

Internationalisation at universities: problems and challenges

Leonardo Santos Amâncio Cabral, Francesco di Tommaso, Tena Grzicic
Theodoros Ioannou, Idun Strand, Marketa Tokova

1. Introduction

Internationalisation is a largely recognised and known process. However, despite everyone using the term and drawing conclusions on its consequences and meaning for the European higher education, there is no clear consensus on its definition, understanding, and benefits. Many scholars (such as Knight or Yang)¹ offer their own definitions and interpretations, which leads to the situation where the explanation of the whole process gets even more complicated.

Internationalisation was chosen as one of the discussion topics for the UNICA student conference in Rome (September 2010) in order to allow students - among the most important beneficiaries of internationalisation - to discuss the process as such, including its problems and threats. Therefore, the participating students decided not to go into the academic discussions on what internationalisation is and how it could be defined. Instead, they focused on the practical impacts, on the pros and cons and on solutions to solve the most problematic aspects.

This paper aims to cover and explain in depths the outcomes of the students' discussion and bring more reasoning for the opinions voiced. The introduction will present shortly the current state of arts of the discussions concerning internationalisation, together with a literature review to help the reader find their way through the article. The outcomes themselves will depict the four most important sub-topics discussed during the conference: 1) languages and culture, 2) information and communication, 3) student mobility, and 4) financing (together with specialisation).

¹ Yang: „the awareness and operation of interactions within and between cultures through its teaching, research and service functions, with the ultimate aim of achieving mutual understanding across cultural borders” (Yang, 2002)

Knight: ”integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003)

Even if these topics were discussed also by students participating in other forums – they were also identified as those most relevant for internationalisation nowadays and are thus elaborated also in this context.

1.1 Context of internationalisation

The term internationalisation made its wide appearance at the beginning of the 90s. However, it could be claimed that internationalisation is an inherent feature of any university which wishes to create and spread knowledge. Consequently, higher education has since its roots been internationally oriented and cooperative (Yang, 2002). Of course, with the strengthening globalisation and interdependence from the beginning of the 1990s, also the process of internationalisation became more visible and more of an interest for many higher education institutions around the globe. New possibilities for cooperation among higher education institutions opened and what had started as simple student and staff mobility developed progressively into a more significant and thorough collaboration.

Despite its wide use and agreement on its importance, there is a lack of a simple and all-encompassing definition of internationalisation. The term often refers to many different matters, dimensions and levels of the higher education (Yang, 2002), including development of curricula, student and staff mobility, research and teaching cooperation, programmes taught in foreign languages, and so on. Internationalisation is also strongly linked with the process of regionalisation and the increasing number of regional networks; as the cross-border cooperation is being strengthened, it fosters the international orientation of a university.

The non-existence of a single definition, however, does not prevent the universities and academia from recognising the importance of internationalisation. No university can nowadays exist without external cooperation and relations. Otherwise it would lag behind the overall evolution and trends. Indeed, according to the surveys of the International Association of Universities (IAU), universities from all regions of the world clearly see the benefits and importance of internationalisation. On the other hand, risks and challenges are naturally the other side of the coin. In the IAU survey of 2003, 96 percent of the respondents agree that internationalisation brings benefits, while 70 percent acknowledge also the risks. More internationally oriented staff and students, together with improved academic quality were quoted among the most important benefits, while commercialisation of education programmes, increasing number of low-quality providers and brain drain were mentioned among the biggest risks of internationalisation (Knight, 2007).

One of the most cited obstacles to the internationalisation is the lack of finances, commitment and attention from national governments (Knight, 2007). Yang argues that this is due to the wrong understanding of the process of internationalisation (Yang, 2002). In many cases, it is interchanged with globalisation, which relies on the market competition. Thus, the governments leave quite some autonomy to the universities, limiting the funding necessary for international research, mobility and development projects. Missing national policies for internationalisation indicate additionally the lack of comprehension of the benefits that internationalisation brings to the whole society.

Higher education is increasingly international and it has been a topic of the utmost interest and debate since the beginning of the 21st century. Naturally, it is not developing in inertia but responds to the new realities of the globalised world and thus brings new challenges (Knight, 2007). A relevant example could be shown in the field of mobility. While mobility continues to be the key aspect of internationalisation, new forms of 'mobility' are emerging ranging from distance education and e-learning to twinning programmes, and programme and institution mobility, i.e. direct investment of universities to build campuses and learning centres abroad (OECD, 2004).

