



Buddy System

A handbook of buddy programmes practices in Europe

Quantitative and qualitative
methodologies.



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ABOUT THE BUDDY SYSTEM PROJECT

The Buddy System is an online platform matching international students and local students for a buddy programme. The platform, developed centrally, provides management access to local stakeholders responsible for coordinating the integration of the incoming students. After the pairing is complete, international students can benefit from a personalised welcome, thanks to their local buddy. It includes: support for administrative procedures, one-to-one visit of the city and place of study. To sum up he can be helped when needed.

The BuddySystem is dedicated to international students who, thanks to the platform, will have the opportunity to develop a relationship and interact with local students and enrich their lives through an intercultural experience.

Since June 2015 and the second version of the platform, more than 25 000 users from 145 nationalities experienced Buddy System and around 10 000 pairs were made by our local coordinators in 30 French cities.

You can learn more about it on buddysystem.eu.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The buddy programmes' practices research has been designed within the framework of the European

project Buddy System to get an in-depth overview of how Higher Education institutions (HEIs) and student associations have been implementing their buddy programmes. There are two main aspects for this activity: The first one is to gather local practices from various HEIs and/or student associations (questionnaire) and thereafter analyse the local practices and draw recommendations on how the Buddy System online platform can be further developed to best respond to local needs; the second one is to evaluate the impact on the soft skills and competences of local and international students taking part in a buddy programme. In addition, the qualitative research part will also investigate in-depth existing buddy programmes' practices and expectations towards an ideal relationship between buddies and incoming students in the future. Our findings aim at improving the relationship between buddies and incoming students, promoting the inclusion of international students with disabilities, guaranteeing further on free access to the web platform and adapting it flexibly to local requirements and, finally, identifying the competences (knowledge, knowhow, behaviour/experiences, learning competence) developed by buddies and incoming students. We consider the latter objective in the context of an eventual future official recognition of gained competences by the buddies within their studies.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH: THE INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIENCE

1. METHODOLOGY AND STUDY POPULATION

1.1 Definition of the survey's goals

This survey has been created in order to gather the different buddy programmes' practices in Europe, evaluate their advantages and drawbacks, and therefore formulate recommendations for the further development of the buddysystem.eu online platform.

1.2. Methodology

The data represented derives from a quantitative survey administered online via SurveyMonkey and has been disseminated through the respective networks of the members of the Buddy System consortium and beyond. The cohort has been built following the probability sampling method while keeping in mind that the main targets were HEIs as well as student associations. The survey

has taken place during January and February 2018 (two full months).

1.3. Characterisation of the cohort

Among the 228 respondents who answered the survey, 50.88% (116 answers) represents student associations, 41.67% (95 answers) represents HEIs and the last 7.45% (17 answers) picked "Other".

It should be noted that the respondents were given the possibility to choose "Other" and specify the type of organisation they are part of, so that the survey would be as comprehensive as possible. In light of the results collected within that specific section, we are able to say that most of the respondents from the "Other" category are in reality representatives from student associations (65%) and could be generally included to the student association category.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, very few respondents from the cohort (17 answers) have answered "Other" and would thus make this manipulation unimportant.

All in all, none of the categories is underrepresented even though the balance between HEIs and student associations from our cohort is in favour of the student associations. The large number of answers from both categories enables us to have a comprehensive and global understanding of the buddy programmes' practices in Europe.

From another point of view, it is important to highlight that most of the survey's respondents have indicated that their country is France (25% - 57 answers). The same question also includes respondents from Germany (9.65%), 9.21% from Czech Republic, 7.89% from Poland, 7.89% from Romania, and 7.89% from Spain. Other respondents (less than 5% each) are based in Greece, the UK, Austria, Hungary, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, etc.

In line with the results to that question, we can clearly state that there is an overrepresentation of respondents based in France.

They represent 66.67% of the total population of HEIs and 33.33% of the student associations. This disequilibrium can be considered as a bias to our research however our study feeds itself from the multitude of practices and even within a same country, we are likely to find very different ones.

In addition to the intrinsic information (nature and location) collected, one of the most important questions was whether respondents had or had not a buddy programme. The survey informs us that the large majority of the cohort (80.26% - 183 answers) does have a buddy programme and 19.74% (45 answers) does not. From the 80.26%, more than half are student associations (56.83%), followed by HEIs (34.97%) and other (8.20%). In parallel to this, 68% of the respondents state that a student association was the leader of the initiative (including Erasmus Student Network (ESN) sections, international student associations, student unions, etc.), compared with 25.33% for the local university/schools. It appears that student associations are more likely to develop a buddy programme than HEIs. We could speculate that it is more likely for students to request such services from student

associations as the peer-to-peer contact is more natural and HEIs could still be seen as ivory towers or too administrative. Therefore, the initiative of implementing a buddy programme, driven by the demand from students, is more likely to reach the student associations.

Additionally, among the respondents that have a buddy programme, 34% indicated that it is 2 to 4 years old, 28.67% 5 to 7 years old, 12% 8 to 10 years old, 21.33% more than 10 years old and 4% only less than one year old. If we consider 5 years as a median, we can observe that the majority of the buddy programmes are above this threshold. This also means that the implementation phase is relatively far behind and the buddy programmes' practices may have evolved over time.

2. BUDDY PROGRAMME LOGIC AND PLAYERS INVOLVED

2.1. Encountered obstacles and main reasons of the non-implementation of a buddy programme

If we take an interest in the reasons stated by the portion of the cohort that does not have a buddy programme, the most quoted one from the total of the cohort is the lack of time (32%) or in other words, the lack of human resources.

Among the respondents that do not have a buddy programme, it is noteworthy that the majority (68.89%) are HEIs. At first sight, it would appear that HEIs are more likely to encounter obstacles to the implementation of a buddy programme than student associations. The main reasons mentioned by HEIs are the lack of time (40%), lack of financial resources (20%) as well as, for an equal value (20%), the shortage of local volunteers (local buddies). As far as student associations are

concerned, the major reason put forward for 50% of them is the fact that there is an already existing programme run by another entity (HEI, student association). Among this group, 50% highlight the fact that the competitors are not successful in the implementation of the buddy programme¹. If we cannot totally divert the fact that the comments could possibly be subjective, we could still argue that there is a real need of an efficient and attractive system that could cover the main encountered obstacles from both sides (HEIs and student associations).

2.2. The buddy programmes' reasons of creation²

The creation and implementation of buddy programmes derives from specific needs and aim at bringing solutions to identified issues within the higher education area. On that matter, the survey shows us that both functional/administrative and social guidance are considered very important objectives. In fact, 94.67% of the portion of the cohort that have been implementing a buddy programme states that such

a service should aim at easing the arrival of incoming students in the new city/university. 86% and 84% of them also agree that a buddy programme should provide additional support to international students at large and facilitate their social integration, respectively. Ensuring better cultural integration of the international students seems to be a less common argument that leads to create a buddy programme, but the high percentage collected (78%) still makes it highly relevant. Finally, the last reason mentioned, with an above average percentage (54.67%), points out that a buddy programme should aim at strengthening internationalisation and contributing to the local students' development of intercultural awareness. All of the reasons mentioned above are equally important to the eyes of HEIs and student associations since we can observe a maximum difference of seven points of percentages.

It is interesting to highlight the fact that the same priorities are given to the buddy programmes whether

1 "The university is the one organising something similar but with bad results." or "... we really would like... the one from the competitor is not so good...", data collected from the "Buddy Programmes' practices in Europe", Buddy System consortium, (2018).

2 "The university is the one organising something similar but with bad results." or "... we really would like... the one from the competitor is not so good...", data collected from the "Buddy Programmes' practices in Europe", Buddy System consortium, (2018).

they are recent (< 5 years old) or already existing for more than five years.

In light of the results, we can affirm that the functional/administrative objectives of a buddy programme seem to be the main reasons of its creation. It should also be noted that the first and most quoted objective — “Ease the arrival of incoming students in the new city/university” — builds upon the idea that a buddy programme’s reach is limited. In fact, even though we can argue that the answer is biased as there could be various understandings of the word “arrival”, it is indisputable that it relates to something punctual and/or limited in time. Once the student is familiar with the city/university, the objective would be complete. Therefore, we could put forward that the majority of the buddy programmes do not aim at favouring the appearance of a long-lasting relationship between the local buddy and the international student.

2.3. The sustainability of the buddy programmes³

The main actors involved in

the further development and the sustainability of the buddy programmes at the local level are the student association (87.33%), the university international office (78.67%) and local authorities (6.67%). From the total of the respondents who answered this question, 7.33% also chose to name a specific stakeholder and 0.67% stated that no one is helping them to sustain the buddy programme. Despite not being very representative, as they are in some cases cited only once, we can underline that alumni, cultural organisations, language labs and the community involvement units could also be relevant stakeholders.

Considering the high percentages obtained, we can put forward the fact that student associations and HEIs’ international offices are the two essential elements of the chain. They generally work closely together on the development and sustainability of the buddy programme which makes it difficult to dissociate the involvement and the roles of both of the actors. Thus, we can consider that

international offices and student associations equally participate in the following tasks/activities⁴ : promotion (81.33%), support in recruiting local students (74.67%), organising activities for buddy programme students (69.33%), support in recruiting international students (55.33%), monitoring the activities of students taking part in the buddy programme (52%).

Apart from the main activities undertaken by the different stakeholders in order to run and further develop the buddy programme, the commonly cited answer is: matching local and international students. This proves that the local buddy programme leader outsources, in some cases, one of the main responsibilities of the management of the buddy programme. It could possibly mean that the leader of the initiative does not have the time or the resources to do it internally, and we could put forward that a better and most efficient way of matching international and local students such as the buddysystem.eu platform could potentially offer a solution to the problem.

3. BUDDY PROGRAMME: A LOOK AT THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS

3.1. The enrolment in the buddy programme

The study shows that it is a common practice to enable the local and international students to apply to the buddy programme online (79.37% and 76.98% for local and international students respectively). At this point, it is interesting to highlight the fact that there is no difference between recently created programmes and older programmes. It seems that the communication paradigm in which we are and the arrival of the ICTs have surely eased the transition from paper to digital.

