

# FACILITATORS OF INTERNATIONALISATION AT THE DOCTORAL DEGREE LEVEL

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## ***Abstract***

*This paper focuses on the process of internationalisation in European higher education and research by discussing strategic supranational commitments and institutional practices effecting change in the delivery and execution of doctoral degree programs in sync with the imperative of globalisation.*

**Key words:** doctoral degree, internationalisation, European Higher Education Area, European Research Area

## **Internationalisation in academia**

Scientists and higher education institutions have responded to the demands of globalisation by embracing the processes of internationalisation<sup>1</sup>. Globalisation has manifested not only in an increasingly integrated world economy and an overwhelming presence of information and communications technology but also in the emergence of an international knowledge network where English plays a key role<sup>2</sup>. Internationalisation in academia has become a strategy where academic systems, institutions and individuals undertake policies and practices to cope with the global academic environment<sup>3</sup>. The process of internationalisation entails the integration of an „international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education“<sup>4</sup>. This commonly accepted definition has been revisited as „the **intentional** process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimen-

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<sup>1</sup> Altbach, P., Reisberg L., and L. Rumbley (2009)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Altbach, P. and Knight, J. (2007)

<sup>4</sup> Knight, J. (2003)

sion into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, **in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society**<sup>5</sup>. The scholars who suggested this definition stress on their understanding that internationalisation needs to become more inclusive by focusing more on the curriculum and the learning outcomes rather than on the elitist and exclusive mobility strand<sup>6</sup>. This call for an inclusive strategy emphasises that internationalisation should not be a goal in itself but a means to enhance the quality of education and research.

## **Internationalisation in European higher education and research**

Dwelling on the achievements of the most prominent supranational initiatives in education and research at European level, the Erasmus mobility program, reinforced and streamlined by the Bologna process, and the Marie Curie fellowship program, the European Union has stepped up its strategic approach to internationalisation by pledging commitment to support and implement the European Education Area and the European Research Area<sup>7</sup>.

The European Heads of State and the European Commission endorse the purpose of the European Education Area as development of „a holistic approach to EU action in education and training“ and the creation of „a genuine European space of learning“ for the benefit of all stakeholders<sup>8</sup>. In its Communication on achieving the European Education Area<sup>9</sup>, the Commission outlines an ambitious plan to attain the objectives of the EEA by engaging in the full roll-out of European higher education alliances, university consortia with integrated study programs and curricula that enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries, thus making transition between education systems easier. This initiative is to ensure a seamless transnational cooperation and incentivise higher education institutions in Europe to adapt and train „the future generations in co-creating knowledge across borders, disciplines and cultures for a resilient, inclusive and sustainable society“<sup>10</sup>. The Commission emphasises its support for these strategic partnerships with a view to providing opportunities for a wider cohort of participants to take part in mobility, including in blended online and physical exchanges, and thus bring about the creation of „a pan-European talent pool“<sup>11</sup>. These commitments are endorsed in the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education

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<sup>5</sup> de Wit, H., Hunter, F., Howard, L. and E. Egron-Polak (2015)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 29

<sup>7</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/about-education-and-training-in-the-eu\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/about-education-and-training-in-the-eu_en)

<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en)

<sup>9</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

and training<sup>12</sup> where the further development of the European Education Area is assigned an overarching political priority. The Council fosters the role of higher education institutions as central in the „knowledge square“<sup>13</sup> where universities fulfil their four missions: education, research, innovation and service to society, with a pronounced focus on enhancing the relevance of higher education to the labour market needs.

The Council Conclusions on the New European Research Area<sup>14</sup> call for the development of enhanced synergies and interconnections between the European Research Area and the higher education elements of the European Education Area. The New ERA is defined as an „impact-driven area“ where researchers, knowledge and technology circulate freely to ensure excellence and a competitive edge of the European research and innovation ecosystems. The Council highlights the importance of a continued openness to international collaboration for achieving the goals of the new ERA and supporting Europe’s role as a global leader. Likewise, in its Communication on the new ERA<sup>15</sup>, the Commission specifically stresses on the role of ERA in establishing a global leadership in research and innovation and becoming a pole of attraction to talent. It recognises that researchers and innovators need incentives to work together and reaffirms its commitment to facilitate access to funding for cooperation and sharing of data and support state of the art research infrastructure. The Commission particularly notes that it is paramount to create conditions that attract and retain the best researchers in Europe in the global competition for talent. There is an awareness that the imbalances between the number of PhD graduates and tenure track positions in the public science systems exacerbate the negative tendency of talent outflow. A European Framework for Research Careers is thus envisaged to help alleviate the situation by implementing measures that reinforce inter-sectoral mobility, strengthen academic-business cooperation and encourage entrepreneurship in researchers.

