

**The Inclusion of First-Year International Students: a Qualitative Investigation of the
Buddy Project (2022-2023) at the University of Groningen**

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Abstract

Higher education classrooms become increasingly more international (De Leersnyder et al., 2022), with both national and international students benefitting from the intercultural surroundings (Bender et al., 2019). However, as described by the Acculturation Model (Sarmiento et al., 2019., Bender et al., 2019), international students face acculturation difficulties and have to manage a more extensive adaptive process compared to a domestic student. This study aimed to explore in-depth experiences and perceptions of first-year international students about the Buddy Project of the University of Groningen, specifically related to inclusion. A semi-structured interview guide was used to interview 10 participants. Data were analyzed using an inductive and deductive methodology using analysis based on coding. Results indicated that participants of the Buddy Project felt included as international students, but the project did not contribute as much as expected in aiding this feeling. Participants did not experience loneliness in an excessively high amount but did mention it concerning their international context. Considering the results of this bachelor thesis, and the other four related bachelor theses, it may be concluded that the Buddy Project is beneficial for first-year international students. Self-reported feelings of inclusion among participants are present and perceived support from the Buddy Project was mentioned recurrently. Nonetheless, more research into the specific needs of international first-year students and the role of the Buddy Project in facilitating these at the beginning of their study seems advisable.

Keywords: acculturation, inclusion, loneliness, the buddy project, international students, qualitative research

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The Netherlands now has three times as many international students as it did in 1988, and studying abroad has gained massive popularity on a global scale (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2012). International students temporarily move to another country for education (Bender et al., 2019). It has not gone unnoticed how diverse university classrooms have become as a result of internationalization, and many researchers have explored the effects of this phenomenon (e.g., Take & Shoraku, 2018). The overall conclusion of this research is that international students face more challenges in their academic and social integration than domestic students do, which threatens their general well-being (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2012).

Numerous universities in The Netherlands are motivated to attract international students (CBS, 2022). It appears to be a worldwide trend, almost all universities are investing in internationalization. To define this better, internationalization is best understood as the integration of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the curriculum, as well as the program's learning objectives, assessment tasks, instructional strategies, and support services (Leask, 2009). Although these internationalization trends aim to create the best environment for students, research suggests they can lead to decreased feelings of psychological safety and inclusion compared with students in mono-national student settings (De Leersnyder et al., 2022). Universities should therefore foster an international environment in which students' mental health and well-being are taken seriously (Strielkowski et al., 2021). As an example, universities can host welcome events, language traineeships, peer coaching, and other facilities that fulfill the socioemotional needs of international students (e.g., Hyde, 2012).

In this context, the current study will concentrate on The Buddy Project, run by the University of Groningen (UG), which aims to facilitate student inclusion and aid in the welcoming of first-year students. This Buddy Project is set up to provide a support system for international students in Groningen, specifically in the psychology department (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2018). The purpose of the current study is to investigate whether participants in The Buddy Project feel more supported and have a greater sense of inclusion during their first semester at the UG than non-participants.

Costs and Benefits of International Student Mobility

The increase in student diversion has both positive and negative effects, as analyzed in research and supported by certain theories, such as the Culture Shock Theory by Oberg (1960), the Acculturation Model by Berry (1997), and the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory by Kim (1988) (cf. Sarmiento et al., 2019).

Positive effects of the increase in student diversity are that international students have an increasing effect on academic and social resources for their home country, bring economic benefits to the host country, and personally profit from the intercultural surroundings cause of encounters with multiple perspectives. (Bender et al., 2019; De Leersnyder et al., 2022). The most significant benefit of international academic mobility, according to Gürüz (2011), is that it has aided in the advancement of rational thought and scientific knowledge. All international students have brought their own norms and values across borders, leading to the development of a globally shared set of ideologies, including democracy, the right to speak freely, and respect for civil rights (Gürüz, 2011). In a similar vein, a study by Sherry and colleagues (2010) described that international students improve their cross-cultural expertise, and ameliorate their self-esteem and autonomy. Overall, it can be aforementioned that cross-cultural exchange has a high potential to be advantageous to both the international student and

the host nation, by giving the student a lucratively developed career and personality (Shkoler et al., 2020).

However, international students will likewise face numerous acculturation difficulties and have to manage a more extensive adaptive process compared to a local student, as described by the Acculturation Model (Sarmiento et al., 2019., Bender et al., 2019). An international student is thought to have a particular outlook and approach to interacting or not interacting with the new culture, and the majority of these students have trouble adjusting in the personal-emotional and sociocultural domain. Personal-emotional adaptation is related to the feelings of emotional fulfillment that arise from successfully adjusting to a new environment, whereas sociocultural adaptation is related to the process of integrating and interacting with this environment (Sarmiento et al., 2019). Difficulties with these adjustments may lead to a diminished sense of inclusion (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2012), and are most often caused by cultural disorientation, as explained by the Culture Shock Theory (De Leersnyder et al., 2022). This disorientation may arise because international students are subjected to a large amount of new social norms, values, and expectations from their host nation, university, and peers (De Leersnyder et al., 2022). The initial sensations of fascination with the new environment experienced by international students can, under certain conditions, later transform into feelings of impotence, anxiety, and loneliness (Oberg, 1960). A person experiences loneliness when there is a gap between the quality of their current and ideal social connections (Perlman and Peplau, 1981). Risk factors for experiencing loneliness among international students can be feelings of social- and cultural detachment, such as experiencing feelings of exclusion (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022).

