

PROMOTING THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY EDUCATION: THE BULGARIAN-AMERICAN COOPERATIVE EXPERIENCE

Robert F. Orlikoff

East Carolina University, Greenville – North Carolina (USA)

Dobrinka Georgieva

South-West University “Neofit Rilski” – Blagoevgrad (Bulgaria)

Abstract. Several collaborative projects between South-West University in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, and 8 universities in the USA have worked well to improve the overall competence of students in speech-language pathology programs and practicing clinicians to better meet the needs of individuals with fluency and voice disorders. The US Fulbright Senior Specialist and EU Erasmus+ exchange programs serve as effective instruments that provide systemic and long-term impact supporting innovation and fostering contemporary teaching methods. These international projects prepare students and faculty succeed in a global, multicultural society, and in doing so, advance speech-language pathology as an evidence-based allied health science discipline.

Keywords: speech-language pathology; internationalization; higher education; Erasmus, Fulbright

Introduction

Speech-language pathology (SLP), known as logopedics in certain countries (including Bulgaria), is a profession with practitioners who continuously work to improve outcomes for individuals with communication and (in some cases) swallowing disorders. The clinical and academic education of speech-language clinicians developed at different times, varying widely among countries. Based largely on 19th and early 20th century research, pedagogy, and medical practice in Germany and France, SLP training programs in the USA have had much time to establish and maintain high educational standards and to further increase its scientific base to promote accountable evidence-based practice¹⁾ (Duchan, 2002; Georgieva, 2010) while advocating for an ever-expanding scope of practice and greater interprofessional collaborative practice among allied health professionals.

In Bulgaria, speech therapists have been trained almost exclusively within the framework of special education (Georgieva, 2010). However, following positive accreditation in 2009, South-West University (SWU) established the first Bulgarian logopedics program (BA, MA, and PhD level) in the area of Public Health. The logopedics program at SWU has since received Bulgaria's largest Erasmus+ K 107 grant (150 000 €), which supports cooperation with several well-established US universities, including Michigan State University (MSU), East Carolina University (ECU), and the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt). This work (Erasmus+ Grant, 2016 – 2020) is a direct continuation of 7 previous Fulbright projects (2004 – 2016) developed within the SWU Stuttering Research Center and coordinated by Prof. Dobrinka Georgieva. SWU has thus established partner projects with eight US universities to establish collaborations that help promote research activities and evidence-based SLP practice in Bulgaria.

Aim of study: The main purpose of the present study is to conduct a theoretical review of selected Fulbright and Erasmus+ projects according to the main strategic documents shaping contemporary higher education.

The article describes the essential goals for international collaboration policy concentrated on:

1. Improvement of overall competence of students in SLP undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs as well as practicing clinicians by increasing knowledge and skills within the areas of fluency disorders and voice disorders; and
2. Development of projects utilizing the US Fulbright Senior Specialist and EU Erasmus+ programs.

Method: Using document and content analyses of the Fulbright and Erasmus+ projects in addition to the official strategic documents that shape international collaboration in university training, education and research, the authors outline positive outcomes and provide recommendations for further studies between the USA and Bulgaria.

Discussion of the main strategic documents shaping global perspectives in contemporary SLP education

The Fulbright Program is a US cultural exchange programs designed to improve intercultural relations and competence between US citizens and other countries through the exchange of individuals, knowledge, and skills. In 1992, the Bulgarian and US governments signed a 10-year agreement creating the BG-US Commission for Educational Exchange. Since becoming fully operational in 1993, more than a thousand individuals have completed Fulbright research and academic cultural exchanges. Over the past decade, SWU can report 9 Fulbright exchanges, 3 of which involved research projects, the other 6 (completed within the Fulbright Senior Specialist Program) involved educational exchange. Of note, 7 of the 9 exchanges were in the field of SLP within the area of public health (see Table 1).

Seeking to add coherence to higher-education systems across Europe, the *Bologna Process* established the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) in 1999 to facilitate student and staff mobility, to make higher education more inclusive and accessible, and to work toward making European higher education more competitive worldwide. With 48 European countries participating as part of the EHEA, they have agreed to: (i) introduce a three-cycle higher education system consisting of bachelor's, master's and doctoral studies; (ii) ensure mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad completed at other universities; and (iii) implement a system that ensures strong quality and relevance of learning and teaching (EHEA, 2020²; European Commission, 2018³; EUA, 2021). Bulgaria's education minister was among the original 29 signatories of the Bologna declaration.

