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Attracting international students and scientists to medium-sized cities: why, how, and who

**A summary report of the meeting in
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Introduction

International student mobility has risen in the last decades, not only in the traditional markets (Europe and the US) but also in new ones. A growing number of universities and cities have developed active policies to attract international students. In our exchange meeting in Magdeburg on internationalisation, we focused on the attraction & marketing of international students (Bachelor, Master and PhD levels), as well as scientists who will work for either the university or scientific institutes in the city (thus, we exclude the “broader” group of foreign expats who might come to work at companies).

We took as starting point that effective talent attraction rests on four main steps:

1. Define target groups and subgroups in line with your mission & strategy
2. Understand the target groups’ needs
3. Understand and define the unique features of university and city
4. Reach the decision makers of the target group with appropriate communication and activities

The programme was organised along these lines. We heard contributions from a keynote speaker (Martin Bickl from the Goethe University in Frankfurt), and from the partner cities Aalborg, Delft, Magdeburg, Parma, and Tartu. They explained their strategies, their approach to target groups, and the relation between city and university. Finally, there were testimonials from a number of international students and researchers that reside in Magdeburg; they gave us first-hand information on their journey to the university and the city and their experiences.

This report offers the 15 main insights that came out of these contributions and the discussions that followed. It ends with a simple checklist that cities & universities can use to analyse their talent attraction strategies.

1. Strategy and value added are more important than numbers

Universities are interested to attract more international students, in the levels of Bachelor, Master, or PhD. And scientific institutions increasingly want to attract foreign scientists. But why? How is this need based on their strategy? Our keynote speaker, Mr. Martin Bickl, noted that many universities, cities and countries are “obsessed with numbers”, but often do not have a sense of purpose. Just attracting numbers is not the wisest option; the institutions must have a clear idea where they want to go in the future, what areas or studies they want to focus on, and how the attraction of talent is in line with the strategic mission of the university and the needs of the city; this should be the basis for any attraction activity. From that basic answer to the “why” question can then follow a market segmentation, which can be based on age, geography, or study level (Ba, Ma, PhD) or study field.

2. Cities and universities have different reasons to attract international students and staff

There are many reasons why cities and universities might be interested to attract foreign students. Some more relevant for universities, others more for city administrations.

For cities, a reason to want international students and researchers is to counter the trend of an ageing population; second, some cities/regions face a shortage of skills, in general or in specific fields (such as IT and R&D expertise). Attracting international students might be an answer, but only under the condition that some of them will stay after graduation. Third, attracting international students can help a city or region to become more diverse (in terms of culture); this might be relevant for relatively “monocultural” cities that have difficulties to compete in the global market for talent because expats

cannot easily plug into city life. Finally, international students (and scientists) could help to improve a city or region's image abroad, and be the basis for future trade relations and investments, when they become ambassadors after they move out again; this is especially important in cities whose image as knowledge location is not optimal. For universities, there are other reasons to attract international students: financial (only in case they pay a sufficiently high fee; otherwise they are a bleeder for the university); enhancing cultural diversity (helping education to become more intercultural); improve quality (in case international students have a high level or are more motivated). Having said that, we may conclude that internationalisation efforts in the partner cities are often too much focused on numbers, and pay insufficient attention to strategic embedding. They should be more targeted, have a close link with the research and educational strategy of the university, and also fit with the needs and interests of the current national and international students. The latter is important because there is a saturation point as to the number of international students in the classroom.

