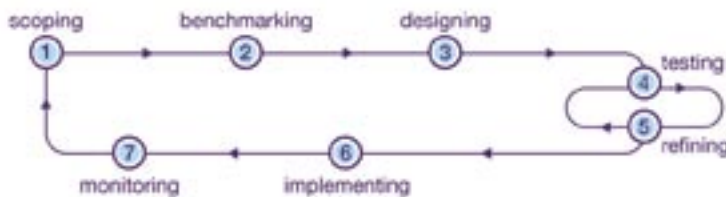


## The process of designing information

To be able to design or redesign information material in a usable and understandable way, a designer has to undertake several different investigations, according to David Sless, director the CRIA. He “*identified an orderly set of stages through which information can be successfully designed: starting with the scoping and benchmarking stage; developing, testing and modifying a prototype in the prototype development and refinement stages to ensure that the design meets the performance requirements; and implementing the design for production and distribution in the specification and implementing stages. ... This idealised sequence of design process stages is used, with some modifications and adaptations, in professional information design practice.*”



In this thesis I will follow this process. It is not meant to be scientific, but for me as an information designer it is a necessary aid to understand where the problems of misunderstandings and undesired performance originate, in order to decide how they can be solved. As Sless says in one article, “*Thus, like the fairy tale which starts with ‘once upon a time’ and ends with ‘they lived happily ever after’, the story of many design projects begins with ‘a problem’ and ends with ‘a solution’.*”

## The scoping stage

As part of the scoping stage, which is defined as “ensuring that all factors necessary for the design or redesigns are known and taken into account, as far as possible,” the designer has to get to know different kinds of information:

First, who the stakeholders are has to be determined. According to Sless, stakeholders are all persons who have an interest in the outcome of the redesign of existing information for foreign UDLA students. In this case, it would be employees of several departments who have to deal with foreign students within the university. From my investigation and personal experience, I have included the following departments: the International Affairs Office, CILC, Admissions, Migration Service, Student housings and Medical Service.

In relation to stakeholders, performance requirements have to be determined. That means, “the tasks that you want people to be able to perform with the design.” Other questions have to be answered, for example the history of proposals for change, business plans and strategic directions, data requirements, regulations, system and production constraints, house-style and branding requirements. The next step is to define the user group of the information UDLA provides, and to find out their problems, wants, needs and the context of use. In order to understand what the problem’s boundaries are, that means laying out what kind of problem has to be solved by this investigation.

www.communication.org.au

David Sless, *Usable Medicines Information* (Australia: CRIA, 2001) 21.

David Sless, *The stages of information design*, Material for lectures, hold in the MDI Program at UDLA, Autumn 2004

David Sless, *A pragmatic point of view: implications for information design*, CRIA: 1999, available from the World Wide Web: [http://www.communication.org.au/cria\\_publications/publication\\_id\\_56\\_1662939679.html](http://www.communication.org.au/cria_publications/publication_id_56_1662939679.html)

David Sless, *What is scoping*, UDLA lecture 2, hold in the MDI Program at UDLA, Autumn 2004

David Sless, *Performance Requirements*, UDLA lecture 3, hold in the MDI Program at UDLA, Autumn 2004

### *The stakeholders*

The most important part of the scoping stage is asking questions, according to Sless. Therefore I always interviewed one of the people in charge at each department to find out what information the certain department provides, what problems they have in dealing with the international students, how they want students to use the given information and what they want to achieve with it.

One problem I detected is that each department produces its own information materials, without co-ordination with the other departments. During my investigation, all departments, except the International Affairs Office, stated that the lack of communication between each other is a problem. They do not know the information that is distributed by the other departments, and students who get similar or contrary information by several departments end up confused about what they have to do. As I stated on page four, students get different information about the required student visa from different departments at different stages.

### *Stakeholders at UDLA*

1. The employees of the department of **International Affairs**, who are co-ordinating all the exchange programs of UDLA. They are responsible for all students who come for an exchange period, either based on a convention or on their own account.
2. The **CILC department**, who offers a variety of language courses and special cultural programs to both Mexican students, international students and professionals. They offer language courses throughout the whole year, especially in the summer term when they receive groups of international students. These courses are independent of conventions and are open to everybody.
3. **Admissions Office**, they are the contact persons for all foreigners who want to study a complete career at UDLA. They provide information about all necessary papers which have to be presented to the university, in order to study a bachelor, a Maestría with recognition of the SEP (Secretary of Public Education) or a Master. The study program for Maestría and Master is the same, the only difference is the paperwork one has to do.
4. **Migration Services**, they help foreign students and professors do the paperwork for their visa-registration. They also provide information about all necessary papers for the registration process of migratory papers.
5. **Student housing**, some of the foreign students who come to UDLA decide to live in the university's student houses. They provide information about the student housing rules.
6. **Medical service**, Medical service is available for foreign students as well. In order to study at UDLA, every student (Mexican or foreign) has to take a medical exam after his arrival. The students have to fill in forms with information about their medical history. With this information UDLA's medical service is informed about the student's state of health, which is important in case of health problems or emergencies.

*Stakeholders responsibilities, provided information and encountered problems with foreign students*

To find the answer to this question, I have always interviewed the person in charge in each of the departments listed above.

