

Review of the Eurasia Programme 2015-2021

December 2020



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Preface

This report presents the findings from our review on the ongoing Eurasia Programme for the period 2015–2021 commissioned by the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (hereafter referred to by the Norwegian acronym Diku). The review was carried out by Julia S.P. Loe from PwC Norway and Pål W. Skedsmo from the Fridtjof Nansen Institute (FNI), with the former as project manager. Helge Dønnum, Director at PwC Norway, contributed to internal quality control and Roger Mortensen at PwC Norway served as assignment partner for the review.

As several of the projects in the Eurasia Programme are not yet finished, the review is not an impact evaluation of the projects and the Eurasia Programme as such. Rather, the overall purpose of this review is to assess the progress and results to date and to assess the management of the programme in order to recommend how the Eurasia Programme can be further developed for the next programme period.

For the entire duration of the review period (March–December 2020), Covid-19 significantly affected the way the review was carried out. The proposed field visits to higher education institutions (HEIs) in Eurasia that would have added valuable insight to the review had to be cancelled. We did our best to remedy this with more elaborate surveys and the extensive use of video interviews.

We would like to thank all interviewees and survey respondents for their willingness to share their experiences and opinions with us. It has been a pleasure to learn more about the multitude of projects in various disciplines taking place between Norwegian and Eurasian HEIs.



Roger Mortensen
Oslo, December 4, 2020

Executive Summary

The review of the Eurasia Programme covers the current programme period from June 2015 to June 2021. The programme stimulates increased cooperation related to education between Eurasian and Norwegian higher education institutions (HEIs). The entire project portfolio of 62 projects that have been supported with NOK 153 million is included in the review. The projects in the programme are typically collaborations with a view to cooperate in activities such as developing new courses and study programmes and facilitate student and staff mobility.

The nine countries in which Norwegian HEIs may enter into cooperation with Eurasian HEI's are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan and Ukraine.

The overall aim of the Eurasia Programme is to 'contribute to renewal and internationalisation of higher education in the partnering countries as a means to provide a basis for political and economic reform, to stimulate sustainable development, to increase the level of education in the population and to increase respect for human rights'. The overall aim is operationalised into eight programme objectives.

The review takes into consideration that the programme period is ongoing and that at the time of this review, only some of the supported projects have been completed. The purpose of the review is threefold:

- › To assess the Eurasia Programme's achievements in light of the overall aim and the anticipated outcomes.
- › To assess the management of the programme, including the quality and efficiency of Diku's role as administrator.
- › To provide recommendations for possible adjustments to the Eurasia Programme beyond 2021.

The intention of the review is not to evaluate the implementation of individual projects but the projects' aggregated contribution to the fulfilment of expected objectives and impacts of the Eurasia Programme. The methods applied in this review include document studies, two electronic surveys and 50 semi-structured interviews targeting project coordinators, network partners, students in Norway and the partner countries and other relevant stakeholders.

Findings from the review

Achievement of programme objectives

The review finds that the Eurasia Programme has a project portfolio that contributes significantly to the programme objectives.

The programme functions as a low-threshold way to establish new collaborations, enabling them to develop and mature in a way that allows for the acceleration of internationalisation and renewal of education in the long-term, with potential for synergies with other programmes. Survey data shows that 94 % of project consortia expect to continue their collaboration in some form after the project has ended.

The Eurasia Programme is also a catalyst for increased regional collaboration between HEIs in Eurasia, for instance through the establishment of arenas where stakeholders across and within the partnering countries who otherwise would not have met get to know each other.

We find that more research-based and internationally-oriented education at the institutions in the partnering countries has been provided, through new courses, and as academic staff in Eurasia have been more trained in supervision of students and teaching methods that involve students to a higher degree. Over the ongoing project period 152 courses have been implemented, the majority are at the Master's level. This is a significant increase in courses compared to the first programme period. Projects with ambitious plans to establish joint courses or double degrees in some cases however have had to readjust their ambitions due to regulatory obstacles or a lack of institutional backing.

During the current project period, 551 students from Norwegian HEIs have been on mobility exchange to Eurasia and 931 students from Eurasian HEIs have been on mobility exchanges at Norwegian HEIs. This is a significant increase in mobility exchanges compared to the previous programme period. There has however in some cases been challenges in recruiting Norwegian students for mobility stays in Eurasia. The overall reported learning outcome and level of satisfaction among students who took part in stays abroad is high.

Overall results and effects of the Eurasia Programme

While the first programme period of the Eurasia Programme from 2010-2015 opened new opportunities for cooperation between Norway and the Eurasian partner countries, the project activities have been expanded in the current project period. We find that the Eurasia Programme contributes to the desired outcomes 'renewal' and 'internationalisation' of higher education in the partnering countries in terms of:

- › Establishment of sustainable educational partnerships internationally and regionally supporting integration in the European higher research area
- › Increased levels of research-based education, including new teaching methods
- › Renewal of curricula, courses and study programmes
- › Increased students' participation in research projects
- › Broader recruitment of international students
- › Institutional change

We find that the Eurasia Programme has increased the competence in academic research and publishing, and contributed to improved language skills which enables project participants to be part of an international network. The Eurasia Programme contributes to attracting students from Norwegian HEIs to Eurasia, and for students and staff in Eurasia to travel outside the region. This strengthens the links with the outside world.

As of today, it is hard to establish a direct causal link between the outcomes of the programme and the desired impacts of 'providing a basis for political and economic reform, stimulating sustainable development, increasing the level of education in the population and increasing respect for human rights'. However, when qualitatively assessing the data collected for the review, we find that the Eurasia Programme is likely to contribute indirectly to societal change in the Eurasian partner countries in the longer-term.

By establishing contacts with HEIs in Norway, the programme provides the partners with an understanding of how Norwegian and Western institutions work and how we think about democracy. It gives the partners a chance to identify possibilities in their home country.

Our data indicates that participation in mobility has an important and positive influence on students' careers. In the longer term, increased competence and new perspectives attained through renewal of education with a high learning outcome is likely to spread. For example, some students will probably become future decision makers in the public and private sectors in their countries.

A challenge for the Eurasia Programme is whether it can contribute to capacity building within the partnering countries, as for some students the mobility opportunities offered through the Eurasia Programme are an important step towards moving abroad permanently.

Administration of the Eurasia Programme

The review finds that the administration of the Eurasia Programme functions exceptionally well. The level of satisfaction with Diku's advisory service, proposal processes and reporting requirements is high. The current programme structure allows for flexibility as projects can be short-term or long-term. We find that Diku has the institutional and individual capacity and competence to provide important and very high-quality advice to project implementers. In our assessment, Diku clearly lives up to the reporting requirements in agreement with the Norwegian MFA. The calls for proposals and information pertaining to them are, in our assessment, timely and relevant. However, the review finds that to a large extent the goal the goal structure has overlapping objectives, which may restrict the opportunities Diku has to conduct proactive portfolio management.

Recommendations



To enable strong and lasting partnerships, we recommend that Diku continues to provide arenas such as seminars and conferences where project coordinators can develop their contextual and regional competence through the sharing of experiences and best practices.



To increase the quality of regional collaboration, we recommend that Diku ensures that all network partners are provided with sufficient opportunity to communicate directly with Diku and to increase the knowledge of a given project's results and impact among the network partners.



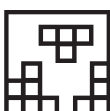
To increase the mobility of students from Norwegian HEIs, Diku should identify and communicate the advantages offered by mobility exchanges in Eurasia for their education.



To avoid the risk of contributing to 'brain drain', projects should develop approaches to help retain talent in the partnering countries such as developing a qualifications and recruitment plan for academic positions.



To enable improved assessment of goals achievement by the Eurasia Programme, we recommend that Diku simplify the overall aim and review the programme objectives with a view to avoiding overlap of the objectives and to clarify the link between objectives and the overall aim. We suggest developing a new goal structure which includes SDGs as long-term impacts.



To optimise its project portfolio Diku may announce calls for proposals with more flexibility, for instance with minimum and maximum duration and funding available, rather than calls with fixed project categories.



Diku may also consider distinguishing its calls and portfolio between the Eastern Partnership and Central Asia, to be more in line with categories within Erasmus +. The name of the programme may be changed accordingly to the 'Eastern partnership and Central Asia programme (EPCA).



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Introduction

1.1 About the review of the Eurasia Programme

The Norwegian Programme for Cooperation with Eurasia (Eurasia Programme) is funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and administered by The Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education (Diku).

The purpose of the review of the Eurasia Programme as mandated by the terms of reference and specified in the bid is threefold:

- › To assess the Eurasia Programme's achievements in light of the overall aim and anticipated outcomes (as detailed in the agreement between the Norwegian MFA and Diku and the call for proposals).
- › To assess the management of the programme, including the quality and efficiency of Diku's role as administrator.
- › To provide recommendations for possible adjustments to the Eurasia Programme beyond 2021.

The purpose of this review is not to assess the implementation of individual projects but the projects' aggregated contribution to the fulfilment of expected outcomes and impacts of the Eurasia Programme. In this review, we focused on collecting data that expands on the existing knowledge, looking beyond the results to consider the impact and actively seeking feedback and advice from project participants.

Within the scope and limitations of this review, we have established a baseline constituted by the first programme period of the Eurasia Programme, running from 2010-2015, available statistics on mobility and on our general understanding and knowledge about Eurasia and their higher education sector. We have corroborated this contextual knowledge using the existing, but limited, research on the topic.

In order to review the Eurasia Programme's achievements, the report accounts for our observations from the data collected on the aggregated level of projects in the Eurasia

Programme that we, in turn, assessed in light of the Eurasia Programme's objectives and overall aim.

In order to review Diku's administration of the programme, we analysed our observations from the data collected and then assessed how the programme could be improved in light of these findings. We also assess the hierarchy of the Eurasia Programme goals.

Based on the review's observations and assessments, we provide recommendations for possible adjustments to the Eurasia Programme for a new project period beyond 2021.

Structure of the report

In chapter 1, we present the Eurasia Programme in context and provide an overview of the current project portfolio. In chapter 2, we present the research strategy and review design. In chapter 3, we review the Eurasia Programme's success in achieving the programme objectives and analyse the overall results and effects of the project collaboration. In chapter 4, we review the management of the Eurasia Programme, including questions regarding the programme structure and Diku's administration of the programme. In chapter 5, we present our conclusions and recommendations for the development of the Eurasia Programme.



1.2 The Eurasia Programme

The Eurasia Programme seeks to foster lasting cooperation with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Eurasia, a region that Norwegian HEIs had virtually non-existent ties with during Soviet times. These countries in the former Soviet Union are approved for official development aid (ODA).

The nine countries in which Norwegian HEIs may collaborate with Eurasian HEIs as project coordinators are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan and Ukraine, whereas HEIs from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan can only be network partners in projects.

Diku's partnership model is based on the foundation that if one links different kinds of collaboration in a project premised on equality between partners, one can create durable partnerships as well as strong results. To the Eurasia Programme, this implies that both the Norwegian and Eurasian partner institutions assign a project coordinator. In the Eurasia Programme goal structure, the programme's overall aim is operationalised into eight objectives, as presented in Table 1 (below).

Table 1: Goal structure of the Eurasia Programme

Overall aim:

The Eurasia Programme's overall aim is to contribute to renewal and internationalisation of higher education in the partnering countries to provide a basis for political and economic reforms, to stimulate sustainable development, to increase the level of education in the population and to increase respect for human rights.

Programme objectives:

- › Development of strong and lasting institutional partnerships through academic collaboration between higher education institutions in Norway and the partnering countries.
- › Regional collaboration between higher education institutions in the partnering countries.
- › Development and implementation of courses, study programmes and degrees that are relevant to the needs of the partnering countries, e.g. for the labour market.
- › More research-based and internationally-oriented education at the institutions in the partnering countries, promoting a high level of student activity.
- › Improved links between higher education and the public and private sectors in the partnering countries.
- › Improvements in university management, including implementation of reforms related to the Bologna process.
- › More awareness, interest and knowledge about the partnering countries at Norwegian higher education institutions.
- › Increased mobility of students and staff between the partnering countries and Norway.

The table shows that the aggregated long-term impact of the program can be understood to foster stronger HEIs in the Eurasian region through increased collaboration with Norwegian HEIs. The programme promotes increased internationalisation of study programs, increased mobility for students and

researchers, more research-based education, etc.

The Eurasia Programme 2010-2015

The current Eurasia Programme is a continuation of the first programme period, which ran from 2010-2015. During the first programme

period 20 long-term and 64 smaller projects were funded, as well as a separate scholarship programme. Disbursements from the initial Eurasia Programme 2010-2015 totalled around 93 million NOK.¹

The main contribution of the first programme period, according to the final report, was that the Eurasia Programme contributed to a shift from very little contact between Norwegian and Eurasian HEIs, to the partnering countries becoming perceived as possible partners for academic collaboration.

The final report for the period 2010-2015 showed that funded projects had contributed to the establishment of new courses and degrees in the collaborating countries and supported extensive mobility of students and staff. Project reporting indicated positive effects on students' analytic capabilities and general enhancement of their academic level and of the staff at the Norwegian HEIs' knowledge about the partnering countries. In addition, a better link between research and education and the introduction of new educational methods and material at the institutions in the region were established.

Between 2010-2015, the Eurasia Programme supported close to 600 students and 450 staff for mobility exchange. In addition, 148 students from Eurasia received financial support for up to two semesters' study at a Norwegian HEI—23 students had the entire study program funded.² While statistics on student and staff mobility – including which countries students and staff travelled between – were registered project by project, numbers were not reported on an aggregated level. However, Diku's own assessment is that a vast majority of student

mobility 2010 – 2015 was students from Eurasia traveling to Norway. Statistics published by Diku, indicate that only 24 students from Norwegian HEIs participated in mobility to Eurasian HEIs 2010 – 2015.³ Regarding staff mobility, it is assumed by Diku that most of the mobility was from Eurasian HEIs to Norway or among Eurasian HEIs, but that staff mobility from Norway to Eurasia was at least higher than the level of student mobility. While this will give a fairly precise baseline, numbers are not certain and specific for 2010 – 2015 as for the present programme period.

For comparison, we can consider Erasmus+ and this programme's support for mobility of students and staff to visit HEIs in Europe. In the latest statistics available (published in 2020, but from a call in 2017), Erasmus then supported 5000 students and staff with mobility within the Eastern partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) and approximately 1 000 from Central Asia.⁴

The project portfolio at present

The current programme period for the Eurasia Programme runs from June 2015 to June 2021.

The latest available annual report of the Eurasia Programme shows that by the end of 2019, the programme had distributed more than 153 million NOK to 62 projects: 37 long-term projects with a duration of three or four years and 25 short-term projects with a duration of two years.⁵ It should be noted that there is a significant difference in the amount of funding between short-term and long-term projects. Long-term projects could receive 3-6 million NOK in funding, while short-term projects receive 300,000 NOK.

1 SiU 2016, Sluttrapport: RER-10/0012, Program for samarbeid om høgre utdanning i Eurasia 2010 – 2015, Vedlegg – tilskuddsmidler p. 4

2 Ibid.

3 See <https://statistikk.diku.no/details?country=0&county=0&level=0&institution=0&portfolio=0&program=12&from=2010&to=2015&&dimension=&bookmark=ProjectMobility&freetext=&rowVar=ActivityType>

4 Erasmus+ annual report 2018, see <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ae35558f-41b8-11ea-9099-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

5 Diku, Annual report for 2019, The Eurasia Programme, p. 1

In addition, during the current period, the Eurasia Programme has awarded approximately 2.5 million NOK in project development funding to 37 applicants prior to calls for

proposals. Key figures and results from the Eurasia Programme are presented in table 2 (below).

Table 2: Key figures and results from the Eurasia Programme

Key figures and results from the Eurasia Programme

- › 551 students from Norwegian HEIs have been on mobility exchange to Eurasia.
- › 931 students from Eurasian HEIs have been on mobility exchange to Norwegian HEIs.
- › The majority of the students participating in mobility are female.
- › 152 courses are under implementation, the majority at the Master's level.
- › 73 Master's theses have been submitted related to supported projects.
- › 328 employees and 149 students from Eurasian HEIs have been on mobility exchange to other countries in the region.
- › Georgia is the most visited country, both among employees and students.
- › 639 students have been on mobility exchange stays where research is included.
- › 574 employees from Eurasian HEIs and 585 employees from Norwegian HEIs have been on an exchange stay at a partnering HEI.

All countries eligible for support from the Eurasia Programme are represented in the current project portfolio. Among the 62 projects, 24 projects have its main partner in Ukraine, followed by Armenia (8 projects) and Georgia (7 projects). This means that these three countries together account for more than 60% of the entire project portfolio. In addition, Kyrgyzstan has six projects, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Moldova each have four, Belarus three and Tajikistan two.⁶

When we consider that many projects have network partners in multiple Eurasian countries, a more nuanced picture of country participation emerges. Georgia is involved in the most network projects (12); followed by Armenia (7); Azerbaijan and Belarus (5); Moldova, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (4); and Ukraine and Uzbekistan (3).

Ukraine is the country with the heaviest footprint on the portfolio in terms of

geographical distribution, followed by Armenia and Georgia. We see that the Ukrainian HEIs are involved as main partners in almost 40% of the projects in the current project portfolio. However, if one adjusts for projects per capita, Ukraine trails behind Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan.⁷ Ukraine also have the lowest number of projects being involved only as network partner, together with Uzbekistan.⁸

Distributed by academic disciplines, we find that technology (13 projects), natural sciences (12 projects) and economy (11 projects) are the most common in the portfolio, accounting for more than 50% of the projects. The other categories of discipline include educational sciences (8 projects), social sciences (7), humanities and health sciences (5) and, finally, music (2). Apart from educational sciences, where a majority of projects are short-term, all categories have a fairly even distribution of long-term and short-term projects.⁹

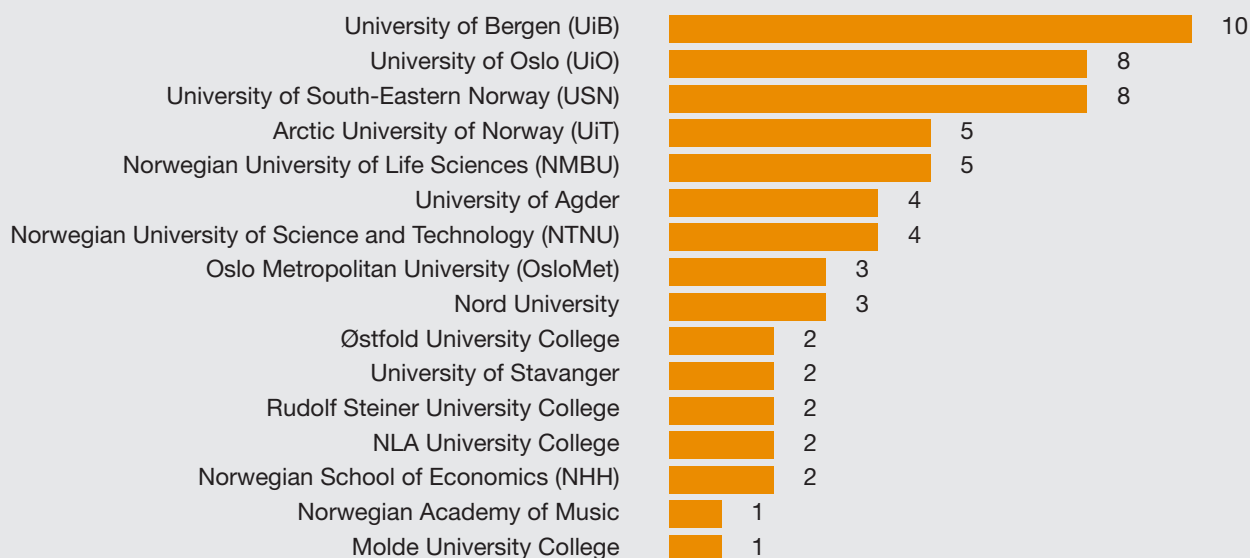
⁶ Diku, Annual report for 2019, The Eurasia Programme, p. 5.

⁷ Based on latest available population records from the World Bank.

⁸ In addition, comes Turkmenistan which does not participate in any of the projects.

⁹ Diku, Annual report for 2019, The Eurasia Programme, p. 7.

Figure 1: Projects divided between Norwegian HEIs



A total of 16 Norwegian HEIs participate in the Eurasia Programme, of which the University in Bergen, the University of Oslo and the University

of South-Eastern Norway have the highest number of projects. An overview of the projects per institution is presented in Figure 1, above.

1.3 The Eurasia Programme in context

The ambition of the Eurasia Programme is to renew the higher educational sector and increase the level of internationalization in the partner countries. The underlying logic of the programme resembles several other project mechanisms established after the fall of the Soviet Union, assuming that the international collaboration would accelerate these countries' shift from a Soviet past to a liberal democratic world order. Initially, this reflected nothing more than an ambition to reorganise government and society by encouraging and advocating reforms able to foster 'good governance', a 'vibrant civil society' and a 'marketisation of the economy'.

The passing of time has indicated that this is a tall order. There has been limited levels of democracy attained in many countries

and others have experienced authoritarian backlashes. Although some of the most ambitious strategies have fallen out of use, the foundation that democratisation can be strengthened through increased international cooperation still applies.

