

**A Helping Hand Abroad: A Qualitative Investigation of Psychology Students'
Evaluation of the Buddy Project (2022-2023), as a Supportive Resource for Facilitating
Acculturation and Improving Well-being**

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Abstract

The Buddy Project at the University of Groningen pairs and matches new international students with experienced peers to provide social and academic support, aiming to ease the transition into the Netherlands, alleviate acculturation stress, and foster a sense of belonging. This qualitative study was inspired by the master thesis of A.C. Henneke (2023) and investigates the experiences and evaluations of new international students in the 2022-2023 Buddy program. The objective is to gain insights into its effectiveness in easing acculturation stress and enhancing well-being. Coding and analysis of transcripts from semi-structured (as well as one quantitative question) interviews revealed overall satisfaction (mean grading of 5.9). Appreciation for activities, buddy support, and early initiation was noted. However, areas for improvement include organizational issues, limited in-person interaction, and the need for increased engagement. Recommendations emphasize expanding social activities and revising the matching process. Despite limitations (small sample size, potential biases), the findings provide valuable insights on the way students experienced the buddy project. By implementing recommended strategies and conducting further research, the Buddy Project can be enhanced for future projects. The study concludes that the project seems to positively contribute to students perceived acculturation and inclusion, but improvements would be recommended to meet specific needs.

Keywords: Acculturation, Buddy Program, University of Groningen, Evaluation, Qualitative research

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Internationalization in the University of Groningen

The process of internationalization is rapidly transforming the world, bringing nations together and providing opportunities for people to gain new perspectives. In the realm of education, internationalization offers students the chance to expand their horizons, by studying abroad in a variety of countries of their choosing, sometimes even with the help of financial support in the form of grants and scholarships. However, studying abroad also comes with challenges for the incoming students (Baba & Hosoda, 2014) and with responsibilities for the host university. Accordingly, universities that attract and accept students from abroad try to facilitate the study start of incoming students from abroad. The present paper will look at such intervention designed to facilitate international students’ adjustment at their host university: The “Buddy Project” at the Psychology Department of the University of Groningen. More specifically, it will investigate the “new” students’ evaluation of the Buddy program, of the year 2022-2023. This will be done through a qualitative interview, asking participants to give a numerical evaluation and explaining this through concrete experiences (positive and/or negative). This is aimed to answer the following research question: “Does the Buddy Project ease acculturation stress and enhance the new student’s well-being?”

Benefits of studying abroad

Studying abroad is a life-changing experience that offers many potential gains for young people. It provides an opportunity to learn about new cultures, develop independence, and gain cultural awareness as well as academic and personal skills. As Merry Bullock (2014) notes, internationalization involves understanding one's own culture within a global context

and valuing diverse perspectives. It also means recognizing and respecting the vast differences in human behavior, norms, explanation systems, conceptual structures, and modes of interaction that exist across the world. Since 2006, the number of foreign students studying in the Netherlands has more than tripled, with 103,700 of them currently enrolled at a Dutch university (Statista, 2022). Today, the university of Groningen is very diverse, with more than 120 nationalities represented among its students and staff (University of Groningen, 2023). The University of Groningen was one of the first universities in the Netherlands to recognize the advantages of internationalization. It became the first university in the Netherlands to offer a fully English-taught psychology degree, to attract international students. At first, over 90% of the students were from Germany, but over time, the university's reputation grew, and students from all over the world joined the program. In a report on “Internationalization at the Faculty BSS” from May 2019, it is stated that the international Bachelor-track of Psychology attracted students from 70 different nations in the year 2018.

Challenges of studying abroad

For several international students, the transition to a new university within a new country can be stressful and challenges may arise. Research has shown that international students often experience acculturation stress, which can negatively impact their psychological well-being (Choudaha, 2014). Acculturation stress can lead to feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and anxiety (Berry, 1997). In some cases, international students may also feel a loss of cultural identity as they have to adapt to a new cultural environment (Berry, 1997). Reasons for these challenges are language barriers, cultural differences, and a lack of social support. It is well known that feeling a sense of belonging (SOB) and having social support are crucial for psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Zengilowski et al., 2023). In a paper by Shaheed and Kiang (2021) the authors describe how students' SOB relates to the subjective/personal feelings of identification within the

university's community; these are associated with inclusivity and other crucial outcomes like retention, college satisfaction, and a positive self-concept. Studies have shown that a SOB is favorably related to academic results and motivational outcomes that affect academic success, such as mastery, self-concept, and self-efficacy (Shaheed & Kiang, 2021; Zengilowski et al., 2023).

This is where university support becomes crucial. Studies have shown that university support plays a significant role in international students' adjustment and well-being (Cho & Yu, 2014; Ra, 2023). Therefore, the University of Groningen has implemented a range of strategies to support its internationalization efforts. These include international education, innovative research with global impact, strategic partnerships with world-class institutions, and institutional policies that enhance internationalization (University of Groningen, 2023). Furthermore, the University of Groningen has recognized the difficulty of internationalization for several students and has therefore implemented several support services like an internationalization office, further, some welcome activities for international students are organized. Within the Psychology Department specifically a project to support international students started in the year of 2017 and is still active now. This is the “Buddy Project”, which pairs new international students with more experienced/higher educational level international students.

The program aims to ease the transition of the new students, into the university and the Dutch culture by providing them with social and academic support. The buddy project therefore aims to play a crucial role in supporting international students' well-being by facilitating social connections and through this, providing a sense of belonging. The program is supposed to be particularly beneficial for students who are experiencing acculturation stress or struggling with homesickness (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This paper therefor aims to investigate if the desired effect is achieved, by the program.

Setup of the Buddy project

The University of Groningen's Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences (BSS) is the organization behind the Buddy Project. The project was first initiated and created by Marina de Giorgi in 2017, from 2019 to 2021 coordinated by Carla Schröder and Laura Ballato, and last year (2022) it was organized by Laura Ballato and Isabele Ditzsch. It was established to facilitate a smooth transition of new coming students into the university of Groningen. The project mainly focuses on international first year psychology students, these “new” students are matched with more experienced students from the BSS faculty. Potential first-year, new Master's, pre-master, and exchange students are all considered “new” students. These students, both Dutch and international, are first-time students at the University of Groningen (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021). As far as possible, newcomers and senior students are matched according to the students’ cultural background, interests and hobbies.

