

FROM ACCESS TO INCLUSION: UKRAINIAN STUDENTS IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITATIVE COMPARATIVE STUDY

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students in European higher education
Qualitative comparative study

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Contents

Preface	7
1. Introduction	9
2. Conceptual and theoretical framework	11
2.1. Transformations in higher education: European and global contexts	11
2.2. Harmonization, quality assurance and institutional structures in the EHEA	13
2.3. Educational migration, student mobility and internationalization	17
2.4. Legal and policy frameworks for migration, asylum and integration in the EU	19
3. Methodology	23
3.1. Research rationale and conceptual anchoring	23
3.2. Research objectives and research questions	23
3.3. Qualitative research design: round tables, participant perspectives, and thematic analysis	26
3.3.1. Research logic and justification of qualitative approach	26
3.3.2. Participants and composition of round tables	27
3.3.3. Key thematic areas of the round tables	27
3.3.4. Data collection, documentation and analysis	28
3.4. Use of secondary data and institutional sources	29
3.5. Triangulation, data validation and ethical consideration	32
4. Results from four countries	35
4.1. Slovakia	35
4.1.1. Legal, institutional and policy frameworks for inclusion in Slovakia	35
4.1.2. Trends in Slovak higher education in connection with Ukrainian students' inflow	39
4.1.3. Institutional responses: Matej Bel University case	42
4.1.3.1. Gender and age of Ukrainian students at UMB	45
4.1.3.2. Academic programs and study levels of Ukrainian students at UMB	47
4.1.4. Qualitative analysis – results from round tables at Matej Bel University	51
4.2. Poland	53
4.2.1. Legal, Institutional and Policy Frameworks for Inclusion	54
4.2.2. Trends in Polish higher education in connection with Ukrainian students' inflow	56
4.2.3. Institutional responses: the University of Rzeszów case	60
4.2.3.1. Structure of Ukrainian students at UR	62
4.2.4. Qualitative analysis – results from round tables at Rzeszów University	68
4.2.4.1. Good practices and systemic challenges in inclusion	69
4.3. Romania	76
4.3.1. Description of the higher education system in Romania	76

4.3.1.1. Bachelor's degree studies	78
4.3.1.2. Master's degree studies	80
4.3.1.3. Challenges and perspectives of HE in Romania	82
4.3.2. Adaptation of Romanian universities for the integration of Ukrainian students	83
4.3.3. Ovidius University of Constanta – institutional insights and student dynamics	88
4.3.4. Ukrainian Students in Ovidius University	90
4.3.5. Qualitative analysis – results from round tables at Ovidius University in Constanta	95
4.3.5.1. Responses from the perspective of Romanian students	96
4.3.5.2. Responses from the perspective of Ukrainian students	130
4.3.5.3. Responses from the perspective of professors	144
4.4. Ukraine	162
4.4.1. Description of the higher education system in Ukraine	162
4.4.1.1. Educational programs and higher education degrees awarded	163
4.4.1.2. Licensing of educational activities and accreditation of educational programs.	165
4.4.1.3. Organization and structure of the higher education system	166
4.4.2. Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University – Institutional insights and student dynamics	169
4.4.3. Qualitative analysis – results from round tables at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University	177
4.4.3.1. Motivations and benefits of studying abroad	177
4.4.3.2. Shared educational goals and cultural diversity	179
4.4.3.3. Integration, language barriers, and cultural adaptation	181
4.4.3.4. Support programs, study preferences, and academic experiences	184
4.4.3.5. Challenges, living conditions, and student advice	188
5. Comparative synthesis, SWOT analyses and recommendations	193
5.1. SWOT analyses by country	193
5.1.1. Slovakia	193
5.1.2. Poland	196
5.1.3. Romania	200
5.1.4. Ukraine	204
5.2. Cross-country comparative insights	208
5.3. Policy and institutional recommendations	212
6. Conclusions and future directions of research	217
References	219
Authors	227
List of Figures	231
List of Tables	233

Preface

The preparation of this monograph stems from the joint academic and institutional commitment of universities from Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine to explore one of the most pressing issues of contemporary European higher education – the inclusion of students affected by war and displacement. The work presented here is the result of the Erasmus+ KA220-HED cooperation partnership project European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (Project No. 2023–1-SK01-KA220-HED-000157553). The project is coordinated by Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, with partner institutions the University of Rzeszów (Poland) and Ovidius University of Constanța (Romania), and associated collaboration with Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (Ukraine).

The outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 profoundly transformed the educational landscape of Europe, challenging universities to respond not only as academic institutions but as communities of solidarity and resilience. The authors of this monograph – representing multiple disciplines and national perspectives – share the belief that higher education has both the moral and professional responsibility to create inclusive environments that enable displaced and international students to participate fully in academic and social life.

This publication is the outcome of collaborative efforts carried out in 2023–2025, encompassing document analysis, institutional case studies, and qualitative fieldwork through focus groups and round-table discussions. Each national research team examined inclusion practices within its own higher education context, while maintaining a comparative and European-level perspective. The synthesis of these findings offers a complex picture of how higher education systems and institutions across Central and Eastern Europe have adapted to the presence and needs of Ukrainian students.

We express our sincere gratitude to all colleagues, experts, and participants who contributed to the collection and interpretation of data – university teachers, administrators, and students whose openness made this research possible. We also acknowledge the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, which enabled not only the implementation of the project but also the exchange of knowledge, experience, and mutual understanding among partners.

This monograph thus reflects both scientific inquiry and collective engagement. It aims to contribute to the European discussion on inclusion, well-being, and institutional resilience, offering insight into how universities can translate values of empathy and solidarity into everyday academic practice.

1. Introduction

The inclusion of Ukrainian students into European higher education represents both a humanitarian necessity and an academic opportunity, a test of how universities can embody social responsibility while maintaining educational quality and international relevance. Since 2022, the war in Ukraine has displaced millions of people, among them thousands of students and scholars. This unprecedented migration wave has created new realities for European universities, particularly in the Central and Eastern European region, where cultural proximity and geographical closeness have translated into a strong moral and institutional engagement.

Higher education institutions have responded with remarkable flexibility, adapting administrative procedures, curricula, and support mechanisms to provide access to study for displaced students. At the same time, these institutions have become laboratories of inclusion, resilience, and intercultural learning, where the concept of inclusion transcends legal frameworks and becomes a lived academic practice. In this sense, inclusion is not merely an instrument of crisis response but a process of transforming universities into more empathetic, participatory, and future-oriented institutions.

This monograph was developed within the Erasmus+ KA220-HED cooperation partnership project European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS), carried out between 2023 and 2026. The project is coordinated by Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Slovakia), with the University of Rzeszów (Poland) and Ovidius University of Constanța (Romania) as key partner institutions, and with the involvement of Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (Ukraine) as associated partner. Together, these institutions have joined efforts to examine inclusion practices and experiences from four national perspectives, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine, representing both host and home academic systems within a shared European framework.

The main objective of the project and this publication is to explore how national and institutional systems of higher education respond to the inclusion of displaced Ukrainian students, and to analyse the extent to which these responses are consistent with the values of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The monograph seeks to provide a comparative synthesis of policy frameworks, institutional strategies, and student experiences.

Methodologically, the study adopts a multi-layered research design combining document analysis, institutional case studies, and qualitative fieldwork. National research teams collected data through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and round-table discussions with university administrators, teachers, and students. The inclusion of the Ukrainian perspective, both through institutional feedback and participant reflections, allows for an authentic understanding of the challenges, motivations, and aspirations of those directly affected by the crisis.

Thematically, the monograph is organised around several key questions:

1. What legal, institutional, and policy frameworks govern the inclusion of Ukrainian students in the respective national contexts?
2. How have universities adapted their organisational and pedagogical practices to support these students?
3. What are the main barriers and enablers of inclusion as perceived by students and staff?
4. To what extent do these practices align with European principles of equity, participation, and quality in higher education?

Beyond these empirical objectives, the monograph aims to contribute to the theoretical development of inclusion research by linking the findings to broader conceptual frameworks such as the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2014), sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018), and inclusive excellence (Williams, Berger, McClen-don, 2005). These frameworks enable the interpretation of inclusion not only as institutional policy but as a multidimensional process involving agency, recognition, and transformation.

Each national chapter, dedicated to Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine, provides a detailed analysis of its respective context, followed by a comprehensive comparative synthesis and policy recommendations. The concluding parts of the monograph connect empirical results with theoretical and strategic implications, aiming to inform both academic debate and practical policymaking in higher education.

In this way, the present work seeks to extend the understanding of inclusion as a shared European responsibility and as a bridge between crisis response and long-term reform. By examining how universities translate values into structures and experiences, the monograph contributes to ongoing discussions about the future of higher education in an era defined by mobility, diversity, and uncertainty.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

This chapter explores the dynamic and evolving landscape of higher education, mobility, and migration within the European context. It is structured around four interrelated themes: transformations in higher education institutions, harmonization and quality assurance under the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), international student mobility and educational migration, and the legal and policy frameworks that govern migration and integration. Together, these components form a coherent background for understanding the challenges and opportunities related to the inclusion of students with migratory experience, particularly those from Ukraine, into European higher education systems.

Each section offers both conceptual insight and practical examples, including national adaptations that reflect the diversity of the European educational space. Special attention is given to the interplay between global trends (e.g., digitalization, knowledge economy, international rankings), European policy instruments (e.g., Bologna Process, EQF, ECTS), and institutional practices (e.g., accreditation, integration support). This multidimensional approach aims to provide a comprehensive foundation for the subsequent empirical and policy-oriented chapters of the monograph.

2.1. Transformations in higher education: European and global contexts

Across Europe, two opposing paradigms regarding the mission of the university and the role of higher education can be observed. On one hand, there is a paradigm rooted in global and transnational recommendations, such as those proposed by the World Bank, OECD, and the European Commission. These recommendations promote systemic reforms in higher education and are heavily influenced by the principles of New Public Management (Amaral et al., 2009; Štech, 2011; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). On the other hand, there remains a paradigm grounded in the traditional academic community's values and norms, rooted in the elite, Humboldtian model of the university (Nóvoa, Lawn, 2002; Amaral et al., 2009). These two paradigms constantly interact and conflict, shaping contemporary reforms in higher education (Amaral et al., 2009; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021).

Changing social, economic, cultural, and legal conditions, both external and internal, are increasingly forcing higher education institutions to operate in a state of permanent adaptation (Kwiek, 2006; Maassen, Olsen, 2007). This includes adjustments in financing, governance, and quality assurance (Kwiek, 2006; Amaral et al., 2009). As Kwiek and others have noted, this ongoing transformation is driven not only by

the expectations of the labour market but also by the growing role of universities as knowledge hubs and agents of innovation in the global economy (Kwiek, 2006; Duczmal, Jongbloed, 2007; Maassen, Olsen, 2007).

The higher education system worldwide is undergoing a profound transformation driven by global trends, including increased accessibility, digitalization, and the diversification of educational models (Altbach, Reisberg, Rumbley, 2010; OECD, 2021). In Europe, the Bologna Process has significantly influenced the harmonization of higher education structures, emphasizing comparability, quality assurance, and mobility among member countries (Witte, 2006; Ravinet, 2008; Reinalda, 2008). Globally, institutions are adapting to the rising demand for higher education, with a projected surge in tertiary-level enrolments surpassing 260 million by 2025 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). This projection was confirmed by UNESCO announcement from 23rd June 2025, according to which the number of students enrolled in higher education worldwide reached 264 million (UNESCO, 2025). These trends underscore the importance of innovative, flexible, and inclusive higher education systems capable of addressing the evolving needs of society and the labour market (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2025).

These global transformations are further influenced by regional crises, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has profoundly impacted higher education (Lagvilava, 2023; Melnyk, Dashkovska, Pogrebnyak, 2024). This crisis highlights the urgent need to enhance the inclusion of students who have fled from regions affected by hostilities. Displacement has disrupted the academic trajectories of thousands of students, necessitating adaptive measures within educational institutions to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities (Lagvilava, 2023; Melnyk, Dashkovska, Pogrebnyak, 2024). This situation has accelerated efforts to integrate flexible, inclusive practices into higher education, aligning with global trends and underscoring the critical role of education in fostering resilience and societal recovery during times of unprovoked aggression.

Ukraine joined the Bologna Process in 2005, adopting a three-cycle structure of higher education aligned with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). These reforms laid the foundation for further harmonization efforts described in Section 2.2.

Migration, in its various voluntary and forced forms, has become a key determinant of higher education mobility (more in section 2.4).

2.2. Harmonization, quality assurance and institutional structures in the EHEA

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) represents a landmark achievement in the process of European integration in the field of education (Froment, 2003; Reinalda, 2008; Curaj et al., 2012). Established through the Bologna Process, which began in 1999, the EHEA aims to create a unified, competitive, and attractive space for higher education across Europe (Froment, 2003; Reinalda, 2008; Curaj et al., 2012). Its primary goals include enhancing the compatibility and comparability of higher education systems, promoting student and staff mobility, ensuring high-quality education through rigorous quality assurance mechanisms, and facilitating the recognition of qualifications and periods of study (Froment, 2003; Reinalda, 2008; Curaj et al., 2012).

The EHEA encompasses 49 countries, extending beyond the borders of the European Union to include nations from Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (Reinalda, 2008; Curaj et al., 2012). This broad geographical scope reflects the inclusive and cooperative nature of the Bologna Process, which seeks to harmonize diverse educational traditions and systems while respecting national and institutional autonomy (Froment, 2003; Curaj et al., 2012).

Higher education institutions across the European Union have adopted a multidimensional approach that integrates research, teaching, and societal engagement (Enders, 2004; Maassen, Stensaker, 2011). This model aligns with global development agendas, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and emphasizes the role of universities in advancing inclusive, quality education (SDG 4). The rapid adoption of digital technologies, combined with the expanding scope of lifelong learning, is reshaping traditional educational paradigms (Reichert, Tauch, 2003; Curaj et al., 2015; European Commission, 2020a). This transformation requires higher education systems to provide not only academic excellence but also accessible, equitable, and innovative learning pathways (Curaj et al., 2015; European Commission, 2020a).

Within this evolving European framework, Ukraine's higher education system continues to adapt to both regional expectations and national realities (Lugovy, Slyusarenko, Talanova, 2019; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). Its institutions – ranging from universities and academies to institutes and colleges – serve as critical platforms for academic development, innovation, and research. At the same time, these institutions are undergoing substantial reforms to enhance compatibility with international structures and to respond effectively to global challenges (Lugovy, Slyusarenko, Talanova, 2019; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021).

Since 2002, Ukraine has restructured its higher education system around educational programs that lead to qualifications at various levels. The current structure reflects the gradual transition from older Soviet-influenced models to a system aligned

with European standards (Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, Talanova, 2019; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). Ukraine adopted the Bologna Process in 2005 and enacted the Law “On Higher Education” in 2014, introducing a three-cycle degree system – junior bachelor, bachelor, master, and doctor of philosophy or doctor of arts (Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, Talanova, 2019; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). These changes aim to foster diversity and flexibility in student learning paths, enhance international recognition of Ukrainian qualifications, and support academic and professional mobility (Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, Talanova, 2019; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021).

Higher education standards in Ukraine are closely linked to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which outlines the structure of qualifications, expected learning outcomes, and competencies at each level of education (Coles, Oates, 2005; Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, Talanova, 2019; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). This framework is harmonized with both the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) (Coles, Oates, 2005; Bjørnåvold, Coles, 2007). Such alignment ensures consistency, comparability, and mutual recognition across borders (Coles, Oates, 2005; Bjørnåvold, Coles, 2007). It also supports integration with global best practices and enables individuals to pursue further study or work in other countries with fewer administrative or academic obstacles (Coles, Oates, 2005; Bjørnåvold, Coles, 2007).

At the same time, globalization continues to influence nearly every domain of public life, including education (Altbach, Knight, 2007; Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Teichler, 2017). The growing prominence of the knowledge economy, the spread of digital tools, and the increasing interconnectedness of societies have all contributed to the rise in cross-border educational migration. Students seek international education not only to enhance their academic credentials and future employment prospects, but also to gain access to diverse cultural experiences and globally recognized qualifications (Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Teichler, 2017). This dynamic has elevated the importance of student mobility as both a personal strategy for growth and a societal mechanism for knowledge exchange (Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Vögtle, Windzio, 2016).

From a systemic perspective, educational migration is now recognized as a vital contributor to national intellectual capital (King, Raghuram, 2013; Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Vögtle, Windzio, 2016). Students who study abroad acquire new competencies, broaden their perspectives, and often bring valuable knowledge back to their home countries – or contribute to their host countries’ academic and economic ecosystems (King, Raghuram, 2013; Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Vögtle, Windzio, 2016). In this context, student mobility is not only an individual pursuit but also a phenomenon that reflects wider trends in globalization, economic competition,

and demographic change (Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Vögtle, Windzio, 2016; Teichler, 2017).

Despite Ukraine's progress in aligning with European education frameworks, several challenges remain (Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, Talanova, 2019; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). Ukrainian higher education institutions face difficulties in achieving international visibility, particularly in global rankings, which continue to shape perceptions of academic quality (López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). This limited visibility undermines competitiveness and can affect graduate mobility. Ukrainian graduates may be required to complete additional exams or undergo extensive recognition processes in foreign countries, reflecting ongoing barriers in mutual qualification recognition and systemic trust (Lugovyi, Slyusarenko, Talanova, 2019; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021).

Parallel developments in other countries, such as Slovakia and Poland, offer useful comparative insights into how national systems implement EHEA principles in diverse ways (Kohoutek, 2009; Pędziwiatr, Magdziarz, 2023). In Slovakia, migration-related institutional structures – though focused on asylum and integration policy – provide valuable examples of how coordinated governance, including partnerships with NGOs, can support broader goals of inclusion. Slovakia's approach emphasizes a balance between state responsibilities and community engagement in fostering integration, a model that can inform strategies for integrating students from conflict-affected regions such as Ukraine (Kohoutek, 2009; Pędziwiatr, Magdziarz, 2023).

The Polish higher education system further exemplifies how European reforms manifest in national contexts (Reinalda, 2008; Dobbins, Knill, 2009; Curaj et al., 2012). Poland has fully adopted the Bologna Process, including the three-cycle system (licencjat/inżynier – magister – doktor), and implemented the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) (González, Wagenaar, 2008; Reinalda, 2008; Dobbins, Knill, 2009; Curaj et al., 2012). This facilitates academic transparency, recognition of learning outcomes, and student mobility across Europe (González, Wagenaar, 2008; Dobbins, Knill, 2009). At the same time, Poland retains unique structural features. For instance, the parallel existence of licencjat and inżynier degrees at the bachelor level accommodates both academic and vocational pathways. Moreover, the distinction between academic universities (entitled to award doctoral degrees) and vocational higher education institutions reflects differentiated institutional missions (Dobbins, Knill, 2009). The coexistence of full-time (typically tuition-free) and part-time (often fee-paying) study formats further illustrates the hybrid character of accessibility and financing in Poland's system.

Poland's centralized quality assurance system, coordinated by the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA), ensures the monitoring and evaluation of higher education programs and institutions (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, Pârlea, 2004; Kohoutek, 2009; Loukkola,

Zhang, 2010). This national framework is integrated with the European qualifications system and provides a transparent mechanism for maintaining academic standards. Such measures are especially important in the context of internationalization, as they build credibility, enhance institutional reputation, and facilitate the integration of foreign students, including those from Ukraine (Kohoutek, 2009).

Ultimately, the comparison of institutional structures and quality assurance mechanisms within the EHEA highlights both convergence and divergence among member states (Froment, 2003; Reinalda, 2008; Curaj et al., 2012). These differences influence how Ukrainian students navigate the European higher education space and underscore the importance of flexible, coherent, and student-centered policies for internationalization (Reinalda, 2008; Curaj et al., 2012; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). The Polish example, in particular, illustrates how systemic organization interacts with demographic, cultural, and legal factors to condition the success of integration efforts (Dobbins, Knill, 2009; Loukkola, Zhang, 2010).

Higher education institutions are of great importance for both society and the economy. As E. Stańczyk-Hugiet notes, „reforms in universities are permanent and are associated with the search for an ideal model“ (Stańczyk-Hugiet, 2022, p. 555). Reforms in Poland are part of global changes, which are conditioned by the changing relationship between the state and academia (Reinalda, 2008; Štech, 2011), with Polish academic tradition largely referring to the classical idea of the German university after the reforms of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Zakowicz, 2012). However, today we are witnessing a debate over the shape and duties of academic institutions (Amaral et al., 2009; Štech, 2011) – there is consideration of moving away from the classical concept of the university towards an entrepreneurial university that meets labour market expectations and prepares graduates for the modern labour market (Chmielecki, 2019). In Poland, as in Western Europe, we currently observe two opposing paradigms regarding the mission of the university and the role of higher education (Nóvoa, Lawn, 2002; Amaral et al., 2009; Štech, 2011). On one hand, there is a paradigm in the form of a practical set of global and transnational recommendations (from the World Bank, OECD, and the European Commission) regarding systemic reforms in higher education, strongly supported by the ideas of New Public Management (Nóvoa, Lawn, 2002; Amaral et al., 2009; Štech, 2011). On the other hand, we see a paradigm of traditional thinking of the academic community deeply rooted in the values and norms of the elite, Humboldtian university (Nóvoa, Lawn, 2002; Štech, 2011). Both paradigms constantly clash with varying intensity (Nóvoa, Lawn, 2002; Amaral et al., 2009; Štech, 2011).

Changing social, economic, cultural, and legal external and internal conditions for the functioning of higher education institutions are increasingly forcing them to operate in a state of permanent adaptation to changes in financing and management methods (Kwiek, 2006; Štech, 2011).

2.3. Educational migration, student mobility and internationalization

In recent years, the trend of educational migration from Ukraine has gained significant momentum (Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023; Chala et al., 2024; Samoliuk et al., 2024), reflecting broader global patterns of student mobility (Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Teichler, 2017). A growing number of Ukrainian students are choosing to pursue higher education abroad (Chala et al., 2024; Samoliuk et al., 2024; Hrynevych, 2025), motivated by the expansion of accessible and diversified educational offerings worldwide (Altbach, Knight, 2007; King, Raghuram, 2013). This development is part of a larger shift in how young people, especially from emerging economies, perceive the value of international education in enhancing their career prospects and social mobility (King, Raghuram, 2013; Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Teichler, 2017). The increasing number of Ukrainian citizens holding foreign diplomas underscores this trend (Chala et al., 2024; Samoliuk et al., 2024; Vasylytsiv et al., 2024), with many of these graduates entering not only domestic labour markets but also increasingly competing internationally (Samoliuk et al., 2024; Vasylytsiv et al., 2024).

This phenomenon aligns with the broader globalization of higher education, which has created an environment in which students are no longer limited to academic institutions within their home countries (Curaj et al., 2012; De Wit et al., 2015; Nikolina, Makhnachova, Kuzinska, 2024). Instead, they actively seek out diverse, high-quality academic options abroad that promise to provide them with competitive advantages in an interconnected global marketplace (King, Raghuram, 2013; Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Teichler, 2017). This shift is particularly relevant for students who wish to acquire cutting-edge knowledge, develop multilingual and intercultural competencies, and position themselves favourably within transnational professional networks (Altbach, Knight, 2007; King, Raghuram, 2013; Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023).

The broader implications of this educational migration for Ukraine – and similarly situated countries – are multifaceted (Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023; Nikolina, Makhnachova, Kuzinska, 2024; Samoliuk et al., 2024). On the one hand, returning graduates bring valuable knowledge, international experience, and advanced skills that can contribute to domestic innovation and development (Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023; Samoliuk et al., 2024; Vasylytsiv et al., 2024). The infusion of globally acquired competencies into the Ukrainian labour market has the potential to support national modernization efforts, enhance institutional quality, and improve the responsiveness of higher education to societal needs (Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023; Vasylytsiv et al., 2024). On the other hand, the sustained outflow of young, talented individuals may result in a “brain drain,” whereby the most promising students and future professionals settle permanently abroad (Boichuk, 2023; Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023; Nikolina,

Makhnachova, Kuzinska, 2024). This tension between talent circulation and talent loss underscores the urgency of reforming domestic higher education systems to make them more competitive, attractive, and internationally connected (Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023; Samoliuk et al., 2024; Nikolina, Makhnachova, Kuzinska, 2024).

As educational migration becomes an increasingly visible phenomenon (Chala et al., 2024; Samoliuk et al., 2024; Hrynevych, 2025), its drivers also come into sharper focus. Chief among these is the globalization of education itself – manifested through the internationalization of curricula, growing numbers of transnational degree programs, and institutional collaborations across borders (González, Wagenaar, 2008; Curaj et al., 2012; De Wit et al., 2015). Many universities in Western Europe, North America, and parts of Asia now offer programs tailored to the demands of the global economy, emphasizing skills such as critical thinking, innovation, digital fluency, and intercultural communication (González, Wagenaar, 2008; King, Raghuram, 2013; De Wit et al., 2015). These competencies are perceived by students as indispensable for success in the labour market, and as such, drive demand for international study experiences (King, Raghuram, 2013; Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Teichler, 2017).

In parallel, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed the logistical and communicative landscape of student mobility (European Commission, 2020a; Marinoni, Van't Land, Jensen, 2020; Chala et al., 2024). Application processes, academic counselling, and virtual tours have become more accessible through online platforms, and students can now gather detailed information about foreign institutions with relative ease (European Commission, 2020a; Marinoni, Van't Land, Jensen, 2020). This digital transformation has reduced barriers to entry and empowered prospective students to make more informed and strategic decisions about their academic futures abroad (European Commission, 2020a; Marinoni, Van't Land, Jensen, 2020).

The motivations for international student mobility extend beyond purely economic or academic goals (Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; King, Raghuram, 2013; Teichler, 2017). Many students pursue education abroad to gain access to research infrastructures unavailable in their home countries, to participate in more open and innovative academic cultures, or to experience life in multicultural societies (Altbach, Knight, 2007; King, Raghuram, 2013; Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023). In doing so, they become active agents in the global exchange of ideas and values (King, Raghuram, 2013; Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; Teichler, 2017). Young educational migrants are often highly adaptable, resilient, and motivated, which enables them to integrate successfully into new environments and enhances their learning outcomes (Papatsiba, 2005; Altbach, Knight, 2007; King, Raghuram, 2013). Their presence in host countries contributes to cultural diversity and enriches academic communities (Papatsiba, 2005; Altbach, Knight, 2007; King, Raghuram, 2013).

Moreover, the internationalization of higher education facilitates not only individual development but also broader forms of cooperation and mutual benefit (Curaj et al., 2012; De Wit et al., 2015; Teichler, 2017). Academic mobility contributes to the circulation of talent, ideas, and innovation, thus reinforcing the foundations of the global knowledge economy (Curaj et al., 2012; Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013; De Wit et al., 2015; Teichler, 2017). Countries that attract and retain international students benefit from their academic contributions and, in many cases, from their transition into skilled labour markets (King, Raghuram, 2013; Rachaniotis, Kotsi, Agiomirgianakis, 2013). At the same time, home countries that can reintegrate returning graduates into their academic and professional sectors stand to benefit from knowledge transfer and the strengthening of international ties (Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023; Samoliuk et al., 2024; Vasylytsiv et al., 2024).

In this context, Ukraine's position within the European Higher Education Area offers both opportunities and obligations (Reichert, Tauch, 2003; Reinalda, 2008; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). As a participant in the Bologna Process and related frameworks, Ukraine has access to the tools and networks that support structured mobility and qualification recognition (Reichert, Tauch, 2003; Reinalda, 2008; López-Duarte, Maley, Vidal-Suárez, 2021). The challenge now lies in creating institutional conditions that encourage students to return, invest their newly acquired competencies domestically, and contribute to the transformation of Ukrainian higher education and society. In doing so, educational migration can evolve from a unidirectional flow into a circular dynamic of mobility, return, and reinvestment (Щербаченко, Теслик, 2023; Chala et al., 2024; Samoliuk et al., 2024).

2.4. Legal and policy frameworks for migration, asylum and integration in the EU

The European Union's approach to migration, asylum, and integration is grounded in a complex and evolving legal and policy framework that seeks to balance humanitarian obligations, security concerns, and the principles of solidarity and shared responsibility among Member States (Vitiello, 2022; Küçük, 2023; Soler García, 2024). This framework is rooted in the Treaties of the European Union, particularly the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which grants the EU competence in the areas of asylum, immigration, and external border control.

Migration and asylum have become central themes in contemporary European legal and policy discourses, shaped by processes of globalization, geopolitical instability, and recurring humanitarian crises (Vitiello, 2022; Soler García, 2024). These phenomena are governed by a complex legal framework that spans international, European

Union (EU), and national levels, reflecting the multifaceted nature of migration and its implications for sovereignty, security, and human rights (Costello, 2016; Vitiello, 2022; Küçük, 2023). The evolving nature of migration necessitates not only harmonized legal definitions but also comprehensive, responsive, and inclusive policy measures that can address both long-term structural challenges and immediate humanitarian needs (Vitiello, 2022; Kortukova, Yemets, 2024; Soler García, 2024).

Within the European Union, migration-related policies are structured around several core pillars: legal migration, irregular migration and return, asylum and international protection, integration of third-country nationals, and border management (European Commission, 2016; Peers, 2016). The EU legal framework includes regulations and directives that set minimum standards for Member States, while allowing flexibility in implementation to reflect specific national contexts. In this regard, Slovakia provides a useful example of how EU legal instruments are transposed into domestic law and applied in practice, particularly in the context of the large-scale arrival of Ukrainian nationals after February 2022 (Münch, 2018; Seberíni et al., 2024; Krzysztofik, Tarasova, 2025).

In Slovak legislation, as in most EU Member States, the concept of a “foreigner” refers to individuals who do not hold national citizenship, including both EU/EEA/Swiss nationals and third-country nationals (Seberíni et al., 2024; Krzysztofik, Tarasova, 2025). The recodification of Act No. 404/2011 on the Residence of Foreigners was a key step toward aligning Slovak law with the EU *acquis*. It introduced a coherent framework for different categories of foreign nationals, including long-term residents, family members of EU citizens, and individuals with special protection needs (Seberíni et al., 2024; Krzysztofik, Tarasova, 2025). Vulnerable persons such as minors, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, single parents, and victims of severe violence are granted particular safeguards, reflecting both EU principles and international human rights obligations (UNHCR, 2009; FRA, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022).

Within this framework, accommodation providers are also legally regulated, ensuring accountability in the provision of housing to migrants (Seberíni et al., 2024; Krzysztofik, Tarasova, 2025). This dimension of migration governance is crucial for maintaining humane living conditions, especially during mass influx situations.

Asylum seekers represent a more specific category governed by both international and EU law (Directive 2011/95/EU (European Parliament and Council, 2011); Directive 2013/32/EU (European Parliament and Council, 2013)). According to the EU Asylum Procedures Directive (2013/32/EU), applicants for international protection must be allowed to remain in the Member State while their claims are examined. The 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol remain the cornerstone of international refugee law, defining refugees as individuals with a well-founded fear of persecution

(UNHCR, 1951; European Parliament and Council, 2011). These definitions are embedded within EU secondary legislation, such as the Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU), and operationalized through national legal instruments, including Slovakia's Act No. 480/2002 on Asylum. Refugees in Slovakia are granted permanent residence status, reflecting a long-term commitment to protection and integration (Seberíni et al., 2024; Krzysztofik, Tarasova, 2025).

Not all applicants, however, meet the criteria for refugee status. In such cases, subsidiary protection may be granted to individuals who face serious harm in their country of origin, such as death, torture, or inhuman treatment. This form of protection is temporary, initially granted for one year, with the possibility of extension (UNHCR, 1951; European Parliament and Council, 2011; European Commission, 2020b). Termination or revocation may occur if the underlying risk no longer exists, if the individual acquires permanent residence elsewhere, or if the person represents a security threat. The legal regime also accounts for the rights of family members and dependent persons, creating a nuanced and flexible system that balances humanitarian protection with national interests.

A particularly vulnerable group are unaccompanied minors (UNHCR, 2009; Daniel-Calveras, Baldaquí, Baeza, 2022; FRA, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022). EU law and national regulations mandate the provision of special care, guardianship, education, and integration support to these children. Slovakia, as a Member State, adheres to the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ensuring that the best interests of the child are the primary consideration in all migration-related decisions (UNHCR, 2009; Daniel-Calveras, Baldaquí, Baeza, 2022; FRA, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022).

Another important but often overlooked category in the migration discourse are internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Vitiello, 2022; Díaz Lafuente, 2024). While not crossing international borders, IDPs face challenges similar to those of refugees. Within the EU legal architecture, the Council Directive 2001/55/EC on minimum standards for giving temporary protection has provided an essential legal basis for addressing mass displacement, particularly during emergency situations (Vitiello, 2022; Ineli-Ciger, 2023; Küçük, 2023).

This directive became especially relevant after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Temporary Protection Directive was activated for the first time to address the sudden and massive influx of displaced persons from Ukraine (Vitiello, 2022; Ineli-Ciger, 2023; Küçük, 2023). Under this scheme, beneficiaries are granted immediate access to residence, healthcare, accommodation, food, education, and the labour market in EU Member States, including Slovakia (Münch, 2018; Vitiello, 2022; Seberíni et al., 2024; Soler García, 2024; Krzysztofik, Tarasova, 2025). Eligible individuals include Ukrainian nationals, stateless persons or third-country nationals who had

international protection or long-term residence in Ukraine, and their family members. This status is currently valid until March 4, 2025, with the possibility of extension (European Commission, 2024).

Temporary protection is implemented through an expedited administrative procedure (European Commission, 2022; Vitiello, 2022; Soler García, 2024). Applicants must register in person, present identification, and receive a residence permit marked “Temporary Protection” (Münch, 2018; Seberíni et al., 2024; Krzysztofik, Tarasova, 2025). This scheme is designed to be inclusive and responsive, ensuring that even those without valid documentation can be granted protection, pending verification. The protection ceases under specific conditions, including the acquisition of another form of legal residence, application for asylum, return to the country of origin, or if the individual becomes a threat to public order or security. Fraudulent applications are also grounds for revocation (European Commission, 2022).

This instrument represents an essential bridge between emergency humanitarian response and structured legal protection. By streamlining access to rights and services, the EU demonstrates its solidarity and capacity for coordinated action in times of crisis (Enríquez, 2022; Vitiello, 2022; Küçük, 2023; Kortukova, Yemets, 2024). Slovakia’s implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive showcases how national institutions can operationalize EU law to provide timely and effective support, particularly for students, scholars, and academics fleeing war.

In conclusion, the EU legal and policy framework on migration, asylum, and integration is grounded in the principles of human dignity, solidarity, and shared responsibility. It balances the sovereign rights of Member States with the collective obligation to uphold fundamental rights and international legal commitments. In times of acute crisis, such as the war in Ukraine, this framework has shown its capacity for flexibility and rapid deployment, while ensuring protection and legal certainty for displaced persons. Continued efforts are needed, however, to harmonize implementation, strengthen institutional capacity, and ensure long-term integration pathways, especially for vulnerable groups such as students and young professionals (Vitiello, 2022; Xhardez, Soennecken, 2023; Kortukova, Yemets, 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research rationale and conceptual anchoring

This monograph investigates the inclusion of Ukrainian students in higher education institutions (HEIs) across four countries – Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine – through a comparative, cross-national lens rooted in the context of European academic integration, educational migration, and post-conflict adaptation. The project was motivated by the urgent need to understand how national HE systems accommodate displaced students, especially after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and how this experience contributes to building more inclusive, resilient educational systems within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Rather than limiting itself to quantitative indicators or a single type of empirical input, the methodological framework adopts a multi-layered qualitative design supported by desk-based research, policy analysis, legal contextualisation, institutional case studies, and most importantly, a unique qualitative research component based on structured round table discussions in all four countries.

The overarching analytical approach is grounded in several theoretical paradigms: migration and refugee studies, sociology of education, Europeanisation theory, and inclusive education. “Educational inclusion” is not treated narrowly as physical access to higher education. Instead, it is conceptualised holistically, embracing linguistic and cultural integration, psychosocial well-being, access to support services, legal and administrative status, as well as academic adaptation and participation in university life.

3.2. Research objectives and research questions

The methodology was designed to reflect and respond to the complexity of inclusion processes affecting Ukrainian students in higher education systems (HEIs) across four national contexts: Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine. Given the geopolitical, legal, and socio-cultural heterogeneity of these contexts, the research framework adopts a comparative, multi-scalar, and stakeholder-informed perspective. Below, we outline the main research objectives.

1. **To analyse the legal, institutional, and policy frameworks that facilitate or hinder the inclusion of Ukrainian students in higher education.**

This objective acknowledges that legal status (e.g., under temporary protection or asylum law), eligibility criteria, recognition of prior education, and visa/residency regimes significantly shape the possibility of accessing higher education. By

mapping legal and administrative norms, the monograph explores how national and EU-level instruments are translated into practice, and whether these frameworks serve as facilitators or obstacles to inclusion.

2. To explore how HEIs in Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine respond to the presence of Ukrainian students in practice.

Beyond the legal landscape, the actual implementation at the institutional level determines students' real-life experiences. This objective focuses on university-level responses, including support measures, language adaptation, mentoring systems, and the creation of inclusive learning environments. It also investigates institutional flexibility during emergencies, such as waiving tuition, fast-track admissions, or designing bridging programs.

3. To compare national inclusion strategies and identify good practices and systemic challenges.

By adopting a cross-country comparative framework, this objective enables the identification of both divergent and convergent patterns across national systems. The comparison allows for the detection of good practices and systemic bottlenecks. These findings can inform recommendations for future policy and institutional strategies, and they are especially relevant for shaping coordinated EU-level approaches and transnational collaboration.

4. To investigate how these national responses align with broader European frameworks, including the Bologna Process, EU's Temporary Protection Directive, and the EHEA.

This objective reinforces the European dimension of the study. It recognises that while education remains primarily a national competence, European frameworks set normative expectations and structural benchmarks. The analysis therefore considers to what extent the national and institutional responses reflect core Bologna values (e.g., recognition, mobility, inclusion), and how Ukrainian students are integrated into this space, either temporarily or with long-term perspectives.

To address these objectives in a structured and analytically coherent manner, the study was guided by the following research questions. These questions were formulated to directly correspond with the goals outlined above, ensuring that each objective is explored through targeted inquiry across both national and institutional levels. We set the following research questions.

1. What are the legal and institutional arrangements for Ukrainian students in each country?

This question explores the rights and limitations Ukrainian students face depending on their formal status (e.g., refugee, temporary protection holder, third-country national). It includes how countries interpret "student" status under migration law and how institutional policies adjust to accommodate diverse

legal categories. The analysis distinguishes between access-related policies (e.g., admissions and fee structures) and residency-related frameworks (e.g., permits, registration procedures).

2. How do HEIs support the academic, social, and psychological integration of these students?

Here, the focus shifts from structures to lived experiences. This question investigates support services such as language courses, academic tutoring, career counselling, mental health support, and access to student life. It also captures how well these services are coordinated across university departments and how responsive they are to the specific needs of displaced students. Insights from Ukrainian student voices are especially central here.

3. To what extent are the support systems compatible with European standards?

This question evaluates alignment with key EU and EHEA principles, including the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, and the principles of social dimension in higher education. It asks whether national and institutional systems are not only functional but also fair, transparent, and harmonised across borders – thus supporting mobility and continuity of study for Ukrainian students.

4. What barriers and success factors can be identified across different institutional and national contexts?

This question synthesises systemic and practical insights. It enables the identification of patterns that either hinder or enhance student inclusion: bureaucratic delays, lack of linguistic support, unclear recognition procedures, but also innovation, institutional leadership, and inclusive pedagogies. It invites cross-stakeholder reflection and helps shape transferable lessons.

5. What are the lived experiences of students and teachers involved in the integration process?

As the most human-centred question, this invites first-hand perspectives gathered through round tables. It draws attention to emotional aspects, interpersonal relationships, perceptions of inclusion or marginalisation, and the meanings attached to the educational journey under forced displacement. Teachers' roles in mediating these experiences, mostly through pedagogy, empathy, or advocacy, are also explored, making this question essential for a comprehensive understanding of inclusion.

3.3. Qualitative research design: round tables, participant perspectives, and thematic analysis

The core of this monograph's methodological framework lies in its qualitative research design, built upon a multi-country approach to analysing inclusion processes of Ukrainian students in higher education. While legal, institutional, and statistical data provide an essential background, the inclusion phenomenon can only be fully grasped by capturing the lived experiences, perceptions, and expectations of those directly involved in the integration process. Therefore, a series of structured qualitative data collection activities, in the form of moderated round tables, were conducted in all four participating countries: Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine.

These round tables were designed to explore in depth the perspectives of key stakeholders in the inclusion process, namely:

- 1) Ukrainian students (who fled or relocated due to the war or chose mobility for other reasons),
- 2) domestic students (studying at host institutions and interacting with Ukrainian peers),
- 3) and Academic staff (teaching and supporting Ukrainian students in higher education settings).

3.3.1. Research logic and justification of qualitative approach

The qualitative method was chosen deliberately to address specific analytical goals that quantitative research alone cannot capture. These include:

- 1) identifying subtle institutional dynamics,
- 2) exposing perceived and real barriers to inclusion,
- 3) understanding emotional, psychological, and social impacts,
- 4) and discovering non-documented, informal mechanisms of support or exclusion.

Inclusion is not merely a policy output; it is a process of everyday interactions, institutional culture, language practices, and power relations. Round table discussions offer the opportunity to understand these through an open, yet structured, format.

The decision to conduct round tables in all four countries ensures the comparability of findings across different national and institutional settings, while maintaining sensitivity to local contexts. Importantly, it allows the inclusion of perspectives from the “sending country”, it means Ukraine, which often remains analytically invisible in inclusion studies dominated by host-country perspectives.

3.3.2. Participants and composition of round tables

Each round table was composed of 6–12 participants, selected through purposive sampling in order to reflect diverse experiences within each target group (students, staff). The selection criteria included:

- 1) Ukrainian students: gender, age, length of stay in the host country, language skills, field of study;
- 2) domestic students: degree of contact with Ukrainian peers, previous international experience, language background;
- 3) teachers/academic staff: field of teaching, involvement in support services, language of instruction, experience with internationalization.

Across the countries, the moderation was semi-structured, guided by pre-prepared topic blocks but allowing for spontaneous elaboration. The moderators were trained staff or researchers familiar with inclusion-related themes and local higher education systems.

Efforts were made to balance the composition of groups in terms of gender and study level (bachelor, master, doctoral), and to include participants from various disciplines to ensure multi-dimensional insights. In some cases, mixed round tables (e.g. teachers and students) were conducted, while in others, separate sessions were held to encourage freer discussion.

3.3.3. Key thematic areas of the round tables

The discussions were structured around four key thematic blocks, developed jointly by the research teams in all participating countries. These themes reflect both research objectives and theoretical foundations from the European and national inclusion frameworks:

- 1) Legal and institutional frameworks,
- 2) Awareness of legal status and rights (residence, study, work),
- 3) Perceptions of transparency and accessibility of institutional rules,
- 4) Experiences with bureaucracy and institutional communication,
- 5) Degree of alignment between formal policies and actual practices,
- 6) Academic support and integration,
- 7) Access to academic counselling, tutoring, and mentoring,
- 8) Adjustment to different pedagogical and assessment methods,
- 9) Language of instruction and language support availability,
- 10) Recognition of prior learning and academic performance,
- 11) Social and psychological dimensions,
- 12) Social inclusion in student groups and extracurricular life,

- 13) Instances of discrimination, stereotyping, or support,
- 14) Psychological well-being, stress, coping strategies,
- 15) Peer-to-peer relationships and solidarity,
- 16) Future prospects and long-term inclusion,
- 17) Aspirations regarding stay vs. return to Ukraine,
- 18) Perceived employability and career opportunities,
- 19) Opinions on whether inclusion is temporary or transformative,
- 20) Views on long-term contribution to host and home societies.

Each country team was encouraged to adapt the phrasing and emphasis of the discussion topics to the local context, while preserving the integrity of these four overarching categories.

3.3.4. Data collection, documentation and analysis

In all countries, the round tables were audio recorded (with prior informed consent), and detailed notes were taken during the sessions. Transcriptions (partial or full, depending on the national team's capacities and ethical considerations) were created for analytical purposes. Participants were anonymized, and no personal identifiers were retained in the data set.

Where full transcription was not feasible, a synthesis of participant quotes and paraphrased responses was produced by the moderators, structured by the four thematic blocks. These were then coded manually using qualitative content analysis procedures.

In some countries, additional data were collected via short written reflections submitted voluntarily by participants after the round table, especially when emotional or sensitive issues were discussed and participants preferred to elaborate in writing.

The analysis was conducted separately in each country by the national teams, using thematic coding as the primary method. All data (transcripts, notes, written reflections) were processed using a grounded theory-inspired approach, with codes emerging inductively from the data, but informed by the pre-defined themes.

After initial coding, the country teams prepared national analytical summaries, highlighting:

- 1) main patterns and themes,
- 2) notable quotes,
- 3) areas of divergence or consensus,
- 4) and preliminary cross-cutting insights.

These summaries served as the basis for the comparative analysis, which was coordinated by the lead institution. The comparison sought to:

- 1) identify commonalities across countries (e.g. recurring barriers or good practices),

- 2) highlight context-specific features (e.g. different legal statuses),
- 3) and assess how institutional responses align with European-level frameworks and declarations.

Where possible, country-specific findings were triangulated with desk research, policy analysis, and institutional data to strengthen validity.

The research strictly adhered to ethical standards applicable in each participating country. Participants were informed of:

- 1) the research purpose of participating at roundtable,
- 2) voluntary nature of participation,
- 3) right to withdraw,
- 4) data protection measures,
- 5) and anonymisation procedures (in the context of written elaboration of roundtable results, not in the context of in person participation in the roundtable).

Written or oral informed consent was obtained in all cases. In contexts involving vulnerable individuals (e.g. displaced students), particular care was taken to avoid re-traumatisation or pressure to disclose sensitive information. Discussions were moderated with empathy and cultural sensitivity.

In some countries, the research underwent ethical review by university ethics boards. Even where such formal procedures were not required, institutional support was secured to ensure legitimacy and participant trust.

3.4. Use of secondary data and institutional sources

In addition to the primary data collected through round table discussions in Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine, the research methodology of this monograph incorporated the analysis of secondary data. These sources played an essential role in building a comprehensive understanding of the legal, institutional, and socio-political environments in which Ukrainian students navigate their higher education pathways.

Secondary data were used in this monography to complement and triangulate qualitative findings. They served as background material to support the interpretation of qualitative inputs and allowed for a multi-layered perspective that integrates institutional, national, and European dimensions. The inclusion of secondary data was instrumental in:

- 1) mapping the legal and policy frameworks concerning the inclusion of displaced and international students;
- 2) understanding the demographic profile of Ukrainian students in host institutions;
- 3) clarifying the institutional arrangements and procedures established in response to the war in Ukraine;

- 4) providing insight into national and European support schemes relevant to student mobility and protection.

Secondary sources were not used for statistical generalization but rather for contextual and documentary purposes, enabling a richer and more anchored interpretation of the qualitative narratives emerging from the round tables.

The types of secondary materials incorporated into the analytical process include:

- 1) institutional documents and reports issued by the participating universities, including internal strategies, mobility statistics, and procedural guidelines related to international student support;
- 2) national-level legislation and policy documents, particularly those aligned with the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive and the Bologna Process;
- 3) European-level frameworks, such as recommendations from the European Commission, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, and Erasmus+ strategic documents;
- 4) publicly available statistical data from national statistical offices, Eurostat, UNESCO, and other relevant international bodies;
- 5) academic literature and previous research reports, especially those addressing migration, higher education, and student mobility in Central and Eastern Europe.
- 6) institutional sources from participating universities.

Each partner university (Matej Bel University in Slovakia, the University of Rzeszów in Poland, and Ovidius University of Constanța in Romania) contributed data and institutional overviews that were used as secondary analytical material. These documents offered descriptive information about:

- 1) the number and status of Ukrainian students enrolled at the respective institutions;
- 2) institutional responses and integration procedures adopted in the aftermath of the 2022 crisis;
- 3) internal policies regarding language support, student counselling, and administrative services;
- 4) interaction with national or international support schemes related to displaced persons or international students.

These materials were incorporated into the comparative analysis to illustrate institutional capacities, variation in national policy environments, and different models of higher education inclusion.

Secondary data played an essential role throughout the analytical process by complementing the qualitative material and ensuring the internal coherence of the research framework. These data were systematically incorporated to support the development of national case profiles, providing a factual and institutional background for interpreting findings from the round table discussions. By linking experiential accounts with documentary evidence, the analysis achieved a balanced perspective that combined

lived realities with the broader structural and legal environment in which higher education institutions operate.

A consistent use of terminology and conceptual framing was maintained across all national teams through the continuous reference to secondary materials, such as policy papers, institutional strategies, and international reports. This helped to align interpretations, reduce semantic variation, and strengthen the comparability of findings across countries.

Furthermore, secondary data enabled a deeper contextualization of qualitative insights by situating individual experiences within the wider political, administrative, and socio-economic frameworks of each country. The review of national and European legislation, policy instruments, and institutional strategies made it possible to identify the specific conditions shaping inclusion processes, as well as the systemic differences between the participating higher education systems.

Finally, the integration of documentary evidence allowed the research team to confirm the institutional scope and operational conditions within which the universities functioned. This step ensured that qualitative narratives were interpreted not in isolation, but as part of a multi-level system involving universities, governments, and European policy structures. Through this multi-source analytical approach, the study achieved both methodological depth and contextual validity, reinforcing the reliability of its comparative conclusions.

The research team applied a structured document analysis approach, reviewing each type of source for its relevance to the research objectives and key questions. Materials were thematically coded according to institutional type, policy level, and relevance to inclusion, mobility, or legal status.

The use of secondary data was guided by ethical and methodological rigor. Only publicly available or institutionally authorized documents were included in the analysis. Where institutional data were shared, their use was limited to background analysis and was not presented in a way that could identify individual students or respondents.

Limitations of secondary data include differences in data availability, consistency, and scope across the three participating countries. The heterogeneity of institutional reporting and the lack of harmonized indicators for displaced student inclusion also presented analytical challenges. These were addressed through triangulation and careful contextual interpretation of data.

