



New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

FOREIGN STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA – IMPORTANT PART OF THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Foreign students in higher education establishments are becoming more and more important issue in the improvement of higher education institution attractiveness and competitiveness in the international education space. In recent years student mobility is becoming more and more important factor for effective university work. It requires attractive international study environment suitable to the majority of worldwide nations and cultures. Those issues are studied in academic research as well as prepared large number of policy documents. The paper/report is based on the theoretical studies as well as surveys of the foreign students of the University of Latvia. The goal of the research is to investigate the feedbacks from international students about their experience at the University of Latvia and offer some steps for more efficient solutions that would improve studies at University of Latvia for foreign students and make the University of Latvia more attractive for foreign exchange students. Comparisons of some indicators at University of Latvia, University of Tartu and Aarhus University are carried out. Research methods: theoretical study of relevant theory, statistical data, international rankings and documents. Quantitative surveys of foreign students are used. For data analysis of survey results indicators of proportions are used.

Theoretical Background

Internationalization might be considered as the main tool for preparing universities to nowadays society and its needs. Recently the degree of usage of English language has increased



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remarkably and, therefore, universities should follow current higher education trends in order to develop its visibility at the international education space. Leask (Laesk, 2007:33) states that globalization has put an inevitable challenge on higher education institutions. The researcher proposes that universities “have a clear responsibility to prepare graduates with international and intercultural perspectives, who can be active and critical participants in world society”. Globalization has increased people mobility and in the 21st century more than ever people are engaged in international activities, for example, studies abroad and international job market. Consequently, higher education institutions should focus on internationalization in their study environment more profoundly. Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007:4) implies that ‘if universities manage to prepare only a small percentage of their students for that world (i.e. those who actually go and study abroad), they will miss their goal’. The goal of the universities should be that all students should be prepared with the necessary international and intercultural experience in order to become competitive citizens in the globalized world. Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007:4) confirms that we all live in the world where everyone is influenced by the globalization processes. He states that “[students] will all have an international career, even if they live in their home country”. It might be an occupation in an international company, an international colleague in a local company, cooperation with overseas partner institutions etc.

Nowadays internationalization process is one of the most discussed issues at the higher education conferences and meetings. Although the term ‘internationalization’ seems to be widely known, still it means different things to different people and there is a great variety of the interpretations of the term. Generally, international education can be defined as “education which familiarizes the students in the international context, with the ways and traditions of other countries” (Marga, 2003:259). The internationalization of higher education institutions evolves more complex elements such as “adopting universities to the conditions of globalization in science, communication, and economy” (Marga, 2003:259). In other words, the universities try to reach the top level standards of the internationalization of higher education to ensure the competitiveness among the vast number of universities. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) puts forward the most appropriate definition: internationalization can be understood as “the concept and the process of integrating an international dimension into teaching, research and service functions” (OECD, 1999:3). Internationalization processes include many activities that are set as goals to ensure successful international development. Moreover, internationalization process in higher education institutions should cover all the body of the institution, however, “many [...] still associate internationalization with going abroad for study or a placement” (Beelens, 2007:1). Great emphasis should be paid not only on the mobility and placements but also on the study programmes, curriculum, staff development, international cooperation and research.

Teekens (Teekens, 2007:6) states that internationalization process in the nowadays globalized world can be characterized by four indicators: “internationalization concerns collective efforts”, “mobility is based on market principles”, “it happens worldwide”, “mobility focuses on full-degree mobility, rather than exchanges”. This statement claims that cooperation and joint programmes with other partner universities might facilitate the internationalization process better than coping with the problem individually [as a result both universities are beneficiaries]. Teekens (Teekens, 2007:6) continues that “in long run, institutional cooperation offers a better potential for structural cooperation and curriculum development than individual



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staff contacts”. Better results can be reached if the whole institution is involved in the cooperation thus ensuring more efficient cooperation and outcomes than of one or two persons only. Additionally, the statement implies that there has appeared a new trend from short-term mobility focusing on a full-degree mobility thus emphasizing the importance of recruitment of international full-time students.

Maringe (Maringe, 2009) claims that successful implementation of internationalization raises the transnational recognition and higher education institutions’ position in the higher education space. Additionally it attracts more foreign students thus increasing the institutions budget from international student fees. However, one should not refer to the internationalization process as a mean of gaining profit, but concentrate on the added value the internationalized university may offer to the students, namely, “open minds, generosity toward other peoples, know how to behave in other cultures, and how to communicate with people with different values and customs”(Roth, 2010). With regard to the internationalization process at the University of Latvia, remarkable improvements are urgent in the field of international study environment, including course offer for exchange students, updated webpage for international students, and international competence development of academic and administrative staff.

