Strengthening International Relations Offices in Moldovan HEIs for further integration into the EHEA

DELIVERABLE 1.1

Training Kit on European policies and practices for inclusive and sustainable internationalization of Higher Education

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- **Annex 1** – Description of the Action (contractual annex defining objectives, activities, deliverables, and timeline in EU grant agreements)
- **BIP** – Blended Intensive Programme
- **BM** – Beneficiary Module (Erasmus+ platform)
- **CA** – Consortium Agreement (internal agreement between project partners regulating responsibilities, financial distribution, and liability mechanisms)
- **CBHE** – Capacity Building in Higher Education
- **Compliance** – Adherence to legal, regulatory, and contractual requirements within EU-funded projects
- **Conversion Rate** – Percentage of prospective students progressing from one stage of the recruitment funnel to the next
- **Co-financing** – Financial contribution from project partners or institutions supplementing EU funding
- **CRUE** – Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades Españolas
- **DG EAC** – Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission service responsible for Erasmus+)
- **Deliverable** – Tangible or intangible output defined in the project proposal and required for reporting and funding justification
- **Dissemination** – Activities aimed at sharing project results with target audiences and stakeholders
- **EC** – European Commission
- **ECTS** – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
- **EACEA** – European Education and Culture Executive Agency
- **EHEA** – European Higher Education Area
- **Eligibility** – Compliance of costs, activities, or participants with funding rules and requirements
- **Enrolment** – Formal registration of a student into a programme of study
- **ENHANCE** – European University Alliance ENHANCE
- **Erasmus+** – European Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport
- **Erasmus Without Paper (EWP)** – Digital system supporting paperless mobility management
- **EU** – European Union
- **EU Delegation** – European Union external representation office in partner countries supporting programme implementation and cooperation
- **Evaluation** – Assessment of project relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and impact
- **Evidence** – Documented proof demonstrating that planned activities and outputs have been completed

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- **Exploitation (of results)** – Use of project outputs for institutional, academic, or commercial benefit
- **Flat Rate** – Percentage-based funding applied to eligible cost categories (e.g. indirect costs)
- **Grant Agreement (GA)** – Legal contract between the European Commission/EACEA and project beneficiaries defining rights, obligations, and funding conditions
- **HEI** – Higher Education Institution
- **Impact** – Long-term systemic change generated by project implementation
- **Indicator** – Measurable variable used to assess progress or achievement of objectives
- **Internationalization** – Strategic process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into higher education
- **International Relations Office (IRO)** – Institutional unit responsible for international cooperation and mobility management
- **KA1** – Key Action 1 (Learning Mobility of Individuals)
- **KA2** – Key Action 2 (Cooperation among Organisations and Institutions)
- **KPI / KPIs** – Key Performance Indicator(s)
- **Lead** – Potential applicant who has expressed initial interest in a programme or institution
- **Lump Sum Funding** – Funding model where payments are based on achievement of predefined results rather than reimbursement of actual costs
- **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** – Formal agreement outlining cooperation intentions between institutions
- **Monitoring** – Continuous tracking of project progress against planned objectives and indicators
- **MoE** – Ministry of Education
- **Outcome** – Medium- to long-term effect or change resulting from project outputs
- **Output** – Concrete result produced by project activities contributing to overall objectives
- **PL** – Project Leader
- **PM** – Project Manager
- **Procurement** – Process of acquiring goods, services, or works in compliance with institutional and EU rules
- **Quality Assurance (QA)** – System ensuring standards, consistency, and compliance in project or institutional processes
- **Quality Assurance Board (QA Board)** – Project-level monitoring body responsible for quality oversight
- **Real Costs** – Funding model based on reimbursement of actual eligible expenditures supported by documentation

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- **Reporting** – Formal submission of technical and financial information to the funding authority
- **Risk Management** – Systematic process of identifying, assessing, and mitigating risks affecting project success
- **SEPIE** – Servicio Español para la Internacionalización de la Educación
- **Stakeholder** – Any individual or organisation affected by or involved in the project (e.g. ministries, employers, students, partners)
- **Sustainability** – Ability of project results or institutional changes to continue beyond funding period
- **Sustainability Plan** – Strategy ensuring continuation and use of project results after funding ends
- **T1.2** – Task 1.2 (Needs Assessment reference in the project)
- **Traceability** – Ability to track decisions, activities, and outputs through documented evidence
- **UEFISCDI** – Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (Romania)
- **Unit Costs** – Predefined fixed amounts reimbursed per defined activity or output
- **Validation** – Internal verification process confirming accuracy and completeness of deliverables before submission
- **WP** – Work Package
- **WP Leader** – Work Package Leader (partner responsible for coordination and delivery of a specific work package)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Capacity Building Toolkit provides a comprehensive strategic and operational framework for strengthening the internationalization capacity of higher education institutions (HEIs), with a particular focus on institutions in Moldova and comparable higher education systems in transition. It is designed to bridge the gap between high-level internationalization strategies and the institutional systems, processes, and capabilities required for effective implementation.

Internationalization in higher education has evolved far beyond student and staff mobility. It is now a multidimensional institutional transformation process encompassing strategic planning, curriculum development, partnership management, digital transformation, research collaboration, international marketing and recruitment, and the design and implementation of EU-funded cooperation projects such as Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE). Within this context, HEIs are expected not only to participate in international activities, but to develop coherent, data-informed, and sustainable institutional systems capable of supporting them over time.

The Toolkit is structured around interrelated thematic areas that collectively define a holistic approach to internationalization. It situates institutional practice within European and national policy frameworks and draws on comparative experiences from Spain, Romania, and the Czech Republic to extract transferable lessons for institutional development. These policy perspectives establish inclusion, sustainability, and global engagement as core principles of modern higher education internationalization.

A central pillar of the Toolkit is institutional strategic planning. It emphasises that successful internationalization requires clearly defined objectives, prioritised actions, measurable KPIs, and continuous monitoring systems. Rather than fragmented or opportunistic initiatives, institutions are encouraged to adopt structured, evidence-based strategies aligned with institutional capacity and long-term development goals.

Mobility and collaboration remain key components of internationalization, particularly within the Erasmus+ framework. The Toolkit provides detailed operational guidance on managing student and staff mobility, inter-institutional agreements, blended intensive programmes, and supporting administrative workflows through digital systems such as the Beneficiary Module and the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) Dashboard. It also highlights the importance of internal regulations, student support mechanisms, and quality assurance systems to ensure that mobility processes are efficient, transparent, and impactful.

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Beyond mobility, the Toolkit expands the concept of internationalization to include innovation, curriculum transformation, research collaboration, green internationalization, and active global partnerships. These dimensions position internationalization not as a separate institutional function, but as a driver of academic quality, institutional reform, and long-term competitiveness.

Digital transformation is identified as a critical enabler across all dimensions of internationalization. The effective use of digital platforms, data management systems, and mobility tracking tools enhances transparency, operational efficiency, and decision-making capacity, while also addressing common institutional gaps in digital skills and infrastructure.

International marketing and recruitment are reframed as structured institutional processes rather than promotional activities. Effective recruitment depends on a clearly articulated value proposition, targeted market selection, programme readiness, and a digital ecosystem structured around the applicant journey. Universities are encouraged to adopt a conversion-oriented approach in which visibility is meaningful only when it translates into enquiries, applications, admissions, and enrolments. Responsiveness, clarity, and data-driven decision-making are essential to improving performance across the recruitment funnel.

In parallel, the Toolkit positions Erasmus+ CBHE and similar EU-funded cooperation projects as strategic instruments of institutional development rather than purely administrative or financial exercises. These projects support structural transformation in higher education through curriculum reform, governance development, and institutional capacity building. The shift toward lump sum funding models represents a fundamental change in EU financial logic, moving from cost reimbursement to performance-based delivery. As a result, institutional success depends less on financial justification and more on the ability to deliver, document, and evidence agreed outputs and results.

This shift significantly increases the importance of robust internal governance structures, clear allocation of responsibilities, and strong risk management systems. The Toolkit defines key institutional roles in project implementation, including strategic oversight by Project Leaders, operational coordination by Project Managers, and compliance, continuity, and support functions provided by International Relations Offices. The effectiveness of CBHE implementation depends on clarity of roles, elimination of ambiguity, and strong coordination between academic and administrative structures.

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Documentation and internal control systems are presented as core elements of project implementation rather than administrative by-products. Real-time documentation, structured archiving, version control, and traceability are essential for ensuring audit readiness and institutional accountability. Risk management becomes particularly critical under lump sum funding, where risks are directly linked to performance outcomes rather than incurred costs. Early identification, continuous monitoring, and proactive mitigation of risks are therefore essential components of effective project governance.

Proposal development is reframed as the first phase of implementation rather than a standalone competitive exercise. Strong proposals are characterised by internal coherence, realistic planning, well-defined deliverables, clear governance structures, and embedded quality assurance mechanisms. Misalignment between proposal design and institutional capacity is identified as one of the main causes of implementation difficulties.

Finally, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting are presented as an integrated system that determines both performance quality and funding outcomes. Internal validation processes prior to submission represent the most critical control point, as they ensure consistency between planned activities, delivered outputs, and supporting evidence. Once submitted, reports become final, making early internal review essential to institutional success.

Overall, the Toolkit concludes that sustainable internationalization depends on the development of coherent institutional systems rather than isolated initiatives. Whether in recruitment, mobility, or EU project implementation, success is determined by the ability of institutions to translate strategy into structured processes, ensure coordination between academic and administrative units, maintain rigorous documentation and accountability systems, and continuously improve based on data and evidence. Internationalization, therefore, is not achieved through visibility alone, but through sustained institutional discipline, clarity, and system-wide coherence across all stages of engagement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Purpose and objectives of the kit

This training kit has been conceived as a starting point for reflection and action. It brings together a set of ideas, practices, and examples that aim to support Moldovan higher education institutions in navigating a rapidly evolving international landscape. As European higher education continues to move towards more integrated, inclusive, and sustainability-driven models, institutions are increasingly expected not only to participate in international activities, but to embed them as a natural part of their academic and organisational life.

The purpose of this training kit is therefore to provide a practical and accessible reference that helps translate these broader European developments into concrete institutional practice. It is not intended as a theoretical overview, but as a working document that can support those responsible for internationalization, whether in leadership roles, academic departments, or international offices, in making informed and realistic decisions. Throughout the different sections, the emphasis is placed on connecting policy frameworks with day-to-day implementation.

A central idea that runs through the training kit is that internationalization is no longer limited to mobility. While student and staff exchanges remain an essential component, they are now part of a wider set of activities that include curriculum development, digital collaboration, research cooperation, and internationalization at home. This broader perspective is reflected across the chapters, which explore how institutions can gradually shift from fragmented initiatives to more coherent and strategically aligned approaches.

The training kit also aims to support the strengthening of institutional capacity. Many Moldovan HEIs already have valuable experience through participation in Erasmus+ and other international programmes. The challenge ahead is to build on this experience in a more structured way, improving coordination, expanding expertise, and ensuring that internationalization is shared across the institution rather than concentrated in a limited number of units. For this reason, particular attention is given to practical aspects such as strategic planning, partnership development, digitalisation, and internal organisation.

At the same time, the training kit highlights two cross-cutting priorities that increasingly shape European higher education: inclusion and sustainability. Ensuring that international opportunities are accessible to a wider range of students and staff, and that internationalization activities are designed with a long-term perspective, are no longer optional

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considerations. They are becoming defining elements of how institutions position themselves within the European Higher Education Area.

Finally, this training kit aims to contribute to a broader process of positioning and engagement. By aligning more closely with European approaches, strengthening partnerships, and improving internal processes, Moldovan HEIs can enhance their visibility and role within the international academic community. This is not about replicating models from elsewhere, but about adapting relevant practices in a way that reflects local priorities and capacities.

In this sense, the training kit should be understood as a flexible support tool. It offers guidance, but also leaves space for adaptation. Each institution will find its own pathway, pace, and priorities. The intention is simply to provide a shared point of reference that can help structure this process and support informed, gradual change.

1.2. Overview of inclusive and sustainable internationalization

Internationalization in higher education has expanded considerably in recent years, both in scope and in ambition. What was once largely understood as the mobility of students and staff is now seen as a much broader and more complex process. Universities are increasingly expected to integrate international and intercultural dimensions into all aspects of their work, from teaching and research to governance and societal engagement. Within this evolving context, two ideas have gained particular importance: inclusion and sustainability.

Inclusive internationalization starts from a simple but important observation: traditional models tend to benefit only a limited group of students and staff. Mobility programmes, while extremely valuable, often reach those who already have the resources, confidence, or flexibility to participate. As a result, large parts of the academic community remain only indirectly involved. The current shift in European higher education is therefore towards widening participation and ensuring that internationalization is not restricted to a small, highly mobile group.

In practice, this means designing activities that can reach a broader audience. Internationalization at home plays a key role here, by bringing international perspectives into the classroom through curriculum design, collaborative online learning, and interaction with international partners. Digital tools and blended formats make it possible to involve students who may not be able to travel, whether for financial, personal, or academic

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reasons. Inclusion also applies to staff, requiring institutions to create opportunities for a wider range of academics and administrative personnel to engage in international activities, not only those who are already experienced or well connected.

At the same time, inclusion is closely linked to institutional culture. It is not only about creating opportunities, but also about removing barriers and ensuring that participation feels accessible. This can involve practical measures, such as clearer information, language support, or simplified administrative procedures, but also a broader shift towards recognising diversity as a strength. When internationalization is approached in this way, it becomes less of a specialised activity and more of a shared responsibility across the institution.

Sustainability, in turn, introduces a different but equally important perspective. It invites institutions to look beyond individual projects and consider how internationalization can be maintained over time. In many cases, international activities are strongly linked to external funding, particularly programmes such as Erasmus+. While these opportunities are essential, they can also create a cycle where activities depend on project timelines rather than long-term planning. A more sustainable approach requires embedding internationalization within institutional structures, ensuring that it continues to develop even when specific funding periods come to an end.

This also involves making strategic choices. Rather than engaging in a large number of short-term initiatives, institutions may benefit from focusing on fewer, more stable partnerships that can evolve over time. Sustainable internationalization is often built through continuity: repeated cooperation, gradual development of joint activities, and growing trust between partners. In this sense, it is less about expansion and more about consolidation.

Sustainability also has a practical dimension linked to resources and efficiency. Digitalisation plays an important role here, allowing institutions to simplify processes, reduce administrative workload, and maintain cooperation even when physical mobility is not possible. Blended forms of collaboration, combining online and in-person elements, are becoming increasingly relevant. They not only lower costs and environmental impact, but also make international engagement more flexible and resilient.

In recent years, environmental considerations have also become part of the discussion on sustainability. Higher education institutions are increasingly aware of the footprint associated with international travel and are exploring ways to balance the benefits of

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mobility with more sustainable practices. While mobility will remain a key feature of internationalization, there is a growing interest in alternatives that reduce its environmental impact without losing its educational value.

Bringing inclusion and sustainability together creates a more balanced approach to internationalization. It shifts the focus from short-term, activity-based models towards long-term processes that are embedded in institutional life and accessible to a wider community. This does not necessarily require radical changes, but rather a gradual rethinking of how internationalization is planned and implemented.

For Moldovan higher education institutions, this perspective is particularly relevant. As highlighted in the training needs assessment, many institutions already have a solid foundation in international cooperation, especially through mobility programmes. The next step is to build on this experience in a way that broadens participation and ensures continuity. By integrating inclusive and sustainable principles into their strategies, Moldovan HEIs can develop internationalization models that are both realistic and forward-looking.

In this sense, inclusive and sustainable internationalization should not be seen as an additional layer on top of existing activities, but as a way of organising them more effectively. It provides a framework that helps institutions make better use of their resources, involve more people, and create lasting impact.

1.3. Methodological approach to inclusive and sustainable internationalization

The methodological approach underpinning this Toolkit was developed through an evidence-based and participatory process aimed at ensuring that the resulting training and operational framework responds directly to the real institutional needs of Moldovan Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Rather than adopting a purely theoretical perspective, the methodology was grounded in an initial institutional diagnosis and needs assessment conducted among the Moldovan partner universities participating in the project.

The development process was initiated under the ***Milestone 2 – Training Need Assessment Report*** which was done among Moldovan Partner HEIs, coordinated by the European partner institutions: the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CZU), and University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest (USAMV Bucharest). The purpose of this assessment was to identify existing competencies, operational challenges, institutional priorities, and

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capacity development needs related to internationalization within the partner HEIs from the Republic of Moldova.

The methodological framework therefore combines four interconnected dimensions: institutional needs assessment, comparative European benchmarking, systems-based institutional analysis, and process-oriented operational design. Together, these dimensions ensure that internationalization is approached not only as a strategic ambition, but as a structured and sustainable institutional transformation process.

Evidence-based institutional needs assessment. The first methodological component consisted of a structured fact-finding and training needs assessment questionnaire addressed to International Relations Offices (IROs) and institutional representatives from five Moldovan partner HEIs. The assessment collected both quantitative and qualitative data regarding institutional internationalization capacities, operational structures, staff competencies, strategic priorities, and sustainability risks.

The findings demonstrated that all participating institutions are actively engaged in internationalization activities and possess prior experience in Erasmus+ projects, primarily as project partners. Most institutions have already established formal internationalization strategies approved at Senate level or integrated into broader institutional development frameworks. This confirms a positive institutional commitment toward internationalization and alignment with European Higher Education Area (EHEA) priorities.

At the same time, the assessment revealed several structural and operational limitations affecting the effectiveness and sustainability of internationalization processes. While competencies related to mobility management, partnership coordination, and communication activities were assessed as relatively strong, important gaps persist in more advanced areas, including:

- Strategic planning for internationalization aligned with European frameworks;
- EU project proposal writing and competitive project development;
- CBHE project management and compliance;
- Risk management and quality assurance mechanisms;
- Grant reporting and documentation;
- Data-driven planning and performance monitoring;
- Digital tools for internationalization management;
- International student recruitment and marketing strategies.

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The assessment further highlighted significant organisational constraints within IRO structures. Most partner institutions operate with small international offices composed of one to three staff members, often with limited role differentiation and high operational workload concentration. Although staff turnover remains relatively low, indicating institutional stability, the limited human resource capacity restricts institutional scalability and reduces the ability to manage increasingly complex internationalization processes effectively.

Another important finding concerns the limited decentralisation of internationalization activities within institutions. In several HEIs, internationalization functions remain concentrated within the IRO, with moderate or limited faculty-level engagement. This creates challenges for institutional coordination, cross-unit collaboration, and the integration of internationalization into academic structures and decision-making processes.

The assessment also identified emerging institutional priorities shared across participating HEIs. These include:

- Expansion of international partnerships;
- Strengthening student and staff mobility;
- Increasing participation in Erasmus+ and international programmes;
- Enhancing institutional visibility and international outreach;
- Improving international student recruitment mechanisms;
- Aligning institutional strategies with European policy priorities;
- Strengthening institutional sustainability and resilience.

At the same time, institutions expressed concerns regarding long-term sustainability due to limited financial resources, dependence on external project funding, and insufficient institutional capacity for strategic planning and implementation.

The results of this Milestone therefore constituted the primary evidence base guiding the development of this Toolkit and the associated capacity-building activities under Work Package 1.

Comparative European benchmarking and policy alignment. Building upon the institutional diagnosis, the second methodological dimension involved comparative analysis of European internationalization practices and governance models from partner countries represented within the consortium, namely Spain, Romania, and the Czech Republic.

This comparative approach enabled the identification of transferable institutional practices, operational mechanisms, and governance solutions relevant to the Moldovan

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higher education context. The objective was not to replicate institutional models directly, but rather to adapt proven European approaches to the realities, capacities, and strategic priorities of Moldovan HEIs. Particular attention was given to:

- ✓ Institutional governance models for internationalization;
- ✓ Strategic planning aligned with Erasmus+ and EHEA priorities;
- ✓ Mobility management systems and partnership development;
- ✓ Digitalisation of internationalization processes;
- ✓ Quality assurance and compliance mechanisms;
- ✓ Inclusive and sustainable internationalization practices;
- ✓ Institutional coordination and faculty-level engagement.

This dimension ensures that the Toolkit remains aligned with European policy frameworks and Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) intervention logic, while maintaining contextual relevance and institutional adaptability.

Systems-thinking approach to institutional internationalization. A third methodological pillar of the Toolkit is the application of a systems-thinking approach to internationalization. Based on the findings of the need's assessment, it became evident that many challenges faced by partner HEIs are not isolated operational issues, but rather interconnected institutional capacity constraints.

The methodology therefore conceptualises internationalization as a whole-of-institution process involving interdependent components, including: *Institutional strategy and governance*, *Administrative and academic structures*, *Human resource capacity*, *Digital infrastructure and data systems*, *Quality assurance mechanisms*, *External partnerships and stakeholder engagement.*

From this perspective, sustainable internationalization requires coordinated institutional transformation rather than fragmented activities focused exclusively on mobility or project participation. The systems-based methodology promotes:

- ➢ Alignment between institutional strategies and operational implementation;
- ➢ Vertical coherence between governance and execution levels;
- ➢ Horizontal coordination across faculties and administrative units;
- ➢ Integration of digital tools into institutional workflows;
- ➢ Reinforcement of accountability, monitoring, and compliance mechanisms.

This approach directly addresses several critical gaps identified through the survey, including fragmented coordination, insufficient faculty engagement, limited use of

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institutional data, and operational dependence on small IRO teams.

Process-oriented operational design. The fourth methodological component consists of process-based operational design aimed at translating strategic objectives into practical implementation tools and institutional workflows.

The Toolkit was therefore structured around concrete operational areas identified as priorities during the need's assessment process, including:

- ✓ Erasmus+ mobility management (KA1, KA171, BIPs);
- ✓ Partnership development and inter-institutional agreement management;
- ✓ EU project proposal development and CBHE project management;
- ✓ Grant implementation, reporting, and compliance;
- ✓ International student recruitment and communication strategies;
- ✓ Digital tools for internationalization management;
- ✓ Internal monitoring, evaluation, and performance tracking;
- ✓ Inclusion, diversity, and sustainable internationalization practices.

Each thematic component includes operational guidance, workflows, implementation recommendations, institutional roles, and performance-oriented approaches intended to support institutional applicability and usability.

Special attention was given to implementation realism and institutional feasibility. The Toolkit acknowledges the differentiated levels of institutional maturity among partner HEIs and therefore adopts a progressive capacity-building logic rather than prescribing rigid institutional models.

Results orientation and continuous institutional development. An overarching methodological principle throughout the Toolkit development process is the integration of results-based management and continuous institutional learning. The methodology reflects current Erasmus+ implementation requirements, particularly the increasing emphasis on measurable outputs, evidence generation, accountability, and performance-based funding mechanisms. Consequently, the Toolkit incorporates:

- Clear alignment between objectives, activities, outputs, and indicators;
- Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms integrated into implementation processes;
- Risk-informed planning and mitigation approaches;
- Internal validation and quality assurance procedures;
- Evidence-based institutional decision-making practices;

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Furthermore, the methodology recognises that internationalization is an evolving institutional process requiring continuous adaptation and improvement. Monitoring, feedback collection, and institutional learning are therefore treated as permanent functions rather than final reporting exercises. In this sense, the Toolkit functions simultaneously as: a strategic framework aligned with European higher education priorities, a practical operational guide for institutional implementation, a capacity-building instrument supporting progressive institutional development, and a results-oriented management tool aligned with Erasmus+ CBHE requirements.

Overall, the methodological approach ensures that the Toolkit responds directly to the identified needs of Moldovan partner HEIs while supporting the development of coherent, inclusive, sustainable, and performance-oriented internationalization systems grounded in institutional accountability, operational clarity, and long-term resilience.

1.4 Rationale and Alignment with the T1.2 Needs Assessment

One of the most important findings emerging from the T1.2 Needs Assessment was that the internationalization challenges faced by the partner institutions are not uniform. Although all participating universities share a common objective of strengthening their internationalization capacities and increasing their integration into the EHEA, the assessment revealed substantial differences in institutional experience, international engagement, organizational maturity, and available human resources.

The analysis demonstrated that internationalization within the partner institutions remains at different stages of development. Some universities continue to face fundamental challenges related to mobility management, partnership development and participation in Erasmus+ activities, while others have already established a stronger international presence and require more advanced competencies related to strategic internationalization, international student recruitment, research cooperation, digital transformation, and institutional leadership.

For example, UCCM and AMFA reported limited participation in mobility programmes, a relatively small number of active international agreements, and little experience in managing Erasmus+ cooperation projects. For these institutions, the priority is to strengthen operational capacities related to mobility administration, partnership development, project participation, and international outreach. In contrast, Comrat State University has already established a relatively solid international profile, with increasing

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mobility numbers and participation in Erasmus+ projects. Its future development depends less on operational management and more on strategic planning, international student recruitment, research internationalization, and institutional positioning. Similarly, AMTAP benefits from a comparatively strong international student presence but requires additional capacities to transform this visibility into sustainable partnerships, mobility opportunities, and international projects. UTM, as consortium coordinator, possesses more advanced internationalization experience but identified the need to strengthen strategic leadership, research internationalization, digital transformation, and international competitiveness.

The needs assessment also highlighted several common challenges shared across the consortium. These include the absence of comprehensive internationalization strategies, insufficient expertise within International Relations Offices, limited participation in European cooperation projects, weak integration of inclusion and sustainability principles, inadequate use of digital tools, and the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Furthermore, internationalization activities remain heavily concentrated around Erasmus+ mobility, while broader dimensions such as curriculum internationalization, international research cooperation, international marketing, and global engagement remain underdeveloped.

These findings indicate that strengthening internationalization requires more than increasing mobility numbers or signing additional agreements. Sustainable institutional development depends on strengthening the professional capacities of the staff responsible for planning, implementing, monitoring, and continuously improving internationalization processes. Consequently, the development of a Competency Framework for International Relations Office staff represents a direct response to the needs identified through T1.2 and constitutes a practical mechanism for translating institutional challenges into targeted capacity-building actions.

The T1.2 Needs Assessment demonstrated that a one-size-fits-all approach to capacity building would not adequately address the diverse realities of the participating Moldovan HEIs. Consequently, the Competency Framework presented in this Toolkit does not prescribe a uniform development pathway. Instead, it provides a flexible structure that enables each institution to identify priority areas for capacity development according to its specific needs, level of internationalization maturity, and strategic objectives. The framework therefore serves as a practical mechanism for translating institutional challenges into targeted and context-sensitive capacity-building actions.

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Consequently, the Competency Framework presented in this Toolkit does not prescribe a uniform development pathway. Instead, it provides a flexible structure that allows each institution to identify priority areas for capacity development according to its specific needs and strategic objectives. The framework was developed directly from the competency gaps identified through the survey and serves as the foundation upon which the Training Kit modules have been designed.

To ensure direct alignment between the needs identified through T1.2 and the proposed capacity-building interventions, the competency framework was structured around ten priority competency areas, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Mapping T1.2 Findings to Competency Areas

Main Need Identified Through T1.2	Institutions Most Concerned	Competency Area
Lack of strategic internationalization planning	All partners	Strategic Planning for Internationalization
Weak project development and proposal writing capacities	UCCM, KDU, AMTAP, AMFA	EU Project Proposal Writing and Project Development
Limited partnership diversification	UCCM, AMTAP, KDU	Partnership Development and International Cooperation
Need to expand mobility participation	UCCM, AMFA, AMTAP	Mobility Partnership Management
Digitalisation gaps and limited use of data	KDU, UCCM, AMFA	Digital Tools for Internationalization
Compliance and project management challenges	All partners	Risk Management and Compliance
Limited implementation of inclusion measures	All partners	Inclusion and Diversity Practices
Weak integration of sustainability principles	All partners	Green and Sustainable Internationalization
International student recruitment challenges	UCCM, KDU, AMTAP	Communication, Visibility and International Student Recruitment
Limited use of KPIs and monitoring systems	All partners	Monitoring, Evaluation and Institutional Performance Management

Competency Area 1. Strategic planning for internationalization

One of the most recurrent findings of the T1.2 Needs Assessment was the need to strengthen strategic approaches to internationalization. Although most partner institutions possess institutional strategies, internationalization activities are often implemented through isolated initiatives rather than through coordinated institutional planning. Several institutions reported difficulties in translating internationalization objectives into measurable actions, monitoring progress, and aligning activities with European Higher Education Area priorities.

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IRO staff should therefore develop competencies related to strategic analysis, policy development, institutional planning, and performance monitoring. At an advanced level, staff should be capable of contributing to institutional internationalization strategies, defining strategic priorities, establishing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and supporting evidence-based decision-making.

Competencies should include:

- strategic planning methodologies;
- SWOT and needs assessment analysis;
- development of internationalization strategies;
- KPI development and monitoring;
- internationalization governance models;
- alignment with EHEA and Erasmus+ priorities;
- institutional reporting and performance evaluation.

Competency Area 2. EU Project proposal writing and project development

The survey results identified proposal writing as one of the highest-priority training needs across the consortium. UCCM, Comrat State University, AMTAP, and AMFA all reported significant gaps in identifying funding opportunities, preparing competitive applications, and developing sustainable international projects.

While many institutions participate as project partners, fewer possess the expertise required to coordinate projects or build international consortia. Consequently, strengthening proposal development competencies represents a critical step toward increasing institutional access to European funding opportunities.

IRO staff should progressively develop competencies in:

- identification of funding opportunities;
- project concept development;
- consortium building;
- needs analysis and intervention logic;
- work package design;
- budgeting and financial planning;
- impact and sustainability planning;
- proposal writing and submission procedures.

Knowledge should cover:

- Erasmus+ KA1;

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- Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships;
- Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE);
- Horizon Europe;
- Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA);
- COST Actions;
- CERV;
- Interreg;
- Creative Europe;
- European Universities Initiative.

Competency Area 3. Partnership development and international cooperation

The T1.2 assessment revealed that most institutions remain dependent on a relatively limited number of international partners and mobility agreements. Several respondents highlighted difficulties in identifying new partners, maintaining active cooperation, and transforming formal agreements into meaningful academic collaboration. Modern IROs must move beyond administrative partnership management and adopt a strategic approach to international cooperation. Staff should be able to identify potential partners, evaluate institutional compatibility, negotiate agreements, facilitate academic cooperation, and periodically review partnership performance.

Competencies should include:

- partnership mapping and identification;
- institutional profiling;
- partner evaluation methodologies;
- negotiation and networking;
- development of interinstitutional agreements;
- management of academic networks;
- partnership monitoring and diversification.

Advanced practitioners should be capable of developing strategic partnership portfolios aligned with institutional priorities.

Competency Area 4. Mobility partnership management (KA1 and KA171)

Mobility management remains one of the central responsibilities of all partner institutions. However, survey results indicate substantial differences in operational capacity. While UTM manages large mobility volumes, other institutions reported difficulties in expanding participation and managing mobility processes efficiently.

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Competency development should therefore focus not only on administrative compliance but also on mobility growth and quality enhancement.

Staff should acquire competencies related to:

- Erasmus+ mobility regulations;
- mobility planning and implementation;
- selection procedures;
- Learning Agreements;
- grant management;
- participant support;
- academic recognition;
- mobility monitoring;
- mobility quality assurance.

