

Academic exchange programmes to enhance foreign language skills and academic excellence

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ABSTRACT: Universities attempt to tailor their educational processes to the labour market, by working to improve graduates' innovation and practical skills. One method to accomplish this is the use of academic foreign exchange programmes. When studying abroad, students experience different styles of education, gain valuable knowledge in their major and develop communication skills. In addition, they have the opportunity to live independently in another culture for an extended period of time, develop confidence and self-understanding, learn another language, gain a unique cultural experience and make new lifelong friends. All these experiences make graduates more employable and may lead to rapid promotions. This article considers the benefits of participation in academic exchange programmes and presents the results of a survey taken by graduate students at National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University who participated in a range of academic exchange programmes. The survey showed their expectations and attitudes towards these programmes, as well as the results of their participation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, education is increasingly seen as an essential part of a professional life and crucial to the development of a modern economy. The global education industry and market are fast growing. Some developed countries have actually moved to universal higher education. European countries have set new high standards for international cooperation in education. In addition, the philosophy of continuous education and training throughout a person's life (or lifelong learning) has become a dominant paradigm of civilized countries. Today, higher education is a requirement of the labour market and is an essential component in the quest for financial independence and prosperity.

To meet the demands of the modern world, universities employ innovative teaching methods and promote academic exchange programmes to develop:

- Foreign language proficiency [1-3];
- Personal educational environment and research skills [4][5];
- Teamwork and time management skills [6][7];
- Skill in communication, information sharing and the ability to work on projects in collaboration with others [8].

Studying abroad is an investment in the future aimed at the acquisition of knowledge, skills and experience that are necessary for success. Universities offer various exchange programmes for students and staff in summer schools and training with international partner universities and organisations. To promote academic exchange, universities invite students to international academic presentations, assist them in the selection of partner universities and programmes, provide scholarships and financial support, give additional foreign language classes, and hold lectures on the history and culture of other countries.

In this article, the authors analyse the experience of graduate students who participated in several academic exchange programmes. The participants of the study were 31 Master's degree students at National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, Tomsk, Russia. The study employed the following methods: literature review, survey and data analysis.

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH

Many modern universities provide opportunities for students to study both at home and abroad for a certain period (usually from a semester to a year). Most academic exchange programmes transfer credits from a partner university without awarding an academic degree. Education in the partner university does not generally increase the total duration of the degree programme and has a number of advantages including the following:

- Developing global citizenship and global competence [9][10];
- Enhancing employment opportunities [11][12];
- Developing a professional skill set [13];
- Providing insights into different cultures and promotes intercultural competence [14-16];
- Advancing global projects, team work and research [17-19];
- Increasing academic excellence [20];
- Promoting foreign language competence [21];
- Developing communication and leadership [22].

The main objective of an international academic exchange is the accumulation of human, social and cultural resources. The effectiveness of these exchanges is measured by the extent to which its goals have been achieved. International academic exchanges perform a number of important functions for a society, including the following:

- Establishing and developing scientific, educational and social relations;
- Acquiring competencies that will provide competitive advantage to participants when they enter the labour market;
- Dissemination of scientific achievements, knowledge, information, dissemination of scientific and educational values;
- Updating training programmes;
- Introducing innovative teaching methods and techniques;
- Developing knowledge and skills in the professional field.

Experts point out that an international academic exchange is a complex, multidimensional process of intellectual advancement, exchange of scientific and cultural potential, resources, training and technology. International academic exchange contributes to the following:

- Strengthening the integration processes, society, business and educational system;
- Enhancing the competitiveness and quality of programmes;
- Modernising teaching methods and techniques;
- Preparing highly trained professionals who are able to work on the global market.

The international academic exchange takes various forms including:

- Exchange programmes for students, lecturers and scientists;
- International conferences and seminars;
- Joint educational projects and research internship.

The success of academic exchange programmes depends on:

- Integrating educational standards and effectiveness of programmes;
- Facilitating credit transfers between partner universities;
- Motivating students' learning at the partner universities.

Despite benefits from a multitude of unique life experiences of an academic exchange, students may encounter difficulties in the following:

- Insufficient financing;
- Low student motivation;
- Insufficient language proficiency;
- Difficulties in intercultural communication;
- Differences in university rules, class schedule, deadline pressure, educational assessment systems, etc;
- Transfer of university credits.

Russian universities strive to overcome these difficulties and introduce various means to promote international academic collaboration, joint research and to develop international academic exchange. To achieve these goals, Russian universities do the following:

- Introduce measures to stimulate academic exchange;
- Establish centres that coordinate and monitor international academic exchange and evaluate the results;
- Develop information transfer support systems;
- Improve the system of financial support and establish grants;
- Increase the number of programmes and partner universities;
- Promote language learning.

Academic mobility programmes are available for those who want to experience another system of higher education and want to do the following:

- Gain knowledge in their field of interest;
- Plan to use what they learn (and experience) in their chosen career;
- Improve their foreign language proficiency;
- Become acquainted with the culture, history, traditions and customs of the host country.

