Research Projects for Europe

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IntlUni – the opportunities and challenges of the multilingual and multicultural learning space in the international university

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Abstract: This report outlines the main outcomes of IntlUni, an Erasmus Academic Network project 2012-15. IntlUni has addressed the opportunities and challenges of the multilingual and multicultural learning space, established as a result of the increasing internationalization of European higher education. 38 higher education institutions in 27 countries participated in the project that was financially supported by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme. The main outcomes are the IntlUni Principles for quality teaching and learning in the multilingual and multicultural learning space as well as the IntlUni Recommendations targeted at higher education institutions, national or regional authorities responsible for the legal and financial framework of higher education and, finally, European bodies supporting the development of the European Higher Education Area.

Keywords: internationalisation of higher education, international classroom, multilingual, multicultural, English Medium Instruction

Introduction

IntlUni has been an Erasmus Academic Network project, financially supported by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme (2012–15). The project has comprised 38 higher education institution partners in 27 countries, thus in itself constituting what might be called a microcosm of European higher education today. IntlUni has been coordinated by Aarhus University (DK).

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IntlUni was established at a time when focus was beginning to shift from the numbers of mobile students as one of the main indicators of success towards a growing interest in enhancing the quality of internationalisation in European higher education. This trend is reflected in other projects as well, notably also in the revised definition of the internationalisation of higher education suggested by de Wit, Hunter, Howard & Egron-Polak in a study requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (new additions added in *italics*):

[Internationalisation of Higher Education is] the *intentional* process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education, *in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society* (de Wit et al. 2015:29).

The original incentive for establishing the IntlUni network and the project was the realization that more and more higher education teachers were faced with serious challenges as a result of having students with increasingly diverse backgrounds in their classrooms. The project therefore set out to identify ways to meet these challenges in the multilingual and multicultural learning space. The term *learning space* was chosen to imply physical as well as virtual classrooms; *multicultural* because students have different cultural (ethnic) backgrounds and have been used to different academic or educational cultures, traditions and norms; finally, *multilingual* because students, and indeed often also their teachers, have different first languages, none of which are – or at least only one of which is – the shared language of instruction. This linguistic diversity obviously has implication for how teachers and students interact, and the language proficiency of all actors is crucial in order for them to communicate successfully across cultures; it goes without saying that the language proficiency is also important with a view to the students' academic literacy, their academic reading and writing skills.

With these perceived challenges as the point of departure, the overarching aims of IntlUni have been (i) to identify the quality criteria that should characterize teaching and learning in the multilingual and multicultural learning space, and (ii) to develop recommendations for how higher education institutions may develop and implement quality teaching and learning in this space. At an early stage of the project it was noted that, in addition to the challenges, there were also substantial opportunities in the international classrooms, and the final outcomes of the project are therefore also presented under the title *Opportunities and challenges in the multilingual and multicultural learning space* (Lauridsen & Lillemose 2015).

Outcomes

One of the main outcomes of the project is the *IntlUni Principles for quality teaching and learning in the multilingual and multicultural learning space*. These Principles were developed as a result of a joint process of sample collection, consultation and validation in the group of IntlUni partners and among external stakeholders. They derive from almost a hundred different examples of local practices developed to meet a wide variety of challenges in the partner institutions. For more information on the methodology, please see Lauridsen & Lillemose (2015).

Dimension (actor)	Focus of activity (process)	Quality principles
1. The institution	Educational context & institutional environment	1. Providing an inclusive learning space 1.1 Providing institutional support for learning-conducive environments 1.2 Integrating students and staff in the institution
2. The teacher	Educational processes	2. Raising awareness about teaching and learning processes 2.1 Reflecting on teaching approaches and negotiating learning processes 2.2 Managing and leveraging diversity
3. The student	Educational outcomes	3. Developing one's own cultural identity and extending one's knowledge base 3.1 Benefitting from awareness of cultural differences and the ability to deal with linguistic diversity 3.2 Acquiring and applying contextual and intercultural knowledge to different cultural contexts

The IntlUni Principles for quality teaching and learning in the multilingual and multicultural learning space (Cozart, Haines, Lauridsen & Vogel, 2015:19).

