



**eQuATIC**

Online Quality Assessment Tool  
for International Cooperation

A low-angle photograph of graduates in black gowns and caps, celebrating with their arms raised against a bright sky. The image is framed by a large, stylized white diamond shape with a dark grey border. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a building's facade.

# RESEARCH: THE USE OF DATA FOR INTERNATIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly digital world, Higher Education systems are digitalising as well, impacting teaching, management and administration. This research paper looks at how digitalisation impacts internationalisation of Higher Education in an information age. We have been looking particularly at how digitalisation has impacted the collection and usage of data for decision-making processes and more specifically, the impact digitalisation has on inter-institutional partnerships. Inter-institutional partnerships enabling mobility are a core element of Higher Education's efforts to internationalise, yet the processes on how to establish, maintain and possibly terminate partnerships is largely unexplored. The quality of partnerships can have a direct impact on the success of internationalisation, entailing the quality of mobilities and general cooperation between the partners.

This research paper attempts to create a better understanding of these processes. It has been created in the framework of the Erasmus+ co-funded project Assessing Quality of Partnerships amongst Higher Education Institutions (shortly the eQuATIC project), led by Ghent University with the support of the European University Foundation (EUF), the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA) and the University of Warsaw.

The eQuATIC project is based on the initial efforts of Ghent University to strengthen their decision-making process for inter-institutional partners for student mobility based on data. Through a pilot project co-funded by the Flemish Ministry of Higher Education, the project developed, in cooperation with multiple Flemish Higher Education Institutions, an analysis tool for the quality of partnerships and allowed the abovementioned consortium to learn both from the research data presented in this paper, as well as from the practical experiences of the pilot project.

We acknowledge the wide variety of partnerships and types of activities that exist in Higher Education but for the scope of this research paper we focus on those partnerships that are set up to enable student mobility. When the terms partnerships and agreements are being used in the context of this paper, we thus also mean those type of partnerships that are targeted at student mobility.

Before we can talk about the quality of partnerships, we made it our aim to get a better understanding of the decision-making processes of establishing, maintaining and terminating those partnerships in the European Higher Education Area. For this purpose, we have (a) conducted a literature review, (b) conducted qualitative interviews and (c) surveyed European Higher Education Institutions (hereinafter called HEIs).

The research has taken place under the premise that successful policy making at any HEI should be data-informed. Therefore, the research has looked particularly at data collection and reusability in European Higher Education. In the interviews and survey, we approached institutions based on two perspectives. On the one hand we looked at data collection and reusability of data relevant for inter-institutional partnerships and on the other hand we looked at current processes and practices of establishing, maintaining and terminating partnerships.

We extended the research of how institutions use data-informed policy making to establish quality partnerships with a chapter that looks at policies and practices on national level.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research paper is a result of different research activities conducted in the framework of the eQuATIC project. To get a better understanding on the current situation, as well as desired aspects of quality in inter-institutional partnerships enabling mobility, we have been conducting a literature review and gathered both quantitative and qualitative data through an online survey and a range of interviews.

All research activities took into consideration two aspects:

- (1) State of the art on data collection and reusability in internationalisation policies;
- (2) Practices of setting up, maintaining and terminating inter-institutional partnerships enabling student mobility

We started by conducting a literature review focusing on research and other publications in English and focusing on the European Higher Education Area. We looked into literature tackling the topic from a European perspective, as well as national sources in selected countries, as can be seen in chapter 5.

Following the literature review, we created a generic question catalogue that was used to interview staff members working at International Relation Office (mostly on centralised level) at HEIs. We interviewed 11 institutions, which were chosen amongst the members of the European University Foundation, institutions that have previously expressed interest in the eQuATIC project and partners of Ghent University and the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA). We tried to cover as many countries of the EHEA as possible, while also looking at institutions of different sizes and character e.g. big research universities and smaller colleges and universities of applied sciences.

The aim of the interviews was to get a better understanding of the two main aspects of inter-institutional partnerships as outlined above and identify general trends.

Building on the observations of the interviews, we created an online survey which 94 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) answered. The survey included both quantitative questions as well as open-ended questions to collect additional qualitative data. Participants in the survey could chose to skip some of the questions, leading to a lower number of responses for specific questions. This reflects especially in the open-ended questions, where in average only half of the survey participants answered.

When carrying out the research we identified some good practices that we also share in the context of this research paper.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1. Data collection and reusability**

##### **3.1.1. DATA INFORMED POLICY MAKING**

When you meet a colleague from a foreign university for the first time, you might ask about the size of his/her university and further in the discussion you could probably ask about the number of exchange students and the size of the international office. The answer on these questions will help you get an insight in the context this colleague is operating in. Unconsciously, data (e.g. the total number of students, the number of exchange students, the number of employees at the IRO) is used to help you interpreting the context and reality of the working environment of your colleague.

Helping to interpret context and realities is also very useful in the own context. When a new policy is established, you might want to understand if it has the foreseen effects. You can build upon your own expertise and subjective observations to evaluate the new policy measures, but you also want to have a more objective approach towards this evaluation by using actual data. Data can provide insights in processes and effectiveness of policies at your institution.

The example above illustrates the link between data that can provide information and lead to knowledge. The link between those three concepts (data, information and knowledge) is explicitly mentioned in the Higher Education Data & Information Improvement Programme (HEDIIP) hosted by the UK Higher Education and Statistics Agency (HESA):

- Data is a representation of facts; it can be formed of numbers, text, graphics, pictures, sound and video.
- Information is data in context – the difference between a string of random numbers and the context that these represent a telephone number.
- Knowledge is harder to pin down; one definition is 'information with perspective.' By applying insights, trends, patterns and even assumptions to information, knowledge may be created. Knowledge used to be very much a human interpretation of data but with the massive shift to large, low cost compute power, predictive analytic engines and the explosion of available data, knowledge is very much both human and system generated perspectives and insights.

Knowledge and information are crucial for making good policy and therefore data can serve policy makers. However, data is only an asset if some kind of management structure is in place. Data should be properly collected, transformed, brokered and used. This use spans daily operations, external returns, medium to long term planning and analytics-based intelligence. A data asset will support those scenarios transparently, fairly and securely all at a known cost. The key to a well-managed data asset is its flexibility to respond to change – change that is all around and gathering pace. Well managed, appropriately governed and universally trusted data is a real – if unseen – asset for any institution (Data Capability: A call to action, 2016: p.2).

In the context of preparing policy in Higher Education and Research in general and in internationalisation specifically, data can thus be a crucial asset. Data-based (or evidence-based) policy is an often-discussed topic in this context. However, in the context of this research the focus is more on data-informed decision making because policy options should not only be decided based on data. De Vlieger, Gijssels, Oeijen, & Pauwels (2015) refer to the interplay between data that can provide a certain insight and ideological, political and social perceptions. It is evident that data as such do not have an added value for preparing policy. However, when well captured, interpreted and described, data can provide useful insights for policy preparation and evaluation. Menon, Dawn & Gibbs (2014) also stress the importance of performance indicators that should inform decision making in educational planning and policy making, but they should not be seen as a substitute for reflection and judgement.

The prevalence of data-informed over data-driven is also stressed by Maycotte (2015) who illustrates the importance of human instincts and experience when flying an airplane.

No matter how sophisticated the systems onboard are, a highly trained pilot is ultimately responsible for making decisions at critical junctures. Being data-informed is about striking a balance in which expertise and understanding of information plays as great a role in decisions as the information itself. Given access to increasingly sophisticated data, good decision-makers don't just put everything on auto-pilot and rely on data alone; instead, they use the data to move faster and more nimbly than they could otherwise.

In an interview Dirk Van Damme, Head of Innovation and Measuring Progress (IMEP) at the Directorate for Education and Skills at OECD, refers to the lack of urgency of the use of data in Higher Education: "In terms of the higher education community, I think we are still not as advanced as what we should be. We don't have enough data on higher education that is internationally comparable and that we can use for the more sophisticated types of analysis. I see that as a really big problem [...]. Specifically regarding internationalisation what we do have – and that's already very valuable – is data, collected with UNESCO, on international mobility in higher education. But that's certainly only one element of internationalisation". In the same interview Mr. Van Damme expresses his frustration about the reluctance of being more data-intensive and collecting more comparable data (Mesquita, 2016).

### 3.1.2. DATA CAPABILITY

De Vlieger et al. (2015) discuss the data capability of the staff that needs to apply the data-informed policy making and Andy Youell (2018a) also points towards the potential risks (cfr. infra) of the widespread use of spreadsheets as data enabler and the potential lack of the correct skillset of staff who need to deal with these data. There is a clear need in experts at interpreting data. It is not the indicator per se that is important, but the context and its interpretation. In other words, data on itself is only a powerful means if it is contextualised, interpreted and used properly (Casals, 2016).

The complexity of interpretation of performance indicators and the underlying data is also stressed by Menon et al (2014). Performance indicators represent a very accessible and apparently simple tool for management - a unit or an individual is either meeting or not meeting a target, and by a demonstrable extent. However, such simplicity, whilst superficially attractive, is also fraught with potential dangers. Performance indicators have much to offer university managers and wider staff, but they require full understanding and sensitive awareness of the operating environment within which they have been applied. This includes a knowledge of potential flaws in underlying data and a willingness to react accordingly. The staff who work with data need the time and commitment to move beyond the mechanistic production of performance indicators; they need to be able to uncover the background and to be able to explain and interpret the indicators in use.



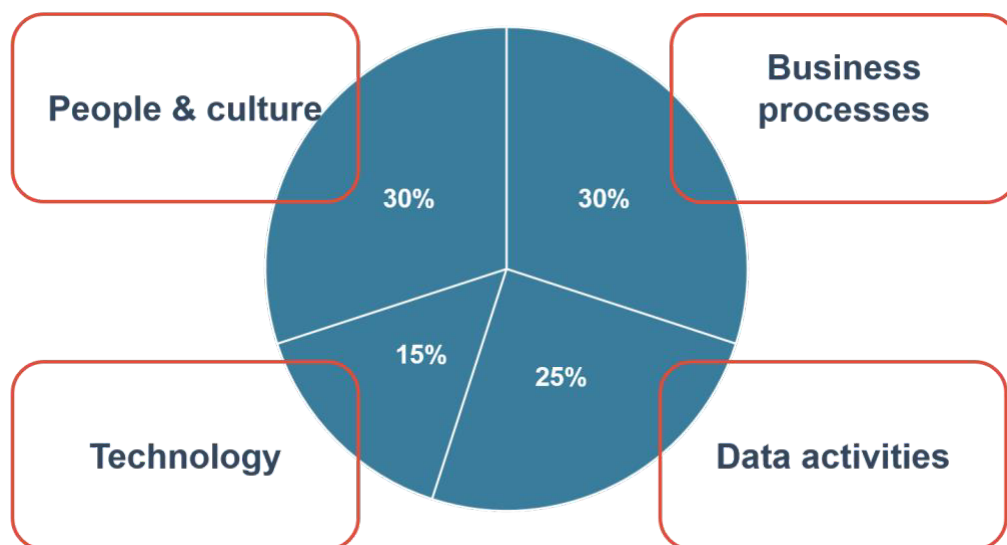


Figure 1 - HEDIPP data capability wheel

In the HEDIPP publication *Data Capability: a call for action* (2016) people and culture form a separate dimension (30%) besides the business process (30%), data activities (25%) and technology (15%). Most organisations focus on technology, overlooking the important aspect of people and what they do with data (Business processes) which counts for 60% of any data project. The people and culture dimension of data is often overlooked so missing the vital link between how data is perceived and how it is used.

