

Environment for Transnational Education Partnerships:  
Challenges and Opportunities

---

# Spain and UK

Findings and recommendations  
from primary research

Part of Going Global Partnerships



---

# Content

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY / 4**

**INTRODUCTION / 6**

**CURRENT POSITION / 7**

**Value of transnational education partnerships / 8**

**Overview of the regulatory and policy frameworks / 9**

**Challenges for education collaborations  
and transnational education partnerships / 10**

1. For the United Kingdom
2. For Spain

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS / 19**

1. The signature of UK-Spain bilateral agreements
2. Navigational aids (a knowledge hub)
3. Promotion of educational strengths  
and improve knowledge
4. Creation of networks

**REPORTS REFERENCED / 21**

**ANNEX 1**

**SEPIE Spanish Universities Survey / 23**

# Executive summary

This report considers the opportunities for HEIs in Spain and the UK to develop and extend joint partnerships and collaboration. This includes all programmes of higher education (HE), from Level 5 vocational and educational training (VET) qualifications to undergraduate, postgraduate or doctoral level. The report aims to provide a better understanding of the environment for partnerships and collaborations.

Interviewees identified **opportunities** for partnerships and collaborations through sharing good practices and building new networks between Spanish and UK institutions in education, mobility and research:

- Education – joint or double degrees and certifications, joint doctoral programmes and split-site PhDs, top-up degrees delivered in Spain, collaborative online international learning (COIL), and expanding vocational teaching partnerships (particularly in new media and technology areas).
- Mobility – expanding internships and encouraging two-way mobility including through short-term programs, summer programs, and language courses.
- Research – strategic networks based on university or subject groups, joint laboratories, building on the existing focus on health sciences, and investigating opportunities in classical philology, music, philosophy, and art.

**The environment is complex but it also provides interesting opportunities. Identifying the main challenges and providing tangible recommendations within the new bilateral context of UK-Spain relations is the objective of this report.**

They also identified important **challenges** that need to be addressed. These are:

- Immigration and visa procedures. New conditions to be satisfied, added costs and lack of timely and clear information about what is required and how to get it, particularly about internships.
- Qualification recognition processes. Additional bureaucracy for UK degrees.
- Franchise and validation programmes. New procedures for authorisation and additional and difficult-to-navigate pathways.
- Lack of framework agreements for reciprocal mobilities and university academic collaborations.
- Funding to support reciprocal mobilities, but also for management costs and extra overheads.
- The immediate challenges of information provision and promoting understanding.

Finally, the report provides four **recommendations** to address these challenges:

1. Signing of UK-Spain government and sector-institutional framework bilateral agreements.
2. Setting up a knowledge hub and actions to promote and inform institutions on areas of concern or uncertainty.
3. Promotion of educational strengths (of Spain in the UK and vice versa).
4. Creation of networks for communications and collaborations.

To conclude: although the environment for education collaborations between UK and Spain is challenging, the strength of existing collaborations and the interest perceived in HEIs from both countries, as well as overarching institutions, are reasons to remain optimistic.



**Academic collaboration fosters innovation and contributes to better cross-cultural understanding. It is a path that we must walk together.**

**Mark Howard**, Director British Council Spain



# Introduction

This report considers the opportunities for higher education institutions in Spain and the UK to develop and extend joint international partnerships in education in the current environment. These include the provision of all types of HE programmes, from VET Level 5 qualifications to undergraduate, postgraduate or doctoral level degrees. The British Council is keen to encourage greater Spanish-UK collaboration, particularly where this will support both countries' higher education agendas. Given the importance that HEIs place on mobility agreements, these have also been included in the report.

The report aims to provide a better understanding of the environment for such partnerships. In order to do this, a review of the legislative, regulatory and policy frameworks for international higher education was undertaken. Interviews were then conducted with higher education stakeholders in both countries. These included government representatives, sector agencies, higher education leaders, partnership managers and academic course leads. The report contains their views relating to the opportunities and the main challenges, together with how these might be addressed. Their contributions in the interview discussions inform the recommendations.

Data in this report is drawn from three sources:

1. Field research conducted by the British Council involving interviews with 21 Spanish HEIs in 2020.<sup>1</sup>
2. Research conducted for this project (March-April 2022). This comprises 13 interviews conducted with 15 Spanish and UK stakeholders. In addition, the Spanish Service for Internationalisation of Education (SEPIE) offered to send the interview questions to Spanish universities. SEPIE's collated report is included in Annex 1.
3. The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Aggregate Offshore Record (2022) providing information on the current position on UK transnational education (TNE) provision for the academic year 2020-21 in Spain.<sup>2</sup> We have found no data relating to Spanish TNE provision in the UK.

