

National Policies and Strategies for Internationalization: The Lights Are Still on in Europe

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Internationalization in higher education is under pressure in many contexts around the world, yet national-level action focused on internationalization is still discernible across Europe. Recent evidence from the European Higher Education Area demonstrates that some countries have dedicated strategies for internationalization in higher education, and most others direct some national-level energy toward this work. Moving forward, strategizing flexibly to mitigate the effects of volatility will be key.

The global outlook for internationalization in higher education is a decidedly chilly one at present. Around the world, as national governments tilt rightward, borders harden, and both trade and culture wars heat up, internationalization faces major headwinds. Indeed, the foundational activities of international student and staff mobility, interinstitutional partnerships, international research collaboration, intercultural learning, and transnational education are being challenged in profound ways.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to reflect on the relatively encouraging findings of a recent initiative—the National Policies for Internationalisation Project ([NAP](#))—undertaken by the Academic Cooperation Association and the European Association for International Education. This research provides a current snapshot of national strategies and policy frameworks for the internationalization of higher education across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Few “Defined Strategies,” but Pervasive Attention

The NAP project identified 13 EHEA higher education systems with defined, standalone national strategies for internationalization in 2025. From Norway to Turkey, Italy to Ireland, the countries with such strategies encompassed a notably wide range of characteristics in terms of size, geographic location, and higher education system types.

Meanwhile, nearly all of the 35 other (equally diverse) systems considered by the project also exhibited some degree of national-level attention to internationalization in higher education—to varying extents, of course. Evidence for this was found in many countries’ overarching (education) strategy documents, where objectives often signaled a commitment to the internationalization of higher education in some fashion. Frequent topics included the development of joint/double degree programs; strengthening international partnerships;

encouraging incoming/outgoing student mobility support, international talent attraction, and/or talent retention; enhancing mutual recognition of qualifications; promoting the country’s higher education offer internationally; and various efforts intended to strengthen research and innovation in a global context. Diaspora-focused efforts were also occasionally referenced. Some countries, such as Poland and Spain, have explicit national strategies in the making. Others, such as Kazakhstan, have expired standalone strategies whose influence continues to be felt in the current policy context.

Progress in the Face of Persistent Challenges

A closer look at the 13 NAP-identified national strategies indicates considerable forward momentum with national policies for internationalization but also the ongoing need to deal with longstanding challenges.

In terms of forward momentum, the NAP project noted that national strategies in place in 2025 had reached a “2.0 level of maturity.” That is, they have gone beyond their predecessor strategies, reflecting further developments in the field. For example, alongside a typical focus on the physical mobility of students and staff, current strategies appear to support virtual exchanges or activities such as blended mobilities that combine physical movement with integrated digital components. The same applies to the nuance and scope of cooperation: several strategies distinguish between bilateral and multilateral cooperation, sometimes highlighting the strategic relevance of one or both of these modalities. Clearly, internationalization has been changing in recent years, as reflected by national strategies in Europe that seek to harness or direct this phenomenon today.

Furthermore, the NAP project found that most of the identified national strategies framed internationalization as a tool for quality enhancement and for national and institutional progress. Institutional capacity building and capacity enhancement are

often quoted in the current strategies, which appear to assume an impact-driven lens. Complex portfolios or “laundry lists” of internationalization activities seem no longer to be pursued on their own (or used to measure achievement against external targets or metrics).

However, even as national strategies exhibit advancements in a maturing internationalization landscape, these documents illuminate the pesky intransigence of longstanding challenges. Many national strategies reference the need to address issues such as visa and entry barriers for non-European students and the inconsistencies related to recognizing credits and qualifications earned abroad.

Influences from Many Sides and One Constant: Volatility

The factors affecting national strategies for internationalization across the EHEA arise from many sources, both internal and external. Internal influences originate from the national context; external influences stem from outside that environment (i.e., regionally or globally).

Domestic politics and cross-border geopolitics, as well as economic and demographic developments, exert an array of influences over national strategy- or policy-making environments focused on internationalization in Europe. One commonality across the EHEA, however, is the broad appreciation for key European-level frameworks and initiatives, such as the Bologna Process or European Union–funded programs (e.g., Erasmus+ mobility and the European Universities Alliances). These efforts are widely perceived as valuable and are routinely named as enabling or guiding factors in national policies or strategies.

A second commonality framing the national policy/strategy landscape for internationalization across the EHEA is the sense that volatility is the new normal; repeated and unpredictable crises in recent years have directly affected the international education sector. In this uncertain environment, there is a

growing expectation for new strategies to be more adaptive and forward-looking, able to predict some of these developments and respond effectively to them.

Keeping the Lights on

For policymakers eager to preserve the positive and mitigate the potential threats to internationalization in higher education, the NAP project identified three courses of action likely to positively shape policy/strategy formulation in this area. These avenues principally emerged from detailed conversations with key informants in 11 EHEA countries.

First, the tangible value of international education must be made apparent. To ensure future funding and support for the sector, there is a widely agreed-upon need to investigate and document the impact of internationalization more thoroughly at all levels. Second, the conversation around internationalization must extend beyond the “inner circle.” Engaging the wider public to better understand and appreciate internationalization is another important ingredient for policy success. Third, future strategy making should build on several trends already identified in some of the newest policy documents across the EHEA, which include reaffirming internationalization’s core principles while cultivating the agility to deal with the unexpected developments that will inevitably arise. Additionally, integrating periodic strategy reviews will enable these policies to serve as truly living documents, capable of adapting to the shifting demands of the moment.

As elsewhere in the world, significant challenges are buffeting internationalization in higher education across the EHEA. But the existence of just over a dozen defined, standalone national strategies for internationalization in highly diverse country contexts, alongside many other notable national-level efforts in the region, provide evidence that the “lights are still on” for internationalization in Europe. Continued attention and advocacy will be required to sustain—and ideally strengthen and expand—such commitments.

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