### 3.1.3. INFORMATION SOURCES

#### Student information system (SIS)

Data is stored in some kind of database. The most common system for managing student data in most HEIs is the so-called Student Information System (SIS). The SIS is the main tool to administer student data. Processes that are handled by a SIS provide capabilities for registering students in courses; documenting grading, transcripts, results of student tests and other assessment scores; building student schedules; tracking student attendance; and managing many other student-related data needs in a school (Wikipedia, 2018).

More and more SIS also cater for student mobility. A large-scale survey (a total of 1050 answers were collected) conducted in the context of the Erasmus Without Paper project shows (Figure 2) that 26% of institutions use software that has been developed in-house.

11,7% rely on commercial solutions and 18,3% on a mix of both while more than 1/3 of the respondents do not have any IT tool in place for managing mobility (Jahnke, 2017).

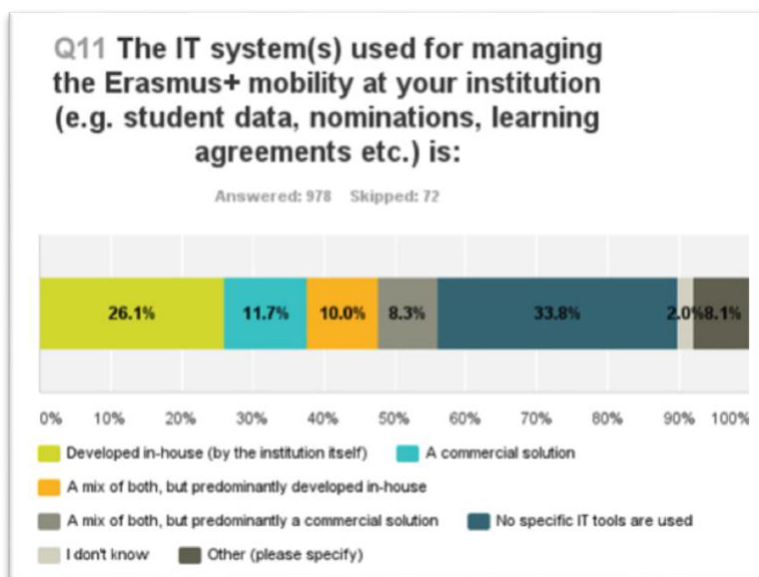


Figure 2 - IT systems used for managing Erasmus+ mobility

Looking at the institutions that indicated that they use an IT system (566 answered this question), 21.9% of institutions use the same system for managing local and international student data (Jahnke, 2017).

It is also remarkable that a large percentage of institutions have no specific IT-tools available for the management of student mobility. One can assume that those institutions use basic, own-designed databases, possibly in Excel or Access to manage student mobility.

### Mobility management software

There are several commercial tools available<sup>1</sup> for the management of student mobility and internationalisation processes. Besides functionality needed to manage the mobilities themselves, those systems also have powerful functionality for reporting.

<sup>1</sup> The most known examples are MoveOn by QS Unisolution, Mobility Online from SOP, SoleMOVE from Solenovo, Osiris by CACI, the solutions offered by Terra Dotta and the DreamApply package.

## Centralised vs decentralised

The EWP Desk Research (Jahnke, 2017) provides insight about the level where Erasmus+ mobility data is managed. Almost 50% of respondents manage their Erasmus+ mobility centrally, while 24% indicate that it is predominantly the central International Relations Office (IRO) that manages mobility. A substantial number of institutions manages their Erasmus+ mobility in a decentralised manner though (Figure 3).

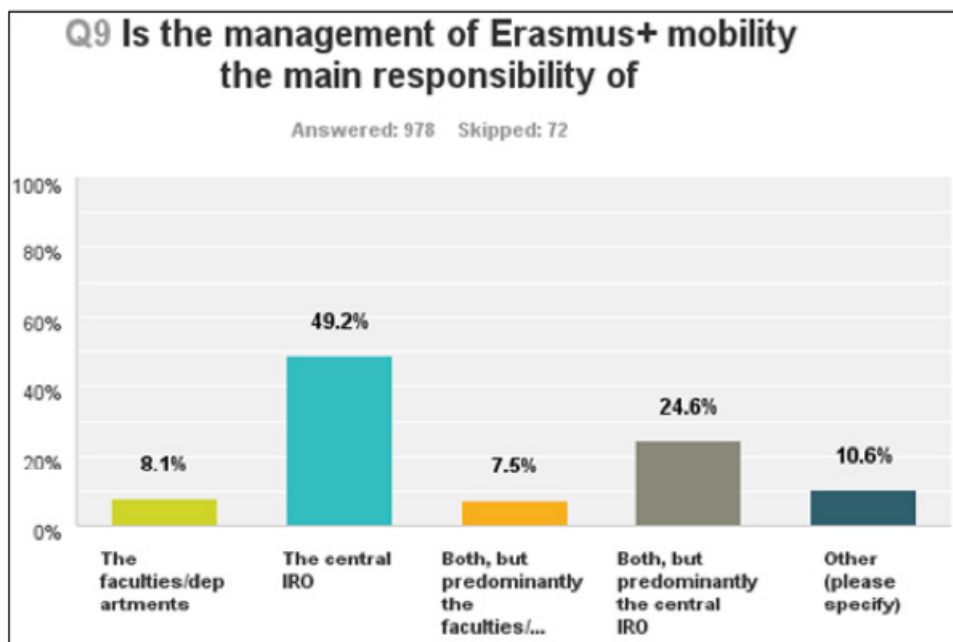


Figure 3 - Responsibility level for managing Erasmus+ mobility

Decentralised data gathering could be a challenge if information is needed at the centralised level. Clear standards and guidelines are crucial for a common understanding about

## Spreadsheets

Using spreadsheets for data processing is somewhat contested. Research suggests that 88% of spreadsheets contain some sort of material error (Panko, 2008). In his blogpost "Spreadsheets – a blessing or a curse", Andy Youell, former Director of Data Policy & Governance, at HESA points to 6 broad reasons why spreadsheets go wrong. Youell describes spreadsheets as great enablers and democratisers of the data revolution. However, he also points to a clear risk of spreadsheets that are being used to undertake major data processes without the sort of discipline and professionalism that you would see in a major systems project. In his conclusion he points towards "The use of

spreadsheets needs to be underpinned by the sort of skills and mindset that underpins professional systems development" (Youell, 2018a).

#### 3.1.4. BIG DATA

Nowadays there is a lot of talk about big data. Big data seems to generate big money. The most successful companies on the stock market are driven by enormous quantities of data. Despite the fact that it is not completely clear what big data really is, a lot of value is given to it. Companies invest in big data because they believe it will increase their revenue long-term.

However, it is very important to clearly define goals before dreaming about big data techniques. Prof Guy De Tré points out that big data solutions are only useful for big data problems. The main challenges that big data can formulate an answer on are referred to with the 4 V's: Volume (scale of data), Variety (different forms of data), Velocity (the speed that data is generated) and Veracity (imperfections of data). Only if the classical information system is not able to handle one of these challenges, big data techniques could have an added value (De Tré, 2018). It is also worth noticing that given the popularity of the term big data, a collection of data is quickly referred to as big data in all sorts of contexts but not always with the necessary expertise and background.

### 3.2. Inter-institutional partnerships enabling mobility

#### 3.2.1. INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS IN ERASMUS+

The Erasmus programme, the European Union's funding programme for Education, had a vast impact on international partnerships. In the most recent Erasmus+ programme almost every call for proposal, whether for staff exchange, student mobility, strategic partnerships, capacity building projects, joint programmes or knowledge alliances, requires HEIs to partner with other HEIs and entities in Erasmus+ programme and partner countries (Sandström, Weimer, 2015). Inter-institutional partnerships are defined in the 2018 Erasmus+ Programme Guide as "an agreement between a group of participating organisations in different [Erasmus+] Programme Countries to carry out activities in the fields of education, training, youth and sport [...] in the form of [...] individual long-term mobility, intensive programmes in higher education and cooperation between local and regional authorities to foster inter-regional, including cross-border, cooperation" (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2019).

In the ECTS User's Guide, offering guidelines for implementing ECTS, selection of partners is addressed under the chapter on ECTS for mobility and credit recognition. It is suggested to establish exchange agreements with institutions:

- that offer transparent descriptions of their programmes, including learning outcomes, credits, learning and teaching approaches and assessment methods
- whose learning, teaching and assessment procedures can be accepted by the sending institution without requiring the student to take any additional work or examination
- that are duly quality assured according to their respective national systems.

Agreements may not only be made with institutions offering similar programmes, but also with those providing programmes that are complementary (ECTS User's Guide, 2019).

As explained in the introduction, for this research we focus on inter-institutional partnerships enabling mobility, thus a relationship between two or more HEIs to exchange students and/or staff through mobility schemes. In their research on international strategic partnerships, Sandström and Weimer (2015) come to the conclusion that student and staff mobility dominate the activities included in international strategic partnerships.

The details of the relationship are typically defined in the inter-institutional agreement that the institutions sign. An inter-institutional agreement is the document where the conditions and details that determine the quality and the scope of a partnership are laid down (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2019). This typically works on the templates provided for by the European Commission, and which bind the signing parties to define the terms of the partnership.

The agreements' basic terms are set out in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). These include the three principles of non-discrimination, full credit recognition and gratuity. More practically, the signing HEIs also agree to publish and update their course catalogue, carry out exchanges only within the agreement's framework, ensure that outgoing students are well-prepared (particularly in terms of language skills), to integrate incoming students into the student life of the hosting HEI, as well as to accept all activities indicated in the learning agreement and to provide transcripts for them among other practices (Erasmus Charter for Higher Education, 2019).

### 3.2.2. INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS: A EUROPEAN POLICY PERSPECTIVE

In 2013 the European Commission launched its internationalisation strategy "European higher education in the world". In this document it is noted that: "While several Member States and many HEIs already have higher education internationalisation strategies in place, these are often centred mainly on student mobility: international academic cooperation is often still fragmented, based on the initiative of individual academics or research teams, and not necessarily linked to an institutional or national strategy." (European Commission, 2013: p. 3).

The Commission proposes three key priorities that should be integrated elements of a comprehensive internationalisation strategy of HEIs and Member States: international student and staff mobility; the internationalisation and improvement of curricula and digital learning; and strategic cooperation, partnerships and capacity building. Note that the latter proposed key priority includes international partnerships between higher education institutions.

