

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

Conference Report from the UNICA IRO Meeting 2025

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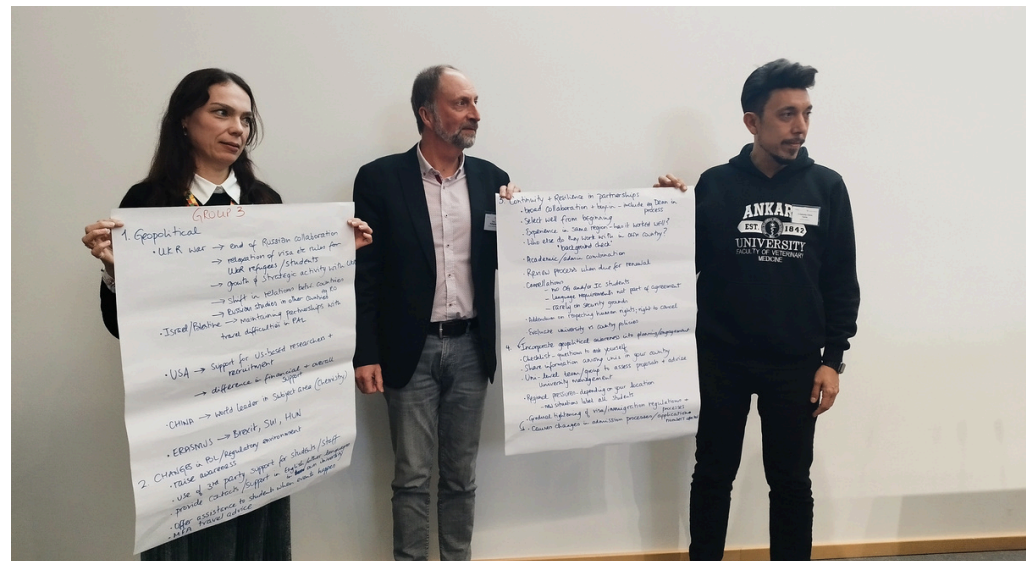


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Introduction

The UNICA IRO Meeting is a cornerstone event of the network since the creation of the UNICA International Relations Officers Group (IRO Group) in 1995. To mark the celebration of the group's 30th anniversary, members took the opportunity of the annual meeting to revisit a theme that has long been central to its work: strategic internationalisation.

The topic built 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. The host of the meeting, Tallinn University, with its leadership's proactive approach to internationalisation and its establishment of broad global connections, welcomed participants on its campus on 10-12 December 2025.

About the topic

"Strategic Internationalisation: Navigating Diplomacy, Partnerships, and Intercultural Competence in a Changing World"

In an era of increasing global complexity, the role of International Relations Officers (IROs) extends beyond traditional mobility and programme management. It is becoming a strategic and diplomatic function, crucial for institutional growth and reputation.

As universities shift from Education providers towards committed actors in societal and community engagement, IROs find themselves navigating shifting political landscapes, evolving visa and regulatory frameworks, and growing scrutiny around international collaborations. This demands not only operational expertise but also a strong sense of diplomacy: the ability to build trust across cultures, manage sensitive partnerships, and align institutional priorities with broader national and international agendas.

At the same time, partnerships themselves are becoming more complex and more strategic. Rather than focusing solely on exchange numbers, institutions are increasingly seeking meaningful, long-term collaborations that integrate education, research, innovation, and societal engagement. IROs play a key role in identifying, nurturing, and sustaining these partnerships, ensuring they are balanced, values-driven, and mutually beneficial.

Another essential dimension, though not new, is intercultural competence. Internationalisation is no longer a choice, but a strategy that is intertwined with university activities at large. This involves working closely with academic and administrative colleagues to embed intercultural learning across the institution.

Ultimately, strategic internationalisation requires IROs to act as connectors, advisors, and change agents. By combining diplomatic skills, partnership-building expertise, and intercultural awareness, they help their institutions not only respond to a changing world but actively shape their place within it.

The theme allowed the 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 began 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 moved to a more specific discussion in Session 2, examining the diplomatic role of universities, and of International Relations Officers in particular. The programme concluded with a practical application in Session 3, which consisted of a workshop on Intercultural Communication.

This short report presents the main conclusions from each session, serving both as a record of the discussions and as a foundation for future activities.

