

**An Investigation of Motivation Role in a Peer Pairing Program**

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### **Abstract**

In the present qualitative study, we set out to investigate the role of motivation and expectations in the context of a peer pairing programme offered by the Department of Psychology at the University of Groningen. Due to the qualitative nature of this study the main goal is to understand how motivation and expectation influence the experience of incoming students who joined the Buddy Project. Uncovering this will be instrumental to design efficacious improvements for future editions of the program. To achieve our aim, we conducted semi structured interviews and used a mixture of thematic analysis and open coding. Through these two techniques we were able to first highlight areas of interest thanks to relevant literature, and then freely explore amongst the themes for informative patterns. To exemplify, in the present study we relied on self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation to inform our analysis of students' motivation, and after coding for SDT we then started looking for commonalities between students' accounts. Three were the overarching themes: expectation, nature of students' motivation, and efforts. From these themes various patterns emerged: students' evaluations being dependent on them getting what they wanted out of the programme, a lack of controlled motivation, or the prevalence of social and academic motive for both joining the programme and for pursuing an international education. After presenting the patterns we closed off by discussing improvements built on these (e.g., adding to the matching procedure what students want out of the programme)

*Keywords:* Peer pairing programme, motivation, expectations, adaptation, self-determination theory

## **An Investigation of Motivation Role in a Peer Pairing Program**

The charm of attaining an international education has been consistently growing in recent years, and the Netherlands was able to establish itself as one of the top host destinations worldwide for international students seeking tertiary education. In the academic year of 2021/22 as many as 115 thousand international students enrolled in Dutch universities, an astonishing figure when compared to 33 thousand in the academic year of 2005/06 (CBS, 2022). Whilst interest in seeking education abroad keeps increasing for young adults, life in a new country is not easy and this experience comes with its own set of difficulties. According to literature on the topic, incoming international students face both practical and acculturative challenges (e.g., Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Students' emotional response to these challenges is crucial as adaption inevitably shapes a student's worldviews and is thus a vital moment of personal development (Westwood et al., 1986; Mori, 2000).

To assist in the acculturation process of incoming international students, many university boards have explored interventions and peer pairing programmes were one design that saw success (Westwood & Barker, 1990). Evaluation of one such programme undertaken by the University of Groningen is the aim of the present study. The programme in question is named "Buddy Project" and was fathered by the Department of Psychology to offer incoming international students support as they accommodate to their new life in the city of Groningen.

With this goal in mind, the Buddy Project pairs incoming students with a senior buddy through its own matching procedure. Depending on the pool of participants criteria such as hobbies and nationality are considered to group, when possible, similar individuals together (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021). The pairs are then invited to contact each other, and their relationships are fostered both through events offered by the department (namely in the form of activities and seminars), as well as by private interaction outside the university setting.

Participation in the programme is voluntary, and we<sup>1</sup> foresee that motivation and expectations may have important influences on the pair's interactions, as well as more generally on attitudes toward the programme. Investigation of this specific aspect will be the focus of the present thesis.

### **International Student's Acculturative Challenges**

Before discussing the role of motivation, it is first important to spend some time characterising the set of challenges faced by international students to contextualise the issues that the Buddy Project was designed to address. To name a few of the shades that constitute the acculturative challenge faced by international students we have issues such as language proficiency (Zhang and Mi, 2010), family pressure (Lee, 1984), cultural Differences (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006), and failed expectations which can range from a student inability to meet the same level of academic performances to difficulties forming friendships with members of the host culture (these four stressors were also discussed jointly in Pedersen, 1991; Oropenza et al., 1991; Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000). Whilst each has its specific character, all stressors contribute to students' perception of their international experiences and their day-to-day interactions.

Following Lazarus's (1993) theoretical framework, where he explores the way cognitive appraisal interplays with stressors, this day-to-day temporal dimension can be particularly concerning. Daily experiences of stressors result in a stream of negative appraisals which may exacerbate stress and, in the context of acculturation, ultimately undermine initial attitudes, social skills, ability to cope, or positive self-image (Lazarus, 1990, 1993; Aubrey, 1991; Chen 1999; Lin & Betz, 2009). To illustrate, we can imagine a student

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<sup>1</sup> The present research was conducted in a group context. Therefore, the pronoun "we" will hereafter reference the whole research team

that due to the language barrier feels unable to communicate intentions, opinions, or feelings. Whilst our international student might have at first been confident and excited about the novelty of being in an international context, constant negative experiences when speaking with locals can have a discouraging effect which will induce a sense of helplessness, or more generally, of inability to face the challenges present in their new life (Aubrey, 1991).