However, the meaning of partnerships is taken broader, covering also partnerships between universities and schools, between governments and universities, and between industry and universities. This becomes evident in other EU policy documents, such as the Renewed EU agenda for higher education (2017). The four priorities for action in this policy document are: 1. Tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development; 2. Building inclusive and connected higher education systems; 3. Ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation; 4. Supporting effective and efficient higher education systems. Instead of international partnerships between HEIs it is cooperation between HEIs, schools and VET providers (under the second priority) and cooperation between universities and businesses (under the third priority) that are highlighted in this document.

The European Commission has significantly stimulated intensified international partnerships through the funding of joint programmes, e.g. the Erasmus Mundus joint masters and EU support for Bologna reform projects regarding joint programmes. This was encouraged by subsequent Communiqués of the Ministers of the EHEA calling for an increase of joint programmes and the removing of barriers in QA, recognition and national legislation. The recent EU initiative on creating European Universities ([https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en)) should lead to significant and innovative long-term international partnerships in designated university networks with potentially far-reaching impacts on European higher education, but this is not the topic of this study.

In 2014 U-Multirank ([www.umultirank.org](http://www.umultirank.org)) was launched after its development was initiated by the European Commission. U-Multirank is an alternative multidimensional and user-driven approach to ranking in which performances of higher education institutions are compared on five dimensions: (1) teaching and learning, (2) research, (3) knowledge transfer, (4) international orientation and (5) regional engagement. The tool enables comparisons at the level of the university as a whole and at the level of specific study programmes.

The tool covers currently approximately 1,600 universities from 95 countries around the world (<https://www.umultirank.org/about/u-multirank/frequently-asked-questions/>). For the dimension international orientation one can make its personalized ranking by comparing HEIs in e.g. Europe on some or each of the following indicators: foreign

language bachelor programmes (the percentage of bachelor programmes that are offered in a foreign language); foreign language master programmes (the percentage of masters programmes that are offered in a foreign language); student mobility (a composite of international incoming exchange students, outgoing exchange students and students in international joint degree programmes); international academic staff (the percentage of academic staff with foreign citizenship); international joint publications (the percentage of the university's research publications that list at least one affiliate author's address located in another country); and, international doctorate degrees (the percentage of doctorate degrees that are awarded to international doctorate candidates).

Although one can compare its own institution with other institutions as a whole or in a certain subject the comparisons all relate to quantitative aspects. Qualitative aspects of the international orientation dimension are not considered in U-Multirank. Partnerships only feature in the dimension Research where one of the indicators is strategic research partnerships (the number of strategic partnerships per FTE academic staff). However, one can argue that the sheer number of such partnerships does not say anything about the quality of neither these partnerships nor of research. Although the classification would help HEIs "to engage more effectively in partnerships" (Bartelse and Van Vught 2009: 58), the development of U-Multirank was more focused on stimulating transparency, institutional profiling and diversity, as well as providing a multidimensional user-oriented alternative to the traditional rankings (Federkeil & Westerheijden 2018) than providing a tool to aid institutional partnerships.

A comparison of the IAU 4<sup>th</sup> Global Survey and the EAIE Barometer 2014 (Egron-Polak, Hudson & Sandström 2015) showed that strategic partnerships constituted the fourth and third priority for respondents of (world-wide and European) HEIs. Among the internationalisation activities that have seen the largest increase over the past 3 years in the EAIE survey are the number of international strategic partnerships, and the implementation of international strategic partnership agreements. Both studies also showed that national-level policy is a key external driver of institutional internationalisation policies.

Following the EAIE Barometer 2014 an additional publication based on the results of the Barometer was dedicated to international strategic partnerships (Sandström & Weimer 2016). In this publication international strategic partnerships are defined "as those that encourage durable collaboration between institutions and organisations by building sustainable academic networks, strengthening exchanges among students and staff, and enhancing exchanges of knowledge and practices" (Sandström & Weimer 2016: 5).

In the EAIE Barometer 2014 improving partnerships was the most commonly mentioned challenge faced by the respondents, and skills for developing and maintaining

international partnerships were mentioned as the third-largest skill need. This apparent need coincided with the launch of the Erasmus+ programme with its emphasis on partnerships. The average number of international strategic partnerships, according to the definition above, is 71 per institution in the EHEA.

There is a wide diversity per country in the quantity of partnerships: between 184 in Spain and 20 in Albania. In Flanders the average number is over 100, in The Netherlands it is close to 50, in Germany and Austria close to 70, in Poland almost 90. The authors note that the diversity may be partially explained by national and institutional differences in what is considered to be a 'strategic' partnership. Whilst some HEIs promote a high number of partnerships as a proxy for international engagement, others deliberately focus on a smaller number of intensified strategic partnerships. The relativity of high numbers of reported strategic partnerships becomes clear when looking at the activeness of those partnerships. Of the respondents 19% reported that all of their strategic partnerships were active, 47% reported that most of them were active, 24% reported that some of them were active and 1% reported that none of them were active, and 10% didn't know. The number of partnerships did not correlate with the level of activeness. However, HEIs that had included international strategic partnerships in their institutional internationalisation strategies were also reported to be slightly more active in implementing strategic partnerships.

The priority regions for international strategic partnerships reported by HEIs in the EHEA were the EU (89%), Asia (56%), North-America (44%), other European countries (32%), South America (14%), Africa (10%), and Oceania (2%). Respondents from countries in Western and Northern Europe were more likely to prioritise Asia and North America as important regions, in Eastern European countries there was a higher preference for other European regions, and South America was the second most important region for respondents from Spain and Portugal.

Student exchange, academic staff exchange, research projects, joint research & innovation, joint or double degree programmes were all mentioned by more than half of the respondents as included in the content of the strategic partnerships. Some other relevant findings in the study are that senior institutional leadership is most often responsible for approving international partnerships, and that the proportion of active strategic partnerships is somewhat higher at HEIs with multiple internationalisation offices with a coordination mechanism. The publication includes a list with "do's" and tips for developing an international strategic partnership policy and managing international strategic partnerships in practice.

In the second edition of the EAIE Barometer (2018) international strategic partnerships has decreased from third to fourth priority for internationalisation activities in the strategy of HEIs. Mobility, and in particular student mobility, is still the first reported priority. Furthermore,



53% of respondents indicated that their HEI had a formalised internal quality assurance system for internationalisation activities (see section 3.2.3. below). The most commonly assessed activities were international mobility opportunities for home students (64%) and for home staff (47%), as well as international student recruitment (40%). International strategic partnerships were assessed in their HEI according to 28% of the respondents. However, if international strategic partnerships were a prioritised activity then 52% of respondents indicated that it was quality assured at their HEI. Still, this figure implies that about half of the HEIs that consider international strategic partnerships as a priority do not assess the quality of these partnerships.

### 3.2.3. WHAT IS GOING ON WITH QUALITY?

The issue of quality in higher education in the European Higher Education Area is competence of each HEI itself and to a certain extent succumbs to national legislation. External quality assurance agencies are responsible for the quality assessment and accreditation. In order to guarantee that higher education students and staff across the EHEA meet certain quality criteria, quality assurance has become an important aspect of education policy-making.

“Quality assurance in education can be understood as policies, procedures, and practices that are designed to achieve, maintain or enhance quality in specific areas, and that rely on an evaluation process”. In the field of higher education, although some quality criteria are laid down in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), ultimately the decision on QA is up to each HEI itself.

The countries and in some instance sub-national polities, employ a variety of different criteria to assess the quality of higher Education Institutions that varies considerably within the framework of the ESG. Likewise, the system and institutions assessing quality vary per country.

Some European countries have centralised agencies whereas others, like Austria instead feature the national education ministry taking charge more directly of quality assessment. Quality assessment can also take place externally or internally, with only some of the countries featuring in-house quality reviews in the HEIs.

Already in 2001 Dirk Van Damme, former professor at Ghent University and nowadays Head of the Innovation and Measuring Progress Division at OECD, wrote an article about *Quality issues in the internationalisation of higher education*. In this article he states that we have come to a point in the development of higher education where internationalisation policies and practices face the limits of their development unless the quality challenge is addressed in all its consequences. Moreover, he refers to the importance of integrating quality assessment of internationalisation policies and practices

in the overall quality assurance mechanism of institutions and countries (Van Damme, 2001). Almost ten years later the EAIE addressed the issue of internationalisation and quality assurance in its *EAIE Professional Development Series for International Educators*. In the preface of this issue quality assurance in internationalisation is described as a relatively new phenomenon (van Gaalen, 2010).

When we look at a current state of affairs on this topic, we can consult the results of the *EAIE Barometer: Internationalisation in Europe (second edition)*. In total, 53% of respondents (out of 2317) indicated that their HEI had a formalised internal quality assurance system for internationalisation activities, with quality being assessed either systematically (33%) or on an ad hoc basis (20%). A quarter of the respondents detailed that the quality of internationalisation activities was not formally assessed at their HEI. It is also interesting to note the remaining 22% were unaware of any quality assessment activities (Sandström, Hudson, 2018). Sandström and Hudson (2018) also conclude that it is well understood that properly assessing the quality of internationalisation activities is often challenging. It is a different process than evaluating whether a particular activity has achieved its numeric targets.

Quality assurance of international partnerships is not as such a topic in the EAIE Barometer but the most often undertaken quality assurance efforts are related with international mobility of home students. Quality assurance of international partnerships enabling mobility is clearly related to such practices. The link between quality of partnerships and mobility is also addressed by van Gaalen (2010) where the establishment of selection criteria and procedures for partners and management of the partner network are mentioned under tools for quality assurance of student mobility. Moreover, selecting suitable partner universities and programmes is the first vital step towards recognition. She also points towards the importance of the evaluation of cooperation as most cooperation in higher education does not seem to have an expiry date, which means that cooperation continues (most often successfully) without any questions being asked. Part of the quality assurance system should be the evaluation of each partner on a regular (e.g. three year) basis.

#### 3.2.4. RANKINGS

One of the best known methods of estimating the quality of a certain HEI is to see its placement within the various international university rankings. Of the plethora of rankings there are, four are generally considered to be the most significant: the QS World University ranking, the Times Higher Education (THE) ranking, the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) or Shanghai ranking and the U-Multirank ranking.

In the QS ranking, reputation (academic and employer) plays an important role in determining a university's score accounting for 50% of the total score. International staff

(5% of total score) and international students (5%) are also taken into account besides citations per staff and student/staff ratio.

THE includes international outlook (percentage of international staff, international co-authorship and percentage of international students) in the calculation of the indicator score (7,5% of the total score). However nearly two-thirds of the indicator score are based on the combination of citations (research output) and the research categories add up to nearly two-thirds of the ranking's position. The other elements taken into account are teaching (30%) and industry outcome (2,5%)

In the Shanghai ranking, research, defined as the aggregation of the values for highly-cited authors, and general research output quality also add up to 60% of a HEI's score. Another factor that impacts this ranking is the number of alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals. Finally, the per capita performance is taken into account where a score on each of the other indicators is divided by the number of FTE academics.

To sum up both QS, THE and ARWU ranking take into account several factors in order to gauge the quality of a university, but the degree of research output is the determinant factor. Due to this preference for academic output the usefulness of these rankings for gauging the quality of a fellow HEI to serve in an inter-institutional partnership is limited.

