

FACULTY EXCHANGE PERIODS — MAIN OBSTACLES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FROM FACULTY VIEWPOINT

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Abstract

Internationalization is an important part of higher education and faculty exchange periods are one typical way for it. This paper presents a case study of the barriers and challenges relating to faculty exchanges at the Turku University of Applied Sciences. Seven categories of barriers were identified: family and friends, language skills, work responsibilities at home university, lack of information, personal insecurity, too much work needed for an exchange period, and finance. Seven possible categories of challenges were identified as well: yearly working plan, language training, exchange implementation, share experiences, reasons to participate in an exchange, concrete support, and curriculum changes.

Introduction

Internationalization is emphasized in various reports. In the literature, there are three dominant ideas relating internationalization (Murphy, 2007):

- internationalization is a process and not an event,
- its goal is to expose students and faculty to ideas, methods and people from other countries and
- internationalization is considered beneficial and essential in most universities worldwide.

Murphy (2007) continues that the process of internationalization has three interrelated components: internal, imported and exported. Murphy (2007) reported that the exported component provides the highest potential for higher international awareness. Van Damme (2001) states very similarly: Faculty mobility can be considered as the second most important form of internationalization in higher education. Furthermore, according to another report the faculty is the key group for international success within a university (Nilsson, 2003). In Finland faculty exchanges have a central role as well. The Finnish Ministry of Education has named faculty exchange as purposeful and essential part of internationalization of the higher education institutes (Ministry of Education Finland, 2007).

Internationalization is thus a strategic choice of the Faculty of Telecommunication and e-Business in the Turku University of Applied Sciences and faculty exchanges

are an essential part of it. Mobilizing teachers is as important as mobilizing students. While students' normal exchange period is at least half a year, a typical exchange period for our teachers is only one week. Every year around 15–20 teachers go for one-week exchange period to our partner institutes. Most of our teachers use the Erasmus international mobility program, but some also use Nordplus and go to Nordic countries. These figures represent roughly 17 percent of our personnel. However, promoting faculty exchange is a challenge. The group of teachers going to exchange does not vary much yearly meaning that we have many teachers who haven't participated in any of the international mobility programs. We wanted to learn the rationale behind this and hopefully find solutions to support exchange periods.

In this paper, we first look back at the literature and other researches relating to faculty exchanges. After that the research is introduced. In the results section we report the identified barriers and possible solutions to faculty exchange. Finally, there are discussion and conclusions.

Faculty Exchange in Higher Education

The latest development plan of education and research by the Finnish Ministry of Education emphasizes globalization as a possibility for national and international wellness (Ministry of Education Finland, 2007). To make this more concrete it is crucial to include the importance of international experiences or opportunities within University's mission statement (Fung & Filippo, 2002). Furthermore, months-long periods abroad should become a norm for students and teachers (Ministry of Education, 2005). Actually, five different types of international staff mobility are listed: participation in international conferences, guest lecturing abroad, international visits to study and research, international peer review work and research collaboration (Smeby & Trondal, 2005).

The literature generally presents mobility as something positive and associated with all kinds of benefits (Musselin, 2004) and the benefits derived from international efforts are well worth the risk (Fung & Filippo, 2002). For a single teacher, the cross-cultural experiences and the comparisons she/he makes abroad within the host country's natural setting are the foundation for inter-cultural learning (Bodycott & Walker, 2000; Fung & Filippo, 2002). The academics travelling to teach overseas broaden their horizons and this informal learning can translate into improved teaching practices at home as well (Razzano, 1996). Thus the international faculty exchange programmes can be cost-effective methods for faculty development and enhanced student learning as well (Lange & Ailinger, 2001). At best, a teacher's experiences might be like Uhl described: "Awareness of the similarities and differences in their culture, teaching and learning strategies,

social behavior, and norms of society . . . and the subculture of the university, food, climate, transportation, leisure time activities, and the natural beauties of the country . . . are experiences that change the thinking of the visitor forever” (Uhl, 1993). To summarize the basic idea of exchanges: international experiences can promote the idea that people should enjoy the similarities and respect the differences in other cultures (Fung & Filippo, 2002).

