ACADEMIC MOBILITY AS A KEY FACTOR OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract: Academic mobility of both faculty and students forms a critical element of the international dimension of higher education and is one of the most important factors of quality assurance of higher education institutions worldwide. Internationalization and globalization of Russian higher education system is having one of the major impacts on the quality management and assurance. Faculty and student mobility figures are now one of the core factors for obtaining state accreditation for Russian universities as well as an important indicator showing the university success and prestige.

The aim of the paper is a closer look at the perspectives and results of the academic mobility, the factors stimulating and discouraging mobility, and the outcomes of the mobility influencing the education in Russian universities.

Siberian State Aerospace University has had more than 10 years experience in organizing student mobility. Most of the problems in carrying out international activities are common for the whole Russia but still there are some peculiarities featuring technical universities situated in the centre of Russia.

1. Internationalization of higher education as a call of the times
Rush development of science, information and communication technologies puts new tasks to the modern society. The role of the education, especially of the tertiary one, is rapidly increasing. Higher education and science have become the key factor of the society development. To solve problems of the national, regional and global scale serious changes have to be done in the system of education. It is becoming more and more obvious that those changes cannot be done only on the regional level without taking into consideration the demands of the world trade markets. Reforms of the national education cannot be based only on the regional criteria. Worldwide experience has to be used. But the best national traditions should not be lost in this process of changes and development.

1.1 Main areas of internationalization of university activities
International activities of universities usually include such areas as:
- enlarging the network of partner universities and organizations abroad, as a rule, by means of concluding long-term agreements of cooperation;
- developing faculty and student mobility and exchanges;
- promoting the university image in the world by means of obtaining international recognition through international accreditation, membership in internationally acknowledged organizations and associations, etc.;
developing joint degree programmes with foreign partner universities;
- enhancement of the education services export through attracting foreign students to the university;
- organization of international conferences, seminars, symposiums, etc.

All activities mentioned above are of the same importance if a university wants to develop international cooperation on the full scale. This paper does not aim to review and discuss all points of international activities. We will go into detail on only some of them that seem to be very important on the one hand and quite problematic to fulfill on the other hand.

As a rule each university has quite a big amount of cooperation agreements concluded with foreign partners. Though the main problem is usually not the amount of agreements but how effective they are. Quite often as soon as an agreement is concluded everybody forgets about it. There is one parameter that can evaluate how effective an agreement is. If more than two thirds of all the obligations and tasks are fulfilled one can say that it really works. As all other activities are usually based on the previously concluded agreements it is very important to make those agreements work.

1.2 The role of quality assurance in the international aspect of higher education

Quality assurance is considered to be the basic principle of the common European education area. Quality is the basis for trust, relevance, mobility, compatibility and attractiveness. Mutually acceptable quality assurance systems should be created on the university, national and world education levels. Increasing education quality is a general problem of all universities. To solve it each university needs to raise efficiency of teaching, scientific and administrative levels. Many European countries have already been using national systems of education quality assurance. There is a common European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). According to the principles of the Bologna Declaration various independent accreditation agencies and associations have been established to evaluate education quality.

But how can each university reach those criteria of internationally accepted quality? How can education quality be measured? What is the role of internalization in this process? What international activities can help the university to raise the education quality? In order to answer these questions one have to think about the major parameters that can be used to measure the efficiency of the international activities in higher education.

1.3 University internationalisation evaluation

The idea of finding common criteria to measure the effectiveness of university internationalization is not new. The international ranking of higher education institutions is a widely debated example of how measurement has started to influence the success and attractiveness of higher education institutions. The call for accountability by students, faculty, deans, the management of higher education institutions and national governments, as well as the call for quality assurance, is an important issue on the agenda of higher education, in general, and this includes the internationalization process, programmes and projects. Accreditation, ranking, certification, auditing and bench-marking have also become key items on the international higher education agenda.
Selection of right indicators to measure the internationalisation is not as simple as it may seem. We will not try to discuss how important each indicator is. We will just enumerate those indicators which are most common for all universities worldwide.

When examining how international the university is one usually considers the level of academic mobility of faculty, scientists and students. This is one of the major factors that on the one hand seems the aim of each university and the result of the internationalisation on the other hand. It includes the share of the international students in the university, the number of the university students participating in joint programmes abroad, the number of faculty coming to teach to the university from foreign partner universities and the amount of university faculty members taking part in various international activities.