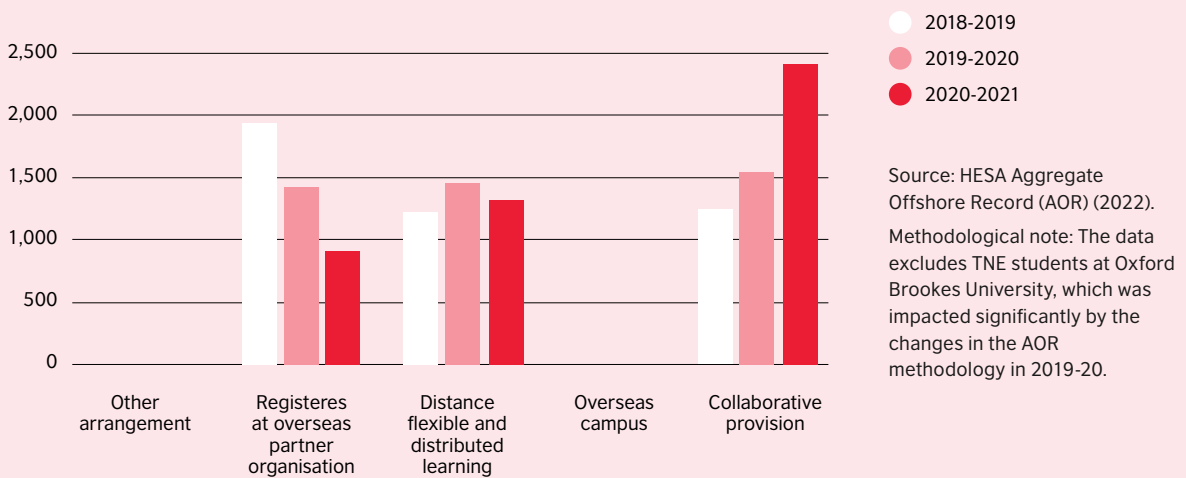
1. Report by Marta Hernández Ruiz, Professor of EU and International Relations, CEU San Pablo University.

2. We use the term "transnational education" to refer to any qualifications of another country that students get in their country of residence. This is normally achieved through academic collaborations: double or joint degrees, articulation, validation or franchise. It also includes online learning.

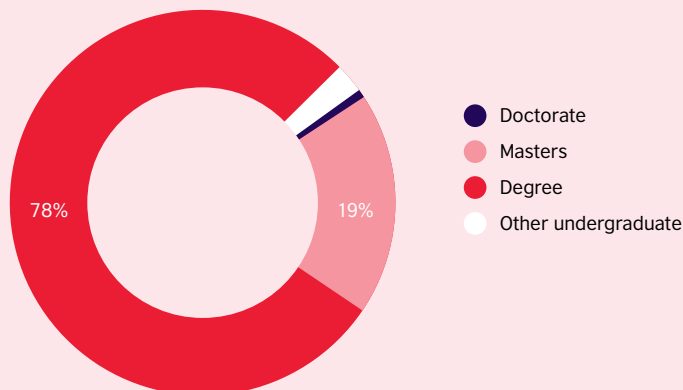
# Current position

Figure 1 shows that there has been a 96 per cent increase in the number of students taking part in collaborative provision programmes between 2018-19 and 2020-21. However, there has also been a 53 per cent decrease in the number of students registered at an overseas partner organisation.

**Figure 1: Number of students enrolled in UK TNE provision in Spain 2018-19 to 2020-21**



**Figure 2: The level of study of students on UK TNE provision in Spain in 2020-21**



# Value of transnational education partnerships

The majority of UK-Spain teaching collaborations are in the business subject areas. They include double or joint degrees (e.g. [the BSc in International Business Management](#)<sup>3</sup>, a four-year programme providing two full degrees – one from Lancaster University and one from ICADE Business School in Spain) and also UK franchised and validated courses. On many of the latter, UK interviewees reported that such courses respond to local area needs, providing specialised content that complements local offers in Spain. When UK courses are offered in Spain through validation or franchise, courses are very slightly adapted and localised by Spanish partners to meet local market needs. For the most part, courses are also taught in Spanish in year one and often year two, moving to English in years three and four. Interviewees from Spanish partner institutions offering UK qualifications reported that UK validated and franchised programmes contribute to their commercial business enabling them to stay competitive.

One of the values identified was that the flexibility of the UK HE system made it possible to deliver “top-up” degrees. These are typically one-year (exceptionally two-year) programmes which enable students to obtain a Level 6 degree qualifications, whether these students have completed a VET Level 5 diploma or two years of a university degree. The UK university reviews students’ previous learning and considers whether they can be accepted on the top-up (and often final) year of their degree, depending on academic parity. There are a few examples of top-up programmes offered in Spain, but most students go to the UK following two years of Level 5 British (or Spanish) study in Spain.

Graduate outcome data in Spain is not generally collected systematically. Anecdotally, however, graduates from collaborative programmes have higher employment rates than counterparts on Spanish-only courses. On vocational education courses, for example, several of the Spanish partners reported that the vast majority of their students receive employment offers even before finishing their courses, mainly due to the courses being designed and flexibly adapted directly to employers’ specialist needs in particular industries. Teaching delivery is largely through problem-based rather than rote learning, which produces graduates that are adept at addressing new industry-based problems as they arise. One interviewee commented that some of the Spanish vocational education programmes are not sufficiently nimble in being adapted to fast-changing industry technologies, which makes it harder for centres and students to be immediately fit for the purpose of either the current or future industry. Given Spain’s unemployment rate for 15- to 24-year-olds, one of the highest among Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, employment prospects are a concern for parents and students.

Currently, teaching partnerships are a relatively small part of Spain-UK engagement. The majority of agreements between Spanish and UK universities relate to student exchanges within the Erasmus+ programme – and the major concern for most Spanish universities is the impact of Brexit on these.

3. See <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/international-business-management-spain-bsc-hons-n2r4/>.



# Overview of the regulatory and policy frameworks

The main policy driver is the “Strategy for Internationalisation of Spanish Universities”, adopted by the Spanish government in 2015, and the Spanish Ministry of Universities is currently working on updating it. This sits within the framework of the objectives set in the Europe 2020 Strategy and was in response to the EU’s strategy for the internationalisation of higher education (2013), which invited all member states to develop national strategies in line with the objectives at European level. This is a broad strategy that goes beyond student mobility and the signing of international agreements to internationalisation of the curriculum, brain circulation, internationalisation of research, international joint qualifications, internationalisation at home, transnational campuses, quality assurance, accreditation and evaluation system, attracting the best students to Spain, university rankings, international alumni associations, employability and entrepreneurship, and language skills. Actions for universities were set out under four main areas:

1. Internationalisation of university systems (including recognition of degrees and credits, transnational quality, internationalisation of education programmes, internationalisation at home, and mobility of students and staff).
2. International competitiveness of the sector (including regional innovation strategies and communities, university-business forums, business models and university services).
3. Co-operation with other regions of the world (including the EU and European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Ibero-American knowledge space, Euro-Mediterranean HE and Research Area, co-operation with developed and emerging economies, and Development Aid).

