The International Office SUPSI
Activity Report 2021

The service

The International Office manages and administers everything that revolves around internationalisation issues, with a focus on mobility programmes, including the Swiss-European Mobility Programme (SEMP). The service is mainly dedicated to supporting the student body, academics and staff wishing to undertake a stay outside the canton, as well as to advising, welcoming and organising incoming mobility at SUPSI. Internationalisation encompasses all measures that contribute to making a higher education institution competitive in the areas of teaching, research and various services within an international and intercultural context. In this respect, the International Office is, in various aspects, a platform for information and cross-disciplinary exchange for the departments and SUPSI in general. Although not directly involved in the international activities of Research and Undergraduate and Graduate Studies, (direct mandates), it actively participates in the development and maintenance of networks with national and international partners.

Overview

Mobility management and process improvement were the focus of the 2021 activities. The unstable situation related to the pandemic meant that there were fewer mobility placements than requests received; all these dossiers were followed up by the service, which tried to take into account the real needs and possibilities for mobility of SUPSI students and staff and guests. Many individual exchanges and workshops were postponed until 2022; all processes and documentation will therefore have to be redrafted and updated.

The exchange management tool ‘Mobility Online’ has been implemented for almost all student mobility flows: the pilot phase made it possible to finalise all the necessary steps to manage the mobility process efficiently and effectively. Students and the mobility network were required to be more flexible to allow for adjustments to be made in the process. All exchange participants were helpful and supportive and this facilitated this work. Several suggestions were received in the feedback sessions.

The mobility process was also the subject of careful analysis in connection with the SUPSI Quality Assurance System, which provides for regular evaluation of its processes internally and by a commission of external experts. With the involvement of more than 50 people, the evaluation based on 6 reference standards of students, collaborators, transversal staff and partners has made it possible to draw up a report assessed at the beginning of 2022 by an external commission. The feedback received will be the starting point for refining the process and for reflection on the topic of internationality at our institution. The reorganisation of the service has led to the inclusion of a contact person for all administrative aspects related to visas, permits and insurance, who, in addition to looking after mobility and visiting students, supports matriculated students from non-EU/EFTA countries from the departments and the Accademia Teatro Dimitri.

DACD: Department of Environment, Construction and Design
DEASS: Department of Business Economics, Health and Social Care
DFA: Department of Education and Learning
DTI: Department of Innovative Technologies
CSI-SUM: Conservatorio della Svizzera italiana – University of Music
FFHS: Fernfachhochschule Schweiz
ATD: Dimitri Theatre Academy

In respect of gender identity, all designations and offices indicated in this document and referred to as ‘he’ are to be understood as referring to the corresponding term in the female gender.
Student Mobility Report

2021 saw an increase in mobility requests from SUPSI students, thanks to the excellent promotional work undertaken by the mobility coordinators of the departments and affiliated schools. Compared to last year, 70 incoming students were interested in studying or interning at SUPSI and over 120 SUPSI students were interested in an experience outside our institution. In the end, over 110 mobilities were carried out, with a good balance between study and internship mobility.

International seminars and study trips such as DACD’s IMIAD, GIDE, Ethiopia, China Architecture, Civil Engineering and Interior Architecture workshops and the DTI’s Study Trip MSE China Module could not be held and were postponed to 2022. However, new communication tools made it possible to resume some activities; the IMIAD and GIDE workshops, for example, were held in ‘remote’ mode. The slow recovery also affected the DEASS International Cooperation Internships; although fewer in number than in previous years, it was possible to carry out some internships within the programme.

The mobility of the affiliated schools has remained stable compared to the pre-pandemic period: the Conservatorio della Svizzera Italiana (CSI-UOM) and the Accademia Teatro Dimitri (ATD) have always been linked to the world of internationality precisely because they are typical art schools. For them, ‘classic’ mobility is one of many activities: small classes and selected students mean that the number of exchange students is low. As far as DEASS Landquart is concerned, mobility is linked to the number of students who have to do the compulsory internship and the places available.

