

Guideline and procedure for the selection of international partner universities to promote student mobility

Vision

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam seeks to cooperate with top research universities around the world. These partnerships benefit research, projects and mobility. Student mobility¹ is not the only way foreign universities cooperate, but it is the most visible and it has the strongest impact on education. Good partnerships depend on sound agreements based on carefully considered choices to benefit and boost student exchange. International business is all about partnerships and networks: “your network determines who you are”.

VU Amsterdam aims to put together a portfolio of research universities that provide good education and are preferably in the top 200 of the most important international rankings.² We want these partnerships to cover as many disciplines as possible, with as little fragmentation as possible, in order to truly achieve an intensive working relationship with a partner university. The exchange partners are appealing to VU Amsterdam students who wish to go on a student exchange, and their students are well qualified and prepared for possible enrolment in our international Master’s degree programmes. Exchange partners such as the programme countries Indonesia and South Africa and the Aurora network also operate in line with strategic internationalization policy.

Guideline objective

The regional coordinators at VU Amsterdam’s International Office are responsible for managing all the university’s exchange agreements. The International Office provides a guideline that is intended to serve as a tool for all VU Amsterdam stakeholders who are in any way working with potential partners and may wish to sign a cooperation agreement with them. We work together to create a high-quality partner portfolio that complies with the academic requirements of our degree programmes, meets the demands of students and contributes to objectives outlined in the Strategic Plan.

In addition to the International Office, faculties and the Executive Board are also looking to initiate and agree contracts with partner institutes. These agreements not only concern institutional and/or research collaborations but sometimes also involve student exchange. Some partnership contracts agreed in previous years turned out not to be viable for student mobility or showed a significant imbalance, whereby considerably more foreign students came to study at VU Amsterdam than vice versa. Imbalance can lead to increased pressure on the organization and a disadvantageous situation for government funding. Imbalance also causes major housing shortages, a pressing issue due to the fact that it is already almost impossible for foreign students to find accommodation in Amsterdam on their own.

¹ Student exchange is defined as the inbound and outbound mobility of students not intended for the purpose of obtaining a degree. Student exchange programmes work based on the fact that no money changes hands; students remain enrolled at their home university and pay their tuition fees there. For a limited period of time, usually a semester or no more than one academic year, students are enrolled as visiting students at a partner institute.

² [Shanghai ranking](#), [Times Higher Education ranking](#), [QS World University Ranking](#)

One of the objectives outlined in the 2020-2025 Strategic Plan is that 30% of all Bachelor's students are able to experience going abroad. Experience going abroad includes work placements in other countries and other forms of short-term mobility such as summer schools. Most students will however opt for a standard exchange programme. When the optional component was introduced to almost all of VU Amsterdam Bachelor's degree programmes, students were given the option of spending a semester abroad without a resulting delay in their studies and as part of their primary degree programme. The result is that an increasing number of VU Amsterdam students are expressing an interest in spending a semester studying abroad. This growth is also required to achieve the objective.

In order to facilitate the growing number of students who wish to spend a semester abroad, the International Office is working tirelessly to establish a high-quality portfolio of partner institutes that will interest our students. Potential outbound students must be assured that the education they will receive at a foreign university meets the requirements of the degree programmes and accreditation. This may require input from the faculties about the quality of the range of courses on offer.

Substantiation guideline partner selection and evaluation

The guideline is based on the following principles:

1. **The quality of the education provided by the partner university complies with the academic requirements of the degree programmes:** the education provided to all VU Amsterdam students in the course of their primary degree programme must always comply with the requirements set by accreditation committees such as the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders. The university must be accredited in their own country. The courses are of a sufficient level to be approved by the Examination Board as electives in the VU Amsterdam degree programme.
2. **The university is an appealing partner institute for VU Amsterdam Bachelor's students.** A healthy balance of inbound and outbound students must be possible. A negative balance with more inbound than outbound students is financially disadvantageous and will negatively impact VU Amsterdam, which is why it's important to investigate whether or not a potential partner organization appeals to our own students. The following is important to VU Amsterdam students:
 - The first semester should offer a sufficient and diverse range of courses that are in line with the degree programme and are offered at a second or third-year level, in order to meet the requirements set by the VU Examination Board.
 - Good course descriptions must be available to present to the Examination Board.
 - The range of English-taught exchange courses: without a diverse range of interesting English-taught programmes, exchange programmes are usually not viable. When students register for second or third-year courses taught in a language other than English or Dutch, they run the risk of not being able to successfully complete these courses as their language skills are generally not up to an academic level. A very intensive language course takes time and is expensive. Students may

also fear that they will not be able to obtain a pass mark for these courses and will usually avoid choosing a foreign university with a limited range of English-taught courses.

