>Angela Yeah [laughter].</p> <p>Ana: Well, that's a good sign... Because sometimes, some people find that after spending time with their family and friends going back is not easy. But you seem to have settled in.</p> <p>Angela: Yeah.</p> <p>Ana: So, let me... ok. You said that one of the problems was language. When you arrived in Italy, did you find it strange to speak in Italian all the time.</p> <p>Angela: [laughing] yes... sometimes I said "sorry" to the people.</p> <p>Ana: Yes, it's those little words like "sorry" and "excuse me" that are difficult to remove when you go back home.</p> <p>Angela: Yes, and sometimes in conversations with friends, I say a word in English, because maybe it's a word also in Italian, and then I keep speaking in English. Like I say "anyway", or something like that.</p> <p>Ana: Yes, 'code-mixing', that's quite common. What about seeing all your friends again back home? What did you tell them about your time in Glasgow?</p> <p>Angela: Actually, it was strange, because everyone was asking me "Oh, so tell me about the Erasmus..." and I was like "mmm...ok...well I don't know where to start, because there're so many things to say, so</p>	<p>LANGUAGE Effect of going back home on L2 (difficulty)</p> <p>Missing Erasmus destination while home</p> <p>Wanting to make the most of Erasmus</p> <p>LANGUAGE Code-mixing</p> <p>FRIENDS Telling friends about Erasmus</p>
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<p>just ask me a particular question, because it's difficult to... to...</p> <p>Ana: ...to summarise everything?</p> <p>Angela: Yes. So ... so maybe if I start talking about the house the things came up in my mind and so it was easier...but then when I started... well also maybe while something it reminds me about something about the Erasmus, so I start "well, yes, and when I'm in Glasgow I..." and then I tell everything.</p> <p>Ana: did you have the impression you had changed during your time in Glasgow?</p> <p>Angela: Some friends of mine say I'm alcoholic [laughter]... No, it's just that all the pictures of Facebook are about parties, but it's just that people... bring the camera in that occasion, so you see just that, but it's not only this.</p> <p>Ana: No, of course, you don't take your camera to lessons...</p> <p>Angela: No, and I spend a lot of time with my friends in the library, and I have a really good time with them...</p> <p>Ana: Yes, it's true that the image of being an Erasmus is going to parties and having lots of friends.</p> <p>Ana: Anyway, did you get a chance to see your friends who are doing their Erasmus in...</p> <p>Angela: Yes, it's really nice. Actually, Viola came here the first week-end of January...</p> <p>Ana: Yes, I remember you wrote that you were together...</p> <p>Angela: Yes, that was really nice, and also when we came back, we met in Bologna and we started talking about the Erasmus... no, it was really nice. Actually, Chiara is living... she's saying it's a bit different for her because she's maybe not partying a lot like us ... but you know for sure. But I think it's a good thing anyway.</p> <p>Ana: Yes, it's so nice when you can share your experience with friends doing their Erasmus in other places... when I did mine it was almost impossible to keep in touch with friends who maybe were in the same country.</p> <p>Angela: Yes, it's nice, and we always write emails, I told you I think, we write emails about what is happening, what we're living, so ...</p> <p>Ana: Do you also feel that you can get some support</p>	<p>Difficulty talking about experience</p> <p>FRIENDS Friends perceiving change Image of Erasmus students Facebook</p> <p>SOCIALISING Library as place of socialisation</p> <p>CO-NATIONAL FRIENDS Co-national friends doing Erasmus at the same time</p> <p>ERASMUS Easier to talk to other Erasmus because they share experience</p> <p>Sharing experience with friends on Erasmus</p>
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<p>from your friends, even if they are far away?</p> <p>Angela: Oh yes, of course. Because actually, above all with Viola, she's doing an Erasmus in York, we have a lot of Skype calls, even at midnight or something like that, and we talk about what was happening. Maybe if one of us was sad about something ... no, it was really useful, because we're living the same experience, and maybe I've lived something before them, so I could tell them "Oh yes, I felt the same, and that happened to me..." something like that.</p> <p>Ana: Yes, this support is important, it makes you feel you're not on your own. It seems you have a lot of friends, but perhaps for Chiara, who doesn't have as many friends...</p> <p>Angela: Yeah... and actually I was a bit sorry for Chiara because... maybe because she has a boyfriend at home she was a bit sad about that ... because I'm really enjoying to go out with all my friends and stuff, but not just to party, also because I want to get to know them. I was a bit sorry, but well, if for her is ok, she's learning anyway something, it's very useful.</p> <p>Ana: And perhaps the way students socialise in the UK and in Spain is different, there they start going out at midnight or 1 in the morning, and if you have lessons in the morning and you don't want to be too tired it's impossible to socialise...</p> <p>Angela: I hadn't understood about that, but actually it's true, because at the beginning Chiara told us "I was going out with my flatmates last night and it was nine and I told them when are we going out? and they said no, no, we're going out at 1." And she was like "What!".</p> <p>Ana: That's right, it's not easy. Anyway, let's talk about you. You said then that language was not easy, having to speak English again, and you found you needed a few days to start speaking English again?</p> <p>Angela: Above all to understand, I think.</p> <p>Ana: Really?</p> <p>Angela: Also because Scottish accent is really strong, so... when I went in London it was... well, different. I understood everything in the subway, while here I'm used to not to understand, because they speak with a ...microphone and it sounds like disturbed, and also with a Scottish accent, it's impossible, so I don't even try to understand. London is really clear, like your accent, I always understand you.</p>	<p>SUPPORT Obtaining support from friends Technology</p> <p>Leaving a partner behind</p> <p>PERCEIVED CULTURAL DIFFERENCES Difference in socialisation patterns</p> <p>LANGUAGE Difficulty understanding spoken L2</p>
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<p>this friend called Clarisse. I think we are good friends because we talk about everything. Also when I was in Italy, we wrote each other a lot...</p> <p>Ana: Where is she from?</p> <p>Angela: France. Actually, when I started Erasmus I said I want a lot of Spanish friends because maybe I would like to go to Spain... not just to use them, but also because I like Spanish people. And it's strange, because my... can I say 'best friend'?</p> <p>Ana: yes...</p> <p>Angela: My best friend here is French, so... [laughter]</p> <p>Ana: Well, sometimes you don't choose friends for their nationality, they just happen...</p> <p>Angela, yes, it's true. No, and I have also Spanish friends, and actually I was happy during the holiday because maybe some people I didn't expect wrote me and asked me how I was... so it was nice.</p> <p>Ana: Why do you think it's relatively easy to make friends when you are in Erasmus? Some people say they have made many more friends than they have at home. Is that your experience?</p> <p>Angela: Well... I have a lot of friends here... I know a lot of people, and... also... yes, I think I also spoke about serious things with most of them. But I don't know... really really friends... I don't know actually.... Because as you said before, real friends can't be a lot... I don't know what to say... yes, I really feel good with my group, but I don't know.... maybe you can keep on seeing a lot of them, also if they are not so close.</p> <p>Ana: Yes, I see what you mean... What about Scottish people, Scottish friends....</p> <p>Angela: Oh, I think I have just my flatmate.</p> <p>Ana: Just your flatmate.... And why is that? Why is it so difficult to have Scottish friends?</p> <p>Angela: Yeah, because actually in class I tried to talk to them, but I think they want to spend time between them, between Scottish people... maybe because we are going home...</p> <p>Ana: So they don't want to invest in friendships...</p> <p>Angela: I think so. Or maybe that class is not the right way to meet Scottish people, because for example, also the other friends I have, if they have a Scottish friend it's just because they live with them, so they can share... spend a lot of time together, or they live close, something like that.</p>	<p>other international students</p> <p>INTERNATIONAL FRIENDS</p> <p>'Instrumental' friendships</p> <p>Best friend: French</p> <p>Staying in touch with new friends during holidays</p> <p>Finding it easy to make friends</p> <p>Real/superficial friends</p> <p>Single friend/group</p> <p>HOST NATIONALS</p> <p>Difficulty befriending host nationals</p> <p>Meting people through courses/sharing accommodation/extra-curricular activities</p>
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<p>Ana: So the way to make Scottish friends or local friends is by living together, not by being in class together...</p> <p>Angela: And also with activities or groups like football or something like that...so some friend of mine have Scottish friends that play with them football.</p> <p>Ana: I see. And do you do other activities outside of class?</p> <p>Angela: Actually on Wednesday I went to the 'Salsa' class. And actually it was nice because it wasn't the... because actually we have two 'Salsa' class. One is one hour with the International Society. So it's supposed to be with most Erasmus people. But I went to another one of the GU Union, and it was with a lot of Scottish people. It was a two-hour class. I think it's better that one, because there are Scottish people, and I found it was quite difficult sometimes to understand them. So it'll be a good...</p> <p>Ana: Yes, good practice.</p> <p>Angela: And also I don't do any sport, so actually...</p> <p>Ana: Yes, dance is a nice physical activity...</p> <p>Angela: Yes, and so funny, because some parts have Spanish names, but I didn't understand they were Spanish names [laughing] because they said "daymee" and it was 'dame'... and when I understood I said "Oh! it was just this word!"... I definitely have to come here because I can understand better Spanish... [laughter]</p> <p>Ana: [laughter] ok...And what's the weather like? Is it very cold?</p> <p>Angela: Oh, today it was really sunny. That's why we went out, to enjoy the sun.</p> <p>Ana: Well, in Glasgow, that's amazing</p> <p>Angela: Yes, it was amazing yesterday, because in the morning it was snowing, and after one hour there was the sun. [laughter]</p> <p>Ana: So you're enjoying your stay in Scotland....</p> <p>Angela: Actually, now there are a lot of friends who are leaving, because they have finished their Erasmus, so it's a bit a sad period, because two guys from Bologna went home on Thursday, and yesterday another girl, and next week a Spanish boy... maybe he's coming to Bologna in April, so I will see him again. But it's sad, because you start thinking, oh, when it will be my turn it will be so sad...</p>	<p>WEATHER</p> <p>FRIENDS Sadness at other Erasmus leaving. Anticipating own departure</p>
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<p>Ana: But some new people are coming, presumably...</p> <p>Angela: yes, I've met some new people, a French boy, and also an Italian girl who wrote me some mail, she was from Bologna, and she wrote me some mail to ask me for the flat and things like that.</p> <p>Ana: And what advice did you give her?</p> <p>Angela: Well, I said it was difficult, but...that she has to come here and go around... and look at the website also but also go and see the flat... and then she found a good flat, so...</p> <p>Ana: did she also want to have other kind of information or was she just looking for advice regarding accommodation?</p> <p>Angela: Well, she is a 'laurea magistrale', a 'specialistica'...</p> <p>Ana: A Masters student...</p> <p>Angela: Yes, but we have the same coordinator... and I think she is a bit older than us, she is 26 or 28 I think, so it's a bit different... well, I think it's different... we're all 21 or 23 at least so... maybe you're here but you're starting to think about something more serious...</p> <p>Ana: Yes, perhaps you're right. Anyway, we'll talk again in 3 or 4 weeks...</p> <p>Angela: Yes, and I'll be even more sad... February will be sad because these two Spanish friends who were more friends than the ones who left in these last days will go... I talked to one of them yesterday and she said: "Oh, yes, but I'm prepared because I know that I will just see you again..." and I was like "No, I know I can see you again, but no, I'll be so sad"....</p> <p>Ana: Yes, of course... but that's part of the experience, having to say goodbye... Anyway, talk soon, and thanks again.</p> <p>Angela: Yes.... Ok....Bye.</p>	<p>Information/advice provided to newcomers</p> <p>Co-national arriving.</p> <p>Difference between Erasmus at 21 and at 26</p> <p>FRIENDS Saying goodbye to friends</p>
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APPENDIX II

1) General consent form

Note: the consent form mentions the ICAPS questionnaire, a tool developed by Matsumoto et al (2001), which was then abandoned once the data had been collected.

Consent form

Participant name and surname: _____

Place and date of birth: _____

Participant identification number: _____

Project Topic: Exploring experiences of a study-abroad programme among Erasmus students: a student perspective

Name of Researcher: Ana M. Beaven

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated..... for the above project which I may keep for my records and have had the opportunity to ask any questions I may have.

I agree to take part in the above study and am willing to:

- 1 – Take the ICAPS questionnaire before departure and upon return*
- 2 – Take a language test before departure and upon return*
- 3 – Be interviewed before departure and upon return, and have the interviews audio-recorded for research purposes.*
- 4 – Complete the “MUDLS” spreadsheets when required*
- 5 – Be interviewed by telephone during sojourn abroad, and have telephone conversations recorded for research purposes*

I understand that privacy and confidentiality will be guaranteed as explained in the information sheet.

I understand that personal information, including audio recordings, will be held and processed for the following purposes:

- PhD thesis to be presented at the University of Warwick.*
- Presentation of papers at conferences.*
- Report on findings for providers of ICAPS questionnaire*

Concerning the audio-recordings of interviews and telephone conversations, I hereby give my consent to the following:

1. The audio-recordings can be studied by the researcher for use in the research project. Yes/No
2. The audio-recordings or transcripts can be shown to participants of seminars and workshops. Yes/No
3. The audio-recordings or transcripts can be used for academic and professional publications. Yes/No
4. The written transcripts can be kept in an archive for other researchers. Yes/No
5. The audio-recordings can be used by other researchers. Yes/No
6. The audio-recordings or transcripts can be shown at meetings of academics or professionals interested in the study of intercultural issues and study abroad. Yes/No
7. The audio-recordings or transcripts can be shown in classrooms to students. Yes/No
8. The recordings or transcripts can be shown in public presentations to non-scientific groups. Yes/No
9. The recordings can be used on television and radio. Yes/No

I have read the above description and give my consent for the use of the records as indicated above.

Concerning the photographic material I provide, I will be given the possibility, at the end of the period of data collection, to review the material and select the photographs which can be used in the research. I will be asked at that point to sign another written consent form for the use of those photographs.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

2) Consent form (Facebook)

Participant name and surname: _____

Participant identification number: _____

Project Topic: Exploring experiences of a study-abroad programme among Erasmus students: a student perspective

Name of Researcher: Ana M. Beaven

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project, and specifically for agreeing to give me access to your Facebook profile. This form explains what this entails.

Please read the following statements and sign at the bottom if you agree with them:

“I understand that I will be asked to become a contact of Ana Beaven on Facebook. I am aware of the fact that I do not have to accept this ‘friendship request’ but that, if I do, her other contacts will be able to read any comments that I make on her page (‘wall’). In addition, Ana Beaven will be able to see the contributions that my other contacts make on my page (e.g. answers to my postings, postings on my ‘wall’, tagged photographs etc.) I therefore realise that Ana Beaven is unable to provide anonymity for me from her contacts. I understand that I can adjust the privacy settings on my own Facebook account to decide whether I will be visible to Ana’s other Facebook ‘friends’.

I also understand that Ana Beaven will be able to view as much of my personal Facebook profile form as I allow her to. It is my responsibility to read the ‘Privacy’ information provided by Facebook and act accordingly, changing the settings if necessary.

I understand that Ana Beaven will respect my request not to look at specific photo albums that I may wish to keep private, even if I do not change my privacy settings.

I also accept that Ana Beaven will show me any material she is intending to use in her research at the end of the data-gathering period, and that it is my right to withhold permission for the use of specific material. In addition, my anonymity will be guaranteed (by removing names and providing pseudonyms, as well as blurring photographs). I also understand that, if the materials contain contributions from other contacts of mine, Ana Beaven will request permission from them before using the materials.

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can remove Ana Beaven as a 'friend' from Facebook at any time without giving a reason. I can ask questions at any time. I am free to withdraw or discuss any concerns with Ana Beaven at any time throughout the research process."

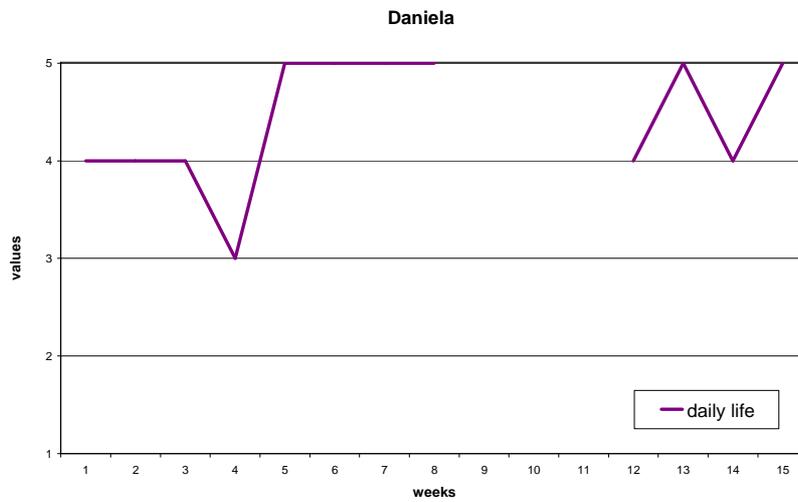
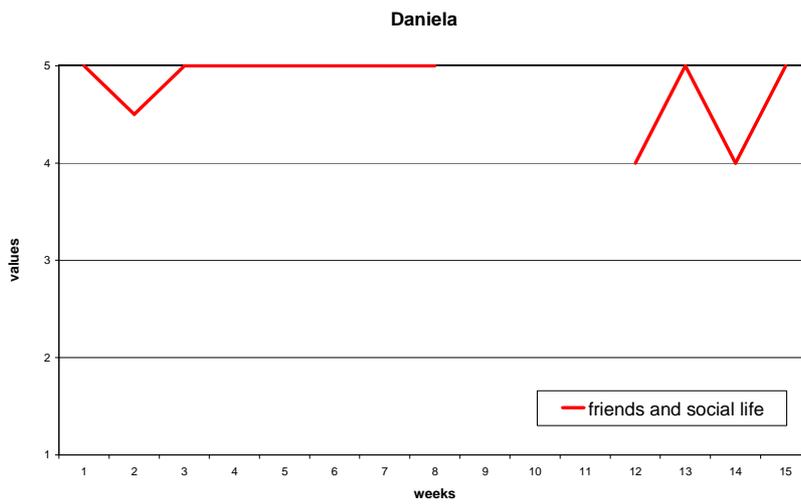
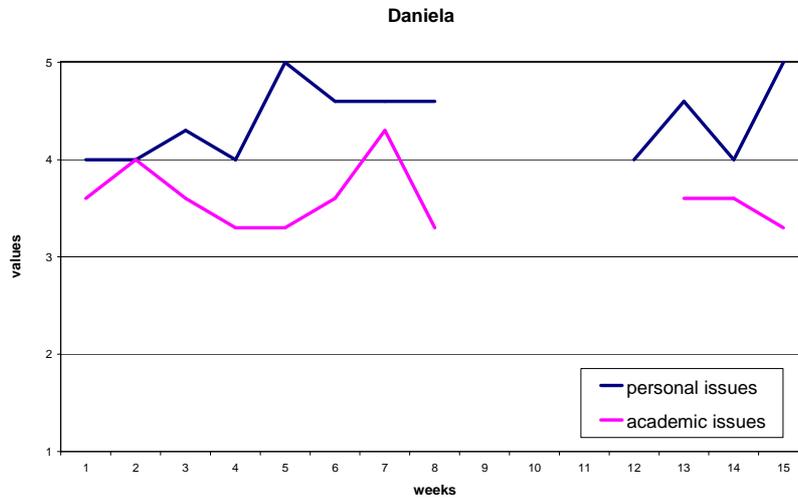
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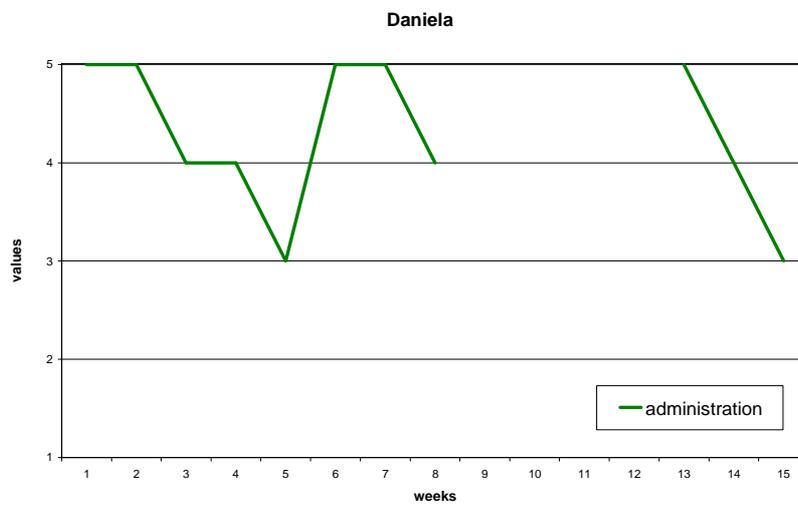
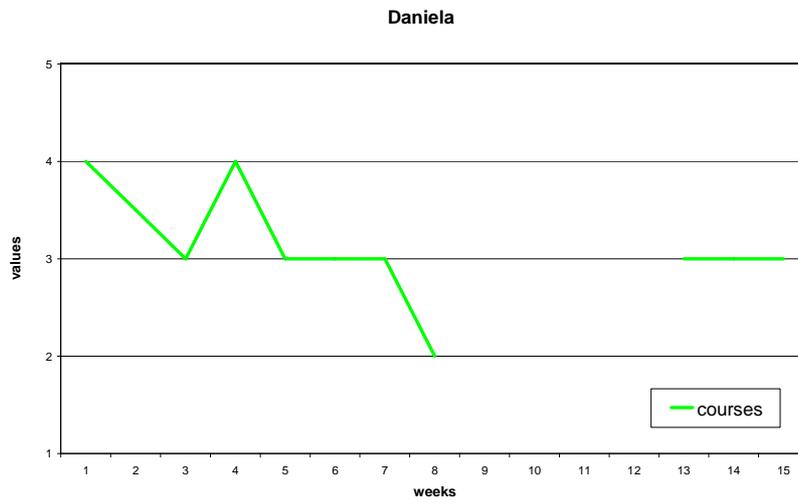
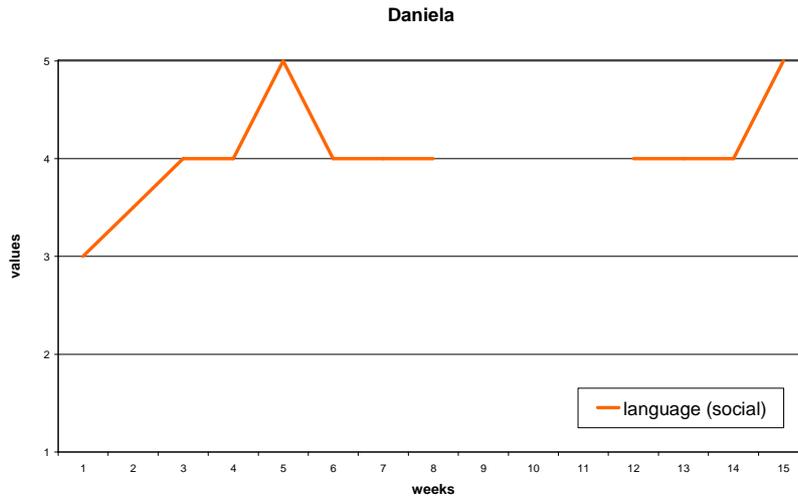
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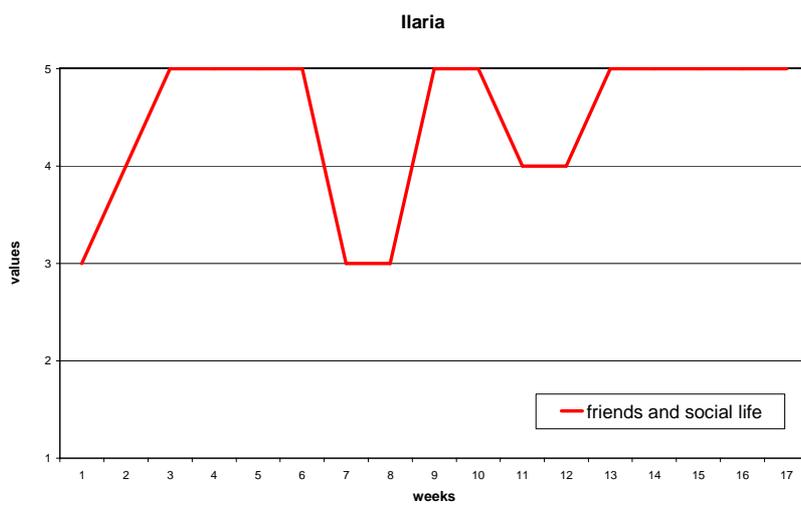
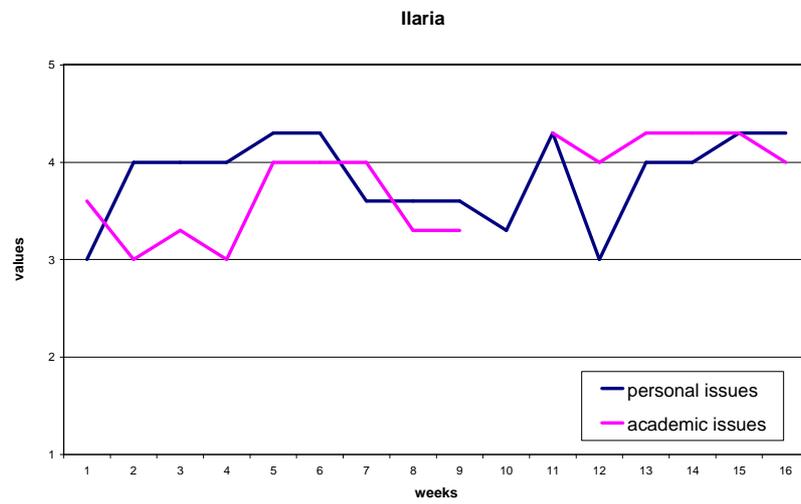
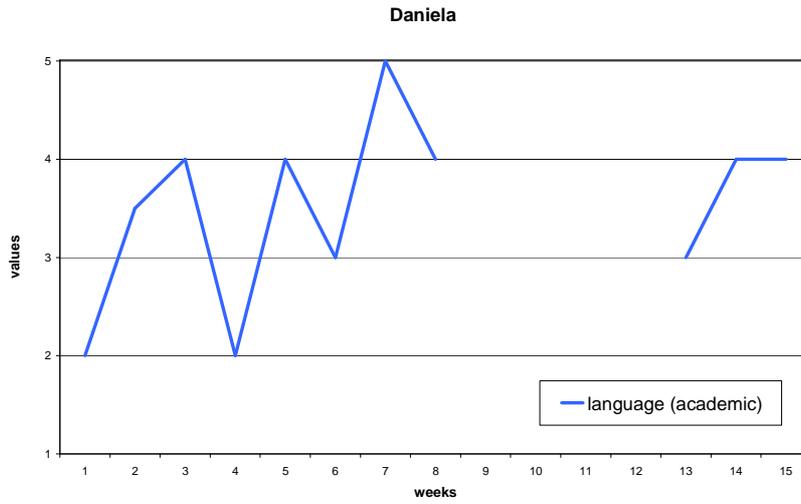
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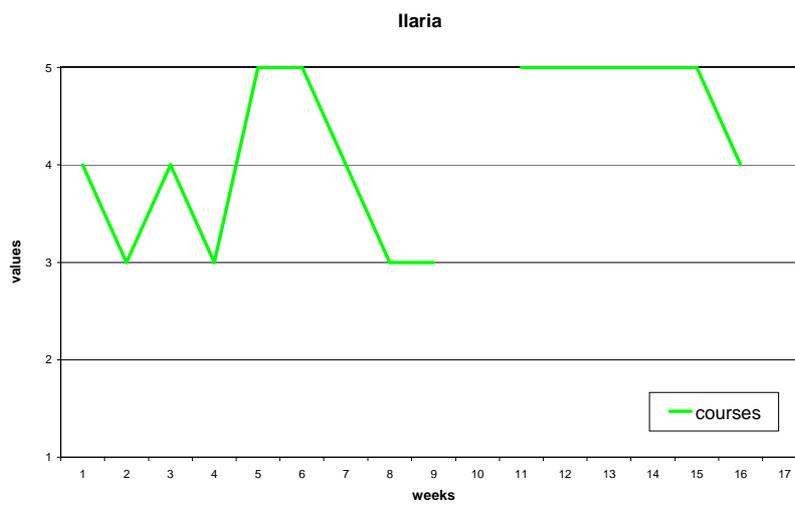
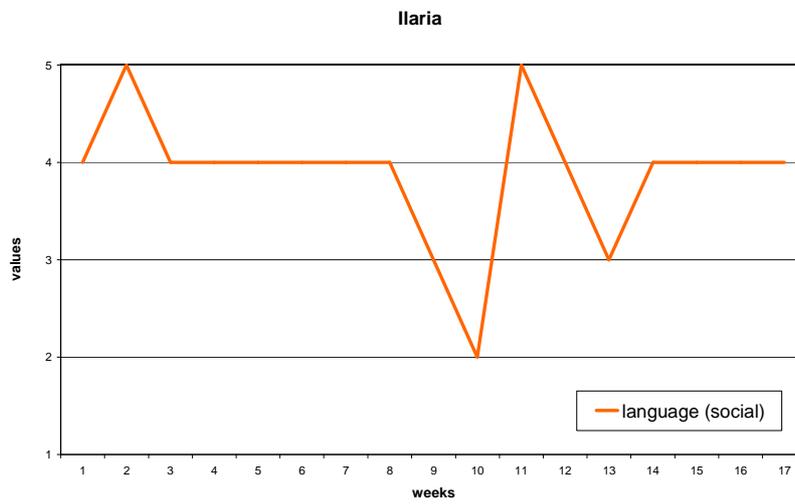
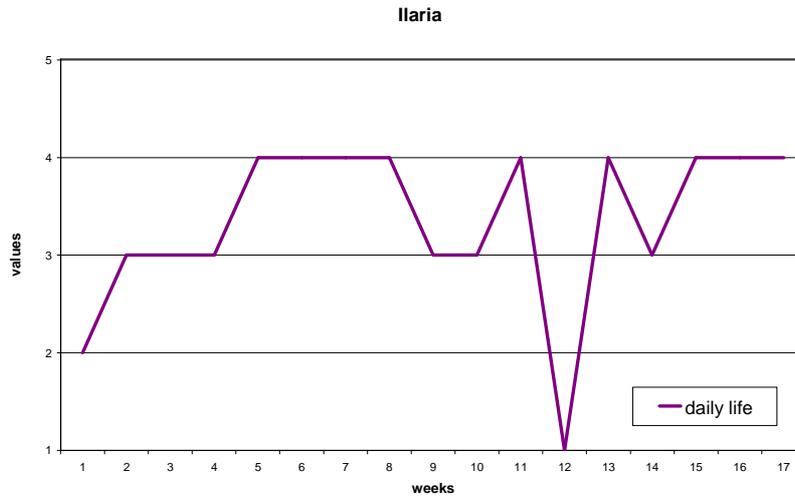
Note: This consent form was developed by Sally Baker, a PhD student at the Open University, who kindly shared it with me and authorised me to use it in my research.

