



## THE BUDDY PROJECT

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### Abstract

*A project was started in autumn 2008, between first-year, international, mechanical engineering students and Finnish, adult, evening mechanical and information technology engineering students to facilitate the integration of international students in Finnish life. The aims of the project were the following:*

- *integration and familiarisation of local community for international students*
- *introduction to Finnish companies*
- *reduction of prejudices and stereotypes in Finnish workplaces*
- *possibility of Finnish language acquisition*
- *improvement of English communication skills*
- *multi-faceted communication in English (SMS, face-to-face, phone, email)*
- *multinational communication experience for Finns*

*The Finnish students were employed, which was seen as something that could be extremely beneficial for introducing the international students to the Finnish workplace and for Finnish workplaces to experience international students.*

*Both groups had tasks to perform during the project. Focus was placed on communication and organisation of meetings, etc. Every adult student was expected to conduct a tour of their workplace (if possible) and to conduct a simulated job interview with the international student as the job applicant. Both groups had to write a final report of the interview and experiences of the project.*

*Despite some minor problems, the overall experience was positive. Some concrete results were obtained: friendships, possible summer workplaces and continued contact after the project. The aims of the project were met according to feedback received from the international students. Based upon these experiences, the project is being redeveloped this autumn (2009).*

## 1. Introduction

Finnish society has a high number of people either retired or nearing retirement. Over the next 15 years this will reach a peak, which means that there will be a shortage of workers. The Finnish government started an initiative to encourage international students to study in this country with the aim of them staying and joining the workforce. To accomplish this many international degree programmes were initiated in universities of applied sciences (UASs). However, it appears that most of the international students want to either return to their native countries or to an English-speaking country – Finland is only viewed as being a free educational gateway. This is a challenge for teachers (as it seems to be in our hands) – how to encourage international students to stay in Finland and become integrated into the community and workplaces. Hence, this project was initiated in autumn 2008 to help the international students to develop networks and to help them gain an insight into both the Finnish working world and culture. The students involved were first-year, international mechanical engineering students, who had mostly been in Finland a few weeks before the project began, and Finnish, evening mechanical and information technology engineering students. The aims of the project were the following:

- integration and familiarisation of local community for international students
- introduction to Finnish companies and working life
- reduction of prejudices and stereotypes in Finnish workplaces
- possibility of Finnish language acquisition
- improvement of English communication skills
- multi-faceted communication in English (SMS, face-to-face, phone, email, messenger)
- multinational communication experience for Finns

The Finnish students were all studying part-time and all had full-time employment. With internationalisation increasing all the time, it was thought that it would be an ideal opportunity to give the Finnish students a 'real taste' of inter-cultural communication by joining them up with an international buddy. It was also considered that the workplace could be extremely beneficial for the international students to get an early insight into the Finnish workplace and for Finnish workplaces to experience international students.

Upon further research it became apparent that the project might help with the reduction of culture shock and also help with the phases of adjustment in a foreign country. However, this was not researched in the project and will be a development possibility in the future. The term 'culture shock' was first used by Oberg [1]. He mentions that there are at least six aspects to culture shock which include:

- Stress due to the effort of making psychological changes;
- Feelings of loss in regards to friends, family, possessions;
- Experiencing rejection by new culture;
- Confusion of new role, expectations, values and self-identity;
- Feelings of helplessness in new environment;
- Anxiety over cultural differences.

Furnham [2] mentions that the process of cross-cultural adjustment is usually seen as a linear process which can include various stages as seen in Table 1.

	<b>General Attitudes &amp; Feelings</b>	<b>Significant Events and Adjustment Issues</b>	<b>Emotional Responses to Events</b>	<b>Attitudinal and Behavioural Responses to Events</b>
<b>1 month</b>	exhilaration; excitement	accommodation; school; colleagues; sights; orientation; language; transportation	sense of mission and purpose; tourist enthusiasm	curiosity about nationals; enthusiasm for classes
<b>3 months</b>	bewilderment; restlessness; impatience; disenchantment;  anger	'Life-skills'; unfamiliar sounds, smells, foods, language; Culture/learning shock	restless, uncertainty; search for familiar activities; some withdrawal  want to go home	scepticism; frustration; question values of others and self;  possible psychological and medical problems
<b>4/5 months</b>	gradual recovery	acceptable class performance	interest in new activities or cultural resignation	constructive attitudes; accommodation
<b>6 months</b>	normal	normal class performance	equilibrium	equilibrium

Table 1. Phases of adjustment (adapted from Alder [3], University of Michigan [4] and Bigelow [5])

According to Furnham [1] there has been a huge amount of general research on how social networks and social support reduce stress by providing information, emotional and moral support. However, not much research has been carried out on how social networks help international students. If some of the problems that occur are alleviated, then students may feel more favourable and become more settled into life in Finland. Also, as some of the responses and adjustments affect how students study, it would be highly beneficial for institutions to initiate social network projects to facilitate learning. Hence, in future projects this aspect will be investigated.

## 2. Initial project implementation

The project was implemented for the first time in autumn 2008 with another HAMK lecturer, Laura Ojanen, and has been developed and repeated in autumn 2009. The results in this paper are from the initial project as the 2009 project is still ongoing at the time of writing this paper. The initial project was integrated into and evaluated as part of compulsory English courses. The project involved international Mechanical and Production engineering students (N=28) and Finnish Mechanical and Production and Information Technology students (N=29). The Finnish students were all employed and were studying part-time in the evenings and weekends. The international students were from various countries including Nepal, Nigeria, Ghana, China and Vietnam. The Finnish students were mostly older than the international students.

