

A Model of Informal Curricular Practice for Internationalization at Home: The Buddy Programme at Umeå University, Sweden

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Abstract

This paper explores the aspects and activities of a buddy program at a Swedish university to derive practical insights for enhancing similar initiatives that support Internationalization at Home (IaH). Since its introduction, the concept of IaH has gained significant attention in the field of internationalization of higher education and has even shifted the focus of approaches from mobility-based ones to domestic, campus-based strategies in the European context. Within this context, internationalization of the informal curriculum, alongside the formal curriculum, constitutes a core component of IaH. Informal curricular activities play a vital role in fostering international and intercultural learning across campus, extending beyond formal educational settings. However, empirical studies on informal curricular practices remain limited both in Europe and Japan. Therefore, sharing successful examples is valuable for institutions seeking effective ways to promote IaH. This study identifies five key insights: (1) clearly articulating that IaH within institutional policies is essential for advancing internationalization; (2) appointing dedicated personnel to manage buddy programs enhances their effectiveness; (3) that communicating the benefits of being a buddy is crucial; (4) that organizing activities in groups rather than one-on-one may improve accessibility and participation, and (5) that collaboration within and out of institution is essential to broaden the reach and enhance the impact of the buddy program. Universities can adapt these insights to suit their own organizational structures and circumstances.

Keywords: Internationalization at Home (IaH), buddy program, informal curriculum

1. Introduction

This paper presents the aspects and activities of a buddy programme at Umeå University in Sweden as a representative example of an informal curricular initiative supporting Internationalization at Home (IaH), a concept first proposed by Bengt Nilsson at Malmö University, Sweden in 1999.¹ The emergence of the IaH in higher education was driven by the recognition that fewer than ten percent of students in Europe had studied abroad during their degree programs, despite extensive efforts by the European Union (EU) to promote international mobility.² Jane Knight describes the introduction of IaH as “a significant development

¹ Beelen, Jos and Jones, Elspeth. "Looking Back at 15 Years of Internationalisation at Home." *Forum Winter 2015*, 2015, pp. 6-8.

² 畷田谷, 桂子. "グローバルランゲージスペースの過去・現在・未来ー課外国際共修と内なる国際化ー" 鹿児島大学総合教育機構紀要, vol. 6, 2023, pp. 44-60.

in the conceptualization of internationalization.”³ IaH has shifted the focus of internationalization in higher education from mobility-based approaches to domestic, campus-based strategies.⁴

This paper first examines the concept of IaH in the European context in Chapter 2 and highlights the significance of the informal curricular activities within this framework in Chapter 3. It then, in Chapter 4, presents findings from an online interview conducted in June 2025 with the International Student Coordinator responsible for the buddy programme at Umeå University. Despite the growing interest in IaH, empirical studies on informal curricular practices remain limited in both Europe and Japan.⁵ Sharing successful examples is therefore valuable for researchers and educators seeking effective approaches to enhance IaH. Finally, in Chapter 5, the paper discusses key insights gained from the buddy programme that may contribute to the development of IaH initiatives at Japanese universities.

2. Definition of IaH

One of the most widely cited definitions of IaH is provided by Jos Beelen and Elspeth Jones: “*Internationalization at Home is the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.*”⁶ This definition highlights three key elements:

First, IaH is intended for all students, not only those who participate in international mobility programs.⁷ Therefore, international and intercultural dimensions should be embedded not only in elective courses but also in compulsory ones.

Second, learning opportunities should extend beyond formal classroom settings.⁸ Students can engage in intercultural learning through interactions with international students and researchers both formally and informally on campus, as well as through collaborations with local cultural, ethnic, and religious communities off-campus.

Third, Beelen and Jones emphasize the importance of clearly defining and internationalizing learning outcomes, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods to enhance the overall quality of education.⁹

3. Informal Curricular Activities for IaH

a. Initiatives and Significance of Informal Curricular Activities

The internationalization of the informal curriculum, alongside the formal curriculum, constitutes a core component of IaH. Informal curricular activities play a crucial role in supporting students’ international and

³ Knight, Jane. "The Changing Landscape of Higher Education Internationalisation – for Better or Worse?" *Perspective: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, vol. 17, 2013, pp. 84-90, doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2012.753957., p85.

