



# Parent Handbook

Preparing for your student's experience of a lifetime





# About ISEP

ISEP is a network of over 300 colleges and universities in more than 50 countries cooperating to provide affordable access to international education for a diverse student population. ISEP students gain intercultural competence through integration into their host institution and host culture while exploring the international dimensions of their academic field.



**“The best decision of my life, to study abroad. Worth every penny and now I have everlasting memories and stories and friends from all over the world. I would recommend the opportunity to anybody, in a heartbeat.”**

*Christyna Cain, Mansfield University to Universidad Pública de Navarra*

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# Dear ISEP Parent

Your student has most likely chosen ISEP for study abroad because of the affordable, high-quality academic and full-immersion experience that they will receive. It is a very exciting time for students as they make preparations for what will be a defining experience in their lives. This is an opportunity for your student to expand their world view and to gain a greater sense of self-confidence, awareness, maturity, and independence as (s)he conquers new challenges and experiences.

However, as parents, you are also facing new challenges in trying to understand what to expect during your student's study abroad program and the role you will play in his/her experience. This handbook is meant to serve as a resource for ISEP parents in order to provide guidance and reassurance along with setting appropriate expectations for your student's time abroad.



**"I chose ISEP because it offered the opportunity to use my scholarship, a bonus that most programs didn't offer."**

*Samantha Corvino, Agnes Scott College to Université de Franche-Comté*



# ISEP Benefits

All ISEP benefits are explained in the Institutional Information sheet (IIS) your student will receive with his/her acceptance packet. Encourage your student to read all information carefully, to take a copy of the IIS with them and to leave one copy with you at home.

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## What's Included

**ENROLLMENT:** As an ISEP student, your student is enrolled in a full-time academic program at his/her host institution and is guaranteed a full course load as defined by the host institution. Access to all courses cannot be guaranteed as some may require prerequisites or be closed, limited to certain years, or unavailable due to scheduling conflicts between departments.

**FEES:** Mandatory registration fees—along with housing, room, and board—are covered for ISEP students. ISEP-Direct program fees may not include room and board. Please check the ISEP website for details on specific ISEP-Direct programs. Optional fees—those not required of all students—are not covered through ISEP. Optional fees may include student club/organization fees and optional excursions. Fees for cross-registration at another institution, regardless of whether or not it is an ISEP member, may not be covered. Additionally, ISEP does not cover any study abroad fee required by the student's home institution.

**ORIENTATION:** Orientations vary among institutions and may be designed for all incoming students or specifically for international students. Students are encouraged to meet their designated ISEP host coordinator before class begins and ask ISEP specific program/benefit questions.

**HOUSING:** Housing benefits apply to students on all ISEP-Exchange programs and to those on ISEP-Direct programs that include housing benefits. Housing, or a stipend covering the cost of housing, is available from the Official Date of Arrival to the last day of your student's placement period, including vacation and examination periods.

**MEALS:** Meal benefits apply to ISEP-Exchange students and to those ISEP-Direct students who choose program packages that include meals. A minimum of 19 meals per week are provided during each semester. Your student may receive a cafeteria meal plan, meals provided by a host family, or a stipend. Stipends suffice for normal student fare, usually in the subsidized student cafeteria, and are not meant to cover restaurant costs or non-food expenses.

**BENEFITS DURING VACATIONS:** Housing is provided throughout the placement period, including during vacations. However, your student's housing may change for that period of time. Your student may, for example, move to a room in a residence hall that stays open during vacations, live with a host family, or receive a temporary housing stipend. Meals are provided during vacations that occur within each semester, but host institutions are not required by ISEP to provide meals during vacations between semesters. The host institution



is not obliged to convert vacation benefits to a stipend should your student decide to make other arrangements or travel.

The Southern Hemisphere academic calendar runs from February/March to December. For Southern Hemisphere sites, unless otherwise noted on the IIS, vacation benefits do not apply during the break between academic years (December – February/March). However, ISEP vacation benefits do apply during the recess between semesters (June – July).