The other criteria include the number of joint programmes and courses in the university, international reputation of the university worldwide, its ranking in international top lists, membership in international organisations and associations, the number of programmes accredited by international agencies and associations, participation in international scientific programmes and grants etc.

As you can see all criteria described as the other ones are directed to much extent to attract international students and faculty to the university. That is why we can suppose that student and faculty mobility can be evaluated as a crucial factor and criteria in internationalisation of all higher education institutions.

2 Student mobility as a core value and perspective aim

Student mobility is assumed to be one of the most important prerequisites for an open and dynamic international educational area that will aid worldwide integration and labour market mobility and accompany academic recognition of each university.

Student mobility refers to the process when students change university and usually even the country for some certain period of time. The period of time can be various but usually it is restricted to a semester or a year. Student mobility is usually not spontaneous, it is very often organized and stimulated by the administration and international departments of the university. However the mobility can be organized by the other organization (eg. travel or recruiting agency) or the students themselves (self-organized or “free-movers”).

2.1 International students worldwide

Over the last decades, the number of students studying outside of their home country grew at an unprecedented rate. While most of the traditional host countries are seeing the numbers of international students continue to rise, newly emerging hosts in the developing world have entered the competitive higher education market and are re-mapping the unidirectional flow of global talent. UNESCO statistics institute shows that the number of students who study abroad for either a degree or for a period of time increased by about 60 % since 2001. Today the share of foreign students in the whole quantity of students in the world is not less than 2-3 %. In 2010 there were more than 4.1 million international students worldwide.

Mostly often students choose such countries as the USA, Great Britain, France, Germany, China and others. The United States is the biggest destination. According to the Institute of
International Education, the latest figures show there are 691,000 students in the US, with an annual value to the economy estimated at around $20 bn.

It’s also no longer necessarily for overseas students to travel from overseas to a foreign university. Figures released by the British Council this year show that there are now more “overseas students” taking UK degrees in their own countries than there are overseas students coming to study in the UK. More than 160 branch campuses have been opened in more than 50 countries – mostly by US universities. There are also a multitude of partnerships and joint degrees as part of this academic cross-pollination. According to the British Council, this type of “transnational” studying has increased by 70% in a decade.

2.2 Student mobility in Russia

Russian integration into the world system of higher education has been carried out over the course of last twenty years as a result of the expansion of Russia’s international activity. The preceding period witnessed prominent reductions in funding and transition to the market economy. As a result, Russia gave up its once prominent position in the world market of education: 10.8 % of foreign exchange students globally studied in the country on the eve of the collapse of the USSR, and 3.8 – 4.0 % of these students study here today.

From the other hand the international role of higher education institutions and their international cooperation resulting in student mobility expansion has been on the rise in Russia in recent years due to the Bologna process. It has become increasingly vital for Russian business and industry to have a highly educated, internationally oriented workforce with sufficient skills in foreign languages. Over 20,000 Russian students study abroad each year. This number is increasing annually by approximately 10 %. Mobility of the Russian students in the European higher education is highest in such countries as Germany, France and Finland. Quite a number of Russian students study in the United States and in Great Britain.

In general, the most popular program among the Russian students studying abroad is social sciences. Also such courses as business (fundamentals of economics and business, management, marketing, finance, business accounting, and international business), English language, information technology, contemporary design and art are currently in high demand among the Russian students studying abroad. Technical disciplines are less popular. Probably that is because Russia has been traditionally very strong itself in the fields of natural and technical sciences.

According to the data of the Department of International Education and Cooperation of the Ministry of Russian Education there are about 108 thousand foreign students in Russian higher institutions. Most foreign students in Russia come from the Southeast Asia and countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), much fewer come from the European countries and from Africa and the Middle East. Less than 2 percent are from the northern American countries mainly from the USA. One of the most frequent nationalities among the foreign countries is Chinese: there are more than 15 % Chinese students in Russia and the number is growing every year by 10 %.
According to the last data of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, the most popular specializations are Geology and mineral resources development, Health and social services, Business and management, Humanities and arts, Russian language.

Most students coming to study in Russia are either full time students receiving bachelor’s and master’s degrees or exchange students.

