Erasmus Policy Statement

ITM’s  international (EU and non-EU) strategy

The core tasks of the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) are to conduct and promote scientific research, organize professional and academic education and provide scientific and health services in the field of tropical diseases and global health, with special attention to low and middle-income countries (LMIC). ITM is, in its scientific niche, a strong national and international brand and a solid partner for many organisations worldwide.

ITM has strong international ties and is (founding) member of many EU and international partnerships, such as the TropNet (European Network on Imported Infectious Disease Surveillance), the FESTMIH (Federation of European Societies for Tropical Medicine and International Health) and especially tropEd, the international network for higher education in international/global health. ITM focuses on the regions where tropical diseases occur, through 19 institutional collaborations in partner countries in Africa, Asia and South-America. These collaborations allow an interdisciplinary approach and institution-wide involvement of ITM staff. ITM selects partners based on common scientific interests, values, scientific excellence and relevance for society and development. Institutional partnerships develop progressively and usually start as a specific joint research or PhD project.

ITM’s internationalisation strategy is centred around:

- Strengthening international academic cooperation within and outside the EU through strategic partnerships and networks
- Further developing the collaborative dimensions and innovation in ITM’s teaching programmes
- Facilitating incoming and outgoing mobility for students, staff and researchers

Specific ambitions in the field of education, as stated in ITM’s policy plan, are to emphasize collaboration, innovation and knowledge sharing. Those are the key strategies for a relevant and sustained scientific and societal impact. ITM’s Education Office and the education units of the three scientific departments operationalize these strategies.

Every year, more than 500 students including researchers, medical doctors, nurses and other health professionals follow advanced (blended) courses at ITM. At least 50% of them are international students.

Yearly about 110 early stage researchers are working on their PhD. The PhD programme for students from LMIC is based on the ‘sandwich’ concept which entails periods of mobility from their local research institutes to Belgium or elsewhere in the EU, depending on the programme. "Internationalisation at home" is a key characteristic of ITM’s international character.
International guest lecturers or experts (frequently alumni) contribute significantly to the continuous adaptation and relevance of ITM’s courses to changing contexts.

International mobility and collaborative-degree programs are areas of focus in ITM’s internationalisation strategy. Mobility and credit transfer through flexibility is expected to increase in both the MSc. programmes in Public Health (MPH), mainly but not exclusively through the tropEd network, and Tropical Animal Health (MSTAH). The latter is a collaborative programme managed jointly with the University of Pretoria (SA). Incoming and outgoing staff mobility within and outside the EU is common at ITM for teaching, training and research purposes. ITM’s academic regulations equally valorise staff involvement in teaching and training at ITM or in national or international collaborative contexts.

The international MSc. programmes are accredited by the Dutch - Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO). Specialised short courses are accredited by the tropEd network, which is proof of an international quality recognition by peers.

Quality of education has also been supported through the LinQed network (2008-2016), an international collaborative initiative focused on higher education quality assurance among 15 ITM partner institutions in 12 countries. This initiative paved the way for the creation (2017) of a new Alliance for Education in Tropical Medicine and International Health (hereafter called "The Alliance"). The Alliance is a framework for internationalisation and strategic integration of existing and new national and international collaborations in the field of education. The Alliance's objectives are:
- Staff and student mobility, including internship opportunities at ITM and partner institutions
- Joint course development and delivery
- Joint quality assurance
- Alumni networking
- Offering Open Educational Resources (OER)
- Development of knowledge management platforms to support global communities of practice in different thematic fields
- Collaboration with the private sector (NGOs or enterprises).

In today's era of global knowledge and technology, the interconnectedness of persons and institutions and opportunities for student/staff mobility (physical and virtual), such as through Erasmus+ initiatives, is paramount to work effectively as health experts in a global scene.

### Strategy for the organisation and implementation of international (EU and non-EU) cooperation projects

ITM builds on a substantial experience with international cooperation projects in research, education and capacity building.

ITM has participated in 32 EU funded projects since 2010 (FP7, H2020, EDCTP, ERC, DCI) and 10 of these projects are (or were) led by ITM. The experience which ITM developed in the framework of existing capacity strengthening programmes, could through the Erasmus+ programme benefit other LMIC Partner countries that are currently out of scope for the Belgian development cooperation framework. ITM is involved in the Erasmus Mundus TransGlobalHealth joint PhD programme which targets training of approx. 40 scientists in
transdisciplinary global health research. Six PhD candidates are primarily hosted by ITM and another seven are visiting scientists at ITM during their PhD.

ITM aims at organizing and implementing its strategy mainly through the Actions Mobility (Key Action 1) and Cooperation for Innovation and Exchange of Good Practices (Key Action 2).

With regards to **Key Action 1**, ITM intends to develop incoming and outgoing mobility for E+ student grantees. Possibilities for outgoing mobility will be studied in our master-after-master and PhD programmes. Incoming mobility will allow ITM to further internationalize its student population and where possible increasing the share of incoming EU students. As part of the Erasmus+ programme, ITM will enhance outgoing staff mobility for teaching and training purposes, both towards EU Programme and Partner countries. ITM staff already teaches at other Belgian, EU and international universities. Increased incoming staff mobility will allow for broadened expertise, mutual exchange of experiences and quality enhancements in our course programmes.

