

Lessons Learned and Best Practices on Retaining International Students for The Labour Market

As collected during the #study #stay #work workshop 19 November 2024 at Fontys University of Applied Sciences during the INTERLOCALITY closing event.

Below is an inventory of inputs from staff at Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) from Germany, Italy, Finland, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

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Facilitating labour market entry: roles and pitfalls

1. What can **universities** do to facilitate optimum labour market entry for international students?

Universities of applied sciences from five European countries identified the following interventions for universities to increase the stay rate and facilitate labour market entry for international students. The interventions have been ordered in 3 categories:

<p>A. Build strong, multi-faceted relations with local employers</p>	<p>B. Actively prepare international students for entering the local labour market</p>	<p>C. Ensure readiness to receive international students and employees at the university and at potential employers</p>
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A:

1. The importance of setting up multi-faceted cooperation initiatives with employers is highly effective in ensuring more of your students can enter the local labour market.

For example: ask companies to provide cases to be worked on by students in class. Make long-term and structural agreements with companies on providing internships and pre-internships (short introductory engagements with potential employers) for international students.

2. Use regional development agendas when selecting potential employers and educational focus.

B:

It is noted that interventions are needed beyond providing an academic programme in ensuring successful labour market entry of international students. Examples of these interventions are:

3. Organise employability camps: In Denmark, a 2-week employability camp is organised by the university in cooperation with local industry. The students themselves pay to participate, and the university provides the labour needed in organising the camp. This intervention resulted in an increased stay rate and employment of international students.
4. Incorporate language lessons into the curriculum, as following courses outside the curriculum is often not feasible for international students.
5. Courses that introduce international students to the local culture and labour market have proven to be very effective.
6. Incentivise students to participate in these programmes, for example by allocating points for following these courses or rewarding them with preferential treatment in receiving career services.
7. Facilitate interaction between local and international students, this will help international students to form a professional network and feel at home; both elements

will increase the stay rates of international students. Local students will also benefit by gaining international competence. It is crucial that these activities start early in the studies.

8. Provide mentorship programmes, for example mentoring by (international) alumni, local students or professionals from local organisations.

C:

1. Make sure all university staff are equipped to deal with international students and their needs.
2. Invest in data monitoring of stay rates and language requirements at local employers and use this data to adjust policies and shape interventions.

Policy Development

3. Do you help the students who need the most help entering the labour market, or do you spent resources on the group that has a good chance of finding a job or on those that need the most help?
This is a policy question that one needs to answer and is informed by strategic priorities and available resources.
4. Another important policy question that needs to be addressed with awareness and based on national policy is the balance between the interests of the individual and society as a whole.
5. Set up a language policy that takes into account local labour market needs and demographic developments. Elements of the language policy should include the medium of instruction, language standards for UAS employees, and the language of UAS documentation.

2. Pitfalls or things to be aware of for universities.

1. Institutions of higher learning (IHL) can sometimes paint too rosy a picture to attract students.
2. IHLs can lack urgency and strong incentives to facilitate labour market entry in the host country for international students.
3. IHL can lack financing or have an overreliance on project funding for interventions that facilitate labour market entry.

3. What can employers do to facilitate optimum labour market entry for international students?

Universities of applied sciences from 5 European countries identified the following interventions for employers to increase the stay rate and facilitate labour market entry of international students. The interventions have been ordered in 3 categories:

A. Fostering a culture of openness and willingness to change	B. Seizing opportunities around international talent	c. Early interventions
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A.

1. A conservative culture and unwillingness to change is seen by universities across countries as one of the main obstacles for employers to welcome international talent. This is more often observed in small and medium companies.

2. Onboarding and the education of employers in hiring international students and staff are seen as needed. Examples of these interventions include intercultural courses, peer learning initiatives with other employers, buddy programmes and governmental international onboarding programmes.

B.

3. In this period of an aging population across Europe it is vital for employers to transform the knowledge that there will be staff shortages due to demographic developments into action and change. For example, by having an inclusion policy, inviting international students for internships and networking events together with local students, and having a clear recruitment strategy.