4. International attraction of universities (including their standing in world rankings, teaching in English, joint degrees, participation in international network and projects, and promotion of universities abroad).

The Spanish Service for the Internationalisation of Education plays a pivotal role in promoting and supporting internationalisation of the HE sector. Since 2015 SEPIE has also been responsible for the promotion of Spanish universities overseas.

The legal framework in Spain allows the establishment and operation of private universities from overseas. Currently there are four listed from the USA and two from France<sup>4</sup>. The regulatory framework also allows the provision of cross-border higher education. The National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) notes that Spain has 84 universities (50 public, 34 private) and that almost all are engaged in TNE (either as participants or providers), mainly through distance learning, joint programmes or double degrees. The process for accrediting new programmes (or new HEIs) can be complex, involving national and regional accreditation. Quality assurance of bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees is similarly complex, involving three stages undertaken by ANECA and 10 regional quality assurance agencies.

Qualifications obtained through TNE programmes offered in Spain are recognised, provided that they are from fully accredited teaching entities of foreign universities. The 822/2021 Royal Decree reconfirms the status of the four-year (240 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credit) undergraduate degree system and recognition of degrees by foreign universities that have signed an agreement with Spain, including three-year (180 ECTS credit) degrees. We understand that countries within EHEA fall into this category.

# Challenges for education collaborations and transnational education partnerships

The UK's exit from the European Union is by far the greatest challenge faced by both Spanish and UK universities in continuing or initiating education mobilities, collaborations and transnational education partnerships. Interviewees pointed to challenges related to the UK's status as a non-EU member and as a country not associated to the Erasmus+ Programme. This resulted in increased bureaucratic processes and also in "soft" challenges such as changed perceptions on both sides which could, in particular, affect collaborations on two-way mobilities. Challenges identified by interviewees in both countries were largely of two types – regulatory and labour market issues, and non-regulatory or perception issues.

**It is essential that stakeholders work together, through shared collaborative networks and knowledge hubs, to build trust and understanding between individuals, institutions and countries. Building a more favourable environment is possible and can only be achieved through collaboration.**



“

**There is clearly a desire for institutional and governmental collaboration in both countries. This commitment has already resulted in a long-term working group.**

**Enric Ordeix**, Dean EAE Business School Barcelona and President of the British Chamber of Commerce Education Working Group

## For the United Kingdom

### 1. Regulatory and labour market issues

#### Spanish visa processes

UK students going on mobility (study or exchanges) to Spain for longer than three months, or for any length of time if the student travels as an intern and receives a stipend, now need a visa. Spanish consulates in the UK were somewhat overwhelmed in 2021 when they received very high numbers of visa applications. In mid to late September hundreds of students were still awaiting their visas in the UK, and many had not even received an appointment. The level of confusion was high and the image of long queues at the consulate in London did not help to encourage students to take up mobility placements in Spain (something also pointed out by Spanish universities in the SEPIE report). The situation in the Consulate in London is being addressed. As a last resort, it is also possible to travel to Spain and apply for a visa once there<sup>5</sup>.

#### Qualification recognition processes in Spain

Administrative processes for the recognition of UK qualifications in Spain have become more complex now that the UK is not in the EU. This affects UK degrees in the UK or awarded with, or through, Spanish partner institutions. So, while the regulations have not changed significantly, the authentication of certificates requires

additional processes, which can involve delays and added costs. There are two processes for degree recognition:

- **Equivalencias** – graduates have to show that courses studied are equivalent at the different levels (undergraduate, masters, doctoral). This requires all documents to be officially translated and submitted to the Spanish Ministry of Education.
- **“Homologación”** – this process requires detailed evidence that every element of the content of the degree course studied is the same (each module, topic covered etc.) as the Spanish course. This is particularly important for people wanting to work in regulated professions in Spain (medicine, law, including teachers in public schools etc.). Spanish courses leading to entry to these are heavily regulated. The same is true if the candidate wants to work as a public servant. Students wanting to take a course leading to a regulated profession will need to get their previous qualifications “homologada” as well. The “homologación” requires the submission of official translations of qualifications and detailed course content to the ministry. This is a lengthy administrative process with a significant backlog (typically two or more years).

Since the UK is now a non-EU country, all documents required for either equivalency or homologación must be authenticated through the Hague Apostille. This applies to all public documents including those issued by education institutions, such as A-level and degree certificates. The process requires, once apostille is obtained, that all

5. The original directive, signed on 21 December 2018 by Jose Alarcón Hernández, is validated and published at the Spanish government’s register: <https://sede.administracion.gob.es/pagSedeFront/servicios/consultaCSV.htm>, using the code: PTF-6b21-5f68-f2fb-4fab-26f4-1074-ad7e-f45f.

documents are officially translated. Some UK HEIs interviewed were unclear about what was required – one reported having only become aware of this very recently when told by their Spanish partner.

