TRULY INTERNATIONAL? –
A CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL CHECKLIST FOR EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES
The author
Since 2015 Rolf Tarrach has been the President of the European University Association (EUA), of which he has been a Council Member for ten years. Furthermore, he holds the position of Vice-chair of the jury of the French “Initiative d’excellence”. He is the former President of the Spanish Scientific Research Council and a former member of the European Union Research Advisory Board. Until 2015, Rolf Tarrach was the President of the trilingual University of Luxembourg, and in this role he promoted the international orientation of his university, including the involvement of international staff.

Summary
Nations like the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands have very different preconditions regarding their language, university system and the overall level of international orientation in the countries. Therefore, the strategies of internationalisation have to be adapted to each specific case. Nevertheless, it is important to exchange successful practices in order to learn from each other; the platform of the European University Association serves this purpose.

A cross-institutional checklist for the internationalisation of European universities evaluates the amount of internationals in leadership positions, assesses whether calls for open positions are posted in English and checks if EU programmes are utilized for internationalisation. The appointment of internationals as honorary professors and bilingual study programmes work in favour of such a checklist as well. Moreover, the grants of the European Research Council can be a good orientation to further internationalisation at Higher Education Institutions.

The text is based on the “Humboldt Ferngespräche” lecture held at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin on 10 November 2016.
Internationalisation challenges the structures, processes and personnel of higher education institutions. The question I want to address today is the extent to which the administrations of European universities are actually fit for the increasing number of international researchers, PhD candidates and students. I would like to start with the different strategies for internationalisation of HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in Europe. After that I would like to propose a cross-institutional checklist for the international alignment of European universities. But first let me start with a few words on the European University Association (EUA) which plays an integral part in connecting European universities on the topics surrounding internationalisation.

The EUA is an association of some 850 universities – a very large association. These institutions are from 47 countries, not only from the European Union – but from Europe as a geographic concept. You can imagine that the diversity of university systems that we include is enormous. The council consists of 34 rectors’ conferences from 34 different countries. In this council, an exchange on how universities are organised in the different countries takes place, which is a very efficient way of learning from each other. The EUA, furthermore, plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and works with the European Commission, the European Parliament and other key decision-makers. Within this network the association promotes the interests of its members. The EUA wants to support its member universities in achieving highly diversified profiles with a wide spectrum of graduate qualifications as well as a high mobility rate among their staff and students.
INTERNATIONALISATION IN HEIS IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Firstly, let me shed some light on how European HEIs manage internationalisation. Internationalisation is, of course, everywhere today: it is a major issue. Since the concrete circumstances of the countries demand different strategies, there is no global blueprint of internationalisation.

A couple of evenings ago, I met Dame Julia Goodfellow in Berlin. She is the president of Universities UK, which is the equivalent of the Standing Conference of Rectors and Presidents of Higher Education Institutions here in Germany. She told me that in British universities, 17% of the academic staff comes from the European Union. Additionally, in British universities a lot of people come from the former Commonwealth countries and those institutions, therefore, have a very high level of internationalisation. Their university system is relatively open which has been a very successful strategy for attracting many researchers, professors and teachers from all over the world.

In France, I have been vice-president of the Initiative d'excellence for five years, which is a modified version of the Exzellenzinitiative in Germany. One of its three goals, which are different from the German ones, is the internationalisation of French universities. HEIs in France have already reached a certain level of internationalisation but they certainly haven’t achieved their full potential yet. That is one of the reasons why the French government decided to provide funds to specific groups of universities and research centres in order to help them become more open to foreign staff.

The Netherlands has a very high level of internationalisation as well. The teaching language is one of the characteristics that correlate strongly with internationalisation. In Dutch universities, 30% of the Bachelor courses and 75% of the Master courses are given in English. The discussion there concerns more the risk of losing the Dutch language, as a scientific language which is a valid concern. But there are no comparable problems with German.

