

**Being at home while being abroad:  
Social aspects of exchange program**

Case study

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# **1 INTRODUCTION**

This is a case study about social aspects of exchange program. This study will explain how social contacts work for exchange students in real life and what kind of social problems do they face. Main goal for this study is to recognize social problems of exchange program, and secondary also offer some solutions. This study answers to question how exchange students adapt living abroad and how they make themselves feel like home.

Author of this study is exchange student in Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences on academic year of 2011-2012 and has observed himself and other exchange students for this study. This case study is created in Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences June 2012 and observations of this study is made of exchange students of that university during the whole academic year of 2011-2012. Some of the observations may also refer to exchange students of Oulu University of Applied Sciences who were observed during academic year of 2010-2011 by author of this study.

# **2 SOCIAL CONTACTS TO HOME COUNTRY**

While studying abroad as exchange student it is important to manage social contacts to home country. Exchange program may last over varying lengths of time from completing only one course in just few weeks to even completing whole degree in many years abroad. Most common lengths of exchange program is one-semester program, which is usually 3 to 6 months. <sup>[4]</sup> When considering this, there arises a question of how to keep contact in home country and is it enough to keep contact via Internet.

## **2.1 Via Internet**

Communication technology nowadays is so advanced that it is easy to use by everyone, Internet connections are fast enough in Europe for live video chats and about 75% of the Europeans are using the Internet. <sup>[5]</sup> This all make it possible to keep contact via Internet in real-time with girl-/boyfriend, relatives and friends.

As an example, one of my Finnish exchange student friends have a wife back in Finland and another one have a betrothed-to-be. They speak everyday on Skype via Internet, and during the year they have been travelling few times back to Finland as well as their partners have travelled here few times. This way their long range relationship have not been damaged.

As an another example, most of my exchange student friends chat with their old friends on Facebook weekly, so their friendship stays fresh and they have a feeling of home. Furthermore, most of them also speak on Skype, call with mobile phone or write e-mails to parents and rest of the family at least once a month so that the family knows you are safe, and also to have a feeling of home.

As an another example, one my friends in Oulu University of Applied Sciences studied abroad six months in Tanzania. There Internet connections were so bad, that it was not even possible to write a blog every week. His relatives were a bit afraid because they did not know how he is doing and is he well. Also his relations with his old friends came more distant.

## **2.2 Visiting home country while being abroad**

Almost everyone of the exchange students I know have visited at least once in their home country during the exchange program. The ones who have relationship in their home country visit far more often, even once a month. Only exception is the ones who have travelled from another continent. Brazilians and Koreans for example have not travelled to their home country at all. Instead, they travelled a lot during their exchange

program as a chance to see the world far away from home. However, they seemed to keep much more contact in their home country via Internet instead. The ones who lived more closer the destination country visited far more often their home country but did not keep that much contact via Internet instead.

The ones who visited their home country more often kept a stronger bond in their home country and adaption between the home country and destination country were more balanced.

### **2.3 Visiting exchange student from home country**

Most of the exchange students have had at least one friend or relative visiting them abroad during the exchange program. According to exchange students, it helps them to understand what this is and how this may change your life. Also, most of them wants to show the city and have a feeling of home abroad.

As an example, no one of my relatives or friends have visited me during my 10-month exchange program. I do not feel need to travel my home country and when I talk with my relatives and friends via Internet I can discuss about all the topics, but I still have a strong feeling that it would be really nice if someone would visit me. I would like to share the experience and make them understand what kind of awesome exchange year I have been trough. I have a feeling that no one of them might not understand it fully if they do not visit me at all. The feeling is a bit same as if you have a new house and no one of your friends or relatives are not visiting you.

As a conclusion, I see that it is not mandatory for old friends or relatives to visit exchange student abroad but it would make stronger social bond during the exchange program as well as after the exchange program when adapting back to normal life. I believe, that influence of exchange program is high and it is actually hard to adapt back to normal life afterwards.