Relatedly, an important potential negative effect to pay attention to is that international students report a lower feeling of inclusion. This ‘psychological inclusion’ can be described as a tension between uniqueness and belonging, i.e., the feeling of wanting to belong and

possessing strong interpersonal relationships, without the loss of individual uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). Valcke and colleagues (2020) describe inclusion as “the psychological need to establish and/or maintain warm and friendly social relationships”, which seems to be very relevant according to the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory by Kim (1988) (cf. Sarmiento et al., 2019). Otten and colleagues (2014) state that there can only be a strong sense of belonging and room for individuality in an open organizational culture, which, consequently, calls for attention from universities.

Relevance of inclusion

Valcke and colleagues (2020) state that the contentment that comes from the feeling of inclusion, has psychological benefits, and is of direct influence on an individual’s well-being, and feelings of happiness. A recent study by Bernstein and colleagues (2021) also explored this effect of inclusion on well-being in a sample of 156 college students and confirms that inclusion significantly affects a positive mood and psychological fulfillment needs.

Focusing on the integration of international students, the acculturation difficulties they face are prone to be connected to a weakened sense of inclusion (Sarmiento et al., 2019). As previously described, this can accelerate a lower sense of well-being and deterioration of academic performance. Looking at all the positive aspects studying abroad has to offer, it would be shameful for universities and host countries not to pay attention to this problem. In line with this idea, the UG, located in the North of the Netherlands, has set up a support program within its international, English-taught Psychology program. This program is called ‘The Buddy Project’ and will be described in the next section.

The Buddy Project of the UG Psychology Department

The UG has upheld the title of ‘internationality’ since its founding in 1614, meaning it has since then hosted international education. Many students came from countries other than The Netherlands, and the first professors formed a vibrant international community (Van

Berkel & Termeer, 2021). Presently, the UG has the responsibility of education for a total of 37.000 students according to the Annual report of the UG for the year 2021 (“Jaarverslag Rijksuniversiteit Groningen 2021”; Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2022). Currently, 27% of all students attending the UG are international, representing 120 different nationalities.

The present study will concentrate on the UG’s Psychology program, whose internationalization efforts go beyond simply offering education in English. In 2017, supported by the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, de Giorgi set up the basis for the “Buddy Project” and carried out the first trial (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021). Since then, this program annually tries to facilitate international students' inclusion and aids in welcoming first-year students from abroad. New incoming international students are matched with senior students of the faculty, based on their hobbies, common interests, and nationality (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021). Because there were insufficient applicants for the senior buddy program, buddies were paired with three to four newcomers (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021).

Initially, the senior buddy, who receives training in intercultural competence before meeting the new coming student(s), is expected to provide informal guidance for an assigned group of international students regarding educational goals; e.g., helping them to find the exam hall or explain how to use the online university environment. Over time, the senior buddy should also make an effort to invest in social activities and support the newcomer when necessary for other purposes. This can include getting familiar with the Dutch culture, exploring the city of Groningen, providing assistance with the housing market, and applying for sports facilities, e.g. There are no additional formal rules for and about the relationship between buddy and newcomer (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021).

The present research

By taking into account the results of a recent master thesis by Henneke (2023), the present study will investigate the remaining questions regarding the evaluations given about

the Buddy Project. In her master's thesis, Henneke (2023) conducted quantitative research among participants and non-participants of the buddy project within the academic year 2022-2023. An online questionnaire was used to explore the effect of the program on students' sense of belonging, well-being, group identification (referring to the identity of Psychology students), perceived support received by the university, and feeling of loneliness. By comparing the experiences of participants and non-participants within the group of first-year international students, the study aimed to ascertain the effectiveness of the Department's Buddy Project in providing the necessary support for international students. Overall, the findings suggested that international students scored quite high in terms of perceived support and well-being. However, other than expected, participants in the program did not score better than those who did not participate.

So far, we can only speculate about the underlying reasons for this finding. As a result, the current study expands on these findings by conducting semi-structural interviews with Buddy Project participants by conducting exploratory research. More specifically, the current study, which was carried out by a team of five bachelor students, will address the following research question: How did the international first-year psychology students experience the Buddy Project of 2022-2023? The interviews among participants will cover a total of five domains, including students' motivation to study abroad and to join the Buddy Project, their perceived inclusion, the match buddy-newcomer, and their broader evaluation of the buddy project as rooted in positive and/or negative experiences, respectively. The focus of the current bachelor's thesis is on domain inclusion. Two corresponding research questions will be analyzed and further discussed in the following sections: (1) How much do the participants feel included within the University of Groningen, in general, and the Psychology Department, in specific?, and (2), which elements of the program, if any, may have fostered their feeling of inclusion?

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 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 the 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 were 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 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 at 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 to get accustomed to 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 to them the way the interviews were structured. The documents of the detailed information of research and informed consent, which participants had already received by mail, were shortly discussed, including the question for students' permission to record the interviews; all participants gave this permission; after they signed the informed consent form the interview started. As specified in the interview guideline, and as outlined above, the interview covered five domains related to students' experiences with the buddy project. In the end, after the recording was stopped, 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 anonymize 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 analyzed following particular theoretical ideas (e.g., zooming in on the Acculturation Model by Berry (1997)), we also allowed the data content to inform and develop our analyses. This approach resulted in several 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 analyzed using Atlas.ti Mac/Windows (version 23.1.1).

