

Background

The ending of the Cold War brought new opportunities and challenges to a region divided for decades. The 1990s saw much bridge-building activity, ranging from environmental issues to the ecumenical movement. There was also a lively debate about the shape of Baltic identity. Weakened by political division, the Baltic Sea region now experienced a tremendous renaissance, a rediscovery of past roots and the forging of new connections. Out of all these activities has emerged a strong awareness of the need for collaboration in order to promote the region to a wider world. The BalticStudyNet is an excellent example of this awareness. It is built upon a strong foundation of working to promote the region initiated by the Humboldt University of Berlin. Experience gained over the past decade has given the promoters of the project the confidence to present the region, not as a monochrome entity, but as a diversity of cultures, customs and peoples. The promotional brochure *Read the Baltic Signals! Study the Sea of Opportunities* manages in a few pages to give not

only a flavour of that diversity, but also to provide an attractive and informative guide to would-be students.

Aims and Objectives

The aims of the project were clearly stated in the initial submission to the Erasmus Mundus Programme, Action 4 as the global promotion of the Baltic Sea region 'as an area of top-quality, innovative higher education'. The Baltic Sea region was characterised as 'a most interesting example of how building a knowledge-based society becomes part of building a European region'. What is lacking, however, is 'global visibility and brand recognition'. At the heart of the project was thus a promotion campaign aimed at making the region better known outside Europe. This campaign has four main strands:

1. A travelling exhibition, with handout materials
2. Lecture and promotion tours to selected higher education institutions
3. Workshops for multipliers from third-country higher education institutions, introducing them to the region and its higher education structures

4. A textbook on the Baltic Sea region

In addition, the participating institutions were to become involved in a full programme of meetings, conferences and discussions.

Presentations were made at a wide range of specialist forums in Europe and overseas, thereby spreading awareness of BalticStudyNet.

Comment

- The declared focus of the project was on study and research opportunities in the humanities and social sciences. Given that the stated aim of the project was the enhancement of the profile of the Baltic Sea region, this would seem a logical choice: but if the purpose is to attract students to the region, some consideration might have been given to the promotion of other areas of study as well. This need have been no more than an appropriately located 'and by the way, there are also tremendous study and research opportunities in medicine, engineering and the sciences', with some useful links to websites, but it would have opened more doors.
- There is one actual existing study programme detailed in the promotional literature, the Joint Masters' Degree Programme

in Baltic Sea Region Studies, taught by four of the participating universities. More information on relevant courses and programmes at the other participating universities might have been useful.

- The emphasis on diversity is carried through very well in the promotional literature, but it may have more resonance within Europe than outside. As the delegation to the Chinese universities noted, the term 'Baltic' is far harder for Chinese students to grasp than 'Europe', and it may well be that a simpler, even a simplistic initial approach would have reaped greater rewards.
- 'Baltic' also carries with it particular connotations, though perhaps more so in Europe and America. Those involved with the project cannot be praised enough for their efforts to create a positive and broader image of the Baltic as a region around the sea, rather than as a collective term attached to three countries whose modern history has been so closely affected by great power politics, and it seems churlish to make a critical comment. Nevertheless, one might ask if 'Northern Europe' might not have been a more appropriate

term, with a few rather simple themes selected to illustrate it
- landscapes and seascapes, the sea as a vital channel of
communication, the challenges of winter (was a deliberate
decision taken to eliminate winter from the picture
altogether - virtually all the photographic material is
summery!), and above all, the resourceful and innovative
spirit of the region's peoples.

Outcomes

An interim progress report was filed in 2008. It acknowledged the importance of sustained dialogue between the participating universities, and indicated areas where that had proved fruitful, most notably in the preparation of literature and the streamlining of existing curricula in order to adapt to the needs and interests of students and researchers from third countries.

In its evaluation of progress so far, the report made some useful observations based on visits already conducted, and made several recommendations concerning future promotional visits. It noted that non-degree programmes such as summer schools might serve a useful purpose in drawing potential students to the region, and it

concluded that there ought to be more emphasis on research and intra-institutional collaboration.

The programme of visits encountered hitches, which necessitated some readjustment of the schedule. It is pleasing to note, however, that the delegates more than rose to the occasion when faced with problems.