Internationalisation of higher education

Internationalisation of higher education is a relatively new phenomenon but, as a concept, it is one that is both broad and varied.¹⁰ Over the last 30 years, the European programmes for research and education, in particular the ERASMUS programme, has been important to instigate a broader and more strategic approach to internationalisation in higher education in Europe.¹¹ The ERASMUS programme created common understandings

¹⁰ See [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU\(2015\)540370_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU(2015)540370_EN.pdf)

¹¹ Ibid.

and drivers for internationalisation in most countries, and this was further reinforced by the Bologna Process.

The Bologna Process is a mechanism promoting intergovernmental cooperation between 48 European countries in the field of higher education. The Bologna Process seeks to bring more coherence to higher education systems across Europe.¹² The process established the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to facilitate student and staff mobility, to make higher education more inclusive and accessible, and to make higher education in Europe more attractive and competitive worldwide. Enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching is also a core mission of the Bologna Process.¹³ Research shows that the Bologna process not only entails specific steps and policies, but is also a metaphor for changes related to internationalization occurring within the HEI sector in these countries.¹⁴

Increased staff and student mobility may be reached through a common credit system, for instance. While the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) was instituted within the Erasmus programme to better facilitate transfer of credits for students studying abroad in 1989, it has become a tool for institutions across Europe to streamline the recognition of qualifications and periods of study.¹⁵ The standard unit is 60 credits ECTS for a full-time academic year. In addition, an important mandate of the Bologna process is promoting transparency within HEIs.

To become a member of the European Higher

Education Area it is required that a country is party to the European cultural convention (and, by extension, sits on the European territory) and commits to implementing and pursuing the objectives of the Bologna process.¹⁶ This implies that in Central Asia only Kazakhstan is a member. However, the four other Central Asian republics have also committed to following the principles of the Bologna process without being fully-fledged members. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have been full members of the Bologna Process/ European Higher Education Area since 2005, Kazakhstan since 2010 and Belarus since 2015.

Eurasia at a glance

Differences in language, religion, geography, economy and political orientation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union call for acknowledgement of the nuances between the countries taking part in the Eurasia Programme. A common political and institutional past are probably the main factors justifying the term 'Eurasia' for such a diverse range of countries.

While some of these countries constitute distinctive regions in a geographical sense (South Caucasus and Central Asia), these geographic regions are not necessarily meaningful to categorise the countries' needs and readiness for international cooperation between HEIs. This is corroborated by research indicating that Central Asia is not a 'functional region' when discussing HEI collaboration.¹⁷

Based on a variety of indices and statistical data, we find that the Eurasian countries have relatively different scores. Corruption, democratization, brain drain, and level of

12 See https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/bologna-process-and-european-higher-education-area_en

13 See <http://ehea.info/>

14 "The Bologna Process in Central Asia", 2019, see <https://emmasabzalieva.com/2019/06/06/the-bologna-process-in-central-asia/#:~:text=The%20Bologna%20Process%20is%20a,systems%20and%20facilitate%20greater%20mobility.&text=Bologna%20has%20also%20reached%20the,%2C%20Tajikistan%2C%20Turkmenistan%20and%20Uzbekistan>

15 See p. 3, http://www.ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/72/5/ECTS_Users_Guide_2015_613725.pdf

16 See http://www.ehea.info/page-full_members

17 Martha Merrill 2019

official development aid (ODA) received are four dimensions we believe to be particularly important to understanding the countries and their potential in the Eurasia Programme.¹⁸

- › Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova are perceived to have the lowest levels of *corruption*; Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Ukraine the highest.
- › Azerbaijan, Belarus and Kazakhstan are considered to be the most repressive regimes; whereas, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine are at the other end of the spectrum in terms of *democratisation*.¹⁹
- › The countries most vulnerable to brain drain might be those where remittances as share of GDP is high. The level of work migration is especially high in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan where remittances account for around 28% of GDP, while Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova also have double digit numbers. The largest portion of work migrants go to the Russian Federation, consisting mainly of unskilled laborers. This implies that the link between work migration and possible brain drain within HEIs is not obvious.²⁰
- › The Eurasia Programme's financial support is ODA, and we see that Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan far exceed the other countries in *ODA received per capita*.²¹

Among the Eurasian states, it is only Belarus and Kazakhstan which has not seen secessionist rebellion, warfare and unsolved territorial disputes since 1991. This has led to

the existence of several de facto independent quasi-republics with limited international recognition. While wars, break-away regions and revolutions do not necessarily directly influence policies towards the HEI sector, it indicates the fragility in parts of the region. Project implementation may stumble due to risks related to political instability and armed conflict.

Regional conflicts also reduce opportunities for regional collaboration, for instance between Armenia and Azerbaijan,²² and to a lesser extent between Russia and any of the countries Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the secession of Crimea since 2014, arguably limits the possibilities for HEI collaboration there. The same can be said regarding the internationally un-recognized de facto republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), Transnistria (Moldova) and Nagorno Karabakh (Azerbaijan) which could have seen possible HEI collaborations with Norwegian HEIs.

Post-soviet leadership has been formed by former Soviet elites in many cases and several countries have seen the transfer of power after widespread street protests, often following disputed elections. This happened in Georgia ('Rose revolution', 2003), Ukraine ('Orange revolution', 2005), Kyrgyzstan ('Melon revolution', 2010), Ukraine again ('Maidan', 2014) and Armenia ('Velvet revolution', 2018).

Higher education sector in Eurasia

Despite regional and national differences between the countries included in the programme, at the overall level there are many

18 In the following we will not consider Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

19 A number of sources has been used here, among them: Freedom House, see <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2020>, the Press Freedom index, see <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>, and the Rule of Law index <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>

20 Remittances as percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), see World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?page=4&view=map&year_high_desc=true

21 Official development aid received per capita, see World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?page=4&view=map&year_high_desc=true

22 Recent warfare in and around Nagorno Karabakh is but one example of this fragility, while also indicating Russia's role as regional power and arbiter in the region. For instance, in how Russia negotiated and will enforce an agreement negotiated at the behest of the OSCE Minsk group.

common traits between HEIs in post-Soviet countries, likely to impact the ability of the Eurasia Programme to foster change. These nine republics share a common Soviet socialist past, and even though the dissolution of the Soviet Union occurred almost 30 years ago, this historical commonalities still defines several aspects of these countries' educational systems. Common traits include:

- › A similar educational structure across the countries included in the review
- › A relatively low degree of internationalization of study programmes
- › Limited core funding and thus possibly a reliance on foreign project funding

In the Soviet Union, the establishment and distribution of HEIs among the Soviet republics served four major functions: economic development, ethnic cultural development, equalization of access and Russification. Soviet leadership aimed to create a higher education system in each of the Soviet republics that was sufficient for the functioning of the main sectors of the economy, including the social sector. This meant that each republic was to have a 'normal' set of infrastructural HEIs.

If the republic had a specific industry central to its economy, specialised HEIs were also established to underpin and strengthen this industry.²³ A central question is whether the existing HEI's in Eurasia responds to the current needs of their societies, and how the Eurasia Programme can contribute to this.

The emphasis on education relevant for economic and industrial development further implies that social sciences played only a minor role in the Soviet Union, which has had repercussions. Obviously, critical thinking and opposition to authorities could be a high-risk

endeavour. Many students with academic aspirations instead chose an education within the natural sciences. Today, natural sciences and technology stand stronger than social sciences and in some fields institutions in Eurasia are leading, e.g. the IT-sector in Ukraine.

This said, there are also obviously differences among HEIs in Eurasia, between and within countries, where there is a broad range of private and relatively new HEI's—some of which are represented in the project portfolio. As the majority of the Eurasia Programme's funding is allocated especially to projects in Ukraine, but also to Armenia and Georgia, some country-specific traits for these three countries will be described.

The higher education sector in Ukraine is notably the most diverse and biggest within the Eurasia Programme's target area, with private universities, Soviet monolithic universities, and old universities with a clear Westward orientation, such as the Catholic university in L'viv. Between 1991 and 2013 several notable events occurred in the Ukrainian HEI sector, including the introduction of Bachelor's and Master's degrees and the adoption of ECTS. However, it has been claimed that ECTS has been interpreted and implemented in a way that contradicts European practices.²⁴

Ostensibly, most educational programmes do not sufficiently meet current employment or labour market demands, that education methods are outdated and plagiarism is rampant.²⁵

In 2014, Ukraine adopted the Law On Higher Education in 2014-2017 which furthered the internationalisation process by dictating that an international language certificate as well

23 Isak Froumin and Yaroslav Kouzminov (2018) : Common Legacy: Evolution of the Institutional Landscape of Soviet Higher Education, p. 66

24 KAS 2017, p. 59

25 Ibid.

as other requirements must be obtained.²⁶ Further, the functioning of student self-governing bodies created separately from the student trade unions would be guaranteed by the law.

Bologna process-instigated reform in Ukrainian higher education has been instilled slowly, inconsistently and without a clear strategy.²⁷ The universities have not provided with autonomy, the curricula require significant changes, and the system for making such changes is flexible. Efforts are needed to preserve the attractiveness of Ukraine for international students. A foreseen expansion of student and institutional autonomy is impeded by corruption, low trust towards public institutions, and elections of rectors by staff and students have so far led to election of status quo candidates rather than reformers in many cases.²⁸

Armenia's 23 public and 39 private HEIs are autonomous and free to set their own tuition fees.²⁹ For implementation of reforms related to the Bologna Process, Armenia established the National Qualifications Framework in 2007. In 2015, a new state programme for 2016-2025 was developed to reflect the needs of the labour market.³⁰ The change in political leadership in 2018, also led to leadership changes in several public universities in Armenia, including reform candidates at several of the bigger universities in Armenia.

In Georgia, the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport oversees what is called the Education System Complex Reform. In regards to higher education, the goal of this reform is better internationalisation with the aim of transforming Georgia into a regional hub for international business, tourism, transport

and education.³¹ Over the past two decades Georgia has made significant changes in its higher education system and in the last years the main focus has been on quality assurance reform and internationalisation aspects. It is the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement which is responsible for improving the quality of education.³²

Education and societal changes

One way to operationalise the ambition to contribute to processes that have a democratisation aspect (such as respect for human rights, political and economic reforms) is to link democratisation with student mobility. As pointed out by Chankseliani (2016:301), research focusing on student mobility from post-Soviet countries is scarce, despite a large growth in the numbers of international students from the region. However, some studies exist, including Chankseliani's own research, that attempt to readdress this gap. One of her studies shows that the former Soviet countries with higher proportions of students studying in Europe or the US have achieved higher levels of democratic development (Chankseliani 2018: 281). In contrast, countries with a higher proportion of students studying in Russia have reached significantly lower levels of democratic development.

While the assumption of a causal link between student mobility and achieved democracy can be questioned, the research sheds light on important aspects of student mobility in Eurasia, in particular the potential effects on students' mindset the exchange stays abroad may have.

One critique of Chankseliani's model could be that her data include students from the

26 Such as Scopus or World of Science-indexed publications needed to be certified a state-awarded academic title.

27 Shevchenko, 2019

28 KAS 2017

29 European Union (2017), p. 2

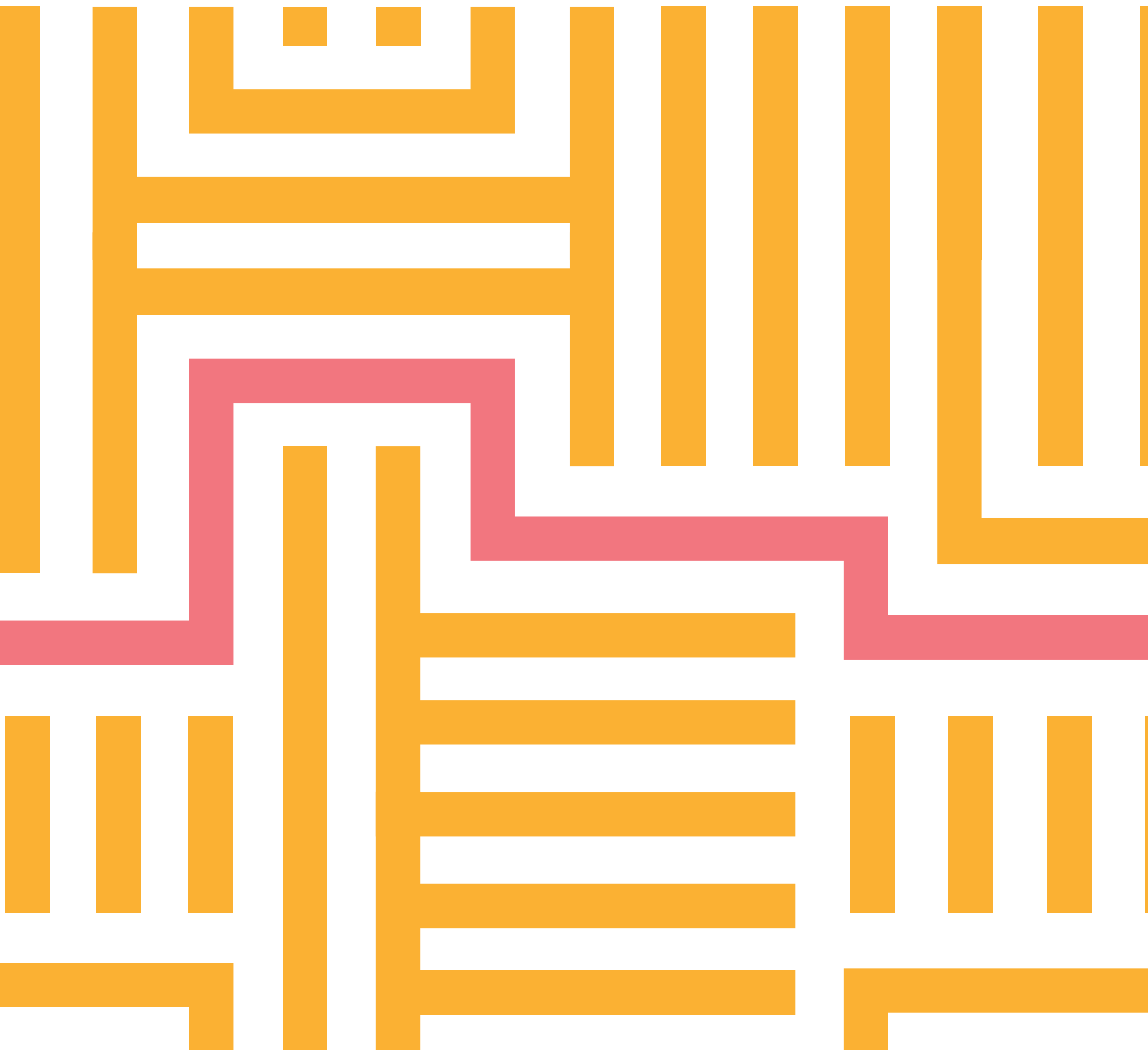
30 European Union (2017), p. 20

31 Georgia Today (2019)

32 SPHERE (2019)

Baltic republics, which all score relatively highly on the democracy index. Unsurprisingly, students from Baltic countries participate in student mobility to Russian institutions to a lesser extent. It is very probable that this has to do with the fact that these countries are

EU members and part of the Schengen area, meaning that citizens can more easily travel to western Europe than students from the other post-soviet states. In addition, scepticism towards Russia is prevalent in the Baltic societies.



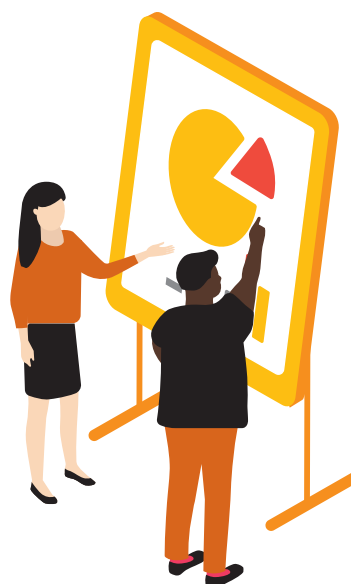
Research strategy and review design

The review has been carried out as a programme evaluation where a combination of approaches from impact and process evaluations were employed:

- › To assess the Eurasia Programme's achievements in light of the overall aim and the objectives, we applied approaches from impact evaluations. These are designed to assess to what degree a programme/activity has led to the anticipated results and impact.
- › To assess the management of the Eurasia Programme, including the quality and efficiency of Diku's role as administrator, we applied approaches from process evaluations. These typically assess a programme's development and consider activities in the programme to assess to what degree it runs as planned, is managed and whether Diku has sufficient resources and skills to fulfil its mandate.

A guiding principle for a programme evaluation is that it is based on a *programme theory*, which implies one or more assumptions, points of view or theories about how the measures create reactions and learning, changes behaviour or any other way results are obtained that lead to the desired outcomes.

We see the programme theory of the Eurasia Programme reflected in its overall aim, which is operationalised into eight objectives (see Table 1 in section 1.2). The groundwork of the goal structure is that fulfilment of the eight objectives will provide the Eurasia Programme's two desired outcomes: *renewal* and *internationalisation* of higher education in the partnering countries. These outcomes provide a basis for the programmes' desired broader impacts in the collaborating countries.

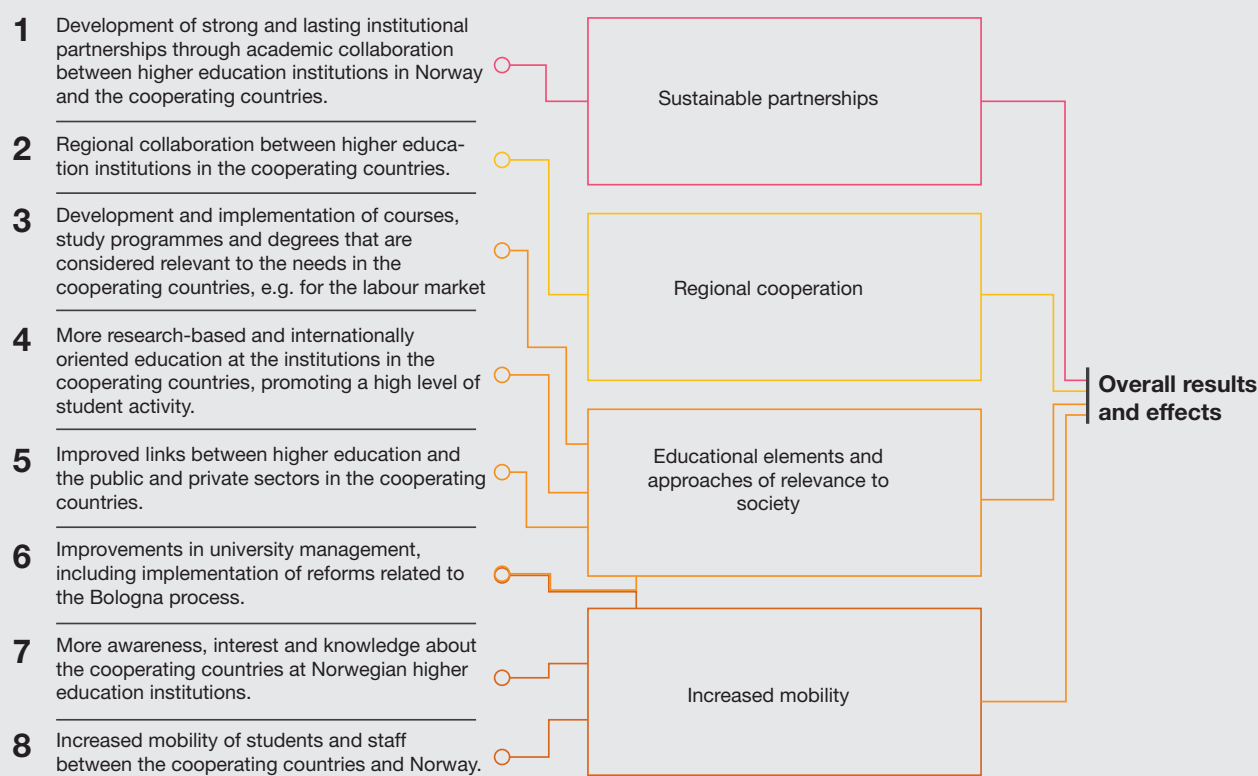


2.1 Operationalisation of the Eurasia Programme's achievements

In our review of the Eurasia Programme's achievements in light of its overall aim and anticipated outcomes, we test the assumptions of the programme theory: firstly, we assess whether the objectives of the Eurasia Programme are being achieved, and secondly, we assess whether these achievements of objectives are leading to renewal and internationalisation of higher education in the partnering countries outcomes. Further, we discuss whether the outcomes achieved are likely to lead to the desired impacts.

In order to assess whether the objectives are being achieved, we have clustered the eight programme objectives into four main categories, which we consider to be analytically sensible to separate while avoiding significant overlap. In the report's chapter 3, we organise our findings around these four categories, which are: 1) sustainable partnerships; 2) regional cooperation; 3) educational elements and approaches relevant to society; and 4) increased mobility. The clustering of objectives is illustrated in figure 2 (next page). As illustrated in the figure, we will review objective

Figure 2: The Eurasia Programme's objectives clustered into four main categories



1 and 2 separately and objectives 3, 4, and 5 together. We consider objective 7 to follow from objective 8; therefore, we assess them together under the label 'increased mobility'. Finally, we consider objective 6, on improvements in university management, including implementation of reforms related to the Bologna process, to transverse several other objectives, mainly 3, 4 and 8. We incorporate the assessment of objective 6 into the analysis of whether the Eurasia Programme has led to renewal and internationalisation of higher education in the partner countries.