As mentioned earlier, U-Multirank operates rather differently from the other main ranking organisations. As opposed to having fixed categories that feed into the ranking, it has various variables to contribute to more specialised rankings, as the variables can have varying weight depending on the importance the user gives to certain categories.

As a result of this, although a university's rank has become an increasingly relevant factor in selecting where to study, these rankings are not the most apt indicator to select a partner institution to team with for an inter-institutional partnership. It is an element that can't be ignored however it should be the determinant factor to decide on engaging in a partnership for student mobility.

## **4. INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND POLICIES**

### **4.1. Interview analysis**

As previously mentioned, this work's dataset is both quantitative and qualitative. Besides the 94 institutional responses to the quantitative survey, 11 semi-structured, open-ended, qualitative interviews were held. The qualitative approach was taken in order to take into account the contextual and institutional specificities that set the various HEIs apart, and to provide a more in-depth look into the procedural aspect of managing agreements and inter-institutional partnerships.

The qualitative aspect therefore aimed to provide “[a] better sense of the important functions in a complex situation” (Stake, 2010, p.23). It also served in a manner complementary to the numerical, quantitative surveys. Whereas the latter served to provide a more comprehensive view, the individual interviews facilitated a better understanding of specific data and policy evaluation. It filled in the gaps that the more comprehensive nature of a survey may leave out. In this case, these were the criteria and procedures for the management of inter-institutional agreements and inter-institutional partnerships.

Format-wise, the interviews were held over Skype and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. They were based on an interview guide with prepared questions. As an open-ended interview however, interviewees were free to diverge from the initial questions. This occasionally resulted in non-anticipated follow-up questions. The interviewees were the International Relations officers from the various surveyed institutions that agreed to do the qualitative interview. The interviews were conducted prior to the survey. As a result, both the questions’ guide and the interviewees’ answers served as the basis to inform the quantitative survey questionnaire.

The interviewees were deliberately selected on the basis of three criteria:

- (1) previous expression of interest in the eQuATIC project resulting in interviewees having already thought of aspects pertaining quality in inter-institutional partnerships,
- (2) membership in the European University Foundation (EUF) or the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) as trusted partners and for easier access and,
- (3) deliberate diversity of HEIs by nature (i.e. comprehensive and applied sciences HEIs), size and geographical location.

As a result, these institutions differ considerably in terms of student and staff size, ranging from 2,000 to 50,000 students; on the nature of the university (research-intense and universities of applied sciences) as well as in the number of existing inter-institutional agreements, from around 100 to nearly 2,900. To meet geographical balance criteria, there was a deliberate choice of institutions from various European regions, on the basis of the United Nations’ geographic regions. These are Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, Southern Europe and Western Europe.

The breakdown is as follows:

- Northern Europe: 2
- Eastern Europe: 3
- Southern Europe: 2

One of which, the Universum College, is in Kosovo, which is not included in the EAIE Barometer, but based on the location of neighbouring FYROM and Albania in the

scheme, it seems safe to assume it would likewise be included in this geographical grouping.

- Western Europe: 4

#### 4.1.1. DECISION MAKING LEVELS

Based on the conducted interviews, the HEIs were categorised into four groups based on their decision making in internationalisation:

1. Centralised,
2. Decentralised
3. Mixed but more centralised
4. Mixed but more decentralised

This division closely resembled a common approach to higher education governance, as also highlighted in the Erasmus Without Paper Desk.

In the category 1 - centralised, decisions regarding international student mobility are taken by a single, general body, for instance, a centralised International Relations Office or a vice-rector for international relations. In category 2 - decentralised, decisions are instead taken by the various faculties independently. In the other two categories 3 and 4, a mix of both systems exists, in which either the centralised university body or the faculties are more distinct.

The interviewees categorised their universities on the basis of these categories, with an even division between the 4 different categories and two interviewees only defining their system as mixed, without a clearer specification. In two instances, the same university had different points of entry, at the faculty level and also at a central IRO, with somewhat different procedures depending on the level in which the application was made by the individual staff.

Another aspect worth noting is that the procedure and the level of decision-making is not always consistent. The procedures for initiating, reviewing, terminating or discontinuing an agreement do not always involve the same actors. For instance, individual professors and students played a pivotal role in negotiating and drafting an agreement but were often excluded from decision-making at the review or termination stages.

According to the respondents, the ultimate decision about establishing, terminating or discontinuing an agreement or an inter-institutional partnership usually rests on the university rectors/presidents or vice-rectors for international affairs in the more centralised systems. In HEIs with more decentralised approaches, the decision lies usually with the faculty deans. Depending on the university, Erasmus+ or international relations' coordinators also play a role in the review (and occasionally approval) of applications.

An issue reported by some of the consulted universities that feature in both mixed systems is an insufficient degree of coordination, as the central IRO may have enacted plans for preferred inter-institutional partnerships and agreements, but the faculty level IROs still operate in ad hoc manner when signing an agreement with third parties. Another corollary of this development is that in some of the surveyed HEIs, the IRO staff cannot accurately estimate the amount of inter-institutional agreements that exist.

The role that the individual academic staff play in decision-making about mobilities also greatly varies between universities. Generally, the academic staff, either individually or collectively in working groups, play a considerable role in the establishment of new agreements. In the universities that are identified as more decentralised, individual staff play a much more significant role - oftentimes the IROs just review and sign the staff's proposals. In the more centralised systems, there have been instances of rejection based on pre-existing partnerships, strategic preferences or other criteria.

#### **4.1.2. PROCEDURES ON ESTABLISHING, MAINTAINING AND TERMINATING PARTNERSHIPS**

As previously mentioned, the majority of interviewed HEIs had no official process for the establishment of new inter-institutional partnerships. This rather occurs on a more ad hoc basis and is usually driven by the individual academic staff or very occasionally by the students. Matters however work different in the cases of review procedures, if they exist. The same can be said discontinuing and termination procedures.

The termination of an agreement can either happen due to proactive termination of it or merely by discontinuation, that is, not renewing an agreement by the end of its agreed-upon duration. Three of the consulted IRO officers reported that their universities lacked any specific protocol for terminating an agreement or institutional partnership. The majority possess these procedures, but they seldom have established criteria. Instead, based on the answers, there is rather a pattern of ad hoc common reasons.

Most respondents reported that, in practice, it was very rare for their universities to proactively terminate an agreement. Usually, the 'established' procedure was to not renew the agreement or inter-institutional partnership in case there are deficiencies that could not be addressed.

The most commonly reported reason for terminating an agreement is that it has become inactive or 'sleeping', which is to say, that there have been no incoming or outgoing mobility of either students or staff for a determined period of time. Another oft-repeated reasoning for terminating an agreement is the lack of a sufficient number of English courses in the partner institution or the insufficient English language skills of the incoming students from a partner HEI.

Various interviewees also mentioned concerns about 'academic quality' and a mismatch of academic curricula between both partner HEIs. Despite the references to

the concept of academic quality, the interviewees failed to explain what elements constitute the basis of a partner university's 'academic quality', as this information is usually coming from the faculty/department level. Related to this concept of academic quality is the concept of complementary, only mentioned by the University College Southeast Norway, whereby one of the elements for reviewing and terminating agreements is whether their curricula are complementary to their own programmes'.

Lastly, the other most commonly mentioned reason is the balance between incoming and outgoing exchange students. This balance can either be with the individual partner HEIs (as is the case in Frankfurt) or with a particular country (as is the case of Prague's Charles University).

As such, it is possible to elaborate a pattern of criteria that universities have typically used in order to cancel partnerships. Writ-large, these criteria can be summarised as inactivity, poor English language availability, uneven balance between incoming and outgoing students or overall academic performance of the partner institution.

Some HEIs, like the University of Copenhagen, Ghent University or the Robert Gordon University, have developed a more structured set of criteria for initiating, reviewing and terminating or discontinuing an agreement or inter-institutional partnership. Besides these, some of the interviewed institutions, like Frankfurt, have what they refer to as 'strategic regions', with which the university wishes to pursue closer ties. Similarly, the BFI University of Applied Sciences (in Vienna) also has a strategy for establishing its partnerships with other HEIs. Others, like Uppsala want to establish a strategic region approach but had not done so at the time of the interview.

#### 4.1.3. DATA GATHERING

Most institution that were interviewed have some system used at the central level to store mobilities and agreements. Some of the interviewees indicated that faculties/departments have their own systems but need to report the mobilities and agreements at the central level. Although these institutions do have data available at the central level, they fail to use it structurally for policy making. If the data is used it is more on an ad hoc basis. Some examples of what the data was used for by different institutions: monitoring of recognition, monitor balance on agreements, general mobility figures (incoming and outgoing students). One interviewee pointed out that making some analysis available for the faculties/departments is not enough to provoke action. Concrete policies and action lines should be included in the analysis.

Most of the institutions that were interviewed did gather the information on agreements and mobilities for both Erasmus and non-Erasmus students. One of the big, decentralised institutions did have all information on Erasmus at a central level as well as the institution-

wide agreements but other non-Erasmus agreements were managed at departmental level and the central IRO had no idea about how many of those agreements exist.

#### 4.1.4. INTERVIEW CONCLUSION

One of the clearest aspects that emerge from the analysis of the interviews is that the majority of respondent HEIs does not seem to possess a strategy when it comes to both setting up inter-institutional agreements or developing partnerships. In most cases a more organic route is preferred, whereby agreements are made as they are proposed by students/academics and are only terminated in the case that the criteria mentioned above take place.

Indeed, the majority of universities operates in a largely ad hoc manner. Although some degree of centralisation and institutionalisation has taken place, individual academic staff appear in control of the creation of agreements, which are then subject to control and management by IROs, Erasmus coordinators, rectors or deans. Furthermore, the criteria for the establishment, review or the termination and discontinuation of an agreement or an inter-institutional partnership is also not subject to a clear pattern. Instead, it is often subject to varying university-specific criteria. In some instances, there were no mechanisms for either rejection or review of agreements. Besides this situation, even where the procedure did exist, oftentimes there were no pre-existing criteria on which to base the decision. This situation applies to all decision-making stages, but it was especially significant in the case of new agreements. In this instance, universities had no criteria to establish new agreements, only to reject proposals.

The potential of using data collected on partnerships and student mobility remains largely unexploited. Although most of the institutions (both the centralised and decentralised organised ones) to some extent have data available, the structural usage of this information lacks behind.

## 4.2. Good practices at institutional level

### Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences

At the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, the central IRO attempts to create co-ownership over the agreements, as naturally the set-up of the agreement is done organically through existing contacts by academic staff. This is done by creating performance reviews based on internal review criteria set out by the IRO in collaboration with the faculties. This should create the desired co-ownership of the agreements also beyond its establishment, giving academic staff the opportunity to evaluate their agreements. The IRO also gives recommendations on whether to continue or discontinue agreements based on those criteria. This is usually done at certain milestones like a mid-term review of a programme period (Erasmus+) or just before a new programme starts.