### Labour market issues

While, in general, the labour market accepts and values UK qualifications, the exception is entry into the regulated professions in Spain. Spanish courses enabling entry to these are heavily regulated and require applicants to have studied detailed course content. Some scoping work was previously undertaken by the British Embassy on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. The reality is that the mutual recognition of professional qualifications requires detailed bilateral agreements between individual professional bodies. The scoping found that very few of these existed. The embassy foresaw mismatched national priorities as one of the challenges here – i.e., areas important to the UK are not important to Spain and vice versa.

UK interviewees whose courses in Spain are geared to the labour market are aware that this is an issue for students aiming to enter regulated professions. Students who enter on these courses must always be made aware of any issues relating to the exercise of regulated professions in Spain.

### Regulatory framework (validation and franchise)

There is no doubt that it is a difficult challenge for UK HEIs to navigate the intricate Spanish regulatory world. This is particularly the case for validated and franchised UK programmes delivered through Spanish HEIs.

Many UK HEIs rely on their Spanish partners to navigate the regulatory processes (and bureaucracy) in Spain. Their own level of knowledge and awareness varies. So, while there clearly are problems of bureaucracy, one academic course leader reported that, as far as she is concerned, there are no problems on the horizon at all. Others had come up against problems at a very late stage. One UK HEI, for example, had discovered just before printing degree certificate that double degrees in the UK and Spain were different, and that what the Spanish partners meant by a double degree did not comply with the UK university's regulations.

One of the challenges for some UK HEIs is that their various Spanish partners are often inconsistent in their interpretation of, and approach to, the Spanish regulations. This makes it difficult to know what the correct story is. It is also difficult for UK HEIs to solve any issues at a distance, not only because they lack information but also because they lack reliable and trusted contacts within the Spanish government authorities.

## 2. “Soft” issues and challenges

### Lack of clear information from a single and reliable source

The main “soft” issue identified by UK interviewees is the lack of reliable information, particularly in the context of new legislation and procedures since January 2021, but also in relation to Spanish changes in legislation in general, which are perceived to be frequent. Information from Spanish partners often mirrored their own confusion. UK HEIs reported various pieces of information (and opinions) from partners, including that the Spanish government is tightening control, that the 2021 decree means that all courses in Spain must be exactly the same as ones delivered on the UK campus (which could create problems for the home campus as well as the Spanish partner), that courses will need to be authorised and controlled by ANECA, or other similar statements. One Spanish HEI commented: “In theory, recognition should be easy because we’re all part of the EHEA, but procedures in Spain somehow invalidate the mutual recognition agreement as procedures are long and cumbersome, neither immediate nor easy to get.” The information gap has widened significantly now that the UK is no longer an EU member country and no longer participates in the Erasmus programme.

### Culture, traditions, approaches

Some minor challenges were identified here. UK teaching and assessment methods, for example, are different from those in Spanish education. The latter employs more traditional teaching methods with more rote, rather than problem-based, learning. Although the system is moving towards problem-based learning, in comparison there is less emphasis on learning outcomes and much more on exams. (One interviewee commented: “it’s exams, exams, exams - even the smallest things have to be examined!”) All existing partnerships collaborations have found ways of accommodating the different approaches, and some did comment that the process was enriching for both sides of the partnership. The main challenge appears to be dealing with the expectations of Spanish students (and their parents) that there should be lots of exams.

We now understand what the key issues are facing universities. This report lists four concrete recommendations to facilitate UK-Spain collaboration:

- **Dissemination of clear(er) information**
- **Promotion of the Spanish HE sector to the UK and vice versa**
- **Development of networks with shared and common interests**
- **Delivery of framework agreements for collaboration**

## For Spain

### 1. Regulatory and labour market issues

#### UK immigration and visa procedures

Given the weight of mobilities for UK-Spain collaborative HE agreements, this was the biggest challenge raised. 64 per cent of Spanish universities in the SEPIE survey identify visa requirements for entry to the UK as the greatest issue. Difficulties include proof of English language level (the level required for a UK visa is higher than that asked for by UK host universities), costs, and obtaining the Certificate of Sponsorship for the period 2021 to 2027. The difficulties were further elaborated by interviewees, who described their confusion and worry about UK visa and immigration rules (both the legalities and the paperwork). This impacted on their willingness to encourage staff or student mobility to the UK.

Visas for internship in the UK are particularly complicated. SEPIE respondents point to the lack of legal framework now that the UK is not part of Erasmus+, with institutions not knowing how to obtain a Certificate of Sponsorship for Erasmus 21-27 mobilities to the UK (or indeed any internship longer than two months). To date, there is no information from UK Visas and Immigration. Non-Erasmus internships require a UK HEI partner for internships into a company to be possible. Complexities are leading to some receiving HEIs to withdraw. In some cases, the difficulties are so great that Spanish institutions are no longer sending interns to the UK.

One of the HEIs interviewed described the situation it faces. For this university, internships of around 10 months form the fourth year of the degree course. It sends some 1,500 students per year on company internships to a number of countries, including Europe, the USA, the UK, Japan, Australia, Canada and Thailand. The lack of clear information on UK visas for individuals spending more than six months on UK internships with companies means that the HEI will not send any students to the UK this year. Added to the visa difficulty, there are issues around payments to interns. Since this can no longer be done through Erasmus+, there are potential problems in transferring money, as well as possible tax questions. This means dealing with the UK tax authorities (HM Revenue and Customs) as well as UK Visas and Immigration. The time needed to navigate the UK government regulations – and the risk of not doing it correctly – are considered too great. The university has concluded that it is easier to send students to other non-member countries like the USA, Canada and Australia than to the UK.

Responding to the question of how collaborations had changed over time and the reasons for the change, 46 per cent of SEPIE's university respondents identified Brexit as the major factor.

