

# Building a Norm of Internationalization: The Case of Estonia's Higher Education System

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to explain how internationalization that is so widespread today has developed into an accepted standard in local contexts. This study demonstrates that internationalization of higher education can be regarded as a norm-building process that is facilitated through the active behavior of institutional agents. By using the illustrative case of Estonia, the article identifies different stages, actors, motives, and mechanisms that played a crucial role in establishing internationalization practices in Estonia's higher education system. Informed by the data gathered through 28 interviews and three focus groups, the study also reveals the specific contextual conditions that may influence a country's internationalization practices.

## Keywords

internationalization, norm-building, Estonia, higher education

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, internationalization of higher education has become a fundamental practice in most higher education institutions worldwide. Many authors have theorized over the rapid growth of internationalization activities exploring the complex relationships and dynamics as both agent and reactor to globalization (e.g., Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2008; Van der Wende, 2007). Most of the scholarly work has

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focused on analyzing the emerging trends in internationalization describing the changes in student mobility flows (e.g., Rivza & Teichler, 2007; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007), examining shifts in institutional policies and strategies (e.g., Gacel-Avila, 2005; Knight, 2006), or critically assessing the unintended consequences of these processes (e.g., Denman, 2002; de Wit, 2011; Hughes, 2008; Van der Wende, 2007).

There is a great variety in the way internationalization materializes in different regional and national contexts. For example, Trilokekar (2010) is concerned with the Canadian approach to internationalization that has core emphasis on trade and economic rationales over academic and cultural relations. de Wit (2011), referring to the European Commission's policy to stimulate student mobility in Europe, argues that in some cases, internationalization has become an equivalent to exchange programs, an objective in itself and not a tool for achieving broader goals such as higher quality of educational experiences for students. Alongside with the concern over quality, there is the concern over access. Lavankura (2013) points out that the provision of international programs in Thailand often favors the middle and upper class students who have the financial resources to take advantage of those offerings. Knight (2011) and de Wit (2011) address the various misconceptions and myths associated with the concept of internationalization. For example, it is often incorrectly assumed that internationalization automatically equals to the quality of curriculum, or that more international students on campus automatically mean increased international culture in the institution (Knight, 2011).

Scholarly writings tend to explain these differences by analyzing country-specific or institutional responses to internationalization and/or globalization (Burnett & Huisman 2009; Byun & Kim, 2011; Luijten-Lub, 2007). Internationalization is theorized as an external socio-economic phenomenon that affects national higher education sector (e.g., Kälvermark & Van der Wende, 1997; Luijten-Lub, Van der Wende, & Huisman, 2005). There is the underlying assumption that the process happens somewhere outside stakeholders' direct sphere of influence, and there is the institutional need to react or respond. As asserted by Knight (2008), the national/sector level has an important influence on the international dimension of higher education policy and funding. Yet, it is usually at the institutional level that the real process of internationalization is taking place. This article takes a perspective whereby internationalization is an intrinsic process built within and by the mutual activities of governments, higher education institutions, students, faculty, citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other institutions. These stakeholders are active participants of the process, shaping the way internationalization evolves and gets implemented in different contexts.

The focus of this article is to take a process perspective to internationalization, aiming to unpack and explain internationalization as it is actively built by stakeholders in a country-specific context. We aim to understand how an idea as pervasive as internationalization gets promoted, adopted, and disseminated, so that it becomes an accepted norm. In essence, we are looking to explain how the process emerges and develops from within, thus causing global changes in the ways higher education institutions operate.

**Table 1.** Stages of Norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
	Norm emergence	Norm cascade	Internalization
Actors	Norm entrepreneurs with organizational platforms	States, international organizations, networks	Law, professions, bureaucracy
Motives	Altruism, empathy, ideals, commitment	Legitimacy, reputation, esteem	Conformity
Dominant mechanisms	Persuasion	Socialization, institutionalization, demonstration	Habit institutionalization

This study demonstrates that internationalization of higher education has become a universal norm that is actively built through the activities of institutional agents. By using the illustrative case of Estonia, the article identifies different stages, actors, motives, and mechanisms that play a crucial role in establishing internationalization practices in a country's higher education system. This article also emphasizes the specific contextual conditions under which internationalization practices get adopted and examines how these practices have become a general standard for universities and other higher education institutions in one country.

## Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the concepts of norm-building to frame the analysis. A norm is defined as "a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). This standard behavior is created and held by a particular community of people who actively are engaged in building a norm. There are two main streams in the norm-building literature: international macro-perspective studies of norm-building and studies focusing on domestic modifications to universal norms. Both approaches are useful in informing the analysis.