“Strategic Internationalisation” | Mikk KASESALK, Strategy Manager, Tallinn University

The opening talk, led by [Mikk KASESALK \(Tallinn University\)](#), delved into how Tallinn University is shaping its international presence and cooperation from 2010 through 2030. It highlighted a shift from decentralized, mobility-focused efforts driven by individual academics toward a more mission-driven, institution-wide approach aligned with European priorities:

2010-2020:

- The approach was decentralized, driven mainly by academics and academic units;
- The focus was mobility-centric with an emphasis on academic cooperation.

2020-2030:

- The approach remains decentralized but with more institutional coordination and focus on institutional cooperation;
- Internationalization is mission-driven, integrated into research, teaching, social engagement, and aligned with European priorities, with European funding becoming key;
- The university aims to weave international collaboration into its research, teaching, and social outreach, leveraging European funding as a key resource

A key challenge lies in identifying suitable partners to support a broader approach that also contributes to the third mission of universities, particularly in terms of societal engagement.

Funding constraints remain a significant barrier, reinforcing the importance of engaging with European-level opportunities. This, in turn, requires universities to align their strategies with European priorities, while also prompting a degree of critical reflection towards national authorities, whose understanding of internationalisation in higher education is often perceived as too limited.

The strategic dimension of internationalisation is therefore becoming more prominent, although there is a shared concern that it should not evolve into merely a survival strategy in the coming decade.

From an Estonian perspective, membership in the European Union has positioned the country as both a contributor to and beneficiary of European cooperation, with expectations that universities act as drivers of change within their local environments. Looking ahead, several possible scenarios for the next ten years were identified:

1.Integrated European Academic Area: semi-federated university alliances, automatic mutual recognition of qualifications, micro-credentials, talent attraction, systemic internationalization, and stable EU funding;

2.Digital-first, hybrid internationalization: virtual mobility rivaling physical mobility, AI-personalized modules, digital campuses, selective physical mobility, and emphasis on digital pedagogical capacity;

3.Talent scarcity and the competition scenario: aggressive European talent attraction in STEM and green sectors, shift towards migration and retention policies, industry-linked recruitment pipelines, transformation of international offices into talent offices, and support for integration and career pathways of international graduates.

The presentation concluded with the recognition of the need for universities to engage more actively with the public. Traditionally, universities have focused on presenting evidence and leaving decision-making to policymakers. However, if they are to play a more prominent role in society, they may need to adopt a more assertive voice, articulate informed positions and opinions. This shift is not without challenges, as universities are often characterised by a high degree of conservatism and resistance to change.

In summary, the presentation offers three important answers to its prompt question, ***“why does strategic internationalisation matter?”***:

1-It strengthens resilience and autonomy amid geopolitical, economic, and demographic challenges. By diversifying partnerships, attracting and retaining talent, and maintaining global connections, universities are better equipped to adapt to external shocks and shifting global dynamics;

2-It aligns universities with European priorities and policies, including the European Education Area, ERA, and the European University Alliances. Engaging with these frameworks allows universities not only to access funding and networks, but also to actively contribute to shaping the future of education and research in Europe;

3- It enables universities to fulfil the growing expectation of generating European public value, by connecting local capacities with global knowledge flows, and by ensuring that international engagement serves both institutional goals and wider societal needs.

Session 1

The Strategic Imperative: Why institutions choose to cooperate with specific partners

After establishing the importance of strategic internationalisation, session 1 focused on why institutions choose to cooperate with specific partners. Through the voice of three IROs of the network, the session highlighted 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.

[Åsa PETRI \(Stockholm University\)](#) presented the case of Stockholm University, focusing on the challenge of balancing risks and opportunities that international cooperation in higher education poses to our work in higher education international cooperation today. In its university strategy for the period 2023-2026, the institution emphasises the importance of maintaining internationally leading research and providing broad, research-based education of high international quality, while also contributing to democracy and sustainable development. Internationalisation remains central to this vision: integrating global perspectives into curricula, promoting student mobility through programmes such as Erasmus+ and Nordplus, and fostering a diverse student body are seen as key to preparing graduates for an interconnected labour market and enriching the academic environment.