**1. International Affairs Office: Caroline Payant, Co-ordinator**

*Responsibility*

The International Affairs Office is responsible for all exchange students who come to the UDLA. They are the only ones at UDLA who are in contact with the exchange student before his arrival. The International Affairs Office organises an introduction week for international students in the first week after their arrival. After the inscription for his courses, the student has to go on his own, but help from the International Affairs Office is available during their office hours.

*Information giving*

They inform international students about the application procedure, what to bring when coming to Mexico, the academic course program, accommodation possibilities, cultural differences, Mexican cultural activities and UDLA-events.

*Typical problems*

Despite all information that is given to the students, some of them do not bring the needed or correct papers with them and have to arrange them while here. This delays things and complicates the whole process. The International Affairs Office expects that these problems arise because students do not completely read the provided information.

A lot of foreign students suffer from culture shock. Every semester there are cases of early returns home of one or two students because of adaptation problems and homesickness.

Some cultures' behaviour is very different from the Mexican's and can be offensive and rude. The International Office would appreciate if foreign students would try to understand cultural differences and to adjust their behaviour to the Mexican's.

**2. CILC: Myrna Iglesias, Head of the department**

*Responsibility*

This department organises language and cultural courses for foreigners, which take place throughout the whole year, but especially during the summer term. They have to inform the students about costs, needed documents, due dates and administrative processes. All students have to send the needed documents first by e-mail, and then the originals by mail, in order to be accepted for the language course. Therefore, this department does not have problems with needed but missing papers.

### *Information giving*

Information about the courses is provided on CILC's website. Information about documents and due dates is sent by e-mail. The student is in constant e-mail contact with the department until he arrives.

After his arrival, the student is given a notebook that contains schedules and additional information about UDLA, Puebla, Mexico and Mexican culture. CILC hires around 20 Mexican students as 'animators' for the summer term, when most language students arrive. These 'animators' accompany the international students on trips, help them to find their way around, answer questions and help in case of problems.

### *Typical problems*

Most of the students experience health problems, especially stomach disorders during the first weeks.

Conflicts arise when students do not respect student housing rules, or get very drunk and in the mood to fight with others. Alcohol abuse is a frequent problem of foreign students at UDLA. In the past this has led to cases of sexual abuse of foreign girls by men, because the girls were intoxicated to the level that they could not control what they were doing or what was happening to them. CILC hands out recommendations in relation to students' desired behaviours, security and type of problems that can arise. But in many cases students do not accept the given recommendations and get in trouble.

Cultural differences cause problems as well. Coming from a foreign culture and being ignorant of Mexico's, international students have problems on deciding which person is reliable and trustworthy and how to behave towards Mexicans of the opposite sex, among others. One example I will cite is the story of a Japanese girl, told to me by Myrna Iglesias: the girl accepted a ride on a Mexican construction worker's bike. She was not aware of the risk she ran by going with somebody she did not know and who comes from a different social class, which does not have a good reputation. She was unaware of the possible meanings of accepting to go with a Mexican man and sitting close with him on the bike. I assume that because she was not familiar with Mexican culture, she accepted this offer perhaps believing that it is a usual thing to do or to be polite and not refuse the offer of a ride on the bike to her house.

Because all employees speak advanced or superior levels of English and some speak French as well, language is not a big problem in this department. Only communication with Japanese students is sometimes difficult, because they neither speak English or Spanish well when they arrive to UDLA.

### **3. Admissions Office: Carlos Larrauri, Co-ordinator**

#### *Responsibility*

This department is one of the first authorities within UDLA that foreign students have to contact when planning to study a complete career at this university. The Admissions Office has to inform the foreign students about costs, paperwork processes, needed documents, required visa and due dates. Each foreign student has to hand in certain documents to be fully accepted as a full-time student.

*Information giving*

This department has a list identifying all required documents and how to validate them in accordance with Mexican law. But these lists are not always handed out to the future student. Depending on how the student contacts the Admissions Office, they give the information in any of the following ways: post the student a printed list, send it by e-mail or give the information on the telephone.

*Typical problems*

Few foreign students can afford to visit the UDLA before being accepted as a full-time student in order to check or hand in the needed documents personally. Therefore, the contact is virtual most of the time, by telephone, e-mail or postal service. Communication by telephone causes complications in terms of language problems and poor understanding.

Another problem is that the validation of required documents is different for each country. Therefore, different information material is needed to provide information for each group of students. For example students who already have a degree from a country which does not belong to Latin-America, and the difference of studying a Maestría or Masters degree etc.

Some of the foreign students do not bring their documents in the required form, which slows down all the paperwork process. And since they are far from home, it can be quite difficult and expensive for the student to get the right validations of his documents.

Because people from different countries and cultures come to study at the UDLA, cultural differences exist and can lead to misunderstandings. For example, as part of the Mexican cultural behaviour Mexican UDLA employees often just provide part of the information, because from their point of view the foreign student does not need to know what the paperwork processes will be like after the student's arrival to Mexico. But this often frustrates students and their parents when they discover that after the student's arrival to Mexico, they still have to arrange their papers for two more months in order to be accepted by the SEP (Secretary of Public Education).

Often language is a problem, because many future international UDLA students do not speak or understand Spanish very well when they contact Admissions Office for the first time. Or they know Spanish, but do not understand the specialised terms of administrative processes and required documents. Therefore the admissions department has changed its staff during the last year to include workers who speak at least English as second language.

It often happens that different workers of the admissions department attend to the student. Therefore the student can get confused because the information can differ from the last time he contacted the UDLA, or the same information is given again. Here it would be necessary to have one employee responsible for the student throughout the whole process of admission.

