

The Buddy Programme: Integration and Social Support for International Students

Per A. Nilsson

International Office / Department of Geography, Umeå University, Sweden

Email: per.a.nilsson@umu.se

Address: Umeå University, SE-901 87 Umeå, Sweden

Introduction

The integration of international students is essential for the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEI). Issues of both personal and social adjustment are included in the process. For example, the U-curve (e.g. Klineberg and Hull 1979; Lysgaard 1955; Torbiorn 1982), which expresses different phases during a stay abroad such as ‘honeymoon’, ‘culture shock’, ‘adjustment’ and ‘mastery’, is one way of describing the challenges international students face abroad, mainly focusing on the individual level and life within academia. Some authors focus on the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Furnham and Bochner 1982), while other scholars have recognized the importance of social relationships as one dimension of social capital and especially how this relates to international students’ academic performance (Neri and Ville 2008). The well-being of international students has been a concern among researchers for decades (cf. Rienties and Tempelaar 2013; Rode, Arthaud-Day, Mooney, Nera, Baldwin, Bommer and Rubin 2005; Szabo, Ward and Fletcher 2016). After all, transitioning from one’s home country to a university abroad is a significant life event, and students studying abroad may undergo a cultural and psychological adjustment to a new country (e.g. Brown 2009; Leask 2009; Szabo et al. 2016). However, recent research has also shown that social life outside academic studies has a strong influence on academic integration (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet and Kommers 2012; Van Mol and Michielsen 2015). As such, many types of support (e.g. language proficiency or social and cultural events outside academia) can be offered to international students to help them integrate with the surrounding society. Such support does not necessarily need to be limited to the HEIs themselves: many stakeholders are involved in the integration process, and some have argued that student integration is not only a university issue but also a community one (Marangell, Arkoudis and Baik 2018). One example of an intermediary organization in Europe that invests in international students’ well-being in order to assist them in adapting during their sojourn abroad is the Erasmus Student Network (ESN). The ESN is aimed at improving international students’ social lives during their time abroad, through the concept of ‘students helping students’ (Erasmus Student Network 2018). Participation in social activities can help address problems international students face; and, most importantly, successful social integration during their time abroad will hopefully translate into better academic performance and a comprehensive personal experience. After all, whereas a study by Rientis and Tempelaar (2013) showed that social adjustment is the primary predictor for academic success, another study (Neri and Ville 2008) shows that, for international students, social capital is not associated with improved academic performance but rather with increased well-being.

In order to work proactively with the international student community in the interest of improving the well-being of international students, different types of peer/buddy/mentor programmes are offered at many HEIs. A buddy programme by nature addresses social support, aiming at encouraging networks and friends. Brown (2009) showed that the adjustment process of a group of international students in the United Kingdom empowered them to reduce stress and offset loneliness through the development of social relationships. The international students appreciated the friendship and bicultural bonds with domestic students, stimulating them to partake in cultural and linguistic learning

(Brown 2009). Matching international students with domestic students has proven to be successful in integrating students and changing the culture on campus (Leask 2009). However, if HEIs are to increase the value of diversity on campus, there is a need for a systematic and integrated approach at the HEI itself (Leask 2009). Previous research shows that peer-support programmes can help students adjust to a new culture and to new international surroundings (Campbell 2012; Lassegard 2008). However, the lasting effects of peer programmes can be best maximized when students first arrive in a new country (Campbell 2012). Hendrickson (2018) concludes that establishing student contact with local intercultural connectors enhances the potential to connect with domestic students.

In this paper, I describe an example of a buddy programme (BP) specifically designed to integrate international students within the local student community. Such an endeavour is important in order to inform other educators/practitioners and programme managers around the globe about what works, and why it works. I thereby specifically focus on how the programme is perceived by incoming international students, to examine whether it works as a tool for integration.

The Buddy Programme (BP)

Every year Umeå University welcomes a large number of international students from around the world, and when these students arrive they generally have questions and concerns. For example, they can encounter a number of practical issues, and it is important that they feel welcome and receive help and support. Most students have a desire to experience Swedish culture and the society outside the university campus, and to meet Swedish families. The BP, having developed over time after receiving feedback from previous international students, can help facilitate such needs.