The scope of the review does not allow for an extensive analysis of the link between the objectives and the overall aim of the Eurasia Programme. Instead, we analyse the programme's achievements and potential societal benefits through the survey data and broad qualitative material. We emphasise whether and to what degree the project collaboration, as perceived by 'insiders' has contributed to the objectives and desired

long-term effects.

The topics discussed for each of the four categories address different levels, ranging from general to specific, and cover a wide range of empirical fields relevant to the review. In light of the observations from each of these categories, we assess whether the objectives for each of the four categories were reached. The selection of topics and their relevance is accounted for in each of the subsections where objectives are assessed.

In the second step of the analysis, we assess the overall results and effects of the project collaboration. We discuss the overall aggregated long-term impact of the Eurasia Programme's project portfolio, on an individual, institutional and societal level, in relation to specific traits of the region and what may be realistic to achieve in a challenging post-Soviet context.

When assessing the projects' contribution to renewal and internationalisation as well as their

broader societal impacts, one should note that more is to be expected from long-term projects than those from short-term ones.

For our assessment of the overall results and impacts, we rely to a larger extent on data from long-term projects.³³

2.2 Operationalisation of programme management

To review Diku's administration of the Eurasia Programme, we have established a basis against which Diku's management and administration may be assessed. This is foremost based on the agreement between the Norwegian MFA and Diku and the two attachments to this agreement. The agreement states the geographical target area for the programme and elaborates that Diku shall:

- › Announce the programme, evaluate proposals, make funding decisions and assess the progress of awarded projects.
- › Ensure the measures in the Public Administration Act's requirements on access to information, right to appeal, the Freedom of Information Act and the Archival Act are applied.
- › Ensure management of the Eurasia Programme shall follow Chapter 6.3 in the Norwegian state's Guidelines for Financial Management.³⁴

Attachment 1 to the agreement mainly considers Diku's responsibilities vis-à-vis MFA, such as annual reporting requirements, payment details, etc. Attachment 2 considers requirements that are more specific to the management of the Eurasia Programme. These requirements include having external reviewers

of project proposals, that all project owners submit progress reports covering financial costs, that progress flows in accordance with objectives and the budgets are revised for the upcoming year. Attachment 2 also stipulates that based on necessity, Diku will make field visits to funding recipients.

The requirements for Diku pertaining to the administration and financial management of the Eurasia Programme can be operationalised to be the following questions:

- › Does Diku announce calls for proposals that are timely, sufficient and relevant?
- › Does Diku facilitate a review process of high quality and transparent funding decisions?
- › Does Diku provide a system of narrative and financial reporting for the projects and report on an aggregated level to the MFA?
- › Does Diku conduct individual reviews of projects?
- › Does Diku provide feedback and advice to projects at a sufficient level?

In addition, the Eurasia programme's programme structure and goal hierarchy will be discussed.

2.3 Methodology

In the review, we distinguish between:

- › Observations
- › Assessments
- › Recommendations

Observations refer to a factual account of the data collected in relation to the pertinent question(s), including desk studies, interviews and surveys. *Assessments* refer to the reviewers' appraisals. *Recommendations* refer

33 Most of our interview data — selected together with Diku — is from long-term projects. Furthermore, more than 75 % of the respondents in the survey were coordinators in long-term projects.

34 Available from https://lovdata.no/dokument/INS/forskrift/2003-12-12-1939/KAPITTEL_6#KAPITTEL_6

to concrete measures or actions rooted in the observation and review.

The review is based on empirical findings from document studies, electronic surveys and semi-structured interviews. Two regular field visits were initially planned for the review (to Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine), but due to the outbreak of Covid-19 travel was not possible. Therefore, we carried out an alternative plan for data collection, where we depended on the survey data to a larger degree, conducted 20 more interviews than planned (online) and tried to gather contextual information to the best of our abilities.

While the survey was sent to all project coordinators, possible interviewees were selected more strategically (see below). The survey

sample is used to identify overall trends, while the interviews provide depth and examples of the different kinds of projects. This way, the data sources complement each other.³⁵

Desk study and interviews

The document studies consisted of reading project reports and annual reports for the Eurasia Programme, white papers and other official documents relevant to the study and academic literature related to higher education in Eurasia. An overview of assessed material is found in Annex 1.

We carried out 50 interviews in total, including two interviews with one respondent regarding different roles. All interviews but one were carried out via video or telephone. An overview of respondents is presented in Table 3 (below).

Table 3: Interviewees for the review of the Eurasia Programme

- 3 current or former members of the board of the Eurasia Programme
- 4 representatives of the MFA in Norway or Norwegian embassies in Eurasian countries
- 1 representative of Diku (in addition to regular contact throughout the review)
- 1 student advisor at a Norwegian HEI
- 4 students participating in student exchanges abroad; 3 from Norwegian HEIs travelling to Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine, and one traveling to Norway from a HEI in Kyrgyzstan
- 16 main partners representing Norwegian HEIs
- 8 main partners representing HEIs in Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan and Ukraine
- 12 network partners representing HEIs or institutions/organisations, including 5 in Norway and 7 in the partnering countries of Armenia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine

In selecting interviewees among the 62 projects in the programme portfolio, we sought insight from project coordinators from a broad range of different project types of relevance to the

review. These included projects with:

- › a large degree of network cooperation
- › bilateral collaboration

35 We do not have an overview of how many of our interviewees responded to the survey, although we know from the interviewees that many did as they referred to the survey in our conversations.

- › substantial ambitions about societal change or value
- › cooperation with much student involvement
- › focus on building administrative capacity
- › ambitions about joint degrees

Long-term projects that were ‘new’ when starting up and participation in long-term projects with several rounds of financing and a long history were also important to our analysis. We assessed at least one project in each category and aimed to interview both project coordinators within the same project. Our data from interviews with coordinators in Norway is larger than from the partner countries because we interviewed more coordinators in Norway than initially planned, while some of the coordinators at the Eurasian HEIs that we contacted did not respond or were not available during the data collection phase. However, this discrepancy implies an expansion of our data compared to what was initially envisioned. With 15 interviews conducted among project coordinators or network partners in Eurasia from the different kinds of projects as described above, the perspectives from project participants in Eurasia on the whole represent a significant share of the data regarding project experiences.³⁶

During the interviews, we took advantage of the flexibility of this interview format by letting the respondents elaborate on their viewpoints with few interruptions, seeking to gain insight into respondents’ experiences, perspectives and ideas. We also encouraged the respondents to provide examples of what they meant. This way, we gained a large amount of material by respondents elaborating on their reality in their own words. Some quotes from interviewees are included anonymously throughout the report.

Surveys

As part of the review, two electronic surveys

were also carried out, targeting two main groups:

- › Project coordinators and network partners of the projects in the Eurasia Programme
- › Students who participated in study exchanges abroad in Norway or in one of the partner countries through the Eurasia Programme

The survey data was collected in late spring 2020 using the Qualtrics survey programme. The surveys were offered in English. For both surveys, contact information was provided by Diku and a reminder was sent to email addresses of individuals who did not respond within a few days.

Both surveys included several open questions, where respondents were asked if they would like to expand on their response to specific questions or share examples of what they meant. Quotes exemplifying responses to open questions have been applied in an anonymised form throughout the report. When relevant, we distinguish between responses from respondents affiliated to Norwegian or Eurasian HEIs.

The electronic survey for project coordinators and network partners and the electronic survey for students contained several background questions about the respondents and the projects or mobility they participated in. To assess the representativeness of the responses to both surveys, we carried out a comparative analysis of the background variables provided and the traits of the overall population of project coordinators, network partners and students participating in exchange stays abroad through the Eurasia Programme—known due to Diku’s own reporting. Central insight from this analysis are summarised below, while the full version, as well as an overview of traits of the respondents in both surveys is found in Annex 2 ‘Methodology and background data’.

³⁶ As we in the review distinguish between our interviews with Eurasian and Norwegian HEIs, we do not believe that the overrepresentation of Norwegian HEIs in our interview material colours our interpretation of interview data from Eurasian HEIs.

Survey for project coordinators and network partners

The survey for project coordinators and network partners was sent to 321 respondents. A total of 91 people responded to the survey, of which 85 were used as a basis for the analysis; the remaining six respondents either did not fill in answers to the questionnaire or did not consent to participate. This gives a response rate of 26%.

However, when distinguishing between project

coordinators and network partners, we find that 57% of the project coordinators at Norwegian HEIs during the current project period and 53% of the project coordinators at Eurasian HEIs responded to the survey. The low total response rate results from more than 90 % of the network partners not responding.³⁷ This implies that results from this survey represent chiefly the perspectives of project coordinators—a limitation that we account for in the forthcoming analysis. The division of respondents is illustrated in Figure 3 (below).

Figure 3: Number of respondents who are network partners, project coordinators at Norwegian HEIs and project coordinators at Eurasian HEIs and the share of respondents who are project coordinators.

What is your role in the project?



Furthermore, 77% of the respondents reported that they were part of long-term projects lasting for 3 or 4 years, while 22% reported that their project was short-term, lasting 2 years. In the portfolio of the Eurasia Programme for 2019, approximately 60% of the projects are long term. This implies that there is an overrepresentation of participants

in long-term projects in the survey sample.

Project coordinators and network partners representing each of the partnering countries in the Eurasia Programme are included in the survey's selection.

All in all, our analysis of background data

³⁷ The low response rate among network partners may be because this group have a more limited role in the project collaboration than project coordinators, and thus less understanding of the context for the survey, and what it might be used for. Language barriers may be another factor affecting response rate, as network partners in Eurasia to lesser extent than coordinators may be proficient in English.

indicates there is a moderate overrepresentation of stakeholders which one may expect to be most invested in the projects, namely project coordinators, and stakeholders involved in long-term projects. The other characteristics of the survey sample are largely in line with the portfolio of the Eurasia Programme; thus, likely representative.³⁸ Taking the above points into account, the survey data collected is considered suitable as a foundation on which to assess the results of the Eurasia Programme and Diku's administration of the programme.

Survey for students

The survey for students who participated in a mobility exchange abroad through the Eurasia Programme was sent to a total of 1087 email addresses. A total of 274 responses were received, which left us with a sample of 256 completed questionnaires. This gives a complete response rate of 24%.

In considering the response rate, it is worth noting that many respondents may have limited incentives to respond to the survey. We know that in some cases, projects have ended, and a large share of study exchanges abroad took place several years ago. It is likely that a substantial portion of the students contacted for the survey have ended their studies by now and may not be using the same email address as before. We consider a 24% response rate to be satisfactory.³⁹

The background data collected shows that 65% of the respondents to the survey were female and 35% were male. This corresponds with Diku's reporting on gender balance among students participating in student mobility.

The overall geographical distribution of respondents is in line with the total number of students who have taken part in mobility through the Eurasia Programme. In the student survey, 68% responded that their stay took place in Norway. The largest share of respondents are from Ukrainian HEIs (32 %), followed by students from Norwegian (21 %), Belorussian (13 %) and Moldovan (11 %) HEIs. It should be noted that students from HEIs in Georgia are underrepresented in the survey compared to the total number of students from Eurasian countries who have participated in study exchange stays in Norway. Otherwise, the characteristics of the survey sample are largely in line with the portfolio of the Eurasia Programme, and are deemed representative.



38 See 1.2 above and Diku, Annual Report for the Eurasia Programme 2019, p. 5 – 8.

39 Here one may note that a response rate of 24%–26% is in line with Statistics Norway's official Election Survey 2015, in which Statistics Norway managed response rates of 25%–27% exclusively using a web survey with email invitations and SMS follow-up, see https://www.ssb.no/valg/artikler-og-publikasjoner/_attachment/275502, p. 11.



Achievements of the Eurasia Programme

This chapter accounts for the Eurasia Programme's achievements with respect to overall aim and anticipated outcomes. The chapter is organised into the four main categories of objectives described in the previous chapter; sustainable partnerships,

regional cooperation, educational elements and approaches relevant to society and increased mobilisation. In the final section of this chapter, we consider these four categories in relation to each other, and assess the overall effects and impact of the project collaboration.

3.1. Sustainable partnerships

This section addresses issues related to the Eurasia Programme's objective 'development of strong and lasting institutional partnerships between HEIs in Norway and the partner countries.' For simplicity, in the analysis of this objective will mainly use the term 'sustainable partnerships'.

Sustainability of partnerships is hard to measure directly, as it is too early to say definitively whether the collaborations continue in the long term. In our assessment of sustainability, one of the factors we analyse is whether the partners plan to continue their collaboration after the project ends. However, there are a wide range of other factors likely to affect whether the partnerships end up being sustainable. In our review, we take a broad approach when assessing sustainability, including identifying the motivation the project partners, perceptions of equality in the partnerships, sources of success or failure in the project collaborations and satisfaction with project results. As we assume sustainable partnerships are more likely when both parties gain, we also assess whether the collaboration lends quality development to higher education in Norway

Observations

Cooperation after the project ended

Survey data report that 94% of project coordinators and network partners plan to continue cooperating with their partners after their project ends, of which 20% plan to continue cooperating even without external funding.⁴⁰

Interviews unpack how some of the coordinators plan to cooperate with their partners and in what way. In several cases, the Eurasia project partners planned to apply together to other financial support mechanisms, such as the EU's Horizon 2020. In other cases, proposals had already been submitted, of which some had been successful. Respondents typically answered that they would continue with joint research activities and publication, guest lecturing and mobility. These findings align with Diku's annual report on the programme, which presents that in projects where final reports were submitted in 2019, all had plans for further cooperation.⁴¹

For the Eurasia Programme there is a potential to combine the projects with Erasmus + global mobility and expand the project cooperation through Erasmus + capacity building. These measures prioritise areas near the EU, including

40 Only five respondents in the survey for project coordinators and partners responded that they did not plan to continue partnering after the project ended. Among these, one was a network partner, while the remaining four were project coordinators in Norway.

41 Diku, Annual report for 2019, The Eurasia Programme, p. 11.

the Eurasian Region. Mobility scholarships can be used to complement the Eurasia projects and to make sure that more students and staff can participate in the project cooperation between the institutions. Over the current project period, several of the Eurasia Programme project coordinators applied for financing for student and/or staff mobility through the Erasmus + global mobility initiative. However, there have been few applications for funding through Erasmus + capacity building based on existing Eurasia projects.⁴² According to Diku, one reason may be that the application process is demanding.⁴³

Our data do not allow for us to conclude on the potential for the Eurasia Programme to make use of these or other national and EU measures for educational cooperation or what the challenges are. However, we find that several respondents praise Diku for their application process which is considered less burdensome than for EU-funding, for example. While not specifying their answers, several respondents point out that the Eurasia Programme is an important enabler for establishing new partnerships and functions as a stepping-stone for applying to other programmes.

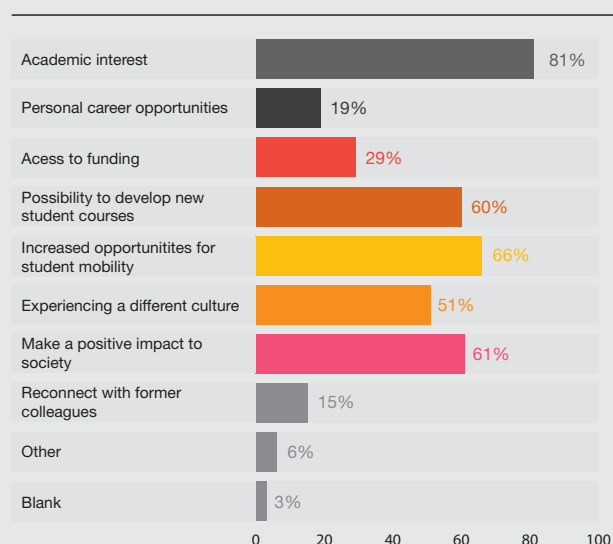
Motivation for participating in the partnership

In order to achieve sustainable partnerships, the project participants need to be motivated to take an active part in the collaboration. Diku assumes capacity building projects that only imply a role as a 'helper' will have shorter durability than projects based on common interests,⁴⁴ and applicants for funding through the Eurasia Programme therefore need to account for their common academic interests in the application.

Survey data collected for this review show that academic interest is the motivational factor selected by the highest number of respondents (81%) when presented with a list where one could select more than one answer. However, when asked which of the motivational factors the respondents considered the most important, only 14% of the respondents at Norwegian HEIs and 22% of the respondents at Eurasian HEIs answered 'academic interest'. Instead, to 'make a positive impact on society' was the most selected alternative by coordinators in both Norway (53%) and in Eurasia (35%), as illustrated in Figure 4 (below).

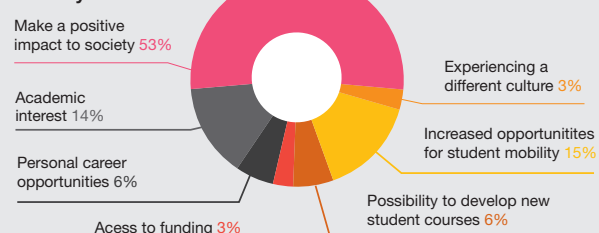
Figure 4: Motivation for participation in project cooperation

What is your motivation for participating in the project?
More than one answer is possible.



Which of the motivational factors do you consider the most important?

Norway



Eurasia



42 An exception is the Water harmony project which in 2016 got support through Erasmus + capacity building- This has provided opportunity to build on the project, and to include more network partners.

43 See Diku, Annual report for 2019, The Eurasia Programme, p. 12.

44 Diku, Annual report for 2019, The Eurasia Programme, p. 9.

The figure shows that access to funding is not an important motivational factor for participating in the Eurasia Programme. This finding is corroborated by the interview data, suggesting that for Norwegian HEIs, the Eurasia Programme with its limited funding, is not perceived as financially attractive given the large degree of administrative work involved.

The findings from the survey are in line with responses about motivation in interviews with project coordinators and network partners, where Norwegian respondents tended to emphasise their desire to make a difference, and many pointed out how rewarding it was for them to learn to work in a different cultural context.

Respondents from Eurasia often mentioned the opportunity to make a difference in their institution or home country as particularly important—and to learn from Norway. ‘Participation in joint projects with Western scientists encourages a better understanding of the current scientific context’, one respondent remarked. Through project collaboration, new equipment was bought for several projects, which was motivating for some of the respondents in Eurasia. In some cases, the collaboration is also providing access to more advanced laboratories in Norway. One example of this is an investigation on the genetic properties of agricultural crops and plant varieties in a collaboration between the University of Tromsø and the National Agrarian University in Armenia.

As making a difference in any capacity is a core motivational factor for participating in project collaboration, it can be assumed that partnerships are more likely to be sustainable in the long term if participants are satisfied with the project results from their collaboration. Survey data show that all the project coordinators in Norway and Eurasia and practically all network partners report they are very or somehow satisfied with the project results at

their institution.⁴⁵ This finding is in line with data from the interviews where many respondents mention a high degree of achievement of their project objectives.

Equality in the partnerships: funding, workload and influence

Diku’s partnership model implies that the partnerships between Norwegian and Eurasian HEIs should be equal, even though the Norwegian partner receives and administers the funding in order to minimise the risk of corruption.

Our data indicates that the fact that the Norwegian partner receives and administers the funding may reduce some of the academic ‘ownership’ of the project for other partners. Some respondents pointed out that the Norwegian partner had the ‘financial power’ because they are the receiver of the funding and that partnerships could never be fully equal because of this. Some comments from project managers at HEIs in Norway and Eurasia are presented in Table 4, see next page.

The responses in the table exemplify that practically all responses from project coordinators at Eurasian HEIs were positive on how the funding was distributed in the project, using terms such as ‘fairly’, ‘transparently’ and ‘honestly’. This indicates that the programme has succeeded in establishing a sense of equality in many of the projects. Some Norwegian respondents pointed out that the projects cover direct costs but not salaries.

In interviews, several respondents stated that transfer of funding have been a challenge, and that it had been solved by letting the Norwegian partner administer costs, buy tickets, buy equipment, etc. However, this implies that administration takes more time in some projects than in others. Many project managers reported that they had worked much more administratively than planned and several respondents suggested that Diku should

45 Only 1 out of 23 network partners was not satisfied with the project results.

provide project managers with better training on how to deal with the transfer of funds.

Table 4: Would you like to comment on how the funding is divided in the project? Open question in the survey among project managers at Norwegian and Eurasian HEIs

Comments on the distribution of funding

Project managers at Eurasian HEIs

Funding is distributed fairly, according to the project activities, the efforts of the project participants and the level of remuneration in the partner institutions.

Funding is shared between the participating universities very transparently, honestly, without any inconvenience.

In the project, funding is distributing in accordance with the approved budget and plan, very transparent.

Project managers at Norwegian HEIs

The funding consisted mainly of travel expenses. These were divided equally. The Norwegian partner got some funds for managing the project.

Eurasia partners are rather motivated to receive equipment funding, travels and salary support. Budget allowances structure should be adjusted accordingly.

The project covers all direct local costs for each country partner but not salaries for their participation; some of the funding cover salary in Norway, but also here this is much less than the actual cost.

