

urbanIQ



Improving the quality of life for international students and scientists in medium-sized cities

**A summary report of the meeting in Tartu,
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1. Introduction

International student and staff mobility in Europe has risen in the last decade. Where Europe's larger cities are used to host an international population, for many medium-sized university cities, internationalisation is a relatively new phenomenon. This gives rise to all sorts of challenges for universities, city administrations, and other organisations, and asks for new types of collaboration.

In our exchange meeting in Tartu, we focused on the question *how to improve the quality of life for international students, scientists and expats*. When the internationals are here, how to make sure that they have a good and meaningful time in the city?

We focused on the following issues:

- Information in English: How and with which information in English to inform highly qualified international talents (housing, health care, public transport, finance, official government communication)
- Organization of special support: Which services and advisory services (accommodation, language courses, etc.) are offered, and how is the service organized?
- Support for partners and families: How is the care of temporarily living families (childcare, care of adult partners) organised?
- Particular challenges and difficulties in city & university with regards to improving the quality of life for foreign workers and students (These can be organisational aspects, legal issues, cultural, etc.)

The programme was organised along these lines. We enjoyed contributions from a keynote speaker (Jan Kees Kleuver, City of Groningen), and from the partner cities Delft, Magdeburg, Parma, and host city Tartu. They explained their strategies, their approach to target groups, and the relation between city and university. There were testimonials from a number of international students and researchers that reside in Tartu, giving us first-hand information on their journey to the university and the city and their experiences in Tartu. Also, the delegations developed problem trees (to identify their core problems and its roots related to internationalisation), as well as solution trees (finding solutions and developing/prioritizing actions that are needed).

This report summarizes the main insights that came out of these contributions and the discussions that followed.

2. Engage international students and expats in the design of policies & projects

Engaging the user/target group in the design of services is a prerequisite to develop the right policies for the right groups. Thus, city and university must engage the internationals in the design, implementation and evaluation of their policies of internationalisation. It is also possible to go one step further and invite and empower internationals to take action themselves. Among the internationals who live in a city, there are always individuals who want to take an active role and organise things for the wider community. The City of Groningen plays on this: it supported a student start-up that took the initiative to develop an English-language cultural and nightlife agenda ("hereandnow"); the startup could use a desk at the city hall, and the city helped them with funding, and to obtain access to wide networks in the local cultural scene. Likewise, Groningen empowered an initiative by an Irish lady, who set up City Central: a house where all expats and NGOs can come together and meet. The funding is provided by the key stakeholders for whom internationalisation is a priority: the city, the universities, the university hospital.

3. Create interfaces between internationals and locals

Quality of life is also about integration, social networking, and having a sense of belonging. And this cannot be left to chance.

A worrying observation is that in many places, foreigners have to cope with a negative perception of local citizens (this especially affects those who are easily recognizable as foreigners). We assume that much of this attitude has to do with ignorance: not knowing who the other is. The best way to change this is by having more social interaction (of all kind) between human beings. Our partner cities work hard to promote this. Recently, Tartu opened an International House, where locals and foreigners come together to cook, eat, play or do sports. Groningen has a similar type of house; Magdeburg and Delft have a buddy system, linking a foreign student to a local, who can help him or her find the way. We also learned the importance of letting foreigners participate in local customs and festivities. Culture and sports are great facilitators of contacts: being part of a sports team, a choir or a music team. However, a barrier to integration is language: especially sports and cultural clubs are very locally oriented, and typically do not have an English-language website, making it difficult for internationals to join. It is an open question what cities and universities could and should do about this.

4. Create a work culture where internationals feel a home and supported

During our discussions, it became clear that an “international culture” at the workplace helps to make internationals feel more satisfied and at ease in their job. Organisations where many internationals work are wise to foster such a culture. A good practice example was provided by Skytte Institute (part of the University of Tartu). It has about 20 international staff members (of a total of 50), and many more international students. New foreign scholars are linked to a mentor, who can give guidance for all sorts of practical problems; they also receive a “sauna towel” as invitation to join the sauna culture – a key element of social life in Estonia. They are explicitly encouraged to participate in other social events such as “stammtisch”, the beginning and closing of academic year, etc. An international work culture does not only help the internationals; also for the “locals”, it is an enrichment of their work experience.

5. Provide clear information, in English, in many organisations

Universities tend to offer sufficient English-language information on study and work related issues for their foreign students and scientists; But the situation is less rosy in the public sector (information about schools, kindergartens, all kinds of permits and rules), in social organisations (such as sports clubs, choirs, orchestra’s), and also in suppliers of housing. Moreover, in most countries, all official documents and letters have to be written in the official national language to be legally binding. This can create difficulties for foreigners. The most urgent situation is in the medical sector: it is very important that internationals can have access to English-speaking doctors, and more in general know how to find their way in the medical system. We heard that this is not always the case...