At the same time, the institutions are navigating the risks associated with international engagement more carefully. This includes understanding foreign legal systems, conducting risk assessments, and ensuring well-informed, balanced partnerships. While international cooperation brings clear benefits, such as enhanced institutional attractiveness, stronger global networks, and contributions to addressing societal challenges, it also requires managing trade-offs between openness and security. Particular attention must be given to student mobility, especially in high-risk destinations, where physical, digital, and academic risks may arise. As a result, institutions are called to provide robust support systems, clear guidance, and preventative measures, while also encouraging students to take responsibility for their international experiences.

Catalin PLOAE (Bucharest University of Economic Studies) followed with the presentation of a plan to handle ASE's international partnerships, aiming to focus efforts where they count the most. The challenge starts from the fact that ASE maintains dozens of international agreements spanning continents and disciplines. Yet without a clear framework, they risk spreading resources too thin and missing opportunities for transformative collaboration.

To improve partnership management, the university has introduced a “three-tier-model”, aimed at facilitating the transition from a flat list of cooperation to structure tier. So, instead of treating all partners equally, the model categorizes partnerships into three tiers based on their strategic value and level of engagement:

- **Tier 1:** Anchor Partnerships: for deep, strategic collaborations involving joint degrees, research centers, and faculty integration that deliver transformational results.
- **Tier 2:** Core Partnerships: for broad mobility and competence development programs such as student exchanges and faculty visits that form the backbone of international engagement.
- **Tier 3:** Future Partnerships: for exploratory and pilot projects in emerging markets to test compatibility and position ASE for future opportunities.

This model transforms ASE's extensive partnership portfolio into a manageable, strategically aligned roadmap ensuring sustainable and impactful global engagement. With this, resource allocation is impacted, as by distinguishing high-impact relationships from exploratory ones, ASE can focus staff time and funding on partnerships that generate the most value.

At the same time, the model is accompanied by a decision evaluation framework to ensure partnerships support institutional priorities and have measurable impact. Ultimately, the model aims to triple resource efficiency, increase Tier 1 partnerships by 25% within five years, and achieve 100% strategic alignment, resulting in clearer prioritization, stronger impact, better market growth, transparency, and data-driven decisions.

Martin POVAŽAN (Comenius University in Bratislava) concluded the first session with a presentation opposing “Depth” over “Transaction”. Proceeding from the premise that strategic partnerships begin at home, he conducted an experiment in his first year as head of IRO in which he 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, which he calls “conscious internationalization”, builds the integrity and capacity necessary to carry out the “outward” work, this is, the strategic analysis of regions and partners, grounded in departments, study programmes, and realistic collaboration potential. Inner reflection improves international partnerships by helping institutions gain clarity about who they are and what they truly want before engaging with external partners. Starting "at home" means identifying who is reaching out on behalf of the organization and ensuring internal coordination to build strong services and processes. This self-knowledge allows for more capacity and integrity when moving forward with partnerships.

POVAŽAN defends that, 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 both Comenius University and its 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.

During the discussion, [Yvon MOLINGHEN \(Université libre de Bruxelles\)](#), added an important reflection by sharing the Université libre de Bruxelles position with regards to partnerships: “We’ve decided we don’t work with countries, we work with universities”. To explain this, he shared that, when the war in Ukraine started, the ULB didn’t immediately stop working with Russian universities. The work with those universities only ceased when the rectors backed up Russia’s position. He went on to explain that, sometimes, it comes down to the universities’ individual ties with professionals. People to people contact must be kept until as much as possible, as safe as possible.

Session 2

The Diplomatic Dimension: The IRO as a diplomatic actor

Session 2 of the IRO Meeting built on the previous session, shifting the tone to more in-depth reflections and complex questions on the role of Higher Education in public and cultural diplomacy. Participants were invited to join one of three break out groups that focused on different dimensions of the overall topic: how universities act as diplomatic actors, navigating complex international partnerships, and managing geopolitical challenges.

[Anete ELKEN \(Tallinn University\)](#) started by framing the topic with a presentation on partnering with the government and EU in Africa Collaboration. Tallinn University has established significant partnerships with African institutions and government entities, primarily focused on digital transformation, educational innovation, and competency-based education. Supported by the [Estonian Centre for International Development \(ESTDEV\)](#), the university collaborates with partners in countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Botswana, often in collaboration with the Estonian government's international cooperation efforts. These efforts are part of [Estonia's regional strategy for Africa](#), which aims at strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations based on shared values, interests and equal partnership.