The Head of International Relations Department of the University of Latvia Mrs. Alina Gržibovska: “...situation among universities in the Baltic States and universities in Denmark or Norway differ in one significant aspect, namely, to the governments’ support to state universities. While in Latvia universities have to deal with the improvement of international environment within university’s own budget, state universities in Denmark and Norway receive additional funding from the state for each foreign student including full time and exchange students enrolled at the university”. Carroll-Boegh and Takagi (Carroll-Boegh, 2006) confirm that universities in Denmark have greater potential “because their funding is based on students completing each year of the course”. Therefore they [state universities in Denmark and Norway] have more possibilities to develop effectively and create more successful international study environment.

Every university has its own development plan, namely, in which directions to develop with greater efficiency and how to maintain the successful experience. The definition of the term strategy should not be considered only as the plan with set goals. According to Weber (Weber, 2006), ‘in order to become stronger and to improve, the whole institution needs to define and implement a long-term strategy on the basis of its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its opportunities and threats’. The most efficient further development plan can be composed after careful analysis of weaknesses and strengths of a respective university body. Research results of Van der Wende (Van der Wende, 2007) have proved that “successful internationalization strategies depend on the right mix of competitive and cooperative options”. Therefore, each university should find its own suitable methods and further steps for development in order to become a successful and internationally attractive higher education institution.

Nowadays university rankings have become as indicators of a prestige and quality of education the respective university may offer. Marginson and van der Wende (Marginson, 2007) claim that ranking has become a global phenomenon that has lead to the high competition among higher education institutions worldwide. However, one should note that universities do not have equal background in the worldwide competition, because ‘the



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universities that have established themselves earlier in global higher education have the competitive advantage' (Horta, 2009), and the so-called 'newcomers' have to compete with a double energy and impetuosity.

Although in academic research is considered rankings as a 'driver of change' (OECD, Rankings) it can also be associated with a threat to institutions' reputation, attraction of foreign students and international partnerships. Moreover, OECD suggests that 'rankings influence the willingness of others to partner with them or support their membership of academic/professional associations' (OECD, 2007), which means that international rankings have an important influence on partnership negotiations. On one hand, it might be positive that various ranking tables are presented thus ensuring the variability between the higher education institutions. They might differ from the evaluation requirements, selected geographical location, etc. On the other hand, one might be confused of the various ranking tables when searching and analyzing the data of a particular university. This report is based on three different tables such as Ranking Web of World Universities, QS World University Rankings and Academic Ranking of World Universities.

Van der Wende (Van der Wende, 2007) points out that "a common problem is that these ranking systems evaluate universities as a whole (ignoring that they have different goals and missions and that they are internally differentiated)". The main disadvantage is that all worldwide universities are evaluated by equal requirements, but one should take into consideration that countries differ from each other as well as their labour market needs, cultures, national policies, values etc. Van der Wende (Van der Wende, 2007:280) states that universities should be evaluated by "[...] their various functions taken separately, including the different aspects of research and teaching and the different disciplines, locations and discrete service functions". It might be defined as unfair when compared, for example, top ten universities in the USA with the universities in relatively poor and underdeveloped countries. One might say that this is an arguable issue and each ranking table has different representative role.

One of the tools of becoming an internationally recognizable institution is a successful brand. Branding of the universities has become a topical issue with regard to the transnational recognition. In other words, branding is closely related to the reputation building of the higher education institution with a common aim of 'creating an innovative 'world-class' university' (Aula, 2011). The definition of a successful brand implies 'a name, symbol, design, or some combination, which identifies the 'product' of a particular organization as having a sustainable competitive advantage (Chapleo, 2010). The definition suggests that branding is a complex challenge with a great responsibility in representation of a respective institution. Chapleo (Chapleo, 2010: 169-183) continues that creation of a successful brand is based on three characteristics: an effective product, a distinctive identity and added values.

Internationalization is a complex process and cannot be successfully achieved within experience of a single institution; therefore, international cooperation is one of the tools of introducing transnational view, experience, and culture in the respective institution. Usually collaboration agreements are signed when signatories are aware that cooperation will be mutually beneficial to both parties, in other words, a successful knowledge transfer and sharing of experience. International cooperation is based mainly on exchange level including the exchange of students, staff members (both academic and administrative), researchers, scientific discoveries etc. The main aim of international collaboration is the exchange of knowledge and



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experience, for example, the experience of other cultures, teaching and learning methodologies, knowledge sharing in the field of science, organizational and administrative experience etc.