⁴ ---. *Higher Education in Turmoil*. Sense Publisher, 2008.

⁵ Robson, Sue et al. "Internationalization at Home: Time for Review and Development?" *European Journal of Higher Education* 2017, 2017, pp. 19-35.

⁶ Beelen, Jos and Jones, Elspeth. "Redefining Internationalization at Home." *The European Higher Education Area*, 2015, pp. 59-72, doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0_5., p69.

⁷ Ibid., pp68-69.

⁸ Ibid., pp68-69.

⁹ Ibid., pp68-69.

intercultural learning across campus, extending beyond formal educational settings.¹⁰

This paper focuses on informal curricular activities such as buddy programs, tandem language learning, intercultural communication workshops and peer-assisted study sessions.¹¹ Additionally, international residence programs, structured extracurricular activities with international and intercultural elements, and informal activities without explicit intercultural objectives – such as sports and cultural clubs – are also included.¹² The goals of internationalized education can be realized through the thoughtful design and implementation of these informal activities.¹³ Such initiatives contribute to shaping campus culture and provide students with opportunities to engage with diverse cultures in everyday their lives, beyond the boundaries of formal instruction.¹⁴

b. Key Insights to Advance IaH

De Louw, and Beelen and Jones emphasize that a comprehensive, institution-wide approach is essential for the effective implementation of IaH.¹⁵ All levels and categories of university staff must be involved in promoting IaH.

To begin with, the most critical initiative – internationalizing curriculum – requires proactive engagement from academic staff. Faculty members should seek professional support, such as assistance from educational developers, to integrate international and intercultural dimensions into their courses.

In addition, embedding IaH into institutional policies demands leadership from executive members. Despite its significant potential to enhance the internationalization of higher education, IaH remains relatively unknown outside specialized circles. Including IaH in university policies can raise awareness and foster broader engagement among staff.

Both bottom-up and top-down approaches are necessary to advance IaH. Furthermore, administrative staff should also be provided with opportunities to take part in professional development programs to build the competencies needed to support IaH initiatives. Ultimately, a holistic and comprehensive strategy for internationalization is required to fully realize the potential of IaH.

4. A Model of Informal Curricular Practice: The Buddy Programme at Umeå University, Sweden

The characteristics of the buddy programme at Umeå University are described below and outlined in Table 1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Soulé, M.V. "Epos Guide on Internationalisation at Home in the Post-Pandemic World. An Introduction for Teaching Staff in Higher Education." 2023. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.14694.60484/1>., pp31-34.

¹² Ibid., pp31-34.

¹³ Ibid.,p31.

¹⁴ Ibid., p31.

¹⁵ De Louw, Eveke et al. "Advancing Internationalisation at Home: 5 Keys Insights." *EAIE*, vol. 2025, 2019.

a. Context

Umeå University is one of the largest comprehensive universities in Sweden, comprised of four faculties, thirty-eight departments and units, nineteen research centers, 41,567 students and 4,627 employees as of 2024. The university maintains 815 exchange agreements and 538 partner universities across fifty-five countries, welcoming approximately 3,600 international students annually, including exchange and PhD students. The university's internationalization policy outlines its commitment to enhancing the quality of education, research, and administration through internationalization. Within this policy, four priority areas for further development are identified: IaH, international cooperation in research and education, personal international experiences for students and staff, and hosting initiatives that promote internationalization. To foster intercultural competencies among students, staff, alumni, and external partners, the university promotes the internationalization of its curriculum as part of its IaH initiatives. The buddy programme is introduced on the university's website as one such initiative, enabling students to engage with global perspectives within the campus environment. Other programmes, including language and international courses, are also presented under the IaH framework.