In some cases, contrary information material is handed out to the student by Admissions Office, program co-ordinators or Migration Service, which causes confusion. The student cannot decide which information to follow and will probably have problems later on because of missing documents or wrong validations.

Another problem is that no department at UDLA is especially responsible for international UDLA students. They are not included at the International Affairs Office and therefore are not getting information needed for their sojourn and will probably not be aware of cultural differences they will encounter.

#### **4. Migration service: Viridiana Estrada, Co-ordinator**

##### *Responsibility*

UDLA's migration service helps foreign students and employees to apply for or register their visa. They inform the foreigner about costs, needed documents and due dates.

##### *Information giving*

The migration service hands out printed lists or a flyer containing a table naming needed documents, and costs. Most of the information is only provided in Spanish.

##### *Typical problems*

One problem is that the foreigner is not informed before coming about the paperwork he has to do for the registration of his visa and its costs.

In most foreign countries, the Mexican embassy gives information that the visa for students is free. In Mexico the foreigner will realise that the registration of this visa has costs.

Another problem is the language. Most information is only provided in Spanish, which makes it difficult or impossible for many foreign students to understand. And the employees of this department do not speak English for the most part, or feel insecure doing so. Another problem is that some foreigners want the information just in Spanish, but do not understand it well and therefore bring the wrong documents.

The biggest problem is that students do not hand in all needed documents, or hand in a wrong form and delay the process of registration. It seems to the department as if the foreign students do not read all given information.

Information about the duration of the registration process is missing, and students often get angry, because they do not get their visa in time for travelling. Cultural differences can be offensive. Some cultures' behaviour is very rude compared to others'; some students get angry about the leisurely way some Mexicans act.

A lot of students do not understand the importance of their visa. A lot of North American students for example never pick up their visa after registration, leave the country without it and leave all problems to UDLA.

Other students enter Mexico as tourists, although they have a student visa. This makes the whole paperwork process more complicated and delayed.

#### **5. Studenthousing: Fernando Gil, Manager of Colegio Bernal**

##### *Responsibility*

The student housing needs information about the student's name, sex, age and habits, to be able to fit him in an appropriate apartment where he will feel comfortable.

International students need to be informed about the rules of student housing. They have to understand that living in a student houses in Mexico is perhaps more restricted than they are used to in their home university.

#### *Information giving*

Student housing hands out a printed version of their rules, gives recommendations for public transportation (taxis) and informs the students about emergency numbers.

#### *Typical problems*

One big problem is the communication with the International Affairs Office. This department does not provide sufficient information, and its employees are not available in case of an emergency.

The student houses have problems with foreign students who do not accept the rules. Some exchange students get very drunk and need to be brought to the medical service. Others have problems with hygiene, are untidy, do not change their bedclothes and do not clean up their dishes. Some students get homesick and need special attendance.

### **6. Medical Service: Dr. Alfredo Memije Neri, Director**

#### *Responsibility*

This medical service is responsible for the physical and mental health of the UDLA students and employees. This service is included in the study fee paid by every student. Every new UDLA student has to take a medical exam during his first semester at UDLA, as well all exchange students. This exam is necessary to give the university's medical service an idea of the student's health history.

#### *Information giving*

The doctors only give verbal information about the health precautions that students should take. The questionnaire the student has to fill out for his medical exam is provided only in Spanish. No further printed information exists.

#### *Typical problems*

One big problem is language. Not all exchange students speak Spanish at their arrival. Therefore they have problems understanding the questionnaire and communicating with the doctors, who may not speak the foreign language.

The missing information leads to misunderstanding without explanations. Many exchange students do not understand why they have to take a medical exam, if they do not have to take it at their home university.

Because of the lack of information, a lot of foreign students get sick (missing vaccinations), have stomach problems (they eat in the wrong places), or develop respiratory problems (because they have not brought appropriate clothes for the winter period). They may also have psychological problems (cultural shock) or even dog bites from Cholula's street dogs. Worst of all, a lot of them do not know that a medical service exists at UDLA.

Further medical attendance (hospital or specialist) paid by UDLA's insurance is just available in case of an accident, not for illness. This fact is often not known and leads to financing problems in case of illness.



If a foreign student needs to take medicines regularly, he has to check before coming if his medicine is available. This is often a problem, and UDLA's medical service would like to be contacted by these students before their arrival, to be able to help them.

### *Conclusion*

The most important problem is that the departments have to decide on the production of **only one unified information** text that could be given to the student and would include everything he needs to know. All existing information has to be collected and decided upon what to be included in one publication. Also, communication between the departments has to improve.

Furthermore I have detected three main problems which have to be solved which all departments have in common:

Most of the departments have problems, and have to do additional work because the students **do not perform as expected**. This includes that the students do not bring all the necessary papers, they do not correctly certify documents, and they do not respect due dates – all of which complicates the process. Students claimed during my investigation (see next chapter), that this relevant information is missing in the material UDLA handed out to them. While talking to the people in charge in UDLA's departments and collecting all existing information material, I realised that most of the information a foreign student needs before coming to Mexico does exist! But while the students claim that that information is missing, the providers of this information expect that the students just do not read the given information. Therefore in step 2 of the process of designing information, the so-called benchmark, I will analyse the existing information material on design, usability and content in order to understand why the existing information does not perform as wanted.