### **3 SOCIAL CONTACTS ABROAD IN DESTINATION COUNTRY**

Social contacts in destination country are of course important when staying long time abroad. In my case, I already knew few of my classmates from Finland when I moved to Germany as an exchange student. However, based on my experience, most of the exchange students do not know anyone when moving to the new country. Some of them do not even have anyone else from their own country, or even from a similar culture. During my first semester here in Germany, there was only one girl from Korea and no one else from Asia in our exchange students group.

#### **3.1 International Office**

When the exchange year is about to start, the International Office in destination country takes a huge role to make exchange students feel like home.

As an example, about one month before my exchange year started the International Office from Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences with student tutors invited me and my fellow exchange students to a Facebook group established for exchange students for that semester specifically. When my second semester started, some of the exchange students returned to their home country and new exchange students arrived. Once again, the International Office established another Facebook group so that each time the group would take maximum effort by only inviting exchange students who were present. With that Facebook group, they were able to introduce themselves and each one of us to each other tentatively, so that we would not be alone or that afraid of moving abroad. That helped us establish preliminary social network and in the end turned out to be really effective way. I have to say, that without this Facebook group our social lives in Germany would have been very much different. Facebook seems to be highly effective communication method nowadays when social media is the word of the decade.

See Figure 3: Exchange students HNU SS12 Facebook group as an example how Facebook is used for increasing communication and improving social relationships.

As an another good example, when we arrived to Germany we first had orientation weeks arranged by the International Office. One part of the orientation weeks was intensive German language course, which was really useful for daily social contacts which happens in grocery stores etc. That was also really useful for strengthening social contacts that were preliminary established in Facebook group mentioned above. Other parts of the orientations weeks helped to strengthen these social contacts as well, as well as understanding the culture of Germany and culture of countries where exchange students originated.

See Figure 4: Orientation weeks for international students in Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences to understand activities that were given during the orientation weeks.

### **3.2 International students**

Based on my experience, exchange students (referred as international students in this chapter, since some of the international students are doing their practical training or the whole degree abroad and are not necessarily *exchange students*) form a tight social network with each other. As an example, when I got to know international students who were studying in Finland, they had strong social relationship mainly with other international students. As an another example, during the last two semesters I have spend abroad in Germany international students have done the same thing. The strongest social relationship are with other international students. This is possible because exchange students are most likely first ones to meet each other, as can be drawn as conclusion from chapter 3.1 International Office. In addition, other international students are in the same position as exchange students and based on my experience, stay in the same dormitories and therefore also meet other international students more likely.

### **3.3 Classmates**

In addition to other exchange students and international students, exchange student may have social contacts with classmates from school. Some of the exchange students I know do not have local classmates since they attend to courses which are in English and

not that popular to German students in Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences. In my case however, since I am doing a double degree with German students, I am one of the lucky ones who have this opportunity to get social contacts with local classmates. Since most of the exchange students in my experience tend to form social relationships with other international students and therefore already have social network in destination country, and local classmates most probably already have strong social network from previous years, I do not find it necessary to build up strong relationship with other classmates.

However, I find it highly recommended. Based on my experience, the stronger the social relationship with local classmates have become, the more accepted exchange student have been among the classmates and naturally the social network have increased significantly. If I compare my situation to the exchange students who only know other international students, my social network in Germany is more than twice as large. It helps me to feel more like home.

On my class, there is about 50 German students plus four Finnish exchange student me included. They all know each other but they tend to stay in a groups of 3 to 6 people. After I asked around, this happened roughly after the first year and it is only natural, that some of the people get to be better friends with each other than others. So when we as an exchange students started to study with them, we basically got to know different groups inside our class instead of getting to know all of them at once. As an example, I am used to do group works with either the Finns or with the same three German students on my class. The second Finn is used to do the same, but with the different four German students on my class. The third and fourth Finn repeat the model, but also with different groups of German students. In addition, when we invite our fellow German students to spend time with us on our free time, there is different German students from our class who takes part. Since our group size is as high as 50, we still have not had social relationship with all of our classmates, if I do not count the daily polite greeting habit. However, as I said, this is not even necessary. Even though it is highly recommended.