As a result, it can be difficult for expats or international students to 1) find a house; 2) understand how to comply with formalities; 3) become a member of a sports or cultural clubs, 4) have access to public facilities, schools, kindergartens etc. and 5) find good medical assistance. More awareness and effort is needed from all these stakeholders to tackle this problem. Another language-related issue is that internationals cannot follow the local news, as there are typically no English language local news outlets.

Cities and universities tackle these issues in several ways. In Magdeburg, both universities have an international office providing their students and researchers with info about housing, bureaucratic formalities, financial support/insurance, public transport, healthcare, and access to a buddy programme. The city publishes a “migration guide” for newly arrived persons with basic information about life in Magdeburg. In Delft, the university set up a comprehensive website portal¹ with English-language information on visa&permits, taxes, housing, social security, medical aid, etc. It distinguishes 3 different target groups: 1) High potentials (tenure trackers, assistant- associate- or full professors), 2) PhD-candidates, postdocs and guests, and 3) international students. It adopts a “red carpet” approach for the high potentials: the get a more personal/ individual service already before coming to Delft. The city of Delft has its own channels to inform and serve internationals, on a website² dedicated for expats. Highly-skilled/knowledge migrants can make use of the Expat desk THIC (The Hague International Centre), a one-stop-shop; International students (from TU Delft/ UNESCO-IHE) can register at special registration days (for social security number, housing, bank account etc.). Internationals can also benefit from the services and community of ACCESS³, a not-for-profit organisation that helps expats to settle in The Netherlands. It is run by people who have been expats themselves. Finally, the city, the university and Access collaborate, to organise the annual “Welcome to Delft” event, and have a Pop-up helpdesk (10 times/ year).

It is not only key to provide internationals with the right information, but also the other way around: what do city&university know about their target groups? In Magdeburg, interestingly, the city and the universities made a common analysis about what they know and don’t know about their foreign students and staff (see figure 1). It turns out that they know a lot about international students and their problems, but less on PhDs, researchers, and their families.

Figure 1 What city & universities in Magdeburg know about their international target groups

Students:

We know their biggest problems: - Getting the visa and arriving before the semester starts
- Finding affordable housing
- Getting information in English

We know how to reach them: - Registration at the international office
- Support via student initiatives (IKUS, buddy program, MIPS)

We know how many are accepted but know how many actually arrive

We mostly know when they arrive

Many offers but little participation by the international students

PhDs and researchers:

We don't know when they arrive

We only partly know their biggest problems

- Comfortable and affordable housing
- Support during the first few weeks

We don't know how many they are

We need better coordination and information between university, faculties and research institutes to know problems and needs

Spouses and families:

Child care offered by student services (closely affiliated with the university)

family representative with family office, kindergarden and parents-childroom, family scholarship

- no English webpage, difficult for international students/researchers

¹ <https://www.tudelft.nl/en/about-tu-delft/working-at-tu-delft/coming-to-the-netherlands-tu-delft/>

² <http://www.delft.nl/expats>

³ <http://www.access-nl.org>

6. Take care of the partners and families

Support for partners and families is essential for foreigners who are new in the city. In Magdeburg, university staff or students with families can use the “regular” support offer: childcare, a parents-child-office (enabling temporary working with (sick) child), etc.

Delft has several amenities for international families: an international primary school (rapidly expanding), including day-care, with a bilingual curriculum; A secondary school is under development. The University of Technology offers career advice for partners of foreign staff. On the community level, there are several initiatives such as the Delft Mamas (a network of young mothers), an International Neighbour Group, various Facebook groups etc. Such spontaneous, self-organised networks are very important; cities and universities are wise to identify and support them in their functioning.

7. Have a strategic interface and work systematically

The sections above indicate that making foreigners feel at home is a complex and multi-faceted challenge, with many practical implications for a big number of organisations in the city. A strategic approach is helpful, in which the key stakeholders meet regularly, discuss, identify problems, challenges and opportunities together, and come up with solutions.

In most cities, there is some form of strategic alignment between the city and universities regarding internationalisation. Groningen has an internationalisation strategy in which the larger key players participate; In Magdeburg, the cities’ Foreigners Authority holds regular consultations with the International Offices of both universities and with all responsible staff of the other scientific institutions and annual working group meeting with many institutions.

Consultation and meetings are a good start. But to achieve better results, a systematic approach can be helpful. It can be considered to apply analytical tools where the stakeholders and the target groups come together to discover problems/weak spots, and develop new solutions. A good method, tried at our meeting, is problem tree/solution tree analysis⁴: this method allows to identify problems together with the stakeholders and user groups, to analyse their causes and consequences. It can be a very good basis to discover new solutions.

⁴ http://evaluationtoolbox.net.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=28&Itemid=134