3.5. Triangulation, data validation and ethical consideration

To ensure the methodological robustness and credibility of the research findings, a process of triangulation was implemented throughout the data collection and analysis stages. Given the qualitative nature of the study, triangulation served both as a validation mechanism and as a means to integrate multiple perspectives from different sources and stakeholders. Following forms of triangulation was applied:

1. Data triangulation: Information was sourced from multiple types of respondents (Ukrainian students, domestic students, academic staff), and from several countries (Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Ukraine), ensuring a variety of experiences and national contexts were captured.
2. Source triangulation: Findings were validated against secondary data from legal texts, policy documents, and institutional records to ensure internal consistency and relevance.
3. Investigator triangulation: In each country, the local academic team was responsible for facilitating the round table discussions, analysing the national legal and policy frameworks, and reviewing institutional responses. Cross-validation among teams helped minimize individual bias and ensured balanced interpretation.
4. Method triangulation: The integration of qualitative data (round tables) and documentary analysis (legal, institutional and policy documents) enabled a multi-faceted understanding of the research questions.

Triangulation was not only a methodological tool but also a conceptual strategy that allowed researchers to explore contradictions, convergences, and divergences across national and institutional contexts.

This monograph fully adhered to the fundamental principles of research ethics, particularly in the context of vulnerable populations such as displaced students. All participants in the round table discussions were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of their contributions, and their right to withdraw at any point. Participation was strictly voluntary, and oral or written informed consent was obtained in line with the national requirements and institutional ethical standards in each participating country. To protect the identities of participants, no personal data were collected or retained that could be used to identify individuals. Participants were referred to in the analysis only by general descriptors (e.g., Ukrainian student, domestic teacher), and care was taken to ensure that even indirect identifiers (e.g., field of study, year of enrolment) were omitted where necessary. Special attention was given to the ethical implications of engaging with students who may have experienced trauma or displacement. Moderators of round tables were instructed to avoid intrusive questioning, to respect emotional boundaries, and to provide participants with information about counselling or

support services if needed. Each partner institution ensured compliance with its internal ethical review procedures. The coordination team at Matej Bel University oversaw the integration of ethical protocols across all national teams to ensure methodological and ethical consistency.

4. Results from four countries

This chapter presents the main empirical findings derived from the qualitative and documentary research conducted in four participating countries – Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine. Each national analysis reflects the specific historical, institutional, and policy context shaping the inclusion of Ukrainian students in higher education, while simultaneously following a shared methodological and analytical framework developed within the project.

The structure of each national section is intentionally harmonised to allow for cross-country comparison and synthesis. The analyses focus on:

- 1) the legal, institutional, and policy frameworks relevant to the inclusion of displaced and international students;
- 2) trends in higher education before and after the onset of the war in Ukraine;
- 3) institutional responses of selected universities to the inflow of Ukrainian students;
- 4) qualitative insights emerging from round tables and focus group discussions.

4.1. Slovakia

4.1.1. Legal, institutional and policy frameworks for inclusion in Slovakia

Migration, asylum, and inclusion have become increasingly central to the Slovak Republic's legal and policy agenda, particularly since 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered the most significant refugee movement in Europe since World War II. Within this context, the Slovak state, its institutions, and higher education sector have undergone a process of rapid adaptation, balancing humanitarian obligations with legal harmonisation under the European Union (EU) framework. The Slovak approach to migration and inclusion thus reflects both its domestic legal tradition and its commitments arising from international and European law.

The concept of migration in Slovak legal and academic discourse extends beyond the mere movement of individuals across borders. It encompasses a set of complex socio-political dynamics with economic, demographic, and humanitarian dimensions. Although there is no single universal definition of “migration,” Slovak law follows internationally accepted standards. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs defines a long-term migrant as a person who resides outside their country of origin for at least twelve months. Within this broad understanding, migration can be categorised by voluntariness, legality, and duration.

1. Voluntary migration refers to mobility motivated by employment, study, or family reunification.

2. Forced migration includes movements caused by armed conflict, persecution, or natural disasters.
3. Legal migration denotes entry and stays authorised by valid residence permits, visas, or other legal documents, while
4. Irregular migration signifies entry or stays without proper authorisation.

This categorisation reflects the complexity of contemporary migration flows and underpins the Slovak Republic's policy design, which must ensure effective migration management while safeguarding fundamental rights.

The term foreigner is foundational to Slovak migration law. Pursuant to Act No. 404/2011 Coll. on the Residence of Foreigners, a foreigner is defined as any person who does not hold Slovak citizenship. This category encompasses Union citizens (nationals of EU, EEA, and Switzerland), third-country nationals, and stateless persons. It also includes family members of Union citizens who are third-country nationals – such as spouses, dependent children, and partners in duly attested relationships – who enjoy derivative residence rights.

Certain third-country nationals are exempt from visa obligations under bilateral or multilateral agreements, while others are admitted on the basis of long-term or temporary residence permits. The legal status of foreigners in Slovakia is therefore closely tied to EU legislation and its harmonisation mechanisms.

A cornerstone of Slovakia's legal framework is Act No. 480/2002 Coll. on Asylum, which governs the procedures and conditions under which asylum or subsidiary protection may be granted. This legislation operationalises Slovakia's obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 Protocol, and relevant EU directives forming part of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).

Under Slovak law, an asylum seeker is defined as a foreign national who has formally applied for asylum and whose claim is pending decision. In line with Directive 2013/32/EU on Asylum Procedures, an applicant for asylum must be permitted to remain lawfully in the Member State during the examination of their claim.

Refugee status may be granted to persons who demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Refugees are accorded permanent residence status, access to integration programs, and equal treatment in several areas of social life.

Where the criteria for refugee status are not met but there exists a real risk of serious harm upon return, applicants may receive subsidiary protection. This temporary protection, initially valid for one year, is renewable depending on the persistence of risk factors such as ongoing conflict or persecution. It is revoked if the beneficiary obtains asylum, acquires permanent residence, or no longer faces a risk of harm.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 precipitated the activation of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC), providing immediate

and collective protection to displaced persons. Slovakia, as an EU Member State, transposed this framework into its national legislation and implemented a fast-track legal regime under the Act No. 55/2022 Coll. on Measures Related to the Situation in Ukraine (“Lex Ukraine”).

Temporary protection in Slovakia grants Ukrainian nationals – and certain other categories of residents of Ukraine – legal residence, access to education, healthcare, employment, and accommodation. The status is valid until 4 March 2025, subject to potential extension.

Eligible beneficiaries include:

- 1) Ukrainian citizens residing in Ukraine before 24 February 2022,
- 2) persons who had international or equivalent protection in Ukraine,
- 3) family members of the above categories, and
- 4) foreign nationals with permanent residence in Ukraine who cannot safely return home.

Applications for temporary protection must be lodged in person with the Foreign Police Department and are granted immediately upon submission of valid identification. Where documentation is lacking, a decision is issued within thirty days. Successful applicants receive a residence permit marked “Temporary Protection”, entitling them to stay, work, and access basic services within Slovak territory.

This legal framework embodies the humanitarian orientation of Slovakia’s migration policy and ensures rapid, non-discriminatory access to protection for those fleeing the war. Beneficiaries enjoy the right to free movement within Slovakia and, under EU coordination mechanisms, within the Schengen Area, provided they do not seek equivalent protection elsewhere.

Temporary protection may be terminated if the holder acquires asylum, permanent residence, or equivalent status in another Member State, or if it is found to have been obtained fraudulently. The legislation further allows revocation in cases posing threats to national security or involving serious criminal conduct.

Migration governance in Slovakia is primarily coordinated through the Migration Office of the Ministry of Interior, which manages asylum applications, international protection, and integration programs. It operates in close collaboration with the Bureau of Border and Foreign Police, which oversees residence registration and enforcement of migration regulations.

The institutional structure is complemented by partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international actors, notably the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). NGOs such as the Slovak Humanitarian Council and Mareena contribute to providing integration assistance, psychosocial support, language training, and community mediation.

Slovakia's asylum infrastructure includes three principal facilities:

- 1) The Reception Centre in Humenné, which conducts initial registration and health screening;
- 2) The Accommodation Centre in Rohovce, primarily for single men; and
- 3) The Facility in Opatovská Nová Ves, which houses vulnerable groups such as families, women, and unaccompanied minors.

This decentralised system ensures differentiated care according to the specific needs of applicants.

Integration in the Slovak context is understood as a reciprocal process of adaptation requiring effort from both newcomers and host communities. It encompasses access to education, healthcare, housing, and employment, but also cultural participation and civic engagement.

The Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic – Perspective until 2025 emphasises inclusion as a pillar of social cohesion and sustainable migration management. It explicitly links integration policies to Slovakia's demographic needs, labour market dynamics, and commitments under EU law. In practice, integration measures include Slovak language courses, professional counselling, job-matching services, and targeted mentoring programs, often implemented in cooperation with universities and local governments.

Of particular importance is the integration of foreign students, including those from Ukraine, into Slovak higher education. Legislation governing the recognition of qualifications, residence permits, and access to study is aligned with EU standards to ensure equitable treatment and academic mobility. The Act No. 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education provides for the admission of applicants with temporary protection, refugee status, or asylum, even in the absence of complete documentation, under special procedures established by university senates.

The Slovak legal and institutional framework for migration and inclusion thus operates at the intersection of national competence and supranational regulation. Its alignment with European directives ensures coherence with the Common European Asylum System, while its domestic implementation reflects national priorities of security, human rights protection, and social integration.

By adopting the Temporary Protection Directive and streamlining access to higher education and the labour market, Slovakia has demonstrated a commitment to European solidarity in response to the Ukrainian crisis. These efforts are further supported by the EUAA (European Union Agency for Asylum), Frontex, and funding instruments such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).

From a legal and institutional standpoint, Slovakia's framework can be characterised as structured, rights-based, and adaptive. It combines legal certainty with humanitarian flexibility, enabling rapid responses to crises while maintaining compliance with EU norms.

4.1.2. Trends in Slovak higher education in connection with Ukrainian students' inflow

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reshaped the demographic and institutional landscape of Slovak higher education. Within a matter of weeks, universities across Slovakia transitioned from conventional internationalisation processes to rapid humanitarian and educational responses. Ukrainian students – both those who had already been enrolled before the war and newly displaced arrivals – became an integral part of Slovak academia, contributing to unprecedented diversification and policy innovation within the sector. The inflow of Ukrainian nationals thus brought both opportunities and challenges, revealing structural strengths and weaknesses of Slovakia's higher education system in the context of crisis-induced migration.

Before 2022, Slovak higher education institutions (HEIs) already hosted a steadily increasing number of foreign students, particularly from neighbouring and culturally proximate countries. Ukrainian students had long constituted one of the largest international groups, owing to geographical proximity, linguistic similarities, and established bilateral cooperation. According to data from the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information (CVTI SR), the share of Ukrainian students in Slovak higher education had been growing gradually since 2015, reflecting a stable pattern of academic migration driven by affordability, quality, and cultural familiarity.

However, the post-2022 influx dramatically altered these dynamics. Following the activation of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive, thousands of Ukrainian citizens – including students, researchers, and academic staff – sought refuge in Slovakia. Universities were faced with the dual task of addressing humanitarian needs and ensuring academic continuity. This rapid adjustment demanded both institutional flexibility and the redefinition of inclusion mechanisms.

The first wave of responses across Slovak universities was characterised by emergency measures:

- 1) simplified admissions for displaced students,
- 2) recognition of interrupted or incomplete studies,
- 3) temporary tuition waivers, and
- 4) access to Slovak language courses and psychosocial counselling.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic issued a set of extraordinary guidelines allowing Ukrainian students to be admitted without complete documentation of prior education, provided they could demonstrate study history by alternative means (e.g., transcripts, digital records, or university confirmations). This measure aligned with §56(2) of Act No. 131/2002 Coll. on Higher Education, which authorises universities to admit applicants with asylum, subsidiary protection, or temporary protection status even in the absence of official certificates.

At the national level, several mechanisms facilitated inclusion:

1. The Slovak Academic Information Agency (SAIA) established consultation points and disseminated verified information on scholarships and recognition procedures.
2. The Ministry of Interior's Migration Office and IOM Slovakia coordinated language and integration support in collaboration with higher education institutions.
3. The National Scholarship Programme (NSP) and other mobility schemes temporarily redirected funds to support Ukrainian students and academics.

These rapid measures highlighted the institutional resilience of Slovak higher education and its ability to transform crisis management into structured inclusion policy.

The statistical evidence reveals a significant increase in the number of Ukrainian nationals enrolled in Slovak HEIs after 2022. Data compiled by the Ministry of Education indicate that Ukrainian students became the largest group of international learners in the country, surpassing cohorts from the Czech Republic, Kazakhstan, and Serbia.

This growth manifested most prominently in public universities with broader disciplinary profiles and regional outreach. Institutions such as Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, the University of Prešov, and Comenius University in Bratislava recorded the highest concentration of Ukrainian students. In smaller regional universities, the relative share of Ukrainian students often exceeded 20% of all international enrolments.

At the same time, universities observed a diversification of study modes. While a majority of Ukrainian students enrolled in full-degree programmes, a substantial number participated in short-term exchanges, bridging interrupted studies from Ukrainian universities through individual mobility arrangements or memoranda of cooperation.

The distribution of Ukrainian students across study levels revealed distinct patterns:

- 1) the bachelor's level remained dominant, reflecting the demographic structure of newly displaced young people;
- 2) the master's level showed steady growth, particularly in social sciences, business, and law; and
- 3) the doctoral level saw the least increase, primarily due to research language requirements and funding limitations.

One of the defining features of the Ukrainian student inflow was the linguistic adaptability afforded by the similarity between Slovak and Ukrainian languages. This proximity significantly reduced communication barriers and facilitated integration into Slovak-language programmes.

Nevertheless, English-taught programmes also experienced growth, as they attracted Ukrainian students aiming for continuity in international careers. The most popular fields of study included:

- 1) Economics, Management, and International Relations, driven by employability potential and existing Slovak-Ukrainian cooperation networks;

- 2) Education and Humanities, reflecting students' professional backgrounds and pedagogical interests; and
- 3) Computer Science and Engineering, linked to the broader European demand for digital skills.

In parallel, Slovak universities expanded language preparation programmes, often through university institutes of language and professional preparation. These courses became a crucial component of academic inclusion, combining Slovak language instruction with cultural orientation, practical information, and peer mentoring.

Furthermore, a growing number of universities – led by Matej Bel University, the Technical University of Košice, and the University of Žilina – introduced integration events, mentoring schemes, and mixed-classroom models to foster intercultural interaction. These initiatives reflect a shift from short-term humanitarian assistance to long-term inclusion strategies aligned with the EU's principles of the European Education Area (EEA).

From a policy perspective, the inclusion of Ukrainian students intersects with Slovakia's long-term objectives of internationalisation and demographic renewal. The Long-Term Plan for Education, Research, Development and Youth for 2021–2027 identifies internationalisation as a strategic priority, linking it to competitiveness, innovation, and regional development.

The Ukrainian influx has accelerated several trends:

1. Diversification of student populations – enhancing multicultural competence among Slovak students and staff.
2. Expansion of international cooperation – through bilateral agreements and projects such as the Erasmus+ partnership European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS).
3. Digitalisation and flexible learning models – prompted by the need to accommodate hybrid participation for students commuting between Ukraine and Slovakia.
4. Curricular innovation – including the introduction of modules on intercultural communication, conflict awareness, and inclusive pedagogy.

These developments illustrate how humanitarian inclusion has evolved into a systemic learning process for Slovak higher education, strengthening its adaptability and reinforcing its European profile.

Beyond academic outcomes, the arrival of Ukrainian students has reshaped the social fabric of Slovak campuses. University dormitories, student unions, and civic spaces became sites of transnational interaction, where shared Slavic cultural roots fostered empathy and solidarity. At the same time, integration was not without friction: psychological adaptation, financial uncertainty, and bureaucratic complexity occasionally hindered a smooth transition.

Universities responded by integrating psychological counselling, mentoring, and volunteering opportunities into student services. Many institutions also engaged local

communities – municipalities, NGOs, and cultural associations – to promote intercultural coexistence and reduce prejudice.

Overall, the presence of Ukrainian students has contributed to the “internationalisation at home” agenda, expanding intercultural learning opportunities for Slovak peers while embedding solidarity into academic culture.

4.1.3. Institutional responses: Matej Bel University case

The number of Ukrainian students at Matej Bel University has seen a significant rise, particularly in recent years. The enrolment data reveals an upward trajectory, with the most substantial increase occurring between 2021 and 2022.

The enrolment of Ukrainian students at Matej Bel University (UMB) has shown a remarkable upward trend over recent years, reflecting both external geopolitical influences and the university’s proactive support initiatives. In 2019, only 4 Ukrainian students were enrolled, marking the starting point of this significant growth trajectory. By 2020, the number had doubled to 8 students, demonstrating a steady initial increase. The Figure 1 illustrates the enrolment trends over time, from 2019 to 2023.

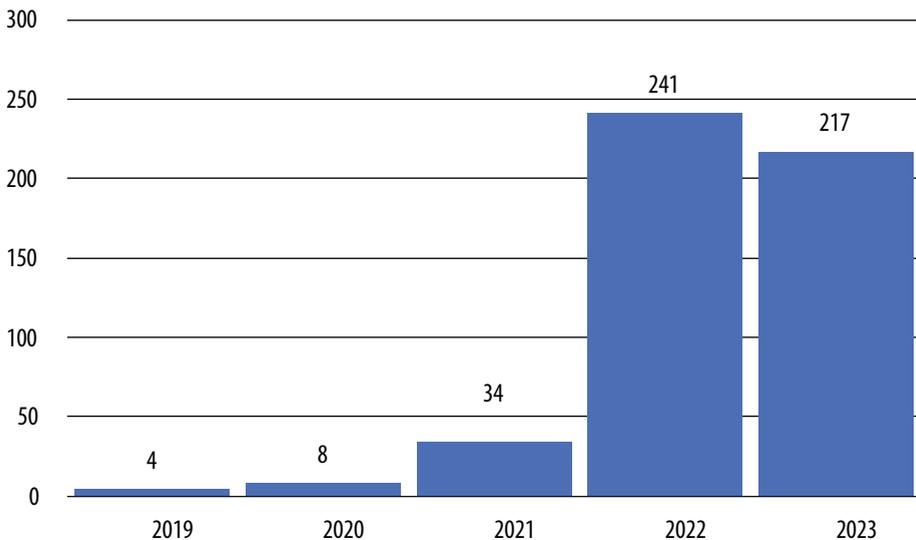


Figure 1. Enrolment Trends of Ukrainian Students at UMB in 2019–2023

Source: own elaboration based on UMB academic system data.

A pivotal moment occurred in 2021, with the enrolment surging to 34 students, an eightfold increase from 2019. This marked the beginning of a sustained and rapid

expansion. The largest increase was observed in 2022, when 241 Ukrainian students enrolled, underscoring the profound impact of external geopolitical factors, likely including the escalation of conflict in Ukraine and the resultant displacement of students seeking stable educational opportunities abroad.

While 2023 saw a slight decrease, 217 students joined UMB, maintaining the upward trend and highlighting the continued demand for higher education among Ukrainian students. This sustained interest suggests that UMB has become an increasingly attractive destination for Ukrainian students, driven by its reputation, support structures, and commitment to inclusion.

This progression from 4 students in 2019 to over 200 students annually in recent years indicates a growing demand for higher education at UMB among Ukrainian students, strongly influenced by geopolitical conditions and the university's responsive measures to accommodate their needs. The data reveal not only the resilience and adaptability of Ukrainian students but also the effectiveness of UMB's initiatives in fostering a welcoming and inclusive academic environment.

For the academic year 2023/2024, the number of newly enrolled Ukrainian students reached 217, maintaining the high levels observed in the previous year. These students represent a diverse group in terms of study programs and faculty distribution, as outlined in the following section.

The cumulative enrolment data for Ukrainian students at Matej Bel University reveals a varied distribution across faculties, reflecting their academic preferences and career aspirations. Over the years, the Faculty of Economics has consistently attracted the highest number of Ukrainian students, positioning itself as a primary choice for those seeking education in economic disciplines, particularly in management and finance. The Faculty of Political Science and International Relations and the Faculty of Law also rank prominently, with substantial enrolment numbers highlighting a strong interest in international relations, political studies, and legal disciplines, particularly those with a focus on international law and European legal frameworks. In contrast, lower enrolment figures are observed in the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Natural Sciences, suggesting a more limited interest in pedagogical and scientific fields among Ukrainian students.

This varying faculty distribution underscores the appeal of fields like economics, law, and international relations, which likely align closely with the career goals of Ukrainian students and their applicability in both Slovakia and Ukraine. The geopolitical context of their home country may also play a significant role in shaping these preferences, as these disciplines offer skills and knowledge that are highly relevant in post-conflict reconstruction, international cooperation, and global economic integration.

During the 2023/2024 academic year, the distribution of newly enrolled Ukrainian students across faculties follows a similar pattern. The Faculty of Economics continues

to lead as the most popular choice, reaffirming its appeal to students interested in economic fields, particularly management and finance. The Faculty of Political Science and International Relations maintains its strong position, reflecting an ongoing interest in international relations and political studies, likely influenced by the continuing geopolitical situation in Ukraine. Similarly, the Faculty of Law has experienced steady enrolment, particularly among students drawn to international and European legal studies, which are increasingly relevant in the context of Ukraine's aspirations for closer ties with the European Union.

In contrast, the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Natural Sciences continue to see lower enrolment numbers, although they remain valuable options for Ukrainian students pursuing careers in pedagogy and scientific disciplines. These faculties provide essential academic opportunities, even if they attract a smaller portion of the Ukrainian student population.

Overall, the distribution of Ukrainian students at UMB reflects not only their academic preferences but also broader socio-economic and geopolitical factors that influence their choices. The sustained interest in economics, international relations, and law underscores the alignment of these disciplines with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate and contribute to a rapidly changing global environment, both during and after the challenges posed by external conflicts. The Figure 2 presents the distribution of Ukrainian students by faculty for the 2023/2024 academic year.

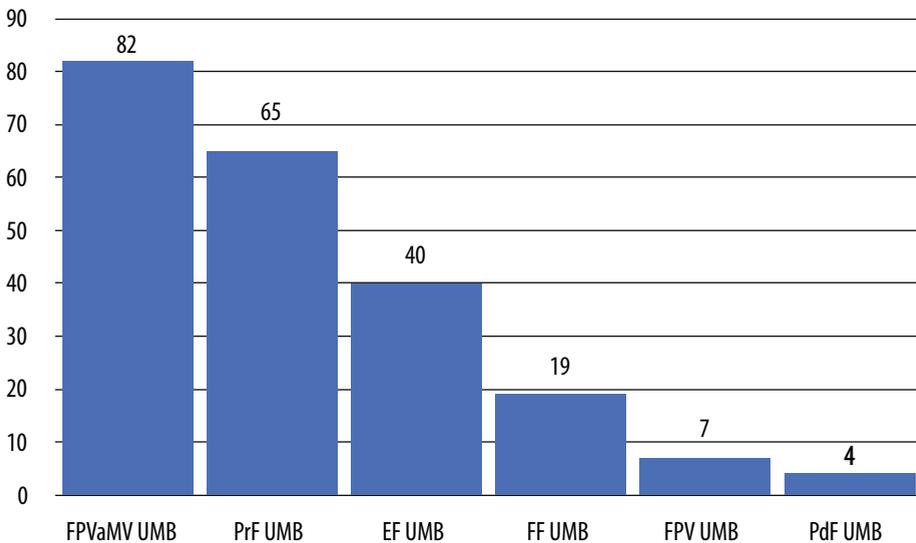


Figure 2. Ukrainian Student enrolment at UMB by Faculty for 2023/2024

Source: own elaboration based on UMB academic system data.

4.1.3.1. Gender and age of Ukrainian students at UMB

The overall gender composition of Ukrainian students at UMB reveals a predominance of female students, with 57% female and 43% male. This distribution aligns with global trends where disciplines such as economics, international relations, and education tend to attract a higher proportion of female applicants. At UMB, the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations are notable for their high female enrolment, reflecting the appeal of business, management, and diplomatic studies among female students.

Conversely, the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Natural Sciences show a more balanced gender ratio. These fields often attract a diverse demographic due to their broader career applications, including legal professions and STEM-related opportunities. Figure 3 displays gender distribution of Ukrainian students (as cumulative situation).

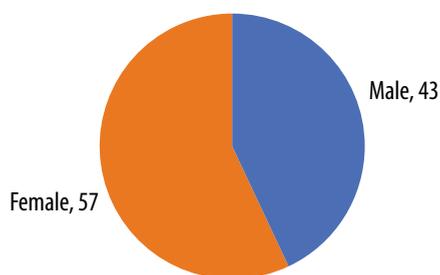


Figure 3. Gender of Ukrainian Student at UMB (cumulative data, in %)

Source: own elaboration based on UMB academic system data.

The gender distribution for the academic year 2023/2024 remains consistent with cumulative trends, with 56% female and 44% male students. Female representation continues to dominate in faculties focused on social sciences and business studies. The Faculty of Economics sustains its position as the most attractive for female students, underlining the global shift towards gender diversity in traditionally male-dominated sectors like finance and management.

The Faculty of Political Science and International Relations also retains a higher female enrolment, suggesting that political and diplomatic studies are increasingly perceived as viable and attractive career paths for women, particularly in the context of geopolitical challenges.

Age distribution among Ukrainian students highlights the predominance of younger demographics. Students aged 18–25 years constitute the majority, reflecting direct transitions from secondary education to undergraduate programs. This trend underscores the importance of robust undergraduate recruitment and support structures for this age group.

A smaller but significant proportion of students, aged 30 and above, are engaged in specialized or postgraduate programs. These individuals are often mid-career professionals seeking advanced qualifications, demonstrating UMB's ability to attract a diverse range of learners. Age distribution of Ukrainian students cumulatively for the 2021–2024 is displayed on Figure 4.

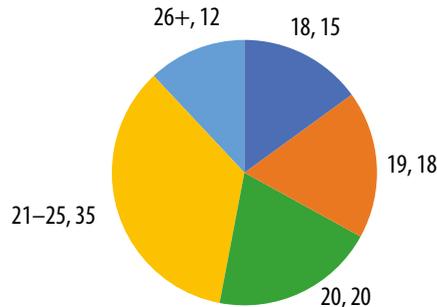


Figure 4. Age distribution of Ukrainian Student at UMB (age, % of students)

Source: own elaboration based on UMB academic system data.

The age distribution of Ukrainian students at Matej Bel University in the academic year 2023/2024 reveals significant insights into their academic engagement and preferences. The most represented age groups are 18, 19, and 20 years old, with the majority of these students enrolled in first-year undergraduate programs. This dominance of younger students highlights the critical role of UMB's undergraduate offerings as an entry point for Ukrainian students pursuing higher education. It also underscores the university's attractiveness to students seeking foundational studies in a variety of disciplines.

Age distribution patterns vary notably across faculties, reflecting differences in academic focus and student demographics:

1. Faculty of Economics: This faculty attracts the largest proportion of younger students, primarily those aged 18 to 22 years, indicating its strong appeal for individuals beginning their academic journeys in fields like business, finance, and management. This trend emphasizes the role of the Faculty of Economics in offering robust undergraduate programs that cater to foundational and career-oriented education.
2. Faculty of Political Science and International Relations: The age distribution here demonstrates a balanced mix of younger and slightly older students, suggesting that this faculty appeals not only to undergraduates but also to those pursuing postgraduate studies. This balanced demographic profile may be influenced by the interdisciplinary and globally relevant nature of its programs, which attract a diverse range of students with varied academic and professional aspirations.

3. Faculty of Law: A noticeable presence of older students, particularly those aged 25 and above, is observed in this faculty. This demographic trend highlights the faculty's role in providing opportunities for midcareer professionals or individuals transitioning into legal studies. Such students may be drawn to programs focused on international law or European legal frameworks, aligning with the evolving professional needs of Ukrainian students in light of geopolitical changes.

In summary, the age distribution data for 2023/2024 reinforces the strategic importance of UMB's undergraduate and postgraduate offerings in attracting and accommodating Ukrainian students. The faculty-specific variations further emphasize the university's ability to cater to diverse academic interests and professional goals, ensuring that it remains a pivotal institution for Ukrainian students at different stages of their educational journeys.

These demographic patterns reveal essential insights into the composition of Ukrainian students at UMB, informing targeted strategies for academic support, mentorship, and integration initiatives.

4.1.3.2. Academic programs and study levels of Ukrainian students at UMB

Understanding the academic preferences and study levels of Ukrainian students at Matej Bel University provides essential insights into their educational aspirations and the university's ability to cater to their needs. This section provides a detailed analysis of the most popular study programs and the distribution of students across different levels of study.

Among the 52 study programs at which Ukrainian students at Matej Bel University study, several programs emerge as the most popular among Ukrainian students. Their popularity reflects both global educational trends and specific factors influenced by Ukraine's current socio-economic and geopolitical circumstances. The academic preferences of Ukrainian students reveal distinct patterns, with a strong focus on programs that align with their aspirations and the socio-economic needs of their home country. The following programs are notable in terms of enrolment and popularity: International Relations, Law, Economy and Business Management, and Slovak Language in Linguocultural Competence for Foreigners. Each of these programs caters to specific interests and career goals, reflecting broader trends in education and employment.

1. **International Relations:** This programme leads in popularity, with 222 Ukrainian students actively enrolled, making it the most soughtafter programme at UMB. Several factors contribute to its appeal:

- Relevance to Ukraine's geopolitical context: The ongoing conflict and Ukraine's pursuit of stronger international alliances have heightened the demand for expertise in global politics and diplomacy.
 - Comprehensive curriculum: Students are exposed to critical areas such as international law, global governance, and conflict resolution, equipping them with tools to work in international organizations, embassies, and NGOs.
 - Strategic aspirations: Ukrainian students view this field as a platform to advocate for their country's interests on the global stage and strengthen its international presence. This program's ability to address both immediate and longterm needs of Ukraine's international positioning makes it an ideal choice for many students.
2. **Law:** The Law program, with 95 students enrolled, highlights a significant interest in legal education, particularly in international and European contexts:
 - Preparation for legal professions: This programme provides foundational and specialized knowledge in areas such as European law and international treaties.
 - Alignment with Ukraine's EU aspirations: As Ukraine continues to pursue closer ties with the European Union, legal expertise becomes critical for governance and policy alignment.
 - Diverse career opportunities: Students are drawn to careers in law that include judiciary roles, international advocacy, and corporate law, making this programme highly relevant.
 3. **Economy and Business Management:** The Economy and Business Management programme attracts 31 students, demonstrating a focus on practical and managerial education:
 - Skills for economic growth: The programme equips students with essential skills in entrepreneurship, corporate leadership, and financial management.
 - Relevance to Ukraine's economic revitalization: As Ukraine works toward rebuilding its economy, this programme positions students as future leaders in business, both domestically and internationally.
 - Careeroriented focus: The emphasis on innovation and sustainable business practices resonates with students aiming to contribute to economic development.
 4. **Slovak Language in Linguocultural Competence for Foreigners:** With 25 students enrolled, this programme underscores the importance of linguistic and cultural integration for Ukrainian students:
 - Support for longterm residency: Students interested in establishing careers or lives in Slovakia find this programme particularly valuable.
 - Facilitation of social integration: The curriculum focuses on building linguistic proficiency and cultural competence, critical for adapting to Slovak society.

5. **Economy and Business Management in English:** This program, with 15 students enrolled, caters to those seeking an internationally oriented education in business and management:

- **Global focus:** The English language curriculum appeals to students aiming for careers in multinational corporations or international markets.
- **Accessibility for nonnative Slovak speakers:** The use of English ensures accessibility for Ukrainian students still mastering the Slovak language.

The table 1 provides a visual summary of enrolment in these popular programs.

Table 1. Number of Ukrainian students at UMB divided by the most popular study programs (2023/2024)

Program	Number of Students
International Relations	222
Law	95
Economy and Business Management	31
Slovak Language in Linguocultural Competence for Foreigners	25
Economy and Business Management in English	15

Source: own elaboration based on UMB academic system data.

These five programs underscore the strategic focus of Ukrainian students at UMB. Their popularity reflects not only personal career aspirations but also broader national priorities, as students prepare to contribute to Ukraine's economic recovery, international standing, and governance reforms. These programs collectively highlight UMB's role in equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to address critical challenges and opportunities in both domestic and global contexts.

The distribution of Ukrainian students across different study levels at Matej Bel University offers a nuanced understanding of their educational objectives and career aspirations. The majority of students are pursuing foundational education through undergraduate programs, while a significant portion is engaged in advanced studies through postgraduate programs.

1. **72% Bachelor's Programs:** Undergraduate education represents the entry point for most Ukrainian students at UMB. These programs are tailored to provide a broad academic foundation, equipping students with essential skills and knowledge in fields like economics, international relations, and public administration. The high enrolment reflects the demand for accessible and high-quality undergraduate education, especially among younger students who are transitioning from secondary schools in Ukraine. Additionally, the curriculum's practical orientation ensures that graduates are well-prepared for professional careers or further studies.

2. **28% Master's Programs:** Postgraduate education, though representing a smaller segment, is a critical component of UMB's academic offerings for Ukrainian students. Many students pursuing master's programs aim to specialize in their respective fields, with a focus on advanced topics such as international diplomacy, public policy, and strategic management. This segment often includes mid-career professionals or individuals seeking to enhance their qualifications for leadership roles. The presence of this group underscores UMB's ability to attract students with diverse academic and professional goals.

The predominance of Bachelor's students suggests that UMB serves as an entry point into higher education for many Ukrainian students. This trend aligns with the university's efforts to provide accessible and supportive undergraduate programs. At the same time, the presence of Master's students highlights UMB's ability to attract individuals seeking advanced academic and professional development.

These findings underline the importance of maintaining high-quality undergraduate offerings while also expanding resources and opportunities for postgraduate students, particularly in the most popular disciplines.

The majority of Ukrainian students at Matej Bel University are enrolled in full-time programs (96.6%), reflecting a preference for comprehensive and immersive academic experiences.

This overwhelming preference for full-time study indicates that Ukrainian students prioritize structured and intensive educational engagement, likely aligning with their goals for rapid integration and academic advancement. The high proportion of full-time students underscores the importance of providing robust support structures for their academic and social integration. Full-time study programs require students to dedicate significant time and resources, which may necessitate additional support in areas such as housing, scholarships, and mental health resources.

The relatively low number of part-time students suggests that this mode of study is less popular among Ukrainian students at UMB. This could be due to language barriers, visa requirements, or a lack of tailored part-time programme offerings. It also indicates that most students likely prioritize an uninterrupted academic schedule over balancing studies with work or other commitments. By maintaining strong support for full-time students and exploring ways to make part-time study more accessible, Matej Bel University can further enhance its ability to cater to the diverse needs of its Ukrainian student population.

4.1.4. Qualitative analysis – results from round tables at Matej Bel University

The panel discussions and round tables conducted at Matej Bel University (UMB) in Banská Bystrica offered a nuanced and multi-dimensional view of how inclusion policies and institutional practices are perceived and enacted by both students and academic staff. These events, organised in 2024 as part of the European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS) project, brought together Ukrainian students, Slovak peers, faculty members, and university administrators.

The primary objective was to examine the real-life functioning of inclusion frameworks within the Slovak higher education context, exploring how Ukrainian students adapt academically and socially, what obstacles they encounter, and how university structures respond to their evolving needs.

Discussions were moderated by the research team and recorded for thematic analysis. The participants represented a cross-section of UMB's academic community, including members of the Faculties of Economics, Education, Law, and Political Science and International Relations. The qualitative data collected during these sessions provided an in-depth understanding of integration dynamics that extend beyond formal statistics.

The following subsections present key insights derived from these discussions, structured around six thematic domains: (1) the adaptation process, (2) challenges faced by students, (3) sources of support, (4) long-term integration, (5) recommendations for improvement, and (6) addressing barriers to inclusion.

Adaptation Process: A Multi-Stage and Evolving Experience: The adaptation of Ukrainian students to the Slovak academic environment emerged as a complex and fluid process rather than a linear trajectory. Faculty members noted that adaptation unfolds in several stages – initial adjustment, stabilisation, and deeper integration – each marked by distinct emotional and cognitive challenges.

The initial phase, typically during the first semester, was characterised by disorientation and stress associated with unfamiliar administrative procedures, new pedagogical styles, and language barriers. Teachers reported that even well-prepared students needed considerable guidance to navigate expectations such as continuous assessment, self-directed learning, and group projects, which differ from the academic culture many experienced in Ukraine.

To facilitate early adaptation, faculties introduced a set of practical interventions, including introductory Slovak language courses, individual consultations, and informal study groups. Some lecturers supplemented instruction with explanations in English or Ukrainian when necessary, ensuring comprehension without compromising academic standards.

However, participants repeatedly emphasised that adaptation does not end after the first months of study. Rather, it is a continuous and adaptive process, evolving alongside the student's growing academic competence and personal confidence. As one faculty representative observed: "After the first semester, the challenges change – from understanding the language to mastering analytical writing, critical thinking, or presenting research in a new academic culture."

Thus, the adaptation journey at UMB can be viewed as a long-term developmental continuum, requiring consistent institutional attention, not only immediate crisis support.

Challenges Faced by Students: Between Academic Expectations and Social Adjustment: Both students and staff acknowledged that Ukrainian students face interconnected academic and social challenges. The most prominent of these include mastering specialised academic vocabulary, managing high reading loads in a foreign language, and adjusting to active learning methods emphasising class participation and debate.

Language barriers were consistently identified as the most significant limiting factor. While many Ukrainian students understood Slovak passively, the productive use of language – especially in written assignments and oral examinations – presented persistent obstacles. This linguistic tension sometimes led to reduced participation in seminars, self-doubt, or withdrawal from group discussions.

Beyond the classroom, social integration posed an equally demanding task. Ukrainian students frequently described difficulties in forming deeper relationships with Slovak peers. Although interpersonal interactions were polite and cordial, they were often limited to surface-level communication. Students attributed this to mutual hesitation – Ukrainians' linguistic insecurity and Slovaks' uncertainty about how to approach displaced peers.

Faculty members confirmed that this lack of organic interaction can reinforce feelings of isolation and create invisible barriers within the student community. One lecturer summarised: "Integration requires more than proximity; it requires intentional engagement. Without structured opportunities, students tend to stay within familiar groups."

These insights underscore the need for intentional pedagogical and extracurricular design to foster genuine intercultural exchange.

Sources of Support, Faculty Engagement and Institutional Sensitivity: In contrast to the difficulties identified above, panel participants highlighted numerous positive examples of institutional support and faculty engagement. The university's coordinated response during and after 2022 was repeatedly praised as "empathetic, flexible, and proactive."

Faculty representatives described a culture of individualised care, where teachers often adapted materials, deadlines, or forms of assessment to accommodate students

facing linguistic or psychological challenges. These actions were not imposed by central policy but emerged organically from professional ethics and empathy.

A particularly innovative measure mentioned during discussions was the creation of employment opportunities for Ukrainian women within the university's support services – for instance, in campus housekeeping and administrative assistance. These positions provided modest income but, more importantly, helped students and their families rebuild routine and dignity after displacement.

Students also recognised the role of peer and mentoring support, particularly informal guidance from senior Ukrainian students and Slovak classmates. This micro-level network often filled gaps that formal structures could not immediately address.

Faculty members expressed strong commitment to open-door communication, emphasising that small gestures – such as personal meetings or checking in after exams – had a measurable impact on students' confidence and retention.

This finding demonstrates that inclusion at UMB is not solely the product of institutional regulations but also the result of human relational capital – the collective empathy, initiative, and moral engagement of academic staff.

4.2. Poland

Poland has become a principal destination for Ukrainian students, especially in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Even before the war, tens of thousands of Ukrainians pursued higher education in Poland due to geographic proximity, cultural ties, perceived educational quality, and the allure of earning a European Union (EU) member state diploma. In 2019, over 39,000 Ukrainian nationals were studying in Poland – fully half of all international students in the country. This number dipped slightly in subsequent years, but the outbreak of war triggered an unprecedented influx. In the 2022/23 academic year, the Ukrainian student population in Poland surged by over 12,000, reaching about 48,150 (approximately 47% of all international students). By 2023/24, Ukrainians remained the largest group of foreign students (over 46,000, or 43% of internationals) in Polish academia. This extraordinary mobility event – the largest refugee flow in Europe since WWII – posed immense challenges and prompted rapid responses across Poland's higher education system. This chapter examines how Ukrainian students have been included in Polish higher education. The analysis focuses on four key areas: (1) the legal, institutional and policy frameworks that facilitate or hinder their inclusion; (2) how higher education institutions (with a focus on the University of Rzeszów) have responded in practice; (3) noteworthy good practices and persistent systemic challenges in Poland's inclusion strategies;

and (4) the alignment of Poland's approach with broader European frameworks, including the Bologna Process, the EU Temporary Protection Directive, and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

4.2.1. Legal, Institutional and Policy Frameworks for Inclusion

In response to the refugee influx, Poland introduced special legislative solutions to support Ukrainian students and academics. Foremost was the Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of Ukraine, which removed key barriers to accessing public higher education. Under this law, Ukrainian students enrolled at public universities are exempt from tuition fees for full-time studies conducted in the Polish language. By contrast, under ordinary circumstances foreign nationals would pay tuition unless studying on a scholarship or EU program, since public universities in Poland charge no fees only for domestic/EU students in Polish-taught full-time programs. The Act also made Ukrainian students eligible for need-based social scholarships and student loans, levelling their access to financial aid. Furthermore, recognizing the displacement of Ukrainian scholars, the Act enabled Ukrainian academic staff to be employed at Polish universities without the usual competitive hiring process, expediting their entry into academic positions. These measures were unprecedented and aimed at preventing any interruption in the education and careers of those fleeing the war.

Importantly, Poland's emergency law operationalized the EU's Temporary Protection Directive in the higher education context. The EU Council's activation of this Directive (March 2022) granted Ukrainians immediate temporary protection status across member states, and Poland's Act built on this by offering concrete educational benefits. As a result, a large share of Ukrainian students in Poland have legal status under temporary protection. For example, at the University of Rzeszów about 25.8% of Ukrainian students hold temporary protection permits – the single most common residence status in this group. Others have alternative legal bases such as Poland's "Karta Polaka" or Pole's Card (held by 21.7% – a document for people of Polish heritage) or various combinations of visas and residence cards (Figure 5). In practice, the Temporary Protection status – coupled with the Polish assistance law – has given Ukrainian youth a secure footing to enrol in university and access student services without bureaucratic delays or prohibitive costs.

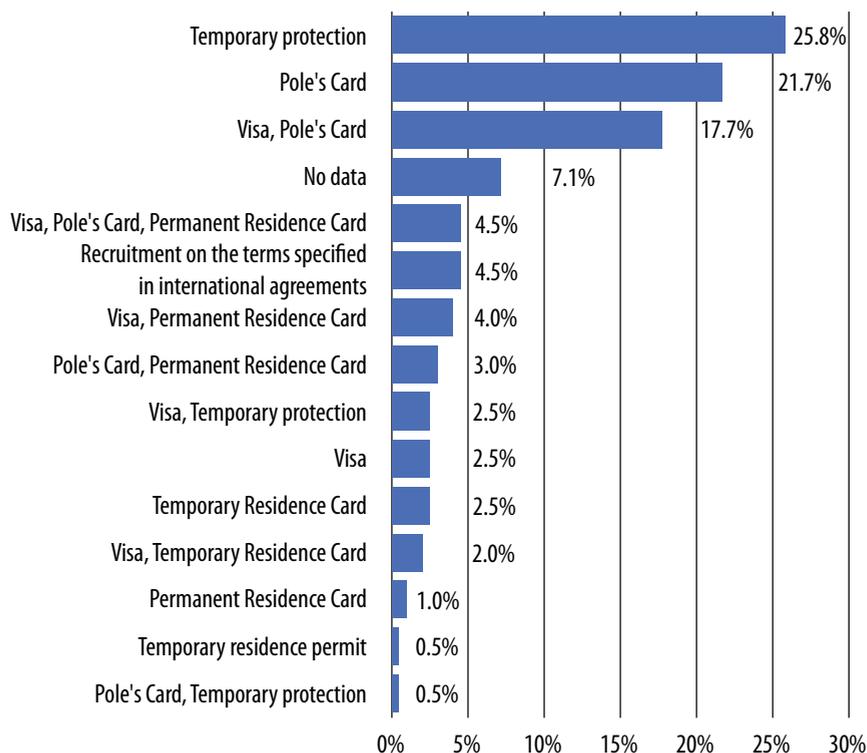


Figure 5. The structure of documents allowing residence in Poland

Source: own elaboration

Alongside legislative changes, Poland launched national programs to financially support Ukrainian students and researchers. The Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA) rolled out a special grant programme “Solidarni z Ukrainą” (“Solidarity with Ukraine”) in spring 2022. This programme was dedicated to Ukrainian students and doctoral candidates who arrived after February 24, 2022, enabling them to continue their studies or research in Poland on an interim basis. It provided scholarships or maintenance aid from March to September 2022, effectively bridging the academic year disrupted by war. Over 6,288 applications were submitted under this scheme, and NAWA allocated a substantial budget of PLN 25.7 million to support these Ukrainian students and PhD scholars. In parallel, the National Science Centre (NCN) established a special funding initiative for Ukrainian academics. Through this program, one-year research fellowships in Polish institutions were financed (with a total budget of PLN 6 million), allowing Ukrainian scientists to continue their work in safety. These targeted national programs demonstrate Poland’s institutional commitment to inclusion, beyond simply opening doors – they provided the material resources to help Ukrainian students and researchers integrate into the Polish academic system.

4.2.2. Trends in Polish higher education in connection with Ukrainian students' inflow

Structurally, Poland's higher education system itself is conducive to integrating foreign students due to its alignment with European standards. As a member of the EHEA, Poland long ago adopted the Bologna Process reforms, using a three-cycle degree structure (Bachelor–Master–Doctorate) with universally transferable ECTS credits (Figure 6).

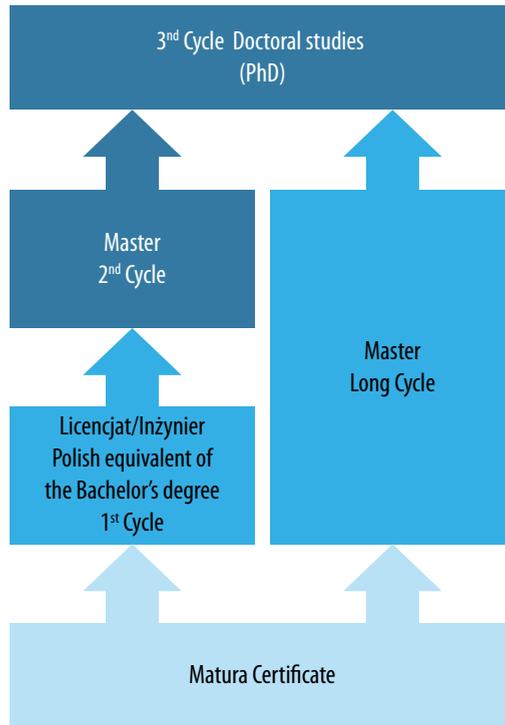


Figure 6. Structure of studies in Poland

Source: own elaboration.

Ukrainian higher education has likewise been aligned to Bologna standards (Ukraine joined the EHEA in 2005), which greatly facilitates academic continuity for Ukrainian students in Poland. Credentials such as the Ukrainian secondary school leaving certificate (matura equivalent) are recognized for university admission, as Polish law requires a secondary-school credential for any university entrant. Similarly, compatibility in degree cycles and credit systems means that Ukrainian students can transfer or continue studies in Poland without major academic obstacles. In short, Poland's full integration into the European Higher Education Area provides a framework of recognition and quality assurance that underpins the inclusion of Ukrainian students. Many Ukrainians were drawn to study in Poland precisely to obtain a degree respected

across the EU. Now, with the war-driven influx, the Bologna/EHEA framework has proved invaluable: it allowed Poland to rapidly admit students from Ukraine into comparable programs and levels, supported by tools for credit transfer and qualification recognition.

During peacetime, the primary factors influencing the choice of Poland as a study destination for Ukrainian youth seeking education abroad were primarily geographical and cultural proximity, a belief in the high quality of education, and the opportunity to obtain a diploma from a European Union member state. In 2019, there were over 39,000 Ukrainian students in Poland, accounting for half of all international students in the country. From that point, both the number and share of Ukrainian students among international students gradually declined.

However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine caused a significant increase in the Ukrainian population in Poland, which also boosted interest among young Ukrainians in the educational opportunities offered by Polish universities. In the 2022/23 academic year, the number of Ukrainian students rose by over 12,119, reaching 48,150 and accounting for approximately 47% of all international students (Figure 7).

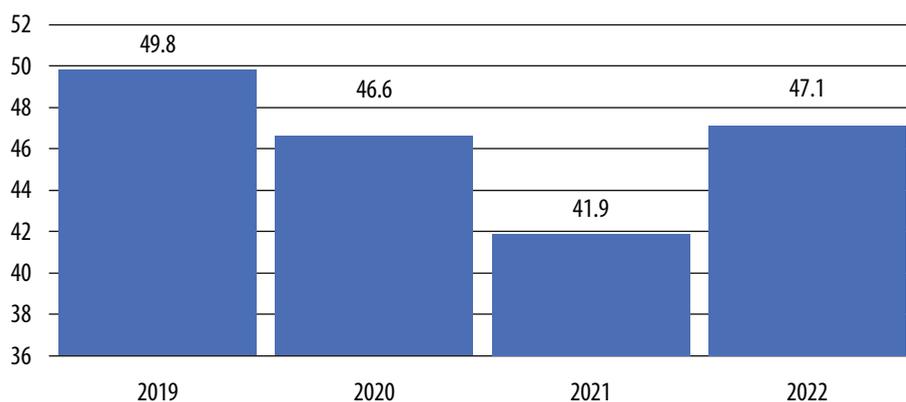


Figure 7. Ukrainians' participation among all foreigners at UR in the years 2019–2022 (in %)

Source: own elaboration based on: *Cudzoziemcy na uczelniach...*, 2023.

It is worth noting that in the 2022/2023 academic year, there were 27,999 first-year students from Ukraine, which means that nearly 60% of all students from Ukraine were those starting higher education (Figure 8).

