A Shared Vision: Examining the Contributions of FORTHEM Member Universities to Intercultural Competence Development

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ABSTRACT

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This research investigates how the FORTHEM Alliance, one certain network within the European University Initiative, promotes intercultural competence among its member universities. By examining the policies and practices of three universities – the University of Jyväskylä, the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, and the University of Agder – this study explores how the alliance contributes to developing intercultural skills among students and staff. A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with four university employees involved in maintaining the FORTHEM Alliance at their respective institutions. Findings reveal a strong alignment between the alliance's goals and member universities' initiatives, such as student mobility, language training, and intercultural collaboration. While the alliance demonstrates significant efforts, expanding its scope beyond European values, strengthening staff involvement, and addressing challenges in virtual mobility are crucial for further enhancing intercultural competence. The research contributes to understanding how university alliances can promote intercultural skills and informs future strategies for promoting internationalisation and cross-cultural collaboration.

Keywords: FORTHEM Alliance, intercultural competence, higher education, European University Initiative

CONTENT

1   INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of higher education has become a dominant trend in Europe (Teichler, 2010). Studying abroad is no longer an uncommon experience reserved for a select few. This shift is reflected in the significant rise in student mobility across Europe. In the mid-1980s, the number of students studying abroad was less than half a million (Rivzi, 2011). By contrast, within the European Union (EU) alone, the figure reached an impressive 2 million students during the 2014-2020 period (European Commission, 2020a). The European Union's commitment to internationalisation within its educational sphere is further evidenced by the substantial financial resources allocated to this area. The Erasmus+ program (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) exemplifies this dedication. For the 2014-2020 period, the Erasmus+ budget stood at a significant EUR 14.7 billion (Durán Martínez et al., 2016). This commitment continues with the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 program, boasting a budget of EUR 24.57 billion, the aim is on student and educator mobility (European Council, 2020). The substantial increase in funding highlights the EU's prioritisation of internationalisation, such as mentioned internationalisation through mobility, within its higher education sector.

Internationalisation in higher education goes beyond just physical mobility (Rivzi, 2011). It also encompasses a curriculum-oriented approach that emphasises intercultural communication and intercultural competences (IC) (Castro et al., 2016). IC encourages respectful interaction and dialogue between individuals from diverse backgrounds (Aba, 2015; Ganesh & Holmes, 2011). This concept, introduced by the Council of Europe in 2008 (Council of Europe, 2008), aligns with the EU's focus on intercultural understanding (European Union, 2008). Building IC complements knowledge acquisition by promoting skills development within an international context, a key objective of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Coperías Aguilar, 2009).

Despite the EU's emphasis on internationalisation, research on the Erasmus+ program suggests that student intercultural competence (IC)

development varies considerably (Onorati, 2010; Alfonzo et al., 2017; Castro et al., 2016). While some students enhance their cultural acceptance, others gain only limited sensitivity. This disparity is likely due to the involvement of diverse educational systems within the program, many of which lack a unified approach to promoting interculturality (Onorati, 2010; Gutiérrez et al., 2015; Aba, 2015; Castro et al., 2016; Yarosh et al., 2018). Ideally, national educational frameworks would integrate cultural awareness development. However, studies indicate that such a design is often absent, resulting in a lack of curriculum focused on IC within Erasmus+ (Onorati, 2010; Gutiérrez et al., 2015; Aba, 2015; Castro et al., 2016; Durán et al., 2016; Jacobone & Moro, 2015). Consequently, the program may not be fully realising its potential to develop IC in students and staff.

This research tries to examine how one certain network in the European University Initiative, that is, the FORTHEM Alliance, can maximise its potential in fostering European values and strengthening another age of Europeans adept at collaboration and cooperation across cultures (Gunn, 2020). In order to understand various approaches to what IC means within the FORTHEM Alliance in promoting interculturality, this thesis will investigate the following research questions:

How are the universities involved in the FORTHEM Alliance promoting intercultural competence through their participation in the European University Initiative?

To address the main research question, this thesis employed a qualitative approach through four semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected from three FORTHEM Alliance member universities: the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany), and the University of Agder (Norway). Notably, these universities show varying approaches to interculturality based on their unique history and location. This diversity provided a rich foundation for an informative case study, with each university serving as a distinct case (Yin, 2023). The interviewees, representing diverse roles within their respective universities, offered valuable insights into the range of policies implemented by these institutions.

The need for this research is highlighted by several key factors. Firstly, exposure to diverse cultural, political, and economic contexts is considered the gold standard for preparing students for international careers (Jacobone & Moro, 2015). Employers increasingly value the intercultural competences (IC) gained through international study experiences (Durán Martínez et al., 2016). Demographic shifts, technological advancements, and globalisation have fundamentally reshaped the workforce and its skill set requirements (Tillman, 2012). To remain competitive, employers seek graduates equipped with "global" competencies, encompassing the ability to navigate interactions with individuals from varied linguistic, cultural, religious, and geographic backgrounds (Holmes et al., 2015). IC development is thus crucial in preparing students for their future careers, making it an essential goal for universities (Jacobone & Moro, 2015). The mixed results of IC development within Erasmus+ programs designed specifically for this purpose raise concerns for the EU and universities alike.

Secondly, the value students place on IC is evident in their motivations for participating in the Erasmus+ program. A desire to experience life beyond their home country and broaden their perspectives, leading to a deeper understanding of themselves and other cultures, is a common theme (Teichler, 2017). This aligns with their aspirations for personal growth and enhanced career prospects, often involving international work opportunities. The mobilities of Erasmus+ events should try to be transformative rather than merely informative (Gutiérrez Almarza et al., 2015). Developing intercultural competences among youth is recognized as a key benefit of the program, as intercultural contact promotes IC development (Messelink et al., 2015). Students hold universities accountable for providing them with these skills, and universities must meet these expectations.

The ever-growing interconnection of academia and professions underscores the critical need for intercultural competence (Byram & Fleming, 1998). Despite its recognised importance, a gap remains in our understanding of how universities within the FORTHEM Alliance encourage intercultural skills among their academic communities. This research investigates the practices of

the FORTHEM Alliance, specifically focusing on the approaches, initiatives, and strategies member universities use to promote intercultural competence. By doing so, the study aims to generate valuable insights that extend beyond individual institutions, showing how collaborative alliances in higher education contribute to intercultural skill development among students and staff.

The ultimate goal is to inform future efforts in internationalisation and cross-cultural collaboration within the European higher education landscape. The findings hold significance not only for academia but also for policymakers, administrators, and educators shaping the future of higher education through collaborative initiatives like the FORTHEM Alliance.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Higher Education and its internationalisation

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of the term "internationalisation" in Europe, particularly within higher education. This trend manifested at both the national level within individual countries and across Europe as a whole (Teichler, 2010). Distinguishing between internationalisation and globalisation is crucial to avoid confusion. Globalisation in higher education, as Rumbley et al. (2012) explain, refers to the "broad economic, technological, and scientific trends that directly impact higher education and are largely unavoidable in today's world" (Altbach, 2006, p. 123). A core assumption of globalisation in higher education is the diminishing significance of borders and national systems (Teichler, 2010). In contrast, internationalisation in higher education focuses on "integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the goals, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education" (Teichler, 2017, citing Knight, 2008, p. 21). By that we can see internationalisation as a response to globalisation. It provides a range of strategies to capitalise on the occasions shown by globalisation's powers (Rumbley et al., 2012). Specifically, it refers to the increase in beyond-borders collaborations within a national higher education system (Teichler, 2010).

The drive to encourage student mobility has resulted in a multitude of institutional strategies. Studying abroad is no longer a privilege for a select few, but a more widespread phenomenon (Teichler, 2010). However, student mobility is just one facet of how internationalisation has grown within institutions. The past decade has seen a notable increase in various collaborative models: Franchise operations: Agreements where one institution grants another the right to use its brand and curriculum to offer programs (Knight, 2018). Articulation programs: Agreements allowing students to transfer credits between institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Branch campuses: Physical campuses of an institution established in another country (Wilkinson, 2013).

Online program delivery: Utilising technology to deliver educational programs across borders (Siemens, 2013).

This trend has fueled the rise of "excellence programs," where universities compete for talented students, prestigious classes, accessibility to impactful articles, and funding (De Wit & Deca, 2020). We can also see a shift towards the commercialization of internationalisation activities, with institutions utilising them as a revenue stream to offset funding shortfalls (Rumbley et al., 2012). While encouraging exchange, cooperation, peace, mutual understanding, human capital development, and solidarity were traditionally the core drivers of internationalisation efforts, competition, profit and name have arguably become quite as valuable (De Wit & Deca, 2020). Internationalisation in the sector of higher education has become an important imperative for institutions, crucial for their continued relevance and sustainability (Rumbley et al., 2012).

A closer look at the concept of internationalisation in higher education reveals two main aspects: internationalisation abroad and internationalisation at home. The first pillar, internationalisation abroad, emphasises the movement of individuals across borders, often referred to as international mobility (Rivzi, 2011). During the 1980s and 1990s, student mobility became the primary focus within internationalisation abroad. The success of programs like Erasmus and the Bologna reforms, with their emphasis on student exchange, exemplifies the centrality of mobility in policy on internationalisation and opportunities within the European Union (Teichler, 2017). This mobility of students, academic and non-academic staff remains arguably a significant point of internationalisation in higher education. It's also easily quantifiable for policymakers, with global mobility within higher education reaching record highs (Rumbley et al., 2012).

While student mobility is a prominent feature of internationalisation in higher education, a second facet focuses on the curriculum itself (Castro et al., 2016). Leask (2014) defines an internationalised curriculum as one that actively engages students with research informed by international perspectives, cultural and linguistic diversity. This approach promotes the development of students' international and intercultural competencies, preparing them as future global professionals and citizens (p. 5). This definition emphasises active student

participation in the learning process and the intentional aquariation of learning outcomes that go beyond mere content and reach a wider range of students (Leask, 2014).

An internationalised curriculum places significant emphasis on developing intercultural competences (IC) (Yarosh et al., 2018). This involves incorporating various elements: Foreign language education (Messelink et al., 2018), networking opportunities to connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds (Messelink et al., 2018), content that supports global understanding (Castro et al., 2016), initiatives that promote intercultural integration on campus (Castro et al., 2016), activities that encourage intercultural communication and competences (ICC) (Aba, 2015). These ICCs equip students to engage in inclusive and open-minded exchanges, or intercultural dialogues, with individuals or parties from different cultural backgrounds (Ganesh & Holmes, 2011). The term "intercultural dialogue" was introduced by the Council of Europe in its 2008 White Paper and subsequently endorsed by the EU (Council of Europe, 2008). This concept reflects a socio-political response to the growing demand for intercultural communication and understanding within the European Union (Holmes, 2014).

Internationalisation of the curriculum serves as a critical bridge between broader institutional internationalisation goals and student learning with practical skill acquisition. This emphasis on preparing students for a globalised world underpins the rationale for internationalisation in higher education (Leask, 2014). Consequently, universities often publish policy statements outlining ambitious visions of graduates as "globally engaged" citizens ready to contribute positively in an interconnected world. However, a gap often exists between these well-intentioned pronouncements and their translation into curriculum which are oriented to student learning opportunities (Leask, 2014). To sum up, the implementation of such programs can be unclear. While internationalisation is considered a vital strategic objective for higher education institutions, the focus often falls primarily on one type of internationalisation - student mobility programs like Erasmus+. The following section will explore the challenges this poses for promoting interculturality within Erasmus+.

2.2 European Universities Initiative

The vast scope of the Erasmus+ program, encompassing education, training, youth, and sport, makes analysing policy input solely for higher education challenging. However, the program's core strength lies in facilitating diverse mobility experiences for both individuals and institutions (European Parliament, 2018). For individuals, Erasmus+ offers study abroad placements, traineeships, and volunteer opportunities that broaden horizons and encourage cultural exchange. Organisations benefit from program funding to enhance educational and training standards, support youth engagement and entrepreneurship, and promote inclusive sports practices (European Parliament, 2018). A more focused approach is to examine Key Action 2 (KA2) within Erasmus+. KA2, titled "Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices," is a subprogram that supports collaboration between organisations and institutions in education, training, youth, and sport. This Key Action supports various projects, including partnerships for cooperation, excellence, and innovation. All funded projects under KA2 must focus on developing, transferring, or implementing innovative practices in their respective fields (European Parliament, 2018). One recent initiative within KA2 is the European Universities Initiative, the EU's flagship effort to strengthen the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025 (European Commission, 2021). This initiative focuses on creating beneficial partnerships among HEIs, promoting the development of "European Universities": collaborative connections where students can earn degrees by studying in multiple EU countries. By boosting student and staff mobility, the European Universities Initiative promotes the adequacy, openness, and initiatives of European higher education. These "European Universities" are set out establishing long-term and structured cooperation (Gunn, 2020). The initiative pursues two key objectives (Gunn, 2020):

1. Strengthening European Identity and Values: This objective aims to unite a new generation of Europeans comfortable collaborating across diverse cultures, languages, borders, sectors, and disciplines.