Teekens (Teekens, 2007) suggests that ‘learning from other countries and universities is not only useful, but extremely inspiring and a motivation as well’. From the personal experience it can be said that after the business trip to a cooperating university the level of inspiration is remarkable. The amount of ideas, experiences and suggestions that would facilitate the work or create better study environment is significant. Every employee engaged in the internationalization process should have an opportunity to go abroad and become acquainted with the experience of a partner university. Sursock et al. (Sursock, 2010) states that ‘today more attention is being paid to quality rather than quantity of partnerships and there is greater critical awareness for the need to select partners carefully and purposefully’. Many universities currently are reevaluating their partner universities and even cancelling or not prolonging their cooperation agreements. As the reasons might be considered the ineffectual cooperation where, for example, with regard to student mobility, one of the parties send students with insufficient language or background knowledge that is not suitable for the host university. In such cases the study level is endangered and weakens the overall quality of the study not only for the students but for all the host institution. Consequently, as Kehm and Teichler (Kehm, 2007) suggest, the partner institutions have become more selective in their choice of partners. Universities are interested in cooperation with respectful and high level universities that assure the quality. Kehm and Teichler (Kehm, 2007:266) introduce that currently has appeared ‘a shift from cooperation to competition’, which creates a paradox situation, namely, universities want to cooperate with the best partner universities, but at the same time keeping in mind that the partner universities are the competitors in the international education space. Cultural diversity is one of the characteristics of the internationalization processes and is regarded as a benefit for international education space. Laesk (Laesk, 2007) proposes that ‘culturally diverse campus provides a window on the world’ which means that different cultures can be merged without necessarily going abroad. On one hand it is a valuable experience for all students and lecturers, but on the other hand it puts new challenges to the university, namely, the study environment should be well prepared for international knowledge transfer. The preferable outcome would be that the knowledge and experience obtained at the University of Latvia would be better and of a higher quality than at the students’ home university. Therefore, in order to become open to different cultures within the domestic environment, the university should increase the quality level of the studies so that it suits all students both local and international, and preferably the most talented and motivated students. Teekens (Teekens, 2007) suggests that ‘when dealing with intercultural competences in higher education we really move from the issue of internationalization to what could be called ‘interculturalization’. He means that we become more aware of cultural diversity and it becomes the leading point in the process of internationalization with regard to the tolerance and understanding when setting up the international classroom. Although Laesk (Laesk, 2007) claims that diversity on campus does not definitely guarantee internationalization of a university, according to Bok (Bok, 2010) “diversity can certainly enrich education”. Cultural diversity can be considered as the added value of a particular university because ‘it can teach [students] to appreciate differences in culture and customs and outlook on life and it can teach them ultimately to adapt more easily to a globalized, cosmopolitan world’ (Bok, 2010:21). The main advantage is that one does not have to go abroad to get acquainted with different cultures and nations.



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However, one should be aware that still many things should be improved in order to enjoy true satisfaction. If the university is willing to attract incoming exchange students, Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007) identifies several problems that should be solved or improved:

- a) Supply good housing facilities;
- b) Make all facilities and services available for incoming students;

Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007) states that “in order for international students to be able to use all services of an institution, they have to be accessible in a language that the students speak”. Therefore, employees engaged in the services for international students should have a good command of English, and it is not enough if only the International Relations Department or Student Service are competent to communicate in English. Although Sursock et al (Sursock, 2010) considers that student services have the most important role at the university and that “they need to ensure that students have access to all that they need”, one should be aware that university’s body is compiled of many units and each unit dealing with services for students should have a good command of English in order to adapt the international education space.

Have tutors for incoming students.

- c) Common social events for both international and local students;

As the main problem indicated by international exchange students is the lack of communication with local students, and therefore, international students are usually communicating with other international students. Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007:60) proposes that international students should feel that they are welcome to take part in social events made for all students of the respective university. Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007:60) adds that international students should be informed about the events organized for or by the local students. The main problem is that usually international students are not aware of the events organized by the respective faculty or university and thus ensuring the isolation from the local students. “Usually things work the other way round: home students are encouraged to participate in activities that are specially organized for international students” (Beelens, 2007:60) in order to meet local students.

- d) Guest lecturers;

Invitation of guest lecturers is considered as a significant tool with regard to the internationalization process and according to Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007), guest lecturers are ‘an effective way to internationalize the curriculum’. Teissier (Teissier, 2007) introduces that “most of the visitors are people with a lot of experience and with a cultural background that is different from ours’ and therefore visiting lecturers are important in order to share experience and knowledge. On the other hand, Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007:53) suggests that participation in the lesson lectured by the guest lecturer “creates a situation in which students are forced to speak another language and look at issues from another angle”, which are the most important aims of the guest lecture. The majority of the guest lecturers come from another country with a different culture, values and views to the nowadays society. These differences create the added value to the lecture and introduces international point of view to the chosen topic.

