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Celina Handzel (PL)
Małgorzata Wilczyńska (PL)
Marcin Żuk (PL)
Iuliia Kubai (PL)

European Eastern University Report on existing solutions and good practices

Abstract

This report is the result of desk research into existing solutions and good practices. The research involved an analysis of secondary sources in Poland and other EU countries with a view to finding good solutions that could be adapted in Lublin to make its educational and non-educational services more appealing to foreign students.

The research was done between October 2014 and June 2015 and covered a total of ten institutions, including two Polish universities (the Warsaw University of Technology and the Wrocław University of Technology), and eight foreign universities – the University of Split (Croatia), the University of Murcia (Spain), the University of Tartu (Estonia), the University of Copenhagen (Denmark), Masaryk University (the Czech Republic), the Zittau/Görlitz University of Applied Sciences (Germany), the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain), and the Riga Technical University (Latvia). The investigated issues related to good practices were divided into four categories, namely:

- 1) Academic foreign-student affairs;
- 2) Non-academic foreign-student affairs;
- 3) University internationalisation policies;
- 4) Issues involving Eastern-Partnership students.

In summarising the part of the report that deals with academic affairs, the conclusion can be drawn that the English language is the most popular language of instruction for foreign students.



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Some courses are, however, provided only in national languages. To help foreign students complete them, universities offer preparatory courses. The analysed universities undertake improvements and have established dedicated units dealing exclusively with applicant support, which is undeniably a good practice. Also, it is becoming a standard among universities to adopt good practices related to providing applicants with information about curricula and other study-related issues. Any university that wants to improve its educational standards should adopt these good practices.

It is evident that foreign applicants prefer study-related information to be provided in a plain and friendly manner, such as in the form of figures, tables, and lists. Where a university implements unconventional informational solutions, such as the Zittau/Görlitz University of Applied Sciences, which provides applicant information in the form of *"Stepping Stones Towards Studying"*, or where information must be filtered by modes of study, or by the nature of the study system, it is essential to explain how to look up information on the website – otherwise, efforts aimed at finding information might prove ineffective. All the studied universities handle applications for study-exchange programmes, full-time study programmes, and other programmes, fully or partly online. They make a clear distinction between full-time study programmes and study-exchange programmes, which seems to be reasonable given the various education profiles and accommodation/living needs.

What is interesting is that a number of universities have decided not to provide all information on their websites. Instead, they communicate with accepted applicants via e-mails. Given the information overload on the Internet and university websites, this solution can be considered a good practice. Moreover, applicants might see personalised messages as more reliable. When analysing the applicant support issue, it might seem that the universities which are very confident about the reliability of their online information and systems provide no additional support for their applicants. This facilitates the management of applications and facilitates a systemic approach to recruitment, which seems to be essential for the administration of large numbers of applicants. There is also all reason to publish academic-recognition information, so such an approach should be considered a good practice.



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In addition, it is important to note the absolute need to provide foreign students with courses in the foreign language of study. In this context, universities should consider providing various modes of language study, such as online courses, intensive language courses, one-term and two-term courses, etc. This approach helps to prevent any misunderstandings and ensure equal treatment for all applicants, whatever their country.

Each university seems to have its individual approach to scholarships. By extension, the availability of scholarships is probably a matter of financial capabilities. As such, providing scholarships is not a common practice.

The part of the report on non-academic affairs deals with the everyday lives of students in the foreign countries of their choice. In order to help foreign students obtain authorisation to stay legally in the country, most of the studied universities provide relevant information on their websites in the form of more or less detailed instructions, and also publish printed "step by step" guides. Some universities open special support points for foreigners (the so-called "International Welcome Points").

Universities often cooperate with various institutions, municipal authorities and NGOs that support foreign students. This cooperation gives way to quality-of-life improvement projects for foreign students. Examples of such projects include "*Wrocław for foreigners – Infolink*", Host Cities' Volunteers for UEFA EURO 2012, and the "*Welcome to Copenhagen*" web portal.

Another non-academic aspect involves accommodation for foreign students. It is very common practice for universities to offer student accommodation in university-owned halls of residence or dedicated private apartment blocks, houses, or flats for rental. The study found that universities guarantee a range of facilities for disabled students.