We first used thematic analysis to explore areas that were already marked as critical in the literature behind each domain. In the context of inclusion, this could for example be keywords related to feelings of belonging. Open coding was then used to find additional commonalities between the interviewees.

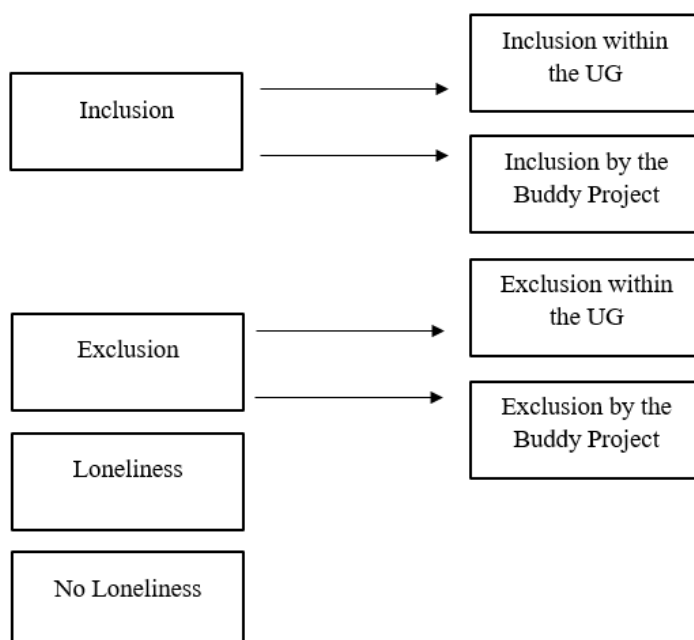
Results

All of the participants shared insightful stories about what it is like to be an international student and the role of the Buddy Project in this experience. Analysis of theories

led to four different categories as a basis for coding; inclusion, exclusion, loneliness, and not feeling lonely. To gain better insights into the role of the Buddy Project on feeling included or excluded, the categories inclusion and exclusion were divided into inclusion within the UG, exclusion within the UG, inclusion by the Buddy Project, and exclusion by the Buddy Project. The structure of the categories is reflected in the figure below (Figure 1), and described in the following text. Appendix B includes the codebook used for the thematic coding in ATLAS.ti.

Figure 1

Categories Representing the Basis for Interview Coding



Inclusion within the UG

Most newcomers felt included as a student of the UG. Analysis of transcripts led to the discovery of five different reasons for the feeling of inclusion, as displayed in Table 2. For instance, some participants felt included due to a student association, and others were just feeling very welcome by the UG. Most participants mentioned they felt included thanks to the

first-year university practicals, such as ‘Academic Skills’ and ‘Dialogue and Group Skills’.

As stated by Danny (P11):

Basically, I would say through academic skills at one point that you get to know more people and then also dialogue and group skills also helps. Because you do get to interact with other people and not just the ones you see like day-to-day.

Thus, most participants related their feeling of inclusion within the UG to the practicals and therefore seemed to experience a feeling of inclusion from weekly meetups with a fixed group of students.

Table 2

Document Group: Inclusion Within the UG

Code	Frequency	Participants
University practicals	12	8
No specific reason	11	8
Feeling like a student of the UG	7	5
Student Association	3	2
Feeling welcome	3	2

Besides mentioning the practicals, there were 11 instances in which participants mentioned feeling included without providing a specific reason. Most of the time, this was a response of the participants after a control question by the researcher. To give an example, Noah (P1) gave the response “*Yeah, I think so*” to the question; “*Well you said you felt pretty welcome here, could you then say you felt included within the UG?*”. When asked for a specification later in the interview, the respondents mostly replied with the same type of answer summarized as; “I just had that feeling”, or “I never really felt excluded”.

A total of seven times, feelings of inclusion were mentioned specifically, because five participants felt like they were ‘students of the UG’. So, to explain this better, their feeling of inclusion was strengthened because they saw themselves as one of the many students of the university. A quotation to explain this was given by Robin (P8); “*Hmmm... I think yeah. But ehm... I wasn't thinking about like, oh am I being included or am I not being included? Like, I am a student, so now I'm a part of university*”.

Lastly, there are two other groups of codes: Some participants felt included within the UG because they specifically explained that they experienced a welcoming feeling, and some benefited from the student association of the psychology department (i.e., the VIP). What stood out is that every participant mentioned feeling included at the UG at least twice. In total, a feeling of inclusion within the UG was mentioned 36 times by the 10 participants in this study.

Exclusion within the UG

Overall, participants made much fewer mentions of feeling excluded, but if so, they reported a greater variety of reasons (see Table 3). Seven out of ten participants reported a feeling of exclusion by the UG, with the main reasons relating to having trouble making friends within the university community, and only little contact with non-international students. For example, in interview 5, relating to the difficulty to make friends, Andrea mentioned the following;

I don't know it's I guess it's tough to make friends like in such a new place and I don't know there were already some groups of people and then you wouldn't want to come up to them, because like they're already a group and so it felt intimidating.

