

## 30th UNICA IRO Meeting Tallinn University | 10 – 12 December 2025

### “Strategic Internationalisation: Navigating Diplomacy, Partnerships, and Intercultural Competence in a Changing World”

## SESSIONS’ BRIEFING

### Context of the event

The UNICA IRO Meeting is a cornerstone event of the UNICA Network. As the group celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the meeting 2025, hosted by Tallinn University, will revisit a theme that has long been central to its work: **strategic internationalisation**. The topic builds on the foundations of the [2024 meeting’s focus on “Building the Ideal International Relations Office”](#), moving the conversation forward to the “why” and “who” of international cooperation.

Tallinn University, with its leadership’s proactive approach to internationalisation and its establishment of broad global connections, is uniquely positioned to host a discussion on this topic. This theme will allow participants to explore how UNICA members can leverage strategic partnerships to achieve institutional goals, while also fostering a deeper understanding of the diplomatic and cultural nuances involved.

The programme begins with a strategic reflection from an institutional perspective (Opening Talk and Session 1), focusing on the overall importance of internationalisation and why collaboration with international partners is essential. It then moves to a more specific discussion in Session 2, examining the diplomatic role of universities, and of International Relations Officers in particular. The programme concludes with a practical application in Session 3.

Together, the sessions aim to offer participants a comprehensive understanding of the strategic and diplomatic role of International Relations Offices, which is crucial for institutional growth and reputation.

## BRIEFING SESSION 1 | The Strategic Imperative: Why institutions choose to cooperate with specific partners

Date and time: **11 December 2025 | 11h15-12h45**

### Session format

- 1. Introduction & framing by the Chair (15')**
- 2. Presentations (45 mins, 15' per speaker)**
- 3. Panel discussion + audience reactions and interaction (30')**

Session 1 follows a 30-minute opening talk on Strategic Internationalisation by Mikk Kasesalk (Strategy Manager, Tallinn University), which will set the scene for the forthcoming session by outlining why collaboration with international partners is essential for universities today. Building on this foundation, Session 1 will focus on the strategic imperative, this is, why institutions choose to cooperate with specific partners. Through the voice of different IROs of the network, the session will highlight the key drivers behind successful international partnerships, the role of leadership in guiding long-term international strategies, and the ways in which universities can position themselves within an increasingly competitive global higher education landscape.

### Objectives of the session

1. Examine how institutions align their internationalisation efforts with institutional priorities;
2. Understanding the setup of a strategic roadmap for global engagement;
3. Learn from concrete examples of successful university-to-university cooperation, including institutional delegations, long-term partnerships, and network-building practices.

### Expected outcomes:

- A clearer understanding of how institutional priorities inform and shape internationalisation strategies.
- Improved capacity to develop or refine a strategic roadmap for global engagement, including identifying priorities, sequencing actions, and engaging key stakeholders across the institution.
- Enhanced insight into effective partnership-building models, supported by real examples of successful institutional cooperation.

### Guiding Questions:

1. How does our institution currently define its internationalisation priorities, and how are these reflected in existing partnerships?
2. What steps are needed to develop a coherent and actionable strategic roadmap for global engagement?
3. Which examples of successful university-to-university cooperation could be adapted or scaled to benefit our institution?
4. How can leadership and key stakeholders be engaged effectively in shaping internationalisation strategies?
5. What lessons can be learned from both successes and challenges in building long-term international partnerships?

### Chair & Speakers

**Chair:** **ANETE ELKEN**, Senior specialist of international cooperation at the Strategy Office of Tallinn University.

**SPEAKER 1:** **ÅSA PETRI**, Head of Unit of the International Office and Deputy Head of Student Services, Stockholm University

**Abstract:** **“Higher education international cooperation in the current geopolitical climate”**

The presentation will focus on the challenge of balancing risks and opportunities that international cooperation in higher education poses to our work in higher education international cooperation today.

**SPEAKER 2:** **CĂTĂLIN PLOAE**, Senior International Relations Expert, Bucharest University of Economic Studies

**Abstract:** **“The ASE Partnership Matrix: A Roadmap for Global Engagement”**

The presentation, addressing one of the major topics for discussion within this area, proposes a clear, structured model for how ASE manages and prioritizes its numerous international relationships. The key focus is on moving beyond a flat list of agreements to a hierarchical, multi-level engagement model that maximizes resource allocation.

Partnerships are categorized across three tiers: Tier 1 for strategic, deep engagement (joint degrees/research); Tier 2 for broad mobility and competence development; and Tier 3 for exploratory, emerging market connections. Progression from an emerging Future Partner (Tier 3) to an Anchor Partnership (Tier 1) is governed by a Decision Framework assessing criteria like research output, regional influence, and discipline strength.