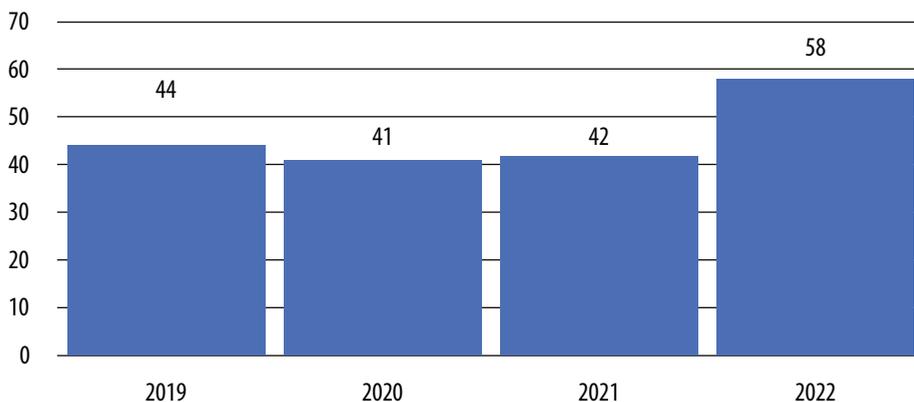


Figure 8. Share of first-year students from Ukraine among all students from Ukraine at UR (2019–2022) (%)

Source: own elaboration based on *Cudzoziemcy na uczelniach...*, 2023.

In the academic year 2022/23, young people from Ukraine enrolled in both bachelor's and master's studies, as well as integrated master's programs (first-cycle, second-cycle, and long-cycle Master's programs) (*Cudzoziemcy na uczelniach...*, 2023). The majority of students were enrolled in bachelor's programs, with significantly fewer in master's or integrated master's programs (75% in bachelor's programs, 20% in master's programs, and 5% in integrated master's programs).

The largest group (i.e., 40% of all students from Ukraine) decided to pursue part-time studies at private universities. The percentage of Ukrainian students studying full-time among all foreign students at private universities was 34.1%.

Also, at public universities, the proportion of Ukrainian students among all foreign students was high, at 38.8%. Full-time and part-time long-cycle master's studies offered by public universities were less popular among Ukrainian students in 2022.

Regarding fields of study, the most popular among students from Ukraine in the 2022/2023 academic year was management. In 2022, 21% of all foreign students from Ukraine in Poland were studying this field. Moreover, it accounted for more than half of all foreign students studying management in the analysed academic year.

In the 2023/24 academic year, there were 1.245 million students in Polish universities, including 107,000 foreign students. The majority of foreign students came from European countries, with the largest group from Ukraine (46,200, or 43.1% of all foreign students) (*GUS: w ub. roku akademickim w Polsce...*, 2024). Full-time students dominated. The most popular fields of study were: management, computer science, and logistics. Tourism and recreation, economics, international relations, psychology, philology, administration, and internal security were somewhat less popular (Figure 9).

The majority of Ukrainian students chose to study in the largest academic cities, such as Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, Wrocław and Lublin. In the Mazowieckie voivodeship, they accounted for 24% of all foreign students (11.5 thousand people). In the next largest voivodeship (Małopolskie), this number was 6.4 thousand fewer than in Mazowieckie. More than 4,000 Ukrainian students also studied at universities in the Lower Silesian, Lublin, Greater Poland, and Łódź voivodeships (*Liczba zagranicznych...*, 2024). The voivodeships with the smallest number of students from Ukraine, not exceeding 1,000 students, are: Świętokrzyskie (853), Lubuskie (254), Podlaskie (190), and Warmińsko-Mazurskie (186) (*Cudzoziemcy na uczelniach...*, 2023, p. 79).

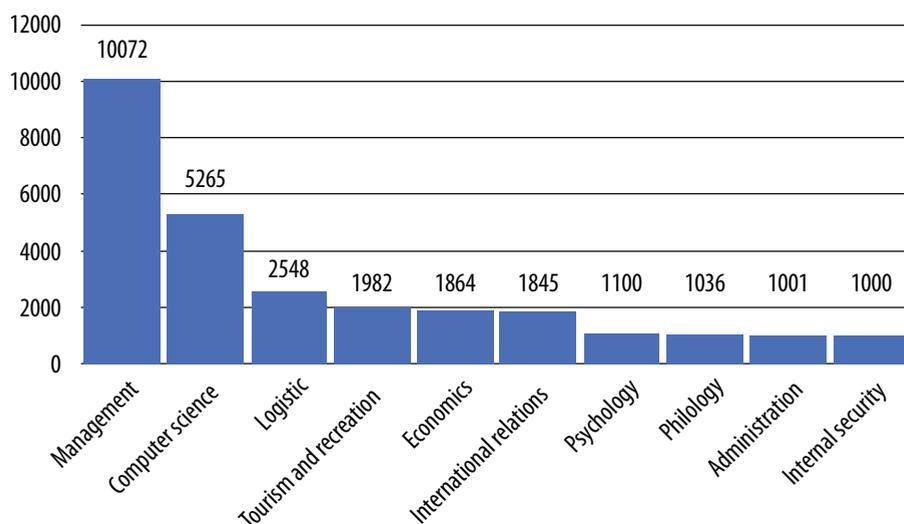


Figure 9. Most popular fields of study among students from Ukraine at UR in 2022

Source: own elaboration based on *Cudzoziemcy na uczelniach...*, 2023.

At universities located in the Mazowieckie province in 2022, first-year students from Ukraine made up 25% of all foreign students. The difference between the Mazowieckie province and the next one (Małopolskie) was over 4,400 students.

Over 2,000 first-year students from Ukraine were also in the Łódzkie, Małopolskie, Dolnośląskie, Wielkopolskie, Śląskie, and Lubelskie provinces (*Cudzoziemcy na uczelniach...*, 2023, p. 88).

At the 10 universities with the largest number of students from Ukraine in 2022, one-third of all Ukrainian students were enrolled. These universities are: Akademia Finansów i Biznesu Vistula, Akademia Ekonomiczno-Humanistyczna in Warszawa, Społeczna Akademia Nauk in Łódź, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Akademia WSB, Akademia Nauk Stosowanych – Wyższa Szkoła Zarządzania i Administracji w Opolu, Krakowska Akademia im. Andrzeja Frycza Modrzewskiego in Kraków, Wyższa

Szkoła Bankowa in Wrocław, Wyższa Szkoła Informatyki i Zarządzania in Rzeszów, Wrocławska Akademia Biznesu w Naukach Stosowanych (*Cudzoziemcy na uczelniach...*, 2023, p. 80). The most first-year students from Ukraine in 2022 studied at Akademia Ekonomiczno-Humanistyczna in Warszawa, Społeczna Akademia Nauk in Łódź, Akademia Finansów i Biznesu Vistula and Akademia Nauk Stosowanych – Wyższa Szkoła Zarządzania i Administracji w Opolu (*Cudzoziemcy na uczelniach...*, 2023, p. 89).

In summary, Poland's policy framework since 2022 has been largely facilitative of Ukrainian students' inclusion. By waiving tuition, extending financial aid, and easing hiring and admission rules, the government removed key structural barriers. Additional funding programs provided critical support to sustain studies. These measures, grounded in European-wide protections and standards, set a supportive stage for Ukrainian students – although their effective implementation on the ground would depend on how institutions and communities responded, and some gaps or unintended frictions have emerged (discussed later as challenges).

4.2.3. Institutional responses: the University of Rzeszów case

At the institutional level, Polish higher education establishments have been on the front lines of integrating the sudden wave of Ukrainian students. The University of Rzeszów (UR) is a public university in southeastern Poland, near the Ukraine border, that offers an illuminating case study of how a higher education institution responded in practice. UR is one of the largest universities in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship, with nearly 15,000 students, and it has a growing international profile. Even before 2022, UR hosted a modest number of foreign students. In the 2023/24 academic year, UR enrolled 178 international students, of whom 91 were Ukrainian citizens – making up 51% of the university's foreign student body. This reflects how the war-driven influx shifted UR's demographics, as Ukrainians quickly became the majority of its international students.

As Ukrainian students began arriving, the University of Rzeszów's administration and student community mobilized swiftly to assist. Both official and grassroots initiatives sprang up to provide newcomers with material and informational support. For example, student organizations (including scientific circles, the University Legal Clinic, and the ELSA law students' association) launched aid drives for Ukrainian refugees on campus. They organized collection campaigns for essential supplies – gathering non-perishable food, toiletries, medical dressings, children's toys, and other necessities – to distribute to Ukrainian students and families in need. Such acts of solidarity by Polish students helped create a welcoming environment and addressed refugees' basic needs beyond academics.

University authorities also took steps to disseminate critical information to the new students. UR set up dedicated sections on its website with details on available support services and clear guidance on administrative procedures for foreigners. Recognizing that many Ukrainians arrived with urgent legal questions, the university published information on legalizing residence in Poland. This information explained visas, temporary protection, and other permit issues in accessible terms. It was noted, however, that while the university could inform students, the actual legal processes had to be handled by government offices. UR as an academic institution “does not mediate or possess legal tools” to secure residence documents for students. Still, by proactively compiling resources and directing students to the proper channels, the university helped Ukrainian students navigate Polish bureaucracy during a chaotic time.

Given the language barrier and cultural adjustment issues many faced, the University of Rzeszów put in place programs to facilitate integration into academic and daily life. One notable initiative was a project titled “Skills – Language – Culture. Innovations in the Diagnosis and Education of Adult Ukrainian Citizens.” This project, implemented by UR as part of a national program (CHANCE – New Opportunities for Adults, co-financed by the EU), offered intensive support to Ukrainian refugees seeking to adapt to life in Poland. Participants – including university-age youth and other adults – received free Polish language courses to improve communication. Training sessions also educated them on practical topics: how Polish institutions function, basics of job seeking and legal employment in Poland, Polish cultural norms, financial literacy (e.g. currency, banking), and even local transportation and communication systems. The program additionally provided free legal advice and psychological support to Ukrainian participants. Such comprehensive training greatly eased the transition for those who had fled war with little familiarity of Poland. It addressed not only language skills but also the bureaucratic, economic, and emotional challenges of resettlement. While this particular project served a broad group of adult Ukrainians (not exclusively UR students), it was spearheaded by the university and exemplifies the kind of outreach Polish academia undertook to support refugees’ educational and social inclusion.

Within the university community, efforts to integrate Ukrainian students into campus life have continued through various events and services. Faculty and student organizers at UR have arranged a range of projects, workshops, seminars, and cultural events aimed at helping Ukrainians adjust and fostering intercultural relationships on campus. These have included orientation sessions, Polish Ukrainian student meet-ups, and initiatives to involve Ukrainian students in existing student organizations and research circles. The overarching goal has been to strengthen Ukrainian students’ sense of belonging in the academic community and the city of Rzeszów.

4.2.3.1. Structure of Ukrainian students at UR

Below is an overview of the analysis of existing data describing the status quo of students with Ukrainian citizenship who have undertaken studies at the University of Rzeszów. On the basis of the data collected, the following aspects were analysed: nationality, citizenship, mother tongue, type of study, gender, age, country of birth, field and level of study and the structure of documents allowing residence in Poland.

A total of 198 Ukrainian students studying at the University of Rzeszów took part in the survey. The data show (Table 2) that they are predominantly of Ukrainian nationality, which is reflected in their share of 64%, i.e. 127 persons.

Table 2. Structure of students from Ukraine at UR by nationality ($N = 198$)

Nationality	Response rates	Percentages
Ukraine	127	64
Poland	69	35
Portugal	1	0,5
Russian Federation	1	0,5
Total	198	100

Source: own elaboration.

Polish nationality is held by 69 students from Ukraine, i.e. 35% of the group of students surveyed. Among the students from Ukraine, there was also 1 student of Russian nationality and 1 student of Portuguese nationality. However, all 198 respondents indicated Ukrainian language as their mother tongue. The vast majority of Ukrainian students – 95%, or 186 people – chose to study full-time. Only 5%, i.e. 10 persons, chose part-time studies and 2 people (1%) chose 4-year studies. Out of 198 Ukrainian students, 194 were born in Ukraine, representing 98% of all respondents. One student was born in Portugal, two in Russia, and one person did not provide a place of birth. We identified high level of homogeneity in the sample, which limits the generalizability of the results to other national groups. However, since the primary goal of the study was to understand the situation of students from Ukraine studying at the University of Rzeszów in the context of the war, such a sample structure is expected. It is also worth mentioning that the birthplaces of students in Ukraine were analysed. The results are highly diverse. The Ukrainian students were born both in large cities, such as Lviv (31 individuals), Kyiv (10 individuals), Ternopil (6 individuals), Kharkiv (4 individuals), Kryvyi Rih (3 individuals), Odesa (2 individuals), Zaporizhzhia (2 individuals), as well as in small towns and villages, such as Zelena, Samara, Kostryna.

Women make up the majority of the sample, with 117 individuals, representing 59%. On the other hand, there are only 81 men among the students from Ukraine at the University of Rzeszów, which constitutes 41%. This distribution may be attributed

to the 2022 Military Mobilization Law in Ukraine, which applies to men aged 18 to 60. The Figure 10 presents data regarding the age distribution of the group of students from Ukraine studying at the University of Rzeszów.

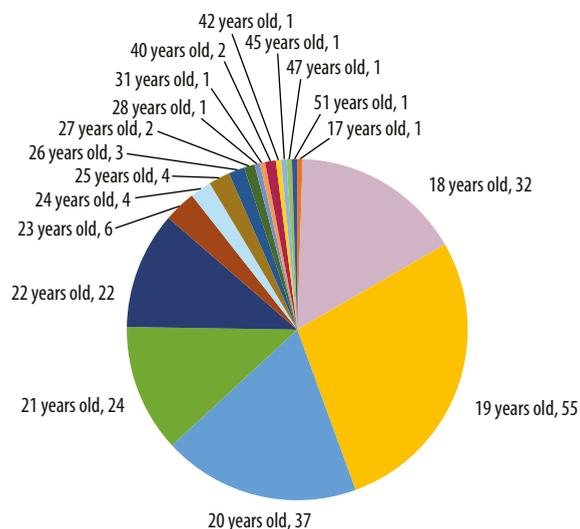


Figure 10. Structure of Ukrainian students at University of Rzeszów by age (in %)

Source: own elaboration.

The largest group consists of 19-year-old students (55 individuals). The second largest group is 20-year-old students (37 individuals), and the third largest group consists of 18-year-old students (32 individuals). Meanwhile, students aged 21 and 22 are also significantly represented: 21 years old (24 individuals), 22 years old (22 individuals). After the age of 22, the number of students decreases significantly, down to individual cases in older age groups (e.g., 40, 42, 45, 47, 51 years – each of these groups includes only one person). Students aged 17 to 22 make up the majority of the surveyed students, which is typical for university students. The very few individuals over the age of 25 indicate that most students at the University of Rzeszów choose to pursue higher education immediately after graduating from high school.

In total, 198 students study in 48 fields. Several people study two fields, which gives 207 selected studies. Among Ukrainian students, the most popular field is Tourism and Recreation. 23 Ukrainian students study in it (11%). The second most popular field is Economics. Currently, 13 students from Ukraine study in this field (6.3%). Mathematics is also particularly popular, with 12 Ukrainian students (5.8%). Internal Security is a field with 10 students (4.8%). It is the fourth most popular field of study among Ukrainian students. In addition to these fields, the following are also considerably popular: Visual Arts, Physiotherapy and Medical field (9 students each), Administration,

Informatics and Pedagogy (8 students each). Table 3 presents all fields of study where you can find at least one Ukrainian student. Several people study two fields, which gives the number of studies taken at the level of 207. This is important for the analysis. The part of the analysis concerning studies, fields of study and their types was related to the number of fields (207).

Table 3. Structure of students from Ukraine at UR studying in fields of study ($N = 198$)¹

Field of study	Number of people studying a given field	Percentage share of the field
Tourism and Recreation	23	11.1
Economics	13	6.3
Mathematics	12	5.8
Internal Security	10	4.8
Medical field	9	4.3
Physiotherapy	9	4.3
Visual Arts	9	4.3
Administration	8	3.9
Informatics	8	3.9
Pedagogy	8	3.9
Logistics in the agri-food sector	7	3.4
Cultural Studies	6	2.9
Informatics and Econometrics	6	2.9
Archeology	5	2.4
Emergency Medicine	5	2.4
Graphics	5	2.4
International Relations	5	2.4
Artistic education in the field of musical art	4	1.9
Biotechnology	4	1.9
English Philology	4	1.9
Renewable energy sources and waste management	4	1.9
Law	3	1.4
Physical education	3	1.4
Political Science	3	1.4
Social Work	3	1.4
Instrumentalism	3	1.4
Finance and Accounting	2	1.0
Germanic Philology	2	1.0
History	2	1.0
Journalism and Social Communication	2	1.0

¹ The number of students was related to the total number of selected fields of study, i.e. 207. Not to the number of Ukrainian students, i.e. 198. This is dictated by the fact that some of them study two fields of study.

Field of study	Number of people studying a given field	Percentage share of the field
Russian Philology	2	1.0
Optometry	2	1.0
Biological Sciences	1	0.5
Applied Polish Studies	1	0.5
Dietetics	1	0.5
Environmental Protection	1	0.5
Food Technology and human nutrition	1	0.5
Landscape Architecture	1	0.5
Musical arts	1	0.5
Painting	1	0.5
Public Health	1	0.5
Sociology	1	0.5
Teaching foreign languages – English and Russian	1	0.5
Sociology	1	0.5
Mechatronics	1	0.5
Applied linguistics	1	0.5
Diagnostic systems in medicine	1	0.5
Historical and cultural tourism	1	0.5
Total	207	100.0

Source: own elaboration.

However, on the Figure 11 the most popular fields of study chosen by students from Ukraine are presented. It should be said that all of them are full-time students. This means that there are no people who combine studies with another factor that distracts from gaining knowledge.

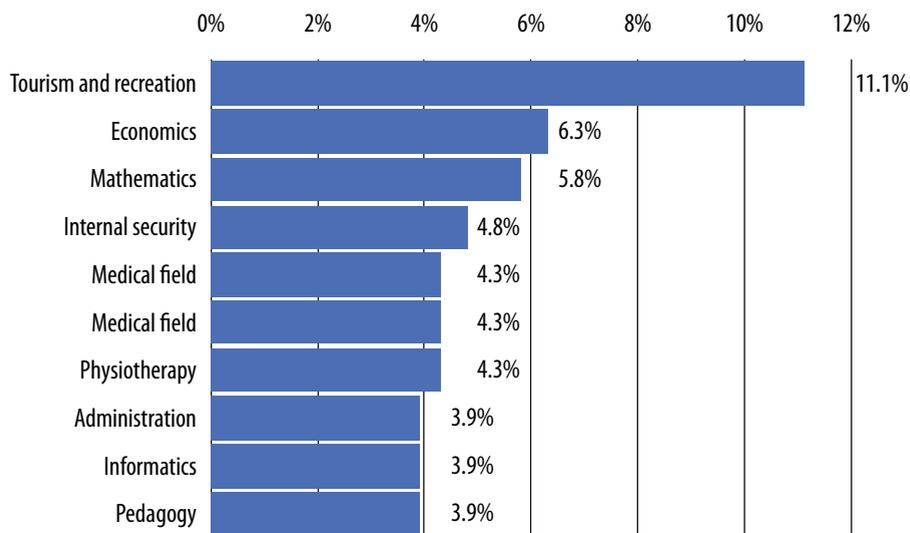


Figure 11. The most popular fields of study chosen by students from Ukraine at UR

Source: own elaboration.

By assessing the choices of individual fields of study, one can formulate a general scientific interpretation that the choices of students from Ukraine are consistent with the decisions of Polish students.

As for the least popular fields of study, we can mention the following: Biological Sciences, Applied Polish Studies, Dietetics, Environmental Protection, Food Technology and human nutrition, Landscape Architecture, Musical arts, Painting, Public Health, Sociology, Teaching foreign languages – English and Russian, Sociology, Mechatronics, Applied linguistics, Diagnostic systems in medicine, Historical and cultural tourism. There is one student from Ukraine studying in each of these fields.

When assessing the level of studies that Ukrainian students are currently at, the vast majority of them are studying first-cycle studies (72.9%). This is primarily due to the fact that the “3 + 2” education system is currently in force in most fields of study in Poland. 13.5% of people are studying second-cycle studies, i.e. master’s studies. Therefore, a total of 86.4% of Ukrainian students study in the “3 + 2” system. 12.6% of Ukrainian students are studying uniform master’s studies (Figure 12).

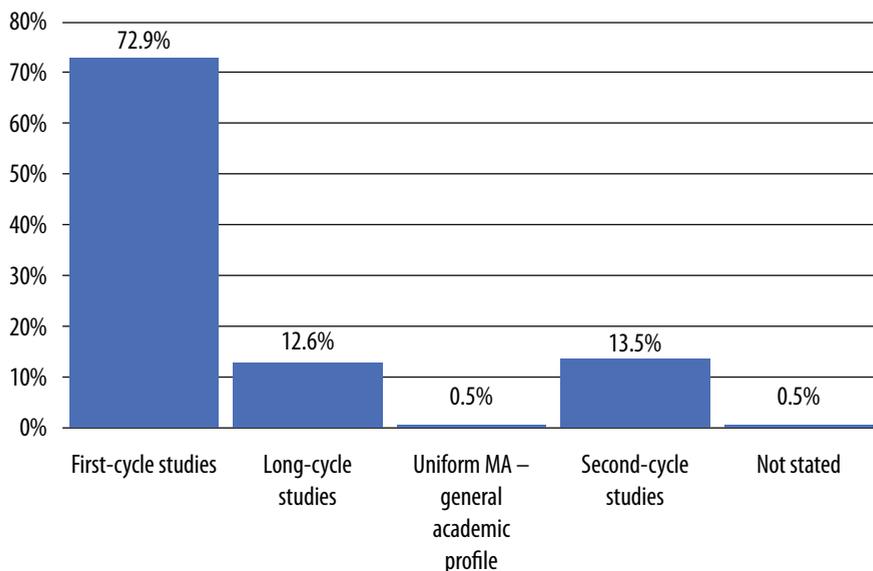


Figure 12. Academic level of study of students from Ukraine at UR (in %)

Source: own elaboration.

Almost half of students from Ukraine (47.3%) are in their first year of studies. 35.3% of students are in their second year. 14.5% are third year students. So definitely the largest number of people are in their first years of studies. This means that the popularity of studying outside Ukraine is growing, first of all. Secondly, in previous years there was no large influx compared to the current year.

As a result of the analysis of the collected data, the following conclusions can be drawn. The group consists of 198 Ukrainian citizens studying at the University of Rzeszów. The vast majority 64% (127 people), are of Ukrainian nationality, all hold Ukrainian citizenship and were born in Ukraine. The native language of the studied group is Ukrainian.

The students' ages range from 17 to 51 years, but the largest group consists of students aged 17 to 20 (75%), who study full-time (94%) at the first-cycle level (72.9%). The majority are study on first year (47.3%) and second year (35.3%). Women make up the majority of the group, with 117 individuals.

The most frequently chosen fields of study are tourism and recreation (11.1%), economics (6.3%), mathematics (5.8%), and internal security (4.8%), while the least popular is pedagogy (3.9%). Notably, 9 students are enrolled in more than one field.

4.2.4. Qualitative analysis – results from round tables at Rzeszów University

In 2023–2024, the University of Rzeszów took a role in an Erasmus+ strategic partnership project titled “European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students” (EIUS). This international project (Erasmus+ KA220) was expressly focused on identifying and improving inclusion practices for Ukrainian students across Europe. As part of the project, UR organized a series of events to gather feedback and stimulate dialogue among its students and staff about the challenges and opportunities of the new multicultural reality. Three major participatory events were held, each tailored to a specific target group:

1. **Workshops for domestic students:** A workshop on April 18, 2024 engaged Polish students at UR in discussion about integrating their Ukrainian peers. In preparation, UR sent invitations to all 14,427 students via its intranet platform and social media, yielding 27 Polish student participants plus a few staff observers. During the workshop, students were introduced to the project’s aims and then divided into small groups to perform a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) of Ukrainian student integration. This structured brainstorming allowed Polish students to articulate positive aspects of having Ukrainian classmates as well as perceived downsides, and to propose ideas to improve cohesion.
2. **World Cafe with Ukrainian students:** On May 9, 2024, UR held an in-person “World Cafe” discussion with Ukrainian students enrolled at the university. The event was well-publicized (information was sent to all 15,000 UR students and specifically emailed to all 207 students of Ukrainian nationality) and ultimately 15 Ukrainian students participated, alongside facilitators and a few staff observers. Using a roundtable format similar to the workshop, the World Cafe let the Ukrainian students candidly share their experiences, needs, and suggestions regarding studying in Poland. Discussion topics ranged from academic issues (classes, language difficulties) to social life, mental health, and interactions with peers and faculty. Notably, organizers observed the Ukrainian students were initially considerably anxious and reserved – likely a combined effect of language barrier and not all knowing each other – but after some ice-breaking and prompting, they opened up and engaged actively. This underscores the importance of creating a trusting space when soliciting input from vulnerable student groups.
3. **Round table with academic staff:** A third event on May 15, 2024 gathered UR’s Polish teaching staff (35 lecturers attended) for an online roundtable to discuss the integration of Ukrainian students from the faculty perspective. Professors and instructors exchanged views on how Ukrainian refugees in their classes affect teaching and learning, what benefits or strains arise, and what support the faculty themselves might need to effectively teach a more diverse student body.

These project's events exemplify UR's practical responses, not only providing services top-down, but also actively listening to both Ukrainian and Polish students and staff. By using participatory methods (workshops, world cafes, round tables), the university has tried to identify issues and co-create solutions with those directly involved. The fact that more faculty attended the roundtable than expected and that students voiced even controversial opinions (discussed below) indicates that the university community is deeply engaged in the inclusion process. Summaries of the events and key findings were published on UR's website and social media, demonstrating transparency and a commitment to follow-up actions. In sum, the University of Rzeszów's response has been multifaceted: emergency relief and information, continuous integration support, and reflective evaluation of its own inclusivity through dialogue. This case offers insight into good practices and also reveals challenges that need to be addressed, which we turn to next.

4.2.4.1. Good practices and systemic challenges in inclusion

Poland's experience integrating the large cohort of Ukrainian students has surfaced a mix of success stories and persistent challenges, many of which are evident from the University of Rzeszów's initiatives and the feedback gathered there. Overall, the emergency measures and community goodwill have been key enablers of inclusion, but they also brought to light issues of capacity, perception, and equity that require ongoing attention.

On the positive side (we can refer as good practices and strengths), several practices in Poland's response stand out as effective in promoting inclusion, including:

Proactive policy support: The swift enactment of the assistance law and scholarship programs is a clear good practice at the systemic level. By immediately removing financial and legal barriers, Poland set the stage for successful inclusion. Ukrainian students themselves have acknowledged the benefit of these policies – for instance, the opportunity to receive a scholarship was frequently mentioned by UR's Ukrainian students as a major “opportunity,” as it gives a real chance to “support oneself” financially during studies. Having their education subsidized or funded has allowed many to focus on academics rather than mere survival.

Inclusive institutional culture: Within universities like UR, an ethos of solidarity and openness has been nurtured. Ukrainian students report overwhelmingly positive daily interactions with their Polish peers. Many noted that they have “cool and nice colleagues who willingly ‘accept’ us into their circles”, and that studying together and exchanging experiences with local students has been a highlight of their time in Poland. This indicates a welcoming atmosphere at the interpersonal level. Polish students, when considering “strengths” of having Ukrainians on campus, similarly pointed to mutual

learning and cultural exchange – they value gaining new perspectives, working in international teams, and breaking down prejudices through personal contact. Joint research projects, conferences, and language practice (Polish students practicing English or even learning some Ukrainian, and vice versa) were cited as mutually beneficial outcomes of integration. This organic peer-to-peer inclusion is a result of both populations' willingness to engage, and it's something universities have further encouraged through group work and extracurricular activities.

Intercultural and language support: Providing avenues for refugees to learn the local language and for domestic campus members to develop intercultural competencies is another good practice evidenced at UR. The “Skills – Language – Culture” course discussed earlier is a model of comprehensive integration support, combining language instruction, cultural orientation, and legal/psychological counselling. Additionally, participants in the inclusion discussions recommended expanding such support: Polish students suggested more Polish language classes for Ukrainians (and perhaps Ukrainian language basics for Poles) to bridge communication gaps. They also saw value in intercultural workshops (for example, trainings about Ukrainian history or war trauma for faculty and students) to build empathy and understanding. The fact that these ideas are coming from the student body and staff themselves is promising – it means there is recognition within the community that deliberate efforts (like language courses, cultural events, mentoring programs) can improve integration. UR has already implemented some of these: e.g. offering psychological support services and considering a mentorship program where experienced Polish students could buddy up with new Ukrainian students. Such measures, if expanded, are likely to further ease the adaptation of Ukrainian students and also help Polish students and faculty adjust to a more international campus.

Dialogue and participatory management: A notable good practice is the use of regular dialogue platforms (workshops, round tables, surveys) to monitor the inclusion process. UR's example of gathering stakeholders to conduct a SWOT analysis on Ukrainian student inclusion is innovative and could be replicated at other institutions. It created a safe space for grievances and suggestions to surface. The outcomes – which were published and shared - serve as feedback for university management and policy-makers on what is working and what is not. Moreover, these dialogues have an intrinsic benefit: they raise awareness among participants. Polish students in the workshop admitted that hearing diverse viewpoints was “a source of information they had not heard before,” giving them a more nuanced understanding of the Ukrainian student experience. Many faculty also concluded that such discussions should be held more frequently to continually address integration challenges. In essence, Poland is learning in real-time how to integrate refugees in higher education and involving the academic community in that learning process is itself a best practice.

Despite these strengths, the inclusion process has faced systemic challenges and points of friction that need to be acknowledged and addressed:

Language barrier and communication gaps: The most pervasive challenge cited by all groups is the language barrier. Many Ukrainian students initially struggle with Polish (the primary language of instruction at public universities) and sometimes with English, which is often the “neutral” language of communication with Polish peers. This leads to academic difficulties (e.g. understanding lectures or completing assignments) and social isolation. Likewise, Polish students note that communication can be “a major obstacle” – some Ukrainians have limited Polish, and conversely a few Ukrainians expected Polish students to know Ukrainian, causing frustration. A related issue is lack of information in Ukrainian. Ukrainian students reported that much of the university’s official information (announcements, guidelines, websites) is only in Polish or English, leaving those not yet fluent feeling lost. While many Ukrainian students do acquire Polish proficiency over time (indeed, they see mastering Polish and English as a top “opportunity” of studying in Poland), the initial gap can hinder their academic performance and confidence. This challenge underscores the need for translation of key materials and for continual language training. It also places an extra burden on instructors to ensure comprehension in classes with non-native speakers. Some UR faculty noted difficulty in evaluating written work of Ukrainian students when language errors obscure meaning. In short, language remains a fundamental hurdle to full inclusion – one that requires resources (e.g. hiring bilingual staff, offering courses) to overcome.

Psychological trauma and support needs: The war in Ukraine has inevitably inflicted trauma on many student refugees – whether from direct exposure to violence or the stress of displacement. Academic staff at UR highlighted that post-traumatic stress symptoms (anxiety, concentration problems, etc.) are observed in a number of Ukrainian students and adversely affect their studies and social integration. These students may withdraw from campus life or underperform academically unless given proper support. At the same time, Polish faculty and students are not necessarily equipped to recognize or address trauma in their Ukrainian colleagues, which can lead to misunderstandings. A lack of adequate psychological support was pinpointed as a weakness in the current system. Although universities like UR have some counselling services, the scale of need post-2022 likely exceeds the capacity. Additionally, faculty could themselves use guidance on handling discussions of war or signs of trauma in class. The roundtable discussions suggested organizing workshops on war trauma for teachers and students to foster empathy and effective support strategies. Without scaling up mental health and counselling resources – for both students and staff – this challenge will persist. It is both a humanitarian and academic issue: unaddressed trauma can derail refugees’ educational trajectories, undermining the very goal of inclusion.

Perceptions of inequity and resentment: A delicate challenge that emerged, especially from the Polish student workshop, is the perception among some domestic students that Ukrainian students receive “too much” assistance or unfair advantages. One group of Polish students voiced a controversial but evidently not uncommon sentiment: that “the Ukrainian community received too many social benefits from the Polish state and, their expectations were therefore constantly increasing.” They argued that Ukrainian students have had an easier admissions process and guaranteed places in dormitories. In their view, this comes at the expense of Polish students. They even claimed that lecturers sometimes treat Ukrainian students “more favourably” or give them leniency (a “concessionary rate” for exams or credits), causing frustration among Polish peers who feel held to a stricter standard. These perceptions – whether entirely accurate or not – can fuel resentment and social division on campus. It’s a classic inclusion dilemma: the additional support given to level the playing field for refugees can be misinterpreted as special treatment, breeding jealousy. In the UR workshop, other students pushed back against these views, and it was noted that often “Ukrainian students do not want to be treated better”, preferring equal treatment to avoid standing out. Nevertheless, the risk of “automatic dislike on the part of Polish students” was acknowledged if any group is seen as receiving extra privileges. This is a systemic challenge that needs careful management through communication and fairness. Universities might need to dispel misconceptions by transparently explaining what support Ukrainian students receive and why (for example, clarifying that free tuition is a government mandate, or that dorm placements for Ukrainians were expanded and not simply taken from Polish students). UR students recommended exactly this: information campaigns to explain the reasons and benefits of supporting Ukrainian students, in order to avoid hostile attitudes. Additionally, ensuring that support programs benefit all struggling students – not only refugees – can help. For instance, if additional counselling or scholarships are made available, Polish students in need should also have access. Striving for a balance of support for all students was seen as vital to prevent a zero-sum mindset on campus.

Integration and social cohesion issues: True inclusion means more than physical presence in classrooms; it requires social integration. Here, challenges exist on both sides. Some Polish students pointed to instances of reluctance or intolerance from their compatriots – a “reluctance or intolerance of Polish students” towards Ukrainians was noted as a threat, manifesting in prejudiced remarks or social exclusion. Indeed, Ukrainian participants reported experiences (or at least fears) of discrimination by Polish students and “being rejected by ‘local’ students” in social settings. This can be exacerbated by cultural differences or even something as simple as a foreign accent, which some Ukrainians said made them anxious about rejection. On the other side, there is also a tendency for Ukrainian students to isolate themselves – sticking together in a closed

circle, which limits their integration with the wider student community. The World Caf^v© discussion highlighted this self-segregation as a serious issue: students recognized the “closedness of the Ukrainian community” as a barrier that can prevent them from improving language skills and forming friendships outside their group. This can become a vicious cycle, where minimal mixing leads to mutual mistrust or ignorance. Few organized integration events specifically targeting Polish-Ukrainian interaction was cited as a weakness by Ukrainians – meaning universities could do more to intentionally bring the two groups together (through team projects, cultural exchanges, sports, etc.). Encouragingly, both student groups in the UR workshop saw opportunities in greater social integration: Polish students mentioned that working with people from outside the EU (like Ukrainians) can broaden horizons and build soft skills like communication and adaptability. Ukrainian students likewise cherished “meetings and conversations between students of different nationalities” as a top advantage of being in Poland. Thus, while the challenge of fostering genuine social cohesion is real, the interest and goodwill to overcome it exists. It simply needs to be harnessed through structured opportunities and a supportive institutional climate.

Resource and capacity constraints: Finally, a systemic challenge lies in the capacity of universities to support a larger international/refugee student population. Polish universities, especially in regions like Rzeszów, had to absorb students quickly, which strained resources such as housing, financial aid pools, and student services. The concern about dormitory space, for example, underpinned Polish student resentments as noted above – it reflects a real limitation that dorm supply is finite. Faculty at UR also noted that providing extra support (academic or pastoral) to Ukrainian students adds to their workload, as they must spend additional time tutoring language gaps or coordinating help, on top of their regular duties. Without administrative support or compensation, this can lead to burnout and reduced quality of instruction for all. Moreover, a lack of long-term funding beyond the initial emergency grants could pose a challenge: the NAWA “Solidarity with Ukraine” program, for instance, was a short-term scheme. If the war-induced exile of students continues for years, universities and the Polish government will need to plan sustainable funding to cover tuition waivers and expand facilities. In summary, scaling up infrastructure and services is necessary to ensure the inclusivity gains can be maintained without disadvantaging any student group.

To conclude this section, it’s worth noting an insightful observation from the World Cafe, meaning that the issues Ukrainian students face in Poland are not entirely unique. When asked about their expectations, advantages gained, and problems encountered, Ukrainian students’ answers turned out to be “similar for students of many nationalities.” Their academic and social aspirations, and even some struggles, mirror those of other international students. The war itself was rarely explicitly mentioned in their discussions; many have been in Poland for a long time or come from regions of Ukraine

less directly affected, so day-to-day their concerns are more practical (language, studies, friends) than geopolitical. This suggests that the inclusion of Ukrainian students can, in many respects, be approached as part of the broader agenda of internationalization and support for foreign students in higher education. If Polish universities improve conditions for Ukrainian students – by enhancing language support, combating discrimination, expanding counselling, etc. – they will simultaneously be improving the environment for all international students. In effect, the Ukrainian refugee situation has spotlighted areas for improvement in universities' capacity to welcome diversity and addressing those will yield a more inclusive system for everyone.

Poland's approach to including Ukrainian students has been closely aligned with, and reinforced by, broader European frameworks and principles in higher education and refugee protection. In fact, the Polish case can be seen as a practical enactment of European commitments to mobility, recognition, and academic solidarity.

As mentioned, Poland is a long-standing participant in the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area, which emphasize compatible degree structures, credit transferability, and cooperation among universities across Europe. This alignment has greatly smoothed the path for Ukrainian students. Structurally, Poland's three-tiered system (BA/MA/PhD) and use of the ECTS credit system mean that Ukrainian students can easily continue studies without losing progress. For example, a Bachelor's student from Ukraine (which also uses a 4-year first cycle) can enrol in a Polish university and have their credits recognized toward the 180 ECTS needed for a Polish licencjat degree. Likewise, Ukrainian master's and doctoral students fit into Poland's second and third cycle programs with minimal discrepancy. The Lisbon Recognition Convention, to which both Poland and Ukraine are signatories, underpins mutual recognition of qualifications, ensuring that Ukrainian school diplomas and prior coursework are accepted for admissions purposes. These Bologna/EHEA tools have proven invaluable: they provided a ready-made scaffolding for Poland to absorb a massive number of students on short notice, something that would have been far more chaotic if curriculum structures were incompatible or credentials had to be individually evaluated outside a common framework. Moreover, the fact that Polish and Ukrainian higher education share quality standards and an emphasis on outcomes (thanks to Bologna) gave Polish universities confidence in the academic preparation of the incoming Ukrainians. In essence, the academic integration of Ukrainian students is a success story for the EHEA – it shows the resilience and flexibility that a unified European higher education space can offer in times of crisis.

From the student perspective, alignment with European standards was part of the attraction to study in Poland in the first place. The desire to obtain a European diploma was a key motivator for Ukrainians studying in Poland during peacetime. That motivation has only become more salient in wartime, as a Polish (EU) diploma is not only

internationally recognized but also a hedge against uncertainty – it could open doors across Europe for graduates whose home country is under attack. The continuation of their education in Poland means these students remain on track to earn degrees that are valued in the European labour market, aligning with the EHEA goal of fostering mobility and employability.

Poland's inclusion strategy also aligns tightly with the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) and related European Union measures taken in response to the Ukraine crisis. The TPD, activated by unanimous EU decision, granted Ukrainians temporary protection status which includes rights to residency, access to employment, education, and social services in any EU country. Poland's aforementioned Act on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens was essentially the national implementation of this European directive, tailored to Poland's context. By waiving tuition and offering scholarships for Ukrainian students, Poland arguably went even further in the education realm than the baseline TPD requirements, showcasing an exemplary application of the directive's spirit. The outcome is that tens of thousands of Ukrainian young people are now enrolled in EU universities (with Poland hosting the largest share by far), continuing their studies instead of languishing in refugee limbo. This is precisely the outcome the Temporary Protection status intended – quick integration into host societies, including educational systems, rather than protracted displacement. The data from UR confirm this integration: more than a quarter of Ukrainian students at UR hold temporary protection documents, meaning they are living in Poland under the harmonized EU refugee regime and concurrently contributing to and benefiting from the Polish university system.

It's also noteworthy that Poland's actions influenced EU-wide academic support. Polish universities were among the first to announce acceptance of Ukrainian student refugees, spurring others in Europe to follow. The spirit of the Bologna Process – where countries collaborate to support each other's students – was reflected in how swiftly Polish academia extended a hand. In return, European bodies and networks (the European University Association, etc.) have disseminated Poland's experiences as lessons for other systems. There is synergy here: European frameworks made Poland's response possible, and Poland's on-the-ground innovation (like NAWA's scholarship scheme) is now informing the broader European response to integrating refugee students.

The University of Rzeszów's participation on the EIUS project itself is an example of alignment with European initiatives. Funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the EU, this project connects partners across multiple countries to share best practices for including Ukrainian students. That such a project was quickly approved and funded by the European Union underscores a continental commitment to addressing the issue. The EIUS project's outcomes will likely feed into European-level recommendations for higher education institutions dealing with refugee influxes. In a way, UR and Poland

are serving as a pilot site for the EHEA on refugee inclusion, with findings disseminated through Erasmus+ networks.

Lastly, Poland's efforts resonate with the core values and recent communiqués of the EHEA ministers – namely, a commitment to equity, inclusion, and academic solidarity. The EHEA has increasingly emphasized that higher education should be inclusive and that disadvantaged or displaced groups (such as refugees) merit special support to access learning opportunities. The emergency measures for Ukrainian students can be seen as an enactment of these values. Furthermore, by maintaining Ukrainian students' education trajectories, Poland is helping preserve Ukraine's human capital and facilitating future reconstruction – an aim echoed by European statements to support Ukraine. The mobility of students from a war-torn EHEA member (Ukraine) to another (Poland) and potentially back again in the future is exactly the kind of fluid academic cooperation the EHEA envisages, albeit in tragic circumstances.

In conclusion, Poland's inclusion of Ukrainian students has not happened in isolation; it is deeply embedded in the European context. The legal and structural alignment provided by EU and EHEA frameworks enabled a rapid and relatively coherent response. European funding and collaborative projects bolstered national and institutional efforts. And the outcome – thousands of Ukrainian students continuing their studies in Poland – stands as a testament to the power of a unified European Higher Education Area to uphold educational continuity and integration even amid a continental crisis. Poland's experience thus offers valuable insights for EHEA countries on how to operationalize solidarity and inclusion when faced with sudden large-scale student mobility, ensuring that the doors of learning remain open in even the darkest of times.

4.3. Romania

4.3.1. Description of the higher education system in Romania

The Romanian higher education system has undergone significant evolution in recent decades, transitioning from a centralized and rigid model to a more flexible one, designed to align with the demands of the labour market and the European and international context.

A major reform in this regard took place with the implementation of the National Education Law No. 1/2011², which introduced substantial changes in the structure and organization of higher education. In 2023, the Higher Education Law No. 199/2023 was enacted, amending and updating the previous legislation. This new law consolidated

2 Published in the Official Gazette / Monitorul Oficial no. 18 from 10th of January 2011.

and expanded upon previous provisions, introducing new elements aimed at improving the quality of education and addressing modern challenges.

Higher education in Romania is governed by the National Education Law No. 1/2011, which sets out the structure and organization of higher education at all levels. This law has been amended and updated through various subsequent regulations to meet contemporary needs and align with European and international standards, particularly within the Bologna Process framework.

The Higher Education Law No. 199/2023 was enacted to reflect the new realities and needs of Romanian society and the education system. It includes a range of essential reforms that impact all levels of education, with a particular focus on higher education, introducing new measures regarding the quality of education, the digitalization of academic processes, and the internationalization of higher education. The following are among the most significant provisions of Law No. 199/2023 with respect to higher education:

1. The legislation aims to reinforce the autonomy of universities. The legislation reaffirms the principle of university autonomy, thereby enabling higher education institutions to define and manage their own study programmes, research, and development strategies in accordance with national and international quality standards. Universities are encouraged to develop their own international partnerships, offer programmes in foreign languages, and collaborate with institutions worldwide.
2. Digitalization of education: The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgent need for the digitalization of educational processes. Law No. 199/2023 includes measures to support the full digitalization of administrative and academic processes, promoting the use of modern technologies in teaching, research, and assessment. It is now obligatory for higher education institutions to incorporate online platforms into their management of educational resources and implementation of distance learning.
3. Quality assurance and evaluation: The legislation underscores the necessity of guaranteeing and enhancing the calibre of higher education. The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), n.d.) plays a central role in evaluating and accrediting university programs, and Law No. 199/2023 introduces new criteria and procedures for the external evaluation of universities and study programs. These measures aim to align Romanian higher education with international standards and enhance the global competitiveness of graduates.
4. Internationalization of higher education: In an increasingly globalized world, the law emphasizes facilitating academic mobility and international collaborations. Romania is encouraged to participate in European and international education

programs, such as Erasmus+, and to develop joint study programs between Romanian universities and prestigious foreign institutions.

Romanian higher education is structured into three main cycles: Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral studies. A Bachelor's degree programme represents the initial stage of higher education, with a typical duration of between three and four years, contingent on the field of study. Law No. 199/2023 maintains the ECTS credit-based structure, ensuring compatibility with higher education systems across Europe and facilitating student mobility.

The new legislation introduces greater flexibility in curriculum organisation and the implementation of interdisciplinary programmes, thereby enabling universities to respond more expeditiously to labour market needs.

Master's degree programmes represent the second cycle of higher education and are essential for deepening knowledge and specialisation in a particular field. The 2023 legislation has introduced additional measures to encourage research participation from this academic stage, providing students with access to resources and funding for research projects. The duration of Master's programs remains between one and two years, with the final dissertation continuing to be a principal criterion for evaluating the knowledge gained.

The reforms introduced by Law No. 199/2023 are aimed at modernizing higher education in Romania and aligning it with global trends. For instance, universities are encouraged to strengthen their research and innovation capacities, particularly in STEM³ fields, support entrepreneurship, and develop continuous training programs for professionals.

Another notable aspect introduced by Law No. 199/2023 is the facilitation of collaboration between universities and the private sector, with the objective of developing educational programmes that are aligned with Romania's economic and social requirements. Such collaborative endeavours also aim to augment the number of internships and practical projects available to students, thereby facilitating their more seamless integration into the labour market.

4.3.1.1. Bachelor's degree studies

Bachelor's degree programmes represent the initial stage of higher education in Romania, providing a comprehensive academic foundation for students aspiring to specialise in a specific professional domain. The regulatory framework for these programmes is delineated by the National Education Law No. 1/2011, as amended and supplemented by the Higher Education Law No. 199/2023. This legislation establishes the overarching

3 Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

framework for the programme, encompassing its duration, structure, and evaluation methodologies.

The duration of Bachelor's studies is typically three to four years, although this may vary depending on the field of specialisation. In the majority of cases, programmes extend over a period of three years in disciplines such as economics, humanities and social sciences. In disciplines that are more technically or specialised, such as engineering or architecture, the duration of the programme may extend to four years.

The structure of Bachelor's programmes is based on a semester system, with each semester comprising a specific number of credits in accordance with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). The ECTS has been designed to guarantee the compatibility and recognition of studies across European institutions, thereby facilitating student mobility within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Admission to Bachelor's degree programmes is typically based on an entrance examination, the nature of which may vary depending on the university and field of study. In accordance with the provisions enshrined within the Higher Education Law No. 199/2023, admission criteria may encompass a variety of factors. These include the attainment of a high school graduation exam score, the successful completion of an entrance examination administered by the university, or a combination of both. It is important to note that higher education institutions are granted autonomy in determining their respective admission procedures, provided that these procedures align with the general norms established by the Ministry of Education.

Admission is open to high school graduates holding a baccalaureate diploma or an equivalent qualification. For further details on admission, consult the general framework methodology for organising entrance exams in higher education, according to Ministerial Order No. 3.693/2024⁴.

The primary objective of Bachelor's programmes is to furnish students with a robust foundation of theoretical and practical knowledge in a specific domain, thereby preparing them for either professional careers or further studies at the Master's level. The objective of these programmes is to cultivate both general abilities and domain-specific capabilities that are essential for success in the chosen profession.

The curriculum of a Bachelor's program consists of:

1. Core subjects – these provide students with the essential knowledge required in the field of study.
2. Specialized subjects – the objective of which is to develop the requisite skills for the targeted profession.

4 Published in the Official Gazette / Monitorul Oficial no. 111 from 7th of February 2024.

Elective and optional courses allow students to partially customise their academic path, providing opportunities to explore related fields or to deepen certain areas of interest.

Additionally, during their Bachelor's studies, students participate in internships or applied projects, which help familiarize them with the labour market requirements and the professional environment in their field of specialization.

The evaluation of students during the Bachelor's cycle is conducted through a continuous assessment system, which may include written exams, seminar papers, projects, laboratory activities, and professional internships. Each academic activity is assigned a grade, with the number of credits allocated corresponding to the grade awarded. Promotion is dependent on achieving a minimum score, as established by the university.

Completion of Bachelor's studies is contingent upon the successful completion of a final examination, which is typically divided into two sections:

1. A written or practical examination in the field of study, designed to evaluate the knowledge and skills acquired during the Bachelor's cycle.
2. The preparation and defence of a Bachelor's thesis constitutes the third element of the programme. This is research or applied project that demonstrates the student's ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts and to present well-argued solutions and conclusions in a rigorous manner.

Upon successful completion of the final examination, graduates are awarded a Bachelor's degree, thereby certifying their qualification and granting them access to either the labour market or to Master's studies, representing the second cycle of higher education.

Full-time Bachelor's programs can be financed either by the state budget or through tuition fees.

Bachelor's studies culminate in the successful completion of a final or diploma examination, depending on the field of study, resulting in the award of a Bachelor's degree, Engineer, Architect, or Urban Planner, as appropriate.

The organisation of final examinations is governed by the General Framework Methodology, which was approved by Ministerial Order No. 3.691/2024⁵.

