EWP+ Consortium

Development, Implementation and Support of the European Student Card Initiative

Mandatory Business requirements Erasmus+ Inter-institutional agreement

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1. Purpose of this document

This document maps and describes the business requirements and business processes for Erasmus+ Inter-institutional agreements (IIAs) set up in the context of Erasmus Without Paper (EWP). It aims to clarify the requirements for the technical solutions developed under EWP and in the local implementation that should adequately support the business processes related to the approval of IIAs at Higher Education Institutions. Official Erasmus+ guidelines will be published by the European Commission.

Focus of this document is limited to intra-European bilateral Inter-institutional agreements.

2. What is an Erasmus+ IIA

Bilateral Erasmus+ Inter-institutional agreements for intra-European mobility are concluded between two higher education institutions (HEIs) that have been awarded the Erasmus Higher Education Charter (ECHE). IIAs entail institutional commitment to exchange student and staff and the conditions under which these exchanges will take place. IIAs are a prerequisite for certain Erasmus+ activities (student mobility for studies including blended mobility, and staff mobility for teaching). The content (referred to as terms of the agreement in the official template) needs to be approved by both parties before such exchanges can take place. All fields and conditions for valid IIAs are defined by the European Commission in the official template for the programme period 2021-2027.

In the official template, the IIA consists of two parts:

- General information about each of the institutions. This can be updated at any time without the need for approval by the counterpart;
- Terms of the agreement that need to be approved by both HEIs.

3. IIA negotiation process

Research (See: [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 IIAs. It is common that IIAs are set up on an ad hoc basis and often driven by individual academic staff. Once the first contacts are established, in most cases International Relations Officers (IRO), at the central or decentral level, take over in order to find common ground on the details and exact cooperation conditions for the agreement. Such "negotiations" often take place via email and at some point are translated into the template and shared with the counterpart. The majority of agreements are concluded for the full duration of each Erasmus+ programme period. This means that when a new programme starts, many IIAs are renewed and sometimes with new conditions. This will launch a new "negotiation" often taking place directly from IRO to IRO via email, phone or other.

4. Sharing & approving IIAs process: pre-EWP

In a pre-digital process, after the negotiation one of the two partners (partner A) created the agreement and shared it via Word/PDF. Partners that already used mobility software to manage mobilities, often had functionality to create the agreements in their system and generate a PDF directly from the system. Others without mobility software would use the Word template provided by the European Commission and fill in all the fields. In some cases the shared agreement was already signed by partner A when it was shared with partner B, in some cases it was not.

Partner B who received the PDF would either:

a) agree and sign it
b) agree and ask partner A to sign first (if that wasn't the case yet)
c) ask partner A to make changes
d) share an updated version of the agreement with partner A.

In the process described above, sometimes the partner would ask to include all fields of education, into one agreement, in other cases the partner would argue to include only one field of education per agreement. There were also institutions who preferred to have separate agreements per study level (BA and MA).

Once the agreement got signed, both partners used their own processes to add it to their records. Those HEI using software to manage mobilities created the agreement in their system. They might have followed the PDF agreement but could also decide to merge several PDFs into one digital agreement (or the other way around). Partners without a mobility software system would use a database, e.g. in Excel or Access whole others printed and stored agreements in a cabinet with binders.

For the steps described above, there was no clear sequence of steps or common practice.

5. IIA objectives EWP

The overall objective of supporting digital bilateral IIAs via EWP is to replace the signed PDF or paper documents with a digital process of approval. In order to do so, relevant data needs to be exchanged between the partners in a structured way and a machine-readable format and approved in a digital manner by both partners.

This overall objective can be broken down into several objectives:

- Replace a paper-based workflow with a digital workflow;
- Make it easier for partners to keep information up to date and make it available in a digital format (e.g. to feed student-facing systems);
- Enable partners to share updates in a digital manner on general "factsheet" information connected to the agreement;
- Have concluded negotiations (via email/phone) about a new agreement finalised by sharing the content of the agreement directly from the system;
- Facilitate digital approval of agreements by both partners, after which agreements can be considered valid for mobilities;

- Increase transparency about the actual content of the Erasmus+ Inter-institutional agreement and how it is defined in the system of each partner.