### Spanish regulations (in particular for franchise and validation programmes)

Many of the Spanish HEIs involved in UK validation and franchising agreements commented on the bureaucracy associated with Spanish government regulations. It was clear from the interviews that Spanish HEIs are taking different approaches to these. Regional governments also appear to play a greater or lesser role in the processes, depending on their interests. In some processes, there is also a requirement for approval to be given by both national and regional governments which inevitably lengthens the process.

One institution delivering UK non-university HE courses described the “tortuous” process of obtaining approval to set up delivery in a new centre not far from their existing location, authorised three years ago with minimum hassle. This has caused considerable delay and a huge amount of persistence: “In spite of very supportive local authorities and great support through concrete interventions from British Council, we are still awaiting approval.” The institution applied in February 2021. The same process of approval for the same qualifications in the current venue only took three months, which is stated by Spanish administration as the period expected for authorisation.

All respondents agree on the increasing levels of bureaucracy that not belonging to the EU brings to any qualification approval, the difficulties of successfully navigating pathways to achieve authorisation and the considerable investment of time needed to do so.

### Lack of framework agreements and processes (for mobilities and university academic collaborations)

Primarily because the UK is no longer covered by the framework agreements of the EU, more complex agreements and procedures are now required between UK and Spanish HEIs. Respondents to the SEPIE survey point to potential difficulties in signing agreements, the administrative procedures to implement cooperation agreements, and the

**Academic collaboration requires small varied collaborations in order to build trust amongst institutions in UK and Spain.**

**Three main avenues are identified for academic collaboration:**

- **HND/FP Superior joint degrees**
- **Top-up programmes for double degrees.**
- **Split-site PhDs**

lack of precedents or applicable jurisdiction in case of disagreement. Interviewees also noted that Spanish HEIs would require increased staffing if they had to develop and manage different ad hoc agreements with each UK university.

In terms of double and joint degrees, interviewees for the British Council's 2020 field research suggested there was a need to homogenise course content and quality since UK and Spanish HEIs used different criteria. (They noted that this was one of the reasons why there were more joint and double degrees with France.) It is worth mentioning here that a couple of the interviewees mentioned UK top-up courses, not well known in Spain, as an excellent opportunity for education collaboration agreements through articulation programmes, leading to UK-Spain double degrees.

### Lack of EU funding

Since the United Kingdom is no longer covered by the Erasmus framework, future funding is a significant challenge. 36 per cent of SEPIE respondents rank this as the second most serious difficulty, alongside the lack of the EU framework (or bilateral collaboration frameworks) to underpin co-operation agreements. The issue is not only funding for the students but the lack of funding for management costs and overheads, such as insurance, which for EU member countries is included in Erasmus+ funding.

Funding will also be more complex in UK-Spanish double or postgraduate degrees that involve student mobility. Where Erasmus+ might have been used to support this before Brexit, there will now need to be individual agreements between UK and Spanish HEIs to levy or balance fees.

## 2. “Soft” issues and challenges

### Perception that UK HEIs are not interested in Spain

Although Spain was the second country of choice for Erasmus mobilities from the UK (Erasmus 2018-19 data), in the interviews for the British Council's field research in February 2020, Spanish universities outside Madrid or Barcelona perceived the UK to be elitist and largely uninterested in developing projects with Spanish universities. While these comments relate to student exchanges, they are echoed in experiences relating to teaching partnerships and research collaborations. Spanish universities do not see the UK as a natural partner, looking instead to Germany, France, Holland, Italy, the Nordic countries, the USA and Latin America. For teaching partnerships, there is a perception that UK HEIs are not proactive but that they expect Spanish partners to solve any problems that arise. Spanish HEIs find it easier to collaborate with French and US partners. The result is an absence of close relationships with UK HEIs, which acts as a demotivator to many Spanish HEIs seeking overseas collaborations. This particularly impacts transnational education partnerships – and especially joint and double degrees, since these typically require both a high level of trust between partners and a significant investment of resources (human and financial) over a relatively long period.

Mobility (student but also faculty) is of primary importance to Spain, HEIs point to a number of difficulties at the level of the UK government, UK HEIs and UK students, who show less interest in mobilities than other Europeans. All Spanish HEIs



mentioned that the Turing programme cannot be considered a replacement for Erasmus, as it is neither reciprocal nor does it include a framework bilateral or multilateral agreement. As a result there are important extra bureaucracies and difficulties to overcome for successful mobilities, such as issues related to visas or costs towards the UK. UK HEIs have in the last three years cancelled mobility arrangements and also withdrawn from cooperation agreements with other European and Spanish partners. In some cases, strategic alliances of European universities have been damaged.

While Erasmus mobilities to Spain from the UK in 2018-19 amounted to 4,300 – just behind Italy, France and Germany and well above the rest of the EU countries – some HEIs interviewed said they had no students going to or moving from the UK this year.

### **Lack of information and promotion**

In 2020, the British Council's field research found that Spanish HEIs were confused about whether the UK was intending to stay within the Bologna plan, and also what impact the UK's exit from the EU would have on the recognition of credits and degrees. Respondents recommended that there should be information sessions to clarify the UK's position. In SEPIE's survey, Spanish universities request information from the UK on:

*“new agreements, renewals of existing ones, information on how to approach the collaboration between the two parties, to know what the priorities of the Educational System in the UK are (mobility, joint programs, etc.), information on how*

*and from whom to request Certificates of Sponsorship (CoS). Clear and precise information is required to give the students details on what the country and the university require and it would be desirable to have unified criteria.” They note that it is important that “this information does not change during the process”.*

Over and above this practical information, respondents in the British Council's field research also believed it was necessary to promote Spanish HE and encourage interest in the United Kingdom so that UK universities are more receptive to collaboration proposals, “since reciprocity is key”. Taking a different angle, interviewees for this report felt that greater promotion of UK courses was needed in Spain. They pointed to the fact that UK courses have a good story to tell, particularly in terms of employment outcomes for their Spanish students. At a time of very high unemployment for this age group in Spain, the majority of graduates from UK higher education and vocational courses obtain employment easily. This should be proactively promoted, to encourage HEIs from UK and Spain to enter academic collaborations for mutual benefit.