The main problem with guest lectures is that sometimes they are not taught as a part of a programme and students do not feel familiar with the topic, namely, they are not interested and are reluctant to attend. Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007:53) claims that if the guest lecture is not part of a regular course and is not closely related to the subject of the course, students are not



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motivated to attend extra lectures. Therefore, before inviting guest lecturers, the faculties should be informed about the topic of the guest lecturer and whether it corresponds to the current programme at the respective university. Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007:53) also stresses that “guest lecturers should always have the full support of the receiving department”. Good teaching and living conditions would promote further cooperation and establish closer mutual dealings within faculty members, for example, staff exchange. With regard to the teaching staff exchange, Beelens et al (Beelens, 2007:53) gives advice that the first visit at the partner university should not be made as a teaching visit because at first one should get familiar with the foreign colleagues, study programme and the teaching conditions in order to have a successful experience and efficient guest lecture.

Empirical Research Results

In the globalized world and greatly competitive environment the main aim of all the universities is to become internationally recognized as the top level research and study universities. The analysis of the University of Latvia Strategic Plan 2010-2020 (UL, Strategy), Internationalization Strategy 2009-2013 of the Aarhus University (Aarhus University) and the University of Tartu Strategic Plan 2009-2015 (TU Strategy) is conducted in order to compare the foresight of the development of all three universities. For example, the vision (UL, Strategy) of the University of Latvia is that in 2019 the university will be “a leading research university in the Baltic Sea region” and will rank ‘highly among European universities’. Aarhus University has put forward the following priority: “to be among the leaders in the development of higher education within Europe” (Aarhus University), whereas the aim (TU Strategy) of the University of Tartu is “to become an internationally attractive [...]” and “the best in Estonia”. Aarhus University has stated quite a challenging aim of becoming one of the leaders in Europe. While the University of Latvia and University of Tartu are enough self-critical and reasonable in facing the challenges related to the aim of becoming a respectful and attractive higher education institutions within the Baltic Sea region and even at the European level.

The comparison of all three university strategies points out the main development scenarios, common and different views, trends and challenges. Basically all three universities have common goals related to the internationalization processes – become an internationally recognized research university and enrich international collaboration. Increasing the number of courses and study programmes taught in English, recruitment of international students and international staff members are the common aims to all three universities. The analysis of each university’s individual plan is followed by a paragraph of interrelated aims between the universities:

1. Individual plan of Aarhus University

The difference is that Aarhus University is mainly oriented on research development by means of increasing international research funding and promoting outgoing mobility of researchers (Aarhus University). Aarhus University puts emphasis on cooperation agreements with elite universities and active participation in key university networks. With regard to the university branding, Aarhus University is looking forward organizing high-profile conferences with international participation thus ensuring the worldwide recognition.



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2. Individual plan of University of Latvia

In order to promote international recognition, the University of Latvia aims to increase cooperation agreements, increase the number of joint degree programmes and attract more exchange students. Additional attention is paid to staff development; namely, the University of Latvia is interested in promoting the capability of academic and administrative staff members according to the international standards. University of Latvia has put forward six characteristic values, which are identified as main driving forces (UL, Strategy): people, excellence, academic freedom, academic culture, responsibility for one's activity in front of the society and the state, and openness and respect for diversity.

3. Individual plan of University of Tartu

The strategic plan of University of Tartu (TU Strategy) is concerned with promotion of student mobility, but the main emphasis is put on attracting Estonian lecturers and researchers, who work and defend their doctoral thesis abroad and on creating network of internship facilities at local and international level. University of Tartu wants to strengthen its identity as Estonian national university and develop a learner-centred teaching environment.

4. Interrelated aims between Aarhus University, University of Latvia and University of Tartu

The University of Latvia and Aarhus University identify themselves as research universities; therefore, both universities concentrate on recruitment of high level international researchers and collaboration with international research centres and projects thus ensuring the increase of internationally recognized publications. Additionally, Aarhus University and the University of Latvia show interest in organizing international summer schools, seminars and specified international courses as part of the internationalization. University of Tartu and Aarhus University have common aims at developing a professional arrival and support system for incoming students from abroad. Currently lifelong learning and continuing education are topical issues in the higher education space and the University of Latvia and University of Tartu have defined these types of education as one of the main focus areas. All challenges are achievable the question raises in the methodology and the term in which the goals can be fulfilled. The set goals are used as tools of internationalization in order to become transnational high level universities.

Data of table 1 – university rankings provided by the *Ranking Web of Worldwide Universities* indicates that University of Latvia neighbour university [and a competitor] – University of Tartu is evaluated 671 positions higher than the University of Latvia, which is a significant disparity. However, the possibility to reach the level of the Aarhus University might be considered as a remarkable challenge for both the University of Latvia and University of Tartu.