At advanced levels, staff should be capable of designing mobility development strategies, identifying new mobility opportunities, and monitoring institutional mobility performance indicators.

Competency Area 5. Digital tools for internationalization

Digitalization emerged as one of the most significant gaps identified during the Needs Assessment. Several institutions reported difficulties related to digital workflows, data management, reporting systems, and the use of technology to support internationalization processes.

The transition towards digital internationalization requires staff capable of managing both operational and strategic digital tools.

Competencies should include:

- Erasmus Without Paper (EWP);
- Beneficiary Module (BM);
- mobility management platforms;
- digital document workflows;
- virtual collaboration tools;
- Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems;
- data analytics;
- artificial intelligence applications;
- dashboard development;
- digital communication platforms.

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Advanced-level staff should be capable of leading institutional digital transformation initiatives supporting internationalization.

Competency Area 6. Risk management and compliance

The Needs Assessment demonstrated that risk management and compliance remain underdeveloped areas within several partner institutions. International activities expose universities to financial, legal, operational, reputational, and security-related risks, requiring structured management approaches.

IRO personnel should understand:

- Erasmus+ contractual obligations;
- financial compliance requirements;
- audit preparation;
- GDPR compliance;
- safeguarding obligations;
- mobility safety procedures;
- crisis response mechanisms;
- reputational risk management.

Advanced practitioners should be capable of establishing institutional risk registers, monitoring compliance indicators, and supporting institutional leadership in managing internationalization-related risks.

Competency Area 7. Inclusion and diversity practices

Inclusion represents a central priority of Erasmus+ 2021–2027 and was explicitly identified as an area requiring further institutional development. While partner institutions demonstrate commitment to inclusion, practical implementation mechanisms remain limited.

Competencies should focus on the operationalisation of inclusive internationalization principles and support for participants with fewer opportunities.

Staff should understand:

- Erasmus+ Inclusion Strategy;
- accessibility requirements;
- inclusion support funding;
- support mechanisms for participants with fewer opportunities;
- diversity-sensitive communication;
- equity monitoring;

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- inclusive mobility planning.

Special attention should be given to supporting:

- students with disabilities;
- students from low-income backgrounds;
- first-generation students;
- students from rural areas;
- refugee and migrant students;
- underrepresented groups.

Competency Area 8. Green and sustainable internationalization

The survey results indicate that green internationalization remains among the least developed areas across the consortium despite being a key Erasmus+ priority. IRO staff should acquire competencies enabling them to integrate environmental sustainability into internationalization policies, mobility programmes, and institutional planning.

Competencies should include:

- Green Erasmus priorities;
- Green Travel initiatives;
- carbon footprint monitoring;
- sustainable event management;
- environmental impact assessment;
- SDG integration;
- sustainable procurement practices;
- sustainability reporting.

Advanced practitioners should be capable of integrating sustainability objectives into institutional internationalization strategies and performance frameworks.

Competency Area 9. Communication, visibility and international student recruitment

The Needs Assessment identified significant challenges related to international visibility, recruitment of international students, and promotion of international opportunities. These challenges were particularly evident among institutions seeking to increase international student enrolment and strengthen their international profile.

Competencies should include:

- international marketing;

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- branding and positioning;
- recruitment campaigns;
- digital marketing;
- social media communication;
- website internationalization;
- applicant communication;
- international admissions support;
- student recruitment data analysis.

Advanced-level staff should be capable of designing institutional recruitment strategies and identifying emerging international education markets.

Competency Area 10. Monitoring, evaluation and institutional performance management

One of the most important findings emerging from T1.2 was the limited use of data for decision-making. Most institutions reported only partial utilisation of internationalization data, while some collected information without systematically analysing it. As internationalization becomes increasingly performance-driven, IRO staff must develop competencies related to monitoring, evaluation, and institutional intelligence.

Competencies should include:

- KPI development;
- internationalization indicators;
- dashboard design;
- data collection methodologies;
- reporting systems;
- benchmarking;
- impact assessment;
- evidence-based decision-making.

Key indicators may include:

- inbound mobility rates;
- outbound mobility rates;
- international student enrolment;
- international staff participation;
- active international partnerships;
- project funding attracted;

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- inclusion indicators;
- sustainability indicators.

At advanced levels, staff should be capable of producing institutional internationalization reports and supporting strategic decision-making through data-driven analysis.

Collectively, these ten competency areas constitute the foundation of the Training Kit and provide the basis for the design of the learning modules developed under WP2. By addressing both common and institution-specific capacity gaps identified through the T1.2 Needs Assessment, the framework supports a more strategic, inclusive, sustainable, and evidence-based approach to internationalization across Moldovan Higher Education Institutions.

2. POLICY & FRAMEWORKS

2.1. European internationalization policies and strategies in Higher Education

Over the past decades, European higher education has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from predominantly national systems into an increasingly interconnected, internationally oriented, and strategically coordinated higher education landscape. Internationalization has become a central dimension of higher education governance, shaped not only by academic cooperation, but also by broader political, economic, social, and geopolitical priorities.

At the European level, the Bologna Process and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have provided the foundational framework for this transformation. Through the promotion of degree comparability, transparency, quality assurance, and academic mobility, these initiatives have strengthened institutional cooperation and enhanced the global competitiveness of European universities. Instruments such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement, and common quality assurance standards have facilitated greater compatibility across national systems and reinforced trust among higher education institutions.

In recent years, European internationalization policies have evolved beyond the traditional focus on physical mobility toward a more comprehensive, systemic, and inclusive model of international cooperation. While Erasmus+ remains the flagship programme supporting student and staff mobility, cooperation partnerships, and institutional capacity building, newer initiatives such as the European Universities Initiative promote deeper forms of transnational collaboration through long-term university alliances. These developments reflect a strategic shift from isolated international activities toward integrated

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institutional partnerships supporting joint education, research, innovation, and knowledge exchange across borders.

Simultaneously, the European Union increasingly links internationalization to broader strategic objectives related to skills development, employability, competitiveness, sustainability, and digital transformation. Recent policy initiatives, including the European Skills Agenda and the emerging Union of Skills framework, emphasise the need to equip learners with competencies relevant to the green and digital transitions while facilitating lifelong learning, flexible learning pathways, and the cross-border recognition of qualifications and micro-credentials. In this context, higher education institutions are expected not only to generate knowledge, but also to contribute actively to inclusive labour markets, innovation ecosystems, and broader societal resilience.

For Moldovan HEIs understanding these evolving European policies and strategies is essential. They provide both a reference framework and a source of inspiration for institutional development, particularly in partner countries seeking to strengthen their own internationalization agendas. This chapter therefore aims to present an overview of the main European approaches to internationalization in higher education, highlighting key trends, instruments, and opportunities that can inform the design and implementation of effective, sustainable, and context-sensitive strategies.

European approaches to internationalization are characterized by a systemic and policy-driven perspective, where internationalization is not treated as an isolated activity but as an integral component of higher education systems. One of the core approaches is the harmonization and convergence model promoted through the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which facilitates compatibility of degrees, credit transfer (ECTS), and quality assurance frameworks, in line with broader EU efforts to promote transparency and comparability in higher education systems[1]. A second key approach is mobility-based internationalization, historically centred on the physical exchange of students and staff, primarily operationalized through Erasmus+, as established in Regulation (EU) 2021/817[2]. More recently, this has evolved into a broader model of internationalization at home, integrating international and intercultural dimensions into curricula and institutional practices, as encouraged in the European strategy for

[1] *European Commission (2017). Communication on a renewed EU agenda for higher education.*
[2] *Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing Erasmus+*

universities[3]. In parallel, the emergence of transnational and alliance-based cooperation, particularly through the European Universities Initiative, reflects a shift toward deeper institutional partnerships. These approaches are increasingly framed within broader European skills-oriented policies, notably the Union of Skills, which links internationalization to the development of future-oriented competences and Europe's global competitiveness[4].

Within these approaches, several key trends can be identified. First, there is a transition from quantitative expansion to qualitative impact, with a stronger focus on learning outcomes, inclusiveness, and institutional transformation, as highlighted in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide. Second, internationalization is increasingly aligned with wider EU priorities, particularly through the European Skills Agenda and the emerging Union of Skills framework, which emphasize skills for the green and digital transitions, lifelong learning, and employability[5]. Third, inclusiveness and accessibility have become central policy priorities within Erasmus+ and related European initiatives. Internationalization is increasingly expected to ensure equitable participation opportunities for individuals from underrepresented, disadvantaged, or vulnerable groups. Finally, digitalisation is reshaping international cooperation models through the expansion of blended mobility, virtual exchange formats, digital collaboration platforms, and micro-credentials. These developments support more flexible and accessible forms of international learning while enhancing institutional adaptability and resilience[6].

These policy directions are supported by a comprehensive set of European instruments and implementation mechanisms. Erasmus+ remains the principal funding instrument for mobility and cooperation, including Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE), cooperation partnerships, and Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs). The ECTS framework and the Diploma Supplement facilitate academic recognition and transparency, while the Lisbon Recognition Convention strengthens the recognition of qualifications across borders[7]. Quality assurance is guided by the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), while the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) supports comparability of qualifications across countries[8].

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[3] *European Commission (2022). A European strategy for universities*
[4] *European Commission (2023–2024 policy direction). Union of Skills (policy framework linked to skills, competitiveness, and mobility).*
[5] *European Commission (2020). European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience.*
6 Council of the European Union (2022). Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability.
7 Council of Europe and UNESCO (1997). Lisbon Recognition Convention.
8 European Parliament and Council (2008, revised 2017). European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

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More recent instruments, including support for European University alliances, digital education initiatives, and the development of micro-credentials, further demonstrate the increasing integration between internationalization policy and flexible, skills-oriented learning pathways promoted under broader European education and employment strategies.

Importantly, these approaches, trends, and instruments create significant opportunities for higher education institutions, particularly within Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) contexts. They support curriculum modernisation through joint and interdisciplinary programmes, strengthen institutional governance capacities, encourage innovation in teaching and learning, and facilitate the development of long-term strategic partnerships. In addition, they enable institutions to align educational provision more closely with labour market needs while strengthening institutional resilience and international visibility.

For partner-country institutions such as Moldovan HEIs, these frameworks provide important opportunities to modernise governance structures, strengthen International Relations Offices (IROs), expand international cooperation networks, improve digital capacities, and develop more coherent internationalization strategies aligned with European standards and priorities.

Taken together, these European policies and frameworks provide a solid foundation for the development of internationalization strategies that are effective, sustainable, inclusive, and context-sensitive. Effectiveness requires aligning internationalization with institutional missions, measurable objectives, and operational capacities. Sustainability depends on embedding internationalization within governance systems, financial planning, quality assurance mechanisms, and long-term institutional development strategies. Context sensitivity requires adapting European models and policy instruments to national realities, institutional maturity levels, and available resources.

By engaging critically and strategically with these European policy frameworks, higher education institutions can move beyond fragmented international activities toward integrated and performance-oriented internationalization systems capable of generating long-term institutional and societal impact.

Recommendation.

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2.2. Internationalization in Spanish Higher Education

2.2.1. Current state and key trends

Over the past decade, the Spanish higher education system has consolidated a strong international profile within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Internationalization has become a strategic priority across Spanish universities, supported by national policy frameworks, sustained participation in Erasmus+, and increasing institutional engagement in global academic cooperation.

Spain currently ranks among the most attractive destinations for international students in Europe. According to the latest available official data, the number of international students enrolled in Spanish higher education institutions reached approximately 160,000 during the 2023/2024 academic year. This growth reflects not only the diversity and quality of academic provision, but also Spain's broader cultural, linguistic, and social attractiveness. Simultaneously, Spain remains one of the leading countries participating in Erasmus+, both in terms of incoming and outgoing mobility, with close to 200,000 student and staff mobility participants hosted in 2023 alone.

Historically, the internationalization model in Spanish higher education has been strongly mobility-driven. Erasmus+ exchanges and short-term academic mobility schemes have played a central role in shaping institutional internationalization structures, partnership networks, and administrative practices. Mobility therefore remains a defining feature of the Spanish system, particularly through credit mobility and inter-institutional cooperation agreements.

However, the Spanish higher education landscape is currently undergoing a gradual transition toward a more diversified and strategic model of internationalization. One important indicator of this shift is the increasing growth of full-degree international student enrolment, which is progressively outpacing traditional mobility flows. This development suggests that Spanish universities are moving beyond exchange-based internationalization toward longer-term international academic engagement.

In parallel, universities are expanding their international academic offer in order to attract a broader and more geographically diverse student population. A particularly significant trend is the increasing number of programmes delivered in English, especially at Master's level. Although the availability of English-taught programmes remains more limited than in several Northern European systems, this evolution represents an important strategic repositioning of Spanish higher education institutions within the global education

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market.

Policy reforms have also contributed significantly to this transformation. The national Strategy for the Internationalization of Spanish Universities established a comprehensive framework focused on mobility, talent attraction, international research collaboration, and graduate employability. More recently, the Organic Law of the University System (LOSU 2023) reinforced these priorities by explicitly promoting international mobility, the attraction of international academic staff and researchers, and the reduction of administrative barriers affecting foreign students and scholars.

Importantly, LOSU has also expanded the legal and strategic capacity of Spanish universities to operate internationally. The reform facilitates more flexible institutional structures and enables universities to establish or participate in educational initiatives beyond national borders, including joint campuses, international centres, and strategic academic hubs. This represents a significant evolution from traditional mobility-centred internationalization toward more structural and long-term forms of transnational cooperation and global institutional presence.

Beyond mobility, Spanish higher education institutions are increasingly adopting a more comprehensive understanding of internationalization. This includes integrating international and intercultural dimensions into curricula, strengthening international research cooperation, and expanding partnerships beyond Europe, particularly with Latin America and, increasingly, Asia. Simultaneously, initiatives linked to "internationalization at home" are gaining prominence, with the objective of ensuring that all students benefit from international learning environments regardless of their participation in physical mobility programmes.

Despite these advances, several structural challenges continue to affect the internationalization capacity of Spanish universities. One of the most frequently identified limitations concerns language capacity, both in terms of the number of programmes offered in English and the linguistic preparedness of academic and administrative staff. In addition, administrative complexity and decentralised governance structures can limit institutional agility and slow the implementation of international initiatives. International student support services, including housing, administrative assistance, and social integration mechanisms, also remain unevenly developed across institutions.

Overall, the Spanish higher education system can be characterised as a mature and highly active internationalization environment, particularly strong in mobility, European

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integration, and institutional participation in Erasmus+ cooperation frameworks. At the same time, the system is progressively evolving toward a more strategic and multidimensional model of internationalization, in which degree mobility, curriculum internationalization, alliance-based cooperation, and global institutional positioning play an increasingly important role. This transition creates important opportunities for institutional innovation and global engagement, while simultaneously requiring stronger governance capacities, strategic coordination, and long-term investment in internationalization structures.

2.2.2. The role of CRUE and SEPIE

Understanding the operational functioning of internationalization in Spain requires analysing the complementary roles of two central actors within the Spanish higher education system: CRUE Universidades Españolas and Servicio Español para la Internacionalización de la Educación (SEPIE). Together, these institutions contribute to a governance model in which strategic coordination and programme implementation are closely interconnected. For Moldovan higher education institutions, this relationship provides a valuable example of how national coordination mechanisms can support institutional internationalization processes.

CRUE Universidades Españolas acts as the principal representative and coordination platform for Spanish universities. Through its Internationalization and Cooperation Commission, CRUE brings together university leadership, vice-rectors, International Relations Offices (IROs), and policy experts in order to define common priorities, exchange institutional practices, and support coordinated responses to emerging internationalization challenges. From a strategic perspective, CRUE contributes to shaping national discussions on key internationalization priorities, including:

- *How can we attract more international students?*
- *How do we integrate internationalization into curricula?*
- *How can we strengthen partnerships beyond Europe?*

The Commission regularly develops guidelines, policy recommendations, thematic working groups, and peer-learning activities aimed at strengthening institutional capacity and promoting shared strategic approaches among universities. This collaborative framework reduces institutional fragmentation and enables universities to benefit from collective expertise and coordinated policy dialogue.

SEPIE, on the other hand, is responsible for turning strategy into action, mainly

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through the management of Erasmus+ and other international programmes. From a practical perspective, SEPIE provides funding opportunities, training sessions, technical support, and communication tools that universities use to implement their international activities. It works directly with higher education institutions to manage mobility projects, cooperation partnerships, and capacity-building initiatives. In addition, SEPIE promotes Spain as a study destination, which supports universities in their efforts to increase international visibility and recruitment. For CBHE stakeholders, SEPIE represents the operational gateway to European and international cooperation.

The interaction between CRUE and SEPIE is particularly visible in the design and implementation of national internationalization strategies. Rather than operating independently, both institutions coordinate their activities to ensure coherence between strategic priorities and operational implementation. For example, when national objectives are established in areas such as digital mobility, inclusion, sustainability, or participation in European university alliances, CRUE contributes institutional and policy perspectives from the university sector, while SEPIE operationalises these priorities through programme calls, funding instruments, implementation guidelines, and support mechanisms.

This coordinated governance model ensures that universities are not only informed about strategic developments, but are also equipped with the operational tools, funding opportunities, and institutional support necessary for effective implementation.

Importantly, internationalization in Spain has progressively evolved beyond a predominantly mobility-centred model. While Erasmus+ exchanges remain a core component of institutional internationalization, Spanish universities increasingly focus on curriculum internationalization, internationalization at home, English-taught programmes, and participation in transnational university alliances such as the European Universities Initiative.

Within this context, CRUE promotes the integration of internationalization across all university functions, including teaching, research, governance, and societal engagement, while SEPIE facilitates institutional participation in the corresponding European cooperation frameworks. This reflects a broader understanding of internationalization as a comprehensive institutional transformation process rather than a collection of isolated mobility activities.

Another important area of coordination concerns the attraction and retention of international talent. SEPIE supports the external promotion of the Spanish higher education

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system through international outreach activities and institutional partnerships, whereas CRUE supports universities in strengthening their internal capacities to receive, integrate, and support international students and academic staff. This includes improving English-language services, simplifying administrative procedures, and enhancing student support and integration mechanisms.

Finally, both CRUE and SEPIE are increasingly aligning their activities with emerging European priorities related to digitalisation, sustainability, skills development, and employability. Their coordinated efforts support university participation in initiatives linked to the European Skills Agenda and the Union of Skills framework, including the development of flexible learning pathways, micro-credentials, and stronger university–labour market connections.

Overall, the Spanish model demonstrates how effective internationalization depends on strong coordination between strategic governance and operational implementation. CRUE provides institutional representation, policy coordination, and strategic direction, while SEPIE delivers programme management, funding mechanisms, and implementation support. For institutions involved in Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education initiatives, this example illustrates the importance of creating coherent links between policy frameworks, institutional governance, operational structures, and international cooperation activities.

2.3. Internationalization in Romanian Higher Education

2.3.1. National policy framework for internationalization

The internationalization of higher education has become an increasingly important strategic priority within the Romanian higher education system, particularly in the context of European integration, demographic pressures, and the growing need to strengthen institutional competitiveness at international level. Over the past decade, Romania has progressively developed a policy framework aimed at improving the global visibility, attractiveness, and international relevance of its universities.

A central policy initiative in this area is the programme "*Romania on the Horizon 2030: Increasing International Relevance through the Internationalization of Higher Education*", implemented under the Education and Employment Programme (PEO) 2021–2027. Managed by the Programme Management Authority within the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, this initiative aims to strengthen the quality, relevance,

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inclusiveness, and international competitiveness of Romanian higher education institutions across all development regions of the country.

The programme reflects a broader strategic alignment with European higher education priorities, including the objectives of the European Education Area, the Bologna Process, and Erasmus+ cooperation frameworks. In particular, it promotes institutional modernisation, international academic cooperation, increased mobility participation, digital transformation, and improved institutional governance capacities.

Recent reforms supported through EU Structural Funds and the 2021–2027 multiannual financial framework further reinforce these objectives by encouraging universities to integrate internationalization into institutional development strategies, quality assurance systems, research agendas, and employability-oriented educational reforms.

Within this policy environment, internationalization is no longer understood solely as participation in mobility programmes, but increasingly as a comprehensive institutional transformation process involving governance, curriculum development, digitalisation, research cooperation, international student recruitment, and global academic engagement.

2.3.2. The strategic role of UEFISCD

A key institutional actor supporting the internationalization of Romanian higher education is the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI). Over the last decade, UEFISCDI has played a central role in developing evidence-based policies, institutional capacity-building mechanisms, and strategic internationalization frameworks at national level.

UEFISCDI has coordinated and implemented numerous projects and policy initiatives aimed at strengthening the international dimension of Romanian higher education institutions. Its contributions include:

- conducting national analyses on the state of internationalization in Romanian universities;
- supporting the development of institutional internationalization strategies for 20 Romanian universities;
- developing the national “Study in Romania” platform;
- preparing strategic frameworks for national internationalization policy;
- designing proposals for institutional structures dedicated to promoting Romanian higher education internationally;

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- developing monitoring methodologies and performance indicators for internationalization;
- and producing policy briefs supporting evidence-based decision-making.

Through these initiatives, UEFISCDI has significantly contributed to the professionalisation of internationalization governance in Romanian universities and to the development of more strategic and data-driven approaches to international cooperation.

An important milestone in Romania's international promotion efforts was reached in 2021, when UEFISCDI, together with the Ministry of Education and the National Council of Rectors, launched the country's first professional international branding campaign for higher education. This initiative marked a transition toward more coordinated national visibility and international student attraction strategies.

Beyond policy development, UEFISCDI also functions as an important intermediary between European higher education priorities and institutional implementation, facilitating the alignment of Romanian universities with European frameworks related to quality assurance, research cooperation, digitalisation, and skills development.

2.3.3. International student mobility and inbound trends

Romania has experienced a steady increase in inbound international student mobility over recent years, reflecting the growing visibility and attractiveness of its higher education system within the European and global education landscape.

According to official statistics, the number of international students enrolled in Bachelor's programmes reached 32,092 during the 2023–2024 academic year, representing an increase of approximately 48% compared to the 2014–2015 academic year. In parallel, the proportion of foreign students enrolled in Romanian tertiary education increased from 5.4% in 2018 to 6.7% in 2023, approaching the OECD average of 7.4%.

Romania's higher education system currently comprises approximately 544,000 tertiary students distributed across 57 higher education institutions, including 49 public and 8 private universities.

Several factors contribute to the growing attractiveness of Romanian higher education for international students. These include relatively affordable tuition and living costs, internationally recognised programmes in strategic fields such as Medicine and Engineering, multilingual educational provision, and Romania's integration into the European Higher Education Area.

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At the same time, Erasmus+ participation has strengthened the international visibility and mobility capacities of Romanian universities, contributing to the expansion of institutional partnerships and cooperation networks across Europe and beyond.

2.3.4. Competitive advantages of Romanian Higher Education

Romanian higher education institutions possess several structural and strategic advantages that support their internationalization efforts and enhance their competitiveness within the European and global higher education environment.

According to analyses conducted by UEFISCDI, the main competitive strengths of the Romanian system include:

- *increasing institutional visibility in African, Asian, and neighbouring regional markets;*
- *full implementation of the Bologna three-cycle degree structure and ECTS framework;*
- *a favourable quality-to-cost ratio, particularly in fields such as Medicine, Dentistry, Engineering, and Agricultural Sciences;*
- *a growing number of programmes delivered in English, French, and German;*
- *operational quality assurance systems aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG);*
- *active participation in the Bologna Process and international academic organisations, including the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF);*
- *and the organisation of international summer schools, academic conferences, professional certification programmes, and scientific cooperation initiatives.*

These advantages contribute to Romania's positioning as an accessible and academically competitive destination for international students, particularly from neighbouring countries, developing regions, and francophone academic communities.

2.3.5. Government Scholarship Programme (Study in Romania)

An important component of Romania's internationalization strategy is the national scholarship programme administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for citizens from non-European Union countries. The programme represents one of the principal instruments through which Romania promotes academic cooperation, educational diplomacy, and international visibility within the global higher education landscape.

The scholarship scheme provides funded study opportunities across all cycles of

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higher education, including Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral programmes, covering a broad range of academic disciplines, with the exception of Medicine, Dental Medicine, and Pharmacy. Scholarships generally include tuition fee exemption, accommodation support, and a monthly financial stipend, thereby increasing accessibility for students originating from developing countries and strategic partner regions.

Applications are managed exclusively through the official "Study in Romania" digital platform, which serves as a centralised national gateway for international student recruitment, scholarship administration, and institutional promotion. Beyond its administrative role, the platform contributes significantly to enhancing the international visibility of Romanian universities by providing integrated information on study programmes, admission procedures, scholarship opportunities, and student life in Romania.

The programme also plays an important role in diversifying the international student population and strengthening Romania's academic presence in regions such as Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and neighbouring Eastern Partnership countries. Through this initiative, Romanian higher education institutions are able to expand their international networks, foster intercultural exchange, and develop long-term academic and professional connections with future graduates and institutional partners abroad.

Beyond its educational and recruitment dimensions, the scholarship programme functions as a strategic soft-power instrument, supporting Romania's foreign policy objectives, cultural diplomacy, and international cooperation agenda. By investing in the education of international students, Romania strengthens bilateral relations, promotes intercultural dialogue, and enhances its international profile as an accessible and competitive higher education destination within the European Higher Education Area.

2.3.6. Institutional capacity challenges

Despite positive trends, significant institutional weaknesses remain: Despite important progress in internationalization, Romanian higher education institutions continue to face several structural and institutional challenges that limit the full development of sustainable internationalization strategies.

One of the most significant limitations identified in UEFISCDI analyses concerns insufficient institutional capacity in international marketing and communication. Earlier institutional assessments revealed that nearly half of Romanian universities lacked dedicated international communication or recruitment strategies, limiting their ability to

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compete effectively in the global education market. Additional challenges include:

- *declining domestic student populations caused by demographic trends and migration;*
- *increasing international competition from universities across Europe and beyond;*
- *limited private investment in research and innovation;*
- *uneven institutional capacities across universities;*
- *and administrative and bureaucratic constraints affecting international cooperation processes.*

Furthermore, many internationalization structures remain heavily dependent on external project-based funding, particularly Erasmus+, raising concerns regarding long-term sustainability and institutional resilience.

These challenges demonstrate the importance of strengthening governance capacities, professionalising international relations offices, investing in institutional digitalisation, and developing long-term strategic internationalization models.

2.3.7. Funding and structural support mechanisms (2021-2027)

Romania benefits from substantial European funding opportunities supporting higher education modernisation and internationalization under the 2021–2027 programming period. Approximately EUR 31 billion in EU Structural Funds are available through instruments including: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the Cohesion Fund, and the Just Transition Fund.

Within this framework, several measures directly support higher education internationalization, including:

- ✓ university digitalisation initiatives financed under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP);
- ✓ the development of RUNIDAS, the Single National Integrated Register for Diplomas and Study Documents;
- ✓ projects focused on equity, employability, governance reform, and internationalization policy development;
- ✓ and competitive funding schemes supporting institutional internationalization projects through the Institutional Development Fund (IDF/CNFIS).

These investments contribute to strengthening institutional infrastructure, improving governance systems, and enhancing universities' capacity to participate in European

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and international cooperation frameworks.

2.3.8. Strategic priorities and institutional transfer to Moldova

Based on national policy developments and institutional analyses, several strategic priority areas emerge for the future development of internationalization in Romanian higher education. These include:

- strengthening institutional internationalization governance and professionalising International Relations Offices;
- expanding multilingual and internationally oriented study programmes;
- developing joint degrees and micro-credentials aligned with Erasmus+ priorities;
- improving alignment with EHEA and Bologna Process mobility frameworks;
- enhancing digital recruitment tools and international student services;
- strengthening international research cooperation and researcher mobility;
- developing institutional monitoring systems and internationalization KPIs;
- and reinforcing diaspora engagement and educational diplomacy mechanisms.

Together, these priorities reflect a transition toward more strategic, evidence-based, and institutionally integrated models of internationalization.

For Moldovan higher education institutions, the Romanian experience offers particularly relevant and transferable lessons due to the regional, linguistic, institutional, and historical proximity between the two systems.

Unlike models derived from larger Western European systems operating within significantly different funding and governance environments, Romania's internationalization trajectory reflects challenges and opportunities similar to those currently faced by Moldovan HEIs. These include Bologna Process alignment, institutional modernisation, demographic decline, limited administrative capacities, and strong dependence on European project funding.

Several key lessons emerging from Romanian practice are particularly relevant for Moldovan institutions participating in the IRO4ALL project.

- **Build an evidence base before setting targets:** Romania's most durable internationalization gains followed UEFISCDI's investment in systematic institutional self-assessment: using a standardised diagnostic instrument aligned with the IAU framework and applied across 47 public HEIs. Moldovan IROs should resist the temptation to set mobility targets before conducting a comparable baseline

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analysis. The IRO4ALL needs assessment (T1.2) provides a starting point; institutions are encouraged to extend this into a full annual internationalization monitoring cycle, tracking inputs, outputs, and outcomes across all faculties.

- **Use competitive funding to drive institutional behaviour:** Romania's Institutional Development Fund (IDF/CNFIS) model demonstrates that annual competitive calls, where universities submit project proposals for internationalization funding and are judged on quality and impact, generate more strategic and sustained institutional engagement than one-off grants. Moldovan HEIs should advocate for a similar incentive-based funding mechanism within the national higher education financing framework, and in the meantime use EU project funding (including the IRO4ALL budget) as a catalyst for activities that demonstrate institutional value and can be sustained after project closure
- **Professionalise the IRO as a strategic unit, not an administrative desk:** one of the clearest findings from the UEFISCDI SWOT analysis was that half of Romanian universities lacked a marketing or communication strategy for internationalization, reflecting IROs that were reactive rather than strategic. Such an IRO manages Erasmus+ agreements proactively, runs structured selection cycles, supports academic staff in joint project development, and contributes to institutional strategic planning. Moldovan IROs should define their own scope of functions in writing, secure dedicated staffing, and connect IRO performance to institutional KPIs.
- **Develop a sector-specific value proposition for international recruitment:** Romania's strongest inbound recruitment results are in Medicine, Dentistry, and Engineering, fields with clear international demand and a coherent institutional offer. For Moldovan agrarian and life sciences universities, the equivalent opportunity lies in agriculture, food safety, viticulture, environmental engineering, and veterinary medicine, disciplines with growing global relevance and limited competition from large Western European institutions. Moldovan HEIs should develop precise, evidence-based value propositions for these fields, supported by programme pages in English, targeted digital campaigns in priority markets (particularly from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the MENA region), and scholarship pathways for non-EU students.

For Moldovan universities, similar opportunities exist in areas including agriculture, veterinary medicine, food safety, environmental sciences, and engineering. Developing

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targeted international recruitment strategies, multilingual programme offers, and strategic regional partnerships could significantly strengthen institutional visibility and international competitiveness.

Overall, the Romanian experience demonstrates that sustainable internationalization depends not only on participation in mobility programmes, but also on institutional governance capacity, strategic planning, professionalised internationalization structures, evidence-based management, and long-term investment in institutional transformation.