Senior buddies underwent a short training on intercultural competences, additionally “new” and senior buddies were briefed beforehand and informed about the code of conduct, how to act culturally sensitive and being aware of potential challenges that may arise. This was done to ensure inclusivity and support for all new international students, regardless of their cultural background.

The Buddy Project may aid new students even before arriving in Groningen, by providing the new international students with a buddy, whom will be their point of contact. The buddy will be able to answer many questions the new students may have, starting with a safe arrival in Groningen, travelling to the Netherlands, finding accommodation, opening a bank account. This may help to alleviate any anxiety or acculturation stress which new students may feel about coming to a new country. Additionally, the buddy can offer emotional support and encouragement, which can be especially beneficial for students who have a low

SOB or are feeling homesick or anxious about their transition to a new environment. Once the new student has arrived in Groningen meetings and activities between the buddies may be arranged. The organizers of the project, arranged several activities, events and workshops (on and offline) which the buddy pairs could attend, including a welcome quiz, as well as several sport workshops such as Yoga (all participation was voluntary) (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021). Apart from these leisure activities, the guiding buddies were expected to answer routine questions about the university websites, give campus directions, as well as “catering or other facilities that may be of interest, i.e., sports center, library, etc.” (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021).

Previous evaluations of the buddy project

As stated earlier, the evaluations provided by the "new" students will be investigated in this paper. This will be done by asking participants to give an evaluation number and explaining the root of their evaluation by giving concrete examples of their personal experiences (positive and/or negative). Although some internal reports have already been written on the Buddy Project (with the one by Ballato & Schroeder, 2021, being the last one), these reports were mostly descriptive, and did not provide a systematic evaluation of the intervention. The need to provide such evaluation was further enhanced due to a recent master thesis by A. C. Henneke (2023). Her research was quantitative and hypothesized that “new” 1st-year students within the buddy project would score higher on perceived support and well-being, as well as lower on loneliness, compared to the “new” students *not* participating in the buddy program. Unlike hypothesized the study, wherein nearly half of all students who took part in the Buddy project participated, found quite high scores on perceived support and well-being, and low scores on loneliness, but there were no significant differences between both groups. Do these results indicate that the Buddy Project is not useful? - Such conclusion seems inappropriate based on these data, as a ceiling effect for the dependent variables and a selection bias might as well account for the findings. As Henneke (2023, pp. 27-28) stated:

It is possible that those who decide to join the project might be lower in well-being and perceived support or higher in loneliness in general than those who did not participate. In that case, it is possible that their levels of well-being and perceived support increased, and their loneliness levels decreased throughout the project, while non-participants might have started at the same level they reached (Henneke, 2023, pp. 27-28).

Accordingly, the most relevant conclusion from this quantitative work is that more research is needed to better understand whether and how the Buddy Project may positively affect newcoming student's well-being. Ideally, such research would take a longitudinal qualitative approach; however, as a longitudinal study is not possible to be conducted in the limited time of this bachelor project, it was decided to make an overall qualitative evaluation. Using this, it will be possible to gain more in-depth information on whether and how the Buddy project may have affected the student's acculturation process as well as their general well-being.

Method

Study Design

This qualitative investigation is exploratory in nature. Since we want to get deeper insights into the "Buddy Project", we held semi-structured interviews, wherein interviews are assisted by a mixture of predetermined questions, leaving room for spontaneous questions as well (Hennink et al., 2020). This holds two main advantages: first of all, it ensures that all relevant themes are touched upon, and secondly it gives sufficient room for participants to come up with their own themes and experiences related to the Buddy Project. To structure our research, we opted for five domains: (1) motivation to study abroad and to participate in the project, and the related expectations; (2) perceived inclusion within the UG; (3) match buddy-newcomer; (4) buddy project's influence on newcomers' social context; (5) students' general

evaluation of the project and related positive and negative experiences. These domains appear to be relevant according to literature and relate to previous research (Henneke, 2023); they will be discussed independently in each of the five bachelor theses related to the broader topic of getting more insight into the faculty's Buddy Project.¹

Participants

11 participants were recruited by various means: (1) coordinators of the Buddy project sent emails to participants from the 2022/23 cohort; (2) invitations were sent in WhatsApp groups for first year psychology students; (3) by presenting our research in a first years' lecture, and lastly (4) by using the SONA student sampling platform of the UG, where students can participate in research for credits.

Eligible individuals were international students that took part in the "Buddy Project" in the academic year of 2022-2023. The rationale for limiting to the 2022/23 edition was to draw from the same pool of participants as Henneke (2023), since her research inspired the current study. Furthermore, previous editions of the study, namely the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 versions, took place amidst the covid pandemic, meaning that most of the activities were performed online, which was different in 2022/23. Based on these criteria we excluded one participant, who did not take part in the Buddy project, hence bringing down the total number of participants to 10.

The participants in our sample came from three different continents and had the following nationalities: German, Slovakian, Lebanese, Lithuanian, Venezuelan and American. The biggest part (40%) of the sample was German. Most participants (80%) were European. Participants' age ranged from 19 to 30 years ($M = 21.4$, $SD = 3.47$) (see Table 1 for the descriptives).

¹ Access to all transcripts can be requested via the principal investigator, Prof Dr. S. Otten.

Table 1Participant Descriptions^a

Number	Age	Nationality
1	25	German
2	20	German
3	21	German
4	20	German
5	20	Slovakian
6	20	Slovakian
7	30	American
8	19	Lithuanian
9	20	Venezuelan
10	19	Lebanese

Note. It was chosen to use Numbers instead of Alias to ensure the anonymity, but it should still be considered that these are all real people, and the data is reflective of “real life”.

Procedure

10 interviews were held in a university room suited for qualitative research and recorded by using a vocal memo application on the phone of one of the researchers. Data was collected in May 2023 and all interviews were conducted within two weeks, scheduled to last 45 minutes. To avoid too much variance in interviewing style, two members of the thesis group, Yvonne Smid and Hanna Kwakernaak, conducted all interviews jointly. Hanna took the lead in all interviews, and Yvonne made sure all domains were investigated thoroughly

and, where needed, asked the more in-depth questions. The location for the interviews was kept constant to avoid possible environmental differences; specifically, all interviews took place in an office-room in the Heymans building of the UG. The room entailed a table and four chairs where the interviews could be held. Furthermore, the office could be closed and had windows, making it possible to limit background noise and bring in fresh air. The interviews were previously practiced by the interviewers with fellow students in order to get accustomed with the structured questions (the interview guide can be found in Appendix A) and get to know each other's interviewing styles.

