



MASARYKOVA  
UNIVERZITA



# **CAN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES CREATE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES?**

An exploratory, comparative-case study into the integrated approach  
of three European University Alliances regarding interculturality

A master thesis by Femke Boersma  
Solis-ID: 5714508 / Učo no.: 492570

Master programme: European Governance  
Utrecht University and the Masaryk University

01 August 2021

1<sup>st</sup> supervisor: MSc. et MA. Marija Aleksovska (Utrecht University)  
2nd supervisor: Mgr. et Mgr., Ph.D. Veronika Zapletalová (Masaryk University)  
Internship supervisor: MSc. et Mgr. Joep Bresser (Neth-ER)

# ABSTRACT

Existing literature on interculturality in higher education shows that the Erasmus+ programme is insufficient in helping students develop intercultural competences (IC) to their full potential. However, there is little to no information available on how the Erasmus+ programme tries to enhance interculturality, i.e. the policy input regarding interculturality. Therefore, this thesis tries to understand how the Erasmus+ programme can maximize its potential, by zooming in on one of its new, flagship initiatives: the European Universities Initiative. This initiative aims to create networks of different European universities, so-called alliances. The research questions leading this thesis, is: *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?* Three alliances – ECIU, EPICUR and ENLIGHT – have been researched in their ability to be successful in IC-acquisition among students. On the basis of four indicators, derived from theory, successfulness could be determined. In conclusion, the alliances are moderately successful in the creation of IC among students, beyond mobility. Where they excel in teaching methods that really foster the development of the skills, a lot can still be improved regarding the creation of a harmonized, integrated strategy, which also focusses on attracting a culturally diverse group of students.

# PREFACE

This thesis has been conducted as part of the double-degree, joint master's programme European Governance at the Utrecht University and Masaryk University from 2019-2021, as well as my internship at the Netherlands House of Education and Research (Neth-ER) in the spring semester of 2021. I would like to start off by giving a big thanks to both my supervisors from the universities, Marija Aleksovska and Veronika Zapletalová, for giving me good and valuable input, keeping me motivated and always being open and available for any question that I had. I felt really supported by them during the entirety of the writing process. Their guidance has helped delivered this product, of which I am quite proud. Next, I want to thank Marij Swinkels and Sebastiaan Princen for their guidance throughout the entire thesis and internship process in the past year, as well as being always quick to respond to my many emails.

I also want to thank my internship supervisor, Joep Bresser, as well as all my colleagues at Neth-ER, for making my internship fun and informative: the perfect balance. It was a strange year to start working at a new organisation, due the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, I have always felt like part of the team and the last weeks in Brussels really added something to my experience. I want to thank them for being kind and open to me.

I could not have conducted this thesis, if it were not for my respondents. I really want to thank them all for taking time out of their busy schedules to talk to me, making this thesis possible.

Lastly, I want to thank everyone in my personal life that has helped me with writing my thesis, specifically those that helped with the transcribing. As every researcher will know, this is truly the least fun and the most time-consuming part of the research. I want to thank my father Ids Boersma, my friends Stijn Oosterwijk and Jasper Blom for helping me transcribe. Especially my boyfriend Maarten Keuning has done an incredible job at transcribing multiple interviews for me. I could not have done it without him. Furthermore, I would like to thank all my friends who have been there for emotional support during this rollercoaster, specifically Linda den Bol, Kamil Jarończyk and Sandra Zwick who I had late night calls and study sessions with.

Femke Boersma

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>PREFACE .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Intercultural competences.....	6
European Universities Initiative.....	7
Societal and academic relevance.....	9
Reader's guide.....	10
<b>2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2.1 INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Internationalisation at home .....	12
<b>2.2 ERASMUS+ AND INTERCULTURALITY .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.3 EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE .....</b>	<b>16</b>
What is the European Universities Initiative? .....	16
How is interculturality guaranteed in the curricula? .....	17
<b>3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.1 DEFINING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.2 INDICATORS THAT DETERMINE 'SUCCESS' .....</b>	<b>20</b>
Research questions and hypothesis .....	22
<b>4. METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN: COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY.....</b>	<b>25</b>
ECIU.....	25
EPICUR.....	26
ENLIGHT.....	26
<b>4.2 RESEARCH METHOD: INTERVIEWS.....</b>	<b>27</b>
Semi-structured interviews.....	28
<b>4.3 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>5. FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>31</b>

<b>5.1 THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL: STRATEGIES .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<i>ECIU</i> .....	33
<i>EPICUR</i> .....	34
<i>ENLIGHT</i> .....	36
<b>5.2. THE PROGRAMMATIC LEVEL: TEACHING .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<i>ECIU</i> .....	38
How is communication stimulated? .....	39
<i>EPICUR</i> .....	40
<i>ENLIGHT</i> .....	43
Skill acquisition.....	44
How will students communicate?.....	45
<b>5.3 THE STUDENT LEVEL: PARTICIPATION.....</b>	<b>46</b>
Student participation.....	47
Student representation .....	48
<b>6. DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>6.1 HOW SUCCESSFUL ARE THE THREE ALLIANCES? .....</b>	<b>51</b>
Indicator 1: Harmonizing a strategy on interculturality .....	51
Indicator 2: Integrating IC into the curricula.....	52
Indicator 3: Role of the educator .....	52
Indicator 4: Communicating with a diverse group of students.....	54
How do the alliances perform?.....	55
What are the wider implications?.....	56
<b>6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>6.3 LIMITATIONS.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>7. CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>8. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>62</b>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

When we speak about major, long-term trends in Europe, ‘internationalisation’ ranks the top. Especially within higher education, internationalisation has been a top priority since the 1990s. Studying abroad is no longer a rare and eccentric domain of a few (Teichler, 2010). A whole range of institutional strategies have been employed to encourage students to consider education abroad, leading from about less than half a million students in the mid-1980s (Rivzi, 2011) to 2 million students studying abroad in the European Union (EU) in the period 2014-2020 (European Commission, 2020a).

That the internationalization of the European higher education remains a high priority in Europe’s educational agenda, is clear. The Erasmus + (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) budget from the period 2014-2020 was EUR 14.7 billion (Durán Martínez, Gutiérrez, Beltrán Llavador, & Martínez Abad, 2016). Erasmus + 2021-2027 will be provided with a budget of EUR 24,57 billion, with again a prime focus on mobility of students and education practitioners (European Council, 2020). This new budget constitutes a significant increase compared to the previous programme and shows the importance attached to internationalization of higher education in the EU.

## *Intercultural competences*

Further specification on the concept of internationalization in higher education reveal two key elements. The first important feature is that of international mobility, which refers to the border-crossing element of internationalization (Rivzi, 2011). This has been underlined by the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission, who have all issued recommendations for promoting mobility, understood as the principal tool for building a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and above all, the free movement of people and ideas (Jacobone & Moro, 2015).

The second feature of internationalization in higher education is curriculum-oriented (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016). It encompasses among other things the building of intercultural communication and intercultural competences (IC) (Aba, 2015). IC help in creating an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds, also known as having an intercultural dialogue (Ganesh & Holmes, 2011). The Council of Europe inaugurated the term in 2008 in its White Paper and the EU promulgated it during its European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in the same year. It is a social and political response to the need for intercultural communication

and understanding in the EU (Holmes, 2014). The importance of building IC as part of an internationalized curriculum is shared by the EU, as the philosophy and characteristics of the EHEA are not about the accumulation of knowledge, but on the acquisition of skills and competences in an international setting (Coperías Aguilar, 2009).

### ***European Universities Initiative***

One might think that the EU is doing everything in its power to ensure that students develop IC, given its major importance to universities, students and society overall. However, this is not the case. Research regarding the Erasmus+ programme, reveals that the levels of IC achieved by students that participated in its programmes, differed quite a bit. Some became more culturally acceptant, other just gained some sensitivity. Studies (Onorati, 2010; Alfonzo de Tovar, Cáceres Lorenzo, & Santana Alvarado, 2017; Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016) show that this is mostly due to the fact that different educational systems are involved in a programme like this, while they lack an integrated approach to interculturality. This assumes that the national, educational design aims to develop cultural awareness. However, studies (Onorati, 2010; Gutiérrez Almarza, Durán Martínez, & Beltrán Llavador, 2015; Aba, 2015; Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016; Yarosh, Lukic, & Santibáñez-Gruber, 2018; Durán Martínez, Gutiérrez, Beltrán Llavador, & Martínez Abad, 2016; Jacobone & Moro, 2015) also found that most often, a design of any sort is lacking. This means that there is no internationalized curriculum that focusses on IC. The Erasmus+ programme is not maximizing its potential to help students develop IC.

This research tries to understand how the Erasmus+ programme can maximize its potential, by zooming in on one of its new, flagship initiatives: the European Universities Initiative. This new programme under Erasmus+ aims to strengthen strategic partnerships between higher education institutions in Europe, by forming ‘European Universities’: networks of universities in which students can move easily and obtain a degree by combining their studies in several member states 2025 (European Commission, 2021c). The 41 transnational alliances that have been selected so far, are tasked with promoting European values and bringing forward a new generation of Europeans that are able to work and cooperate with people of different cultures, among other things (Gunn, 2020). In order to assess the effectiveness of the alliances regarding interculturality, this thesis is conducted according to the following research question:

*How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?*

In order to determine ‘success’, this research has determined four indicators that are effective and necessary conditions for the alliances to create IC successfully among their students. An alliance is more successful in helping students develop IC, when:

- higher education institutions within an alliance that harmonize their strategies on interculturality (Nolan & Hunter, 2012).;
- they integrate the development of IC into the curricula of their programmes (Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016);
- the educator is able to and does help the student reflect upon their own intercultural communication skills (Onorati & Bednarz, 2010; Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Acedo, 2012; Quezada, 2010; Coperías Aguilar, 2009; Starkey, 2003).
- there is an open exchange of views between people with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds (Council of Europe, 2008; Aba, 2015; Ganesh & Holmes, 2011).

On the basis of these indicators, I developed four sub-questions that need to be answered in order to determine the successfulness of the European Universities Initiative:

1. *In how far have European Universities aligned their institutional cultures to the goals of the alliance, regarding interculturality?*
2. *In how far do the European University Alliances incorporate an integrated approach to interculturality in their curricula?*
3. *What is the role of the teacher within the teaching programmes, regarding the approach to interculturality?*
4. *What evidence is there for the effectiveness of the European University Alliances in fostering open communication between students from a diverse background?*

In order to answer these questions, I have conducted seventeen semi-structured interviews with people from three different alliances: ECIU, EPICUR and ENLIGHT. From the outset, these three alliances all have different approaches to interculturality, if any at all. This allowed for a comparative case study, in which the three alliances served as cases. The interviewees came from different universities and had different roles in their respective alliance. This gave a well-rounded idea on what policies the three alliances deploy. So, on the basis of these semi-structured interviews, I was able to determine which alliances successfully fulfil the four indicators and which do not.

### *Societal and academic relevance*

Why is this research necessary? First, experiencing a different cultural, political and economic context is the best practice to prepare students for future careers outside of their home country (Jacobone & Moro, 2015). Employers all over the world increasingly value the IC that students acquire while studying abroad (Durán Martínez, Gutiérrez, Beltrán Llavador, & Martínez Abad, 2016). Demographic changes, as well as technological developments and globalization have changed the nature of the workforce and the skillset it requires (Tillman, 2012). Employers expect their employees to have ‘global’ competences, including an understanding of people from different linguistic, cultural, religious and geographic backgrounds (Holmes, Bavieri, & Ganassin, 2015) to keep up with international competition (Tillman, 2012). IC are important in preparing students for their careers. Therefore, students that develop IC during an international study, represent a fundamental objective for universities (Jacobone & Moro, 2015). When the Erasmus+ programme is producing mixed results in programmes that specifically state that they aim to create interculturality competent students, it should concern the EU and universities.

Second, understanding the added value of IC is also shown by students that take part of the Erasmus+ programme, stating that they want to experience life outside of their home country, change their perspective and broaden their horizon, in order to reflect better on their own lives and other cultures (Teichler, 2017). They stress a shared desire to grow and have better professional prospects, which entails working abroad. The Erasmus+ experience needs to be formative rather than informative (Gutiérrez Almarza, Durán Martínez, & Beltrán Llavador, 2015). Enhancing the intercultural understanding amongst young people is seen as one of the benefits of the Erasmus+ programme, as the intercultural contact can improve building IC (Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015). In conclusion, students expect and want universities to teach them these skills, so, universities should keep these expectations in regard.

Third, if we want to justify the budget that is reserved for the Erasmus+ programme – which has almost doubled compared to the previous programme period – we need to understand how the Erasmus+ programme, and within that, the European Universities Initiative more specifically, try to achieve desirable outcomes. Currently, this is not really researched, which brings us to the academic relevance of this thesis. The existing literature focusses on the skills the students acquire after being a part of an Erasmus+ programme. On the basis of the differences found between them and the lacking of a concrete strategy, they conclude that the input from the universities themselves is lacking or insufficient. However, an in-dept research on what the Erasmus+ programmes actually do, in order to give concrete recommendations on

the basis of existing strategies and policies, is missing. Especially regarding the European Universities Initiative, there is almost no existing literature yet, given the newness of the initiative. This thesis fills this gap, by assessing in detail what policies the alliances within the European Universities Initiative deploy. Not only would that give a better insight into what exactly is missing – apart from the broad statement: a strategy – but it would also serve as a recommendation to a very new and promising initiative in order to increase its success. Given that the European Universities Initiative is still in its pilot-phase, there is a lot that can still be altered in the workings of the alliances. Therefore, now is a good time to reflect on its actions.

### ***Reader's guide***

The next, second chapter, the literature review, maps out what the existing literature tells us about the connection between interculturality and internationalisation of European higher education, more specifically, the Erasmus+ programme. This chapter will show that the Erasmus+ programme is insufficient in helping students develop IC to their full potential. Nevertheless, this literature review will show that within current research, there is a gap: there is little to no information available on how the Erasmus+ programme tries to enhance interculturality, i.e. the policy input. Therefore, this chapter concludes with the research question on how the European Universities Initiative is currently trying to develop IC among their students and how successful these attempts are. This will lead us to the third chapter, the theoretical framework, which will lay down the conceptual approach needed to assess this successfulness. On the basis of four indicators, the sub-questions emerge, as does the hypothesis that will lead the thesis. The fourth chapter, the methodology, explains how this research will be conducted, which research design is used and how the interviews are shaped.

Furthermore, the fifth chapter will discuss the results of the interviews, based on the four indicators. As the first and second indicator are intertwined, the findings will take them together, creating a division of the results based on the policy-making level: institutional, programmatic and student level. Next, the sixth chapter is the discussion, aimed at discussing these results in-depth, by referring back to the theoretical concepts laid out before. This is done to insight on the successfulness of the alliances researched. This chapter will then proceed to explain what these findings entail for more general purposes, like society and academia. It will also discuss the limitations of this research. Lastly, the seventh chapter will be the conclusion, in which the research question and its sub-questions will be answered.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research tries to fill the gap regarding intercultural competences (IC) acquisition and the European Universities Initiative. In order to understand why this gap exists, it is important to go back to what the internationalisation of higher education should bring about and how interculturality is tied to this. This literature review will proceed to show how the Erasmus+ programme tries to incorporate interculturality into its framework and why this is insufficient. This will raise the question on how effective a new Erasmus+ initiative like the European Universities Initiative will be in IC development, something it sets out to produce, something that is still unclear as of now.