### **3.4 Other friends**

Even though examples given above already prove that exchange students are most likely to get wide social network already from school, it is highly likely that they will also get social relationship with other locals as well. As an example, I have got to know locals from my dormitory and parties. Anyway, I do not believe that this difference that much to situation when making friends in home country. Biggest difference is the language barrier on this matter.

However, there is few cases that should be mentioned. One time on the party, one of the Finnish exchange students met accidentally a Finn who have been working here for a while. Without that language barrier she became friends with us pretty quickly. As an another example, on the last semester here was only one Brazilian with no other Portuguese speaking exchange student. When he once met another Portuguese speaking guest on one party, he immediately felt bonded with him.

## **4 SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF EXCHANGE PROGRAM**

Studying abroad in a different country, maybe far away from the home country, in a different culture and most probably with another language than mother tongue, there will most probably also be some problems. Examples followed are cases that are only small part of the exchange program and I have to emphasize that most of the exchange students I have spoke it, also most of the ones mentioned in these examples, have said that the exchange year have been best time of their lives and they have loved it. I agree with those comments. Still, there are some problems that shadows the enjoyable journey of exchange students.

### **4.1 Culture Shock**

Culture shock is not necessarily a social problem of exchange program but it surely is a major factor when studying abroad and it cannot be avoided. It affects on social

relationships in home country and abroad, as well as in adapting to destination country and later on back to home country.

Culture shock is defined as a psychological disorientation that most people experience when living abroad in another country where culture differs from home country. The symptoms of culture shock include homesickness, boredom, withdrawal, compulsive eating and drinking, excessive sleep, irritability as well as stereotyping host nationals and hostility towards them. <sup>[2]</sup> Culture shock can be divided into five stages (described below in examples), which take place first in destination country and later on in home country when returning. Together these forms a W-curve, as seen on attachment Figure 2.

First stage is honeymoon stage, whereat person feels euphoria about the new culture and situation while everything is so exciting and new. <sup>[3]</sup> As an example, when we first arrived as exchange students to Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences, we felt exactly like this. It was actually easier to form social relationships in destination country but as a negative side, some of the social relationships in home country suffered because of this. This is better described in chapter 4.5 Relationships.

Second stage is distress stage, whereat problems arise. On this stage person starts to feel confused and/or isolated. <sup>[3]</sup> As an example, many of the exchange student I know have had symptoms of the culture shock (described above) in this stage. This may naturally affect in social relationships, if person feels example hostility towards host nationals or simply isolates itself from the social contacts. Chapters 4.3 Conflicts and 4.4 Homesickness are part of the consequence of this stage.

Third stage is re-integration stage, whereat problems become stronger. Person starts to feel angry and frustrated, dislike the culture, language and food, as well as idealize life "back home". Person is reconnecting with the values of itself and own culture. This is healthy reaction and completely normal. <sup>[3]</sup> As an example, many of the exchange

students have travelled back to home country multiple times during the exchange program.

Fourth stage is autonomy stage, whereat person starts to accept the situation. Person do not feel isolated anymore and person starts to feel like itself again. <sup>[3]</sup> As an example, many of the exchange students have become more open and their personalities have come up more after the months have passed.

Fifth stage is independence stage, whereat person starts to feel confident, comfortable and itself again, embrace the culture and see everything in a new but realistic light. Person starts to feel like home. <sup>[3]</sup> As an example, many of the exchange students I know feel like home here in Germany. Also exchange students I knew in Finland felt the same way.

## **4.2 Cultural differences**

Culture in destination country may differ a lot from home country. Addition to locals, exchange students often form a big part of social relationships abroad with each other. Therefore it is likely that cultural differences will raise.

