# Making students active partners in the internationalisation efforts of higher education institutions

**Ligia Deca**

The institutional capacity to attain an international profile seems to be the standard by which contemporary institutional leaders are judged. This article aims at capturing the student view on the internationalisation of higher education, stressing the opportunities, threats and challenges, while making a case for student involvement as a key element in designing and implementing successful internationalisation strategies at institutional level. The article's viewpoint is based on the author's two years of experience as Chairperson of the European Students' Union, a one-year mandate as President of the National Alliance of Students Organisations in Romania and as a student in a university with a clear internationalisation commitment – the Constanta Maritime University. Some of the views presented in the article were voiced at the 2009 European University Association Autumn Conference in Giessen.

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## 1. Introduction

Looking at the latest trends in higher education, it is easy to see that internationalisation has become a strategic priority for national governments and higher education institutions alike, one which has significantly grown in importance in the past few years. The political impetus given to the topic has been evident in the Bologna Process ever since the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, but has been strengthened in the European Union context by the European Commission's Modernisation Agenda for Universities, as well as by the debates prompted by the Lisbon Strategy and by the recent EU2020 discussions.

**The perspective of this article**

This article sets out to highlight the student perception of the internationalisation phenomenon, stressing the opportunities, threats and challenges, while making a case for student involvement as a key element in designing and implementing successful internationalisation strategies at institutional level. The author's viewpoint is based on her two-year experience as Chairperson of the European Students' Union, a one-year mandate as President of the National Alliance of Students Organisations in Romania, and as a student in a university with a clear internationalisation commitment – the Constanta Maritime University. Some of the views expressed in the article were voiced in the 2009 European University Association Autumn Conference in Giessen.

## 2. Internationalisation and its place in the higher education debates

The International Association of Universities (IAU) signalled in its 2003 Survey (IAU 2003, 12) that a large majority (73%) of respondents identified internationalisation as a key area on their priority list.
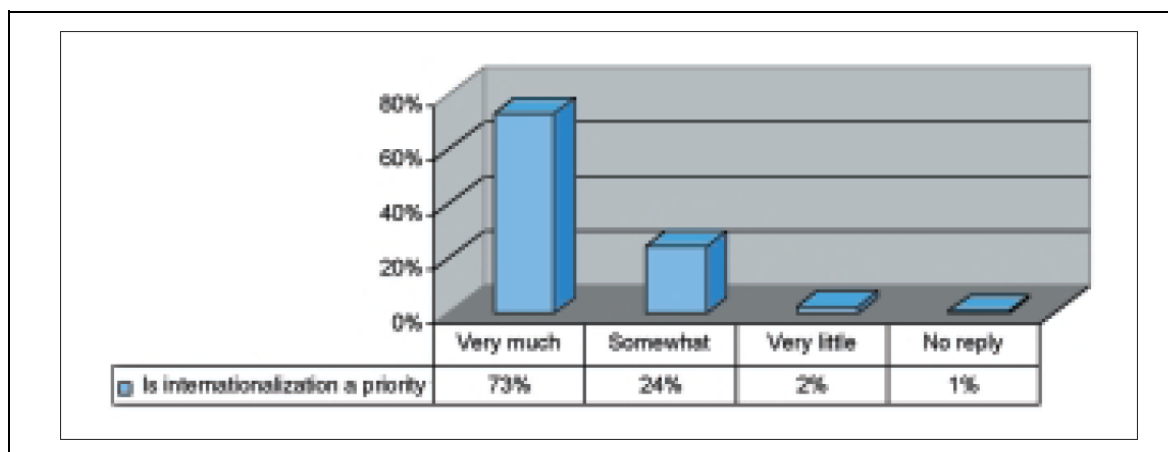
**Fig. A 3.4-1-1          Priority given to internationalisation (IAU 2003, 12)**

Seven years later, the European University Association (EUA) not only confirmed that internationalisation featured as one of the most important trends shaping institutional missions in the previous three years (cited by 61% of the Trends 2010 respondents), but also foresaw that in the next five years internationalisation would be the most important development (21% of respondents), leaving areas such as quality assurance or the Bologna Process trailing well behind (EUA 2010, 73).