2. Enhancing European Higher Education: The initiative seeks to improve the readiness, execution, appeal, and global recognition of European institutions, employability, traditions, civic engagement, economy and well-being. Ultimately, European Universities aim to elevate educational standards and strengthen the connection between higher education, research, and innovation in the EU.

As evident from these objectives, the Erasmus+ program, through the European Universities Initiative within KA2, actively promotes the development of intercultural competence (IC) among participating students. The program equips them with the skills and knowledge to work and collaborate effectively within diverse cultural settings.

2.2.1   What is the European Universities Initiative?

The European Commission solidified the concept of the European Universities Initiative (EUI) on November 17, 2017, with the report "Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture" (European Commission, 2017). This report emphasised the creation of a European Education Area (EEA) to complement the ongoing European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The vision for the EEA was to support a strong European identity and culture through trust, mutual recognition, collaboration, exchange of best practices, mobility, and growth (European Commission, 2017). The Commission released the EUI concept alongside a document titled "Network of European Universities" (European Commission, 2017). Following the Education Committee's endorsement of the initiative's vision for European Universities, a three-year pilot phase was launched inside the Erasmus+ program in 2019. During this pilot, the Commission selected the first seventeen alliances designated as "European Universities" (European Commission, 2019). The core principle of the initiative lies in establishing alliances that serve two key goals: (1) promoting shared European values and (2) enhancing the quality, global competitiveness, and attractiveness of European higher education institutions (Gunn, 2020).

European Universities consist of diverse HEIs, ranging from universities of applied sciences to comprehensive research-based universities or universities

with technical focus. These institutions form cross-national alliances across the EU, aiming to provide advantages for students, teachers, and society. The initial 17 alliances were chosen from 54 applications, comprising 114 higher education institutions from 24 member states. Following the opening of the latest call in September 2022, support was granted to 23 alliances continuing their cooperation and seven new alliances in July 2023. With the application results of 2023, and the ongoing third call, the number of European Universities alliances increased to 64. The alliances represent a total of 560 higher education institutions from 35 countries with a budget of €402.2 million (European Commission, 2024).

2.2.2   In what way is interculturality ensured in the curricula?

This thesis aims to investigate how the universities involved in the European University Initiative perceive the contribution of their alliances to effectively fulfil its Key Action 2, aimed at promoting Intercultural Competence (IC). However, due to its novelty, there is limited research on the European Universities Initiative. The Commission conducted a single survey on the initial, preliminary results, which primarily addressed the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic without a proper focus on practical implications of the alliances in promoting interculturality (European Commission, 2020b).

With the initial budget of EUR 287 million in the first piloting phase during the years 2019 – 2022, which increased to a record number of €1.1 billion for the budgetary period 2021 – 2027 (Funding for European Universities Alliances, 2021), and the substantial importance attached to this program in strengthening the European Education Area (EEA), further research is needed to examine whether and how the European Universities Initiative achieves its intended and set outcomes. Since the alliances only recently passed the fresh stage, this presents an opportune moment to observe and assess their operations, as strategies and policies have space to be modified.

Given the limitations of a master's thesis, exploring numerous alliances would require a broader scope than feasible. To ensure a focused and insightful investigation, only one alliance has been selected: the FORTHEM Alliance. This

choice aligns with my research interests and benefits from the accessibility of resources offered by one of its partner universities. By focusing on a single alliance, this research allows for a deeper understanding and analysis of its specific initiatives and contributions. This brings the main research question of this research: *How are the universities involved in the FORTHEM Alliance promoting intercultural competence through their participation in the European University Initiative?* This thesis specifically investigates how the FORTHEM Alliance integrates internationalisation into its alliance level initiatives.

2.3   FORTHEM Alliance

The FORTHEM Alliance is a network of nine multidisciplinary public research universities reaching across Europe, united by a shared vision of transforming higher education and research to address the complex challenges of the 21st century. Founded in 2019 as one of the first seventeen European Universities under the European Commission's initiative (Press Corner, 2019), FORTHEM aims to create a truly interconnected European educational and research landscape. As for its origin, the Commission's subsequent announcement of the European Universities Initiative provided the framework for FORTHEM's formation.

FORTHEM's inaugural pilot universities were coordinated by the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany), including the University of Burgundy (France), the University of Valencia (Spain), the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), University of Opole (Poland), the University of Latvia (Latvia) and the University of Palermo (Italy). In November 2022, the new coordinator university became the University of Burgundy and with that the alliance welcomed two new members – the University of Agder (Norway) and the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (Romania) – further strengthening its geographical diversity and expertise. These additions brought the total number of FORTHEM universities to nine, representing a balance between established research institutions and emerging higher education hubs (FORTHEM, 2020a).

2.3.1 Core Mission and Specialisation of FORTHEM

This alliance envisions a future where classrooms resonate with European identity and move forward innovative practices. It began on this mission by promoting innovative models for university collaboration, seamlessly weaving Europe into the everyday learning, supporting and refining the best teaching methods from across the continent, and ultimately shaping the future of European universities into a more interconnected and impactful space (FORTHEM, 2020b).

To achieve its objectives, the FORTHEM Alliance focuses on three main pillars. Rather than solely focusing on physical travel, this alliance adopts a broader perspective on mobility, aiming to develop innovative forms of academic exchange and engagement. This ambitious goal is driven by the Digital Academy, a platform designed to empower students, faculty, and administrative staff to undertake diverse mobility journeys (FORTHEM, 2020h). Recognizing the importance of civic engagement, FORTHEM focuses on empowering students to become active participants in their communities. It achieves this by strengthening student associations and collaborating with professional integration services within universities. Moreover, the axis facilitates interregional dialogue and collaboration among socio-economic actors, encouraging a more inclusive and interconnected society (FORTHEM Strategy, Cooperation & Engagement, 2020). Nine thematically focused Labs, spearheaded by designated partner universities within the FORTHEM alliance, serve as a platform for tackling critical societal issues. These Labs leverage the expertise of researchers, students, and external partners. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, they organise conferences, conduct in-depth research, and coordinate PhD programs, supporting the development of robust research projects and networks aimed at finding solutions to the pressing challenges of our time (FORTHEM Strategy, Cooperation & Engagement, 2020).

From these three core pillars, the first three FORTHEM missions were created. In comparison with the current five missions which FORTHEM has, there is significant development in the focus area covered by this alliance (see Table 1).

Table 1

Evolution of FORTHEM missions, comparison of the pilot phase with current phase of EUI

Missions in the pilot phase	Missions currently
Mobility Mission	European Campus Mission
Outreach Mission	Service-to-Society Mission
Labs Mission	Labs and Co-creation Mission
Not included in the pilot phase, emerged from FIT FORTHEM project	Research, Innovation and Transfer Mission
Not included in the pilot phase, emerged from collaborative initiatives	Skills and Competences Mission

FORTHEM has currently five missions: European Campus, Skills and Competences, Research, Innovation and Transfer, Labs and Co-creation, and Service-to-Society (FORTHEM, 2020b).

The European Campus Mission is an initiative designed to enhance transnational talent circulation and offer students seamless mobility, online international opportunities, and personalised learning paths. Building upon previous experiences, this mission aims to deepen international cooperation structures, incorporating FORTHEM student status, joint learning and teaching, and micro-credentials. It advocates for the enhancement of the Digital Academy (DA), a digital platform connecting educational offerings across all nine FORTHEM universities. Alongside ECTS transfer, a gamified system involving open badges and micro-credentials enables learners to receive recognition for their developed skills. The mission also entails the establishment of a "Digital Academy Office" responsible for managing DA courses, the formation and coordination of Green and Diversity & Inclusion Units, the formulation of codes of conduct for FORTHEM, and the promotion of the implementation of the Erasmus Student Card Initiative and FORTHEM Community (FORTHEM, 2020c).

The objective of the Skills and Competences Mission is to furnish students and staff members with the necessary skills and competencies for success in the 21st century. This mission emphasises the aquariation of forward-thinking, innovative pedagogies aimed at enabling students to acquire critical and academic literacies, digital and green skills, and the capability for continuous learning. Recent findings from the Skills and Competences Mission indicate that universities should prioritise the quality, rather than the quantity, of digital tools used in teaching. It is essential for educators to have access to resources and training for ongoing development of their digital and pedagogical skills, along with support for their well-being. International collaboration and the exchange of multimodal teaching practices can boost teachers' confidence, motivation, and enthusiasm. The integration of up-to-date skills promotion into everyday teaching is crucial, necessitating fresh approaches to enhance interaction and engage students in online and hybrid teaching. Anticipating a shift towards teaching in multidisciplinary and multicultural communities, partnerships between universities and companies are expected to grow (FORTHEM, 2020d).

The primary objective of the FORTHEM Alliance's Research, Innovation & Transfer (RIT) Mission is to develop cross-sectoral collaboration and training for future leaders in Research and Innovation (R&I). This mission is centred on advancing transnational cooperation among researchers, guided by the principles of responsible research, innovation, and open science. It is also dedicated to offering comprehensive training programs for early-stage researchers, aiming to establish new benchmarks for research assessment in Europe. Furthermore, the mission endeavours to formulate policies and practices that facilitate collaboration between academic and non-academic stakeholders across different regions. By doing so, FORTHEM serves as a platform for delivering appropriate training to young researchers and expediting research projects addressing the most critical European and global challenges (FORTHEM, 2020e).

The mission of FORTHEM Labs and Co-creation is geared towards promoting collaborative creation of solutions for the challenges anticipated in

the future. This involves bringing together researchers, students, industry players, non-profit organisations, and representatives from the public sector. The labs are specifically concentrated on nine distinct areas: Diversity and Migration, Multilingualism in School and Higher Education, Food Science, Digital Transformation, Climate and Resources, Experiencing Europe, Resilience, Life Quality and Demographic Change, Art & Aesthetics in Contemporary Society, and Cultural Heritage. Through engagement with these stakeholders, the labs can formulate solutions customised to the specific needs of various regions, Europe, and the global community. Additionally, the labs serve as a platform for researchers and students to acquire new skills and experiences, while providing businesses with access to innovative research and solutions (FORTHEM, 2020f).

The objective of the FORTHEM Alliance's Service to Society Mission is to enhance the ties between the alliance's universities and their respective regions, empowering citizens and organisations through education, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement. Through involving students, staff, and schoolteachers in initiatives promoting European values, intercultural education, and lifelong learning, the mission sets out to develop a more engaged and informed society. Additionally, the mission endeavours to bolster entrepreneurship and afford students opportunities for practical experience in the professional realm (FORTHEM, 2020g).

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the area of higher education, particularly within the framework of the FORTHEM Alliance—a collaborative initiative among European universities aiming to promote academic and cultural exchange—there is a growing emphasis on the development of intercultural competence. Across the FORTHEM Alliance's missions, there is an evident commitment to intercultural competence. The Skills and Competences Mission prioritises innovative pedagogies and future-oriented skills, essentially promoting intercultural competences through a focus on critical literacies and adaptability. In the Research, Innovation & Transfer (RIT) Mission, transnational cooperation and responsible research highlights the necessity of intercultural awareness in collaborative activities. The FORTHEM Labs and Co-creation Mission explicitly recognises the importance of intercultural competences, with diverse thematic areas and stakeholder engagement promoting collaborative problem-solving across cultural differences. The Service to Society Mission, by emphasising stronger connections between universities and regions and promoting intercultural education, aims to promote intercultural competences among its stakeholders. All together, these missions reflect a holistic approach within the FORTHEM Alliance, integrating intercultural perspectives to prepare individuals for the complexities of an interconnected global environment. This research aims to address a question: *How are the universities involved in the FORTHEM Alliance promoting intercultural competence through their participation in the European University Initiative?*

The importance of intercultural competence cannot be overstated in a world where global connectivity and collaboration are integral aspects of academic and professional spheres (Byram & Fleming, 1998). Despite the significance of this competence, there is a gap in our understanding of the specific strategies practised by universities within the FORTHEM Alliance to encourage intercultural skills among their academic communities. Therefore, a

case study for this alliance will be applied to better understand the European Universities Initiative in practice.

This research seeks to clarify this gap by observing the intricacies of the FORTHEM Alliance and examining the approaches, initiatives, and strategies employed by member universities to promote intercultural competence. By doing so, the study aims to contribute valuable insights that extend beyond the borders of individual institutions, providing a broader understanding of how collaborative alliances in higher education contribute to the development of intercultural skills among students and staff.

In essence, the research problem centres on the need to comprehensively understand the methods used by universities participating in the FORTHEM Alliance to develop intercultural competence, with the ultimate goal of informing future collaborations in internationalisation and cross-cultural collaboration within the European higher education landscape. The findings of this study will not only benefit academia but also hold relevance for policymakers, administrators, and educators involved in shaping the future of higher education through collaborative initiatives like the FORTHEM Alliance.

The overall aim of this research is to examine the current position and goals of universities participating in the FORTHEM Alliance in promoting intercultural competence through their collaboration. The specific objectives are:

- Explore how the goals of the FORTHEM Alliance, concerning intercultural competence, align with the institutional policies and practices of member universities.
- Examine the specific contributions that member universities of FORTHEM make to the alliance goals based on their own policies and practices.

