

Exploring Study Abroad Options in Madrid: A Comprehensive Analysis

Prof. Dr. Miguel Buñuel
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
miguel.bunuel@uam.es

Abstract: Madrid, a vibrant capital, beckons students worldwide with its rich cultural tapestry, academic prowess, and quality of life. This paper explores the diverse study abroad options in Madrid, ranging from full-degree programs to semester exchanges and short-term intensive courses. It evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of each option through a survey among staff involved in study abroad in Madrid, evaluating seven attributes: Degree of international experience, independence and self-growth opportunities, logistical support, cultural immersion, academic rigor, affordability, and managerial ease. Additionally, it identifies trade-offs between attributes and provides insights tailored to different student profiles. The findings underscore Madrid's position as a premier study abroad destination and offer recommendations to enhance the overall experience.

Key words: Study abroad, Madrid, international education, student experience, study in Spain.

1. Introduction

Madrid, the vibrant capital of Spain, stands as a premier destination for international education, captivating students from around the globe with its rich cultural heritage, academic excellence, and unparalleled opportunities for personal and professional growth. Moreover, Madrid is consistently ranked as one of the “Most Livable Cities” in the World. According to Monocle's Quality of Life Survey 2023, Madrid is ranked first in Spain, seventh in Europe, and eighth in the World.

Renowned for its world-class universities, dynamic arts scene, and cosmopolitan atmosphere, Madrid offers a truly immersive experience that transcends traditional classroom boundaries. With its welcoming community, diverse student body, and strategic location, Madrid provides an ideal setting for students to broaden their horizons, deepen their understanding of global issues, and forge lifelong connections. Not surprisingly, Spain in general is considered as one of the top 10 places to study abroad ([educations.com](https://www.educations.com)), and Madrid is its largest destination.

Join us as we delve into the myriad study abroad options available in this captivating city, unlocking pathways to academic achievement and cultural

enrichment. Welcome to Madrid – where every corner is a classroom, and every experience is an adventure.

2. Study Abroad Models in Madrid

2.1 Full-Degree Programs

Enrolling in a full-degree program in Madrid offers foreign students a deep integration into the Spanish academic system, providing a profound cultural experience and language fluency. The challenges of language barriers and adapting to a different educational system exist but are outweighed by the immersive benefits.

Located in the center of the second largest country in the European Union, the Community of Madrid is home to 6 public universities ([Alcalá](#), [Autónoma](#), [Carlos III](#), [Complutense](#), [Politécnica](#) and [Rey Juan Carlos](#)), 12 private universities ([Alfonso X el Sabio](#), [Antonio de Nebrija](#), [Camilo José Cela](#), [CUNEF Universidad](#), [ESIC Universidad](#), [Europea de Madrid](#), [Francisco de Vitoria](#), [Internacional de la Empresa](#), [Internacional Villanueva](#), [San Pablo CEU](#), [UDIMA](#) and [Pontificia de Comillas](#)), and the [UNED](#) (National Distance Learning University) headquarters. These numerous universities represent the largest concentration of students in Spain and one of the largest in Europe.

In addition to quantity, Madrid universities offer quality. If we look only at public universities, which are the best ranked, we can see in Table 1 that all of them are among the best global universities in the world, according to the QS World University Rankings 2024 of Top global universities.

Table 1: QS World University Rankings 2024 of Madrid public universities

Public universities in the Autonomous Community of Madrid	QS World University Rankings 2024: Top global universities
U. Complutense de Madrid	171
U. Autónoma de Madrid	199
U. Carlos III de Madrid	319
U. Politécnica de Madrid	349
U. de Alcalá	538
U. Rey Juan Carlos	951

Source: Own elaboration with data from World University Rankings 2024.

The total number of students attending Spanish universities in Madrid in the 2022-23 academic year was 353,275. Table 2 shows how this number is distributed between public and private universities.

Table 2: Number of students at Madrid universities in the academic year 2022-23

Type of Spanish universities in the Autonomous Community of Madrid	# students 2022-23
6 public universities	218,180
11 private universities	97,897
UNED in Madrid (distance learning, public, national)	29,497
UDIMA (distance learning, private, only Madrid)	7,701
TOTAL	353,275

Source: Own elaboration with data from [Comunidad de Madrid](#).

Thus, foreign students can choose between 6 public and 11 private Spanish universities to come to Madrid to study on campus. Sometimes local or international providers facilitate application processes. The latter is very common, for instance, with Chinese providers for Chinese students who register at Spanish universities.

