

The Role of Student Associations in providing Community Involvement and Integration between domestic and international students

Adriana Pérez Encinas

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales, C/ Francisco Tomás y Valiente 5, 28049, Madrid, Spain, E-mail: adriana.perez.encinas@uam.es

Providing a context for effective interaction between domestic and international students has been an issue for many institutions over the years. Various policies and procedures have been reviewed and adapted over time but still there are some tasks that at some stage go beyond the main responsibilities of international offices. One central factor to be considered is the role of student associations, which are mostly formed by student volunteers. To provide community involvement and to help in the integration of international students, both student associations and institutions need to work collaboratively in order to offer a fruitful cooperation.

In this article we reflect on the importance of the role of student associations in providing an appropriate environment for integration and, therefore, community involvement for international students. Not all institutions offer the same level of service provision and as a result, student involvement within the community is not always equal for all types of students. Domestic students are often unaware of the benefits interaction can bring and international students may not always have opportunities to interact and integrate as they would like to.

The research will analyse the role of student associations and demonstrate the benefits of improving the integration of international students on campus. We will use a qualitative method to help discover the real actions and thoughts of student volunteers and administrative staff taking part in the provision of services to students. Focus groups are used to allow a comparison of two cases from two different countries and universities: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy. The resulting comparative analyses will review the main services requested by international students, and gather together the main concerns of the two groups involved in the provision of services.

It is hoped that this research will enhance the recognition and use of student associations as principle links between domestic and international students to foster better integration and community involvement. However, for real integration of domestic and international students it is evident that effective collaboration between the institution and the student associations will be indispensable.

Keywords: community involvement, volunteering, integration, student association, domestic and international student

Introduction

Community involvement and interaction between domestic and international students is still an unsolved issue for many institutions across the world. Internationalization policies try to cover this topic by involving international students in campus activities but it is not always easy. Some of these tasks are seen as an issue that goes beyond the core responsibilities of service officers. Some books and articles have talked about how to engage international students with domestic students in an effective way. We found studies related to mentorship programs and buddy systems but not many about the international cultural immersion of the university staff (teachers, administrators) as it is not as easy as it looks. In fact, it is suggested that academic staff can also be part of the mentorship programs in order to help students with their academic issues: course timetables, student attendance, coursework, relationship with academic staff, etc. (Erasmus + guidelines 2014). The services provided within the framework of the buddy system could also be made available, after any necessary adaptation, to mobile staff members. In this sense, the receiving institution should appoint academic mentors who are responsible for dealing with problems related to the academic issues as they are the experts on this topic.

This paper is part of a PhD study with the title: Strategies for welcoming international students: formal and informal students' support services as mediators for the satisfaction and integration of international students at university. Under this topic, we identify three types of student support services at university: internal, collaborative and external. *Internal services* are those provided at an institutional level and internally at the university. For example: international relations office, libraries, admission office, etc. These services include fixed staff with dedicated tasks as part of their daily activity. *External services* are providers within a university that deal with issues that the university system does not cover. These types of services require collaborative work between internal and external staff. Some examples will be: accommodation services, student providers that attract international students, etc. And lastly, *Collaborative services* are those carried out on a volunteer basis and mainly by students. In this case, they need a closer relationship with the institution to ensure a fruitful cooperation between both parties and ultimately to benefit the international students. In most of the cases, they need to ask for institutional support to develop their tasks and activities. For example: volunteer students, field groups at university, etc.

It is uncommon that all institutions offer the same service provision. Some of them use more external service providers and some of them use more collaborative services. In any case, to provide a good service provision without spending a lot of money, it is necessary to use the collaborative service model that volunteer students offer. However, this requires close cooperation between the institution and the collaborative network. This paper focuses on the collaborative services and their important role in the management of international students' needs and how they integrate and are involved into the campus. An in-depth analysis of literature is presented, along with the outcomes from two focus groups with volunteer networks that took place in two European universities: one in Spain and one in Italy.