Developed in 2009, the *Europe 2020 Strategy* has served as the basic EHEA policy for the past decade (European Commission 2009⁴). This document reinforced the long-term prospects of the EHEA, emphasizing student-centered learning and mobility to "help students develop the competences they need in a changing labor market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens." In particular, it defines the two priorities of higher education as: (i) stimulation of the student mobility (i.e., at least 20% of graduated college students in Europe must have a study-abroad experience), and (ii) strengthening of international education and culture for European college students.

The Erasmus+ Program was developed by the EU to facilitate exchanges of students, faculty, and administrative staff with the purpose of improving educational training systems, while focusing on skills development, employability, institutional development, and the internationalization of European higher education. Between 2011 and 2017, SWU supported more than 260 exchanges to various countries, of which more than 70 focused on SLP. The validation of the modern university as a research and education center that prepares highly qualified specialists that support our current knowledge-based economy is the principle aim of *The SWU Strategy for International Cooperation and Concept for structure and functional development according to the international standards and EU Strategy 2020* (Tcholakova, Georgieva & Ivanov 2012). The *Erasmus+ Programme Guide* (European Commission, 2020⁵), as well as SWU's published rules for organization and management of Erasmus+ activities (SWU, 2020) were key in regulating the exchange projects undertaken.

The strategic documents of the following two US universities are presented as they engaged in the largest number of mobilities with SWU during the four years of Erasmus+ KA 107 projects. The main aim of the *MSU Mission and Strategic Plan* is to advance the university's international agenda. MSU's International Studies and Programs (ISP) works with the whole of the university to mobilize research capacity, enhance scholarship and educational programs, strengthen international experiences, support foreign language instruction and build partnerships around the world. ISP aligns international strategy with the university's strengths in thematic

focus, regional expertise, and global partnerships. These efforts expand and deepen global research and create lasting impact (MSU, 2021).

The *ECU Capture Your Horizon* strategic plan for 2017 – 2022 defines the university's responsibility to ensure the health and wellbeing of the citizens of the US state of North Carolina and its region. With the aim to be a national model for student success, public service and regional transformation, ECU (i) uses innovative learning strategies and delivery methods to maximize access; (ii) prepares students with the knowledge, skills and values to succeed in a global, multicultural society; (iii) develops tomorrow's leaders to serve and inspire positive change; (iv) discovers new knowledge and innovations to support a thriving future for eastern North Carolina and beyond; (v) transforms health care, promotes wellness, and reduces health disparities; and (vi) improves quality of life through cultural enrichment, academics, the arts, and athletics (ECU, 2021). The mission of ECU's Office of Global Affairs is "to amplify the global impact of ECU, its faculty, staff and students," by preparing students to succeed in a global, multicultural society by maximizing access to international experiences; encouraging regional transformation by contributing to a globally aware, globally engaged, and globally competitive citizenry; and facilitating global, international and intercultural public service and community engagement (ECU Office of Global Affairs, 2021).

The other US universities involved in Fulbright projects, including Pitt, West Virginia University (WVU), Minnesota State University (MSU), Vanderbilt University (VU), and the University of Cincinnati (UC), all strongly support study-abroad opportunities for their students and stress international cooperation as an important part of their mission.

Discussion of the Fulbright and Erasmus+ KA 107 collaborations between SWU and US Universities

Eight US institutions have collaborated with SWU between 2004 and 2020. During this time, there were 7 Fulbright and 27 Erasmus+ exchanges, involving 34 individuals (23 faculty members, 5 students, and 6 administrative staff). These collaborations provided continuing education for students and clinicians with the intent of increasing their knowledge and skills in the areas of fluency and voice disorders while promoting cultural competence and awareness.