When the programme started in 1999 little more than a hundred students participated, while today it accommodates more than 1,000 students each year. When it started it was exclusive to exchange students, but it has been widened to include all international students coming to Umeå University, including exchange students, fee-paying students (outside the EU/EEA), and students with EU citizenship. International students come from all over the world, meaning not only that they have different cultural backgrounds but also that they arrive with different expectations; this also needs to be reflected in activities within the programme, for example activities without alcohol. This cultural variation thus places great demands on the choice of activities to be organized.

A student coordinator, responsible for the programme's management and administration, is recruited among the domestic students with the requirement that they have international experience as well as previous experience of the BP. The coordinator receives a one-year employment contract from the International Office, enabling him or her to work full-time for one academic year. After this, a new student is recruited for the position. The experience has been that the programme is best managed by an energetic person of the same age as the international students, with support from senior staff at the International Office.

The programme has 16-18 buddy groups, with a group containing approximately 30 international students and six to eight domestic students. The BP consists of two parts: the individual programmes in each group, and a common part in which activities for all students are arranged by the student coordinator. The student coordinator manages the operation of the larger joint activities, while the operations within each buddy group are managed by its group leader. The student coordinator provides tips and recommendations to the groups for activities, based on observations of which activities have worked well in previous years and those that may be useful for the purpose of the programme. Examples of activities include berry picking, celebrating "cinnamon bun day" by baking, a Swedish dinner, an international dinner, excursions, and "fika" (coffee breaks, of great importance to Swedes). Buddy groups are responsible for their own costs in connection with their activities. Since some activities are very popular, equipment has been purchased centrally, and can be borrowed by the groups when necessary. The programme is divided into an

autumn and a spring term. As new students arrive each semester, the vast majority of those who are exchange students will be studying for one semester. Therefore, there are new group constellations every semester. It should be noted that students who stay longer tend to not be as much in need of social support during their second semester. The new students who arrive during the spring semester will feel just as welcome as their predecessors. The programme strives for equivalence in activities and opportunities between the two semesters.

Prior to the beginning of each semester, group leaders and domestic students participating in the programme receive training. This training is vital for ensuring that all group leaders and Swedish students are acquainted with the programme's purpose, expectations, and needs.

The common part of the programme is shared with all enrolled students. These activities should be seen as a complement to the buddy groups, as some activities are more suitable for larger groups and some require too much planning to be organized by an individual buddy group. This also offers an opportunity to get to know more students outside one's own group. Additionally, these activities are important for ensuring the programme's quality, as the quality of the individual buddy groups may vary slightly.

Method and data

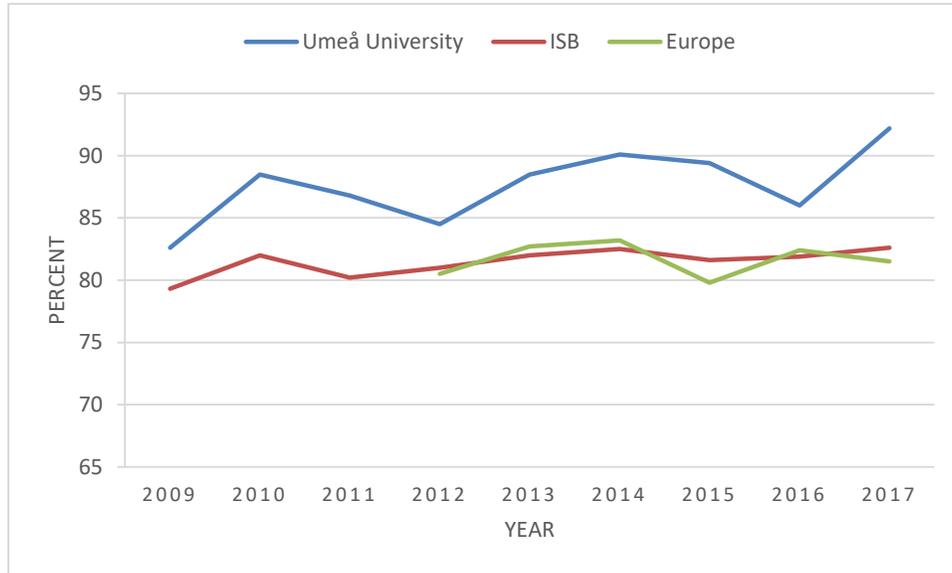
Since 2009 international students have been systematically monitored at Umeå University through the International Student Barometer (ISB), collected through the International Insight Group (i-graduate). From 2009 to today, between 120 and 208 Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in approximately twenty countries, about half of them European countries, have participated in the survey each year, with approximately 150,000 students responding annually. The overall average response rate is about 30%, while for Umeå University the response rate has been closer to 40%. The survey is directed at international students at the participating HEIs. All international students are asked to complete a survey in November. Umeå University purchased the survey for the period 2009-2017.

