Improving your mobility-enabling university partnerships through the use of eQuATIC

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GUIDELINES

eQuATIC

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The guidelines were created in the context of the Erasmus+ Key Action 2 Strategic Partnership project Assessing quality of partnerships amongst Higher Education Institutions (eQuATIC).

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1 INTRODUCTION

These guidelines on improving your mobility-enabling university partnerships through the use of eQuATIC are meant for practitioners in the field of internationalisation. They consist of a set of concrete steps, tips and hints that are applicable in the daily context of the International Relations Office and decentralised internationalisation services. The guidelines are heavily based on the research on the use of data for internationalisation in higher education (Jahnke, Leys, et al., 2019)[1] that has also been conducted in the framework of the EU-funded project “Assessing quality of partnerships amongst HEIs“.

The first part of the guidelines is a concrete set of explanations and questions you should be able to answer in regard to both **data gathering and reusability** and **inter-institutional partnerships** (Chapters 2-4).

The second part of the guidelines consists of a concrete set of recommendations for using the **eQuATIC tool** (Chapter 5 and 6).

The third and last part of the guidelines presents thoughts on how to better **work with your partners** e.g. at conferences, by using feedback to change your own policies but also in light of the much-discussed European Universities initiatives (Chapters 7-9).

The guidelines are a snapshot of the situation in September 2019. Digitalisation in internationalisation is progressing rapidly and while generic parts of the guidelines around data will remain the same, we predict that the digitalisation of e.g. Erasmus management will substantially impact the need on how to work with data, capabilities of student information systems and so on. Keep in mind that from 2021 a new Erasmus programme will start. This might change the data that the European Commission requires Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) holders to submit online. Already in spring 2019 the EC announced that digital exchange of data between institutions will become obligatory[2].

[1] Research: the use of data for internationalisation in higher education (Jahnke, Leys, et al. 2019)
[2] This was announced during a webinar “Erasmus Goes Digital!” organised by the European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/education/events/webinar-erasmus-goes-digital_en

2 INTER-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

2.1 Identify your partnerships enabling mobility

2.1.1 Define

The first step to improve the quality of your mobility-enabling partnerships is to clearly define what such partnerships mean within your organisation. While Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) cooperate with other institutions in different forms e.g. research cooperation, meetings during conferences, personal cooperation between academics and staff etc., a partnership enabling mobility is traditionally supported by an interinstitutional agreement encompassing mobility flows of students and/or staff.

For Erasmus mobilities, the European Commission provides an interinstitutional agreement template[3], which contains (a) information about the partners and (b) information about the mobilities enabled through the agreement. Furthermore, it contains (c) practical information about the institutions, such as recommended language skills, additional requirements for the mobilities, the academic calendar and information about visas, insurances and housing.

The section (b) of the Erasmus+ agreements contains cooperation conditions referring to subject area and study cycle. Some institutions set up one agreement with a specific partner containing mobility flows for many different study fields while others set up separate agreements with the same partner per subject area. This impacts the definition of what an agreement is and should be taken into account when creating an overview (see infra).

HEIs also set up agreements outside the Erasmus framework that usually also include specific clauses on sending and receiving exchange students (and/or staff), which often follow the same principle.

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[3] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/applicants/inter-institutional-agreement_en (September 2019)

Questions you should be able to answer:

- How are mobility enabling partnerships defined at my institution?
- What data-objects does my institution take into account for defining a partnership (e.g. ISCED field of study, faculty…)?
- What other types of partnerships/agreements does my institution have?
- What types of mobility enabling partnerships does my institution have (e.g. Erasmus, regional frameworks, bilateral agreements outside scope of Erasmus…)?

2.1.2 Overview

The next logical step is to create an overview of your current mobility-enabling partnerships at institutional level.

If you are interested in improving your Erasmus partnerships, you will need to understand the format in which you store information about your Erasmus partnerships. Until 2019, the traditional format is a collection of interinstitutional agreements saved as PDF files. A lot of institutions still store a large number of ring binders with signed copies of their agreements. For institutions using more sophisticated mobility management software, the relevant data is usually stored in a central system that allows you to get an overview of the number of agreements, the number of mobilities enabled for each subject area and study cycle and the pdf copies of the signed agreements.

