

Austria – Fachhochschule Burgenland

Institution	Fachhochschule Burgenland – University of Applied Sciences Burgenland - Austria
Study programs	We offer a range of bachelor, master and PhD programmes. We also offer bridging programmes and further education courses. For information please refer to our homepage: www.fh-burgenland.at .
Skills in German language	German language skills are necessary for admission for most study programs.
Study fees	There are no study fees at the Fachhochschule Burgenland for the bachelor and master courses. A fee may be applicable for other courses. Please refer to the particular course on our website.
Interviewed Person	Validation professional the the FH Burgenland

Preparation

Prof. Dr. A.K. is the program director for UAS Burgenland's bridging program for international students. She has a degree in English language and literature studies and a PhD in philosophy. She earned a "German language for Non-Natives" teaching certificate 20 years ago and has been involved since the year 2000 in developing teaching programs for international "incoming" students.

About the Bridging Program:

The Bridging Program for International Students is a one to two-year university preparation program for international applicants, which leads to undergraduate and graduate programs at UAS Burgenland. The program acts as a bridge between their current qualifications and entry requirements of the various degree programs offered at UAS Burgenland and is designed to plug academic gaps, improve your German and English language skills and familiarize students with Austrian life and culture in preparation for university studies.

Students can choose to participate in the Bridging Program offered at Campus Pinkafeld for two or four semesters before applying to and eventually joining their desired degree program. The full Bridging Program is a four-semester academic program targeted at students whose academic readiness and/or German and/or English language skills is/are not sufficient to be admitted to regular undergraduate programs at UAS Burgenland. The two-semester Advanced Bridging Program requires that students already meet the specific entry requirements of their desired undergraduate or graduate program, apart from sufficient language qualifications. Upon successful completion of the two or four semester Bridging Program they can apply to one of the regular undergraduate or graduate programs. The Bridging Program is offered on a fee paying basis and entry into undergraduate and postgraduate studies is subject to admission criteria. The final acceptance of enrolment will always be at the discretion of the head of the desired degree program.

Highlights

- Full-time studies
- Duration of Bridging Program: 2 – 4 semesters
Academic year 2015/2016: 1 October 2015 – 31 July 2016
Academic year 2016/2017: 1 Oktober 2016 – 31 July 2017
- German and English language courses are available from level A1 to at least level B2 according to the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" (CEFR)
- Internationally recognized German language diplomas "ÖSD - Österreichisches Sprachdiplom Deutsch" can be obtained after completing each German language module; ÖSD diplomas are state-approved examinations for German as a Foreign/Second Language which correspond to the levels of CEFR

- Applicants who basically meet all entry requirements of the desired degree program and can prove German language skills at least at A2 level and English language skills at least at B1 level (according to CEFR) are candidates for the Advanced Bridging Program (2 semesters only). If there is no official proof of the applicant's levels available, corresponding language proficiency exams can be taken at Campus Pinkafeld upon arrival/before program start.
- Studies at UAS Burgenland do not only offer applicants with 'A'-Levels academic perspectives, they also open up chances for academic development to people with a completed vocational training (certificate from a vocational school) which usually doesn't grant access to university studies directly. In order to find out if they are such an eligible candidate for application to the UAS' Bridging Program, applicants need to check the admission requirements for their desired bachelor program at www.fh-burgenland.at.
- The program languages are German and English
- The total obtainable credits are 30 ECTS per semester
- Students may join a community of international students in the adjacent student hostel (other residential options might be available upon request).

In the current academic year (2017-18), 35 students were admitted (divided into two cohorts), according to the status of September 2017. Bridging Program students typically come from China or Pakistan. Other countries of origin are (exemplarily): Iran, India, Vietnam, Macedonia, Turkmenistan, and Columbia.

Awareness

During the three years of experience since the start of the first cohort in study year 2014-2015, A.K. has learned about the intercultural differences in educational background, learning styles, and awareness of personal capacities among her students. She has adapted her program to include elements of country and culture studies, "study capacity" trainings like learning creativity techniques; time-, target-, and self-management.