The first stream of literature focuses on the mechanisms of creating international or universal norms (e.g., Björkdahl, 2006, 2008; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Payne, 2001; Risse, 1999). Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) describe a process of international norm-building by distinguishing among three distinct phases: norm emergence, norm cascade, and norm internalization (see Table 1). The authors identify different actors, motives, and mechanisms that influence each of the stages.

The first stage of the process is characterized by the emergence of a group of norm entrepreneurs who vigorously start conducting norm-building activities. The main motivation behind these activities is the fact that norm entrepreneurs themselves strongly believe in the ideals and values represented by the norm. Krause (2001) emphasizes the significance of developing an "expert" agreement about a perception that a problem exists. Payne (2001) adds that persuasive communication is considered fundamentally important in norm-building as it helps to secure the support of decision

makers. The second stage is described by international socialization activities intended to increase the amount of norm followers. According to Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), three possible motivations for adopting norms in this stage are legitimation (to secure power domestically), conformity (to belong to a recognized group), and esteem (to gain or defend self esteem). Countries, for example, adopt norms because they want to relate themselves to members of the international community where all members follow certain norms. In the third stage, norms become so widely accepted that they are internalized and become a habit, making conformity with norms almost automatic. Already established norms are not contested and fall off the radar of political debate, fostering similarity in activities and policies.

The second stream of norm-building literature describes the role of domestic political, organizational, and cultural contexts in reconstructing international norms (e.g., Acharya, 2004; Björkdahl, 2006). Norm adoption is seen as a process of localization where norm takers gradually build similarities between international ideas and norms already institutionalized in local beliefs and practices. There are several factors that influence the process. Acharya's (2004) research on Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) shows how local actors are key agents in taking initiative in adopting ideas, but do it selectively and strategically. Only those ideas that might increase prestige or strengthen domestic institutions get to be endorsed. According to Checkel (2001), international norms get more easily transferred into domestic contexts where a previous "cultural match" exists, meaning the similarity in legal system and bureaucratic and administrative agencies. Gurowitz's (1999) and Acharya's (2004) research shows that countries more concerned about international reputation embrace new norms most eagerly and thoroughly.

To examine the contextual variations in higher education, Knight (2008) calls to analyze the country-specific rationales, which dictate how the process evolves and what activities are in the focus. Knight and de Wit (1997) propose taxonomy of social/cultural, political, economic, and academic drivers. Several authors indicate the blurring boundaries between these categories pointing to the shift away from academic and socio/cultural rationales to increased emphasis on economic and political rationales (Altbach & Knight 2007; de Wit, 2002; Dunn & Nilan 2007). Knight (2008) notes there is a difference between the national and institutional rationales as well. For example, in some cases, the development of human capital for nation-building purposes might not correspond with the institutional desire for broader international recognition through implementing English language study programs.

Overall, this theoretical approach is useful for illuminating the specific institutional responses to norm-building activities and explaining the dynamics of the process. As norm-building is a contextual activity, this framework also allows focusing on local variations of the internationalization.

## **The Case of Estonia: Contextual Background**

Estonia is situated in Northeast Europe. With its population of 1.3 million people (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2014), Estonia

has been able to maintain its cultural traditions and language despite various rulers throughout its history. Since regaining its independence in 1991, Estonia has often been regarded as an economic success story of a transition country (Feldmann, 2006). There are currently (2013-2014) 26 post-secondary institutions in Estonia (universities and professional higher education institutions) that operate in Estonian with 128 degree programs offered in English (Kirss et al, 2014). The goal of Estonian higher education policy in the last decade has been the integration with the European higher education area. Successfully adopting the Bologna reforms, Estonia is an active member in Erasmus student mobility programs with more than 1,000 students studying or doing internships abroad, which is close to 10% of the graduates in 2012 (European Commission, 2014).

Internationalization of higher education in Estonia became a significant theme in the mid-1990s, gaining strategic importance from the 2000s onward. The national-level internationalization strategy, a sub-document of the strategy for higher education, provides an overview of the Estonia's approach to internationalization. According to this document, internationalization is not understood as a goal in itself but a tool for achieving improvements in the quality of teaching and curriculum. Core activities involve developing more responsive legal system (e.g., flexible immigration law, opportunities for international students to work, regulating cross-border education), an institutional-level support system for internationalization (e.g., cultivating tolerance and awareness across cultures, primary services accessible to those not fluent in Estonian), and internationalization of teaching (increased number of degree-seeking international students, attracting international faculty, availability of foreign language study programs, methods and motivation schemes for introducing international dimension into existing curricula) (Ministry of Education and Research [MOER], 2006). Although there is a clear emphasis on the economic rationale to improve the competitiveness of Estonian higher education in the region, the specific core principles listed in the strategy suggest more nuanced and balanced approach to internationalization. For example, the emphasis is given to providing equal opportunities to all students and faculty to engage in internationalization activities. Although there is the drive to introduce international dimension into every curriculum, the preservation of Estonian language as a primary language of teaching is also a core responsibility.