In making the overview you will need to take the definitions into account (see supra). When you differentiate the subject areas, you will be able to create an overview of partners and agreements (as you can have multiple agreements with the same partner).

Should your institution not use a mobility management software, we recommend using the Erasmus Dashboard[4] provided for free by the European University Foundation under the Erasmus Without Paper initiative and supported by the European Commission.

Partnerships organised outside the Erasmus framework might follow the same concept as Erasmus partnerships. Most institutions use similar or even the same template for such interinstitutional partnerships. Should you use a different template, try to aggregate the information about those

[4] https://www.erasmus-dashboard.eu/intro (September 2019)

partnerships with the Erasmus partnerships to create a complete overview of all your mobility-enabling partnerships.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- What system do we use to store information on partnerships?
- How many mobility enabling partnerships do we have?
- What are possible study destinations for credit mobility?

3 IDENTIFY CURRENT DECISION-MAKING PRACTICES

Once you have a complete overview of your current partnerships, you will want to identify the current processes for taking decisions on partnerships. This includes decisions on establishing new partnerships i.e. setting up new interinstitutional agreements, renewing partnerships that are already established or terminating partnerships that are no longer of interest for your institution.

3.1 Establishment

New partnerships are usually set up by preceding prior contacts, site visits, meetings on conferences, existing academic cooperation or other activities. Whether such activities result in a concrete agreement depends heavily on the processes to establish new partnerships at each individual HEI.

When a new partnership is established it is difficult to assess the potential quality and success of the partnership, however you can already take into account some elements at this stage: is the partner accredited?; does the partner have an educational offer for your students?; is the educational offer in a language your students are usually able to study in?; are there already existing links with the institution (e.g. in research, projects…)?; do you already have agreements in the region and what is the interest of students (incoming & outgoing) to go to this region?; are exchanges possible given the academic calendar at the partner?; does the partner use some kind of credit system e.g. ECTS?; does the institution offer sufficient (online) information on its academic offer, student facilities etc.?; are the services provided to incoming students of an acceptable standard?

While those questions are all relevant, each HEI has their own set of criteria on how to establish partnerships. Ideally, these criteria are clearly defined and known to all parties at an institution that are involved in setting up new partnerships. Creating a simple checklist can facilitate this process tremendously.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- What is the current process of establishing new partnerships?
- Who is responsible for initiating new partnerships?
- What criteria does your institution or individual faculties/departments have in place to establish new partnerships?
- Who takes the final decision on whether a partnership is established i.e. signing an interinstitutional agreement?

3.2 Renewal

The renewal process is an important milestone for ensuring quality of your existing partnerships, as your institution will have experience with the respective partners and can now evaluate whether the partnership is successful or not. The renewal process can be done at any time but is traditionally done before e.g. a new Erasmus programme generation starts (every 7 years). With the new Erasmus programme being around the corner (at the time of publishing this guidelines), starting on 1 January 2020, reviewing and renewing partnerships is a crucial step in enabling high-quality mobilities for your students.

The eQuATIC tool which is described in Chapter 5 will help you review your current partnerships and take informed decisions on their possible continuation.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- What is the current process of renewing partnerships?
- How does your institution evaluate partnerships at the moment?
- What criteria are important for your institution (and your students) on defining a quality partnership
- Who is responsible for the review?
- Who is responsible for taking decisions on renewing partnerships?

3.3 Termination

Discontinuing partnerships is an imperative step to ensure that partnerships that are no longer relevant or of insufficient quality (as per your own definition) are treated accordingly. The eQuATIC research: the use of data for internationalisation in higher education (Jahnke, Leys, et al., 2019) shows that the most common reason for not renewing a partnership is that it has become inactive or sleeping. Other criteria include poor availability of accessible courses (e.g. English-taught; with compatible learning outcomes), uneven balance between incoming and outgoing students or insufficient overall academic performance of the partner institution.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- What is the current process of discontinuing a partnership?
- What are the steps leading to a termination of a partnership?
- Do you have a mitigation mechanism in place for partnerships of insufficient quality before terminating them?
- Who is responsible to take a final decision on discontinuing a partnership?

