

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ERASMUS+ MOBILITY IN BUSINESS EDUCATION: AN EXAMINATION OF A SUCCESSFUL BULGARIAN-MEXICAN COLLABORATION

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Abstract. The paper discusses the role of the European Union's Erasmus+ Mobility Programme in improving business education in universities around the world, with only one located in an EU member country. Based on a case study, the importance of matching basic provisions in the internationalization strategies of universities interested in pursuing such collaboration is highlighted. It also examines some of the more significant organizational prerequisites for the practical implementation of the partnership concept, as well as for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of mobility and other associated joint activities.

Keywords: business education; inter-university partnerships; Erasmus+ mobility

Introduction

International activity is critical to the development of modern universities. Today, there are numerous opportunities for international academic exchange. One of these relates to the Erasmus+ programme, which aims to exchange best practices and strengthen cooperation among higher education institutions. In this regard, Bulgarian universities have extensive experience collaborating with universities from both within and outside the European Union through the Erasmus+ programme. Universities cooperate in a variety of scientific and professional fields. This publication focuses on international collaboration in the fields of business and management education. The goal is to investigate the impact of international Erasmus+ mobility on the development of business and management education. As an example, key aspects of the collaboration between the University of Ruse

“Angel Kanchev” in Bulgaria and the University CETYS in Mexico are examined and discussed.

1. Prerequisites for successful international cooperation

Business and management is one of the most popular fields at the University of Ruse for Erasmus exchanges, both by program and by partner countries. This paper examines the role of international Erasmus+ mobility in the development of business and management education and provides an example of an Erasmus+ collaboration with one of Latin America’s leading universities, CETYS University in Mexico. The significant similarity between the two universities’ internationalisation strategies is an important prerequisite for successful and effective international exchange.

The Bulgarian university’s strategy focuses on expanding the geographical scope of its network of international partnerships, including those with universities in Latin America, as well as strengthening the internationalisation of education and research. The Mexican university’s strategy includes prioritizing the expansion of degree courses in English that have been developed and certified in accordance with international standards, in order to develop professionals with high professional and intellectual capacity who will actively participate in the country’s social, cultural, and economic development. The Erasmus+ partnership between the two universities is a natural extension of Bulgarian and Mexican lecturers’ scientific collaboration in a variety of international initiatives, including Bulgarian educators delivering business economics lectures to CETYS Business School students in 2020. The Mexican university’s partnership is highly valued, both in terms of subject matter and active learning methods. Practice and research show that, particularly in entrepreneurship education as part of economic education, the use of active forms such as case studies and business games is becoming increasingly important (Papazov & Mihaylova 2012; Woolfolk-Ruiz & Acosta-Alvarado 2016; Vasilska 2020; Sterev 2023).

Economic cooperation between the two universities includes long-term joint initiatives such as updating curricula in strategic management, corporate planning and control, and entrepreneurship; joint research related to undergraduate and graduate student training; invitations to membership in scientific and editorial boards, and so on. It stands to reason that the development of educational and scientific contacts should be prioritized in the rating and accreditation of the profession. It is a positive fact that the partner university in Mexico has been accredited and certified by agencies for academic quality and educational models that meet the highest national and international quality standards. It is the first non-U.S. higher education institution to be accredited by the Western Association of Colleges and Schools, and the business program is the first in northwestern Mexico to receive international accreditation from the Accreditation Council for Business Schools. The in-

ternational accreditation of the Marketing Management and International Business degree programmes ensures that, as a result of Erasmus+ mobilities in the Business area, curricula can be supplemented and updated with new knowledge, skills, and competencies resulting from international research, especially in Latin America. Once again, it is critical to emphasize the importance of both universities' shared goals for academic development, separate and parallel research, and a comparable ability to develop and maintain academic links.

The development of CETYS University's business direction is based on high-quality curricula, with the goal of attracting capable and talented students while also enriching professional skills to meet global standards. This unquestionably establishes the university as a strategic training centre in Mexico. The University of Ruse is constantly improving and developing on the foundation of its established national and international reputation, while also maintaining close ties with other higher education institutions and integrating into international educational and scientific networks. CETYS University is strategically focused on education and research partnerships with the United States and Europe. Its orientation toward the Bulgarian university stems from the successful direct bilateral academic relations between faculty and business students established as part of the Erasmus+ academic exchange program with Brno University of Technology in the Czech Republic. Erasmus faculty mobility is being implemented at the Czech university, with lecturers from the University of Ruse's business department training Mexican students and Mexican lecturers training Erasmus students from Bulgaria. The teamwork of Bulgarian and Mexican lecturers and students was praised as promising, resulting in the Erasmus+ collaboration.