During this conversation, an observation worth noting is the structural imbalance in internationalisation. Many universities benefit from practical accessibility due to their location and even more straightforward visa processes. In contrast, other countries face accessibility challenges due to logistical constraints and end up being less attractive when it comes to exchanges, despite being academically valuable. These inequalities make partnerships risk becoming extractive rather than truly collaborative and reinforcing global inequalities, with well connected universities becoming more connected and the others further marginalised.

Break out group 1

Understanding the role of Higher Education in public and cultural diplomacy

As established, higher education institutions are not just academic actors, but also agents of public and cultural diplomacy. Through their students, research collaborations, and international networks, universities contribute to narratives of openness, innovation, and cultural exchange. Yet this role is not always explicitly defined or strategically leveraged. The first group has focused on the ways in which institutions move from being passive participants in internationalisation to active shapers of intercultural dialogue and global influence.

The discussion framed universities as bridges between local and global communities, arguing that that connection becomes a form of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Here's the main ideas to retain:

- A country's image is not shaped by institutions alone, but by the ecosystem of people, stories, and networks universities create;
- Intercultural understanding is not automatic; it must be designed, facilitated, and embedded locally;
- Successful diplomacy initiatives are intentional, people-centred, and narrative-driven, rather than purely institutional.

Visual storytelling to shape perception, the use of alumni as ambassadors, and engagement with local communities were some of the operational tactics to translate those ideas into practice.

To sum-up, internationalisation is a two-way dynamic, not rooted in institutional outputs (number of exchange students or partnerships), but rather in relationships and lived experiences that are a testament to global engagement with local impact.

Break out group 2

Negotiating and maintaining complex international agreements

Group 2 focused on the elements that make international partnership sustainable. While signing agreements is often the visible outcome of international cooperation, the real challenge lies in negotiating, managing, and maintaining these relationships over time. Competing priorities, limited resources, and differing institutional cultures can quickly turn even the most promising collaboration into a fragile arrangement. Furthermore, external forces such as shifting geopolitical conditions, can also represent a source of constraints and tensions.

The group's reflection concluded that:

- Negotiation is not just about defining activities, it's about aligning legal, institutional, and cultural expectations early on;
- Institutional capacity and priorities differ, so balanced partnerships must be rooted not in equivalence but in transparency and realistic scope-setting;
- Partnerships are vulnerable to internal shifts if led by specific academics in the context of personal relationships. Even if initiated in that context, the sustainability of partnerships depends on institutional ownership of agreements;

- Complexity must be planned for, not reacted to;
- Successful partnerships are not the ones with the most ambition, but the ones that manage complexity most deliberately.

Overall, the key message is that successful international partnerships are not defined by ambition alone, but by how deliberately institutions anticipate challenges, align expectations, and embed collaboration in sustainable, institution-wide structures.

Break out group 3

Navigating geopolitical factors in international partnerships

The third group focused on universities control over their international partnerships in an increasingly volatile world. Geopolitical dynamics, ranging from diplomatic tensions to shifting regulatory frameworks, are playing a growing role in shaping the possibilities and limits of academic collaboration. For International Relations Offices, this raises difficult but necessary questions about risk, resilience, and strategic positioning. Partnerships that once seemed stable can quickly become uncertain, requiring institutions to adapt while preserving academic values and long-term goals. Here's what universities can do to act ahead, rather than reacting:

- Establish partnerships with resilience in mind: the demonstrated vulnerability of partnerships to external forces has shown that universities must adopt more strategic approaches, including diversifying partnerships, developing crisis-response mechanisms, and strengthening support systems for students and staff. Ensuring resilience requires both careful partner selection and continuous reassessment of collaborations, particularly in regions affected by political instability or regulatory change;
- Embed geopolitical awareness in internationalisation strategies, recognising that global engagement is no longer neutral, but deeply interconnected with broader political and economic developments.

Ultimately, this confirms the same conclusion as the previous two groups: universities must shift from reactive internationalisation to strategically navigating a fragmented and shifting global landscape.

“Improving Intercultural Communication and Inclusivity in Professional Settings”

On the second day, the group shifted to a more concrete approach through a workshop on Intercultural Communication by Anastassia ZABRODSKAJA (Tallinn University). This session provided participants with academic and research-based concepts to better understand and navigate cultural differences in their daily professional interactions. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their own communication patterns and biases, while also exploring strategies to foster more inclusive and effective exchanges.

