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ENLIVEN
**ENHANCED LEARNING AND
TEACHING IN INTERNATIONAL
VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS**

Design:
**Virtual Support Measures for Students
in International Learning Environments**

Intellectual Output 3
Activity 2

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Table of contents

1. Objective	3
2. Current situation	3
3. Conceptual considerations.....	4
4. Practical example: PIASTA (Intercultural Living and Learning) at Universität Hamburg.....	5
5. Spotlight: Welcome Week at Universität Hamburg	7
6. Challenges.....	8
7. Recommendations	8
8. References	10



1. Objective

The following document focuses on the social dimension of intercultural learning and living in the digital world. It includes suggestions and recommendations on how digital learning environments can be shaped to enable those participating in a virtual exchange to have similar experiences and interactions as those who actually physically go abroad. How can we create spaces of experience and encounter that make everyday university and study life in digital environments socially and culturally experienceable?

2. Current situation

A survey carried out by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) at German higher education institutions in December 2021 revealed that the number of international students at German higher education institutions had increased again in the 2021/22 winter semester despite the coronavirus pandemic. Higher education institutions in Germany recorded an increase of around 13 percent in the number of first-year students from abroad.¹

However, despite the increasing number of international degree-seeking students at German higher education institutions, the dropout rate is particularly high among this group of students.²

The commitment of higher education institutions to offer appropriate measures and support services can make a difference and help international students to shape their everyday life and their studies positively and successfully. International students can also play an important role themselves. As ambassadors of their own culture, they can contribute to the internationalization of the campus and to a vibrant campus community.

The figures from the DAAD's survey for the 2021/22 winter semester give cause for optimism: "around 80 percent of the surveyed universities estimate that at least three quarters of international first-year students are now in Germany. 63 percent even assume a presence of 90 to 100 percent. Only 7 percent of the universities assume that less than half of the international students are already present. Teaching currently takes place as a mixture of in-person and digital distance learning: around 80 percent of the universities surveyed indicated this kind of hybrid teaching mode".³

The absence of the traditional classroom environment and absence of normal university life with physical contacts to other students and to the local population constitutes a major challenge for students and teaching staff. This is the result of a survey carried out amongst students and teachers of the ENLIVEN project partners during the pandemic:

Main critical issues that have changed teaching during the pandemic that were identified by 5050 answers are considerable increase in working time (7.62%), dispersal of information (7.01%),

¹ DAAD press release from 21-12-21: https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/communication-publications/press/press_releases/schnellumfrage-wintersemester-2021-2022/

² HRK: <https://www.hrk.de/themen/internationales/internationale-studierende-und-forschende/>

³ DAAD press release from 21-12-21: https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/communication-publications/press/press_releases/schnellumfrage-wintersemester-2021-2022/

*difficulties in the overall organization of work and in distance teaching activities (8.93%), increased stress and physical fatigue (9.96%), increase in the number of absences and lack of participation (7.74%), increase in cases of discomfort (5.01%), difficulty in guaranteeing assistance and educational support to persons with disabilities (3.11%), increased difficulty in understanding what was explained/assigned (7.45%), digital divide/IT issues (10.85%), **difficulty in increasing the sense of belonging through distance learning, gained by participation, empathy, and effective communication (15.13%),** difficulties in delivering/attending “practical” subjects/laboratories through distance teaching/learning (12.55%), economic impact of distance learning for teachers and students (2.77%), and other (1.86%).⁴*

The survey results confirm that the social dimension of learning is important for students to complete their studies successfully and in a manner that is good for their well-being, especially when teaching takes place in virtual environments.

In terms of intercultural learning, the temporary blocking of international mobility in the past two years highlights the need to find new forms of international encounter for students in the future, including those who cannot physically study abroad even when it is possible. Students who are unable to spend time abroad due to financial, health, or family reasons, too long have been neglected in discourses about international mobility.

