

A DECADE OF EXPERIENCE: ADVANCES AND REFLECTIONS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL GROUPS AT THE FACULTY OF VETERINARY MEDICINE OF THE UNIVERSITY CEU CARDENAL HERRERA

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Abstract

The internationalization journey of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at CEU Cardenal Herrera University (CEU-UCH) started a decade ago with the creation of the French bilingual group, followed two years later by the initiation of the English bilingual group. This initiative resulted in a substantial rise in the enrolment of international students, constituting nowadays approximately 50% of the total student population in the faculty. Consequently, the Coordinator of Bilingual Groups position was established to address the unique needs and intricacies of the international student management. Over the past 10 years, this role has undergone continuous evolution. Initially, the Coordinator played a pivotal role in various tasks, including the recruitment and admission of new students, their orientation, providing ongoing support to international students, and helping in their professional integration, always in collaboration with other services. With the success of the bilingual groups and the substantial influx of international students, specific responsibilities were delegated to specialized services while others underwent refinement. Noteworthy examples include the management of new student admissions to the French group and the validation processes for international students, the digitalization of which commenced in 2020. This, in turn, has led to a reduction in file evaluation times, enhanced the precision of collected information, and improved the overall student experience by minimizing response times. Ultimately, this innovative international management model serves as a blueprint that can be adapted and extrapolated to other domains, as well as to other Faculties and Universities.

Keywords: internationalization, digitization, veterinary students, personal follow-up, management of international groups.

1 INTRODUCTION

Internationalization in education integrates a multinational, plurilingual and intercultural approach that can improve student preparation to become global citizens and make a meaningful contribution to society [1]. It exposes students to diverse perspectives and ideas from around the world and offers them the opportunity to acquire essential competencies to face shared challenges when entering the job market [2]. From a pedagogical perspective, international education not only enhances communicative skills but also reinforces essential abilities such as adaptation, cooperation, respect, and interpersonal relationships [3]. Consequently, internationalization has been one of the key strategic priorities of the University CEU Cardenal Herrera (CEU-UCH) for the last decade. In this sense, the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the CEU-UCH accepted the challenge of creating its first French bilingual group in 2012/13. In this academic year, the group consisted in nine international students. By the following year, 2013/14, this number had increased to 54. From then on, between 65 and 80 international students joined this bilingual group annually. In parallel, starting from the 2014/15 academic year, an English bilingual group was developed and achieved comparable success. Due to the high number of international students who applied each year to access the Veterinary Medicine Degree and admitted at the CEU-UCH, together with the specific characteristics of international students (language, academic

backgrounds, culture, etc.), an evolution in international student management was necessary. This led to the creation of a new coordination position: the Coordinator of Bilingual Groups. This Coordinator is knowledgeable about the language and educational systems of the students' home countries and is responsible for ensuring that the students receive the adapted support to succeed in their studies and to address the unique needs and intricacies of international student management. The Coordinator of Bilingual Groups plays a crucial role in facilitating communication between students and teachers, as well as in promoting intercultural exchange and understanding among students from different backgrounds.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the CEU-UCH offers instruction in Spanish, French and English during the first two years of the curriculum. From the third year, the instruction is in Spanish. Students who receive education in French or English during the first two years are part of the French and English bilingual group, respectively. These groups are almost entirely composed of international students. Since the creation of the first bilingual group in 2012, more than 1,000 international students joined the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. The management of the bilingual groups has been assumed by three successive Coordinators, each holding the position for a minimum of two years. They organized the implementation of new procedures in various areas.

2.2 Work approach

The evolution of internationalization management has witnessed constant enhancements and adaptations to the changing times, commencing with the establishment of protocolized and standardized actions and finishing with the streamlining of bureaucratic processes through digital transformation. This transformative journey unfolded through a systematic approach based on a cycle of continuous improvement, followed by each of the subsequent Coordinators, as shown in Fig. 1.