As noted by Enders (2004), the economic and political power of a country, its size and geographic location, the role its language plays internationally, and previous internationalization policies are all important factors influencing the course of internationalization processes. In this study, we chose Estonia as a unique case for several reasons. First, all of the factors stated above are seen as a major challenge for Estonia. Nevertheless, Estonia has demonstrated significant determination in integrating internationalization activities into its higher education policies and institutional practices. Second, a relatively short time frame for the rapid changes (the past 20 years) allows the norm characteristics to emerge more strongly. As proposed by Cowen (2009), the time-space compression in countries in transition highlights the forms of social expression. Finally, key stakeholders holding institutional memory were all accessible, active in their positions, and able to provide firsthand information to inform the analysis.

## Method

The goal of the study was to understand the process of internationalization in the Estonian higher education system. The following research questions were guiding the study:

**Research Question 1:** Who are the actors driving internationalization?

**Research Question 2:** What mechanisms are used to facilitate internationalization process?

**Research Question 3:** How does the domestic context influence the acceptance of internationalization?

This study involves two main methods of data collection. First, publicly available policy documents were reviewed including the institutional strategic plans and national strategies relevant to internationalization of higher education. Content analysis was used (Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1996) to identify themes concerning the nature, focus, and targets of these strategic documents. Based on this analysis, an interview protocol was designed.

Second, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2011.<sup>1</sup> These included informants among the senior university administration (19), senior policy experts at the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (3), representatives from the state-affiliated organizations (3), and international experts from the European organizations involved in internationalization policy development (3). Three focus groups were conducted: two with international students studying in Estonia (18 participants) and one with domestic students studying in Estonian universities (9 participants).

The interviews, on average, were 50-min long, were recorded, and were transcribed. Thereafter, standard qualitative data analysis techniques were used to organize, code, and analyze the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss, 1987). First, open coding of the research results was carried out, where a list of initial thematic categories was formed. The second step involved axial coding, where the numerous categories were organized into fewer groups, forming a coding paradigm. Finally, selective coding (Creswell, 2014) was used to integrate the categories, interpret data, and present the research findings.

## Findings

The analysis of the empirical findings supports the norm-building theory, providing evidence on three distinct stages of the process—norm emergence, norm cascade, and internalization (see Table 2). Each of the phases has its own dynamics, involving specific actors, motives, and mechanisms that drive the process. Context-specific variations are also evident and explained below.

## Norm Emergence

Internationalization as an actively built norm started to emerge in Estonia in the mid-1990s. There were two main motives that triggered the process—political and financial.

**Table 2.** Norm-Building Process in Estonia's Higher Education Internationalization.

	Stage 1 (mid-1990s-2005)	Stage 2 (2006-2010)	Stage 3 (2010-onward)
	Norm emergence	Norm cascade	Internalization
Actors	Ministry officials; key higher education sector stakeholders (university and professional higher education institution vice deans; international office reps, government-affiliated experts, faculty members).	University administration (rectors, international office reps, department reps), international networks, foundations, organizations.	Law; professions; bureaucracy.
Motives	Political and financial; idealistic commitment to internationalization; need for a policy position for European higher education developments.	Legitimacy, reputation; increased competition for talent; demographics.	Conformity; creativity for innovative approaches; building new value systems.
Mechanisms	Top-down (ministry-led meetings, debates) approach; persuasion of stakeholders.	Bottom-up approach (initiative of the universities); creating binding policy documents; monitoring and evaluating indicators; demonstrating results; policy learning.	Habit; institutionalization; focusing on priority areas; emphasis on coordination; increasing quality (among students, programs and support framework).

First, the turbulent political situation of the early 1990s had settled, and Estonia had gained its independence. The country's political leaders quickly started to establish new ties with the European Union (EU). Universities became important stakeholders in the process. In parallel to the political efforts, universities reached out to build academic relations with European universities. As a university administrator recalls,

It [internationalization] emerged during the mid 90s, the early *years* of Estonian independence with the aim of integrating [Estonia] with the EU. Our rector [name] focused on systematically developing international relations with the West.