### 2.1 INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The term “internationalisation” has been used since the 1990s to describe one of the major long-term trends in Europe, mainly that in the field of higher education, both within individual European countries and at the European level as a whole (Teichler, 2010). Internationalisation differs from globalization. It is important to understand the distinction, as they can easily be mistaken for one another. According to Rumbley, Altbach and Reisberg (2012), globalization constitutes “*the broad economic, technological, and scientific trends that directly affect higher education and are largely inevitable in the contemporary world*” (Altbach, 2006, p. 123). Globalization assumes that borders and national systems as such get blurred or disappear (Teichler, 2010). On the other hand, as Teichler (2017) states, internationalisation is characterized as a “*process of integrating in international, intercultural or global dimension in the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education*” (Knight, 2008, p. 21). Internationalization can therefore be understood as a reaction or a companion trend to globalization, a toolkit of responses available to the opportunities presented by the forces of globalization (Rumbley, Altbach, & Reisberg, 2012). It addresses an increase in cross-border activities amidst a national system of higher education (Teichler, 2010).

Internationalisation at universities has always been a part of its research, teaching and service to society, but this was more fragmented and implicit. Comprehensive strategies to incorporate internationalisation in higher education, have been something of the last three decades (De Wit & Deca, 2020). With the Cold War behind us, the ever closer Union and the globalization of our societies, Europe began a process of strategic development of the international dimension of higher education. At the start of the millennium, internationalisation became a core activity, an integrated strategy within institutions of higher education (De Wit & Merckx, 2012).

As a result, a whole range of institutional strategies have been employed to encourage students to consider education abroad, leading from about less than half a million students in the mid-1980s (Rivzi, 2011), to 2 million students studying abroad in the EU in the period 2014-2020 (European Commission, 2020a). Studying abroad is no longer the rare and eccentric domain of a few (Teichler, 2010). However, mobility is not the only way in which internationalization has spread across institutions: an increase in franchise operations, articulation programmes, branch campuses and online delivery of higher education has also been noted in the last decade. This has led to excellence programmes, where institutions compete for talents, positions in global rankings, access to high impact journals and funding (De Wit & Deca, 2020). We observe a pattern of the commercialisation of international higher education initiatives, using it as a means of earning income to compensate for funding deficits (Rumbley, Altbach, & Reisberg, 2012). Exchange and cooperation, peace and mutual understanding, and human capital development and solidarity have been important drivers of international activities. However, it is clear that competition, revenue and branding have become equally, if not more important (De Wit & Deca, 2020). In conclusion, internationalisation in higher education poses a strategic objective essential to the relevance, dynamism and sustainability of the institutions of higher education (Rumbley, Altbach, & Reisberg, 2012).

Further specification on the concept of internationalisation in higher education reveal two key elements that are worth exploring: internationalisation abroad and internationalisation at home. The first important key feature of internationalisation in higher education is that of international mobility, which refers to the border-crossing element of internationalisation (Rivzi, 2011). This is also regarded to as ‘internationalisation abroad’. Within internationalisation abroad, student mobility became the most prominent in the 1980s and 90s. The success of the Erasmus programme illustrates this, as well as the Bologna reform process, where the emphasis was placed on student mobility. From these examples, it is clear that student mobility has a key role in the internationalisation policies and activities in the EU (Teichler, 2017). The mobility of students, researchers and non-academic staff is therefore one of the most obvious and important aspects of the internationalization of higher education. Next to this, it is easy to document and understand in terms of policymaking. The scale of mobility within higher education around the world has never been greater (Rumbley, Altbach, & Reisberg, 2012).

### ***Internationalisation at home***

While the first feature of internationalization of higher education is focused on mobility, the second feature is therefore curriculum-oriented (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016).

The definition of an internationalized curriculum is, according to Leask (2014, p. 5) to “*engage students with internationally informed research and cultural and linguistic diversity and purposefully develop their international and intercultural perspectives as global professionals and citizens.*” This puts both an emphasis on active involvement (engagement) of the students themselves within the learning process, as well as within the (purposeful) development of international and intercultural learning outcomes. What this means, is that there is a need to go beyond internationalization of the curriculum that is solely content-based and only provides evidence of learning outcomes for a few students (Leask, 2014).

Therefore, within this internationalized curriculum, special attention has been given to the importance of developing intercultural competences (IC) (Yarosh, Lukic, & Santibáñez-Gruber, 2018) This encompasses: the building of an internationalized curriculum; consisting of foreign language education; networking (Messelink, Steehouder, & Huberts, 2018); promoting understanding of the world; international recognition of the university; intercultural integration in campus (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016); and intercultural communication and intercultural competences (IC), also referred to as intercultural communication competences (ICC) (Aba, 2015). These ICC help in creating an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds, also known as having an intercultural dialogue (Ganesh & Holmes, 2011). The Council of Europe (2008) inaugurated the term in its White Paper and the EU promulgated it during its European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in the same year. It is a social and political response to the need for intercultural communication and understanding in the EU (Holmes, 2014).

In this way, internationalization of the curriculum is able to connect broader institutional agendas with a focus on internationalization with student learning and their skill acquisition. All students will become professionals and citizens in an ever-globalizing world, which constitutes the common rationale for internationalization. Therefore, universities often release policy statements with many well-intentioned, maybe even bold and for sure visionary statements on their ‘globally engaged’ students, ready to make a positive difference in this interconnected world. However, how these statements are then translated into student learning through internationalizing the curriculum, or in other words: into the input in these programmes, often remains unclear (Leask, 2014). It is striking that internationalisation of higher education poses such a vital and strategic objective to the core of higher education institutions, but only one form of internationalisation – abroad – seems to be fully employed. The next section will show that this is the exact problem for interculturality within the Erasmus+ programme.

## **2.2 ERASMUS+ AND INTERCULTURALITY**

The Erasmus + programme supports education, training, youth and sport in the EU. It has a budget of €26.2 billion for the programme period of 2021-2027, which is almost double as much as its predecessor programme. It claims to focus on social inclusion, green and digital transitions and the participation of the youth in democratic life. The programme does this via mobility and cooperation opportunities in higher, vocational, school and adult education, youth and sport (European Commission, 2021a). It has three key actions on which it is based: Key Action 1 on the Learning Mobility of Individuals, Key Action 2 on Cooperation among organisations and institutions and Key Action 3 on Support to policy development and cooperation. Actions under Key Action 2 are meant to build strategic partnerships in the field of educations, which are supposed to bring positive and long-lasting effects on the participating organisations, as well as on the people (in)directly involved in the activities. According to the its website (European Commission, 2021b), the Erasmus+ Programme wants to create “*greater understanding and responsiveness to all kinds of diversity, e.g. social, ethnic, linguistic, gender and cultural diversity as well as diverse abilities.*”, where the Key Action 2 specifically intends to impact “*improved provision and assessment of basic and transversal skills, particularly: entrepreneurship, social, civic, intercultural and language competences, critical thinking, digital skills and media literacy.*”

As seen by Key Action 2, there is a clear policy-goal to realise intercultural competences (IC) as part of the Erasmus+ programme. The Erasmus+ programme understands the value of IC, as the opening line on their student website is: “*Prepare for the intercultural experience of your life.*” (ErasmusProgramme, 2019). Students that take part in the Erasmus+ programme also understand this added value of IC: they state that they want to experience life outside of their home country, to change their perspective and broaden their horizon, in order to reflect better on their own lives and other cultures (Teichler, 2017). They stress a shared desire to grow and have better professional prospects, which entails working abroad. The Erasmus+ experience needs to be formative rather than informative (Gutiérrez Almarza, Durán Martínez, & Beltrán Llavador, 2015). Consequently, enhancing intercultural understanding amongst young people is seen as one of the benefits of the Erasmus+ programme, as the intercultural contact can improve building IC (Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015).

It is therefore understandable that a great deal of research (Onorati, 2010; Gutiérrez Almarza, Durán Martínez, & Beltrán Llavador, 2015; Aba, 2015; Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016; Yarosh, Lukic, & Santibáñez-Gruber, 2018; Durán Martínez, Gutiérrez, Beltrán

Llavador, & Martínez Abad, 2016; Jacobone & Moro, 2015) has been done on whether students participating in exchange programmes have indeed acquired IC, which they generally have. In a study by Onorati (2010) for example, all students showed a shift in their intercultural sensitivity at the end of their exchange programmes. These beforementioned studies focus mainly on the output from participating in the Erasmus+ programme: what are the levels of IC that can be found with students after their exchange? However, from these studies, it seems that these levels of IC found within the Erasmus + programme, can only be attributed to mobility (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016; Jacobone & Moro, 2015). Despite the positive effect of Erasmus+ on IC, intercultural development is yet to be contemplated within its projects (Alfonzo de Tovar, Cáceres Lorenzo, & Santana Alvarado, 2017). The level of IC achieved, differed amongst students. Some students develop intercultural sensitivity, while others achieve intercultural acceptance. This is mostly due to the different educational systems of the different countries involved in such programmes (Onorati, 2010). It is not to say that mobility cannot produce development of IC within students (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016), but it assumes an underpinned, national, educational design that aims to develop cultural awareness (Onorati, 2010). Opportunities are being missed with regard to understanding the added value of an integrated intercultural approach employed by the EU (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016).

This is exactly what Leask (2014) meant, when she mentioned that higher education institutions – or in this case a programme regarding higher education – make these elaborate statements on the way they will transform education, but that in practice, the curricula are not internationalized to their full potential. The lack of focus is not only apparent within international programmes like the Erasmus+ exchanges, but also in its research. The studies mentioned in the section above also focus mainly on the outcomes of the exchanges, instead of looking at the input: the policies in place to help students develop IC. By not exploring the exact gaps in the policies of the universities, it is hard for them to understand what exactly is missing in their approach. Large amounts of money are being spent on the Erasmus+ programme, but it is debatable how well this money is being spent to achieve the actions in Key Action 2 if a focused, comprehensive, institutionalized programme on an integrated intercultural approach is missing (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016). If we want to justify the budget that is reserved for the Erasmus+ programme, we need to understand *how* this programme can achieve desirable outcomes. Whereas previous studies have focused on the outcome of the Erasmus+ programme to evaluate the development of IC, this thesis looks at the input.

## **2.3 EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES INITIATIVE**

The Erasmus+ programme is of such a large scope – it encompasses education, training, youth and sport – that it would be hard to research the policy-input in this programme regarding higher education. It becomes very intangible at the programme-wide level. It makes more sense to look at one of the actions within the Erasmus+ programme that specifically targets interculturality within the European higher education as part of its second Key Action. This allows for much more specificity. The European Universities Initiative is one of the latest programmes within Key Action 2 of the Erasmus+ programme. It is the flagship initiative of the EU to build a European Education Area (EEA) by 2025 (European Commission, 2021c). It aims to strengthen the strategic partnerships between various higher education institutions, encouraging the emergence of ‘European Universities’: bottom-up networks of universities in the EU where students can obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU member states. They aim to strengthen student and staff mobility, foster quality, inclusiveness and competitiveness of European higher education. The European Universities want to create a systemic, structural and sustainable institutionalised cooperation. It follows two objectives (Gunn, 2020):

- Promoting European values and strengthening the European identity by bringing together a new generation of Europeans who can **work and cooperate within different cultures**, in different languages and across borders, sectors and academic disciplines.
- Increasing the quality, performance, attractiveness and international competitiveness of European higher education institutions, to contribute to a knowledge economy, employment, culture, civic engagement and welfare. European Universities will boost the quality of higher education and strengthen the link to research and innovation in the EU.

With this initiative, the Erasmus+ programme aims to enhance the building of IC among the students that participate within the alliances, by actively promoting students being able to work and cooperate within different cultures, also known as being interculturally competent.

### ***What is the European Universities Initiative?***

It was Macron who, on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 2017, delivered a speech, *New Initiative for Europe*, to set out a vision for a fair, protective and ambitious Europe. He proposed a new landscape for the European higher education: *“I believe we should create European Universities—a network of universities across Europe with programs that have all their students study abroad and take classes in at least two languages. These European Universities will also be drivers of educational innovation and the quest for excellence. We should set for ourselves the goal of*

*creating at least 20 of them by 2024. However, we must begin setting up the first of these universities as early as the next academic year, with real European semesters and real European diplomas.”* (Gunn, 2020, p. 16). The European Commission embraced this vision and on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November 2017, it became reality in the report *Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture*. A special emphasis was placed on the creation of a European Education Area (EEA), which should aid the already existing European Higher Education Area (EHEA), that was to be based on trust, mutual recognition, cooperation and exchange of best practices, mobility and growth, creating a sense of a European identity and culture. The Commission released the report with the accompanying document *Network of European Universities*. After the position on the emergence of European Universities, set in a Initiative, was reaffirmed by the Education Committee, a three-year pilot phase was set out within the Erasmus+ programme in 2019, with the first seventeen alliances of ‘European Universities’, selected by the Commission. The initiative rests upon the creation of alliances to 1) promote common European values and 2) make European higher education institutions more qualitative, performative, attractive and competitive (Gunn, 2020).

The European Universities are composed of different types of higher education institutions, from universities of applied sciences, to technical universities and research-comprehensive universities. They are transnational alliances of these higher education institutions from across the EU, in order to benefit students, teachers and the society. The first alliances were selected out of 54 applications and involve 114 higher education institutions from 24 Member States. The second call opened in November 2019 and resulted in the selection of an additional 24 alliances in July 2020. The initiative is composed of 41 European Universities Alliances, with a budget of €287 million (European Commission, 2020b).

### ***How is interculturality guaranteed in the curricula?***

This thesis focusses on the European Universities Initiative in order to assess if the Erasmus+ programme can deliver on its Key Action 2 to build IC. From the events set out above, it is clear that the initiative quickly gained approval and went to the implementation stage. This is a milestone, because the European Universities Initiative overcame political and practical obstacles of schemes that were in place for seventy years (Gunn, 2020). However, as the European Universities Initiative is so new, there has only been little research done on the initiative. There is just one survey on the first, preliminary results, conducted by the Commission (2020b). However, this survey mostly focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and did not touch upon the effectiveness of the alliances regarding interculturality.

With a budget of EUR 287 million and the importance that is attached to this programme to create a EEA, more research is needed on if and how the European Universities Initiative delivers its desired and promised outcomes. As the alliances are still in their pilot phase, it is the ideal moment to take a step back and evaluate their workings, because strategies and policies can still be changed. This leads us to the research question of this thesis: *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?* Opposed to previous research on the successfulness of the Erasmus+ programme, this thesis specifically looks at how the European Universities are integrating internationalization in their curricula. That means looking beyond mobility (internationalization abroad). Hence, this thesis distinguishes itself by focusing on input, rather than outcomes.

In order to answer this question, it is important to know how intercultural competences can be successfully created by higher education institutions. From this literature review, we know that it should come from an integrated approach to interculturality, but what this means, remains vague. Therefore, the next chapter – the theoretical framework – will explain the conceptual approach needed to answer the research question. From this theoretical framework, sub-questions will emerge, which helps the thesis in answering its main question.

# 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the theoretical framework, the thesis will take a closer look at what constitutes ‘success’, regarding the development of intercultural competences (IC). Even though the definition of IC was briefly touched upon in the literature review, this chapter conceptualizes them further. Next, indicators for successful IC-acquisition are determined, which are the basis for the sub-questions supporting the research question: *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?* Lastly, these indicators will produce a hypothesis on which alliances are more likely to succeed.

## 3.1 DEFINING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

Interculturality is the notion that between people that belong to various cultural groups, a relation exists that is based on mutual understanding and respect (Kim, 2009). It differs from concepts like equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), which refers to fair treatment and opportunities for everyone. Interculturality on the other hand, is rooted in communication. Interculturality goes beyond tolerance – where people merely *accept* the existence of the other – but expressed a deep shared *understanding* which is seen in the dialogic outcomes between the different people (Ganesh & Holmes, 2011). From these dialogues, a new, creative, innovative and expressive form of communication can emerge, in which people question their own and each other’s culture, leading to the adoption and adaption of features derived from other cultures (Young & Sercombe, 2010). These dialogues are then referred to as an ‘intercultural dialogue’ or ‘intercultural communication’ (ICC).