As an example, Spaniards are really outgoing people and talk a lot. One of my Spanish friends have said, that even if they do not have anything else to say, they make something up - anything. Finns in the other hand are quite silent and stolid. It is in their nature and they just do not express themselves that loud. From Spanish aspect, Finns may seem strange and I have heard that they feel even uncomfortable with Finns because of awkward silence. From Finnish aspect, Spaniards may seem hyper-active and even exasperating. Finns may also feel uncomfortable because between Finns there is no awkward silence - it is just known as silence. With Spaniards however awkward silence appears to Finns as well. Despite of mentioned, the Spaniards and the Finns that I know have strong social relationship with each other and these cultural differences effect only on their behavior in situations.

As an another example, most of the European cultures have a strong alcohol culture, and especially youths use a lot of alcohol in parties. From my experience, exchange students spend a lot of time together particularly in parties and social relationships are build up and strengthen in these parties. However, example Jordanians have religious views which may prevent partying and I also know few exchange students who simply do not like partying. Even though other activities exists as well, it is possible that in these few cases some of the exchange students find themselves isolated from the main group. This may rise as huge social problem during the exchange problem and may cause homesickness.

### **4.3 Homesickness**

Homesickness is a common experience and its causes, its course and its consequences are not well known. <sup>[1]</sup> However, I can share my experiences and observations to clarify those.

As an example, one of the Jordanians last semester felt homesick all the time. She got along with everyone but she did not make strong social relations to anyone. She also mentioned to me that culture shock was major factor for her and that she missed her family a lot. She had lived all her life with her family. I know from experience that moving away from home the first time is huge change of life, not to mention that during exchange program even the country, culture, language and everything you know may change.

As an another example, one of the Finns drop out from double degree program and returned to Finland after first semester instead of staying whole academic year as planned. Unlike in previous example, he did not feel homesick because of family reasons or culture shock. He also got along with everyone but he also did not make strong social relations to anyone. He spend a lot of time in dormitory alone like Jordanian in previous example. Later on before he left to Finland he began to make better relations to other exchange students. After this, he even started to consider about staying for whole academic year after all. In addition, his poor school success was

another factor for the desire to return home and therefore it was hard to overturn the decision.

As a conclusion from these examples, the largest cause for homesickness is a lack of strong social relations in destination country. Also cultural differences, too attached family relations, isolation or poor school success may cause homesickness.

#### **4.4 Conflicts**

Like in all social relationships and in life generally, conflicts may occur. Conflicts that may occur particularly during the exchange program are in my experience mostly caused by cultural differences and attitudes against foreigners.

As an example, few of the Finns last semester were residents of dormitory which had only German speaking caretaker, mostly German residents and a landlord who had strict rules. The conflict can be divided in three phases that are described on Figure 1: Conflict Phases. At first in advance phase, the Finns were relatively loud and therefore broke the house rules. Afterwards in escalation phase, German residents blamed Finns about all the problems in dormitory even if they were not present, the German speaking caretaker were unable to understand other than German residents and complained continually Finns, the landlord tightened the rules ridiculously (e.g. toilet is forbidden to use after 10 pm) and refused to communicate in English, and the Finns did not communicate with other residents. Later on in clarification phase when the Finns were moving out and they left the flat in perfect condition, caretaker was actually crying and offered an apology for her behavior.

#### **4.5 Relationships**

Long range relationships are known to be difficult since for most of the people sexual intercourse and spending time physically with partner is important. In addition, exchange program can be live changing experience mentally since worldview expands, it is possible to meet different kind of people from other cultures and possibilities of

travelling increases. This may cause emotional distancing. Also exchange students mostly have a lot of events and parties, which may lead to cheating and seriously damage or end love relationship.

As an example, during the last six months more than half of the long range relationships that I know my fellow exchange students have had suffered cheating of some kind. About one third of the long range relationships have ended either of the cause mentioned or because of emotional distancing.

## SOURCES

order: books in alphabetical order, websites in alphabetical order, figures in alphabetical order  
author: book, page number. publisher, year.  
author, "name of the article", source, date published, link, date viewed

[1] Carden, A. I., Feicht, R: Homesickness among American and Turkish college students. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 22, page 418. 1991.

