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Measuring Internationalisation

A NEW APPROACH FOR BENCHMARKING WITHIN
THE COIMBRA GROUP NETWORK OF EUROPEAN
UNIVERSITIES

This article presents a new approach for measuring internationalisation that has been used by the Coimbra network of European universities for benchmarking purposes. Existing measures of internationalisation focus on structural/demographic-type criteria, such as the proportion of international students and international staff. Yet such measures do not capture the extent to which the diverse university population are integrated into a community, nor the benefits that such integration can bring. We report on the use of an innovative new tool that was recently made available to the sector to capture such experiences and benefits.

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1. Introduction

The limitation of current internationalisation ranking measures

This article presents a new approach for measuring internationalisation that has been used by the Coimbra Group network of European universities for benchmarking purposes. We note that rankings and league tables such as the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings judge academic institutions on internationalisation using structural measures such as the number of international students registered, volume of mobility among students, international staff, citations of publications with international co-authors, and reputation surveys. Such measures do not always accurately reflect student or staff experience or highlight the opportunities available for personal development in a culturally diverse academic community. There is a notable lack of evidence that can be used to measure and evaluate performance in key areas such as academic and social integration, language skills, opportunities for intercultural education, and other skills relevant to the development of students and academics in culturally diverse universities. This article presents an innovative alternative approach to measuring internationalisation taken by the Coimbra Group network.

2. The Coimbra Group

Importance of internationalisation to the Coimbra Group network

Founded in 1985 and formally constituted by Charter in 1987, the Coimbra Group is an association of long-established European comprehensive, multidisciplinary universities of high international standard (www.coimbra-group.eu). At present, the Coimbra Group has 40 members drawn from 23 countries all over Europe. Taken together, that represents more than 1.4 million students and 225,000 academic and professional support staff. It is committed to creating special academic and cultural ties in order to promote internationalisation, academic collaboration, excellence in learning and research, and service to society. Coimbra Group universities were among the first to embrace student mobility when the Erasmus programme was first launched in 1987 and data from our members when compared with the totals published by the EU (from the last comprehensive survey in 2014) shows mobility to/from our universities represents about 16% of all Erasmus+ students mobility in Europe (European Commission, 2017). It is also the mission of the Coimbra Group to “influence European education and research policy and to develop best practice through mutual exchange of experience”. The Group recognises that internationalisation is an important feature of the missions of all of our member universities. We pride ourselves on being culturally diverse academic communities of students and staff. Two Coimbra Group high-level policy seminars held in 2017 on “Internationalisation of the Curriculum” and in 2018 on “Employability and

Lifelong Learning” demonstrate that our member universities are looking to innovate in areas where skills and competences in intercultural communication are critical.

3. Background

At the 2017 Coimbra Group high-level seminar on education policy entitled “Internationalisation of the Curriculum” (www.coimbra-group.eu/policy-seminars), participants agreed there was a need to better understand and address the many and various challenges of internationalisation at their institutions. Traditional evaluation of internationalisation at universities, in particular, is normally based on very basic structural measures such as the number of international students and staff (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). While such data provides a useful high-level measure of the scale of internationality within an institution, a more useful and meaningful analysis would need to reveal more about the effect of this diversity on teaching and research communities. Institutions may undertake formal student surveys and evaluations, but these very rarely probe deeply into questions on academic and social integration, language skills, intercultural competence, and opportunities to study or work in another country or culture. Even if an institution were to undertake an in-depth analysis of internationalisation, it is difficult to evaluate and assess any metrics derived from an isolated one-off internal survey. An alternative approach is for an institution to benchmark any survey against a number of similar universities, so that their survey responses can be compared with those of an identified peer group, enabling them to check unexpected responses (both better and worse) against those of others. Perhaps the best-known survey tools to benchmark the student experience are the Student Barometer (SB) (www.i-graduate.org/services/student-barometer) and the International Student Barometer (ISB, www.i-graduate.org/services/international-student-barometer) run by *i-graduate* since 2005. The SB and ISB are useful tools because of the large number of institutions that participate in any given year and the broad scope of the surveys, which cover every aspect of the student experience: pre-enrolment, arrival, student life, and learning. However, for an in-depth analysis of internationalisation, these surveys are limited in value because the precise composition of the benchmark group used to compare SB and ISB results is not known because institutions only share data anonymously and also because these student surveys are primarily designed to probe aspects of satisfaction and do not directly compare student expectations against their actual experience. Another important, but often neglected, area to survey on internationalisation is the perspectives of staff as educators and administrators.

