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## **LEARNING FROM OTHERS' EXPERIENCES:**

**Preparing students for specialist counselling assignments  
using an online self-study platform**

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### Abstract

This study examines an online platform for independent self-studying created for the preparation of students for specialist counselling assignments. The platform uses learning from others' experiences as a main learning method. Users also encounter virtual counselling situations where the recently conveyed experiences are used to solve the situation.

The platform was created to order for the German Academic Exchange Service to expand the training of their student ambassadors on the *studieren weltweit* campaign, which aims to improve the international mobility of students in Germany. This paper examines the question whether the platform is successful in preparing the campaign Ambassadors for their counselling assignments.

The study was executed using a qualitative research design. A sample of the future users of the platform was asked to complete it and then interviewed in semi-structured qualitative interviews on their experiences. A thematic analysis of the data was used to understand the success of the platform among the interviewees.

The main finding of the study is that the platform was successful in preparing the Ambassadors for their tasks. The interviewees reported to feel better prepared and more confident toward Ambassador assignments than before using the platform. They approved of the teaching and learning method, learning from others' experiences.

*Keywords: Learning from others' experiences; specialist counselling; self-study; practical skills, training, e-learning, student ambassadors*

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Academic Exchange

I am writing this thesis as an international degree student from Germany studying in an English-taught master's programme in Finland. This mix of cultures, countries and languages is no coincidence, as there are many assets to acquiring your education in an international context. Just like me millions of students seek to make international experiences by completing a degree or parts of it abroad or by doing internships, summer schools or language courses abroad. Studying abroad is generally associated with skills such as “international awareness, cross-cultural communication skills and self-confidence” (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018, p. 65). Programmes like Erasmus+, which is facilitated by the European Union since 1987, have made international exchange easier, more accessible, and more popular. Nine million people received Erasmus funding between the years 1987 and 2017 (European Commission, 2017).

Not only the European Union gives out funding for international academic exchange; national organisations of different countries provide scholarships, grants, and other financial and organisational aids in order to help people make those valuable experiences. The German Academic Exchange Service (German name: Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, short: DAAD) is the world's largest funding organisation for academic exchange (DAAD, 2022b). One of its main responsibilities is “promoting the internationalisation activities of German universities and research organisations” (DAAD, 2022a); hence, of students and researchers. In cooperation with the German Ministry for Education and research, launched the campaign “studieren weltweit – ERLEBE ES!”<sup>1</sup>

Each year about 30 students are recruited for the campaign to become so called Correspondents and report about their studies, internships or other educational experiences made abroad to an audience of German students. Their goal is to provide information and counselling and to encourage others to make their own international experiences. Their work takes place on various social media platforms, mostly Instagram, but also Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and TikTok. Correspondents also write longer blog

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<sup>1</sup> Engl.: experience it – STUDY WORLDWIDE; usually referred to as “studieren weltweit”

posts on their own blog, embedded in the *studieren weltweit* website. While being a correspondent, students also interact with interested followers, for instance through private messages on their social media channels, through stories or through comments on their blogs. Sometimes they take part in Instagram live sessions or similar formats where they talk about their experiences and answer questions from the audience. In the focus of the Correspondents' task is the authentic portrayal of a student's experiences. Correspondents returning home can choose to become Ambassadors<sup>2</sup>. This study will focus on the training of those *studieren weltweit* Ambassadors.

Ambassadors take Ambassador assignments (AA) to work on fairs or to give presentations in school classes or at universities and other institutions of higher education. They either work alone, with other Ambassadors or in cooperation with DAAD employees. They are supposed to add an authentic eye-level point of view for students seeking information on studying abroad. However, they are now expected to also give information and advice to students, beyond their own experiences.

Therefore, they receive training, especially on the financing options offered by the DAAD and other institutions. In order to receive all the necessary information and skills ambassadors attend a two-day long webinar and are provided with a website where they find written information, webinar recordings, useful links, and materials, such as presentation drafts. In summer 2021 the training materials were enriched by an online learning platform which Ambassadors can use for independent self-directed preparation for assignments. The platform is supposed to be an additional learning tool next to the materials that were available until then.

The platform's goal is to improve Ambassador's feeling of preparedness and confidence for Ambassador assignments by training counselling skills and practice counselling in a virtual setting. The platform, therefore, touches upon a skill area not fully covered by the previously existing learning materials. Within the Ambassador programme, it is known as *Selbstlernmodule*, which translates to self-study modules. Hence, I will also use the abbreviation SSM for self-study modules to refer to the platform throughout this paper.

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<sup>2</sup> The terms used in the programme are "Correspondents" and "Botschafter". The German word "Botschafter" translates to ambassador. To ensure fluent reading of this text, the English word Ambassador is used in this paper. In the given context Ambassador functions as a proper name and will be capitalised for this reason.

The aim of this qualitative study is to evaluate the success of the SSM. Did the platform help unexperienced Ambassadors to feel better prepared and more confident regarding their first assignments? Did the Ambassadors improve their counselling skills and what role did the learning platform have in this development? How did the Ambassadors perceive the SSM as a learning environment and process?

This study is not only relevant for the DAAD, who commissioned the SSM in order to develop Ambassador training. It is also written in the historical context of distance teaching, which has just reached a new and unexpected peak due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis is ongoing for over two years at the point of writing. Contact restrictions have created an immediate need for functional and useful digital learning tools. Research in the field of e-learning and distance learning had gone on for years, but the sudden change of situation has caused many institutions and teachers, who previously were not interested in the topic, to consider and use digital and especially online learning tools. Teaching and learning from a distance, however, is not a new phenomenon at all.

## 1.2 Context of the study

The concept of distance education goes back to the 1700s (Harting & Erthal, 2005, p. 35). An early form was correspondence education, which was well established in Europe and the USA by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sumner, 2000, p. 273). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century print material was combined with other types of media such as audio and video recordings or broadcasts (Sumner, 2000, p. 276). Distance education has always been a way to innovate and renew education. The early forms of correspondence education helped to make education more accessible, for instance, to lower-class people and women (Sumner, 2000, p. 274). However, introducing interaction and social learning to distance teaching and learning was neglected even when the necessary forms of media were on the rise, argues Sumner (2000, p. 276). With the internet becoming accessible to broad audiences the world of education should finally open up to the idea of creating an interactive teaching and learning environment, Sumner wrote in the year 2000 (2000, p. 278).

Since that technology has developed at an extreme pace. While at the beginning of the new millennial access to communication technology was very limited with 80% of the world population not having used a telephone before (Denny, 1999, p. 14 as cited in

Sumner, 2000, p. 278) in 2021 59.5% of the world population were active internet users (Statista, 2022). According to those numbers interactive distance teaching in online platforms should be simple to be put into action – in theory. Interaction in distance teaching still comes with challenges. Interaction in teaching and learning can be separated into three forms of interaction: learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction and learner-learner interaction (Moore, 1989 as cited in Robinson et al., 2017). Especially learner-learner interaction and learner-instructor interaction bear challenges when facilitated in a distance teaching context: Only those with appropriate equipment (software, hardware, internet access) and skills can benefit from the student interaction that is desired in modern distance teaching (Sumner, 2000, p. 278). Apart from this it requires students and instructors to be online at the same time and to study at the same pace which decreases the flexibility of distance teaching. It also increases the workload as it is not sufficient to create and make the contents accessible once but to facilitate lessons again and again. But “[h]igh-level learning or deep, meaningful learning can occur when at least one type of interaction (...) is supported” (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 535). In fact, “students perceived higher satisfaction in online courses when learner-content interaction was prioritized” (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 535).

The SSM created for the DAAD also focusses on learner-content interaction. Knowing that learner-learner and learner-instructor interaction was not feasible for this project special effort was made to make the platform interactive by having the user interact with the content in a way that is close to the lifeworld of the Ambassadors. In this case, the user practices exemplary situations relevant to the task of Ambassadors. But it was also attempted to integrate a degree of human interaction for the learners. As mentioned above, in the context of the project it was not feasible to have learners interact with each other or to have them interact with an instructor while working with the SSM. Instead, instructions were given through videos of other Ambassadors talking about their experiences while studying abroad. The idea is that new Ambassadors can learn from others’ experiences and implement them into their counselling activities.

Sumner argues that the current generation of distance education bears huge potential to build lifeworld-adjacent education, but that “[a]t this point, it is important to remember that history is not on the side of education for the lifeworld” (Sumner, 2000, p. 278). With

the SSM and this study examining the success of the platform I want to show how the potential identified by Sumner can be used in an online based self-study platform.

The study and the SSM does not only stand in the historical context of distance education, but also fills a gap in research regarding the training of counselling skills in situations where students perform specialist counselling aiming at other students or peer counselling. Scientific literature focusses on counselling skills of teachers, social workers, and medical staff. Also, peer counselling studies are often set in school contexts or examine health-related peer counselling programmes. Generally, specialist counselling performed between students and student ambassadors is not a well-covered topic and neither is the training of those skills.

### 1.3 Self-study modules for unexperienced Ambassadors

As mentioned before the SSM is an addition to the Ambassador training that has so far focussed on the internalisation of specialist knowledge. The new platform intended to help Ambassadors prepare for AAs by training counselling skills and by making them familiar with situations similar to those that are to be expected on an actual assignment. By making them familiar with the actual task Ambassadors are expected to feel better prepared and more confident toward the performance of AAs. When creating the SSM special attention was paid to incorporating the training of counselling skills relevant for *studieren weltweit* Ambassadors. In the following I will briefly explain the functioning of the platform to ensure further understanding. A more in-depth explanation of the platform and its creation is found in chapter 3.1.

The SSM is structured in five modules that focus on different subject areas relevant to Ambassadors. At the beginning of the module the user watches several short videos of other Ambassadors. In the videos they talk about things that they have experienced while living abroad and that are relevant to the subject of the module. After watching the videos, the user is confronted with a counselling situation where a fictional client is introduced with a short text about their situation and a quote with a question. The user can then choose from three different pre-formulated answers. After selecting an answer, the user gets feedback relevant to the given answer and has the choice between repeating the

situation or continuing to the next one. Within one module there are several counselling situations and videos with information.

There is no grading or point system. Ambassadors only receive constructive feedback and can therefrom extract how successful their answer had been. Ambassadors do not compete with each other and there is no tracking of success involved. This was a conscious choice made before producing the SSM, as the goal was to create a learning tool that was entertaining to use and that helps Ambassadors to prepare on their own terms and not to evaluate the Ambassadors or to test their knowledge.

The SSM was created by me, a former Correspondent and active Ambassador of the *studieren weltweit* programme, on behalf of the DAAD's teams that are involved in the *studieren weltweit* campaign.

## 2 Improving Preparedness and Confidence

### 2.1 Learning from Others' Experiences

The teaching and learning method used in the SSM essentially incorporates learning from peers. Peers are persons that share similar attributes such as age, social position or abilities (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022b). Boud (2001) defines peer learning as “students learning from and with each other in both formal and informal ways” (p. 10). The emphasis in peer learning is on the learning itself, argues Boud (2001) and on the emotional support learners offer each other (p.10). In peer learning learners share “ideas, knowledge and experiences” (Keppell et al., 2006, p. 453). The environment found in the SSM does include the sharing of ideas, knowledge and experiences and incorporates emotional support, because the learners can contact the Ambassadors who share their experiences personally if they wish to. However, there is an emphasis on the dyadic reciprocity in peer learning (Boud, 2001, p. 10). This means that learners usually work in pairs or small groups to solve a task together. Through the sharing of ideas, knowledge, and experiences they learn from each other while teaching at the same time. This does not apply to the SSM, because one of the key aspects was to create a learning tool that anyone can take independently and on their own terms; hence, there is no active interaction between experience sharers and receivers during the learning process.