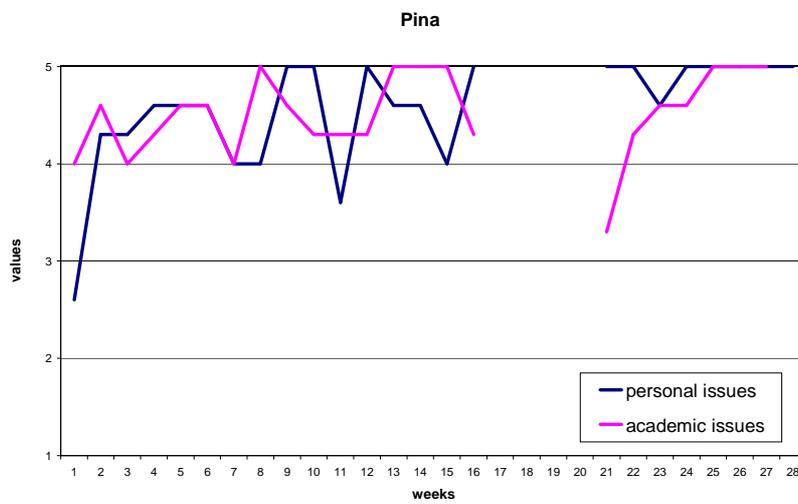
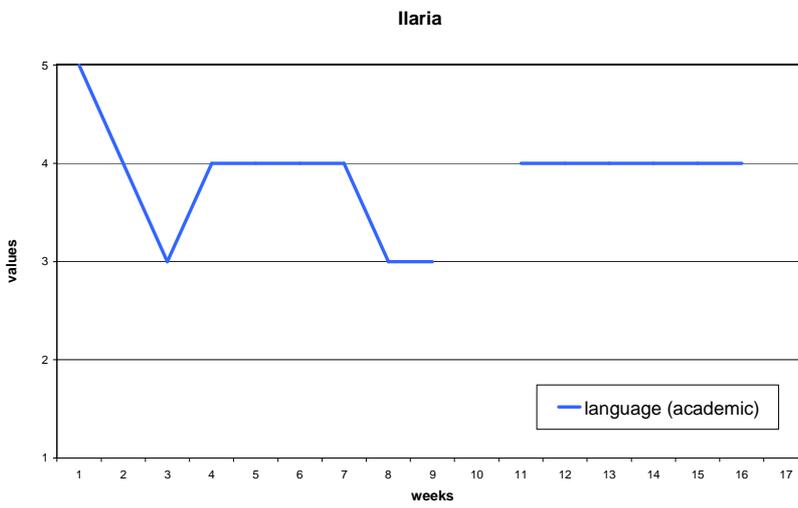
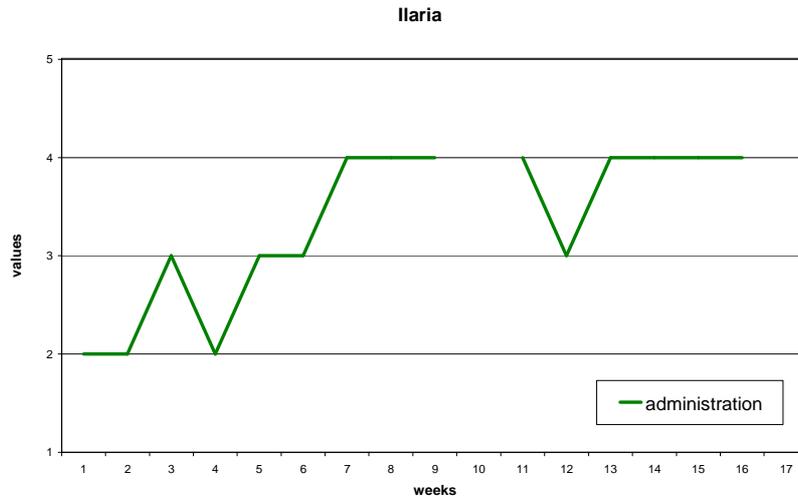
APPENDIX III - COMPLETE SET OF GRAPHS

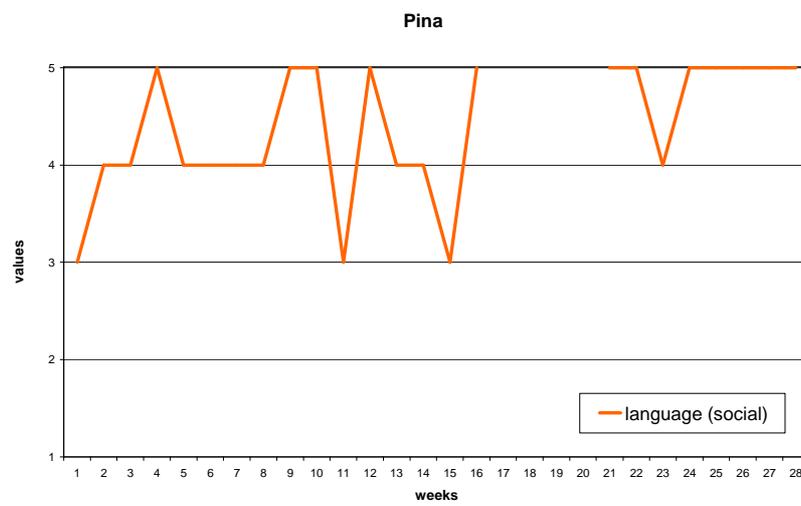
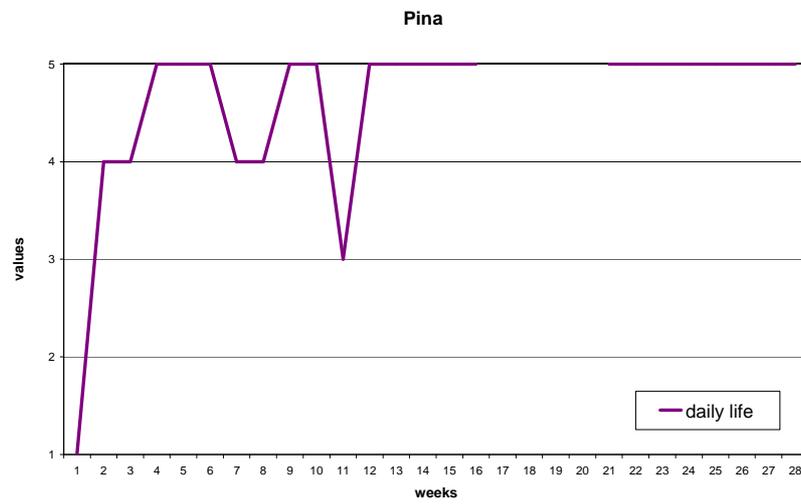
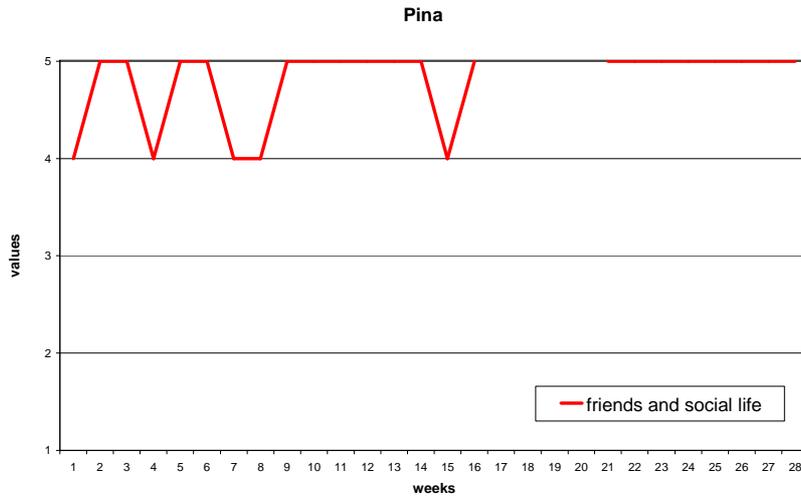


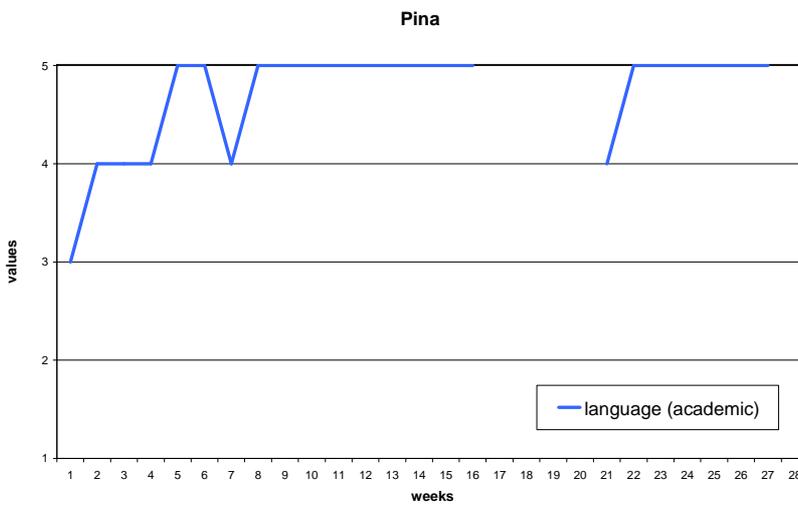
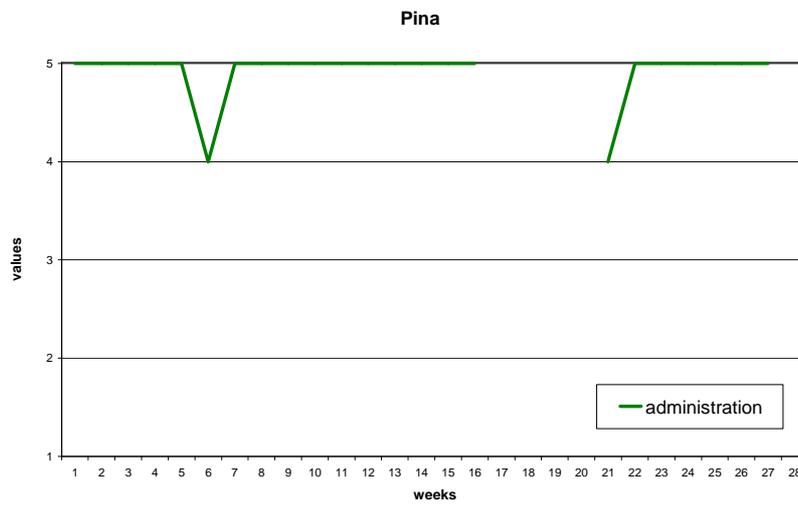
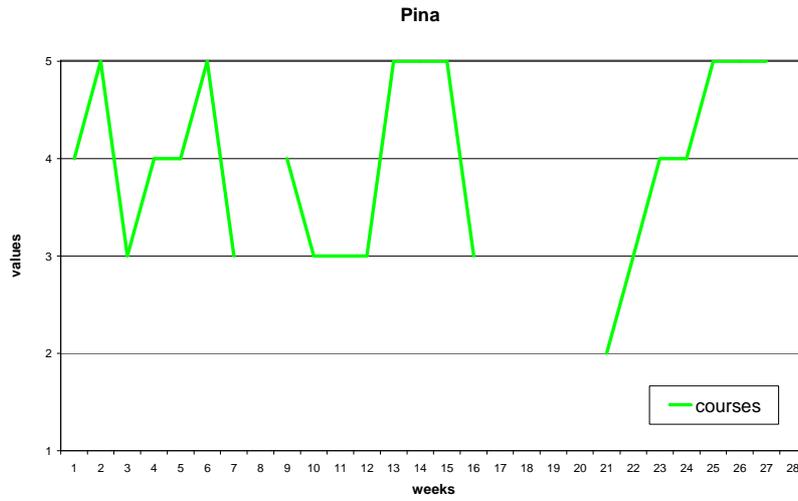


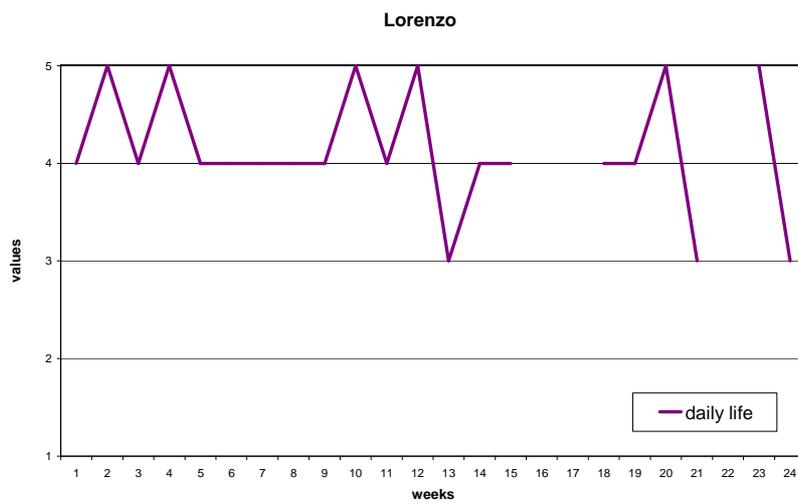
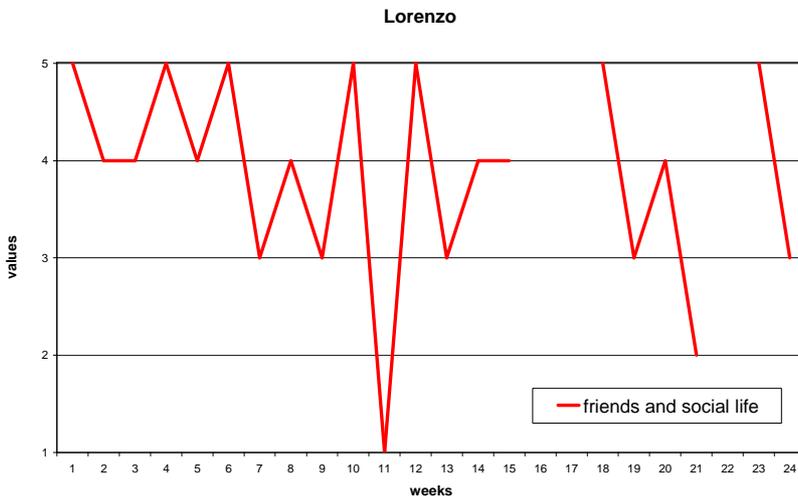
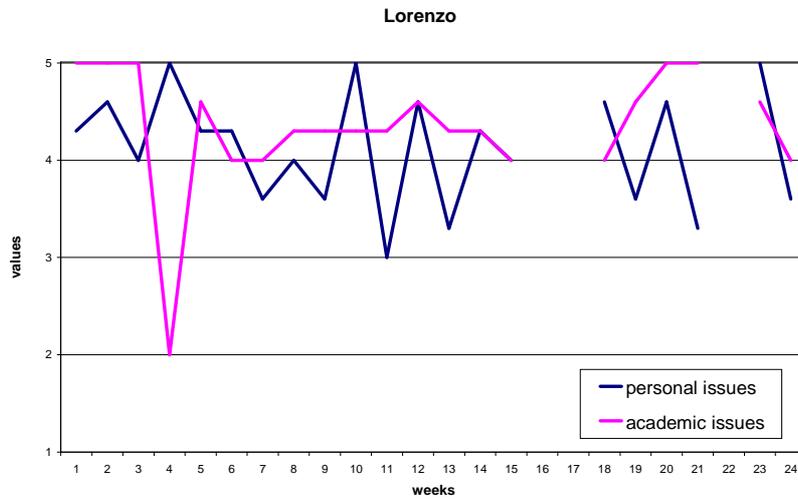


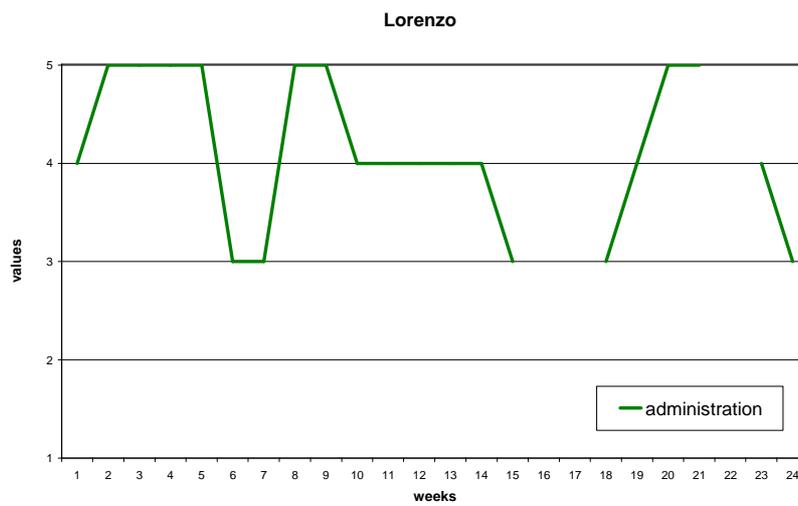
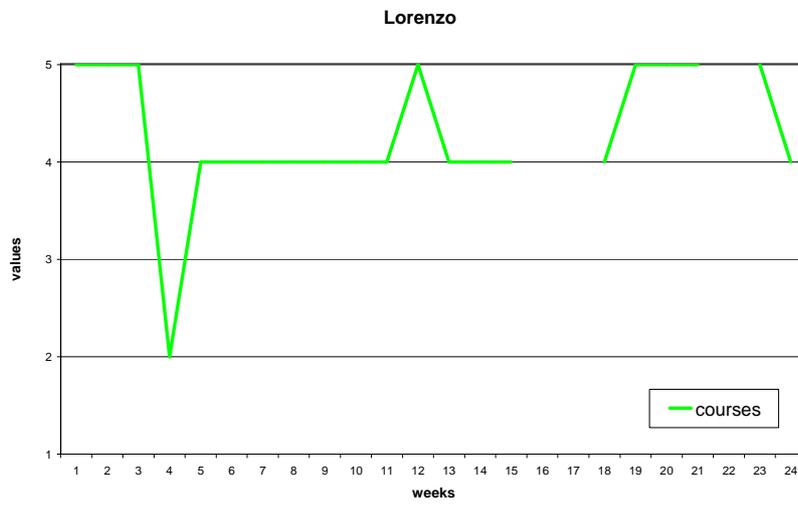
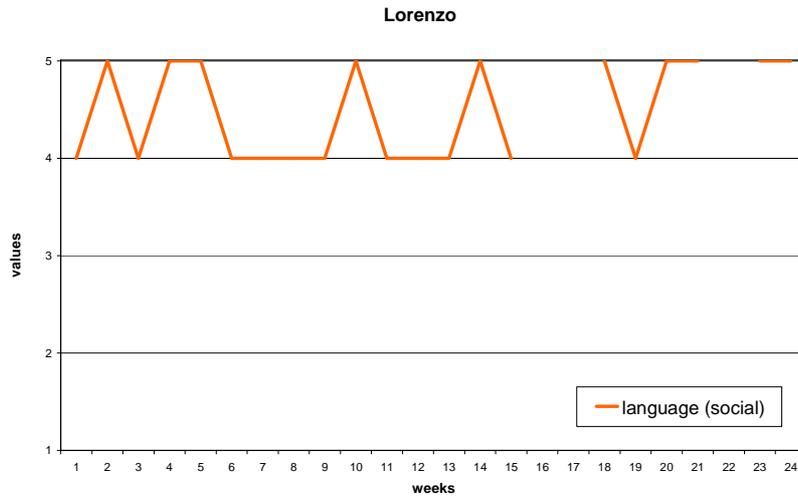


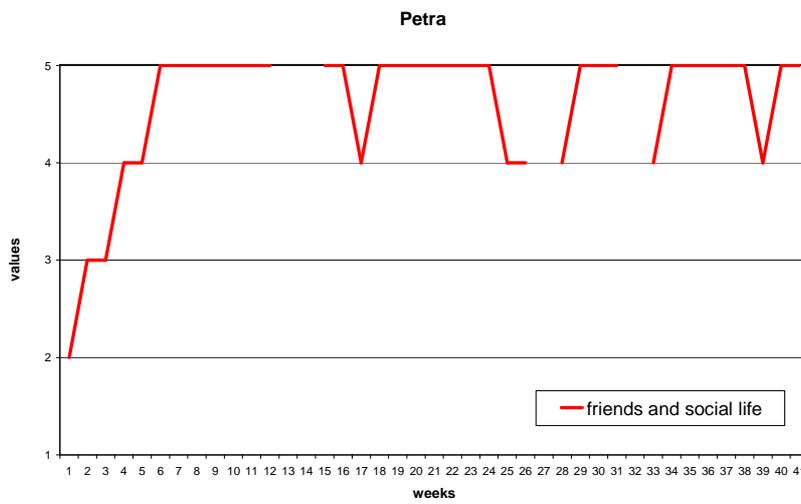
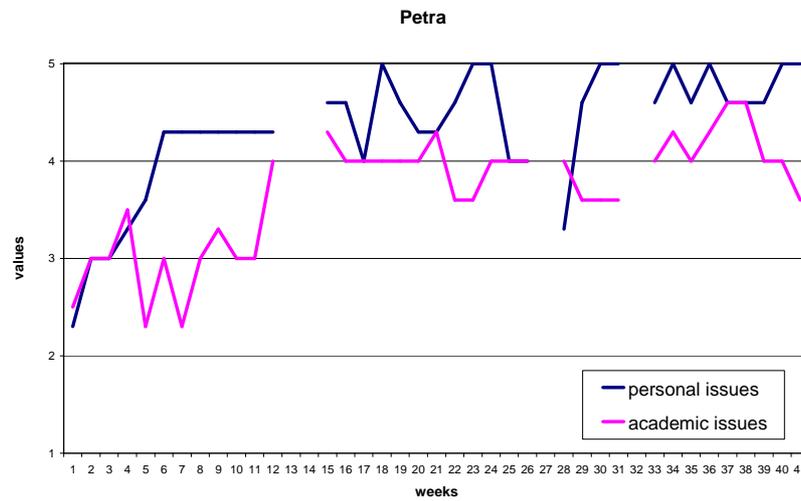
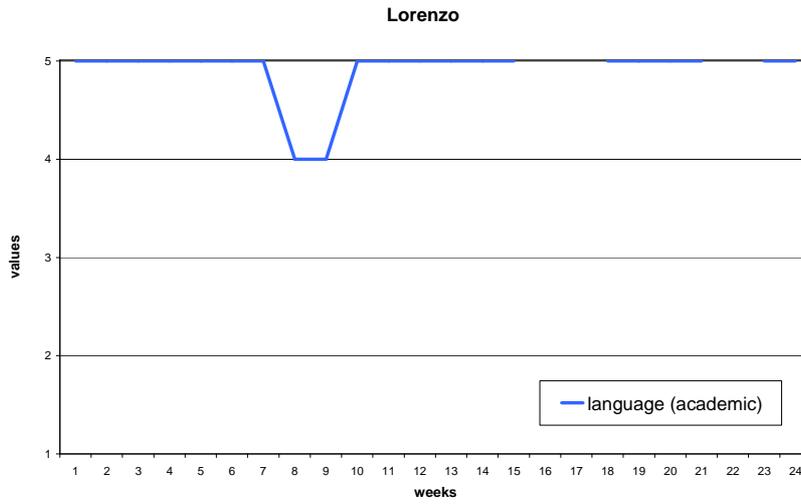


