

Internationalisation made to measure

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Publication date

2014

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Mikroniek: vakblad voor precisie-technologie

Citation (APA)

Herder, J. (2014). Internationalisation made to measure. *Mikroniek: vakblad voor precisie-technologie*, 54(4), 4-4.

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
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INTERNATIONALISATION MADE TO MEASURE



Internationalisation is a prominent issue in any university's policy. Rightfully so, because science is a global business, certainly with open access becoming more general. Yet the action points tend to focus on attracting M.Sc. students and comparison with universities abroad. While certainly important for the financial situation and reputation of our universities, it is also interesting to take a view from the ground, i.e. the daily business of a research group. A quick CV scan of a group's population learns that a typical postdoctoral researcher has B.Sc. and M.Sc. degrees from different universities, sometimes even from different countries, obtained a Ph.D. at another continent, oftentimes naturalised in the host country, and had various short stays at yet other institutions in other remote countries. This type of international exposure is deemed increasingly important, for instance to obtain personal grants such as an NWO Veni.

I tell my students to not take me as an example. For someone born in Hengelo, the Netherlands, it may have been some step to study at Delft but for the rest my international mobility has been limited to two six-month research stays abroad. I did develop a variety of international activities though, and surely these stays and activities have meant a lot to me personally, my career and my view on academia. For all of these reasons I encourage my students to go out and explore. Indeed, an important responsibility of the university is to put young people in a profitable starting position for their career, B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D. students and young entrepreneurs alike. Many students do part of their M.Sc. graduation at befriended labs abroad, often resulting in a joint paper. For those not able to go out there are other options, such as organising international symposia. Either way, it is a valuable experience: the contacts, the way things work in another academic group, managing the project, and handling the independence, which after all is the main assessment criterion for any academic degree.

Arranging an international stay, however, is not always easy. Particularly, finance is usually not trivial, even for Ph.D. students on a funded project. Travel budget is limited and not tailored to stays other than a regular conference. There are some grants to fill this gap, but not too many. Given the importance we attach to international experience, it would be appropriate to make funding available to this end. Conversely, if we are sending our students all over the world, it is not more than appropriate to host roughly as many foreign students over here. Financially this tends to be even more difficult. Budgetting a few thousand euros annually for each Ph.D. project would already be a great step.

In spite of its importance, internationalisation is not a guarantee or necessity for success. This holds for individuals, but also for conferences or scientific organisations. This is evident from the same quick CV scan but now focussing on the higher ranked faculty, where one finds among many foreign names also many reputable individuals with steady positions at the same institute throughout their career. By the way, at home they provide a firm base for internationalisation. It is also clear from the many highly valued conferences organised by national professional or scientific bodies. One such example is the biennial DSPE conference, which stands out in the plethora of international conferences by a clear focus on high-tech industry. In all other respects it has the components of a regular scientific conference, but keeping this focus will strengthen its position and it will see rising interest across industry and academia.

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