Even if almost the entire application process takes place online, there are still a few 4.76% local and 2.38% international students who have to undergo a paper-based application. The slight difference in points between local and international students is explained by the fact that it is most

3 The data derived from a multiple choice question that enabled the respondent to tick multiple answers, thus the sum of all the percentages is higher than 100%.

4 The data derived from a multiple choice question that enabled the respondent to tick multiple answers, thus the sum of all the percentages is higher than 100%.

common for international students to be automatically enrolled in the programme. In fact, from the 20.63% of the cohort that have answered “Other”, most of them commented that the programme is a part of the welcoming process at their HEI.

If recruiting international students to take part in the programme is relatively easy, especially when automatically matched with one local buddy or multiple local buddies, the issues that one can encounter are the following: 1) there are too few international students to match the number of local students and 2) there are too few local volunteers to be able to match one local buddy per international student. To our understanding, the latter situation is most likely to arise. In fact, as seen above, the support in recruiting local students (74.67%) wins over the support in recruiting international students (55.33%).

On another note, we asked the cohort to inform us about the

different steps that local and international students must go through to take part in the buddy programme. The results show that, in general, there are homogeneous processes for both local and international students:

1) students must fill in a form (hard or digital copy) or create an account on a web platform;
2) the matchmaking is made by a third party (buddy administrator, automatic matchmaking). It should be stressed that in some other cases the matchmaking is made by the local students themselves, as explained by a handful of respondents⁵ : “Both sides have to register in the web application Broaddy⁶. Czech students then get to pick an international student and then contact him” or “Both have to register on the website, local students after that choose their Erasmus buddy.” At this point we can ask ourselves what is the best practice regarding the matchmaking? Should we really give the local students the freedom of choice or should we arbitrarily create the pairs? If we consider that

the quality of a buddy relationship can be measured through its longevity, we can put forward that the principle of homophily is one key to the system. This would mean that the more common points both students have the merrier and thus we can argue that the subjectivity of the local student’s choice in finding an international student could actually be beneficial as they would theoretically be in a better position to find the right companion. However, it is noteworthy that this asymmetric system may reveal shortcomings as giving the possibility to the local students to choose their pair when international students do not have a choice is fundamentally unbalanced and might be unfair. Logically, we could also discuss the fact that the best choice for the local student might not be the best match for the international student. Additional bias can be found in the subjective preferences of the local students and their personal drives.

In parallel to the similar process that we have identified for local and international students, we should highlight that there may be some alternative paths. In fact, in

some cases, two additional steps are added in order for a local student to take part in the buddy programme. One of them is a face-to-face meeting that takes the form of a motivational interview. The idea that some respondents support is the fact that it enables them to truly understand the profound motivation and abilities to communicate of the volunteer and make sure the person is taking their responsibilities seriously: “Local: Come once to us, talk with us, so we see they are not doing just because of fun” or “They need to pass an interview and to speak one of the languages of our Erasmus+ students”. The other step is a buddy training and can take the form of an actual face-to-face training through info sessions or could also be simple documentation on the principles that one local buddy should follow (e.g. “Buddy manual”⁷).

3.2. The student database and its management

The type of tool that is most used to manage the student database is the spreadsheet (48.41%),

5 Data collected from Question 17: “Please describe briefly, what are the different steps that local students and international students (if different) must go through to take part in the buddy programme.”

6 On the Broaddy platform, “Choosing of mentees by mentors (is) based on anonymised profiles (only gender, country and interests).”, available at <https://broaddy.com>.

7 “They (Local students) also need to read the Buddy manual (Broaddy system-<https://upol.broaddy.com/login>)”, “The buddy programmes’ practices in Europe”, question 17.

followed by open online tools such as Buddy System (24.60%), internal tool (15.87%) and finally “other” tools (11.11%). After close analysis of the answers, it appears that the tools mentioned in the “other” category fall under the open-online tools⁸.

The overall results show us that the largest number of respondents favour an offline tool over online ones. At this point, it is interesting to highlight the fact that no correlation can be made between the duration of existence of the buddy programme and the likeliness to use the spreadsheet, as young and older buddy programmes utilise it similarly (45.85% and 50% respectively use the spreadsheet to manage the student database). Moreover, both student associations and HEIs have a similar high percentage of answers for “spreadsheet” (45.07% and 55.56% respectively).

In light of the results or, more precisely, the non-correlations, we can elaborate on the fact that the main reason of the widespread utilisation of the spreadsheet is not related to traditionalism. Although the scope of the research does

not allow us to put forward further conclusions, additional researches on the topic could focus on the individual motivations and mind-sets of the buddy programmes’ coordinators in order to better understand the reasons and drawbacks that one could have to favour offline or online tools for the management of students’ personal data.

3.3. The buddy programmes’ technical management

Most of the time, from the different experiences in the management of the buddy programmes it appears that no technical issue is to report. 45.24% attests not having encountered any when another 34.13% answers that they cannot say. Only 20.63% of the cohort has dealt with technical issues.

The results and comments gathered do not give us a precise overview of the technical issues encountered as some of the answers are unclear, incomplete or irrelevant. However, some of the respondents have pointed out that one issue is to know whether the local and

international students have been able to make contact. If we cannot consider this as a technical issue, we could easily see it as a critical need that one buddy programme coordinator could have. This particular need could be directly answered by the Buddy System platform by adding a feature that would enable the person in charge of the buddy programme to be notified once the student couple has made the first contact or have the international student confirming that (s)he has been contacted. Nonetheless, we have to keep in mind that if a feature of that sort can be implemented, it would probably not be a 100% reliable way to evaluate the actual number of connections made. In fact, both students could potentially use another way to connect with each other (e.g. social media platforms, emails, SMS, etc.). In order to reduce the evaluation’s level of inaccuracy, one solution could be to further develop the user experience and/or the marketing means (e.g. call to actions) of the Buddy System platform. Through such means, users could be highly encouraged and/or rewarded (e.g. reward programmes on the platform could be designed such as collecting badges, etc.) for their contribution on the platform.

From another perspective, we can state that the younger a buddy programme is, the more likely digital technical issues will be encountered (29.17% for the young compared with 15.38% for the older buddy programmes). Even if we cannot completely dismiss the hypothesis which would assume that experience is one of the main factors, the additional comments of the respondents lead us to another conclusion. Buddy programmes that are 8 years old to >10 years old are more likely to use human labour instead of computer-based power to proceed with the matchmaking. The fact that the matching of students is done by hand partially explains the reason why the chances of a digital technical issue to occur are lower.

3.4. The matchmaking specificities

The majority of the respondents (66.94%) tell us that the matchmaking is a data-driven process compared to 22.58% non-data-driven. Data-driven processes mean that there is no place for randomness, in other words, the local buddies and international students are matched according to the personal information they have previously provided. In addition,

⁸ The majority of the respondents mentioned (among “other”): Broaddy, Mobility-Online, Facebook, Buddy System.

10.48% has chosen “other” and 58.34% among those indicates that the matching is made according to the local students’ preferences as they are the ones choosing their “protégé(s)”. The 41.66% left brings up a contrasting answer as the respondents insist on the fact that no matching would be completely data-driven as the whole students’ preferences and the limits of the programme itself (e.g. lack of local volunteers) have to be taken into consideration.

The matchmaking processes are also various as they can either be done by hand (71.77%), or in a semi-automated⁹ (20.97%) or entirely automated (7.26%) way. The most common process for matchmaking is manual, which seems to be in accordance with the results obtained concerning the tool used to manage the student database. In fact, 61.80% of the spreadsheet users proceed with the matchmaking manually. Additionally, almost half of the respondents (46.15%) who have implemented a semi-automatic process have chosen to use an open online tool over the second most used tool, the

spreadsheet (23.08%). Finally, all of the buddy programmes that have a fully automatic process for matchmaking utilise either an open online tool (66.67%) or an internal tool (33.33%). The comparative analysis that can be drawn between the manual, semi-automatic and automatic processes is interesting as it shows that the tool chosen to manage the student database is very likely to determine the way the matchmaking will be done. The patterns show that if an online tool is used for the management of the student database, the process of the matchmaking is at least partially automatic.

As the results have shown, most of the buddy programmes are still relying greatly on human labour and the need of computer-based solutions to either manage the database or proceed with the matchmaking would most certainly reduce the buddy programme coordinators’ workload. In parallel to that, it is interesting to know that in 2017, the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) desk research had already outlined this very issue. In fact, “90% of respondents consider the workload surrounding

the management of Erasmus+ exchanges very high or high.”¹⁰ The arguments developed throughout the report make it clear that the digitisation of the Erasmus+ administration could greatly help saving resources and easing their work. Thus, we could support the idea that all digitised way of managing a buddy programme could offer the same results.

3.5. The matchmaking criteria

The most frequently used criteria¹¹ for matchmaking are the language(s) spoken (76.61%), the field of study (72.58%), the nationality (49.19%), the gender (49.19%), the university campus (45.16%) and the hobbies (41.94%). Other criteria also include the availability of the local buddy (29.03%), the age (21.77%) and the reliability of the local buddy (18.55%). For 13.71%, other criteria come into play: the arrival time of the international student, the local buddy’s previous experience in the country of the international

student(s) (if applicable), local buddy’s specific country or culture interests/wishes, the international student group size that one local student has to manage (in the case where one local buddy is able to supervise multiple internationals at the same time) and finally the overall experience that the local student could have in Erasmus, ESN or in mentoring at large.

The general results show that a large majority of the cohort promptly uses two criteria — the language(s) spoken and the field of study — and these are therefore the prerequisite of a buddy relationship. In fact, these would ensure that both students will be able to communicate and understand each other as well as being able to understand and possibly help with study-specific issues. The nationality, gender, university campus and hobbies are the four following and most popular criteria in percentage points (>40%) and seem to be equally important in the matchmaking process. The conclusion that we can draw at this point is that the three quarters

⁹ A semi-automatic process is a process that is automatic but a person must validate the pairing.