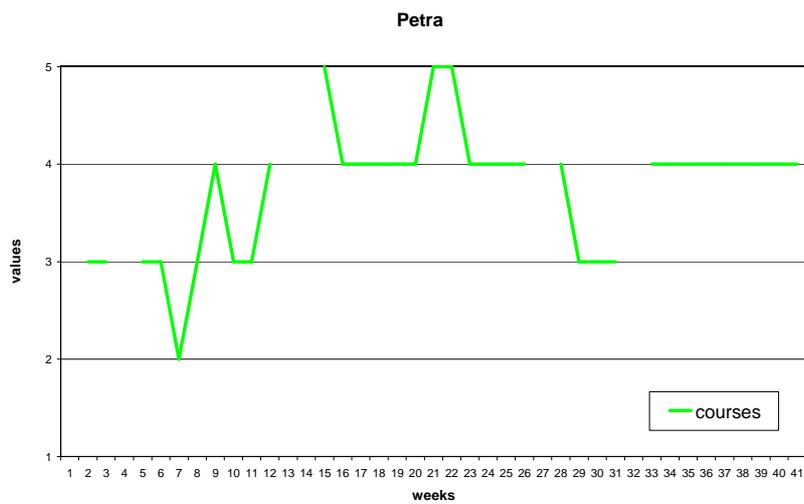
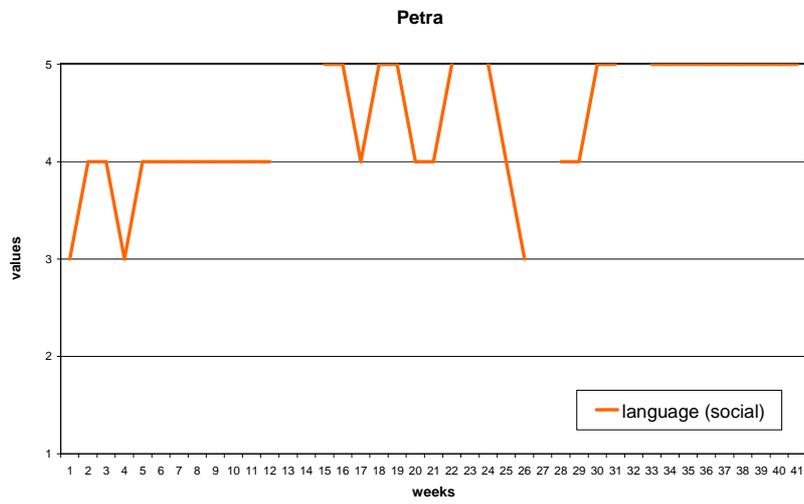
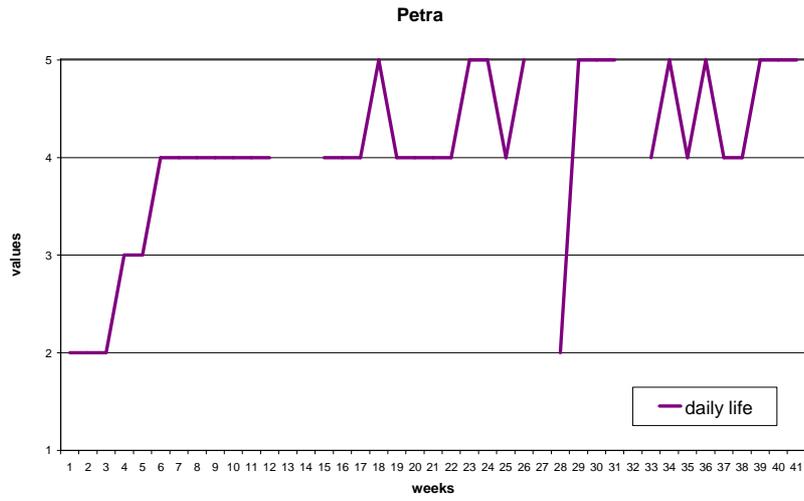


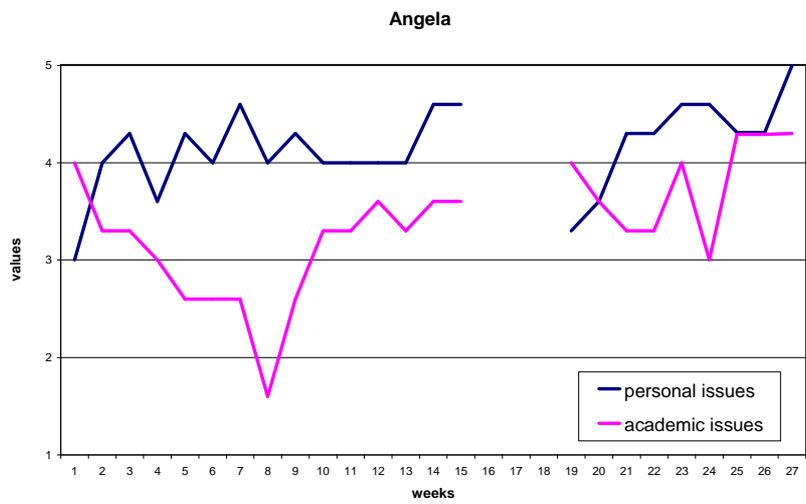
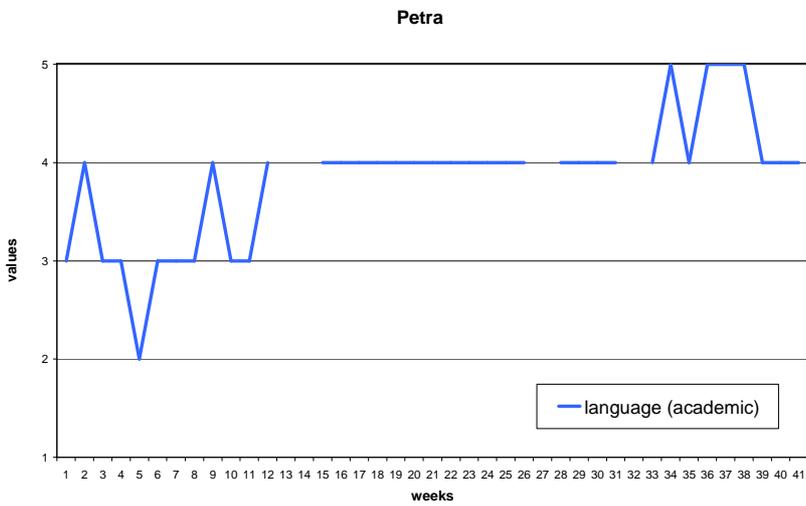
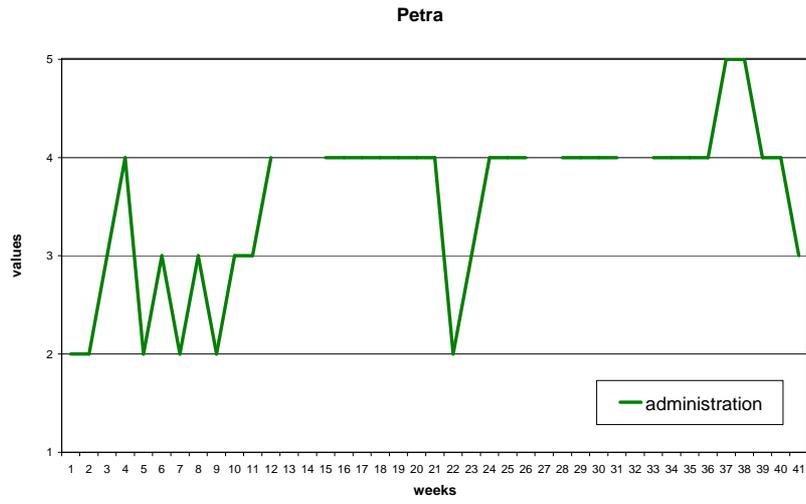


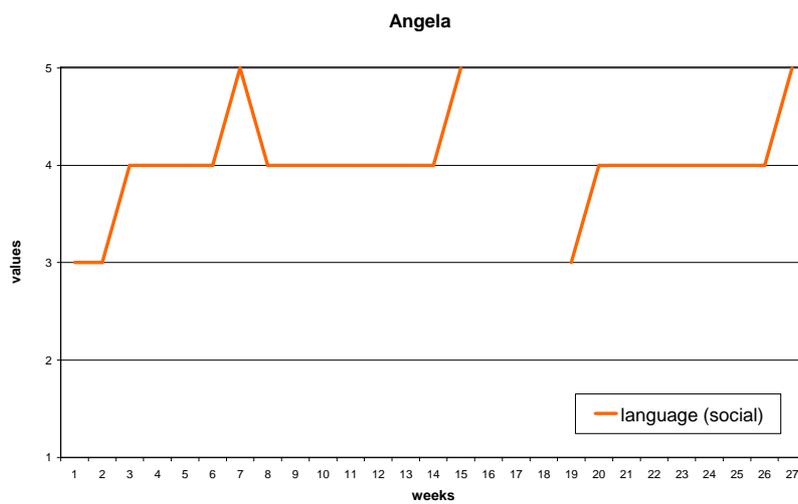
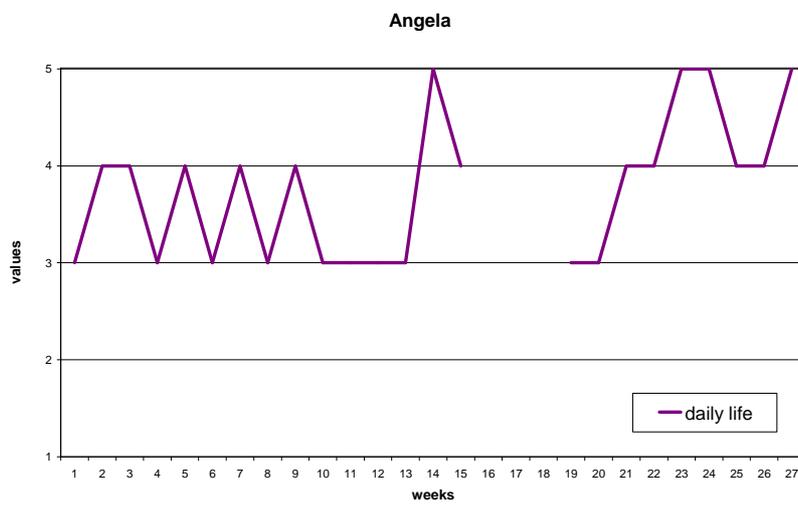
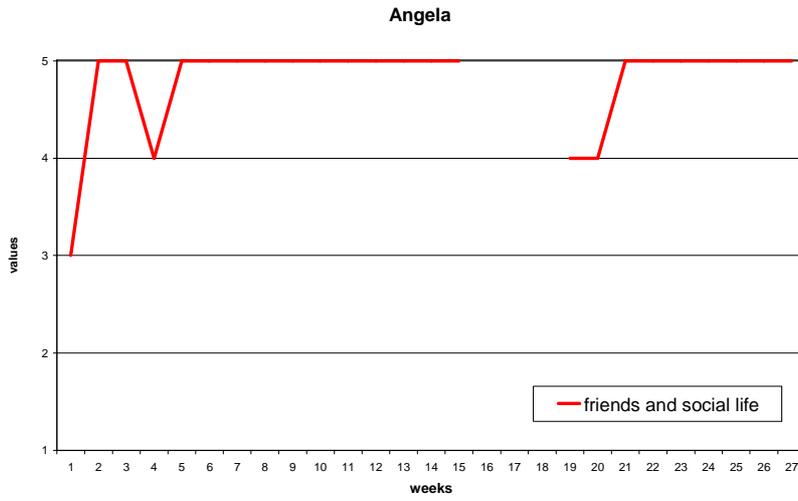


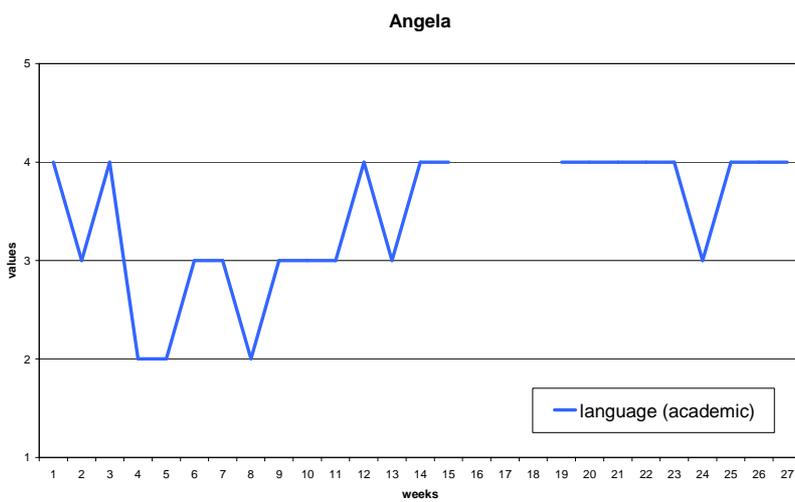
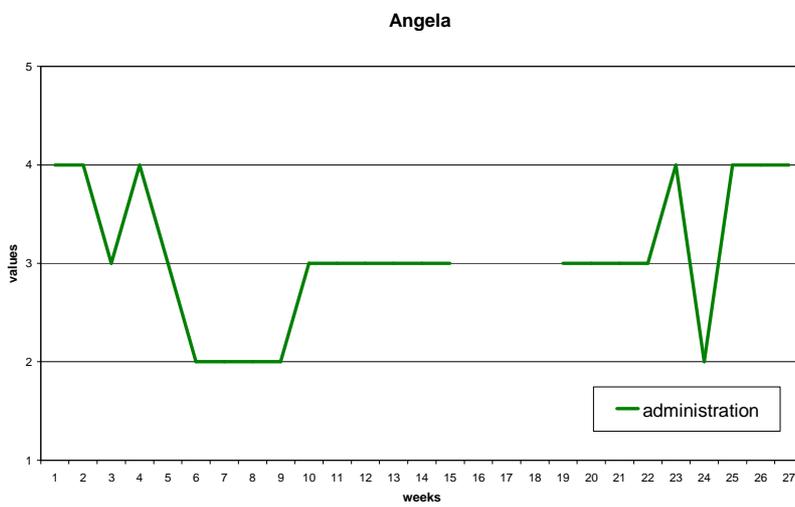
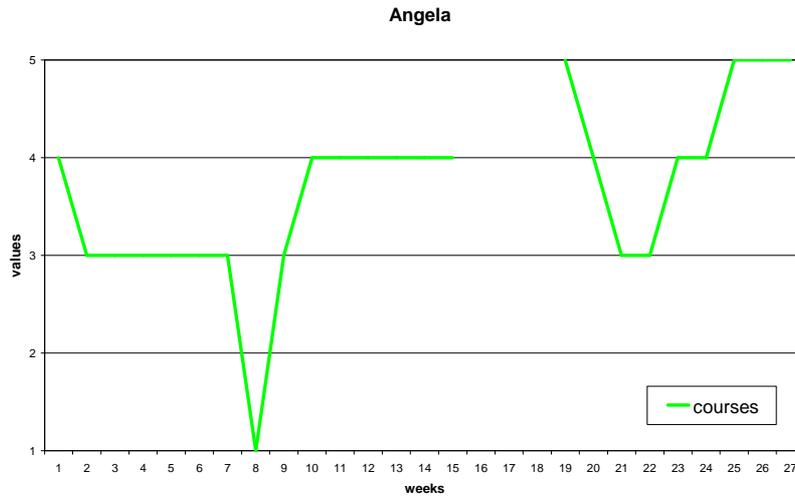


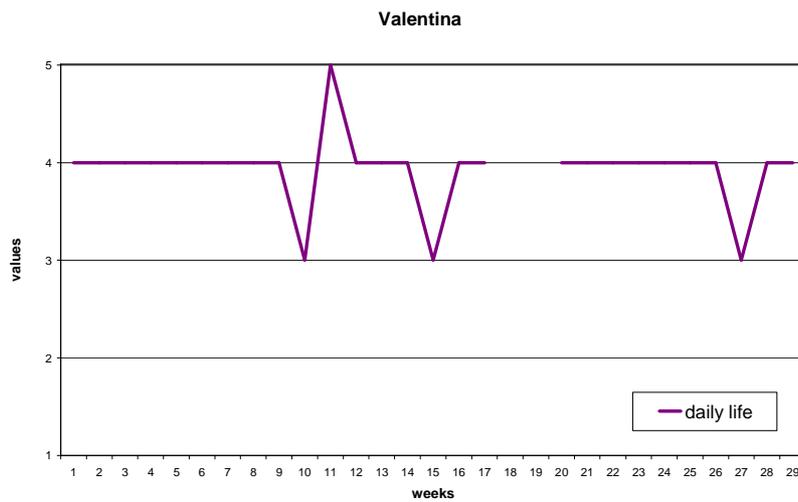
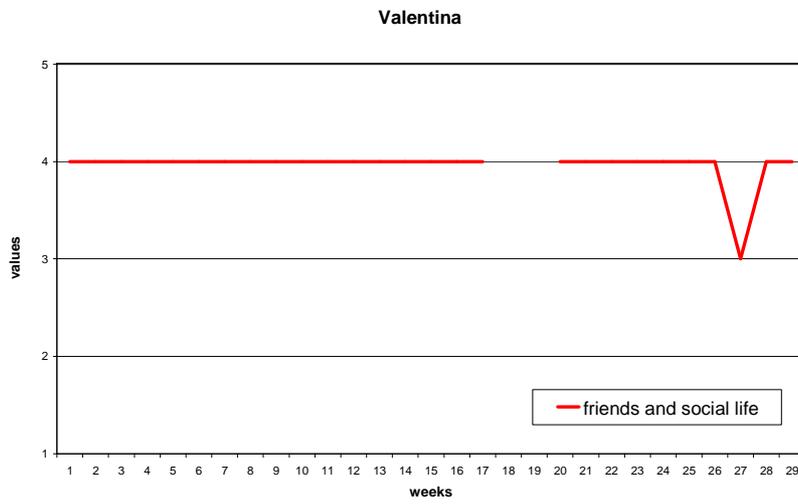
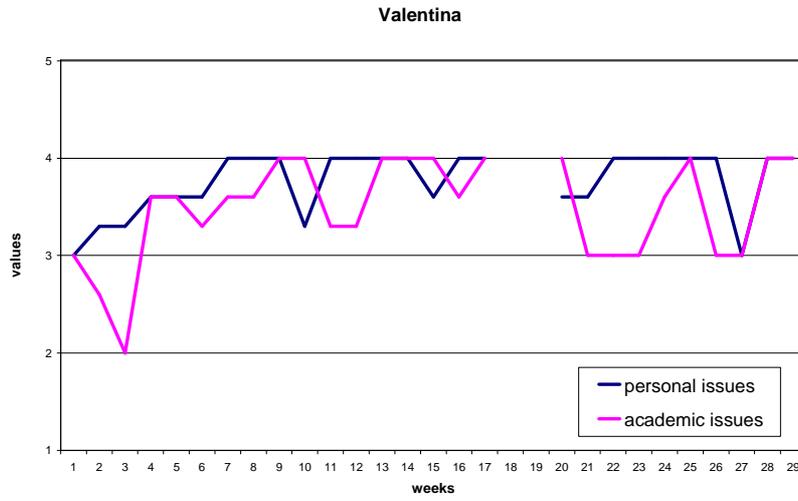


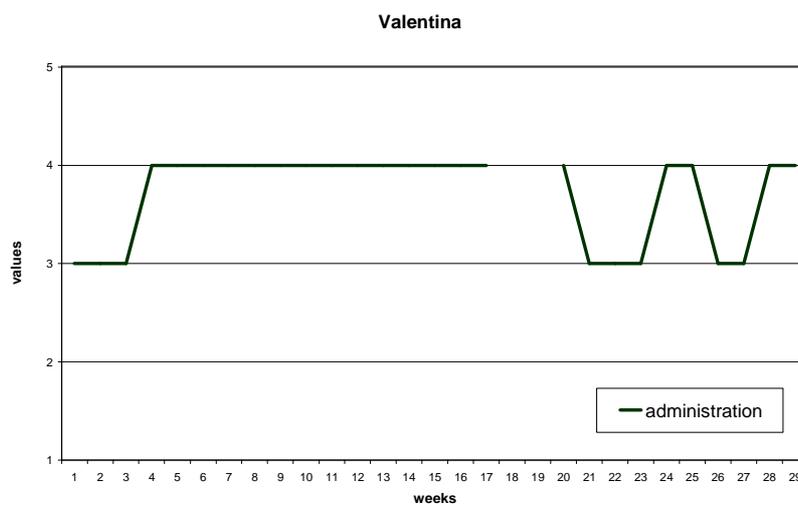
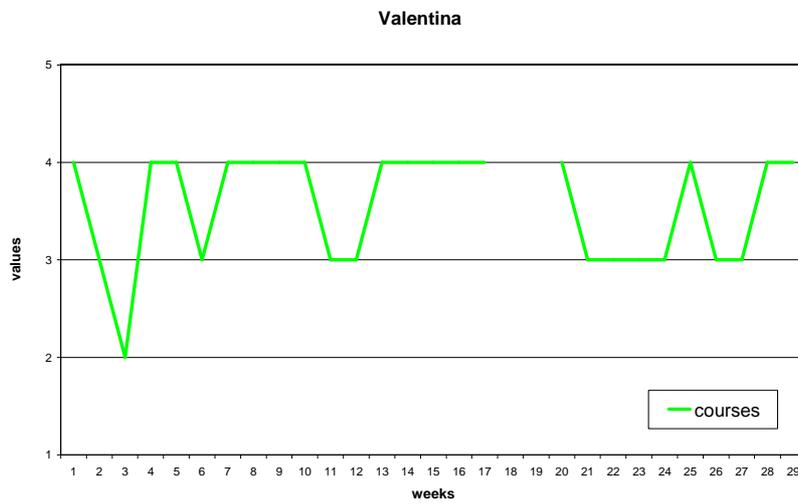
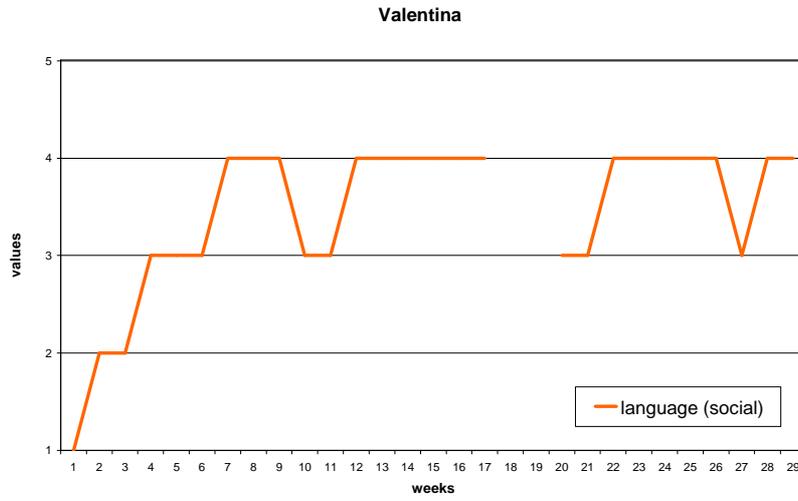


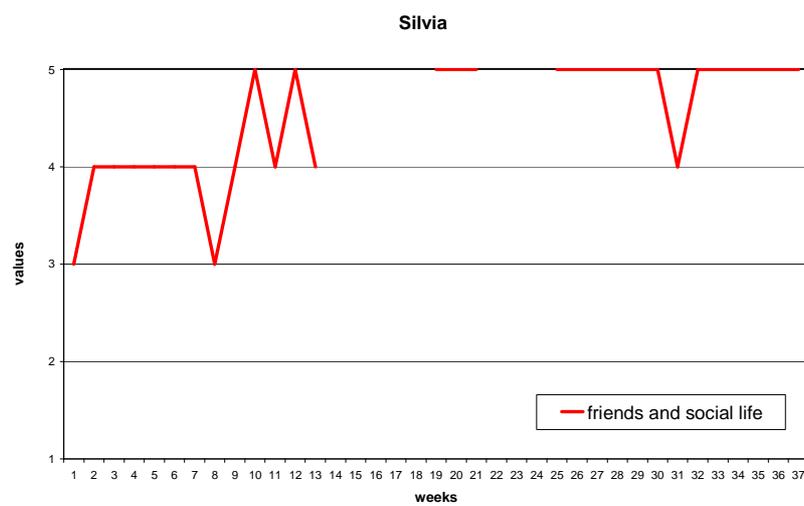
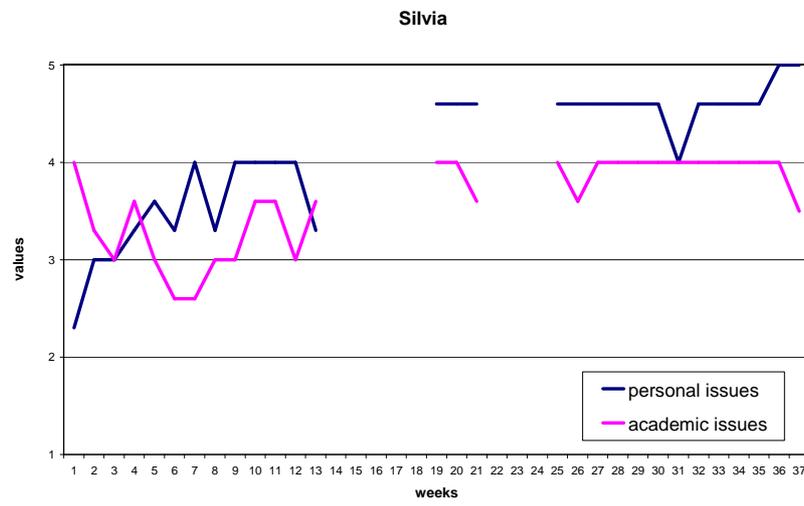
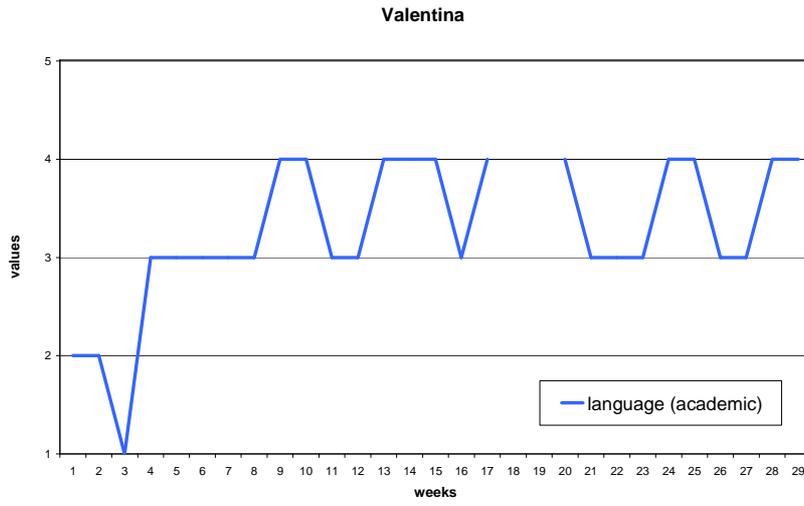