In the meantime, the Fernfachhochschule is working on internal synergies and communication to enable mobility activities: sharing with SEMP partners and focusing on students’ characteristics (distance learning, on-the-job training) will make it possible to consolidate ways of enabling funded SEMP mobility.
Outgoing student mobility

In 2021 we again had a good turnout of students interested in an experience outside the canton or abroad. Of more than one hundred SUPSI students interested, more than 70 undertook a mobility period in Switzerland, Europe and further afield. The preferred destination for our students remains Italy, which is closely followed by Swiss mobility, which was also in high demand in 2021 due to the still uncertain pandemic situation in the early part of the year. This led to a consolidation of the Swiss network between SUPSI and other institutions and to greater attention being paid to this mobility option by students enrolled at our Swiss universities. Most outgoing students study in the DEASS area of healthcare, a field of study that includes various internship periods abroad. 2021 saw an increase in mobility by DTI students, thanks to the promotional work carried out by the department’s mobility coordinator.

Some sixty DFA students were also able to take advantage of MOVETIA’s teacher mobility programme (NALE) and receive a small amount of financial support for their two-week Francophone internship planned as part of the degree course (not counted in the 2021 statistics).

Outgoing student mobility

- Withdrawn: 31%
- SEMP mobility: 26%
- International mobility: 19%
- Mobility cancelled or interrupted due to Covid: 13%
- Swiss mobility: 11%

Incoming student mobility

In 2021, there were some 70 applications for incoming mobility from partner universities. Many of the mobilities were carried out by students from Italy thanks to the range of degree courses in Italian language. Half of the students come from the healthcare area, mainly from Nursing and Physiotherapy; this year SUPSI also hosted around ten students from various Italian universities at the DTI for the preparation of their theses. There were also a number of cases of ‘remote’ exchanges.

Incoming student mobility

- SEMP mobility: 40%
- Withdrawn: 31%
- International mobility: 21%
- Mobility cancelled or interrupted due to Covid: 7%
- Swiss mobility: 1%
In 2021, as in previous years, there were many requests for mobility funding under the SEMP programme, for both teaching and education. Once again this year, the pandemic affected incoming and outgoing staff mobility, and many requests were postponed to 2022.

As far as the SEMP programme is concerned, the International Office keeps track of and assists all requests; the service is also involved for other types of mobility (visiting professors, post-doctorates, confederation fellows) but not yet in a systematic way. Other visits and collaborations are therefore managed directly by the departments.

The majority of SUPSI employees who went on mobility were engaged in teaching activities, i.e. teaching assignments or the provision of training at a European university institute. Teaching abroad allows participants to gain a broader view of the world of education, exchange knowledge with colleagues in another country and directly experience good teaching practices.

DEASS employees were the ones who took most advantage of this opportunity in 2021, and applications came mainly from DACD and DEASS. Interest in job shadowing mobility has also increased within the central management departments. Interest and requests come from increased attention and more widespread communication: Even though the number of final departures does not yet correspond to the number of requests, the entire mobility network (mobility coordinators and the International Office), as well as those directly involved, have worked throughout the year to try to make exchanges a reality, shifting the mobility period where possible within 2021 (according to openings and pandemic restrictions) or to the following year.

As for guest mobility, several moved with SEMP while others came with alternative types of grants to support their activities. The two DEASS International Weeks (workshops) planned for 2021 were postponed to the following year.

(Tables below only to provide the numbers from which the table above is generated. Not for publication)
Activities with incoming students

Collaboration with USI and the Erasmus Student Network association ESN Lugano for the recreational activities of mobility students continues and intensifies. In 2021, numerous events were organised by both ESN and the service. The uncertain pandemic situation affected both participation and the number of activities; the result was nevertheless positive. While ESN activities are aimed at settling in and organising free time, the International Office’s activities are aimed at getting to know the students, share a few social occasions and get feedback on their mobility as it unfolds. For this reason, in-person and remote meetings were alternated, in order not to lose contact with the students.

At this juncture, the online aperitif where students received a box with local products directly at home to enjoy the best of Ticino in company was very much appreciated. A “Suitcase of Memories” was also created for the event, where each student had the opportunity to write a few words to remember their experience at SUPSI.

Future activities will aim to familiarise the student community with SUPSI; with the art schools, for example, it will be possible to have privileged access to the world of theatre and music, without forgetting the services offered to students such as CV revision and collaboration with the students’ association.

Activities with SUPSI outgoing students

Meetings with SUPSI students departing for a study or internship experience in other cantons and abroad also continue on a regular basis. These meetings are always very stimulating: the sharing of expectations before departure and the feedback upon return allow both a sharing and an enrichment of the mobility community and the SUPSI network. Thanks to these meetings, it is always possible to improve the support for exchanges and generate interesting ideas for future activities. These students become real ambassadors both to our partners and to our institution, as they often participate in information meetings as testimonials and share their experience on social networks and on the institutional website.

