

**Exploring International Students' Experiences with the Buddy Project within their  
Social Context**

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### **Abstract**

This bachelor thesis aims to explore experiences of international students with the Buddy Project in relation to their social contexts. The project, implemented at the psychology department of Groningen University, matches first-year international students with senior students to support them in their acculturation process. Providing social support might be an important factor in helping these students adapt to their new environment. Therefore, the current thesis focusses on the social context of the participants to gain insight into what kind of relationships are important to the acculturation process of international students and how the Buddy Project relates to this. Qualitative research is done through semi-structured interviews with 10 participants of this years' edition of the project (2022-2023). Data was analysed through coding using inductive and deductive approaches. Patterns showed that students found a variety of ways to establish new relationships, mainly through university related activities which shows the important role universities play in the social life of international students. Moreover, most valuable relationships seemed those that provide guidance to Groningen student life. The Buddy Project seemed not to be important for establishment of new relationships, however it was experienced valuable as it provided informational support. Hence, to increase the impact of the Buddy Project, the enhancement of social support through increasing social interactions among the participants of the project is suggested. Further research could investigate the needs among international students to connect with local students from the host country.

*Keywords:* international students, Buddy Project, social context, social support, qualitative research

## **Exploring International Students' Experiences with the Buddy Project within their Social Context**

Studying abroad is becoming more popular than ever before (OECD, 2022). In the Netherlands the number of international students has doubled over the last decade. Last year, international students comprised 40% of the total tertiary first-year student population (CBS, 2022; Statistica, 2022). This proportion is expected to rise even more, as attracting international students has a variety of advantages for universities (Rose-Redwood & Rose Redwood, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tavares, 2021). International students provide universities with financial benefits, as they often pay higher tuition fees, and, more importantly, academic advantages, as they bring along diverse perspectives, knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the intergroup relations can foster intercultural awareness, a necessary skill to function in this globalising world (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Besides being beneficial to the host university, the exchange students themselves can also gain a lot from studying abroad, as it enhances global perspective, stimulates personal growth and broadens career possibilities (Anderson & Lawton, 2015).

Although studying abroad might be very enriching, a broad range of literature highlights the many challenges students face before and during their exchange (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Katsumoto & Bowman, 2021; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). First of all, there are stressors new students in general deal with: like finding accommodation, getting used to the university and making social connections. Many international students experience additional challenges, as they have to adapt to a new environment and a new culture (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). This adaptation to new environments is also called *acculturation* and is often accompanied with stress, termed *acculturation stress*. Berry (2006, p. 43) defined acculturation stress as “a response by people to life events that are rooted in intercultural

contact. Frequently, these reactions include heightened levels of depression (linked to experience of cultural loss) and of anxiety (linked to uncertainty about how one should live in the new society).”

The most common acculturative stressors of international students are: language barriers, educational stressors, sociocultural stressors, practical stressors and even discrimination (Cena., et al, 2021; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Qualitative research about the experiences of international students showed that students experienced feelings of exclusion and othering at their host community, which negatively affected their well-being (Tavares, 2021).

### **The Buddy Project**

Host universities seem to play a significant role in the acculturation process of the students; international students mentioned that they experienced a lack of internationalisation on campus, a lack of intercultural awareness among peers and a lack of institution-led activities to socialise with peers (Tavares, 2021). Therefore, interventions are offered by universities to help students integrate into their new environments and overcome their challenges. An example of such an intervention is the ‘Buddy Project’ that was set up and implemented at the psychology department at the University of Groningen, for the first time in 2017 (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021). The aim of this project is to increase the perceived support and inclusion of newcomers international students and help them adjust to student life at Groningen University. Once international students have signed up for the project, they are matched with senior students (mostly 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>-year students), with whom they can seek contact, to ask questions about the university, and about student life in general. During their stay abroad, the international students and their buddies can participate in activities offered by the coordinators of the program. Past Buddy Project activities included a yoga workshop, a Zumba class and a time- and stress management workshop. To create the buddy groups, the

project comprises a matching procedure, whereby students are matched based on similar interests and field of study as indicated in an online-questionnaire. The project starts just before the new students arrive at their new university and ends after the first semester of their study.

