HIGHER EDUCATION
COOPERATION WITH RUSSIA

Assessment of CIMO's Russia operations
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The purpose of this report is to assess the Centre for International Mobility (CIMO)’s cooperation with Russia. From the beginning of 2017 CIMO and the Finnish National Board of Education merged to form Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI). The new organisation continues to provide expert services in the same fields as the predecessors: developing education and life-long learning as well as promoting international mobility and cooperation.

EDUFI’s cooperation with Russia includes the nationally funded FIRST programme, which focuses on student and teacher exchanges between higher education institutions in Finland and Northwest Russia, a new, geographically more extensive pilot programme to support mobility from Finland to Russia, and the north2north programme, which enables members of higher education institutions of the University of the Arctic to engage in small-scale student exchanges with Russia. In addition, EDUFI provides funding for Finnish students to complete practical training periods in Russia and administers Russian state grants that provide support for pursuing degrees, or parts thereof, in Russia. EDUFI also provides funding for young Russian researchers to participate in its Winter School in Finland and complete research periods in Finland through the EDUFI Fellowships programme (previous CIMO Fellowships). In addition to funding programmes, EDUFI supports cooperation between Finnish higher education institutions and Russia by organising cooperation seminars and student fairs and by producing knowledge and statistics. This assessment report covers different operations before the existence of the new EDUFI organisation, therefore the activities are referred to as CIMO’s activities.

The cooperation environment is constantly evolving; Higher Education sectors both in Finland and Russia are undergoing major reforms and public funding for HE institutions is decreasing. There was a clear need to evaluate the current objectives and practices in HE cooperation with Russia. How should the role of EDUFI in promoting and supporting cooperation between HE institutions in Finland and in Russia be defined? How should the cooperation programmes and support instruments be developed further? In order to find answers to these questions CIMO decided to implement an external evaluation of its programmes and activities promoting HE cooperation with Russia.

A steering group with the aim of supporting the external evaluation was appointed. The members of the steering group were counselor of education Erja Heikkinen from the Ministry of Education and Culture, rector Anneli Pirttilä from the Saimaa UAS, vice rector Riitta Pyykö from the University of Turku, project manager Martin Krispin from the DAAD Moscow office and senior adviser Herdis Kolle from SIU. Maija Airas, Outi Jäppinen and Juha Ketolainen participated in the work on behalf of EDUFI. Finnish higher education institutions gave their contribution by participating in a discussion seminar and students by answering a questionnaire.
We would like to warmly thank everyone for their contribution in the evaluation process! Also we would like to express our gratitude to the University of Helsinki Aleksanteri Institute and particularly, Dr. Ira Jänis-Isokangas for the high-quality implementation of the evaluation.

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OBJECTIVES OF THE ASSESSMENT

Russia is CIMO’s most significant bilateral focus country in the higher education sector, and the situation is not expected to change in terms of resources in the near future. However, the changing environment and the rapidly developing higher education sectors in Finland and Russia, as well as the unfavourable economic outlooks for the two countries, call for an assessment of the Finnish higher education sector’s operations in Russia. The objective of the assessment is to define CIMO’s future role in promoting and supporting Finnish higher education institutions’ cooperation with Russia and development needs in terms of CIMO’s instruments of support for operations in Russia. The main focus is on the FIRST programme for higher education institutions in Finland and Russia, but this programme will also be examined alongside the other programmes in Russia that are operated by CIMO.

The FIRST programme has not previously been profoundly assessed by external evaluators during its ten-year-history. However, the programme was assessed by CIMO in 2012. This assessment involved a combination of statistics, feedback from higher education institutions and assessments by external experts with regard to the programme and its current state and future needs. In addition, in the same year, CIMO assessed the intensive courses implemented within the FIRST programme. A report by Arto Mustajoki on universities’ cooperation with and expertise in Russia was published in 2007. The FIRST programme was discussed to some extent in the report.

This assessment was carried out by the Aleksanteri Institute, which operates under the University of Helsinki and also serves as a national coordinator. The institute has participated in many cooperation projects carried out by Finnish and Russian universities and universities of applied sciences.

In this assessment, CIMO’s operations in Russia and cooperation between Finnish and Russian higher education institutions were examined with regard to the objectives set by CIMO, looking at the following aspect: How can CIMO’s operations in Russia be further developed within the scope of the existing resources? The operations in Russia and the related development needs will be examined from three perspectives:

1. Addressing national needs and the changing international circumstances in CIMO’s operations in Russia
   • Do the current programme instruments meet national needs in the best possible way?
   • How should the changing international environment and Russia’s economic and political development be taken into account?
   • How can the programmes competitively promote Finland in the changing international educational markets?

2. FIRST programme structure, content and administration
   • Do the current programme structures or formats, or cooperation within the programme, leave room for development in terms of the number of networks, for example?

1 http://www.cimo.fi/palvelut/julkaisut/selvitykset/first-selvitys
2 http://www.cimo.fi/palvelut/julkaisut/selvitykset/intensiivikurssien_vaikuttavuus
Should the geographical focus of the programme be expanded to cover Russia as a whole, or should Northwest Russia continue to be favoured in terms of the further development of regional cooperation? In terms of funding, what should be the ratio between student and teacher exchanges and intensive courses? Is there room for new forms of cooperation that would aid the achievement of national goals?

Is the current length of the funding period appropriate? How can the programme administration be further developed?

How can credit transfer be facilitated within the programmes? How can the programme content be further developed to ensure that the content is in line with the indicators that the Ministry of Education and Culture and the higher education institutions have determined for international cooperation and internationalisation at home?

3. Significance of CIMO’s operations in Russia

What is the significance of educational exchange with Russia for Finnish students, teachers and educational institutions and for Finnish society? How can Russian higher education institutions be encouraged to better promote their operations? How can Russian higher education institutions be encouraged to commit to developing the programme and providing resources for the programme?