There is as yet no report on the two workshops for multipliers. As a visiting lecturer on both occasions, I can however testify to the enthusiasm and careful attention to detail that went into the planning and execution of the programme of lectures and visits.

The majority of the participants were from former Soviet countries, and they seemed positively inclined towards further collaboration.

Comments

- The travelling exhibition was one of the main strands of the promotional drive. It does however seem to have had mixed success, not least as a consequence of a lack of sympathy on the part of customs officials and transport difficulties. It is hard to evaluate the exhibition without having actually seen it, but I am inclined to think that there is too much text.

Exhibitions should be eye-catching, rather than full of information; where there was positive feedback, on the trip to Canada and the USA, it was the bright colour and the logo that were talked about, rather than the textual content. More successful seem to have been the handout materials, which are well-designed, very readable and informative.

- The programme of visits was also a mixed success. The tour of Chinese universities seems to have been the most successful. The hosts appear to have made proper preparation beforehand, and even where there seemed to be little evidence of mutual interests, as in the case of Tongji university, with its focus on engineering, useful contacts were made. The most successful visit of all was to the Beijing Foreign Studies University, and this in large part was due to the good relationship already established between that university and the University of Gdansk.
- The visits to Petrozavodsk and Kyiv were clearly not as well supported by the host institutions, but the visitors found students who were well informed and interested in the possibilities of study abroad. Their main concerns were

financial, which prompts the question of what sort of funding is available for students from former Soviet countries.

- Finding the money for study abroad did not seem to be a major concern for students encountered in China, Canada or the USA. In these countries, the main problem was one of orientation. Of the recommended methods of overcoming the perceived lack of awareness of European studies in North America, summer schools would seem to be the most useful. However, there are already a number of summer schools that cater for students from third countries, mostly in order to learn a language: one wonders if there are any indices of how successful these have been in attracting students to further study in the Baltic.
- The North American trip was frankly disappointing. There seems to have been a distinct lack of interest beyond the universities that do have departments covering the Baltic region (and even a lack of interest from the leading Canadian university specialising in Baltic studies), and a number of organisational hitches during the visit are indicative of a lack

of preparedness by the host institute. North America ought to be a major recruiting-ground. American and Canadian students, particularly those with family roots in the region, are well represented amongst the exchange students and free movers studying in the Baltic region countries. One can only conclude that the processes and mechanisms whereby such students find their way to the higher education institutions of northern Europe are already firmly established. It is worth noting that the visits to China, Russia and the Ukraine were brought about on the basis of already existing academic contacts. This does not seem to have been the case with North America, and may explain the rather disappointing results.

Conclusions

This was a well thought-out project, resting upon a solid foundation of previous experience, and drawing upon the resources of eight major universities in the Baltic region. The Humboldt University in Berlin acted as the lead institute, but this was in all respects a team effort. There is a refreshing candour

about the progress report that suggests the members of the team learnt from their experiences, and were flexible enough to adapt to changed or unforeseen circumstances. In that which I would have thought posed the most difficult challenges, i.e. the creation of a Baltic 'brand' that managed to avoid the pitfalls of particularism and the tyrannies of historical dogma, the project was remarkably successful. I am confident that the textbook will be a benchmark for the future. The project was less successful in its outreach, though lessons were learnt, and many valuable contacts were established. The main conclusion that can be drawn from this experience is that the patient building-up of contacts with suitable partner universities in third countries pays off.

It is too early to measure the outcome of this project in concrete terms. Clearly, contacts already established will need to be followed up, and where possible, widened. It might be helpful to identify a key partner university in a third country with a view to using it as a disseminator of information about the BalticStudyNet. How useful were the workshops in acquainting multipliers from higher education institutions with BalticStudyNet remains to be seen, though as an academic, I am inclined to think that students

are more likely to be directed towards the region by enthusiastic teachers than by information officers.

This project has demonstrated the value of coordination and cooperation in the promotion of the Baltic region as an attractive destination for students and researchers. Much remains to be done, but a firm base has been created for future activities, and a range of useful contacts have been made. Above all, a very positive image of the region as a vibrant and innovative part of Europe has been disseminated.