The actual sessions started with welcoming the participants, offering them a soft drink and asking how they were feeling. After putting them at ease, we introduced our domains of research and explained them the way the interviews were structured. The documents of the detailed information of research and informed consent, which participants had already received by mail, were shortly discussed, including the question for students' permission to record the interviews; all participants gave their permission; after they signed the informed consent form the interview started. As specified in the interview guideline, and as outlined above, the interview covered five domains related to students' experiences with the buddy project. At the end, after the recording was stopped, participants were asked about their age and nationality. They were also asked how they experienced the interview, and there was time for some more casual talk to blow off some steam (if applicable). Lastly, the participants were rewarded with 1.2 SONA-credits and a free piece of cake for their time investment. On average, the interview recordings lasted 29 minutes (range: 22 – 35 minutes).

Ethics

The present research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty BSS. As required by ethical guidelines, every participant was thoroughly informed of the scope of our study, and informed consent was obtained from all the students that participated in this study

before the interviews were conducted. Moreover, to protect students' privacy each participant received an alias, which has been used to anonymise their quotes (see table 1).

Data analysis

For data analysis a deductive (i.e., theory-driven) and an inductive (i.e., data-driven) approach were combined to identify and develop codes and themes. This means that, although data were analysed following particular theoretical ideas (e.g., how the project was experienced by the participants, what they particularly enjoyed and what they would like to see improved), we also allowed the data content to inform and develop our analyses. This approach additionally resulted in a number of data-driven codes, based on which the researchers' identified patterns that could subsequently be developed into themes, in this thesis, particularly relating to overall evaluation. Transcripts were manually created and analysed using Atlas.ti Mac/Windows (version 23.1.1).

We first used thematic analysis to explore areas that were already marked as critical in the literature behind each domain. In the context overall evaluation, participants answers were organised into: Grading, second grading, things they liked, things they disliked and recommendations. Open coding was then used to find additional any other trends that arose.

Results

As previously stated, the present study utilized thematic analysis (TA) to develop a comprehensive code book. This cyclical process involved constant engagement with the data and the previously established codes (from the interview questions), allowing for the identification of recurring patterns in the dataset. The interviews provided a valuable opportunity to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and evaluations of the buddy project. The participants' responses to the questions and the resulting codes formed the basis for the first codes groups developed.

The data were organized into the following code groups, all of which relating to the Buddy Project: “Grading”, “Reasons for Joining”, “Engagement”, “Positive about Program”, “Buddy Help”, “Negative about Program”, and “Recommendations”, allowing for a systematic analysis of the participants' feedback and insights.

It is important to highlight that the code groups "Engagement" and "Buddy Help" emerged during the open/inductive coding process, as participants spontaneously discussed these themes without specific prompting during the interviews. This underscores the significance of these topics and the participants' recognition of their relevance within the context of the buddy program.

By sharing participant quotes and offering interpretive analysis, we will highlight the key themes, patterns, and areas of significance that emerged from their evaluations. The following sections will examine the specific findings, providing valuable insights into the impact of the buddy project by reporting participants' rating of the program, and in which experiences (positive and/or negative) this rating is rooted.

Ratings

The participants' evaluations of the buddy program were captured using a rating scale ranging from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating the highest level of dissatisfaction and 10 representing the highest level of satisfaction. Participants' actual ratings of the Buddy Project ranged from 3 to 8, with a mean rating of 5.9 (SD=1.66), reflecting a variety of perceptions and experiences among the participants (see figure 1). Also, it is noteworthy that no extreme ratings were given.

Figure 1*Participant 1st Ratings*

Note. All ratings were on a rating scale ranging from 1= *very unsatisfied* to 10= *very satisfied*

At the end of the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to reconsider and potentially change their initial ratings. This step was intended to allow participants to reflect on their experiences and provide a more accurate assessment of the program. However, no participant chose to alter their initial rating, indicating a consistent and unwavering evaluation of their experiences with the buddy project.

In the subsequent sections, we will delve into participants' qualitative feedback to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and the reasons behind their specific ratings. By analysing their narratives, we can uncover the positive and negative aspects that influenced their evaluations and gain insights into the factors that contributed to their overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the buddy program.

Engagement within the Buddy project

Open coding revealed that the engagement of both the buddies and the students was a relevant building block of students' rating of the Buddy Project analysis. This code group reflects participants' perceptions of the level of activity and involvement displayed by either their assigned buddy, themselves, or other students within their buddy group (sometimes, a single Buddy supported not only one, but two or three 1st-year students).

On one hand four participants reported that they felt their assigned buddies were not sufficiently engaged within the project (see Table 1). These participants, later, recommended a better matching and selection procedure to ensure more engaged and active buddies in future iterations of the program.

On the other hand, four participants (1, 3, 9, and 10) indicated that their buddies demonstrated a high level of engagement, participants. Participant 10 was present in both the "Buddies Engaged" and "Buddies Not Engaged" groups as they mentioned that the buddy initially displayed active involvement but became less engaged *“But like after like October or something we, I don't think we've texted again.”*²

Furthermore, seven participants expressed that either themselves or another student within their buddy group were not as engaged as they initially desired. These instances demonstrate that engagement within the buddy project is not solely dependent on the buddies, but also on the active participation of the students themselves. One example of a student's self-reported low engagement was given by participant 2: *“So, there were these events, but I was I had other stuff to do”*; another example of another student's lack of engagement within the group was mentioned by participant 10: *“...other person who was assigned to my buddy, dropped out of the program like 2 weeks later”*.