Noah told us in interview 1 that it sometimes feels like you are in a bubble as an international student, which results in a feeling of exclusion. Added to this argument, and also

related to exclusion within the UG, was the following comment, also made by Noah; *“Like, also in the program I felt like we would maybe have some courses together or something”*.

Table 3

Document Group: Exclusion Within the UG

Code	Frequency	Participants
Hard to make new friends	3	3
Low contact with non-international students	3	1
Difficulties coming to the UG	2	1
No specific reason	2	2
In lectures	1	1
People speak different languages	1	1
Lack of social gatherings	1	1

Charlie is the one participant (P6) that follows online education due to personal health issues. This is also the participant where the code ‘difficulties coming to the UG’ comes from. Charlie sometimes feels excluded as a student of the UG because of the lack of presence at the university, and mentioned this twice in the interview.

The ‘no specific reason’ code group is referred to twice by two participants, again as an answer to a control question by the researcher. Then, there were three more reasons given by three different participants. Silke (P4) stated the following regarding exclusion in lectures; *“I mean like I don’t really socialize with anyone in the lectures, other than my friends of course, so the lectures aren’t really a place where you feel included”*. Robin (P8) felt excluded during the activities of VIP because there were a lot of Dutch people forgetting to

speak English. Andrea (P5) was the participant who brought up feelings of exclusion the most frequently, three times. Never mentioned by anyone else, Andrea feels like the psychology program features too few social gatherings, and explains this in the following statement:

... and I think that's once again because of the lack of events. I don't know I don't feel that included with the people from my program, only if someone specifically organizes something like but you just invite someone to go someplace then you feel like you're with them but you don't really feel that along with the program itself.

Inclusion by the Buddy Project

Because this research is mainly focused on the Buddy Project, it is important to investigate the role of this program in the feeling of inclusion among participants. This section will therefore revisit the topic of feeling included while concentrating solely on how inclusion relates to the Buddy Project. Questions focused on whether the Buddy Project contributed in any way to participants' sense of inclusion. Example questions can be found in the interview guideline in Appendix A.

Table 4 lists the five different categories of arguments participants provided as a reason for their sense of inclusion as facilitated by the Buddy Project. It stands out that there are two 'top favorites' among the answers participants provided: (1) that they have someone to reach out to, and (2) a connection with a small group of people. Six out of ten participants mentioned they felt included in the program because they could always build upon their buddy or someone out of the group they were assigned to. Taylor explained this in interview 9 and mentioned the following; *"Being able to have someone to talk to, was good to get that inclusion started and feel part of something, yeah so do think I was part of, it did make it easy for me to feel included"*. The other four participants in this research did not have a close connection to their buddy or group.

Four of the six respondents who said they valued having someone to reach out to also mentioned they felt this sense of inclusion because of the connection they had with their group. Robin explained this in interview 8: “*Being with other people from your group, makes you feel included in the group*”. In a similar vein, Luca (P3) defined where this feeling of inclusion comes from:

I think every way to sort of have a of small groups. You know, even stuff like practical or something. Everything that's a bit more easy to handle because you know when you have such giant courses, every sort of smaller group is very helpful to have some sort of community and the buddy project is of course that as well. Like you have a small group of three till four people or something and that in itself can be like a good starting point. You know to have some sort of, yeah, connection.

Table 4

Document Group: Inclusion by the Buddy Project

Code	Frequency	Participants
Having someone to reach out to	9	6
Connection with a small group	7	4
Meeting new people	2	1
In the summer break	1	1
Activity related	1	1

Eight out of ten participants said they felt included, and this was mentioned 20 times throughout all interviews. Senna (P10) had a 25% input in the total frequency of these mentions and explained that she had met her current best friend thanks to the Buddy Project.

The ‘meeting new people’ code comes from interview 10, and can be further explained by the following quote: “*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*”. Senna was also the one that related this feeling of inclusion to an activity of the Project, in which the best friend was introduced. Lastly, to explain the code ‘in the summer break’ better, Silke (P4) explained it in the following line; “*I guess it just made it more real. Especially in like the summer before I started university, just felt like okay I'm actually going to be a student there, you know?*”.

Exclusion by the Buddy Project

As stated in the previous part, the focus of this research is mainly on the feeling of inclusion among the ‘newcomers’ in the Buddy Project. By concentrating on inclusion, it was also possible to identify participants who felt excluded, which resulted in the creation of this code group that will be discussed in the section below.

Three participants specifically mentioned they experienced feelings of exclusion concerning the Buddy Project, and this led to the formulation of three different codes (see Table 5). Of the eight participants that experienced exclusion at least once, only three of them related this to the Buddy Project. Focusing on the transcripts, it stands out that some participants did not have a good connection with their buddy or someone from their group. Sometimes they even mentioned they never spoke to some people out of the group, as Senna mentioned in interview 10;

But the other two people actually weren't as interested, so I felt like either they didn't like us or like they weren't as interested in the project, so they were I do not know, they weren't never there for our meetings, so it was weird, so.

Many interviews revealed that participants did not participate in the Buddy Project’s activities for a variety of reasons, with the most frequent ones being a lack of interest in the

activities, activities occurring during exam time, and reluctance to go without their buddy or group. In interview 5, Andrea summarized these most common reasons to not attend the activities: “*I think they did help or they like could help more if they were more appealing or yeah if they if more people went to them and they were more interesting*”. However, the total frequency of exclusion experienced within the Buddy Project appears to be way lower than the experiences feeding into the domain of inclusion.

