

**The Support of International First Year Students through the Buddy Project: The
Match between Students and Buddies**

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Abstract

The University of Groningen is working with a buddy project to support first year international students. In this project, the students are being matched to a senior student by means of a questionnaire about hobbies and interests. However, according to a recent study, the effects of this programme do not seem to be noticeable in comparison to students who do not participate in the project. In this thesis, to better understand this finding, the match between the buddy and the assigned first year student(s) is explored through qualitative research with participants of the project. 10 first year international students were interviewed about the relationship with their buddies. Most people were positive about their buddy, but barely any participants had a closer, social relationship with their buddy. When it came to similarity, the results were very divided; different participants would have liked to see different things from their buddy. Possibly, matching could be tailored more around these wishes. For example, the match could be more based on preference for an academic or a social relationship. These findings highlight the importance of a good matching procedure for the buddy project and its potential beneficial effects on international students.

Keywords: International Students, Buddy Project, Qualitative Research, Matching

The Support of International First Year Students through the Buddy Project: The Match between Students and Buddies

Introduction

Dutch universities have become very international over the years. The number of international students in 2020 was more than three times the number of international students in 2006 (Statista, 2022). These people from all around the world move to the Netherlands to study their programme of choice. They come to a foreign country, often alone. This can be very difficult and challenging (Cena et al., 2021). Because many students leave behind their loved ones in their home country, they will likely want to meet new people and make new friends to have a safe sense of belonging. They will also have to face multiple acculturation challenges, like overcoming the language and culture barriers (Smith et al., 2011). To make this process less difficult, universities provide interventions that aim at helping these students to adjust more easily to their new environment and at making them feel more included.

In this context, mentoring programs can be helpful. Since 2017, the Department of Psychology in Groningen has been working with such a program, called the buddy project (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021). In this project, the new students have been matched with a student in a higher year. These so-called buddies helped the first years with multiple things, from questions about the university and studying, to learning more about the new city and its culture. Participating in this project can also be a great way to form new social connections. In a recent study (Henneke, 2023), the effects of the buddy programme were analysed through a questionnaire for students. The study was aimed to investigate the difference between students who did not participate and students who did participate in the programme. Henneke hypothesized a significant difference in well-being, perceived support, and loneliness between the participants and non-participants of the Buddy-project; however, her results did not reveal any reliable difference on these aspects.

Henneke (2023) also found that almost half of the students that participated in the project and the study did not meet up in person with their buddy. However, there was no difference between the groups that did and did not meet up, except for the aspect of well-being. People who did not meet up with their buddy scored higher than the people who did meet up. This finding is an important aspect to consider, because of two reasons. The first one being that a lot of people did not meet up with their buddy and, thus, might have not had the opportunity to make full use of the programme. The second reason is that people who did meet up also generally did not feel the benefits of such meeting; in fact, they scored even a bit lower on well-being than those who met their buddy in person. This is puzzling, as an important aspect of the project is the intended positive contact between the student and their buddy. Accordingly, it seems truly relevant to look more closely at the relationship between the student newcomers and their buddies, and specifically at the question whether the matching of the two might have failed. The success and/or failure of the procedure will be the focus of this thesis.

The Psychology Department works with a matching procedure to match the newcoming students with their more senior buddies with the aim to ensure that they will be able to build a good relationship with each other. In this thesis, I want to find out what the students find important when it comes to their buddy and the perceived match with their buddy. The underlying assumption is that the quality of the contact between the buddy and the student can be of great influence when it comes to the experience of the project. It is plausible to assume that different students have different expectations of their buddy, and that these expectations are not always met. Currently, the matching process is done by a questionnaire (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021). The first year students and buddies will be asked about their hobbies and interests, and this will be used to match them accordingly. However, in the light of the results by Henneke (2023), and especially the finding that many newcomers did not

have a single one-on-one meeting with their buddy, one may wonder whether this matching did indeed work.

Similarity-attraction

To understand the results of the research done by Henneke (2023), it can be important to look at reasons why some matches might work, and others do not. People generally get along better with others who are more like them (Laursen, 2017). This principle is described as the similarity attraction principle. People who have more in common and have the same interests should like each other more and will in general be more prone to become friends. If people then spend more time together, they may also grow to being more similar. On the other side, if people are dissimilar, there is a higher chance of discontent in a friendship. This can result in people growing further apart. For this reason, one may assume that a good match between junior- and more senior students is important in the buddy-project. If the first year student and buddy are similar, chances are higher that they will be content with the relationship. Siem and Stürmer (2012) argued that people want to help others more if they like them. This statement highlights why it is important that the buddies get along with their assigned first year student. According to literature, similarity should in general result in a better relationship (Laursen, 2017); liking and willingness to help would be more probable in this case. The question for this thesis is, how important is similarity in a short-term programme like the buddy-project?