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2.4. Internationalization in Czech Higher Education

The internationalization of higher education is a fundamental driver of academic quality, institutional relevance, and global competitiveness. In the Czech Republic, the approach to internationalization has evolved from facilitating ad hoc student mobility programs to implementing a structurally embedded, comprehensive national framework. For Moldovan Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) seeking deeper integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through the IRO4ALL project, the Czech model offers a robust benchmark for policy design, strategic management, and practical implementation at the institutional level.

2.4.1. Conceptual framework and vision

The primary conceptual document guiding internationalization in the Czech Republic is the *Strategy for the Internationalization of Higher Education for the period from 2021* (also referred to as the Internationalization Strategy). This strategy serves as a

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complementary pillar to the overarching *Strategic Plan of the Ministry for Higher Education for the period from 2021* (SZ2021+). Both documents align with the wider educational goals of the national *Strategy for Education Policy of the Czech Republic 2030+* and European policies, building firmly on the principles of the Bologna Process and the EHEA.

The foundation of the Czech Internationalization Strategy is encapsulated in its central vision, which highlights a significant paradigm shift. It states that due to the international dimension and the quality of education, research, and the third role, Czech universities are preparing their graduates for a leading role in the global knowledge society, thereby contributing to the prosperity and sustainable development of communities at home and abroad. Internationalization is therefore no longer viewed merely as the act of sending students abroad; it is an intrinsic element of teaching, research, and societal engagement.

2.4.2. The six priority areas of the national strategy

The Czech Internationalization Strategy is structured around six priority objectives, which provide a comprehensive framework for universities to formulate their individual institutional strategies.

1. **Development of global competences of students and staff:** The strategy emphasises that all students and academic staff should acquire global, intercultural, and language competences.
    - *Ambitious quantitative targets have been set: at least 20% of all full-time Bachelor's and Master's degree graduates must complete a study period or internship abroad of at least 14 days.*
    - *Furthermore, 80% of full-time doctoral students are expected to complete a study period or internship abroad of at least 30 days.*
    - *Inclusion is a vital principle within this pillar. The system is designed to ensure that students or academics who cannot travel due to special needs or socio-economic disadvantages are still involved in acquiring global competencies.*
    - *To adapt to modern demands, new formats such as blended mobility have been introduced, allowing students to combine a shorter physical stay abroad of approximately two weeks with digital collaboration before and after the placement.*

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2. **Internationalization of Study Programmes:** To benefit non-mobile students, a concept known as "Internationalization at Home", universities are tasked with providing study programmes with substantial international elements.
   - *This includes incorporating coursework taught in foreign languages and integrating international or combined placements directly into standard study plans.*
   - *The Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MŠMT) financially supports activities that develop the language, intercultural, and pedagogical competences of academic staff to prepare and teach these modernised programmes.*
3. **Simplification of the Recognition of Foreign Education:** A major administrative bottleneck in global education is the recognition of prior learning. The Czech strategy emphasises simplifying this process by rigorously applying the qualitative standards outlined in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE).
   - Key focal points include the automatic recognition of credits gained abroad and the comprehensive digitalisation of mobility administration.
4. **Creating an International Environment and Promotion Abroad:** Attracting international talent requires a holistically internationalised campus. The strategy mandates removing administrative and language barriers for incoming foreign academics and students to ensure their full integration.
   - *On a national level, promotional efforts are collaboratively coordinated with the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research (DZS), notably through the "Study in the Czech Republic" initiative, which aims to position the country as a premium destination for higher education.*
5. **Strengthening the Strategic Management of Internationalization:** The strategy outlines that successful internationalization requires strong institutional leadership and cannot be relegated solely to administrative units.
   - *HEIs are required to formulate their own localised Strategic Plans and annual Implementation Plans, reflecting the national priorities.*
   - *To support these efforts, the MŠMT provides methodological guidance and financial backing, utilising resources such as the Programme of Support for the Strategic Management of Public Higher Education Institutions and the Jan Amos Comenius Operational Programme.*

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6. **Quality Assurance and the National Accreditation Bureau:** This pillar connects internationalization directly with national quality assurance mechanisms.
   - *The National Accreditation Bureau, which was transformed into an independent legal entity under public law known as the National Accreditation Bureau for Tertiary Education on July 1, 2025, plays a pivotal role in this alignment.*
   - *It evaluates how HEIs incorporate international standards into their internal quality assurance, ensuring that global cooperation contributes directly to educational excellence.*

2.4.3. Institutional implementation and ongoing reforms

At the institutional level, Czech HEIs operationalise these national directives through annual implementation plans that mirror the structure of the overarching SZ2021+ framework. This creates a predictable schedule of activities and ensures continuous evolution.

The structural necessity of highly capable administrative support was starkly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden shift to distance learning and virtual mobility revealed that adapting to new educational conditions is nearly impossible without expert and technical support from specialised organisational units. The SZ2021+ notes that if university management fails to provide this support, individual staff members are left to face uncertainty and increased workloads while seeking solutions on their own.

Consequently, the role of International Relations Offices (IROs) in Czech HEIs has been significantly elevated. IROs are no longer merely clerical units processing paperwork; they have evolved into strategic hubs. They manage complex digitalisation efforts (such as the *Erasmus Without Paper* initiative), support the integration of foreign students, and advise academic leadership on building strategic international partnerships.

To remain competitive, the Czech legislative framework is continuously updated. Recent amendments have focused on improving conditions for early-stage researchers, a key demographic for internationalization. For example, recent reforms have introduced the concept of a guaranteed "doctoral student income," ensuring that the minimum monthly income for PhD students is not less than the minimum monthly salary multiplied by a coefficient of 1.2. Furthermore, regulations have been clarified regarding the granting of Czech authorisation to foreign higher education institutions, enabling Czech legal entities to provide foreign higher education study programmes in cooperation with international partners.

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2.4.4. *Translating Czech Best Practices to Moldovan HEIs*

For Moldovan universities the Czech Internationalization Strategy serves as an exceptionally relevant case study for institutional modernisation and EHEA integration. Several actionable lessons can be directly translated into the policies and structures currently being developed in Moldova:

1. *Adopt a Comprehensive, Top-Down Vision:* Moldovan HEIs should transition from viewing internationalization as an isolated "student exchange" metric to embedding it fully into research, curriculum design, and the university's third role. Internationalization must be actively championed by top university management, not just the IRO.
2. *Prioritise Inclusion and Blended Formats:* Following the Czech emphasis on inclusive education, Moldovan IROs should heavily promote blended and virtual mobilities. These formats provide crucial international experiences to students and staff who may lack the financial means or physical ability to participate in traditional, long-term exchanges.
3. *Institutionalise Strategic Management:* Successful internationalization requires dedicated, predictable funding lines and continuous evaluation. Moldovan HEIs should adopt the practice of drafting clear, multi-year institutional internationalization strategies accompanied by annual implementation action plans.
4. *Empower and Professionalise the IRO:* As demonstrated by the Czech response to recent global challenges, individual academics cannot manage the administrative complexities of modern internationalization alone. Moldovan institutions must invest in the capacity building of their IRO staff, empowering them to act as strategic advisors, digitalisation experts, and intercultural trainers for the broader academic community.
5. *Digitalise Administrative Processes:* To align with European standards and simplify the recognition of credits, Moldovan institutions must prioritise the digitalisation of their international relations administration. Reducing bureaucratic friction for both mobile students and visiting academics is a fundamental prerequisite for building a truly international campus environment.

By adapting these strategic frameworks and investing in robust administrative capacities, Moldovan higher education institutions can effectively foster inclusive and

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sustainable internationalization, ultimately securing their successful integration into the broader European educational landscape.

2.5. Key definitions: inclusion, sustainability, global engagement

In the context of our project, **inclusion** can be understood as the effort to ensure that internationalization processes are accessible and beneficial to all groups within the institution. For Moldovan HEIs, this means actively addressing barriers that may prevent certain students or staff from taking part in international activities, whether those barriers are economic, geographic, or institutional. It involves putting in place practical measures such as targeted financial support, flexible mobility formats, or improved digital access to make participation more equitable. At the same time, inclusion also requires institutions to reflect these principles in their internal policies and governance, so that diversity and equal opportunities become part of how internationalization is planned and implemented.

Sustainability refers to the extent to which the results achieved during the project continue to exist and develop once external funding has ended. In the case of Moldovan HEIs, it implies that initiatives linked to internationalization, such as new courses, mobility schemes, or cooperation frameworks are not limited to the duration of the project but are fully integrated into the institution's regular activities. This involves securing long-term financial support, building staff capacity, and establishing stable administrative procedures. Sustainability also has a broader dimension, including the promotion of efficient and resilient practices, for example through the use of digital tools or blended mobility formats, which can help maintain international cooperation over time.

Global engagement refers to the way in which Moldovan HEIs position themselves and participate in the international academic community. In the context of our project, this goes beyond simply increasing mobility numbers and involves building meaningful and balanced partnerships with institutions abroad. It includes collaboration in teaching, research, and innovation, as well as the development of curricula that reflect international perspectives. Strengthening global engagement also means improving the visibility of Moldovan institutions and their capacity to act as reliable partners in international projects. Ultimately, it is about ensuring that internationalization contributes both to the institutions' development and to their role in addressing wider global challenges. Several strategies to increase Global Engagement will be addressed later in chapter 5.

2.6. Case Study: Contribution of the ENHANCE Alliance to the

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Internationalization of Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV)

➢ **Context and Objective.** Within the framework of institutional internationalization, the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV) joined the European Universities Alliance ENHANCE with the objective of strengthening its participation in deep, structured European cooperation. The subsequent expansion of the alliance under ENHANCE+, increasing the number of partner institutions to ten, further aimed to consolidate long-term collaboration mechanisms and enhance the impact of internationalization actions. This case illustrates how participation in a European University Alliance can support the transition from traditional, mobility-based internationalization towards a more strategic, integrated, and sustainable model.

➢ **Implementation and Key Actions.** UPV's engagement in ENHANCE has translated into a steady development of joint academic initiatives, from collaborative courses to challenge-based learning activities, alongside a gradual alignment of curricula with partner institutions. One practical enabler of these initiatives has been the ENHANCE Innovative Learning Campus (ILC) catalogue (ilc.enhanceuniversity.eu), which brings together many of the learning opportunities offered across the alliance in a single, accessible space. In practice, this has made it much easier for students and staff to identify and take part in international learning experiences, without necessarily depending on traditional long-term mobility.

At the same time, the alliance has encouraged a more flexible approach to mobility, combining physical exchanges with blended and short-term formats. This has opened participation to a broader and more diverse group of students and staff. With the transition to ENHANCE+, these efforts have gained scale, supported by stronger coordination mechanisms and increased collaboration in areas such as digital learning, micro-credentials, and joint programme development.

➢ **Results and Impact.** Participation in ENHANCE and ENHANCE+ has had a visible impact on UPV's internationalization strategy. Mobility has become more diverse and accessible, and international and intercultural dimensions are now more naturally embedded in teaching and learning processes. At the same time, the university has strengthened its capacity to operate in complex international partnerships. Beyond this, the alliance has given UPV access to a broader academic and innovation ecosystem, reinforcing its position within the European Higher Education landscape. It has also helped align institutional activities with wider European priorities, particularly in areas such as skills

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development, digitalisation, and interdisciplinary learning.

- **Lessons Learned.** UPV's experience highlights a number of important points. First, participation in a European University Alliance only works when there is clear institutional commitment and a genuine alignment with broader strategic goals. Second, moving from bilateral cooperation to a multilateral alliance inevitably brings more complexity, which needs to be properly supported in terms of governance and resources. Third, internationalization has to be embedded in core academic work if it is to have lasting impact. Finally, offering more flexible and varied mobility formats is essential if participation is to become more inclusive.

- **Transferability and Recommendations.** This experience offers useful insights for MD HEIs. While the full European University Alliance model may not be directly transferable, many of its underlying principles are. Building long-term partnerships, integrating international perspectives into curricula, and using flexible, digitally supported learning opportunities can already make a significant difference. What matters most is approaching internationalization in a structured and strategic way, while remaining realistic about local constraints and opportunities.

- **Conclusions.** The case of UPV within ENHANCE and ENHANCE+ shows how European University Alliances can act as catalysts for institutional change. By embedding internationalization in everyday academic practice and linking it to broader educational and societal objectives, universities can move towards more coherent and sustainable approaches. For institutions looking to go beyond isolated initiatives, this experience offers a concrete and workable point of reference.

3. STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION

3.1. Steps for developing institutional internationalization strategy

Internationalization in higher education does not happen by chance. It requires a deliberate, institution-wide effort that connects global ambitions with local realities. A well-designed strategy provides direction, helps prioritize resources, and ensures that international activities are not isolated initiatives but part of a coherent institutional project. In practice, this means aligning internationalization with the university's mission, engaging the academic community, and building structures that can sustain long-term impact.

The following steps offer a practical pathway for higher education institutions aiming to design or refine their internationalization strategy.

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Step 1: Establish Institutional Commitment and Leadership

The process begins with a clear institutional mandate. Senior leadership must signal that internationalization is a priority, not an optional add-on. This involves defining why internationalization matters for the institution: whether it is to improve academic quality, enhance global visibility, foster intercultural competence, or strengthen partnerships. At this stage, it is also important to identify who will lead the process and how different units (academic, administrative, and support services) will be involved.

Step 2: Conduct a Situational Analysis

Before defining future goals, the institution needs a realistic understanding of where it stands. This typically involves mapping existing international activities, mobility programmes, partnerships, international research projects, curriculum initiatives, as well as identifying strengths and gaps. External factors should also be considered, such as national policies, demographic trends, and global opportunities. The objective is to build a shared evidence base that will support informed decision-making.

Step 3: Define Vision and Strategic Objectives

Based on the analysis, the institution can articulate a clear vision for internationalization. This vision should be ambitious but realistic, reflecting both institutional identity and external opportunities. From this vision, a set of strategic objectives is derived. These objectives should cover key dimensions such as education (e.g. internationalised curricula), research (e.g. global partnerships), and service to society (e.g. regional engagement with global relevance). At this stage, clarity is more important than complexity: objectives should be understandable and meaningful for the academic community.

Step 4: Set Priorities and Focus Areas

Not all internationalization activities can be pursued at once. Institutions need to make choices about where to concentrate efforts. This may involve prioritising certain regions, strengthening specific partnerships, or focusing on selected disciplines. Prioritisation helps avoid fragmentation and ensures that resources are used strategically. Importantly, these choices should be justified and transparent, so that stakeholders understand the rationale behind them.

Step 5: Develop an Implementation Plan

Once priorities are defined, the strategy needs to be translated into concrete actions. This includes defining initiatives, timelines, responsibilities, and required resources. Successful implementation plans are realistic and clearly structured, but also flexible enough

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to adapt to changing circumstances. At this stage, it is essential to ensure coordination across different units, as internationalization often cuts across traditional organisational boundaries.

Step 6: Define KPIs and Monitoring Mechanisms

To ensure progress, institutions must establish how success will be measured. This involves defining key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned with the strategic objectives such as mobility numbers, joint programmes, international research outputs, or levels of student engagement. However, measurement should go beyond numbers: qualitative aspects, such as the quality of partnerships or learning outcomes, are equally important. A regular monitoring process allows institutions to track progress, identify challenges, and adjust actions when needed.

Step 7: Ensure Communication, Engagement, and Sustainability

A strategy only works if it is understood and supported by the academic community. Continuous communication is therefore essential, both to explain the strategy and to show its results. Engaging staff and students helps create a sense of ownership and encourages participation. At the same time, institutions should think about sustainability: embedding internationalization into policies, procedures, and curricula so that it becomes part of everyday practice rather than a temporary initiative.

In essence, strategic planning for internationalization is not just a technical exercise but a collective process. It requires dialogue, reflection, and a shared commitment to positioning the institution within a global academic landscape. When done well, it transforms internationalization from a set of disconnected activities into a coherent and purposeful institutional journey.

3.2. Goal setting, KPIs, monitoring

Once the strategy has been outlined, the next step is really about giving it life in a way that people can actually work with. Setting goals at this stage is less about drafting perfectly worded statements and more about making the strategy feel tangible. It means identifying a few clear directions that help guide everyday choices: what to prioritise, where to invest time, and what really matters in practice. When this is done well, people across the institution can see how their own work connects to the bigger picture, and the strategy starts to feel less like a document and more like a shared project.

KPIs come in naturally at this point, but they don't need to feel rigid or overly

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technical. At their best, they simply make progress easier to see. They help answer straightforward questions: Are we moving in the right direction? Are some areas advancing faster than others? What seems to be working, and what isn't? Used in this way, indicators stop being just numbers to report and become a starting point for conversations. They can prompt useful discussions between teams, highlight differences across faculties, and bring attention to issues that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Monitoring, in turn, is what keeps everything grounded over time. It creates regular moments to pause, take stock, and adjust if needed. Rather than waiting until the end of a planning cycle, institutions benefit from checking in along the way looking at what has changed, listening to feedback, and being honest about where things are falling short. These moments don't have to be overly formal; what matters is creating a habit of reflection that helps the strategy stay relevant as circumstances evolve.

In the end, what really makes a difference is how naturally all of this fits into the institution's way of working. When goals are part of regular discussions, when indicators are used to support decisions, and when monitoring becomes a normal part of reviewing progress, the whole process starts to feel less like an added layer and more like common sense. That's usually the point where the strategy begins to work as intended: quietly shaping decisions, staying flexible, and keeping internationalization moving forward in a steady, consistent way.

3.3. Prioritizing actions based on T1.2 findings

During the Training Needs Assessment (T1.2) conducted among the Moldovan partner HEIs, it became clear that internationalization is no longer a new or unfamiliar domain for these institutions. Over the years, they have built a solid base of experience, particularly through their involvement in Erasmus+ projects, and have formally recognised internationalization as a strategic priority. What emerges now is a different kind of challenge: not how to start, but how to move forward in a more structured, confident, and sustainable way.

A recurring issue is the gap between strategic intention and everyday practice. While institutional priorities are often clearly defined, their implementation tends to rely heavily on small International Relations Offices, where responsibilities are concentrated and workloads are high. This model has its limits. For internationalization to develop further, it needs to be shared more broadly within the institution. Strengthening internal

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coordination, clarifying responsibilities, and involving faculties more directly can make a noticeable difference. When academic staff are more engaged, internationalization stops being a specialised function and starts becoming part of how the university operates as a whole.

At the same time, there is a clear need to deepen professional expertise in areas that have become increasingly important. Managing mobility programmes is no longer enough on its own. Institutions are expected to design competitive projects, handle complex funding schemes, and comply with evolving European requirements. These are not skills that can be acquired overnight. They are built gradually, through practice and exposure. Creating opportunities for staff to learn from experience, collaborate with peers, and take on more demanding roles over time can help close this gap in a realistic way.

Another important aspect concerns how institutions make decisions and assess their progress. The assessment suggests that international activities are often driven by opportunity rather than by a systematic use of information. Introducing a more structured approach to data, even in a simple and pragmatic way can help bring greater clarity. Tracking mobility patterns, reviewing partnerships, or analysing project participation can provide useful insights if this information is regularly discussed and used. The goal is not to make processes more complex, but to make decisions more informed.

This naturally connects to the need for regular reflection. In a context where teams are often under pressure, it is easy to focus on delivering activities without taking the time to step back. Creating space, formal or informal, to review progress, gather feedback, and adjust priorities can help keep efforts aligned with institutional goals. These moments of reflection are often where small but important improvements emerge.

Finally, the issue of sustainability runs throughout all these observations. Much of the progress achieved so far has been made possible through external funding, particularly Erasmus+. While this has been highly beneficial, it also highlights a certain level of dependency. Strengthening internationalization in the long term means embedding it more firmly within institutional structures, ensuring that it is reflected in core activities such as teaching and research, and gradually building a more balanced model of support.

Taken together, these elements suggest that the next phase of internationalization for Moldovan HEIs is less about expansion and more about consolidation. By strengthening internal organisation, investing in people, and developing a more reflective approach to planning and decision-making, institutions can build on what they have already achieved

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and move towards a more stable and mature internationalization model.

4. MOBILITY & COLLABORATION

4.1. Student and staff mobility (KA1, Erasmus+ guidelines)

The Erasmus+ Programme, under its Key Action 1 (KA1), represents one of the most impactful instruments for higher education internationalization in Europe and beyond. For universities aspiring to integrate more deeply into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a well-structured, administratively sound, and student-centered approach to KA1 mobilities is not merely beneficial; it is essential. In order to administrate and develop the Erasmus+ KA1 mobility programme, there are a lot of things to be taken into consideration: from the structure and responsibilities of the Erasmus Office, the conduct of admission sessions for students and academic staff, the organization of mobilities (student or staff), compliance with internal and external regulations, and the use of the key digital tools such as the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) Dashboard and the Beneficiary Platform that is the main instrument used to administrate the mobilities of the participants.

Under the 2021–2027 Erasmus+ programme, KA1 supports the mobility of students (for studies or traineeships), academic and administrative staff (for teaching and training). Grants cover individual support, travel costs, and where applicable, top-up allowances for participants with fewer opportunities. Participating institutions must hold a valid Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE).

The Erasmus Office (which is usually under the direct supervision of the International Relations Office or IRO) is the administrative engine that oversees all KA1 mobility activities. A clearly defined structure, with distinct roles and responsibilities, is a prerequisite for efficient project management and regulatory compliance. Also, there is a need for a clear guidebook which has rules, administrative documents, and guidelines for both the participants (students / staff) and the Erasmus officers.

4.1.1. Structure and responsibilities of the Erasmus+ Office

Recommended Organizational Structure

Based on best practices at USAMVB Bucharest and peer European institutions, a functional Erasmus Office should comprise at minimum the following roles:

Position	Core Responsibilities	Key Tools / Systems
Erasmus Institutional Coordinator	Overall project oversight, ECHE compliance, reporting	EWP Dashboard for signing Inter-institutional Agreements

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	to the National Agency, signing IIAs, performing dissemination activities of the mobilities, and participating in events such as Erasmus Open Doors, etc.	Beneficiary Module - a key administrative part in which the Erasmus Coordinator is managing the KA131 and KA171 projects (mobilities, budget, deadlines, reports, etc.), signs the Training Agreements / Teaching Agreements of the incoming / outgoing staff
Erasmus Administrative Officer	Beneficiary Module entries, travel requests, grant calculations, participant documentation	Beneficiary Module, EWP Dashboard, Excel grant calculators
Incoming Student Mobility Officer	Admission sessions, Learning Agreements, student orientation events	communications with the incoming students and partner universities
Outgoing Student Mobility Officer	Admission sessions, Learning Agreements, OLS language tests, student orientation events	EWP Dashboard, OLS, communications with the outgoing students and partner universities
Staff Mobility Officer	Staff admission calls, Mobility Agreements, teaching/training scheduling, certificate issuance	EWP Dashboard, institutional calendar
IIA & Partnerships Officer	Negotiating and signing Inter-Institutional Agreements, monitoring partner compliance, EWP integration	EWP Dashboard, email, legal templates
Erasmus+ Faculty Coordinators	Developing Learning Agreements / Online Learning Agreements with the students. Signing of the LA / OLA. Mentoring the outgoing students of the faculty.	EWP Dashboard

4.1.2. Administrative workflows

Each mobility cycle generates a defined sequence of administrative tasks. Staff that participate in the outgoing / incoming mobilities (students or staff) must be trained, and responsibilities must be documented in internal operating procedures (SOPs). The principal workflows are:

- Insertion of approved mobilities into the Beneficiary Module
- Generation and processing of travel grant requests and financial annexes
- Creation, circulation, and archiving of Learning Agreements (for students) and Mobility Agreements (for staff)
- Uploading and verification of supporting documentation (transcripts, certificates,

bank details, travel proof, etc.)

- Coordination with the Finance Department for grant disbursements and financial reconciliation
- Post-mobility reporting: collection of participant reports, entry of completion data in Beneficiary Module
- Managing the online admission platform for outgoing / incoming students
- Monitoring the mobilities with partner organizations / universities.

4.1.3. Beneficiary Module (BM) and best practice

The Beneficiary Module (BM) is the European Commission's online platform for managing all aspects of an Erasmus+ grant. The correct and timely use of the BM is a contractual obligation. Key guidelines include:

1. Registering the project immediately upon receipt of the Grant Agreement and verifying all pre-populated data (project dates, budget, contact persons).
2. Creating a mobility entry for each participant before mobility begins. Entries must include participant category, sending/receiving institution Erasmus codes, planned mobility dates, grant amounts, and activity type.
3. Uploading all mandatory documents per participant: signed Learning/Mobility Agreement, OLS language test confirmation (where applicable), and signed grant agreement.
4. Updating mobility records promptly when dates change (e.g., extension requests, early returns), using the amendment procedure in the BM.
5. Closing each mobility record after the participant returns by entering actual dates, uploading the transcript/certificate, and confirming the participant's report completion.
6. Preparing and submitting Interim and Final Reports within the deadlines stipulated in the Grant Agreement.

The Erasmus Office at USAMVB maintains a dedicated Excel tracking register, updated weekly, that mirrors all BM entries. This internal shadow register allows the team to catch discrepancies, prepare for NA monitoring visits, and provide accurate data to the Finance Office at any point during the project lifecycle.

4.2. Inter-Institutional Agreements (IIAs) and the Erasmus Without Paper

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(EWP) Dashboard

Inter-Institutional Agreements (IIAs) constitute the legal and operational foundation of Erasmus+ cooperation between partner higher education institutions. These bilateral agreements define the framework for student and staff mobility, including subject areas, study levels, mobility volumes, language requirements, and the duration of cooperation. Since 2023, all IIAs must be concluded in digital format through the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) Network, marking a shift towards fully paperless, standardised, and interoperable mobility management across Europe.

Before initiating a formal agreement within the system, partner institutions are encouraged to conduct preliminary discussions via email or virtual meetings. These exchanges typically clarify key parameters such as mobility flows, subject areas, duration of cooperation, and institutional expectations, ensuring that the subsequent digital negotiation process is efficient and aligned.

The Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) Dashboard serves as the central digital platform for the creation, negotiation, approval, and management of IIAs. It replaces traditional paper-based procedures and ensures that all agreement data is structured, machine-readable, and synchronised across institutional systems. Through the dashboard, institutions can initiate new agreements, collaborate in real time with partners, track revisions, and store both active and expired IIAs in a centralised repository.

To ensure effective use of the system, institutions must follow a structured operational procedure. Access to the EWP Dashboard is provided through the institution's EWP node, which must be technically configured and maintained by the IT services. Users must authenticate with institutional credentials and hold appropriate roles, such as IIA Editor or IIA Approver, depending on their responsibilities. When initiating a new agreement, the Erasmus coordinator must input the partner institution's Erasmus Code, define the academic years covered, select subject areas using ISCED classification, specify study cycles (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate), and indicate mobility quotas, duration, and language requirements.

Once drafted, the agreement is sent electronically to the partner institution for review. The receiving partner is automatically notified and may accept the draft or propose amendments. All modifications are managed through the platform's built-in version control and commenting functions, ensuring full transparency of the negotiation process. After final agreement is reached, the authorised institutional representatives—typically the

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Institutional Erasmus Coordinator or Rector—digitally sign the document. The signed IIA becomes legally valid and is automatically stored within the EWP system, while institutions are advised to download and archive a PDF copy for internal record-keeping.

Effective management of IIAs extends beyond their initial signing. Institutions are expected to maintain an updated internal register of all agreements, including expiry dates, partner contacts, mobility quotas, and thematic fields of cooperation. Renewal processes should be initiated at least six months before the expiration of existing agreements to ensure continuity of mobility flows. Annual monitoring of mobility performance against agreed quotas is also recommended, allowing institutions to adjust future agreements based on actual demand and strategic priorities. Furthermore, institutions must ensure that all active IIAs correspond exclusively to partner universities holding a valid Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE).

In conclusion, the transition to the Erasmus Without Paper system represents a significant step towards the digitalisation and standardisation of Erasmus+ cooperation. Proper implementation of IIAs through the EWP Dashboard enhances administrative efficiency, strengthens institutional transparency, and supports more strategic and data-driven international partnerships within the European Higher Education Area.

4.3. Organisation of outgoing student mobility: admission, selection and academic preparation

A transparent, well-publicised, and rigorously administered admission session is the cornerstone of equitable Erasmus+ student mobility. The following guidelines reflect both Erasmus+ Programme Guide requirements and institutional best practices. An international platform is a nice-to-have tool in order for the students and staff to see exactly what calls exist and so thus, the application process can go smoother.

Admission sessions should be organised at least twice per academic year: once for outgoing mobilities beginning in the spring/summer semester (deadline: typically October/November) and once for mobilities beginning in the autumn semester (deadline: typically March/April). Announcements should be published via:

- The institution's official website and student portal
- Social media channels (Facebook, Instagram) targeting students
- Faculty bulletin boards and direct communication through Faculty Deans' offices

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- Student associations and Erasmus Student Networks (ESN)

Institutions should define clear eligibility criteria, in line with Erasmus+ Programme rules and any additional criteria permitted by institutional policy. Standard criteria include:

Criterion	Standard Requirement
Enrolment Status	Active full-time or part-time student at the sending institution
Academic Level	Bachelor (min. 1 completed year), Master, or Doctoral
Academic Performance	Defined by each faculty
Language Proficiency	Self-declaration or OLS test; minimum B1 in language of instruction at host
Erasmus+ History	Max. 12 months per cycle (Bachelor/Master/Doctorate) across all Erasmus+ activities

Selection must be merit-based, transparent, and free from discrimination. A recommended selection procedure:

- ***Application submission***: students submit applications via an online platform or standardised paper form, attaching academic transcripts, language declaration, and motivation letter.
- ***Eligibility screening***: the Erasmus Office verifies all applicants against the eligibility criteria within 5 working days.
- ***Scoring***: a Selection Committee (comprising Erasmus Coordinator, Faculty Academic Coordinator, and a student representative) scores eligible applications on the selection criteria announced in the selection process info pack.
- ***Ranking and selection***: candidates are ranked by score. The top candidates up to the IIA quota for the relevant partner/field are provisionally selected. A waiting list of 3-5 candidates is maintained.
- ***Notification***: all applicants are notified of the outcome in writing within 3 working days of the application deadline. Rejected applicants receive brief reasons and information on appeal procedures.
- ***Nomination***: selected students are officially nominated to the host institution via the EWP Dashboard or email, as required by the partner.

Each selected student must prepare a Learning Agreement (LA) before departure. The LA lists the courses to be taken at the host institution and their ECTS equivalents.

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Guidelines:

- Use the Erasmus+ official LA template or the digital LA available via the EWP Dashboard.
- The LA must be signed by the student, the sending institution's Academic Coordinator, and the receiving institution's coordinator before mobility begins
- Changes to the LA after arrival are permitted (Changes to the Learning Agreement Table B) but must be approved within 5 weeks of arrival
- The Erasmus Office should verify that the host courses are genuinely equivalent to home courses and that full recognition of ECTS upon return is guaranteed in writing

4.4. Admission sessions for academic and administrative staff

Staff mobility under Erasmus+ KA1 includes two main activity types: Staff Mobility for Teaching (STA), in which academic staff deliver lectures or teaching activities at a partner institution, and Staff Mobility for Training (STT), which enables both academic and administrative staff to participate in structured professional development activities at a partner institution or relevant organisation. Both formats contribute to institutional capacity building, skills development, and the strengthening of international cooperation networks.