The survey was conducted in English and covered topics such as application, arrival, learning, and living support. For this article, three survey questions were considered relevant: 'institution clubs/societies', 'making friends from this country', and 'the social activities (organized events)'. For this study the author received aggregate data from the Umeå survey, as well as the benchmarking scores of the whole survey (ISB) and for Europe specifically. Importantly, one of the major limitations of this study is that no micro-level data were available, limiting the results to a descriptive analysis of international students' integration at Umeå University. Nevertheless, such descriptive data is also very informative, as it provides information on international students' integration over a timespan of eight years. As such, the presented descriptive results are relevant for advancing our understanding of how students perceive the Buddy Programme and the added value of such programmes.

Results

Organized events such as social activities have been a cornerstone of the BP, and when Umeå University participated in the ISB survey for the first time the programme had been running for ten years. As can be observed in figure 1, the international students at Umeå University showed good satisfaction with the social activities offered. Benchmarked with the total ISB and Europe, international students at Umeå University were very satisfied during the surveyed period and top-ranked (places 2-7) in six of the nine surveys. Figure 1 also indicates a progression in satisfaction among students at Umeå University, interpreted as a steady course forward in regard to being able to adjust the BP's content and improve its quality.

Figure 1. Students' self-reported satisfaction with organized social events (%)

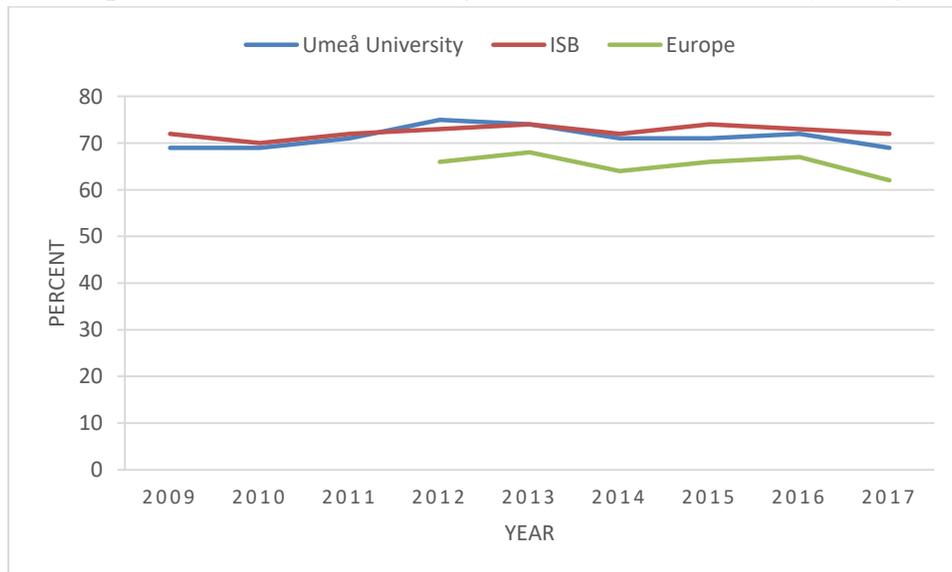


Source: i-graduate.

Notes: For the 2010 and 2011 surveys, Europe was not benchmarked. Levels of satisfaction were rated on a six-grade ordinal scale (from 1 = very dissatisfied to 6 = very satisfied), with higher scores indicating higher levels of life satisfaction, and the scale was dichotomized into either satisfied (5–6) or dissatisfied (1–4).