CETYS University's business direction is entrepreneurial and ideologically aligned with the European HEInnovate concept (HEInnovate, 2024), which is additionally utilized by the University of Ruse. Mexico's economics curriculum is globally recognized and leading, and international collaboration with European universities is extensive, with partners including the University of Applied Sciences of Upper Austria, the University of Barcelona, the University of Tallinn, the University of Bergamo, the Technical University of Brno (Czech Republic), San Diego State University, the University of California, Washington State University (USA), and others.

According to the retrospective analysis, Cornell University in the United States has historically supported graduate education at Ruse University through student exchanges and faculty specializations in regional development management. Internationalisation, entrepreneurship, and innovation, as well as university-industry-business links, are all part of the Mexican university's academic environment, which is consistent with the Bulgarian university's internationalisation strategy of closer international cooperation in order to innovate in education and research and provide career opportunities.

The goal of Erasmus+ mobility is to make the partnerships formed in the field of business and management a sustainable practice. The realization of such a goal is quite realistic given that the Mexican university has extensive experience with Erasmus+ academic exchanges with universities in Europe (Poland, Czech Republic, Austria, and Italy). It benefits from well-established internal university mobility policies that account for the ECTS transfer system's unique features. The Mexican university is a preferred partner of European universities due to its well-established and successful organisation for selecting students and teachers and resolving academic issues in international exchanges.

Another important prerequisite for successful Erasmus mobilities is the availability of up-to-date information on contracted places, facilities, special services, and social activities, as well as the transparency of recognition procedures and course selection advice. The Mexican university's decision to encourage students to take at least one course outside of the Mexican curriculum in order to broaden their knowledge of business is greatly appreciated.

The quality of mobility at the University of Mexico is determined by a two-stage selection process for students and faculty. The first stage is administrative in nature, whereas the second stage aims to select the best candidates. The written justification of expectations and potential mobility achievements is critical in student selection, and the evaluation of academic achievements is the most important criterion for professors. Along with this criterion, participation in the research process in the relevant field of study, publication activity in global databases, and English proficiency are important selection criteria.

According to an analysis of the Mexican university's bachelor-level academic regulations, students approved for mobility must have a minimum of 60 ECTS and a grade point average above very good (between 89 and 100 Mexican points). The university assesses the quality of the exchange by conducting a mandatory survey of participants, administrative and academic units following the mobility. The goal is to assist the university in planning future mobility and negotiating academic exchanges.

One of the most important prerequisites for academic exchanges is a degree of academic discipline correspondence between the two universities' curricula. According to analyses, there is more than 80% correspondence in undergraduate studies at Bulgarian and Mexican universities, and 85% in master's studies. It is also worth noting that the educational profiles of the University of Ruse and CETYS University are similar, as both have structural units for business studies, engineering, social sciences, and humanities, resulting in a fruitful intra-university environment.

Academic exchanges, as well as learning, have been linked to increased intercultural awareness, more active participation in society, more positive interactions with people from different backgrounds, and so on. In this regard, it is important to

note that CETYS University has established student interest clubs, cultural heritage exploration clubs, 15 sports clubs, and two innovative programmes for international students: IMPACTO, which focuses on the personal development of people from the region, and FORTES, which trains and works with people from various social groups. This is a prerequisite for Erasmus+ students to have a greater sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, as well as more confidence in their own abilities and self-esteem.

2. Impact of international cooperation at university and regional level

In the fields of strategic business management and control, there is a significant correspondence between the two universities, allowing Bulgarian and Mexican lecturers to collaborate not only on the chosen topics, but also on joint research and publications indexed in international databases. One advantage of the chosen approach is that the combined resources of the two universities produce synergistic effects in teaching, which benefits both students and research.

It is natural to measure and evaluate the results of the Erasmus+ joint work between the two universities based on the number (or percentage) of changes made to curricula to facilitate student mobility, the synchronization of semesters (periods) of study, and the availability of equivalent courses and thematic areas in the Bulgarian and Mexican universities.