The organisation of staff mobility begins with the publication of a transparent and well-structured call for applications. Open calls should be issued at the beginning of each academic semester and must clearly specify the available partner institutions, eligible fields or disciplines, mobility duration limits, grant rates, eligibility criteria, required application documents, and selection procedures. To ensure broad accessibility, calls should be disseminated through multiple communication channels, including institutional email systems, faculty meetings and departmental newsletters, and the university's official Erasmus+ webpage.

Eligibility for staff mobility is generally extended to all employees holding a valid employment contract with the institution, including both academic and administrative staff. Mobility duration is defined in accordance with the Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021–2027. For STA mobilities, a minimum teaching load of 8 teaching hours per week of stay (or for shorter stays, per mobility duration) is required, with a minimum duration of 2 days and a maximum of 2 months, excluding travel days. For STT mobilities, the

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minimum duration is also 2 days, with a maximum of 2 months. Participation in Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) follows separate specific rules defined in Section 6 of this handbook.

Prior to departure, each selected staff member must sign a Mobility Agreement, which constitutes the formal framework for the activity. In the case of teaching mobility, the agreement outlines the teaching programme, including topics, number of teaching hours, target groups, and expected learning outcomes. For training mobility, it defines the training objectives, planned activities, host institution details, and anticipated professional development outcomes. In both cases, the agreement must also include the names of the sending and receiving institutions, Erasmus codes, and exact mobility dates. Importantly, the sending institution formally commits to recognising the mobility, either through workload allocation, professional evaluation, or staff development recognition systems.

Financial management of staff mobility is based on a dual-grant structure consisting of individual support (daily allowance) and travel support. The Erasmus Office is responsible for ensuring accurate grant calculation in accordance with National Agency rules and programme guidelines. Daily subsistence rates are applied according to destination country group classifications, while travel grants are calculated using the European Commission Distance Calculator, based on the official distance between the sending and receiving institutions. Where applicable, participants may also benefit from a Green Travel top-up for the use of low-emission transport modes such as trains, buses, or carpooling, including additional financial support for extended travel days.

Before departure, each participant must sign a formal Grant Agreement with the institution, which specifies the total grant amount, payment schedule (typically 80% prior to departure and 20% upon completion), eligibility conditions, and participant obligations. All financial processes must comply with institutional financial and procurement regulations, ensuring transparency, auditability, and consistency with Erasmus+ requirements.

Upon completion of mobility, the Erasmus Office is responsible for collecting and verifying all supporting documentation, including proof of travel, certificates of attendance or participation, and any additional evidence required to confirm the successful completion of the activity. These documents are essential for financial reconciliation, reporting, and audit purposes.

In conclusion, staff mobility under Erasmus+ KA1 represents a structured mechanism for professional development and institutional cooperation. Through clearly defined

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procedures for call publication, eligibility, agreement signing, grant management, and post-mobility validation, institutions ensure transparency, compliance, and strategic alignment of staff mobility with broader internationalization objectives.

4.5. Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP)

A Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) is defined as a short-term, flexible and intensive learning scheme developed within the Erasmus+ framework. Its main objective is to foster innovative teaching and learning methods through the use of online cooperation and jointly developed curricula.

The blended approach is determined by the combination of the physical mobility aspect and the virtual component. The physical mobility consists of a short-term on-site learning phase lasting between 5 to 30 days (excluding travel time) and must take place at the receiving HEI or at another venue within the host country. The virtual component is a mandatory online element that must be pedagogically integrated within the physical mobility and count towards overall learning outcomes. While there is no required minimum or maximum duration and the timing of the virtual component can be either before, during or after the physical phase, the total number of study hours pertaining to the number of ECTS the program awards must be taken into consideration. Primary objectives include:

- Widening participation by offering mobility opportunities to learners who are unable to attend in long-term physical mobility due to financial constraints, study field requirements or other barriers
- Developing innovative teaching and learning methods, such as challenge-based learning where transdisciplinary international teams work collaboratively to solve real-world problems, that can be based on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, for example
- Building stronger cooperation networks between European HEIs
- Promoting digital innovation and inclusion using online collaborative tools

Organizers should view BIPs as more than just a short course. Their added value lies in:

- Transnational perspectives: enabling students and staff to gain new perspectives on a study topic through exchange with peers from different countries.
- Experimental learning: providing a "lab" environment where organizers can test new, innovative ideas in teaching before scaling them up
- Inclusivity: offering flexible mobility formats that ensure the Erasmus+ program

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is accessible to students from all backgrounds and cycles (Short cycle, Bachelor, Master, and PhD)

- Institutional growth: building the capacity of HEIs to implement and manage blended mobility and international cooperation more effectively

4.5.1. Eligibility and mandatory criteria

To secure Erasmus+ funding and ensure the validity of a BIP, organizers must adhere to a strict set of eligibility requirements and structural criteria.

1. Consortium composition and administrative requirements - *A BIP is not a standalone course but a collaborative effort between multiple European partners:*

- Minimum participation: a BIP must be developed and implemented by a minimum of three Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).
- Transnational diversity: these institutions must come from at least three different EU Member States or third countries associated to the Programme.
- Accreditation: every participating HEI must hold a valid Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE).
- Legal framework: an Inter-institutional Agreement (IIA) must be signed by all partners before the mobility phase commences.
- Coordination: one institution acts as the Coordinating HEI, applying for the grant on behalf of the group and managing the registration in the Beneficiary Module.

2. Learner requirements and the "minimum 10" rule - *The eligibility of the program's funding depends heavily on reaching a specific threshold of mobile learners:*

- Mandatory minimum: A BIP must involve at least 10 mobile learners who are funded by Erasmus+ internal policy funds. This group includes students (Short cycle, Bachelor, Master), doctoral candidates, and staff members undertaking staff mobility for training.
- Non-eligible for the minimum: participants from the receiving (host) HEI and teachers/trainers involved in delivering the program do not count toward this minimum of 10.
- Tolerance margin: there is a 10% tolerance margin regarding this minimum; if only 9 funded learners participate, the BIP may still remain eligible for funding.
- Inclusivity: organizers are encouraged to maintain a waiting list of candidates and plan for more than 10 learners to avoid disqualification due to last-minute

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dropouts.

3. Academic recognition and credits (ECTS) - *The program must award student participants a minimum of 3 ECTS credits.* These credits are awarded for the combined workload of both the physical and virtual components. Ideally, the BIP should be designed as a curricular element of the degree programs at participating institutions or at least be complementary to them.

In accordance with ECHE principles, home institutions are required to automatically and fully recognize the learning outcomes achieved during the BIP. Recognition must be documented through standard Erasmus+ tools, including Learning Agreements, Transcripts of Records, and Certificates of Attendance.

4. Structural and temporal criteria - *As previously mentioned, the program must be structured as a "blended" experience with specific timeframes:*

- Physical phase: the on-site learning component must last between 5 and 30 days (excluding travel time).
- Virtual component: The virtual part is mandatory. It must facilitate collaborative online learning where students work collectively and simultaneously on assignments. While there is no specified minimum duration for the virtual part, it must be pedagogically integrated with the physical phase

5. Financial eligibility: organizational support (OS) - *Funding for the organization of the program is distinct from the grants given to individual students, as the the mobility grants for participants (travel and daily subsistence) are paid by their sending institutions from their regular Erasmus+ budget:*

- Grant calculation: the Coordinating HEI receives 400€ per funded mobile learner.
- Funding caps: the grant is capped at 20 participants, meaning the maximum total organizational support for a single BIP edition is 8,000€.
- Use of funds: these funds are intended to cover preparation, design, development, implementation, and follow-up costs. This can include room rentals, guest lecturers' fees, field trips, materials, and administrative tasks.
- Zero-Grant participants: learners who do not receive an Erasmus+ grant (zero-grant participants) still benefit from the BIP framework and can be counted for the calculation of the grant.

6. Roles and responsibilities - *Organizing a BIP necessitates a clear division of labor among the participating partners to ensure all Erasmus+ regulatory requirements are*

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met.

The Coordinating HEI is typically the institution that applies for the BIP grant and receives the Organizational Support (OS) funds, taking responsibility for the overall management, coordination, and the mandatory registration of the program in the Beneficiary Module.

The Receiving HEI, which is often the same institution as the coordinator, acts as the host for the physical mobility phase and is specifically responsible for the pedagogical delivery of both the physical and mandatory virtual components.

Meanwhile, Sending HEIs are charged with the recruitment and selection of their own mobile learners, managing the disbursement of individual mobility grants for travel and subsistence from their own Erasmus+ budgets, and ensuring that all participation is properly documented through tools like Learning Agreements.

To facilitate these diverse tasks, each participating institution should ideally appoint an academic coordinator to oversee educational content and an administrative coordinator to manage the logistics and mandatory documentation.

4.5.2. Implementation Checklist

1. Define concept: clarify learning outcomes, thematic focus, and target group (Bachelor, Master, or PhD). Choose a theme that is innovative and aligns with Erasmus+ priorities, such as inclusion, digital transformation, or environmental sustainability. Topics often involve solving real-world problems like the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
2. Form Consortium: identify at least two partners from different countries; search via existing alliances or dedicated sites like erasmusbip.org
   Ensure that all institutions hold a valid ECHE and Establish a signed Inter-institutional Agreement (IIA) with each partner specifically covering the planned mobilities before they commence.
3. Design structure: plan the virtual interaction (icebreakers, online lectures, collaborative assignments) and the physical schedule (intensive workshops, study visits).
   Use interactive platforms like Teams, Miro, Mural, Padlet, or Mentimeter for simultaneous teamwork.
4. Secure funding: apply for BIP OS funds during the annual Erasmus+ call (usually February).

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5. Develop a communication plan: define channels (Teams, email) and create promotional materials to attract students.
   Define channels for internal collaboration, such as monthly virtual meetings starting at least six months in advance. Create promotional materials (leaflets/leaflets) that clearly state the BIP schedule, eligibility rules, available grants, and the application process and establish a transparent, inclusive selection procedure based on criteria like motivation, language skills, or academic merit.
6. Prepare documentation: Ensure all learners have Learning Agreements and Grant Agreements; prepare attendance sheets and certificates of participation.
   - *Before mobility: ensure all student learners sign a Learning Agreement via Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) and a Grant Agreement with their home institution. Provide a handbook with practical info on travel, safety protocols, and accommodation.*
   - *System registration: the Coordinating HEI must register the BIP in the Beneficiary Module and provide the unique BIP ID to partners so they can link their participants to the program.*
   - *During and After: collect daily attendance signatures and issue Certificates of Attendance or participation. For students, provide a Transcript of Records to ensure automatic credit recognition.*
7. Quality Assurance
   - *Feedback collection: conduct surveys after both the virtual and physical components to gather participant feedback*
   - *Impact evaluation: evaluate if the learning outcomes were met and analyze the program's overall impact on students and staff*
   - *Reporting: the Coordinating HEI must summarize results, including statistics and photos, in a final report to the National Agency*
   - *Sustainability: use the conclusions to refine the program for future editions, potentially rotating the coordinator role among consortium partners*

Advice for a Successful BIP

Drawing from successful implementations, organizers should follow these recommendations:

1. **Planning and Coordination:**

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- Overestimate numbers: plan for more than the minimum 10 participants and maintain a waiting list to ensure eligibility in case of last-minute dropouts.
- Early communication: start the planning process at least six months in advance and hold monthly meetings with all partners
- Involve IT and administration: don't forget to engage your IT department early to set up virtual tools and your admissions office for student registration.
- Rotate coordination: for sustainable internationalization, consider rotating the "Coordinating HEI" role among partners in subsequent years, using the first BIP as a template.

2. **Program Design:**

- Make both components meaningful: ensure the virtual part is not just a preparation for travel, but a substantive collaborative effort where students work collectively on assignments. A common pitfall is repeating the same content in both the virtual and physical phases. Each component must offer unique value; for example, use the virtual part for introductory lectures and the physical part for intensive, small-group workshops.
- Invite external experts: enhance the program's quality by inviting guest lecturers from industry, cultural institutions, or other universities to provide diverse perspectives
- Include a social program: integrate cultural excursions and social activities to foster intercultural dialogue and team spirit.
- Be inclusive: design activities to be accessible to participants with disabilities and those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

3. **Logistics and safety:**

- Unified information: provide participants with a handbook or fact sheet (with a QR code) containing safety info, contact details, emergency protocols, and the schedule
- Accommodation: try to accommodate all participants in the same location to maximize their interaction.
- Safety first: Ensure every participant is insured for travel, third-party liability, and accidents.

Common pitfalls to avoid:

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- Don't underestimate the added workload for both academic and administrative staff
- Don't treat the BIP as a regular yearly mobility; it requires a higher level of integration and specific documentation
- Overlooking the virtual component: organizers often treat the mandatory virtual part as an afterthought or mere preparation for travel. It must be a substantive collaborative effort.
- Assuming prior knowledge: organizers should not assume that all partners have prior experience with BIP rules or standard Erasmus+ documentation.
- Ignoring academic calendar conflicts: failing to coordinate the physical phase around the different partners' exam periods and lecture-free weeks can severely impact student recruitment.

4.6. Internal rules and regulatory framework for Erasmus+ KA1 Mobility

A robust internal regulatory framework is essential for the legally compliant, financially sound, and equitable management of Erasmus+ KA1 mobilities. Institutions should adopt and publish the following internal instruments.

Every institution holding an ECHE must have a published Erasmus Policy Statement (EPS), which is the strategic document describing the institution's internationalization vision, targets for mobility volumes, quality assurance measures, and commitment to inclusion. The EPS must be publicly accessible on the institution's website and aligned with the ECHE application commitments.

Mobility regulations: key provisions. An internal Mobility Regulation (Senate-approved) should govern all aspects of KA1 management. It should cover:

- Eligibility criteria for students and staff (see Sections 4.3 and 4.4)
- Selection procedures and anti-discrimination provisions
- Rights and obligations of mobility participants (insurance, conduct abroad, reporting obligations)
- Recognition policy: automatic recognition of ECTS earned abroad upon successful completion of the Learning Agreement; the home institution may not impose additional exams
- Grant disbursement procedures: advance payment, final payment, conditions for recovery of grant in case of unjustified early return

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- Force majeure provisions: procedures for early return due to illness, political instability, natural disaster, etc.
- Confidentiality and data protection (GDPR compliance): processing of participant personal data

ECTS recognition and transcript of records. Full academic recognition of study periods completed abroad is a cornerstone of the Erasmus+ programme and a binding commitment under the ECHE. The institution must:

- Include automatic recognition provisions in the Mobility Regulation with no possibility of derogation by individual faculties
- Ensure the Academic Coordinator (Faculty level) signs the Learning Agreement, thereby committing the faculty to recognition
- Process Transcripts of Records (ToR) received from host institutions within 5 weeks of their receipt and update the student's academic record accordingly
- Issue a Europass Mobility document or equivalent for each completed mobility period

Insurance and health coverage. The institution must ensure that all participants have adequate insurance coverage during their mobility. Recommended provisions:

- Students: European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) for EU nationals + supplementary accident/liability insurance for the full duration abroad
- Staff: institutional travel insurance policy covering medical expenses, trip cancellation, and professional liability
- For non-EU participants (e.g., Moldovan students): arrange private health insurance and verify coverage in the host country before departure
- Document proof of insurance for every participant and archive with mobility file

Code of conduct for mobility participants. All participants should sign a Code of Conduct before departure, committing to: representing their home institution responsibly; complying with host institution rules; attending all scheduled courses/activities; submitting the EU Survey/participant report on time; and promptly reporting any issues (health, academic, safety) to the home Erasmus Office.

Travel Grant calculation and financial management. The financial management of Erasmus+ KA1 grants is one of the highest-risk areas from a compliance perspective. National Agencies regularly audit grant calculations during monitoring visits. Adherence to the

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following guidelines will substantially reduce financial audit risk.

Distance calculation. Travel grants are calculated based on the distance between the city of the sending institution and the city of the receiving institution, measured using the official European Commission Distance Calculator (available at the Erasmus+ website). The distance must be calculated and documented at the time of grant agreement.

Individual support for students. Student individual support (daily allowance) rates are set by the National Agency call for proposals and vary by host country group and duration. As a general principle:

- Days 1–14: higher daily rate applies
- Days 15 onwards (for longer mobilities): reduced daily rate applies
- The Erasmus Office must calculate the total individual support based on the planned duration in the grant agreement and reconcile against actual duration upon return

Grant Agreement with participants. A bilateral grant agreement between the institution and each participant is mandatory. It must specify: total grant amount, breakdown by component (individual support + travel), payment schedule, bank details of participant, duration of mobility, conditions for recovery, and participant obligations. This document must be signed before any grant payment is made.

Financial reconciliation and recover. Upon return, the Erasmus Office must verify actual dates against planned dates and recalculate grants where necessary. Recovery procedures must be activated if:

- The participant did not complete the minimum duration without force majeure
- The participant failed to submit the EU Survey / Participant Report by the deadline
- The participant received higher grants than entitled due to calculation error

4.7. Communication, outreach and mobility support activities

A well-structured Erasmus+ mobility system depends not only on procedures and regulations but also on continuous communication, participant engagement, and institutional support activities that foster awareness, motivation, and successful integration of mobility participants before, during, and after their experience abroad. In this context, the Erasmus Office plays a central role in ensuring a coherent cycle of information, preparation, reception, and follow-up activities that contribute to a strong institutional culture of internationalization.

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At least once per semester, institutions should organise Erasmus+ Information Days as the main outreach and promotional event for students and staff. These events should present available mobility opportunities, including partner universities, study fields, funding opportunities, and application procedures. A key feature of these sessions is the involvement of returning participants, often referred to as "Erasmus Ambassadors," who share their experiences and provide peer-to-peer insights into academic and personal aspects of mobility. Information Days should also include structured Q&A sessions with Erasmus Office staff, distribution of informational materials, and targeted outreach to students with fewer opportunities, including those facing financial, geographical, or accessibility-related barriers.

Once students and staff have been selected for mobility, participation in a Pre-Departure Orientation Session is mandatory. This session ensures that all outgoing participants are fully informed and adequately prepared for their mobility experience. It covers essential administrative and academic aspects such as programme rules, participant rights and obligations, finalisation of Learning or Mobility Agreements, and grant agreement procedures. It also addresses practical issues, including accommodation, travel arrangements, health and accident insurance, visa requirements where applicable, and activation of Online Linguistic Support (OLS). In addition, participants receive guidance on intercultural communication, adaptation to the host environment, and emergency contact procedures, ensuring both academic readiness and personal preparedness.

For incoming students and staff, institutions must organise structured Welcome and Integration Activities to support their successful arrival and inclusion. These typically begin with an initial welcome meeting with the Erasmus Office, followed by a campus orientation introducing key services such as libraries, IT support, administrative offices, and student facilities. A "buddy system" is strongly recommended, pairing incoming participants with local student volunteers to facilitate social and academic integration. Complementary social and cultural activities, such as guided tours, networking events, and extracurricular activities organised in cooperation with student unions or Erasmus Student Network sections, further enhance the integration process. Academic orientation sessions should also be provided to explain institutional structures, grading systems, course registration procedures, and academic expectations.

Upon completion of mobility periods, institutions should organise post-mobility feedback and recognition activities. These events serve both celebratory and evaluative

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purposes. Returning participants may be formally recognised through certificates, presentations, or public sharing of their experiences. At the same time, structured feedback should be collected through the EU Survey and additional institutional questionnaires in order to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Former participants should also be encouraged to become Erasmus Ambassadors, contributing to future Information Days and peer-learning activities. This feedback loop is essential for continuously improving mobility processes, partner selection, and student support services.

Finally, a coherent digital communication strategy is a critical component of modern Erasmus+ management. Institutions should maintain an updated and user-friendly Erasmus+ section on their official website, including application forms, deadlines, partner lists, frequently asked questions, and procedural guidelines. Social media channels should be used actively, particularly during mobility selection periods, to share testimonials, promotional content, and practical guidance. Short-form video materials such as student stories, virtual campus tours, and application tutorials can significantly increase engagement. Additionally, a regular newsletter targeted at students, staff, and alumni helps sustain long-term interest and builds a stable internationalization community within the institution.

Taken together, these communication and support activities form a continuous engagement cycle that strengthens participation, improves mobility quality, and embeds internationalization into the institutional culture.

Useful links:

1. European Commission Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu
2. Erasmus Without Paper Dashboard: https://ewp-reference.erasmusapp.eu
3. EC Distance Calculator: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/distance-calculator
4. EACEA Erasmus+ National Agencies directory: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/national-agencies
5. EC OID Search: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-esc/index/organisations/search-for-an-organisation

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4.8. Collaboration Models and Partnerships

4.8.1. Francophone Networks as a Strategic Driver of Internationalization

Case study: University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest (USAMV Bucharest)

Internationalization strategies in European higher education have historically centred on Erasmus+ mobility frameworks and bilateral academic agreements. While these remain essential instruments, they do not exhaust the range of available cooperation pathways. Francophone institutional networks offer a structurally distinct and operationally valuable dimension of internationalization, one that is particularly relevant for universities located in OIF member states or seeking to diversify their international partnerships beyond the Erasmus+ framework.

The Republic of Moldova is a full member of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), and several Moldovan higher education institutions including the Technical University of Moldova (TUM) are already members of the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF). This existing membership represents a significant and often under-utilised strategic asset. The question for Moldovan IROs is therefore not whether to join Francophone networks, but how to move from formal membership to active, structured, and results-oriented engagement.

This section draws on the institutional experience of USAMV Bucharest to illustrate what such engagement looks like in practice across partnership development, researcher mobility, event hosting, and institutional visibility and to offer transferable recommendations for Moldovan HEIs.

Key Francophone Networks and Their Institutional Value

1. **The Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF)**

The AUF is one of the world's largest university networks, comprising over 1,000 member institutions across approximately 120 countries. For member institutions, the AUF serves as a facilitator of joint research initiatives, mobility funding, co-organised academic events, and bilateral partnership agreements within a shared linguistic and institutional framework. The network spans Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, the Middle East, and the Americas, offering member institutions access to a geographically diversified cooperation ecosystem.

USAMV Bucharest has been an AUF member institution for several years. This membership has underpinned the development of active partnership agreements with

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universities in France, Belgium, the Maghreb, and sub-Saharan Africa, primarily in the fields of agronomic sciences and veterinary medicine. The key lesson from this experience is that membership alone generates limited outcomes: it is the deliberate, sustained exploitation of network mechanisms like the mobility schemes, joint events, scholarship programmes that produces concrete partnerships.

2. The Eugen Ionescu Doctoral and Post-Doctoral Scholarship Programme

The Eugen Ionescu programme is a scholarship scheme co-funded by the Romanian Government and the AUF, enabling doctoral and post-doctoral researchers from AUF member countries to conduct research periods at Romanian universities. The programme is administered through the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in partnership with the AUF.

USAMV Bucharest hosts 15 researchers per cycle under this programme: 5 positions are jointly funded by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the AUF, while the remaining 10 are financed directly from the university's own institutional budget. The majority of beneficiaries originate from sub-Saharan African countries. This voluntary institutional investment reflects a deliberate commitment to Francophone academic cooperation and has positioned USAMV Bucharest as a preferred destination within the programme, generating lasting academic relationships with partner institutions across Africa.

This model illustrates a transferable principle: targeted institutional co-investment in existing scholarship mechanisms, even at modest levels, can significantly increase an institution's attractiveness within Francophone networks and generate durable research partnerships at relatively low administrative cost.

3. The Groupe des Ambassades, Délégations et Institutions Francophones de Roumanie – GADIF

The Groupe des Ambassades, Délégations et Institutions Francophones de Roumanie (GADIF) constitutes a diplomatic and academic interface that has proven particularly valuable for partnership development. USAMV Bucharest maintains an active institutional relationship with GADIF, which functions as a connector between Romanian universities and Francophone diplomatic representations and institutions operating in Romania.

Engagement with GADIF and the broader Francophone diplomatic community has produced concrete outcomes for USAMV Bucharest. The university has hosted the GADIF Francophonie Gala for two consecutive years, reinforcing its visibility within the

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Francophone diplomatic community in Romania. More broadly, the relationships cultivated through this network facilitate direct contacts with universities from OIF member states and support the identification and formalisation of inter-institutional agreements a process that would otherwise require significantly greater time and resource investment through conventional bilateral outreach.

Where equivalent Francophone diplomatic structures exist, such as OIF regional representations or local Francophone groupings Moldovan HEIs are similarly positioned to activate these channels as partnership facilitators.

4. The OIF and the "Je parle français" Hackathon

USAMV Bucharest has established a partnership with the OIF through its participation in the Je parle français Hackathon, a competitive event open to secondary school students and university students from OIF member countries. USAMV Bucharest served as host institution for the first time in 2025 and renewed the partnership for 2026.

Beyond its educational purpose, the event functions as a strategic visibility instrument. Participants from multiple OIF member countries are welcomed on campus, where they engage directly with the university's academic environment, infrastructure, and programmes. These participants constitute an informal network of ambassadors in their home countries, a cost-effective mechanism for institutional reputation-building across OIF member states. Given Moldova's OIF membership, Moldovan HEIs are equally eligible to host this type of event and to benefit from the associated visibility.

5. The Réseau International des Chaires Senghor de la Francophonie

USAMV Bucharest holds membership in the Réseau International des Chaires Senghor de la Francophonie (RICSF), a network established in 2002 under the auspices of the OIF, bringing together universities committed to teaching, research, and institutional reflection on Francophone cooperation. While the network's direct operational impact on routine IRO activities is limited in scope, membership provides an institutional signal of commitment to Francophone values and facilitates connections with peer institutions across Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

6. Internal Structures Supporting Francophone Cooperation

The sustainability of USAMV Bucharest's Francophone engagement rests in part on dedicated internal structures operating within and alongside the International Relations and Mobility Office (IRO).

The IRO maintains a dedicated Francophone cooperation function, responsible for

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managing institutional relationships with AUF, OIF, and GADIF, coordinating scholarship programmes, and facilitating new partnership agreements with French-speaking universities. This internal capacity enables faculty members and departments across all disciplines including those without French-language instruction to engage with Francophone partner universities for staff exchanges, joint research, and collaborative projects.

The university also hosts a Centre de Réussite Universitaire (CRU), established within the AUF framework, which operates as a collaborative partner to the IRO in supporting Francophone academic activities and events on campus.

The practical significance of these structures is that Francophone cooperation at USAMV Bucharest does not depend on the existence of extensive French-language academic programmes across all faculties. French language competency within the IRO team, combined with a clear institutional mandate and dedicated structures, proves sufficient to initiate and sustain partnerships that might otherwise remain inaccessible. This is a directly relevant lesson for Moldovan HEIs: the conditions for active Francophone engagement are already partially in place, and the main requirement is structured activation rather than initial construction.

7. Transferable Recommendations for Moldovan HEIs

Several Moldovan higher education institutions, including TUM, already hold AUF membership. The following recommendations are framed as a framework for moving from formal membership to strategic and operational engagement:

1. Conduct an internal audit of existing Francophone assets. Inventory current AUF membership status, existing partnerships with Francophone institutions, French-language competencies within the IRO, and any prior participation in AUF or OIF programmes. This audit provides the baseline for a structured engagement plan.
2. Activate AUF mobility and funding mechanisms proactively. AUF membership provides access to multiple co-funding instruments for researcher mobility, joint research projects, and academic events. These mechanisms are frequently underutilised by member institutions that engage passively with the network. Designating a staff member within the IRO to monitor and respond to AUF calls is a low-cost, high-return measure.
3. Consider institutional co-investment in scholarship programmes. The Eugen Ionescu model at USAMV Bucharest demonstrates that modest supplementary funding can substantially increase an institution's hosting capacity and attractiveness

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within the Francophone network, generating lasting research relationships with partner institutions.

4. Engage with Francophone diplomatic structures. OIF regional representations and Francophone diplomatic groupings can serve as partnership facilitators, supporting the identification and formalisation of inter-institutional agreements with universities from OIF member states. Moldovan institutions are well-positioned to activate these channels given Moldova's established OIF membership.
5. Use event hosting as a visibility and recruitment instrument. Hosting Francophone events: OIF hackathons, AUF scientific conferences, Francophonie galas, generates institutional visibility among Francophone academic and diplomatic communities at relatively low cost, while creating informal networks of future partners, students, and researchers.
6. Establish or formalise a dedicated Francophone function within the IRO. A clearly identified Francophone cooperation role, even as part of an existing IRO position formalises the institutional commitment, ensures continuity, and enables cross-faculty engagement beyond language-specific programmes.

Sources and References

1. Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) — Institutional overview and member network: https://www.auf.org

2. AUF — Eugen Ionescu Doctoral and Post-Doctoral Scholarship Programme 2025–2026: https://www.auf.org/bourses-de-recherche-doctorale-et-postdoctorale-eugen-ionescu-2025-2026/

3. AUF — Europe Centrale et Orientale, Member institutions: https://www.auf.org/europe-centrale-orientale/membres/

4. Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF): https://www.francophonie.org

5. Réseau International des Chaires Senghor de la Francophonie (RICSF): https://www.chaires-senghor.com

6. USAMV Bucharest — International Relations Office platform: https://international.usamv.ro

4.8.2. Thematic academic networks and international associations

Membership in international academic networks and associations constitutes a

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distinct and often underutilised dimension of institutional internationalization. Beyond bilateral agreements and mobility programmes, these networks provide access to policy dialogue, peer learning, joint research infrastructures, and partnership opportunities at a scale that individual institutions cannot generate independently. USAMV Bucharest holds membership in eleven international associations as of 2025, spanning governance, disciplinary, and regional networks. The most relevant for IRO development and international cooperation strategy are presented below.

1. **The Association for European Life Science Universities (ICA) and the CASEE Network**

The Association for European Life Science Universities (ICA) is the overarching European network for universities specialising in life sciences, agricultural sciences, and related disciplines. USAMV Bucharest is a member of ICA, which provides access to a broad community of European peer institutions engaged in joint research, curriculum development, and academic exchange.

Within the ICA framework, the ICA Regional Network for Central and South Eastern Europe (CASEE) operates as a specialised regional platform grouping 16 member institutions from 12 countries. CASEE facilitates cooperation in academic programme development, student and staff mobility, and joint research within a shared disciplinary and regional context.

Of direct relevance to the IRO4ALL consortium, both CZU Prague and TUM Moldova are also CASEE members. This shared membership creates a pre-existing cooperation infrastructure between three IRO4ALL partners, which can serve as a basis for joint academic initiatives beyond the scope of the current project. For Moldovan HEIs in the life and agronomic sciences, ICA and CASEE membership offer a structured entry point into a network of European peer institutions with aligned academic profiles.

2. **The International Association of Universities - IAU**

The International Association of Universities (IAU) is a global higher education organisation affiliated with UNESCO, bringing together universities and higher education institutions from over 130 countries. IAU membership provides access to global policy dialogue on higher education, comparative data and research on internationalization trends, and a worldwide network of institutional partners. For IROs, IAU membership is particularly valuable as a source of benchmarking data and strategic guidance on internationalization policy at institutional level.