Incoming and outgoing mobility of staff and students from EU Programme countries will be enhanced as current funding for this type of mobility is limited. The added exposure will create stronger EU ties and will enhance ITM’s participation in EU networks such as tropEd and TropNET. By virtue of the EU Partner country mobility possibilities, E+ will allow ITM to expand its scope beyond the list of low and middle income partner countries under the current Belgian development cooperation framework. ITM strives to attract excellent incoming teachers to complement own teaching expertise. ITM also welcomes more diverse incoming trainees and PhD candidates. The possibilities for starting or participating in Erasmus Mundus Joint Master degrees will be explored.

With regards to **Key Action 2**, our strategy involves all the different types of Actions available:

**A) Strategic Partnerships:** ITM aims to strengthen its relations with higher education institutions in the EU as a participant or as an applicant in this type of Action. Within the tropEd network, ITM already participates actively in a proposal aimed at developing transferrable digital competencies for global health professionals. We intend to innovate in our education practice while developing new partnerships.

**B) Knowledge Alliances:** ITM intends to focus on digital competencies and knowledge management in the field of tropical diseases and international health. At ITM, a 'WikiTropica' concept is under development. The concept of WikiTropica is based on an elaborate wiki with both an educational as well as a clinical finality. It is the main purpose of the wiki to be used as an innovative tool during teaching and to allow (young) researchers in global health to demonstrate their expertise on an internationally recognized platform. Healthcare professionals will be able to use the information for diagnosis and treatment of tropical infectious diseases, not only common in the global south but increasingly also in the EU due to increased migration, travel and global warming. Small and medium-sized enterprises strong in competencies such as marketing, software development, knowledge management and data analysis, artificial intelligence and machine (language) translation will be involved in partnerships.

**C) Capacity building:** ITM has extensive expertise in scientific capacity strengthening and promotes the 'Switching the Poles' concept; switching the lead and expert seat to the global south. ITM will focus on academic staff development through North-South-South interactions, transferable skills and digital innovation within tropical and international health programmes.
ITM mainly focuses on low- and lower-middle-income countries - in accordance with our capacity strengthening policy - mainly in Africa and selected partner countries in South-America and Asia. Within Erasmus+, ITM will be able to additionally focus on countries that are not prioritized under the Belgian development cooperation framework. ITM’s capacity building expertise within Erasmus+ initiatives will further contribute to global capacity strengthening in health.

**Impact of ITM’s participation in the Erasmus+ Programme on the modernisation of ITM**

In its education policy ITM focuses on:

1. **Strengthening teaching capacity**

With support of the Belgian development cooperation, ITM has developed The Alliance which aims to collaboratively develop higher education between partner institutions and ITM. An improved pedagogy and digital readiness are important areas of attention in the Alliance. The Erasmus+ program will allow ITM to use mobility funds for staff training specifically within a EU context. Career development of education support staff is facilitated through an expert track in the institution’s jobs architecture. Education activities or experience are explicitly valorised for scientific career development. ITM also pays special attention to professionalization opportunities and in-house pedagogical expertise provided by ITM’s Education Office and education units.

2. **Accommodating mobility and flexibility**

ITM aims to strengthen the outgoing and incoming mobility of its scientific and education staff and students. Through Erasmus+ participation, both ITM and the EU will benefit from the exposure and the possibilities of enhanced mobility. The many longstanding and global institutional relationships create numerous opportunities for mobility. ITM’s study programmes aim to become better connected with other international course programmes and to enhance flexibility. Under its internationalisation policy, ITM is expanding the scope of its alumni networking and activities. ITM proactively strives for a better coordination of mobility and flexibility. ITM’s student service mentors incoming and outgoing students, organizes integration activities (such as language courses) and supports psychosocial wellbeing of incoming students. Support mechanisms have been put in place to create an optimal campus and learning environment. ITM perceives this ‘accommodation’ as key to study success and an integral part of mobility and will continue to secure a professional and comprehensive student support service.

3. **Piloting innovation and inclusiveness**

Part of our courses is blended and for specific education projects ITM collaborates with NGOs and small and medium-sized enterprises. Within the Erasmus+ programme, ITM aims at piloting new projects to digitalize global health(care) and to initiate new public-private partnerships. ITM feeds strong communication channels in English and in the regional language (Dutch) driven by a highly professional communication team. ITM also organises an outreach programme on development issues for the Belgian general public (schools, national television documentaries,
...). Our outpatient clinic yearly welcomes 35,000 travellers and patients for travel and sexual health advice respectively. Our travel health website is an important information, education and communication tool with more than 300,000 page views per year. These factors all contribute to our intricate connection with local communities. Evening courses targeted at healthcare professionals foster lifelong learning. ITM is an equal opportunity employer, which implies proactive promotion of diversity (e.g. staff with different cultural backgrounds, gender, religion, disabilities). Most international students at ITM are based in/origin from LMICs. ITM coordinates a scholarship programme for LMIC and (a limited number of) EU students with the goal to enhance inclusive education and build global capacity in health(care). ITM regards inclusive education therefore as a global, all comprising concept.

4. Emphasizing transferable competencies

Within our Master programmes and in all three scientific departments (Public Health, Biomedical and Clinical Sciences), transferable skills training is implemented (for instance on critical thinking or presentation and communication skills). Our doctoral training programme also includes transferable skills courses (e.g. academic writing skills, ethics, supervision skills, research methodology) and will be enhanced and expanded to take into account for instance more managerial and public engagement strategies, taking into account other outcomes than academia after a PhD. The Erasmus+ programme participation is a trigger to further reflect on an institutional strategy for transferable skills and to expand the implementation of transferable skill trainings.