



European Network on International Student Mobility
Connecting Research and Practice

**What role for national-level agencies in connecting
researchers and practitioners working on international
student mobility?**

ENIS Policy Brief 05/2023

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1. Snapshot overview

With an outreach to both practitioners and researchers on international student mobility (ISM), national-level agencies can actively support the integration of ISM research results into practice by (1) commissioning research where practitioner input is required and encouraged, (2) supporting the translation of research results into a language that is more accessible and applicable to ISM practice at the institutional level, (3) creating joint platforms for dialogue and peer learning for the two groups, (4) supporting research-informed peer learning between practitioners and (5) exchanging with other national agencies on their related approaches.

2. Main Issue to be addressed

The creation of bridges among researchers and practitioners in the field of ISM is both urgent and complex. On the one hand, relevant research often does not reach practitioners and policymakers. Research results on ISM remain strongly restricted to scientific circles, despite their significance for policy and daily practice. On the other hand, practitioners' needs and concerns rarely have direct access routes to ISM researchers.

Bridging the gaps between and within the practitioners' and researchers' communities is important, for scientific findings to finally find their translation into actionable recommendations for ISM practice, and to ensure policies and practitioner initiatives are evidence-based.

National-level actors, and in particular national-level mobility and higher education internationalisation agencies, can play a crucial role, as they are often (well) connected to both ISM researchers and practitioners in their countries. They also have different means through which they can support an active dialogue between the two key groups in order to advance both research and practice.

Consequently, this brief focuses on the facilitator role that such national-level agencies can play in their national context. It does so by pointing to five concrete lines of action, informed by a mapping exercise carried out within the ENIS network that identified the needs of researchers and practitioners.

Against this background, this policy brief seeks to answer the following questions: *How can national-level actors, and agencies in particular, help to bridge the different needs of ISM researchers and practitioners? How can closer links with researchers support the agencies to develop evidence-based ISM practices? How can they support the creation of lasting links between researchers and practitioners in ISM agencies' countries, foster the practical relevance of research results and enhance their uptake in practice?*

3. Key findings

Between June and September 2022, a mapping exercise to identify a list of key relevant ISM stakeholders was carried out by the ENIS network, together with a related survey (N=87) amongst the network members (i.e. ISM researchers at different career stages, practitioners, scholar-practitioners, and representatives of various stakeholder organisations promoting ISM,



including internationalisation agencies). The latter gathered data on the needs of these diverse stakeholders. This dataset allowed to identify a series of core needs in ISM and potential ways of tackling those needs in practice.

Additionally, a series of in-depth exchanges and brainstorming sessions were conducted with ISM experts involved in the ENIS action, both researchers and practitioners from different national contexts. These complementary qualitative data collection moments were focused on *how the identified needs could be addressed*. The key recommendations for national-level agencies put forward below are derived from these quantitative and qualitative data collection exercises.

Why are national agencies the primary target group of this brief? The ENIS mapping survey mentioned above identified national-level actors, including agencies, as the second most relevant type of stakeholder in ISM (according to 57.5% of respondents), after HEIs (72.4% of respondents), while policy/decision makers were identified as the most common readership of ISM policy briefs (82.76%). For their relevance and role in combining support, policy, and decision-making functions, national-level agencies were thus singled out as the main addressee of this brief.

To facilitate a better exchange between ISM practitioners and researchers, national agencies, as well as other facilitator bodies, must understand the key differences between the needs of the two groups. The ENIS survey mentioned above highlighted, on the one hand, the need for clear and accessible information, in non-scientific language, on the part of ISM practitioners and scholar-practitioners. In turn, ISM researchers referred to challenges related to access to data and data collection, and the need for information about practitioners' main challenges and relevant topics, in order to strengthen their research.

With student mobility being a major internationalisation activity, relevant data exist in national internationalisation agencies, whose day-to-day work makes ISM possible. In other words, ISM practitioners and national-level stakeholders often "sit on top of a potential gold mine of data and perspective" (1), which are seldom explored by researchers and do not sufficiently inform practice, a situation that could be largely improved through targeted actions.



4. Recommendations

01 | Ensure practitioner input is included from the start in new research endeavours

When national-level agencies commission research from external researchers, they could request the involvement of practitioners with relevant experience from the early stages of the research process. Early involvement would allow practitioners to not only help confirm the research findings and inform their presentation (the involvement of practitioners in final validation rounds happening already more regularly), but positively influence the actual research design from the start, improving the relevance of the actual research questions and the practical applicability of the findings. That said, research funding programmes, typically administered at the national level by research funding agencies, are not always accommodating, and sometimes even make it difficult to engage practitioners in the research design, particularly in early stages. A reform of the respective instruments in such cases is equally necessary, to encourage, rather than to sanction, practitioner input.