Based on these objectives, the following research questions will guide this study:

- How do the goals of the FORTHEM Alliance related to intercultural competence align with the institutional policies and practices of member universities?

- What specific contributions do member universities of FORTHEM make towards the alliance's goals concerning intercultural competence, considering their individual policies and practices?

This research holds significant value for the research and academic community, offering deeper insights into the strategies employed by FORTHEM Alliance universities to promote intercultural competence. Academic researchers can leverage these findings to contribute to the theoretical framework of intercultural competence development in collaborative higher education initiatives. Simultaneously, practitioners, including administrators and educators within FORTHEM and similar alliances, should gain practical insights that inform policy decisions. The research delivers actionable information on effective strategies, enhancing institutions' efforts to promote intercultural competence and thereby improving the quality of education and supporting a culturally aware academic environment. Additionally, students benefit from a more enriched learning experience within FORTHEM Alliance universities, gaining comprehensive intercultural competence essential for success in a global landscape. From a broader perspective, policymakers shaping European higher education can use these insights to design policies that promote internationalisation and intercultural competence, benefitting academia, educational practitioners, students, and policymakers alike in promoting a more informed and effective collaborative framework within and beyond the FORTHEM Alliance.

4 RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

4.1 Research Context

4.1.1 FORTHEM's Vision for Intercultural Competence

Established in 2019 as part of the European Commission's European Universities Initiative, the FORTHEM Alliance brings together nine multidisciplinary public research universities across Europe (FORTHEM Strategy, Cooperation & Engagement, 2020). Inspired by a shared vision to transform higher education and research to address the 21st century's complex challenges, this collaborative network aims to develop a truly interconnected European educational and research landscape (FORTHEM, 2020b). While the term "intercultural competence" may not be explicitly mentioned, it is visible in FORTHEM's five core missions.

The European Campus Mission prioritises mobility, international online opportunities, and the promotion of a European identity (FORTHEM, 2020c). These initiatives encourage students to engage with diverse cultures and viewpoints, promoting adaptability and expanding their understanding of the world (Byram & Fleming, 1998). This aligns with the development of key intercultural competences, such as the ability to communicate effectively across cultures, appreciate diverse perspectives, and adapt to different contexts (Bennett, 2004).

Similarly, the Skills and Competences Mission encourages future-oriented skills, critical thinking, and adaptability in both students and staff (FORTHEM, 2020d). These capabilities are crucial for navigating intercultural encounters with sensitivity and open-mindedness. Critical thinking allows individuals to analyse situations from different perspectives, while adaptability enables them to adjust their communication and behaviour to interact effectively with culturally diverse individuals and groups (Deardorff, 2009).

The Research, Innovation & Transfer (RIT) Mission emphasises cross-sectoral collaboration, responsible research, and open science (FORTHEM,

2020e). This mission promotes international and intercultural understanding by bringing researchers together across borders and promoting the exchange of knowledge and perspectives. Such collaborative environments encourage intellectual engagement with diverse viewpoints and research approaches, contributing to the development of intercultural sensitivity and competence (De Wit & Meyer, 2015).

Furthermore, the Labs and Co-creation Mission focuses on collaborative problem-solving across cultural contexts (FORTHEM, 2020f). By engaging diverse stakeholders such as businesses, NGOs, and the public sector, this mission encourages participants to work together, promoting intercultural awareness and appreciation. Engaging with representatives from various backgrounds and sectors provides opportunities to understand different perspectives, communication styles, and problem-solving approaches, further supporting intercultural competence (Yousef, 2007).

Finally, the Service to Society Mission bridges the gap between universities and their local communities, promoting intercultural education and an engaged citizenship (FORTHEM, 2020g). This mission acknowledges the importance of supporting understanding and respect between diverse groups, contributing to a more inclusive and understanding society. Intercultural education plays a crucial role in developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to engage effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, ultimately contributing to intercultural competence (Banks, 2015).

While not explicitly named, FORTHEM's commitment to promote the skills and perspectives needed to excel in an interconnected world underscores its dedication to promote intercultural competence. Its diverse initiatives, ranging from international mobility programs to collaborative research projects, create an environment that encourages intellectual exchange, open dialogue, and intercultural understanding. This multi leveled approach lays the foundation for a European higher education landscape that empowers individuals to become competent and responsible global citizens.

4.1.2   Exploring Variations in Intercultural Strategies

There is a significant gap in understanding the specific strategies practised by individual member universities to translate this value into action. This research aims to bridge this gap by focusing on the approaches taken by three distinct universities within the alliance: the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany), and the University of Agder (Norway). Choosing these three universities creates a rich and diverse database for exploring intercultural competence strategies within the FORTHEM Alliance. Each institution has a unique geographical location, cultural context, and institutional profile. This allows the research to capture the potential variations in strategies across different member universities and describe how these variations might be influenced by specific regional and institutional circumstances:

- Finland's strong educational system and emphasis on internationalisation offer valuable insights through the University of Jyväskylä. This perspective helps us understand how Nordic universities approach intercultural competence development (Sarja & Rinne, 2018).

- Germany's rich historical and cultural background showcased by Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz. By examining its strategies, we gain insights into how a historically significant region promotes intercultural competence within its higher education institutions (Engels, 2017).

- Norway's focus on social equity and inclusion provides the context for understanding the University of Agder's approach. This perspective adds valuable information on how Scandinavian universities implement intercultural competence strategies (Björklund & Mikkelsen, 2022).

This research focuses into the specific strategies adopted by each university, carefully considering the unique cultural and institutional contexts within which they operate. By analysing these strategies and their connection to the individual university contexts, the research aims to achieve three key objectives:

- **University Context:** A case study with an overview of the university's history, mission, and profile. Highlighting relevant aspects of its institutional policies and practices related to internationalisation and intercultural competence.

- **FORTHEM Alliance Goals and Alignment:** Summarising the FORTHEM Alliance's goals related to intercultural competence. Analysing how the policies and practices of each university align with these goals, using specific examples and evidence from semi-structured interviews.

- **University Contributions to FORTHEM Goals:** Describing the specific contributions made by each university towards the FORTHEM Alliance's intercultural competence goals. Analysing how these contributions are shaped by the university's individual policies and practices.

4.1.3   How Qualitative Methods Align with the Research Questions

This research looks into the unexplored area of intercultural competence within the FORTHEM Alliance, aiming to evaluate how its member universities translate the alliance's goals into their own practices. This exploratory research demands an approach that can navigate the subtle distinctions of individual experiences, study diverse perspectives, and clarify the complexities essential in intercultural competence. For this reason, a qualitative exploratory approach is the most suitable research approach.

The limited existing research on specific strategies employed by member universities regarding intercultural competence highlights the need for an exploratory approach. Unlike quantitative methods that rely on predefined categories, qualitative methods offer flexibility and adaptability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This allows us to follow emerging themes and patterns in the data, leading to new insights and understandings that might not be captured through a rigid quantitative research.

Furthermore, this research aims to study the "experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders" such as university administrators, faculty, or students. Qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, are

beneficial in discovering the rich source of individuals' lived experiences and their interpretations of events and phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This allows us to capture the subjective meanings and complexities surrounding intercultural competence, as opposed to relying on standardised quantitative measures that might miss important distinctions.

The very nature of these research questions express the need for a qualitative approach. Questions like *How do the goals of the FORTHEM Alliance related to intercultural competence align with the institutional policies and practices of member universities?* and *What specific contributions do member universities of FORTHEM make towards the alliance's goals concerning intercultural competence, considering their individual policies and practices?* essentially deal with perceptions, interpretations, and lived experiences. Qualitative methods provide the tools to study these subjective dimensions and provide a better understanding of how intercultural competence works within the FORTHEM Alliance.

Moreover, the notion of intercultural competence itself is a complex and multi layered term. Qualitative methods allow us to capture the diverse interpretations, challenges, and successes associated with promoting intercultural competence across different universities and stakeholder groups. This provides a deeper understanding than quantitative measures, which might struggle to capture the amount of data and context surrounding such a complex concept (Deardorff, 2009).

4.2   Research Participants

This qualitative case study investigates the experiences of four university employees involved in maintaining the FORTHEM Alliance at their respective institutions: the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany), or the University of Agder (Norway). These participants were selected for their expertise on the topic, ensuring the data collected holds valuable meaning and contributes to understanding the research questions (Tracy, 2013).

The study uses an interpretive paradigm, acknowledging the subjective nature of reality and the potential for diverse interpretations (Moon & Blackman, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In this approach, the researcher collaborates with participants to co-construct meaning from their experiences and perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Here, the participants' knowledge and expertise are crucial in understanding the real-life practices relevant to the FORTHEM Alliance's goals, particularly in the area of intercultural competence.

To gain a holistic perspective and capture different institutional approaches, the study uses two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews allowed participants to share their insights and perspectives on the universities' contributions to the FORTHEM Alliance's intercultural competence goals. Document analysis provided additional context by examining relevant institutional policies and practices.

For anonymity, the participants are referred to as I1 (interviewee 1), I2 (interviewee 2), I3 (interviewee 3) and I4 (interviewee 4) throughout the research. Each participant possesses extensive experience contributing to the FORTHEM Alliance and its development. While specialising in different aspects relevant to their universities' needs, their diverse perspectives enrich the dataset despite the small-scale nature of this qualitative case study.

4.3   Data Collection

4.3.1   Case Study

As the FORTHEM Alliance consists of 9 member universities, it would be challenging to study the entire Alliance. Referring back to the literature review of this research, FORTHEM Alliance as a whole is aimed to promote intercultural competence among its practices, but only a few of the members have mentioned that in their public documents, websites and other resources. In order to understand how successful the FORTHEM Alliance is promoting IC,

we need to study not just one member university but those with distinct scopes of availability on interculturality.

An informative case study is a research method used to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of a specific case, phenomenon, or situation. Unlike other case studies, the primary aim of an informative case study is not to test a hypothesis or theory, but rather to clarify the case in detail and provide valuable insights into its functioning, processes, and complexity (University of California - Berkeley, 2023). For this thesis, three universities were selected: the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany) and the University of Agder (Norway).

All cases were examined for an overview of the university's history, mission, and profile. Highlighting relevant aspects of its institutional policies and practices related to internationalisation and intercultural competence. The selection of these specific universities from the FORTHEM Alliance was made based on multiple factors. One of them being the presence of each university in the FORTHEM Alliance with the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and the University of Jyväskylä already included in the pilot phase, and the University of Agder joining later as one of the newest additions to the alliance. The scope and and the academic focus of each university differs greatly, giving space for more visible exploration of universities' approaches to internationalisation and their focus on global engagement.

4.3.2   Semi-structured interview

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. This method provides a balance between obtaining focused information and allowing participants to share their unique perspectives. The interview guide outlined key topics connected with the research questions, but also offered flexibility to explore emerging themes during the conversation. This adaptability is crucial for capturing participants' interpretations of issues and events. While the guide ensured a degree of consistency across interviews, it also allowed for deviations to look deeper into unexpected insights or ask follow-up questions not

originally planned. This approach facilitates comparison of data while remaining receptive to the individual narratives (Bryman, 2012).

The development of interview questions for the selected universities within the FORTHEM Alliance; University of Jyväskylä (JYU), Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU), and University of Agder (UiA) considered several key factors. The primary aim of this research is to understand the Alliance's goals for intercultural competence (IC) and analyse how each university's policies and practices align with those goals.

The case studies provided valuable insights into each university's unique approach to internationalisation and promoting IC. The interview questions focus into specific details mentioned in the case studies to gain a comprehensive understanding of their practices. This allows for the collection of specific examples and evidence from interviewees during the interviews. This data is crucial for supporting the analysis of alignment between university practices and the Alliance's goals.

The interview questions follow a consistent structure across all three universities. First, we aim to understand each university's perspective on the FORTHEM Alliance's IC goals. Questions in this section explore how they interpret these goals and how their own specific approach contributes to developing IC within the Alliance.

Second, the questions focus on the universities' policies and practices. Here, we look into specific initiatives mentioned in the case studies. The goal is to understand how these initiatives translate the university's approach to IC into concrete actions.

Third, we explore the alignment between university practices and the FORTHEM Alliance's goals. These questions encourage interviewees to reflect on how effectively their university's practices contribute to achieving the Alliance's IC objectives. We can also ask them to elaborate on specific initiatives that demonstrate successful implementation. Additionally, these questions explore potential areas for improvement in aligning with the Alliance's vision for IC development.

Finally, we include additional prompts in the interview. These prompts allow interviewees to share further insights and experiences beyond the initial questions. This can potentially lead to unexpected but valuable data that can enrich the overall understanding of IC development within the FORTHEM Alliance.

4.4   Data Analysis

This research used inductive thematic analysis, a qualitative approach to analyse the collected data from interviews and document reviews used for case studies of each university. This method was chosen as it aligns with the explorative nature of the research, aiming to identify and understand emerging themes related to intercultural competence practices within the FORTHEM Alliance universities. This section will explain the data coding procedures and theme development process.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and document reviews were carefully examined. This initial step allowed for familiarisation with the raw data and identification of potential themes. Each transcript and document was independently coded by using a line-by-line approach. During this stage, codes were assigned to segments of data that captured specific meanings, concepts, or experiences related to intercultural competence within the universities. As coding progressed, the initial codes were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and clarity. Codes that overlapped or lacked clarity were merged or re-defined. This iterative process resulted in a robust codebook capturing the key aspects of the data.