Participant 8 stood out as an important voice in the discussion of engagement. Not only did they provide the highest rating of 8 for the overall evaluation of the program, but they also expressed positive sentiments about both the engagement of their assigned buddy and the active participation of the other students within their buddy group, throughout the program. As a result, they have developed lasting friendships *“Yeah also she was like if you don't like know anyone yet you can hang out with us like my friends or whatever else like that was so*

² The singular form “they” is used since it is inclusive of all persons and prevents writers from making gendered assumptions

sweet. Other people in my buddy group are also nice, like I still know them". This noteworthy experience highlights the significance of group cohesion and active participation in fostering meaningful connections and positive outcomes.

Table 1: *Code group: Engagement*

Code	Participants ³	Frequency ⁴
Buddy yes	4	6
Buddy no	4	12
Student yes	1	1
Student no	6	18

Participant Likes and Buddy Assistance

Participants were asked about their specific likes and positive experiences with the buddy program. This resulted in the emergence of six codes (see tables 2 and 3 below).

Like - Activities and Workshops

This was mentioned by six participants, who indicated enjoyment of interactive elements within the program, examples include Yoga, a stress management workshop or the welcome activity. A quote by participant 9 illustrates this: *"I like the fact that we had like activities like yoga and stuff and like introduction like to other people like other groups of buddies, so that was nice."*

³ Participants is the number of participants mentioning something about this factor.

⁴ Frequency is the number of times this was mentioned. This is valuable as it shows how important some factors might be to the participants (i.e., by mentioning something several times).

Like – Before & first weeks Netherlands

The code "Before Netherlands" arose as six participants expressed appreciation for the project starting before university, allowing them guidance and support prior to the onset of university-related stress. Participant 4 *“I really like that it started before we came here, because that's like when you need it most...”*. Participant 3: *“I think for me was most useful like during the process of coming here and the first weeks or so. That was the time that I needed the most help in adjusting”*. The statement indicates that supporting the students in the early stages of, or already prior to, their arrival in the Netherlands as well as the first few weeks of the project were most crucial for their adjustment.

Like - online communication

Five participants praised their buddy's effective online communication, noting quick responses that eased their transition. For example, participant 3 mentioned that they *“really liked the contact through WhatsApp, cause whenever you think of a question, you just ask and you get an answer”*. Similarly, participants 1,2,6, and 9 all mentioned the buddies' quick online answers helping them a lot, as this way they were able to ask them everything

But what is “everything”? What does it entail? - Regarding assistance provided by buddies, three codes emerged. "Academic Help", “Organisational Help”, “Private Matters Help”.

Buddy Help - Academic

This was mentioned by nine participants with a frequency of 16 mentioning in total, with examples such as guidance on study-related issues, provision of sample exams, or sharing previous study notes. Participant 8 was one of a few who mentioned their buddy helping them specifically with the statistics courses: *“we texted a lot around the statistics and stuff, so yeah, stats 1A and 1B”*. Participants 1 and 8 both mentioned three times receiving academic help, suggesting that they were satisfied with the help they received.

"Organizational Help" was mentioned by five participants, indicating the buddy's support with course selection, book recommendations, or assistance in navigating administrative tasks, like signing up for health insurance. A representative example for this can be derived from the transcript of participant 3, "*... like the most basic thing, like how do I register?*", and participant 1, "*I could always ask questions about things I don't know, health insurance, or whatever and she would already know a bit about it*"

Buddy Help - Private Matters

This was mentioned by six participants, with instances of buddies offering support in personal situations such as helping find a lost bike or providing reassurance before exams. Participant 9 also mentioned that their buddy introduced them to their friends, "*she gave me a lot of advice and she also introduced me to some of her friends*". According to Participant 9, this experience provided them with a strong sense of assurance, making them feel valued and accepted. It was evident to them that their buddy's intentions went beyond fulfilling the responsibilities of the program alone: "*I felt I felt that ... it wasn't only like the buddy project and that was it, like she was actually like trying to like help me once we would like get close.*" This gesture had a profound impact on Participant 9's emotional well-being, fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing their overall experience within the buddy project.

It appears that participants 1, 3, 7, 8, and 9 received assistance across all three categories of help (academically, organizationally, and privately) from their buddies. Additionally, participants 1 and 8, who mention receiving help most frequently in all three categories, also provided the highest ratings. Furthermore, participants 3, 7, and 9 also received help across all three categories and provided ratings of 6 and 7, which compared to the other participants are relatively high ratings (for more information about what the participants liked and what kind of help they received, see the appendix).

Table 2: *Code group: Like about Project*

Code	Participants	Frequency
Activities and workshops	6	10
Before & first weeks Netherlands	6	12
Buddy Overall	8	13
Feel included	6	14
Good online Responses	5	7
Other	8	11

Table 3: *Code group: Buddy Help*

Code	Participants	Frequency
Academically	9	16
Organizational	5	9
Privately	6	10

Together, these results highlight several positive aspects of the buddy program, including engaging activities, early support, satisfaction with buddies overall, a sense of inclusion, effective online communication, comprehensive assistance in academic, organizational, and personal matters, and the formation of connections within buddy groups.

Dislike about Project

Next, through open coding, the aspects disliked by participants regarding the buddy project were identified, leading to the formation of the coding group "Negative about Project." Through the iterative process of code creation, four distinct codes emerged under this broader theme: "Buddy match", "Social activities", "Too little contact", "Bad organisation", see table 4.

Dislike - bad organization

The code "Dislike - bad organization" encompassed participants' complaints about various organizational issues within the project. Seven participants expressed dissatisfaction, with a frequency of 16 total mentioning's, indicating that organizational problems significantly affected students' satisfaction. These problems ranged from feeling left out in the buddy matching process to insufficient information about activities and inconvenient scheduling. *"Oh yeah. I didn't know that was connected to that, but I did want to join some yoga stuff. I think it was also during exam season."* (Participant 6)

Participant 5 commented the following about getting late into the matching process: *"if you're sort of you know an odd man out, then you get like... Leftover people.... there was literally nothing like nothing in common. Not at all."*

Dislike - too little contact

The code "Dislike - too little contact" emerged as eight participants expressed dissatisfaction with the level of contact between themselves and their buddy, despite being engaged in the project. Various reasons, such as COVID-19 restrictions or difficulties in arranging meetups, hindered in-person interactions. Participants mentioned their desire for more face-to-face meetings, but logistical challenges prevented them from doing so. In this vein, participant 1 stated: *"we try to meet in person a couple of times and our group yeah*

that never really worked out so that was a bit unfortunate". Similarly, participant 6 said: *"it would be different if we actually met, but I don't know. It just like it never came to that"*

Table 4: Code group: Dislike about project

Code	Participants	Frequency
Buddy Match	5	9
Social Activities	3	5
Too little contact	8	14
Bad organization	7	16

Overall, these findings shed light on some negative aspects of the buddy project, including organizational issues, mismatches in incoming student - buddy pairing, dissatisfaction with social activities, and insufficient contact between participants and their buddies. From these topics, the most prominent one was dissatisfaction with the organization, which was expressed by 7 participants (for more information about what the participants disliked, see the appendix C).