**The potential to influence change in the missions of higher education institutions**

In the global and European context, it is clear that an area viewed with such potential by institutional leaders should induce a certain degree of change in the mission of higher education institutions, with clear implications for the institutional environment in which students play an active part.

The European Students' Union has conducted a very interesting survey of the perceptions of the level of attention given to internationalisation by different higher education actors. In the view of ESU members (ESU 2009, 147), the wider public has little or no awareness of recent internationalisation developments, while the interest of governments in the topic remains significant. Within academic communities, students "seem to be the least informed about internationalisation and the initiatives taken, with little more than 20% claiming that they are significantly or fully aware" (see ESU 2009, 148) of developments in internationalisation.
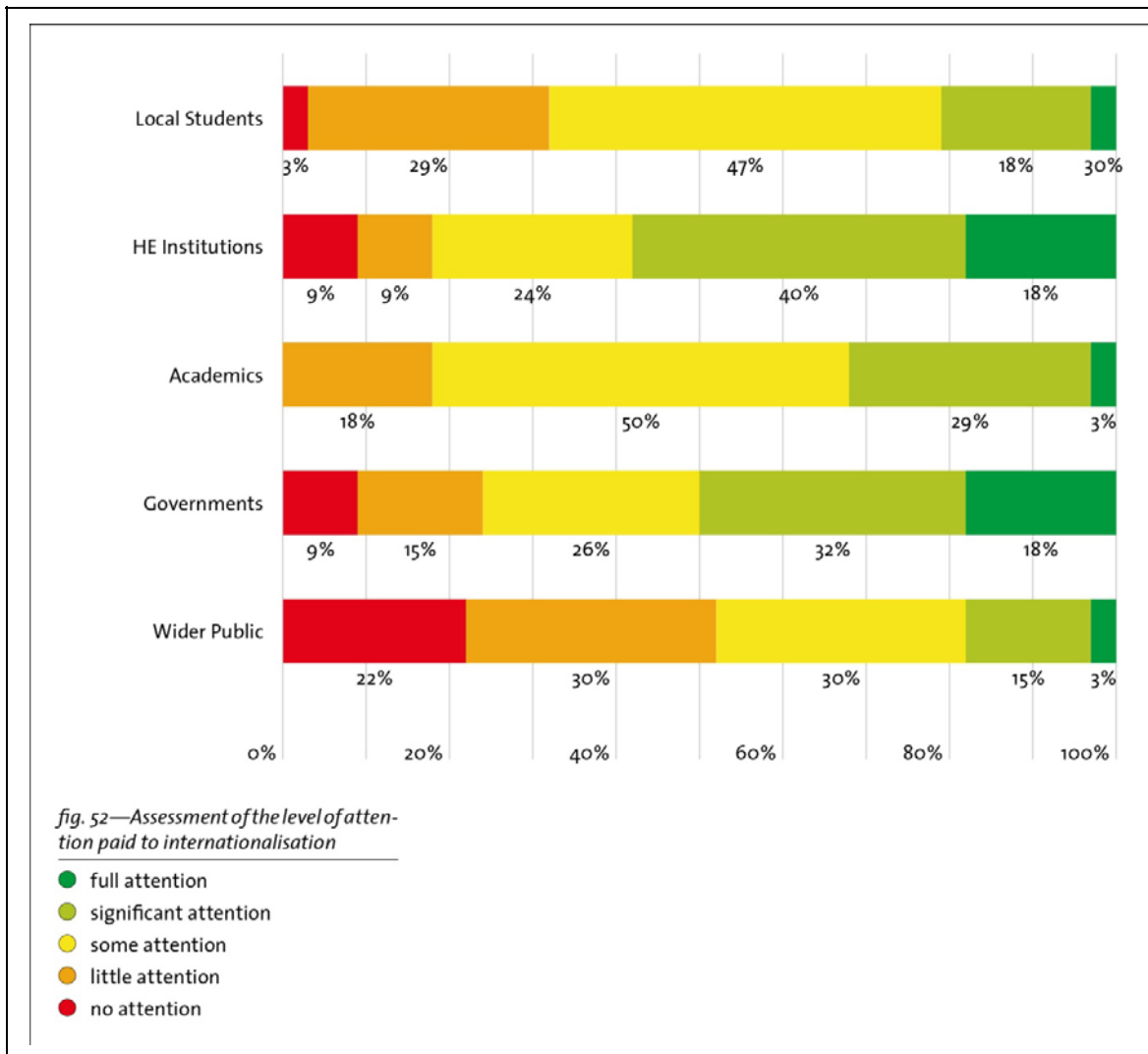
**Interest in internationalisation**

fig. 52—Assessment of the level of atten-
tion paid to internationalisation

- ● full attention
- ● significant attention
- ● some attention
- ● little attention
- ● no attention

