Reports and thanks from Santander award recipients 2013/2014
Introduction by the Principal

It is three years since we signed our original agreement with Santander UK plc, and I am delighted to have the chance to reflect on the progress that has been made in that time.

Santander UK has continued to grow, not merely surviving the economic crisis but thriving throughout the past few years, becoming an established name on our high streets, in our communities and in our universities. Queen Mary University of London has experienced similar progress too, rising dramatically through the league tables to join the prestigious Russell Group of universities and growing our reputation as a destination for the very best students, inspiring teachers, and leading researchers from across the world.

In this context, it is very rewarding to see our partnership with Santander becoming stronger over time. It has developed to encompass study abroad opportunities, internships, enterprise activities and scholarships for overseas students to come to London. Queen Mary is a university with a tradition of service to its local communities and the promotion of opportunity to individuals less favoured by financial or social background and I believe in widening opportunities for all our students. It is heartening to read in this publication of the difference made to our students’ lives through their involvement with Santander’s programmes at Queen Mary, and these stories illustrate the lasting impact that has been achieved over the past three years.

As we look to the future, our partnership continues to expand and evolve. I am excited by two new developments in particular: funding of projects in our Students’ Union which will improve the employability of our graduates through training and community work; and the opportunity to collaborate more closely with Grupo Cultural AfroReggae’s arts intervention work in Rio de Janeiro which offers a real alternative to the gang culture of the favelas. I am sure that our new agreement offers just as much opportunity for growth as the one we signed three years ago.

I welcome the new agreement between our organisations and the commitment to our University which it symbolises. On behalf of Queen Mary University of London, I thank Santander UK plc for its continued and increased support of our work.

Professor Simon Gaskell
President and Principal, Queen Mary University of London
November 2014
John Robert Moffat's year abroad took him from Queen Mary University of London to the University of Granada, Spain.

My year abroad was a very successful year, in which I achieved very high grades, improved my Spanish language skills, made lots of great friends and developed many other skills, such as teamwork, decision-making and presentation skills.

The award from Santander was a great financial aid that helped to finance my living and housing costs, as well other costs, such as books and stationery. The scholarship greatly lessened the financial burden associated with living abroad and allowed me to focus on my studies and enjoy my year as an Erasmus student.

I would like to express my gratitude for having received this award that helped me so much. I believe that it is highly commendable that companies such as Banco Santander continue to recognise the importance of helping to fund university education. Thank you.

Yonca Nacakgedigi travelled to Germany for her year abroad and thanks to Santander was able to experience living away from home for the first time in her life.

Many students move out of their parent’s home in their first year at university and experience an independent life at a young age. Having lived at home all my life, my year abroad in Germany was going to be the first time I would be living away, gaining my independence and experiencing life from a different perspective. Living with my single parent mother, and my younger sister and brother in London, we have never been financially sound. All through my life I have had to be very careful with my spending and always aware of what the future may bring. When I applied for the Santander Grant, I never imagined that I would actually get it. When I found out that I had been granted the Santander Grant, I could not believe my luck. The grant I received from Santander allowed me to fly to Germany with peace of mind.

Paying for rent, food shopping and simple living costs such as travel expenses and laundry all added up to the point where it could have been overwhelming. Thanks to the grant Santander awarded me, I did not have to always focus on my spending, but concentrate on my education and the experience of studying in a different country. I will always be grateful for the support from Santander and cannot thank them enough for the freedom they gave me.
Since I came back from Germany in July, I have had a positive mind frame and have started my fourth and final year at Queen Mary University of London. I believe the positive experience I had in Germany has given me the energy and optimism I need to get through my final year with high grades. I am currently concentrating on graduating with good grades and making my mother proud. I have had an offer from Teach First to become an English teacher at a secondary school in September 2015. I want to give back to students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and give them the opportunities their peers from high-income families have. Education should not be limited by a family’s income and I would like to work towards that once I graduate.

This is why I am so grateful to Santander. They are providing grants to students who are having financial difficulties and giving them the break they need to concentrate on their studies instead of their financial status. Thanks to Santander I had an amazing Year Abroad where I gained invaluable experience, which I am hoping to share in the future. I hope that Santander continues to inspire students because the help they provide has major impacts on our lives. I was lucky enough to be awarded the grant and it has helped shape my future. Thanks to Santander, I will be able to give back to younger students who desperately need educational help.