4.3.1.2. Master's degree studies

Master's degree programmes constitute the second cycle of higher education, offering advanced specialisation in a particular field or interdisciplinary area. These programmes typically span a duration of one to two years and necessitate the prior completion of a Bachelor's degree as a prerequisite for admission. Master's programs are

5 Published in the Official Gazette / Monitorul Oficial no. 118 of 9th of February 2024.

designed to facilitate the acquisition of in-depth theoretical and practical knowledge, in addition to cultivating research capabilities. Upon successful completion, these programs culminate in the attainment of level 7 on both the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)⁶ and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)⁷.

Master's programs can be offered either as full-time or part-time. The regulation of educational offerings, study programmes, and maximum enrolment capacity of higher education institutions is subject to annual government decisions developed by the Ministry of Education.

In accordance with the prevailing legal provisions, the responsibility for admitting students to master's programmes lies with individual universities. This is typically achieved through a selection process based on applications or through an examination. In accordance with the pertinent legislation, admission to these programmes is reserved exclusively for individuals who have obtained a Bachelor's degree that is accredited by the relevant authorities. In certain instances, the admission process may also entail interviews, written examinations, or research projects, contingent upon the specific requirements of the programme in question.

A Master's programme is designed to provide advanced training in a specific field of study. These programmes integrate theoretical instruction, seminars, research, and practical internships, equipping students with the knowledge and skills to pursue either further doctoral studies or employment in a specialized field.

In accordance with the standards set forth by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a Master's programme entails the attainment of between 60 and 120 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits. When these credits are added to those earned during the Bachelor's cycle, the total reaches 300 ECTS credits for both cycles.

The assessment of students enrolled in Master's programmes is conducted through a combination of periodic examinations, research projects, and practical activities. The programme culminates in the preparation and defence of a dissertation, which is an original research document that demonstrates the student's ability to analyse and synthesise complex information.

The submission and defence of the dissertation constitute a mandatory requirement for the conferral of the Master's degree. For a more detailed exposition of the manner in which Master's studies are conducted, we direct the reader to the general framework methodology for organising Bachelor's, diploma, and dissertation exams, as approved by ministerial order.

6 EQF/CEC.

7 More details on Autorităţii Naţionale pentru Calificări, n.d.

Romania is a participant in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and is an active participant in the Bologna Process. This commitment ensures that the structure of study cycles and the utilisation of ECTS credits facilitate the international recognition of qualifications obtained in Romania, thereby promoting the academic and professional mobility of graduates. Furthermore, Romanian universities are encouraged to offer programmes taught in foreign languages and to collaborate with international institutions with a view to enhancing the quality of education.

4.3.1.3. Challenges and perspectives of HE in Romania

Despite the fact that Romania's Bachelor's degree programmes provide a robust foundation for higher education, significant challenges remain in the modernisation of university infrastructure, the adaptation of curricula to labour market demands, and the increase in access to digital resources. The Higher Education Law No. 199/2023 emphasises the digitalisation of educational processes and the fostering of collaboration between universities and the private sector with a view to improving student integration into the labour market.

It is anticipated that Bachelor's degree programmes will continue to evolve in a student-centred direction, with an increased focus on the development of transferable and interdisciplinary skills. This will equip graduates with the ability to adapt more effectively to the ever-changing global economy.

Bachelor's degree programmes represent the first cycle of higher education and correspond to between 180 and 240 ECTS/SECT credits, or between 240 and 300 credits for double specialisation programmes. These programmes culminate in the attainment of level 6 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) or the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), in accordance with the specifications provided on the National Qualifications Authority website (Autorităţii Naţionale pentru Calificări, n.d.).

The structure of higher education institutions, the range of educational offerings, and maximum enrolment capacity are set on an annual basis in accordance with the List of Fields and Specializations, a document prepared by the Ministry of Education and approved by government decision.

Bachelor's degree programmes are available in three modes of study: full-time, part-time, and distance learning. Full-time study programmes typically span a duration of three to four years, with a minimum of 60 ECTS credits being awarded per academic year.

The duration of studies in disciplines such as performing arts, engineering sciences, legal sciences, and pastoral theology is typically four years. However, in the domain of music, the duration may vary between three and four years, contingent on the specialisation chosen. In fields such as military sciences, intelligence, and public order,

the duration of studies varies between three and four years, depending on the specific military branch or specialty in question.

It is noteworthy that programmes in fields regulated at the European Union level are organised exclusively on a full-time basis and last between five and six years. These programmes integrate the first and second cycles into a single, cohesive programme. Upon successful completion of these programmes, students are awarded degrees that are equivalent to Master's degrees.

Full-time Bachelor's degree programmes may be financed by public funds or through tuition fees.

Admission to Bachelor's degree programmes is contingent upon the completion of secondary education and the possession of a baccalaureate diploma or an equivalent qualification. The organisation of admission exams is regulated by the General Framework Methodology, as approved by Ministerial Order No. 3.693/2024, which sets the admission norms for Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral cycles.

Completion of Bachelor's degree programmes is contingent upon the successful passing of a final or diploma examination, as stipulated by the field of study, for example engineering, architecture, or urban planning. The diplomas issued thereby certify the obtained title. The organisation of final exams is regulated by the General Framework Methodology for the Conduct of Graduation Examinations, which was approved by Ministerial Order No. 3.691/2024⁸.

4.3.2. Adaptation of Romanian universities for the integration of Ukrainian students

The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict has resulted in an unparalleled surge of refugees across Europe, including a considerable number of Ukrainian students seeking to continue their academic studies in neighbouring countries. Romania, which shares a direct border with Ukraine, has played a significant role in accommodating these students within its higher education system. This study will examine the strategies and initiatives implemented by Romanian universities to integrate Ukrainian students, including policy adjustments, support structures, and resources provided at both institutional and governmental levels.

In light of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Romanian universities have demonstrated a strong commitment to facilitating the integration of Ukrainian students by implementing a range of support measures. These measures are informed by both national policies and local institutional initiatives, reflecting a coordinated effort to address

⁸ Published in the Official Gazette / Monitorul Oficial No. 111 from 7th of February 2024.

the challenges faced by displaced learners. In response to the displacement caused by the conflict in Ukraine, the Romanian Ministry of Education introduced adaptive policies to ensure academic continuity for Ukrainian students. A key element of these policies is the facilitation of academic mobility for students who, due to the conflict, were unable to access or provide traditional academic documentation from Ukrainian institutions. Furthermore, these students have been offered tuition waivers, scholarships, and access to student accommodation and healthcare services.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education has taken measures to streamline the enrolment process, enabling Ukrainian students to join Romanian higher education institutions based on evaluations of their competencies and prior academic records. This measure ensured that Ukrainian students who could not retrieve or validate their documentation from Ukrainian institutions could still access higher education in Romania. Consequently, universities modified their admissions procedures to align with these new criteria, thereby ensuring a fair and equitable assessment and integration of the students in accordance with international standards.

In addition to the facilitation of enrolment procedures, a series of financial assistance programmes specifically designed for Ukrainian students have been implemented by Romanian universities. A considerable proportion of Ukrainian students enrolled in Romanian public universities are beneficiaries of state-funded scholarships, which encompass tuition fee coverage and a monthly stipend to support their basic living expenses. These scholarships are designed to alleviate the financial pressures that are often associated with displacement, thereby enabling students to focus on their academic studies. Furthermore, the Romanian government provides tuition waivers and supplementary financial assistance to displaced students, thereby facilitating a smooth academic transition for them.

In recognition of the emotional and psychological challenges that are inherent to the experience of displacement, Romanian universities have established dedicated counselling and psychological support services for Ukrainian students. The establishment of collaborative relationships with organisations such as UNICEF and the British Council has facilitated the delivery of trauma-informed training for academic staff and support personnel. This training programme is designed to equip educators with trauma-sensitive techniques, thereby enabling the creation of supportive learning environments for students who have experienced war-related distress. These workshops prepare educators to better understand and respond to the trauma-related needs of refugee students, helping create a more inclusive and sensitive academic environment.

In addition to financial aid, universities have also prioritised the provision of housing solutions for Ukrainian students. The provision of university accommodation has been extended to Ukrainian students, thereby enabling them to reside on campus and integrate more effectively into university life. By sharing dormitory spaces with Romanian

students, Ukrainian students benefit from greater social interaction and cultural exchange, which can facilitate their adaptation to the new environment.

To address linguistic challenges, Romanian universities have organised free Romanian language courses specifically designed for Ukrainian students. These language courses have been designed to facilitate communication within the academic environment and to promote integration into Romanian society more broadly. Furthermore, for students enrolled in English-taught programmes, Romanian universities have offered targeted support to help them navigate academic and administrative processes in English, ensuring their transition is as smooth as possible.

These measures illustrate Romania's compliance with the broader European standards for the integration of refugees in higher education. Addressing both the academic and personal needs of Ukrainian students, Romanian universities facilitate the continuity of their studies while also fostering an environment supportive of empathy and cultural exchange, which benefits the entire academic community. The comprehensive nature of this approach underscores the stabilising effect of education in times of crisis, providing Ukrainian students with a path forward despite the challenges they are facing.

In order to facilitate the integration of Ukrainian students, Romanian universities have implemented educational and psychological support programmes that are tailored to their needs, thereby providing a stable environment and access to quality education. It has been documented that approximately 60% of Ukrainian students avail themselves of the counselling services provided by their respective universities. To illustrate, the University of Bucharest has established a programme of free Romanian language courses, with a particular focus on the acquisition of essential vocabulary for use in both academic and everyday contexts. This initiative is designed to facilitate the integration of Ukrainian students into their new society. Such courses are delivered by volunteer professors and offered in a hybrid format, combining online and on-campus delivery, thus accommodating students' diverse needs and preferences.

It is also noteworthy that Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca (UBB) has established a psychological support programme for Ukrainian students in collaboration with local specialists and international organisations, including UNICEF and the British Council. The program incorporates individual and group sessions for students who have experienced trauma and stress associated with the conflict. The objective of these emotional support sessions is to provide a secure environment in which students can articulate their emotions and receive guidance from psychologists with expertise in trauma-related issues.

The Polytechnic University of Bucharest has established a collaborative partnership with the National Institute of Public Health with the objective of offering free psychological counselling services to Ukrainian students. The programme offers students

the opportunity to engage in therapeutic sessions and to access educational resources on the management of stress and anxiety. In addition, the Polytechnic University has conducted training for teaching staff on how to manage the behaviours of students who have experienced traumatic events and adapt teaching methods to create an inclusive educational environment.

Moreover, the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași (UAIC) has initiated cultural orientation programmes for Ukrainian students, thereby facilitating their integration into the Romanian academic milieu. These programmes include guided city tours, presentations on Romanian culture, and networking activities that facilitate interaction between Ukrainian students and both Romanian and other international students. Furthermore, the establishment of a dedicated assistance centre for international students at UAIC offers a comprehensive support system, including guidance on administrative matters and assistance in navigating academic studies.

The West University of Timisoara has developed an online platform providing Ukrainian students with access to free courses, study materials, and mentorship sessions with university professors. The platform offers assistance to students experiencing difficulties in adapting to the Romanian educational system, providing an additional framework for academic support.

The statistics demonstrate both the quantitative integration of Ukrainian students into Romanian higher education and the qualitative impact of the support provided. Romania's comprehensive approach, evident in both policy and practice, demonstrates a commitment to fostering an inclusive educational environment for all students, regardless of background. The data further underscore the importance of targeted financial, academic, and emotional support mechanisms, which contribute to the students' overall success and well-being.

The integration of Ukrainian students into Romania's higher education system has been supported through a coherent set of governmental and institutional measures adopted since 2022. Within the framework of the EU Temporary Protection Directive and its transposition into Romanian legislation through a series of emergency ordinances, the Ministry of Education and national universities have developed mechanisms aimed at ensuring the educational inclusion of Ukrainian citizens displaced by the war. These initiatives have included the reservation of study places, the organization of online learning modules, and the facilitation of admission procedures for students lacking complete documentation due to displacement (UNESCO, n.d.).

Complementary to these measures, Romania has also adopted policies that exempt Ukrainian refugee students from tuition fees and guarantee access to academic guidance, Romanian language courses, and psychological counselling, with the purpose of fostering both academic adaptation and social integration (*Regional Refugee Response...*, 2024). At the institutional level, universities in major academic centers

– such as Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, and Timișoara – have implemented specific programs for the inclusion of Ukrainian learners, often in partnership with local NGOs and international agencies.

A milestone in this process was the signing, in August 2023, of the Bilateral Agreement between the Government of Romania and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on the mutual recognition of educational documents, which ensures continuity of academic trajectories and facilitates the equivalence of qualifications obtained in Ukraine (*Government approves signing...*, 2023). This agreement consolidated Romania's position among the EU member states most actively involved in harmonizing the legal and institutional framework for Ukrainian refugee students.

These developments are also reflected in official monitoring instruments such as the *Report on the State of Higher Education in Romania 2022–2023*, published by the Romanian Ministry of Education (Ministerul Educației, 2023). They are also documented in analyses produced by the Eurydice Network of the European Commission, which document the broader policy context of educational inclusion and mobility for Ukrainian nationals across Europe. However, while these reports provide extensive descriptions of policy measures and institutional practices, they do not publish consolidated statistical data on the number of Ukrainian students enrolled in Romanian higher education institutions, focusing instead on the legal, organizational, and social dimensions of inclusion.

Romanian universities have utilised international partnerships and collaborations as a means to augment support for Ukrainian students and academics, addressing both immediate educational requirements and broader integration endeavours. A notable element of this collaboration pertains to Romania's partnership with European institutions and agencies, aimed at facilitating academic mobility and credential recognition for Ukrainian refugees.

In an effort to optimise available resources, Romanian universities have established collaborative relationships with partner institutions in Ukraine, thereby enabling Ukrainian academics to continue their professional activities in Romania. A notable example of such collaboration is the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR), coordinated by the Council of Europe. The EQPR facilitates the recognition of qualifications by Romanian universities, even in cases where documentation is incomplete, a common occurrence among displaced students who may have lost their educational records during their flight from Ukraine. The EQPR assessment involves document reviews and structured interviews by credential evaluators, enabling students to continue their studies or pursue employment despite incomplete records. The EQPR system has been methodically implemented in Romania, Italy and the Netherlands, facilitating the enrolment of hundreds of Ukrainian students in higher education programmes without encountering bureaucratic obstacles.

Romanian universities are similarly engaged in the Erasmus+ programme and other European academic mobility programmes, thereby facilitating further exchange opportunities for Ukrainian students. Participation in such programmes confers dual benefits, both academic and cultural, thus enabling Ukrainian students to gain experience of a variety of educational settings across Europe. Numerous Ukrainian students pursuing their studies in Romania are beneficiaries of financial assistance to cover living expenses while participating in exchange programmes with other European academic institutions through the Erasmus+ programme.

These international and institutional collaborations collectively demonstrate Romania's commitment to establishing a supportive and interconnected educational framework for Ukrainian refugees. The partnerships with European institutions, Ukrainian educational authorities, and international organisations reflect a broad, integrative approach that not only addresses immediate academic needs but also facilitates long-term academic and professional integration for Ukrainian students and scholars.

4.3.3. Ovidius University of Constanta – institutional insights and student dynamics

Ovidius University of Constanta, founded in 1961, is one of the most important higher education institutions in Romania, located on the shores of the Black Sea. Following its transformation into a comprehensive university in 1990, it has been able to diversify its academic offerings, extending from medicine and life sciences to social sciences such as economics and law, applied sciences, engineering, humanities and arts. The university currently has approximately 15,800 students, including over 1,100 international students, and over 1,000 teaching and administrative staff. The student-to-faculty ratio of 12.5: 1 is indicative of the quality of the educational process, as it ensures a closer interaction between students and teachers. The University holds the distinction of being the largest Black Sea University within the European Union⁹.

The UOC is organised into 16 faculties that offer study programmes at all three academic levels: Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate. These include the Faculties of Letters, Theology, Law and Administration, Economics, Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Psychology and Education, Applied Sciences and Engineering, Civil Engineering and Arts. The University is dedicated to the continuous adaptation of its curricula and academic offer to align with the evolving demands of the labour market and the needs of its student body.

9 Rector's activity report, 2023, retrieved from Universităţii Ovidius din Constanţa, n.d.

In 2023, the UOC offered 81 undergraduate programmes in 42 fields, with a total of 11,458 students. The master's programmes encompass 62 specialisations in 33 fields, catering to 2,579 students, with a focus on both research and the development of professional competencies for the labour market¹⁰.

The UOC is committed to fostering a diverse academic community, comprising students from Romania, as well as from EU and non-EU countries, including Asia and Africa. The English-language study programmes offered by the Faculties of Medicine, Informatics and Business Administration contribute to the university's international appeal, with international students representing 7% of the total academic population and exhibiting a consistent annual increase.

The UOC has observed a gradual increase in the number of international students, which has recently been further augmented by the influx of refugee students from Ukraine. The number of international students at the UOC has increased from 1,038 in 2022 to 1,162 in 2024–2025, representing a total increase of approximately 11.95%. This figure accounts for 7.34% of the total number of students at the UOC.

This increase can be attributed to the university's strategic initiatives aimed at promoting the integration of students from diverse geographical backgrounds, including Ukrainian refugees. These initiatives encompass the provision of academic programmes taught in English and the provision of personalised support services.

In order to facilitate the integration of Ukrainian students, the UOC has implemented a series of measures. These measures are designed to provide Ukrainian students with access to budgeted places, accommodation in student hostels and support for academic adaptation. This commitment to inclusivity and multiculturalism has served to reinforce the UOC's reputation as an institution that prepares students for a globalised market and advocates for equal access to education.

In May 2021, Ovidius University of Constanta (UOC) became a member of the European consortium ERASMOB, which was subsequently renamed ARTEMIS, marking the inaugural phase of the institution's journey towards attaining European University status. The ARTEMIS consortium comprises partners from France, Germany, Belgium, Greece, Estonia, Norway and, most recently, Italy. The objective of the consortium is to establish a university network that is focused on sustainable mobility, digital education and interdisciplinary collaboration, with the aim of supporting lifelong learning and regional socio-economic development¹¹.

In June 2024, the UOC was awarded the status of "European University" through the Erasmus+ programme, in collaboration with its partner institutions. The mission of ARTEMIS is to serve as a catalyst for innovation and international cooperation,

¹⁰ Internal data from Ovidius University of Constanta, 2024.

¹¹ Report of the Senate Standing Committee for International Relations and Institutional Image, UOC 2023/

promoting inclusion and mobility as essential elements in higher education. This initiative, which forms part of a network of 64 European alliances, serves to enhance the prestige of the UOC and to ensure compliance with European standards of inclusive and accessible education.

The dual education programme for the 2024–2025 academic year has been initiated as part of the CRESC Project, which constitutes a component of the Regional Consortium “Tehno-Dobrogea”. This initiative is the result of a collaboration between Ovidius University of Constanta and the Constanta County School Inspectorate. The project, which is supported by 15 economic operators, provides 283 places for students in the county. Its focus on specialisations that align with market demands, along with the provision of scholarships and practical training opportunities, is a key aspect of the programme. The imminent “Ovidius Engineering Hub” campus is poised to offer state-of-the-art study facilities. With funding exceeding €27 million, the project is designed to establish a comprehensive educational pathway from high school to university in partnership with local authorities and professional organisations¹².

The UOC continues to exert a considerable influence on the educational and research landscape of the Black Sea region. The institution’s diversified academic structure, active involvement in research, and international partnerships exemplify its adaptability and commitment to excellence in education and social development.

4.3.4. Ukrainian Students in Ovidius University

The present study of Ukrainian students at Ovidius University of Constanța for the 2024–2025 academic year highlights several relevant demographic features, such as their distribution by biological gender, age, faculties, and study conditions. This research provides a comprehensive view of how Ukrainian students integrate into the Romanian academic environment, reflecting their interest in various fields of study and associated socio-economic profiles.

In terms of biological gender, there is a slight predominance of female students. Women account for 60% of the total Ukrainian student population, while men make up 40% (Figure 13). This relatively balanced distribution suggests that both genders are equally attracted to the educational opportunities offered by the university. A further analysis reveals that women are more represented in the humanities and health sciences, while men are more frequently enrolled in technical and economic fields.

12 UOC press releases, 2024 retrieved from Universității Ovidius din Constanța, n.d.

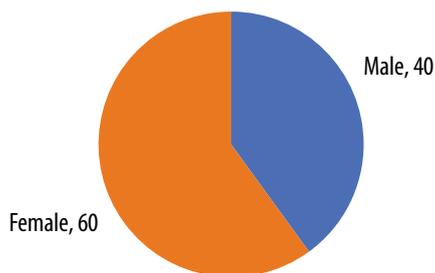


Figure 13. Gender distribution of Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)

Source: own elaboration.

In terms of age, the majority of Ukrainian students are between 17 and 22 years old, which is typical for undergraduate students. The mean age is approximately 20 years, suggesting that the majority of these students are at the inception of their academic careers (Figure 14). The youngest students are enrolled in preparatory programs or in the early years of undergraduate studies, while older students are generally in the final years of their bachelor's programs or even pursuing master's degrees.

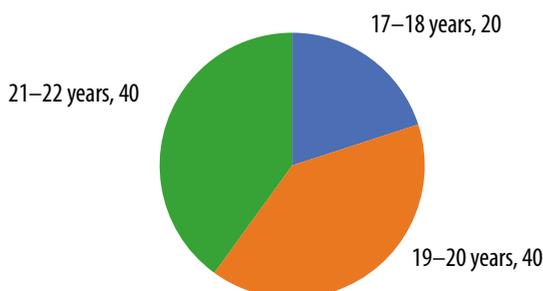


Figure 14. Age distribution of Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)

Source: own elaboration.

The majority of Ukrainian students are enrolled in undergraduate programs, reflecting their focus on foundational academic training. Approximately 70% of these students are pursuing bachelor's degrees, which is a standard percentage given the overall structure of higher education in Europe. A significant segment of students, around 20%, is enrolled in the Romanian language preparatory year, which is essential for those who have not yet acquired the linguistic skills necessary to follow courses in Romanian. This preparatory year offers an invaluable opportunity for these students to enhance their linguistic proficiency and prepare for the rigours of their subsequent academic studies.

The number of students enrolled in master's programs is smaller, representing only 10% of the total Ukrainian student population. This reduced proportion can be attributed

to the tendency of most international students to first complete their undergraduate studies before deciding whether to continue their education at an advanced level. No Ukrainian doctoral students were identified in the analysed dataset for the 2024–2025 academic year (see Figure 15).

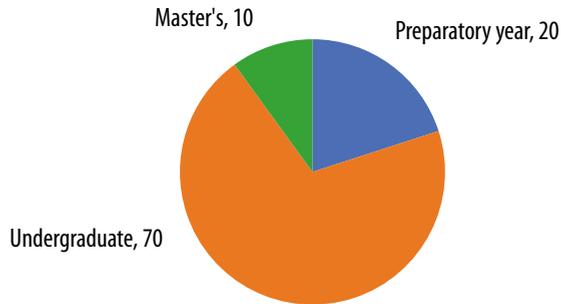


Figure 15. Types of studies of Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)

Source: own elaboration.

Ukrainian students are dispersed across various faculties, with a distinct predilection for humanities, economics, and medical disciplines. The Faculty of Letters attracts the largest number of Ukrainian students, with 40% of them enrolled in programs such as Romanian Language and Literature, English Language and Literature, and various combinations of modern languages. Furthermore, a significant proportion of these students are enrolled in the Romanian Language Preparatory Program, which provides a solid foundation for continuing their university studies in Romania.

The Faculty of Economic Sciences on the other hand, enrolls approximately 20% of Ukrainian students, with a focus on specializations such as International Business and Finance and Banking. These disciplines are selected by students who recognise the global economy as a domain with international applicability and extensive professional opportunities.

The Faculty of Medicine also attracts a significant number of Ukrainian students, accounting for 20% of the total. These students are enrolled in Medicine programs, some of which are taught in English, highlighting the international nature of the faculty and its attractiveness to students from outside Romania. The continued attraction of international students to the Faculty of Medicine is attributable to the global professional opportunities associated with the field and the prestige it commands.

The Faculty of Physical Education and Sports also records about 20% of Ukrainian students, who are enrolled in programs such as Kinetotherapy and Special Motricity and Sports and Performance Motricity. The health and physical recovery field is growing, and Ukrainian students recognize the career potential in these areas, both in Romania and in Ukraine.

The Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences attracts 10% of students, with a primary focus on programs such as Law and Maritime Law. These specialisations are essential for those who wish to pursue a career in international law, an important aspect for Ukrainian students given the geopolitical context and the strategic position of both Ukraine and Romania on the Black Sea.

The Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences enrolls a smaller number of Ukrainian students, around 5%, with a primary interest in the Tourism Geography specialization. This field offers a range of interesting career opportunities, given the tourism potential of coastal regions and the attractiveness of ecological tourism (Figure 16).

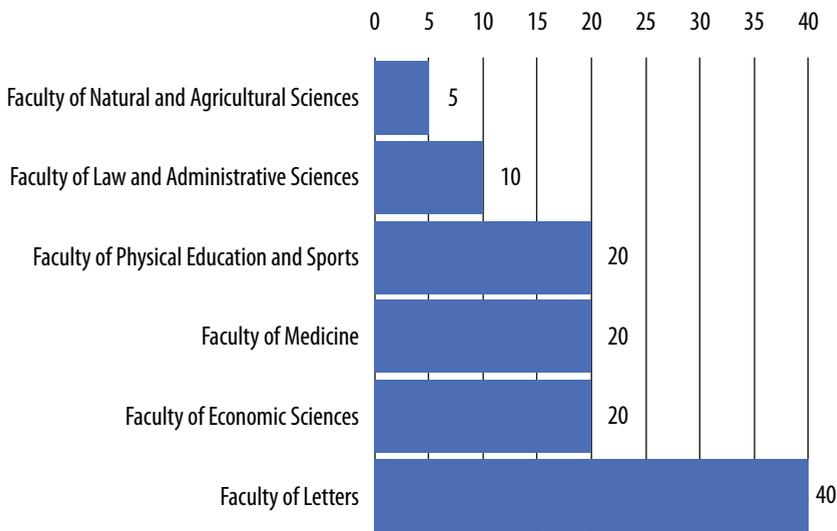


Figure 16. Distribution of Ukrainian students at the faculties UOC (in %)

Source: own elaboration.

The conditions under which students study vary significantly depending on their status and the programme in which they are enrolled. Approximately 40% of students benefit from scholarships and are exempt from paying tuition fees, which represents significant support provided by the Romanian state or other international institutions. These students benefit from favourable financial conditions, allowing them to focus on their academic progress without the burden of financial concerns.

A smaller proportion, around 10%, studies tuition-free but without scholarships, meaning they do not have to pay for their education, but they do not receive any additional financial support either. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among students who benefit from specific educational facilities provided by the Romanian state, yet do not meet the criteria for scholarship grants.

On the other hand, 20% of students pay tuition fees in Romanian lei (CPL), typically at the rate established for citizens from outside the European Union. These students generally come from families that can afford to financially support their studies without relying on external assistance.

A significant proportion, 30%, pays tuition fees in foreign currency (CPV), primarily students enrolled in programs taught in English, such as medicine. This segment is noteworthy due to the elevated fees imposed on non-EU citizens and for programmes taught in foreign languages, such as international medicine programmes (Figure 17).

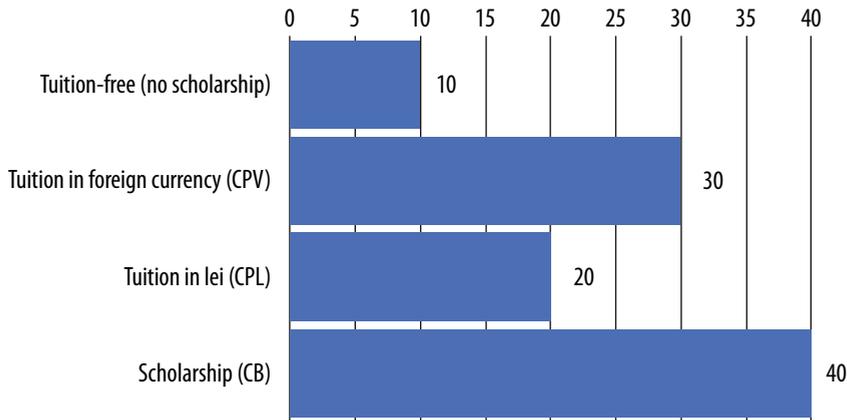


Figure 17. Financial support for Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)

Source: own elaboration.

The academic progress of Ukrainian students is generally stable, but there are cases where they have faced challenges regarding the continuity of their studies. About 10% of these students have benefited from extended study periods, indicating a need to prolong the duration of their studies for academic or personal reasons. Additionally, a small number of students have had to resort to resuming studies or re-enrolment, either due to temporary interruptions or financial or familial reasons.

The Romanian educational system is distinguished by its flexibility, as evidenced by its provisions for the resumption of studies or the extension of study periods. This flexibility is indicative of a significant degree of adaptability in supporting international students. In the context of Ukrainian students, this support assumes particular significance in light of the prevailing geopolitical climate and the potential challenges they may encounter in their home country (Figure 18).

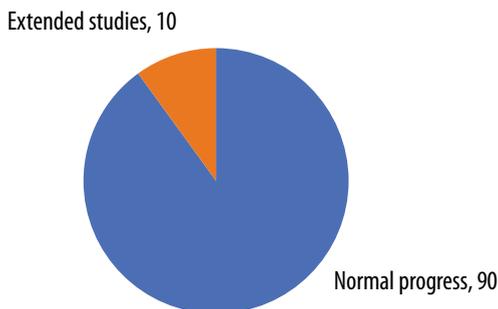


Figure 18. Academic progress of Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)

Source: own elaboration.

4.3.5. Qualitative analysis – results from round tables at Ovidius University in Constanta

The present study has been designed to explore the challenges and opportunities encountered by Ukrainian students at Ovidius University in Constanța. The data presented herein were collected through a focus group conducted during the “Building Bridges” workshop, which formed part of the European Inclusion of Ukrainian Students (EIUS) project, funded by the Erasmus+ program. The participants comprised 18 Ukrainian students, 31 Romanian students, and 26 faculty members, ensuring a diverse and representative sample.

The study employed a qualitative research approach, utilising the focus group method to facilitate an in-depth exploration of relevant topics through open discussions. The data collection took place on 16 May 2024 in the Google Room of the Corp A campus at Ovidius University, where the workshop fostered a conducive environment for constructive dialogue between students and faculty members. The discussions were overseen by experienced facilitators and covered topics such as integration challenges, positive experiences, academic opportunities, and strategies to enhance inclusivity within the academic environment.

Participants were selected to represent a broad range of perspectives: These comprised Ukrainian students from various study programmes and years of study, Romanian students who contributed local insights, and faculty members who offered an academic and pedagogical perspective on the integration process.

The data collection process entailed the conduction of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth examination of each topic, while participant observation provided valuable insights into the behaviours and interactions of the participants.

Thematic analysis was employed for the analysis of the data. The raw data were coded to identify recurring themes, which were subsequently categorized and refined

for coherence and relevance. The findings were compiled into a comprehensive report, offering insights and recommendations aimed at improving the integration process for Ukrainian students at the university.

4.3.5.1. Responses from the perspective of Romanian students

Advantages of cultural diversity: How does the presence of Ukrainian students enrich our university's academic environment, particularly by bringing diverse perspectives to group projects?

Cultural diversity as an academic enrichment: A substantial proportion of the responses highlighted the pivotal function of Ukrainian students in enriching the academic environment through their cultural diversity. The prevailing sentiment is that cultural diversity enhances academic discourse and the educational experience. It is noteworthy that respondents frequently cited the manner in which Ukrainian students introduce unique perspectives in group projects, thereby suggesting that exposure to different cultural contexts broadens their own understanding and contributes to a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment.

The integration of diverse cultural viewpoints is particularly noted for fostering a more vibrant dialogue within academic settings, such as group projects and discussions. It is further emphasised by respondents that the cultural backgrounds of Ukrainian students facilitate a spectrum of ideas that challenge conventional thought processes. It is further reported that Ukrainian students contribute alternative approaches and solutions, aiding in the development of innovative ideas and creative problem-solving. For instance, respondents have noted that the presence of new traditions, social customs, and varying educational backgrounds among Ukrainian students has been a catalyst for novel perspectives, which, in turn, have contributed to a more nuanced approach to complex subjects.

The notion of “cultural sensitivity” is also emphasised, indicating a value placed on understanding diverse social norms and cultural practices. Many responses reflect a respect for intercultural awareness, hinting at a transformation in students' social competencies, as they learn to empathise with, and respect, different viewpoints and values. This exposure is described as an educational advantage that not only broadens academic horizons but also prepares students for a globally connected world, where such sensitivity is invaluable.

Challenges in communication and language barriers: While a significant proportion of responses highlighted the positive impact of Ukrainian students' presence, a subset of responses acknowledged the challenges posed by language barriers. The issue of language competency, specifically English, is cited as a limiting factor that sometimes hinders effective communication and collaboration. Some respondents reported

difficulties in engaging meaningfully with their Ukrainian peers due to these barriers, suggesting that linguistic limitations may curtail the potential benefits of cultural exchange.

The phrase “does not contribute because they do not know English” reflects a sense of frustration among some Romanian students, possibly indicative of unfulfilled expectations regarding communication within a shared academic setting. This observation also underscores a more general issue concerning the role of language proficiency as a prerequisite for social and academic integration in internationalised educational spaces. While the inclusion of international students is acknowledged, it is imperative for universities to address linguistic challenges to facilitate more seamless interactions and collaborative learning experiences.

Furthermore, these challenges underscore a conspicuous absence in the support systems for international students, as language barriers are not merely an academic impediment but also a hindrance to the formation of social connections. The responses thus highlight a need for enhanced language support mechanisms, such as preparatory language programs or peer tutoring, which could empower Ukrainian students to engage more fully with their Romanian counterparts, thereby maximizing the mutual benefits of cultural diversity.

Social integration and interpersonal growth: Another recurrent theme in the responses is the view that the presence of Ukrainian students fosters not only academic benefits but also personal growth for Romanian students. It is noteworthy that respondents frequently underscore the promotion of values such as openness, tolerance, and mutual respect through interaction with Ukrainian students. For instance, respondents alluding to “learning to be human” and “learning to be open to communication” suggest a more profound, introspective impact on Romanian students. Such reflections imply that multicultural interactions encourage a re-evaluation of social attitudes and contribute to developing a broader worldview.

This side of interpersonal development is not confined to academic environments but extends to social interactions, where students reportedly cultivate friendships and exchange life philosophies. The observations indicate that Ukrainian students offer Romanian students a chance to encounter and engage with life perspectives that differ from their own, thereby encouraging critical and empathetic thinking about diverse life experiences. The expression of curiosity and appreciation for cultural exchange, as evidenced by the mention of “learning new customs, traditions, and new words”, reflects a deeper level of engagement with cultural diversity that extends beyond the confines of the classroom. This fosters a sense of community where students feel enriched by the presence of international peers, contributing to a more vibrant and culturally inclusive learning environment.

However, there is a sense that the integration process is not universally smooth, as some students express reservations about the extent of Ukrainian students' contribution to the academic environment. This ambivalence may hint at latent biases or at the need for institutional initiatives that facilitate smoother integration, such as cultural exchange programs or shared extracurricular activities, which could help foster positive interactions and mutual respect among students.

Enrichment of academic dialogues and collaborative creativity: In addition to facilitating social integration, Ukrainian students are commended for their role in encouraging more inclusive and collaborative academic dialogues. Their contributions are often lauded for the value they add to group projects through their unique perspectives, which are said to stimulate creativity and innovation. Their diverse approaches to problem-solving, influenced by their cultural and educational backgrounds, are perceived as a welcome addition to the university's academic environment.

This observation aligns with the notion that collaborative learning in multicultural contexts fosters constructive outcomes, allowing students to integrate diverse viewpoints to reach comprehensive and well-rounded conclusions. It is further reported that Romanian students working alongside their Ukrainian counterparts experience an enhancement in their capacity for critical and creative thinking, attributable to exposure to unconventional approaches and problem-solving techniques. The notion of "new mentalities" and "different ways of perceiving our educational system" underscores the recognition on the part of Romanian students of the potential of alternative perspectives to stimulate intellectual curiosity and foster academic growth.

Moreover, this collaborative creativity is linked to the broader goal of intercultural competence, as Romanian students gain insight into diverse cognitive and cultural frameworks that may be less common in a monocultural environment. The experience of working with Ukrainian students is a valuable preparatory experience for future professional environments, where teamwork and diversity are often essential components.

Perspectives on contribution and value of Ukrainian students: Finally, a clear dichotomy exists in perceptions of Ukrainian students' overall contribution to the university environment. While many responses are favourable, acknowledging the academic and social enrichment contributed by Ukrainian students, some responses are more equivocal or even negative. These voices of dissent are indicative of a perception that Ukrainian students may not always assimilate seamlessly or contribute equally to group endeavours, with some attributing this to language or cultural differences.

For instance, phrases such as "does not contribute" and "no added value" suggest that some students do not perceive a direct benefit from the inclusion of Ukrainian students. This perception may stem from unmet expectations regarding linguistic or academic proficiency, as previously mentioned, or from a lack of understanding of how cultural diversity indirectly enhances the educational experience. These responses highlight

the potential need for educational institutions to proactively emphasise and facilitate the benefits of cultural integration, with a view to raising awareness of the long-term advantages that multicultural environments can offer.

The contrasting views also reveal the subjective nature of cultural appreciation, as individuals' perceptions of diversity are shaped by their own experiences and predispositions. For students who embrace multicultural engagement, the presence of Ukrainian students can be a significant benefit, while for others, perceived language barriers or differences in academic background may overshadow potential advantages. This discrepancy underscores the necessity for the deliberate creation of structured opportunities for intercultural interaction, which have the potential to mitigate misunderstandings and assist students in recognizing the value of diversity in educational settings.

Academic cooperation: Do you believe that collaboration with Ukrainian students can enhance academic performance by integrating different types of knowledge and skills to achieve common goals?

Academic enrichment through cross-cultural collaboration: A recurrent theme in the responses is the conviction that collaboration with Ukrainian students has the potential to considerably enhance academic performance. Many Romanian students perceive the integration of diverse knowledge and competencies as a valuable asset that facilitates a more effective and innovative learning experience. The notion of “integrating different types of knowledge and skills” is frequently cited, with respondents observing that these interactions can result in more comprehensive and well-rounded academic outcomes. This notion reflects an appreciation for the fresh perspectives and unique insights that Ukrainian students contribute to group projects, which, according to the respondents, stimulate critical thinking and foster creative problem-solving.

The academic benefit of this diversity is emphasised in responses that describe collaborative projects as opportunities to “explore diverse perspectives,” which contribute to individual and collective growth. These responses suggest that students recognise the academic value of working with individuals from different educational backgrounds, as such interactions challenge students to question assumptions and consider alternative approaches to academic problems. This dynamic not only enriches the learning process but also prepares students to think critically and creatively in an increasingly interconnected academic landscape.

Enhancement of intercultural competence: In addition to academic performance, the responses emphasise the development of intercultural skills as a key outcome of collaboration with Ukrainian students. Romanian students frequently mention that working alongside Ukrainian peers helps them become more culturally sensitive, adaptable, and empathetic. The phrase “collaborating with people from different nationalities” is used repeatedly, indicating a broad awareness of the importance of intercultural

competence in a globalised world. This perspective is consistent with the notion that exposure to diverse cultural contexts equips students with essential communication and adaptability skills.

Furthermore, respondents frequently express that such collaboration facilitates the acquisition of knowledge concerning novel customs, languages, and social norms, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a more inclusive and globally aware university community. The development of intercultural competence is regarded as a vital skill for future professional environments, where teamwork and diversity are valued. The responses indicate that these competencies not only enhance academic collaboration but also foster an environment on campus where cultural differences are celebrated and respected, thereby encouraging a more cohesive and supportive learning community.

Diversity as a catalyst for innovation and creativity: Numerous responses have been proffered which posit that the diversity contributed by Ukrainian students engenders increased creativity and innovation within academic settings. Students frequently observe that the diverse backgrounds and distinctive experiences of Ukrainian students engender novel concepts and viewpoints, which are pivotal in addressing intricate academic challenges. Moreover, Romanian students have reported that the integration of diverse approaches has enabled the formulation of innovative and effective solutions. This notion is further accentuated by the emphasis placed on the significance of “stimulating critical and innovative thinking” through exposure to diverse viewpoints.

The responses highlight that such diversity is not only beneficial for generating creative solutions but also for enriching the academic discourse. The integration of ideas and interpretations from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds fosters a more expansive and sophisticated academic discourse. This collaborative innovation is particularly valued in group projects, where the integration of multiple perspectives allows for a more holistic approach to academic objectives, benefiting the entire team and fostering a learning environment that values creativity.

The network of international collaboration: Another noteworthy theme that emerged from the respondents’ responses was the perception that collaboration with Ukrainian students serves to expand the university’s international network. Students frequently mention that interactions with their Ukrainian peers provide valuable connections, which can facilitate future academic and professional collaborations. This perception is indicative of a recognition of the long-term benefits that such partnerships can offer, particularly as students prepare to enter globalised industries where international contacts are advantageous.

The responses indicate that these connections are not limited to social benefits but extend to academic enrichment. By collaborating with Ukrainian students, Romanian students reportedly gain access to different academic perspectives and methodologies,

which can enhance their own understanding of their fields of study. The references to “international career opportunities” and “networking advantages” indicate a strategic awareness of how these connections can influence students’ professional trajectories. For a significant proportion of respondents, the opportunity to establish an international network through these academic collaborations is a motivating factor that underscores the value of integrating Ukrainian students into the academic environment.

Diverse opinions on the necessity of collaboration: Whilst the majority of respondents expressed a favourable view of the initiative, a minority of students voiced reservations regarding the necessity of collaboration with Ukrainian students. These responses imply that some Romanian students possess sufficient competence to achieve academic success independently, without the need for additional perspectives. Statements such as “Romanian students are competent enough” appear to reveal an underlying belief that the existing academic skills within the local student body are adequate for achieving high academic standards.

This viewpoint highlights a divergence in attitudes toward collaboration, where some students perceive it as supplementary rather than essential. For these individuals, collaboration with Ukrainian students may be perceived as advantageous in certain contexts but not as a pivotal factor in academic success. This ambivalence may stem from a lack of exposure to the potential benefits of diversity or from previous experiences where collaboration was not effectively structured to maximize its value. These responses suggest that while cross-cultural collaboration is widely appreciated, there are opportunities for the university to further demonstrate its academic benefits to those who remain unconvinced.

Conditions for successful academic collaboration: The responses indicate a consensus that the success of cross-cultural academic collaboration is contingent on the presence of conducive conditions. For instance, certain students emphasise the significance of faculty assistance in fostering a sense of integration among Ukrainian students within the educational system. Statements such as “Ukrainian students need the support of professors” indicate an awareness of the challenges that international students may face, including potential discrimination or difficulties adapting to a new academic environment.

This standpoint highlights that effective collaboration necessitates more than merely a diverse composition of participants; it also requires a conducive infrastructure that addresses cultural and linguistic barriers. Romanian students recognise that the university has a role to play in facilitating integration, whether through language support programmes, faculty training, or initiatives that foster a welcoming campus atmosphere. This acknowledgement signifies an awareness that the advantages of cross-cultural collaboration are optimised when all students feel equally included and supported within the academic environment.

Collaborative learning and mutual growth: Finally, the responses conveyed a shared belief that academic collaboration fosters mutual growth among both Romanian and Ukrainian students. Many respondents describe this partnership as a process of shared learning, where each group benefits from the other's strengths and insights. The comments made by the respondents further substantiate this viewpoint, with statements such as "we can evolve together, both personally and professionally" suggesting that the students perceive this collaboration as a conduit for comprehensive development. Romanian students further report that working with their Ukrainian peers facilitates learning not only about academic subjects but also about personal and professional skills that will serve them in diverse contexts.

This perspective reflects an appreciation for the reciprocal nature of academic collaboration, where each student contributes to, and benefits from, a collective learning experience. The recognition of shared growth underscores a commitment to building a university community that values each student's unique contributions and fosters an environment where students can achieve their academic and personal potential through collaboration.

Interdisciplinary opportunities: Considering the diverse perspectives and skills of Ukrainian students, what types of interdisciplinary projects or study topics do you think could be developed collaboratively?

Cultural and comparative studies as a foundation for interdisciplinary projects: A recurrent theme in the responses is the potential for projects that explore cultural diversity through comparative studies. A significant proportion of Romanian students have proposed projects that investigate the similarities and differences between Romanian and Ukrainian cultures, histories, and social norms. For instance, a recurrent proposal is for the undertaking of "cultural and literary studies," a course of study which would facilitate the exploration and comprehension of both the commonalities and the divergences between the two cultures. This interest is indicative of a desire to utilise interdisciplinary projects as a means of bridging cultural gaps and fostering mutual understanding.

The focus on comparative studies also extends to the analysis of educational systems and public policies. By examining the differences in the approaches to education and governance in Romania and Ukraine, it is believed that valuable insights can be gained into the strengths and weaknesses of each system. The implementation of such interdisciplinary projects fosters an exchange of ideas, encouraging students to critically analyse their own systems while learning from the practices of their international peers. Such comparative studies have the potential to serve as a foundation for further interdisciplinary research, thereby contributing to a more enriching academic experience for all participants.

Sustainability and environmental studies: Another recurrent theme pertains to the interest in sustainability and environmental studies, domains in which the diverse perspectives of Ukrainian students could offer valuable insights. A significant proportion of the responses under consideration emphasise that projects addressing the subjects of “resource management” and “renewable energy” would benefit from an interdisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from environmental science, economics, engineering, and social studies. It is further posited that the unique vantage point of Ukrainian students, honed through their training in these areas, could offer novel solutions, particularly in the realm of sustainable natural resource management and the development of green energy solutions.

The responses indicate that such projects would benefit not only from the technical skills of Ukrainian students but also from their experience with different environmental challenges and regulatory frameworks. For instance, a project on “energy sustainability” might examine Ukraine’s approach to renewable energy sources and compare it with Romanian policies, thereby enabling students to develop comprehensive and context-sensitive strategies. The emphasis on interdisciplinary research in this area is indicative of an emerging awareness among students of the significance of sustainable development and the value of diverse perspectives in addressing global environmental issues.

Health and social impact of crises: Health studies, especially those focusing on the social impact of crises, emerge as another key area where interdisciplinary collaboration is highly valued. Romanian students have expressed a keen interest in exploring public health topics that could benefit from the experiences of Ukrainian students, particularly in relation to managing healthcare in crisis situations. In response to a survey, it was indicated that projects on “public health systems in crisis contexts” could integrate knowledge from fields such as medicine, sociology, and political science, drawing on the experiences of Ukrainian students who may have first-hand insights into managing healthcare during times of conflict.

The proposed projects would facilitate not only academic exchange but also allow students to develop practical solutions for healthcare challenges. Romanian students recognise that Ukrainian students’ unique experiences with crisis management could enhance their understanding of resilient healthcare systems, making this area an ideal focus for interdisciplinary collaboration. The proposed projects underscore the potential of cross-cultural partnerships to cultivate a more profound comprehension of the social and health-related ramifications of crises, a domain of study that has witnessed a marked increase in relevance in recent years.

Technology and innovation: Interdisciplinary projects focusing on technology and innovation are also highly recommended by the respondents. Students suggest projects that address “the impact of technology on society” and propose solutions

for various social challenges. This interest reflects an understanding of the role that technological innovation plays in shaping contemporary society and the belief that Ukrainian students could contribute technical expertise to these projects.

For instance, respondents propose “IT applications for social issues,” where Ukrainian students with backgrounds in information technology could collaborate with students in social sciences to develop apps or platforms addressing social problems. The responses indicate that these interdisciplinary initiatives have the potential to yield practical outcomes with real-world applications, such as platforms that support social integration or educational resources. The combination of technical proficiency and social science acumen is poised to yield novel solutions that are both impactful and sensitive to the diverse needs of populations.

Social and community development projects: Projects that focus on social and community development are another area where Romanian students see significant potential for collaboration with Ukrainian students. Many responses advocate for projects that address “social and economic issues” through an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together students from various academic backgrounds to propose community-based solutions. For example, students mention “community development projects” aimed at tackling local and regional challenges, such as poverty, education, and social inclusion.

These projects emphasize the importance of involving Ukrainian students, who may have unique insights into social development due to their own cultural and social backgrounds. By working together on initiatives such as “community-based projects for addressing social challenges,” students can develop strategies that are inclusive and tailored to the needs of different communities. This approach aligns with a broader interest in promoting social equity and reflects an understanding that complex social issues require a multifaceted, interdisciplinary response.

Political science and international relations: Another frequently mentioned area is political science, particularly in relation to international relations and conflict studies. Romanian students have expressed an interest in projects that would explore the “impact of conflicts and international policies” on local communities and environmental conditions. It is asserted by these students that the incorporation of Ukrainian student perspectives, drawing upon their first-hand experiences of ongoing conflicts, could significantly enhance the depth and richness of these academic pursuits, offering unique insights into the political and social ramifications of such confrontations.

Such interdisciplinary undertakings are poised to draw in students hailing from a myriad of disciplines, including political science, sociology and environmental studies, thus facilitating a multifaceted examination of subjects pertaining to conflict and peace-building. The responses indicate that such projects would not only deepen students’ understanding of global politics but also foster a more empathetic perspective on the human consequences of international policies. The collaborative exploration

of these subjects reflects a shared interest in developing a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding international relations, an area of study with considerable relevance in today's globalised world.

Heritage preservation and cultural exchange: Finally, heritage preservation and cultural exchange projects are proposed as a means for interdisciplinary collaboration that would capitalise on the unique cultural heritage of Ukrainian students. Many responses emphasise the value of projects focused on “cultural heritage conservation” and “cultural traditions,” where students could explore the preservation of historical landmarks, art forms, and traditions. These projects are expected to encourage students to engage with each other's cultural backgrounds, fostering a mutual appreciation for the history and customs of both countries.

The preservation and study of cultural heritage is a task suited to a collaborative effort between students from different disciplines, including history, anthropology, and the arts. Such a joint undertaking would ensure the maintenance and celebration of cultural traditions. This approach underscores a recognition of cultural heritage as a crucial element of identity and reflects a desire to promote cultural awareness and understanding through academic collaboration.

Linguistic challenges: What difficulties do you encounter when communicating with Ukrainian students due to language differences? Do you feel that these differences hinder effective communication?