**Abb. A 3.4-1-2**     **Assessment of the level of attention paid to internationalisation (ESU 2009, 148)**

The most common feature of internationalisation is widely considered to be the mobility of students, staff and researchers, but these are no longer its only important aspects. The increasing quest for international presence leads institutional leaders to give high consideration to building institutional partnerships, which involve research and teaching, as well as capacity building and sometimes institutional profiling (through international networks of peer institutions seeking a competitive edge in a specific sector). A specific and sometimes controversial feature of internationalisation is the profit-driven side of cross-border higher education provision, which is increasingly diversified, but relatively unregulated at international and sometimes even national level;

this occasionally creates legal confusion when education is not clearly defined either as a public responsibility or as a private undertaking similar to a commercial service.

The next section of the article will examine the benefits of internationalisation for students, as well as the challenges that students experience when being involved. Also, we will look at possible threats of pursuing cross-border educational provision without a clear ethical dimension to this undertaking.

# 3.    Internationalisation with students' eyes

Students experience the effects of the internationalisation process, rather than forming part of the institutional groups that develop the internationalisation strategies. In order to gauge the students' opinion on internationalisation, it is necessary to divide the concept into some of its most visible component elements, such as:

- International student mobility and cross-border institutional provision;

- Institutional partnerships leading to student exchanges, joint degrees and international university consortia;

- International institutional benchmarking or ranking.

## 3.1    International student mobility

Many studies stress the importance of international student mobility, starting from the idea that mobility is beneficial for a student from all points of view:

- **From a personal point of view**, through the acquisition of a superior understanding of new cultures, diverse educational systems, and new languages

**Benefits of mobility – one of the principal features of internationalisation**

- **From an academic point of view**, by being able to benefit from and contribute to a different academic environment and by contributing to the diversity of the student body as a mobile student or as a returning student in the home institution. This assumption rests on the hypothesis that diversity enhances the quality of the academic process.

- **From a professional point of view**, by giving the student wider labour market access, as well as by significantly improving the ca-

pacity of the future professional to work in multicultural environments and to be comfortable with the lifestyle and working culture of a different country or region.

- **From a societal point of view,** as mobility should help the student become more tolerant of other cultures and perhaps also extend her or his degree of participation and understanding in the societal process, thus creating a more active citizen, equipped for diverse democratic societies.

An international university is likely to encourage mobility and to facilitate the departure and re-integration of mobile students from and to their alma mater. A short-term mobility period abroad will not be regarded as a potential risk for the academic quality of the degree, but rather as an added value. It is of course important that safety measures are in place, such as the learning agreement, as in the case of the ERASMUS Programme, or that students are encouraged to be mobile within the institutional network of which the home university is a member.

Good practice also involves giving financial support to mobile students and having well designed programmes, which integrate the mobile students into the host institution and ensure their participation in institutional governance.

**Risks inherent in the design of mobility policies**

Due to its enormous potential, mobility is sometimes seen within the student ranks as a multiplier of the inequalities present in higher education (ESU, 2009). If a student does not have access to a mobility period abroad, as a result of financial considerations or of socio-economic background, it is likely that the overall value of the entire academic experience will be less than that accruing to a mobile student. This is why mobility is still seen in many areas as a luxury, rather than the rule; it is also why places made available by programmes providing support for mobility are quite sought after in most European countries. Interestingly enough, the selection for mobility periods in many cases is made according to academic performance criteria, which have a proven link to the socio-economic background of the student in some cases. This fuels the same danger of multiplying social inequalities, instead of establishing a "fair" distribution of mobility opportunities within the student body.