The White Paper *Living together as equals in dignity* (Council of Europe, 2008), provides a conceptual framework on intercultural dialogues: “*Intercultural dialogue is understood as a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others. Intercultural dialogue contributes to political, social, cultural and economic integration and the cohesion of culturally diverse societies. It fosters equality, human dignity and a sense of common purpose. It aims to develop a deeper understanding of diverse worldviews and practices, to increase co-operation and participation (or the freedom to make choices), to allow personal growth and transformation, and to promote tolerance and respect for the other.*” (p. 46). IC can be considered a synonym of intercultural communication, only with a stronger focus on

competences. Basically, having IC enables one to have an intercultural dialogue or take part in ICC. Being interculturally competent, means having the ability to (Aba, 2015):

- think and act in interculturally appropriate ways;
- behave in a flexible manner when confronted with foreign cultures;
- manage key challenging features of intercultural communication;
- be able to transcend ethnocentrism; and
- be able to adapt to verbal and non-verbal messages in the appropriate way.

Being competent means being aware of explicit and implicit values of one's own and other cultures, to make an evaluative analysis of these values and to be mindful of and able to handle cultural conflicts. When eventual conflicts arise, the student should be able to find common criteria or otherwise, accept differences (Starkey, 2003).

### **3.2 INDICATORS THAT DETERMINE 'SUCCESS'**

In this section, four indicators are determined that indicate a successful creation of IC among students, by higher education institutions. From the literature review, we know that the higher education institutions need to have strategy on the internationalization of curricula regarding interculturality. However, this remains vague. These four indicators discuss more in-dept what this entails and thereby, they serve as the basis for the four sub-questions, in order to answer the main research question on the success of European Universities Initiative.

First, strategic alliances are complex, as the institutions within them differ and the building of IC requires an integrated approach throughout. Each higher education institution brings its own, unique culture into the alliance, indicating that institutional stories and patterns differ. As internationalization of the curricula depends on common visions and ideas for these programmes, it is important to understand how different institutional cultures affect positive outcomes (Nolan & Hunter, 2012). If there is no harmony in the way a vision, like developing IC among students, is carried out in the curricula as a strategy, this could seriously hamper an effective, hence successful, approach to creating IC among students as a European University. The strategy on interculturality should be able to count on institutional support from the entire alliance (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016). Therefore, the first indicator is that partner universities within the alliances need to harmonize their strategies on interculturality. That means that the first sub-question is: *In how far have European Universities aligned their institutional cultures to the goals of the alliance, regarding interculturality?*

Second, the strategy on interculturality in the alliances should be integrated throughout the entire alliance. It is good if one course helps students develop IC, but this is insufficient. Every course should help develop IC, otherwise, just a handful of students will have skills after their participation in the programme. All the curricula should integrate interculturality in order to deliver interculturally competent students as an alliance (Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016). Therefore, the second indicator is that the development of IC should be integrated into the curricula of alliances' programmes. This means that the second sub-question is: *In how far do the European University Alliances incorporate an integrated approach to interculturality?*

Both these first two indicators rest on the notion of a strategy regarding interculturality being present. In the absence of a strategy, both indicators automatically cannot be fulfilled. In this way, both questions are intertwined. This will also show in the findings, where the findings on the first two indicators are taken together.

Third, many studies (Onorati & Bednarz, 2010; Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Acedo, 2012; Quezada, 2010; Coperías Aguilar, 2009) have stressed the importance of the educator in helping students acquire and develop IC. This is because reflection plays a fundamental role in developing IC. Students cope with intercultural conflicts, not by experiencing them, but by reflecting upon them. The development of such awareness should be continually reinforced throughout the stages of learning (Starkey, 2003). Teachers help to provide meaning to this cognitive process (Onorati & Bednarz, 2010; Coperías Aguilar, 2009). This emphasizes the relevance of deliberately integrating reflection on one's own communicative behaviour into the teaching methods specifically, so it is not up to the individual teacher to help intercultural development among their students (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016). Therefore, the third indicator is that the educator is able to and does help the student reflect upon their own intercultural communication skills. The third sub-question consequently becomes: *What is the role of the teacher within the teaching programmes, regarding the approach to interculturality?*

Fourth and lastly, within the definition of IC as provided in the section before, the ability to have an intercultural dialogue is mentioned. In order to share a deep understanding with someone from a different cultural background, the student has to communicate with another person (Aba, 2015; Council of Europe, 2008; Ganesh & Holmes, 2011). As IC are a communicative skill, the students should be able to communicate, in order to learn from this. Otherwise, there is nothing to reflect upon. Therefore, the fourth indicator is that students

should be able to communicate openly with students from different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. This makes the last sub-question: *What evidence is there for the effectiveness of the European University Alliances in fostering open communication between students from a diverse background?*

### ***Research questions and hypothesis***

This gives us the following research question: *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?*, with the accompanying sub-questions:

1. *In how far have European Universities aligned their institutional cultures to the goals of the alliance, regarding interculturality?*
2. *In how far do the European University Alliances incorporate an integrated approach to interculturality in their curricula?*
3. *What is the role of the teacher within the teaching programmes, regarding the approach to interculturality?*
4. *What evidence is there for the effectiveness of the European University Alliances in fostering open communication between students from a diverse background?*

If we take a look at what the current alliances set out to achieve, by zooming in on the factsheets released by the Commission and the websites of the alliances, only six alliances mention interculturality/IC or describe that they specifically want to foster communication between cultures: ARQUS, EPICUR, ATHENA, ENLIGHT, EUNICE and Transform4Europe. There is no indication on whether they have succeeded so far. However, if we look at the indicators presented in this chapter, it is clear that alliances need a well-thought out strategy that they will carry out into the entire alliance and the teaching methods for all its modules.

Not even mentioning interculturality, does raise the question in how far IC-acquisition is a strategy or priority at all, as well as if there are any policies in place to enhance interculturality. This leads us to the following hypothesis: *Alliances who explicitly mention interculturality in their outings, are more likely to successfully incorporate the preconditions set out in the four indicators of success regarding IC development.* On the basis of this hypothesis, three alliances have been selected as case studies for this thesis. The next chapter, the methodology, will explain how and why.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

This research tries to answer the question *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?* As most of the alliances have not started yet with their programmes, or just offered their first few courses, it is not realistic to look at the output: studying how and if students have become more interculturally competent due to the alliances' programmes. Therefore, the focus of this research is on researching the state of affairs within the alliances right now regarding strategies on interculturality, in order to determine their potential success. In this way, the research is focused on the input from the alliances: what policies are being put into place that could successfully enhance the development of IC among students? To assess 'success' for enhancing IC, four indicators have been derived from the theories presented in the theoretical framework. An alliance will be more successful in creating IC among students beyond mobility, when:

- the higher education institutions within an alliance that harmonize their strategies on interculturality (Nolan & Hunter, 2012).;
- they integrate the development of IC into the curricula of their programmes (Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016);
- the educator is able to and does help the student reflect upon their own intercultural communication skills (Onorati & Bednarz, 2010; Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Acedo, 2012; Quezada, 2010; Coperías Aguilar, 2009; Starkey, 2003).
- there is an open exchange of views between people with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds (Council of Europe, 2008; Aba, 2015; Ganesh & Holmes, 2011).

In essence, this types of research tries to seek certain evidence that would hint at possible success regarding the development of IC among students. Therefore, this research is exploratory in nature. It is not trying to explain why a certain situation exists (i.e. explanatory research), but it examines the alliances within the European Universities Initiative for something specific: these four indicators. Therefore, this thesis is using the methodological approach of limited exploration, a research in which the researchers know what to look for (Stebbins, 2001). Interculturality and IC are better-known phenomena, so this exploratory research is not completely free of confirmatory elements. Actually, the indicators have been deductively derived from the grounded theory on intercultural competences, which typically indicates confirmatory research, opposed to exploratory. However, this research is not deductive; the

indicators are not tested on whether they hold in real life, which is the premise of deduction. The deductively-derived indicators are used to make generalized statements about the topic of the thesis: the European Universities Alliances' ability to foster the development of IC among students (Denscombe, 2010). So, the exploratory element exists within the policymaking of the alliances: there is knowledge on the phenomenon (IC), but not on the situation (alliances).

In an exploratory research, both quantitative and qualitative data can be gathered, although the latter usually predominates the research. This is also the case for this thesis. First of all, it predominantly emphasizes an inductive approach, which is one of the key characteristics of qualitative research (Bryman, 2012). Next, the way the research gathers data is interpretative. The research is done on the basis of interviews, providing for the second key feature of qualitative research, where the examination of the interpretation of the world by its participants is the driver. This is the opposite of positivism, in which natural scientific models shape the world. Qualitative research can be positivist, by trying to explain human behaviour. As this research is exploratory and not explanatory, this does not fit with the thesis. What makes qualitative research interpretative, is the notion of 'understanding'. When the respondents were asked about how the four indicators are present in their alliances, they answered based on their own interpretation. Their responses have a subjective meaning that need interpretation of the researcher in order to be understood (Bryman, 2012). By asking the respondents what their alliances are doing, I, as the researcher, interpreted those answers in the light of interculturality to understand how the alliances work and how that fits with the four indicators.

Using a theory to explore a specific situation – like an alliance – is an 'interpretative' case study research. The researcher explicitly uses a theoretical foundation in order to examine or interpret a case, an intensive study of a situation. This type of research serves as a way to provide a mechanism or an overview in which changes can be effected on the organization, institution or in this research, alliance researched. In the end, this research is therefore designed to effect changes along the lines of the given theory. The focus of this thesis is therefore primarily on the three cases that it researched, to bring about change, if necessary. Meanwhile, the theoretical interpretation of the case gives prescriptive leverage (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999). Therefore, three alliances served as cases in order to be compared with each other, which ultimately serves as a way to see where the gaps are in their policymaking, in order to maximize their potential.

## **4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN: COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY**

As the European Universities Initiative consists of 41 alliances, it is not possible to research the entire Initiative, given the scope of this research. As laid down in the second chapter, all alliances are supposed to foster IC among students, but only some have explicitly set out to do so in their published documents, websites and other outings. However, the four indicators that have been derived from theory, entail that an explicit strategy, containing several elements, is crucial to the success of the strategic partnership in creating IC. As the hypothesis in the theoretical framework stated: *alliances who explicitly mention interculturality in their outings, are more likely to successfully incorporate the preconditions set out in the four indicators of success regarding IC development.* In order to understand how successful the Initiative as a whole is, we should look at multiple alliances with different outings on interculturality in their factsheets and websites, to see if there are differences in their input. If so, this could have an impact on the outcomes of the alliances and so, the Initiative's success.

Comparative case studies examine two or more cases, to discover contrasts and similarities, but also patterns that can occur across the cases. Cases must have enough commonality to allow for comparison, with something to set them apart in order to be considered separate cases. Each individual case still needs to be described in detail, like with a single case study. This enables comparison on a very detailed level. Therefore, this research design lends itself very well to small N-studies (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). For this thesis, three alliances were selected:

### ***ECIU***

The European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) is composed of twelve universities: University of Twente (The Netherlands); Aalborg University (Denmark); Dublin City University (Ireland); Hamburg University of Technology (Germany); Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania); Linköping University (Sweden); Tampere University (Finland); Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain); University of Aveiro (Portugal); University of Stavanger (Norway); University of Trento (Italy); and, Institut National des Sciences Appliquées (France). ECIU was part of the first call, in 2019, but was already founded in 1997 with a group of entrepreneurial universities. ECIU is focussed on innovative challenge-based learning. Specifically, this means that their learners, teachers and researcher work on innovative solutions to challenges in business and society in cooperation with different stakeholders and cities. By changing their educational pedagogy, they hope to contribute to sustainable cities and regional knowledge economies (ECIU, 2021; European Commission, 2019a).

### ***EPICUR***

The European Partnership for Innovative Campus Unifying Regions (EPICUR) consists of eight universities: Adam-Mickiewicz University of Poznań (Poland); Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece); University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (Austria); Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (Germany); University of Haute-Alsace (France); University of Freiburg (Germany); University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands); and, University of Strasbourg (France). Like ECIU, EPICUR was part of the first call in 2019. Their aim is to strengthen European linguistic diversity and collaborative teaching formats by creating a four-year European bachelor of Liberal Arts and Sciences (L.A.S.). The goal behind this is to bring students, teachers and researchers together and to become aware of European multilingualism and cultural diversity. Teaching will be rooted in real-world problems, interdisciplinary and interculturality (EPICUR, 2021; European Commission, 2019b).

### ***ENLIGHT***

The European university Network to promote equitable quality of Life, sustainability & Global engagement through Higher education Transformation (ENLIGHT) is made up of nine universities: Ghent University (Belgium); University of Bordeaux (France); University of the Basque Country (Spain); Comenius University Bratislava (Slovakia); National University of Ireland Galway (Ireland); University of Göttingen (Germany); University of Groningen (The Netherlands); University of Tartu (Estonia); and, Uppsala University (Sweden). ENLIGHT is a European University from the second call, in 2020. They want to transform European higher education by turning students into globally engaged citizens with the knowledge and skills to tackle major societal transitions, through the use of local, societal challenges within the courses. Teaching will incorporate multiple disciplinary approaches, intercultural awareness, inclusive leadership and multilingualism (ENLIGHT, 2021; European Commission, 2021d).

All cases have been researched on their ability to fulfil the four indicators that determine how successful an institution is in building IC among its students. The reason these specific cases were selected, is as follows. There was the need for cases that do and do not include interculturality in their outings, like their website and the Commission's factsheets. In this way, the hypothesis could be tested, as the cases could be compared on the basis of their outings. ECIU clearly does not incorporate interculturality in its outings, while EPICUR and ENLIGHT quite openly integrate interculturality in their outings. According to the hypothesis, that would mean that EPICUR and ENLIGHT are more successful at IC-acquisition than ECIU. However, using only one case to compare ECIU with, would not be reliable enough. It could be that the

case with clear interculturality in its outings is more successful, but that this is a mere coincidence and not perse related to the way this alliance represents itself. Therefore, I researched two alliances against ECIU. Furthermore, I choose EPICUR and ENLIGHT, as they employ different teaching methods. As the four indicators require quite specific ways to integrate interculturality into the teaching methods, it will be interesting to see if differences in their “successfulness” occur. If there are differences between them, the hypothesis does not hold, because apparently then, the outing is not a clear prediction of actual policy in place to develop IC. So, this is why this research will look at both EPICUR and ENLIGHT.

## **4.2 RESEARCH METHOD: INTERVIEWS**

As little information on this topic is available, the most logical way to acquire knowledge, is through the use of interviews. In using the three alliances as cases study, where the only extensive source of information on their workings is their own website, you risk using information that is mainly promotional instead of purely factual. If we believe the websites of EPICUR and ENLIGHT, they are a great driving force behind the development of IC among students. However, even though this might be the genuine vision from the alliances, it does not provide us with any information on how this translates into actual actions that are felt by actual people, namely, students. Only those that are involved in the alliance can give insights into this. Therefore, I interviewed seventeen respondents: four from ECIU, five from EPICUR and seven from ENLIGHT. I also interviewed a national student representative, in order to get a better view on student representation within the alliances. The respondents from the alliances all had different roles: they were either a policy advisor, project staff, teachers or students that were in some way tied to the alliances. They were all from different partner universities within the alliance as well. In total, the seventeen respondents came from nine different universities.