Another integral part of peer learning is that the roles of teacher and learner remain undefined and can shift at any point in the learning process (Boud, 2001, p. 10). This does not apply to the SSM either, as the user of the SSM remains in the learner position at any time. However, the key aspect of learning from the shared knowledge and especially the shared experiences of peers is true for the SSM. It also supports the creation of a support network; after all, Ambassadors are encouraged to get in touch with their peers – just that it does not happen *during* the learning process. Hence, the type of learning in the SSM is a form of non-reciprocal peer learning. Essentially, Ambassadors learn from the experiences of their peers. I will therefore refer to the teaching and learning method used in the SSM as learning from others' experiences.

Such kind of knowledge transfer through learning from others' experiences takes place for instance in large organisations such as universities or enterprises (Boud & Middleton,

2003, p. 194; Moskaliuk et al., 2016, p. 70) or in health professions education (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 91). Written records of such experiences are stored and referred to for personal development and training of tasks (Moskaliuk et al., 2016, p. 70). In the same way the experiences of Ambassadors and Correspondents should be stored in the SSM in order to make it accessible in pre-assignment training. Experiences can also be an integral part of intra-organisational knowledge transfer when not stored. Work units that are organised as communities tend to refer to each other's experiences for solving issues related to their work. This includes consulting colleagues and supervisors, who then draw from their own experiences to support the solution finding process. This can be especially observed well, when communities are strongly knit and show high stability over a longer period of time (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 201). Learning from others' experiences is a way of informal learning and often it is not acknowledged as a way of learning but understood as a mechanism that is part of a proper execution of one's tasks (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 195).

The process of learning from others' experiences consists of externalisation and internalisation. Learners must internalise other's experiences in order to apply those successfully to their own specific situations. To access and use those experiences for internalisation, they first need be made accessible, i.e., they must be externalised first. Patterns are used to help the cognitive process of learning from other's experiences by collecting individual knowledge and making it available (Moskaliuk et al., 2016, p. 70). Patterns contain "problem-solution pairs that focus on the structural features of a problem and [consider] which invariant aspects of a solution are relevant for similar problems" (Moskaliuk et al., 2016, p. 70). The idea of those patterns is that experiences can be collected in a similar style which simplifies the knowledge transfer process and helps to internalise the experiences and reuse them when a similar situation occurs.

In order to support this process, the SSM transfers its knowledge with similar patterns throughout the process. The Ambassadors presenting their experiences in the videos were briefed to make sure all videos follow a similar style and that the focus of the video is on the experience and its connection to the facts. In the virtual counselling situation, the learner encounters a problem-solution pair. A virtual visitor proposes a specific situation and gives a problem. At the same time the learner is presented with three solution-options. The learner has to decide which experience is the most suitable to apply to this situation.

That means the learner has to “focus on the structural features” (Moskaliuk et al., 2016, p. 70) of the problem and find the suitable experience to apply. Ideally, after the counselling situation the learner has made a connection between the experiences from the videos and the problems from the counselling situations and can use them in similar situations happening during real Ambassador assignments.

As established by Boud and Middleton (2003, p. 195) learning from others’ experiences often happens without being recognised as a learning process, let alone being actively set up in a clear teaching and learning environment. The SSM features learning from others’ experiences as the main teaching and learning method. Therefore, this study presents a unique chance to explore the success of learning from others’ experiences, in the way it is explained above, in a more formal context than those found in research thus far.

Ambassadors are trained for AAs by learning from others’ experiences. But what are the actual learnings transmitted by the SSM?

## 2.2 Specialist Counselling

Before defining the specific skills, the Ambassadors need for their tasks, we will have to take a closer look at some definitions. The term counselling is broadly used in areas such as psychotherapy, crisis support, and guiding (Zarawi Mat Nor, 2020). The level of severity of the clients’ issues can vary. In this paper the kind of counselling referred to can be more seen under the term “guiding”. The definition used here comes from the German term *Fachberatung* to which an appropriate translation has to be developed.

In their book Wimmer et al. (2012) define counselling in general as a communicative situation between a counsellor and a client, who are working together on finding a way to achieve a specific goal. Next to *Fachberatung* Wimmer et al. (2012) identify two more types of counselling: *Prozessberatung* and *psychosoziale Beratung*. Translations for the last two can be done quite literal: process counselling and psychosocial counselling.

*Fachberatung*, however, is the term that is most suitable for the type of counselling described in this thesis. Wimmer et al. (2012) define *Fachberatung* as an intended and coordinated communication process with the goal to convey subject specific information and knowledge, to provide the client with knowledge and possibilities to make decisions

and to change, overcome or find a solution to existing problems of the client. Examples of *Fachberatung*-Services would be, for instance, school counselling for students, career counselling at universities or job market services. Those services also fit the term “guiding”, that was previously identified as one direction of counselling (Zarawi Mat Nor, 2020), so we can assume that *Fachberatung* is a form of counselling.

Wimmer et al. (2012) define further, that during the counselling process the counsellor will have to develop intermediate targets such as retrieving all the necessary information from the client, add and deepen knowledge, provide different options for the client, and help them to consider risks and chances of those options and thus support the decision-making process. In this, the counsellor takes a specialist role, not only as the person able to guide the counselling process but also as someone with knowledge beyond the client’s knowledge (Wimmer et al., 2012).

*Fach* translates as *subject*, but *Fach-* or the adjective *fachlich* also mean specialist. Despite not being used as commonly as the term *Fachberatung* in German, I suggest specialist counselling as an adequate translation which conveys the same meaning and intention.

Using an example, I will illustrate how the previously given definition of specialist counselling corresponds to the form of counselling provided by Ambassadors.

A student approaches an Ambassador on an informative event regarding studying abroad. The student wants to study in Australia for one year but is unsure if they will be able to realise their plans (= has to make a decision). They say that they are worried about how to finance the stay (= has an existing problem that needs resolving). The student asks the Ambassador for information on how to finance a stay like this (= subject specific information is required.)

In order to provide successful counselling, the Ambassador will ask further information such as the status of studies the student is currently in, the study subject and what the student’s current level of information on the topic is. Through this initial conversation the Ambassador finds out that the student is an undergraduate teacher student for biology and chemistry and that they have looked into one scholarship programme but are not sure if this programme is suitable for them (= existing problem, lack of specialist knowledge). The Ambassador, now knowing the background of the student, refers to a scholarship

scheme specifically intended for teacher students, a scheme the student had not previously heard of. The Ambassador can also explain the programme that the student referred to closer (= adding new and deepening existing knowledge) and together they conclude that the student is eligible for both programmes. The Ambassador explains the steps of the application process for the programme and hands over a brochure for further reading (= support decision-making process).

The student is now equipped with additional subject knowledge in order to make an informed decision. The Ambassador has specialist knowledge which is of essential importance in the counselling situation and has helped the student to move on in their decision process, which is similar to specialist counselling the way it is explained by Wimmer et al. (2012).

As mentioned above specialist counselling may overlap with psychosocial counselling and process counselling. It may be that an Ambassador is, for instance, confronted with a student, who is overwhelmed by the organisation process of their study abroad experience. In this case the Ambassador may help with their specialist knowledge but might have to also draw from personal experience to comfort the student, be empathetic and understanding. Wimmer et al. (2012) define psychosocial counselling as counselling for clients who are in psychologically burdening life situations, who are going through a crisis or suffer from mental illnesses. Such severely problematic circumstances are not common at the level of student counselling performed by Ambassadors and if they were to occur, they would not be advised to engage in counselling those clients. We can thus say that psychosocial counselling is not an integral part, if any, of the counselling given by Ambassadors.

Process counselling focusses on the support of the client in a longer process of change. In process counselling counsellors work with the knowledge of the client and help them to find a solution for the issues at hand with the knowledge that the client already brings to the situation. Specialist counselling of course also uses the client's previous knowledge and supports the decision-making process of the client, but the specialist knowledge of the counsellor is of essential importance for the success of the counselling (Wimmer et al., 2012, p. 12). Therefore, it can be concluded that the type of counselling performed by *studieren weltweit* Ambassadors is a type of specialist counselling.

Wimmer et al. (2012) further elaborate that specialist counsellors need specialist knowledge on one hand and counselling skills on the other. In the case of *studieren weltweit* Ambassadors, specialist knowledge is for instance, knowledge on scholarship and grant programmes, on how to organise a semester or year abroad, and on different types of stays such as studying, researching, internship, summer schools and language classes. This specialist knowledge is mostly conveyed in a compulsory webinar and by written materials. Specialist knowledge was already trained before the existence of the SSM.

### 2.2.1 Counselling Skills

Counselling skills are defined by Wimmer et al. (2012) as methodological competency, i.e., knowing how to structure a counselling situation in order for it to be successful. Apart from that social competency is required, i.e., empathy, communication techniques and using solution-oriented language. The last aspect defined by Wimmer et al. (2012) is personal competency meaning that the counsellor has to be aware of their own role as a counsellor, to be aware of one's own limits and presentation towards others.

Schiersmann and Weber (2009) define counselling skills in more detail and categorize them in six different dimensions. Those are competencies evolving around the counselling process, such as creating a safe and stable setting and a transparent process. Another dimension is the one regarding the client. i.e., the ability to use knowledge about the client's CV in a meaningful way during the counselling process, to judge dynamics of motivation and decision-making and social and cultural sensibility toward the client and their background. Another dimension involves self-reflexive competencies of the counsellor, such as the willingness to change, improve and continue learning through self-reflexion, education and professional exchange and competencies related to organisation and society. Lastly there are also dimension transcending skills that are relevant for all the dimensions (Schiersmann & Weber, 2009, p. 10). But which of these skills apply to *studieren weltweit* Ambassadors?

Not all skills mentioned above are required from Ambassadors as the process of counselling done by Ambassadors still happens on a rather casual level in comparison to professional counselling, performed by counsellors with special education.

Specialist counselling can often be a long and complex process. Take the example of a school counsellor having counselling sessions with a teenager who is causing trouble during lessons. The teenager comes from a difficult home and there are probably several problems in this person's life that must be addressed and worked on before there can be any improvement in the teenager's situation. Most likely the counsellor will meet the student several times for periods of up to an hour or longer. The reason why I chose this example is to illustrate how the counselling experiences of Ambassadors differ from this example of professional specialist counselling and how the needed counselling skills consequently differ as well. Ambassadors meet their clients usually in casual and open settings, for example, a client approaches them on a fair, after a presentation or via chat on an online event. Both counsellor and client are usually students, sometimes clients are pupils, parents, teachers or PhD students. The counselling situations usually last between a few minutes up to 15 minutes. Due to the casual setting on an event like a fair or an information day at a school, counsellor and client do not meet again and the process is not supervised by the counsellor over a course of several weeks, months or even longer.

This means the counselling situation we are talking about in this case is much less in-depth than many of the types of counselling referred to in the scientific and specialist literature reviewed. This means that also the skills required from the counsellors, i.e., the Ambassadors, are less complex and thus require less complex training. On bigger events Ambassadors are usually also accompanied by trained professional specialists from the DAAD, who are experts for different areas.