### **The Role of Social Support**

Social support is an important feature of the Buddy Project. “*Social support* refers to a social network’s provision of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual’s ability to cope with stress” (Cohen, 2004, p.676). Social support can be achieved in different forms, often categorised in emotional support, informational support and instrumental support (Cohen, 2004). It can be attained at different levels, in close relations (friends, family, peer students e.g.) or more distant (faculty members, professionals, advisors). Barrera (1988) proposed three models of social support that may explain the relationship among social support, stressful events and psychological events;

The ‘direct effects model’ proposes that social support directly contributes to psychological well-being, independent from stress (Barrera, 1988). Barrera argues that social support results in the fulfilment of the basic human need for attachment and affiliation and therefore contributes to psychological well-being. In line with this model, a qualitative research done by Domínguez et al (2022), showed that international students experienced that the acceptance, encouragement, validation and guidance given by their support system helped them feel more positive. Furthermore, research indicates that interactions with host nationals are particularly valuable to international students (Katsumoto & Bowman, 2021; Cena, et al, 2021; Tavares, 2021). Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013) created a conceptual framework that identified four primary types of social interactions international students may engage in: self-segregators (social interaction only with co-nationals), exclusive global mixers (social interaction only with co-nationals and other internationals), inclusive global mixers

(social interaction with a mix of co-nationals, other internationals and host nationals) and host interactors (social interaction mostly with host nationals). Interestingly, their sample is mostly categorised as exclusive global mixers. International students repeatedly reported that local students, i.e., students from the host country, often seem not interested in making cross-cultural friendships (Katsumoto & Bowman, 2021; Cena, et al, 2021; Tavares, 2021).

Secondly, the ‘stress-buffering model’ assumes that social support moderates the relationship between a stressful event and psychological well-being (Barrera, 1988). This model proposes that the support an individual receives from their social relations will reduce the effect of stress. In case of an international student this might be talking with other international students about the stress that comes with moving abroad (emotional support), which in turn can relieve the effect of that stress on psychological well-being. In line with this model, Cena and collaborators (2021) found that social support received by socialising with co-nationals was important to international students, as they could discuss the cross-cultural challenges they endured.

Finally, the ‘social support deterioration model’ proposes that social support mediates the relationships between a stressful event and psychological distress (Barrera, 1988). Barrera argues that a stressful event diminishes social support, which in turn increases psychological distress. In theory, this means that an international student, who experiences acculturation stress, might distance themselves from their social connections, leading to less social support and therefore an increase in psychological distress.

The three models suggested by Barrera (1988) illustrate the potential power of having social connections and receiving social support can have on buffering against (acculturative) stressors. Therefore, it is of interest to see how social connections and social support are experienced by international students, and what the role of the Buddy Project is in this. Questions arise like: Is social support indeed of importance?; What kind of relationships are

most valuable to international students?; How does this relate to the Buddy Project?; How can we integrate the respective findings into the Buddy project?

### **The Buddy Project Evaluated**

Recently a master thesis on the of the Buddy Project was done, with the aim to identify whether participation in the project positively affected international first-year students' well-being and their perceived support (Henneke, 2023). Henneke hypothesised that participants of the Buddy Project would score higher on wellbeing and perceived support and lower on loneliness compared to non-participating students. Data was gathered among 129 first-year international students, 63 of them participating in the project and 66 not. The participants had to fill in an online questionnaire about their perceived inclusion within the psychology department, perceived in-group identification with psychology students, perceived university support, well-being since starting the study, and perceived loneliness. Results revealed that the whole sample scored quite high on the first four constructs mentioned, and low on loneliness. However, no significant differences between the two groups were found.

In general, according to the data by Henneke (2023), participants of the Buddy project had a positive experience. The students evaluated the usefulness of the project, their satisfaction with their buddy contact, and how glad they were for participating relatively high. Surprisingly, almost half of the participants stated that they never met up with their buddies in person. Furthermore, students who did meet up with their buddy even scored significantly lower on wellbeing, compared to those who did not meet up with their buddy. A possible explanation for these surprising results might be that internationals who are lower in well-being at the beginning of their exchange, seek more help and therefore meet more with their buddy, whereas those who already have higher well-being might already found a social support network to rely on, therefore not meeting up with their buddy (Henneke, 2023).