Recommendations

The final code group that emerged from the analysis was "Recommendations." Participants were asked to provide recommendations for future projects and suggestions for improvement, these were then coded deductively. Their responses were categorized into four distinct codes, of which two stood out the most, see table 5:

Recommend - Selecting and matching

Under the code "Recommend - Selecting and matching," participants provided suggestions to enhance the process of selecting and pairing buddies. Seven participants, with a frequency of 15 statements in total, emphasized the importance of selecting the right buddies

and students as well as matching them, accordingly, see table 7. Participant 5 wanted the project to expand their search of buddies to further departments allowing a wider range of buddy personalities *“So maybe advertise a little more, especially to other students. Maybe pick students who are calmer... This one, I think, was from an engineering program or something.”* Participant 10 mentioned that they enjoyed the group dynamics and further stated that they *“like a bigger group that would be nice and not just like, meet up like planning meetups with the buddy himself.”*

Most students, however, stated that matching hobbies is not something they were caring about *“I mean we, we're all psychology students, so there, there is some sort of general overlap already. So, I don't know if you have to further break it down”* (participant 2).

Recommend - Academic activities & Recommend - Social activities

The codes "Recommend - Academic activities," and "Recommend - Social activities" can be merged into one keeping in mind that while two participants requested an increase in academic activities, with a frequency of two, a significantly higher number of participants, nine in total, emphasized the importance of more social activities, with a frequency of 29. This substantial frequency highlights the significance and value that social activities hold for the participants. Participants strongly recommend incorporating a greater variety of social activities into future projects, ensuring ample opportunities for interaction, socializing, and forming connections with fellow students. Simultaneously, the inclusion of academic activities can provide a balanced approach that supports participants' academic growth and fosters a well-balanced experience within the project. Concrete example for activities were: *“going to like some ACLO group lesson together”* (participant 6), *“walk to the nature you know, outside the city like, to a nice field somewhere outside”* (participant 7), *“would have been cool to have like, places to volunteer or something”* (participant 5) *“plan a picnic or something when it's still a bit warmer outside. Because some people can like, contribute or*

cook something” (participant 10), *“where older students give, not tricks, but like some tips on how they study or like some hacks and how they survived the university or something”* (participant 6).

Table 5: *Code group: Recommendations*

Code	Participants	Frequency
Activities Academical	2	2
Selecting & Matching	7	15
Start project & Ensure Involvement	5	9
Activities Social	9	29

Discussion

The qualitative evaluation of the Buddy Project aimed to explore the experiences and evaluations of new international students, who participated in the Buddy program (2022-2023). By looking at their grading and then analyzing their feedback, valuable insights to the root of their evaluation were gained.

Among the various codes identified, the recommendation of social activities stood out as the most prominent. The findings revealed that the majority of participants (90%) emphasized the importance of expanding and diversifying social activities within the Buddy Project. The results will now be interpreted to gain a deeper understanding of their implications for a better insight of the specific needs of new coming international students and for potential improvements for the Buddy Project. The effectiveness of the Buddy Project in fostering a SOB, easing acculturation stress and enhancing the well-being of new students will now be tried to be derived from the experiences of the participants, what they particularly enjoyed and areas which they would like to see improved. Also, it is important to mention that

a few other codes arose within the analysis. Due to the explorative nature of this study, the most frequent codes were presented, other codes are mentioned and explained within Appendix C.

Rating

The overall grading for the buddy project indicated a moderate level of satisfaction among the students, neither extremely negative nor positive. This suggests that the students did not perceive the project as useless in effectively contributing to the student's adjustment. Also, the decision not to alter their initial ratings when asked at the end of the interview, highlights the stability and reliability of this assessments. However, when thinking about the effectiveness of the project in facilitating student adjustment, it is crucial to delve deeper into their specific preferences and concerns. By exploring what aspects of the project, students liked, disliked, and what improvements they would like to see, we can try to gain a better understanding of its impact.

Liked

The students expressed appreciation for several aspects of the project. They particularly liked the provided activities, which enabled them to socialize and therefore it is plausible to assume that they also feel a greater sense of belonging (SOB). Additionally, having someone to contact for any questions was highly valued by the students. They found their buddies to be helpful in addressing various types of inquiries, including academic, organizational, and personal matters. The online nature of communication facilitated quick responses from the buddies. Furthermore, the students emphasized their positive experience with the early initiation of the project, even before the start of university. This timing was significant as it coincided with the period when students typically had numerous questions and concerns. Through this early contact, the project seems to facilitate student's acculturation process

during this critical time, suggesting that the buddy project contributed to the students' sense of well-being and increased their feelings of inclusion.

Disliked

While the students appreciated the online contact with their buddies, they expressed concerns regarding the lack of in-person social interaction. Many students desired more face-to-face meetings with their buddies, as they believed it would have further enhanced their sense of inclusion. This sentiment also extended to their critique of social activities, with students expressing a desire for more events, particularly at the beginning of the academic year. As mentioned previously, it is believed that increased social activities and in person contact could contribute to students SOB therefore also to their well-being and in turn alleviate acculturation stress (Peperkamp, 2017; Zengilowski et al., 2023). Furthermore, the students heavily criticized the overall organization of the project. Although the number of activities increased later in the year, this coincided with a period when students were already busy with exams and had established social circles. Additionally, some students mentioned feeling a lack of compatibility with their assigned buddies. This suggests that it might be beneficial to revise the timing and structure of the matching process to ensure better alignment between students and their buddies.

