

MILSA

MILSA (Mentoring Intercultural Learning Through Study Abroad) is a comprehensive English language mentoring program that offers students who are undertaking a study abroad the possibility of reflecting on their intercultural learning. By participating in MILSA, students receive the opportunity of developing and enhancing their intercultural learning and intercultural communication skills. Upon completion, mentees receive a Certificate of Completion issued by the University of Bern.

Why MILSA?

Students' intercultural learning is encouraged and prompted during pre-departure and post-sojourn workshops, but also through innovative use of communication technologies, blog contributions and active reflections during students' time abroad. These multiple measures ensure that MILSA mentees receive comprehensive support throughout the study abroad experience to maximise intercultural learning. As a consequence, students are scaffolded in their critical social and cultural negotiation not only with the host society but also in their own intercultural reflections.

By taking part in MILSA...

... students reach a more nuanced and reflected understanding of the meaning of interculturality and of their own intercultural experiences. Mentees largely develop intercultural sensitivity to the cultures and language of the host society and become conscious of their own role as exchange students and of their reactions to the host country. By sharing their experiences on the blogs and with their peers, they receive the opportunity to reflect on their study abroad and on coming home, a step that can be difficult for some and is certainly eased by the knowledge that this experience is shared by others. Certainly, participating in MILSA means strengthening peer networks, including with international students at the home university.

In a nutshell, the program supports students in...

- learning to talk about the study abroad experience in view of future professional interviews
- acquiring learning strategies and skills for positive learning experiences at the host university
- reflecting on personal role and experiences and developing a self-critical stance and self-awareness
- learning to formulate expectations and dealing with (inter) cultural situations and social realities
- learning to deal with stereotypes and prejudice
- settling in the new social and cultural environment

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

MILSA is comprised of four parts, each with overarching themes (eg: expectations, cultural practices, linguistic learning, intercultural experiences) where students reflect on and develop these themes from the first workshop before their study abroad to the final online survey at the end of the program.

Before departure

First Steps in Intercultural Learning Workshop

This workshop focuses on intercultural learning, its meaning, relevance and problems. With some theoretical input, exercises and group work students negotiate what it means to be an intercultural learner in preparation of their time abroad. «Interculturality», «culture» and other related and equally complex terms be discussed. Students' expectations for study abroad are be discussed.

During study abroad

Blog posts, Skype interviews and group task

While away, students stay in touch with the mentor in Bern, as well as with their peer group. Communication occurs via the blog website milsablog.ch, Skype and email. The mentor sends blog and group work tasks to students and talks to them via Skype at least once. Students' communication goes three ways: with the mentor, with their peers and with the blog readers audience via world wide web.

After return

Coming Home Workshop

This session allows students to reconnect with the other participants in person, in particular with the members of their peer group. Time is provided for exchanging experiences of leaving and coming home. In view of future professionalism, students and mentor concern themselves with study abroad as an asset for this and students learn to translate the intercultural and other skills they learned or enhanced during abroad into professional skills.

Key modules of the mentoring

- First Steps in Intercultural Learning Workshop (4 hours)
- Blog contributions on intercultural learning experience
- Skype interview with mentor (60 minutes)
- After return: Coming Home Workshop (4 hours)
- Group task (6 hours)
- Online evaluation (30 minutes)

Mentoring Intercultural Learning Through Study Abroad





What did you learn by taking part in MILSA?

Taking part in MILSA has definitely helped me to become aware of how much we can learn and benefit when we expose ourselves to different cultures. While it might be impossible to ever prepare for such a situation beforehand, MILSA has given me tools that made it easier for me to learn from other cultures once I was exposed to them. The awareness that I can always learn from people with other cultural backgrounds is definitely a skill that I'll appreciate all my life.

Who can you recommend MILSA to?

I would recommend MILSA to anybody who is doing an exchange semester. The experiences you make when immersing yourself into a different cultural setting are unique and MILSA prepares you to take full advantage of this situation. Comparing and sharing your experiences with peers during the stay furthermore helps to develop strategies to effectively deal with this foreign situation and minimize the effects of culture shock.

What did you like best about MILSA?

To me, the greatest experience of the MILSA program was when we got to reunite after our exchange. Writing blog posts and reflecting on the impacts of cultural differences on me has helped me to cope with feeling like a stranger in my host country at times. Sharing my insights with my fellow MILSA colleagues and learning from them was definitely the most interesting experience.

