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# **INSTITUTIONAL COMPONENTS AFFECTING THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY ON ESTONIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A comprehensive understanding of higher education internationalization remains elusive within the European context, despite the guidance offered by the European Union (EU) through policy principles, notably the Bologna Process. As a result, Member States face challenges in developing and implementing effective internationalization strategies. Typically, these prove unsustainable due to their overly ambitious and broad focus, leading to inefficiencies such as inadequate allocation of resources, and to fragmented approaches that often fail to produce cohesive, functional systems. This paper argues that establishing clear definitions, priorities and coordinated action plans involving key stakeholders could enhance the formulation of more feasible and impactful regulatory strategies, facilitating a smooth internationalization in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The opposite would increase the likelihood of wasteful investments and

mismanagement, affecting the stability, reliability, and sustainability of advancements in this area. This article contributes to the delineation of a higher education internationalization model drawing from an examination of Estonian institutional policies and regulatory trends. Through a partial institutional review, it explores the challenges, opportunities, and prospects inherent to cultivating a well defined, principled and comprehensive internationalization approach, emphasizing the necessity of meaningful stakeholder involvement for the creation of reflective regulatory frameworks to ensure the attainment of tangible and measurable goals.

## KEYWORDS

Internationalization, Estonian higher education, higher education policy, European Higher Education Area (EHEA), institutional analysis.

## Introduction

In Europe, the concept of internationalization in higher education lacks a clear, shared understanding, resulting in its suboptimal characterization and inconsistent views on implementation processes at the operational level. Regulatory strategies are commonly used to unify views, but despite extensive guiding resources on educational policies—such as those related to the Bologna Process<sup>1</sup>—there is still no broadly accepted definition of internationalization. This lack of consensus adds barriers to the challenges inherent to fulfilling broader missions of higher education in promoting development and change.<sup>2</sup> Without a common framework, individual states develop their own approaches, leading to fragmented strategies that undermine the concerted planning and effective execution of internationalization efforts intended at the highest governance levels. Disparate methods rarely merge into cohesive, fully functional systems, generating more confusion and inefficiency.<sup>3</sup>

In this as in any significant governance effort, the effectiveness of policies and regulatory initiatives critically depends on their clarity and deliberate alignment with higher ranking rules.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, establishing meanings, scope, and priorities explicitly, and developing coordinated action plans with differentiated layers for stakeholders' involvement are essential for the seamless implementation of the internationalization of higher education in the region.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, policy making and governmental strategies with an overly broad scope without detailed action plans and stakeholder responsibilities invariably contribute to inefficient resource utilization, problems related to oversight and accountability, and ultimately, unsustainable outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

The convergence and internationalization of higher education have been chief drivers of the educational policy reforms in Europe over the past decades, and two of the focus points of the higher education regulatory initiatives within the European

<sup>1</sup> *The Bologna Process Revisited: the Future of the European Higher Education Area*, EHEA, [online] (last accessed on 02.04.2024) // <http://ehea.info/page-ministerial-conference-yerevan-2015>

<sup>2</sup> Ross Hudson, "Dominated by economics? Evidence of changing drivers of internationalization and its funding within higher education institutions in Europe," *Higher Education Policy* Vol. 29 (2016): 1–19.

<sup>3</sup> See Ulrich Teichler, "Internationalising higher education: Debates and changes in Europe," *Changing educational landscapes: Educational policies, schooling systems and higher education-A comparative perspective* (2010): 263–283; Hans de Wit and Gilbert Merkx, "The history of the internationalization of higher education," *The handbook of international higher education* (Routledge, 2022), 23–52.

<sup>4</sup> From a wider discussion on policy design as in Ishani Mukherjee, Kerem M. Coban, and Azad S. Bali, "Policy Capacities and Effective Policy Design: A Review," *Policy sciences* Vol. 54, No. 2 (2021): 243–268.

<sup>5</sup> Hans de Wit and Fiona Hunter, "The future of internationalization of higher education in Europe," *International higher education* Vol. 83 (2015): 23.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew J. Kilpatrick, "Transparent frameworks, fiscal rules and policy-making under uncertainty," *Fiscal Rules and Policy-Making Under Uncertainty (February 1, 2001)* (2001): 175.