The EU’s European Universities initiative operates entirely in this spirit by looking to transfer the strengths of European education and research areas to new joint structures. Students, staff, and researchers should be able to take advantage of the offers of partner universities within the European Universities Initiative in an uncomplicated and flexible manner in order to learn, teach, and research on an inter-university basis.

In addition to proven forms of cooperation, new forms of social interaction, mobility and internationalization are needed to ensure inclusion and diversity. The development of virtual dialog formats and suitable virtual support measures irrespective of location therefore calls for particular attention.

3. Conceptual considerations

The majority of students will not be able to experience physical mobility, even after the pandemic, for a variety of reasons. Therefore, it will be necessary to develop forms of virtual mobility for all.

In this context, the approach of "internationalization at home" (IaH) will take on a prominent role. The task will be to enable the vast majority of students who cannot study abroad to experience international encounters locally, through activities virtually and in physical presence, within and outside the curriculum.

IaH is the counterpart to international mobility. Ideally, IaH and outgoing mobility are two complementary elements in a university’s internationalization strategy - neither replaces the other.

⁴ ENLIVEN Deliverable IO3.A1: Report on the online survey – Assessing the International Digital Learning Environments: <https://www.enlivenproject.eu/2022/01/28/requirement-analysis/>, p. 7.

Beelen and Jones, whose definition of IaH is widely shared, phrase that “Internationalization at home is the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments”⁵. IaH can take place both in a formal learning context within the framework of courses as well as in extracurricular settings through informal offerings in the social and cultural areas.

Based on experiences and best practices shared by international offices at universities, suitable measures in the extracurricular area may include:

- a leisure, cultural, and coaching program that brings together domestic and international students outside the formal curriculum
- an international welcome week that immediately places first-year students in an intensive international and intercultural environment
- a Certificate of Intercultural Competence, which recognizes and certifies the international and intercultural experience and commitment of students and staff members
- a buddy program, which enables domestic and international students to support and encourage each other.

The program *PIASTA (Intercultural Living and Learning)* at Universität Hamburg, which was analyzed for the recommendations as presented below, shows that extracurricular measures are met with a particularly positive response when they are deliberately targeted at all students, both domestic and international. Students should be involved in the development and implementation of services wherever possible. This is based on the conviction that a tolerant and inclusive campus can emerge only through lived diversity. In contrast to the perception of international students as students to be cared for, international students become multipliers and actively participate in shaping campus life as intercultural ambassadors.

4. Practical example: PIASTA (Intercultural Living and Learning) at Universität Hamburg

Launched by the Department of International Affairs at Universität Hamburg in 2009, the program PIASTA (Intercultural Living and Learning) offers a diverse range of extracurricular activities. PIASTA activities are aimed at international and domestic students equally. The goal of the program is to create opportunities for dialog and interactions that invite students to reflect on their own point of view through the encounter with the other and to openly encounter the new. Diversity through different perspectives finds expression in the program offer.

Students can access support services in the academic and the socio-cultural areas.

What is special about the PIASTA program is the change in perspective: international students are not only recipients of services, but become active participants.

⁵ Beelen, Jos/ Jones, Elspeth: “[Redefining Internationalization at Home](#).” In: Adrian Curaj et al. (ed.): The European Higher Education Area. Springer / Cham 2015, pp. 59–72, p. 69.



In 2009, the PIASTA concept was selected by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to be a model project in the PROFIN Program, a program which promotes the integration of foreign students. The PIASTA program was awarded the Universität Hamburg Equal Opportunity Prize in 2016.

The program includes the following offers and services:

- International Welcome Week
- Welcome Buddy Program
- Language tandems and language courses
- Cultural events and leisure activities
- Intercultural evenings with activities
- Seminars and workshops
- Certificate Intercultural Competence for recognition of intercultural engagement
- Information and advice for international students

The approach "by students for students" is implemented in almost all areas: both German and international students act as student advisors and tutors for their fellow students. They serve as contact persons on an equal footing, advise in different languages, share their experiences and their skills, and thus become motivators and intercultural ambassadors.