Students from institutions on the Southern Hemisphere academic calendar who plan to study in Northern Hemisphere countries for an academic year should be aware that the Northern Hemisphere academic year

typically runs from August/September to May/June. If your student's placement crosses different academic years, (s)he will not receive vacation benefits during the summer vacation period (June – August).

**EQUIVALENT VS. IDENTICAL BENEFITS:**

As an ISEP student, your student has the opportunity to enroll in classes; participate in the activities of his/her host institution; and receive housing, meals, and services. However, (s)he will not necessarily receive identical housing, meals, and services to those (s)he leaves behind at the home institution. Because higher education is funded differently throughout the world

and exchange rates fluctuate, the monetary value of the exchange benefits may not be identical to the amount paid to the home institution. ISEP, in other words, is based on equivalent and not identical benefits.

In addition, because of social and political differences between countries, student services and other benefits differ greatly across institutions. Part of the ISEP experience involves your student learning to adapt to the differences between the home and host institutions.

As your student settles into his/her host institution, encourage him/her to avoid making quick judgments about arrangements that have been made. Your student should take the time to find out what the typical accommodations are for local students. Also, your student is encouraged to try to get a sense of the customs and values of the host culture.

Adjusting to host living patterns and standards may be one of the most difficult challenges your student faces as an ISEP student, but meeting this challenge will give him/her an insider's perspective on the culture.

#### **ADDITIONAL EXPENSES:**

Your student's Institutional Information Sheet (IIS) may provide an estimate for the local cost of living for many of the expenses below; these expenses are not covered by ISEP benefits

- » Books and supplies
- » Laboratory or special course fees
- » Language courses and optional excursions not covered by benefits
- » Meals during the semester break for full-year students
- » Refundable housing and utility deposits
- » Optional fees for apartment services such as phone or internet
- » Housing accessories such as linens and kitchen supplies, if not provided
- » ISEP health insurance and health care services (insurance may cover services, but you may have to pay up front and be reimbursed)
- » Travel (airfare plus train, bus, or cab fare for arrival and daily travel)
- » Fees for passport, visas, and required immunizations
- » Personal spending



# Practical Considerations



There are a number of ways in which you can help your student prepare for the study abroad experience:

## Help your student prepare to be self-sufficient and responsible.

While supporting your student through the process is very important, it is also necessary to understand that (s)he is enrolling in an immersion study abroad program. This is a more independent type of study abroad experience. One of the best ways you can help your student is by encouraging him/her to take responsibility from the beginning in preparing for study abroad.

## Review the materials in your student's placement packet together.

The Institutional Information Sheet (IIS) and Student Handbook contain important information on preparing for life at the host institution. Your student will receive both documents from their home institution coordinator once (s)he has accepted placement. Your student should also receive a Welcome/Admissions packet electronically or at his/her home address from the host institution before departure.

## Health Insurance

ISEP has designed a comprehensive international health insurance program to meet your student's needs. All ISEP

students and accompanying dependents are required to enroll in the ISEP insurance program (with some exceptions) as a condition of placement. This requirement will not be waived, even if your student is covered under another policy.

The only way ISEP can ensure that all students are covered for the full study period abroad is by having them enroll in ISEP health insurance. It is impossible for ISEP to review individual health insurance policies and verify that each student is adequately covered.

The ISEP health insurance includes benefits that family health insurance may not, such as medical evacuation, repatriation, referral to physicians and hospitals abroad, and emergency assistance.

For more information on the summary of benefits, please visit the ISEP website: [http://www.isep.org/students/Placed/health\\_insurance4.asp](http://www.isep.org/students/Placed/health_insurance4.asp)



## Student Visas

Verify that your student knows how to obtain a student visa and begins the application process as soon as possible. Visa information can be found in the online country handbooks at [http://www.isep.org/students/Placed/country\\_handbooks.asp](http://www.isep.org/students/Placed/country_handbooks.asp). It is the responsibility of your student, not ISEP or the home or host university, to ensure that a visa is obtained in time for study abroad.

## Packing & Travel Plans

Purchasing an international flight can be daunting even for the experienced traveler. The good news is that there are many resources available to help guide you and your student through the process. The New York Times offers a weekly 'Frugal Traveler' column which includes many important money saving tips and ways to better use the internet to find travel deals.