It is clear that this is not an equal distribution of respondents per alliance. This is a difficulty of interviewing that I encountered. Regardless of the amount of emails and calls you put out, some people do not answer or do not want to participate. This is a limitation of using interviews that is difficult to manage. I had also hoped for a more equal distribution of types of respondents. Again, a researcher doing interviews is completely dependent on the willingness and ability of people to be interviewed. For example, with ENLIGHT is was able to speak with students, but not with teachers. For ECIU, this was the other way around. Hence, you always miss out on perspectives that could have been relevant. Nevertheless, the respondents were knowledgeable on the topic and were able to give insights from different perspectives, due to their place in the alliance. This partly made up for the fact that not all types of respondents were interviewed.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

There are several ways on how to conduct interviews. For this research, semi-structured interviews were used. With this type of interview, the researcher has an interview guide with topics that need to be covered, but there is a lot of leeway for the respondent in the way they can reply. Often, questions do not follow the guide exactly, as they can arise during the interview. This flexibility is necessary to understand how respondents see issues and events, by allowing them to elaborate on their own perspectives and opinions. As the researcher does not know beforehand what these will be, there needs to be room for the respondents to go off-topic, or for the researcher to ask questions that are not part of the interview guide. Still, due to the fairly structured nature of the interview, the questions asked and the information given by the respondents will be similar throughout the several interviews conducted. This allows for comparison and offers the ability to check of the boxes that need to be checked (Bryman, 2012).

For this thesis, this was the best way to conduct interviews. We know what indicators need to be implemented in order to call an alliance successful, but the theory does not specific exactly how, for example, the teacher needs to act in order to help the student reflect upon their own behaviour. These indicators are therefore still open to a degree that they do not prescribe how the policies exactly need to look like, only that they need to be in place. Therefore, using questions to ask on how the respondents thought these policies were implemented in the alliances, while keeping in mind the overarching indicators, was the best way to go about the interviews. This is in line with the basic principles of semi-structured interviews and thus the reason for the choice to gather data this way.

The interview guide is based on the four sub-questions that the thesis wants to answer:

1. *In how far have European Universities aligned their institutional cultures to the goals of the alliance, regarding interculturality?*
2. *In how far do the European University Alliances incorporate an integrated approach to interculturality in their curricula?*
3. *What is the role of the teacher within the teaching programmes, regarding the approach to interculturality?*
4. *What evidence is there for the effectiveness of the European University Alliances in fostering open communication between students from a diverse background?*

The first two indicators are intertwined: they both rest on the notion of a strategy regarding interculturality being present. In the absence of a strategy, there cannot be harmonization of a

strategy, nor a strategy that is integrated into the curricula. So, both indicators automatically cannot be fulfilled. Therefore, questions that were asked could sometimes refer to both sub-questions. In general, The respondents were asked in various ways if there exists a strategy on interculturality on an institutional level and what this entailed. Next to this, in the interviews, I tried to find out whether this strategy was integrated throughout the entire alliance, i.e., if there was harmonization within the alliance regarding interculturality. Furthermore, as the alliances are still young, the respondents were asked about a possible future strategy on interculturality for their alliances and how institutional cooperation in general was foreseen for the future. The corresponding questions in the interview guide, are:

- What are the main aims of the alliance?
- In what way is interculturality represented and ensured within the alliance/programmes?
- How are decisions made with regard to interculturality?
- How effective do you think this strategy is in building IC among students?
- What is the strategy for the coming years regarding interculturality?

The third indicator is looking in-dept at the role of the teacher and their teaching methods in the alliance. To research this, the respondents were asked how the alliance has and/or will design its programmes, what the role of the teacher would be within the courses, in what way soft skills would be taught in these programmes and how the alliance will know if their students actually acquired these soft skills. Corresponding questions are:

- Is there a way in which teachers and students can reflect upon their own behaviour?
- What is the designated role of teachers in the strategy towards interculturality?
- How does the alliance measure its effectiveness in IC-acquisition?
- How are students stimulated to work together?

For the fourth indicator, respondents were asked how students would participate and in what way they are able to communicate, how wide-spread the alliances are among their student population and how this influences the composition of the educational programmes of the alliance in terms of diversity. Next, respondents were asked how student participation could be enhanced and what role student representation has in this. This resulted in the questions:

- In what way do the modules in the alliance stimulate communication between students?
- How diverse are the students in the alliance and how is this diversity ensured?
- How big is student participation and what is done to increase it?
- What is the role of student representatives within the alliances?

### **4.3 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY**

Reliability is based on the question if the results of a study are repeatable (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, this concerns internal reliability (would another researcher with the same set of previously generated themes match them with the data in the same way?) and external reliability (would researchers discover the same themes in similar settings?). Threats to the reliability can be avoided, if explicit details regarding the theoretical perspectives, as well as a well-thought-out research design is being used (Franklin, Cody, & Ballan, 2010). Regarding reliability, my thesis holds up well. The theoretical framework describes in detail which indicators are used in order to assess the successfulness of higher education institutions regarding interculturality. If another researcher would use these indicators to tests the success of other alliances, or other higher education institutions in general, they would match the data the same way, in line with those indicators. As they are detailed, they do not leave a lot of room for interpretation by the researcher themselves. If a researcher were to ask the same research question as me, they would also be in need of developing a framework like I did, as they would otherwise encounter the same problem I realized quickly on. If there is no theory to hold against the respondents' answers, you run the risk that Leask (2014) mentions: you hear great promise, but it might be an empty one. Therefore, you need to understand what constitutes success. Other researchers would have to conceptualize a framework to test this success with, like I did.

Validity concerns the integrity of the conclusions that derive from the research. This entails two things: internal validity (is there a good match between the theories and the observations?) and external validity (can the results of the research be generalized?) (Bryman, 2012). As many researchers (Golafshani, 2003) have done, one can argue if this is really applicable to qualitative research. Qualitative research in its core tries to understand a phenomenon by interpreting its workings. This is already by definition not a result that can be generalized, as it pertains to one specific situation. In my case, I have researched three alliances, so the findings are directly related to them, and not to other alliances. However, because I want to conclude something on the entire European Universities Initiative, I specifically chose cases that represented the alliances at best: they all had a different degree of integrating interculturality, on paper and in practice. Some results were applicable to all, so there is definitely generalization possible. Next, I do not believe it is very important if not all results apply to all alliances. This thesis does not aim to criticize the European Universities Initiative as a whole, but tries to help it discover where potential weaknesses may be to its aims. For some alliances, this will be more useful than others, who are already doing well. This is in my opinion valid as well.

## 5. FINDINGS

The question that leads this research, is *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?* In order to assess “successfulness”, I determined four indicators for successful skill acquisition in higher education, specifically regarding the development of intercultural competences (IC) within a strategic cooperation between higher education institutions. These indicators for success are:

1. As each institution is unique, there is a risk that the outcomes of strategic alliances, like the development of IC, within higher education institutions will differ (Nolan & Hunter, 2012). In order to create an integrated approach to the development of IC as a European University, **higher education institutions within the alliances need to harmonize their strategies on interculturality.**
2. The impact of the teacher can be enhanced through institutional support, by **integrating the development of IC into curricula.** The content and quality of international learning need to be addressed in programmes at the institutional level, to guarantee the creation of IC in these programmes (Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016).
3. The **educator has an important role in helping students develop IC.** Reflection on one’s behaviour is important in understanding intercultural conflicts. Teachers can help students give meaning to this cognitive process. They should foster and guide intercultural communication between students (Messelink, Van Maele, & Spencer-Oatey, 2015; Onorati & Bednarz, Learning to become an intercultural practitioner: the case of lifelong learning intensive programme Interdisciplinary Course of Intercultural Competences, 2010; Acedo, 2012; Quezada, 2010; Starkey, 2003).
4. There needs to be an **open exchange of views between people with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds,** with mutual understanding and respect being central to the conversation, in order for an intercultural dialogue to take part (Castro, Woodin, Lundgren, & Byram, 2016; Council of Europe, 2008; Aba, 2015).

Based on these indicators, the findings are structured along the following outline. First, it is important to understand whether, on an institutional level, there exists an integrated approach to the development of IC within the European Universities Alliances and to which extent (indicator 2). This also requires us to ask the question: are the institutions within the alliance

harmonized, specifically in their strategies on interculturality (indicator 1)? Therefore, the first part of the findings (§5.1) will focus on the institutional level. It will revolve around the strategies the institutions deploy regarding interculturality and in how far these are integrated on an alliance-level, or whether they are reserved to individual institutions only.

Second, the teacher and teaching methods are deemed crucial in helping students develop IC (indicator 3). Therefore, the second part of the findings (§5.2) will be structured along the programmatic level of the alliances, as we zoom in on skill acquisition within the programme. It will focus on the role of the teacher and teaching methods within the courses the alliances set out to teach. To do this, we need to assess how these courses are designed and if they and teachers try to foster intercultural communication in the way they stimulate students to communicate and in the way skill acquisition is guaranteed within this communication.

Third and lastly, intercultural competences rest on the premise that different kinds of students are able to have dialogue with each other (indicator 4). It is therefore important to understand how students participate in the alliances and what their representation entails. Therefore, the third part of the findings (§5.3) will be structured along the student level within the alliances.

Three alliances have been interviewed. This has been done to make a comparison between them. In first two sections (§5.1-2) of this chapter, a clear difference between the three becomes visible. However, in the last section (§5.3), the difference between the three alliances was not evident. Therefore, only the first two section will be structured along the alliances, opposed to the last section. I will use the pronouns they and them for all the respondents, in order to protect their identity.

## **5.1 THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL: STRATEGIES**

Two indicators are used to assess the interculturality on the institutional level: strategizing an integrated approach to interculturality and institutional harmonization. There will be a division per alliance, to showcase their difference in strategies.

There is one overarching finding regarding interculturality that stood out in all alliances. Respondents did not always know the definition of interculturality. They would confuse it with diversity or inclusivity. Even though these concepts all relate to interculturality, they are not the same. This is an important finding to keep in mind when respondents answer positively to a question about whether there is a strategy on interculturality. In the interviews, I made sure to explain it several times. However, not all respondents grasped the concept.

## ECIU

Within ECIU, there is no explicit, integrated strategy on interculturality, as the respondents stated. As one respondent explained, this is also not the focus of ECIU and therefore a conscious choice. The focus of the alliance is mostly on

*“The Commission did have inclusiveness in the Award criteria, so you could score points if you are inclusive and specifically target those disadvantaged students or the first-generation students (...). And ECIU, that's not our profile. (...) In that sense, interculturality is not a pedagogical concept [for ECIU].” – #11*

competence-building in general and to support life-long-learners. They explained that the aim of the European Universities is not to complete all the goals that the Commission has set out,

*“We don't have something about, let's say, interculturality and so on.” – #10*

but in their eyes to pick a few and build an identity around those goals. One respondent emailed me after

the interview, stating that they could not find official documents where intercultural competences were outlined as a desired outcome. They said that interculturality is not a strategic objective for ECIU. As there is not a concrete strategy in place, there is also no harmonization of this strategy, which is the first indicator of success. These two indicators are very intertwined: an integrated, harmonized strategy on interculturality will foster IC among students. If there is no strategy in the first place, both indicator 1 and 2 cannot be fulfilled.

This does not preclude that the alliance will not aid students in developing IC however, according to the respondents. The respondents were still positive that the alliance will succeed in this because inclusivity and diversity are at the heart of the alliance. Regardless, arguments that supported this, often revolved around mobility and the diversity of the classroom, and not necessarily the incorporation of a thought-out

*“At the moment we're trying to develop (...), with some of the other universities within the alliance, an intercultural competences and communication module, which would be something open for anybody to follow. (...) So, it is quite high on our priority. And of course, it goes in alignment with our mobility targets as well.” – #9*

strategy on interculturality. The example given by the quote from respondent #9 shows this: interculturality is a module a student can take; it is not an integrated strategy for all the modules. Again, this does not mean that the alliance will not allow students to develop IC by individual courses and mobility, as the respondents themselves also note. However, it does differ from having an integrated strategy on interculturality throughout all courses in the alliance.

One teacher (also known as *teamcher*) mentioned that they took a training on intercultural sensitivity in communication, out of their own interests and because it was in line with their teaching program in ECIU. Therefore, the teacher was able to help their students in their

*“One of the things of ECIU as an alliance (...) it's not always very clear on how things should be done. So that does give a bit of room for each university or even each 'teacher' or person to do these courses (...) So, yes, there is definitely a strong sense of multiculturalism in ECIU, but it might change from university to university or even from course to course to how this is dealt with.” – #12*

cognitive process when they were working together with students from different cultural backgrounds. The respondent did note that this they took this training out of their own, intrinsic interests. Within the alliance, they can

share their experiences and knowledge with other teachers. However, per university, faculty, department and teacher, the attitude towards actively developing intercultural competences differs. Therefore, there is no integrated strategy, according to this respondent.

### **EPICUR**

Respondents from EPICUR were mixed in their answers on whether there is an integrated strategy regarding interculturalism within the alliance. Some said that it is too early in the process to talk about soft skill-development, as the main aim is still to converge their liberal arts and sciences (L.A.S.) programmes. As this is being prioritized now for the pilot phase, implementing a strategy on interculturalism within the curriculum is not necessarily a priority. When asked how interculturalism is represented in the EPICUR programmes and if there is a strategy, several respondents that were closely tied to the actual teaching, answered that it was rather implicitly integrated into the L.A.S. programme. They explained that the specific topics within the L.A.S. programme that are priorities for EPICUR, like sustainability, European identities, and ethics, are inherently tied to interculturalism and therefore, are represented. However, they would not call it an integrated strategy. One respondent, who oversaw developing the L.A.S. programme at their university, even mentioned that a strategy on interculturalism for them was not present. Student mobility, according to them, would help create IC among students, but they could not recall a certain strategy on interculturalism or IC being in place.

*“Here for our curriculum development, I'd say [a strategy on interculturalism] is rather implicit. (...) But it's also something that's in a way tied to the program and to the EPICUR idea itself. So, there is, of course, an idea to have things like that in your first year, in your core program. (...) So, it's more or less, it's implicit and it's also tied to the topics.” – #15*

*“We have this work package strengthening and connecting regions. And I think this work package tries to include the particularities of all eight partners, instead of thinking of an international alliance as a place where all people learn to communicate the same way. And try to make it possible to connect without losing your own specialties.” – #16*

One other respondent explained that regional identities are very important to EPICUR. Therefore, the alliance is also not meant to produce a completely harmonized strategy on every goal. This is also the reason, according to the respondent, that there is not one way to do things regarding communications skills. It seems

that interculturalism is important for EPICUR, but the respondents believe there is no

harmonized strategy on interculturality that is presented from EPICUR itself. The development of intercultural competences is more implicit in all the individual universities and programmes, as they say, because of the way their alliance works.

However, another respondent stated that interculturality is very important for EPICUR and that there is a lot of work being done to integrate this. One university within EPICUR, the University of Haute-Alsace (UHA), has a centre dedicated to cross-border skills, like intercultural competences, called NovaTris. They do this by supporting the UHA staff and students, running several courses and supporting research projects. The respondent noted that all the universities do have different approaches to interculturality, but that NovaTris provides them with ideas and solutions to help these universities reach their potential. On the one hand, whenever I

*“I mean, we do a lot of interculturality, (...) but we don't do it in a very formal way, we just do it. On the other hand, UHA has a whole department only taking care of interculturality so, it's a different approach. (...) It's the universities having their own approach to interculturality. And I mean, if we're talking about numbers (...) We have 30% of foreign students here.” – #13*

asked about tangible ways in which their own university (which was not UHA) integrated interculturality, I noticed that the respondent referred to inclusion, not necessarily to strategies on intercultural communication and how to foster this. On the other hand, the respondent stated that since May, EPICUR has been working on an EDI statute, looking deeper into the issues on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Interculturality is supposed to be included into this strategy as well. Because it has just started, it is hard to tell if it will include interculturality,

*“After EPICUR was running for a year, we decided that the issues of equality, diversity, inclusion (EDI), in addition to interculturality, were so important that we have now started a new strategic initiative on EDI issues. Where we now work together to define an EDI Statute for all of the eight universities.” – #13*

instead of solely focussing on EDI issues, which are tied to but – by definition – different from intercultural communication and the related competences. Nevertheless, the strategy is supposed to be carried out in the entire alliance.