Beyond initial descriptive codes, this research used axial coding to further develop and refine the identified themes. Axial coding is a crucial stage in thematic analysis, where connections between the initial codes are established, revealing broader conceptual categories or overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the process of axial coding, the relationships between codes were examined, searching for connections, similarities, overlaps, and potential groups. In practice, initial drafting included the use of artificial

intelligence tools to better direct the possible themes and global themes for thematic analysis. It is important to note that no actual collected data were used in direct communication with AI. This tool was used only for brainstorming and initial practice round with the selected semi-structured interview questions. For example, codes related to 'language support initiatives,' 'cultural awareness workshops,' and 'faculty-led internationalisation projects' could be considered interrelated, potentially leading to an emergent theme like 'intercultural competence development efforts.' Additionally, axial coding explored potential hierarchical relationships, uncovering broader themes like 'formal curriculum components' versus 'informal learning contexts' (Google - Gemini, 2024). The actual initial codes, themes and global themes from collected data are seen in Table 2 below.

This repetitive process of axial coding allowed for a distinctive and multi layered understanding of the intercultural competence practices within the FORTHEM Alliance universities. By highlighting how policies, initiatives, and daily practices interacted, it showed the identification of both university trends and institution-specific strategies for promoting intercultural competence. The thematic outcomes from axial coding (see Table 2) served as the base for interpreting the findings and answering the study's research questions.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis

Initial Codes	Themes	Global Themes	Research Questions
Intercultural training workshops Civic engagement partnerships with international institutions Joint research projects with an intercultural focus Joint online courses Faculty exchange	Intercultural competence development efforts	Understanding University's Perspective on FORTHEM Alliance Goals	Alignment Analysis
	Mobility and collaboration		
	Internationalisation strategy		

programs Cotutelle doctoral degrees	Intercultural development strategies Internationalisation efforts Intercultural training and language learning		
Promoting English-medium education while encouraging the use of other languages Bureaucratic hurdles in recognizing ECTS credits for online courses Increased funding for research collaborations Student and staff exchange programs	Language policy Administrative structures and challenges Resource allocation and administrative structures Mobility programs	University's Policies and Practices in Relation to IC	
Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication Recognition of intercultural learning experiences Staff & student exposure through FORTHEM meetings and mobility programs Multilingualism in Schools and Higher Education Lab	Focus areas and strengths Knowledge sharing and best practices	Alignment between University's Practices and FORTHEM Goals	Contribution Assessment

Existing transnational study programs beyond FORTHEM	Existing practices beyond FORTHEM		
Center for Intercultural Studies	Intercultural training and language learning		
Expertise in sustainability and development in the Global South			
Focus on language learning programs for international students			
Workshops on intercultural communication			
Joint research projects with an intercultural focus			
Streamlined procedures for online courses	Limitations of current practices	University's Limitations and Future Directions	
Staff collaboration initiatives			
Over-reliance on English as the alliance language			
Increased funding for research collaborations	Future directions		
Streamlining administrative processes			
Lack of faculty training in intercultural pedagogy			
Focus on virtual exchange programs			

4.5   Ethical Solutions

This master thesis prioritises ethical research conduct, recognizing its impact on the aspect of qualitative studies (Tracy, 2013). The research ethics framework focuses on four key areas: informed consent, participant anonymity and pseudonymity, researcher-participant relationships, and data storage and disposal.

Potential participants were invited to contribute through an email outlining the research topic, study objectives, and a privacy notice. A written consent form was provided, ensuring confidentiality, voluntary participation, and permission for data use in the research. The consent form emphasised participant respect and the right to withdraw from the study at any point. Furthermore, to safeguard against participant embarrassment or harm, the reporting section was to replace names with pseudonyms while potentially retaining non-identifiable details like school name or work experience. All information was transcribed and reported anonymously or pseudonymously.

During interviews, the researcher primarily acted as a facilitator, maintaining a natural conversational flow. Equally important, participants were positioned as experts contributing valuable insights to the research topic. The researcher actively encouraged participant voices and respected their perspectives.In the beginning, a test interview was conducted to refine the different interview segments, proper timing, and interview consistency.

Confidentiality and privacy were prioritised throughout data collection. This includes digital interview recordings and transcripts, as well as signed consent forms. Recordings and transcripts are stored on an university owned U-drive, ensuring both local and far access while the data analysis takes place. As advised by the university of Jyväskylä, other external devices are avoided due to potential security risks. Upon study completion, all digital files will be overwritten, and any physical data will be deleted in designated confidential waste paper containers located on the university campus.

5   FINDINGS

The chapter presents the collected data and outcomes, following the structure of the two main research questions of this qualitative study. As the semi-structured interview structure already followed the two main research questions, the findings, and the data collection analysis per se, were divided to correspond with this structure.

Firstly, I answer the first research question: *How do the goals of the FORTHEM Alliance related to intercultural competence align with the institutional policies and practices of member universities?* The first subsection is therefore identified as **5.1 FORTHEM Alliance Goals and Alignment** and explains two thematic areas concerning understanding university's perspective on FORTHEM Alliance goals and university's policies and practices in relation to IC.

The second research question: *What specific contributions do member universities of FORTHEM make towards the alliance's goals concerning intercultural competence, considering their individual policies and practices?* is discussed in the subsection **5.2 University Contributions to FORTHEM Goals**. This subsection explains two other thematic areas regarding alignment between university's practices and FORTHEM goals, and university's approach to student and staff mobility.

5.1   FORTHEM Alliance Goals and Alignment

The FORTHEM Alliance, though not explicitly mentioning "intercultural competence," prioritises initiatives that encourage the skills and perspectives necessary to succeed in a globalised world (FORTHEM Strategy, Cooperation & Engagement, 2020). Through their core missions we can observe FORTHEM's diverse initiatives creating an environment for intellectual exchange, open dialogue, and intercultural understanding. Membership in this alliance encourages student mobility, international online opportunities, and a European identity (FORTHEM, 2020b). This promotes intercultural

understanding by exposing students to diverse cultures and viewpoints (Byram & Fleming, 1998). Furthermore, the alliance focuses on developing future-oriented skills, critical thinking, and adaptability in students and staff. These skills are crucial for intercultural interactions (Deardorff, 2009). There is also emphasis on cross-border collaboration and knowledge exchange which encourages intercultural understanding among researchers (De Wit & Meyer, 2015), together with focus on collaborative problem-solving with diverse stakeholders. Intercultural awareness is therefore supported by working with people from various backgrounds (Yousef, 2007). Furthermore, the alliance also tries to bridge the gap between universities and communities, promoting intercultural education for an inclusive society (Banks, 2015).

Regarding the understanding of intercultural competence as a term, not specifically described in the strategic papers of the FORTHEM Alliance, some believe the provided documents show clear directions pointing to intercultural competences:

> Intercultural competence as a term, I don't think it's mentioned in the documentation, but the FORTHEM strategy and the vision part of FORTHEM strategy, for example, says that we need to facilitate international cooperation on an everyday basis. I think that's a very strong statement. (I3)

Some are taking a more holistic approach and consider the FORTHEM Alliance as a tool for internationalisation: "Our idea is to improve internationalisation and that is the main goal. The content and the exchange with all members of all universities and I think this can be interpreted as the idea of intercultural competence of our university and the FORTHEM Alliance," (I4).

In reaction to that, we find many of the core mission goals reflected in the key aspects of intercultural competence for staff and students within the Alliance interpreted by all interviewees. Most notably, universities highlight the increased opportunities for **intercultural communication provided through international collaborations**:

> I really think that they (staff) keep joining in and experiencing the working with people from at least 9 different cultures and nationalities so I see so much learning from both our employees and staff. And from students (...) engaging and spending their time with

people from other cultures. I think there's a lot of learning just by doing and experiencing. (I1)

International collaborations also help to reduce anxiety from intercultural communication which might be present for staff and students exposed to a bigger international environment for the first time (Jacobi, 2020).

> The intercultural competence within this university alliance's goal is mainly to bring international collaboration (...) to everybody's daily life (...). The goal is to change maybe the mindset of students and staff members a little bit so that I might have a colleague not in my university but in another university who I work very closely with and it's easier or more common for me to contact the colleague in another university for this specific area. There are cultural differences not only cultural in terms of national differences in culture in that sense but also in organisations so that different universities work differently. (I2)

The positive impact of the FORTHEM collaboration on intercultural communication can be also seen through various mobility programs which will be discussed later in this chapter in more detail.

> (For staff) the really highly increased exposure to intercultural communication, I'm talking about team meetings with FORTHEM colleagues (...). FORTHEM has increased, for the students, the opportunities to be involved in activities with other FORTHEM universities (such as) short-term mobilities but also semester-long mobilities and virtual mobilities. (...) if you are a student who would really be interested in collaborating with students from other countries to make a project in a civic engagement, FORTHEM has provided some modest funding. I can imagine that the discussions when you plan a negotiation then the implementation of a joint civic engagement project from students from other FORTHEM universities is very good from the point of view of developing your intercultural communication skill. (I3)

International experiences are offered to a broader audience exceeding faculty development which allows involvement of multiple university levels of staff to participate and gain practical skill for intercultural communication.

> We offer a lot of international programs concerning the studies and concerning the staff. For example, if you are working as a secretary, you can go abroad and get some linguistic or some cultural competences in our partner universities. (...) we try to intensify the international content (by) some links together for the special 9 universities. (I4)

Furthermore, while looking at the university's policies and practices directly linked to specific missions for the FORTHEM Alliance, we find multiple direct links described by the interviewees. In addition to previously mentioned intercultural communication skills:

The Skills and Competences Mission (mentions) that we need to allow our students to develop their so-called 21st century skills which I think are very clearly connected to intercultural communication skills. If we talk about adaptability or possibility, the skills to react to new situations in a flexible way and be open minded, then I think we are talking basically also about intercultural communication skills. (I3)

We also find a direct link to a term **global mindset** which integrates the ability to understand and navigate the complexities of various cultural and strategic landscapes, both globally and locally. It equips individuals and organisations to effectively manage geographically dispersed operations despite these diverse environments (Torkkeli et al., 2018):

In the context of the alliance it (university's global mindset) is very much in line with the Service to Society Mission (...) this idea is about developing our regions in order to kind of solve some of the sustainable development goals and the world's large challenges. (I1)

The interviewed universities view global competence as crucial for tackling global challenges. They also aim to develop not only the skills of intercultural communication but also the values and responsibilities associated with global engagement.

We mentioned (...) in the European Campus Mission that our goal is to enable students to become active and responsible global citizens. I don't think you can't be a global citizen and responsible and active, if you have no global competence. (I3)

The analysis of this chapter revealed that the alliance's initiatives develop the skills and perspectives necessary for successful intercultural interaction. The FORTHEM Alliance's core missions promote intellectual exchange, open dialogue, and intercultural understanding through various means. Student mobility programs, online collaboration opportunities, and a focus on promoting a European identity all contribute to this goal. The alliance also emphasises developing future-oriented skills, critical thinking, and adaptability – all crucial for effective intercultural interactions. Furthermore, cross-border collaboration, knowledge exchange, and collaborative problem-solving with diverse stakeholders create an environment for intercultural understanding among researchers and students. The alliance's efforts extend beyond the university walls, as it bridges the gap between universities and communities.

This focus on community engagement contributes to intercultural education and the development of a more inclusive society.

While the term "intercultural competence" isn't directly mentioned in FORTHEM's strategic documents, interviewees acknowledged the alliance's initiatives as promoting its development. Increased opportunities for intercultural communication are provided through team meetings with FORTHEM colleagues, mobility programs that expose students to diverse academic and cultural environments, and even civic engagement projects that require collaboration with international partners.

The alliance's international programs extend beyond faculty development, offer opportunities for staff at all levels to gain practical intercultural communication skills. The focus on "global mindset" further corresponds with the goals of intercultural competence, promoting the ability to navigate the complex cultural environments essential in a globalised world. Universities within the alliance view global competence as essential for responsible global citizenship, encompassing not only communication skills but also the values and responsibilities associated with global engagement.

5.1.1   University alignments

Looking at each university separately, their policies and practices in relation to IC highlights multiple direct links to the goals:

The University of Jyväskylä (JYU), a prestigious public multidisciplinary university with six faculties, also houses four independent institutes, including the Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication (Movi). Movi plays a crucial role in promoting internationalisation by **supporting multilingual communication skills** among students and staff, promoting international collaboration, and implementing the **university's language policy** (University of Jyväskylä, 2015). JYU's diverse community is exemplified by its significant international presence (12% of employees are from 64 nationalities), with over 14,000 students, including approximately 4% international students (University of Jyväskylä, 2021). The University of Jyväskylä has established

internationalisation and intercultural competence as central values within its academic identity. JYU's language policy reflects the institution's multilingual and multicultural composition. It acknowledges the university's Finnish heritage while also recognizing the growing diversity of its student body and staff. It establishes Finnish as the primary language of instruction and administration while simultaneously promoting English-medium education and encouraging the use of other languages relevant to different academic disciplines (University of Jyväskylä, 2015). The encouragement of the use of other languages has been fully supported by all FORTHEM members who see the use other languages than English as a true concept of multilingual communication:

> (...) especially in Finland, it's quite evident that we just use English and that's it. But when working in this alliance it came to my mind that okay maybe assuming that everybody would know English is actually kind of a boundary for many people that maybe no English is not my language, I can speak other languages than English. In that sense we only have a selection of people participating if we only use English. I think we should pay more attention to that. (I2)

Multilingualism for the University of Jyväskylä is not just about learning multiple languages. It prioritises communication skills and the ability to interact effectively, even with limited language proficiency.