Furthermore, it should be considered that these stressors do not occur in isolation and that their plausible interplay can worsen this negative appraisal cycle. Some logically feasible pathways of interaction to illustrate this idea are: (a) Low language proficiency exacerbates academic difficulties (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000) which in turn makes it harder to keep performance expectations up (Pedersen, 1991; Smith & Khawaja, 2011) and possibly raises family pressure whether perceived or actual (Lee, 1984); (b) lack of language skills together with cultural differences makes it harder to form friendships with students from the host culture which would serve as an important buffer against stress (Lin & Betz, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011); (c) cultural differences and failed academical expectations can negatively affect a person confidence in their language skills (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). While the causality of these specific interaction chains has to my knowledge not been directly investigated, the presence of multiple and related stressors makes it so less resilient students have a harder time turning past these negatively connotated experiences.

Building on this point, despite their straightforward structure a fair criticism of these interplays is that they surely do not operate in a vacuum. This is indeed true and as a matter-of-fact attachment style (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Brisset et al., 2010), coping techniques (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), and personality traits (Brisset et al., 2010; Ying & Han, 2006) have all been identified as a negative predictor of acculturative stress as well as positive factors for adapting to the host culture. These work as important buffers in a student's experience of acculturative stress and do so either by keeping their resilience and confidence up or because

they favour prosocial and adaptive behaviour. Although this is a certainly hopeful note it should be kept in perspective how internationals on the other end of the scale (high in trait anxiety, with avoidant/anxious attachment styles, or maladaptive coping strategies) are ultimately more vulnerable to acculturative challenges (Aubrey, 1991; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Brisset et al., 2010; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

### **The Role of International Students' Motivations and Expectations**

The aim of the peer pairing program offered by the Department of Psychology at the University of Groningen is to help struggling students adapt to their new life, but to do so it is first imperative to understand why some students may be struggling more than others.

Understanding what kind of motivations students have for joining the programme, or more generally for pursuing an international education, may help elucidate what is at stake for them and help design precise interventions. Thus, building back on Aubrey's (1991) example of how interplaying acculturative challenges can lead otherwise enthusiastic students towards feelings of helplessness, it is important to explore how this "enthusiasm" should be characterised and the ways it can differ from student to student.

But before delving into the nature of student motivation research by Geeraert et al. (2021) on cross-cultural travellers' (international students, immigrants, expats) expectations can help us clarify further how acculturative challenges can impact initial "enthusiasm". The author compared two hypotheses on the relationship between expectations and reality: the accuracy hypothesis and the directional hypothesis. Respectively, the former proposes that realistic expectations are what facilitates adaptation whilst the latter stresses that it is the magnitude and quality of the discrepancy between expectations-reality that determines whether adaptation is successful or not. Geeraert and colleagues' findings were in line with the latter option. In assessing expected vs experienced psychological and sociocultural adaptation measured before (expected), at the beginning of the sojourn abroad (experienced),

and 5 months after (experienced), they found out that both magnitude and quality of a discrepancy were significant predictors of well-being and stress; a finding that the author reports as fitting to the broader theoretical framework of expectation violation theory (Burgoon, 2016; Burgoon & Ebesu Hubbard, 2005).

It appears that the initial enthusiasm of students is affected by their expected adaptation and whether this falls in line, is under-met, or surpasses their experience. This finding ought to be kept into account since it showcases how forecasted adaptation is an important benchmark for incoming students. Considering that incoming students may have different motivations or goals for pursuing an international education, we ought to characterise the grounds on which expectations may be modelled.

To do so we can follow Chirkov et al. (2007, 2008) studies on international students' motivations in which he adopts the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is a multidimensional approach and as such there are distinct aspects of motivation that need to be considered: the level of self-determination of people's behaviour, which branches out from controlled (dependent on others) to autonomous motivation, and the outcome of the goals they strive for, specifically whether these are intrinsically or externally rewarding. Their composites lead to four different motivational profiles: intrinsic (autonomous-intrinsic), identified (autonomous-extrinsic), introjected (controlled-intrinsic), and external (controlled-extrinsic). These profiles are likely to shape which outcomes will be expected by a prospective student and determine their efforts; viz. a prospective international student who is intrinsically oriented is likely to have open expectations and be highly motivated in their pursuit, whilst an externally oriented student is likely to have impending expectations and be motivated only on contingent rewards.



Since the results from Chirkov et al. (2007, 2008) partially demonstrated a relationship between the SDT framework and the adaptation of international students this framework will be helpful to interpret our data. Critically, Chirkov and colleagues demonstrated this relationship only partially since, despite a positive relationship between autonomous motivation and adaptation as well as a negative correlation for controlled, goals did not seem to have the same clear-cut influence due to only one of the studies producing significant results. A plausible reason for this is due to the different operationalisation of goals insofar that Chirkov and colleagues focused on specific emigration motives instead of investigating extrinsic vs intrinsic goals.

