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ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME, KEY ACTION 2

CAPACITY BUILDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Furthering International Relations Capacities and Intercultural Engagement to Nurture Campus Diversity and to Support Internationalisation at Home (FRIENDS)

HOME AWAY FROM HOME PROGRAMME

1. Introduction

The FRIENDS project is funded under the Erasmus+ Programme for Capacity Building in Higher Education. It combines the efforts of 12 Asian Partner Country Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and four Programme Country HEIs from Europe. FRIENDS is built around the concept of internationalisation at home and aims to build capacities for it across the five Partner Countries involved, namely Bhutan, Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand.

The Home Away From Home Programme is designed to meet the needs of international students and students with diverse cultural background studying at the 12 Partner Country HEIs. The Programme offers an integrated model for student care and support, in order to co-create a study experience that is welcoming, friendly and supportive for international students, as detailed in this document. This model has been formulated following the discussions and brainstorming sessions organized during the Home Away From Home Virtual Tea Party held on 8 October 2020, which engaged 49 staff and executive members from across the FRIENDS consortium.

The guidelines for international student care and support outlined in this document are to be endorsed and further adjusted by each of the 12 Asian HEIs involved to reflect their local context and specific needs.

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2. Policies and Regulations at the HEIs

It is important to indicate that it is the responsibility of each institution to provide international students with a safe, secure and caring environment that support and nurture them as they strive to achieve their best during their studies.

2.1. Institution's policy

The policy at the HEI covers the support and assistance to be provided to international students, including pre-departure assistance, arrival and on-campus support as well as preparation for returning home after completion of the planned study period.

2.2. Designated staff or office

The HEI has a special designated team, office or staff member to offer support and guide international students. The staff members are available at a set time weekly, or during the institution's working hours, or on a 24-hour service schedule. They handle welfare and safety matters with regards to international students, and can be reached via telephone, social media and/or other means of communication.

2.3. Emergency hotline 24/7

The HEI has a dedicated staff member or team reachable 24 hours per day in case of emergency situations involving international students. In such cases, welfare and security staff are within reach in 20 minutes.

2.4. Educational visa

International students need to obtain the required educational visa before departing for study in another country. The HEI provides assistance, support, and necessary official documents to international students for the process of visa application or extension, and for managing other immigration procedures required by the national law.

2.5. Health and accident insurance

The HEI provides international students with a basic accident insurance. International students are responsible for contracting and maintaining their health and accident insurance coverage throughout the period of their studies. In addition, the HEI provides information and support to international students for obtaining a new coverage or for extending their existing medical insurance.

2.6. Rights and obligations of the international students

All rights and obligations pertaining to local students also apply to international students. International students must follow all the academic regulations (e.g. cheating, plagiarism and/or copyright etc.). The HEI ensures that international students are appropriately informed about all academic and non-academic rules and regulations applying at the institution.



3. International Student Care and Support

3.1. Academic support

Pre-arrival guidance

The HEI offers an English-language online guidebook, handbook, specific website or an English-language centre, which includes useful information about preparing for studying abroad and what to expect when on-site, including academic requirements and support. International students are provided with e-counselling or physical counselling prior to arrival, to inform them about their academic programme, department specializations, and other important details to be taken care of in advance.

Orientation programme

The HEI provides an orientation programme (e.g. Orientation Week) to introduce international students to the institution's academic services (e.g. library, information technology, academic and student services departments) and social and recreational activities; to facilitate initial academic advice; to inform international students about the institution's rules and regulations; and highlight the academic requirements for each level or plan of study. The orientation may include tours of the campus and facilities, visits to the local area, and so on. HEIs may advise the new international students to arrive a few days earlier in order to participate in the orientation programme before their classes start.

Academic mentors/ advisors

The HEI ensures that there is an academic advisor or a designated staff member accessible to students on a daily basis, who can assist and advise international students in matters related to their studies. The institution may also create an advisory committee where faculty can consult and share issues with the international office in order to provide guidance and support to international students. The academic mentors/ advisors also monitor international students' academic performance, their GPA and attendance, both to ensure that international students maintain satisfactory course progress and to provide support in a timely manner if necessary.

Language support

A large number of international students are non-native English speakers and although they submit evidence of English language proficiency for admission purposes, many of them struggle with their studies in English and have difficulties in passing the English Exit Exam, which is required in many HEIs. This greatly affects both their academic and social adjustment. Therefore, the HEI provides academic English support, either in the form of self-study online language software or as specialized English language courses or tutoring sessions, including intensive test-focused classes. Local students with good English skills or student clubs may also help international students increase their English skills or advance in any other academic subject they may encounter difficulties. In addition, the HEI provides basic national language classes to international students in order for them to be able to "survive" outside the classroom or campus.