Students who are active with PIASTA undergo a 2-day training program that qualifies them to carry out the activities.

The program portfolio is supplemented by trainings from external trainers on specific key topics.

All program areas focus on the facilitation of intercultural encounters with the following objectives:

- promotion of a welcoming culture
- facilitating contact and networking among international and local students and the promotion of intercultural exchange
- perception of diversity as enrichment
- increasing intercultural sensitivity and promotion of intercultural skills among local and international students
- facilitating the integration of international students
 - in the social area through activities to help integration into the student community
 - in the area of residence regulations by providing information, advice, support and mediation services
 - in the academic area through offers for the acquisition of interdisciplinary key competencies
- promotion of interest in intercultural exchange, involvement in intercultural activities, and stays abroad

5. Spotlight: Welcome Week at Universität Hamburg

The Welcome Week at Universität Hamburg does not differentiate between international and domestic students. All new students are invited to take part. It offers a diverse program, consisting of information events, campus and neighborhood tours, and interactive activities to get to know one another. To accommodate both those not (yet) in Hamburg and those already in the city, there is a mix of digital and on-site events.

The focus is on the commonality between all first-year students: starting a new phase of life in a new city and are building a new social network.

Both German and international students are used as intercultural role models. Experienced students from all faculties are recruited to be welcome buddies. Welcome buddies provide advice and support to new international students. They are the first personal point of contact at the University from the moment of admission. Virtual and on-site events are held regularly during the semester.

This resonates positively on several levels:

- For international students, a successful start to their studies plays a significant role in their academic success.
- A weekly program of activities in German and English specifically designed for the target group fosters the integration of international students.
- At the start of their studies, international students receive personal support from a contact person for bureaucratic, language, and cultural hurdles.
- Irrespective of their origins, first-year students feel welcome on campus.
- Exchanges and networking between international and local students contributes to the internationalization of the campus.

Experience has shown that interest in language tandems and in opportunities to participate in the program increases following the Welcome Week, as does the demand for stays abroad.

Welcome Week at Universität Hamburg in numbers:

Welcome Week Winter Semester 2021/22 (hybrid):

- 🇩🇪 95 events
- 🇩🇪 9,959 registrations
- 🇩🇪 1,921 participants
- 🇩🇪 average of 5 events per participant

2020:

- 🇩🇪 46 events
- 🇩🇪 8127 registrations
- 🇩🇪 1,699 participants

2019:

- 78 events
- 6223 registrations
- 1,504 participants

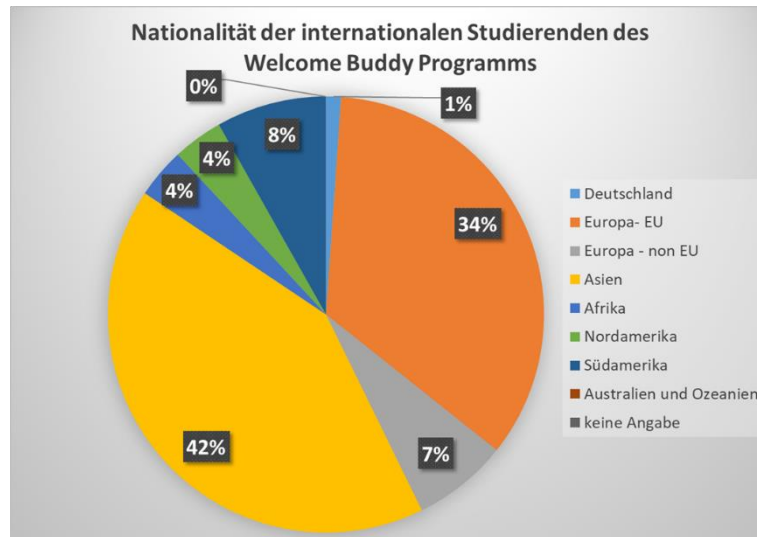


Figure 1. Nationality of international students in the Welcome Buddy Program

6. Challenges

Measures and programs can only promote integration if they develop into a university-wide network of intercultural living and learning. Integration does not function sustainably in organized special programs. The objective should be a campus-wide change of perspective.

