



UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI  
DI MILANO

## Case Study – UNIMI (Italy)

- BA in Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication
- MA in Languages and Cultures for International communication and Cooperation

*Credits, grades recognition and mobility*

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# School of Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication - study programmes

- BA in Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication
- MA in Languages and Cultures for International Communication and Cooperation
- Internationalization is in the DNA of the two programmes
  - Students major in two foreign languages with minors in law, economics and sociology
  - At MA level, they develop advanced language skills and take advanced courses in the same subject areas (not same subjects)
  - Focus on contemporary international issues



# Main characteristics of degree courses

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- Highly international by definition
- Students choose two languages among the following:
  - Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Spanish, Russian & Italian L2
- Students are very keen to spend time abroad
- Highly encouraged to do so - policies are in place to ensure that their efforts gain academic recognition
- considerable effort on the part of UNIMI to favour students' international experience
- Internationalisation also correlates with employability!



# Credit recognition and validation - two sets of issues

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- Erasmus exchanges and extra European agreements
- Entry requirements for admission to MA → based on credits!
- Both aspects are important, as they crucially contribute to the internationalization of a) individual students (and students as a group) and b) the degree course as such (the higher the number of international students, the greater recognition at institutional level, with benefits for the institution itself)



# Exchange agreements in place

## Erasmus - Europe

56 universities in 17 countries:

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Norway, The Netherlands, Portugal, Poland, UK, Spain, Sweden, Hungary (and Switzerland)

## Extra Europe

Argentina: Villa María (Córdoba)

Brasil: Università Federale di Uberlandia

Chile: Playa Ancha (Valparaíso)

China: Liaoning Normal University

Colombia: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Bogotá)

Cuba: Universidad de la Habana

Japan: Doshisha University (Kyoto), Meiji University (Tokyo), Waseda University (Tokyo), Kyoto University

Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara, Claustro de Sor Juana (Città del Messico)

India: Manipal (Karnataka)

Russia: Pushkin Institute (Mosca), Russian State University for the Humanities (Mosca), Linguistics

University of Nizhny Novgorod, Moscow City

Pedagogical University (Mosca), Novosibirsk

Pedagogical State University, High School of Economics (Mosca)

U.S.A. : University of Louisville



# Mobility figures

## Erasmus - Europe

year	n. of students
2010	6
2011	43
2012	59
2013	67
2014	71
2015	75
2016	115

## Extra Europe

No data prior to 2016

In 2016, 28 students

New agreements have been signed to facilitate credit recognition.

Percentage of students gaining credits abroad

around 15-17% (below benchmark of 30% for competitors - but there's a reason for this)



# Erasmus exchanges: Requirements for students

- During the exchange, students are required to gain (approximately) the same number of credits as they would gain were they to study in their home university
- i.e. 30 credits for a term / 60 credits for the whole year
- This requires that students plan their learning agreements carefully
- It often requires that they change their learning agreements along the way
- In 2016, out of 125 learning agreements, 103 had to be changed



## 2016 data

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Average credits per  
student spending 1 term  
at host institution

29.5

Average credits per  
student spending 2 terms  
at host institution

52.2





# Gaining the credits - not an easy task!

- General vs course-specific difficulties
- General: perfect matches are difficult - flexibility is needed! Institutions (and professors) must accept that students gaining credits abroad will NOT acquire EXACTLY the same competences as they would at home
- Course-specific: both the BA and the MA are relatively new courses; this type of course is still quite rare in Europe, where traditional BAs and MAs in foreign languages have a strong literature & philology component
- This means that sometimes it is not easy to find a suitable number of matching courses at partner institutions



# What strategy?

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- Pre-agreement negotiations are needed
- «packages» should be identified
- Students should be given a fairly set choice of courses
  - not many options, but certainties about the outcome and the «deliverables»
- Such an approach is aimed at maximising students' (and the institution's) investment



## Double/joint degree focus

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- Whenever possible, we try to identify partner institutions that offer courses which are very close in aim and objectives to the ones we offer.
- Ideally, exchange agreements are a sort of test run for double/joint degrees (though this is not always feasible)
- Exchange agreements are very selective in terms of who can participate
- They are only open to students of courses which provide an excellent match



# Monitoring the offer and the outcomes

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- Agreements are assessed and reviewed on a regular basis
- For each agreement, there is one person in charge; s/he monitors the offering and the students' experience
- Agreements are fixed-term, renewable
- If an exchange agreement is not satisfactory, better conditions are sought; if this fails, the agreement is not renewed
- Conditions sometimes change en route: institutions can change their offering, or their policies.



# Referents at partner institutions & within institutions

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- It is important to have a referent for each agreement
- Referents maintain close ties with partners and make sure the information we have is up-to-date
- Internationalization is an important management function at all levels, especially in large institutions such as UNIMI



# grades

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- Huge variations across countries
- For instance, Italy has grades out of 30. All grades in the range are used
- There's a risk that students get penalised when transferring grades
  - Especially when the host institution does not offer dedicated courses, exchange students may be at a disadvantage and their efforts fail to be rewarded;
  - Institutions must be careful of making assumptions about the value of grades.
- tier- system based on statistics - top 1% - top 5% - top 25% etc.



# Key issue: advance planning

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- Students are selected in March each year for the following academic year
- Students choose on the basis of the previous year's offering
- Courses can be taught over one term, two term, or in a number of other ways;
- Courses which are suitable on paper may not be available when students actually leave
- This is especially problematic for students who only go for one term (they may not be able to complete a course, or the course they have chosen may not be available)



## Advance planning ctd

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- Pressure to get course offer out as early as possible
- Sometimes tyhis means that you must get your course syllabus out even before you have finished teaching a course - no chance of seeing how it was received, or how students performed
- Need for students to get their language skills up to the level required
- Not so much of a problem for students of foreign languages; but may be a problem for students of other subjects, especially if the host institution offering is not in English (and it often is not)





- Huge effort on the part of students
- It may slow down their career
- It may lower their grades
- Sometimes institutions have policies in place designed to offset this risk
- UNIMI has a policy in place which enables (but does not compel) course coordinators to award a bonus to students who have gained credits abroad.

## Other problems

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- Funds - insufficient funds: institutions have to add to them out of their own pocket . Even so, they are never enough
- UNIMI has been investing heavily in internationalization
- Excellent opportunities for students to cover costs for non-EU destinations
- Still, it costs them quite a bit - not everybody can afford the expense



# MA applications

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- Numerous applications for admission to our MA on the part of students holding a foreign degree
- Difficulties in assessing whether they have the requirements
- Huge mismatch in terms of background knowledge
- How should we assess their competences? Test them? Trust their institutions?
- Stringent requirements (esp. In terms of knowledge of Italian) → fewer students
- What you don't test prior to admitting them, you have to assess/compensate for ex post



# Grades & certifiable competences

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- Grade equivalence is important in this case as well
- We offer «excellence scholarships»
- Importance of information provided in transcripts of records and attached documentation
- Students should have detailed descriptions of course contents
- Institutions must be prepared to provide tutoring to fill any gaps in background knowledge



# Conclusions and «food for thought»

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- Internationalisation is a challenge for both institutions and students
- Need to «get used» to alternative pathways to the acquisition of knowledge and competences
- Process can be very stimulating for all institutions and individual teachers involved.
- It demands self-reflection on our practices and objectives
- Differences may and should remain across countries and institutions, but they will enable critical reflection on what we do