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3. **The Danube Rectors' Conference - DRC**

The Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC) is a regional network of universities from the Danube region countries, promoting academic cooperation, research collaboration, and institutional dialogue across a geopolitically and culturally diverse area. USAMV Bucharest's membership in the DRC is of direct relevance for Moldovan HEIs, as Moldova is geographically and historically part of the Danube region. The DRC constitutes a natural platform for developing partnerships between Romanian and Moldovan universities within a shared regional framework.

4. **The European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education — EAEVE**

The European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE) is the recognised accreditation and quality assurance body for veterinary education institutions in Europe. USAMV Bucharest's membership in EAEVE reflects the accredited quality of its veterinary medicine programmes and facilitates academic recognition, student mobility, and partnership development with other EAEVE-accredited institutions across Europe and beyond. For Moldovan HEIs with veterinary or animal science programmes, engagement with EAEVE standards provides a framework for programme quality benchmarking and European recognition.

5. **The European University Association - EUA**

The European University Association (EUA) is the largest and most representative association of universities in Europe, comprising over 850 member institutions and national associations from 49 countries. The EUA plays a central role in the Bologna Process and in shaping European policies on higher education, research and innovation. Membership provides access to strategic publications and analyses, participation in working groups and expert consultations, and a broad network of European universities engaged in collaborative research and institutional development. USAMV Bucharest officially joined the EUA in November 2025, reflecting the institution's commitment to active engagement in the European higher education policy space.

6. **Disciplinary and Research Networks**

In addition to the networks above, USAMV Bucharest holds membership in several specialised research networks that reflect the institution's disciplinary strengths and research priorities:

– ***European Research Alliance towards a Chemical Pesticide Free Agriculture***

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***(ERA)**, focused on sustainable agriculture research and the reduction of chemical inputs across European farming systems.*

- ***European Fruit Research Institutes Network (EUFRUIT)**, a platform for collaborative research and knowledge exchange in fruit science across Europe.*
- ***Oenoviti International Network (OENOVITI)**, dedicated to research and education in viticulture and oenology at international level.*

While these networks are primarily research-oriented rather than IRO-facing, they illustrate an important principle: disciplinary network membership generates international visibility and credibility in specific academic fields, which in turn facilitates the identification of relevant partnership opportunities and the development of joint research projects with international institutions.

Sources and References

1. ICA — Association for European Life Science Universities: https://www.ica-casee.eu
2. CASEE — ICA Regional Network for Central and South Eastern Europe, Member Institutions: https://www.ica-casee.eu/members
3. IAU — International Association of Universities: https://www.iau-aiu.net
4. Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC): https://www.danube-rectors.org
5. EAEVE — European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education: https://www.eaeve.org
6. EUA — European University Association: https://www.eua.eu
7. USAMV Bucharest — International Affiliations 2025: https://usamv.ro

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4.9. Practical guidelines, checklists for agreements, logistics, student support

The International Relations Office (IRO) sits at the heart of an institution's internationalization strategy. Its mandate spans the full lifecycle of international cooperation: identifying potential partners, negotiating and managing interinstitutional agreements, coordinating outgoing and incoming mobility flows, and ensuring that every student and staff member who participates in a mobility receives coherent, timely, and empathetic support.

This document provides practical, actionable guidelines for IRO staff, faculty coordinators, and institutional leadership. It is organised into four thematic areas: (1) finding and evaluating potential partner universities, (2) building and maintaining a portfolio of interinstitutional agreements, (3) managing the operational logistics of mobility, and (4) developing the student and staff support infrastructure that makes internationalization a positive experience for all participants.

The guidelines are designed to be adapted to each institution's context. Checklists are included throughout to support consistent practice across faculties and administrative units.

4.9.1. Finding and evaluating potential partner universities

1. Strategic Approach to Partner Identification

Partner identification should be a deliberate, strategy-driven activity rather than an opportunistic one. The IRO, in collaboration with faculty leadership, should define partnership priorities aligned with the institution's academic strengths, research agenda, and geographic diversification goals. A useful framework distinguishes between three types of target partners:

- *Consolidation partners - institutions with which the university already has informal links (joint publications, shared alumni, visiting lectures) that can be formalised.*
- *Strategic development partners - high-profile or thematically aligned universities that would strengthen specific academic areas.*
- *Geographic diversification partners - institutions in underrepresented regions, including Programme Countries not yet covered and Partner Countries targeted through Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility.*

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Sources and Tools for Partner Discovery - the IRO should guide faculty coordinators and interested staff towards the following channels:

Source / Tool	How to Use It
Erasmus+ Dashboard / ECHE register	The European Commission maintains a public register of all Erasmus Charter holders. Filtering by subject area and country gives a first long-list of eligible partners.
IREG / QS / THE Rankings	Subject-level rankings help identify academically comparable institutions in priority regions and fields.
EUA (European University Association)	Membership directories and thematic networks surface potential partners in specific disciplines or institutional types.
Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) Network	The EWP portal allows IROs to search for institutions already connected to the digital agreement exchange network.
Erasmus+ National Agencies	National Agency newsletters, info days, and contact seminars are a direct route to meeting IRO peers from other institutions.
Academic conferences	Faculty members attending international conferences are well placed to identify potential partners; the IRO should provide them with a lightweight introduction template.
Alumni networks	Former students or staff now working or studying abroad are valuable connectors to partner institutions.
Existing staff/student networks	Current international students or visiting scholars can identify home institutions interested in formalising cooperation.

Partner Evaluation Checklist - before investing resources in a formal partnership approach, the IRO should apply a preliminary evaluation. The following checklist is recommended:

☑ **Partner Evaluation Checklist**

- Holds a valid Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) — or equivalent for non-Erasmus partners
- Offers study programmes relevant to at least one faculty at the home institution
- Has an active IRO or international office with responsive staff
- Operates in a language accessible to home institution students (or offers courses in English)
- Has an academic calendar compatible with the home institution's semester structure
- Is located in a country with manageable visa and travel logistics for home students

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- Has no outstanding issues on Erasmus Commission blacklists or institutional compliance records
- Shows interest in a balanced exchange (willing to send and receive students)
- Has been referenced positively by academic staff or returning students
- Is connected (or willing to connect) to the Erasmus Without Paper network

4.9.2 Interinstitutional agreements, guidelines and checklists

Types of Agreements - the IRO typically manages several categories of interinstitutional agreements. Each has distinct legal and procedural requirements:

Agreement Type	Description
Erasmus+ Interinstitutional Agreement (IIA)	The standard bilateral agreement required for Erasmus+ student and staff mobility. Since 2023, these must be concluded digitally via the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) network.
General Cooperation Agreement (MoU)	A broader memorandum of understanding covering academic cooperation, joint research, or double degrees. Does not replace the IIA for Erasmus+ mobilities.
Joint/Double Degree Agreement	A formal programme-level agreement establishing a shared curriculum and joint or double diploma award. Requires faculty-level sign-off in addition to institutional approval.
International Credit Mobility Agreement	A specific agreement for mobilities between Programme Countries and Partner Countries, funded under the international strand of Erasmus+.
Non-Erasmus Bilateral Agreement	Agreements outside the Erasmus+ framework, covering mobilities funded by other sources (national programmes, university funds, third-party donors).

The IIA Negotiation and Signature Process - the following sequence of steps represents best practice for concluding a new Erasmus+ Interinstitutional Agreement:

1. **Initial contact -** The IRO or faculty coordinator reaches out to the partner IRO (via email, at a conference, or through an EWP search). A brief expression of interest is exchanged.
2. **Academic mapping** - The relevant faculty coordinator confirms which subject areas and study cycles (Bachelor / Master / PhD) will be covered, and the proposed number of student places and months per year.
3. **Draft IIA preparation** - The IRO prepares a draft IIA using the standard Erasmus+ template (or the EWP digital workflow), specifying mobilities, contact persons, and language of instruction.

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4. **Partner review and negotiation** - The draft is shared with the partner IRO. Adjustments are made to balance flows, align academic requirements, and confirm language provisions.
5. **Institutional approval** - The finalised IIA is submitted for signature by the authorised institutional representative (Rector, Vice-Rector for International Relations, or delegated officer).
6. **Digital exchange via EWP** - Both institutions upload or exchange the signed IIA through the Erasmus Without Paper network. Paper-only processes are no longer accepted for new agreements.
7. **Registration in IRO records** - The agreement is entered into the IRO's agreement management system with expiry date, responsible coordinator, and annual review flag.

Agreement Management Checklist

☑ **IIA / Agreement Management Checklist**

- Agreement covers the correct subject areas and ISCED codes matching the faculty's programmes
- Student places, study cycles, and mobility duration are explicitly stated
- Language of instruction confirmed (and minimum language requirements agreed where relevant)
- Named contact persons at both institutions recorded (IRO coordinator + faculty coordinator)
- Agreement signed by authorised institutional representatives on both sides
- Digital version exchanged via EWP (for Erasmus+ IIAs concluded from 2023 onwards)
- Expiry date noted and calendar reminder set for renewal (minimum 6 months before expiry)
- Agreement stored in institutional document management system with version control
- Faculty coordinator has been notified and has confirmed acceptance of the partnership
- Agreement reviewed annually: confirm partner still holds valid ECHE, check mobility balance
- Dormant agreements (no mobilities in past 2 years) flagged for review or termination

4.9.3 Mobility logistics. Practical guidelines

Pre-Departure Logistics for Outgoing Students: Logistics management begins the moment a student is selected for a mobility and does not end until the grant has been fully processed. The IRO should maintain a standardised pre-departure checklist that is shared with selected students as early as possible ideally within one week of the selection outcome being communicated.

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☑ Pre-Departure Checklist — Outgoing Students

- Learning Agreement (LA) drafted, signed by student, home faculty coordinator, and home IRO
- LA sent to and countersigned by host institution
- Grant Agreement / Financial Agreement signed by student and IRO
- European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) obtained or private health insurance arranged
- Visa or residence permit application initiated (where required) — minimum 8–12 weeks before departure
- Accommodation at destination confirmed (university dormitory or private arrangement)
- Travel booked and travel details provided to IRO (for insurance and emergency contact purposes)
- Bank account details submitted for grant disbursement (IBAN verified)
- First instalment of mobility grant disbursed (typically 70–80% of total grant)
- Emergency contact information updated in institutional student record system
- Pre-departure orientation session attended (in-person or online)
- IRO emergency contact card / information sheet received by student
- Online Linguistic Support (OLS) assessment completed (for Erasmus+ participants)

During-Mobility Support: The IRO's responsibility does not pause while students are abroad. A structured mid-mobility follow-up process reduces the risk of early returns, academic problems, and unresolved administrative issues.

☑ During-Mobility Support

- A mid-mobility check-in (email or brief online call) should be scheduled at the halfway point of each mobility.
- Students should be reminded of the procedure for requesting a Learning Agreement amendment (LA change) if their course selection changes at the host institution.
- Any request for mobility extension must be processed via an amended grant agreement before the original end date.
- Incidents (health, safety, academic difficulties) should be logged in the IRO's case management system and escalated to the appropriate institutional contact where needed.

Post-Mobility and Grant Closure

☑ Post-Mobility Checklist — Grant Closure

- Transcript of Records received from host institution and filed
- Academic recognition confirmed by home faculty coordinator (credits transferred)
- Confirmation of Attendance (or equivalent) received and dates verified
- Mobility report (participant report) submitted by student via EU Survey / platform
- Final grant calculation completed (adjusting for actual mobility duration)
- Second / final instalment of grant disbursed (or recovery initiated if mobility shortened)
- Erasmus Student Charter obligations reviewed and confirmed

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- Online Linguistic Support (OLS) final assessment completed
- Student invited to participate in ambassador / mentoring programme for future applicants
- Student feedback survey completed and results recorded for partner quality review

Logistics for Incoming Students: Incoming students face unique challenges they arrive in an unfamiliar environment, often with limited knowledge of local administrative procedures. The IRO should have a dedicated incoming student logistics workflow:

Stage	IRO Action
Nomination & Acceptance	Receive nomination from partner IRO; issue acceptance letter and login to course catalogue / learning management system.
Invitation Letter	Generate and send official Invitation Letter for visa purposes within 5 working days of file validation.
Accommodation	Provide a list of university dormitories and vetted private accommodation options. Where possible, guarantee at least one application cycle to university housing.
Arrival Guide	Distribute a written arrival guide covering airport transfer, local transport, registration procedures, banking, healthcare access, and emergency contacts.
Welcome Day / Orientation	Organise a structured orientation event at the start of each semester covering academic registration, campus tour, administrative procedures, and social introduction.
Buddy Programme	Match each incoming student with a trained student buddy from the host institution for the first 4 weeks.
Course Registration Support	Provide a dedicated session or appointment for incoming students to finalise their course selection and resolve any timetable conflicts.
During-Stay Support	Designate a named IRO contact for incoming students. Publish office hours and response time commitments.
Departure & Transcript	Issue official Transcript of Records within 5 weeks of the end of the examination period.

4.9.4 Student and staff support. Documents and programmes

The effectiveness of international mobility depends not only on administrative compliance and financial management, but also on the quality of support services provided to participants throughout the mobility cycle. Modern International Relations Offices (IROs) are expected to adopt a participant-centred approach that promotes academic success, social inclusion, wellbeing, equal opportunities, and positive international experiences for

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all mobility participants.

In line with the Erasmus+ Programme priorities on Inclusion and Diversity, Digital Transformation, Environmental Sustainability, and Civic Engagement, support services should be designed to address the needs of a diverse participant population. Particular attention should be given to students and staff with fewer opportunities, including individuals with disabilities, socio-economic disadvantages, caring responsibilities, migrant or refugee backgrounds, and participants from geographically remote regions.

Support mechanisms should accompany participants throughout all stages of mobility: pre-departure preparation, mobility implementation, academic integration, wellbeing support, and post-mobility reintegration. To achieve these objectives, the IRO should maintain a comprehensive framework of documents, procedures, guidance materials, and structured support programmes.

Core Student Support Documents: The IRO should develop and maintain a suite of standardised documents that guide students through every phase of their mobility. These documents should be available in both Romanian and English, kept up to date each academic year, and accessible through the IRO platform and website. The student support function of the International Relations Office extends beyond administrative assistance and should be understood as a comprehensive framework that promotes equitable access, inclusion, wellbeing, academic success, and positive mobility experiences for all participants. In line with the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, support mechanisms should be designed to address the diverse needs of participants, particularly students with fewer opportunities, including those with disabilities, socio-economic disadvantages, caring responsibilities, refugee or migrant backgrounds, and students from geographically remote areas. Support services should be proactive, accessible, and integrated throughout the entire mobility cycle, from outreach and selection to reintegration upon return.

Document	Purpose and Content
Erasmus+ Student Guide	A comprehensive handbook covering the full mobility lifecycle: eligibility, application, selection, preparation, during-mobility obligations, and return. Updated annually.
Pre-Departure Information Pack	A concise, practical document covering visa requirements by country, health insurance obligations, travel safety, emergency procedures, and IRO contact details.
Learning Agreement Template & Guide	The standard LA form with step-by-step completion instructions, guidance on course selection, and timelines for obtaining all required signatures.

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Grant Agreement Template	The standard financial agreement specifying grant amount, disbursement schedule, repayment conditions, and force majeure provisions.
Academic Recognition Procedure	A faculty-specific guide explaining how credits earned abroad are recognised and transferred to the student's home programme transcript.
Student Rights & Obligations Charter	A summary of the student's rights and obligations under the Erasmus+ programme, including the right to receive support and the obligation to complete the mobility report.
FAQ Document	A living document addressing the most frequently asked questions, updated after each selection cycle based on incoming queries to the IRO.
Country Fact Sheets	One-page summaries for the most frequently chosen destination countries, covering visa requirements, cost of living, climate, healthcare, and cultural tips.
Emergency Contact Card	A credit-card sized document (digital and printable) listing IRO emergency contacts, the institution's insurance policy number, and the national Erasmus+ emergency line.

Student Support Programmes: Documents alone are insufficient. The IRO should develop structured support programmes that create a community of practice around international mobility and reduce barriers to participation, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or first-generation international travellers.

Pre-Departure Orientation Programme: A mandatory (or strongly recommended) orientation session held before each departure wave, covering practical logistics, academic expectations at the host institution, safety and wellbeing abroad, and peer testimonials from returning students. Format: 2–3 hour in-person or hybrid session, supplemented by an online resource module.

Erasmus Student Ambassador Network: A structured programme in which students who have completed a successful Erasmus+ mobility are trained and recruited as Erasmus Ambassadors. Their responsibilities include: presenting at pre-departure orientations, answering questions from newly selected students, contributing to social media content, and participating in IRO open days. Ambassadors receive formal recognition in their academic record (ECTS through co-curricular recognition where institutional policy allows).

Buddy Programme (Incoming and Outgoing): A peer support scheme matching each incoming international student with a local student volunteer (buddy) for the first month of their stay. For outgoing students, the IRO facilitates contact with former students

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or current alumni at the destination institution. Buddy coordinators receive a short training session on intercultural communication and the limits of their support role (i.e., knowing when to escalate to professional staff).

Inclusion and Diversity as a Core Principle of Student Support

In line with the Commission Implementing Decision - framework of inclusion measures of Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps 2021-27 , adopted in October 2021 https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/commission-decision-framework-inclusion-2021-27 , and the Implementation guidelines - Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/implementation-guidelines-erasmus-and-european-solidarity-corpsinclusion-and-diversity-strategy, International Relations Offices should ensure that mobility opportunities are accessible to all participants, particularly those facing barriers that may limit their participation in international activities. The Erasmus+ Programme recognises that students and staff may encounter economic, social, cultural, geographical, educational, health-related, or disability-related obstacles that reduce their ability to access international mobility opportunities. Consequently, inclusion and diversity should not be treated as separate initiatives, but rather as transversal principles integrated into all stages of mobility management, from promotion and selection to mobility implementation and post-mobility support.

The Erasmus+ Programme Guide emphasises that institutions must adopt an inclusive approach when designing and implementing mobility activities. This requires International Relations Offices to proactively identify potential barriers, provide targeted support measures, and ensure that all participants have equitable access to information, funding opportunities, and administrative assistance.

The Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy identifies eight broad categories of barriers that may affect participation in mobility programmes:

1. Disabilities, including physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychosocial disabilities requiring adapted support measures;
2. Health-related barriers, including chronic illnesses, temporary medical conditions, or mental health challenges that may affect participation in international activities;
3. Educational and training barriers, such as learning difficulties, low academic confidence, interrupted educational pathways, or limited previous international exposure;
4. Cultural differences, including language barriers, intercultural adaptation challenges, and limited familiarity with international environments;

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5. Social barriers, including family responsibilities, social isolation, or limited support networks;
6. Economic barriers, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds who may perceive mobility as financially inaccessible despite available grants;
7. Barriers linked to discrimination, including those related to gender, ethnicity, religion, migrant background, or other characteristics protected under national and European legislation;
8. Geographical barriers, affecting participants from rural, remote, peripheral, or less-developed regions with reduced access to international opportunities and information.

To address these challenges effectively, the IRO should establish a comprehensive inclusion support framework. This framework should begin during the promotion phase by ensuring that all Erasmus+ calls, information materials, and application procedures are accessible, clear, and available through multiple communication channels. Special attention should be given to reaching underrepresented student groups through targeted information sessions, collaboration with student support services, and direct engagement with faculty members.

During the selection and preparation phases, participants with fewer opportunities should be offered individual counselling sessions to discuss their specific needs and identify appropriate support measures. Where applicable, the IRO should assist students in applying for Erasmus+ Inclusion Support funding, additional top-up grants, or other financial mechanisms designed to compensate for extra costs related to disability, health conditions, or socio-economic disadvantages.

Practical support measures may include assistance with accommodation arrangements, accessible transportation options, visa procedures, medical documentation, and adaptation of mobility schedules. Institutions should also designate a dedicated inclusion contact person within the IRO responsible for coordinating support before, during, and after the mobility period.

Particular attention should be paid to students with disabilities or specific health conditions. In such cases, the sending institution should maintain close communication with the host university to ensure that appropriate academic, physical, and administrative accommodations are available upon arrival. Early planning is essential to guarantee accessibility of campus facilities, accommodation, teaching activities, and support services.

Mental health and wellbeing constitute another important dimension of inclusive

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mobility. Students should be informed about available counselling services both at the sending and receiving institutions. Regular wellbeing check-ins during the mobility period can help identify emerging difficulties related to adaptation, loneliness, academic stress, or cultural adjustment. Clear referral procedures should be established to facilitate access to professional support whenever necessary.

For students originating from rural or remote areas, additional preparatory activities may be beneficial, including workshops focused on intercultural communication, international travel planning, financial management abroad, and practical aspects of living independently in a foreign country. Such measures help reduce anxiety and increase confidence among first-time mobility participants.

Finally, institutions should systematically monitor participation rates among students with fewer opportunities and evaluate the effectiveness of inclusion measures implemented. Annual reviews of mobility statistics, participant feedback, and identified barriers can help the IRO refine its support services and contribute to the broader objective of making Erasmus+ mobility genuinely accessible to all members of the academic community.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Referral Protocol: The IRO should develop a clear protocol for identifying and referring students who are experiencing mental health difficulties before, during, or after their mobility. This includes: a brief wellbeing check during pre-departure orientation, a mid-mobility check-in question on overall wellbeing, a referral pathway to the institution's counselling service for returning students experiencing readjustment difficulties, and staff training on recognising signs of distress in email or platform communications.

Academic Integration Support for Incoming Students: A programme of academic integration support specifically for incoming students, delivered in the first two weeks of the semester. Elements include: a writing centre session on academic conventions at the host institution, a library and research resources orientation, a meeting with a designated academic tutor or faculty contact, and access to recorded lectures or supplementary materials for challenging courses.

Staff Mobility Support: The IRO's support responsibilities extend to academic and administrative staff undertaking Teaching Assignments (STA) or Staff Training (STT) mobilities. The following should be in place for staff participants:

- A dedicated Staff Mobility Guide covering grant conditions, teaching programme

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requirements (STA: minimum 8 hours per week of teaching), eligible activities for STT, and reporting obligations.

- A staff pre-departure checklist mirroring the student version, adapted for professional travel contexts (institutional insurance, travel authorisation procedures, substitution arrangements).
- Post-mobility debriefing session with the IRO to capture knowledge transfer outcomes and identify whether the partnership warrants a strengthened IIA or new cooperation activities.
- Formal recognition of mobility participation in staff development records and, where applicable, in performance review frameworks.

4.9.5 Quality Assurance (QA) and continuous improvement

Monitoring and Evaluation: The IRO should establish a regular monitoring cycle to assess the effectiveness of its partnership portfolio, logistics processes, and student support programmes. Key indicators to track include:

Indicator	Guidance
Mobility balance ratio	Ratio of outgoing to incoming students per partner. A sustained imbalance (>2:1) should trigger a review conversation with the partner IRO.
Grant absorption rate	Percentage of available grants awarded and taken up. A low rate may indicate barriers in the application process or insufficient awareness.
Academic recognition rate	Percentage of returning students whose credits abroad are fully recognised without reduction. Below 90% warrants a review of the LA process.
Student satisfaction score	Average rating from post-mobility participant reports. Target: above 4.0 / 5.0. Scores below 3.5 for a specific partner trigger a quality review.
Early return rate	Percentage of students who return before the planned end date. Target: below 5%. Each early return should be documented with reasons.
IIA renewal rate	Percentage of agreements renewed before expiry. Target: above 85% of active agreements renewed on time.

Annual IRO Review Cycle: The following annual calendar supports continuous improvement in IRO operations:

- **September–October:** Review returning student feedback from the previous

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academic year. Update country fact sheets and FAQ document.

- **November:** Annual review of IIA portfolio — flag dormant agreements, initiate renewals for agreements expiring in the following 12 months.
- **December–January:** Partner identification exercise for the following cycle — identify gaps in the partnership portfolio by faculty and region.
- **February–March:** Pre-departure orientation for spring departures. Update pre-departure information pack.
- **April–May:** Mid-year check-in with all students currently on mobility. Process Learning Agreement amendments.
- **June–July:** Close outgoing mobility files. Confirm transcript receipt. Begin grant closure process.
- **August:** Annual report to institutional leadership on mobility volumes, partner performance, and internationalization KPIs. Prepare selection session configuration for the coming year.

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5 INNOVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

5.1 Strategies to increase global engagement

Global engagement is an essential dimension of higher education, shaping how institutions connect, collaborate, and position themselves in an increasingly interconnected academic landscape. For Moldovan HEIs, strengthening this dimension is not only about increasing international visibility, but also about creating meaningful, lasting links with partners abroad and integrating international perspectives into their core activities. The following strategies outline practical ways in which institutions can gradually expand and consolidate their global engagement, building on existing capacities while responding to emerging opportunities and challenges.

- **Building stronger, long-term partnerships.** One of the most effective ways for Moldovan HEIs to increase their global engagement is to focus on fewer but more meaningful international partnerships. Rather than relying on occasional collaboration, institutions benefit from working closely with selected partners over time, identifying common priorities and developing joint activities. This could include regular exchanges, shared academic initiatives, or coordinated project participation. When partnerships are stable and based on trust, they tend to generate more opportunities and make institutions more visible internationally.
- **Bringing an international dimension into teaching.** Global engagement should not be limited to mobility; it needs to be reflected in what and how students learn. This means gradually integrating international perspectives into curricula, whether through joint courses, visiting lecturers, or comparative approaches in teaching. Offering programmes in English and supporting academic staff in teaching international cohorts can also make a significant difference. Over time, this helps create an academic environment that feels connected to a wider global context.
- **Taking a more active role in international programmes.** Participation in programmes such as Erasmus+ or Horizon Europe is already important, but there is room for Moldovan HEIs to become more proactive. Strengthening internal expertise in writing and managing projects can help institutions move from being occasional partners to more central actors in international consortia. This not only increases access to funding, but also strengthens institutional credibility and opens new collaboration channels.
- **Rethinking mobility opportunities.** Mobility remains a key element of internationalization, but it does not have to follow a single model. Alongside traditional exchanges,

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shorter or blended formats can make international experiences more accessible to a wider group of students and staff. Encouraging staff mobility is equally important, as it often leads to longer-term academic cooperation. A more flexible and inclusive approach to mobility can significantly broaden participation.

➢ **Improving international visibility.** Being active internationally also means being visible. Many Moldovan HEIs could benefit from clearer and more consistent communication in English, especially online. Up-to-date websites, accessible information for international partners, and the dissemination of project results all contribute to a stronger institutional profile. Participating in international events, whether physically or online, also helps create connections that may lead to future collaboration.

➢ **Connecting with global challenges.** International engagement is increasingly linked to addressing shared global issues. Aligning institutional activities with topics such as sustainability, digital transformation, or skills development can make cooperation more relevant and attractive to partners. It also creates opportunities to work not only with universities, but also with external stakeholders such as companies or public bodies, which adds another dimension to internationalization.

➢ **Strengthening internal structures.** Global engagement cannot rely only on individual initiatives; it needs to be supported at institutional level. This means having clear strategies, well-functioning international offices, and staff who are trained to manage international cooperation. When responsibilities and processes are well defined, international activities become more coherent and easier to sustain over time.

➢ **Creating a supportive institutional culture.** Finally, internationalization works best when it is seen as part of everyday academic life. Encouraging staff to get involved in international activities, recognizing these efforts, and sharing experiences across the institution can make a real difference. Over time, this helps build a culture where global engagement is not an extra task, but a natural part of how the institution operates.

5.2 Examples of research and teaching collaborations

Active global engagement thrives on concrete, mutually beneficial academic activities. For Moldovan HEIs, transitioning from passive agreements (e.g., dormant MoUs) to active collaborations can be achieved through several scalable formats.

- **Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)**

COIL is often one of the most practical ways to internationalise teaching when

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resources are limited. At its core, it is simply about two lecturers, one from a Moldovan university and one from a partner institution abroad, working together to design a shared learning experience. Instead of sending students to the partner institution, the international dimension is brought directly into the classroom through online collaboration.

What makes COIL particularly valuable is not just the connection between institutions, but how that connection is used. The module is planned jointly, so both sides agree on what students should learn and how they will work together. This usually leads to small, mixed groups of students who collaborate on a task over several weeks: analysing a case, solving a problem, or developing a joint project. In doing so, students are not only learning academic content, but also figuring out how to communicate, negotiate, and organise themselves across different cultures and academic expectations.

From the students' perspective, this tends to be a very different experience from a traditional course. They are no longer working only with classmates they already know, but with peers who may have different ways of thinking, studying, or approaching deadlines. At first, that can feel challenging, but it is precisely what helps them develop key skills: how to work in international teams, how to communicate clearly online, and how to adapt when things don't go exactly as planned.

For Moldovan HEIs, COIL can make a real difference because it lowers many of the usual barriers to internationalization. There is no need for travel funding, visa procedures, or long administrative processes. A well-designed COIL activity can be integrated into an existing course and reach an entire class, rather than just a handful of mobile students. In that sense, it helps move from "internationalization for a few" to "internationalization for all."

It can also be a useful starting point for building deeper partnerships. Working together on a COIL module allows academic staff to get to know each other, understand how their institutions operate, and identify areas for further collaboration. In many cases, these first small-scale teaching collaborations later evolve into joint research, staff exchanges, or even more structured programmes.

Of course, COIL does not run on its own. Lecturers need time and support to design the activities and coordinate with their counterparts. It also requires some flexibility from institutions to recognise this type of work and to ensure that the necessary digital tools are in place. But once those conditions are there, even modestly, COIL can become a regular part of teaching.

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Over time, incorporating approaches like COIL can help create a more open and internationally connected learning environment within Moldovan universities—one where students gain international experience as part of their everyday studies, rather than having to wait for an opportunity to go abroad.

- **Joint Supervision and Mentorship. The generation of co-authored scientific publications**

Establishing structured frameworks where Master's or PhD students are co-supervised by academics from a Moldovan university and an international partner creates a more integrated and collaborative research environment. In practice, this approach goes far beyond simply sharing supervisory responsibilities. It encourages regular academic exchange, joint definition of research questions, and exposure to different methodological traditions and research cultures. For students, it provides access to a broader pool of expertise, infrastructures, and academic networks, often leading to higher-quality research outcomes and a more international academic profile. For institutions, it builds durable partnerships that evolve naturally from individual supervision relationships into wider cooperation in research projects, teaching, and institutional development.

One of the most immediate outcomes of joint supervision is the generation of co-authored scientific publications involving researchers from both institutions. These outputs are particularly valuable in the context of international rankings, where indicators such as international research collaboration, citation impact, and publication in high-impact journals carry significant weight. Co-supervised research tends to produce publications with higher visibility, as they benefit from combined networks of dissemination and often address topics of broader, cross-border relevance. As a result, these publications are more likely to be cited, which positively influences bibliometric indicators used in rankings such as QS and Times Higher Education. Over time, even a modest but consistent increase in internationally co-authored outputs can noticeably improve an institution's research performance metrics.