Apart from financial obstacles, other problems threaten the potential impact of mobility on the level of institutional internationalisation. One is the recognition of the quality of time spent abroad. Recognition in itself should be eased by the proper implementation of the Bologna recognition tools (European Credit Transfer System, Diploma Supplement, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, qualifications frameworks). A very good guide to helping students make use of the recognition tools is provided by the article drafted by Professor Andrejs

Rauhvargers: "The Lisbon Recognition Convention: principles and practical application" (EUA 2006).

Trust is a key element in recognising the value of mobility experiences, especially from the point of view of academic relevance. Trusting the quality of a programme in a foreign country or provided by a foreign institution is a delicate matter, which clearly concerned international organisations in the past decade. Next to the already well known European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Education have attempted to introduce a quality culture within cross-border education, which is very challenging since quality assurance mechanisms are more difficult to set up in a multi-cultural global environment, information is less easily accessible and degree comparability becomes more complicated.

**Trust as an important enabler of mobility and internationalisation**

The Guidelines make recommendations to all stakeholders on how to foster a quality culture within cross-border educational provision: to governments, higher education institutions, student bodies, quality assurance and accreditation bodies, academic recognition bodies and professional bodies. The recommendations are of a rather practical nature and can be seen as the starting point in the effort to assure the quality of the programmes of universities beyond the borders of the country in which they are established. The text box below lists – for easy reference – the recommendations made by the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for higher education institutions.

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**Guidelines for higher education institutions / providers**

Commitment to quality by all higher education institutions / providers is essential. To this end, the active and constructive contributions of academic staff are indispensable. Higher education institutions are responsible for the quality as well as the social, cultural and linguistic relevance of education and the standards of qualifications provided in their name, no matter where or how it is delivered. In this context, it is recommended that higher education institutions / providers delivering cross-border higher education:

(a) Ensure that the programmes they deliver across borders and in their home country are of comparable quality and that they also take into account the cultural and linguistic sensitivities of the receiving country. It is desirable that commitment to this effect should be made public;

(b) Recognize that quality teaching and research is made possible by the quality of faculty and the quality of their working conditions that foster independent and critical enquiry. The UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel

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and other relevant instruments need to be taken into account by all institutions and providers to support good working conditions and terms of service, collegial governance and academic freedom;

(c) Develop, maintain or review current internal quality management systems so that they make full use of the competencies of stakeholders such as academic staff, administrators, students and graduates and take full responsibility for delivering higher education qualifications comparable in standard in their home country and across borders. Furthermore, when promoting their programmes to potential students through agents, they should take full responsibility to ensure that the information and guidance provided by their agents are accurate, reliable and easily accessible;

(d) Consult competent quality assurance and accreditation bodies and respect the quality assurance and accreditation systems of the receiving country when delivering higher education across borders, including distance education;

(e) Share good practices by participating in sector organizations and inter-institutional networks at national and international levels;

(f) Develop and maintain networks and partnerships to facilitate the process of recognition by acknowledging each other's qualifications as equivalent or comparable;

(g) Where relevant, use codes of good practice such as the UNESCO/Council of Europe 'Code of good practice in the provision of transnational education' and other relevant codes such as the Council of Europe/UNESCO 'Recommendation on Criteria and Procedures for the Assessment of Foreign Qualifications';

(h) Provide accurate, reliable and easily accessible information on the criteria and procedures of external and internal quality assurance and the academic and professional recognition of qualifications they deliver and provide complete descriptions of programmes and qualifications, preferably with descriptions of the knowledge, understanding and skills that a successful student should acquire. Higher education institutions/providers should collaborate especially with quality assurance and accreditation bodies and with student bodies to facilitate the dissemination of this information;

Ensure the transparency of the financial status of the institution and/or educational programme offered."

In the ESIB (now ESU) survey carried out in 2007 (ESIB, 2007) regarding the level of interaction of its members with the internationalisation of higher education, student unions were asked to self-assess their level of awareness regarding this document. The results are frankly low and indicate an immediate need for governments and higher education to further involve them in all activities in the field.

Despite this relatively low level of awareness, the relevance of it was recognised by most unions for different purposes, from policy making to advocacy on behalf of the students they represent. The survey itself helps in turning attention to this document and has had positive effects. When questioned about the possible benefits of the guidelines, the benefit considered to be the most important one for ESIB members was the provision of an international framework for quality assurance in cross-border higher education that can inform policy at national and institutional levels. This is closely followed by improving the quality of cross-border higher education and by raising awareness of cross-border higher education quality issue (ESU, 2009).