MILSA mentee: Michael Schär
Host university: University of Technology Sydney, Australia
Field of study: Business Administration
Year of stay abroad: 2017/18

Family-Arizing

Michael Schär

Sample blog post

I write this blog sitting on the rooftop of my student housing where the breathtaking view over busy central Sydney reminds me of the stories and aspects I haven't yet gotten to discover. As I reflect on the things and people that have become familiar over time, I can't help but wonder how learning from other cultures has ultimately changed my own cultural identity.

My exchange experience has been overwhelming at times, especially in the beginning. My first few interactions with this foreign culture were undoubtedly characterized by a feeling of awkwardness and uncertainty – sometimes more, sometimes less. Looking back, one strategy that has helped me a lot is the «baby steps» approach. Embracing the uncertainty during unfamiliar interactions and repeating unfamiliar activities and tasks makes them feel familiar one little step at a time. I've found that this seems to work on a variety of activities, for example constantly using a credit card rather than paying by cash.

While it was easy for me to familiarize myself with this kind of practical activity, it took me longer to adapt

to other people's cultural practices that conflicted with deeply rooted cultural practices that I had learned as part of my Swiss upbringing. Take the concept of punctuality, for example. Punctuality would often come up when I introduced myself as Swiss, as people would often ask me about my opinion on watches. After all, this is one of the best-known stereotypes about Switzerland. In Switzerland, according to the stereotype, people will go to great lengths to show up to appointments on time. Furthermore, «on time», will often be defined as being 2–3 minutes early to ensure a timely start at the agreed upon time. Having had the opportunity to work with students from a variety of cultural backgrounds has shown me that this concept is radically different across cultures. Over the course of a semester, I can recollect only one meeting that started «on time», that is according to my definition. As I have a lot of patience, I don't really mind when people are «late». But this is exactly the point – maybe they were running early when applying their own understanding of punctuality. Still, I imagine that even the calmest person would lose faith in his/her teammates after waiting for two hours.

I think, however, that it's important to remember that adapting can be easy. When I tried to have a meeting with my teammates, all I had to do was try to be one hour late, while my teammates usually tried to show up one hour early. This usually worked out well enough, as we met each other half way.

While stereotyping is not always bad, it does remind us that adapting to cultural practices that are close to core beliefs of our own cultural identity is difficult. For example, it came as a great surprise to me that I seem to confirm a wide array of Swiss stereotypes. While I noticed that people relied on stereotypes when meeting me, I also caught myself relying on stereotypes when dealing with people from my host country. Just as my life isn't all about chocolate, banking or watches, Australian culture is much more than surfing, kangaroos and Vegemite. Of course, I was still somewhat disappointed when nobody wanted to go surfing with me as I arrived in the middle of their winter. However, I quickly learned that I liked the alternative activities a lot too. So instead of trying to catch some waves in the (not actually) cold water, we ended up having big Sausage Sizzles, a community event in which people come together to sizzle and eat sausages and enjoy life by exchanging stories and having a good time.

As the semester is now officially over, many of my fellow students are traveling through Australia. This has turned my housing into a little

«ghost town» with me as the only resident. After having had full discretion over the choice of laundry machines (on a less serious note: it took me ages to familiarize myself with this devilish machinery), I headed upstairs to finalize my latest blog contribution. It's here that I encountered one of my friends enjoying the sun. After a week of feeling rather lonely, I was reminded that the biggest support in conquering all these challenges is to be able to rely on people I didn't know until quite recently. Reflecting on what has changed in the understanding of my own cultural identity leads me to realize this person has become a friend because we've both learned to overcome our cultural differences by appreciating the little things that make us unique. I'm grateful to realize that learning how to overcome cultural differences and interacting with unfamiliar cultural practices will have a larger impact on my life than I ever believed possible. It seems like that in some instances, the unfamiliar has not only become familiar, but family.

«Je suis Québécoise, pas Canadienne!»

Tamara von Rotz

Sample blog post

2017 – Canada's 150th anniversary! When I first got to Canada this summer, I travelled the West Coast and I was very much aware of the fact that Canada was proudly celebrating its 150th anniversary. For me as a traveler this meant free entries to National Parks, several celebrations throughout the year and heaps of special offers. The Canadians I met, stayed with, and travelled with, celebrated the anniversary and it was a frequent topic of conversation.

