Undergraduate Exchanges

Background

There are two kinds of undergraduate exchange programmes: University-wide exchanges and School-owned exchanges. Currently, the only Informatics-owned exchanges are Erasmus exchanges with European universities.

Generally speaking, for every student we "export" on an exchange, we (the University, or the School) "import" one student. There are also many "study abroad" students who come outside of exchanges. I am not aware of any outgoing students apart from those on exchanges.

Problems

- Import/export imbalance: For example, in 2016/17, Informatics exported 20 students for a full year and imported 122 students, most for a single semester (39 on exchanges and 83 study abroad) against a target of 24+22. This imbalance is already being partly addressed by the decision to guarantee study abroad students no more than 20 points of Informatics courses per year from 2019/2020.
- Demand from our students exceeds supply: Student demand is overwhelmingly for the US, Canada, Australia, and English-speaking destinations in Asia (Singapore, Hong Kong). These are university-wide exchanges, where Informatics students compete with other students across the University for a small number of places. Many university-wide exchanges in the US are with universities having lacklustre Computer Science departments. Additional destinations that have been requested by students are ETH Zürich and EPFL in Switzerland.
- More students should be going abroad: The university's Strategic Vision 2025 envisions all of our students being offered an international learning experience by 2025. This is in line with other world-class universities. In Informatics, the current figure for exchanges is about 10% and we don't provide other international learning experiences, at least not in an organised way.
- An attempt to introduce a new "MInf with Study Abroad" degree programme (identical to our current MInf, but with a requirement to spend a year on exchange) as a way of encouraging more students to go abroad, was blocked at College level in 2017 on the grounds that Informatics has insufficient School-owned exchanges to guarantee students on this programme a year abroad.

Proposal

My proposal is that we set up new Informatics-owned exchanges with good partner departments in desirable destinations. Once these are in place, we could possibly attempt to restrict imports to students on these exchanges. Further, this removes the obstacle to introduction of the Minf with Study Abroad degree programme.

In April, I contacted 19 universities on the east coast of the US in April to gauge interest in new exchange programmes, targeting top Computer Science departments, and visited 9 of these after initial positive reactions. In QS-rank order: Carnegie Mellon University, Cornell University, University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, University of Pennsylvania, University of Maryland, Boston University, Penn State University, Brown University, Northeastern University. All would like to set up undergraduate exchanges with us, however Brown's internal rules may make an exchange impossible. There are already university-wide exchange programmes in place with a few of these universities, and the proposal for these is to add an Informatics-owned exchange on top of the existing arrangement, possibly by ring-fencing some of the existing places. The University of Toronto – which I was unable to visit – has signalled a desire to expand their existing university-wide exchange to include more Informatics students.

I would like permission to go ahead with setting up these exchanges and then re-proposing the Minf with Study Abroad. I would aim to start with small numbers at each university and grow selectively where experience in the early years is positive. I plan a visit soon to ETH and EPFL to see if they are also interested. In future, another visit could be to the west coast of the US where most of the attractive university-wide exchange destinations are located. Of the universities I contacted on the east coast, Waterloo University is also interested, plus (more tentatively) Columbia University and Johns Hopkins. These could be added later, or I could try to pursue them now. Other obvious targets in the US that have not yet been approached are the University of Michigan and University of Texas at Austin.

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