

Study Abroad – Guidelines

for Incoming Students



The most dangerous worldview is
the worldview of those who
have not viewed the world.

(Alexander von Humboldt)

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1 Introduction

As a result of greater **mobility and internationalization processes** in the higher education system (cf. Crowther et al. 2000) and the increasingly globalized worlds of work and life, all universities and institutions of higher learning are confronted with opportunities and challenges. Since a more international, heterogeneous student body gives rise to increased confrontation with a variety of daily university practices, all participants – students, instructors and university employees – are required to question what is their own, what they are familiar with and what is perceived as normal, “to consider what is their own as compared to the unfamiliar from a new perspective” (Hornung 2015: 45) and ideally to develop intercultural language communication competence as part of a **change in perspective**.

For students, universities are communication intensive places of socialization where they experience a formative phase in their personal development. If they decide to **study abroad**, the communicative requirements of daily life as a student are further shaped by a linguistically and culturally divergent academic context within which orientation, adaptation, performance and conclusion of an academic chapter in their life must be managed during the few months of a one semester *study abroad* program.

The **transit and diversity experience study abroad** is an individual mobility event that basically involves more *process* than event, which is why this kind of education-related stay abroad – to have a lasting impact – requires specific, culturally sensitive preparation, support and reflection. At the university, intercultural language communication competence does not develop automatically and **student engagement** in a culturally unfamiliar academic context in a foreign language can only be expected from students “if they were taught to expect subtle differences in instructional style, or had explicit information about the cultural differences they might notice.” (Kinging 2009: 129)

These informal guidelines that focus on university **communication and interactions** should encourage reflection on selected aspects of the *study abroad* phenomenon from which professional, linguistic and intercultural benefits can be obtained along with benefits in the areas of personal development and identity formation.

This kind of **mobility experience** naturally differs from individual to individual and each *study abroad* experience is unique. Nevertheless, we are convinced that a high degree

of generalization and abstraction of concrete experiences makes it possible to address topics such as conventions for forms of address and behavior, expectations for roles and performance or strategies for dealing with irritating situations – independent of what, where and how long you study at a foreign university.

We would like to thank the former outgoing and incoming students who have spoken very openly about their stays abroad for the trust they have placed in us. A great **thanks** also goes out to our colleagues for numerous informative discussions and intensive exchanges of experiences on the *study abroad* phenomenon. Finally, we would like to thank Daniela Unger-Ullmann for the opportunity to participate in a university research project at *treffpunkt sprachen* – Centre for Language, Plurilingualism and Didactics that is concerned with the relatively new field of **mobility and exchange program research**.

We hope that these guidelines greatly help incoming students at the University of Graz to experience **self-efficacy** by using a reflective approach to possible irritating situations and to benefit more from a *study abroad* adventure by more consciously examining what they have experienced and learned. We welcome constructive feedback and suggestions.

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2 Before your departure

- Before you depart, prepare yourself for the country and its people so that you do not travel to your host country Austria completely uninformed and potentially make a **cultural blunder**. Get in contact with a buddy you might have in Graz before your departure.
- **Before** you study abroad in Graz, take a **language course** or learn German on your own (for example by taking advantage of online language learning opportunities) or as part of a tandem language learning partnership. If you are in Graz before the semester starts, you have the opportunity to participate in an **intensive German course** at *treffpunkt sprachen*, the language center of the University of Graz. The intensive courses start three weeks before the start of every semester:
<http://bit.ly/2fTVenJ>
- **Get in touch** with students who are familiar with the University of Graz – either former outgoing students or incoming students from Graz currently at your own university. As a buddy (mentor), you can guide incoming students and gain **access** to the language and culture of Austria through them while still at your home university.
- Be prepared to be seen as “**your country's ambassador**” and to be asked questions about its economy, politics, history, society, language, and culture. Your answers may be viewed as those of an expert.
- Set **goals** for yourself that you would like to achieve during your stay abroad. Do you prioritize increasing your foreign language competence, your professional competence, your social competence, your intercultural competence or something else? Consciously reflect on your own **expectations**.
- Consider well what **form of accommodation** suits you best: student dormitory, shared rental apartment, host family, etc. Your choice of whom to live with greatly determines what language(s) you will speak on a daily basis and how much contact you will have with Austrians. Information on accommodation in Graz can be found at:
<http://international.uni-graz.at/index.php?L=1&id=3375>
- Do the **academic calendars** of both universities differ? Is the academic year at your home university divided into a winter semester and a summer semester as in Graz?

