

End Report

Program Advisory 7th Trimester Committee

2014-2015 Trimester 1



RSM
Student
Representation

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Introduction

This year's 7th trimester committee consists of four enthusiastic and open-minded members. As a part of Student Representation's Program Advisory, we aim to improve the information flow between the various parties related to the 7th trimester of BA and IBA.

The committee will do this by gathering feedback from students about the various options such as exchange, internship, and minor. At the same time we want to start a dialogue with organisations such as (I)BA program management, career services and the international office to exchange ideas.

The topics which have been researched this trimester are: general information flow, exchange, and language requirements.

In this report we strive to reflect the opinions of the students in a highly accurate and objective manner. On their behalf, we will make suggestions and look for appropriate solutions regarding the 7th trimester.

Kind regards,

7th trimester committee 2014-2015
Program Advisory

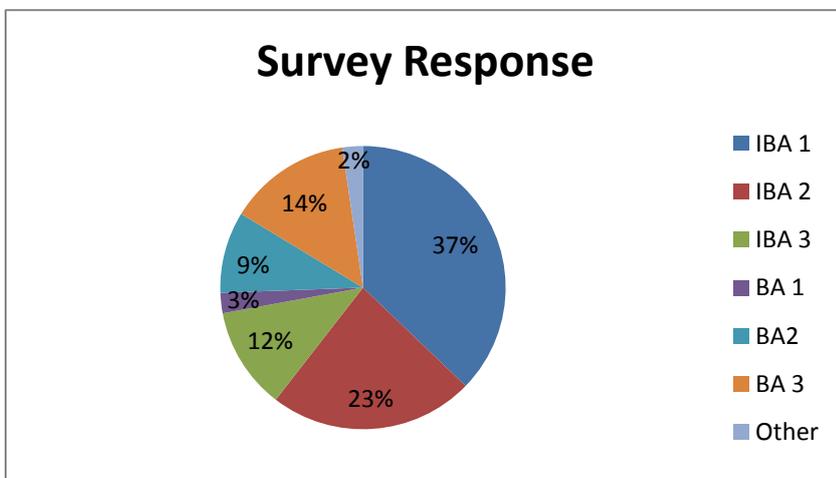
Methodology

Throughout this trimester both qualitative and quantitative feedback has been collected with regard to general information flow, exchange, and language requirements. The methods used are; survey, focus group, and informal talks with a few mentors.

Survey

By using Google-forms we created an online survey which covered the three research topics of this trimester. Open-, closed-, as well as rating questions were incorporated in this survey, which means we were able to retrieve useful quantitative as well as qualitative data.

In total 43 students replied to our survey, 26% BA and 74% IBA. A more detailed distribution is shown in figure 1.



← Figure 1: Survey Response

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that we created different questions for BA and IBA regarding language requirements as the rules for language electives are not exactly the same. A link to the survey can be found in appendix 1.

Focus group

On Wednesday the 29th of October 2014, the 7th trimester committee organised a focus group in collaboration with Program Advisory’s other committees. Similar to previous years it was a great success. Students felt content they could express their opinion, and the committees were able to gather valuable information through more in-depth conversations. Fortunately, the focus group provided a perfect opportunity to collect more feedback from especially BA students as their response to the survey was relatively low. The guiding questions we posed during this event can be found in appendix 2.

Conversation with mentors

In addition to the survey and focus group we also held informal conversations with some mentors from the first year IBA mentor program. The issues we discussed with them were related to the awareness of exchange requirements amongst first year students as we wanted to confirm some findings of our focus group.

Information flow

This topic mainly deals with the awareness amongst students about the 7th trimester. Key questions are: To what extent are students aware of the different possibilities in this trimester? Do they know where to find the information they need? When would they like to receive more detailed information about the different options?

Feedback from survey

The survey showed that almost 80% of the students were aware of the possibilities this trimester offers. We were pleasantly surprised by this result but our concern focused on the remaining 20%. Some choices require early awareness (e.g. particular grades and/or language requirements), as stressed by the participants of the focus group, this unawareness can be a great disadvantage at later stages of a student's academic career. To be more specific, only 18% of the respondents claimed they could find all the information they need. The majority (64%) answered: "Yes a bit, but I cannot find all the information I need". This does not necessarily mean that the information is not available; it frequently means that the concerned students were unable to find it. Furthermore most students indicated they obtained most of this information from fellow students, the RSM-website and Blackboard.

Additionally, more than 90% of all students indicated that they want to receive more detailed information about the 7th trimester in the first year already. Especially first year students indicated that they would like to receive this information in the first (81.25%) or second trimester (12.5%). This finding emphasizes that there is a strong desire amongst students for detailed information in an early stage of their studies, so they can make a deliberate choice. Overall, 32.6% of the respondents wants the information flow about the exchange to start in the first trimester, 25.6% in the second trimester and 32.6% wants it to start in the third trimester.