### **Competition vs the declining importance of the UK**

After interviewing Spanish universities in 2020, the British Council concluded that “leaving the Erasmus framework will reduce the relative importance of the United Kingdom for Spanish universities in a substantial way.” The British Council's report notes increasing competition from other countries:

“Within Europe, the importance of countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries, France, Italy, and Poland stand out. These countries have been positioning themselves strategically since the exit from the United Kingdom began to be negotiated. Since they teach their degree courses in English, they are attractive. With France and Italy, the historical ties stand out, and with Poland, being a destination that is betting on teaching in English with a lower cost of living than the rest.”

Outside the EU, the UK would be in direct competition with the USA, Australia, Canada (all increasingly popular) and Latin America (supported by Santander funding and frameworks as well as language and cultural affinity).

Specifically in terms of transnational education partnerships, the British Council found that Spanish universities were collaborating in developing double and joint degrees, mainly with universities in Italy, Poland, France, Germany, the USA and Latin America. The British Council’s findings and predictions in 2020 are supported by the interviews conducted for this report. Almost without exception, Spanish partners delivering UK courses raised the issue of the growing competition from other countries as a real challenge to the future of UK courses in Spain. EU funding and frameworks are making collaborations with EU member countries more attractive and the current uncertainties about the UK’s regulations (particularly visa requirements for internships) are making Spanish HEIs to look towards Australia or Canada as potential non-EU replacement partners. It is essential to find new ways of collaboration

between middle-rank universities in Spain and the UK, to counteract the growing competition and reduced number of mobilities.

In the vocational education area, Spain is mirroring Germany’s model, which has excellent results for labour integration and international prestige. Yet all the interviewees offering UK VET qualifications in Spain suggest that there are excellent opportunities for collaboration with the UK system, as there is great parity between qualifications. Such collaborations would support the objectives of internationalisation and language learning included in the recent Spanish law for vocational qualifications. Our interviewees perceived the German model as less transferable to Spain, largely because of Spanish industry not having the tradition or capacity to replicate the German model. The German model is also based on rote learning, which will not meet the requirements of growing industry sectors in Spain.

One of the interviewees mentioned that there is very strong parity of programmes between UK Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and Spanish Formación Profesional Superior, and that mutual academic collaborations would strengthen both systems. He mentioned there are already some excellent existing examples of “combined” qualifications in Spain that demonstrate how these benefit student employment opportunities and meet industry labour needs.

# Conclusions and recommendations

In SEPIE's survey, 64 per cent of HEIs express "great interest" in maintaining or creating new collaborations with UK universities. These are in the areas of research and of mobility, where HEIs suggest that Turing could be used in new areas such as short-term programmes, summer programmes, language courses and cooperation. The latter includes joint and double degrees, cooperation within university networks, joint laboratories, internships, sharing good practices, collaborative online international learning (COIL) and hybrid projects. A recent report from la Fundación Española para la Ciencia y la Tecnología (FECYT), "An Analysis of Scientific Research Collaborations between Spain and UK, 2011-2020", shows that the best research is produced jointly, and that Spain-UK research collaborations have grown by 18 per cent annually since 2011. Most collaborations appear to be in health sciences, while SEPIE's questionnaire respondents pointed to classical philology, music, philosophy and art as areas of opportunity for research collaborations.

Interviews conducted for this report echo these opportunities, as well as identifying additional ones such as vocational teaching partnerships (particularly in new media and technology areas with high unsatisfied demand for skilled graduates); increasing the delivery of top-up degrees delivered in Spain; joint doctoral programmes or split-site PhDs; and strategic networks of HEIs based on university or subject groups.

If the opportunities are to be capitalised on, the challenges will also need to be addressed. The recommendations below reflect the views of Spanish and UK stakeholders in terms of how this might be done. These largely fall into two categories – those that require regulatory or policy solutions (1 below) and those that might be solved with better information and networking (2-4). They are as follows:

**It is essential that stakeholders work together, through shared collaborative networks and knowledge hubs, to build trust and understanding between individuals, institutions and countries. Building a more favourable environment is possible and can only be achieved through collaboration.**

## 1. The signature of UK-Spain bilateral agreements

- a. A UK-Spain bilateral government framework agreement is essential (and urgent) to address the major challenges which result directly from Brexit.
- b. A framework sector agreement to facilitate mobility collaborations following the UK's withdrawal from Erasmus+. This could be signed by bodies representing UK and Spain HEIs (i.e. SEPIE or CRUE and the British Council or Universities UK International (UUKi)) and would help to eliminate the difficulties perceived by Spanish HEIs to greater collaboration (e.g., lack of personnel to manage ad hoc agreements and mobilities, with different rules for each university).

## 2. Navigational aids (a knowledge hub)

- a. Since a framework agreement will take time to achieve – and many of the challenges are in “unknown territory” – the British Council in co-operation with SEPIE should lead on unravelling the bureaucratic pathways that cross this territory, and providing reliable advice to institutions in Spain and the UK.
- b. One component of this could be a series of briefing sessions on key areas (regulations, visas, the UK's position in the EHEA, relevant national strategies and policies, etc.). These could bring together stakeholders from both countries, providing an opportunity to exchange and clarify information.