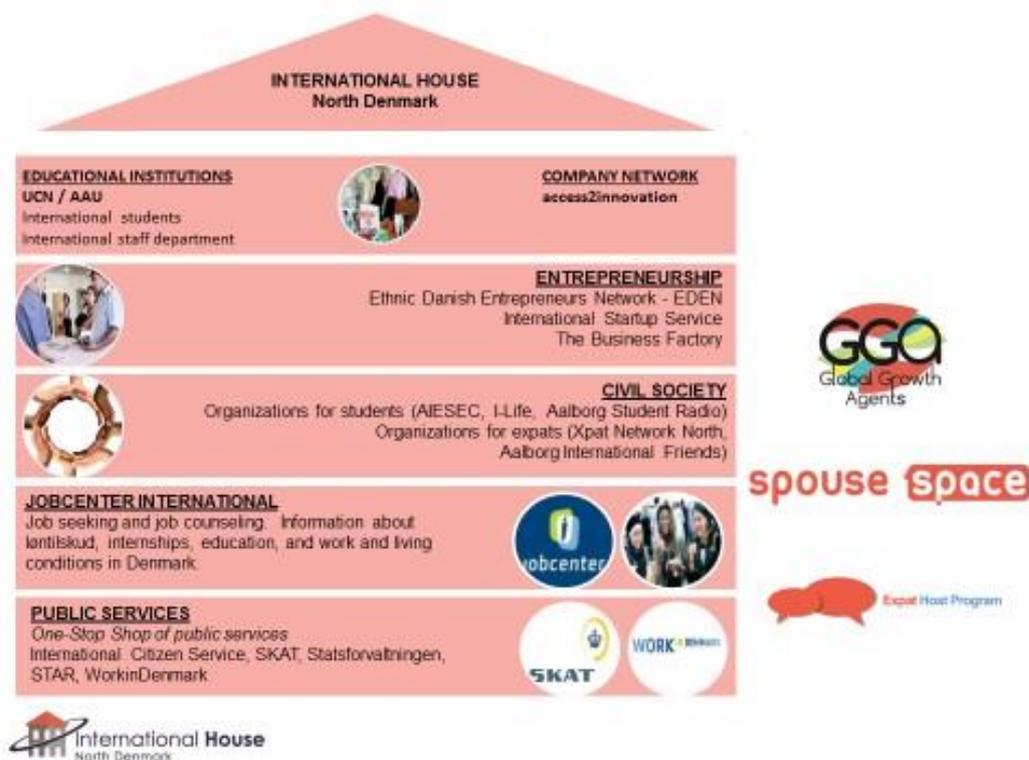
3. Internationalisation implies a change of campus culture

A growing number of international students is not only a quantitative phenomenon: it implies a change of campus culture. Our keynote speaker noted that a growing number of Muslim or Hindu groups in Germany might imply a shift from a typical "beer culture" at campus towards a coffee culture. Universities must develop ideas how to shape this development wisely. If they fail to do so, integration will be limited and the economic potential of internationalisation is not realised.

4. A common strategy between city and university (also including other stakeholders) can help to align efforts and make them more effective

In all of the partner cities, internationalisation is an ambition of both the city and the university. And everywhere, there are many practical collaborations in sub-fields, and the key players talk to each other. Nevertheless, there is work to be done to make collaborations more strategic. The situation in Magdeburg is exemplary for most other cities: Despite a relative agreement on the aim of internationalisation and its benefits, and also a relative fast growth of international students, there has been no clear strategy. As Klaus Puchta, speaker from Magdeburg pointed out, city and university have not defined particular target groups, or performance indicators; it is not defined how many foreigners would be good to have, and from which countries or studies. Also, there is no explicit and systematic approach as to what marketing channels to use. Finally, cities and universities indicate a lack of cooperative planning, and there is no common or aligned marketing strategy between city and university.

A comprehensive strategic collaborative approach was presented by Aalborg, where city, university and business developed an "International House" with a lot of services and networks for expats, international researchers and students. The focus lies on the retention of highly skilled labour and matchmaking between companies and graduates.



5. There is often a gap between strategy and practice when it comes to internationalisation

In many cases, the recruitment process of international students has been “professionalised”: it is done by specialised agencies, local, national and international, that “sell” study destinations and universities. In some cases, they set quantitative targets (the German DAAD set the ambition at 350,000 international students for Germany). However, on the practical level, in the universities and cities where the international students actually arrive, a lot of hurdles must be taken. In Germany, for example, there are many Bachelor and Master courses in English, but students still need the German language to communicate with the library, with education committees, or with the municipality, and many relevant documents are only in German. For internationalisation really to take off and bear fruits, this gap needs to be closed.

