



Erasmus+ Mobility Programme in the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” - Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

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Abstract. The article aims at analyzing the latest development of the Erasmus+ Programme in the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” – Blagoevgrad as a part of a wider internationalization strategy. This activity, especially mobility under Key Action 103 and Key Action 107, is inextricably linked to the current processes of globalization and regionalization, including in the field of higher education. An inference has been drawn that the growing number of mobilities during the last five years marks a ‘success story’ for the university but also highlights some problems that are to be worked on, such as the continuous modernisation of curricula. The paper emphasizes upon a very significant issue whose essence is: the mobility under the “Erasmus+” Programme not only improves students’ career development prospects but also broadens their horizons and their social, cultural and linguistic abilities. The authors see internationalization not as a mere goal, but as a contribution to the quality of students’ education and this explains the importance of physical mobility. The future cooperation with the current and new partners will contribute to the sustainable international development of the university.

Research Contribution: The article provides insights into the latest development of the Erasmus+ Programme in SWU “Neofit Rilski”, particularly under Key Action 103 and Key Action 107 and highlights both the success achieved and the challenges that have been identified.

Keywords: Erasmus+ mobilities · internationalization · SWU “Neofit Rilski”

1 Introduction

Internationalization has become an important feature of contemporary higher education. It is a complex, multi-layered process that has multiple aspects, including changing the content of curricula and programs, as well as developing students’ competences to work in a multicultural environment. Today the number of disciplines that contain in their name the term ‘international’ is growing at an extremely fast pace - international law, international trade, international business, international relations, etc. And this should not be otherwise, since processes such as globalization and regionalization determine

the peculiarities of modern life on the planet. Despite the diverse, sometimes opposing views on globalization, it undoubtedly causes previously unknown changes in people's overall lives, including in the field of education [3]. Evidence of this is the ongoing discussion on global higher education. As the notion of global education develops it will require a more careful and nuanced approach to its interpretation that should balance the interests of different countries [9]. Sometimes economic and political issues dominate over the academic and cultural value of international higher education as some experts point out [10].

Foreign language skills, knowledge of other countries or cross-national features and the ability to conduct comparative studies are mandatory for the future successful professional realization of the students. International cooperation and communication as well as different international funding also represent important activities that can be associated with the internationalization of higher education. Surely, some of these activities can be carried out 'at home', at the university itself. But the role of the Erasmus+ Programme as one where physical mobility of the students, PhD candidates, academic staff and administrative staff across the countries is carried out was and remains crucial.

It is hardly necessary to convince anyone of the advantages and usefulness of the internationalization of higher education. The mobility of knowledge, students, PhD researchers, lecturers and staff, the adoption of common comparable criteria for the quality of education, and the increase in the number of international scientific projects leads to Bulgaria's cohesion with the academic world from different countries and cultures. The country's national educational politics became a part of a wider European framework.

2 Erasmus+ Programme at South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

The Erasmus+ Programme has been part of the educational portfolio of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" since 2001. It is an important part of the implementation of the development vision for the international cooperation of the university. The programme fulfills the role of a guide of European values among the academic, student and PhD researcher communities at the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" [2]. The vision for the development of international cooperation emphasizes the implementation of initiatives that confirm the place of the South-West University "Neofit Rilski". Through the Erasmus+ Programme, the university stimulates its international openness for global cooperation and transnational education and internationalizes its educational product through knowledge transfers and innovative practices. The University's International Department applies annually for funding to the Human Resources Development Center whose main task is Bulgaria to be a preferred and desirable Erasmus destination. Bilateral Erasmus+ agreements have been concluded at the institutional level with other European and worldwide universities in a specific field of knowledge according to the university's profile.

3 Erasmus+ Programme Under Key Action 103 and Key Action 107

It should be noted that during the last few years the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” has implemented six agreements under the Erasmus+ Programme under Key Action 103: Student and Staff Mobility with Programme Countries and under Key Action 107: Student and Staff Mobility between Programme Countries and Partner Countries. Cooperation in different fields with partner countries such as the United States, Albania, Moldova, Armenia, Morocco, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyz State Law Academy) has been established [1].

As a whole, the activity of South-West University “Neofit Rilski” under the Erasmus+ Programme under Key Action 103 and Key Action 107 and developing cooperation with partner institutions all over the world can be assessed as successful. Moreover, in financial terms that means about €1,110,000 received by the University in the last two years for the abovementioned activities [1].

In 2021, the new programming period of the European Commission (2021 – 2027) began [7]. The Erasmus+ Programme is undergoing major changes regarding the conclusion of new agreements. Until that moment, all University agreements were concluded on paper. Since the end of last year, the European Commission has announced that in the future all agreements will be concluded entirely and only through the use of digital mechanisms. Unfortunately, due to the spread of Covid-19, the European Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency could not provide higher education institutions in Europe with a timely launch of the new platform for signing new agreements. This resulted in the automatic renewal for one academic year of all current fellowships.