## 3. Promotion of educational strengths and improve knowledge

- a. In the UK, promoting the strengths of Spanish institutions with the aim of encouraging more UK institutions to consider partnerships (particularly outside Madrid and Barcelona).
- b. In Spain, promoting a greater understanding of the UK's higher education and vocational systems to Spanish stakeholders, including employers and parents. Particular areas would include top-up degrees and HNDs.

## 4. Creation of networks

- a. The British Council should work in collaboration with SEPIE and UUKi to develop a network of UK and Spanish universities through which communications can be targeted and collaborations fostered.

To conclude, while there are challenges in extending and strengthening academic collaborations or mobilities between the UK and Spain, there are good reasons to remain optimistic. The strengths of existing relations and collaborations and the interests of institutions, students and sector agencies provide a basis on which to build new ways of engagement and maximise opportunities.

# Reports referenced

- British Council (2020), “The Relationship between Spanish and British universities: Opportunities for Collaboration after the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union”.
- SEPIE (March 2022), “Survey of Spanish Universities: Issues for Spanish-UK collaboration”. Conducted for this project – see Annex 1.
- HESA Aggregate Offshore Record (2022).
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2022), “[Unemployment by Age Group](#)”.
- La Federación Española para la Ciencia y la Tecnología - FECYT (2022), [Análisis de la producción científica en colaboración entre España y Reino Unido. 2011-2020](#)



---

# Annex

SEPIE Spanish Universities Survey

## QUESTION 1. What are the main difficulties currently facing international collaborations between Spanish and UK universities?

**Responses** have been categorised as follows:

- **VISA APPLICATION/PROCESSING-UK:** Difficulties in attaining English language competency level (inconsistencies between HEI course entry requirements and visa criteria), application and other associated costs, difficulties obtaining Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) for the period 2021-2027.
- **VISA APPLICATION/PROCESSING Spain:** Difficulties in obtaining appointments at Spanish Consulates.
- **AGREEMENT RELATED ISSUES:** Universities would like to have a template agreement for bilateral collaborations, covering legal aspects and particularly for internships.
- **TURING PROGRAMME:** Lack of programme understanding for Spanish stakeholders, lack of programme reciprocity.
- **COMMUNICATION:** Difficulties in maintaining communication with partners
- **FUNDING:** Lack of funding, higher/ additional costs (for example, post-Erasmus+ mandatory insurance purchase, lack of reciprocity balance in exchanges (Turing).
- **INTERNSHIPS IN UK:** Difficulties or complete stoppage, lack of legal framework post-Erasmus+, complexities and delays associated with obtaining CoS, withdrawal of receiving HEI's due to complexity of procedures.
- **CREDIT RECOGNITION:** Different credit structure (ECTS).
- **NO DATA:** no data provided.



## QUESTION 1: RESULTS

Responses can be seen in the table and graphic below. Responses suggest that visa processing provides significant challenges to international collaboration. UK visa processing-related issues were cited as a challenge for 64.29% of respondents, whilst 21.43% cited difficulties in securing an appointment at a Spanish consulate.

Other significant challenges cited by respondents were issues relating to agreements (35,71%) and funding (35,71%).

QUESTION 1	N°	%	
VISA APPLICATION/PROCESSING UK	18	64.29	
VISA APPLICATION/PROCESSING SP	6	21.43	
AGREEMENT RELATED ISSUES	10	35.71	
TURING PROGRAMME	5	17.86	
COMMUNICATIONS	3	10.71	
FUNDING	10	35.71	
INTERNSHIPS IN THE UK	3	10.71	
CREDIT RECOGNITION	1	3.57	
NO DATA	1	3.57	

## QUESTION 2. Have these difficulties changed over time – and which factors have influenced this?

**Responses** have been categorised as follows:

- **YES, BREXIT.** There have been changes due to Brexit which have resulted in challenges for international collaboration. Difficulties encountered refer to:
  - 1) Exit from EU programmes such as Erasmus+
  - 2) Perceived lack of like for like student mobility programmes for EU students going to the UK
  - 3) Difficulties signing agreements
  - 4) Reduced interest from British students to go abroad
  - 5) Damaged alliances with EU universities
  - 6) Complex procedures in exchange programmes that vary according to modality (studies, internships, staff)
- Cancellation of mobilities due to the UK's exit from the Erasmus+ program.
- **YES.** There have been changes but the respondent has not specified which.
- **YES, BREXIT - VISA.** Yes, there have been changes due to Brexit, with issues ranging from:
  - 1) Cessation of freedom of movement. and resulting complexities for travel and residence
  - 2) T5 visa procedure for Erasmus internships
  - 3) Delays in visa processing, resulting in increased waiting times
  - 4) Increased visa costs discouraging students from going to UK
- Requirement for UK HEI involvement in setting up internships
- **YES, BREXIT - HEALTH COVERAGE.** Difficulties with health insurance (for stays longer than 6 months).
- **YES, BREXIT - LANGUAGE VISA.** The British government requires a C1 level (and not a B2 level) to obtain a visa and only accepts specific certificates.
- **YES, COVID-19.** Overload of in-person and online services.
- **NO DATA.** No data provided.

## QUESTION 2: RESULTS

Answers are shown in the table and graphic below. Most respondents indicate that Brexit has caused or compounded issues. (64.29%). Difficulties in visa applications (35.71% and to a lesser extent, changes in language requirement (7.14%) and the health insurance card (3.57%) have also been cited as issues for Spanish stakeholders.