Recommendations

When asked for recommendations for future projects, the students overwhelmingly emphasized the need for more social activities. As previously mentioned, these activities are suggested to have played a crucial role in alleviating acculturation stress for students who arrived in the Netherlands, and even before their arrival. The results section presented various ideas for requested social activities. Although most activities were enjoyed by the students it is important to consider that certain social activities may even have negative effects on the sense of belonging, as highlighted by E. Peperkamp (2017) in their paper on leisure experiences.

These activities may lead to divisions and potential conflicts among students. Therefore, further research is needed to identify social activities that better cater to the needs of students and foster a positive sense of community. Furthermore, students expressed a desire for increased engagement from both their assigned buddies and other students in the buddy group. It should also be noted that even some new students themselves became less engaged as the project progressed due to exam commitments or the establishment of their own social support systems, suggesting that the project might not need to cover the first half year.

Furthermore, the students provided proposals for improving or reconsidering the matching process. Some participants expressed a lack of connection with their assigned buddies, which they initially expected to be stronger. Several participants could not be matched as they joined the program at a later point in time, but they still expected to be matched. To address this, it may be useful to inform participants that if they join the project after a certain timeframe, they may not be able to be matched anymore. This would potentially help manage expectations and probably also reduce dissatisfaction. One participant even noted that matching based on hobbies and interests may not be as important, stating that since they were all psychology students, there was already a general overlap. With this the student proposed that the project managers could consider shifting the primary focus, from matching hobbies and interests to the type of assistance the buddies can provide, and the potential expectations students may have, in terms of support.

Overall, the students generally expressed moderate satisfaction with the buddy project, appreciating its early initiation and the availability of a contact for their questions. While they found value in the provided activities, they expressed a desire for more social interactions and in-person meetings. Criticisms revolved around issues of poor organization and a mismatch/ too high expectations into the matching procedure. The recommendations put forth included selecting and increasing social activities, revising the matching process.

Limitations, Strengths, and Future Research

Despite the promising and informative results discussed above, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study. A potential weak point is the sample and its size. A sample size of 10 is relatively small and certainly puts limits to the generalizability of the findings. Yet, even within this small sample, data saturation seemed to be achieved (i.e., responses converged to very similar themes), indicating that further data collection would unlikely yield substantially different insights. Moreover, a potential selection bias is worth considering. The recruitment process relied on availability sampling through various channels such as WhatsApp groups, email, and lectures, which may have introduced a potential sampling bias and self-selection bias. Participants with negative experiences may have been more motivated to participate, resulting in a skewed or overly negative portrayal of the buddy project. Finally, another potential bias to consider is the social desirability bias. Some participants mistakenly perceived the interviewers as the organizers of the program, which may have influenced their responses such that they wanted to be polite and evaluate the program positively. However, it is worth noting that despite this bias (and maybe even due to this bias), the participants demonstrated high levels of engagement. They actively took the time to reflect and provide thoughtful recommendations for improving the program, highlighting their genuine interest in contributing by sharing their perspectives and experiences.

On one hand, it is important to acknowledge that the researchers had limited knowledge and experience with qualitative methods, which may have affected the quality of the interviews. At the same time, it is important to highlight that the interview process was extensively practiced with non-participants prior to data collection, allowing the researchers to refine and improve the interview guideline and -techniques. Researchers also had cultural awareness due to their own experiences of moving to a new country or living in Groningen,

where many international students are present. Moreover, the researchers familiarized themselves with relevant literature on cultural awareness. Despite these efforts, looking backwards, the interview guideline could have been improved, for example by giving participants more room to freely express their thoughts and experiences. Additionally, there were instances where similar questions were asked repeatedly, leading to confusion among participants who did not wish to provide redundant answers.

As stated at the start of this paper, conducting a longitudinal study would have been optimal as it could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the buddy project over time. In the future such a study could examine the shifting levels of engagement and the timing at which the project is most beneficial for international students. By tracking participants' experiences, perceptions and engagement throughout their academic journey, a longitudinal study would provide a deeper understanding of the program's impact and inform strategies for further optimizing its effectiveness.

Conclusion

All in all, the present data offers valuable insights into the experiences of new international students participating in the Buddy Project. It can be said that the buddy project was experienced mostly positively among the participants, who enjoyed the early contact, the social activities as well as just having someone there in case they need help.

Nonetheless the findings also shed light on the areas for improvement, i.e., the matching procedure & the organization of the project, this entails the activities as well as ensuring engagement among students. These insights can guide future efforts to enhance the quality of the project and ensure a more positive and beneficial experience for international students. For example, by increasing the number of activities while rearranging the timing of these activities (more towards the start of the academic year). Also, might it be useful to find a way to ensure involvement of students and their buddies throughout the project (this may require

more research to find the most effective way of increasing voluntary participation (Curtis, 2017)).

Additionally, through addressing the identified limitations, such as the low researchers experience, potential biases, and implementing the recommended strategies, project organizers can conduct further research (such as a longitudinal study, throughout the project) and work towards creating an even more effective and impactful Buddy Project. Building upon Hennekes' (2023) research, this study concludes that while there is room for improvement, the buddy project seems to have a positive impact on students' acculturation process, sense of belonging and their feelings of inclusion. Closing with a statement by participant 4:

„In the beginning you come to a new country, and you have a lot of questions, and you feel a bit lost and you need someone to sort of ground you, like settle you and yeah you need directions and the buddy project does that.” ... “helped me feel more incorporated in the very beginning when I had no one else here.”

Compliance with Ethical Standards: This research involves human participants. All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Collaboration: This research was executed in collaboration with L. Drago, H. Kwakernaak, Y. Smid, S. Voogd, (each having their own domain).

