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The Border University Network as a Response to Academic Challenges in the Field of Internationalization

Abstract. In the context of the upcoming challenges for science and higher education – both in the field of academic research and students education, the internationalization of scientific research and development of transnational academic contacts appears necessary and unavoidable. It has been one of the priorities of Polish universities. The paper presents an example of its implementation initiated by the University of Białystok. Taking advantage of its cross-border location, the University created a platform for the exchange of scientific and didactic experiences with researchers from the Eastern European border states and students studying at their respective academic centers. This way, the Border University Network became the largest university consortium in this part of Europe. Its effect is one of scientific and didactic cooperation in the exchange of research and implementation services, use of infrastructure and apparatus as part

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of joint scientific ventures, joint grant applications, and publishing of international scientific journals which will enable scientific research to be presented on a global scale, not just on a regional and national scale as before. Internationalization becomes an obvious matter to which the Polish, as well as the entire Eastern European scientific environment, has to get used to. That is why every attempt of making it real is worth analyzing and developing.

Keywords: internationalization in higher education; Border University Network; international cooperation of universities; Eastern European universities

Introduction – on academic internationalization in Poland

In Poland, the internationalization of science and higher education is experiencing its renaissance. The multitude of legal instruments and financial incentives, which are still being established, intensifies the internationalization process. There are many (and more) regulations in the entire legal order in the field of science and higher education whose function is to create a legal basis for its internationalization. All of this is to bring Polish science closer to the highest international standards, to enable international academic research and wider exposition of its results. In the Higher Education Internationalization Programme established by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, it was pointed out that internationalization is one of the most important challenges facing Polish higher education and it was understood not only as undertaking studies by foreign students in Poland, but also as long-term and short-term employment of foreign staff and participation of Polish scientists in international educational and research programs (“Program Umiejdzynarodowienia Szkolnictwa Wyższego,” 2015). In subsequent years, more emphasis was placed on the return to the country of Polish scientists from foreign academic centers (“MNiSW stawia na umiejdzynarodowienie polskiej nauki,” 2017).

The internationalization of studies and scientific research is certainly a consequence of the integration and globalization processes that are taking place in various spheres of social life. In the literature, it was pointed out that the assessment of whether internationalization of the education and science sector had already become a fact or whether it is still a process (state) more desirable than implemented is less explicit. It is pointed out as a paradox that internationalization, which is one of the priorities of today’s education and R&D policy, has usually been included in the European concept of higher education. In other words, today particular emphasis is placed on the internationalization of higher education, while the international character of the first universities emerging in Europe was simply obvious and did not require special focus (Bergan, 2011, p. 11; Rozmus & Waltoś, 2016). Internationalization in the sphere therefore does not need to be created or built from scratch. Rather it has to be “brought out”, recovered, and restored to its proper place.

It is obvious, however, that the desire to make efforts for internationalization of scientific research which has been neglected in recent decades, also for political reasons, cannot be programmed in legal norms. What is needed is a real awareness of the necessity to undertake such activities, genuine recognition of the huge potential of internationalization of research and the process of educating students, and the law has only to stimulate such processes. The objective of education, which is the pursuit of truth, must be implemented in the sense that the truth can be found only beyond borders and only in cooperation, not in alienation. Internationalization in the legal sphere should therefore go hand in hand with real factual actions taken on its behalf (see Siwińska, 2014).

The University of Bialystok toward internationalization

Taking advantage of its cross-border location at the meeting point of nations and cultures, on the border of ideas, the University of Bialystok, which is the only Polish university with a foreign branch, undertook the obligation to create a platform for the exchange of scientific and didactic experiences with researchers from the Eastern European border states and students studying at their respective academic centers. For many years, the authorities of the University of Bialystok had noticed the need to intensify international cooperation and expressed the conviction that from the location of the university – being as it is at the meeting point of East and West – they were well placed to take a leading role in bringing that objective to fruition.

Initially, cooperation took a bilateral form between individual universities (such as the cooperation of the University of Bialystok and the Janka Kupala Grodno State University which began more than 20-years ago). Then, with the cooperation of domestic and foreign scientific and social partners, more intense efforts were made to create an institutionalized form of cross-border cooperation which would multiply the potential of individual universities from the Eastern European area. Finally, on October 11, 2013 in Bialystok, along with representatives of universities from Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, the agreement establishing the Border University Network was signed. The Network, having the University of Bialystok as its leader, includes the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, the Baranavicki State University, the A.S. Pushkin Brest State University, the Janka Kupala Grodno State University, the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, the Ternopil National Economic University, the Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, the Voronezh State University, and the Smolensk Branch of the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (see “The agreement on the Border University Network signed,” 2015)⁴. It is the largest university consortium in this part of Europe.

