

# Organizational Aspects of the Erasmus+ Mobility: The Case of a Successful Bulgarian-Russian Partnership

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to broaden the understanding of the Erasmus+ Program mobility impact on the business and management education in Bulgarian and Russian universities. In particular, it offers an extension of its scope formed on the example of the Erasmus+ cooperation between the University of Ruse (Bulgaria) and Kazan National Research Technical University named after A.N. Tupolev (Russia) in the business and management study fields. This case study report highlights some important organizational aspects of the business and management Erasmus+ education in Bulgaria and Russia. It presents also some practical aspects and is based on the Erasmus cooperation between the two mentioned universities. The findings from the case study appear to be in line with existing literature; for instance, it confirmed that academic mobility is shaping the curricula in the universities involved.*

**Keywords:** *business and management education, Erasmus+, cooperation, academic studies, university cooperation.*

**JEL classification:** A20

**DOI:** 10.24818/RMCI.2020.4.437

## **1. Introduction**

Erasmus+ is the European Union's program to support education, training, youth and sport. Its budget of over €15 billion provides opportunities for more than 4 million Europeans to study, train and gain experience, and volunteer abroad. Set to last until 2020, Erasmus+ doesn't offer opportunities for students only, but for a wide variety of academic and business staff. The Erasmus+ Programme contributes also to the achievement of a sustainable development of the partner countries in the field of higher education (European Commission, 2017).

In Bulgaria, the implementing of the Erasmus+ Program for the current 2014-2021 period is a responsibility of the Human Resource Development Centre. In 2017-19, it financed 16 higher educational institutions under the Key Action 107

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“International Dimension in the Higher Education” (shortly KA 107). This makes around 52% of all candidates and is equivalent to totally € 1,848,308.00 (Human Resource Development Centre, 2020).

It is known that by studying or teaching abroad with Erasmus+, students or professors (and university staff) can improve their communication, language and intercultural skills and gain soft skills highly valued by future employers and other organizations.

The focus of this paper (case study report) is on the organizational aspects, results and benefits of the exchange mobility, especially between Bulgaria and one of the partner countries, Russia, in the field of business and management studies. The purpose of this study is to broaden the understanding of Erasmus+ Program mobility impact on the business and management education in Bulgarian and Russian universities. In particular, it offers an extension of its scope formed on the example of the Erasmus+ cooperation between the University of Ruse, Bulgaria, and Kazan National Research Technical University named after A.N. Tupolev (KNRTU-KAI), Russia, in the business and management study field.

## **2. Literature review and identification of problem areas**

The Erasmus+ Program mobility impact on the higher education is an important issue. Such a program plays an important economic and social role not only within Europe. Erasmus+ mobility student flows gained an appropriate level of approximately two million since 1987, rose in recent years by the enlargement of the program to eastern countries and the so called Partner countries. Country size, cost of living, distance, educational background, university quality and the host country language are all found to be significant determinants influencing the Erasmus student flows. Other determinants like country’s characteristics and time effects can also affect mobility flows (Rodríguez González et al., 2011). Other authors found that in spite of the still important socio-economic barriers for the take-up of the Erasmus+ program, the access to it was moderately widened (Otero, 2008).

Jacobone and Moro find that the highest values among Erasmus+ students in terms of outcomes were attributed to cultural enhancement, personal development and foreign language proficiency (Jacobone & Moro, 2015). It is also important to have in mind that leadership, organizational culture and knowledge constitute a sufficient notion of the contemporary organizational development (Pencheva, 2018). Many partnerships aim obtaining and better utilizing tangible and intangible resources at the universities (Nastase, Florescu, Mircioi, 2018).

In a survey among Erasmus+ students from the University of Oviedo for example, it was found that job prospects are an important motivating factor to engage in Erasmus+ student mobility, and the overall assessment of the planned stay is acceptable, good or excellent in most cases (Fombona et al., 2013).

A Polish survey shows that the Erasmus+ mobility contributes to gaining multiple skills and competencies, which are highly valued by future employers, and develop an important social and cultural experience (Bryla, 2014) and ecological

thinking. This corresponds to the idea of a sustainable business development in its three basic aspects – economic (financial), social and ecologic (Zabunov & Zlateva, 2012).

Lithuanian analysis of Erasmus+ implementation (Damkuvienė et al., 2015) indicates that major outcomes of the academic staff are improvement of their curricula due to introduction of new teaching methods, while for the universities the main impact includes enhancement of school goals achievement and improved tolerance and creativity in teaching approach. According to the same authors, besides teaching staff and higher education institutions themselves, both students and their parents benefit from Erasmus+ activities.