Internationalisation of European higher education and research has become a strategic commitment. In the European Research Area Policy Agenda<sup>16</sup> the Commission has assigned a high priority to achieving „a truly functioning internal market for knowledge“. Among the many actions the Commission has pledged to undertake toward the free circulation of researchers, staff, knowledge and technology, we can highlight the implementation of an open science cloud for knowledge and research sharing and the ERA4You initiative which aims at a balanced circulation of R&I talent, better access to mobility funding programs, support for attracting and retaining research talent.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C\\_.2021.066.01.0001.01.ENG](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2021.066.01.0001.01.ENG)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13567-2020-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0628>

<sup>16</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research\\_and\\_innovation/strategy\\_on\\_research\\_and\\_innovation/documents/ec\\_rtd\\_era-policy-agenda-2021.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/strategy_on_research_and_innovation/documents/ec_rtd_era-policy-agenda-2021.pdf)

## **Internationalisation in European higher education and research institutions**

Internationalisation is considered an institutional imperative in a global context<sup>17</sup>. The current discourse on internationalisation in higher education institutions revolves around the concept of comprehensiveness<sup>18</sup>. Comprehensive internationalisation „shapes institutional ethos and values“ and „not only impacts all of campus life but the institution’s external frames of reference, partnerships and relations“ and it is, therefore, essential that commitment and action be „embraced by institutional leadership, governance, faculty, students, and all academic service and support units“<sup>19</sup>.

Surveys on the state of internationalisation in higher education in Europe show that it has become mainstreamed at institutional level<sup>20</sup>. The overarching objective declared by European educational institutions is achieving excellence in teaching and learning and thereby preparing students for a global market of products, services and ideas. The surveys highlight several important points made by the respondents: a) increasing international student mobility is a key focus in their institutions; b) international research collaboration and international strategic partnerships are given priority among their internationalisation activities. The surveys show that supranational European actions and regional/national-level policy are perceived as key influencers of their institutions’ policies on internationalisation.

### **Doctoral studies in the context of European internationalisation**

In the Berlin Communiqué<sup>21</sup> the Ministers for Higher Education acknowledged the need for a synergy of the EHEA and the ERA toward a Europe of research and innovation. Doctoral studies were included as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. Research, research training and the promotion of interdisciplinarity were highlighted as foundational to the quality and competitiveness of European higher education. Toward that end, educational institutions were highly encouraged to cooperate and enhance mobility at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels across Europe. In 2005, the European Commission released the European Charter for Researchers<sup>22</sup> where it provided recommendations for enhancing the competitiveness of doctoral training and committed

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<sup>17</sup> de Wit, H., Hunter, F., Howard, L. and E. Egron-Polak (2015)

<sup>18</sup> Hudzik, J.K. (2011)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 6

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL\\_STU\(2015\)540370\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU(2015)540370_EN.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial\\_declarations/2003\\_Berlin\\_Communique\\_English\\_577284.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2003_Berlin_Communique_English_577284.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> [https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/am509774cee\\_en\\_e4.pdf](https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/am509774cee_en_e4.pdf)

to actions for overcoming any obstacles to geographical and intersectoral mobility at the doctoral degree level.