¹⁰ Erasmus Without Paper desk research, European University Foundation, 2017, p. 39. Available at: <https://www.erasmuswithoutpaper.eu/sites/default/files/pages/EWP%20desk%20research%20final%20version.pdf>

¹¹ The data derived from a multiple choice question that enabled the respondent to tick multiple answers, thus the sum of all the percentages is higher than 100%.

of the secondary criteria used to proceed with the matchmaking are based on a cognitive approach. In fact, almost all the elements that are taken into consideration are what we could categorise as civil information. “Hobbies” is the only affective-based criterion among the most used criteria.

In parallel, the respondents have ventured the idea that extra criteria such as the duration of stay of the international student, the local buddy’s intercultural background, personal values, the international and local students’ expectations of the buddy relationship, motivations and commitment of the students taking part in the buddy programme as well as more affective-based criteria (music genres, books they like, etc.) could be a great addition to the matchmaking options.

4. EVALUATING THE STUDENTS’ SATISFACTION

Among the cohort, we can observe two common practices. On the one hand, a majority of respondents

(55.37%) evaluate the satisfaction of students taking part in the buddy programme and on the other hand 44.63% do not. If we have a closer look at the results, we can see that HEIs almost systematically proceed to an evaluation (69.77%) when student associations are less assiduous (52.94%).

From the respondents’ comments, we are able to identify that the most common means of evaluation is a simple form that is provided either offline or online, usually once per semester (at the end) to both local buddies and international students. A handful of respondents also commented¹²: “Local students have the chance to get “points” for a certificate for international cultural contacts during the study period. It is only possible to get the points if you come to a reflection interview.” or “...The tutors do write a report after each matching and may meet the organiser of the International Office whenever they like...”. Those insights show that the evaluation can also integrate a formal, non-formal or informal oral feedback as well as a more complex written feedback.

According to the results obtained, the respondents seem to agree that the overall local buddies are rather satisfied with their buddy experience (61.98%). The experience is very positive for 31.40% of local student bodies and rather not satisfying (5.79%) to not satisfying at all (0.83%) for the rest. The main reasons mentioned¹³ to explain the satisfaction are the possible positive outcomes of one buddy relationship (“great friendships”, “prolong their international experience”, “have a lot of fun”) while, the disappointment is associated with the international student’s lack of commitment to the buddy relationship (“...the incoming student is not reliable”, “Sometimes the international student “use” the locals student for the welcome and then don’t speak again or don’t share with the local student the international life of his Erasmus.”, “...not all of the international students are interested in fostering a relationship with their buddy, they often reach out only when they have a problem.”).

Concerning international students, we can observe the same patterns¹⁴ as for their levels of satisfaction. The positive outcomes of the buddy relationship are also mentioned in order to explain why international students are satisfied with the programme (“meet local students”, “access to local culture”, “lots of events and trips”). Paradoxically, the reasons put forward to depict the non-satisfaction echo the local students’ ones (“The most common reason for not being satisfied is that the local students didn’t spend enough time with the international students.”, “Some of them are disappointed because of a non-response situation. They wait for weeks and they never receive any contact from the local student.”, “The most common problem is the relation between international and local students... It’s difficult for some of them to assure a frequent meeting.”)

It seems that in all the cases, and independently from the perspective taken, the non-satisfaction is a complex result of

¹² Data collected from Question 27: “Do you evaluate the satisfaction of students taking part in the buddy programme?”.

¹³ Data collected from Question 28: “Overall, are local students satisfied with their buddy experience?”.

¹⁴ The majority of international students (68.6%) is rather satisfied, with 26.45% being very satisfied. 4.13% is rather not satisfied, and 0.83% is not satisfied.

things that is initially triggered by a lack of commitment to the buddy relationship. In fact, one of the most important factors¹⁵ to ensure a successful buddy relationship is, according to the respondents, the frequency of contact (92.56%). Secondly, similar interests are essential (54.55%), language(s) spoken (40.50%), same campus (31.40%), similar background (18.18%) and finally general foreign language proficiency (14.88%) are also valuable factors. Others have also insisted on the fact that the personality traits and soft skills of the students (open mindset, good will, level of sociability) should be considered as important factors to a successful buddy relationship.

5. BUDDY PROGRAMME: HOW TO PROMOTE IT TO THE STUDENTS

While improving the buddy

programme's shape and content is key to ensure its sustainability, it is even more important to get the main beneficiaries of the programme on board. If we have a look at the main communication ways and channels used to promote buddy programmes¹⁶, it appears that direct digital communication (84.30%), such as newsletters or emailings¹⁷, is a very popular choice among the respondents. Another equally popular choice is social media¹⁸ (81.82%). The website of the organisation (HEI or student association) is also indicated as a key channel of communication by 70.25% of the cohort as well as word-of-mouth (61.16%). Secondly, printed communication, network of the university and events on campus are equally important ways and channels (+/- 40% each) to spread the word about the programme. A few points of percentage are allocated to events outside campus (14.05%) which could possibly

¹⁵ The data derived from a multiple choices question that enabled the respondent to tick multiple answers, thus the sum of all the percentages is higher than 100%.

¹⁶ The data derived from a multiple choice question that enabled the respondent to tick multiple answers, thus the sum of all the percentages is higher than 100%.

¹⁷ The communication tools mentioned are part of an overarching push-communication strategy where receivers get the information from senders without any action required. (e.g. billboards)

¹⁸ Social media is a communication tool that is part of a pull-communication strategy where receivers have to fetch the information sent from senders. (e.g. search on internet)

mean there is a lack of resources (financial or human) that does not allow an extension of the promotion outside campus or that the means do not allow enough targeting.

In the context of the communication paradigm in which we find ourselves today, the growth of new technologies and media have greatly impacted our ways to reach out to the world that surrounds us. According to the respondents' answers, the best ways to connect with local students are via social media (80.99%), direct digital communication (68.60%) or word-of-mouth (61.98%), while the more efficient ways to get in touch with the international students are direct online communication (80.17%) and social media (78.51%). In light of the results, we can put forward that it is undeniably more effective to use online rather than offline communication means to reach out to the students. If some of the respondents underlined the fact that it is difficult to enrol students in general but more specifically local students into the buddy programme, we could possibly

find solutions in the intensification of the direct and indirect online communication towards the main beneficiaries and give particular attention to the human factor via knowledge and experience sharing among students throughout the year (e.g. testimonials of previous local buddies during information sessions).

6. BUDDY RELATIONSHIPS AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

6.1. The students and the buddy programme

The most common types of activities that are organised within the buddy programme framework¹⁹ are social activities (e.g. networking events) and cultural activities (e.g. tour of the city) which collect 90.60% and 72.65% respectively. Other popular ones are language-oriented activities (52.14%) followed by sports activities (46.15%). As shown through the results, the social activities are essential as they can be a good

¹⁹ The data derived from a multiple choice question that enabled the respondent to tick multiple answers, thus the sum of all the percentages is higher than 100%.

base to create a strong and long-lasting buddy relationship. Culture is also really important when on mobility as it can potentially help students to understand the subtleties of history and heritage but this type of activities could eventually be less attractive to local students. Finally, language-oriented activities are key to unlock a better comprehension and experience of the mobility at large while collective sports could be a useful way to create a bond between students.

On another note, we can observe that the two most preeminent reasons why local students participate in the buddy programme are because they were once an international student themselves and feel concerned (83.76%) or because they want to learn more about another culture/language (78.63%). Other frequently mentioned reasons are that local students seek new relationships (63.25%), would like to improve their soft skills (50.43%) or contribute to the student life (41.88%). If multiple motivations could also be applied simultaneously to one student, we believe that one would always dominate. However, although we can draw an unequivocal

conclusion on the reasons why one local student would enrol into the programme, we have to keep in mind that the data collected is biased as it reflects the subjective opinion of the respondents who are not themselves beneficiaries of the programme.

In parallel to that, we can see that a majority of the programmes do not offer any kind of recognition to local students for participating in the buddy programme. However, 43.59% do integrate rewards to motivate the students in the programme. A simple certificate of participation is delivered 30.77% of the time while ECTS credits allocation (12.82%) and financial rewards (5.98%) are rarer. Also, and despite the a priori, it is to note that the rewards appear not to be a striking and decisive reason for the local students to take part in the programme as it has only gathered 20 votes out of the total number of the respondents that have a buddy programme.

6.2. The students' personal development

To analyse the competences and soft skills that both local and international students are more likely to develop and/or improve while participating in the buddy

programme, we can compare the variables and the corresponding points in percentages while looking at the local or international students' perspectives. In light of the results, it seems both international and local buddies tend to develop and improve the same set of skills. In fact, the competences that got 70% or higher are the following three: a) Intercultural understanding (L²⁰: 80.76%, I²¹: 82.91%), b) Cultural awareness (L: 83.76%, I: 79.49%) and c) (Foreign) Language proficiency (L: 75.21%, I: 76.92%). While improving language proficiency is one of the most common outcomes of a buddy relationship, it is important to note that 92.38% of the time that language is English. Spanish (4.75%), French (0.95%) and German (1.90%) are also mentioned but insignificantly.

Moreover, some differences are to be highlighted when we look at the competences between 50% and 70%. In fact, we can count a total of five competences for the local students in this group (in order of importance: efficiency in communication, networking,

mentoring, empathy and respect) when only three competences for the international students (in order of importance: networking, efficiency in communication and adaptability). Finally, when we look at the rest of the competences (below 50%), the results become much more heterogeneous as we can observe large variations in points of percentage: adaptability (L: 44.44%, I: >50%) ability to listen (L: 44.44%, I: 29.91%), self-management (L: 24.79%, I: 30.77%), attentiveness (L: 20.51%, I: 18.80%), leadership (L: 16.24%, I: 1.71%), respect (L: >50%, I: 45.30%), empathy (L: >50%, I: 23.08%), mentoring (L: >50%, I: 4.27%).

