

INTERNATIONALIZATION AS A LEADING FACTOR OF UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITY INTEGRATION INTO THE EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL SPACE

Alina Maslova*, Olga Goncharova

Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University, Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine

**Corresponding author: mav2429@gmail.com*

The European Union has recognized internationalization in higher education as essential for enhancing quality, competitiveness, and innovation. This study explores the impact of internationalization on Ukrainian universities, focusing on Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University's (BKMSPU) participation in the EU-funded Erasmus+ programmes. The research aims to highlight BKMSPU's experience in grant projects as part of its internationalization strategy. The methodology of the study involves online research and analysis of recent publications and documents on higher education internationalization in Ukraine and at BKMSPU in particular. The results show that internationalization is crucial for transforming and modernizing Ukraine's education system, integrating it into the global educational landscape. The authors stress that internationalization enhances academic quality and mobility, fosters global competencies, develops international partnership, and promotes knowledge exchange. Despite its benefits, challenges like ensuring the quality of qualifications obtained abroad, lack of clear policies and guidelines, non-alignment of international and domestic programmes, financial problems, cultural differences, unequal and non-reciprocal relationships, the brain drain and overcoming language barriers should be taken into account. The authors conclude that BKMSPU's participation in Erasmus+ projects demonstrates positive outcomes, enhancing the staff and students' competencies and promoting international collaboration. This experience will contribute to BKMSPU's further integration into the European Higher Education Area and enrich its internationalization strategy.

Keywords: internationalization, European education area, higher education, Erasmus+ programme, grant projects

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Introduction

The European Union has long recognized the importance of internationalization in higher education as a key driver for enhancing quality, competitiveness, and innovation. In recent years, the EU has taken significant steps towards creating a more integrated European Higher Education Area (EHEA), where students, staff, and researchers can move freely and exchange knowledge across borders. Thus, internationalization has become a key aspect of the reform agenda of any university willing to become an active member of EHEA (de Wit, Altbach, 2021).

One of the key benefits of internationalization is the enhancement of academic quality and excellence through exposure to diverse perspectives, cultures, and teaching methods. It also fosters the development of global competencies among students, preparing them for the challenges of an

increasingly interconnected world and enhances the competitiveness of university promoting knowledge exchange and collaboration at the international level (Buckner, 2019).

In recent decades, internationalization has emerged as a strategic tool for reshaping higher education all over the world and has become a prominent trend in universities worldwide. Following the definition of internationalisation as “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit et al., 2015) this study demonstrates the increased awareness that internalization will promote local Ukrainian university’s integration into the EU educational area.

Despite the considerable increase in discussions about Ukraine’s integration into the EU in various areas such as politics, economics, finance, foreign trade, migration, and social issues, there is minimal focus on the educational sector (Kharazishvili et al., 2021). The issue of internationalization in this sector has recently attracted attention of a certain number of domestic scholars exploring the questions of quality improvement of higher education in Ukraine: Y. Kharazishvili et al. (2021) discussed strategic European integration scenarios for Ukraine and Poland; M. Debych (2023) specified goals and challenges of higher education internationalization in our country; Y. Zayachuk (2020) described the integration of the Ukrainian higher education system into the European and world educational space; I. Gromov et al. (2022), O. Kolomiyets (2021), A. Verbytska (2017) studied internationalization in the context of higher education development. Among foreign scientist interested in the topic under discussion are P. Altbach, E. Buckner, J. Knight, H. de Wit and others. However, we believe that not all aspects of the stated issue were thoroughly addressed, making further research in this area relevant and timely for Ukrainian society.

Thus, the aim of this study is to highlight Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University’s (BKMSPU) experience of participation in the grant projects within the implementation of the EU-funded Erasmus+ programmes as a part of its internationalization strategy.

Methodology

To accomplish the aim of the study, various approaches have been employed, including conducting online research, analyzing, and organizing available information. Recent publications and documents regarding the internationalization of higher education in Ukraine and in BKMSPU namely have been reviewed and examined.

Results and Discussion

The mandatory condition for the transformation and modernization of the national Ukrainian system of education is its integration into the European and world innovative educational area adjusting key parameters with innovative standards that form lifelong and human-centered education of high quality and integrity (National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine, 2021).

Another aspect of internationalization, according to Knight (2004), implies a range of international activities, including student and faculty academic mobility, international partnerships and projects, global academic programs, and research endeavors. It also involves providing education in other countries and integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the curriculum and teaching methods (Knight, 2004).

