

# Italy – UK co-operation in higher education: a study of challenges and opportunities

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A report prepared for the British Council Italy  
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# Preface

Italy has always been a top market in Europe for sending prospective students to the UK. Since the UK's departure from the EU and the global Covid-19 pandemic we are observing a new trend with fewer Italians applying to study at UK universities.

This report explores the opportunities for higher education institutions in Italy and the UK to develop and extend joint international partnerships in education in the current environment. These include higher education (HE) programmes at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral level degrees. Supporting higher education connections between Italy and the UK, as well as student mobility from Italy to the UK, is a priority for the British Council.

Although there have been positive relations between Italy and the UK in many fields including higher education, there has been insufficient information about the quality and quantity of existing collaborations. This research was thus commissioned to understand the current situation, potential opportunities and capacity, and obstacles encountered before, during and after establishing partnerships between the two countries.

The British Council welcomes the news that the UK will rejoin the world's largest research collaboration programme, Horizon Europe. As an organisation that builds connections, understanding and trust between the UK and countries worldwide, we are delighted that the UK will be part of this world-leading programme.

The research approach (June – October 2022) included individual interviews led by the British Council with higher education representatives, partnership managers and academic course leads from 12 Italian higher education institutions (HEIs). In addition, the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) conducted an online survey to Italian universities.

***British Council Italy***

# Introduction

This report outlines the findings of a study undertaken by the British Council in Italy aimed at understanding the views of Italian universities regarding the challenges and opportunities for co-operation with the UK HE sector.

Different internationalisation activities have been considered, including inbound and outbound student and staff mobility, academic partnerships such as joint and double degrees, and research collaborations.

The internationalisation of the Italian HE sector and its relationships with the UK is taking place against the backdrop of a historical juncture affected by broader international dynamics. On the one hand there is growing pressure on Italian universities to respond to the changing needs of students, society and the knowledge economy in the context of contemporary processes of globalisation and regionalisation, as clearly outlined in the national strategy for the international promotion of Italian higher education 2017/2020.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, Italian HE providers are still coming to terms with the implications of the UK's departure from the European Union, where the UK has traditionally played a key role in their internationalisation activities, as well as with the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

These dynamics are clearly reflected in the information collected as part of this study. Before looking at the findings of the surveys and in-depth interviews, this report outlines the current state of relationships between the UK and Italian HE sectors with regard to student and staff mobility, transnational education and research.

<sup>1</sup> Strategia per la Promozione all'Estero della Formazione Superiore Italiana 2017/2020, Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (MAECI), Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (MIUR) [https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/04/strategia\\_fsi.pdf](https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2017/04/strategia_fsi.pdf) [last accessed 07/01/23].

# A portrait of UK-Italy relations in higher education

## 2.1. Student mobility

Looking at the most recent data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in the UK, which refer to the 2021/22 academic year, the number of Italian students enrolled at UK HE providers reported a 22.5 per cent drop from 14,605 students in 2020/21 to 11,320 in 2021/22, with a 50 per cent drop of first year enrolments from 6,220 to 3,105.

This is in line with similar drops in student recruitment from across EU countries in the wake of Brexit (except for the Republic of Ireland), confirmed by the most recent UCAS data for undergraduate applications and acceptances for the 2022 entry cycle, which show that EU student undergraduate enrolments are down a further 28 per cent following a 50 per cent decrease in 2020/21 (-18.1 per cent for Italy) (British Council 2022).<sup>2</sup>

Italy is now the second largest EU sending country after France (figure 1) and the tenth largest sending country overall (table 1), down from being the largest EU sending country of international students to the UK and sixth largest sending country overall in 2020/21.

<sup>2</sup> UCAS end-of-cycle data shows strong growth from most non-EU countries in 2022 but a continued drop in new EU undergraduates, Kevin Priest, Insights Blog 2022. <https://education-services.britishcouncil.org/insights-blog/ucas-end-of-cycle-data-shows-strong-growth-most-non-eu-countries-2022-continued-drop> [last accessed 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Where do HE students come from?, HESA 2023, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from> [last accessed 03/02/23].

Figure 1: Top ten EU sending countries of students to the UK 2017/18–2021/22 (HESA 2023) <sup>3</sup>