Table 5

Document Group: Exclusion by the Buddy Project

Code	Frequency	Participants
Too few social events	2	2
Did not take part in the activities	2	2
Little/no interaction with Buddy	1	1

Loneliness

Since Valcke and colleagues (2020) describe inclusion as the psychological need to establish and/or maintain warm and friendly social relationships, it became relevant that participants should also be asked about if they ever experienced feelings of loneliness. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, and stated by Hasnain and Hajek (2022), risk factors for experiencing loneliness among international students can be influenced by feelings of exclusion. Due to these potential interactions, loneliness was also coded for in the transcripts, which provided some interesting and useful insights. This code group mainly focuses on acculturation issues and the difference between the experience of a non-international and international student. It did not focus on loneliness experienced related to the Buddy Project or the UG in particular.

It turned out that eight participants experienced feelings of loneliness at least once during their first half-year of being an international student. This was related to their social context, as shown in Table 6, in the majority of the cases. The code got added to quotations if the participant specifically mentioned that feelings of loneliness resulted from having way fewer social contacts than previously in your home country. Robin explained this in interview 8 when responding to the question about experiencing loneliness: *“Not anymore, but at the beginning, for sure. Especially at the beginning, like when I was in Assen, I felt like I was the only one there. Everybody was here in Groningen, so that also added to the feeling”*. Charlie is the one participant that experienced loneliness the most often, and also the one that follows online education as mentioned before. This participant had the highest frequency of feeling lonely. In the following statement, it got explained better where this results from: *“I miss talking to more people. I’m weird but I’m social. And it would be nice if I had more of a social group”*.

Table 6

Document Group: Loneliness

Code	Frequency	Participants
Social context	5	3
In the summer break	4	3
No specific reason	3	3
COVID-19	2	2
Exam period	1	1

The other codes should be viewed as additional environmental factors contributing to feelings of loneliness. For example, some international students specifically felt lonely in the

summer, because the university had not started yet, or due to COVID-19 measurements of the UG that led to online education for a month. An example illustrating the code ‘in the summer break’ stems from Taylor in interview 9:

Umm yeah it was pretty natural for me to find friends, but yes I think like the first few weeks it can feel a bit lonely because you just left your home and its like the first time I was in this situation, yeah didn't know that many people yet or a lot of people who I didn't really know then so yeah of course there are moments when you are just alone at home and you are like ok what do I do now?

Regarding COVID-19, in the academic year 22/23, the faculty of behavioural and social sciences went back to online education for a restricted period from halfway through December until the beginning of January. Two participants mentioned they felt lonely during this period due to the closure of this department of the UG. Luca (P3) explained this in the following quotation:

Well, I really hated wh-wh-when around Christmas time, everything went online that gave me, like, that gave me like. Yeah, because I stayed here and everyone went home and that was like, horrible. And yeah, it was just complete horrible experience with, like, online lectures and everything online. So that was that was quite bad.

Feelings of loneliness were mentioned quite often; no less than 80% of the participants mentioned these feelings at least once in their interviews (the total number of mentionings across all interviews was 15).

Not Feeling Loneliness

The interviews also wanted to focus on positive feelings, and, therefore, also addressed situations wherein students did not feel lonely. It became apparent that all ten participants could recall times when they had *not* felt lonely. This resulted in a selection of six different codes, with ‘meeting new people’ being the most prominent one (see Table 7). Once

more, this code group does not concentrate on the distinctions between the Buddy Project or the UG as potential sources of not experiencing loneliness.

In their interview, more than half of the participants mentioned something about *not* feeling lonely three times in their interviews. Therefore, the average of comments about *not* feeling lonely is way higher than the comments made about feelings of loneliness. There are a total of 23 quotations in the interview transcripts that reflect this code group. A quote by Taylor (interview 9) exemplifies the ‘meeting new people’ code, which was most often mentioned:

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.

Another short, but very clear example is provided by Luca (interview 3): “...and I was meeting a lot of new people”. In the interview, we once more asked control questions pertaining to this code group. In a total of five interviews, participants did (at least once) not give a specific reason for why they did not feel lonely. To give an example, Noah (P1) commented the following; “*But, other than that I feel perfectly fine here. Like, I haven't really felt lonely*”.

Table 7*Document Group: Not Feeling Loneliness*

Code	Frequency	Participants
Meeting new people	7	5
No specific reason	6	5
Having a group of friends	4	2
Having a close friend	3	3
Being busy	2	2
Sport association	1	1

The codes, ‘having a group of friends’, and ‘having a close friend’ were mentioned in the interviews almost equally often. Very often, these two codes are related to the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) introduction week and KEI-week, with participants making statements about how they met a close friend or group of friends there. Taylor specifically spoke about the ESN week and mentioned the following about having a close friend;

I mean, I met one friend at the ESN week like very randomly like she wasn't even in my group, but we instantly connected and I feel like we became like best friends on the spot so that was very lucky that happens like three days after I got here.

Roan explained more about the value of having a group of friends in interview 7, focussing on why he hasn’t experienced feelings of loneliness in the second semester;

But in the second semester, I feel like I just... I found my group of people that I like. I don't know. That I understand and like we get along very well. SO yeah I feel like the second semester regarding the social life was much better.