Indeed, internationalisation does not mean giving up the domestic language. That would be a misleading concept of internationalisation.
It is not true that a German university where everything is run in English is automatically more international. Internationalisation revolves much more around a certain mind-set. Multilingualism is a better sign of internationalisation than monolingualism, even if the one spoken language is not the domestic language.

Another country which is highly international, in a peculiar way, is Switzerland. In Zurich, 60% of the professors come from Germany. It has reached a point where the Swiss are actually starting to worry about this high percentage of foreign professors, and are thinking about restricting the appointment of foreign people. Nevertheless, they continue to open their calls for academic positions and take the best candidates no matter where they come from. Through this procedure the university will become quite international. But this is an internationalisation which is partially unidirectional. It is an internationalisation which is based on the high quantity of good candidates from Germany. Nevertheless, the Swiss system is a very international one. In the French-speaking part of Switzerland one can observe the same situation with a very high percentage of French professors instead of German ones.

That leads me to mention the unsolicited internationalisation which can be found, for instance, in medical studies in Austria and Belgium. A lot of German students want to study medicine in Austria, and a lot of French students want to study medicine in Belgium because the German and the French university systems are not able to accept all the applicants for this study programme. The European Union allowed both countries to set quotas. This is normally forbidden by EU rules, but the two countries argued that they needed a certain percentage of medical doctors who would stay in the country after their studies. This is another type of internationalisation which simply results from the right of free movement and isn't explicitly requested by these countries.

Luxembourg is a special case because the university is very young. It was founded in 2003 and is the only one in the country. Before, Luxembourg had no universities at all. One could postulate that there
is a correlation between having a good university system and being a country with a high level of well-being. Well, Luxembourg was the counter-example to that; no university and, at that point, the highest per capita income in the world. In fact, relatively speaking, the per capita income decreased a little since the university was founded.

Luxembourg as a country is already extremely international and the university has a high level of internationalisation as well: only one quarter of the professors are Luxembourgish and the staff come from 90 different countries. It’s a trilingual university – French, English and German are the languages of communication at the whole university. That only makes sense because everyone who goes to school in Luxembourg speaks four languages. Multilingualism is a completely normal thing. Nobody is surprised if you switch from one language to the other in daily conversations. Luxembourg has 550,000 inhabitants and, of those who are actively working, only one third are Luxembourgish, one third are foreigners living in Luxembourg, and one third are commuters who enter the country each day and leave the country again in the evening. In the city of Luxembourg during the night, 75% of the population are foreigners and during the day 85% are foreigners. If you talk to somebody on the street, chances are that this person will be a foreigner. Actually, it would be against the odds if this person happened to be a national. Therefore, the fact that the university is extremely international is nothing out of the ordinary. It would have been surprising if the university were very Luxembourgish. In fact, the Luxembourgish language is not used at the university. This must be one of the few universities in the world where the national language is not used.
A CHECKLIST FOR THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF UNIVERSITIES

THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF LEADERSHIP POSITIONS
I would like to start with one of the toughest indicators on the checklist of true internationalisation: How international is the university’s leadership? Internationalisation should be something which doesn’t have to be talked about. That is to say, there will be no department of the university in charge of internationalisation. Eventually, when a university reaches a good level of internationalisation, it will be internalised. Then, among the president of the university, the vice-presidents of the university, the deans, and the different boards of the university, there will be a certain presence of foreigners. In Germany, as well as in other European countries, this is usually not the case. There are, of course, exceptions and there are some universities where the rector or the president is a foreigner. In fact, there are some universities of applied sciences here in Germany which have foreign leadership. But this is still very exceptional. It is the same as when a company tells you that they have a good gender policy, and then you ask about the composition of the company’s board and they are all men. Their gender policy doesn’t seem to work. The same holds for the internationalisation of universities. That is very likely the toughest indicator. But it is a relevant one and when you reach it, then you can very likely forget about having a specific internationalisation policy because you will have already achieved the goal of internationalisation.