Feedback from focus group

Most of the feedback of the focus group corresponded with the feedback from the survey, but it definitely provided more insight into the topics. The awareness of the different options and the available information should be improved. This could for example be done through communication via social media and more aligned information sessions during the first year mentor sessions.

A remarkable comment we heard several times during the focus group was that students feel that the –in their eyes- more negative things such as having good grades and doing related extracurricular activities are emphasized more than the positive things you can gain from for example doing an exchange or internship. This is a pity, because the 7th trimester committee believes that this trimester plays a crucial role in both bachelor programs as it provides a lot of opportunities for both academic and personal enhancement. Consequently, the students in the focus group stressed the need for improvement to reach out to the students adequately.

Secondly, the students were not aware of the fact they can ask for contact details at the International Office in order to get in contact with students who, for instance, already

took part in an exchange. The experiences these students have may be of great value to our students as personal experiences and knowledge often outweigh general information.

Solution according to PA

First of all it is important that the available information could easily be found by all students. One way to do this is to put all the web links or references to the relevant information in the course manual. Another way to do this is through the Facebook pages created by RSM itself. Students access these pages quite frequently. Hence, we would like to suggest that Programme Management can make a pin post (a message that stays on top of the page) containing some general information about the 7th trimester. To avoid spam, Programme Management can mention that they will not respond on questions through Facebook, but students are more than welcome to ask questions to their mentors during the mentor sessions.

Secondly, we would like to plead for an earlier start of the information flow (i.e. information sessions, access on blackboard to relevant information etc.). An earlier start means a start at the beginning of the first year. This because the grades of the first year count if you want to take part in an exchange or internship program. In our opinion it is beneficial to start as early as possible, which means the first trimester. We are aware of all the new impressions students have to deal with in the first trimester, but at least you can raise awareness of the 7th trimester and mention when the information sessions will start. For example: raise awareness in first trimester by mentioning the grade requirements/language courses and provide useful links in for example the course manual. Combined with starting the information sessions in the second trimester.

In addition to this, we want to mention that the current state of how the 7th trimester is generally presented can be improved. This should not be extremely difficult as most resources are already there. (e.g. invite more students to the information sessions to tell about their experiences, promote the videos students made during their trip via the internet)

Checklist to improve the problem

- Start in the first trimester with the information flow, which will extend as the year progresses.
- Refer to the relevant webpages in the Course Manual (during the first year already), on Facebook or during the mentor sessions.
- Highlight the positive aspects of doing an exchange, internship, minor, etc.

Exchange

This year most second-year students feel well-informed about the basic requirements but few are aware of the details as for instance a TOEFL-score for a particular institution. Compared to last year the exchange awareness improved due to early information session in the third trimester of the former first year and current second year students. First-year students are relatively uninformed since many mentors did not elaborate sufficiently about this topic as it was stated in the mentor guidelines.

The exchange guidelines are informative and provide general details about the exchange. However, specific details such as exact TOEFL- scores per institution are not provided and the information about the motivation letter appears rather broad. This poses a challenge to students since they do not know how exactly they are expected to write a motivation letter. This topic concerns mostly second-year students as they are about to choose and apply for their exchange destinations. To clarify the issue students are facing, bad examples for motivation letters are provided by the university but good examples are rather scarce.

Feedback from surveys

The results of our surveys indicated that most respondents are interested in an exchange (68.3%) rather than an internship (17.1%) or a minor (14.6%). Even though the majority of respondents (69%) already decided which destinations to apply for, few (28.6% of respondents considering an exchange) know the exact requirements for their spots. The most important sources for information about the exchange are the host university website (41%), the information session and the study reports (both 34%) and the fact sheets (30%). A minority considered the course list on blackboard (16%). When asked about anything unclear regarding the exchange, the main concerns were the exact TOEFL- scores, the courses offered at the host institution and where to look them up and the updates on Blackboard. Regarding the updates on Blackboard, a quarter of respondents was either content or very content (26.7% together) some were indifferent (41%) and others not content or not content at all (40.74%).

Feedback from interviews with mentors

The mentors interviewed responded, that they did not or not sufficiently explain about the exchange. The reason for this was that they simply forgot due to the range of topics they are expected to cover. The priority for this topic compared to other topics mentors are expected to explain, was quite low.