## **Current Research**

The current research aims at further exploring how last years' cohort of first-year international students (hence, the same cohort as was investigated by Henneke, 2023) experienced the Buddy Project. Through qualitative research we hope to shed new light on the experiences of the students with the project and get input for further improving this intervention. In this vein, five domains are created to direct this research (Motivation, Inclusion, Evaluation, Matching and Social Context). The present thesis focuses on the last domain, which means the focus lies on the relation between the experiences of the Buddy Project and the broader social context of the international students. More specifically, the goal is to investigate to what extent and with whom newcomers engage in social contact with, and how this relates to the Buddy project.

Social support might be an important asset to decrease the stress many international students endure. Besides, the social context of the international students might help understand the significant differences in wellbeing between students who did meet up regularly with their buddy and who did not (Henneke, 2023). It might be that some of the participants of the Buddy Project already found other ways to create a social buffer and therefore did not depend so much on the project. Furthermore, until now, research on how participants evaluated the Buddy Project focussed only on the experience with the program itself, rather than how students experience their acculturation process, in general, and how the Buddy Project could help herein.

To summarize, the present research strives to provide more information on the departments Buddy Project and to inform innovation plans regarding the future editions of the project. By focusing on students' broader social network, this thesis may provide new insight into possible factors outside the project that could feed into its effectiveness.

## **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*

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

## **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 table 2 in Appendix A) 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 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, 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 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 (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., zooming in on the type of social support), 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 researcher identified patterns that could subsequently be developed into themes, in this specific thesis particularly relating to the social context. 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, viz. In the context of social support, both informational and emotional support can be provided by the Buddy Project. Open coding was then used to find additional commonalities between the interviewees.

