

EMPOWERING UNIVERSITY OF UDINE THROUGH INTERNATIONALISATION

Claudio Cressati*

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE INSTITUTION

| 123 |

The University of Udine was founded in 1978 as part of the reconstruction plan of Friuli after the earthquake of 1976. Its creation was the result of a broad popular mobilization. Its aim was to provide the Friulian community with an independent centre for advanced training in cultural and scientific studies, and it rapidly established a national and international reputation as one of the most innovative and complete medium-sized Italian universities. It offers a wide range of teaching programmes in various fields (Agriculture, Communication and Multimedia, Economics, Engineering, Humanities, Law, Mathematics and Computer Science, Medicine, Modern Languages), at BA, MA and PhD levels, in tune with the changes in society and with the development of new professions. About 15.500 students are enrolled¹.

Udine and its University are a point of reference in a region which is historically a meeting place of different worlds and cultures. Geographically situated in the centre of the European Union, at the crossroads of Latin, Germanic and Slavic languages, between the Alps and the Mediterranean, the University of Udine plays an active role in a close network of relations, and it is committed to sharing its knowledge and ideas.

Since its establishment, the University has pursued a policy of internationalisation, aimed at preparing students and forging relations and partnerships with foreign universities and institutions. It collaborates not only within Europe but across the globe and has long-standing connections with North Africa, the Middle East, India and China. Participation in EMUNI, the Euro-Mediterranean University based in

* University of Udine: <https://www.uniud.it>; contact email: claudio.cressati@uniud.it

1 For relevant statistics see: <http://nuva.uniud.it/scon/ateneo-in-cifre/informazioni-generalis>



Piran, was in this light the finalization of a policy undertaken from the very beginning.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge that the University of Udine has had to confront since the start of its activities was to affirm its peculiarity within a context, like the Italian one, which was characterized by many historically renowned universities, having lots of courses offered as well as students enrolled. At the same time the University of Udine had to overcome its peripheral connotation, with regards to the Italian national frame, and to become a relevant centre able to foster development and growth within the Friulian region, a territory which has been marked for a long time by marginalization and brain drain. It was hence necessary to convert the weak points in advantages.

Historically speaking, Friuli was a land of emigration: people used to leave it in order to look for jobs that they could not find in their homeland. The preferred destinations were other European countries, yet Friulians also used to reach non-European countries with the aim of finding better living conditions. The consequence of this moving process was that several economic, social and cultural relationships have been put in place with many peoples that were different on the basis of geography and culture, thus leading to the development of new ideas. The University of Udine has therefore tried to develop exchanges with other countries, both European and non-European, and particularly with other universities. The highlight of this process was represented by the start of the Erasmus Programme. To this respect, it is worth mentioning that the “father” of this programme was Domenico Lenarduzzi, a Friulian who used to be a high official within the European Commission. As a tribute to his fundamental role, the University of Udine awarded him the *Laurea honoris causa* in Education Science in 2004².

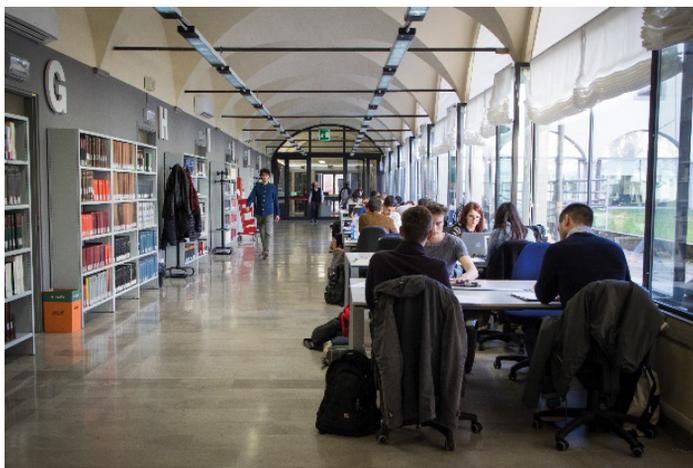
THE SOLUTION

To define a clear strategy for the whole University is the solution put in practice in order to foster an even stronger internationalisation. This strategy is coordinated by the Delegate for Internationalisation,

2 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gb7Ph-uVack>



nominated by the Rector. Actions and programmes are implemented by the International Relations Office (IRO) with the assistance of a specific Mobility Committee established to promote and coordinate students and staff mobility and the development of double, multiple and joint degrees. The Committee is supported by geographical area managers. Each of them has been nominated for the deep knowledge and expertise on specific geographical areas. The main focuses are Australia, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Russia, India, China and South-East Asia, USA/Canada, and South America.



To maximize the efficiency of this strategy, each Department creates a specific approach to reach the targets defined by the whole University. This gives the Departments the possibility to choose partners that best complement their *curricula* in terms of quality of teaching, services (libraries, laboratories, contact with local companies, etc.) and opportunities for students and staff. This “federative” approach develops the best practices in the different fields and spread them among all Departments.

Up to now, exchange agreements have mostly been signed with partners operating within the EU (Northern Europe, Germany, Spain and France in particular). However, in the past few years also non-EU countries have become target destinations, in particular China, Australia, India, Thailand, South America and Russia, thanks to the financing of mobility grants offered by local authorities and institutions.

