

Library ambassador for international students

Bridging cultures and fostering inclusive learning in academic libraries

1. Introduction

Public relations are a significant component of a library as an institution and include customer service,¹ engagement, community building etc. In academic settings, it is important for libraries to be inclusive, accessible, supportive and reachable. Therefore, it is crucial to support human resources in order to meet set standards and to keep up with the evolving field of academic librarianship.² For this purpose, many university libraries, especially in the US and UK, employ students as ambassadors. According to the Penfield Library at the State University of New York at Oswego, "Library Ambassadors are student representatives of the library. They promote library resources and services, provide valuable student feedback to the library, and create content for library events and initiatives."³

By employing students as ambassadors, university libraries empower them with leadership opportunities and instill a sense of pride and ownership.⁴ Ambassadors hence act as first respondents to queries related to the use of the library, its services and resources. Studies have shown that students are more likely to consult their peers than official librarians for information.⁵ However, library ambassadors are usually not formally trained and typically work part-time as volunteers on a temporary basis.

This paper presents a case study from the University Library Passau, where the role of library ambassador has been reinterpreted and implemented to support international students and the university's broader efforts to promote internationalization. Unlike usual practices, we did not hire a student on a volunteer basis, but someone with academic credentials and an international background for a tailored role. It is proven that an ambassador's work is more effective and successful if planned carefully, including training and support.⁶ We have summarized here the modifications we made to the existing

- 1 Hasty, Douglas F.: Student assistants as library ambassadors. An academic library's public relations initiative, in: *Technical Services Quarterly* 18 (2), 2001, p. 31-40, https://doi.org/10.1300/J124v18n02_03.
- 2 Suansah; Setiawan, Muhammad: Collaboration of library ambassadors and librarians towards excellent service at the University of Muhammadiyah Surakarta Library, in: *KnE Social Sciences* 9 (12), 2024, p. 437-449, <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v9i12.15871>.
- 3 Penfield Library: Penfield Library Ambassadors, State University of New York at Oswego, 20.08.2025, <https://libraryguides.oswego.edu/Ambassador>, last accessed: 04.02.2026.
- 4 Peter, Katharin: "Once a library ambassador, always a library ambassador!" Using peer mentoring to integrate the library into the first-year academic experience and beyond, in: *Imagine Innovate Inspire: The Conference Proceedings of ACRL 2013 in Indianapolis, IN*, Association of College and Research Libraries, 2013, p. 454-459, <https://alair.ala.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/6ea9ccdd-4611-42fb-89a4-ecc6def02787/content>, last accessed: 04.02.2026.
- 5 Clifford, Mike; Gadd, Elizabeth; Coombs, Jenny; Hollier, Carol; Franklin, Ginny; McCormick, Karen; Maynard, Paul; Willmot, Peter; FitzGerald, Maurice: Engaging the disengaged indefinitely, and with no budget. Creating a sustainable model for student library ambassadors, 4th International Symposium for Engineering Education, University of Lincoln, 2012, https://repository.lincoln.ac.uk/articles/conference_contribution/Engaging_the_disengaged_indefinitely_and_with_no_budget_creating_a_sustainable_model_for_student_library_ambassadors/25167440?file=44451140, last accessed: 19.03.2026.
- 6 Gartland, Clare; Negrea, Violeta: Student ambassadors and HE outreach, in: *Folostină, Ruxandra; Gartland, Clare; Khasanzyanova, Albina; Çelen, Ümit* (eds.): *Partnering with student ambassadors to create more inclusive universities*, London & New York 2025, p. 1-15, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003582809-1/student-ambassadors-outreach-clare-gartland-violeta-negrea?utm_source=researchgate.net&utm_medium=article, last accessed: 19.02.2026.

concept in order to customize it for international students at a university library in Germany, as well as the ongoing projects, plans and key takeaways after eight months of our journey.