Despite of the differences between partners in terms of control of project funding, survey data shows that more than 50% of the project coordinators felt that the influence over the project and workload was equal between the

partners in Norway and Eurasia. In total, practically all (98%) of the project coordinators felt they had an equal partnership to a large or some extent, as illustrated in Figure 5 (below).

Figure 5: Perceptions of equality in the partnerships



The figure shows the overall responses from project coordinators in Norway and Eurasia. When distinguishing between responses from coordinators at Norwegian and Eurasian HEIs, we find that more coordinators in Eurasia (64%) than in Norway (43%) think that both partners have equal influence. Similarly, more coordinators at HEIs in Eurasia (64%) than in Norway (40%) responded that the workload is equal.

In interviews, several respondents talked about how planning and carrying out the project activities was done in collaboration, and that, in line with the survey data, both sides had equal influence in *decision making*. One interviewee suggested that 'equality' in partnerships should actually be defined in terms of influence in the project, which would make it sensible in discussion about equal partnerships, despite the economic and academic differences between them.

In order for the partnerships to be perceived as equal, it was also mentioned that it is essential that the Eurasian partner understands the Norwegian economic system. In countries with a high degree of *informal practices* and low levels of trust, some partners could become suspicious and wonder whether the partner tried to cheat them. Dissemination of governance procedures in Norway is thus integral to establishing a sense of equality.

Sources of success and failure in the project collaborations

In interviews, many coordinators expressed that a key to make the partnership work is to have people in the project who are informed on how things work in Eurasian societies. At the same time, several interviewees underlined that contextual knowledge can be built throughout the projects. In some cases, strong and durable partnerships were built over time and the partners learned from their initial mistakes. Staff mobility was identified as an important feature in projects, as it enabled fruitful collaborations between researchers and administrative staff

at Norwegian and Eurasian HEIs. Having faced challenges together, the partners got to know each other better and solved practical issues. New projects with the same partners were likely to have a greater impact than the first projects according to respondents.

It was furthermore pointed out that Eurasian stakeholders need to be made aware of the less hierarchical structure in Norway. For example, per diem allowances are the same for students and academic staff. In some of the Eurasian countries, professors expect to be treated differently from students and can get offended if offered equal conditions, an interviewee explained.

Being able to communicate well in a common language is essential when it comes to practical implementation and dialogues with partnering institutions. Several interviewees pointed at the lack of English competence among partners and students as a problem. According to interviewees, the level of English spoken by younger people is better than older participants from Eurasian countries. It was found in most projects that at least some of the project participants were able to communicate well with the partners and translate when it was necessary. Proficiency in Russian by at least one project participant from the Norwegian side was mentioned as beneficial by several interviewees.⁴⁶

We find that Eurasian and Norwegian HEI's have human resources and willingness to contribute in-kind, and the opportunities the Eurasia program offers are considered valuable. Moreover, according to many respondents, time rather than funding, is the most critical factor for reaching ambitious objectives. Several respondents suggested that it would be beneficial with longer project periods.

Risk mitigation

We find that projects largely have worked actively to identify and mitigate the risks

46 While many languages are spoken in the partnering countries in Eurasia, other languages were not mentioned.

involved, although some projects are more lenient than others.

The review uncovered a case where the key partner in a partnering country was an NGO run by the local project coordinator, while also being affiliated with an academic institution. In another case, a central stakeholder in a project was allegedly not affiliated with the Eurasian HEI stated in the project documents. While it is perhaps not surprising that different organisational modes exist, this begs caution and reveals that partnership structures are often complex. Norwegian HEIs in instances like this do need to consider the risks involved in such setups.

In 2020, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic severely impacted project implementation and progress, particularly in terms of student and staff mobility. In addition, many research seminars have been cancelled. Some respondents did inform us how they had managed to keep up project activities despite of the pandemic, however.

As many projects rely on relatively few engaged individuals on both sides there is the risk that projects are too reliant on individuals at the behest of institutional anchoring and support. It has been noted in the annual reporting of the Eurasia Programme that the institutional anchoring in Norwegian HEIs is surprisingly weak.⁴⁷ This finding is corroborated in this review. While project coordinators in Norway are often eager to promote their project, several have alluded to scepticism at their HEI regarding Eurasia projects. For the leadership and administrative staff at Norwegian HEIs, Eurasia projects may seem less attractive, as internationalisation with other parts of the world are considered more prestigious and the projects may be burdensome in terms of administration, handling of costs, etc. Allegedly, one reason is that the administrative burden is too high and the university does not want such onus, even if the coordinator considers

the project important both at a personal and a societal level in Eurasia.

We however find several examples of strong institutional anchoring in the Eurasian partner country; the explanation is that dedication at a high level is important to be able to make efficient decisions in the project.

Quality development in higher education in Norway

While the overall aim of the Eurasia Programme is related to desired outcomes and impacts in Eurasia, the review finds the Eurasia Programme contributes to quality enhancement in higher education in Norway, as well.

Reported benefits include a higher degree of internationalisation in Norway, access to data used in academic publishing, increased self-reflection and broadening of horizons of the participants, enhancing critical thinking and competence in intercultural interaction. As one coordinator remarked: 'Our institution is strengthened as a result of the project cooperation. Our students and staff get exposed to other institutions; we are asked questions by our partners that force us to reflect over our own practices'.

One of the coordinators in Norway remarked that their home university in Norway received a better reputation nationally due to the results of their project cooperation. Several project coordinators indicated that the project was imperative for their own career advancement and in establishing an international research network. The several Horizon 2020 applications submitted on the basis of Eurasia projects, some of which have been approved for funding, is an indication of the increased prestige and career advancement opportunities the Eurasia Programme may bring to researchers and HEIs in Norway.

Another reason for positive assessments by early-career researchers in Norway, such as

47 Diku, Annual report for 2019, The Eurasia Programme, p. 33.

postdocs, is that the Eurasia Programme provides them with the opportunity to explore their academic interest and establish project collaboration on a scale that fits their career stage before entering large-scale project consortia where a more senior researcher level is often expected.



Assessments

Our data shows that Eurasia Programme has contributed significantly to the development of strong and lasting institutional partnerships through academic collaboration between HEIs in Norway and Eurasia. As the review has not assessed all projects in the portfolio, we cannot conclude that all projects have contributed to this objective. However, the fact that the majority of project participants plan to continue to cooperate on educational activities and mobility after the project ends is a robust indicator that most partnerships are sustainable.

We find that the Eurasia Programme plays an essential role in establishing long-term collaboration between HEIs in Norway and Eurasia, as it functions as a first step to create robust consortia that may later qualify for other kinds of funding. We find the fact that the Eurasia Programme projects have been a starting point for Horizon 2020 proposals to be a significant signpost of truly durable and mutually fruitful collaborations, for example.

While we agree that common academic interest is important to build sustainable partnerships, our observations indicate that enthusiastic individuals and ambition to make positive changes to society could be even more important for long-term collaboration. This review finds that enthusiastic individuals are essential for project development and results. Weak institutional anchoring may be a hindrance for establishing sustainable partnerships, primarily in projects where one needs institutional anchoring to successfully implement the project.

It may not always be realistic to achieve a large degree of institutional anchoring. We note that in some cases, projects funded by the Eurasia Programme are considered an administrative burden by institutions, as they require significant administrative resources. Further, the Eurasia Programme has relatively low prestige at Norwegian HEIs. Yet, it is worth noting that some of these projects driven by enthusiastic individuals have been making a lasting difference. In some cases, much can be achieved even without strong institutional anchoring.

While it seems to be of general benefit that at least one key stakeholder on each side knows the context of the partnering country well, we have also found that contextual knowledge can be built throughout the projects. In our view, Diku should not reject project proposals solely on the base of lack of former experience with the partner countries. Diku should also be conscious not to let the cooperation being 'monopolised' by participants that know the context well. On the other hand, it seems likely that partnerships that have already been established, overcome whatever adversity and

identified new possibilities that are realistic to achieve greater chances to achieve their stated objectives than entirely new constellations.

Our data indicate that it is beneficial that at least one person on the Norwegian side speaks Russian. Russian is however not the lingua franca in the region to the same extent as it used to be. While many of the project coordinators at Eurasian HEIs were educated in the Soviet Union and speak Russian, there is a generational shift occurring. Today, a larger share of young people in partner countries

learn English than before. Project collaboration and mobility through the Eurasia Programme gives them an opportunity to practise and improve their skills, which again opens the door to increased contact with other countries.

While all objectives are important, objective 1 largely seems to be a prerequisite for all the other objectives. An important task for Diku is therefore to ensure that the conditions for partnerships' success and failure are considered in the selection and follow-up of projects.

3.2. Regional collaboration in Eurasia

This section addresses issues related to the Eurasia Programme objective 'regional collaboration between higher education institutions in the cooperating countries'. In this section, we focus on the extent and scope of this regional collaboration, the qualities the network partners bring to the project collaboration and their degree of involvement. Despite the incapacity for enquiries in each of the projects with network partners, insights into participation were obtained through electronic survey and interviews.

Observations

Extent and scope of regional collaboration

Several bilateral projects that received funding between 2010 and 2015 have expanded their scope in projects funded between 2016 and 2020 and now include more countries and institutions in the region.

Twenty-one projects in the Eurasia Programme's portfolio are network projects, around half of which have network partners in two Eurasian countries in addition to the Eurasian main partner

As of 2019, the projects in the Eurasia Programme had 240 network partners, 47 of which are in Norway.⁴⁸ The projects with the

most regional project partners are the ones with the longest time frame and most financing.

The regional collaboration in Eurasia also encompasses an increased regional student and staff mobility. Between 2016 and 2019, 149 students from Eurasia took part in study exchanges in other countries in the region, mostly Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Belarus. Regional staff mobility is greater than regional student mobility.

A total of 326 staff have travelled to other Eurasian countries, mostly to Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. This is almost 30% of all staff mobility which is 1159. Between 2010 and 2015, total staff mobility was 447, but a specified number of regional staff mobility does not exist. Assuming that the share was almost equal then as now, regional staff mobility could have been around 120 then. As the total number of staff mobility has been more than doubled since the first programme period, we can assume that regional staff mobility has as well.

The interview data collected for this review shows examples of how the Eurasia Programme has led to increased regional collaboration in Eurasia, both within and

48 Diku, Annual report for 2019, The Eurasia Programme, p. 14

between partner countries. We find that regional collaboration is developed step by step. Once an individual knows someone from another HEI in the region, it becomes easier to reach out when new opportunities occur, and each of the partners may involve people they know at their institution. Initially, researchers often meet at project events that bring people together, such as conferences and seminars. Several interviewees say that it would not have been possible for many to attend these platforms for meeting people from other parts of the region without the support of the Eurasia Programme.

An example of a project which was established early and expanded later as a result of the project collaboration is 'Water Harmony – Integration of Education, Research Innovation and Entrepreneurship', which is the project in the Eurasia Programme with the largest number of network partners. Many stakeholders have been engaged to increase the impact of the project.

The review finds that not only project coordinators but also network partners exert effort to expand the scope and impact of the project. In one interview, a network partner talked about how she actively and strategically involved people from different departments at her institution. According to the respondent, an important part of increasing regional collaboration is identifying enthusiastic individuals who are willing to take part in the project without remuneration.

However, in many cases, relevant stakeholders cannot participate without economic compensation. Several respondents therefore suggested that parts of the project funding should be allocated among network partners.

Involvement of network partners

In some of the projects in the Eurasia Programme's portfolio, many individuals are listed in project documents as participants. However, the degree of active participation of the listed partner institutions and project participants in the projects is unknown. We thus contacted a selection of network partners to investigate these participants'

extent of involvement. We also discussed the involvement of network partners with project coordinators during the interviews.

We find that the approached network partners are largely actively involved in the projects, and many have a strong, personal involvement in the collaboration. Several network partners talked enthusiastically about the value of the project for them and their country. Project coordinators in Norway pointed out that, in addition to the project results, the involvement of the partners in Eurasia is meaningful for the participants in terms of feeling included in the international community.

However, the interviewees emphasized that Diku must consider that different network partners may have quite differing views on results reported within their project. During the data collection process, one story emerged that, although anecdotal, may give insights into some challenges related to broader project involvement. One of the network partners in a Eurasian country reported excellent results from the project cooperation but felt that more could have been done and that there was a lack of transparency in the project. *'Maybe Norwegians trust people very much'*, the respondent remarked. While wanting to take an active role in the project, this network partner stated that there was a lack of information about project progress from the side of the Eurasian project coordinator. They did not have common meetings; thus, without any means of communicating their concern to Diku, the partner felt alienated. Another network partner in the same project confirmed the story of this respondent.

Benefits and challenges of being organised as network projects

Data collected for this review shows both advantages and disadvantages related to being organised as a network project compared with bilateral projects. Our main finding is that bilateral cooperation implies less administration; network projects, although more challenging to coordinate, can have a broader impact as they involve more HEIs and countries. Interviewees for example stated that it is difficult to schedule meetings

that suit all the participants in projects with many network partners.

The survey responses from the participants of the network projects about the benefits and challenges of this kind of organisation are presented in Table 5, below.

Table 5: Feedback from survey respondents about the benefits and challenges of being organised as a network project

Benefits and challenges of being organised as a network project

Project managers and network partners at Eurasian HEIs or organisations

We see a synergistic effect from the interaction of three universities and one institution. Joint research projects and publications, student mobility and communication, and general conferences are important for the professional development of students and teachers.

The challenge is that it takes more time to reconcile different issues. This was especially noticeable when we signed the contract. It took many months to reconcile all legal issues.

Participation in a multilateral project made it possible to establish new contacts with a number of organisations and colleagues working in our field of research.

Project managers and network partners at Norwegian HEIs or organisations

The benefits are the new and longer-term persistent contacts established between the partners in each country. The challenges are the size of the tasks needed to coordinate a large project with limited staff resources.

Benefits include a wider outlook, broader resources, complimentary expertise and inter-cultural dialogue.

The challenges include more risk for misunderstandings and chaos. The benefits include larger project impact, influence on more institutions at the same time, more know-how and more best practices to be shared.

This shows that the benefits and challenges described by the project coordinators and network partners are similar. Participation in network projects enables one to have new experiences, develop their know-how and make a bigger impact. One way of doing these is to involve stakeholders from NGOs and the private and public sectors, which is regarded positively by several respondents. A main challenge is finding appropriate partners, one respondent remarked.

Assessments

The network projects meets the Eurasia Programme objective about contributing to regional collaboration between HEIs in the partnering countries.

The data collected for this review is not

sufficient for determining the degree to which, and the means by which, the increased regional collaboration has affected higher education in the partnering countries. Nevertheless, according to our assessment, the Eurasia Programme is not only a likely catalyst for continued cooperation within the project fields. It also encourages broader educational cooperation between institutions in Eurasia after the projects end.

In our assessment, network projects may lead to greater impact, as they involve several institutions and/or countries. However, the considerable administration related to network projects may be a burden for the Norwegian project coordinators. How it can be made be attractive to apply for funding with a network project is thus a crucial question for Diku to

consider. Regional collaboration, including mobility exchange, should be able to take advantage of the comparative strengths of each partner, such as the benefits of an exchange between a large university and a small institution or NGO.

As some network partners are concerned about how these projects are run, it seems reasonable

for Diku to consider increasing the level of control with these projects. It should not only engage with the project coordinators but also communicate with the network partners to a larger extent than it currently does. Such conversations with the network partners could be initiated in the absence of the project coordinators so that the former may speak freely.

3.3. Educational elements and approaches of relevance to society

Educational elements and approaches

This section assesses the achievement of objectives 3, 4 and 5 of the Eurasia Programme. They are clustered together because, as we see it, they are interlinked and partly overlapping. Together, they relate to our understanding of the meaning of ‘renewal’ of higher education.

Questions to be answered include whether new educational elements have been developed and implemented during the current project period and whether these elements are considered relevant to the needs of HEIs in the partnering countries. Furthermore, we need to assess whether the Eurasia Programme contributes to more research-based and internationally oriented education at HEIs in Eurasia and if the projects in the portfolio promote a high level of student activity.

We will also look into whether the Eurasia Programme helps improve the links between higher education and the public and private sectors in the partnering countries. The latter could both lead to or result from the development and implementation of educational elements considered relevant to the needs in the partnering countries.

The data collected for this review does not allow for an in-depth analysis — neither a comprehensive country-specific assessment nor a region-specific one — of all these aspects. Nonetheless, the rich material collected through the interviews and surveys provides new insights related to all of the above issues, which are presented below.

Observations

Development and implementation of educational elements

In numeric terms, there is a clear increase in educational elements in the current project period of the Eurasia Programme compared with the previous period (between 2010 and 2015). For example, 152 courses have been developed as part of the projects; in comparison, 65 were developed in the previous funding period (2010–2015).

A relevant question in this regard is whether the developed courses are entirely new or mere adaptations of existing courses. While we had limited capacity to examine many cases, our interview data gives us examples of both course types; many courses are entirely new, while others are adaptations of existing modules. For example, in Armenia, a new module is developed in an already existing course in biodata in the only university in the agricultural sphere in the county.

In some cases, existing courses are translated or digitalised to expand their reach. An example is a course about internal control and the COSO framework and its application to HEIs in the region. This course was developed as part of a collaboration between Nord University, the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and network partners. The course has been digitalised and is currently run in the English language with Ukrainian subtitles.

While the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has put activities on hold, it has enabled a further step towards increased digitalisation in project cooperation. As one respondent stated,

‘We have been trying to provide recordings of lectures online. This has become an important experience in long-distance learning, which has been proven relevant during the current COVID-19 lockdown’. According to interviewees, most HEIs in Eurasia have access to technology enabling the digitalisation of higher education. However, unequal access to software and unstable internet access may reduce the possible benefits of digitalisation.

The differences in the credit systems and academic calendars in Norway and Eurasia hinder the establishment of joint courses. However, we found projects where these obstacles were overcome and where the alignment of credits according to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System successfully enabled the establishment of courses. This also contributes to general internationalisation and alignment with the Bologna process for several Eurasian HEIs.

Through the Eurasia Programme, we find that double degrees and new master’s programmes have been established with, for instance, Georgian and Ukrainian HEIs. Some projects, such as the Norwegian–Ukrainian cooperation in public sector economy education, initially aimed for joint degrees but had to settle for double degrees, which are more achievable. According to interviewees, the obstacles experienced in this regard originated from the Norwegian HEIs involved. Research-based education and enhanced student involvement also require a shift yet are observed to be possible without the same challenges as those of formal changes, such as the introduction of joint degrees.

For projects with progressive plans to develop new study programmes and/or joint degrees, the harmonisation of Norwegian and Eurasian study programmes can be difficult, and some respondents reported that this is not given

enough thought in the project design in some cases. Interviewees noted that several of the challenges faced in this area are often exogenous to the projects themselves and can be solved only by implementing changes at a higher institutional level or even in national legislation. This has caused delays and readjustments of goals in some projects.

Relevance to needs of society

Diku has not specified how and who defines the needs in the partnering countries and whether the needs in the labour market are more important than other societal needs, such as needs in the public sector. In the Soviet Union, if a republic had a specific industry central to its economy, specialised HEIs were also established to underpin and strengthen that industry.⁴⁹ Thus, a central question is whether the existing HEIs in Eurasia respond to the current needs of their societies.

Our interviews and document studies indicate that many of the courses and study programmes that have been developed partly due to funding from the Eurasia Programme have high relevance to the needs in Eurasian partner countries.

For example, skills attained through education in accounting, budgeting and finance for the public sector in Ukraine could arguably be important in the long term while students become decision-makers and their knowledge can be used to implement political and economic reform and to combat corruption.⁵⁰ There are also other projects that may contribute to the long-term aim of political and economic reforms. For instance, through academic collaboration and mobility of staff and students in the field of e-governance and digital citizenship, EGLOVOC supports ongoing local democracy reforms in Ukraine.

The project ‘Moldova–Norwegian Collaboration

49 Isak Froumin and Yaroslav Kouzminov: *Common Legacy: Evolution of the Institutional Landscape of Soviet Higher Education*, p. 66

50 CPEA-2015/10005 Norwegian-Ukrainian cooperation in Public Sector Economy Education: Accounting, Budgeting and Finance (NUPSEE)

Program in Optometry: Enhancing Primary Eye Health Care in Moldova' has established education in optometry in Moldova, where an average of 20 optometrists graduate every year. This education is meant to continue after the project ends. Prior to the project, there was a lack of expertise in optometry in the country. Therefore, with increased competence in optometry, the impact of the project is tremendous at the individual level, enabling people who were considered practically blind to work and contribute to society.

