

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.

2. Policies and Regulations at PSU

It is important to emphasize that it is the responsibility of PSU to provide international students with a safe, secure and caring environment that supports and nurtures them as they strive to achieve their best during their studies.

2.1. PSU policy

The policy at PSU 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

PSU has a special designated team, office or staff member to offer support and guide international students. The staff members are available during working hours. 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

PSU has a dedicated staff member or team reachable 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. PSU 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

PSU 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, PSU 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.). PSU 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

PSU 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 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

PSU provides an orientation programme to introduce international students to its 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 PSU's rules and regulations; and highlight the plan of study and the academic requirements for each level. The orientation may include tours of the campus and facilities, visits to the local area, and so on. PSU advises its new international students to arrive a few days earlier in order to leave themselves ample time for settling in before their classes start.

Academic mentors/ advisors

PSU 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. Additionally, 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 at PSU. This greatly affects both their academic and social adjustment. Therefore, PSU provides academic English support in the form of self-study online language software, and as specialized English language courses or tutoring sessions, including intensive test-focused classes available to the international students at request. In addition, PSU provides basic Thai language classes to international students in order for them to be able to "survive" outside the classroom or campus.

Recognition of credits

PSU 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, PSU provides a basic accident insurance to international students included in the tuition fee, if such is due. PSU also provides information on the available reasonably-priced health insurance coverage for international students that its partner insurance companies may offer.

On-campus health facilities

PSU includes on-campus hospitals and clinic ready to offer medical assistance to international students. English-speaking certified nurses or medical doctors are on duty. Ambulance services are available 24/7 to operate in case of emergency. PSU also contains pharmacies, a dental clinic, and the department of mental health.

Guidance and counselling

PSU has welfare officers or professional counsellors ready to help and advise the international students encountering difficulties. The related department takes supportive action and facilitates the psychological care. They also offer webinars on mental health and well-being. PSU operates systems to identify at-risk students, such as communication between the faculty and the International Relations Office, and a buddy system to inform privately about potential cases during regular meetings or once there is a special case. Related units 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, therefore PSU ensures that support is 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. Online support for education and guidance or counselling for international students is available when necessary.

3.3 Cultural and Social Integration

Buddy system

PSU arranges student ambassadors and/or buddy programmes to assist international students. Local students 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 PSU via online communication. Buddies present the local

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 PSU 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 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

PSU 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 PSU, 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 activities 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 PSU 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 PSU. 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 do internships at various offices, like international relations, library, or computer labs.

Cultural activities

PSU regularly arranges cultural activities and events for international students to mingle with the local students and share their own culture. The cross-cultural activities include international days or festivals and 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. PSU also involves international students in the national traditional festivals and other religious festivals. Some of the cultural activities arranged by PSU 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 PSU and may also include animated traditional games.

3.4 Campus Life, including Facilities and Accommodation

PSU 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, PSU also ensures 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 are 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 supervisors able to speak English. The campus compound is under constant security surveillance, with 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, PSU's related department or office informs them about the necessary immigration procedures, such as study visa and other arrangements to be taken care of before their departure. PSU 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 along, information about the university and how things work here, common cultural expressions in local language, online resources, administrative departments and

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

It is important to communicate with the incoming international students days or even weeks before they take a flight to PSU. 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 PSU.

On-arrival reception

The related department or office at PSU 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, they can also accompany the staff to the airport for the pick-up service. 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

PSU 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 kinds of 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, qualified staff may be invited to speak on the immigration procedures and to answer to eventual questions from international students. PSU may arrange regular visits by immigration officers to offer services on campus for PSU’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 PSU. 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 PSU 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



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



F R I E N D S



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

Information support

The first channel for conveying information towards the international community is PSU's English-language website. In addition, each faculty or college may provide an English version of their website containing essential academic information for international students. PSU also provides 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 PSU. 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 PSU

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. To do so, a one-month leniency period is provided before mandatory visa cancellation. In addition, PSU encourages its international alumni to join a specific communication channel dedicated to alumni.



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



F R I E N D S



4. Conclusions

This integrated model for international student care and support aims to point out how PSU can adapt to successfully support international students, and create a welcoming, friendly and supportive educational and living environment on all of its five campuses. The key points brought into discussion in this paper concern the policies and regulations related to international student care and support at PSU, 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).