When a student decides to start an academic exchange programme, he/she should consider the following points:

- Choose a partner university and a degree programme that matches his/her needs. These may be research-oriented programmes or topical courses;
- Find out which language is used at the university (students should have sufficient knowledge of the language for academic studies);
- Determine whether the student is eligible for this programme;
- Determine whether the university offers scholarship programmes;
- Choose the length of the programme (usually a semester or a year);
- Submit an application (with reference to their academic achievements and personal qualities);
- Write an individual study plan.

In choosing an exchange programme, students should determine whether their major matches the programme at the host university. Otherwise they may become frustrated either by the difficulty of the course content or its relevance [23]. They also should increase their awareness of the new culture [24] and improve their communication skills. This will hopefully increase their ability to build relationships that will result in better academic and future professional outcomes [25]. Academic mobility is essential for personal and professional growth, and each participant must analyse his/her own situation and the foreign culture. It develops personal qualities, intercultural communication and an ability to build a relationship with the outside world.

For academic mobility, National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU) offers joint educational programmes developed and implemented by two partner universities (two Russian or one Russian and one foreign), providing degrees (qualifications) from both universities to graduates who have successfully completed the programme. Students are enrolled in the joint educational programme on a competitive basis on the recommendation of the selection committee, which consists of representatives of both universities. Currently, TPU implements joint programmes with universities in Germany, France, Britain, the Czech Republic and Kazakhstan. The educational programme and the defence of diplomas are carried out by both TPU and the partner university. Academic exchange programmes require that the student will study at a foreign (or Russian) partner university for at least one semester. Study at a foreign university earns points that are transferred into the TPU system and are documented in an appendix to the Russian state diploma.

To evaluate students' attitude towards exchange programmes, a survey was conducted among 31 Master's degree students at National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University who participated in a range of academic exchange programmes.

The results are shown below:

- 1) How did you learn about your exchange programme?
 - a) Through information provided by the dean's office (39%)
 - b) At the university centre of academic mobility (29%)
 - c) From fellow students (22%)
 - d) At an organised presentation (10%)
- 2) What did you want to achieve by studying abroad?
 - a) To increase the possibility of being hired for an international job (58%)
 - b) To study in a new academic environment (23%)
 - c) To expand my social circle (13%)
 - d) To gain independence and learn self-reliance (6%)
- 3) What influenced your decision in choosing the exchange programme university?
 - a) Financial support provided (52%)
 - b) Opportunity to acquire training in the major (22%)
 - c) Reports from those who studied there (16%)
 - d) High ranking of the university (10%)

- 4) What advantages does participating in academic exchange programmes provide?
 - a) Broadening the knowledge and skills in the major (45%)
 - b) Improving foreign language skills (29%)
 - c) Expanding the circle of acquaintances and new friends (16%)
 - d) Becoming acquainted with the culture and customs of the host country (10%)

- 5) What was the most difficult for you in the exchange programme?
 - a) Financial expenses (55%)
 - b) Language proficiency (23%)
 - c) Different lifestyle (climate, food, etc) (16%)
 - d) Homesickness (6%)

- 6) Would you recommend the participation in your programme to other students?
 - a) Yes (94%)
 - b) No (3%)
 - c) I do not know (3%)

- 7) Would you like to participate in an exchange programme again?
 - a) Yes (90%)
 - b) No (7%)
 - c) I do not know (3%)

Participating in exchange programmes allows students to experience another learning environment and enhances the student's resume and job opportunities. The main factors that influence the choice of the university for the exchange programme are the level of financial support provided and the opportunity to acquire training in the major. Academic exchange increases knowledge in the major, improves language skills and facilitates making new friends. In addition, teachers noted that students became more curious, industrious and motivated, and showed better academic performance. Among the hardships noted were the financial expense and insufficient foreign language proficiency. An overwhelming majority found that participation in exchange programmes was very worthwhile and they would recommend their universities to other students.

Academic exchange provides a means to develop educational programmes and improve their competitiveness. It helps the student to become familiar with different cultures, to gain life experience and to experience personal growth. Academic exchange programmes help students avoid the isolation of an educational system and highlight their competences. It enhances students' mobility and career opportunities, immerses them in a new language and prepares them for the global labour market.

CONCLUSIONS

Humanity lives in a constantly changing world in which knowledge and experience have become the most important assets. Responding to the challenges of the time, higher education adds international elements to the content of courses, promotes joint projects and research activities, and contributes to the academic mobility of students and staff.

Nowadays academic exchange is becoming an integral part of almost every Russian university. Participation in academic exchange programmes improves students' resumes, enables students to attend leading universities, allows them to learn new languages and experience new cultures. It allows them to develop independent opinions, to increase personal flexibility and to develop an ability to succeed in a challenging world.

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