Language barriers as a primary challenge: The responses indicate overwhelmingly that language barriers are the most significant obstacle in communicating with Ukrainian students. Numerous Romanian students have noted that the absence of a common language frequently results in misunderstandings and impedes effective communication. The phrases “difficulty in understanding ideas or intentions” and “inability to fully convey thoughts” underscore the struggles students face when trying to navigate conversations in English or Romanian. For some students, the challenges are heightened by a lack of familiarity with technical or academic jargon, which can complicate discussions and lead to misinterpretations.

This phenomenon is not confined to day-to-day interactions but extends to academic discourse as well, with students reporting instances where their Ukrainian peers encounter difficulties in comprehending sophisticated concepts or instructions. The response highlighting the “literal translations or different interpretations of expressions” suggests that even when English is used as a common language, subtle differences in phrasing and expression can lead to confusion. This limitation has the effect of restricting the depth and quality of communication, and consequently making it more difficult for students to engage in meaningful dialogue and complete collaborative projects effectively.

Cultural differences in communication styles: In addition to linguistic challenges, several responses emphasise cultural differences in communication styles as an added layer of complexity. Romanian students observe that communication styles in their interactions with Ukrainian students can vary considerably, with some cultures placing significant emphasis on politeness and indirectness, while others adopt a more straightforward approach. This divergence can, on occasion, result in misunderstandings, as students may misinterpret intentions or tone. The response that references “styles of communication in different cultures” points to a recognition among Romanian students that these differences impact collaboration, particularly when they are compounded by language barriers.

These cultural nuances influence how students express themselves and interpret one another’s words, which can lead to unintentional misunderstandings or even conflicts. For instance, students have noted that Ukrainian peers may encounter difficulties in contributing meaningfully to discussions if they are uncertain about how their contributions will be received or if they perceive a risk of misunderstanding. This dynamic underscores the need for greater cultural sensitivity, as awareness of these differences can help students approach conversations more openly and with a better understanding of potential communication gaps.

Limited proficiency in a shared language: Whilst a significant proportion of respondents assert that English is employed as a common language, a number of students have indicated that neither they nor their Ukrainian peers possess complete ease with it. For instance, some Romanian students have remarked that their own English proficiency is not particularly strong, which serves to compound the difficulty of communicating with peers who may also have limited proficiency. This phenomenon is exemplified by statements such as “English is not my strong point” and “they barely understand a few words in English.” These remarks illustrate how limited language proficiency on both sides can create additional barriers to clear communication.

The acknowledgement of these challenges by Romanian students indicates that language difficulties are not exclusive to Ukrainian students. This shared limitation has the effect of complicating communication, as students are sometimes unable to convey complex ideas effectively. Some students have expressed a willingness to utilise tools such as Google Translate to overcome these barriers, though they recognise the limitations of such tools and the potential for additional misunderstandings. This dynamic reveals an underlying tension in using a secondary language for academic collaboration, where both groups may lack the proficiency needed for nuanced discussions.

Misinterpretation of instructions and academic tasks: A recurrent theme in the responses is the misinterpretation of instructions or academic tasks, which has the potential to impede the progress of collaborative projects. Some Romanian students have expressed frustration regarding their Ukrainian peers’ misunderstanding of assignment

requirements or their divergent interpretation of instructions, attributable to language and cultural differences. This phenomenon is often cited as a contributing factor to inefficiency, as it can result in students having to allocate additional time to clarifying details or redoing tasks that were not completed as expected.

The response that describes “interpretation issues due to linguistic and cultural differences” illustrates this challenge, as Romanian students find themselves needing to rephrase or simplify instructions to bridge communication gaps. This predicament assumes particular significance within academic settings, where precise understanding of instructions is paramount. These challenges underscore the necessity for enhanced structured support, such as guidance from instructors or the establishment of standardised communication practices, with the aim of preventing misunderstandings and promoting consistency in collaborative endeavours.

Solutions and adaptive strategies for mitigating language challenges: Notwithstanding the barriers that have been identified, a number of students have expressed the opinion that communication challenges can be mitigated through the implementation of adaptive strategies. For instance, responses that mention “providing more language classes” or “allowing more time for language practice” indicate a belief that language skills can be developed over time, which would ease communication between Romanian and Ukrainian students. Romanian students recognise that language acquisition is a gradual process and acknowledge the potential benefits of structured support for Ukrainian students to improve their Romanian or English language skills.

Another adaptive strategy that was mentioned is the use of technology, such as Google Translate, which students feel can serve as a temporary solution to facilitate communication. While acknowledging the limitations of such tools, students perceive them as beneficial for basic conversations and as a conduit for more challenging language gaps. Furthermore, some students have expressed a willingness to engage in joint English language practice, perceiving these interactions as a means of enhancing their own linguistic competencies. This collaborative approach to language learning fosters a sense of mutual support and positions linguistic challenges as opportunities for personal growth rather than solely as obstacles.

Opportunities for intercultural skill development: Beyond the immediate challenges, several responses suggest that these linguistic barriers present opportunities for developing intercultural communication skills. Some Romanian students note that engaging with Ukrainian peers, despite the language differences, has helped them become more adaptable and patient in their communication efforts. One response highlights the value of these interactions in developing proficiency in a second language, underscoring the perception among Romanian students that navigating these challenges fosters enhancement in their own linguistic competence and intercultural sensitivity.

It is evident that students recognise the value of making an effort to understand one another, perceiving it as a means of enhancing their university experience and contributing to a more inclusive academic environment. These challenges are perceived as catalysts for acquiring pivotal skills, including empathy, active listening, and creative problem-solving. This perspective is indicative of a favourable attitude towards the linguistic and cultural diversity present at Ovidius University, and it suggests that students are willing to invest additional effort to bridge communication gaps and foster a collaborative academic community.

Cultural misunderstandings: Do you experience difficulties due to Ukrainian students' lack of understanding of cultural norms and customs? How do you think this lack of knowledge affects their adaptation?

Social isolation and challenges in building connections: One of the most frequently expressed concerns pertains to the risk of social isolation for Ukrainian students, which is attributed to cultural misunderstandings. Numerous Romanian students have noted that Ukrainian students may encounter difficulties in navigating local social conventions, which can impede their ability to establish social connections and feel integrated within the academic community. The challenges faced by Ukrainian students in adapting to Romanian social conventions are exemplified by phrases such as “difficulty integrating into the community” and “feeling marginalized”. This predicament frequently gives rise to feelings of alienation, as Ukrainian students may experience a sense of dislocation in social settings where local customs and norms differ significantly from their own.

The responses indicate that these difficulties are particularly pronounced in informal interactions, where Ukrainian students may be unintentionally excluded by their Romanian peers due to differences in behaviour or communication style. For instance, Romanian students have noted that some Ukrainian students appear reluctant to engage with local social practices, which can result in a sense of distance and reduced opportunities for interpersonal connection. This dynamic underscores the significance of cultural orientation programmes, which could familiarise Ukrainian students with Romanian customs, thereby helping to bridge the observed cultural gaps and foster a sense of belonging within the university community.

Misinterpretation of behavioural norms: Another salient issue that has been posited pertains to the potential for misinterpretation of behaviours, which may arise from divergent cultural norms. Romanian students have highlighted that actions or expressions that are considered polite or appropriate in one culture may be interpreted differently in another. For instance, responses allude to the possibility of misinterpretation in communication styles, where gestures, tone, or social cues might carry divergent meanings. One student illustrates how “differences in politeness or directness” can

engender confusion, as behaviours regarded as respectful in Ukraine might not conform to Romanian standards.

These misunderstandings have the potential to influence the perception of Ukrainian students by their Romanian peers, which can result in unintended conflicts or misconceptions. Romanian students have noted that this absence of cultural knowledge can engender friction in both academic and social interactions, as divergent expectations regarding behaviour can be misinterpreted as arrogance or disinterest. This underscores the necessity for intercultural awareness and education among all students, as understanding these differences can help prevent unnecessary conflicts and facilitate smoother interactions.

Academic adjustment and cultural expectations: Cultural misunderstandings also extend into academic settings, where Ukrainian students may be unfamiliar with local expectations for academic behaviour and performance. Romanian students have noted that Ukrainian students often exhibit divergent academic habits and approaches, which can result in challenges in collaborative projects or classroom interactions. One response highlights that Ukrainian students may “struggle with adapting to the academic style,” which suggests that Romanian students recognize a divergence in educational practices and standards between the two countries.

These adjustments are often arduous for Ukrainian students, as they must learn to navigate new academic norms while adapting to a foreign cultural environment. Romanian students recognise that without an understanding of local academic expectations, Ukrainian students might face difficulties in meeting standards for class participation, teamwork, or assignment requirements. This awareness underscores the potential benefits of academic orientation programmes, which are designed to introduce Ukrainian students to Romanian educational practices, thereby facilitating more seamless adjustment and enhancing their academic experience.

Emotional impact and psychological stress: It has been asserted by numerous respondents that cultural misunderstandings can have a significant emotional impact, with the process of adapting to a novel cultural environment being a source of stress and anxiety for Ukrainian students. Romanian students observe that a lack of familiarity with local norms can contribute to feelings of frustration, confusion, and even isolation. One response describes how the “lack of knowledge of local norms can intensify stress,” reflecting an understanding that cultural adaptation is not merely a social or academic challenge but also an emotional one.

The psychological distress associated with these cultural adjustments has the potential to adversely impact Ukrainian students’ mental health and overall well-being. Romanian students have proposed that a lack of familiarity with Romanian customs may heighten anxiety, particularly in social situations, as Ukrainian students may feel uncertain about how to behave or respond to local norms. This observation underscores

the significance of establishing a conducive environment where Ukrainian students feel at ease in seeking assistance and articulating their concerns. Such a setting may be facilitated through mentorship programs, peer support networks, or counselling services.

Open-mindedness and opportunities for cultural exchange: Notwithstanding the challenges encountered, a proportion of Romanian students have expressed a more optimistic perspective, observing that Ukrainian students frequently exhibit a willingness to acquaint themselves with Romanian culture and to adapt over time. These observations imply that, while cultural misunderstandings may act as obstacles, they are not insurmountable. Romanian students who have had positive interactions with Ukrainian peers observe that these students are generally willing to engage with local customs and are interested in building connections. One response highlights the belief that “with time, these differences will become normalised”, suggesting that Romanian students subscribe to the notion that cultural adaptation is a gradual process that can be facilitated through mutual openness and understanding.

This perspective is indicative of a recognition that cultural differences, while challenging, also present opportunities for cultural exchange and learning. Romanian students further posit that intercultural interactions have the potential to enhance the university experience for both groups, fostering empathy and broadening perspectives. This viewpoint underscores the potential for a positive and inclusive environment where Romanian and Ukrainian students can share their cultural backgrounds and learn from one another, transforming cultural differences into a source of mutual growth.

Suggested solutions for supporting cultural adaptation: In order to address the challenges identified, Romanian students have proposed a number of solutions. These solutions emphasise the necessity of cultural orientation and support programmes. A significant proportion of the responses advocate for the implementation of structured initiatives, including “cultural orientation sessions” and “mentorship programs,” which are designed to assist Ukrainian students in acclimatizing to Romanian norms and customs. These initiatives are predicated on the premise that they would provide Ukrainian students with the resources and guidance necessary to navigate local expectations in both academic and social contexts, thereby facilitating their adaptation.

Furthermore, the recommendation of open dialogue and the facilitation of intercultural workshops has been put forward as a means of fostering mutual understanding and mitigating the potential for misunderstandings. The provision of a platform for the discussion of cultural differences and the sharing of experiences is proposed as a means of enabling both Romanian and Ukrainian students to navigate cultural nuances more effectively. Responses also highlight the importance of peer support, suggesting that pairing Ukrainian students with Romanian mentors or “cultural buddies” could offer them a reliable source of information and support as they adjust to their new environment.

Insufficient support resources: What gaps do you observe in the support resources available for Ukrainian students at your university? Do you believe that the assistance currently provided meets their needs?

Insufficient linguistic support: A recurrent issue identified in the responses is the absence of adequate linguistic support for Ukrainian students. Many Romanian students emphasise that language barriers are a recurring challenge for their Ukrainian peers, especially in academic and social settings. Responses allude to “limited access to linguistic resources” and the necessity for more “language courses” that are specifically designed for international students. While some English-language resources are available, Romanian students suggest that these may not be adequate for Ukrainian students who are not proficient in English or Romanian.

The respondents recommend that the university expand its language support options, proposing additional courses in Romanian and English that could help Ukrainian students improve their language skills and participate more fully in academic activities. Furthermore, the suggestion has been made that bilingual course delivery or the provision of translated materials could alleviate some of these linguistic challenges, thereby enabling Ukrainian students to engage more effectively with course content. This feedback emphasises the crucial role of linguistic support in facilitating the academic success of Ukrainian students and fostering their integration into the university community.

Limited cultural orientation and integration programs: Another prominent theme is the perceived lack of cultural orientation and integration programs designed to help Ukrainian students adapt to the local academic and social environment. Several Romanian students note that Ukrainian students may face difficulties understanding local customs and norms, which can impede their ability to feel comfortable and connected. The absence of structured cultural orientation programs is mentioned as a key barrier, with students suggesting that more “dedicated cultural integration programs” could help Ukrainian students navigate these challenges.

The responses indicate that Romanian students view cultural orientation as essential not only for Ukrainian students but also for fostering a more inclusive academic community. The recommendations put forward include the introduction of orientation sessions that address local customs, social expectations, and academic norms, as well as the organisation of intercultural events where Ukrainian students can share aspects of their own culture. The promotion of cultural exchange and understanding through these initiatives has the potential to enhance Ukrainian students’ sense of belonging and facilitate smoother interactions with Romanian students and faculty.

Need for academic mentoring and personalized guidance: Romanian students have also highlighted the necessity for more personalised academic support that is tailored to the unique needs of Ukrainian students. It is noteworthy that several responses

allude to the existence of general academic support measures, yet observe that these may not be adequately adapted to cater to the specific challenges confronted by international students. It is asserted by Romanian students that the implementation of “personalised academic counselling” and “mentorship programmes” could facilitate the effective navigation of Ukrainian students through the university’s academic expectations and available resources.

This feedback highlights the potential value of pairing Ukrainian students with mentors, whether faculty members or senior students, who can offer individualised support. The provision of such mentorship has the potential to assist Ukrainian students in comprehending the academic system, establishing realistic objectives, and cultivating effective study strategies. Furthermore, personalised academic guidance has the potential to address specific concerns related to language barriers, cultural differences, or unfamiliar teaching styles. This, in turn, could enhance Ukrainian students’ academic success and overall satisfaction.

Psychological and emotional support: Several responses suggest that Ukrainian students might benefit from additional psychological and emotional support, particularly as they adjust to a new country and academic environment. Romanian students recognize that adapting to a foreign culture can be stressful, especially for students dealing with linguistic or cultural challenges. However, some respondents feel that the existing psychological resources may not be adequately tailored to meet the specific emotional needs of international students.

In response, Romanian students have proposed an enhancement to the university’s psychological support services, namely the introduction of counselling specifically designed for international students. The focus of this counselling would be on issues such as cultural adjustment, language stress, and isolation. Furthermore, they advocate for the provision of easily accessible mental health resources that are sensitive to the unique cultural backgrounds of Ukrainian students. This feedback reflects an awareness of the psychological impact of cultural adaptation and a belief that more targeted mental health support could improve the well-being of Ukrainian students and facilitate their integration.

Financial resources and practical support: Financial challenges are another area where Romanian students feel that additional support may be beneficial for Ukrainian students. Responses mention the importance of “scholarships or separate financial aid” that could alleviate the economic pressures Ukrainian students may face when studying in a new country. Some students suggest that financial support could also include subsidized housing, meal plans, or transportation, making it easier for Ukrainian students to manage living expenses while focusing on their studies.

These financial resources are perceived as a necessary support for international students, many of whom may struggle with the cost of living in a new country. Romanian

students suggest that the university consider expanding its financial assistance programs specifically for Ukrainian students, helping them to focus on their academic and social integration without the added burden of financial stress.

Sufficient or satisfactory support for Ukrainian students: Interestingly, while many responses point out gaps in the existing support resources, a significant portion of students believe that the current level of support is sufficient. Some students feel that the university already provides adequate resources to make Ukrainian students feel “at home,” noting that these students have access to various forms of assistance and opportunities to integrate into the academic community. Comments like “the support is sufficient” or “the current aid is more than enough” reflect a sense of satisfaction with the existing resources.

This perspective suggests that while there is room for improvement, some students feel that the university has made meaningful efforts to support Ukrainian students. However, the contrasting opinions reveal that there may be variations in the experiences and needs of Ukrainian students, depending on factors such as language proficiency, cultural familiarity, or individual backgrounds.

Recommendations for enhancing support: Based on these observations, Romanian students propose several recommendations for enhancing support resources for Ukrainian students. Key suggestions include:

1. Expanding language support: Offering more language courses in Romanian and English and providing bilingual materials or translators to assist Ukrainian students with academic content.
2. Developing cultural orientation programs: Introducing cultural orientation sessions and intercultural events to help Ukrainian students understand local customs and social norms, promoting smoother cultural adaptation.
3. Establishing mentorship programs: Pairing Ukrainian students with faculty or senior student mentors who can offer guidance on academic and personal matters, helping them navigate the university system.
4. Enhancing psychological support: Providing specialized counselling services that address the unique emotional and psychological challenges faced by international students.
5. Increasing financial assistance: Offering targeted scholarships, grants, or subsidies for Ukrainian students to ease financial stress and allow them to focus on their studies.

By implementing these recommendations, the university could create a more comprehensive support system that meets the diverse needs of Ukrainian students, enhancing their academic experience and overall satisfaction.

Opportunities for interaction with Ukrainian students: What personal and academic development opportunities does contact with Ukrainian students offer you? (such as developing intercultural skills and gaining new experiences)

Enhancement of intercultural communication skills: One of the most frequently mentioned benefits of interacting with Ukrainian students is the improvement of intercultural communication skills. Romanian students recognize that navigating communication with peers from different cultural backgrounds enhances their ability to communicate effectively and empathetically in a multicultural environment. Phrases like “development of intercultural skills” and “improvement of interpersonal communication abilities” underscore the value students place on these interactions for honing their adaptability and understanding in diverse social and academic contexts.

The aforementioned competences are applicable not only within the university environment but also within professional contexts in which students are likely to encounter a variety of cultural perspectives. Romanian students have noted that acquiring competence in intercultural communication fosters increased confidence and prepares them to engage collaboratively with individuals from diverse backgrounds, a skillset that is highly prized in today’s globalised job market. This practical experience in intercultural communication helps Romanian students to develop into more adaptable and inclusive individuals.

Broader academic perspectives and critical thinking: Another key opportunity identified is the exposure to new academic perspectives and the stimulation of critical thinking. Interacting with Ukrainian students has been found to facilitate a deeper understanding of differing cognitive processes, learning strategies, and problem-solving methodologies. The responses obtained from the participants in this study have revealed that interactions with Ukrainian peers, such as conversations and group projects, have a profound effect on the students’ intellectual outlook. Specifically, the interactions have been found to engender a shift in perspective and thought processes, prompting the students to interrogate their own assumptions and to explore alternative approaches to academic subjects.

This broadening of academic viewpoints has been identified as a particularly beneficial factor in fostering creativity and critical analysis. Furthermore, it is notable that Ukrainian students, by virtue of their unique educational experiences and knowledge, have the capacity to challenge local perspectives and inspire innovative ideas among their Romanian counterparts. This exposure enables students to approach academic subjects from a more holistic viewpoint, understanding issues from multiple angles and considering solutions that they might not have otherwise encountered. This interaction fosters a dynamic learning environment, where diversity of thought enriches academic discussions and collaborative projects.

Fostering empathy, tolerance, and cultural awareness: Empathy and tolerance emerge as important themes in students' reflections on their interactions with Ukrainian peers. Many Romanian students mention that working alongside students from Ukraine fosters a sense of empathy, as they learn about the challenges and cultural differences their peers face. Responses highlight that interacting with Ukrainian students helps develop "understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity" and promotes "tolerance and acceptance."

The aforementioned qualities contribute to the establishment of an academic community that is more inclusive and supportive, where students are receptive to learning about and respecting one another's backgrounds. Romanian students recognise that these interactions teach them to look beyond cultural stereotypes and appreciate the individuality of each person. The cultivation of empathy and tolerance in students has been demonstrated to engender increased openness to new ideas and a heightened capacity for compassion. These qualities have been shown to enhance students' interpersonal skills and prepare them for responsible citizenship in an interconnected world.

Reciprocal learning and knowledge exchange: Romanian students also see these interactions as a valuable opportunity for reciprocal learning and the exchange of knowledge. Responses frequently mention "mutual learning" and "exchange of ideas," suggesting that both Romanian and Ukrainian students gain from sharing their unique cultural and academic experiences. Romanian students appreciate learning about Ukrainian traditions, values, and worldviews, which enhances their cultural literacy and enriches their understanding of global diversity.

Group projects and informal conversations facilitate the sharing of aspects of Romanian culture, thereby creating a space for meaningful cultural exchange. This bidirectional learning process has been shown to broaden students' horizons and cultivate a sense of solidarity and mutual respect. It is recognised by students that these interactions allow for the learning from each other's strengths, creating a balanced exchange where each group contributes to the other's growth and development.

Preparation for a globalized world: Romanian students emphasize that interacting with Ukrainian peers prepares them for life and work in an increasingly globalized world. Responses suggest that these interactions provide practical experience in adapting to different cultural contexts, a skill that will be essential in their future careers. For example, students describe how collaborating with Ukrainian peers helps them "develop skills for a globalized environment" and "prepare for future professional challenges."

The emphasis on these interactions as preparatory experiences is indicative of an understanding that global competence requires first-hand engagement with diverse cultures. By engaging with Ukrainian students, Romanian students can develop competencies such as cultural adaptability, collaboration, and conflict resolution, which are

highly prized in international work environments. This interaction fosters a global mindset, equipping students with the tools they need to navigate diverse professional environments confidently and effectively.

Personal growth and self-awareness: It has been reported by a significant number of Romanian students that interaction with Ukrainian students has a beneficial effect on their personal growth and self-awareness. These interactions, they argue, engender a process of introspection and self-improvement by challenging students to reflect on their own values, beliefs, and cultural assumptions. The responses collected indicate that these interactions contribute to a more expansive worldview and a deeper understanding of human diversity. Furthermore, they suggest that these experiences encourage students to critically reflect on their own identities and their place in a multicultural society.

Engaging with peers from different backgrounds encourages Romanian students to step outside their comfort zones, building resilience and open-mindedness. These interactions foster a more profound comprehension of the intricate global landscape, as well as of the self, thereby contributing to the students' overall maturity and emotional intelligence. It is noteworthy that students do not perceive these opportunities exclusively as academic or social experiences; rather, they view them as catalysts for significant personal growth.

Recommendations for enhanced engagement opportunities: While the students recognise the advantages of interacting with Ukrainian peers, some responses suggest a desire for more structured opportunities to foster these interactions. Romanian students have proposed that the university should consider introducing a greater number of “multicultural events” and “intercultural workshops” as a means of facilitating more meaningful connections between students from diverse backgrounds. These events could include cultural exchange programmes, joint academic projects, and social gatherings that encourage deeper understanding and collaboration.

The university's strategic creation of such intentional spaces for cultural exchange has the potential to optimise the benefits of these interactions, thereby enabling students to engage more profoundly with diverse perspectives. The implementation of such structured opportunities would not only facilitate meaningful connections but also reinforce the university's commitment to inclusivity and global competence, ensuring that all students feel supported and enriched by the multicultural environment.

Integrative events: What benefits can you identify from participating in integrative events that promote interaction between Romanian and Ukrainian students? (such as fostering a friendly atmosphere and building relationships)

Creation of a friendly and inclusive atmosphere: A frequently cited benefit of integrative events is the establishment of a friendly and welcoming atmosphere within

the university community. Romanian students have described these events as settings where students from diverse backgrounds can interact informally, creating an environment that is perceived to be “open and inclusive” where all feel welcome. This amicable environment is regarded as pivotal in fostering intercultural comprehension and facilitating the acclimatisation process for international students, notably those hailing from Ukraine.

This amicable environment fosters a sense of ease in students engaging with one another, irrespective of cultural or linguistic differences. Romanian students further observe that these events provide a foundation for empathy and openness, allowing students to share their experiences and support each other. The promotion of inclusivity through integrative events is conducive to the cultivation of a university culture that values diversity and fosters a sense of belonging for all students.

Building personal and lasting relationships: Another significant benefit is the opportunity to establish personal and long-lasting relationships with Ukrainian students. The responses obtained highlighted that these events allow students to form friendships that transcend cultural barriers. Some students even described how they can “create strong interpersonal relationships” and “lasting friendships.” Romanian students recognise that these interactions can serve as a conduit for the establishment of deeper connections, which have the potential to evolve into enduring personal and academic partnerships.

These friendships not only enrich the social lives of students but also provide a supportive network that can be valuable throughout their academic journey. Romanian students recognise that building bonds with Ukrainian peers fosters a sense of unity and helps create a tight-knit university community. Furthermore, these friendships may also encourage students to explore each other’s cultures outside of formal academic activities, deepening their understanding and appreciation of diverse backgrounds.

Promoting cultural understanding and mutual respect: Integrative events are regarded as pivotal platforms for cultural exchange, wherein Romanian and Ukrainian students have the opportunity to acquaint themselves with each other’s traditions, customs, and values. It has been noted by many students that these interactions have a positive effect on mutual understanding and cultural awareness, as they provide a direct way to engage with another culture. The activities designed to celebrate and share different cultural practices have been shown to engender a more profound respect for diversity among students (Smith, 2020), thereby strengthening intercultural relationships.

This cultural exchange fosters tolerance and acceptance, as students become more familiar with each other’s perspectives and backgrounds. Romanian students recognise that participating in these events helps break down stereotypes and assumptions, replacing them with authentic, first-hand experiences of Ukrainian culture. The cultivation of mutual respect is pivotal in fostering a harmonious campus environment,

one in which students are encouraged to celebrate their differences and engage in mutual learning.

Facilitating collaborative learning and exchange of ideas: A significant proportion of Romanian students identify collaborative learning as a key benefit of integrative events, emphasising the opportunities these events create for the exchange of ideas and the collaborative working on shared projects. Responses indicate that these interactions “facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences” and encourage a spirit of teamwork across cultural boundaries. Romanian students place a high value on the opportunity to gain new academic insights from their Ukrainian peers, who bring unique perspectives and educational backgrounds to collaborative projects.

These joint initiatives foster a learning environment that extends beyond the confines of the classroom, where students can apply their knowledge in practical settings and learn from each other’s academic strengths. Furthermore, it has been observed that working with Ukrainian peers encourages Romanian students to engage in critical thinking and explore alternative solutions to shared challenges. This experience prepares them for future collaborative work in diverse, multicultural settings, enhancing their adaptability and teamwork skills.

Developing communication skills and cultural sensitivity: Participation in integrative events with Ukrainian students also provides an opportunity to develop essential communication skills and cultural sensitivity. Numerous Romanian students have attested to the efficacy of these events in facilitating “intercultural communication” and enhancing their capacity to navigate linguistic differences within a conducive environment. The act of communicating within a multicultural environment has been shown to foster the development of key competencies such as clear expression and active listening, which are indispensable for effective collaborative endeavours.

Furthermore, these interactions enhance students’ cultural sensitivity, as they become more aware of how cultural differences influence communication styles, values, and behaviours. Furthermore, these events instil qualities such as patience, openness to new ideas, and adaptability, fostering an environment of empathy and respect that facilitates the resolution of cultural differences. This exposure to diverse communication styles is valuable for personal development and prepares students for future interactions in globalised professional contexts.

Encouraging personal growth and expanding worldviews: Integrative events are regarded as opportunities for personal growth, with a significant proportion of Romanian students noting that these experiences broaden their horizons and encourage self-reflection. Responses have been documented in which these events are described as “expanding our understanding of the world” and helping students “gain new perspectives on life and society.” Engaging with Ukrainian peers has been shown to elicit

introspection regarding personal beliefs and assumptions. This fosters a more nuanced understanding of oneself and the world around oneself.

This exposure to different ways of thinking encourages Romanian students to embrace diversity and approach challenges from multiple perspectives. It is evident that these interactions not only enhance students' cultural literacy but also foster adaptability, openness to change, and receptivity to novel ideas. This personal growth contributes to a more holistic university experience, where students gain insights that extend beyond academic knowledge.

Strengthening university unity and community spirit: Romanian students also perceive integrative events as being of paramount importance in fostering a robust sense of university unity and community spirit. The integration of students from diverse cultural backgrounds fosters a more cohesive university community, where a sense of shared experience is cultivated. The responses gathered indicate that these events are effective in promoting a spirit of unity and inclusiveness, thereby contributing to the creation of a campus environment that values diversity and works towards common goals.

This sense of community fosters a positive university culture, where students are encouraged to support each other academically and socially. Romanian students place a high value on the opportunity to contribute to a collaborative campus environment, where diversity is celebrated and students are united by shared experiences and goals. This unity not only benefits individual students but also strengthens the university's reputation as an inclusive and supportive academic institution.

Development of Intercultural Skills: What benefits does the development of intercultural communication skills bring through interaction with Ukrainian students? (such as enhancing communication abilities, empathy, and tolerance)

Improvement of Communication Skills: A significant benefit of interacting with Ukrainian students is the enhancement of communication skills, particularly in navigating linguistic and cultural differences. Romanian students have noted that these interactions have taught them to communicate "clearly and effectively". This has involved practising active listening, articulating ideas more thoughtfully, and adapting to diverse communication styles. Students recognise the pivotal role these competencies play in transcending language barriers, particularly when confronted with Ukrainian students who exhibit a lower level of proficiency in Romanian or English.

The development of these communication skills in an intercultural context has been shown to enhance the adaptability of Romanian students as communicators. The necessity to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps encourages them to express ideas in a way that resonates across cultural boundaries. These experiences have been shown to enhance not only immediate communication abilities but also to equip students with transferable skills that will serve them in a variety of professional and social settings.

Cultivating empathy and understanding: Another key benefit emphasised by students is the cultivation of empathy and understanding. Engaging with Ukrainian students enables Romanian students to develop an appreciation for diverse cultural backgrounds and life experiences, fostering an ability to “see the world through others’ eyes.” This empathy fosters a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Ukrainian students, both cultural and linguistic, and enables Romanian students to respond with patience and compassion.

Empathy is regarded as a fundamental component in the establishment of respectful and supportive relationships. Furthermore, it has been noted that understanding the struggles and perspectives of their Ukrainian peers helps to dismantle prejudices and stereotypes, replacing them with genuine appreciation and solidarity. This empathy has been demonstrated to not only enhance personal interactions but also contribute to the cultivation of an inclusive university culture that values diversity and mutual support.

Building tolerance and openness to diversity: Romanian students identify tolerance and openness to diversity as essential outcomes of intercultural interactions. By engaging with Ukrainian peers, they learn to embrace cultural differences, becoming “more open-minded” and “willing to learn about other cultures.” This tolerance is crucial for creating a welcoming university environment where students from diverse backgrounds feel accepted and respected.

Tolerance also promotes resilience against cultural biases, as students learn to set aside preconceived notions and approach each interaction with curiosity and respect. Romanian students recognize that building tolerance allows them to engage with others more constructively, appreciating the unique perspectives each individual brings. This open-mindedness enriches their academic and social lives, preparing them for future interactions in multicultural environments.

Enhancing conflict resolution and adaptability: Interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds can present challenges, particularly when misunderstandings or cultural differences arise. Romanian students view these moments as valuable opportunities to develop conflict resolution skills and adaptability. Responses mention that “resolving misunderstandings in intercultural interactions” requires patience, negotiation, and the ability to find common ground, which strengthens their capacity to handle conflicts constructively.

The necessity for adaptability is also emphasised, as students learn to adjust their communication and behaviour to align with different cultural expectations. This adaptability is imperative for navigating a multicultural world, where flexibility and openness to new approaches are often required. Romanian students recognise that these experiences contribute to their enhanced adaptability and better equip them to effectively engage in diverse social and professional contexts.

Broadening perspectives and personal growth: Interacting with Ukrainian students offers Romanian students a broader worldview, encouraging them to question assumptions and embrace new perspectives. Responses highlight that these interactions “expand our understanding of different lifestyles and values,” helping students see beyond their own cultural frameworks. This exposure to different perspectives challenges them to think critically about their own beliefs and behaviours, fostering personal growth.

The broadening of perspectives is imperative for cultivating an inclusive and empathetic mindset. Romanian students have noted that understanding the diversity of human experiences has enabled them to become more reflective and considerate individuals. These insights contribute to their overall maturity, allowing them to engage with others more thoughtfully and with greater respect for cultural diversity.

Practical experience for future global interactions: Romanian students perceive the intercultural competencies they acquire through these interactions as being of immense value for future global interactions, both in their professional careers and personal lives. A significant proportion of respondents emphasised that acquiring proficiency in intercultural communication equips them with the necessary skills for professional environments characterised by interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds. This experience fosters the development of a “global competence”, a term which has assumed increasing importance in today’s interconnected world.

This practical experience enables students to hone their skills in cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving, all of which are indispensable in international contexts. By developing a sense of assurance in their capacity to navigate cultural variations, Romanian students report an increased sense of readiness for global interactions and a heightened capability to establish meaningful connections with individuals from diverse international backgrounds.

Recommendations for continued development: While students have expressed satisfaction with the benefits of intercultural communication skills, some have suggested the potential value of additional opportunities for enhancing these skills. The recommendations put forward include the organisation of workshops on intercultural communication, language exchange programmes, and joint projects with Ukrainian peers. These structured activities could provide more in-depth training on navigating cultural differences and strengthen students’ confidence in their intercultural abilities.

The university could further support students in developing these essential skills by offering more formal opportunities for cultural exchange. These initiatives would enhance students’ intercultural competence and reinforce the university’s commitment to fostering an inclusive and globally oriented academic community.

Consequences of prejudices: How do you think specific prejudices against Ukrainian students might affect the dynamics and acceptance within the student community?

Social exclusion and isolation: One of the most frequently cited consequences of prejudice is the social exclusion and isolation of Ukrainian students. Romanian students have noted that biases can engender an “atmosphere of exclusion”, in which Ukrainian students feel unwelcome or marginalised. This social exclusion has been shown to hinder the formation of friendships and limit the participation of Ukrainian students in social and academic activities, contributing to a fractured student body. The isolation of Ukrainian students due to prejudices hinders their full integration into the community, which is detrimental not only to the affected individuals but also to the overall unity of the student body.

Furthermore, the exclusion of Ukrainian students serves to reinforce pre-existing stereotypes, as the limited interaction between the two groups reduces opportunities for Romanian students to gain insight into and comprehend their Ukrainian peers. This dynamic establishes a self-perpetuating cycle in which the absence of interaction serves to reinforce pre-existing biases, thereby creating significant barriers for Ukrainian students in terms of overcoming these challenges and achieving full integration. Romanian students recognise that this dynamic weakens the sense of community and limits the potential for a vibrant, interconnected campus culture.

Psychological impact and decreased self-esteem: Another critical impact of prejudices is the psychological toll it takes on Ukrainian students. Discrimination and biases have been found to have a detrimental effect on the confidence and self-esteem of Ukrainian students. This can result in a feeling of undervaluation or unwelcome amongst Ukrainian students. This negative self-perception can result in stress, anxiety, and even depression, affecting their mental health and overall well-being.

In academic settings, the psychological distress associated with prejudice can also compromise academic performance. Furthermore, Romanian students observe that Ukrainian peers who feel discriminated against may struggle to focus on their studies, leading to decreased motivation and engagement. The psychological burden of facing prejudices thus affects both their personal and academic lives, reducing the quality of their university experience.

Barriers to interaction and reduced collaboration: Prejudices also create significant barriers to interaction and collaboration between Romanian and Ukrainian students. The responses indicate that these biases can result in a lack of trust and social segregation, thereby limiting opportunities for teamwork and open communication. In the context of group projects and extracurricular activities, these barriers can impede the full participation of Ukrainian students and hinder their ability to contribute effectively, thereby diminishing the collaborative potential within the university.

The repercussions of this paucity of collaboration are twofold, impacting both Ukrainian students and their Romanian counterparts. The former are deprived of the chance to learn from a variety of perspectives, whilst the latter are similarly hindered in their ability to do so. This lack of engagement has been shown to have a detrimental effect on the academic environment, as students are less likely to share ideas, exchange knowledge, or work together productively. Romanian students have proposed that the cultivation of a collaborative and inclusive culture is imperative in order to overcome these barriers and ensure a dynamic learning environment for all students.

Reinforcement of stereotypes and social divisions: Prejudices directed towards Ukrainian students have the potential to reinforce pre-existing negative stereotypes and exacerbate existing social divisions. Romanian students have acknowledged that such biases frequently originate from misinformation or a lack of understanding, thereby perpetuating harmful stereotypes. This cycle of prejudice and misunderstanding has been shown to engender resentment and tension within the student community, thereby creating an environment in which Ukrainian students may encounter difficulties in feeling accepted.

The reinforcement of stereotypes has the effect of preventing genuine cultural exchange and dialogue, as students are less likely to engage with each other openly. This resistance to interaction fosters a sense of cultural division within the student body, leading to the formation of distinct groups based on cultural differences. Romanian students recognise that overcoming these stereotypes requires proactive efforts to promote awareness and cultural understanding.

Diminished academic and social opportunities: Prejudices have been shown to limit the academic and social opportunities available to Ukrainian students (Kuzmina et al., 2023), impacting their ability to thrive in the university setting (Kuzmina et al., 2023). The extant literature indicates that biases can “hinder participation in extracurricular activities” and “reduce involvement in campus life,” thereby depriving Ukrainian students of valuable experiences that contribute to personal and academic growth. This underrepresentation in participation hinders the development of interpersonal connections, the acquisition of practical skills, and the cultivation of a sense of belonging within the university environment.

Moreover, the limited engagement in academic projects and social events has been shown to reduce the visibility and presence of Ukrainian students on campus, thus reinforcing their marginalisation. Romanian students emphasise the importance of fostering an environment where Ukrainian peers feel motivated to participate and contribute, ensuring they can reap the full benefits of the university experience.

Strategies to combat prejudices and foster inclusivity: Romanian students suggest several strategies to counteract these prejudices and promote a more inclusive community. Key recommendations include promoting cultural awareness, fostering

open dialogue, and organizing events that encourage interaction among diverse student groups. Responses emphasize that “education against prejudice” and “promotion of diversity” are critical for breaking down biases and creating a welcoming campus environment.

1. **Cultural awareness campaigns:** Romanian students advocate for initiatives that educate the university community about Ukrainian culture, fostering respect and understanding. These campaigns can help dispel stereotypes and emphasize the value of diversity, encouraging students to approach differences with curiosity and empathy.
2. **Dialogue and discussion groups:** Facilitating open dialogue sessions can provide a safe space for students to express their concerns and learn from each other’s perspectives. Romanian students believe that these discussions can help students confront their biases and recognize the harmful impact of prejudice on their peers.
3. **Inclusive events and activities:** Organizing events that bring together Romanian and Ukrainian students in collaborative settings can help build positive relationships and break down social barriers. Romanian students recommend activities that encourage teamwork and cultural exchange, such as joint academic projects, cultural festivals, and workshops.
4. **Mentorship and support networks:** Creating mentorship programs that pair Ukrainian students with Romanian peers or faculty members can offer additional support and guidance, helping them navigate social and academic challenges. This approach fosters a sense of belonging and reinforces a supportive community.
5. **Promoting diversity and inclusion training:** Romanian students suggest incorporating diversity and inclusion training into the university’s orientation programs to help new students understand the importance of inclusivity from the outset. These trainings can emphasize the benefits of a diverse community and equip students with tools to engage respectfully and empathetically with peers from different backgrounds.

Effects of social isolation: In what specific ways can social isolation negatively impact the academic and social experience of Ukrainian students?

Decreased academic motivation and engagement: A significant consequence of social isolation is the deterioration of academic motivation and engagement. Romanian students have observed that Ukrainian peers who feel disconnected may experience a sense of “lack of belonging”, which in turn reduces their interest in participating in academic activities. The absence of a nurturing social network has been demonstrated to engender a tendency towards non-participation in academic activities, such as class attendance, assignment completion, and overall disengagement from studies.

This detachment can lead to diminished academic performance, as students may feel disengaged from the educational environment.

This disengagement is a personal challenge for isolated students and a broader issue for the university community. When students withdraw academically, it disrupts the collaborative learning environment, thereby diminishing opportunities for diverse perspectives and group work. Romanian students posit that fostering a sense of community is essential to maintaining student engagement and motivation to achieve their academic goals.

Emotional stress and mental health issues: Social isolation has been demonstrated to be a contributing factor to elevated levels of emotional distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among Ukrainian students. The findings suggest that the absence of a robust social support system serves to exacerbate feelings of loneliness and vulnerability, thereby hindering students' ability to effectively manage academic pressures and personal challenges. This emotional burden can have severe repercussions on mental health, impacting students' ability to focus, process information, and actively participate in academic and social settings.

Furthermore, the psychological effects of isolation can create a cycle of withdrawal, as students facing mental health challenges may feel even more reluctant to reach out for support or engage with peers. Romanian students emphasise that isolation not only affects academic success but also endangers students' well-being, necessitating proactive measures to offer emotional support and reduce loneliness.

Reduced collaboration and interactive learning opportunities: Social isolation also limits opportunities for Ukrainian students to participate in collaborative and interactive learning experiences. Romanian students recognise that without social connections, Ukrainian peers may miss out on group projects, study groups, and other academic interactions that enhance understanding and foster critical thinking. Consequently, social isolation hinders collaborative learning, a process that is imperative for academic growth and the cultivation of communication and teamwork skills.

The absence of interaction deprives both Ukrainian and Romanian students of the opportunity to learn from one another and to share diverse insights. This environment fosters a sense of disconnection from the academic community, potentially hindering students' willingness to contribute meaningfully. Romanian students emphasise that integrating isolated peers into collaborative activities can enrich the educational experience for all and foster a more inclusive academic atmosphere.

Impaired social integration and personal development: Social isolation has been demonstrated to impede the capacity of Ukrainian students to assimilate into the social fabric of their institution, consequently restricting their participation in extracurricular activities, clubs, and campus events that contribute to a comprehensive university experience. The absence of social interactions deprives students of opportunities

for personal development, as they lack the chance to build relationships, explore new interests, and develop essential life skills. Romanian students have noted that isolation can result in Ukrainian peers forming small, insular groups, which further reduces their integration into the broader community.

This impaired social integration not only affects the personal growth of Ukrainian students but also contributes to a less cohesive university environment. It is acknowledged by Romanian students that a more inclusive social atmosphere would allow all students to benefit from shared experiences, cultural exchange, and mutual support, ultimately enhancing the vibrancy of campus life.

Diminished sense of belonging and institutional commitment: Social isolation has also been demonstrated to diminish Ukrainian students' sense of belonging, engendering a perception of disconnection from the university community. Romanian students elucidate that in the absence of meaningful social bonds, isolated students may perceive the university as an unfriendly or indifferent institution. This perceived lack of connection has been shown to engender a decline in overall satisfaction with the academic experience, and in some cases may even impact the student's decision to remain at the institution.

The exclusion experienced by students has been found to have a detrimental effect on their engagement with academic and social activities, which in turn affects their long-term success and the likelihood of forming lasting connections with the university. The promotion of a supportive community, one in which all students feel valued, is identified as a key factor in encouraging retention, engagement, and the cultivation of a positive campus culture.

Strategies for countering social isolation and enhancing inclusion: In order to address the problematic effects of social isolation, Romanian students have proposed a number of strategies with a view to fostering a more inclusive environment. These initiatives are designed to enhance social cohesion, offer emotional support, and establish a welcoming environment for Ukrainian students within the university community.

1. The organisation of social events and collaborative activities: Specifically, the organisation of cultural festivals, teambuilding workshops, and social mixers is advocated by Romanian students, with the aim of fostering interaction between Ukrainian and Romanian students. These events have the potential to provide a platform for students to connect, share experiences, and build friendships in a relaxed and inclusive setting.
2. The implementation of mentorship programs is also recommended. The pairing of Ukrainian students with Romanian mentors has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy in mitigating social disparities and providing guidance, support, and a sense of belonging to students who may be experiencing social isolation. The establishment of mentorship programs has been shown to foster meaningful

relationships that encourage academic engagement, personal growth, and integration into campus life.

3. The provision of access to counselling and emotional support services is also crucial. Romanian students emphasise the significance of readily available mental health services for students experiencing social isolation. Access to counselling and emotional support services can provide a secure environment in which Ukrainian students can articulate their feelings and navigate the challenges of adapting to a new environment. This can result in a reduction in stress and an improvement in wellbeing.
4. The creation of opportunities for group work and academic collaboration: In order to increase the participation of Ukrainian students in academic activities, Romanian students propose the design of projects and group assignments that encourage collaboration across cultural lines. Working together in diverse teams can facilitate mutual understanding, foster connections, and enhance the educational experience for all.
5. The promotion of cultural awareness and inclusivity training is also recommended. Educating the university community about the importance of inclusivity and cultural sensitivity can reduce prejudices and foster a welcoming environment for Ukrainian students. Awareness programmes can assist in the deconstruction of stereotypes and the cultivation of a campus culture that values diversity, respect, and mutual support.

Challenges arising from lack of support: What specific difficulties can result from inadequate support for Ukrainian students, both in adapting to the university environment and in their educational journey?

Language barriers and communication challenges: One of the most significant difficulties resulting from inadequate support is the language barrier. In the absence of adequate language resources, Ukrainian students may encounter difficulties in comprehending course materials, communicating with peers and professors, and actively participating in academic discussions. Romanian students have noted that, in the absence of translation services, language courses, or bilingual materials, Ukrainian students face added pressure to bridge this gap independently.

These challenges have been shown to hinder academic performance by limiting Ukrainian students' access to information and curbing their ability to fully engage in classroom activities. Romanian students suggest that offering tailored language support would ease communication and improve academic engagement, allowing Ukrainian students to better integrate into the academic environment.

Social isolation and emotional well-being: Social isolation is a critical issue that is closely associated with a lack of adequate support for Ukrainian students. In the absence of a nurturing community or structured programmes that could facilitate interaction,

these students may experience a sense of alienation from their peers. As Romanian students have highlighted, the impact of social isolation on academic engagement is two-fold: it not only impacts personal well-being but also engenders a sense of exclusion.

The absence of a support network has been shown to intensify feelings of loneliness and to lead to anxiety, which in turn can affect students' overall well-being and diminish their motivation to participate in academic or social activities (Brown, Brown, 2013). This social alienation can give rise to a decline in confidence and an escalation in stress, which can impede students' ability to concentrate on their academic studies. Romanian students emphasise the importance of social events and mentoring programmes in facilitating connections and fostering a sense of belonging among Ukrainian students within the university community.

Difficulty navigating academic systems: Romanian students have observed that Ukrainian students frequently encounter difficulties in navigating the intricacies of the university's academic systems in the absence of adequate guidance. The registration process, academic requirements, and the overall structure of the educational system can prove overwhelming for students who are unfamiliar with local practices. The absence of orientation programmes or academic counselling services specifically designed for international students further exacerbates these challenges.

The absence of comprehensive orientation programmes or academic counselling services specifically designed for international students can compound these challenges, potentially leading to misinterpretations regarding coursework expectations, academic deadlines, and grading policies. This, in turn, can result in unintentional academic setbacks for these students. In order to address this issue, Romanian students advocate the introduction of orientation programmes that provide Ukrainian students with clear instructions on academic requirements, as well as ongoing academic counselling to ensure they are well-supported throughout their studies.

Limited access to academic and psychological support resources: Romanian students also note that a lack of access to academic resources, such as tutoring and language support, as well as psychological services, can place Ukrainian students at a significant disadvantage. Without adequate academic resources, these students may struggle with coursework and experience performance issues, while a lack of psychological support leaves them vulnerable to the emotional challenges of adapting to a new environment.

The importance of academic resources in facilitating student comprehension of course material, the completion of assignments, and the management of course demands cannot be overstated. Furthermore, the provision of psychological support has been identified as a vital element in aiding students in coping with factors such as homesickness, cultural adjustment, and academic stress. Romanian students advocate for a stronger emphasis on mental health services and tutoring programs specifically designed to meet the needs of Ukrainian students.

Increased stress and risk of burnout: The absence of support services has been shown to intensify the stress and anxiety experienced by Ukrainian students, potentially leading to burnout. Romanian students elucidate that, in the absence of a reliable support system, Ukrainian students encounter elevated levels of academic pressure and cultural adjustment stress, which can rapidly result in fatigue and disengagement. This compounded stress affects not only academic performance but also personal resilience, making it harder for students to thrive in the university setting.

The consequences of burnout and stress can manifest in decreased focus, absenteeism, and, in some cases, withdrawal from university. Romanian students emphasise the significance of establishing an environment conducive to well-being and resilience by providing support services that address both academic and emotional needs.

Strategies for improving support and integration: In order to address the challenges faced by Ukrainian students, Romanian students have proposed a series of measures with the aim of providing them with the necessary support to adapt to university life and succeed academically. The aforementioned recommendations concentrate on the establishment of an inclusive and supportive campus environment that caters to the unique needs of Ukrainian students.

1. **Enhanced language support programs:** The implementation of language programs tailored to the linguistic and cultural needs of Ukrainian students is recommended, encompassing specialised language courses, translation services, and bilingual materials. The provision of these resources would facilitate the successful navigation of linguistic challenges by students, thereby ensuring their full engagement in academic activities.
2. Furthermore, the recommendation of mentorship and social integration programs is proposed to facilitate a deeper cultural immersion and social integration of Ukrainian students. To foster social inclusion, Romanian students recommend mentorship programs that pair Ukrainian students with local mentors, as well as regular social events that encourage interaction and friendshipbuilding. These initiatives have the potential to assist Ukrainian students in establishing connections, fostering friendships, and enhancing their sense of integration within the university community.
3. **Comprehensive orientation and academic counselling:** Romanian students emphasise the importance of structured orientation sessions that cover academic expectations, registration processes, and resources available to international students. Furthermore, the provision of ongoing academic counselling would serve as a point of contact for questions and concerns, thereby ensuring the provision of support to Ukrainian students throughout their university experience.