Furthermore, joint supervision contributes to strengthening academic reputation, another key dimension in global rankings. When Moldovan HEIs are consistently involved in co-supervision with well-established international universities, they become more visible within global academic communities. This visibility is reinforced through conference participation, joint doctoral committees, and collaborative dissemination activities, all of which position the institution as an active and credible partner in international research.

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In parallel, co-supervised graduates themselves often become ambassadors of these collaborations, continuing their academic careers in international contexts and contributing to long-term reputation building.

From a strategic perspective, co-supervised research also helps Moldovan HEIs align more closely with European practices within the European Research Area, where joint doctoral training and cross-border supervision are increasingly common.

- **International Seminars: A success story at Universitat Politècnica de València**

At the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), the development of the "International Seminars" programme has proven to be a practical and highly effective mechanism for internationalising the curriculum in a flexible and resource-efficient way. The model is conceptually simple but strategically powerful: by mobilising Erasmus+ guest lecturers, a full semester course is delivered through a sequence of short teaching visits, typically resulting in a 14-week programme with 14 international academics. Each lecturer contributes a specialised session aligned with their expertise, collectively forming a coherent course taught entirely in English. This approach allows institutions to introduce internationalised teaching modules without increasing permanent teaching loads or requiring additional recruitment, effectively achieving a "zero-cost in personnel" solution while maintaining high academic quality.

From an academic perspective, the benefits are immediate and tangible. Students are exposed to a wide variety of international perspectives, teaching styles, and disciplinary approaches within a single course, significantly enriching their learning experience. The diversity of lecturers also increases the attractiveness of the course, often improving student engagement and motivation. At the institutional level, the programme strengthens ties with multiple partner universities simultaneously, as each visiting lecturer becomes a potential gateway to further collaboration in research, mobility, or joint programmes. In this sense, International Seminars serve not only as a teaching innovation, but also as a catalyst for broader internationalization processes.

The model is also particularly well aligned with the objectives and funding logic of Erasmus+ KA171. Under KA171, universities can invite teaching staff from partner countries to deliver short-term teaching assignments, typically funded through mobility grants covering travel and subsistence. By strategically coordinating these individual mobilities within a single course framework, institutions can maximise the impact of each mobility

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flow. Instead of isolated teaching visits, mobilities become part of a structured academic offer, generating cumulative value over the semester. This allows Moldovan HEIs, for example, to transform a limited number of incoming mobilities into a visible, high-impact internationalised course offer.

In practical terms, implementation within KA171 requires careful planning and co-ordination. First, the host institution defines the course structure, learning outcomes, and thematic scope, ensuring coherence across the different sessions. Partner universities are then engaged through existing inter-institutional agreements, with each partner nominating a lecturer whose expertise matches a specific topic within the course. Teaching assignments are scheduled sequentially across the semester, and recognition of teaching workload is formalised through mobility agreements. Digital tools—such as electronic signatures and shared platforms—can greatly facilitate the preparation and validation of mobility documents, learning agreements, and teaching plans, reducing administrative overhead and enabling smoother coordination.

For Moldovan HEIs, adopting this model offers a particularly attractive pathway to internationalise curricula despite limited resources. It enables the introduction of English-taught modules without requiring a fully internationalised permanent faculty, while simultaneously increasing exposure to European academic standards and practices. Moreover, it supports staff development through peer exchange and fosters opportunities for follow-up collaboration, including joint research or co-supervised theses. Over time, these interactions can contribute to strengthening institutional reputation and expanding international networks.

In sum, the International Seminars model demonstrates how Erasmus+ mobility funding can be leveraged in a more strategic and integrated way. By reframing individual teaching mobilities as components of a structured academic programme, universities can deliver high-impact internationalization outcomes at minimal cost, while enhancing the quality, visibility, and sustainability of their educational offer.

5.3 Tools and methods for active collaboration

Successful collaboration requires removing administrative barriers and providing the right infrastructure for academics to connect. Strategic implementation relies on both technological and institutional tools:

Digital Collaboration Ecosystems: Beyond basic video conferencing, institutions

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should utilize integrated platforms (like Moodle, Microsoft Teams, or specialized COIL networks) that allow secure document sharing, joint grading, and asynchronous student interaction across borders.

Academic "Matchmaking" Initiatives: IROs can organize virtual networking events or "pitch sessions" focused on specific academic disciplines (e.g., agriculture, engineering, arts) where researchers from partner universities present their work to find potential collaborators.

Action-Oriented MoUs: Moving away from generic Memorandums of Understanding by utilizing "Action Plan Templates." Every new partnership agreement should include a specific appendix detailing the exact activities (e.g., 2 guest lectures, 1 joint publication) expected within the first 12–24 months.

Internal Seed Funding: Providing small institutional grants (e.g., travel stipends or access to premium research software) to academics who actively initiate joint projects with international partners.

5.4 Curriculum development

Curriculum development represents one of the most important dimensions of higher education internationalization. While student and staff mobility remain highly visible components of internationalization strategies, only a minority of students participate in physical mobility opportunities during their studies. Consequently, higher education institutions must ensure that international, intercultural, inclusive, digital, and sustainability-related dimensions are embedded directly into curricula, teaching methods, learning outcomes, and assessment practices. This approach, commonly referred to as Internationalization at Home (IaH), enables all students to acquire global competences regardless of their ability to participate in international mobility.

The European Commission increasingly encourages higher education institutions to move beyond mobility-centred internationalization and adopt comprehensive curriculum internationalization strategies. These strategies should ensure that graduates develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to operate effectively in multicultural, multilingual, and globally interconnected environments.

Internationalization at Home (IaH)

Internationalization at Home refers to the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.

The concept recognises that mobility opportunities remain inaccessible to many students due to financial, social, family, health, or geographical constraints. Therefore, international

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competences must be developed through curriculum design, teaching activities, virtual collaboration, international guest lectures, multilingual learning environments, and intercultural engagement on campus.

Key components of Internationalization at Home include:

- Integration of international perspectives into course content;
- Comparative analysis of global case studies;
- Use of international literature and research sources;
- Participation of international students in classroom activities;
- Guest lectures from foreign academics and industry experts;
- Multilingual and intercultural learning environments;
- Virtual collaboration with students from partner universities;
- Development of global citizenship and sustainability competences.

By embedding these dimensions within academic programmes, institutions ensure that internationalization becomes a learning outcome for all students rather than a privilege available only to mobile participants.

Curriculum Mapping for Internationalization

An essential first step in curriculum internationalization is curriculum mapping. This process involves systematically reviewing study programmes to identify where international, intercultural, digital, and sustainability-related competences are currently developed and where gaps exist.

Curriculum mapping should examine:

- Programme learning outcomes;
- Course learning outcomes;
- Teaching methodologies;
- Assessment methods;
- International content and perspectives;
- Intercultural learning opportunities;
- Sustainability-related competencies;
- Digital and collaborative skills.

A curriculum mapping exercise allows programme teams to identify areas where additional internationalization measures may be integrated without necessarily creating new courses.

Internationalising Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes represent the most effective mechanism for embedding internationalization within academic programmes.

Programme learning outcomes should explicitly include competencies such as:

- Intercultural communication;
- Global citizenship;

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- International teamwork;
- Multilingual communication;
- Ethical awareness in global contexts;
- Digital collaboration across borders;
- Sustainability awareness;
- Adaptability and resilience in multicultural environments;
- Critical understanding of global challenges.

Examples of internationalised learning outcomes include:

- Analyse professional issues from multiple international perspectives;
- Communicate effectively within multicultural teams;
- Apply intercultural awareness in professional decision-making;
- Evaluate the global dimensions of disciplinary challenges;
- Demonstrate understanding of sustainable development principles in international contexts.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has emerged as one of the most effective instruments for curriculum internationalization.

COIL involves structured online collaboration between students and academic staff from institutions located in different countries. Through joint assignments, discussions, projects, and presentations, students develop intercultural competencies without leaving their home institution.

Typical COIL activities include:

- Joint virtual classrooms;
- International teamwork projects;
- Collaborative case studies;
- Online simulations;
- Shared research assignments;
- Virtual debates and workshops.

COIL contributes simultaneously to internationalization, inclusion, and digital transformation priorities by making international experiences accessible to a wider range of students.

Virtual Exchange and Global Classrooms

Virtual Exchange initiatives complement physical mobility by creating opportunities for sustained intercultural interaction through digital platforms.

Global Classrooms may connect students from multiple countries simultaneously, allowing them to work on common themes such as climate change, food security, digital transformation, public health, entrepreneurship, or sustainable development.

Benefits include:

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- Increased access to international experiences;
- Reduced financial barriers;
- Lower environmental impact compared to physical mobility;
- Development of digital collaboration skills;
- Strengthened institutional partnerships.

Virtual mobility should be recognised as a valuable complement to physical mobility rather than a substitute.

English-Taught Modules and International Learning Environments

The gradual development of English-taught courses and programmes remains an important internationalization strategy.

English-medium instruction contributes to:

- Attraction of international students;
- Increased participation of visiting professors;
- Improved international visibility;
- Greater integration within European higher education networks.

However, institutions should adopt a balanced multilingual approach that preserves national languages while increasing international accessibility.

Exchange Windows and Mobility-Friendly Curriculum Design

Mobility opportunities are often constrained by rigid curriculum structures and recognition difficulties.

To address these challenges, institutions should introduce mobility windows—dedicated periods within study programmes specifically designed for international study experiences.

Effective mobility windows should:

- Be integrated within programme structures;
- Include clearly defined recognition procedures;
- Minimise overlap with compulsory courses;
- Facilitate automatic credit transfer;
- Support participation by students from all academic disciplines.

Well-designed mobility windows contribute significantly to increased participation rates and more equitable access to international experiences.

Joint Programmes, Double Degrees and European Degrees

Advanced forms of curriculum internationalization involve the joint development of academic programmes with foreign partner institutions.

Joint and double degree programmes require:

- Curriculum alignment;
- Harmonised learning outcomes;

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- Shared quality assurance procedures;
- Agreed assessment standards;
- Automatic credit recognition mechanisms;
- Integrated student support systems.

Such programmes provide students with enhanced international learning experiences and strengthen institutional cooperation.

Future developments within the European Education Area increasingly promote the concept of European Degrees, which may further encourage transnational curriculum integration.

Microcredentials and Flexible International Learning Pathways

Microcredentials represent a rapidly growing area of European higher education policy.

They consist of short, targeted learning experiences that certify specific competencies and can be accumulated over time.

Internationally-oriented microcredentials may focus on:

- Intercultural communication;
- European integration;
- Sustainable development;
- Digital transformation;
- Global leadership;
- International project management;
- Artificial intelligence in global contexts.

Jointly developed microcredentials with international partners can provide flexible opportunities for lifelong learning and international engagement.

Sustainability Competences and Global Citizenship

Contemporary curriculum development should integrate sustainability as a transversal theme across disciplines.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a useful framework for embedding global challenges into teaching and learning.

Students should develop competencies related to:

- Environmental responsibility;
- Social inclusion;
- Ethical decision-making;
- Responsible global citizenship;
- Climate action;
- Sustainable innovation.

These competencies contribute simultaneously to sustainable internationalization and employability.

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Quality Assurance and International Accreditation

Curriculum internationalization should be supported by systematic quality assurance mechanisms.

Institutions should regularly review programmes using indicators such as:

- International content within curricula;
- Participation in COIL and Virtual Exchange activities;
- International learning outcomes achievement;
- Student satisfaction;
- Graduate employability in international contexts;
- Participation of international academic staff.

Where appropriate, institutions may seek international accreditation from recognised agencies and professional bodies to strengthen programme visibility and international recognition.

Programme Review and Continuous Improvement

Curriculum internationalization should be embedded within regular programme review processes.

Annual or periodic reviews should assess:

- Achievement of international learning outcomes;
- Feedback from students and employers;
- Alignment with international developments in the discipline;
- Opportunities for new partnerships and joint programmes;
- Integration of digital, inclusive, and sustainable approaches.

Through systematic curriculum development, higher education institutions can ensure that internationalization becomes an integral component of educational quality and graduate preparation, rather than being limited exclusively to mobility activities.

5.5 Green internationalization

The internationalization of higher education has traditionally focused on increasing mobility flows, expanding international partnerships, and enhancing global engagement. However, growing concerns regarding climate change, environmental sustainability, and responsible resource consumption have led universities worldwide to reconsider the environmental implications of international activities.

In line with the European Green Deal, the Erasmus+ Programme 2021–2027, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), higher education institutions are increasingly expected to integrate sustainability principles into all dimensions of internationalization.

Green Internationalization refers to the systematic integration of environmental

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sustainability considerations into internationalization policies, strategies, mobility schemes, partnerships, and institutional operations.

Rather than limiting sustainability efforts to environmental awareness campaigns, universities are encouraged to adopt a whole-institution approach that reduces the environmental footprint of international activities while maintaining the educational, scientific, and intercultural benefits of international cooperation.

For International Relations Offices (IROs), this means moving beyond mobility administration towards a more strategic role in promoting environmentally responsible internationalization.

European Policy Context

Green internationalization is strongly aligned with several European policy frameworks, including:

- ***European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019)*** https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en ;
- ***Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021–2027*** https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/2021-erasmusplus-programme-guide_en.pdf ;
- ***European Strategy for Universities (2022)*** https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf ;
- ***Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on learning for the green transition*** and sustainable development 2022/C 243/01 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022H0627(01) ;
- ***2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*** https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda .

Particular relevance exists for:

- SDG 4 – Quality Education;
- SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities;
- SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production;
- SDG 13 – Climate Action;
- SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals.

Universities are therefore encouraged to integrate sustainability not only into teaching and research but also into international cooperation activities.

Aligning with the European Green Deal and the overarching priorities of the current Erasmus+ programme, internationalization strategies must address their environmental

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footprint. Moldovan HEIs can integrate sustainability into their global engagement through several approaches.

Sustainable Mobility Policies: While physical mobility remains essential, institutions can incentivize "green travel" (e.g., choosing trains or buses over flights for regional European travel where feasible) and strongly promote blended mobility formats that reduce the overall frequency of long-haul travel.

IROs should therefore actively promote Green Mobility principles by encouraging participants to choose environmentally friendly transportation options whenever feasible.

Examples include:

- rail transport;
- coach transportation;
- car-sharing arrangements;
- combined mobility solutions;
- longer-duration mobilities reducing travel frequency.

Green mobility should not be viewed as a restriction but rather as an opportunity to maintain international engagement while reducing environmental impact.

Practical Actions for IROs

- ✓ Include green travel information in mobility calls.
- ✓ Provide guidance on sustainable transport routes.
- ✓ Promote longer-term mobilities instead of multiple short trips.
- ✓ Encourage blended mobility whenever appropriate.
- ✓ Collect data on transportation modes used by participants.

The Erasmus+ Programme explicitly promotes Green Travel by providing additional financial support for participants using low-emission means of transport.

According to the Erasmus+ Programme Guide, green travel generally includes:

- train;
- bus;
- carpooling;
- other shared low-emission transport options.

Responsibilities of International Relations Offices

International Relations Offices play a central role in promoting and implementing Green Travel measures. IRO staff should be trained to:

- inform participants about available Green Travel opportunities;

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- provide guidance on sustainable travel routes and alternatives;
- support participants in understanding eligibility requirements;
- verify supporting documentation in accordance with programme regulations;
- monitor institutional Green Travel participation rates;
- contribute to institutional sustainability reporting.

Furthermore, IROs should actively promote awareness regarding the environmental implications of international mobility and encourage participants to consider sustainability aspects when planning their journeys.

Documentation and Compliance

To ensure compliance with Erasmus+ regulations, institutions should establish clear procedures for documenting Green Travel activities. Depending on programme requirements, supporting evidence may include:

- travel tickets;
- invoices;
- travel itineraries;
- proof of transportation mode used;
- participant declarations where applicable.

Institutions should ensure that all documentation clearly demonstrates the travel route, dates of travel, and the transportation method employed.

Strategic Benefits of Green Travel

Beyond financial incentives, Green Travel contributes to broader institutional objectives by:

- reducing the carbon footprint associated with mobility activities;
- supporting institutional sustainability commitments;
- strengthening alignment with European environmental priorities;
- contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 13 (Climate Action);
- promoting environmentally responsible behaviour among students and staff.

As sustainability becomes an increasingly important dimension of European higher education policy, Green Travel represents a practical mechanism through which universities can balance international engagement with environmental responsibility.

Good Practice Example

An institution may establish annual Green Mobility targets as part of its internationalization strategy. Examples of institutional indicators include:

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Indicator	Example Target
Share of Green Travel mobilities	25% of total mobilities
Participants informed about Green Travel	100%
Green Travel awareness sessions organized	Minimum 2 annually
CO_2 emissions monitored	Annual reporting implemented

The integration of Green Travel indicators into institutional monitoring systems enables universities to assess progress, identify improvement opportunities, and demonstrate their contribution to sustainable internationalization objectives.

Digital and Paperless Administration

The digital transformation of higher education internationalization has accelerated significantly in recent years, driven by the increasing need for efficiency, transparency, sustainability, and interoperability across European higher education institutions.

One of the most important developments in this area is the establishment of the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) Network, a European digital infrastructure designed to enable secure and paperless exchange of mobility-related information between higher education institutions participating in Erasmus+.

The implementation of Erasmus Without Paper represents a fundamental shift from traditional document-based administration towards fully digital mobility management processes. For International Relations Offices (IROs), EWP is not merely a technological tool but a strategic instrument supporting institutional modernization, administrative simplification, and sustainable internationalization.

Fully implementing the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) network and using digital signatures for inter-institutional agreements, learning agreements, and transcripts can drastically reduce paper waste and streamline administrative workflows. Beyond the clear efficiency gains for managers, extending the use of electronic certificates to students amplifies these benefits by enabling entirely paperless mobility processes, from application to recognition, without printing, scanning, or physically transporting documents. This not only reduces the environmental impact associated with paper consumption, printing, and courier services, but also shortens processing times and minimizes the risk of document loss or duplication.

The implementation of EWP enables IROs to transition from administrative transaction management towards strategic mobility management.

Benefits include:

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- faster processing of mobility procedures;
- improved data quality;
- enhanced institutional coordination;
- increased transparency;
- better compliance with Erasmus+ requirements;
- reduced administrative workload.

The successful implementation of Erasmus Without Paper requires institutional readiness across multiple dimensions.

Governance Readiness

Institutional leadership should formally support digital transformation initiatives through:

- strategic planning;
- resource allocation;
- internal policies;
- staff training programmes.

Technical Readiness

Institutions must ensure compatibility between their Student Information Systems and EWP infrastructure.

This may involve:

- software upgrades;
- integration of digital mobility platforms;
- data security measures;
- interoperability testing.

Human Capacity Readiness

Staff members require adequate training regarding:

- EWP workflows;
- digital document management;
- data protection requirements;
- mobility process redesign.

As mobility information is exchanged electronically, institutions must ensure compliance with: European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/data-protection-regulation/ .

When both staff and students are equipped with secure digital identities, universities can move towards a fully digital mobility lifecycle in which all documents are created,

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signed, exchanged, and archived electronically. This contributes directly to greener internationalization by lowering the carbon footprint of mobility management while fostering more sustainable administrative practices across partner institutions. At the same time, students benefit from greater autonomy and faster procedures, as they can sign and submit documents remotely, which is particularly valuable in cross-border contexts. In this sense, the widespread adoption of electronic certificates becomes not only a technical improvement, but a concrete step towards embedding sustainability principles into the everyday functioning of internationalization in higher education.

Integrating Sustainability into Academic Cooperation: Prioritizing international partnerships and joint research projects that focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as climate change, renewable energy, or sustainable agriculture.

When establishing new international partnerships, universities should consider sustainability-related criteria alongside traditional academic indicators.

Potential criteria may include:

- institutional sustainability strategies;
- commitment to the SDGs;
- participation in climate-related initiatives;
- environmental management systems;
- sustainability-focused research centres;
- green campus policies;
- community engagement activities.

Role of IROs in Supporting Sustainability Research Networks

Modern International Relations Offices increasingly act as facilitators of international knowledge ecosystems.

Their responsibilities may include:

- identifying sustainability-oriented funding opportunities;
- supporting consortium building;
- facilitating researcher matchmaking;
- promoting interdisciplinary cooperation;
- disseminating partnership opportunities;
- supporting participation in European research programmes.

Particular attention should be given to opportunities under:

- Horizon Europe;

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- Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships;
- Erasmus+ Capacity Building Projects;
- COST Actions;
- European University Alliances;
- Interreg programmes.

Green Campus Initiatives as a Global Bridge: Linking the university's internal sustainability efforts (like recycling programs or energy-efficient campuses) with international student networks and global eco-campus rankings to foster a shared culture of environmental responsibility.

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6. INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND SUPPORT SERVICES

International partnerships are the structural foundation of global engagement. However, signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is merely the starting point; the true value lies in the active management of these relationships and the quality of support provided to the mobile students and staff who bring these partnerships to life. For Moldovan HEIs, developing systematic partnership management and comprehensive support services is crucial for building a sustainable international reputation.

6.1 Building and sustaining partnerships

A common challenge for universities worldwide is the accumulation of "dormant" agreements, MoUs that generate no concrete activities. To maximize resources and strategic impact, Moldovan HEIs should adopt a quality-over-quantity approach to partnership building

- Strategic Alignment: Partnerships should not be initiated purely on an ad-hoc basis by individual researchers. They must align with the institution's overall strategic plan. Before signing an agreement, institutions should assess if the potential partner offers complementary academic strengths, shares similar institutional goals, or opens access to a priority geographical region.
- Mutual Benefit and Reciprocity: Sustainable partnerships require a balanced exchange of value. This might involve reciprocal student mobility, co-supervision of doctoral candidates, or pooling complementary resources to apply for joint European funding (such as Erasmus+ KA2 or Horizon Europe).
- Designated "Champions": Every active partnership should have a designated academic or administrative "champion" within the university who is responsible for maintaining regular communication, exploring new avenues for collaboration, and advocating for the partnership internally.
- Regular Health Checks: IROs should implement a bi-annual review process for all institutional agreements. Partnerships that have yielded no student exchanges, joint research, or staff mobility within a three-year window should either be strategically revitalized or formally retired.

6.2 Services for international students and staff

Attracting international talent is only half the challenge; retaining them and ensuring

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a positive experience requires robust, user-centric support services. A negative administrative experience can severely damage an institution's international reputation. Moldovan HEIs should strive to develop a "One-Stop-Shop" approach for international support:

- Pre-Arrival Support: Clear, accurate, and English-language guidance on visa applications, residence permits, health insurance, and accommodation options. This information must be easily accessible on the institutional website prior to the student or staff member's arrival.
- Comprehensive Onboarding: Organizing mandatory "Welcome Weeks" that go beyond campus tours. Orientation should cover academic expectations, grading systems, cultural adaptation, and practical life in Moldova (transportation, banking, emergency contacts).
- Buddy and Mentorship Programmes: Pairing incoming international students with trained local student "buddies," and incoming academic staff with faculty mentors. This facilitates peer-to-peer integration, language practice, and social inclusion.

Administrative Accessibility: Ensuring that all critical administrative units (registry, IT support, library, housing) have at least one English-speaking staff member and that essential university documents (regulations, forms, syllabi) are officially translated.

6.3 Partnership management templates

Standardizing the documentation used in international relations reduces bureaucratic friction, ensures legal compliance, and clarifies expectations. Moldovan HEIs should develop and maintain a centralized toolkit of standardized templates, accessible to all faculties:

- The Tiered MoU System: Utilizing different templates based on the commitment level. A standard MoU can serve as a broad declaration of intent, but it should be accompanied by an Action Plan Template (or Specific Agreement) that legally binds both parties to concrete activities, timelines, and financial responsibilities over a specific period (e.g., 1-2 years).
- Fact Sheets: A concise, annually updated two-page document containing all essential technical information for partners: academic calendar, nomination/application deadlines, grading scale, ECTS information, and IRO contact details.
- Partnership Evaluation Matrix: A standardized rubric used by the IRO and faculty leadership to assess the vitality of a partnership. Metrics should include the number

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of mobile students/staffs, joint publications, co-organized events, and successfully secured joint funding.

6.4 Link to needs assessment: address gaps in partnership initiation and maintenance

Based on the preliminary needs assessment conducted in WP1 (T1.2) of the IRO4ALL project, several recurring gaps in partnership initiation and maintenance were identified across Moldovan partner institutions. Addressing these is a priority for structural reform:

- Gap: Fragmented Data and Lack of Tracking: Many institutions lack a centralized, digital database of active partnerships, leading to overlapping efforts and lost institutional memory when staff leave.
    - Solution: Implement a centralized digital partnership registry (integrated with digital tools discussed in Chapter 7) accessible to all IRO staff and faculty leadership, detailing the exact status, expiration dates, and historical activity of every MoU.
- Gap: Reactive Rather than Proactive Initiation: Partnerships are often initiated in response to incoming requests rather than deliberate outward outreach based on institutional strategy.
    - Solution: Train IRO staff and academic leaders in proactive networking, proposal writing, and pitching the institution's unique value proposition at international conferences, EAIE, or NAFSA networking events.
- Gap: Language and Intercultural Barriers in Administration: A lack of confidence in professional English among wider administrative staff limits the depth of institutional cooperation.
    - Solution: Deploy targeted capacity-building and language training for non-academic staff (registry, finance, housing) to ensure the whole institution, not just the IRO, is capable of maintaining international relationships.

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7. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Digital transformation in higher education internationalization is no longer optional; it is a fundamental requirement for full participation in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Modernizing International Relations Offices (IROs) requires moving beyond the mere "digitisation" of paper documents (e.g., scanning forms into PDFs) toward true "digitalisation"—the complete rethinking and automation of administrative workflows. For Moldovan HEIs, embracing a digital-first approach ensures institutional resilience, reduces bureaucratic friction for both staff and students, and aligns local procedures with mandatory European standards.

7.1 Digital tools for internationalization management

At the institutional level, managing global engagement requires robust, secure, and interoperable digital infrastructures. Instead of relying on decentralized spreadsheets and fragmented email chains, modern IROs utilize integrated tools to govern internationalization at a macro level:

- Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems for HEIs: Dedicated CRMs allow universities to manage their entire portfolio of international partnerships centrally. These tools track the status of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), monitor the balance of exchange numbers, and provide data analytics to evaluate which partnerships are actively contributing to institutional strategic goals.
- Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) Infrastructure: The EWP network is the cornerstone of European digital mobility administration. Connecting to the EWP network—either through a third-party mobility provider or an in-house IT system—is essential for the secure, machine-to-machine exchange of Inter-Institutional Agreements (IIAs) and student nominations.
- Digital Identity and Signature Protocols: Implementing verified digital signature frameworks (such as eIDAS compliance) and joining federated authentication networks (like eduGAIN) allows academic staff and university leadership to execute legally binding international agreements rapidly and securely, without the delays of physical mail.

7.2 Platforms for collaboration, mobility tracking, and communication

While institutional management tools operate in the background, a separate layer of digital platforms is required to manage the day-to-day lifecycle of mobile students and

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facilitate active academic collaboration.

- Mobility Tracking and Lifecycle Management: IROs must deploy unified application portals that manage the entire student journey. This includes integrating with the Online Learning Agreement (OLA) platform, allowing students to seamlessly track their application status, manage course selections, and eventually receive their digital Transcript of Records. A unified dashboard prevents students from getting lost in the process and drastically reduces the email workload for IRO staff.
- Platforms for Virtual Collaboration (COIL & Blended Mobility): To support "Internationalization at Home" and green mobility formats, institutions must leverage digital learning environments (such as advanced Moodle deployments, MS Teams, or dedicated virtual exchange platforms). These platforms must be configured to allow secure, temporary access for foreign guest lecturers and international peer groups to collaborate asynchronously and synchronously.
- Streamlined Communication Channels: Effective communication relies on automation. Digital platforms should include automated email funnels that guide incoming students through necessary steps (visa application, housing registration, orientation schedules) at specific milestones, complemented by tools like the Erasmus+ App to keep mobile students informed via their smartphones.

7.3 Link to needs assessment: include digital skills gaps identified in T1.2

The successful implementation of the aforementioned digital tools depends entirely on the capacity of the staff operating them. During the Training Needs Assessment (T1.2) conducted among the Moldovan partner HEIs, several specific digital skills gaps were identified that currently constrain the pace of institutional internationalization. Addressing these gaps is a primary focus of the IRO4ALL capacity-building efforts:

1. Over-reliance on Manual Processing and Siloed Data: The assessment revealed a widespread reliance on manual data entry across disparate, non-integrated software systems (e.g., using Word and Excel to track mobilities). Staff require training on how to transition to, and trust, automated relational databases and centralised CRM environments.
2. EWP Integration Readiness: There is a significant gap in the technical and practical understanding of the Erasmus Without Paper network. IRO staff and institutional IT departments need targeted upskilling on how to implement EWP nodes,

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manage data synchronization, and troubleshoot errors in digital Inter-Institutional Agreements (IIAs) and OLAs.

3. Facilitation of Virtual and Blended Mobility: While staff are familiar with basic video conferencing, there is a gap in the competencies required to structurally support Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs). Staff require training in deploying and managing advanced digital pedagogical platforms to foster cross-border virtual teamwork.
4. Data Privacy and Security Awareness: As universities process increasing amounts of digital data across borders, there is an urgent need to enhance the digital literacy of IRO staff regarding GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) compliance, secure data sharing protocols, and cyber-hygiene when handling international student records.

7.4 Case study: Digital Transformation at USAMV Bucharest

The International Relations Office (IRO) has undergone a significant digital transformation through the design and deployment of a comprehensive online platform dedicated to the management of mobility flows. The platform serves as the operational backbone for the Erasmus+ KA1 programme as well as other international mobility schemes, streamlining every stage of the mobility lifecycle for both students and staff, in both incoming and outgoing directions.

Prior to the platform's introduction, mobility management relied heavily on manual processes, paper-based documentation, and fragmented communication channels. The digital platform has replaced these legacy workflows with a fully integrated, secure, and role-aware system that brings together applicants, faculty coordinators, and the Erasmus+ Office within a single environment.

International academic mobility has grown substantially in both volume and complexity. The IRO is responsible for coordinating a diverse portfolio of outgoing and incoming mobilities (student study periods abroad, staff teaching assignments, and staff training visits) funded through multiple sources including Erasmus+ KA1 and other bilateral or institutional schemes.

The key drivers that motivated the digital transformation initiative included:

• Increasing number of mobility applications requiring coordinated processing across multiple institutional actors.

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• Need for transparent, auditable selection processes aligned with Erasmus+ programme requirements.

• Requirement to handle bilingual documentation (Romanian and English) for international partnerships.

• Demand for real-time data access and reporting for institutional and programme-level decision-making.

• Regulatory obligation to protect applicant data in accordance with GDPR and institutional security policies.

• Strategic alignment with the European Student Card Initiative (ESCI) and its digital infrastructure.

Before the platform was introduced, the selection and mobility management processes were characterised by manual document collection, email-based coordination, and spreadsheet-driven tracking. These approaches introduced risks of data loss, version inconsistency, and delays in communication between students, coordinators, and the IRO. Reporting for programme audits required significant manual effort, and there was no systematic mechanism for logging communications or maintaining a complete audit trail.