The limitations of existing approaches

Forming an internationalisation benchmarking group

An ideal approach is to have the freedom to select your own benchmark group of institutions and to run a suitably-focused survey across as comprehensive and representative a sample of institutions as possible. Such an opportunity was presented to the Coimbra Group in 2017 at our high-level education policy seminar when Helen Spencer-Oatey spoke about the Global Education Profiler (GEP), an integrated pair of surveys designed to gather robust data on the motivations and experiences of students and university staff (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019; see also www.i-graduate.org/services/global-education-profiler-). The GEP is licensed to *i-graduate* as a commercial product and so the challenge for the Coimbra Group was to put together a group of our members to form a benchmark group and to negotiate an arrangement with *i-graduate* that would provide flexibility to add additional questions to the existing surveys and a discount for being a member of the Coimbra Group of Universities.

4. Aim and Objectives

Key goals for the new measure of internationalisation

The aim of the benchmarking study is to provide a rich and detailed comparative dataset on internationalisation that will form a baseline for long-established research intensive universities across Europe. The surveys are intended to provide each individual institution with detailed questionnaire results for students and staff broken down by internal structures defined by each university (e.g. department, faculty, college or other structure). Data for each institution is then aggregated into an anonymised benchmark data set and shared so that each institution would see their own results, but the institutional identifiers would be removed from all comparative data. The study would enable each institution to:

Evaluate: the current internationalisation strategy and reveal strengths and weaknesses

Track: staff engagement, global curriculum and international collaborations

Enable: a programme to create global students, improving their employability prospects

Prioritise: effort, optimise resource allocation, and enhance satisfaction

Compare: against peers and best practice benchmarks

The ambition for the benchmarking project is to highlight potential areas for institutional policy development that include:

- the social and academic integration of international and home students across each institution;
- global curriculum development;
- international exchanges and collaborations; and
- programmes to create global opportunities for students, thereby improving their employability prospects.

The results are intended to help universities to identify areas to prioritise effort, optimise resource allocation, and ultimately enhance student and staff satisfaction. If the surveys were repeated at a future date, institutions would be able to track interventions and measure their impact for students and staff, and help reveal strengths, weaknesses and the effectiveness of internationalisation strategies.

Furthermore, by providing benchmarked data within a network of trusted partners we open up opportunities to discuss the many excellent initiatives being led by our member institutions, thereby disseminating good practice, and encouraging sharing and cooperation within existing structures internal to the Coimbra Group (e.g. the education innovation working group) and new and evolving structures such as the European Universities initiative (European Commission, 2019). Benchmarking is timely for our members given (1) the launch in 2019 of the pilot phase of the European Universities initiative that aims to strengthen international partnerships and competitiveness across Europe, and (2) the recent political progress announced at the European Higher Education Area conference held in Paris in May 2018 (see the Paris Communiqué and Statement on the Fifth Bologna Policy Forum, 2018).

Benefits for universities

Timeliness of the initiative

5. Survey Instrument Design: The Global Education Profiler

The Benchmarking project used the Global Education Profiler (GEP), a survey tool developed by Helen Spencer-Oatey and Daniel Dauber at the University of Warwick which is now licensed to *i-graduate*, a leading education survey company well known to many Coimbra Group members for the Student Barometer and International Student Barometer surveys. By working as a network in partnership with *i-graduate*, and with Helen Spencer-Oatey and Daniel Dauber, the Coimbra Group had:

Advantages of partnering with *i-graduate*

- a very professional delivery mechanism that conducts surveys via email and on mobile devices;
- secure surveys that maintain anonymity;
- translation of the survey questions to fit local language requirements; and
- a professional reporting service for the quantitative and qualitative data.