6. Some innovative interventions undertaken by employers to engage international graduates are: traineeships with job guarantees, meet-and-match networking events in the first semester of the study programme, masterclasses and mentor programmes, working with targets from universities of applied sciences, organising tech excursions, and organising thematic conferences.

C.

6. Employers that engage at an early stage with students gain the most benefits, both in terms of securing future suitable employees as well as benefiting from the intellectual power of students and IHLs in solving their problems and identifying opportunities.

4. Employers: Pitfalls and obstacles

The main pitfalls or obstacles identified by universities in dealing with companies are a reluctance to hire international students for internships or more permanent employment, especially among small and medium enterprises. It was also mentioned that it can be challenging working together with employers and securing their buy-in and cooperation.

5. What can governments do to facilitate optimum labour market entry for international students?

Universities of applied sciences from 5 European countries identified the following interventions for governments to increase the stay rate and facilitate labour market entry of international students. The interventions have been ordered in 3 categories:

A. Provide (long-term) thought leadership	B. Render services	C. Role as linking pin
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A.

1. There is a role for governments as thought leaders and to steer towards solutions for an aging population and lack of technically schooled personnel. For this to happen, universities indicate that it is important for governments to think long-term and allow time for the public benefits to become clear.
2. Think holistically about the student, not just as a potential unit of labour.
3. It was mentioned multiple times that it is important to involve different stakeholders in developing policy. These stakeholders include university staff, students, as well as local employers.

B.

4. Initiate and execute onboarding support for employers hiring internationals, potentially linked to giving out job seekers' permits.
5. Encourage **language learning** for students by communicating about opportunities in the job seekers' permits and also link state benefits to achieving language goals.

A **flexible and generous approach** towards learning the language will yield positive benefits for the host community. For example, provide free or low-cost language learning on a flexible time period. In the best case, a prospective student can already start learning the host country's language prior to departure, so that mental space is reserved for the immense challenges of settling in a new country as a young person. Also, some international students or graduates will only be ready to learn the language later in their journey when they are no longer faced with challenging educational and settling-in demands.

6. Have clear and well communicated attraction and/or retention policies for international talent, especially technical talent.
7. Providing welcoming campaigns and services and ensuring all layers of government also employ internationals to encourage a feeling of belonging for the group.
8. It is noted by the participating universities that employers are not always aware of the rules and regulations around international students and graduates. Good information provision and dissemination is of utmost importance for facilitating hiring of international graduates.

C.

9. On a local level, governments have a role in connecting employers, universities, and third sector actors such as unions and public-private partnership consortia. From the participating universities there is a call to think in ecosystems, not stakeholders.

6. Governments: Pitfalls and obstacles

An important obstacle as identified by universities is the lack of long-term funding and reliance on short-term project funding in the field of interventions that will increase the stay rate.

Radical policy and policy objective changes at every political shift pose a real threat in tackling international student retention and their step towards the local labour market.

Interventions around this topic have long-term gains, but in the short term, the political space might not be conducive for interventions.

7. What can international students do to facilitate optimum labour market entry for international students?

Universities of applied sciences from five European countries identified the following interventions for international students that will increase their stay rate and facilitate labour market entry:

1. To be successful in the labour market and feel at home in one's host country, it is important to meet the locals and not stay in the bubble of other international students. Visit, for example, a local sport club. Network forming is very important for future career perspectives and feeling at home, especially in homogenous high-trust societies.
2. Early activation is very beneficial, for example, start learning the language already before leaving to the country of study. It is vital to participate in orientation activities, this investment will have long-term benefits.
3. Think out of the box and make the investment to participate in (short or pre-) internship programmes, networking events, and other initiatives that are organised by the university or other stakeholders.
4. Students should speak up and let their university and host country government know what they think and what they need. Their participation in creating policy and shaping the environment is important.
5. Last but not least, look after oneself holistically. Fitting in takes time, don't be too hard on oneself, and make sure to take time for things that are relaxing and makes one happy.