The assessment was carried out in cooperation with operators in the field. It was based on material and statistics produced by CIMO on its operations in Russia. The assessment also made use of discussions about the significance of cooperation with Russia and the FIRST programme procedures with those responsible for international affairs at higher education institutions. In addition, a steering group was established for the assessment. The group consisted of representatives of the Aleksanteri Institute, CIMO, the Ministry of Education and Culture and higher education institutions, as well as the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education (SIU) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which are CIMO’s sister organisations. The topics discussed with the members of the steering group included national and international partners’ experiences of cooperation with Russia and Russian higher education institutions, and development needs with regard to CIMO’s programmes related to Russia. For the purpose of the assessment, new statistics were produced for student and teacher exchanges, and an extensive survey related to educational exchange with Russia was carried out with students.
NATIONAL NEEDS AND CHANGING INTERNATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Russia is highly significant for Finland. In the current Government Programme, economic and political development in Russia is seen as both a threat and an opportunity. Russia has undergone extensive and often unpredictable changes over the past few decades. This unpredictability and the hope of tapping more effectively into the large Russian market have provoked discussion about the importance of Russia-related expertise for Finnish society. Several reports, statements and strategies have paid attention to this aspect and presented measures to increase such expertise among Finns. These reports and their suggested measures have mentioned student and teacher mobility as an important consideration with regard to cooperation with Russia.

The objectives for CIMO’s operations in Russia were defined in the Action Programme for 2003–2007, which was published by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2003. In the section dealing with researcher, teacher and student mobility and cultural exchange, the action programme suggested that CIMO’s operations in Russia, and particularly its FIRST programme, should be strengthened and expanded. The suggested measures included increasing teacher exchanges and intensive courses within the FIRST programme and seeking incentives to increase interest in study in Russia. The action programme limited the geographical scope of the cooperation to Northwest Russia, but it also mentioned St Petersburg and Moscow as particularly important centres for the development of culture, education and science.

Development of Universities’ Cooperation with and Expertise in Russia, a report prepared by Arto Mustajoki for the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2007, examined the assessment of these goals to some extent. From today’s perspective, the report deals with a quite different Russia, with which Finland should cooperate. Nevertheless, the observations presented in the report about educational cooperation and student exchanges remain topical. The report presented a favourable review of CIMO’s efforts to support Finnish universities’ cooperation with Russia. The report saw the imbalance in student exchanges between Finland and Russia to be temporary, as the social and economic development in Russia was deemed to be more positive than today. The report examined only universities’ cooperation with Russia and excluded universities of applied sciences. However, based on universities’ experiences of educational exchanges, it suggested that the FIRST programme should be expanded and its marketing increased. In addition, the report suggested that the Winter School should be expanded to cover humanities and social sciences as well as organising seminars for Finnish and Russian PhD students.

Russia 2017: Three Scenarios, a report published by the Committee for the Future of the Parliament of Finland in 2007, also took into account the possibility of unfavourable social and economic development in Russia. Nevertheless, the report emphasised the importance of Russia-related expertise and a knowledge of the Russian language and culture among Finns. The report encouraged Finnish young people to learn Russian and familiarise themselves with Russians and their culture. Student exchanges and practical training periods offer
excellent opportunities for this. The report presented a favourable review of CIMO’s efforts to promote student and trainee exchanges between Finland and Russia. Much like Mustajoki’s report, it paid attention to the fact that Finnish students had been quite reluctant to go to Russia. The report suggested that Russia-related expertise should be increased at all levels and student and trainee exchanges between Finland and Russia should be expanded. It expressed the hope that an increasing number of students would be willing to spend a period of six months, for example, in Russia as part of their studies.

The favourable economic development in Russia in the early 2000s was also reflected in the Ministry of Education and Culture’s Strategy for the Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions in Finland 2009–2015.¹ The strategy discussed Russia’s role as a growing market area and major centre for culture and science which calls for special attention. According to the strategy, cooperation with and expertise in Russia should be increased in Finnish society. One of the five main strategic focuses was related to promoting the export of expertise – that is, high-quality cooperation in research, education and culture between Finnish and Russian higher education institutions. The funding level of the FIRST student exchange programme, among others, should be increased.

The strategy paid attention to the fact that the Finnish system of education and research is not sufficiently international and the level of international mobility among teachers, researchers and students is too low in comparison to other countries. According to the strategy, the benefits of international cooperation between higher education institutions were also related to the much-demanded increase in Russia-related expertise. The strategy noted that higher education institutions play a key role in the internationalisation of society and the economy, as they attract highly qualified professionals and foreign investments.

The FIRST programme, coordinated by CIMO, has helped higher education institutions to network in Northwest Russia and to strengthen their potential for development, general competence level, resources, and business and industry in their regions, as well as local competitive and innovation abilities. The Winter Schools organised by CIMO have opened up the opportunity for the Finnish and Russian academic communities to work and network with and learn from the best experts in their fields, benefit from high-quality infrastructures and familiarise themselves with new research methods, fields and ideas. The teacher exchanges included in the FIRST programme have brought new expertise and influences into Finnish higher education institutions. The student exchanges included in CIMO’s operations in Russia have improved participants’ language skills and labour market position while also increasing mutual understanding between cultures and societies. CIMO’s operations in Russia are, in other words, a natural part of implementing the goals of the internationalisation strategy.

The current Government Programme defines increasing international cooperation in education and research, as well as increasing educational export, as a goal for competence development and education. CIMO’s operations in Russia support this goal naturally. Based on the reports, it can be concluded that Finnish society needs a nationally coordinated Finnish-Russian student and teacher exchange programme, like the activities CIMO has organised through its own programmes. The challenge is to develop forms of activities so that they best reflect the changed international, political and economic situation.

Higher education institutions’ cooperation with Russia is based on bilateral exchange agreements and exchange and cooperation programmes coordinated by CIMO. The Finnish-Russian Student and Teacher Exchange Programme (FIRST) is the most extensive Russia-related programme coordinated by CIMO. It was established in 2003, and it promotes cooperation between higher education institutions in Finland and its nearby regions in Northwest Russia. The programme supports student and teacher exchanges between higher education institutions in Finland and Russia, as well as jointly organised intensive courses.

All of the programme funding is provided by Finland. The funding consists of an annual appropriation by the Ministry of Education and Culture and funds allocated annually by CIMO in accordance with the geographical focuses of its strategy. These funds have enabled the programme funding to be increased annually in line with the suggestions presented in the reports on cooperation with and expertise in Russia. In 2015, the total programme budget was EUR 568,164, of which student exchanges represented 72%, teacher exchanges 7% and intensive courses 21%. The number of applications has been higher than the amount of funding available. Meanwhile, around 10–20% of the funding granted is returned due to an imbalance in student exchanges.