Another important factor is the **language barrier**. Misunderstandings on side of student and UDLA employees arise because a lot of students do not properly speak Spanish when they arrive and a lot of UDLA employees do not speak foreign languages. It would be very helpful if every department would have at least some employees who can speak foreign languages, at least English and French. And all information produced has to be at least bilingual, in Spanish and English.

Problems arise as well because of **cultural differences**. Some departments reported that the behaviour of some foreigners is rude and strange to them, and that students react angrily if things do not work out as planned etc. Here it would be important to not only provide information about the Mexican culture to the students, but to train UDLA's employees about cultural differences and intercultural communication as well. In this way they would be able to understand the 'strange' behaviour of foreign students and to be able to explain the way Mexican administration works, to prevent offences on student's and employee's side.



### *Performance requirements*

Performance requirements are tasks the stakeholders want students to perform when using the information. In case of information for foreign students, they can be defined as follows:

Identify	Find	Understand	Act
sender		purpose of information	
who to contact for more information			contact UDLA in case of questions
all needed documents		what authentication is needed for documents	bring all needed documents with correct authentication
	due dates, costs, possibilities of accommodation, what to pack	when to hand in what, how much things cost, possibilities of accommodation, what to bring to Mexico	hand in everything on time, decide for accommodation, bring all you need but leave unnecessary things at home
	what administrative processes have to be undertaken, while in Mexico	what to do and the consequences of not following directions	do all needed administrative processes on time
	cultural information	the significance of cultural differences	develop cultural sensitivity
how to contact UDLA's medical service and emergency numbers	information about health & security	what vaccinations or precautions are needed	follow advise, take precautions as only drinking bottled water, not eating food from street vendors, staying away of street dogs, avoid excess alcohol, take secure taxis only

### *Production of information for international students at UDLA*

The following is information from the stakeholders about the production process and the information that each department provides.

#### *Decision taker*

Normally the department's coordinator decides on the publication's content and in some cases about the design as well. He briefs the designer on how he wants it to look. But only in some cases the designer proposes a design. In the UDLA's publication department, the designer decides on the design, normally working in contact with the head of the department responsible.

### *Designer*

Some departments commission external designers for the development of new publications for international students, for example the International Affairs Office and CILC. Others, like the Migration Service, work with UDLA's publications office. The reason some departments prefer to work with external designers instead of the UDLA's publication department is that it is too slow.

### *Design process*

New information is produced every semester in order to keep its content up to date. Designs are changed as well, to make them look different from the previous one. In some cases, elements used stay the same; but colours, typography and layout are changed. When asked, however, nobody could give me reasons for these changes.

The International Affairs Office asks the students for feedback by e-mail, but does not get many responses. They therefore conclude that the information works well, despite the fact that many students do not act as wanted. No performance test is carried out to evaluate how the student uses the information material. Publications of other competitive Mexican universities are not taken in account. Their information material is consulted only to adjust prices, but not to check how information is designed.

### *Language*

Most of the UDLA's publications are produced in Spanish. Only the International Office and CILC produce bilingual information. This is not always easy to recognise, because the languages are placed in separate parts of the publication. Other information is produced in Spanish and English as well—but a separate brochure or flyer is printed for each language, as in case of the visa information.

### *Visual identity*

At the UDLA, no congruent visual identity has been determined. Only the use of the logotype, colours and typography have been defined, but this has not been communicated to all departments. No design manual exists, and nobody checks publication's designs before their production. Therefore everybody feels free to do what he thinks best. Every department produces its own publications, and consequently no coincidences of appearance exist. This includes cases in which the UDLA's publications department has designed the publications.

### *Conclusion*

It becomes clear that the UDLA needs to determine a visual identity in order to produce information material with a congruent appearance, which will be immediately recognisable as an UDLA publication. This visual identity should be defined in a design manual, according to which all publications should be produced—no matter whether they are produced internally by the publications department, or by external designers. As an international university, all publications should be produced bilingual in English and Spanish. This will increase their accessibility to a wider audience.

The user should always be taken into account, and **performance tests** of existing information should be carried out. This way the only way to assure that the information is fulfilling its purpose.

## User's problems, needs and wants

To be able to redesign information material or to develop a different strategy of providing information for international students, the designer needs to understand the user's problems, needs and wants. As David Sless says, *"As part of this respect and valuing, it makes polite sense to consult users of information and find out what they want to use the information for and what difficulties they might have in using it, before proceeding to give them the information."* By asking questions to users, in this case foreign students, I tried to find out what information they really need, what problems they encountered when coming to study at the UDLA and how they would like to receive the information.

### *Questioning of international UDLA students*

To get the needed information from the UDLA's international students, I developed a bilingual questionnaire in Spanish and English according to facts I have read about or from my own experiences. I did this in order to get to know what experiences and problems the international students have when they come to the UDLA. English can be seen as a 'world-language,' says Sean Coughlan, BBC News education reporter, *"In the year 2000, the British Council says there were about a billion English learners – but a decade later, this report says, the numbers will have doubled. The research has looked at the global population of young people in education – including 120 million children in Chinese primary schools – and how many countries are embedding English-language learning within their school systems."* Most northern European students have a good knowledge of English. For most southern Europeans, written Spanish is understandable, because of its familiarity to French, Italian and Portuguese. Therefore I decided to provide all questions in English and Spanish to secure that the majority of all international students would understand.