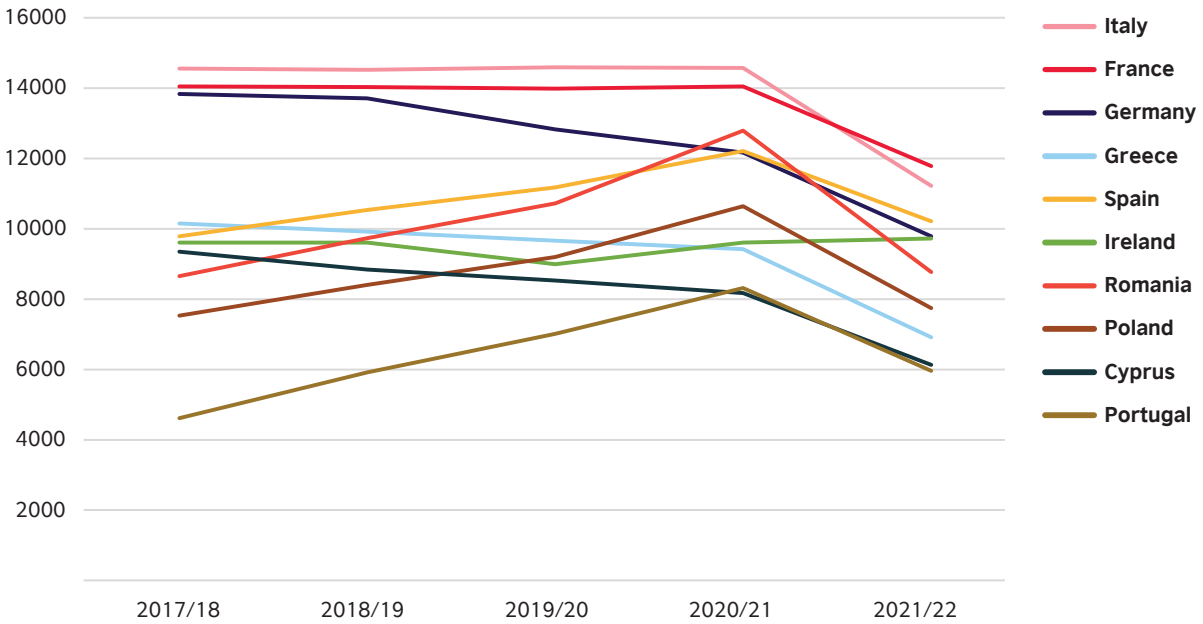
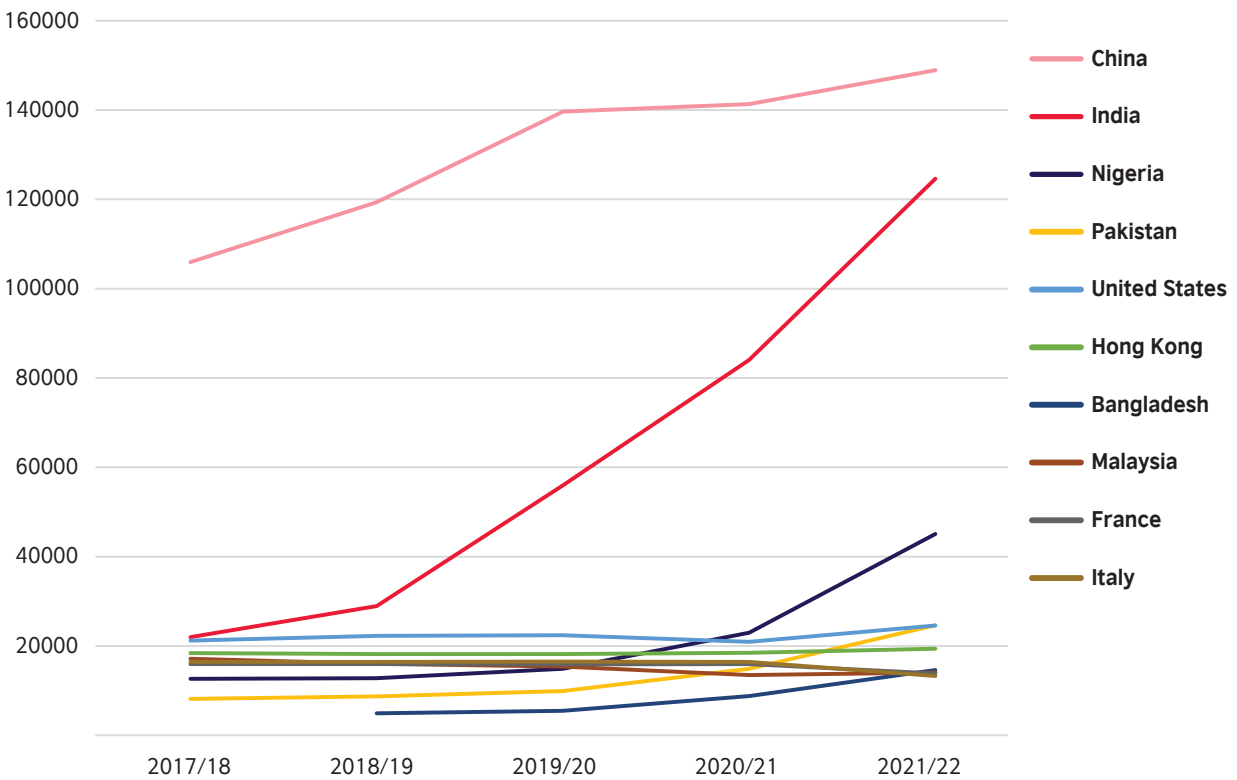


Figure 2: Top ten sending country of international students to the UK <sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Where do HE students come from?, HESA 2023, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from> [last accessed 03/02/23].

Of all Italian students in the UK, 6,900 are enrolled on an undergraduate programme and 4,420 on postgraduate courses (2,545 post-graduate taught and 1,875 postgraduate research).<sup>5</sup>

Most Italian students are enrolled at London based HE providers with seven out of the top ten receiving providers being based there (table 1).

Table 1: Top ten destination UK HE providers for Italian students<sup>6</sup>

King's College London	495
University College London	475
University of the Arts, London	365
City, University of London	320
Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine	290
University of Westminster	275
The University of Edinburgh	260
University of Glasgow	260
ESCP Europe Business School	255
University of Oxford	230

The most recent HESA data for 2021/22 have started to show the impact of Brexit on student mobility from Europe, with mobility from Italy having been particularly affected. This data might not yet fully capture the impact of Brexit on student mobility under Erasmus+ co-operation and exchange projects, since these are funded for up to four years and some of these are still being phased out at the time of this study. The Erasmus programme accounted for the major source of funding for international mobility at Italian HE providers (76 per cent of total international mobility).<sup>7</sup>

Looking at the latest available data from the Italian Erasmus+ National Agency INDIRE referring to 2018, the UK was the fourth most popular destination for Italian students with 3,331 students going to the UK to study or undertake internships as part of Erasmus study mobility arrangements. The UK was also the fifth sending country of Erasmus students to Italy (tables 2 and 3).

<sup>5</sup> Table 28 - Non-UK domiciled HE students by HE provider and country of domicile 2014/15 to 2021/22, HESA 2023 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from> [last accessed 03/02/23].

<sup>6</sup> Where do HE students come from?, HESA 2022 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from> [last accessed 03/02/23].

<sup>7</sup> Rapporto biennale sullo stato del sistema universitario e della ricerca 2018, Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del sistema Universitario e della Ricerca (ANVUR) 2018, <https://www.anvur.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ANVUR-Rapporto-2018.pdf> [last accessed 07/01/23].



Table 2: Number of Italian Erasmus students by destination country, Call 2018 (European Mobility)<sup>8</sup>

Destination country	Mobility for studying	Mobility for internships	Total
Spain	9,647	2,459	12,106
France	4,091	810	4,901
Germany	3,495	1,000	4,495
United Kingdom	1,616	1,715	3,331
Portugal	1,996	415	2,411
Poland	1,689	218	1,907
Belgium	1,147	572	1,719
Netherlands	1,025	514	1,539
Sweden	635	193	828
Austria	570	234	804

Table 3: Number of Erasmus students going to Italy by source country, Call 2018 (European Mobility) (source Agenzia Nazionale INDIRE 2020)

Source country	Mobility for studying	Mobility for internships	Total
Spain	7,842	1,544	9,300
France	2,719	794	3,513
Germany	2,472	476	2,948
Poland	1,259	508	1,767
United Kingdom	834	545	1379
Turkey	903	416	1.319
Portugal	907	307	1.214
Romania	506	454	960
Netherlands	621	154	775
Belgium	470	105	575

<sup>8</sup> Erasmus+ in breve: Analisi dei dati Call 2018 e prospettive future Istruzione Superiore, Agenzia Nazionale Erasmus+ INDIRE, 2020, [https://www.erasmusplus.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Report-HE\\_2018.pdf](https://www.erasmusplus.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Report-HE_2018.pdf) [last accessed 07/01/23].