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## Ghent University – Belgium

At Ghent University in Belgium a new policy was adopted in early 2019 shortly before the renewal of the Erasmus agreements for the new Erasmus programme. The policy ‘towards a qualitative management of student exchange agreements’ aims to bring management of exchange agreements towards the 21st century. The current approach towards partnerships is still based on personal relations as it was the case in 1987 in the very beginning of the Erasmus programme. In the new policy those personal relations between academics remain key for successful partnerships but an additional layer of faculty endorsement is added to it. Five overarching principles should facilitate this process:

- Portfolio of partnerships per study programme: the starting point to make an agreement should be the added value of the study programme. In defining this added value, the learning outcomes of the whole study abroad programme should be compatible with or complementary to the learning outcomes of the home degree. Agreements are not created on demand of individual students. A new agreement should be approved by the study programme committee.
- Qualitative agreements: quality should prevail in any sort of exchange agreement. When concluding new agreements there should be a check on the accreditation, teaching methods, language of instruction, compatibility of educational offer... For existing agreements eQuATIC is actively used for permanent monitoring and improvement of those existing partnerships.
- Reciprocity: the own offer and support for incoming exchange students deserves the same attention as for outgoing exchange students. Ghent University should offer them the same quality that is expected from the partner universities. Reciprocity also implies some balance (not absolute balance) between incoming and outgoing exchange students.
- Data-informed evaluation process: there should be a permanent evaluation of the existing partnerships and Ghent University has several tools available. UGI is a business intelligence platform that can monitor interest of students for certain countries/institutions and balanced agreements. eQuATIC is already in use at Ghent University and should be used to identify weaknesses in cooperation to be discussed with partner universities. Besides the two tools made available at central level, study programmes and faculties also have their own intelligence to be taken into account.
- Active agreements: Ghent University does not want to have so called “sleeping agreements”. Agreements that have been inactive (no inbound or outbound mobility) for 5 years should be terminated. A limited number of non-active

agreements can be renewed for a short period of time after approval of an activation strategy by the study programme committee.

With the newly adopted policy it is expected that the total number of partners (762 in 2017-2018) and agreements (2 123 in 2017-2018) for student mobility will decrease by the start of the new Erasmus programme.

### **Robert Gordon University - Scotland**

At Robert Gordon University in Scotland all partnerships are evaluated on an annual basis. The process is mainly manual, but quality prevails in the agreements of Robert Gordon University. The annual check is designed to be of assistance in monitoring annually ERASMUS or other student exchange programmes, in order to ensure that the curriculum on offer remains appropriate and allows students to progress to the next stage of their course on return from a study period abroad. The annual check should be completed and returned to the International Exchanges Manager prior to the end of session for study periods being undertaken in the following academic session. Any issues of concern should be acted upon executively.

The check entails following information:

- Changes in the curriculum
- Number of students
- Academic performance
- Student feedback/satisfaction
- Accommodation provided
- Willingness of partner to monitor any Tier 4 students<sup>2</sup>

### **Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences – the Netherlands**

Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences has developed partnership evaluation tools geared towards the needs of study programmes in terms of vision, quality and alignment of learning outcomes with the needs of professional field. The rationale for internationalisation at programme level is grounded in the needs of the working field in terms of international and intercultural competencies and takes into account priorities defined at institutional level.

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<sup>2</sup> In the UK, when students come from outside the EU or EEA, they have to come to the UK on what is known as a Tier 4 visa. Each university has to monitor the attendance of every Tier 4 student in line with government issued guidelines. If Robert Gordon University sends a Tier 4 student on exchange, the partner institution has to monitor them according to these guidelines on their behalf, even though the student is no longer in the UK! This can be quite burdensome and not every institution is willing to do it as it's a UK government requirement, not an Erasmus requirement.

The quality of partnerships is assessed periodically through standardised evaluation tools against a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators both at institutional and programme levels. These evaluation tools consist of a Quick Scan (overall quality standing of the partner institution); a Screening Report (assessment of relevance at programme level) and Audit Review (continuous monitoring at programme level). The study programmes are the ones responsible for the decision-making regarding the establishment/renewal of cooperation agreements and are advised to follow a clear workflow coordinated at institutional level.

### **University of Copenhagen – Denmark**

The University of Copenhagen made a shift in their approach towards institutional partnerships in 2013. Before this shift in policy the general approach towards partnerships was characterized by capacity building to underpin the ambition of increasing the number of students engaging in an exchange to or from the University. Proposals about new partnerships from comparable institutions were most often accepted, and the University did not have a standardized format for evaluating, renewing or terminating agreements. The approach at the University of Copenhagen was perfectly in line with practices about partnerships across a majority of institutions across Europe.

In the new policy adopted in 2013 some important principles were identified:

- **Balanced agreements:** There should be a balance between incoming and outgoing student mobilities at agreement level
- **Agreements reflecting student demands:** Some agreements had no or very limited student mobility. In the revised portfolio of agreements each of the partners should have a clear added value to students
- **High-ways for mobility:** Agreements with high volume of mobility

The incentive for the new approach came partly from the government that focused on the high number of inbound students and sought to attain a better balance between outbound and inbound mobility. As it is now, universities in Denmark will only get public funding for inbound students to the extent that they are exchanged with a student from a Danish university. In addition to the financial incentive to balance inbound and outbound mobility, there was also, at an institutional level, an increased understanding about the importance of more quality in partnerships and a more channelled use of resources.

After six years, the results in terms of numbers of agreements and quality assurance at the University of Copenhagen are quite clear. They have 100 institutional exchange partners worldwide and 250 Erasmus partners across all six faculties of the institution. In terms of mobility there are 1 700 incoming and 2 000 outbound exchange students. To realize its goals, the University of Copenhagen took three important actions:

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- Quality assessment of all institutional partnerships: Criteria taken into account when assessing quality include research based institutions and ranking; academic and geographical spread; academic performances and student satisfaction; volume and balance. Evaluation takes place when starting a new agreement; during the lifespan of the agreement where student performances and the level of activity are taken into account; and towards the end of the duration of the agreement where student satisfaction and balance are evaluated in combination with other strategic considerations.
- Super partners: These are mobility agreements with high volume (or the potential to grow based on interest from students) that cater for up to 50 students each way per year. The super partners are comprehensive universities with academic profiles that match the one from the University of Copenhagen. For identifying these partnerships, rankings, course offerings and well-established agreements and relations are taken into account. Moreover, there should be potential for other activities besides the regular mobility.
- Delegation visits to select partners: Delegations of faculty and administrative staff visit partners to strengthen the partner relations, discuss concrete areas of collaboration and share best practice.

Altogether, the various initiatives at the University of Copenhagen have led to an increased understanding within and outside the University about the importance of partnership management. The super partner concept underpins growing student interest in these select partners and supports the ambition of providing quality mobility and a more channelled use of resources. The central international office is the driving force in the implementation and follow up of the new policy.

### **Utrecht University, Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance – the Netherlands**

The faculty of Law, Economics and Governance at Utrecht University has a "Guideline to formalise international partnerships" in place. When proposing a new formal partnership agreement a roadmap for this process has to be followed and there have to be important arguments to motivate this request, including e.g.: the partner profile; existing collaborations; potential to broaden the scope of collaboration; strategic added value partnership; expected achievement; mutual commitment for collaboration; quality of education; options for joint education; quality of research; options for staff exchange; need for exchange options in the country/region of the partner; interest from students on both sides; and, offer of courses (taught in English). After the agreement is formalised the success of the agreement will be monitored. At least 6 months prior to the expiration date of the agreement there will be an evaluation based on the following criteria for quality of the collaboration and achievements:

- Reciprocity student mobility - number of students - number of semesters
- Study results - absolute number of ECTS earned at partners by student from faculty level - average ECTS earned at partner by students from faculty - absolute number of ECTS earned at faculty by students from partner - average ECTS earned at faculty by students from partner
- Evaluations of faculty students of the education and support at partner
- Offer of English taught courses (number, quality, level, variety)
- Reciprocity staff mobility - number of staff for research - number of staff for education - number of administrative staff
- Evaluations of faculty staff of the quality, facilities and support at partner
- What are the concrete achievements in the collaboration in education (e.g. joint courses, e-learning activities, guest lectures)?
- What are the concrete achievements in the collaboration in research (e.g. academic workshops, seminars, research projects, PhD programmes)?
- Have there been meetings to discuss managerial and strategic issues?

Based on the evaluation and consultation with the department(s) the agreement will be renewed, modified or terminated.

This Faculty has also criteria for strategic partnerships in place which are derived from the university-wide criteria for strategic partnerships. Most of the following criteria need to be met or a strategic partnership: commitment (this can be based on positive experiences in the collaboration with at least 2 departments and/or at the managerial level); external (providing explicit support, staff, resources); content (proof of existing collaboration, e.g. by joint publications, external funded projects, joint education, structural exchange of student and/or staff); organisation (comparable research quality and added value for research focus, structure and organisation of educational programmes and support fits with the Faculty, proactive approach in internationalisation at the relevant level of the partnership, good offer of English taught courses in case of collaboration in education and student exchange); profiling (position at international rankings, i.e. higher or comparable with Faculty departments or in top in specific regions, regional diversity to allow for an optimal use of (regional) external funding options).

### 4.3. Online-Survey Analysis

#### 4.3.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

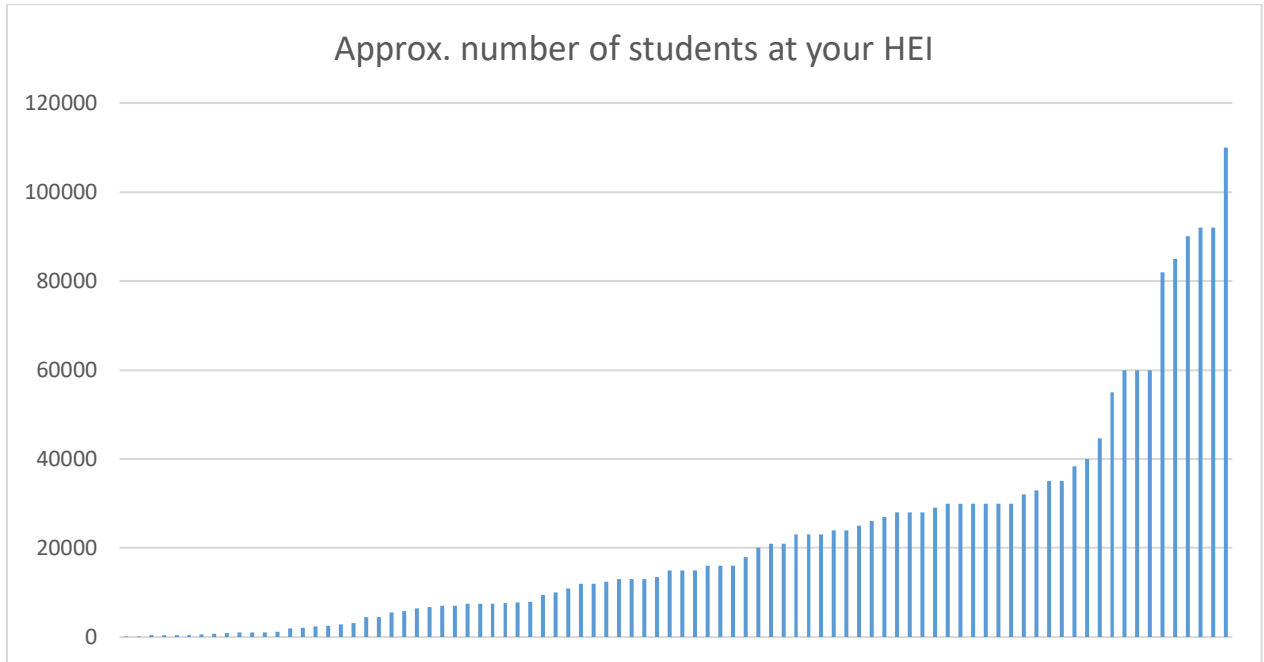


Figure 4 - Approximate number of students at interviewed HEIs

The online questionnaire was answered by 97 HEIs. As can be seen in Figure 4, around 2/3 of those HEIs can be considered large HEIs with 15,000 or more students. The overrepresentation of large institution is due to the fact that bigger institutions are more likely to have a high number of inter-institutional partnerships and thus are more specifically interested in the structured management of quality of those partnerships. Furthermore, this could be an indication that small (under 5,000 students) and medium size institutions (5,000 – 15,000) have lesser need for a policy on quality partnership, as they can ensure the quality of their partnerships on a more individualised basis.