7.4.1 The mobility management platform

The mobility management platform is a purpose-built web application that centralises all processes related to international mobility within the institution. It is designed around a multi-actor model, recognising that the mobility workflow involves distinct roles students, faculty Erasmus+ coordinators, and the central Erasmus+ Office each with specific responsibilities and access requirements.

The system architecture supports both a public-facing component (visible to prospective applicants and partner institutions) and a protected internal environment where all application, selection, and reporting activities take place. All data in transit is encrypted via SSL/TLS certificates, and all forms are protected against Cross-Site Request Forgery (CSRF) attacks.

The platform is organised around the following functional modules:

Feature Area	Description
Identity & Access Management	Full lifecycle management of user accounts: creation, activation, role assignment, password reset, authentication, authorization, and blocking. Role-based access control ensures each actor sees only the content and actions relevant

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	to their remit.
Selection Session Management	Administrators can create, configure, and publish Erasmus+ selection sessions for each academic year, setting eligibility criteria, timelines, and associated documentation requirements.
Application Submission	Students submit applications directly through the platform, uploading required documents such as CVs, Letters of Intent, Academic Status certificates, diplomas, and other supporting materials.
Faculty Coordinator Functions	Erasmus+ Faculty Coordinators can review candidate applications within their faculty, upload supporting or evaluative documents, and participate in the selection workflow.
Document Generation	The platform generates official documents — nomination letters, grant agreements, and mobility-related certificates — in Romanian or English depending on document type and destination partner.
Lists & Reports	Automated generation of selection lists, ranked candidate rosters, and programme reports for outgoing study, teaching, and training mobilities, segmented by funding source.
Data Export	All collected data can be exported in Excel format for further analysis, archiving, or submission to programme authorities.
ESC API Integration	Optional integration with the European Student Card Initiative (ESC / ESCU) via API v2, enabling digital card issuance and inter-institutional mobility data exchange.
Email Logging	All system-generated emails are logged to the database, providing a complete and auditable record of communications with applicants and coordinators.
Public Information Portal	A publicly accessible section displays course offerings, partner institution contacts, and entry points (account creation or login), presented in compliance with the institution's visual identity guidelines.

Services provided through the application:

- Content managed by accounts, with different roles and access levels specific to each;
- The entire flow of account creation, activation, password reset, authentication, authorization, blocking.
- Management of Erasmus+ selection sessions of each academic year.
- Adding, editing, viewing by students / Erasmus+ coordinators and the Erasmus+ Office of the data / documents required in the Erasmus+ selection process.

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- Possibility of adding documents by students and Erasmus+ Faculty Coordinators (CV, Letter of Intent, Academic Status, Diplomas and other documents required in the selection process).
- Creating, publishing, collecting applications, generating documents (en or ro, depending on the type of document), lists and reports for outgoing mobilities (study, teaching and training, on different funding sources);
- All data forms have client-side or server-side data validation (standard and customized, e.g. when a field in the form is validated depending on the value of another field (or more) in the same form), depending on technical needs as well as data security and integrity.
- To protect user data, all forms have Cross-Site Request Forgery (CSRF) protection, along with many other measures. Also, all traffic is protected by an SSL certificate;
- Export collected data in Excel format;
- API v2 integration with ESC (European Student Card Initiative), if desired;
- Log emails sent to the database;
- Display list of courses, contact details and account creation or login page, respecting the beneficiary's visual identity manual, on the public side of the platform.

7.4.2 Data quality, integrity, and security

All data entry forms in the platform incorporate both client-side and server-side validation. Validation rules include standard field-level checks (required fields, format constraints, character limits) as well as contextual cross-field validation, where the validity of one field may depend on the value of one or more other fields in the same form. This layered approach ensures data quality at the point of entry and reduces the need for downstream correction.

The platform implements a comprehensive security posture aligned with current web application best practices:

- CSRF Protection: All forms include Cross-Site Request Forgery tokens, preventing unauthorised requests from malicious third-party sites.
- SSL/TLS Encryption: All traffic between clients and the server is encrypted, protecting data in transit from interception.
- Authentication Controls: The account lifecycle module enforces strong

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authentication practices, with provisions for account blocking in response to suspicious activity.

- Authorisation Framework: Role-based access control ensures strict data segregation — no actor can access data or perform actions outside their defined scope.
- Input Sanitisation: Server-side validation independently re-validates all inputs, providing a defence-in-depth layer against injection attacks.

7.4.3 Scope of managed mobility types

The platform is not limited to a single type of mobility or a single funding source. Its design explicitly accommodates the full range of mobility actions relevant to the institution:

Feature Area	Description
Outgoing Student Mobility (Study)	Management of student applications for study periods at partner institutions under Erasmus+ KA1 and other bilateral agreements.
Outgoing Staff Mobility (Teaching)	Processing of staff teaching assignments (STA) at partner universities, including document generation and reporting.
Outgoing Staff Mobility (Training)	Management of staff training visits (STT), with dedicated selection sessions and grant documentation.
Incoming Mobilities	Reception and coordination of incoming student and staff mobilities, including information provision and administrative support.
Non-Erasmus Mobilities	Support for mobility flows financed through other institutional, national, or bilateral funding sources managed through the same platform.

7.4.4 Impact and outcomes of the digital transformation

Operational Efficiency

The platform has substantially reduced the administrative burden associated with mobility management. Selection sessions that previously required weeks of manual coordination can now be configured, published, and closed within the system, with real-time visibility into application progress for all stakeholders. Document generation, previously a time-intensive manual task, is now automated and available on demand.

Transparency and Equity

The formalisation of selection criteria and the centralisation of the application process within a structured digital environment have enhanced the transparency and perceived

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fairness of mobility selection. Candidates have equal access to the application interface and receive consistent, system-generated communications. The complete audit trail — application submissions, document uploads, coordinator actions, and email logs — supports institutional accountability.

Data Governance and Compliance

By consolidating mobility data within a single, secured platform, the institution has significantly improved its data governance posture. Personal data processed in the context of mobility applications is handled within a controlled environment with defined access controls, reducing exposure compared to the prior email and spreadsheet-based approach. The platform's architecture is designed to support compliance with GDPR requirements applicable to the processing of student and staff data.

Internationalization and Integration

The optional integration with the European Student Card Initiative (ESC) API v2 positions the platform in alignment with the broader European digital education ecosystem. This capability enables the institution to participate in pan-European digital mobility workflows, facilitating the digital recognition of student status and mobility documentation across partner institutions.

7.4.5 Mobility process flows

The platform supports structured, multi-step digital workflows for both outgoing and incoming mobilities. These flows are enforced within the system, ensuring each actor fulfils their role at the correct stage before the process can advance. All notifications, scheduling, document collection, and status tracking are managed centrally through the platform.

Outgoing Mobility — Student Application and Selection Process

The outgoing student mobility process is divided into four sequential selection stages. A student must successfully complete each stage before advancing to the next. The platform manages all associated communications and document flows.

Step 1 — Account Creation and Opportunity Discovery

Students begin by registering on the platform using their institutional email address. This ensures that access to the application environment is restricted to currently enrolled students. After authentication, students can browse all open mobility opportunities published by the Erasmus+ Office, which are organised into two categories:

- Long-term mobilities — standard Erasmus+ study or placement semesters,

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typically lasting one semester or academic year.

- Short-term mobilities (BIPs — Blended Intensive Programmes) — short physical mobilities combined with a virtual component, lasting between 5 and 30 days.

Each published opportunity displays the destination partner institution, duration, available places, funding conditions, and eligibility requirements, enabling students to make an informed choice before submitting their application.

Step 2 — Application Submission

To formally apply for a selected opportunity, the student completes the application form within the platform. All inputs are subject to client-side and server-side validation. Required data and documents are as follows:

Personal and Academic Data	Uploaded Documents
• First and last name • Academic year of study • Internal student code • Faculty and department • Phone number • Other required fields	• Academic transcript / record • Identity document (ID or passport) • Curriculum Vitae (CV) • Motivation letter • Additional documents as required

Step 3 — Faculty-Level Selection (Two Sub-Steps)

Following application submission, the Erasmus+ Faculty Coordinator for the student's faculty can view all candidate applications within the platform. The coordinator communicates to students the date and time of the first selection assessment. Faculty-level selection consists of two sequential sub-steps, both of which must be passed:

- 3a. Faculty Interview — the student is interviewed by the Faculty Erasmus+ Coordinator or a designated faculty panel. Results are recorded in the platform. Students who do not pass do not advance.
- 3b. Foreign Language Examination — students who pass the faculty interview then sit a foreign language proficiency test. Only candidates who pass both assessments (interview and language exam) are eligible to proceed to university-level selection.

Step 4 — University-Level Selection

Candidates who have cleared both faculty-level assessments have their complete dossiers reviewed by the Erasmus+ Outgoing Officer at the central IRO. Following this file review,

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the officer schedules the eligible candidates for a university-level interview. The platform automatically sends each candidate a notification specifying their assigned interview date. Successful completion of the university-level interview is the final step in the selection process. Students who pass all four stages — faculty interview, foreign language exam, IRO file review, and university-level interview — are formally awarded an Erasmus+ mobility. The platform then generates the relevant grant documentation in the appropriate language.

Outgoing Mobility Selection — Summary Table

Feature Area	Description
Step 1. Registration & Discovery	Student registers with institutional email; browses long-term and short-term (BIP) opportunities published in the platform.
Step 2. Application Submission	Student fills in personal/academic data and uploads required documents (transcript, ID, CV, motivation letter).
Step 3a. Faculty Interview	Faculty Erasmus+ Coordinator reviews applications, notifies students, and conducts faculty-level interviews. Outcomes recorded in platform.
Step 3b. Language Examination	Students who pass the faculty interview sit a foreign language proficiency exam. Both sub-steps must be passed to advance.
Step 4. University-Level Interview	IRO Outgoing Officer reviews dossiers; platform notifies eligible students of their university-level interview date and time.
Mobility Award Process	Students who pass all four stages are awarded an Erasmus+ mobility grant. Official documents are generated by the platform in the required language.

Incoming Mobility Process Flow

The incoming module supports foreign students nominated by their home institutions who wish to complete a study period at the host university. The flow is designed to be accessible to international applicants and culminates in course selection from the integrated online catalogue.

Step 1. Account Creation. Unlike outgoing students, incoming foreign students register on the platform using their own home institution email address. No host-institution credential is required, ensuring the platform is fully accessible to international applicants from the moment of nomination.

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Step 2. Personal Data Submission. After account activation, the incoming student completes their personal data profile within the platform. This includes identity information, home institution details, intended mobility period, and any other fields required for administrative processing, together with relevant supporting documents.

Step 3. File Validation by Incoming Officer. The IRO Incoming Officer reviews the student's submitted file in the platform. Once the file is reviewed and validated, the process advances to the next step. Files that are incomplete or require clarification can be flagged for the student to update.

Step 4. Issuance of Invitation Letter. Upon validation of the student's file, the platform automatically generates an official Invitation Letter issued by the Erasmus+ Office of the host institution. This letter is delivered to the student through the platform and serves as formal confirmation of the incoming mobility, required for visa applications and other administrative purposes at the student's home country.

Step 5. Course Selection from the Online Catalogue. Following receipt of the Invitation Letter, the incoming student accesses the host university's course catalogue directly within the platform. Courses are organised by faculty, allowing the student to identify and select subjects appropriate to their study programme. The chosen courses form the basis of the student's Learning Agreement, to be agreed between the student, the home institution, and the host institution.

Incoming Mobility - Summary Table

Feature Area	Description
Step 1. Registration	Foreign student creates an account on the platform using their home institution email address.
Step 2. Data Submission	Student completes personal data profile and uploads required supporting documents within the platform.
Step 3. File Validation	IRO Incoming Officer reviews the submitted file in the platform and validates or requests corrections.
Step 4. Invitation Letter	Upon file validation, the platform generates and issues an official Invitation Letter from the host institution's Erasmus+ Office.
Step 5. Course Selection	Student browses the faculty-organised course catalogue within the platform and selects courses for their mobility period, forming the basis of the Learning Agreement.

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The development and deployment of the mobility management platform represents a comprehensive and coherent digital transformation of the International Relations Office's core operational processes. By replacing fragmented manual workflows with a secure, role-aware, and feature-rich digital environment, the institution has materially improved the efficiency, transparency, and quality of its Erasmus+ and broader mobility management activities.

The platform is not a static solution but a sustainable digital infrastructure capable of evolving alongside the institution's international partnerships, programme requirements, and the wider European digital education ecosystem. It stands as a concrete and replicable example of how targeted digital investment in higher education administration can generate measurable institutional, student, and staff benefits.

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8. INTERNATIONAL MARKETING & RECRUITMENT

8.1 Looking beyond promotion: What international recruitment really involves

International student recruitment is often misunderstood as a promotional activity: preparing a brochure, attending an education fair, publishing social media posts and waiting for applications. In practice, effective recruitment is a structured institutional process. It connects academic offer, market intelligence, digital visibility, admissions, applicant communication, student services, data analysis and long-term reputation building. For Moldovan higher education institutions, the central challenge is therefore not only to become more visible abroad, but to become clear, credible and responsive throughout the entire applicant journey.

Prospective international students rarely choose a university in isolation. They compare countries, cities, costs, visa conditions, safety, recognition of diplomas, language of instruction, student life and future opportunities before selecting an institution or programme. This means that a university must be able to explain, in a concise and convincing way, why an international student should choose its programme, its institution and Moldova as a study destination. Generic statements such as "high-quality education in an international environment" are not sufficient, because they do not differentiate one institution from another. Strong recruitment communication connects real institutional strengths with student motivations: affordability, practical training, European cooperation, multilingualism, professional relevance, cultural proximity, employability or distinctive disciplinary expertise.

The starting point is a clear value proposition. Each institution should ask a simple but demanding question: why should a qualified international student choose us instead of another university in another country? The answer must be based on evidence, not aspiration. For one university, the strongest argument may be a specialised programme; for another, links with employers, practical placements, regional expertise, competitive tuition fees or a safe and accessible study environment. Once defined, this value proposition should be used consistently across the website, presentations, email communication, webinars, social media campaigns, fairs and partner materials. Consistency is essential: international applicants need to encounter the same message at every stage of their decision-making process.

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8.2 Choosing where to focus: Markets and programmes that really work

Recruitment also requires selectivity. No institution can successfully promote all programmes in all countries with the same intensity. Universities should identify a limited number of priority markets and understand them in depth. A relevant market is not simply a country where occasional interest exists; it is a country where there is demand for the university's programmes, where tuition fees are realistic, where visa and recognition procedures are feasible, and where the institution can build repeated contact through schools, agents, alumni, fairs, digital campaigns or university partnerships. Market analysis should be practical. Institutions need to know which fields are attractive, who influences the decision, which countries are competitors, what concerns students and families have, which online channels are used and what arguments are persuasive.

The same disciplined approach should be applied to the programme portfolio. Not every programme is ready for international recruitment. A programme should be actively promoted only when it has a clear language of instruction, stable academic capacity, transparent admission requirements, realistic tuition fees, international relevance, administrative readiness and a clear description for foreign applicants. Programme pages should not reproduce accreditation language or internal administrative terminology. They should answer the questions applicants actually ask: what will I study, what skills will I gain, why is this field relevant, what career options may follow, what documents are required, how much does it cost, when is the deadline and how do I apply? In many cases, the programme page is the point at which interest either becomes an application or disappears.

8.3 Let your website (and Digital Tools) do most of the work

For the reasons mentioned above, the university website is the most important recruitment instrument. Education fairs, agents and social media may create awareness, but serious applicants almost always return to the website before applying. If the website is outdated, fragmented or written mainly for internal users, recruitment performance will suffer. A dedicated international recruitment website, or at least a clearly structured international section, should be built around the applicant journey. It should allow students to find programmes quickly, understand admission requirements, check tuition fees, obtain visa and residence guidance, contact the university and start an application. Visible calls to action such as "Find a programme", "Apply now", "Ask a question" or "Join a webinar" are not cosmetic details; they are part of conversion management.

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The dedicated CZU recruitment website, study.czu.cz, offers a useful example of this applicant-centred logic. Its value lies not primarily in design, but in structure: prospective students can access programmes, admissions information, practical guidance and student support in one place, without navigating the complexity of the main institutional website. Moldovan HEIs can draw from this approach when designing their own digital recruitment environment. A recruitment website should not function as an online brochure. It should attract visitors, guide them to relevant programmes, capture enquiries, support applications and generate measurable data.

Digital marketing should follow the same conversion logic. Visibility alone is not a result. A campaign that produces impressions or likes but no qualified leads has limited recruitment value. Effective digital recruitment directs prospective students to a clear landing page and encourages a next step: requesting information, registering for a webinar, downloading a guide or starting an application. Useful tools include search engine optimisation for programme pages, paid search in priority countries, targeted social media advertising, webinars, short videos with current students or alumni, deadline reminders and structured email follow-up. Each tool should be evaluated according to its contribution to the recruitment funnel, not according to visibility metrics alone.

8.4 Staying close to applicants: Communication and admissions matter

Once a student makes contact, speed and clarity become decisive. International applicants usually communicate with several universities at the same time. The institution that replies quickly, clearly and practically often has a competitive advantage. Universities should therefore define basic communication standards: who responds to enquiries, within what timeframe, using which templates, and how the next step is recorded. Even a simple applicant tracking system is preferable to scattered email inboxes and individual spreadsheets. At minimum, the institution should know who contacted it, which programme they are interested in, what stage they have reached, who responded, and whether the student eventually applied, was admitted and enrolled.

Admissions should be understood as part of recruitment, not as a separate administrative procedure. A strong applicant may choose another destination if the process is slow, unclear or unpredictable. Good admissions practice includes transparent deadlines, clear document requirements, online submission, confirmation that documents have been received, predictable evaluation timelines and clear instructions after admission. The

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period after an offer is issued is particularly important. The student has not yet enrolled and may still be comparing options, waiting for visa information, discussing costs with family or searching for accommodation. Pre-arrival webinars, checklists, direct contact with current students and reliable visa guidance can significantly improve conversion from admission to enrolment.

8.5 Working with partners and Learning from your own data

External partners can support recruitment, but they must be governed carefully. Education agents may be useful in markets where families rely on local advisers. Study portals can improve programme visibility. Digital marketing agencies can strengthen campaigns and analytics. However, none of these actors should replace the university's responsibility for ethical communication, accurate information and admissions quality. Contracts with agents should define approved messages, commission rules, data protection, reporting duties and consequences for misrepresentation. Partners should be evaluated by real outcomes: completed applications, admitted students, enrolled students and student success, not only by the number of leads delivered.

A mature recruitment system is data-driven. Each university should monitor the recruitment funnel from first contact to enrolment. Core indicators include website visitors by country, enquiries, applications started, applications completed, offers issued, offers accepted, enrolled students, visa or arrival difficulties, first-year retention, and performance by programme and recruitment channel. The most important management question is not "how many people saw us?", but where do we lose students, and why? If many visitors do not apply, the problem may lie in unclear programme pages or weak calls to action. If admitted students do not enrol, the barriers may be communication, visa procedures, financing, accommodation or stronger competing offers.

8.6 Moving forward: Coordination, priorities and continuous improvement

National cooperation can strengthen institutional recruitment, provided it is treated as a supporting mechanism rather than a substitute for university-level work. A coordinated Study in Moldova initiative can help build trust in Moldova as a study destination, provide verified information on visas and recognition, and direct prospective students towards universities and programmes. Moldovan HEIs should actively participate in this initiative by keeping programme information up to date, contributing student and alumni stories, coordinating messages for priority markets, sharing relevant recruitment insights

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where appropriate and using the platform as a common national reference point in international promotion. The national platform can generate visibility and confidence; universities must then convert that visibility into applications, enrolments and student success.

For Moldovan HEIs, the practical first step is not to create a perfect recruitment system immediately, but to professionalise the basics. Each institution can begin by selecting a small number of priority programmes, defining a clear value proposition, improving programme pages, choosing two or three priority markets, setting up enquiry tracking, preparing standard communication templates, organising targeted webinars and measuring conversion. After each recruitment cycle, results should be reviewed: which markets produced serious applicants, which programmes converted well, where students dropped out, which channels justified further investment and which processes need improvement.

The central lesson is straightforward: international recruitment is not achieved by being visible once. It is achieved by being clear, credible and responsive throughout the applicant journey. A successful university does not merely promote itself; it helps prospective students understand the offer, trust the institution, complete the application, overcome practical barriers, arrive successfully and become part of the academic community. This is the practical know-how that turns international marketing from occasional promotion into a strategic instrument of internationalization.

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9. COOPERATION, PROJECT PLANNING & MANAGEMENT

The increasing complexity of Erasmus+ cooperation projects requires a fundamental rethinking of how universities approach project planning and management. What was once largely an administrative function has evolved into a strategic, risk-sensitive, and governance-driven activity.

This transformation is closely linked to two major evolutions in EU funding:

1. The increasing use of lump sum funding models, which emphasise results rather than costs, and
2. The growing scale and ambition of cooperation projects, which aim not merely to fund activities, but to transform institutional structures and systems.

These changes bring both opportunities and risks. On one hand, institutions benefit from greater flexibility and reduced administrative burden. On the other hand, they assume greater responsibility for ensuring that the project delivers exactly what was promised. In this context, international officers occupy a pivotal role. They are no longer only facilitators of mobility flows or administrative intermediaries; they are increasingly:

- Advisors to academic staff on compliance and feasibility
- Designers of internal project governance structures and procedures
- Mediators in consortium-level conflicts
- Protectors of the institution against financial and reputational risk

9.1 Erasmus+ Actions: Beyond mobility

Erasmus+ is often perceived, especially outside specialised administrative circles, as a programme centred on student and staff mobility. While this perception is understandable, it is increasingly incomplete. The cooperation actions of the Erasmus+ Programme is key to the strategic ambition of the European Commission, for it goes far beyond the exchange of individuals.

In cooperation projects, universities are not simply hosting participants or sending students abroad; they are engaging in structured, multi-year interventions aimed at institutional development. These projects operate at a different scale and require a different mindset.

Whereas mobility actions are largely predictable, standardised, and decentralised, cooperation projects are characterised by:

- **Interdependence between partners**: the success of one activity often depends on

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the completion of another

- **Diversity of institutional contexts**: partners may operate under different regulatory, financial, and academic frameworks
- **Long-term outputs**: curricula, governance reforms, digital tools, and institutional strategies

This means that managing such projects requires thinking beyond administrative execution. It involves understanding how different components interact and how decisions taken at one stage may affect outcomes at a later stage.

A useful way to conceptualise an Erasmus+ project is as a coordinated change process, where the consortium collectively attempts to achieve reforms that no single institution could deliver alone.

Tip & Hint: A common mistake is to treat cooperation projects as an aggregation of individual institutional activities. They are system-based interventions, where coherence between partners and overall impact is more important than individual excellence.

9.2 Understanding EU Funding models: when and why each one is used

For most Higher Education Institutions, participation in European Union-funded programmes particularly Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe— has gradually evolved from an institutional ambition into a strategic and operational necessity. Participation in these programmes is no longer perceived solely as an opportunity for international visibility or academic cooperation; increasingly, it is linked to institutional modernisation, access to innovation, curriculum development, digital transformation, and long-term international positioning.

Yet, despite the academic dimension often associated with EU-funded projects, their implementation depends heavily on one decisive factor: the ability to manage funding correctly, transparently, and strategically.

Experienced project managers frequently are well aware that when project funds begin to be used, institutions have moved from proposal writing into a sphere of legal, financial, and operational responsibility. They understand that EU-funded projects operate within a highly regulated environment where financial accuracy, traceability, and compliance are essential. Their experience allows them to anticipate common risks, including weak documentation, inconsistent reporting practices, procurement errors, and insufficient internal controls that may lead to financial corrections or reimbursement of funds.

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However, to minimise such risks, it is essential that the institution, through its management and central administrative offices, establishes clear internal procedures, maintains continuous communication between academic and financial teams, and implements systematic monitoring and support mechanisms throughout the entire project lifecycle rather than only during the reporting phase. Priority should also be given to evidence-based documentation, periodic internal reviews, and proactive risk assessment in order to ensure that all activities and expenditures remain fully auditable and aligned with programme requirements.

One of the most common misconceptions among inexperienced project teams is the belief that all EU-funded projects operate according to the same financial logic. In reality, the funding mechanism chosen by the European Commission fundamentally shapes how a project is planned, implemented, monitored, documented, and audited. The funding model determines:

- what type of evidence is required;
- how risks are distributed;
- what level of flexibility exists;
- how institutions should organise internal procedures;
- which management capacities become most important.

Even though most Erasmus+ actions have shifted to a *lump-sum* funding model, EU programmes have generally used four main funding models.

9.2.1 Real costs

Under the real cost model, beneficiaries declare actual expenses incurred during project implementation. Every declared cost must be supported by accounting records and documentary evidence.

This model is common in research-intensive programmes such as Horizon Europe, particularly for personnel costs, equipment, subcontracting, and travel expenditures.

Key Characteristics

- Based on actual expenditure;
- Requires invoices, payroll records, contracts, payment proofs, and accounting entries;
- Demands full traceability between activities and financial records;
- Closely integrated with institutional accounting systems.

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Advantages

- High flexibility in adapting resources to project realities;
- Reflects actual institutional expenditure;

Challenges

- Significant administrative workload;
- Continuous financial monitoring required;
- High exposure to audits and financial corrections;
- Increased pressure on coordination between project teams and finance departments.

Practical Example

If a university researcher works 35% of their working time on a project, the institution must be able to demonstrate:

- employment status;
- salary calculation methodology;
- time allocation;
- proof of work performed;
- accounting registration of the salary cost.

Any inconsistency between these elements may lead to partial rejection of costs.

Tip & Hint

Treat real-cost projects as an extension of the institution's accounting system, not as a parallel administrative structure. Some institutions underestimate the level of precision required. In reality, real-cost projects often function like mini-auditable financial ecosystems embedded within the university.

Common Mistake: One frequent error is reconstructing documentation after implementation rather than producing it during implementation. Retroactive reconstruction is highly visible during audits and significantly weakens institutional credibility.

Some project managers prefer real-cost projects, as they perceive them to be safer because everything is documented; however, this is not entirely the case. The greater the volume of documentation, the higher the risk of inconsistencies, calculation errors (e.g. in the calculation of actual hourly rates for each employee participating in the project), or procedural weaknesses.

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9.2.2 Unit costs

Under the unit cost model, the EU establishes predefined amounts for specific activities or outputs. Instead of reimbursing actual expenditure, the programme reimburses a fixed amount once the activity has been successfully completed.

This approach is widely used in Erasmus+ mobility projects and in Key Action 2: Erasmus Mundus Joint Master.

Typical Examples

- Mobility grants;
- Individual needs of students with disabilities;
- Daily subsistence allowances;
- Travel bands;
- Staff teaching assignments;
- Organisational support per participant;

Advantages

- Simplified financial reporting;
- Reduced accounting burden;
- Predictable budgeting;
- Easier implementation for institutions with limited financial capacity.

Challenges

- The real institutional expenditure may differ from the unit amount. Optimisation is crucial;
- The activity itself must be fully documented;
- Weak activity evidence may invalidate the funding.

Important Operational Principle

- ➢ Under unit costs, the central question is not: "How much money was spent?"
- ➢ Instead, auditors ask: "Did the activity actually take place as declared?"

Required Evidence

Typical supporting documentation includes:

- attendance lists;
- certificates of participation;
- mobility agreements;
- boarding passes;
- participant reports;
- training materials;
- digital participation records.

Tip & Hint

In mobility projects, institutions should never rely solely on participants to preserve

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documentation. Universities should maintain centralised digital archives from the beginning.

On the other hand, optimisation of unit costs is crucial for the financial feasibility of the project (e.g. selecting meeting venues and dates bearing in mind the availability of low-cost flights and cheap accommodation).

Common Audit Problem: An activity may have genuinely taken place, but if evidence is incomplete or inconsistent, the activity may still be considered ineligible.
In EU financial logic: "What cannot be demonstrated is treated as if it never happened."

9.2.3 Flat rates

Flat-rate funding applies a predefined percentage to a category of eligible costs. The purpose is to simplify the reimbursement of indirect or difficult-to-measure expenditures.

Common Uses

- Indirect costs;
- Administrative overheads;
- Office support;
- Institutional infrastructure costs.

In Erasmus+ there has been a general rule in most actions which established a flat-rate funding of 7% for indirect costs, calculated on total eligible direct costs.

Advantages

- Reduced administrative burden;
- No need to calculate actual indirect expenditure;
- Simplified reporting procedures.

Risks and Limitations

- Misunderstanding which costs are already covered;
- Risk of double funding;
- Confusion between direct and indirect expenditure.

Tip & Hint

Once a cost is covered by a flat-rate mechanism, it should not appear elsewhere in the budget. Double declaration of costs remains one of the most common audit findings in EU-funded projects.

Institutional Recommendation - Universities should establish internal guidance clearly identifying:

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- which expenditures belong to indirect costs;
- which expenditures may still be declared directly;
- how financial units should separate these categories.

Without a clear internal interpretation, inconsistencies between departments often emerge (e.g. at some universities, administrative staff are considered an indirect cost. Consequently, reporting administrative staff hours as a direct cost in the implementation of a project activity would result in double funding and render such declared hours ineligible).

9.2.4 Lump Sum Funding

Lump-sum funding represents one of the most significant shifts in recent EU financial management, in particular as regards the Erasmus+ Programme, in which most actions are already being funded under this system.

Under this model, funding is linked primarily to the successful completion of predefined results rather than to the reimbursement of actual or unit costs.

Core Logic is that the EU no longer asks: "How exactly was every euro spent?" Instead, the central question becomes: "Were the agreed results delivered successfully?"

Advantages

- Significant reduction in financial reporting;
- Greater managerial flexibility;
- Stronger focus on outcomes and impact;
- Reduced transactional administration.

Risks

- Payment depends on successful delivery;
- Poorly designed deliverables create major implementation risks;
- Partially completed work may not be reimbursed;
- Ambiguity in outputs can generate disputes during evaluation;
- In the event of a request for reimbursement, the partner responsible for the unsuccessful task may be difficult to identify or to hold accountable due to a lack of well-defined liability clauses in the Consortium Agreement.

Internal Reality Often Overlooked

Although the EU may not require detailed financial reporting under lump sum, institutions still need robust internal financial management.

Universities must still:

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- manage contracts;
- distribute resources;
- control expenditures internally;
- prevent misuse of funds;
- ensure sustainability;
- Ensure that the reporting system for lump sum projects is compatible with system audits and with other funding models, as professors and researchers will most likely participate in activities that use a different funding system.

Practical Observation

Lump sum simplifies reporting externally but often increases the importance of internal project governance.

It is not uncommon to hear "It's a lump sum project, I don't need to justify its costs" from professors and researchers in charge of a lump sum project.

This statement accurately captures the shift from financial justification to performance-based justification, as well as the challenges it poses for the institution, since new processes and procedures must be developed, which may generate internal controversy.

Now, the institution can no longer rely on the argument that "the European Commission requires all these documents"; instead, this has turned into an internal decision aimed at protecting the institution and ensuring the robustness of its internal reporting procedures.