During 2021, meetings were held partly in person and partly remotely: this did not, however, prevent the students from participating in an active and purposeful manner and with a high participation rate.
Buddy Programme

In order to facilitate the integration of international students into a new university environment, which may be a source of anxiety for many to overcome, SUPSI has been organising the Buddy Programme for several years, launching a promotional campaign at two different times during the academic year. The main purpose of the Buddy’s role is to assist host students throughout their mobility period at SUPSI, so that they can settle in and enjoy the experience to the fullest. This gives them the opportunity to develop different linguistic and cultural knowledge, as well as soft skills thanks to their proximity to the international students. The Buddy is given the responsibility to organise the support of the mobility students autonomously, respecting their educational needs and requirements. Whenever an activity is organised by the International Office, in addition to the mobility students, the corresponding Buddy is also invited, so as to create social interaction with numerous students.

The type of mobility has an influence on this experience, in that clearly students on study mobility have more opportunities during the semester to meet their Buddy in the department, whereas for students on placement the meetings take place outside SUPSI during work breaks and at weekends. Due to the pandemic, organising activities between mobility students and Buddies was more problematic; however, students managed to maintain contact and make the Buddy Programme a worthwhile proposition.

The aim remains to actively promote the Buddy Programme among students from the various SUPSI departments in order to support all mobility students at SUPSI. Indeed, it is essential that incoming students are assisted especially before their arrival and at the beginning of their stay. For this reason, once completed their assignment, each Buddy was asked to write a small testimonial to be published on social media. The international community of mobility students is thus also enriched by our students having an international experience on SUPSI campuses.
Social networks

In addition to information meetings within SUPSI, the International Office increasingly uses social media channels such as Instagram and Facebook to promote mobility.

Instagram

The Instagram page was very popular in 2021, thanks to various types of content. Despite the fact that this channel has been in use for just over three years, there has been a more than positive response from followers, whose numbers are increasing. The page is followed by both SUPSI matriculated students and international students and partner universities.

The International Office also runs the hashtag #supsiexchange. The purpose of the hashtag is to allow all students to post mobility-related photos in one section, giving the public the opportunity to view all experiences simultaneously.

We cannot rule out that additional social networks, such as Linkedin or Twitter, may be used in future, a decision that will be made taking into account technological developments and the type of information to be shared.

Facebook

The Facebook channel was used less in 2021 than in previous years as priority was given to Instagram. Thanks to the link between the two platforms, it was still possible to keep both pages updated. The goal remains to continue to propose more entertainment activities and to post more photos and videos of events organised by both the International Office and ESN Lugano. Thanks to the option of temporary stories and featured stories, not to mention live videos, more facets can be shown to the public and thus make the dedicated Instagram mobility page more interesting. Testimonials from students will also enrich both channels.

It cannot be excluded that additional social networks such as Linkedin or Twitter may be used in the future, an assessment that will be made taking into account technological developments and the type of information to be shared.

Matriculated students from non-EU countries

As part of its activities, during 2021 the International Office took care of all the paperwork for students arriving from non-EU/EFTA countries from the four departments and the Dimitri Theatre Academy who need visas and permits to enter Switzerland and thus access studies at our institute.

Work was carried out with the canton on the documentation that students must present to their country’s consulate and a complete package was put together in Italian and English to serve as a guideline for preparing their dossiers. The students were accompanied throughout the procedure, starting with checking the documents to be filed and assisted in any problems or additional requests for documentation by the Immigration Office.

Online meetings were organised both with students prior to their arrival in Switzerland and with the secretariats and/or degree course assistants to give all the instructions on the procedure to follow after arrival in our country (application for a permit and procedure for exemption from standard health insurance/access to Swisscare student insurance).

Out of 21 students who applied, 16 were granted visas. All 16 students who were able to start their studies here were granted Swisscare coverage thanks to the collaboration with SUPSI.
Swisscare

Anyone residing in Switzerland must be insured for illness and accident, and the same applies to our foreign students. While in general European students are covered by their EHIC (European Health Insurance Card) and it is only necessary for them to apply for exemption from the standard Swiss health insurance, both the student body in mobility and incoming students from non-EU countries must necessarily take out a new policy.