Another study focused on the features of the international mobility between the EU and the Russian Universities reveals that mobility is a crucial step in curricula development, especially for higher education purposes (Fino, Zinchenko & Solovyev, 2013). The problem is commented in a similar way by another publication stating that the most important competences such as systemic thinking and professional technical skills should be considered in the process of curricula development (Svirina, Suslova & Dashina, 2016). Furthermore, the Erasmus+ mobility is seen even as a prerequisite for curricula development (Stanimirov, 2006; Lambovska, 2018), especially in the of business entrepreneurship education (Papazov & Mihaylova, 2012; Arun, 2017). Additional studies examine the relationship between critical thinking dispositions of prospective lecturers and their attitudes toward multicultural education (Aybek, 2018) and the new scientific basis and reveal perspectives for further international studies (Hofbauer & Sangl, 2016).

In terms of providing better opportunities for students in the labor market, several researchers had studied Erasmus program impact from this angle. For instance, Brooks and Waters (2012) indicate that abroad experience improves graduate's chances in the open labour market; this idea is echoing Yorke (2006) who indicates that employers consider diploma a necessary thing but not sufficient to hire a person – while experience abroad might be considered this sufficient addition. Finally, Alfranseder et al. (2012) pointed out that Erasmus experience helps to develop personal soft skills, and these skills become an important factor influencing potential employers' decision.

Similar findings are reflected by the studies assessing students' experience in Erasmus plus program. For instance, Diamond et al. (2011) views university graduates' perspectives higher as they think of their experience abroad as a milestone for developing teamwork skills; Grotheer et al. (2012) evaluates students' job opportunities higher as those who have experienced mobility are more willing to seek the job abroad – and thus have better chances for acquiring one.

All these aspects of the Erasmus program mobility studies give us a reason to analyse some main organizational issues on the example of the cooperation between the University of Ruse, Bulgaria, and Kazan National Research Technical University named after A.N. Tupolev (KNRTU-KAI), Russia, in the business study field.

### **3. Good practices of the Erasmus+ cooperation between the University of Ruse, Bulgaria, and KNRTU-KAI, Russia, in the business study field**

Kazan National Research Technical University (KNRTU-KAI) was established in 1932. In 1992 the university acquired the status of a State Technical University. Today, the University is one of the leading Russian institutions in the aircraft engineering, engine and instrument production, computer science and radio and telecommunications engineering. It is the largest technical university of the Republic of Tatarstan and the Volga region. The KNRTU-KAI educates around 25,000 students in 65 majors concerning Engineering, Business and Humanitarian Sciences, with a university faculty body of 1,800 persons, including 150 Full Professors and Doctor of Science degree holders, 600 Associate Professors and PhD degree holders.

The University of Ruse “Angel Kanchev” is the largest Bulgarian multi-profile university along the river Danube. The broad orientation of the university provides promising opportunities for research and innovation in advanced scientific areas, as well as participation in modern thematic networks. The university has over 250 multi-lateral and bi-lateral international agreements in the field of science and education, of which more than 200 are under the Erasmus+ Program. Every year between 80 and 100 Bulgarian students study partially abroad within the program.

Starting the Erasmus+ cooperation in 2016 in the field of business and management there were some important points of analyses.

1. *Relevance of the universities' strategy.* The University of Ruse “Angel Kanchev” builds a policy of supporting academic partnership with universities from Russia and deepens educational and scientific contacts in various fields (Information and Computer Technologies, Business, Management and Administration, etc.). Academic mobility is a priority in assessing the rating of both Bulgarian and Russian higher education institutions. The Erasmus+ mobility between University of Ruse and Kazan National Research Technical University (KNRTU-KAI) is one of the general objectives for the academic development in the field of business management and entrepreneurship. As a result of the Erasmus+ bilateral exchanges between the University of Ruse and KNRTU-KAI in the field of business studies, it is expected to strengthen: transfer of knowledge, good learning practices; the application of research results in an international academic environment, etc. Mobility participants (students and professors) are selected on the basis of their capacity to develop and maintain international academic relationships. KNRTU-KAI has experience in organizing and participating in various international activities and has the necessary capacity to accept professors and students and to provide them with interactivity with the local academic environment. KNRTU-KAI's Branch “Vostok” in Chistopol, responsible for the development of business management and entrepreneurship,

identifies the need to be more enterprising, according to the HEInnovative concept (developed by the European Commission) where the University of Ruse was adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science among the leading higher education institutions in Bulgaria. KNRTU-KAI is strategically oriented towards cooperation with European partners on education, research and intellectual property. The orientation towards Bulgaria stems from the direct regional relations of Tatarstan (the local region of Russia) with Bulgaria, the historical similarity of the inhabitants of this part of Russia and Bulgaria and the guaranteed support of the Russian regional authorities for the development of higher education. The KNRTU-KAI's main focus of business teaching is the development of technological entrepreneurship, which is fully in line with the strategic objectives of the University of Ruse and the curricula of Business and Management Faculty majors (Table 1).