Table 1 outlines the chronology of SLP development in the USA and Bulgaria (Andreev 1897; Denev 1940; Ivanov 1973; Stoyanov 1999; Lubinski & Golper 2007; Georgieva 2009; Georgieva & Popova 2012a; 2012b). From the perspective of SWU, much of the success of the exchanges with the US university SLP programs has been tied to their historic development as a dynamic, systematic, and scientific applied health science – allied with, but independent from, medicine, social science, and special education.

Surveying SLP/logopedics programs in selected central and southeastern European countries, Georgieva (2010; 2014) highlighted the need to improve the quality of courses and guarantee the excellence of professional education by creating effective continuing-education programs, workshops, and seminars through research-informed teaching; extending the traditional role of SLPs through the development of new subspecialties; and engaging in basic and applied research to support accountable evidence-based practice.

In addition to providing unique experiences and academic courses for three MSU students who visited Bulgaria for a 3-month study abroad, SWU has sent two students to MSU to be trained in areas that are uncommon for SLPs in Bulgaria. Within the Erasmus+ program at MSU the Bulgarian students participated in courses covering such topics as swallowing disorders, audiology and hearing rehabilitation, neurogenic and motor-based speech disorders, cognitive communication disorders, and SLP research methods.

A total of six exchanges of administrative staff have occurred between MSU and SWU to support the development of further international exchange programs and a graduate (MA-level) curriculum for a possible SLP/Logopedics program to meet the educational and clinical needs of Bulgaria. The administrative exchanges have provided department chairs and program directors collaboration with SWU Erasmus experts, education specialists, and staff members who oversee international affairs. This has promoted the sharing of how different educational and clinical systems function, leading to discussions of how these systems may adapt to the current and future needs of students, patients, and speech-language clinicians in each country.

Essential to the development of a health-science-based SLP curriculum has been the delivery of courses in fluency and voice disorders. In lecture, both the Bulgarian and US academics emphasized the principles of education as reflective practice, collaborative practice, cultural competence, contexts of practice, holistic and evidence-based practice, creativity, mindfulness and care, as well as professional knowledge and practical skills. The special purpose of the Fulbright and Erasmus+ teaching was to (i) provide advanced knowledge in existing theories and scientific research through research-based teaching, and (ii) to evaluate critically research evidence regarding the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and management of communication disorders. All teaching activities during the Fulbright and Erasmus+ projects conformed to the accepted frame of research-informed teaching promoted by European universities.

Conclusions

The Erasmus+ and Fulbright programs serve as effective instruments for systemic and long-term impact by supporting innovation and contemporary teaching methods. During the past 15 years of collaboration between SWU's Logopedics program and several US universities, these partnerships have influenced the way educational institutions disseminate research, create valuable international collaborations, and

prepare students at the undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate level. Furthermore, visiting MSU students have had the opportunity to gain culturally and linguistically diverse perspectives as they relate to European culture and the field of SLP abroad. These students were exposed to different models of health care, billing, clinical populations, and scope of practice.

Students and clinicians in SWU received education and training from US faculty who provided important knowledge and evidence-based insight into the etiology, pathogenesis, and clinical symptoms of fluency and voice disorders. All described exchange activities have fostered international recognition of both the SWU Logopedics program and the Stuttering Research Center. Further, the activities were in accord with the Bulgarian National Strategy of Scientific Research with its emphasis on the internationalization of science and education. The internationalization of the scientific and educational achievements of SWU's Logopedics program is essential to full participation as Faculty in Public Health as well as to structure and functional development outlined by EU Strategy 2020.

Relationships have been built between institutions in the USA and Bulgaria that continue to foster collaborations and consultations on various research projects, resulting in publications (St. Louis, Andrade, Georgieva, & Troudt 2005; St. Louis, Filatova, Coşkun, Topbaş, Özdemir, Georgieva, McCaffrey, & George 2010, 2011; Georgieva 2013a; Georgieva 2013b; Georgieva & Orlikoff 2020; Brosh, Yaruss & Georgieva, in press) as well as national and international professional conferences (Georgieva, Andrade, St. Louis, & Troudt 2004; St. Louis, Goranova, Georgieva, Coşkun, Filatova & McCaffrey 2007; Kuster, Georgieva, Felsenteld, St. Louis, Topbaş, & Shultz 2008; Georgieva, Spray, Yaruss, Orlikoff & Deliyski 2018). Although the US universities that participated in the Fulbright and Erasmus+ KA107 projects with SWU represented different structures and systems of higher education, all of them shared one essential strategic purpose: to offer high-quality student education that best prepares them for a successful career as a speech-language clinician. The Fulbright and Erasmus+ exchanges served as an effective instrument for gaining an international perspective regarding education and practice in the field of SLP.