> I remember sitting in many meetings when we made a really strong point as Jyväskylä, that multilingualism doesn't mean that you learn dozens of languages, that's not how we see it in Jyväskylä. It is also about communication skills. It means interaction skills. It means that you will use every bit of language skills that you have even if you have very restricted language skills in a certain language. (...) It is a very strong communicative focus and flexible dynamic use of your language skills in all the repertoire that you have. I would say that we really made a multilingual language policy. I think it shows in the actual text of our very first FORTHEM application. (I3)

Beyond language, JYU's strategic vision aims to equip its graduates with the **skills and perspectives necessary in today's globalised world**. This translates into multidisciplinary programs, integrated international offerings, and strong partnerships with local, national, and international institutions (University of Jyväskylä, 2019):

> We are really requiring all the fields and all the programs to make it possible for the students to get involved internationally either here at the home campus in

internationalisation at home or even perhaps preferably taking advantage of the mobility opportunities that we offer. I would say that that is a very strong initiative in favour of students' intercultural competence development, a very strong statement. (I3)

The interviewees acknowledge a need for better support in helping international students connect with the local community. JYU could do more to encourage international students to consider staying and building a future in the country after their studies. This could involve career guidance or internship opportunities that leverage their intercultural skills:

I think we should be able to do more to offer our international students, who come (...) to study here, to support them in finding kind of connections with the local society and maybe to learn also the local language a little bit more and create those connections for them to find the possibilities in our country if they so wish. But of course as such already the international programmes already develop intercultural competence in many ways because you work in an intercultural group and these kinds of things are there all the time in your daily life. (I2)

The University of Agder (UiA) is a public university that encompasses six academic faculties (University of Agder, 2024). The central pillar of UiA's **institutional strategy** prioritises encouraging a **global mindset** within its diverse and inclusive academic community. With the focus on boosting visibility and attractiveness, UiA actively works to enhance its visibility and appeal to international partners, students, and researchers by increasing collaboration and exchange possibilities. By recognising the growing interconnectedness of our world, UiA equips graduates with the necessary knowledge, skills, and intercultural competencies to grow in the globalised landscape. UiA also integrates international and intercultural perspectives into its research and teaching practices (University of Agder, 2021). UiA translates its commitment to internationalisation into a comprehensive set of strategic initiatives. The university actively develops partnerships and collaborations with diverse institutions worldwide to create useful research collaborations and enable the development of **joint educational opportunities**. UiA prioritises **promoting student and staff mobility** through various initiatives, such as exchange programs, internships, and even **virtual exchange opportunities** which provide invaluable experiences for both students and staff. Additionally,

UiA aims to increase the number of outgoing and incoming students and staff, expanding the university's global reach and further supporting its diverse community. The University of Agder integrates **international perspectives into its curriculum**, offering courses taught in English to support global learning experiences for its students. UiA recognises the importance of attracting and retaining highly skilled **international students** and staff. To achieve this, the university creates a welcoming and inclusive **community** for all individuals, regardless of their origin implemented in their institutional strategy (University of Agder, 2022):

> (...) we have a global development studies program and we have a European studies program and those are, I would say, especially good at integrating international perspectives into the study programs. (...) it's also a part of our internationalisation action plan to integrate more global perspectives into the study programs in the South. (I1)

UiA also aims to deepen partnerships and collaborations with institutions in developing regions, such as the Global South. Through these collaborations, UiA seeks to facilitate knowledge exchange and contribute to development efforts in the Global South, creating mutually beneficial partnerships and contributing to global progress:

> I don't see any real contradiction in Alliance's goals and global goals that way but what we try to do is share information in these projects (so) most of our researchers who are internationally engaged in Europe are also engaged in the world. (I1)

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU) creates a vast community where over 35,000 individuals from more than 120 nations collaborate in a spirit of academic exploration. Its interdisciplinary approach allows students, researchers, and faculty to engage in diverse academic and artistic opportunities, supporting collaborative projects and stimulating dialogue between different fields (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, 2024). JGU promotes interconnectivity and collaboration through its extensive network of over 500 global partnerships with universities across various continents. This network, built on the "bottom-up" principle, **empowers individual faculty and departments to build connections** and establish collaborative research and educational initiatives. This collaborative spirit extends beyond academia, with

partnerships involving cultural institutions and industry leaders (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, 2023):

> We have, not a FORTHEM study programme, but we have the transnational studies (...). They have a programme, for example, which concerns four universities in Europe. So the students in their masters have to spend one semester in each allied university. (I4)

To demonstrate its commitment to internationalisation, JGU actively **supports student and staff mobility** through various initiatives. The university facilitates participation in international exchange programs, allowing students to gain invaluable academic and cultural experiences firsthand. JGU offers doctoral students unique opportunities to pursue **joint doctoral degrees**, known as Cotutelle programs, in collaboration with esteemed international partner universities. JGU also recognises the importance of effective communication and cultural understanding across diverse communities. Therefore, the university **prioritises language learning and intercultural training for both staff and students**, equipping them with the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of the increasingly interconnected world (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, 2014). The university further strengthens its commitment to internationalisation and intercultural competence through a trio of unique features. The Faculty of Translation Studies, Linguistics, and Cultural Studies offers programs in translation and interpretation. This faculty doubles as a **research centre** dedicated to the study **of interculturality**. Additionally, the Center for Intercultural Studies promotes academic dialogue and research within the university, encouraging a deeper **understanding of different cultures** and enabling **communication across diverse communities**. Finally, the International Preparatory and Language Center (ISKK) plays a crucial role by equipping students with the necessary **language skills, preparatory programs, and intercultural training** to prepare them for the international academic environment.

> I think translatology has a new role even in language teaching because before as was always ignored, (...) now it's changing from mother tongue to the target law language or vice versa. Naturally they have interpreters for Brussels and whatever else employability goals, (...) and they can give an intercultural competence training. (I4)

This chapter examined the specific approaches of the University of Jyväskylä (JYU), the University of Agder (UiA), and Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU) in promoting intercultural competence (IC) within the FORTHEM Alliance. The analysis revealed that each university implements various strategies aligned with its development.

JYU prioritises communication skills and interaction over simply acquiring multiple languages. Their language policy encourages a flexible dynamic use of existing language skills, promoting inclusivity in multilingual environments. The Centre for Multilingual Academic Communication (Movi) supports JYU's internationalisation efforts by supporting multilingual communication among students and staff. JYU's international programs and diverse student body provide rich opportunities for intercultural interaction and competency development.

UiA's strategy emphasises on a global mindset within its diverse academic community. The university actively develops partnerships with international institutions, promoting student and staff mobility, and integrating global perspectives into its curriculum. UiA seeks to attract international students and staff by creating a welcoming and inclusive environment. Partnerships with institutions in developing regions showcase UiA's commitment to knowledge exchange and global progress.

JGU takes a multifaceted approach to IC development. It creates a vibrant international community with over 120 nationalities represented. The university's extensive network of global partnerships supports interconnectivity and collaboration. JGU actively supports student and staff mobility through exchange programs and joint doctoral degrees. JGU offers language learning and intercultural training programs to equip students and staff with necessary communication and cultural understanding skills. The Faculty of Translation Studies, Linguistics, and Cultural Studies, the Center for Intercultural Studies, and the International Preparatory and Language Center (ISKK) all contribute significantly to JGU's strong focus on IC development.

This analysis examined that all three universities within the FORTHEM Alliance, despite their unique approaches, contribute to the development of

intercultural competence among students and staff. By promoting multilingual communication, global mindsets, collaboration, intercultural training, and inclusive environments, these universities prepare their graduates to success in today's interconnected world.

5.2 University Contributions to FORTHEM Goals

Looking at specific contributions which each member university of FORTHEM makes towards the alliance's goals concerning intercultural competence, considering their individual policies and practices, creates a diverse sample. Each institution has a unique geographical location, cultural context, and institutional profile. Examining the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, a nation known for its strong educational system and international focus, offers a valuable perspective on how Nordic universities develop intercultural competence (Sarja & Rinne, 2018). Similarly, Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany, situated within a region rich in history and culture, provides insights into how universities in historically significant areas promote intercultural competence within their institutions (Engels, 2017). Finally, the University of Agder in Norway, a country known for its emphasis on social equity and inclusion, allows us to understand how Scandinavian universities implement intercultural competence strategies through its approach (Björklund & Mikkelsen, 2022).

Universities involved in this research mention the importance of training courses. In most cases, it translates into **language courses** offered to incoming international students: "We (at JGU) have a lot of offers concerning learning languages. But learning languages is one of the first steps in achieving intercultural competence. We have, for example, our ISSK that's a centre where you can study a lot of foreign languages. They also offer courses for the incoming students to improve their language," (I4). Some are also focusing on outgoing mobility students. Sometimes the quality of integration abroad for new students is not equate and the sending university could improve their efforts in intercultural competence preparedness of their students:

> I think we (at JGU) have no special offers or maybe really a few for outgoing students. Because normally if they start a summer school in another country, they already know the language or they have to do it in the hosting university. We do have language offers but for that you have to be present at the university when it's offered. This is for all incoming students, not just FORTHEM. (I4)

However, these courses do not serve only as a preparatory vocabulary set for the desired country. We also see the importance of **cultural training** connected to language training to prepare future mobility students in their new environments.

> Yes, so we (at UiA) have a few different types of intercultural training courses. First there's one for the international students when they arrive here, a very kind of short course to get them integrated and then we have an intercultural training for outgoing students. So for the students who go to Europe and to English speaking countries there is a relatively short kind of preparatory program and then we also try to use some of the FORTHEM intercultural communication seminars. We do a special series of workshops for students who are going to Africa or Indonesia where they are going to be in practical training. (I1)

To even more highlight the importance of intercultural competence learning in modern education, this module needs to be also **recognised in curricula** of students involved in FORTHEM. In most of the Europe, ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) is used to evaluate students **academic career** and as that also intercultural competence should be recognised:

> The intercultural competence as such is already an academic competence for students and that should be recognised in the degrees or in careers as a university employer. (...) for us this is the idea that the students would get not only nice experience and connections and all that but that it should be also recognized as ECTS credits in their degree. (I2)

This could also increase the **attractiveness of activities offered by the Alliance** and make their efforts more visible and feasible: "(...) students could kind of include everything that they do within this alliance to their degrees. So we could recognise the activities for the students ECTS credits in their degrees so that it is there in their curriculum," (I2).

International mobility as a whole is a significant part of internationalisation abroad and as that also provides students and staff with

intercultural competence development. One of the benefits, as described by the member universities, can be the practical aspect of this practice:

> I mean very much learning by doing. I see how some of our teachers would start with a few teaching where they got students from Norway, in the classrooms were students from Finland and just by getting to know each other, they asked each other questions and they were very active (...). I think that is a good and safe environment for this kind of exchange. They learn quite a bit about their own countries in their own context. (I1)

Physical mobility also offers **direct recognition** for parties involved. The importance of FORTHEM mobilities and especially their recognition is further highlighted by the financial aspect which offers more resources for the FORTHEM Alliance to develop their programs:

> When we are a partner in this alliance, we not only want this to be shown as ECTS credits to our students but also to the students from Alliance universities who come to our university and so that we could actually kind of give them official ECTS credits. This is also in our interests of course because the money for the universities comes from the ECTS credits and not from just a nice exchange between people but we need to be able to record the things in ECTS credits. Of course this is easy for us when they come physically here (...). (I2)

Mobilities goes also beyond students and the FORTHEM Alliance makes an effort to provide possibilities also for **staff mobility**. This practice further develop the intercultural competence of academic staff which should align with the needs of students becoming more international during their studies:

> I see that the international staff mobility and the internationalisation of students go hand-in-hand. If our staff (...) is truly international they take part in international mobility themselves. So it's more powerful if the academics say to their students and encourage their students to consider certain parts of university mobility. (I3)

Looking at the big variety of mobility programs offered by the FORTHEM Alliance, each studied university showcased their direct involvement. The impact of mobilities is enormous and includes also **development of skills and competences for employability**:

> We offer summer school, especially for FORTHEM. Our (doctoral) degrees are great because two researchers from two universities work together, in the context of FORTHEM and in other contexts. And these people learn directly about research management in two countries that is absolutely important to have success in two countries for a future career. I think our (doctoral) degrees are really great and exchange programmes have the same effect on a lower level. (I4)

Member universities of the FORTHEM Alliance actively increase their intercultural collaboration efforts. This does not only concern countries from the EU but also their **connections with countries outside of the European Union**. While intercultural dialogue outside of Europe is not directly mentioned in the goals of FORTHEM, all interviewees recognise its importance in developing intercultural competence and understanding the European Union's values:

> I think all development is all connected and the world is so connected so I don't see any real contradiction in alliance goals and global goals that way (...) Most of our researchers who are internationally engaged in Europe are also engaged in the world. (I1)

There is a strong emphasis for dialogue and understanding with non-EU countries, students, and citizens:

> (...) we cannot be in the European Union bubble where we share our European values and then we have no dialogue with those (outside EU) countries, not with colleagues or students or citizens who are not convinced by the European Union values. I think we need a dialogue. (...) I would say that the strategy or policy that we currently have is actually a good thing from the point of view of the alliance because we state in our vision that we want to enforce the European values. (I3)

Moreover, while acknowledging the importance of promoting European values, there is a concern about potentially limiting students' exposure to diverse perspectives. The member universities advocate for a broader view that incorporates global cultures and ways of thinking. This global approach is further supported not only by member universities of the FORTHEM Alliance. Recently, a vision statement supporting the role of European alliances in international cooperation has been discussed in an online conference organised by the Ulysseus European University (Ulysseus, 2024).