Conventional wisdom holds that airfares are typically cheapest if purchased on a Tuesday or Wednesday as that is when most airlines release fare sales and promotions. You can track airfare projections for your preferred route with sites such as Bing or Yapta and evaluate a median price by tagging specific flights in Kayak. Once you've narrowed down the flight you want you can often save money and earn full frequent flyer miles by booking directly on the airline's website.

Your student will be tempted to pack their entire closet. It is a good idea to help remind them that they will likely have to carry everything they bring with them up and down steep flights of stairs by themselves. Packing for an extended stay abroad is difficult but not impossible. One strategy is to help your student write a list of essential items (waterproof jacket, warm sweater, comfortable shoes, etc.) and then start by making a pile of everything that they want to bring on the bed.

Encourage them to eliminate half of the pile and then half of the remaining pile. Your student will be left with an appropriate number of items for the trip and hopefully enough space for all the wonderful items (s)he will want to bring home. This strategy could also help your student save a significant amount of money on checked baggage fees depending on the airline they have selected for their flight.



## Keeping in Touch

Before your student departs, set up a communication plan including emergency numbers both at home and abroad when possible. Make sure you have working e-mail accounts and learn about the telephone and postal systems of your student's host country. Find out what your long distance carrier's rate is for that particular country and consider starting a Skype or Google Voice account.

Your student may also want to consider purchasing an unlocked GSM phone before departure as most countries offer affordable pay-as-you-go SIM card systems for cellular communication.

Once your student is on site, be flexible. Give your student several days to contact you after arrival. It may take him/her a couple of days to settle in and figure things out. Consider setting up a weekly or bi-weekly time for phone calls.



## Money Matters

How much money your student will need for their daily expenses while abroad will vary greatly by location and their individual spending habits. It is important to help your student research the costs of routine items in their host country before departure and to help them use this information to draft a budget for their stay. Your student's IIS will contain some information on local pricing but it is a good idea to research cost of living information in trusted guidebooks and online. It is helpful to track current exchange rates through sites such as [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com).

Traveler's Cheques are no longer recommended as they have been replaced to a large extent by the more widespread use of credit and debit cards. Your student should have the equivalent of 100 USD in their host currency on hand at the time of departure. Before departing, your student should establish a checking account tied to an ATM/Debit card and grant you access in case of an emergency need of funds. Most banks will charge the user an ATM transaction fee plus a foreign transaction fee for all withdrawals made while abroad. This is usually between one to three percent of the amount of the

withdrawal and may be factored as part of the overall exchange rate of the transaction. Your student should ask prospective banks about their fees for international withdrawal upfront and feel free to shop around for the lowest rate. Even considering the burden of fees, withdrawing money from an ATM will still be more affordable than exchanging cash in most cases as banks and exchange bureaus charge hefty fees of their own and do not always offer the most advantageous exchange rate of the day as ATM transactions generally do. Be certain that your student is aware of his/her card's banking network and that (s)he knows to use an ATM that offers services on that network. (Cirrus and Star are the most common.)

It may also be beneficial for your student to have a credit card in case of emergency or if (s)he plans on making multiple point of sale purchases. The same fee structure applies to most credit cards but there is an additional layer of protection should your student's card information be copied or stolen. Your student should contact his/her bank and credit card companies prior to departure to inform them of the primary destination and duration of stay while abroad. This will help avoid unnecessary holds on his/her account for security purposes.

In some instances it may make sense or it may be required for your student to set up a bank account in the host country. This is especially true if they will be receiving regular deposits from their host school for housing or meal stipends or if they will be receiving pay in their host currency for internships or campus work. Your student's host coordinator can provide local bank information.

## Health and Safety Problems Overseas

Before your student departs on an ISEP program, discuss all of the health and safety information (s)he has received in the Student and Country Handbooks, and what precautions should be taken while abroad and when traveling on weekends and during academic breaks.