Higher Education Area (EHEA).<sup>7</sup> Crăciun observes that strategic thinking about higher education internationalization is primarily a European phenomenon, where universities are largely funded with public resources.<sup>8</sup> Under these circumstances, it is safe to state that without adequate regulatory direction and support, national-level internationalization strategies are likely to fail. She also noted that only an astonishingly low 11% of countries worldwide had a national or official higher education internationalization strategy.<sup>9</sup> Of these, 49 belong to the EHEA, with Estonia being one of them. Studying the policy development and adoption in individual countries has thus become increasingly relevant, as the overall outlook for these processes remains uncertain. Curaj et al. emphasize that one of the challenges in further developing the EHEA will be reconciling the need to implement common principles and goals with the diverse traditions and recent histories of its members.<sup>10</sup> While the cross-border aspect of internationalization is widely reported, primarily based on the number of student, faculty, and personnel exchanges, we still know relatively little about the regulatory frameworks, internationalization of curricula, educational methodologies, or learning outcomes from a comparative perspective. These additional matters require a closer and more qualitative examination to ensure that the progress is sustainable and informative and to elaborate up to date policies that are inclusive and based on a thorough understanding of the educational landscape, with elements of consistency, efficiency, and transparency, encouraging stakeholder trust and engagement.

In short, complexity indicates the importance of policy flexibility and stakeholder engagement, to increase strategic robustness while remaining responsive to specific environments, systems, and their peculiarities.

This article helps to characterize a normative model of higher education internationalization, examining public policies and regulatory trends, using Estonia as a case study. It addresses whether a set of priorities and general regulations can form the backbone of a successful internationalization strategy, drawing from an analysis that includes the regulatory environment and the roles different stakeholders play in formulating and implementing policy mandates. The study covers the supranational, national, and the individual educational institutions' levels, and the way entities perceive and implement internationalization. The discussion argues for a more deliberate strategic governance and effective policy formulation providing direction and consistency and enhancing efficiency key factors for long-term success and robust public policy supported undertakings.

Initially, the article covers the background and clarifies the meaning and significance of internationalization in the context of higher education. It then addresses the policy and legal framework in Estonia, looking into the suitability of broad and undefined approaches and the ramifications of operating under a disarticulated agenda. The final section draws conclusions and makes suggestions for a proper internationalization strategy in higher education, taking into account best regulatory practices, stakeholder engagement and adaptability to foster success and sustainability.

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<sup>7</sup> *Supra* note 3.

<sup>8</sup> Daniela Crăciun, "National policies for higher education internationalization: A global comparative perspective, in European higher education area": 95–106; in: Adrian Curaj et al. (eds.), *European Higher Education Area: The Impact of Past and Future Policies*, Springer (Cham, 2018), 100.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Curaj et al. (eds.), *European High Education Area: The Impact of Past and Future Policies*, Springer (Cham, 2018), Introduction: 2.

## 1. Defining internationalization in higher education

### 1.1 Conceptual background

More than two decades ago, Van der Wende had already referred to a broad internationalization conception, as "any systematic, sustained effort aimed at making higher education (more) responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalization of societies, economy and labour markets."<sup>11</sup> Other definitions, such as Kreber's, are more concrete in orientation. Hers is teaching and learning centered, relating to changing or developing towards the incorporation of international dimensions into the curriculum and the methods of instruction.<sup>12</sup> It presupposes that the academic staff should take part, if needed updating their own careers and knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Some authors reiterate that a multifaceted understanding, often coupled with curricular reform, faculty development, and institutional structures and solid institutional backup, including policies and regulations, that allow some control over the implementation and sustainability of internationalization processes.<sup>14</sup> It is hard to rely on the literature for a unique delimitation, because scholars keep reassessing and conceptualising internationalization in terms of a global, and changing phenomenon, influenced by various political, social, economic, educational, and technical factors, and affecting a wide scope of stakeholders.<sup>15</sup> Knight argues that the term has become a catchall phrase used to describe anything remotely connected to global, intercultural, or international matters, leading to a loss of meaning and no direction.<sup>16</sup> This dilution risks obscuring the true aims and benefits of internationalization efforts, exposing the need for clarity and precision in literature and policy discussions. It also shows the context that helps make sense of the developments in the normative framework discourse.

Whereas Knight stated that internationalization is "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions (primarily teaching/learning, research, service) or delivery of higher education,"<sup>17</sup> Ellingboe saw it as "an ongoing, future-oriented, multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary, leadership-driven vision that involves many stakeholders working to change the internal dynamics of an institution to respond and adapt appropriately to an increasingly diverse, globally focused, ever-changing external environment."<sup>18</sup> Such processes can be expected to reshape internal dynamics, enabling universities to adapt to shifting global trends and

<sup>11</sup> Marijk van der Wende, "Internationalising the curriculum in Dutch higher education: An international comparative perspective," *Journal of studies in international education* Vol. 1, No. 2 (1997): 54. About her report "Internationalising the Curriculum in Dutch Higher Education: An International Comparative Perspective," *The Hague: The Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education (NUFFIC)*, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Carolin Kreber, "Different perspectives on internationalization in higher education," *New directions for teaching and learning* Vol. 2009, No. 118 (2009): 1–14.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Marvin Bartell, "Internationalization of universities: A university culture-based framework," *Higher education* Vol. 45 (2003): 43–70.