7. BUDDY PROGRAMMES IN NUMBERS

To have an idea of the scope of the buddy programmes across Europe and to support this research with concrete figures, the respondents have been asked to evaluate in numbers different aspects of their student flows and

20 The letter "L" stands for local students.

21 The letter "I" stands for international students.

buddy programme impact. It is noteworthy that data have been previously cleared as some of the answers were invalid and would have compromised the results.

7.1. International and local students' ratio disequilibrium

All in all, when we look at the numbers of students registered at the responding organisations, we can notice a large gap between the minimum (1) and maximum (56,000) values. In fact, both HEIs and student associations have answered this question according to their own organisation realities which makes it hard to build valid trends. In our study framework, we will look at the total amount of students registered at the responding HEIs and exclude the results of the student associations to this specific question to ensure that the number of student registered²² per se are defined as students being enrolled into a

study programme at the HEI and not volunteers and/or employees working for a student association.

According to the results, HEIs host in average 20,473²³ students. Among them, an average of 319 international students participate each year in the buddy programme²⁴ while only 131 locals do. The ratio of international students per local student is thus 2.4²⁵. These results support the previously raised issue that it seems to be harder to recruit local buddies than international students and that the buddy coordinators will generally have to match more than one international student per local student in order to satisfy the demand in buddies. In reality, the trend is verified as respondents state that they pair, on average, 2.4²⁶ international students with one local student. When looking curtly at the results, we could consider that the impact of the buddy programmes are not yet considerable as only 2.20%

of the total population of students are participating as either a local buddy or an international student. However, those results should be taken with a pinch of salt as they are also directly related to the incoming students flow and the capacity and resources of the host institution that cannot be accurately evaluated in the frame of this study.

7.2. The longevity of the buddy relationship

Finally, the respondents have been asked to estimate (in months) the duration of the buddy relationships. The average result to the question (5.04 months) leads us to think that one buddy experience is meant to last, in broad terms, one semester. While considering the fact that most of the Erasmus+ students go abroad for 6.2 months²⁷, this would mean that the buddy relationships would generally not survive beyond the study period at the host institution. This clearly proves that one buddy relationship has more chances to last when both of the

students can physically meet. The physical presence of the students is therefore the cement of the social tie that links one with another in the frame of a buddy programme. Thus, we have reasons to believe that the development of social activities for local buddies and international students is key to the success of buddy relationships.

22 Denomination used in the questionnaire Buddy Programmes' practices in Europe.

23 Rounded up number.

24 This average number derives from the total answers of both HEIs and student associations.

25 Rounded up number.

26 Average number obtained with the data gathered to the following question of the Buddy programmes' practices in Europe questionnaire: On average, how many international students are paired with one local student?.

27 Student mobility for studies average duration (in months), in European Commission, 2015, Erasmus: Facts, Figures & Trends, p. 7. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/statistics/erasmus-plus-facts-figures_en.pdfThe data derived from a multiple choice question that enabled the respondent to tick multiple answers, thus the sum of all the percentages is higher than 100%.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: BUDDY PROGRAMMES' PRACTICES IN EUROPE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

1. METHODOLOGY AND STUDY POPULATION

1.1. Definition of the research goals

The main goal of the qualitative research is to study and develop existing instruments for welcoming and supporting international students from European universities. We are focusing on existing tools facilitating the process of assigning local students (buddies) to interested international (incoming) students and on additional measures to support the integration of incomings via these arranged local student – incoming student relationships. Therefore we gathered the experiences concerning the local programmes, the expectancies and ideas for improvements on both sides (local buddies and incoming students). Hereby, we also aimed at showing

the development of competence on both sides for eventually official recognition in the future.

1.2. Methodology

The qualitative study was done in three different European countries, Austria, Finland and Great Britain at three universities, where buddy programmes were already implemented, i.e. at the three partner universities in the project (University of Hertfordshire, University of Eastern Finland, and University of Vienna). Altogether, we conducted 30 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with both, incoming students (15 interviews) and local buddies (15 interviews) to include both perspectives. During the period of investigation (March to July 2018), we had 12 interviews in Austria, 10 in Finland and 8 in Great Britain. Interviews had a length between 19 and 43 minutes. To get access to the students, we worked together with the local

student networks and universities' international offices for welcoming students from abroad.

In Vienna, the interview guideline with open questions was elaborated and afterwards shared with the project partners. After this feedback process, the guideline, which was also partly informed by the structure and outcomes from the quantitative study, was adapted and finally used by all the three partner organisations to perform the interviews. There are two versions of the guideline, one for local buddies, one for incoming students. The interviews were video-recorded and transcribed in each country.

We asked questions concerning the following topics:

- Personal background
- Motivation for becoming a buddy/for going abroad
- Experiences as a buddy/as an international student abroad
- Experiences with the use of the Buddy System platform (or the local matching tool in use)
- Inclusiveness
- Expectations on relationship between buddy and incoming student
- Competences developed
- Languages

- Formal recognition and evaluation

To analyse the transcripts we conducted a qualitative content analysis. Categories were built deductively prior to analysing the data and they are based on the main topics from the interview guideline. Categories were applied on the transcripts with the help of the computer-based programme Maxqda.

1.3. Characterisation of interviewees

Among the 30 respondents who were interviewed, two third (21 persons) were female and one third male (9 persons). They were aged between 20 and 32. In Great Britain, the interviewed incoming students stem from Europe (Italy, Norway) and Asia (South Korea), and the interviewed buddies as well have different nationalities: 2 from Great Britain, 1 from Latvia and 1 from Estonia. In Finland, however, the buddies included in this study are Finnish and incoming students stem from Europe (Austria, Germany, Romania and Turkey) and Asia (Syria). The interviewed Austrian buddies have Austrian, German and Italian (South Tyrol) nationality, incoming students have European (Czech Republic,

France, Germany, Netherlands) and Asian (Taiwan) nationalities.

2. THE STUDENTS' MOTIVATIONS TO TAKE PART IN A INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE

2.1. Motivation for becoming a buddy

Local buddies have a wide range of reasons why they wanted to become buddies for welcoming international students. Their principal motivation lies in cases, where buddies themselves took part in an exchange programme before (either as a student in school or at university), often in their **own lived experience abroad**. In some cases they had been supported by buddies, in other cases they were a little bit lost when they arrived in the new country. However, they have first-hand knowledge on the importance of being welcomed, informed and supported when arriving in a new country.

"Probably, my experience in Nicaragua, because I had much support from people over there and they were incredibly friendly,

showed me everything and, I don't know, I thought, I should give it back, somehow." (I6A)

After having lived for a semester or a year abroad, students often continue to study at home and they want to preserve the feeling of going international. So they become a buddy and try to continue their life of an Erasmus student by getting to know and **meeting Erasmus students** at their home university. Others have not been abroad for study reasons yet and try to compensate by meeting international students **at home**. Another big motive is **intercultural exchange** without going abroad and the willingness to establish and develop new intercultural contacts. Quite similar is the intention **to get to know new perspectives** from people stemming from other countries. Some students pursue more personal goals and try **to make new friends** in the international context. They would like to have new friends in other countries in order to be able to stay in touch after the international student's stay abroad and to be able to visit the new friend afterwards in his/her home country.

Sometimes more altruistic moves prevail. Students **enjoy helping newcomers** at their university

and incoming Erasmus students as well. They like to show others around, to share their knowledge and expertise and to give useful hints concerning living in the new city, studying at a new university and immersing into a new and unknown culture.

Especially for local students, the possibility **to improve one's language skills** is another big incentive to become a buddy. For these students it is essential to get a perfect match concerning language competences.

"It would have been great, if I had someone, who speaks one of the languages that I can speak, simply for being able to refresh, and it is fun when you can use it." (I1A)

"But originally I would say that my motivation was simply that I'm interested in learning languages so I need to practice them. I would forget about my Russian, for example, and my Mandarin Chinese, which I studied in my school environment very easily, if I didn't have any verbal practice." (I2F)

2.2. Motivation for becoming an

international student

International students have a bundle of individual motives when it comes to their decision to study abroad. They are eager to get into contact with new cultures. In some cases their main motive is rather **meeting new cultures** and people from all over the world than doing their studies in a foreign country as such.

"Studying is important but you can study in your home country just as well. I think it was more about getting to know people from other countries and seeing the world." (I4F)

Getting to know new cultures, usually, goes hand in hand with their **passion for travelling** for a longer period of time than it is normally possible, when you are simply on holiday in another country. Due to the high costs that are often linked to a long stay abroad they like to take the more economic opportunity during their studies to live for some months or years in a culturally different environment: *"You can never go for so long so cheap, basically, abroad and have so many experience meeting new people from all over the world and even do travelling."*

(I7F)

Following a more cognitive approach, we also learned that **work-related reasons** can have a major impact on the decision process: Building up new competences to be able to operate in the working world later on, having better chances in recruiting situations because of an excellent CV which excels in virtue of internships or studies abroad or more favorable career prospects came up in the qualitative interviews conducted for this study.

“So the idea was that if I have to go for it, I have to do a master in public health or health administration, because it gives me an advantage when I’m applying for expatriate in other countries or even in the headquarters in other organisations like the United Nations.” (I6F)

“I also wanted to see another culture, live another place, be adventurous and then I will see the benefits from having things in English, and be able to adapt to another culture and adapt another system in my work later on and that will really improve my communication with human beings and be able to speak in different ways to different types of people.”

(I1GB)

However, the main motivation to join the Erasmus exchange programme, of course, might also be purely for **study reasons**. To **broaden up the local perspective of studying at home** only, which could be seen as too narrow, to get to know new approaches, theories and practices in the own field of study, to learn other subjects or another focus than at home are some other goals of international students. Furthermore, a **good reputation of the host university** can impact on the enthusiasm for studying in a foreign country or city. Sometimes, former, usually, **positive foreign experiences** made in school or during another stay for study purposes, inform the current willingness to go for it again.