4. **Improved access to tutoring and academic resources:** The provision of tutoring services, workshops, and academic resources specifically tailored to international students is recommended, with a view to supporting Ukrainian students in achieving their academic goals. Access to tutors familiar with the needs of nonnative speakers would provide valuable academic assistance and improve learning outcomes.
5. **Mental health and emotional support services:** Romanian students advocate for accessible mental health services, including counselling and stress management workshops, to support the wellbeing of Ukrainian students. The provision of a secure environment in which to articulate their challenges and to receive guidance would assist students in the management of stress, anxiety and homesickness, thereby promoting resilience and mental health.

4.3.5.2. Responses from the perspective of Ukrainian students

Common educational objectives: What learning goals do you feel you share with Romanian students, and what benefits do these shared objectives bring to you?

Attaining academic qualifications: For a considerable number of Ukrainian students, the attainment of a diploma represents a pivotal objective shared with their Romanian counterparts. The attainment of a diploma is regarded as a significant milestone, signifying not only academic accomplishment but also a pivotal step towards securing stable employment and making a meaningful contribution to society. This shared objective serves as a unifying force, transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries to unite students from diverse backgrounds. It underscores the commonalities and similarities that the student experience shares, regardless of the specific academic, cultural, or linguistic nuances that may exist among them. Many Ukrainian students believe that by pursuing this goal alongside Romanian students, they benefit from a diverse academic environment where different perspectives enhance understanding and motivate them to succeed.

Deepening knowledge and developing expertise: As several Ukrainian students have noted, a common emphasis on establishing a robust foundation in theoretical knowledge is observed, which is regarded as paramount for cultivating expertise in their respective domains. They place significant value on the Romanian emphasis on a meticulous and comprehensive academic approach, as it encourages them to not only memorise facts but also to attain a profound comprehension of the underlying principles of their studies. This congruence with Romanian academic objectives fosters a supportive community of peers who share an equal dedication to mastering their respective disciplines, thereby enabling them to challenge conventional boundaries and attain a higher level of proficiency.

Developing communication and collaboration skills: The enhancement of communication and collaboration skills is a frequently emphasised objective for Ukrainian students, who ascribe considerable value to the improvement of these competencies in collaboration with their Romanian peers. Engaging with Romanian students offers practical experience in communicating across cultural and linguistic divides, which is essential for adapting to the academic and professional environment in Romania. It is further asserted by many Ukrainian students that these interactions facilitate the development of critical interpersonal skills that will benefit them in both personal and professional settings, fostering confidence and enhancing their capacity to work in diverse teams.

Cultural exchange and building interpersonal connections: For a number of Ukrainian students, the opportunity to study alongside their Romanian peers represents a distinctive occasion for cultural exchange. They perceive that this common objective is advantageous for them, as it serves to enhance their comprehension of Romanian culture, traditions, and social mores. This is considered to be beneficial for their personal and professional development in a foreign environment. One student has expressed a desire to share Ukrainian traditions with their Romanian peers, perceiving this exchange as a mutually beneficial endeavour. This objective enables Ukrainian students to establish meaningful relationships that extend beyond the confines of the classroom, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and providing them with emotional support within the university community.

Fostering personal growth and self-improvement: A significant proportion of Ukrainian students share the objective of self-improvement with their Romanian classmates. Interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds fosters the development of critical thinking skills, the capacity to adapt to novel circumstances, and an enhancement of resilience. These experiences foster a mindset of continuous learning and personal growth, which are essential for both academic and life success. It is evident that Ukrainian students recognise the value of collaborating with Romanian peers in honing their problem-solving skills and broadening their perspectives. This, in turn, fosters the development of well-rounded individuals who are equipped to tackle global challenges.

Mutual emotional support and empathy: For a number of Ukrainian students, the common objective of providing emotional support and empathy is a notable benefit of studying with Romanian peers. The benevolence and readiness of Romanian students to provide assistance when required is greatly valued by these students, contributing to the cultivation of an inclusive and supportive academic environment. This emotional connection serves to strengthen the bonds between students, engendering a sense of solidarity and understanding among the Ukrainian students, which is particularly important given the challenging circumstances in their home country. The cultivation

of empathy and the support for each other's challenges serve to reinforce a robust sense of community, thereby enhancing both social integration and academic motivation.

The contribution of cultural diversity: How do you believe cultural diversity enriches your academic experience at a university in Romania?

Exposure to new perspectives and broader understanding: Many Ukrainian students have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to study alongside peers from diverse backgrounds, which they perceive as offering a more comprehensive view of various academic subjects. They emphasise that engaging with students from diverse cultural backgrounds enables them to approach subjects from multiple perspectives, fostering critical thinking and innovative solutions. This exposure has been shown to not only broaden their understanding of academic concepts but also to nurture tolerance, as students learn to appreciate viewpoints that differ from their own.

Personal growth and broadened worldview: A significant benefit identified by Ukrainian students is the positive impact of cultural diversity on personal growth. Engagement with Romanian and other international students has been demonstrated to engender increased openness to new ideas, a greater capacity for adaptability, and a more well-rounded personal outlook. One student emphasises that cultural diversity not only prepares them for their future careers but also fosters personal growth, cultivating openness to diverse ways of thinking and living. This environment fosters the development of qualities such as empathy and flexibility, which are highly prized in today's globalized world.

Enhanced communication skills and language proficiency: For a considerable number of Ukrainian students, studying in a multicultural environment provides practical benefits, particularly in terms of language acquisition. Engaging with Romanian students and other international peers has been found to facilitate the enhancement of both Romanian and English language skills, frequently in an engaging and interactive manner. One student remarks upon the enjoyable experience of learning Romanian alongside peers from other countries, which fosters both linguistic competence and a sense of community. This interaction strengthens their communication skills, making them more effective and adaptable communicators.

Cultural exchange and appreciation: It is noteworthy that several Ukrainian students underscore the significance of acquiring knowledge about Romanian culture, traditions, and historical context, which they perceive as an integral component of their academic pursuits. They further emphasise the acquisition of insights into Romanian history, literature, and customs, which serves to enhance their appreciation for the country in which they are pursuing their studies. Moreover, this exposure to Romanian culture has been found to encourage Ukrainian students to share aspects of their own culture, leading to a meaningful cultural exchange that benefits everyone involved.

Creation of a collaborative academic environment: Cultural diversity brings together students with different experiences and skill sets, creating a collaborative and supportive academic environment. Some Ukrainian students note that the presence of diverse backgrounds and knowledge within the university enables them to learn from each other and leverage unique skills. This diversity fosters a culture of knowledge-sharing, where students can assist each other and collectively enhance their learning experiences.

Overcoming prejudices and building friendships: The presence of cultural diversity within the university environment offers a significant opportunity for the transcendence of stereotypes and the establishment of authentic friendships. For a number of Ukrainian students, this diversity signifies the realisation of commonalities with Romanian students that transcend national and ethnic boundaries. This realisation fosters an inclusive mindset, allowing students to establish connections with each other on a human level, rather than focusing on differences. The cultivation of friendships across cultural boundaries has been shown to enhance the university experience and contribute to the establishment of a more cohesive community.

Academic and personal balance: The multicultural context of higher education in Romania provides a distinctive environment for Ukrainian students, offering a dual benefit: it facilitates both the acquisition of professional skills and the expansion of personal horizons. It has been demonstrated that, in pursuit of their academic studies, Ukrainian students in Romania encounter a multicultural environment that imparts invaluable life lessons, preparing them not only academically but also cultivating their cultural awareness and empathy. This dual benefit of acquiring academic knowledge and developing personal competencies adds depth to the university journey, providing a well-rounded educational experience.

The importance of relationships and collaboration: How important is it for you to build friendships with Romanian students and collaborate with them during your university studies?

Key to language improvement and cultural adaptation: It is widely acknowledged among Ukrainian students that establishing connections with Romanian peers is instrumental in enhancing one's proficiency in the Romanian language. Engaging in conversations and building friendships with native speakers offers practical language immersion, helping them to adapt to the local environment more quickly. This linguistic exchange fosters a conducive environment for learning and practising Romanian, which students perceive as being indispensable for daily life and academic success.

Essential for social integration and support: The development of interpersonal relationships with Romanian students is also of paramount importance for the process of social integration. Numerous Ukrainian students have attested to the supportive and welcoming disposition of their Romanian peers, which engenders a greater sense

of familiarity and comfort. Possessing Romanian acquaintances has been demonstrated to facilitate a sense of familiarity, thereby providing a reliable network for guidance with quotidian tasks and fostering comprehension of the local culture. For many, these friendships ease their transition into a new academic setting and make their experience in Romania feel less isolating.

Broadening horizons and personal growth: Interacting with Romanian students allows Ukrainian students to learn different perspectives and ways of thinking. Engaging with people from a different background helps broaden their horizons, enhancing their ability to appreciate and understand diverse viewpoints. This cultural exchange not only enriches their academic journey but also contributes to their personal growth, fostering open-mindedness and adaptability – qualities they believe are valuable beyond university.

Building trust and academic collaboration: Several students note that collaboration with Romanian peers is essential for academic success. Through shared projects and group work, they can gain insights into local academic standards and expectations. The cultivation of trust and collaborative endeavours within academic environments fosters the development of enhanced teamwork and collaboration skills, which are pivotal for the success of their future professional endeavours. These experiences facilitate a more profound comprehension of Romanian society and enhance their adaptability within the university environment.

Creating mutual understanding and cultural exchange: For many Ukrainian students, friendships with Romanian students provide a platform for mutual cultural exchange. They find that Romanian students are open to learning about Ukrainian culture, while also eager to share their own customs and traditions. This reciprocal exchange fosters a sense of mutual respect and understanding, thereby creating a conducive learning environment for all parties involved. Furthermore, some students regard these relationships as a means of promoting tolerance and appreciation for diversity within the university community.

Varying levels of importance based on personal experience: While most students value collaboration, a few Ukrainian students feel that connecting with Romanian peers is less relevant to their university experience. Some have had limited interaction with Romanian students due to factors such as language barriers, differing academic schedules, or a personal preference for focusing on their studies independently. These students tend to view their relationships with local peers as secondary to their primary academic goals.

Linguistic and communication challenges: What challenges do you encounter in daily communication with Romanian students due to language differences?

Struggling with language barriers: For a significant proportion of Ukrainian students, the primary challenge lies in navigating the linguistic barrier. Despite the existence

of some students who are learning Romanian, the expression of complex ideas and opinions in classroom or social settings remains challenging for them. This is often due to an inability to articulate their thoughts precisely in Romanian, which in turn affects their ability to participate actively in discussions. This obstacle can impede the formation of close friendships and the comprehension of cultural subtleties, thereby affecting their overall social and emotional well-being.

Slower comprehension and translation efforts: It has been reported by several Ukrainian students that the processes of understanding and translating information require a greater investment of time, particularly within academic contexts. While endeavouring to enhance their Romanian competencies, these students find that the process of comprehending class materials and engaging in conversations can be rather protracted. This has been found to have a detrimental effect on their ability to participate effectively in class discussions and group projects, as they require additional time to translate and process the information.

Accent and cultural jokes: A pervasive challenge encountered by students is the management of accents and cultural references. Some Ukrainian students have noted that their accents can result in humour or misunderstandings, which can lead to feelings of self-consciousness or reluctance to contribute to conversations. Furthermore, there is often a struggle to comprehend colloquial expressions, humour, and cultural references, which can impede engagement in meaningful dialogue with Romanian peers.

Limited willingness to communicate in English: For students who have not yet attained fluency in Romanian, English frequently functions as a transitional language. However, it has been observed that not all Romanian students are willing or comfortable speaking English regularly. This discrepancy can result in a lack of opportunities for full engagement with their Romanian classmates, potentially leading to feelings of isolation.

Overcoming initial difficulties: While some students mention facing initial difficulties with communication, others have made progress in learning Romanian and have fewer issues now. They have adapted by studying Romanian intensively, which has helped them minimize language-related barriers over time. Some students have found supportive Romanian friends or classmates who assist them with translation or clarification, which has improved their overall experience.

The impact on confidence: The language challenges also affect students' confidence in class. Some find it hard to speak up, especially when they feel uncertain about their ability to communicate clearly. The fear of making mistakes or not being fully understood can sometimes deter them from contributing in discussions, limiting their academic and social engagement.

Cultural misunderstandings: To what extent does a lack of understanding of Romania's specific cultural norms and values affect your adaptation and integration process at the university?

Minimal impact for many students: Most Ukrainian students report that cultural misunderstandings do not significantly impact their integration into Romanian university life. Many feel that Romanian and Ukrainian cultural values and social norms are considerably similar, which makes the adaptation process relatively smooth. They express that they feel comfortable and welcomed, and any minor differences are easy to observe and adapt to without major issues.

Curiosity and positive adaptation: Some students describe their experience of adjusting to Romanian cultural nuances with curiosity and openness. They are eager to learn about the cultural rules and values of Romania, which they see as an enriching part of their university experience. Rather than being an obstacle, this exposure to different cultural elements broadens their perspective and makes them feel more connected to their new environment.

Minor challenges in communication: For a few students, misunderstanding cultural norms occasionally leads to small communication challenges. They worry about accidentally misinterpreting certain social cues or norms, which might lead to confusion or slight misunderstandings. However, they generally feel that these instances are minor and manageable, especially with continued exposure to Romanian culture.

Interest in learning more about Romanian culture: Several students recognize the importance of understanding the cultural values of the country where they are studying. They are motivated to learn about Romanian customs and values, as they believe this understanding helps build stronger relationships and prevents any potential misunderstandings with peers and faculty.

Respect for cultural similarities and differences: Overall, the Ukrainian students appreciate the friendly and adaptable nature of Romanians, which helps ease any cultural adjustment. For those who have encountered minor misunderstandings, the general cultural similarity between Romania and Ukraine and the openness of Romanian students make the adaptation process easier.

Support for international students: Do you have access to support programs for international students? What shortcomings do you notice in this area, and are such initiatives available at UOC?

Limited awareness and access to support programs: Many Ukrainian students seem to have limited information about specific support programs for international students at Ovidius. While some have heard of these resources, they aren't always aware of what is available or how to access them. A few students mentioned that they

would appreciate better communication, possibly through direct announcements or guidance, as they do not regularly check the university website.

Mixed experiences with administrative support: It is evident that students who have engaged with departments such as the international office or specific faculties, including the Faculty of Medicine, have generally reported positive experiences, particularly with regard to initial enrolment support. However, it is noteworthy that the university websites have been found to lack clear and comprehensive information, with certain forms and instructions resulting in confusion or repetitive requests. The enhancement of clarity on these websites has the potential to streamline the support process.

Informal support networks: It was noted by several students that they had received informal support from professors and event organisers. This welcoming attitude from faculty and staff has been shown to facilitate adaptation and engender a sense of community. However, formalised support initiatives or programmes specifically designed for Ukrainian and other international students appear to be less visible.

Existing support viewed as adequate by some: For those students who are aware of support resources, the current level of support seems sufficient. They appreciate the efforts made by the university and report no major issues with accessing the resources they need.

Anticipated improvements in the future: Some students believe that support for international students will grow in the future, anticipating more initiatives or programs tailored to meet their unique needs. This optimism reflects a positive outlook on the university's potential to enhance its support infrastructure.

Opportunities of studying in Romania: What opportunities do you think you have by studying at a university in Romania?

European-recognized diploma: One of the primary benefits that Ukrainian students derive from studying at a Romanian university is the opportunity to obtain a diploma that is recognised throughout Europe. This credential confers considerable advantages for future employment, thereby endowing students with a competitive edge in the European job market. The diploma serves as a validation of their education, thereby facilitating access to professional opportunities that adhere to European standards.

Cultural exposure and personal development: Romania's educational environment is characterised by cultural diversity, providing Ukrainian students with the opportunity to interact with peers from a variety of backgrounds. This exposure has been shown to facilitate a more profound comprehension of Eastern Europe and the European Union, whilst concurrently enhancing the students' intercultural communication skills. Engaging with local students and other international peers enables Ukrainian students to develop a more well-rounded worldview and acquire skills that enhance both their academic and social experiences.

Enhanced language skills: The pursuit of academic studies in Romania offers a valuable opportunity for Ukrainian students to enhance their proficiency in the Romanian language. This linguistic competence is paramount for successful integration into Romanian society and facilitates enhanced access to resources. Moreover, a significant number of courses are offered in English, thereby providing students with the opportunity to enhance their proficiency in both languages. This linguistic skill set is valuable not only in academic settings but also in professional environments, where multilingual abilities are often an asset.

Access to Erasmus and international programs: Romanian universities have a strong commitment to internationalisation, as evidenced by their active participation in prestigious international exchange programmes such as Erasmus. These programmes offer Ukrainian students the invaluable opportunity to pursue their academic endeavours in diverse European nations. These programmes have been shown to enhance students' educational experience by exposing them to a variety of teaching styles, academic environments and cultural experiences across Europe. The Erasmus experience is highly valued by students, as it promotes both personal and academic growth.

Stability and peace of mind: For a considerable number of Ukrainian students, Romania provides a stable environment in which to pursue their studies, unencumbered by the disruptions caused by conflict. This stability is of particular importance, as it enables students to engage fully in their academic and social lives. The supportive environment in Romania fosters a sense of security and peace, which are indispensable for personal well-being and academic success.

Building a network for future opportunities: The Romanian university environment facilitates the establishment of connections that can prove invaluable for the professional futures of Ukrainian students. Through collaborative projects, academic events, and social interactions, students establish relationships that may result in future career opportunities or collaborations. The value of this network extends beyond Romania, with the potential to extend across Europe, offering valuable resources as students transition from academia to their professional careers.

Organizing events for better integration and cultural understanding: What types of cultural and integration events do you think would help you integrate better and understand Romanian culture?

Organized cultural trips and excursions: It is a commonly held belief amongst students that organised trips to Romania would facilitate a more profound comprehension of the country's landscapes, history and traditions. The organisation of joint trips with Romanian and international students has been identified as a means of facilitating interaction in a natural setting. This approach is believed to offer students

the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of Romania, while also fostering closer bonds with their peers.

Cultural fairs and festivals: It is submitted that events such as cultural fairs, which showcase traditional Romanian music, dance, and crafts, could offer a rich introduction to local traditions. Participation in such festivals, or even contribution to their organisation, would facilitate active engagement with Romania's cultural heritage and cultivate a more profound appreciation of its customs among students.

Workshops on art and handicrafts: Students are also interested in hands-on workshops featuring Romanian art, pottery, traditional crafts, and cooking. These workshops are designed to facilitate engagement with the local culture by encouraging interaction through shared activities. The primary objective of these workshops is to establish a connection between students and the local culture, while also ensuring an enjoyable and practical learning experience.

Romanian film and literature evenings: The organisation of screenings of classic and contemporary Romanian films, followed by discussions in English or Romanian, would provide students with insight into Romanian perspectives, values, and history. Similarly, evenings focused on Romanian literature could introduce students to influential writers and facilitate a deeper understanding of cultural nuances through storytelling and discussions.

Language and history classes: For a subset of students, a comprehensive understanding of Romania's linguistic and historical milieu is instrumental in fostering a stronger sense of connection. The provision of informal language and history classes specifically designed for international students has the potential to facilitate a more profound appreciation of cultural references and enhance their participation in academic and social settings.

Sport and interactive competitions: The integration of students into the local community could be facilitated by the organisation of sporting events, which may include local games or friendly competitions. The concept of sports as a universal language is predicated on the premise that they can serve as a medium for fostering a sense of teamwork, cultivating interpersonal relationships, and facilitating cultural exchange, all within a recreational and enjoyable setting.

Social clubs and networking events: A significant number of students have expressed an interest in social clubs that would provide a relaxed setting for interaction with Romanian students. These social clubs have the potential to facilitate networking sessions, cultural exchange discussions, and group activities, thereby providing a platform for both Romanian and international students to share their experiences, ask questions, and establish supportive friendships.

Potential for developing international networks and relationships: How do you think participating in foreign language courses contributes to improving your intercultural communication skills and expanding your international networks?

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Language and history classes: For some students, understanding the language and historical context of Romania is key to feeling more connected. Offering informal language and history classes specifically tailored for international students could help them better appreciate cultural references and participate more fully in academic and social settings.

Sport and interactive competitions: Sports events, which could include local games or friendly competitions, would provide students with a familiar yet engaging way to integrate. Sports are a universal language, and interactive games or tournaments could create a sense of teamwork, fostering friendships and facilitating cultural exchange in a fun environment.

Social clubs and networking events: Many students express interest in social clubs where they can connect with Romanian students in a relaxed setting. These clubs could host networking sessions, cultural exchange discussions, and group activities, allowing

both Romanian and international students to share their experiences, ask questions, and form supportive friendships.

Concerns about prejudice: What negative effects do you anticipate that prejudice and stereotypes could have on Ukrainian students in Romanian universities?

Feelings of exclusion and marginalization: Prejudices and stereotypes have the potential to engender feelings of separation among Ukrainian students within the broader community, thereby giving rise to a sense of exclusion. This feeling of isolation can be exacerbated if Ukrainian students perceive that they are being treated differently due to cultural misunderstandings or perceptions linked to their nationality. This dynamic can impede the ability of Ukrainian students to establish meaningful connections with their Romanian peers and fully integrate into the university community.

Impact of war-related discussions: Discussions concerning the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have the potential to be particularly challenging. For Ukrainian students, exposure to conversations that are overly simplistic or lacking in empathy can be distressing, potentially leading to a sense of their personal experiences being disregarded. In a globally diverse environment, discussions that fail to demonstrate sensitivity to these issues can engender feelings of isolation and even disrespect, particularly when the emotional weight of the situation is not fully comprehended by others.

Misunderstandings about support and privileges: It has been hypothesised that some Romanian students may harbour the misconception that Ukrainian students receive preferential treatment or have an “easier path” in university due to assistance or scholarships related to their status as foreign or displaced students. Such assumptions, which are frequently unwarranted, have the potential to engender feelings of resentment. For Ukrainian students, such misunderstandings can be challenging to navigate and may result in reluctance to fully engage with university life, due to concerns about potential judgement or stereotyping.

Difficulties in social integration: Language barriers and cultural differences can make it challenging for Ukrainian students to connect with Romanian peers. These differences may give rise to stereotypes, such as perceptions of Ukrainian students as being “cold” or reserved, simply because they face difficulties in expressing themselves fluently. These stereotypes can act as barriers to social interaction, potentially leading to feelings of disconnection and isolation among Ukrainian students.

Public and community reactions: Beyond the confines of the university environment, Ukrainian students have been known to encounter unfavourable responses when engaging in communication in their mother tongue or when being perceived as “outsiders”. These occurrences, although taking place outside the university environment, have the potential to contribute to an overall sense of unease and to a reduction in the confidence of Ukrainian students in their daily interactions. This additional layer

of tension may also have an impact on their social engagement within the university itself, making them more hesitant to participate in group activities or social events.

The risk of feeling isolated: In what ways do you think social isolation might impact you as a student, both educationally and socially?

Decreased academic motivation and access to resources: Social isolation can significantly affect academic motivation for Ukrainian students. Being separated from peer groups may limit opportunities for collaborative learning and reduce access to informal networks where valuable academic information – such as tips on courses, exams, and study resources – is shared. The absence of such informal networks can potentially create a situation where Ukrainian students may experience a sense of academic marginalisation, which can, in turn, have a detrimental effect on their overall performance and enthusiasm for their studies.

Limited opportunities for social and personal development: It is evident that social isolation can impede opportunities for personal growth and social engagement, both of which are pivotal for a comprehensive university experience. For Ukrainian students who do not have regular interaction with their Romanian peers, the development of friendships and interpersonal skills can be challenging. This social isolation can lead to a sense of disconnection from the broader university community, potentially diminishing the richness of their social life and impeding their personal development.

Feelings of loneliness and emotional challenges: Prolonged isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, affecting mental well-being and potentially contributing to stress, anxiety, or even depression. For students studying abroad, the absence of a supportive social network may amplify these sentiments, thereby impeding the adjustment to a novel environment. Ukrainian students may find it more challenging to cope with academic pressures in the absence of a network of friends who can provide them with emotional support.

Impact on language acquisition and cultural adaptation: Social isolation can slow down language learning and cultural adaptation. Daily interaction with local students helps international students improve their language skills, especially for those like Ukrainian students who may be new to Romanian. The reduced opportunities for practice that social isolation engenders can hinder these students' progress towards achieving a satisfactory level of communication, which can, in turn, engender feelings of separation from their peers.

Missed cultural exchange and broader perspectives: The isolation of Ukrainian students on campus restricts their exposure to diverse cultural perspectives, which are a fundamental component of studying in an international setting. This absence of interaction with students from diverse backgrounds may result in a limitation of opportunities

for Ukrainian students to broaden their understanding of different worldviews, which could enhance both their academic and social experience at the university.

The Impact of intercultural misunderstandings: What issues do you think could arise due to cultural differences and misunderstandings between students, and how might these affect the atmosphere within the university?

Potential for misunderstandings and stereotyping: Cultural misunderstandings have the potential to give rise to the development of stereotypes and misconceptions, which may have an impact on the manner in which students from different backgrounds perceive one another. For Ukrainian students, interactions with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those from the Middle East, may challenge pre-existing stereotypes and assumptions. If these misunderstandings remain unaddressed, they have the potential to engender feelings of discomfort or alienation, thereby contributing to an atmosphere that is less inclusive.

Challenges in group work and collaborative projects: Cultural differences in communication styles, problem-solving approaches, and attitudes toward deadlines or tasks can impact collaborative academic projects. For instance, Romanian and Ukrainian students may approach tasks with similar directness, yet interactions with international students from other regions may involve differing expectations. These variations, if not recognised and addressed, have the potential to engender frustration and diminish group cohesion, thereby affecting both the outcomes of the project and the satisfaction of the students.

Social isolation and reduced interactions: Misunderstandings arising from cultural differences have the potential to result in social isolation for specific student groups, particularly if language barriers or divergent social customs impede regular interaction. When students perceive that others are evaluating them or misinterpreting their intentions, they may retreat from social interactions, which curtails prospects for forging more profound connections and integrating into the social fabric. This phenomenon is further compounded in the case of Ukrainian students, who may encounter challenges in navigating these dynamics if they perceive a lack of respect for cultural differences or hesitancy among their peers to engage in open dialogue.

Emotional and social tensions: Despite the evident similarities between Romanian and Ukrainian cultures, there are notable disparities in cultural norms and practices, which can prove surprising or unfamiliar to students. These disparities may manifest in areas such as smoking habits or dietary preferences. These cultural differences can, on occasion, give rise to minor cultural clashes, which, if left unaddressed through open dialogue and mutual respect, have the potential to influence the campus atmosphere and generate tensions.

Reduced cultural exchange and learning opportunities: In instances where students exhibit reluctance to engage due to misapprehensions or cultural misperceptions, the potential for mutual learning is constrained. For instance, Ukrainian students may be deprived of valuable insights into Romanian culture and the opportunity to establish relationships with students from diverse backgrounds. This absence of cultural exchange has the potential to impact the richness of the overall student experience, as learning to navigate and appreciate cultural differences is a fundamental aspect of studying in an international setting.

4.3.5.3. Responses from the perspective of professors

Enhancing discussions through unique experiences: How do you believe that the first-hand experiences of students from Ukraine, who have lived through war, can contribute to enriching debates and diversifying the perspectives of other students?

Bringing abstract concepts to life through first-hand experiences: Ukrainian students, having endured the realities of war, offer a unique and tangible perspective that brings theoretical concepts such as conflict, security and international relations into sharper focus for their peers. The presence of these students in academic discourse underscores the importance of global alliances such as NATO and the EU, and the intricacies of residing in proximity to unstable regions. Their narratives render these subjects more relatable, encouraging other students to understand such issues beyond an academic framework and perceive their immediate, real-world ramifications.

Enriching empathy and fostering solidarity: The provision of a platform for Romanian students to hear directly from their peers who have experienced the hardships of war has the potential to engender feelings of empathy and solidarity. These interactions engender an environment in which students become more sensitive to the struggles of others, fostering a deeper commitment to supportive peer relationships. The act of sharing personal narratives can act as a catalyst for inspiration, encouraging classmates to cherish their own educational prospects and to cultivate a culture of mutual respect, understanding and emotional resilience within the academic community.

Strengthening discussions with diverse perspectives: It is evident that Ukrainian students contribute significantly to academic debates, particularly in subjects such as human rights, crisis management and political science. The students' personal perspectives contribute to a nuanced understanding of the humanitarian, psychological, and socio-political challenges associated with living through conflict, thereby enriching classroom discourse with authentic voices. Their experiences have been shown to act as a catalyst for the development of diverse viewpoints amongst their peers, encouraging an approach to topics that is characterised by greater complexity and understanding.

Providing lessons on resilience and adaptability: The actions and narratives of Ukrainian students exemplify resilience, adaptability, and determination. These qualities are indispensable for surmounting difficulties, and their dissemination within the academic environment has the potential to inspire their peers. By observing the perseverance and courage demonstrated by Ukrainian students, others may gain a broader understanding of how to handle personal and academic challenges, leading to a stronger determination in their studies and a more resilient outlook on life.

Challenging stereotypes and expanding cultural awareness: Engaging with Ukrainian students has been demonstrated to facilitate the academic community in transcending prevailing stereotypes and cultivating a more profound respect for cultural diversity. The act of listening to Ukrainian students discuss their personal experiences has been demonstrated to be an effective means of dispelling misconceptions and fostering open-mindedness, particularly in the context of sensitive subjects such as international conflicts. These interactions have the potential to dismantle prejudices, encourage acceptance, and establish the foundations for a culturally rich and inclusive university environment.

Highlighting the value of education in difficult times: The dedication to education exhibited by Ukrainian students, even in the face of adversity, serves as a compelling exemplar of the transformative power of learning and personal growth. Their presence underscores the significance of access to education as a fundamental right, even in challenging environments, and motivates their peers to prioritise their studies. This perspective shift underscores a shift in mindset towards gratitude and commitment among students, who are reminded of the privileges they may sometimes take for granted.

Resilience and perseverance: What remarkable traits do you observe in students who, despite the challenges of relocation, choose to continue their education?

Resilience and inner strength: A notable characteristic exhibited by Ukrainian students who persist in their academic pursuits despite the challenges posed by relocation is resilience. These students have been shown to possess a remarkable capacity to recuperate from trauma, confront uncertainty, and reconstruct their academic lives in a new country. Their capacity to cope with stress and embrace challenges is indicative of their inner strength, a factor which helps them to maintain focus and achieve academic goals even in challenging circumstances. This remarkable resilience serves as a source of inspiration for their peers, fostering a unique sense of motivation within the academic environment.

Determination and ambition: The decision to pursue education in a foreign environment is indicative of a strong sense of determination and ambition. Ukrainian students evince an unwavering commitment to their academic and professional growth,

perceiving education as a conduit to stability and a more promising future. This commitment to personal enhancement and achievement serves as a model for other students, demonstrating that dedication to personal growth and the pursuit of educational excellence can lead to significant life outcomes.

Adaptability and flexibility: Adapting to an unfamiliar educational system, language, and culture demands a significant degree of adaptability. Ukrainian students have demonstrated remarkable adaptability in their integration into Romanian universities, successfully acclimatising to novel academic and social frameworks. This adaptability not only fosters personal growth but also enriches the university environment by introducing diverse perspectives and approaches to learning, enhancing the experience for all students.

Empathy and solidarity: It is evident that students who have confronted considerable adversity often demonstrate a heightened capacity for empathy, particularly towards their peers who are grappling with their own challenges. Their experiences have been shown to engender a sense of solidarity, with many students reporting a motivation to support others in need, whether through volunteering or informal acts of kindness. This heightened empathy has been shown to engender an academic environment that is more inclusive and compassionate, characterised by a culture of mutual support among students.

Intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness: Notwithstanding the challenges encountered, Ukrainian students have demonstrated a robust intellectual curiosity and a fervent desire to acquire knowledge. Their openness to new knowledge and commitment to broadening their intellectual horizons not only aids their own educational pursuits but also inspires a culture of learning within the university. This intellectual curiosity and openness to new ideas have been shown to stimulate lively discussions and contribute to an intellectually dynamic academic community.

Self-discipline and organizational skills: The successful balancing of the demands of relocation with academic responsibilities requires a high level of self-discipline and organisation. Ukrainian students have been shown to possess a strong aptitude for effective time management, setting priorities, and maintaining concentration on academic endeavours. This commitment to self-management not only facilitates academic success but also establishes a positive role model for their peers, thereby cultivating an environment characterised by commitment and responsibility.

Courage and optimism: The pursuit of further education in an unfamiliar environment is an endeavour that demands fortitude and a forward-looking disposition. Ukrainian students are a paradigm of such qualities, demonstrating an optimism and resilience in the face of uncertainties. Their courage in pursuing their dreams in the face of adversity is to be commended, and serves to inspire their peers, reinforcing the importance of perseverance and hope.

Influencing behavioural models: What impact do you believe collaboration with Ukrainian students might have on fostering attitudes of openness and tolerance among Romanian faculty members?

Empathy and cultural awareness: Collaboration with Ukrainian students has been demonstrated to encourage Romanian educators to become more empathetic and culturally aware. The unique challenges faced by these students due to factors such as relocation and conflict serve to promote a deeper understanding of diverse backgrounds. This, in turn, inspires educators to respond with greater sensitivity and support. This increased empathy fosters a more inclusive learning environment, where educators actively consider and respect each student's personal experiences and cultural context.

Reduction of stereotypes and prejudices: Direct interaction with Ukrainian students has been demonstrated to be an effective method of combating pre-existing stereotypes and biases, thereby facilitating the establishment of a more authentic understanding of the individuality and characteristics of the Ukrainian student body. Prior negative stereotypes about Ukrainians are quickly dispelled as educators witness first-hand the resilience, determination, and strength of these students. This process of deconstructing stereotypes fosters an environment of tolerance and acceptance within academic communities.

Enhanced receptivity and adaptability: Engaging with students from Ukraine has been demonstrated to encourage educators to adopt a more receptive stance towards diverse educational requirements and to cultivate greater flexibility in their teaching methodologies. The unique backgrounds of these students frequently necessitate bespoke approaches, compelling educators to innovate and adapt. This adaptability benefits the entire student body, as educators refine their methods to accommodate a wider range of learning styles and cultural contexts.

Role modelling inclusivity and support: Engaging with students from Ukraine has been demonstrated to encourage educators to adopt a more receptive stance towards diverse educational requirements and to cultivate greater flexibility in their teaching methodologies. The unique backgrounds of these students frequently necessitate bespoke approaches, compelling educators to innovate and adapt. This adaptability benefits the entire student body, as educators refine their methods to accommodate a wider range of learning styles and cultural contexts.

Development of intercultural communication skills: Dealing with Ukrainian students improves educators' intercultural communication skills and enhances their ability to manage diversity in the classroom. Learning to navigate cultural nuances and language barriers provides educators with valuable skills for creating a harmonious and effective learning environment, ultimately benefiting students from all backgrounds.

Fostering a collaborative and inclusive atmosphere: Collaboration between Romanian educators and Ukrainian students helps to create a cooperative academic

atmosphere. Exposure to different perspectives encourages educators to facilitate open dialogues about cultural differences, promoting mutual respect and understanding. This openness leads to a supportive educational environment where students feel seen, valued and understood, fostering unity and cooperation.

Encouraging flexibility and innovation in teaching: The unique experiences and perspectives of Ukrainian students inspire Romanian educators to explore new methods and perspectives in their teaching practices. Such a need to accommodate and integrate different points of view leads to innovative approaches that enrich the learning experience for all students and promote a more dynamic and flexible educational model.

Strengthening solidarity and compassion: Interacting with Ukrainian students instils a sense of solidarity and compassion in Romanian educators, reminding them of the value of tolerance and understanding in times of adversity. Witnessing the challenges faced by these students reinforces the educators' commitment to providing a supportive and inclusive environment, promoting the values of empathy and resilience within the university.

Challenges associated with trauma: What difficulties might arise when working with students who have experienced traumatic events related to war and forced relocation?

Emotional vulnerability and mental health challenges: Working with students who have experienced trauma related to war and forced displacement often reveals deep emotional vulnerability. Many may struggle with issues such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress, which can have a significant impact on their academic performance and participation. These challenges may manifest as difficulty concentrating, intense emotional reactions or a general sense of disengagement from their studies. Educators are called upon to respond with empathy and offer additional emotional support and access to counselling resources to help these students manage their mental health.

Academic disruptions and learning gaps: Trauma can affect cognitive function, leading to memory problems and difficulty retaining information, which hinders learning. In addition, these students may have missed parts of their education due to conflict and displacement, resulting in knowledge gaps that hinder their ability to keep up with coursework. Educators may need to provide academic accommodations, such as extended deadlines or additional tutoring, to bridge these gaps and enable students to succeed academically.

Challenges with social integration: Trauma can sometimes make students more introverted or cautious in social interactions, affecting their ability to connect with peers and participate in group activities. Feelings of pride or reluctance to be seen as vulnerable may also make them reluctant to seek help, further isolating them within

the academic environment. Educators and peers need to foster a supportive and inclusive atmosphere that encourages these students to engage, while respecting their personal boundaries.

Potential for behavioural sensitivity and triggered reactions: Certain topics or classroom discussions may inadvertently touch on sensitive issues related to students' traumatic experiences, leading to unexpected emotional responses. Teachers may witness instances of discomfort, upset or withdrawal, especially when discussions revolve around conflict or disturbing global events. Teachers can manage these sensitivities by creating an environment of open communication and carefully monitoring classroom dynamics to avoid re-traumatizing experiences.

Adaptation and resilience struggles: Transitioning to a new cultural, educational and social environment can be overwhelming for students dealing with the effects of trauma. The adjustment period can be prolonged as they overcome language barriers, cultural differences and feelings of instability. Educators play a crucial role in providing guidance and a sense of belonging that can help ease the challenges of adjusting to a new academic environment.

Impact on classroom dynamics and communication: Trauma can sometimes lead to unpredictable behaviour or emotional barriers that can cause friction in classroom interactions and collaborative projects. Educators may find that these students are either overly reserved or, conversely, display moments of heightened emotional expression. To ensure a productive and harmonious learning environment, educators can approach these situations with understanding and facilitate effective communication that respects each student's emotional state.

Need for specialized support and training: Many educators may not have the necessary training to support students who have experienced severe trauma, leaving them unprepared to effectively address the unique needs of these individuals. The lack of adequate resources, such as access to psychological support or trauma-informed teaching strategies, can hinder the educational experience for both students and educators. Addressing these needs may include workshops on trauma awareness for faculty and the creation of a network of counsellors available to support students in distress.

Encouraging empathy and reducing stigmatization: Educators can help reduce the stigma associated with being a trauma survivor by fostering an environment that promotes openness and respect. When students feel that their experiences are understood and valued, it helps to reduce feelings of alienation. This approach not only benefits the individual, but also promotes a culture of empathy and support within the classroom.

Impact of language differences: To what extent do you believe that language differences between you and the students can affect the teaching and learning process?

Challenges in communication and understanding: Language differences between teachers and Ukrainian students can create barriers to effective communication, affecting the clarity of explanations, instructions and feedback. Students who struggle with the language of instruction may find it difficult to follow lectures, engage in discussions, or ask for help, leading to misunderstandings and fragmented learning experiences. This barrier can also prevent teachers from fully understanding students' questions or concerns, creating a potential disconnect in the learning environment. Teachers are encouraged to adapt their communication style and find ways to simplify language where possible to mitigate this challenge.

Reduced student participation and engagement: Language difficulties can make students reluctant to participate actively in class discussions or group activities. If students are not confident in their language skills, they may withdraw from interactions, missing out on opportunities for collaborative learning and the exchange of ideas. This can lead to a less dynamic classroom atmosphere and limit students' engagement with the content. By fostering a supportive environment and encouraging questions, teachers can help students feel more comfortable participating despite language barriers.

Impact on academic performance and knowledge retention: Language barriers can affect students' ability to fully comprehend complex academic concepts, leading to gaps in knowledge and a superficial understanding of material. This can also affect their performance in exams and assignments if they struggle to interpret questions or express their understanding adequately. Teachers may need to provide additional resources, such as translated materials or simplified summaries, to help students understand and retain information.

Increased stress and anxiety for students and educators: For students who are not proficient in the language of instruction, trying to keep up in class can be a source of frustration and stress. They may feel overwhelmed or anxious about their ability to succeed academically, while teachers may feel pressure to accommodate these students within an already challenging curriculum. Both students and teachers benefit from fostering patience and understanding, recognising that effective learning may require additional time and effort on both sides.

Cultural and linguistic adaptation needs: The process of adapting to a new language is closely linked to cultural adaptation. For students from Ukraine, learning Romanian or English in addition to their academic studies is an additional challenge. Educators can play a crucial role in easing this transition by fostering an inclusive environment that respects cultural diversity and by providing guidance on language resources, such as tutoring or language courses.

Utilizing technology to bridge language gaps: Today's digital tools offer many solutions for overcoming language barriers, from translation apps to online dictionaries. These tools allow both students and teachers to translate unfamiliar terms or phrases,

facilitating smoother communication. Teachers who familiarise themselves with these technologies can better support their students and ensure that language differences do not get in the way of learning.

Encouraging language learning and cross-cultural integration: Although language differences present challenges, they also offer opportunities for growth. Encouraging Ukrainian students to improve their language skills not only supports their academic success, but also enhances their ability to integrate into the social and cultural environment of the university. This integration promotes a more cohesive learning community where students from different backgrounds can work together and learn from each other, strengthening both language skills and intercultural understanding.

Limited efficiency due to lack of support: How does the absence of adequate psychological and social support resources affect teaching effectiveness when working with students who require special attention?

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Enriching educational experiences: What teaching methods can professors employ to enhance educational experiences for both students and faculty? What are the best ways to leverage the diversity of experiences and perspectives of Ukrainian students to create engaging and varied academic courses?

Project-based learning and collaborative activities: Professors can enhance the educational experience by integrating project-based learning and collaborative activities that bring together both Romanian and Ukrainian students. By forming mixed teams, students have the opportunity to approach complex issues from different cultural perspectives, while Ukrainian students can draw on their unique backgrounds, historical knowledge and cultural experiences. This method not only fosters teamwork but also promotes cross-cultural understanding, providing valuable insights for both groups.

Celebration of cultural diversity through special events: Organising cultural events such as performances, festivals or exhibitions allows students to explore and celebrate different cultural backgrounds. Such activities provide a platform for Ukrainian

students to share their cultural heritage, while enriching the learning environment for Romanian students. Through these events, students learn to appreciate different cultures and languages, broadening their world view and promoting inclusivity within the academic environment.

Interactive learning methods (role-play, case studies, and storytelling): Engaging students through interactive methods such as role-play, case studies and storytelling allows them to share and reflect on personal experiences, especially those related to significant life events. Ukrainian students, in particular, can contribute valuable insights to discussions on topics such as resilience, adaptation and global issues, thus enriching the educational content. Storytelling, in particular, allows students to share cultural narratives that enhance both empathy and intercultural communication skills among classmates.

Incorporation of digital tools and multimedia resources: The use of digital tools, video presentations and multimedia platforms can make educational content more accessible and engaging for all students, especially when there are language barriers. Translation tools and digital resources also help Ukrainian students to better understand the material, and the inclusion of visual aids can enhance comprehension and retention. This method is beneficial for both students and professors as it encourages interactive and visually-supported learning experiences.

Structured discussions and debates on current issues: By organising structured discussions and debates on contemporary issues, educators can foster a learning environment that values diverse opinions. Ukrainian students, with their direct experience of conflict and resilience, bring unique perspectives to such discussions. Professors can facilitate conversations that not only deepen academic understanding, but also develop critical thinking and analytical skills, making these sessions meaningful and relevant for all students.

Learning through case studies reflecting diverse contexts: Using culturally and socially diverse case studies helps students understand complex global issues. For example, case studies on the economic and social impact of conflict can provide relatable academic content for Ukrainian students, while exposing Romanian students to new perspectives. This approach emphasises critical analysis and helps students develop solutions based on a broader understanding of global contexts.

Personalized and flexible teaching approaches: Teachers can enhance the learning experience by tailoring their teaching methods to students' unique backgrounds and experiences. This personalised approach is particularly effective for Ukrainian students, as it allows for adjustments based on their specific needs and cultural contexts. Flexibility in assignments, language support and the inclusion of culturally relevant materials can make the academic environment more inclusive and supportive.

Inviting guest speakers and organising intercultural workshops: Inviting guest speakers or organising workshops that highlight different cultural experiences can bring real-world relevance to the curriculum. Ukrainian students can hear from people with similar backgrounds, fostering a sense of connection and shared experience, while Romanian students are exposed to global perspectives. Such initiatives not only enrich learning, but also reinforce the values of empathy and mutual respect.

Creating an atmosphere of openness and acceptance: How can professors promote an atmosphere of openness, acceptance, and understanding for refugee students from Ukraine in their courses? What tools and support resources might professors need to help them foster a welcoming and supportive environment for Ukrainian students?

Encouraging an inclusive and supportive learning environment: Professors can foster a sense of openness and acceptance by creating a classroom atmosphere that encourages students to share their personal experiences and perspectives. By incorporating regular moments for open dialogue or reflection, professors allow Ukrainian students to contribute their unique viewpoints, which in turn helps build mutual understanding and respect among all students. The implementation of a structured feedback loop, such as short reflection sessions at the end of each class, also helps adapt teaching methods to better suit the diverse needs of students.

Utilizing collaborative learning and group projects: Group-based learning is an effective way to integrate Ukrainian students and facilitate social connections within the classroom. Organizing mixed teams for collaborative projects enables students to work closely with their peers, thereby promoting empathy and cultural exchange. Ukrainian students can bring their experiences and insights into these projects, enriching discussions and broadening the perspectives of their classmates. This method not only supports social integration but also enhances the overall learning experience for everyone involved.

Promoting cultural diversity through events and discussions: Hosting cultural events such as exhibitions, storytelling sessions or themed presentations can celebrate the cultural backgrounds of Ukrainian and other international students. By inviting students to share elements of their culture, professors can create an inclusive classroom environment that values diversity. This approach allows all students to feel seen and respected, fostering a more accepting and collaborative atmosphere.

Creating a safe space for sharing personal stories: Given that some students may have experienced traumatic events, professors can create a safe and supportive environment for sharing by setting ground rules for respectful listening and empathy. For example, professors could devote a few minutes at the beginning of each class to sharing

positive personal experiences, which can help Ukrainian students gradually feel comfortable discussing their backgrounds without pressure.

Providing language support and flexible teaching approaches: Addressing language barriers is essential to creating a welcoming atmosphere. Professors can support Ukrainian students by providing bilingual or translated materials and incorporating visual aids and digital tools to facilitate comprehension. Encouraging the use of common languages such as English or offering simplified language for instructions will help Ukrainian students feel more included and empowered in the learning environment.

Empathy training and professional development for educators: Professors can benefit from participating in training programmes that focus on trauma sensitivity and intercultural competence. Such programmes provide valuable tools for recognising and addressing the emotional and psychological needs of students who have experienced displacement. These skills will enable professors to more effectively support Ukrainian students and enhance their ability to create a truly inclusive learning space.

Implementing a peer support network or mentorship program: Establishing peer support groups or mentoring programmes allows Ukrainian students to connect with other students in a structured, supportive environment. Professors can facilitate this process by helping students find partners or mentors within their class, creating a sense of belonging and mutual support. These networks enable students to face academic and social challenges with greater confidence and foster a collaborative spirit.

Promoting open communication and respect for diversity: Professors can set the tone for an inclusive environment by encouraging open communication and modelling respect for diversity. They can initiate conversations on topics such as empathy, inclusion and cultural awareness, and help students see the value of different perspectives. This approach creates a classroom culture that celebrates diversity and strengthens relationships between Ukrainian students and their peers.

Offering psychological and social support resources: Working with campus counsellors or social support services can be invaluable in addressing the needs of Ukrainian students. Professors who have access to such resources are better equipped to refer students to professional help when needed, and to ensure that emotional and social needs are met in parallel with academic goals. In the absence of these resources, professors can advocate for the establishment of psychological support programmes to effectively help all students.

Strategies for cultivating empathy: What training initiatives or workshops could be implemented to prepare faculty to recognize and adequately respond to the specific needs of Ukrainian students? How can professors more effectively support the expression of experiences and needs of these students?

Cultivating empathy through tailored initiatives and workshops: Teachers could consider organizing events where Ukrainian students are invited to share their personal experiences, fostering understanding among classmates. Cultural evenings that highlight Ukrainian and other local traditions, including food, music, and dance, create an environment of inclusivity and cultural respect, helping Ukrainian students feel a sense of belonging within a multicultural region.

Building empathy through active listening and communication training: Educators benefit from training that enhances active listening and empathetic communication. Such workshops could involve exercises like role-playing, where teachers practice empathy by engaging with diverse perspectives and learning how to navigate sensitive conversations effectively. Collaborating with local Ukrainian organizations and community support networks can provide teachers with the necessary context and resources to address the specific needs of Ukrainian students.

Incorporating psychological support for trauma sensitivity: For educators working with students who may have experienced trauma due to displacement, psychological training can be invaluable. Such programs would guide teachers in developing a sensitive approach, focusing on the careful selection of language and the potential impact of certain topics. By providing a foundation in trauma awareness, teachers become better equipped to create a safe and supportive classroom environment that meets the needs of all students.

Organizing group and community activities for social integration: Active involvement in extracurricular activities and community-building events, such as group projects or collaborative extracurricular workshops, offers a structured way for students to build relationships and share perspectives. By encouraging teamwork among students of different backgrounds, teachers create a supportive setting where Ukrainian students feel integrated and valued.

Introducing reflection sessions and regular feedback loops: Structured moments for personal reflection or feedback allow teachers to gauge the emotional well-being and engagement levels of their students, adapting their teaching to accommodate specific needs. Teachers could implement short debriefing or reflection sessions at the beginning or end of class to give students a space to express concerns and foster an environment where students feel understood and respected.

Fostering cultural awareness through international exchanges and best practice sharing: Exposure to other educational models, through exchange programs or guest speakers who have previously worked with refugees, provides teachers with diverse strategies for addressing the unique needs of displaced students. Sharing best practices with international colleagues can offer educators insight into methods proven effective in fostering an inclusive, empathetic academic environment for refugee students.