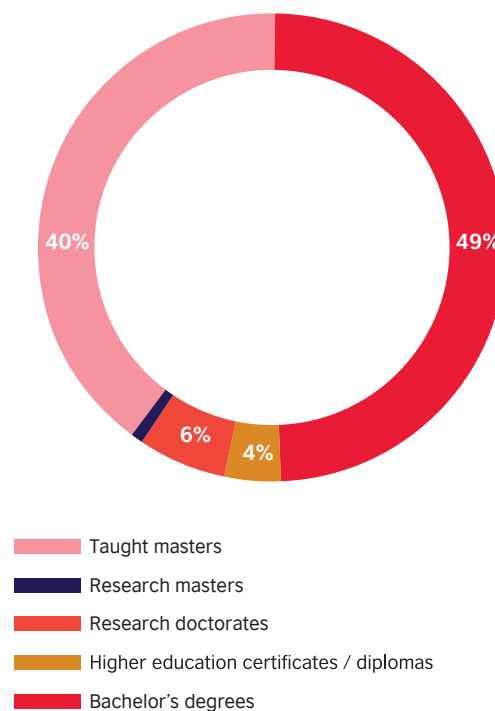
## 2.2. Transnational education

Looking at transnational education (TNE), as per the latest HESA data referring to 2020/21, Italy is the eighth largest destination of UK TNE amongst EU countries (see table 4) and 34th overall worldwide (HESA 2022). Of these students approximately 1,365 are studying bachelor's degrees and 1,065 are enrolled on taught masters (see figure 3).

Table 4: Top ten EU receiving countries of UK TNE (source HESA Aggregate Offshore Record 2022<sup>9</sup>)

Greece	20,335
Germany	11,155
Cyprus (EU)	9,825
Ireland	6,565
Spain	4,665
Austria	3,270
France	3,080
Italy	2,570
Malta	2,370
Netherlands	2,315

Figure 3: UK TNE students in Italy by level of study (HESA Aggregate Offshore Record 2022)



<sup>9</sup> Neither Jisc nor Jisc Services Limited can accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from data or other information supplied by Jisc or Jisc Services Limited.

Out of all UK TNE students in Italy, 1,340 are studying through distance, flexible or distributed learning<sup>10</sup>, whilst 1,160 are studying through collaborative partnerships in country. In total 104 UK HE providers have reported having TNE students in Italy, of which 88 have only students on distance, flexible or distributed learning, and 17 have collaborative in-country partnerships.

Table 5 lists the overall top ten TNE providers in Italy (including distance, flexible or distributed learning) and table 6 the top ten TNE providers for collaborative partnerships only.

Focusing on TNE with physical presence in Italy through collaborative arrangements with Italian non-degree awarding partners, research of publicly available information reveals the following existing UK TNE arrangements (table 7).

Table 5: Top ten UK TNE providers in Italy

Buckinghamshire New University	340
The Open University	340
University College of Osteopathy	245
University of London	225
University of Chichester	220
University of Chester	95
University of Oxford	65
King's College London	65
SOAS University of London	60
Arden University	50

Table 6: Top ten UK TNE collaborative providers

Buckinghamshire New University	320
University College of Osteopathy	245
University of Chichester	210
The Open University	110
University of Chester	95
Swansea University	45
University of Bedfordshire	40
Middlesex University	25
University of Westminster	25
St Mary's University, Twickenham	25

<sup>10</sup> HESA defines 'distance, flexible or distributed learning' as: 'educational provision leading to an award of an awarding provider delivered and/or supported and/or assessed through means which generally do not require the student to attend particular classes or events at particular times and particular locations. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/offshore> (last accessed 07/01/2023).

Table 7: List of UK TNE offered in Italy (source: publicly available information on providers' websites)

UK TNE awarding institution	Italian partner institution	Programme of study
Buckinghamshire New University	Istituto Superiore di Osteopatia (ISO Milan)	BSc (Hons) Osteopathic Principles
		PG Dip Advanced Osteopathic Practice
		PG Cert Advanced Osteopathic Practice
		MSc Advanced Osteopathic Practice
University College of Osteopathy	Accademia Italiana Medicina Osteopatica (AIMO)	BSc (Hons) Osteopathic Science
		BSc (Hons) Osteopathy Conversion
		MSc Osteopathy
University of Chichester	Sonus Factory	BA (Hons) Popular Music
		MA Composition for Film, TV and Games
		MA Sound Design in Visual Media
		MA Music Education
	H-Farm	BSc (Hons) Digital Economics and Finance
		BSc (Hons) International Business Studies
		MA Digital Marketing and Data Analytics
		MA Digital Transformation and Entrepreneurship
The Open University	Fondazione IRCCS 'Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori'	Collaborative Research Degree
	IFOM Fondazione Istituto FIRC di Oncologia Molecolar	Collaborative Research Degree
	International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology	Collaborative Research Degree
	IRCCS Istituto Clinico Humanitas	Collaborative Research Degree
	IRCCS Istituto di Ricerche Farmacologiche Mario Negri	Collaborative Research Degree
	Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn	Collaborative Research Degree
	Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia	Collaborative Research Degree
University of Chester	Florence Institute of Design International	BA (Hons) in Design
University of Westminster	Istituto Europeo di Design Group, Spain and Italy	BA (Hons) Fashion Marketing and Communications – Milan
Swansea University	Accademia per lo Sviluppo dell'Osteopatia e della Medicina Integrativa (ASOMI)	BSc (Hons) Osteopathy 'top-up'
St Mary's University, Twickenham	Pontifical BEDA College	BTh Theology, Graduate Diploma Theology

UK TNE awarding institution	Italian partner institution	Programme of study
University of Bedfordshire	Music Production and Dance Academy	BA (Hons) Music Performance
		BA (Hons) Music Production
		BA (Hons) Music Business
		BA (Hons) Creative Media
Richmond, The American International University in London	European School of Economics	BSc (Hons) International Economics and Political Science
		BSc (Hons) Business Administration
		MSc in Business Management
		MBA Entrepreneurship and Leadership
		MBA Film Production
University of the West of Scotland	Roma Contemporary Music School (Bari, Bologna, Rome)	BA (Hons) Commercial Music
		MA Music – Song writing/Sound Production/Industries

Except for the Open University, which offers doctoral degrees through supported supervision with approved Affiliated Research Centres, UK collaborative TNE in Italy primarily consists of validated degrees. Appendix 1 includes a set of case studies looking at some of the TNE partnerships listed in table 7.

This list of collaborative TNE partnerships excludes double degrees agreements whereby students registered with the Italian partner university have the option to also take the UK partner university's degree through a period of study in the UK. As the interviews carried out for this study illustrate, these are typically one-way agreements taken up by a relatively low number of Italian students supported by mobility scholarships, with few UK students taking the double degree option.

## 2.3. Research

Regarding research collaborations there is no precise data available, however Italy has traditionally been one of the top research partners for the UK and vice versa. As outlined by the UK Science and Innovation Network in their recently updated Italy Country Snapshot<sup>11</sup>:

‘Italian academic staff make up the largest foreign community in the UK research sector and contribute to maintaining co-operation with Italian institutions. The UK is also the top destination for Italian Marie Curie fellows.’

As already observed in the context of student mobility, it is to be expected that the decision on the part of the UK not to take part as an associated third country in the new Erasmus+ programme 2021-27 will have an impact on existing UK – Italy research collaborations, since many of these collaborations have in the past been taken within the framework of Horizon 2020. This is indeed one of the main risks associated with Brexit as perceived by the Italian universities surveyed as part of this study, which will be the focus of the remainder of this report.