Documentation and support

The main target group of the Bridging Program for International Students at Campus Pinkafeld is applicants aiming to obtain a bachelor's or master's degree at UAS Burgenland who lack the required entry qualifications. Following completion of the program they are eligible for application to a degree program at one of the two campuses at UAS Burgenland. Participants are most often recommended to the program by their communities or by word-of-mouth.

Personal and educational documents needed are:

- CV including personal statement on motivation to join the program
- Valid passport
- Completed application form which can be requested at the managing office
- Secondary school leaving certificate and/or any other proof of your university entrance qualifications in your home country
- Secondary school transcript (final year)
- If they already started/completed some sort of higher education/studies, (university) transcripts and/or awarded diplomas/degrees
- Language certificates (German, English)

The required educational documents may differ according to applicants' personal educational background. Their application, however, can only be processed if all the required personal and educational documents are made available in due time. According to specific countries of origin, it might also be necessary to have all your original documents certified by the Austrian embassy or consulate in your home country. If the documents are not issued in German or English, prospects need to provide certified German or English translations as well.

We asked A.K. about common pitfalls and supportive factors in the documentation process from the applicants' perspective, which she has been able to observe in her role as a program director.

Several factors complicate the application process: For one, participants need to prove to the public authorities that they can raise € 10.000,- of funds and savings to afford their life in Austria for the duration of the program, and where the funds come from. Some countries do not allow their citizens to leave even if they are accepted as students of the bridging program. This can be the case if they give contradictory or non-credible information at different interview occasions with the embassy, or if they behave in a way that would make them suspicious of using the study program as a pretence for their plan to start a new life in Austria and get the title of residence in the first priority. Applicants also have to document that they have a secured accommodation, e.g. a room at the students' dormitory in Pinkafeld, for which evidence they have to raise the total sum of three months' rent. In order to facilitate the process and help applicants overcome the hurdles, the program manager and secretary at the UAS offer to stay in constant contact with applicants and give them continuous feedback as needed and answer to their questions.

Assessment

Before students get started on the lengthy and time consuming procedure of documentation (as a prerequisite for getting admitted and/or leaving their home countries), A.K. gives them an opportunity to assess their own skills and see if their expectations match reality in a pre-application skype interview. The interview is in a one-to-one setting where students are asked to speak in English and German. After some small talk, they are asked questions about their motivation and their personal situation. Technical or functional skills are not tested since applicants have to present their formal, NARIC-checked valid credentials later in the process. However, certificates documenting language skills usually fail to give reliable and realistic information. In one case, an applicant from China had submitted a valid higher education degree of English language ECTS, whereas it turned out that he didn't speak a word of English. Therefore, speaking skills are assessed in the interview.

As was mentioned earlier (section I) in the description of the application procedure, several players are involved in processing the application: public authorities, governmental bodies in the applicants' home country; the national Austrian embassies; finally, after receiving the positive decision from their countries' authorities, they are accepted by the foreign ministry of Austria and then allocated to the administrative districts, which is when they finally get the permission of residence in Pinkafeld (location of the UAS' campus) for one year. After showing their record of successful studies, their title of residence is expanded for the second year.

Given the complicated process of application, which can last as long as a full year (example Pakistan), it happens that participants give up during the process, or they have to discontinue because they need their money back. A.K. sees a tendency of growing rigour in the way authorities deal with applicants.

Impact

We referred the questions in this section to the situation when students have successfully completed their application, been admitted to the Bridging Program, and then started on it. Two phases of impact can be defined: mid-term and long-term.

Mid-term: While being enrolled in the Bridging Program. Students can develop their intercultural skills immensely. They get loads of personal and social feedback, support, networks, and rich experience. Personal growth is one of the most important benefits allowing participants to integrate into their host country. For example, Chinese students learn how to manage their learning process autonomously. In the beginning, they are self-conscious, do not dare to communicate actively, do not understand Austrian dialect expressions. The language classes are led by a team of at least two different teachers, thus students cannot get fixated at one person, which gives them more flexibility in their

communication. At the end of the program, they undergo the ÖSD (Austrian Language Diploma) examination at the UAS, which entitles them to study at Austrian institutions starting their programmes at German B2 level.