The benefits to Coimbra Group members go beyond simple analysis of each institution's data. The anonymous benchmarking allows the Coimbra Group network to take a lead in assessing competencies and policy development to support internationalisation.

Stages of Internationalisation

Internationalisation trajectory

The GEP is based on the premise that a key goal of universities is to foster 'global fitness' (technically, intercultural competence) among its students and staff, and that this entails moving along the institutional level trajectory shown in Figure 1. In other words, it requires a strategic move from a focus on 'compositional' or demographic-type elements, such as the diversity of the staff and student population, to a focus on mixing and interaction among people from different backgrounds ('community internationalisation'), which in turn will foster intercultural competence among staff and students.



Figure 1 An internationalisation trajectory for fostering 'global fitness' (© GlobalPeople, 2019, used with permission)

Importance of transformative learning opportunities and engagement

The link between interaction and personal growth is based on the notion of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990b) that has been applied to intercultural learning by a number of theorists (e.g. Mendenhall et al.,

2017; Spencer-Oatey, 2018; Taylor, 1994). This learning process comprises three key elements: a trigger experience, careful reflection on that experience, and the acquisition of new perspectives. A trigger experience is any kind of encounter that is surprising or unexpected in some way and that acts as a 'stretch opportunity' for learning. At university, this can occur when people mix and interact (in the classroom and beyond) with those who hold different attitudes, beliefs and/or ideologies, or have different patterns of behaviour and ways of communicating. However, while an internationalising university can offer good stretch opportunities, not everyone necessarily moves out of their comfort zone to engage with those opportunities. It is always much easier to converse with those who are similar to ourselves, because of the principle of homophily (McPherson et al., 2001). In the GEP, respondents are therefore asked to rate items for importance, as well as their actual experience.

Engagement with trigger experiences is really important but is insufficient on its own. As Mezirow (1990a) argues, the engagement needs to be critically reflective, in that all participants need to think about what happened, challenge their assumptions, and try to understand the other person's point of view or way of doing things. Without this, the stretch opportunity may simply result in negative evaluations of others, with the opportunity for learning dissipating. Yet it can be difficult to achieve this reflection on one's own; most people benefit from guidance and support in thinking through unexpected incidents. This support can also help them link their experiences with the global competencies they are developing and gain a clearer understanding of what those competencies entail.

The need for mindful reflection and support

These various elements have been incorporated into the University of Warwick's GlobalPeople (2019) conceptualisation of global fitness and how it can be fostered. It is summarised in Figure 2.



Figure 2 The GlobalPeople developmental model of global fitness
(© GlobalPeople, 2019, used with permission)

Design of the GEP

Types of insights from the GEP

The aim of the GEP is to probe the following:

- How far universities are providing the conditions needed for fostering global fitness.
- What importance students and staff attribute to the various facets of global fitness and its development.
- How far students and staff are engaging with the stretch opportunities that are available to them.

Design of the student GEP

There are two versions of the GEP: the student version and the staff version. In the student version of the GEP, these issues are probed through five constructs (social integration, academic integration, global opportunities & support, communication skills, foreign language skills), with ten items per construct, and with each item being rated twice on a 6-point scale: once for 'importance to me' and once for 'my actual experience'. The links between the constructs and the GlobalPeople developmental model of global fitness are shown in Table 1.