<sup>11</sup> Italy Country Snapshot, UK Science and Innovation Network (UKSIN) 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-science-and-innovation-network-country-snapshot-italy> [last accessed 07/01/2023].

# Study findings

## 3.1. Survey

A survey exploring priorities for internationalisation, existing partnerships, and barriers for co-operation, with a focus on challenges and opportunities associated with Brexit, was shared with all Italian universities. A total of 38 responses was received from universities with different experiences of international partnerships and different levels of engagement with internationalisation.

### 3.1.1. Priority areas for internationalisation

The first overarching question concerned the respective institutional priorities related to internationalisation, with an option to select five priorities. As illustrated by the following table the most selected priority was that of developing joint or double degree partnerships with foreign universities, followed by working together as part of university alliances and increasing mobility with an equal number of preferences, and then undertaking international research and development collaborations.

Table 8: Priority for internationalisation for survey respondents

Joint or double degree partnerships with individual foreign universities	30
Working together in well-known alliances (e.g. European Universities Alliance)	24
Mobility	24
International Research and Development collaboration	22
Increased international profile and ability to connect with international institutions	19
International curriculum	17
International classroom and alumni network	14
Equality, diversity and inclusion	11
Sustainable Development Goals	9
Attracting international staff	9
Virtual exchange/blended learning	8
Opportunities for increased funding	6

### 3.1.2. Existing co-operation with UK HE providers

Only four of the 38 respondent institutions have indicated that they do not have any type of partnership with UK HE providers, either for mobility or research, or any other kind of co-operation. Amongst the 34 respondents co-operating with UK providers, the most common type of co-operation is through EU funded exchange or research programmes, with 11 respondents indicating they have more than ten partnerships (table 9). Co-operation, either for research or student and staff mobility, was also found

outside of EU funded programmes, even if at lower levels (table 10). When asked whether co-operation takes place within university alliances or consortia, only eight respondents reported that this is the case.

Table 9: EU exchange or research programmes with the UK (e.g. Erasmus, Horizon 2020) of survey respondents

No partners	6
1-2 partners	7
3-5 partners	8
6-10 partners	2
10 or more partners	11

Table 10: Co-operation with the UK outside of EU programmes of survey respondents

Student mobility		Staff mobility		Research co-operation	
No partners	9	No partners	12	No partners	12
1-2 partners	8	1-2 partners	12	1-2 partners	8
3-5 partners	10	3-5 partners	6	3-5 partners	7
6-10 partners	5	6-10 partners	3	6-10 partners	2
10 or more partners	2	10 or more partners	1	10 or more partners	5

Table 11: Priority areas for further co-operation with UK HE providers

Student mobility	36
Research co-operation	30
Staff mobility	28
University consortia	12

All respondent universities indicated that they are or might be interested in developing new partnerships with UK HE providers, in particular with regard to student mobility and research collaborations, with 36 and 30 preferences respectively, followed by staff mobility (28 preferences) and co-operation within university consortia (12 preferences).



### 3.1.3. Perceived risks and opportunities associated with Brexit

Only seven respondents indicated that there are existing barriers to working with UK partners, specifically mentioning the increased administrative burden associated with Brexit (e.g. visa processing, health insurance, funding, legal jurisdiction), the lack of funding opportunities outside of the European funding programmes and the apparent lack of interest to engage in mobility programmes with Italy by a number of UK universities. However, most respondents identified high risks for partnership development going forward as a consequence of the UK leaving the EU.

The main concerns associated with Brexit relate to decreased mobility to the UK, with 23 respondents highly agreeing that this is a risk and nine respondents somewhat agreeing, followed by decreased participation of UK partners in EU funded programmes, with 21 respondents highly agreeing that it is a risk and 11 somewhat agreeing. Other areas of concern associated with Brexit were reduced staff mobility and decreased student placement opportunities, with 19 and 15 respondents respectively highly agreeing that these are areas of risk, and seven and 16 somewhat agreeing (table 12).

Table 12: Perceptions of risks associated with Brexit

Decreased student mobility		Decreased participation in EU programmes		Decreased staff mobility		Decreased student placements	
Don't agree	6	Don't agree	5	Don't agree	11	Don't agree	7
Somewhat agree	9	Somewhat agree	11	Somewhat agree	7	Somewhat agree	16
Highly agree	23	Highly agree	21	Highly agree	19	Highly agree	15

The last questions of the survey explored Italian universities' perceptions of potential opportunities associated with the UK leaving the EU. The most recognised opportunity, with 21 respondents, is that of being able to attract students who decide

not to study in the UK. This is followed by the opportunity to attract talented staff from the UK and set up new partnerships outside of the UK, with 13 respondents respectively (table 13).

Table 12: Perceptions of opportunities associated with Brexit

Attract students		Attract staff		Set up new partnerships	
Don't agree	6	Don't agree	14	Don't agree	16
Somewhat agree	11	Somewhat agree	11	Somewhat agree	9
Highly agree	21	Highly agree	13	Highly agree	13

## 3.2. Interviews

In addition to the surveys reported above, interviews with representatives of ten Italian universities with different experiences of internationalisation were carried out. Similar topics to those explored in the survey were discussed, with a view to getting a more detailed understanding of challenges and opportunities. The findings are reported below, focusing on the three thematic areas of student and staff mobility, research

co-operation and double degrees, which are strictly interconnected, as student and research mobility are often linked to research co-operation and joint-double degrees. In conclusion, two additional thematic areas are considered: overarching priorities for internationalisation for Italian universities and the support that the British Council could provide to foster Italian–UK partnerships.

### 3.2.1. Student and staff mobility

With regard to student and staff mobility there was unanimity among the institutions interviewed that most of the mobility agreements, including those with UK HE providers, take place through the Erasmus+ programme, which provides the required funding and, as observed by one interviewee, ‘are the ones that help us the most financially.’

Not surprisingly then, Brexit, and specifically the UK government decision not to continue to be involved in the Erasmus+ programme as an associate third country, is seen by the Italian universities interviewed as a big obstacle to closer Italian–UK co-operation in higher education. This is the case even if many interviewees say that they are seeking to use much of the 20 per cent of EU funding budget allocated for non-EU collaboration to support co-operation with the UK to meet the continued demand of students and staff to undertake study and research mobility to the UK.

As one interviewee stated, referring to teacher mobility:

*‘We are no longer able to guarantee this teacher mobility since 2019/20. If they [teaching staff] go with their own funds we don’t know...we have a local programme that supports staff mobility, and we try to use 20 per cent of the Erasmus funds to support staff mobility to the UK... still funding it’s much more limited than before.’*

In addition to the lack of secured funding, which is particularly challenging given the higher fees now charged by UK HE providers to Italian students as international students, the main obstacle is perceived to be the increased bureaucracy and administrative complexity involved in drafting and managing mobility agreements outside of the standardised EU framework, with agreed templates, as well as securing visas and health insurance for visiting students and staff.