Making friends from the country where one is studying is an indicator of how well an international student is integrated with the student community and society (Brown 2009; Campbell 2012; Hendrickson 2018; William and Johnson 2010). This has been one of the purposes of the BP at Umeå University. However, with regard to making friends from the host country Figure 2 show a stable pattern, but overall the students are quite satisfied. Learning from other cultures and making friends from the host country are perceived as positive among international students (Brown 2009; Campbell 2012; Hendrickson 2018; William and Johnson 2010). Umeå University fared slightly better compared to the scores from HEIs in Europe, and about equally when benchmarked with the total ISB.

Figure 2. Students' self-reported satisfaction with making friends from the host country during the period abroad (%)

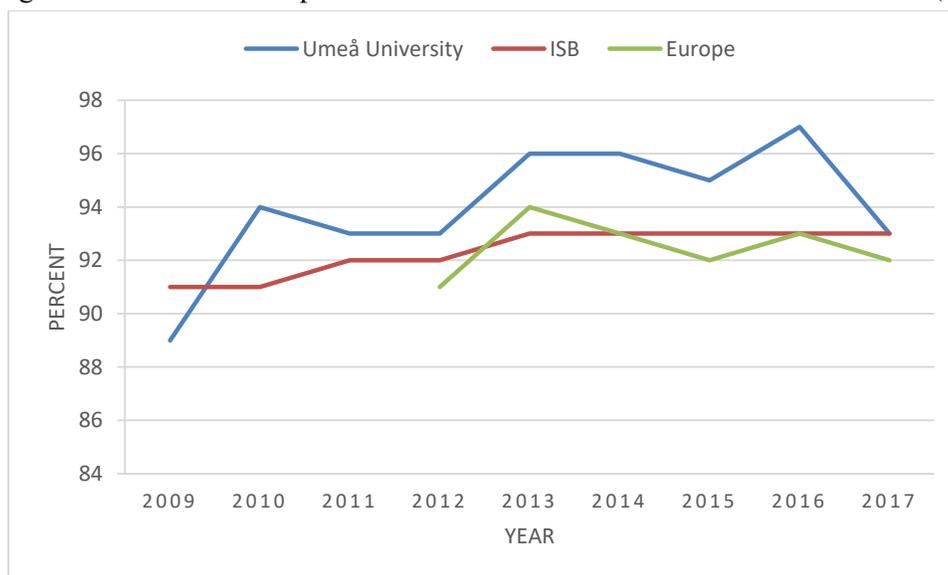


Source: i-graduate.

Notes: For the 2010 and 2011 surveys, Europe was not benchmarked. Levels of satisfaction were rated on a six-grade ordinal scale (from 1 = very dissatisfied to 6 = very satisfied), with higher scores indicating higher levels of life satisfaction, and the scale was dichotomized into either satisfied (5–6) or dissatisfied (1–4).

Belongingness is an important construct for academic success (Hausmann, Schofield and Woods 2007), and institution clubs and societies are expressions of such needs. International students want to interact with peers and to have the chance to connect with Swedes and make new friends from the host country during their stay abroad. This often serves to inspire them to get involved in the business of clubs and societies, and motivates them during their studies abroad. Figure 3 shows that international students overall are satisfied with what they get out of activities through clubs and societies at Umeå University, and the impression is that this is an appreciated part of the experience of studying abroad. Over the surveyed period, with the exception of 2009, Umeå University students are more satisfied compared to the total ISB and Europe. One important explanation for this might be the BP, as the programme has served as a door-opener to the student community.

Figure 3. Students' self-reported satisfaction with institution clubs and societies (%)



Source: i-graduate.

Notes: For the 2010 and 2011 surveys, Europe was not benchmarked. Levels of satisfaction were rated on a six-grade ordinal scale (from 1 = very dissatisfied to 6 = very satisfied), with higher scores indicating higher levels of life satisfaction, and the scale was dichotomized into either satisfied (5–6) or dissatisfied (1–4).

Finally, the ISB survey also contains a section for open comments. This is an opportunity for students to provide more specific information about their experiences at Umeå University. As Table 1 shows, the qualitative data suggest that students mainly touch upon issues such as cultural awareness, cultural adaptability, and cross-cultural communication skills. However, personal outcomes such as maturity and increased confidence have also been a major learning experience for these students.