<sup>14</sup> Sabine Schuerholz-Lehr, et al., "Internationalizing the Higher Education Curriculum: An Emerging Model for Transforming Faculty Perspectives," *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* Vol. 37, No. 1 (2007): 69.

<sup>15</sup> Michael R. Paige, "Internationalization of higher education: Performance assessment and indicators," *Nagoya Journal of Higher Education* Vol. 5, No. 8 (2005): 101; Fiona Hunter, et al., "The evolving definitions of internationalization: A question of values," *The Handbook of International Higher Education* (Routledge, 2022), 53–74.

<sup>16</sup> Jane Knight, "Five myths about internationalization," *International higher education* No. 62 (2011).

<sup>17</sup> In Jane Knight, "Internationalization Remodeled: Definitions, Rationales, and Approaches," *Journal for Studies in International Education* 8(1) (2004): 5–31, as referred by Jane Knight, "The changing landscape of higher education internationalisation—for better or worse?" *Perspectives on the internationalisation of higher education* (Routledge, 2013), 85.

<sup>18</sup> Brenda J. Ellingboe, "Divisional strategies to internationalize a campus portrait: Results, resistance, and recommendations from a case study at a US university," *Reforming the higher education curriculum: Internationalizing the campus* (1998): 199.

effectively prepare students and faculty for an interconnected world. What matters most is not to be constrained to one or two aspects but to promote a 'comprehensive internationalization' understanding incorporating several dimensions and facilitating the integration of international, intercultural, and global perspectives into teaching, learning, research, and outreach activities. At the same time, it could open more opportunities to bridge academic disciplines, foster engagement, and eventually drive responsive organizational and institutional transformations.

Finally, de Wit et al. offered a characterization that is useful for being practical, adaptive, and comprehensive but not overly ambitious. They propose to understand internationalization as the "intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of postsecondary 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>19</sup> They identify a few specific components, which can be adjusted according to different conditions or requirements. It suggests flexibility, and capacity to respond to new situations, environments, or challenges, assuming that the different stakeholders are acknowledged.

Despite the useful operational qualities in the aforementioned conceptualizations, in this partial institutional analysis the focus shall remain within the scope of the normative expectations that may reflect them, and the effects, in fact, of the Estonian educational policy discourse in the internationalization of higher education, when broad as it has been regulated. No regulatory effort has been precise and comprehensive so far.

## 1.2 Internationalization in regulatory instruments

In the European formal institutional environment, internationalization is not a strictly delineated term, but one used functionally as a process aimed at harmonizing educational systems within the EHEA, and for standardization, promoting mobility at the regional, national, and organizational levels.<sup>20</sup> This approach officially supports human exchange as a key focus of the Bologna Process,<sup>21</sup> oversimplifying internationalization's dimensions, somewhat trivializing the challenges it involves. Successful internationalization relies heavily on a more extensive cross-border collaboration and calls for greater actions, incorporating international, intercultural, or even global dimensions into the core activities of higher education institutions. This approach would extend beyond teaching, learning and research, to encompass various concrete missions and services.<sup>22</sup> An integrated view like that suggests that international elements become embedded within university functions, presumably resulting in raising academic quality, research excellence, and human development.<sup>23</sup>

Domestically, the mobility aspects of internationalization are easily measurable through exchange data and curriculum analysis, making reporting and promotion based on these metrics straightforward and frequent. However, a deeper understanding of

<sup>19</sup> Hans de Wit, Fiona Hunter, Eva Egron-Polak, Laura Howard (eds.), "Internationalisation of Higher Education," *A study for the European Parliament* (Brussels, 2015), expanding on the definition by Knight, which was recognized by de WIT in Hans de Wit, "Internationalization of Higher Education: The Need for a More Ethical and Qualitative Approach," *Journal of International Students* Vol. 10, No. 1 (2010): i-iv.

<sup>20</sup> Bernd Wächter, "Mobility and internationalisation in the European higher education area," *Beyond* (2010): 14.

