Taking Advantage of Time Away

TATA (Taking Advantage of Time Away) is a programme of preparatory and debrief meetings (before departure and on return to University) and an online resource for use during the period of work or study away from University.

**School/Subject Area:** Literatures, Languages and Cultures

**Target Audience:**Developed initially for use with Year 3 modern languages students but with potential to be adapted for any student who elects to or is required to spend a period of his/her course away from the University of Edinburgh

**Staff Involved:** Careers Service staff, Employability Consultant, E-learning staff

**Dates/timings:** Launched academic session 2009/10, now ongoing

Key features

It is generally accepted that students who elect or are required as part of their course to spend time away from the University gain skills, experience and maturity, all of which will generally enhance their lives and contribute specifically to their employability. Usually, with the benefit of hindsight, students come to understand what they have gained from this period in their lives, but they often approach it with little preparation and expectation, do not reflect on or capture the experience as they are living it, and struggle to articulate what they have got from it on their return. To help them capitalise fully on their time away, **TATA (Taking Advantage of Time Away)** is a programme of preparatory and debrief meetings (before departure and on return to University) and an online resource for use during the period of work or study away from University. For those who cannot attend preparatory/debrief meetings, summary resources are made available.

The programme is flexible, and can be tailored to students from any degree discipline, spending anything from one month to a year away from University, whether working or studying in the UK or abroad. It is not compulsory and can be delivered by careers and/or academic staff, helped, whenever possible, by those who know at first hand the value of time away – students who have already had this kind of experience, graduates and employers.

Planning

Between April and August 2009, three Careers Advisers and the Employability Consultant gave significant time to initial discussion, research, planning and development of the TATA prototype – seeking a resource that was sufficiently flexible to cope with the range of students’ experiences at the same time as trying to prompt a meaningful development experience for each individual. Adapting the prototype for future use in other Schools in the University should take significantly less time.

Project

The **TATA model**, when used with modern languages students, comprises:

**1. Meeting for departing Year 2 students**

* Two Careers Advisers
* Three final year modern languages students
* 50-minute lunchtime presentation, February/March
* Focus on hopes/expectations, practical issues, opportunities to develop skills and gain experience
* Introduction to the TATA online resource, how and why to use it during the year away
* Keeping in touch with the Careers Service

**2. TATA online resource**

* Allows students to set goals for and during time away, evaluate and record their experience so far, pause and reflect, optimise contacts, take action
* Use of the resource is optional; students can do as much or as little as they want, starting at any point
* Students are encouraged to use the resource via four email prompts, sent by Advisers approximately four times throughout the year away
* The resource includes additional messages from graduates and employers illustrating the positive effect of time away on personal and career development

**3. Meeting with returning final year modern languages students**

* Two Careers Advisers
* 50-minute lunchtime presentation, mid-September
* Focus on the benefits of a year abroad in terms of skills and experience development, and on understanding what employers are looking for
* Career planning and future opportunities for languages graduates
* Outline of Careers Service resources

Resources

Now that the groundwork has been completed, significantly less time will be needed to customise and run the programme in other Schools. The 50-minute ’before and after‘ talks, which could also involve inviting student speakers and gathering employer quotes, may require approximately 2 to 3 hours’ preparation. Drafting and sending out email prompts to students encouraging them to use the online resource may require no more than 1 to 2 hours during the time away period. Students are enrolled to access the online resource before departure, although self-enrolment at any stage is possible.

Evaluation

TATA for modern languages students is a three-stage programme (before, during and after). Feedback on the individual elements has been collected and proves to be very positive.

* “I appreciated the advice about reflecting on experiences early in my placement and using that knowledge to shape the latter stages.”
* “It made you remember to keep going for things. Sometimes time can go slowly and TATA encouraged you to keep focussed, and that the year abroad is a relatively short amount of time.”
* “Before leaving Edinburgh, I was keen to do many things with my time in Italy, and trying to do that would probably have been too much, thus detracting from my overall experience; following the suggestions I instead decided to focus on key, achievable goals, making the experience much more manageable & fulfilling.”
* “It just reminded me of how I must make use of the time away, and not just pass the year and have regrets afterwards.”

Advice

Not everyone has a problem-free time away experience. Keep the tone of any communication with students while away positive but not over-jolly and worthy. Including messages/quotes from students who may have already experienced time away, graduates and employers lend authenticity.

Developing a generic resource that can be tailored to be made meaningful in multiple disciplines/settings and to students away from the University for different lengths of time can be tricky! Time spent identifying the underlying common threads or processes is valuable in ensuring the necessary flexibility and efficiency of the final product.

This type of resource can be useful for serving multiple purposes – it is therefore important to think through the needs of both students and their Schools early in development. TATA’s primary aim is to help students make the most of their time away; it can also, for example, help students feel connected with the University while away. Adaptations can be made so that Schools can use the resource as a way to keep in touch with students, or to connect students with others who are away from the University.

Key contacts

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<http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/hss/taking-advantage-time-away>