Table 1. Selected open comments in the ISB survey

	Feedback from students
Nationality not	"I have to say that the social [programmes] [at] Umeå university, such as the BP, amazing! It gives

<i>known, 2016</i>	the chance to know not only Swedish culture, but other cultures as well.”
<i>Student from Rumania, 2016</i>	“the BP is one of the best way[s] to feel integrated in the social life of Umeå and to make friends from other countries and Sweden.”
<i>Student from Germany, 2015</i>	“As [an] exchange student you maybe want to experience typical Swedish life. This is well organized by the international office and through the buddy programme but nevertheless there is not really an integration with the Swedish students.”
<i>Student from Ireland, 2013</i>	“the BP and general banter with the international students and those Swedish students who are involved in that banter is just fantastic.”
<i>Student from China, 2016</i>	“In here I will find a fantastic buddy group. It is very useful when you study abroad or want to have more friends and know the culture.”
<i>Student from Finland, 2016</i>	“Umeå University has helped me to learn about Swedish culture as well as to meet new people through the BP.”
<i>Student from Turkey, 2016</i>	“I think the BP is working quite well, alongside the other events made for the international students which helped us get together and meet other people in quite an ‘easy-going’ environment.”
<i>Nationality not known, 2016</i>	“The university has provided some great opportunities for making new friends and social connections through the BP and having the opportunity to meet an array of people from literally everywhere around the world has been amazing.”
<i>Nationality not known, 2012</i>	“The buddy groups have been a great opportunity [though] I didn’t have time to use it so much.”
<i>Student from Germany, 2012</i>	“The BP is an excellent idea and I don’t think that there are many other universities where there are so many people caring for international students!”
<i>Nationality not known, 2012</i>	“The BP has helped me to make many friends and join in numerous social events.”
<i>Nationality not known, 2013</i>	“All the activities and means to make friends from Sweden or other countries are [offered to] undergraduate students. The BP is an example, as all of the members of the buddy group are students in their late teens or very early 20s. As a [Master’s] student, my social interests are not fulfilled when meeting only undergrad students, because they will unfortunately not be contacts for the nearest future. It would be better if the social programmes [had] extra activities dedicated only to [Master’s] students.”

Source: i-graduate.

Discussion

As students leave to study abroad, they have certain expectations in terms of academic and personal exploration, and it is an anticipated transition. Personal and student characteristics affect how an individual views life during a sojourn abroad. An important expectation seems to involve connecting with peers from other countries and learning more about another culture (Nilsson 2015). Students have their individual strategies for obtaining such objectives. At Umeå University, the BP plays an important role in enhancing such contacts and learning. When they sign up for the BP, students get access to social support, intimate relationships, and networks of friends.

As the findings showed, a well-organized BP can provide international students with a great deal of social activities that they are happy with. However, there is also a flipside to this. With a well-developed BP, some international students tend to stay with the programme and thereby miss opportunities to mix with national students outside the BP. The results of our study indicate that Umeå University has been more successful with social activities than with opening the doors to integrating with national students. However, addressing the students’ well-being in

relation to making friends from the host country has proven to be difficult for most HEIs as the ISB scores shows for when international students are surveyed.

An awareness of the international students' well-being is a great asset of the BP. The buddy groups serve an important function, in the sense that they represent a very large part of the international student population. For the future, it seems pertinent for the HEI to collaborate with the surrounding society to increase students' well-being and help international students integrate and contribute to society. However, it should be stressed that the mission of HEIs is to address measures that can enhance academic adjustment and outcomes, for instance focusing on the retention and academic achievements of international students during their sojourn abroad.

Another challenge is to maintain good quality within the programme as the number of international students is on the rise, especially since the programme is aimed at including all international students who want to participate. Setting a ceiling for the number of participants in the BP is not an option; a BP that excludes students will result in students feeling left out instead of included. The long-term quality of the programme is dependent on a systematic approach, addressing feedback from group leaders and students. This has also been recognized by Betty Leaks (2009).

Finally, it is important to recognize that those who have taken a positive view of international student mobility and connectivity with different student groups on campus in order to build up increased global understanding are now challenged by those who feel that what they see as eroding national cultural identities are leading to cultural homogenization (Knight 2012). This will make it even more important to increase efforts on campus to include students from different countries. This will of course be a major challenge for the BP in integrating international students with students from the host country.