6. Identifying and targeting specific target markets helps to make the internationalisation efforts more successful.

If it is clear why the university and the city need more international students and researchers, and how that contribute to strategic goals, the segmentation process can begin. Segmentation of target groups can be based on country of origin, field of study, level of study (Bachelor, Master, PhD), but also on students motivations. Concerning the latter, the following division of students types can be useful (based on a study¹ of international students coming to the US)

- Strivers (30% of international students): they are very high on ambition, and selective in terms of university they choose (preferring highly ranked institutions), but can be low on financial means
- Strugglers (21%): have limited resources, but are less selective concerning their institutions

¹ Choudaha et al. (2012), found at <http://wenr.wes.org/2012/08/wenr-feature-2012-not-all-international-students-are-the-same>

- Explorers (25%): They not only have academic interests, but see studying abroad as a personal experience. They tend to go to 2nd tier institutions.
- Highfliers (24%): Tend to be wealthy, and are prestige-seeking, so they typically target the highest ranked universities

Aalborg University and Delft University of Technology specifically go after the more clever students, no matter where they come from; Tartu focuses on particular nations; Parma targets students in fields related to food and nutrition, in line with their status as Unesco city of food.

7. In choosing target groups, it is important that the university closely aligns its activities with national recruitment organisations (such as DAAD in Germany, or “Study in Estonia”).

The process of choosing the target markets should be organised well; the right actors must be involved so that it does not depend on single persons or dominant faculties but becomes a shared and rational process.

The University of Tartu is very advanced in this respect. They go for three national markets (Latvia, China, Belarus). Within each country, they go for specific target groups based on the study programmes & country profile, e.g. Finland & Medicine. On the national level, they co-operate with other Estonian universities in the Study in Estonia programme to reach other target markets as well.

8. Systematic research helps to really understand the target groups

Many universities have defined target groups, but the knowledge about their decision behaviour is tacit, stays in the heads of a few recruiters, or is based on untested assumptions. More systematic research can help to identify what really drives their behaviour.

The University of Tartu does systematic research among the target groups (together with Study in Estonia), to understand their behaviour. This sometimes leads to interesting and unexpected conclusions: for example, it turned out that students do not choose Tartu for the quality of the city (although it is a very nice and lively student city), but mainly for the quality of the educational institutions.

9. When trying to reach the target markets, it is important to know who the decision-makers are, how they come to their choices, and what information they need.

Regarding Bachelor or Master studies, the parents of the students are very important players in the process, and they highly value aspects such as safety and security. This is especially key to attract female students, and also there are variations per culture/country of origin. This has implications for the design of promotion materials and online information. Specific sections with “information for parents” help in this respect.

10. It helps to link the internationalisation strategy strongly to the economic strengths or “unique selling points” of the city at large.

This helps to attract students and talents that fit the needs of the city, and also makes it easier to find the target groups. Many smaller and medium sized cities do not have a very strong reputation or “brand”; The international students we interviewed in Magdeburg said that they had some general and imprecise stereotypes and/or prejudices in their mind about the city and the university.

Parma is a good practice in this respect. The city and the university link internationalisation to the city’s very specific strength and reputation (recognized by Unesco) as city of food, nutrition and gastronomy. This theme is elaborated in several directions (food related science and education, events,

tourism, food industry, security etc). Thus naturally, this theme also is the basis for the internationalisation strategy of the university and the city. In education, Parma presents itself as a pivotal international center for Post-graduate training in the Food and Nutrition domain. The project will take advantage of a strong networking with top European institutions, including EFSA, that will attract experts in different field of risk assessment, food safety, food security, food law, methodology, nutrition and other related areas. Programs include visiting professor programs, and training programs at PhD, master, and professional level. The other cities do not have such a clear theme that leads the strategy.

11. It can help to build long-standing relationships with a limited number of target markets

Long relations with partner cities, regions and universities help to build trust and a good reputation. Important instruments in this respect are partnership agreements, exchange programmes and summer courses. Returning students can be ambassadors for the host, and entice more students to follow. Some universities have branch campuses in other cities abroad; these cities are then natural recruitment targets. But also, city networks can have spill over effects and contribute to international student mobility. Parma is using its membership of the Creative Cities Network to develop relations with cities that also excel in food and nutrition, and the university builds partnerships on top of this.