In addition to abiding by the recommendations of the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines, it is crucial that the European higher education institutions incorporate an ethical dimension to their internationalisation efforts. Having in mind the long term societal development that higher education needs to assure in a sustainable manner in each country or global region, it is important that higher education institutions develop ethical codes for their internationalisation activities, with a special focus on cross-border provision. Financial and recruitment interests should be linked with a global mission of ensuring equitable development of active citizens, while trying to prevent brain drain.

**Possible unethical dimensions of internationalisation strategies**

In Europe, it is also crucial to recall that the Leuven / Louvain-la-Neuve ministerial communiqué emphasises that transnational education provision is not to be regarded as a private sector with commercial interests: "*Transnational education should be governed by the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance (ESG) as applicable within the European Higher Education Area and be in line with the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-*Border Higher Education".

**Internationalisation and the marketing drive**

UNESCO has taken steps to warn students of the cases in which internationalisation of higher education can be the cause for not seeing through dishonest educational offers promoted by disreputable providers, due to the difficult access to information regarding the honesty of their offer[1]. In this case, the students are often the ones to find them-

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[1] http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49864&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

selves in an international legal maze with little possibility to find the appropriate authority to appeal to for safeguarding their rights; higher education institutions should assume responsibility for eradicating diploma mills and for assuring the same quality of education in all the campuses that they operate across the world.

**Different status of students from different geographical backgrounds**

The status of mobile students is also a factor affects the student view internationalisation. The very different treatment that mobile students often receive in terms of tuition fees, subsidies for local transport, accommodation and food, visa and working permit regimes, as well as segregation on campus is often the reason mentioned by students to be sceptical about institutional internationalisation strategies. The figure below (ESU 2009, 154) outlines the difference in treatment of non-European/ non-European Union students in European Higher Education Area higher education institutions:
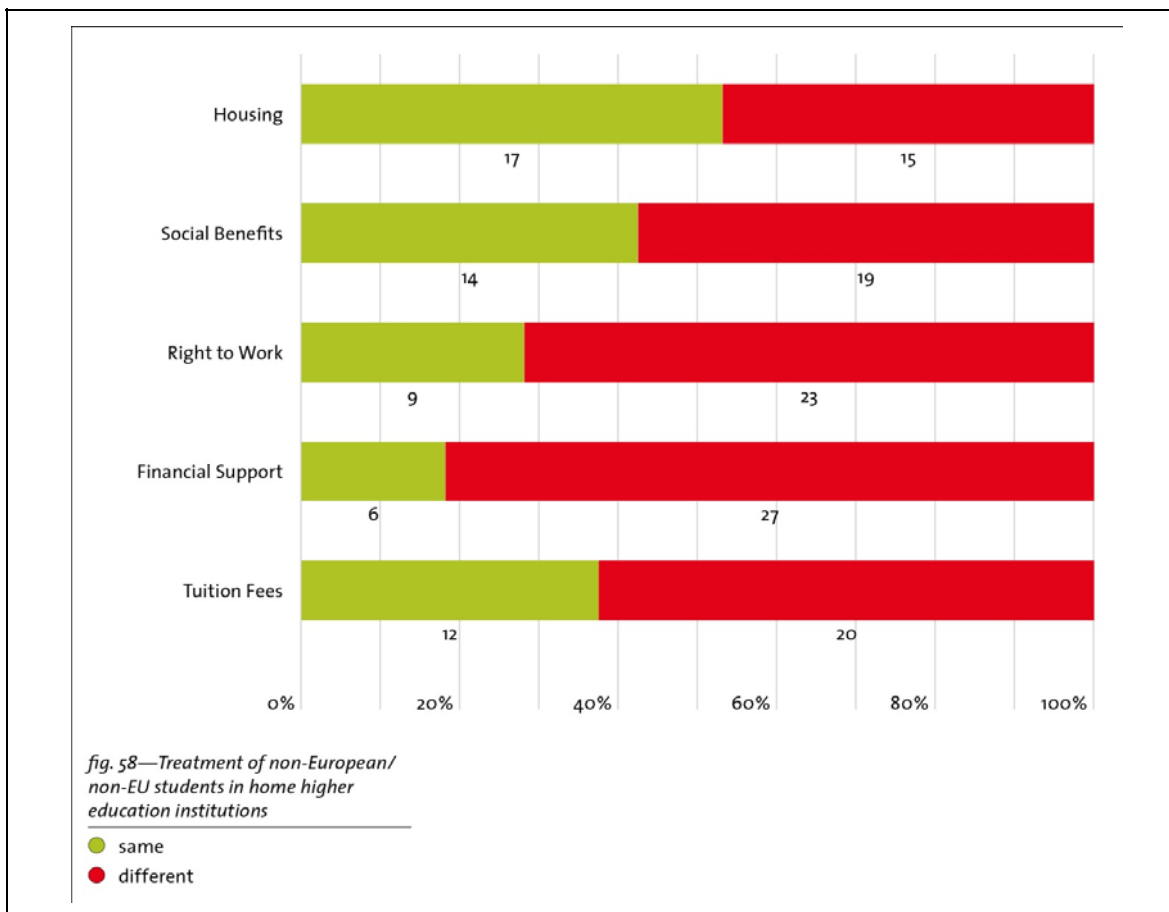