4 MAP AND COLLECT RELEVANT DATA

"If you torture the data long enough, it will confess to anything" is a well-known citation from Ronald Coase. The importance of the role of the torturer can't be stressed enough and throughout the guidelines we will try to provide the person responsible for data in the International Office with the necessary insights on how to handle data in a trustworthy, transparent and correct way. The role of staff at Higher Education Institutions (HEI) that deal with data is gaining importance. However, we should be aware that the required skillset that entail the expertise of data-processing and interpretation with a thorough insight on Educational processes and procedures, is not evident.

Many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) strive for data-based and/or data-informed policy making, however in the daily institutional practice there is huge room for improvement in data gathering and data cleaning (the reuse of data for the sake of policy making).

We try to look at the topic of data from a practitioner's perspective, keeping in mind that most practitioners in international relations are not data scientists or data professionals.

4.1 Data collection and reusability

At HEIs a lot of data is registered because it needs to be registered, without keeping in mind the importance of reusability.

The way data is collected has a huge effect on its usability when you want to analyse the data in a later stage. In setting up processes it is important that you already keep in mind what you will do with the data that you gather throughout these processes. And you should also create awareness amongst the administrative staff who is processing files from mobile students or agreements that good quality data is of utmost importance. We don't register just for the sake of registration. All information that enters in your database could potentially be useful for some data project.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Do you take the usage of data into account when processes are evaluated?
- Do we try to create awareness about the importance data input/processing amongst administrators?

4.2 Data governance

To be able to evaluate current partnerships, you will need to ensure that data governance structure and processes are in place.

In practice, most institutions do not have such formalised structure and processes. To quote Alex Leigh (2018) "Data Governance is not easy. If it was, we would already be doing it".[5]

Creating a data project for mobility-enabling partnerships can be based on the analysis of the current partnerships (Chapter 2 and 3) and will require you to map where and how the current data is stored. Such a data project for mobility-enabling partnerships needs to typically be embedded in a bigger structure, meaning that the institution will need to use data management systems e.g. mobility management software, databases, student information systems etc., which should be inter-connected.

If an institution lacks such structures, IRO members should talk to colleagues from other services (e.g. IT services, student services etc.) and try to join forces and expertise. We recommend setting up a meeting

[5] https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-point-data-governance-alex-leigh/ (September 2019)

to map the current systems and databases. A bottom-up approach that involves staff members from different departments can guarantee the support by the relevant leadership.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Who can help me with exports from our database?
- Is there some structure in place for data governance?

4.3 Skilled staff: the data steward

Many institutions invest in technology but not in people who need to use this technology and in business processes that could be organised more efficiently with the new technology. Therefore, it is recommended to employ someone in the International Relations Office or in an office of strategic planning who can take up the role of data steward. The data steward is a specialist in the domain of internationalisation and combines this expertise with knowledge on where to find what data. The person is responsible for quality of the data sets and should have a mandate to improve the whole data process in close collaboration with your IT department: from registration of a certain process to the reporting templates.

The data steward should also take part in discussions about standards and definitions (see following sub-chapter). The data steward can easily create an overview of current mobility-enabling partnerships (see chapter 2.1.1).

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Who can help me with answering questions on the number of agreements, the number of exchange students, cooperation with a specific country, etc.?
- Is there someone at the IRO who knows where to find what data?
- Who is responsible at the IRO for administrative processes for student mobility?

4.4 Use of standards

Standardisation of data is crucial for enabling flows of data between systems and linking data from different data sources. If you want to enable the flow of data between systems, reducing cost and complexity in the data gathering process and get better and useful information to evaluate the quality of your mobility-enabling partnership, you need to standardise your data. A great example is Erasmus and non-Erasmus interinstitutional agreements. If the respective data is saved in the same standardised format, it is easy to compare and evaluate them together.

It is blindingly obvious – having a dozen different ways of representing the same data will lead to complex mapping processes, mismatches and inconsistencies that render your analysis difficult or even meaningless.

Data standardisation is really very difficult to achieve (Youell, 2018). Youell points out that a standard is a combination of a specification and adoption. Without the latter, there is no standard (Youell, 2018).