GEP Student Constructs		
Stretch Opportunities + Guided Support	Pro-active venturing + mindful reflection → Intercultural skilfulness	
• Global Opportunities & Support	• Social Integration • Academic Integration	• Global Communication skills • Foreign Language skills

Table 1 *Constructs in the GEP (student version) and their links with facets of global fitness (© GlobalPeople, 2019, used with permission)*

Design of the staff GEP

The staff version of the GEP has two broad sets of constructs. One set, like in the student version, focuses on elements that foster global fitness (integration, identification, global skills support, personal global strengths, global communication skills, foreign language skills). The other set focuses on professional performance, for academic staff and for professional services staff, plus their working context (classroom composition, global curriculum, student engagement in class, teacher engagement with students, international collaborative knowledge, international collaborative relations). Each item is rated twice on a 6-point scale: once for 'importance to me' and once either for 'my actual experience' or (for performance-related constructs) for 'my ease of handling'. The constructs, and their links with the GlobalPeople developmental model of global fitness are shown in Table 2.

GEP Staff Constructs Professional Performance focus			
Teaching Focus		External International Focus	
Stretch Opportunities	Pro-active venturing + Mindful reflection	Intercultural understanding + Intercultural relating	
• Classroom composition • Global curriculum	• Student engagement in class • Teacher engagement with students	• International collaborative knowledge • International collaborative relations	
Personal and Professional Development focus			
Well-being	Support	Global Fitness Outcomes	
• Identification • Integration	• Global skills support	• Personal global strengths • Building relations in organisation	• Global communication skills • Foreign Language skills

Table 2 *Constructs in the GEP (staff version) and their links with facets of global fitness (© GlobalPeople, 2019, used with permission)*

In addition to the construct items, participants are asked to provide a range of demographic-type data, which each university can customise if they wish for their particular circumstances. They can also add open comments.

6. Format of Results

Participation Data

Approximately 17,000 students at the thirteen participating Coimbra Group member universities completed the GEP survey. These were distributed across different levels of study, with the majority (57%) being Bachelor level students, 26% Masters level students, 11% PhD students, and 6% other (see Figure 3). They were also distributed across domestic and international students, with the majority (79%) being domestic students (see Figure 4).

Survey participants

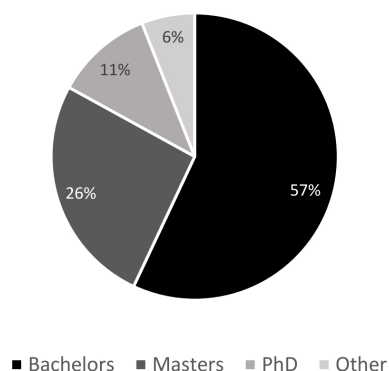


Figure 3 Participants by level of study (© i-graduate, 2019, used with permission)

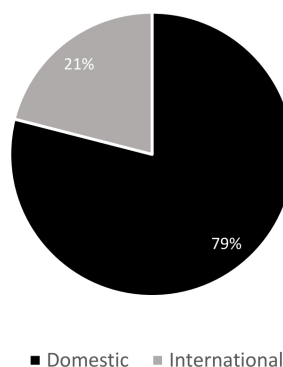


Figure 4 Distribution of domestic and international students (© i-graduate, 2019, used with permission)

Approximately 8,000 staff members at the participating Coimbra Group universities completed the GEP survey. These included both staff from academic departments (73%), central service departments (20%), university executive (2%), and other (5%). The distribution between academic/teaching staff and professional support staff is shown in Figure 5.

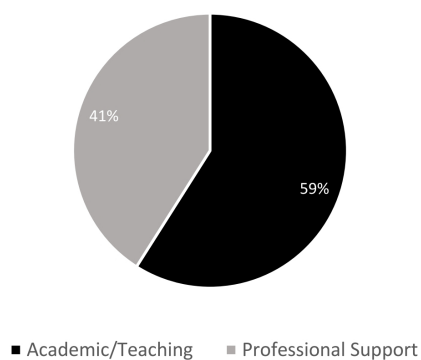


Figure 5 Proportion of academic/teaching and professional support staff (© i-graduate, 2019, used with permission)

Internationalisation Engagement Data

As mentioned above, participants rate each construct item in two ways: once for 'importance to me' and once either for 'my actual experience' or for 'my ease of handling' (for personal performance-related constructs). This yields a matrix of four quadrants, with participant results distributed across them.