Ambassadors themselves are not professional counsellors but volunteers with limited counselling training. They work on a voluntary basis and take on approximately one to five assignments per year for which they do get reimbursed to cover their expenses. The purpose of the Ambassadors is to share their experiences in a relatable fashion as a student who already has made the experience the client seeks. At the same time, they are specialists who know more than the client and can thus help with their specialist knowledge. The purpose of the Ambassadors is not to provide psychological help or long-term support to their clients. With those facts in mind Ambassador counselling skills are defined.

## 2.2.2 Ambassadors' Counselling Skills

The counselling skills needed by *studieren weltweit* Ambassadors can be separated into three categories following the six dimensions suggested by Schiersmann and Weber (2009). Those are:

### **Skills regarding the client**

#### *Filter for relevant information*

This dimension includes the ability to use the client's information in order to suggest suitable solutions. This means that the Ambassador has to be able to filter the conversation for relevant information in order to identify the problem at hand and to perform counselling targeted at this specific problem.

#### *Support decision-making process*

The Ambassador also needs to help the client in the decision-making process, i.e., for instance, to help the client recognise pros and cons about different solutions, and to give the client enough useful information so that the client can take the next step in the process. The client has to feel that they know how to proceed, upon leaving the counselling situation.

#### *Take social aspects into account*

Ambassadors have to be sensitive toward the social background of the client. For instance, the Ambassador has to be aware that client's financial situation might differ from their own.

### **Social skills**

#### *Empathy*

Ambassadors have to be empathetic. They have to be able to understand the personal situation of the client and adjust their style of counselling accordingly. In this context,

this means to communicate successfully with clients that are worried, stressed, dismissive or have fears regarding the topic at hand.

#### *Solution-oriented language and thinking*

Ambassadors have to focus on the solution of the specific problem or question proposed by the client and communicate their solution in a direct and clear way.

### **Self-reflexion skills**

#### *Awareness and willingness to change and to improve*

Ambassadors perform their tasks a few times per year usually over a time of several years. Every AA is a chance to reflect on the own performance and to improve the counselling skills. Ambassadors have to be aware of this chance and show the willingness to improve.

The other dimension and skills suggested by Schiersmann and Weber (2009) can be neglected. Those are the dimension regarding the counselling situation and organisation and dimension transcending skills. The Ambassador usually has no influence on the surrounding, time and place of the counselling situation. This means that the dimension regarding the counselling process and organisation does not apply to the situation of an Ambassador. Also dimension transcending skills, identified by Schiersmann and Weber (2009), such as ethical awareness cannot be part of the basic skill set required from Ambassadors, as the situations and topics of the counselling usually do not touch upon ethical dilemmas.

### 2.3 Aim of the Study

The final aim of this study is to evaluate the success of a digital web-based self-study platform (SSM), which is using learning from others' experiences. The SSM can be considered successful if three conditions are met:

- 1) The Ambassadors enjoyed studying with the SSM.
- 2) Ambassadors feel more confident and prepared for Ambassador assignments after having completed the SSM.
- 3) Ambassadors improved their counselling skills by completing the SSM.

*Confidence* is “the quality of being certain of your abilities or of having trust in people, plans, or the future” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022a). In the context of the Ambassador training this means that a confident Ambassador trusts their own abilities to perform a good AA.

*Prepared* means to be “ready to deal with a situation” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022c). In this context it means that Ambassadors feel ready to perform a good AA.

The main research question of this paper is:

**RQ: Did the SSM fulfil its purpose of preparing unexperienced Ambassadors for Ambassador assignments?**

Due to the limits of this study, it is not possible to actually test whether the SSM trained Ambassadors perform better in their first assignments in comparison to Ambassadors who did not train with the SSM. Instead, the personal evaluation of the participants' feelings of preparedness and confidence toward ambassador assignments, will be used.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 The Self-Study Modules (SSM)

The platform<sup>3</sup> is integrated in a private website only available to Ambassadors and the staff maintaining the site. The content is spilt into five different modules covering different topics typically addressed in ambassador counselling situations. Ambassadors can freely choose the order in which they want to work on the modules. There is a separate section explaining the idea of the SSM and how they work in general that should be read beforehand. Each module starts with a short introduction explaining the contents of the module and how much time one will need (between 10 and 25 minutes per module). The modules are of different lengths, but the general structure is similar.

First the user watches one or several videos of other ambassadors talking about different aspects of the same topic. For instance, in the module called “languages” one ambassador talks about how they learned Indonesian during their internship and another ambassador talks about how they managed to learn Italian without prior knowledge by living and studying in Italy. All videos have been custom filmed for the project, but two videos which had been made earlier for a different purpose but follow the same style. One video is in the style of a drawn explanatory video and forms an exception.

After watching the videos, the user navigates to the next page which contains a virtual counselling situation. This page always features photographs from real ambassador assignments, where the user can see ambassadors and DAAD employees talking to visitors on fairs or giving presentations in front of an audience. Above the photograph a general situation is explained. For example,

“An information fair about studying abroad takes place at a university. A student, who already has secured a spot in an exchange programme, talks to you about the topic of learning languages.”

Underneath the photograph there is a quote from the fictional student, in this case:

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<sup>3</sup> Screen shots showing examples of the SSM can be found in the Appendices (Appendix 1)

“I am going to study in English in Sweden. But I do not know if I will be alright without knowing any Swedish. I think it would be a pity not to learn the local language at all, but I guess most of the time I will talk English anyway.”

The next paragraph asks the user to react to the statement. There are three options of which none is completely wrong, but some take the situation of the student better in account than others. After choosing one option the user gets immediate feedback explaining why the chosen option was good or less ideal. The user always has the option to either repeat the last situation or to go to the next one or to return to the overview of all the modules if it was the ultimate situation of the module.

### 3.1.1 Skill Training

The aim of the SSM is to improve preparedness and confidence of Ambassadors before their first AA. In order to do so the SSM has to train practical skills, i.e., counselling skills, that prepare the Ambassadors for counselling during AAs.

Previous research has focussed on the training of practical skills for instance in the medical field (Bugaj & Nikendei, 2016; Haycock et al., 2009) or to improve the practical skills of graduates of theory-based degrees (e.g. Ogbuanya & Chukwuedo, 2017; Dasmani, 2011; Deegan et al., 2016) for instance to improve employability or work performance and safety. Typical methods used in the training of practical skills are skills labs (Bugaj & Nikendei, 2016), simulation (e.g. Treadwell & Grobler, 2001; Salakari, 2007; Keskitalo, 2015), mentor programmes (e.g. Ogbuanya & Chukwuedo, 2017; Harvard & Dunne, 1992) or blended learning approaches using multimedia platforms (e.g. Deegan et al., 2016).

Cooper’s (2013, p. 4) model for effective professional development consists of 4 stages: Theory, demonstration, practice & feedback as well as coaching & follow up (Cooper, 2013, p. 4) The platform developed for the professional development of Ambassadors caters to the second and third stage. Stage one, theory, is covered by a compulsory webinar series attended by the Ambassadors before becoming an active Ambassador. The simulation of a specialist counselling situation acts as a demonstration of how the knowledge will be used in the field. The Ambassador gets an idea how a counselling

situation could look like and how it could be resolved. By interacting with the learning tool, by giving answers, the Ambassadors practice what they have learned so far. As Cooper (2013, p. 4) points out, stage three, practice, and feedback, must happen immediately after the demonstration took place, which is achieved by the platform as all four stages are united within the SSM. Each module and each situation are practice phases. By providing immediate feedback after each attempt the user has the chance to improve with every situation.

The specific counselling skills identified in chapter 2 are trained by different functions of the SSM.

#### *Filter for relevant information*

In the SSM Ambassadors train this skill by finding the best solution to a question asked by a fictional client who has a short backstory. The answers are all correct to a certain degree, but they were created with the intention that only one answer matches the situation perfectly. The others are answers that might sound correct at first sight but do not address the exact situation of the client. This is how Ambassadors learn to have a close look at all the information and pay close attention to the actual needs of the client.

#### *Support decision-making process*

The different answers in the SSM incorporated different ways of guiding a client out of a counselling situation. Sometimes answers referred to a brochure that is usually available to Ambassadors when working on an information event. Sometimes the answers referred to other Ambassadors or to the *studieren weltweit* website. Those different options were spread throughout the answers in the SSM, so that Ambassadors can pick up on the different solutions and internalise them.

#### *Take social aspects into account*

In order to train this skill clients were chosen to have different background stories and approaches to topics such as financing solutions.

#### *Empathy*

This skill was implemented in the SSM by assigning different emotions to the fictional clients. E.g., there was a worried mother, an overzealous student or a group of students

that show little interest in the topic. There was also a situation with two friends who had different emotions towards the topic of going abroad. Those are all realistic emotions that clients usually have, and Ambassadors were trained to give answers suitable to those people.

#### *Solution-oriented language and thinking*

The SSM included this again in the different answer options. Some were more direct than others and some went past the question completely. Like this Ambassador were shown different ways of responding while focussing on the solution of a problem.

#### *Awareness and willingness to change and to improve*

Due to the feedback feature in the SSM, Ambassadors can not only reflect on their actions within the SSM but also internalise the importance of self-reflexion as a skill. Users of the SSM also have the choice to repeat a situation immediately, for instance, if they are not happy about their answer or want to see the feedback for another option.

Generally, the feedback feature pointed out the importance of the skills above when an answer was chosen that did not incorporate the needed skill.

In the following part I want to describe the process of creating the SSM, I will explain the technical working of the SSM and how the content was curated and produced. The SSM were created in a three-months-long project done in the form of an internship at the DAAD department responsible for the *studieren weltweit* campaign from July 2021 until October 2021.

### 3.1.2 Technical Production

The SSM are part of a website based on the Content Management System WordPress. It is included into the password protected website available to Ambassadors for finding all necessary information surrounding their tasks. The SSM are essentially quizzes created with the WordPress plug-in QSM. In order to make the modules appear the way they do, several quizzes are linked with each other. Those chains of interlinked quizzes are linked to the overview page where all the modules are listed. The linking of individual quizzes is not apparent to the user. From the user perspective each module forms a closed system.

All content has to align with the data security standards of the DAAD. Therefore, some adjustments were made in the backend of the QSM tool, for instance in order to embed all videos with a data security confirmation check before they can be played. The WordPress plug-in was also adjusted to the corporate design of the *studieren weltweit* campaign.

All videos, apart from one, were filmed by Ambassadors using their own equipment. One is an explanation video made using the software *simpleshw*. All videos, but two, were filmed just for the purpose of the SSM and are therefore, unknown to all ambassadors using the platform.<sup>4</sup> The videos were edited by me in order to make them fit the format. Two videos had already been produced in a similar style for a different purpose. All videos are between 30 sec to 2.5 min long.

Overall, 20 Ambassadors were instructed to film videos for the SSM. Some Ambassadors covered more than one topic so that 27 individual videos were filmed in the end. After editing 26 custom made videos and two pre-produced videos were uploaded to YouTube as non-listed content and used in the SSM. Before the filming Ambassadors were instructed so that all the videos would be in a similar style. Apart from technical instructions, such as time limit, video quality, camera position etc., there were also always instructions for what to say in the video. The instructions included the general topic of the video and questions that should be answered throughout the clip or a specific experience that should be recounted. All videos started with the Ambassador presenting themselves, i.e., name and type and place of stay abroad followed by the experience related to the topic of the video.