Long-term: After finishing the Bridging Program. The impact of a successful completion of this program is that they have credentials that will recommend them for starting the regular BA or MA programme in their field of expertise at an Austrian university. Degree holders can very often realise their dream of getting enrolled in their favoured university BA/MA program. They will then most likely want to go back to their home countries where good career opportunities await them because of their international experience. A minor part of the students have become engaged in long-term love relationships with Austrian residents and can pursue their personal happiness by starting a family in Austria.

SPECIAL SECTION ONLY FOR VALIDATION PROFESSIONALS**Job profile and training needs**

A.K. has earned several degrees in her educational background which qualify her for the position as the Bridging Program Director: Among others, she is a certified teacher of “DAF” (Deutsch als Fremdsprache – “German for Non-Natives”), and a certified examiner of “ÖSD” (Österreichisches Sprachdiplom – Austrian Language Diploma). Before taking on this position, she had been working with international students for nearly twenty years and she had been for several years in charge of the “Preparatory program” (Vorbereitungslehrgang) for students from a non-traditional educational background.

She gave essential impulses to bringing the Bridging Program to life in 2014 and has been the main proponent of its constant improvement over the years. Notwithstanding her broad experience in the field, she felt thrown into a completely new environment and welcomed it as a chance for personal growth.

She states that her students need a lot of support and she as a teacher strives to respond with a forbearing, patient attitude. Successful communication is not a matter of course, so it takes A.K. a number of trials to explain a concept to her students, having to find yet another way “how else (she) could explain this to (her) student?”. That was new to her in her teaching career and demands flexibility and creativity.

A.K. claims that the most important training needs for a teacher/assessor of migrants and refugees would be how to guide students to acquire new working techniques and autonomous or self-guided learning capacities (e.g. studying vocab, doing homework). Moreover, teachers would benefit from awareness of and trainings on how to manage the mutual expectations of the teachers’ and the learners’ role / responsibilities, and how they are shaped by culture.

A.K. believes that it would support her and the trainers in her program to know group dynamics and how cultures interact in the classroom – e.g. one of her colleagues was afraid that two different religious groups might get in conflict in her class. Even if this has never happened so far and students really get along well with each other, it might be advantageous for teachers to be prepared and educated for dealing with potential conflicts, and with other issues arising from cultural diversity. For example, it would be good to be familiar with praying rituals during Ramadan, which are practised very strictly by students from Pakistan, and have to be considered in the teaching schedule. Or, equality and acceptance of women never was an issue in any of the classes, but “you never know” that it might become one day.

Policy context

It was described above (sections I, IV, V) how several layers of national and international policies and authorities come into play in the complex process of applying for the Bridging Program.

This leads to impediments in the planning of the study year, as is shown in this example. In late September 2017, at the time of the interview, applicants from Pakistan had not yet been issued the positive note by the embassy for the current study year (which they need to join in November at the latest to be still admitted as late-starters) in spite of being admitted by the UAS. A.K. states that she would appreciate an accelerated and more flexible processing of applications by all the authorities involved.

The status of Bridging Program students is one of “associate” or “irregular” student. As such they cannot apply for funding by the Austrian state and its federal states. Refugees having acquired a title of permanent residence are eligible for the Bridging Program but most likely cannot afford the study fees. Owning a refugees’ passport would make them eligible to apply for a scholarship – but only for regular studies, which is not the case for the Bridging Program. If the eligibility criteria for refugees’ scholarships were revised to include irregular study programs, this would make the Bridging Program a realistic option for integrating refugees into the higher education sector in Austria.

UAS Burgenland had offered a free place for one refugee on trial in an earlier cohort. It was a successful experiment, and a potential expansion of the “wildcard” concept for future study years is under discussion.

Taking into account all of the above mentioned observations, it can be concluded that one major motivation to join a Bridging Program (at UAS, or similar ones at UAS Technikum Vienna, or UAS Upper Austria) could be that it offers a basis for participants to become official residents of Austria. One of the drawbacks is the lack of public funding. In consequence, legally acknowledged residents of Austria with refuge or migrant background might rather opt for a non-paying preparatory programme at one of the universities.