Literature Review

Community engagement and involvement

The provision of student services is becoming a key topic in the internationalization policies for higher education institutions due to the growing numbers of mobile students. Taking into account global mobility numbers we can state that the student mobility flow maintains an important position as one of the main discussion topics in the field of internationalization of Higher Education not only at a European level, but also globally. In global terms, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship increased more than threefold, from 1.3 million in 1990 to nearly 4.3 million in 2011 (OECD 2013), representing an average annual growth rate of almost 6%.

Integration based on ethnic, academic and social aspects is important for international students, to help with the involvement and engagement of international students in the local community during their exchange period. A common assumption in higher education is that academic integration is the extent to which students adapt to the academic way-of-life (Tinto 1975). There are many institutions facing the problem of integration between domestic and international students. In many cases, domestic students are unaware of

what the benefits of interaction with international students will be. On the other hand, international students may not always have the opportunity to interact and integrate as they wish. Ward's publication (2001) about 'The impact of international students on domestic students and host institutions' shows that the amount of cross-national interaction is generally low, that international students expect and desire greater contact, and that interaction with domestic peers is generally associated with psychological, social and academic benefits for the international student.

The recently launched program from the European Commission, Erasmus + (2014) states that: 'Institutions should make every effort to foster integration of mobile students'. One of the suggestions made is to initiate a system, whereby volunteer local students (who have been approved by a designated body) assist the incoming mobile students both before and during the mobility period. Local students could, for example, assist incoming students by meeting them at the airport, helping them to find accommodation and explaining everyday cultural challenges they might meet in the host country. In order to institutionalise this support for mobile students, it is strongly recommended that the receiving institution establishes a student network. Student support is not only requested by international students, despite the fact that domestic students are already on the campus, it can be that they are still interculturally deficient. Leask (2009) suggested that international educators "move away from deficit models of engagement, which position international students as interculturally deficient and home students as interculturally efficient, when both need support".

According to good service provision it is important that institutions emphasize that mentoring and support arrangements information should be outlined in the catalogue from the receiving institution. It is necessary to include details about the culture and information about everyday life of the host country. They also put the focus on arrangements to allow international students to meet local students. Welcome receptions or orientation weeks are crucial to help with the integration and involvement of international students with domestic students, also to avoid psychological issues such as isolation or loneliness that they may face during the first days. Research indicate that international students suffer more psychological and social distress than domestic students (Ward 2011). Cho and Yu (2015) agree that as a person identifies more with his or her group by experiencing more cognitive oneness and emotional belongingness to the group, he or she is more likely to feel psychological support from his or her group and emotional satisfaction. Student academic success is related to the appropriate adaptation of students to the university studies and university life (Michavila, García Delgado, Martínez, Merhi, Esteve & Martínez Soto 2012). Novera (2004) reports that academic success enhances personal confidence and status, helping students to fit in; therefore, social adjustment is key to academic adjustment.

Some recommendations to foster an international student community in the strategy of the institution will be: to connect international initiatives with the institution's existing strategic priorities; to focus on continuous data-driven approaches to decision making; and to forge flexible coalitions with key campus stakeholders. In all cases, succeeding as an international educator means making a difference in students' lives- helping international students to thrive at their host university (Glass, Rachawan & Buus 2015). Also to collaborate with the international student community, which involves empowering international students to participate in open forums, be representatives at fairs, be responsible for the organization of events, etc.

There are still some factors that directly influence campus integration and the engagement of the whole community. According to Michavila et al. (2012), English continues to be an obstacle for the internationalization of universities. English is not only necessary in the classrooms, English is needed in the culture of the campus to create a better welcome scenario for international students.

Despite the growing sense that student services matter, very little research has been done to shed light on exactly what non-European degree-seeking students desire and expect in the way of support services (Kelo, Roberts & Rumbley 2010). In the study launched by Studyportals in 2013 about "Key influencers in students' satisfaction in Europe" they recommend a series of actions to integrate local and domestic students. Some of the recommendations are related to mentoring programs and a good university support service provision in administrative procedures, accommodation or removing bureaucracy as much as possible:

- Provide a tutor or mentor as contact person for every international student.
- Implement a buddy system to match new international students with current students, to help them settle in.