A problem I detected during the orientation test within the UDLA (see page 106), and as was reported to me by the UDLA's employees in several departments, is that Asian students have a lot of problems understanding because they do not speak either English or Spanish well. But throughout the last four years, only 43 Asian students have come to the UDLA. The majority, with 2102 students, have come from Europe, Australia, Canada or the United States. Therefore I use just Spanish and English as the language on the questionnaires and later on for my proposal of the student information.

I decided to send the questionnaire out by e-mail to all current exchange students, because as I learned from former investigations, it is often difficult to locate the students on the campus or it happens that they just do not have the time. UDLA's International Affairs Office provided me a list of the e-mail addresses of all exchange students who are currently enrolled. In total, I sent the questionnaire to 255 international students.

### *The questionnaire*

In the first part of the questionnaire I asked the students about their background: where they come from, if they have been abroad for a long period before, why did they decide to go abroad, for what reasons did they decide to come

David Sless, *"Theory for practice"*, CRIA, [www.communication.org.au](http://www.communication.org.au): 1997, available from World Wide Web: [http://www.communication.org.au/cria\\_publications/publication\\_id\\_54\\_417218731.html](http://www.communication.org.au/cria_publications/publication_id_54_417218731.html)

Sean Coughlan, *"English 'world language' forecast"*, BBC news UK Edition: Thursday, 9 December, 2004, available from World Wide Web: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4080401.stm>

see Appendix D

to Mexico/UDLA, what did they know about Mexico and UDLA before their arrival and where they got this information from.

The next part is about cultural differences students detected between the Mexican and their own culture, problems they had being a foreigner in Mexico and causes for misunderstandings.

In another part of the questionnaire I wanted to know how much contact the international student has to Mexicans or to other international students. Finally, I include a part that asks if they would like to have additional information and how they would like to receive the information.

### *The questioning process*

After sending out the questionnaire by mail, the first responses arrived astonishingly fast. Most of the students who answered first wrote real stories about their experiences in Mexico and at the UDLA. Some of them were very frustrated, yet others were really happy about being in Mexico. These quick and extensive answers showed the need of the student to communicate these issues to somebody. It seemed as if, at least for some of them, it had been the first time somebody asked how they felt, what problems they encountered and what they would like to know. Students who took longer to answer the questionnaire (persons 17–27), normally answered much more briefly. It can be concluded that the less the students needed to express their experiences or feelings, the shorter and less emotional the answers.

After the first answers to my mail, I had to send the questionnaire two more times to get at least 10% of the questioned students – 27 in numbers – to answer my mail. This has been frustrating, but I experienced something similar during the investigation about orientation within the UDLA. While Mexican students nearly always took the time to participate in questionings or testing, a lot of foreign students refused because they did not have time, or just said clearly that they do not want to participate without naming a reason.

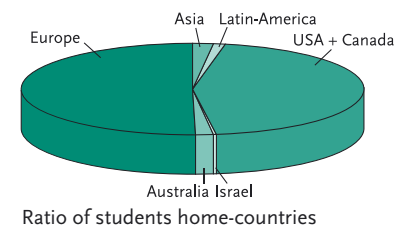
### *Questioning results*

#### *Information about the students*

Although only 27 of 251 of the solicited persons answered my questionnaire, the results gave me a good view of existing problems, which happened to agree with reports the UDLA's employees had given to me at the same time. The students come from different countries and different continents: one from Canada (Francophone region), 7 from France, 8 from the USA, 1 from Singapore, 6 from Germany, 1 from Austria, 2 from Denmark and 2 from Australia. According to sex there were 8 male and 19 female students who participated in this investigation. This resembles the ratio of the countries of origin of foreign UDLA students during the last four years. From 2174 students, 1088 came from Europe, 975 from the USA and Canada, 43 from Asia, 39 from Australia, 26 from Latin-America and 3 from Israel.

About half of the participating students had previous experience of a sojourn, either for work or study.

See question 1 Appendix A



See question 2 Appendix A

In the case of international UDLA students, the main reasons for going abroad have been to learn a foreign language (in this case Spanish), to want to get to know a culture different from their native one or to have a new experience. Only a few students gave their particular like of travel as a reason for going abroad. Learning a language is often easier when the language can be ‘lived’ and learned in relation with the culture it is spoken in, and not only in class.

See question 3 Appendix A

These results contrast to results of studies that Bochner (1973) and Klineberg and Hull (1979) have done. Bochner asked students returning to their home country for their main reason for going abroad to study. He found that the majority of this group of students are *“primarily interested in getting a degree and/or professional training rather than learning a second culture or achieving personal growth.”* An important thing to keep in mind is that he questioned people from third world countries who went abroad to study in a first world country. Klineberg and Hull’s study shows results of 2536 foreign students in ten different countries, and confirmed that, *“71 per cent of the respondents said that obtaining a degree or diploma was important, and again the acquisition of qualifications and experience ranked as the single most important reason for going to a foreign university.”*

Furnham & Bochner, 38.

Although I do not know where from the students in Klineberg and Hull’s study came from, the answers I got can show that people from first-world countries who go abroad to study to a second-world country like Mexico have different reasons for their sojourn. At the UDLA, 96.9% of all exchange students who have come from summer 2000 to autumn 2004 are from first-world countries. Academic expertise seems to have no importance for these students; in fact, most European students have stated that the academic standard of the UDLA is much lower than the standard of their home university. They are more interested to get to know the foreign culture and language.

