

HERE STUDY VISIT REPORT

“ORGANIZING INTERNATIONAL CREDIT MOBILITY”

Belgium – University of Ghent and European Commission DG, 11-12 June 2015.

Over 25 years ago academic and in particular student mobility has become an increasingly prominent feature of university life in Europe, as well as an important catalyst for European integration. Mobility takes a variety of types: by type (degree vs. credit mobility), by direction (ingoing vs. outgoing) and by funding mechanism. The most visible being the movement of degree-seeking student and short-term mobility, or study abroad. In 2006-2007, the figures showed that over 1,5 million degree-seeking foreign students were enrolled in 32 European countries (EU, EFTA countries and Turkey), which represented approximately 50% of the rather recent global student mobility ‘market’. This number has risen considerably since the turn of the century, which is primarily due to an increase in the demand of international non-European student programmes of study in the UK, Germany and France, although other European countries have also benefited from this growth. It is noteworthy that European students prefer to study within Europe and have been given the incentive to do so.

A number of factors drive academic mobility. They are recognized not only by those who choose to be mobile, but also often by governments and the higher education institutions that structure and support such mobility. And many of the latter associate mobility with inherent gain, weather motivated by the need to generate income, the recruitment of excellent minds, academic competition and collaboration, the migration of demographic decline, or the internalization of learning. Many different kinds and aims of short-term and long-term student and staff mobility are far from universal. Not all institutions are equipped to respond to external pressures, particularly those stemming from regionally or nationally set targets, or from the growing conviction that mobility should be measured and evaluated.

There are a lot of open issues about mobility, such as: understanding of mobility; attitudes to mobility - benefits and obstacles; resources and services to support mobility; mobility in institutional strategies; role of external stakeholders; data collection of mobility and measuring the quality of mobility. The HERE study visit organized by University of Ghent and DG European Commission was a great opportunity to get information and brother picture of mobility and to explore different mechanisms how can we improve mobility. This issue is particularly interesting for University of Montenegro and two private universities in Montenegro, having in mind very low numbers of student and staff mobility (both outgoing and ingoing).

First host of this study visit, University of Ghent – UG (ranked as 70 on Shanghai list, as 1 in Belgium) has a long tradition and high reputation in credit mobility and internalization. University adopted an integrative platform 2015-2020 to improve internalization and set five main goals in that respect: motivation to internalization; internalization is essential element of academia; internalization improves research, knowledge and management quality; force academic staff to reflect on their work; and to enhance outbound student mobility up to 25%. UG has 600 international students through ERASMUS + and 800 international students gained through individual applications and 3635 students graduated PhD degree (35% of them are international students). One of the main goals of student and staff mobility is to improve intercultural competencies. UG has the Certificate on Quality of Internalization, issued by EQAR. This is obvious by the very developed procedures to support mobility:

- Before arrival (guidance in the administrative acceptance procedures; support housing university residences and private market; support visa application/residence permit);
- Upon arrival (welcome days for new international students / for all new international students; before the start of each semester; two-day programme during which students receive a warm welcome at UG);
- Language voucher to learn Dutch (University Language Center);
- Informative welcome guide (arrival assistance; necessary administrative steps; rules and regulation; practicalities; facilities; first aid; language support – acculturation; academic support; information about selected faculty; leisure etc.).

Very interesting presentation has been delivered by UG staff on EGRACONS Conversion Tool. This is very user-friendly web-based tool for grade conversion that will be made available to all European HEIs on a voluntary basis enabling a transparent interpretation of students' accomplishments. EGRACONS is a reliable web application that helps participating institutions in student mobility to convert grades obtained abroad. Grade conversion can happen only between students own institution and host institution. Participating institutions must provide grading tables to use tool (see also ECTS Users' Guide).

Interesting was, as well, a session 3 on students' perspective of student mobility. Four PhD outgoing mobility students from University of Ghent presented their experiences on mobility (at universities in Sweden, Finland and Spain). My personal impression was that they expressed serious doubts on quality of studying at universities out of Western European countries and some prejudices of the studying at partner countries.

As the most prominent and problematic issue in credit mobility most of participants on study visit defined recognition by own university of student accomplishments at host university and incompatibilities in curriculums.

Second day of the study visit was organized by DG of European Commission in Brussels and we had opportunity to hear about different credit mobility programmes: ERASMUS +; DAAD; pan-European student networks; Flanders Knowledge Area. This session showed that there are a lot of possibilities for mobility, but in the other hand showed there is a need for stronger cooperation and links between own and host institutions in promotion and support this.

Very informative session no.7 was about ECTS User's Guide, great publication which covers very important clarifications on:

- ECTS key features (ECTS credits, Learning outcomes, Workload, Allocation, Awarding credits, Accumulation of credits, Transfer of credits, ECTS documentation);
- ECTS programme design (Context, Profile, Programme Learning Outcomes, Structure, Learning, teaching and assessment, Monitoring of credit allocation);
- ECTS for mobility and credit recognition (degree mobility, credit mobility, grade distribution);
- ECTS and lifelong learning (Lifelong learning – open learning opportunities, Recognition of prior learning);
- ECTS and quality assurance;
- ECTS and supporting documents (Course catalogue, Learning Agreement, Transcripts of Records, Work Placement Certificate).

As a conclusion of this study visit report, I could say that mobility is changing dramatically in quantity and shape, that transparency and recognition of learning acquired elsewhere should be a priority and I would like to stress importance of staff mobility as a precondition for improvement of student mobility.

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