Feedback from focus group

In the focus group we discussed the exchange with the present students. During these discussions we found three main areas of improvement. Most students agreed on the missing example of an excellent fictional motivation letter to provide them with an example of what the international office considers as a cutting-edge application. Moreover, mainly first year students felt uninformed about the requirements for an exchange and would appreciate information about this area earlier. This problem arises amongst others because mentors did not provide them with sufficient information about this topic.

Solution according to PA

First of all, the mentor guidelines concerning the information to be conveyed such as the exchange requirements should be made mandatory discussion topics, to ensure that first-year students are informed on time.

Furthermore, second-year students want to be provided with a fictional perfect motivation letter conveying an impression of the activities and motivations RSM expects. However, the 7th trimester committee fears this might result into a situation in which all students write a very similar motivation letter in which their true intentions and goals are not mentioned. Hence, we would like to propose a different solution; create a structured overview of guiding questions which students need to answer in their letter. This overview should be published well in advance on the Bachelor Exchange Blackboard page for example.

Additionally, TOEFL- scores need to be well-communicated; detailed information is to be found in the section 'language requirements'.

These solutions are the most efficient solutions since they provide maximum quality with minimal effort. Alternatives we considered seemed either less effective or involve more effort.

Checklist to improve the problem

- Mentor information guidelines must be mandatory.
- An overview of guiding questions which students need to answer in their motivation letter should be published timely, on Blackboard for example.

Language Requirements & Courses

In the 7th trimester of their studies IBA and BA students have equal chances to go on exchange to one of RSM's partner universities. To participate in the exchange students are required to prove their ability to speak certain languages. While language requirements in for example French, German or Spanish only apply to certain universities, it is necessary for all students to include an official proof of their English level into their application. For that purpose, RSM's International Office strongly advises students to take the official TOEFL-test at ETS language centres. The TOEFL-test was thus one of the focal points of our focus group.

Besides, we were interested in the awareness and quality of the language courses offered by the Language & Training Centre also with respect to the language requirements for the exchange. For that purpose we collected 43 student responses in our surveys and analysed the outcomes accordingly.

Feedback from surveys

In the survey both IBA and BA students were asked whether they thought if information about the language requirements for the 7th trimester is provided early enough. According to the survey 30 out of 43 students do not think that this is the case. In fact, 60% of those who do not think that information is provided early enough voted for provision of information already in the first trimester of their studies, 23% voted for the second trimester.

In the first open question of our survey IBA students answered whether they took a language course in their first year and indicated why they did or did not. Out of the 32 responses for this open question four students did take a language course in their first year because they perceived it as very useful in the Netherlands to speak Dutch or because they wanted to go on exchange to a country where Spanish is required. The dominant feedback was however that current first year students do not take a language course because they want to focus on their mandatory studies. Most of them are planning to take one either in the second half of their first year, after they have adapted to university life and if their time allows it, or in their second year. Both former reasons are also congruent with the feedback from current second and third year students who currently take a language course. In this regard it is important to mention that many students would like to take a course during their first year, or regret having not taken it then, but are deterred by the workload. Closely related is the reason that students perceive the language courses to be badly scheduled since the language exams often coincide with their regular exams. Furthermore, two students specifically mentioned their initial desire to take German but eventually failed to do so because it was not directly offered by the university but by the Goethe-Institut. Another reason was that the information offered on the Goethe-Institut's website is not available in English. A limited availability of language courses and unavailability of higher level follow-up courses were also indicated by students. Nevertheless, they emphasized the importance of promoting language courses as early as possible. One even stated that language courses were not introduced in the first year such that he was unaware of them. Other collected reasons for not taking a language course in the first year included lack of time in general, lack of interest, indecision about which language to take, the plan to do it on exchange, or the fact that the student's own level of Spanish was too high for the offered courses.

In case an IBA student has already taken a language course at the Language & Training Centre, we asked them to rate the quality. The outcome was positive; none of the 9 students rated the quality as insufficient. In fact, 67% rated the quality as being very good or good. Since the university also acknowledges certain language courses other than those offered by the Language & Training Centre, we also asked IBA students about their awareness of this matter of fact on a scale from 1 (not informed at all) to 5 (very well informed). In contrast to the former, these results are disappointing. 72% out of 32 students feel not informed at all or at least slightly uninformed. 8 people were neutral about this questions and only one person felt very well informed about this possibility.

Our BA survey addressed students from these cohorts in particular, as they do not (yet) have the possibility to take two language courses for 5 ECTS as part of their curriculum. First and foremost, 10 out of 11 BA students would like to have this possibility. In the case that they would have the opportunity, the fact that 4 would take an English course is highly important because this can be linked to their attempt to go on exchange and therefore the TOEFL test.