Recognition of credits

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The HEI supports the transfer of credits for exchange students via established credits systems such as ACTS or ECTS.

3.2. Health Care, including Mental Health and Counselling

Health and accident insurance

International students are required to maintain health and accident insurance coverage for the duration of their studies. However, the HEI may provide a basic accident insurance to international students included in the tuition fee, if such is due. The HEI also provides information on the available reasonable-price health insurances for international students, as institution's partner insurance companies may offer.

On-campus health facilities

Whenever possible, the HEI includes an on-campus hospital or clinic ready to offer medical assistance to international students. English-speaking certified nurses or medical doctors are on duty. Ideally, an ambulance should be available 24/7 to operate in case of emergency. The institution or the on-campus medical facility may also contain a pharmacy, dental clinic and department of mental health or counselling unit.

Guidance and counselling

The HEI has welfare officers or professional counsellors ready to help and advise the international students encountering difficulties. The designated department within the institution takes supportive action and facilitates the psychological care. They may also offer webinars on mental health and well-being on a regular basis. The institution comprises a system to identify at-risk students, such as communication between the faculty and the International Relations Office, or a buddy system to inform privately about potential cases during regular meetings or once there is a special case. Institutions may create class chat groups who can take care or give moral support to a sick or hospitalized student. Faculty may also observe the international students in class and give recommendations to the office involved in counselling if needed. They can look for signs like frequently missing class. Furthermore, particular needs may arise from events happening in the home or host country of the international student, and support must be available during difficult times and throughout special circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. International students need to be duly informed and supported during challenging situations when education is disrupted and travel restrictions come into force. The online support for education and guidance or counselling for international students is available when necessary.

3.3 Cultural and Social Integration

Buddy system

The HEI arranges student ambassadors and/or buddy programmes to assist international students. Local students can offer hospitality, arrange campus tours and organize visits around the city for the international students but also help with practical issues like opening a bank account. International students may meet their buddies during an orientation or even before they arrive at the institution via online communication. Buddies present the local



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cultures to their foreign friends and help them with the smooth adjustment to the new environment.

Orientation and welcoming events

During the orientation programme, local cultures are presented and international students are introduced to the social aspects of the institution besides its academic side. The orientation also introduces students to the rules and policies that can help them stay safe. A variety of events are held to orient and welcome the new students. A freshmen party or social event is arranged in order for the new international students to meet with their seniors and get acquainted with their new classmates.

Joint activities - local and international students

The HEI integrates international students in all extracurricular activities for local students, like camps, seminars, volunteer activities. International students are invited to join various student clubs and societies available at the HEI, such as International Students Association, sport clubs, and volunteer unions. International students have also the opportunity to be involved, together with the local students, in co-curricular activities with some credits to connect and engage in the local communities doing social responsibility projects and community services. Their involvement in community activities also supports their cultural immersion.

Connect with institution staff

It is important to connect the international students with the related staff and offices, like international relations, student affairs division or other units related to their stay at the institution. In this way, the international students will know who they can contact in case of social integration difficulties during their studies. International students may also get the opportunity to work as interns at institution's offices, like international relations, library, or computer labs.

Cultural activities

The HEI regularly arranges cultural activities and events for international students to mingle with the local students and share their own culture. The cross-cultural activities may be international days or festivals and can integrate cooking, singing and dancing. The multicultural events also encourage diversity on campus and offer the opportunity for international students to share their own traditions. The institution also involves international students in the national traditional festivals and other religious festivals. Some of the cultural activities arranged by the HEI to celebrate the cultural diversity on campus may be: Erasmus Day, International Day, Multicultural Night, Independence days (of other countries), Chinese New Year, International Students Evening, International Food Festival, Valentine's Day, Yoga Day, Cooking Fests and Competitions, etc. Moreover, the diversity of cultures on campus may be also displayed during an International Sports Day or Competition, which gathers local and international students to compete in traditional and regular sports. The activity can be conducted as cooperation between various student clubs at the HEI and may also include animated traditional games.