Half of the participants came to the UDLA for the reason of an exchange program their home university has with the UDLA. Others came because of the UDLA’s good international reputation, that means the UDLA is renowned in other countries—its membership in SACS (Southern Association of Colleges) for example is important for foreign students who want to study abroad. Others came because they wanted to study in Mexico.

See question 4, Appendix A

From all 291 foreign students who enrolled for an exchange term at the UDLA in Fall 2004, 64.3% came for a regular exchange on the basis of an agreement between UDLA and their home university. 15.8% came to obtain a ‘double diploma’, based on agreements between their universities. 9.3% came as part of a group program, based as well on agreements between UDLA and other universities. 10.6%, (equalling 31 students) came on their own account, which means that they paid study fees at the UDLA to stay for one to four semesters. The semester before just 18 students have come on their own account, which means that the number of paying foreign students who want to study at the UDLA for various semesters is increasing. Clear information material about the UDLA, its programs, costs and services could help to increase this number!

See Appendix D

A lot of exchange students come to Mexico with little to no knowledge about the UDLA or Mexico. Others get information by friends who have been in Mexico or at the UDLA before, from the internet, but very few from the UDLA itself. This shows that the majority of foreign students are not looking for information themselves and therefore arrive unprepared to Mexico. Therefore it could be helpful for the UDLA, to prevent problems with their international students, to provide this kind of information. Although for many people it would be common sense to look up information about the country one is going to, it does not seem to be a reality amongst foreign students who come to the UDLA. Some students stated that they were very busy arranging everything before their leaving their country and therefore did not look up information. I talked to several exchange students and their lack of knowledge astonished me. They brought several electrical devices from Europe without knowing that the local voltage is just 110V instead of the 230V the students are used to in their home countries. Every morning during winter, foreign students can be seen on campus in a T-shirt or skirt. These students had no idea about the climate of the Mexican highlands, did not bring warm clothes for the winter period and as a consequence get infections. A problem for many foreigners who come from different climates is that they are not prepared for the temperature changes that happen here in the Mexican highlands. Northern Europeans for example expect to find warm weather when they see sunshine and blue skies. They learn from experience to dress right, but this learning process often results in a bad cold or flu, which has to be cured by the UDLA's medical service. Most dog bites, which have to be treated at the clinic, are suffered by foreign students. A lot of them are not used to street dogs and therefore run a higher risk of being bitten.

*See question 5+5.1, Appendix A*

This makes it clear that the lack of knowledge is financially affecting the UDLA, because the students are medically treated in the clinic without charging them. It also affects them socially, because negative experience as described above could lead to a negative attitude the foreign student forms towards Mexico or Mexicans.

Because of this lack of knowledge about Mexico nearly no one had formed an attitude towards Mexico or Mexicans before their arrival. This could also be seen as something positive, because they arrive without prejudices. But at the same time this also means that these students come quite ignorant of this country and are not prepared to interact with the Mexican culture. Or perhaps they do behave adequately and therefore will not feel comfortable and 'at home,' and have to learn the Mexican way of doing things the long way—by learning from experience how to behave and how to understand Mexican behaviour. It is not the UDLA's responsibility to provide information of this kind, as I stated above, but it could be helpful not only for the student but as well for the UDLA to provide information about Mexico, its culture and UDLA, to prevent problems. For sure, not every foreign student would read the given information or behave right, but it would be probable that fewer students would get in trouble than now.

*See question 20 Appendix A*

#### *Cultural differences and problems encountered by a foreign student*

For most of the students questioned, a main cause of problems they face is the foreign language—they still do not speak well. This causes academic problems

*See questions 8–11 Appendix A*

as well, as students reported. Other problems that students had in relation to their being a foreigner in Mexico have been that some Mexicans tried to take financial advantage of them. Others stated that it seemed to them as if foreign students, especially Americans, have a bad reputation in Mexico. Mainly, all foreign students are expected to come to Mexico just to have fun. Relations between men and women cause problems, because of different cultural points of view. Students got lost because they were given wrong descriptions of where to go to find what they are looking for, or got in trouble because of misunderstandings with administrative staff. Most of these problems arise because of cultural differences that the student is not aware of. Frustrating situations like this can easily lead to culture shock, as Bock describes it, *“as primarily an emotional reaction that follows from not being able to understand, control and predict another’s behaviour.”*

Bochner and Furnham, 49

91.9% of all exchange students who have been at the UDLA during the last four years come from ‘low-context cultures’ who spend their time abroad in a ‘high-context culture’. Therefore they experience several cultural differences, which can cause misunderstandings, frustration and insecurity. Or they can be very attractive for a foreigner because of their difference and ‘exoticness’.

See question 17, Appendix A

Mexicans’ friendliness, their warmth, openness, accessibility and helpfulness have been named as positive characteristics of the Mexican culture and make it attractive for foreigners.

See question 18, Appendix A

Negative differences that often lead to frustrating experiences for the foreigner, have been qualified as Mexican impunctuality, and unreliability—meaning that the foreigner does not know what the Mexicans really think, because they avoid saying “no”. A phenomenon of Mexican culture has been reported by several students in this questioning—that Mexicans give directions although they are not sure about them, and students got lost. Because many foreign students lack knowledge about Mexican culture and cultural differences, these kinds of experiences have been taken personal. In this case, for example, one North-American student interpreted it as a sign of the Mexican dislike of North-Americans. She expected the Mexican to send her to a wrong place on purpose. But it is just an example of typical ‘high-context’ cultural behaviour. They want to be nice and helpful and want the foreigner to have a positive experience in this moment; therefore they prefer giving them directions although they are not sure about the location, instead of saying that they cannot help. As John C. Condon describes it: *“Viewed from the Mexican perspective, a visitor asks somebody for information which that person doesn’t know. But wanting to make the visitor happy and enjoy a few pleasant moments together, the Mexican who was asked does his best to say something that will please the visitor.”*

John C. Condon, *Good Neighbours – Communicating with Mexicans (USA: Intercultural Press, Inc., 1985)* 42.