CALLS FOR INTERNATIONAL STAFF
A vital prerequisite for the internationalisation of the university’s leadership is the availability of calls for academic positions in more than the German language. There should always be an English version of all calls to make sure that enough foreign candidates apply. The language requirements for those positions should not be set too high in order to avoid excluding very promising candidates who don’t speak advanced German. It is advisable to support foreigners in learning
German once they’re in Germany and are already working at the university. In Denmark, they established a procedure whereby competency in the Danish language is not a requirement at the time of appointment. Along with the employment contract, however, international employees sign a commitment to learn basic Danish within a couple of years. The Danish universities also offer all kinds of facilities to help them meet that commitment. Although the German language might not be conceived as particularly international, it is still an attractive language for many foreigners. This is an advantage of Germany compared to the Netherlands, for instance. Foreigners don’t really go to the Netherlands because of the Dutch language, rather, they go in spite of it. The attractiveness of the German language can be used to achieve multilingualism, an essential part of every internationalisation programme.

THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL GRANTS
The European Research Council (ERC) offers funds which can be spent to further internationalisation at your universities. Those grants are used as an indicator for the quality of research at universities. Universities always brag about how many ERC grants they have, and that can be a good way of achieving competitiveness and comparability. You can use those allowances in three ways: firstly, for retaining good research; secondly, for bringing scientists who currently work abroad back to Germany; and thirdly, for attracting foreign staff. The first two ways are already utilised quite often but the third way has not been exploited to its full potential yet. Bringing foreign staff into the university is essential because those people will automatically make the university more international.
INTERNATIONALISATION THROUGH CONNECTIONS WITH RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

In Germany, and particularly in Berlin, there are all kinds of Max Planck institutes, Helmholtz institutes and other kinds of research institutions. Many of the directors or people in leadership positions at these institutions are honorary professors at universities. At the Max Planck institutes, particularly in the life and the physical science sections, 40% of the directors are foreigners. This gives universities the opportunity to appoint a foreigner from one of those institutions as a honorary professor, which can further the internationalisation of the university. A foreigner has valuable insights into other systems and can give innovative impulses for changes in the procedures of German universities. These people do not only come with a different philosophy of life, they also have different ideas about how to organise higher education and research.

BILINGUAL STUDY PROGRAMMES

Bilingual study programmes are a good way to integrate other languages, foreign staff as well as foreign students at universities. These programmes can take place on the Bachelor as well as the Master level where two languages, for example German and English, are used simultaneously. Bilingual means that everybody, both the students as well as the teachers, must have at least a good passive knowledge of both languages. Some teachers will then use the one language and some teachers will use the other; some exams will be taken in English and some in German. The students can choose to speak and write in either of the two languages. It would be ideal, however, if they switched between both languages. This is a little more complex than having a monolingual programme, but it certainly advances internationalisation.
STUDENT MOBILITY
The opportunities afforded by the organised Erasmus exchange programme are already utilised with the strategic partners of universities. This is the best way of doing it, since through long-term partnerships each side knows that their students are taken good care of. The experience of spending time in another country and at another university is of immense value, even if the specialised learning process is slowed down. Each professor thinks that what he or she teaches is the most important thing and the only really relevant subject in that programme. That’s perfectly normal, but not a realistic view of holistic teaching. Therefore, it’s not the end of the world if the student spends a semester in a place where he or she might not have the same learning experience as at their home university. It is an essential experience to live in another country, to meet other people, to speak other languages and sometimes even to get ill in a foreign country. When you get ill and you’re alone, you have to successfully communicate with a doctor in another language, where you might not know the exact terms for the ailment you have. That makes you a person with a broad range of international skills. It is the daily life experience that counts.