The complete negotiation process of IIAs is not in scope of the functionality developed under EWP. Exchanges via email/phone/video-call should underpin negotiations and towards the end of this process, the IIA can be transferred via EWP in order to conclude the negotiations. The newly established Business Process Owner Forum will assess recent suggestions to add a messaging tool to supporting the negotiation process in the system and help determine the feasibility of adding this in the future.

EWP does not aim to over-standardise the process to respect organisational diversity and practices as much as possible while fully complying with the requirements of the European Commission.

6. Sharing & approving IIAs process: with EWP

At the end of the negotiation process one of the partners (partner A) creates the agreement in its system and shares it with Partner B via EWP.

Partner B receives the IIA data and decides to either:

a) Agree and approve the IIA;
b) Ask partner A via email, phone or video call to make changes and share a new version via EWP;
c) Suggest changes by modifying the agreement and sharing it via EWP.

An IIA is concluded (= valid for mobility) once it is approved by both partners via the approval API. From the EWP perspective only after the approval by both parties the agreement can be considered to be final and valid for mobilities.

For the time being and until eSignature becomes a function available in EWP, 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.

7. Stakeholders

- Business process owners working on IIA administration at institutions holding an ECHE;
- IT-managers working at IROs & third party mobility software providers;
- IT-teams developing solutions for mobility administration.

8. EWP user stories

Creating IIA at partner A

Upon completion of a negotiation process between both partners via email or phone, partner A user logs in to the client system IIA module and creates an IIA. The agreement includes fields such as # of students/staff for training/staff for teaching, total # of months/weeks, ISCED field of education and if needed also a clarification about the ISCED field of education, EQF-levels, indication of language requirements, an indication of mobility type (student mobility for studies/student mobility for traineeships/staff mobility for teaching), contacts. Partner A user can also add other information relevant for the terms of the agreement.

Create/update statistic factsheet information

Users from both partners create/update their static 'factsheet-like' information before sharing the terms of agreements. It includes information such as: institutional info, calendar info about nomination and application deadlines and procedures, additional requirements, info on inclusion and accessibility, housing, visa, insurance and optional additional information.

When needed, a partner can update this information at any time. This info is a standard for all partners so whenever it's updated, partners are notified and the update is made available for all partners the institution has an agreement with.

Before sharing the agreement via EWP, partner A user can already sign the agreement in its local system (in most institutions the legal representative has the mandate to sign an agreement. The legal representative can perform such action directly in the system or there is a delegation of powers towards the administrative support at the level of the IRO). The legal representative or representative with delegation of powers logs in to the system where IIAs are managed and can push a button/perform an action to sign the agreement (the system keeps track of who performed the action (upon secure login) at what time).

Partner A shares the IIA with partner B

User from partner A logs in to the IIA module and sends the agreement via EWP towards partner B for the partner's approval.

Retrieving IIA at partner B

Partner B logs in to its client system for managing IIAs and can see the agreement in his/her "EWP inbox". Partner B can see all the fields proposed by partner A as well as the "statistic fact sheet information".

Approving IIA from partner A by partner B

Partner B user logs in to its client system and has checked the proposal from partner A. Partner B agrees with the terms of the agreement and with all fields. Partner B links the agreement to an existing agreement in its own system or imports the agreement (this is a crucial step in the technical approval process). Partner B has a button to approve the agreement (note that in the local implementation the approval can be provoked by a signing action).

Suggesting changes by partner B to partner A via email

Partner B logs into its client interface and checks the proposal from partner A and wants to make some changes. E.g. Language for partner A → partner B direction is missing. Partner B mails to partner A requesting to add EN B2 to mobility direction partner A → partner B.

Suggesting changes by partner B to partner A via system

Partner B logs into its client interface and checks the proposal from partner A and wants to make some changes. E.g. Language for partner A → partner B direction is missing. Partner B imports/links the agreement and adds the language for partner A → partner B direction. Partner B shares the updated agreement with partner A.