Other minority options:

- Foreign university campus: An exceptional approach is when a foreign university establishes its own campus in Madrid, offering students the unique opportunity to pursue either a full or partial foreign degree within Madrid. There are 6 foreign centers authorized by the Community of Madrid ([Saint Louis University in Spain](#), [The College for International Studies \(CIS\)](#), [Suffolk University - Madrid Campus](#), [Schiller International University](#), [Asociación ESCP Europe](#), and [Universidad Francisco Marroquín](#)). Their offer is limited compared to the complete offer of degrees of the Spanish universities, and they enroll few students.
- Joint and dual academic degrees: International collaborations between foreign and Spanish institutions result in joint and dual academic programs. This fosters academic exchange, cultural understanding, and expands the range of courses available to students. A joint degree leads to one single degree awarded by both the Spanish and foreign institutions. A double degree leads to two degrees awarded, one by each institution. In both cases, students would complete part of their academic journey in Madrid and part at the foreign institution.

It is interesting to note that a change in the regulations governing the entry of foreigners into Spain allows students from outside the European Union (EU students can work in Spain as they do in their home countries) to combine their training with jobs of up to 30 hours a week from mid-2022. This has boosted the arrival of non-EU students, especially from Latin America. In 2023, 122,460 training permits were issued (undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate, professional training, and other training), according to [El País](#).

2.2 Semester Programs

Semester programs in Spain offer students a balanced experience, providing a taste of Spanish culture and academic life without the commitment of a full-degree program. Pros include cultural immersion and language acquisition.

The options available for studying semester programs in Madrid are the following:

- Exchange agreements with Spanish universities: Many foreign universities forge exchange agreements with Spanish universities, forming the foundation for their study abroad programs in Madrid. This model facilitates cultural immersion and academic integration, offering students a chance to experience the local educational environment while maintaining ties to their home institutions.
- Universities with their own programs in Madrid: Some top-tier US universities, exemplified by [Stanford University](#), establish their own programs in Madrid. These institutions organize courses and activities tailored to their academic standards, providing students with a unique, university-specific study abroad experience. Notably, certain US universities may choose this route instead of signing traditional exchange agreements.
- Dual-mode institutions: In some instances, universities adopt a dual approach, exemplified by [Boston University](#). These institutions both organize their own programs in Madrid and maintain exchange agreements, providing students with a broader spectrum of study abroad options. This model showcases flexibility and diversity in program offerings.
- Utilizing large third-party providers: Certain US universities without direct agreements or programs in Madrid leverage the services of large study abroad providers like [CIEE](#). These organizations often establish agreements with local Spanish universities to organize comprehensive study abroad programs, catering to the academic needs and preferences of US students.
- “Free movers” (independent student arrangements): Some universities allow students to independently choose to be visiting students at local universities in Madrid for a semester or year. In these cases, students are responsible for making their own arrangements, fostering a sense of autonomy in their study abroad experience.

It is worth noting that Spain is the main destination for the world's largest exchange program, the EU's Erasmus+ Program. According to the [European Commission](#), Spain received 142,900 Erasmus+ students in 2022, followed by Italy with 101,800 students, Germany with 75,300 students, France with 61,000 students and Portugal with 55,800 students. Madrid is the region that attracts the most students in Spain.

2.3 Short-Term Intensive Courses

For those seeking a condensed but immersive experience, short-term intensive courses, such as summer schools, are available. These are ideal for students with time constraints, providing a snapshot of Spanish culture and academia. However, the brief duration may limit cultural immersion.

The options available for studying short-term intensive programs in Madrid are the following:

- Spanish universities: Some universities offer summer or winter courses, like [UAM Summer School of Economics and Business](#).
- Local non-university providers: Some offer summer or winter courses, like [SpaCIE Climate Change Summer School](#).
- Foreign universities' programs: Universities like [NYU](#) offer summer programs in Madrid. Sometimes they are open to students from other institutions.
- Third-party providers: They offer summer or winter courses, often through agreements with local universities, like [ISA](#).
- Tailor-made courses: Some foreign universities sign agreements with local universities to organize these courses.
- Faculty-led courses: Some US universities organize faculty-led courses, combining their faculty's expertise with Madrid's cultural context.

Short-term study abroad programs, such as summer schools, witness a range of approaches. Some universities accept students enrolling directly in programs organized by local Madrid universities or local providers, while others limit choices to partner institutions or larger providers they work with.