The programme administration and the student exchange principles are modelled on the EU-funded Erasmus programme. The programme has a simple administrative structure, and resources are not used for administrative operations other than basic processes. With regard to the assessment of applications, quality is the most important criterion for FIRST projects. In terms of existing networks, attention is paid to previous cooperation and its quantitative and qualitative results, as well as reciprocity and connections between mobility and other forms of cooperation in education.

Within the FIRST programme, grants are awarded to networks created by higher education institutions. A network must include at least one higher education institution in Finland and one in Northwest Russia. The programme covers all fields of education. The higher education institution that coordinates the network must be based in Finland. The coordinating institution submits an application to CIMO. The number of higher education institutions par-
Participating in cooperation within FIRST networks has increased moderately. The number of networks has stabilised at around 25. The largest networks involve more than 20 Russian partners, while the smallest ones consist of one Finnish and one Russian higher education institution. The number of Russian higher education institutions participating in the programme is higher than that of Finnish higher education institutions. This applies to the programme as a whole and to many of the networks.

Reciprocal student exchange between higher education institutions in Finland and Northwest Russia is the key aspect of the FIRST programme. Student exchange periods are between three and twelve months long, with the grant covering a maximum of nine months. Finnish and Russian students pursuing a degree at a higher education institution that belongs to a network are eligible to take part, provided that they have completed their first year of study. The programme covers all fields of study, with the exception of students majoring in the Finnish or Russian language, as they have other opportunities to participate in student exchanges. In addition, the student exchange period may not be completed in the student’s home country.

The maximum amount of a monthly grant is EUR 560. No minimum amount has been determined. However, the grant amount paid to the student arriving in Finland must not be lower than that paid to the student going to Russia. Students accepted for participation in the programme are not eligible for a second grant.

The proportion of FIRST programme exchanges out of all student exchanges between Finland and Russia can be derived from statistics published by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela), Statistics Finland and CIMO. With regard to mobility from Russia to Finland, its share of all student exchanges was around 50% in the 2000s. Pertaining to mobility from Finland to Russia, the FIRST programme represents around one third of all student exchanges. With regard to student and teacher mobility, the programme operations can also be examined in terms of the distribution of support between Finnish and Russian participants. Such an examination shows that the proportion of students arriving from Russia is significantly high in terms of their total number and share of the support available. Their share is even higher when comparing the number of grants awarded to the number of grants actually used. In the 2014–2015 programme season, the funds used for student mobility represented 72% of the total programme budget, and 70% of this share was granted to Russian students.
In other words, the number of students arriving in Finland is higher than the number of students going to Russia. In 2015, a total of 84 exchange students left for Russia through the FIRST programme, while 197 students arrived in Finland. The most popular fields are economics and business administration, technology and social sciences. With regard to teacher exchanges, the situation is more balanced, with the numbers of teachers arriving in Finland and going to Russia being of almost equal sizes. Among teachers, the three most popular fields are the same as those among students: economics and business administration, technology and social studies.

The FIRST intensive courses were introduced in 2006 and have been highly popular. The amount of funding granted for intensive courses has been increased and consequently, the number of students participating in intensive courses has grown. CIMO commissioned a study to be carried out in 2012 with regard to the institutional impact of intensive courses at higher education institutions, including intensive courses funded through the FIRST programme.7 According to the study, intensive courses changed students’ attitudes towards Russia and made them interested in Russia as a student exchange destination. However, for the mobility to increase to a significant degree, instruction in English should be available more extensively in Russia.

A new pilot programme with Russia was introduced in summer 2015. The programme supports student mobility from Finland to Russia through exchanges with higher education institutions outside Northwest Russia. The pilot is related to cooperation between the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, which aims to increase student mobility between Finland and the Russian regions not covered by the FIRST programme. Through the pilot programme, CIMO awards grants to Finnish higher education institutions for short-term and long-term student exchanges with Russia. Russian higher education institutions may participate in the programme by means of funding provided by the Russian government.

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The north2north programme (n2n) supports student mobility in the Nordic countries, Russia and North America. Students of the member institutions of the University of the Arctic are eligible. Students wishing to participate in the n2n programme submit their application to their home institution. The goal is to support mutual knowledge and awareness of the North, as well as high-quality education in northern regions. Through the programme, student exchange grants are awarded to Finnish students wishing to attend a higher education institution in the Nordic countries, Russia or North America and to Russian students wishing to attend a Finnish higher education institution.

Universities have recruited talented postgraduate students and researchers through the Finnish-Russian Winter School, many of whom have later completed a doctorate in Finland. The Winter School is a form of cooperation developed by CIMO. The Winter School supports Finnish universities’ efforts to attract talented young researchers from Russia to their research groups, particularly in the fields of biology, psychology and computer science. The ten-day Winter School is held once a year. Based on applications and telephone interviews, around 25 Russian or Ukrainian doctoral students are selected to participate. Leading researchers in the related fields serve as instructors and have an opportunity to later apply for CIMO Fellowships grants for the participants whom they want to invite to join their research groups as postgraduate students. The Winter School has received good feedback from researchers in the related fields.

CIMO also coordinates a training programme that enables around 20–25 students each year to complete a practical training period in Russia. International cooperation with Russia on trainees requires a proactive approach, as training opportunities are sometimes difficult to find in certain fields. Training opportunities in Russia have been available particularly for students majoring in the Russian language and other humanities, as well as social sciences and social work. Some opportunities have been available for students of commerce, administration and technology. Finnish students and recent graduates have also completed training periods at the Finnish Institute in St Petersburg, the Embassy of Finland in Moscow and the Consulate General of Finland in St Petersburg, and in institutions teaching Finnish language and culture. Educational institutions in St Petersburg and elsewhere in Russia have provided assistance with arrangements related to practical training opportunities. CIMO has also cooperated with organisations, companies and international programmes. One challenge for the realisation of training programmes is Russia’s strict practices regarding immigration and work permits.