Some also reported that the physical intimacy in Mexico is much closer than they are used to. For some it is an unpleasant experience, others like it because for them it is a more personal way of greeting a friend. The students have to get used to close physical intimacy. To prevent them from being shocked, some information about typical cultural behaviour could prepare them for this difference.

Others find the Mexican system very slow and find the Mexican way of taking things easy as somehow strange. One student even realised a different use of



gestures. It is always important to remember that *“we cannot expect that we will like everything about another culture any more than we approve of everything about our own. Nor should we try to force ourselves to try.”* as Storti explains.

Storti, 67

But here some information about cultural differences could help to prepare the foreign student for such experiences. With some explanations, misinterpretations like the one of the North-American student could be avoided and perhaps help the foreigner to stay calm, although processes will be different or slower than he is used to from his native culture. As Storti describes: *“...it helps immensely to know that these stresses are coming. If we expect something of a rough side, we aren't caught altogether off our guard. We may still be thrown by the experience, but being psychologically prepared diminishes the impact.”*

Storti, 9

Most of the students would like to hear about experiences of previous international UDLA students. These reports, in form of ‘testimonials,’ could help the foreign student to be better prepared for their stay abroad, and could make the foreigner aware of his own cultural behaviour that could be taken as strange or offensive by the Mexicans.

See question 23, Appendix A

Language is a big problem for the sojourners. A lot of students come to the UDLA with little to no knowledge of Spanish. A lot of information is provided bilingual, but because the two languages are separated in different parts of the brochure, this is not clear to the student. After the student's acceptance to the exchange program, most of the communication is held in Spanish, which makes it difficult for the foreigner to understand it. Because he does not understand Spanish well, the student feels insecure about understanding the information right and as a result probably will not be able to perform as wanted. Therefore a lot of students stated that they would like to have all information bilingual, in Spanish and English. All of them agreed about wanting to learn Spanish, the English text would be just an aide for them to be sure about understanding right.

See question 22, Appendix A

#### *Contact to with Mexicans*

I did this investigation after the students had been in Mexico for three months. All of them made some Mexican friends, but still the best friend in Mexico for most foreign students is another foreigner. A lot of the students said that they would like to have more contact with Mexicans, but find it difficult to get to know them. They state that they want to stay in contact with their Mexican acquaintances after they return to their home country, but what shows is that they are interested more in superficial contacts with Mexicans.

See questions 13–16, Appendix A

A lot of students reported the experience of emotional problems such as being homesick or a feeling of loneliness. The same number of students but not the same persons wished to go back to their country. This is a very important result, because if somebody experiences emotional problems or is feeling homesick, he cannot enjoy his stay abroad and most probably cannot be able to perform well in his studies. The investigation has shown that the more Mexican friends the foreigner has, the fewer his emotional problems. This shows again that close contact and interaction with members of the host population are important for the foreign student, as Sellitz and Cook found out in a study, “so-

See question 19, Appendix A

*journalers who have at least one close host-national friend experienced fewer problems than sojourners with no close national friends.*" Therefore UDLA should try to help to solve this problem by promoting contact between Mexican and international students and perhaps to keep closer contact to its international students after their first week at UDLA.

Furnham and Bochner, 128

People who do not have a lot of contact with Mexicans have more problems with Spanish and seem to be quite unhappy about their stay in Mexico. This demonstrates the importance of contact with members of the host nation. This confirms what Bochner says, *"The first is the availability of a 'culture friend' to serve as an unofficial tutor in cultural affairs. The evidence indicates that many sojourners lead lives that are relatively isolated from their host society. Those sojourners... who do have some intimate contact with host members, seem to be more content, satisfied and successful than sojourners who have no such contact."*

Furnham and Bochner, 251.

This would help in other facts as well: Many students are missing a contact person within the host nation that they could consult in case of questions or problems, or who could accompany them when they have official appointments. The employees of the International Affairs Office are available from 9 am to 5 pm, but normally do not accompany the foreigner to places outside UDLA, to the SEP, for example. Outside of the office hours, the foreigner has to solve his problems on his own. Therefore a lot foreigners said that they would like to have a mediator or 'buddy', at least for the first weeks. A mediator could also facilitate the process of culture learning, and function as a *"major source of cultural information"* as Bochner puts it.

See question 21, Appendix A

Furnham and Bochner, 128.