During the period 2018–2021, the International Education Programmes and Cooperation Department managed to expand its partner network under the Erasmus+ Programme with a total of 13 new agreements under Key Action 103. At the moment, the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” has concluded over 270 active agreements with 170 European universities under Key Action 103 and 33 agreements under Key Action 107.

Due to the imposed governmental and institutional restrictions on travel and reception of foreign guest lecturers under the Erasmus+ Programme, outgoing and incoming mobilities were carried out only with the University of Tirana, Albania, University of Elbasan, Albania, University of East Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yerevan Brusov State University of Languages and Social Sciences, Armenia. Mobility with our other partners in Key Action 107, including Moldova State University and Université Mohammed Premier were postponed. Mobilities with East Carolina University and Michigan State University had to be canceled.

Regardless of everything, it can be said that internationalization is also a challenge to the quality of education at public universities, like South-West University “Neofit Rilski”. It contributes to the maintaining of the university’s established position in the national higher education system as well as stimulates ensuring recognition and fulfillment of the university’s mission in Bulgaria. From the point of view of its connectivity and interdependence with the quality of education, the internationalization process through its mechanism of spreading good practices undoubtedly represents a potential for new growth of higher education in Bulgaria.

Table 1. Number of outgoing student and doctoral mobilities.

Year	Mobilities
2016/2017	20 mobilities
2017/2018	35 mobilities
2018/2019	49 mobilities
2019/2020	57 mobilities
2020/2021	90 mobilities

4 Student and Doctoral Mobilities Carried Out for the Last Five Years

The South-West University “Neofit Rilski” implements two types of mobilities under the Erasmus+ Programme - student mobility for training purposes and student mobility for practice purposes. Within the framework of KA 103 and KA 107 of the Programme, the value of financial support for students is fixed by the European Commission. For the previous academic year under KA 103, the university reports a total of 90 student and doctoral student mobilities. The mere fact that during the same period, 30 students from foreign universities studied at the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” (incoming mobility), is also encouraging.

The Table 1 shows the increasing tendency for outgoing student and doctoral mobility in our university in five year period despite the serious obstacles caused by COVID-19. On the contrary, the relatively rapid recovery of activities after the waves of the Covid-19 pandemic is also an indicator of the significant role that the Erasmus+ Programme plays for the universities.

Student mobility has a positive impact on the overall development of the student’s personality, from the expansion of professional knowledge, through the improvement of language competence, as well as personal development - better adaptation to new and emerging situations, higher self-esteem or improvement of social skills. In their interviews after returning to Bulgaria students almost unanimously declare that they have improved their communication, problem-solving and decision-making abilities and their preparation work. Our students not only acquire new knowledge but also strengthen some basic general-applicable skills that are highly valued by employers with whom the university tries to be in permanent contact. The programme also contributes to the development of interpersonal competencies such as tolerance, confidence, problem-solving skills, curiosity, knowledge of one’s own strengths and weaknesses, and determination. The “Erasmus+” Programme not only improves students’ career development prospects but also broadens their horizons and social contacts.

5 Academic Staff Mobility for Teaching and Training Purposes

During the last academic year, the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” carried out a total of 78 outgoing mobilities - 45 mobilities of professors for the purpose of teaching

Table 2. Number of outgoing staff mobilities for teaching and training purposes by year.

Year	Mobilities
2016/2017	28 mobilities
2017/2018	53 mobilities
2018/2019	76 mobilities
2019/2020	50 mobilities
2020/2021	78 mobilities

and training and 33 mobilities of administrative staff. That also represents a significant increase compared to outgoing staff mobility figures from the previous five years (Table 2).

A positive trend is observed in the participation of academic staff mobilities. In their interviews after coming back to SWU, 96.77% of participants noted that they acquired specific knowledge or practical skills related to their current job or professional development. 96.97% share that they have further developed their work skills based on the good practices obtained from their stay abroad, and 96.97% believe that as a result of the mobility they have improved their cooperation with the partner institution/organization. From a survey conducted, 100% of lecturers indicate that they have expanded their network of international contacts [1]. New knowledge and specific know-how through good practices borrowed from partners are obtained, personal competencies are developed, which are applied in daily work, and social, linguistic and intercultural knowledge is increased. Many of them indicate that satisfaction with their work increases. For the same period, 20 professors, six of them under KA 107, had incoming teaching mobility at the South-West University “Neofit Rilski”.

The trend related to the mobility of administrative staff is also positive. 97.78% have increased their satisfaction with their work, and 97.78% of them share that they have strengthened or expanded their professional network of new contacts [1].

6 Achieved Results

During the last few years, the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” was able to achieve visible and significant results under the Erasmus+ Programme mainly in two directions: increasing the number of mobilities and increasing grant funding. For another year, the university reports an increase in student and doctoral mobility, despite the severe epidemic situation related to the spread of Covid-19 worldwide. The work of the international department was hampered due to an outflow of participants, which led to postponed and canceled teaching and student mobilities. The significant increase in grants earned should also be noted. In the last two years alone, our university has won grants amounting to €1,117,113 for student and staff mobilities, which is double the amount compared to the previous period [1]. The complete list of all active (270 at the moment) Erasmus agreements available for students, divided by faculties, fields of knowledge, degrees of study and language of instruction, is published on the website of the Erasmus+ Programme - <https://erasmus.swu.bg>.