Your student's behavior and decisions are more likely to affect his/her health and safety than any general conditions in the host country. Students who do not prepare themselves, ignore advice provided by the home and host coordinator, ISEP, and locals, or behave as if they are invulnerable, may run into difficulties. "Your daughter or son is considerably less likely to be the victim of a natural catastrophe, of social violence, of disease, or of program negligence than of being victimized by her or his own poor judgment, exercised in unfamiliar surroundings." (Advice for Parents: Frequently Asked Questions, by William Hoffa, SAFETI On-line Newsletter)

The ISEP Guidelines for Student Health and Safety Abroad are available in PDF format on our website. The guidelines outline the responsibilities of the ISEP Central Office, the Home Institution, the Host Institution, ISEP Participants, and Parents/Guardians/Family for student health and safety abroad.

\*These guidelines are based on NAFSA's (Association of International Educators) Health and Safety Guidelines. <http://www.nafsa.org/regulatoryinformation/default.aspx?id=6775>

## Prepare for Your Student's Return

What will your student need to do to arrange for financial aid, pre-registration for courses, and housing on his/her return? Making these arrangements before departure will help your student have less stress abroad, and help him/her smoothly re-integrate into the home institution after the program.



# Culture Shock

Upon arrival in the host country, your student will experience many emotions. Much of what they are feeling may be related to what has been studied and defined as “culture shock.” Culture shock is defined as being “precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse.” To put it more simply, your student will find that life in his/her host country differs significantly from what they are used to. They will realize that the landscape, food, social norms, dress, customs, and methods of communication are all different. The small daily activities that are normally easy, such as grocery shopping or making a telephone call, become difficult.



Culture shock has been thoroughly studied and can be broken down into several phases.

## Step 1: The Honeymoon Stage

When your student first arrives in a new culture, differences are intriguing and (s)he may feel excited, stimulated, and curious. Like any new experience, there's a feeling of euphoria upon arrival, and (s)he will be in awe of the differences (s)he sees and experiences. Your student will feel excited, stimulated, and enriched. During this stage, your student will still feel close to everything familiar back home.

## Step 2: The Distress Stage

A little later, differences create an impact. Everything your student is experiencing no longer feels new; in fact, it's starting to get him/her down. (S)he may feel confused, isolated or inadequate and realize that his/her familiar support systems (e.g. family and friends) are not easily accessible

## Step 3: Re-integration Stage

During this stage, your student may begin to dislike the culture, the language, the food. (S)he may reject it as inferior and may even develop some prejudices towards the new culture. (S)he may feel angry, frustrated and even feel hostile to those around

him/her. Your student may even question his/her decision to study abroad. (S)he may start to idealize life “back home” and compare his/her current culture to what is familiar. Don't worry. This is absolutely normal and a healthy reaction - it means that your student is adjusting. (S)he is reconnecting with what (s)he values about him/herself and his or her own culture.

## Step 4: Autonomy Stage

This is the first stage in acceptance. This stage is sometimes called the emergence stage when the student starts to come out of the 'fog' and finally begins to feel like him/herself again. (S)he starts to accept the differences and feel like (s)he can begin to live with them. Your student will feel more confident and better able to cope with any problems that may arise based on his/her growing experience. (S)he no longer feels isolated, and instead, (s)he is able to look at the world around and appreciate where (s)he is.

### Step 5: Independence Stage

Your student will begin to feel like him/herself again! (S)he embraces the new culture and sees everything in a new, yet realistic light. Things start to become enjoyable. (S)he feels comfortable, confident, able to make decisions based on his/her own preferences and values. (S)he no longer feels alone and isolated. Your student will begin to understand and appreciate both the differences and similarities of both the home and host culture. (S)he starts to feel at home.

Culture shock may result in many symptoms that you may notice when speaking with your student. These symptoms range from physical to emotional. They may include:

- » Headaches
- » Difficulty sleeping or insomnia
- » Loss of appetite
- » Irritability and anger over minor frustrations
- » Homesickness
- » A feeling of sadness, loneliness, and vulnerability
- » Idealization of home culture
- » Feeling shy or insecure
- » Feeling lost or confused
- » Questioning of the decision to move to the host country

## Helping your Student Cope with Culture Shock

Keep in mind that initial disorientation is a normal part of adjusting to a new culture. The frustration your student may feel will pass and (s)he will begin to enjoy his/her new experiences.

