Fostering Outgoing Mobility by Implementing an Innovative Online Platform for Partner University Allocation. ITMO University Educational Design Practices

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Abstract
Within the Russian internationalization strategy for increasing incoming and outgoing academic mobility indicators, ITMO University utilizes a variety of tools to match the objective. Increased number of ITMO students aimed at spending a semester abroad and the constantly growing number of 200+ active academic partners worldwide become a challenge which calls an innovative solution. While students are struggling to cope with a large amount of information in order to make the choice of a host university, ITMO International Office staff spends significant time on live consultations to help students find a matching curriculum at a partner university. The current circumstances generate a need to mechanize processes for outgoing mobility to minimize time devoted to consultations and help students to reduce the list of suggested universities. Therefore, in September 2019 ITMO International Office introduced a demo version of an innovative platform that applies several filters diminishing the number of exchange destinations in accordance with the students' study level and major. In order to evaluate the platform's impact upon outbound student mobility, a pilot case study was conducted both with outgoing exchange student and International Office staff. The data collected have shown the positive dynamics in students' motivation and general awareness regarding exchange studies abroad. Furthermore, the study says that the platform facilitated students' better choice of a host university. However, compared to the previous semester ITMO University staff members declare to have had minor changes in consulting hours spent on assisting students in university allocation.

Keywords: student exchange, technology, outgoing mobility, application.

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Introduction

Within the Russian internationalization strategy, that was intensified 7 years ago, ITMO University strives to comply with the requirements of the governmental educational plan. In 2013 Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation launched the "5 to 100" project intending to get 5 Russian universities to enter World Top 100 QS or Times Higher Education rankings by the year 2020, which is reflected in the name "5-100". The maximization of leading Russian universities' competitiveness in the international education and research market is affirmed as the main "5-100" goal, according to the project's official website.[1]

ITMO has been a member of the "5-100" academic excellence project from its beginning. It was chosen together with other 13 Russian universities to enter the project on a competitive basis. In the project's framework, annually ITMO team presents to the board of the International Council of Russian Ministry of Higher Education the report on the results and the committee, in turn, evaluate the way ITMO has fulfilled the project goals through the last year. Being a highly scored university-leader guarantees stable greater financial support from the government. The "5-100" excellence project sets various strategies to be implemented by the top Russian universities. The most topical strategy in the research framework states the following:

'Putting into force a number of international and internal academic mobility programs for faculty members and researchers (internships, advanced training, professional re-training, exchange programs, etc.)'.[2]

Therefore, the "5-100" membership provides outgoing academic mobility (OAM) with a financial pillar to match the objective. Since ITMO utilizes a variety of tools to improve its OAM, on the one side, the number of students willing to spend a semester abroad is growing rapidly. The situation is to be handled by ITMO staff responsible for OAM.

On the other side, the International Office has established 200+ active academic partnerships which means 200+ partner university destinations for ITMO students. Consequently, according to the undertaken study, a significant amount of time is spent on live consultations of students, who are to find a curriculum in a partner university that matches their curriculum at ITMO. Moreover, students find it challenging indeed to cope with a large amount of information they have to harness in order to make their prior choice.

As a result, the current circumstances generated a need to mechanize processes for outgoing mobility to cut off time spent on consultations and to help students reduce the list of suggested universities.

Online Application for Partner University Allocation

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[1] "5-100" Russian Academic Excellence Project by Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation (n.d.). Retrieved from https://5top100.ru/en/about/more-about/
[2] "5-100" Russian Academic Excellence Project by Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation (n.d.). Retrieved from https://5top100.ru/en/about/more-about/

International Office staff accepted the challenge correspondingly and came up with the solution to create an online application advisor in the collaboration with ITMO programmers. The application is to shorten the list of appropriate partner universities in accordance with data inserted by a user.