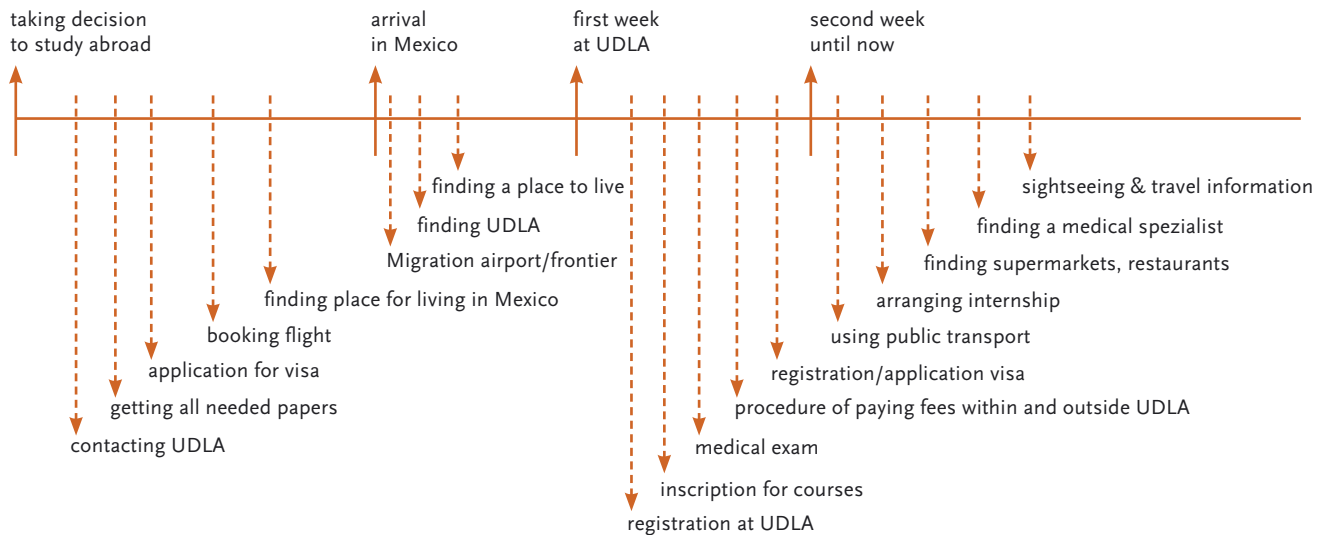
#### *Information handed out to students*

Although the students have stated that their first impression of the information material the UDLA provided has been good and sufficient, they asked afterwards for additional information and added that they would like to receive the information not only in Spanish, but also in English. Some students denied getting information in English, because they want to learn Spanish, but to provide bilingual information is not done to hinder their learning Spanish. It would be an additional aid to secure that the student understands right and perhaps would help to learn Spanish, because the student could refer to the English text in case he does not understand a certain word.

To find out exactly when a foreign student needs certain information or help, I asked them about critical moments from the time the decision to go abroad was made to the present. I gathered their answers in a time line, to identify when specific information is needed.

See questions 6, Appendix A

The diagram (see next page) clearly shows that different types of information would be greatly helpful at different stages. In addition to information material, which contains all information at once, it could be helpful to provide information on web pages corresponding to these stages: Before the student's arrival to Mexico, the first week, and long-term or general information. This way, the student would have different ways to find the information he needs at a certain stage. Students who would like to get all information about everything they have to do all at once could consult the complete printed information. Others, who



are interested only in information they need at a certain stage, could consult the website whenever it is needed. Additionally, the International Office could send parts of information at the relevant stages by e-mail. This could be a way to insure that the student gets necessary information and will probably perform as wanted.

Most of the information students require is contained in the existing material, but a problem is that students receive overlapping or contrary information, such as in case I described above about the Visa Flyer. This causes confusion, because the student does not know which instructions to follow. Too much information can cause an information overload and lead to a rejection of the given information. If the user cannot find what he is looking for, he probably will quit consulting the information, miss the important facts and will not act as desired. Therefore it would be necessary, as I described above, that all departments agree on one information material, which will be provided in the form of a printed guide and online.

*See question 24, Appendix A*

In addition to the information the students received from the UDLA, they would like to have some about tourists sites, food places, maps of Cholula, Puebla, the UDLA campus and a bus-map, as well as information about cultural differences and medical specialists.

### *Conclusion*

This investigation confirmed that international UDLA students encounter several difficulties or problems before and after their arrival to Mexico. **Overlapping, contrasting or too much information** causes the student to miss important information, which causes the student to not act as wanted and get in trouble afterwards. Therefore it is very important that all departments agree on only one information material, which will be handed out.

A lot of students come to study at the UDLA and are quite ignorant of Mexico, its culture and way of life. Therefore they face problems, frustrating experiences

and culture shock because of not being prepared to live in a foreign culture and dealing with **cultural differences**. They cause misunderstandings and finally a culture shock and can lead to the student's withdrawal from the host nation, or not enjoying his stay. Previous information about Mexico, its culture and way of life could serve as a preparation for foreign students--they could get an idea about what is awaiting them when going abroad. Culture shock can always occur, but with previous information, the process can be easier and faster.

Other problems arise due to the **language barrier**. This also affects the foreigner's personal communication with Mexicans, and can lead to frustrating experiences because of the student's incompetence of expressing what he wants, or understanding the wants of others.

After their arrival they need **contact and interaction with the Mexican population**, because this will help to learn and understand the Mexican culture and way of life. But many international students reported that they had difficulties with getting in contact with Mexicans. A mentor system where Mexican students perform as 'buddies' for international students would be helpful and could be organised by the UDLA. This kind of mentor-system could be helpful as well for Mexican students who plan to go abroad. If the UDLA could organise that these students, before going abroad, will act as 'buddy' for an international student from the country he is going to, both foreigner and Mexican student would be helped. The Mexican student could get to know the other culture by interacting with this student and could improve his language skills while practising the foreign language.