2. The concept of International Library Ambassador at the University of Passau

The University Library Passau continuously takes measures to enhance student learning experience and satisfaction. These services include competent library staff, comfortable study spaces both for group and individual work, a library lounge and technical equipment such as scanners and printers. The library also offers courses and workshops that significantly support students in their studies and research. Recently, the University of Passau has been working rigorously to make its institutions, offers and services more inclusive and accessible, especially for the international cohort.⁷ In line with the Bavarian higher education agreement for the years 2023 – 2027 between the University of Passau and the Bavarian Ministry of Art and Science, the University is continually aiming to position itself internationally.⁸ In cooperation with the faculties, strategies have been agreed upon to attract more international students, internationalize degree programs, and enhance the exchange of students and teaching staff with other countries.

To support this ongoing commitment, the University Library Passau has implemented the role of a Library Ambassador for international students to bridge the gap between the library as an institution and the international academic cohort as a community. The desired profile was defined as a candidate holding a higher education degree, preferably obtained from the University of Passau. Prior professional experience at the institution was a formal requirement. An international background was not mandatory but considered helpful to ensure a first-hand understanding of the needs and challenges of international students. It was a deliberate decision not to hire someone with a library science background in order to gain an outside-the-box perspective. Other requirements were the ability and motivation to work effectively in a team-oriented, intercultural environment and strong communication skills in English and German.

As the university is continuously expanding its range of English-language degree programs,⁹ it is also important to review existing institutional structures and ensure the meaningful integration of the international community within the university. The library plays a vital role in advancing research, learning, and community engagement. Therefore, it strives to be inclusive and accessible to all students regardless of their background. While many German students are familiar with the academic library system in Germany, international students often require additional guidance and support to access and utilize these resources effectively. Hence, initiatives like the International Library Ambassador are

7 Weinert, Barbara: Universität Passau erfolgreich bei der Internationalisierung der Lehrkräftebildung, 22.10.2024, <https://www.uni-passau.de/internationales/aktuelles/meldung/universitaet-passau-erfolgreich-bei-der-internationalisierung-der-lehrkraeftebildung>, last accessed: 02.02.2026.

8 University of Passau: Hochschulvertrag 2023 – 2027, 21.09.2023, https://www.uni-passau.de/fileadmin/dokumente/universitaet/Profil/Hochschulvertrag_2023-2027_final.pdf, last accessed: 25.01.2026.

9 The B.Sc. in Artificial Intelligence started in winter semester 2025/26. The M.Sc. in Business Administration was relaunched with a completely revised curriculum and has been taught entirely in English since summer semester 2025. In addition, two new English-taught programs – the M.Sc. in Information Systems and the M.A. in International Education and Global Learning – will be introduced in the summer semester 2026.

considered both timely and necessary, given that currently enrolled international students account for around 18 percent of the student body.¹⁰

3. Role and responsibilities

The initial responsibilities for this role were conceptualized as the following:

- To contribute ideas for improving the library's general outreach for international students, researchers, staff and external users.
- To make important information on the website also available in English.
- To offer one-to-one consultation on library-related queries to international students.
- To promote library services through workshops and training sessions in English on topics such as writing a thesis, finding specific or general literature and making effective use of library resources.
- To assist library staff with activities and events for international students, e.g. an evening at the University of Passau (held on 22nd Oct 2025), Orientation week etc.
- To provide the library faculty with ongoing student input.
- To represent the library at student events.
- Community building and engagement.

To appeal to current university members, the job advertisement detailing the requirements for the temporary position was posted internally. Several people who felt they met the requirements applied. Three qualified applicants were interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to evaluate the applicants' qualification for the job and to discuss their background and ideas for the project. After the interviews, a suitable candidate was selected. She had recently submitted her doctoral thesis, completed her master's degree, and held various positions at the University of Passau during both programs of study, thereby gaining experience both as a student and as a member of academic staff. Additionally, she has an international background and is proficient in several languages, which is particularly valuable for supporting students from India and Pakistan.¹¹ These groups comprise the largest English-speaking international student population at the University of Passau. Subsequently, the role was slightly redesigned based on the specific skills of the person hired.