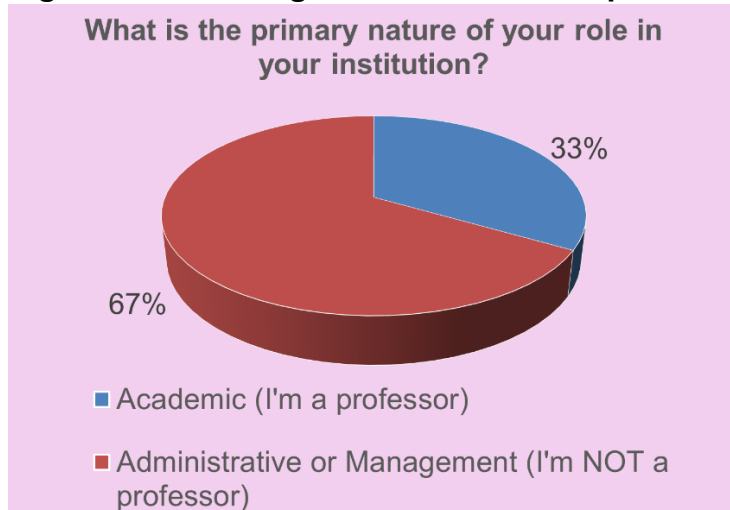
3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Each Option: A Survey

3.1 Introduction and survey sample

An anonymous survey was conducted among 93 members of academic and administrative or management staff involved in study abroad in Madrid on how they believe each of the available options for a foreign student to study in Madrid performs on seven attributes. In the survey, the options are shown in the rows of a table. The seven attributes to be evaluated are in the columns. Respondents assign a value to each attribute on a scale of 1 to 5.

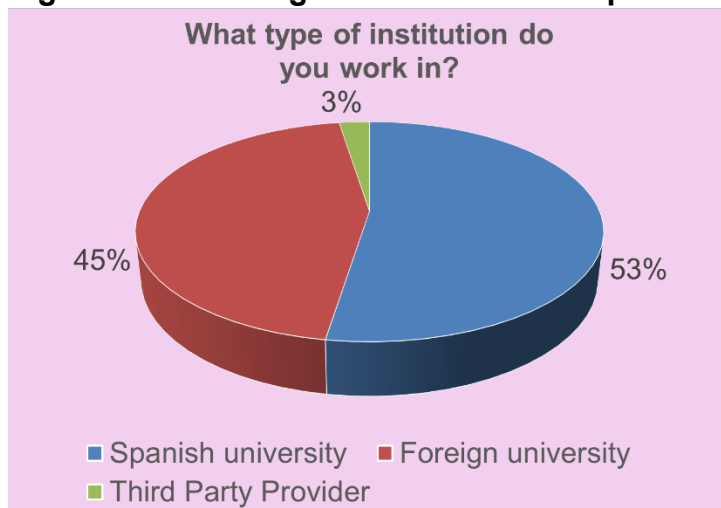
There were two initial questions about the sample:

- What is the primary nature of your role in your institution? The percentage distribution of responses is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of responses to sample question 1

Source: Own elaboration.

- What type of institution do you work in? The percentage distribution of responses is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of responses to sample question 2

Source: Own elaboration.

3.2 Meaning of the scale from 1 to 5

For the seven attributes to be evaluated, the meaning of the scale is the following (4 and 2 are intermediate options that could also be chosen):

- A) Degree of International Experience:
- 5: Exposed to diverse nationalities
 - 3: Mainly exposed to Spaniards
 - 1: Primarily exposed to other US students (if coming from an US university; replace US by other country when appropriate)

- B) Opportunities for building independence and self-growth:
 - 5: Abundant opportunities for independence and self-growth
 - 3: Moderate independence and self-growth prospects
 - 1: Limited avenues for independence and self-growth

- C) Logistical Support and Guidance:
 - 5: Comprehensive support and guidance provided
 - 3: Adequate support available
 - 1: Limited logistical assistance offered

- D) Cultural Immersion Opportunities:
 - 5: Extensive opportunities for cultural immersion
 - 3: Moderate exposure to local culture
 - 1: Limited cultural immersion opportunities

- E) Academic Rigor:
 - 5: Extremely rigorous curriculum
 - 3: Moderately rigorous curriculum
 - 1: Limited academic challenge

- F) Affordability:
 - 5: Significantly cheaper than studying at home
 - 3: Approximately the same cost than studying at home
 - 1: Significantly more expensive than studying at home

- G) Managerial and regulatory easiness for the universities involved:
 - 5: Very easy to manage and/or not significant regulatory difficulties
 - 3: Medium managerial and regulatory difficulties
 - 1: Very difficult to manage and/or significant regulatory difficulties

3.3 Average answers

The average answer for each question is shown in the tables 3-5:

Table 3: Average survey answers in relation to the options for foreign students enrolled in a full-degree program in Madrid (Grado, Bachelor, Master...)

