



Teaching mobility: a hidden key for successful internationalisation practices

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The mobility of academics is a relatively little-discussed topic these days in the context of the internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), especially when compared to the plethora of activities associated with student mobility, digitalisation, and the European Universities Alliances, to name only a few.

Teaching mobility seems to take a back seat to these hot topics, which is rather contradictory, as there is practically no aspect of internationalisation that cannot be enhanced by investing in teaching mobility to a greater extent than what is presently the case.

It is easy to see that committed lecturers actively involved in international mobility can make a significant contribution to the success of internationalisation. They can help increase student mobility by raising awareness and motivating students, as well as creating the best possible conditions for the smooth recognition of credits. They also support internationalisation at home initiatives, joint courses and international cooperation via personal participation or by activating their contacts. But to achieve all this, a strategic approach is essential.

The convergence between institutional strategy and individual initiatives is not easy in practice and seems to be limited. In most cases, institutions are supportive of teaching mobility, but a much more comprehensive approach is needed to realise its full potential. This is why we decided to put teaching mobility under the spotlight yet again: to encourage learning from past experiences, building on existing tools, and having further joint reflections and actions. We are dedicating some EUF networking events to the topic to share inspiring examples, seeking to increase the visibility of the issue and equip universities with the ideas and means to be more decisive in promoting teaching mobility. This article brings forward the views from colleagues from across the network who have first-hand experience with teaching mobility and have also acted as catalytic for wider take up in their respective institutions.

The [research](#) carried out in the Teach with Erasmus+ project has analysed the responses of 745 academics. Some issues identified 4-5 years ago, such as substitution and recognition, still persist. One of the key missing ingredients is an integrated follow-up of teaching mobilities to incorporate their impact, not only at the individual but also at the institutional level. Interest in research-related activities is also a powerful incentive and key driver for an academic career. Many lecturers do not participate in teaching mobility because research simply takes precedence. However, we also see good examples of how the two can be combined to reinforce each other, which in turn strengthens the institutional context and mindset.

An institutional internationalisation strategy that builds on both the institution's identified needs and the academics' personal ambitions is clearly

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Author

Anikó Makkai-Kovács

Senior Policy and Research Officer, EUF



Author

Anita Kardos

Communication Officer, EUF

the way forward, and teaching mobility should be one of the cornerstones of such a strategy, as can be seen from the interviews and reflections below.

In this article, we have examined how this opportunity is used by the lecturers of some EUF member institutions, which advantages they see, which difficulties they encounter, and how they benefit from their experiences. It is a mere snapshot, with many subjective elements, but general trends and conclusions are anyway perceptible:

- It seems that teaching mobility is not yet seen as a core element of internationalisation strategies, despite the fact that it has or could have a significant qualitative impact. It usually derives from an individual initiative.
- The popularity and take up of teaching mobility can vary widely, not only from one university to another, but even within the same institution. In some departments, mobility is on an upwards trend, and in others, on the contrary, it is more and more difficult to convince lecturers to take part. It is influenced not only by the academic field but also by the habits of the teachers, other financial opportunities, the schedule of academics, etc.
- The main benefits of teaching mobility include personal development, networking, and preparing for future wider-scale collaboration that in many cases are the bases of substantial and strategic partnerships of the HEI. It can also be a tool for international recruitment or a way of supporting internationalisation at home
- Mobile teachers also provide an example to students and encourage them to apply for mobility grants. In addition, recognition is easier if it is in the hands of academics who are aware of the importance of mobility.
- The link between teaching mobility and research activities is twofold. Teaching mobility takes a background role compared to research (and publication pressures), but it also can be the first step towards research cooperation.

The recommendations of the Teach with Erasmus+ project provide policymakers, universities and academics with recommendations and tools on how to further improve teaching mobility within their own areas of competence. [Read more here.](#)

A precursor for long-term international cooperation

Interview with Prof. Jordi Bonet Martí (University of Barcelona, Department of Sociology)

Anita Kardos (A.K.): *Is there a strategic approach for teaching mobilities and is it a popular activity in your institution?*

J.B.M.: My impression is that teaching mobility tends to be based on individual initiative rather than institutional strategy. When I applied for Erasmus teaching mobility, I was the first to do so in years in my department. However, it should also be added that I joined this department five months before the lockdown due to Covid, and well, this last period is not typical in many ways, but certainly not in terms of mobility.

I have to say that research mobility is much more popular in Spain. Teaching mobility is less recognised here. Still, I am very much in favour of teaching mobility, and I see many advantages. It allows me to improve my teaching skills, get to know other methods, and learn from each other.

Research mobility is always very subject-oriented. In contrast, teaching mobility is more an opportunity to meet other colleagues and gain insights into other approaches and cultural differences. You may also meet fellow teachers whose fields of expertise and professional interests do not exactly overlap with yours. It can give rise to new ideas and cooperation initiatives.