Modifying an approved agreement

When an agreement is approved by both partners (most often for the duration of the programming period), one of the partners can propose to change e.g the #of students or the #of months for a given academic year or for the rest of the duration of the agreement. Both partners should approve such a change in order to become valid.

Terminating an approved agreement

Partner A unilaterally decided to terminate an agreement with Partner B because there is a serious issue. Partner A informs Partner B one academic year in advance that the agreement will be terminated for the next academic year.

9. IIA interoperability - mandatory business requirements

- An IIA consists of two components. End user should be able to consult both components in its system:
  - General information that can be changed at any time without the need to resign an agreement (mobility factsheet API).
  - Terms of the agreement (terminology from the European Commission) to be approved by both institutions (Inter-institutional agreements (CNR) API + Inter-institutional agreements Approval (CNR) API).
- Each node in the network must be able to handle agreements with more than one mobility specification/cooperation condition.
- The copy of the agreement stored in each partners' systems must be presented to each other via the IIAs API as exactly one IIA having the same number of corresponding cooperation conditions.
- Regardless of whether a field is mandatory in the API, if it is present in the IIA of one HEI it is highly recommended to have it in the matched IIA of the partner HEI.
- For the time being and until eSignature becomes a function available in EWP, 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.
- It is possible to renegotiate/expand/pause the terms of the agreement approved by both institutions in the course of the cooperation. This will lead to a new approval by both partners once the changes have been decided. The European Commission requires that "The partners commit to amend the table below in case of changes in the mobility data by no later than the end of January in the preceding academic year".

- In order to terminate an agreement the European Commission states "It is up to the involved institutions to agree on the procedure for modifying or terminating the Inter-institutional agreement. However, in the event of unilateral termination, a notice of at least one academic year should be given. This means that a unilateral decision to discontinue the exchanges notified to the other party by 1 September 20XX will only take effect as of 1 September 20XX+1. The termination clauses must include the following disclaimer: "Neither the European Commission nor the National Agencies can be held responsible in case of a conflict".
- It should be possible to delete an agreement that was never approved by both parties and to notify the partner about it.
- The maximum duration of an agreement should not extend the duration of the Erasmus+ programme period it was created in.

10. IIA - user requirements in local implementation

- Users must be able to create an agreement in their own system and send it to the partner via EWP;
- Users must be able to approve their own agreement;
- Users must be able to consult/import/approve an agreement from the partner via EWPs;
- Users must be able to share approval via EWP;
- All nodes in the network must be able to handle agreements with several subject area codes inside one and the same cooperation condition.

11. IIA - user recommendations in local implementation

- It shouldn't matter whether partner A or partner B initiates an agreement;
- The local implementation should keep the approval response from the partner in its system to demonstrate at any time the agreement was approved;
- User friendly way to filter agreements (minimal set: country, institution, status, Erasmus code, ISCED field of study, academic year);
- User should be informed about errors in EWP-communication with partners;

- When HEI B receives an agreement from HEI A, HEI B can approve or modify the agreement via EWP. When modified, those changes should be easy to identify by HEI A when HEI B shares the modified copy.

12. Most common misunderstandings in current implementations

- When to send or accept an Approval CNR: Approvals must take place if previously ∗both∗ parties have exchanged their iia id.
- Further reading: https://github.com/erasmus-without-paper/ewp-specs-api-iias/blob/stable-v6/example-scenario/README.md
- An IIA is only finalised when it is approved by both partners. There are many cases where Partner A creates an IIA, sends it to Partner B, Partner B approves it and unilaterally considers it finalised.
- The meaning of "signed" IIA: the EWP Spec has no interest whether an iia has been internally officially signed or not by some institutional coordinator. Partners may include the 'signing-contact' or the 'signing-date' but this should not be taken as an approval. An IIA is approved by the approval API.
- Invalid ISCED codes: the EWP Spec requires the use of ISCED codes implied at: http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/isced-fields-of-education-and-training-2013-en.pdf
- What is expected to happen when Partner A sends IIA Approval CNR and then Partner B sends IIA GET CNR? It is a valid scenario that although partner A approved an IIA, partner B still wants to change the IIA. This use-case has no clear solution yet to handle it in the system. However, one suggestion is that Partner A should consume the IIA GET Response and should not further assume that the IIA has been approved by him. The approvals should start again. (Notice that in such a case there will be a problem with the hashes if Partner A will not send the IIA GET CNR again).