**SPEAKER 3: MARTIN POVAŽAN**, Head of International Relations, Comenius University in Bratislava

**Abstract: “Depth over Transaction: How Institutional Self-Reflection Leads to Purposeful Partnerships”**

In my presentation, I proceed from a simple premise: strategic partnerships begin at home. In my first year as Head of the IRO, I intentionally turned the focus inward - coordinating with faculties to simplify processes, align services, nurture a shared understanding, and build a university-wide database of agreements to reveal our full landscape and potential synergies. This inner work - what I call conscious internationalization - builds the integrity and capacity we need before we reach out. From there, we move to a strategic analysis of regions and partners, grounded in departments, study programmes, and realistic collaboration potential. Much like community-building, partnership is about choosing where depth can grow: engaging a smaller number based on clear criteria so that people, time, and resources are used wisely and respectfully—for us and for our partners. In this spirit, purposeful partnerships arise when the institution is coherent inside and selective outside, turning exchange from a transaction into a sustained dialogue of meaning, value, and shared impact.

## SESSION 2 BRIEFING | The Diplomatic Dimension: The IRO as a diplomatic actor

Date and time: **11 December 2025 | 14h00 – 17h00**

### Session format

#### **A. Opening talk to frame the topic (15')**

"The IRO as soft diplomat: Partnering with the government and EU in Africa Collaboration"  
| **Anete ELKEN**, Senior Specialist of International Cooperation, Strategy Office, Tallinn University

#### **B. Break Out Groups (90 min)**

- Understanding the role of Higher Education in public and cultural diplomacy | **Facilitator: Anete ELKEN** (Tallinn University)
- Negotiating and maintaining complex international agreements | **Facilitator: Helena DERŠEK ŠTUHEC** (University of Ljubljana)
- Navigating geopolitical factors in international partnerships | **Facilitator: Catherine CONVERY** (University College Dublin)

#### **C. Comfort Break to organise ideas (30 min)**

#### **D. Break out Groups: reporting, Discussion & Wrap-Up (45 min)**

Session 2 builds on the morning sessions', shifting the tone to more in-depth reflections and complex questions on the role of Higher Education in public and cultural diplomacy. Participants will be invited to join one of 3 break out groups that focus on different dimensions of the overall topic: how universities act as diplomatic actors, navigating complex international partnerships, and managing geopolitical challenges.

### Objectives of the session

1. Explore the role of higher education institutions as actors in public and cultural diplomacy;
2. Understand how universities can negotiate and maintaining complex international agreements;
3. Examine strategies to navigate geopolitical factors in international partnerships;
4. Identify best practices for leveraging universities' unique position in global education, research, and cultural exchange.

### **Expected outcomes:**

- Enhanced understanding of why universities can't be dissociated from diplomatic efforts
- Improved capacity to manage complex partnerships and geopolitical challenges
- Improved preparedness to anticipate potential challenges in partnerships and develop effective mitigation strategies.

## Chair & Speakers

**Chair: Elena AVGOUSTIDOU-KYRIACOU**, Director of the International Relations Service, University of Cyprus, Coordinator of the UNICA IRO Group

**SPEAKER (OPENING TALK): ANETE ELKEN**, Senior Specialist of International Cooperation, Strategy Office, Tallinn University

**Abstract: “The IRO as soft diplomat: Partnering with the government and EU in Africa Collaboration”**

This talk explores the IRO's crucial evolution into a diplomatic actor. Using a case study focused on EU-Africa strategic cooperation, we will demonstrate how IROs actively move beyond traditional mobility management to leverage high-level partnerships with the national government and EU organisations.

This approach showcases the university's contribution to public and cultural diplomacy, effectively bridging institutional priorities with geopolitical goals to forge stronger Euro-African ties.

## **FACILITATORS BREAK-OUT GROUPS**

1. **Anete ELKEN**, Senior Specialist of International Cooperation, Strategy Office, Tallinn University
2. **Helena DERŠEK ŠTUHEC**, Head of the dept., Office of International Relations, University of Ljubljana)
3. **Catherine CONVERY**, Global Mobility Manager, University College Dublin

## Break-Out Groups

### TOPICS

1. **Understanding the role of Higher Education in public and cultural diplomacy**  
**Facilitator: Anete ELKEN** (Tallinn University)
2. **Negotiating and maintaining complex international agreements**  
**Facilitator: Helena DERŠEK ŠTUHEC** (University of Ljubljana)
3. **Navigating geopolitical factors in international partnerships**  
**Facilitator: Catherine CONVERY** (University College Dublin)

### Suggested Guiding Questions

#### **BG1: Understanding the role of Higher Education in public and cultural diplomacy**

- In what ways can higher education institutions contribute to shaping a country's international image and influence?
- How can universities leverage research, teaching, and mobility programmes to foster intercultural understanding?
- What examples demonstrate successful public or cultural diplomacy initiatives led by universities?

#### **BG2: Negotiating and maintaining complex international agreements**

1. What are the key factors to consider when negotiating long-term international partnerships?
2. How can universities balance institutional priorities, partner expectations, and resource constraints in agreements?
3. What strategies help sustain partnerships through changes in leadership, policy, or funding?
4. How can challenges in multi-party agreements be anticipated and mitigated?

#### **BG3: Navigating geopolitical factors in international partnerships**

1. How do geopolitical tensions influence university partnerships and collaborations?
2. What strategies can IROs use to manage risks associated with changing political or regulatory environments?
3. How can universities ensure continuity and resilience in partnerships across different regions?
4. How should institutions incorporate geopolitical awareness into strategic planning for international engagement?