While it may be disconcerting for you to watch your student go through this process, culture shock is a catalyst for

self-growth that will help him/her develop an understanding of his/her host culture and of him/herself. Your student may call you complaining about all of the things in his/her host country that frustrate them or are not working. Rather than immediately acting on your instinct to fix the problem, remember the following:

- » Your student may just need to vent his/her frustration. If (s)he is experiencing the common symptoms of culture shock, (s)he may be focusing only on the negative and trying to connect with those from home who understand what (s)he misses.
- » Encourage your student to speak with his/her host ISEP coordinator if they are having a problem with which (s)he needs help.
- » While it is difficult to watch your student struggle through certain challenges, allowing them to navigate the common issues faced when going abroad and encouraging them to solve the problems will help him or her develop a sense of independence, resourcefulness, and confidence.

One of the most effective strategies to help your student mitigate culture shock is preparation. The more your student knows about what to expect, the more comfortable (s)he will be. Encourage your student to research the local history, politics, cultural norms, etiquette, and education systems.

It is also helpful for students about to go abroad to speak with those who have been abroad and to international students at the home university before (s)he goes.

ISEP country handbooks are available on each country to help in the preparation process. ([http://www.isep.org/students/Placed/country\\_handbooks.asp](http://www.isep.org/students/Placed/country_handbooks.asp)).



# Re-entry

Upon return, your student may feel slightly disoriented or out of place; it may be similar to what (s)he felt when (s)he arrived in his/her host country. This is called return shock or reverse culture shock. These feelings are temporary and completely normal.

## Common Re-entry Stages

(Summarized from *Back in the USA: Reflecting on Your Study Abroad Experience and Putting It to Good Work* by Dawn Kepets)

### Step 1: Disengagement

With the departure date nearing, your student begins to concentrate on his/her return home. It is a feeling of having one foot in the host country and the other foot in the home country. (S)he starts thinking about wrapping up his/her time abroad and making plans for what (s)he'll do when (s)he gets home.

### Step 2: Euphoria

In this stage, your student gets excited about the prospect of going home. (S)he thinks about seeing his/her old friends, eating his/her favorite foods, and speaking his/her native language. This stage may occur before leaving the host country or just upon arrival home. It may also be quite brief, especially for those who were very well adjusted to their host culture. Students who were unhappy while abroad may not experience return shock beyond this stage.

### Step 3: Dampened Euphoria

This stage occurs after a short time back in the home county and is characterized by your student feeling like a foreigner in his/her own country. (S)he may feel frustrated, alienated, and critical of his/her own culture. Things that were previously completely normal to him/her now stand out. (S)he feels like no one really wants to hear about his/her experience and can't relate to it. This is a good time for your student to seek out other study abroad

returnees. They can provide support and sympathy as (s)he readjusts to life back in the home country.

### Step 4: Gradual Readjustment

Your student may experience the following sentiments:

- » Boredom
- » No one wants to hear his/her stories
- » The experienced is hard to explain
- » Homesickness for friends and host culture
- » Relationships have changed
- » Seeing home culture with a critical eye
- » Inability to apply new skills and knowledge to the home environment
- » Loss of the experience

You can encourage your student with the following advice to help alleviate some of the symptoms of reverse culture shock:

- » With your student's new international experience and language ability, (s)he can seek out new outlets to channel his/her interests—new friends, clubs, activities, etc.
- » Your student can seek out other study abroad returnees; (S)he will be more receptive to listening to all the details about a student's time abroad and will have stories to share as well.
- » When your student discusses time abroad with less receptive audiences, (s)he should remember to keep stories brief and interesting.
- » Technology makes it easy to keep in touch with new friends via email, Skype,

Facebook, etc. It may also help your student to seek out and befriend people at home who are from the host country.

- » Your student can keep the experience alive by maintaining contact with the friends (s)he made while abroad and sharing his/her experiences with those who can relate to them.
- » Journaling or scrap-booking may help your student better articulate and express what (s)he went through.

## Academics

Study abroad students are not on vacation. They are engaging in an important academic experience. The academic system in your student's host country will most likely operate differently from the academic system to which they are accustomed. Your student should be prepared for differences in the registration process, teaching style, and grading system. Experiencing these differences is part of the cultural understanding that your student will obtain through his/her study abroad experience. A good way to help your student to prepare for these differences is to encourage your student to educate him/herself on the educational system in his/her host country.

