

# AUDIT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OULU

Authors **Kerstin Norén, Guðrún Geirsdóttir, Damon Mohebbi, Siamäk Naghian, Hilla Vuori & Mira Huusko, University of Oulu self-assessment (eds.) Johanna Bluemink & Johanna Flyktman**

Year of publication **2024**, FINEEC publications **9:2024**

Language **English**

ISBN **978-952-206-843-9**

## 4.1 An evaluation area selected by the HEI

- HEI's self-assessment

### The internationalisation of degree programme curricula and student experience

Internationalisation is strategically important for the UO. Our approach to internationalisation enhances the quality and impact of our education and R&I. The recently updated International Action Plan aims to systematically implement and promote internationalisation within the university culture, structures, and services.

In relation to the internationalisation of degree programmes and student experience, the university commits to the following ambitions:

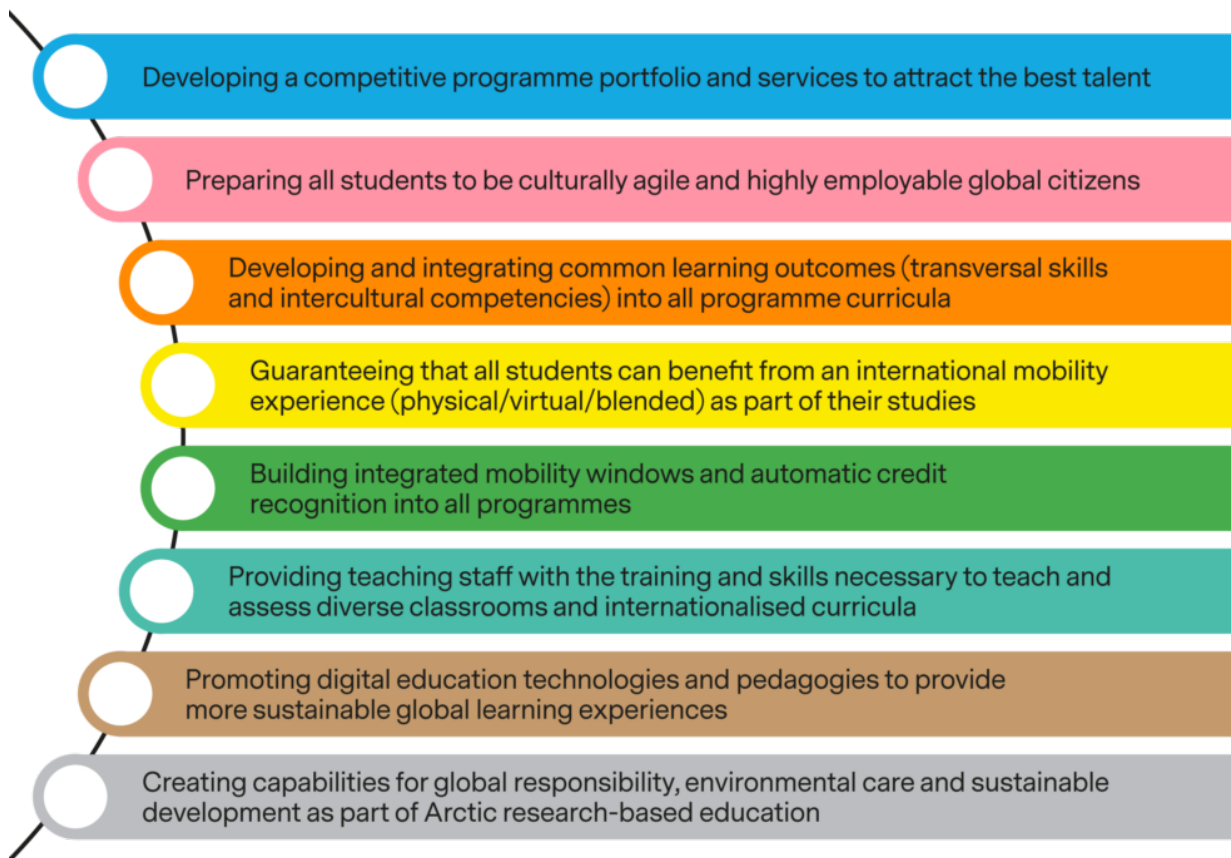


Figure 14. The UO strategic ambitions for internationalisation of degree programmes and student experience.