Inform yourself early about the start and end of the academic year at the University of Graz and any possible **overlapping** of terms, deadlines and examination times at your home university. The sooner you know when courses are not held (holidays, breaks), the easier it is to book cheap flights for short stays at home or find an internship. More information on terms and deadlines can be found at:

<https://www.uni-graz.at/de/studieren/studieninteressierte/termine-und-fristen/>

- In Austria, you should be able to speak about your **degree program** in German. Is it referred to the same way as at your home university? You may be asked how your degree program is structured and what the titles of the individual courses are. You need the appropriate vocabulary in the foreign language for this.
- Inform yourself in advance about how the **credits** for courses are currently transferred so you do not need to study longer because of your stay abroad.
- Don't assume that everything at your **host university** in Graz works the same as at your home university. This may apply to the procedure for registering for courses or examinations, the information management system of the University of Graz UNIGRAZonline (https://online.uni-graz.at/kfu_online/webnav.ini) or the learning platform Moodle (<https://moodle.uni-graz.at/login/index.php>), the teaching-learning setting, performance requirements, examination procedures and much more. More detailed explanations of UNIGRAZonline can be found at: <http://bit.ly/2fc3bRP>
- Come up in advance with strategies for dealing with any “**downers**” – motivational crises or emotional low points. It can help to have activities ready that can help you when you feel lonely, homesick, lovelorn or overwhelmed. Studying means having to meet requirements and to perform when personal **uneasiness** (e.g., simply because of oppressive weather or living situations) may significantly affect your general well-being and thus your ability to perform.
- What do you do at home when you don't feel good? What are your personal **strategies for coping** that have previously helped you in times of crisis? Listening to music or making music yourself, taking a brief time out, reading, writing, having real or virtual contact with others, telephoning, skypeing, doing sports or crafts? Keep up with your hobbies while you are abroad. Since common interests can often connect people, this may make it easier to get to know Austrians.

- Make an effort to find a **contact person** who you can turn to at any time during your *study abroad* in Graz. Important providers of information in Graz are the Office of International Relations (<https://international.uni-graz.at/>), the international department of the Austrian Students' Union Graz (ÖH) and the International Exchange Erasmus Student Network (<http://unigraz.esnaustria.org/>). Academic advisors (<http://bit.ly/2f05Mk4>) or buddies (<http://unigraz.esnaustria.org/buddy-program-uni-graz>) can provide you with support in Graz on a daily basis. *Zentrum Integriert Studieren* is an important provider of information for students with disabilities or chronic illnesses: <http://integriert-studieren.uni-graz.at/>

3 After you arrive

3.1 Organization of daily life and your studies

- Be prepared that it may take a long time until you become accustomed to your new living situation. The **orientation phase** at a host university and in a foreign university town takes time. Be patient with yourself if this **period of settling in** in Graz takes longer than you expected. For easier orientation, you can download the free UniGrazMobile App to your smartphone: <https://it.uni-graz.at/de/unigrazmobile-app/>. A map of the campus can be viewed at: <http://campusplan.uni-graz.at/>
- It is to your benefit to attend the mandatory **Welcome Week** organized by the Office of International Relations; you will very quickly become acquainted with other students and the University of Graz early on before the semester starts. Information about Welcome Week is available at: <http://bit.ly/2eB8Rbl>
- Exchange students are neither tourists nor locals, yet like the latter, their daily life takes place in the country. A **specific daily schedule** with rituals and routines and special activities you can regularly look forward to (e.g., film evenings, cooking with others or sports), provides your life in Graz with a structure. Dealing with lecture-free time during the breaks or on Sundays and public holidays may be challenging, especially when fellow Austrian students are enjoying private time with their families. The University of Graz offers reasonably priced sports courses that you can enroll in at the beginning of the semester. More information can be found at: <https://sportinstitut.uni-graz.at/>

- Is it easy for you to reach out to people you don't know? In Graz *you* will probably have to take the first step, actively approach others and initiate a conversation. To **make contact**, you need to **take the initiative** and not be discouraged if you are met with rejection.
- **Planning your semester** at the University of Graz requires great independence and personal responsibility. It is highly unlikely that you will receive a preset schedule that you need to follow. Instead, you must structure your own week. You are personally responsible for budgeting your time in your degree program and should note that many courses build on others and have mandatory prerequisites.