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3.4 Campus Life, including Facilities and Accommodation

The HEI aims to support international students on campus enjoy the best student living experience by providing quality facilities, as well as comfortable accommodations, to help them get the best out of campus life. Reliable on-campus management and maintenance services should also be available. Besides the good quality of teaching and learning facilities, the HEI must ensure that international students can easily access medical and dental facilities, food courts and sport complex etc. The following facilities to support students' life on campus may be available:

- FRIENDS Teahouse
- full medical and dental facilities: hospital, clinic, dental clinic
- on-campus accommodation/ residence/ dormitories (online reservation system)
- canteens/ food courts/ restaurants (reasonable prices and food for all religions)
- fully-equipped sport complex (including swimming pool, fitness center)
- prayer rooms for Muslims/multi-faith rooms
- libraries offering online books and academic journals
- English speaking zones/ other foreign language speaking zones
- banks and post office
- student clubs and societies
- free campus-wide Wi-Fi
- free campus bus service
- campus stores and book shops
- childcare services (nurseries)
- laundry services
- cultural center

Further on-campus support may be offered by the International Relations Office, Student Affairs Office, Graduate School and international relations staff at each faculty or college. Finally, the on-campus accommodation for international students should have designated wardens or supervisors able to speak English. Ideally, the campus compound should be under security surveillance and have regular security patrols around the campus and accommodation blocks.

3.5 Services, including Visa, Immigration Issues, and Information Support

Pre-arrival support

Once an international student's application has been successful, the HEI related department or office informs him/her about the necessary immigration procedures, such as study visa and other arrangements to be taken care of before his/her departure. The HEI staff also sends the link for the online English guidebook or handbook containing useful information about preparing for studying abroad and what to expect when on-site, including accommodation, medical insurance, visa requirements, budgeting for living expenses, advice on what to bring with you, information about university and how things work here, common cultural expressions in local language, online resources, administrative departments and

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campus facilities etc. This online publication is a valuable guidance for international students, detailing on useful information both academically and socially at the HEI and in the host country.

It is important to communicate with the incoming international students days or even weeks before they take a flight to the host HEI. The e-counselling or online meetings (e.g. Skype, Zoom) with them can facilitate the communication process and ensure good pre-departure arrangements, including securing accommodation. The related office or staff provides the new international students with necessary documents for processing the appropriate visa in their own country before coming to study at the HEI.

On-arrival reception

The related department or office at the HEI or the faculty arranges airport pick-up service for the incoming international students. They also assist the students to check-in at their accommodation. If the local student buddy was already assigned, he/she can also accompany the staff to the airport for the pick-up service. Some institutions may assign only the buddy to pick-up the incoming student at the airport (transport provided by the HEI). Ideally, upon arrival the incoming international students are provided with an “orientation package” comprising a small guidebook with basic information, campus and city maps, telephone numbers and survival expressions in the local language.

On-campus assistance

The HEI has a designated department or office to support the international students during their studies (e.g. International Relation Office, Student Affairs Unit and One-Stop Service). One of the major assistance offered to international students is that related to the Bureau of Immigration. Therefore, a staff member or a visa unit is assigned to offer guidance and assistance to international students for visa and other immigration matters. During Orientation, Immigration Officers/ Border Guard may be invited to speak on the immigration procedures and to answer to eventual questions from international students. The HEI may arrange regular visits by immigration officers to offer services on campus for the institution’s international students and staff.

The designated office also coordinates with other concerned units (e.g. student welfare services and registrar’s department) in order to help international students take care of various matters related to their studies and stay at the host HEI. They also assist the new international students connect with student clubs and societies, especially with the International Students Association.

Successfully helping international students to settle at the host HEI also involves assisting them to set up a bank account, ensure that they hold appropriate health insurance, communicate with their local consulate /embassy etc. Additional on-campus support may consist of:

- signs around the campus in English language

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- projects offering opportunities for international students to go abroad (e.g. via institutional network)
- involvement in the FRIENDS Teahouse and the international centers at the HEI (e.g., ASEAN Center, American Corner, India Corner etc.)

Information support

The first channel for conveying information towards the international community is an institutional English language website. In addition, each faculty or college may provide an English version of their website containing essential academic information for international students. The HEI also insures dedicated communication channels for its international students, such as group emailing lists, Facebook or line groups, all being provided in English language. Multilingual communication channels are a great plus for the HEI. These channels are used to inform international students on various academic and social matters, including upcoming activities and events. One of the most important information supports for international students concerns the guidance for immigration procedures. Therefore, the related staff or unit must keep international students regularly informed on new immigration rules and other related announcements.

Assistance before leaving the HEI

The staff or offices designated to assist international students will help them to make the necessary arrangements and prepare related documents, and to manage any pending local matters, before their departure from the host country after graduation. The HEI must ensure that the international students join the specific alumni communication channel in order to continue keeping in touch with the institution.

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4. Conclusions

This integrated model for international student care and support aims to point out how HEIs can adapt to successfully support international students at their institution and create a welcoming, friendly and supportive educational and living environment. The key points brought into discussion in this paper concern the policies and regulations related to international student care and support at the HEI, and the specific matters, which must be considered in order to offer quality care and support to international students, such as academic support, health care (including mental health and counselling), cultural and social integration, campus life (including facilities and accommodation), as well as services (including visa, immigration issues, and information support).

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