For importance/experience constructs, the matrix has four quadrants as follows (see Figure 6):

Interpreting the importance/experience construct results

- **Flourishing:** Importance is high and actual experience is high
- **Nurturing:** Actual experience is high but little importance is attached to it
- **Unfulfilling:** Importance is high but actual experience is poor
- **Limiting:** Importance is low, and this in line with actual experience

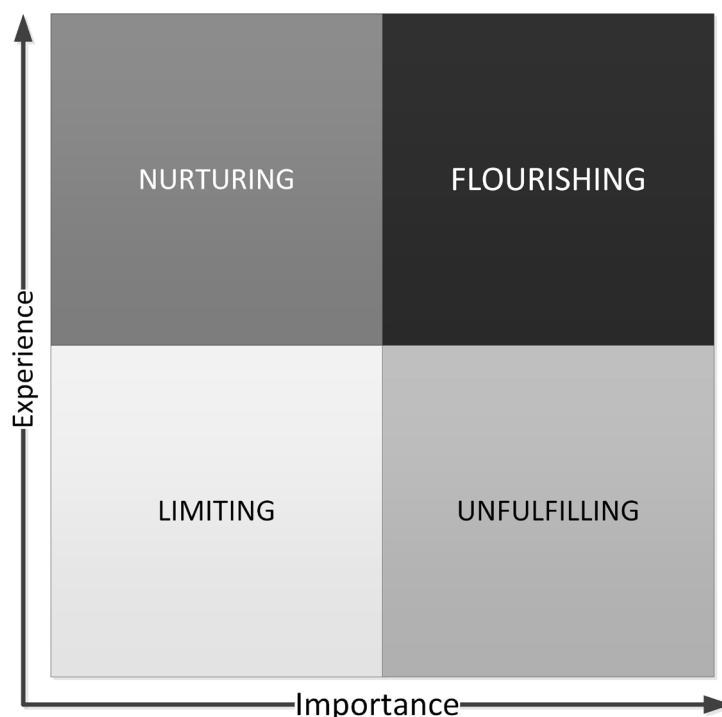


Figure 6 The matrix for constructs rated for importance and actual experience (© Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2018, used with permission)

Flourishing is the most desirable quadrant for the majority of the results to fall in, in that participants not only attribute importance to the internationalisation facet but also are experiencing it and hence taking advantage of it. Nurturing is also a positive quadrant in terms of experience, but the lack of importance such participants attribute to the internationalisation facet may indicate little reflection on their experiences and hence insufficient capitalising on their opportunities. When

participants' ratings fall within the unfulfilling quadrant, they are likely to be dissatisfied because of the gap between the importance they attribute to the issue and their actual experience of it. So, high proportions of responses within this unfulfilling quadrant is concerning in terms of student satisfaction. The limiting quadrant is the most concerning of the four in terms of reaping the benefits of internationalisation, in that participants neither attribute importance to it nor are experiencing it. These respondents may be satisfied, but they may be significantly missing out on the benefits that internationalisation can bring.

Interpreting the importance/ ease of handling construct results

For importance/ease of handling constructs, the matrix again has four quadrants (see Figure 7):

- **Flourishing:** Importance is high and staff feel comfortable in handling the issue
- **Challenging:** Importance is high but staff find the issue challenging to handle
- **Undemanding:** Comfortable in handling the issue but little importance is attached to it
- **Demotivating:** Staff find issue challenging to handle but attach little importance to it

