

INTERNATIONALISATION AND INNOVATIVE TEACHING AS THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE AND BEYOND

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The importance of internationalisation

Our world has been expanding since the Middle Ages and globalisation has never been as far reaching as today. Yet, the trend where nations periodically open themselves up to the international community only to withdraw and focus on themselves remains. Nationalism, protectionism and xenophobia are still very real and the turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russo-Ukrainian War and the resulting economic crisis are expected to bolster isolationist forces. Withdrawing completely from the world no longer seems reasonable and continued contacts between nations and cultures can serve as a mitigating force, which is a key principle behind the Erasmus+ mobility schemes.

Citizens who are educated to be open to multiple perspectives, world views, and truths, and who communicate with people from other cultures are less likely to give in to isolationism and animosity fuelled by political forces. Despite the tumultuous events, the context of internationalisation in European higher education has changed little since the inception of the idea of the IMPACT project in 2018. Under the Erasmus+ scheme, the top four countries (France, Germany, Spain and Italy) continue sending more students abroad, and the top five receiving countries (Spain, Germany, UK, France and Italy) host more students than all the other member states of the European Union combined (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2022a, 2022b). The internationalisation of higher education assumes a willingness on behalf of a country's leadership to create a favourable legal framework, educational policies and other conditions. The role of the university leadership in facilitating internationalisation is also crucial through implementing the relevant procedures and creating a teaching and learning environment accommodating the needs of international students while encouraging its own students to study abroad. International mobility in Central Europe—and particularly Slovakia and the Czech Republic, where participants in the Effective Teaching for Internationalisation programme came from—is uneven. Poland and, compared to its population, the Czech Republic do well: they are currently the 7th and 10th most active countries in sending their students abroad and rank 6th and 10th in hosting the largest number of international students annually within the European Union (Table 1). They are also net receivers in student mobility just like Hungary. On the other hand, Hungary is the 18th and 15th and Slovakia is the 20th and 23rd, respectively, in sending their students to foreign universities and hosting international students. Slovakia is the only net sender among the Visegrád countries, suggesting that it is not as attractive for foreign students as the other countries in the region.

Table 1. Mobility of higher education students in Central Europe and each country's ranking among the 27 European Union member states plus the United Kingdom

Country	Student mobility								Difference of outgoing and incoming student mobility			
	Outgoing				Incoming							
	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Czech Republic	5868 10 th	5467 10 th	5378 10 th	5826 10 th	7654 15 th	8251 15 th	7815 15 th	8078 15 th	-1786	-2784	-2437	-2252
Hungary	2850 16 th	2922 16 th	2873 16 th	2532 18 th	4469 15 th	4631 15 th	4773 15 th	4977 15 th	-1619	-1709	-1900	-2445
Poland	10036 5 th	10006 5 th	9729 7 th	9044 7 th	13942 6 th	14421 6 th	14920 6 th	15606 6 th	-3906	-4415	-5191	-6562
Slovakia	2397 18 th	2588 18 th	2244 19 th	1834 20 th	1481 22 nd	1505 22 nd	1669 22 nd	1614 23 rd	916	1083	575	220

Net senders are highlighted in grey.

Source: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2022a, 2022b

There are many reasons why a particular country or a university is chosen by international students, not all of which can be influenced by governmental or university policymakers—e.g., attachment between minorities and their home country, historical heritage, popular tourist attractions, pleasant weather—but the quality of education, as the example of the Czech Republic shows, together with a highly supportive learning environment can be strong motivating factors for foreign students. This has been a cornerstone of our project: in addition to expanding the number of courses that foreign students can enrol in, the IMPACT project also emphasised the development of the teaching skills of our participants (Pleschová 2020). These two are closely connected: the persisting habit among professors to lecture frontally neither takes into account the learning needs of international students, including the fact that they are used to learning differently, nor utilises classroom diversity to enhance the learning of all students.

The primary motivation behind the IMPACT project was to create a more supportive learning environment for incoming international students. Yet, as the chapters in *Internationalising Teaching in Higher Education* document, the project has benefitted local students just as much as their international peers (Pleschová and Simon 2022). Thus, even though the teachers in this book sometimes worked in an indifferent, minimally supportive, and constraining environment, where lack of funding, governmental and university policies set strict limits on what teachers can do, they made remarkable advances in expanding student horizons.

Internationalising teaching practices

In practice, internationalisation is most often a bottom-up, rather than a top-down, process in which educators and students take centre stage (Knight 2004). University teachers have considerable freedom in deciding what they teach and how, which is crucial for academic development courses that focus on individual teachers to succeed (Pleschová and Simon 2018). As the main outcome of the IMPACT project, the number of courses available for international students at Masaryk University (MUNI) but especially at Comenius University in Bratislava (UNIBA) has increased: there are twenty-four newly developed or significantly redesigned courses—five at MUNI and nineteen at UNIBA—that were internationalised and now available in English. The courses are in a variety of fields—psychology, sociology, history, political science, economics, pedagogy, media studies, literature, linguistics, law, medicine, ethnography—and are hosted by their respective departments.

The IMPACT project was designed to enhance student learning through changing teachers' attitudes and teaching practice. The chapters of this volume authored by the graduates of the Effective Teaching for Internationalisation programme show how changing the old mindsets can visibly aid student learning. Some fields of study—like medicine—tend to consider themselves global by nature, and thus ignore the potentials that learning from other cultures can offer students. Other disciplines perceive themselves as heavily nationally oriented—e.g., legal studies, history or literature—with little imagination of how they could connect to the world. The authors of this book have shown that there are no programmes that are too local or overly global for internationalisation.