4. Implementation – work in progress

Together with the heads of various library departments, we identified gaps from the international students' perspective and developed a prioritized plan to address their specific needs and to improve library services for the respective target groups. The courses and training workshops offered to non-German-speaking students at the university library were also analyzed.

10 University of Passau: Facts and Figures, 2025, <https://www.uni-passau.de/en/university/about-the-university/facts-and-figures>, last accessed: 25.01.2026.

11 Approximately 250 students from India and Pakistan are currently enrolled in various degree programs. Ibid.

Simple improvements that international students could begin using right away were implemented to achieve an immediate impact. At the same time, tasks requiring longer preparation were set in motion. The initiative is therefore ongoing, with new ideas continuously emerging. Since April 2025, initial steps have been taken, including measures that may have seemed obvious but became more apparent from the perspective of the new Library Ambassador. The new International Library Ambassador has since carried out the following tasks and activities:

4.1 Library signage and information material

The Head of the User Services Division and the International Library Ambassador conducted a comprehensive walkthrough of the Central Library and its four reading rooms. The goal was to assess signage, user regulations, accessibility, and the quality of information material. Most of these resources were available only in German. The first task was therefore to identify which material in the reading rooms should also be offered in English. We are in the process of standardizing and determining the best way to make these information available.

4.2 Library website – updates and improvements

Together with the library staff, a *Welcome Kit for International Students*¹² has been designed which is available on the library's homepage (already enrolled students can also make use of it). It was observed that newcomers prefer a single, comprehensive source of essential library-related information. The Kit includes information pertaining to the use of the library card, and the Passau Search Portal, borrowing procedures, printing/scanning options, e-media, and one-to-one consultation services etc. This carefully compiled, customized guide, which includes a section of frequently asked questions, has also helped to reduce the number of inquiries to library staff at the information desks.

We also reviewed the subpages on the library's website with regard to their relevance for international students and identified which subpages should be made available in English. Some have already been translated while others are in progress. Additionally, we have improved the online visibility of our English offers, such as courses, workshops, training sessions, walking tours, events etc. and have integrated them on either main or subpages.

4.3 Walking tours

The University Library offers only one walking tour in English at the beginning of a semester. It was brought to our attention that international students are often not able to attend due to various administrative and bureaucratic issues pertaining to the start of their studies in Germany. Therefore, during the winter term we offered two additional tours of the Central Library halfway through the term and saw a significant increase in attendance. We also offered several introductory walking tours in English of the Computer Science and Mathematics, and Economics reading rooms, which were well attended by newcomers. In general, we have observed an increase in interest and a positive level of participation by changing the timing and number of English tours offered. As a result of the improved timing and

12 University of Passau: Welcome Kit for International Students, 2025, <https://www.ub.uni-passau.de/en/information-contact/library-for-internationals>, last accessed: 20.02.2026.

revised format, the tours were frequently followed by continued interaction among international participants, who have used the library as a social and meeting space as well beyond the tour itself. Many students reported that, apart from gaining information about the library, the tour also served as an opportunity to connect and network with other international students.

4.4 Training courses and workshops

Drawing on the experience of our Library Ambassador and previous participation statistics, we have revised and expanded our English offers. The general course on *Research essentials* is continued along with *Mastering your master thesis*, a new course specifically designed for master students in advanced semesters. So far, participation in the new courses has been positive and promising. The courses are offered on two separate dates, and we are currently evaluating whether online via Zoom or in-person sessions yield better engagement and outcomes. Two new English training courses for doctoral students focusing on literature search and publishing will also be offered in the upcoming summer semester.

