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**INTERNATIONALIZING KNOWLEDGE – THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OFFICE FOR THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES OF TODAY****Slaveyah Goranova**

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**Abstract:** The International Relations Office has not only become an indispensable feature of the modern European university, but it is also enjoying a constantly growing importance. While there exist many factors that motivate the growth in importance of the International Relations Office, in the present article we have highlighted only a couple of them: the desire to offer quality education and the wish to benefit from European funding. Due to this ever increasing importance, the International Relations Office is under significant pressure to redefine and reinvent itself. We offer examples of how such reformation efforts are focused on linking the function of the office to the processes of internationalization, modernization/development, or project development and execution. We review the role of the International Relations Office in overcoming challenges faced by the European universities of today. These challenges range from credit-hour recognition to bridging the gap between theory and practice, from achieving an enhanced mobility and internationalization to offering support for the implementation of joint Masters and Doctoral degrees, from disseminating latest policy information to working towards a more digitalized university. Based on the exposed information, we conclude that the International Relations Office has a truly important role in the internationalization of higher education institutions in Europe.

**Keywords:** internationalization, diversification, International Relations Office

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Today's European universities cannot carry out their main mission of education and research without establishing and maintaining internationalization practices. "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main"<sup>385</sup>, so is no university a self-contained system, a self-sufficient organism. Thus in the past decade we have witnessed a serious growth in the importance of the International Relations Office for universities throughout Europe.

**2. MAIN FACTORS THAT MOTIVATE THE GROWTH IN IMPORTANCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OFFICE**

There are a few key operating factors that have motivated this growth in importance, and that do not promise to cease doing so in the foreseeable future. Here it suffices to focus on a couple of them: the ones that could continue to spur such growth even if no other factors were at play.

First and foremost, a quality education does not depend solely on the instructors: it determines and is, to a degree, determined by the kind of students that are attracted to the university. Excluding non-national prospective students would mean limiting the pool of quality applicants, thus lowering the quality of the student population as a whole. Furthermore, such exclusion would also translate into an exclusion of certain quality national students who are looking for an educational institution that attracts top students regardless of their origin<sup>386</sup>.

In recognition of the moral stigma of leaving out deserving applicants due to their national origin and the real harm that it does to the quality of education that a university offers, the European Union has closely linked the amount and type of funding it awards to the internationalization practices of prospective beneficiaries. The very first criterion for the selection of successful applicants for Erasmus+ funding is based on these practices<sup>387</sup>. Thus the International

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<sup>385</sup> Donne, J. "Meditation XVII" in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, <http://www.readprint.com/work-519/Meditation-XVII-John-Donne/contents> (last visited on 5 Sep 2017), pp. 1,(1624).

<sup>386</sup> The Guardian. *Why I Want to Study Alongside lots of International Students*, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/mortarboard/2012/sep/10/benefits-of-studying-with-international-students> (last visited on 2 Nov 2017), pp. 1, (2012).

<sup>387</sup> European Commission. *Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility Guidelines for Experts on Quality Assessment 2016 Call for Proposals*, <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus->

Relations Office becomes essential for developing strong project proposals and instrumental in attracting European funding.

### 3. THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OFFICES

In light of this key role of the International Relation Office, the office itself is under significant pressure to redefine and reinvent itself. Typically, the efforts are centered on linking the function of the office to the processes of internationalization, modernization/development, or project development and execution. For instance, the International Relations Office at the University of Murcia, Spain is headed by the Vice-Chancellor of Coordination and Internationalisation<sup>388</sup>. The French Université Catholique de Lille has an Office of International Affairs and Development<sup>389</sup>. Our university, the Medical University of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, has instituted a Department of International Relations and Project Activity<sup>390</sup>.

### 4. THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OFFICE IN OVERCOMING CHALLENGES FACED BY TODAY'S EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

The efforts directed to the reinvention and reform of the International Relations Office are triggered by the necessity of overcoming certain major challenges that European higher institutions face today.

The Bologna process call for internationalization cannot be answered without, first, improving the recognition of credits obtained abroad<sup>391</sup>. While this recognition does not belong to the realm of the International Relations Office, we believe that the office ought to facilitate it by convincing the responsible department of the great impediment that low levels of recognition are to the process of internationalization.