[2] "Dealing with culture shock", Center for European Studies and Architecture, 2010, [http://www.oired.vt.edu/cesa/currentstudents/cs\\_culturalshock.htm](http://www.oired.vt.edu/cesa/currentstudents/cs_culturalshock.htm), July 1 2012.

[3] Deborah Swallow, "The classic 5 stage culture shock model", [deborahswallow.com](http://www.deborahswallow.com), May 15 2010, <http://www.deborahswallow.com/2010/05/15/the-classic-5-stage-culture-shock-model/>, July 1 2012.

[4] "International exchange and study abroad programs", [Topuniversities.com](http://www.topuniversities.com), <http://www.topuniversities.com/studying-abroad/advice/international-exchange-and-study-abroad-programs>, June 20 2012.

[5] "Internet users", International Telecommunications Union , 2011, <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/>, June 20 2012.

Figure 1: Prof. Dr. Reisach Ulrike adapted from "Peace Education", [Dadalos](http://www.dadalos.org/frieden_int/grundkurs_4/konflikt.htm), [http://www.dadalos.org/frieden\\_int/grundkurs\\_4/konflikt.htm](http://www.dadalos.org/frieden_int/grundkurs_4/konflikt.htm), June 4 2012.

Figure 2: Author adapted from "Culture Shock", British-German Association, <http://www.britishgermanassociation.org/special.php?pageno=19>, July 1 2012.

Figure 3: Authors screenshot of Facebook group, July 1 2012.