A.K.: *What benefits have you experienced and what difficulties have you encountered during teaching mobility?*

J.B.M.: Teaching mobility is an excellent way of building your network. It is also a good way to explore the field and learn more about the higher education system of a particular country if you are thinking about international cooperation in a longer term or want to do research.

Good contacts are vital. If the host institution does not have a well-established system for receiving foreign lecturers, it is quite challenging to be a guest teacher. In such cases, it can be particularly important to have a personal contact on the spot to help you to get things moving.

Another critical issue might be that departments do not always have the flexibility to change the timetable and include the guest teacher's hours into a week. It can make the implementation of teaching mobility very difficult or, in some cases, even impossible.

Otherwise, I have found that students are rather open, whereas there is some resistance and a certain inflexibility on the part of the lecturers when they must allow a guest teacher into their course.

A.K.: How do you think the impacts can be exploited?

J.B.M.: Five-day teaching mobility is a very short period. Learning specific methods, you can adapt in your classroom next week is not typical in such a short time. There is no such immediate, direct impact. But we always see new and inspiring things, and our attitude is certainly affected by these mobilities in the long term. The more academic staff are involved in teaching mobility, the more willing they are to cooperate. Those who gain experience as visiting lecturers are later more flexible in their attitude towards the guest teachers received by their own department and in recognising students' achievements abroad.

Reflections

Although there is a place for both teaching and research in the activities of a university, as in the personal careers of academics, it is very common for the balance to tip towards the latter. The "publication pressure" on academics shifts their focus mainly towards research activities, not realising how teaching mobility could support them in finding new connections and research partners. It would be desirable to recognise and exploit more widely that the opportunities teaching mobility provides can be combined well with other research exchanges.

As a general rule, teaching mobility requires participants to complete 8 hours during their stay. This rule is intended to ensure quality, but it is also an obstacle, especially if the curriculum and timetable of the course are quite tight. As a consequence, the opportunity to make effective use of teaching mobility to fill local capacity gaps and to invite guest lecturers to complement the portfolio of the local academic staff is often missed.

The average length of a mobility is 5 days, but the Programme Guide stipulates a limit of sixty days. However, participants usually do not take up the possibility of longer mobility because it can be challenging to arrange their substitution at their home institution. For this reason, it is very common practice for academics to go on mobility during the spring or autumn holidays, taking advantage of the different timetables of the academic year in each EU country.

Although there is a general understanding that teaching mobility is an effective element of international activities, measuring its impact is a rather challenging task. It is in this context that the [Quality and Impact Tool for Teaching Mobility Assessment](#) has been developed under the Teach with Erasmus+ project.

Building relationships and setting a personal example for students

Interview with Zoltán Horváth (Faculty of Sciences, Institute of Mathematics and Informatics) and Dr. Melánia Nagy (Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Department of Criminal Law) from the University of Pécs

A.K.: What is the role of teaching mobility in the institutional internationalisation strategy?

Z.H.: Teaching mobilities are usually based on individual motivation. There is no pressure from the part of the institution, anyone who feels the urge can participate. It is an option that many teachers take up.

M.N.: There is no formal strategy for organising teaching mobilities in the department, but my supervisor, who I see as my mentor, considers them essential for our work. She regularly participates in teaching mobility and encourages us to do the same.

A.K.: What do you see as the main benefits of teaching mobility, either at personal or organisational level?

Z.H.: Teaching mobility is essential for development. During teaching mobility, we get a lot of new impulses to build on professionally and gain motivation. We learn about other teaching methods, and it is also an excellent opportunity to get to know the partner institutions personally, explore new connections and develop new projects or research together. It is much easier to involve people with whom you already have a personal relationship in a future project. The opportunity to build international contacts is also invaluable for research.

M.N.: It is hard to imagine being a lecturer without international contacts. Beyond a certain level, we cannot develop without them. To progress professionally, we need to have international publications. A condition for habilitation is to provide a lecture in a foreign language. Teaching mobility provides inspiration, practice and confidence for that.

A.K.: *What are your personal motivations?*

M.N.: The major advantage of teaching mobility is that it combines teaching and learning.

Z.H.: I think motivating students to participate in student mobility is essential. Unfortunately, it is a common tendency that they are very passive and not interested in opportunities. I try to give them an example and convince them of the importance of gaining international experience.

A.K.: *What do you think might be holding many academics back from getting involved?*

Z.H.: The only disincentive is if teachers are not confident in their language skills. Younger people may be less hesitant than their older fellows, but this fear of language deficiencies is not really linked to age or where they are in their careers.

