

ERASMUS+ as a prospective cluster for RUDN University to strengthen cooperation with EU HEIs

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Abstract. In the global competition, also affecting the higher education sector, universities have to formulate adequate development plans. One of the crucial points of the internationalization strategy of RUDN University is the establishment of clusters in various regions of the globe. Because of its history mostly orientated to developing countries, RUDN University does not have any cluster in Europe, and traditionally its cooperation is focused on the Asian, African continents, and Latin America. The European Union funded programme Erasmus+ represents a crucial tool for RUDN University to enhance its collaboration with European Universities in various forms. The most common ways are the development of academic mobility (Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility), developing transnational projects with European and non-European Universities (Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education), and promoting teaching and research on European studies (Jean Monnet Activities). Through a quantitative analysis, the author shows how these actions of the Erasmus+ programme have contributed to enhancing partnerships and internationalization at home, supporting curricula upgrade, and improving collaboration with companies.

Keywords: Educational policy, international educational programs, Russia, Erasmus program, European Union.

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Introduction

Intensification of inter-university cooperation and expansion of international partnerships are crucial aspects in the context of strengthening the internationalization of higher education institutions. Expert widely supports that the competition market rules are in force also in the educational environment [1], [2], [3]. Universities, in a sense, have become the subjects of market relations. University representatives began to operate with new concepts for them, such as “ranking”, “status”, “authority”, “reputation”, and “competition”. Under the current conditions, the advantage is for those universities that have been able to determine strategic priorities of development, “clusters” that can in the future, lead to tangible results in the context of increasing competitiveness.

The Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) has followed these trends. Since 2016, it supports the development of the cluster system of cooperation with partner universities around the world. The cluster approach to the export of Russian education is a large-scale project of RUDN University, which foresees personnel training for foreign countries. The cluster system implies certain practices that can strengthen the position of RUDN University in the international educational market as a provider of educational services. Clustering includes holding of international Olympiads for students and the establishments of centres of Russian language for pre-university training outside Russia [4]. Until 2021, clusters will unite 70 countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, North Africa, and the CIS. 9 regional clusters will be launched in the framework of this strategy, and each cluster will have its own supporting (core)

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country. Cluster cooperation will include three main areas - educational, research, and industrial-educational [5]. Since 2016, RUDN University conducted 87 student Olympiads in 35 countries, in which 5225 pupils and students took part. The main subject areas of such activities were mathematics, computer science, physics, biology, Russian language, chemistry, law, and social studies. Recently, applicants from China, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic have shown positive dynamics and become the most successful [6].

As we can see, the cluster cooperation of RUDN University has not developed any cluster project in the European region so far. Orientation to the countries of Africa, Latin America, and Asia derives from the tradition of RUDN University, established in 1960 with the mission of helping and supporting the decolonized countries of the world. At the same time, the issue of expanding the geographical range of collaboration of the university remains highly relevant. At present, students from 157 countries of the world are studying at RUDN University, and the university aims at increasing it even more. However, a considerable part of countries for brand new collaborations for RUDN University is located in Europe. In this perspective, cooperation with European universities in the framework of European Union-funded programs is an excellent opportunity for RUDN University to expand its geographical range. Since 2015 RUDN University has been implementing the Erasmus+ program for student and teacher exchanges, which is the main one in the European Union area.

The program provides an opportunity for students and post-graduate students of the RUDN University to study at European universities for 1 or 2 semesters, as well as to accept students and post-graduates from European countries. This mobility program also provides professors and university administrative staff to carry out teaching assignments and training at partner universities in Europe and invite colleagues from European universities. The implementation of Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (international short-term mobility) is carried out based on bilateral agreements, commonly called Erasmus Inter-Institutional Agreements (IIA).

Another action of the Erasmus+ program includes projects foreseeing cooperation for the development of the potential of higher education (Capacity Building) - a continuation of the Tempus program. Capacity Building projects are projects of inter-institutional cooperation between universities of the Program countries and Partner countries, aimed at:

- modernization, expansion of accessibility and development of the internationalization of higher education in the partner countries;
- creation of a platform for the development and strengthening of cooperation between the EU and partner countries;
- promoting voluntary rapprochement with the trends in the development of higher education in the EU countries;
- promoting intercultural and interpersonal exchanges.

The Jean Monnet program represents the third principal action of the Erasmus + program. This program aims to increase knowledge about European integration processes through teaching, research, and debate on topics related to the history, politics, economics, and legislation of the European Union, as well as EU relations with other regions of the world. The main objective of the program is to bring the European dimension to higher education systems [7]. Since 2015, RUDN University has been participating in all these three actions of the Erasmus + program.