Enhancing communication skills through intercultural workshops: To address potential language and cultural barriers, workshops focusing on intercultural communication can provide teachers with tools to understand and connect with students from diverse backgrounds. Through exercises in empathy-driven communication, teachers can create a classroom atmosphere where every student feels comfortable expressing their needs.

Implementing peer support programs and collaborative learning opportunities: Creating peer mentorship programs, where Ukrainian students are paired with classmates or senior students, can help newcomers navigate their new academic and social environment more effectively. Teachers can support these relationships by facilitating introductions and encouraging participation in class projects, thus fostering a collaborative spirit and enabling students to support one another through challenges.

Possibility of intercultural conflicts: Do you believe that cultural differences and distinct life experiences could lead to risks of conflicts or tensions between Ukrainian and Romanian students?

General scepticism about conflict potential: Many respondents doubt that cultural differences would inherently lead to conflict, suggesting that tensions between students typically arise for reasons unrelated to cultural or national differences. For example, one respondent mentions that conflicts occur even among Romanian students and rarely, if ever, between Romanian and foreign students. Other notes that although there are cultural differences, the common youth and curiosity of the students tend to promote unity rather than division. A similar point is made about the traumatic experiences of Ukrainian students; rather than creating conflict, these experiences tend to create empathy among Romanian students, who may feel compassion for their Ukrainian peers.

Potential risks from prejudices and stereotypes: Some responses recognise that prejudices or stereotypes can create a risk of conflict, as students from different backgrounds may hold prejudices or misconceptions about each other's cultures. These stereotypes could influence interactions if students rely on superficial or misinformed views, potentially leading to discomfort or exclusion. The recommendation here is to address prejudice directly through intercultural education and awareness initiatives. This could include programmes that teach about Ukrainian culture or the refugee experience to promote understanding, reduce prejudice and help students build respectful relationships.

Concerns over trauma and communication challenges: Some respondents point out that the traumatic experiences of Ukrainian students in relation to the war may lead to tensions, not necessarily due to conflict, but due to differences in emotional needs and behaviour. They suggest that these students may experience feelings of isolation or

misunderstanding if their struggles aren't acknowledged. This theme extends to the suggestion that students may feel that their difficulties aren't fully understood by their Romanian peers, which could lead to frustration or strained interactions. To mitigate this, respondents suggest training teachers to recognise signs of trauma and adopting approaches that encourage open communication and sensitivity to students who may need additional support.

Preventive strategies and faculty involvement: Several respondents emphasise the role of teachers and administrators in fostering a supportive, inclusive environment that discourages conflict. By promoting dialogue, encouraging collaborative activities, and setting expectations of respect and empathy, teachers can help students manage differences constructively. Respondents suggest that educational institutions can implement proactive initiatives such as intercultural workshops, group projects and counselling services. Some mention the value of establishing clear communication channels and non-discrimination policies to create a safer, more inclusive environment for all students.

Empathy and inclusive activities as preventive measures: Some responses advocate using empathy-building activities to prevent conflict before it arises. Organising joint cultural events or discussion sessions where students can share personal stories can reduce misunderstandings and build mutual appreciation. For example, one suggestion is to organise informal events such as cultural evenings where students can celebrate Ukrainian and Romanian traditions together. Other ideas include group discussions on the challenges faced by refugees, which could promote empathy and foster bonds between students.

Integration without special distinction: Some respondents believe that treating Ukrainian students as equal members of the student body, without special differentiation, could reduce the likelihood of conflict by ensuring that they feel integrated. They argue that offering the same resources and opportunities to all students, regardless of background, could help Ukrainian students to fit seamlessly into the community without feeling stigmatised. These respondents suggest avoiding 'positive discrimination' and focusing on creating a naturally inclusive environment where students feel valued and respected as individuals.

Challenges of the language barrier: Some respondents highlight the significant difficulties posed by language barriers in the teaching and communication relationship between Romanian professors and Ukrainian students. These obstacles can affect the learning and teaching process in several ways. For instance, students may struggle to understand lectures, participate in discussions, or complete assignments effectively. This can lead to frustration, decreased academic performance, and feelings of isolation. To address these challenges, respondents suggest implementing language support programs, such as Romanian language courses for Ukrainian students and providing

translation services or bilingual teaching materials. Additionally, fostering an environment of patience and understanding among faculty and students can help mitigate the impact of language barriers on the educational experience.

Total language barrier without a common language: Several responses note that when neither Romanian nor Ukrainian students can communicate in a common language such as English, the resulting language barrier can be total, significantly affecting the learning experience. When students can communicate in English, respondents highlight that difficulties are mitigated as teaching materials and projects can be provided in English, facilitating the academic process. The main challenge, however, is that Ukrainian students can take some time to learn Romanian, leaving a gap in understanding classroom instructions and academic material in the meantime.

Communication and comprehension challenges: A commonly cited problem is the difficulty of clear, direct communication between teachers and students, as language differences can prevent students from fully understanding instructions or expressing their own questions and thoughts. Respondents suggest that this miscommunication can affect the quality of teaching, as essential information can be lost or misunderstood, leading to incomplete understanding and ineffective learning. Some respondents anticipate that students who are not confident in a foreign language may feel discouraged from participating in class discussions, thereby limiting engagement and hindering collaborative learning.

Impact on academic performance and retention of material: Several respondents mentioned that if students do not fully understand the language of teaching, this can have a negative impact on their academic performance. The complexity of academic language and terminology makes it difficult for students to grasp key concepts. This concern extends to assessment, where students may struggle to answer exams and assignments accurately. Respondents suggest that language barriers can lead to incorrect application of learned knowledge, potentially compromising the student's overall educational experience.

Empathy, patience, and technological aids as solutions: Respondents emphasise that patience and empathy on the part of educators are crucial in overcoming language barriers, suggesting that an understanding attitude can help students feel more supported. In addition, some respondents point to technology, such as translation software, as a valuable resource in overcoming language challenges. Suggestions include providing materials in both Romanian and English, using highly accurate translation programs to maintain the integrity of course content while supporting the learning needs of Ukrainian students.

Potential isolation and social integration challenges: Language barriers not only impact on academic learning, but also on social integration within the academic community. Some respondents highlight that Ukrainian students may feel isolated if they

cannot fully participate in social or academic discussions, leading to potential exclusion from peer interactions. This separation can negatively affect their sense of belonging and comfort in the educational environment. To mitigate this, respondents suggest collaborative group activities that involve Romanian students, fostering an inclusive environment and enabling social bonds that support language learning and cultural understanding.

Bilingual support and financial incentives for language learning: A few respondents suggest concrete institutional solutions to bridge the language gap. One recommendation is financial incentives for lecturers to take courses in Ukrainian, which could provide them with language skills to better support their students. Another suggestion is to provide free Romanian language courses for Ukrainian students, which would speed up their integration into the Romanian-speaking academic environment and help them to participate more actively in class. Such initiatives could ease the transition and promote a more inclusive and accessible learning experience.

Professional development in communication and cultural sensitivity: To better address these language challenges, some respondents suggested that teachers could benefit from additional training on how to communicate effectively across language barriers. This training could include strategies for simplifying language, using visual aids, and being aware of cultural nuances that may affect communication. These responses highlight the importance of equipping teachers with the tools to make learning accessible despite language differences, thereby supporting student engagement and reducing frustration on both sides.

The impact of insufficient resources and support: What issues do you think could arise from the lack of resources and support for Ukrainian students, both in terms of their academic success and educational experience? What impact do you believe these issues could have?

Risk of demotivation and its broader impact: A recurring theme is the risk of demotivation among Ukrainian students, who may face a lack of purpose or drive if adequate resources and support are not provided. This lack of motivation could manifest itself in apathy, potentially leading to academic disengagement and even risky coping mechanisms such as addictive behaviours, which could negatively affect not only the students concerned but also their peers. The lack of support and meaningful opportunities for engagement may prevent these students from developing a positive outlook on their educational journey.

Negative impact on academic performance and risk of dropout: Many respondents highlight the direct impact of inadequate support on academic performance, suggesting that without the necessary resources, students may struggle to meet academic expectations. Lack of access to learning aids, financial support and mentoring could

lead to lower grades and, in severe cases, contribute to higher dropout rates among Ukrainian students. Some respondents emphasise that without the necessary guidance, students may feel overwhelmed by academic demands, leading them to abandon their studies.

Social isolation and psychological challenges: Social isolation and psychological distress are recurring concerns, with several responses noting that without resources aimed at fostering social inclusion, Ukrainian students may feel marginalized or alienated. This isolation could heighten feelings of loneliness and stress, exacerbating mental health challenges. Respondents emphasize that students dealing with trauma or adjustment issues may be especially vulnerable, and the absence of support services like counselling or peer integration activities can lead to further emotional distress.

Barriers to cultural and social integration: Another major issue highlighted is the difficulty of cultural and social integration in the absence of supportive resources. Some respondents indicate that without initiatives to support cultural exchange and mutual understanding, Ukrainian students may struggle to adapt to the academic and social environment, limiting their ability to connect meaningfully with local students. Such gaps could prevent Ukrainian students from building relationships, diminishing their overall educational experience and reducing their sense of belonging within the academic community.

Institutional responsibility and broader educational impact: Respondents suggest that educational institutions hold a responsibility to provide a conducive learning environment, especially for students from challenging backgrounds. Without adequate support systems, there may be a detrimental effect on the institution's overall learning atmosphere, potentially affecting all students. Moreover, the lack of inclusive practices could hinder the university's reputation as a diverse and supportive environment, ultimately dissuading other international students from choosing the institution in the future.

Opportunity for positive institutional development and funding: Some responses suggest that if sufficient support systems are put in place, it could positively impact the institution, potentially positioning it as a model of best practices for supporting international students. Furthermore, respondents mention that successful integration initiatives may attract additional funding from entities like the European Union, which could enhance educational services overall. By offering comprehensive support, the institution could both elevate its reputation and provide a more enriching experience for all students.

Potential negative influence on academic standards and quality: A few responses raise concerns that a lack of resources might compromise academic standards. If instructors do not have the tools or support to address diverse student needs, the quality of education could decline, potentially impacting all students' learning outcomes.

Respondents suggest that without necessary resources, educators may struggle to maintain high standards, and students who need additional support might not receive the assistance required to meet academic expectations.

Broader social and cultural implications: The absence of adequate resources and support could also have broader social implications, with some respondents pointing out that students may gravitate toward other communities where they feel accepted. This shift could mean a loss of potential contributions from Ukrainian students to the Romanian workforce and society, impacting both local and international perspectives within the academic environment. Respondents suggest that fostering a supportive environment for Ukrainian students could, in the long run, contribute positively to the socio-economic landscape.

4.4. Ukraine

4.4.1. Description of the higher education system in Ukraine

Higher education in Ukraine is delivered through various types of institutions, each with distinct characteristics and roles, as outlined in detail by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine:

1. **Universities:** These are multidisciplinary or specialized institutions offering education across various degrees, including Doctor of Philosophy. Universities also engage in fundamental and applied scientific research.
2. **Academies and institutes:** These sector-specific institutions provide education at the bachelor's (first cycle) and master's (second cycle) levels in one or more fields of knowledge. They also offer doctoral and post-doctoral programs in specific disciplines and conduct fundamental and applied scientific research.
3. **Colleges:** These institutions, or structural units within universities, academies, or institutes, primarily offer education at the junior bachelor's and/or bachelor's levels. Colleges may also conduct applied scientific research and creative or artistic activities. To attain the status of a college, at least 30% of the institution's licensed capacity must be allocated to training students at the junior bachelor's and/or bachelor's levels.

The status of a national higher education institution is an honorary designation awarded in recognition of exceptional contributions to the advancement of higher education, science, and culture in Ukraine. This prestigious status acknowledges the institution's significant impact and is formally reflected in its official name.

4.4.1.1. Educational programs and higher education degrees awarded

Since 2002, higher education in Ukraine has been structured around educational programs leading to the award of degrees at various levels: junior specialist (incomplete higher education), bachelor (basic higher education), specialist (complete higher education), and master (complete higher education).

In 2005, Ukraine joined the Bologna Process, adopting a three-tiered system of higher education comprising bachelor, master, and doctor of philosophy degrees. The enactment of the Law of Ukraine “On Higher Education” in 2014 facilitated the gradual implementation of this system, fostering greater diversity and flexibility for students in designing individual educational trajectories and enhancing the compatibility of Ukraine’s higher education system with the European Higher Education Area.

The initial (short cycle) level of higher education remains an integral component of Ukraine’s education system. Training at various levels is conducted through educational programs with either academic or professional orientations. Higher education institutions independently develop and approve these programs, adhering to legislative requirements and educational standards established for each level and specialty within the higher education framework.

Higher education standards in Ukraine are meticulously designed to align with the National Qualifications Framework, a comprehensive system that outlines qualification levels and the corresponding degrees within the national education system. This framework is harmonized with the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, ensuring compatibility and consistency with international standards. Such alignment facilitates the recognition of Ukrainian qualifications abroad, enhances academic and professional mobility, and supports lifelong learning initiatives by integrating global best practices into the national education system.

The training of specialists with higher education in Ukraine is structured across several levels, beginning with the initial (short cycle) level and progressing through the first (bachelor’s), second (master’s), and third (educational-scientific or educational-creative) levels. Each of these stages is aligned with specific learning outcomes and competencies as outlined in the National Qualifications Framework, ensuring a clear progression in skills, knowledge, and professional development. The system culminates in the awarding of degrees that correspond to these levels: junior bachelor, bachelor, master, and doctor of philosophy or doctor of arts.

At each level, educational programs are developed to meet the needs of both students and the broader labour market, balancing academic rigor with practical application. For example, the short cycle focuses on foundational skills and applied knowledge, preparing students for entry-level positions or further studies. The bachelor’s level emphasizes a broader academic foundation and specialization in a chosen field, while

the master's level offers advanced expertise and research opportunities. The third level fosters original research, artistic innovation, or specialized professional practice, producing highly qualified individuals who contribute to scientific, cultural, and economic progress. This multi-level approach ensures that Ukrainian higher education remains responsive to the evolving demands of both the domestic and international landscapes.

The final admission for obtaining higher education at the educational and qualification level of a junior specialist in Ukraine was conducted in 2019. Following the enactment of the Law of Ukraine "On Higher Education" on September 6, 2014, the diploma of a junior specialist was reclassified and now holds equivalence to a diploma at the educational and professional level of a junior bachelor. This legislative change aimed to align educational qualifications with updated standards and provide clarity in the qualification system. Individuals who began their studies under the junior specialist program by 2019 and successfully completed their coursework receive a junior specialist diploma, which is legally recognized as equivalent to a junior bachelor's diploma.

Similarly, the last admission to the educational and qualification level of a specialist occurred in 2016. Under the new legal framework established by the same 2014 law, the qualification of a specialist is considered equivalent to a master's degree. This adjustment reflects a broader effort to streamline the structure of higher education qualifications in Ukraine, enhancing compatibility with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Additionally, the law redefined the scientific degree of Candidate of Sciences as equivalent to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), further ensuring the alignment of Ukrainian academic degrees with international standards. These reforms facilitate greater recognition of Ukrainian degrees on a global scale, thereby supporting academic mobility and international collaboration.

To bolster these efforts, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) was implemented within Ukraine's higher education framework. ECTS provides a standardized method for quantifying and recognizing academic workloads, qualifications, and educational components. One ECTS credit corresponds to 30 academic hours, making it easier for students, educators, and institutions to understand and transfer academic credits across different countries and systems. The integration of ECTS into Ukrainian higher education not only fosters student mobility but also enhances the transparency and comparability of educational achievements, further embedding Ukraine within the global academic community.

4.4.1.2. Licensing of educational activities and accreditation of educational programs.

Educational activities in the field of higher education in Ukraine are conducted based on licenses issued by the designated licensing authority, as established by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine in accordance with applicable legislation. Prior to 2020, licensing requirements extended to each individual specialty offered by a higher education institution or scientific institution, ensuring oversight of all areas in which higher education applicants received training. However, significant reforms were introduced on January 16, 2020, to streamline the licensing process and enhance its focus.

Under the revised framework, licensing in higher education now applies to two key areas: the overall educational activities of a higher education institution at a specified level of higher education, and educational programs that culminate in the awarding of professional qualifications within regulated professions. These changes aim to simplify regulatory requirements, reduce administrative burdens, and focus on ensuring quality and compliance in essential and regulated educational areas.

To ensure transparency and public accessibility, detailed information regarding the issuance and revocation of licenses for educational activities is maintained in the Unified State Electronic Database on Education. This centralized platform provides stakeholders with easy access to up-to-date licensing information, promoting accountability and trust within the higher education system: <https://registry.edbo.gov.ua/vishcha-osvita>.

Until 2019, accreditation procedures in Ukraine's higher education system were conducted based on fields of study (fields of knowledge) or specific specialties. However, significant changes were implemented in 2019, shifting the focus of accreditation to the evaluation and approval of individual educational programs offered by higher education institutions. This reform aimed to align the accreditation process more closely with international practices and ensure a higher level of quality assurance for specific educational offerings.

The quality assurance system of higher education in Ukraine is a multi-tiered framework designed to uphold and enhance the standards of educational activities and outcomes. It is composed of three interrelated components:

1. Internal quality assurance system: This component is managed by higher education institutions themselves, focusing on maintaining and improving the quality of their educational activities and outcomes. Institutions develop and implement their own policies and procedures to ensure continuous quality enhancement.
2. External quality assurance system: This system involves the evaluation of educational activities and the quality of higher education by external bodies. It provides an independent assessment of whether institutions and programs meet established standards and fosters public confidence in the higher education system.

3. National and independent quality assurance bodies: The National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education plays a central role in overseeing and coordinating quality assurance activities. Additionally, independent institutions contribute by assessing and ensuring the quality of higher education, offering further layers of scrutiny and validation.

These interconnected systems ensure a robust framework for maintaining and advancing the quality of higher education in Ukraine, promoting alignment with global standards and enhancing the competitiveness of Ukrainian educational institutions on the international stage.

Ukraine acknowledges the certificates of accreditation for educational programs issued by foreign accreditation bodies or higher education quality assurance agencies, provided that these agencies are included in a list approved by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. The most recent version of this list, which was approved on July 10, 2019, under Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 554-r, is based on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). This recognition facilitates the international mobility of students and ensures that Ukrainian institutions adhere to global quality assurance standards, fostering greater integration with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and beyond.

4.4.1.3. Organization and structure of the higher education system

The higher education system in Ukraine is built upon a progressive and multi-tiered structure, designed to offer a diverse range of qualifications to meet the educational needs of its population. This structure incorporates a variety of degree programs, each with distinct educational objectives and outcomes, which allow students to specialize in a wide array of academic and professional fields. These programs, ranging from the Junior Bachelor to the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), ensure that students are equipped with the necessary theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and research expertise to contribute effectively to their chosen industries or academic disciplines.

Ukraine's alignment with European higher education standards, particularly following its participation in the Bologna Process, has led to the implementation of a three-cycle system (Bachelor, Master, and Doctor of Philosophy). This structure not only facilitates academic mobility but also enhances the comparability of Ukrainian higher education with other European systems. The country has also introduced integrated programs that cross disciplinary boundaries, preparing students for careers that require a multidisciplinary approach. This chapter will explore these various levels of education in detail, highlighting their role in shaping the Ukrainian higher education landscape and their compliance with international standards.

Within this framework, the different academic levels – from Junior Bachelor to Doctor of Arts – represent not just an academic progression but also a response to the evolving demands of global education and labour markets. By examining the structure and organization of these programs, we gain a deeper understanding of the educational practices in Ukraine and how they are designed to cultivate expertise in diverse fields, all while fostering academic rigor and creativity.

1. Junior Bachelor is an educational or educational-professional degree obtained at the initial level (short cycle) of higher education and awarded by a higher education institution as a result of the successful completion by a higher education applicant of an educational program, the volume of which is 120 ECTS credits. A person has the right to obtain a junior bachelor's degree provided that he or she has completed general secondary education. To obtain a junior bachelor's degree on the basis of professional pre-higher education, a higher education institution has the right to recognize and transfer ECTS credits, the maximum volume of which is determined by the higher education standard within each specialty. The junior bachelor's degree corresponds to level 5 of the National Qualifications Framework, the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the short cycle of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.
2. Bachelor is an educational degree obtained at the first level of higher education and awarded by a higher education institution as a result of the successful completion by a higher education applicant of an educational and professional program, the volume of which is 180–240 ECTS credits. A person has the right to obtain a bachelor's degree provided that he or she has completed general secondary education. To obtain a bachelor's degree on the basis of a junior bachelor's degree or on the basis of professional pre-higher education, a higher education institution has the right to recognize and transfer ECTS credits, the maximum amount of which is determined by the higher education standard within each specialty. A bachelor's degree corresponds to level 6 of the National Qualifications Framework, the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the first cycle of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.
3. Master's degree is an educational degree obtained at the second level of higher education and awarded by a higher education institution (scientific institution). It is awarded as a result of the successful completion by a higher education applicant of the relevant educational program. The volume of the program is 90–120 ECTS credits for an educational and professional program or 120 ECTS credits for an educational and scientific program. A person has the right to obtain a master's degree provided that he or she has a bachelor's degree. The master's degree corresponds to level 7 of the National Qualifications Framework, the European Qualifications

Framework for Lifelong Learning and the second cycle of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.

4. Integrated “cross-curricular” programs. A master’s degree in medicine, pharmacy, or veterinary medicine is obtained on the basis of complete general secondary education or a junior bachelor’s degree, a professional junior bachelor’s degree, or a junior specialist’s educational qualification level in the relevant specialty. The degree is awarded by a higher education institution as a result of the successful completion by a higher education applicant of the relevant educational program. If a master’s degree in medicine, pharmacy, or veterinary medicine is obtained on the basis of complete general secondary education, the volume of the program is 300–360 ECTS credits. For obtaining a master’s degree in medicine, pharmacy, or veterinary medicine on the basis of a junior bachelor’s degree or on the basis of professional pre-higher education, a higher education institution has the right to recognize and transfer ECTS credits, the maximum volume of which is determined by the higher education standard. Master’s degree in medicine, pharmacy or veterinary medicine corresponds to level 7 of the National Qualifications Framework, the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the second cycle of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.
5. Doctor of Philosophy is an educational and scientific degree obtained at the third level of higher education on the basis of a master’s degree. The degree of Doctor of Philosophy is awarded by a specialized academic council of a higher education institution or scientific institution as a result of the successful completion by a higher education applicant of the relevant educational and scientific program and the public defence of a dissertation in a specialized academic council. The standard term for the preparation of a Doctor of Philosophy in postgraduate studies (adjunct) is four years. The volume of the educational component of the educational and scientific program for the preparation of a Doctor of Philosophy is 30–60 ECTS credits. This degree corresponds to level 8 of the National Qualifications Framework, the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the third cycle of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.
6. Doctor of Arts is an educational and creative degree obtained at the third level of higher education on the basis of a master’s degree. A person has the right to obtain a Doctor of Arts degree in creative postgraduate studies. The standard period of training for a Doctor of Arts in creative postgraduate studies is three years. The volume of the educational component of the educational and creative program for the Doctor of Arts is 30–60 ECTS credits. This degree corresponds to level 8 of the National Qualifications Framework, the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning and the third cycle of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area.

In conclusion, the Ukrainian higher education system provides a comprehensive array of academic programs, structured to guide students from foundational education to advanced research and professional expertise. Through its tiers – Junior Bachelor, Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral programs – students are offered both academic and professional opportunities for growth. Moreover, the introduction of cross-curricular, integrated programs further enriches the academic environment, responding to contemporary needs for multi-disciplinary knowledge and adaptability in various industries.

As Ukraine continues to modernize and align its education system with global standards, these educational pathways will remain crucial in shaping a highly skilled and competitive workforce. The focus on the Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Arts programs further elevates the nation's contribution to global academic and scientific communities. The continued development of these educational structures will ensure that Ukraine's higher education system meets the evolving challenges of a dynamic global landscape, positioning its graduates to excel both locally and internationally.

4.4.2. Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University – Institutional insights and student dynamics

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University is one of Ukraine's leading educational institutions, renowned for its diverse academic offerings and commitment to scientific advancement. The university features two prominent Educational and Scientific Institutes – the Institute of Biology, Chemistry and Bioresources, and the Institute of Physical, Technical and Computer Sciences – along with ten specialized faculties that cover a wide range of disciplines, including Geography, Economics, Foreign Languages, and Law. With a strong academic foundation, the university is home to 73 departments, many of which are led by highly qualified scholars, with 67% of department heads holding the title of Doctor of Science. This breadth of educational resources ensures that Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University remains at the forefront of higher education in Ukraine.

The foundational element of Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University's operations has consistently been its faculty, whose scientific and pedagogical potential remains central to the institution's mission of producing highly qualified specialists and responsible citizens of Ukraine. The university's teaching staff plays a crucial role in shaping the academic environment, driving both educational and research activities. Furthermore, institution's commitment to excellence in education is reflected in its capacity to train over 14,000 higher education applicants across a diverse range of disciplines. This is achieved through the dedicated work of 73 departments, each of which contributes to the comprehensive academic framework of the university.

The faculty's expertise, coupled with the university's well-established academic structure, enables the delivery of rigorous educational programs aimed at fostering the development of future professionals who are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and ethical grounding necessary for success in both national and global contexts. The high level of academic and research engagement at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University underscores its continued role as a leading educational institution in Ukraine, committed to advancing both the individual aspirations of students and the broader societal needs of the country.

The educational process at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University is underpinned by a dedicated team of 945 scientific and pedagogical staff members, whose collective expertise and experience play a pivotal role in delivering high-quality education. Among these, 126 professors and 160 doctors of sciences contribute to the university's academic rigor, ensuring that students benefit from the guidance of experts in their respective fields. In addition, 463 associate professors and 612 candidates of sciences further enrich the university's academic environment, providing a wealth of knowledge and experience to students. The university's faculty includes notable individuals such as four laureates of State Prizes, a corresponding member of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, and a corresponding member of the National Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of Ukraine, reflecting the institution's high standards of academic excellence and research achievements. Furthermore, 47 faculty members and staff hold honorary state titles, underscoring the recognition of their significant contributions to education and science at both the national and international levels. This exceptional team of scholars is integral to the university's mission of providing a world-class education and fostering a research-driven academic environment.

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University offers comprehensive postgraduate and doctoral programs, providing advanced academic opportunities for students aiming to contribute to their respective fields through rigorous research. The university is home to 9 specialized academic councils, including 5 doctoral councils, which oversee the defence of theses and ensure the high standards of academic research. In response to the growing demand for advanced academic qualifications, the Ministry of Education and Science authorized the establishment of 3 one-time specialized councils in 2020. During that year, a total of 16 theses were successfully defended across all specialized academic councils, including 11 candidate theses and 5 doctoral theses, reflecting the university's commitment to producing high-quality scholarly research and fostering the next generation of academic leaders.

The postgraduate program at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University offers specialized training in 22 scientific disciplines, encompassing a wide range of research areas. The university provides corresponding educational and scientific programs tailored to the needs of advanced students pursuing their academic careers. Out

of these 22 scientific specialties, 16 have received formal accreditation, ensuring that the programs meet rigorous academic and professional standards. This comprehensive approach to postgraduate education reflects the university's commitment to cultivating highly skilled scientific personnel capable of contributing to research and innovation across various fields.

As of December 1, 2024, Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University accommodates a diverse and dedicated group of 342 postgraduate students across various scientific disciplines. The university provides flexible study options, with 293 students enrolled in full-time postgraduate programs and 49 students pursuing their education through evening and correspondence formats. This distribution reflects the institution's commitment to offering diverse educational pathways that cater to the needs of students from different backgrounds and circumstances.

Among the postgraduate students, a significant proportion, specifically 180 individuals, are pursuing their Doctor of Philosophy degrees with funding from the state budget, underlining the university's role in producing highly skilled professionals for the national economy. The remaining 162 postgraduate students receive financial support from private individuals or legal entities, highlighting the growing participation of external partners in supporting higher education. The university's doctoral studies are available in 11 scientific specialties, ensuring a wide range of advanced academic opportunities for those aspiring to pursue the highest level of academic achievement. This comprehensive approach to postgraduate education at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University reinforces its status as a leading institution in fostering scientific knowledge, research innovation, and academic excellence.

As of December 1, 2024, Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University is home to a vibrant academic community of 14,071 students, demonstrating the institution's broad reach and commitment to providing higher education across various disciplines. The majority of students, totalling 11,648, are enrolled in full-time study programs, reflecting the university's central role in delivering a comprehensive and rigorous educational experience. Within this group, there is a fairly balanced gender distribution, with 5,935 women and 5,713 men, indicating the university's appeal to students of all backgrounds. Additionally, 2,423 students are pursuing their studies through part-time study options, which cater to individuals who may be balancing work or other responsibilities alongside their education. In this category, women represent the larger portion, with 1,985 part-time students, while men account for 438 students. This diverse student body highlights the university's ability to serve a wide range of educational needs and its dedication to fostering an inclusive environment where students can thrive academically, regardless of their personal circumstances.

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University is distinguished by its rich array of specialized research and academic centres that foster a comprehensive understanding

of various cultural, historical, and geopolitical topics. These centres include the Ramon Hnatyshyn Canadian Studies Centre, the American Studies Centre, and the Romanian Studies Centre, each dedicated to exploring the unique aspects of their respective regions and contributing to the global knowledge base. Additionally, the Gedankendach German Studies Centre offers in-depth research opportunities in German language and culture, while the Euro-Atlantic Integration and Security Centre focuses on the region's geopolitical dynamics and integration processes. The Bohemian Studies Centre provides expertise on Central European cultures, and the G. Bostan Comparative Romanian Philology Centre emphasizes the comparative study of Romanian languages and literatures. Further enriching the university's academic offerings, the Slavic Studies Centre delves into the linguistic, cultural, and historical aspects of Slavic nations, and the Judaic Centre offers specialized studies on Jewish history, culture, and religion. The Historical and Cultural Centre serves as a hub for interdisciplinary research on historical developments and cultural heritage. Collectively, these centres not only contribute to the academic prestige of Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University but also provide a platform for international collaboration and knowledge exchange, positioning the institution as a leading centre of academic excellence in the region.

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University is housed across 18 buildings, 12 of which are dedicated to educational purposes. A notable architectural landmark within the university's campus is the former Residence of the Metropolitans of Bukovina and Dalmatia, renowned for its stunning beauty and historical significance. This architectural ensemble was transferred to the balance of Chernivtsi State University in 1955 by the resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR. Its selection was no mere coincidence, as the building has a long history of theological education, with generations of theological students having traditionally studied within its walls. The Residence's striking design, combined with its cultural and educational heritage, continues to stand as a symbol of the university's commitment to preserving its rich academic and historical legacy.

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educational environment, have become a beacon for temporarily displaced students who arrived in our city at the onset of the war. As a result, many of them have chosen to join our academic community, drawn not only by the university's historical prestige but also by the welcoming, picturesque region of Chernivtsi, which remains a safe haven and a symbol of resilience in challenging times.

It is widely acknowledged that unrestricted access to learning resources is a fundamental prerequisite for education to achieve both broad accessibility and financial sustainability.

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University boasts one of the richest book collections in the region, with its Scientific Library housing nearly 2.8 million copies. The university is also home to the Ruta Publishing House of Chernivtsi National University, contributing to its strong academic and cultural presence. In addition to its educational and research facilities, the university offers a wide range of extracurricular resources, including a state-of-the-art sports complex, a research farm, and a botanical garden, each supporting both academic inquiry and student well-being.

Open principles – such as open educational resources, free and open software, open data, and open standards – are fundamental to the true empowerment of faculty and students worldwide. These principles play a crucial role in making education and opportunities accessible to all. As the landscape of learning evolves, how learners engage with and acquire meaningful education has become a central topic of discussion. In this context, education necessitates new policy reforms that embrace the expansion of educational concepts and foster open debates surrounding these issues.

The Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University further enriches its academic offerings through specialized resources such as a geophysical observatory, natural history, geological, and ethnographic museums, and a historical and architectural museum complex. From a technological standpoint, this is more achievable today than ever before, thanks to the increasing accessibility of the internet and smart devices. However, realizing this potential hinge on fully embracing the paradigm of open education-providing learning opportunities to anyone, anywhere, at any time, and on any device. These resources play a vital role in fostering interdisciplinary learning and research. Additionally, the university is equipped with an information and telecommunications centre, and it serves as a UNESCO site management centre, demonstrating its commitment to global academic collaboration and heritage preservation. UNESCO has emphasized the critical importance of expanding access to education, highlighting it as a cornerstone for future development and global prosperity. With the number of students in tertiary education worldwide projected to exceed 260 million by 2025, this priority is more pressing than ever. These diverse facilities not only enhance the educational process but also create a vibrant and dynamic environment for both students and faculty members, solidifying the university's role as a leading

institution in Ukraine and beyond as education continues to be an essential, shared and collaborative social good.

Adjacent to Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University lies a meticulously designed and picturesque dendrological park, home to a variety of rare plant species. This serene space serves as a peaceful retreat for both faculty and students, offering a place of psychological solace after enduring prolonged periods of shelling and air attacks. The park's proximity to the university's bomb shelter provides an added layer of safety, offering a reassuring environment for those who have returned from studying abroad or fled from regions impacted by ongoing hostilities. The park has become a symbol of resilience, providing a much-needed refuge for the university community amidst the challenges brought by the ongoing war. Access is a compulsory quality indicator of education systems in which all learners have access to education and learning environments anytime and anywhere. In transforming learning and teaching, educational processes need to encourage inclusion and equality for all learners through assuring access. By proposing meaningful learning and professional development opportunities in lifelong learning processes, open education commits to promoting universal access and participation. In ensuring motivation, equality, evaluation of learning progress and creativity, we must rethink learning and teaching environments to enhance the quality of education.

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University is home to an extensive system of student self-government bodies, which actively contribute to both the educational process and the broader scientific and public life of the city and region. These student organizations play a pivotal role in fostering a dynamic and engaged academic community. Additionally, the university publishes the student newspaper "New Formats", which serves as a platform for student voices and perspectives. This initiative ensures a seamless continuation of the educational and extracurricular interactions between students and faculty, maintaining the vibrant academic atmosphere that existed before the war. Despite the challenges posed by the conflict, these efforts exemplify the university's commitment to preserving its educational integrity and fostering a resilient community.

In transforming lives and developing skills, education and the learning environment have important roles in ensuring inclusive and equal learning opportunities and promoting lifelong learning to an increasing number of people. Because education involves transformative and developmental processes, it affects the inclusion, equity and development of learners in the practices of global and national educational systems. Learning environments need to reflect the values human rights, shared responsibility, inclusion and the protection of human fulfilment.

An important component of the functioning of the modern Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University is international activity, within the framework of which Yuriy

Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University has concluded 206 agreements with educational, scientific and cultural institutions from almost 30 foreign countries (agreements with Russian and Belarusian educational institutions have been terminated unilaterally). It is also an auxiliary tool for Ukrainian students who wish to try studying abroad without breaking the main connection with their native higher education institution.

An integral component of Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University's international cooperation is the implementation of double degree programs, which further enrich the academic experience for its students. The university has established agreements for 16 joint educational programs (OPN OPPs) with 9 higher education institutions across 5 countries: China, Poland, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovakia. These partnerships provide students with the opportunity to earn degrees from both the university and its international counterparts, thereby enhancing their qualifications and expanding their global opportunities. This initiative not only fosters academic exchange but also strengthens the university's global network, contributing to its growing international reputation.

The active participation of both teachers and students in joint scientific programs highlights Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University's commitment to global academic collaboration. These programs are carried out in accordance with agreements on creative cooperation with renowned educational and scientific institutions from countries such as the USA, Canada, Austria, Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, England, Macedonia, Romania, the Czech Republic, China, Israel, and others. The university's international standing is further exemplified by notable achievements, including the recognition of two professors as "Person of the Year" by the International Biographical Centre in Cambridge. Additionally, several distinguished scientists have been awarded the title of "Honorary Doctor" by prestigious universities such as the University of Saskatchewan (Canada), the University of Suceava (Romania), and the University of Bălți (Moldova). The university's academic excellence is also reflected in the awarding of grants to 14 teachers, postgraduates, and students, as well as the receipt of the prestigious Galileo Galilei Prize by Prof. O. Angelsky. These accomplishments underscore the university's significant contribution to the global scientific community.

In October 1999, Chernivtsi University was accepted into the ranks of honorary members of the International Association of Universities "PhiBetaDelta" (USA). Since 2000, Chernivtsi University has been a member of the Danube Rectors' Conference.

In January 2009, the university joined the European University Association and joined the Partnership Agreement in the creation of the Electronic Library of Ukraine (ELibUkr). Another defining moment is the positive decision to join Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University to the Magna Charta Universitatum.

On June 28, 2011, marking the 15th anniversary of the Constitution of Ukraine, the 35th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee made a landmark decision.

The Committee included the Architectural Ensemble of the Residence of the Metropolitans of Bukovina and Dalmatia, now the Central Building of Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, in the UNESCO World Heritage List. This prestigious inclusion marked the Residence as the third distinctly Ukrainian site to be honoured with such recognition. The Residence, with its rich historical and cultural significance, stands as a symbol of architectural beauty and heritage, further cementing Chernivtsi University's status as a centre of academic and cultural importance.

Currently, the Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (the only one in Ukraine) performs a dual function: on the one hand, it is a centre of education, science, and spirituality of the Bukovyna region, and on the other, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

On October 4, 2015, during the celebration of the 140th anniversary of Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, the restored monument to the first rector of the University, Kostyantyn Tomashchuk, was unveiled. Tomashchuk, a deputy of the Austrian parliament and regional seym, and an Honorary Citizen of Chernivtsi, played a pivotal role in the development of the institution. The monument was restored in the Taras Shevchenko Central Park of Culture and Recreation, formerly the city park of Chernivtsi, at the original location where it was first installed in 1897. This act of restoration not only honours the legacy of Tomashchuk but also symbolizes the enduring academic and teaching traditions of the university. The monument stands as a testament to the role of the classical European university, which, even during times of armed conflict, has consistently served as a centre for the preservation of national heritage and a refuge for those in need (more than just relevant for the current Ukrainian situation).

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University has traversed a challenging and transformative path in its history, evolving from its early roots into one of the most prestigious and influential educational institutions in Ukraine. Over the years, it has become a significant hub for education, science, and culture, not only for the Bukovina region but for the entire western region of Ukraine. The university has faced numerous challenges, including political upheaval, economic difficulties, and social changes, yet it has remained steadfast in its mission to provide high-quality education, promote scientific research, and foster cultural development. Through its continuous growth and adaptation to the changing landscape of higher education, the university has contributed significantly to the intellectual, social, and cultural fabric of the region. Its rich history is intertwined with the broader history of the nation, as it has been a centre of resilience and innovation, offering a platform for students, faculty, and researchers to thrive despite adversity. The university's evolution is a reflection of its commitment to academic excellence and its role as a beacon of knowledge and cultural exchange,

shaping the future of Ukraine and fostering a sense of community and progress in the western part of the country.

4.4.3. Qualitative analysis – results from round tables at Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University

The following chapter presents an integrated analysis of empirical data and student narratives collected through the comprehensive survey “Cross-Border Education: Ukrainian Students’ Perspectives on Studying in Europe.” This chapter synthesizes both quantitative and qualitative insights, offering a multidimensional perspective on how Ukrainian students experience studying abroad. The results reveal not only measurable benefits – such as language development, professional advancement, and intercultural competence – but also deeper personal transformations and adaptive processes that accompany their academic mobility. By highlighting the voices of Ukrainian students within European higher education systems, the chapter situates individual experiences within broader socio-educational and cultural frameworks, illustrating how cross-border education contributes to personal growth, social capital, and academic excellence.

4.4.3.1. Motivations and benefits of studying abroad

One of the core objectives of the survey was to identify what Ukrainian students perceive as the main advantages of studying in a foreign country. Their responses illuminate both pragmatic and aspirational motivations, intertwining academic ambition with a search for personal fulfilment and international exposure.

A considerable proportion of respondents (35%) identified the competitive advantage in the job market as the most significant benefit of studying abroad. This advantage derives from the unique perspectives and experiences acquired while studying within a different academic culture, which, in turn, enhance employability and adaptability. Exposure to international learning environments fosters a global mindset – a skill increasingly valued in a transnational labour market shaped by mobility, innovation, and intercultural collaboration. For Ukrainian students, who are often navigating a context of socio-political uncertainty at home, gaining this international credential becomes an important strategy for ensuring long-term professional stability and resilience.

Furthermore, 65% of respondents emphasised that language acquisition represents one of the greatest assets of studying abroad. Learning and mastering a foreign language serve not only as an academic necessity but also as a bridge to intercultural understanding. Through immersion, students acquire linguistic confidence that facilitates communication in academic and social settings alike. This linguistic competence

enhances cognitive flexibility, broadens career opportunities, and enables participation in international academic communities. In many cases, students reported that interaction with peers and instructors in the host language accelerated their learning process far more effectively than formal classroom instruction alone.

Another recurring theme across the narratives is the role of social connectedness and the formation of international friendships. Approximately 43% of students reported that studying abroad allowed them to meet new people and establish lasting interpersonal relationships. Such connections frequently transcend cultural or national boundaries, creating informal support networks that significantly enhance students' sense of belonging. These relationships often evolve into academic or professional collaborations, forming an enduring component of students' international social capital. Beyond immediate friendships, these interactions contribute to the development of empathy, open-mindedness, and intercultural communication skills – attributes essential to modern citizenship.

In addition, 16% of respondents underscored the importance of exploring another country as a distinctive educational experience. For these students, studying abroad offered an opportunity not only to learn in classrooms but also to encounter new societies, traditions, and value systems. This experiential learning strengthens cultural sensitivity and contributes to a more holistic understanding of global interdependence. Travel and exploration thus become extensions of the learning process – practical exercises in adaptability, observation, and comparative reflection.

Although fewer respondents (7%) explicitly mentioned awareness of cultural factors as a major benefit, their qualitative responses reveal that attention to cultural nuances permeates nearly every aspect of studying abroad. Awareness of social norms, communication styles, and values shapes interactions both inside and outside the academic sphere. By internalizing these intercultural lessons, students learn to interpret behaviour through a culturally informed lens, thereby reducing potential misunderstandings and fostering respectful collaboration.

Collectively, these findings suggest that the benefits of studying abroad extend well beyond the academic domain. They encompass personal growth, linguistic and intercultural competence, the expansion of social networks, and enhanced career prospects. The combination of these outcomes contributes to a transformative learning experience that prepares students to participate actively and confidently in the global knowledge society.

Transformative nature of academic mobility: Beyond measurable gains, the narratives reveal the transformative nature of academic mobility. For many Ukrainian students, studying abroad represents not simply an educational trajectory but a profound personal journey that redefines their identity and worldview. Several respondents described the experience as a process of “self-rediscovery” through confrontation with

difference – learning to negotiate between familiar Ukrainian academic traditions and the novel expectations of European higher education institutions.

The acquisition of independence, adaptability, and problem-solving skills was noted by a remarkable 96% of participants. These qualities emerged through everyday challenges – navigating bureaucratic systems, managing finances, or adjusting to unfamiliar social norms. Each obstacle became an implicit learning opportunity, reinforcing resilience and self-efficacy. As one respondent phrased it, “When you study abroad, you not only learn the subject – you learn yourself.”

Such reflections align with contemporary theories of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), which posit that exposure to disorienting experiences prompts critical self-reflection and a re-evaluation of prior assumptions. In this sense, the foreign environment operates as a pedagogical space, compelling students to reconsider cultural preconceptions and professional aspirations. Consequently, academic mobility functions as a catalyst for both cognitive and emotional development, empowering students to act as agents of change upon their return.

4.4.3.2. Shared educational goals and cultural diversity

The analysis of Ukrainian students’ perspectives reveals that studying abroad is not only a means of individual advancement but also an arena of shared learning and mutual exchange. In the survey, students were asked to identify the educational goals they felt could be shared with peers from host universities and to reflect on how cultural diversity enhances the educational process. Their responses underscore a crucial insight: academic mobility is a reciprocal process that fosters co-learning, intercultural dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge.

Shared educational goals between Ukrainian and host-country students: When asked about the specific educational goals they could share with their counterparts abroad, Ukrainian students articulated several dimensions of academic collaboration. Over half of respondents (53%) highlighted knowledge assessment and examination processes as a key area of mutual understanding and exchange. This finding suggests that Ukrainian students possess a strong awareness of academic standards and evaluation systems, enabling them to compare and critically engage with the pedagogical structures of European universities. Sharing these experiences encourages discussions on academic integrity, transparency in grading, and diverse evaluation philosophies – issues that are foundational to trust in higher education systems.

In addition, 46% of students indicated that they were familiar with a wide range of educational methodologies applied in Ukrainian universities, particularly those emphasizing subject-based specialization and teacher-led instruction. By juxtaposing these methods with the often more interactive and student-centred approaches in their host

institutions, they contribute to comparative learning dialogues. This pedagogical exchange allows for a cross-fertilization of teaching strategies: Ukrainian students bring structured, discipline-oriented perspectives, while European peers often model participatory and project-based techniques. The resulting synergy encourages innovation in learning practices and cultivates pedagogical adaptability among all participants.

A further 51% of respondents pointed to industrial practice and applied learning as another educational domain that could be shared and compared. This focus highlights Ukrainian students' recognition of the importance of connecting theoretical knowledge to professional contexts. By engaging in conversations about internships, apprenticeships, and practical training systems, students build an understanding of how various European countries integrate experiential learning into curricula. The exchange of best practices across national systems thus not only enhances academic understanding but also strengthens students' readiness for the labour market.

Taken together, these responses illustrate that Ukrainian students perceive themselves not as passive recipients of education but as active contributors to transnational academic discourse. Their ability to share perspectives on assessment, pedagogy, and practice demonstrates both confidence and competence within international learning environments. Such reciprocity is essential for building inclusive and equitable academic partnerships, aligning with the principles of the European Education Area and broader objectives of intercultural learning in higher education.

The educational value of cultural diversity: Cultural diversity emerged as a dominant theme in students' reflections on their educational experiences abroad. A significant 47.8% of respondents explicitly stated that cooperation with international peers contributed to achieving better academic results. This outcome is linked to the exchange of knowledge, problem-solving approaches, and intellectual traditions among students of different cultural backgrounds. The interplay of perspectives enhances creativity, fosters critical thinking, and broadens the scope of discussion in classroom settings.

From an educational standpoint, cultural diversity acts as a catalyst for intellectual development. It challenges assumptions, encourages comparison of cognitive frameworks, and promotes flexibility in thought. Students exposed to multicultural learning environments often become more adept at identifying alternative solutions, synthesizing ideas, and appreciating multiple viewpoints. The Ukrainian students' responses suggest that learning in such diverse contexts nurtures essential competencies for the 21st century – communication, adaptability, and global awareness.

Beyond the classroom, diversity also transforms students' personal outlooks and interpersonal skills. The vibrant interaction between traditions, customs, and values broadens their horizons, offering a deeper understanding of global interconnectivity. Friendships and collaborations established in international academic settings often extend into professional networks, laying the groundwork for transnational cooperation.

Many students noted that sharing cultural experiences – through food, music, or festivals – helped dissolve stereotypes and fostered mutual respect. These informal moments of cultural exchange complement formal academic learning, creating a holistic environment for intellectual and emotional growth.

Language learning as a bridge to integration: Language plays a dual role in this process: as both a practical necessity and a medium of cultural connection. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) cited language learning as one of the principal benefits of studying abroad, and many directly linked linguistic proficiency to effective intercultural communication. Immersion in the host language accelerates comprehension not only of linguistic structures but also of social norms, humour, and context-dependent expressions – elements essential for authentic integration.

The process of acquiring a new language also nurtures cognitive agility and empathy. It compels students to observe, interpret, and negotiate meaning in real time, fostering an awareness of nuance and difference. As one participant remarked, “Learning another language means learning another way of seeing the world.” This statement encapsulates the transformative potential of language study within the broader educational experience: it is not merely instrumental but profoundly epistemological, reshaping how individuals understand both themselves and others.

In this respect, language learning becomes an act of bridge-building – linking academic and social worlds, connecting Ukrainian and European educational cultures, and creating the conditions for reciprocal understanding. For many respondents, language acquisition was inseparable from personal development, as it required patience, resilience, and courage to communicate despite imperfection. Such experiences reinforce the notion that linguistic competence is not an isolated skill but a cornerstone of intercultural competence.

4.4.3.3. Integration, language barriers, and cultural adaptation

Integration into a host university and society represents one of the most complex dimensions of the study-abroad experience. For Ukrainian students, integration extends beyond adjusting to a new academic system – it encompasses navigating linguistic challenges, social expectations, and cultural values that often diverge from those at home. This section explores how language barriers and cultural misunderstandings affect students’ adaptation processes, the emotional and psychological responses they evoke, and the strategies employed to overcome them. The findings provide an in-depth view of the adaptive journey Ukrainian students undertake as they transform from visitors into active participants within their host academic communities.

The role of friendship and social networks in integration: Establishing social connections with foreign peers emerged as a critical factor in successful integration. Nearly

half of the respondents (47%) emphasised that making friends with local students was essential for learning the host language and understanding the social fabric of university life. Friendship, in this sense, serves as both a social and linguistic bridge. It allows students to practice the local language in authentic contexts, gain insight into cultural nuances, and develop the confidence needed to engage more freely in both academic and everyday communication.

Furthermore, 18% of surveyed students highlighted the importance of learning about local customs and habits through such interactions. They viewed friendship as a form of informal cultural education that complements formal academic learning. Through everyday exchanges – shared meals, study groups, and participation in social events – students gradually internalise cultural values, unwritten norms, and etiquette, which are often difficult to grasp through observation alone.

For many, the friendships formed during their time abroad were deeply transformative. They often transcended temporary companionship, evolving into professional networks and long-term relationships. According to 63% of students, building a network of international contacts provided access to diverse perspectives and potential future collaborations. These networks, formed in multicultural academic environments, serve as an invaluable resource for career development and intercultural understanding.

The integration process, therefore, is not simply about adjusting to a new environment – it involves creating belonging through shared experiences. This process strengthens students' resilience and nurtures a sense of global citizenship, as they learn to operate in multicultural contexts characterised by empathy, flexibility, and cooperation.