Despite highly positive expectations many barriers and challenges relating to international mobility has been identified too (Fuller, Amillo, Laxer, McCracken, & Mertz, 2005). These barriers are written from the student viewpoint, but many of them are valid with the teacher exchanges as well. The barriers are categorized in two categories: personal and institutional barriers. The personal barriers related to languages, finances and the overall willingness to go abroad. The list of institutional barriers contained items such as calendar differences, curriculum differences, quality assurance and cultural mismatches and misunderstandings. Other problems that are identified in earlier studies are heavy teaching load in teacher’s mother university, limited financial and administrative support (van Damme, 2001).

Since challenges and problems relating teacher exchanges are identified different solutions are presented as well. There are for example three ways a university can prepare their staff for teaching exchange (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003):

- provide staff information about general issues that lecturers routinely face in exchange
- provide country-specific information to assist lecturers to make their teaching relevant to the context
- develop systems that support and enhance the informal support and sharing of information between staff.

Lange and Ailinger (2001) modelled faculty exchange even more precisely and introduced a model for international faculty exchange. This model included the components of pre-exchange planning, academic activities, socio-cultural events, communication and evaluation of outcomes (Lange & Ailinger, 2001). For pre-exchange planning they created a checklist with the following items (Lange & Ailinger, 2001): expectations, educational level of students and faculty, library resources, electronic databases, internet and e-mail access, academic and public holidays, university events and customs, dress code, living arrangements, transportation, church & shopping locations, work contract, country visa and money management. Academic activities focus on the academic work both before and during the exchange. Socio-cultural events should also be planned well and this dimension is important for understanding the culture and the people better.

Good communication is an essential element in the model as well as evaluation of the outcomes.

Nilsson (2003) reported actions to increase the language competence among both teaching and administrative staff. They offered language courses for the faculty such as “How to Teach in English” and “Practical English for Administrators” (Nilsson, 2003).

The importance of the money is emphasized as Fung et al. (2002) report that funding will be essential to encourage faculty participation. Faculty participation in exchanges could be encouraged by sending people over in pairs or small groups, particularly on a lecturer’s first trip to a new teaching site (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003).

The Research

In this research qualitative methods were used and the research was a descriptive case study. In general, a case study aims for in depth-understanding of the context of the phenomenon (Cavaye, 1996). Furthermore, a descriptive case study presents a complete description of a phenomenon within its context (Yin, 2002). A case study is well suited to capture the knowledge of practioners and to document the experiences of practice (Benbasat, Goldstein, & Mead, 1987). This study presents identified barriers and challenges relating to faculty exchange at the Faculty of Telecommunication and e-Business in the Turku University of Applied Sciences.

The Turku University of Applied Sciences is one of the biggest of its kind in Finland. Our University is organized in six units of education that promote multidisciplinary learning. The faculty of Telecommunication and e-Business represent four different fields of education: technology, business, natural sciences and culture. Our main goal is to work in close co-operation with our region and to answer the requirements of the working life.

The Faculty of Telecommunication and e-Business operates in two cities and has six different degree programs (Table 1) leading to the Bachelor of Engineering and Bachelor of Business Administration. The Bachelor of Engineering is a four-year degree with 240 ECTS and Bachelor of Business Administration is a three and a half year degree with 210 ECTS. In addition, we have a Master of Engineering program called Technology Competence Management. The faculty has approximately 1500 students of whom roughly 550 study in Salo campus and 950 in Turku campus.

Table 1: Bachelor Degree Programs in Telecommunication and e-Business

Degree Program	Credits ECTS	Discipline	Students
Information Technology - English - Finnish	240	Information Technology	727
Electronics	240	Computer Engineering	259
Business Information Technology	210	Information Systems	196
Business and Administration	210	Business	176
Library and Information Services	210	Information Services	85

Internationalization is one of the focus areas in our mission statement: The Faculty of Telecommunication and e-Business operates interactively with the working life educating future international experts, activating entrepreneurship and developing our region with applied research. Our international activities are based on our internationalization strategy. The strategy defines our main lines and gives guidance for more detailed yearly operational plan in internationalization. The strategy defines that

- Internationalization is part of our daily operations through teacher and student exchanges as well as through R&D-projects.
- Intercultural environment enriches our learning and motivates us to pay attention to courses offered in a foreign language.
- Our international activities are focused on India/China besides Europe.

