



# **Integrating international students & staff in city life**

**By Willem van Winden**

## 1. Introduction

International student and staff mobility in Europe has risen in the last decade. Where Europe's larger cities are used to absorb 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 an international exchange meeting in Parma, we focused on the question ***how integrate international students, scientists and expats in the urban society of the host city.***

We focused on the following questions:

- How do the students and scientists mix with the population?
- What are the main barriers that prevent mixing?
- How can citizens see the benefits of internationals for their city?
- How can international students and scholars be encouraged to open themselves to the population?
- What policies could help to promote integration?
- How can city and university collaborate more effectively in all these respects?

The programme was organised along these lines. We enjoyed contributions from a keynote speaker (Carlos Cardoso Oliveira, University of Porto), and from the partner cities Delft, Magdeburg, Tartu, and host city Parma. They explained their approaches, and how city and university work together. There were testimonials from international students and researchers that reside in Parma, giving us first-hand experience on their integration in Parma. We visited the European Food Security Agency (EFSA) where many internationals work, and also the brand new International School. Also, the delegations conducted a backcasting exercise, in which they sketched an "ideal" situation five years from now, and discussed what measures would be needed to reach that situation. This report summarizes the main insights that came out of these contributions and the discussions that followed.

## 2. Background

In many medium sized cities, the size of the international higher skilled population is rising. Several groups can be distinguished. Within the students group, there are exchange (Erasmus) students, who stay only a few months, Master students (1 or 2 years), PhD students (4 years); in the academic staff category, there are visiting scholars (typically a few months), and more permanent staff, for example researchers/expats who work for international organisations.

### Box: some facts&figures on Parma

UNESCO Creative city of Gastronomy

University was founded in 962

25,000 students

450 international exchange students (300 from EU, 150 non EU)

70-80 international trainees

30-50 visiting professors

Seat of the European Food Security Agency (EFSA) since 2003

Parma will be the Italian Capital of Culture in 2020

Mr. Oliveira, from Porto University, pointed at another relevant category of “internationals”: the children from (recent) immigrants, who are populating Europe’s universities in growing numbers. They are in an in-between position: formally they do not count as foreigners, but their embeddedness in the society is different from the other students, and they are often perceived as foreigners by the local population and some of their fellow students. But they are invisible to the system, and do not receive additional support from city or university.

A recurrent question is to what extent it is necessary or desirable that internationals mix in into the local society: most of them are here temporary, after all. Several reasons were put forward. On a personal level, intercultural exchange can potentially enrich both the visitors and the hosts; they can learn from each other’s culture, observe and absorb new ideas and ways of living, engage in new friendships. Interpersonal contact can contribute to increase mutual understanding and respect between nations and cultures. An American visiting professor to Parma praised the mixing of students of different backgrounds for another reason: in his experience, local students become more curious and engaged when they are in the same classroom as internationals; it offers a comparative lens on subject matters, which stimulates debate and learning. Finally, intercultural exchange is important to prepare students for an international work environment. Learning how to appreciate and work with people from other cultural backgrounds is a competence that is increasingly in demand in internationally oriented organisations.

An enriching perspective on integration was provided by Mr Carlos Cardoso Oliveira from Porto University, who presented the conceptual model of Professor Berry<sup>1</sup> on acculturation. The model discerns 4 types of acculturation, based on 1) the level of maintenance of the own heritage culture, and 2) the participation in the host culture. Low participation in the host culture is associated with marginalization (disconnected from society and own culture) or separation (“living in your own bubble”), and both have negative effects.

Figure 1 Berry’s four types of acculturation



The participation of internationals in the host culture depends on the intercultural sensitivity of both sides: the foreigner, and the local. There are two extreme types<sup>2</sup>. In the case of ethnocentrism, a person only accepts and praises its own cultural background, and negatively perceives other cultures. Contacts are minimized, leading to marginalization or separation. In the case of ethno

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ucd.ie/mcri/resources/Dermot%20Ryan%20Reading.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.mairstudents.info/intercultural\\_communication.pdf](http://www.mairstudents.info/intercultural_communication.pdf)

relativism, there is acceptance of other cultures, followed by a process of adaptation that might erase the own identity (resulting in assimilation), or integration. Foreigners who enter into a new country might react with adversity (rejecting local values and falling back on peers or fellow migrants), or adjust to the host country<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. Actions to enhance the participation of internationals in the host culture

During the meeting, we heard a vast number of examples of a large number of initiatives that are taken to increase the interaction between internationals and locals.