Feedback from Focus Group

The main point discussed during our focus group with regard to language requirements was the TOEFL-test. IBA students, who often already have a different proof of their ability to speak English, were particularly interested in an overview for which university the TOEFL is specifically required. On the other hand, BA students mentioned the problem of their unawareness of English courses at the university's Language & Training Centre to prepare them for the test. In general, students from both cohorts emphasized their request for a specific overview of the English language requirements for each partner university in the Exchange Guidelines. In this regard they would also appreciate an alignment of the TOEFL score for each university, as some of them demand a higher score than the one declared by RSM.

Solution according PA

Overall, it would be advisable to raise the awareness of the possibility to take language courses, particularly with respect to the exchange, earlier in the curriculum. This could be done during the (I)BA-kickoff, through special announcements on Sin-online, emails sent to the whole cohort, or the mentors could mention it during their sessions. As many students showed interest in taking a German language courses, but were deterred by the fact that the information on the website of the Goethe-Institut was not provided in English, it would be appropriate to add the respective information in English to the LTC website. Furthermore, more follow-up courses in the LTC and increased awareness of language courses acknowledged by the university other than offered by the LTC would assist in solving the problem. Finally, to reduce students' confusion about specific minimum TOEFL scores and language requirements for different universities, it would be advisable to add an extra column to the Exchange Guidelines where these are presented or update the language requirements document on the exchange Blackboard page.

Checklist to improve the problem

- Raise awareness of language requirements for exchange purposes already in the first or second trimester in both cohorts.
- In particular, raise awareness of English courses at LTC for BA students.
- Provide information in English about German language courses at the Goethe-Institut.
- Raise awareness of acknowledged language courses offered by other institutions.
- Give BA students the opportunity to take two language courses for 5 ECTS as part of their curriculum.
- Add an extra column to the Exchange Guidelines where the specific language requirements, including the respective minimum TOEFL score are stated or update the language requirements document.

Conclusion

All in all the collected feedback demonstrates that a lot of students wish to receive information about the 7th trimester in an early stage of their studies as they would like to prepare themselves and make up their mind about the options available. We suggest that the information flow should start in the first trimester and should be extended as the year progresses. Think about referring to relevant webpages in the Course manual, posting messages in the Facebook groups and paying some more attention to it during the mentor sessions.

Furthermore, a way should be found to stimulate mentors to actually talk about the 7th trimester as only mentioning it in the mentor guidelines does not work. Additionally, several students, specifically second years, wondered whether it is possible to include a good example of a motivation letter in the exchange requirements.

Accordingly, we looked at the language requirements for the 7th trimester. We specifically focused on language requirements in relation towards the exchange as official proof is not asked for an internship or minor.

The most important findings are to improve the awareness of English courses at the LTC for BA students and update the information about English requirements by adding an extra column to the Exchange Guidelines (or update the Language Requirements document on Blackboard) which mentions the required TOEFL score and other accepted English diplomas per university. Additionally, the language requirements for exchange purposes should be made more explicit during the first or second trimester in both cohorts.

Lastly, if you have any questions or suggestions after reading this report, please do not hesitate to contact us at programadvisory@rsmsr.nl.

Appendix 1: Survey

We used google forms to create our survey, it can be accessed via the following link:
<http://goo.gl/forms/VLBukzLOaQ>

Appendix 2: Case Focus Group

On the 29th of October 2014 the committees of Program Advisory organised a focus group for (I)BA students. To provide them with some background information we created a so called 'case'. The 7th trimester case can be found below.

7th trimester Topic: exchange requirements

Dear students, thank you very much for your attendance and participation in the focus group organized by SR Program Advisory! Your opinions are of crucial value to our research and effort towards bringing positive changes to the study environment of RSM.

This case report is aimed at providing you with some background information on the topic: exchange requirements.

As you probably know there are several options available to obtain the required ECTS for the 7th trimester of your BA/IBA studies. One of them is going on exchange to one of RSM's foreign partner universities. In order to structure the selection and application process for future exchange students, RSM's International Office and the host universities have created so called 'exchange requirements'.

In this Focus Group, we want to hear your personal experience and suggestions related to this issue, both positive and negative.

Questions that you can ask yourself during this Focus Group are:

- Are the exchange requirements of host universities and the International Office well aligned?
- Can I find all the information I need?
- If you could change one thing about the 7th trimester exchange requirements, what would it be?
- What do you think of the idea to set the extra requirement for students who are currently doing an exchange to provide their contact details so future exchange students (most likely first and second years) can ask them specific questions related to their destination. How should this be done, and should it be compulsory?

During the first round we'll share ideas and experiences, thus identify possible problems. After that we'll look at possible solutions and implementation methods. We challenge you to come up with creative solutions and encourage you to speak your mind! Also, try to listen to others and be honest with yourself.