What is the “clustering” of the Erasmus + program for RUDN?

In line with the strategy of internationalization of RUDN University, which foresees the establishment of clusters in crucial regions, the Erasmus+ program can be a valuable tool for RUDN to strengthen its collaboration in the European region. The clustering approach of RUDN University with European organizations follows the following paths:

1) Cooperation with leading universities in Europe. All actions of the Erasmus + program involve cooperation with European universities awarded with the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). According to the rules set in the Erasmus+ programme guide, European Universities awarded with ECHE can participate in the programme [8]. In its strategy of

internationalization, RUDN University gives priority to the so-called “leading universities”, which mostly refers to HEIs ranked among the top 500 in QS rankings. However, RUDN University has adopted a broader definition of leading universities, including those awarded with the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education, which has been considered as a label of quality.

Cooperation of RUDN University with leading universities is one of the imperatives of improving the status of RUDN University according to various parameters: increasing academic ranking, awareness, expanding the base of contacts, and international recognition among the academic community and employers.

2) Grant support through the funds of the Erasmus+ program. In the framework of International Credit Mobility, candidates for mobility receive a monthly scholarship consisting of 700-800 euros (undergraduate / post-graduate students) per month, while staff 100-140 euros per day (as part of teaching and training mobilities for administrative staff - usually within five working days). The Erasmus+ programme foresees support for travel calculated, taking into account the distance from the place of departure and place of arrival [8]. Differently from Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility, where the grant is paid directly to the participant of RUDN University, in the Erasmus+ actions Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education and Jean Monnet, the grant support is given to the universities.

Economic rationale

According to this logic, nations rely on international educational programs to obtain some profits. The economic benefits can be of different types. Some countries and universities generate a considerable portion of their incomes, thanks to the tuition fees of international students. A certain number of nation-states, like the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia, with a commercialised full-fee approach and are leading exporters of education services in the world, generating for them a considerable portion of their GDP [10]. According to the data published by Universities U.K., the advocacy organisation for universities in the United Kingdom, international students coming to the U.K. provides a significant boost to local businesses and regional jobs. Besides, they injected more than £25 billion a year into the British economy [11]. Also, the organization Universities Australia underlined that international students generated \$32 billion for the Australian economy, boosting wages and jobs in the financial year 2018 [12].

At the same time, in other cases, foreign graduates become inbound high-qualified workers when they decide to remain in the host country after the completion of their studies [13]. Such a phenomenon, commonly defined as 'brain drain,' is widely debated by scholars. If, on the one hand, it can create some economic benefits from the host country, on the other hand, it creates a loss of human capital for the home country, which can only be compensated by the remittances from the high-skilled migrants [14]. According to the international nonprofit association NAFSA (Association of International Educators), during the 2018–2019 academic year, international students studying in the U.S. brought almost \$ 41 billion, and they supported 458,290 jobs in the United States [15]. These data confirm that international students represent a valuable source of income for the host country.

Vassiliki Papatsiba, senior lecturer of the School of Education at the University of Sheffield, underlines that the educational program Erasmus in Europe has not only an impact on European higher education but also at economic level in the achievement of the European Single Market [16]. The European integration process started as a project of European nations focused on commercial matters, and gradually, it embraced other sectors, including education. The achievement of a European Single Market, which implied the free circulation of people, goods, capital, and services, could not ignore issues related to education. In other words, a European worker moving from an E.U. country to another, should not face restrictions associated with the recognition of diploma obtained in another European country. Also, the free circulation of students in Europe thanks to the Erasmus program, enable them to enhance their competences and skills, which have a positive effect on the national and whole European economy.

In the economic rationale, the promotion of political values through international education programs is indirect. The first objective is to obtain some profits, then popularize specific values as freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law, and economic pragmatism. For instance, in the case mentioned above of the European Union, the economic benefits can be for all the actors involved. Nation-states will obtain benefits in having more skilled workers and upgrade of some sectors of their economy, workers will become higher qualified and better-remunerated, and the E.U. will have a more technologically advanced and integrated Single Market. The economic success can have a spillover effect and facilitate among the society the appreciation of values like the freedom to conduct business, which encourages innovation, entrepreneurship, economic, and social development.

Implementation of the Erasmus+ in the RUDN University

Quantitative indicators (number of people, number of agreements, amount of funding) are an easy way to measure the participation of organizations in the Erasmus+ programme.