b. Purposes

The buddy programme at Umeå University is designed to facilitate the social integration of all types of international students into the local community, thereby supporting their academic and social success during their time in Umeå. To achieve this, the programme organizes activities that foster cultural exchange and mutual understanding. International students have opportunities to connect with local students, learn about Swedish culture, and share their own cultural backgrounds with both buddies and fellow international students. The university's website also emphasizes the programme's goal of encouraging interaction among students from diverse backgrounds.

c. Administration

The buddy programme is implemented university-wide and is managed by the International Office. A full-time international student coordinator, typically a former participant in the programme, is hired on one-year academic contract to oversee its operations. The coordinator monitors group activities, attendance, future plans, and group dynamics through monthly meetings with buddy leaders. Feedback from these meetings is used to improve the programme.

To facilitate communication and responsiveness, the coordinator uses social networking services such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram to share information with buddies and international students. In-person consultations with the coordinator are also available when needed.

d. Participants

There is no fixed limit on the number of participants in the buddy programme. Any student, apart from

international students who have been enrolled for less than one semester, may become a buddy by submitting an application form. Students who typically apply include those interested in studying abroad, meeting new people, or returning to the programme after previous participation. All newly enrolled international students are eligible to join by completing the application form.

In the Spring semester of 2025, the programme included 140 buddies (28 of whom were buddy leaders) and 465 international students from over 65 countries. Buddy groups are formed each semester, typically consisting of 8-10 buddies (including two leaders) and 25-40 international students. Fourteen buddy groups were formed in Spring 2025. In the Autumn semester of 2024, sixteen buddy groups were created, comprised of 149 buddies (32 leaders) and 670 international students from more than 65 countries.

Regarding grouping formation, buddies may request placement with international students from specific countries for language learning or study abroad preparation. While international students are generally grouped randomly, the coordinator considers factors such as balancing large nationality groups across multiple teams and accommodating specific needs – for example, grouping LGBTQ+ students, older students (e.g., PhD or internship students), and others with similar backgrounds.

e. Buddies' responsibilities

Buddies are expected to assist international students with various aspects of student life both on and off campus. This includes practical guidance such as how to purchase a bicycle, use public transportation, and locate nearby grocery stores.

Each buddy group includes two buddy leaders, selected by the international student coordinator from among applicants who express strong motivation – such as an interest in studying abroad or engaging with other cultures. These leaders are responsible for coordinating groups activities, maintaining attendance records, and sharing updates with the coordinator. Buddy leaders organize biweekly meetings with their group members to plan and manage upcoming activities. Buddies are expected to actively support their leaders in organizing these events and to participate in them. All buddy activities are conducted on a volunteer basis.

f. Events

Events within the buddy programme are organized both by the international student coordinator and by individual buddy groups. At the beginning of each semester, the coordinator hosts an opening session to provide practical information to both buddies and international students. This is followed by the first group meeting, where students are introduced to one another. To facilitate interaction, buddies organize icebreaker games within their groups.

Each group is expected to independently plan and organize weekly events throughout the semester. Activities are chosen based on group preferences, resulting in a diverse range of events across different groups and semesters. Common activities include various sports (e.g., volleyball, climbing, football), ice

baths, hiking, international dinners, ice skating, hockey, cross-country skiing, movie nights, fikas (coffee and tea gatherings), barbecues by the lake, Northern Lights excursions, pub crawls, parties, and karaoke.

According to the coordinator, efforts are made to ensure a balanced mix of sports, cultural, social, and leisure activities to accommodate the diverse interests of participants. Events organized by the coordinator tend to be larger in scale and open to all members of the buddy programme, while group-organized events are more intimate and tailored to specific group dynamics.

Each buddy group creates a group chat to facilitate communication. Within these chats, buddies and international students share event information, discuss plans, and propose informal gatherings. English is used as the common language for communication during these activities.