*fig. 58—Treatment of non-European/ non-EU students in home higher education institutions*

- same
- different

**Fig. A 3.4-1-3**      **Treatment of non-European/non-EU students in home higher education institutions (ESU 2009,155)**

The presence of international students on campus has an enormous potential for developing "internationalisation at home", a process in which a student can experience cultural diversity and exchange ideas and knowledge with people from other countries, while staying on his or her home campus. Unfortunately, international students are mostly kept apart from the remainder of the student body (ESU 2009, 155).

Recruiting international students in order to balance constrained institutional budgets is a topic that often makes it to the pages of the international press. The following conclusion (Economist, Aug 5th, 2010) illustrates the cynicism current in a world in which we often talk about the intrinsic value of international education:

**Internationalisation and balancing institutional budgets**

> "*Universities intent on growth in these officially austere times are particularly reliant on foreign students. The government controls closely the supply of undergraduate places to British and EU students, because it must lend money for fees (at subsidised rates) to those who need it, as well as pay universities for taking them. An institution has to apply for permission to expand. If permission is refused, its only way to grow is to recruit students from outside the EU. That is exactly what has been happening. Just 7.1% more students overall were enrolled in higher education in 2008 than in 2004, but non-EU numbers increased by 23.7%.*"

The inequalities between students coming from the non-EU countries and their EU colleagues is striking, especially within the European Higher Education Area in which a pledge has been made by ministers for balanced and diverse mobility flows, together with the commitment to the effect that "at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad" (Leuven/ Louvain-la-Neuve ministerial communique 2009).

Higher education institutions have a duty to all of their students to ensure equal treatment and equal opportunities, while fulfilling their education mission. Student organisations have repeatedly warned of the temptation to commercialise, which often leads to treating students not as future active global citizens, but rather as clients with the right to very different price tags, according to their geographical origin. It is perhaps to be expected that national authorities should subsidise their own students more, but this should not mean that higher education institutions should be able to claim more for educational programmes than they cost, in order to make a profit or to offset deficits in some of their departments. These recent trends have given rise to student scepticism regarding the benefits of internationalisation and this feeling can only be overcome by a responsible attitude towards the role of institutions in educating a global population.

## 3.2 Institutional partnerships leading to student exchanges, joint degrees and international university consortia

Institutional partnerships are usually perceived as beneficial for reducing the obstacles to student mobility, creating networks of scholars, exchanging good practice and sharing institutional resources. Students benefit from these links and can interact more easily with colleagues from partner institutions. Recognition of mobility periods or internships facilitated by the partner institution is much easier if there is a good partnership in place.