> I think that if we truly want in FORTHEM to foster intercultural dialogue and understanding, if we truly want to train our students to become global responsible citizens, we cannot do it in a bubble. (...) You need to be aware of other global cultures and the ways of thinking of people from other sides of the globe. (...) It's really dangerous if we educate our students to just look at the European values (in) European cultures. (I3)

However, its implementation to the FORTHEM goals in the near future might not be possible as we will talk about the current weak points of each member university in alignment with the FORTHEM intercultural competence goals in the next paragraph:

> To be honest, I've never tried to connect FORTHEM with the international context I already have concerning other continents. Maybe I can open the next chapter when I'm talking to outside of EU collaborations. That is merely possible. But I think the FORTHEM ship is too large to organise it really well. (I4)

This chapter examined the diverse approaches of the FORTHEM Alliance member universities (University of Jyväskylä, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, and University of Agder) towards promoting intercultural competence (IC) among students and staff.

The analysis revealed a strong commitment from all three universities to develop IC. This commitment is evident in their strategies, which include language and cultural training programs for both incoming and outgoing students. The University of Agder provides an example of adjusting these programs to specific destinations, ensuring students are well-prepared for their unique experiences. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the call for integrating IC development directly into the curriculum. Formal recognition through the ECTS credit system could incentivise student participation and solidify the importance of IC within the academic experience.

International mobility programs, both physical and virtual, emerged as another crucial element in promoting IC. These programs provide students and staff with invaluable opportunities for practical application of their intercultural skills. The importance of staff mobility was also emphasised, as faculty who have themselves experienced intercultural exchange are better equipped to guide students on their own journeys.

However, the chapter also suggests areas where the FORTHEM Alliance could strengthen its approach to IC development. One key area is broadening the alliance's perspective beyond promoting European values. The interviewees stressed the importance of promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding with countries outside the EU. Educating students to be "global responsible citizens" requires exposure to a wider range of cultures and ways of thinking. This corresponds well with recent discussions on the role of European alliances in promoting international cooperation beyond the continent.

Finally, the chapter acknowledges some challenges that the FORTHEM Alliance needs to consider. While some interviewees expressed interest in expanding beyond EU partnerships, some concerns exist about the feasibility of integrating these activities within the current alliance structure. Additionally, while universities recognise the importance of IC, a more formalised approach to integrating it into curriculum and recognising its value in student achievement may be needed.

5.2.1 Improvements and future directions

There are certain areas, mentioned by the interviewees, where the contributions to the FORTHEM Alliance goals to intercultural competence could be further strengthened. With the ever developing initiative as the European University Initiative, this might set a course to new directions for the future development of this alliance. Frequently mentioned topic was the **involvement of staff in FORTHEM opportunities**. As described by the interviewees this area, while deemed successful and important, might need further planning and improvements. Universities showed interest in involving various members of the institution, not only the one already working with FORTHEM due to its topic coloration or mutual interests but also other employees who could further benefit from international connections:

> (…) the involvement of our staff members even more to all of this so that we could have with this development of intercultural competence in only in us who are international coordinators or people whose work is international already, but so that we could find ways for our staff members to collaborate with their colleagues in this alliance universities. (I2)

However, this need involves another possible weakness in the current state which is a preparatory plan for the newly involved:

> We could have given them (employees who participate in FORTHEM) some sort of crash course in what to expect, instead we throw them in there and let them and talk about it afterwards. So we definitely could do more preparatory courses for employees and also for students. (I1)

Furthermore, the members find difficulties in the staff recognition in their academic careers which would further strengthen the benefits of

involvement in the FORTHEM Alliance, beyond the gained intercultural competence skills for personal development:

> (...) It's been really difficult sometimes to interest our academic staff members to get involved in FORTHEM because there's no incentive. If you are really ambitious thinking about an academic career in the university, the requirements a person is being evaluated are peer-reviewed international publications, research projects, supervision of doctoral students but teaching visits abroad - no, being involved in an educational collaboration - no. It's not our problem, this is a national issue but still I think we should be bold enough to say in this university we are going to count also these important examples of a person getting involved in educational cooperation with international colleagues. (I3)

Integrating international students to the local society is not always as smooth as it should be, and offering English courses to all students does not always bridge the gap. The universities seek more direct approach to raise the awareness of interculturality on campuses:

> (...) we have a large number of international students that come into those (courses offered in English) courses, they (international students) always pretty much say they don't have contact with local students. I would really like to do an intercultural communication meeting at the start of the semester for these local students to give them some more confidence so they can welcome the international students in a better way. (I1)

When talking about internationalisation at home, one of the newly booming concepts is **virtual mobility**. In the area of higher education, virtual mobility promotes information and communication technologies (ICT) to create international and collaborative exchanges between universities. These exchanges, which can be academic, cultural, or experiential, are organised entirely online and eliminate the need for physical travel (European Commission, 2018). While its organisation seems beneficial, its practical implementation, especially the **recognition** is unclear. Partially due to different policies on national level of each member university:

> Where we have faced challenges is the online participation of the students who don't come physically to our campus but who would like to study an online course, for example, or who would like to join a course that we offer and then there would be students from other alliance universities who would like to join online. In principle it's possible and we would love to have them but then when we come to the practical details of how we actually, what is the study right that we are giving to this student and how we actually give them ECTS credits for this participation, there we face a lot of challenges

still. (...) it would be easier for our university to offer online courses for our partner university students so that they don't necessarily have to come here and to study for the whole semester or for an intensive course but so that they could also study online. (I2)

Lastly, the interviewees raised the awareness of **financial limitations** related to FORTHEM organisation. While the biggest sponsorship comes from the European Commission (Funding for European Universities Alliances, 2021), it is deemed to be rather difficult to implement in practical programs. Furthermore, some universities find little to no support from its national government which would further strengthen the implementation of the FORTHEM Alliance goals:

> For many years now the university has not defined any concrete quantitative objectives for student mobility. (...) There are no financial incentives for universities to increase their student exchange for example. (...) Somehow they (government) are assuming that it is also so deeply already integrated in the everyday practices of the universities that you don't need to mention it anywhere and you don't need to put any money into it. (I3)

The interviewees express concern about the perceived lack of financial support from FORTHEM, which could interfere with their commitment to the alliance's goals, particularly in developing research related to intercultural competence. This suggests that the current funding structure might not sufficiently incentivise universities to invest heavily in FORTHEM initiatives, especially those with higher resource demands like research projects. This also creates a potential prioritisation of teaching activities like summer schools which require less financial investment over research collaboration due to funding limitations:

> One moment we had no support so why should we get a lot of effort in the FORTHEM Alliance when we get money in another context. (...) In FORTHEM it's so complicated. (...) We have to get money otherwise we have a lower number of students and for this we have to offer better programs. For better programs you need money. And if you don't get money from FORTHEM, what will you do? (...) if we want to develop intercultural competence we have to develop research and teaching. Teaching is not so difficult because students can come in the summer school (...) but the research needs also to be supported. (I4)

This chapter explored opportunities to further strengthen the FORTHEM Alliance's efforts in promoting intercultural competence among its members. The analysis identified several key areas for improvement.

While staff involvement in FORTHEM activities is recognised as valuable, universities want to extend participation beyond those already involved due to specific interests or existing international connections. To achieve this, the alliance could develop a comprehensive staff development program that equips staff members with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective intercultural collaboration within FORTHEM initiatives. Additionally, the chapter highlighted the need for preparatory training for newly involved staff to ensure they are equipped to collaborate effectively. Furthermore, a lack of formal recognition for staff participation in FORTHEM activities within university promotion and career advancement systems was identified as a potential disincentive. The alliance could advocate for the recognition of these contributions within member universities to incentivise broader staff participation.

The chapter highlighted the need for strategies that go beyond English language courses to facilitate deeper intercultural interactions between international and local students. The development of campus-wide intercultural awareness programs was suggested as a way to promote inclusivity and support international students. These programs could involve workshops, cultural events, and peer mentoring initiatives that create opportunities for students to learn from and interact with each other's cultures.

The unclear recognition and awarding of ECTS credits for participation in online courses offered through virtual mobility programs showed as a challenge. Additionally, there was an emphasis on the need for clearer procedures and regulations regarding online student participation in courses across member universities. To address these issues, the alliance could collaborate on the development of clear guidelines and procedures for online student participation and credit recognition within virtual mobility programs. This would ensure consistency and transparency across member universities

and incentivise student participation in these valuable online exchange opportunities.

Concerns were raised regarding the adequacy of current FORTHEM funding mechanisms, particularly regarding support for research initiatives focused on IC development. Additionally, the lack of financial support from some national governments for universities' participation in the FORTHEM Alliance was identified as a potential barrier to achieving its goals. By securing more robust funding structures, the alliance can ensure it has the resources necessary to support a wider range of impactful initiatives focused on IC development.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The FORTHEM Alliance, as a unique collaboration of European universities, presents a valuable case study for exploring strategies to promote intercultural competence. Given the alliance's focus on promoting cross-cultural exchange and collaboration, understanding its approaches can display important insights for other higher education institutions.

To address the research question of how the FORTHEM Alliance promotes intercultural competence, a comprehensive analysis of the strategies employed by its member universities was conducted. Through document analysis, case-study analysis and semi-structured interviews, information on understanding universities' perspective on FORTHEM Alliance goals, universities' practices and policies in relation to IC, alignment between universities' practices and FORTHEM goals and universities' unique approaches to mobilities were gathered. This analysis allowed it to identify key themes in the approaches adopted by these universities.

In order to answer the main research question following in this study: *How are the universities involved in the FORTHEM Alliance promoting intercultural competence through their participation in the European University Initiative?* Two sub-research questions have been created to examine the approaches of member universities of the FORTEHM Alliance. In this chapter, we look at the findings of both sub-research questions together in order to answer the main research question as a whole. After that, there will be recommendations for future research, followed by limitations of the research and an overall conclusion of this whole research.

6.1 How are the universities involved in the FORTHEM Alliance promoting intercultural competence through their participation in the European University Initiative?

The following mind map provides a small summary of the main points discussed in the next chapter:

Table 3

Mind Map

Alignment between FORTHEM Alliance goals and member university practices in promoting intercultural competence		
Strong Alignment	**University Practices**	**Areas for Improvement**
Aligned core missions (intellectual exchange, open dialogue, intercultural understanding)	Opportunities for intercultural communication (team meetings, mobility, civic engagement)	Expand collaborations with non-EU universities
Initiatives support intercultural competence (student mobility, online collaboration, European identity)	Multilingual communication and inclusivity (JYU language policy, Movi centre)	Develop comprehensive staff development programs
Emphasis on future-oriented skills, critical thinking, adaptability	Comprehensive approach (JGU: international community, partnerships, mobility, language learning, training)	Create campus-wide intercultural awareness programs
Cross-border collaboration, knowledge exchange, collaborative problem-solving	Global mindset (UiA)	Address recognition of ECTS credits and procedures
Community engagement		Explore alternative funding models and advocate for increased support

The analysis of the findings reveals a strong connection between the FORTHEM Alliance's goals and the institutional policies and practices of its member universities regarding intercultural competence. The alliance's core missions emphasise intellectual exchange, open dialogue, and intercultural understanding (FORTHEM Strategy, Cooperation & Engagement., 2020). These goals are achieved through various initiatives such as student mobility programs, online collaboration opportunities, and a focus on promoting a European identity. All these initiatives create opportunities for interaction with diverse perspectives which is a key component of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2009).

Furthermore, the alliance emphasises developing future-oriented skills, critical thinking, and adaptability – all crucial for effective intercultural interactions (Coperías Aguilar, 2009). The findings highlight that the alliance's efforts target these areas, further aligning with the development of intercultural competence. The alliance also promotes intercultural understanding by creating an environment for cross-border collaboration, knowledge exchange, and collaborative problem-solving with diverse stakeholders, following both researchers and students. Additionally, the alliance's efforts extend beyond the university borders by bridging the gap between universities and communities. This focus on community engagement encourages intercultural education and contributes to the development of a more inclusive society, again corresponding with the broader goals of intercultural competence (Holmes et al., 2015).