Participants are responsible for covering their own expenses related to these events. Information about upcoming activities is shared via social media platforms, allowing students to explore different cultures, learn about Swedish traditions, and engage with the local social scene.

g. Benefits

Buddies participating in the programme can earn points that support their applications for study abroad and receive official certificates recognizing their involvement. Buddies earn one point per semester, while buddy leaders earn two points, with a maximum of two points applicable toward their degree program. To qualify, participants must meet three requirements: active involvement in the buddy programme, organization of at least three activities per semester, and attendance at more than 50% of group activities and meetings. Buddy leaders are responsible for tracking attendance and submitting records to the programme coordinator, who issues the certificates. In some academic programs, participation in the buddy programme is a formal prerequisite for students wishing to study abroad.

In addition to the points, the buddy programme offers various personal and professional benefits. Buddies have the opportunity to meet people from diverse cultural backgrounds and develop intercultural competencies – skills increasingly essential in today’s global society. Through these interactions, they can build international networks that may be valuable for future study, travel, or employment abroad. Communication with native speakers also provides a chance to practice and improve foreign language skills. Moreover, buddies play a key role in helping international students feel welcomed and supported at Umeå University. The contribution not only enhances the experience of international students but also fosters a sense of fulfillment and personal growth among the buddies themselves.

h. Collaboration

The buddy programme collaborates with various organizations both within and outside the university. Internally, it works closely with the Student Health Center, aligning with the university’s commitment to student well-being. Through this partnership, the buddy programme contributes to creating a safe and inclusive campus environment by raising awareness about topics such as safe sex, substance abuse prevention,

and mental health. The center offers comprehensive range of service free of charge, including counseling, mental health workshops, and LGBTQ+-certified support.

The programme also collaborates with student unions on campus through joint activities, meetings, and promotional efforts. Events such as karaoke nights, bingo games, and board game nights are co-organized with student unions and the international students. These collaborations ensure that international students receive the same benefits as domestic students, including access to discounts throughout the city.

Beyond the university, the programme partners with private companies such as clubs, sports centers, and other local businesses. These partnerships provide additional advantages to programme participants, including discounts, sponsored activities, and event support. One notable example is the collaboration with an elk farm located about an hour's drive from the city. Each semester, the farm is specially open for buddy programme members, reflecting the strength of this community partnership.

i. Outcomes

While the buddy programme at Umeå University has been successful in promoting the integration of international students into the local student community, its impact on domestic students has not yet been systematically assessed.

The university monitors the experiences of international students through the International Student Barometer (ISB), a global survey that evaluates international students' satisfaction at higher education institutions.¹⁶ In the 2023 ISB, which included 121,418 respondents from 137 universities worldwide, Umeå University ranked first globally in the categories of living, support and overall satisfaction.¹⁷ The international student coordinator attributes these positive results in part to the buddy programme. Despite these achievements, the programme's influence on domestic students remains unclear. However, comments from university leadership suggest a strong institutional commitment to internationalization. Cathrine Norberg, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Umeå University, emphasized the essential role of international students in creating a vibrant academic community.¹⁸ Similarly, Ingrid Svensson, Head of the International Office, highlighted the importance of collaborative efforts across the university to provide high-quality services to international students.¹⁹ These statements imply that international students are well integrated to campus life and that meaningful interactions between international and domestic students are taking place. Although domestic students likely develop soft skills – such as teamwork, communication skills, and empathy skills – through participation in the buddy programme, this has not been empirically verified. Nevertheless, the coordinator asserts that the programme fosters valuable competencies, including leadership and problem-

¹⁶ Nilsson, Per A. "The Buddy Programme: Integration and Social Support for International Students." *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*, vol. 11, 2019.

¹⁷ Bergström Grahn, Jessica. "World's Most Satisfied International Students." Umeå University https://www.umu.se/en/news/umea-university-tops-international-student-satisfaction-survey_11897719/. Accessed 23 June 2025.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

solving skills among buddy leaders.