During the era of globalization and internationalization of education, particularly in higher education, it is essential to maintain a high level of competitiveness in the educational services market, which applies to both individual institutions and the national educational system as a whole (Gromov et al., 2022).

Benefits of internationalization are obvious. It is the enhancement of academic quality and excellence through exposure to diverse perspectives, cultures, and teaching methods; unification of educational and scientific resources; universalization of knowledge; facilitation of access to higher education. Internationalization also fosters the development of global competencies among students, preparing them for the challenges of an increasingly interconnected world (Gromov et al., 2022).

Furthermore, internationalization enhances the competitiveness of European universities by attracting top talent from around the world, including students, researchers, and faculty. This not only raises the profile of European universities but also promotes knowledge exchange and collaboration at an international level.

Despite its benefits, internationalization also presents challenges for university integration in the EU education area. One of the main challenges is ensuring the quality and recognition of qualifications obtained abroad. Differences in academic standards and assessment practices across countries can make it difficult to assess the value of international qualifications.

Another challenge is the language barrier, which can hinder effective communication and collaboration among students and staff from different linguistic backgrounds. Efforts to promote multilingualism and language learning are therefore crucial for overcoming this challenge and promoting greater integration within the EU education area.

Among the other challenges of internationalization Moshtari and Safarpour (2023) differentiate:

- policy and organizational structure challenges (lack of clear policies and guidelines, non-alignment of international and domestic programmes, inefficiency of organizational structure for internationalization);
- financial and physical resources challenges (financial problems, inadequacy of scientific facilities and equipment, weakness in ICT infrastructure);
- academic and competency challenges (lack of scientific competencies and skills in using digital tools);
- social and cultural challenges (cultural differences, unequal and non-reciprocal relationships, the brain drain).

In spite of the challenges, internationalization efforts in Ukraine are driving national educational reform, with the goal of ensuring that higher education institutions are able to establish themselves within the international educational landscape (Verbytska, 2017). For that purpose in 2022 the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the Strategy for the development of higher education in Ukraine for 2022-2032. The document is aimed to reform the education system of Ukraine taking into account new challenges our country faces in the time of martial law and continuous aspirations to become an equal member of the European Union. One of the strategic goals described in the mentioned Strategy deals with the process of internationalization of higher education of Ukraine which implies

- ensuring comparability and recognition of Ukrainian education qualifications in Europe and the world;
- implementing the best foreign educational experience in Ukraine;

- dynamic growth of foreign students' number in Ukraine;
- adaptation of graduates of higher education institutions to life and work in multicultural environment;
- increasing the number of educational and scientific projects on international cooperation, integrating scientific and pedagogical staff to the European and world-wide education and research space (Strategy for the development of higher education in Ukraine for 2022-2032, 2022).

Y. Zayachuk acknowledges that our country faces numerous challenges in meeting the goals of the Bologna reforms within internationalization process. She recognizes the significant effort required to achieve the reforms' positive objectives but emphasizes that Ukraine has no choice but to integrate into the European higher education space (Zayachuk, 2020).

In order to follow general state education policy of European integration, strategy of the country in the development of higher education and tendency to implement the principles of the Bologna process Bogdan Khmelnsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University has recently developed and approved its own internationalization strategy as a part of its Development strategy for 2023-2028. The document focuses on the following strategic priorities in terms of internationalization:

1. International and project activities of the University - presupposes expanding the range of international cooperation and signing of international cooperation agreements with educational institutions all over the world; studying foreign internalization experience and enhancing the University's connections with global educational and scientific collaborators through collaborative research, conferences, seminars, training sessions and other events; elevating the level of publication activity, particularly by disseminating outcomes of joint research in international journals; broadening the range of project engagements and intensifying efforts to secure international grants; establishing centers for self-directed learning and enhancing proficiency in English to actively involve academic staff in global initiatives and facilitate English-language publications stemming from international research and projects.

2. Academic mobility of research and teaching staff and students - assumes promotion and geography expanding of academic mobility programmes; creating collaborative educational programs and dual degree offerings with international partners to integrate into the global educational sphere and enhance the country's intellectual capacity; enhancing international, cultural, and professional exchanges, promoting BKMSPU beyond Ukraine by attracting more foreign applicants.