A positive achievement is the amended 2021 provision of Art. 53, par. 3 of the Regulation on educational activities of SWU, allowing students who are orphans, people who have permanent disabilities or people with reduced working capacity, who are placed into foster care, or in a specialized institution, students from remote rural areas or underdeveloped regions, to be entitled to special reliefs in accordance not only with the Bulgarian general legislation but also with the university's internal regulations and a decision of the Academic Council. Also, SWU "Neofit Rilski" can apply to the Human Resource Development Center (Bulgaria) for an additional 100 euros for costs related to the organization of the mobility activity of people in disadvantaged physical or mental condition, receiving additional support based on real costs.

An analysis was made of how our Erasmus+ Programme can fit into the European Commission's overall green and digital Erasmus+ policy [5]. We have undertaken to reduce the use of paper and office supplies by 20%. Paper application forms were replaced with electronic ones, student training agreements in the future will be concluded entirely online, and inter-institutional agreements will also be only in digital copy. We started the "Erasmus Forest" on the university grounds, planting one tree each year.

Analyzing the results of the outgoing student and doctoral mobility under the Erasmus+ programme, it should be pointed out that 95% of the students who have successfully completed their training and practice mobilities noted an improvement in their language skills. A positive trend is that after the mobility according to their self-assessment, 100% of the participants noted an enviable growth in their problem-solving abilities, their logical thinking skills and their abilities to reach conclusions in an analytical and reasonable manner. 89.47% of participants also note the positive impact of their mobility on their ability to organize and perform tasks more efficiently and effectively, and 84.21% esteem the value of different cultures [1, 4]. As it is pointed out "multilingualism, which is a vital and integral part of Europe's rich and cultural diversity, is a way out of the deep crisis that has gripped Europe because the continent is a huge labor market, where English is the working language, but knowledge of a universal language is not enough" [8].

Moreover, in recent decades the programme has become a tool that also has a specific social function to provide opportunities for disadvantaged socio-economic groups. And another distinctive feature is that nowadays Erasmus+ is not only a programme about the exchange within the European Union, but it provides opportunities for mobility and cooperation with neighboring countries and other regions as well. Bulgarians have lived for centuries at a crossroads between Europe and Asia along with various peoples and ethnicities and it is apparent the young Bulgarians can find their identity at the Balkans' level, at the European Union level, and the global level [8].

7 Problems Found

Facing its 35th anniversary it could be underlined that the Erasmus+ Programme is perhaps the most multi-layered programme of the European Commission, and precisely because of this, the problems with its administration are of a different nature [7]. The unprecedented crisis related to the spread of Covid-19 on a global scale has affected the Erasmus+ Programme extremely hard, not only at the local level but also at the

European level. In addition to the health crisis, other identified problems in the organization and management of the programme are difficulties related to financial, economic, demographic, political, linguistic and intercultural aspects.

The discrepancy between the curricula of the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” and the host institutions, the lack of awareness, the insufficient language preparation, the lack of academic confidence and the feeling of insecurity in our students (recognition of credits, stay abroad, financial uncertainty) further complicate the implementation of the programme. Overcoming stereotypes of recognition of disciplines and semesters according to workloads and credits is still a problem, and in this sense, it should be understandable that recognition is something other than the search for perfect match and equivalence of the subjects. The low dimensions of grants under the Erasmus+ Programme for student mobility are an obstacle for many students who wish to carry out mobility in wealthier European countries. Bureaucratic hurdles should not be pointed out in the last place. The procedure is sometimes accepted by students as poorly explained that requires familiarization with a certain amount of information.

8 Conclusion

In conclusion, the Erasmus+ programme is of great importance for the South-West University as a state institution that offers training in Bulgarian and English in 67 Bachelor’s, 86 Master’s and 43 specialized PhD programmes. With its 45-year history, our University has a leading position in the scientific and educational space both in Bulgaria and South-Eastern Europe. The strategic location of the University naturally facilitates academic cooperation with a number of Universities in the Balkan region.

Still important for the mobilities under the Erasmus+ programme will be the modernization of the curricula at the South-West University “Neofit Rilski” and their synchronization with the best European and international standards (curriculum development). The added value that Erasmus+ mobility brings is much higher than the absorption of the learning material provided for in the program. New social experience, improvement of language skills, acquaintance with the traditions in the training of other countries and universities as well as competitiveness and greater opportunities for realization in the labor market are undoubtedly among the most significant benefits of the internationalization of higher education. Taking into account the accumulated experience - expansion of the partner network, provision of useful contacts, valuable knowledge about the peculiarities of very different types of cultures and practices in the field of higher education and science, coordination of regulatory requirements, mutual complementation of expert potential, administrative capacity and material resources, etc., we believe that continuing cooperation with our partners is important for the implementation of the university’s development strategy.

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