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Interdisciplinary Projects of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership: the Potential for the Development of Higher Education in the EU and Ukraine

Abstract

The article under consideration here is devoted to an exploration of the significance of strategic partnership projects of EU universities as a case study in the development of the higher education system in Ukraine. The emphasis is on interdisciplinarity as a significant and promising guideline that contributes to the attraction of innovative approaches and the integration of knowledge from different disciplines to achieve maximum results. It is observed that the primary objectives of projects undertaken within the framework of the strategic partnership encompass compliance with the goals of sustainable development, academic mobility of teachers and students, inclusiveness, lifelong learning, interdisciplinarity, and other pertinent factors. The latter aspect is the focus of this discussion, and it is worthy of note that it is increasingly the subject of numerous studies and is actively used. The *objective of this study* is to ascertain the features of the implementation of the concept of interdisciplinarity in the projects of the strategic partnership Erasmus+, as a means to the development of the higher education system. *Methodology.* The following research methods were selected for this study: 1) analytical and synthetic methods that facilitated the interpretation and understanding of the key points of scientific works devoted to strategic partnership projects, directly related to these projects; 2) the generalisation method was employed to comprehend the study's results and formulate conclusions. The analysis of strategic partnership projects presented in the work was carried out on the basis of the classification of G. Heckhausen, who distinguished indiscriminate, pseudo-interdisciplinary, auxiliary, complex, additional, unifying interdisciplinarity. *Results.* In accordance with this theoretical basis, the following strategic partnership projects were considered: "International mobility: opportunities and problems. Proper preparation for studying at a foreign university", "University network of cultural heritage – comprehensive protection, management and use", "DigiLing: trans-European center for e-learning in digital linguistics". The analysis of the projects revealed a comprehensive, complementary and unifying interdisciplinary focus.

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interdisciplinarity, strategic partnership, university, higher education system, Ukraine, EU

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1 Introduction

A pivotal step in the process of aligning the contemporary Ukrainian higher education system with European standards is the forging of productive communication and collaboration with foreign educational institutions, which has been termed "strategic partnerships". It is important to note that the term has been borrowed from the field of entrepreneurship, where its actualisation and further study have been explained by "the need

to increase the effectiveness of international co-operation to address priority economic and political goals and counter threats to the economic security of participating countries" (Khodzhaian, 2017, p. 48). The concept has evolved to encompass the dynamic relationship between partners in the context of long-term collaboration, characterised by mutual benefit and a synergistic effect (Herasymchuk, 2014). The main principles of co-operation are as follows: 1) common interest of the partners in fruitful co-operation and mutual recognition of the strategic

nature of relations; 2) willingness to take into account the interests of the other party, readiness for compromises; 3) mutual refusal to take discriminatory or ultimatum actions; 4) long-term partnership; 5) ensuring effective mechanisms for implementing the strategic format of relations; 6) legal consolidation of the content and mechanisms of strategic partnership in bilateral documents; 7) disciplined, consistent and predictable relations, strict fulfilment of obligations; 8) high efficiency of strategic partnership at the level of the state, regions, business, ordinary citizens of both countries, and so forth (Herasymchuk, 2014). Subsequently, the term "strategic partnership" began to be adopted by other domains of human activity, including the higher education system in its entirety and, in particular, its international co-operation sector.

In scientific works, the concept of "strategic partnership" is understood as a system of "interaction between two or more states, which is based on the recognition of common values and/or their vision, a high level of co-operation in certain areas, mutual foreign policy support, in particular, within international organisations, coordination of positions in crisis situations and in resolving international conflicts" (Yermolaiev, Parakhonskyi, Yavorska & Reznikova, 2012). When the term was adopted by the sphere of higher education, its semantic load was maintained, though the vector of understanding underwent a certain degree of modification. The "Erasmus+ is" programme (2019, p. 17) asserts that the fundamental purpose of strategic partnerships is to facilitate the development, transfer and/or implementation of "innovative practices, as well as the establishment of collaborative initiatives to enhance co-operation, peer learning and exchange of experience at the European level".

Strategic partnership projects can involve at least three partner organisations from three different Programme Member States. Ukrainian higher education institutions can be involved as partners "if they have unique experience that will have a significant impact on the project results (added value)".

2 Literature Review

When the term was adopted by the sphere of higher education, its semantic load was maintained, though the vector of understanding underwent a certain degree of modification. Accordingly, within the context of higher education, a strategic partnership is defined as a collaborative endeavour between a Ukrainian higher education institution (or multiple institutions) and one or more educational institutions, characterised by the active exchange of experience, mutual support, and the creation of conducive conditions for the execution of projects and activities aimed at enhancing the quality of education. The coordination and facilitation of such interactions

is typically undertaken by the departments specialising in internationalisation and international co-operation at partner universities.