### 3.1.3 Content Production

The content was created mostly based on the needs identified by the DAAD team organising the *studieren weltweit* Correspondent and Ambassador programme and by me, as an Ambassador myself. We included the most important themes which are *Why study abroad and how?*, *Organisation and Planning*, *Financing solutions*, *Finding*

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<sup>4</sup> Two Ambassadors taking part in the study also filmed videos for the production of the SSM. Their own videos were the only ones known beforehand and they were not aware of the other Ambassadors' topics or video contents before testing the SSM.

*Accommodation and Learning languages.* When creating the virtual visitors and counselling situations there was also a focus on training counselling skills as specialist knowledge is trained and tested in other contexts.

The situations never have answers that are completely wrong. On a specialist knowledge level, all answers are possible. Like this the user is not occupied with trying to find the correct answer knowledge-wise but has to think about the concrete situation at hand. This is how counselling skills like filtering important information out of the question and recognising advantages and disadvantages of different options for the individual are trained. Empathy is also trained, because the user has to develop an understanding for the person seeking advice. For instance, in some situations, the user is confronted with an emotional advice seeker, such as a sceptical mother, a very insecure student or a pupil that shows little interest in the topic. The SSM also show different methods of supporting the decision-making process of the advice seeker, such as referring to another Ambassador or handing out a flyer or magazine with relevant information. The overall practice of matching problems with solutions trains the skill of solution-oriented thinking and communication. Social and cultural aspects were incorporated into the backstories of the fictional clients.

In order to create the fictional counselling situations, I did not only look at the counselling skills that are supposed to be trained but also used data from previous Ambassador advice seeker interaction. From lists of questions asked at previous online interactions I condensed commonly asked question and those that generally seemed to be difficult to answer, e.g., because they were very specific. Another aspect were the topics that are compulsory for Correspondents to write about. Those are topics generally frequently addressed by clients, also when interacting with Ambassadors. Furthermore, I was able to use my own experience from visitor interactions at fairs and presentations. The themes and questions were regularly checked with the DAAD team to make sure the contents match with their expectations.

One key feature of the SSM is the immediate feedback the user receives right after every answer. The feedback always includes something that was good about the given answer and something that was missing or that could be added. The user has the chance to repeat the situation immediately, if necessary. The feedback feature helps the Ambassador to first develop a feeling for the importance of self-reflexion and secondly the skill itself.

The connections between the different answer options and the respective feedback had to be developed with care, to make sure every answer given had a suitable and constructive feedback text connected to it.

Another important aspect in the development of the SSM was that the platform was supposed to be entertaining and have a low threshold to engage with it. To achieve this the content was separated into the five themed modules mentioned above and designed so that it is possible to do one module at a time. One module has a completion time between 10 and 25 minutes, so the time required to train with the SSM is manageable and can be adjusted to the individual needs and time availabilities.

There is also no written information intake longer than a few sentences during the SSM. All the information is conveyed by videos, mostly of other Ambassadors. The atmosphere is casual and friendly with videos taken by the Ambassadors themselves at home. The Ambassadors in the videos are relatable, usually more experienced Ambassadors that report on personal experiences rather than facts or incorporate facts into their own personal experiences. The former Correspondent blog pages of the Ambassadors in the videos are linked above the videos to encourage engagement with the experiences of the Ambassador. After all, learning from the experiences of others is one of the goals of the SSM. The experiences are sometimes referred to in answer options or feedback texts in order to remind the user to pay attention to the experiences told and how to relate them to the counselling situations.

## 3.2 Qualitative Research Design

In order to answer the research questions, the SSM were evaluated using semi-structured qualitative interviews. Qualitative research has the advantage of describing circumstances from the point of view of the participants in the study (Flick, von Kardorff & Steinke, 2004, p. 3). The aim of the SSM was to improve the learning experiences and outcomes of Ambassadors. Therefore, their opinions and feelings towards the new platform were gathered in an open way that leaves enough space for them to express their own thoughts and feelings about the learning process. Like this, it was possible to identify ways to improve or develop the still new platform in the future.

The semi-structured interview was chosen as the suitable data collection method, in order to “ensure the same thematic approach is applied during the interview” (Qu & Dumay, 2011) while leaving enough room for new ideas or research interests that might come up during the interviews. Using an interview guide, it was possible to make sure to cover all the important aspects, needed to answer the research questions. However, the questions were formulated in an open style and the interviewees were encouraged to talk freely about whatever they wanted to say about the topics mentioned by the interviewer. Keeping the interview open for unexpected answers, the interviewer had the chance to dive deeper into a previously unknown or unexpected area of interest (Qu & Dumay 2011, p. 246). Back-up questions and buzzwords were used in the guide in order to help the interviewer guide the interview in certain directions if necessary (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 13).

The interview guide<sup>5</sup> was kept in a loose form to allow the interviewer to change the order of questions and to be more flexible during the interview in general (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 12). It consisted of five parts. In the first part the interviewee was asked to speak about their experience with the SSM in general. To dive deeper the interviewee was asked about their feelings towards Ambassador assignments before and after completing the SSM. They were also asked if they felt well prepared for their first or next AA. This part was always the introduction to the interview.

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<sup>5</sup> The original interview guide in German and an English translation are attached to this document (Appendices 2 and 3)

Part two and three were interchangeable. The interviewer would choose the next topic depending on the aspects the Ambassador had mentioned before. Part two covered the topic *Learning from others' experiences*. Ambassadors were asked to talk about their experience of the learning environment and process.

Part three covered counselling skills. Ambassadors were asked to self-evaluate seven counselling skills and to give their own ideas about which skills an Ambassador should have. Self-evaluation is a process for gaining subjective evaluations of someone's skills. This method does not produce objective results; however, due to the qualitative nature of the study focussing on the personal experiences of the five selected Ambassadors testing the SSM, self-evaluation was a suitable way to gain the information of interest. Following an example from a study by Stewart et al. (2002) the interviewees were supported in their self-evaluation by applying a "linear and (...) bi-polar" scale in the formulating of the question. This "reflect[s] changes in confidence without the explicit use of the term" (Stewart et al., 2000, p. 906). Therefore, the question for skill self-evaluation always included the phrase "Is this something you are already good at, or would you like to still practice this skill?" and as a follow-up question, if not mentioned by the participant, the question "How did the SSM influence the development of this skill?"

Part four covered administrative questions, such as, if the participant has encountered any technical problems with the SSM, were they able to complete all of them, like it was required and what assignments the Ambassador had been on or plans in the near future. The answers to part four questions are not part of the analysis but will be considered if the researcher sees a clear influence on the participants experience of the SSM, due to anything mentioned in part four. Part five was the finalising part. The participant had the chance to give a final statement about the learning experience and the interviewer gave a general overview of the process of the research project.

### 3.2.1 Participants

Five Ambassadors participated in the study. Four of them have never done an AA before. One had been to a virtual fair before but claimed to still be insecure and hence wanted to participate in the study. This Ambassador can also be considered unexperienced, like the others. Two other Ambassadors had taken part in Instagram live-sessions where followers

had the chance to ask questions about studying abroad. Those Ambassadors still consider themselves as unexperienced, as an Instagram live-session usually does not have the same intensity as an AA.

Already when requesting the videos from the Ambassadors in the summer of 2021, while creating the platform, the email contained information about the planned research project. Two ambassadors with little to no experience agreed to take part in the study already at that point. The other three Ambassadors were chosen in autumn. The coordinator of the Ambassador programme helped by suggesting candidates, i.e., Ambassadors with no experience, and sending out the interview requests from her email address. We expected a better turn-out rate when the emails come from her address, as the coordinators name is known among the Ambassadors, as they receive regular emails from the coordinator. Out of five requests, three more Ambassadors agreed to take part in the study, one declined, and one did not react.

The email that was sent to the Ambassadors included information on the research project and what was required from the participants and how much time they would have to invest (completing the SSM and taking part in the interview, ca. 2.5 h). It was also made clear that the interview is not about testing their specialist knowledge but to gain an understanding for their experience of the learning process.

### 3.2.2 Ethical Considerations

The research was carried out aligning with the *Ethics in Social Science and Humanities* guidelines published by the European Commission (2018). A full risk assessment was conducted for this research, like suggested by the guidelines (European Commission, 2018, p. 18) and the risk for the participants in the study was estimated to be on a low level. The data collected contains personal recollections, feelings, emotions, and opinions, but the subject is not highly personal or problematic, so that "emotional, psychological, economic, reputational, and legal" harm of the participants is extremely unlikely (European Commission, 2018).

Nevertheless, the identity and private information of the participants is kept as secure as possible. Only me and the programme coordinator know the identity, of those who took

part in the study. Only the author has access to the interview recordings and transcripts. It is not possible to link any of the data reported on in this study to individual research participants. This was assured to the participants in the beginning of the interview.

When using direct quotes from the interviews there are no names, codes or pseudonyms used, as all participants share the same situation. Their individual background is not of interest for the findings of this study. Therefore, it is not important who said what but just what was said. This makes it impossible to trace back information to the participants for anyone not involved in the study. The participants do not belong to any group of “vulnerable participants” listed by the European Commission (2018, p.11).

The GDPR of the European Union was followed while conducting this research. The data will be stored no longer than necessary, and at least until the successful completion of the research project at hand. The data will be kept secure at any time. Every participant gave verbal consent to the recording of the interviews before they took place.

All the participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Participation was voluntary and potential participants were informed of an estimation of time and effort required from them (European Commission, 2018). Following the suggestions of the *Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK* no ethical review statement from a human sciences committee was required for this study (TENK, 2019).

As I am both the producer of the SSM and the researcher conducting this study on the success of the SSM there is the possibility that I might be biased. However, I want to assure that I approached this study, especially the empirical part, with the necessary degree of objectivity. The project with the DAAD had already ended before I started the empirical part of this study. This means that there is no incentive for me to influence the outcomes of this study in any way.

### 3.3 Data Collection Process

The interview requests were sent out on 22<sup>nd</sup> of November. The interviews took place between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> of December 2021 using Microsoft Teams video-calls. Participants were provided with the log in data for the SSM on 27<sup>th</sup> of November which means that they had approximately three weeks to complete the SSM. This means that there was enough time to complete the SSM but also that the completion was not too long ago when the interviews took place. The interview requests contained a short explanation of the SSM and the research project. It also gave information on the organisation of the interviews and what was the aim of the interview.

The Ambassadors were asked to reserve about one hour for the interview. In the end the interviews lasted between 34 and 52 minutes, on average 45 minutes. In the beginning of each interview the consent for recording was collected verbally and the interviewees were assured that the recordings will be used only for the purpose of the study and that their answers will only be reported anonymously in the context of the master's thesis. The participants were encouraged to talk freely about anything that comes to their mind, to not limit themselves and to not worry about talking too much, as any information might be useful for the study and the further development of the SSM. Then the interview was followed through as described in 3.2. During the interview the interviewer took notes in order to pick up things said by the interviewee and thus support the interview to go in-depth.

All interviews were conducted in German, as this is the native language of all participants and the researcher. The interview guide was translated meticulously from English to German.