- Ensure that the international office is well organised and welcoming.
- Provide language classes for international students, if they do not already speak the local language.
- Promote and support student associations. Through their activities, network and services they positively contribute to student satisfaction. The level of support from the institution often determines how active student associations can be.

The last recommendation refers to the promotion and support of collaborative services, in this case, student networks. Most of the staff located in the international offices do not have the time to make sure that integration activities are taking place. There is a lack of funding and time, moreover few staff have been trained for that purpose. Therefore, in the next part we look into data about collaborative services and the role of students' associations.

The role of students' associations: data about collaborative services

Some European student associations working for international students are: *Erasmus Student Network*, *Erasmus Mundus Association*, *OCEANS*, *AEGEE*, amongst others. These four student networks are working with students globally. Some universities and international relations offices have their own student union or student association. Although we will only mention four of the biggest ones in Europe in the next framework, we recognize the importance of all of them and their volunteer work, independent of their size and number of members.

Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is the largest student association in Europe. It was born on the 16th October 1989 and legally registered in 1990 for supporting and developing student exchange. It is present in more than 480 Higher Education Institutions from 37 countries. The network is constantly developing and expanding. ESN engages around 34,000 young people offering its services to around 190,000 international students every year. ESN works for the creation of a more mobile and flexible education environment by supporting and developing the student exchange from different levels, and providing an intercultural experience also to those students who cannot access a period abroad "internationalization at home".

Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association has almost 9000 student members. It offers an international professional and personal network for Erasmus Mundus students and graduates. Their members can join professional networks and service teams to network and become active within the association. A jobs board and special entrepreneurship section are offered to its members. EMA members are ambassadors of the Erasmus Mundus. They share the idea of international education and spread the message around the world. EMA serves as a channel of communication for students, alumni, universities and the European Commission.

OCEANS Network is a network for students and alumni of specific bi-lateral exchange programs between the European Union on the one side and the industrialised countries (Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and the USA) on the other. The student exchanges aim to promote better relations between people, improving the intercultural understanding and knowledge transfer. OCEANS Network is run by the students and alumni themselves with the help of a service provider and it is funded by the European Commission.

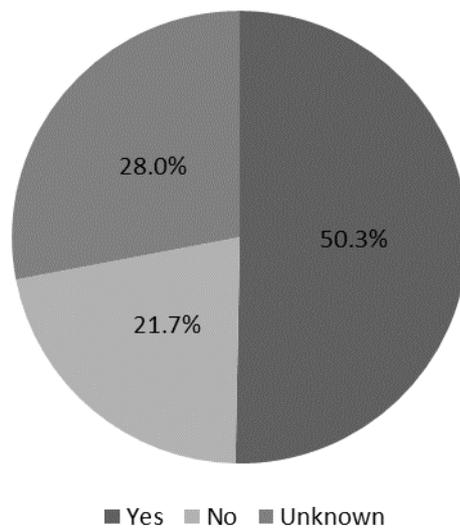
AEGEE (Association des États Généraux des Étudiants de l'Europe) is one of Europe's biggest interdisciplinary student organisations. As a non-governmental, politically independent, and non-profit organisation AEGEE is open to students and young people from all faculties and disciplines. Founded in 1985 in Paris, today AEGEE has grown to a Network of 13000 friends, present in 200 cities in 40 countries across Europe. AEGEE puts the idea of a unified Europe into practice. Operating without a national level, AEGEE brings 13000 students from 40 different countries directly in touch with each other.

Student associations play a vital role in the integration of international and domestic students thanks to a group of activities and actions that they organise during the academic year. In some cases, they are the people in charge of organizing the official welcome meeting of international students at university. In this sense, this group of volunteers will be one of the main contacts for international students as well as those who participate in the mentor or buddy program that the university may offer. This first connection helps them to integrate better in a new environment. During the first week it is recommended to organize trips or cultural visits. In these activities international students will connect more with local students and make their

first friends. It is important to organize events with local students to avoid the creation of an “international bubble”. Through international lunches, weekly coffee language tandems, international fairs and trips, students can share their experiences and have the chance to get to know new people already at the beginning of their stay.