Interestingly, while the term "intercultural competence" isn't directly mentioned in FORTHEM's strategic documents, interviewees acknowledged the alliance's initiatives as supporting its development. This is further supported by the universities' practices. All three universities analysed (Jyväskylä, Agder, Mainz) provide increased opportunities for intercultural communication through team meetings, mobility programs, and civic engagement projects with international partners. These initiatives directly address the development of intercultural communication skills (Jacobi, 2020).

The focus on multilingual communication and inclusivity, evident in JYU's language policy and Movi centre, aligns with the goals of intercultural

competence. A flexible and inclusive approach to multilingual communication ensures effective interaction in diverse settings. Similarly, UiA's emphasis on a global mindset within its academic community aligns with promoting intercultural competence. By integrating global perspectives into the curriculum, actively seeking international students and staff, and partnering with institutions in developing regions, UiA creates an environment that encourages navigating complex cultural environments, which is a core aspect of intercultural competence. JGU's multi-layered approach provides the most comprehensive example of aligning practices with intercultural competence development. JGU promotes an active international community, extensive partnerships, student/staff mobility, language learning, and intercultural training programs. All these contribute to intercultural competence development by creating a supportive environment for intercultural interaction, equipping students and staff with necessary communication and cultural understanding skills, and providing opportunities to practise these skills in diverse settings.

There is a strong alignment between FORTHEM Alliance's goals and member universities' practices regarding intercultural competence development. Even though the alliance doesn't explicitly use the term, the initiatives and practices implemented by the member universities directly develop the skills and perspectives associated with intercultural competence. This alignment holds great potential to benefit students, researchers, and the broader community by preparing them to navigate and succeed in today's interconnected world.

Looking at the analysis of the FORTHEM Alliance's approach to intercultural competence (IC), it reveals a strong base built on the member universities' commitment. All three universities – Jyväskylä, Mainz, and Agder – demonstrate a clear focus on promoting IC through initiatives like language and cultural training programs, encouragement for integrating IC development into the curriculum, and a strong emphasis on international mobility programs (both physical and virtual). The University of Agder's practice of preparing

programs to specific destinations showcases a valuable approach that could be explored further within the alliance.

However, the analysis also identifies areas for improvement. One key area is expanding the alliance's perspective beyond promoting solely European values. Expanding collaborations with universities outside the EU would expose students to a wider range of cultures and prepare them to be "globally responsible citizens," as highlighted in the chapter.

Another crucial aspect is strengthening staff involvement. The current focus seems to be on staff with existing international connections. To expand participation, the alliance could develop a comprehensive staff development program that equips staff members with the necessary skills and knowledge for effective intercultural collaboration within FORTHEM initiatives. Additionally, offering preparatory training for newly involved staff and advocating for recognition of staff participation within university promotion and career advancement systems would support broader engagement.

The findings also highlight the need for strategies that go beyond language courses to facilitate deeper intercultural interactions among students. The development of campus-wide intercultural awareness programs, including workshops, cultural events, and peer mentoring initiatives, could be a powerful tool for promoting inclusivity and supporting international students.

Addressing challenges in virtual mobility programs is another important step. The lack of clear recognition and awarding of ECTS credits for online courses, along with the need for clearer procedures for online student participation, interferes with the effectiveness of these valuable programs. By collaborating on the development of clear guidelines and procedures for online student participation and credit recognition, the alliance can ensure consistency and transparency across member universities, thereby rewarding student participation in these exchange opportunities.

Finally, securing more robust funding structures is critical. Concerns exist about limited research funding for IC development and the lack of financial support from some national governments. Exploring alternative funding models like internal grant opportunities or cost-sharing mechanisms

for IC research projects could be a promising solution. Additionally, the alliance could advocate for increased financial support from national governments to further its goals.

The FORTHEM Alliance can significantly enhance its efforts in encouraging intercultural competence among its student and staff population, mainly by building on the existing strengths of its member universities and addressing the identified challenges through strategic initiatives. In today's interconnected world, these efforts are crucial for preparing future generations to navigate diverse environments, collaborate effectively across cultures, and contribute to a more inclusive global society.

6.2   Recommendations for future research

This research exposes both the strengths and areas for improvement in the FORTHEM Alliance's approach to intercultural competence. While the alliance's core mission and initiatives offered by member universities provide a strong foundation, there's room for further development.

One key area for future research is to assess the long-term impact of these initiatives. Studies could research surveys, interviews, and case studies to understand how participation translates into real-world skills and behaviours. This would allow the alliance to refine its programs and measure their effectiveness in promoting intercultural competence among students and staff.

Another rich area for research would be exploring the potential of global collaboration. Currently, the focus leans towards European institutions. Possible research could analyse the effectiveness of existing partnerships with universities outside the EU and their contribution to intercultural competence development. Additionally, exploring potential benefits and challenges of establishing new partnerships with institutions in diverse geographical regions would provide valuable insights for expanding the alliance's reach and impact.

Staff development is another crucial area for improvement. Currently, the focus seems to be on staff with existing international connections. Future research could focus on comparative analysis of existing staff development

programs in similar alliances or the evaluation of the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches for intercultural competence development.

Beyond staff development, exploring case studies of successful campus-wide intercultural awareness programs is another research area worth investigating. These programs could extend beyond language courses and encompass workshops, cultural events, peer mentoring initiatives, and international student support services. This comprehensive approach would create a more inclusive environment and provide ongoing opportunities for intercultural learning and interaction for the entire university community.

Virtual mobility programs hold great promise, but require addressing some challenges. Collaboration on development of best practices for online student assessment and evaluation across member universities is essential. This would incentivise student participation and ensure a consistent and transparent experience for all involved.

Finally, securing more robust funding structures is critical. Investigating the impact of internal and external funding on the sustainability and autonomy of the alliance, could be a promising research area.

6.3   Limitations

Given the extensive nature of this research and practical considerations, a small-scale study was used for this research. While not all member universities of the FORTHEM Alliance were included, three were selected, each with a varying number of respondents. Interviews were conducted with university staff from some institutions, but there was a notable absence of input from students or staff not directly involved in FORTHEM Alliance development.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the alliance, interviews were conducted with individuals holding diverse roles within the organisation. This approach allowed for a broader range of perspectives and experiences, ultimately contributing to a more complete narrative. However, it's important to mention that due to the limited sample size, there may be gaps in the story resulting from the inability to interview everyone involved.

The timeline for this research was extended due to challenges in communication with the selected respondents. These delays resulted in significant wait times between interviews, impacting the overall project timeline. Additionally, the online interview format presented some interpretive difficulties. Certain responses required further clarification to ensure they aligned with the research objectives.

6.4   Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate how universities within the FORTHEM Alliance promote intercultural competence (IC) through their participation in the European University Initiative. Given the increasing importance of IC in the globalised world and the EU's strong emphasis on internationalisation, this study sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of how such alliances can effectively promote intercultural skills among students and staff.

The findings reveal a strong alignment between the FORTHEM Alliance's goals and the practices of its member universities in promoting IC. While the term "intercultural competence" might not be directly mentioned in all strategic documents, the alliance's focus on intellectual exchange, open dialogue, and promoting a European identity directly contributes to the development of IC. Universities within the alliance have implemented various initiatives, such as student mobility programs, online collaboration opportunities, and language and cultural training, to enhance intercultural interaction and understanding.

While the FORTHEM Alliance has made significant progress in promoting intercultural competence (IC), the study identified areas for further improvement. Expanding global collaborations, enhancing staff involvement, and addressing challenges in virtual mobility programs are critical to maximising the alliance's potential. Additionally, implementing comprehensive campus-wide IC initiatives and securing more robust funding structures are essential for a holistic approach to IC development. The findings of this study have implications for both future research and practice.

In conclusion, the FORTHEM Alliance demonstrates a strong commitment to promoting intercultural competence. By building on existing strengths and addressing identified challenges, the alliance can significantly enhance its impact on students and staff, preparing them to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world. The findings of this research contribute to the growing knowledge-base on intercultural competence in higher education and provide valuable insights for policymakers, administrators, and educators involved in similar initiatives.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Semi-Structured Interview Guide - JGU

<u>Introduction statement:</u>

Thank you for joining the interview session today. The purpose of this interview is to gather qualitative data for a master's thesis titled "A Shared Vision: Examining the Contributions of FORTHEM Member Universities to Intercultural Competence Development." The interview is expected to take about 30 minutes to an hour. The details about this research process are described in the research notification provided to you in advance. You have also been provided a privacy notice which informs you about the processing of your personal data as part of the research. You are here because you have signed a consent form to participate in this research project. The interview will be audio-recorded, as described in the research notification, privacy notice, and consent form. If you have any questions regarding the research notification, the privacy notice, and the consent form, now is the time for you to ask the questions.

I would like to remind you that participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study, stop participating or cancel your previously given consent, without stating any reason for this and at any time during the study. This will have no negative consequences to you. If you stop participating in the study or if you cancel your consent, the personal data, samples and other information collected on you up to that point will be used as part of the research material as far as it is necessary in order to ensure relevant research outcomes.

You are not obliged to answer any question during the interview, but you may answer at your own free will. Your responses will be anonymized in the interview transcription stage. Please refrain from using any names during the discussions.

<u>Interview questions:</u>
1. In your opinion, what are the key aspects of intercultural competence (IC) development for students and staff within the Alliance?

2. How does JGU interpret the FORTHEM Alliance's goals related to intercultural competence (IC)?

3. How do JGU's internationalization efforts, with its three core pillars (research collaborations, equipping students, integrating intercultural perspectives), contribute to developing IC within the university?

4. JGU offers programs like Cotutelle degrees and exchange programs. How do these initiatives specifically equip students with the intercultural skills necessary for success in a globalized world?

5. JGU has unique features like The Faculty of Translation Studies and the Center for Intercultural Studies. Could you elaborate on how these contribute to JGU's alignment with the Alliance's goals for IC development?

6. Are there any areas where JGU's practices could be further strengthened to better align with the Alliance's vision for IC development?

7. How do JGU's initiatives, such as language learning and intercultural training for staff and students, contribute to developing intercultural competence within the university?

8. JGU offers preparatory programs for international students. How do these programs ensure a smooth transition and foster IC within the diverse student body?

9. In your view, how does JGU's "bottom-up" approach to partnerships with universities across various continents contribute to developing IC among students and faculty within the Alliance?

Appendix 2 Semi-Structured Interview Guide - JYU

Introduction statement:

Thank you for joining the interview session today. The purpose of this interview is to gather qualitative data for a master's thesis titled "A Shared Vision: Examining the Contributions of FORTHEM Member Universities to Intercultural Competence Development." The interview is expected to take about 30 minutes to an hour. The details about this research process are described in the research notification provided to you in advance. You have also been provided a privacy notice which informs you about the processing of your personal data as part of the research. You are here because you have signed a consent form to participate in this research project. The interview will be audio-recorded, as described in the research notification, privacy notice, and consent form. If you have any questions regarding the research notification, the privacy notice, and the consent form, now is the time for you to ask the questions.

I would like to remind you that participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study, stop participating or cancel your previously given consent, without stating any reason for this and at any time during the study. This will have no negative consequences to you. If you stop participating in the study or if you cancel your consent, the personal data, samples and other information collected on you up to that point will be used as part of the research material as far as it is necessary in order to ensure relevant research outcomes.

You are not obliged to answer any question during the interview, but you may answer at your own free will. Your responses will be anonymized in the interview transcription stage. Please refrain from using any names during the discussions.

Interview questions:
1. In your opinion, what are the key aspects of intercultural competence (IC) development for students and staff within the Alliance?

2. How does JYU interpret the FORTHEM Alliance's goals related to intercultural competence (IC)?

3. How does JYU's multilingual language policy contribute to fostering IC within the university community?

4. How do JYU's strategic educational initiatives, such as multidisciplinary programs and international partnerships, align with developing IC in graduates?

5. Could you provide examples of specific initiatives at JYU that demonstrate successful implementation of the Alliance's IC goals?

6. Are there any areas where JYU's practices could be further strengthened to better align with the Alliance's vision for IC development?

7. How does JYU's strategy of engaging with institutions in countries facing limitations on human rights and free expression contribute to developing IC?

8. Are there any challenges JYU faces in maintaining ethical and responsible engagement within these collaborations?

9. How does this approach support the overall goals of the FORTHEM Alliance in fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding?

Appendix 3 Semi-Structured Interview Guide - UiA

<u>Introduction statement:</u>

Thank you for joining the interview session today. The purpose of this interview is to gather qualitative data for a master's thesis titled "A Shared Vision: Examining the Contributions of FORTHEM Member Universities to Intercultural Competence Development." The interview is expected to take about 30 minutes to an hour. The details about this research process are described in the research notification provided to you in advance. You have also been provided a privacy notice which informs you about the processing of your personal data as part of the research. You are here because you have signed a consent form to participate in this research project. The interview will be audio-recorded, as described in the research notification, privacy notice, and consent form. If you have any questions regarding the research notification, the privacy notice, and the consent form, now is the time for you to ask the questions.