3. Image of the University at the international level – implies implementing the international dimension of BKMSPU's image strategy by showcasing its accomplishments at international educational and scientific gatherings (exhibitions, forums, conferences, etc.); fostering the University's openness and integration into the global educational and scientific sphere by promoting achievements and disseminating the outcomes of research projects and grants among international professional communities and the public; ensuring that university students and academic staff are aware of opportunities to engage in international projects and secure grants, updating information in English about the University's scientific achievements in the global arena on its official website and social media platforms; monitoring the implementation of the University's international image strategy, and adjusting it as necessary based on assessments and feedback from stakeholders (Bogdan Khmelnsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University, 2023).

Considering the Bologna Process the EU has actively supported and generously financed different programs, which have offered numerous university students from both EU and developing nations the opportunity to gain academic experiences abroad. One of these programmes Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University actively participates in is Erasmus+ program as the framework for cooperation in the field of education, training, youth and sports. The programme gives its priority to inclusion and diversity with close attention to disabilities, health problems, discrimination in education, cultural differences; digital transformation; environment and fight against climate change; promotion of democratic lifestyle, the EU common values and civic engagement; the European dimension in sports (European Commission. Erasmus+ EU programme for education, training, youth and sport).

According to the data presented in European Commission fact-sheet of Ukraine's participation in Erasmus+ in 2014-2020, our country's general involvement in this initiative is constantly increasing in the areas of international credit mobility, Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, Capacity Building in Higher Education, and Jean Monnet activities (European Commission, 2020). Notwithstanding being temporarily relocated higher education institution and functioning under the conditions of uncertainty and martial law in Ukraine of latest 2022-2024, BKMSPU has managed to participate in 6 Erasmus+ projects:

1. Erasmus+ project, Jean Monnet Module "Strengthening the EU common values through the policy of multilingualism in the education and training of future teachers" (№ 101083321). Project duration: 2023 - 2026. Grant amount: 30 000 EUR. The project aims to improve the educational and pedagogical process in Ukraine, bring it closer to European standards in the field of teaching foreign languages, create a basis for learning and teaching foreign languages from an early age, and spread the EU common values.

2. Erasmus+ project "Bringing Opportunities and Organizational Success To Small Local Universities in Ukraine" / BOOST (№ 101083203) ERASMUS-EDU-202. Project duration: 2023 - 2025. Grant amount: 50 205 EUR. The project aims to progressively increase the technical and IT capacities of the Ukrainian partner-universities; improve digital and blended learning formats; deepen the introduction of student-centered learning; promote the professional development of the teaching and administrative staff; expand international communication and internationalization of the Ukrainian institutions involved.

3. Erasmus+ project "MOOC-based micro-credentials for teacher professional development" / CRED4TEACH (№ 101082858) ERASMUS-EDU-2022-CBHE. Project duration: 2023 - 2026. Grant amount: 700 193 EUR. The project aims to provide high-quality, responsive, inclusive, flexible and competence-based training provisions to in-service teachers across the educational sectors. Its objectives are the following: to boost staff skills for the development and delivery of MOOC-based Micro-credentials; to develop and introduce national and institutional frameworks for the delivery, issuing and recognition of Micro-credentials, to create, deliver and validate 11 pilot MOOC-based Micro-credentials, to encourage the wider adoption of Micro-credentials for professional development of teachers and other target groups.

4. Erasmus+ project "Universities-Communities: strengthening cooperation" / UNICOM (№ 101083077). Project duration: 2023 - 2027. Grant amount: 988 431 EUR. The project aims to enhance universities' social role through boosting university-community engagement leading to the elaboration of state policy on supporting the third mission of universities for ensuring social cohesion, resilience, sustainability and prosperity in Ukraine. Another focus of the project is to develop national

policy on enhancing the third mission of universities and community-university cooperation; promote collaboration among the project's target groups and stakeholders in university-community engagement, drawing on European experiences and practices in areas such as inclusion and gender equality, cyber security and digitalization, ecology, civic education, and more; experience the best European practices in order to develop the academic content and manage the project effectively.

5. Erasmus+ project “Boosting university psychological resilience and wellbeing in (post-)war Ukrainian nation” / BURN (№ 101129379) ERASMUS–EDU–2023–CBHE. Project duration: 2024 - 2026. Grant amount: 47.187 EUR. The project aims to increase awareness about psychological resilience and wellbeing in academic partner institutions and bolster expertise in trauma-informed therapy among students and faculty members; enhance the capabilities of partner universities by establishing Centers for Psychological Resilience and Wellbeing. These centers will play a pivotal role in providing top-tier psychological support to the university community grappling with the ramifications of war.