“I guess my principle motivation was to get to know a different surrounding of studying, different educational system and to deepen my knowledge in a different field then my home university may be focusing on.” (I8F)

“So, first of all, I always wanted to go somewhere, like, here to study, and then I got the opportunity to do the Erasmus project.” (I5GB)

Another big issue is **language**. In this realm we noticed local differences as well as differences linked to pursuing certain courses of studies. On the one hand, students who are studying languages (linguistics, translation studies etc.) are going to countries where they can practice and develop their target language(s). On the other hand, as we have seen above, also local buddies are interested in practicing their already acquired language competences. Therefore, the language use in the buddy relationship is in these cases a major challenge for both sides, because the students involved have to negotiate somehow their language practices in order to keep both parties satisfied. If they do not manage this process of negotiation properly, at least one party is left more or less unsatisfied behind. As for the local differences, we could observe that if host countries with an for language learners attractive local language, i.e. a language that is frequently learned by students in Europe, in our case Great Britain (English) and Austria (German), are selected by international students, and, according to our findings, they chose their place of study mainly for language learning purposes.

“I wanted to improve my English, that was the main thing.” (I1GB)

“I saw a lot of the UK movie so I loved the accent, the UK accent, but usually in Korea guys, all Korean guys were in the American accent but I’m so interested in the UK accent so I want to come to, in UK and I want to learn the English words.” (I8GB)

In the case of Great Britain, the motivation to develop their proficiency in English is true for students regardless of their course of study, as English as the dominant lingua franca in the Western world is known to all international students there. In Austria, it seems to be depending on the course of study and/or the motivation and interest in the local language. In any case, usually international students in Austria who are willing to practice German (instead of English only) have prior competences and knowledge of the local language.

“I always knew, I wanted to go to a German speaking country, because I wanted to improve my German, it was an obvious choice.” (I4A)

“Simply to improve my language competences, so that I am able to

interpret without any problems.” (I3A)

In Finland, however, international students often do not have prior knowledge of the local language. If they come for language learning purposes, they intend to practice English, which does not exclude a certain interest and willingness to get some skills in Finnish as well.

“Also probably the language. So, being forced to communicate in a language other than your native language is always good practice. And that being English. But also trying to learn some Finish because it’s a very, different languages to what the languages I’ve been studying so far. So I thought that’s a really interesting experience and it’s always different to stay in another country for more than just a holiday, so, to really get to know another culture maybe.” (I8F)

Often some of the above mentioned reasons to study abroad are combined with a **recommendation** from peers, who have been studying abroad as well, from the home university, which intends to promote studies abroad, or from the student’s family.

“My family encouraged me to study abroad to see different cultures.” (I9F)

To sum it up, the students’ motives for becoming a local buddy or for going abroad are important for this study, because they impact heavily on the perceived experiences in the buddy relationship and on the satisfaction with the current matching criteria and process in place.

3. STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES IN BUDDY RELATIONSHIP

3.1. The preferred matching criteria

Concerning the **preferred matching criteria** the qualitative study confirms partly the quantitative results. In our interviews buddies and international students mentioned the following matching criteria as essential for a good match:

- Same/Similar course of studies
- Common language(s)
- Common interests, hobbies, sports
- Age
- Country of origin, ethnicity

It should be mentioned that the

list above is not a ranking and that the answers differed a lot between individuals as far as their assigned importance is concerned. However, for international students it seems to be quite useful to have a buddy, who knows a lot about their **course of study**, their curriculum and the administrative requirements in their host university. The key issue here is that local buddies are able to support the international students in these regards, so that they can pursue their studies without having too many frictions, and when questions of all kind arise. If the buddies can do so, it is not necessary in every case that the studies of the students are the same. On the contrary, some students prefer rather differences than similarities.

“If you study the same subject as your buddy does then you can actually give an insight on the subject, courseworks, and how the school operates itself.” (I7GB)

“Last semester it was good because, well, I am a geography student and we had only geography students for two of us. So it was easier to integrate the people and the group and also the Erasmus students to our Finnish student association and

our parties and our social groups. But this semester it was it was a bit harder because my tutees were of forestry and education, it was not as much common ground and that’s probably the reason why I haven’t hung out this semester with my tutees as much.” (I1F)

3.2. The importance of language

Relating to languages, it is very important to have a common language, which is usually at least English. But to see the bigger picture, it is necessary to look at the linguistic background of students, their actual language proficiency and preferences. When arriving in the foreign country, the language proficiency of international students (in English or another local language, e.g. German) is not always that high, it develops only by and by. Therefore, according to our finding, it seems advisable also to have other languages in common, e.g. the native languages of incoming students.

“Language is also important, because she also knows the Korean words, so I feel so comfortable in here and at first I don’t have the understanding skills, but she told the Korean words, so I think the language is so important.” (I8GB)

The quote above shows that for meeting the needs of some international students (e.g. feeling more comfortable abroad, being able to communicate also in his or her first language), it can be an additional asset, if the local buddy knows the first language of his or her assigned student. So to have more than one language in common, like in this case, can meet the needs of the incoming students as well as the language learning needs of the local buddy. "If they say grammatically wrong English, I would say it back to them, you know, if I'd say it in Korean, they'd say the same to me so we're both learning." (I8GB)

In all three case-study countries, respondents attached a high importance to the language issue and to the high level of responsibility of coordinators in the matching process concerning language issues:

"I think having some language, at least a shared language, a shared language because even here sometimes very rarely but sometimes we have people who only speak a language that a normal Finnish person can't speak. So not English, not Finnish, not Swedish but something else and their other languages are quite

weak, so in that situation the buddy system would have to, at least on our organisation or level, I'd say minimising the language barrier, if possible, or and minimising geographical borders, if possible or geographical distance." (I2F)

3.3. Other criteria: a pinch of homophily

Common interests, hobbies, or sports, that can be practised together, are helpful, because it also assures that local buddies and incoming students have immediately something to talk about and in the long run, it helps to organise activities together, that both are fond of. Especially, the focus on planning and doing things together seems to be essential for an active and good relationship in the long term.

Some of the respondents also mentioned **age** as an important criterion, because they experienced an age gap of more than three years as hindering. Life experiences and interests were too different according to the interviewees. However, it must be noted that in these cases age was not the only reason why a buddy-incoming student-relationship did not work out well. Linked to cultural

and linguistic preferences, also **ethnicity** and **country of origin** were indicated.

Only from the local buddies' point of view, the following criteria were named:

- Living in the same area
- Equal treatment
- Gender
- Personality

For practical reasons and to be able to meet each other more frequently, geographical proximity **or living in the same area** in the host country was indicated. Especially in Finland, where distances are larger and winters are colder, this is an obvious issue, whereas in cities like Vienna (Austria) with a well working and quite comfortable public transport system other criteria are more important.

As our interviewed students in Finland do not dispose over the Buddy System platform yet, they do not experience the principle of reciprocity, **equal treatment** or double choice concerning the preferences or matching criteria that they can indicate when participating in the local buddy programme. Therefore they ask for this opportunity, so that incoming

students, like the local buddies, can indicate their preferences, too.

"So there should be reciprocity and equal, like, social equity should be considered, that you don't favor any side. So I think that could be the first criteria that, if choice is given to both participants so from organized perspective, from the perspective of the University, for example, that both groups, either domestic students or international students, are treated with at least the goal of equity." (I2F)

For some persons, the possibility to choose the **gender** of the incoming student is also relevant, as well as **personality** matching, which is for practical reasons more a theoretical wish than a criterion, which is seriously demanded.

"Of course, personality, but you can't really choose what kind of people you are going to meet." (I1F)

As for the international students, they ask for buddies who are willing to meet with their international students frequently, who are really available and **have enough time** for joint activities, and who are able to build up and maintain a **positive interpersonal relationship**. In return, it is also their own obligation

to reserve enough time for their relationship with the buddy and to invest personally into it, including **having an interest** in the local culture.

- Showing interest/Having an understanding for the other (culture)
- Having time
- Positive interpersonal relationship

3.4. Students first meeting and joint activities

The first contact and the **first meeting** are obviously crucial for developing a good relationship. In practice, sometimes there are a few obstacles to meet these requirements. Technical problems with the current platform, as well as late matching or wrong data (e.g. a false date of arrival, that is indicated in the system) or a mismatch in terms of absolutely ignoring any preference (matching criteria) that was asked for can easily block the establishment of a good relationship or even prevent a first personal meeting. Beside of these organisational obstacles, the students themselves might decide not being any more interested in the buddy-incoming student relationship (e.g. because they are already integrated in the new

social system), which leaves often one frustrated partner behind. At the moment, there are not enough instruments or strategies available to the students to handle this kind of problems.

However, in most cases a first meeting takes place and many students (locals and incoming) really appreciate these encounters. Below there are some positive experiences listed:

“And then he picked me up from the train station. Since I was the first time here, I think it was nice of the dude and also he led me to my house, give me my keys, because the Elli office is not open after four or five, I think, and I arrived kind of at six or seven. So we went together to my home, leave my luggage and help me to take my SIM card and my internet and introduced me to the environment. So it was nice, I mean. He, also showed us the school after that they showed us around and explained how to pay rents or where to buy stuff, and first time meeting here we didn't have pillow or any blanket, so he described us where to buy, the way to the market, and there can we look whether they are open or not. Also he showed us the Carelicum if we needed anything else we can

find him here or we can text him or something like that.” (I9F)

“I remember, I think she wrote to me per email and then we connected on facebook, I think, and there was other two students and then we met in one café near the main university building and we started talking in English and then we realised that we all talk German, so we talked in German and we talked mainly about where we come from and to become more comfortable and then the buddy told us about Vienna and about the districts and what people say about which, because that's what we were interested in, we asked about the city.” (I4A)

“I invited them to go eat at a local restaurant and we just got to know each other that way. My other buddy I gave her a bit of a choice, you know 'do you wanna go to a pub it's really British' or do you want to go to a restaurant or stuff and she was just like she really likes beer so I was like “ok yeah we can go to a pub”, so that's just, I feel like bonding over food is always good. With the other three, I emailed them and was talking with them on Facebook, so we'd already, kind of had a rapport with them, on friendly terms and I met all

of them individually, but basically when they arrived in Hatfield I helped them with their bags and helped them move into campus.” (I2GB)

The local buddy-incoming student relationships can be characterised as quite diverse. They differ in terms of frequency of contact and intensity, quality of contact (personal versus via social media), personal investment, availability and the range of doing **joint activities**. More specifically, the students in all three case study countries dispose over a broad spectrum of joint activities and their individual choice is depending on practical requirements, options, and personal interests. They can be grouped into four categories: There are practical activities mainly concerning housing, administration and infrastructure, cultural activities linked to the host country's culture, physical activities (mainly sports) and social activities (making friends, networking, having fun together). Table 2 shows some typical joint activities.