Let's look at a concrete example: you want to collect all possible information for a visit from Ghent University staff. You will possibly need to (1) query your Student Information System to see if you have any degree students from that given institution. You will also (2) look into student mobility numbers in the system used to manage student mobility. Then you will (3) consult your Erasmus+ project compendium to find out if you have any projects in common. Next up you will (4) query the research database to look for any Horizon 2020 projects. There might also be a database to (5) look for joint-Phd's with this university and you might have some international post-docs who are alumni of the visiting institution or even full time professors etc. for the given university. And finally, you also (6) want to check the number of joint publications with this institution.

You end up with 6 data sources. In each of the sources the name of the institution might be written a bit differently, e.g. Universiteit Gent, Ghent University, B GENT01, University of Ghent, UGent. Because of the lack of a unique standard for institutions you will end up querying 6 different databases with (at least) 5 variations for the name of one specific institution. Imagine conducting this exercise for all your partner institutions.

The example above illustrates a challenge that is probably recognisable for a lot of staff trying to compile a cooperation portfolio with an international partner institution. It is evident that the ability to link data about institutions is crucial for the success of evaluating a mobility-enabling partnership.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Do we use (international) standards at my institutions?
- Is there some forum where the need/use of standards is discussed and can we join the discussion/receive input from those discussions (institutional, national, international)?
- Are descriptions available about standards at your institution?

4.5 Data cleaning

4.5.1 Clean data in the source

Data cleaning is a crucial process if you want to use it for data-informed decision making. Once you query your databases you will encounter minor or major errors in the export of your database. Of course, you want to correct those errors before you start analysing. The logical thing to do is cleaning it in the export but it is as important to correct the errors in the original data sources as well. The next time when you make an export from your data, you won't need to correct the same errors again.

The beginning of an Erasmuscode has a fixed form: one or two characters indicating the country followed by two or one blanks. The format is as follows: B--GENT01 or PL-WARSZAW01. In many data sources this formal format is not respected and only one blank is used in all cases. You can correct this in an export taken from your SIS but if you make another export, the Erasmuscode will be wrong again. Therefore, you better correct the Easmuscode directly in your SIS. In your next export the correct format will be guaranteed.

4.5.2 Keep track of changes

Very often the export from the database is only the first step. End-users start processing and manipulating the exported data (the risk of making errors in this phase is referred to under the header data capability (3.2.1) in the research on the use of data for internationalisation in higher education). When a process of data manipulation is needed to answer a specific question, you want to make sure those questions are answered in the same way when you receive an export of the same data set or for another academic year. Therefore, it is highly recommended to keep track of each of the steps of the processing. If you can repeat the same data manipulation on different data sets, you make sure to follow order of actions.

Keeping the original data source (even if it is extracted directly from your information system) also helps to evaluate processes and actions undertaken on the data.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Do errors occur over and over again in my exports from a specific data set?
- Can I come to the same answer twice after two times cleaning the same data set?

4.6 Reusability by design

When designing tools to support administrative processes at the International Relations Office, one can already plan ahead and think about the potential reporting based on the data collected throughout these processes. Taking into account potential reporting in the planning stage will make the actual reporting much easier.

Once a tool is up and running, the cost to change it is much higher than when certain functionality or fields are foreseen in the planning phase. It needs some thinking ahead but will pay off in a later phase.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Do we already take reporting into account when setting up a new IT-process?
- Are we GDPR compliant?

5 Upload your data in eQuATIC

With eQuATIC you can easily analyse your existing mobility-enabling partnerships. The eQuATIC indicators are grouped in three clusters that shape quality of an international partnership: quality of the partner, quality of the information exchange, impact of the cooperation. Each of the indicators reveal strengths and weaknesses in the cooperation and as such can be addressed towards the partner in order to improve the overall quality of the partnership.

One of the cornerstones of eQuATIC is the principle that quality of international cooperation is assessed without a huge administrative workload for staff involved in Internationalisation. In order to stick to this principle, the indicators used within eQuATIC are based on data available within the databases of the HEIs.

However, before having the reports and analysis available in the tool, you need to upload data. This data will be automatically processed into the indicator scores. The data is uploaded based on standardised templates that are based on existing reporting templates which makes recycling from other reporting, e.g. for mobility tool possible.