Nevertheless, the study by Chirkov et al. (2007, 2008) did find autonomously motivated students as more likely to adapt in an international context, in contrast to students whose motivation is built on the expectations and wishes of others. This notion will serve as an important guide for the forthcoming analysis of student motivation, yet we should note how the mechanism that ties autonomous motivation to better adaptation was not directly uncovered by Chirkov and colleagues since their study was correlational in nature. Their research being the only study in the literature that investigates adaptation by adopting SDT means that there are no alternative papers explaining how SDT affects adaptation. If we are to turn to other applications of SDT, proneness and stability in efforts (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000) might explain how autonomously motivated students are more likely to adapt to the host country in the same fashion that efforts lead to better academic performance in autonomously motivated students (Botnaru et al., 2021; Breva & Galindo, 2020).

In conclusion, expectations along with different styles of student motivation are likely to be an important factor in the face of acculturative challenges, as they can determine how these will be approached. Observing if SDT and the motivational profiles derived from it surface in our study will be interesting to see. Before closing, I want to note how our interest

in SDT is only informative. This study is qualitative research that aims to explore the nature of incoming students' motivation; hence it is not concerned with providing direct support to the studies just discussed. Rather we hope to use this existing literature to inform our exploration of students' motivation.

### **The Buddy Project and the Present Research**

Equipped with a better understanding of the role of expectations and motivations for international students' well-being we can go back to the aim of this research, namely further investigating the “buddy project”. To review, the psychology department at the University of Groningen established its peer pairing program to help incoming international students to adapt to their new life. Specifically, this project is meant to help new students face the previously discussed challenges of (a) adapting to the academic environment; (b) adapting to the city culture; (c) providing new social avenues through the buddy and the programme. These aims were built with the acculturation literature just discussed in mind, but since most studies referenced so far were based in the US and Australia we had to consider how novel and different challenges may be present in the context of the Netherlands.

One such deviation is the discrepancy between the host culture language being Dutch and the language of teaching being English, an issue absent in the studies considered so far. This naturally makes it harder for international students to interface with the host culture and makes it trickier for them to form friendships with locals. For transparency's sake, it is a possibility that internationals in a Dutch context may not be interested or expect to do so, the desire for friendship with members of the host culture discussed so far (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000) may be directed exclusively towards people from an anglophone culture. Regardless, this is relevant to the buddy programme as pairs tend to be between international students themselves. Interaction between co-nationals is a positive experience and another important buffer for stress (Westwood et al., 1986; Aubrey, 1991; Lin & Betz, 2009; Cena et al., 2021).

However, as the pairings are between internationals it is not straightforward that the same mechanism is in place; albeit Tavares (2021) and Kashima and Loh (2006) mention it as equally positive.

Due to this and other differences, Henneke's (2023) preliminary research into the outcomes of the buddy program was an important starting point for this study since she investigated post-test results on well-being, loneliness, and perceived support between participants and non-participants. (Un)fortunately, her study did not yield any significant difference and the results were positive in every dimension across both groups. This outcome, although easily attributable to the lack of pre-test measurements, leaves us unable to draw any conclusion. Explanations for this puzzling result stretch from the cohort being resistant to acculturative stress to the Buddy Project working as intended and, regardless of which option coincides with the facts, each has its own set of implications. It will be then interesting to explore whether pre-project attitudes yielded any impact on later evaluation.

Henneke's (2023) inconclusive results, as well as other doubts on the efficacy of the programme, motivated the present study and are behind our decision to use qualitative techniques to investigate the motivation of students joining the programme. To achieve this goal our interviews with former participants will tap into five domains to get more insights into students' experience of the programme. Matching procedure, social support, student motivation, inclusion, and general evaluation are the domains considered relevant since each is expected to moderate the programme effectiveness<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Each domain was researched by other members of this thesis project and presented in their respective paper. As mentioned in the next line the current thesis focus is motivation and discussion of the other domains will be only in reference to it. For a closer look of the other domains, it is possible to refer to the other thesis.

Specifically, motivation will be the central domain of this paper. As was showcased by Aubrey (1991) initial attitudes and expectations are likely to influence the acculturation experience of students. Understanding the motivating factors behind a student's pursuit of international education can give us an important glimpse into the disposition of students to face acculturative challenges. Likewise, students' expectations or motivations specific to the buddy project are also worth considering since these may be distinct from the ones behind the broader pursuit of international education. Possible motivations might be tied to either seeking belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dundon et al., 2021) or achieving academic success. Hence, it will be interesting to see how students' motivations, expectations, and experiences with the programme relate to each other.

## **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 couple 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 themes and experiences related to the Buddy Project. To structure our research, we opted for five domains: (1) motivation to study abroad, to participate in the project, and consequent expectations; (2) perceived inclusion within the UG; (3) match buddy-newcomer; (4) buddy project in newcomers' broader social context; (5) students general evaluation of the project and related positive and negative experiences. These domains appear to be relevant according to the literature and are related 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.