**Institutional partnerships and free student movement**

Looking at institutional partnerships, it is hard to believe that they could have any downsides. However, there are some pitfalls. One of them is the tendency to recognise mobility periods or degrees obtained in a partner institution much more easily than those from respectable non-partner institutions around the world. Students are thus directed to be mobile within specific networks of institutions which limit their freedom of choice according to the existing partnership agreements of the alma mater. Moreover, recognition systems do not function properly; the easy recognition of study periods in partner institutions is fast becoming a patch-up solution to creating a functional recognition system at institutional level. Additionally, the proliferation of world league tables could mean that institutional networks are created on the basis of comparable positions in world rankings, which also has the effect of clustering institutions and of limiting the freedom of students to experience the institutional and cultural diversity that Europe has to offer.

**Internationalisation and national regulations**

An example of an incentive programme supporting inter-institutional partnerships is the Erasmus Mundus programme. Over and above the criticism of the "elite" character of the programme resulting from the limited number of places and the high demand, student organisations in Denmark have accused Erasmus Mundus of introducing the commercialisation of higher education through the backdoor, by accepting tuition fees for the Erasmus Mundus programmes in which Danish institutions were partners, despite the fact that Denmark had no tuition fee system[2]. It is true that Erasmus Mundus rules make it possible for partner institutions to adhere to specific requirements imposed by national systems of education, but here was an interesting case of the influence that cross-border education arrangements can bear on national higher education systems, sometimes with unfortunate consequences for students.

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[2] See http://www.esu-online.org/index.php/News/news-archive/253-denmark-against-tuition-fees

## 3.3 International institutional benchmarking or ranking

There is now a call for more transparency regarding the quality and comparative prestige of higher education institutions for the benefit of students world-wide. There are numerous attempts to create simplified systems of comparison and hierarchy, based on criteria which are generally useful to other target groups (e.g. performance in research publication). It is amazing that rankings seem to have a powerful influence on students' choices, but that they sometimes have very little relation to the criteria that students would use to choose a specific institution or programme (e.g. quality of teaching).

Many students need additional, more in-depth tools for choosing their future institution. For this purpose, the university website should be a guide for any future or current student through what that particular institution has in store for its future students or researchers. It is interesting to observe that institutional websites are usually trying to offer information for very different target groups, while sometimes clustering the information most relevant for students under only one tab, titled "Students". At a time when information for students is of extraordinary value for orientation in an increasingly diverse and international global higher education area, university websites could perhaps be a more comprehensive information tool that can offer exactly the information students would need in an easily accessible form. Research into how to achieve this would be very welcome in the future.

**Internationalisation as a stimulus for student-centered transparency tools?**

In addition to a good website, it would be very useful to have access to a centralised database with the institutions and programmes which are accredited or otherwise authorised and with an explanation of the national context in which they operate. Unfortunately, this is a complex venture, albeit extremely useful for students who wish to make an informed choice; the temptation to simply aggregate indicators and to publish a not-so complicated ranking is accordingly very great in the current context.

## 4. Involving students in institutional internationalisation efforts

Students are an essential part of the academic community and the most numerous group within it. Yet it is not unusual for the involvement of students in the development of internationalisation strategy to be kept to a minimum, since it is somehow seen as not of direct interest to the home institution's student body.

**The benefits of student participation in the internationalisation process.**

For any internationalisation strategy to succeed, student participation has to become an automatic feature. Students are able to assess, with their own perspective, whether the internationalisation strategy brings benefits to the quality of teaching and research, as well as whether the environment created by the potentially diverse student body is an inclusive one. Ownership of an activity or a process raises its chances of being successfully promoted. On the assumption that mobile students and staff are the representatives of their home institutions, it would be much more effective to have them promote the institution and its internationalisation efforts, rather than remaining in ignorance of what is being planned by the institutional leadership.

It is not only the home students who need to be involved in the design and implementation of institutional internationalisation strategies. Incoming students will have much to say about a system that they are experiencing for the first time and will be able to contribute with their previous experience to the enhancement of the system that they are visiting. Furthermore, an institution can adapt its programmes and teaching methods (and sometimes even the structure) much more easily to the needs of its diverse student body if it involves students in all of its processes. An interesting case in this regard is that of the author's alma mater – Constanta Maritime University.