Potentially relevant for the present research is a study by Amodio and Showers (2005), who showed that there was a difference between close and weak relationships when it came to the relevance of similarity between partners in intimate relationships. The study showed how in a weakly committed relationship, opposites were found attractive. In high-commitment relationship, however, similarity correlated with higher liking. So, there was a contrast found between these different types of relationships and what works for them. This could be an

indication that dissimilarity would be more beneficial for the buddy project, since the buddy-newcomer pairs might be classified as weakly committed relationships. However, some international students might also seek for and benefit from a close relationship with their buddy. This could signal the dependence of the matching procedure in the project based on the wishes of the participants. Not everyone might benefit from similarity, as is currently assumed in the matching procedure.

The importance of culture

Next to hobbies and interests, the matching of nationalities could also be an important aspect of the matching procedure. The purpose of the project is to make first year international students feel more included and adjusted to their new environment. A part of this process can be assumed to depend on cultural adjustment. Accordingly, the role of similarity can also be studied with a focus on cultural differences. Some new students come from a hugely different culture to the Netherlands, like China, and others from a more similar culture, like Germany. Are new students better helped by a buddy from the same or a similar culture or will buddies, who bring in a different cultural perspective, be more helpful?

Siem and Stürmer (2012) studied the connection between the level of cultural similarity and the willingness of volunteers to help international students. They found that when cultures are similar, people's motivation to help mainly comes from empathy, because they perceive the other person as part of their in-group. As a result of that, people felt more sympathy, warmth, care, concern, and empathic interest towards the other person in this study. However, when the two people came from a very dissimilar culture, the willingness to help could mainly be predicted by individual attributes (like attractiveness or friendliness) and relationship satisfaction. Because people would feel more satisfaction in their friendships when two people are similar (Laursen, 2017), it would be important to have a good match. Thus, this should be especially true when students are dissimilar when it comes to their

culture, because in this case individual attributes matter more when it comes to satisfaction towards the friendship. This would hopefully positively impact the quality of the Buddy project and its influence on first year students.

Similarity can be a key factor in the relationship between a first year student and their buddy, but when it comes to culture, this might be different. Shu et al. (2020) argue that cultural diversity in socio-emotional networks can be very important when it comes to cultural adjustment for international students. Social support networks that are diverse in nationality and include host-nationals would help with cultural adjustment. International students also usually like learning about other cultures (Cena et al., 2021). This supports the idea of matching people from different cultures in the buddy project. It also brings up the idea of involving more host-nationals.

So far, this thesis mainly discussed the different aspects in a relationship that make the buddy and first year student closer, like similarity. However, Walsworth et al. (2021) explains how weak friendships might be more helpful than close friends for international students. Cultural and social satisfaction were reported as higher in this research with international students who had a more diverse network. This network included people to whom they did not talk to a lot. This also means that a close relationship with your buddy might not be necessary for the buddy project to have a positive impact on first year students.

This study

The aim of interviewing first year students that have participated in the buddy project is to get more in-depth information about what exactly happened during the project. The students will be asked multiple questions about the buddy-project, including questions on the perceived match with their buddy, and whether they think the match was well done. As this thesis is part of a collaborative bigger research of a group of bachelor-students, more domains will be covered in the interview, but the focus of this thesis is the matching between first year

students and their senior buddies. The qualitative data obtained in the interview could give a more complete picture of why some students were not especially positive about the project (Henneke, 2023) and the role of the matching procedure herein. Reflecting on the match between first year students and their buddies could also help explain why so many participants did not meet up in person during the programme. Together, this information could generate important input to help improve the project and, in specific, the matching process.

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.

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).

Table 1

Participant Descriptions^a

| 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 |

- a. Name of participants described with an alias.

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) to better clarify the role division and get acquainted with 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 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. 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., the theory of similarity-attraction, Laursen, 2017), we also allowed the data content to inform and develop our analyses. This approach 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 inclusion. 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. Open coding was then used to find additional commonalities between the interviewees.