The next row shows data of *QS World University Rankings* where the University of Latvia is not represented, while the University of Tartu is among the 551-600 best universities in the world. Aarhus University shows its best achievement in this ranking taking the 84th position. The last row represents data of *Academic Ranking of World Universities* where, unfortunately, the University of Latvia and University of Tartu are not present and Aarhus University ranks at the 98th place.



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Authors conclude that Aarhus University has the most successful results among all three Baltic Sea region universities and from three different ranking tables takes the position in TOP 100 in two of represented tables, whereas University of Tartu shows relevant superiority over the University of Latvia, namely, the positions and the presence in two of three university rankings. The most unpleasant situation is for the University of Latvia, which is present only in one of the three provided university rankings. This observation leads to the discussion of the active participation and application to university rankings, international recognition and attractiveness. Universities should consider higher education rankings as important indicators in the higher education space.

Table 1

University Rankings 2010

University	Ranking Web of World Universities ¹		QS World University Rankings ²	Academic Ranking of World Universities ³
	2011	2012		
 University of Latvia	1132	948	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
 University of Tartu	461	501	551-600	Not mentioned
 Aarhus University	157	223	84	98

Source: Author's prepared based on Internet sources

To conclude, the University of Latvia has a challenge to create a successful brand that represents its strengths, identity and added value that will highlight it among other higher education institutions. A successful branding might help to obtain international attractiveness and foster its position in the worldwide university rankings.

Currently the University of Latvia has 105 bilateral agreements with universities in 37 countries, more than 500 Erasmus agreements with 278 universities in 28 European countries and the number of agreements is increasing every year (Exchange). The available data shows that achievements in the number of cooperation agreements are highly progressive, however, one might start to consider about gradual refraining from signing too many cooperation agreements. For statistical numbers the data provided is relevant, however, has one conducted an analysis of the actual cooperation within all the signed agreements? The results might be surprising from both negative and positive point of view. The selection of the partner

¹ Source: Ranking Web of World Universities, January 2012 (Online <http://www.webometrics.info/>)

² Source: QS World University Rankings, 2010 (Online <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings>)

³ Source: Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2010 (Online http://www.arwu.org/ARWU2010_5.jsp)



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universities should be based on the quality of knowledge and experience the respective higher education institution may offer to the partner university.

One may claim that cooperation has more advantages than disadvantages and collaboration is used as a tool for international visibility. Today the topical trend is the establishment of various worldwide university networks thus creating the sense of unity and closer relationships. “Creating small international and European networks is a strategy frequently chosen by institutions to boost their visibility and combine strengths” (Sursock, 2010). The University of Latvia is currently a member of thirteen (Exchange) international university networks and organizations and by its active participation represents the university as a reliable, competitive and internationally visible higher education institution. For example, the membership in the Baltic Sea Region University Network (BSRUN) facilitates cooperation within the member institutions in the respective network by means of student and academic staff exchange, information exchange and implementation of joint research projects. The common goals and challenges put forward by all cooperation parties are achieved with joint input and strength.

When many cultures merge together in shared environment, one should have excellent proposals how to deal with the delicate situation and create or improve the environment the most acceptable for every culture. International environment does not relate only to the study programmes and tolerance and understanding towards international students. The aim of setting up international environment is to create a familiar study environment for foreigners so that they do not feel excluded or separated from local students. The University of Latvia is always proud of the growing number of exchange students thus verifying the university’s attractiveness in the eyes of partner universities. Some empirical evaluations for incoming exchange students at University of Latvia:

1) Supply good housing facilities

The opinions about the quality of student dormitories might be discussable; however, one might believe that the university does the best it can do. After several complaints of international students at University of Latvia, the authors came to conclusion that additional attention should be paid to the knowledge of English of the dormitory’s personnel. It is not the case that living in the dormitories includes only paying bills and receiving the keys. Everyone may experience household related problems such as problems with sink, shower etc., and in order to identify and solve these problems a sufficient knowledge of a language common to both parties is needed. If compared with the University of Tartu, the receptionists of the student dormitory were able to speak at least three languages and students were sure that they can rely on the reception if any problems appeared and that students will be understood. If the University of Latvia associates itself with internationalization, then the student housing facilities should provide the best conditions for both local and international students.

2) Make all facilities and services available for incoming students

Employees engaged in the services for international students should have a good command of English, for example, with regard to the services for international students, a successful experience has been observed with the University of Latvia Sport Centre because the representatives of the centre are welcome to international students and have sufficient English language skills. For example, each year exchange students are competing with local football or floor-ball teams and have fully integrated into the University of Latvia sport life. Probably



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local students would not like to admit the fact that one needs good skills to defeat the football competitors from Spain, Portugal or Italy.