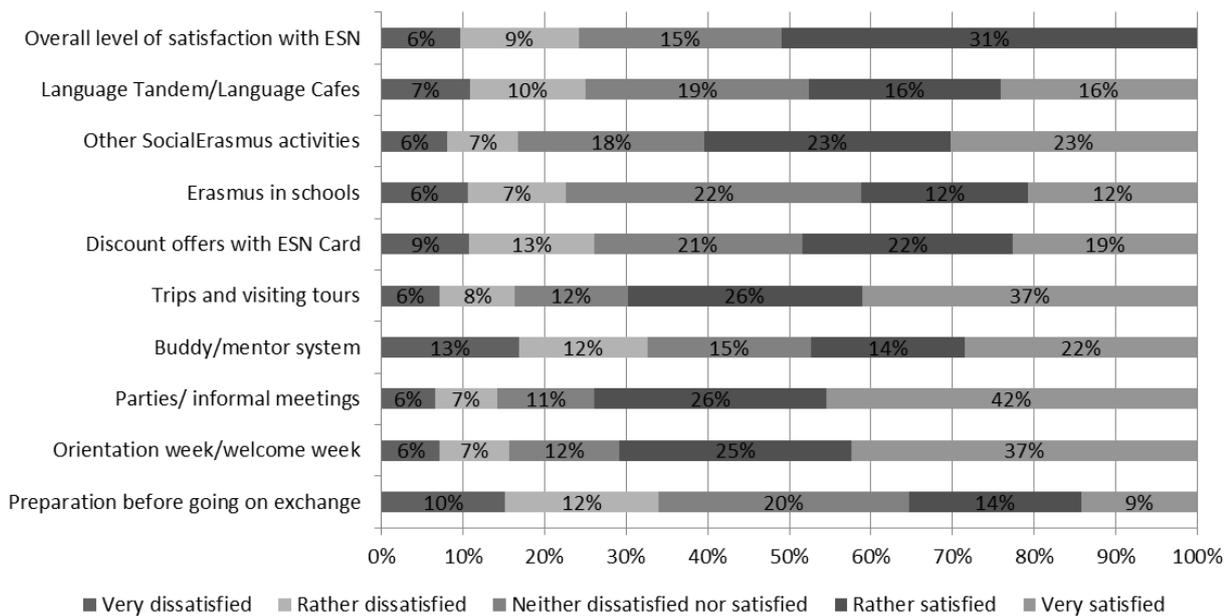
We identify different types of student associations. Independently of their name, characteristics and goals it is important to enhance the connection between them, and international and domestic students. *Erasmus Student Network*, one of the biggest student associations in Europe dealing with mobility issues, regularly conducts a study with more than 20,000 respondents every year. In the ESNSurvey 2015 more than half (50.3%) of the respondents (n=13,707) were aware of the existence of an ESN section in their host country. Around 28.0% of students stated there was no ESN section and 21.7% did not know.

Figure 1 (ESNSurvey 2015): Existence of an ESN section at the students’ host university (n=13,707)



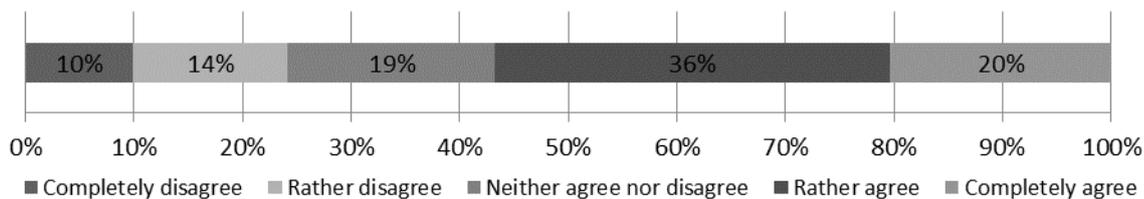
Alongside the satisfaction with activities promoted by this network, international students rated their overall satisfaction of ESN with an average of 3.8 points out of 5. The most valued activities were the first ones taking place at the beginning of the academic year (orientation week/welcome week) and informal meetings or trips. In fact, student associations play an important role in welcoming international students by organizing orientation or welcome weeks and by being present the moment international students arrive on campus with informal events, trips and tours (see figure 2).