These align with national policy, the [University Strategy](#), our new strategic education development programme (Noste) and the [Arctic Strategy](#).

The UO has almost 14,000 students, of which approximately 10% are international. The Finnish national target, and our internal target is to triple the number of international students by 2030.

2021	Bachelor	Masters	Doctoral	Licentiate	Total
Home (Finnish) students	7047	5139	1395	9	<b>13590</b>
International students	417	432	420	9	<b>1278</b>
Exchange students					<b>447</b>

Figure 15. Total number of home and international students at the UO.

Our current portfolio includes a total of 100 programmes, of which 21 master's (2 yrs.) and three combined bachelor's and master's programmes (3 + 2 yr) are taught in English. Forty-one study options are fully taught in English and most home and international students are taught together.

In the context of curriculum planning, internationalisation of degree programmes and student experience happens via international mobility (studying, traineeship, and work), language learning, and a variety of internationalisation activities at home (I@H) and via the internationalisation of curriculum (IoC) practices.

## International mobility

The UO is part of the [European University UNIC](#), which has ambitious goals to increase mobility, inclusion and to create a common virtual campus. UNIC’s shared aim is to provide a mobility experience (physical, virtual or blended) to 50% of students and 25% of staff.

UNIC’s new virtual mobility pilots have been successful. The first-ever Blended Intensive Programme was organised with the Oulu Business School and 91 students from UNIC partners have enrolled on the UO virtual courses since the introduction of a common virtual course tray.

The demand for outbound student mobility at the UO has been satisfactory but has still not returned to pre-Covid levels. Incoming exchange is robust, and a better balance is desired.

Student exchange		
Year	Incoming	Outgoing
2018	834	381
2019	798	351
2020	402	132
2021	447	153
2022*	603	249

\*Numbers for 2022 are not official.

Figure 16. The number of incoming and outgoing exchange students per year (2018-2022).

Mobility opportunities are promoted via the study abroad fair, drop-in sessions, faculty-specific information sessions and mobility ambassadors.

The university supports three types of internships abroad: Erasmus+ traineeships, embassy internships, and internally funded internships outside Europe. Grants are directed to bachelor and master students, but as of 2023 doctoral students may also apply.

## Language and communication

Language and communication studies play an important role in the internationalisation of degree programmes and cultural competency development.

The University offers studies in 8 languages: Finnish, Swedish, English, German, French, Russian, Ukrainian, and Japanese. In some faculties, students can collect completed language and communication studies into the Languages, Culture and Communication Studies package. At the Oulu Business School, students can complete a 25-credit International Business Communication Skills minor.

An increasing number of English taught programmes include compulsory Finnish as a second language studies. The UO has invested in a Finnish language offering and offers a [study path](#) starting from A1 up to C2. In addition, students can gain language and multilingual mediation skills by participating in credit-bearing Café Lingua events or Tandem language learning. The [University's new language policy](#) supports the development of a multicultural and multilingual campus community.

## Internationalisation at home and of curriculum

The UO community represents more than 100 nationalities and creates excellent conditions for the development of multicultural skills.

Current I@H and IoC practices include visiting lectures, multicultural campus events, virtual exchanges, and joint projects with partners. However, the level of interest, capacity and participation varies hugely between faculties and programmes.

All students have an opportunity to tutor new international degree seeking and exchange students as part of a long-running I@H practice: the [Kummi student activity](#). This provides an excellent opportunity to practice intercultural communication skills and connect with students from various backgrounds.

A similar programme is offered to the local community. The [Kummi Family programme](#) connects our international degree seeking students with local families. It enriches students' experience and facilitates better integration into Finnish society.

## Student feedback on internationalisation

The national Bachelor's Graduate Survey contains one question that specifically addresses international competency development. In 2022, the UO scored slightly below the national average.

In preparation for this audit, the Students' Union collected student views on internationalisation. One challenge is two-way integration: whilst there are opportunities for interaction between home and international students, participation is low due to highly separated communities. This may be partly due to lack of information, e.g. student guilds are unable to invite incoming exchange students to events with no access to contact details (GDPR). Faculties that run both English and Finnish taught programmes should make more effort to bring students together and integrate courses more effectively. These everyday encounters would provide the best foundation for improved integration. The key message is that students would like to see stronger integration of internationalisation into current teaching practices.

