

Chronicle of Higher Education – September 15, 2009

European Universities Look Overseas for New Partnerships



University of Salamanca

Spanish universities, like the U. of Salamanca, are working with a new, federally financed foundation to recruit more international students.

By Aisha Labi

With its sunny climate, relaxed lifestyle, and relatively easy-to-learn language, Spain would seem to need little selling as a destination for foreign university students.

Yet although it is a popular study-abroad option for Americans and draws a fair number of students from Latin America, the country is not a major player in the fast-growing international student market.

So last year the Spanish government created a foundation to promote Spanish higher education abroad. Starting with nearly \$3-million from the ministries of education, science and innovation, and foreign affairs, the organization will tap into a global network of embassies and cultural institutions to create an international marketing campaign.

"We don't have a brand abroad. Maybe we do in Latin America, but if you ask someone in China, they do not know about our universities," says Mònica Margarit Ribalta, director of Fundación Universidad.es.

The Spanish foundation is the newest entrant in an expanding group of European organizations created to raise the international profile of universities on the Continent. This week roughly 4,000 European educators like Ms. Margarit will meet in Madrid to discuss their strategies at the annual conference of the European Association for International Education.

At a time when many associations have seen conference attendance drop off, EAIE can boast that its Madrid gathering will draw 1,000 more participants than last year. The group's vibrancy reflects a deep interest in internationalization across European higher-education systems. Indeed, the leadership of the 27-nation European Union has said that it aims to make European higher education more attractive internationally.

In many ways, Europe's interest in internationalization mirrors that of the United States. European universities want to develop closer ties in Asia and the Middle East, for example, two regions that American institutions have paid particular attention to in recent years. They also want to draw more students from across the globe, rather than rely on a handful of feeder countries. And they hope to build deeper partnerships with universities abroad, leading to more-sophisticated relationships that include joint degree and research projects, along with student and faculty exchanges.

In several areas of internationalization, European universities rival or better their American counterparts. But in others, particularly international student recruitment, they want to capture a bigger share of the market.

Fewer than 700 students from China, for example, enrolled at Spanish universities during the 2007-8 academic year. To bring in more Chinese students, Spain's Ministry of Education agreed in 2007 to recognize Chinese university-entrance qualifications, a concession that had hitherto been reserved for European Union students.

Ms. Margarit is convinced that with her organization taking the lead, a concerted national strategy could easily draw more students from China, India, and other countries with few cultural ties to the Iberian peninsula. She also notes that Spain is well positioned to forge

relationships in Asia. It already has strong links to Latin America, a region where business deals with China are increasing.

Inherent Advantages

Vera De Hen, who runs day-to-day operations for the EAIE, says Spain's increasingly global focus reflects a broader trend across southern Europe in internationalization. Traditionally, northern countries—particularly the Nordic region and the Netherlands— have been more aggressive about raising their global profile.

But thanks to a range of European efforts and programs, even the relative laggards enjoy an inherent advantage over, say, smaller American institutions looking to expand their global presence.

The links forged through such efforts as government-financed scholarship programs and European Union grants for projects involving several member states confer competitive advantages on European institutions, even in countries without well-developed internationalization strategies.

For the past decade, for example, 46 European countries have been engaged in the Bologna Process, an extensive overhaul of their higher-education systems designed to improve mobility among students, faculty members, and staff members throughout the region. The process allows for greater consistency among degree programs across once-divergent national university systems.

Fiona Hunter, director of the office of international relations at the University Carlo Cattaneo, in Castellanza, Italy, and the most recent past president of the EAIE, says that Bologna has made European universities more attractive globally by creating a more coherent degree-granting process.

As a result, she says, "there are these new European degrees, there's more flexibility, there's more professionalism, there's more internationalization, and there are more programs being offered in English."

American educators are watching Bologna closely, mindful of how it may affect them.

"They're making higher education more portable across national boundaries, and that is creating a very powerful force in the world," says John K. Hudzik, vice president for global

engagement at Michigan State University and president of Nafsa: Association of International Educators. "We're talking about a population and a GDP greater than the U.S. What they're doing is beginning to shape what we do."

The European Union's highly successful Erasmus programs have also laid the groundwork for globalization by funneling billions of dollars into scholarships for students who wish to study abroad.