Figure 2 (ESNSurvey 2015): Students' satisfaction with their ESN section at their host university (n=13,707)



Another important issue to take into consideration is the integration activities that these student associations provide. The average satisfaction with activities and the integration into the local community is given an average score 3.4 out of 5. In total, almost 60% completely or rather agree with the fact that ESN activities helped exchange students integrate into their host environment.

Figure 3 (ESNSurvey 2015): Integration into the local community through activities offered by ESN (n=2,559)



This data show that student associations are playing an important role in the integration and involvement of international students. Studyportals report on Key Influencers in International Student Satisfaction in Europe (2013) also mentioned that: ESN promotes active involvement of both local and international students stating that this action helps international students connect with locals and avoid the “international bubble”.

Material and methods

Methodology

Focus groups were conducted to provide a qualitative framework gathering information about two groups of volunteer students. This method allows participants to respond directly and spontaneously to share their personal experiences and comments about the topic. Focus groups are group discussions which are arranged to examine a specific set of topics (Kitzinger 2005). The task of the group interviewer is not to conduct interviews simultaneously but to facilitate a comprehensive exchange of views in which all participants are able to speak their minds and to respond to the ideas of others (Walker 1985). To conduct group interviews the facilitator should give enough confidence to the group and should have skills to moderate and create a rapport before the discussion starts. Basically, the interviewer and researcher have created a protocol to

conduct the focus group appropriately and in an orderly manner. As well as a short questionnaire to gather personal data to gain an understanding of the volunteer's profile. According to their general profile, we conclude that all of them had different motivations to join a volunteer network, but in most of the cases their main reason was to pay forward their experience as exchange students and to meet people from different backgrounds and contexts. Even though volunteering does not seem to be a common practice in both universities, we identify in the focus group participants, a group of highly committed students willing to help other students. Thanks to this previous questionnaire we could identify already the relation of the volunteers with some of the questions of the focus groups. Additionally, the questions posed have been double checked by peers in the field.

The target group for the collaborative focus group with student associations was composed of volunteer students that were actively participating in a student association that helps international students in their integration on campus. Participants gathered together to discuss a specific issue with the help of a moderator in a particular setting where participants feel comfortable enough to engage in a dynamic discussion for one or two hours (Liamputtong 2011). Each focus group took about one hour and ten minutes, including greetings, instructions and conclusions.

Two focus groups have been carried out in two European universities: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, Spain and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy. They were organised with the help of the International Relations Office of both institutions. The focus group in Universidad Autónoma de Madrid was formed by nine participants and by six in Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Methodologically, focus group interviews involve a group of 6–8 people who come from similar social and cultural backgrounds or who have similar experiences or concerns (Liamputtong 2011). Both focus groups were double audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher one or two days after the focus group took place. The researcher was not only asking the questions but also taking notes of the most relevant aspects of the discussion.

These focus groups are part of a series of focus groups for a dissertation. In order to triangulate all the information coming from different perspectives, three groups of stakeholders were involved: international students, university staff members and volunteer students belonging to a student network. This paper focuses on the volunteer students' focus groups as they offer a collaborative service within the institution.

Before contacting the student associations, research was conducted in order to identify who the main actors were in providing collaborative services in both institutions. Four student associations were identified:

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid: *ASOEX* and *Erasmus Student Network*

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore: *Erasmus Student Network* and *ESEG*

After checking this information with the International Relations Office, all associations have been contacted. ESEG members could not attend the focus group because there were not enough members this year and some of them were graduating so the continuity of the association was uncertain.

Description of the sample at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

The Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, known as UCSC or simply Cattolica, is an Italian private research university founded in 1921. The UCSC is the largest private university in Europe and the largest Catholic University in the world. Its main campus is located in Milan, Italy with satellite campuses in Brescia, Piacenza- Cremona and Rome. The University is organized into 12 faculties and has 29,000 faculty members. It has a student population of 41,000 students and 3,100 of them are international. It also has 600 international connections. UCSC has been granted five stars by QS Stars, a global university rating system, in the following fields: employability, teaching, facilities and engagement.