New administrative positions for internationalization were established in universities to support building relations among international partners.

Yet, the individual institutional efforts were not enough to support the larger political goals. It was clear that to align with the European higher education developments,

Estonian universities needed a system-level reform. The main actor in the process was the MOER that called attention to the problem. Previously established standards (e.g., degree system, access to higher education, university governance) were challenged and problematized as the burden of the Soviet occupation. The universities were in favor of the reforms as it opened up channels for new academic collaborations. A high-level university administrator reflects on the situation: “it was a time for a desperate need for changes.” As a result, Estonia was among the first countries to sign the Bologna Declaration in 1999, initiating the large-scale reforms in its higher education sector. As stated by an Estonian politician closely associated with the process, “being left out wasn’t politically acceptable” (Archimedes Foundation, 2008).

Although the internationalization process started as a political statement to demonstrate Estonia’s alignment with Europe and not the Soviet bloc, the process was rapidly developed further by pragmatic reasons—financial resources. With the Bologna reform, new opportunities for Erasmus student mobility programs became available. Estonia started participating in the Erasmus Program as an accession country at the end of the 1990s. Also, the EU mobility support through Tempus program was provided to Estonia. These trans-European mobility schemes gradually increased the numbers of mobile students. For instance, in 2003-2004, only 300 Estonian students went abroad to study in a foreign higher education institution; by 2013-2014, the number had become fourfold (above 1,200 participated in international mobility; Archimedes Foundation, 2014).

These gradually expanding numbers of student exchanges across the EU and beyond were new to the Estonian higher education sector. There were several bilateral exchange agreements established between the individual universities (e.g., University of Tartu and University of Helsinki, Tallinn University and University of Jyväskylä) during the Soviet era, but these involved only a few students or faculty exchanges. With the potential of increased mobility, a clearly formulated policy position and institutional regulations regarding internationalization initiatives were needed. The Ministry took the lead to secure an organizational platform for internationalization, starting to convince the key experts among the Ministry policy makers, university leaders, and administrators of the necessity for the unified strategic directions for internationalization. A high-level Ministry policy expert comments,

We had previously adopted the Bologna 3+2 model and it was clear that the process cannot continue in such a basic form than before. There was a perceivable need within the sector to create a debate, clarify our standpoints and to form official positions [regarding internationalization] among ourselves.

Regular contact between the Estonian education policy makers and European administrators helped to guide the process. The opportunities to apply for the European Structural Funds to support the mobility programs opened up. Clearly formed and articulated policy position regarding internationalization was necessary for the Ministry to apply for the European funding programs. As the Ministry policy expert notes,

What followed [to Bologna process] was the programming of DoRA<sup>2</sup> and we needed a strategic document to justify why we need to add one or another aspect into this scheme. The work *towards* forming our internationalization strategy started as idealistic attempt to articulate our goals but the document itself turned out to have a very practical use.

The Ministry with the help from the Archimedes Foundation<sup>3</sup> took the lead and organized formal discussions about developing a higher education internationalization strategy for Estonia. The first brainstorming event happened in 2004, but more focused debates and seminars took place in 2005, involving higher education institution leaders, administrators, Ministry policy experts from the higher education unit, and representatives from the government-affiliated organizations. In parallel, a Strategy of Higher Education 2006-2015 was adopted (in 2006), affirming internationalization as a key direction for higher education. With this formal support, the first national-level policy document explicitly devoted to higher education internationalization—the Estonian Higher Education Internationalization Strategy 2006-2015<sup>4</sup>—was finalized and adopted. It was a clear sign of the emphasis given to internationalization. This process of more formalized institutionalization through those policy documents marks the beginning of the next rapid phase in the process of norm-building—the norm cascade.

## Norm Cascade

The norm cascade is characterized by the increase of the norm followers. In case of Estonia, the norm followers were most higher education institutions that quickly started to incorporate the newly presented practices into their institutional structure. An important factor in the process was Estonia joining the EU in 2004, which increased the political legitimacy of the MOER. After joining the EU, Estonia started to participate in the EU decision-making process as a full member formulating and upholding national positions with respect to the proposed EU legislation and development plans in higher education (MOER, 2014).