In cases where the degree of activity is quite high, where the

Practical activities	Accompany student to apartment Showing campus
Cultural activities	Sightseeing together Showing city Travelling together Visiting Christmas market Movies Theatre
Physical activities	Sports Walking Experiencing nature
Social activities	Eating and drinking together Inviting each other at home (eating, dancing etc.) Cooking together Parties and events Café Pub Sauna evenings Volunteering, social engagement together

Table 2: Typical joint activities

students manage to become friends, they **keep (personal) contact** over the whole period of the international student's stay in the host country and further on via social media. Sometimes they visit each other after the incoming student has left the country. Others have no personal contact at all or just one meeting. The frequency of contact is quite different depending heavily on the commitment and the mutual sympathy of the partners. Some of them meet every day, once a week or twice a month, in many cases the frequency of contact decreases after some weeks or months, but there are exceptions.

"We were in touch every day and three of my tutees they stayed here and applied for master programmes, so, like now, we are taking trips together, we are seeing almost every day and so I really, really I think that they are like perfect matches for me." (I3F)

"Maybe once a month I ask the ones I was more acquainted with about what they have been doing and so on and I have plans to visit them eventually but there is a lot of them so there are many places I should go to and there's only so much time." (I4F)

We also asked students about their **most striking experiences** in their buddy – incoming student relationship. Usually, they reported on nice and unexpected behaviours and situations, although they also could mention negative ones. Below, there are some exemplifying quotations from the interviews. It is worth mentioning that often the most striking experiences were linked to the first meetings.

"And it was a Saturday night and it was February, it was minus 22 degrees, and only bars were open and I'm not a partying or at least not a bar-going type, so I was sitting outside on a bench in the city centre at near the bus stop where the airport shuttle bus should stop, and after an hour, I think, it was still like 30 minutes postponed again, so I was waiting there in the cold for about two hours until the airport, the plane finally landed and the airport bus finally arrived, because the airport also takes some time. So I was really cold, but I felt that at least they get the apartment key." (I2F)

"What I found particularly nice was that she always introduced me as the best buddy on earth." (I2A)

"I think, I wasn't expecting this

much help, because I know that sometimes people really do not do it, so I was kind of very concerned about that, but Sami gave a warm, warm welcome and helped us with the environment and told us that sometimes it can be like this, but we should consider also there are Finns that are really open-minded and really warm, so not to worry about them, I think this was the most striking because I was expecting a little bit cold maybe."

(I9F)

4. STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE BUDDY SYSTEM PLATFORM (OR LOCAL MATCHING TOOL)

The Buddy System platform is currently in use only at the partner universities in Hertfordshire and Vienna. This is why only results from these places are named in this section of the qualitative study. To make it more known and to guarantee a sufficient number of local (and incoming) students who actually participate in the buddy programmes of universities, a high publicity of the matching tool is indispensable. In fact, results show that mostly the **international students are informed well,**

whereas local students often get to know it only by accident or because they studied abroad before and took part in a buddy programme at their host university.

The incoming students usually get a personal email from the (host) university, local students have to find out about the possibility to become a buddy often on their own. This is why the respondents ask for more information about and **promotion** for it. Regardless of some emails about the system sent out by the universities also to local students and of some entries on social media or the local ESN sections' website, local students have not paid much attention to the buddy programme until now, and the interviewed local buddies mentioned that they were rather informed by their friends or by navigating haphazardly through the web. Interestingly, some of the interviewees did not even register via the matching tool Buddy System, but either they were directly contacted by ESN or by their faculty. To sum it up, there seems to be some room for manoeuvre concerning promotional activities for the Buddy System platform and for the universities' buddy programmes in the future.

Once, students got access to the platform they consider it usually as **user-friendly and easily accessible**. However, technical problems were reported, that hindered the person affected to enter her or his preferences. We also got informed that the range of languages available should be enlarged and, if you click on the link that it is possible at first that the French version of Buddy System pops up only. This is for not French-speaking persons a little challenge.

Mostly in Vienna (Austria), some buddies and some incoming students were unsatisfied with the **lack of consideration of their preferences** (e.g. languages in common, course of studies, age), also late matching (after arrival) was reported and wrong data in the system (false date of arrival). These experiences did not necessarily hinder a good buddy-incoming student relationship subsequently, but they were seen as obstacles to be overcome.

We also asked about the **perceived inclusiveness of the current online tool**. The respondents were requested to judge, if the Buddy System platform was fully accessible for

students with disabilities or not. Many of the respondents have not thought about this issue until then and had only little memory of the tool. So we offered them some possible examples on how to make a website more inclusive, e.g. pictures with an alternative acoustic description, non-acoustic signals, font size, contrasting colours, complexity of language in use etc.

Interestingly, one of the respondents really was aware of the topic and could recall somehow:

“Yeah, I’m a graphic designer so I can tell you: when I opened the page there was this big image and then there was this small text behind. That was all along the image, and it was really close to the image so probably to leave a little bit of space between the image and the text and to not make everything bold; I still remember it after nine months!” (I5GB)
In general, the language of the platform was considered as easily understandable and the navigation as not complicated.

5. BUDDY PROGRAMMES AND INCLUSIVENESS

Next, we asked respondents about the perceived inclusiveness of the university's buddy programme itself. Generally, the **buddy programmes** as such are **seen as inclusive**, as it embraces diversity per se and because the idea of the programme is to help other international students to get integrated and to be welcomed, to assist them with everyday problems as well as with study issues. However, these were very spontaneous answers, as most of the interviewees did not think about this topic before and did not know any local or international student with disabilities personally.

However, we also interviewed a local buddy who has been assisting an international student with a disability, so in this single case the interviewed buddy experienced that it was possible and manageable to study abroad for students with disabilities. Although it was clearly indicated that it means mostly an even greater challenge for someone with disabilities to relocate and to live in a foreign country. In order to **attract more international students with disabilities**, it

could be helpful, according to the respondents, to make lived experiences of studying abroad more visible, e.g. on the website of the university in matter. In other words, they recommend, for example, field reports from other students (with disabilities) who had studied at that place before.

“But if you know about the programmes or if you know, if you actually know someone who lived here or, read about this kind of things that they do, I think it would be easier for people to choose.” (19F)

Furthermore more (targeted) **information** on the accessibility of the university and other university services and activities is needed to attract persons with disabilities, because it would be essential for them to know what is possible and what not, and which kind of assistance is to be expected (e.g. in terms of accommodation).

“Describing the services available both in terms of just inclusiveness and what in Finnish we call the ‘esteettömyys’ which sometimes refers to just wheel-chair access but sometimes it refers to all the whole range of possible physical and mental disabilities that the

accessibility, that’s what they call it in English. So I think, there is something on that maybe on the webpage.” (12F)

Additionally, information on the environment outside the university, the infrastructure of the city is necessary as well, e.g. if the public transports are (fully) accessible or if the city has other services available for students with disabilities. An **extra encouragement** for going abroad could be needed, according to the respondents, as well as the offer of special scholarships. As for the buddy programme, it would be useful to inform the local buddy in advance, if the incoming student agrees.

6. EXPECTATIONS ON A PERFECT RELATIONSHIP

The interviewed students were asked to describe their expectations on a perfect local buddy-incoming student-relationship and they agreed largely upon the wish to build up a **friendship** and to **be active and spend time together**.

“I would love to have the close social interaction because you

don’t maintain or get a good friendship, if there was no time enough for this person and many things to share together and do together, activities or whatever, so this way you can get to know each other more and if you felt that this is a good person that I want to have as a friend, of course, you have to do double effort to keep this person.” (16F)

Another big issue is **mutuality**, i.e. that both sides are equally interested in the relationship and linked to it so that both sides are gaining something out of the relationship. For example, coming back to languages, if both students are keen on practising the first language of their partner, they have to agree on that and realise it by choosing adequate linguistic practices (code switching, assigning each language a certain time frame etc.). Beside **language exchange**, there are a lot of other things they can learn from each other, like e.g. knowledge of the other culture, cultural practices (e.g. cooking) etc. (**cultural exchange**).

The students describe the perfect relationship also in terms of ideal personality traits or behaviors, like being **open, respectful** or being

humorous. More operational aspects of a good partnership were also mentioned, like having a satisfying **time planning** and scheduling together and sharing the **same course of study**.

7. DEVELOPED COMPETENCES

Local buddies and international students develop similar competences. We can group them into eight different categories, which are, of course, partly overlapping: **Self-competences, social skills, cultural competences, organisational competences, communication skills, linguistic skills, personal development, and knowledge**. Table 3 shows the eight categories, both for local buddies as well as for international students, and presents some given examples. Certainly, the range of examples could be enlarged within each category, if we studied the developed competences more in-depth.

	Local Buddy	International Student
Self-competences	Responsibility Commitment	Get self-organised
Social skills	Helpfulness Bridging person to other locals	Empathy Respect
Cultural competences	Cultural openness Intercultural comprehension Knowledge about other cultures Enlarging own perspective Tolerance	Knowledge about other cultures Tolerance Experiencing the other culture Enlarging own perspective Adapting Cross-cultural communication
Organisational competences	Talent for organising Problem solving	Co-organising events
Communication skills	Introducing oneself Courage to talk to people Finding topics Acting outgoing	Courage to talk to people Daring to ask Communication with authorities
Linguistic skills	Language proficiency Metalinguistic awareness Social interaction with a language learner	Language proficiency
Personal development	Openness Initiative Friendship Trust Self reflection Empathy	Independence Self confidence Openness Self reflection Learning to lead a relaxed life
Knowledge	About university structure and policy About practical things About own country Teaching local characteristics	About host country's policy

Table 3: Developed competences

The following quote describes a typical self-assessment of a developed competence:

“Well, you meet a lot of new people, so I suppose it teaches you tolerance. I like to think I was

quite tolerant even before, but I've seen more people from various cultures than I normally would so that's definitely helped and, also maybe some people who I might have had some light bias towards before and this has helped me to

see that these bias were wrong. People are people no matter where you go.” (I4F)

8. ZOOM IN ON THE LANGUAGE ISSUE

Students in Great Britain and Finland mainly used **English** in their buddy-incoming student relationship. However, if language as matching criterion was taken into consideration, language practices offered a more complex picture.