Table 1. Volunteer students profile. Focus group 1. Student associations: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

	Student Association	Gender	Age	Home Country	Have you been on exchange?	Did you join the network after your exchange?
1	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	F	21	Italy	Erasmus program	Yes
2	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	M	22	Italy	Erasmus program	Yes
3	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	F	23	Italy	Erasmus program	Yes
4	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	F	25	Ukraine	No	No
5	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	F	25	Italy	Erasmus program	Yes
6	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	F	26	Italy	Erasmus program	Yes

Description of the sample at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM) is a public university with an outstanding international reputation for its high-quality teaching and research. Founded in 1968, it has been generally recognized as one of the best Spanish universities in both national and international rankings. UAM has seven faculties. Currently it has about 30,000 students with more than 1,446 international students. Moreover, UAM has 2,900 professors and researchers and nearly 1,000 administrative staff. UAM has a distinguished reputation in research: in 2009 it was awarded the recognition of “Campus of International Excellence UAM+CSIC”, a joint project with the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC).

Table 2. Volunteer students profile. Focus group 2. Student associations: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

	Student Association	Gender	Age	Home Country	Have you been on exchange?	Did you join the network after your exchange?
1	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	F	19	Spain	No	No
2	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	F	21	Spain	Yes	Yes
3	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	F	26	Spain	Erasmus program	Yes
4	<i>Erasmus Student Network</i>	F	27	Spain	Yes	No
5	<i>ASOEX</i>	F	29	Kyrgyzstan	No	No
6	<i>ASOEX</i>	F	32	Spain	No	No
7	<i>ASOEX</i>	F	34	Chile	Yes	Yes
8	<i>ASOEX</i>	M	41	Chile	Yes	No
9	<i>ASOEX</i>	M	44	Guatemala	No	No

Results and Discussion

Thus, friendships and connections with local and international students are one the main concerns of international students once they arrive on campus, according to our research.

Data analysis

The questions that were posed to the participants during the focus groups were divided into three phases. The first phase was focused on pre-arrival services. The second was about services on arrival and integration with students and official bodies, and the third was about the overall satisfaction with the services during their stay and the final perceptions. These group phases have been developed under the framework elaborated by Kelo et al. (2010) where they state there are different types of services provided for international students depending on the phase they are, their needs and that the service perception might change. The most important support service areas identified by the students had to do with: information and orientation, integration activities with local students, the institution, and/or surrounding community, language support and other practical considerations, including assistance with visas and other administrative procedures such as housing, support for families and career and internship guidance.

Table 3. Phases of different types of services for international students (Kelo et al. 2010)

Phase	Most important service	Least important service
Pre-arrival	Finding somewhere to live	Information about area
Upon arrival/ Service on arrival	Finding somewhere to live	Formal welcome
During Period of study	Support for academic problems	Language support

According to the research done, we identified different needs that students have for the different phases:

Table 4. Phases of different types of services for international students (self-elaboration June 2015)

Phase	Most important service
Pre-arrival	Finding somewhere to live
Upon arrival/ Service on arrival	Finding friends
During Period of study	Maintaining connections with locals and internationals

Phase one: pre-arrival services

During the pre-arrival services phase, we identify that volunteer students get mostly questions about the city, accommodation and course information. In the case of students requiring visas, they ask the volunteers to help with paperwork and bureaucratic matters. This is not necessarily the case with non-visa seeking students. International students, independent of their country of origin and exchange program face a new reality, living in a different city with a different culture. They experience difficulty and stress when searching for a place to live. Accommodation has become one of the main unsolved issues that they face before moving to a new country for a period of time.

One of the most important recommendations volunteers can do for institutions is to establish a mentorship or buddy program. Someone that can help each student with their personal requests. In the case of UAM and UCSC, the volunteers requested access to the international student data in order to help them before they arrive at the university. The normal channels they have to advertise themselves is through the welcome day at the university where they ask for the e-mail address of those who want to join them. On the other hand,

they also have created social media pages where international students can connect with them before arriving, although this media is not reaching most of them.