Results

For the results relevant to the research question of this thesis, I coded the transcripts of the interviews done with all 10 participants. The subcategories that were identified in the interviews were the (1) overall view on the buddy, (2) the closeness with the buddy, (3) the focus of the relationship, and (4) the similarity between the first year student and the buddy. These categories gave an overall view of the qualitative data obtained regarding the match and the relationship between the newcoming students and their buddy. The codes for the view on the buddy were divided in a negative, positive, and neutral view. I analysed the closeness between the participant and their buddy with the codes close and not close. With the focus of the relationship, I made a divide between an academically and socially focused relationship. When it came to similarity, I analysed aspects in which the buddy and first year student were similar or dissimilar.

The findings of this study show that the experiences of first year students that participated in the buddy project with their buddy were fairly positive. This might be a sign of good matching. However, the opinions about the buddies were not as black and white. Most people were positive, but this did not mean that the buddy and student were close or similar.

View on the buddy

As was said in the beginning of this section, the view on the buddy was mainly positive. Six out of ten participants were predominantly positive, one was fairly neutral, and

one was more negative. Two participants had mixed opinions, because they did like their buddy, but they were not that positive about the relationship and contact.

Even though six participants were positive about their buddy, there was still a lot of complexity within their answers, and some were more positive than others. The following quote exemplifies a positive evaluation:

“She made it really comfortable to text her whenever and she would always text me back. I think that if I would have another question, I could text her and she would be very nice about it.” - Andrea

As seen in the quote above, the buddy was experienced as nice and always available for questions. Several participants talked about their buddies as being available and always up to answer questions. These qualities were seen as important and valuable in the relationship and the experience with the project. Noah explained how their¹ buddy sent them long voice recordings through WhatsApp to explain things. This indicates the willingness of the buddies to help and to put effort into the relationship.

Luca was fairly neutral about the relationship. They met up with their buddy only once and did not have a lot of contact. However, they could still ask questions if they needed to. When we look at the negative aspects that participants mentioned, it was mostly the lack of contact. Some people would have liked to have more contact and meet up in real life more often. One of the two people who were negative about their buddy barely had contact with them:

“I didn't really get anything out of that. I think the best thing to come out of it was someone to talk to, in like the first week I was here. And that was about it. And it wasn't the buddy, it was like another group person.” - Charlie

¹ In this thesis, the pronouns they/them are used to not disclose personal information about the participants and be inclusive.

For those participants, who were in general positive about their buddy, a lack of contact was also a common theme. According to the participants, a lot of buddies responded when they were asked questions, but most duo's/groups did not meet up a lot or not at all.

Closeness

When we look at the statements made about the amount of contact between buddies and first year students, we can see a clear pattern. Almost all participants mostly were in contact with their buddy through text messages rather than real-life encounters.

“I never really met with my buddy so... We only texted through WhatsApp, although we wanted to meet. She like offered if I wanted to meet, but we'd never really got to do that, so I don't know.” - Roan

“But she wasn't here for the summer, neither for the start, or the start of the school year. So the only contact we had was through texting.” - Robin

Roan and Robin both said they did not meet up with their buddy. Robin also added they would have liked to have more contact. Roan however said they did not know what they would have done differently if the roles were reversed, and really liked the amount of contact they had. This is also an illustration of the difference between the first year students and their needs. Some might not need a lot of contact with their buddy to feel like they got enough out of the project.

Interestingly, only one person said to be close with their buddy:

“I honestly did not expect it to be like, to have such a close relationship. I thought it was going to be like a buddy project and that was it. But at the end, like she sometimes texted to, like, do something to go and do something and it was okay.” - Senna

The fact that most participants were not that close with their buddy is something that makes it more difficult to see if the matching procedure was appropriate. A lot of the students did not really get to know their buddy on a deeper level, and it's more difficult to judge how good the

match was. However, a close relationship was not needed to make the buddy project successful for everybody. It also depends on the kind of relationship first year students would like with their buddy.

Focus of the relationship

Most participants mainly had study related questions for their buddies. Explanations about courses or how to study for exams were very valuable for a lot of participants. For example:

“I think I learned quite a bit about psychology. Like the course itself and stuff and what he was going to get into and how stuff worked, and he also gave some really good advice about like, yeah, with some subjects you can, you know, study last minute and still do well. But with stats, you got to be on at the moment, you get the material.