Tip & Hint

In proposal development, do not treat the budget as a financial estimate alone. Under lump sum, it represents a commitment to deliver specific results, and this commitment will be assessed independently of actual expenditure.

In addition, before implementation begins, project teams should ask: "What evidence will we need at the end of the project?". Then implementation systems should be designed backwards from that requirement. This approach dramatically reduces future reporting problems.

9.3 CBHE project management guidelines. Internal procedures

An often-overlooked aspect of EU project participation is that the participation in European projects indirectly shape institutional culture. Universities that successfully manage them over time tend to develop:

- stronger administrative coordination;

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- more transparent procedures;
- improved digital archiving systems;
- clearer internal responsibilities;
- enhanced strategic planning capacity.

In this sense, Erasmus+ projects are not merely financial mechanisms to achieve common goals within the Consortium, they also function as governance instruments.

Managing a CBHE project requires combining academic, administrative, and legal perspectives into a coherent operational framework. At the centre of this framework is the **Description of the Action (Annex 1)**, which functions as the contractual reference point for all activities.

Too often, Annex 1 is treated as a static document, relevant only during the proposal phase. In reality, it should serve as a dynamic management tool throughout the project lifecycle. Every decision whether related to activities, timelines, or deliverables— should be assessed against its consistency with Annex 1.

One of the main challenges in CBHE projects is ensuring that this alignment is maintained across multiple partners, each with their own internal priorities and constraints. This requires structured coordination mechanisms, including:

- Regular progress monitoring
- Clear communication channels
- Defined decision-making procedures

International officers play a crucial role in maintaining this structure. They are often the only actors within the institution who have a comprehensive understanding of both the internal regulatory framework, the details of CBHE guidelines and grant agreement, and the operational realities of project implementation. Their added value lies precisely in their ability to bridge these dimensions.

Building effective internal procedures

Strong procedures reduce dependency on individual staff members and create institutional resilience.

This is particularly important at universities, where EU project management is often decentralised across faculties, departments, and administrative units.

The role of international officers will vary significantly depending on the management structure devised by their institution. In any case, this structure should always aim at defining:

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A. Clear Roles and Responsibilities

One of the most common operational risks in universities is role ambiguity.

When responsibilities are unclear:

- tasks are duplicated;
- deadlines are missed;
- documentation becomes inconsistent;
- accountability weakens.

B. Division of Responsibilities

Project Leader (PL)

Strategic Responsibilities. The PL shall:

- Provide overall strategic direction;
- Ensure alignment between project objectives and institutional priorities;
- Represent the institution in consortium-level decision-making;
- Maintain relations with the coordinating institution (if not coordinated) and funding authorities;
- Ensure institutional commitment and allocation of necessary resources.

Governance and Oversight. The PL should:

- Approve internal project structures and work plans;
- Monitor progress against objectives and indicators;
- Supervise Project Team members (academic and administrative);
- Resolve high-level conflicts or implementation bottlenecks;
- Escalate critical risks to institutional leadership when necessary.

Financial and Legal Responsibility. The PL is responsible for ensuring:

- Compliance with grant agreement obligations;
- Institutional approval of budgets and expenditures;
- Availability of co-financing or institutional support where applicable;
- Audit preparedness;
- Proper supervision of contractual and procurement processes.

Reporting and Representation. The PL should:

- Validate official reports before submission;
- Participate in steering committee meetings;
- Represent the institution during monitoring visits and audits;

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- Ensure institutional visibility of the project.

Project Manager(s) (PM)

PMs are responsible for operational implementation and daily coordination.

Operational Coordination. PMs should:

- Coordinate day-to-day project activities;
- Maintain implementation calendars and deadlines;
- Follow up on deliverables and milestones;
- Coordinate communication among work package leaders and partners;
- Organize consortium meetings and maintain minutes.

Administrative Management. PMs are expected to:

- Collect supporting documents from partners;
- Maintain organized project archives;
- Prepare technical reports and progress updates;
- Monitor completion of contractual obligations;
- Track indicators and KPIs.

Financial Monitoring. PMs should:

- Monitor budget consumption;
- Verify eligibility of expenses before submission and their compliance with Annex 1;
- Coordinate financial documentation collection;
- Support preparation of financial reports;
- Monitor subcontracting and procurement timelines.

Communication and Dissemination. PMs should:

- Coordinate dissemination activities;
- Ensure proper use of Erasmus+ visibility rules;
- Maintain project communication channels;
- Update websites and dissemination materials;
- Support sustainability planning.

Risk Management. PMs should:

- Maintain a risk register;
- Identify delays or non-performance early;
- Propose corrective measures;
- Monitor partner engagement levels;

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- Escalate significant risks to the PL and IRO.

International Relations Offices (IROs) / Central Support Offices

IROs provide institutional continuity, compliance assurance, and administrative support. They often act as *facilitators* and advisors to guarantee the successful management of the project (e.g. providing a bridge between other institutional services, such and Human Resources, Contracts Office, University Legal Services, etc.)

Institutional Compliance and Quality Assurance. IROs should:

- Verify compliance with Erasmus+ regulations;
- Ensure alignment with institutional procedures;
- Review documentation for completeness and consistency;
- Support audit readiness;
- Maintain institutional records of all Erasmus+ projects.

Administrative and Legal Support and Advice. IROs are responsible for supporting and advising on:

- Partnership and Consortium agreements;
- Mandates and institutional signatures;
- Mobility documentation;
- Procurement and tendering procedures;
- Visa, travel and insurance support where applicable;
- Data protection and ethical compliance;
- Institutional access to the *Funding and Tenders Portal* or similar platforms.

Financial Control Support. IROs should:

- Support financial verification procedures;
- Ensure retention of supporting documents;
- Maintain institutional accounting traceability;
- Assist in internal financial monitoring;
- Coordinate with finance departments during audits.

Continuity and Institutional Memory. IROs play a critical role in:

- Preserving project documentation beyond staff turnover;
- Maintaining institutional repositories;
- Supporting handovers between project staff;
- Ensuring continuity during changes in leadership or management.

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Capacity Building and Internal Training. IROs should:

- Train academic and administrative staff on Erasmus+ rules;
- Disseminate programme updates;
- Provide templates and procedural guidance;
- Promote best practices across projects.

Tip & Hint

Every project should begin with an internal "responsibility mapping exercise." Even highly competent teams encounter problems when assumptions about responsibilities remain implicit rather than formalised.

C. Segregation of Duties

Segregation of duties is a fundamental internal control principle.

In practice, this means:

- the person requesting expenditure should not be the only person approving it;
- the person approving expenditure should not also execute payment;
- the person implementing activities should not be the sole validator of financial reporting.

Why This Matters

Segregation of duties:

- reduces risk of error;
- limits conflicts of interest;
- strengthens institutional transparency;
- increases reliability during audits.

This principle is not based on distrust of staff members. It is based on the understanding that strong systems protect both the institution and the individuals working within it.

In lump sum projects, the Central Control Unit can still validate the financial report by reviewing expenditure and ensuring compliance with internal regulations. However, a key question arises regarding the validation of the technical report: who is responsible for verifying that the activities implemented are fully aligned with the proposal approved by the funding authority?

In most cases, this responsibility falls to the professor or researcher in charge of the project, as there is often no independent internal mechanism or unit with the necessary subject-matter expertise to carry out this verification. As a result, technical validation tends

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to rely on the project leader's own assessment, which may create risks in terms of consistency, objectivity, and institutional oversight. However, there is no straightforward alternative: options such as internal peer review or dedicated quality assurance boards typically require significant resources that many universities do not have readily available.

D. Documentation Strategy

A common mistake in project management is treating documentation as an afterthought. In reality, documentation should be seen as part of the implementation itself.

Essential Documentation

Institutions should systematically preserve:

- contracts and amendments;
- invoices and payment proofs;
- procurement documentation;
- attendance lists;
- mobility records;
- deliverables and outputs;
- timesheets (where applicable) or alternative individual task reports;
- communication with Project Officers;
- meeting minutes;
- evaluation reports.

Additional Recommended Documentation

Although not always mandatory, the following materials often become extremely useful during audits:

- internal emails explaining decisions;
- draft versions of deliverables;
- screenshots of online activities;
- agendas;
- participant feedback;
- institutional approvals.

Tip & Hint

When uncertainty exists, preserve the documentation. However, documentation must also remain organised and searchable.

An archive containing thousands of unsorted files can become nearly as problematic

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as missing documentation.

Setting up a clear folder structure and applying consistent file archiving practices, such as version control, standardized naming and storage locations, and regular backup to ensure efficient document management and traceability.

E. Risk-Based Approach to Control

Effective internal control is not about documenting everything equally. Resources should be concentrated where risks are highest.

High-Risk Areas Often Include

- procurement;
- subcontracting;
- personnel costs;
- mobility activities;
- externally contracted services;
- deliverables linked to major payments.

Lower-Risk Areas May Allow Simplification

- routine communication;
- standard administrative exchanges;
- low-value operational expenditures.

Strategic Recommendation

Institutions should identify:

- high financial exposure areas;
- activities most likely to face audit scrutiny;
- processes historically associated with errors.

Targeted control is generally more effective than excessive bureaucracy.

F. Internal Coordination Between Academic and Administrative Staff

One persistent challenge in higher education institutions is the separation between academic and administrative cultures.

Academic staff often prioritise:

- content quality;
- research outcomes;
- educational innovation.

Administrative staff focus on:

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- procedural compliance;
- deadlines;
- financial reliability.

Both perspectives are necessary. Projects tend to fail when one dimension dominates at the expense of the other.

Tip & Hint

Regular coordination meetings between academic coordinators, finance officers and members of the Central Control Unit significantly reduce misunderstandings. Many problems emerge simply because information circulates too late.

9.4 Proposal writing guidance

In recent years, a growing number of Erasmus+ CBHE proposals have been drafted or heavily shaped by professional consultants. While this practice can improve competitiveness in terms of scoring and alignment with evaluation criteria, it often introduces structural weaknesses. Consultants may lack a deep understanding of the internal processes, administrative constraints, and operational realities of the partner institutions. As a result, proposals can become overly ambitious, insufficiently grounded, or disconnected from the actual implementation capacities of the consortium. This frequently leads to difficulties during project execution, particularly in areas such as deliverable validation, financial justification, internal coordination, and ownership of results. For CBHE projects to be sustainable, auditable, and institutionally embedded, project ownership must remain firmly within the partner organisations, with consultants acting as facilitators rather than primary designers.

Proposal writing in Erasmus+ CBHE is often approached as a purely competitive exercise, focused on scoring highly against evaluation criteria. While this is important, it is insufficient. A successful proposal must also be implementable, auditable, and resilient to unforeseen difficulties. In CBHE projects given their structural nature, multi-country partnerships, and long implementation periods, weak proposal design inevitably translates into implementation risks.

Strategic Selection of Partners

One of the most critical (and often underestimated) aspects of proposal drafting is the alignment between partners and assigned activities.

Consortia should not be built solely on existing institutional relationships or

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geographical balance. Instead, they must be constructed around complementary capacities and clearly defined roles. Poor partner-task alignment is one of the main causes of underperformance in CBHE projects. When selecting partners, ensure that:

- Each partner has demonstrated expertise in the tasks they are assigned
- Their institutional mandate allows them to deliver the expected outputs (e.g. curriculum development, accreditation, infrastructure management)
- There is a balance between:
  - Academic partners
  - Technical/administrative partners
  - Stakeholders (e.g. ministries, enterprises)
- The consortium includes actors capable of ensuring impact and sustainability (not only implementation)

Designing Realistic and Implementable Activities

A frequent weakness in CBHE proposals is overdesign: including too many activities, outputs, or ambitious timelines that are not feasible.

When drafting the proposal, continuously test feasibility:

- Can this activity realistically be implemented within the timeframe?
- Are dependencies between tasks clearly identified?
- Are mobility, procurement, and administrative procedures realistically planned, considering national constraints?
- Are there contingency plans for delays (e.g. accreditation processes, procurement bottlenecks)?

A strong proposal demonstrates operational realism, not only conceptual ambition.

Do not forget:

- Accreditation or institutional approval procedures may take longer than expected
- Procurement rules in partner countries may delay equipment-related activities
- Staff availability is often overestimated at proposal stage

Work Packages, Deliverables, and Outputs

As noted, the definition of work packages and deliverables is central. In CBHE lump-sum projects, these elements are directly tied to funding justification.

Avoid vague deliverables such as “report” or “study”. Each deliverable must clearly specify:

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- **Content**: What exactly will be produced?
- **Structure**: Sections, format, length, templates
- **Ownership**: Who is responsible? Who contributes?
- **Validation process**: How and by whom is it approved?
- **Evidence**: What documents will prove its completion?

In addition:

- Link each deliverable to **specific indicators** and **milestones**
- Ensure consistency between:
    - Description in Part B
    - Work plan tables
    - Budget allocation

Allocation of Responsibilities and Governance

Responsibilities must reflect real capacities, not symbolic distribution.

At proposal stage, clearly define:

- Work package leaders and co-leaders
- Decision-making processes
- Escalation mechanisms in case of delays or conflict

Equally important is the definition of **governing bodies**, which should not be generic. A solid CBHE proposal typically includes:

- Project Steering Committee (strategic decisions)
- Technical/Academic Committee (content validation)
- Quality Assurance Board (independent monitoring)
- Financial/Administrative Coordination mechanisms

Each body should have:

- Defined composition
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Decision-making rules
- Meeting frequency

Tip & Hint

Governance structures should be operational tools, not formalities. If they are not usable during implementation, they will not be used.

Quality Assurance and Internal Control

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Quality assurance must be designed as a continuous process, not as a single work package or final check. At proposal stage, specify:

- Internal review processes before deliverables are submitted
- Quality criteria (technical, academic, administrative)
- Use of templates and standardised formats
- Documentation of feedback and revisions

Consider introducing:

- Peer-review mechanisms between partners
- External advisory boards, where relevant
- Internal audit trails for deliverables and decisions

This is particularly important given the shift toward **performance-based funding** (lump sum model).

Documentation Strategy and Archiving System

Proposals must anticipate documentation and audit requirements from the beginning. Setting up a shared file naming system for all project members at proposal phase should be mandatory, along with defining a clear folder structure and applying consistent file archiving practices—such as version control, standardized storage locations, access rights management, and regular backups—to ensure efficient document management, traceability, and audit readiness. This will guarantee that when the project is awarded all project partners already share the same methodology.

At proposal stage, include:

- A common folder structure, for example:
    - 01_Project Management
    - 02_Work Package 1
    - 03_Work Package 2
    - 04_Deliverables
    - 05_Financial Documents
    - 06_Reporting
- File naming conventions (e.g. *WP2_D2.1_Draft_v1.0_Date_Author*)
- Version control policy
- Rules on final vs draft documents
- Clear designation of official repositories

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- Shared contacts spreadsheet

Financial Coherence and Resource Allocation

Even in lump-sum projects, financial design remains critical.

Ensure:

- Coherence between activities and budget allocation
- Justified distribution of funds across partners
- Alignment between workload and financial compensation

Avoid:

- Artificial equal distribution of budget
- Overfunding partners with limited implementation roles
- Underestimating coordination and management costs

Risk Management

Risk management should move beyond generic statements.

At proposal stage:

- Identify specific risks (e.g. delays in accreditation, staff turnover, procurement issues)
- Define mitigation measures that are realistic and actionable
- Assign responsibility for risk monitoring

Key Elements Frequently Forgotten in CBHE Proposals

- Alignment between outputs and institutional capacity
- Realistic planning of administrative procedures
- Definition of internal validation processes for deliverables
- Documentation and evidence requirements from day one
- Clear ownership of results within institutions
- Sustainability mechanisms beyond project lifetime
- Integration of results into institutional strategies and structures

Ultimately, proposal writing in CBHE should be understood as the **first phase of project management**. Every weakness at proposal level will multiply during implementation. The strongest proposals are not those that promise the most, but those that demonstrate clarity, coherence, realism, and auditability.

Tip & Hint

Before submission, conduct an internal "implementation stress test":

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- Can each partner clearly explain their responsibilities?
- Can each deliverable be evidenced and validated?
- Can the project survive delays, staff changes, or administrative constraints?

If the answer to any of these is uncertain, the proposal is not yet ready.

9.5 Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting

Monitoring and reporting are the mechanisms through which project performance is translated into funding decisions. In lump sum projects, this process is particularly sensitive, as it directly determines whether the consortium receives the agreed funding. Unlike cost-based models, the focus is not on justifying expenditure but on demonstrating that work has been completed in line with the approved proposal and meets the expected quality standards.

The reporting process typically unfolds in three stages: **internal reporting by partners**, **internal validation by the coordinator**, and **submission to the Agency**. Each of these stages carries specific risks and requires clear procedures, responsibilities, and timelines.

The most critical stage is **internal validation**. At this point, the consortium still can:

- Identify weaknesses
- Request corrections
- Clarify inconsistencies
- Ensure alignment between deliverables, evidence, and proposal commitments
- Verify that outputs meet both technical and formal requirements

Once the report is submitted, however, this flexibility disappears. The evaluator's assessment becomes decisive, and any shortcomings may result in partial or full rejection of work packages, leading directly to financial reductions.

A particularly important aspect is the **timing of responsibility**. Before the report is accepted, the coordinator bears full responsibility for any financial corrections. This creates a strong incentive to ensure that all deliverables are not only completed, but also robustly justified, internally validated, and properly documented. In practice, this means that coordinators must act not only as aggregators of information, but as gatekeepers of quality and compliance.

9.5.1 Strengthening Monitoring and Control Mechanisms

Effective monitoring should not be limited to reporting deadlines. Instead, it should

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be designed as a **continuous process throughout the project lifecycle**.

Key elements include:

- Regular internal progress reviews (e.g. quarterly or per milestone)
- Use of performance indicators linked to each work package
- Early identification of delays or underperformance
- Clear communication channels between WP leaders and the coordinator

Tip & Hint

Introduce **early warning systems**, where deviations from plan are flagged well before reporting deadlines, allowing corrective actions.

9.5.2 Specific Considerations for Lump Sum Projects

In lump sum CBHE projects, the link between performance and funding requires particular attention:

- Deliverables must be fully completed, not partially
- Outputs must correspond exactly to what was described in the proposal
- Evidence must be clear, structured, and easily verifiable

A recurring issue in evaluations is the mismatch between:

- What was promised in the proposal
- What was actually delivered
- What is presented in the report

Even when work has been carried out, poor presentation or weak evidence can lead to negative assessments.

Key principle

Completion is not only about doing the work, but about proving it convincingly.

9.5.3 Internal roles and responsibilities in reporting

To ensure robustness, reporting responsibilities should be clearly structured:

  - Partners
  - Produce deliverables and supporting evidence
  - Ensure internal coherence before submission to WP leaders

- Work Package Leaders
  - Consolidate inputs
  - Perform first-level technical validation

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    - Ensure consistency within the work package
- Coordinator
    - Perform final validation (technical + administrative)
    - Ensure alignment with proposal and Grant Agreement
    - Take responsibility for submission and overall coherence

In stronger systems, an additional layer can be introduced:

- Quality Assurance Body or Internal Review Committee, acting as an independent reviewer before submission

Avoiding Common Pitfalls

Several recurrent weaknesses in CBHE reporting should be explicitly avoided:

- Retroactive reconstruction of documentation instead of real-time collection
- Submission of draft or incomplete deliverables
- Inconsistent versions of the same document
- Lack of clear ownership of outputs
- Weak linkage between activities, outputs, and reported results

These issues are particularly critical in lump sum projects, where there is little tolerance for ambiguity.

Integrating Monitoring, Quality Assurance, and Reporting

Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting should not be treated as separate processes. Instead, they should form an integrated system where:

- Monitoring identifies progress and risks
- Quality assurance validates outputs
- Reporting communicates results externally

This integration ensures that:

- Problems are detected early
- Deliverables are improved before submission
- Reports are consistent, credible, and audit-ready

Tip & Hint

Internal validation should be treated as a quasi-audit process, not as a formality. It is the last opportunity to correct problems before external evaluation.

Additionally, coordinators should systematically ask:

"If I were an external evaluator with no prior knowledge of the project, would the

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evidence provided clearly and convincingly demonstrate that the work has been completed as described?"

If the answer is uncertain, further validation and clarification are still required.

Tip & Hint

Internal validation should be treated as a quasi-audit process, not as a formality. It is the last opportunity to correct problems before external evaluation.

9.6 Risk management and compliance

Risk management is the area where the impact of lump sum funding is most visible. In cost-based systems, risks can often be mitigated through financial adjustments, reallocation of eligible costs, or corrective accounting measures. In lump sum projects, however, risks are directly linked to performance outcomes, and may therefore materialise as immediate financial consequences.

In practical terms, this implies that:

- Even correctly incurred costs do not guarantee funding
- Deliverables that are incomplete, delayed, or of insufficient quality may lead to partial or total rejection of work packages
- Financial corrections are triggered by implementation gaps, not bookkeeping errors

For this reason, risk management cannot be treated as an isolated task. It must be embedded into the overall governance of the project, combining contractual safeguards, financial incentives, operational monitoring, and decision-making capacity.

9.6.1 Understanding Risk in Lump Sum Projects

A first step toward effective risk management is recognising that risks in lump sum projects are structural, not exceptional. They arise naturally from the interaction between:

- Fixed outputs (defined in Annex 1)
- Distributed responsibilities (across partners)
- Performance-based evaluation

Main categories of risk:

Technical risk

- Deliverables not completed
- Outputs not aligned with Annex 1

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- Insufficient quality or lack of evidence

Financial risk

- Reduction of grant due to partial implementation
- Inability to recover funds from responsible partner

Operational risk

- Delays in one work package affecting others
- Lack of coordination between partners

Legal and governance risk

- Unclear responsibilities
- Weak consortium agreement provisions
- Inability to enforce decisions

Tip & Hint

Risks rarely occur in isolation. A delayed deliverable (technical risk) often leads to coordination problems (operational risk) and eventually to funding reduction (financial risk).

9.6.2 Risk management approach: from reaction to anticipation

In lump sum projects, reactive management is insufficient. Once a deliverable is rejected or a work package is partially accepted, the financial consequences are already materialised and often difficult to reverse. Effective risk management therefore requires:

1. Anticipation

- Identifying critical dependencies between tasks
- Assessing partner capacity realistically
- Building early warning indicators

2. Prevention

- Clear deliverable definitions
- Internal milestones and deadlines
- Strong communication structures

3. Monitoring

- Regular progress reporting
- Internal validation of outputs
- Tracking of delays and deviations

4. Corrective action

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- Rapid intervention in case of delay
- Task redistribution when necessary
- Adjustment of internal planning

Tip & Hint

The earlier a risk is identified, the cheaper it is to solve. A delay detected two months in advance is manageable; one detected at reporting stage is costly.

9.6.3 Liability and Protection Mechanisms

Liability is arguably the most critical aspect of consortium management under lump sum funding. The EACEA Model Grant Agreement establishes that the coordinator is responsible for receiving and distributing funds, and for submitting reports. However, it does not fully regulate the internal allocation of responsibility among partners.

This creates a structural imbalance:

- From the European Commission perspective, the consortium is a single contracting entity
- Internally, implementation is fragmented across multiple beneficiaries

The critical moment: before report acceptance

The most sensitive phase occurs before the technical report is accepted by the Agency. At this stage:

- The coordinator is fully liable for any financial corrections
- The European Commission does not intervene in internal disputes
- Any reduction must be absorbed and redistributed internally

Only after acceptance does the Commission have the possibility to address issues at the level of individual partners.

Key implication

The consortium agreement must act as a pre-emptive liability allocation mechanism, ensuring that responsibility can be clearly assigned and enforced internally before external evaluation occurs. Without such provisions, the coordinator risks becoming the default financial risk bearer, even when failures originate elsewhere.

Core elements of a robust liability framework

- Clear assignment of responsibility per work package and deliverable
- Clear governance structure to address the possible declaration of a partner in default

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- Reallocation of tasks and funding form a defaulting partner to one or various partners that can undertake such activities
- Explicit financial consequences linked to underperformance
- Defined recovery procedures (timelines, methods, enforcement)
- Rights for the coordinator to suspend or offset payments

Tip & Hint

Always test liability clauses with a real-case scenario:

"If partner X fails to deliver, can we recover funds quickly and legally?"

If not, the clause is insufficient.

9.6.4 Compliance mechanisms in practice

Ensuring compliance requires more than contractual obligations. It depends on creating a system where incentives, controls, and governance structures reinforce each other.

Financial instruments

These are the most effective tools because they directly affect partner behaviour:

- Payments linked to validated deliverables
- Retention of a percentage until final acceptance
- Suspension of payments in case of delay
- Budget reallocation when tasks are reassigned

Tip & Hint

A simple and effective rule: "No validated deliverable = no payment."

Contractual instruments

Contracts should include:

- Detailed deliverable descriptions
- Binding deadlines
- Reporting obligations
- Formal notification procedures

Governance mechanisms

Strong governance enables action:

- Steering Committee with decision-making authority
- Defined escalation procedures
- Voting systems that avoid paralysis (e.g. no unanimity for operational decisions)

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Without the ability to take decisions quickly, even well-designed compliance systems fail in practice.

9.6.5 Monitoring and Early Detection

Monitoring is the cornerstone of effective compliance. Projects should implement:

- Regular partner reporting cycles
- Internal milestones ahead of official deadlines
- Deliverable review and feedback procedures

Early warning signs

- Repeated missed internal deadlines
- Poor-quality draft outputs
- Lack of communication from a partner
- Misalignment between reported progress and expected results

Tip & Hint

Set internal deadlines at least 2–3 weeks before official ones to allow time for corrections.

9.6.6 Managing Underperformance

Despite preventive mechanisms, underperformance may occur. It is essential to address it systematically and proportionately.

Recommended escalation sequence:

1. Informal clarification
2. Written notification
3. Corrective action plan
4. Escalation to governance body
5. Financial consequences and/or task reassignment

Tip & Hint

Document every step. If recovery becomes necessary, written evidence is essential. Risk management in lump sum projects is not about avoiding problems—it is about ensuring that problems can be identified, managed, and resolved without jeopardising the project as a whole.

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CONCLUSIONS

This Capacity Building Toolkit on Inclusive and Sustainable Internationalization demonstrates that internationalization in higher education has evolved into a comprehensive institutional transformation process requiring systemic alignment across strategy, governance, operations, and digital infrastructure. It is no longer confined to mobility activities or external visibility, but constitutes a structured, evidence-driven framework that integrates academic development, institutional management, and international cooperation into a unified organisational approach.

A central conclusion is that sustainable internationalization depends fundamentally on institutional coherence. Fragmented initiatives, isolated mobility schemes, or ad hoc partnerships are insufficient unless embedded within clearly defined strategic objectives, measurable indicators, and robust internal governance systems. Effective internationalization requires alignment between institutional strategy, academic priorities, and administrative capacity, ensuring that all organisational units operate within a shared framework of responsibility, accountability, and performance monitoring.

The analysis of European policy frameworks and national practices in Spain, Romania, and the Czech Republic confirms that successful internationalization models combine institutional autonomy with structured governance mechanisms. While diversity of institutional approaches is essential, long-term effectiveness depends on the standardisation of core processes such as mobility management, partnership development, quality assurance, and reporting. The transfer of these practices to higher education systems in transition, such as Moldova, requires adaptation based on institutional readiness, leadership commitment, and operational capacity rather than direct replication of external models.

Mobility and collaboration remain core pillars of internationalization; however, their effectiveness increasingly depends on administrative efficiency, procedural clarity, and digital integration. Tools such as Erasmus Without Paper (EWP), the Beneficiary Module, and integrated mobility management systems represent not only technical innovations but structural shifts toward transparent, traceable, and data-driven governance. Institutions that fail to adopt such systems risk reduced efficiency, lower competitiveness, and weakened capacity for compliance and reporting.

Across all dimensions of internationalization, digital transformation emerges as a cross-cutting enabler. It enhances recruitment, mobility management, partnership

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coordination, monitoring, and institutional reporting. However, technology alone is insufficient without corresponding investments in institutional capacity, staff competencies, and governance frameworks that ensure meaningful use of digital systems. Digitalisation must therefore be understood as an organisational transformation process rather than a purely technical upgrade.

In the field of international marketing and recruitment, the Toolkit identifies a fundamental paradigm shift: recruitment must be treated as a structured, data-driven conversion process rather than a promotional or communication activity. Institutional success depends on the clarity of the value proposition, strategic selection of target markets, readiness of academic offerings, and the effectiveness of digital platforms in guiding applicants through the entire decision-making journey. Performance is measured not by visibility, but by conversion outcomes across the full applicant funnel, including enquiries, applications, admissions, and enrolments.

A key conclusion regarding EU-funded cooperation projects (notably Erasmus+ CBHE) is that they function as strategic instruments of institutional development rather than administrative funding mechanisms. The transition toward lump sum financing represents a structural shift in EU funding logic, moving from expenditure-based reimbursement to performance-based delivery. This requires institutions to demonstrate not costs, but verifiable outputs, deliverables, and results. Consequently, project success is determined by implementation quality, documentation integrity, and the ability to evidence achievement against predefined objectives.

This funding evolution significantly increases the importance of internal governance systems, role clarity, and risk management frameworks. Effective CBHE implementation depends on clearly defined institutional responsibilities, including strategic leadership by Project Leaders, operational coordination by Project Managers, and compliance and continuity support by International Relations Offices. The elimination of role ambiguity is essential to ensure consistency, accountability, and coordination across consortium partners and internal units.

Furthermore, documentation and traceability are elevated to core management functions rather than administrative outputs. Real-time documentation, structured archiving, version control, and evidence-based reporting are essential for audit readiness and performance verification. In parallel, risk management becomes performance-oriented rather than financial, requiring continuous monitoring, early identification of implementation

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risks, and proactive mitigation strategies supported by strong consortium governance and clear contractual frameworks.

Proposal development is redefined as the first phase of implementation, rather than a pre-award competitive exercise. High-quality CBHE proposals are characterised by internal coherence, realistic planning, clearly defined deliverables, integrated quality assurance mechanisms, and strong alignment between objectives and institutional capacity. Weak alignment between design assumptions and operational feasibility remains one of the primary causes of implementation failure.

Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting are ultimately understood as a single integrated system of performance assurance. In lump sum projects, internal validation prior to submission constitutes the most critical control point, as it ensures alignment between planned activities, delivered outputs, and supporting evidence. Once submitted, reporting outcomes become final, reinforcing the need for continuous internal monitoring and structured validation processes throughout the project lifecycle.

Overall, the Toolkit concludes that sustainable internationalization is an institutional condition rather than a set of activities. It requires universities to move from fragmented participation in international initiatives toward coherent systems of strategic governance, operational discipline, and continuous improvement. Success in internationalization is determined by the capacity of institutions to integrate policy, administration, academic development, digital systems, and external cooperation into a unified framework of action.

Internationalization, therefore, is not achieved through increased activity or visibility alone, but through consistent institutional alignment, procedural clarity, evidence-based management, and sustained organisational learning. Institutions that embed these principles across all levels of operation are best positioned to achieve long-term global engagement, academic excellence, and competitiveness within the European Higher Education Area and beyond.

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