Phase two: services on arrival

In some cases student associations are asked by the principal from the institution either to organize or to collaborate in the organization of the welcome meeting for international students. According to our results, this has been a fact in our two cases. Most of the questions asked on arrival are related to information about courses, the location of the library, health information and accommodation (although the latter has probably been solved pre-arrival in most of the cases).

In all focus groups, participants agreed that international students were looking for friendship and a group of friends once issues such as accommodation and course choices had been solved. The organization of events during the first week, in some cases, called Welcome Week or Induction Week, are indispensable to establish the first connections. These activities help to ease the loneliness experienced and help in the health and well-being of students that miss their home country and environment.

Phase three: during their stay

In the third phase, participants in the focus group agreed that volunteer students do not get so many questions or requests during the stay of the international student in relation to courses, teachers, accommodation providers and friends, as this has been set up in the first two phases. Nevertheless, student associations continue playing an important role in the integration with local and international students and are the only bodies organizing events during the academic year. They see these student associations as a meeting point where they are offered different activities and they maintain the connection between local and international students throughout the whole academic year.

Members of student associations are mostly local students in the case of *Erasmus Student Network* and international students themselves in the case of *ASOEX* but for a long period of their studies. In any case, both groups agree that more can be done for the integration of the newly arrived international students.

When we asked them to answer the question: Why is the role of student associations important to promote the integration and satisfaction of IE? They replied:

“To make international students feel more comfortable and integrate more with the locals and also with other foreigners. To live an unique experience in their life not only from the academic point of view but also from the enjoying part”. (Participant in focus group one)

Another respondent suggested:

“Whoever is part of a student association focused on international students is in charge of improving people’s life. How? Giving smiles. Being positive. Having fun with students”. (Participant in focus group one)

Conclusion

We can conclude that international students are aware of the volunteer associations and value their role in the integration of local students with international students. Volunteer associations not only offer support and guidance in relation to accommodation issues, courses and schedules but also serve as the main and closest connection to establish the first friendships. They also face problems to get institutional support: rooms, student data, infrastructure, funding and recognition. Nevertheless, they continue helping international students to integrate better in a new environment. In many cases, they have few resources and no access to funding and data. One of the recommendations made for institutions from Studyportal’s report (2013) is about the promotion and support of student associations. Through their activities, network and services they positively contribute to student satisfaction. The level of support from the institution often determines how active student associations can be. Institutions need to understand that this support is needed if they cannot

cover this social part to engage and involve international students on campus. Also we need to realize the continuity problem that volunteer students face. They might stay as volunteers for a period of their studies, therefore many organizational changes in the association might occur if they do not feel engaged within the institution.

Secondly, we identified three types of main concerns when international students go abroad. In the first phase the main concern is all about housing. Not all European universities are prepared to offer a good service or provision related to housing. Because housing has been identified as the main obstacle before arrival to an institution, this issue needs to be addressed at an institutional level in order to attract and retain more international students. The second concern occurs during the second phase and it is related to fear of being alone and suffering loneliness. International students need to find their first friend as soon as possible in order not to feel alone and to identify with other groups and types of students. More events need to be organized at an institutional level to integrate both groups of students; international and local students. If this is not possible, students associations need to get sufficient support and recognition to carry out activities that involve them with the community. The last concern that takes place in the third phase is to keep personal connections in order to have a satisfactory international experience. In this phase, less problems occur and questions asked have to deal more with daily matters but not so much with academic or administrative issues. To solve these issues, international students do not ask directly in the international office, however they ask to the student associations as they maintain the personal contact with them all along their stay. According to Bianchi (2013) most international students agree that they study abroad not only to obtain a degree but also to have an international experience. Learning about new perspectives refers to learning about new ways to view the world and its problems which opens their minds to new viewpoints.

Finally, it is necessary to strengthen the collaboration between institutions and those collaborative services in order to integrate and successfully involve international students with the local community. Any college or university wishing to strengthen in-campus commitment to international students must reach out and engage in active collaboration with all departments and offices across the campus, with the larger community, and most importantly with the international community itself (Glass et al. 2015). Reaching this point, the role of student associations will be a key consideration for the internationalization of the institution and, consequently, for the whole community.

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