2.3 Experience of SibSAU in Student Mobility
Siberian State Aerospace University (SibSAU) is a contemporary multi-disciplinary higher school where specialists in such high-technology and innovative spheres as rocket and space production as well as international business, finance, management and humanities are trained. The university has established and maintains international relationships with forty universities in twenty-five countries of the world. The main focus in on long-term projects aimed at making educational and scientific activity meet world standards.

The stress in international cooperation is made on realization of mutually beneficial programs of academic exchange and joint projects which allow students to get Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree training in foreign universities. The aim of SibSAU is to have an average of 10% of students both as foreign students studying in the university and students of SibSAU participating in different programs of student mobility.

International integration of Siberian universities has its own peculiarities one of which is their geographical position. SibSAU is situated in the centre of Russia. It is quite distant from both Europe and Asia-Pacific region which does not help the university to have transboundary agreements with foreign universities. For foreign students Siberia is considered very often as an exotic and sometimes even dangerous place to study. For Russian students there are also many obstacles including for instance visa procedures. There are no Consulates or Embassies of foreign countries in Krasnoyarsk and students have to go to Novosibirsk or even Moscow to obtain a visa which is quite expensive, requires much additional time.

The number of outgoing students exceeds the number of foreign students studying in SibSAU. On the average about 40 foreign students come to SibSAU each year mostly as exchange students or for summer courses and internship. Up to 45-50 students of SibSAU study each year abroad as exchange students or for double diplomas.

Most student mobility programs are developing with the US universities, the universities of the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary and Holland. Quite a lot of students from the former USSR study in SibSAU which is peculiar for all Russian universities. Student exchange and study abroad programs are organized under SibSAU bilateral agreements with such European higher schools as Holland Fontys, Eindhoven, Budapest Business School in Hungary, Czech Technical University in Prague, etc.

One of reasons why the number of outgoing students is much higher than the ingoing ones is in language proficiency. Students from SibSAU study in foreign countries in the English language. All partner universities from European countries collaborating with SibSAU offer courses in English. At the same time SibSAU is only developing special disciplines in the English language. That is why students from the Czech Republic and Hungary willing to
combine studying the Russian language and their areas of some special interest. Though there are already several courses in SibSAU which are delivered in the English language for both foreign and Russian students. They are mainly for Bachelor’s Degree in International Business and some programs in Master’s Degrees. Such practice from the one hand helps to attract foreign students to the university and from the other hand stimulates Russian students to learn foreign languages and communicate with students from abroad.

One of the most successful joint projects of SibSAU is with State University of New-York, College in Oneonta (SUNY, Oneonta). For more than ten years it has allowed students from SibSAU to get a dual degree (SibSAU Bachelor’s Degree in Management and SUNY Bachelor of Science degree in Business Economics). To earn the degree from SUNY Oneonta, SibSAU students are required to complete 122 credit hours of courses. In the case of SibSAU, the program was developed in consultation with SUNY Oneonta, so that its courses would be accepted for transfer to the maximum allowable amount, which is seventy-seven credit hours during 3 years in the home university. After transferring the maximum of seventy-seven credit hours from SibSAU to SUNY Oneonta, students must complete 45 credit hours in specified courses at SUNY Oneonta. But up to 15 credits of SUNY Oneonta coursework are usually taught at SibSAU by SUNY Oneonta faculty. Such summer courses delivered by American faculty in Krasnoyarsk give excellent experience both in the English language proficiency and special knowledge about American peculiarities of Business courses to SibSAU students. They also attract foreign students from partner universities from the Czech Republic, Hungary etc.

One more joint project was developed by SibSAU in collaboration with Dickinson State University (DSU), the USA. Two universities have agreed upon the Articulation and Implementation Agreement to outline the terms regarding the administration and implementation of the “Dual-Degree Joint” (DDJ) Program. The DDJ Program includes two plans: “2+1+1” Plan which allows SibSAU students who have completed their sophomore year to study at DSU during their junior year; and “3+1” Plan which allows SibSAU students who have completed their junior year to study at DSU during their senior year. DSU confers the Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration after the student completes the DDJ program requirements including successful completion of all required DSU credits and the equivalent of 128 U.S. credits (including acceptable transfer credits from SibSAU), returning to Russia within one month of the DDJ program’s end date, and successfully completing all SibSAU’s degree requirements. DSU does not award the degree until SibSAU sends written confirmation that the student has completed his/her studies and has been granted a Russian Bachelor’s degree.