## Participants

11 participants were recruited by various means: (1) coordinators of the project sent emails to participants of the Buddy Project; (2) invitations were sent in WhatsApp groups for first-year psychology students; (3) 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 ourselves to the 2023 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. Based on these criteria we excluded one participant who did not take part in the 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, Croatian, Lebanese, Lithuanian, Venezuelan and American. The biggest part (40%) of the sample was German. Most participants (80%) were European. Participants’ age ranged from 19 until 30 years ( $M = 21.4$ ,  $SD = 3.47$ ) (see table 1 for the descriptives).

**Table 1**

### Participant Descriptions

Alias	Age	Nationality
Noah	25	German

Luca	20	German
Danny	21	German
Taylor	20	German
Roan	20	Slovakian
Robin	20	Slovakian
Charlie	30	American
Andrea	19	Lithuanian
Senna	20	Venezuelan
Silke	19	Lebanese

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## **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, and 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 role in all interviews and Yvonne made sure all domains were investigated thoroughly by asking deepening 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

practised by the interviewers with fellow students to get accustomed to the structured questions (the interview guide can be found as an appendix) and to learn each other's rhythms.

The sessions themselves 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 to 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 this 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. In the end, after the recording was stopped, the 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 informed of the scope of our study and informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Moreover, to protect students' privacy each participant received an alias which will be used to anonymise their quotes (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 theoretical ideas (i.e., whether there were violated expectations, or the adoption of the SDT), we also allowed the data content to inform and develop our analyses. This approach resulted in several data-driven codes, based on which the researcher identified patterns that could subsequently be developed into themes, in this specific thesis particularly relating to the overall evaluation of the buddy project. Transcripts were manually created and analysed using Atlas.ti 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, viz. in the context of motivation, both academic and social reasons can be important factors behind a student's desire to join the “buddy project”. Open coding was then used to find additional commonalities between the interviewees.

## **Results**

In line with the theoretical background of this paper and intending to use the related evidence as a steppingstone to improve the buddy project, three relevant themes were identified from the interviews: (1) expectations, (2) the nature of student's motivations, (3) students' efforts. Some recurring motives also surfaced from analysing the interviews, but since these applied generally to the broader three themes, they were not worth discussing by themselves. It will suffice to say that students were concerned with four domains: social, academical, personal, and practical. These domains already appeared rather frequently in research on adaptation and acculturation challenges (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) and it must be noted how they were not mutually exclusive and could concur. For example, a recurring topic amongst German interviewees was how their pursuit of international education in Groningen was motivated by the difficulties of being accepted into psychology programs in Germany; this issue encompasses practical reasons (not being able to enter German universities),



personal ones (wanting to pursue a study that interests them), as well as academical motives (studying their major of interest)

## **Expectations**

The idea of investigating expectations was inspired by Geeraert et al. (2021), who found support for a directional hypothesis of the expectation-reality link, wherein met or exceeded adaptation expectations lead to better adjustment than when students failed to achieve them. The theme of expectations was not limited to this issue though, and an interesting pattern that surfaced whilst coding expectations was their relationship with motivation. Specifically, whether the nature and domain of a student's motivation would lead them to form corresponding expectations.

To showcase this latter point we can take an illustrative quote by Senna: “Yeah, but either way, like I wanted to go to another place in which I will, like, feel more, I don't know, I could have more friends or like people who I can actually talk to”. Senna’s motivation for pursuing an education abroad was grounded in the wish to build a new life with more social interrelatedness, which led her to have a corresponding expectation in the same regard. Interestingly, when later asked about her expectations she first contradicted this previous statement by mentioning that she did not have many expectations, but promptly clarified she was instead trying to manage them. Senna’s expectation management was also detailed by her as being in response to the old and heartfelt disappointment she experienced when her expectations were not met as she moved away from her home country at a young age. Expectation management was not always present though, and some students like Taylor were straightforward in what they anticipated: “So, I was really excited about like just meeting people from everywhere and that was like our biggest expectation just meeting people, also, from different continents and everything”.

A different, yet highly prevalent pattern that arose in analysing expectations, was that the degree by which a student's expectations of the programme were met appeared to predict their overall evaluation of the buddy project; in a similar fashion to the directional hypothesis by Geeraert et al. (2021). This pattern emerged by considering students' ratings that were originally probed for the evaluation domain (see the thesis by Theisen, 2023), which ranged from 1 to 10, and by seeing if their reasons for joining the programme were later met. It emerged that when students' motives and expectations were met evaluation of the programme was higher, notably this was consistent across our sample. To exemplify we found two cases where students met their expectations and scored the programme with an 8, students whose rating ranged from 5 to 6 had their motives partially met, and lastly, students who did not get what they wanted out of the programme rated their experience from 5 to a lowest of 3 in the case of Charlie.