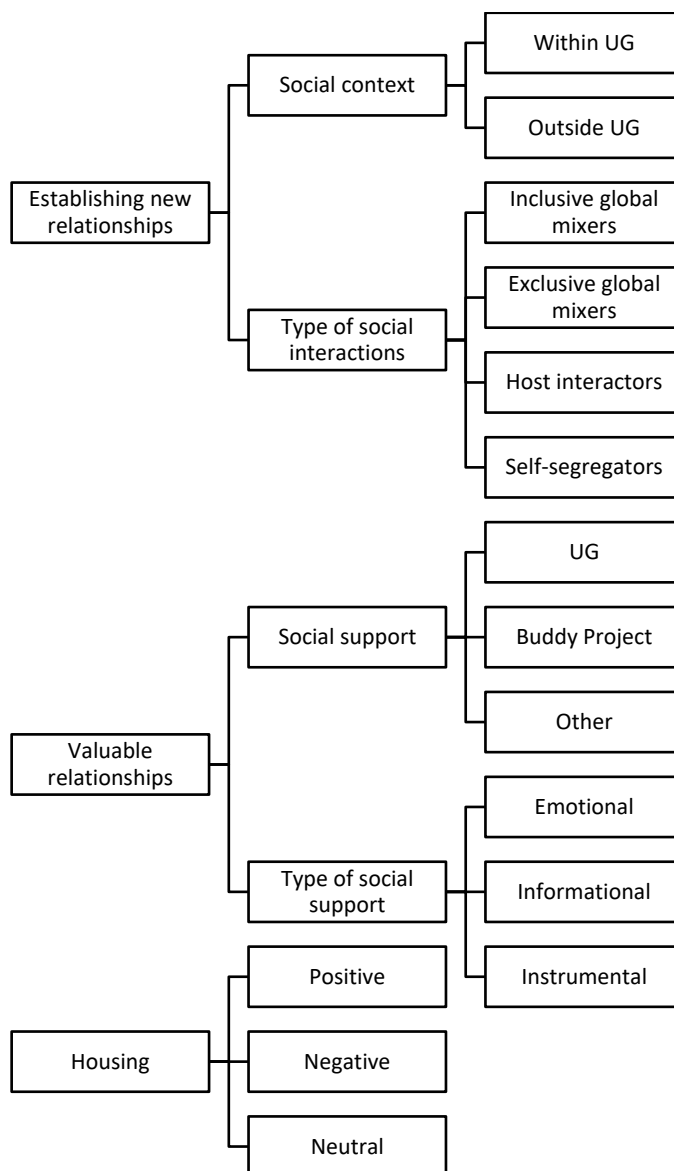
### **Results**

The interviews represented a variety of experiences with the Buddy Project. Inspired in particular by the typology on social interactions created by Rose-Redwood and Rose-

Redwood (2013), the theory behind social support suggested by Cohen (2004), and the master thesis by Henneke (2023), the questions about the domain of ‘social context’ centred around the following three themes: (1) establishing new relationships, (2) valuable relationships for international students and (3) their housing situations. Figure 1 represents this theory-driven coding structure, which will be described in the following section. The complete codebook created after deductive and inductive approaches can be found in table 3, in appendix A.

**Figure 1**

*Representation of Theory-driven Coding Structure*



## **Establishing New Relationships**

Almost all participants mentioned they met new people through the UG and related activities at the start of their studies abroad. University related activities they mentioned were practical courses (Academic Skills, Statistics, Dialogue and Groupskills) and the student association of the department (VIP). One of the participants explained the importance of having a common goal in order to interact with each other, which is provided mainly through the practical courses:

Basically, through, I would say through Academic Skills at one point that you get to know more people and then also Dialogue and Groupskills also helps. Because you do get to interact with other people and not just the ones you see like day-to-day... So for me, that's also why most of my friends are from like Academic Skills and D&G Skills because then I have a reason to talk to them. (Danny, 21)

The Buddy Project was mentioned one time as a way to get to know 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 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. (Senna, 20)

More than half of the participants also mentioned non-university related places where they met new people. These places contained a variety of locations/contexts, like sport associations, non-psychological related student associations, side-jobs, housing, etc. Especially introductory weeks for students, like KEI-week and ESN-week, were mentioned often as a place to get in contact with new people. One participant mentioned that Groningen offers a variety of ways for students to get into contact with new people:

I don't know, I think for me it was very easy to find a lot of people, friends that I just could connect with, like very fast, because of the ESN-week for example, and just like so many welcoming projects, that happened within the first weeks it was a lot to take in to be honest felt like I think made it very easy to meet like hundreds of people, and I think of course there's going to be some like you can connect with so yeah I think it was very natural for me to have that social life. (Taylor, 20)

Although Groningen seemed to offer a variety of opportunities to meet new people, not all relationships formed during the beginning of the participants' studies abroad grew into lasting friendships. Three participants explicitly mentioned struggling with making friends at the start of the year, like 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. (Danny, 21)

One participant explicitly mentioned that their social life was 'non-existent'; "I am a lot older than most of the other students so I don't really have a lot of interaction with any one" (Charlie, 30). Later, in the interview it becomes clear that they have a disability and therefore are not able to go to lectures and practical courses in person.<sup>1</sup> This indicates the importance of seeing each other on a daily basis and in real life, as is often mentioned by the participants as reason why they mainly meet new people through UG. An overview of the most common answers can be found in table 4.

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<sup>1</sup> For inclusivity reasons nonbinary pronouns are used.



**Table 4***Establishing New Social Relationships*

Code	Subcode	Frequency
Within UG	Buddy Project	1
	Practicals	4
	VIP	4
Total		9
Outside UG	Introductory week	4
	Sport association	3
Total		7

**Type of Relationships**

When discussing participants' social life, we expected we would also automatically learn what types of social interactions (e.g., self-segregators, exclusive global mixers, inclusive global mixers, host interactors) the participants engaged in (Rose-redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Therefore, we did not consistently and explicitly ask about the nationalities of the friends they made in Groningen. Consequently (and unfortunately), only five of the transcripts could be coded for the type of social interactions the participants engaged in. All five participants mentioned friends who had a variety of nationalities (Dutch friends, friends from the same or a different non-Dutch-country), meaning that there was no clear pattern of social interactions visible at first. However, relationships with Dutch nationalities were less common for all, like Danny illustrates; ‘‘ It would probably be like 20% Dutch, like 50%