We wanted to learn the barriers and challenges with the faculty exchange. Two open questions were presented:

- What are the main barriers to going to exchange?
- What are the solutions to these barriers?

The faculty members answered both questions anonymously in separate papers. The data was analysed with content analysis.

Results

Altogether 77 faculty members answered the survey. The survey resulted in 115 barriers to faculty exchange and 78 possible solutions to support and increase faculty exchanges. The named barriers were classified in seven categories (Table 2).

Table 2: Barriers of Exchange Periods

Categories	Count	Percentage of faculty members
Work responsibilities at home university	22	28.6 %
Too much work needed for an exchange period	17	22.1 %
Lack of information	9	11.7 %
Language skill	9	11.7 %
Family and friends	36	46.8 %
Finance	3	3.9 %
Personal insecurity	19	24.7 %

The biggest barrier category to faculty exchange was “Family and friends.” Almost half of the faculty named family and friends related topics as barriers to participating faculty exchanges. The respondents gave the following answers for example:

- Who will take care of the children while in exchange?
- Home responsibilities (hobbies and other activities)
- Spouse travels much
- Spouse has irregular working hours
- Small children
- Dogs and cats — who will take care?

In addition, quite many just answered Family without any explanations. A good summary of all the named barriers was the answer saying: the situation of the civilian life doesn't make it possible to go the exchange.

Almost 29 percent of the faculty members named barriers that were grouped to “Work responsibilities at home university” category. The barriers belonging to this category were such as

- Too much work at the moment
- A lot of work waiting when you come back from the exchange
- The schedule is too tight — not possible to be away for one week
- How to arrange the responsibilities here during the exchange?
- So much teaching that all time is needed for preparation.

Barriers relating to “Too much work needed for an exchange period” and “Personal insecurity” categories were named by about 17 faculty members. Following barriers were classified to “Too much work needed for an exchange period” category:

- Preparing teaching for foreign environment is difficult (the technical environment is not known, a lot of communication is needed)
- Schedule differences
- A lot of work to modify the teaching suitable for exchange (language, context related issues)
- Too much paperwork and other arrangements needed
- Communication problems with the partner
- The exchange period is not precisely connected with curriculum.

The “Personal insecurity” had barriers such as:

- Afraid of flying
- What could I do there?
- Will I manage it?

Finally, there were a number of faculty members expressing that they have received too little information on the exchange possibilities. Also, a number of faculty members saw that their language skills are a barrier to exchange. Only three faculty members answered that financial issues are a barrier.

The solutions provided by the faculty were classified in seven categories (Table 3).

Table 3: How to Support Exchanges?

Categories	Count	Percentage of faculty members
Yearly working plan	8	10.4 %
Language training	7	9.1 %
Exchange imlementation	21	27.3 %
Share experiences	8	10.4 %
Why go to exchange?	13	16.9 %
Concrete support	19	24.7 %
Curriculum changes	4	5.2 %

There are two categories that together gathered over half of the solutions: “Exchange implementation” (27.3%) and “Concrete support” (24.7%). The faculty proposed following “Concrete Support” actions for example:

- support for taking family with you
- more help for practical matters
- better financial support
- support for the family staying home
- turnkey exchanges
- managers are in key positions.

The faculty proposed following solutions to “Exchange implementation” for example:

- more advertising about the exchange possibilities
- exchanges with colleagues
- replacement solutions in home university during the exchange
- better planning of the exchange period besides teaching
- connecting the exchange to some common development project with the host university
- head-to-head exchanges.

The rest of the solutions are presented in the

Table 4.