In Kiev and Minsk (Ukraine), there is a German faculty of engineering; this is a significant recruitment base for German universities. For Magdeburg, a connection with cities that have German schools could make sense, as the prospective students then already have a language advantage and are more familiar with German culture.

12. It is important to systematically analyse and evaluate how the international students experienced all aspects of the city and the university.

Original research and analysis is needed to obtain important feedback information of what to improve (in the city and in the university), and how, and also what information and promotion could help. Facebook groups of international students are another important source of information; following them generates very valuable insights for policy. Cities and universities are wise to do both.

The University of Tartu, through the iGraduate programme, tracks how happy the students are. It also helps to organise frequent face-to-face meetings with a number of foreign students –breakfasts, or town hall meetings- to learn about their positive and negative experiences.

13. The attraction of international researchers is a different process compared to students.

The academic labour market is very international, job openings are often filled by foreigners (with the exception of Italy). Here, what matters is the quality of the research group; PhDs or postdocs are attracted to research groups with a strong scientific reputation –this increases their chance of co-authoring high level scientific publications-, and the quality/reputation of the city matters less in their decision. Also, personal contacts are often a first basis for a contract. Thus, general campaigns to attract researchers do not make much sense for these groups. The best guarantee for attracting more researchers to have high quality research groups. Understanding the perception and needs of foreign researchers is key, however. Cities and universities can do much to understand the needs, problems and challenges of foreign population: organise meetings, follow Facebook groups and LinkedIn groups, organise activities for spouses, etc.

14. Defining and communicating the “unique selling points” of city and university is needed to stand out against the competition

For most medium sized university cities in Europe, it is very difficult to have a sharp profile that distinguishes it from others. As described, Parma is an exception, with a strong focus on food. Other cities/universities should identify smaller pockets of excellence or specifics that make them stand out. This can be done in various ways.

Over the last decade, Magdeburg has developed excellent research (and related business) in specific medical fields, and now manages to attract talented researchers. In Aalborg, the university has adopted a specific teaching model, Problem Based Learning, that is very practical and applied, and makes it different from others.

15. There are various fruitful ways to engage international students and alumni as ambassadors for their host city or university

Current internationals or alumni are often the best ambassadors, but it takes active policy from the side of the city and the university to make most out of it. In Tartu, there is an active ambassador network, with 25 ambassadors from 21 countries. They are active through blogging, being present at media, and they host events in Estonia and abroad to inform international students. Also, they act as buddies for newcomers. In Magdeburg, there are such networks as well; international alumni present themselves at career workshops, and there are dinners for alumni of different year groups. For the university, it is a challenge to keep tracking them. In Frankfurt, the university successfully engages international alumni at recruitment fairs; interested students prefer to get “real” information from people who actually were there.

Checklist for cities & universities

With the checklist below (based on the insights above and outcome of the discussions), cities and universities can analyse where they stand in terms of international students and researcher recruitment. It should be merely used to stimulate the discussion between stakeholders in city and university to identify gaps and develop joint actions.

Before they come

We know why we want international students and researchers

We know which type of international students and researchers we want (study fields, level, etc.)

We understand our target groups; we know what they find important in choosing a foreign city/university

Our internationalisation actions are in line with our core strategies regarding education & research

We provide the right information for the right groups (students, parents)

We have a clear and founded strategy how and where to recruit them

We have a clear and agreed division of tasks between city, university, student unions and national organisations regarding recruitment

When they are here

We can serve our students in foreign language, not only in education but also in practical matters

We help them deal with the officialdom

We create an inclusive campus culture; from beer culture to coffee culture

We invite international students and researchers to hear their experiences, challenges and problems

We follow their Facebook and LinkedIn groups

We provide support for spouses

We integrate them with national students in education and student life

We have a clear and agreed division of tasks between city, university, student unions and national organisations regarding hosting them

After they are gone

We keep track of our international alumni

We support an active international alumni network

We make most out of our international alumni

We involve alumni in recruitment of new international students

We have a clear and agreed division of tasks between city, university, student unions and national organisations regarding alumni actions