After all the interviews had been recorded the audio files were transcribed using *Express Scribe* as a supporting software. The interviews were transcribed in standard orthography (Flick et al., 2010, p. 250) in order to make the task of transcribing easier and less time consuming. The sentence structures were adjusted when necessary to achieve a conclusive sentence. The interest in the data analysis is in the statements of the interviewees and not in the way they spoke, so standard orthography transcription seems like the most suitable option for this situation (Flick et al., 2010, p. 250).

### 3.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis “is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012b, p. 57). The first step of the analysis process is to get familiar with the data, that means to read the transcribed interviews several times (Braun & Clarke, 2012a, p. 60; Flick et al., 2010, p. 254). Doing so one extracts general themes from the data that later become codes that are applied to the data in order to find relevant information that helps understanding the topic and eventually answer the research questions (Flick et al., 2010, pp. 255–257).

The approach to data in this study will be neither exclusively inductive nor deductive. The two approaches are commonly mixed and according to Braun and Clarke “[i]t is impossible to be purely inductive, as we always bring something to the data when we analyze it, and we rarely *completely* ignore the semantic content of the data when we code for a particular theoretical construct” (Braun & Clarke, 2012a, pp. 58–59), like we would in deductive research.

The data at hand was first approached with an inductive mindset, looking for themes that can be extracted from the data. Then the data was screened again with the research questions in mind. Especially, in order to extract the results of the self-evaluation of counselling skills this was necessary. Combining the themes that emerged from both approaches a code book was created. It features both codes coming from the data itself and codes coming from the theoretical framework of the study and the research questions that resulted from the theory. For coding the coding software *NVivo* was used.

As mentioned in 3.3, the interviews were conducted in German. Thus, the transcripts were kept in German for analysis. All analysis was done in German and only in the end, when the final results became evident, direct quotes were translated and the findings were reported in English in the paper. This was done to ensure that no valuable information would get lost in translation due to frequent back and forth translating during the analysis process.

The first step of analysis for this study was to sort the interview transcripts by the five topics of the interview guide. This was necessary because the questions were not asked in order. The order was adjusted to the topic flow with each participant instead. The codes

F1-F5 and different templates were added to the respective parts of the transcripts in Microsoft Word. Like this it was possible to use the auto code function of *NVivo* and to read the interviews by topic area.

First of all, the interviews were read several times in their full length. Annotations with comments and interpretations of the answers were added. The Annotations were then copied into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and annotations referring to the same reoccurring themes were marked in different colours. From those annotations codes were created and the transcripts were coded according to it in *NVivo*. The results were then sorted to the three phenomena

- A) Perception of learning from others
- B) Feeling of preparedness
- C) Counselling skills.

The themes, represented in the third column of figure 1, were sorted to the phenomena (column number two) and broken into topics brought up by the Ambassadors. Those topics are listed in the outer right column of figure 1. Individual points were identified and suitable quotes for each point were identified from the material. The results of the thematic analysis are summed up in figure 1 and will be explained in more detail in the next chapter.

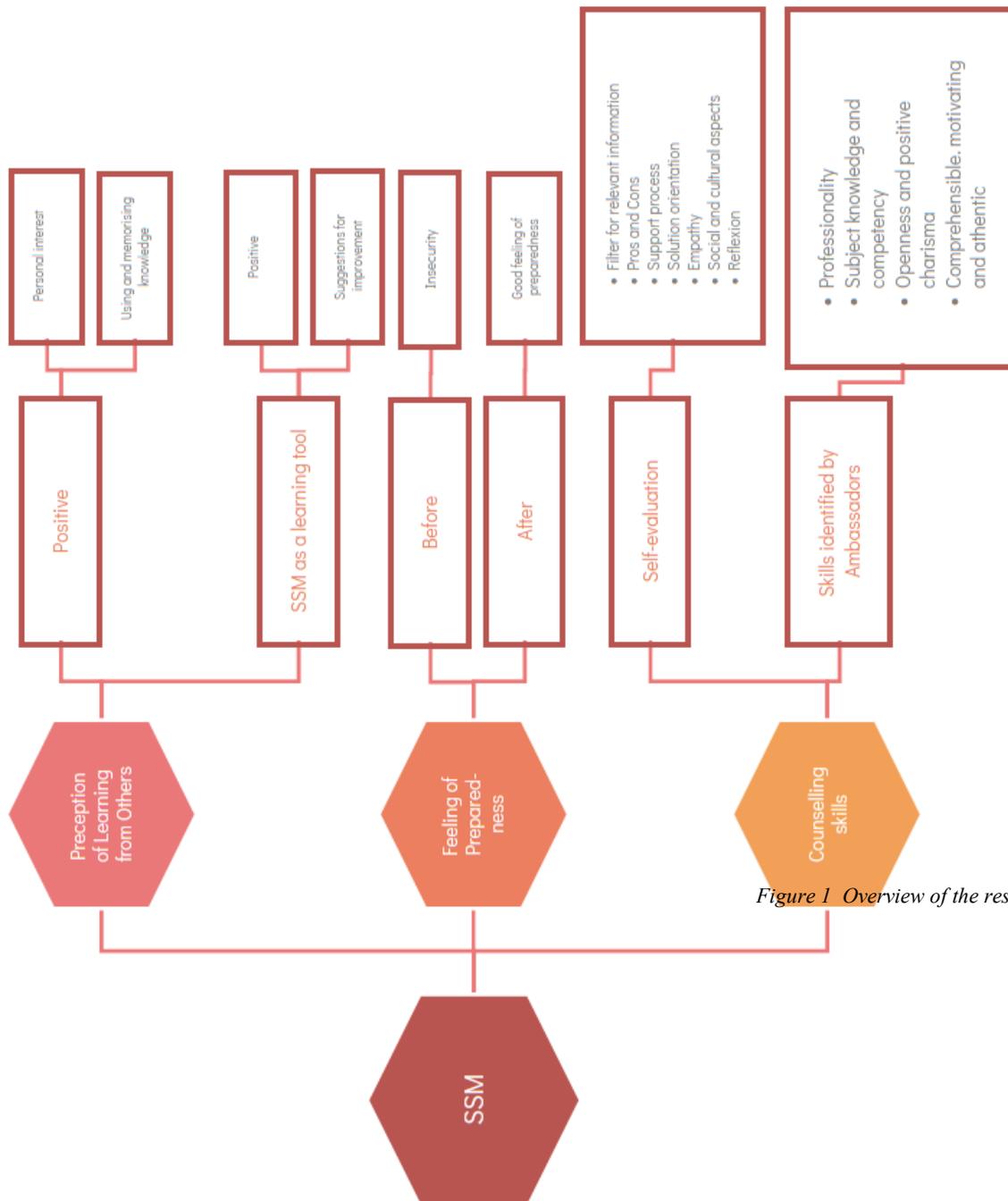


Figure 1 Overview of the results of the thematic analysis

## 4 Results

In this chapter the results from the qualitative interviews are reported. The chapter is separated into three parts. Part one will focus on the interviewee's perceptions of learning from others and their overall perception of the SSM as a learning tool. In part two the focus will be on all the results regarding the Ambassadors' feeling of preparedness and confidence are gathered. In part three counselling skills, presenting the results from the self-evaluation and additional counselling skills that were extracted from the interviews. All results are supported by quotes from the interviews.

### 4.1 Perception of Learning from Others

The first part of this chapter will focus on the results regarding the Ambassadors' perception of learning from others' experiences through videos in the SSM. The participants reported to perceive learning from others' experiences as positive and helpful. The Ambassadors also talked about their opinion on the SSM as a learning tool. The perceived learning with the tool as good but also had some suggestions for improvement.

#### 4.1.1 Positive Perception of Learning from Others

Overall Ambassadors perceived learning from others' experiences as positive and helpful. They claimed the SSM to have helped them to memorise the knowledge and reported on different ways in which they intend to use the experiences of others in an AA.

##### *Using and memorising knowledge*

One aspect the Ambassadors appreciated about learning from others' experiences was that they felt it provided them with a broader knowledge base than before going through the SSM. They saw the experiences of others as useful tools to use in counselling situations.

Ambassadors stated that they could imagine using the knowledge they gained from the others' experiences in their own counselling situations, especially, when asked about something they have not personally experienced. The videos also opened their eyes to aspects they had previously not considered, due to their own experiences being very subjective. They reported the SSM had helped them to "broaden their horizon" beyond their own subjective experiences. The SSM was also seen as a tool to reflect on one's own experiences and to become aware that other's experiences might have been different.

As an individual you only know your own way (...) But like this one can easily reach the limits. But now, with all the knowledge about other possibilities and also about the huge number of possibilities, I see my role as an Ambassador differently. I am not only reporting on my own experiences, but I try to broaden my horizon and to then share this new information.

My experiences are very subjective. When I talk about finances then these are things that are very subjective, things that were important to me in that moment. But I think it was good to see what the others had to say, because this broadened by horizon and it made me think, ok I can use this as a tool, when I have an assignment myself.

Ambassadors also felt that watching the videos and learning about their colleagues' experiences abroad gives them a new way of providing information to advice seekers. Not only could they use the information from the others, but they could also use the others themselves as an "external knowledge source" by asking them for further information or by referring advice seekers to other Ambassadors or their respective social media profiles. They found it made the counselling more personal because they could rely on "actual humans" as a source.

I could also create this connection with the Ambassador who has actually experienced what the person asks for.

If I have more questions or did not understand something, I could also text this Ambassador and say, hey, how did you do this. Maybe this can then also help me with my next assignment.

I think that all those counselling situations were good in that sense that I could also refer to the *studieren weltweit* webpage with the names of the Ambassadors, e.g., hey Lisa<sup>6</sup> completes her degree abroad, maybe you could have a look at her profile. And that makes it so much easier for me!

The videos also helped connecting information to faces and names and Ambassadors reported it would help them to memorise the new knowledge. Ambassadors were able to give specific examples of information that they remembered due to a connection made to a specific person who appeared in a video.

I think it really helps to connect everything, to remember it better. For example, when talking about looking for accommodation I think that one option is apartment exchange because that is Lena in Stockholm<sup>7</sup>. But if I would only get the dry information about the options, I don't think it would stick with me like that. That's why I think it is great as a preparation tool.

Another reason, why the Ambassadors liked learning with the experiences of their colleagues was personal interest in the experiences and adventures of the others and the interest in creating a network with other Ambassadors.

Some Ambassadors saw the videos as a sort of networking tool. They got to know the faces of other Ambassadors. Someone stated to feel more included in the Ambassador programme by getting to know others, especially older Ambassadors, that have already been on the programme for some years. Ambassadors reported it to be inspiring and helpful getting to know other Ambassadors through the SSM and that it increased their sense of belonging and support within the programme.

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<sup>6</sup> Name changed

<sup>7</sup> Name and place changed

I am a person who thinks a lot. And then it helps (...) the more support I get and the more I feel like a part of the whole network. (...) And the more I feel included and the more I see that there are others and simply know that there is help and support coming from all sides, the more confident I feel as an Ambassador.

Ambassadors also appreciated the information from the videos for their personal development. It gave them ideas for types of stays abroad, that they personally could still realise during their studies. Which would then again make them more experienced and able to share new experiences with clients and colleagues and therefore enrich the programme.

Everybody brings their own point of view to the table. I thought it was super exciting, not just because I thought, ok I can use this as an Ambassador, but also, to see all those things you can do and that I could do that, too. So, it was good for me – personally.

#### 4.1.2 SSM as a Learning Tool

In this part the focus is on the perception of the SSM as a learning tool. The Ambassadors perceived the SSM as a good learning tool and only had some minor suggestions for improvement.