One of the tasks of CIMO is to promote Finnish language and culture at universities outside Finland – also in Russia – in a variety of ways. In 2016, CIMO’s network included thirteen universities across Russia that offer study programmes in Finnish language and culture. CIMO sends visiting lecturers in Finnish language and culture to the Northern (Arctic) Federal University in Archangel, Petrozavodsk State University and Udmurt State University in Izhevsk. In previous years, visiting lecturers have also been sent to the Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg State University. In addition, in 1993–2015, so-called language assistants were sent to universities in Finno-Ugric areas in Russia.

CIMO supports study programmes in Finnish language and culture in foreign universities through various means; for instance by sending visiting lecturers and trainees to universities, organising language and culture courses in Finland and awarding grants for studies and research in Finnish universities as well as trainee grants for Finnish jobs. CIMO also organises annual teachers training days in Finland as well as other sporadic training and
education. Universities can apply for funding for the employment of a local teacher and for cooperation projects between universities. CIMO also donates study materials, literature and journal subscriptions for universities.

All of the above-mentioned forms of support are also available for Russian universities. In addition, CIMO participates in the organisation of the Finnish kindred people programme. Within the programme framework, CIMO awards grants from its kindred people grant programme for students and researchers in Finnish universities, and organises rotating summer courses in Finnish language and culture in different Finno-Ugric areas in Russia. The kindred people grants are intended for advanced Master’s students, PhD students and researchers who study or conduct research in universities in Finno-Ugric areas in Russia, live in Russia and master a Finno-Ugric language spoken in Russia, and study Finno-Ugric languages.

In addition to the funding programmes, CIMO supports cooperation between universities and Russia by organising regular Finnish-Russian higher education cooperation seminars, by coordinating the Study in Finland student fair and by furthering the working life relationships of students in the event From Exchange to the World of Work. CIMO also circulates information about the Russian state grant programme. In addition, CIMO distributes topical information about Russian issues on its email lists.

**Based on the conducted assessment, the development needs of CIMO's operations in Russia are related first and foremost to the FIRST programme and, more broadly, to issues related to student exchanges, the balance between Russian and Finnish student exchanges and the structures directing student exchanges.**
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CIMO’S OPERATIONS IN RUSSIA FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND STUDENTS

The significance of CIMO’s operations in Russia has been examined through feedback from higher education institutions and students. In spring 2016, CIMO organised a discussion event in collaboration with actors working in international affairs in higher education institutions and CIMO’s operations in Russia. Following pre-structured themes, the participants discussed the significance and realisation of operations in Russia and particularly the FIRST programme in higher education institutions. The discussion was attended on the spot and remotely by eighteen representatives of universities and universities of applied sciences.

A student enquiry was also organised in connection with the assessment. It reached students well and attracted over 900 responses. The enquiry was directed at students who had participated in a student exchange in Russia, those who were considering participating and students who by no means wanted to take part in a student exchange in Russia. Respondents included students who had participated in a FIRST exchange and students who had done their Russian student exchange through a bilateral exchange programme. Most of the respondents had done their exchange in St Petersburg, Tver and Moscow, but there were also some who had been exchange students in more remote areas, all the way to Yakutsk. Most of the student exchanges had taken place in 2011–2016.

Feedback from higher education institutions

Feedback provided by higher education institutions on CIMO’s operations in Russia has been examined from several perspectives. These include the general significance of the FIRST programme in terms of international cooperation between higher education institutions and internationalisation at home and cooperation with Russia, as well as the content and administration of operations in Russia and suggestions for development with regard to the programmes. It is also important to consider how operations in Russia serve the achievement of the objectives presented in the Ministry of Education and Culture’s Strategy for the Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions in Finland. These objectives focus on students’ opportunities to participate in student exchanges or some other form of mobility in a systematic and high-quality manner without prolonging studies, as well as opportunities for internationalisation at home, double degrees and other international education programmes, and new and traditional forms of student and teacher mobility.

FIRST is a significant factor in furthering higher education mobility and internationalisation at home. According to the feedback received from higher education institutions, the FIRST programme has played a major role in the development of Finnish higher education institutions’ cooperation with Russia. The programme has freed up resources for other operations and ensured sufficient funding for cooperation with Russia. In addition to travel grants, it has provided students with monthly grants, which is a major improvement compared to the previous situation. The FIRST programme has increased exchanges with Russia at the level of universities and other higher education institutions. It has also played a significant role in terms of international networking among personnel at universities of applied sciences. Teacher mobility and intensive courses have been highly important in this respect.
The programme has succeeded in creating more exchange opportunities and facilitating personal networking. The programme has also increased activity and allowed for more in-depth cooperation in the long term between Finnish and Russian higher education institutions. Talented Russian students have studied at Finnish higher education institutions and facilitated internationalisation at home. For Russian students, a FIRST scholarship is a significant prerequisite for study in Finland.

The FIRST programme has played a significant role in the development of nearby region cooperation and internationalisation at home. Even though interest in the Russian language and exchange with Russia has decreased in Finnish regions near the Russian border with the decrease in shopping trips from Russia, according to higher education institutions, it still pays to invest in Russia-related expertise. Russian exchange students and teachers have facilitated internationalisation at home and regional cooperation between higher education institutions. Finnish and Russian students who have completed a student exchange or practical training period have fared well in the labour market. In the current economic circumstances in Finland and Russia, the programme has created opportunities for Russian students to come to Finland and enabled Finnish higher education institutions to target mobility funds more accurately and meaningfully.

“The FIRST programme has been crucially important both for funding old cooperation forms and for creating new cooperation agreements. When FIRST started, we had a few agreements, but there was no bilateral mobility due to lack of funding. Student and teacher mobility has also acted as a development platform for other forms of cooperation.”

“FIRST is of essential importance. It has motivated organisations, even when the level of motivation or knowledge has been low among individuals or on other levels with regard to Russia. Or when there have been downright doubts about the good will of our neighbour…”

Development needs are related to furthering student mobility to Russia, in particular. As successful as it is, the FIRST programme also involves challenges and development needs. Two factors are currently affecting the attractiveness of the programme: the political situation in Russia is a concern for Finns, and the unfavourable exchange rate of the rouble is a concern for Russians. However, based on their experiences, the higher education institutions believe that these can become temporary problems. The most significant challenge has been to increase interest in exchange opportunities in Russia among Finnish students and teachers. According to representatives of higher education institutions, the relatively low level of interest is explained by prejudice, the political situation in Russia, the low availability of instruction in English and the high study credit requirements, among other reasons.