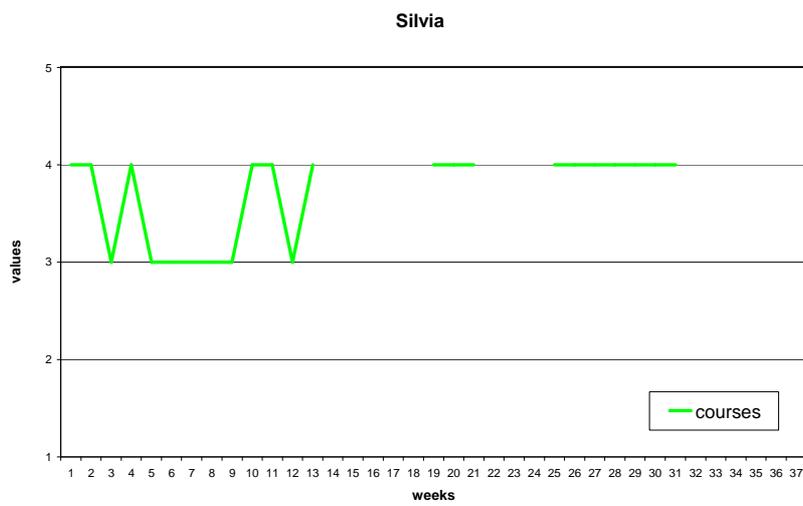
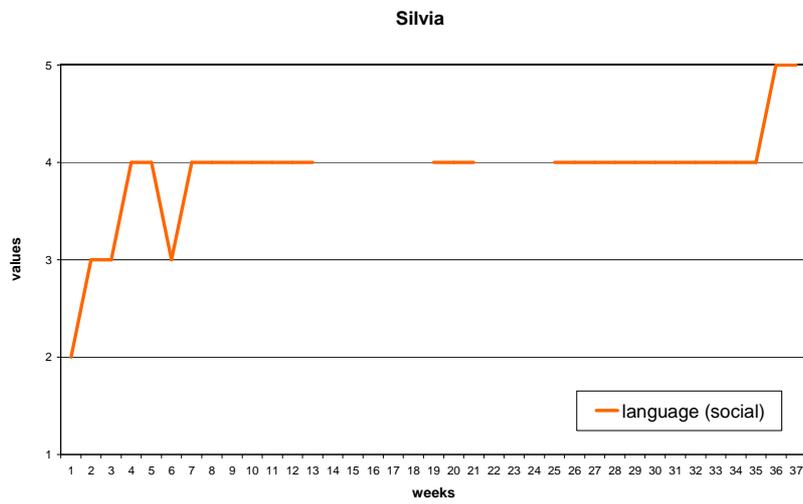
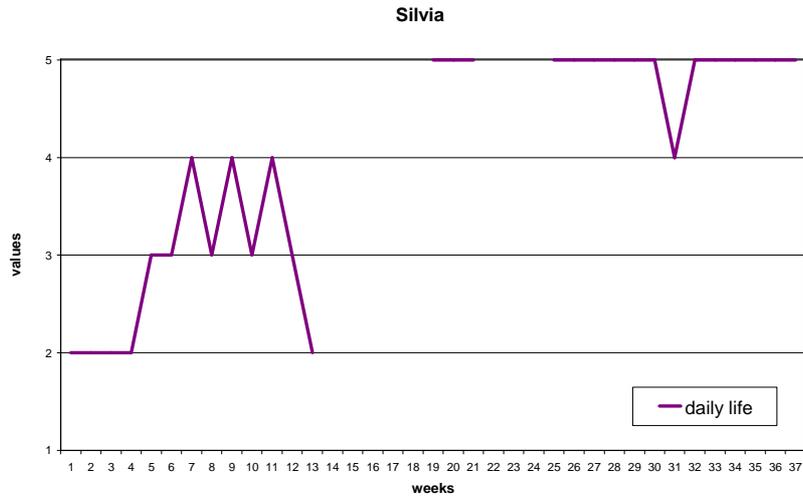


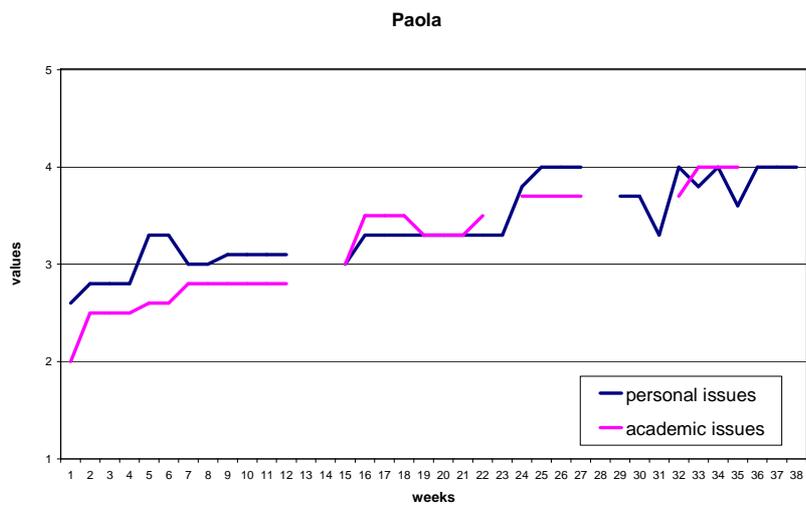
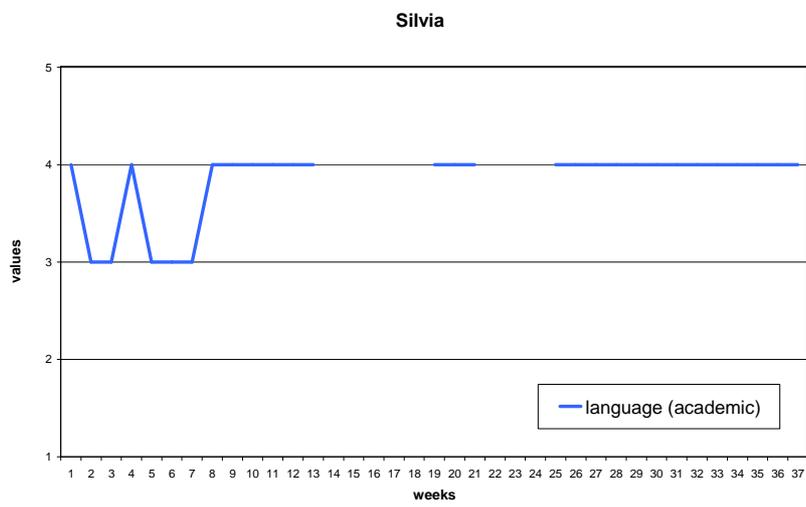
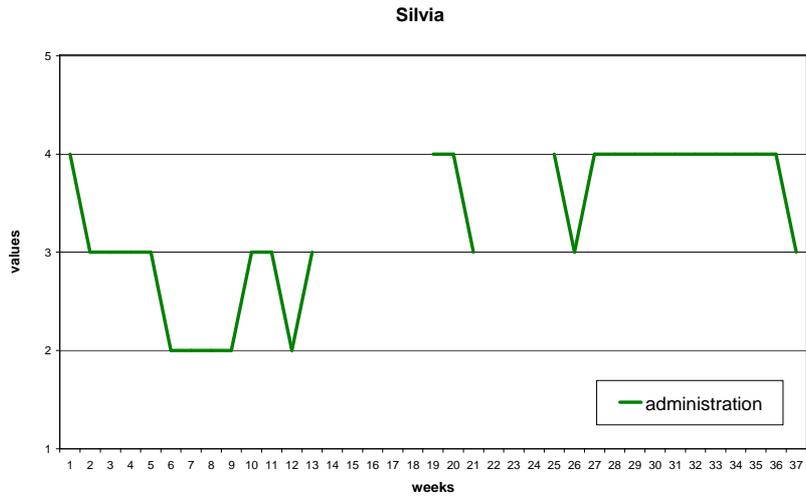


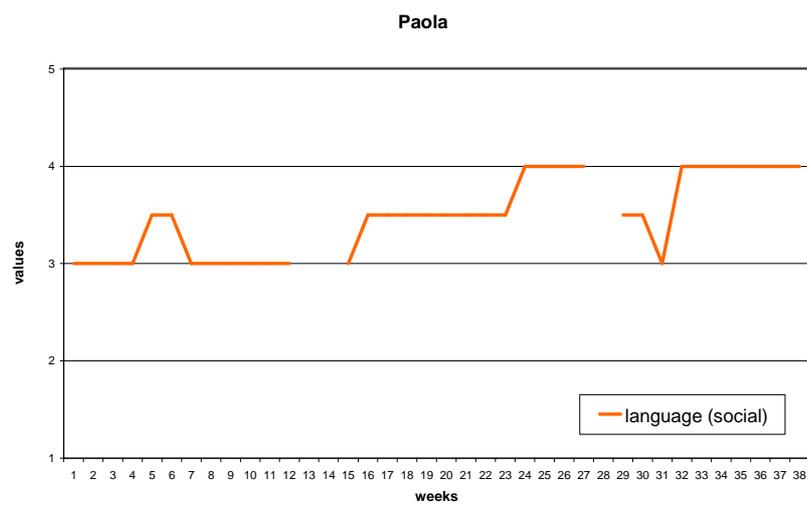
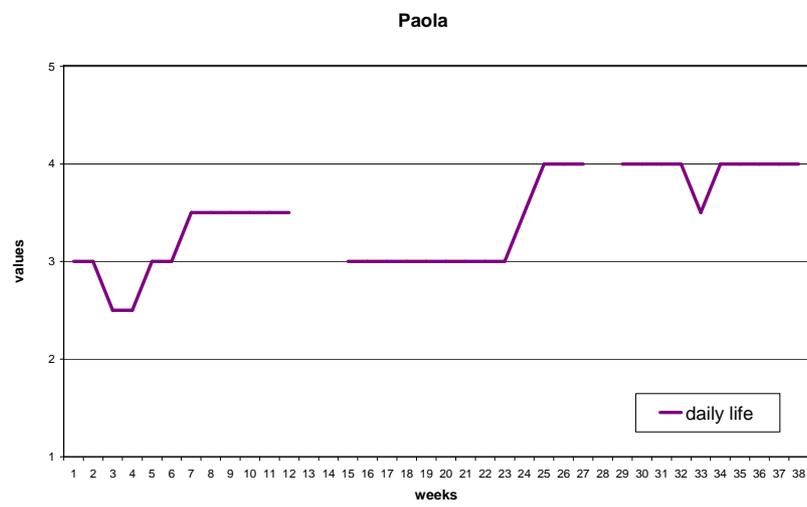
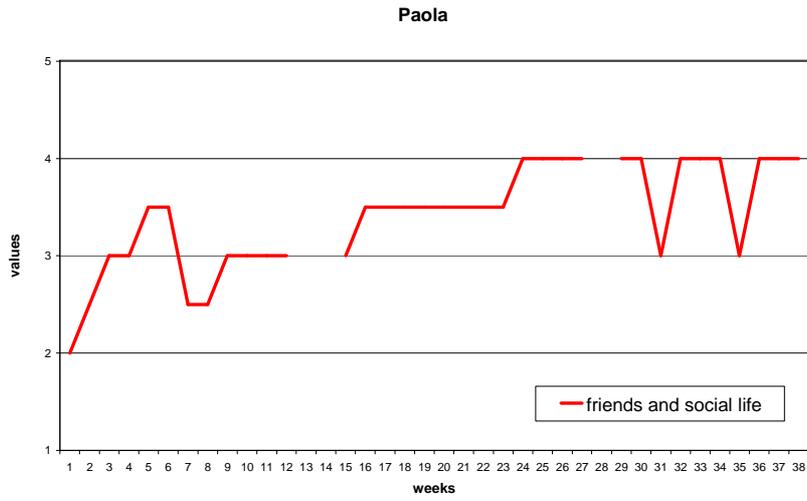


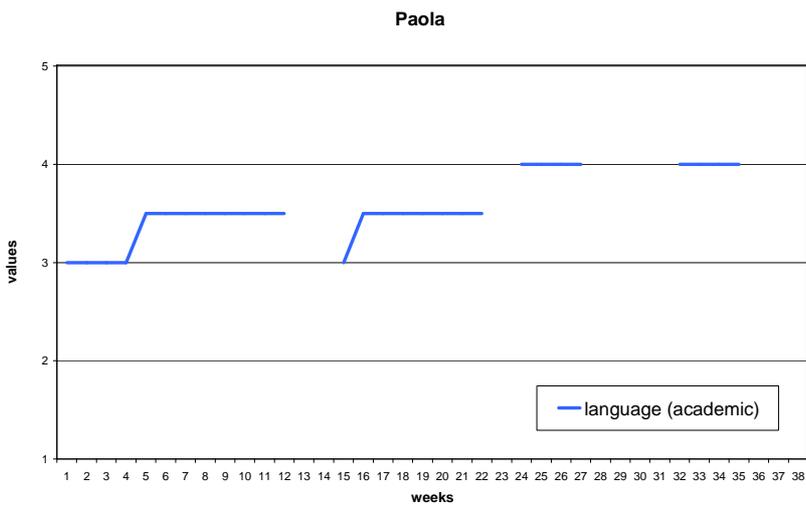
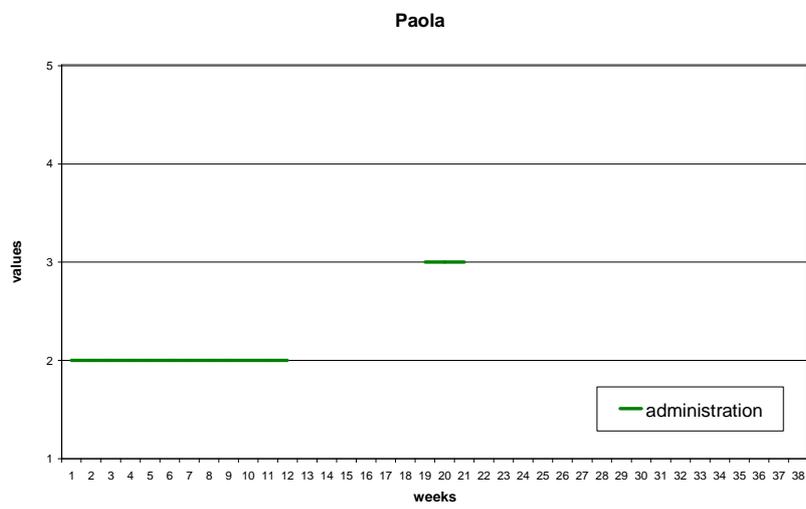
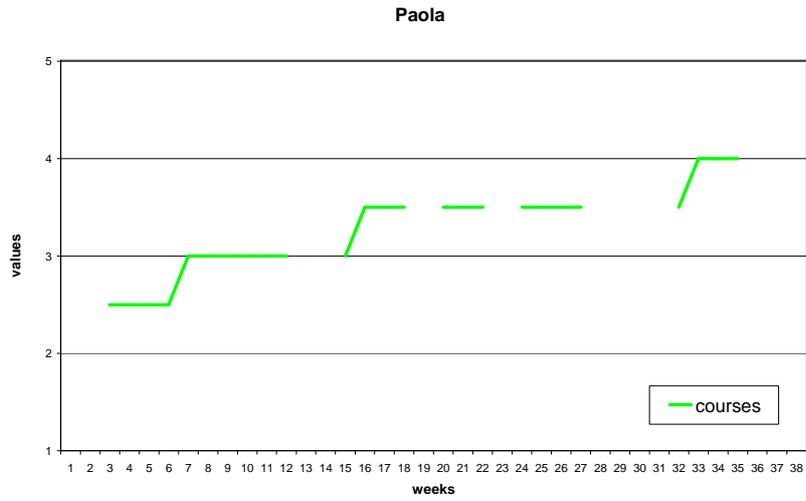


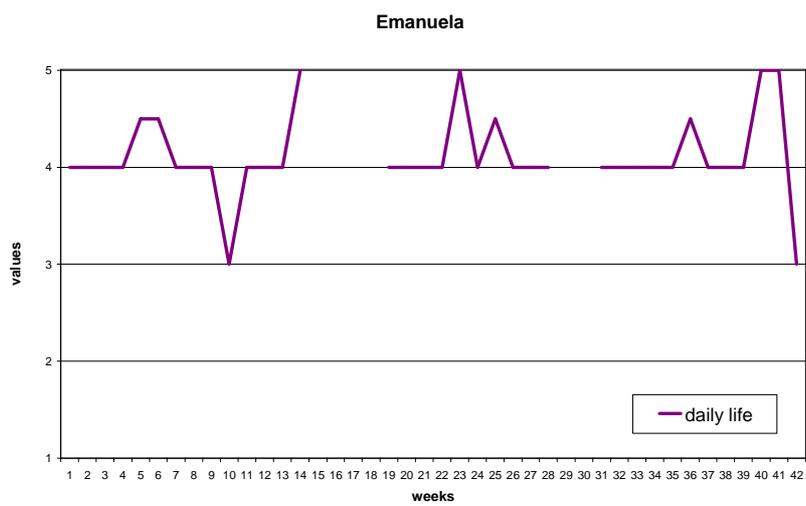
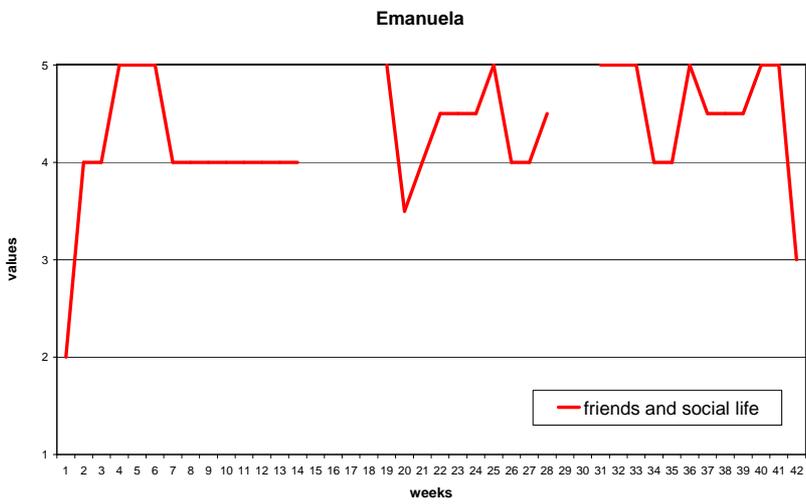
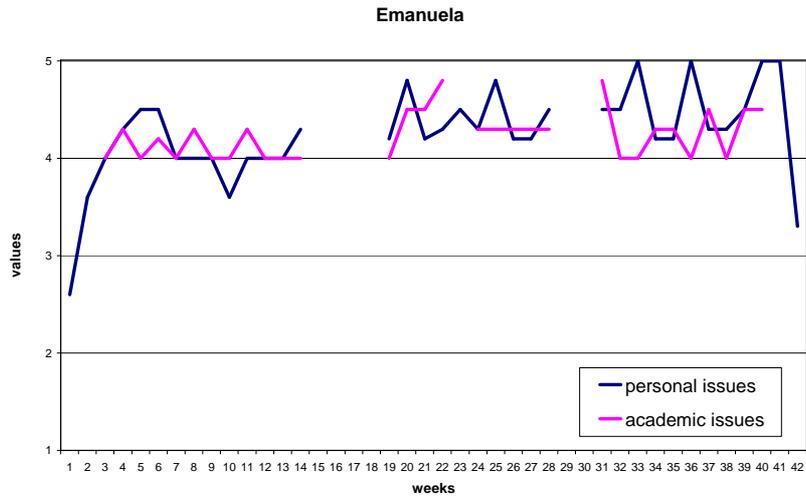


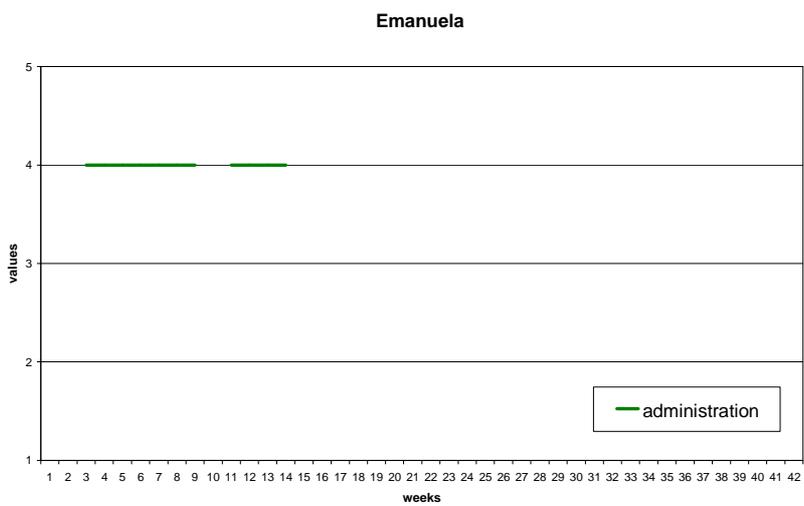
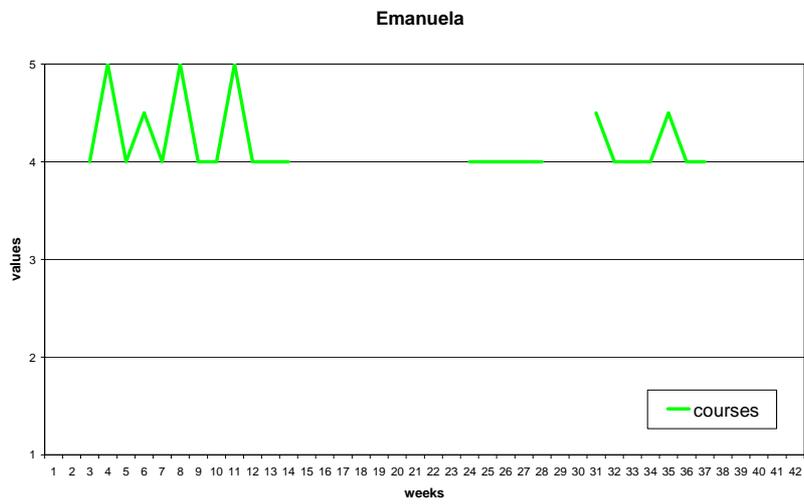
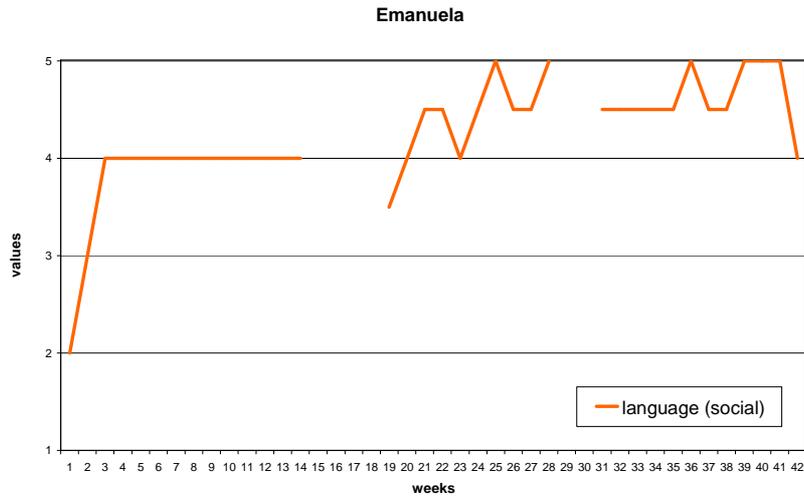


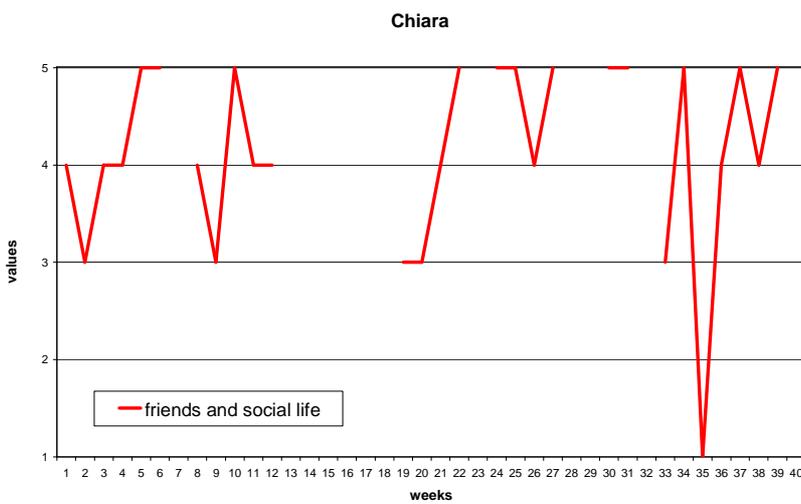
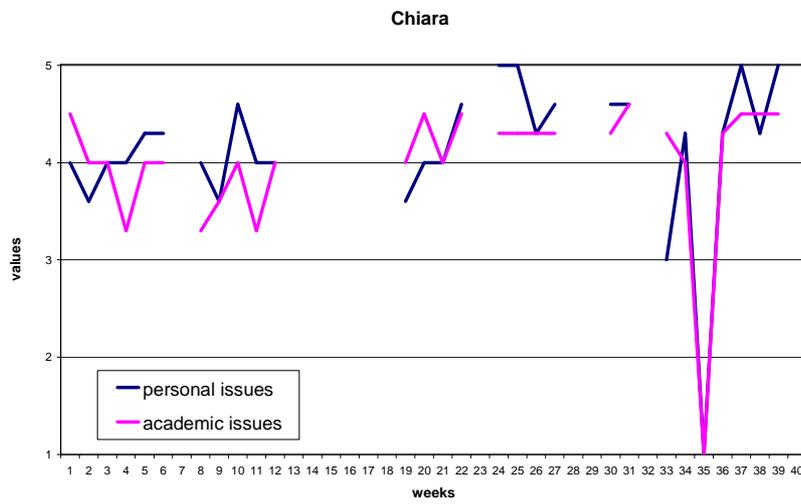
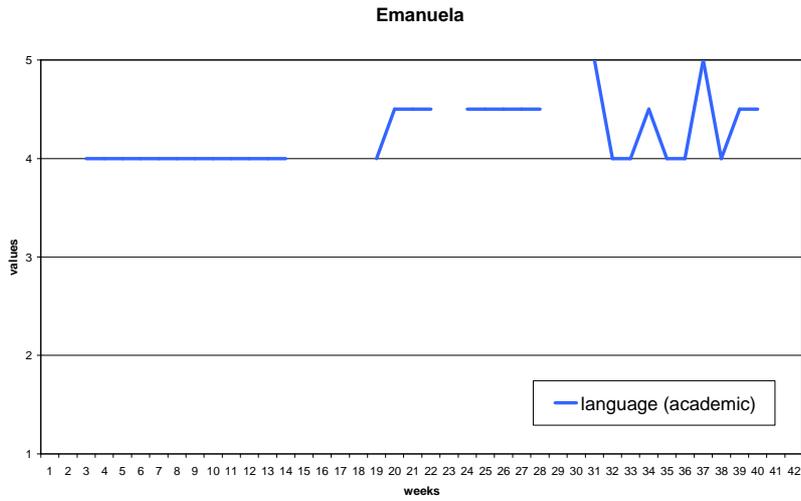