Charlie expressed the following motivation to join the programme: "I figured I would be lonely. Cuz, you know, a whole new place and I don't speak Dutch yet. So I was hoping for comradery among other students. But yeah. I did not have luck.". In this quote, it appears evident that his goal was forming relationships and avoiding the negative outcome he had anticipated. Regretfully, absence by the buddy and general lack of contact with the other members of his group within the project meant his motivation for joining the program was grossly under met which led him to give the program a rating of 3.

### **Nature of Students' Motivation**

In coding the nature of students' motivation we relied on Chirkov et al. (2007, 2008) correlational study on SDT and adaptation. To recap, SDT is a multidimensional approach divided across the two dimensions of autonomous-controlled and extrinsic-intrinsic motives.

In adopting SDT it was first surprising to see the lack of controlled motivation. Nearly all participants were autonomously motivated to pursue education in the Netherlands and to join the buddy programme. Considering the positive nature of doing things for oneself rather than for others, this may explain why our sample of interviewees seemed well-adjusted and proactive regardless of possible acculturative and practical challenges. For example, German students' enthusiasm did not seem to be fazed by being forced to study psychology abroad in response to the high requirements of German universities. In the words of Noah: "But well in Germany it's a bit different, you need a certain grade in high school to be able to study." and "I was super super motivated to start yeah so, I just want to sign up for everything the university offer to help me you know with the studies". Despite not being able to study their major of choice in Germany, this subset of our cohort seemed interested in making the most out of their university life in the Netherlands.

Controlled motivation being unmentioned by our participants also meant that the two motivational profiles of introjected and external were absent in our sample. The lack of these two profiles signified that the motivational profiles were either identified, when rewards were extrinsic (e.g., Noah: "but I decided that first of all I wanted an English degree", and Luca: "Groningen specifically, just because it has a good psychology program"), and intrinsic when activity were in themselves rewarding (e.g., Silke: "I just looked more into it and I liked the programme itself", and Noah: "I wanted to study psychology for a longer time"). Unfortunately, assigning participants to only one motivational profile was not possible, and as the above quote from Noah showcases some interviewees presented multiple motivational profiles.

Now turning to the second dimension of SDT, extrinsic-intrinsic motivation, this did not seem to showcase any meaningful pattern by itself. More informative were the specific types of students' motivation differentiated across the four domains mentioned at the

beginning of the result section: social, academical, practical, and personal motives. Academic motives were predominant both as a reason for joining the buddy project and for coming to the Netherlands and/or Groningen. Interestingly, academic motives highly concurred with other motives. This possibility was already mentioned at the beginning of the introduction and to illustrate we can take Andrea's quote: "I think as I said before, that I like really wanted someone I could text at any time and that they would respond and give a good like a good answer", or Noah's statement: "yeah I don't know I think that's the main reason why I signed up yeah guidance". These were coded not only as academic motives for joining the programme but further as personal and practical respectively.

Noah's quote with his mention of guidance is worth delving on. Guidance was a salient issue to multiple students joining the buddy programme and was predominant in students' accounts of the programme and of their interactions with the buddy. Even if it was predominant when students recalled their expectations it was not always specified as a motive for joining, and whether it was simply not explicated or not considered as a motive for joining is an open issue.

Whilst academic goals were on average met by the buddies, people joining with social motives were not as fortunate. Not every person that joined for social reasons was fully disappointed but organisational issues of the programme, such as a high dropout rate, poor scheduling of activities, and lack of buddies, meant that opportunities to socialise were scarce. For future reference the lack of buddies, which meant that rather than working in pairs multiple incoming students were grouped under the same buddy, did not always have negative implications. When groups were functional social interaction appeared to be collaterally greater thanks to peers being able to interact amongst themselves.

All in all, on the nature of motivation it was remarkable how predominant autonomous motivation was compared to controlled and how the low informative value of the

extrinsic-intrinsic dimension engenders salient motives as more relevant targets for future interventions.

### **Motivation and how it Affects Efforts**

Efforts were a somewhat surprising theme; besides having been briefly mentioned in the introduction as being more common in autonomously motivated students, it was not one of the main foci of the analysis, and thus not directly inquired. Nevertheless, in studying the content of the interviews it was interesting to see the wide range of efforts made by students to adapt to their new life. These included efforts to fulfil academic needs (such as joining the programme to know more about the courses and their structure), and practical needs (such as finding accommodation), but efforts to fulfil social needs were predominant. To illustrate take this quote from Danny:

“Well, I did have my friend, but other than that I also went to two introduction weeks, Kei week and the ESN week. And I did meet some people there, but nothing really substantial. So that stressed me out a bit in the beginning because I was like, ”well now I don't have any friends here. What am I going to do?” And then I did start finding some friends, but I feel like now in the last few weeks it's become even more like expanding. So that's nice.”