As it appears from the table above, the principles cover three dimensions or actors: the higher education institution, the teachers, and the students. These actors each have a focus of activity; the institution is responsible for the educational context and environment, the teachers for the educational processes and the students for the educational outcomes achieved. The principles describe the conditions under which these processes, carried out by the three main actors, can lead to the successful fulfillment of learning outcomes in all disciplines across the

curriculum of a given programme of study. Each of the Principles is exemplified in a set of Illustrative Samples, cf. Peckham & Kling (2015).

While (some of) the challenges may derive from the diversity of the students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, quite a few of the solutions to the problems as well as the opportunities that also present themselves in the international classrooms, are of a didactic nature, and there is a close interrelation between the linguistic, cultural, and didactic factors that can easily be underestimated in the multilingual and multicultural learning space. Many university leaders, teachers and students tend to focus on issues of language proficiency and overlook the fact that the three factors are closely interlinked.

The three dimensions or actors in the IntlUni Principles carry an important message: The HE teachers or the students alone cannot meet the challenges unless the higher education institution provides an appropriate institutional environment, and it is considered the responsibility of the institutional leadership and management to do just that, but also to provide institutional support for a learning-conducive environment for all students and an inclusive environment for all students and staff.

How this can or should be done differs considerably from one institution to the other. Therefore, the IntlUni Principles are not to be read as a set of quick fixes that, when implemented, can be ticked off on a to-do list. Rather, they form the point of departure, or a set of guidelines that leadership and management teams, academic and administrative staff may use in local, contextualized negotiations on how to move forward with initiatives to increase the quality of international education in their respective higher education institutions. No one hat fits all. For further on the Principles, please see Cozart, Haines, Lauridsen & Vogel (2015); Peckham & Kling (2015) and also Lauridsen & Cozart (2015).

The second major outcome of the project is the IntlUni Recommendations. These are targeted at the higher education institutions, national or regional authorities responsible for the legal and financial frameworks for higher education in their country or region, and European bodies supporting the development of the European Higher Education Area. As regards the institutions, the main recommendations are for them to take into account the IntlUni Principles and to ensure that academic (and administrative) staff be given the necessary and appropriate professional development opportunities needed in order for them to develop the quality of their teaching and the students' learning in the multilingual and multicultural learning space. For all the recommendations, please see Lauridsen, Dafouz, Stavicka & Wetter (2015).

Impact

Given the nature of the IntlUni Erasmus Academic Network, with 38 partner institutions in 27 countries and the overwhelming diversity these institutions represent, the project has been able to paint a broad picture of the current situation in the multilingual and multicultural learning spaces across Europe, to identify examples of successful practices in specific local contexts and develop a set of general quality principles and recommendations. There is no doubt that these principles and recommendations will be taken on board and further developed to a varying degree, and that the initiatives that have been taken and will be taken in the near future by institutional leaders and academic staff, will also vary considerably.

However, at the end of the project, the IntlUni outcomes were presented to a wider audience, including university leaders, at a European conference, and on that occasion it was gratifying to see how many of these decision makers were prepared to return to their own institutions and not only take note of the outcomes, but actually also take action and use them as a platform for negotiations and decisions to be taken in their respective higher education institutions. The same impression may be derived from the IntlUni Impact and Exploitation report developed with input from all 38 partner institutions in the last few months of the project (Cünnen et al. 2015).

Rather than presenting a string of solutions, which could never be implemented in the same way in different local contexts, the IntlUni outcomes present principles, samples and recommendations that may be used as appropriate in partner institutions and beyond as a point of departure for new developments in the internationalisation of higher education programmes of study and the way they are taught across Europe.

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- Website: www.IntlUni.eu
- References to publications based on IntlUni outcomes will continue to be posted on the project website at <http://intluni.eu/final-outcomes/intluni-publications/>.