	Degree of International Experience	Opportunities for Building Independence and Self-growth	Logistical Support and Guidance	Cultural Immersion Opportunities	Academic Rigor	Affordability	Managerial and regulatory easiness for universities
At a Spanish university	3,9	4,4	2,5	3,9	4,5	3,9	2,9
At a foreign university with campus in Madrid	3,6	3,4	4,1	3,5	3,3	3,0	3,5
Through a joint or dual program between Spanish and foreign universities	3,4	3,7	3,3	4,3	4,3	3,0	3,0

Source: Own calculation.

Table 4: Average survey answers in relation to the options for foreign students enrolled in a semester program in Madrid

	Degree of International Experience	Opportunities for Building Independence and Self-growth	Logistical Support and Guidance	Cultural Immersion Opportunities	Academic Rigor	Affordability	Managerial and regulatory easiness for universities
Through an exchange agreement with a Spanish university	4,1	4,3	3,4	4,3	4,2	3,4	3,7
At his/her home university's own program in Madrid	2,1	3,4	4,0	3,8	3,8	2,7	3,9
Through a third-party provider	1,7	3,0	3,8	3,8	3,6	1,7	3,7
Through his/her independent arrangement ("free movers")	3,7	4,8	2,3	4,5	4,8	3,5	1,8

Source: Own calculation.

Table 5: Average survey answers in relation to the options for foreign students enrolled in a short-term intensive course (summer and winter programs...)

	Degree of International Experience	Opportunities for Building Independence and Self-growth	Logistical Support and Guidance	Cultural Immersion Opportunities	Academic Rigor	Affordability	Managerial and regulatory easiness for universities
At a Spanish university	4,1	4,1	2,9	3,9	4,0	4,1	3,3
At a local non-university program	4,3	4,8	2,9	4,3	4,0	4,0	3,5
At a foreign university with Campus or program in Madrid	2,5	4,0	3,3	3,5	3,7	2,8	3,8
Through a third-party provider	1,8	2,8	4,0	3,8	3,0	1,3	3,8
In a tailor-made course at a Spanish university for his/her home university	1,0	1,5	3,8	3,5	3,3	2,0	3,8
In a faculty-led program led by his/her home university faculty members	2,0	2,6	4,0	3,0	4,8	2,8	3,4

Source: Own calculation.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Madrid is a top study abroad destination

Madrid emerges as an unparalleled destination for study abroad, offering a perfect blend of academic excellence and cultural richness. Its allure lies in its:

- Scenic parks, gardens, and architectural marvels.
- Culinary diversity with high-quality eateries catering to varied tastes.
- Low cost of living compared to other major cities.
- High quality of life, ensuring access to top-notch healthcare services and a secure environment for students.
- Rich artistic and cultural heritage, providing endless exploration opportunities, and hosting some of the greatest museums in the world.
- Proximity to both mountains and beaches, offering diverse recreational options.
- Vibrant nightlife, adding excitement and entertainment to student life.
- Prestigious universities, fostering academic growth and global learning experiences.

In relation to the last point, the Community of Madrid boasts a formidable lineup of public universities, several of which rank prominently in the QS World University Rankings 2024, as shown in Table 1. Universidad Complutense de Madrid leads the pack at 171st globally, followed closely by Universidad Autónoma de Madrid at 199th. These institutions are further complemented by

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, and Universidad de Alcalá, which all feature prominently within the top 500 globally.

Furthermore, when considering subject-specific excellence, the universities in Madrid exhibit significant strength, as shown in Table 6. Universidad Complutense de Madrid particularly shines with an impressive 15 subjects ranked in the top 100 globally, demonstrating its comprehensive academic prowess across diverse disciplines. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, and Universidad Carlos III de Madrid also make notable contributions to this list, further solidifying Madrid's position as a hub of academic excellence on the world stage.