Another project with significant aims about societal benefits or change is the 'Georgian–Norwegian Collaborative in Public Health'.⁵¹ The project is a collaboration between the Arctic University of Norway, the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU), and four Georgian network partners. The project has increased public health competence in Georgia by developing a new, international master's programme in public health with special focus on register-based epidemiology, where students are trained to analyse big data. The master's programme had its third admission of students

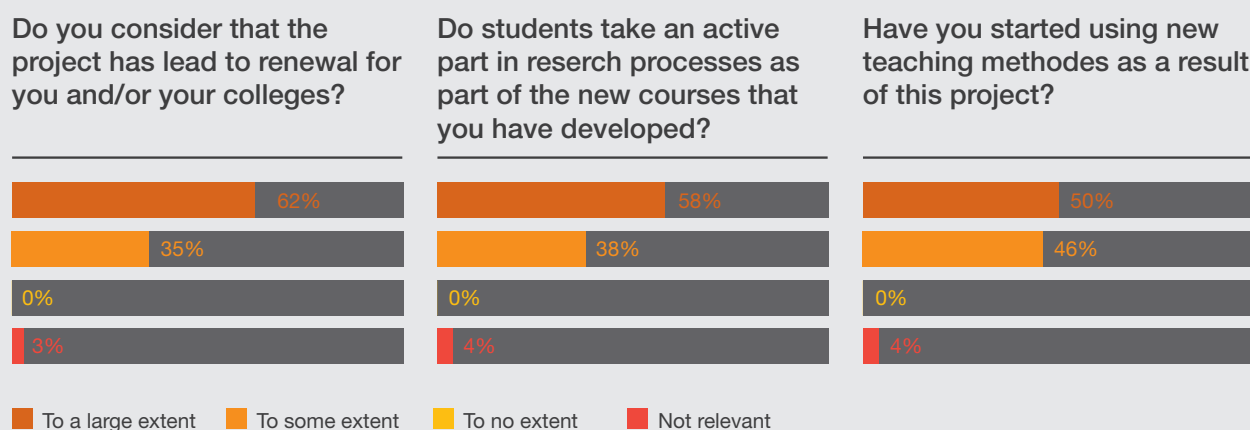
in 2020. A major achievement of the project is its contribution to the establishment of a birth registry, which has considerably helped improve maternal health and childcare in Georgia.

The Eurasia Programme has also supported a project which has helped establish a master's programme in music pedagogy in Georgia, which can revive and improve music teaching practices in the country. In addition, the project includes modernising the library at the Tbilisi state conservatory by implementing electronic systems, improving infrastructure, revising the existing doctorate programme and strengthening teacher and student mobility between the institutions.

Enhanced teaching methods and research-based education

Survey data shows that practically all project coordinators in HEIs in Eurasia report that the Eurasia Programme funded project they have taken part in had led to outcomes related to renewal of higher education, as illustrated in Figure 6 (below).

Figure 6: Perceptions of renewal of higher education in the partnering countries



The figure shows that 62 % of the project coordinators at the HEIs in Eurasia respond that the projects they have taken part in have

led to academic renewal for themselves or their colleagues to a large extent, while 35 % responded that such projects have led

51 GeNOC-PH CPEA-2015/10057

to academic renewal to some extent.⁵² This finding is corroborated in interviews with coordinators in Norway and Eurasia, where many stated that the projects they have taken part in have helped change the mindset of both teachers and students.

Survey data furthermore shows that 58 % of the project coordinators at Eurasian HEIs responded that students to a large extent take an active part in research processes as part of the new courses they have developed, while 38 % responded that students to some extent participate actively in research.

In addition, 50 % of the project coordinators at Eurasian HEIs responded that they to a large extent have started using new teaching methods as a result of the project, while 46 % responded that they have done so to some extent.

In the interviews, respondents in Eurasia explained how the projects they had participated in had led to new teaching methods. They accounted for how skills acquired through the programme were used in the teaching and supervision of graduate and postgraduate students, and several graduate students had already defended their dissertations. These interviewees added that, as the project partners often represented different academic disciplines, the project cooperation contributed to interdisciplinary linkages.

The respondents provided a wide range of examples of improvements in research-based education methods, such as in cases that involve fieldwork or writing and submitting academic papers related to the courses attended. One interviewee explained that a specific project has enabled more students to join studies on rural tourism, conducting research on the possibility of developing rural tourism products and the impact of cultural, natural and industrial heritage related to the

development of tourism. In another project, a research centre was established where they engage students in research projects as part of the courses.

Among the respondents representing Norwegian HEIs, one noted that the teaching of data mobilisation skills has enabled students and staff at partner institutions to a higher and more internationally oriented level. Another respondent stated that, as a result of the project, their partner institution has started to encourage fieldwork outside the region for their students. Summer schools on methods and joint courses within the projects have inspired new ways of teaching, new topics and future cooperation. Other respondents in the survey and the interviews shared that access to the empirical context of the Eurasian region has resulted in several publications in international journals.

Interview data and project reporting further reveal that project collaboration extends the international research networks of Eurasian researchers and increases the likelihood of successful publication. However, several project participants claim that sub-optimal proficiency in English and academic writing undermines these opportunities for publishing. Several projects have therefore started offering courses in academic writing.

Survey data shows that positive effects from the Eurasia Programme related to renewal are achieved both in partner countries and Norway. For example, 50 % of the project coordinators at HEIs in Eurasia and 27 % in Norway reported that the project has contributed to better access to research infrastructure. A total of 77 % of the project coordinators at HEIs in Eurasia and 67 % in Norway responded that the project has contributed to improved access to international research networks. Finally, 23 % of the project coordinators at HEIs in Eurasia and 20 % in Norway responded that the project

⁵² Twenty-three percent of project coordinators at HEIs in Norway responded 'to a large extent' and 63% 'to some extent' to the same question, which indicates that the Eurasia Programme has led to some degree of renewal also in Norway.

has contributed to beneficial administrative changes at their institution.

Improved links between higher education and private and public sectors

In the interviews, we found examples of private and public sector decision-makers who were involved by project partners, such as by being invited to participate in seminars and conferences for knowledge dissemination. We also found that links are being established through internships at companies.

Furthermore, links between higher education and the private and public sectors are being established through the involvement of network partners that are not HEIs. Seven of the 23 network partners who responded to the survey reported that they were involved in the project as representatives of institutions or organisations that were not HEIs. Four of them reported that the project has given them access to updated knowledge relevant to their field of operation, whereas two responded that they have established new contacts important for their organisation because of the project.

Assessments

The review finds that the Eurasia Programme has made important contributions to the development and implementation of courses, study programmes and other educational elements that are relevant to society in the partner countries. While it may be more desirable for the Eurasia Programme to support the development of new courses, in our view, one should not underestimate the positive effects of adaptation. For example, if courses were digitalised or translated into languages that more students speak and were thus made more available, their impact is likely to increase.

In the development of new study programmes, the projects sometimes encounter challenges at the institutional or national level concerning legislation. It can thus be expected that more modest steps, such as the development of joint courses, can be achieved within a project time frame. Therefore, the Eurasia Programme should perhaps encourage the development of joint courses rather than the creation of joint degrees, which is hard to implement, such as in Ukraine.

More research-based and internationally oriented education at the institutions in the partnering countries has been developed as a result of Eurasia Programme-funded projects, and academic staff from Eurasia have been receiving more training in the supervision of students and in teaching methods that involve students to a greater degree.

Furthermore, we find that the Eurasia Programme to some extent helps improve the links between higher education and the public and private sectors in the partnering countries, such as through the involvement of different levels of public authorities and students' internships at companies.

The partnerships that were established in the first programme period (2010–2015) have expanded their scope and continued their collaboration with new partners that are not HEIs. Therefore, although the extent is difficult to measure, the Eurasia Programme may have helped enhance the links between the public and private sectors to some extent.

As private and public sector decision makers are engaged — at least as an audience — such engagement may indirectly be used as a foundation for decision-making in the long run. However, it requires interest from the private and public sectors, which may be hard for the Eurasia Programme to influence.



3.4. Increased mobility

In this section, we assess achievement of the objective to increase mobility of students and staff between the partnering countries and Norway. In the previous sections, staff mobility has been identified as an important and positive feature in the projects. In the following, we focus primarily on student mobility and students' experiences from exchange programmes abroad through the Eurasia Programme.

This includes the experiences of HEIs in organising mobility, the students' challenges, learning outcomes and satisfaction with their stays abroad. In addition, we assess the Eurasia Programme's impact on the students' future careers and, as much as we can with the data, the extent and causes of brain drain potentially related to the Eurasia Programme.

Observations

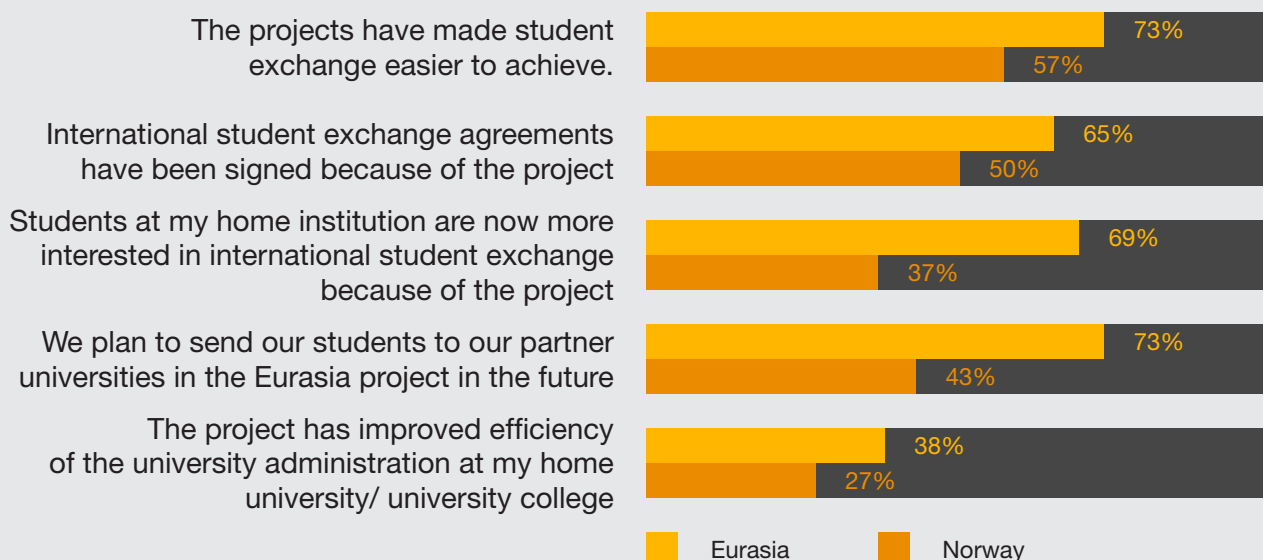
The number of students taking part in mobility is significantly higher during the current

programme period of the Eurasia Programme (1,400) than between 2010-2015 (more than 700).

Of these, Diku's statistics indicate that 24 students from Norwegian HEIs participated in student mobility to HEIs in Eurasia 2010 - 2015, as compared to more than 550 between 2016 and 2020, which is an impressive increase.

The survey data collected for this review shows that a large share of project coordinators in Norway (57 %) and Eurasia (73 %) responded that the projects they have participated in have made student mobility easier to achieve. More than half of the project coordinators reported that international student exchange agreements have been signed because of the project, as illustrated in Figure 7 (below).

Figure 7: Project results related to increased mobility



The figure shows that students at HEIs in Eurasia (69 %) and Norway (37 %) are now more interested in international student exchange because of the Eurasia Programme funded project.

In addition, 73 % of the coordinators in Eurasia

and 43 % in Norway responded that they plan to continue to send their students to their partner universities.

Furthermore, 38 % of the project coordinators at HEIs in Eurasia and 27 % in Norway revealed that collaboration related to mobility

have improved the efficiency of the university administration at their home universities or university colleges. Although the way by which efficiency has been achieved is not specified, the relatively high degree of respondents claiming that the programme had contributed to increased efficiency in university administration indicates a considerable achievement.

Interviewees confirm that the project collaboration has contributed significantly to increased mobility, which the numbers as compared to the previous programme period also confirm. The responses from the Eurasian project coordinators and network partners related to the different kinds of mobilisation offered through the projects they participated in were largely positive. For instance, some Eurasian students were enrolled for entire semesters at Norwegian HEIs or had the opportunity to participate in short-term exchanges, such as summer school programmes lasting two to four weeks. PhD students were able to both attend classes and work at Norwegian partner institutions. Students were also given the opportunity to participate in shadow practices among employers within their fields of study and to attend scientific conferences to an increased extent.

Motivation and recruitment of students for exchange stays abroad

The survey data shows that 'experiencing a different culture' was the reason mentioned by the largest number of students from HEIs in Eurasia (69 %) and Norway (84 %) for their decision to participate in the study exchange programme.

For students with home institutions in Norway, fieldwork or other data collection relevant to their studies was the second most important reason (43 %), for participating in study exchanges abroad, while one fifth (20 %) of the Norwegian students mentioned better job opportunities after completing their degrees.

More than half of the students with home institutions in Eurasia emphasised the opportunity to practise their language skills (60 %), or that the universities they travelled to offered courses that they could not take at their home universities (55 %). Furthermore, nearly half of

the students with home universities in Eurasia indicated that they were motivated by fieldwork or data collection relevant to their studies (43 %) and better job opportunities after completing their degrees (42 %).

In interviews, the fact that the stay was fully financed was mentioned as an additional deciding factor for several respondents. As one student from a Eurasian HEI said, 'I have always had this desire and goal to explore other countries and experience different cultures and learning styles. Funding was decisive when choosing Norway. *I also applied to other programmes in several countries, including Japan, but they were not fully funded, so I could not go. It's hard for me to pay for education*'.

The Norwegian students interviewed about short-term stays in Eurasian countries also said that their stays were fully funded, including travel and accommodation, which was considered important because it lowered the threshold for participation. These stays also included cultural activities that were positively regarded, while travelling in groups makes students feel safer, as mentioned by several respondents.

Attracting Norwegian students for stays in Eurasia

Increased student mobility is assumed to contribute to more awareness and knowledge about the partnering countries at Norwegian HEIs. Several project managers however referred to difficulties related to recruiting Norwegian students, particularly finding candidates willing to go on long-term stays to Eurasia. According to interviewees, a main reason for such lack of interest is that the quality of study is often assumed to be lower at Eurasian universities compared with that at Norwegian universities.

Some interviewees remarked that HEIs in Norway do not necessarily promote exchange to Eurasia sufficiently, and staff at Norwegian institutions in some cases express scepticism about the learning outcome, which could prevent students from considering exchanges to these countries.

Such attitudes were expressed directly or indirectly by other individuals consulted for this review; for example, a student advisor said, *'There's a lot of talk about quality in higher education. It's a bit of a paradox to have an exchange deal with institutions in Eurasia and claim that the quality of education is the same as in our university. The students know this, but these countries are our partners, so we don't speak negatively about them. It is not something we want to problematise externally'*.

Our data however suggest that Norwegian students participating in student exchanges in Eurasia largely consider it a positive experience afterwards, leading to an increased degree of interest in these countries and societies. As one coordinator in Norway said, *'I think most students get a positive shock when they go to Ukraine. Their feedback is that Ukraine is different from what they expected — friendly, safe, and academically interesting'*.

This positive view was confirmed by one of the Norwegian students interviewed for the review, *'If there is one thing I regret, it is that I didn't spend a full semester in Ukraine. After a week's stay in Kiev, I was left with a very positive impression. I realised I had underestimated the country, but it was too late. If I had visited Ukraine earlier, it would probably have inspired me to stay longer'*.

A student who participated in a short-term stay in Belarus expressed a similar view, talking about how much more interesting and academically fulfilling his experience was than he expected.

Current or former students interviewed for the review were asked for advice about how to attract Norwegian students for mobility stays in Eurasia. Responses included as announcing opportunities well and in a timely manner. *'Don't plan a summer programme with a deadline in May because, at that point, students will have planned to have summer jobs*

already', one respondent remarked. It was also pointed out that there should be a plan for how to announce and promote the exchange stay. Placing a notice in the common areas of universities is not enough if one expects to attract many students, according to respondents.

In the review, we also found projects that were very successful in recruiting students. In addition to strategically marketing the opportunity, these projects are within academic disciplines that use field visits as a teaching method (such as social anthropology, tourism studies and biology); thus, Eurasian countries may pose interesting opportunities. These projects strategically market the opportunity to participate in mobility exchanges to HEIs and countries visited by a few students as a positive and interesting experience in addition to the expected learning outcome. Returning students are involved in these recruitment campaigns. In some projects, the number of students applying for an exchange far exceeds the number of openings, and the selection criteria are strict. One respondent found that the Norwegian students were more willing to travel to the Eurasian region than they expected, even though these countries were not the first choice of most students.

Experiences with mobility

The survey data shows that all respondents, except two, who participated in mobility exchanges through the Eurasia Programme were satisfied or very satisfied with their stays abroad. The two students who reported they were dissatisfied with their stays were both from Norway; one of them went to Georgia and the other to Ukraine. Except from that, analysis of the results linking them to country data does not show any trend indicating that respondents traveling to certain countries were more satisfied than the others.⁵³

The high reported satisfaction with mobility exchange is corroborated by responses to open questions asking the students for further

53 Twenty-three of the student respondents participated in a study exchange stay abroad within the Eurasia region. Of these, 15 responded that they were very satisfied, and 8 said that they were satisfied.

comments. Many students from Eurasian HEIs expressed that their stay in Norway had been a life-changing experience that had changed their way of seeing the world.

Project coordinators interviewed for the review shared similar stories, emphasizing how much the opportunity to travel abroad through the Eurasia Programme meant for students from HEIs in Eurasia and how satisfied they tended to be.

When asked in the survey whether they encountered specific challenges during their mobility stays, the majority of students did not indicate that they had experienced problems. However, near half of the Norwegian students did to some or a large degree considered the academic level at the visited Eurasian HEIs to be not challenging enough.

Furthermore, around one-third of Eurasian students responded that language barriers and cultural difference posed a challenge for them to *some degree* in Norway. A main regret for many was furthermore that they felt that their stays abroad were too short. The disadvantage of short stays in Norway was also raised in several interviews with project coordinators involved in projects in Georgia and Ukraine. Short-term stays in Norway have limited academic value, as the students do not have the time to adapt to the new learning environment, as one coordinator remarked. Another coordinator stated that semester-long stays in Norway are not cost-effective in terms of visas and travel; one full year would be better.

A common experience for many international students was, according to interviewees, that they found it hard to get to know Norwegians. This was a remark from both foreign students on mobility exchange in Norway through the programme and Norwegian students and coordinators observing students from Eurasian countries in Norway. One student from a partnering country had experienced sickness while in Norway and did not receive any follow-up from the projects they were under. It had also been hard to find the way from the airport to the university campus in Norway.

Furthermore, we find that obtaining visas is difficult not only for third country students but also for Eurasian students in countries where Norway does not have an embassy or consulate. Although all costs are reimbursed, the understandable delay was also reported as a significant hurdle for students with limited financial resources.

Outcomes for students

Survey data shows that Eurasian students taking part in short-term stays reported that their stays 'to a large degree' (55 %) or 'to some degree' (31 %) had given them knowledge and skills that are needed in their home countries. Eurasian students taking part in long-term stays responded 'to a large degree' (33 %) and 'to some degree' (47 %) to the same question.

Their stays abroad also gave them better language skills; to this question, 57 % of the students taking part in short-term stays and 64 % of the students taking part in long-term stays responded 'to a large extent'. More than 90 % of the Eurasian students reported that they have gained increased knowledge about other cultures as a result of their study exchanges abroad through the Eurasia Programme.

In interviews, students from Norway who have stayed in Eurasian countries and vice versa indicated that the styles of teaching are different. The main difference reported by both Norwegian and foreign students is that the Norwegian students are used to being more independent in an educational system where critical thinking is encouraged. One student explained, *'On the Belarusian side, I think the teaching is different. I would say it is more old-fashioned and less flexible. Teachers just explain. They lack the practical exercises that they offer in Norway. In Norway, there is more freedom in teaching, and more interaction between students and lecturers'*.

Survey and interview data shows that many students are positive regarding the Norwegian style of teaching. However, it may take some time for Eurasian students to adapt and understand how to study this way.

Norwegian students who have stayed in Eurasian countries reported important factors other than the quality of study. Knowing a different culture and meeting people from different countries has many benefits that they appreciate. One of the Norwegian respondents however remarked that, in some cases, one cannot describe the quality to be better or

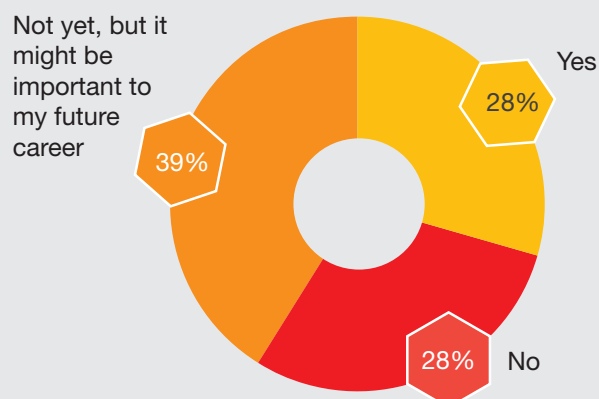
worse; teaching quality merely differs.

Survey data furthermore shows that most of the students with home institutions in both Norway and the partner countries believe that their exchange stays abroad are important for their personal career or might be important for their future career, as illustrated in the figure below.

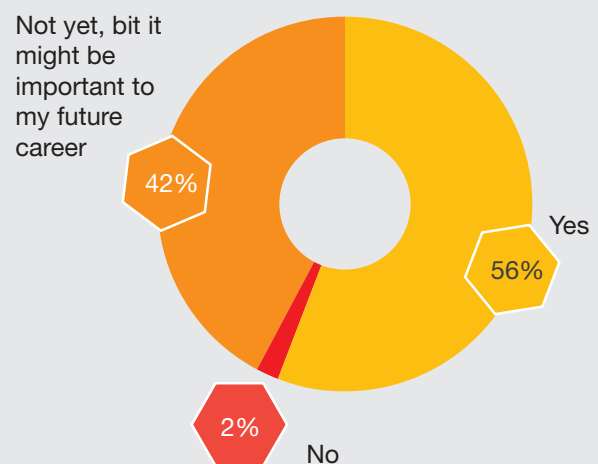
Figure 8: Survey responses from students about whether participation in the study exchange programme is important for their personal careers

Has the participation in the study exchange programme been important to your personal career?