Like, you can't postpone it. So I think that was quite valuable.” - Danny

Although most participants felt like they could always ask certain academically related questions and get a helpful answer, it was not the only form of contact between the new students and buddies. Senna, who had a close relationship with their buddy, shared that their connection was not only academically related. They mentioned always being able to ask study related questions, but also mentioned having a social focus in the relationship.

“We sometimes went and hung out, like, outside the buddy project, like with the other buddy we had, the Italian one. We sometimes went and like, had something to eat and it was nice.” - Senna

Senna was the only participant who indicated having a relationship with not only academic focus, but also a social one. However, most students were content with the kind of relationship they had. The participant below explained how they did not mind the academically focus in the relationship:

“Yeah, but that was also enough for me, yeah as I said it was very easy to find friends, I think, very fast so it wasn't like, dependent on it. I don't like being like, please invite me to your social things, like that, no.” - Taylor

Although most people said that they did not need the social focus in the relationship with the buddy, some did give indications that it would have been a nice addition.

“The only thing that, like he did come to, like those meet ups and stuff. But like I mean, that probably wasn't his job, but like he never, like reached out by himself. Being like, “hey, you want to do something or?” Uhm like, “if you want to, I don't know, go somewhere at night I can really recommend this club or this bar or this restaurant or something like that”. But I don't know in how far buddies were instructed to do those things, so I can't really judge them for not doing that.” - Danny

“I signed up for VIP and I found new people quite quickly, but maybe others struggled more. And to maybe have some social contact will be very beneficial. Sometimes I feel like a couple people in our studies seem a bit lonely at times also. So, yeah I think that could help.” - Noah

Thus, the social aspect seems to be missing in a lot of relationships between students and their buddies. By matching people to a buddy that, for example, has similar interests, this could be something that might develop naturally.

Similarity

The matching procedure was done with a questionnaire that aimed to match first year students to buddies who had some similarities, to help them form a connection. However, the participants partly had a different experience when it came to similarity. The results were very divided. Some participants said to be very different from their buddies, while others indicated that they found a lot of similarities.

“Yeah. I mean, as I mentioned, like we clicked with each other since we were like from the same culture? I think we also had, like, some common hobbies, like climbing or something with nature as well. So, yeah, I think it was really nicely matched.” -

Robin

If we look at the quote above, we can see the distinction between culture and hobbies. The participants who said their buddy was from the same country were in general positive about this fact. They felt like they connected better because of their shared culture.

“And I got a buddy, Natalia. She was from Poland. So we, like, texted each other, you know, in the WhatsApp group. And like, clicked in like the closeness of our countries.” - Robin

Because a lot of buddies had multiple people in their group and not just one first year student, the culture of the other first year students could also be an important aspect:

“I think it's one of the biggest things that didn't, like, mesh with me was the fact that I also had my roommate with me and it turned out that they both were from the same country that I wasn't from. So they would like, meet up more, they were talking their language, and so I was a little bit left out.” - Andrea

When we look at hobbies and interests, the similarities were perceived very differently between participants. Some said to have things in common, but others did not find any shared interests. This could be because of a lack of contact, but could also be related back to the matching procedure.

Matching procedure

To match people accordingly, a questionnaire had been filled out by the first year students and buddies. As was stated above, not every participant agreed that they were similar to their buddy. Although some participants did feel they had shared interests, the people who did not feel similar did not think the questionnaire added to their experience.

“Yes! It was weird that they didn't find really anybody with anything somewhere... I think he really liked football, which I will give negative points too. And I don't know... A bunch of other things that are not in my alley at all.” - Charlie

However, most people did not feel like it was a problem if the questionnaire did not give them a similar match. Their reasonings for this varied. For example, one participant mentioned that psychology students already had a similar interest, and another explained how difference in personalities has had positive aspects:

“So, the buddy that I got was much different from my personality, but I guess that didn't really bother me because she was very outspoken and you know, like social and I'm the type of person who is reserved I guess when I'm talking to someone, so it wasn't really a problem to have different personalities, but I did feel like it wasn't really, like the questionnaire didn't really do much regarding that. But maybe it was the lack of buddies that fit my personalized type.” - Silke

The participants that did find a good match were in general more positive about the matching questionnaire, although this was not true for everyone. Some did think the questionnaire was a good idea, although they were not very similar to their buddy. In general, some shortcomings of the procedure were found in the interviews. The participants named some things they would like to see differently:

