

Practical guidelines: implementing digital inter- institutional agreements



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INTRODUCTION

The guidelines on implementing digital inter-institutional agreements are meant for practitioners in the field of Internationalisation who are involved in negotiating, setting up and signing Erasmus+ inter-institutional agreements. They consist of a set of concrete steps, tips and hints that are applicable in the daily context of the International Relations Office and decentralised internationalisation services.

In the first part of the guidelines we focus on the inter-institutional agreement itself. In what context is it used and how does such an agreement come into being? It also touches upon common practices related to such agreements. The second part will zoom into the EWP functionality for supporting digital inter-institutional agreements. In chapter 3 critical success factors are included while the final part of the guidelines includes a link to good practices on EWP-implementation in the EWP Competence Centre.

The guidelines are a snapshot of the situation early 2023.

ERASMUS+ INTER-INSTITUTIONAL AGREEMENT: THE BASICS

Inter-institutional agreements in the context of Erasmus+ are concluded between two (or more) higher education institutions (HEIs). They are a prerequisite for certain Erasmus+ activities (student mobility for studies including blended mobility, and staff mobility for teaching) and need to be established before the exchanges take place. All the fields and conditions that need to be included in the inter-institutional agreements were defined by the European Commission in the [official template](#) for the programme period 2021-2027.

The inter-institutional agreement consists out of two parts:

- General information about each of the institutions that can be updated at any time without the need for approval by the counterpart (also known as Factsheet information);
- Terms of the agreement that need to be approved by both HEIs (in EWP referred to as cooperation conditions).

EWP - FUNCTIONALITY FOR SUPPORTING INTER-INSTITUTIONAL AGREEMENTS

In order to have a fully digital inter-institutional agreement, it is important that data from the inter-institutional agreement and approvals can be exchanged in a digital manner between both parties involved in the agreement. Therefore, systems in use at HEIs need to speak a common language and this language is defined by EWP at a central level. In the context of EWP a [so-called “API-specification”](#) allows systems in the network to communicate & understand each other. The EWP network itself is a middle layer solution that interconnects different nodes (systems that have successfully connected to the network). It functions on the basis of a peer-to-peer communication protocol, where no information exchanged among the parties is ever stored.

The local implementation is the system that HEIs use to connect to the EWP network and entails the functionality to manage agreements. The provider of your software needs to develop specific functionalities to be able to exchange agreements via EWP. This local implementation can either be part of an in-house solution, 3rd party mobility management software or the EWP Dashboard. This is part of the EWP basics, more info can be found [here](#).



The following functionalities are needed in order to exchange inter-institutional agreements in a digital manner:

- you are able to create a new agreement and share it with your partner via EWP;
- you are able to approve your own agreement;
- you can review agreements initiated by your partner;
- you can import or connect agreements initiated by your partner to your “own” agreements;
- you are able to approve the agreement initiated by your partner;
- you are able to share approvals via EWP;
- you are able to create/receive agreements with several subject area codes inside one and the same “cooperation condition” (see table 1 and table 2 examples below).

Once both partners are using a system connected to EWP and have a local implementation providing the functionalities needed, they can exchange messages following the pre-defined protocols. In doing so, end users can see data shared by the partner in their local system and approve an agreement shared by the partner.

To summarise, from an end-user perspective EWP consists of functionalities integrated in the software in use for managing student mobility. The software allows HEIs to create agreements and share them with the partner via the network or review an agreement created by the partner.





What does EWP cater for?

Facilitate easy updates of factsheet information without the need manually importing that information in the system or re-approving inter-institutional agreements

Confirm the data points from the email negotiation process by exchanging the inter-institutional agreement in a digital manner

Replace the signatures on PDF and paper by EWP approvals

Provide the basis for student mobilities for studies and staff mobility for teaching (including blended mobilities)

What does EWP not (yet) cater for?

