

GHENT UNIVERSITY'S STRATEGIC INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

1 CONTEXT: THE INTEGRATED POLICY PLAN FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION

Within the framework of the Integrated Policy Plan for Internationalization, the strategy paper on Strategic Initiatives for International Cooperation (approved by the Board of Governors on 13 March 2015) sets the framework for strategic international cooperation activities.

The goals for Ghent University's strategic international cooperation are:

- To strengthen the link between research, education and services to society, within an international context;
- To enhance visibility and impact of Ghent University in the international environment, by coordinating long-term partnerships in order to consolidate the leading role of Ghent University;
- To seize opportunities (networking, funding...) within the international environment to enhance the impact of Ghent University.

Special emphasis is put on collaborations that:

- Focus on networking with high level and/or high potential partners;
- Focus on networking with countries, regions or around themes of strategic importance for Ghent University;
- Collaborate with partners in the South with a strong focus on human capacity building;
- Align themselves with the overall strategic goals of Ghent University in sustainable development and internationalization.

Three models for strategic international cooperation have been put forward: (1) International Thematic Networks; (2) Regional Platforms and (3) Strategic Institutional Partnerships.

Information on the first two models can be found on <https://www.ugent.be/nl/univgent/waarvoor-staat-ugent/internationalisering/internationaal>

2 GHENT UNIVERSITY STRATEGIC INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

2.1 Definition and Criteria

In general, **strategic partnership** can be defined as 'a formal alliance between two or more higher education institutions developed through an international process whereby the partners share resources and leverage complementary strengths to achieve defined common objectives. Strategic cooperation is tied to the strategic goals and objectives of an academic unit, college or university as a whole. It indicates a multi-dimensional engagement between the involved institutions and implies the joint undertaking of a diverse range of activities with the aim of the parties' mutual benefit'.¹

The **criteria** used for describing a partnership as strategic and institutional were translated into the specific context of Ghent University's Integrated Policy Plan for Internationalization and its third model for strategic international cooperation, the Strategic Institutional Partnership (SIP):

(1) Multidimensional

- a. A SIP is a *broad* partnership and is not bound to a single faculty, nor department or program (nor to a single discipline, cf. infra). The partnership must therefore be an attractive international platform by offering opportunities to as many faculties, departments as possible, and equally to individual researchers, lecturers and students. Beyond the academic part, the active involvement of the central sections in the partnership is also a potentially important added value.
- b. In addition to the breadth, the involvement must be *in depth* throughout the different levels of the faculties and the central sections ("embedding at grassroots level"). The partnership must therefore be an attractive international platform by offering opportunities to the various roles within the faculties (from senior professors to young researchers) and central administration (from management to administrators).
- c. A SIP does not have a single thematic focus (as opposed to the ITN). Nor does a SIP form the framework for a single form of cooperation or activity ("single strand activity").
- d. Due to its broadly supported nature, a SIP has a certain intensity and operational focus within the cooperation, which distinguishes it from the large international associations and networks.

(2) Top-down vs. bottom-up

- a. The recognition of a SIP is not only at the highest, central levels. The SIP is often described in top-down terms. It is true that a SIP is centrally supported and managed. The cooperation within a SIP has therefore been established intentionally and has not developed incidentally or organically.
- b. However: the central management relates to facilitating and monitoring the quality of the multi-dimensional cooperation. The SIP must be able to offer a strong platform to support bottom-up initiatives. It must be possible to respond to opportunities that present themselves from the basics. There is therefore a need for a thorough incentive policy (see below) to be able to offer support for a multitude of potentially valuable initiatives across the board and to allow them to develop.

¹ Banks, Clare/Matthias Kuder (2016): *Current Trends in Strategic International Partnerships. In: Global Perspectives on Strategic International Partnerships. A Guide to Building Sustainable Academic Linkages. Institute of International Education, New York, p11.*

(3) Sustainability

A SIP is not bound by the limits of a single project, but cross-project. A SIP forms, as it were, a pool of preferential partners for setting up various projects and initiatives.

(4) Added value

A SIP is aimed at strengthening the individual position of the partner institutions. This translates into joint objectives that are recognized by all partners. A SIP is then not merely an incubator for attracting external funds (or for project consortia for applications). It is inherent in the SIP that synergy objectives and objectives are achieved and initiatives are developed that individual institutions cannot achieve on their own. On the one hand, a SIP thus forms a green house for new, joint initiatives in new domains and for new forms of cooperation. On the other hand, a SIP also distinguishes itself from the transactional forms of academic cooperation (cq exchange and joint initiatives in education and research) by a transformational aspect: the SIP allows UGent to optimize its own operation and increase its capacity at different levels.