“I felt like it was too broad in a sense, we also like movies, we like stuff, but like we didn't go into that, into like type of music because at the end, like the group that I had, it was, people sometimes like quite different... Um, for at least two people that were not as close to us. They were quite different. They didn't seem like the type of people I could be friends with, even though I tried to, to like, get close to them, but like, it didn't work. So I felt like maybe like if the questionnaire was more specific like type

of music, type of movies you watch and stuff, then it would have been more accurate, and sounds like fun.” - Senna

“Well, maybe, well, it's just my case, but maybe if I were to do it again, I would also maybe just like... Maybe matching in real life would be nicer, but also I don't know how would you do that so, maybe that would be a little bit weird. So maybe, I don't know like, if I had to go through the whole thing again, I would just like maybe do more stuff in real life, in person, yeah. Maybe that's the only thing. So, yeah.” - Roan

“So, I think I don't know maybe for the matching process they could look into the nationality of the people, so this wouldn't happen. Like when they do a group that there would be two people from the same country and one from the other one, because it's like inevitable they will be left out.” - Andrea

Although most people did think matching students to a buddy by means of interests and hobbies was a good idea, there were still a lot of participants who found shortcomings in the procedure. You can see this back in the already mentioned way the students were very divided when it came to similarity with their matches. Some participants were matched with a similar buddy, but others had their doubts about their buddy and the questionnaire results. The conclusion from these result that can be drawn is the fact that the questionnaire did not succeed to give everyone a good match.

To conclude this section, Table 2 gives a summarizing overview of the findings as described above.

Tabel 2*Summary of results*

| <i>Participant</i> | <i>View on buddy</i> | <i>Closeness</i> | <i>Focus</i> | <i>Similarity</i> |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Noah | Positive | Not close | Academic | - |
| Luca | Neutral | Not close | Academic | Dissimilar |
| Silke | Positive | Not close | Academic | Dissimilar |
| Andrea | Mixed | Not close | Academic | Similar |
| Charlie | Negative | Not close | Academic | Dissimilar |
| Roan | Positive | Not close | Academic | Dissimilar |
| Robin | Mixed | Not close | Academic | Similar |
| Taylor | Positive | Not close | Academic | Similar |
| Senna | Positive | Close | Academic/social | Similar |
| Danny | Positive | Not close | Academic | Similar |

Discussion

This thesis discussed the buddy project and the match between the buddy and the newcomer. Through interviews with international students that participated in the buddy project, we wanted to get a better understanding of the project and how the participants experienced it. The qualitative approach in this research made it easier to get insights about the buddy project and in particular the matching procedure. By asking participants about their experience and go more in depth, the goal was to understand what the general opinion was about the matching, but also the individual experiences as participant in the buddy project.

We found that lot of participants said to be positive about their buddy, even though the aspects of closeness and similarity were not found to be high with most of them. The positive opinions do signal that participants were generally satisfied about the project and/or the buddy.

However, there were still some aspects that could've improved the experience for most participants.

The relationship between buddy and newcomer

When we look at the closeness of the relationships, we see that there were not many duos that were very close. Nine out of ten said to have a more distant relationship. The participant that was close with their buddy, said to be quite similar to their buddy as well. This is in line with the literature (Laursen, 2017) which stated that similarity should make for a better relationship. However, there were more participants who thought they were quite similar to their buddy that were not that close. They mainly talked about the fact that they mostly spoke to their buddy through text and did not meet up a lot. This could be for example because one of two were busy or they did not feel the need to. Maybe some duo's had the potential to become really close, but they were not in contact often enough.

The positive opinions mainly were attributed to the fact that buddies were generally available to answer any questions and would help whenever was needed. We do see that those participants who saw themselves as dissimilar to their buddy reported to not have a close relationship. In that respect, the only participant that was close to their buddy, was similar to them as well. Although it's hard to draw concrete conclusions from this, the findings are still in line with the similarity attraction hypothesis (Laursen, 2017).

When we asked the participants what they would improve about the buddy project when it came to their buddy specifically, something that came back a lot was the fact that they would like to meet more in person. Not everyone had the desire to do this, but in general people would have liked the project to be more active. This also meant to meet up with their buddy, especially for the ones who never saw them in real life. Two participants out of ten did not meet up a single time with their buddy, so this is an aspect that could definitely be approved. Meeting face to face could help to get to know each other better and, potentially, discover more similarities.