Ambassadors perceived most parts of the learning tool and process as positive. They liked receiving information through video, having an interactive quizzing aspect, receiving immediate feedback and the organisation of the content. They claimed that the way the SSM were created helped them to memorise the information and that working with the SSM was an overall enjoyable experience that they would not mind doing again for repetition.

Ambassadors appreciated receiving information in form of videos. They felt this made the learning process less formal and less academic, but more enjoyable, easier to take in

and more fun to complete. They did not miss receiving information in any other way, such as longer texts. They experienced it as non-tedious and not tiring and appreciated that one could “think along” while watching. They reported to engage more in detail with the video content than they would with text content.

I always like it better to get information through video rather than for example in written form, because when reading maybe one does not really pay attention and just scans it quickly.

It definitely is more fun to watch the videos rather than to read a text, because you can already think along a bit.

I liked the mix. You got your information from a video, there were always different people, different backgrounds, so it was not monotonous, not like an online lecture done by one person would be.

One Ambassador found that learning from videos was especially appropriate for the situation at hand, because it prepares better for personal interaction. They saw it as an improvement of the counselling process to have the experiences of others at referral.

In the modules it was especially good to have the videos, where you learned from the experience of the others and not from the raw info material. I think this is especially good when you have to engage interpersonally. So that, [in a counselling situation] you can say, ok you have this question, and I can answer it because I know someone who has experienced this. Instead of just saying, there you go, here is a flyer for you.

Some Ambassadors also mentioned that the SSM was interactive due to the quizzing aspect. The quizzing aspect meant that they had to use the new information right away in a practical context. This helped them to memorise the knowledge that was transmitted, because they had to engage with the content more in-depth than they usually would.

I really liked having the counselling situations. Because you had to really think about this situation and really look at it closely. I've always noticed that it does much more for me when I engaged with the material and questioned myself, in comparison to just reading a text and having to extract everything from there.

It is something different because it is also interactive. I would almost say that I took more from this than from a university lecture. Because it was simply more interesting, but it was also made in an interesting way, with the videos and so on.

The learning process was also supported by the feedback feature. The feedback feature was seen as especially helpful in the context of improving the counselling skill *self-reflexion*. The Ambassadors' views of the feedback feature will therefore be addressed more in-depth in 4.2. Overall, the feedback feature was seen as a helpful part of the learning process that helped to make it a full-circle-experience.

When you clicked the answer, then there was the feedback. I thought this was really good. It showed again what else could be addressed or what brochures could be useful and where to find it. That made it very complete.

Generally, the Ambassadors were pleased with the organisation of the content and themes. Ambassadors who had previously felt overwhelmed by the amount of the knowledge required from them, felt that now the themes and required subject knowledge is well sorted in their head. Ambassadors also liked the increase in difficulty throughout the modules.

I believe it is similar content to the webinar, but the modules managed to break it down a bit. For example, in the webinar we got a Link to a collection of flyers and then there were like 20 or 30 publications in there. In the modules it was more like, for *this* topic *this* flyer would be good. So, through the modules it got more structured for me.

I thought it was very well built and it made a lot of sense in which order everything was. (...) The first module was still quite easy (...) but the further you got, it was also more about how to cater to this specific person.

Overall, the Ambassadors' feedback for the SSM was positive. They described it as entertaining, exciting, and appealing. They appreciated the absence of pressure in comparison to other study formats. The absence of pressure increased their motivation to complete the SSM. Ambassadors reported that learning with the SSM "does not really feel like learning" but the results show that they did learn a lot from the SSM, nonetheless.

Often you think, well, I have to do this now and then it is a little bit...well...but this was made in a really appealing way. And it was also fun, it was really well done.

It was not dry at all or anything. It was never so that I thought, oh no, how long does this still last. It was fun. It simply does not really feel like learning that much. It is more like realising, ah ok this is another option and thinking, oh, that's exciting. Overall, I liked it. I also think it is always good when there is no final test in the end. It takes the fun out of learning when there is pressure behind it.

Despite being overall content with the SSM as a learning tool some Ambassadors also had suggestions for improving the SSM. Some felt the learning experience could have been improved by different editing of the videos and by adding a written summary or overview at the end of each module. However, not all had the same opinions on the different suggestions.

Most Ambassadors were of the opinion that editing all the videos within one module together as one would be more comfortable to watch and would have made using the tool easier from a usability point of view. They found the length of the individual clips appropriate to "quickly remind yourself of something" but editing the different speakers into one video would have been more comfortable "for the flow".

One Ambassador wondered if a written summary of all the facts learned during each module would be a good idea.

A summary would be cool. So that maybe you could print it out or take it with you digitally. So that you have a cheat sheet in the counselling situation. That would be comfortable, but maybe it is not necessary after all. It is not rocket science really. Maybe it is good to show a bit of self-initiative and to learn it yourself.

Other Ambassadors felt that this would have taken the focus of the experiences in the videos or that it would have been “too much” and overload the otherwise clear and concise design of the SSM. They found the modules had an appropriate length for internalising everything without a written summary.

People prefer different ways of learning. This explains why someone would have liked an additional summary and someone else would not have needed one. Overall, however, all the Ambassadors had a very positive opinion on the SSM, which will also show in the rest of the results in this chapter. All of them stated they would use the SSM again for repetition and in order to prepare for assignments. The Ambassadors found the “laid-back” way of the SSM and the sectioning into shorter modules very suitable for assignment preparation. Repeating a module was “no big deal”, due to that, one Ambassador argued.

I think I would do that over and over again before assignments. Because then you know what target group to expect and then you can pick specific situations. Yes, I think I would look at the modules again and again.

The ambassadors agreed that the SSM is especially effective when used in combination with the compulsory webinar, where the ambassadors are taught the most important subject knowledge required for the AAs, and when paired with the information found on the internal page for Ambassadors. Some of the Ambassadors felt overwhelmed by the amount of knowledge conveyed during the short duration of the webinar. The SSM helped them to sort the information in their head and to get a picture of what AAs actually look like. They saw the SSM as a “playful” and “entertaining” addition to the “front-of-class approach from the webinar.”

## 4.2 Feeling of Preparedness and Confidence

In this part the results for the theme of preparedness and confidence of Ambassadors towards upcoming AAs are collected. Confidence and preparedness in the Ambassadors are assessed based on their statements about feelings before and after completing the SSM. Before completing the SSM the Ambassadors reported insecurities and worries regarding AAs, while after completing the SSM the Ambassadors stated to feel prepared and confident or at least not to worry about AAs anymore and to feel more relaxed towards them. Ambassadors also reported having gained a new and better impression of the actual Ambassador task after completing the SSM.

### 4.2.1 Before the SSM

The Ambassadors reported to feel insecure towards AAs before completing the SSM. They found it difficult to imagine situations and questions that could come up. They felt overwhelmed by the amount of knowledge that they felt was required from them, which led to worries about their performances in counselling situations. Furthermore, Ambassadors worried that their own experiences would be too specific and thus, not helpful in counselling.

Before completing the SSM Ambassadors reported not having been able to imagine concrete counselling situations and how to solve them. They struggled to imagine what AAs actually look like, what kind of questions could be asked in counselling situations and what exactly is required from the Ambassadors.

No, actually I could not imagine anything. I thought, well it will be alright somehow, but when I think about the counselling situations from the modules, then I could not imagine anything to be honest.

Before I would not have known what kind of questions could come and what to do when there are actually parents or worried relatives. But I feel a lot safer now in this respect.

Some Ambassadors mentioned insecurities due to the lack of specialist knowledge or the fear that the knowledge might not be acquired in time before the first AA. Many felt overwhelmed with the amount of knowledge taught in the webinar and thus felt insecure or worried towards AAs.

In the webinar this was so much input that I thought, oh god, what did I burden me with? I thought, I really have to take some weeks to read everything before I start. I was really, really concerned about my first assignment.

Some Ambassadors were also worried that their own experiences would be too subjective and specific and thus, not be versatile enough and that they could for this reason not help the advice seekers properly. For instance, one Ambassador who completes a whole degree abroad, instead of studying in Germany and going on exchange, like most others do, said:

I did think about it before and I thought, what if someone comes – and I expect that to be the majority – and has questions about going on exchange, well, how should I give an informed answer and appear competent at the same time and appear to be aware of what I am doing?

#### 4.2.2 After the SSM

After completing the SSM the Ambassadors reported feeling better prepared for upcoming AAs. They felt that they had a better understanding of counselling situations and the work done by Ambassadors. They stated to feel positive or even excited for their upcoming AAs and reported to have a new understanding of the Ambassadors' tasks.

After completing the SSM the Ambassadors all stated to have a better idea of the tasks required from them when having an AA. They also reported to have a better idea of the types of visitors that they should expect and what kind of situations and questions could come up.

I have learned the kind of questions that could be asked, what is on people's minds and how to answer in the best way, how to address the individual worries and hardships of the clients and how to cater to those people and calm them down.

I now have the feeling that I know more what to expect, in the sense that: before I would not have known what kind of questions could come and now, I feel more confident.

After completing the SSM all Ambassadors stated that they now felt better prepared and more confident that their first or next AA will be a good experience. Someone explained that the SSM reassured them that they would be good at their assignment: "Even those answers, where I thought, this is clear to me, gave me the confidence that I knew that anyway and that I will then be able to react in the correct way." Those that still felt like they needed more preparation felt that the SSM was an appropriate way to do so. Repeating the SSM and testing the terrain on an actual AA was considered the right way to become even more confident. The fictional counselling situations played a big role for the Ambassadors for creating a feeling of preparedness.

Before I would have gotten an assignment and I would have struggled with it, because I would not have known how to prepare. Now I know where I have to go in order to prepare and that just gives me a kind of confidence, that I did not have before.

It was a step-by-step building of confidence. I think this [the SSM] really helped. There is no more...well, it never was fear...but there is no more hesitation.

Not only preparedness and confidence were improved but one Ambassador also expressed excitement for their first assignment after completing the SSM.

Especially when it comes to those fair scenarios, by now I am thinking, wow, this could be really cool – to chat with the people and to share your experiences.

Lastly, several Ambassadors stated that they now see the role of Ambassadors in a new light. They see it as less intimidating and less complex, and they now see it as “an actual interaction with the clients” and that “Ambassadors are more of a guide to others than a knowledge data base.” This new insight into the Ambassador role has given them confidence for future AAs.

Overall, the Interviewees had a positive experience learning with the SMM. Learning from others’ experiences was perceived as positive and helpful for memorising the contents and Ambassadors stated to feel better prepared for AAs than they did in the past.

### 4.3 Counselling Skills

In this part all the results of the self-evaluation of counselling skills will be gathered together with additional skills extracted from the interviews. Those skills are skills explicitly or implicitly mentioned by interviewees throughout the interviews. For the predefined counselling skills there will always be a summary of the skill level evaluated by the Ambassadors, followed by a summary of the Ambassadors' opinions on the influence of the SSM in the development of their skills. Suitable quotes from the interviews support the findings.

#### 4.3.1 Pre-defined Counselling Skills

The counselling skills defined in the theory part of this thesis are the ability to use the client's CV in order to suggest suitable solutions (filter for relevant information), help the client with the decision-making process, help the client to recognise advantages and disadvantages about different solutions, take social and cultural aspects of the client into account, empathy, solution-oriented language and thinking and the awareness and willingness to change and to improve (self-reflexion). As explained in the methodology chapter the interviewees were always asked to estimate their skill based on a bi-polar scale using the question: "Is this something you are already good at, or would you like to still practice this skill?" The results will, thus, be reported in a similar style.