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Table 1. Chronology of the most important periods of SLP development in the USA and Bulgaria (including collaboration in university education)

USA	Year	Bulgaria
Physicians, grammarians and elocutionists begin to share interest in speech correction	1800	Individual nonscientific attempts to treat speech disorders
1882. The first US textbook on speech disorders published in Philadelphia (Samuel O. L. Potter. <i>Speech and Its Defects: Considered Physiologically, Pathologically, Historically, and Remedially</i>) 1892, Edward Wheeler Scripture establishes a speech research laboratory at Yale University	1880 – 1900	1897. Andreev translated, edited and published the Russian author Anders's article "Заикание и его лечение..." (Andreev, 1897; Georgieva, 2009)
Carl Emil Seashore establishes the Department of Psychology at the University of Iowa, where he also begins to develop the first US research and training program in speech and hearing	1904 – 1909	1904, P. Mednikarof specialization in Logopedics and Education of the Deaf: Vienna 1906, The first State Institute for the Deaf and Dumb founded in Sofia (related with F. Urbih activities) (Georgieva & Popova, 2012a) 1909, The first class for children who stutter was opened in Sofia
University of Wisconsin establishes a graduate program and clinic in speech disorders	1914	
Speech clinics in privately funded and university-based centers begin to be established across the country	1916 – 1920	Predominantly centered on private practice
1922, Sara Stinchfield (Hawk) receives first PhD in speech disorders from the University of Wisconsin 1924, Lee Edward Travis receives first Ph.D. in the discipline of communication sciences and disorders 1925, American Academy of Speech Correction, the forerunner of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association (ASHA), is established	1922 – 1925	1923, St. Stoyanov published his work on stuttering (Stoyanov, 1999) [1924, IALP was founded in Vienna by Emil Froeshels]
1928, Sara Stinchfield Hawk publishes <i>Speech Pathology with Methods in Speech Correction</i> 1931, Lee Edward Travis publishes <i>Speech Pathology: A Dynamic Neurological Treatment of Normal</i>	1928 – 1934	1930, L. Stoyanova specializes in Rome Montessori method (Georgieva & Popova, 2012b)

Speech and Speech Deviations 1934, A Code of Ethics is created by what was then known as the American Speech Correction Association		
1936, The <i>Journal of Speech Disorders</i> is first published	1936 – 1947	1940, D. Denev's <i>Epidemiology of the Speech Disorders</i> is published 1947, The Bulgarian government regulates general education of children and pupils
1952, ASHA initiates the development of national standards for SLP certification	1950 – 1952	1950/51, Daskalov and Stoyanova started the first training course for logopedists in the country 1952, The first logopedic room was opened in health system in Pavlovo, Sofia
	1953 – 1955	1953, The first program on Defectology (Special Education) established at Sofia Teachers Institute 1954, The first logopedics room within school system established in Sofia 1955, Research department at Institute of Neurology and Psychiatrics in Sofia opened (Georgieva & Popova, 2012b)
The standards for the Certificate of Clinical Competence (CCC) are implemented	1965	
Clinical practicum hours increase to 300	1973	First Bulgarian manual on Logopedics is edited (Ivanov, 1973)
1993, ASHA requires a master's or doctoral degree in SLP and audiology for CCC, as well as 75 hours of course work, including basic sciences, 375 hours of observation and practicum, with 250 hours of those required at the graduate level, and a 36 week Clinical Fellowship	1987 – 1994	1987, The specialty of Defectologia (with specialization Logopedics) established at SWU 1994, The first special education center within Sofia University created
	1996 – 1998	1996, Bulgarian Association of Logopedics and Phoniatrics founded 1998, First National congress on Logopedics and Phoniatrics, Sofia
	2000 – 2002	2000, SWU Stuttering Research Center founded by Georgieva 2002, Logopedics as a specialty

