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The Multilingual & Multicultural Classroom

Background

Universities have always been international. However, since the mid-1980s, Europe has witnessed a development for faculty as well as students that goes far beyond what has previously been the case.

With the introduction of the European Commission exchange programmes – the ERASMUS and its follow-on programmes – in the second half of the 1980s, student exchanges gained momentum. Since then, various co-operation programmes in education as well as research have been further developed.

What follows below is based on the current situation as seen from the perspective of the Aarhus School of Business, Aarhus University, Denmark.

We may consider this European development within the last 25 years as a three-step process:

1. Student and faculty exchanges. Students were considered guest students at their host universities, and it was taken for granted that students should adapt to the host environment; this was part of the experience. Also, part of the experience was that students should learn the language of the host country in order to participate in the programmes offered there.
2. Especially the small countries whose national languages were some of the less widely used and taught languages in Europe, found that in order to attract a sufficient number of international students to satisfy the needs for exchange places for their own students, they needed to offer courses in a language that was more attractive than the local language to international students. More often than not, this language was almost exclusively English. – Often other special initiatives were also taken to attract more international students, for instance, the invitation of English-speaking guest professors for a short period time, a semester or perhaps a year.
3. In order to further stimulate an international dimension in research as well as education (vis a vis globalization in general), universities have more recently begun to recruit more international faculty for (permanent) positions as Ph.D. students, assistant or associate professors as well as full professors (chairs).

Furthermore, programmes have been developed – not least at master level – that are geared towards an international (not only European) student audience and taught in English. This last phase has resulted in a much more multilingual and multicultural environment at the universities than it was previously the case - with international faculty and students not only visiting for a semester, but actually staying in the country for several years and often applying for non-temporary jobs at the universities or in the private sector.

The development outlined above has led to a much more truly international university, but it has also resulted in some challenges for faculty and students – and for the university administration that has had to come to grips with the many issues they now have to deal with such as advice for incoming faculty on almost anything from local taxation to schools for accompanying children, job opportunities for spouses of incoming faculty, etc. etc. Much of this must take place in English – at least at the beginning – and the administrative units need to decide what information should be available in English, in English and the local language, or in the local language only. This, and the translation processes it entails, is also labour intensive and requires additional funding.

Now, what are the consequences?

At the early stages of this development, about a decade ago, many universities thought that it was a question of languages only, or rather, that it was a question of teaching and communicating in English. This could be taken care of as a result of the implementation of a language policy. But as it turns out, this does not seem to be enough.

Experience now tells us that there is a triangle of issues to be dealt with:

1. Language: Choice of language – and the necessary and sufficient language competences of students, faculty and staff.
2. Culture: The cultural background of students, faculty and staff and the intercultural dialogue. The university is international, no longer local, regional or national, and therefore faculty and staff are expected to bring the best from their own background into the university and thereby enrich the international dimension, not exclusively learn how things have always been done locally.
3. Pedagogical / didactic tradition: All international faculty and students bring their own educational background into the classroom. To which extent are they expected to adapt to traditional local norms, and to which extent are the local norms (local faculty and local students) flexible enough to allow for a truly international environment?

This last question seems to be where we are at the moment. How do we come to grips with it – as university leaders, faculty, staff and students? Whose cultural and educational norms will prevail? And do all parties concerned have the necessary and

sufficient language and intercultural competences to engage in the teaching and learning activities in this – relatively new – international environment?

Research as well as experience already tells us that this is often easier said than done. While there is no doubt that further research into these matters would help us map out all the challenges that this development entails, we already need to discuss the issues and seek solutions to immediate problems.

First steps for action:

An international workshop on 22 October 2009 will be organized as a one-day event with short presentations followed by interaction between the participants (please see separate program for the workshop). – To the workshop will be invited faculty and staff at the ASB, Aarhus University as well as members of the ELC and representatives of other interested parties in European Higher Education.

The follow-up seminar on 23 October 2009 will be a combination of a workshop and a meeting establishing a Special Interest Group (SIG) under the auspices of the European Language Council (ELC) and outlining the next steps for action in an action plan. At this seminar or immediately thereafter, interested parties must declare their interest in joining the SIG and if possible outline the area(s) of responsibility they are prepared to take on within the SIG.

Under the auspices of the ELC, a SIG should:

- Map the challenges for the diverse set of stakeholder groups (local and international faculty; local and international students; staff);
- Map existing research results and what can be learned from this;
- Suggest future joint research and development projects.

Please note that it is possible to participate in the international workshop and/or the follow-up seminar.

An **ASB internal follow up seminar** will be held at the ASB on 12 November 2009 (13.00-16.00). This is intended for ASB faculty and staff only.