(5) Reciprocity

The reciprocity within a SIP goes beyond the level of mutual recognition of each other as equal partner institutions. The partners endorse the same definition of a SIP and undertake to include the SIP in their own strategy and organization. Moreover, they enter into a shared commitment to ensure continuity through an equal, active contribution and through an equal investment.

At the inter-university level, the partners consider each other to be equal in the inclusion of administrative reciprocity.

Based on the above criteria, **a SIP can be defined as follows:** *A strategic institutional partnership is a multi-dimensional and cross-project partnership between two or more institutions on an equal and complementary basis and in mutual management, which results from a well-considered policy supported by all partners on an institution-wide basis. The partnership thus forms a framework for intensive cooperation between the partners in the field of education, research, services and institutional management with a view to strengthening their joint but also individual position.*

The basis of a SIP is the **mutual recognition** of the partnership as the SIP including its characteristic criteria. It also differs from the international networks to which UGent has committed itself through institutional membership as within a SIP, UGent also determines the objectives and the resources deployed. Rather than lobbying or joint action towards governments or project financiers, the objective of SIP is to **develop activities together** with the partner(s) with regard to the **institution's core assignments** such as joint educational programs, joint research, setting up joint infrastructure, etc.

2.2 SIPs at Ghent University

Five different categories of Strategic Institutional Partnerships can be distinguished

(1) Regional partnerships

- a. UGent-Lille-UCL

(2) European partnerships

- a. U4Society
- b. ENLIGHT

(3) International regional partnerships

- a. 3Continents UGent/Missouri/UWC

(4) Institutional partnerships based on long-standing development cooperation projects

- a. Can Tho (Vietnam)
- b. ESPOL (Ecuador)
- c. Jimma (Ethiopia)
- d. UWC (South Africa)

(5) Institutional partnerships based on research excellence

- a. Macquarie University (Australia)
- b. University of Queensland (Australia)
- c. University of Toronto (Canada)
- d. Harvard University (USA)
- e. University of California at Berkeley (USA)

2.3 Structure and Responsibilities

The broad anchoring of a SIP requires an **internal steering group** in which all faculties have the opportunity to be represented. The steering group acts as an advisory body regarding the SIP, but also ensures dissemination. The operational follow-up is at least ensured by a **central coordinator** who is also responsible for the internal dissemination of information. The coordinator forms a first-line internal and external contact point for the SIP for resp. academic and operational matters.

In addition, consultation structures between all partners (depending on the dimensions involved) are also required at **inter-university level** at different levels: (1) executive, (2) academic, (3) central, and (4) operational. There is a clear organization chart tailored to the SIP, with a clear division of roles for decision-making, reporting and communication.

An important fact is that the partners consider each other to be of equal value and thereby either **jointly manage the partnership** or alternatively. Administrative reciprocity also implies that all partners charge the SIP within their own organizational structure; that joint SIP decisions actually take effect in the individual partner institutions and that vice versa internal decisions that have an impact on the SIP are proactively discussed with the partner.

2.4 Institutional partnerships based on research excellence

In June 2018, the Research Council decided to allocate part of the BOF-funds, earmarked for international research cooperation, to support a number of institutional partnerships based on research excellence with € 75,000 per year for 4 years, on the condition of equivalent co-financing from the partner institution. After consultation with the faculties, 6 universities were selected with whom discussions were started with the view of establishing a Strategic Institutional Partnership. This resulted in the signing of a Letter of Intent/Memorandum of Understanding and the allocation of the funds for the first year of operation with **University of Queensland** (Australia), **University of Toronto** (Canada), **University of California, Berkeley** and **Harvard University** (USA). Negotiations with **Macquarie University** (Australia) are still ongoing and are to be set up with the **University of Melbourne** (Australia).

The following table provides an overview of the UGent coordinators and the selected topics for each of those SIPs:

SIP	Coordinator	Research topics
Macquarie University	Michel Tison	Health Data science Global change
University of Queensland	Korneel Rabaey	Knowledge Exchange and Entrepreneurship Materials, Metals and Fire Safety Fresh Water and Marine Systems Health and Antibiotic Resistance
University of Toronto	Olivier Degomme	Health equity & impact Twenty-first century citizenship Sustainable systems
Harvard University	Lies Lahousse	Neurocognitive, cardiovascular and respiratory
University of California at Berkeley	Luc Martens	European studies Art & Science Augmented intelligence Climate Change Equity & Inclusion

More detailed information on each of those partnerships can be obtained from the SIP coordinator.