

# Report on the 19th SPACE Conference

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The 19th international SPACE (European Network for Business Studies and Languages) conference that recently took place in Spain provided valuable insight into several areas of interest. Most notably, methods on how to successfully enhance the internationalization of higher learning institutions were shared through mobility and joint degrees programs. Furthermore, the conference provided an academic forum for a highly professional and earnest discourse on pertinent topics of relevance for higher learning institutions, which this year pivoted around intercultural awareness and dialogue. In sum, the SPACE network provides a wealth of academic and administrative advantages that the academic sphere could greatly benefit from.

*Key words:* mobility, internationalization of higher learning institutions, intercultural awareness

## Introduction

The current short commentary is an account of the 19th international SPACE conference held in Valencia, Spain from the 8th to the 12th of April, 2008. The purpose of the article is to give interested readers insight into the areas that SPACE organization covers, the benefits it delivers and finally to provide food for thought about the faculties integrating into SPACE network and eventually becoming permanent SPACE members. For questions and comments I remain open.

## SPACE – A truly Pan-European Organization

The term 'Pan-European' is often used rather frivolously. I myself, in my academic works, am probably no exception and could be deemed guilty of abusing the word only to depict common ground between two countries. Granted, this does indeed suffice for the minimal interpretation of the term Pan-European, but it denies full appreciation of the word when it is applied to a truly European agenda. SPACE (European Network for Business Studies and Languages), however, does the word justice. It connects more than 80 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in 30 countries from both 'old' and emerging 'new'

Europe. It is this truly European approach which provides the SPACE conferences with invaluable insights from other European HEIs that is difficult to find elsewhere.

Through the Pan-European network, SPACE seeks to:

- Develop joint degrees and shared programs including online exams and courses. SPACE acts as the hub from which the partner institutions can access and coordinate courses. This is especially helpful for newly established HEIs that are looking forward to gain academic knowledge from more experienced schools.
- Act as a platform for idea and research exchanges. The annual conferences are organized as peer-reviewed research forums.
- Offer an environment for initiating mobility projects for staff and students.
- Facilitate work placements for students.

For further listing of SPACE goals and objectives, for which indeed there are many, I suggest you refer to the SPACE website ([www.space-eu.info](http://www.space-eu.info)).

### **The 19th SPACE Conference in Short**

The 19th SPACE conference served two main purposes: first to coordinate joint development and mobility programs and second to deliver academic presentations on conference themes 'Advances in Higher Education: Research, Education and Innovation in the European and Global Research Area' and 'Intercultural Dialogue: Cultural Diversity in the Business World and European Citizenship'.

Excellent presentations were held on how online virtual courses can be better channelled to partner institutions through real-life examples. Along the same vein, there was an exchange of knowledge on the ways in which mobility of teachers and students could be vastly improved including how to address some of the most common pitfalls of student and staff mobility. Sally Brown delivered a particularly interesting presentation entitled 'Assessment, Learning and Teaching: An International Perspective' wherein she discussed several candid revelations about international exchanges that took place at Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, UK. Two topics of particular interest were the perception gap that foreign and local students have towards ordinary academic situations, and as inconsistent views that teachers harbor towards international students.

Within the topic of 'National and International HE and Business Partnerships' the following papers were of particular interest and are worth mentioning:

Ole Faaborg and Eija Källstrom presented the paper 'Matching the Requirements for Soft Skills in Business' wherein they explore the need for soft skills in business and how business schools can effectively match the current trends in industry requirements for staff with soft competencies. The results showed that in both cases there is a high demand for disciplinary skills in combination with soft skills, but that the felt importance for soft skills differs from country to country. Conclusions of the authors were that soft competences are in demand and that a shortage may be experienced in the future if universities do not adapt their programs accordingly.

Kasim Tatic presented an intuitive paper called 'Cross-Cultural Communication, Jungian Psychology and Emotional Intelligence' which took a step back from a typical cultural dialogue and argued that communication between individuals is always cross cultural as a result of differing levels and manifestations of emotional intelligence. The paper assumes that the academic community will be better served if cultural investigations begin at personal level before digressing to the national level. Although the paper received merit at the conference, I thought the points brought up by the author were not as productive as I had expected. It is important to acknowledge people's individual upbringing, however, in the context of intercultural dialogue, I believe it is also important to distinguish between culture and personality. The author failed to convince me of this distinction and hence, in my opinion, took an unnecessary step backwards within the cultural debate. Nevertheless, his paper has some value on the psychological level and readers interested in this aspect can find value in his work.

