

WUN Education: An Undergraduate Mobility Program (UMP) – state of affairs and the road ahead

Background:

WUN has been very successful as a research network with many innovative initiatives launched, from the RDF program to stimulate collaboration between network partners to addressing four grand challenges: Public Health, Climate change, Understanding Cultures and Higher Education Research. These are complemented by cross-cutting activities, currently big data, economics as well as the Africa and China groups working to together in a matrix structure. In this framework there has been also a (non –formalized) place for students, mostly at the graduate level by participation in the research activities and exchanges through the WUN Research Mobility Program (RMP).

In the discussions leading to the current strategic plan of the network, the question was asked whether the sole, or better, predominant focus on research is still sufficient to lead the network into the future. Dealing with grand challenges within a world that is characterized by rapid geopolitical changes voices from within the network have demanded a broader role for WUN, focussing on added visibility, such as the BREXIT seminar organized in 2017 together with the Universities of Maastricht and York; and the China Belt and Road conference organized in 2018 with *Renmin* University. These activities have proven to be successful additions to the WUN network activities.

With respect to education, the Partnership Board (Board) has – in principle – approved a strategy and program to add an undergraduate “educational arm” to the WUN portfolio, the main reason being that when dealing with grand challenges and sustainable development goals, universities have to take their role in making sure that these themes are also affecting education. In addition, such a dimension would add to the recognition of WUN as a network with broad impact. It also would increase the visibility of WUN in an increasingly complex world of university networks. The Board, therefore, had voted to pursue this model and set up a small working group under the leadership of Peter Lennie.

State of affairs:

The working group has prepared a preliminary report and has presented some recommendations for the further development of the program. The proposal focusses basically on three models of undergraduate mobility, in brief:

1. Organizing a WUN summer school or schools
2. Setting up research based graduate exchange, and
3. A consortium-wide WUN undergraduate exchange program.

The report was discussed and endorsed by the WUN Board steering committee, with the task to prepare a more detailed business and implementation plan to present to the full Board. Before this step could be actioned , the WUN central office requested feedback from the international/ student exchange officers at all WUN member universities. This feedback provided diverse opinions:

whereas some officers expressed endorsement for the plan as a whole, others were more cautious and concerned. Looking at these responses from the level of “middle management” of WUN member universities, there was not unanimous support of the proposal as a whole. Whereas many showed support for and interest in the summer school and/or the research based exchange, there was more concern about setting up a consortium-wide exchange program. These concerns were based on a number of factors, such as the additional work load, cost for the institutions either directly or through the WUN subscription, imbalance between exchange partners and the realization that in many cases institutions have already got extensive exchange agreements, also with WUN partners. In any case it has to be noted that this diverse picture is somewhat contrasting with the perceived unanimous support from the executive level of the Board members of WUN, and at this stage hindering the development of a concise implementation plan.

Next steps

To continue with this process a number of important questions have to be addressed and answered by the Board:

- 1) Does the Board still endorse the project to add undergraduate education and mobility as a theme to WUN?
- 2) Is the current plan (or parts thereof) still the basis that should be built on in the further process to create a business- and implementation plan?
- 3) Which parts of the working group report should be followed up in the next steps?
- 4) If the project continues, can the Board members ensure that there is alignment concerning this vision in their organization i.e. by the responsible officers?
- 5) Will the Board confirm that a formal working group is established now to prepare the following steps for approval?
- 6) Does the Board agree that there is an additional budget needed at the central WUN level (which could be funded through a modest increase of fees)?
- 7) Alternatively, would the Board stimulate that a group of WUN universities dedicated to create an (undergraduate) educational arm of WUN comes together (*coalition of the willing*) to plan and carry out a pilot project carrying a WUN label?
- 8) As an additional / complementary measure: Is adding an additional “WUN-label” to the existing exchange programs between network partners a cost-effective and easy way to start and increase visibility of WUN’s commitment to (undergraduate) education?

It is necessary to have a clear answer to these question from the Board to ensure that there are no misunderstandings about this project, its scope, significance and the next steps to be taken.

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Professor Martin Paul,

Chair of the Partnership Board , WUN