5.1 Uploading data in eQuATIC

The first step before you can start utilising eQuATIC is that you upload your own data into the tool. When logged into the tool as local administrator (access rights that the first registered user of an institution gets and can also attribute to additional users), you can upload data by selecting an Excel file from the computer. This Excel file needs to be prepared in advance based on the eQuATIC upload templates.

Make sure that the column names of your upload exactly match the names in the templates as the first validation of the upload is the presence of all column names. These names should exactly match the names as they are written in the upload template. There is also data validation in terms of the expected value in the rows of the upload. Information on column names and data validation is part of the upload templates.

More information on data templates and uploads can be found on the eQuATIC support platform.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Do you have the right credentials to upload data in eQuATIC?
- Have you found the upload templates?
- Do you understand the upload templates?

5.2 Where to find eQuATIC data

There is no general rule of where data that is relevant for eQuATIC can be found. Each HEI has its own tools and systems to keep track of student mobility, international agreements, educational projects and other information that is used for eQuATIC.

5.2.1 Student information system

Some institutions keep the information about mobilities in their Student Information system. Use the reporting functionality to export the data needed for eQuATIC. If you can't customise reports, you might need to ask colleagues from the IT-department to help you exporting the necessary info.

5.2.2 Mobility management software

If you use mobility management software, most of the data needed for eQuATIC could be found in this system. Most mobility software packages have functionality to make reports (= exports from the database).

You will need to make such export containing the necessary info and rename the column names accordingly. Possibly you will need to add information on credits to your mobility data.

5.2.3 Mobility tool

Several indicators in eQuATIC are based on the Erasmus+ participant report for outgoing students. Each HEI that participates in Erasmus, has access to mobility tool and can easily download the participant report (go to mobilites → more actions → export participant report). Once downloaded, the integral export of the participant report can be uploaded to eQuATIC. eQuATIC will only store relevant information and won't store any personal data.

You can also consider exporting outbound and inbound mobility from MT+ (mobility Import – Export section). Both data for student and staff (Erasmus+) mobility are available. A drawback of only using MT+ data is that you will only be able to use eQuATIC for Erasmus partnerships.

5.2.4 Excel

Maybe you don't have an advanced data management system and you use Excel to keep track of mobility data. We recommend making a copy of your master-file and create the eQuATIC templates from this copy.

5.2.5 Combination of sources

For some of the indicators you will probably need to combine different sources in order to fill out the upload template.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Do you know in what system(s) you can find the information needed in the upload templates for eQuATIC?
- Do you know who can make exports from systems/databases to support you in preparing data uploads?

5.3 Preparing your data uploads

Before you can start preparing the data upload you need to have an export of the data from the original data source. In many cases there are tools available to create such a report, very often exported in Excel format. Once you have the export containing the necessary data, you can easily rename the field names along the instructions in the data templates. You don't need to worry about additional fields. The eQuATIC tool will ignore all additional fields and only store information from the fields indicated in the template.

5.3.1 Institution identification

Institutions are a crucial data-object for eQuATIC. As all data that is uploaded in the tool needs to be linked to an institution, the identification of institutions is crucial. For identifying the institution in your data template and in the eQuATIC database, there are three possible keys: the Erasmuscode, the Participant Identification Code (PIC) and the name of the institution. As there can be a lot of variation in the name of institutions across databases of HEIs (accents, language used, use of "the university" vs "university", use of brackets etc., the tool tries to match the institution on the upload via the Erasmuscode or the PIC. Although Erasmuscodes are not always registered correctly (also see chapter on data cleaning) and the PIC is not stable over time, both Erasmuscode and PIC could be considered as the only standard that is consistent across various databases. If the Erasmuscode (or PIC) in the template exactly matches the Erasmuscode (or PIC) in eQuATIC, the tool will not take the name of an institution into account. In other words, if an Erasmuscode or PIC is present in your upload, you don't need to adapt the name of institutions to the names in the eQuATIC database. The Erasmuscode (or PIC) will be taken into account for linking the data in the upload template to the institution in the eQuATIC database.

The opposite is true for institutions that do not have an Erasmuscode or PIC. For those institutions, linking data from the template to the data on institutions in eQuATIC is done by name. Therefore, the name of the institution in the template should exactly match the name of the institution in the eQuATIC database.