Ideally, an organizational unit should be permanently established within the University that can build on existing networks and contacts. In order to implement and carry out these measures on a broad scale, this organizational unit must be equipped with sufficient staff, an appropriate level of status, and decision-making authority. Funds must be made available to the unit for coordination and administration staff and tutors, for workplaces and premises, and for holding seminars and events, also virtually.

Strategically and organizationally, it is important to involve all affected institutions, cooperation partners, teaching staff, and student organizations in the development of the program. Doing so will increase acceptance and support within the faculties, institutions, and student organizations.

7. Recommendations

New forms of encounter and dialog can emerge from the realization that all students, both those who can travel and those who are tied to their home campuses, can make a valuable contribution to internationalization. The shift from physical to virtual formats as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, as

exemplified by the Welcome Week at Universität Hamburg in the winter semester of 2021/22, leaves room for experimentation and design. "Zoom makes sense" was how one participant put it in a virtual intercultural training in which students from different universities across different time zones took part. Students who might never have met come together in a virtual space and have the opportunity to network and exchange globally from their home location.

Virtual offerings in addition to on-site offerings enable the participation and inclusion of different target groups:

1. students who do not have the chance to study abroad for a period of time
2. students who could travel, in principle, but are restricted to participating only in local activities due to external factors (e.g., travel restrictions or lockdown due to global health crises)
3. all students who are interested in connecting globally, regardless of personal situation or external circumstances

To reach these target groups, virtual offerings must be visible and easily accessible, and appealing in terms of content. This applies to both formal and informal learning contexts.

Designing virtual meeting spaces in such a way that they form a meaningful addition to physical mobility and deliberately reach new target groups should not be viewed as a burden by universities, but rather as an invitation and an opportunity to rethink teaching and learning.

The following suggestions and considerations may be useful in designing and creating virtual international environments:

For the organization:

- Create an organizational unit that makes visible the mission of "Internationalization at Home" and corresponding offers
- Involve and network with all relevant institutions and stakeholders
- Launch a university-wide communication campaign for IaH: "What's in it for YOU?"
- Have a variety of formats to choose from, both virtual and on-site:
 - in the sociocultural area, for example, a buddy program, tandem program, language café, excursions and leisure activities for groups, university sports;
 - in the personal development area, for example, trainings on transcultural awareness, intercultural communication, conflict resolution, anti-bias;
 - in the formal learning context, for example, interdisciplinary project work in international teams, consulting projects with local NGOs/companies, etc.

For campus life:

- Enable students to take part in the program development process
- Address international students and invite them to act as intercultural ambassadors
- Create various opportunities for students to become involved in intercultural activities and recognize their commitment, for example, by awarding them a Certificate of International Competence or acknowledging their voluntary work as a multiplier
- Offer topic-specific programs to qualify student tutors to carry out activities

For teaching:

- Establish networks and programs with other universities for joint virtual projects or the mutual opening of courses
- Consider and incorporate the interests and needs of local and international students at both the home campus and at partnering universities in the design of virtual formats, in particular with regards to logistical and administrative processes (consider different time zones, simplify enrollment process, recognize academic achievements)
- Conduct thematic and interactive workshops to foster global learning
- Develop innovative teaching formats, such as a “Global Classroom”: students from two or more universities work on interdisciplinary issues in virtual, international teams or conduct virtual consulting projects for local companies under the guidance of their lecturers as part of their coursework.

8. References

Beelen, Jos/ Jones, Elspeth: “[Redefining Internationalization at Home](#).” In: Adrian Curaj et al. (ed.): The European Higher Education Area. Springer / Cham 2015, pp. 59–72.

DAAD press release from 21.12.21: https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/communication-publications/press/press_releases/schnellumfrage-wintersemester-2021-2022/

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