Or Senna who joined the programme to meet new people:

“Well, like I have to mention the buddy project because I didn't have any friends here and I didn't know anyone and thanks to the buddy project I I met a group of people actually. But yeah I mean we were like four people in the group, and our buddy like a second-year student. But yeah, at the end I only started talking to like a girl that was Italian, and we started talking a lot, and we were like quite close the first months. That was quite I wasn't alone at the beginning, so that was nice.”

In observing social efforts, it was interesting to see how their success or failure led respectively to positive and negative accounts of their experiences. For example, in the first quote by Danny, we can observe how his unrewarded social efforts induced a degree of stress; possibly for fear of isolation which was later resolved as he started making friends. Probably, not having friends and later having them contributed to the initial negative feeling and later positive one, but I think it is worth entertaining whether seeing his efforts' initial lack of results and later success may have been also a factor at play.

To this avail, comparing Senna's quote to Danny's can serve as a good counterfactual to highlight how seeing someone's efforts being rewarded may be at play. Senna's efforts were readily rewarded as she befriended an Italian girl assigned to her buddy group, yet the other two members of the group being distant produced instead a negative outcome as she discusses in the following quote:

“But the other two people actually weren't as interested, so I felt like either they didn't like us or like they weren't as interested in the project, so they were I do not know, they weren't never there for our meetings, so it was weird, so. [...] Like I disliked the fact that, yeah, some people weren't maybe they weren't... Like we weren't much because I didn't talk to them. And at the beginning we weren't, like, close, like with the other two people. But yeah.”

These two contrasting experiences produced a mixed attitude which was further discussed by Senna when as she mentioned her unfulfilled attempts to befriend and engage with the other two members of the group. Senna's quote serves as a counterfactual to Danny's because Senna did have already a friend in the Italian girl meaning that this case cannot be fully reduced to the stress of lacking a social circle. Moreover, the quality of the reports was correlated with how the efforts were met which served as further proof for an independent contribution of efforts.

Lastly as a closing remark, it should be noted how the buddy project could be conceptualised as an effort; namely, to reduce acculturative stress or meet personal goals (whether social or academical). This idea was drawn from the quotes presented in this section and it will be worth considering for the upcoming discussion.

### **Discussion**

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the role of students' motivations and expectations in the context of a peer pairing program. As presented in the previous section, three themes emerged out of our interviews with students: expectations, nature of students' motivations, and efforts. In order, it was interesting to see how, in line with Geeraert et al. (2021) directional hypothesis, students' expectations behind joining the programme and the way these were later met predicted overall evaluation. Despite presenting this pattern as in line with Geeraert and colleagues there are important theoretical considerations that need to be discussed, and we will turn to these shortly. On the nature of motivation, the absence of controlled motivation was puzzling, as it was the low informational value of the extrinsic-intrinsic dimension. The four domains of personal, academical, practical, and social motives made up for the latter lack of informational value and led to some interesting observations. Lastly, it was interesting to see the range of efforts made by incoming students to adapt to life in a new country. On this note one pattern that appeared relevant was that whether efforts were rewarded or not seemed to influence how the experience behind them was perceived.

Let's now start to discuss these findings in an orderly fashion starting with why using Geeraert et al. (2021), to explain how students' evaluations of the programme were tied to whether their expectations for joining the programme were met or not, is problematic. Originally this pattern seemed to be perfectly in line with the directional hypothesis, but after more careful consideration the fact that Geeraert and colleagues present their hypothesis as in line with expectation violation theory (Burgoon, 2016; Burgoon & Ebesu Hubbard, 2005) is

an issue. Expectation violation theory is a framework for interpersonal communication and using it to explain outcome satisfaction is unwarranted. We then ought to ask ourselves what if not the directional hypothesis can motivate this pattern.

Fortunately, Lazarus (1993) work on cognitive appraisal, whereby stress and emotions are dependent on the subjective interpretation made by an individual of the events around him, can work as an equally likely explanation. Cognitive appraisal would explain why meeting expectations leads to better students' evaluations of the Buddy Project (having the experience that I wanted equals I am having a positive experience of the project) yet, if we are to use this framework over the directional hypothesis, we ought to wonder whether expectations still fit in the picture and, if they do not, which other factors was the appraisal based on. After all, the pattern was characterised as being grounded in expectations following Geeraert et al. (2021), but if we are to disregard the directional hypothesis we must reconsider this.

Goals can be a first alternative ground on which students appraised their experience insofar that a student could have judged their experience of the programme on whether his goals for joining were met. Alternatively, we can consider the pattern we observed in our discussion of students' efforts. If we conceptualise joining the Buddy Project as an effort by students to face acculturative challenges, or meet some need/goal, it can follow that cognitive appraisal of their Buddy Project experience may be based on whether they felt it rewarded their efforts.

