



## Study Abroad Guidelines as a Tool to Support International Student Mobility

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### Abstract

*As a result of greater mobility and internationalization processes in the higher education system and an increasingly globalized world, all universities and institutions of higher learning are confronted with opportunities and challenges. Since a more international, heterogeneous student body gives rise to increased confrontation with a variety of daily university practices, all participants – students, instructors and university employees – are required to question what is their own, what they are familiar with and what is perceived as normal. Ideally, they develop intercultural communicative competence as part of a change in perspective. This article presents a research project on international student mobility called “Short term study abroad – Needs and experiences”, conducted at the University of Graz (Austria), Centre for Language, Plurilingualism and Didactics. First project outcomes are three study abroad guidelines for different target groups: incoming and outgoing students as well as faculty members. All these guidelines encourage reflection on university communication and interactions, based on the assumption that a mobility experience like studying abroad – to have a sustainable impact – requires specific, culturally sensitive preparation, support and reflection. Naturally, each study abroad experience is unique. Nevertheless, we as authors are convinced that a high degree of generalization and abstraction of concrete experiences in an unfamiliar academic context makes it possible to address topics such as conventions for behavior, expectations for roles or strategies for dealing with irritating situations – independent of what, where and how long you study abroad.*

*Keywords: student mobility; internationalization in higher education; study abroad guidelines; intercultural communicative competence.*

### 1. Introduction

For students, universities are communication intensive places of socialization where they experience a formative phase in their personal development. If they decide to study abroad, the communicative requirements of daily life as a student are further shaped by a linguistically and culturally divergent academic context within which orientation, adaptation, performance and conclusion of an academic chapter in their life must be managed during the few months of a one semester study abroad program. The transit and diversity experience *study abroad* is an individual mobility event that basically involves more a *process* than an event, which is why this kind of education related stay abroad – to have a sustainable impact – requires specific preparation, ongoing support and reflection. At the university, intercultural language communication competence develops by no means automatically and *student engagement* in a culturally unfamiliar academic context in a foreign language can only be expected from students “if they were taught to expect subtle differences in instructional style, or had explicit information about the cultural differences they might notice.” [1] If international students are encouraged to reflect on selected aspects of the study abroad phenomenon, then professional, linguistic and intercultural benefits can be obtained along with benefits in the sense of personal development and identity formation. [2]

### 2. Description of the research project

Aiming at the specific situation of studying only one semester abroad and the concomitant needs and experiences of international students, the qualitative research project “Short term study abroad – Needs and experiences”, was initiated in 2013 at *treffpunkt sprachen* – Centre for Language, Plurilingualism and Didactics at the University of Graz, Austria. [3] The project's objective is to survey students' expectations and needs, their initial and ongoing motivation as well as high and low points during their semester abroad. Points of interest are

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- central intercultural sources of conflict in university communication, such as
- the organization of studies,
- teaching methods and learning styles,
- performance requirements, but also
- differences in interaction and role expectations.

This paper describes the first completed steps and the anticipated outcomes in terms of transfer into practice. In winter term 2015/16 data collection began by interviewing five volunteering Erasmus students three different times throughout their sojourn in Austria, that is in October, December and January, what makes in total 15 interviews (5x3). The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately one hour per student. In addition, five reflective writing assignments concerning their expectations, hopes, needs, motivations and experiences were collected from each voluntary study participant, thus allowing to analyse 25 reflective texts (5x5). On the basis of the collected data and the gained in-depth understanding of the study abroad experience three study abroad guidelines for three different target groups were elaborated in winter term 2016/17: for incoming students, for outgoing students and for faculty members at the University of Graz. The guidelines for incomings are available in German and in English.

As regards transfer into practice one prominent goal – apart from the support for incoming and outgoing students – is the professional development of teachers and other university employees involved in the appropriate handling of exchange students and their needs. Especially the guidelines for teachers of all subjects and fields of study aim to show how educators can provide targeted support for incoming students and adequately prepare outgoing students for their studies abroad. Speaking of language classes, we aim to develop recommendations on methodology and didactics (e.g. content, structure): for German as a foreign language intensive courses offered every September and February as well as for various language semester courses offered at *treffpunkt sprachen* that are attended by exchange students.