German and then the rest like other'. Furthermore, it was mentioned in two interviews that Dutch people were expected to be harder to interact with:

We started talking, we talked together and then I learned she was Dutch and I didn't expect to have Dutch friends because at the end, like, I know, like usually people from my countries like hang out with the with each other and like all internationals hang with, between internationals. So I didn't expect that. But yeah, she's like one of my closest friends here. And it is nice. (Senna, 20)

### **Most Valuable Relationships**

To gain insight into social support, we asked the participants about their most valuable relationships during the beginning of their study abroad. Table 5 provides an overview of most common answers. Relationships gained within the UG and outside the UG were mentioned equally often. Moreover, especially interesting in the context of the present research, participants most often mentioned the Buddy Project, followed by the practical courses of the psychology programme (see table 5). When the participants mentioned valuable

**Table 5**

#### *Valuable Relationships*

Code	Subcode	Frequency
Social support through UG	Buddy Project	4
	Practicals	3
	Total	7
Social support Other	Introductionary weeks	2
	Total	7

relationships outside the UG this entailed a variety of relationships, for instance a helpful landlord, or a friend that was already studying in the Netherlands. In general, all participants described someone who was already familiar with student life in Groningen as very valuable during the beginning of their studies abroad.

When participants explained why certain relationships were valuable to them at the beginning of their study abroad, informational support was the most mentioned reason (mentioned by ten participants), closely followed by emotional support (mentioned by eight participants), instrumental support was not mentioned. Relationships that were mentioned by the participants as most valuable had this status because they gave them access to practical information: regarding housing, necessary documents, grocery shopping, cycling etc.. Participants also mentioned 'new people they met' as being valuable because now they had somebody to chat with and hang with; somebody who is familiar to them and, therefore, made them feel less lonely (emotional support). Like Luca explained; "...So that was really helpful to like have at least some familiar faces and some names and just, you know, go from there...".

When we asked Danny about valuable relationships as international student, they mentioned a friend who had already studied a year in Groningen and a friend they made in class as especially valuable relationships;

Well, I would say both of them helped me like academically. Like if I didn't know whether I was like studying the right thing or what, like Electro- meant by something, like understanding material and stuff, I think they both helped me. And then also, just like emotionally, like meeting up, talking to each other, stuff like that, yeah. (Danny, 21)

The Buddy Project, specifically, was experienced as valuable because it gave the participants the opportunity to ask all sorts of questions (university related but also more

general questions regarding student life) to someone, which was especially helpful during the beginning of their stay abroad as Silke describes;

Yeah it was nice because we got to ask questions, I asked a lot of questions then and I found him really helpful, like personally regarding the buddy project I think for me was most useful like during the process of coming here and the first weeks or so. That was the time that I needed the most help in adjusting to, yeah, to life here. (Silke, 19)

### **Housing Situation**

Almost all students mentioned having a hard time finding an accommodation, referring to it as a stressful start. Some students first stayed in a temporary place (camping/hostel) to look for a room. Half of the participants moved once during their time here. Danny illustrates the importance of having a nice place to live to her well-being:

Really stressful because I couldn't find anything and then I did find something, but it was, not very nice accommodation like I live with my landlord and then this like 50-year-oldguy with his two sons. So it wasn't really a student accommodation at all and they weren't very like, clean either, so I really didn't like that. But then recently I got a different room, so now it's a lot better. Like now I live with other students and the people who live on my floor are pretty clean, so I'm much happier now. (Danny, 21)

To sum up these results, the interviews in general revealed that new relationships are founded easily in a variety of ways.<sup>2</sup> The Buddy Project does not seem to be significant in establishing relationships, however it does seem an important way of gaining social support, especially informational support. When it comes to valuable relationships, all participants seem to describe someone who is already familiar with the student life in Groningen. Lastly, finding housing seems to be a significant stressor to all participants.

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<sup>2</sup> Access to all transcripts can be requested via the principal investigator, Prof Dr. S. Otten.