In order to avoid the significant costs of standard Swiss health insurance, SUPSI had already entered into an insurance agreement with Group Mutuel/Academic Care, which was passed on to Swisscare at the end of 2020 to enable students to have coverage comparable to that of the KVG at reduced prices. To access this policy, interested students need to connect to the Swisscare platform from our website by subscribing to coverage and then initiating the application process for exemption from standard Swiss health insurance. The entire process is overseen and managed for them by the International Office, which has become the information centre for all international students on health insurance issues and the contact point for the IAS Social Insurance Institute exemption application files.

During the course of 2021, the International Office managed around 30 dossiers, including the transfer of insurance from Academic Care to Swisscare for students still covered by the previous insurance, new applications from matriculated and PhD students from non-EU countries, and some cases linked to the ‘particular’ statute of the countries of origin.

Relations with university partners

As of 1 June 2021, a new feature enables Swiss higher education institutions participating in the SEMP programme, and thus also SUPSI, to organise IN and OUT student mobility (for study and/or internship purposes) worldwide. This new service, which expands the geographical area of the programme, allows us to develop international mobility in cooperation with institutions around the world.

As with Swiss and European partners, worldwide partner institutions must have signed an agreement with a Swiss higher education institution that is a member of SEMP and accepts the quality criteria of SEMP / the Erasmus+ European Charter for Higher Education ECHE. They must also be official higher education institutions awarding a recognised diploma or other recognised higher-level qualification on a par with universities, in accordance with the laws and practices of the country in which they are based.

Also in 2021, the aim of the International Office activities was to maintain existing partnerships and create new ones, supporting our institution wherever possible in educational collaborations related to exchanges and mobility.

It is essential for the service to establish and maintain an active relationship between the institutions, their teaching staff and the mobility students: an important activity based on professionalism, trust and mutual esteem that leads SUPSI to an ever-increasing number of international agreements.

In 2021, SUPSI had 157 active SEMP agreements with 24 countries. Italy, also due to language sharing, remains the preferred partner (45), followed by Spain (25), Germany (17) and Belgium (11). France and Switzerland come next with 10 agreements each. 22 SEMP agreements were activated during 2021.

With some 60 European partners, DEASS remains the department with the largest number of SEMP agreements, followed by DACD.
Mobility management via the Mobility Online

Throughout 2021, work was done on the implementation of the Mobility Online tool, which allows the automated management of incoming and outgoing student mobility. With this support, mobility management is handled more effectively. All documentation is in one place and both students and departmental mobility coordinators will have an overview of the current situation of each mobility placement.

At present, all types of outgoing mobility have been implemented, while for incoming ones, only those of the SEMP programme have been implemented. In 2022, co-worker mobility should also be implemented.

Mobility Online allows the creation of an interactive task list for applicants and their application workflow. This workflow outlines the entire process in detail. Candidates actively participate in data management by entering their information, filling in online forms, uploading files (e.g. scanned paper documents, portfolios, photos) and printing their documents from the system. Candidates can complete their tasks online after logging into their individual accounts. The workflow provides candidates with the necessary and reliable overview of all steps to be followed.

In addition, the International Office collaborates in a working group with other Swiss universities that use the same tool, in order to optimise common functions within the SEMP programme.

Crisis management

In conjunction with the drafting of the SUPSI protection plan, following the pandemic, the International Office, with the help of the departmental coordinator for mobility in the DEASS healthcare area, has been working on a Crisis Management plan for SUPSI students and staff, which will be finalised shortly.

A plan has been drawn up and it is planned to implement Crisis Management in the Mobility Online tool with an Online Emergency Information Form, so that the whereabouts of mobility students and staff can be identified at any time and they can be contacted individually in case of need.

**Students**

Students are briefed on Crisis Management during the meeting before their departure, when they are made aware of insurance issues, the need to find out about the measures in place in the country of destination, to register with the Swiss/Italian embassy and to find out in advance what to do in an emergency.

**Staff**

An information sheet is also to be prepared for employees in order to make them aware of the issue and to be prepared in the best possible way in the event of a crisis to be managed.
Project Internationalisation of Curricula and Swiss Global Competence Lab

The collaboration on the High-impact measures for the comprehensive internationalisation of Curricula (IoC) in Switzerland project with partner universities ZHAW, BFH and HES-SO, which started in 2019, continues, joined by the Swiss Global Competence Lab project, also funded by the national agency Movetia under the International Programme. This project continues the IoC project with the creation of a Swiss competence centre for internationalisation of the curriculum, a centre that will provide services for all academic staff in this area such as training, evaluations and counselling.