In comparison with previous years, scientific and pedagogical staff of the University participated in a greater number of international programs and projects. Thus, in 2022, they were involved in 36 international programs and projects, while in 2023, this number increased to 61.

Figure 1 below shows BKMSPU faculties’ involvement in international programmes in comparison between 2022 and 2023, where data of Philological faculty is indicated in blue colour, Faculty of Natural Geography – in orange colour, Faculty of Chemistry and Biology – in purple colour, Faculty of Informatics, Mathematics and Economy – in yellow colour, the Educational and Research Institute of Social, Pedagogical and Art Education – in green colour.

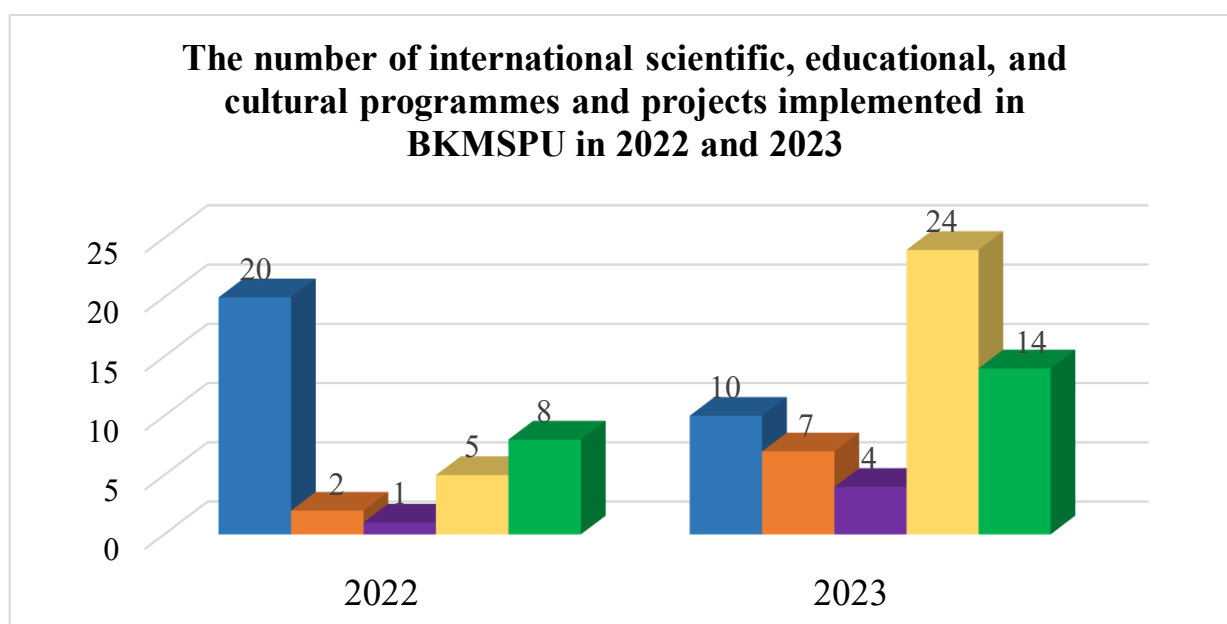


Figure 1. The number of international scientific, educational, and cultural programmes and projects implemented in BKMSPU in 2022 and 2023

Taking into account the necessity to develop international cooperation with the EU in the future the following applications were supplied by our University teams this year to join the new calls for Erasmus+ proposals:

- “Developing Future Educators' Digital Competence Through Introducing Robotics into Curriculum” (EduRob);
- “Ukrainian Mobility Application” (UMApp);
- “Implementation of Digital Education Model with Self-Defense-Oriented Classes (IDEMS)”. Call Ka211: Capacity Building in Higher Education;
- PTSD And Sexual Trauma: Training Experts - Network for a Stronger Europe. Partnering with Ukrainian HEIs to improve curricula and train psychologists, therapists and specialists on war-related PTSD and sexual trauma;
- Quality Education and Welfare for Children and Youth in Vulnerable Life Situations: Developing and Assuring Staff Competences for Holistic Support Systems in Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, and Sweden.