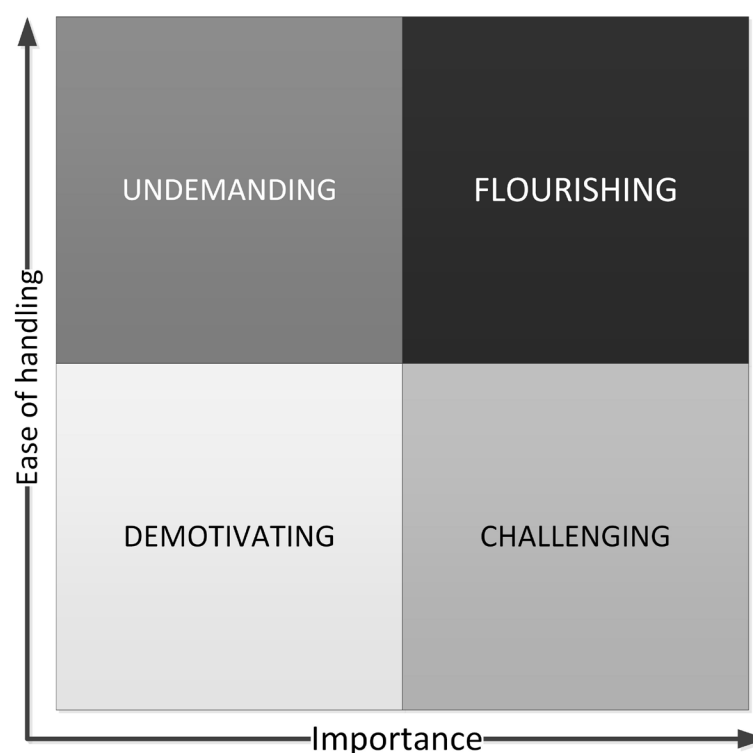


Figure 7 The matrix for constructs rated for importance and ease of handling (© GlobalPeople, 2019, used with permission)

Once again, flourishing is the most desirable quadrant for the majority of the results to fall in, in that participants not only attribute importance to the internationalisation facet but also feel comfortable handling it. Challenging is also positive insofar as participants regard it as important, yet it is concerning that they find it challenging to handle, which may result in stress. Scores that fall into the undemanding quadrant are the opposite of this. Such ratings are positive insofar as participants feel comfortable in handling the internationalisation facet, but the lack of importance they attach to it suggests that they may not appreciate what it can offer and may therefore fail to capitalise on the benefits it can offer. Participants who fall into the demotivating quadrant are the most concerning. Their ratings indicate that they find the internationalisation facet challenging to handle, but attribute little importance to it. This may be because of disillusionment and reflect a way of coping psychologically with the situation.

These matrices are used to report the GEP results in a range of ways, including the distribution of scores per construct, the distribution of construct scores by demographic variable (e.g. by level of study, by domestic/international cohorts), or the institutional benchmark scores by construct. Figure 8 illustrates the latter. (For examples of the former, see Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019.) An initial analysis of the data summarised in Figure 8 shows that students' experience is close to meeting expectation for the following constructs: 'social integration', 'communication skills' and 'academic integration'. However, it seems that 'foreign language skills' and 'global opportunities & support' constructs exhibit a clear gap between expectation and experience, favouring an 'unfulfilling' feeling.

Sample benchmark chart

Institutions can benchmark their own results against other institutions who have participated in the project by comparing their performance on all the various measures that the GEP provides. Figure 8 illustrates two ways in which benchmark-type data can be presented anonymously.

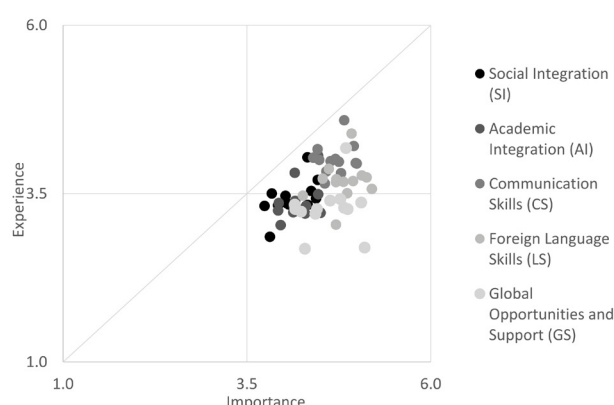


Figure 8 Scatter plot of responses from the Coimbra Group benchmark (Student GEP) (© i-graduate, 2019, used with permission)