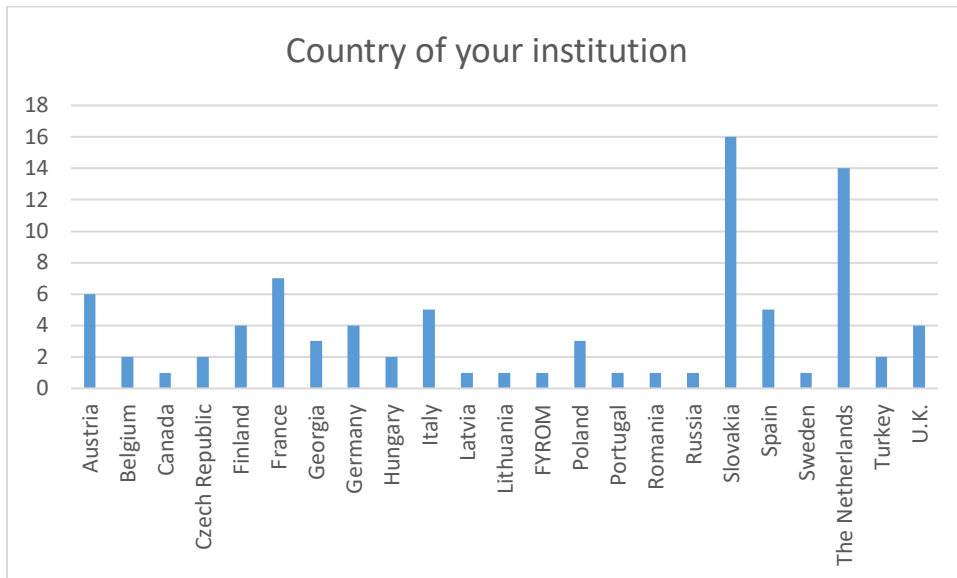


Figure 5 - Countries represented in survey

The answers collected were from institutions located in a total of 26 different countries as can be seen in Figure 5. Most answers are coming from institutions from Slovakia with 16 and the Netherlands with 14 participants. This can be ascribed to the fact that the Slovak Academic Information Agency (SAIA), as an active associate partner of the project, has promoted the survey to all Slovakian HEIs. Furthermore, the previous high interest in eQuATIC by institutions in the Netherlands has led to them being a particular target when disseminating the questionnaire. The geographical distribution allows us to draw some general conclusions for the EHEA but has a limited representativeness in terms of countries and distribution of participants per country.

### 4.3.2. GENERAL TRENDS

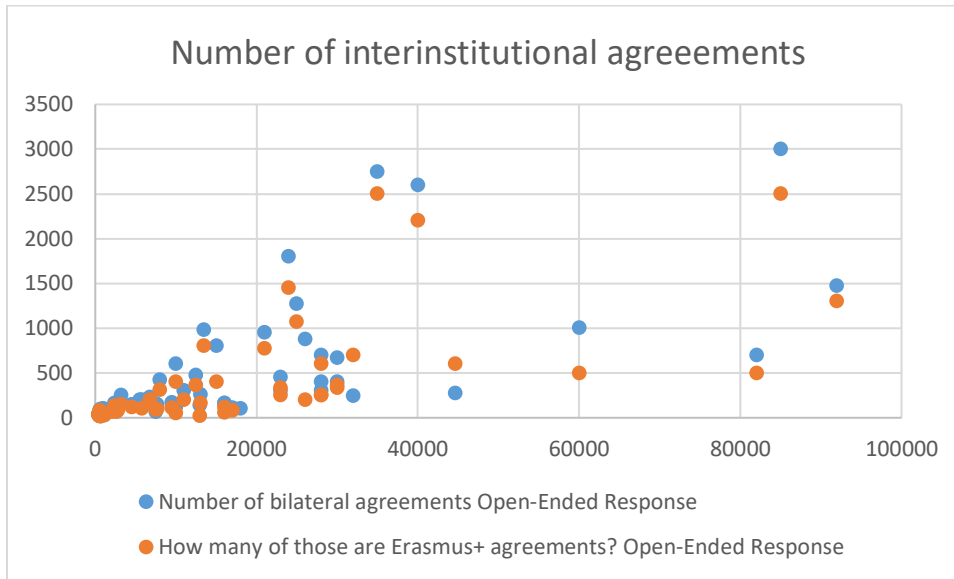


Figure 6 - Number of students vs. number of agreements

When comparing the number of students with the number of inter-institutional agreements, there is a trend that with a growing number of students, the number of agreements increases, as can be seen in Figure 6. Not surprisingly, smaller institutions have more agreements per student. Some small size institutions (under 5000 students) have more than 500 agreements while the highest number of agreements observed in our sample is an institution with 85,000 students that has around 3000 agreements.

In average, 76% of all inter-institutional agreements in our sample are Erasmus+ agreements, meaning that the partnerships established on the basis of the Erasmus+ programme dominate the EHEA landscape.



## How much do you agree with the following statements

Answered: 67 Skipped: 30

	TOTALLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	TOTALLY AGREE	N/A	TOTAL
International cooperation with HEIs needs to be of quality	1.52% 1	0.00% 0	3.03% 2	13.64% 9	80.30% 53	1.52% 1	66
My HEI has an official procedure for setting up new interinstitutional agreements	4.48% 3	16.42% 11	14.93% 10	28.36% 19	34.33% 23	1.49% 1	67
My HEI has an official quality assurance process before setting up new interinstitutional agreements	10.61% 7	22.73% 15	25.76% 17	28.79% 19	10.61% 7	1.52% 1	66
My HEI evaluates interinstitutional agreement regularly	4.62% 3	16.92% 11	29.23% 19	33.85% 22	13.85% 9	1.54% 1	65
My HEI has an official procedure for discontinuing interinstitutional agreements	4.55% 3	36.36% 24	24.24% 16	22.73% 15	9.09% 6	3.03% 2	66

Figure 7 - procedures for inter-institutional agreements

We wanted to know how important the quality of international cooperation is to universities and as can be seen in the Matrix in Figure 7, more than 93% (totally) agree that international cooperation with HEIs needs to be of quality.

Furthermore, we asked survey participants to answer questions on the processes connected to inter-institutional agreements. While more than 50% of institutions have official procedures for setting up new agreements, only around 39% of institutions have a quality assurance process connected to it.

When looking at the processes connected to existing agreements, less than 50% of the institutions agree with the statement that their HEI evaluates those agreements regularly

and almost one third is neutral to the statement. This indicates that even though a process might be in place, it is not regularly applied.

Lastly, we asked the survey participants about the procedure on discontinuing inter-institutional agreements. As can be seen in the matrix in Figure 7, only around 31% of all institutions have an official procedure and around 40% do not have an official procedure.

This shows that there is a strong discrepancy between the obvious need for quality in international partnerships identified by HEIs and the procedures connected to assuring quality when setting up, maintaining and discontinuing agreements.

In the following part, we will look in more detail into each of those processes to understand how those are regulated and how they are applied in practice.

### 4.3.3. SETTING UP INTER-INSTITUTIONAL AGREEMENTS

How would you describe the decision making process of setting up new interinstitutional agreements at your HEI?

Answered: 67 Skipped: 30

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
centralised (decisions are taken by one general body - e.g: IRO, Vice-Rector of International Relations...)	14.93%	10
decentralised (decisions are taken by several separate bodies - e.g: faculties)	13.43%	9
a mix of both but rather decentralised	31.34%	21
a mix of both but rather centralised	37.31%	25
N/A	2.99%	2
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>67</b>

Figure 8 - Setting up inter-institutional agreements

To get a better understanding on the decision-making process around inter-institutional agreements, we asked participants to describe the processes.

As can be seen in Figure 8, inter-institutional agreements are in more than 68% of the cases set up through involving bodies on both decentralised and centralised level and when defining whether it is predominantly the central or decentralised approach, both formats are almost equally common.

With around 15% managing the decision-making process for setting up agreements solely on central level and around 13% solely on decentral level, these options are less dominant than the mixed approaches.

#### 4.3.4. MANAGING INTER-INSTITUTIONAL AGREEMENTS

How would you describe the management process of interinstitutional agreements at your HEI?

Answered: 67 Skipped: 30

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ centralised (e.g. at a central IRO)	43.28% 29
▼ decentralised (e.g. at faculty/department level)	4.48% 3
▼ a mix of both but rather decentralised	20.90% 14
▼ a mix of both but rather centralised	28.36% 19
▼ N/A	2.99% 2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>67</b>

Figure 9 - Managing inter-institutional agreements

When asking HEIs to describe the process of managing existing inter-institutional agreements, Figure 9 shows us that the centralised approach with over 43% is the most common approach, while a mixed approach is still chosen by almost half of the answers on only as little as 4-5% manage existing inter-institutional agreements on decentralised level.

#### 4.3.5. DATA-PROCESSING

We asked survey participants to answer a few statements related to data and reusability of data for processes related to inter-institutional agreements.

## How much do you agree with the following statements?

Answered: 54 Skipped: 43

	TOTALLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	TOTALLY AGREE	N/A	TOTAL
Erasmus mobility data at my HEI is stored in a way that is easily insertable in the European Commission's Erasmus+ Mobility Tool	3.70% 2	7.41% 4	25.93% 14	40.74% 22	16.67% 9	5.56% 3	54
Non-Erasmus mobility data at my HEI is stored in the same way as Erasmus data	7.41% 4	24.07% 13	16.67% 9	25.93% 14	22.22% 12	3.70% 2	54
My HEI is using a common student information system (SIS) for both, local and international students.	9.26% 5	7.41% 4	3.70% 2	37.04% 20	40.74% 22	1.85% 1	54
I have easy access (I have the access myself or can ask a colleague) to reports about partnerships and mobility	5.56% 3	9.26% 5	5.56% 3	42.59% 23	37.04% 20	0.00% 0	54
The participant report from Erasmus+ is a useful source of information	0.00% 0	7.55% 4	18.87% 10	49.06% 26	9.43% 5	15.09% 8	53

Figure 10 - data-processing

The data that every HEI needs to report to the Erasmus+ MobilityTool is highly relevant for analysing the success of each inter-institutional agreement. We therefore asked whether the data institutions store about Erasmus+ mobilities can easily be transferred into the MobilityTool. Less than 16% of HEIs totally agreeing with the statement, while 40% agree to some extent. This indicates that they most likely have to conduct some minor data-modifications before transferring the data into the MobilityTool. Around 4% strongly disagree, 7% disagree and 26% are neutral. This means that a substantial number of institutions needs to do more than minor modifications to the data stored at their institution before being able to report it in the MobilityTool. This could explain why a majority of institutions finds the workload surrounding Erasmus+ too high and increased from the previous programme as described in the Erasmus Without Paper Desk-Research (Jahnke, 2017).