Speaking of students, at the University of Luxembourg we introduced a system where new foreign students would spend a Sunday together with Luxembourgish families at the very beginning of their stay, which worked very well. We always had enough families who were willing to take in the students. They would invite them to have lunch at their home, then in the afternoon to go to a concert or to the theatre and spend the day together. Many of these families have kept in touch with that student during the course of their studies. There are an abundance of things you can do to help students to feel integrated. Many universities also have a buddy programme, whereby each incoming foreign student meets a person who makes them feel at home and advises them on technicalities for a year.
PHDS AND POST-DOCS
It is well known that the integration of foreign post-docs and PhD students is one of the most efficient ways to make the university international. Post-docs in particular often come from countries where they already have a lot of contacts with other PhD students and professors. Those networks are crucial for internationalisation. If enough foreign staff come with their networks, the university will automatically use those networks and broaden its international perspective.

ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF
The internationalisation of HEIs includes the administrations of those institutions being run in English. This is definitely a challenge but there are steps which lead to this achievement. English courses can be organised for free and the Erasmus programme can be utilised for exchanges of administrative staff. These exchanges are a very efficient way of internationalising the administration and should be used much more. Spending half a year or a year abroad should be manageable for most employees and their families. I know that spending longer periods abroad can be a strain on personal relationships, but whatever is worth doing is never easy. Limiting yourself to doing easy things restricts self-development. It is important to accept challenges and taking a sabbatical should be made possible for more administrative staff in order to internationalise the university’s administrative structures. Spending a year somewhere else is a great experience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EU PROGRAMMES
Making use of the programmes of the European Union is a way of bringing together different people from countries all over Europe. The value of these programmes is immense because they offer the opportunity to establish networks which will help you to get acquainted with researchers whom you can invite to collaborate on a research project. The downside of these programmes is that the bureaucracy is
often complicated and in Germany, luckily, there are other possibilities which make it less attractive to go through the European Union programmes. In the southern countries of Europe, however, the funds of EU programmes are vital for enabling international exchange.

In summary, a cross-institutional checklist for the internationalisation of European universities evaluates the amount of internationals in leadership positions, whether calls for open positions are posted in English and if EU programmes are utilised for internationalisation. Moreover, the appointment of internationals as honorary professors and bilingual study programmes are practices in the true spirit of internationalisation. A good orientation towards further internationalisation at your university can also be the ERC grants. All that being said, the strategies towards internationalisation need to take into account the particularities of each country and each university.

**SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES IN GERMANY**

I want to end with some remarks on your specific situation in Germany. Here you have the unique opportunity to be very attractive to foreign academic staff and researchers. The most attractive countries were traditionally the United Kingdom and the United States. With Brexit, the United Kingdom is now less popular and is seeing the effects already. In spite of the fact that Brexit has no legal consequences as yet, there are psychological consequences; the people who would have decided to go to the United Kingdom have decided against it. Some researchers who are already living there are trying to get British passports and others are trying to come back to the continent. That is an interesting source of very good people.

With Mr Trump in charge of the United States, you can expect that something similar will happen in the United States, too. The number of foreign students interested in going to the United States might decrease, which means they might be looking around for other places though likely not the physicists like myself because they are
very far removed from politics. But people who work in social sciences might consider other options. There are a lot of foreign people working in the United States; some of these might try to come back to Europe.

Moreover, the whole of southern Europe is in dire straits financially. At many universities the salaries have decreased by 15-20%, and they were not very high to begin with. So you have huge sources of very bright people who are looking for a better place to do research or teach. Thus, I think Germany has unique opportunities, but the outcome will depend on how open the universities are to seizing those opportunities.
QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Wolfgang Deicke, Co-ordinator of the bologna.lab, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin:

One of the criteria you mentioned first was the international nature of the leadership of institutions, and one of the things that I think we’re all aware of is that, with our research institutes, we have no problem in attracting international scientists to lead German or internationalised institutions in Germany. With universities, that tends not to be the case, which might have something to do with the structure and the rules of governance, and the way in which we’re tied to our local political systems and prerequisites. I’m wondering whether you’d be prepared to soften the criteria, so the question is: does it have to be foreigners who lead the institution as hard criteria, or are nationals with international experience sufficient? Because I think that truly, if you want to overcome the idea of thinking in national categories, then the shape or colour or lettering on one’s passport or birth certificate shouldn’t really matter.