“My buddy want to learn the more Korean word and I want to learn more English, so always we talk, she use the Korean word and I use the English word because we can understand both languages so we use both and she used Korean and I use English and I think it's so good development for us.” (I8GB)

“I'd say 70 % Korean, 30 % English.” (I2GB)

These examples from Great Britain demonstrate that students' language practices can be multilingual, even in an English-speaking country. The **incoming student's native language** was dominant in their communication

and in this way both partners could meet their individual language learning needs as well as more identity-related needs, like having the possibility to practice one's native language. The same is true in some cases in Finland, where English usually prevails, as incoming students rarely possess enough language proficiency in Finnish to be able to lead conversations. But the use of the incoming student's native language is rather an option. Students reported there that they also practiced, German, Russian and a bit of Mandarin Chinese.

It is noteworthy that the situation in Vienna (Austria) can be characterised completely different. The interviewed students used mainly the **local language German**, sometimes in addition to English depending on who was participating in their conversation. If incoming students in Vienna have a high proficiency in German, practicing the local language is usually also their main motive for having chosen Vienna as a place for their studies, especially if they pursue language-related studies, and this means that the actual use of their native language has to be negotiated between the partners. If local partners are highly interested

in practicing the incoming student's native language, they try to do so and sometimes they succeed, depending on their partners' willingness to cooperate. In addition to German and English, they told us that they also practiced French, Italian, Czech and Russian in their buddy-incoming student relationship.

As for **improvements of their language competences**, the respondents perceived regularly an increase in their English proficiency, in the local language (German), as well as in the native languages of incoming students, if they could practice those languages. They mainly developed **speaking and listening skills**, many of them also reported advanced writing and reading skills, mainly due to the (home) work they had to do for their studies or to their online communication via social media with their partners.

In the context of language learning we asked our respondents, if they think that learning the local language was still a motive for international students to go abroad. The answers were heterogeneous because, again, they believe that it depends on the place of study.

"I really think it depends on the country where people are going. So at least for my university, the way that if you want to go to, like Italy, Portugal, and France, am I forgetting any other country? Then you have to learn, you have to know the language, the local language and you have to proof that by some kind of certificate. And if you want to go any other country you just have to proof that you know English. So, I guess people who want to really learn French, then they go to France because they also want to learn French and because you have to learn it there and have to be perfect, because I have to be able to follow the course. But, I mean, I don't think the major motivation for exchange students here is to learn Finnish. So, to answer the question, I think it really depends on the country. But since English is becoming more and more and more normal, it might not be the main motivation." (I8F)

By contrast, as for the Viennese context, the estimations concerning learning the local language as a main motive for studying in Austria, were definitely quite high: "Sixty percent would go because of the local language." (I4A)

9. FORMAL RECOGNITION: THE STUDENTS' OPINION

At present, there is no formal recognition for the work of local buddies at the partner universities in Austria and Great Britain. In Finland, local buddies receive a certificate, ECTS and a small amount of money to cover their travel expenses.

The respondents have a lot of ideas for **future recognition**, e.g.:

- Certificate, written document
- ECTS
- (Official closing) events
- Involvement or participation in decision processes at university
- Small gifts, money
- Expense allowance
- Sponsoring a visit to incoming student

However, some students see it quite critical when it comes to official recognition, especially when money is involved.

"People who, especially, ones that I know, who want to become buddies, is because they're nice people and it's rewarding in itself

and you don't really guess, like a formal award for it. It's already rewarding in itself, I feel like, if there's like an explicit reward, then you know it takes away that motivation." (I2GB)

In fact, studies about motivation show that an **extrinsic reward can decrease the level of intrinsic motivation** ("crowding-out effect"). Therefore, it is advisable to reflect carefully about an official recognition and about the question which components it should encompass in the future. It seems to be less problematic according to our respondents, when a certificate about the buddy's duties and developed competences is issued. A written document that can be put into the CV is mostly seen as quite useful. Even some incoming students (*"It would be very helpful."* I6GB) would like to receive such a document which states that they took part in a local buddy-incoming student relationship, because they, too, develop a variety of competences.

10. BUDDY PROGRAMMES' EVALUATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

The investigated buddy

programmes in Austria and Great Britain are currently not evaluated. In Finland feedback is gathered from incoming students as well as from local buddies. Generally, it is rather seen as positive to evaluate the current buddy programmes in order to develop them further in the future.

Below are some ideas for future evaluation listed:

- Programme evaluation and personal evaluation
- Evaluation/feedback from incoming students and local buddies
- Written questionnaire, survey
- Online evaluation
- Evaluation should inform feedback loop
- Possibility to change buddy/incoming student

RECOMMENDATIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES

Based on the results of the quantitative and qualitative researches, a list of recommendations has been drawn up. This list aims at highlighting the good practices to help the buddy programme coordinators, the stakeholders and volunteers supporting the management of such programmes to develop a system that ensures a qualitative experience for students, maximises internationalisation at home opportunities and ensures its sustainability beyond the involvement of individuals.

1. IMPROVING THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF BUDDY PROGRAMMES

1.1. Foster a sense of community

The buddy programme should foster a sense of community and enable social interactions between the buddy programme

participants. It should induce a sense of commitment between participant and therefore ensure a long lasting relationship between local buddies and international students.

In practice 1: One important element to consider when implementing a buddy programme is the branding of the programme. Buddy programmes' coordinators should pay special attention to setting up the brand strategy that encompasses the short, mid and long terms goals, the values and vision as well as its identity. In other words, the strategic plan should answer the three following questions: Who are we? What do we stand for? What do we want to achieve? Those three steps will, later on, support the appearance of a sense of community and drive the buddy participants towards a meaningful membership. The Buddy System platform should allow the buddy programme

coordinator to customise specific inputs such as logo, university name, contact email, start of semester...

In practice 2: The Buddy System platform does not allow registered local buddies or international students to browse the profiles of their peers, thus making it difficult to build an online community around it. However, the platform serves as a triggering element for the users to meet in real life via the “events” section and therefore fosters a sense of community. The “events” section of the platform is an online space where people are able to browse the buddy activities offered by different stakeholders and make event suggestions. This feature is one of the core elements leading to repeated rather than a punctual usage, while entailing more affective mechanisms than functional ones. The buddy programme coordinator and the partners of the initiative should make sure to update this “events” section at least once a month. The university and student association milestones should also appear in this section such as the welcoming and information sessions for international students, ESN activities, etc., thus allowing a homogeneous circulation of

information to the international students and local buddies. Users of the platform should be allowed to register for the event, mark their participation (anonymously) and invite their local buddy/international student to participate.

In practice 3: One could imagine a reward programme that could foster the active participation of the students on the online platform. The rewards could take the form of badges that would be visible on the profile of the student. Rewards could be attributed to acknowledge the user’s good behaviour (e.g. responsiveness to the messages), active participation (e.g. suggesting new events), history (e.g. attendance to the events, for the local student: number of international students helped), etc. Additionally, in the framework of the matchmaking process, both the buddy programme coordinator and the students could make use of the badges to inform their choice.

1.2. Facilitate the establishment of a working relationship

In order to **facilitate the process of establishing a working relationship** between local buddies and international students some underpinning

measures can be offered. Local coordinators should actively enhance both parties to contact them in case of important troubles within the relationship. Until now, students who do not succeed in their buddy relationship are more or less left alone and quit the buddy programme. In the case of local buddies this is even worse, because they usually decide, due to their negative experience, not to apply for a new partnership in the following semester. Considering the fact that in all the case study countries there is a lack of local buddies, this should be avoided in the future.

In some cases, an additional advice from a third party might improve the situation. To monitor the process, though, we suggest to organise follow up events, or to provide coaching and supervising, if there is a felt need for that. In any case, it should be assured that both partners are able to gain something out of the relationship (e.g. the practice of a certain language versus social integration). However, sometimes these issues have to be negotiated at the beginning and it can be one task of the coordinators to instruct local buddies and international students to do so. For this, of

course, **local coordinators have to be trained:** They are assuming a work which requires a lot of empathy, a good sense of responsibility and taking care of others. In addition, training should also cover all technical skills (e.g. how to deal with the platform) which are needed to fulfill the task successfully.

1.3. Facilitate the integration into the local community

In some of the case study countries, there are no **common events for international students and local buddies.** Therefore, international students are more prone to stay within their community of exchange students and the integration process might fail. On the other hand, local buddies are often also interested in making the acquaintance of other international students, especially, if they are not perfectly matched.

In order to satisfy the needs of international students and local buddies more efficiently, universities and/or local student organisations should propose more joint events for both parties. There are at least three optimal moments to do so: **at the beginning and the end**, and also somewhere in

between the exchange semester/year abroad.

1.4. A more inclusive programme

As for **inclusiveness**, there is only little knowledge about this topic among students, unless they know someone with disabilities who studies abroad and participates already in a buddy programme, which is rarely the case. However, there is a lot of potential in buddy programmes (and online matching tools) in order to make exchange programmes more inclusive, to attract more international students with disabilities and to motivate them to study temporarily in a foreign country. The greatest challenge seems **to reach the target group** by appropriate means and by an online matching tool, which also takes into account the sensitivity of the topic and which also meets the technical demands regularly linked with being as most inclusive as possible as a website.