Replace email/personal contacts for setting up an inter-institutional agreement and a first round of discussion about the content of the agreement

Multilateral inter-institutional agreements



The advantage of digital fact sheets

As part of the official template for inter-institutional agreements there is the “general information entered into the higher education institutions’ profile and updated by the higher education institution.” This part can be updated at any time without the need for approval by the counterpart. It is a set of information about nomination & application deadlines, application procedure, guidance about inclusion & accessibility, housing, visa, insurance, ... In pre-EWP times such information was gathered in a factsheet that was shared with partners via PDF or a specific website article. Keeping such information up to date and sharing the latest version with students was somewhat cumbersome as it was oftentimes a purely manual exercise.

EWP allows HEIs to exchange such information in a digital manner, making the latest updates coming from the partner available at any time without the need to manually enter it in your local system. This allows the local implementation to make this information accessible to students in the preferred format (a must stipulated by the official template) and also allows such information to be easily available for key tools such as the Erasmus+ App.

This general information is also important to streamline the nomination process, as nomination deadlines as well as mobility options are made available in a standardised manner for all partners.

Negotiating agreements

Research ([Research: the use of data for internationalisation in higher education, 2019](#)) has shown that there is a wide variety of practices when it comes to establishing new inter-institutional agreements. It occurs on a more ad hoc basis and is usually driven by the individual academic staff. Once the first contacts are established in most cases International Relations Officers (IRO), at the central or decentral level, take over contact in order to find common ground on the details and exact cooperation conditions for such an agreement. Such “negotiations” often take place via email and at some point are translated to the template and shared with the counterpart. The majority of agreements



are approved for the duration of the Erasmus programme and when a new programme starts, many such inter-institutional agreements are renewed, sometimes with new conditions. Yet again, for defining such conditions “negotiations” often take place directly from IRO to IRO via email, phone, etc.

Partners that use mobility software to manage mobilities (in their in-house or 3rd party system), have the functionality to create the agreement in their system and share it via EWP directly from their system. HEIs using the EWP Dashboard can create the agreement directly via the EWP Dashboard and send it to the partner via EWP as well.

Sharing the inter-institutional agreement via EWP is the final step of the negotiation process that is described above where both partners can confirm all details in the agreement by first validating each other’s digital proposal. In this phase oftentimes small (or more fundamental) details need to be changed in order to come to a final agreement that is ready for approval. It is also the phase where the agreement received by the partner is imported/mapped to one of the own agreements.

Linking both copies (the own version and the version of the partner) of the agreement is a crucial step before approval can take place. From a technical perspective an inter-institutional agreement can only be approved when the technical identifiers of both agreements are being shared.

In the process described above, sometimes the partner would propose to include several fields of education into one agreement. In other cases, the partner would argue to only include one field of education per agreement. On a technical level both systems should be able to handle agreements with more than one “cooperation condition”.

Table 1: example inter-institutional agreement A (only one cooperation condition)

Sending HEI	Receiving HEI	Subject area code	Subject area name	EQF level	Mobilities per year	Total months
F XXX01	PT YYY02	0222	History	Master	2	10





Table 2: example inter-institutional agreement B (only one cooperation condition)

Sending HEI	Receiving HEI	Subject area code	Subject area name	EQF level	Mobilities per year	Total months
PT YYY02	F XXX01	0222	History	Master	2	10

From a business viewpoint it doesn't make sense to consider the agreements above as separate agreements as at the very least you would want to include mobility in both directions so the examples of inter-institutional agreement A and B should never exist. For this agreement one should use the logic of agreement C.

Table 3: Example inter-institutional agreement C (multiple cooperation conditions)

Sending HEI	Receiving HEI	Subject area code	Subject area name	EQF level	Mobilities per year	Total months
X XXX01	Y YYY02	0222	History	Master	2	10
Y YYY02	X XXX01	0222	History	Master	2	10

Both partners need to agree on the exact content in terms of cooperation conditions before being able to approve.