A.K.: *What is your experience of working with the host institution's trainers? Is there reciprocity between the institutions in terms of teacher mobility?*

Z.H.: In most cases, the experience is that they are open to hosting foreign teachers. It should be taken into account that communication can be complicated, response times can sometimes be very long. The content and the scope of the teaching mobility depend very much on the partner institution. The common ground between their interests and my field of expertise must be defined really well.

There is no reciprocity between institutions in terms of sending and receiving tutors. Many of our lecturers participate in mobility, but only a few come to us. This situation will certainly not resolve itself without institutional measures.

A.K.: *And what about the students? Are they open to having visiting lecturers?*

M.N.: Some students are very interested, so the class is much more interactive and they can express their opinions and comments. Now, in Berlin, I will have a pre-scheduled class that students could take according to the curriculum. There will be an exam and some reporting requirements. I think this is a good tactic because, in this way, the class is not an extra burden for them, but part of the curriculum, and can be chosen by those interested in the subject.

A.K.: *What is the impact of learning mobility? How can the results be recycled?*

M.N.: Recycling my experience as a guest lecturer is mainly done in my own classes. Publications can be important outputs of teaching mobility and, for this reason, contacts are usually maintained later on. This is how I became an editorial board member of a Georgian professional journal. There have also been examples of joint conferences and invited speakers, based on personal and professional relationships developed through previous academic mobility.

Z.H.: In several partner institutions, I have seen that hosting visiting teachers is a planned process, raising the quality of teaching. Guest teachers bring new colours and a different perspective to the subject. In medical faculties, for example, this works very powerfully. We have an institutional protocol for recycling the experience of teaching mobility, but personal conversations with colleagues with similar professional interests are more important. These exchanges can lead to new ideas, even new international projects.

Reflections

Teacher mobility is an easy-to-access, easy-to-use tool for teaching staff to gain international experience and to get involved in the European higher education scene, while also having an impact on student motivation and domestic internationalisation. By adopting a proper strategic approach, this impact could be multiplied many times over.

The role of committed academics in promoting student mobility cannot be overemphasised. According to the [survey](#) carried out in the framework of the Teach with Erasmus+ project, more than 50% of students said that

one of their teachers had motivated them to participate in mobility. At a time when student mobility rates are declining, it is a missed opportunity not to take advantage of this side-effect of teaching mobility and systematically involve academics in encouraging student mobility.

Teaching mobility can also contribute to internationalisation at home efforts and to improve the quality of local curricula, but this effect can be very sporadic and short-term if it lacks a strategic approach and is not part of a well-planned process.

Integrating guest lectures in the curriculum, allowing students to gain credits and recognition, is a forward-looking good practice that is recommended for all institutions. It requires careful planning and timely preparation, but it can avoid problems such as the difficulty of fitting a new lecture into the timetable or the possibility that the topic may not meet the interests of the students taking the course.

The imbalance of outgoing and incoming teaching mobility is a phenomenon that occurs in many institutions, regardless of the field of specialisation. Where there is a strong institutional intention to strengthen internationalisation, this situation can be changed through strategic planning and targeted actions (e.g. by regularly inviting lecturers from potential partner institutions). Guest lecturers can not only enrich the educational offer with specific topics, but their classes can also give students who have not yet a mobility experience a taste of what it is like to participate in international courses. Their presence also provides an international networking opportunity for less mobile lecturers of the host institution.

Teacher mobility as a key to international recruitment

Interview with Matthias Paetzel (Department of Environmental Sciences, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences)

Debora Lucque (D.L.): Does your institution have a strategy for teaching mobilities?

M.P.: The international strategy is being built up gradually and this is still in progress. Initially, the mobility strategy focused on systematising all student mobility. Now, the attention has shifted to teacher mobility. The Western Norway University had grown from the initial 3000 students to the current 16,000 when, back in 2016/17, several small universities decided to merge and rename themselves as the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, which in turn led us to deal more systematically with the mobility strategy.

As for me, I am not only actively participating in teacher's mobility activities, but I'm also the international coordinator at my institute in Sogndal. I do have a strategy for teaching mobility, both a personal one and an institutional one, for my fellow academics. I focus on my own front door. I open the door for teachers: go out, teach, recruit and come back. And then, I open the door for incoming students.

I started going on teaching mobility around 1997, very early. Shortly after, I created an international course, a one-semester programme for international students here at my institute. The easiest way of recruiting students is to go abroad and teach in other institutions. The international programme has been going on for 20 years, and every edition welcomes between 30 and 40 students. Thanks to my teaching mobility experiences, I get at least 5 to 6 students, especially from each of the institutions where I teach regularly as a guest lecturer.

D.L.: Regarding the benefits, I wonder if you see any other uses for teaching mobility at the institutional level?