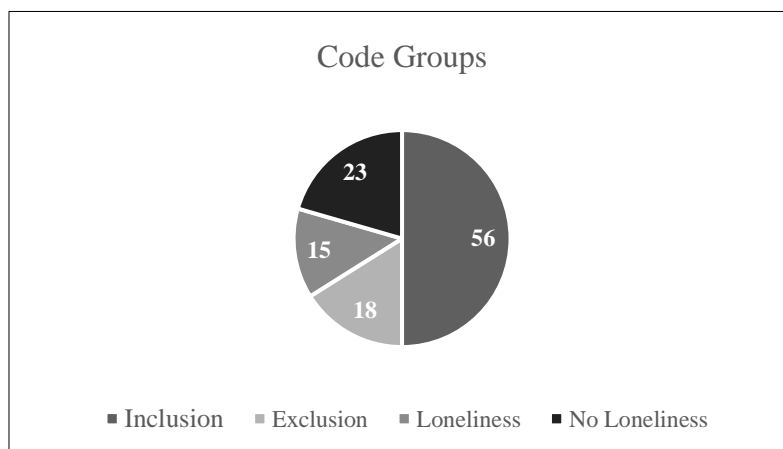
Finally, there is the code for ‘being busy’, which was mentioned by two participants. One of them, Taylor (P9) gave a clear example of why this code was used; “*I think I never felt like too lonely or anything like; there was always another activity which I could go to so it was fine. Pretty good I think.*”. Roan specifically mentioned the sports association Vitalis as a reason for not feeling lonely, which is why this code was also added.

General Observations

Looking at all interviews, it appears that participants mentioned feelings of inclusion about three times more frequently than feelings of exclusion, without differentiating whether these feelings of inclusion/exclusion related to the Buddy Project or the UG. Figure 2 below shows the distribution of all code groups from all interviews. The density reflects the frequency with which a code group was mentioned across all interview transcripts. ‘Not feeling loneliness’ and ‘Inclusion’ were the only two codes that got mentioned in *all* interviews. Additionally, it is noteworthy that inclusion was mentioned four times in one interview, which was the most of any code. Results will be further discussed in the following section.

Figure 2

Density of Code Group Remarks Within Participant Interviews.



Note. N = 10.

Discussion

This thesis set out to investigate feelings of inclusion among first-year international psychology students that participated in the Buddy Project from the UG in 2022/2023. Ten semi-structured interviews provided qualitative data on this domain of research and resulted in the discovery of interesting knowledge on how international students experienced the start of their study and the role of the Buddy Project herein. The results conceived by this thesis are unique compared to earlier research conducted on the Buddy Project by Henneke (2023), and Ballato and Schroeder (2021). This statement may be verified by the fact that this is the first in-depth collection of data produced by qualitative research that also takes into account the experiences of participants outside of the Buddy Project, but within the UG. The following discussion will debate the findings of the present research and the support they provide for the theories cited in the introduction of this thesis. Strengths and limitations are likewise featured, along with suggestions for further research.

General Findings

This study built upon the master thesis of Henneke (2023) and it may be affirmed that it resulted in clearer insights about why the Buddy Project can be of value for first-year international students. Overall, feelings of inclusion were more often experienced than feelings of exclusion. In terms of the Buddy Project, participants mentioned feelings of exclusion way less frequently than feelings of inclusion. Moreover, this study investigated feelings of loneliness. The analysis of the respective results indicates that participants mentioned experienced not being lonely more often than being lonely.

According to the findings, and to answer the first research question, the Buddy Project generally has little effect on encouraging inclusion among first-year international students in the UG's Psychology department. Theisen's (2023) thesis summarizes the ratings given by Buddy Project participants, with a mean rating of 5.9, and states that the range of ratings

indicates that participants' perceptions and experiences of the program varied. Overall, only emphasizing the domain inclusion, participants of the Buddy Project seem to benefit when they have a good connection with their buddy and other group members. Generally acknowledged by participants is the fact that they have someone to reach out to for academic questions and/or social bonding, which can be referred back to the second research question of this thesis.

Results also reflected certain flaws within the program. Seven out of ten participants expressed that they did not have a good connection with their buddy or someone out of the assigned group (Theisen, 2023). This did not result in feelings of loneliness often, but influenced participants perception about the usefulness of the project. A good connection should be the basis for aiding and abetting the feeling of inclusion, and, as stated in the evaluation rapport, a buddy should always be available to answer immediate, routine questions of a general nature and/or redirect the question to the correct member of staff (Ballato & Schroeder, 2021). Almost all participants also promoted the presence of more social activities and advised including a wider range of social activities in upcoming projects to ensure there are plenty of opportunities for interaction, and building relationships with other participants. Making improvements on the aforementioned defects will, in turn, generate a higher feeling of inclusion because good social relationships seem to be very relevant according to the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory by Kim (1988) (cf. Sarmiento et al., 2019).