Students from Norwegian HEIs



Students from Eurasian HEIs



In an open follow-up question on how the Eurasia Programme is important for their careers, the Norwegian respondents typically answered that it has helped them identify topics for their master's theses, which will affect the direction of their future careers. One respondent remarked that their experience from conducting fieldwork in Eurasia helped in gaining employment at a Norwegian embassy, while another shared that a certificate and the IT knowledge he or she gained through their stay abroad were relevant when applying for work and at the respondents' present workplace.

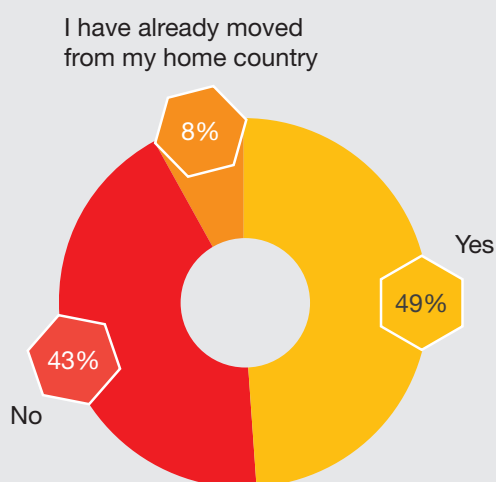
Students with home institutions in Eurasia shared examples about how they, after their study exchanges, received better job offers. One respondent wrote that the experience helped in securing employment in an international company in Ukraine. The students also stated that their participation in the programme helped develop their English-language skills, which are important for some of the respondents' work. Some respondents from Eurasia also answered that their study exchanges have given them opportunities to move abroad. As one respondent explained, *'I visited Norway for the first time through the Eurasia Programme, and now I live and work in Norway'*.

Braindrain

Work migration from the periphery of the former Soviet Union to Russia and Western Europe is massive to the extent that remittances sent by working migrants account for 25 %–30 % of the GDP of several of the countries covered by the Eurasia Programme. The effects of work migration are most imminent in Moldova, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. To map the extent of brain drain, the survey included a question for students in Eurasia about whether they plan to move or have already moved abroad. The results are presented in Figure 9 (below).

Figure 9: Overview of respondents who are considering moving to another country or have already moved following student mobility through the Eurasia Programme

Are you planning to leave your home country to move to Norway or another country?



The figure shows that near half of the respondents from Eurasian HEIs are considering leaving their home countries, while 8 % have already moved. Of these, most respondents are from Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. However, as approximately two-thirds of the respondents are from these three countries, the survey data does not reveal much about brain-drain in South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Project coordinators and network partners in Ukraine and Moldova confirmed in interviews

that brain drain is a problem in these countries. Moldova is the poorest countries in Europe, and — as for several of the other countries in this review — it is difficult to make a living on the salaries offered in academia. As remarked by a respondent from Moldova, as soon as people become educated, they leave the country to gain employment abroad. They are exasperated with the corruption in the country and thus prefer to obtain better opportunities somewhere else.

Respondents in Ukraine noted that the country has, for example, some of the best IT professionals in the world. However, these experts often move abroad, and a consequence, according to one respondent, is that the public sector in Ukraine lacks basic competence. One of the Ukrainian network partners however remarked that a positive effect of the Eurasia Programme-funded project he participated in is that it has given him the opportunity to stay in his home country. During the interview, he remarked, *‘One of the effects of the Diku project is retaining talent; in this case, it retains me in Ukraine as a talented researcher’*.

To limit the negative consequences of brain drain and increase the likelihood for students to stay in their home countries, where they are needed, one of the respondents from a Eurasian country argued that providing lower-level education for many students is better than investing large sums in PhDs for a few individuals. Other respondents however argued that it is important to support the education of more PhDs to increase the country’s level of competence in various fields.

Another respondent argued that more weight could be put on training academic staff who already have permanent positions at HEIs in Eurasia, pointing out that when they train students, they can never be sure that they will stay in their fields of study. This implies that HEIs may invest considerable resources in students who graduate and proceed doing something else. Most of the staff is however permanently employed. If they train staff, they will pass their knowledge to many other people. *‘The impact of the training will be bigger’* the respondent remarks.

Assessments

The Eurasia Programme has contributed to a significant increase of mobility between HEIs in Norway and partnering countries. For some students, the Eurasia Programme may be their only opportunity to travel abroad, and the importance of this experience is evident in this review's data, where students describe their stay abroad as a 'life-changing experience'. Fully funded exchange programmes makes it easier for more students to travel, also the ones that are not part of the elites.

Mobility in the Eurasian region traditionally occurs between post-Soviet states, particularly Russia due to the perceived higher quality of Russian education, historical ties and high numbers of Russian speakers in some of the partner countries. In particular, Belarus and Kazakhstan have close ties with Russia, while countries like Georgia and Ukraine have strained relations with Russia. Nonetheless, since 2014, Russia has been increasing financing for Ukrainian students to study in Russia. The Eurasia Programme offers an opportunity to experience higher education outside of the Russian sphere.

While mobility from Norway to HEIs in Eurasia has increased significantly since the first programme period of the Eurasia Programme, it has in some projects been challenging to attract Norwegian students. A central barrier to recruiting students from Norwegian HEIs seems to be that the countries and HEIs in Eurasia are not considered prestigious, attractive or safe. However, once in the partner country, the impression is improved, and students may become excited about returning to the partner country in the future.

For this reason, giving students the opportunity to know a country before they decide about longer stays may be fruitful. Short-term stays seem to be a low-threshold means of persuading Norwegian students to visit Eurasian countries. Likewise, full funding for stays also to Eurasia seems to be an important factor, as it reduces the barriers for participating.

Our data indicates that host institutions should follow up better with students upon their arrival in Norway. This includes arranging airport transfers, checking in on their physical and mental health and organising events where foreign and Norwegian students can interact.

In terms of brain drain, the central question is whether the Eurasia Programme helps Eurasian HEIs retain talent or the mobility exchange increases the likelihood for the participants to leave their home countries.

Our data does not reveal conclusive findings, but it is probable that the Eurasia Programme makes it easier for students to leave their home countries after they obtain international experience. At the same time, as one respondent stated, the Eurasia Programme helps retain talent by providing opportunities for academic research within a country. A question for Diku to consider is whether this can be done to an even higher degree. Could the Eurasia Programme to a larger extent contribute to other kinds of work, such as by having the projects contribute to establishing workplaces?

A primary concern for HEIs may be what they can offer their students and academic staff in terms of recruitment positions and attractive salaries. While the latter is not for the Eurasia Programme to influence, recruitment positions (tenured positions) may be encouraged within the programme structure.

While brain drain is a problem in several Eurasian countries; in some cases, having educated people abroad can also contribute positively to the partner country.

A student who works abroad may for example at some point return to their home country, bringing with them even more competence for use of their country. This may happen if, for instance, there are better future opportunities in their home country than there are today.

People working abroad furthermore often send money to their families in their home countries. Furthermore, people working

abroad may maintain networks in their home countries and develop collaboration which may have large, positive societal effects. Individuals who know the opportunities in their new countries as well as the local

contexts in their home countries have the opportunity to build a bridge. Cooperation may take place in the business sphere — in organisations and among HEIs.

3.5. Overall results and impact of project collaboration

In the previous sections, we have assessed the achievement of the Eurasia Programme's objectives, clustered into four categories: sustainable partnerships (3.1), regional cooperation (3.2), educational elements and

approaches of relevance for society (3.3.) and mobility (3.4). The table below summarises the Eurasia Programme's achievements, and shows which of the categories of objectives these achievements help fulfil.

Table 6: Achievements of the Eurasia Programme that fulfil the programme objectives

Achievements of the Eurasia Programme	Objectives fulfilled
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Partners plan to continue collaboration after the projects end, with or without external funding. › Horizon 2020 applications are developed. › Activities such as guest lecturing, co-publishing and data sharing are performed in the long run. 	Sustainable partnerships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Partnerships established in the first project period expand their scope by including new regional network partners. › Projects establish new arenas for collaboration across and within partner countries, such as seminars and conferences, thus enabling first meetings. › Data indicates that the above is a catalyst for further cooperation. 	Regional cooperation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › More courses, study programmes and degrees are developed and implemented than between 2010-2015 › Existing courses or modules are improved and/or made more widely available, for example through translation and digitalisation. › New teaching methods are applied, and students are involved in research activities › Many projects respond to needs in the partnering countries. › The projects to some extent lead to improved links between higher education and the public and private sectors. 	Educational elements and approaches of importance to society
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Larger numbers of students and staff participate in mobility than between 2010-2015 › Such mobility to some extent leads to more awareness, interest and knowledge about the partnering countries at Norwegian HEIs. 	Increased mobility

Renewal and internationalisation of higher education

The next step of the analysis is to consider whether the achievement of the objectives

contributes to the programme's overall aim, where the desired outcomes are 'to contribute to renewal and internationalisation of higher education in the partnering countries'.

For purpose of this review, we apply a revised version of a commonly accepted working definition for internationalisation:

The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society

As pointed out in a European Parliament report about higher education in the EU,⁵⁴ this definition reflects the increased awareness that internationalisation has to become more inclusive and less elitist by focusing not predominantly on mobility but more on curricula and learning outcomes. This arguably implies that mobility needs to become an integral part of the internationalised curriculum to ensure internationalisation for all, not only individuals who can travel. Furthermore, according to the author, this definition implies that internationalisation is not a goal in itself but a means to enhance the quality of higher education. Indicators of internationalisation in accordance with this definition could include:

- › International educational partnerships between institutions
- › Regional educational partnerships between institutions
- › Internationalisation of curricula and research
- › Recruitment of international students, and students, staff and scholars exchange programmes

We see that the above indicators of internationalisation are in line with the four categories of objectives applied in this review; sustainable partnerships, regional cooperation, educational elements of importance to society and mobility. We also find that ‘renewal’ could be considered a part of internationalisation when using the above definition.

Renewal of higher education is not clearly defined by Diku, but our understanding is that it refers to internationalisation of curricula and more research-based education in the Eurasian partner countries (possibly also encompassing institutional change and reforms related to the Bologna process).

We find that fulfilment of the objectives leads to internationalisation of higher education in the partnering countries in several ways.

- › Establishment of sustainable educational partnerships internationally and regionally supporting integration in the European higher research area
- › Increased levels of research-based education, including new teaching methods
- › Renewal of curricula, courses and study programmes
- › Increased students’ participation in research projects
- › Broader recruitment of international students
- › Institutional change

In our assessment, sustainable partnerships contributes to renewal and internationalisation because it is a precondition for achieving the other objectives and because it leads to extended collaboration under other funding mechanisms.

Regional collaboration contributes to internationalisation through for instance the involvement of several HEIs and other stakeholders in the region in development

54 European Parliament (2015) Internationalisation of higher education (2015) [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU\(2015\)540370_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU(2015)540370_EN.pdf) p. 29.

of courses and study programmes, which implies synergies and that new material and approaches are spread.

Development and implementation of educational elements and approaches of relevance to society contributes to renewal of higher education in several ways, including institutional change related to the Bologna process. We find that the Eurasia Programme contributes to that students in Eurasia may take courses and study programmes in their home countries where they can learn from international experiences and best practices. This contributes to internationalisation not only for the students participating in mobility but also for other students. As the number of students who can travel is limited, changes at Eurasian home institutions are likely to affect more people.

While we have little data on this, the Eurasia Programme possibly also contributes to building capacity to attract more international students from Western countries. HEIs in Eurasia may not have competence themselves to establish courses that can attract international students. They may be able to establish courses in English, but they may not have enough students to make the investment viable.

We find that mobility stays through the Eurasia Programme contribute to improving the English-language skills of students and staff. This is important in the educational sphere, where one has to cooperate with foreign partners and obtain access to information and data that are of relevance to their field. It is also important in a broader sense, as it gives access to various elements, such as reading and understanding foreign media, and thus new ideas and ways of seeing the world.

Impacts on broader society

Finally, we assess whether renewal and internationalisation of higher education in Eurasia are a means to producing a broader societal impact, such as by providing a 'basis for political and economic reforms, stimulating sustainable development, enhancing the education of individuals and increasing respect for human rights'.

From our understanding of the programme theory, the objectives of the Eurasia Programme do not necessarily need to lead *directly* to the desired impacts; they merely have to contribute to them, which minimally would imply a slight push in the right direction.

It is hard to establish a direct causal link between the outcome of the programme and the provision of a basis for the desired societal impacts. Furthermore, some of the effects may not materialise in the short term but can be achieved in the long term. The fact that the programme runs until 2021 implies that one cannot expect all the effects of the programme to have been realised by the time of this review.

At the same time, the data collected and analysed for this review makes it possible to identify several long-term effects that one may deem probable on individuals, institutions and broader society.

Individual level

The Eurasia Programme first and foremost encourages broader interaction with and understanding of the outside world. By establishing contacts and increasing mobility the programme helps give partners an understanding of how Norwegian institutions and political system function. This gives the partners a chance to identify possibilities for their own countries.

There is little doubt that the Eurasia Programme has a tremendous effect on individuals. While many Norwegian students have many choices of countries they can study in and can select top universities internationally, the opportunities are fewer for Eurasian students. This may be due to a lack of required academic qualifications, language skills, visa issues and in some cases costs. This review's data indicates that the opportunity to study in Norway and learn about its academic culture is decisive for the future of many students.

For students who stay in their home countries, the increased competence and new perspectives gained through renewal of education with excellent learning outcomes and mobility are likely to spread in the long term, such as when

students become future decision makers in the public and private spheres in their countries. This could have a positive impact on certain aspects of the programme's overall aims, such as contributing to social and economic reform, sustainable development and increased respect for human rights.

Increased respect for human rights might be achieved by observing and experiencing new ways of thinking and seeing the world. For example, a host country may set an example related to gender equality and inclusion of minority groups, among others.

A challenge for the programme is whether it can help competence be developed and maintained within the partnering countries, as for some students, mobility opportunities offered through the Eurasia Programme are an important step towards moving abroad permanently.

Institutional level

We find that the Eurasia Programme contributes to institutional change, and in this sense underpins and supports Bologna-related processes at Eurasian HEIs. The Bologna process is what makes it possible to envisage common courses across countries, as a common structure has been established, and regulations about e.g. how study points are counted. This implies that students should be able to select studies and courses abroad without too large hindrances

We note that almost 40 % of respondents at Eurasian HEIs answered that the project collaboration related to mobility has led to improved efficiency of university administration (see section 3.4). In addition, our interview data sheds light on how some respondents perceive institutional change to have occurred also in other ways. Several interviewees stated that it largely took place as a by-product of collaboration on courses and study programmes across countries. This includes a gradual and partly standardisation of academic calendars, implementation of ECTS and mobility measures, where one has adapted existing frameworks to new ones. Although the data does not allow us to be very conclusive, this probably implies that the Eurasia Programme

contributes to building capacity to attract international students also from Western countries. Many interviewees expressed gratitude for the opportunity for cooperation with and learning from Norwegian institutions.

Societal level

As data regarding net ODA received per capita indicates, some countries are more used to international collaboration than others. Most of the countries with the highest levels of ODA, such as Armenia, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, are also among the most democratic in the region.

The increased internationalisation of HEIs in these countries contributes further by opening up the institutions to international collaboration and mobility exchange of students and staff. Our assessment indicates that project collaboration in the above-mentioned countries in addition to Moldova and Ukraine, involves less risks compared with those in more authoritarian countries.

In terms of broader societal impacts, some crucial positive short-term changes have been identified, such as the programme's contributions in Georgia to the creation of a birth registry, and a master's programme in music pedagogy established, which has the potential to revive and improve music teaching practices in the country. In addition to the wider societal effects this project has, this project — among many others — contributes to reaching the expected impact related to increasing the level of education of the population by educating teachers in music pedagogy.

In Moldova, the Eurasia Programme has contributed to establishing permanent education in optometry and in improving library services in Moldova. As pointed out in section 3.3. projects in the portfolio of the Eurasia Programme also include educational elements which are relevant to combat corruption and supporting ongoing local democracy reforms in Ukraine.

We furthermore find examples of project which have contributed to sustainable development, for example the project 'BioDATA, Biodiversity Data for Internationalization in

Higher Education'⁵⁵ This project is a collaborative effort between the University of Oslo and Tajikistan, with network partners in Norway, Ukraine, Belarus and Armenia. The project has worked to create datasets on vital genetic and biological resources and diversity in a range of Eurasian countries, and. data from these countries is important for addressing the global loss of valuable biodiversity.

The network project 'Water Harmony – Integration of Education, Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurship (Water Harmony II)' also contributes to sustainable development.⁵⁶ This project is a collaboration between NMBU and the Ukrainian State University of Chemical Technology, with 11 network partners from Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

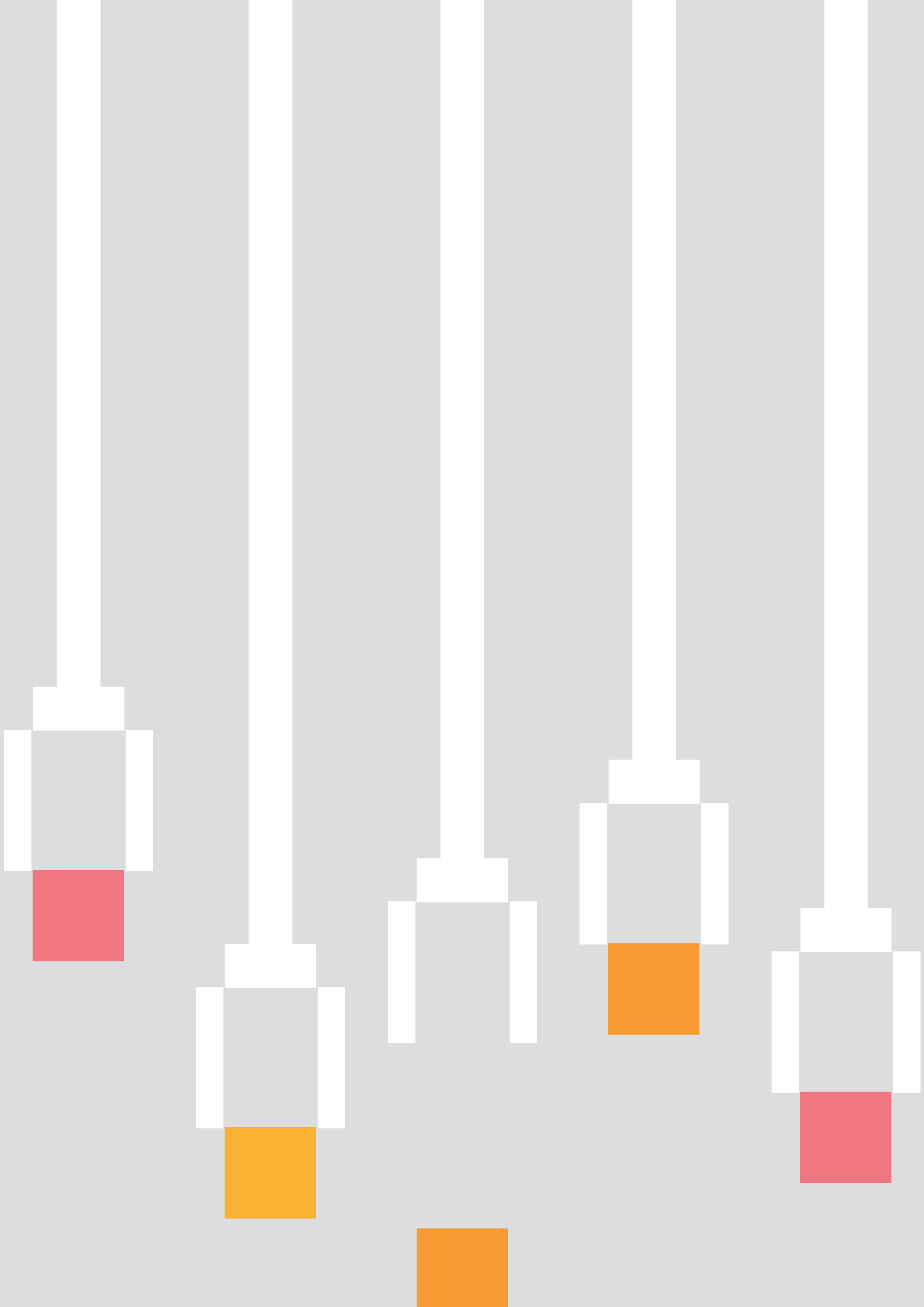
The above examples are likely to provide valuable contributions to the fulfilment of three of the long-term goals and various aspects related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In general, we find that the project portfolio contributes with important knowledge, thus increasing the likelihood of producing positive impacts in terms of political reforms, sustainable development and an increased level of education. Although this relationship cannot be deemed causal in a strict sense, we believe that the contributions in several projects are actually and potentially impressive.