13. High level process flow chart IIA
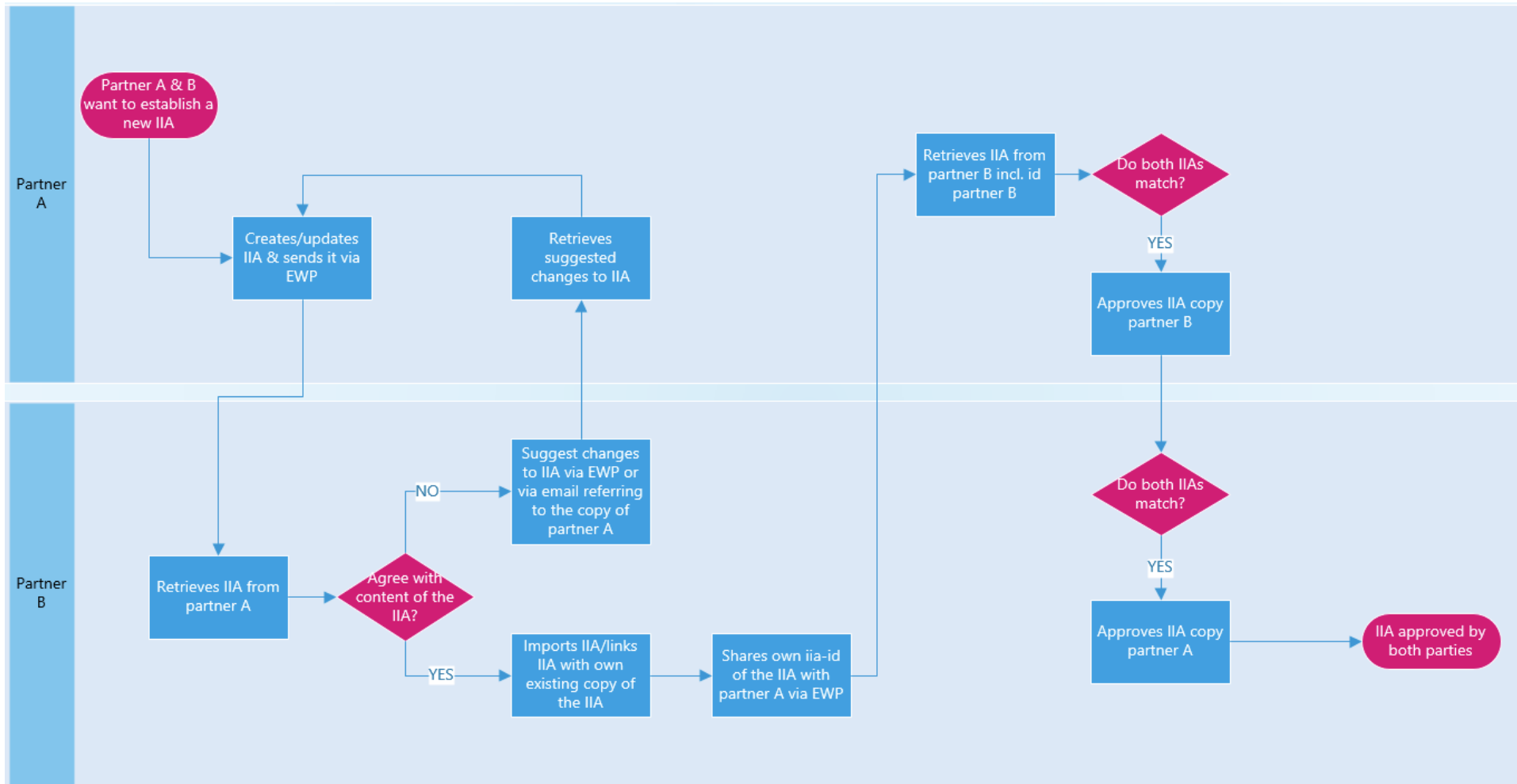
Figure 1: High level process flow chart IIA