**Table 1. Offered education for Erasmus+ students in the field of Business and Management\***

<b>Type of Higher Education Institution</b>	<b>Name of Higher Education Institution</b>	<b>Bachelor Level Education (4 years), Majors</b>	<b>Master Level of Education, Majors</b>
University, public	University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev" (Bulgaria)	Economics Business Management Industrial Management Digital management and innovation	Business administration Entrepreneurship and innovation Management of European projects
University, public	Kazan National Research Technical University's Branch "Vostok" in Chistopol (Russia, Tatarstan).	Economics Management	Innovations

\*The data are relevant to July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020.

The co-operation for 4 years between the Business Faculty of University of Ruse and the Department of Economics of Innovation Production of KNRTU-KAI's Branch "Vostok" in Chistopol focuses on the technical and economic issues of business (covered by the Russian university) and the strategic elements of business management training (covered by the Bulgarian university) which ensures the achievement of a synergic effect in realized bilateral Erasmus+ mobility and strengthening of the expert skills and teaching experience. The realization of the internationalization strategy is greatly helped by the established trust between the two universities' co-operation academies through academic exchanges.

2. *Cooperation experience.* University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev" has experience in Erasmus+ exchange with Russian universities and the

main benefit of this is the education and teaching processes improving. KNRTU-KAI also takes an active part in the academic mobility (for example with universities from Germany, Latvia, Kazakhstan, and Sweden). The quality of the cooperation is guaranteed by a bilateral agreement between the two universities in which the institutional Erasmus+ coordinators and academic coordinators are specified having in mind their international experience. The good practice shows that contact persons are responsible for the academic issues of incoming and outgoing students and professors. Usually, Faculty Erasmus+ coordinators from Bulgaria and Russia invite the participants (professors), but always having in mind the field of their expertise and the main business and management courses during the semester and their international experience. It is easy to do cooperation in the field of Business and Management because of the over 60% similarities on the subjects. The coordination process is connected with the incoming and outgoing mobility relationships, participation in the subject choice and monitoring of the Erasmus+ mobility. When encountered difficulties, the coordinators help to overcome it and communicate with the contact person from Russia. The selection of participants for outgoing and incoming mobility respects the criteria set out in the Erasmus+ Regulations and in the Internal Erasmus+ Mobility Rules of the University of Ruse and KNRTU-KAI. Professors and students carry out mobility in the business and management areas, specified in the agreement, with a required level of foreign language skills. In 2017 two were incoming and two were outgoing student mobility; and two were incoming and two were outgoing teaching staff mobility in the field of Business and Management, with excellent reviews. The academic mobility with KNRTU-KAI's Branch "Vostok" in Chistopol, Russia (its teaching staff consists of 77.3% PhD, 10.3% Science Doctors) helps to improve the quality of student's and professor's training and enhances research cooperation and personal development and foreign language proficiency.

3. *Detailed mobility responsibilities.* The quality of Erasmus+ mobility with Russia depends on the implementation of activities at the three main phases: before, during and after the mobility. Mobility is preceded by a selection process that takes place in several stages: announcement of universities, fields of knowledge, number of students per university, maximum and minimum duration of mobility, deadline for submission of applications. Responsible persons for this process are experts, faculty Erasmus+ coordinator and very well prepared contact persons. Ranking (selecting) candidates is based on the results of the foreign language test and scientific interests of the candidates. There is a selection committee appointed by order of the Dean of the Business and management faculty, chaired by a faculty Erasmus coordinator, including the contact

persons. During the mobility (incoming and outgoing), the contact persons monitor, coordinate and control the process. All mobility participants are offered accommodation, a library, labs, and modern software. One of the attractive things is that students are given the opportunity to participate in a number of international initiatives: sports, cultural, entertainment and international scientific teams. Excursions and celebration of Bulgarian Traditions (with the assistance of Students Erasmus Club) are organized and meet with approval. A preparatory course in Bulgarian language is provided and there is a great interest of it. It is a very good practice to organize an Erasmus+ week at the University of Ruse. So the Erasmus+ mobility contributes to gaining multiple skills and competencies, which are highly valued by future employers, and develop an important social and cultural experience. Special letters of thanks are also sent to the all partners. The finalization of outgoing and incoming student mobility is done by the Erasmus+ expert, contact person and the faculty Erasmus+ coordinator. We can say that this practice give us the new scientific basis and reveal perspectives for further international studies.