It is also important to note that the developments of internationalisation in Europe are tightly linked to the Bologna process, which both triggered and defined the process of internationalisation among European higher education institutions. Although the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is an example to many regions of the world, it would be wrong to assume that all problems and issues have been successfully solved here. On the contrary, there are still challenges and obstacles, and the national governments, as well as all the stakeholders in the EHEA will have to make a lot of efforts to overcome them.

2. Main issues discussed

2.1 Culture and language

Culture

Working with other nationalities requires knowledge of their cultural backgrounds. And it is a truism: there is no better way of getting to know a culture than by actually studying and living in a specific country. One learns a new language, comes up with new ideas and enriches themselves and their home country. Because of the huge cultural benefits, studying across Europe should be promoted.

The increasing mobility of people within Europe in the past few decades has made cross-cultural communication even more important. The integration of Europe has increased the internationalisation of education. This has created new educational demands for European societies, such as cultural training at an early stage for teaching staff and local students to be culture-sensitive, open-minded and aware of cultural diversity. Students who go to study abroad are usually open-minded, ready to learn about other cultures in advance and they can mingle quite easily with other students. Often the problem is that the local students are those who are less tolerant and sometimes reluctant to accept different nationalities “intruding” into their home country. The solution is to change the attitude of local society towards foreigners and help them value the positive sides of cultural diversities. Education and greater cross-cultural knowledge is really needed to overcome the problems and challenges regarding cultural differences and possible cultural threats caused by processes of internationalisation and europeanisation. Continued recognition of the importance of providing students and teachers with international and intercultural skills, while maintaining cultural diversity and uniqueness, can successfully bring higher education to internationalisation. This will subsequently also increase the trust and understanding among students and teaching staff all over Europe even in this current competitive context. Universities have the power to influence the whole process of studying in unity and accepting different cultures around us.

Languages

English language is the most “internationally” used and common language around the world, so it is natural that it has become the most important one. Respecting this world wide dominance of English language, the student forum has concluded that giving importance to English as a *lingua franca* is a path to enhancing internationalisation of European universities. Students who want to go and study abroad can face big difficulties with learning the local language (especially at a sufficient level so that they can listen, write and, most importantly, understand the content of the courses taken at foreign universities). Discussing all the aspects of the language issue in order to find the most feasible solutions, the Forum has come up with several recommendations.

First of all, a universal possibility to attend content classes in English should be granted so that students can freely choose and take subjects they want at any European university. To accomplish that, students and teaching staff have to attain a high level of English in order for teachers to teach their subjects in English (as well as in the local language(s)), and for students to understand the content of classes in English (as well as in their own language(s)). What Europe needs are some practical answers to this challenge.

- English language should be learned already in early age so that young people, potential future students and teachers, have the opportunity to gain an excellent knowledge of this language.
- All films and TV shows should be shown in the original language with English subtitles. TV is nowadays still the most powerful media with the biggest possible audience. Spending even only a few hours per week watching TV, people can improve their knowledge of English by reading the subtitles.
- Learning English should be made easy (and rewarded) with free or affordable English courses. Many students do not work while attending high school or studying at university, and those who do, earn just enough to cover their living expenses. Therefore, English courses for students should be accessible to all, and as a reward to the best ones, even free.
- At high schools, English language should be obligatory. This is the best way of teaching potential future students how to listen, think, understand and study in English.
- Standard English exams should be taken in the last year of high school. Implementing this measure in educational systems in all European countries will make studying abroad and applying for it much easier.
- Educational materials in English should be made accessible and provided to students by universities. Those materials are essential if studying at European universities is to be made possible in local and English language.
- Due to the importance of English language, studying English within any degree programme should be made possible to any student who so wishes.

Accepting these recommendations and turning them into reality will make attending classes abroad easier for students. Or will it not?

The fact that it is relatively hard to learn a foreign language and that the knowledge of a foreign language is rarely as good as the knowledge of the native language has to be also taken into consideration. It is relatively more difficult for non-native speakers to think in English and thus, it is not easy to study all subjects in English. Hence, while maintaining measures for language issues with the purpose of making progress in the process of internationalisation at European universities, there should be awareness of possible loss of quality. Because of that, the measures should be chosen very carefully.