All of that changed once I arrived in Quebec: I still found the Canada 150 sign at the main tourist spots, but the Quebecois did not seem to take great interest in the anniversary – one of my Quebec flat mates even asked me how many years Canada was celebrating. I was slowly growing aware of the fact that many Quebecois did not identify themselves with Canada, but rather with Quebec. To me, this was quite peculiar.

As the semester went on, so did these types of encounters, and I slowly began to grasp this idea of being

Quebecois rather than Canadian: I noticed that my flat mate was not the only Quebecois who did not know what anniversary Canada was celebrating and learned that, whereas many Canadians from other provinces travelled to Ottawa for Canada Day to celebrate the big anniversary, in Quebec July 1st is rarely celebrated, but rather perceived as just another holiday which many people make use of to move house. I also realized that the red-white Canada flag I had gotten used to seeing in the other provinces must make way for the Quebec flag here. My final puzzle piece was found when a student indicated «Quebecoise» as her nationality on a questionnaire I had distributed as part of an experiment at university. This strengthened my belief that many people in la belle province identify themselves with Quebec rather than with Canada.

So what helped me to finally understand this idea of a Quebecois identity? This mostly happened thanks to conversations and by spending everyday life with my local friends. They showed me how proud they are of

their language, of their culture, of their province and of its history. It was also by learning more about this history that all of this slowly started to make sense: Whereas Canada might celebrate 150 years as a country, Quebec City celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2008 and Montreal is celebrating its 375 years this year. Thus, it is not surprising that many Quebecois could not care less about Canada's 150th anniversary. I further got to grasp the Quebec identity through listening to their music. Whereas in other provinces, one would find mainstream (American) music on the radio, in Quebec, one needs to search for such a radio station, as most stations broadcast local Quebec music, a further asset to Quebec's rich culture. A final way of understanding this phenomenon was by talking to other international students who taught me about other places in the world with a similar situation, such as in Catalonia or in Northern Italy.

I deeply feel that learning about this once again helped me focus on individual people rather than on a whole (stereotyped) picture. I feel like in today's world, where discourse is often based on categorical «we» and «them», this focus on the individual should be a change to aim for. Not all Canadians are the same, not all Quebecois are the same, just like not all of us Swiss are the same. We are often tempted to look at entire categories, whether talking about a country, a religious group, a linguistic community and perceive all people of that same category

as one and the same. However, by speaking to people and by learning about their history, their culture and especially their perceptions of self, we finally look beyond and start to understand the individuals which are part of a whole. Thanks to my experiences and my friends, I got to practice all of this and, whereas in the beginning I perceived the Quebecois identity as peculiar, I finally learned to appreciate it.

The backpacking visitor I was at my arrival in Quebec might have just changed into une petite Quebecoise herself who not only understands her classmates', friends' and housemates' feelings but truly shares them and brought back home to Switzerland a more open-minded brain as well as a full heart for Quebec (to the extent that my Quebec flag is proudly hanging in my room, whereas the red-white maple leaf one is in my drawer, patiently waiting to be used).

I am happy to have chosen Quebec for my stay abroad and I look forward to the time when I will be able to speak with my Quebec friends at ease – perhaps even with a slight Quebec accent myself?

What did you learn by taking part in MILSA?

By taking part in MILSA I learned how to perceive and approach otherness as different rather than as wrong and thus how to better accept other people's ways of thinking. Further, thanks to MILSA, I grew aware of my newly-found role as a cultural mediator as well as of just how valuable my experiences made abroad are for my professional and my personal life.

MILSA mentee: Tamara von Rotz
Host university: Université Laval, Québec City, Canada
Field of study: French Linguistics and Literature
Year of stay abroad: 2017/18

Who can you recommend MILSA to?

MILSA is a program for everyone who is ready to challenge themselves to look beyond stereotypes and prejudice and to dig deeper to reflect profoundly on cultural learning. Further, it is definitely recommendable for both, first-time exchange students as well as students who have already been abroad several times.

What did you like best about MILSA?

I really appreciated how MILSA challenged me to reflect upon things I would not normally take time to think about and thus taught me once again to think twice before judging not only when confronted with other cultures but also in other aspects of life. I also liked the Coming Home Workshop where we took time to discuss what we had learned and how we had grown thanks to our experiences abroad.

