

INTERNATIONAL BUDDY EXCHANGE Experience Report

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My journey in the International Buddy Exchange program started before the Winter Semester 2021, when I was an exchange student at the University of Siegen. Having the local Buddy as an international new student in Germany has been a very helpful experience for me, after what I decided to share my knowledge, my experience and offer my support for the new incoming exchanges students also interested in the Buddy Program. Initially, I expected many activities together with my own, as well as other buddies, many trips and interesting projects. I expected to gain new friends and interact with many interesting people. My expectations also involved being as helpful and supportive to my Buddies as possible. I would say, after my experience as an Erasmus student and as an incoming Buddy, I felt prepared to be a local buddy in winter 2021. As a result, my expectations were met. Regardless the pandemic, I was able to meet many interesting students from various backgrounds and cultures. Especially my Buddies, Chrysa Elpida and Maria from Greece, their friends from France, from Italy, Turkey, Azerbaijan etc.

I was glad to discover that my Buddies also study International Relations, like me in their home University. Other than that, Mediterranean and Caucasian cultures have many similarities due to the common historical and geographical aspects. Thereafter, it was quite easy to understand each other, no complications occurred in interpersonal communication. I was positively surprised by the openness and kindness of my two Buddies, which have been always positive, smiling and welcoming as I was. I learned that both Maria and Elpida are two young, strong, determined, and hardworking women just like me, which makes me happy and at ease in interaction. First times we interacted it involved mostly responsibilities, questions, tips about how to live in Siegen, Germany. Over the time, I got to know them better and I learned that Elpida was actually writing a report at her home university about Georgia, my country of origin. I volunteered to help her with report, as a result we shared many interesting ideas, talks and messages.

I find particularly interesting and positive, the occasions when I randomly met my two buddies on international student gatherings or parties. This has created extra warm and open environment for casual talks and interaction, which led us to discovering more common things about each other.

Participating in Erasmus exchange, Local Mentoring and Buddy programs has promoted my intercultural competences highly. I was able to meet and get to know foreign students from different lands, cultural and personal experiences, which has played part in broadening my horizon and perspectives about the world and life, more globally. My buddy Maria, for example, is a polyglot, regardless her young age, she has already travelled several European countries, learned over 4 languages and plans to come back to Germany or move to France after her Bachelor graduation. She is self-aware and strong-minded

which I find a common trait of both of us. Chrysa Elpida, my second buddy, is a close friend of Maria, they together travel and handle themselves independently in different lands, places, situations. Maria is a diligent student of International Relations at her home university in Greece. Hard-working and clear-aimed, she is very much study and self-development oriented, with goals connected to her future professional growth and success. I find those traits respect worthy and admirable.

As the Buddy program begun, I offered girls to meet them upon their arrival in Germany. However, due to the short notice, and my vaccination date at the same day, I was not able to meet them upon arrival. Nonetheless, we have created common WhatsApp group for three of us where we have been in contact ever since. Our main language of communication was English, though we share some other common languages, like German. In future I hope to be able to speak French, like my buddies. During the semester Maria and Elpida have always felt welcome to write to me in case of any questions, call or simply come by for any situations for support, although I respected their independent integration and supported in times of need. This mostly involved questions and the tips that I would give. Over the semester term not once did problem or misunderstandings occur.

After all, I think that having exchange possibilities like Buddy program at the University are very important for the international students. Many students face difficulty integrating in culture, learning language, finding the way around campus and various online platforms for studying. Offering support from the local students is the best solution, as well as a great friendship possibility. Moreover, Intercultural exchange enhances the international competences of young people all around the world and contributes to open-mindedness and less discrimination. As a result, I would always recommend a Buddy Program to the incoming, as well as local students at the universities. And I am ready to continue participation in such programs in the future.