Referring to first and second cycle students, the University of Udine has created a Job Placement Service in order to stimulate students’ abilities, competences and knowledge and qualify their

capacities. The aim is to create a professional, personal and academic added value through the development of an educational culture based on direct experience and know-how exchange. As for the third cycle, research is the main goal. PhD students are encouraged to spend at least 6 months abroad (both at EU and non-EU destinations): in this case they receive extra funding by the University.

Concerning the mobility of incoming students, the approach is to accept exchange requests from institutions of any EU and non-EU country as the University aims to offer an international experience also to those students who decide not to join an Erasmus exchange. Moreover, the University of Udine has built specific collaborations with neighbouring universities in Austria and Slovenia so to increase the overall attractiveness of the Alpine-Adriatic area.

The University of Udine is now able to offer a complete semester in English language for 17 *curricula*. In some of these cases, the entire *curriculum* is taught in English. This increases the number of incoming students in mobility programs and represents an opportunity for Italian students as well. Double, multiple and joint degrees have been strongly promoted, too: they are now 13, covering almost all subject areas.

To reach these goals the University of Udine implemented already 20 years ago some flagship initiatives, in order to foster the internationalisation process of the whole university. One of the first and most relevant was the Euroculture project, established (together with the Universities of Deusto, Göttingen, Groningen and Uppsala) in 1996 and implemented since 1998, i.e. even before the Bologna Process was put in place. The main aim of the Euroculture project was to build a European network for education and research. In 1999, the participating universities gave birth to a Master course. As a consequence, the network increased and new partners joined (Strasbourg, Kraków e Olomouc), thus leading to the creation of a Consortium. Year after year, Euroculture has enlarged and strengthened its educational offer (from 60, to 90, and finally to 120 ECTS; from 2, to 3, then to 4 semesters; from the double degree to the joint degree), and it has established cooperation even with 4 non-European partners (Indiana University, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Osaka University, University of Pune). In 2005, the Euroculture Master was awarded the label of excellence within the framework of the Erasmus Mundus Programme. This recognition was confirmed twice, and it will remain in place at least until 2022.



Since the beginning, the aim of the Euroculture Master was to develop an interdisciplinary *curriculum* common to all partner universities, providing graduates with advanced education for those professions in which knowledge of European culture and EU institutions are particularly relevant. Graduates could thus be competitive in an increasingly international labour market. More in detail, the course gives students the means to analyse social phenomena on a European scale, to understand how European institutions and organisations work, and to reflect on historical and cultural factors playing a key role in the process of European integration.

Since 2011, the Euroculture Consortium has forged cooperation with many Associate Partners. Among them, EMUNI is one of the most important. It recognized the value of this international education programme, confirming its commitment to implement various forms of collaboration (placements, conferences, study visits, research projects, etc.), with specific reference to the University of Udine.

THE RESULTS

The University of Udine targets all the four priorities of the new European Agenda for Higher Education⁴. It is aware of HEI's role in improving education, research and innovation, and it is

3 See : https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/he-com-2017-247_en.pdf

regularly revising and renewing the *curricula* in order to make them more competitive and innovative. In particular, taking into account that Italy has one of the lowest percentage of graduates in Europe, the University of Udine has implemented strategies to attract a wide number of students through a high-quality offer that guarantees a better preparation and improves graduates' attractiveness in the labour market.

For that reason, innovative and flexible teaching and learning methods are strongly promoted. In particular, the Erasmus+ Traineeship and other projects that the University carries out in collaboration with local private and public institutions (the Udine Scientific Park, the Friuli Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce, business associations and NGOs) give the possibility to develop and strengthen cooperation with all kind of organizations (for example the exchanges of students, academics, entrepreneurs and experts in the wine sector between Udine and other Mediterranean countries).

Moreover, the University of Udine is very active, by leveraging on the "knowledge triangle" (through business plan competitions, entrepreneurship and business model courses, collaborations with scientific parks and business incubators), in encouraging the development of new ventures by its students and staff in high-tech sectors as a way to contribute to the process of industrial modernization of the region. The participation to exchange programs, besides the evident effects on the quality of human capital, has created opportunities for international networking, crucial to the growth of business ventures, particularly the newly born ones.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The University of Udine is well aware that its first role is to respond to the needs of its territory, forming and shaping citizens able to handle the complexity of the modern society. Nowadays all the regional stakeholders are conscious that without a coordination and a strategy for a "macro-territorial system" it is not possible to cope with future challenges. The University strategy for the implementation of international cooperation projects has been fulfilled thanks to an effective collaboration with the Regional Government, other local institutional partners and the Ministry of Higher Education; furthermore, the strong links with the Friulian people living abroad helped to develop meaningful social and institutional relations useful for a solid academic exchange.



The University took advantage of EU funds to finance the mobility of students and researchers, as it believes in the necessity to increase their technical capacity. With the other regional HEIs and the local authorities, the University is running a project for Supporting Human Assets in Research and Mobility, with the aim of financing projects: PhD grants, research study grants, mobility for experimental thesis, study courses in EU HEIs, PhD grants for research projects in EU.



In the near future new tools will be implemented with the following aims: information and communication of all the international programmes financing education and training; selection of specific target groups for a prompt communication, according to the type of project; specific training in international activities for the staff; professional management of all financial resources in order to guarantee the achievement of the strategic goals (all grants will be allocated through an internal competitive procedure); support to the dissemination of the results through all the available tools (publications, conferences, newspapers, website, social media, etc.).