Ione Abbott

Ione Abbott’s year abroad took her from Queen Mary University of London to Salamanca University, Spain.

As a student of French and Hispanic Studies at Queen Mary, I spent my year abroad at Universidad de Salamanca in Castile and León where I studied French, Portuguese and Spanish. It was an exciting opportunity, both on an academic and personal level as I had access to new literature, philosophy and thought. Living with native Spanish speakers, I built on my linguistic skills and became rapidly fluent. I engaged in regional culture and gained a unique insight into life in Spain.

I would like to express my gratitude to Santander for their generosity in the awarding of this grant. It gave me the freedom to delve deeper into Hispanic life and to explore the Iberian Peninsula. I also developed my intercultural sensitivity and learnt about the importance of effective communication, a skill that will benefit me in a future academic or professional environment.

As a result of my year abroad I now have a strong desire to work in Spain in the future and hope to return as soon as possible. Thank you, Santander.

Jessica Padfield

Jessica Padfield spent her year abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina, working for a social business called Hecho en Bs As, helping the homeless community.

After spending my first two years studying Hispanic Studies in London at Queen Mary, last September 2013 I nervously left England to spend a year in Buenos Aires.

The first few weeks were undeniably strange, and manic. Starting a new job, trying to find a house, friends and my feet all at once was challenging, especially in a society and culture that I was not hugely familiar with. Although I had initially learnt Spanish in Central America, when arriving in Argentina the accent was so strong, and they used so much ‘lunfardo’/slang that it almost felt like people were speaking to me in an entirely different language, so just getting myself understood was difficult.
Before I left for Argentina I had arranged an internship to work with an organisation called *Hecho en Bs As*, a street paper, the equivalent of Britain’s *The Big Issue*. I was based on the social side of the organisation rather than the journalistic side, working directly with the sellers of the magazine.

My job was to attend to the sellers in whatever they may need, whether that be finding them a hostel to sleep for the night, giving them clean clothes, sorting out problems to do with their check point, problems with the police, documentation or just a chat when they needed it. They didn’t cease to tell me stories of violence, poverty and discrimination that confronted them day in day out. Often they brought these problems into the centre in a manner of ways, which of course was at times very difficult, not only in terms their safety but also in terms of a personal connection that I made with lots of them as I got to know them. I guess one of the learning curves that one goes through when doing social work is that one must distance oneself from many of the realities that the people one works with face. Overall I got on incredibly well with the people that I met in *Hecho en Bs As*, and not only developed massively in terms of my linguistic skills and employability skills but was also offered a job there if I decide to return to Buenos Aires in the future.

As a city Buenos Aires is buzzing in terms of its culture, particularly its art and music scene, therefore outside of work there was never a dull moment! I became particularly interested in Argentine folk music which I have actually since decided to base my dissertation on.

I am now back in London for my final year of university, which is an odd feeling after a year away, I feel strangely culture shocked! I am looking forward to my final year however I miss Buenos Aires hugely and all the incredible people that I met there. At the moment I am continuing to do social work, as my boss from Buenos Aires put me in contact with *The Big Issue*. It is incredibly interesting working in a similar field in the UK and comparing the two organisations. I am also involved with a Latin American cleaners union based in London, supporting and representing those employees who are being mistreated by their employers and have problems communicating because of their lack of English. I guess being in my final year, I am suddenly feeling daunted by the prospect of having to plan my future, although my experience working at *Hecho en Bs As* has made me think seriously about going into working in drug rehabilitation therapy, specifically counseling. I am also seriously considering returning to Buenos Aires to live after my degree.

I would like to take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to Santander for the grant that I received this year, which enabled me to go to South America. Although life in Argentina was a fair bit cheaper than life in London, being outside of Europe I did not receive an Erasmus grant therefore your money was a huge help and I wouldn’t have been able to go to Latin America without it. I hope that Santander continue to give such grants as it is not only a great incentive for those students who are going away, it is also a great recognition for those students who are hard workers and have been dedicated to their studies throughout the course of their degree.
Francesca Veronesi

Francesca Veronesi spent her year abroad in Mannheim, South-West Germany, where she studied at the University of Mannheim.

I cannot stress enough how much improving my language skills, communicating with locals and travelling during my year abroad were life-changing events. Life abroad challenges students greatly: they have to learn to study differently, to learn or consolidate a foreign language, to meet people with a very different background and learn to build good friendships in a relatively short time.