2.2 Information and communication

One of the primary challenges of the internationalisation process at European universities is the issue of establishing, maintaining and improving relationships between the different schools and between their student populations. Communication and information-sharing is primarily executed on a one-to-one basis, which is highly time-consuming and inefficient. This results in neglect and deterioration of relationships between the academic institutions as well as missed opportunities of collaboration. Moreover, the students have difficulties navigating through all the information about universities and can find it inconvenient, or almost impossible to get in touch with other students around Europe.

During the discussions at the conference, the students expressed the need for a common “meeting place” for European universities and their students. There is a felt void in terms of means of communication and the conference strongly encourages a simplification of this process through the use of internet, which today is generally the most important communication tool in Europe. The Forum feels that this barrier is important to overcome in order to promote the process of internationalisation, and proposes thus the following:

Information platform for higher education institutions in Europe

Firstly, the Forum suggests creating a standardised communication and information platform common to all European universities. The purpose of this is to facilitate communication and information-sharing at different levels between academic institutions and also to provide practical information about universities to simplify the process for (future) mobility of students. The layout of the platform should be something in the spirit of Facebook, where universities can create their own “profiles” within a standardised framework. There should be specific categories (e.g. Programmes offered, Pictures, Rankings, Forum, Advice for exchange students etc.) which are not possible for the institutions to change in order to make the information easily recognisable and facilitate informal communication.

The Forum suggests that the platform can be accessed at 3 levels:

- Students (lowest degree of access)
- Researchers (medium degree of access)
- University staff and management (highest degree of access)

The purpose of this division is to provide relevant information to the actual user with a focus on this person’s area of interest. The platform could include (on all levels) also a feedback/rating system where students and staff on exchange can write comments (positive and/or negative) about the university. This is to achieve a higher degree of transparency and motivate the institutions to improve their practices. The basic and general information should also be accessible to external users who might be searching for study or job opportunities.

This information should be available without the creation of a user profile. One of the primary functions of the platform should be to facilitate informal communication at all three levels and in a more inclusive fashion than is the case today by creating well structured forums where all can participate.

Due to the size and complexity of the platform, in order for the project to be successful it should be initiated by a central and high-powered body like the European Commission. Promotion, as well as integrative and educational measures, are crucial in the implementation of the project. The success of the initiative strongly depends on the full participation of most/all European universities. The goal is to make it the standard information platform for higher education institutions in Europe.

Training for International Relation Offices (IRO) staff

As more and more students are going on exchange, the role of the IRO staff is becoming increasingly important. This should be reflected in the recruitment process of new employees and their continuous professional training. Initiatives like international seminars and meetings as well as exchange opportunities between IROs would benefit all institutions and also the students who can enjoy high quality information and the international connections of the staff.

2.3 Student mobility

Student mobility can be understood as “a study period taken abroad, including all academic and social aspects involved” (European Students’ Union, 2007). Over the last decades, the international mobility of students has become a major policy in Europe (Kelo, Teichler & Wächter, 2006). However, with the increase of this process, it is possible to identify that there are still some problems and challenges to overcome.

According to discussions during the *UNICA Student Conference 2010: Europe through Student’s Eyes*, the current challenges in mobility relate, mainly, to the provision of information about visas, accommodation and courses; recognition of credits, degrees and qualifications; work placements and traineeships; and support to access and study for all students and in particular, those with disabilities.

Firstly, regarding the availability of information, the European students agreed that there is a problem of attracting students and teachers to an exchange caused by insufficient information and motivation. Given this, there is a need for better trained staff in the IROs and for the creation of an online information platform that could facilitate information exchange,

communication and cooperation between students, researchers and staff (see above). This would also lead to a better provision of information about accommodation and university courses.

Besides the problems of information, many students who intend to participate in a programme of student mobility face great difficulties in obtaining student visas. Smith (2006) called for a simplification and acceleration of the legal and administrative procedures for entry for non-EU students and researchers. The impact of national visa policies on mobility can be experienced by students from countries like Croatia, Russian Federation, Turkey, Albania and many others. Therefore, it is necessary that adequate information and support on visa issues is provided to facilitate access to the EU countries.

Another issue concerns the students' return to their countries: many students still face difficulties having their credits, degrees and qualifications recognised. Trends 2010 report (Sursock, Smidt, 2010) indicates that the recognition of credits remains problematic at 54 percent of institutions. It is hence not difficult to identify the need to improve smooth and flexible arrangements for academic and professional recognition.