> Constanta Maritime University (CMU) is a small specialist institution, offering programmes for maritime officers, maritime engineers, engineers specialising in port logistics, and tele-communications engineers. Being a part of the international family of maritime institutions, it is also a member of IAMU – the International Association of Maritime Universities, which is a body recognised by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). A characteristic of this institution is the close link between faculty and the shipping companies, due in part to the professional requirement that each student should achieve a certain level of practical experience by taking part in training voyages. Thanks to the CMU Student Organisation, CMU became increasingly aware of the importance of high quality provision of the practical experience component. It was also the student organization which organised the first Job Fair and the first employers' perception survey. These two events led directly to a first series of partnerships between CMU and two well known shipping companies for the training voyage of final year students, as well as to the introduction of private bursaries for the students the companies selected for eventual employment. The continuous dialogue between the Student Organisation and the institution aided the building of new international partnerships with foreign shipping and crewing companies (as students who came back from training provided feedback to the student organisation). This then led to a growth in the CMU partnerships with other higher education institutions with a similar profile, which were increasingly interested in sharing the good practice.

In the light of the benefits that students can bring, when actively involved in internationalisation strategies, it is useful to provide a short checklist for enhancing student participation in this key area for higher education institutions. This shortlist is in no way exhaustive but should make a tentative start in tackling the issue of greater student involvement in internationalisation strategies:

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| Institutional leaders should include students in the design, implementation and evaluation of internationalisation strategies; | ☐ |
| Internationalisation efforts should be coupled with an effort to gain from the diverse backgrounds present in the student body and thus involve visiting or mobile students in the same manner as indigenous ones in the internationalisation processes; | ☐ |
| Equal and fair treatment of both incoming and outgoing students is essential in a successful internationalisation strategy and in the integration of all the diverse backgrounds that students come from; | ☐ |
| Internationalisation can be a goal in itself, but it should also be a part of a broader institutional mission. Students should be made aware of how internationalisation aids the higher education institution to fulfil all its purposes and how they can best participate in this effort in order to increase their ownership of the institutions' internationalisation strategy; | ☐ |
| Devise the information tools and materials in a student-centred way, which will help students easily identify the most suitable programme or academic path they can follow within an institution; | ☐ |
| Underline the importance of the academic community in achieving "internationalisation at home" so that every member of the student or staff body benefits from the international experience that the institution has; | ☐ |
| Make known the success of students or staff members in international environments so that a set of role models with international experience is established; | ☐ |
| Organise events in which representatives of partner institutions or international students and staff are able to share their views and experiences with the academia in an informal manner; | ☐ |
| Ensure a good set of academic counselling services for students, as well as the adequate living and learning conditions, without causing any segregation from the more numerous indigenous student body; | ☐ |

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|---|---|
| Make use of the perception that mobile students have of the institution and seek their input with regard to the enhancement of the institution's curricula, teaching methods, facilities and even strategies; | ☐ |
| Support events with an international character organised by student organisations, as they tend to increase the feeling of ownership to the student community of mobile students; | ☐ |
| Ease the "red tape" that students have to negotiate in order to be able to join an academic community and liaise with the appropriate authorities to provide everything that is in the power of the institution to prevent delays or further bureaucracy in processing visa or working permit applications. | ☐ |

**Checkliste A 3.4-1-1**    Title

By way of conclusion, it is worth mentioning that students and academia always had a symbiotic relationship, each being dependent on the evolution of the other. The numerous benefits that internationalisation brings to each member of the academic community and to the higher education institution itself are best maximised when there is a harmonious collaboration on the design and implementation of internationalisation strategies. The negative effects that globalisation can have on higher education institutions can be minimised, when all the interested parties are involved in creating systems of checks and balances which ensure a continuous review of the institutional efforts to fulfil their multi-faceted missions. And a broad involvement in the efforts of internationalisation can be the solution to that problem. As for student involvement, the way forward is perhaps best encapsulated in the following quotation:

"If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944)

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Note:

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**Biography:**

**Ligia Deca** is the newly appointed Head of the Bologna Secretariat. She was previously Chairperson (2008-2010) of the European Students' Union (ESU). As Chairperson, she was the main policy and organisational coordinator of ESU, while being its official representative in the Bologna Follow-Up Group, the European Union Lisbon higher education consultations and UNESCO. In 2008, she was also the coordinator of the Coalition for Clean Universities - a campaign aimed at fostering academic integrity and fighting corruption in the Romanian education sector.