Rolf Tarrach:

Yes. I mean you’re right – certainly it’s much easier for the research institutes than for universities. I think there are very many reasons for that. You mentioned one of them – universities are much more connected to local circumstances than research institutes. Research institutes do their research and usually the research is not really connected to the local politics. I think it also has to do with governance. The governance in research institutes is much more top-down, so it is easier to decide something, which is not necessarily very popular, than at a university where you usually have a very complex, somehow bottom-up, system of deciding.

You ask: “Why don’t you employ Germans who have been abroad?” It is not exactly the same. You might spend four or five years abroad and still not really have a complete understanding of the country where you have spent this time. Some people go abroad, do research
at a research institute there and know very little about the country when they come back. Whether these people are going to bring so much international experience with them depends. Some of them – yes, no doubt – some of them are integrated in the country and when they come back, they could be as useful or even more useful than a national from that country. But, statistically, I would say that you will get fewer of those. Nevertheless, you have a point when you say that the advantage of the German national who comes back is that he or she usually knows the German system. Therefore, maybe the advice he or she gives is more useful because they know the system and wouldn’t advise things which are basically impossible here because of legal or social reasons. And yet, another country, another language is much more than just another university system or research system. It is another way of looking at problems. I’ve been lucky. My family came from Germany and I was born in Spain. At home, we spoke German but I spoke Spanish with the rest of the world. So I got a picture of life which is very different from that of the southern countries and the northern countries in Europe. I really understand both of them and they are both very much part of my way of seeing things. If you are lucky and you take the good things from each one, because it is not true that everything is good in one place and everything is bad in the other place, you understand much more and it helps you a lot.

Thus, having a mixed cultural background means that you bring many other things with you which might be useful for a university because it is a very complex and broad system.

Inse Böhmig, Strategy Officer, Central International Initiatives, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin:

You said at the beginning that internationalisation revolves around a certain mind-set. Looking at the administration of higher education institutions, you mentioned instruments such as staff mobility or hiring international staff, but beyond that for the ones who stay in their positions, is there anything you would recommend to achieve this mind-set?
Rolf Tarrach:
I think one should not treat administrative staff too differently from academic staff. That is to say – if you open up positions and it is becoming more and more normal that you open positions for academic staff internationally – why not do it for administrative staff, too? You can say, well, there you really need German language skills immediately – very likely. But don’t forget there are millions of people who speak German and are not Germans, and I am not talking about the Austrians and the Swiss. There are lots of people in other countries who have learned the German language and who might be interested in coming here. When you work together with a foreigner each day – you become international. You talk to that person. You discuss issues with that person.

These people will give you a different perspective. So that, I think, is one measure which can be taken. I guess it’s not done usually. Maybe that has to do with the salary level – the salary is not so attractive to bring a person in from another country. But today Berlin is a very attractive city. Furthermore, there are many European countries where the percentage of people on the dole, people without a job, is extremely high. I remember in Barcelona – I left Barcelona 30 years ago – Siemens announced recently that they were looking for 100 engineers and they got 5000 CVs – 5000 CVs! So in the area of Barcelona you have 5000 engineers who were interested, in principle, in coming to Germany. This shows that there is interest in coming to Germany for work, although this is not quite comparable with administrative staff.

But you can also start with a sabbatical – this is something which can be done with partner universities. Don’t only use your partner universities for moving students, use them for moving staff too – there’s specific money for that in the Erasmus programme. If you have partner universities you can structure that in the right way. And these people – not only do they have the experience in another country and at another university – they come with ideas of how to organise the administration differently, which as you know is always a major issue. They come having had an experience in another place, with another
administration. Again, all kinds of administrations have their good features. In the southern countries, for instance, what they are very good at is the immense capacity to improvise – they’re very bad at planning. When I tell them in Spain or France that, for the Exzellenzinitiative, you start organising something in 2016 when the first call will be in 2018 – well they don’t understand that – they say: “Come on! Do they start discussing this three or four years before? That can’t be – we don’t know if we’re going to be around in three or four years.” But then what they do is to improvise at the last moment and they do it in an efficient way. So you can always learn from others.