The most important issue is that all students should have the same access to LUIS system as local students (with appropriate data) with information provided in English, for example, students should be able to see the timetable as well as be able to find course descriptions and additionally, a short and specific user manual should be provided with a reader friendly instructions of how to manage the information system.

With regard to ensuring the international environment, firstly, additional attention should be paid to the necessity of bilingual signs. For example, when international student enters the faculty or main building of the University of Latvia, usually students already feel lost because of the lack of enough information in English. The suggestion is that university should implement bilingual signs, for example, in which direction is the library, cafeteria, secretary, Dean's office, international coordinator etc. In order not to spend extra 20 minutes for searching the right room, students would be grateful if provided with bilingual signs. Secondly, although the catering services at the University of Latvia faculties are not owned by the university, it might be very respectful attitude if the menu would be provided bilingual as well. On one hand it would be a kind gesture not only to international students but also to the international staff members or guests, so that they could not only see and guess the name of the dish but also be aware of its ingredients. This improvement might be very helpful also for those who are engaged in the modern societies' eating habits, for example, vegetarians, vegans etc., and as the university states that it is international and open to all cultures, bilingual menu would also prove this conviction.

3) Have tutors for incoming students

It is noted that it should be expressed gratitude to the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) Riga Team for the input and energy they devote to enrich international students' life in Latvia. ESN Riga is not welcome only to students within the Erasmus programme but to all international exchange students who have come to study in Latvia within different exchange agreements. Starting from the academic year 2010/2011 ESN Riga is helping to acclimatize also the full-time degree seeking students from abroad. One should not that ESN Riga is a not-for-profit international student organization which "provides opportunities for cultural understanding and self-development under the principle Students Helping Students" (ESN, 2011). Moreover, the attention should be drawn to the fact that the members of ESN Riga are volunteers and are not paid for their work. The members are mainly students who have experienced tutor services during their exchange period abroad or non-mobile students, who are led by own interest and enthusiasm. The organization offers various trips around Latvia and neighbour countries in order to introduce international students with the culture and identity of the Baltic States. Regular events related to intercultural familiarization and informal social events are organized in order to get acquainted with other cultures, make friendships etc.

The general aim of tutors is to keep in touch with the international student before he or she arrives and give advices to the relevant questions proposed by the newcomers, and to meet international students when they arrive, for example, at the airport or the bus station. In order to evaluate the work of the ESN organization, international students were asked to fill the survey and reply to the following question: Did you have a student buddy taking care of you at the beginning of your stay? The survey was conducted for international students at the University of



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Latvia and University of Tartu and both parties had to give answers (with regard to the visiting country) about the ESN Riga and ESN Tartu respectively. Table 2 shows that 153 international students of the University of Latvia have expressed their opinion from which 89.6 percent have given an affirmative answer, 5.2 percent of the respondents have given a negative answer and 4.5 percent of students indicated the option 'other'.

Table 2

Did you have a student tutor taking care of you at the beginning of your stay in Latvia?

Responses		Frequency	Proportion (percent)
Valid	Yes	138	89.6
	No	8	5.2
	Other	7	4.5
	Total	153	99.4
Missing	System	1	0.6
Total		154	100.0

Source: Author's calculations based on survey of foreign students in 2010, (n=154)

Under the option 'other' students have mentioned the following most frequent alternatives: the tutor was working and could not meet; they will meet within few days; my friend's tutor is taking care of me as well; and the tutor got ill. Data represented at Table 2. shows that negative answer has been given by 8 international students, and the reason might be that as student tutor services are not obligatory, the international student may choose whether he or she needs an assistance or not. However, statistics shows that ESN Riga is welcome and hard working for international exchange students, and is successfully helping them to integrate in the society.

The comparative analysis with the ESN Tartu is available on Table 3 which presents the outcome of the survey conducted for the international students of the University of Tartu.

Table 3

Did you have a student tutor taking care of you at the beginning of your stay in Estonia?

Responses		Frequency	Proportion (percent)
Valid	Yes	24	21.2
	No	7	21.2
	Other	2	6.1
	Total	33	100.0

Source: Author's calculations based on survey of foreign students in 2010, (n=33)

Table 3 shows that 33 respondents have participated in the survey from which 72.7 percent had given positive answer, 21.2 students have replied negatively and 6.1 percent have indicated 'other' as their answer. For example, one student has indicated the option 'other' with a comment that officially he or she had a student tutor, but the tutor did not do much to help.