Beyond those indicated, it is very important to consider the challenges and problems faced by students with disabilities. Within the emergent policies of inclusion, the number of students with disabilities pursuing tertiary education is growing, further challenging current thinking about how to support them and the capacity of schools to effectively meet their educational needs. According to De Anna, Arslan & Cupidi (2001), European mobility programmes have a low participation of students with disabilities and the majority of the universities do not encourage their international mobility. Universities need to promote initiatives to ensure the full participation of foreign and non-foreign students with disabilities in academic activities and mobility.

It is clear, therefore, that in the context of student mobility many challenges still need to be overcome and universities should take efficient measures to provide students better access to information. Particular attention should be paid to the problems of students with disabilities. Consequently, the Forum recommends some initiatives that would improve the current situation:

- Improving visa systems to facilitate participation in student exchange programmes;
- Maintaining and strengthening existing international relations as well as develop new ones, including membership in international networks and establishment of joint programmes;

- Designing an international curriculum that includes both studying and working experience;
- Developing a tutoring system for incoming international students at the various departments (language, culture and study support);
- Articulating efficient infrastructures (accessibility, curriculum, cultural, and social inclusion) for students with disabilities and improving the support to them in the internationalisation process.

2.4 Financing and specialisation

Two major topics that are highly related with the mobility of students and the process of internationalisation are the finances (both student and programme funding) and the specialisation of universities, and are thus very important for reaching the 20% student mobility goal of the Bologna Process.

Firstly, it is important to examine the financial support at the universities. This includes funding for the students in the form of scholarships, funding for teaching specific programmes and funding given for research at the universities. The main problem is that financial support should be sufficient for students to make ends meet (i.e. pay for tuition fees, if necessary, and for accommodation). However, as a matter of fact, the provided funding is never sufficient and prevents thus students from families with lower income from participating in exchange programmes.

As a result of the discussions, the main proposal is to have more money earmarked for internationalisation. This would be a good motivation for the mobility of students and staff. Some examples of how to use this earmarked money would be in the form of scholarships for the students going abroad (to both students with and without disabilities). Another way is to give support research done in cooperation between universities, which will strengthen the aim of internationalisation. Another proposal was to fund more courses taught in English, which would be an extra incentive for attracting more international students.

During the phase of formulating the Forum's ideas, some problems came to the surface. Considering the contemporary society, with problems such as the economic crisis, increasing the financial support in order to fulfil these proposals seems to be a rather unlikely and unfeasible option for many universities and governments. Furthermore, universities now have a dual role, regional as well as international. The problem is that universities still depend on national governments and their budgets and therefore on political legislation within the

national context. Thus, in order for the funding to be equal for all students, it must be done by a European centralised organisation.

Having said enough about the problem of finance, it is time to analyse the topic of the specialisation at the universities. It was not clear from the beginning of the discussions that the topics of financing and specialisation are closely related. However, later on, it was proved that one could be a solution to the other. It could be argued that the promotion and implementation of specialisation of universities could save a lot of money which could become a financial source for above mentioned suggestions and solutions.

The major idea behind the specialisation at the universities was to create specialised centres for certain – rather minor – degrees and programmes at few selected universities (mainly for Masters and doctoral studies), while keeping the Bachelor degrees more general and delivered at many universities. The main reasoning is that not every university necessarily needs to offer all programmes and study fields (especially if the number of applicants is relatively low).

The Forum suggests that those programmes would be grouped and concentrated to one higher education institution per region. This would allow savings at universities from where these minor programmes were moved. Additionally, one could expect increased mobility as interested students would have to go study in another country or city in order to enrol in the programme they wish to. By localising specific programmes together at just few universities in the EHEA, the variety of courses and scholars within one programme could be improved and in turn, so can be the quality of education.

Of course, the Forum realises all possible inconveniences connected to the specialisation. Therefore, a survey which would map the current situation and localise specialised and minor programmes, with relatively low number of participating students, and evaluate the possibilities of merging them into one programme at a limited number of universities. Additionally, it is also questionable how many universities should offer the specialised / minor programmes and which locations should be chosen to host them. Furthermore, there is a risk that the outcomes could be rather opposite – with decreasing number of students who would be potentially interested but due to the need of moving, they opt for another degree.

