

Empowering the exchange experience?

Studying students' learning in taking an exchange program abroad

Department: Human Geography & Spatial Planning, Research group: Geography & Education

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Project description

The UU has a long tradition of student mobility and, as such, experience with large inbound and outbound student flows following parts of their curricula in Utrecht and abroad, respectively. Each year, over 1,100 undergraduate and graduate UU students are accepted for an exchange program abroad, which mostly takes the form of a one-semester stay abroad encompassing five months of full-time courses. *But what do students really learn abroad?* In essence, taking an exchange program is an effective way to deepen a student's disciplinary knowledge and skills, to improve intercultural competences and also broaden and strengthen professional skills. However, upon return, students are hardly aware of these effects – especially the effects on their intercultural and professional skills. And even if they are, they have great difficulty to both articulate these newly acquired skills and link these to their identity, personal and professional development and competences.

To increase the learning effects of taking an exchange program abroad, in 2018 the UU Faculty of Humanities developed a training trajectory that UU students can take as an additional elective (the UU-wide course Intercultural Learning, 2,5 EC). This trajectory aims to improve exchange students' recognition, understanding, and mobilization of intercultural and other professional competences towards employability skills. The course entails a trajectory of teaching practices during and around their stay abroad inspired by the PEER model, while promoting continuous reflection and feedback on that reflection (Gibbs, 1988). This UU training trajectory was developed jointly with the HGSP department at the Faculty of Geosciences, as its Geography & Education section focuses on researching students' learning.

After a dip during the Covid-19-period, exchange programs are again in full swing, in both Fall and Spring semester. This means that since 2021, twice a year, we are collecting data about UU students' self-assessment of specific employability skills, both before leaving for an exchange, as upon their return. *We wonder to what extent and how students perceive their skill development after a (training trajectory around an) exchange program, and how differences in these perceived learning effects between students can be explained.*

In this particular project we aim to contextualize and analyze the first empirical results of our training trajectory. After a literature review, we answer our research question via both a quantitative approach using data on self-assessment of employability skills, collected via pre-departure and back-home questionnaires, and a qualitative approach, analyzing the depth and breadth of self-evaluation reports and focus group discussions. In these analyses, we particularly want to explore whether, in what way and why both perceived skill development and reflections on learning from an exchange program differ, for instance between students' personal and disciplinary experiences and backgrounds, and between teaching, learning, and living contexts abroad.

Main tasks of the Bright Minds Assistant in this project:

- 1) perform a literature search and review in the field of intercultural, professional and employability skill development of students in higher education;
- 2) explore and analyze the survey data regarding exchange students' self-assessment of specific skills before and after the exchange program;
- 3) assist with organization, data collection and analysis of focus group discussions.

Job requirements

Experience with both quantitative and qualitative research methods is recommended.