## **Discussion**

The present study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences from participants of the Buddy Project and specifically how these relate to their social context. The perspective taken here is unique to earlier research on the Buddy Project at the psychology department of the University of Groningen (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021; Dietzch & Urban, 2022; Henneke, 2023) for two reasons. First, the qualitative nature of the study provides unique and detailed insights. Second, to the best of my knowledge, this is a first attempt to also take into account experiences of studying abroad in a more general sense; experiences of international first-year students outside the context of the Buddy Project were discussed as well. Therefore, findings might not only contribute to the further development of the Buddy Project, but might also contribute to understanding of the experiences of international students in general. In the following discussion, the social context of international students and its relation to the buddy project is considered. The extent to which these findings provide support for theories on enhancing interpersonal relationships (Finkel., et al, 2015; Reddish, et al., 2013; Wolf., et al, 2016) are discussed, as well as potential implications for further research.

### **Welcoming Atmosphere**

Findings suggest that the university is an important factor in establishing new relationships for international students. More specifically, the practical courses provided by the psychology programme where small group teaching is used (unlike the theoretical courses) seem to be very important to make new connections. Furthermore, non-university related activities seem also important for starting a new social life. Especially the introductory weeks by a variety of student and sport associations were mentioned multiple times when asking students about how they managed to create a new social life. These findings may on the one hand, be understood in terms of the ‘familiarity-attraction link’ (Finkel., et al, 2015; Homans, 1950). During the activities, students see each other on a regular basis, whether this

is long term (practical courses) or only for a week (introductory weeks). This regular contact in turn, may lead to familiarity and therefore increase liking among students which enhances the chances of establishing relationships. On the other hand, the findings suggests the importance of common goals in enhancing interpersonal relationships. This is in line with research done by Wolf and his colleagues (2016), who had shown that sharing common goals is associated with more positivity towards one another. Furthermore, Reddish and colleagues (2013) have shown that shared goals can have a positive influence on social bonding. In practical courses, such as the academic skills course, common goals are provided for instance in group assignments. Moreover, shared goals already exist in the introductory weeks as people assign to meet new people in the first place. Not surprisingly, international students seem eager to make new connections, which indicates the importance of creating a new social life to the students.

The Buddy Project did not seem to play a significant role in creating a social life, in the first place. However, many students mentioned they wished to have gotten into contact with other participants of the Buddy Project, which implies that participants were motivated to meet new people through the project (for more details on participants' motivation, see the thesis by L. Drago, 2023). The seemingly minor role of the Buddy Project in establishing social relationships might, to some extent, explain the lack of difference in well-being between participants and non-participants of the Buddy Project, found in the master thesis by Henneke (2023).

When it comes to the types of interactions international students engage in, the findings indicate that international students mainly interact with a mix of nationalities, which can be classified as 'inclusive global mixers' according to the framework by Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2013). However, relationships with Dutch students were less common compared to other nationalities, which is in line with earlier research (Katsumoto & Bowman,

2021 Cena, et al, 2021; Tavares, 2021). Unlike findings from earlier research (Katsumoto & Bowman, 2021; Cena, et al, 2021; Tavares, 2021), the international students interviewed in the present study did not mention the wish to have more contact with locals.

### **Providing Guidance**

International students can find social support within the context of their university and outside this context. Especially the Buddy Project and the practical courses seem to be helpful for obtaining support. The Buddy Project seems valuable, mainly because of the informational support that it provides. The practical courses, on the other hand, seem valuable as they induce daily interactions among students. Outside the context of university, a wide variety of connections seem to be valuable to international students (contact with a landlord, a ‘study abroad agent’, a friend who also studies in the Netherlands etc.). However, there seems to be a commonality among these relationships: the contacts all provide guidance to the student life of Groningen. Together, these findings imply that international students do seek guidance and support, and that universities seem to do a good job already in this respect.

