

Psychologists proof positive 'side effects' of studying abroad

July 3 2013



Psychologist Dr. Julia Zimmermann from Jena University conducted the most comprehensive study about the effects of student sojourning. Credit: Jan-Peter Kasper/FSU

Spain, France and Great Britain – these are the favourite countries of young Germans who study abroad under the ERASMUS programme. More and more German students consider one or two terms at a university abroad an essential part of their CVs. As a consequence, the number of students who spent some time at a foreign university has more than doubled over the last few years and it is estimated that about a quarter of all German students have gained some form of international

experiences.

And that is worth it – not only in terms of university and [career success](#). Sojourning in a foreign country also has positive effects on the students' personal development. That is what psychologists of the Friedrich Schiller University Jena (Germany) could prove in the context of the project 'PEDES – Personality Development of Sojourners' which is up to now the most comprehensive study about the effects of student sojourning. Dr. Julia Zimmermann and Professor Dr. Franz Neyer present their research results in the magazine *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

"To find one's way in a foreign country is an important [life experience](#)," states Professor Neyer. "Such experiences have influence on the personality development of [young adults](#)." "Therefore we posed the question whether a stay abroad can influence the personality development of sojourning students," Julia Zimmermann says. To answer this question, the psychologist conducted an online-study that followed a sample of more than 1,000 students from about 200 German universities over the course of an academic year.

The sample included both students who were planning to go abroad as well as a [control group](#) of students who stayed in Germany during that time period. All students completed three online questionnaire, the first one shortly before the beginning of the term – either abroad or in Germany –, the second and third one five and eight months later, respectively. Amongst others, the questionnaires included measures of the Big Five personality traits, i.e., Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability that are considered to constitute the basic dimensions of human personality.

The result: "Those students who are about to study abroad are – even before they leave – more open-minded, conscientious and extravert than

their fellow [students](#) who stay at home," says Julia Zimmermann. Moreover, the Jena psychologists assessed the personality changes the experience sojourning abroad brings about: "Those who spent some time abroad profit in their personality development, for instance in terms of growing openness and emotional stability. Their development regarding these characteristics clearly differed from the control group even when initial personality differences were taken into account," says the psychologist, who herself studied in France with the European ERASMUS-programme during her time at university.

The researchers identified the much higher numbers of international contacts as a mechanism to explain these differences in personality development. "People who integrate successfully into a different culture may find it easier to cope with new situations and master challenges," assumes Dr. Zimmermann. "However, it is not imperative to go abroad to gain these experiences. But those who hit the road clearly benefit from the sojourning experience," Zimmermann resumes. According to the Jena researchers their findings suggest that the generous support of student sojourns abroad is worth to be continued in the future.

More information: Julia Zimmermann, Franz J. Neyer: Do We Become a Different Person When Hitting the Road? Personality Development of Sojourners, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2013, [DOI: 10.1037/a0033019](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033019)

Provided by Friedrich Schiller University of Jena

Citation: Psychologists proof positive 'side effects' of studying abroad (2013, July 3) retrieved 19 September 2024 from

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