The various programme instruments – student and teacher exchanges and intensive courses – were regarded as important. With regard to student exchanges, the programme was considered to be beneficial for Finnish students in the sense that they are provided with a monthly grant in addition to a travel grant, which is not always possible in bilateral exchange programmes between higher education institutions. The monthly grant paid to Russian students in Finland has facilitated their mobility under difficult economic circumstances.

However, the support paid to Russian students was also seen as a problem to some extent, as there was a feeling that the Russian higher education institutions had not made a financial commitment to the programme. The reciprocity requirement causes many Finnish higher education institutions to consider whether they should grant scholarships to Russian stu-
dents, as there is a risk that the number of Finnish students going to Russia will be insufficient, in which case the Finnish higher education institution must foot the bill.

Finnish exchange students are required to complete 55 study credits during an academic year, which will be challenging because Russian higher education institutions do not offer a sufficient number of courses in English. On the other hand, Russian higher education institutions do not necessarily accept credits completed by their own students at a Finnish higher education institution.

The lack of instruction in English at Russian higher education institutions and the lack of marketing create difficulties for reciprocity. Some Russian universities play a particularly important role in FIRST networks, as they participate in several networks. The general lack of instruction in English emphasises the importance of the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia and the Higher School of Economics, which have invested in teaching in English and services for international students. However, many other universities in Northwest Russia and elsewhere in Russia could be important cooperation partners if they provided more instruction in English.

Within the networks, the number of Russian higher education institutions is often higher than that of Finnish institutions, which may present structural problems in terms of reciprocity, since it creates pressure for student exchanges from Russia to Finland. However, for Finnish higher education institutions, the large number of Russian institutions in the networks increases cooperation opportunities in research and teaching.

The importance of teacher mobility and intensive courses is great. According to the feedback from higher education institutions, teacher mobility has been a successful instrument, as it has freed up resources for student exchanges. However, teacher exchange scholarships are sometimes too small, and the related bureaucracy seems to be disproportionate to the amount of the scholarship. In addition, the minimum requirement for the number of teaching hours has prevented other higher education institution staff from making use of exchange opportunities.

The feedback on the intensive courses within the FIRST networks has been positive in every respect. Intensive courses have led to permanent cooperation relationships. However, there is still room for development. The respondents wondered whether it would also be possible to organise intensive courses in Finland. For this reason, they hoped for added flexibility in terms of funding, so that funding could be transferred to other operations if needed; to teacher exchanges and intensive courses, for example.

Russian language teachers in Finland, as well as the intensive courses, play an important role in terms of the appeal of exchange opportunities in Russia. In addition to intensive courses, the respondents expressed a need for shorter mobility periods, as well as participation in summer courses, if possible. They also hoped that it would be possible for one person to receive several mobility grants, for example for a shorter period followed by a longer period. There was also a need for a project preparation grant that would serve to create new networks or strengthen existing ones.

The FIRST programme is particularly important as a national programme. This is particularly clear when FIRST is compared to the global mobility plan of Erasmus+, in which competition is hard and participants relatively few, and the programme does not take national needs into account.
In the feedback, higher education institutions commended CIMO’s programmes with Russia for their many best practices related to content and administration, but they also pointed out development needs. The programme administration was regarded as quite simple and straightforward in comparison with the EU-funded Erasmus+ programme. The programme received positive feedback on its relatively low amount of bureaucracy and uncomplicated administrative structure. The most important administrative issues were related to the reciprocity requirement and flexibility between funding categories.

Furthermore, the respondents wished for a simpler application process, which could be achieved by means of an electronic application form. It was suggested that the application and administrative processes should be modelled on the Nordplus programme, and that more funding should be allocated to student mobility and teacher exchanges. Many were happy with the current annual application process, while some felt that a two-year funding cycle would work better, as it would allow annual changes to be better taken into account. They wished for a longer perspective for operational planning, as annual changes can be considerable in the fields of economics and business administration and technology, for example. If the funding practices were more flexible and allowed for the transfer of funds from intensive courses to student exchanges and vice versa, for example, the funds could be used more meaningfully. It was also suggested that more intensive courses should be organised, including one in Finland.

The expansion of the FIRST programme to cover an area larger than Northwest Russia received strong support. The suggestions also included combining the FIRST programme with the pilot programme, which would be an easy way to expand the geographical coverage of the programme. This would also ease the administrative burden on small higher education institutions, which typically have smaller-scale programmes and networks and lower mobility expenses but a heavy workload related to applications and administrative and reporting procedures. This would enable higher education institutions to prioritise the regions and institutions they consider important. However, an instrument to support regional cooperation could be introduced within the programme.

The FIRST programme is funded entirely by Finnish operators, whereas the Finnish and Russian partners share the financial responsibility for bilateral agreements between higher education institutions. The respondents discussed the best way to communicate the need for financial responsibility to Russian operators. Russian higher education institutions focus on trying to attract international degree students, and mobility programmes are not a national priority. Perhaps the Russian partners should be asked what would happen if the FIRST funding were changed or discontinued.

With regard to bilateral exchange, the problem is that cooperation is discussed at a high level in the organisation (between rectors), but information does not reach those responsible for the operations in practice. The best solution would be to enable the employees responsible for practical operations to interact within the FIRST programme. In addition to teacher exchanges, the programme could include staff exchanges, which would enable administrative staff to engage in discussions, solve problems and share best practices at the grassroots level. The respondents also wished for a joint staff training event for the employees responsible for international affairs at the higher education institutions participating in the programme. In addition, funding could be targeted at joint operations at the grassroots level, including training related to credit transfer. Such measures could facilitate solving many problems and increase the Russian higher education institutions’ understanding of studies
pursued in Finland. They could also help Russian institutions to market their programmes more effectively.