The Turing Scheme established by the UK government after leaving the Erasmus+ programme is recognised by the Italian universities interviewed to be supporting only outward mobility for UK students and ‘their students are not interested in coming to Italy’. The issue of lack of reciprocity in exchange programmes is indeed a common observation made by many interviewees as a deficit in existing mobility agreements with the UK, which seems to be affecting smaller universities in particular:

‘What penalised us in our relationship with UK universities is a high demand from our students to go to Scotland and England, but a very low demand from UK students to join our university – as a small university we were unable to be attractive in relation to UK universities.’

It is generally recognised that there are a range of good reasons why UK students are less attracted to study overseas, such as not needing to improve their English language, limited availability of Italian degree courses offered in English, the labour market in the UK being more vibrant and offering a wider set of opportunities, and the fact that study abroad periods for UK students do not generally earn credits for UK degrees.

One interviewee observed how low levels of outward mobility of UK students to Italy have also impacted the mobility of Italian students to the UK, since:

‘In the last ten years, the willingness of Anglo-Saxon universities to have agreements with Italian universities was strongly linked to having a balance between the mobility of outgoing and incoming students, and this penalised us.’

The latter consideration might be less relevant post-Brexit, with Italian students now paying full international student fees and hence becoming a sought-after source of revenue for UK HE providers. But this very consideration is seen to lead to another challenge to the establishment of Italy-UK mobility programmes, since now ‘the logic is business oriented’ and ‘in the end, the Italian university will act as a business finder, because the agreement we have at present is the one where we send the student’.

Thus, the challenge is now primarily one of funding. Whilst there is continued demand from Italian students to study in the UK, the problem is that students are asked to pay the fees of the hosting partner, which are now very high. One interviewee observes how this limits not only the quantity but also the quality of students that can be sent to the UK, since:

‘this means that we look at who we can send, not necessarily based on their excellence, but a student who can afford to pay considerable costs. Our problem is how we can offer greater chances to our students to go to the UK’.

Similar funding issues are said to be encountered with mobility agreements with US universities. Italian universities generally provide a limited number of scholarships to support their student mobility and the Italian Ministry of Education also makes available additional funds to support highly performing students with fewer financial means wishing to access international mobility programmes. Despite these additional available funds, the point remains for interviewees that not being able to access Erasmus+ funding to support mobility to the UK will significantly impact mobility agreements with UK HE providers.

Therefore, other locations are emerging as priority destinations of mobility, in particular student mobility. ‘After Brexit, Spanish and Portuguese destinations remain the destinations they [the Italian

students] prefer at European level,’ one interviewee noted. ‘Nowadays Italians are looking at the Netherlands and Germany as alternative countries, but if they had the opportunity they would go to the UK,’ observed another. And similarly:

‘French universities, German, Netherlands, some Spanish universities are among our main interlocutors, and Poland and Romania. Outside Erasmus+ we have agreements with the United States, with Australia, and two of the main Chinese universities.’

Whilst another interviewee observes that: ‘At present the market and the attractiveness for our students is towards different areas of the world, for example Chinese and Russian universities, which have of course now been interrupted.’ Despite the financial challenges, it is interesting to note that for some universities the US remains the main destination of student and research mobility, which might point again to the challenges posed by higher bureaucratic complexity post-Brexit, even for those students who might be able to afford higher costs.

Similar considerations to those raised in connection to mobility programmes were also raised when talking about research partnerships and academic partnerships through double degrees.

## 3.2.2. Research co-operation

Interviewees generally concurred that research co-operation with the UK has so far taken place primarily in the context of the EU framework, with Horizon 2020 as the main source of funding, even if there are research collaborations that take place outside of EU funding programmes, often originating from direct connections established by individual academics.

It is therefore again not surprising that, as is the case with mobility programmes, Brexit is seen as a great challenge for research co-operation with the UK. As different interviewees put it:

‘One of the huge losses from Brexit is the loss of connection with UK research.’

‘Many Erasmus+ research projects used to involve UK partners and now the UK isn’t taking part in these activities.’

‘Even if universities can and do collaborate through their own funding, and co-operation with UK universities can continue on this basis, this will not be able to replace Erasmus+ funding.’

Indeed, some of the challenges for research co-operation overlap with those for mobility agreements since many mobility agreements involve the transfer of PhD students and researchers. As explained by one interviewee:

‘With Brexit, many aspects of our agreements, such as transfer of PhD students, have disappeared... post Brexit it’s not easy for an Italian researcher to go to the UK on a long-term basis.’

### 3.2.3. Double degrees

Interviews confirmed that co-operation in research between Italian and UK universities is by far more significant than collaboration in teaching. The main difficulties encountered by the Italian universities interviewed related to complexity and administration, and a concern for the lack of reciprocity similar to that raised in connection to student mobility. In the words of different interviewees:

‘We have joint projects, however they are almost always projects aimed at research, almost never didactic... We do not plan to establish joint degrees, because the bureaucracy takes a very long time and it is demanding... and then you find yourself maybe with only three students. However, our intention in the near future is to be able to set up joint research doctorates with the United Kingdom.’

‘A double degree project is nice if there is reciprocity, but unfortunately, we have never had British students who participated. They are often unique relationships, only for our students, it would be nice to be able to reciprocate.’

‘Double degree programmes are important for the faculty, the research and for internationalisation... at the beginning we mainly saw one-way programmes where our students would go abroad and over the last years, we now start to see effective two ways. This trend is not the same for the UK. We have double degree programmes with the UK but those remain one way.’

Exploring in more detail the specific challenges with establishing double degrees, interviewees shared difficulties associated with different legal requirements and different internal institutional processes, as well as challenges due to the high level of English language competencies required for double degrees, different credit systems between the UK and Italy, and the different duration of Master’s degrees: ‘Their masters lasts one year, ours lasts two, and this structural policy influences participation, they would have to do an extra year to get a degree.’

And, of course, another main challenge regards costs associated with different fee levels charged by UK and Italian universities, raising similar barriers to those affecting student mobility. As observed by different interviewees:

‘We have over 30 double degrees, but with the UK none at the moment – fees are the main barrier. We try to negotiate fee waivers but often it’s not possible.’

‘Fees [charged by UK institutions] for international students are impossible. We do not find students who can pay such high fees... our UK partner has granted a quarter of the total fees, but it remains high, therefore we need to look for scholarships.’

‘There are big differences in terms of UK and Europe fee-wise. With double degrees we try to work on a mutual tuition fee waiver, which is difficult when approaching the UK. It would be good to know if there are possibilities to negotiate discounts.’

Representatives of small Italian universities also observed how for them it is difficult to attract the interest of potential UK partners, which prefer engaging with larger and better ranked Italian institutions.