The theme 'Leadership and Culture' had only one relevant paper worth mentioning:

Stefan Moens presented the paper 'Innovative Cross-Cultural Educational Method' wherein the author proposed a new method of internationalization at home. The content of this presentation was relevant to HEIS that experience difficulties in getting their local students to take international semesters abroad as methods of increasing intercultural awareness at home were discussed. The paper pivots around how to increase interaction with the foreign students at the local university and accesses how two different groups, the internationally 'involved' and 'non-involved' students, tackle the internationalization of foreign students at home. It was shown that both groups must develop their cross-cultural capabilities which would prove useful in their preparation for the business world. Furthermore, coerced integration of the local students with foreign

students was seen as an important step of internationalization at home and a way of arming the local students with a better multicultural/international toolkit.

Within the theme 'The 2008 Intercultural Dialogue Year' the following papers were of particular interest:

Alexandra Albuquerque presented a very interesting paper called 'Can Erasmus Mobility Really Help Crossing Borders? The In and Out of a Case Study'. In the paper she draws conclusions based on Portuguese Erasmus experiences which are not that different from those in Slovenia. The notion that mobility of students can actually reinforce, rather than weaken, the borders between the countries is aired but quickly discarded in favor of several other benefits, particularly cultural development and language improvement. Furthermore, the article states that students as well as teachers who have participated in Erasmus exchange programmes and have during the exchange successfully interacted with foreign cultures can, because of their experience, contribute more to the internationalization at home.

The benefits of mobility are similarly acknowledged in the article of Lenka Drabkova. Her paper 'The Role of Students' Mobilities in Intercultural Relations Development' concludes that mobility is one of the most important international activities that universities can undertake with the aim of building and developing relations among the institutions of higher education and among nations. As such, the concept of student and teacher mobility has many purposes. For teachers, mobility is a good chance to meet professionals working in the same field, share experience, compare the systems of education in their home country and a foreign country, improve a foreign language and last but not least start cooperating on different grants and projects. For students the advantages are equally ample with the added benefit of receiving recognizable accreditation for their academic work.

The theme 'Advances in Language Studies and Education' contributed the following interesting paper:

Jane Stapleford and Dawn Leggot presented their paper entitled 'Language Studies and Pedagogies for the Development of Employability and Intercultural Competence for the Global Workplace' which dealt with the gap between students' perception of their skills and what is indeed required from them once they enter the job market. The paper addresses some techniques that can be used to develop pedagogical strategies for overcoming both staff and student resistance and tips for embedding employability and internationalization

in HEIS quality assurance systems. The study concludes that certain curriculum changes like incorporating personal development planning can indeed help to bridge the gap between the students' perception of their skills development and the skills that 21st century employers require.

The final paper that I consider in my account is perhaps also the most interesting. Doina Cmeciu from Romania presented her work on overcoming prejudices in a globalized world. I recommend this paper to anyone interested in an occasionally honest read about prejudices and stereotypes; a topic in the intercultural research debate that is highly neglected despite the human tendency towards stereotypes. The paper entitled 'Managing "Pride and Prejudice" through (inter/trans) Cultural Communication' focuses on the difficulties arising during a communication process when the locutor and interlocutor do not share the same cultural values. Effects like pride and prejudice in particular emerge from misunderstanding and misinterpreting messages exchanged during such an encounter or pride and prejudice are a consequence of one's own stereotypes. The ambitious and very interesting outset of the paper is, however, followed by a rather predictable conclusion; in order to overcome prejudices and stereotypes one must be able to develop competences and skills in assessing the social context together with the position and roles of the communicators. The article also suggests that Erasmus exchange programs facilitate this development.

### **Conclusion**

The 19th SPACE conference provided very valuable insight in two main issues. First, some practical insights were shared on how intercultural exchanges of teachers and students can be facilitated through better mobility and joint degree programs and second, in-depth presentations and debates on the topic of intercultural dialogue were presented and debated.

Besides these tangible aspects, the conference also provided a professional platform for teachers and academics with similar interests to network and coordinate upcoming cooperative inter-university plans and also to meet some noted authorities on cultural issues, like Lars Lyngje Nilesen, the President of Eurashe, and Fons Trompenaars, a founding father of modern cultural discourse, just to mention a few.