<sup>21</sup> The Bologna process is a collaborative effort including public authorities, universities, teachers, and students working to create a unified higher education framework across Europe. Read more in: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission), *The EU in Support of the Bologna Process* (2018), DOI: 10.2766/936927

<sup>22</sup> John K. Hudzik, *Comprehensive internationalization* (Washington, DC: NAFSA, The Association of International Educators, 2011), 5-6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

regulatory frameworks, and their influence on curricular integration, teaching methods, learning outcomes, is lacking, as well as case studies observing these correlations. Teichler observed that while initiatives like increasing English-taught courses, hiring foreign instructors, and attracting international students are important, they fall short of the comprehensive internationalization objectives,<sup>24</sup> not to mention how little is known on whether promotion from the top down makes a difference. These initiatives, valuable as they are, represent just part of a larger agenda that transcends mere increases in mobility numbers. These deficiencies are obstacles for the full realization of the Bologna Process's goals, if to refer to just some of the commitments acquired by EHEA countries. What is more, overlooking the implications as well as the domestic impact these policies have on higher institutions performance and their academic communities, risks undermining their transformative potential.

The lack of consensus around a universal definition of internationalization in the regulatory landscape may be a matter of choice and advantageous to some, while others could see it as a regulatory flaw. A non-restrictive approach allows for varied paradigms, but vagueness and indetermination lead to loose, disparate meanings and unpredictable interpretations. This situation reflects a typical dialectic in regulatory theory, where the balance between flexibility and clarity is constantly negotiated. This work assumes that this is by far the most problematic aspect that must be addressed. Matei et al. straightforwardly claim that the lack of conceptual clarity has significant implications for the governance of public education and institutional development. Poorly articulated policies cannot be effectively implemented or prepared for operationalization.<sup>25</sup>

Simply put; when institutional certainty is lacking, non-compliance and lack of accountability tend to prevail.<sup>26</sup> Given these issues, it is preferable to aim for a comprehensive and precise definition. Striking a balance can prevent overly rigid constraints that hinder practical application while providing enough specificity to guide interpreters. Regulatory practices that stress on the quality of general rules, and standards would permit the consistent implementation and scrutiny, within more concise and targeted frameworks, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and integrity of internationalization efforts in higher education.

In 2017, The Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers Conference (FOHE-BPRC), a landmark in the European higher education area, concluded that to raise the quality of the European education and research effectively, policymakers across Europe must immediately address, among other issues, the latest demographic changes (multiculturalism, refugees, students who work, etc.) and the need for more substantial and collaborative internationalization efforts, focused on the enhancement of curricula and learning outcomes.<sup>27</sup> Shortcomings identified then persist now and are perhaps country specific, but mostly related to the strategic management difficulties of the public sector, that experiences complex governance obstacles nowadays. It is generally expected that a state that has educational policies in place and possesses enough

<sup>24</sup> Ulrich Teichler, "Internationalisation as a challenge for higher education in Europe," *Tertiary Education & Management* Vol. 5, No. 1 (1999): 5–23.

<sup>25</sup> Liviu Matei et al., "Patterns of funding internationalisation of higher education: A conceptual framework for the study of internationalisation": 205–219; in: Adrian Curaj, et al. (eds.), *The European Higher Education Area* (Springer, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Kristi Joamets and Maria Claudia Solarte Vasquez, "Regulatory Framework of the Research-Based Approach to Education in the EU," *TalTech Journal of European Studies* Vol. 10, No. 3(32) (2020): 118, DOI: 10.1515/bjes-2020-0024

<sup>27</sup> Adrian CURAJ, *supra* note 12, 4–5.

resources to carry them out will be diligent in their application. However, this cannot be realized, if public institutions are unable to practice responsive and proactive regulatory activities, including the capacity to carry out the determination of the normative language in policy and law making. It is of the essence of the EHEA's higher education governance ambition to hold public authorities accountable for promoting and maintaining at the top of the political priorities' agenda freedom, institutional autonomy, and participation values,<sup>28</sup> yet states still struggle when implementing their educational strategies, and keep producing suboptimal outcomes. In the FOHE-BPRC 2024, the internationalization of higher education beyond the 2020 EHEA targets was first in the list of topics invited for discussion.<sup>29</sup>

Public universities are not entirely autonomous. They depend on the state for funding. At the same time, they are responsible for diffusing the focus on nation centered interests, preparing, and responding to the globalization challenges, and internationalizing, often taking up these huge and correlated but dissimilar responsibilities entirely on their own. This added pressure, creates the wrong incentives to reach good marks on performance even though the internationalization dimensions, the components to be factored in performance assessments and key performance indicators are not addressed or established. Teichler commented on the unresolved tensions this reveals between substance and form, when the former is about internationality, but the latter retains local attributes and must conform to national laws and policies.<sup>30</sup>