### 3.2.4. Priority areas for internationalisation

Interviewees were asked about the priorities for internationalisation for their institutions. For many, one priority is delivering more courses in English to attract more international students, not only exchange students, but specifically international students enrolling directly with Italian universities. This is in line with the year-on-year growth of courses offered entirely in English over the past ten years or so, from 143 in 2013/14 to 595 in 2022/23<sup>12</sup>.

The low level of engagement from Italian students with courses offered in English, often due to the required level of English language, still poses an obstacle to the growth of degrees offered fully in English. At the same time some interviewees stressed the opportunity posed by Brexit in helping Italy position itself as a more attractive destination than the UK for international students, and in particular European students, because of Italy's lower fees and costs of living, as well as less stringent financial requirements to obtain a student visa (such as the amount of deposit to be held in a bank account).

Another related priority for Italian universities is attracting and hiring international academics, although interviewees reported challenges due to the complexity of Italian legislation for recruiting international members of staff. This is less of a problem for private universities, which have more flexibility and are more dynamic on this front, as well as being more proactive and nimbler with regard to international student recruitment.

Most Italian universities have over the past years established international offices helping with the implementation of institutional internationalisation strategies and activities. These include coordinating institutional applications for EU and other international funding opportunities; supporting the implementation of mobility activity, from helping with obtaining outbound and inbound student visas to supporting student and staff recruitment; and organising training programmes to grow institutional sensibility towards internationalisation. The consolidation and strengthening of the role of central international offices is another priority for Italian universities that emerges from the interviews.

The above considerations were often framed by interviewees against the background of the growing importance of international university rankings, with internationalisation metrics playing an increasingly important role, as well as the growing weight given to internationalisation indicators by the Italian ministry, informing budget allocation and providing financial incentives to Italian universities to internationalise.

Lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, in connection with the increased use of digital technologies in teaching and learning practices, also figured in the reflections of the interviewees. Several interviewees in fact pointed to the importance of adopting alternative and more inclusive approaches to internationalisation and mobility, making, for example, use of virtual exchange and virtual and blended approaches to teaching and learning.

<sup>12</sup> L'internazionalizzazione della formazione superiore in Italia. Le università, Fondazione CRUI 2018 [https://www2.cru.it/cru/cru/cru\\_rapporto\\_interdigitale.pdf](https://www2.cru.it/cru/cru/cru_rapporto_interdigitale.pdf); University <https://www.university.it/index.php/public/cercacorsilinglese> [Last accessed 07/01/2023]



### 3.2.5. The British Council's role

Another theme explored as part of the interviews with Italian university representatives was the role that the British Council could play to support the development of Italian and UK co-operation in higher education.

The main support role identified for the British Council by the interviewees is that of helping Italian universities finding suitable partners in the UK, as well as more broadly with HE providers across the Commonwealth.

Providing networking opportunities is considered very important, especially in the wake of Brexit, as well as providing information about strategic areas of interest for different British HE providers, UK funding opportunities for collaborations and broader UK strategic priorities.

One interviewee also observed how there could be scope for the British Council to draw on its knowledge and expertise in international education to offer professional training to Italian universities as they are developing their international activities.

### 3.3. Final considerations

The main finding of this study relates to the perception of Italian universities of the important challenges posed by Brexit to the future of UK-Italy co-operation in HE. The main perceived obstacle concerns funding, as most co-operation between Italian and UK HE providers has so far taken place within the EU funding framework.

Without a replacement source of funding, Italian universities are seeing, and foresee, a drop in student exchange programmes and research co-operation with the UK, especially now that Italian students are due to pay full international student fees to study at UK HE providers. The Turing Scheme is not seen as a suitable solution, given that it only supports UK outward mobility and that most mobility has traditionally taken place from Italy to the UK.

Brexit does not only pose financial challenges, but also presents a range of administrative obstacles. The EU framework provided streamlined agreement procedures and areas such as visa processing and health insurance have also become problematic. Any solution to these administrative challenges would help with supporting the continued demand for UK HE from Italian students and researchers. It would also help with the demand from Italian universities for double degree partnerships, the area of strategic growth indicated as a priority by most interviewed universities.

In addition to the higher costs and administrative hurdles associated with Brexit, the difference in academic regulations and the relative lack of attractiveness of Italian degrees to UK students also present key challenges to the development of academic partnerships. Some universities that were interviewed expressed the need to enhance the understanding amongst the UK student population and UK HE providers of the opportunities and value of studying in Italy. Increasing the number of degrees offered in English will help to strengthen the attractiveness of Italy as a destination of study for UK and international students. The shorter duration of UK master's degrees does however pose an important challenge. Academic partnerships for PhD degrees are perceived to be easier to develop and more attractive than master's and undergraduate collaborative programmes.

A clear appreciation of the opportunities posed by digital technologies in teaching and learning practice also comes through from the interviews, with a number of interviewees pointing to the possibility of more systematically adopting virtual exchange and blended approaches to inform the development of alternative and more inclusive approaches to internationalisation and mobility.

The survey and interviews have not investigated the TNE operations beyond double degrees between Italian and UK degree-awarding bodies. This area of TNE

could be a potential area of growth for UK and Italian co-operation in higher education. Further research on the appetite and potential market for such UK TNE offers in Italy is required, considering also existing challenges associated with Italian policies regarding the recognition of qualifications obtained through franchised or validated collaborative partnerships with local non-degree awarding institutions. To cover this aspect of UK-Italy partnerships in HE, and to prepare the ground for further research, appendix 1 presents a range of case studies looking at different TNE collaborative arrangements between UK degree-awarding bodies and private education institutes in Italy.

Finally, it clearly emerges from the study that there is an important role to be played by the British Council in supporting continued and closer relations between the Italian and UK HE sectors, by providing more information about opportunities for co-operation and available solutions to existing challenges, as well as offering platforms for reciprocal engagement.

One such platform could for example focus on TNE, looking at opportunities for developing joint or double degrees between UK and Italian universities, as well as addressing the underlying quality concerns behind current Italian policy regarding the recognition of TNE offered in partnership with local institutions that do not have Italian degree-awarding status.