We regularly collect feedback from international students (via the International Student Barometer) and enhance services to facilitate smooth integration into Finnish society and working life. International students are actively encouraged to participate in university decision making and contribute to the enhancement of internationalisation. In the 2021 ISB survey 86% felt that their study experience offered value for money, which is 11% higher than the world average, and 1 in 4 the UO students were very satisfied with their learning experience compared to 1 in 5 at European level.

In 2022, the UO started a project to develop a transparent and joined up approach to support all stages of the international student journey and to ensure a high-quality user experience for everyone involved.

## Key challenges

The key challenges in the internationalisation of degree programmes and student experience are detailed below. These focus on issues around degree programme structures, the internationalisation offering, and the need for a cultural change and systematic approach.



Figure 17. Key challenges in the internationalisation of degree programmes and student experience.

#### Strengths

A diverse & intercultural student and staff population.

A variety of internationalisation opportunities and guidance available. Some excellent practices already exist.

Inclusion of internationalisation is facilitated in the curriculum planning process.

UNIC = an excellent platform for piloting new collaborative T&L and mobility models.

#### Enhancement areas

Improved two-way integration and campus community building, and using classroom diversity as an asset in T&L.

Low number of outgoing mobile students. Systematic articulation of offering and better awareness on the benefits of internationalisation to student outcomes & employability.

Systematic integration of internationalisation into programme structures and current teaching and tutoring practices.

Capacity development and training in IoC and I@H practices.

The university wide Internationalisation Action Plan has recently been updated and linked to wider university strategic ambitions and development programmes.

Institutional role and responsibility mapping on different aspects of internationalisation.  
Systematic implementation, monitoring of progress and impact, and sharing of good practice in internationalisation.

## 4.1 Internationalisation of degree programme curricula and the student experience

### - Assessment of the audit team

#### The University of Oulu has a holistic approach to internationalisation

The University of Oulu has adopted a holistic approach to internationalisation, encompassing both outgoing and incoming mobility, as described in its Internationalisation Policy. The University of Oulu impressed the audit team with its well-integrated approach to internationalisation during the audit visit. For the increased internationalisation of degrees and student experience, a comprehensive International Action Plan has been adopted by the university. To lead its efforts in internationalisation, the university has hired an internationalisation manager. The university has however identified the systematic implementation, monitoring of progress, and impact and sharing good practice in internationalisation as an area for enhancement. The audit team recommends the university to build indicators for following up on the progress towards the goals stated in the International Action Plan.

The university's proactive approach to fostering international exposure and collaboration is seen in the ongoing incorporation of mobility windows into degree programmes. According to the audit visit, the university's policy is that all degree programmes should have room for exchange or international internships. This flexible approach acknowledges the changing nature of learning and the university's commitment to giving students a globalised educational experience. However, students pointed out during the audit visit that in some degree programmes there was no chance or mobility window for international exchange. Systematic integration of internationalisation in programme structures was also recognised in the self-assessment report as an enhancement area. The audit team recommends the university to continue working towards ensuring that all students can benefit from international mobility.

Furthermore, the audit team found at UO a variety of activities regarding internationalisation at home (I@H) and internationalisation of curriculum (IoC). Initiatives include virtual courses,

intensive language learning opportunities, and joint programmes with other institutions, enhancing internationalisation without extensive travel. One such programme is the master's degree Programme in Sustainable Mining by four universities in different countries. The project is funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ Mundus programme.

## The visibility of internationalisation opportunities should be improved

While the university's internationalisation efforts have been commendable, gaps in the level of internationalisation are found between the different programmes and faculties. The university should promote the sharing of internationalisation best practices between different faculties and programmes to promote a more unified approach. The audit team recommends the university to provide a platform for faculties to share good practices in internationalisation, to help identify and adopt successful internationalisation practices.

The audit team also recommends that the university strengthens the opportunities of Finnish staff to obtain more international experience and intercultural competence. This could happen through increased interaction with international students and international staff, or through mechanisms like staff mobility.