Many hurdles faced by higher education institutions stem from regulatory indetermination. While inclusion and participation can shape policies and strategies, failing to meet generic requirements necessitates revisiting these issues. Rules outlining the rights and obligations of entities and stakeholders must be established, made available, and monitored using appropriate criteria and factors. Unambiguous policy direction and normative guidelines are essential for the effective and sustainable progress of internationalization efforts, particularly because they stem from top-down initiatives and introduce changes in the communities affected that are unfamiliar and difficult to handle.<sup>31</sup>

Taking outward and inward mobility as examples, which, like most internationalization activities, are resource-dependent, policymakers should guarantee that programs have adequate allocation of financial, human, and other resources, alongside fair administrative procedures. For transparency and sustainability, universities and all participants must understand in detail the actions being promoted. This understanding should include clarity on the intended target groups, the objectives of the mobility, the effects expected, and the time periods involved. For example, it should be explicitly stated whether the mobility opportunities are designed for students, teachers, or if the schemes should vary between different groups. This clarity ensures that programs are not only effective but also equitable and justifiable.

Furthermore, at the university level, mobility initiatives must contribute meaningfully to the institution's internationalization goals, demonstrating how they integrate

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> *The Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference (FOHE-BPRC5)*, [online] (last accessed on 20.04.24) // <<https://fohe-bprc.forhe.ro/>>

<sup>30</sup> Ulrich Teichler, *supra* note 26, 5–23.

<sup>31</sup> When natural cooperation is no longer feasible due to the complexities of human organizations, the formalization of missions and principles becomes essential. The ideal purpose would be to support a coherent roadmap towards the attainment of common goals. It aligns the actions of various stakeholders, creating a structured environment where cooperation can thrive. A similar argument was explained excellently by Tony Honore, "The Dependence of Morality on Law," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 13(1) (1993): 1–17, concerning the role of positive laws to make higher order norms accessible.

into the broader institutional framework, what is the impact on academic offerings, research collaborations, and cultural exchange. The type of mobility and the criteria for selecting beneficiaries should also align with each faculty, school, or department's needs. Some may prioritize student exchange programs and global awareness, while others might emphasize faculty mobility to foster international research partnerships and collaborative projects. In either case, actions should reinforce institutional choices overall.

In summary, the internationalization of higher education holds a significant position in scholarly research and is prominently featured in EU and global regulatory initiatives.<sup>32</sup> It is recognized as a strategic priority by governments and is prominently featured in their educational policy agendas but, to effectively support its realization, the concept must first be officially institutionalized, that is, delimited with precision and more widely accepted. The current observable approach at higher education institutions is unaccompanied by supporting bodies and overly reliant on reductionist, quantitative indicators, conflating internationalization with mere mobility. This operationalization path requires official rectification to make a comprehensive integration of internationalization into policies and frameworks certain and actionable.

Rumbley<sup>33</sup> calls for an 'intelligent internationalization' model where preparation, cooperation, interdisciplinarity, commitment and responsibility are available, to advance consistent institutional agendas and prevent what de Wit called "the disconnection between the local and the global paradigms of knowledge".<sup>34</sup> A critical lack of comparative research exists on the policies that individual states 'deploy' to internationalize their higher education systems,<sup>35</sup> making this observation as relevant now, and the need to broaden the research scope even more evident. Even though recent work has been published on the topic, it does not discuss regulatory quality. For instance, Seeber et al., examine how higher education institutions in 33 European countries internationalize.<sup>36</sup> Their work consists of a cluster analysis that catalogs the orientation of universities' activities, contexts, and organizational characteristics. The analysis identifies patterns, conditions, traits, and justifications distinguishing the universities' 'portfolios,' and, while valuable in describing the sector's landscape and introducing assessment dimensions, it does not conduct policy or other forms of institutional evaluation.

## 2. The Estonian higher education policy and its regulatory framework

The pressing need for policy direction is evident in the Estonian internationalization of higher education, making it an instructive case study for examining trends and the common challenges countries face when incorporating EHEA's policies into their domestic regulatory agendas.

This study assumes that a well-conceived regulatory framework begins with principled and thorough policy direction, establishing a focused pathway for resource and responsibility allocation, as well as goal attainment. Consequently, efficiency, and

<sup>32</sup> Daniela Crăciun, *supra* note 10, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Laura Rumbley, "Intelligent internationalization": A 21st century imperative," *International Higher Education* Vol. 80 (2015): 16–17.

<sup>34</sup> Hans de Wit, "Internationalization in Higher Education: A critical review," Special Issue: Internationalization of higher Education, *SFU Educational Review* Vol. 12, No. 3 (2019): 9–17.