The principal vectors of projects within the framework of the strategic partnership are as follows: compliance with sustainable development goals, academic mobility of teachers and students, inclusiveness, lifelong learning, interdisciplinarity, and so forth. The latter aspect, which is increasingly the subject of numerous studies and is actively utilised, will be the primary focus of this analysis.

The study of the interdisciplinary nature of strategic partnership projects is based on foreign experience in understanding the problem of interdisciplinarity, because it, compared to the domestic tradition, has a longer history of study. Within the context of domestic scientific discourse, the concept of "strategic partnership" is predominantly employed within the purview of political, legal, economic sciences, management, and related domains (for example, the works of O. Voskoboieva (2021), A. Holoborodko (2021), O. Kravchenko (2011), L. Kudyrko and Yu. Vatakh (2024). O. Mytrofanova (2006), I. Sydorenko (2018) and others). The aforementioned problem in the field of higher education has been presented in scientific articles by the following researchers. Y. Zaiachuk (2021) expounds on the prospects afforded to Ukrainian university educators by EU educational programmes, with a particular emphasis on the establishment of fruitful collaborations with international partners, the exchange of expertise, and the provision of teaching and internship opportunities at universities. In addition, O. Kraievska (2014) elucidates the political and legal dimensions of the present phase of collaboration between Ukraine and the EU in the domains of education and science. Shytikova (2016) focused on reviewing information resources to ensure the effective implementation of international projects of the EU educational and research programs Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, emphasising the importance of this international activity for reforming the higher education system, etc. A thorough analysis of publications dedicated to the issue of the essence of strategic partnership reveals that the scientific understanding of the subject is currently in its formative stages. This is due to the fact that the topic has been considered in a fragmented manner, thus necessitating comprehensive research to ensure the relevance of this article.

3 Methodology

The following methodological approach was adopted in this study: firstly, a combination of analysis and synthesis techniques was utilised to facilitate the interpretation and comprehension of the salient points from scientific works concerning strategic partnership projects, and secondly, the

generalisation method was employed to comprehend the research outcomes and formulate conclusions.

4 Results and Discussion

The theoretical basis of this article was the classification of Heckhausen's seminal work, published in the collection entitled "Interdisciplinarity: Problems of Teaching and Research in Universities" (1972, pp. 87-89). The researcher identified two types of interdisciplinarity: 1) indiscriminate, consisting of "encyclopedic attempts" that end in "mixing curricula" (interdisciplinary research is interpreted as a counteraction to the principle of disciplinarity); 2) pseudo-interdisciplinary, which creates programs that combine knowledge from different disciplines (e.g., anthropology, economics, geography, political science, psychology and sociology, etc.). These topics are believed to lead to different professional fields: computer science and computer programming, law, teacher training, administration, and more; 3) auxiliary occurs when a method used by one discipline provides data that has an 'index value' for another discipline at its level of theoretical integration; 4) integrated occurs when different disciplines come together to apply different methods in an attempt to solve a problem. This type of interdisciplinarity is associated with a technological toolkit, in which a hierarchical sequence of clear objectives is pursued that can change or even innovate the "human-environment" system; 5) additional is realised when disciplines of the same field partially overlap in certain subjects, i.e., at the boundary of disciplines (overlap occurs due to correspondence between theoretical levels of integration, outside this specific category there can be no overlap); 6) unifying occurs when there is coherence between two disciplines in terms of subject matter, levels of theoretical integration and methods. For example, in areas where biology borders on physics.

Ukrainian HEIs are active members of many strategic partnership projects, and the number of such projects is gradually increasing. This is an extremely valuable type of activity for domestic institutions, as it allows them to gain foreign experience, spread the principles of the European system of values and share their own ideas, strengthen the influence of our state in the global educational space, popularize Ukrainian traditions, worldviews, etc. To illustrate this point, we will examine strategic partnership projects involving universities in the European Union and projects in which Ukraine participated, emphasising the role of interdisciplinarity as a pivotal element.

In 2018-2021, the Erasmus+ KA project "International Mobility: Opportunities and Challenges. Proper Preparation for Studying at a Foreign University" was implemented in the process

of interaction between the Wrocław University of Economics (Poland as coordinator), the Hellenic Open University (Greece), the West Ukrainian National University (Ukraine) and the University of Pannonia (Hungary). The participants defined the objective of this strategic partnership as the enhancement of the internationalisation process in partner HEIs, which will contribute to the improvement of the quality of higher education. The authors of the project define HEIs as their target audience "as a group of administrative, scientific and teaching staff", students studying at foreign universities and individuals participating in international academic mobility programmes. The following strategies were identified as potential mechanisms for the implementation of the plan: the expansion of the offer, an increase in the number of foreign students, the expansion of contacts with foreign universities, the activation of foreign mobility of scientific and pedagogical staff and students, and the diversification of the educational offer, amongst others. Following the conclusion of the project, the strategic partners presented the following outcomes of their collaborative efforts: a guide for the university entitled "How to Prepare for Accepting a Foreign Student?"; a guide for foreign students entitled "What You Need to Know Before Going to Study, Exchange Abroad"; and "Program and Didactic Materials for Training University Administrative Staff Engaged in Servicing Foreign Students". The strategic partnership project was characterised by a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach, with a focus on the analysis of the common and distinctive features of the culture of the countries in which the participating universities are located. This analysis was informed by knowledge from a range of disciplines, including language, cultural studies, religious studies, semiotics, law, and sociology, among others.