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Appendix A

Table 6

Focus Areas & Codes

Focus Areas	Code Groups	Codes
Expectations	Reason for joining	Contact and Info, Social, Organizational, Other
What participants enjoyed	Like about program	Activities & workshops, before 6 first weeks Netherlands, Buddy overall, Feel included, Good online responses, other.
	Buddy help	Academically, Organizational, Privately
	Engagement YES	Student yes, Buddy yes
What Participants Disliked	Dislike about Project	Bad organization, Buddy match, Social Activities, too little contact
	Engagement NO	Buddy no, Student no
Recommendations	Recommendations	Activities social, Activities Academical, Selecting & Matching, start project & ensure evolvment

Table 7*Codes per Participant*

Participants	Rating	Engagement	Reason joining	Like	Help	Dislike	Recommendations
1	8	Buddy yes, Student no	Contact and Info, Other	Buddy overall, good online responses, Other	Academically, Organizationally, privately	Bad organization, social activities, too little Contact	Activities Social
2	4	Student no	Contact & Info, Other	Feel included, good online responses	Academically	Social Activities	Activities social, Selecting & matching buddies
3	7	Buddy yes, student no	/	Activities and workshops, Buddy overall, Before Netherlands, Feel included, Good online responses	Academical, Organizationally, privately	Bad organization, Buddy match, too little contact	Activities social, start project & ensure evolvement
4	5	Buddy No	Social, Contact & Info, Organizational	Before Netherlands, Feel included, other	Academical	Bad organization, Buddy match, too little contact, social activities	Activities social, Selecting & Matching
5	3	Buddy no	Social, Contact & Info	Activities and workshops, Buddy overall, Before Netherlands, other	/	Bad organization, Buddy match, too little contact	Activities social, Selecting & matching buddies, start project & ensure evolvement

6	5	/	Social, Contact & Info	Buddy overall, good online responses, Other	Academically, privately	Bad organization, Buddy match, too little contact	Activities social, activities academical, start project & ensure evolvment, selecting & matching
7	6	Buddy no, Student no	Social, Contact & Info, Organizational	Activities & workshops, Before Netherlands, Buddy overall, Feel included	Academically, Organizational, privately	Too little contact	Activities social, start project & ensure evolvment, selecting & matching
8	8	Student no, Buddy yes	Contact & Info, Organizational	Activities & workshops, Before Netherlands, Buddy overall, Feel included	Academically, Organizational, privately	Bad Organization	Activities social
9	7	Student no, Buddy yes	Social	Activities & workshops, Before Netherlands, Buddy overall, Feel included, Good online response, other	Academically, Organizational, privately	Buddy match, too little contact	Activities academical, Selecting & matching buddies
10	6	Buddy yes, Buddy no, student no	None/other	Activities & workshops, Buddy overall, Other	Academically	Bad organization, too little contact	Activities social, Selecting & matching buddies, start project & ensure evolvment

Appendix B

Interview guideline

Introduction

We would like to talk about your experiences with the buddy program and your motivations. Our research will be subdivided into five domains; motivation, inclusion, evaluation, matching & social context, which will come forward in this interview in a mixed manner.

First, it might be nice if we introduce ourselves a little bit better. We are five third-year bachelor students currently working on our thesis. Our research is titled: "How do international 1st-year students experience the Buddy Project?" We build upon the quantitative research done by a master student to gain more and hopefully better insights in the experiences of Buddy Program participants. This interview should be seen as more informal and therefore a nice way to chat about your experience. If you are okay with it, I would like to start recording from now on so that we can use the recordings to gain better insights from. The only people that will have access are the five group members, and our supervisor.

Important:

1. Informed consent
2. Questions regarding the research
3. Start recording

Start interview

Motivation

1. Why did you choose to study in The Netherlands?
 1. Was there a specific reason for choosing Groningen?
 2. What were your expectations for this new adventure?

3. What was your social life like when you first came to The Netherlands?
4. What about your living situation?

Social context

2. How did you make new social contacts (inside/outside university) as an international student?
3. What kind of relationships/ social contacts were and are still most valuable to you as an international student?
 1. Can you explain why..
 2. What do these relationships offer you?

Evaluation

4. Imagine you could rate your experience within the buddy program on a scale from 1-10, what number would you give this experience?
 1. Can you give us some reasons for your chosen number?
 2. Are there any other things you particularly liked and disliked about the program?

Motivation

5. Before we dive into the details of your experience with the project. We would like to know what were your reasons for joining the buddy programme?
 1. How did you hear about the program?

Evaluation

6. What about the activities?
 1. Was there any activity you would have liked to see or to see more of?

Matching

7. If you think about the relationship with your buddy, were the two of you a good match?

Give some examples...

1. How did you feel about the contact the two of you had?
 2. Do you think the program gave you a good match, and why?
 3. What about the questionnaire about the matching procedure, did you feel these made sense?
 4. How similar did you feel to your buddy? In what aspects?
 5. How close were you to your buddy?
 6. How would you describe the relationship?
 7. Are you still in contact?
8. Do you feel like you learnt something new from your buddy? In what way?

Inclusion

9. Starting a study abroad can be quite challenging, and for some it may be lonely. How was this for you?

1. How did you experience adapting to student life in general?
2. Did you feel included within the university? How, and why?
3. How was it for you to become part of the community, how did you experience this?
4. Were there situations where you felt excluded, can you explain this?

10. What influence did The Buddy Program have on you feeling included (Do you feel part of the psychology program, do you feel like part of Groningen etc.) Do you think the project contributed to your feeling of inclusion?

1. Why do you think so?
2. Which activities do you think helped in this process and which activities did you miss?

3. How could this be improved by The Buddy Program?
4. Was there any other course that really helped you feel at home in Groningen?

Evaluation

11. Now we have looked in more detail, do you still agree with it or would you like to change your number within the buddy program scale from (1= very negative to 10 very positive)?

1. Explain the reason for keeping your number/ changing your number
2. Next to the improvements you already mentioned, do you have any other recommendations for the program
3. Are there things you would have done differently?

Wrap up

Well thanks for giving us some of your time. It was really insightful!

12. What did you think of the interview?
13. Is there anything you would like to add?
14. Before we depart could I ask your age and nationality? We need this for sample description.

Appendix D

Other Codes not described in result section

Reasons for joining

During the interviews, participants were asked about their motivations for joining the buddy program. The responses provided insights into their initial expectations and intentions. Additionally, understanding the reasons for joining the program can inform future project focus and highlight areas of importance for participants.

Participants' responses regarding this theme were analyzed and categorized into four main code groups and each code group represents a distinct motivation/expectation that influenced participants' decision to participate in the buddy program.