### **Finding Housing: a Stressful Experience**

Groningen is known for its lack of student houses, therefore many students experience finding accommodation as a stressful time. For international students this might be even more stressful, as Dutch students are often preferred over international students by landlords. The present findings portray this well: all students mentioned having a hard time finding houses. Moving during their first-year in the Netherlands also seems the norm rather than an exceptionality. Some students even had to stay on a camping or a hostel to find housing. This implies that international students experience a stressful start, hence a social network to receive support from during the beginning of their time abroad might be extra important.

### **Practical Implications**

According to the present findings, the Buddy Project seems not to be critical in creating a new social life for international students, compared to other social institutions and relationships (UG, housing, student/sport associations, family etc.). However, when discussed in more detail, the Buddy Project seems to provide a useful guide to Groningen student life, mainly through informational support. Although Groningen seems to provide quite some ways to engage in new relationships, the results showed some students still struggled with making new friends. Moreover, Katsumoto and Bowman (2021) recently concluded that interactions with peers may be crucial for the psychological well-being of international students. Therefore, providing various ways to international students to interact with one another on a regular basis might be extra important for those students to establish new relationships and to foster social support in turn. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that most students did wish to see more social activities and more real life meetings with their buddy, which is in line with earlier research on the experiences of the Buddy Project (Dietzsch & Urban, 2022). Taking the findings into account, it is arguable that the Buddy Project could be of more significance to the wellbeing of international students when it enhances provision of social support.

Possibly, provision of social support could be enhanced 1) through social activities where common goals are induced, and 2) through stimulating regular contact among buddies. In social activities common goals could be accentuated through group exercises. During these exercises students need to work together towards a common goal, which might increase social connections in turn (Reddish, et al., 2013; Wolf, et al., 2016). Additionally, more social activities would increase contact among the students, which might increase liking and therefore a higher chance on establishment of relationships (Finkel., et al, 2015). Both factors seem to be important to establish new relationships, which international students are eager to create during the start of their studies abroad. The relationships among students in turn might



increase social support due to shared common experiences and cultural understandings (Rivas, 2019, cited in Cena., et al, 2021; Slaten, 2016).

Second, the senior students should be stimulated more to meet up with their buddies and to go on activities with them. Although the ‘senior buddies’ (who want to guide first-year international students) do receive a handbook to prepare themselves (Dietsch & Urban, 2022), it might be useful to arrange a meeting among these senior buddies to enhance their preparation and their commitment to reach out to the new international students. This could be possibly done by providing a workshop or meeting, where ways to be a helpful guide are discussed and ideas on welcoming the new international students are shared.

Lastly, receiving support seems especially important at the start and a few months before the start of the academic year as international students endure most acculturation stress in this period. Especially once the international students arrived in Groningen, they might endure a stressful period when it comes to finding housing and making new friends. Therefore, it is important the senior buddies are providing a welcoming environment and support to their buddies at the start and even before arrival of the international students. This requires well prepared ‘senior buddies’ before the arrival of the international students, implying that preparation for next year should already start at the end of the proceeding (i.e., in this case current) academic year. Moreover, the interviews also showed that some of the participants of the Buddy Project did not went to activities, because these were placed during exam period. Taking these findings into account, it is arguably best to provide most social activities at the start of the academic year.

### **Limitations**

This study has provided some in-depth insight into experiences of 10 participants of the Buddy Project. Yet, it is certainly not without limitations. First, This research is based on only 10 participants, which puts a limit on the generalizability of the findings. At the same

time, with this limited number of interviews, some clear patterns in the data could already be observed. Second, the sample did only consist of students with European nationalities, therefore these students might have experienced lower acculturation stress and depend less on the Buddy Project compared to students with nationalities outside of Europe. A second limitation is the fact that we as researchers are quite new to the qualitative approach, therefore it was a true learning experience which might have resulted in flaws. This has for instance, contributed to the fact we did not consistently ask about the nationalities of the friends the students made in Groningen. Therefore, we could not code the type of social interactions for all participants. However, we would argue that having students instead of more senior researchers execute this research has also beneficial components. First of all, this might have led to a more confident, trusting atmosphere during the interviews and therefore contributed to more honest data. Second, due to the qualitative nature of this research, data analysis relies heavily on researches interpretation which inevitably influences the results of the study. However, the relatively close shared reality (of living and studying psychology in Groningen) among researchers and participants might have contributed to better understanding of the data and therefore have buffered against this possible bias to some degree. Lastly, due to the exploratory nature of this research no strong conclusions can be made based on the present findings. However the goal of this research is to gain in-depth knowledge of a specific context and inspire new research, which will be discussed in the following section.