It is the responsibility of your student to understand how his/her grades and credits will transfer back to his/her home university. This policy is set by your student's home university. It is important for your student to remember that it is possible that his/her grades may not be as high as (s)he is accustomed to due to the



differing grading systems, teaching styles, and sometimes language barrier. Please remember and remind your student that his/her learning experience occurs inside and outside of the classroom. Oftentimes, the greatest learning experiences cannot be measured by grades.

If your student finds that (s)he is having academic difficulties while abroad, your student should contact the ISEP host coordinator. The coordinator can help your student navigate the academic system and can potentially help find a student tutor. The coordinator may also be able to recommend appropriate classes for international students

Parents should avoid the following:

- » Visiting their student during the semester while classes are in session.
- » Visiting their student during the first and last few weeks of the program. This is an important time in the student's experience for adjustment and reflection.
- » Attending class with their student.
- » Contacting professors about grades and course work.

The best time for parents to visit is either when the semester is finished or during semester vacation when it is easier to travel with your student.

# Preparing to Go Checklist

## Logistics- Your student should:

- Make sure his/her passport is valid for six months past the end of the program.
- Apply for a visa if needed. This can be a very lengthy process, so don't wait!
- Register at his/her home country's Embassy so they know (s)he is abroad.
- Make two copies of all travel documents, ID cards, credit or debit cards, and other essential papers. Your student should take one set, and keep one in a secure place at home.
- Share travel arrangements with his/her family, and make sure (s)he knows where to go once (s)he arrives in the host country. This information can be found on the host institution's IIS.
- Memorize the address and telephone number of his/her residence abroad.
- Exchange information with his/her home and host emergency contacts.
- Bring an adequate supply of any prescription medicines along with a written copy of the prescription.
- Establish how (s)he will pay his/her bills at home (if any) and personal affairs while (s) he is away.
- Use the Quick Fill-in ISEP Reference List in the Student Handbook to record important contact information.
- Buy an international calling card for emergencies. Research affordable services like Skype or cell phone options.
- Set up a power of attorney so a parent or relative can help with finances or emergencies.
- Make sure that his/her family or guardians are aware of his/her wishes in the case of serious injury.
- If applicable, register to obtain an absentee ballot so (s)he can vote in his/her home country's elections while abroad.



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## ISEP Specific- Your student should

- Read his/her host institution IIS carefully! Carry one copy abroad and leave one with someone at home as it contains critical information and contacts for his/her host institution.
- Read his/her online Country Handbook to learn about his/her host education system and culture and to understand the visas (s)he needs to obtain. Links to other resources are provided there as well.
- Read his/her Student Handbook and the information sent from his/her host institution thoroughly. There may be additional steps your student may need to follow such as completing housing or class registration forms.
- Enroll in required ISEP health insurance.
- If (s)he is participating in an ISEP-Direct program, (s)he should speak with his/her coordinator about fee payment.

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## Host Country- Your student should:

- Purchase a guidebook about his/her host country to read and bring along. See the Resources section of the online Country Handbook for suggestions.
- Find contact details for his/her home country's embassy in his/her host country.
- Research postal service options in his/her host country.
- Learn as much as (s)he can about his/her host campus and neighborhood.
- Research the cost of living and quality of life in his/her host country.

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## Mental Packing- Your student should:

- Define and write down his/her goals for his/her ISEP experience.
- Familiarize himself or herself with the customs, social norms, and laws of his/her host country and other countries (s)he will be visiting.
- Understand that (s)he will be viewed as a representative of his/her home country, and prepare him/herself accordingly. Be especially aware of current events and political news that people in the host country may want to ask him/her about.
- Plan strategies to cope with culture shock ahead of time. Have confidence that (s)he will be able to adjust and adapt to the new culture, but remember that it takes time. (S)he should be patient with him/herself and others during this process.
- Practice speaking, reading, and writing in his/her host country's language. Learn vocabulary that (s)he will specifically need for a university setting.



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