<sup>35</sup> Read more in Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters, *Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalization of Higher Education* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Marco Seeber, Michele Meoli and Mattia Cattaneo, "How do European Higher Education Institutions Internationalize?" *Studies in Higher Education* Vol. 45, No. 1 (2020): 145–146.

consistency in implementation, that for the stakeholders are as important as transparency, may be expected to follow. Policies should also be proactive, incorporating risk management and promoting legal compliance and adherence to national and supra-national standards, while remaining adaptable to allow timely updates and maintain relevance. Finally, modelic policymaking for higher education internationalization must reflect a long-term vision to yield benefits for educational institutions and society.

## 2.1 Administrative communications and public policy

Estonia has consistently expressed a political commitment to the internationalization of higher education, and produced policy outputs in that direction. The first Estonian Higher Education Internationalisation Strategy was issued in 2006.<sup>37</sup> A second strategy, valid for five years, was issued in 2015.<sup>38</sup> However, both were non-binding initiatives formulated by the Ministry of Education and Science alone, unlike the kind of strategies and policies that the Government or the Parliament adopts, which are presumably based on coordination, consensus, and capacity assessment substantiation. The first document was evaluated in 2011, and it ranked poorly in quality. The study revealed that it contained no clear tasks or responsibilities and the identification of intended target groups was missing. Most importantly, it was emphasized that achieving its many aims at the intended quality, within the same timeframe was unrealistic.<sup>39</sup> This 'informal' regulatory attempt was unresponsive for lacking in inclusion and collaborative multis-takeholderism, vague and overly optimistic. With it, the first local features of the policy making approach on higher education became apparent.

The second official document spoke about introducing to its target market the promotional programme 'Study in Estonia',<sup>40</sup> the services available for foreign students, and some data about these students having been enrolled in Estonian universities. This strategy had the core purpose of complementing the Eesti 2020 Competitiveness Plan. The implementation document explained that the aim was to raise the quality and international competitiveness of higher education in the region.<sup>41</sup> It can be said that the internationalization strategy became more in line with the broader developmental policies of the country, which is a proper move, notwithstanding, it did not improve its regulatory capacity. The adjustments were incomplete.

The document 'Priority Action for the Internationalization of High Education and Research 2013-2020' resembles earlier versions in terms of the vagueness of goals and the uncertainty of means and procedures to reach them. The text uses the expression "possible tools" to guide the internationalization plan and processes in universities.<sup>42</sup> On how to proceed with "raising the quality of international competitiveness and trustfulness of high education" the document recommends guaranteeing a "sustainable funding of programmes in focus areas" without indicating sustainability parameters or identifying such areas. Furthermore, the document delegates these steps and fails

<sup>37</sup> *Estonian Higher Education Strategy 2006–2015*, [online] // <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/estonia-higher-education-strategy-2006-2015.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Raul Ranne, "Eesti kõrghariduse rahvusvahelise tutvustamise strateegia 2015–2020," *SA Archimedes* (2015) [online] // <https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/korghariduse-rahvusvahelise-tutvustamise-strateegia.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Merli Tamptik et al., "Kõrghariduse rahvusvahelistumise strateegia vahehindamine," *Mid-term evaluation about the Strategy of High Education Internationalisation* (2011) [online] // <http://www.praxis.ee/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2011-Korghariduse-rahvusvahelistumine.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> <https://studyinestonia.ee/>

<sup>41</sup> See in: <https://riigikantselei.ee/en/news/government-updated-estonias-competitiveness-strategy>, Raul Ranne, *supra* note 40, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Eesti kõrghariduse ja teaduse rahvusvahelistumise juhtnõukogu, *Kõrghariduse ja teaduse rahvusvahelistumise prioriteetsed tegevused 2013–2020*, (2012).

to specify who should be responsible, according to what procedures, based on what criteria, and whether changes are possible, how often.

The Estonia 2020 Strategy devoted two pages to the topic internationalization, stating that increasing the international competitiveness of higher education aimed to enable Estonian universities to attract talent in the global market.<sup>43</sup> The policy was based on data from 2017, indicative of that only 2.2% of students had participated in short-term mobility, revealing disconnect and overestimation of institutional capacities. Achieving the EHEA target (20% of graduates gaining mobility experience) would require decisive action that was not planned, along with resources that were unavailable. In addition, the strategy mentions the following internationalization objectives: affording students from Estonian universities to broaden their experience by living in another culture and making useful contacts for their future employability and preparing them for work in a globalized world. It assigned value to the so-called "internationalization at home".<sup>44</sup> This document made no further specifications, leaving the stated purposes devoid of tactics or logistics, without adopting a model to follow or including any executable guidance.