On the other hand, if the specialisation and consolidations of degrees proves successful, it could bring considerable savings. This money could be used for improving other

programmes remaining at the universities, or could be given as financial support to students who want to (and are forced to) pursue the specific degree abroad.

It is clear from the examples above that finances and specialisation could be highly related. Making one a solution for the other could be a positive driving force for mobility – another challenge of internationalisation. Once students have become more mobile, universities will be able to specialise more.

3. Conclusions

The recommendations of the Forum are directed by students to the governments, rectors, administrators, staff, teachers and students to build an inclusive higher education area where the participation of all is secured. The main topics of the Forum – languages, information and communication, student mobility and financing and specialization – are all very important for achieving the process of internationalisation between universities. English as a common language used in EHEA, as well as universities offering courses in English is a necessary prerequisite for facilitation of communication and exchange between universities. Knowing the culture and different educational systems of universities of Europe through the language is the main aim.

However, to improve the information transfer and communication between universities, the Forum calls for an online communication and information platform. This platform would provide the universities with a highly professional and efficient tool for exchange of information and peer learning. It would also improve the student mobility as students could easily find out about programmes of universities and choose more easily the correct educational path. Additionally, students who are better prepared and knowledgeable about their study abroad period could benefit more and learn more not only at the university, but especially about the country and its culture.

To make sure that mobility is accessible to more students, it is necessary to improve and secure stable financing. Suggestions are there. However, what is more important is the commitment of universities and governments through which they would show their clear understanding and support to student and staff mobility – as they are among the most important indirect beneficiaries of the mobility and internationalisation.

4. References

- De Anna, L., Arslan, E., Cupidi, G., “Linee guida sulla Mobilità Internazionale e Studenti Disabili”, *Conferenza Nazionale Universitaria dei Delegati per la Disabilità*, 2001
- European Students’ Union, *Bologna with students’ eyes 2007*, Policy paper of European Students’ Union, 2007 -> in text: (European Students’ Union, 2007).
- European Students’ Union, *Bologna at the finish line: an account of ten years of European Higher Education Reform*. Laserline, 2010
- Kelo, M., Teichler, U., Wächter, B., *Eurodata – Student Mobility in Higher Education*, Bonn, Lemmens, 2006 -> in text: (Kelo, Teichler & Wächter, 2006)
- Knight, J., *Internationalization of Higher Education: Practices and Priorities: 2003 IAU Survey Report*, Publication of International Association of Universities, 2003 -> in text: (IAU, 2003)
- Knight, J., “Internationalization Brings Important Benefits as Well as Risks”, *International Higher Education*, Number 46, Winter 2007 -> in text: (Knight, 2007)
- Knight, J., *Updating the definition of internationalisation*, http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News33/text001.htm, 2003
- OECD, *Internationalisation of Higher Education*, Policy Brief, 2004 -> in text: (OECD, 2004)
- Smith, A., “From “European” to “International” Cooperation”, *Delta Magazine*. December 2006 -> in text: (Smith, 2006)
- Sursock, A., Smidt, H., *Trends 2010: A decade of change in European Higher Education*, Publication European University Association, 2010 -> in text: (Sursock, Smidt, 2010)
- Yang, R., “University internationalisation: its meanings, rationales and implications”, *Intercultural Education*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2002 -> in text: (Yang, 2002)

5. List of participants

| | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Julia Bartl (Austria) | Vaida Petrauskaite (Lithuania) |
| Karen Van de Pas (Belgium) | Raphael Hoogvliets (Netherlands) |
| Tena Grzicic (Croatia) | Ingebor Laukvik (Norway) |
| Theodoros Ioannou (Cyprus) | Katarzyna Klimowicz (Poland) |
| Pavla Koukalova (Czech Republic) | Ana Abreu (Portugal) |
| Karel Kundrats (Estonia) | Andre Machado (Portugal) |
| Riina Koivunen (Finland) | Artem Timoshenko (Russia) |
| Daria Godovikova (Germany) | Terezia Lajcakova (Slovakia) |
| Szilvia Hornyak (Hungary) | Maria Victoria Rodriguez (Spain) |
| Leonardo Cabral (Italy) | Samia El Kadiry (Sweden) |
| Francesco di Tommaso (Italy) | Idun Strand (Switzerland) |
| Fabio Giallanza (Italy) | Kathleen Clancy (UK) |
| Ieva Kumpina (Latvia) | |

Moderator:

Marketa Tokova