My hope, as a project team member, is that changes in curricula and the mindset of teachers are only beginning. I trust that the graduates of the Effective Teaching for Internationalisation course and those who internationalised a course on their own initiative will continue internationalising other courses they teach. A few of them have already expressed such intentions. I also consider it vital that these teachers find colleagues at their institutions who are similarly passionate about teaching and willing to provide the best learning experience for international students. Continued pedagogical conversations with fellow participants and departmental and other colleagues can spark interest and willingness to join their colleagues at home, resulting in a university-wide cultural change in education (Roxå and Mårtensson 2013; Pleschová et al. 2021).

Most importantly, the chapters of this volume have the potential to reach and assist a much larger group of university teachers in their efforts to internationalise their students' learning. From this perspective, the 'replicability in a different context' section of each chapter is of crucial importance. They offer good starting points for those who are considering introducing some of the methods or approaches presented in the book into their own teaching, but feel that their subject, students, or environment do not immediately yield to internationalisation in general, or to the approach they were intrigued by in particular.

Too often, educators are willing to discard otherwise promising and beneficial approaches and focus on the difficulties of adaptation rather than concentrating on the potential adjustments that can work. I encourage educators to prioritise the ‘how to make it work’ over the ‘why it cannot work’. Sometimes a few small adjustments are enough to introduce a method in a new setting, while in other cases a more thorough redesign of an intervention is necessary. The authors of this volume demonstrate that internationalisation, often combined with peer learning, works in many educational systems, including in Central Europe, Italy, Sweden, Germany and Portugal. The contributions solicited through the European Consortium for Political Science showcase that university teachers from all of Europe face similar challenges in terms of internationalisation and innovative teaching and that these can be overcome. I wish that many of the readers will find inspiration in the cases of internationalisation presented in this book.

The COVID-19 pandemic was as much of a challenge as a blessing in disguise for the authors and this book as well. Every teacher who internationalised their course during the pandemic faced difficulties in implementing their teaching design and was forced to adapt their planned innovations to the actual teaching and learning environment. In this, the teachers made this volume richer. If not for the pandemic, all of the classes would have likely been taught face-to-face and there would be no evidence of how internationalisation works in the virtual classroom. It is unlikely that any teacher would consider internationalising a course without the physical presence of international students through implementing internationalisation at home (Beelen and Jones 2015). Consequently, the authors of this book became the best examples of adapting a teaching design to a different context.

Changing mindsets

Often the authors have learnt as much from internationalising their course as their students, which underlines the importance of professional development for educators. Regularly taking courses in academic development and further immersion in educational literature are logical and relatively simple first steps. Beyond this, participating in staff mobility can have tremendous benefits, too. Going abroad and connecting with like-minded individuals can keep up one’s motivation, broaden one’s attitude, and enhance one’s teaching skills.

The Erasmus+ higher education staff mobility scheme offers great opportunities that are exploited to varying degrees in Central Europe. University staff do recognise the opportunity particularly in Hungary and the Czech Republic and both countries are net senders (Table 2). Poland and Slovakia rank fairly high regarding the number of their staff visiting foreign institutions. However, they tend to host more foreign staff than they send abroad and their ranking in receiving international staff is very low—currently Poland is 24th and Slovakia is 27th—among the 27 EU member states and Britain. This can hardly be explained by the size of the country’s population, the number of university staff or the fact that the official statistics combine both research and teaching

visits. Positive personal experience from international mobility can strengthen the commitment of university teachers to internationalisation.

Table 2. Mobility of higher education staff in Central Europe and each country’s ranking among the 27 European Union member states plus the United Kingdom

Country	Staff mobility								Difference of outgoing and incoming staff mobility			
	Outgoing				Incoming							
	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Czech Republic	3312 7 th	3787 7 th	4580 5 th	2536 4 th	3422 5 th	3723 6 th	3842 7 th	2063 8 th	-110	64	738	473
Hungary	2746 9 th	2892 10 th	3277 9 th	1901 5 th	2197 15 th	2617 16 th	2360 15 th	1311 14 th	549	275	917	590
Poland	2351 10 th	3035 9 th	2702 11 th	1286 12 th	3829 19 th	4540 21 st	5003 21 st	2169 24 th	-1478	-1505	-2301	-883
Slovakia	1834 14 th	2281 13 th	2494 13 th	1208 14 th	2286 26 th	2288 27 th	2314 27 th	1450 27 th	-452	-7	180	-242

Net senders are highlighted in grey.

Source: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2022a, 2022b

Successful internationalisation also assumes changing the mindset not only of teachers but also of students. Several of the Effective Teaching for Internationalisation programme participants, including those whose scholarship of teaching and learning study is included in this volume, were disappointed by local students’ lack of interest or courage, often stemming from poor language skills or low confidence, to attend a course in English or another foreign language. Yet, while not all students can participate in student mobility, everyone can benefit from learning from incoming international staff and students, provided that they are willing to engage. It is encouraging to see that our authors show how those local students who took up the challenge almost always saw the benefit of cross-cultural interactions.

For the next generations of university students to enjoy the benefits of global citizenship, the local education system should prepare them not only through learning English and other languages at a high level but also by becoming confident learners in general. This assumes learners who are willing to take risks in their own education. This volume shows that when students become responsible for their own learning as a result of student-centred educational approaches, peer learning and internationalisation, they benefit from university education to the fullest.

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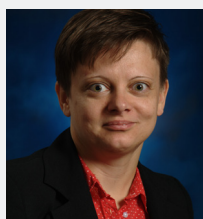
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