If the idea that cognitive appraisal can be due to different factors than expectation is still unclear, we can concretise it by taking quotes from our interviews. To first illustrate the relevancy of these two constructs we can take Noah who stated that: "I was super, super motivated to start yeah so, I just want to sign up for everything the university offer to help me you know with the studies". Noah's strong motivation led him to undertake various efforts



with the goal to make the best out of his studies, and like him his fellow students will also have unique goals which they will make efforts to achieve. How these efforts or goals are then being met can be a perfectly good ground for cognitive appraisal. In the context of the Buddy Project, we can take Charlie who joined the programme to make friends out of fear of ending up alone. Charlie joined the programme in an effort, or with the goal, to make friends and it may be that his appraisal of the programme is based on how his experience satisfied either of the two.

To sum up, it is unclear how students' evaluations of the programme were tied to whether their expectations for joining the programme were met or not. Despite initially explaining this pattern on account of Geeraert et al. (2021) directional hypothesis it may be that a different process is at play, and tentatively we proposed Lazarus (1993) cognitive appraisal theory as an alternative framework. In making the switch from Geeraert and colleagues to Lazarus there is no guarantee that we can keep expectations as central for appraisal, and goals or efforts were discussed as possible alternatives. All in all, it is better to describe this pattern more conservatively, as a link between students' evaluations and them getting what they wanted out of the programme. Whether them getting what they wanted is a matter of seeing efforts rewarded, achieving goals, or meeting some expectations cannot unfortunately be concluded. Regardless, this pattern can help inform future editions of the programme and how so will be discussed together with other suggestions for the future.

Moving on, we previously mentioned how the buddy project can be conceptualised as an effort made by students to their meet goals and, if credit is due to this idea, it may explain the lack of controlled motivation in our sample. Our cohort being limited to students who, voluntarily, took part in the buddy project may entail that this subsection of incoming students is distinctively proactive, which would be characteristic of autonomously motivated people. Students with a controlled motivation do not feel in charge as much as autonomously

motivated students do (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000), hence they may either stay clear from the buddy project or enrol in it just to later drift away.

To this avail, there were some accounts of other students not actively participating (for example in an already presented quote from Senna: “the other two people actually weren't as interested, [...], they weren't never there for our meetings”), although linking this directly with controlled motivation is an overstretch from interviews alone. Some of the students in our cohort similarly became less engaged with the programme as time passed, and whether this was caused by structural problems or issues of motivation remains an open question. Notably, as academic pressure mounted up our interviewees did report prioritising their academic duties over joining the activities offered by the project. Nevertheless, whether students joining the programme are characteristically proactive ought to be considered, since it could entail that the project may be failing to involve a subset of students who could otherwise benefit from the Buddy Project. It is worth mentioning how other factors could have led to a lack of reports of controlled motivation in our interviews. So far, we discussed the possibility that only proactive students are joining the programme, but it may be that proactive students are simply more prone to volunteer as participants in a relatively long qualitative study.

The existence of alternative explanations for the finding just discussed allow us to transition to a broader issue, limitations of the current study. Starting from study specific limitations we need to note the just sufficient sample size, how interviews were conducted in English rather than participants' mother tongues, the incidence of social desirability exacerbated by the interviewers being peers, and how our focus on five specific domains might have restricted or otherwise influenced interviewees recollection. Further unconscious biases and values are an inevitable influence in any research and this study is no freer of them. Whilst these issues are worth mentioning they are not so extensive as to invalidate our findings. More importantly we should address how the qualitative nature of this study does

not allow us to draw conclusions on the mechanisms behind the patterns presented. Although a considerable amount of space was dedicated to exploring what could have caused the link between students' evaluations and them getting what they wanted out of the programme, or why controlled motivation was absent, this was done solely to contextualise our results and to identify more precisely what should be improved in future editions of the programme.

So, let's now address what the buddy project should look to improve upon. Starting from structural issues that arose during the interviews we find a poor scheduling of activities, a high drop-out rate, and a lack of buddies. Starting from the first, most of the participants could not partake in the activities as they clashed with other academical obligations such as exams, and the Buddy Project should be integrated more effectively with the academic curriculum. A more accessible schedule may also help reduce absenteeism and is thus worth looking into. Next is the lack of buddies which meant that rather than working in pairs multiple incoming students were grouped under the same buddy. Interestingly this did not always have a negative effect, and as previously mentioned incoming students enjoyed being able to interact with more of their peers. Despite this positive outcome, the lack of buddies was not intentional and assigning more incoming students to a single buddy increased their workload a great deal. According to second hand reports the workload meant that some buddies struggled to meet their duties with the buddy programme and were unable to cater individually to the students placed under their guidance. Both facets, the extra workload and that larger groups being preferable, should be kept into account when considering future changes.