55 CPEA-LT-2016/10140

56 CPEA-2015/10036



Management and hierarchy of goals

4.1 Diku's administration of the Eurasia Programme

This chapter focuses on the management of the Eurasia Programme, including Diku's role as an administrator. We have collected data about Diku's performance in programme administration in terms of calls for proposals, evaluation of applications, follow-up of projects and reporting. Are there elements in the Eurasia Programme structure that should be revised or changed to achieve a broader impact and/or a more cost-efficient administration? To answer whether Diku has sufficient resources, capacities, competence and organisational infrastructure to manage and administer the Eurasia Programme, we assess Diku's management as outlined in chapter 2.

All the interviewed project coordinators were asked about Diku's management of the programme and their interaction with Diku. In addition, there were several questions about Diku's administration of the Eurasia Programme that project coordinators in Norway and partner countries were asked in the electronic survey. We also assessed the reports Diku received from projects and the reports Diku has submitted to the MFA.

Observations

Calls for proposals

In the current programme period, there have been ten calls for proposals. These include separate calls for long-term projects, short-term projects and seed funding. When Diku chose such a large number of calls for proposals, the justification was twofold.

- › **Increased attention:** There is a desire both in the MFA and Diku to have regular calls for proposals because this attracts more attention in the HEI sector.
- › **Increased quality:** Applicants who receive feedback on their applications have a chance to improve them and apply again with better proposals.

With this large numbers of calls and projects, many HEIs develop contacts and their knowledge of the Eurasian region. In the project managers' survey and interviews, however, several respondents stated that it would have been an advantage to have fewer and larger projects. Several respondents suggested that at least some projects should have a five-year duration: *'It would have been better with a smaller number of bigger projects in terms of funding'*. However, some interviewees stated that even small projects may have a large impact, such as the COSO project mentioned previously.

Interestingly, rather than pointing at insufficient funding, several respondents stated that there was insufficient time to complete all the planned activities. In some cases, there were delays due to administrative routines, delays in implementing activities or gathering of institutional support in partner countries.

While the overall impression is that the project coordinators were satisfied with Diku and the setup of the Eurasia Programme, several suggestions and comments were raised in the interviews and the survey. These did not lean systematically towards any specific direction; most were satisfied with the application process and budgeting, but a few thought that the required budgeting is too detailed. Several respondents suggested bigger projects.

Taken together, the different calls for proposals have enabled prospective applicants to select the project type that fits their institutions best, and they have allowed Diku to support a broad range of project types (short term, long term, seed funding, etc.). This feature may have made the Eurasia Programme better known and more relevant to Norwegian and Eurasian HEIs.

Review and selection of projects

The evaluation process of projects is thorough, with board meetings once a year for funding decisions. Some board members wish they had the capacity to be more involved in evaluating the project proposals. Clearly, the board to a large degree relies on proposal assessments by external and internal evaluators, with a limited opportunity to delve deeper into each proposal themselves. It was also stated that it is important to ensure the board has at least one student representative, especially as student mobility is an important part of many projects.

From interviews with board members and project coordinators with considerable experience in Eurasia, we note that internal evaluators are sometimes perceived to conduct more thorough and coherent reviews of proposals than the external evaluators. From the document studies of the proposal reviews, we observe that reviews are largely pertinent and thorough; in particular, internal reviews have a consistently high quality.

Reporting and budgeting

The general feedback from the interviews is that the annual reporting works well. Although it is considered too detailed by some, others reported that this is important for the progress of the projects. Frequency of reporting is satisfactory. One respondent remarked that to report once a year keep partners on track with information needed for reports and reimbursements. The flexibility exercised by Diku was mentioned as a positive factor by several respondents. For example, when one project could not involve as many students as planned, they were allowed to transfer funds to the next year. Several respondents compared Diku's administration to EU funding, where there is less flexibility.

One interviewee remarked that faster approval of project reports would be beneficial, as this would enable the coordinator to have a better overview of the financial situation at an earlier stage, thus making it easier to plan and prioritise for the coming year.

We find Diku's annual reporting about the Eurasia Programme to the MFA to be thorough and in line with the formal requirements

from the agreement. About the less formal involvement of the MFA, we observe that the capacity for project involvement among Norwegian embassy staff in Eurasia varies between countries. However, some embassy representatives expressed a desire for additional information about the projects and activities. Programme coordinators should be advised that the embassies may be helpful in different ways: *'We are interested in knowing about things related to Norway that happen here, and we may be able to contribute positively to the project cooperation'*.

For the current programme period, Diku introduced an activity-based budget. Earlier, the applicants were asked to describe activities and milestones and to indicate how much they expected to spend on different activities in total. The current approach implies budgeting for each activity. Diku and the respondents in the interviews with the project coordinators stated several benefits. For instance, one coordinator in a project involving many network partners stressed that it is much easier to calculate a budget sorted by activity rather than budgeting per university, as they did before.

Some respondents find it unrealistic to know exactly how much they will spend, such as for a flight ticket four years from now and referred to the budgeting process as guesswork.

A specific suggestion from a Norwegian project coordinator is to have the sums in the budget in one template; in this manner, updates in accordance with changes in other posts are all in one place. The descriptions of the activities could be in a separate template.

Individual reviews of implementation and Diku's advisory services

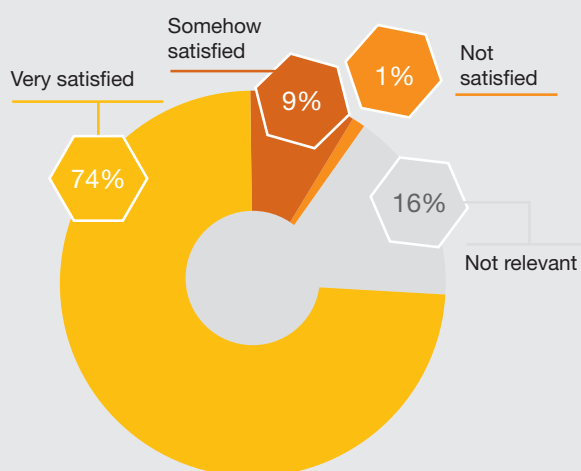
We find that Diku is regularly in contact with project coordinators in Norway and Eurasia, and individual reviews of project implementation are conducted, such as by field visits to Eurasia. Diku was repeatedly described as a flexible donor, with good contextual knowledge about Eurasia and the institutional and societal settings in the region. The project coordinators shared positive stories about monitoring visits from Diku, where they, for example, organised

meetings with students to hear about their experiences with mobility exchange. Several project coordinators reported that they have a low threshold for asking for advice or raising relevant issues with staff at Diku. As one respondent put it, 'It has been a very nice experience with Diku. They are flexible and available to discuss every time we have a problem'.

In the survey, project coordinators from Norwegian and Eurasian HEIs were asked about their level of satisfaction with Diku's advisory services, see Figure 10 (below).

Figure 10: Level of satisfaction with Diku's advisory services

How satisfied are you with Diku's advisory service?



The finding that that 74 % of the respondents are 'very satisfied' with Diku's advisory service are corroborated by the interviews with the project coordinators and network partners. Diku's administration of the Eurasia Programme was highly positively assessed by practically all the stakeholders interviewed for this review. Many of the responses to the open-ended questions in the surveys for the project coordinators, network partners and students included messages addressed to Diku (and Norwegian HEIs) expressing satisfaction and gratitude for

enabling the project cooperation.

The meetings and conferences for sharing project experiences were positively regarded by the participants. For example, the Eurasia Programme's mid-term conference in 2019 was described as a 'very inspirational platform', where the project participants were able to share their achievements and see the achievements of others.

However, as mentioned in section 3.1, this review finds cases where individuals involved in the projects were not affiliated with the institutions listed as their affiliations and where network partners did not feel sufficiently involved. Some respondents therefore suggested increased control with the projects.

Project coordinators at Norwegian HEIs recommended that Diku use common terminology with EU programs so that they do not need to determine differences in the objectives, goals, results, deliverables, impacts and outcomes of different programs.

It was also pointed out that it is important to clarify certain systemic problems with student and staff mobility well in advance: *'We would have shaped our application differently had we been aware of the discrepancies in study credits. This should be dealt with centrally by the university and Diku'*, a coordinator in Norway remarked.

Diku was furthermore encouraged to give Norwegian project coordinators advice on money transfer, which tends to be problematic. It was suggested that Diku provide more funds for academic writing courses for teachers and students in partner countries, infrastructure development and dissemination, and participation of students and teachers at international conferences.

Project coordinators from HEIs in Eurasia also encouraged Diku to contact and interview project partners more often and to organise more visits to partner institutions. A coordinator in Eurasia also advised Diku to learn more about the legal differences between the countries involved in the program, particularly

the issue of international transfer of funds and their taxation. *‘The option of transferring some funding to project partner countries is very important to make collaboration productive’*, a project coordinator in Eurasia remarked.

Assessments

Our overall assessment is that Diku’s administration of the Eurasia Programme functions exceptionally well.

In our assessment, Diku clearly satisfies the reporting requirements in its agreement with the MFA. The calls for proposals and information about these are timely and relevant. Diku has institutional and individual capacity and competence to provide relevant, high-quality advice to project implementers.

Based on our observations, we consider that the reviewing and evaluation process can be improved, particularly regarding the competence and engagement of the external evaluators. Diku may assess whether there is a need to use more resources on this aspect to increase the likelihood of fair and transparent funding decisions.

Diku provides good reporting measures for the project coordinators. There seems to be various benefits related to the activity-based budgeting that the Eurasia Programme has introduced. However, as the respondents stated, the current application form is not well adapted to this budgeting; thus, it may be relevant for Diku to review its current system. This may be done in cooperation with Norwegian project coordinators to gather their experience as users.

It may be fruitful for Diku to involve the board of the Eurasia Programme to a larger degree than it does today, such as by inviting board members to start-up seminars and mid-term project meetings, and to be involved in cases where there are changes in the projects. It would be important for the board to learn how former allocations of funding have functioned. If the board is actively involved throughout the projects, this may inform future selection processes positively.

In general, more is to be expected from long-term projects than those from short-term

ones. Several respondents suggested that larger projects in terms of funding and durability should be supported in the next programme period. At the same time, there have been examples where short-term projects have made an impact. One example of a low-cost, short-term project that has had an impact among the involved institutions is the COSO project, which applies internal control systems to the HEIs participating in the network project. It is thus not given that supporting long-term projects render more impacts.

As mentioned in chapter 1.3, the reform efforts of the Ukrainian HEI sector are not fully implemented, and serious challenges remain at several institutions. HEI-specific challenges related to plagiarism and lack of a research culture are a testament to the importance of several Eurasia Programme-supported projects’ inclusion of elements related to research ethics, publication practices and aims to improve written English skills. In this regard, we find that the current project portfolio has valuable contributions, but their systematic inclusion in all projects could still be improved.

Rather than announcing specific calls for short- and long-term projects, Diku may have regular calls for proposals with durations of two to four years and funding of NOK 0.5 million to 4 million. This is a more flexible approach to announcing calls for proposals, as it allows possible applicants to adjust project duration and size according to needs and capacity. It might also be considered whether internal threshold criteria for larger projects may be included in the calls for proposals, such as by demanding that projects above NOK 2 million should include the education of PhD candidates, recruitment strategies at Eurasian HEIs and similar factors. In addition, seed funding for establishing contacts can be run as open calls, i.e. without specific deadlines, to allow for flexibility.

By accepting new applicants, Diku can expand the scope of the programme and enhance the long-term results and effects. The Eurasia Programme is also likely to become more known at HEIs in Norway if more institutions and individuals could be involved.

Positive results and effects can however also be achieved if Diku supports proposals from established partnerships, i.e. partners that have overcome administrative hurdles and — as part of their collaboration — discovered how an even larger impact can be made in new projects.

To address the challenges encountered by several projects with major plans for joint programmes or double degrees, a

pre-feasibility study would have made it possible to identify and counter challenges that may later hinder successful project implementation. An interviewee suggested that pre-feasibility studies should be mandatory for all new applicants for funding through the Eurasia Programme. At least, Diku may — to an even larger degree than today — encourage applicants to use the opportunity to get to know the partners better before entering into partnerships.

4.2 Programme structure and hierarchy of goals

We now turn to the Eurasia Programme model of objectives and impacts to assess whether they should be changed.

Observations

As accounted for in section 1.2, the Eurasia Programme consists of very different projects; long-term projects have up to 6 million NOK in funding, while short-term projects are funded 300,000 NOK. Some of the projects were entirely new when they received funding, while others were built from former projects, e.g. though expanding geographically and including additional network partners. Some projects are bilateral, while others have several network partners. The review finds that the current programme structure is flexible; it is open for a variety of calls and for Norwegian HEIs to apply with projects that greatly differ in length, goal and impact.

Interviewees indicated that, in the first programme period, there was greater effort to link project results directly to the overall goals. For example, Diku looked specifically into aspects related to human rights, the environment and gender. However, it was challenging to measure, operationalise and review whether the projects contributed to the achievement of these goals.

Diku have in some call texts adapted the goal structure slightly. As explained to the review team, the sentence formulating the overall goal was originally long and broad. Thus, Diku has on some occasions shortened it and only referred to the 'renewal and internationalisation

of higher education in the partnering countries' as the overall goal.

Several objectives in the goal structure of the Eurasia Programme are overlapping. For instance, it is difficult to find a meaningful distinction between objectives 3 and 5, which are both related to the labour market and societal relevance. The specificity of the objectives varies significantly (e.g. to establish long-term partnerships vs developing courses and study programmes of relevance to the labour market).

The overlap between the objectives is also revealed in Diku's own annual report for 2019, where objectives 3 and 5 are reported together, as are objectives 7 and 8. Meanwhile, objective 6 is largely fulfilled through the other objectives, such as that related to student mobility (objective 8). Objective 6 is the objective that the fewest projects explicitly contribute to. Interview data nuances this slightly, as project coordinators stressed that involvement in international collaboration indirectly contributes to internationalisation and hence the fulfilment of this objective. Therefore, there is sometimes a significant overlap between some of the objectives.

According to Diku, what is emphasised is *qualities* in the cooperation, *complementariness* and *length of cooperation* as well as *results after the projects ended* in addition to the need for specific academic development in Eurasia. In other words, the focus is on societal impacts in a broader sense. In the current programme

period, Diku has an agreement with the MFA for each call for proposals. However, the call for proposals does not include everything that is part of the framework agreement with the MFA.

A risk related to making the goals too specific was mentioned: one risks alienating prospective applicants if the calls for proposals are narrow. Interviews with key stakeholders indicated that there has never been an expectation from the MFA that each individual project should realise the goals. However, the programme is assumed to have the kind of effects described at an aggregated level.

Assessments

We note that within Erasmus +, Eurasia is not considered as a region together, rather it is separated between the Eastern partnership countries and Central Asia. This would also be possible for Diku. It may enable a better synergy with Erasmus + while also being more nuanced than the currently politically charged term Eurasia, which is obscuring the vast differences in the region.

We consider the project portfolio's geographical spread is quite balanced. It is natural for HEIs in countries with repressive regimes (such as Azerbaijan and Belarus) to be involved to a lesser extent than open countries (such as Armenia, Georgia and Moldova), at least from the perspective of a Norwegian coordinator, who has to consider where a good partnership may have the best chances of being established, i.e. with fewer anticipated challenges and risks. While it is important to encourage collaboration with HEIs in countries with less involvement in the current project portfolio, Diku could consider targeting specific calls for these countries. This, however, has to be balanced against the aim to attract as many proposals as possible.

Given the relative quality of disciplines within technology and the natural sciences among Eurasian HEIs, Norwegian HEIs favour cooperation within such disciplines rather than in, for instance, the social sciences, which seems to be slightly underrepresented in the portfolio.

Some of the existing programme objectives

are overlapping, and a reorganisation of objectives into fewer objectives will be reasonable for several reasons. While it is natural that many projects contribute to several objectives, this overlap between several of the objectives obscures how projects contribute to the various goals. It may also make it more difficult to identify the projects that should be prioritised in future calls and selection processes.

Furthermore, the objectives are not *operationalised* in a way that clarifies how and to what degree one may conclude that a project has been 'successful' in reaching its goals. As of today, the objectives are largely activity based. Thus, while one may count the meetings and courses that have been implemented, this is largely a quantitative exercise that does not necessarily reveal whether the activities will produce the intended results.

In our assessment, one should also define and operationalise core concepts in the overall aim. The desired outcomes of the overall aim — 'renewal' and 'internationalisation' of higher education and broader societal effects — may be achieved indirectly. However, if one can execute changes in the goal structure, a clearer link between the goals and the projects may be achieved.

A challenge is to operationalise the objectives to something more tangible without necessarily limiting the scope of the projects in the programme. In our view, there is room for significant improvement with limited effort.

Suggestion for new goal structure

One way of simplifying the goal structure is to cluster the objectives into four categories in a way similar to what we do in this review (section 2.1).

Objectives 1 and 2 may be kept separately, as they are today. However, objectives 3, 4 and 5 are related to each other and may thus be clustered together into one category, such as one labelled 'development and implementation of educational elements of relevance to society'.

As objective 7 is assumed to follow from

objective 8, we suggest removing this objective from the goal structure. As of today, objective 7 has a limited connection to the overall aim of the Eurasia Programme, which is to contribute to desired outcomes in the partnering countries', not in Norway.⁵⁷

As objective 6 transverses several other objectives, we suggest removing it from the list of objectives and incorporating it into the goal structure in a different way. It can also be totally removed and instead considered in relation to the assessment of 'internationalisation in the partnering countries'.

Diku should adopt whichever approach that is suitable in light of their experience, considering how they can move from assessing numbers of activities to the quality of the results. This may be done in cooperation with stakeholders of the Eurasia Programme.

The formulation of the overall aim can also be simplified, for example; 'the overall aim of the Eurasia Programme is to contribute to the internationalisation of higher education in the partnering countries as a means to provide a basis for sustainable development'.

We suggest the term 'sustainable development' to describe the desired impact of the programme. We suggest that the Eurasia Programme in the next programme period link its desired broader impacts to the UN SDGs. SDGs 4, 5, 8 and 16 may be of particular relevance to the Eurasia Programme.

'Renewal' of education is removed from the suggestion because it may be considered a sub-category of 'internationalisation', as discussed in section 3.5. In our assessment, the definition applied for this review corresponds well with the Eurasia Programme and with Norwegian policy on internationalisation in higher education.



⁵⁷ This does not imply that the Eurasia Programme should not contribute to quality enhancement in Norwegian higher education. However, the effects and results in Norway are currently not included in the programme's overall aim.



Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter contains general concluding remarks and provides recommendations for possible adjustments in the Eurasia Programme beyond 2021.

The project portfolio of the Eurasia Programme contributes significantly to the objectives. The first programme period of the Eurasia Programme (2010–2015) opened up for cooperation between Norway and the Eurasian partner countries. The collaboration and scope of course development and implementation, study programmes and other educational elements, as well as the mobility of students and staff, have been expanded in the current project period.

By achieving the objectives, the Eurasia Programme also clearly contributes to the desired outcomes ‘renewal and internationalisation of higher education in the cooperating countries’, as discussed in section 3.5.

One may question whether the Eurasia Programme has too ambitious goals in terms of the desired broader societal impact. It is currently hard to establish a direct causal link between the outcomes of the programme and providing a basis for political and economic reforms, stimulating sustainable development, increasing the level of education of the population and increasing respect for human rights.

However, according to a qualitative assessment of the data collected for this review, we have reason to argue that the Eurasia Programme contributes not only to the renewal and internationalisation of higher education but also to societal change in some Eurasian partner countries. In our assessment, the Eurasia Programme has achieved impressive results within the projects, especially given the limited funding available for each project.

In terms of broader societal impacts, significant positive changes have been identified even in the short run. These include contributing to the establishment of a birth registry in Georgia and

the initiation of permanent optometry education in Moldova.

The Eurasia Programme enables broader interaction with and understanding of the outside world in a region where the cultural and political influence of Russia is significant. By establishing contacts, the programme provides partners with an understanding of how institutions work in Norway and how democratic institutions have been developed here. This gives the partners a chance to identify possibilities for their own countries.

The Eurasia Programme has contributed to increased competence in academic research and publishing, wider access to data and improved language skills, thus allowing project participants to be part of international research networks.

The data collected for this review indicates that participation in mobility has an important and positive influence on students’ careers. In the longer term, the effects of the programme may have an impact at the national level due to the spread of competence and new perspectives attained through higher education and mobility stays abroad, i.e. as some students become future decision makers in the public and private spheres.

In our assessment, a challenge for the programme is whether it can facilitate competence being developed and maintained in the partnering countries, as some students use the mobility offered through the Eurasia Programme as an opportunity for moving abroad permanently.

The Eurasia Programme also contributes to institutional changes in the partner countries. There is an ongoing generational change where younger resources are gaining influence at HEIs, which so far have been dominated by staff born and educated in the Soviet Union. This review finds high enthusiasm and eagerness to change among stakeholders in

partner countries, where many exert effort and time for Eurasia Programme-funded projects even without any economic compensation.

While institutional and societal change is taking place in partner countries, one should be careful to assume that large-scale change can be realistically expected even from a long-term perspective. The cultural-political heritage from the Soviet past remains strong. There are also social, political and economic factors outside the control of the Eurasia Programme which limit what can be achieved, such as conflicts between or within partner countries, poverty and corruption.