Inclusion

What do the results tell about the functioning of the Buddy Project? All ten participants gave important insights about the way the program works, as well as how it might be improved. As already stated in the introduction, it is reasonable to anticipate that international students will experience greater acculturation challenges, as described by the

Acculturation Model (Sarmiento et al., 2019., Bender et al., 2019), and, as a result, greater difficulty in feeling included than domestic students (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2012). This should then be reflected in a lower sense of inclusion among the participants. Results suggest that, at least when the interviews were taken, about halfway through the second semester, perceived inclusion is quite high, which is consistent with Henneke's (2023) master's thesis findings. Relatedly, it does seem like the UG does a better job of facilitating a feeling of inclusion among international students than the Buddy Project. When asked about inclusion experiences, the Buddy Project was hardly ever directly mentioned. However, when specifically asked about the contribution of the Project in aiding students feeling of inclusion, the role became recognized and discussed more deeply. The overall frequency of the times the feeling of inclusion related to the Buddy Project was mentioned was therefore somewhat influenced by interviewing techniques.

Exclusion

Besides asking the participants about their experienced sense of inclusion, this research further tapped into actual experiences of exclusion. It makes sense to assume that, if the Buddy Project functions as intended, there won't be any cause for newcomers to feel excluded. Nonetheless, during the project, participants' expectations were not always fulfilled. This resulted in feelings of exclusion only a small number of times, as reflected in the results. It became apparent that in some instances, some internal issues triggered a sense of exclusion. Three out of ten participants claimed to have felt excluded due to shortcomings in the Buddy Project. Participants have been taught a lot about where negative experiences emerged. For example, more than half reported they did not have a good connection with their buddy or with the group they were assigned to. In addition to this, a lot of them never or rarely participated in the activities accommodated by the Project, since they were scheduled during the exam period or not attractive context-wise. All participants stated that the activities

should be more focused on social aspects, and this consistency underlines that this aspect needs thorough consideration. As stated before, changing things within this domain will probably lead to even less feeling of exclusion and strengthen the feeling of inclusion.

Loneliness

Luckily, and similar to experiences of exclusion, the findings suggest that most participants in this study did not suffer from loneliness frequently. Feelings of loneliness will affect international students' mental health and consequently have an impact on their well-being, as stated in the introduction to this thesis and supported by Zheng and colleagues (2023). Loneliness makes people feel like failures when it comes to connecting with others or feeling at home and therefore exemplifies the feeling that symbolizes non-belonging and exclusion (De Leersnyder et al., 2022). In almost all instances, feeling lonely could be traced back to a strained relationship with their friend or other group members, unrelated to the Buddy Project. It's also noteworthy that the majority of participants already anticipated they would feel lonely because they traveled across borders all by themselves.

Not Feeling Loneliness

Mirroring the few mentions about experiencing loneliness, all participants at least once mentioned something about the *absence* of loneliness. However, this positive finding was not always specifically linked to the benefits of the Buddy Project. This could be a valid reason for the findings in the master thesis from Henneke (2023), where there was no difference found regarding well-being between participants and non-participants of the Buddy Project. Not experiencing loneliness as a result of the Buddy Project resulted from meeting new people, and having someone to rely on. Participants advised the matching procedure could be improved by placing more focus on if participants would prefer support on an academic or social level to enhance contact between their Buddy and other group members. Also mentioned was the possibility to insert supervision within the program that focuses on the

effectiveness and presence of contact. More in-depth information about this can be found in the thesis of Voogd (2023) about the match between buddy and newcomer, and the thesis of Kwakernaak (2023) about the buddy project's influence on newcomers' social context (2023).

Limitations

An obvious limitation of this study specifically can be that results are drawn from a small sample, with 10 participants in total, which were selected based on availability, but not representativeness, for either the cohort of international students having started in 2022 or the sample by Henneke (2023), respectively. Relatedly, the results of the present study may not represent all international students in the Netherlands, reducing the generalizability of the present results. However, since this study is qualitative in nature, the number of participants can never be compared with the size used in a quantitative design. Qualitative studies have a very different goal, most of the time focusing on the *how* and *why* behind certain effects, and thus taking more time to perform and analyze. Numerous qualitative studies also employ roughly the same number of participants: indeed, Dworkin (2012) concludes in an article on the optimal sample size in qualitative studies that 5–50 participants are an appropriate number (Dworkin, 2012). Moreover, according to the argument of saturation, after a certain number of interviews, there is no longer relevant data gathering since participants are no longer producing new insights (Dworkin, 2012). This effect of saturation was encountered in the interview transcripts of the present study. Due to the consistency of the participants' answers when asked about program improvements, for instance, the interviewers did not always demand in-depth justifications.

Second, it can be said that some results might have been influenced by the fact that neither of the interviewees had any formal training, and the coding was done using rudimentary knowledge of qualitative data collection. For example, as stated in the results, 'inclusion' and 'not feeling loneliness' were the only two code groups that got mentioned in

all the interviews. According to the interview guidelines in Appendix A, which reflect more specific questions about these two feelings, this might have occurred because interviewees concentrated more on or dug deeper into those domains than into others. If the researchers explicitly focus on those concepts, it makes sense that they become more apparent during the coding and therefore have a higher frequency.

Lastly, a limitation that almost all qualitative studies possess of is that the data collection can – more than quantitative data - be influenced by other factors, such as a bias from the interviewer, or the self-presentation from a participant. However, since interviews were conducted in the presence of two researchers, subjective bias from the researcher was dodged as much as possible.

