

Facultair Deelbeleidsplan – Internationalisation

Staff Mobility and international partnerships

Research and education activities within the faculty WE-BIR build upon strong international collaborations. The key to successful internationalisation lies in the contacts made by our teaching and research staff. We encourage our PhD students, postdoctoral researchers as well as professors to actively seek experience abroad via different forms of staff mobility, including through the active promotion of existing funding schemes (IRMO staff mobility, Global Minds, Erasmus+, doctoral school, FWO). We also advocate for an improved VUB system to record and valorise these mobilities, in all its forms, by using a standardised procedure. The faculty promotes international recruitment of researchers and professors and aims at providing its international staff with qualitative guidance and information to favour their integration.

The faculty aims at getting a better and up-to-date overview of existing research and education partnerships from the different departments, through the use of the dashboard internationalisation developed by IRMO (ASP2030). Such data on qualitative partners is essential to identify priority countries and institutions to actively steer the VUB policy on internationalisation, including the choice of privileged partners, international missions, as well as priorities for funding schemes (VLIR UOS, Erasmus KA).

The faculty actively contributes to set-up new international partnerships, e.g. privileged international partnership, MoUs, favouring partners with high potential for research and teaching collaborations on all continents. It also investigates opportunities offered by established partnerships decided at VUB level. Specifically, the EUTOPIA consortium is considered as a positive opportunity for collaboration on education and research level, e.g. teaching collaboration (WISD – CY), learning communities (Data Science, Geography), joint PhD, ... The faculty also supports university-wide student/staff exchange agreements with the EUTOPIA partners.

International students

Our faculty offers a wide range of English-taught master programmes and 25 % of our students are coming from abroad. The objective is however not to attract as many international students as possible, but to have a healthy mix of local and international students in our master programmes. Our recruitment is aimed at selecting high quality, rather than large quantity of students. Strategic selection of the countries on which to focus recruitment activities need to be informed by acceptance and graduation rates of applicants from different countries, as well as the identification of under-represented countries with promising student markets. The faculty strongly values international master programmes, such as the existing Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses 4CITIES (DGGF) and TROPIMUNDO (DBIO). Newly available funding channels (e.g. VUB Master Scholarships, UNIVERSITAS) should be used more optimally to increase the attractivity and inclusiveness of all our English-taught master programmes.

Our faculty recognises the challenges faced by master programmes registering increasingly large cohorts of foreign students, including the administrative tasks for screening applications, student registration, VISA procedures... as well as specific teaching investment to homogenise the level of students with diverse academic backgrounds. We will continue to argue with the relevant central departments (OWSA, IRMO) to optimise administrative processes and to offer increased support to applicants and students.

The faculty has already one staff member for coordinating internationalization, but many tasks are still being carried out at the level of individual master programmes. A workgroup will be initiated to reflect on how administrative tasks of internationally-oriented master programmes can be harmonised within the faculty.

We further value the contact with our international alumni and wish to preserve the connection they have with our faculty. As part of the PR activities, specific attention is paid to maintain a life-long contact with our network of international alumni as they are the best ambassadors to recruit new students and identify new opportunities for research collaborations or student mobilities (i.e. internships). The faculty strongly encourages and contributes to the efforts of MARCOM in assembling an exhaustive and data-rich alumni database enabling targeted communication to our international alumni. More active contribution to the VUB international alumni newsletters will also highlight the international achievement of our faculty.

Student mobility and Internationalization at home

We aim for all our students to have an international experience throughout their studies, at bachelor or/and master level. This is demonstrated by a steady growth in the number of students spending a semester abroad over the last 5 years. But the faculty also recognises other types of mobilities, such as traineeship, fieldwork, international workshops or summer schools, as highly valuable international experience and expresses the need to properly record and acknowledge these in the student curriculum. The faculty facilitates student mobility through the introduction of Mobility Windows, at bachelor and master level, through information sessions and administrative support, as well as through the establishment of a spectrum of exchange agreements with high-quality academic institutions within and outside of Europe (e.g. renewal of Erasmus+ 2021-27 agreements). Specifically for non-EU exchange, there is a need to further promote and facilitate mobility through a selection of priority institutions offering clear matches with our programmes, and by supporting applications for funding schemes such as Generieke Beurzen and Priority Country Program.

An increase in mobility raises the additional challenge of adequate registration and insurance to guarantee a high-quality and safe mobility experience for our students. In addition, new types of mobility should be explored and digital opportunities should be maximised, as it is crucial to consider sustainability and possible limitations on international travel in the years to come.

Through the influx of international students in our master programmes and the international research and teaching staff, all our students come in contact with people from different cultural backgrounds and traditions. Such internationalisation@home activities might also include the attendance of an international conference or summer school or working on an online project with students and staff from an international partner university (e.g. EUTOPIA learning communities).

Development cooperation

Development cooperation is considered a strategic priority for our faculty. This translates first in the influx of students from the South through programmes such as the International Course Programmes (ICP) and Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses (EMMC). This is the case for the Biology Department, that organises the Master in Lacustrine and Marine Science. The loss in 2017 of the ICP-label for the Master Molecular Biology (DBIT) and the Master Human Ecology (DBIO) generated challenges for recruiting self-paying students from the South and for supporting the required administrative staff. New applications for ICP VLIR UOS funding or alternative funding scheme (EMMC) are actively being sought to ensure the long-term sustainability of these programmes.

Our faculty has a strong tradition of research and development cooperation through funding programmes initiated by VLIR-UOS, BELSPO or ERASMUS KA2. Several departments, including biology, bio-engineering, computer science and geography, have a long experience of research and capacity-building projects with many different countries in the South. The faculty encourages other departments or new staff to get involved in development cooperation, providing support to apply for funding such as Global Minds or Erasmus KA projects.

The faculty has the ambition to share its experience with the whole VUB community and plays an active role in shaping the VUB policy in terms of development cooperation (BAOW, RIB). This includes the requirement to better valorise staff involvement in development cooperation in the VUB KPIs and in the ZAP matrix, in order to preserve the engagement of new ZAP in development cooperation (see evaluation report K. Mertens) and to seek more visibility, for example through applications for the UDC awards