



EAIE president: Internationalisation is not only about mobility

In November, DZS had a chance to interview Markus Laitinen, the president of the European Association for International Education, who was invited to the Czech Republic as a guest speaker for the national network meeting hosted by the Study in the Czech Republic initiative. Laitinen shared with DZS his views on internalisation and talked about his goal to involve Czech higher education institutions more actively in EAIE's work.

What is your main mission as the president of such a large organisation that is the European Association for International Education (EAIE)?

The simple answer is that my role is to prepare a strategy and make sure we follow it. Since last year, the EAIE has a new strategy, which expands until 2020, and we are now looking at different aspects of the implementation. As the chair of the board, I am also involved in decision making concerning the budget and other issues, including external representation. I attend conferences in other parts of the world to represent the EAIE, and to speak about Europe and European higher education. Part of my work is to make sure the EAIE has more members and conference participants from three selected priority countries - Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

During your presentation for Czech universities, you mentioned the goal to involve these three countries more in EAIE's active membership. Can you elaborate on that?

Vice-presidents at the EAIE are elected among the members. When I looked at our membership directory I was blown away by the fact that we have so few members from central-eastern Europe. I was really perplexed and after discussing this issue with my colleagues at the EAIE, we all agreed that if the Association was to be true to its name, we should assign priority status to these three countries and we may add other countries in the future.

Why do you think these countries are less active?

First of all, let's be clear that these three countries are not the only ones that are under-represented. We just had to select a limited number so our work would have an impact. Then, as I have said, we may look at other countries in the future. We also looked at certain democratic issues, such as how many institutions and how much potential there is in these countries. We realised Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic are not the biggest countries but certainly countries with reasonable number of institutions and presumably with reasonable number of international offices within those institutions. We felt there is a lot of undoubted potential. Also, we already had some good contacts within these three countries, who we felt could help us make progress.

I also heard from my colleagues from the Study in the Czech Republic initiative that you are planning to organise staff-training weeks next year?

Yes. Membership is one thing, conference participation another. But in order to better reach people who are for some reason unable to attend a conference or to become members, we felt offering a training could help. We have qualified, certified trainers who can help Czech institutions and their international offices do their work better. First of all, we are going to organise our regular EAIE Spring Academy in Prague and then we want to do other targeted trainings within the Czech Republic.

Is the Academy open to anyone interested in international education?

Yes. The Academy gathers around 150-200 people, but they come from many different countries. Even though we give preferential treatment to Czech participants, including lower fees, the Academy is not intended for Czechs only. That is also one reason why we want to look at so called in-house training or training besides the Academy to reach more Czechs. The content of the Academy is not focused solely on the Czech Republic or Czech issues. It has a more general approach. But we can customise the in-house trainings for Czech institutions and hone in on what their specific challenges are.



Is it difficult to motivate participants of the conference to submit a proposal for conference or for a session?

Well, the challenge is in that we have to open the call for proposals quite soon after the conference ends. Some people can feel a bit overwhelmed by the fact they have just recovered from one conference experience and the next day they should submit a new proposal for another. However, I can tell you that we have already closed the proposals for the 2018 conference in Geneva. We have received a record number of proposals but I have not yet looked into the statistics to see whether our three priority countries are represented among the people who submitted. From past experience I know there have been some Czech presenters but there could certainly be more.

Those who do submit proposals are usually self-motivated. Either they already have their own networks or get asked to be part of a session or to join in a partnership with others. I suppose it can be a bit of a challenge for those who are at an early phase. I would, however, recommend to people who are a bit worried to just go ahead and send in their proposals, because our organisation and the conference programme are about peer-to-peer learning. We, of course, look for quality, but quality can come in very different shapes and from many different sources. Unless we have diversity of views, then I do not think we have the best quality possible. Therefore, I would strongly encourage Czech practitioners to send in their proposal. Moreover, during the conference we run sessions for potential session proposers, so those who are interested should perhaps consider coming to Geneva.

What is your advice for Czech higher education institutions which are looking for new partners outside Europe? Is there a strategy which is better than another?

A wonderful strategy is to send all responsible employees to the 2018 EAIE Conference in Geneva, where they would be joined by 6,000 other participants from all over the world. So, rather than sending a team of people to one place, be that Hong Kong or Sudan or the US, they could come to the conference and find all those potential partners under one roof.

Finally, what is your general message to Czech universities and Czech institutions regarding internationalisation and impact of internationalisation?

I see already quite a lot of development in the Czech Republic when it comes to internationalisation. The numbers are on the rise and the level of professionalism seems to be at a very good level. The trick I suppose is to make the next step and really make sure that you are not only limited to your region when it comes to where students come from. Maybe you should have more diverse recruiting pool. I also understand that you have made good progress in dealing with medical programmes. But again, that is a limited approach. You should probably look at more English taught programmes in other fields and recruit students for these from many different places. More diversity would be my recommendation. Institutions, all in all, should really take internationalisation seriously and consider it to be much more than just mobility.

Markus Laitinen has over 20 years of experience in international higher education in various roles at the University of Helsinki. He has been involved with the EAIE since 1994, and coordinated his university's successful application for the EAIE Institutional Award for Internationalisation in 2013. He is now the Association's president. Throughout his career Laitinen has been an avid proponent of embedded internationalisation and has given talks and published articles on this topic.