



Bridging Policy and Technology: The PIONEER Master's Programme

A Case Study: Dive Deep into PIONEER



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“PIONEER was the first ever Erasmus Mundus or joint master's degree programme for TalTech. We were not only PIONEERS as in our title but also pioneers by working together with the university and creating all the new practices and rules and regulations to run this kind of programme at TalTech.” - Dr. Veiko Lember, TalTech

Among many excellent Erasmus Mundus programmes, the PIONEER Master's Programme, an Erasmus Mundus joint master's degree developed through a partnership between KU Leuven, the University of Münster, and Tallinn University of Technology (TalTech), stands out. The programme is a strategic educational initiative designed to integrate policy and technology within the public sector, combining physical mobility with comprehensive education equipping professionals with the necessary skills to lead public administration in an era of technological advancement.

Programme origins

Originating in 2014, PIONEER was established to address a gap in traditional public administration education, which often lacked a focus on digital government and the complexities of European integration. Combining social science with IT expertise, the PIONEER prepares a new generation of public sector professionals proficient in both policy and technology. Students experience studying in three countries – first they start in public administration at KU Leuven in Belgium, move to Münster in Germany to focus on IT, and then to TalTech in Estonia where knowledge learned in two previous universities is brought together.

The programme came to be as a result of personal relations and connections between academics in different countries and universities as Professor Steven Van de Walle from KU Leuven, the Academic Coordinator, points out. The programme is built on equality, with all partners contributing equally so no one is left out. It is integrated into and aligned with the strategic goals of the universities to enhance their international presence and attract diverse students.

“The University of Münster's involvement in PIONEER aligns with its strategic goals to enhance its international presence and attract a diverse student body.”

Dr. Michael Raeckers, University of Münster



Interdisciplinary and practical approaches to studies

As part of their studies in TalTech, students work directly with challenges in Estonian e-governance, solving complex problems and offering real solutions that are implemented to improve Estonian governance. This interdisciplinary and practical approach is highlighted as a success story by Dr. Veiko Lember of TalTech. During those yearly challenge projects, students need to come up with insights and ideas that are deemed useful by actual policymakers – and also sell those ideas to policymakers. It is something that gives students real-world experience and skills to navigate societal challenges with a complex socio-technical perspective.

“As a practical task, we sent all Pioneers to different corners of Estonia, to solve a challenge of how to get more international tourists to visit not only Tallinn but other parts of Estonia as well. They were in Estonia for the first time, and we had them talk to locals, do fieldwork and come up with innovative and reality-grounded solutions on how to use modern solutions to develop tourism outside Tallinn” – Dr. Veiko Lember, TalTech

Challenges and rewards

The first student cohort was welcomed in 2017, with 16 students starting, but the dynamics of the programme applications are on an upward track, as by 2023 there are more than 350 applications, a testament to both the quality of the participating universities and visibility of Erasmus Mundus brand. Alumni of PIONEER have progressed to significant roles in international organisations, consultancies, and academia, leveraging the expertise gained from the programme.

“I think the programme gives our students the right skill set to work, especially on levels like the European Union or United Nations.”

Dr. Michael Raeckers, University of Münster

Navigating the challenges involved in setting up a cooperative programme between 3 distinct universities, hasn't always been easy. Integrating different academic systems, especially in the context of differing national legislation has been challenging, but those challenges have been overcome through strong faculty relationships and trust. Dr. Egert Juuse from TalTech reflects that the programme has had to be highly adaptive and coordinated, working out joint rules followed by all members of the consortium – as for



TalTech it was the first such project, many rules and agreements had to be made from scratch. Similar challenges were noted by Dr. Michael Raeckers of the University of Münster, alongside Professor Van de Walle, acknowledging the administrative complexities of the programme and underlining the necessity of a flexible and efficient administrative approach to surmount the obstacles – a recommendation that would apply to any new consortia interested in creating Erasmus Mundus programmes.

Different IT systems posed additional challenges, overcoming which sometimes required rather creative solutions, and logistics related to the physical mobility of the students, with students from outside the EU facing most challenges.

Despite the challenges, the rewards have been manifold. Dr. Juuse notes that PIONEER has strengthened their university's reputation, diversified the student body, and facilitated a vibrant research community. Moreover, the transnational nature of the consortium has not only enhanced the educational experience for students by exposing them to various levels of digital governance but has also created a fertile ground for collaborative research and shared expertise among faculty.

Future outlook

PIONEER is a programme of ongoing constant evolution, reflecting the swift pace of technological change, to ensure that the programme remains at the forefront of public sector innovation. With a vision for expansion, Dr. Lember anticipates PIONEER's growing role in tackling global issues like climate change and the digital demands of modern governance, as evidenced by the substantial number of applications for the latest cohort.

For any university interested in establishing Erasmus Mundus consortium, Professor Van de Walle's advice is to prioritise complementary partnerships and maintain a consortium size that is manageable for effective education and administration. Building trust and personal relationships on equal grounds, having a clear division of tasks to avoid duplication and overlapping is vital for any successful consortia, and for PIONEER this has been a success story, reflected in their growth, the success of their alumni and international research this collaboration has fostered.

With all that, the journey KU Leuven, University of Münster and TalTech are on is going strong, with the PIONEER programme standing as an example of the importance of

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interdisciplinary education and international cooperation, looking towards the future to continue influencing the educational landscape through collaborative innovation.

For more information on the PIONEER programme, please visit the PIONEER website: <https://pioneer-master.eu/>.

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