

How can mentoring and buddying schemes aid integration into the host society? (The Netherlands)

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Objectives

It is clear to me that mentor programmes or buddy schemes help international students through the difficult period of transition into studying and living in a new country and can help them make friends with students from the host culture. Through experience of coordinating mentor programmes in the UK, I have found that, although international students appreciate the existence of these programmes, they often drop out after the first couple of weeks. This means that in many cases the goal of helping them meet local students and aiding integration has not been achieved. I have also tried organising social events for British and international students to achieve this goal, but have also found these to be unsuccessful, due mainly to the low attendance of British students. If they do attend they tend to stick together.

Feedback from students has led me to believe that combining a social events programme within the structure of a buddy scheme, and encouraging students to be more involved with the organisation may be the answer, or at least offer more chance of success in achieving this goal. As I was not aware of any UK institutions organising successful programmes like this, I began to research what was happening overseas. I was extremely impressed with the programmes that have been set up for international students in Norway. In Norway these schemes are run in partnership with the National Union of Students (NSU), the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), the Red Cross Youth and welfare organisations. They include an extensive social programme of events including international coffee hours, theatre tours, film evenings, hiking/walking, river trips and even camping, all of which I believe would be of interest to a wide range of students. My objective was to find out more about the organisation of these programmes, the resources needed, initiatives used to encourage participation, how many students attended the social events, and how successful the programmes were in helping international students meet local students and feel part of the community. To achieve this I visited the University of Bergen (UiB), the University of Oslo (UiO) and University of Science and Technology, Trondheim (NTNU).

Norway is known for being one of the most civilised, educated and tolerant societies in the world, and its manner of handling internationalisation has set high standards within Europe. Partnerships with international institutions and providing scholarship opportunities for students from developing countries are seen as high priority. Education is not an income generating business; in Norway it is free for everyone! The majority of international students studying in Norway are taking part in international exchange programmes. It is very clear that international students are valued and a lot of energy is put into ensuring they feel welcome and have a rewarding student experience.

Outcomes from the study visit

The three universities I visited all operate successful and creative buddy/social programmes based on matching local students with international students that rely heavily on keen, proactive and committed students in their organisation. The programmes are coordinated in different ways. Buddy UiO and the International

buddy programme at NTNU rely more on the host university and student welfare organisations for their funding and organisation whilst Buddy Bergen is a Red Cross initiative. Buddy Bergen and Buddy UiO have local students actively involved in the organisation, whilst the International buddy programme at NTNU relies on the International Students Union (ISU). Buddy Bergen achieves the most success in relation to integration due to a well developed one-to-one matching process and an extensive programme of interactive social events. Although NTNU has an interesting social programme, events are mainly attended by international students and there is less success in relation to integration. I have learnt that successful programmes rely on support from the university coupled with the participation of keen and proactive students, and that in order to achieve the goal of better integration between local and international students, it is essential to involve local students in the programme's organisation.

Key findings Buddy Bergen – University of Bergen

There are 14,000 students studying at the University of Bergen and international students make up 10% of the student body. In the city of Bergen there are about 25,000 students. The scheme is open to every student in higher education institutions in Bergen. Buddy Bergen was initiated by the students in the Red Cross Youth Bergen in January 2008 and has the aim of paving the way for better social integration between Norwegian and newly-arrived international students. The scheme is run entirely by a board of four Norwegian students consisting of a Chair, a deputy and two others, who work in collaboration with the National Union of Students in Norway (NSU), the International Students Union at UiB (ISU-UIB) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN). The board promote the scheme, update the website, match the students, manage the budget and answer emails. They are all proactive and very committed to making the programme a success. In the words of the chair 'our job is to create better social integration between foreign and Norwegian students by paving the way for mutual positive experiences. This is not a one way support scheme but a system based on cooperation between equals.'

The scheme runs for the first six weeks of the autumn and spring semesters and participants are expected to meet for roughly an hour each week, either on their own, with other buddies, or at a Buddy event. There is no limit to the number of participants; everyone is welcome to join. Around 700 students take part during the autumn semester and 350 in the spring semester. Students that take part in the scheme are split equally between international and Norwegian students.

The scheme is promoted to all new international students via their offer letter, the university website, and the guide for international students. The board also work hard to promote the event during mentor week (like the UK Freshers week) via flyers and posters and by manning stands in the faculties. It also has its own Facebook site where students can interact and find out about upcoming events. Buddy Bergen has its own logo and they have invested in marketing merchandise like T-shirts and badges. Buddies register by filling in a form on the website which includes their interests, what they are studying, age, gender etc. Matching takes place the week after the mentor week. A Norwegian and international student are matched based on their preferences. This is done via a very nifty IT programme that was developed by a clever international student who coordinated the International buddy programme at NTNU some years ago. The ex-student has been kind enough to share their expertise and helped Buddy Bergen develop their own website; they even assist in uploading photos of social events onto the site.

During the six week period, the board facilitate meetings between buddies by organising social events. One event is organised per week and emails are sent to the buddies to inform them. During the last year the board has worked very hard to create a very impressive social programme despite limited funding. Events have included an international quiz and music event, a buy one get one free deal at the aquarium, a theatre production, ice skating, a film with a discussion afterwards, a mountain hike, a fancy dress event, a games night, a football tournament, an activity day and a pot luck dinner where buddies cook a Norwegian or international dish together and then bring it to the event. I attended the final event of the autumn semester which featured a local rock band. A mixed group of around 200 students attended and international and Norwegians were happily interacting.

