Introduction

The origins of this project arose from the experiences I have had being a foreigner and an information designer at the University of the Americas, Puebla, in Mexico. Information design is, for us designers, *"a polite craft, a considerate craft, one devoted to helping people and providing them with information they can use,"* as David Sless, from the CRIA, comments.

The University of the Americas, Puebla (UDLA-P) is a private university located in the city of Cholula, which is in the state of Puebla, Mexico. Because another 'UDLA' does exist in Mexico City, this university is distinguished by the addition, 'Puebla'. Throughout the thesis I will be referring to the UDLA-P, but will only use the short form, UDLA. And I will refer to the whole international student population as he, to avoid interruptions in the reading progress by using s/he.

Internationality is an important factor of the UDLA's identity. As such, it has signed 154 agreements with universities in 25 countries over five continents. Currently there are 251 foreign students studying full-time at UDLA, and every semester nearly 300 exchange students come to the university to stay for periods ranging from six months to two years.

These students come from different countries all over the world and therefore are coming from cultures different than Mexico's. For many of them it is their first long-term stay abroad.

Information for foreign UDLA-students
As a foreign student in the UDLA, I had to face many situations that had to do with the paperwork needed in order to come to Mexico as a student. Because of missing or misunderstood information, it took me one and a half years to arrange all the needed papers. It has not only been a frustrating experience for me, but for the UDLA's employees who have had to deal with me repeatedly as well. Oftentimes I have been in an angry state, because of unsuccessful missions to the several offices, being in an office at the wrong end of the university or being lost in Puebla. I realised that I might have solved many of these problems if I had received the necessary information – all the proper documents and forms – before I left my country.

After speaking to other international UDLA students, I realised that most of them had similar problems. The whole project started here; I wanted to find the origins of the problem. This was motivated by the fact that, after being in Mexico, I found out that nearly all information a foreign student needs to get prepared for his sojourn does exist. It has been handed out to most of them, but many did not read it. The reasons for this were frequently similar; some information has been provided in Spanish only, or it had not been clear to them that it contained bilingual information and when they received it they could not understand Spanish very well. Others could read it, but still claimed that needed information was missing, because the form in which it has been presented made it difficult to find.

This caught my interest as an information designer: Since the information exists, what was causing such problems for the foreign students coming to study

here? As David Sless says, *"People have always wanted to share information about themselves and the world they live in. What makes today's information design a distinct profession is its blend of interdisciplinary skills and its central preoccupation with helping ordinary people to find and use information appropriately. Whether the information is a train timetable, a legal contract, a form, a product instruction, a graphical user interface, or an interactive multi-media system, the information designer's principle preoccupation is with ensuring that people can use the information appropriately."*

Information related to the needed paperwork is not the only thing one has to arrange. It can be a stressful experience to come to a foreign country and be far away from family, friends and a familiar way of life. Sojourners can get homesick, or withdraw from the new culture and not enjoy their stay. Every year some of the foreign UDLA students return to their country early because of culture shock. The different reasons for these cases are the unfamiliar environment, different living standard, different culture and foreign language – which can cause confusion, frustration and insecurity. An early return is always a negative experience for the foreign student because he has the feeling that he has failed. Also, this could be bad for UDLA's reputation as an international university. Therefore the student needs support, explanation and information to facilitate his adaptation to the Mexican culture and to help him to enjoy his stay abroad.

The project's structure

To find answers to my questions I started to investigate the problems other foreign students encountered, as well as their wants and needs related to the given information. At the same time I interviewed employees in several departments at the UDLA about their problems with foreign students, in order to understand both points of view and to get a hint about where the problem originates.

One problem I detected is that there is a lot of segmentation of information. Different UDLA departments do not co-operate with each other: each one hands out its own information material, leading to confusion because of overlapping or contrary information. For example, students receive information about the needed visa from two departments at three different stages and have problems deciding which one is correct. In addition, they receive too much information at once. A forty-page student guide is sent out by e-mail in PDF format, and it contains a lot of different information. For some students it has been difficult to print the PDF, and to read it on screen is tiring and causes the student to miss important details.

A lot of students do not consult all information given to them, because it has not been clear to them, that it has been provided bilingual. Or, after their acceptance to the exchange program, all correspondence is mostly done in Spanish, and their knowledge of the language is either nil or insufficient before their arrival.

The next step of my investigation has been to collate all the information UDLA provides for international students and to realise a benchmark, which is an analysis of some of this printed information material and the international website. Then it is compared to publications that other international universities

hand out to their foreign students, and also their websites, in order to understand why the UDLA's extensive information material is not working the way they want it. All universities chosen have either signed agreements with UDLA or are Mexican competitors. Here I found out that bad design makes information dysfunctional. Because of a bad structure – content, layout and typography or confusing navigation – the students miss important facts or misunderstand the given information.

These foreign students have strategic and economic value for the UDLA. To be able to send its own students abroad, the university has to receive foreign students – as part of the signed conventions. During the last few years, more students are coming to UDLA for an exchange term on their own account, which means that they have to pay inscription and all courses taken. Full-time international students at this university are paying everything and are normally not receiving an UDLA scholarship. During the course of two years an international master's student will spend approximately 200.000 mx$ just within the university's campus for academic fees, food, drinks, copies, prints and gifts. Therefore it would be in the UDLA's interest to provide information for these students in an easily accessible way, to increase the number of its international students.

To solve the existing problems, in this work I propose a redesign for UDLA's printed and digital information material, a change of its content and a mediator system to increase communication and contact between foreigners and Mexicans.

Although my investigation is focused mostly on foreign UDLA students, during some investigation which included Mexican students and UDLA employees I realised that a lot of information foreigners need would be helpful for Mexican students as well. Above all, for new Mexican students who do not experience culture shock, but experience a big change in their life, because for a lot of them it is the first time they will live away from their families in a new environment and have to arrange their life on their own.