Furthermore, we have developed tailored workshops for English-language degree programs that approach us with specific requirements. This initiative is still in its early stage and is currently operating as a pilot scheme. The MA in Development Studies was the starting point, as the chairs involved approached us with recurring challenges due to program's particularly high proportion of international students. It was mutually decided to split the sessions into five, covering topics such as conducting an effective literature search with a focus on the Passau Search Portal, plagiarism and AI, research ethics, literature management, and referencing. While some of these topics, such as the use of generative AI in research and plagiarism, are relevant across all disciplines, this program-specific format has enabled us to pilot content and communication strategies in close collaboration with one degree program. The response has been strongly positive, and in the near future, we plan to extend this general and tailored approach to other degree programs independent of their disciplinary affiliation.

4.5 One-to-one consultation

As mentioned above, many students, especially newcomers, are often hesitant to approach the library and the staff directly. The International Library Ambassador therefore also offers one-to-one consultations for students (both online and in person). Depending on the nature of the inquiry, students are guided and/or subsequently referred to the relevant staff member for specialized assistance. There has also been a noticeable decline in inquiries at the information desk, as international students increasingly recognize that a dedicated staff member, i.e. the Library Ambassador, is available to support them. One-to-one consultations, thus, not only enable the Ambassador to better understand the challenges faced by international students, but also to build rapport, engage in informal dialogue, and offer general advice on living in Germany.

4.6 Networking with student organizations

We also consider it essential to establish contact with international student bodies, such as the Association des États Généraux des Étudiants de l'Europe (AEGEE) and the Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Économiques et Commerciales (AIESEC), as well as the SwaDesi Indian Community, and other student organizations. The aim is to understand the needs of various student com-

munities from their individual perspectives. We are currently working on developing a framework that allows for their inclusion in our initiatives.

4.7 Collaboration with university departments and staff supporting international students

Several departments at the University of Passau already work with or support international students, e.g. the International Office, the Welcome Centre and the Language Centre. Our current efforts also focus on strengthening communication, collaboration and networking with these units. A successful example of this cooperation was the event “An Evening at the University”, held at the Central Library on 22nd October 2025. It was jointly organized by the library, the department of Future: Careers and Competencies (*Zukunft: Karriere und Kompetenzen*), the Language Centre, the Sports Centre and other university services. We offered a mix of presentations, mini workshops and several interactive sessions, in both German and English. The library designed two specific sessions for international students. One was a general introduction to the library’s resources and support options, including a presentation in the library lounge, followed by an informal question-and-answer session. The second was a guided tour entitled “Secret Spaces of the Library: Guided Tour and Memory Game”, which took students through normally restricted areas such as the magazine and staff-only routes, showcasing special collections, facsimiles, and historic materials. The tour was concluded with a memory game using images related to the library, with small prizes for the winners. The event attracted an exceptional turnout. These two easily accessible, engaging and educational sessions attracted even students who had never visited the library before and had previously viewed it as a formal, intimidating German institution. Building on this success, we plan to further enhance such collaborations with the Library Ambassador as a central contact person within the library to whom both international students and staff can direct their inquiries. The aim is also to network and work closely with the chairs offering English language programs.

5. Impact and feedback

The International Library Ambassador project officially began on 1st April 2025, with the ambassador taking up her position on the same date. Over the past eight months, we have seen several positive changes and identified gaps that the library as an academic institution, should address. At the outset, since the role was newly introduced, students and university staff members were not yet familiar with it. It took some time, and the student engagement has greatly improved lately. The chairs and several departments at the university are now aware of this position, so they redirect queries when necessary.

Overall, the impact of this role has been immensely positive. It has also highlighted several insights and opportunities for both library and the university moving forward. As English language programs are offered, it is important to understand the varying needs, challenges, and expectations of international students to make them feel welcome. Many students have deeply acknowledged the library’s efforts to promote inclusivity, sensitivity, and accessibility following the recent changes we introduced. Those who took part in our events this winter semester appreciated the opportunity to engage in open dialogue and the availability of a dedicated representative to serve as a liaison between the library and the international student community. There has also been positive feedback regarding the over-

all improvement in clarity the of the library's communication (including the website) and the quality of general support.