Survey	Theme	Number of Universities	
		Flourishing quadrant	Unfulfilling/Challenging quadrants
Student GEP	Social Integration	4	9
	Academic Integration	2	11
	Communication Skills	13	0
	Foreign Language Skill	11	2
	Global Opportunities & Support	1	12

Table 3 *Benchmark data on number of Coimbra Group universities falling into key quadrants for each construct (Student GEP) (© i-graduate, 2019, used with permission)*

7. Discussion and Conclusions

The full analysis of the benchmarking data is a two stage process. We are currently at the first stage where each of our participating members are analysing and reflecting on their own quantitative and qualitative data. Members are able to probe deeply into the results and this can be done through a full analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data and perhaps by cross referencing the GEP results with feedback from other student or staff surveys or focus group studies in their institutions. The second stage will see the participating universities come together within our network of trusted partners to open up discussion of the wider policy implications that emerge from the results. Within the Coimbra Group we operate a number of working groups that act as catalysts for disseminating good practice and encouraging sharing and cooperation. In this context our Education Innovation, Mobility and Exchange and Employability working groups will have the opportunity to reflect on the benchmarking results.

The timing of the benchmarking survey coincides with the launch of the first two calls of the pilot phase of the European Universities initiative (European Commission, 2019) that aims to strengthen international partnerships and competitiveness across Europe. Benchmarking across the constructs of 'social integration', 'academic integration', 'communication skills', 'foreign language skills' and 'global opportunities & support' provides important insights into the gaps that currently exist between expectation and experience in both the student and staff bodies in our universities. The European Universities initiative encourages closer cooperation among universities at a time when there is very

little information about the relative performance on internationalisation metrics. Those institutions who will pilot the European Universities initiative and have taken part in the benchmarking will have an excellent opportunity to repeat the GEP surveys in a few years time and so have an evidence base with which to assess their pilot initiatives.

The benchmarking is also timely with the imminent launch of the new Erasmus+ programme (2021–2027), hopefully supported by a doubled or tripled budget compared to the current programme (2014–2020). In particular, the next Erasmus programme aims to expand the impact of international experience to a larger number and more diverse group of students and staff, but also to other audiences beyond the academic community. In this context, universities will experience a more diverse body of students with increased levels of inward and outward mobility. The GEP surveys already alert us to important differences between expectation and experience on academic and social integration and the provision of global skills that prepare students for future employment. These are areas that need to be properly assessed and incorporated in the design of the next Erasmus+ programme to ensure its long-term success.

The ethos of Coimbra Group universities is to produce research that addresses questions of international significance in an increasingly volatile and globalised world. Our students, both home and international, have high expectations around enhanced employability and so education must meet the highest international standards, keep pace with technological innovation and be capable of making a positive contribution to the world. This benchmarking study is a tool that will allow university leaders to better understand the social and academic issues that students face in a multicultural campus and helps them reflect on the types of skills and opportunities that are highly sought after by employers and compare their results with peer institutions. The survey will also help inform universities of the views of staff in their roles of teaching and facilitating the delivery of education and in developing the skills they themselves need to maximise the benefits of internationalisation. Areas where intercultural development opportunities are likely to have most impact include within teaching and learning, international collaborations, and workplace engagement.

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Jürgen Barkhoff is currently Vice-Provost, Chief Academic Officer and Deputy President of Trinity College, The University of Dublin. A Professor of German, he teaches German literature and German and European Cultural History from 1750 to the present. Prof Barkhoff formerly held the positions of Registrar with responsibility for International Relations (2007–2011) and Director of the Centre for European Studies (2002–2005). From 2013 to 2018 he led the university-wide, interdisciplinary research theme 'Identities in Transformation'. He was elected Vice-Chair of the Executive Board of the Coimbra Group in June 2017 and re-elected in June 2020.