4. *Impact of the cooperation.* The Erasmus+ Mobility exchanging with KNRTU-KAI has significant impact on the University of Ruse as a partner university in the field of Business and management sciences. It is related to the teamwork skills in adapting the curricula of the Bulgarian and Russian universities to labour market needs. KNRTU-KAI is a leader in the Tatarstan region in Russian Federation, which very binds to the technological and economic themes in the curricula of business specialties. The benefits for the University of Ruse from this partnership are related to the ability to build interdisciplinary curricula for the Business and Management Faculty and also develop systemic thinking and professional technical skills of students. For KNRTU-KAI the benefits were the possibility to study innovative technology development infrastructure that relates existing knowledge to the soft skills in the field of developing practical environment. As a result of the collaboration parallel studies were done on the same methodology in Bulgaria and Russia, and the learning outcomes were used in the business games and case studies. The results of the mobility cooperation were assessed and measured by the number of joint curricula, the number of new disciplines, the number of new foreign students enrolled, etc. The results of cooperative activities and realized mobility were promoted through joint publications. Using different communication channels were shown the achievement of the goals and results. The priorities of the cooperation between Bulgarian and Russian universities can be assessed at different levels. Regional priorities include the development of international relations; training of academic staff; partnership with business organizations. The partnership helps to break

the barriers of traditional training and the introduction of new methods, such as distance learning courses, intensive courses for professionals, etc. Local employers from Russia and Bulgaria are expected to take part in meetings to change existing curricula and develop new ones. As a whole, the Erasmus+ mobility extends the existing competencies and increases the interest of the students in the business management field, which will influence on the development of innovative projects, preparation of scientific publications, etc. International students' life is not just classes, but also lots of opportunities to get to know the unique Russian and Tatar heritage, so as it was said in at the first paragraph a country's characteristics and time effects also affect mobility flows. Within the post-project period the sustainability of the results is achieved by student interaction and research collaboration, thus pursuing a long-term impact of Erasmus program.

The very good organization of mobility and benefits of it are also the focus of alumni (especially of the possibilities of internship). In view of the above mentioned, Erasmus+ mobility is one of the main points in alumni communication and relationships. Annually, non-research study among business and management alumni at the University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev" (Bulgaria) and KNRTU-KAI (Russia) shows that Erasmus mobility is one of the main indicators for establishing sustainable professional relationships between students and alumni. It is important because university alumni relationships are one of the main indicators of a university's competitive power and its quality level (Sagbas, Saruç, & Tunali, 2018).

#### **4. Conclusions**

This paper highlights important organizational aspects of the business and management Erasmus+ education in Bulgaria and Russia. These aspects are discussed in the light of presented good examples of cooperation between KNRTU-KAI (Russia) and the University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev" (Bulgaria). The findings from the case study appear to be in line with existing literature, for instance, it confirmed that academic mobility is shaping the curricula in the universities involved, which follows the findings by Fino, Zinchenko & Solovyev (2013). It was also revealed that Erasmus mobility provokes interest to language studies (in line with Jacobone & Moro, 2015). Our finding also correlates with those of Diamond et al. (2011) – graduates from both universities assessed their teamwork skills as improved and were better of looking for a job with this experience.

At the same time some findings seem to be not following existing research – for instance, Fombona et al. (2013) indicated the relevance of Erasmus mobility experiences to job market perspectives; while the studied cases revealed that employers were not eager to take it into account international mobility and developed cross-cultural soft skills. This might be the case of relatively self-sufficient country; still, the issue needs future research. The inconsistency of results was also found in the development of sustainability oriented mind-set that should appear according to



Zabunov & Zlateva (2012) also provokes a need for future research in this area. Finally, we have found the opposite outcomes to the ones presented by Grotheer (2012) – even the students who have been a part of Erasmus+ mobility do not consider a job abroad a better option for themselves, though they indicate that it made them think more about in-country employment mobility. Thus one can reflect the fact that the search in this direction is in its initial stage and will be broadened in the future.

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