Table 6: Number of subjects in which Madrid universities are ranked among the top 100 in the world in the QS World University Rankings by subject 2024

University	Number of subjects in the top 100 of the QS World University Rankings by subject 2024 (of 55 subjects + 5 broad subjects)
Complutense de Madrid	15
Autónoma de Madrid	8
Politécnica de Madrid	6
Carlos III de Madrid	4
IE	1
Pontificia de Comillas	1

Source: Own elaboration with data from World University Rankings 2024.

Together, these factors solidify Madrid's reputation as one of the premier cities for international education, promising students an enriching and unforgettable study abroad experience.

4.2 Conclusions from the results of our survey

The following conclusions can be drawn for each of the three main types of study abroad options in Madrid:

- **Full-Degree Programs:** Full-degree programs offered by Spanish universities present students with robust academic experiences marked by high levels of rigor, ample opportunities for personal and academic growth, immersive cultural experiences, and valuable international exposure, all at a more affordable cost compared to their home countries. Joint and dual programs offer similar advantages, albeit with enhanced logistical support but less affordability. Foreign universities with campuses in Madrid provide superior logistical support and guidance, yet they may lack in academic rigor, opportunities for personal and academic growth, and affordability compared to their Spanish counterparts.

- Semester Programs: Exchange agreements with Spanish universities and independent student arrangements (“free movers”) excel in academic rigor, opportunities to foster independence and personal growth, cultural immersion, and international exposure. Studying at the student's home university program in Madrid or through third-party providers are only better options in terms of logistical support and guidance, and their degree of international exposure is especially low (e.g., greater tendency for U.S. students to be mostly with other U.S. students). “Free movers” may have a downside in terms of managerial and regulatory easiness for universities, while third-party programs tend to be the most expensive.
- Short-Term Intensive Courses: Spanish universities and local non-university providers offer comprehensive short-term programs with robust academic standards, fostering independence, cultural immersion, and international experience, all at an affordable cost. Foreign universities, third-party providers, tailor-made and faculty-led courses offer better logistical support and guidance but show low international exposure and affordability. Notably, faculty-led courses stand out for their academic rigor.

For each of the seven attributes valued, the three options available for a foreign student to study in Madrid that score highest in the survey are our “podium winners” in Table 7:

- In relation to the Degree of International Experience, considering being exposed to diverse nationalities as the most favorable: Short-term intensive courses through local non-university providers and Spanish universities, and exchange agreements with Spanish universities are the winners.
- In relation to Opportunities for building independence and self-growth: Semester programs through independent student arrangements, short-term intensive courses through local non-university providers, and studying a full-degree program at a Spanish university are the winners.
- In relation to Logistical Support and Guidance: studying a full-degree programs or semester programs at foreign universities with campus in Madrid, and short-term intensive courses at third party providers and faculty-led courses are the winners.
- In relation to Cultural Immersion Opportunities: Semester programs through independent student arrangements, short-term intensive courses through local non-university providers, studying a joint or dual program or a semester program through and exchange agreement with a Spanish university are the winners.
- In relation to Academic Rigor: Faculty-led courses, studying a semester program through independent student arrangement and full-degree programs at Spanish universities are the winners.
- In relation to Affordability: Short-term intensive courses through Spanish universities and local non-university providers, and full-degree programs at Spanish universities are the winners.

- In relation to Managerial and regulatory easiness for the universities involved: Studying a semester program or a short-term intensive course at a student's home university program in Madrid, and a short-term intensive course through third-party providers or tailor-made courses are the winners.

Table 7: Survey “podium winners”

	1	2	3
Degree of International Experience	Short-term courses through non-university providers	Short-term courses through Spanish universities	Exchange agreements with Spanish universities
Building independence and self-growth	Semester programs by “free movers”	Short-term courses through non-university providers	Full-degree program at a Spanish university
Logistical Support and Guidance	Full-degree programs or semester programs at foreign universities	Short-term courses at third-party providers	Faculty-led courses
Cultural Immersion	Semester programs by “free movers”	Short-term courses through non-university providers	Joint/dual program or exchange agreements
Academic Rigor	Faculty-led courses	Semester programs by “free movers”	Full-degree program at a Spanish university
Affordability	Short-term courses through Spanish universities	Short-term courses through non-university providers	Full-degree program at a Spanish university
Managerial and regulatory easiness for the universities involved	Semester or short-term at home university's programs	Short-term courses at third-party providers	Tailor-made courses

Source: Own elaboration.