Figure 4: Author adapted from International Office

# ATTACHMENTS

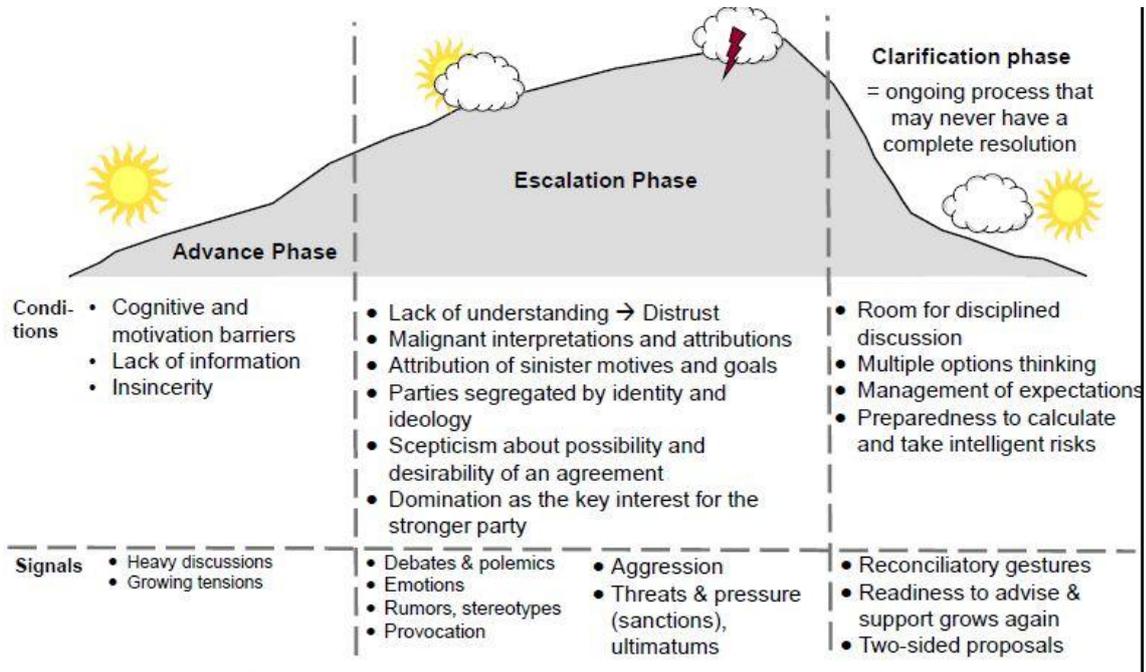


Figure 1: Conflict phases

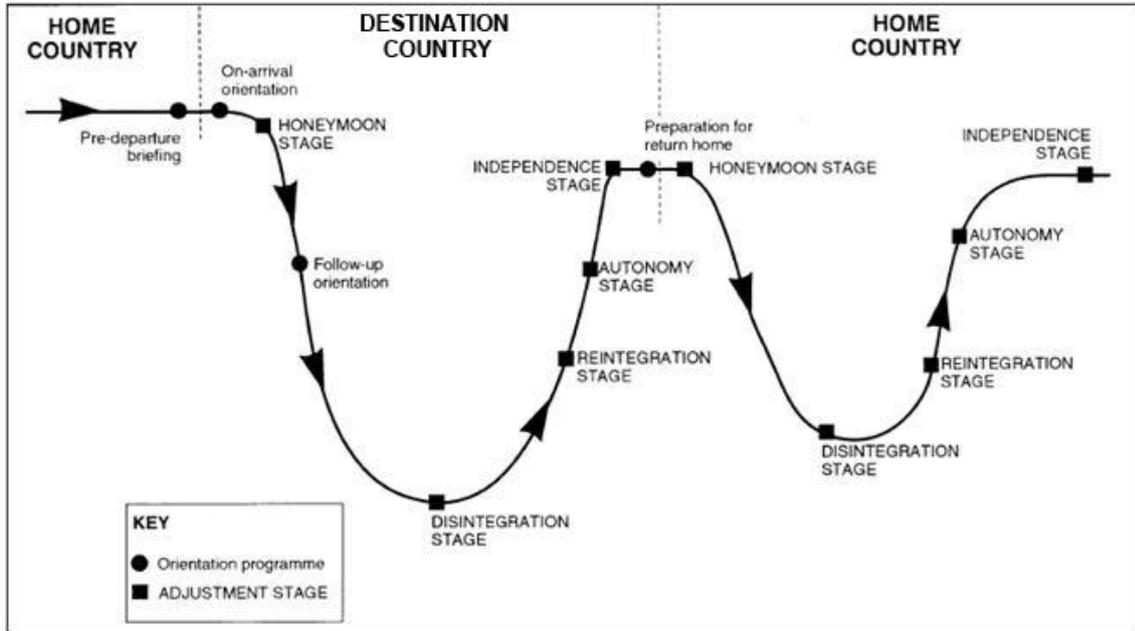


Figure 2: Culture shock W-curve

facebook Search for people, places and things Niko Pääkkönen Home

Niko Pääkkönen

FAVOURITES  
News Feed  
Messages  
Events

GROUPS  
Exchange Students HNU...  
iMuk 9  
WebProject & MuPro  
HNU | Hochschule ... 20+  
Barcelona  
International incomings H...  
Sports to exchange students  
International & Eras... 20+  
Create group

Exchange Students HNU SS12 About Events Photos Files Notifications

69 members · Chat

Write something... Add friends to group

**Mirjam Wenke**  
Last but not least: Save the date! I plan a Good-bye dinner for you on 20 July 2012. Have a good weekend, Mirjam  
Friday at 13:47  
You, Kaisa Kotimäki, Yingying Xia, Cristina Boccia and 6 others like this.

**Cristina Boccia**  
Hi! Does anyone have the the final link for the exams SS 2012? Thank you!  
Thursday at 17:46 near Ulm  
View all 3 comments  
Cristina Boccia Dear Marion! Thank you :) Thursday at 16:03 · Like  
Marion Rehmus Var så god, Cristina! :) Thursday at 16:40 · Like

**Ekin Yildiran**  
Hi everyone!  
We wanted to throw another Turkish Party before we all leave, and now we do it: This Friday at Sproll Bar!  
We are expecting you ALL for TURKISH PARTY III :)  
<https://www.facebook.com/events/490915420925810/?context=create>  
TURKISH PARTY III  
Friday at 22:00 at Sproll Bar  
Like · Comment · Follow post · 25 June at 21:02  
Veronika Hornáková, Bing Chiang, Mirjam Wenke and 2 others like this.