Most importantly, more instruction is needed. Usually, there is not sufficient **information** on the accessibility of the university and the infrastructure of the local environment (including suitable accommodations). Furthermore, **extra encouragement** for

students with disabilities should be provided, because the level of getting out of his or her comfort zone is even higher than for the other international students and the financial needs, frequently, might also be higher.

2. WELL-OILED BUDDY PROGRAMMES: HOW TO

2.1. Collaboration between stakeholders

The buddy programme's initiator should develop a collaboration between the stakeholders at an institutional level. The collaboration should rely upon a joint commitment (agreement) outlining the roles of each stakeholders to facilitate the management of the buddy programme and ensure its sustainability.

In practice: The Buddy System platform backend should allow all stakeholders to have the possibility to actively participate in running the activities of the buddy programme as initially agreed. A customisable access (restricted access for given stakeholders) should be implemented to give the possibility to the buddy coordinator to assign rights to various users.

2.2. Communication strategy

Stakeholders of the buddy programme should implement a push communication strategy that complements the pull communication efforts to bridge the gap in the recruitment of local buddies.

In practice 1: HEIs, together with student associations should undertake measures to map the potential local buddies. The Erasmus alumni network, the active ESN volunteers and/or university/faculties clubs could be a starting point to identify potential local buddies. Once the students have been spotted, the HEI or the student association should get in touch with the students and invite them to participate in the buddy programme. An information session that presents the buddy programme itself, the benefits of being part of the programme and the role of a local buddy could be foreseen as a part of the push strategy.

In practice 2: HEIs should integrate the buddy programme activities within curricula as optional activities, therefore ensuring a broader access to the programme for local students.

Such an option could be rewarded with ECTS credits or another form of recognition, however, the findings of our study have shown that recognition is not a primary motivation for students to be part of a buddy programme.

In practice 3: The Erasmus+ mobile App for students provides all relevant information for potential Erasmus+ participants to support them through the whole mobility process by offering a wide variety of student-centered services. Among those, the step-by-step checklists guide the students through the most important milestones of their mobility -before, during and after-. This list should include the following two elements:

- in the section before mobility "Find your local buddy"
- in the section after mobility "Become a local buddy in your home institution"

Both these elements should be linked with sufficient information to present to the students the Buddy System concept and how to be part of it.

Additionally, receiving and sending HEIs that have an institutional account on the Erasmus Dashboard should use the push-notifications feature to respectively

inform them, prior to their mobility about the buddy programme and encourage them, after mobility, to prolong their buddy experience at home.

2.3. Training

“Above all, a good mentor program requires talented leadership. The coordinators must be effective organizers, talented in communication skills, and able to inspire mentors and protégés to work well together. The tasks are very time consuming and call for a high degree of dedication from the coordinators.” Buddy programme coordinators, university staff and volunteers should be given a proper training to be able to deal with their responsibilities.

The **training of staff** (e.g. the local coordinators, the local buddies etc.) in a more systematic way will be one of the main future goals in order to professionalise either the existing or to create new buddy programmes at locations which do not provide such services until now.

Training should cover different aspects/topics, for example:

- How to handle the matching tool and process in a most

responsible manner

- How to accompany and facilitate best the process of the established relationships
- How to assure the inclusiveness of buddy programmes
- How to inform about best practices in buddy – incoming students relationships (e.g. issues like availability of partners, handling of individual differences, negotiating on individual preferences and motivations of partners etc.)

In practice: All stakeholders who take part in the buddy programme management and sustainability should be entitled to a training in order to be trained to using the Buddy System platform, enrolling students to the buddy programme, managing students’ expectations and goals, creating the proper environment for the development of a good buddy relationship, training the local students, etc. In parallel, the Buddy System project plans to deliver tools and solutions for this purpose. A guide and recommendations towards universities, a handbook for coordinators of Buddy System platform and a toolkit for trainers will be freely available online. These deliverables should help building a base for the training.

2.4. Management of the matching process

The **management of the matching process** by the coordinators has to be professional. It is absolutely necessary to deliver correct dates of arrival to the local buddies, even if the incoming student themselves put in their data incorrectly. An official email to the incoming students to verify their date of arrival could improve the situation. Furthermore, the date of doing the match should be before the incoming students are arriving, especially when they insert their data weeks or months before they actually enter the country.

Concerning the matching criteria, it is advisable to respect as many wishes of the students as possible to facilitate a good start into the buddy-incoming student relationship. Local preferences concerning the selection and weighting of criteria should be possible in the platform. There should be an option for students to mention their must-haves among the criteria and to mention those criteria which are not so important to them. Otherwise they get frustrated, if their main motives for participating in the buddy scheme are ignored. If for practical reasons a good match is not possible,

both partners should be asked in advance, if they are willing to accept their assigned partner even so. In this context, an explicit option for changing partners (without major consequences), especially in cases where one of the partners is not interested any more in the relationship or when one or more of the most important matching criteria according to this study (i.e. language(s), course of studies, age, gender, interests) could not be met, should be integrated into the policy of the buddy programme.

2.5. Recognition of competences

The conducted research provided a lot of insights with regard to **competences developed** by local buddies and international students. Within the qualitative part of the study we could detect five categories of competences which usually evolve within a buddy – incoming student relationship: **self-competences, social skills, cultural competences, organisational competencies, communication skills, linguistic skills, personal development, and knowledge.** Until now, the different stakeholders (e.g. universities, local student organisations) have either not been making or not systematically

been making use of these acquired skills. In order to make the work of local buddies more visible and to honor it, as well as in order to appreciate and acknowledge the development of a large set of competencies, an **official recognition will be necessary** in the future. In fact, to recognise their work would also represent one step further in professionalisation of buddy programmes. The range of possibilities to do so is quite big.

Therefore, the main concern will be how to provide a good set of incentives which will not alter the intrinsic motivation of local buddies, but helps them to make use of their competencies in future situations and enhances their employability. According to the results of the study, especially **certificates** (including a description of their task and mentioning the usually developed competencies), **ECTS and official closing events** are welcomed by local buddies as well as by international students.

As a first step, developed competencies could be made more visible by officially recognising them, and subsequently, experiences and competences of students should be utilised by letting them **participate** in

suitable situations (e.g. training of new local buddies, collaborating with international offices or other university staff/institutions).

2.6. Promote the buddy programme

Buddy programmes have not been sufficiently promoted yet. Especially many of the local buddies only learned by chance about these programmes (or about online matching tools to establish a buddy relationship). Some of them got the information, because friends of them worked as local buddies, or because they have been abroad the semester before and benefitted from having a local buddy in their host country.

Therefore, the interviewed students suggested putting **more effort into promotional activities**, as they think that the buddy programmes are not visible or known enough. Additional attempts should be made in order to make the buddy programmes better-known by using existing and new media and media channels intensively: the stakeholders' websites, posters, social media, directly via email etc.

2.7. Evaluation of buddy programmes

Nowadays, evaluation at universities is commonly practiced and considered as a sign of modernity and continuous improvement. To meet the objective of amelioration, the **evaluation of buddy programmes** has to follow some principles.

First of all, both, **programme evaluation as well as the assessment of the individuals' performances** should be carried out. If you leave out one part, the picture will be incomplete, as individuals' performances can suffer from weaknesses in the programmes and vice versa. Exactly the same is true for the sources of evaluation: who should be asked about feedback? In order to have the full picture, both sides, i.e. local buddies and international students should evaluate and give feedback. Particularly interesting could be the feedback from drop-outs, i.e. students that left the programme early for different reasons, because failures usually provide a lot of insights for further development. Of course, evaluation results should be used to improve the system, it has to be assured that the enhancement of the quality of the programmes

is somehow institutionalised, as otherwise credibility is lost.

3. TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS FOR THE BUDDY SYSTEM PLATFORM

3.1. Responsive design

The Buddy System platform must have a completely responsive design that allows the usage of the tool on any device (smartphone, tablet, desktop...). Given the fact that millennials are progressively shifting from desktop to mobile usage, and most digital natives (generation Z) are already relying mainly on their mobile for internet use, the Buddy System platform should ensure that students get an easy access to the different features via mobile phones. The simplicity of the access to the registrations could potentially bridge a gap in the recruitment of local and international students.

In practice: Within the Buddy System project framework, the integration of the Buddy System platform into the Erasmus+ App is foreseen, and a special attention is given to the development of a responsive, user-friendly environment. The buddysystem.

eu platform is built to ensure its responsiveness on all devices.

3.2. Synergy with different projects

The quantitative survey results show that criteria such as date of arrival of the international student and duration of stay are very important elements to best match students and plan effectively the buddy programme activities. There is already an infrastructure in place covering digitisation of higher education administration that could feed such reliable information. In 2017 the European Commission published the Erasmus+ App that was developed by the European University Foundation. Under LAOS and OLA+ projects the Online Learning Agreement platform for students and Erasmus Dashboard for institutions have been created and enable administrators to manage students' learning agreements (LA) online. In parallel, under the Erasmus Without Paper initiative the data can be exchanged securely within the different information management systems of HEIs.

In practice: The Erasmus+ App is a student-centered tool developed by the European University Foundation which offers a single

entry point for several services. It is already based on Erasmus Profile that provides a unique student ID, yet with the next development steps and the cooperation with the European Student Card initiative and synergies with other projects looking into ensuring a common student ID in Europe, the Buddy System would also benefit from the streamlining of the digitisation initiatives and cater for smooth and easy access to its services by the students.

3.3. A flexible and scalable backend

The Buddy System backend must be flexible and scalable, so that HEIs as well as student associations with different needs and requirements are able to use the tool. The Buddy System platform collects sensitive data and a specific attention should be given to building a system that is secured and 100% complies with the new GDPR regulation.

In practice: When registering into the platform to become a local buddy or as an international student, students must fill in a form and specify their preferences. This data is precious as it is key to matching the students together. Therefore, the most important fields

for the students to complete should not differ from one to another buddy programme, however, in some cases and according to the different vision one programme can have, the Buddy System backend could enable buddy coordinators to add specific fields to sharpen the buddy matchmaking possibilities.

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