# Appendix

## 4.1. Case studies of UK TNE collaborative partnership with Italian non-degree awarding institutions

Collaborative partnerships represent by far the most common type of TNE activity, as illustrated by figure 4, referring to the latest HESA data for UK TNE offered worldwide.<sup>13</sup>

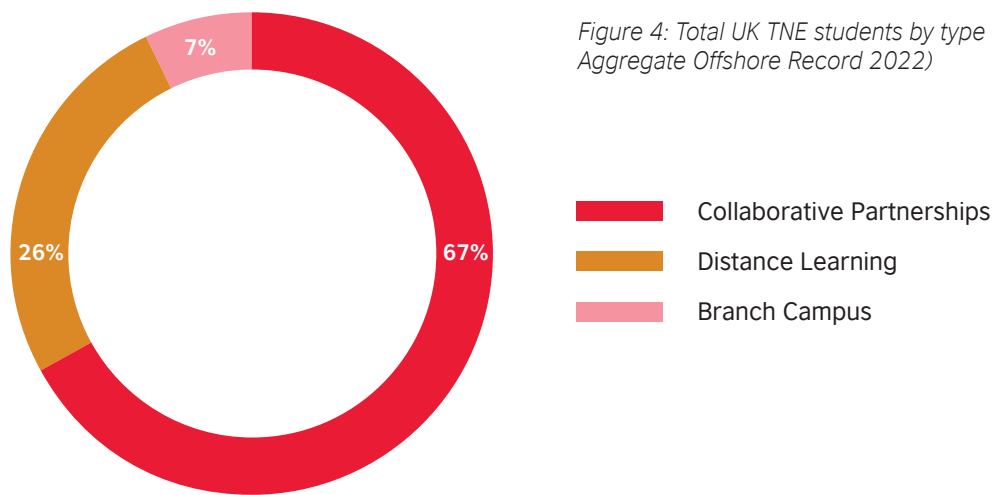


Figure 4: Total UK TNE students by type of delivery (HESA Aggregate Offshore Record 2022)

Although the HESA AOR does not provide information on the status of the partner institution, the most common types of UK TNE collaborative partnerships are with international education providers without local degree-awarding power, following a validation or franchise model. This is also the case in Italy, as can be concluded by looking at tables 6 and 7 on pages 11 and 12. Table 6 refers to HESA data for UK collaborative TNE in Italy, whilst table 7 lists existing collaborative partnerships. Specifically, UK collaborative TNE in Italy consists primarily of validated degrees.

However, most TNE in Italy (54 per cent) is offered through distanced learning. The prevalence of distance learning in Italy over other forms of TNE activity might possibly be due to the challenging Italian policy environment for the recognition of TNE qualifications offered in the country in partnership with institutions without degree-awarding power. This lack of recognition is seen as a key challenge also by existing UK TNE operations in Italy, as it emerged from the conversations that have informed the following case studies.

<sup>13</sup> The Collaborative Partnerships category combines what the HESA Aggregate Offshore Record refers to as partnerships where students are registered at an overseas partner organisation (typically validation) and partnerships where students are registered with the UK degree-awarding body (typically franchise).

### 4.1.1. University of Chichester's partnerships with Sonus Factory and H-FARM College

The West Sussex Institute of Higher Education was formed in 1977 as a result of the merger between two colleges (Bishop Otter College and the Bognor Regis College of Education). Initially, degrees were awarded by both Sussex and Southampton Universities and eventually it became an accredited college of the University of Southampton.

In 1995, the Institute changed its name to Chichester Institute of Higher Education, gaining degree awarding powers in 1999 and becoming University College Chichester. In 2015 it obtained university title by the Privy Council.

The University's mission is 'to provide outstanding education, advance knowledge and benefit the world'. As part of this mission, it engages in academic partnerships in the UK and internationally. The University of Chichester has two TNE partnerships in Italy, one with Sonus Factory and the other with H-Farm College.

Sonus Factory is an Anglo-Saxon inspired school of music and music production, located in Rome, offering a range of professional courses as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Popular Music and a suite of three Master of Arts (in Composition for Film, TV and Games, in Sound Design in Visual Media and in Music Education) validated by University of Chichester.

These validated courses are offered fully in person and are taught in English by Sonus Factory staff. BA degrees are also assessed in English, whilst the MA programmes are assessed in Italian. This partnership was established in 2015 and currently there are just under 30 students taking University of Chichester validated degrees.

H-Farm College, located in Venice, offers Executive courses as well as bachelor's and master's degrees validated by international and Italian universities focusing on digital transformation, entrepreneurship and business. The mission of H-FARM Education is to help students develop the much-desired notions and skills required by new professions and business demands, through dynamic teaching, the development of transversal skills and the use of new technologies.

The courses currently validated by the University of Chichester include a BSc (Hons) in Digital Economics and Finance and a BSc (Hons) in International Business Studies; and two Master's Degrees: Digital Marketing and Data Analytics and Digital Transformation and Entrepreneurship. Courses are offered face to face, online or in a blended version and are taught in English by H-Farm staff. This partnership was established in 2021 and currently there are about 100 students studying University of Chichester validated degrees.

Both these partnerships are seen by the University of Chichester as being of strategic importance and as adding value as they help to:

- strengthen the university's identity as a premium higher education institution through a collaboration with international institutions with a reputation and standing in their sectors;
- create opportunities for the university to be more visible and have a greater positive impact in education internationally;
- support growth in exchange and study abroad activities, as well as supporting other partnerships such as between Sonus Factory and Platform One, another university partner based on the Isle of Wight, and the creation of a joint Master's of Fine Arts programme with H-Farm;
- offer programmes of study that are different from its own and are very innovative;
- produce capable graduates with excellent subject-specific knowledge as well as employability skills.

Brexit and the withdrawal from Erasmus+ are seen as the main challenges for the partnerships, making it problematic for students wishing to have a period of study at Chichester even though some funding is available to H-Farm students to support student mobility. The lack of academic recognition of these validated degrees has also occasionally presented a problem, in particular for students who are looking to go on to an Italian 'Conservatorio' to pursue further studies.<sup>14</sup>

Interesting and positive features of these partnerships include the establishment of a relationship between Sonus Factory and another validated partner of the university, Platform One, located on the Isle of Wight. Platform One now uses Sonus Factory for their own students' European tour module, whilst Sonus Factory's students are invited back to Platform One where they may have the opportunity to attend or participate in the Isle of Wight Festival. Similarly, by drawing on their reciprocal strengths, the University of Chichester and H-Farm have been working to create a joint Master's in Fine Arts, and H-Farm students have been actively engaging with the university's activities such as its research conference.

<sup>14</sup> 'Conservatori' are higher education institutions devoted to the study and practice of music, operating under the Higher Education Institutions for Fine Arts, Music and Dance (AFAM) area of the Ministry of Education, University and Research, which are granted degree awarding power equivalent to that of universities.

## 4.1.2. University College of Osteopathy with Accademia Italiana Medicina Osteopatica

Formerly the British School of Osteopathy, University College of Osteopathy (UCO), based in London, has for over 100 years played a significant role in championing osteopathy and furthering the profession both in the UK and internationally. Established in 1917 by John Martin Littlejohn, a former student of Andrew Taylor Still, the founder of osteopathy, it obtained UK degree awarding powers in 2015 and its University College title in 2017. UCO is the only osteopathic education provider in Europe to be granted the power to award its own degrees.

In 2017 UCO established a partnership with the Accademia Italiana Medicina Osteopatica (AIMO), an Italian osteopathic School located near Milan, to offer UCO validated undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Currently the validated courses consist of a BSc (Hons) in Osteopathic Science (with the possibility of a top-up progressing from a recognised Diploma in Osteopathy), an MSc in Osteopathy, as well as a Postgraduate Certificate in Health Care Education.