Approving agreements

EWP has developed the functionality to digitally approve the inter-institutional agreement. In this process both systems need to share the technical identifier of their local copy of the inter-institutional agreement with the other partner. Depending on your local implementation (that is the system you use for managing inter-institutional agreements) this process might be done automatically behind the scenes or you will need do it manually by checking certain fields and perform some action to link both inter-institutional agreements. It is important that both partners approve the other partner's version of the agreement. Once this is done the agreement is valid for mobility.



Approving vs signing

For the time being and until eSignature becomes a function more widely available across programme countries, approval by both parties in the EWP network is considered as the equivalent of a digital signature confirming institutional commitment, provided the institutional legal representative has given an internal mandate. If necessary, due to local rules or regulations, a legal representative can sign inter-institutional agreements on top of the EWP approval outside the network. In such exceptional cases, HEIs are encouraged to sign digitally and in full compliance with eIDAS legislation.

Depending on the local implementation an EWP approval might be triggered by pushing a button named “approve” or “sign” in the system. Therefore it is important to understand the exact functionality in your local implementation and how it is connected to EWP approvals, as the bilateral approval is a must to consider an inter-institutional agreement as valid for mobility.

The local copy and the partner’s copy

As explained above, from a technical perspective each inter-institutional agreement needs to have a local identifier and the identifier from the partner before it can be approved. Depending on the system you are using you might have a separate inbox or screen to consult the local copy and the partner copy. In such case it is up to the system or the user to connect both copies.

In other systems there is no differentiation between the local copy and the partner’s copy. In the EWP Dashboard the partner copy is imported automatically and during this import it is assigned to a local identifier. This local identifier is shared with the partner after the EWP Dashboard user reviews this specific IIA.

Modifying approved agreements

Once the agreement is in place, it is common practice that both parties agree on temporary changes of the cooperation conditions, e.g. allow more or fewer students for a given academic year, include another level of study than stipulated in the agreement... As the overall cooperation framework is in place, the current practice where both parties confirm such temporary modifications as they see fit (often via email) is considered sufficient and this will also be the case in EWP.

At the time of writing these guidelines (early 2023), the technical community was still discussing how to best support such a scenario. Once decided how to go about modifying approved agreements via EWP, this should be implemented in the local implementation as well making such functionality available for users.

Terminating approved agreements

As per European Commission template it is possible to terminate an approved agreement, both on a bilateral and on a unilateral level.

The functionality to terminate an approved agreement can be used to structurally modify and agreement for the rest of its duration. In doing so, both partners agree to terminate the existing agreement from a given academic year onwards. Afterwards they can create and approve a new agreement with alternative cooperation conditions.

At the time of writing these guidelines (early 2023), the technical community was still discussing how to best support such a scenario. Once decided how to go about terminating agreements via EWP, this should be implemented in the local implementation as well making such functionality available for users.



CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

- All higher education institutions implementing student mobility for studies and/or staff mobility for teaching are connected to EWP;
- All nodes in the network can exchange inter-institutional agreements data in a seamless manner. Therefore, they need to follow the technical specifications and take into account the [mandatory business requirements](#) (when not all nodes in the EWP network can exchange inter-institutional agreement data in a seamless manner, it should be clear which partners are using software leading to many interoperability issues so the EWP network operators can intervene while international officers can focus on what works); A common understanding amongst end-users of what exactly is supported via EWP when it comes to inter-institutional agreements;
- Staff at higher education institutions need to rethink their business processes for dealing with inter-institutional agreements in this digital reality;
- An effective [support desk](#) (now in operation) for addressing interoperability issues (issues in data exchanges);
- Institutions using in-house solutions as well as 3rd party providers need IT-resources for supporting the EWP flow of data;
- Digital change is cultural change: staff members need time to embrace this digital reality and workflows;

BEST PRACTICES

Keep an eye on the [“implementing EWP”](#) series in the EWP Competence Centre.