The matching procedure

When we look at the aspect of similarity in specific, about half of the participants said to be, at least in some parts, similar to their buddy. You could say that for them the matching procedure did work. Four participants felt more dissimilar to their buddy, and one of them had never spoken with their buddy so they could not judge this. When we look at these results, it's difficult to say if the matching procedure worked, or if the similarities were a coincidence. Of those who perceived their buddy as dissimilar, not everybody thought this was a problem. They thought the formal matching procedure was not necessary to have a good match. This was mainly the case for people who were content with having a solely academic focus in the relationship.

The latter finding suggests that the matching procedure should be more about the focus of the relationship. If people want not only an academic, but also a social focus in the relationship, the matching questionnaire could be useful, because the interviews also revealed that similarities were mostly viewed as positive and a way to connect. If people want solely an academic focus in their relationship, this could be a lot less important. This finding could be connected to the study done by Amodio and Showers (2005), who talked about the difference between weak and strong connections and their relationship with similarity. Weak relationships seemed to benefit - or at least not suffer - from dissimilarity, which would be in line with the observation that most participants who were content with an academic relationship, did not value similarity as much.

When we look at the way the buddies acted towards the first year students, there were also big differences. Some buddies were very distant and busy with their own life, which meant the contact was minimal, but, at the other side of the spectrum, one of the participants explained how their buddy invited the group over for dinner and asked them to do other things as well. This means that not every buddy will offer the same to their assigned first year student(s).

Matching on basis of what buddies can offer and what first year students would like to see, could be helpful for the project in general.

There were also some other, more specific, aspects that were mentioned as ways to improve the matching procedure. Senna mentioned making the questionnaire more specific so that people could be matched more appropriately. To illustrate: If two people like music, but they like a very different type of music, chances are they won't see this as a similarity. Also, in real life matching was mentioned, where people would speed date to find a match they liked, but it might be difficult to realize this.

Lastly, it could be a good idea to look more into the nationality of people. Andrea felt excluded in their group, because two people were from the same country and they would sometimes talk in their own language. We discussed at the beginning of this thesis how intercultural matching might be a good idea (Shu et al., 2020). However, most people in the interviews mentioned having a connection with their buddy through a shared culture, as you can also see in the group of Andrea. Some participants also talked about how people who came from the same country or area faced similar problems as they did, so it was easier to ask them for help and for the buddy to answer their questions. Anyhow, it is reasonable to assume that shared culture does play a big role in the connection, mostly in a positive way.

An important complication to note is that carefully taking into account newcomers' wishes regarding matching might not be possible, because of a lack of buddies. It would most likely not be possible to match everyone perfectly, because the number of buddies is limited. For example, there might be an off-balance between the number of buddies that would like a social relationship and the amount of first year students. This makes it hard to comply to everyone's wishes. Matching multiple people to one buddy does give the possibility to distribute people more freely, but probably still not all students will be perfectly matched. To

conclude: Perfect matching is not a realistic goal, but it would be great to get as close to that as possible.

Limitations

Although there are some useful and clear points that came forward in the interviews, there are some difficulties with generalizing these results. Firstly, we only interviewed ten people, which might not be representative of the whole group of first year international students in Psychology. It's hard to predict if other participants of the buddy project would say the same things as our participants. This might be a reason to not draw strong conclusions from the present research, but rather value them as preliminary, yet useful findings. Moreover, we only asked a limited number of questions, and might have missed out on additional valuable information.

Another thing that might be worth mentioning is the fact that some participants mentioned they had the impression that Hanna and Yvonne, our interviewers, were part of the organization of the buddy project. This might have caused these participants to act more positively than they actually were, because they did not want to offend them. It's hard to say if this had any influence, but there definitely is a possibility.

Lastly, many of the participants did not attend a lot of activities offered within the project. This makes it harder for them to judge the project, because they do not have the full picture. When it comes to the match with their buddy, this might be less relevant, but attending more activities could have been a great opportunity for them to meet up. This could also be something that the project itself can stimulate more, so that it can be easier to meet your buddy and others that are participating.

Strengths

Even though this study certainly has some limitations, it also has important strengths to note. For one, by collecting qualitative data, participants could elaborate on their answers and

explain why they answered questions the way they did. They could explain, for example, what they did not like about their buddy, instead of only giving them a grade. This additional information can be very valuable for the project and its future plans. Moreover, because the interviews were semi-structured, this thesis provides information about topics that were specific to each participant. This means that, when important, there was asked for more information to get a full picture.