Feedback from students

Factors that encourage and hamper student exchange to Russia are in several respects similar to factors related to other countries. The most common reason behind an interest in doing a student exchange in Russia were reported to be improving language skills and knowledge of Russia and Russian culture, as well as improving career opportunities. Mobility towards Russia was encouraged by the wish to live abroad, the geographical proximity of Russia and affordability, as well as the fact that doing a student exchange was easy and economically supported. In addition, positive experiences of friends and going with fellow students encouraged students to embark on a student exchange. Factors that discouraged or hindered leaving were family situations, the unstable safety situation in Russia and the lack of funding for supporting the exchange. Similar responses were reported by students who were considering doing a student exchange. In addition to the above-mentioned factors, the responses included mentions of issues related to the international and Russia’s domestic situation, and issues related to sexual orientation and diet, which were presumed to pose a problem in Russia.

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION OF WHY THEY WOULD NOT GO TO RUSSIA (RESPONDENTS N=706)

The enquiry also asked students who had done an exchange elsewhere to compare their experiences with their student exchange in Russia. The responses revealed that the majority rated their experience in Russia as being as positive as in other exchange countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Great Britain, China, Germany, Latvia, Estonia and the United States). The respondents thought the best thing about their exchange in Russia was making new friends and getting to know a new culture, as well as the large number of cultural events in larger cities. Reported negative aspects included the large amount of bureaucracy, the isolation of foreign exchange students, and in some places, experiences related to living arrangements and instruction at the educational institution.

Language skills were perceived in both a positive and negative light. The majority of students emphasised how their language skills improved significantly. In Russia, you have to make
do in Russian. However, poor language skills are problematic for both parties – a poor command of Russian for exchange students and a poor command of English for the university staff and, more broadly, for the local authorities and residents.

**Challenges for student exchange in Russia still include the amount of bureaucracy, challenges in everyday life and housing as well as problems related to language skills.** The survey also included questions about things students encountered that they were not prepared for. Most of these issues were related to bureaucracy, different permits and other forms of red tape. Practices related to visas came as a surprise to many. Many students were also surprised by the attitudes of Russian people towards foreigners. On the other hand, many students considered these issues as being a part of their exchange in Russia. The students therefore wished for more extensive information about the exchange targets, first-hand knowledge about the local situations and advance information about future exchange opportunities.

The survey also mapped which exchange periods attracted most interest. Based on the responses, short, less than six-month periods are the most attractive to students. Short intensive courses were favoured in light of family situations and how easy they are to fit into schedules. Short intensive courses were also believed to lower the threshold for leaving for Russia and to improve language skills. During longer, three- to six-month exchanges, the respondents also believed their knowledge of Russia and Russian culture would improve. In questions mapping popular exchange targets, the most popular universities were MGIMO and HSE in Moscow and HSE, the State University, Herzen and SPbGEU in St Petersburg.

**STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION OF THE GROUNDS FOR SELECTING RUSSIA AS TARGET COUNTRY (RESPONDENTS N=126):**

![Bar chart showing student responses to the question of the grounds for selecting Russia as target country](chart.png)
The survey also asked whether the respondents would recommend Russia to other students. These responses were almost unanimously positive. The answers often emphasised the uniqueness of the experience, overcoming prejudice and gaining life experience. The following are selected samples from the responses:

“In Finland, we know all too little about Russia, our largest neighbouring country. For cooperation, first-hand experience plays a crucial role. In addition, I find it important that the student generation of today gets acquainted with our neighbour from their own starting points.”

“Despite all my setbacks, I found my exchange in Russia valuable, as it significantly moulded my way of thinking and my attitude as well as my ability to operate in different situations”

“You need to seize these kinds of opportunities when they present themselves. In my own case, I got an incredible motivation boost for my later studies and ideas for what I want to do in the future”

“Russia is a fine country for doing a student exchange”

“It is too demanding to manage there without a good background organisation”
DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS ARISING FROM THE ASSESSMENT

CIMO’s operations in Russia are a cost-effective way of coordinating higher education institutions’ cooperation with Russia and internationalisation at home, which are important for Finland. The FIRST programme serves to strengthen Russia-related expertise. National strategies and public discussion stress the importance of such expertise. In line with its national strategies, Finland also has objectives related to increasing internationalisation at home and researcher exchanges through cooperation in education and research, and to marketing its educational programmes and attracting talented researchers and highly competent experts. In this respect, it is only natural that the programme is funded by Finland.

Experiences of EU-funded programmes highlight the need for a national programme. In order to develop, the programme would benefit from additional funding that can be directed at organising new forms of activity, such as winter school for humanities and social sciences, as well as at strengthening established and functional forms of activity, such as intensive courses.

**Student exchange balance and strategic Russia-related knowledge**

The FIRST programme aims to balance the number of exchange students and teachers between Finland and Russia. The problem is, however, that the volume of student movement from Russia to Finland is considerably higher than that from Finland to Russia.

The assessment found several reasons for this imbalance. With regard to the programme structure, a network typically consists of one Finnish higher education institution and several Russian institutions that can send students to Finland based on the reciprocity principle. This offers more choice for Finnish students, but also creates more pressures with regard to student exchanges from Russia to Finland. In addition, some of the leading higher education institutions in Northwest Russia are participating in several networks, which means that their students are more likely to be able to participate in student exchanges with a Finnish institution. There is a need to consider how the structure of the networks could be improved to produce a better balance.

- **Suggestion 1: Setting a cap on the number of FIRST networks an individual Russian higher education institution can participate in.**

Another structural factor affecting student mobility from Finland to Russia was the lack of instruction in English at Russian higher education institutions and their reluctance to market their study programmes and departments. This highlights a small number of Russian higher education institutions that offer a wide variety of courses and programmes in English, but raises the question of the function of other institutions in the network. However, versatile networks improve the effect and impact of Finnish institutions’ cooperation with Russia, particularly in cooperation with nearby areas in Russia. Russian higher education institutions should also be encouraged to direct their own resources to this cooperation and to also see their positive impact in Russia.
• **Suggestion 2: Revising the FIRST networks and their criteria so that they encourage Russian higher education institutions to invest in international instruction and to market their education to Finnish students.**

The report from 2007 by the Committee for the Future noted that Finnish students expressed little interest in exchange opportunities in Russia. Differences in the standards of living, particularly in terms of student housing, were presented as one reason for this reluctance. Even though the gap in living standards has narrowed and the standard of housing has improved over the past ten years, Finnish students’ enthusiasm for going to Russia has not increased correspondingly. Based on the student enquiry, reasons behind the reluctance to go to Russia lie elsewhere.