8. Pitfalls for international students

Avoid focusing only on academic results, social and broader engagement can be highly beneficial for one's future career, especially if staying in one's host country is an attractive option.

9. What can third sector parties do to facilitate optimum labour market entry for international students?

Third sector actors can be non-profit organisations, partnerships between companies and social organisations, and organisations that have a social function as well as just a commercial one, such as banks.

Inspirational examples from 3rd Sector Parties

Below follows a list of best practices, as identified by universities of applied sciences from five different European countries:

1. Make it in the North (Netherlands) – collaboration between universities, government and employers to increase retention in the North of the Netherlands.
2. Talent Boost Programme (Finland).
3. International House North Denmark (Denmark) A one-stop shop that caters for various need of international students.
4. Welcome to Maastricht region (Netherlands) A collaboration with universities, employer associations and start-up hubs (Brightlands campus).
5. FIN (Finland)- an online Finish work/ life programme.
6. UP-Rotterdam (Netherlands) A public private partnership that assist scale ups in Rotterdam and Delft.
7. Banks can play an important role in guiding international students in their financial affairs from te time they open a local bank account, guidance from universities and government can be useful here.

In order to establish a successful partnership:

- Making an ecosystem mapping is useful to identify gaps and opportunities.
- Cross-border collaboration is extra challenging in a regional approach.
- Long-term commitment is necessary.
- Avoid that one party take too much of the leadership roles.
- Practical and local knowledge should be used.

10. Needs of universities per actor

With the best practices and pitfalls identified per group of players in the field of retaining international students, the following needs were identified by universities of applied sciences from five different European countries:

At the list of results, **1 asterisk** indicates those needs that were thought to be most important and feasible; **2 asterisk** indicates those that were important but less feasible.

Word cloud for all needs:



A summary of this word cloud for needs towards ensuring successful transitions of international student into local labour markets would be:

1. Local interventions and willingness are most important
2. Communication, universities, permits, funding, talent, support play a role

3. Language, strategy, commitment, dedication and peers are needed.

From Governments

1. Quicker processing (visa issues, paperwork, residence permits) *
2. Standardised and transparent regulations and rules **
3. Long-term policies (independent from current government) **
4. Longer duration of residence permits
5. Secured funding of third-party sector and for universities **
6. Seeing the “big picture” and benefits of international students
7. Good communication – network
8. To inform and support companies better in hiring international talent.

From Third Sector

1. Support/lobby to convince government that international talent is needed *
2. Commitment – shared agenda and strategy
 - a. Long term
3. Money or help to get it **
4. Collective strength is the key perspective.
5. Include other perspectives.
 - a. Quality of life
 - b. Family/kids – sports/schools/etc
 - c. Holistic

From Universities

1. International graduates retaining strategy at the government level * and **
2. Funding (dedicated)
3. Staff training related to specific issues of international students *
4. Initiate and enhance partnership with local stakeholders *
5. Increase intercultural courses and dedicated modules for students, social activities for integration *
6. Local language course compulsory for study courses in English *

From Employers

1. Thesis projects *
2. Internship for international students *
3. Open mindset **
4. Inclusive
5. Willingness
6. Ability
7. Peer to peer pressure
8. Positive storytelling *
9. Mentors * and **

From Students

1. Involvement (willingness)
2. What they need / would like to do
3. Sustained communication -> feedback, evaluation
4. Commitment

5. Willingness to learn the local language *
6. Awareness of own responsibility *

11. Most feasible interventions summary

The needs section indicates that the most important and feasible interventions, starting with the ones with the most stickers) are:

1. Employers – Provide internships for internationals
2. Universities – Make local language courses compulsory for study courses in English
3. Students – Bring up willingness to learn the local language
4. employers – Provide questions for thesis projects
5. Students – Be aware of own responsibility
6. universities – Take initiative and enhance partnership with local stakeholders
7. governments – Strive for quicker processing of work- and residence permits.
8. Third sector- Support/Lobby to convince government that international talent is needed