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The analysis of both tables indicates that most favourable experience has been for international students of the University of Latvia led by ESN Riga members with more than 15 percent superiority. However, one should be aware that both ESN Riga and ESN Tartu are of great importance for their input in the everyday life of international students.

4) Common social events for both international and local students

As the main problem indicated by international exchange students is the lack of communication with local students, and therefore, international students are usually communicating with other international students. The university should avoid organizing events only for international students because students' aim coming to Latvia is not only to study at the university but also to meet local people and get to know their national identity, values, opinions and culture. It cannot be sufficiently done in a shop or classroom; therefore, social events with local students should be organized. The suggestion would be that social events should be organized with a target group of both local and international students so that they could merge and get acquainted with each other. Moreover, both student groups should be treated equally well so that local students would not feel that representatives of the university express more attention or give greater benefits to the international students. Even if the representatives are willing to show special care or attention to the international students, it should be done professionally enough so that the local students would not notice it. The advantages would be for both parties: local students would improve their language skills and share the experiences or give some advices regarded to life and studies in Latvia, and international students would improve their Latvian language skills and share their overseas experience. Both parties might find a common range of interests and extend their communication or cooperation in future.

It could be suggested that the organization of above mentioned events should be organized by the Student Council of the University of Latvia as it is the representative body of all students enrolled at the respective university. Previous years experience has showed that Student Council takes rather passive role with regard to international exchange students and is mainly occupied with activities related to local students. As example, if we look at the website of the Student Council of the University of Latvia and notice that information in the webpage is available only in Latvian language. For good fortune, the rotation of the representatives at the Student Council takes place comparatively often and current representative of International Affairs has created the Student Councils' account on the nowadays most popular social network *Facebook*, where information about different activities is displayed in English. Moreover, this year Student Council is also organizing Europe wide trips offered also for international exchange students. Anyway, additional attention should be paid to social activities where local students meet international students. There are several good examples when incoming exchange students make friendships with local students and the experience has shown that such long time professional co-operation develops not only the professional growth, but also international co-operation between the countries.

5) Guest lecturers

Invitation of guest lecturers is considered as a significant tool with regard to the internationalization process. The majority of the guest lecturers come from another country with a different culture, values and views to the nowadays society. These differences create the added value to the lecture and introduces international point of view to the chosen topic.



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The main problem with guest lectures is that sometimes they are not taught as a part of a programme and students do not feel familiar with the topic, namely, they are not interested and are reluctant to attend. The statistics show that starting from year 2006 an active participation in teaching staff exchange has been observed. Figure 1 shows the annual changes in the incoming and outgoing teaching staff mobility at the University of Latvia.