Finnish evening students only have twenty-four contact lessons in this compulsory course, and so the time frame for the project was extremely limited. Therefore the initial meeting had to be in the very first lesson. The international students chose a Finnish buddy as they walked into the classroom and discussion started immediately. Both international and Finnish students were given basic

questionnaires for gathering information and contact details of their buddies. Tasks were given to the students to be completed before the end of the course and lecturers acted as facilitators when necessary. Finnish students were expected to:

- take the international students on a tour of their workplaces;
- conduct a simulated job interview with the international student as the applicant;
- write a report of their experiences and tasks.

International students were expected to:

- visit a workplace;
- prepare for a job interview;
- write a final report.

In addition to these tasks the students had to communicate and arrange meetings. The form of communication was up to the students; however, it was encouraged to be versatile so different communication techniques were practised – SMS, face-to-face- phone, email, messaging and chatting. The students were then left to work independently and the lecturers were only contacted via email if there were any problems.

The written tasks were evaluated in conjunction with the compulsory courses and a grade was given based on the European Framework. The students themselves also evaluated the project by answering a feedback questionnaire.

### 3. Results and feedback

The overall experience and feedback from the students was positive. The Finnish students were the only ones that wrote about problems and gave negative feedback which included:

- timetable problems and lack of time as working full-time and had family commitments on top of studies;
- secure workplaces – so no visit was possible;
- communication problems and misunderstandings ;
- the whole project took too much time;
- according to a couple of Finnish students the project should have been discussed first and then should have had the right not to participate;
- one student thought the project impinged on her private life too much.

Some concrete results were obtained which were additional to the original aims: friendships, possible summer workplaces and continued contact after the project. These comments were given as feedback by the Finnish students:

- "I found this task very interesting. And I am sure we will meet again. He invited us to come to China in the future. Maybe someday we will go."
- "It showed me that it is pretty hard to understand someone who speaks with a 'weird' accent. It was very interesting to talk to someone who comes from different culture and hear their way of living."
- "I think that it's very good idea to have these kinds of exercises as it forces us to get to know foreign students and cultures and helps us to talk English in a more informal way. Now, if we meet in the corridors or in shops in Riihimäki it's much easier to say hello and ask how he's doing."
- "I like my new friend and I think I am his "mum" here in Finland. This has been very good experience for me. Finally, I promised him if he wants to learn Finish more and quickly he has to meet my kids. Therefore, we will meet again"
- "I understand 50% and he understand 50% that means 100%"
- "Total communication time was 10 hours - great English practice with e-mail, mobile telephone and in person"
- "Visitor day to my work place is very good practice for me, because in the future I will have a lot of foreigner visitors."
- "I got some new friends, and we spoke of differences in cultures."

And a sample from the feedback from the international included:

- "I got a chance to meet a new persons. I got more information about him and the country, Finland. We have been friends since that time and we have almost contact by phones and mails. Really, I got a good friend by the buddy project."



- "The first thing I enjoyed is that I met a new Finnish friend. He was so cool and friendly that those were really memorable days. I enjoyed visiting his company. I felt so lucky when he introduced his son to me."
- "In my opinion, this kind of project helps the international students to get to know and make Finnish friends."
- "It not only helped me to open my eyes about the work of a mechanical engineer but it also gave me more thinking about my future. It gave me a lot of helpful experience."
- "I learned the true nature of a Finnish person. After this project, I learned how to speak with Finnish people."
- "This project was important for making new friends to whom one can share his feelings and can actually be helpful when we feel lonely."
- "I think this helped me to develop my Finnish language skills and English language skills. It helped me to know about society, people and nature. So, it made it easy to adopt myself in Finland."
- "We got to know Finnish people and their cultures through direct interaction with them. We also could know about the workplaces in Finland. Although I could not get chance to go to his office he helped me and tried to give all the information about his office as far as possible."
- "I enjoyed learning about my buddy and his interests. We even made plans to go sailing sometimes. Though we had difficulties we managed to communicate somehow using any means as possible. This made it even more interesting to figure out each other."

#### 4. Final discussion and future development

The aims initially set for the project were met: students used multifaceted communication tools to discuss and arrange meetings; the Finnish students gained a lot of multicultural knowledge and practice; the international students gained an insight into Finnish working life and culture and also made friends. Extra benefits were gained through the arrangement of summer jobs for two students and that some Finnish students took their buddies home and gave them an insight into Finnish 'everyday' life.

Due to the timeframe of the Finnish students' course being only twenty-four lessons in 4 hour blocks in consecutive week, the time and reflective resources needed were not available – the project had to be set underway on the first evening. With hindsight, we have now implemented the course so that the students meet in the second half of the first lesson. The project was introduced to both sets of students before buddies were introduced. A questionnaire was given to students after they had been informed of the project in which they were asked about their initial reactions to the project (this will also be repeated afterwards to obtain final thoughts and ideas). The system has also been changed so that groups have been formed with 4-5 students per group – they developed names for their groups in the first meeting and conduct communication in groups.

Moodle was used as a databank for the initial project but now Moodle 1.9.x is being used

- as an interface for the students to contact each other
- as an environment for returning tasks, and writing study diaries
- as a repository of tasks

The tasks have also been slightly changed – there is no longer a report but only a learning diary in which students write about their cross-cultural experiences in the project. It is hoped that through Moodle some of the communication problems will be minimised and the lecturers can follow and facilitate the process to a higher degree. In the future questionnaires will be sent to the Finnish students' workplaces to establish their experiences of the visit; social or psychological questions will also be included in the questionnaires given to the international students that can be linked to the phases of adjustment.



## References

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