### 3. Study abroad guidelines

The above described project examines how international exchange students who attend a language course at the Centre for Language, Plurilingualism and Didactics experience their semester in Austria. First of all, one cannot deny the many little and sometimes subtle differences felt when teaching a class with mainly local students in contrast to a class with many or primarily international students. Studying abroad can be the adventure of a lifetime. Students can improve their foreign language skills, broaden their career and academic opportunities and many of them report on gaining a different perspective on their studies. Nevertheless, there can always come up various irritating situations in academic contexts and the frustrating feeling of not being able to express oneself the way it would be so easy in one's first language as well as in familiar academic circumstances. Figure 1 shows several possible differences between classrooms with local or international students. [4]

Tab. 1: Differences between classrooms with local or international students

Possible differences	Classrooms with mostly local students	International Classrooms
Expectations regarding teaching/learning/evaluating/assessment	rather homogeneous	rather heterogeneous
Familiarity with the University of Graz	rather high	rather low
Emotional support from family and friends because of physical closeness	rather high	rather low
Contact/friendships with local students	rather high	rather low
Understanding of Austrian Standard German	rather high	rather low
Transit and diversity experience; continuous reflexion of one's own origins and identity	rather low	rather high

When looking at existing study abroad guidelines we mainly found support for administrative challenges, culture shock and cross-cultural adjustment, but not very much focus on differences in university communication and interaction. Some good examples are Paige et al. [5], Dowell [6], Duke [7], and Lidstone/Rueckert [8]. Speaking of standards of conduct at German universities, one must highlight an online resource from the Universities of Siegen, Kassel and Hamburg. [9]



With the printed 16 pages long study abroad guidelines for incoming and outgoing students we hope that they help international students to experience self-efficacy by using a reflective approach to possible irritating situations. Our aim is that the readers benefit more from their study abroad adventure by more consciously examining what they have experienced and learned. The guidelines are divided into three parts:

- before your departure
- after you arrive
  1. Organization of daily life and your studies
  2. Communication and interaction
  3. Behavior and roles in teaching-learning settings
  4. Course requirements
- after you return

An example of the style in which the guidelines are written is the following advice in the chapter “Course requirements”, for incoming students:

“The amount of emphasis placed on active participation is not the same at all universities or for all types of courses. At the University of Graz, active participation is desired and constitutes part of the assessment of performance. You should be as present as possible, join in the discussion and actively contribute to the teaching-learning event, even if it is difficult at the beginning and you feel unsure of yourself. Your instructors and fellow students will enjoy your contributions even if your grammar and vocabulary are not one hundred percent correct.” [10]

Outgoing students for example, are encouraged to keep in touch with faculty and students from their host university, thus building their own strong international academic social network and hopefully maintaining their linguistic, cultural and academic performance in different languages, cultures and countries.

The table of contents for the study abroad guidelines for faculty members differs lightly from the students’ versions:

- What does it mean to teach international exchange students?
- The International Classroom
  1. Organization of daily life and your studies
  2. Communication and interaction
  3. Behavior and roles in teaching-learning settings
  4. Course requirements
- Relevance and effectivity of study abroad

To provide some insights into the writing style of the teachers’ guidelines we want to conclude with the end of their introduction chapter. Too often, unfortunately, having international students in one’s classes is seen as tiring because sometimes they do not understand immediately or do not behave in ways one expects students to behave.

“We hope that these guidelines contribute to a better understanding of taken for granted academic behaviors and practicalities as culturally coined patterns of thinking and doing. Furthermore, we hope that cross-cultural encounters with international students on campus and in teaching contexts will be seen as a rewarding experience that makes the much-quoted internationalization of higher education come alive and really perceptible.” [11]

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