Some of the academics referenced and their respective ideas include:

- **Edward T. Hall:** “Culture is communication”, encompassing 4 dimensions: time, context, space and information
- **Geert Hofstede:** “Culture is the collective programming of the mind”, rooted in value orientation
- **John Mole:** “Culture is how things are done here”
- **Deborah Tannen:** “All communication is more or less cross-cultural”
- **Ron Scollon:** “Culture is a kind of storehouse or library of possible meanings and symbols”.

These theories reinforce the idea that intercultural communication is not an “add-on” skill, but a core competence for internationalisation. They show that many of the challenges discussed across the sessions (whether in partnerships, diplomacy, or geopolitics) are not only structural or institutional, but also cultural and communicative at their core.

Conclusion and outlook

The 31st UNICA IRO Meeting, coinciding with the group's 30th anniversary, provided not only an opportunity to reflect on past achievements, but also to critically reassess the evolving role of International Relations Officers in a rapidly changing global landscape. Throughout the meeting, a clear shift emerged: internationalisation is no longer a primarily operational function, but a **strategic, diplomatic, and deeply human endeavour**.

Across the sessions, participants highlighted that strategic internationalisation is driven not only by institutional ambition, but by the ability to navigate complexity with intention. Whether in identifying meaningful partnerships, managing increasingly intricate agreements, or responding to geopolitical uncertainty, IROs are required to act with intention and responsibility as opposed to a output mindset. Partnerships, in this context, are no longer measured by volume, but by their depth, sustainability, and shared value.

At the same time, the discussions reinforced that internationalisation is fundamentally about people, relationships, and communication. Universities act as bridges between local and global communities, shaping narratives, fostering intercultural understanding, and contributing to broader societal and diplomatic goals. However, these outcomes require deliberate design, institutional commitment, and the development of intercultural competence at all levels.

Ultimately, the meeting confirmed a shared direction for the UNICA community: the need to move from reactive to conscious internationalisation. In an increasingly volatile world, IROs play a crucial role as connectors, advisors, and change agents, ensuring that international engagement remains meaningful, resilient, and, more importantly, aligned with societal needs.

Actionable ways forward

Looking ahead, the insights gathered during the IRO Meeting provide a strong foundation for the future, as well as a call to continue exploring actionable ways to strengthen the strategic, diplomatic, and intercultural dimensions of internationalisation. Furthermore, during the general discussion of the IRO group on future works, members expressed the will for the group to have a more proactive and coordinated role in shaping the broader environment of internationalisation.

Below are some suggested actionable ways forward for members' consideration:

- Strengthening engagement with policy and decision-making: Participants highlighted the need to move towards a more structured and strategic approach to advocacy, particularly on issues that directly affect international mobility, such as student housing, accommodation, and visa policies;
- Establishing a permanent, thematic task force dedicated to Erasmus+, to monitor developments, collect feedback from member institutions, and formulate evidence-based recommendations for its future evolution;
- Showcasing members' success stories: Find creative ways and encourage members to share their stories with UNICA, giving these stories visibility at the network and stakeholders levels.

The upcoming UNICA IRO Meeting is set to take place at the University of Cyprus, in November 2026.

BEYOND THE REPORT

This report is an outcome of the sessions of the UNICA IRO Meeting 2025.

Learn more about this initiative and other UNICA activities of the UNICA IRO Group:

- [Event's official page](#)
- [Photos of the UNICA IRO Meeting](#)
- [UNICA IRO Group: 30 years of activities & community building](#)
- [The IRO Group through the years photo gallery](#)



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Founded in 1990, UNICA is an institutional network of universities from the capitals of Europe committed to acting as a catalyst in the advancement, integration and cooperation of its member universities throughout Europe. Its vision is to be a driving force in the development of the European Higher Education and Research areas, and to empower its member universities to unlock their full potential, putting knowledge, Research, and Innovation at the service of the needs of society and of the coming generations.

The cultural diversity and “living lab” aspects of Capital cities, the proximity to governing bodies, their technological, cultural and innovative capacity, and the opportunities they provide as powerful economic and commercial centers, create a special environment for UNICA Members. Building on the diverse profiles of its members, UNICA aims to widen and strengthen international collaborations, engage academic leadership, and facilitate networking among academic communities. Activities are prepared by relevant seven UNICA working groups in cooperation with the UNICA Steering Committee and the UNICA Secretariat in Brussels.

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