Moving on, the link between students' evaluations and them getting what they wanted out of the programme provides us with an interesting intervention. Considering that there were students joining the programme to get academic guidance and others who wanted to socialize we can instrumentalise this to improve students' experiences of the Buddy Project.

By asking what students want out of the programme in the matching procedure it would be possible to cater directly to students wishes and make sure that they get what they are looking for. It does not concern us what students' evaluation is exactly appraised on, met expectations, goals, or rewarded efforts; by assessing what they want to get out of the Buddy Project and providing it to them we are likely to improve their experiences regardless. Interestingly, in an exchange I had with the coordinator of the programme one month after the end of our interviews, I was informed that this idea was not new to the organizers of the programme and that it was already in practice. In checking the Buddy Project report published for the academic year 2020-2021 (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021) I could not find any mention of this practice in the section on matching, and I am unsure whether what students want out of the programme is being assessed. If it is not, it may be worth considering.

To close off, in the present section we began by reframing a pattern that emerged from the theme of expectations. Originally, students' evaluation of the programme was tied to whether their expectations for joining the programme were met or not in line with Geeraert et al. (2021), but after careful consideration we discussed why ascribing this pattern to the directional hypothesis is unwarranted. This resulted in the pattern being reframed to students' evaluations being dependent on them getting what they wanted out of the programme, and a possible improvement built on this notion was then proposed. A second pattern that was thoroughly discussed was the lack of controlled motivation. Due to the qualitative nature of our study, we were not able to draw any conclusion for why this was the case, but possibilities were explored. The main take away from the lack of controlled motivation was how more attention needs to be given to whether the reach of the programme is sufficient. Lastly limitation and some improvements for future editions of the Buddy Project were discussed.

Considering how the Buddy Project places itself amidst acculturative challenges it is imperative for the programme to be impeccable. Anything short of it risks having the opposite

effect on a student's acculturation process and potentially lead to feeling of helplessness (Aubrey, 1991). We were able to observe this risk whilst talking with Charlie, the student who evaluated the programme most negatively (with a 3). Charlie was unable to achieve his social goals and, if it was not for some important social buffers present in his life (romantic relationship, friends from back home), it is not hard to see how his negative experience ("Just... There were so many, just completely unanswered text. I really did try. But yeah.") could have led him to feel hopeless. Whilst perfection is unattainable the Department of Psychology should strive to deliver an optimal peer pairing programme so that students like Charlie can be aided in this chapter of their lives.

A closer look should then be given to how motivation interplays with the domains researched by the other members of this bachelor group project (i.e, Kwaakernaak, 2023; Smid, 2023; Theisen, 2023; Voogd, 2023). The focus so far has been strictly on the impact and characteristics of motivation to study Psychology at the UG and to sign up for the Buddy Project with little to no interlap with the other domains investigated by this bachelor group. A multidomain approach could help further improve the Buddy Project efficacy.

### **Conclusion**

To improve the Buddy Project, we explored the role of motivation and expectations in the experience of incoming international students. This qualitative investigation proved fruitful, and we were able to highlight three themes (expectations, nature of students motivations, and efforts) as well as multiple patterns. These patterns can help structure future edition of the programme and some possible interventions, such as assessing what students want to get out of the programme in the matching procedure or urging for a more accessible schedule, were discussed. Ultimately, we hope that the present thesis can improve the Buddy

Project so that it may serve generations of students as a foundation on which to start their life at Groningen University.

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## **Appendix**

### **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 first-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:

- Informed consent
- Questions regarding the research
- Start recording

#### **Start interview**

##### ***Motivation***

Why did you choose to study in The Netherlands?

- Was there a specific reason for choosing Groningen?
- What were your expectations for this new adventure?
- What was your social life like when you first came to The Netherlands?
- What about your living situation?

### *Social context*

How did you make new social contacts (inside/outside university) as an international student?

- What kind of relationships/ social contacts were and are still most valuable to you as an international student?
- Can you explain why?
- What do these relationships offer you?

### *Evaluation*

Imagine you could rate your experience within the buddy program on a scale from 1-10, what number would you give this experience?

- Can you give us some reasons for your chosen number?
- Are there any other things you particularly liked and disliked about the program?

### *Motivation*

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?

- How did you hear about the program?

### *Evaluation*

What about the activities?

- Was there any activity you would have liked to see or to see more of?

### ***Matching***

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

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

### ***Inclusion***

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

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

- Why do you think so?
- Which activities do you think helped in this process and which activities did you miss?
- How could this be improved by The Buddy Program?
- Was there any other course that really helped you feel at home in Groningen?

### ***Evaluation***

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)?

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

### **Wrap up**

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

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