4.3 How to enhance the overall study abroad experience for students in Madrid: Identifying the trade-offs

It is important to realize that no study abroad option can fully satisfy all the attributes we may want to consider. There will always be some trade-off. For example, there is obviously a choice between logistical support and independence:

- **Logistical support:** Programs that offer high levels of logistical support provide students with assistance in various aspects of their study abroad experience, such as housing arrangements, visa applications, transportation, and orientation sessions. This support can be valuable, especially for students who are new to the country or have limited experience traveling independently. It helps alleviate logistical challenges and ensures a smoother transition into the new environment.
- **Independence:** On the other hand, programs that prioritize independence encourage students to take on more responsibility for their logistical arrangements and overall experience abroad. While this approach fosters self-reliance and adaptability, it also requires students to navigate

unfamiliar systems and procedures on their own. Students may need to find their own housing, arrange transportation, and handle administrative tasks without extensive support from program staff.

The trade-off lies in balancing the level of logistical support provided with the degree of independence expected from students. Programs with high levels of support may offer a more comfortable and structured experience, particularly for those who are less confident navigating new environments. However, they may limit students' opportunities for personal growth and autonomy. Conversely, programs that prioritize independence may empower students to develop valuable life skills and cultural competence but may also increase the likelihood of encountering challenges or setbacks along the way.

Ultimately, the optimal balance between logistical support and independence depends on the preferences and needs of individual students, as well as the goals of the study abroad program. Program administrators must carefully consider these factors when designing and implementing their programs to ensure they meet the diverse needs of their student population.

Similar trade-offs may emerge between logistical support and affordability, and between logistical support and cultural immersion. Programs that offer extensive logistical support, such as pre-arranged housing and transportation, tend to be more expensive and may prioritize convenience over immersive cultural experiences. Conversely, programs that encourage students to navigate logistical challenges independently may save money to students and facilitate deeper cultural immersion but require students to be more self-sufficient.

4.4 How to enhance the overall study abroad experience for students in Madrid: Identifying the type of student being advised

The student population willing to study abroad at each institution is not homogeneous. There may be very different types of students, some who value more some of the attributes we have studied and others who value more others. Table 7 could be a good tool to guide students according to their typology towards the most suitable options for them.

Without being exhaustive, we could give some examples of types of students and what might be one of the best options for each of them:

1. Adventurous explorer:
 - Best option: Independent student arrangement (“free mover”).
 - Why: This type of student thrives on spontaneity and independence. They enjoy the challenge of navigating new environments on their own and are eager to immerse themselves fully in the local culture. Choosing independent student arrangements allows them the freedom to explore Madrid at their own pace and pursue unique experiences that align with their interests.

2. Academic enthusiast:
 - Best option: Full-degree program at a Spanish university.
 - Why: Academic enthusiasts prioritize their studies and seek opportunities to engage deeply with their chosen field. By enrolling in a full-degree program at a Spanish university, they can fully integrate into the academic community, take a wide range of courses, and potentially conduct research or internships related to their academic interests.

3. Cultural connoisseur:
 - Best option: Semester program through exchange agreement with a Spanish university.
 - Why: This type of student is passionate about immersing themselves in the local culture and gaining a deeper understanding of the host country. Semester programs through exchange agreements provide ample opportunities for cultural immersion, language acquisition, and interactions with local students. They offer a balance between academic rigor and cultural exploration, allowing students to fully experience life in Madrid while earning credits towards their degree.

4. Budget-conscious traveler:
 - Best option: Short-term intensive course through a local non-university provider or a Spanish university.
 - Why: For students on a tight budget, short-term intensive courses through local non-university providers or Spanish universities offer a cost-effective way to experience Madrid. These programs typically have lower tuition fees, making them more affordable for budget-conscious travelers. Despite the shorter duration, students can still enjoy cultural immersion and academic enrichment during their time in Madrid.

5. Career strategist:
 - Best option: Full-degree program at a Spanish university with internship opportunities.
 - Why: Career-focused students are interested in gaining practical experience and building professional networks during their study abroad experience. Full-degree programs that offer internship opportunities provide valuable hands-on experience in their field of interest, enhancing their resume and increasing their marketability upon graduation. Additionally, these programs allow students to establish connections with local employers and explore potential career paths in Madrid.

4.5 Final words

In conclusion, the study abroad options in Madrid offer diverse opportunities for students to enhance their academic, cultural, and personal growth. By carefully considering their individual preferences, goals, and priorities, students can select the option that best aligns with their needs and aspirations.

I invite readers who are interested in discussing more about studying abroad in Madrid to reach out to me via email at: miguel.bunuel@uam.es

Thank you for your interest in my NAFSA 2024 poster!