M.P.: The most significant benefit of what I am doing here is the awareness that internationalisation actually exists. Luckily, for the past 20 years, I have always had very interested superiors. I am the only permanent member of our institute's steering committee, as I have been the sole international coordinator for the last 20 years. During the monthly meetings, whenever there is anything new or updates on internationalisation, I make a presentation to the other members. I can say that internationalisation is strongly integrated into the institute's life.

Another benefit is that the students are going out. Again, it is different from year to year. As we are a very small institute, approximately 10% of our students are going on mobility.

D.L.: What about the difficulties of organising teaching mobility?

M.P.: Years ago, the situation was different, teachers were more willing to be mobile in my experience. The more they grow older, the more scientific angles they have and they do not want to travel as much anymore. As for the young colleagues, they are interested in becoming professors. As a result, they do not have the time to go on teaching mobility, they are just eager to publish. It is really challenging to involve them.

However, when it comes to career advancement, you usually have to publish your research regularly. That is what gives you a rise as a professor. The pressure to publish means you do not really have time for anything else.

But I think it is really just a mindset that needs to change. Teachers should be educated in a way that teaching mobility is fully integrated into their activities. Furthermore, it would be best if you got acknowledgement for this.

D.L.: Have you got any recommendations on how to convince fellow academics to embark on a teaching mobility experience?

M.P.: I would recommend something similar to what was done 15 years ago: newly recruited professors had to sign a contract with a clause on teaching and developing courses in English. Similarly, you could add in the recruitment strategy that whenever a new person comes in, they have to sign: "I will go on mobility and teach internationally on a regular basis."

One of the reasons that teaching mobility is less popular is the fact that you get no credits for it. Going on teaching mobility is an extra effort that does not get paid. I am idealistic. I am doing this because I think it is worth it. I want my students to have an international experience. I benefited from it myself when I was studying in Germany, only there was no Erasmus at that time.

It would be necessary to find a way to acknowledge teaching mobilities. For example, if 10 research points are required per year to advance, an option would be to specify that 2/3 of these research points have to come from teaching mobility. We should make international experience count.

D.L.: How about incoming mobilities? Does your institution welcome academics and researchers?

M.P.: Oh, yes. It is far easier. We have implemented exchanges on a permanent basis with four partner institutions. I simply have them coming here to Norway: one week in, one week out. Maybe that is also what is needed for the future: if you have permanent connections, you can get more teachers in.

Reflections

No matter how well-prepared a university's internationalisation strategy is, the objectives will not be reached without committed academics. Whether during teaching mobility or other international activities, academics always represent and promote their institution: they build relationships, boost internationalisation and motivate students to go abroad. Since International Relations Offices and Faculties usually face a higher turnover of staff and coordinators, as is also often the case of Rectorates and Boards of Directors, lecturers are perhaps the ones who embody continuity and stability at their institutions the most, with sometimes decades of experience behind them.

The example above illustrates the important role that lecturers can play in promoting their institution and its international courses or programmes, especially when they are involved in international mobility. The impact of personal impressions and word-of-mouth marketing should not be underestimated. Students on scholarships or short programmes may later return to full degree programmes. Teaching mobility can become one of the most natural recruitment tools for universities, essentially free of additional costs.

Recognition has also long been one of the weakest links in the Erasmus+ programme and needs to be resolved, and legislative changes at the national level really need to be considered in this regard. Recognition issues of teaching mobility should also be tackled, as good practices already exist, but a general approach is necessary.

In conclusion

To wrap up, we would like to emphasise some thoughts for further reflection.

A university (like any other organisation) can only function effectively if all staff are aware of the strategic objectives and able to represent them in a meaningful way. At the same time, it is vital to give room to bottom-up initiatives and to build on the personal interest, expertise, and contribution of staff members (in this case, academics). Making this two-way process effective is primarily a matter of organisation development and internal communication.

The different activities, such as research and teaching, or student mobility and teaching mobility, should not be defined in opposition to each other. Each can and should find its place in the big puzzle where they can reinforce each other's impact.

Undoubtedly, lecturers have a huge influence on the success of internationalisation efforts. Despite this, teaching mobility is often not given as much emphasis as it should have. There is still a large potential for institutions to exploit in this field in order to improve their internationalisation ambitions.

It is therefore vital to keep the issue of teaching mobility on the agenda, discuss possibilities, share good examples, learn about and use the tools that have been developed, and find solutions together to the old and new challenges.

Contributors (by order of interview):

- *Jordi Bonet Martí, Professor Lecturer, University of Barcelona, Faculty of Economics, Department of Sociology*
- *Zoltán Horváth, Assistant Professor, University of Pécs, Faculty of Sciences, Institute of Mathematics and Informatics*
- *Dr. Melánia Nagy, Assistant Professor, University of Pécs, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Department of Criminal Law*
- *Matthias Paetzel, Associate Professor, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Department of Environmental Sciences*