The success of the scheme would not have been achieved without the energy, enthusiasm and commitment of the board of students organising it. They are doing a fantastic job of making international students feel welcome in Bergen and ensuring they have a valuable, enjoyable student experience and it was clear that both international and Norwegian students value their hard work. They are a credit to the University of Bergen and certainly inspired me!

Key findings Buddy UiO – University of Oslo

There are 30,000 students studying at the University of Oslo and each year they welcome 1,000 new international students. Buddy UiO is currently funded and coordinated by the Foundation of Student Life in Oslo (SiO) with the help of three local student volunteers who are elected into the role. The aim of SiO is to improve and advance the student experience providing affordable housing, places to eat, health care services, exercise and sports facilities.

Buddy UiO was first introduced in 1993 with the aim of helping all new students (including Norwegians) adjust to university life. It is a massive scheme including 400 buddies, who have been at UiO for some time and 6,000 new students. A coordinator from SiO is responsible for the scheme and supervising the volunteers. When the volunteers take on the role they attend training given by previous volunteers and the coordinator. The buddies are also offered a two-hour training session which includes icebreakers and typical problem situations and how to solve them. The buddy's role is to show new students around campus, offer them information about social events and answer any practical questions. Each buddy is responsible for a mixed group of approximately 20 students mainly studying in the same faculty.

The scheme is promoted to international students via their university offer letter, the pre-arrival guide and website. International students are automatically put into groups before they register. Buddies meet their groups during a welcome ceremony which takes place at the beginning of mentor week in Oslo city centre. This is quite a manic process based on a colour/number system with the coordinator on hand to mop up any students that are unable to find their buddies. The students exchange contact details and make arrangements to meet at buddy events, for example a weekend boat trip, barbeques/picnics and games events. There is also an extensive calendar of special events organised only for international students.

The coordinator is new to the role and recognised that the programme could be more successful in achieving its aim. There are many challenges; the scheme involves large numbers of students and it is often difficult to recruit enough committed buddies. It is necessary to introduce better incentives for participating. Also most new students are Norwegians and they are also struggling to adapt to their new

environment, as many come to the city from remote parts of the country. Their English may be excellent but they are often not confident enough to use it and prefer to mix with fellow Norwegians.

The university recognises the importance of ensuring the scheme is successful for its international students and for this reason the coordinator role is about to be moved out of SiO to the university International Office to ensure better cooperation, improve the scheme and provide it with more funding.

International buddy programme at NTNU - University of Science and Technology, Trondheim

There are 20,000 students studying at NTNU and approximately 1,000 are international. The International buddy programme at NTNU is funded by the university International Office and coordinated by international students from the International Students Union (ISU). It runs in partnership with the ESN. The scheme was set up five years ago to aid better integration between Norwegians and international students.

Unlike the previous two schemes this scheme is introduced during week four of the semester by means of an opening event. The reason for it starting later is due to the ISU board changing at the beginning of the autumn semester, it is one of numerous roles carried out by the ISU, and there is no handover when the previous board leaves. The first three weeks are spent gaining an understanding of the programme and promoting the event by means of flyers and sending out emails to Norwegian and international students to recruit buddies and international guests.

Students sign up to the scheme on the website in the same way as Buddy Bergen. The website has not changed since it was set up by the ex-student who introduced it. The only difference is that Norwegians can request more than one international student as their guests. More international students sign up to the programme than Norwegians. At the opening event students are given badges with their names and country flag and left to find their buddy. International students that don't have a buddy are welcome to ask the Norwegian students to be their buddy during the event. Many other events are organised throughout the academic year. Whilst I was there a Brazilian Carnival event took place.

In order to achieve better continuity it is essential that the new board receives a proper handover. The scheme could also benefit from more involvement from the International office in its organisation and promotion of the scheme.

Reflections on implementing learning points at own institution and other UK institutions

The mentor programme survey carried out by UKCISA last year found that only 29% of institutions ran mentoring schemes for international students and of those only 52% said they were successful. These figures are remarkably low considering that in most research carried out into international students and the issue of social integration, mentor programmes are recommended as a means of aiding this process.

Although none of the schemes I experienced were perfect, I remain convinced that they achieve a great deal of success in terms of aiding the integration process, making students feel welcome in their new environment and offering them a valuable student experience. It is clear to me that the success of the Norwegian buddy

schemes is due to the integration of the social events, the effort that is put into their promotion and the fact that they are organised by devoted students.

Most institutions organise social events for their international students or events for all students that aim to encourage integration and many are lucky enough to have a budget for them, especially during the orientation period. I'm not aware of any institutions that follow the Norwegian model and organise their social events via a mentor programme that matches UK and international students. If students are matched then invited to an interactive social event like a quiz, relationships can flourish and international students can begin to feel comfortable and confident in their interactions with local students. These interactions take place in the safe environment of an event and therefore training of buddies is perhaps not necessary. It is then necessary to keep the momentum going by organising social events each week for the first few weeks that provide fun opportunities for buddies to meet. The events provide the main incentive for students joining the programme, and the programme could be funded by redirecting the social event budget.

In my quest to introduce a similar scheme in my own institution it is now my aim to find some willing and energetic UK and international students that have a passion for discovering new cultures and are keen to be involved in 'paving the way for mutual positive experiences'!