5.3.2 The Erasmus+ participant report: a quick win

As described above, several indicators take the Erasmus+ participant report into account (support and facilities; academic quality; course catalogue information and exchange of mobility documents). To kick-start the use of eQuATIC one can easily export the participant reports from outgoing students from Mobility Tool and upload them as a whole via the data upload functionality inside the tool. You don't need to worry about privacy sensitive information as only the columns needed for eQuATIC (as indicated in the upload template) will be stored in the database. All personal information and irrelevant data will simply be ignored during the upload.

5.3.3 Linking data from different databases

It is quite likely that you will need to compile information from different databases into one template. E.g. information about credits is kept in a Student Information System and information about mobility is kept in a mobility management software. There are advanced tools on the market to help you with this exercise. However, you don't need to be a professional data scientist or IT-geek to link data from different data sheets. There exists a simple function in Excel 'VLOOKUP' that makes linking two data sets very easy on the condition that you have a unique identifier that is present in both files (e.g. email address, student number, Erasmuscode…).

5.3.4 The (un)importance of the Field of study

When presenting eQuATIC to faculty members and representatives of study programmes, feedback often received was: "what about my faculty/programme". In order to avoid creating functionality and related workload to set up a whole institutional structure (some kind of course catalogue) inside eQuATIC, we use the Field of Education (ISCED fields of study) as a proxy for both institutional structures.

The filtering option on ISCED fields of study will of course only work when ISCEDs are attributed to the underlying data.

5.3.5 Decentralised data gathering

If your institution gathers the mobility data at a faculty/departmental level, you can still use eQuATIC. However, you will need to compile the necessary information into one file. Alternatively, you can give access to several local administrators who all upload the information for their faculty/department. To complement the file, you will need to make an export of the existing upload and add the information from your faculty/department. If you don't add the departmental data to the existing one and upload your own file, you will overwrite the existing information.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Is it possible to compile the export templates with your own data?
- Were you able to combine different datasets in one upload template?
- Is it important to have an analysis at the level of the faculty/department/study programme by using ISCED?
- Is the data for eQuATIC available at the central or decentral level?
- Do you know how to combine data from several faculties/departments?

5.4 The result upon successful upload

When you successfully upload several data sets you can use eQuATIC for an analysis of your current partnerships. Based on the 10 indicators (an overview and description can be found at the support platform) you can easily identify strengths and weaknesses in the portfolio of partnerships you have.

In practice you can use eQuATIC to identify those partnerships you don't need to worry about because all indicators point towards a good-quality cooperation, those you want to focus your efforts to because there are some indicators to be improved and those to discuss thoroughly because many problems occur. eQuATIC is not a single truth but it is meant as a starting point for fostering a fact-based dialogue about partnerships within the institution and with the partner.

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Can you generate several indicator scores in the eQuATIC menu for institutional users?
- Can you identify the best scoring partner on a certain indicator?
- Can you identify the worst scoring partners on a certain indicator?
- Can you identify the best scoring partner on a certain cluster?
- Can you identify the worst scoring partners on a certain cluster?
- Can you identify the best scoring partner for your institution?

5.5 eQuATIC for non-Erasmus partnerships

By virtue of the Mobility Tool, you already have a lot of data available for feeding eQuATIC for an analysis of your Erasmus-partners. However, you can also use the tool for partners outside the Erasmus framework. Whether or not this will effectively work for your institution heavily depends on the data you keep on mobilities and partnerships with HEI's outside of Erasmus. If this information is not gathered in a structural way, you better concentrate on the process of gathering this data. But if you keep all non-Erasmus data, eQuATIC can perfectly work. The only thing to keep in mind is that you will need to create your own survey addressing the questions from the participant report that are taken into account for eQuATIC (or adding those to existing questionnaires).

Questions you should be able to answer:

- Are there any surveys for mobility outside the Erasmus framework?
- Can you add questions to such surveys?
- Do you know what questions to add to an existing/new survey?
- Can you make an export from the answers in the template needed for eQuATIC?