- Tartu recently opened an International House, where locals and foreigners come together to cook, eat, play or do sports.
- Magdeburg and Delft have a buddy system, linking a foreign student to a local, who can help him or her find the way.
- In Magdeburg, there is an initiative in which about 20 households (mostly retired couples) welcome foreign students during Christmas, and organise the “dialogue of generations”.
- Magdeburg organises an annual “festival of cultures” where people from 24 countries present the particularities of their country and culture.
- All cities have language tandem initiatives, connecting students/people who want to learn a new language to a native speaker.
- To fight the negative popular image of foreigners (fuelled by the press), Tartu took an initiative to introduce success stories of foreigners in the media, an initiative similar to Humans of New York (in the context of Tartu running for the title of European Capital of Culture 2024)
- Parma and Magdeburg have programmes in which foreign students are invited to teach at local primary schools, telling pupils about their home country and culture.
- For language students, Parma has a more elaborate and sophisticated Teaching Placement programme for language teaching at nursery and primary schools.
- In all cities, Erasmus Student Networks are important drivers of integration, as they tend to have a mix of international and local members (who once did an exchange themselves). In Parma, each semester the ESN organises welcome days for international students, introducing them into the local culture and customs (aperitif, dinner, parties, city tours, sports tournaments). In Delft, the Delft International Student Society (DISS) takes a similar role.
- In Parma, the Erasmus Student Network organises excursions (to companies or touristic sites) for foreign and national students.
- In Parma and Porto, internationals are actively invited in the “Social Erasmus”<sup>4</sup> programme to do voluntary social work, such as cooking for homeless people (the Caritas Canteen in Parma), planting forests (Porto) and providing mobility for people with limitations (Parma).
- In Porto, elderly citizens provide cheap housing for international students from Cabo Verde, through the “shelter” programme. As one participant, Duval Alexandre Santos, said: “I pay just 25 euro, and I found a new family in Portugal”.
- Magdeburg organises a welcoming ceremony for international students & knowledge workers, to get them to know the city and local customs. As part of the ceremony, an

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/education/the-resilience-of-students-with-an-immigrant-background-9789264292093-en.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://assi.unipr.it/social-erasmus>

international who is in Magdeburg for some longer time is asked to share his/her experience on "how to survive in Magdeburg".

- The City of Delft started a programme in which students and refugees are brought together under one roof in a housing project, in order to promote integration.
- Magdeburg's two universities offer an annual scholarship for international students that contributed to integration.
- TU Delft has its International Neighbour Group<sup>5</sup>, that offers a programme activities to the university's international employees and their partners and families. Membership is free and gives international employees and partners the opportunity to meet both local Dutch people and other international employees. The aim is to make them and their families feel at home in the Netherlands.
- In Magdeburg, the IKUS<sup>6</sup> (a union of intercultural students) organises many activities towards cultural exchange, including special events and excursions, international movie nights, free German language classes, and a "dialogue of generations" with elderly Germans.
- Every year, Magdeburg organises the "Mile of Democracy" in which schools, universities, unions, companies, organisations, and authorities stand up for tolerance and against racism.
- Delft and Tartu make efforts to open up the local theatres for internationals. In Tartu, the cities' biggest theatre Vanemuine offers translations and they are working out synchronized translation system in 5 different languages; in Delft, the Veste Theater provides a special offer for internationals.

#### 4. Remaining barriers and challenges

Despite the wealth of initiatives described in section 3, a number of problems and barriers were indicated:

- Internationals and locals still tend to live in their own "bubble", despite the many initiatives that are deployed to change this. Hence, in terms of Berry's model, "separation" still prevails.
- Organisational structures are not always conducive to promote contact. Local students tend to gather in the traditional local student unions, whereas the international students have their own international students clubs.
- Xenophobia and racism is widespread and hinders integration. Foreigners are considered as unwanted by a substantial part of the population, or met with suspicion. Internationals are exposed to many types of discrimination, ranging from the extreme form of harassment in the street, to more subtle manifestations such as landlords that are unwilling to rent a flat to foreign students or knowledge workers.
- Primary and secondary education is regarded as driver for integration of foreigners that stay longer: both parents and children can develop new mixed networks. International schools play a double role: they are crucially important for knowledge workers with children, but can also turn into foreign enclaves without connection to the host society.
- In the end, the degree of interaction depends on the motivation and willingness towards engagement and integration of both the local students/population and the internationals. In Parma, students from the ESN noted that international students are not always motivated to

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tudelft.nl/over-tu-delft/werken-bij-tu-delft/nederland-tu-delft/support-for-international-employees/social-networks-for-partners/international-neighbour-group-delft/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ikus.ovgu.de/en/>

engage with the local culture; the answer is not to organise more, but rather to incentivize and activate foreign students to participate in the existing offer of activities.