From 2015, when Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility was open to Russian universities to 2020, the number of people trained over the Erasmus+ program for academic mobility has been more than 650, including outgoing and incoming students and staff mobility.

To date, RUDN University has signed 53 agreements with member universities of the Erasmus+ program on the implementation of academic mobility. Under the Erasmus+ program, RUDN University deals with about 53 universities from 19 countries of the European Union, as well as Turkey and Macedonia.

Regarding Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education, RUDN University is within the consortium of 2 consortium projects. More specifically, in such projects, the RUDN University Faculty of Economics and the Agrarian-Technological Institute participate (Table 1).

Project name	Project Nr	Project Coordinator	RUDN Faculty	Grant Amount	Project duration
Enhancement of higher education and corporate sectors integration in accordance with new social environment project	574060-EPP-1-2016-1KZ-EPPKA2-CBHE-SP	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Kazakhstan)	Faculty of Economics	814 040,71 €	15/10/2016 - 14/10/2019
Training Capacities in Agriculture and Urban Rural Interactions for Sustainable development of Megacities	586247-EPP-1-2017-1-IT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP	Tuscia University (Italy)	Agrarian-Technological Institute	882 861,00 €	15/10/2017 - 14/10/2020

Table 1 Capacity Building projects at RUDN University (period 2015-2019)

As for the Jean Monnet Activities, RUDN University has been awarded five projects since 2013 (table 2). We can notice, as in the case of Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education, that the Faculty of Economics and Agrarian-Technological Institute of RUDN University are the most active faculties of the university participating in this action of Erasmus+.

Project name	Project Nr	RUDN Faculty	Grant Amount
Good governance, strong democratic institutions, rule of law: prerequisites for investing in innovation	542853-LLP-1-2013-1-RU-AJM-MO	Faculty of Economics	20.981,00 €

European traditions in Russian Education system: foundation for talent mobility	565672-EPP-1-2015-1-RU-EPPJMO-PROJECT	Faculty of Economics	49.305,00 €
Transformation of the social and political values: the EU practice	575361-EPP-1-2016-1-RU-EPPJMO-MODULE	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	27.468,00 €
European traditions in governance, design and environmental management of megacities: search for solutions	574863-EPP-1-2016-1-RU-EPPJMO-PROJECT	Agrarian-Technological Institute	41.666,00 €
Enhanced Skills and Competences in European Studies for Landscape Architects, environmental specialists and managers	611545-EPP-1-2019-1-RU-EPPJMO-MODULE	Agrarian-Technological Institute	25 751,25 €

Table 2 Jean Monnet Activities projects at RUDN University (period 2013-2019)

Differently from Capacity Building projects, Jean Monnet activities in the majority of cases are implemented by a single university. This feature has the advantage of simplifying the administrative and financial management of the project. Moreover, not having to coordinate activities with several partners from different countries, it is easier and faster to make decisions for the project implementation.

RUDN University, which in the past has participated in European educational programs not very actively, has less experience than other Russian universities in EU funded projects. For this reason, when the Erasmus+ programme was launched in 2014 and RUDN University adopted a strategy to start first with easy projects to implement such as International Credit Mobility, which imply only academic exchanges, and Jean Monnet Activities, where it was not necessary to build consortia with several universities from other countries. Only those faculties with more experience in European funded projects, after some experience with International Credit Mobility and Jean Monnet Activities, began to submit applications in more difficult actions of the Erasmus+ programme as Capacity Building in the Field of Higher Education [7].

How can Erasmus help the internationalization?

The Erasmus+ program is a crucial instrument to enhance the international dimension of universities.

Its contribution to enhancing the internationalization dimension can embrace the following spheres:

- 1) Strengthening collaboration with existing partners
- 2) Establishing new partnerships
- 3) Enhancing academic mobility
- 4) Enhancing the internationalization at home
- 5) Modernize curricula
- 6) Fostering collaboration with companies

Partnerships and internationalization at home

Internationalization at home is generally defined as a process aimed at integrating the international and intercultural dimension into the educational program (for all students, not just international students), using formal means (within the framework of the approved educational program - formal learning) and extracurricular learning (informal learning). Besides, the latter

involves interaction with various factors and actors of the local educational environment and the local community [9].

Regarding partnerships, in the period 2015-2020, RUDN University has implemented more than 50 Erasmus projects Erasmus international credit mobility (Figure 1), which fosters the academic mobility of students and staff with European Universities.