6 Utilise the eQuATIC tool to analyse the quality of your current partnerships

Once eQuATIC is stored with data, users from your institution can consult the institution reports about your partnerships. In these reports each indicator score gets a colour code referring to "intervention required", "fair" or "good". These score indications facilitate score interpretation by the individual user. They facilitate problem detection during monitoring exercises.

Having the indicator scores available in eQuATIC is a first important step, but in order to achieve successful usage of the tool you should embed it in the processes and policies at your university. A formal evaluation supported by eQuATIC when an agreement comes to an end seems to be a minimal effort. A round of evaluations and monitoring in the middle of the agreement duration seems more appropriate.

Monitoring of indicator scores can be done at several levels. The most important level is where the responsibility for partner management lies. At some institutions this is at the department level, at other institutions agreement management is dealt with at the central IRO level. A combination of both levels also occurs (for more information you can consult the eQuATIC research paper: the use of data for internationalisation in higher education).

6.1 Monitoring by actor responsible for agreements

Staff members who bear responsibility over a specific partnership or a set of partnerships should be the main eQuATIC users at the level of the institution. When a partnership needs to be evaluated, they can take the analysis objectified by data into account for identifying actions points and issues to be discussed with the partner. People responsible might also have additional sources of information for the partnerships assessment such as focus groups with students, personal contacts & follow up… It is the mix of all this info that can be taken into account in order to make data-informed decisions about the partnership.

The responsible actor might challenge certain data or indicator scores e.g. because more students were exchanged in the context of a specific partnership. This should engage a dialogue on the quality of the data itself underpinning the eQuATIC analysis leading to e.g. better registration of mobilities.

6.2 Monitoring by central authorities

Depending on the internal structure and processes at your institution, eQuATIC can also be used as a monitoring tool by central authorities such as the office of the vice-rector for international affairs, the internal Quality Assurance office or the central IRO. A periodic evaluation by a central level can urge the actors responsible for agreements into taking action. At this level the less successful partnerships designated by low indicator scores should be addressed. The institution's scores page offers functionality to easily identify weak indicator scores.

Moreover, eQuATIC can be added to other quality assurance instruments at the Quality Assurance department. Involving QA-professionals alongside International Officers can increase the impact of the tool by embedding its usage in the general QA-practices.

6.3 Using eQuATIC for making data-informed decisions

When an exchange agreement comes to an end, both partners need to decide whether the agreement will be renewed or not. Having the eQuATIC analysis available helps in making data-informed decisions in this regard.

For the person(s) responsible for agreements eQuATIC can help to identify three groups of partnerships:

1) Partnerships with most indicator scores marked as good. Here everything goes well and these partnerships don't need specific attention as long as the scores remain good over time;
2) Partnerships where some problems are identified based on the eQuATIC analysis and need further inspection;
3) and finally, those partnerships where all alarm bells go off and one can ask why to continue this partnership.

The last group will typically consist of partnerships where nothing happened resulting in blank indicator scores or where all indicators are marked with an "intervention required". Always keep in mind that eQuATIC is there to support in managing partnerships and supports in achieving better quality partnerships. It is up to the users to act upon the signals issued by eQuATIC.

During the negotiations in the renewal process weak indicator scores can be discussed alongside conditions on how to improve them. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

7 IMPROVE THE WAY YOU DISCUSS AGREEMENTS WITH YOUR CURRENT PARTNERS

Imagine going to a conference like the EAIE equipped with the eQuATIC institutional reports on your phone, tablet or laptop (or why not: on paper). When meeting a partner, you can easily share the report and discuss the strengths and potential challenges in the partnership. Most bilateral conversations about the existing partnership currently end after a bit of small talk, some general information about both universities and their educational offer and maybe the mobility flows of the last couple of years. With the institution reports at hand, the conversation could go way beyond mere numbers and end up with discussions about several issues denoted by the eQuATIC indicators.

When the indicator "*exchange of mobility documents*" is marked with intervention required, you should discuss with your partner the handling of learning agreements and transcript of records. In principle the partner should comply with ECTS and the ECHE-charter, but some additional pressure might be needed.