Contrarily, a respondent who is tied to NovaTris, admitted that it is still hard to convince the other universities in the alliances of their importance as a centre on cross-border skills. According to them, they still have to convince their colleagues of the importance of interculturality, even though the alliance claims to put in on the forefront. It seems for EPICUR, that it really depends on the respondent whether they see an integrated approach to interculturality or not.

## ENLIGHT

Within ENLIGHT, all the respondents were convinced that their alliance would create intercultural competences among students, because interculturality is high on the agenda within the entire alliance. This is a very clear sentiment. When asked if the alliance will be successful in creating intercultural competences among students, all respondents reacted positively. A much-heard

*“Yes, [interculturality] is actually the core of our alliance. (...) People should be able to use disciplinary knowledge to communicate with others, learn to listen across the boundaries of their own discipline to what other people can say, including other cultures, learn to cooperate. So, it is about that diversity, being able to combine knowledge with other skills, learning to tell, to collaborate, to present, also to be able to bridge language differences and differences with others. We want to focus on that.” – #2*

response was that interculturality is the core of the alliance, because of its diverse nature. In this line of reasoning, students develop these competences as a consequence of diversity and mobility, one of the core characteristics of the alliance, according to most of the respondents.

According to one respondent, the primary responsibility to define the values and norms of the alliance, is with the alliance itself. Therefore, individual universities need to align their own institutional culture with that of the alliance regarding values, like interculturality. ENLIGHT

*“We are trying (...) to look for what are our common definitions and our common vision and mission. (...) So that means very concretely that we ask teachers, who will have to teach this course or the module, that they take that vision into account.” – #4*

puts out the framework in which the teachers will operate. This respondent did note however – as did some other as well – that this does not mean that teachers and students and project staff within each university are and were not included in defining the vision for ENLIGHT.

So, in the end, the teachers decide what the courses and modules will look like. It is important for this alliance that everyone is involved, so that the effect will be stronger, as the strategy needs to be carried by all the partner universities. The words ‘bottom-up strategy’ were mentioned in several interviews.

Next to this, several respondents explained that the aim of ENLIGHT is to become a European University where national borders are virtually non-existent. One can go to every partner university, take a course there and in the end, get an ENLIGHT degree, instead of a national one with just a few courses from different universities. Therefore, in the logic posed by one respondent, the focus will inherently be on intercultural cooperation, unlike normal exchange programmes (e.g., Erasmus). Students will have to become interculturally competent to acquire a degree like this. This respondent however noted that it would remain to be seen how ENLIGHT would incorporate this into their alliance, especially because it is still just a pilot

phase and not a lot has been put in stone yet. Regardless, they foresaw that with the current global economy, ENLIGHT would have to encompass interculturality into their strategy.

*“Yeah, the way I feel it, [interculturality] doesn't feel like a priority that's necessarily out there. (...) And yes, all meetings with ENLIGHT are with different cultures, so it's true, but I hear the term very little.” – #3*

It is interesting that most student representatives, as well as some other respondents, when asked about interculturality within ENLIGHT, referred to their own experience within the alliance, more specifically the diversity within their student network or staff. When asked if there was an integrated approach to interculturality, the answers among respondents differed. Some did not see it as a strategy that was prioritized, while others saw it as a clear priority of ENLIGHT. Still, both acknowledged that the alliance was so diverse, it forced people with different backgrounds to work together.

*“We haven't been like clearly informed yet, but I think [interculturality] is a big part of the goal. (...) It's like desperately needed when people from so many different countries are supposed to come together and just fluently work.” – #7*

In this way, interculturality was deemed important by all, even though the reason for this related to the make-up of the people working with ENLIGHT, i.e., diversity. This is interesting, because it views interculturality and IC acquisition within ENLIGHT as something that the

*“I think that [interculturality] is present throughout all layers of the project, starting with the start of the Alliance, where you actually bring together high-level stakeholders from different cultures. (...) In the module itself, where you will have teachers from different backgrounds work together to create education and (...) that group of students that is always a mix of different backgrounds.” – #4*

people working with the alliance will experience, more so than – but not exclusively as – necessarily something that students within the alliance will acquire during the courses because of a thought-out strategy. Thereby, it seems as if there is a clear focus on interculturality, but there is a slight disagreement between respondents on whether it could be called an integrated strategy.

## **5.2. THE PROGRAMMATIC LEVEL: TEACHING**

This section will discuss interculturality at the programmatic level of each alliance, which is based on the third indicator: making sure that the educator is able and equipped to foster and guide intercultural communication between students within the courses, so that they develop IC. This entails two components: the role of the teacher in fostering IC within students and the ways in which the programmes of the alliances in its teaching stimulate students to have intercultural communication. Again, this section will be divided up into three parts, on each alliance one. This allows us to compare results.

## ECIU

ECIU is currently using challenge-based learning (CBL) as their main method of teaching within the ECIU programmes. An ECIU challenge is an extracurricular course in which students can participate. All students from all the partner universities can participate in those challenges, which are given by all universities. They revolve around a main idea, like climate change, for which the respective teacher of the challenge looks for a challenge provider. This provider is often a company or a social partner within the region, that issues the problem. The students are asked to provide a solution, which is the main aim of the course. The idea behind this is that students not only acquire academic knowledge – which is still important to ECIU – but also the skills to tackle societal problems. In this way, knowledge and competences are valued equally, opposed to traditional higher education, which revolves solely around the acquisition of academic knowledge. These competences can differ per challenge, because all challenge have different wicked problems to solve, which requires different skills.

*“There is still the need for you to acquire certain knowledge on a base level, which then you can apply at this kind of challenge at this kind of course. (...) There is the added element here that you're learning about teamwork and multidisciplinary.” – #12*

To acquire these skills, ECIU places a lot of importance on the educator, the so-called *teamcher*. They have the role of being a teacher in terms of content, but also a coach for the teams. The *teamcher* is there to help the teams with problems they are facing, while also providing feedback sessions on the team’s work. The pedagogy of ECIU is that the *teamcher* explains what should

*“For the alliance level, (...) there’s different kinds of assessment and a different kind of reflection. Reflecting is a big part of the assessment. (...) But I don’t know how they do it across the different, unique challenges.” – #9*

be done in these challenges, but not how. An interesting note from the respondents, was that per challenge, it differs what the assessment of the course will be. This also means that the kind

of reflection offered by the *teamcher* can differ per challenge. Therefore, the reflection can include group work, taking in intercultural communication, but this is not definitive. However, two respondents (#9 and #12) that were closely involved with the challenges, both stated that in their challenge, intercultural communication was included in the reflection.

Respondents were also asked how ECIU knows whether students will develop these soft skills, like IC. The respondents explained that ECIU is working on the implementation of micro-credentials. These are a qualification for certain learning outcomes, like skills, that are acquired in short course or module (European Commission, 2021e). For the alliances, this

*“So, we have 13 countries where we have to knock on the door, saying: “Can we have this one micro-credential recognized?” Well, that’s not doing it. (...) The only ones who can do something about it are the Member States.” – #11*

means that students can get their newly acquired skills credited from a challenge, so they can prove to future employers that they have certain competences. Several respondents noted that with micro-credentialing, it might be possible to have some ECIU programmes which foster IC within students, which is then accredited. This assumes a real commitment from a programme and its *teachers* to stimulate interculturality and foster IC, in order to rightfully credit students for these skills. However, this is not a reality currently. Every respondent explained that because of different national legislation regarding accreditation, as well as a lack of wide-spread acknowledgement among employers, micro-credentials face an obstacle in their implementation. Regardless, ECIU is pushing to get them recognized throughout the entire alliance.

### ***How is communication stimulated?***

The core of the challenge is that students with different backgrounds (regarding disciplines, universities, and nationalities) team up in these challenges, to solve wicked problems and find innovative and new solutions for these social partners. ECIU specifically also wants to include lifelong learners into this new way of teaching. Lifelong learners are people that are already part of the workforce and want to require new knowledge and skills, by re- and upskilling themselves, to become more valuable workers. The students will most likely only be master students, bachelor students have not been included so far within ECIU. Several respondents claimed that the teams are selected by the teachers of the challenges, where they try to get a diverse team as possible, with a special focus on multidisciplinary teams.

*“We take care of selecting (...) the student teams. We do that with the idea that we will have a team such as multidisciplinary as possible.” - #12*

*“This [diverse team] is also really aligning this internationalization aspect and intercultural aspects in the project as well.” - #9*

As working together in diverse teams is at the forefront of the programmes, all respondent stated

*“I think the challenge-based set-up can help with [interculturality] very nicely, because (...) this is a team effort (...). So, you have to work together interculturally. In that sense that is very natural with the challenge-based model.” - #11*

that developing IC is a natural outcome from the ECIU challenges. One respondent explained that students in their challenge learned to communicate with each other. They found the right tone of voice and the respect for each other. In this way it is different from normal exchange programmes, according to another respondent. Students cannot lean back in class and listen to the lecture, while only talking to exchange students that speak the same language as you – a problem defined by respondents from other alliances as well within traditional Erasmus+ exchange programmes. They must participate in class and communicate with all different kinds of people on an intensive level, in order to pass the course. Communication between students

is really put at the forefront of the programmes within ECIU. However, the notion that student mobility will lead to interculturality, more so than the *teamcher* specifically pressing this – as this is not predetermined and therefore up to the *teamcher* – was still present in a lot of the answers from the respondents.

Something that has been a particular challenge since the emergence of the alliances, has been the COVID-19 pandemic. This has put a stop to physical mobility and with that, communication in real life between students. Respondents acknowledged that this was a challenge for ECIU, but also saw the opportunities it brought. Many respondents pointed out that online mobility is more inclusive and open to people, as it alleviates

*“There were no mobility projects, because the first year was about structuring the project. (...) Then the challenges started really in the last semester, but we were in the middle of the pandemic. So, it was some online mobility, but we know that online mobility is not often seen as mobility, even though it’s mobility.” – #10*

the barriers of moving to another country, which is time and money consuming. Therefore, according to one respondent, it opened the opportunity for people that were usually not able to go for an exchange and in this way, stimulated more people to form IC. However, the respondents did note that there was still a lot to be learned about what online learning should look like. One respondent was however sure that it would not restrict communication with the right strategy. Another respondent was more sceptical about this, stating that it differed from actual dialogue and interaction and that this was not matched with online education. It is important to touch upon this subject, as respondents explained that most challenges will be using ‘hybrid’ or ‘blended’ teaching methods. As the challenges are only given for a period of

*“As a coach or teacher (...) I’m still quite puzzled about this hybrid method of learning. (...) Sometimes you do miss a bit of interaction. (...) There is definitely a lot of tools now to help with that, but it’s still not quite the same.” – #12*

a few weeks, respondents deemed it unrealistic that students from all the partner universities would fly out, to be physically present. Therefore, the challenges will allow students to participate digitally and physically

(hybrid), depending on their choice. The respondents were not sure how this will be carried out and what the plans for digital education were, but explained a work package (mobility) within ECIU is dedicated to this topic.

## **EPICUR**

Within the EPICUR alliance, the goal is to have one European Liberal Arts and Sciences (L.A.S.) programme across the entire alliance, where the teaching philosophy of L.A.S. will be the core of the programme. The idea is that all the partner universities set up courses that fit within a four-year, EPICUR bachelor on L.A.S., for which students from all the EPICUR universities can apply. Next to this, EPICUR is also setting up mobility programmes in the field

of European language and culture, to stimulate multilingualism within their students. Students can follow courses for Modern Greek, Slavonic, and Nordic/Scandinavian languages.

Several respondents explained that they are still setting up a strategy for what the L.A.S. programme within their own faculty should look like. One stated that they are now at the start of this process and have not discussed directly how intercultural competences should be incorporated or how teaching should look like within the programme. When asked how students could get the most out of EPICUR in general in terms of skills acquisition then, one respondent explained that they will be working with a tutoring programme within the alliance. This tutor guides a student, by looking at where a student is standing and what new knowledge and skills they still could develop. However, this is more a career planning tool, in the words of the respondent, than a ticking off boxes for skills the individual student has yet to learn, like IC.

The EPICUR L.A.S. programme is built on a framework of the following topics, according to the respondents: sustainability, European identities and reflecting on science, ethics, and techniques. However, how this should look like, is not set in stone. This was also the reason

*“We have new lectures that are being prepared only for EPICUR (...). We have our specialists, that are incorporating interculturality from the first minute on. (...) Now our job will be with EPICUR, (...) that the professors are reminded constantly about the issue of interculturality and interdisciplinarity. And that we can give them guidance and help when they want to include it into their teaching.” – #13*

that the respondents could not clearly answer questions on overall teaching methods, the role of the teacher within the EPICUR L.A.S. programme or how communication would exactly be stimulated or fostered within this programme. One respondent explained that within the L.A.S. courses offered,

several will revolve around interculturality. However, this does not mean that all courses will have interculturality explicitly implemented in them. As respondent #13 notes, teachers can get guidance, *when* they want to include interculturality into their teaching. It was hard to get a clear picture how that would look like and so, how EPICUR courses would be different.

One respondent explained that the framework is not tight, but should be viewed as a tool to get all the universities behind the general idea of the framework of topics. Every university has a different L.A.S. programme. Some have had one for years already,

*“We are in different stages right now. I think we are in this development stage. We also know from partners that they started. But (...), we hardly know what the colleagues in Thessaloniki are doing right now, or in France. (...) I don't know what will happen in Poland.” – #15*

made according to a top-down structure. Other universities just begun and build it with a more bottom-up approach. Therefore, the boundaries in which each university can build its part of the EPICUR L.A.S programme are different, just like the outcomes, according to a few respondents. This also makes it hard to understand what the other universities are doing, as

everyone currently operates at a different stage, said one respondent. It is clear from the picture that respondent #15 paints, that EPICUR is decentralized and that the EPICUR L.A.S. programme is very dependent on the input of the individual universities. There is not a tight-knit plan on what the programme should look like, more an overall idea on which topics should be taught as part of a European L.A.S. degree within different universities.

EPICUR is also trying to create a virtual campus, where seamless mobility can take place, as students can compose their own bachelor from everything all the partners have to offer. Here,

*“So, the aim is that a student from one university can (...) see the study tracks of other universities. Can apply to them, and the professor from the other university can then accept him or not, depending on the requirements of the lecture.” – #13*

all the campus management systems of the universities would be interconnected. Students can then apply for any course of their liking from all the EPICUR partners, which would create seamless

mobility. At least, this is the goal. Not all respondents were as positive that this would be very realistic, as several casted doubts on the feasibility of this plan. As students cannot fly out to different countries for a single course alone, courses would be online. However, one respondent mentioned that they do not replace mobility with digital formats. There still should be a push for EPICUR students within to do their exchange.

*“We have this overall idea to make a European campus a reality. (...) And maybe we never get to this overall goal to have this seamless mobility.” – #16*

The courses on the virtual campus should act as an appetizer for students, so they are more enticed to go

on an exchange programme, hopefully within EPICUR. Another respondent explained that it differs quite greatly per partner universities to which extent they want to make mobility within EPICUR digital or physical. Some, in their view, would like to see ninety percent of the mobility done digitally, while others prefer physical mobility. The respondents all explained a hybrid model would work best. Either way, it has not been concluded yet on what the ratio digital to physical class should be, given the variety of responses on this. Nevertheless, one respondent expressed their fear for digitalization in education. In their eyes, EPICUR does not understand this new context and goes about as if nothing has changed, while digital communication is nothing like meeting in real life and learning how to have a dialogue with another person.