Non-Erasmus mobility data is not saved in the same format as Erasmus+ mobility data in around 1/3 of the institutions. Only around 48% of the institutions agree or strongly agree with the statement that they save such data in the same format. This has a direct negative impact on if and how institutions can compare data of mobile students.

When asking HEIs about the use of Student Information Systems (SIS), the vast majority, with over 77%, agree or strongly agree with the statement that they use the same SIS for both local and mobile students. With around 80%, the vast majority of survey participants also agrees that they have easy access to reports about partnerships and mobilities.

When asking HEIs how much they agree with the statement whether the Erasmus+ participant reports are useful or not, less than 10% strongly agree and around 50% agree. Only around 8% disagree and no one strongly disagrees. This indicates that the data in the reports is of high value, even though its usability can clearly be improved in the view of the survey participants.

Through an open-ended question, we asked institutions to describe how they store mobility related data. In line with the observations made in the literature review and interviews, institutions use a mix of commercial software, in-house developed SIS systems or simple excel files to store data. There is no clear trend in terms of systems used in our sample. A remark that multiple institutions gave is the need to keep paper records for the National Agency. While the management of Erasmus+ is currently being digitalised, allowing the usage of data rather than documents, the policies and process beyond the HEIs still need to adapt to these new changes

## 5. PRACTICES AND POLICIES AT THE EUROPEAN AND NATIONAL LEVEL

Cooperation between HEIs in different countries can take place on different hierarchical levels, i.e. cooperation between individuals; institutes, departments or schools, institutions, consortia of institutions (De Vivanco, 2016: p. 90). Cooperation between (consortia of) institutions is the most far reaching and a memorandum of understanding between the cooperating HEIs would typically cover activities as the exchange of faculty members, students, publications, and joint research projects, conferences, teaching projects and cultural programmes. Strategic partnerships between institutions “go beyond common partnerships by intent, scope and intensity” (De Vivanco, 2016: p.100). In this study our focus is on partnerships in general, not particularly only strategic partnerships.

In the following sections we will take a closer look at international partnerships between HEIs as they occur in national or institutional strategies in a range of European countries and in some recent international studies. These European countries have been partially selected with a view to geographical balance, and partially because of pragmatic reasons such as access to information of project partners.

### 5.1. International partnerships – a national perspective

De Wit, Hunter & Coelen (2015) have noted a number of key trends in higher education strategies for internationalisation based on seventeen country reports and a literature review. Some of these trends are particularly relevant to mention in the context of this study. First, there is a trend towards developing more national strategies for internationalisation. Second, these national strategies have an effect on institutional strategies for internationalisation. When indicators are being used these tend to focus more on quantitative than qualitative results. Third, there is a perception of insufficient data about internationalisation for making analyses, comparisons and informing decision-making.

Although data on mobility are collected regularly and made freely available, there is also a need for impact studies that can demonstrate outcomes of internationalisation. One can see the similarity with international partnerships where the abundance of data associated with the mobility aspects of partnerships are in stark contrast with the lack of data on the impact of these partnerships on the quality of education, although improving the quality of education is according to the EAIE Barometer 2018 the second most cited goal of internationalisation (mentioned by 65% of respondents).

As was noted above, national policy can be a key external driver of institutional internationalisation policies. In this study we have tried to find examples of national

policies where the quality of international partnerships is explicitly addressed. However, in all of the analysed countries<sup>3</sup>, the issue of the quality of international partnerships is left to the internal policy of higher education institutions. E.g. the response from the **Danish Ministry** is:

“There is no national policy regarding inter-institutional partnerships as the Danish universities are state-funded, autonomous institutions. They can therefore formulate their own strategic visions for their partnership agreements.”

The quality of international cooperation in the higher education sector is not currently coordinated or regulated by any policies or strategies at the national level. International partnerships are usually perceived in quantitative terms of incoming and outgoing students and academic staff members, joint programmes or the number of foreign academics working at higher education institutions. This quantitative approach which is primarily based on mobility measures is emphasised in some official national strategies for higher education, e.g. in the **Czech Republic**:

“The Strategic Plan for the Scholarly, Scientific, Research, Development and Innovation, Artistic and Other Creative Activities of Higher Education Institutions for 2016–2020 by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Czech Republic

Under the 3th priority objective on internationalisation, following indicators of achieving the objectives of the Strategic Plan are mentioned:

1. At least 10% of Bachelor and Master degree programme graduates were sent, as part of their studies, to a study visit or traineeship abroad lasting at least 14 days.
2. The number of foreign students coming to Czech HE institutions for a short-term study visit lasting at least 14 days will amount to at least 10 000 a year.
3. At least 90% of doctoral degree programme graduates were sent as part of their study to an academic travel abroad and at least 50% of them stayed on such trip for more than one month.
4. At least 3% of study programmes will be accredited as joint / double / multiple degree.
5. At least 3% of graduates will graduate in study programmes accredited in other than the Czech language.”

In some other countries, the national strategy does not have such prescribed quantitative measures and it is not only focused on mobility, e.g. in the case of **Croatia**:

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<sup>3</sup> We have specifically looked at Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Belgium (Flanders), Germany, Poland, Slovak Republic, Sweden, The Netherlands

"The Strategy for Education, Science and Technology adopted by the Croatian Parliament on 17 October 2014, and published in the Official Journal, Number 124/2014, 24 October 2014.

Objective 7: Internationalise higher education and enhance its integration into the European and global higher education area

- 7.1. Increasing incoming and outgoing mobility of students and teaching staff
- 7.2. Encouraging teaching in foreign languages
- 7.3. Encouraging the establishment of joint study programmes with world-class higher education institutions from Europe and beyond

MEASURE 7.3.1. Develop a plan for participation in joint study programmes at all levels. Identify strategic partners and negotiate on the creation of joint study programmes. Adopt mechanisms for the accreditation of joint study programmes. Adopt a system of internal rules of higher education institutions for participation in joint study programmes.

INDICATORS: Level of implementation of plans for participation in joint study programmes. Regulations adopted.

MEASURE 7.3.2. Establish a system for encouraging higher education institutions in Croatia to participate in joint study programmes. Secure additional funds for mobility of students and teaching staff (apart from ERAMUS+), in particular through the ESF (specifically, through the Operational Programme 'Efficient Human Resources 2014–2020'). Include them in programme agreements.

INDICATORS: Level of mobility through joint study programmes. Level of implementation of the system. Level of additional funding.

MEASURE 7.3.3. Develop study programmes in cooperation with foreign partners through joint study programmes. Begin the implementation of joint study programmes.

INDICATORS: Number of joint study programmes including higher education institutions from Croatia

- 7.4. Increasing the number of foreign academic staff at higher education institutions"

Although measure 7.3.3. mentions foreign partners in relation to joint programmes the strategy does not define the criteria, indicators or guidelines for identifying these partners. The bodies responsible for implementation of this measure are: The Rectors' Conference, Council of Polytechnics and Schools of Professional Higher Education, Agency for Science and Higher Education, therefore it might be assumed that the selection process is the sole responsibility of individual higher education institutions.



**Sweden** has recently set up an Inquiry to propose a national strategy for internationalisation (Swedish Government Inquiries, 2018). The strategy advocates that HEIs use the approach of comprehensive internationalisation also when it comes to partnerships. Of the eight objectives in the strategy one is called “Higher education institutions enjoy favourable conditions for strategic international partnership and cooperation”. HEIs should widen their international partnerships geographically and establish more long-term partnerships to mutually reinforce the quality of higher education and research. A number of conditions should be fulfilled to reach this objective. However, specific measures with regard to the quality of international partnerships are not mentioned.

In some countries, e.g. in **Germany**, there are policy documents with rather general statements for the encouragement of international partnerships in research (“Strategie der Wissenschaftsminister/innen von Bund und Ländern für die Internationalisierung der Hochschulen in Deutschland”, 2013).

In the **Netherlands** there is a legal requirement that the government publishes each four years a Strategic Agenda for Higher Education and Research. In the current one, international partnerships do not feature as a topic (“Strategische Agenda Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek 2015-2025”). The next Strategic agenda is expected by the end of 2019. The current Minister of Education, Culture and Science has published her view on internationalisation, not only in higher education but also in VET, in June 2018 (“Internationalisation in balance”). This letter to Parliament deals with many topics, e.g. the language policy (the number of programmes taught in English) which received a lot of attention in the media. The issue of international partnerships is not touched upon in this letter.

In **Flanders** a new policy document on internationalisation is also in the making; the major current policy document on internationalisation in higher education is “Brains on the move” (2013). In this document it is stated that: “In the context of more embedded, structural mobility it is important to develop effective partnerships in a network of privileged international partners based on objectified quality criteria.” It is in this context that eQuATIC has initially been developed as “it would be useful to design a tool that can also be used as an advisory instrument for assessing the partnerships.”

In some countries, e.g. **Poland**, a national strategy for higher education does not exist. However, soft incentives towards supporting international partnerships through specific programmes have been implemented. The Polish National Agency for Academic Partnerships launched the International Academic Partnerships programme. Its main aim is to develop durable solutions in the area of scientific, implementation and teaching process cooperation, pursued within the framework of international academic partnerships. The results of the project should provide a foundation for the development

of a long-lasting cooperation of entities forming a Partnership. There are no specific requirements or assessment methods of the quality of international partnerships within this programme. The only criterion used regarding assessment of the foreign partners is “Organisational potential and experience of a Partner/Partners in implementation of international projects”. However, there are no specific indicators or more detailed criteria in this regard.

Some countries are still in the process of development of relevant national strategies. For example, the government of **Slovakia** adopted a document called “National Programme of Education Development” (in Slovak: Národný program rozvoja výchovy a vzdelávania) where the development of a National Strategy of Higher Education Internationalisation shall be completed within 2019. However, there is no official information yet concerning its possible content.

## 5.2. International partnerships in national policies and quality assurance

The international partnerships are usually considered in evaluation of the Erasmus+ projects. However, the key focus point in these evaluations is the purpose of the project and not long-term benefits for particular higher education institutions. The perception of the international partnerships through the quantitative and mobility lenses is reflected in the external quality assurance frameworks and practices in some of the analysed countries, e.g. in:

**Croatia:** The national QA agency ASHE evaluates internationalisation, focusing mostly on the quantitative outcomes i.e., mobility or scientific cooperation.