### **Future Research**

Future research on the effectiveness of the Buddy Project could investigate the lack of contact among the international students and their senior buddies, and how this could be improved. To get a fuller picture of the experiences with the Buddy Project, it might be worthwhile to carry out qualitative research among the senior buddies as well. Furthermore, the role of cultural differences and acculturation stressors should be investigated further, to

enhance the impact and match of interventions like the Buddy Project with the needs of the new international students. Third, it would be interesting to gain more insight in the role of intercultural contact with other international students and with students of the host country for their well-being and their acculturation process. Although this goes beyond the scope of the present thesis, I would like to mention to perform research on possible solutions to the housing situation in Groningen. If host interaction is not that important, could intensive (to foster intercultural contact) but online (to prevent students from really moving abroad and lower the burden on the housing market) university be a solution?

## **Conclusion**

Creating a new social life is important to international students, which is also mentioned often as motivation to sign up for the Buddy Project (for more details on participants' motivation, see the thesis by L. Drago, 2023). In line with this finding, all students suggested more social activities as improvement for the Buddy Project (for more details on participants' evaluation, see the thesis by Theisen, 2023). Although Groningen already seems to have a welcoming environment for international students, the Buddy Project could enhance this by fostering interactions among the buddies. This in turn, hopefully enhances the provision of social support, which might help the international students integrate into their new environment. Furthermore, informational support, as is indeed provided by the Buddy Project, seems to be very valuable to international students to help them adapt to their new environment.

In general, the present research reveals that universities play a central role in the lives of international students when it comes to their social context. Universities therefore, could improve the wellbeing of their international students by fostering more social interactions among (international) students and providing guidance to university life in any form.

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## Appendix A

**Table 2**

*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?	<p>How did you feel about the contact the two of you had?</p> <p>Do you think the program gave you a good match, and why?</p>

		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?

**Table 3***Codebook*

Focus Area	Themes	Codes	Proof quotes
Establishing new relationships	Social context	Within UG	Yeah, well mostly people from my programme like especially from the small like practical groups, you start talking with people there so mainly from that yeah. (Andrea)
		Outside UG	So, I got a job immediately after I got here. I got here at the beginning of summer, so I already was meeting some people from work and with some colleagues went to some social events. (Robin)
Valuable relationships	Type of social interactions	Inclusive global mixers	I would probably be like 20% Dutch, like 50% German and then the rest like other. (Danny)
	Social support	Through UG	In the beginning... And then my one friend from academic skills, she as well. So those two, yeah. (Danny)
		Buddy Project	my buddy was really helpful, because she started contacting us early, I think before we came here if I remember it correctly... That was the time that I needed the most help in adjusting to, yeah, to life here. (Silke)
		Other	In the beginning, I think my friend who was here from

	Type of social support	Emotional	like from last year already... (Danny) When I came here, my roommates were like, they are still are like the people that I feel maybe the closest with because I interact with them on a daily basis. Yeah, and I feel like we also understand each other very well. So, yeah. (Roan)
		Informational	but also then of course you had the buddy project I would contact the person and she helped me a lot to figure out what I need to do and how to get about. (Andrea)
Housing situation		Positive	I was also in the five person flat and at least for sub-rent and one of the flatmates we kind of hit it off and moved in together afterwards so yeah now I'm living together with basically my best friend here. (Noah)
		Negative	Not really, I mean maybe like two people I'm kind of friends with, but like most people I don't really get along with because I steal my food so that's like still a lot of other people's food so that's like not really a vibe. I'm trying to be nice but you know I'm not really like best friends with everyone but that's how it is. (Taylor)
		Neutral	I mean, we get along all right, but we have very different schedules. So we don't really hang out a lot ... So it's like a it's not as intimate but it's like fine. (Luca)

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