02 | Support the ‘translation’ of research findings from academic to more practical language, which is essential for their uptake in practice

In line with academic publishing standards, research findings in the area of ISM are mostly presented in a scientific and technical language, which is not immediately accessible to practitioners. Re-articulating the findings into a language that is more understandable for practitioners and applicable to their day-to-day ISM realities has been shown to improve the application of research results into institutional practices and is also confirmed by existing national-level examples. National-level agencies can support this ‘translation’ process by developing guidelines for researchers on how to present their findings to a practitioner and policy-maker audience, be it in the form of targeted publications or events, and on how to simplify overtly technical and specialist terminology.

Linked to the first recommendation, the involvement of practitioners from the start also reduces the need for ‘translation’ at a later stage, as it does the close interaction and articulation between ISM practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, as explained in the next recommendation.

03 | Establishing regular meeting opportunities between ISM practitioners, policymakers and researchers is fundamental

One of the main barriers to better uptake of research results in practice is that publications primarily appear in scientific outlets and are presented at academic conferences, i.e. events that practitioners and policymakers do not attend nor have access to on a regular basis, if at all. Existing practices by some national-level agencies show that establishing regular and targeted exchanges – through mini-seminars, webinars, workshops, etc. – to present and discuss the research results with the practitioners and policymakers that are working in the respective



area(s) addressed by research is a successful way to establish a lasting dialogue. This is shown to also lead to a habit of more regularly checking research findings to inform new measures at the institutional level or the improvement of existing practices. For these 'meeting points' to deliver the expected results, they have to be designed with the practitioners' needs in mind, and delivered in a format and language that is suitable for and accessible to practitioners.

The ENIS network offers access to an international pool of ISM researchers and practitioners that could be involved in such peer-learning activities at national and international level.

04 | Support peer-learning between practitioners on the uptake of research results and provide necessary guidance when needed/requested

The advancement of institutional practices in ISM, at both institutional and national levels, can be increased by a more active exchange with the relevant research community, as indicated above, as well as between practitioners and policymakers themselves. To support further innovation, national-level agencies can also play a role in creating a platform, or forum for ISM practitioners to discuss the implications, applicability, and uptake strategies of research findings into their own institutional practice, facilitating peer learning in this process. The results of such exchanges could then be fed back to researchers, to inform them about the impact of their own research.

National-level agencies can also support practitioners in working out how to integrate research findings into their work, through specific support and funding measures, as moving from research results to implementation is not always straightforward at the institutional level and can be resource intensive. Practitioners are often left on their own to make sense of the 'Now what?' question and could benefit from further guidance and peer support, which national-level agencies could facilitate.

05 | Enhancing all the above in an international setting, by exchanging with national-level agencies supporting similar processes in other countries

While research results are often context-specific, there are many commonalities in the framework conditions, main barriers, and policy objectives in ISM between different (European) countries. A regular exchange between national-level agencies from different countries, particularly with similar ISM contexts and trends, on recent research findings and their approaches to connecting researchers and practitioners in their own country can lead to the further multiplication of best practice in this field.



5. Case studies/Good practice examples

For recommendation 2: DAAD Forschung kompakt (“Research Brief”) – was launched in 2021, the purpose of the series being to make current higher education research (not conducted by the DAAD itself) accessible and usable for practitioners. For each issue of the publication series, the DAAD invited university researchers to prepare their research findings for the DAAD’s target groups in a compact and comprehensible form, following some ‘practice translation guidelines’ prepared by the DAAD.

[Research at a glance – DAAD](#)

For recommendation 3: The DAAD-Wissenschaftswerkstatt (“Research Workshop”) initially started as an internal measure to inform interested DAAD staff of current results from higher education research and to put them in touch with researchers that work on topics relevant for the organisation. The workshops were opened to a wider public from higher education institutions since the pandemic, and take place bi-weekly in an interactive, 60-minute format, of presentation of findings, followed by discussion.

For recommendation 4: Universities UK International (UUKi) conducted research on the long-term impact of short-term student mobility co-funded by the Northern Consortium and the British Council; published a report on the findings, but also organised a launch event and recorded the event on YouTube. It was guided by a Steering Group, chaired by a Deputy Vice-Chancellor with representatives from the co-founders and other higher education experts.

[Short-term-mobility-long-term-impact-report.pdf \(universitiesuk.ac.uk\)](#)

A launch event for the report took place on 24 June 2022 and the recording can be viewed [on UUKi’s YouTube channel](#).

6. References

01 | Ogden, A. & Streitwieser, B. (2016). An overview of research on US education abroad. In D. Velliaris & D. Coleman-George (Eds.), Handbook of Research on Study Abroad Programs and Outbound Mobility, IGI Global Press, Adelaide, Australia.

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