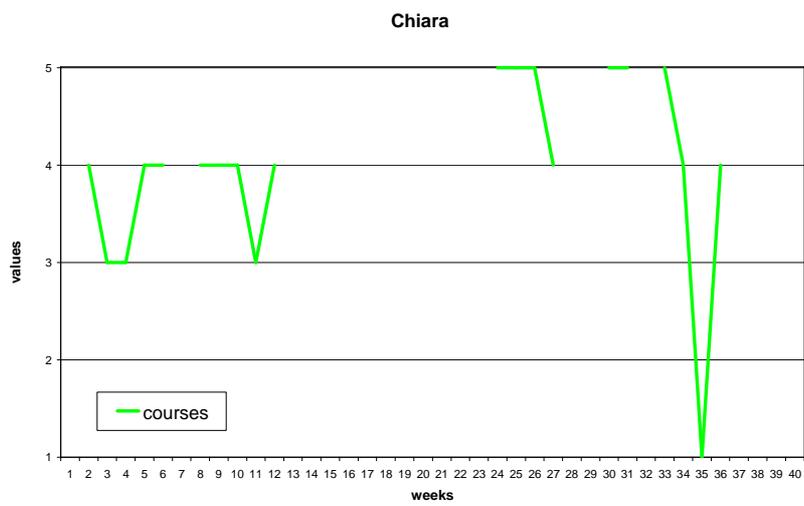
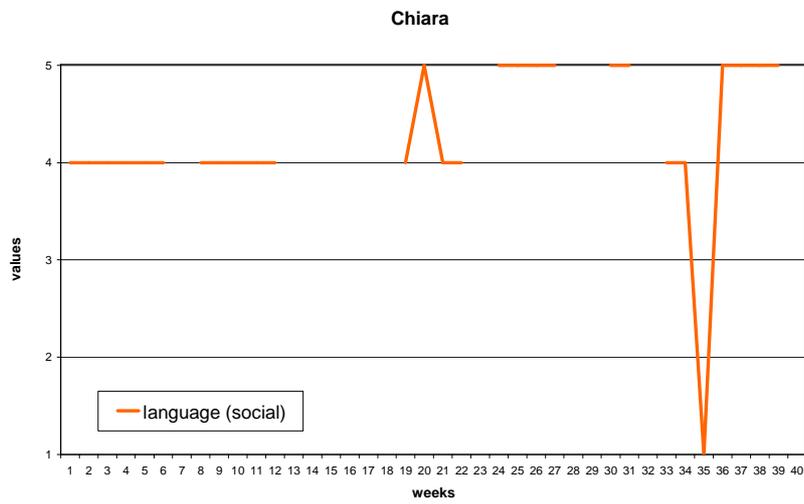
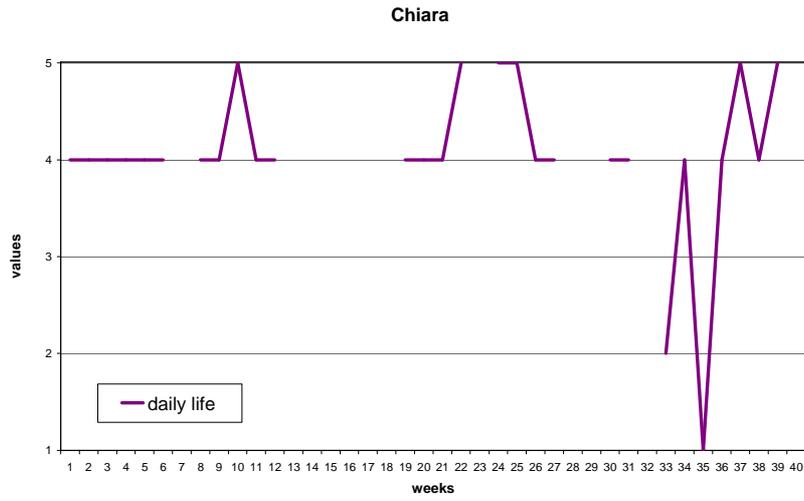


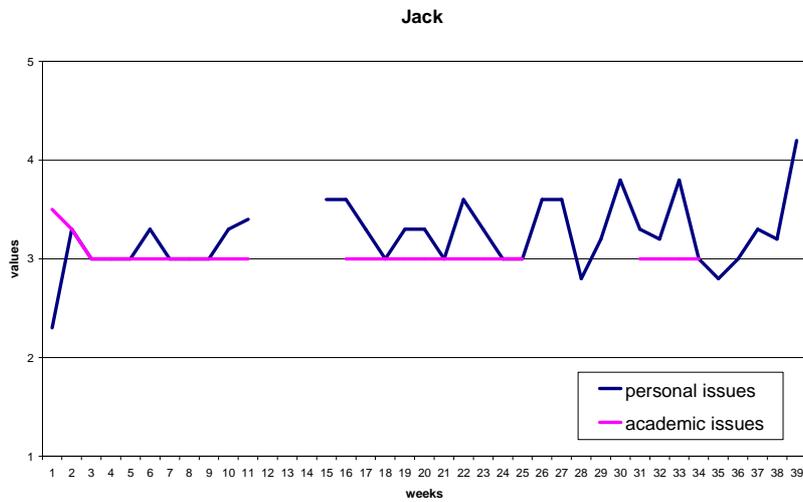
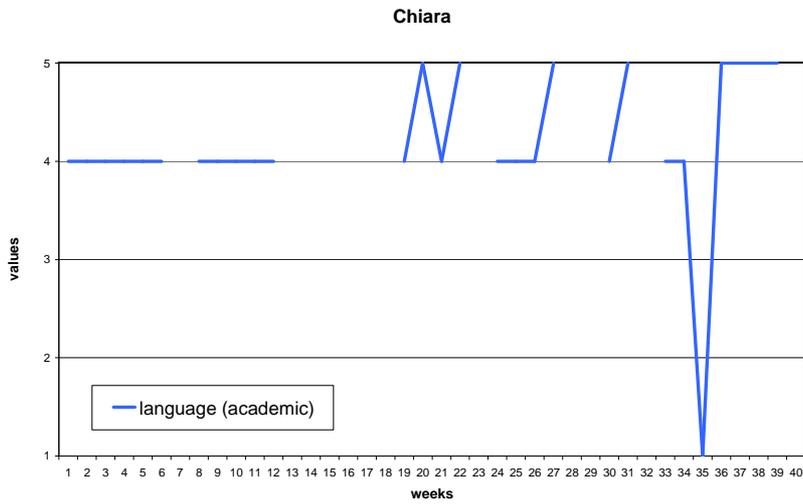
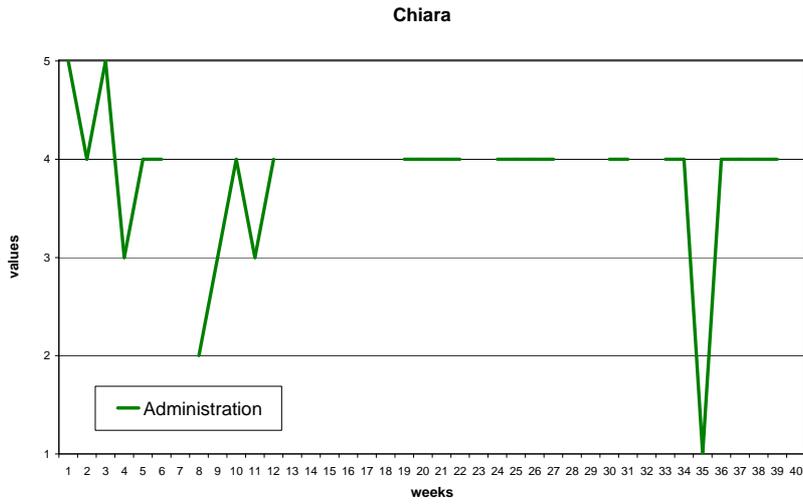


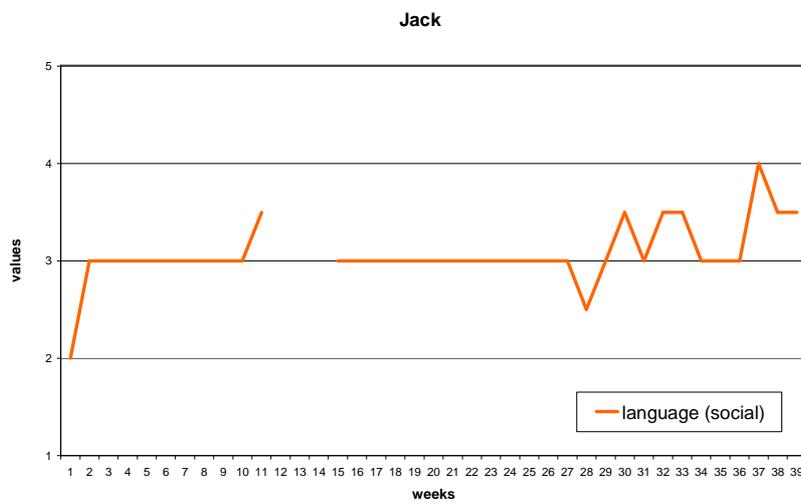
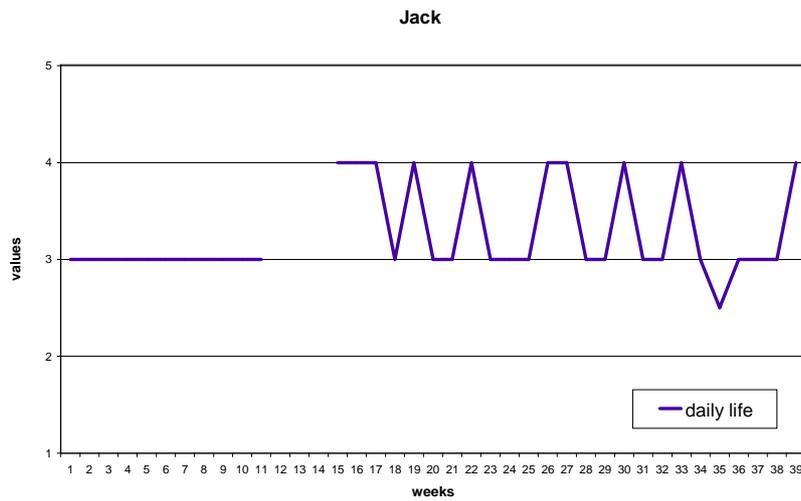
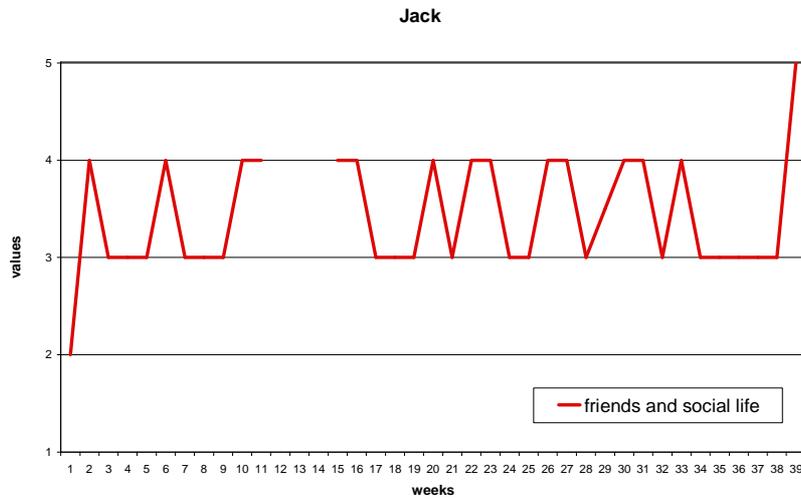




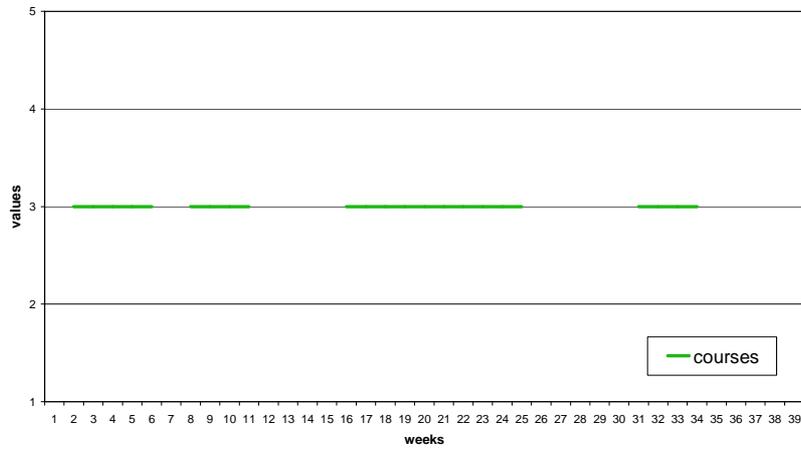




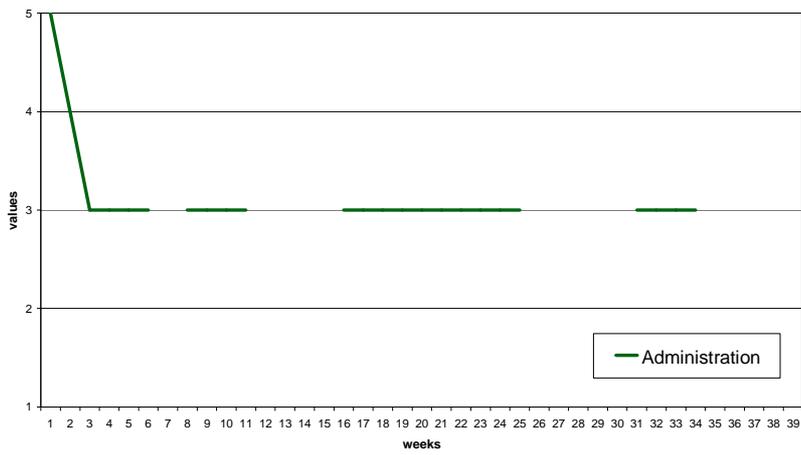




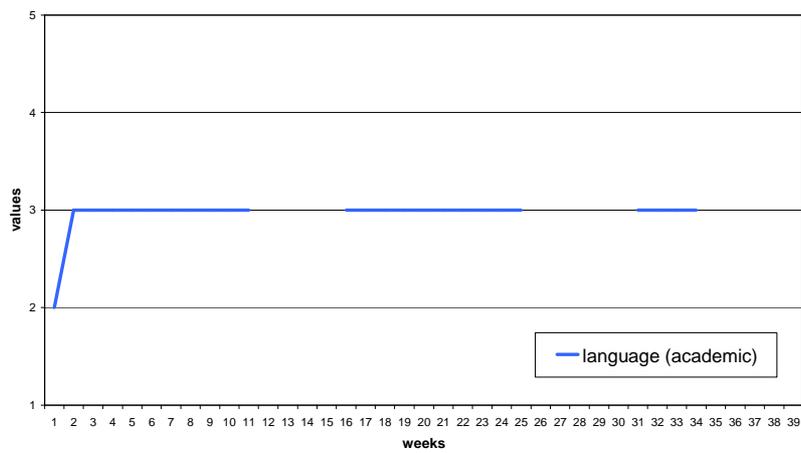
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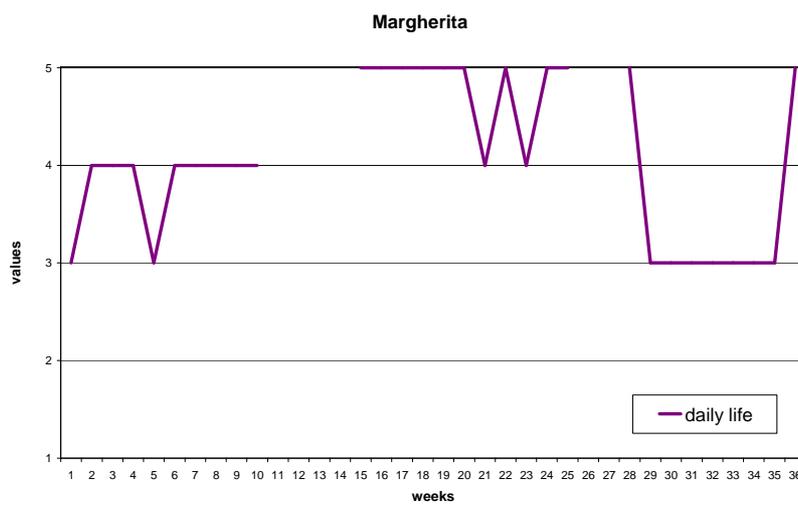
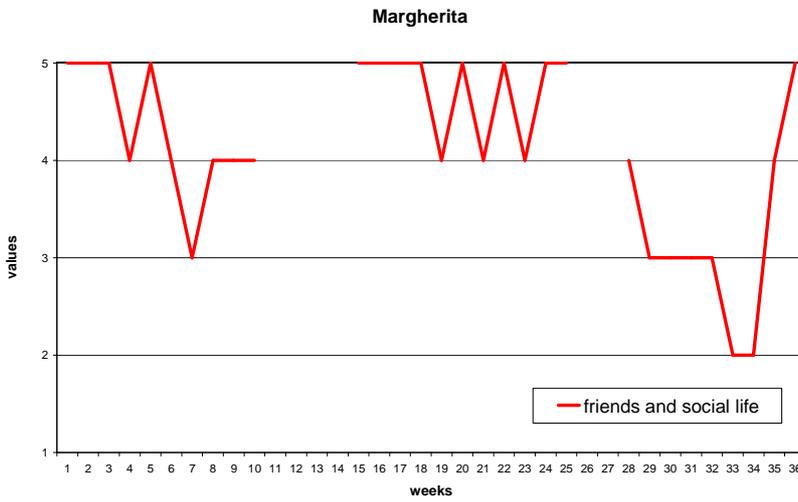
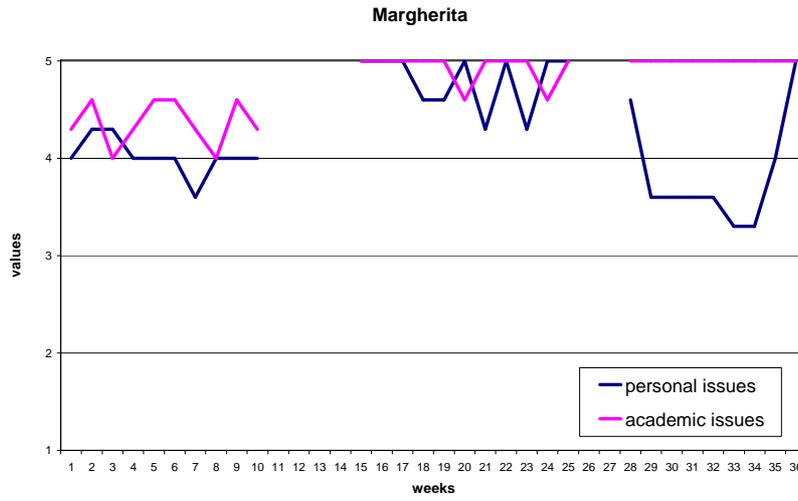


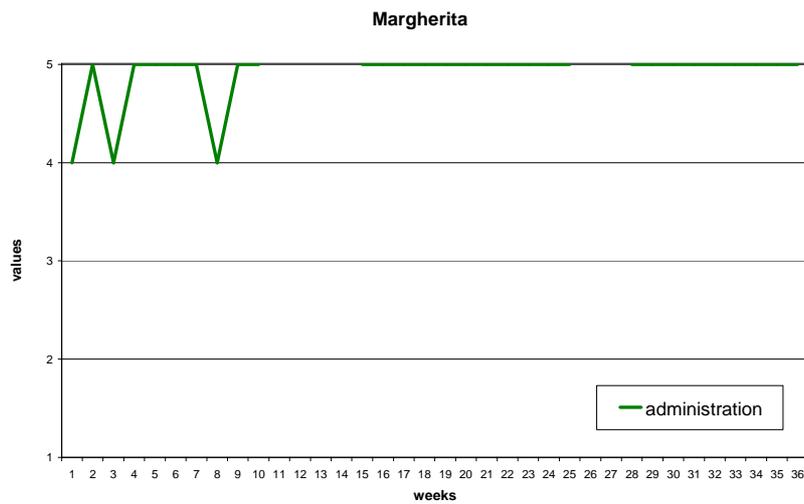
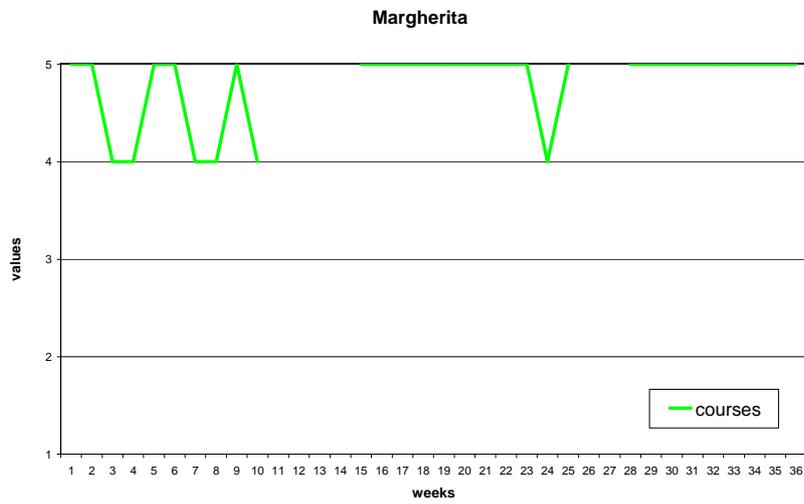
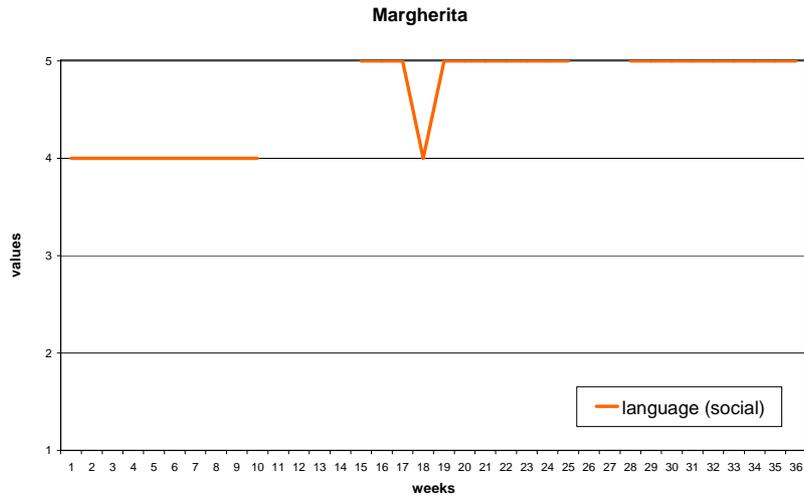
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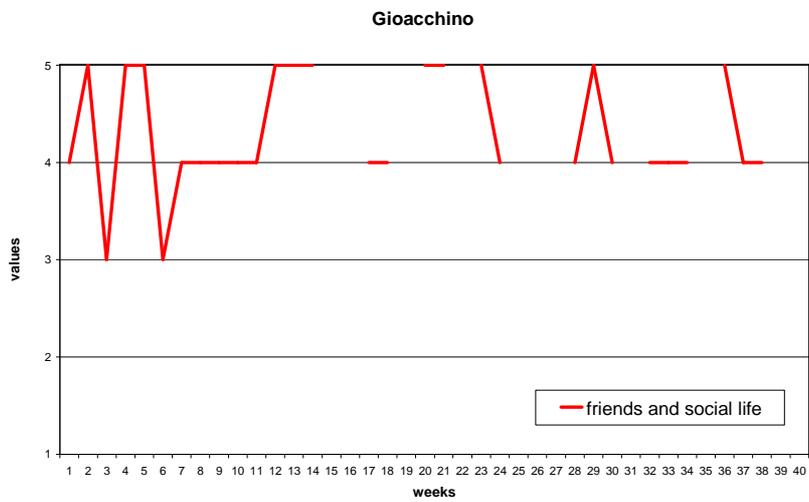
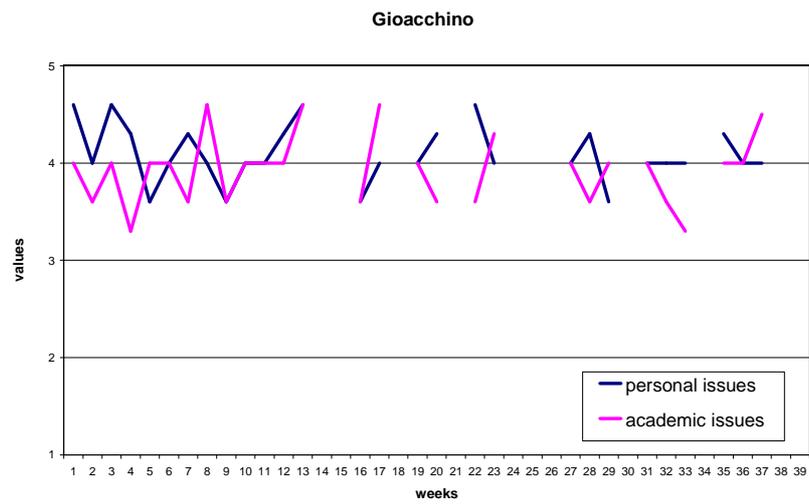
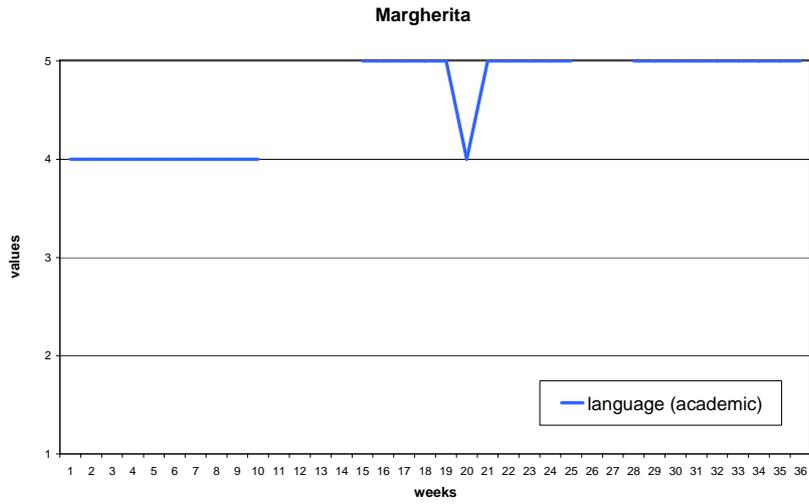


