



Internationalization in European Higher Education: New Data from the Frontlines

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What can some 2800 international higher education professionals, working in 46 different countries, answering several dozen questions about their roles, their employing institutions/organizations, and their personal and professional interests, tell us about internationalization in Europe today? Quite a bit, it turns out, thanks to the recently completed third edition of the EAIE Barometer, a survey exercise conducted by the European Association for International Education (EAIE).

This major data collection effort, which was first undertaken in 2015 and then again in 2018, sheds light on the realities of internationalization in higher education across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), specifically from the vantage point of individuals operating on the frontlines of this work. Amongst other key insights, this significant body of data gives important indications of how professionals across Europe in the field today feel about their working lives, what they think about different aspects of their employing institution's/organization's approaches and performance with respect to internationalization, and how they view the effects of national and European-level actors on this work. Taken together, the data offers compelling indications of positivity as well as signals that further conversation is warranted to better align stakeholder interests and move internationalization agendas meaningfully forward.

Individual Experiences

The 2024 EAIE Barometer data gives ample evidence of job satisfaction among international higher education professionals in Europe. Strong percentages express satisfaction with their overall job/role/position (91 percent), the sense of purpose their job gives them (89 percent), the feeling of being valued by their employer (72 percent) and work-life balance (68 percent). Levels of satisfaction with salary or compensation are less robust, with a solid 40 percent indicating they are either unsatisfied (30 percent) or very unsatisfied (10 percent).

Despite concerns in relation to salary/compensation, a strong 79 percent indicate they plan to continue working in the field of international higher education in the coming three years, and most (65 percent) expect to remain at their same institution/organization during this timeframe.

While there are strong signs of job satisfaction and stability across this workforce, there are also indications of fluctuations and challenges. Job changes for many respondents in the last several years are apparent in the fact, while just 28 percent indicate they have only been working in the field of international higher education for a total of five years or fewer, more than half of respondents (53 percent) report that they have worked in their current positions for five years or fewer. Furthermore, a strong proportion of 81 percent perceive that their job now requires more time/effort, new/different skills or both, as compared to three years ago.

As many individuals change jobs or perceive evolutions in what is expected of their roles, it is perhaps not surprising that a full 84 percent—across all levels of experience—indicate a significant or moderate need for training/professional development opportunities related to the current role. Addressing the widespread perceived need for professional development in the international higher education sector is a key takeaway from this research.

Abstract

New research from the European Association for International Education—the EAIE Barometer, third edition (2024)—captures perspectives on the state of internationalization across the European Higher Education Area from the viewpoint of frontline professionals working in this field. Drawing on more than 2800 responses from 46 EHEA countries, insights are provided into matters of job satisfaction, institutional approaches and performance, and the perceived influence of national and European-level actors on internationalization.

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Institutional Realities

Several interesting insights emerge from the survey questions focused on institutional matters. For example, the 2024 Barometer exercise clearly highlights a trend away from reliance on situating responsibility for internationalization within a single central office or team. In the first iteration of the Barometer survey in 2015, 51 percent of respondents indicated that this was the organizational approach at their institution. This figure dropped to 35 percent in the second edition of the Barometer survey in 2018 and has fallen further to 24 percent in 2024.

Although satisfaction levels for these arrangements were not measured in 2015 and 2018, in 2024, 58 percent of respondents indicate they are either very satisfied or satisfied with how responsibilities for internationalization are organized and 63 percent are confident in the leadership for internationalization at their institution/organization. Just over half (56 percent) of respondents agree that their institution has a clearly defined set of goals for internationalization, and a robust 79 percent agree that their institution's goals are achievable.

The “glass half full” perspective on these findings points to enthusiasm and positivity for institutional leadership, organization, and direction. At the same time, the fact that 37 percent of respondents feel their institution does not have a clearly defined set of goals for internationalization, and 31 percent are not confident in the leadership guiding this work forward should not be easily discounted by institutional leaders or policy makers.

National and European-level Dynamics

In the European context, national governments and regional actors, such as the European Commission, have important steering and funding roles to play in higher education, with significant implications for internationalization policy and practice. The 2024 EAIE Barometer data reflect this reality but also signals shifts that beg for additional analysis.

In this vein, it is quite interesting to note what could be a “softening” in national and European-level influence over time. This is reflected in the fact that in 2024, 58 percent of respondents signaled that national authorities are either highly influential or influential in driving their institution's internationalization goals, as compared to the 68 percent in 2015 who indicated that the national policy level was (highly) influential on the internationalization policy at their institutions. A similar drop was seen in 2024 in respondents' perceptions of European-level authorities' influence (53 percent influential or highly influential) versus 66 percent in 2015.

Unpacking the reasons behind the apparent waning of influence of these key actors in relation to internationalization deserves further attention.

Many Insights, Multiple Realities, Meaningful Stakes

Internationalization, whether considered in the narrower context of the European Union or in the wider arena of the European Higher Education Area, is understood to be a key ingredient in the mid- to longer-term strategies for the region that are focused on economic, political and social vitality. Developing workforces, fostering economic performance, shoring up democratic processes, competing and collaborating globally—many of these aspirations can be linked to higher education systems and institutions whose work is elevated through different aspects of internationalization policy and practice.

The individual professionals operating on international higher education's frontlines in Europe have much to tell us about how this work is proceeding. There is room for both optimism and ongoing critical reflection. ▲

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