I would like to remind you that participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study, stop participating or cancel your previously given consent, without stating any reason for this and at any time during the study. This will have no negative consequences to you. If you stop participating in the study or if you cancel your consent, the personal data, samples and other information collected on you up to that point will be used as part of the research material as far as it is necessary in order to ensure relevant research outcomes.

You are not obliged to answer any question during the interview, but you may answer at your own free will. Your responses will be anonymized in the interview transcription stage. Please refrain from using any names during the discussions.

<u>Interview questions:</u>
1. In your opinion, what are the key aspects of intercultural competence (IC) development for students and staff within the Alliance?

2. How does UiA define "Global Mindset" in the context of the FORTHEM Alliance's goals related to intercultural competence (IC)?

3. How does UiA integrate international perspectives into its curriculum, and how does this contribute to equipping students with the necessary skills for success in a globalized world?

4. UiA offers preparatory courses and intercultural training for students. Can you describe how these programs specifically cultivate IC and prepare students for international experiences?

5. UiA prioritizes strengthening its focus on sustainability and deepening engagement with the Global South. How do these strategic directions potentially align with the Alliance's vision for IC development?

6. Are there any areas where UiA's efforts could be further enhanced to better align with the Alliance's goals for promoting IC?

7. How do UiA's various mobility programs, including exchange programs, internships, and virtual exchanges, contribute to developing IC among participants?

8. UiA aims to increase the number of incoming and outgoing students/staff. How does this strategy contribute to fostering a diverse and inclusive learning environment that promotes IC?

9. In your opinion, how does UiA's focus on fostering a "Global Mindset" contribute to developing IC among students and staff within the Alliance?

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

A Shared Vision: Examining the Contributions of FORTHEM Member Universities to Intercultural Competence Development

I understand that participation in the study is voluntary and that I can pause or stop taking part in the study at any time without giving any reason, and there will be no negative consequences for me. The data collected about me up to the point of pausing or stopping may still be used in the study.

Yes ☐

By giving my consent I accept that data and materials will be collected from me as described in the information sheet.

Yes ☐

By giving my consent to participate in this study, I consent to my interview responses being used for research purposes, as long as they will be processed in such a way that I cannot be identified.
Yes ☐

I confirm that I have received the information sheet about the content of the study, how it will be conducted and what it means on my part, as well as the privacy notice. I have also had the opportunity to ask the researchers further questions. I have therefore been adequately informed about the content of the survey, how it will be conducted and what it means for me, as well as about the processing of my personal data which are processed on the basis of public interest as set out in the law.

I have had sufficient time to consider my participation in the study. I have not been pressured or tempted to take part in the research.

I have considered the above points and have decided that I want to participate in the study.
Yes ☐

_____   _____   _____
Signature   Name, printed   Date

Contact details:

Tereza Pruknerová
tereza.t.pruknerova@student.jyu.fi
+358405964220
Emännäntie 3-5 C35, 40740, Jyväskylä, Finland.

Recorded consent is stored in accordance with data security guidelines, as is other personal data.

[Template updated 3/2024]

Y-tunnus:	Puhelin:	Jyväskylän yliopisto
02458947	(014) 260 1211	PL 35
Sähköposti:	Faksi:	40014 Jyväskylän yliopisto
etunimi.sukunimi@jyu.fi	(014) 260 1021	www.jyu.fi

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

15.03.2024

PRIVACY NOTICE

For the research project: "A Shared Vision: Examining the Contributions of FORTHEM Member Universities to Intercultural Competence Development"

You are participating in scientific research. This privacy notice informs you about the processing of your personal data as part of the research. You have a legal right to receive this information in accordance with the European Union and Finnish legislation.

1. Data Controller

The Data Controller is responsible for lawful processing of personal data in this research.

The Data Controller and implementer of this research: Tereza Pruknerová, tereza.t.pruknerova@student.jyu.fi, +358405964220, Emännäntie 3-5 C35, 40740, Jyväskylä, Finland.

Supervisor: Tamás Péter Szabó, tamas.p.szabo@jyu.fi, University of Jyväskylä, Seminaarinkatu 15 40014 Jyväskylä, Finland.

2. Processor(s) of personal data

Processor of personal data refers to somebody processing personal data on behalf of the Data Controller and according to the Data Controller's instructions. In this research, the Data Controller, Tereza Pruknerová, is also the processor of personal data.

3. Other disclosure of personal data during research

Your personal data will be handled confidentially and without disclosing them to any outsiders.

4. Personal data to be processed in "A Shared Vision: Examining the Contributions of FORTHEM Member Universities to Intercultural Competence Development".

Your personal data will be processed for the research purpose described in the information letter.

In this research, we may collect the following personal data on you: name, university you belong to, interview audio records, and interview transcripts. Data collection is based on the research plan.

Please be advised that the name of universities of the participants will be disclosed to provide general background information of research participants, but the participants will not be identifiable from the quotes used in the report. Please also be advised that the name of the research universities (the University of Jyväskylä, the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, the University of Agder) will be disclosed in the report.

This privacy notice has been shared as an email attachment and each data subject has received this information.

All data subjects are adults, over the age of 18.

5. The lawful basis for processing personal data in scientific research

☒ Data subject's consent (GDPR, Article 6.1a, special personal data categories 9.2a)

Additional grounds

☒Processing of personal data for journalistic, academic, artistic, or textual purposes (Data Protection Act, section 27)

6. Transfer of personal data outside the EU/EEA area

In this research, your personal data will not be transferred outside the EU/EEA area.

7. Protection for personal data

Processing of personal data in this research is based on an appropriate research plan and the study has a designated person in charge. The personal data collected and saved for this research will include only such data that is necessary for the research purpose.

Preventing identification

☒As a protective measure, any direct identification data are removed upon the compilation of the data set (pseudonymised data allowing restored identification by means of codes or equivalent information, and also new data connected to the data set).

The personal data processed in this research will be protected by means of:

☒ user ID   ☒password
☒by other means, how: Recordings and transcriptions will be pseudonymised before analysis. Personal details that may be needed for analysis will be replaced with pseudonyms or codes, with the table linking those pseudonyms or codes to personally identifiable information being stored in an encrypted folder. Original copies of recordings and other data will be securely stored separately from the pseudonymised data.

For this study, a separate data protection impact assessment has been made

☒No, because the research manager in charge has checked that the impact assessment is not compulsory.

The researcher has completed data protection and information security training.

☒Yes

8. PROCESSING OF PERSONAL DATA AFTER _THE RESEARCH HAS ENDED_

☒ The research register will be anonymised after the study has ended, approximately by September 2024. This means that all identification data are fully removed so that there will be no return to the identifiable personal data, nor any new data can be connected to this data set.

9. Rights of the data subject

Cancellation of consent (GDPR, Article 7)
You have the right to cancel your consent if the processing of personal data is based on consent. Such a cancellation has no impact on the lawfulness of consent-based processing conducted before the cancellation of consent.

Right to access your personal data (GDPR, Article 15)
You have the right to get to know whether and which personal data of yours are processed. If you wish, you can also request a copy of your personal data to be processed.

Right to rectification (GDPR, Article 16)
If there are any inaccuracies or errors in your personal data to be processed, you are entitled to request that these be rectified or supplemented.

Right to erasure (GDPR, Article 17)
You have the right to demand in some cases that your personal data be erased. However, the right of erasure is not applicable if the erasure would prevent or greatly hinder reaching the goal of processing in a scientific research.

Right to restriction of processing (GDPR, Article 18)
You have the right to restrict the processing of your personal data in some cases, like when you challenge the correctness of your personal data.

Deviating from the rights
In some individual cases, it is possible to deviate from the described rights on the grounds stipulated in the GDPR and the Data Protection Act insofar as the rights would prevent or greatly hinder reaching the goals of scientific or historical research or statistical purposes. The need for deviating from the rights is always assessed case-specifically. It is also possible to deviate from the rights if the data subject cannot, or cannot any longer, be identified.

Profiling and automatised decision-making
In this research, your personal data will not be used for any automatic decision-making. In this research, the purpose of the processing of personal data is not to assess your personal qualities, i.e. profiling, but personal data and qualities are considered from the perspective of broader scientific research.

Implementing the data subject rights
If you have any questions about your data subject rights, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer. All requests concerning the implementation of data subject rights are submitted to the JYU Registry Office. Registry Office and Archives, P.O. Box 35 (C), 40014 University of Jyväskylä, tel. 040 805 3472, email: kirjaamo@jyu.fi. Visiting address: Seminaarinkatu 15, Building C (University Main Building, 1st floor), Room C 140.

Reporting an actual or suspected information security breach to JYU
https://www.jyu.fi/fi/yliopisto/tietosuojailmoitus/ilmoita-tietoturvaloukkauksesta

You have to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority especially with a locally relevant one in terms of your permanent place of residence or work if you regard that the processing of personal data violates the EU General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679. In Finland, the supervisory authority is the Data Protection Ombudsman.

Updated contact information of the Office of Data Protection Ombudsman: https://tietosuoja.fi/etusivu

University of Jyväskylä

RESEARCH NOTIFICATION

For the research project: "A Shared Vision: Examining the Contributions of FORTHEM Member Universities to Intercultural Competence Development"

I ask you to participate in *A Shared Vision: Examining the Contributions of FORTHEM Member Universities to Intercultural Competence Development*, which aims to explore how the universities involved in the FORTHEM Alliance promote intercultural competence through their participation in the European University Initiative.

You are invited to the study because you are a member of one of the three researched universities which belong to the FORTHEM Alliance. If you agree to participate in this study, you will participate in an online interview via Zoom. The interview will be held in English.

This research notification describes the study and related participation. The privacy notice attachment provides information on the processing of your personal data.

The study will involve about 6 participants in total, both males and females from various positions with work related to FORTHEM Alliance at the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany) or the University of Agder (Norway).

This is a single study, and you will not be contacted again later.

1. **Voluntariness**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study, stop participating or cancel your previously given consent, without stating any reason for this and at any time during the study. This will have no negative consequences to you.

If you stop participating in the study or if you cancel your consent, the personal data, samples and other information collected on you up to that point will be used as part of the research material as far as it is necessary in order to ensure relevant research outcomes.

You are not obliged to answer any question during the online interview, but you may answer at your own free will. Your responses will be anonymized in the interview transcription stage.

2. **Progress of the study**

As part of this study, you will be invited to an individual online interview via Zoom with the researcher. The researcher will ask you several questions while facilitating the discussion. With your consent, the online interview will be recorded for the purpose of transcription and accuracy. The transcription will be anonymized, and your responses will remain confidential, meaning that you won't be identified from your responses. No names will be included in the final report. Quotes will be used from the interviews in the write-up of the study, but the researcher will ensure that no one can be identified from these quotes.

Please note that there are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. The researcher wants to hear varying viewpoints and would like for everyone to contribute their thoughts.

3. Possible benefits from the study

Your participation in this study will contribute to the understanding of how strategies are employed by FORTHEM Alliance universities to promote intercultural competence in its current state. Participating in this study may benefit you by reflecting on your own work.

4. Possible risks, harm, and inconvenience caused by the study

The study is not expected to cause any risks, harm, or inconvenience of any kind. However, if you feel uncomfortable, you can leave the interview at any time, without giving a reason.

5. Study-related costs and compensations to the subject as well as research funding

No monetary reward will be paid for participation in the study.

6. Informing about research results and research outcomes

The study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her master's thesis. The researcher is not compensated financially for the completion of this study.

Your personal data and responses from the online interview will be handled confidentially in accordance with the privacy notice provided to you and no names will be included in the final report. Participants will be asked not to use any names during the online interview. The researcher will analyze the data, but your responses will remain confidential, and no names will be included in the reporting of results.

Please be advised that the names of universities of the participants (the University of Jyväskylä, the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, the University of Agder) will be disclosed to provide general background information of research participants, but the participants will not be identifiable from the quotes used in the report.

Audio recordings of the interviews will be kept on a secured university's U: drive accessible only with credentials of the researcher Tereza Pruknerová. Audio recordings will be accessible to the researcher only, and not kept beyond the use of the study. The audio recording will be destroyed after the thesis is submitted. All documents and recordings will be anonymously labeled with a code number for each participant, with a conversion file held at a secured university's U: drive accessible only with credentials of the researcher Tereza Pruknerová. The anonymized transcription will be kept on a secured university's U: drive accessible only with credentials of the researcher Tereza Pruknerová.

After the study has finished, the results will be written up as part of the master's research thesis of Tereza Pruknerová and submitted to the University of Jyväskylä for examination. The results will also be submitted for publication in the repository of the University of Jyväskylä. If you would like to receive a soft copy of the findings, please let the researcher know by using the contact information provided.

7. Insurance coverage for research subjects

The University of Jyväskylä has insurance for its staff and activities. The insurances of the University of Jyväskylä are not valid if a research subject's home municipality is not in Finland.

8. Contact person for further information

Tereza Pruknerová, tereza.t.pruknerova@student.jyu.fi, a candidate for the master's degree in Development, Education and International Cooperation - Specialisation in Education at the University of Jyväskylä.