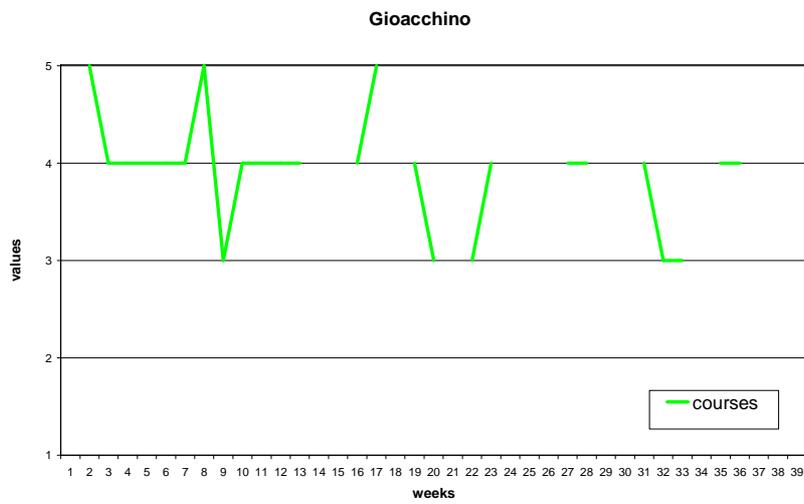
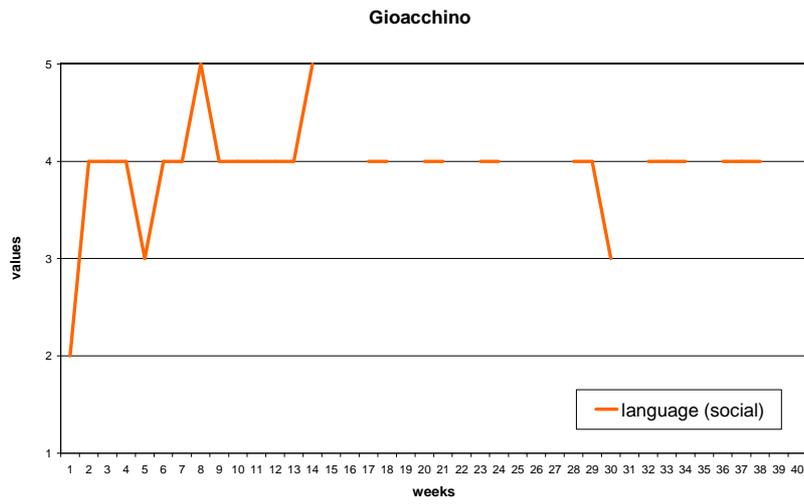
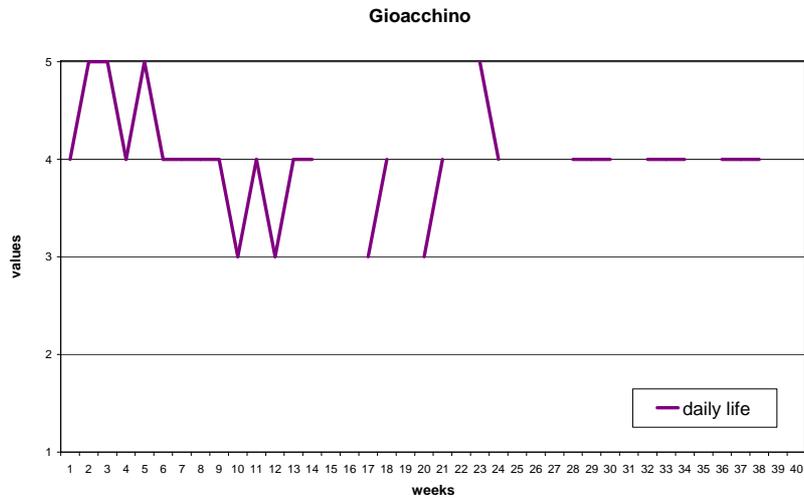
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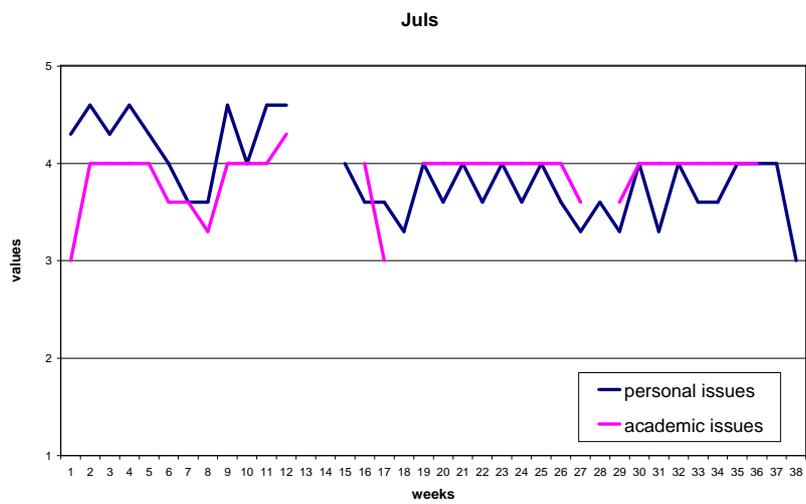
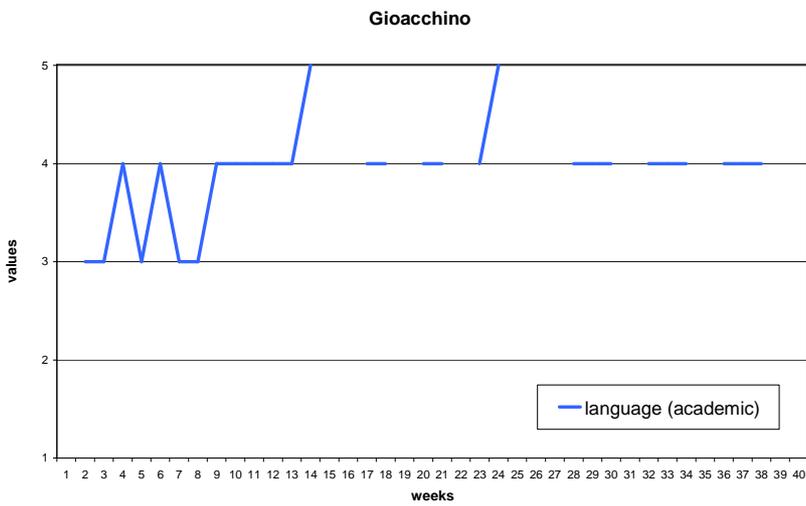
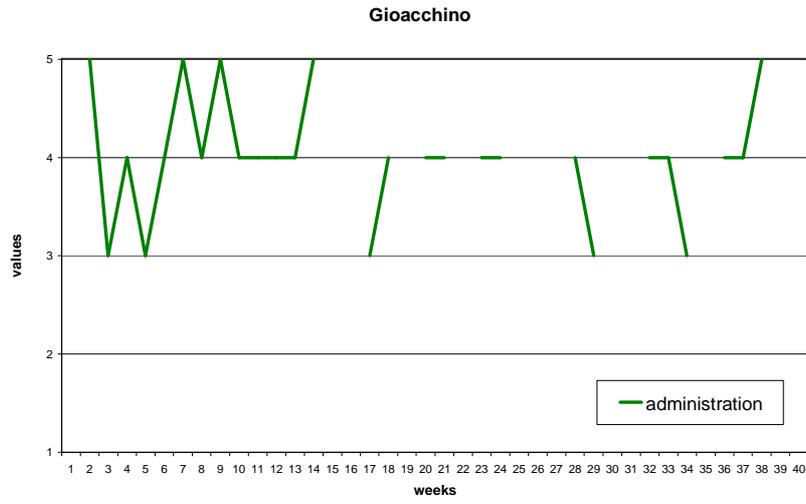


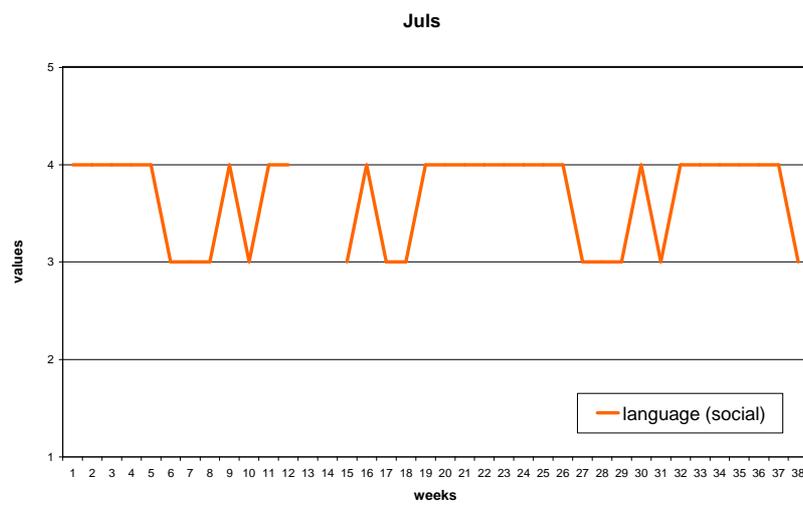
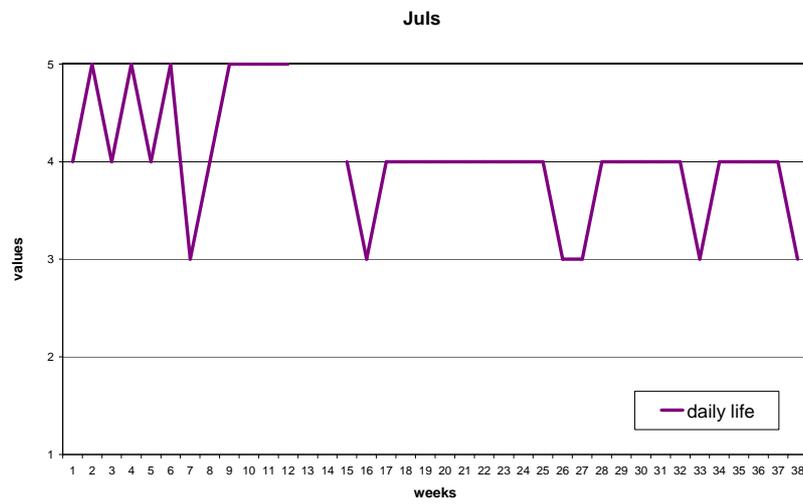
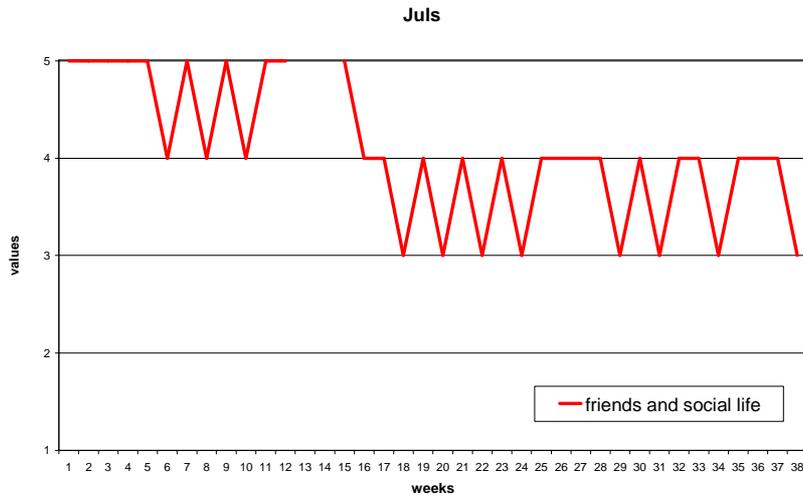


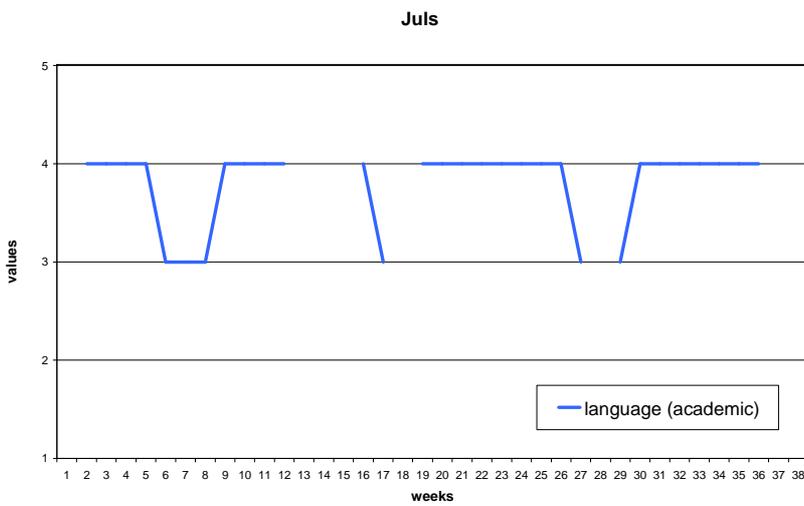
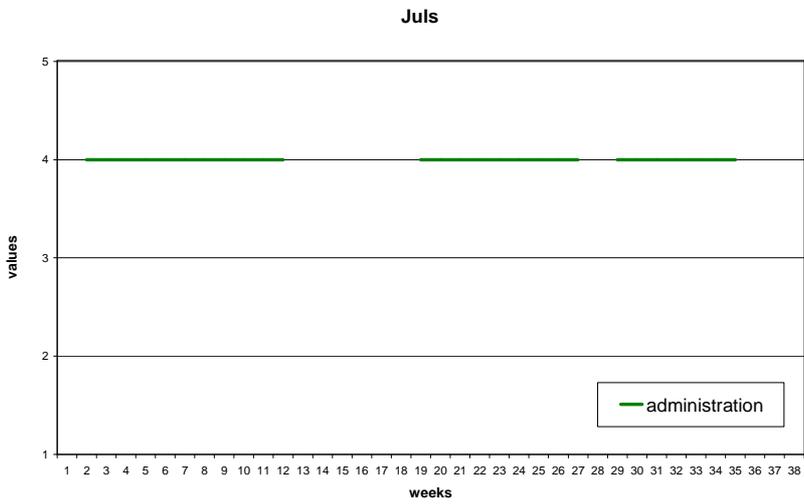
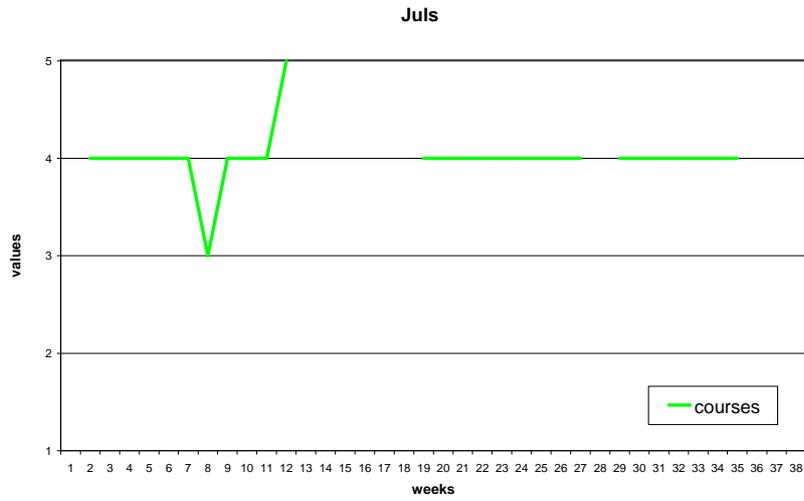


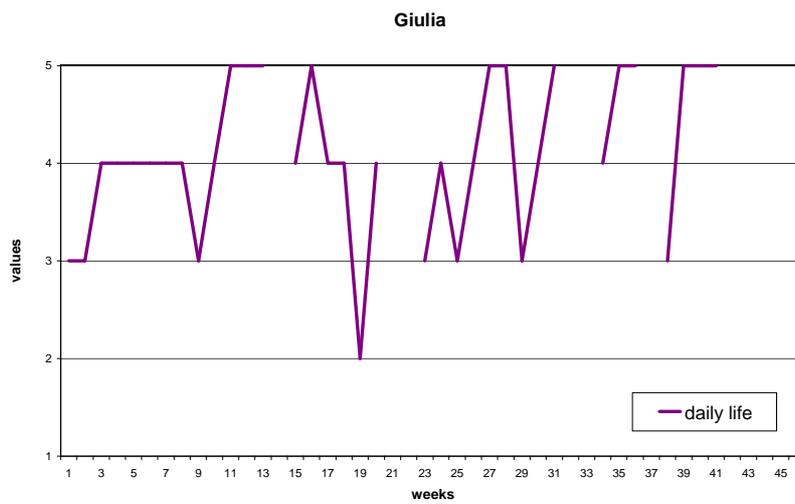
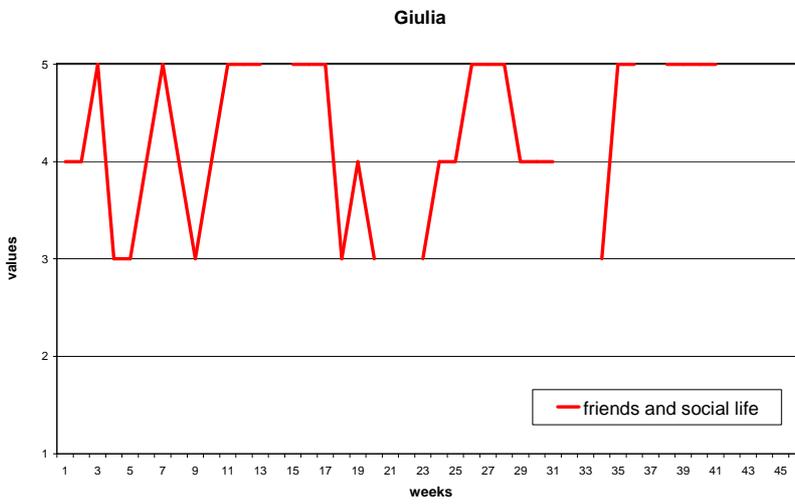
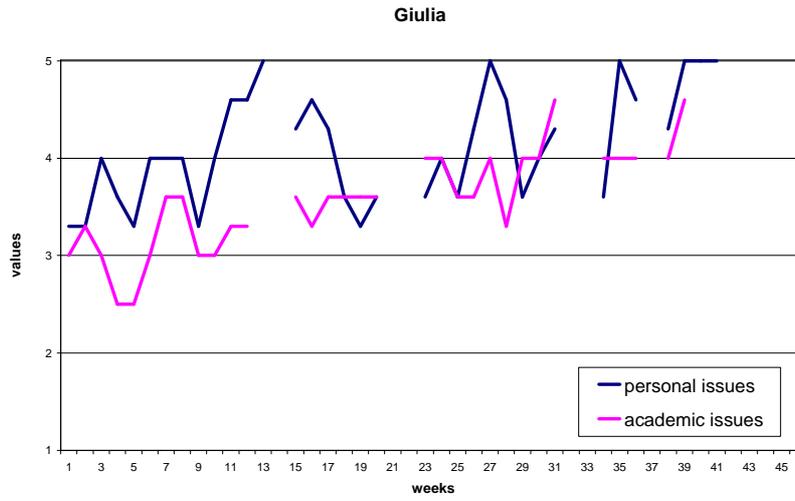


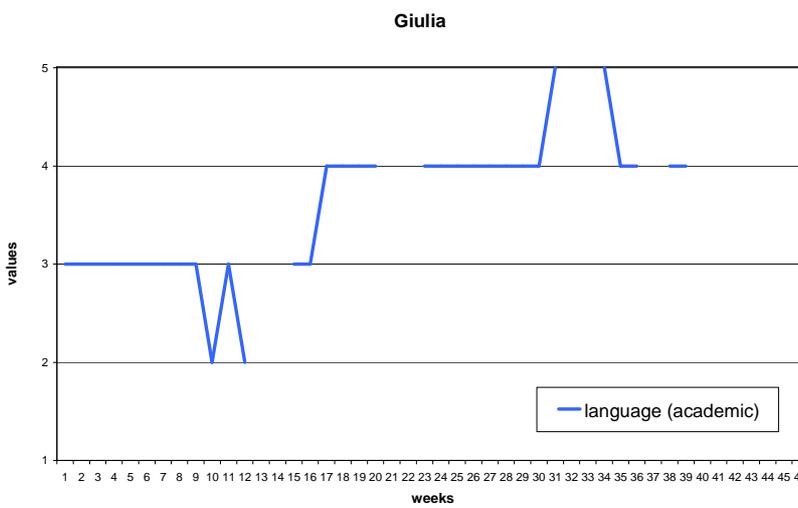
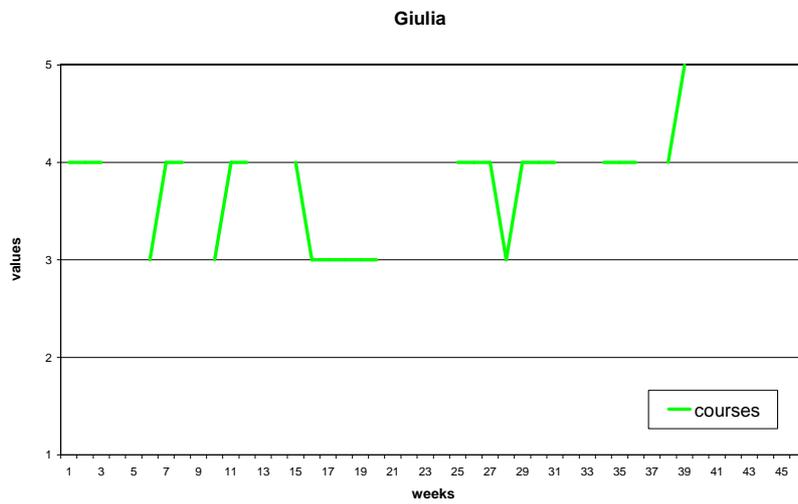
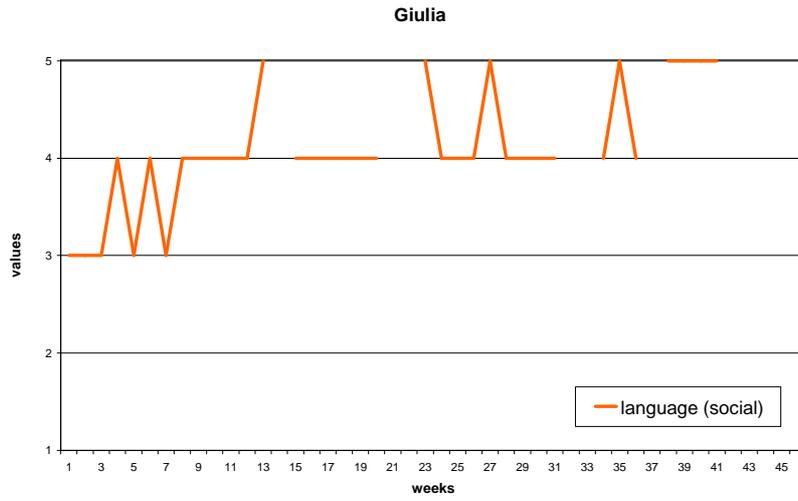


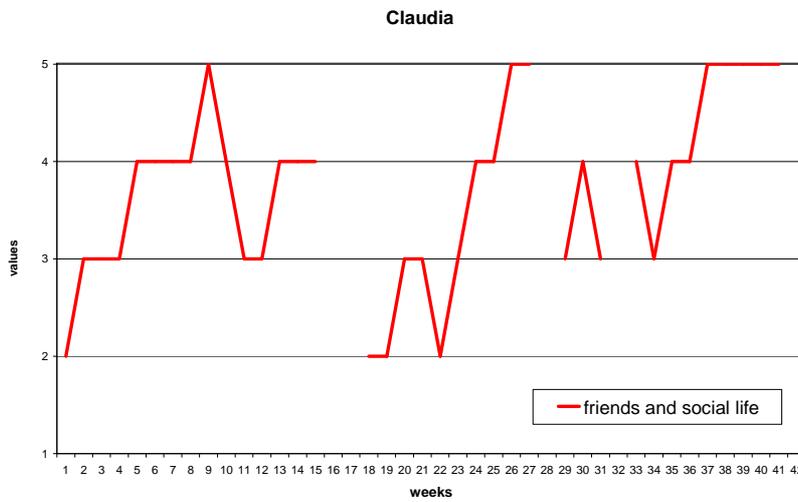
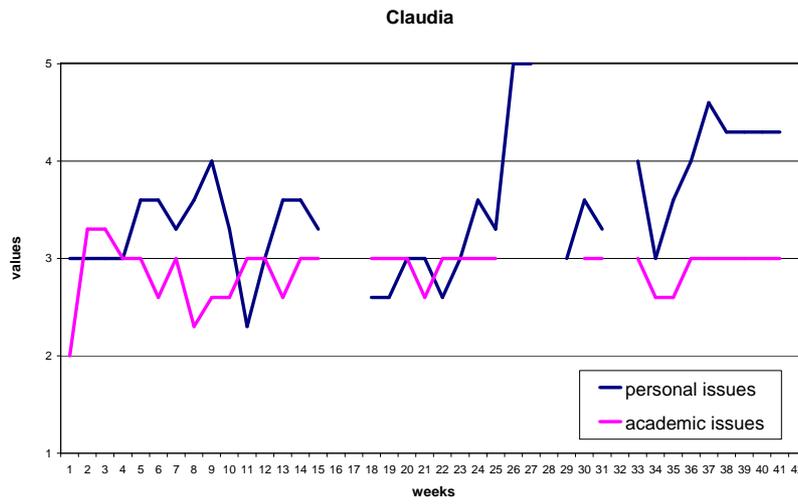
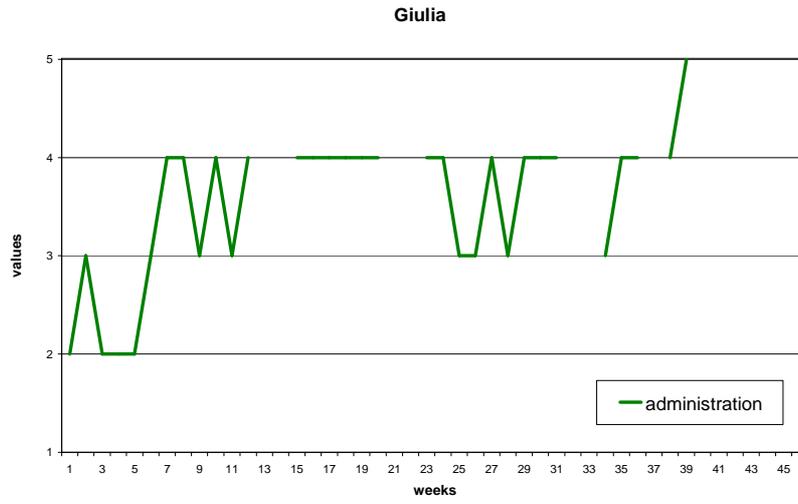


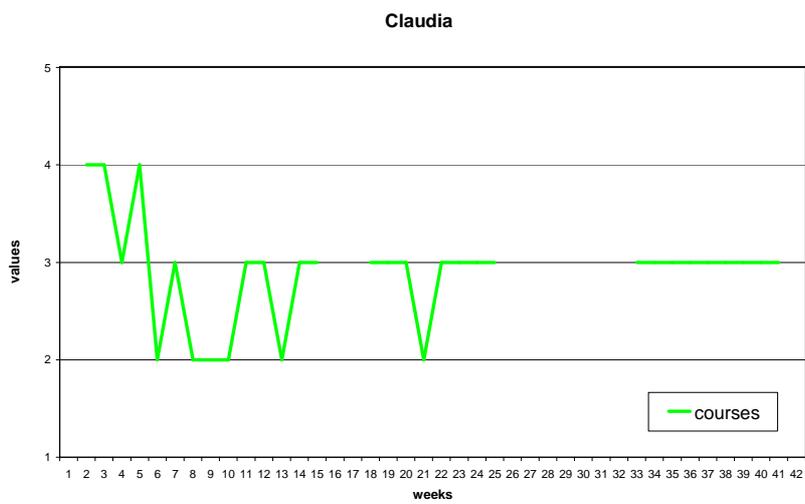
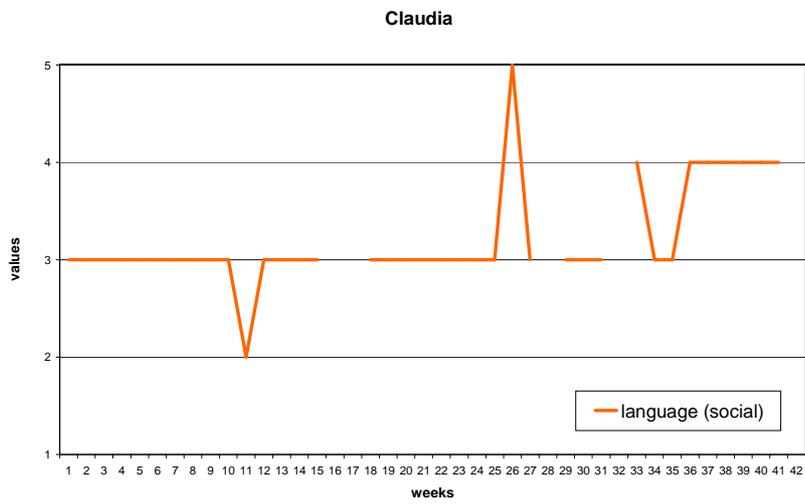
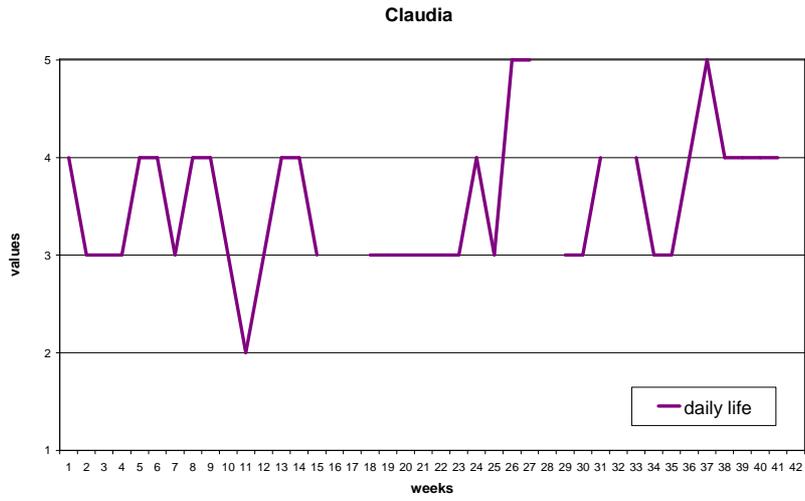