Another example is a weak score for "*performance of incoming students*"*:* incoming students might not take enough credits during their exchange. This should be discussed with the partner. Incoming students might not be prepared sufficiently, courses might be too difficult for incoming students (Bachelor students having to take Master-level courses e.g.) or the educational offer might require a better knowledge of the language of instruction. Getting insight on those elements, can urge both institutions to take action or to identify that the partnership is efficient. If the indicator on "*mobility rate*" reveals a huge imbalance in the cooperation, this should be addressed as well. Maybe both partners do not mind such imbalances, but it is better to be clear about it than to assume it is okay, or to hope the partner will never notice. A weak score on "*support and facilities*" can lead to a critical self-evaluation when it comes to support. And maybe facilities are open for incoming exchange students, but they do not know where to find the information or how to access them.

When a score for "*academic quality*" is not satisfying you might want to dig a bit deeper in the data and try to find out what is wrong. There might not be enough interesting courses for exchange students because the most popular courses are taken by local students. Or exchange students are in a separate track or just receive some course material and are expected to find out themselves.

Having the data available and sharing it with your partner is only the first step in the direction of an improved quality of cooperation. Such conversation will provoke further scrutiny on certain elements and urge institutional representatives into action once they are back at their institution. Especially those elements that came up from the analysis of several partner institutions should be high on their agenda.

7.1 Using eQuATIC as a peer assessment mechanism

The peer assessment methodology is based on the assumption that two institutions upload their data in eQuATIC and can generate reports about each other. Once the data upload is complete, they can share their reports about each other and easily address the strengths and weakness in bilateral cooperation.

While using eQuATIC for assessment of your own partnerships provides useful feedback on the operations at your partner institution, having your partner's report available about your own strengths and weaknesses helps to improve your own performance inside the partnership. In doing so, both partners are able to improve on weak indicator scores. This can lead to seriously addressing issues and improving the quality at both sides of the cooperation. In doing so, the overall quality of the partnership will improve.

We recommend to structurally plan these peer reviews at different moments during the course of a partnership. E.g. during the EAIE conference, during staff visits, via email exchange, at specially organised online meetings etc. In doing so, both partners will be more aware of the improvements or stagnation on several of the indicators which can lead to better follow up of each other's activities and performance in the course of the agreement duration. The evaluation process will also be much easier, as both sides closely monitored the partnership.

The frequency of contacts and peer reviews could be agreed upon in the beginning of the partnership and, depending on how the figures look like, could be adjusted in the course of the agreement duration. There is no need for yearly monitoring of all partnerships but an exchange of data every two or three years seems appropriate. Surely, this is one of the most interesting ways of using the tool since it also provides feedback on your own HEI.

8 ESTABLISH OR ADAPT A STRATEGY ON HOW TO ENHANCE PROCESSES ON HOW YOU COLLECT DATA AND TAKE DECISIONS ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS

You might not be satisfied about the processes and decision-making at your institution when it comes to international partnerships enabling mobility. How all of this can be changed depends heavily on the procedures for creating policy change at your university. However, the key for success for any change will be to bring together stakeholders and consult them at various stages, ask for their input & ideas, launch new ideas in small reflection groups – in short, sit together and listen. It is a time-consuming process, but it is crucial for the adaption of new processes and procedures. If you should need inspiration on how other universities work with partnerships, you can consult institutional good practices in the research on the use of data for internationalisation in higher education (Jahnke, Leys, et al., 2019) that was written in the context of the eQuATIC project.

9 USING EQUATIC FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY NETWORK

The European University Initiative doesn't need an introduction anymore. The first 17 alliances were selected in June 2019. The strategic character and deepened ties that member universities engage in urges applicants to thoroughly review the potential institutions they are about to engage with and look for cooperation links between all potential partners involved.

For this screening process, eQuATIC could be a useful tool. It entails functionality to easily analyse the best functioning partnerships via aggregated indicators scores at cluster level. Moreover, an overall score for each partner institution can be consulted. This functionality combined with country selection is a possible mechanism to identify potential European University partners in different regions. Imagine the potential of eQuATIC if potential partners use eQuATIC and can compare and combine their best performing partnerships in order to identify common ties in identifying additional partner universities for the network. In doing so eQuATIC could play a role in this review process for supporting data-informed decisions about potential partners in a European University Network.

10 Sources

Following hyperlinks updated as of September 2019

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