## ENLIGHT

Currently, ENLIGHT is still in an early stadium of developing programmes and modules as part of the alliance. No courses or modules have started yet. ENLIGHT is as of now focussed

*“Our consortium is naturally marked by social engagement, and within that interculturality is inherently important. Without it perhaps always being explicitly put forward. But the fact that in our project we focus very much on incorporating social engagement with challenges from the local environment, and then getting started and then connecting them with each other, you automatically arrive at that.”– #4*

on developing multiple ENLIGHT modules: courses that students from all the universities, regardless of their disciplinary background, can follow. These modules will be based on the concept of CBL, like ECIU. The challenges will be interdisciplinary, focus on cooperation between students and will be based on

wicked problems of the regions the universities are located in. One respondent stated that the CBL method lends itself perfectly for intercultural communication, as it focusses on local, societal engagement. This is interesting, because it equates social engagement to interculturality, while connecting to local societal partners is by definition something entirely different than connecting and communicating with people from different cultures.

ENLIGHT also has a long-term vision for their educational programmes, where they develop a so-called ‘interconnected campus’, which, like EPICUR, is a plan to design one university system in which students can pick out their own degree by choosing which courses from which of the ENLIGHT alliances they might take. In the end, a student might not even obtain a degree from their national university anymore, but have an ENLIGHT bachelor. However, this is still

not agreed upon and there exists many differences among universities in how comfortable they are in giving up their autonomy and identity for some part, as explained by several respondents. Where some respondents would like to see one ENLIGHT university with a ‘Ghent branch’ and a ‘Groningen branch’ for the future, others do not share this

*“I think that's the goal indeed. That you have the feeling: I enroll in ENLIGHT and I can take courses anywhere. (...) Yes, I do think that is the ambition. But the ambitions between the various partners of the alliance also seem to differ so much. (...) Not necessarily that this is [for the] long term.”– #3*

vision. As a respondent explained, there is quite some convergence on the strategy and goals within this pilot phase, but there is quite a divergence when it comes to the long-term vision. One other respondent pointed out that it is also quite difficult with different national legislation surrounding higher education to accomplish something like this. Therefore, for now, the main focus will be on the ENLIGHT modules, the joint, challenge-based courses.

### *Skill acquisition*

The idea behind the CBL modules, like with ECIU, is that students will develop competences, alongside academic knowledge. ENLIGHT does not implement the concept of the *teamcher* like ECIU, but instead introduces the ‘T-shaped professional’ as a concept upon which their modules rely, as multiple respondents explained. This concept relies on the

*“We have work package 3, which handles global competences very actively. (...) We are expecting to launch one course already on the theme of global competences. So I do believe that there is a genuine effort to cover this [interculturality] (...). One of the central [terminologies] is the T-shaped professional for ENLIGHT. (...) In the horizontal line are the global competences that will make you improve your chances for employability in international teams.” – #6*

premise that students can develop themselves on two axes: the vertical axis – the **T** in T – represents the academic knowledge, traditionally embedded in higher education. However, according to several respondents, within higher education, there has been little to no attention given to the horizontal axis – the **T** in T – which represents the broader competences a student can develop. Within these modules, students from all different kinds of backgrounds must learn how to work together. This is an important precondition, according to several respondents, to

*“If you want to make all those students aware of cultural sensitivity, (...) you also have to introduce courses into the existing curriculum. Because whoever goes on mobility (...), those are often still the adventurers. So we have to offer more courses, offer more opportunities for students to acquire such broader competences.” – #2*

teach students about cultural awareness. One module that has been designed already – the pilot module *Global Engagement*, starting in the fall semester of 2021 – is specifically designed to teach students these skills. This will make them more attractive employees in a globalized world.

In the interviews, the respondents were asked how ENLIGHT will know if students will acquire skills like the alliance hopes for. One respondent explained that ENLIGHT wants to develop a method to measure the impact ENLIGHT modules, like *Global Engagement*. With this, ENLIGHT wants to understand

*“When it comes to general competences and how to mark those, they are greyed out from our national context. I think it would be easy to draw parallel back to a time in history when students were graded on good behaviour.” – #6*

what the module would mean for the future career of the student, so in the long-term. However, these methods have yet to be developed. Another respondent stated that ENLIGHT is going to experiment with badges and microcredentials, but that a framework for assessment has yet to be put in place. One respondent was very enthusiastic about microcredentials as a way to measure and credit skills like IC, which also constitutes as a commitment from the alliance to actually implement teaching methods that support this skill acquisition. However, they acknowledged that implementing a system for microcredentials is not that easy. As this respondent explained, even though ENLIGHT is trying to develop a common system for microcredentials, there are still (people within the) universities who do not think higher

*“There is a common system within ENLIGHT to establish microcredentials. After that, you will hopefully also be able to achieve a European thing with the other alliances at some point. (...) We should not underestimate the fact that there is still quite a large group within universities that are quite strict about this. Like: that idea is nice, but that's not what universities are for.” – #8*

education serves a purpose outside academia. Therefore, they are not interested in putting acquired skills into microcredentials. Because national legislation decides what is accredited for, successful implementation of microcredentials heavily depends on political choices. One other respondent complemented this explanation

with an example. In their national, educational culture, putting general competences as a learning outcome which will be measured and graded, is a culturally sensitive topic, which makes universities hesitant to implement a system like microcredentials.

When asked how the teachers would be positioned within these modules, multiple respondents explained that teachers are guiding the students in the challenges, as to support them in their teamwork. How teachers do that is up to them, according to a respondent, but for the *Global Engagement* module that is about to start, they have selected teachers that are experts on intercultural communication in order to coach the students the best way possible. Other respondents also acknowledged that teachers would have a lot of discretion to design a module.

*“You often see that the problem is not so much with the students, but in the educational framework (...). It is now changing, but there was little room for students to acquire broader competences, to collaborate on the project, also focus on society, instead of always staring at a book.” – #2*

One respondent explained that there are plans to design and host a ‘teaching and learning’ conference, where educators are specifically trained to focus on a wider set of competences as part of an educational programme. This fits in the strategy of making students T-shaped professionals. Right now, the educational system is not focussed on this at all, as said by the respondent, which is what this conference hopes to change.

### ***How will students communicate?***

Respondents were quite divided on in how far education within ENLIGHT would become virtual or not. Most respondents explained that it would become more fluent, where *hybrid*

*“I think it's becoming less and less about the physical mobility.” – #7*

learning would be the main mode of the ENLIGHT modules. On how that would translate into physical mobility, respondents differed in their answers. Some explained it would become less about physical exchange, where others said exchange would still be at the heart of the alliance. One respondent explained that the challenges would become mainly virtual, with the exception

*“They are focusing on exchanges, that is really the intention, that (...) it becomes even easier than within Erasmus itself.” – #3*

of one week, where students could come to the course to meet each other. This respondent also explained that they were looking into options to create solely virtual courses, together with a

core-group digitalisation. Other respondents explained that with the modules, the students at the university where the course would be given, would attend physical classes, but other students would participate virtually.

*“We are going to try to make a good mix of modules (...) to ensure that there is more accessibility, (...) to ensure that you no longer have to go abroad as a student for a semester.” – #4*

When asked how this would influence the communication between students, it was interesting to see that students themselves were more sceptical about this than teachers or ENLIGHT staff. The staff working with ENLIGHT, was fairly positive that hybrid learning would actually open up opportunities for those who previously would maybe be unable to go on an exchange. This way, a more diverse group of people would be enabled to participate, fostering the intercultural communication. However, some students actually thought that virtual education would hamper real communication between students, diminishing the effects that the challenges could potentially have on their skill acquisition. Two respondents therefore even doubted if

*“It is very difficult to incorporate intercultural competences. So yes, on paper that seems like a reasonably explained idea, but I don't know if it will really be the same in practice.” – #5*

IC could be developed among students with this format. One other respondent said that only when the focus in the challenges will explicitly be on the diversity of the participating students in the courses and their teamwork, the challenges will add something. Otherwise, especially virtually, they added, the exchange would be empty. They explained that there is a danger that students of the same nationalities will otherwise stick together in these courses and therefore, miss out on an intercultural exchange. It was unclear from the interviews if ENLIGHT already developed a clear approach on this, or if it was more something the interviewees themselves thought as necessary to include.

*“My recommendation will be: in any case, make sure that group work is really an integral part of every ENLIGHT module and that you also set conditions for people to really mix.” – #8*

virtually, they added, the exchange would be empty. They explained that there is a danger that students of the same nationalities will otherwise stick together in these courses and therefore, miss out on an intercultural exchange. It was unclear

### **5.3 THE STUDENT LEVEL: PARTICIPATION**

This last section will discuss how interculturality is fostered by looking at the way students participate in the alliances. This is based on the fourth indicator, which states that intercultural competences rest on the premise that a diverse group of students is able to have communication with each other. As the communication itself has been described in §5.2 as part of the programmatic design, this section will therefore focus more on the participation of students in these programmes and the diversity within this participation. The findings will show that this is tied to student representation as well. As the answers were relatively uniform throughout the alliances, this chapter will not be split up per alliance, but per type of finding.

### ***Student participation***

Something that stood out in the interviews, was that almost all respondents explained that one of the biggest challenges for the alliances is to get name-recognition among the general student population. Currently, it is still something that mainly lives among the people that are involved within

*“If you ask ten students: do you know ENLIGHT? Maybe nine will say: no, never heard of it. (...) Anyone who pays attention will come across it, but at the moment it is hardly alive. I think that's also because ENLIGHT is still starting.” – #3*

the programme, one way or another. Teachers and students that are not part of a board or a

*“It's kind of like the worst problem as we speak, so to having this student activation. (...) We are still kind of getting to the bottom of understanding, kind of like what drives students and how to reach them.” – #12*

challenge-based module, are not really involved yet with the alliances and what they have to offer, as most respondents shared. This, as the respondents explained, has a lot to do with the fact that the alliances are still very

new. ENLIGHT only exists since 2020, ECIU and EPICUR since 2019. Even though the latter two have existed for a longer time, this was in a different form. It takes time to build a name.

Next to this, the programmes of the alliances are often not really embedded yet in all the universities, which result in the fact that courses are extracurricular. This means that participating in a module, like in the cases of ECIU and ENLIGHT, will require time and energy from the student itself, outside the commitments to their regular studies already. The L.A.S. bachelor that EPICUR envisions does not have this problem, but will take four years, which is longer than a normal bachelor. This also means that students have to dedicate more time and money to their education. Most respondents stated their worry if the alliances would not be able to get this wide-spread student participation. There

*“We don't want to design an elite study track for people who can study a long time without working and have the time to travel and maybe are supported by their parents.” – #16*

were fears of creating an ‘elite’ programme, or at least, not something that attracted the most diverse group of students. For both ENLIGHT and EPICUR, the end station seems to be that an alliance is created where students can develop their own bachelor and master with all the courses the partner universities have to offer in the interconnected/virtual campus. In the end, it is not just about taking individual modules every now and then, but the way students participate within these universities should really change with being part of an alliance.

Contrarily, a respondent from ECIU said that their challenge-based modules are specifically meant for the students who want to go the extra mile. It is not the purpose of the alliance to get all the students involved. They specifically want to target lifelong learners and master students and are not necessarily focused on bachelor students, with the aim of teaching them the skills they deem necessary to develop themselves further. This constitutes a different goal than EPICUR and ENLIGHT, which seem both more focussed on transforming entire bachelors and masters, even though this is not going to be a short-term reality. This is the reason there is less emphasis on the broader student population within ECIU, according to this respondent. Another respondent did not necessarily agree with this, but stated that ECIU is planning on offering several challenge-based modules, so there is also no room for ten thousand students to participate within ECIU. They did say however that the participants should not be an elite group that is able to give their time to ECIU, but that all students should have a chance to participate. Likewise, other respondents from ECIU did mention that it was important to get various people into the programme, both from different cultural backgrounds, as well as students with different disciplines. They explained that this will be an important determinant in the success of the modules, as they revolve around working together to find a solution. The ideas of the two respondents do not necessarily exclude each other, but the sentiment about who participates in ECIU, was different. Where the first respondent was very focused on lifelong learners and entrepreneurial students, the other respondents did not mention this at all, but pressed the idea of the ‘normal’ student being able to participate. Ideas about student participation are therefore mixed within ECIU, so it seems.

*“We are working (...) with lifelong learners, especially with those students who know very well what they want. And those are actually the entrepreneurial students who have been on exchange three times, who already have their own company and who may already have some work experience.” – #11*

*“We have also to remember that it's only a project, so we will never have 1000 or 2000 students from every university participating directly.” – #10*

### ***Student representation***

When asked how student participation could be enhanced, several respondents noted that students are the best motivators for other students to join. More specifically, student representatives and the student networks and boards could play an important role in getting wide-spread recognition of the alliances within their universities, as well as motivate and interest students to explore the programmes of the alliances. As one respondent mentioned, sending out several emails or putting up flyers to make students aware of the existence of the alliances, is not an effective method to increase student engagement.

*“Students are the best ambassadors to motivate other students, we really should also be able to count on the student network in the promotion.” – #2*

However, seemed that student representative bodies did not have a clear idea on their respective role was within the alliance. Next to university boards, faculty boards and department boards, some alliances had their own student boards, also called student networks. These networks are

*“The role it in itself is very new. I think X also told you that it's kind of vague, like the information they have about the role. (...) We haven't been given all clear modules or systems for how to work together.” – #7*

made up of one or two students per partner university. Students of these networks did mention that they felt involved as a network, even though that had taken a while as well. Regardless, they still had a difficult time understanding their own role, also because each student network member had a

different background and different ties to their own, home university. This is why some students explained that they were working on promotional events for their alliance at their home university, but others had not. Some students felt that the alliance and the partner universities themselves were also unsure of the role the network should fulfil.

Other student representatives, like national ones who are not tied to one student network or an alliance, had a harder time understanding their role within the European Universities. This was because they could not follow which responsibilities for student representation were given to which body.

*“I also know that they [ESU] are still struggling with bringing together those people who are involved. And bringing that knowledge together between those networks (...) That is something that we really don't know how to tackle.” – #1*

Therefore, they felt dependent on others for information, but had a hard time getting a clear picture

from all the different bodies they could address these questions to. Especially the European Student Union (ESU), who has taken this role upon themselves to represent all student bodies, was according to this respondent ill-informed, due to the size of the European Universities Initiative and all the different student networks, bodies and boards that are involved. For national student representatives, this makes it difficult to get information and act upon it.

Lastly, national student representatives were doubting if there even is a role for them as representatives in these alliance in the first place. As alliances are cross-border cooperation, it

*“A critical point (...) is that European Universities should not want to become super universities. It's not that it should be a university that's only for the most brilliant or the most talented and for those who have the most money to actually do it. (...) It should remain accessible, even for students who (...) may not have the background that they know how it works, or that they can afford it themselves.” – #1*

is unclear who is responsible for student representation to begin with. National boards only represent the students in their member state or in their specific university, not in other countries. However, as they had clear opinions on student representation and participation, especially when it came to diversity,

it seemed difficult for them to not know their place, as they wanted to voice their opinion and make sure rights of students were guaranteed.

## 6. DISCUSSION

To answer the question leading this research – *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?* – four indicators regarding the development of IC among students have been determined to assess the success of the alliances with. These indicators are: (1) harmonizing higher education institutions in their strategy on interculturality; (2) integrating the development of IC into curricula; (3) the role of the educator by guiding students to reflect on their behaviour; and (4) communicating with a diverse group of students in class. In this research, the evidence displayed that the European University Alliances I researched – ECIU, EPICUR and ENLIGHT – are to some extent successful in their ability to create intercultural competences among their students, as they scored good on one or more indicators. However, there is still a lot that each of the alliances can do, as none of them are making optimal use of their potential to create IC among students.