This review finds that Norwegian HEIs have experience that is valuable for project partners to learn from and which are highly appreciated by the partners. In selecting projects, Diku should nevertheless be cautious with applications where the main approach is to implement solutions that have functioned in Norway, i.e. in a different institutional context, under the assumption that the approaches will function the same way in countries with considerable corruption and informal practices.

Diku's management of the programme is well tuned and based on significant contextual knowledge. However, this review finds overlapping objectives in the goal structure, which may restrict the opportunities Diku has to conduct proactive portfolio management.

What Diku must keep in mind when planning the next programme period is not primarily how to change the programme but how to maintain the significant goal achievement and high satisfaction among stakeholders of the Eurasia Programme during the current project period.

Recommendations for increased impact and fulfilment of objectives

Sustainable partnerships

To enable strong and lasting partnerships, we recommend that Diku continue to provide arenas where project coordinators can develop their contextual and regional competence through the sharing of experiences and best practices, such as seminars and conferences. Diku may also consider incentivising long-term

projects to develop their education and research consortia to apply for the EU's Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ or other international funding mechanisms for collaboration.

Increased regional collaboration

To increase the quality of regional collaboration, Diku should ensure that all network partners are provided with sufficient opportunities to communicate directly with Diku to increase its knowledge of a given project's results and impact among the network partners. This may be performed, for example, during field visits or through individual telephone or video conferences where the main partners are not present to allow for better opportunities for network partners to voice their opinions and possible concerns.

Courses, study programmes and other educational elements

Diku should particularly consider in the internal review phase the institutional anchoring of project proposals that involve the establishment of joint courses and study programmes to avoid unrealistically ambitious plans.

Diku may consider whether all courses and study programmes for the future shall develop contingency plans for digital teaching. In this regard, Diku should also assess obstacles to digital teaching in Eurasia.

To foster improved research culture among academic staff and students, Diku may encourage projects to counter issues with plagiarism, etc by establishing courses in research ethics, publishing rules (i.e. the Vancouver rules for authorship' etc) and academic English.

Mobility of staff and students

To increase the mobility of students from Norwegian HEIs, Diku may identify and communicate the advantages offered by mobility exchanges in Eurasia for their education.

Diku may also identify best practices and issue guidelines on the recruitment, marketing and announcement of student mobility programmes.

To avoid the risk of contributing to ‘brain drain’, projects should develop approaches to help retain talent in the partnering countries such as developing a qualifications and recruitment plan for academic positions.

Diku’s administration and management

We recommend that Diku review the programme objectives to avoid significant overlaps between the objectives and to clarify the link between the objectives and the overall aim, thus enabling improved goal achievement. We also suggest that Diku operationalise the objectives to facilitate the assessment of goal achievement.

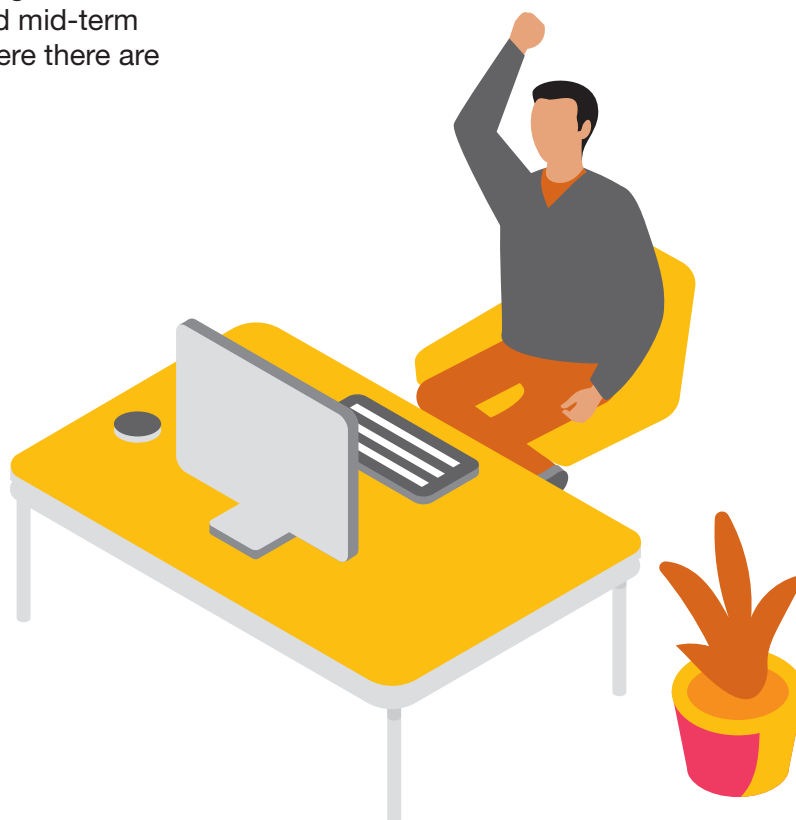
Diku may consider improving the review process for project proposals, particularly by looking into the competence and engagement of the external evaluators and considering whether there is a need to secure a more even and standardised review process, thus increasing the likelihood of fair and transparent funding decisions.

Diku may consider involving the board of the Eurasia Programme to a greater extent than it currently does, such as by inviting board members to start-up seminars and mid-term project meetings and in cases where there are changes in the projects.

To optimise its project portfolio Diku may announce calls for proposals with more flexibility, for instance with minimum and maximum duration and funding available, rather than calls with fixed project categories.

Diku may also consider distinguishing its calls and portfolio between the Eastern Partnership and Central Asia, to be more in line with categories within Erasmus +. The name of the programme may be changed accordingly to the ‘Eastern partnership and Central Asia programme (EPCA)’.

When planning the next programme period Diku should keep in mind the high satisfaction with the project results and administration of the Eurasia Programme among practically all stakeholders in the current project period. Instead of making too many changes, Diku should first ensure that practices that work today are maintained and followed up.





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This list comprises an overview of the documents that have been used as sources in the review. The documents surveyed as part of the desk study (project proposals, reports, etc.) are not listed here.

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Annex 2: Methodology and background data

Surveys

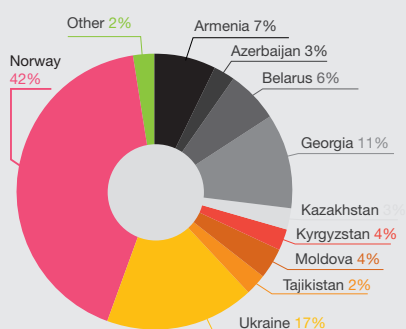
The electronic survey for project coordinators and network partners and the electronic survey for students contained several background questions about the respondents and the projects or mobility they participated in.

Traits of project managers and network partners participating in the surveys

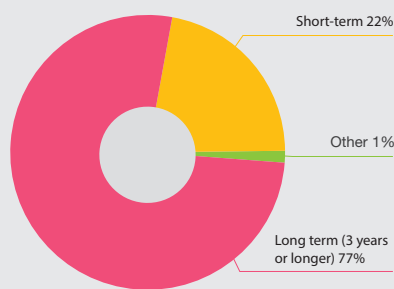
In the survey for project managers and network partners, the respondents were asked to name which country the institution or organisation they represent is located in, the length of their project and the academic field of the project they participated in through the Eurasia Programme. The responses are presented in Figure 11 (below).

Figure 11: Location of institution, length of project and academic field of the project collaboration

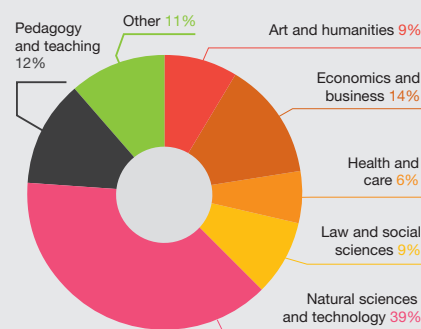
In what country is your institution located?



What is the length of your project?



What is the academic field of the project you are participating in through the Eurasia programme?



The figure shows that project coordinators and network partners located in all the countries taking part in the Eurasia Programme are included in the survey's selection. The representation in the survey is to a large degree in line with Diku's reporting on the location of main partners, where the largest number

of projects have Eurasian main partners — Ukraine with 24 projects, Armenia with 8 projects and Georgia with 7 projects.⁵⁸

When looking into the geographical distribution of the 23 network partners who responded to the survey (this is not illustrated in the

figure), we find that 5 were located in Norway, 4 in Ukraine, 3 in each of Armenia, Georgia and Belarus, one in Kazakhstan and one in Moldova. One of the network partners did not answer which country his or her institution or organisation was located in, while two answered 'other'. This implies a broad geographical distribution among the network partners who responded to the survey. All in all, the relative coherence between the geographical distribution in the survey and in the total project portfolio indicates that the data is representative.

When asked about the length of the project, 77% of the respondents in the survey reported that they were part of long-term projects (3 years or longer), while 22% reported that their project was short term. In the portfolio of the Eurasia Programme for 2019, 37 of 62 projects (approximately 60%) are long term, lasting for 3 or 4 years, while 25 are short term lasting for 2 years. This implies that there is a overrepresentation of participants in long-term projects in the survey sample.

The survey also included a question about the academic field of the project the respondents participated in through the Eurasia Programme. Figure 11 shows that 39% of the respondents to the survey reported that their project was in natural sciences and technology, 14% reported that their project was in economics and business, 12% reported that their project was in pedagogy and teaching, 9% reported that their project was in art and humanities, 9% reported that their project was in law and social sciences and 6% reported that their project was in health and care. Eleven percent answered 'other' and 5% did not respond to the question. The representation in the survey is to a large degree in line with

Diku's overview of the academic fields represented in the project portfolio, where most projects are in natural sciences followed by technology and economics and business.⁵⁹ This increases the probability that the survey data is representative.

In addition to the questions included in the figure, the respondents were asked whether they were part of a bi-lateral or network project. Among the 85 respondents, 54 or approximately two thirds, responded that they were part of a network project with several partners, while 26 or approximately one third answered that their project collaboration is bi-lateral, between one Norwegian partner institution and one partner in Eurasia.

All in all, our data indicates there is a moderate overrepresentation of stakeholders one may expect to be most involved in the projects, namely project coordinators more than network partners and stakeholders involved in long-term projects more stakeholders involved in short-term projects. Along other dimensions, the characteristics of the survey sample are largely in line with the portfolio of the Eurasia Programme. This implies that the data collected is suitable as a basis on which to assess the results of the Eurasia Programme and Diku's administration of the programme.

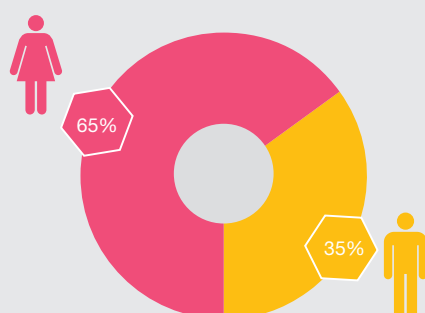
Traits of respondents participating in the survey for students

The electronic survey for students who participated in study exchanges abroad through the Eurasia Programme also contained several background questions, including gender, age and year of the study exchange abroad. The responses to these questions are presented in Figure 12 (next page).

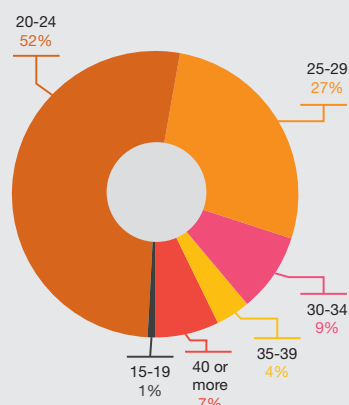
59 Diku, Annual Report for the Eurasia Programme 2019, p. 7-8

Figure 12: Gender, age and year of the study exchange abroad

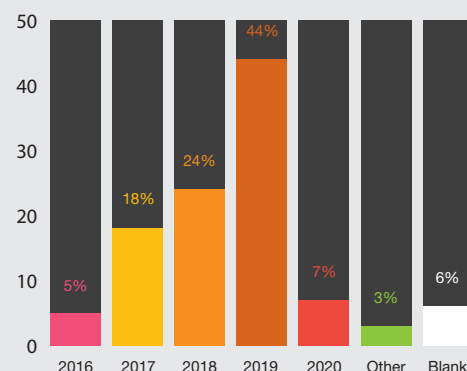
What is your gender?



What is your age?



In which year(s) did you go for a study exchange programme with funding from a Eurasia project?



The figure shows that 65% of the respondents were female and 35% were male. One respondent answered 'undefined' and 17 responses were blank. The overabundance of female respondents in the survey corresponds with Diku's reporting on gender balance in the student mobility, where the majority of students who have participated in study exchanges abroad are female. Of the 931 students from Eurasian HEIs who have participated in mobility in Norway, 572 were female, the largest share of which were from Ukraine. Considering that the largest share of survey respondents are from Ukraine (see Figure 13 below), this finding increases the probability that the survey data is representative.

The students were also asked about their age. The survey data shows that slightly more than half of the respondents are today 20–24 years old, while 27% or almost one third are 25–29 years old. Among the remaining respondents, one is younger than 20 and the rest are 30–39

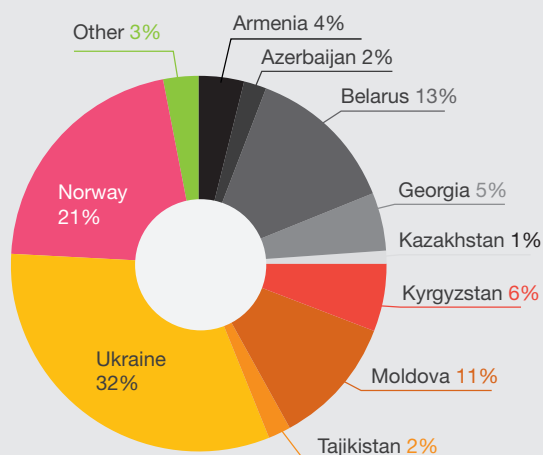
years old. Here, one should keep in mind that some of the exchanges took place several years ago, which means they were younger than what is illustrated in the figure above.

Figure 12 (above) furthermore shows that 7% of the respondents carried out their study exchange abroad in 2020, which constitutes 20 of the 256 survey responses in the sample. Here, one needs to consider that the survey was carried out in the first half of 2020. Prior to 2020, the largest share of respondents carried out their study exchange stay abroad in 2019, followed by 2018, 2017 and 2016, which implies gradually increasing numbers of student mobility per year.

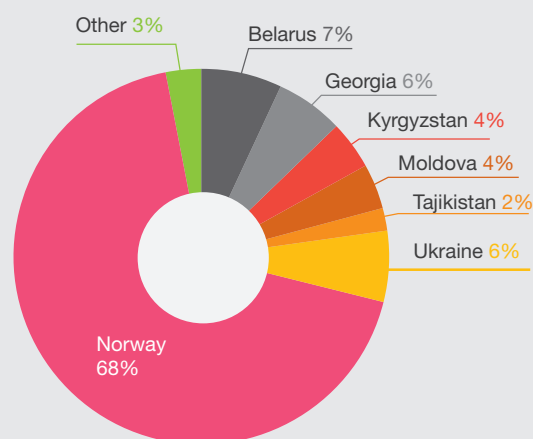
The survey for students also contained questions about which country their home institution is located in and which country they went to for the study exchange programme. The results are presented in Figure 13 (next page).

Figure 13: Country of home institution and country where the study exchange abroad took place

In which country is/was your home university located?



To what country did you go for a study exchange programme (including short-term courses, work practice and summer/winter school)?



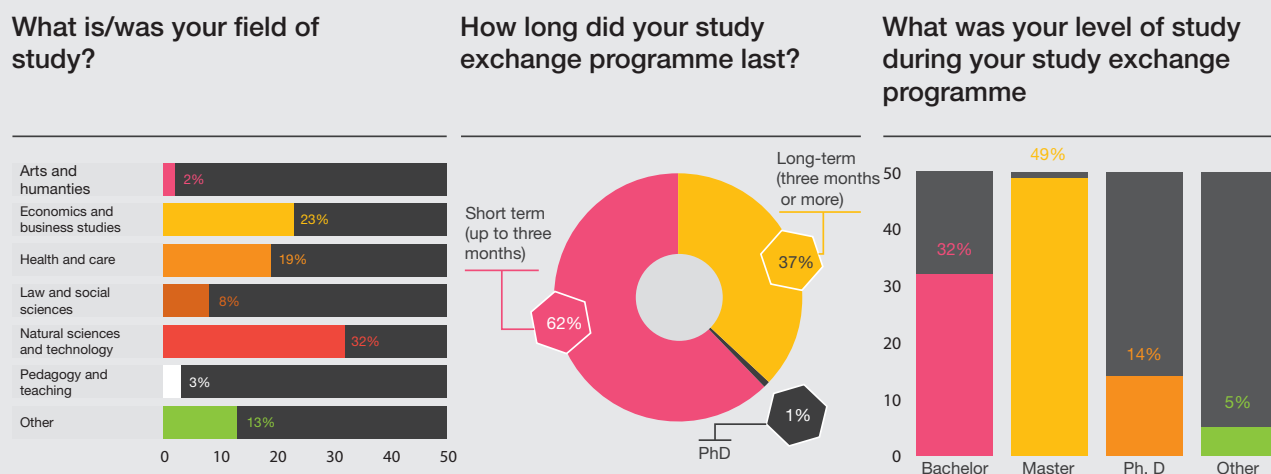
The figure shows that students from all countries participating in the Eurasia Programme are represented in the sample. The largest share of respondents in the survey for students are from Ukrainian HEIs (32 %), followed by students from Norwegian (21 %), Belorussian (13 %) and Moldovan (11 %) HEIs. It should be noted that students from Georgia are underrepresented in the survey compared with Diku's reporting on the total number of students from Eurasian countries who have participated in study exchange stays in Norway.

When asked about in which country the students carried out their exchange programme, more than two thirds or 68%

responded that their stay took place in Norway. We know from before that 931 students from Eurasian HEIs have taken part in study exchange programmes to Norway during the current programme period, while 551 students from Norwegian HEIs have participated in mobility in Eurasia. The largest number of students taking part in mobility in Norway are from Ukrainian HEIs, followed by students from Georgian and Belarusian HEIs. The figure shows that students from Georgian HEIs are somehow underrepresented in the sample.⁶⁰ There is an overabundance of responses from students from Eurasian HEIs and from Ukraine in particular; nevertheless, it lends representativeness to the survey sample.

60 Diku, Annual report for 2019, The Eurasia Programme, p. 26.

Figure 14: Field of study, length of stay and level of study



The figure shows that the largest share of respondents to the survey for students had natural sciences and technology as their field of study (32%), followed by economics and business studies (23%) and health and care (19%). The majority of respondents (62%) participated in short-term stays of less than 3 months, while 37% participated in longer-term stays. Approximately half of the respondents (49%) participated in the stay abroad during their master's studies. Thirty-two percent were bachelor students, while 14% participated in the study exchange abroad as part of their PhD.

Representativity and potential bias in the surveys

To assess the representativeness of the responses to both surveys, we carried out a comparative analysis of the background variables provided and the traits of the overall population of project coordinators, network partners and students participating in exchange stays abroad through the Eurasia Programme,

which is known due to Diku's own reporting. The analysis is presented over the previous pages in this annex. We also considered the data in light of research literature on survey response rates.

It is known that for some phenomena, a low response rate leads to a biased view. For example, one could assume that people who are active and engaged in society may be more likely to respond to surveys. Research on the consequences of low response rates has concluded that there is no clear link between response rates and bias in the results.⁶¹ The bias may be high in a survey with high response rates and small even if the rate is low⁶²

In the case of the surveys in this review, *language barriers* may imply that some individuals chose not to reply to the survey or that they would not be able to express themselves as well as in their mother tongue. It is known that limited English skills is one of the challenges reported in the Eurasia

61 Hellevik (2015) Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning 02/2015 (Vol. 56) Hva betyr representbortfallet i intervjuundersøkelser. See also Singleton, Royce A. and Straits, Bruce C. (2005). Approaches to Social Research. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

62 Hellevik, O. (2016). "Extreme nonresponse and response bias. A 'worst case' analysis". Quality & Quantity, 50(5), 1969-1991. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-015-0246-5>.

Programme.⁶³ There may also be institutional or *cultural differences* between Norway and the Eurasian countries that affect the style and content of responses. Norway is often classified as a ‘high trust’ society, while countries in Eurasia have a lower recorded level of trust of both authorities and fellow citizens. Some may fear the consequences of sharing negative information they consider sensitive or compromising to themselves or others. Respondents may furthermore have a perceived interest in presenting their projects and results in a positive light, as this could affect opportunities for future funding.

We have sought to limit this risk of response bias using several measures:

- › **First**, we emphasised in the email where the link to the survey was provided and in the survey itself that the purpose of the review was to assess the overall impact of the Eurasia Programme and to give advice to Diku about its administration and not to evaluate individual projects.
- › **Second**, we clearly stated in the email and in the survey itself that responses were to be treated anonymously, aiming to lower the threshold for answering openly and honestly.
- › **Third**, we analysed the data from the survey in relation to the interview data and the document studies. A combination of different methods, triangulation, aims to make the findings of the review more robust. By applying various data sources one can uncover different aspects of what one wants to find out more about, and one can analyse the findings in relation to each other.



63 See Diku, Annual report for 2018, The Eurasia Programme, p. 24.