By the end of February 2020, we have already had two iterations, the pilot-version and an upgraded one. The demo-application has both a full and mobile versions. The demo includes 3 filters: Language, Faculty, Degree. Moreover, it has one search line in case a student is interested in a specific university. In the 2nd iteration, a Region was added. Now instead of scrutinizing the whole list of universities, a user only fills in the relevant data and gets a shortened list of suggested universities to be considered.

Figure 1: Application interface

After the launch of the demo version, there was a need to assess its effectiveness and influence on the working process of OAM staff as well as the general development of OAM. Therefore, a case study that examines the quality indicators was conducted.

Research methodology

In order to evaluate the efficiency of the application, a pilot case study was conducted in February 2020 at ITMO University, Saint Petersburg, Russia. Both ITMO students and international office staff took part in the study. The qualitative research method was adopted in order to better assess students' and staff members' perceptions toward the application for partner university allocation. A total number of 30 participants were enrolled: 25 students and 5 staff representatives that account for 100% of employees involved in outgoing mobility.

Students were voluntarily enrolled in the study via an announcement at the ITMO website. Students were surveyed with google forms and interviews. Both google forms and interviews were prepared in English. English was deliberately chosen to be the interview language since it is one of the eligibility criteria to be nominated for the exchange semester. The google forms were used to obtain students' consent to the research and to receive initial information on their perception towards student exchange. Only students who gave positive or neutral responses to the question

"would you like to study an exchange semester?" were enrolled as study participants. Gender representation of the interviewed participants accounted for 68% of females (17 people) and 32% of males (8 people). At the interview, each participant was asked four questions that took an average of 5 minutes to answer. First two questions were related to choosing a university for exchange: "How do you choose a host university?" and "What are the challenges, if any, of choosing a host university?". The other two questions were related to the application. Students were offered to look at the web application and test it on their phones, after that the following questions were asked "What do you think this application is for?" and "What is your perception toward the application?". All interview answers were recorded upon the oral consent of each participant.

Staff members were surveyed with interviews conducted in English. In total 2 male and 3 female staff members took part in the interview. The average time spent on the interview per participant was 5 minutes. Employees were asked three questions, two of them accounted to time that staff members spent on assisting students in choosing a host university: "Approximately how much time per day do you spend on consulting students regarding choosing host universities?" and "What are the challenges, if any, of assisting students in choosing host universities?". The other question aimed at discovering participants' opinion on the application: "What is your perception towards the application?". All participants gave oral consent to the audio recording of their answers.

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze both students' and staff members' perception towards the application, and the challenges experienced while choosing/recommending a host university. Answers were first coded and then assigned to the corresponding group identified by code.

Discussion

1.   Students

The number of male and female participants who filled in the google form was 14 and 17 correspondingly. According to the questionnaire, 6 male participants did not give their consent to be interviewed while all the female participants agreed to take part in the study. Among 25 interview participants, 21 expressed interest in studying an exchange semester, and 4 were not sure if they would like to go for exchange. Among those 4 participants who did not demonstrate confidence 3 doubted because of doing the final year of their degree (4th year of Bachelor's degree or 2nd year of Master's degree); one student was not sure because of working part-time.

Students gave various answers on how they would be choosing a host university: the majority (13 people) said they would be deciding based on a country. Hence, 8 of them already knew the country they wanted to go to, other 5 participants highlighted only certain regions: "I want to go somewhere far", "I want to go to Asia because I have never been there before", and "I want to go to Europe because it is close to home". 7 participants mentioned that they would ask ITMO outgoing mobility staff to help them choose a host university. 3 participants said they would seek the advice of students who had already been to exchange and 2 people said they would look on the Internet and check available information. Based on the students' answers to the first

question, 13 out of 25 students would not request the assistance of the international office in the first place appealing to other resources such as Internet, networking and personal interests. The other 12 students did not seem to evidently demonstrate the choice of a host university and/or a study destination and, therefore, are likely to address ITMO coordinators for help. Therefore, it is considered important to facilitate students' choice, and further develop the application to enlarge the number of students who feel confident and comfortable choosing a university without coordinators' help.