Conclusion

The matching procedure is overall viewed as a useful tool to make the project better for participants and buddies. However, the results suggest that there are some aspects that could use improvement according to the results of our research. A conclusion that can be drawn from the interviews is that there were some people that would have liked a social focus in the relationship with their buddy, and others that were content with an academic focus. This indicates that such preferences could be an important aspect to match people on (see also the thesis by Drago, 2023, on study motivation as relevant factor within the Buddy Project). For solely academic relationships, similarity seemed to be less of a priority, but availability was appreciated in all cases. However, in social relationships, having the same interests and hobbies seemed to help in getting closer. Besides that, coming from a similar culture as your buddy seemed to also be viewed as a positive thing that helped our participants adjust at their host university.

In sum, this research hopefully gave a more in-depth view on the buddy project and how participants experienced it. In this thesis specifically, the aim was to get a better overview of the matching procedure and the relationship between the first year students and the buddies. We hope to have provided substantial contribution to the project, so that it can develop and reach its full potential, to help international students in their first year in Groningen.

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Appendix A

Interview guideline

| Domain/topic | Main question | In depth questions |
|--|--|--|
| Welcoming participant and introduction on research | Do you have any questions regarding the research? | |
| Motivation | Why did you choose to study in The Netherlands? | <p>Was there a specific reason for choosing Groningen?</p> <p>What were your expectations for this new adventure?</p> <p>What was your social life like when you first came to The Netherlands?</p> <p>What about your living situation?</p> |
| Social context | How did you make new social connections as an international student? | |
| | What kind of relationships/ social contacts were and are still most valuable to you as an international student? | <p>What do these relationships offer you?</p> <p>Can you explain why?</p> |
| Evaluation | What number would you rate this experience on a scale from 1-10? | <p>Can you give us some reasons for your chosen number?</p> <p>Are there any other things you particularly liked and disliked about the program?</p> |
| Motivation | What were your reasons for joining the Buddy Project? | How did you hear about the project? |
| | 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? | 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? |
| | Do you feel like you learnt something new from your buddy? | Are you still in contact? 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? |
| | | What helped you in this process? |
| | | Did you feel included within the university? |
| | | 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)? | Can you 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? |
| Summary | Is there anything else you would like to tell us? | How did you experience this interview? What is your age and nationality? |

Appendix B

Codebook

Focus Areas, Themes, and Codes

| Focus Areas | Themes | Codes | Proof Quotes |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Match Buddy- Newcomer | View on the Buddy | Positive Negative Neutral | <p><i>“Uhh, because she seemed very engaged. Like, I can still hit her up and ask some questions if I have to. Like she would also record like long voice memos to explain everything in detail, how the study works and how she studied for exams, or whatever. Uhm, yeah, she seems super nice and engaged that is like the main reason why I felt comfortable.”</i></p> |
| | Closeness | Not close Close | <p><i>“But she wasn't here for the summer, neither for the start, or the start of the school year. So the only contact we had was through texting.”</i></p> |
| | Similarity | Dissimilar Similar | <p><i>“Yes! It was weird that they didn't find really anybody with anything somewhere... I think he really liked football, which I will give negative points too. And I don't know... A bunch of other things that are not in my alley at all.”</i></p> |
| | Focus of the relationship | Academic Social | <p style="text-align: center;">“</p> <p><i>“Yeah, I think I learned quite a bit about psychology. Like the course itself and stuff and what he was going to get into and how stuff worked and he also gave some really good advice about like. Yeah, with some subjects you can, you know, study last minute and still do well. But with stats like you gotta be on at the moment, you get the material. Like you can't postpone it. So I think that was quite valuable, yeah.”</i></p> |
| | View on questionnaire | Negative Positive | <p><i>“But 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. Um, for at least two people that were not as close to us. They were quite different. They didn't seem</i></p> |

like the type of people I could be friends with, even though I tried to, to like, get close to them but like it, it didn't work. So I felt like maybe like if the questionnaire was like more specific like type of music type of movies you watch and stuff like then it would have been more like accurate and sounds like fun."

Advice on
questionnaire

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"So, I think I don't know maybe for the matching process they could look into the nationality of the people, so this wouldn't happen. Like when they do a group that there would be two people from the same country and one from the other one, because it's like inevitable they will be left out."

- a. Codes organized from highest occurrence to lowest.