The Estonian Education Development Plan 2021-2035 followed the Lifelong Learning Development Plan 2020,<sup>45</sup> based on the common vision of EU education area in which the cooperation between states and exchange of best practices are promoted to support student's mobility.<sup>46</sup> This is the current plan which highlights, as a strength of Estonia's higher education system, its international competitiveness and openness, while at the same time identifying the negligible raise in student mobility as a significant issue. One of the aims is to enable all students to participate in mobility programs by removing as many obstacles as it is possible. To this end, it proposes several ideas to stimulate internationalization and student mobility. However, as in the instances preceding the plan, the proposals are largely rhetorical, failing again to specify who should implement them, how, and when, and neglecting to outline funding mechanisms.<sup>47</sup> In this case the simplistic and limiting understanding of internationalization is exposed, together with the continued lack of detail and the gap between strategic objectives and practical execution. The approach to policy making in this field leaves a lot to be desired in terms of clarity, guidelines, designated responsibilities, and secured funding to implement those growing commitments.

The plan pointed out its linkages to other strategies of national interest, e.g. Estonia 2035, the Welfare Development Plan 2016-2023, and the Development Plan of Foreign Policy 2030 but only the most recent makes a direct and modest allusion to the internationalization of education.<sup>48</sup>

Estonia decided to adopt its higher education and science principles officially in 2021, including them in a policy statement to have a validity of 15 years.<sup>49</sup> This com-

<sup>43</sup> Konkurentsivõime kava „Eesti 2020”: 14, [online] // <https://eelnoud.valitsus.ee/main/mount/docList/4a0a6233-6d5e-434b-80b3-26d527fff4bc#QAU5tmzM>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> EV Haridusministeerium, *Eesti Koostöökogu, Eesti Haridusfoorum 2020. Eesti elukestva õppe strateegia 2020*, [online] // [Eesti\\_elukestva\\_õppe\\_strateegia\\_loplik.pdf](https://eesti_elukestva_õppe_strateegia_loplik.pdf) (haridusfoorum.ee)

<sup>46</sup> EV Haridusministeerium, *Eesti haridusvaldkonna arengukava 2021-2035*, 27 [online] // [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/eesti\\_haridusvaldkonna\\_arengukava\\_2035\\_seisuga\\_2020.03.27.pdf&ved=2ahUKewi0rfXV7YyGAxWa-FRAIHav5ACwQFnoECA4QAQ&usq=AOvVaw1vyaFVSfm9AQRnV6tmKcXt](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/eesti_haridusvaldkonna_arengukava_2035_seisuga_2020.03.27.pdf&ved=2ahUKewi0rfXV7YyGAxWa-FRAIHav5ACwQFnoECA4QAQ&usq=AOvVaw1vyaFVSfm9AQRnV6tmKcXt)

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>48</sup> EV Välisministeerium, *Eesti Välispoliitika arengukava 2030*, 11 [online] // [Vabariigi Valitsuse Välispoliitika arengukava 2030](https://vabariigi.valitsuse.valispoliitika.arengukava.2030) | Välisministeerium (vm.ee)

<sup>49</sup> Principles of Estonian higher education and science 2021-2035, EV Haridusministeerium. *Eesti haridusvaldkonna arengukava 2021-2035*, [online] // [Strateegilised alusdokumendid ja programmid](#) |

bination made it challenging to discern what specifically applied to education. While it is understandable that the document did not intend to regulate exhaustively but emphasized orientation, its dual scope inevitably led to more ambiguities. Questions arose about the reasons to make the two concepts equal, and once more, regarding which institutional level should make specific decisions and how the state or universities could secure financial and other implementation resources. At the current time of publication (Fall 2024), no action plans stemming from this document were publicly available, despite the expectation for governments to be transparent and made their initiatives accessible, at least to recipients and stakeholders. The policy making patterns in Estonia in respect to higher education and internationalization suggest that these pronouncements will probably continue to diffuse in practice.

## **2.2. Legal acts and statutes**

The hierarchical system of policy aims and responsible institutions is not clearly outlined in Estonian laws either. While there are various governance approaches and justifications for policies to be general, abstract, and non-restricting, vagueness and indetermination in legal regulations are undisputed flaws.

A review of legal acts regulating higher education reveals that the Estonian Education Law Act (2019) mentions internationalization in several contexts: defining the concept of a university and its mission to support the internationalization of society (Art. 20 (2)), evaluating the quality of higher education based on international principles (Art. 37), and considering international mobility indicators when assigning the budget to universities (Art. 41(5)). The laws by which the biggest Estonian universities are created also reference international cooperation, but it is not precise what are the rules these universities must actually follow. Legislation, therefore, does not delineate any more clearly the goals, responsibilities, or procedures, which are crucial for the policies and mission implementation. At this institutional level the lack of specificity hampers the realization of internationalization goals of higher education.