There was an immediate priority and importance associated with the initiatives that had the Ministry experts engaged. The process quickly spread in a bottom-up manner when internationalization was declared a strategic institutional goal by the majority of higher education institutions anticipating academic benefits such as building profile and status, extending academic horizons, enhancing quality (see Knight, 2008). The main motive for a norm cascade was the need to belong to an international community and establish legitimacy among the other Western universities. Internationalization helped to connect with academic partners abroad and build one's institutional image:

First of all, internationalization has been our first and important priority from the beginning. Research is the other [priority]. We have this ideology of a young dynamic institution. . . . And first we need that the university is recognized as an interesting and useful partner. (University rector)

If we would like to be a recognized university in the European Union for example, or among the Nordic countries, it [internationalization] seemed inevitable. If we are not internationally visible, then we do not exist. (University vice-rector)

Another important rationale for Estonian universities to engage actively in internationalization was the attraction of top talent to increase the country's economic competitiveness. The international students enrolled in English language degree programs were seen as a promising avenue for increasing innovation capacity. The following quote illustrates the "brain gain" rationale:

Yes, we are looking for a direct, sort of, benefit, therefore we send people out and bring the best foreign knowledge into Estonia. We bring in people who are top specialists in their field, and yes, brains. This is targeted *towards* increasing our intellectual capacity. (University administrator)

To attract talent, central funding from the MOER was provided to develop the initial seven master's-level study programs in English (*Ägedad õppekavad*). A coordinated marketing platform "Study in Estonia" was also developed and is actively used.

However, the goal to generate additional income from tuition fees was never a serious motive for most Estonian institutions. Three university administrators mentioned that internationalization in a geographically distant and small country such as Estonia is a very expensive endeavor and the perception of financial gain is inaccurate. The gradual native population decline in Estonia has provided another rationale for internationalization. Institutions try to work toward securing their student body to be able to survive and fully function in the years to come.

The key actors—university administrators—actively started to support and promote institutional-level internationalization activities. They took the lead by developing institutional internationalization strategies.<sup>5</sup> In 2007, the rectors of six public universities signed an Agreement of Good Practice. This document was crucial in the norm-building process as it emphasized an agreement on raising the quality of students' internationalization experience. With their focus to establish a position among the European higher education community, Estonian universities joined international university networks (e.g., European University Association [EUA], Coimbra Group, Baltic Sea Region University Network [BSRUN], Network of Universities From the Capitals of Europe [UNICA], International Association of Universities [IAU]). Assuming leadership positions in the governing boards of those organizations was another opportunity for increasing visibility and promoting one's institution. As a university administrator comments, "We have organized their anniversary conference here in Tallinn. And to be straightforward, these networks are really becoming to trust us."

Characteristic of norm cascade is the mobilizing of additional stakeholders in the process. That was evident by the active engagement of professional higher education institutions in Estonia's internationalization initiatives. The historical role of the professional higher education institutions has been to prepare Estonian youth for the

domestic labor market. The Ministry was straightforward in its limited expectations regarding the internationalization activities of professional higher education institutions:

Internationalization today is crucial only in two Estonian universities from whom we absolutely need to demand all these activities. Internationalization in professional higher education institutions is very nice if they participate in Erasmus mobility programs but their focus is a bit different. (Ministry policy maker)

Yet, the professional higher education institutions themselves were very eager to participate in the process. As internationalization was about to become a standard for any high-quality reputable institution, every college was making attempts to follow that norm. Due to the different dynamics in their student body (e.g., students with families, students with full-time jobs), the attempt to increase the scope of mobility has been challenging. Yet, the eagerness to work toward internationalization was evident. The following quote by a professional higher education institution administrator is representative:

We have maybe one or two students who is going to study abroad each *year*. We cannot say that we have been successful. But we do have very good [exchange] partners who want to engage in mobility. We work very hard trying to increase the mobility numbers.

Stakeholders among the government-affiliated organizations also became active participants in the process. For example, the Development Fund, an organization primarily involved in Estonia's economic investment and innovative growth programs, started to propose recommendations regarding Estonia's approach to higher education internationalization. The organization prepared an analysis for the government on the ways to increase the competitiveness of the higher education sector through internationalization. The emphasis on the need for a sector-wide collaboration was underlined.