- Europe's universities have become more international, with growing numbers of international PhDs, postdocs, and staff exchanges (a good example is Parma's visiting professor scheme). It is much harder however, for talented scholars, to take the next step and obtain permanent/full academic staff positions. Here, the system is still closed to outsiders to a large extent.
- More collaboration between stakeholders is needed to tackle challenges jointly. Parma provides a good example. The University and the EFSA (European Food Security Agency) both face the challenge that their (growing numbers of) international staff and students have problems to find landlords, and will collaborate more to change this.
- More in general, the co-ordination of activities needs improvement. There are many initiatives and activities, but often they are not visible enough, and information is scattered among many different channels.

## Annex 1 Meeting Programme

Tuesday, 10th April		Speakers
	Arrivals	
20:00	Welcome aperitif	
Wednesday, 11 <sup>th</sup> April		
8.15	Pick Up at the Hotels	
08:30	Arrival to the venue	
09:00	Institutional welcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prof. Guglielmo Wolleb, Rector's Delegate UNIPR</li> <li>• Ms Barbara Panciroli, Head of Research, International, Libraries and Museums Area UNIPR</li> <li>• Mr Leonardo Spadi, Municipal councilor with responsibility: relations with student representatives / youth participation and university student welfare</li> <li>• Mr Fabrizio Fanticini, Parma Conservatorium</li> <li>• Mr Klaus Puchta, City of Magdeburg</li> <li>• Mr Willem van Winden, Chair of the Meeting</li> </ul>
9:40	Local context presentation, explaining the city, the university, student population, key projects etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr Stevche Veleviski, TeachInParma office, Mr Alessandro Bernazzoli, Head of International relations Office</li> <li>• Mr Gabriele Righi, Director of Planning and Strategic Control Department, Municipality of Parma</li> </ul>
10:00	Coffee break	
10:15	How do international students/scientists work & live in the city; how do they participate in the city life?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ms Sara Agazio &amp; Ms Elena Bambina - ESN ASSI</li> <li>• Mr Tao Byrne, University of Kent - Student testimonial</li> <li>• Lawrence Levine, Mac George School of Law – Visiting Prof. UNIPR testimonial</li> </ul>
11:00	Site visit to EFSA, The European Food Safety Authority.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speakers EFSA</li> </ul>
13:30	Lunch	
15:00	Sharing experiences: What is happening in the partner cities (Aalborg, Delft, Magdeburg, Tartu) to involve foreign students & scientist in the urban society? What are your main problems/worries/challenges?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ms Nadia Monacelli, CUCI (Parma)</li> <li>• Representatives from Aalborg, Magdeburg, (Parma,) Delft and Tartu</li> </ul>
	Coffee break	
16:00	Interactive Workshop: developing new ideas for improved integration <i>By Each city team, and then sharing results</i>	
18:00	Conclusions and reflections	
20:00	Dinner	

Thursday, 12 <sup>th</sup> April		Speakers
8.15	Pick Up at the Hotels	
09:00	Visit European School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr Carlo Cipollone, Director - School for Europe</li> <li>• Guided Visit</li> </ul>
10:00	Keynote speech + Q&A (questions prepared by groups)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr Carlos Cardoso Oliveira, Communication and Cooperation Services - Faculty of Engineering of the University of Porto, Portugal</li> </ul>
11:00	Coffee break	
11:30	Project presentation: Teaching Placement "LEARNING AND TEACHING WITHOUT BORDERS"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ms Antonella Cortese, International Office UNIPR</li> <li>• Ms Graziana Morini, Istituto Comprensivo G. Ferrari</li> </ul>
12:00 (1)	Lunch ( <b>take-away option for early leavers</b> )	
12:00 (2)	Lunch + Visit ALMA Visit to Alma the world's leading international educational and training centre for Italian Cuisine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaker(s) ALMA</li> <li>• Guided Visit</li> </ul>