In Estonia, public universities find themselves overburdened with policy and regulatory responsibilities. These tasks are implicitly assumed to be their responsibility, not as part of a calculated decentralization project by the government, but rather through inattention, disregard or displacement of governance functions. The resulted imposition thus occurs without providing the necessary legal and organizational capacities. Consequently, the unregulated model that emerges from this situation is not stable, reliable, or sustainable.

This short formal institutional review of the internationalization of higher education in Estonia is as limited as the regulatory pool the state has produced on the matter. It shows that while internationalization is supported in principle, the lack of systematic implementation renders the commitment trivial. The absence of established priorities and clear responsibilities for institutions further undermines its progress. In 2024, the regulatory status remains similar to that of 2011, with many declarations of purpose and aims lacking prioritization. Internationalization, both substantively and procedurally, is left in the hands of higher education institutions that lack competences, clear target groups and information on resource allocation.

## Conclusion

This partial institutional analysis centered on normative policy discourse about the internationalization of higher education. It revealed the importance of regulatory quality and coherence. In the given context, this requires policies that identify priority areas, define concepts, responsibilities, and funding mechanisms to guide the necessary processes effectively. Comprehensive and accurate depictions of internationalization in higher education by policy makers and other regulators recognize the multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary, and dynamic nature of such process.

Coherent policy-making provides a focused pathway for resource allocation and goal attainment, enhancing efficiency, consistency, and transparency, allowing stakeholders to understand and engage. Furthermore, a good policy incorporates risk management and legal compliance, ensuring adherence to national and international standards. Adaptability is also crucial, allowing timely updates that address emerging challenges and maintain relevance. Finally, the long-term vision of higher education internationalization policy must reflect a commitment to sustainability and responsible governance, fostering not only immediate educational benefits but also contributing to broader social and economic development goals.

In a state governed by the rule of law, policies should offer guidance and translate into legal regulations that reflect and implement their principles in real-world scenarios, especially in areas governed by public and administrative law, such as public education. In Estonia, the higher education sector is governed by principled policies and just a few legal acts, presumably owing to the independence of universities to elaborate with setting their own internal rules. Autonomy in governance can be beneficial, allowing for creative, reflexive action and bespoke strategic frameworks, but it also results in informality at the expense of regulatory coherence. This has become evident in the evaluation of the country's approach to the internationalization of higher education, which this review sees lies at the extreme of regulatory neglect as it was the case of other instances in the field of education.<sup>50</sup>

It was posited that in Estonia, internationalization policies are limited and ambiguous rather than general, with a primary focus on international mobility. Yet proper internationalization processes are not that simple and superficial. To institute internationalization processes that are sustainable and reliable, policies must clearly define its meaning, priority areas, responsible institutions, and financing mechanisms, allowing the laws to carry on with mandates for universities to develop specific rules from this systemic foundation.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, its durability and responsiveness require assessment criteria and mechanisms to measure impact and alignment with goals, preventing internationalization from being rendered trivial through poor governance. Inconclusive policies and incomplete frameworks undermine the opportunities that internationalization could bring to a country in a region with such a diversity of competences and expertise.

The current regulatory approach impedes the sustainability of higher education internationalization in Estonia. Universities lack the necessary legal frameworks to guide their efforts effectively. A systematic and well-defined management strategy is needed to bridge the gap between higher policy objectives, domestic policies and their implementation, correcting this dysfunctional model. This should begin with

<sup>50</sup> Kristi Joamets, *supra* note 28, 128–129.

<sup>51</sup> Fabrice Henard et al., *Approaches to internationalisation and their implications for strategic management and institutional practice: A guide for higher education institutions* (Paris, OECD, Higher Education Programme, 2012).

establishing regulatory frameworks that connect with context-specific, real-world academic settings, where the concept of internationalization may not have been fully understood. This challenge is compounded by the tensions at the European level, where the Bologna Process appears to be nearing a standstill, overshadowed by new compelling commitments such as digital transformation and the need to reassess educational systems surrounded by significant societal changes.

This review, though limited to normative content, sets the stage for a more detailed discussion of the necessity of robust, well-defined policy and legal frameworks to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of international education initiatives, particularly in Estonia. It provides guidance on addressing this missing dimension from otherwise excellent country-level studies available in the literature. Additionally, it encourages further research into a more complete institutional analysis of the case study, with detailed explorations at the universities' level.

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