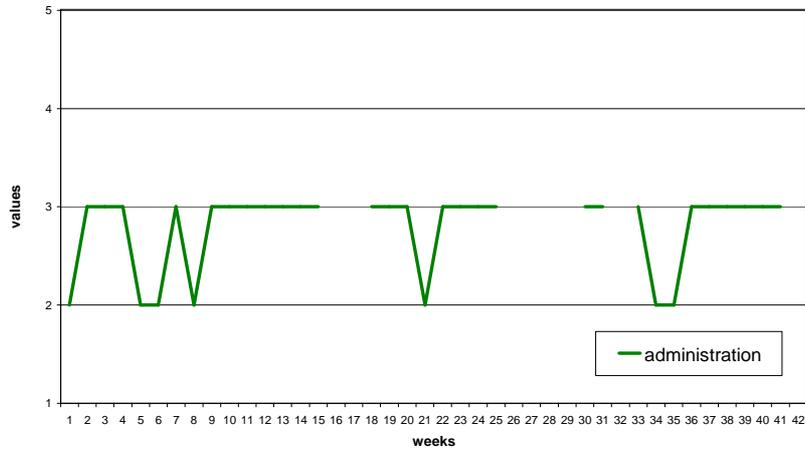




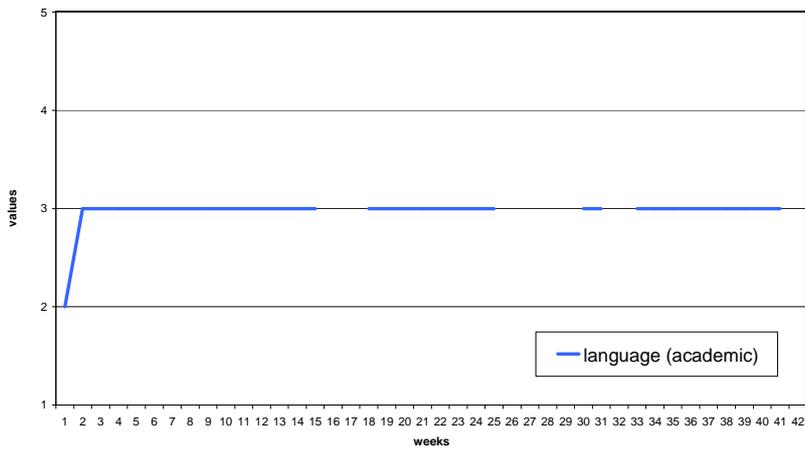




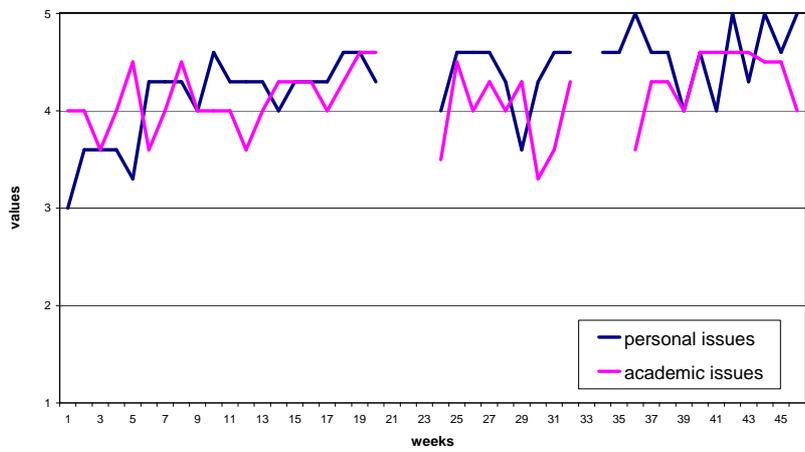
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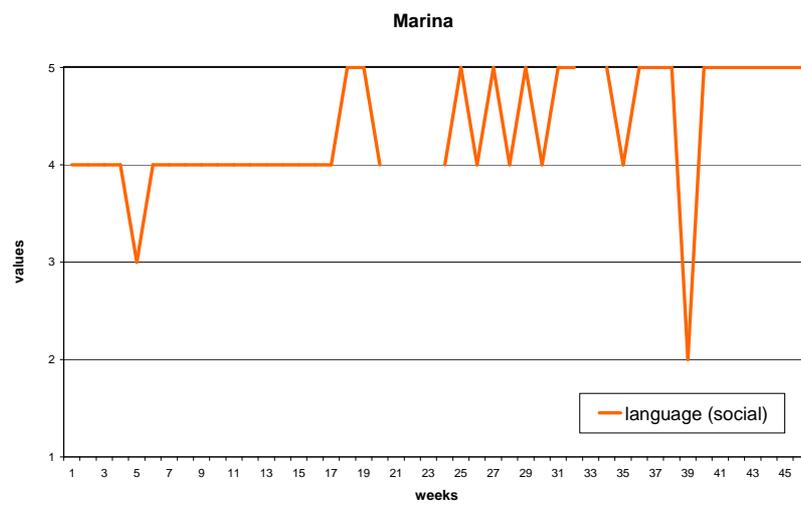
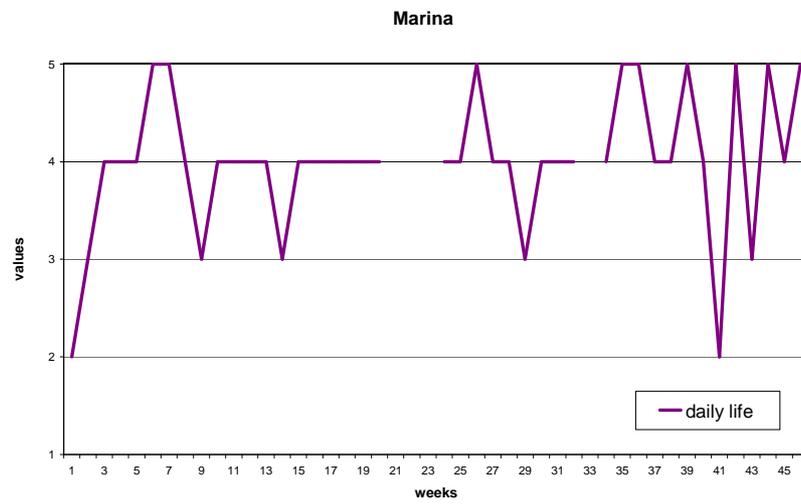
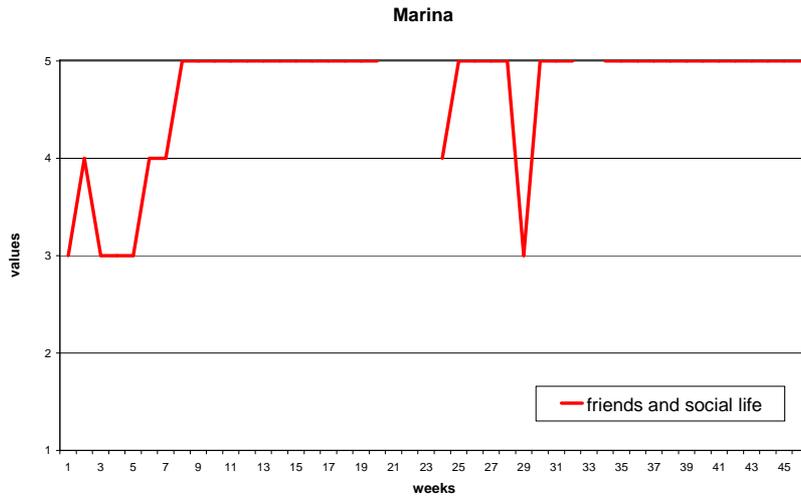


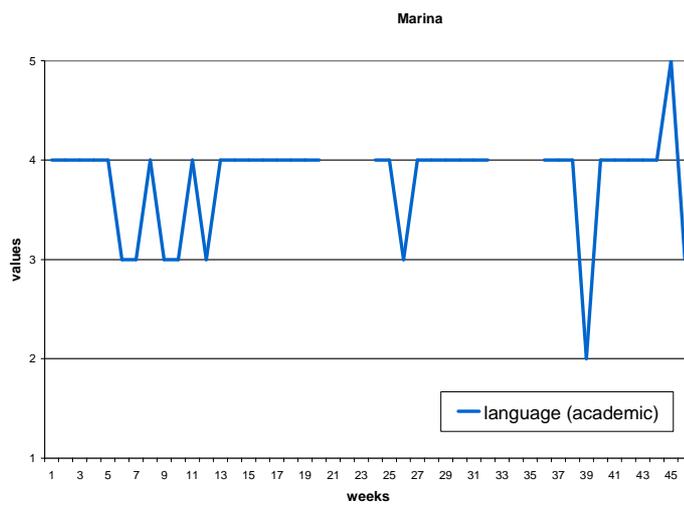
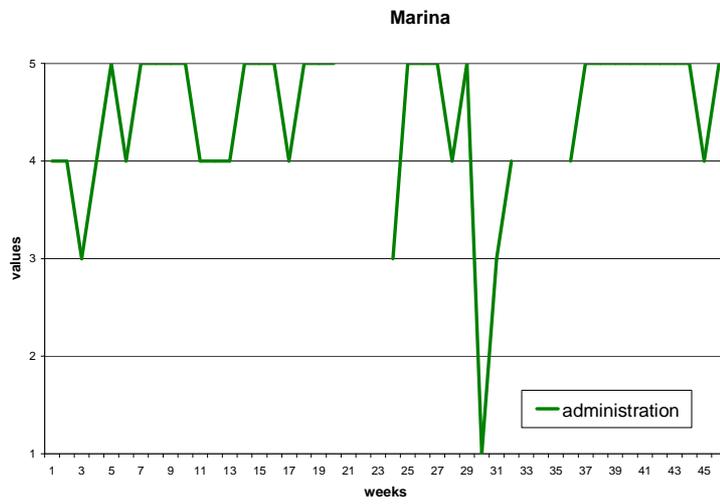
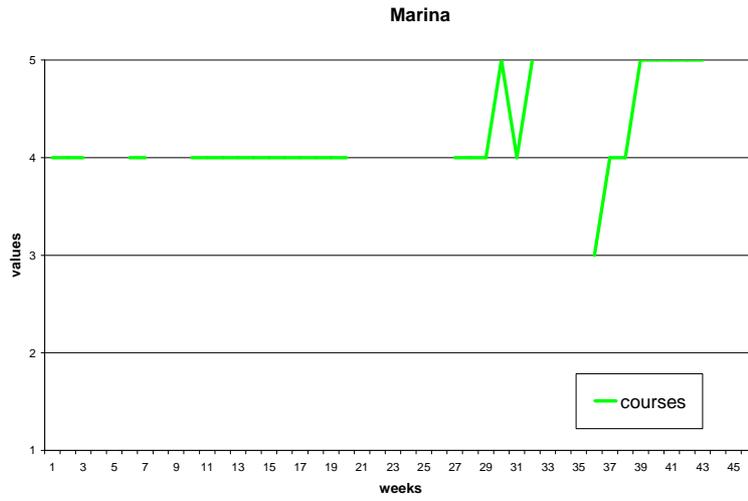
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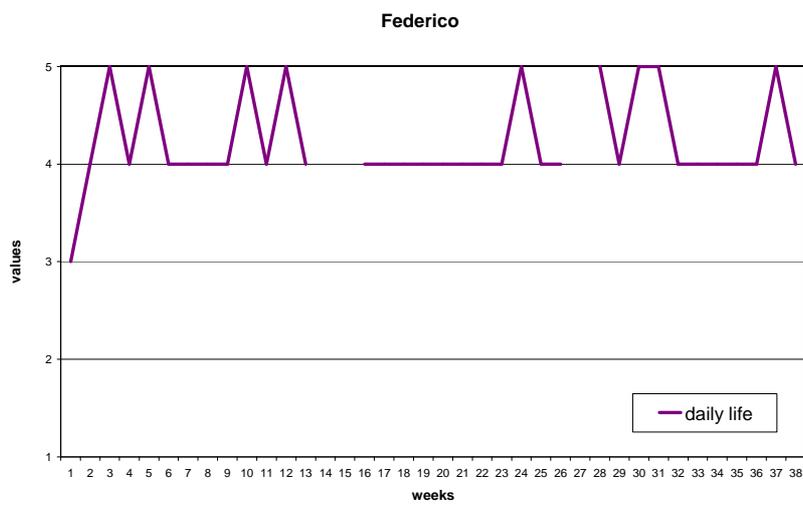
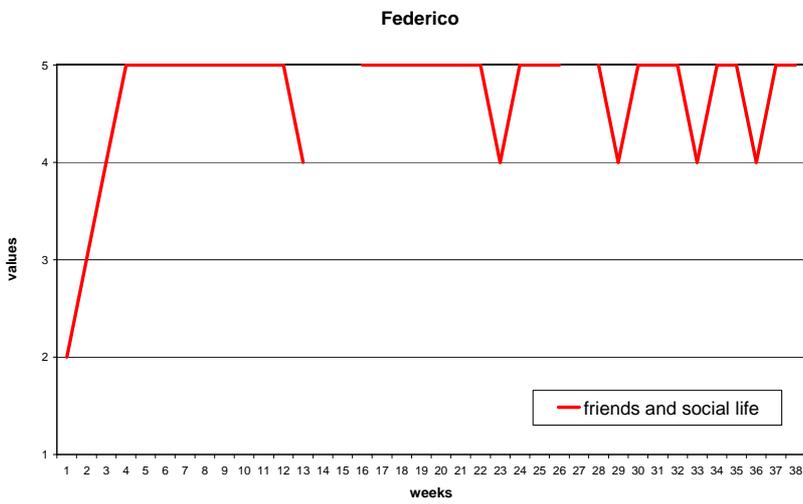
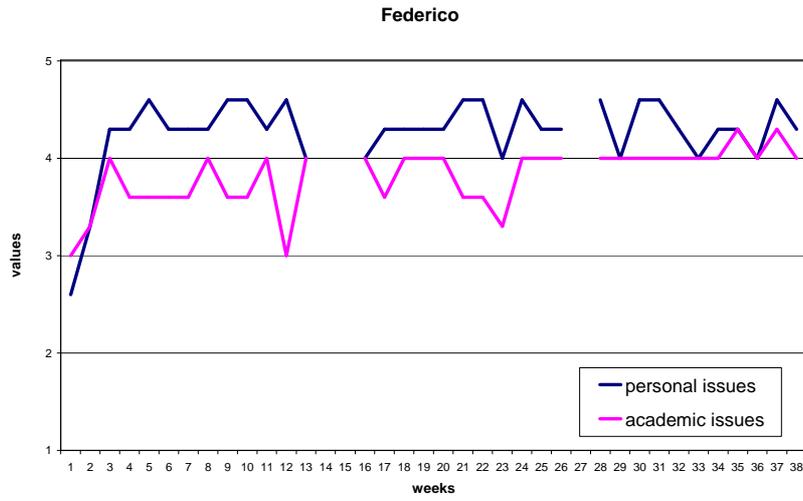


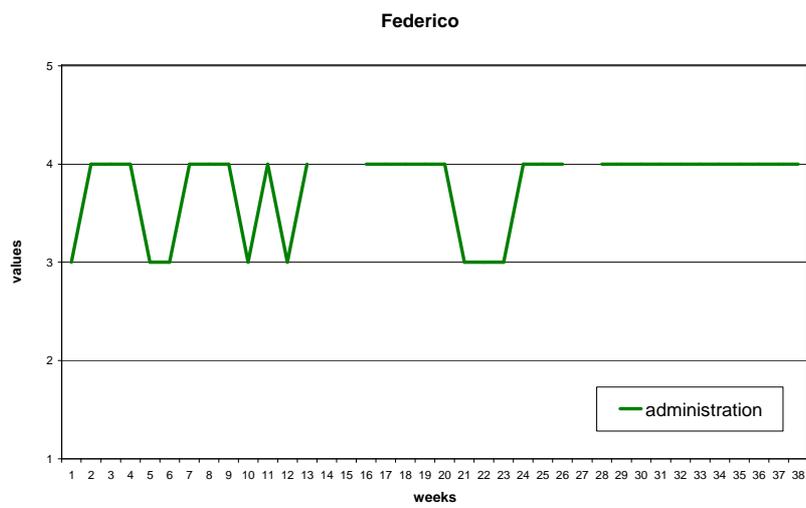
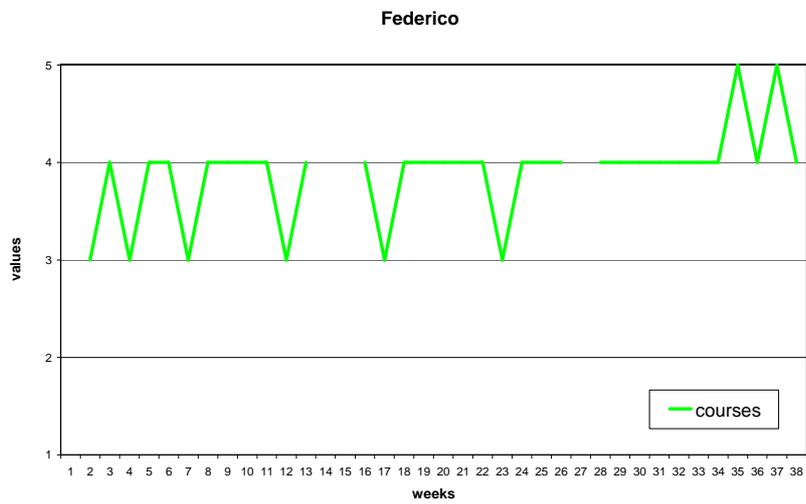
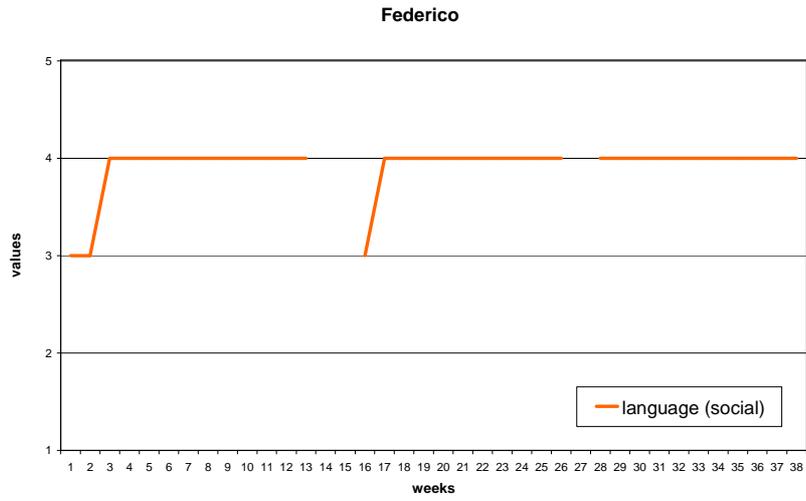
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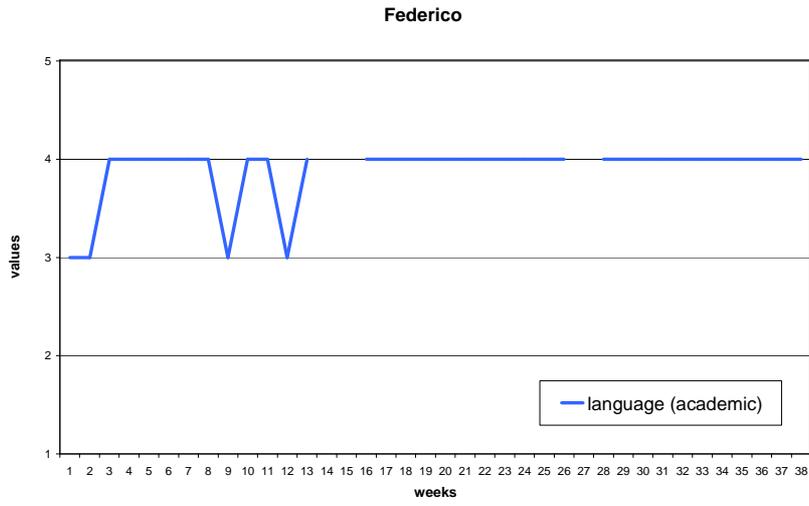




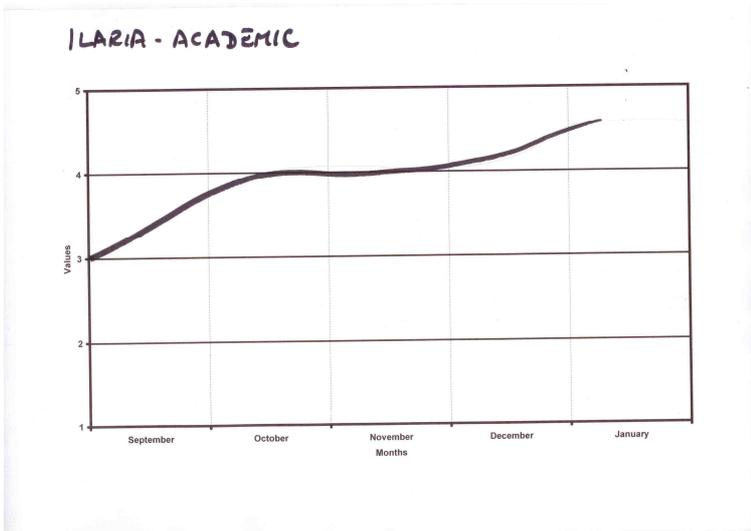
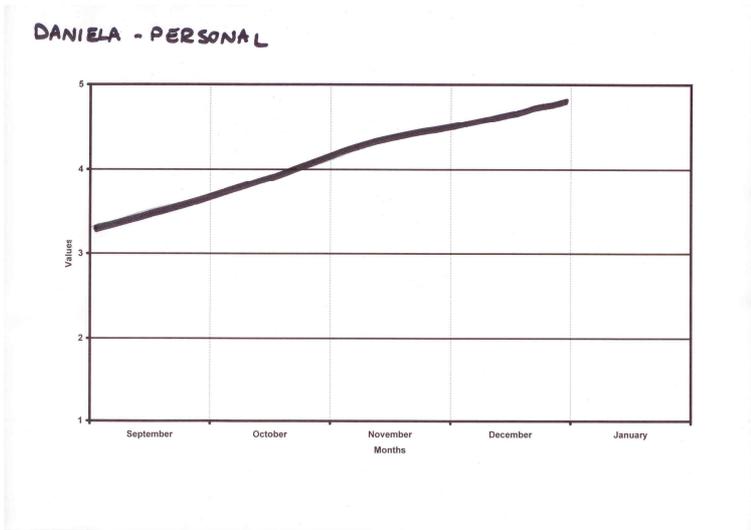
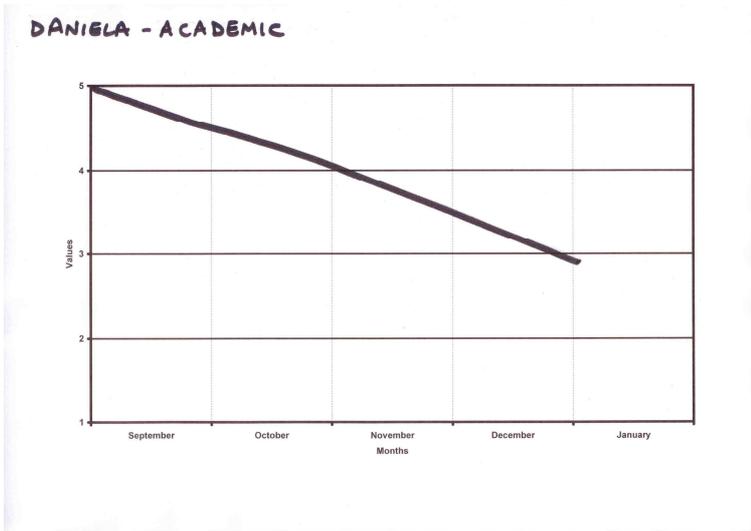


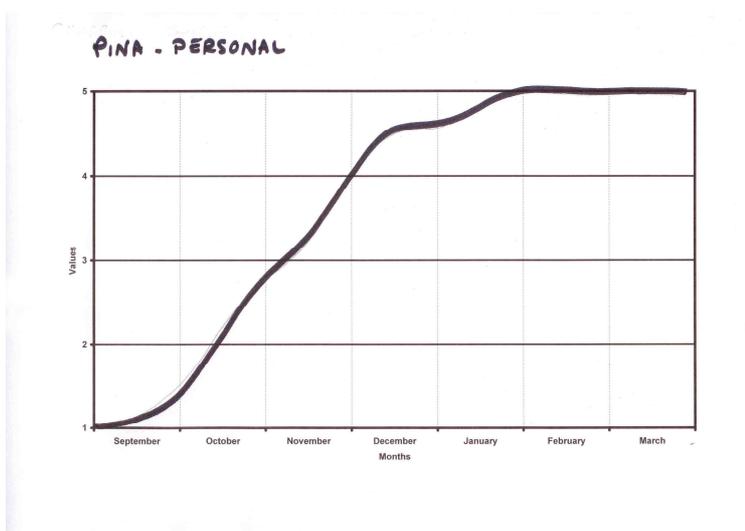
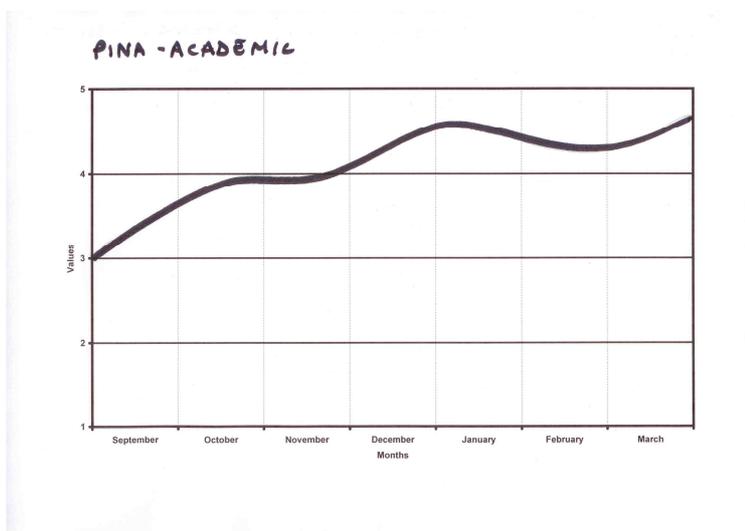
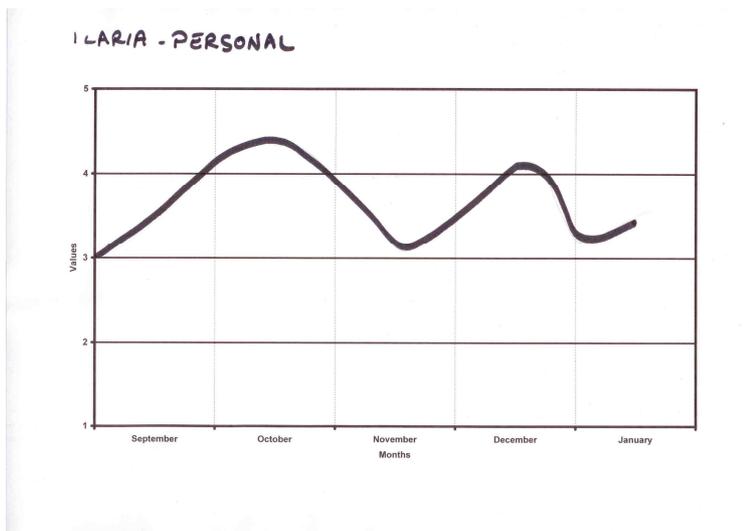