Discussions with students highlighted the diverse internationalisation initiatives at the University of Oulu. However, there is room for improvement in the marketing and communication of these efforts and opportunities. The audit team recommends the university to increase the visibility of international exchange programmes and scholarships, especially for undergraduate students, through targeted campaigns, emails, and robust social media engagement. The university could thus ensure more transparent, inclusive, and effective internationalisation throughout the university.

## Making use of international competences acquired abroad

During the audit visit, the audit team was presented with evidence of the transforming effect of international experiences by the UO students. Acquiring global awareness, attitude, language, and cross-cultural skills is especially important for a global outlook and career. The University of Oulu has the chance to maximise the impact of these abilities when students return from abroad. Students saw international exchange as so beneficial to learning new skills that they suggested exchanges should be compulsory for all students.

According to the audit visit, feedback is collected from exchange students who have returned to Oulu, but it was unclear how and where this feedback is used. Implementing a system to smoothly incorporate global experiences acquired by outgoing students into all facets of academic life would be a strategic improvement. This might involve developing cross-cultural understanding, bringing insights into research initiatives, and integrating global experiences into classroom instruction. The university could promote inclusivity and cross-cultural collaboration by



advising teachers to intentionally integrate and mix international students, students with international experience and domestic students in the same study groups. The university not only acknowledges the importance of outward mobility but also enhances the overall learning environment for all students by more deliberately integrating these experiences into the curricula, fostering a more internationally aware and connected academic community.

## Creating new culture with internationalisation

The University of Oulu continues to seek a substantial rise in the number of international students enrolled, with the goal of tripling the existing 10 % by 2030. The UO has significant numbers of international students in multidisciplinary programmes, and it offers English courses almost in all educational areas. The apparent success in drawing in international students and staff for a wide range of programmes highlights a deliberate and comprehensive approach to global education.

According to the audit visit, offering family-friendly support to international students and staff is a significant feature of the university's approach, demonstrating a comprehensive dedication to diversity. By prioritising a family-friendly environment, the university extends its reach outside the classroom to guarantee the welfare of its global community members.

The University of Oulu could benefit from considering ways to improve community building and labour market integration for its international staff and students to maintain its appeal and draw in top talent. Enhancing activities like mentoring programmes, cross-cultural exchanges, and networking events could build an even more welcoming and encouraging campus community and further support international students and staff to find employment and build connections in the region. For instance, integration could be strengthened through tailor-made Finnish language courses.

The concept of internationalisation includes also attracting and retaining international talent in the city and region. Establishing an atmosphere of reciprocal education and equitable research opportunities is crucial to develop self-assurance and the capacity for international participation. The audit team recommends the university to strengthen the networks of international members of the university with local businesses and firms to increase long-term employment opportunities. In addition, the audit team suggests that the university could better utilise the networks that international staff and students bring to Oulu.

The audit team considers the university ready for the next step in internationalisation: to regard international students and staff as integrated into the university community. According to the audit visit, the university is focused on how to integrate international staff and students into the existing university community. A more productive view could be that those in the university community gain and learn from the international staff and students and build a joint, hybrid culture that is neither wholly Finnish nor wholly international. International staff and students who come to the university should be welcomed as individuals who influence the university and who,

through becoming involved in the community also change the university. The expectations of Finnish students regarding internationalisation should also not be forgotten.

## The potential of the University of Oulu in the UNIC alliance

The audit team was convinced that the University of Oulu is a globally recognised and valued partner. This is especially visible by the university's aims to maximise the potential of the European University alliance UNIC. Recently, the UNIC alliance has secured follow-up funding from the European Commission for a four-year period. This funding will sustain the collaboration among its ten partner universities, including the University of Oulu. The new funding period aims to enhance cooperation between the partner universities' cities and advance educational and research collaboration.

The audit team was presented with the various opportunities that the UNIC alliance offers, such as increased mobility in higher education, a joint master's programme in urban planning, and funding for research cooperation projects. The alliance's long-term goal is to offer diverse opportunities to its members across all partner universities, emphasising increased mobility for students, researchers, and teaching staff. The University of Oulu can make use of its strategic importance in the alliance by shaping the thematic lines of the UNIC alliance, including health, sustainability, digitalisation, and entrepreneurship.