The subsequent strategic partnership that will be deliberated was executed within the framework of an accord between the following academic institutions: Lublin University of Technology (Poland), University of Florence (Italy), University of Bologna (Italy), University of Ioannina (Greece), Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg (Germany). The project also involved "non-academic" partners ICOMOS (Poland), the Romualdo del Biando Foundation and the Flamanica Foundation (Italy). The project, entitled "University Network of Cultural Heritage – Integrated Protection, Management and Use", was implemented between 2018 and 2021. It demonstrated signs of interdisciplinarity due to the coincidental presence of theoretical facts on the problem of cultural heritage in different disciplines. The overarching objective of the project was to establish an international network of researchers specialising in diverse domains of cultural heritage management, protection and utilisation. The partners provided substantial evidence that the

implementation of the concept is only feasible through an interdisciplinary approach, as this problem is characterised by multiple facets. The project integrated knowledge from the fields of heritage protection, management and use, archaeology, architecture and cultural landscapes. The project's outcomes encompass the creation of didactic materials for three modules of the course, namely architectural heritage, archaeological heritage and cultural landscape. Additionally, it facilitated the organisation of summer schools on sustainable protection of cultural heritage, modern management of cultural heritage and modern use of cultural heritage. The project also led to the establishment of an Information and Educational Portal on Cultural Heritage, with a view to enhancing co-operation between universities and communities.

The project "DigiLing: Trans-European e-Learning Hub for Digital Linguistics" (2016-2019) was implemented by five partner universities (University of Ljubljana, University of Zagreb, Charles University, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, University of Leeds) and one industry partner (Lexical Computing CZ, a leading developer of electronic lexicography tools and services). The programme amalgamated a variety of disciplinary knowledge, incorporating translation theory, media studies, computer science and corpus linguistics, a crucial aspect given the inherently interdisciplinary nature of digital linguistics. The project culminated in the creation of the following: 1) a model curriculum for digital linguistics, which was developed by analysing the needs of employers and identifying the key competences and skills of future master's graduates. This was achieved by conducting a trans-European survey among employers and identifying gaps in existing curricula during the first six months of the project; 2) training programmes for teachers of relevant disciplines in the use of authoring tools and the development of high-quality online educational materials; 3) development of seven online courses, each consisting of ten or more study units and corresponding to 3-5 ECTS: "Language Variability in Time and Space", "Introduction to Text Processing and Analysis", "Machine Translation after Editing", "Introduction to Python for Linguists", "Computational Lexicology and Lexicography", "Localisation Tools and Workflows", "Mineral Analysis and Management of Multilingual Terminology"; 4) e-learning resources DigiLing, which have been viewed by one hundred thousand people. The project is of a long-term

nature, with the results being applicable to any individual pursuing or intending to pursue studies in any language or IT-related programme.

5 Conclusions

Following a detailed analysis of individual cases of Erasmus+ strategic partnerships, as classified by G. Heckhausen, it can be concluded that the integration of the Ukrainian higher education system into the Single European Education Area has resulted in a search for foreign institutions with which to establish strategic partnerships. Within the framework of these partnerships, projects and activities are implemented with the aim of popularising domestic values and attracting global experience to the organisation of the educational process.

It is thus proposed that the term "strategic partnership in the field of higher education" be defined as follows: such a partnership is to be understood as a co-operative endeavour between one or more Ukrainian higher education institutions and one or more foreign educational institutions. The basis upon which this co-operation is to be conducted is that of active exchange of experience, support and creation of favourable conditions for the implementation of projects and activities aimed at improving the quality of education. The organisation and facilitation of such interactions is typically undertaken by the departments of internationalisation and international co-operation at partner universities.

A thorough analysis of the international interaction of universities was conducted using a case study approach, focusing on specific projects such as "International mobility: opportunities and problems. Proper preparation for studying at a foreign university", "University Network of Cultural Heritage – Integrated Protection, Management and Use", "DigiLing: Trans-European Center for E-Learning in Digital Linguistics", it can be stated that the main methodological guideline is an interdisciplinary approach, which, by combining knowledge from different disciplines, contributes to increasing the level of higher education and, as a result, the competitiveness of students in all participating countries on the labor market. The potential for further research lies in the study of strategic partnership projects of a non-selective, pseudo-interdisciplinary, auxiliary interdisciplinary direction.

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