Figure 2 below shows general number of application submissions in 2023 for participation in international programs and projects by BKMSPU’s faculties compared to 2022.

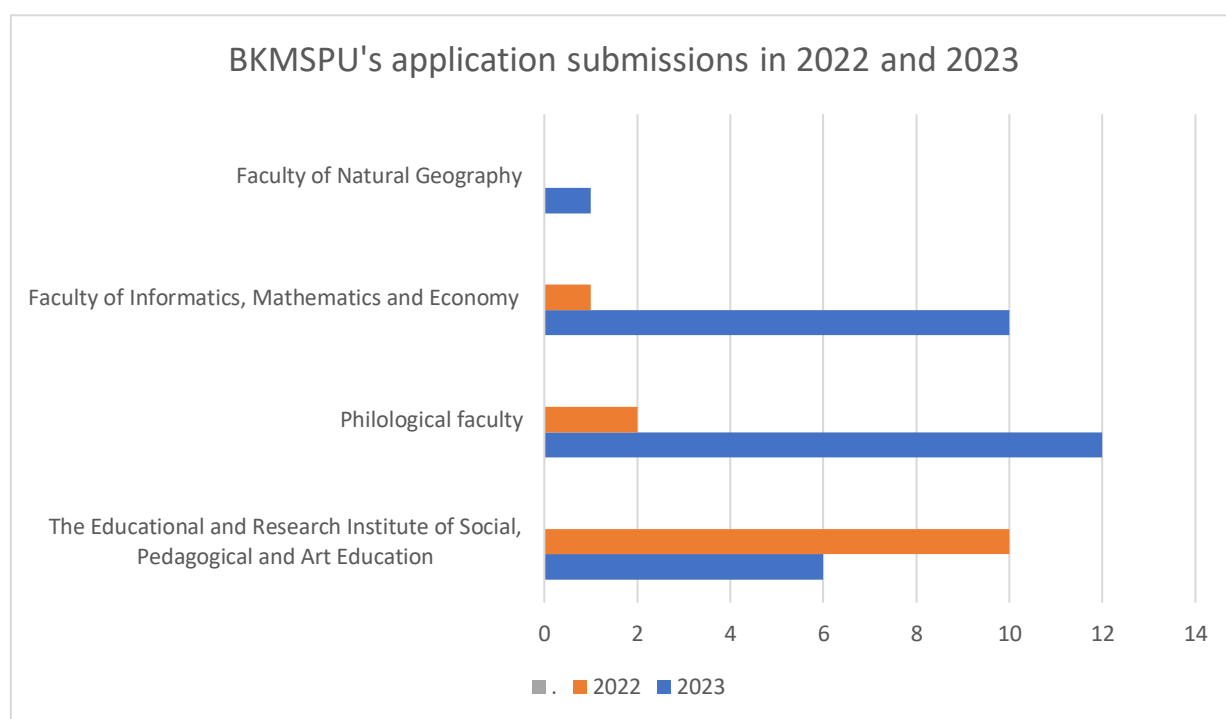


Figure 2. Application submissions in 2022 and 2023

The initial outcomes of implementing the mentioned above Erasmus+ projects demonstrate a positive impact on the enhancement of academic staff and students’ professional, digital and other competencies, encouraging BKMSPU to create and manage innovative educational processes aligned with the principles and standards accepted in the countries of the European Union. The knowledge gained from these international projects will be utilized in establishing a student-friendly and self-directed educational environment, fostering collaboration between the European and Ukrainian partners, and advancing our university’s international grant initiatives. Moreover, the experience

received will enrich our university with simple tools to increase its performance in different areas ranging from technical, digital, learning, community capacity building to updating internationalization strategy.

Conclusions

Analysis of the documents and corresponding scientific literary sources on the research topic made it possible to conclude that internationalization plays a vital role in promoting university integration in the EU education area. By enhancing academic quality, competitiveness, and global outlook, internationalization contributes to the development of a more integrated and cohesive European Higher Education Area. However, to fully realize the benefits of internationalization, it is important to address the challenges it presents, such as ensuring the quality, recognition of qualifications and promoting multilingualism. We truly believe that the experience received by Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University while participating in Erasmus+ grant programmes will promote internationalization and foster further integration of our university into European Higher Education Area.

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Conflict of interest

The authors state no conflict of interest.

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