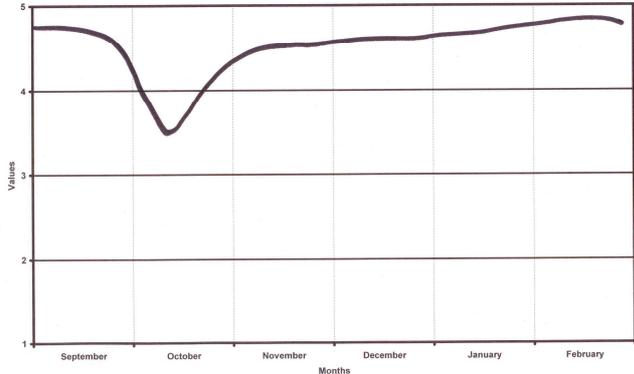


APPENDIX IV - RETROSPECTIVE GRAPHS

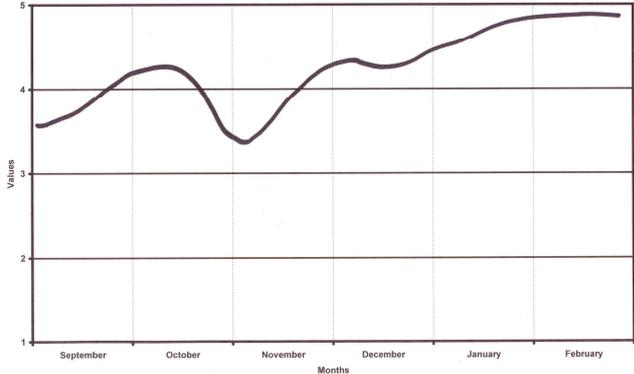




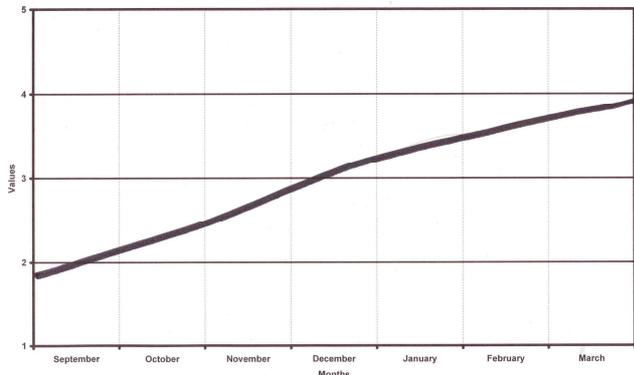
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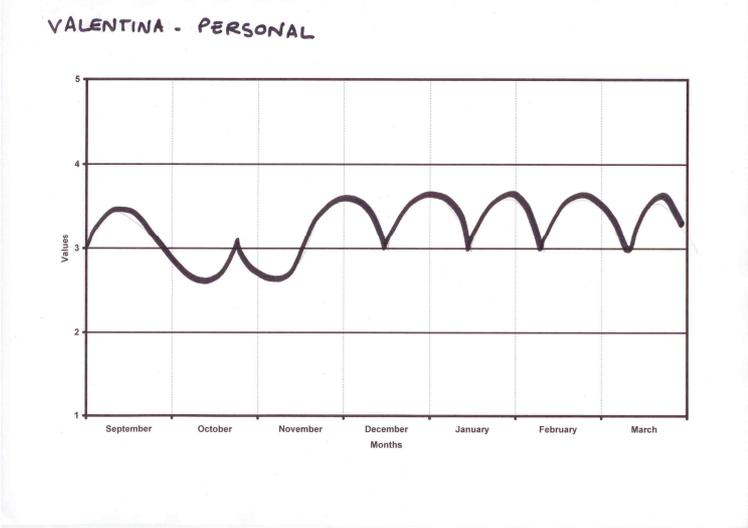
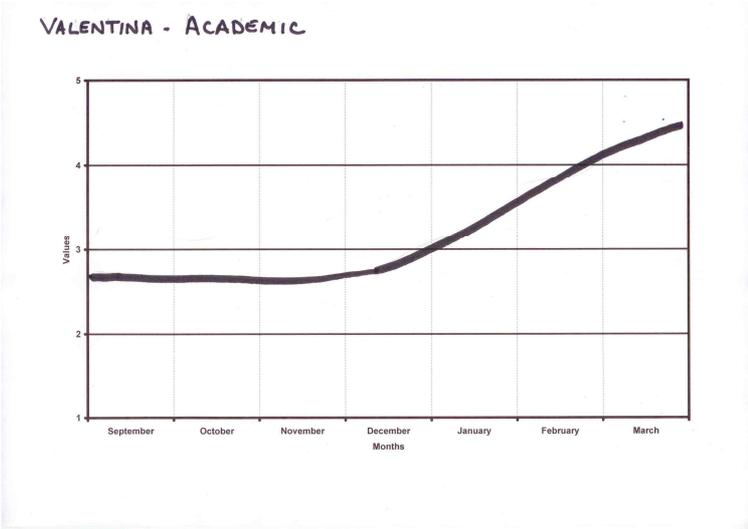
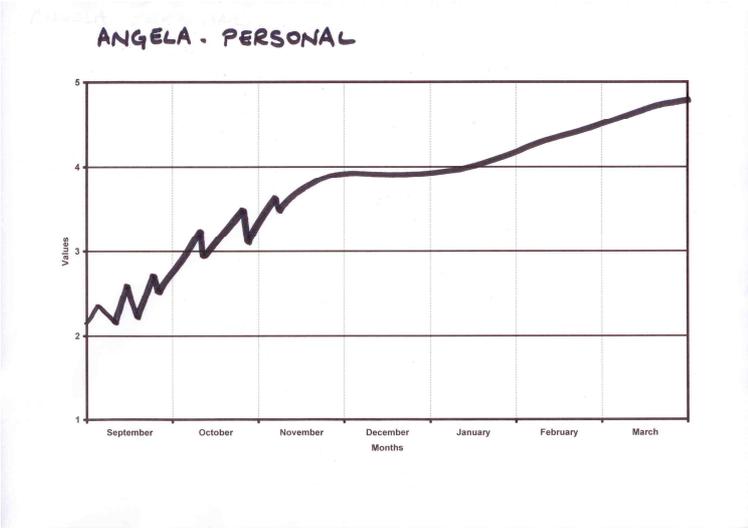


LORENZO - PERSONAL

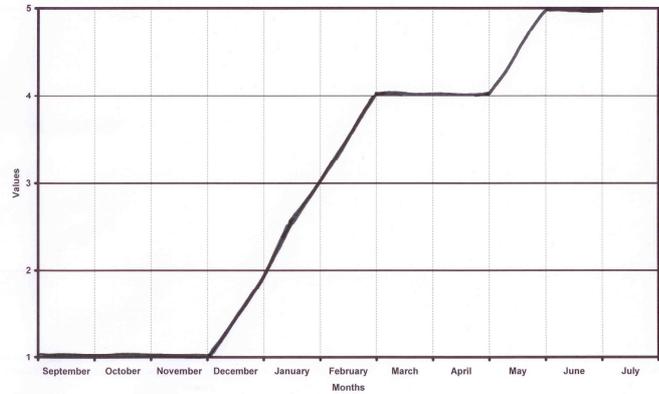
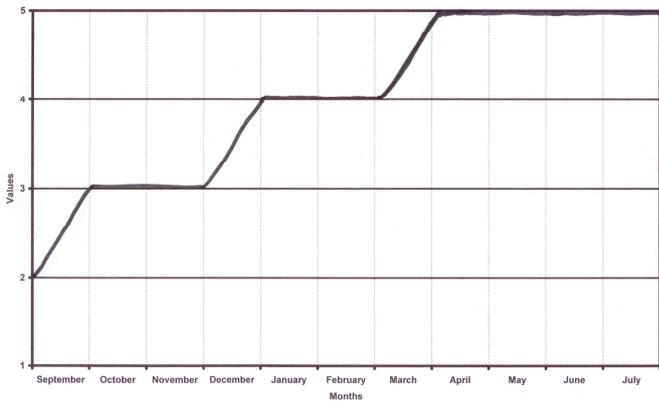


ANGELA - ACADEMIC

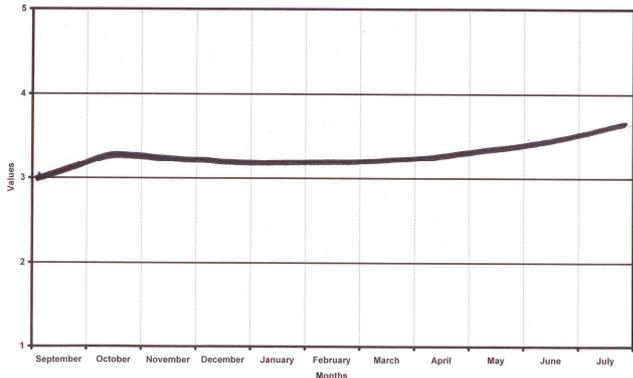




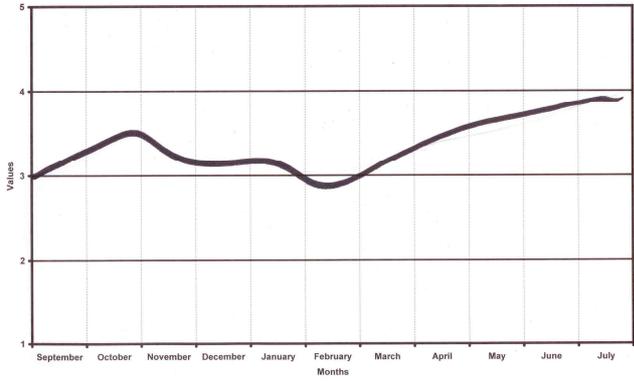
SILVIA



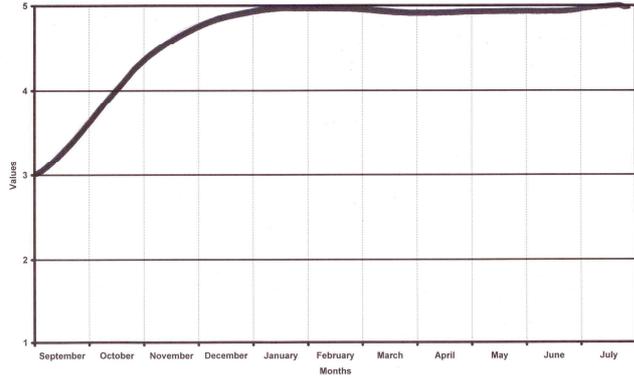
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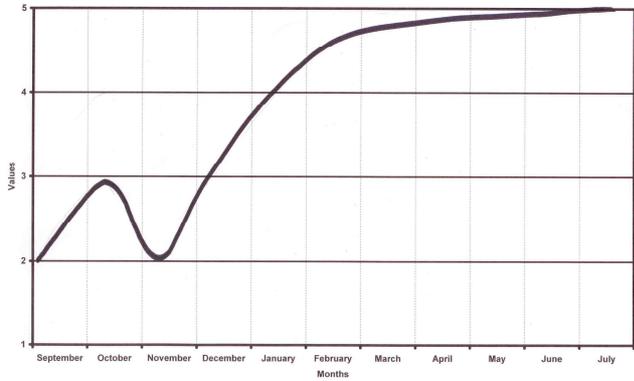
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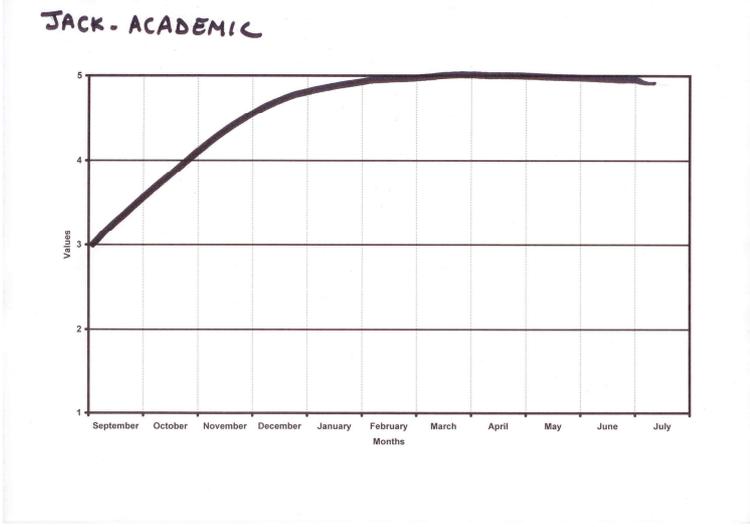
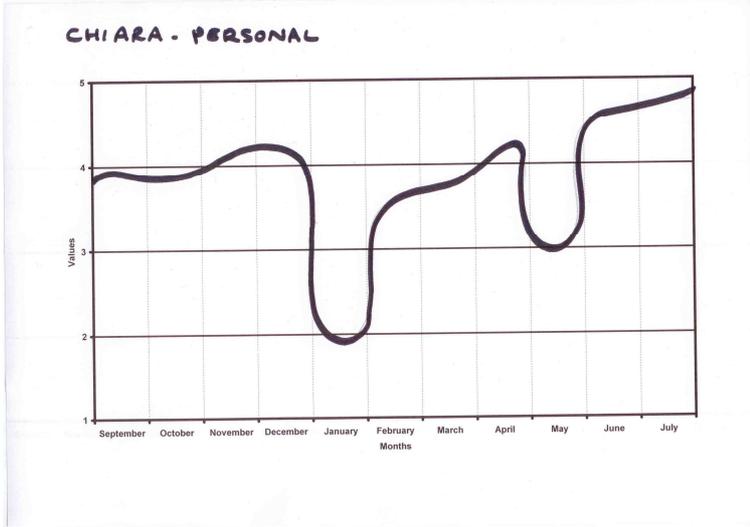
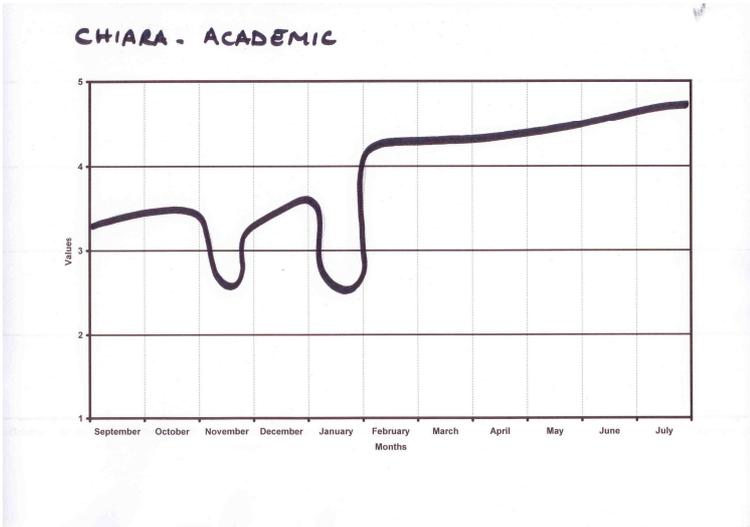


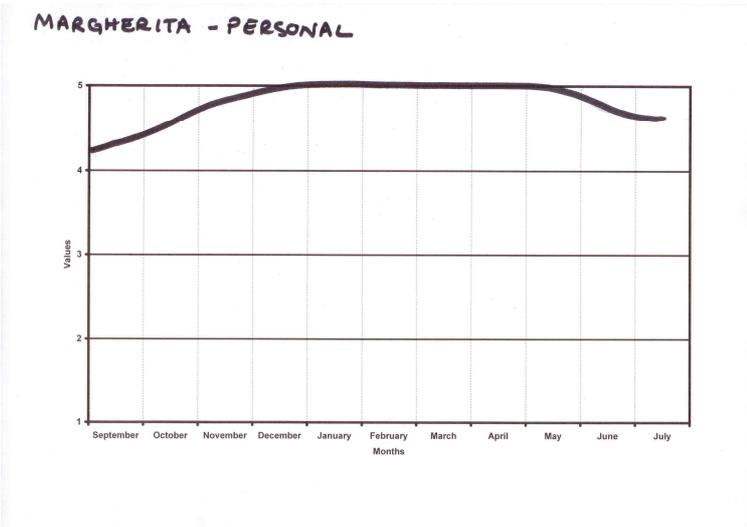
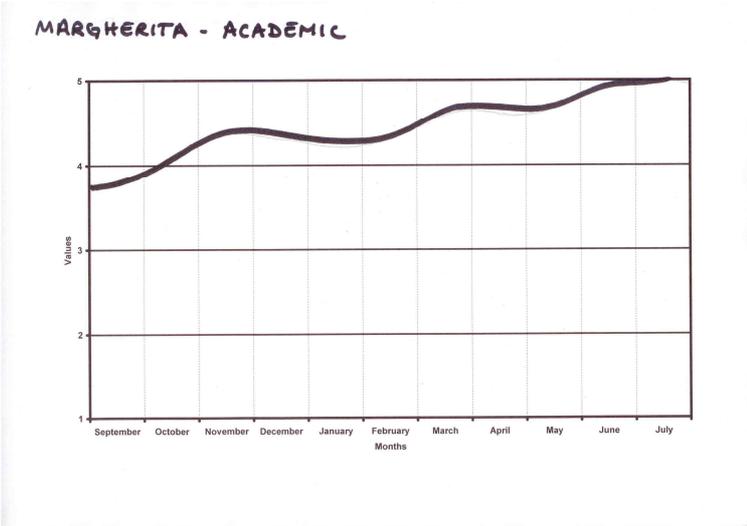
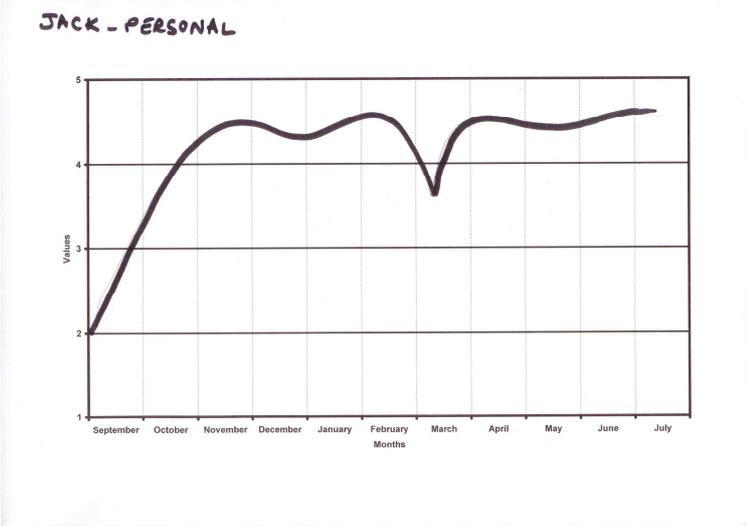
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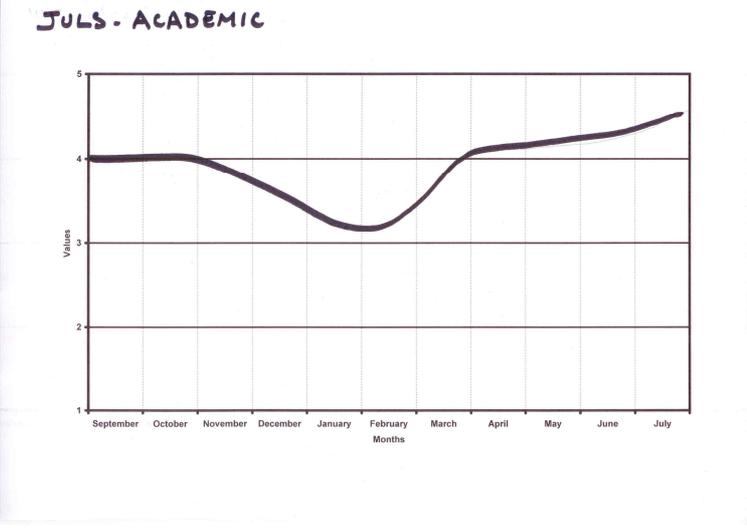
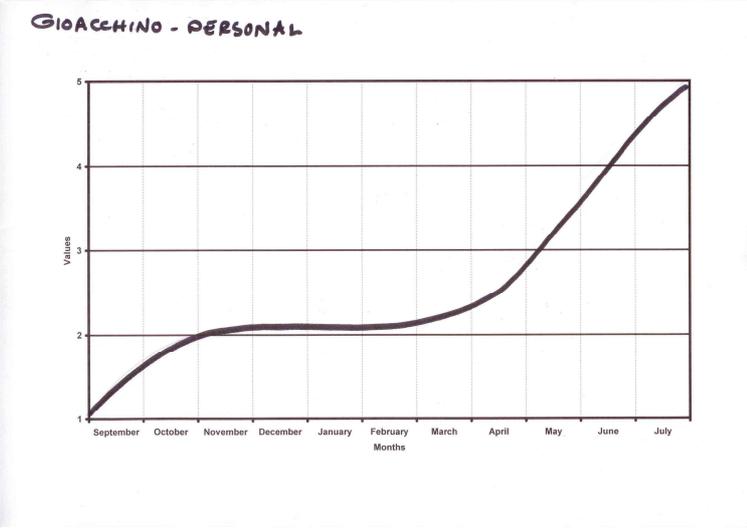
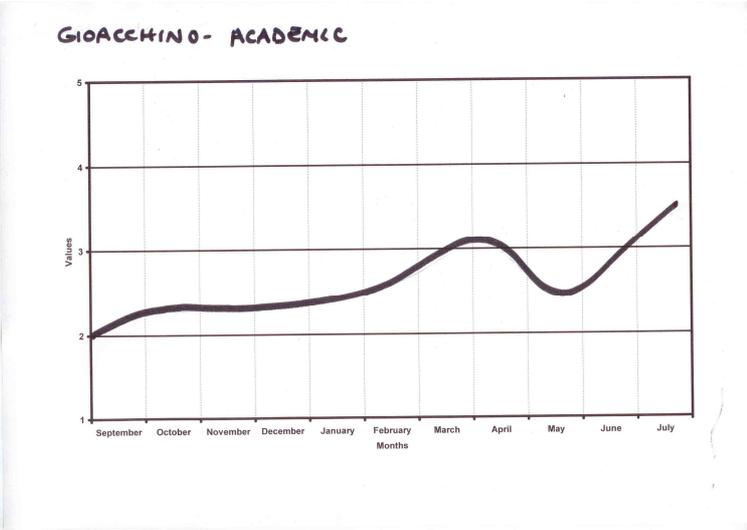


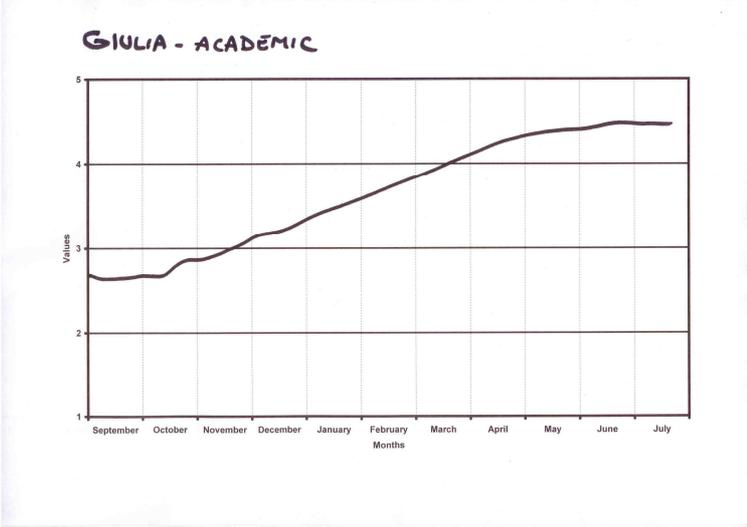
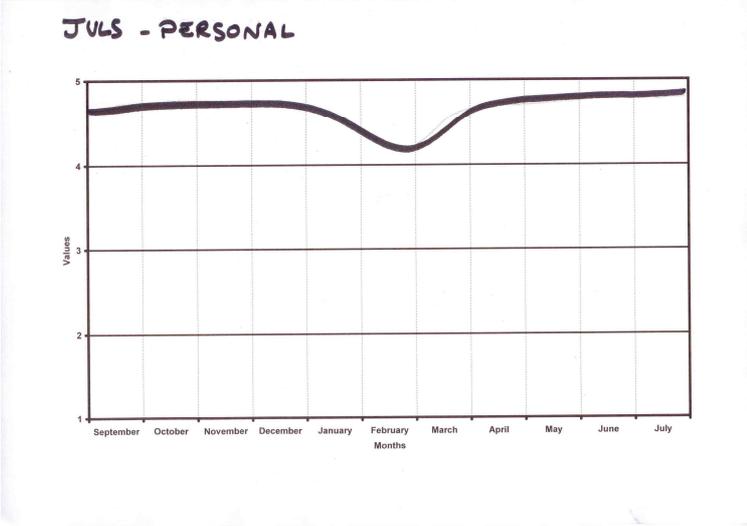
EMANUELA - PERSONAL



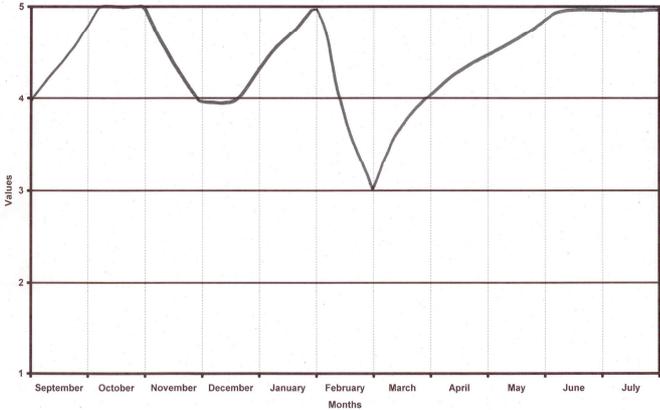
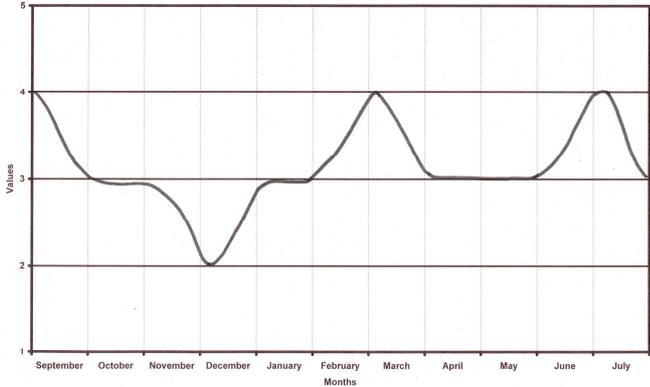








CLAUDIA



MARINA - ACADEMIC