As noted by Elgström (2000), norm-building activities often feature a certain opposition, which forces the norm builders to focus their implementation efforts even more. Norm entrepreneurs must defend and speak in favor of their promoted norm. That was also the case in Estonia. The idea of opening up borders to foreign students and initiating new English language degree programs has had its opponents. Faculty members were critical about the degree-system reform (Archimedes Foundation, 2008), whereas some have been reluctant to teach in English. There is a hidden conflict presented in the core values of the University of Tartu, the oldest university in Estonia, which has taken pride in operating as the national university (*rahvusülikool*). With the pressure to internationalize, the university is turning toward becoming a world-class international university. The opponents, including some influential politicians, saw a direct threat to Estonian culture and particularly to Estonian language. The work of opponents culminated in developing policy documents<sup>6</sup> with the aim of securing Estonian-medium higher education, avoiding the full use of foreign languages in any field or degree level of science and focusing on actively developing scientific vocabulary in the Estonian language (MOER, 2004, 2011).

To convince society, the supporters of internationalization have used arguments such as “knowledge has always been international” and “we need English language degree programs so that the Estonian language degree programs can survive.” Using specific numbers to convince the public of the marginality of the problem was also evident. The following quote is representative:

Being afraid of the attack to Estonian language is nonsense. Our international student body is 1.3%. We would have a reason to talk about it when 15-20% of our international student body is international and our programs are all in English. (University administrator)

Overall, the norm cascade was driven by the need to build legitimacy and increase competitiveness for Estonia’s higher education sector. The process unfolded in a bottom-up manner where most higher education institutions started to advocate for the norm. With its opponents, the broader debates took place in public realm, resulting in an increased involvement of stakeholders in internationalization. In Estonia, the phase of norm cascade was relatively short, culminating with the clear agreements (national and institutional-level policy documents) on the specific directions regarding internationalization. The next phase in norm-building activities features stabilization and conformity in stakeholders’ behavior.

## Internalization

After reaching the norm cascade, a gradual settling process has taken place in Estonia’s internationalization activities since 2010. The efforts are beginning to yield results. The number of degree-seeking international students in Estonian higher education institutions has more than doubled over the past 5 years—in 2009-2010, there were 1,072 international students, rising to 2,230 in 2013-2014 (Kirss et al., 2014). Although there have been other mobility programs introduced in Estonia (e.g., DoRA Program, Kristjan Jaak Scholarships), Erasmus has remained by far the most significant credit-mobility program with participation constantly on the rise. Erasmus student mobility numbers demonstrate 70% growth reaching more than 800 incoming students in 2010-2011 (Tamtik, Kirss, Beerkens & Kaarna, 2011). Together with Spain, Estonia stands out by having relatively balanced numbers in incoming and outgoing Erasmus student mobility (Archimedes Foundation, 2014). There is a firm institutional support structure maintaining internationalization activities. New units and specific administrative structures are in place and functioning (e.g., international student offices, vice rectors, and departments dedicated to international relations). Internationalization is moving toward becoming a conformity, a part of normal everyday operations of higher education institutions in Estonia.

The European influence in relation to boosting internationalization initiatives was evident through the Erasmus Mundus program (2009-2013) with some Estonia’s universities entering into new institutional partnerships and developing joint degree programs in English. The EU’s Tempus initiative (2007-2013) that supports knowledge exchange and curriculum reform of higher education systems had Estonia participating

now as a provider country and not as a receiver country as in the 1990s. Political developments have supported Estonia's position as an equal member in the EU's policy debates. The actions of the Estonian government in the EU are based on common principles formulated in the framework document "Estonia's European Union Policy 2011-2015." The framework document also clarifies the government's primary goals in different areas of policy including aspects of higher education and research.

The internalization process features the gradual implementation of the new values into society. Being a member of the former Soviet Union, Estonia functioned as a closed homogeneous country for decades. Internationalization initiatives in higher education started to break these standards. Universities began to promote values that feature multiculturalism, tolerance, and the acceptance of differences. As a University vice rector notes, "The society was educated. We said, dear people, this [internationalization] is one normal component of life. It actually created a new paradigm [in the society]." To internalize such values, a legislative system needs to support institutional efforts. Currently, Estonia has opted for a conservative migration policy aiming to balance national interests, internal security, and economic needs (Kirss et al., 2014). However, several important legislative changes have taken place. For example, there is a legal framework for joint degree programs, there is a well-functioning system for evaluating foreign academic degrees, and legal obstacles for foreign students' employment in Estonia have been removed. Some challenges remain regarding the immigration laws for incoming foreign students and their health insurance coverage. To overcome this, a lobbying process is ongoing.

Institutional efforts to internationalize the curriculum also supported the acceptance of the new values into institutional culture. As only a small proportion of students participate in the study abroad programs, a special attention has been paid to increase tolerance and integrate international dimension into the study programs offered at home. According to the international students, the faculty is incorporating various cultural examples into their teaching, and the study materials are relevant internationally and applicable in various cultural contexts. An international student comments, "I mean that the professors are not pushing a particular perspective or ideology on the students but it is kind of constructive way of how to get the knowledge, which I think is very good, so." According to some of the university administrators and students, there are still faculty members who are reluctant to change their teaching methods and style, but that type of attitude is gradually disappearing.