##### *Filter for relevant information*

The Ambassadors estimated their skill of filtering relevant information from the client as good or very good. One Ambassador stated this would be something they still wanted to practice more.

The influence of the SSM on the Ambassadors' skill to filter information was high. Generally, the Ambassadors stated that the SSM played an essential or at least a big role in realising the importance of listening closely, and to give answers that are relevant to the specific situation of the client.

I am more aware now how important it really is to listen well and that it is not all about saying, oh yes, going abroad is so cool. But it is important to look, what is this person's situation? There is no point in saying, going abroad will be the best time of your life and so on, if the person is actually worrying about their language skills. Then it's probably not the time to say this.

Generally, all answers, that you can give, are correct and make sense. But it always depends on the situation, it depends on the person and what was said.

I thought this became very clear through the self-study modules, because in the feedback this aspect was always explained. And this construction [of the feedback] just showed me that this is important and that I will pay attention to this in the future.

#### *Help client recognise advantages and disadvantages*

Most Ambassadors estimated their skills to help a client recognise advantages and disadvantages of possible solutions as good or very good. Some stated that they expect the skill to become better with experience, some claimed it to be a natural personality trait for them.

The opinion on the influence on the SSM on the development of the skill varied from the SSM not having any influence at all to it helping to improve by showcasing the importance of the skill. One Ambassador was of the opinion that the SSM helped them develop this skill because it provided overall knowledge on different topics. This specialist knowledge would help them to make an informed judgement regarding advantages and disadvantages. Ambassadors were sure to improve the skill further by gaining experience, not only when performing AAs but also using the SSM for repetition.

I think this is again something that the modules showed really nicely. I would say the more often I repeat the modules and then also make real experiences on top, this skill will become really good. But right now, I would not see me on a ten, maybe on a six.

Yes, the self-study modules definitely helped with this because you hear different things from different people. For example, I thought the topic with living in a host family while being abroad was really exciting. I know that I would not want this, so maybe I am a too opinionated. So, it was good to look at the other side and to see someone, who was in a host family and to see, did that work, what were maybe the positive things and so on. So that you know about that, too.

### *Support the client in their decision-making process*

Ambassadors estimated their skill to support the clients' decision-making process as good or very good. One Ambassador found it hard to estimate the skill as they had never been in an actual counselling situation.

The influence of the SSM on the development of this skill was very high for most Ambassadors. Some found the SSM could have focussed more on the actual process, e.g., by adding layers to the counselling interactions with additional answers and questions.

I would say 70% of this came through the self-study modules, because before everything was this huge inscrutable mass of information, where I would not have known where to start. But now I would say I am a real professional. As I said, what I really like about the modules is that after every counselling situation there is the feedback that says, this thing would be good to look up regarding the topic.

### *Solution-oriented thinking and communication*

Most of the Ambassadors estimated their skill of solution-oriented thinking and communication as very good. Some stated they still needed practice with this skill and that experience would help them. Especially those Ambassadors who themselves have made several or longer study abroad experiences estimated their skill level as very high.

For solution-oriented thinking and communication the Ambassadors felt that the SSM reassured them that their way of approaching problems is good but also offered new ways and solution they had not previously thought of. Those Ambassadors who still wanted to

practice this skill also saw the SSM as a chance to practice before an actual AA, by repeating the SSM.

If someone would now say to me “Hey, I want to go abroad. Tell me something” then I would feel a bit lost. So, I think this comes with practice and then it will become easier to grasp and you know how to react. But for concrete questions I would say that I have understood the process.

### *Social aspects*

The Ambassadors thought of themselves to be able to include the social background when working with clients. Mostly this skill stems from their own experiences and personal interest in the topic. The Ambassadors reported to find this aspect generally tricky as they do not want to make presumptions of the client based on their outer appearance or the little information acquired in the short time of the counselling.

For this skill the Ambassadors saw the SSM as not influential at all or to only have reminded them of the issue. This is the lowest impact that the SSM have had to any of the skills according to the Ambassadors' evaluations.

Just to be aware that the counterpart will probably be in a different situation, will have a different family or financial background. But I cannot remember a task that would have stressed that especially in the self-study modules. I think this could be expanded.

### *Empathy*

The Ambassadors are all very aware of the importance of being empathetic with clients. They estimated their skill to be on a good level. One Ambassador was rather insecure about this skill. Especially showing empathy for client groups that are very different to oneself, such as pupils or parents were seen as difficult due to the generation gap.

Overall, most Ambassadors saw the SSM as a good tool to become aware of the importance of being empathetic with clients and also to practice it. One Ambassador said,

the SSM could have focussed more on empathy, especially with client groups coming from a different generation. Other Ambassadors were able to report concrete counselling situations that made them aware of the importance of addressing the mood of the client and to react in an empathetic way. Those situations reassured them or improved their skill by learning new ways to solve them.

This is where the topic of the generation gap plays a role, because probably the students or pupils, that are interested in studying abroad, are already the next generation and to understand this generation is difficult, I think. I would say there is room for improvement in the self-study modules.

I would expect from myself to react in an empathetic way. But in the modules, there were some situations where I think I could not have guessed the way it was solved there. So, it is quite good to be prepared for this now.

### *Reflexion*

Generally, there is a lot of awareness for the importance of reflexion among the Ambassadors. They all estimated their skills to be good and also reported having reflected on their actions and words in situations similar to counselling situations, for instance when interacting with people on Instagram while in the role of being a Correspondent or Ambassador.

Overall, the SSM was seen as a very good tool in order to practice reflecting on one's own actions and answers in counselling situations. Especially the feature of instant feedback was seen to be helpful for reflecting and also for creating awareness for the importance of reflexion. The feedback helped them to realise if their answer was not ideal and what was not ideal about it. One Ambassador said:

I think depending on what answers you choose it already says something about my own approach and then you always get the feedback. And when you see, maybe I could have added another point here, you can think about how to do it differently in the future.

This shows that the Ambassador already reflected on their actions and approaches while completing the SSM. Ambassadors also like receiving feedback through the SSM because it was more comfortable than to receive feedback from another person.

#### 4.3.2 Counselling skills identified by the Ambassadors

The Ambassadors also added skills other than those predefined in this study. Those are skills that the interviewees deemed relevant for Ambassadors. They were extracted from the interviews, where they had been mentioned implicitly or explicitly. In the following those skills are listed along with explanations taken from the Ambassadors' opinions in the interviews.

##### *Professionality*

Ambassadors found it important to appear professional. This skill included being competent, so that the clients have the feeling that Ambassadors "know what they are talking about." For another Ambassador this also included to be aware that one is there to do counselling and not only to talk about oneself and one's own experiences. The Ambassador added that it would be important to create a certain balance between maintaining a professional distance to the client and keeping the conversation casual and at eye level.

##### *Specialist knowledge and competency*

One very clear skill was to proof specialist knowledge but also to show that one is competent and confident in counselling situations. It is important not to get confused or insecure when a situation is unknown or uncomfortable, but to trust one's own ability to manage the counselling situation correctly. Competence in this context does not only mean having specialist knowledge but also as knowing where to refer clients to, if oneself does not have the answer.

### *Openness and positive charisma*

Being open and inviting towards potential advice seekers was one skill mentioned by several Ambassadors. They thought it was important to convey a positive mindset, to motivate clients to pursue their plans, to be approachable to those who want to ask questions and to show that one is happy to help and enjoys being an Ambassador.

### *Ability to convey experiences and facts in a comprehensible, motivating, and authentic way*

Someone mentioned that it is important to convey experiences and to give facts in a comprehensible way that is suitable for the individual target group. It is also important to be motivating, without transferring a distorted hyper positive picture of study abroad experiences. Challenges of going abroad have to be addressed just like positive aspects are addressed. Ambassadors should create a realistic and authentic picture of studying abroad experiences and show that challenges can be overcome. The unique nature of the *studieren weltweit* campaign is that students communicate to students. Therefore, Ambassadors should meet their clients on the same level and transport an authentic and relatable perspective.

Furthermore, Ambassadors mentioned skills that were also defined as Ambassador skills in this study. Those were empathy, solution-oriented thinking and communication and to filter for relevant information that is important in a specific situation.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

The results show that the SSM did fulfil its purpose of preparing unexperienced Ambassadors for AAs. Ambassadors enjoyed studying with the SSM. They found learning from others' experiences suitable and helpful for their personal development as an Ambassador. They reported to feel more confident and better prepared after completing the SSM. Their skill level regarding counselling skills is good or very good and they found the SSM to have had a noticeable influence on the development and training of those skills. They also saw the SSM as a learning tool they would like to use again, e.g., for repetition or preparation. The SSM has therefore fulfilled its purpose of preparing unexperienced Ambassadors for Ambassador assignments and the research question RQ can be confirmed.

Nevertheless, the SSM could still be improved and extended. One aspect that was pointed out in the interviews was that the videos could be easier to watch when edited all in one instead of playing them individually. This is something that could be changed in the SSM or in other modules that might be added to it.

Even though the SSM's influence on the improvement and development of counselling skills was generally high, one skill stood out: Taking social aspects of the client into account was not visible enough in the counselling situations, according to the interviewees. Therefore, counselling situations could be adjusted or new situations that might be added should take this into account and incorporate this aspect better.

Another aspect to think about is to combine the SSM with the compulsory webinar. During the interviews it became evident that most Ambassadors found those two resources to add up to each other. They found the webinar to supply them with a lot of information in a short period of time and the SSM helped them to make better sense of this information. Ambassadors should be advised to complete the SSM shortly after the webinar to ensure a synergy effect.

I think the most remarkable outcome from the interviews was that Ambassadors do not only have a better understanding of the Ambassador tasks, but also a different understanding of their role. Through the SSM they got the impression that being an Ambassador means to interact with advice seekers and to provide guidance and that it is

not about knowing every last detail about organising and financing a stay abroad. Ambassadors reported to feel less intimidated by the role and to look forward to fulfilling it. I think this result proves that the SSM is a great asset to the Ambassador programme as it helps new Ambassadors to identify with their role and to feel encouraged to take on assignments. Especially in times like these, when physical meetings with other Ambassadors and workshops are not easily possible the SSM can help to increase identification with the programme and the Ambassador role.

Interviewees also reported to find the SSM supporting their feeling of belonging to the programme. The interviewed Ambassadors also reported intentions of wanting to interact with the Ambassadors from the videos which shows that the SSM can support the creating of a network within the Ambassador programme. As suggested in the beginning of this paper the transmission of experiences as a resource for learning and task execution works especially well in tightly knit communities (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 201). Seeing that the SSM supports the sense of community in the Ambassadors programme suggests that it also supports successful experience exchange in the future, not only through the SSM but also during events and meet-ups organised for the programme members.

The SSM was an attempt to create a digital learning tool that incorporates interactive aspects in a situation that does not support real-time learner-learner or learner-instructor interaction. It was also created with the goal to make an life-world-adjacent educational tool as suggested by Sumner (2000). The positive feedback from the interviewees shows that the attempt was successful. The SSM also is a successful example of how to incorporate learning from others' experiences in a formal learning setting (Boud & Middleton, 2003, p. 195).