The UNIGRAZCARD is your official **student identification card**. You can use this ID to borrow books from the university libraries, print your documents and receive discounts at the cafeteria. General information about the UNIGRAZCARD can be found at: <https://studienabteilung.uni-graz.at/de/studieren/unigracard/> and you can add money to your printing account at this link (copying budget):

<https://guthaben.uni-graz.at/budgetrecharge/index.php>

- Inform yourself early on about the standard **types of courses**, the requirements associated with them and their equivalent at your home university (e.g., VO, VU, KS, PS, SE). Look into **registration procedures**, possible attendance requirements or opportunities for making up missed lessons. The different types of courses are described at: <https://kfunierstinformation.wordpress.com/curriculum-2/lehrveranstaltungstypen/>
- The composition of students participating in a course varies depending on the university. Do you know groups of students from your university who are in the same year as you and who complete the same mandatory courses together each semester like a school class? In Graz, the groups in a course change each semester, which means that you must be prepared for a large number of different **compositions of groups**. Interaction with a wide variety of other students will be easier the more actively you approach others and seek out conversation.
- The individual **course units** do not last the same amount of time in all countries and take place a different number of times every week or are blocked. You may have to concentrate longer in each unit than at your home university or get used to attending

more units per week. Do not assume that you are familiar with the **way time is structured at the university**. Courses at the University of Graz normally last 90 minutes.

- Most instructors appreciate it when exchange students **introduce themselves in person** at the beginning of the first course. If you do not need a course certificate and ECTS credits, inform your instructors so that they understand why you may not always be present or do not fulfill all the course requirements.

3.2 Communication and interaction

- In Austria, a variety of a **pluricentral language** is spoken, i.e. a language with several linguistic centers (such as Arabic, German, English, French or Spanish). Give yourself time to become acquainted with this language variety. No one expects you to use Austrian German, but you should be able to understand it. The basic principle is: *to produce* (speak, write) beyond the region and using unmarked forms, but to be able *to receive* (listen, read) what is specific to the region.
- You waste an opportunity to increase your **foreign language competences** if you use English as a lingua franca too often. Your instructors, fellow students and also the local population in Graz will definitely appreciate it if you communicate with them in German.
- In all matters of concern, you should address instructors, fellow students or university employees in German if possible. Find polite, German **phrases for making requests** so you are able to communicate what you intend to and are not met with rejection because you were – unintentionally – too direct, too indirect or even impolite.
- Learn to write **appropriate emails** to instructors or university employees in German. What is considered to be appropriate in terms of forms of address, salutations, linguistic register and style? Inform yourself about what the customary **standards of politeness** are in Austria and how formally you must express yourself in an Austrian academic context.
- What **forms of interaction**, supervisory relationships and **opportunities for contact** with instructors are you used to from your home university? Do you address each other formally or informally? Do you need to make an appointment to speak with them or are they available for you at any time? What is more common, face to face or online communication? Is the tone of your interaction formal or informal, hierarchical and reserved

or friendly and collegial? Do not expect that **hierarchies** and authorities at the University of Graz follow the same pattern.

- The nonverbal communication you are familiar with from your culture may look completely different in Austria. Pay attention to **proxemics**, i.e. relative physical distance, so that you do not get too close to someone or appear to be too physically distant.
- Handle with care the **passwords** you receive from the University of Graz for UNIGRAZ-online and check your personal **email account** regularly. All important information related to studying will be sent to this account. Not checking your email may have a negative effect on your success as a student as a result of missed deadlines or information never received. You can also set up your account so that these emails are forwarded to your private email account.

3.3 Behavior and roles in teaching-learning settings

- What behavior of all who participate in academic teaching-learning settings is tacitly assumed and not questioned at your home university? What **attitude to learning** and what work styles do you expect when working with partners or in groups? Reflect on **roles** and **behavioral expectations** that appear to be a given.
- What has left its mark on the academic teaching-learning culture at your home university? Interactive, discursive **knowledge transfer**, in which the critical opinion of students is desired; or instead receptive **acquisition of knowledge** from the teacher's lecture followed by memorization with exact repetition? In Graz, you are more likely to encounter the former and your opinion will be asked for in most courses.
- What way of dealing with clarifying **comprehension questions** are you familiar with from your home university? Are they asked directly during the lesson, shortly before or after or during separate office hours? In most cases, the lecture culture in Graz is highly interactive and provides many opportunities for answering any open questions.
- What **opportunities for participation** in the design of lessons are you accustomed to from your home university? In Graz, self-study is required to learn much of the content of courses and you are expected to have good **self-organization** skills and competently deal with freedom of choice.

- What kind of work are you used to doing at your home university: individual, partner, group or project? At the University of Graz, courses mostly involve interactive **forms of work and social contact**.
- It is possible that another kind of paper and **presentation** is expected than what you are used to from your home university. Free speaking, reference to the audience and professional presentation techniques are highly valued. Determine beforehand whether the audience should be involved or invited to participate in a concluding activity and whether a handout should be provided in advance. How familiar are you with German language presentation vocabulary?
- Notice how **time is managed** and adapt yourself to the academic culture in Austria. Generally speaking, great value is placed on arriving punctually for courses, office hours or examinations. Arriving too late could have negative consequences.