4 See also websites of the Border University Network members: www.kantiana.ru; www.barsu.by; www.brsu.by; www.grsu.by; www.lnu.edu.ua; www.tneu.edu.ua; www.uwb.edu.pl; www.vdu.lt; www.vsu.ru; www.sfranhigs.ru (Retrieved December 2, 2017).

Its effect is one of scientific and didactic cooperation in the exchange of research and implementation services, use of infrastructure and apparatus as part of joint scientific ventures, joint grant applications, and publishing of international scientific journals which will enable scientific research to be presented on a global scale, not just on a regional and national scale as before (see Błaszczak, 2016).

The Border University Network in action

The activities of the Border University Network also affect other areas of academic reality – hence joint artistic projects and sports tournaments, such as international exhibitions and photographic competitions, and the Border University Network’s women’s volleyball tournaments. Within the Network, events and projects directed directly to students are also organized, such as international law schools (e.g. the Polish-Russian Law School organized by the University of Białystok in cooperation with the Smolensk State University existing since 2015). They allow students to strengthen their competences and increase their attractiveness on the labour market outside their respective home countries – in the public, private and non-governmental sectors. There is also the annual International Competition on International Public Law, in which students from several countries, including universities affiliated to the Border University Network, take part.

University cooperation within the Border University Network also involves a number of international scientific conferences organized by students for students of the universities associated in the Network, where novice researchers can present their own research results. In addition, the international exchange of experiences in the field of student self-governance is intensively developing. For example, as part of the Border University Network, for example, the International Youth Forum for Student Self-Governments’ Leaders is organized. Students from the Eastern universities willingly draw on Polish achievements in this area, seeing for themselves the chance to increase the importance of students in the functioning of the university, including the priority areas for students. Students from the East, following the example of their Polish colleagues, want to have a greater influence on the rules for granting social and scientific scholarships, on appointing the university and faculty authorities (through, among others, guaranteeing the participation of students in all collegial university bodies), on determining curricula and education methods in particular fields of study, on researching and evaluating learning outcomes or – at the national level in the institutionalized form, like the Students’ Parliament of the Republic of Poland or the National Doctoral Students’ Representation authorized to give opinions on legal acts – on lobbying in law-making process in the area of science and higher education, and on developing the best legal solutions jointly with public authorities, thus, shaping – on the principles of partnership – state policy in the sphere of higher education and science. Young intelligent people – often idealistic but possessed of

a valuable willingness to cooperate in improving the world around them and with a genuine desire to be visible as the hosts in their home university.

For students who are more interested in practical rather than scientific knowledge, the existence of the Network ensures greater opportunities for student internships. For example, law and administration students from the Faculty of Law of the University of Białystok can practice in the Belarusian bar and notary, as well as in local institutions and offices. The contacts with internship providers established by the Border University Network universities in their countries can be used for all students, so through internationalization of both theory and practice the level of education and the attractiveness of graduates in the national and international labour market can increase. The consortium is also an opportunity to meet the current needs of students, for example in the field of obtaining materials for the purposes of final papers and diploma theses, organizing joint research projects by scientific circles, conducting transnational empirical, primarily comparative, research in locally implemented projects. For example, students of the Faculty of Physics and Technology at the Janka Kupala Grodno State University hold internships at the Faculty of Physics of the University of Białystok, where, among others, they take classes in computer measurement techniques and do simulations in the field of medical physics. In turn, in 2016, students and doctoral students from Białystok were invited to take part in activities prepared by Russian legal practitioners and theoreticians at the Smolensk State University. The Border University Network universities also plan to create a joint didactic offer in the form of international studies in an integrated formula, that will allow interdisciplinary and transnational education, so that the completion of some didactic classes at universities in other countries would become a standard practice rather than an exceptional one.

A thorough education enriched with international experience responds to the current demand of the labour market and puts graduates from the Network universities at a level higher than their peers. However, it is important that the international cooperation of students can set new standards also in the functioning of local communities. Valuable international contacts are an opportunity to draw good examples in various areas and replicate them in native academic centers and local communities. Universities exert an overwhelming influence on their socio-economic environments; they affect the entire community where they operate. Moreover, one of the priorities of university cooperation within the Border University Network in the social sphere is the initiation of cross-border cooperation programmes – supporting social and economic development and environmental protection in these areas – so that the inhabitants of the broadly understood borderland can benefit from their specific location. The energy of young people enriched with internationalization elements flows from universities to local and national non-governmental organizations, urban movements, social economy entities, and other civil society institutions.