The integration of international students into university life and having regular contacts with the local students is an area that needs further work. As noted by de Wit (2011), there are many examples where international students function as an isolated group having little interaction with the rest of the student community. Students in Estonia confirm that argument. Several local students note that international students almost live "in a parallel dimension." Contacts with the local students are limited even if there is an excitement and enthusiasm at the beginning. An international student comments,

We are quite well integrated at the moment in Estonia because we have been studying in Estonia already for three *years*, but what I remember from the beginning, then all the

information we received for international students were well organized, those tutor things and those kind of meetings were well-organized at the beginning, but after that it stopped. We just needed to get along by ourselves.

In one university, there was an international student representative at the departmental governance board. A local student noted that the cultural issues and language barriers challenged the smooth functioning of the board. There was a need to constantly balance between the limited language skills of the Estonian participants and the inclusion of the international representative.

Universities are starting to experiment with the new innovative approaches to internationalization. Today, at least one Estonian university (Tallinn University) is working toward abolishing its international student office to foster more integrated services to students. It remains to be seen whether this becomes a general trend. Some institutions are experimenting with establishing innovative internationalization programs. For example, Tallinn University of Technology has created an internship platform “Mectory” for students to work abroad as part of their study program. New attractive agreements in Shanghai and Silicon Valley have been signed for that purpose.

With the wide range of international programs, a clear need for better-coordinated internationalization attempts has emerged across sectors and institutions. Establishing specific focus areas has become an important theme. Seven informants stressed the need for agreeing on a few focus areas and excelling in these. A comment by the Ministry policy maker is illustrative:

The main question is about focusing our attempts to certain subject areas and provide central funding to those. . . . We would take a major step forward if we could establish a certain focused areas, certain disciplines where we are deliberately foreign language centered.

This need is primarily driven by the pressures of competition among the higher education institutions around the world. As a small country with limited resources, Estonia needs to be strategic in where it invests. Building on a few focus areas would help to increase the quality of the programs and to be more selective toward the student population. Yet, these decisions are directly linked to the financial resources and international reputation of institutions, which does not lead to an easy solution.

Although during the norm cascade the main focus was on attracting as many international students as possible, the norm internalization features the emphasis on quality over quantity. Three university representatives mentioned the direction of increasing quality among the international student body:

I think that for the next *years* to come or by 2015 we should reach the point where we are able to make a serious choice among the foreign students. Then we are going to see the results of our investments. . . . And maybe then our faculty is also going to invest more.

Another area of future emphasis is the integration of higher education and research collaborations. The current focus has been on the degree-level student mobility, leaving

the researchers and post-doctoral students out of focus. Research collaborations have been addressed separately, usually at the departmental level on the initiative of an individual faculty member. An increased dialogue and strategic coordination of the efforts are needed to avoid duplication of resources. Several university representatives noted a shift toward prioritizing research collaborations in the attempt to becoming a world-class research university. However, there is a need to apply more coordinated institutional-level approaches.

The phase of norm internalization marks the settling and conformity of the process. In Estonia, this phase is characterized by operating within a clear institutional and policy framework for internationalization. The new value systems are beginning to be accepted by the society more broadly, especially increased tolerance and acceptance toward internationalization. More in-depth approaches are in the works with the aim of investing in new selected areas of strength as well as working toward increased coordination between the higher education and research sector. Similarly, national-level developments lean toward increased policy coordination between the different Ministry units and universities.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Global changes happen in localized places. Analyzing internationalization of higher education through a norm-building prism in local contexts is therefore relevant and appropriate. Spreading of norms helps to understand the dynamics behind internationalization becoming the most important global force that shapes the higher education sector in this century (Knight, 2008). Norm-building processes help to clarify how specific standards and values are promoted and incorporated into society.

As demonstrated by the case of Estonia, the theory of norm-building with its distinct stages of norm-building, norm cascade, and internalization got confirmed, featuring leading actors and mechanisms. We learned that the norm-building as a process is not characterized by uniform objectives. It develops through complex dynamics in the network of stakeholders, characterized by diversity in interests and rationales. The case demonstrated differences between the institutional-level drivers and the national interests. In Estonia, national political rationales were the key driving force in the initial norm-building stage. As the process evolved, we witnessed a shift in the rationales away from the political motives toward the institution-building motives. As the process evolved, academic rationales in the form of increasing institutional legitimacy became important, culminating in social rationale—broader community building by introducing new values to the society.