3.4 Course requirements

- At the start of the semester, inform yourself about the exact **requirements** that must be met to pass a course. You should know early on what exactly – within what time period – is expected of you, how firm **deadlines** are and what the consequences are if they are disregarded.
- Inform yourself about the criteria that are used to **assess performance** so that you know what you should pay attention to during the semester. Are the courses subject to ongoing assessment? What components make up the overall course grade, and are individual requirements weighted differently?
- The amount of emphasis placed on **active participation** is not the same at all universities or for all types of courses. At the University of Graz, active participation is desired and constitutes part of the assessment of performance. You should be as present as possible, join in the discussion and actively contribute to the teaching-learning event, even if it is difficult at the beginning and you feel unsure of yourself. Your instructors and fellow students will enjoy your contributions even if your grammar and vocabulary are not one hundred percent correct.
- Do not allow any lack of **language competence** prevent your **professional competence** from being recognized. Try hard to make your knowledge and skills visible and

do not let difficulties in expressing yourself in the language prevent this. Feel free to use English in certain cases so you can contribute actively and self-confidently to the lesson.

- Take advantage of the opportunity to improve your knowledge of German during your stay in Graz. Information about semester **German courses** at *treffpunkt sprachen* that are tailored to meet the needs of exchange students can be found at: <http://bit.ly/2gcMxW8>

If you are studying at Graz University of Technology (TU), the Medical University of Graz (MUG) or the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz (KUG) and attend a German course at *treffpunkt sprachen*, you must co-register:

<http://studienabteilung.uni-graz.at/de/studieren/studium/mitbelegung/>

- **Academic writing requirements** differ according to country and university. It is possible that you have to write fewer or more texts that are shorter or longer and precisely specified or freer in form than at your home university. Take into account as well the prevailing conventions for dealing with criticism. How much expression of personal opinion should or may your text contain?
- Pay attention to whether certain **kind of texts** may be understood somewhat differently at the University of Graz than what you are accustomed to. Ask about guidelines for the different kinds of texts, what exactly is meant by a handout, a composition, an essay, a seminar paper, etc. and what **textual conventions** are expected of you. An important provider of information on academic writing is the *Schreibzentrum* (Writing Center) at the University of Graz:
<https://lehr-studienservices.uni-graz.at/de/studienservices/schreibzentrum/>
- The **examination period** at the end of the semester differs according to the university. In Graz, examinations are held directly after the courses, which means you must plan to study for them during the semester. The language center *treffpunkt sprachen* offers course participants free LanguageLearningCounselling that you can take advantage of to optimize your language learning: <http://bit.ly/2fcelFY>
- The **way examinations are organized** also varies from university to university. You may be accustomed to more oral or more written exams, shorter or longer exams,

individual exams or group exams, etc. Inform yourself early about what **kinds of exams** await you at your host university in Graz.

- The University of Graz has a very strong **culture of evaluation**. Your constructive feedback on the design of lessons is taken seriously and makes an important contribution to ongoing quality development.

4 After you return

- Find ways to reflect on your **learning and life experiences** abroad from a distance of time and space and to share them with others. Were your expectations met and did you reach the goals you set for yourself? It may be helpful to meet up with other former exchange students who usually understand what feelings can go along with returning from studying abroad.
- Don't expect that everyone will have the same amount of interest in your experiences and do not be disappointed if you have the impression that absolutely nothing has changed while you were away although you **personally** may have made great **progress**.
- Having to **say goodbye** to newly found friends and to routines and lifestyles you have come to love can be a painful experience. Be prepared for this as well as for **reverse culture shock**, the feeling of suddenly being a foreigner in your own presumably familiar country.
- Reestablish yourself slowly in your "old life," read something about *study abroad* so that you can place your personal story within a greater context and better understand the **study abroad phenomenon** or your own feelings and thoughts.
- Let others share your experiences by advising future outgoing students or working as a buddy for incoming students so you continue to have **contact** with the language and culture of your former host country Austria. You can also continue to expand your knowledge of the language and culture at home in a tandem language learning partnership.

- You can build up an **international academic network** by remaining in contact with your fellow students or instructors that you got to know in Austria. Benefit from personal exchanges with people from different language and cultural environments.

5 Further reading

5.1 On the *study abroad* phenomenon in general

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6 Notes