Through cooperation between language regions and collaboration with external IoC experts, the project strengthens the international perspectives of UAS in Switzerland and worldwide.

During 2021, dissemination activities of the project results were carried out:
• elaboration of a website and development plan 2021-2025
• organisation of the final dissemination event at SUPSI, to be held in November 2022

SUCTI training

The seed of the SUCTI project was first planted in 2011 at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona, Spain), when the idea of creating an internationalisation course for administrative staff came about. In 2021, a colleague from the International Office and a departmental mobility coordinator participated in the training offered by the agency Movetia to ‘train the trainers’, together with other Swiss higher education institutions.

The ‘Train the Trainers’ course is an intensive one-week training course that aims to turn administrative staff into SUCTI trainers so that they can deliver SUCTI training in their institutions, in their own language, to their peers. When universities have trained all their staff, they will have absorbed the concept of internationalisation, and this systemic change will make them truly international institutions. The ultimate goal is therefore that internationalisation becomes second nature and not just an extra. This ‘Train the Trainers’ programme has provided all the tools one needs to teach courses on internationalisation in one’s own institutions, and will help bring about much-needed systemic change towards internationalisation in one’s own institution.

This training course focused on three different types of content:
• Information on internationalisation
• Intercultural communication skills
• Training skills

It is planned to implement regular courses on internationalisation for administrative staff.
Self-evaluation process
'Student and staff mobility'

As part of its institutional accreditation, SUPSI has set up its Quality Assurance System based on three cornerstones: the Quality Policy and Strategy, the Quality Assurance Framework and the Quality Handbook, within which 22 key processes have been described. These include the process related to student and staff mobility. In order to ensure the smooth running of the School and guarantee the quality of its actions, a continuous improvement cycle (PDCA) is applied to each of the key priority processes identified, and an external peer is regularly requested for each process. 2021 saw the International Office and the mobility network engaged in the preparation of a process evaluation report, which was assessed in early 2022.

During the summer of 2021, the entire mobility network worked to define 6 standards that could serve as a litmus test for the evaluation of the mobility process at SUPSI. These standards are a specific interpretation of the Quality Standards for Institutional Accreditation of the Swiss Accreditation and Quality Assurance Agency (AAQ). An initial self-assessment report was therefore drawn up by the mobility network (International Office and departmental mobility coordinators), which was then discussed with the process managers interconnected with mobility (human resources, undergraduate and graduate studies, sustainability, gender & diversity). At the end of this second internal evaluation, the self-assessment was shared and discussed through focus groups, in remote mode due to the pandemic, composed of SUPSI students and collaborators and guests (people who have been in mobility abroad or at our institution) and international partners, for a total of around 40 people.

The overall result was a confirmation of achievement of the 6 identified standards.

External evaluation
The Final Self-Assessment Report thus constitutes a fundamental element of the external evaluation of the mobility process; it covers the work carried out over the last four years by the International Office and the Mobility Network. The Report includes feedback from those directly involved in the process, as well as those who have contributed to the realisation of one or more mobilities (partners, other SUPSI stakeholders) and those who have carried out mobility (students and collaborators IN and OUT).

In conjunction with the planning of the self-evaluation, the mobility network identified five experts from Swiss and European academia to evaluate the exchange process. The work of the External Expert Commission (EEC) was intense and articulated: after reading and checking all supporting documentation of the activities related to the mobility process carried out (mobility support, circulation and dissemination of mobility information), the EEC worked on the self-assessment report in preparation for a one-day meeting with the same kind of people as the mobility network met for the self-assessment. On 25 February 2022, in mixed mode (in attendance and remote), the committee met more than thirty people with whom it discussed the self-assessment report.

Results
The EEC confirmed the attainment of standards while at the same time giving several suggestions for improvement and best practice. The overall assessment was good and thus allows for the refinement of certain aspects and the possibility of building on a solid foundation for possible further activities related not only to mobility but also to internationalisation projects of the school. The next steps will therefore be a prioritisation of the topic and the preparation of an action plan for 2024-2028.

For more information:
www.supsi.ch/international_en