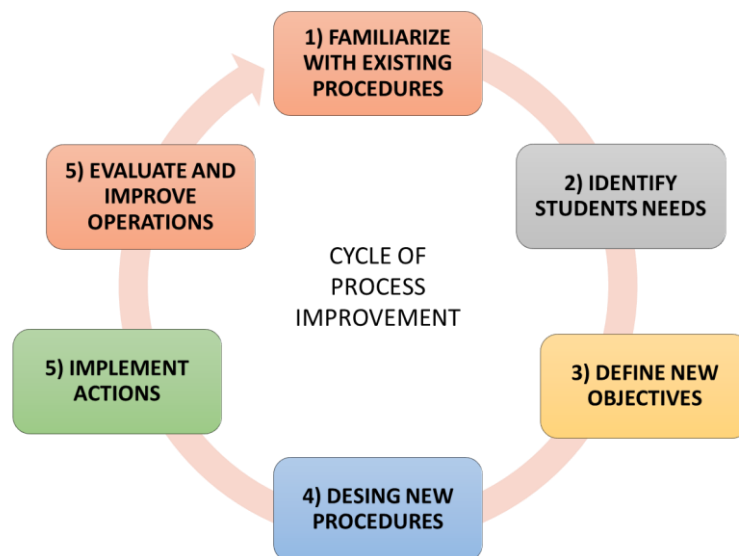


Figure 1: Cycle of process improvement during the 10-year experience of coordination. 1) acquainting of the Coordinator of Bilingual Groups with existing procedures; 2) identifying specific international student needs; 3) formulating new and achievable objectives; 4) designing novel procedures in collaboration with the Dean's team and relevant CEU-UCH services, if required; 5) implementing these innovative procedures; and 6) evaluating and iteratively refining the processes for continual improvement.

2.3 Technical resources

Tools available to the university staff have been used, including Microsoft 365 tools: Word and Power Point to plan the actions to be implemented, Excel to facilitate the evaluation of the recognition of European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), Forms to collect information related to

admission and validation records, Teams to hold meetings between different authors of the digitization process, and SharePoint and Power Automate to activate workflows for validation assessment.

3 RESULTS

Since its inception in 2014, the successive Coordinators of the Bilingual Groups have been an integral part of the Dean's team and contributed to a wide range of activities across various fields. The faculty has relied in the Coordinator to address the specific needs of internationalization. Simultaneously, the actions carried out have been adapted as educational and office technologies, together with the needs of international students, have evolved. Over the past 10 years, the Coordinator has been responsible for a diverse set of tasks, such as selecting and welcoming new students, guiding their first steps in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, monitoring enrolled students, validating ECTS credits from previous academic experiences, supporting professional integration, and collaborating with other services of the CEU-UCH (Fig. 2). These responsibilities have been constantly shaped and refined. Some of these tasks were streamlined over time or assigned to specialized services or roles. Other actions, initially reserved for bilingual groups, were adapted, and transferred to national groups.

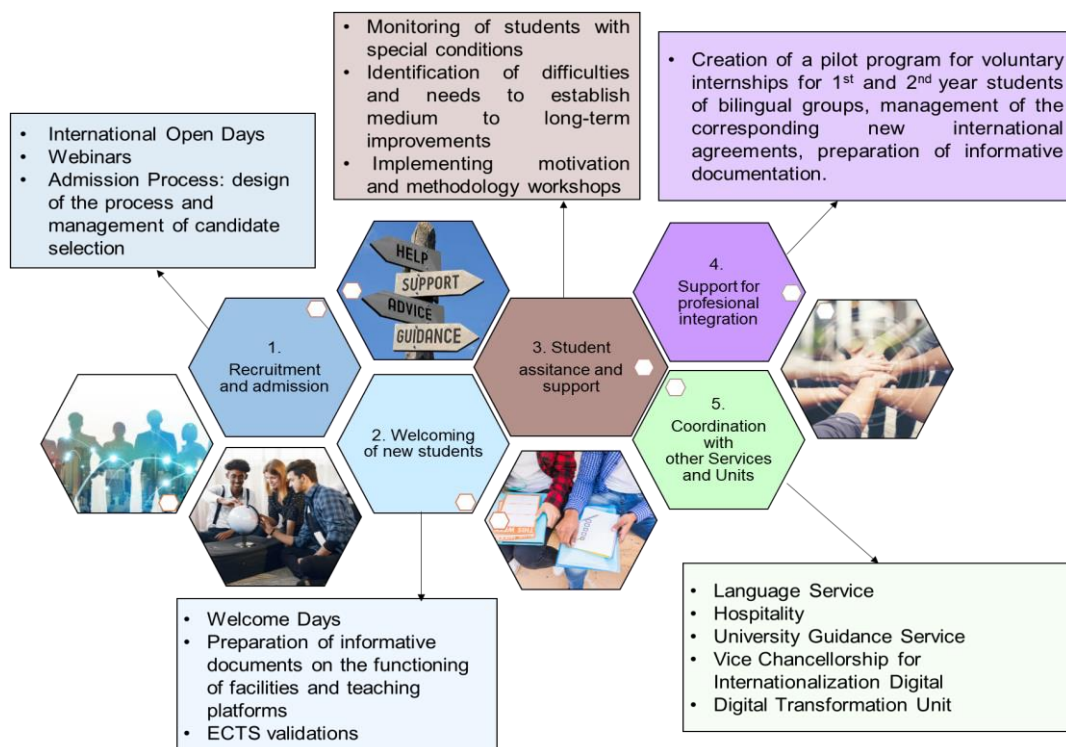


Figure 2: Main actions carried out by the Coordinator since the creation of the position.