In short, ECIU is lacking an integrated strategy on interculturality by expecting it to be a mere by-effect of mobility. EPICUR has little to no harmonization in their strategy on interculturality within all the universities. It lacks a clear vision for the role of the educator in their programmes. ENLIGHT has a clearer vision on implementing a strategy regarding interculturality, integrating IC into curricula and using the educator in an effective way. Still, like ECIU and EPICUR, their challenge lies within fostering open communication between a diverse group of people, the first indicator. This is the biggest challenge for European University Alliances. They risk creating programmes for the most talented, who have the time and financial means to take part in them. Next to this, digitalisation of educational programmes can hamper genuine communication between students and therefore undermine the efforts of the alliances to have intercultural exchanges between them. In the end, developing IC begins with communication.

This chapter looks closer at these findings for the three alliances. On indicator 2, 3 and 4, there are quite some differences between the alliances, while the alliances performed quite similar on indicator 1. Therefore, the next section (§6.1) will first discuss the findings per indicator, to showcase the differences between the alliances. After that, each alliance will be assessed in their overall ‘successfulness’ based on the previous discussion, next to the initial expectations on how well they would do. The second section (§6.2) will give recommendations to different actors within educational policymaking, as the alliances can not enhance their impact on IC-development alone. The third and last section (§6.3) will discuss the limitations of this research and make recommendations for future research.

## **6.1 HOW SUCCESSFUL ARE THE THREE ALLIANCES?**

On the basis of the four indicators for successful development of IC in higher education, ECIU, EPICUR and ENLIGHT will be assessed in their successfulness to create IC among students.

### ***Indicator 1: Harmonizing a strategy on interculturality***

One important finding that translates to all alliances, is that the concept of interculturality was often used interchangeably with diversity or inclusion. Therefore, whenever respondents gave their perspective on interculturality as a strategy, or IC-development within the programmes, it often revolved around the cultural and ethnic composition of the people working with and the students participating in the alliances. In the end, I was successful in dissecting what respondents exactly meant when they spoke of interculturality, but it did signal something important. A harmonized strategy on interculturality throughout the alliance is only successful when the concept of interculturality is clearly defined.

For ECIU, it is clear that there is no harmonized strategy on interculturality throughout the alliance, as interculturality is not a strategic objective to begin with for ECIU. It was mentioned that it is inherently part of the alliance, because of the multicultural aspect of it – which is, as mentioned before, not the same as interculturality – but it was not seen as a priority, a deliverable. On the one hand, for EPICUR, it was less clear, as the respondents seemed quite divided over the fact if it could be called a harmonised strategy. EPICUR is working on an EDI statute, which signifies the importance of the representation of different cultures, but it is something different than interculturality, a concept in communication. It seemed that each university had its own approach to interculturality and other related issues. Therefore, it is hard to call it a harmonized strategy.

With ENLIGHT, it is harder to judge, because it is still a young alliance. Therefore, a lot has yet to be strategized. Regardless, the concept of interculturality within ENLIGHT was more fleshed out and appeared to be streamlined through the entire alliance, with little differences between universities. However, student referred to intercultural communication within the alliance, instead of among students. Still, this does not mean the strategy is not harmonized per se, but it does say something on how widespread the strategic objectives of the alliance are yet among people who are not writing the strategies themselves, being such a new alliance.

All in all, harmonization of institutional cultures regarding interculturality is still inadequate to some extent. It is up to individual universities to focus on interculturality.

### ***Indicator 2: Integrating IC into the curricula***

For ECIU, IC acquisition was not seen as a strategic objective for the curricula of its programmes. There is no integrated approach in place to develop IC. Argumentation used to explain that students do develop IC, often uses mobility as the reason why. This solidifies that there is not an integrated approach in the curricula. Currently, some universities are in the process of developing a module on intercultural competences. This also shows that it is up to some universities, faculties, or teachers to incorporate interculturality into the ECIU curriculum, but it is not present in all curricula.

With EPICUR, the approach to interculturality within the curriculum of the EPICUR L.A.S. programme will be implicit in the curriculum. Again, mobility was explained as the main way to develop IC. There were divided and mixed opinion on whether interculturality was integrated into the curricula of EPICUR. All in all, it seems that an integrated approach to the development of IC in the curricula of EPICUR is not really present.

For ENLIGHT, IC will be integrated into the curricula of the alliance. The alliance has set out a common vision for its teachings, which all the educators should keep in mind when designing the content of their curriculum. The module on *Global Engagement* brings all of this together, but that is just one module. It was harder to judge how ENLIGHT integrated interculturality into the curricula of its courses, as the alliance is still developing most of its modules. Despite this, the overall tendence seemed quite positive and optimistic about ENLIGHT's ability to incorporate IC into the curricula, given its core priorities.

Overall, a real thought-out strategy with accompanying policies seemed lacking, specifically for ECIU and EPICUR. Therefore, the second indicator is not as fully deployed as could have.

### ***Indicator 3: Role of the educator***

Regarding this indicator, ECIU and ENLIGHT acted quite similar. They both plan to introduce CBL as the teaching method for their modules. These challenges are extracurricular courses which revolve around a problem from the local environment, like sustainability in the city. These challenges ask students to work together in teams and solve the challenge. ECIU has introduced the concept of the so-called *teamcher* within these challenges. ENLIGHT has not given it a special name, but envisions the teachers within the challenges like ECIU's *teamcher*. By being a coach to the students, the educator is in an excellent position to help the students reflect on their own behaviour. In fact, this is actually the purpose of the educator in the challenges, according to the respondents from both ECIU and ENLIGHT. For both ENLIGHT

and ECIU, the goal with this type of teaching method is for students to acquire skills. ENLIGHT introduces this as creating the T-shaped professional and will also be hosting a ‘teaching and learning’ conference, where educators are trained to foster skill acquisition for their students. Depending on the challenge, this reflection can be based on intercultural competences, but this is not necessarily explicitly the educator’s focus in every challenge. However, because the educator evaluates the communication between the students regardless of the challenge, not just their solution to the challenge posed, the reflection within a diverse team will inherently mean that students have to reflect on how they communicate with people from different cultures. In this way, participating in a challenge at ECIU and ENLIGHT will result in the educator, or *teamcher*, fostering IC among students.

Both ENLIGHT and ECIU see microcredentials as a way to credit the skills acquired in these modules. This could prove fruitful. If the educator promises that a challenge will make the student more interculturally competent and credits them for this, there should be a commitment to indeed help student acquire those skills. However, not all modules will specifically focus on creating IC. Next, microcredentials will going be introduced into both alliances, but they are still not widely recognized and could therefore be seen as useless outside of the alliances. The problem here lies within national legislation, so it is outside the power of the universities to change this. If there is no push from member states and the EU to change this, the system might not be interesting enough for both students and partner universities, diminishing its value.

EPICUR has a different way of teaching. This alliance is trying to set up an EPICUR bachelor dedicated to L.A.S. within all the partner universities, but this is still very much in the making. Therefore, it was quite hard to judge what teaching method would be used, what the role of the educator would be and how skills would be acquired. This also had to do with the fact that every university will have its own L.A.S. programme and students are able to compose their own bachelor from these programmes. Therefore, the courses will differ quite some and so will their outcome. This is not optimal for the creation of IC among students, as that requires specific reflection from the educator, laid down in the teaching methods used. This is not impossible within the courses of EPICUR, but it was not apparent that this is currently present in the EPICUR’s teaching methods. Therefore, EPICUR’s educators are not per se given a role that fosters IC acquisition within its courses. Next to this, there seemed to be no clear way of measuring how and if students will acquire certain skills as promised.

In short, ECIU and ENLIGHT provide a really strong way to teach students skills, which will be fruitful in helping students reflect on their behaviour. This is not the case for EPICUR.

#### ***Indicator 4: Communicating with a diverse group of students***

When looking at the last indicator, the three alliances perform similar. Ensuring that there will be a diverse group of students – diverse regarding cultures – participating in the courses of the alliances, who have open communication with each other, seems the biggest challenge for the three alliances. This is due to two things: student participation is little and not per se encouraged to be diverse, while digitalisation changes the way students can communicate.

First, student participation in general is difficult due to little name-recognition. This is mostly due to the newness of the alliances, which is something that therefore is not out of the ordinary. However, the programmes from ECIU and ENLIGHT are extracurricular for now, which also means that only students with time and energy next to their regular study track will be able to participate. EPICUR's L.A.S. bachelor is longer than usual, which would also take more money and energy. Combined with low student participation, this could pose a risk for the diversity of the students participating. Without a diverse group of students, it is hard to have intercultural communication, as there are little to no different cultures to have an exchange with. The importance of diversity was often stressed, stating that the goal of the alliances and their courses is to bring people from different backgrounds together and that they will put in effort to guarantee this. Within ECIU, there seemed mixed opinions on student participation, but diversity was nevertheless deemed important. However, it is unclear how the alliances will ensure that student participation is diverse. Student representatives are looked at to increase student participation, but they themselves had mixed views on student representation in the alliances. So, there is a risk that the student groups within the alliances are not the most diverse.

Second, when looking at communication between students, most alliances want to offer digital courses primarily. This does pose a good solution to the risk of having a non-diverse student group, as it enhances the accessibility for international programmes to students with less money. However, it probably hampers open communication between students. As some respondents noted, communicating through a screen and via email is different than having a conversation in real life. It is doubtful that students will trust each other enough to communicate openly and honestly when they have never met. Again, this is not to say that it can not happen in a digital environment, but theories on IC creation have not been researched in a digital environment. Hence, we cannot assume that digitalisation will not impact communication between students.

In the end, offering mainly digital education, combined with a lack of diversity, risks not stimulating or even helping students to have intercultural exchanges. After all, IC are communicative skills, so this can prove undermining to IC creation within the alliances.

### ***How do the alliances perform?***

Coming back to the question that leads the research – *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?* – we can conclude the following. ECIU has performed very well at indicator 3, on the role of the educator and the teaching methods that they apply, namely the challenges. However, the first a harmonized and integrated strategy on interculturality throughout and within the alliance is not present. Therefore, the first two indicators are not satisfied. As for the last indicator, it is not to say that there will be not intercultural exchange as part of the alliance, most likely there will, but it is hard to see how ECIU explicitly fosters this and does not just build something for a select few, which would not completely erase intercultural exchanges, but which would really diminish them. Therefore, indicator 4 is not satisfied. Overall, as ECIU only scores well on indicator 3, this alliance is not considered very successful in creating IC among students beyond mobility. This is in line with the expectations set out in the theoretical framework. ECIU has not mentioned interculturality or IC in their factsheet, website, or other outings. This hinted at the lack of a harmonized and integrated strategy on interculturality, which is confirmed by this research.

EPICUR however does not exactly meet the expectations that it set out for itself. There seems to be some disconnect between the portrayed wish to create IC among students and the actual strategies and actions being employed to ensure this. This is mostly due to the mixed responses from the interviewees. Where some explained that there is a clear strategy on interculturality and that this is integrated into the curricula, others did not. The role of the teacher was not really clear and like the other alliances, there is a risk of creating a bachelor's programme with a group that is not that diverse, while digitalisation could undermine communication skills. From the mixed bag of responses, it seems as if there is a clear wish to incorporate interculturality and that it is and can be present in the curricula offered by EPICUR, but a framework in which this could be enhanced so students are reaching their potential regarding IC acquisition, is lacking. Therefore, EPICUR would not be considered successful in their creation of IC among students, beyond mobility.

With ENLIGHT, the first three indicators seem to be satisfied. Most respondents were convinced of the existence of a harmonized and integrated strategy regarding interculturality throughout the alliance and within the curricula. Several respondents explained explicitly how ENLIGHT has said out a vision regarding interculturality and how teachers are supposed to integrate this into all their courses. Next, like ECIU, the challenges set-up and the role of the

teacher really encourage intercultural communication, so the third indicator is satisfied. However, like all the other alliances, introducing courses that are mostly digital and a lack of student participation can undermine all these efforts and diminish the number of intercultural exchanges. Therefore, indicator 4 is not satisfied. However, overall, ENLIGHT performed well on three of the four indicators, which would render them successful in creating IC among students beyond mobility. This is in line with the expectations that ENLIGHT set for itself in its communication, where they explained that interculturality is at the forefront of the alliance.

### ***What are the wider implications?***

From this previous section, we can conclude that the alliances are not living up to their full potential regarding interculturality. What does this mean? It seems that like Leask (2014) pointed out, the intentions and declarations by the alliances within the European Universities Initiative are different from the reality of the policies in place. This was the case for both alliances that integrated interculturality in their outings, as for those that did not. The hypothesis “*alliances who explicitly mention interculturality in their outings, are more likely to successfully incorporate the preconditions set out in the four indicators of success regarding IC development.*”, did therefore not hold. This does not have anything to do with the alliances not being genuine on their desired outcomes, but more with them making assumptions on interculturality which are not always the right ones. This shows in the way that the concepts interculturality, equality, diversity and inclusion are used interchangeably. Consequently, there is a big focus on mobility as a driver of interculturality, more so than the internationalization of the curriculum, like in the traditional Erasmus+ programmes. In conclusion, this means that a real thought-out strategy with accompanying policies are not fully deployed as they could.

Does this mean that the European Universities Initiative will fail in enhancing interculturality? That would be too simplistic and untrue. When we look at the relevance of the thesis, this research means to help the alliances within the Initiative to understand how they can become more effective and successful in achieving their goals. Something that was interesting, is how innovative the teaching methods within the alliances are, especially the challenge-based learning. It offers a great basis for the teacher to help the students reflect upon their own intercultural communication. From there, it is relatively easy to incorporate a strategy on interculturality within the entire alliance, where teachers are taught to be mindful of interculturality and encouraged to help students acquire IC. But the basis of the teachings that allow for reflection, are already there. If alliances are open to implement a well-thought-out strategy on interculturality, they can quickly maximize their potential regarding interculturality.

One other thing to be mindful about, is to guarantee and guard the diversity of the students participating in the European Universities Initiative. Digitalization is an attractive way to do this, but also has its consequences regarding communication. More thoughts need to be put into how alliances can attract students from different backgrounds in a way that still enables students to socialize and communicate to the fullest. Student representatives are one way to do this, but it remains the responsibility of the universities themselves. Student representation at the level of the European Universities is still very fresh, so alliances need to come up with a clear plan to enhance student participation, but also with their expectation for the student representatives.

All in all, this thesis provided tangible and concrete recommendations for the European Universities Initiative to become more successful at integrating and enhancing interculturality and IC among students. This is relevant for academia, as a research like this before had not been conducted, especially not at the level of the European Universities Initiative. By looking at the input of the alliances regarding interculturality, we understand better *why* students acquire different levels of IC and *how* this can be changed, instead of signalling this, but providing little concrete reasons other than the lack of a strategy. In this way, this thesis is significant in the dialogue that exists in literature about interculturality and higher education.

## **6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

As the European Universities Initiative is still running its pilot, this research provides an interesting perspective on what future steps need to be taken to get the Initiative to maximize its potential. Hence, this research presents recommendations on different policy-making levels.

**EU:** The expectations of the EU need to be better managed. A three-year pilot phase is not long enough to expect alliances to support and foster the development of intercultural competences among students. Most programmes have barely even taken off yet. Next, ‘interculturality and IC’ as concepts are quite intangible. The Commission needs to clarify what they exactly want from the alliances, by defining the concepts and making clear how they will measure the output. Then the alliances would also know what the expectations of the Commission entail, plus, the effectiveness of these alliances regarding interculturality could be measured more clearly.

**Member states:** According to the respondents, legal barriers are forming an obstacle for many alliances to pursue their vision, especially regarding microcredentials. If students are credited for developing IC, the alliances are committing themselves to IC creation and acquisition. This could prove fruitful, but only if microcredentials possess any worth outside of the alliances. As

accreditation is mainly nationally organized, it is up to member states to change the system in which microcredentials are acknowledged.