The supranational commitments to the EHEA and the ERA outlined above and in the previous sections of this paper have steered institutions into implementing an approach to internationalisation of their doctoral degree in line with the goals set at European level. Naturally, institutional strategies vary in breadth and focus. A recent qualitative study on the emergence of a European academic identity among doctoral researchers<sup>23</sup> underpins institutional aspects conducive to the researchers' identification as European researchers. Certain doctoral schools have devised coursework to include an international dimension with a view of assisting student-researchers with building diversified competences<sup>24</sup> – intercultural, entrepreneurial and technology skills, foreign languages, critical thinking, an interdisciplinary mindset, among others. Other institutions have actively sought opportunities for joint supervision of doctoral students and have established *co-tutelle* arrangements. International teaching staff is another institutional asset perceived as a contributor to the student researchers' identification as European researchers. Inter-institutional collaboration as well as funding instruments for doctoral mobility have been highlighted as fundamental drivers of internationalisation of the doctoral degree in other publications too<sup>25,26</sup>.

For the purposes of this paper, we have conducted a review of university websites in European countries of the Nordic<sup>27</sup> region to see what doctoral services are being offered and whether internationalisation is on the agenda in their doctoral programs<sup>28</sup>. The universities are situated in a geographical region with shared cultural features and a history of close socio-economic interaction and co-operation.

The results of the review show an impressive degree of similarity in approach and actions. In every one of the studied universities, internationalisation of the doctoral degree is given a very high priority. To start with, the information about PhD studies on the websites is written in the global lingua franca English, making it accessible to a wide international audience, and is presented in a very detailed and engaging manner, making it appealing to a contemporary digitally versed generation. An interesting tool observed on most of the websites is the availability of a blog and chat section where domestic and international PhD applicants are encouraged to directly interact with doctoral researchers at the university. The space dedicated to blogs is rich in content. It provides

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<sup>23</sup> Stoicheva, M. & and N. Tsvetkova (2021)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> <https://uni-foundation.eu/uploads/2018%20International%20cooperation%20guide.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/about-education-and-training-in-the-eu\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/about-education-and-training-in-the-eu_en)

<sup>27</sup> Finland, Sweden, Denmark

<sup>28</sup> [www.jyvaskyla.fi](http://www.jyvaskyla.fi), [www.tuni.fi](http://www.tuni.fi), [www.aalto.fi](http://www.aalto.fi), [www.helsinki.fi](http://www.helsinki.fi), [www.uu.se](http://www.uu.se), <https://ki.se>, [www.lunduniversity.lu.se](http://www.lunduniversity.lu.se), [www.ku.dk](http://www.ku.dk), <https://international.au.dk>, [www.en.aau.dk](http://www.en.aau.dk)

an insider perspective, creates an affable and unconstrained mean of communication, and thereby serves its purpose to attract both national and international applicants and facilitate their inclusion in the research community. This is an important element in the current global competition for talent.

There is a strong emphasis that PhD studies at these institutions is international in its nature. The thesis can be written and supervised in English, the teaching and research staff is international, the PhD cohort comes from various countries, the PhD curriculum is devised in such a way as to ensure an international involvement of the student researcher. International exposure is stated not only in the form of a strong recommendation for doctoral students at these universities. In two of the Danish higher education institutions there is an explicit requirement that aspiring graduates must complete a study abroad while at the PhD program in order to participate in another active research environment. In their effort to internationalise their doctoral programs and provide mobility opportunities for students, the universities have established bilateral collaborative agreements on doctoral education with higher education and research institutions worldwide. These agreements go beyond the traditional European and Nordic cooperation and mobility funding programs and indicate the institutions' strong commitment to global engagement at the doctoral level. It is important to also note here that the universities specifically offer customised transferable skills training to help doctoral students in their international activities and network-building. The overall impression is that these universities have implemented an approach to delivering their doctoral programs that is in sync with their stated intentions of ensuring that PhD students develop an international outlook and succeed in a globalised work environment. This review shows that the strategies to enhancing internationalisation in higher education and research at EU level have been embraced by these Nordic universities.

### **Concluding remark**

Political engagement at highest EU level with the process of internationalisation indicates that it is assigned a cornerstone place in the development of the European higher education and research area. This paper shows that the facilitators of the internationalisation of doctoral programs are rooted in the supranational commitments to support this process through policy adoption and funding instruments. The deployment of these facilitators can be observed in the strong institutional engagement to implement practices that effect change in the delivery and execution of their doctoral programs in sync with the imperative of globalisation.

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