**Flóra Gyurcsó**  
tomorrow we gonna go to the Ludwigsfeld lake around 11 a.m., if u want join us! if someone has a volleyball or card or something even better! ;) — with Kaisa Kotimäki and Marta Chorzępa.  
Thursday at 23:44 near Neu-Ulm  
You, Taru Väättäinen, Gonzalo Garcia, Lassi Kemppainen and 2 others like this.  
View all 4 comments  
Taru Väättäinen Im in. I just wanna sleep late and I'll join you when I get to it :) 16 June at 00:21 via Mobile · Like  
Yongwhi Kim Actually, i was planning to go there. What a coincident! 16 June at 00:24 via Mobile · Like · 1

Figure 3: Exchange students HNU SS12 Facebook group

HNU Orientation weeks for international students - 1st week -						
Monday 12.09.11	Tuesday 13.09.11	Wednesday 14.09.11	Thursday 15.09.11	Friday 16.09.11	Saturday 17.09.11	Sunday 18.09.11
Arrival Day...	09:00 - 10:00 Room: ENG, 11 <b>Welcome session</b>	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3		Trip to the alps*  <i>Cancelled</i>  registration with 2€ until 15.09.
	10:00 - 13:30 Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3 <b>German course</b>					
	13:30 <b>Lunch together</b> <Peach Fit>			13:30 Room: ENG, 11 <b>Savarian Breakfast</b> with Vice President		
	15:00 <b>Registration at town hall</b>	16:00 Münsterplatz <b>City Quiz + Münster</b>	15:00 Room: ENG, 11 <b>Health Insurance</b>  <b>Visa extension</b>			
	19:00 <b>Welcome by the student tutors</b>			<b>Evening</b> with student tutors		

*Postponed*

*Finnish Party!*

\* registration needed

- International Office
- strongly recommended
- German class
- optional activities

HNU Orientation weeks for international students - 2nd week -						
Monday 19.09.11	Tuesday 20.09.11	Wednesday 21.09.11	Thursday 22.09.11	Friday 23.09.11	Saturday 24.09.11	Sunday 25.09.11
08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	Trip to Heidelberg city*  registration with 8€ until 22.09.	
15:00 - 17:00 Room: ENG, 7 <b>Internet-Intranet</b>	14:30 - 17:00 Room: ENG, 11 <b>German bank account</b>	15:00 - 17:00 Room: ENG, 11 <b>Studying at HNU</b>	15:00 - 17:00 Room: ENG, 7 <b>Individual study schedule</b>			
	21:00 <b>International pub evening</b>			Trip to Stuttgart soccer & city*  registration until 22.09.		

\* registration needed

- International Office
- strongly recommended
- German class
- optional activities

HNU Orientation weeks for international students - 3rd week -						
Monday 26.09.11	Tuesday 27.09.11	Wednesday 28.09.11	Thursday 29.09.11	Friday 30.09.11	Saturday 01.10.11	Sunday 02.10.11
08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	Excursion* Bonn + Köln 01.-04.10.  <i>Volksfest in Stuttgart</i>  registration with 70 € until 20.09.	
15:00 - 17:00 ENG, 11 <b>HNU Quiz</b>	<i>Oktoberfest in München</i>	15:00 - 17:00 ENG, 11 <b>German Culture Workshop</b>	15:00 - 17:00 ENG, 11 <b>International Workshop</b>	<i>Spanish party</i>		

\* registration needed

- International Office
- strongly recommended
- German class
- optional activities

HNU Orientation weeks for international students - 4th week -						
Monday 03.10.11	Tuesday 04.10.11	Wednesday 05.10.11	Thursday 06.10.11	Friday 07.10.11	Saturday 08.10.11	Sunday 09.10.11
	08:30 - 13:30 Room: canteen <b>Welcome of new students at HNU</b>	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German course</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3	08:30 - 13:30 <b>German test</b> Room: ENG, 1; ENG,3		

*Finnish Party vol.2*

- strongly recommended
- German class
- optional activities

Figure 4: Orientation weeks for international students in Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences