

Development of a strategy to optimise international exchange at KU Leuven

Marie-Paule Buyse

Faculty of Engineering Science
KU Leuven, Belgium

E-mail: MariePaule.Buyse@eng.kuleuven.be

Bieke Dutoit

Faculty of Sciences
KU Leuven, Belgium

E-mail: Bieke.Dutoit@wet.kuleuven.be

Matt Tips

Faculty of Bioscience Engineering
KU Leuven, Belgium

E-mail: Matt.Tips@biw.kuleuven.be

Keywords: internationalisation, student as key actor in change process

1. Introduction

By 2020, 20% of the student population should have an international experience - preferably an international period abroad - during their studies.

Although this purely quantitative objective is very challenging, strategies to achieve this must take into account the qualitative dimension of internationalisation. Student mobility, whether individual or structured, has become a fundamental element in achieving excellence in education. However, statistics tell us that the amount of students going abroad is stagnating or even dropping.

The Science, Engineering and Technology Group at KU Leuven has created a Taskforce Internationalisation chaired by vice rector Prof. dr. ir. Karen Maex, and consisting of the deans of the respective faculties (Prof. dr. ir. Michiel Steyaert – Faculty of Engineering Science, Prof. dr. Peter Lievens – Faculty of Sciences, Prof. dr. ir. Jos Vanderleyden - Faculty of Bioscience Engineering), the academic coordinators Internationalisation (Prof. dr. ir. Ludo Froyen, Prof. dr. Patrick Van Dijck and Prof. dr. ir. Dirk Raes) and the staff members Internationalisation (Marie-Paule Buyse, Bieke Dutoit and Matt Tips). The main objective of the Taskforce is to develop a new strategy to motivate students for an international experience – be it abroad or at home - in which *raising awareness* and *quality assurance* are the key words.

2. Key elements of a strategy to optimise international exchange

In a recent paper of LERU on International curricula and student mobility, Bart De Moor and Piet Henderikx give ten reasons why international mobility matters in education¹. The benefits quoted are not limited to the level of the individual student: science, research, education, innovation and more in general the global society gain from the opportunities for

¹ Bart De Moor and Piet Henderikx *International curricula and student mobility*, LERU advice paper N° 12 – April 2013.

students to study abroad. Nevertheless, the number of students interested in an exchange period abroad seems to have reached its limits.

In October 2012 the faculties of the Science, Engineering and Technology Group at KU Leuven decided to organise jointly an *International Week*. The key objective of the initiative was simple: motivating students for an experience abroad. The strategy contained three intermingled aspects:

- raising awareness within the academic community and informing them
- explicit emphasis on quality
- branding of the KU Leuven

(a) From individual to structured mobility

For several decades the Erasmus model, with its individual mobility scheme, had a monopoly on internationalisation in higher education. In the early years of Erasmus, an Erasmus exchange was often considered a party year. The last ten years this perception has changed thoroughly and students are much more serious about this experience. Nevertheless it is still important to identify the correct target group both for incoming as for outgoing mobility.

Consequently a logical next step in the progress of Internationalisation is to focus on the quality of the international experience by, among others:

- (1) *reducing* the number of bilateral agreements (especially ad hoc agreements)
- (2) introducing the concept of *preferential partner universities*:

Based on an informal assessment by the academic staff involved in the master programmes, each programme selected a limited number of partners. The criteria handled in this selection process were obviously the quality of education and research at the partner university and both formal and informal contacts between the staff of both universities. This approach fits perfectly in the structured mobility scheme, as described by De Moor et al., and offers a number of advantages: good footing, detailed knowledge of the programmes. Ultimately dual degree programmes can be elaborated with some of the preferential partner universities.

(b) From information to awareness

Traditionally students were informed on the possibilities and procedures of internationalisation in an information session. The downside of this approach was that the target group was not reached, since only those students interested in an international experience attended the information session. It remained the ambition to reach all students: not only those determined to go abroad, but also those determined *not* to go abroad, and last but not least, those still in doubt! With this in mind the idea was launched to organise an *international week* on campus together, and in close collaboration, with the student organisations. A buzz was created on campus throughout a variety of activities: a debate on limits of internationalisation with an academic representative (Vice rector Internationalisation Bart De Moor), a political representative (European Parliament, Said El Khadraoui), a student representative (Femke Faber), a non-governmental organisation (Ingénieurs sans frontières, Jonathan Avau) and a representative from the industry (Indaver, former CEO Ronny Ansoms), a facebook competition for the best reason/excuse to go or not to go

abroad (with a sponsored city trip for the winner), country flags all over the campus, international menus in the mensa, an info stand on campus with flyers and food, an international film night and gadgets to attract the attention of the students. The final event of the week were the traditional information sessions and an information fair where academics and students could meet to gather answers to their questions.

(c) From passive student involvement to Student Ambassadors

The strategy to focus on quality of international exchange and on raising awareness resulted in a new concept in which both objectives culminated: *student ambassadors*. The concept is very simple: during the International Week students from preferential partner universities are invited for a couple of days. These student delegates are introduced to the different aspects of student life in Leuven: academic, educational, leisure, ... They are also representatives for their home university and get the chance to promote it among the KU Leuven students. When they go back to their home university, they promote and represent the KU Leuven among their fellow students.

The idea of these student ambassadors was welcomed by the partner universities, who were willing to send students. Generally the costs are divided between the universities. The sending university pays for the travel costs of the student, the host university pays for accommodation and food. Each university sends one or two students.

The students of the host university act as hosts for the visiting students. They escort the students during their entire visit in Leuven and throughout the whole programme. During their 3-day stay the student ambassadors were introduced to some key people from the Science, Engineering and Technology Group. They were given the opportunity to visit the research department of their choice, get acquainted with the main research topics and had lengthy introductions to student life in Leuven.

The first day the students arrive in Leuven at whatever time is convenient for them. Upon arrival in Leuven they are welcomed by a KU Leuven student representative who accompanies them to their accommodation and gives them a quick tour of Leuven. In the evening the delegation is welcomed by the vice rector of the group, the deans of the participating faculties and some student representatives with a dinner. The second day the delegation is invited to visit the Parliamentarium in Brussels and, if possible, to have a discussion with someone of DG Education/the EC. In the evening a social activity for all the students is planned. The next day the delegates have the opportunity to visit the department of their discipline. During lunch a discussion with the student representatives of Leuven takes place. This discussion on best practices can have different subjects: student representation in the different universities, organisation of the education, ... In the evening the info session for the KU Leuven students wishing to go abroad takes place. The student delegations get the opportunity to introduce themselves and their university. The info session is followed by an info fair, where the student delegations also represent their countries and universities. Afterwards they get another chance to taste student night life. This is the last scheduled activity. The next day they return to their home university, where they can inform fellow students about the study opportunities in Leuven.

3. Lessons learned

The overall motive behind the new strategy described above was the quality assurance of international mobility at four levels:

- selection of preferential partners
- reaching the target group
- raising awareness for the benefits of international experiences
- optimisation of the information.

Based on the informal feedback of the people involved, both the format of the International Week and the implementation of the Student Ambassadors concept were unanimously positively evaluated. Although it should be emphasised that the role of Student Ambassador cannot be given to exchange students residing at the organising university, since they are not easily immersed in the specific dynamic of the group of the Student Ambassadors.

Based on the number of applications for international mobility, the introduction of strategic partnerships with preferential partners has been a relative success. KU Leuven students are more inclined to choose one of the invited universities as their destination for an Erasmus exchange. The aim however to attract more students from those universities has only partially been reached. Therefore we are now looking for a formalisation of the follow-up of the activities of these student ambassadors at their home university.

However, since no significantly increase in the number of applications for outgoing mobility was noted, it is our conviction that in the future the possibilities of Internationalisation at home should be highlighted.

On the operational level, the active involvement of the students in this initiative has been most impressive. Moreover, although the initiative started as a bottom up initiative, it turned out to be an excellent opportunity to further improve the collaboration between the faculties of the Science, Engineering and Technology Group and central services.