Table 4: More Proposed Solutions

Category	Proposed solutions
Yearly working plan	The exchange should be included in the teachers' yearly working plans. The exchange should be agreed on yearly performance review discussions.
Language training	Tailored English courses. Language courses abroad. Cultural coaching before exchange.
Share experiences	Better reporting of realized exchanges. Presentations by the teachers already been in exchange.
Why go to exchange?	Make exchange a mandatory part of work. Emphasize the personal benefits of exchange.
Curriculum changes	Work placement should be moved elsewhere from spring.

Discussion

The faculty named many barriers and possible solutions relating to exchange periods. The barriers and solutions were analysed in the management board and in the internationalisation working group. Previous researches and this case study showed many similar results.

Internationalization is part of our mission statement and we have given the attention to internationalization as Fung et al. (2002) emphasized. However, we still have a big challenge to make long exchange periods a norm for our teachers like the Finnish Ministry of Education (2005) suggests. On the other hand most of the different types of international staff mobility that Smeby and Trondal (2005) reported are in place in our faculty. Our staff participates regularly in international conferences. A basic requirement to be financed to a conference is that the teacher has some active role in the conference i.e. either a presentation or a chairing responsibility. Our faculty members give guest lectures abroad, but they travel to different meetings relating education development and research collaboration as well. An example of an education development network is the CDIO network (www.cdio.org) that aims to develop education closer to the working life.

The benefits reported in the earlier researches are not surprising. Still, our research showed that there is lack of information among our faculty: there are people that

don't know why they should go to exchange. There are a large group of faculty members thinking that too much work is needed for an exchange period. Certainly we need to correct these ideas with right and sufficient information.

The personal barriers Fuller et al. (2005) reported were also found in this study. Our faculty reported languages, finances and overall willingness to go abroad as barriers to exchange too. In addition, the institutional barriers Fuller et al. (2005) listed were mostly found in this research as well. Heavy teaching load in teacher's home university that van Damme (2001) reported was identified as the second frequent barrier for going to exchange in our research. However, the most frequent barrier in this research was "Family and friends" which was not reported in earlier studies.

Earlier researches emphasized the importance of good preparation of exchange periods. We need to focus more on the pre-exchange planning as over half of the faculty suggested that we should provide more "Concrete support" and improve "Exchange implementation".

We have offered language courses to our faculty similarly as Nilsson (2003) reported. The courses were started based on the identified barriers and possible solutions found in our research.

Fung et al. (2002) emphasized the importance of money for encouraging faculty to participate in exchange periods. In our faculty, during the exchange period the teacher receives a normal weekly salary (40 h) even though the new Erasmus requirement is only five hours of teaching within a week. All travel and accommodation costs are covered and in addition a normal daily allowance is provided.

Gribble et al. (2003) suggested that sending people over in pairs or small groups might encourage faculty participation in exchanges. Our faculty suggested the same solutions.

The solutions which faculty named to support exchanges are already partly in use, but faculty members haven't recognized them. For example, the faculty management board has agreed that the exchanges should be included in the yearly working plan and they should be agreed in the performance review discussions. In addition, we have tried to implement a better reporting system to make the information and experiences of faculty members returning from an exchange available to those thinking of going abroad.

Conclusions

The research showed that the barriers and provided solutions are quite similar to earlier researches. However, the research confirmed us that certain actions can be taken to enhance faculty exchange. It seems that despite all information and active discussion about exchanges there is a need to improve the quality of information and the way we inform our faculty over the exchange possibilities. We need to emphasize the benefits of an exchange to the person him/herself besides the benefits to our faculty and to the students as well. There is still lack of basic information relating to exchange arrangements and possibilities among a portion of our faculty members.

There are many tasks where we can improve our processes:

- Collect and make precise information on our partner universities available to other faculty member going to exchange
- Change the informal briefings of faculty members going abroad to a pre-departure training
- Create a pre-exchange checking list.

The faculty suggested supporting exchanges using exchanges with colleagues. This is one of the ideas that we have discussed, but we have to develop the idea further.

Finally, this research gave us the confidence that we are going in the right direction with our efforts to activate faculty exchanges. With these results, we can further improve our processes in faculty exchanges and make faculty exchanges even more common in our faculty. We also hope that this research can help other universities to support and improve exchange experiences.

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