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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)

UNIVERSITY OF CEBU

HOME AWAY FROM HOME PROGRAMME

1. Introduction

The University of Cebu is one of three partner Higher Education Institutions in the Philippines of the European Union **Erasmus+ FRIENDS** project. The said project is funded under the Erasmus+ Programme for Capacity Building in Higher Education. It combines the efforts of 12 Asian Partner Country (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 carefully designed to meet the needs of international students and students with diverse cultural background studying in the University of Cebu. 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.

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2. Policies and Regulations at the University of Cebu

It is the responsibility of the University of Cebu to provide international students with a safe, secure and caring environment that support and nurture them as they strive to achieve their best during their studies.

2.1. University of Cebu's policy

Pursuant to the CHED Memo No. 9, Series of 2013 and Inter-Agency Committee on Foreign Joint Memorandum Order No. 01, series of 2017, the University of Cebu's policy 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

The University of Cebu's Office of International Linkages and Student Affairs Office are responsible to offer support and guide international students. The staff members of the offices concerned are available Monday to Friday (8:00 AM – 6:00 PM) and Saturday (8:00 AM – 12:00 NN). The offices handle welfare and safety matters with regard to international students, and can be reached via telephone, social media and/or other means of communication.

2.3. Emergency hotline 24/7

Under the Student Affairs Office, the University of Cebu has a dedicated staff team reachable 24 hours per day 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, spending personally, need to obtain the required educational visa before departing for study in the Philippines. The University of Cebu provides non-monetary assistance, support, and necessary official documents to international students for the process of visa renewal application or extension, and for managing other immigration procedures required by the national law.

2.5. Health and accident insurance

The University of Cebu shall require the international students, at their own expense, to get the basic health and accident insurance before coming to the Philippines. International students are responsible for contracting and maintaining their health and accident insurance coverage throughout the period of their studies. The University of Cebu shall provide 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 as stipulated in the University Student Manual. The Student Affairs Office ensures that international students are appropriately informed about all academic and non-academic rules and regulations applying at the institution.

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3. International Student Care and Support

3.1. Academic support

Pre-arrival guidance

The University of Cebu will provide guidebook or handbook which includes 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 services 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

The University of Cebu through the collaborative efforts of Student Affairs Office, College Academic Department, and Office of International Linkages provide an orientation programme (e.g. Orientation Week) to introduce international students to the institution's 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 the institution's rules and regulations; and to highlight the academic requirements for each level or plan of study. The orientation includes tour of the campus and facilities, visits to the local area, and so on. The University of Cebu may advise the new international students to arrive a few days earlier in order to participate in the orientation programme before their classes start.

Academic mentors/ advisors

The University of Cebu through Student Affairs Office's International Care Programme provides 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. The institution has an advisory committee where 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 even though they submit evidence of English language proficiency for admission purposes. This greatly affects both their academic and social adjustment. Therefore, the Student Affairs Office provides an *Ka-akbay program* that aids students' academic and social adjustment. The *Ka-akbay program* provides academic English support program by having a specialized English language courses or tutoring sessions. Selected enrolled local students with good English skills or student clubs may also help international students increase their English skills or advance in any other academic subject they may encounter difficulties. In addition, the Student Affairs Office provides basic national language classes to international students in order for them to be able to "survive" outside the classroom or campus.

Recognition of credits

The University of Cebu supports the transfer of credits for exchange students via established *This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*

credits systems of the institution. The recognition of credits shall be arranged before enrolling in the University of Cebu and coming to the Philippines.

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 before enrolling in the University of Cebu and coming in the Philippines. The University of Cebu shall assist the international students in the renewal of their insurance and provide information on the available reasonable-price health insurances for international students.

On-campus health facilities

The University of Cebu's campuses has its own clinic. English-speaking certified nurses or medical doctors are on duty. The university has its own medical and dental clinic. Moreover, the University of Cebu has two sister hospitals where the international students can avail of appropriate medical assistance and services.

Guidance and counselling

The university through its Guidance Center has guidance counselors ready to help and advise the international students encountering difficulties. The designated department within the institution takes supportive action and facilitates the psychological care. They offer webinars on mental health and well-being on a regular basis. The institution comprises a system to identify at-risk students, such as communication between the faculty and the International Linkages Office, or a buddy system programme by the Student Affairs Office to inform from privately about potential cases during regular meetings or once there is a special case. The university through its peer facilitators programme 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, and support must be 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. The online support for education and guidance or counselling for international students is available when necessary.