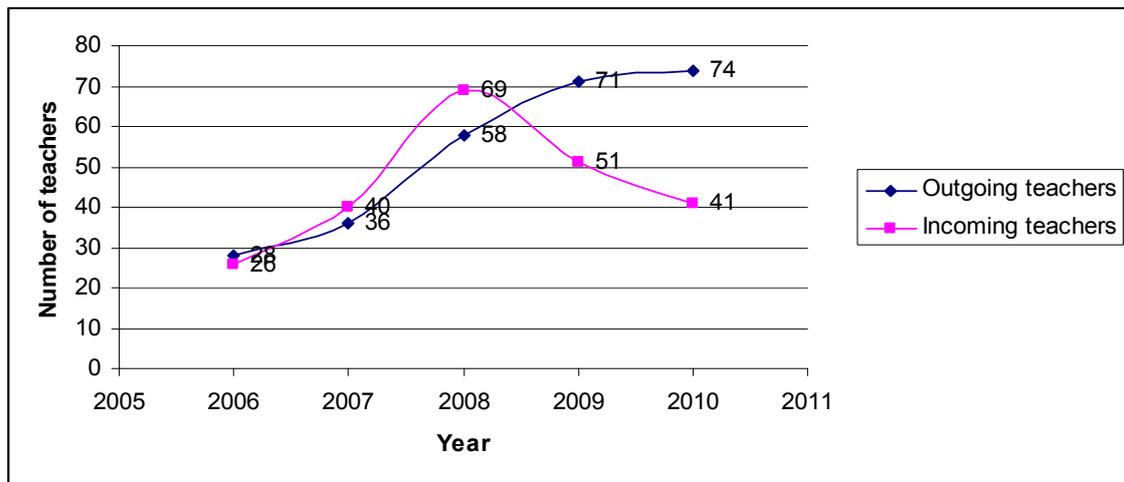


Figure 1. University of Latvia teaching staff mobility 2006-2010

Source: University of Latvia Foreign Relations Department

Figure 1 shows that remarkable differences between the incoming and outgoing staff exchange have appeared in 2009 and 2010. If from time period 2006-2007 the numbers were rather similar then after 2009 the situation has changed vice versa and the outgoing mobility prevail the incoming teaching staff mobility. It could be considered that funding for staff exchange plays a significant role, but it should also be noted that lecturers' motivation to academic growth is a relevant reason as well. From the internationalization point of view, the number of incoming guest lecturers should be improved in order to balance the mobility and give international experience to students and faculty members. On the other hand, the increasing interest of teaching staff members of the University of Latvia to go abroad and conduct guest lectures is a significant achievement in the way to internationalization. A visit abroad encourages teaching staff members to self-development and to master overseas experiences. Starting from 2006 (Exchange, 2012), a remarkable increase in student numbers spending a semester or full year abroad in Europe, USA or Asia has been observed (Figure2). The University of Latvia becomes even more attractive as a place for studies and research – the number of incoming exchange students, who choose University of Latvia as their host university is increasing every year. The most active exchange takes place in the Erasmus programme – the UL has signed more than 525 cooperation agreements with over 278 universities in 28 European countries (Exchange, 2012). The number of available courses held in English increases every year. Successful experience of academic staff exchange ensures



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international scope, ideas and innovations in the study environment. University of Latvia management appreciates that the faculties are active in involving visiting professors in the study process.

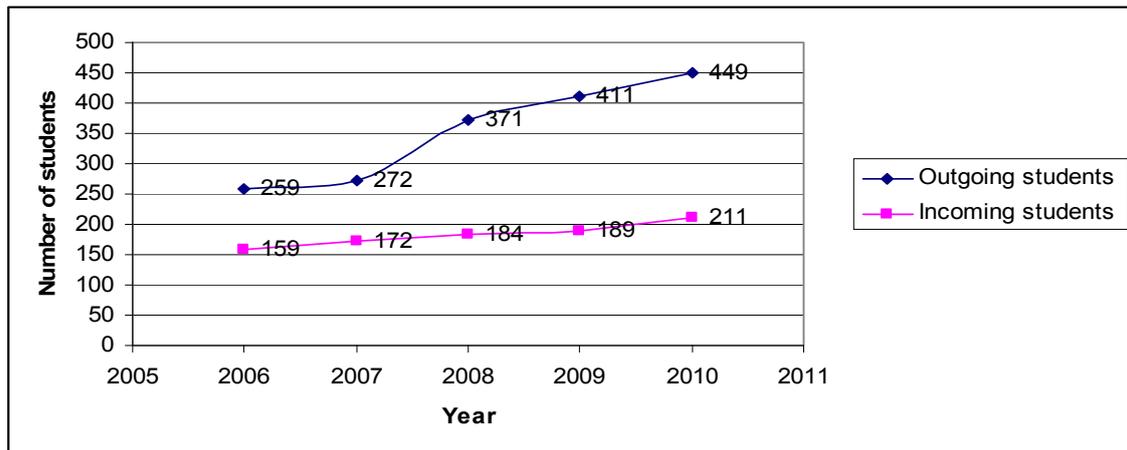


Figure 2. University of Latvia student mobility 2006-2010

Source: University of Latvia Foreign Relations Department

Figure 2 shows that every year increase of outgoing and incoming students takes place at University of Latvia in years 2006 – 2007, outgoing students in last years are around twice as much as incoming students.

Conclusions

Globalization has remarkably affected the role of higher education institutions. Apart from the knowledge transfer, current world requires more internationally oriented knowledge with an emphasis on transnational social and cultural awareness and competences. Internationalization of the higher education institutions is considered as the most effective tool in order to achieve the above mentioned challenges. Moreover, the involvement of all university body ensures successful implementation by means of common strengths, experience and motivation. A professionally composed and up-to-date international strategy is the first step towards the transnational education space and successful improvements. However, a special attention should be drawn to the international university rankings as they play a significant role in the worldwide education community thus influencing the reputation, recognition and attractiveness of a university. International cooperation and partnership building are one of the main tools of internationalization, and are regarded as the facilitators of an international scope, experience and togetherness among higher education institutions all over the world. The survey conducted for international students at the University of Latvia and University of Tartu indicates that both universities have been chosen for study abroad period by international students mainly because of their own wish and considerations. With regard to international recognition and



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attractiveness of both universities, the survey results show that both universities have sufficient reputation as recommendations of previous students and home university's impact on decision making are evaluated as comparatively significant reasons in students' choice. Numbers of academic staff members and students outgoing for international exchange from University of Latvia increases every year. Incoming members of teaching staff to University of Latvia decrease since 2006. There are many challenges for teaching staff and students to participate in student/academic staff mobility for further development of their own and making more attractive study environment at home university.

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