References

- Brown, Lorraine. 2009. "A failure of communication on the cross-cultural campus". *Journal of studies in international education*. 13(4): 439-454, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309331913>.
- Campbell, Nittaya. 2012. "Promoting intercultural contact on campus: a project to connect and engage international and host students". *Journal of studies in international education*. 16(3): 205-227, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311403936>.
- Erasmus Student Network. 2018. Retrieved from: <https://esn.org/history>
- Furnham, Adrian. & Bochner, Stephen. 1982. "Social difficulty in a foreign culture: an empirical analysis of culture shock". In S. Bochner (Ed.), *Cultures in Contact: Studies in Cross-Cultural Interaction*. 1: 161-198. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Hausmann, Leslie R. M., Schofield, Janet W., and Woods, Rochelle L. 2007. "Sense of belonging as a predictor of intentions to persist among African and White first-year college students". *Research in Higher Education* 48 (7): 803-839, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-007-9052-9>.
- Hendrickson, Blake. 2018. "Intercultural connectors: Explaining the influence of extra-curricular activities and tutor programs on international student friendship network development". *International journal of intercultural relations*. 63: 1-6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2017.11.002>.
- i-graduate. 2009-2017. "International Student Barometer. Umeå University results when participating in the survey". Umeå Sweden.
- Klineberg, Otto, and Hull, Frank, W. 1979. "At a foreign university: An international study of adaptation and coping". New York: Praeger.
- Knight, Janet. 2012. "Student mobility and internationalization: trends and tribulations". *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 7(1), 20-33, <https://doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2012.7.1.20>.

- Lassegard, James P. 2008. "The effects of peer tutoring between domestic and international students: the tutor system at Japanese universities". *Higher education research and development*. 27(4): 357-369, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360802406825>.
- Leask, Betty. 2009. "Using formal and informal curricula to improve interactions between home and international students". *Journal of studies in international education*. 13(2): 205-221, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315308329786>.
- Lysgaard, Sverre. 1955. "Adjustment in a foreign society: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States". *International Social Science Bulletin* 7: 45-51.
- Marangell, Samantha., Arkoudis, Sophie, and Baik, Chi. 2018. "Developing a Host Culture for International Students: What Does It Take?" *Journal of International Students* 8 (3): 1440-1458, doi: 10.5281/zenodo.1254607.
- Neri, Frank, V., and Ville, Simon. 2008. "Social capital renewal and the academic performance of international students in Australia". *The Journal of Socio-Economics*. 37: 1515-1538. doi:10.1016/j.socec.2007.03.010
- Nilsson, Per, A. 2015. "Expectations and experiences of inbound students: Perspectives from Sweden". *Journal of International Students* 5 (2): 161-174. ISSN: 2162-3104 Print/ ISSN: 2166-3750 Online.
- Torbiorn, Ingemar. 1982. *Living abroad*. New York: Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.5060240304>.
- Rienties, Bart, Beausaert, Simon, Grohnert, Therese, Niemantsverdriet, Susan, and Kommers, Piet. 2012. "Understanding academic performance of international students: the role of ethnicity, academic and social integration". *Higher Education* 63:685-700. Doi 10.1007/s10734-011-9468-1.
- Rienties, Bart, and Tempelaar, Dirk. 2013. "The role of Cultural Dimensions of International and Dutch Students on Academic and Social Integration and Academic Performance in the Netherlands". *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 37: 188-201. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2012.11.004>.
- Rode, Joseph C. Arthaud-Day, Marne L., Mooney, Christine H., Near, Janet P., Baldwin, Timothy T., Bommer, William H., and Rubin, Robert S. 2005. "Life satisfaction and Student Performance." *Academy of Management Journal of Learning and Education* 4(4):421-433, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40214344>.
- Szabo, Agnes, Ward, Colleen, and Fletcher, Garth, J.O. 2016. "Identity processing styles during cultural transition: Construct and measurement". *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*. 47: 483-507, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022116631825>.
- Van Mol, Christof, and Michielsen, Juris. 2015. "The Reconstruction of a Social Network Abroad. An Analysis of the Interaction Patterns of Erasmus Students". *Mobilities* 10(3): 423-444. doi:10.1080/17450101.2013.874837.
- Williams, Christina, T., and Johnson, Laura, R. 2011. "Why can't we be friends. Multicultural attitudes and friendships with international students". *International Journal Relations* 35(1): 41-48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2010.11.001>.