**Czech Republic:** Government Regulation No. 274/2016 Coll., of 24 August 2016 on standards for accreditation in higher education indicate the issue of the international cooperation of the higher education institutions in various dimensions, including development of the institutional strategy, students and staff mobility, scientific cooperation, development and delivery of the study programmes. Each higher education institution should develop a set of indicators monitoring the fulfilment of objectives of educational, creative and associated activities of the higher education institution that correspond with its mission, strategy and management has been determined. These indicators also include international cooperation.

**Slovakia:** international partnerships are assessed in the framework of accreditation of higher education institutions as well as certain criteria that are taken into account in the allocation of the yearly state budget donation to public and state HEIs (i.e. number of outgoing and incoming students). In the institutional accreditation an indicator is involvement in international cooperation or international partnerships, and the overall result of accreditation is categorising HEIs into one of four categories (A, B, C, and D).

Criteria include involvement of individual academic staff in international professional teams and projects or membership in international professional bodies. International mobility of students, academic staff members and researchers is another criterion that affects the evaluation of HEIs. In certain fields (e.g. Fine Arts) not only the involvement of individuals but also partnerships with foreign research and cultural institutions at institutional level, involvement of the institution to international structures etc. are considered.

**Slovenia:** the external quality assurance framework used by the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency includes generic issues of internationalisation of higher education institutions and focus mainly on the quantitative outcomes, like students and staff mobility.

**Poland:** within the programme assessment framework adopted by the Polish Accreditation Committee, the quality of the international partnerships is not explicitly assessed but the criteria include assessment of students and staff mobility and impact of the international cooperation on the programme content and delivery.

In some other countries the quality of international partnerships and other elements of internationalisation are not explicit elements of the QA frameworks, although these may feature in e.g. an audit trail of an institutional review or in a specific, voluntary assessment of internationalisation:

**Denmark, Flanders, Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden:** in none of the QA frameworks for these HE systems is there a reference to the quality of international partnerships, although partnerships offered through joint programmes and transnational education are mostly covered by the overall or by specific frameworks. International partnerships and internationalisation in general are neither specifically included in the "Guide to institutional accreditation" of the Danish Accreditation Institution (although it may feature as a theme in an audit trail if deemed relevant) nor in the "Guidelines for reviewing the HEIs quality assurance processes" of the Swedish national agency UKÄ. In the Dutch and Flemish programme accreditation and institutional review frameworks international partnerships are not explicitly covered, although it may feature when a panel includes this in e.g. the broader theme of internationalisation in an audit trail as part of an institutional review.

However, the Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) provides HEIs with the opportunity to voluntarily request an assessment of internationalisation of the programme or institutional level according to the framework of the Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation (<http://ecahe.eu/home/internationalisation-platform/certification/>).

This can be combined with a regular programme accreditation or institutional review to make it more efficient. In the new Swedish internationalisation strategy one of the stated

objectives is that: “systems for monitoring and evaluating internationalisation are well established”. Among the conditions necessary to reach this objective it is said that: “The institutions have the opportunity to seek voluntary certification of internationalisation through the Swedish Higher Education Authority or another national or international organisation.” This could be seen as an encouragement to conduct an assessment of internationalisation, e.g. according to the Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation. In addition, this objective includes as a necessary condition that “special evaluations are performed to monitor prioritised areas, such as the management of the migration process, bilateral agreements or digital partnerships.”

In sum, there is no unified or general approach to internal evaluation and monitoring of the quality of the international partnerships.

In each of the analysed countries, governments encourage the higher education institutions to develop their own strategies, internal policies and internal quality assurance systems. This may also include the issues of international cooperation. However, the detailed scope and approach is entirely upon each higher education institution. When looking at institutional practices one will find an enormous diversity in whether there is an institutional policy on international partnerships at all, whether such policies exist on faculty/decentral level, and more importantly whether such a policy is implemented in practice. Indicative are examples of universities where a lot of time was invested in developing an explicit institutional policy which was, however, never implemented on the faculty level. It is often easier to implement international partnership policies on the faculty level.

### **5.3. International partnerships in other regions of the world**

The American Council on Education (ACE) Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement (CIGE) assesses every five years the state of internationalization at American colleges and universities. In the latest 2017 *Mapping Internationalization on U.S. campuses* study student mobility and international partnerships are top internationalisation priorities, ranked above internationalisation of the curriculum and faculty professional development<sup>4</sup>. “Just over 40 percent of institutions have articulated a formal strategy for international partnership development or are in the process of developing such a strategy. Thirty percent of institutions employ a staff member whose primary responsibility is developing international partnerships [...]. Thirty-two percent of institutions have specific campus-wide guidelines for developing/approving new partnerships and/or assessing

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Mapping-Internationalization-on-U-S-Campuses.aspx>

existing relationships. An additional 8 percent of respondents indicated that such policies exist within some departments and programs."

The top countries involved in current international partnerships with US HEIs are China, Japan, UK, Germany, France and South Korea. The top countries targeted for expanded activities are Asian or Latin American: China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Vietnam, and South Korea. This is mostly in line with the country of origin of incoming students. Only 3% of US HEIs report an interest in expanding activities with the UK, Germany and France. On the other hand, nearly half of the HEIs have not identified focus countries for collaboration. As a response to recent changes in federal policies some institutions might seek to strengthen international partnerships as a means to facilitate student mobility (Brajkovic & Matross Helms, 2018).

The CIGE undertook additional research to provide guidance for HEIs by identifying good practices and gaps with regard to international partnerships. The resulting report focuses on themes related to programme administration and management, and to cultural and contextual issues. It is noted in the context of partnerships for joint and dual degree programmes that centralisation of some aspects of international partnership development is needed (e.g. institutional policies regarding memoranda of understanding, academic requirements, and legal considerations).

However, faculty engagement is critical to the success of international partnerships. "One approach is to craft partnership strategies that delineate different "levels" of engagement; while some partnerships may be deemed "strategic" and targeted for expansion at the institution level, informal faculty-to-faculty collaborations outside of these relationships may also be encouraged." (Matross Helms, 2015: p. 20) This report concludes with making a distinction (based on Sutton, 2010) between transactional partnerships which "constitute a simple give-and-take in which students and faculty go back and forth between institutions" and transformational partnerships that "develop common goals and projects over time in which resources are combined and the partnerships are expansive, ever-growing, and relationship-oriented."

In turning to broader cultural and contextual considerations, some institutions will take their international collaborations from the transactional to the transformational level.

In Asia many national policies are geared towards boosting their universities' global competitiveness. For example, in 1998 China declared that it should have several world-class universities (this resulted in the 1985 Project to turn Chinese elite universities i.e. Beijing University and Tsinghua University into leading universities globally).

In China's 211 Project the aim is to develop 100 key universities and disciplines with targeted supplementary funding to improve the quality of teaching and research. Also in Russia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Singapore, several government schemes to

promote world-class universities have been set up (Mok, 2016). The primary focus on reputation of universities in many countries has also assisted the spread of transnational higher education, e.g. the proliferation of British and Australian degrees which hold the promise or image of quality.

UK universities now have 39 foreign campuses abroad, mostly in Asia and the Gulf States. However, there is a tendency in host countries to only welcome global top universities; e.g. Malaysia has banned new links with universities that are not in the top 5% of a global ranking and also China has become restrictive in approvals of new joint-venture campuses<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> "Universities abroad. Dreaming of new spires", *The Economist*, August 25<sup>th</sup> 2018: p. 22-23.



## 6. CONCLUSION

### 6.1. How do institutions set up policy?

Most HEIs in Europe do not have a comprehensive strategic approach to setting up their inter-institutional partnerships. The research undertaken for eQuATIC revealed that, although awareness about the importance of qualitative partnerships exists it seems difficult to materialise and the majority of surveyed institutions lack a specific strategy for managing their mobility partnerships with other HEIs. This equally applies for creating, updating or discontinuing these partnerships.

Instead, it seems that most European HEIs lack an established process for either of the three stages of managing a partnership. When a decision about a partnership is taken, it is often done in an ad hoc manner. For example, behind the signing of an inter-institutional agreement, there are usually individual academic staff members or very occasionally students, but these decisions are rarely taken based on pre-defined procedures and policies.

Part of the management process is also the termination of agreements that are considered to be no longer adequate. The most typical approach does not actually involve seeking to terminate the partnership. Instead, the 'established' procedure is to not renew the agreement or inter-institutional partnership in case there are deficiencies that could not be addressed.

The most often cited reason for terminating an inter-institutional agreement is that it has become inactive or 'sleeping'. Another off-repeated reason for terminating an agreement is the lack of a sufficient number of English courses in the partner institution or the insufficient English language skills of the incoming students from a partner HEI. Lastly, another reason would be issues with a partner HEI's 'academic quality', although the HEI staff that was interviewed was not specific as what elements constituted 'academic quality'.

HEIs do gather a lot of data throughout the mobility process but only a few institutions make use of this intelligence for their policy of partnerships in a structural way. Those institutions that have the tools available for effective mobility management, should focus more on staff and business processes in order to make better use of these tools. There is a huge unexploited potential in this regard and a strategy for managing partnerships could easily go hand in hand with better usage of available data sources.

## 6.2. Do international partnerships feature in European and national policies?

Although policy documents of the European Commission refer to international partnerships and it is advocated that national strategies on internationalisation include this element it is not made clear in these documents how this can happen in practice, nor is it monitored. Although data from the U-Multirank tool which is initiated by the European Commission could facilitate HEIs in finding suitable international partners this was not set out as a main goal of the webtool, and the indicators do not cover any qualitative aspects of international partnerships. In general, the data collection on internationalisation in Europe is focussed on quantitative measures mostly associated with mobility, and not on data from impact studies. In other regions, most notably in Asia, the “quality” of international partnerships plays a much larger role in national policies, although quality is often narrowed to positions on rankings.

In recent years, more national internationalisation strategies have been developed but these strategies do typically not include international partnerships. If international partnerships do play a role in the national strategy it is often connected to mobility and quantitative indicators left to HEIs. Qualitative aspects of international partnerships and the impact that international partnerships have on the quality of education do not feature as topics in national strategies. Governments encourage the higher education institutions to develop their own strategies, internal policies and internal quality assurance systems. This may also include international partnerships. However, the detailed scope and approach is upon each higher education institution.

Strategic international partnerships is said to be quality assured by about half of the HEIs that have prioritised strategic international partnerships in their institutional strategy. This implies that about half of the HEIs that consider international strategic partnerships as a priority do not assess the quality of these partnerships. Even when assessments take place, there is no unified or general approach to internal evaluation and monitoring of the quality of the international partnerships. This also applies to the frameworks of the QA agencies. Although some agencies include international cooperation in their frameworks it is mostly related to assessing quantitative outcomes and mobility. International partnerships may feature as part of the broader theme of internationalisation in audit trails in institutional reviews, or in a voluntary assessment as the Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation, but this is incidental and not a given.

Nowadays strategic partnerships are high on the agenda of HEIs worldwide but the authors of this paper plea for a more strategic approach towards international partnerships in general instead of only focussing on strategic partnerships.



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