The analysis demonstrated the pivotal role of the cultural factors such as language and societal beliefs having an impact on the outcomes of the norm-building process. As internationalization can be perceived as a threat to unique small cultures such as Estonian, it has created increased attention toward balancing out the potential risks. For example, Estonia's internationalization strategy specifically emphasizes the need to work toward more balanced student mobility. According to the Erasmus student mobility report, Estonia has been successful in achieving this goal (Archimedes

Foundation, 2014). Debates over effectiveness of providing university degrees only in English have occurred. Steps at the national level have been taken to promote and foster the use of academic vocabulary in Estonian.

The analysis made us question whether all norm entrepreneurs actually believe in the ideals and values represented by the norm itself (internationalization). In Estonia, the process was driven by the government to accomplish certain political and financial goals. Yet, there was little public debate about the broader goals of internationalization. The topic fell off the political radar soon after the initial stages of norm-building were accomplished. Major challenges in introducing any legal changes at the national level still remain a challenge in Estonia with universities working hard to lobby government for policy decisions supportive of internationalization.

As a context-specific process, a set of mechanisms was applied for norm-building. The initial mechanism used was persuasion. Gathering the key experts, a national-level strategy was created that serves as an important reference point in norm diffusion. Norm cascade featured active participation of most universities, including the professional higher education institutions, in spreading the norm. Institutions developed their own internationalization strategies, giving priority to the issue. Convincing methods (evidence-based arguments, providing reasons why it is important) were used to influence additional stakeholder groups (citizens, faculty members, experts in legal structures). Internationalization became associated with tolerance, acceptance of diversity, and an integrated society. In the final stage, the activities became a conformity, an accepted standard, with formalized institutional operations in place and focus on quality over quantity. Today, a sector-wide policy approach to internationalization has remained a challenge with more work needed.

The analysis reveals several aspects about internationalization. First, internationalization activities have the potential to shape a country's political situation. As Estonia was a society in transition, internationalization served as a tool for gaining broader political legitimacy. Being involved in European higher education reforms and establishing regional student mobility programs helped to quickly establish stronger political ties with the EU. As higher education institutions are the key stakeholders in the knowledge economy, their increased legitimacy (bilateral partnerships, joining international university networks) supports the country's political ambitions at a regional and global scale. This finding supports Acharya's (2004) assertion that countries adopt new norms more eagerly when concerned about reputation. Second, universities operate as powerful knowledge producers, breaking old traditions and spreading new norms in the society. Active engagement in internationalization activities has spread the values of diversity, tolerance, and multiculturalism in Estonia. Universities function as norm entrepreneurs that shape the value systems in the whole country. The opponents of internationalization contributed toward more straightforward debate in achieving that goal. Third, the local responses to global norm-building involve critically analyzing one's internationalization potential and building on the identified strengths at a country level. They also focus on guarding the cultural balance, particularly between the languages used in higher education (e.g., English vs. Estonian).

Internationalization continues to be a key policy area in Estonia's higher education system. It supports the aim of universities and government to become global players in the knowledge economy. Although the norm-building process is largely a reflection of this purpose, the process itself also contains values that help to facilitate a more integrated and collaborative society.

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### Notes

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2. DoRA—a doctoral student mobility scheme, financed through the European Union Structural Funds.
3. Archimedes Foundation is a government-affiliated agency that supports and facilitates programs for training, (higher) education, and research.
4. Strategy is available in English at <http://hm.ee/en>
5. Examples include Internationalization Strategy of University of Tartu 2004, Internationalization Strategy of Estonian Academy of Arts 2006-2010, Internationalization and Public Relations Strategy of Estonian Academy of Music and Theater 2007-2012, Internationalization Strategy of Tallinn University 2008-2015, and Internationalization and Innovation Strategy of Tallinn University of Technology 2012-2015.
6. Development Strategy of Estonian Language 2004-2011. Available at [http://www.eki.ee/keelenoukogu/strat\\_en.pdf](http://www.eki.ee/keelenoukogu/strat_en.pdf); Development Strategy of Estonian Language 2011-2017. Available at [http://ekn.hm.ee/system/files/Eesti\\_keelee\\_arengukava\\_2011-2017\\_0.pdf](http://ekn.hm.ee/system/files/Eesti_keelee_arengukava_2011-2017_0.pdf)

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