Gina Freund, Personal Advisor to the Vice President for International Relations and Teacher Education, Technische Universität Berlin:
I’m interested in the University of Luxembourg as you described it, with the trilingual setup. I think this is a future vision of what universities in Germany would like to become more international, trilingual and bilingual. I think that might be something we’d like to achieve in 20 years from now and Luxembourg is already there. Therefore, I would like to know what sort of topics, strategies or issues and challenges they face at the moment in terms of internationalisation. Today in Germany and at our university, for example, I think most problems come from the language abilities of staff. If that’s not a problem in Luxembourg anymore, I would like to know – what are they dealing with in terms of internationalisation?

Rolf Tarrach:
Well, let me first mention that when I moved to Luxembourg – that was in January 2005 and the university started in 2003 – in autumn 2003, they had had their first rector who died after two months on the job. He came from Canada and then they spent 10 months without one. Then I happened to end up there. At first it took me five months to understand the country. You can’t really take Germany or France and then, say, scale it down and that’s Luxembourg. They’re very different. And then what I did was write a strategic plan for the next 10
years in the summer. I did it on my own and then I discussed it with
the team and afterwards with the board. That was the frame in which
we worked out the first four-year plan, which had a certain number
of goals, including goals for internationalisation. Not too many goals
– that’s one of the essential points. When I evaluate or when I advise
German universities – one of the difficulties I have very often is the
huge amount of goals that are proposed in the documents. This is
something I strongly recommend against because when you have 40
or 50 goals, it’s exactly the same as not having goals at all. It’s not
possible to do everything at once. It is like telling you that you do not
know exactly what your main goals are. So in internationalisation it is
advisable to fix three or four main goals and go for them in the next
four years. Then you can check them with your benchmarks. Very
often, it is a good idea to have a university which is a good model for
you: a university which is not too different from yours and which has
been successful.

When the internationalisation of a university is measured, let me
point out, that is not done correctly. I’m now going against my own
interests. The University of Luxembourg is 170th in the Times Higher
Education ranking worldwide, which is remarkable for a university
which is 13 years old. One of the main reasons is precisely that it is so
international. But it does not make sense to use indicators – extensive
indicators – which do not take into account the place where the uni-
versity is. Being international in a country like Luxembourg, where
Germany is 35 km to the East, Belgium 35 km to the West, France 30
km to the South, and the Netherlands 100 km to the North – that is
not the same as being international in Atlanta where you have to drive
2000 km to be in another country. Internationalisation, if you want to
measure it correctly, should take into account the internationalisation
level of the country or the city where you are. Then the question is: is
the university more international than the country where it is located
– which is what it should be I think – or not. If you measure like this,
the University of Luxembourg will still be international but much less,
because the country is so international. Also, the distance to other
countries should be taken into account. Since we have lots of people who live in Trier, Germans who come over the border, they count as international. Are you really international if you come from Trier which is 40 or 45km from Luxembourg? One of the problems of being international is that very often it is not properly measured. Furthermore, we have in Luxembourg, for instance, a couple of tri-national degrees. One of them is in Physics, for which the students do the first year in Nancy in French, the second year in Luxembourg in English and the third year in Saarbrucken in German. When they get their Bachelor’s degree, they have been studying in three countries, they have been using three languages and they will find a job immediately because that’s what companies today look for when they offer jobs; they very often look much more at these other values beyond having a degree. Of course, for Luxembourg, that is very simple – for Berlin, it would be extremely complex. You would have to work out a programme with Poland, I guess, and with the Czech Republic. It can be problematic to have a strategy which is too much bound by what the rankings are measuring. Luckily, they are improving their measurements, but you might be fixed on something that they are going to change, which happens quite often to universities. It is important to have your own strategy which takes into account where you are in the rankings and in the different systems, but still keep your own profile and your own ideas of what is good for your university and what isn’t.
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