The existence of the Network also means greater opportunities in everyday aspects of didactics. Due to staff exchange programmes, students from the East have the opportunity to acquire knowledge from Western researchers. Through contacts with Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian scientists, Polish students obtain a valuable balance between the Western and Eastern world – indispensable in the cross-border conditions of the University of Białystok and in general the entire Podlaskie Voivodeship. The geopolitical location of Poland was also indicated by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education as one of the main factors conducive to increasing the internationalization level of Polish higher education (“Program Umiejdzynarodowienia Szkolnictwa Wyższego”, 2015). Education, especially at the higher level, has to open heads to ideas and views which – in the case of the East – until recently seemed so foreign and inaccessible.

Actions to increase the potential of university libraries within the Border University Network are also important. The plans provide for the free exchange of scientific publications between institutions, conducting so-called interlibrary borrowing and exchanging experiences between library staff. All this should increase the scientific potential of the consortium members by opening up resources that can form the basis for conducting further advanced scientific research, as well as enabling a broader use of existing research results through dissemination. The consortium members expect that the use of collective library resources and access to scientific research results of the Network universities, may facilitate interdisciplinary research and greater effectiveness in obtaining grants from European Union funds.

Perspectives of the Border University Network

What is particularly important, the Border University Network members are not limited to cooperating only with other consortium members. The Network also looks for external partners – for example in 2016, the Network was accepted as a member of the Baltic Sea Region University Network (BSRUN), which opens new perspectives for scientific and cultural cooperation between the universities associated in both consortia. It is also natural that within the Network, individual universities establish closer bilateral cooperation in the areas connecting them, e.g. their geographic proximity, convergence of scientific research, interaction of student associations and organizations, and the possibility of complementing efforts to overcome common infrastructural and technological shortcomings, etc.

Today, especially in the context of the upcoming reform of Polish science and higher education, the internationalization of scientific research and development of transnational academic contacts appears necessary and unavoidable. The development of international cooperation of Polish universities – both in the field of academic research and students education – is one of the pillars of the aforementioned

science and higher education reform. Internationalization becomes an obvious matter to which the Polish, as well as the entire Eastern European scientific environment, has to get used to. However, it was far from being a consideration at the time the Border University Network was established. Indeed the project was unprecedented in the contemporary history of Polish higher education and reached far beyond the mostwidespread, though not adequate, bilateral inter-university contracts that hitherto existed.

Now, after several years of existence, the Border University Network continues and develops, bringing benefits to universities, academic and administrative staff, as well as to students. Similarly, the collective scientific and didactic potential is also starting to produce tangible results. While other universities are just beginning their efforts to internationalize their research, scientists from the University of Bialystok, together with partners from the Eastern Network universities, already use their several years of experience to create far reaching plans for the future. Among them, a further tightening of scientific cooperation, conducting joint research, and student exchanges as part of European programmes allowing students from Eastern universities to be included in the 'old-continent' student trend. The Erasmus for All Programme, which is to be open to third countries, provides great opportunities. This programme would be a real tool for strengthening cooperation within the Border University Network framework as its members, being partners of the University of Bialystok, would directly benefit from access to the student exchange system. As consortium leader and pivotal link between East and West, the University of Bialystok perceives this as a civilized extension of its duties, while the youth from Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian universities face an opportunity that a dozen years ago would have seemed inconceivable. Notwithstanding, the University of Bialystok is not solely committed to Central and Eastern European cooperation, it undertakes international cooperation with many other partners, including universities in Asia and North America.

Of course, the consortium members from the Eastern European borderlands are also facing new previously unpredictable challenges and obstacles in expanding their cooperation. Science does not tolerate limitations, and sometimes they result from current geopolitical conditions. Administrative boundaries should not stand in the way of freedom to exchange ideas and opportunities for scientific cooperation and didactic activities, but such barriers to the Network's activities do arise. However, these obstacles should be tirelessly challenged. When a whole range of problems appeared at the stage of launching the Network, it was the engagement and real willingness to cooperate that helped overcome them. For this reason, the Network's achievements thus far allow to look optimistically into the future and seek out new platforms for exchanging experiences and opportunities for research, development and didactic cooperation. The truth does not tend to avoid crossing borders – be they real or perceived. Let the keepers of the gates beware!

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