

Looking good from the outside

Excitement about 'new Europe' puts European universities increasingly in demand worldwide, writes Ian Mundell

Policymakers wondering how Europe's universities can be made more attractive to the rest of the world can draw encouragement from a recent survey examining the internationalisation of higher education.

It shows that universities elsewhere in the world already see Europe as a high priority for international collaboration - whether for staff and student exchanges, research co-operation or institutional networks.

The findings come from a survey carried out in 2005 for the International Association of Universities (IAU), a non-governmental organisation based at UNESCO. A comprehensive analysis of the results will be presented in October, but the initial findings already make interesting reading.

The survey asked universities around the world about their priorities and opinions on international activities. Responses were received from 526 institutions in 95 countries - only a small proportion of the higher education sector worldwide, but with sufficiently good geographical coverage to be informative and to surpass any previous work.

Institutions were asked what their geographical priorities were for international activities. In Europe, as in the Asia Pacific, Africa and Latin America, the top priority was for work with other countries in the same region. But Europe ranked second for the other three regions, by a long way for institutions in Latin America and Africa, and equally placed with North America for institutions in the Asia Pacific region.

For institutions in the Middle East, Europe was the top priority for internationalisation activities, while in North America attention was focused equally on Europe and the Asia Pacific. "The interest of the outside world in Europe is absolutely undeniable," says Eva Egron-Polak, the IAU's secretary-general. After intra-regional activity, European institutions favoured international engagement with the Asia Pacific region closely followed by North America. In joint fourth place were Latin America and Africa, with the Middle East sixth and last.

Europe's apparent popularity is likely to be a mixture of its own attractiveness and incentives to look elsewhere, according to Jane Knight, author of the study and a researcher at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, part of the University of Toronto. The Bologna process of higher education reform and, more importantly, EU programmes supporting co-operation with other regions of the world can claim some of the credit for pulling people towards Europe, she says. "Also, and this may not be evident to Europeans, for outsiders there is a sense of excitement about the new Europe." Among the push factors, global politics is likely to be significant. "On the North American side, especially in the United States, there are real challenges in terms of its reputation on security, in terms of work visas," she says.

The survey also shows the extent to which the Bologna process, which would make European courses and qualifications more comparable and interchangeable, is driving internationalisation activities in Europe. For instance, the most popular motivation for carrying out such activities among European institutions was the development and strengthening of their international profile, whereas for the survey as a whole this motivation came third after internationalising students and faculty, and strengthening research capacity. "That is consistent with the Bologna process and its goal of increasing the attractiveness of the European higher education system," says Knight. "Institutions seem to have taken that on board."

Europe is also different from the rest of the world in the aspects of internationalisation that are reported as growing most rapidly. Overall, the most frequently reported growth area is international and institutional agreements and networks, followed by out-going student mobility and research collaboration. For European institutions, however, the most frequently cited growth area is the out-going mobility of faculty and staff. This may be part of a maturation in the internationalisation process of European higher education, Knight suggests, moving on from established student mobility programmes. Sending professors abroad may also be seen as an increasingly important step in building enduring educational and research links.

- *A full analysis of the survey will be published and discussed at an IAU conference in China in October. Preliminary findings are available at www.unesco.org/iau/internationalization/index.html.*

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