Several chairs have also directly and indirectly benefited from this position, including the chairs of Development Politics and of Critical Development Studies, which enroll the highest number of international students and offer all their courses in English. In general, the flow of information between the library and international students has improved as a result of the above-mentioned activities, such as workshops, consultations, and guided tours. This project, and the resulting direct communication between library staff and international students, has also enhanced intercultural understanding within the library community, particularly with regard to cross-cultural user needs and challenges. Together, these measures provide a foundation for an inclusive and welcoming environment for all students.

6. Outlook and future perspectives

Based on the positive experiences of the initial project phase, several follow-up measures, activities, and events are planned for this year. These include a roundtable conference with student representatives, e.g. student councils of all faculties, Allgemeiner Studierendenausschuss (AStA), international student communities etc. in May 2026. The meeting will focus on gathering information on international students' perspectives on the library, including what they consider particularly positive, areas needing improvement, and concrete suggestions and recommendations. It is also intended to help disseminate information about the Library Ambassador project more widely, given that these student representatives maintain direct contact with international students. Additionally, we plan to distribute a questionnaire to international students at the beginning of the upcoming summer term, to understand how aware they are of the resources we offer, how and why they use the library, how often they visit, and what improvements or additions could make the library more attractive to them. In order to improve the support structure, it is important to assess the needs, expectations and experiences of the students. One key goal, among others, is to provide additional English-language training and workshops on topics such as library resources, publishing, and literature management, particularly for bachelor's, master's, and PhD theses.

In particular, the following challenges were identified, along with the resulting recommendations.

- We found that essential library information (e.g. website content, automated e-mail replies, signage, and announcements) was mostly available in only German, which hindered access for international students. It is therefore recommended to systematically expand and standardize key information in English across all communication channels whenever possible.

- Since access to many library services, such as borrowing books requires a German residence address, many international students, particularly at the beginning of their studies in Germany, face significant difficulties. Securing stable accommodation as a newcomer in Germany for some students (especially from non-EU regions) is often challenging. This prevents them from fully using library services. It is therefore recommended that libraries remain aware of the administrative obstacles international students may encounter. Although these challenges are not directly related to the library, they can substantially affect students' participation and access to library services. Libraries should take these factors into account and provide appropriate support where possible.
- Several core library courses were previously offered only in German, limiting options for international students. To address this, we are working to offer these and additional courses to Master's and bachelor's students. Furthermore, we also observed a lack of research-focused workshops for PhD students in English. We plan to offer these for the first time in the upcoming summer semester, covering topics such as publishing a PhD thesis and research strategies.
- As mentioned above, we found that most international students face personal, bureaucratic, and administrative challenges, especially at the beginning of their studies. Consequently, we became aware that they could not take part in various programs provided by the library (e.g. guided tours, info terminals, etc.) offered during the orientation weeks. We therefore recommend offering sessions, courses, and additional guided tours towards the middle or end of the semester. Libraries should be aware of their specific timelines.
- It is also important to note that there is considerable diversity among the international student population. We are therefore developing target groups and analyzing their specific needs and challenges, e.g. Erasmus students, international master's students (who, in our case, form the majority), as well as PhD students and guest researchers. These needs may also differ by faculty; for example, students from the Faculty of Computer Science and Mathematics may not require strategic research guidance to the same extent as others, but may have different needs instead.
- We found that targeted support is most effective when informed by data and close cooperation. It is therefore recommended to use available information e.g. enrollment statistics, develop student personas, and strengthen collaboration with chairs offering English-language programs. Targeted offerings can sometimes be more effective than general programs.

In general, the initiative has not only helped international students but the library staff as well by raising awareness of the needs and challenges of international students. Beyond the local context, the idea of a dedicated contact person for international students is a transferable model. It can easily be adapted by other academic libraries in and outside Germany according to their specific institutional frameworks, strategic priorities and available capacities. By sharing our ideas, initial experiences, and early insights, we aim to inspire other libraries to adopt the concept of a Library Ambassador for international students as part of their efforts to promote internationalization at both the library and university level.

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