5 students believed that there were not any challenges in choosing a host university. 10 students said that the list of universities was too big and, therefore, it was hard to find a matching program at a host university. Money issue was considered challenging by 5 students, other 5 referred to language barriers since they did not speak national languages. In the framework of the last question, the "language" code included the following answers: "The website is only in Chinese", "Most of the programs are offered in Spanish (or French) language", and "Very few people speak English in there".

Most of the students (20 people) gave the correct answer to the question "What do you think this application is for?" - for choosing a partner university. However, 5 other participants supposed that the application was for submitting a request form for the exchange semester. Interestingly, 10 students had seen and tried the application before the interview.

96% of students (24 people) demonstrated positive perception towards the application using the following descriptive words: "helpful", "useful", "easy" "comfortable" and "nice". 1 student answered, "I do not know what to say about the application", this answer was assigned to neutral. 32% of students (8 people) who utilized positive descriptive words also would like to change or add some application's features. Therefore, 4 out of 8 students wanted to have a "search" button to press since they could not notice the universities' list updating automatically upon filling in each filter. 3 out of 8 would prefer to have a comment section to ask additional questions. 2 out of 8 would like to use a mobile application instead of the web application, and 1 out of 8 would like to see another layout.

2. Outgoing Mobility Staff

All the outgoing mobility coordinators stated that 20% to 30% of their working time was devoted to helping students choose a host university. Moreover, participants highlighted that about 15% of students came for repeated consultations regarding choosing a host university. Staff members found it challenging and time consuming that the majority of students preferred talking in person rather than accessing available information remotely on the ITMO's website and other Internet resources. Herewith, according to the staff and student interviews, at least 30% of students coming for consultations were unlikely to access available information on exchange beforehand.

According to the interview, 100% of the ITMO outgoing mobility staff members anticipated positive changes in the forthcoming nomination period when the application would be updated and linked to the personal accounts of students. The latest application update was expected to "better facilitate" (participant 1) students'

choice of a host university, make it "more precise" (participant 3) and, therefore, "more reliable" (participants 2, 3 and 5). 4 out 5 staff members also expected to reduce working time spent on live consultations over the next year.

It is acknowledged that the participants' answers and perceptions towards the application could have been influenced by the presence of the interviewer. Herewith, a relatively small participant sample may not precisely depict the real situation. Moreover, 22 out of 25 students were not native English speakers that could affect the cohesion and coherence of their answers. In order to enhance research reliability a bigger scale research will be conducted both in English and Russian languages in the field within the next several years to test OAM coordinators' hypotheses and to evaluate the application's efficiency and its impact upon fostering outgoing mobility.

Conclusion

Despite mostly positive study results, there are open-ended issues and growth zones in the application that are to be considered both in further research and application development. However, the case study of the demo version implies to observe and reflect changes and respondents' perception all along the way. The application updates aspire to guide users by reducing a list of partner universities to top five most suitable choices for each student. Herewith, the application should soon be linked with students' personal accounts and, therefore, it will automatically access and consider such necessary data as GPA and level of foreign language proficiency. It is believed that the implementation of these indicators will make the application a more reliable advisor for those who aim to spend a semester at ITMO partner universities. Yet a recently conducted survey states that even the demo version of the application facilitated a choice of a partner university. The authors believe that interviewing a bigger number of respondents will show a clearer picture of the application's effectiveness in terms of university allocation.

Furthermore, according to ITMO International Office staff members, they still spent significant time on student consultations which showed minor changes in comparison to previous semesters. The absence of positive outcomes may be caused by several reasons. Firstly, being currently launched, the application may not have enough time to bring changes. Secondly, the demo version may not provide enough information for students to make a final decision. Lastly, the issue may refer to a bigger socio-cultural field within one culture where life consultations are a more convenient form for getting necessary information than self-service search using the Internet and available information.

Wherever further research leads, it is of high importance to facilitate students' choice, and further develop the application in order to enlarge the number of students willing to do an exchange semester.

References

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