Each foreign student should be provided with practical information on how to get to and get around the campus (virtual tours). All of the studied universities adhere to fail-safe good practices, such as publishing various guides and organising events for foreign students during the academic year. It is also common practice to organise themed events. For instance, the University of Tartu



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organises student days during various seasons of the year, with each of the festivals being dedicated to different types of sporting activity. The Warsaw University of Technology has a number of student organisations that organise cultural and sporting events. These organisations enable foreign students to take part in cultural events and sporting contests, and to go on dedicated trips and tours.

The study also looked at how universities support foreign students in coping with their personal difficulties and developing their interests by offering opportunities to join discussion groups and clubs. Universities have organisations, associations and other bodies in place that support students. It is also common practice among universities to provide psychological counselling to foreign students.

As far as student-exchange programmes are concerned, it is a good idea to think of how to arrange for support for foreign students and teachers on their arrival. While most universities hold informational meetings for newly arrived foreign students, there is much more work to do for new teachers. A good "first impression" will certainly contribute to a foreign student's/teacher's overall good opinion of the host university.

As far as internationalisation strategies are concerned, it is interesting to look at how universities encourage foreign students to engage in research. As the authors of one of such strategies rightly observed, it is research opportunities that actually make universities different from vocational schools. Indeed, the joint research efforts of partner universities from different countries might culminate in valuable scientific publications.

It is hard to think of the process of internationalisation, however, without looking at the range of programmes in the English language. For universities whose mother tongues are not leading European languages, providing instruction in English is absolutely essential. Universities might start from having interesting sets of study courses in English for exchange students, and gradually advance towards comprehensive packages of full-time programmes in that language. These kinds of programmes might generate additional income, while also being a driving force for the further internationalisation of universities. It is difficult to imagine the internationalisation of a university



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without its students and teachers having certain foreign-language competence. Universities should use their best efforts to provide foreign-language learning opportunities through foreign-language departments, and also to foster such learning by encouraging students to enrol in summer-school programmes, socialise with foreign students, and attend English-language lectures and seminars together with foreign students. Dedicated language courses for teachers, provided within universities' foreign-language departments, should also be considered a good practice.

Some universities that strive towards internationalisation engage in the interesting practice of providing internship opportunities for teachers and researchers, as well as administration staff. Internships, which might be from two to three months long, allow foreign university staff to gain a thorough insight into the partner university, work on joint projects, and establish long-term contacts.

The study of the selected universities led to the conclusion that Eastern-Partnership cooperation was pursued the most extensively by those universities that lie the closest to each other geographically. It is common practice to engage in various types of international cooperation, such as joint projects, studies, student-exchange programmes under bilateral agreements, and full-time study programmes, etc. Notably, for almost each studied university, the strongest partners are from Ukraine and Belarus. Polish universities, which accept the most Eastern Partnership students each year, have a robust system in place to help foreign students adapt to the local academic community. This, for instance, includes the provision of intensive language courses, cultural and sporting events, informational meetings, research discussions, trips and tours, etc.

None of the studied universities has established a separate body that would deal specifically with incoming Eastern Partnership students. Foreign-student affairs are managed by the International Cooperation Offices. Each International Cooperation Office has an employee assigned specifically with the support of students from the East. Eastern Partnership students enjoy the same rights as other students – they have access to libraries and the Internet, take part in informational meetings, cultural and sporting events, trips and tours, and also receive assistance from student organisations and the employees of the International Cooperation Offices.



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The universities which record an increasing number of Eastern Partnership students each year should consider establishing dedicated support offices, or employing additional staff to support these students. Also, it is worthwhile providing translations into relevant languages, providing information addressed to these students, engaging in broader and more encouraging efforts to facilitate faster and better adaptation in the academic community, and also selecting applicants on the basis of international language certificates.

Cooperation with Eastern Partnership countries is consistently becoming broader in scope, and new financial support opportunities are emerging, such as engaging the universities of these countries in the Erasmus+ Programme as partnership countries and developing new scholarship-support programmes for students.

This publication was prepared with the financial support of the European Commission. It reflects only the views and opinions of its authors and neither the European Commission nor the Polish National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme are to be held responsible for its contents.



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