Dual Degree Programs facilitate and stimulate the growth of student mobility. They imply automatic recognition of credits earned by students during their study abroad period, help to avoid complications of translating grading schemes, explaining transcripts. That is why they can be considered new and radical ventures in academic mobility.

Now SibSAU is planning to increase the share of foreign students as well as the number of students of SibSAU going to study abroad.
One of the key weaknesses is the problem of quality assurance. In order to attract international students and conclude agreements with foreign partners a university has to prove that its programs comply with international standards. External quality assurance is guaranteed by accreditation of the programs in foreign academic and professional organizations and boards. SibSAU was one of the first Russian universities who accredited 11 programs in the European Council of Business Education (ECBE) and 4 programs in the American Council of Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP). Now the aim of the university is to accredit programs in the sphere of techniques and technologies. In 2011 two programmes in computer sciences were accredited by the Russian Association of Engineering Education. Though it is a Russian accreditation agency it uses international standards of quality assurance and a European quality label EUR-ACE® is awarded to the accredited programmes.

Insufficient information on study possibilities abroad sometimes prevents students from taking part in mobility programs. SibSAU takes an active part in international conferences and seminars as well as provides for organization of such events in the university.

SibSAU organizes Summer Schools in Krasnoyarsk for foreign students. The program of three schools (Unique Ecosystems of Central Siberia, Life Support for Space Systems and Tracks of Recent Days) includes not only courses held indoor but also outdoor activities aiming to show Siberian nature and magnificence of surroundings. All Schools are targeted at undergraduates and postgraduates from all over the world pursuing interests or developing their skills in natural sciences and techniques. The highly-qualified faculty of summer courses help students gain extra knowledge within the programme and have a rest to remember Siberia for a long time.

Such events help SibSAU orient its activities towards international integration of its higher education to meet new standards and world tendencies. There are some objective obstacles to these activities but the mission of every university including SibSAU is to link efforts to overcome all challenges.

3 Conclusion
Development of student mobility ensures high quality of academic degrees that are valuable and prestigious both on the local Russian and international labour markets. Major advantages of studying abroad as a part of Russian degree include obtaining international diplomas and certificates, which facilitate the job search in Russia and abroad, improved career prospects, acquiring a wider outlook on life, prestige, foreign language practice and uniform education standards as well as education quality assurance. That is why international integration of higher education, as well as all activities connected with globalization, set new standards for Russian institutions.

Siberian State Aerospace University aims at developing the system of academic mobility cooperation based on the combination of the best Russian and international traditions. The first perspective is in expanding the number of bilateral and multilateral agreements with foreign universities concerning student exchange. In an international orientation, the central standing will be with universities of Europe and the USA in order to provide enrollment of SibSAU students to a variety of joint programs including high-technology and innovative
spheres. Double degree program agreements need to be expanded beyond the USA universities. Strengthening the bonds of international exchange with Asian and CIS countries is on the agenda for the coming years as they can be concerned as major customers of SibSAU’s export of educational services.

The attraction and integration of international students at SibSAU will require further development of such international programs as pre-university foundation program, summer schools, international joint academic programs, internships, upgrading courses and short-term academic programs on different technical and business subjects conducted in foreign languages.

Another emphasis is going to be done by the university on the foreign language capacity, in particular in English. SibSAU is working hard at establishing English taught programs. Much attention at the university is paid to teaching languages to the students and faculty of Business and Humanities. It is very important to apply this practice to the students and faculty of technical departments.

The next direction is the achievement of international standards of quality assurance of more academic programs including those in the branches of techniques and technologies through international accreditation. Other steps for further enhancement of SibSAU international student mobility include development of the network of central and departmental coordinators for international affairs, improvement of the SibSAU external promotional and advertising activities as well as internal channels of communication between the central Department of International Cooperation and academic staff, faculty and students.

We strongly believe that all these efforts will help SibSAU to meet international challenges with solutions to regional problems, to improve the education quality and establish suitable quality assurance system, to develop individuals, and to drive the attainment of economic imperatives.

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