Figure 1 Partners of RUDN University within the Erasmus+ programme

In the case of RUDN, of these 53 collaborations, 56% (30 collaborations) are with new partners, while the remaining 43% (23 collaborations) are with old partners.

New partnerships	Old partnerships
30 (56%)	23 (46%)

Table 3 Number of new and existing partnerships of RUDN University in Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (2015-2019)

The collaboration with new partners has enabled to enlarge the network of RUDN University, foster inbound and outbound mobilities with “rare” countries for RUDN such as Portugal and Malta.

In the case of old partnerships, the Erasmus programme enabled to strengthen existing collaborations. 2 examples: Complutense University of Madrid (double master diploma in international relations) and the Italian University of Tuscia, which has a double master diploma with RUDN Agrarian-Technological Institute in Management and Design of Urban Environment.

Moreover, Erasmus helped some faculties of RUDN, which generally had a scarce international dimension, to increase their indicators of academic mobility.

Internationalization at home. With an average of 50 incoming staff mobility per year, RUDN University has regularly hosted teaching and administrative staff from partner universities. During such mobilities, teaching staff delivered classes in English, while the administrative staff (ICT service, librarians, the staff of international relations office, student services, and student dormitory) were hosted at the RUDN University international staff weeks. During such training, the colleagues from Europe learned more about RUDN University, and at the same time, they shared their experience in their sphere. All this fostered the so-called “international at home” dimension.

Curricula upgrade and collaboration with companies

International projects of universities play a significant role in increasing the competitiveness of higher education at the systemic level. Erasmus+ projects, not only help in achieving the expected results in the development of any innovative models or educational programs, but also foster the discussion among experts in the contemporary dynamics characterized by globalization. Moreover, projects help to develop a common conceptual field and identify non-linear dependencies of the state of education on various cultural, social, economic, and political factors. They represent ways of finding common grounds while preserving the identity and uniqueness of each subject of interaction and cooperation [10], [11].

Since 2015, RUDN University has participated in four Erasmus Jean Monnet projects and two Erasmus Capacity Building projects. Thanks to those projects, RUDN teaching staff had the opportunity to have training in European universities, exchange good practices, and embed the changes in the curricula at the faculty level.



Figure 2 Consortium of TAURUS project

Taurus (Training Capacities in Agriculture and Urban Rural Interactions for Sustainable development of Megacities) and ENINEDU (Enhancement of higher education and corporate sectors integration in accordance with new social environment) projects are the two Capacity building projects implemented at RUDN University. These are projects, which involved the collaboration not only with European but also with non-European universities. In such cases, the partner universities were from China and Kazakhstan.



Figure 3 ENINEDU logo project

Thanks to those projects, RUDN University had the opportunity also to foster collaboration with companies signing new agreements and improving the mechanism of internships. Still, in terms of curriculum development, the collaboration with companies has enabled to establish within the university a centre for entrepreneurship at the faculty of economics. Such a centre represents a bridge between the university and companies. The main idea is to reduce the gap between universities and the firms, modernizing curricula and equipping the students of the skills primarily needed by the labour market.

Main obstacles

The experience of implementation of the Erasmus+ program in the universities of the European Union shows that this program is being successfully implemented with the availability of well-organized administrative resources. For example, in many universities of the Erasmus+ program countries, there is an extensive system of responsibilities related to the implementation of the program. In particular, there is a central office for international relations, and there are units/employees engaged in outbound mobility, units/employees engaged in inbound mobility, as well as departments involved in consortium projects. The number of employees involved in the implementation of the Erasmus + program varies, on average, from 5 to 15 people. In the case of RUDN University, the personnel problem is quite acute. The implementation of the Erasmus+ program is carried out by one unit with limited staff. At the same time, the coordination of the Erasmus+ program in all three areas is just a part of the functionality of these employees.

This situation is not specific to RUDN University; it also takes place in other Russian universities, as well as universities in the CIS countries where there are no specialized departments for the implementation of the Erasmus+ program. The peculiarity of the situation is that Russia, like other countries of the post-Soviet space (except Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), is a partner country of the Erasmus+ program. Besides, at RUDN University, this program is being implemented along with other newer network educational programs - the CIS Network University and the SCO University - in which RUDN University is a rectorate.

The assets of RUDN University described in this paper suggest that RUDN University has the potential to strengthen and expand cooperation with European universities. The Erasmus+ program can be one of the factors of a positive image and recognition of RUDN University in the European region.

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