3.1 Recruitment and admission

3.1.1 Open Days and Webinars

During the initial phase of internationalizing the faculty, the CEU-UCH applied various strategies to introduce the bilingual groups to international audience, such as hosting Open Days. The strong collaboration between the Coordinator of the Bilingual Group, the rest of the Dean's team, teachers of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, and the International Relations Office resulted in Open Days being held for two entire days. They showcased the CEU-UCH, the faculty, the veterinary hospital, the teaching and veterinary research farm, and collaborators such as the Valencia zoological park. Simultaneously, webinars were conducted for student recruitment. Over time, as the bilingual groups consolidated, the events were simplified, and the frequency of the webinars was reduced.

3.1.2 Admission

The success of the bilingual group was soon followed by a growing interest in enrolment, which led to the implementation of a selective process for admission that enabled the formation of excellent groups of highly committed students. Thus, the French group currently admits 75 students for over than 300

applications, resulting in an admission rate of less than 1 in every 4 applicants. The selection process involves several stages. In brief, candidates contact the CEU-UCH, complete the admission form, and submit their documents. After analysing the records and integrating the admission interview results, the list of admitted candidates and waitlisted candidates is prepared in one month.

Initially, all the documentation was paper based. To reduce resolution time, enhance the candidate experience and optimize resource allocation, the process was digitized in 2020, in collaboration with the Digital Transformation Unit of the CEU-UCH.

3.2 Welcoming of new students

3.2.1 Welcome Days and informative documents

To facilitate the integration of new students in the CEU-UCH, the Vice-Chancellorship for Students and University Life planned Welcome Days during the first days of September. Veterinary students were provided with important information about the functioning of the University and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. The Coordinator has always participated in the Welcome Days to organize actions, give informative talks, support workshops, etc.

Moreover, the Coordinator prepared informative documents in various formats, including the general presentation of the Veterinary Medicine Degree and welcome guides for new international students. The initial edition of these documents was published in French and English. The positive feedback from the bilingual groups resulted in the documents being translated and adapted for the Spanish group.

3.2.2 ECTS validation

International students who enrol in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine may have completed other educational programs and earned ECTS credits. To manage ECTS credit transfers, the similarity of the syllabus of higher education previously taken with those taught at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine is analysed. Then, the number of validated ECTS credits and a corresponding grade are calculated. Therefore, it is essential to study each case in depth to verify that the set of subjects taken and passed by a student corresponds to the totality of a subject in the Veterinary Medicine Degree Curriculum. Since 2014, 579 international students have requested ECTS transfer, and more than 1500 subjects were validated.

The high volume of requests, the complexity of international record analysis, and the need of a quick resolution, called for a continuous search for process improvement. This led to the digitization of the process in 2021, in collaboration with the Digital Transformation Unit of the CEU-UCH. By digitizing the process, file evaluation times were reduced, the precision of collected information was enhanced, and response times were minimized, leading to an improved overall student experience.

3.3 Student assistance and support: student guidance and workshops

The Coordinator had to provide linguistic support due to the lack of a French-speaking guidance counsellor and the limited proficiency in Spanish or English of some international students when the French group was established. This situation also led to the organization of workshops in French on motivation and methodology. Currently, the University Guidance Service is taking on these activities, thanks to two French and English-speaking counsellors, which has resulted in a significant enhancement of student support.

3.4 Support for professional integration: pilot program for voluntary internships

In 2014/15, in collaboration with the Practice and Employment Information Service of the CEU-UCH and the Dean's team, the Coordinator designed a new International Summer Internship Program aimed at 1st and 2nd year students enrolled in bilingual groups. It facilitated the completion of approximately 300 internships and the signing of over 250 new international agreements. In 2020/21, the program was extended to 1st and 2nd year veterinary students of the Spanish groups, and from then on, the management was transferred to the International Practice Coordinators and the National Practice Coordinators of the faculty, and the Professional Career Service of the CEU-UCH.

3.5 Coordination with other Services and Units

It is worth emphasizing that the multifaceted tasks carried out by the Coordinator are based on the close collaboration with Services or Units belonging to different Vice-Chancellorships, particularly the Vice-Chancellorship for Internationalization and Digitization, and the Vice-Chancellorship for Students and University Life.

4 CONCLUSIONS

For the past 10 years, the management of international students has played a crucial role in the internationalization of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. The commitment of the faculty to create a specialized position for serving these students has proven to be a success. The attentive approach towards international students, providing guidance and support in all aspects and stages of university life, has been associated with the increase of the popularity of the bilingual groups of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the CEU-UCH. Currently, the faculty can select its students, forming groups of excellence with strong institutional commitment.

The balance of these 10 years of internationalization has been highly positive, thanks to efforts focused on the care of international students. The Bilingual Group Coordinator position and the creation of new services initially aimed at addressing specific aspects of international students. It's interesting to note that some of these services were later extended to national groups or other faculties.

The fast evolution of new technologies together with the commitment to streamline administrative processes and digital transformation, promise a bright future in managing international students at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. Pilot programs, including the use of artificial intelligence, are already underway, marking a step forward in educational innovation and continuous improvement.

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