3.3 Cultural and Social Integration

Buddy system

The University of Cebu through its Student Affairs Office arranges student ambassadors and/or buddy programmes to assist international students. Local students can 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 the institution 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

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During the orientation programme as organized by the Student Affairs Office and International Linkage Office, local cultures are presented and international students are introduced to the social aspects of the institution besides its academic side. The Student Personnel Services Committee may introduce its services, university rules and policies that can help them stay safe. A variety of events are held to orient and welcome the new students. The *Pasundayag* dedicated to freshmen will be 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

The University of Cebu through its Student Affairs Office 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 the university, such as International Students Association, sport clubs, and volunteer unions. International students through the Community Awareness Research and Extension Service (CARE) may take advantage with the opportunity to be involved, together with the local students, in co-curricular activities with some credits 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 institution staff

It is important to connect the international students with the International Linkages Office and Student Affairs Office, or other units related to their stay at the institution. In this way, the international students will know who they can contact in case of social integration difficulties during their studies. As advised by the course advisers and approved by the academic deans, the international students may also get the opportunity to work as interns at institution's offices, like international relations, library, or computer labs.

Cultural activities

The University of Cebu regularly arranges cultural activities and events for international students to mingle with the local students and share their own culture. The cross-cultural activities may be the conduct of the university days, international days or festivals and can 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. The institution also involves international students in the national traditional festivals and other religious festivals. Some of the cultural activities arranged by the university to celebrate the cultural diversity on campus may be: Erasmus Day, International and Intercultural Festival, 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 the university under the supervision of the Student Affairs Office and may also include animated traditional games.

3.4 Campus Life, including Facilities and Accommodation

The University of Cebu aims to support international students on campus enjoy the best student

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living experience by providing quality facilities, as well as assistance in providing comfortable off-campus 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, the university ensures that international students can easily access medical and dental facilities, canteen, etc. The following facilities to support students' life on campus are available:

- UC FRIENDS Teahouse;
- medical and dental facilities: on-campus clinic and dental clinic;
- assistance with off-campus accommodation/ residence/ dormitories;
- canteens;
- fully-equipped sport complex in UC-METC (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;
- ATMs inside the campus;
- student clubs or organizations;
- free campus-wide Wi-Fi;
- free campus bus service to certain pick-up/drop-off points;
- Audio Visual Room as cultural center

Further on-campus support is offered by the International Linkages Office, Student Affairs Office, Guidance Office and the Office of the College Dean/s and Chairpersons. The on-campus accommodation for international students at the UC Maritime Education and Training Center Campus have designated wardens or supervisors able to speak English. The campus compounds are under security surveillance and have 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, the International Linkage Office informs him/her about the necessary immigration procedures, such as study visa and other arrangements to be taken care of before his/her departure. The staff of the International Linkage Office and Student Affairs Office also sends the link for the online English guidebook 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, information about 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 the University of Cebu and in the Philippines.

The Office of the International Linkages and Student Affairs Office shall communicate with the incoming international student/s days or even weeks before they take a flight to the University of Cebu. 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

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documents for processing the appropriate visa in their own country before coming to study at the university.

On-arrival reception

The Office of the International Linkages or the faculty of the concerned College shall arrange 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 as determined by the Student Affairs Office was already assigned, he/she can also accompany the staff to the airport for the pick-up service. Upon arrival the incoming international students may use the UC International Care and Support Guidebook that was sent to them ahead for basic information.

On-campus assistance

The University of Cebu has a designated department or office to support the international students during their studies (e.g. Office of the International Linkages and Student Affairs Office). One of the major assistance offered to international students is that related to the Bureau of Immigration which is handled by the Office off the Registrar. Therefore, a staff member or a liaison officer is assigned to offer guidance and assistance to international students for visa and other immigration matters. During Orientation, Immigration Officers/ Border Guard may be invited to speak on the immigration procedures and to answer to eventual questions from international students. The university may arrange regular visits by immigration officers to offer services on campus for the institution's international students and staff.

The Office of the International Linkages also coordinates with other concerned Student Personnel Services units in order to help international students take care of various matters related to their studies and stay at the host university. 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 the university 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; and
- involvement in the FRIENDS Teahouse and the international centers at the HEI (e.g., ASEAN Center, American Corner, India Corner etc.)

Information support

The first channel for conveying information towards the international community is an institutional English language website. In addition, the colleges shall provide an English version of their website containing essential academic information for international students. The university also ensures 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 the University of Cebu. These channels are used to inform international students on various academic and social matters, including upcoming activities and events. The university shall also provide information that supports international students concerns and guidance for immigration procedures. Therefore, the related staff or unit must keep international students regularly informed on new immigration rules and other related

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announcements.

Assistance before leaving the University of Cebu

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 Philippines after graduation. The university must ensure that the international students join the specific alumni communication channel in order to continue keeping in touch with the institution.

4. Conclusions

This integrated model for international student care and support aims to successfully support international students at the University of Cebu and create a welcoming, friendly and supportive educational and living environment. The key points brought into discussion in this paper concern the policies and regulations related to international student care and support at the university, 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).

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