Secondly, the International Relations Office may play a central part in bridging the gap between theory and practice, between lecture-acquired knowledge and skills needed and valued by the market. To address this discrepancy, we are convinced that the office can and should offer insight into good practices abroad and, simultaneously, ensure that local good practices are promulgated outside the region and country. This would be the kind of “proactive initiative” that European higher institutions are urged to undertake<sup>392</sup>.

Furthermore, the International Relations Office must spearhead the efforts towards an enhanced mobility and internationalization. Both should be increased quantitatively and qualitatively. There should not only be a greater mobility: it should also be “balanced”<sup>393</sup>. Different types of *diversification* are needed when we deal with internationalization<sup>394</sup>. Before the internationalization process at any European university can be improved and strengthened, though, the university needs to elaborate an internationalization strategy. The fact that many higher institutions on the continent are still without one is troubling<sup>395</sup>.

plus/sites/erasmusplus/files/files/resources/2016-expert-guide-ka107\_en.pdf (last visited on 5 Sep 2017), pp. 5, (2015).

<sup>388</sup> Universidad de Murcia. *Internacionalización*, <http://www.um.es/web/internacionalizacion/quienes-somos> (last visited on 4 Aug 2017), pp. 1 (n.d.).

<sup>389</sup> Université Catholique de Lille. *Discover HEI*, <http://en.hei.fr/discover-hei/office-of-international-affairs-development/> (last visited on 10 Nov 2017), pp. 1, (n.d.).

<sup>390</sup> Medical University - Plovdiv. *International Relations*, <https://mu-plovdiv.bg/mezhdunarodno-satrudnichestvo/struktura-sastav-mspd/> (last visited on 10 Nov 2017), pp. 1, (2017).

<sup>391</sup> Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. *The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, pp. 20, (2015).

<sup>392</sup> DORSA Educational Institute. *Bridging the Gap between Academia and Industry*, [https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/teacher\\_academy/catalogue/detail.cfm?id=13302](https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/teacher_academy/catalogue/detail.cfm?id=13302) (last visited on 10 Nov 2017), pp. 1, (n.d.).

<sup>393</sup> Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. *The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, pp. 23, (2015).

<sup>394</sup> Goranova, S. “The Power of Diversified Knowledge – a Proposal for the Implementation of an Internationalization Strategy at European Universities ” in *International Journal*, Institute of Knowledge Management, Skopje, pp. 147-150, (2016).

<sup>395</sup> Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. *The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, pp. 22, (2015).

In addition, the International Relations Office ought to actively participate in the upkeep of the *Study in Europe Brand*<sup>396</sup>. Perhaps the most welcome contribution of the office would be its help in securing financial and administrative support for the elaboration of joint programs at the Masters and Doctoral level. European funding is available via programs such as the *Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees* program<sup>397</sup>.

An often overlooked role of the International Relations Office is that it should serve as a *liaison* with the policy makers of the European Union. Policies are being constantly amended, and new interests become the focal point: the International Relations Office should keep the university informed of all such changes. For instance, mobility results can be improved if the office disseminates information about the latest proposed addition to the Erasmus+ Key Action 1 traineeship options (a pilot program in the IT field that will be launched in 2018<sup>398</sup>).

The International Relations Office should also get involved in the process of digitalization of the higher education not only as a promoter of digitalization, but as a beneficiary as well. Digitalization is clearly beneficial for universities in general; it is particularly advantageous for fostering ties between remote institutions and encouraging international cooperation. September of 2017 marked the completion of the first *Erasmus Without Paper* project: more similar projects that target the reduction of paper documentation are under way<sup>399</sup>.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Europe is making great efforts to truly internationalize its universities. The task cannot be achieved without the active participation of the International Relations Office at each higher educational institution: this is why the office is enjoying an ever increasing importance at European universities of today.

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<sup>396</sup> European Commission, *Education and Training: Supporting Education and Training in Europe and Beyond*, [https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/international-cooperation/education-quality\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/international-cooperation/education-quality_en) (last visited on 9 Nov 2017), pp. 1.

<sup>397</sup> European Commission, *Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees*, [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities/individuals/students/erasmus-mundus-joint-master-degrees\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities/individuals/students/erasmus-mundus-joint-master-degrees_en) (last visited on 2 Nov 2017), pp. 1.

<sup>398</sup> Sullivan, Gerry, *Traineeships to be part of International Credit Mobility Action in 2018*, <http://eurireland.ie/2017/09/22/traineeships-to-be-part-of-international-credit-mobility-action-in-2018/> (last visited on 1 Nov 2017), pp. 1.

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