Table 1: Overview of the Buddy Programme at Umeå University, Sweden

Category	Details
Purposes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitate the integration of international students into the local community - Create a network for cultural exchange - Promote the sharing of international students' cultures and traditions - Provide opportunities for intercultural interaction among students
Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managed by a full-time International Student Coordinator at the International Office
Participants	<p>Spring Semester 2025</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 14 buddy groups (approx. 30 international students per group) - 140 buddies (including 28 buddy leaders) - 465 international students from over 65 countries <p>Autumn semester 2024</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 16 buddy groups (approx. 40 international students per group) - 149 buddies (including 32 buddy leaders) - 670 international students from over 65 countries
Buddy Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assist international students with campus life and daily life - Support group leaders in planning and organizing activities
Buddy Leader Responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organize biweekly meetings - Coordinate group activities - Maintain attendance records and report to the coordinator - Attend monthly meetings with the coordinator
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordinator-led events open to all programme members (e.g., opening session) - Weekly group-organized events (each group hosts one event per week) - Examples: volleyball, climbing, football, ice bathing, hiking, international dinners, ice skating, hockey, skiing, movie nights, fikas, BBQs, Northern Lights excursions, pub crawls, parties, karaoke, etc. - Activities are balanced across sports, culture, leisure, and social themes
Buddy Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Earn points and receive certificates beneficial for study abroad applications - Meet people from diverse cultures - Build international networks - Improve foreign language skills - Help international students feel welcomed at Umeå University

<p>Collaborations with other organizations</p>	<p>On campus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student Health Center - Student Unions <p>Off campus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local clubs - Private companies (e.g., sports centers) - Elk farm (special access for programme members)
<p>Outcomes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The university was ranked first globally in the categories of living, support, and overall satisfaction in the <i>International Student Barometer</i>. - The impact of the programme on domestic students has not yet been investigated. - The programme coordinator notes that the buddy programme fosters soft skills such as teamwork, communication skills, and empathy skills. For group leaders, it also strengthens leadership and problem-solving through activity coordination.

5. Conclusion: Insights from the buddy programme at Umeå University

Although buddy programs are commonly implemented to support international students at universities, university-wide programs – particularly those explicitly positioned as initiatives for IaH – remain underreported. Understanding the detailed structure and operation of such programs is valuable for researchers and practitioners seeking to enhance existing buddy programs as tools for advancing IaH. Based on the case of Umeå University, five key factors contribute to the success of buddy programs in fostering international and intercultural learning beyond formal educational settings

First, clearly articulating IaH within institutional policies is essential for promoting internationalization. At Umeå University, IaH is explicitly identified as a priority area in its educational policy. This formal recognition raises awareness among staff and provides clear guidance on institutional focus.

Second, appointing dedicated personnel to manage the buddy program is highly beneficial. At Umeå University, a full-time international student coordinator – who has personal experience with the programme – is assigned to oversee its implementation. This dedicated role enables detailed follow-up with both buddies and international students. The inclusion of IaH as a strategic priority may also facilitate the allocation of resources for such staffing.

Third, communicating the benefits of being a buddy is crucial. While many universities operate buddy programs, they are often framed solely as support mechanisms for the international students, without emphasizing their role in IaH. Although the academic benefits of being a buddy have been documented, it is unclear how widely these are recognized by students. Umeå University explicitly presents the buddy programme as part of its IaH strategy and outlines its benefits on the university website. This visibility may encourage greater student participation and motivation, even within domestic learning environments.

Furthermore, awareness of these benefits may prompt students to reflect on their own development, thereby enhancing the overall quality of the program

Fourth, organizing buddy activities in groups rather than one-on-one may increase accessibility and participation. One reason domestic students may hesitate to engage with international students is due to time constraints, such as part-time jobs. Group-based activities allow for flexibility – if one buddy is unavailable, others can still participate. Offering a variety of activities also helps attract students with different interests. In the context of Japanese universities, group formats may be particularly effective, as students with lower English proficiency may feel more comfortable participating alongside friends.

Finally, collaboration with other organizations is essential to broaden the reach and enhance the impact of the buddy program. At Umeå University, the programme actively partners with a range of organizations both on and off campus through the international student coordinator. These collaborations help cultivate a more international and intercultural atmosphere not only within the university but also in the surrounding community.

These five insights offer practical guidance for implementing buddy programs in Japanese universities and can serve as a foundation for strengthening IaH.

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