Erasmus+ cooperation, like any significant activity, requires continuous monitoring, measurement, and evaluation of results. In practice, this is reflected in the transfer of credits and recognition of completed modules during the mobility, the number (or percentage) of mobility applicants from Mexico to Bulgaria and vice versa, and the number of joint publications by lecturers from both universities who have participated in a teaching mobility. It is logical that after the mobility, students from the Mexican university will be able to apply specific tools for strategic analysis of small and medium-sized enterprises based on reporting data. The topic is important to Mexican students and is thus included in Erasmus+ faculty programs. Furthermore, it is part of the Mexican university's joint student and research projects to assess strategic opportunities based on reporting data, taking into account market specifics in Europe.

The impact of mobility on Mexican lecturers is related to the improvement of traditional teaching methods and the incorporation of European examples and practices into courses on strategic management and applied economics. This increases competence and influences how the faculty evaluates their teaching performance. The expected benefit is bolstered by the fact that students and faculty are eager for mobility in Europe, with 46% of Mexican university mobility applicants expressing such desire. The impact on Bulgarian faculty is related to specific indicators such as attestation and academic development of faculty members who actively participate in mobility exchanges with foreign universities, including partners from outside the EU.

The benefits to the two universities include increased professional competence in teaching, improved contacts between Bulgarian and Mexican scientific circles, and the planning of other types of joint activities, such as summer schools organized by different European universities (common partners of the University of Ruse and CETYS University), educational networks for the introduction of strategic corporate management, and so on. The interest in digitalizing the learning process in partner universities is also expected to grow (Panteleeva 2020; Stefanova & Zabunov 2021; Zlatarov, Ivanova, Ivanova & Doncheva 2021).

The advantages of the proposed collaboration between the two universities can be seen on a variety levels. At the national level in Bulgaria, it is expected to strengthen the university's links with the labor market through international relations with Latin America, as well as to broaden the professional network in the fields of business training and networking. On a national level in Mexico, the university is expected to strengthen its ties with institutions of practice focused on international relations with Europe. It has been demonstrated that the relationship between training and the labor market is critical in today's environment (Trajkov, Kurunovski, Karadjova, & Dicevska 2023; Ivanov 2023).

Employers in Bulgaria and Mexico have the opportunity to participate in the development of qualifications for business training needs, as well as professional competencies in entrepreneurship and strategic planning. The managerial evaluation of Erasmus cooperation entails developing and implementing a survey at the respective host university on teaching quality, teaching methods, and topics presented by guest lecturers. The monitoring of all of the aforementioned indicators related to the quality of Erasmus+ cooperation allows for the development of a so-called diagnostic matrix for the controllable variables. This allows for a comparison of the performance of different Erasmus mobility projects.

3. Conclusion

The presented international cooperation within the Erasmus+ programme between the Bulgarian and Mexican universities has a significant impact on the competencies related to academic professional development and the improvement of foreign language competences, as well as those in the field of digital technologies and cultural awareness. The impact on business professors in both countries is linked to innovative practices in the use of electronic resources for synchronous and asynchronous learning following the mobility period, as well as English language teaching. In terms of business, the two universities' collaboration is expected to continue through the use of distance learning platforms, the formation of international research teams, the enhancement of teaching expertise, and opportunities for academic development.

The outcomes of collaboration are evaluated by employers based on their assessment of the acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies to integrate

business and communication strategies, carry out market research, create an image of products and services, recognize business opportunities, and position brands on a national and international scale. All of this is completely in line with the teaching experience and expert skills, and it is supported by a large number of prestigious publications in global databases in the field of strategic management, leadership, and applied economics. Additionally, it is a requirement for successful bilateral mobilities.

The sharing of the vision of interaction with national and local industry representatives in Mexico and Bulgaria is an example of the role that collaboration plays in the process. This ensures that the outcomes of individual mobility and the objectives of the university partnership at the institutional level are aligned with one another.

In summary, it can be asserted that the efficacy and execution of Erasmus+ collaboration are associated with several factors:

- Acquisition of skills necessary for collaborative work with professionals from Latin America.
- Enhanced readiness for digital transformation and social integration within higher education institutions in Latin American nations.
- Improvement of higher education standards and the facilitation of academic qualification recognition.

The collective expertise pertaining to the mobility of students and lecturers within the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union, particularly in relation to countries beyond the European Union, holds potential for enhancing the overall framework and mechanisms of forthcoming academic exchanges.

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