Reason - Social

This code group includes participants who joined the program with the primary intention of forming social connections and building friendships. It was the most frequent reason; five out of the ten participants repeatedly expressed a desire to establish meaningful relationships through the buddy program. Their expectations included opportunities for socializing, engaging in group activities, and experiencing a sense of belonging within the university community. A good example for this was Participant 10 who mentioned wanting to join the Project *“due to the fact that in Portugal I had so much difficulty like making friends, I felt like. I wanted to start at least knowing some people”*. Similarly, participant 6 joined the program to connect socially and mentioned to be disappointed by the little contact between them and their buddy *“It was an early indicator that things were not going to go how I had hoped exactly socially. It was a little sad... There were so many, just completely unanswered text. I really did try.”*

Reason - Contact and Information

Seven participants joined the buddy program with the aim of gaining a point of contact and through this obtain information about various aspects of university life and the host country. They sought guidance on academic matters, cultural norms, campus resources, and practicalities such as transportation and accommodation. Participant 5 summaries it well “*I like really wanted someone I could text at any time and that they would respond and give a good like a good answer. Also, that someone was in the same programme before, so they knew what I was feeling and what I was experiencing...*”

Table 9

Code group: Reasons for joining

Code	Participants	Frequency
Organisational	3	3
Contact and Info	8	7
Social	5	9
None/Other	3	5

Reason – Organizational & Reason - Other

The organisational code encompasses motivations related to the program's structure, logistics, and support systems. Participants in this category highlighted the importance of having an organized program that could assist them in navigating the administrative processes and smoothly transitioning into university life and required less contact than the previous code. Participant 8 “*but also from the perspective of somebody helping me, yeah, with everything new here.*”

The "Other" category represents participants whose motivations did not fit into the previous three code groups. Examples include seeking assistance with language practice or having a general curiosity about the buddy program. Participant 1 *"I just took everything that University offered like for guidance, so I just signed up for everything there is"*

Among the identified codes, the social and contact and information categories emerged as the most prominent motivations. Furthermore, the codes Organisational and none/other also fed into participants overall "wanting to feel like they have a point of contact" or "having done everything to get the necessary information". This highlights the importance of fostering social interactions and providing relevant information within the buddy program.

Like - Activities and Workshops

This was mentioned by six participants, who indicated enjoyment of interactive elements within the program, examples include Yoga, a stress management workshop or the welcome activity. Participant 10 *"I like the fact that we had like activities like yoga and stuff and like introduction like to other people like other groups of buddies, so that was nice."*

Like - Buddy Overall

Even though, several students raised concerns about their buddy's engagement and the little amount of contact they experienced with their buddy. Eight participants still mentioned overall satisfaction with their assigned buddy, calling them "friendly", "a nice person", "easy to talk to"... Even participant 6 who got "ghosted" by their buddy mentioned the buddy to be *"nice in general, just busy."*

Like – Inclusion: The buddy project was also credited with fostering a sense of inclusion, this was mentioned by seven participants. Participant 4 stated, *"It was a nice feeling of inclusion"* during a group get-together with their buddy and others. Participant 5 highlighted the immediate companionship and support the buddy provided during initial meetings *"it was*

very good in that aspect that like it helped me feel more incorporated in the very beginning, when I had no one else here...“

Liked – Other

Other positive aspects of the buddy program were coded as "Liked-Other." This included participants enjoying the dynamics of their buddy groups, appreciating the matching procedure, and forming connections with other students in the group. Participant 11 specifically mentioned their group dynamics as it allowed for the formation of a small social circle. Participant 11 expressed: *“like one buddy had several students, because that way you already had like, a small social circle.”* Other participants also indicated their preference for having a group with one or two buddies, as it provided them with additional peers to engage with and navigate their experiences together. Here participant 10 is stating how glad they are to have had another student in their buddy group *“what if she wasn't like she they didn't add her to the group. I would be like, alone and everything would have been different”*.

Buddy help – organizational

"Organizational Help" was mentioned by five participants, indicating the buddy's support with course selection, book recommendations, or assistance in navigating administrative tasks, like signing up for health insurance. An representative example for this can be derived from transcript of participant 4 *“like the most basic thing, like how do I register?”*, and participant 1 *“I could always ask questions about things I don't know, health insurance, or whatever and she would already know a bit about it”*

Dislike – Social activities

Under the code "Dislike – Social activities," three participants mentioned their dislike for certain activities offered by the project. Reasons included the lack of adherence to the program by some groups and a desire for a wider selection of activities. Participant 3 mentioned not being interested in yoga, while Participant 5 highlighted the lack of

participation by groups in organized events. “to some kind of questions or something, no one did it, I remember there were so many groups no one actually did it,” Participant 5.

Participant 3 mentioned preferring to have a bigger selection of activities to choose from as they did not enjoy the activities offered “like I wasn't that much into the yoga stuff.

Dislike – Buddy match

The code "Dislike – Buddy match" revealed that participants had high expectations for a "perfect match" based on shared hobbies and interests. However, five participants expressed disappointment with their assigned buddy or the compatibility of other students in their group. Participant 10 acknowledged the difficulty of achieving a perfect match, citing differences in music preferences as an example. “I felt like it was too broad in a sense like we also we like movies, we like stuff, but like we didn't go like into that, into like music type of music because like at the end, like the group that I had like, it was like people sometimes like quite different like.” Participant 4 further explains that the problems in matching might also stem from the lack of engagement of their buddy they mention not connecting with their buddy due to the fact of not meeting up enough, “*I didn't really connect with my buddy I didn't meet up with her a lot*”

Recommendations:

Recommend - Project start & involvement

The code "Recommend - Project start & involvement" encompassed recommendations related to the initial stages of the project and the student and buddies' active involvement throughout the project. 5 participants, with a frequency of 9 were sorted into this code. Participants recommended carefully selecting buddies making sure they are available and involved throughout the duration of the entire project. Participant 6 elaborates mentioning a need for clear communication from the student to the buddy, education them on their expectation for the project “...also know what the other one expects from you and that it is

clear.”. Participant 11 emphasises the need for direct communication by the buddy to ensure the students involvement “... be like, yeah, we strongly encourage you to guys to come to these events because that way you can meet new people from your faculty”. Lastly as related to the Dislike- organizational & Like Before Netherlands codes several participant mentioned liking that the project started before university. They would improve upon this by organizing more events at the start of the project and not in exam times ”especially like during the summer or before coming here, like July, August, September, at like the beginning, that's when most of the students feel like they need help or they need some social group”

(Participant 7)