Strengths

As a result of the qualitative data collection, in-depth data was generated on how participants experienced the Buddy Project and thereby administer feelings of inclusion/exclusion. The most crucial benefit of qualitative research, and consequently also of the current study, is that it can provide an understanding of certain opinions and assumptions (Choy, 2014). One qualitative study is all that is necessary to gain an additional understanding of the outcomes depicted in the master's thesis, and the current study is proud to have done so. Thereby, a strength applying specifically to this research is that the foundation for the data was drawn from the same cohort as Henneke (2023). This supports the claim that results can explain the findings in the master thesis.

Future Research

In the scope of this research, perception of perceived support from the Buddy Project and the UG was measured among first-year international students. It became apparent in the interviews that a lot of participants struggled with their housing situation, so for future research, it might be beneficial to tap into outside sources of support for international students

and consider its effect in evaluating inclusion or moreover general well-being. What would also be favorable is a study design that measures perceived support multiple times during the Project, such as a longitudinal design. Participants mentioned quite often they would have appreciated more support at the beginning of their studies and needed less after a certain amount of time. Another crucial factor to take into account is the fact that participants in this sample had already been engaged in acculturation for more than 8 months, which will undoubtedly affect how included they feel compared to if the study had been conducted at the beginning of their studies. These changes in time could also influence the experienced feeling of inclusion, and sequentially well-being. In this study, there was also only one participant originating from outside the European Union, which makes the sample in this research a lower-risk group to experience acculturation stress.

Conclusion

The present study looked into the perceived inclusion and loneliness of participants of the university's Buddy Project. This thesis aimed to find more in-depth explanations for the findings of the master thesis from Henneke (2023). Concluded in the master thesis was that the scores on well-being, perceived support, and loneliness of participants and non-participants of the "Buddy Project" did not differ significantly. In sum, and certainly considering the findings from all five projects associated with this interview study, it can be stated that this aim, to get more in-depth explanations for Henneke's (2023) findings, was met. The results of this thesis provided support that the Buddy Project is valuable and beneficial for first-year international students in aiding their feeling of inclusion, but that there is further room for improvement.

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Appendix A

Interview Guideline

Introduction

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

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

Important:

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

Start interview

Motivation

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

- c. What was your social life like when you first came to The Netherlands?
- d. What about your living situation?

Social context

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

Evaluation

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

Motivation

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

Evaluation

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

Matching

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

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

Inclusion

9. Starting a study abroad can be quite challenging, and for some it may be lonely. How was this for you?
- a. How did you experience adapting to student life in general?
 - b. Did you feel included within the university? How, and why?
 - c. How was it for you to become part of the community, how did you experience this?
 - d. Were there situations where you felt excluded, can you explain this?
10. What influence did The Buddy Program have on you feeling included (Do you feel part of the psychology program, do you feel like part of Groningen etc.) Do you think the project contributed to your feeling of inclusion?
- a. Why do you think so?
 - b. Which activities do you think helped in this process and which activities did you miss?
 - c. How could this be improved by The Buddy Program?
 - d. Was there any other course that really helped you feel at home in Groningen?

Evaluation

11. Now we have looked in more detail, do you still agree with it or would you like to change your number within the buddy program scale from (1= very negative to 10 very positive)?
- a. Explain the reason for keeping your number/ changing your number
 - b. Next to the improvements you already mentioned, do you have any other recommendations for the program
 - c. Are there things you would have done differently?

Wrap up

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

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

Appendix B

Codebook

Focus Areas, Themes, and Codes^a

Focus Areas	Themes	Codes	Proof Quotes
Inclusion	Inclusion Within the UG	University practicals No specific reason Feeling like a student of the UG Student Association Feeling welcome	<i>Hmmm... I think yeah. But ehm... I wasn't thinking about like, oh am I being included or am I not being included? Like, I am a student, so now I'm a part of university".</i>
	Exclusion Within the UG	Hard to make new friends Low contact with non-international students Difficulties coming to the UG No specific reason In lectures People speak in different languages Lack of social gatherings	<i>"I mean like I don't really socialize with anyone in the lectures, other than my friends of course, so the lectures aren't really a place where you feel included"</i>
	Inclusion by the Buddy Project	Having someone to reach out to Connection with a small group Meeting new people In the summer break Activity related	<i>"Being able to have someone to talk to, was good to get that inclusion started and feel part of something, yeah so do think I was part of, it did make it easy for me to feel included".</i>
	Exclusion by the Buddy Project	Too little social events Did not take part in the activities Little/ no interaction with Buddy	<i>"But the other two people actually weren't as interested, so I felt like either they didn't like us or like they weren't as interested in the project, so they were I do not know, they weren't never there for our meetings, so it was weird, so".</i>

Loneliness	Social context In the summer break No specific reason COVID-19 Exam period	<i>“Umm yeah it was pretty natural for me to find friends but yes I think like the first few weeks it can feel a bit lonely because you just left your home and its like the first time I was in this situation, yeah didn’t know that many people yet or a lot of people who I didn’t really know then so yeah of course there are moments when you are just alone at home and you are like ok what do I do now?”</i>
Not Feeling Loneliness	Meeting new people No specific reason Having a group of friends Having a close friend Being busy Sport association	<i>“I think I never felt like too lonely or anything like there was always another activity which I could go to so it was fine. Pretty good I think.”</i>

a. Codes organised from highest occurrence to lowest.