International coordinators at higher education institutions mentioned the fact that the political situation in Russia affects Finnish students’ willingness to attend student exchange programmes. This view was confirmed in the student responses. These factors are hard to address as such, but it is therefore important for there to also be student mobility from Russia to Finland and to preserve cooperation structures of Finnish higher education institutions with Russia. At the same time, higher education institutions gain good students and internationalisation at home through an easily coordinated framework. In addition, the FIRST programme has been a crucial instrument for regional cooperation. The imbalance in student and teacher exchanges is therefore no problem from the perspective of strategic Russia-related knowledge.

• **Suggestion 3: Emphasising the importance of Russian students in the FIRST programme for the internationalisation at home of higher education institutions and for increasing Russia-related expertise**

On the other hand, many Finnish students were ready to confront their prejudices and seize the opportunity. Based on the student survey, students had similar expectations of their exchange in Russia as they had of exchanges in other countries. Russia was seen as an opportunity to improve language skills, knowledge of Russian culture and career opportunities. In addition, geographical proximity and affordability were seen as Russia’s strengths. CIMO could support potential exchange students by increasing information about student exchange opportunities in Russia. Information is needed about different Russian higher education institutions, permit processes and everyday practices – before leaving for Russia. A successful exchange experience also increases the possibility of future exchanges, since a significant factor in exchange decisions is recommendations from fellow students.

• **Suggestion 4: Increasing marketing of the FIRST programme in Finnish higher education institutions and investing in information events for future and possible Finnish exchange students leaving for Russia**

One possible measure is to open up the FIRST programme to students majoring in the Russian language. They have the language skills and willingness to go to Russia as exchange students, but they should be required to study subjects other than Russian language and literature during their exchange period. This type of solution would support employment among students majoring in Russian and provide Finnish society with much-demanded, more in-depth expertise in Russia.

• **Suggestion 5: Opening up the FIRST programme for majors in the Russian language on the condition that they study subjects other than Russian language and literature**
Developing CIMO’s operations in Russia and the administration of the FIRST programme

The geographical scope of the FIRST programme is limited to Northwest Russia. This was a strategic decision made to support regional cooperation. However, the feedback stressed the need for funding for cooperation that covers a larger area. This is also reflected in the programme statistics. Pertaining to mobility from Finland to Russia, the FIRST programme represents around one third of all student exchanges. One of the reasons for this is that bilateral exchange agreements involve higher education institutions located in other parts of Russia.

The respondents were mainly satisfied with the administration of the FIRST programme. The feedback from international coordinators at higher education institutions mainly concerned issues related to project funding already granted, such as the opportunity to transfer unused funding to another category. The application process and the duration of the funding period also provoked some discussion. The one-year period of funding is regarded as relatively short, as the application process requires time and resources, and minor changes in operations may have a major effect on the level of success. Based on the assessment, there is a need to consider whether the FIRST programme and the pilot programme could be combined and expanded to cover all parts of Russia, with regional cooperation remaining an important selection criterion.

- **Suggestion 6**: Expanding the geographical scope of the FIRST programme by combining and revising the pilot programme as a sub-programme of FIRST, and making the application simultaneous for both programmes

- **Suggestion 7**: Making the funding period two years

With regard to the FIRST programme, quality is the decisive factor when evaluating applications, but the meaning of quality in this particular context should be explained in more detail. In terms of existing networks, attention is paid to previous cooperation and its quantitative and qualitative results, as well as reciprocity and connections between mobility and other forms of education cooperation. This raises the question of whether the funding always goes to existing networks and the extent to which funding is provided to new ones. Funding for existing networks creates continuity and good practices, but the quality criteria should also offer opportunities for new, innovative networks.

In addition, the quality criteria could be adjusted to create a better balance of student exchanges between Finland and Russia. The criteria should aim at transferring some of the responsibility to the Russian counterparties in an effort to motivate them to attract Finnish exchange students. The quality criteria could include the number of courses taught in English and practices related to the accommodation of exchange students, as well as information and services for international students.

- **Suggestion 8**: Developing the quality criteria of the programme

Because of the considerable exchange imbalance and the very positive feedback on the intensive courses, there is also a need to consider whether funding should be transferred from student exchanges to intensive courses. This would also support research cooperation, create more favourable conditions for cooperation in postgraduate education and provide an easier
way for students and staff to improve their Russia-related expertise. The feedback from higher
education institutions also included calls for the more flexible use of FIRST grants.

- **Suggestion 9: Increasing the funding for intensive courses and further improving the concept**
- **Suggestion 10: Increasing flexibility in the use of FIRST funds**

**Strengthening cooperation between Finnish higher education institutions and Russia**

The feedback on the Finnish-Russian Winter School has been positive in previous reports and in the discussions carried out for this assessment. In his report, Professor Arto Mustajoki suggested that the idea behind the Winter School could be expanded to cover other fields, particularly the humanities and social sciences. Judging from the popularity of the intensive courses, this could be a good idea, as it would enable higher education institutions to cooperate with talented young postgraduate students and researchers in this respect.

The discussions among the international steering group also highlighted the importance of supporting PhD students and post-doc researchers and other academic cooperation with Russia. This is also important for Finnish society, as many of these talented students and researchers will later find employment as experts in ministries and research institutes closely connected to the Russian government.

- **Suggestion 11: Expanding the winter school concept to include the humanities and social sciences**

Based on discussions among the steering group and with staff responsible for international exchanges at higher education institutions, it is evident that higher education reforms in Finland and Russia will affect cooperation and exchange programmes between the two countries.

In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture plays a crucial role in this framework. Its indicators for assessing and funding higher education institutions also affect CIMO’s operations in Russia and the structures of the FIRST programme. For instance, the study credit requirements of the future will affect the students’ motivation to do a student exchange. This has a direct impact on the FIRST programme and the cooperation between Finnish and Russian higher education institutions. In planning programmes, the frameworks of the student and teacher exchange programmes should be flexibly alterable within the programmes, so that they reflect the requirements posed by higher education institutions.