- The city and the country in which the university is located are very important factors in the decision-making process. Capital cities and other exciting and lively cities are generally popular destinations. Students want to have an exciting student life and the opportunity to travel in the area. Geographical distribution is another important factor: avoid clusters of partner institutes in one city or region.
 - Academic calendars align. The semesters at partner institutes may not overlap with our own.
 - Practical considerations: accommodation, cost, safety.
 - The provision of information and service offered to VU Amsterdam students must be excellent. The university's website must be clear and informative. Students should be easily able to find relevant information about procedures, courses and facilities. Partner universities must provide students with the information they need to prepare for their stay, such as information about arriving in their host country and student introduction, visas and accommodation. The university should respond quickly and appropriately to emails and issues.
3. **The collaboration either covers a wide range of areas and is interesting to all or at least multiple VU Amsterdam faculties, or is a programme-specific agreement with a university that VU Amsterdam already has various student exchange agreements with in other fields of study.** VU Amsterdam prefers intensive and wide-ranging collaborations with a limited number (max. 200)³ of universities over fragmentation. Apart from increased efficiency, this will also lead to stronger and closer collaborations with partner universities and also makes it possible to better promote [universities](#) to outbound VU Amsterdam students.
4. **The collaboration possibly also supports other VU Amsterdam objectives in addition to student mobility.** Collaboration to promote student mobility could also contribute significantly to strategic institution or faculty policy. Exchange agreements can for example contribute to the development of VU Amsterdam's profile, to the programme countries policy (Indonesia or South Africa), or promote diversity. Partnerships based on a strategic research collaboration may be bolstered through exchange agreements, including the universities in the Aurora network.

Process steps

For the implementation of the guideline the following process steps apply:

1. The initiator submits a request for student exchange including the completed checklist to internationalrelations@vu.nl
2. The International Office assesses each request for student exchange based on the following additional criteria: reputation and ranking, accreditation, fields of study and range of courses, estimate of student demand, expected balance, expected quality of inbound students, availability of information, scope of the collaboration (one faculty versus university-wide) and possible contribution to other VU objectives.

³ In 2016, VU Amsterdam had agreements with over 250 partner universities for student exchange. You can find more detailed information on <http://studyabroad.vu.nl>.

3. The International Office decides to agree a contract independently or in close consultation with parties involved. In many cases, the International Office can independently assess whether a university is a suitable partner for student exchange, when a university is obviously high quality and offers a suitable range of courses, or whether this is clearly not the case. There are however also universities where this is less apparent. These institutes may be good universities, but appear less appealing to students. Or it may be difficult for the International Office to assess whether the available range of courses show a high course content quality. In those cases, the file may be presented to a Faculty Board⁴ with the request to assess and reach a substantiated conclusion about the quality of education and the desirability of including the potential partner university as an option for student exchange for students of their degree programmes.
4. In some cases, a student exchange agreement is not the most suitable instrument for the initiator's intended objective. In these cases, the International Office will advise on the possibilities as regards partnerships. Distinctions will be made between agreements at programme level, faculty level, or university-wide agreements and staff versus student mobility. The advice may also be submitted to one or more faculties
5. In the event of a negative decision, the option exists to submit a new proposal should there be new reasons for doing so, for example if a university can demonstrate that they have a good English-taught programme two years later.
6. In the event of a favourable decision, the International Office will contact the university in question to begin contract negotiations. Contracts must be signed by:
 - The Director of the International Office (only Erasmus+)
 - The Executive Board's Portfolio Holder for Internationalization (bilateral non-EU)
7. The International Office is responsible for the provision of information to students about the exchange option available (for example VU Worldmap, Facebook, VUnet, SAP), maintains contact with the partner university and keeps the initiator informed.

⁴ The Faculty Board may appoint someone within the faculty as the first point of contact, for example a Portfolio Holder for Teaching or a Portfolio Holder for Internationalization.

Submitting a request for student exchange

1. Prior to submitting a new request for student exchange, please read the document “Guideline and procedure for the selection of international partner universities to promote student mobility” (available on VUnet).
2. Submit the completed table below as a Word or PDF file to internationalrelations@vu.nl.
3. The regional manager will then proceed to process the form and give his/her assessment, based on the request and the guidelines.

University: name and country.	
What is the reason for the request? What are the reasons for wanting to collaborate with this university? (max. (250 words))	
Desired programme level of the exchange for example Bachelor's, Master's or Bachelor's and Master's	
Does this collaboration pertain to a specific field of study? Or is it possible to agree a university-wide partnership contract, for example at faculty level or university level (the latter is preferred) To which VU Amsterdam programmes and/or VU faculties does this agreement apply?	
Is the range of courses satisfactory? Refer to the “Substantiation guideline partner selection and evaluation” in the “Guideline and procedure for the selection of international partner universities to promote student mobility.”	
What does the university's academic calendar look like? Do the university's semesters overlap with our own?	
Any other comments?	
To be completed by the International Office Assessment of request by the regional coordinator:	