These various challenges were not always easy or immediately rewarding, however over time I started seeing many results and improvements. What is perhaps even more important is that I have gained confidence in myself and in what I can achieve. Overall I could have not imagined a better school of life or better preparation for my future than my incredible year abroad.

I am very thankful to Santander to have helped me financially and would encourage them to keep supporting languages students, empowering them and preparing them for professional and adult life.

Nuala Blackshaw

Thanks to Santander, Nuala Blackshaw was able to travel to Granada for her year abroad, where she immersed herself in the local culture and greatly improved her language skills.

This past year I had the incredible opportunity to study abroad as part of my degree with the generous help of the Santander grant. I spent a semester studying at the University of Granada in the south of Spain, which was a fantastic experience. Although I was initially quite nervous about moving to a new country on my own and having to get by with my shaky Spanish, it turned out to be one of the best things I have done in my life.

Starting at a new university was very daunting, as all the classes were given in Spanish and I didn’t understand all of the administrative procedures. I spent the first few weeks running round different offices nervously trying to ask for help in Spanish and fitting all my classes into an impossible timetable. I felt like a fresher all over again! The classes were huge and we were at university for 16-20 hours a week.

I completely fell in love with Granada, which, incidentally, is the most popular Erasmus destination in Europe. The buzzing city centre and the beautiful old town surround the famous Alhambra Palace, which is the main attraction of the city. Granada is full of Andalusian culture with its Moorish architecture, flamenco music at every street corner and tapas galore.

The grant I received from Santander was invaluable for my stay in Granada as it helped me with everyday living costs, travel expenses to university and my flights to and from Granada.

All in all, my year abroad has been one of the best things about my degree. It was very rewarding noticing my language skills slowly improving by speaking Spanish.
every day and especially making friends in a different language. Having spent a significant amount of time in Granada, I found out a lot about the different culture and politics in Spain, which you can’t learn in a classroom. I am actually quite proud of myself for being able to get by in a foreign country and I have come home with a lot more confidence.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Santander for the generous grant I received for my year abroad. It made a big difference to my stay and allowed me to make the very most out of the opportunities I had in Spain. ¡Muchas Gracias!

Katie Holdcroft

I started my degree in French & Hispanic Studies three years ago with a combination of post A-Level French and no knowledge of Spanish at all. I chose to spend my whole Year Abroad in Spain as even though during the first two years of my studies my Spanish progressed, I still felt to get anywhere near degree standard in the language, I should spend a considerable amount of time in a Spanish speaking country.

I was given a post working for the British Council as an English Language Assistant in a primary school situated in the city centre of Valencia. I was very fortunate to have been welcomed into the school community and to have developed friendships with colleagues of all ages. I also thoroughly enjoyed teaching the children who were between the ages of three and twelve. They asked me many funny questions and I loved seeing their reaction when I showed them pictures of Yorkshire pudding and cucumber sandwiches.

Even though when I arrived I was having a fantastic time, I was slightly struggling with the language and it was proving quite problematic in certain situations such as at the bank and at the market. I really wanted to meet Spaniards and develop friendships with people I worked with who didn’t speak English, but ‘real life’ Spanish was something completely different to what I had experienced so far in an educational environment. Therefore, I decided to use some of my Santander grant to pay for twice weekly Spanish classes at an academy to give me the confidence I needed to fully immerse myself in Spanish life. After a few months of classes, I became confident in many situations and was able to make many friends due to my improved knowledge and skills. I also felt confident to speak in the staff room at work and as a result I became more integrated in the school community.

Even though I had decided to dedicate my Year Abroad to Spanish, I did not want my level of French to deteriorate before my final year and if possible, I wanted it to improve. Because this was a level of concern for me, I also decided to take some French classes in my spare time and I was able to maintain it. I am extremely glad I did this because I feel I have come back to university with a more or less similar level in both languages.

In summary, I am extremely grateful to Santander for awarding me this grant. I believe that this grant has helped to change the idea of Spanish as just a subject that I study at university to something I now almost live and breathe. Without a doubt, it has helped me to improve my Spanish and I now feel comfortable studying it at final year university level. It has also helped me to ensure success in my education because it allowed me to take French classes in order to progress to final year level of this language whilst in Spain.

I think the Santander Grant is a fantastic aid to students like me and I would like to express my sincere gratitude for helping me to have an unforgettable Year Abroad.