Credit transfer from Finland to Russia continues to be a significant challenge for student exchanges, as do the stricter academic requirements in both countries. In fact, these requirements conflict somewhat with the mobility objectives of the national strategy for internationalisation. As mentioned in the strategy for internationalisation, short mobility periods facilitate international cooperation at higher education institutions. For this reason, the discussion about the overall relevancy of indicators concerning internationalisation also applies to cooperation with Russia. This may be a consideration in favour of targeting funding at intensive courses and shorter exchange periods.
• **Suggestion 12: Investigating the possibility of organising shorter student exchanges**

The feedback from higher education institutions emphasised the need for cooperation between actors dealing with international matters in Finnish and Russian institutions. In addition to rector-level cooperation, there is a need for concrete interaction between managers and coordinators of international affairs in order to flexibly and pragmatically address questions regarding credit transfer and exchange students’ practical issues.

• **Suggestion 13: Intensifying CIMO’s cooperation with Russian actors apart from at rector level**

There continues to be room for discussion at the level of ministries, as the Bologna Process is not yet working in practice. This is evident, for example, in the fact that three-year Bachelor’s degrees are not yet recognised in Russia. Reciprocity is not working in practice if degree structures do not comply with the Bologna Process. In addition, Russia seeks to focus only on top universities in its international cooperation, which hinders cooperation with universities of applied sciences, among other institutions.

• **Suggestion 14: Increasing support for marketing Finnish higher education institutions in Russia**
FUTURE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND COOPERATION BETWEEN FINNISH AND RUSSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

In recent years, Finnish higher education institutions have undergone significant changes, which has also had an impact on the institutions’ international cooperation. The profiling and competition of universities and universities of applied sciences may also pose challenges for the institutions’ cooperation with Russia. What would happen if a growing number of Finnish higher education institutions would no longer provide the opportunity of studying the Russian language and the expertise in collaboration with Russia became weaker? This would emphasise the national significance of CIMO’s operations in Russia, but simultaneously pose challenges for them. Know-how about higher education cooperation with Russia and practices related to student and teacher exchange needs to be secured both in higher education institutions and in CIMO.

Russia’s education policies will have an impact on the collaboration between Russia and Finnish higher education institutions. The new Federal Law on Education in Russia creates more extensive and favourable conditions for international cooperation than before, as it includes provisions concerning the goals and focuses of international cooperation.

It aims at improving coordination in international cooperation. According to the law, Russia also commits to supporting student, staff and researcher mobility, as well as the mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications.8 This should provide the FIRST programme with the opportunity to encourage Russian higher education institutions to commit to cooperating with Finnish institutions and to obligate Russian counterparts to invest more resources into various forms of cooperation.

However, the problem is that Russian higher education institutions must comply with hard-to-reach objectives, which may lead to limited cooperation. Short-term benefits may win over long-term and systematic activities in the international cooperation of higher education institutions. In particular, this may affect forms of cooperation with Finnish higher education institutions in which regional cooperation plays a significant role.

Both Finnish and Russian higher education institutions are also competitors in the growing international education market. Investing in instruction in English has paid off for Finnish higher education institutions. Respectively, a similar investment on the part of Russian higher education institutions would improve the opportunities and willingness of Finnish students to take part in a student exchange in Russia. The FIRST programme also benefits higher education institutions in both countries in this respect.

However, there are challenges related to how the tuition fees for degree programmes for non-EU/EEA students will affect operations with Russia in the future. How will exchange-based participation in programmes subject to fees be perceived, particularly if a strong imbalance in student exchanges prevails? On the other hand, the FIRST programme could also serve as a marketing channel for degree programmes that are subject to fees.

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8 See the report by Alina Koskela on the new Federal Law on Education in Russia: http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/GPM/Koulutus/Liitteet/FIN_Aлина_Koskelan_raportti_Venajan_uusi_koulutuslainsaadanto_241013.pdf.
Russian higher education institutions face significant pressure to orientate towards the highest international level, which may pose a challenge in the future. In the initial phase, this includes close international cooperation. The goal is that, in 2020, students will no longer seek third-cycle higher education opportunities abroad. Instead, they will have relevant high-quality second-cycle and third-cycle opportunities available in Russia. On the other hand, in order to achieve this goal, Russian higher education institutions may also create joint degree programmes with the leading higher education institutions in the world.

This also opens up opportunities for Finnish institutions to participate in developing high-quality education programmes together with Russian and other international actors, which would also benefit Finnish higher education institutions. A national programme supporting higher education institutions' cooperation with Russia is therefore important, in order for Finnish higher education institutions to be able to maintain close relations with Russian institutions and thereby strengthen their position in the international higher education market. The FIRST programme and CIMO's other operations in Russia will thereby also be of great importance in the future in supporting strategic Russia-related expertise and in furthering the internationalisation and internationalisation at home of Finnish higher education institutions, provided that their resources are secured and the programmes continue to be developed further.

Recent reports have painted a rather different picture of Russia’s development compared to the outlook in the early 2000s. In its report for the Finnish government, the Finnish institute of International Affairs has deemed the political and economic development of Russia to be rather negative and unpredictable in the near future. Legislation that hampers the activities and cooperation of foreign NGOs and other actors could pose a threat for education cooperation, for which it may be difficult to prepare. Increasing tensions in the world political situation may also be reflected in various sanctions and their tightening, which also can affect education cooperation. Despite these possible prospects, it is important to continue to invest in Russia-related expertise and knowledge through education cooperation in Finnish society, so that political, economic and cultural relations can be utilised even in difficult times.

CIMO plays an important role in strengthening strategic Russia-related expertise and knowledge and the internationalisation and internationalisation at home of higher education institutions in accordance with the strategy of the Ministry of Education and Culture. High-quality resources support the furthering of these strategies. Both strategies require mobility and higher education cooperation, which in turn requires an actor that bears the responsibility for national coordination.

The FIRST programme has played a significant role in the support instruments of CIMO’s operations in Russia, and it has for its part successfully implemented the national strategy in developing Russia-related expertise. The suggestions in the assessment are related to correcting the imbalance in student exchanges, developing functional and new forms of mobility and cooperation and expanding the geographical scope of the programme. This requires continuity in funding and the possibility for additional funding for initiating new and innovative functions.

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