QUESTION 2	N°	%	
VISA YES - BREXIT	18	64.29	
YES	1	3.57	
YES – BREXIT VISA	10	35.71	
YES – BREXIT HEALTH COVERAGE	1	3.57	
YES – BREXIT ENGLISH LEVEL VISA	2	7.14	
YES - COVID 19	1	3.57	
NO DATA	5	17.86	






### QUESTION 3. How severe are these difficulties? Could they be overcome and how?

**Responses** have been categorised as follows:

- **YES, NEW PROGRAMMES.** Development of new Turing-type programmes or other mobility programmes. Considerations are:
  - 1) Mobility of university staff
  - 2) Bring back funding for mobility
  - 3) Implementation of networking activity such as workshops, meetings
  - 4) Funding of programmes that allow mobility to the UK (example of Switzerland)
  - 5) Adherence by the UK to existing programmes to recover previous facilities
  - 6) Development and strengthening of key strategic alliances between both countries, to create a general framework of acceptance of Erasmus agreement models.
  - 7) Creation of statutes as in Switzerland or Finland
  - 8) More aid programmes for faculty members and researchers exchange to establish links at an academic level, working on centralized digital models and a joint database as in Erasmus Without Papers.
- **YES, FURTHER INFORMATION.** The universities could request further information on:
  - 1) New agreements, and renewals of existing ones
  - 2) How to approach HEI collaboration
  - 3) How to know what the priorities of the Educational System in the UK are (mobility, joint programmes, etc.)
  - 4) How and from whom to request sponsorship certificates.
  - 5) University entry requirements for students
- **YES, VISA.** The universities indicate they would like the UK to improve visa procedures through:
  - 1) Resolution of issues surrounding language level accreditation, 2) Review of issues surrounding immigration.
  - 2) Reduction of entry costs
  - 3) Fast track visas for students.
- **NO DATA.** No data provided.
- **DIFFICULT.** The respondent believes that the UK should change its university and visa policy.

## QUESTION 3: RESULTS

Data about the answers are shown in the table and in the graphic below. Most of the universities show a great interest in continuing to collaborate with the universities of the UK and express their interest in finding a solution to all the difficulties that emerge from Brexit. To do so, they propose the creation of new programmes between the two countries to promote mobility (46.43%), to facilitate the procedures in order to obtain a visa (35.71%) and to be provided with clear and accurate information on procedures (25%).

QUESTION 3	N°	%	
YES – NEW PROGRAMS	13	46.43	
YES – FURTHER INFORMATION	7	25.00	
YES – VISA	10	35.71	
NO DATA	6	21.43	
DIFFICULT	1	3.57	








#### QUESTION 4. Are there future areas of collaboration or new opportunities for Spanish and UK universities to work together on areas of internationalisation?

**Responses** have been categorised as follows:

- **YES - MOBILITY.** Universities are interested in mobility as the UK is a very in-demand study destination.
- **YES - RESEARCH.** Universities see opportunities of collaboration at a research level.
- **YES - COOPERATION.** In a variety of areas such as: joint laboratories, internships, joint/double degrees and certifications, sharing good practice, COIL and hybrid projects, and cooperation within university networks. Turing (in new areas such as short-term programmes, summer programmes, language courses). Classical philology, music, philosophy, art.
- **DIFFICULT.** The respondent believes that the UK should change its university and visa policy in order to facilitate current and future agreements.
- **YES.** The University does not provide any details.
- **NO.** The University does not provide details.
- **NO DATA.** No data provided.

## QUESTION 4: RESULTS

Results are shown in the table and in the graphic below. Most universities show a great interest in maintaining and creating new collaborations with UK universities (64.29%), as well as developing mobility programmes (14.29%). It is important to note that some universities consider the continuity of collaborations difficult (3.57%) or impossible (3.57%) due to the current problems, to which they consider have no easy solution.

QUESTION 4	N°	%	
YES – MOBILITY	4	14.29	
YES – RESEARCH	2	7.14	
YES – COOPERATION	18	64.29	
YES	1	3.57	
NO	1	3.57	
NO DATA	6	21.43	
DIFFICULT	1	3.57	

## QUESTION 5. How can the British Council and SEPIE best support Spanish-UK collaboration? (i.e., in helping to remove difficulties and/or support new opportunities)?








**Responses** have been categorised as follows:

- **IDENTIFYING DIFFICULTIES.** Compiling issues and offering recommendations.
- **FOSTERING NETWORKING.** Identifying priorities and requirements on both sides.
- **FUNDING.** Support funding and looking for funds, including a bilateral mobility program.
- **VISA FACILITATION.** Considering internships as a study period (UK), making it possible for students to obtain the CoS by themselves.
- **INFORMATION SUPPLY.** Including sharing and disseminating models and guides.
- **IMPOSSIBLE.** Due to the current political and legal circumstances.
- **NO DATA.** No data provided.



## QUESTION 5: RESULTS

Results illustrate three key ways in which SEPIE and British Council can support UK and Spanish HEIs in ongoing collaboration. 46.43% of respondents cited the requirement for both bodies to fulfil a role of signposting and supply of significant information, such as sector updates, models and guides. HEIs have also highlighted support in developing funding and visa facilitation as two other significant priority areas.

QUESTION 5	N°	%	
IDENTIFYING DIFFICULTIES	1	3.57	
FOSTERING NETWORKING	3	10.71	
FUNDING	11	39.29	
VISA FACILITATION	11	39.29	
INFORMATION SUPPLY	13	46.43	
IMPOSSIBLE	1	3.57	
NO DATA	3	10.71	

With collaboration from:



© British Council 2022

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.