In 2007-8 more than 162,000 European students and 27,000 academics used Erasmus money to travel within the European Union to study or teach. A separate program, known as Erasmus Mundus, encourages graduate students and scholars to travel outside the EU and provides graduate-level scholarships for international students wishing to study in Europe. It also underwrites joint degree programs among European institutions and with institutions outside of the EU.

Financing for the program, which began in 2004, was recently quadrupled, to nearly one billion euros, or \$1.4-billion, over the next four years.

The experience universities have gained building relationships abroad through Erasmus has enabled them to become more nimble on the global stage, says Ms. Hunter. A recent study, for example, found that joint and dual-degree programs with institutions in other countries are more common in Europe than in the United States.

"Erasmus Mundus set the trend in Europe for dual and joint degrees, and created the template and model for these sorts of programs," says Ms. Hunter.

Erasmus Mundus has also helped to spur growth in master's-degree programs in different languages, including English. That has proven to be a crucial draw for students from outside Europe. According to a report published by the Academic Cooperation Association, a research group in Brussels, the number of programs taught in English in non-English-speaking European countries tripled in the five years from 2002 to 2007, to more than 2,400.

Dollars and Diversity

For much of Europe, the desire to attract more international students is a simple matter of demographics—aging populations mean that there are not enough homegrown students to

fill classrooms. Ensuring that universities reflect the increasingly ethnically and racially diverse continent is another consideration.

International students also provide an increasingly important revenue stream, especially in the growing number of countries that charge higher tuition to foreign students.

While the climate has become more competitive, European universities tend to be more comfortable co-operating with one another on international ventures than their American counterparts are.

This is driven in part by government policy directives, but also by the fact that internationalization is second nature in a region where so many people are multilingual and national boundaries can be relatively insignificant.

For example, 11 universities in the Øresund region, which straddles Denmark and Sweden, have formed a consortium involving shared courses and facilities with the goal of transforming the region into a major science hub.

European nations are also keenly aware that because the United States remains the preferred destination for many international students, European institutions must work together to increase their international appeal.

Spain has several collaborative efforts at work. In addition to the new national foundation, four of the country's top research institutions have joined together to form an international marketing campaign. And since 1997, eight public universities in the semiautonomous region of Catalonia have worked together to promote their institutions as a coherent entity.

Josep Maria Vilalta, executive secretary of the Catalan Association of Public Universities, says that by jointly leveraging its resources, the group has begun forging links with universities in Africa.

The group is also working to attract top researchers and academics, whether Spaniards who have gone abroad or foreigners.

Individually, Catalonia's eight universities might not place in the top echelons of international ranking systems, but with their resources pooled, the institutions are making a bid to be Southern Europe's leading center for higher education, Mr. Vilalta says.

"We have some very good institutions; we have a very open, multicultural society; Barcelona is an attractive city and one of top destinations for Erasmus students," says Mr. Vilalta. "We're a good place to study."

Helping Other Nations

Cooperation is also taking place among nations. Ms. Margarit's organization, for example, has sought help from some of the more successful and well-established national higher-education organizations in Europe. They include the German Academic Exchange Service, better known as the DAAD; the Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education; and CampusFrance. The four organizations are also planning joint promotional activities in Latin America.

Similarly, national higher-education organizations of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia have turned to DAAD and CampusFrance for guidance on how to attract more international students.

A European Union-financed project included field trips to education fairs in Taiwan and India for firsthand observation of how best to conduct on-site recruitment and to focus marketing strategies on specific countries.

For American institutions, which have long enjoyed a pre-eminent position as the destination of choice for international students, the increasingly competitive landscape presents new challenges. As more European countries focus their recruiting efforts on Latin America, for example, institutions in the United States cannot afford to be complacent about a guaranteed stream of students from Central and South America.

Yet European higher education's increasing international outlook also provides opportunities for American colleges looking for partners abroad. And, as Nafsa's Mr. Hudzik points out, the flow of more scholars and students abroad may ultimately be good for everyone.

"If we believe firmly in the virtues of internationalization and cross-border learning, and all the rest," he says, "then we should be happy anytime we see somebody build the numbers up, regardless of who it is."