	2000 – 2002	separated from Special Education specialty at SWU
	2004 – 2007	2004/05, First Fulbright Senior Specialist Program in SLP: Stuttering Treatment (<i>Prof. K. O. St. Louis, West Virginia University, Morgantown, USA</i>) 2006, National Society of Logopedics founded 2006/07, Second Fulbright Senior Specialist Program in SLP: Stuttering Treatment Materials (<i>Prof. Judith Kuster, Minnesota State University, Mankato, USA</i>) 2006/07, West Virginia University, Adelphi University and Missouri State University organize the <i>First World Conference on Cluttering</i> in cooperation with SWU; Conference held in Katarino,, Bulgaria 2007, Bulgarian Society of Logopedists becomes member of CPLOL
	2009 – 2012	2009, The first successful Logopedics accreditation in Public Health field finalized at SWU; The first and unique department of Logopedics was founded by Georgieva at SWU 2010, The first university speech center established at SWU 2010/11, Third Fulbright Senior Specialist Program in SLP: Evidence-Based Treatment in Fluency Disorders (<i>Prof. Edward Conture, Vanderbilt University, USA, project number PR 4401</i>) 2011/12, Fourth Fulbright Senior Specialist Program in SLP: Treatment Efficacy in Stuttering Disorder" (<i>Prof. J Scott Yaruss, University of Pittsburgh, USA, project number 4907</i>)
2013, Fifth Fulbright research grant: Evidence-Based Practice through Acoustic and Electroglottographic Characteristics Measuring in Stuttering and Voice Disorders (<i>Prof. Dobrinka Georgieva, Cincinnati</i>)	2013 – 2014	2013/14, Sixth Fulbright Senior Specialist Program in SLP: Voice Disorders and Clinical Voice Assessment (<i>Prof. Bernice Klaben, School of Medicine, University of Cincinnati, USA, project number 6028</i>)

<i>Children Hospital and University of Cincinnati, USA, grant number 12-21-05) – the first Fulbright SLP research study</i>		
	2015 – 2016	Fulbright Senior Specialist Program in SLP: Voice Disorders and Instrumental Voice Assessment (<i>Prof. Robert F. Orlikoff, West Virginia University, Morgantown, USA, project number 6884</i>)
Erasmus + KA 107 2017-1-BG01-KA107-035621 key activity 1 <i>Partner country participants: University of Pittsburgh and Michigan State University (3 mobilities: 2 academic and 1 student)</i>	2016 – 2017	Erasmus + KA 107 2017-1-BG01-KA107-035621 key activity 1 <i>Partner: SWU (2 mobilities: 1 academic and 1 student)</i>
Erasmus + KA 107 2017-1-BG01-KA107-035621 key activity 1 <i>Partner country participants: East Carolina University and Michigan State University (6 mobilities: 4 academic, 1 student and 1 administrative staff)</i>	2017 – 2018	Erasmus + KA 107 2017-1-BG01-KA107-035621 key activity 1 <i>Partner: SWU (6 mobilities: 3 academic, 1 student and 2 administrative staff)</i>
Erasmus + KA 107 2017-1-BG01-KA107-035621 key activity 1 <i>Partner country participants: East Carolina University and Michigan State University (5 mobilities: 3 academic, 1 student and 1 administrative staff)</i>	2018 – 2019	Erasmus + KA 107 2017-1-BG01-KA107-035621 key activity 1 <i>Partner: SWU (6 mobilities: 3 academic, 1 student and 2 administrative staff)</i>
Erasmus + KA 107 2017-1-BG01-KA107-035621 key activity 1 <i>Partner country participants: East Carolina University and Michigan State University</i>	2020 – 2021	Erasmus + KA 107 2017-1-BG01-KA107-035621 key activity 1 <i>Partner: SWU</i>

NOTES

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✉ **Prof. Robert F. Orlikoff**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0048-6541>

Dean, College of Allied Health Sciences

East Carolina University

2150 West 5th St. Greenville, NC 27834, USA

E-mail: Orlikoffr16@ecu.edu

✉ **Prof. Dobrinka Georgieva**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5029-9723>

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”

2700 Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

E-mail: logodoby@swu.bg