The partnership is aligned with UCO's strategic commitment to work collaboratively with others to bring valued additions to the university's portfolio, as well as broaden and enrich staff and student experiences through educational and scholarly activity. Through this partnership AIMO is able to offer internationally recognised degrees

in osteopathy in Italy, where there are currently no equivalent qualifications, thus contributing to the development of the profession in the country and the professional development of its students. AIMO is the only international school of osteopathy offering degree courses validated by UCO.

The courses are developed by AIMO and delivered by AIMO's lecturers, involving also external lecturers from Italian universities in the region. Delivery is in English. A modified programme is delivered in English by AIMO at the Swiss International College of Osteopathy, partly on site and partly online. There are currently approximately 200 students registered on AIMO courses validated by UCO.

To support student mobility there is a learning exchange programme being set up where students can spend one week or more at either AIMO or UCO. Having been set up after the Brexit referendum, the partnership has not been affected by the exit of the UK from the European Union. Sharing good practice with regards to teaching, learning and assessment is regarded as a particularly important aspect of this partnership. Communication across cultures, although more challenging than with UK partners, is managed well with regular meetings, remotely and in person, including the attendance of key staff at graduation ceremonies.

AIMO students generally progress to private osteopathic practice. The osteopathic profession in Italy is not currently regulated and there is no equivalent degree in osteopathy as that offered in the UK. This has meant that graduates have so far not faced the problem of having their qualification

recognised for either academic or professional purposes. However, legislation is underway to regulate the profession and establish an undergraduate degree in osteopathy. This will open up the opportunity for AIMO and UCO to co-operate with an Italian university for the delivery of undergraduate degrees.

### 4.1.3. Richmond American University in London and the European School of Economics

Richmond American University London (Richmond) is a private not-for-profit institution operating in London since 1972. It is both accredited in the United States, by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and registered with the Office for Students in England. Richmond's students studying in London receive both UK and US degrees.

Richmond's multi-disciplinary liberal arts degree programmes offer a holistic approach to teaching and learning that focuses on developing academic and personal skills to enable students to make positive contributions through employment, personal development and public service after graduation.

Richmond's newly developed strategy is seeing the university grow and further diversify its student body, broaden and develop its programme of studies and

expand its international partnerships. It is in the context of this strategy that Richmond in 2022 entered into a validation partnership with the European School of Economics (ESE), a private college with centres in London, Madrid, Rome, Milan and Florence. For Richmond this partnership represents a new type of collaboration within the European HE community, allowing students to obtain validated Richmond UK awards<sup>15</sup> whilst studying in any of the ESE campuses.

Currently the validated programmes consist of a BSc (Hons) in Business Administration, an MSc in Business Management, and two MBAs in Entrepreneurship and Leadership and in Film Production. Students studying on these programmes are able to transfer between any of the ESE campuses on a per term or per year basis. Study is entirely in person, with experiential components through internships. Delivery is in English

<sup>15</sup> This validation partnership is limited to Richmond UK awards. It does not confer US awards.



across all of the ESE's sites, although students have a language component to their programme of study across the different degrees.

ESE's student population in the Italian campuses comprises both Italian and international students. Some students begin their programme at one of ESE's Italian sites and may undertake part or the remainder of their programme in Spain or the UK, others begin in Spain or the UK and undertake part or the remainder of their programme in Italy.

The partnership is in its first year, with some of ESE's students remaining on the teach-out arrangements under ESE's previous UK validating university, and so no detailed data or information about student numbers and progression is available. Similarly, it is still early for Richmond and ESE to fully appreciate the range of challenges and good practices associated with their partnerships. However, it is known that ESE's students under previous validation partnerships have typically progressed into professional careers or further studies, both in Italy and internationally, despite existing challenges in Italy for the academic recognition of foreign validated degrees offered by institutions without degree-awarding power.

## 4.1.4. Recognition of TNE qualifications

The recognition of qualifications in Europe is governed by the policy framework set out in the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (UNESCO / Council of Europe 1997)<sup>16</sup> and its subsidiary texts, which include a Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education (UNESCO / Council of Europe 2001 and revised in 2007).<sup>17</sup>

Article VI.5 of the main treaty establishes with regards to TNE qualifications that:

‘Each Party may make the recognition of higher education qualifications issued by foreign educational institutions operating in its territory contingent upon specific requirements of national legislation or specific agreements concluded with the Party of origin of such institutions.’

Italy has set specific requirements for the recognition of TNE qualifications issued in its territory, which are laid out in DECRETO 26 Aprile 2004, n. 214.<sup>18</sup> These specific requirements relate to a number of key areas for safeguarding the quality and standards of TNE qualifications. In particular, foreign higher education institutions operating in Italy must meet the following requirements:

- a. they must be recognised higher education institutions in their country of origin;
- b. they must be higher education institutions of scientific relevance at an international level;
- c. the location or locations where the teaching activities take place in Italy must have appropriate logistical infrastructure and scientific facilities, as well as offer adequate student services;
- d. the teaching activities taking place in Italy must be included in the programmes of study of the foreign institution;
- e. admission criteria and assessment practices must be equivalent to those adopted at the home campus of the foreign institution;
- f. teaching staff must meet the same professional requirements as for teaching staff teaching at the home campus of the foreign institution;
- g. the qualifications awarded in Italy must have the same value as qualifications awarded in the home country by the foreign institution.

The academic recognition of foreign degrees offered in Italy must follow the process of ‘equipollenza’ (equivalence), whereby individual Italian universities confer to a foreign degree the same legal value of an Italian degree. Italian universities are independent in their academic assessment of ‘equipollenza’,

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/higher-education-and-research/lisbon-recognition-convention> [last accessed 25/03/23].

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/REVISED\\_CODE\\_OF\\_GOOD\\_PRACTICE\\_TNE.pdf](https://www.enic-naric.net/fileusers/REVISED_CODE_OF_GOOD_PRACTICE_TNE.pdf) [last accessed 25/03/23].

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/stampa/serie\\_generale/originario](https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/stampa/serie_generale/originario) **DECRETO 26 aprile 2004, n. 214** [last accessed 25/03/23].

however, for guidance and advice they might refer to CIMEA, the Italian ENIC-NARIC, CIMEA does not recommend the recognition of foreign degrees offered in Italy in partnership with institutions without Italian degree awarding power. This position seems to be based on the belief that local partners without the power to award higher education degrees are not suitable to deliver programmes at the required higher education standards, even if supported and monitored by a foreign validating degree-awarding body.

Considering the long established and valued practice of validation in the UK, exemplified by the fact that many of today's UK degree-awarding bodies were previously validated partners of other UK degree-awarding bodies, there could be scope to engage in a conversation with the relevant Italian authorities to improve the reciprocal understanding of the quality and quality assurance of UK TNE. This might ultimately help with opening up opportunities in Italy for added-value TNE that can meet specific local education and training needs, and support the further growth of UK-Italy partnerships in higher education.