As all interviewees agreed that the SSM was a good learning tool that they would not want to miss it in the future, I want to suggest some ways to advance with the project. One next step to expand the SSM could be to add more modules to cover more topics or to add a meta-level to the SSM. There could be for instance a new module where experienced Ambassadors talk about their experiences with doing Ambassador assignments. This would keep the success-proven aspect of learning from others' experiences and help Ambassadors train counselling skills more explicitly than implicitly. Experienced Ambassadors could for example report on difficult situations and how they solved them, or someone could, for example, explain how they usually prepare for an AA.

It would add even more helpful information for preparing and executing successful AAs and further support unexperienced Ambassadors' confidence to handle AAs.

The interviews also revealed counselling skills that the Ambassadors found important, next to those identified in the beginning of this paper. A next step could be to evaluate those skills further and decide whether they should be added to the general skill set required by Ambassadors. Then the SSM could be advanced by adding new counselling situations that incorporate those skills as well.

This study indicates that the concept of the SSM, combining learning from others' experiences and virtual counselling situations, is a good way of training practical skills. The participants especially liked the virtual counselling situations. This concept can also be useful in other situations in practical skill training. As mentioned by Cooper (2013, p. 4) being able to apply the new knowledge or skills immediately is important for the development of practical skills. The evaluation of the SSM did not only support this argument, but also showed that learners appreciate this way of practical skill training. Especially, when learners are trained for interpersonal interaction the idea of creating virtual interactions could be useful to create a realistic understanding and feeling of the skillsets involved.

To conclude, the SSM is a successful project that added to the DAAD's Ambassador programme in many ways. However, there is still room to improve and expand the SSM in the future. The idea of training practical skills by using others' experiences as a knowledge resource also proved to be a teaching and learning method that users enjoy and that creates a successful learning process. A similar success could be possible when applying the approach to similar situations where the training of practical skills is required.

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## Appendices

Appendix 1: Screenshots of the SSM

Appendix 2: Interview guide (German)

Appendix 3: English translation of the interview guide

# Appendix 1: Screen shots of the SSM

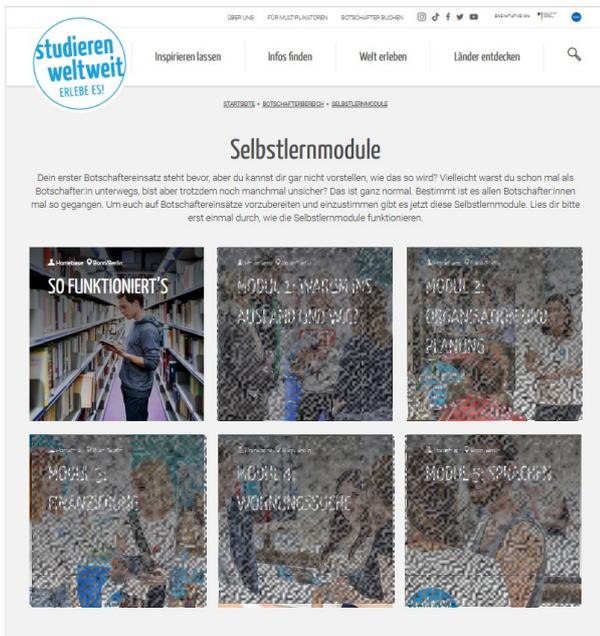


Figure 1 Landing page of the SSM after signing in (blurred for copyright reasons)

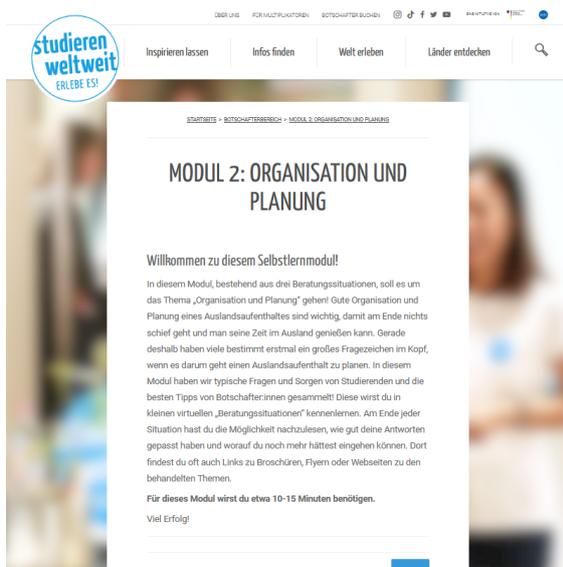


Figure 2 Walk-trough of a module - landing page

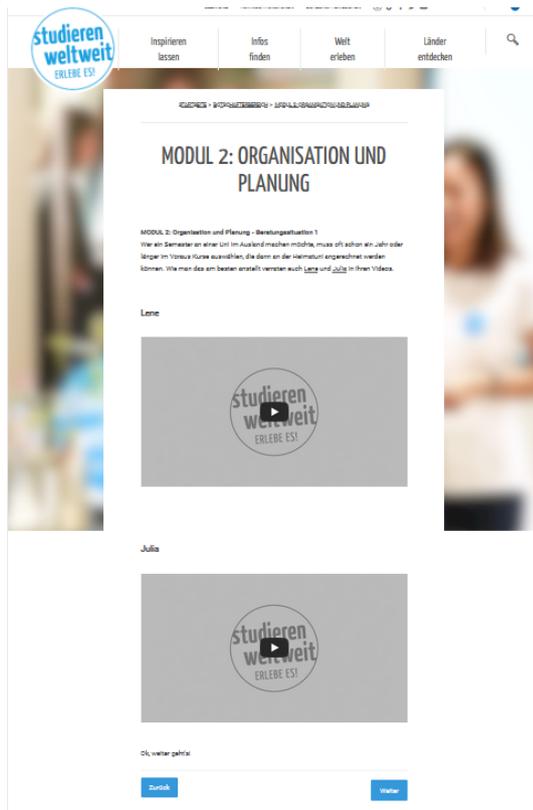


Figure 3 Walk-trough of a module - Videos



Figure 4 Walk-trough of a module - Counselling situation (picture blurred for copyright reasons)

## MODUL 2: ORGANISATION UND PLANUNG – BERATUNGSSITUATION

### 1

Du sprichst einen sehr wichtigen Punkt an. Oft kann man sich gar nicht sicher sein, dass die Kurse auch angeboten werden und muss dann flexibel sein. Dabei ist es jedoch wichtig, auch mit dem International Office gegenzuchecken, wie leicht Kurse während des Auslandssemesters noch geändert werden können und welchen Einfluss eine Änderung auf die Anrechnung hat!

Gut ist auch der Hinweis auf die Wichtigkeit der Motivation bei der Bewerbung. Du solltest dennoch auch Tipps geben, wie Kontakt zu Kommiliton:innen, Dozierenden und der International Office aufzunehmen, um besser zu verstehen, welche Kurse angerechnet werden können.

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[Klicke hier, um zum nächsten Teil dieses Moduls zu kommen!](#)

[Oder klicke hier, um diese Situation zu wiederholen!](#)

*Figure 5 Walk-through of a module - feedback*

## Appendix 2: Interview guide (German)

### Leitfaden

**Und, wie ist es gelaufen mit den SLM? Erzähl mal.**

- **Selbstbewusstsein und Bereitschaft**

- Wie war deine Einstellung gegenüber Botschaftereinsätzen (BE) bevor du die SLM absolviert hast? Welche Gefühle hattest du BE gegenüber?

(follow up buzzwords: Selbstbewusstsein/Mangel an, Angst, Furcht, Kompetenzmangel, einfach/schwierig Situation/Fragen vorzustellen)

- Hat sich deine Einstellung zu Botschaftereinsätzen geändert, nachdem du die SLM absolviert hast? Was hat sich seither verändert? Wie fühlst du dich, wenn du dir jetzt vorstellst, einen BE zu haben?
- Fühlst du dich vorbereitet als Botschafter:in zu arbeiten? Warum/Warum nicht?

- **Subjektive Einschätzung von Beratungskompetenzen**

- Was hast du durch die SLM gelernt? Was kannst du von den SLM für dich mitnehmen?

→ Erklärung: Was sind Beratungskompetenzen

- Wie würdest du deine Fähigkeit einschätzen *wichtige Informationen aus dem Gespräch zu filtern*? Kannst du das gut, oder benötigst du da noch Übung? (→ weitere Kompetenzen)
- Beratungskompetenzen:
  - Wichtige Informationen herausfiltern
  - Vor- und Nachteile erkennen (helfen)
  - Entscheidungsprozess unterstützen (Person auf den richtigen Weg bringen)
  - Soziale Aspekte einbeziehen
  - Empathie
  - Lösungsorientierung

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Selbstreflexion<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Inwiefern haben dir die SLM geholfen XY zu verbessern?</li><li>○ Welche anderen Kompetenzen findest du wichtig für Botschafter:innen?</li></ul></li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <b>Von Erfahrungen anderer lernen</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Wie fandest du die Videos der anderen Botschafter:innen? (Haben sie dir geholfen? Warum/Warum nicht?)</li><li>○ Hat etwas gefehlt?</li><li>○ War der Lernprozess (natürlich/unnatürlich, gezwungen, effektiv, langweilig, interessant, unterhaltsam?)</li><li>○ Wie hat dir das Lernen mit den SLM gefallen?</li></ul></li></ul>

### **Abschließende Fragen**

- Hast du alle Selbstlernmodule gemacht?
- Hast du irgendeines der Module mehr als einmal gemacht oder eine Situation wiederholt?
- Hattest du technische Probleme bei der Verwendung der SLM?
- Hattest du schon einmal einen Botschaftereinsatz bevor oder, seit du die Module verwendet hast?

## Appendix 3: English translation of the interview guide

### Interview Guide

Tell me, how did it go with the SSM?

- **Confidence and Preparedness**

- What was your attitude toward AAs before completing the SSM?  
Which feelings did you have toward AAs?  
(Follow up buzzwords: Confidence/lack of, fear, lack of confidence, ability to imagine AAs and questions)
- Has your attitude toward AAs changed after completing the SSM?  
What has changed? How do you feel if you imagine having an AA now?
- Do you feel prepared to work as an Ambassador? Why/why not?

- **Subjective evaluation of counselling skills**

- What did you learn through the SSM? What can you take away from that for your future?
- ➔ Explanation: What are counselling skills
  - How would you estimate your ability to *filter relevant information from the conversation*? Are you good at this or do you still need some practice with this? (➔ same structure for the other skills)
  - Counselling skills:
    - ➔ Filter for relevant information
    - ➔ (Help) recognise pros and cons
    - ➔ Support decision making process
    - ➔ Take social aspects into account
    - ➔ Empathy
    - ➔ Lösungsorientierung
    - ➔ Self-reflexion

- What influence did the SSM have in the development or improvement of skill XY?
- Which other skills do you deem important for Ambassadors?

- **Learning from the experiences of others**

- How did you like the videos of the other Ambassadors? (Did they help? Why/why not?)
- Did you miss something?
- How did you like the learning process? (natural/unnatural, constrained, effective, boring, interesting, entertaining?)
- How did you like studying/learning with the SSM?

**Final questions**

- Did you complete all modules?
- Did you do any of the modules twice or did you repeat a situation?
- Did you have technical problems with the SSM?
- Have you ever had an AA before or since you used the SSM?