**Alliances:** For the alliances themselves, it boils down to three main recommendations:

1. Understand and write down the desired outcomes you want to have as an alliance on and create a strategy to deliver on them. This begins with understanding what the concepts interculturality and IC mean. Otherwise, alliances can easily mistake their strategies on inclusion for a strategy on interculturality, which seemed to happen within all three alliances. Next, saying that interculturality is important and designing one course regarding this, is not the same as having a well-thought-out strategy that is integrated in the entire alliance. Making an interculturality-strategy within the alliances a success, depends on the level of harmonization between the partner universities. Within the alliances, these levels seem to differ quite a bit still. The commitment is there, but the vision is not always clear, because of differences. This hampers the effectiveness of an alliance-wide strategy.
2. Understand and research how digitalization impacts skill acquisition. Communication is different when it is not done in real life between people. The quality of and output from the modules and courses depends on it. As long as it is not researched if and how digitalization impacts IC acquisition, we can not assume it works the same as in physical education. Alliances need to realize this.
3. Attract all kinds of students. This means that a strategy with concrete actions needs to be put in place to make sure that a diverse group of students participates in class, but also that they interact with each other. Student representatives need to be encouraged to help the promotion in all universities and the alliance itself needs to think about how students of different cultures will be communicating. Some respondents suggested that within the modules, teachers should urge students of different backgrounds to form teams with each other, so that students of the same nationality/background do not cluster together.

**Student representatives:** It is important for the students of the alliances' student boards, university boards and national representative boards to find and demand their place in the alliance. The alliances state to be open for student input, so it is also up to the student representatives to make use of this. Especially national student representatives should actively try to connect to student boards and representatives of other countries and understand they represent students who are not necessarily part of their university or country. Only in this way, they can have a say in the initiative and contribute to its success, especially regarding issues that are of importance to students, like accessibility and participation.

### **6.3 LIMITATIONS**

Like every research, this thesis has its limitations. First and foremost, the COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably affected the research. Otherwise, the alliances would have started under different conditions. It could have been easier, allowing for faster progress compared to now, with the alliances still being in an early stage of development. Therefore, it might have been easier to measure how students were acquiring skills within the programmes of the alliances. It is not to say that this would have happened, but there is a possibility for sure. The pandemic forced the physical closure of higher education institutions and radically changed teaching methods to digital education. It is hard to say how the alliances would have developed under normal circumstances, but therefore, it is nevertheless important to keep this in mind.

Next, this research began with the approach to evaluate how the alliances designed their programmes. Early on, I realized that only very few courses had actually taken place and that there had still a lot to be done to form the actual programmes. This made it harder to evaluate the alliances on the basis of their actual input, but forced the research to be much more dependent on what respondents thought the input would look like. This is not necessarily a problem, but the data presented here can differ from how the actual programmes of the alliances will look like in a few years, as much is still up to change. Therefore, this research should not be seen as a critique on what the alliances actually do, as this can still change, but as a way to see where and if there are still inconsistencies within their strategies regarding interculturality. Future research should therefore focus on the phase directly after the pilot ends, when clear strategies and programmes have to be in place, so that they can get a better perspective on the effectiveness of the policies in place. Where this research serves more as an exploration of the general approach of the alliances, future research could provide more tangible results.

Lastly, due to the scope of the thesis and practical reason, this research is using a small N-study. Not every alliance has been researched and within the three that have, there was no equal representation between the different types of respondents. For some alliances, students were interviewed, while in others, it was hard to get in contact with them. The same goes for the proportion of teachers, project staff and policy advisors per alliance, which are very different. The reason this research wanted to interview people that have different roles within the alliances, is because the range of questions was wide and diverse, due to the indicators used. Different respondents have different experiences, which ultimately makes for a more comprehensive and complete story. There is a chance with a small N-study like this one, that the story is still incomplete in some ways, simply because not everybody could be interviewed.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This research tries to answer the question: *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?* In order to do this, four sub-questions were selected that will answer all the aspects necessary to determine ‘success’.

1. *In how far have European Universities aligned their institutional cultures to the goals of the alliance, regarding interculturality?*

Harmonization of institutional cultures regarding interculturality is still inadequate to some extent. First of all, this became apparent by the lack of cohesion regarding the concept of interculturality. This indicates that there is no definition provided from the alliance-level, which is adapted by all partner universities equally. Second, even though the importance was stressed of interculturality, most often it was explained as something on which individual universities formulate their own goals and or strategies. In sum, it differs greatly per and within each alliance if the institutional cultures of the universities are harmonized on an interculturality-strategy or not, if there even is any. Therefore, the harmonization of European Universities on their institutional cultures regarding interculturality is insufficient.

2. *In how far do the European University Alliances incorporate an integrated approach to interculturality in their curricula?*

For both the alliances that integrated interculturality in their outings, as for those that did not, the intentions on an integrated approach to interculturality seemed to differ from reality. Again, like in the traditional Erasmus+ programme, interculturality strategies are often explained in the light of mobility: internationalization abroad, instead of internationalization of the curriculum. In conclusion, this means that an integrated strategy with accompanying policies for the curricula of the alliances, is not fully deployed.

3. *What is the role of the teacher within the teaching programmes, regarding the approach to interculturality?*

Interestingly enough, the European Universities Initiative poses a strong focus on the role of the teacher within its courses, through the concept of challenge-based learning. The alliances are actively seeking out the relation with the local context, which results in challenges as part of the teaching methods. With a focus on working together in teams and a teacher that serves

as a coach on communication and cooperation as well, this provides a good basis for students to reflect upon their behaviour and as a result, develop IC. In essence, the role of the teacher in the alliances is designed as such, that they are able to help the students in developing IC.

4. *What evidence is there for the effectiveness of the European University Alliances in fostering open communication between students from a diverse background?*

Several risks were detected that can threaten open communication between diverse students. It seems that digital education is the main way to teach within the alliances, which makes sense from a practical point of view. However, there is no evidence that it will not affect the quality of communication between students and the development of IC. Therefore, we have to be careful with creating a ‘transformative’ European Universities that mostly takes place from behind a laptop. Next to this, the alliances also run a risk that they will not attract a diverse group of students. The courses are mostly extracurricular and the alliances have yet to gain more name recognition. If only the highly-motivated, assertive students with extra time can participate, diversity will be pressured. In the end, as IC are communicative skills, students need to be able to communicate with different kinds of people. Right now, there is little evidence that this open exchange between them is guaranteed.

All in all, this brings us to the research question: *How successful are the European University Alliances in the creation of intercultural competences among students, beyond mobility?* Given that three out of the four indicators from the sub-questions are partly or not really sufficiently met, the European University Alliance will most likely generate mild success. However, one key aspect of the creation of IC – enabling the student to reflect upon their communicative skills by guidance from the educator – comes forward very strongly in this Initiative. This makes the Initiative distinguish themselves from the traditional Erasmus+ programmes, where this was also lacking. This result offers a great basis to further equip and enhance the teachers to be mindful of interculturality, as well as the way in which they can transfer this knowledge and these skills to their students. However, there needs to be a basis in the curriculum to this, in order for the Initiative and its alliances to maximize their potential. As one respondent (#2) puts it: *“Just make sure that the curriculum offers more space for the development of broader competences. That is the core to everything.”*

## 8. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aba, D. (2015). Towards an Intercultural Communication Competence Tool for Academic Mobility Purposes. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 39, 6-6.
- Acedo, C. (2012). Internationalization of teacher education. *Prospects*, 42, 1-3.
- Alfonzo de Tovar, I. C., Cáceres Lorenzo, M., & Santana Alvarado, Y. (2017). Erasmus+ Student Profile in the Development of Intercultural Competence: A Case Study. *Revista Electrónica de Lingüística Aplicada*, 16(1), 103-118.
- Altbach, P. G. (2006). Globalization and the university: Realities in an unequal world. In J. J. Forest, & P. G. Altbach, *International handbook of higher education (Vol I)* (pp. 121-140). Dordrecht: Springer Nederland.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Castro, P., Woodin, J., Lundgren, U., & Byram, M. (2016). Student mobility and internationalisation in higher education: perspectives from practitioners. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 16(3), 418-436.
- Coperías Aguilar, M. J. (2009). Intercultural communicative competence in the context of the European higher education area. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 9(4), 242-255.
- Council of Europe. (2008, May 2). *Living Together As Equals in Dignity*. Retrieved from White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue:  
[https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/WhitePaper\\_InterculturalDialogue\\_2\\_en.asp#P72\\_6045](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/WhitePaper_InterculturalDialogue_2_en.asp#P72_6045)
- De Wit, H., & Deca, L. (2020). Internationalization of Higher Education, Challenges and Opportunities for the Next Decade. In A. Curaj, L. Deca, & R. Pricopie, *European Higher Education Area: Challenges for a New Decade* (pp. 3-12). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
- De Wit, H., & Merckx, G. (2012). The History of Internationalization of Higher Education. In D. K. Deardorff, H. De Wit, J. D. Heyl, & T. Adams, *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education* (pp. 43-60). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Denscombe, M. (2010). *The Good Research Guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Durán Martínez, R., Gutiérrez, G., Beltrán Llavador, F., & Martínez Abad, F. (2016). The Impact of an Erasmus Placement in Students' Perception of their Intercultural Communicative Competence. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 45(4), 338-354.
- ECIU. (2021). *About the future of education*. Retrieved from ECIU:  
<https://www.eciu.org/about-eciu#research>
- ENLIGHT. (2021). *About ENLIGHT*. Retrieved from ENLIGHT: <https://enlight-eu.org/index.php/university-about-us/about-enlight>

- EPICUR. (2021). *Education*. Retrieved from EPICUR: <https://epicur.education/education/>
- ErasmusProgramme. (2019). *Homepage*. Retrieved from ErasmusProgramme: <https://www.erasmusprogramme.com/>
- European Commission. (2019a). *ECIU University*. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-factsheet-eciu-updated.pdf>
- European Commission. (2019b). *EPICUR. The European Partnership for Innovative Campus Unifying Regions*. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-factsheet-epicur.pdf>
- European Commission. (2020a). *Key Figures*. Retrieved February 26, 2021, from Erasmus +: [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/key-figures\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/key-figures_en)
- European Commission. (2020b, July 9). *24 new European Universities reinforce the European Education Area*. Retrieved from European Commission: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1264](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1264)
- European Commission. (2021a). *What is Erasmus+?* Retrieved from Erasmus+: [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about_en)
- European Commission. (2021b). *Key Action 2: Cooperation among organisations and institutions*. Retrieved from Erasmus+ Programme Guide: [https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2_en)
- European Commission. (2021c). *European Universities Initiative*. Retrieved from Education and Training: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en)
- European Commission. (2021d). *ENLIGHT - European university Network to promote equitable quality of Life, sustainability & Global engagement through Higher education Transformation*. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-factsheet-enlight.pdf>
- European Commission. (2021e). *A European approach to micro-credentials*. Retrieved from Education and Training: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/a-european-approach-to-micro-credentials\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/a-european-approach-to-micro-credentials_en)
- European Council. (2020, December 11). *Erasmus+ 2021 2027: Council reaches a provisional agreement with the European Parliament*. Retrieved from Council of the EU: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/11/erasmus-2021-2027-council-reaches-a-provisional-agreement-with-the-european-parliament/>
- Franklin, C. S., Cody, P. A., & Ballan, M. (2010). Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research. In B. Thyer, *The Handbook of Social Work Research Methods* (pp. 355-374). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

- Ganesh, S., & Holmes, P. (2011). Positioning Intercultural Dialogue—Theories, Pragmatics, and an Agenda. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 4(2), 81-86.
- Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 8(4), 597-607.
- Gunn, A. (2020). The European Universities Initiative: A Study of Alliance Formation in Higher Education. In A. Curaj, L. Deca, & R. Pricopie, *European Higher Education Area: Challenges for a New Decade* (pp. 13-30). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
- Gutiérrez Almarza, G., Durán Martínez, R., & Beltrán Llavador, F. (2015). Identifying students' intercultural communicative competence at the beginning of their placement: towards the enhancement of study abroad programmes. *Intercultural Education*, 26(1), 73-85.
- Holmes, P. (2014). Intercultural dialogue: challenges to theory, practice and research. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 14(1), 1-6.
- Holmes, P., Bavieri, L., & Ganassin, S. (2015). Developing intercultural understanding for study abroad: students' and teachers' perspectives on pre-departure intercultural learning. *Intercultural Education*, 26(1), 16-30.
- Jacobone, V., & Moro, G. (2015). Evaluating the impact of the Erasmus programme: skills and European identity. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40(2), 309-328.
- Kaarbo, J., & Beasley, R. K. (1999). A Practical Guide to the Comparative Case Study Method in Political Psychology. *Political Psychology*, 20(2), 369-391.
- Kim, T. (2009). Transnational academic mobility, internationalization and interculturality in higher education. *Intercultural Education*, 20(5), 395-405.
- Knight, J. (2008). *Higher Education in Turmoil. The Changing World of Internationalization*. Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense.
- Leask, B. (2014). Internationalizing the Curriculum and all Students' Learning. *International Higher Education*, 78, 5-6.
- Messelink, A., Stehouder, L., & Huberts, D. (2018). *Internationalisering in beeld*. Den Haag: Nuffic.
- Messelink, H., Van Maele, J., & Spencer-Oatey, H. (2015). Intercultural competencies: what students in study and placement mobility should be learning. *Intercultural Education*, 26(1), 62-72.
- Mills, A. J., Durepos, G., & Wiebe, E. (2010). *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Nolan, R., & Hunter, F. (2012). Institutional Strategies and International Programs: Learning From Experiences of Change. In D. K. Deardorff, H. De Wit, J. D. Heyl, & T. Adams, *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education* (pp. 131-146). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

- Onorati, M. G. (2010). Building intercultural competences in a sociological perspective. The experience of the LLP-IP Interdisciplinary Course of Intercultural Competences. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 1, 208-241.
- Onorati, M. G., & Bednarz, F. (2010). Learning to become an intercultural practitioner: the case of lifelong learning intensive programme Interdisciplinary Course of Intercultural Competences. *US-China Education Review*, 7(6), 54-62.
- Quezada, R. L. (2010). Internationalization of teacher education: creating global competent teachers and teacher educators for the twenty-first century. *Teaching Education*, 21(1), 1-5.
- Rivzi, F. (2011). Theorizing student mobility in an era of globalization. *Teachers and Teaching*, 17(6), 693-701.
- Rumbley, L. E., Altbach, P. G., & Reisberg, L. (2012). Internationalization within the Higher Education Context. In D. K. Deardorff, H. De Wit, J. D. Heyl, & T. Adams, *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education* (pp. 3-26). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Starkey, H. (2003). Intercultural competence and education for democratic citizenship: implications for language teaching methodology. In M. Byram, *Intercultural Competence* (pp. 63-83). Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2001). *Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Teichler, U. (2010). Internationalising Higher Education: Debates and Changes in Europe. In D. Mattheou, *Changing Educational Landscapes. Educational Policies, Schooling Systems and Higher Education - a comparative perspective* (pp. 263-283). Dordrecht: Springer Nederland.
- Teichler, U. (2017). Internationalisation Trends in Higher Education and the Changing Role of International Student Mobility. *Journal of International Mobility*, 5(1), 177-216.
- Tillman, M. (2012). Employer Perspectives on International Education. In D. K. Deardorff, H. De Wit, J. D. Heyl, & T. Adams, *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education* (pp. 191-206). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Yarosh, M., Lukic, D., & Santibáñez-Gruber, R. (2018). Intercultural competence for students in international joint masters. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 66, 52-72.
- Young, T., & Sercombe, P. (2010). Communication, discourses and interculturality. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 10(3), 181-188.