Language barriers and communication challenges: Despite the numerous benefits of studying abroad, language barriers remain one of the most persistent obstacles for Ukrainian students. According to the data, 67% of respondents identified language difficulties as a significant source of stress and misunderstanding in daily life and academic communication. Limited proficiency in the host language often impedes students' ability to engage fully in lectures, seminars, and informal discussions.

This communication gap can generate feelings of frustration, embarrassment, and isolation. Students reported that even simple tasks – such as purchasing groceries, navigating public transport, or clarifying academic requirements – could become sources of anxiety. The inability to express complex ideas or emotions leads to a sense of helplessness that, in turn, affects academic performance and social confidence. Some respondents also noted that misunderstandings caused by language limitations occasionally escalated into conflicts or awkward situations with peers or professors.

Moreover, a lack of linguistic fluency can hinder the formation of meaningful connections, as students may struggle to participate in spontaneous conversations or group projects. This exclusion is often unintentional, yet it underscores how language functions as both a tool of inclusion and a barrier to integration.

Recognising these difficulties, many students sought assistance through specialised language programs or support services. Some turned to private tutoring, while others joined informal peer-learning groups or participated in online language exchanges. Universities with dedicated international offices and academic counselling centres were particularly appreciated for their role in facilitating integration. Students also acknowledged the value of organisations such as Edusteps and other advisory bodies that helped them identify suitable language-learning resources and adapt to academic discourse.

Ultimately, overcoming language barriers is not only a matter of linguistic skill but of emotional resilience and proactive engagement. Students who embraced the challenge of language learning often reported improved self-esteem and a stronger sense of belonging, viewing each interaction as a step toward integration rather than a test of proficiency.

Culture shock and the stages of cultural adaptation: The process of cultural adjustment is rarely linear. Ukrainian students described their adaptation as a gradual journey marked by emotional highs and lows, corresponding closely with the classic stages of culture shock.

In the initial stage, many students experienced euphoria and excitement. The novelty of a new country, the prestige of studying at a foreign institution, and the prospect of independence created an overwhelming sense of optimism. This “honeymoon phase” typically lasted from several weeks to several months. Students eagerly explored their surroundings, attended social events, and expressed enthusiasm for their new academic environment.

However, as the initial excitement subsided, many entered the disillusionment stage, characterised by discomfort, confusion, and homesickness. Some students encountered unspoken barriers – subtle social norms, administrative complexities, or perceived indifference from local communities – that challenged their early enthusiasm. In certain contexts, Ukrainian students also felt the weight of social stereotypes or perceived competition with local populations, particularly regarding employment and scholarships. These factors occasionally intensified feelings of alienation and uncertainty.

In the third stage, students began to adopt coping mechanisms. They sought solidarity among fellow Ukrainians or other international students, forming informal support networks that provided emotional reassurance and practical guidance. Humour, shared experiences, and mutual encouragement helped alleviate the sense of isolation. During this stage, many respondents reported the importance of maintaining contact with family and friends at home while simultaneously investing in new relationships abroad.

Finally, in the adaptation and adjustment stage, students developed a deeper understanding of local norms, values, and communication patterns. Gradually, they became more comfortable navigating cultural differences and managing expectations. The initial

culture shock gave way to a more stable phase of intercultural competence, where misunderstandings diminished and a genuine appreciation for diversity took root.

Approximately 47% of students indicated that they eventually reached this phase of stability and integration. They felt more at ease in their host communities and more confident in their intercultural communication skills. Importantly, many noted that this transformation did not erase their cultural identity; rather, it expanded it, allowing them to integrate new cultural elements into their worldview.

Emotional and psychological dimensions of adaptation: The adaptation journey also carries significant psychological implications. Students described moments of doubt, loneliness, and exhaustion, often intensified by academic pressure and uncertainty about the future. Yet, these experiences frequently led to the development of emotional maturity and self-awareness.

The process of navigating cultural dissonance encouraged introspection and self-reflection. Students learned to question assumptions about their own cultural norms, values, and priorities. As one respondent observed, “When you are far from home, you start seeing your own culture with new eyes.” This metacognitive shift is central to intercultural learning: by understanding others, individuals also deepen their understanding of themselves.

At the same time, respondents highlighted the importance of institutional support systems – counselling services, peer mentoring, and international offices – that provide safe spaces for discussing adaptation challenges. Universities that offered structured orientation programs and mental health resources were perceived as more inclusive and supportive. Conversely, a lack of such mechanisms often exacerbated students’ sense of marginalisation.

The psychological resilience developed through these challenges becomes one of the most enduring outcomes of international study. Additionally, ability to manage stress, uncertainty, and cultural ambiguity prepares students for both personal and professional demands in increasingly globalised contexts.

4.4.3.4. Support programs, study preferences, and academic experiences

The previous sections outlined the multifaceted process of adaptation and the critical role of language, culture, and resilience in shaping the experiences of Ukrainian students abroad. This part turns attention to institutional and structural aspects of international study, exploring how universities and mobility programs facilitate students’ educational journeys. It also examines the academic preferences of respondents, their perceptions of teaching quality, and the pedagogical relationships that underpin their experiences in European universities.

Participation in international support and mobility programs: A majority of surveyed students demonstrated an active engagement in structured programs supporting international education. Specifically, 61% reported participating in initiatives designed to promote mobility and international cooperation. These included academic exchanges, internships, and short-term study abroad opportunities that were often embedded within broader frameworks such as Erasmus+ or bilateral university agreements.

Such programs, as students emphasised, not only broaden academic horizons but also enhance employability by offering practical exposure and intercultural competencies. They create spaces for learning that transcend classroom boundaries, allowing participants to gain professional experience and soft skills indispensable in global contexts.

The survey also revealed that the range of available mobility formats is extensive. Students referred to:

- 1) credit and degree mobility, where coursework completed abroad could be transferred or recognised at the home institution,
- 2) language internships, providing immersive training in professional communication,
- 3) educational and scientific internships, combining research with practical applications, and
- 4) international seminars and conferences, which encourage academic visibility and peer collaboration.

These structured experiences serve as key vehicles for the internationalisation of higher education. By integrating mobility opportunities into curricula, universities foster not only academic excellence but also intercultural literacy.

Nevertheless, respondents identified several persistent barriers to full participation. Nearly 39% cited the language barrier as a significant obstacle to engaging effectively in these programs. Limited linguistic competence sometimes prevented students from applying for scholarships, fully participating in joint projects, or presenting research at international events. Other concerns included financial constraints and bureaucratic hurdles related to visa procedures and credit recognition.

Despite these challenges, 100% of respondents affirmed that their universities offered mobility or support programs of some kind. This finding highlights the substantial institutional commitment across European higher education to support inclusivity and access for students from Ukraine. The variety of initiatives – ranging from scholarships and named awards to summer schools and digital training opportunities – illustrates the growing diversification of academic pathways available to Ukrainian learners in Europe.

Academic aspirations and country preferences: When asked about future plans for studying abroad, 53% of surveyed students expressed a clear intention to pursue further education outside Ukraine. The analysis of their destination preferences

offers valuable insight into how Ukrainian students perceive the European academic landscape.

Three countries emerged as particularly attractive: the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Poland.

1. The Netherlands was identified as a top choice due to its high number of English-language programs and the accessibility of communication – approximately 95% of the Dutch population is fluent in English. Students valued the Netherlands' progressive educational environment, transparent admission processes, and pragmatic teaching style that emphasises innovation and critical thinking.
2. The United Kingdom attracted students through its prestigious academic reputation and strong employment opportunities. Respondents were particularly drawn to the structure of sandwich programs, which integrate one year of professional internship into the degree without interrupting studies. The possibility to work part-time during the academic year (20 hours per week) and full-time during holidays was also viewed as an important advantage, providing financial independence and hands-on experience.
3. Poland, in turn, appealed to students for its geographical proximity and cultural similarity. Shared historical ties and a comparable mentality made adaptation smoother. Additionally, Poland's position as a transport hub within Central Europe allowed students to travel conveniently, further enriching their educational and cultural exposure.

These preferences reflect a combination of academic, linguistic, and socio-cultural considerations. For many Ukrainian students, proximity to home remains important, not only logistically but emotionally, as it facilitates continued family contact and a sense of familiarity.

Field preferences and professional orientation: The choice of academic majors further clarifies students' motivations and aspirations. The survey data indicate that 47% of respondents preferred disciplines related to business, economics, management, and finance. This strong orientation toward economic and managerial studies reflects both the global relevance of these fields and the perception that they offer robust career prospects. Respondents often cited the universality of business education and its potential to open doors across sectors and countries.

An additional 33% expressed interest in information technology and related fields, including engineering, artificial intelligence, and design. This preference highlights the increasing significance of digital literacy and technological competence in the contemporary job market. The rapid global expansion of IT industries, combined with Ukraine's emerging role as a hub for software development, makes this choice both practical and forward-looking.

Smaller but noteworthy proportions of students indicated an interest in marketing and communications (6%), law, and international relations. These fields were associated with the desire to engage in global communication and diplomacy, reflecting students' awareness of Ukraine's evolving position in the European and international community.

In sum, the pattern of field selection suggests a strategic and pragmatic orientation among Ukrainian students. Their academic interests align with sectors where international qualifications are most valued and transferable.

Academic environments and integration through learning activities: The survey responses underscore that integration within academic life is facilitated not only through formal instruction but also through participation in extracurricular and intercultural activities. Nearly 78.8% of respondents identified integration events – such as sports competitions, creative workshops, and cultural festivals – as valuable opportunities for developing interpersonal connections and intercultural understanding.

Sports activities, particularly team-based competitions, were viewed as a powerful mechanism for breaking down communication barriers and fostering mutual respect. Creative workshops and collaborative projects provided additional opportunities to exchange cultural perspectives and strengthen community cohesion. Participation in national and international celebrations deepened students' understanding of the host country's traditions and offered moments of cultural reciprocity, as Ukrainian students also introduced aspects of their own heritage.

These activities complement formal academic engagement by reinforcing social learning and language immersion. They create informal learning contexts where students practice linguistic skills in natural environments and internalise cultural nuances more effectively than through structured coursework alone.

The role of language courses in intercultural communication: Nearly 46% of students identified language courses as instrumental in improving intercultural communication and integration. Respondents observed that such courses do more than teach grammar and vocabulary – they cultivate openness, empathy, and curiosity. Language learning becomes a means of developing interpersonal understanding, as it enables participants to engage in authentic dialogue with peers from diverse backgrounds.

Language courses that incorporate elements of cultural studies were particularly valued. These programs, often designed for international students, introduced participants to national traditions, idioms, and societal norms, helping them decode the cultural subtext of communication. Students noted that these experiences not only facilitated their adaptation but also enhanced their confidence in academic discussions and collaborative work.

The data confirm that linguistic competence functions as a core dimension of intercultural competence. By acquiring language skills in a structured academic setting,

students become better equipped to navigate complex intercultural environments and to mediate between different educational and cultural systems.

Educational quality and classroom experiences: Respondents overwhelmingly praised the academic quality and teaching culture of European universities. Among those who had studied under Erasmus+ or similar programs, 93% rated the level of education as high or very high. They noted that instruction was delivered by experienced faculty, supported by well-equipped classrooms and advanced digital learning tools.

One of the most valued aspects was the pedagogical diversity encountered abroad. Students reported that European teaching methods combined structure with creativity – balancing theoretical lectures with seminars, workshops, and problem-based learning. Interactive whiteboards, online learning platforms such as Moodle, and multimedia resources were frequently mentioned as tools that enhanced engagement and accessibility.

Respondents particularly appreciated the inclusive and egalitarian nature of teacher-student relationships. Approximately 65% emphasised the supportive atmosphere created by lecturers, who encouraged participation, valued students' opinions, and provided individual feedback. The absence of hierarchical distance between teachers and students contributed to a sense of mutual respect and intellectual partnership.

At the same time, about 35% of respondents observed that this environment changed their perception of mistakes and learning. They began to see errors not as failures but as part of the learning process. This pedagogical shift, common in Western European universities, fosters self-confidence and intrinsic motivation, allowing students to engage more actively and fearlessly in their studies.

4.4.3.5. Challenges, living conditions, and student advice

While the preceding sections have illuminated the academic, cultural, and interpersonal benefits of studying abroad, it is equally important to acknowledge the difficulties and constraints that accompany this experience. Ukrainian students, despite demonstrating adaptability and perseverance, reported facing a range of practical, emotional, and systemic challenges that influenced their educational and social integration. This part analyses these challenges – ranging from financial pressure and housing shortages to social isolation and intercultural misunderstandings – and concludes with students' practical recommendations for prospective mobility participants.

Financial constraints and the cost of living: Financial limitations emerged as one of the most significant difficulties encountered by Ukrainian students abroad. While many reported that tuition fees were moderate or covered by scholarships, the cost of living – including housing, food, transportation, and study materials – was frequently

described as unexpectedly high. According to 70% of respondents, expenses beyond tuition placed substantial pressure on their budgets.

Students particularly emphasised the challenge of balancing limited financial resources with the desire to participate fully in university life. Many were forced to restrict travel, social activities, or extracurricular engagement in order to prioritise basic necessities. This financial tension occasionally generated stress and hindered integration, as social events often required expenditures that some students could not afford.

Respondents suggested that universities could mitigate these difficulties by offering clearer information on cost-of-living expectations, providing targeted financial aid, and facilitating part-time work opportunities compatible with study schedules. A small number of students, particularly those studying in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, noted that the possibility of legally working part-time was a key factor in their choice of destination.

The data therefore underscore a structural dimension of inequality: while mobility programs aim to promote equal access, financial disparities continue to shape students' actual experiences abroad.

Housing conditions and the challenge of accommodation: Securing suitable housing represented another major obstacle. As the data indicate, finding accommodation at the beginning of the semester was particularly challenging due to high demand in student cities and limited availability of affordable options.

Among respondents, 48% reported living in rented apartments rather than dormitories. While this arrangement provided independence, it often came at a high cost and with logistical complications. Rent prices in Western and Southern Europe ranged from €350 to €450 per month, excluding utilities, and were even higher in metropolitan areas. Students living in shared apartments also noted difficulties such as noise, insufficient lighting, or long commutes – sometimes up to 1.5 hours each way – to their university campuses.

In contrast, those who obtained dormitory housing – especially in Poland, Slovenia, and parts of Central Europe – expressed greater satisfaction, citing convenience, affordability, and opportunities for socialisation. Around 30% of respondents reported positive experiences in student dormitories, which often served as spaces for intercultural interaction and community building.

The findings highlight that access to stable housing is integral to successful integration, influencing students' physical and mental well-being as well as their academic performance. Respondents recommended that universities provide more robust housing support systems, such as online accommodation platforms, orientation assistance, and temporary housing options for newly arrived students.

Academic and pedagogical challenges: Although most respondents praised the quality of education in European universities, some noted challenges associated with academic

adjustment and workload expectations. The requirement for extensive independent study – averaging 300 to 400 pages of reading per week in certain programs – was particularly demanding. Students observed that this structure required a high degree of self-discipline and time management, as teachers rarely monitored compliance.

Some participants also pointed to the pedantry and rigidity of assessment methods in certain institutions, notably in Germany, where examination procedures were perceived as overly formal and rule-bound. Around 13% of students expressed that such rigidity occasionally stifled creativity and did not sufficiently accommodate individual learning styles.

Nonetheless, the majority acknowledged that these challenges ultimately strengthened their academic resilience. The need to adapt to different systems of evaluation and independent research prepared them for graduate studies and international careers, reinforcing their autonomy and critical thinking.

Everyday difficulties and cultural adjustments: Beyond academics, Ukrainian students encountered numerous everyday challenges related to daily life and adaptation to new cultural environments. Some of these difficulties may appear minor but collectively contribute to a sense of discomfort and fatigue over time.

For instance, students studying in Britain noted that adapting to local food habits proved unexpectedly complicated. They described a monotonous diet dominated by fried dishes and sandwiches, often lacking fresh ingredients. Occasional shortages of basic groceries – such as eggs, vegetables, and fruits – due to irregular supply chains exacerbated this frustration. Similarly, students in Southern Europe expressed surprise at the irregular business hours of shops and offices, which contrasted with more predictable schedules in Ukraine.

Several respondents also experienced technical and administrative issues, such as malfunctioning bank cards or delayed financial transfers. While these incidents were usually resolved, they created moments of stress and uncertainty. In some cases, universities offered compensation or vouchers to affected students, demonstrating institutional responsiveness.

These experiences underline the reality that adaptation extends well beyond cultural and linguistic learning – it encompasses the mundane but essential aspects of everyday survival. As students navigate these challenges, they develop resourcefulness and problem-solving skills that contribute significantly to their overall maturity.

Social isolation and its psychological impact: Although most students ultimately integrated successfully, the issue of social isolation surfaced as a recurring concern. For some, especially during the initial months abroad, feelings of loneliness and detachment from social networks were acute.

According to 47% of respondents, social isolation did not substantially affect their decision to study abroad or return home; however, they recognised its potential negative

impact on peers. Isolation can erode self-esteem, limit participation in group activities, and reduce motivation for academic engagement. Students lacking strong social support – whether through family contact, local friendships, or institutional counselling – were more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion and withdrawal.

A number of participants described struggling to find genuine friendships beyond formal academic contexts. They emphasised that cultural politeness in host societies sometimes masked emotional distance, making it difficult to establish deep interpersonal relationships. To counter this, students recommended participating in student associations, volunteering, and cultural clubs as effective ways to foster belonging.

Social inclusion, therefore, cannot be assumed as a natural outcome of academic mobility; it must be actively supported through institutional measures such as mentoring schemes, intercultural communication workshops, and peer networks.

Institutional and resource limitations: In addition to individual struggles, students identified broader structural deficiencies that hindered their academic integration. Insufficient access to resources – whether textbooks, laboratory equipment, or advisory services – occasionally generated frustration and competition among peers.

Approximately 15% of respondents associated such shortages with conflict or tension in the classroom. They observed that limited resources could undermine cooperation, provoke misunderstandings, or create a sense of inequality. This situation was especially pronounced in larger universities, where international students sometimes perceived themselves as marginalised in access to academic materials or administrative assistance.

These findings highlight that inclusion requires more than goodwill; it demands institutional investment. Universities hosting Ukrainian students must ensure equitable resource allocation, accessible information, and clear communication channels.

5. Comparative synthesis, SWOT analyses and recommendations

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the empirical and qualitative findings from all four participating countries, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine, and to situate them within a comparative analytical framework. By drawing on the preceding national chapters, this section identifies converging and diverging tendencies in higher education inclusion, institutional practices, and student adaptation.

1. A SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) for each national context, developed from quantitative data, round-table discussions, and document analyses presented earlier in the monograph.
2. A comparative and theoretical interpretation, connecting observed empirical trends to conceptual frameworks of inclusion, well-being, and internationalisation.

This structure allows a multidimensional synthesis that bridges the gap between institutional realities and conceptual debates about inclusion in higher education. It also provides evidence-based recommendations relevant to policymakers, university leaders, and international education practitioners

5.1. SWOT analyses by country

5.1.1. Slovakia

The Slovak case represents a hybrid model of inclusion, characterised by a solid legal foundation, decentralised institutional approach, and a pronounced humanitarian effort. As documented in Chapter 4.2, Slovakia's response to the Ukrainian student inflow combined state-level legal adaptation (through Lex Ukraine and the Temporary Protection regime) with university-led initiatives (case of Matej Bel University).

The following SWOT analysis integrates the empirical findings from national policy documents, round-table data, and institutional case study. It also links these observations to the theoretical principles of inclusion as a multidimensional, relational process (as conceptualised in Strayhorn, 2018; GEM, 2020; OECD, 2023).

Strengths

Slovakia's primary strength lies in its legal and institutional coherence. The country rapidly harmonised its migration and education policies with EU directives, ensuring legal certainty for displaced persons under temporary protection. This framework created the necessary conditions for immediate access to education, work, and housing

– essential preconditions for inclusion as defined in the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999).

At the institutional level, universities demonstrated notable adaptability and empathy. The case of Matej Bel University illustrates how decentralised governance can generate effective, context-sensitive solutions. Faculties independently developed Slovak language courses, counselling services, and flexible admission procedures under §56(2) of the Higher Education Act. These measures not only enabled access but also fostered a sense of belonging among Ukrainian students, resonating with Strayhorn's (2018) emphasis on inclusion as belonging.

Another key strength is cultural and linguistic proximity. The shared Slavic linguistic roots between Slovak and Ukrainian significantly reduced communication barriers, particularly in everyday interactions. This factor accelerated both academic and social integration, confirming the theoretical assumption that linguistic familiarity can serve as an accelerator of inclusion in host environments (OECD, 2023).

Finally, Slovakia's response was strongly underpinned by societal solidarity. Civil society organisations, municipalities, and individuals collaborated with universities, reflecting a whole-of-society approach. Such cooperation exemplifies the principle of relational inclusion, where academic and social ecosystems mutually reinforce integration.

Weaknesses

Despite these achievements, the Slovak inclusion framework reveals several structural weaknesses that constrain its long-term sustainability.

First, inclusion measures were largely project-based and temporary. While initiatives like individual projects and university-level mentoring programmes proved effective, they remain dependent on external funding rather than permanent institutional structures. Without continuity mechanisms, successful practices risk fading once project cycles end and this could lead to a challenge highlighted in European Commission reviews of post-crisis education responses.

Second, language barriers persist in academic communication. Although Slovak and Ukrainian are similar, advanced academic discourse, particularly in economics, law, and science, demands high proficiency. Students frequently reported difficulties writing essays, presenting research, or understanding administrative procedures. Theoretical models of linguistic capital (Pierre, 1991) help explain how limited language mastery can constrain students' academic agency even within otherwise inclusive institutions.

A third weakness is limited coordination across universities. Inclusion practices remain decentralised and context-specific, lacking a coherent national framework

for monitoring, evaluation, and sharing of best practices. This fragmentation reduces policy learning potential and leads to uneven quality of support services across the higher education system.

Finally, infrastructural limitations, particularly dormitory capacity and financial aid, constrain access for displaced students. While universities offered temporary waivers and humanitarian housing, long-term accommodation remains a systemic gap.

Opportunities

Slovakia's current position offers several promising scenarios for consolidation and advancement.

First, there is a clear opportunity to institutionalise inclusion policies at both the national and university levels. The experience of Matej Bel University is an example of a national model of humanitarian inclusion in higher education. Embedding inclusion criteria into accreditation processes (under the Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education) would ensure that universities integrate these values structurally, not episodically.

Second, Slovakia can capitalise on the momentum of European cooperation. Through Erasmus+, membership in European university alliances, and HRS4R networks, Slovak universities have access to transnational knowledge and financial instruments. Aligning inclusion objectives with the European Education Area (EEA) agenda can help secure long-term funding and policy visibility.

Third, inclusion can become a driver of internationalisation at home. The growing presence of Ukrainian and other international students creates a laboratory for intercultural learning and global competence development among domestic students. This approach aligns with De Wit and co-authors (2015) argument that internationalisation should not be confined to mobility but embedded in the daily learning environment.

Finally, inclusion represents an opportunity for regional revitalisation. Universities outside major urban centres, such as in Banská Bystrica, can use international student presence to strengthen their regional role, foster labour market diversity, and support local innovation.

Threats

Several external and systemic risks may undermine the sustainability of inclusion efforts. The most immediate is the uncertainty of temporary protection status. Should EU policy shift or conflict dynamics prolong indefinitely, students may face renewed legal and emotional instability. This uncertainty directly affects their motivation and capacity to plan long-term careers or studies.

Another threat concerns staff fatigue and resource depletion. The high emotional and administrative demands placed on faculty and international offices risk burnout, particularly when additional responsibilities are not compensated. Without institutional recognition, the culture of care that underpins inclusion may erode over time.

Financial constraints represent a structural vulnerability. As project funding concludes and public budgets tighten, universities may struggle to maintain language and counselling services. Finally, demographic decline in Slovakia could paradoxically threaten inclusion: while it creates a demand for foreign students, it may also intensify political debates around migration, potentially reducing public support for such measures.

In summary, Slovakia's inclusion model can be described as legally robust but institutionally fragmented. It successfully ensured access and basic protection for Ukrainian students but still faces challenges in sustaining and scaling these measures.

When interpreted through the theoretical lens of inclusive excellence (Williams, Berger, McClendon, 2005), Slovakia demonstrates how excellence and inclusion can coexist – provided that support mechanisms evolve from humanitarian improvisation to structural innovation. The Slovak experience thus contributes to the broader European debate by showing how mid-sized, regionally embedded universities can operationalise EU inclusion principles in practical, human-centred ways.

5.1.2. Poland

Poland represents the most extensive and mature context among the three analysed countries in terms of both scale of inclusion and institutional preparedness. As the primary host of Ukrainian students in the region, hosting more than 40% of all Ukrainian learners studying in the EU, Poland's experience illustrates how higher education systems can transition from crisis management to structural inclusion when supported by coherent policy frameworks and strong institutional autonomy.

This section builds upon the Polish national chapter, expanding its findings through the SWOT analytical framework while situating them within broader theoretical discourses of inclusion, migration, and higher education governance. The analysis demonstrates that Poland's success lies in its capacity to merge humanitarian responsiveness with academic pragmatism, even as structural and resource-related challenges remain.

Strengths

Poland's strongest asset is its long-standing historical and linguistic affinity with Ukraine, which has fostered enduring educational, economic, and cultural ties. This shared background provided a natural foundation for mutual trust and mobility. Even before 2022, Ukrainian students constituted the largest foreign group in Polish higher education, drawn by geographic proximity, affordable tuition, and the high reputation of Polish universities within Central and Eastern Europe.

This continuity enabled a rapid and well-organised response when the war in Ukraine began. Universities, guided by the Ministry of Education and Science, immediately implemented simplified admission procedures, tuition fee exemptions, and recognition of disrupted studies. The Law on Higher Education and Science (Ustawa z dnia 20 lipca 2018 r. – Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce, 2018) already provided flexibility in admitting foreigners and recognising partial qualifications, which facilitated the legal transition to temporary protection frameworks introduced after February 2022.

From an institutional standpoint, Poland's universities demonstrated administrative and pedagogical agility. Faculties across Warsaw, Kraków, Lublin, and Rzeszów rapidly expanded their international offices, established dedicated information portals in Ukrainian and English, and trained staff to handle humanitarian cases. Several institutions introduced bridge semesters, enabling Ukrainian students to complete disrupted coursework or language training before entering full programmes.

Another major strength lies in Poland's human capital and internationalisation experience. Over the past decade, Polish universities have participated extensively in Erasmus+, CEEPUS, and Horizon Europe projects, acquiring robust management capacities. This international experience facilitated efficient integration of displaced students and staff. Academic staff were generally well prepared for multilingual classrooms, aligning with theoretical models of intercultural pedagogy and inclusive curriculum design (Banks, 2006; Deardorff, 2011).

At the societal level, Poland demonstrated solidarity and civic engagement unprecedented in recent European history. Local governments, NGOs, and student associations mobilised to provide housing, food, and psychological assistance. This bottom-up mobilisation reflected the "whole-of-community" principle central to inclusion frameworks such as GEM Report (2020) and Carney and Delaney (2025), which stresses that academic inclusion must be embedded within social ecosystems rather than confined to institutional boundaries.

Weaknesses

Despite these strengths, Poland's model also revealed internal asymmetries and systemic vulnerabilities. The uneven distribution of resources across universities emerged as a critical weakness. Institutions located near the eastern border, such as Rzeszów University, absorbed disproportionate numbers of Ukrainian students without equivalent state compensation. This imbalance strained housing, counselling, and administrative capacities.

Moreover, while national coordination existed, the rapid influx led to an extend use of ad hoc measures. Some universities operated without unified protocols for language placement, recognition of prior learning (RPL), or psychological assistance. As a result, the quality of inclusion varied across institutions, depending largely on leadership commitment and external partnerships.

A further limitation concerns psychosocial support. While emergency assistance was widely available in 2022, long-term mental health and adaptation services remain underdeveloped. Faculty participants in round tables reported cases of student fatigue, concentration difficulties, and anxiety linked to prolonged uncertainty and separation from family. Yet professional counselling remains scarce, particularly outside major academic centres.

Language barriers continue to present persistent obstacles. Although Ukrainian students benefit from Slavic linguistic proximity, the complexity of academic Polish, especially in technical and legal disciplines, hampers full academic performance. English-medium programmes mitigate this gap, but they simultaneously risk reinforcing linguistic segregation, as Ukrainian students may cluster within English-speaking circles, limiting authentic immersion into Polish academic culture.

Finally, inclusion practices have often been dependent on the goodwill of individual staff rather than formal institutional frameworks. Without clear incentive systems or workload adjustments, faculty members providing mentoring and translation support risk burnout. This highlights a key governance weakness: the absence of systematic institutionalisation of inclusion responsibilities within job descriptions, funding schemes, or quality assurance frameworks.

Opportunities

Poland's position within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) offers significant opportunities for scaling its inclusion model from emergency support to structural policy. The country can transform its temporary protective measures into long-term strategic internationalisation through several complementary pathways.

First, demographic trends create a natural opening: declining birth rates in Poland are leading to shrinking domestic student populations, making inclusion of international

and refugee students an opportunity for sustaining university viability. Ukrainian students represent a valuable human capital resource that can offset this demographic contraction, particularly in STEM, business, and health sciences.

Second, Poland's experience positions it as a regional knowledge hub for inclusion governance. By codifying its best practices into national guidelines and training curricula for university administrators, Poland could assume leadership within EU-level initiatives, similar to the Nordic model of international student integration. This opportunity aligns with European Education Area objectives to enhance inclusiveness and academic mobility across borders.

Third, the integration of Ukrainian students offers an impetus for curricular innovation. Several Polish universities have already introduced bilingual or intercultural programmes that combine Polish and Ukrainian cultural studies, business relations, and comparative law. Such academic diversification can promote bilateral cooperation beyond the war context, strengthening long-term academic diplomacy between Poland and Ukraine.

Moreover, Poland can use inclusion as a testing ground for European micro-credentials and transnational learning modules. Flexible learning structures would enable Ukrainian students who return home post-war to maintain academic ties with Polish universities, promoting circular mobility and regional brain circulation.

Finally, the robust engagement of local governments and NGOs opens the door for university–community partnerships. Cities like Lublin and Kraków could become models of integrated inclusion ecosystems, linking education, employment, and civic participation.

Threats

Several external and structural threats could undermine Poland's progress if not addressed strategically. The most prominent is the risk of "inclusion fatigue." As emergency enthusiasm fades, maintaining long-term engagement may become difficult, particularly if public discourse shifts or if state funding decreases. Without sustained institutionalisation, temporary goodwill may dissipate into bureaucratic inertia.

Economic pressures represent another potential threat. Inflation, housing shortages, and rising energy costs have strained both student and institutional budgets. Universities dependent on tuition revenue from international students may face conflicting incentives between inclusion and financial sustainability.

A further risk lies in social and political polarisation. Although solidarity with Ukraine remains high, societal attitudes can shift rapidly under economic strain or populist rhetoric. Negative framing of migration could reduce public support for inclusive education policies. This risk is consistent with comparative findings in European

studies (OECD, 2023), which identify political volatility as a determinant of inclusion sustainability.

Additionally, competition among universities for international students might undermine cooperation. As Polish institutions increasingly view Ukrainian students as a stabilising demographic, recruitment could become market-driven rather than inclusion-oriented, potentially compromising ethical standards and equity principles.

Finally, the psychological exhaustion of students and staff, especially those who have been navigating inclusion challenges for several semesters, poses a less visible but serious threat to long-term well-being. Without institutional recognition and mental health infrastructure, academic burnout could undermine retention rates and academic quality.

In synthesis, Poland embodies the most comprehensive and systemically grounded inclusion model among the countries analysed. Its pre-existing academic infrastructure, cultural proximity, and administrative capacity allowed for rapid and largely effective responses to the Ukrainian crisis.

The Polish case confirms theoretical propositions about the multilevel governance of inclusion (Morén, Ramberg, 2024): successful integration depends on the coordination of policy, institutional autonomy, and micro-level practices. Poland demonstrates that alignment between national frameworks and institutional initiative can generate synergy rather than tension.

Nevertheless, sustainability remains the critical challenge. To consolidate its achievements, Poland must transform ad hoc emergency actions into permanent institutional frameworks, supported by consistent funding and professionalisation of inclusion services.

From a theoretical standpoint, Poland's trajectory mirrors what the transformative inclusion model (Masika, Jones, 2016; Lowe, El Hakim, 2020) describes as the evolution from reactive to proactive inclusion – moving from humanitarian response to strategic integration that enriches both host and incoming communities.

5.1.3. Romania

Romania occupies a distinctive position within the comparative framework of this monograph. Unlike Slovakia and Poland, whose inclusion models are largely built upon geographic and linguistic proximity, Romania's approach to integrating Ukrainian students reflects a multicultural and multilingual tradition. This approach is shaped by its historical openness to international education, its coastal location as a crossroads

between Europe and the Black Sea region, and its growing participation in EU academic networks.

The analysis presented here builds on findings from Chapter 4.3, combining evidence from national policy documents, institutional strategies (particularly those of Ovidius University of Constanța), and the results of qualitative round tables. Through a SWOT analytical perspective, Romania's case illustrates how a system in transition, modernising its higher education structures while balancing socio-economic disparities, can develop inclusion practices that are both adaptive and human-centred.

Strengths

Romania's principal strength lies in its humanitarian orientation and institutional flexibility. The country responded rapidly to the influx of displaced Ukrainians after 2022 by activating multiple national and local-level coordination mechanisms. The Ministry of Education, working in cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and UNHCR Romania, issued clear guidelines to ensure that children and young adults fleeing war could access education at all levels.

Within higher education, the government introduced simplified procedures for recognition of qualifications, tuition waivers for students under temporary protection, and expanded access to Romanian or English-taught programmes. Universities were encouraged to establish integration and mentoring offices, often managed in collaboration with NGOs and regional authorities.

A particularly illustrative example is Ovidius University of Constanța, which became a regional hub for Ukrainian students due to its strategic location on the Black Sea and its prior experience with international cohorts from Moldova, Turkey, and the Caucasus. UOC's pre-existing infrastructure for multicultural education, mostly English and French-taught programmes, preparatory language years, and international student offices, allowed it to integrate Ukrainian students swiftly without major structural disruptions.

Romanian universities also benefit from a high degree of curricular diversification. The availability of English-language study programmes, supported by international accreditation, provides a flexible entry point for displaced students whose Romanian proficiency is limited. The inclusion of intercultural content in curricula, especially within social sciences and education faculties, further reinforces Romania's alignment with inclusive pedagogy principles (Booth, Ainscow, 2016; Ioannidi, Malafantis, 2022), emphasising equity of access and recognition of diversity as an educational value.

Weaknesses

Despite these achievements, several weaknesses limit the depth and sustainability of Romania's inclusion system. The first is the fragmentation of governance. Coordination between ministries, universities, and local authorities often remains inconsistent. While national policies articulate inclusive goals, the mechanisms for monitoring their implementation are weak, resulting in substantial variation among institutions.

Round table discussions revealed that support structures frequently depend on individual initiative rather than institutional mandates. Administrative staff and lecturers often fill multiple roles, such as mentors, translators, and counsellors, without corresponding structural support. This reliance on personal commitment makes inclusion vulnerable to staff turnover and burnout.

A second weakness concerns the language barrier. Although English-taught programmes offer accessibility, they may inadvertently isolate Ukrainian students from local peers and limit their cultural immersion. At the same time, Romanian-taught programmes pose linguistic challenges, as intensive preparatory courses (often one academic year long) delay full integration. Participants in qualitative discussions reported that students who enrol directly into Romanian-taught courses struggle during the first semesters with comprehension and written assignments, leading to higher dropout risks.

Moreover, Romania's regional disparities amplify these challenges. While large universities in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, and Constanța have the resources to support international students, smaller institutions in rural or economically weaker regions lack infrastructure and funding. This uneven distribution of capacity mirrors broader socio-economic inequalities within the country.

Finally, data collection and research on inclusion outcomes remain underdeveloped. Few universities systematically monitor the academic performance, retention, or well-being of Ukrainian students. Without evidence-based indicators, it is difficult to evaluate the real effectiveness of integration policies, echoing a weakness also identified in OECD's (2023) review of Central and Eastern European higher education systems.

Opportunities

Romania's evolving higher education landscape provides several opportunities to consolidate and expand inclusion measures.

First, the country's multicultural history and its constitutional recognition of ethnic and linguistic diversity offer fertile ground for developing a national inclusion strategy that transcends the current crisis response. The inclusion of Ukrainian students can serve as a catalyst for embedding diversity management principles into university

governance – similar to gender equality or disability inclusion policies already in development under the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) framework.

Second, there is significant potential for deepening cooperation between universities and NGOs. Organisations such as Save the Children Romania and Mare Nostrum have already played key roles in supporting refugee education. Institutionalising these partnerships through formal agreements could create sustainable models for psychosocial support, mentorship, and community engagement.

Third, Romania can leverage its EU membership and geographic position to strengthen academic diplomacy. Its proximity to Ukraine and Moldova, along with its role as a maritime gateway to the Black Sea, positions it strategically for future regional education partnerships. Expanding Erasmus+ cooperation with Ukrainian universities and developing dual-degree programmes could promote both inclusion and post-war reconstruction efforts.

Fourth, the national policy shift toward digitalisation in higher education opens an opportunity to expand hybrid and online learning pathways. Such formats could accommodate Ukrainian students who temporarily return home or move between countries. This flexibility aligns with the UNESCO principle of learning continuity in crisis contexts (Carney, Delaney, 2025).

Finally, inclusion presents an opportunity for curricular innovation and staff development. Integrating intercultural communication, trauma-informed pedagogy, and conflict sensitivity into teacher training programmes can build long-term institutional capacity for inclusive education.

Threats

Romania's inclusion landscape is not immune to external and internal threats. The most pressing is economic vulnerability. As a middle-income EU member state, Romania faces constraints in public funding for higher education. Inflation and post-pandemic fiscal pressures could jeopardise ongoing inclusion initiatives once EU project cycles conclude.

A second threat concerns demotivation and attrition among displaced students. Many Ukrainian students enrolled in Romania perceive their stay as temporary, leading to limited engagement with local culture and low retention rates beyond the first study cycle. Without effective strategies for social integration and career planning, this transient engagement could reduce the impact of inclusion policies.

Another threat lies in unequal access to opportunities within the higher education system itself. Universities with limited internationalisation experience may not attract or support Ukrainian students, creating a two-tiered system in which inclusion

is concentrated in a few well-resourced institutions. This imbalance undermines national coherence and risks perpetuating inequality among regions.

Finally, public perception and political volatility remain latent threats. While Romanian society largely expresses solidarity with Ukraine, shifts in political rhetoric or misinformation could erode support for refugees. Ensuring sustained social legitimacy for inclusion therefore requires transparent communication, outreach, and evidence of mutual benefits for host communities.

Romania's model of inclusion can be characterised as humanitarian, flexible, but fragmented. It excels in responsiveness and empathy, yet it lacks the systemic consolidation necessary for sustainability. The Romanian case exemplifies what inclusion theorists such as Tinto (2019) describe as “institutional adaptation through necessity” – an emergent, bottom-up process driven more by moral and social commitment than by strategic design.

When situated within the broader conceptual framework of this monograph, Romania illustrates how inclusion in higher education operates at the intersection of three dimensions: the legal (ensuring rights and access), the pedagogical (supporting learning and language acquisition), and the psychosocial (fostering belonging and well-being). Success depends on balanced attention to all three, which Romania has achieved to a moderate but promising degree.

The country's trajectory suggests potential for transformation from reactive inclusion to systemic integration, where inclusion becomes embedded in policy, funding, and institutional culture. Romania's universities, particularly Ovidius University, have already demonstrated that inclusive education can serve as both an ethical commitment and a strategic advantage, reinforcing the institution's international visibility and societal relevance.

In conclusion, Romania offers a model of moral inclusion, rooted in solidarity and adaptability, yet facing the strategic challenge of institutionalising its achievements. Its experience provides essential lessons for both EU and Ukrainian higher education systems on how compassion, flexibility, and cooperation can translate into resilient academic communities during periods of geopolitical instability.

5.1.4. Ukraine

The Ukrainian higher education system occupies a fundamentally different position within this comparative framework. While Slovakia, Poland, and Romania represent host systems adapting to an inflow of displaced students, Ukraine itself embodies a higher education system in crisis transformation, operating under the pressures

of war, displacement, and resource disruption, yet simultaneously maintaining remarkable resilience, innovation, and international cooperation.

The Ukrainian case, therefore, must be analysed through a dual lens: as both a sending and transforming system. On the one hand, it faces the outflow of students and academic staff; on the other, it develops new modalities of transnational education, online learning, and institutional survival. This section synthesises data presented in Chapter 4.4 and related materials, employing a SWOT analysis to highlight Ukraine's key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, while situating them within the theoretical and empirical context of this monograph.

Strengths

Ukraine's foremost strength lies in the resilience and adaptability of its academic institutions and communities. Despite unprecedented challenges, the country has managed to preserve the functionality of its higher education system through digitalisation, decentralisation, and international partnerships.

Immediately following the outbreak of war, universities transitioned to online and hybrid education models, supported by domestic digital infrastructure and international assistance. This rapid adaptation built upon experiences gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrating institutional learning capacity under crisis conditions. In theoretical terms, this aligns with the concept of adaptive resilience (Ross, Scanes, Locke, 2024; Лондар, Маркус, 2025), where institutions not only survive disruption but evolve new competencies through adversity.

A second strength lies in the deep-rooted academic tradition and strong human capital. Ukrainian universities, such as Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, and V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, maintain internationally recognised standards in science, engineering, and humanities. Many of these institutions have long-standing partnerships with EU universities, enabling knowledge exchange and mobility even under wartime constraints.

Another notable strength is emotional cohesion and collective identity among students and academics. As round-table discussions revealed, Ukrainian students abroad display high levels of motivation, discipline, and academic engagement, which are attributes nurtured by a strong educational culture that values effort and perseverance. This social capital, rooted in solidarity and shared national purpose, has functioned as a psychological buffer, sustaining students' commitment despite trauma and instability.

Finally, Ukraine's commitment to internationalisation and reform alignment with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) remains firm. The ongoing harmonisation of curricula, credit transfer (ECTS), and quality assurance demonstrates continuity of vision. The Ministry of Education and Science has actively pursued partnerships,

memoranda, and joint programmes that ensure Ukraine's sustained participation in European academic networks, reflecting long-term strategic resilience.

Weaknesses

Yet these achievements coexist with severe systemic weaknesses, largely stemming from the destructive impact of war. The most immediate weakness is infrastructural devastation. Numerous universities in eastern and southern regions, such as Mariupol State University and Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute, suffered physical destruction or were forced to relocate. These losses have disrupted research facilities, libraries, laboratories, and student housing.

Another weakness concerns the mass displacement of students and staff, leading to fragmented academic communities and disrupted continuity of learning. The brain drain phenomenon, both temporary and permanent, poses serious risks to the long-term reconstruction of Ukraine's knowledge base. Many academics have taken positions abroad, while others remain internally displaced within safer regions, facing irregular working conditions.

The transition to digital learning, while necessary, has also exposed technological and equity gaps. Limited access to stable internet connections, digital equipment, and safe study environments disproportionately affects students in rural areas or occupied regions. Consequently, disparities in participation and academic achievement have widened, illustrating the socio-economic dimension of educational vulnerability.

Furthermore, Ukraine's higher education governance faces administrative overload. The dual necessity of managing war-related emergencies and ensuring academic quality has overextended institutional leadership. The Ministry's regulatory focus on immediate crisis management sometimes leaves limited capacity for long-term planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

From a psychological standpoint, students and faculty alike experience chronic stress and emotional fatigue. Studies confirm widespread anxiety, concentration difficulties, and depressive symptoms among displaced youth. Without systematic psychosocial support infrastructure, these human consequences remain largely unaddressed within the formal education system.

Opportunities

Despite adversity, Ukraine's higher education system faces a historic opportunity for renewal and transformation. The ongoing crisis has accelerated structural changes that could modernise the system and deepen its integration into the European knowledge space.

First, the combination of displacement and digitalisation has prompted universities to rethink learning models, experimenting with hybrid, modular, and transnational formats. These innovations could form the foundation for a future flexible learning ecosystem aligned with EU trends in lifelong and distance education.

Second, the extensive network of partnerships with EU universities, strengthened by solidarity during wartime, creates opportunities for joint degree programmes, virtual mobility, and research consortia. Initiatives such as Erasmus+ cooperation, the “European Universities” alliances, and bilateral agreements with Slovak, Polish, and Romanian partners can be leveraged to rebuild Ukrainian education through shared expertise and mobility of both students and staff.

Third, the anticipated post-war reconstruction phase presents an opportunity to align education with national rebuilding priorities. Universities can serve as hubs for training in engineering, social work, urban planning, and psychological counselling, all crucial for reconstruction. Linking inclusion-oriented education with national development goals reflects Sen’s (1999) capability approach, where education enhances both personal well-being and societal resilience.

Fourth, the displacement of Ukrainian students across Europe has created a transnational academic diaspora. This network can become a valuable asset for future collaboration, knowledge transfer, and international advocacy for Ukraine. Engaging these students in dual-degree schemes, online mentoring, and innovation clusters could transform temporary exile into a long-term intellectual partnership between Ukraine and the EU.

Finally, the crisis has stimulated unprecedented global visibility and solidarity for Ukrainian academia. This heightened awareness offers leverage for sustained international funding, including through the EU’s Horizon Europe programme, UNESCO initiatives, and World Bank education recovery funds.

Threats

Nevertheless, significant threats jeopardise the stability and recovery of Ukraine’s higher education. The most immediate is the continuation and unpredictability of armed conflict, which threatens physical safety, disrupts operations, and perpetuates uncertainty. As long as hostilities persist, strategic planning remains constrained by the necessity of day-to-day crisis management.

A related threat is the long-term erosion of academic human capital. If large portions of students and young researchers remain abroad, Ukraine may face a generational gap in its scientific and professional workforce. The resulting asymmetry between domestic and diaspora-based institutions could weaken national research capacity.

Economic deterioration also poses a substantial threat. Inflation, currency instability, and the diversion of public funds to defence reduce the state's ability to finance higher education. Without external assistance, universities risk closure or significant downsizing.

Another concern is psychological burnout and trauma, particularly among educators working under prolonged stress and exposure to conflict. Without systematic well-being support, mental health issues may erode the quality and motivation of teaching staff.

Finally, geopolitical uncertainty threatens to delay Ukraine's full integration into the European Higher Education Area. While political will remains strong, sustained reform requires stable governance and financial investment. Prolonged instability could risk institutional isolation or dependency on external actors.

The Ukrainian higher education system demonstrates a paradoxical blend of fragility and resilience. It functions under extreme duress yet continues to innovate and internationalise. The country's experience reveals that inclusion, in its broadest sense, can also operate in reverse: not only as the inclusion of displaced students abroad but also as the inclusion of the homeland into the international educational community during crisis.

Theoretically, Ukraine embodies what might be termed "transformative resilience" – a process through which institutions reinvent themselves under systemic stress. This resonates with frameworks of adaptive capacity (Лондар, Маркус, 2025) and higher education resilience (Carney, Delaney, 2025), where crisis becomes a catalyst for innovation and reconfiguration.

In conclusion, Ukraine's higher education sector, though wounded, remains intellectually vibrant and normatively aligned with European values. Its continued survival and eventual renewal will depend on sustained international cooperation, systemic reform, and the capacity to transform adversity into opportunity. As such, it stands as both a testament to educational endurance and a symbol of the transformative power of inclusion in the face of profound crisis.

5.2. Cross-country comparative insights

The comparative synthesis of the four national cases, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine, reveals a complex and multilayered picture of inclusion in higher education during crisis. Each system demonstrates distinctive trajectories determined by its historical, cultural, and institutional context, yet all share a common commitment

to safeguarding the right to education and maintaining academic continuity despite disruption.

When examined collectively, these cases illuminate both the shared European logic of humanitarian inclusion and the context-specific variations that arise from differences in legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and social structures. The following analysis explores these dynamics across three main dimensions: 1) governance and policy coherence, 2) institutional responses and pedagogical innovation, and 3) student experience and well-being. It also interprets these findings in relation to theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2 – particularly Sen’s capability approach, Strayhorn’s (2018) notion of belonging, and the GEM (2020) and Carney and Delaney (2025) conceptualisation of inclusive systems of education.

Governance and policy coherence

Across all four countries, inclusion policies emerged within the intersection of national regulation and European coordination. Yet their pace, structure, and degree of institutionalisation differed substantially.

1. Poland exhibited the highest level of policy coherence and readiness. Its pre-existing legal framework for admitting foreign students under the Law on Higher Education and Science (Ustawa z dnia 20 lipca 2018 r. – Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce, 2018), combined with strong administrative capacity, allowed for immediate and uniform implementation of simplified procedures and tuition exemptions. The Polish model thus illustrates the concept of multilevel governance of inclusion: effective alignment between central directives and autonomous university action.
2. Slovakia followed a semi-decentralised path. The national framework – anchored in Lex Ukraine (Act No. 55/2022 Coll.) and the Higher Education Act – provided legal access, while universities such as Matej Bel University assumed operational responsibility for implementation. This hybrid structure produced flexibility and innovation but also fragmentation. The Slovak case shows how inclusion thrives where legal certainty intersects with local initiative, yet risks stagnation without coordinated monitoring.
3. Romania developed an inclusion architecture through adaptive coordination rather than pre-planning. National ministries issued guidelines, but implementation relied heavily on institutional creativity and NGO collaboration. This decentralised model generated strong humanitarian outreach but limited consistency. From a governance perspective, Romania reflects inclusion by moral impulse – driven by empathy and solidarity rather than systemic policy design.

4. Ukraine, by contrast, represents inclusion under duress. Its governance shifted from routine regulation to emergency management. Despite decentralisation and infrastructural collapse, the Ministry of Education and Science maintained national oversight through digital platforms and partnership agreements. The Ukrainian case exemplifies resilience governance: a mode in which adaptive networks substitute for formal bureaucratic control.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that governance coherence is a decisive factor for the sustainability of inclusion. Countries with mature administrative structures (Poland, Slovakia) managed to stabilise inclusion early, whereas systems in flux (Romania, Ukraine) relied more on improvisation and external support. Yet the moral legitimacy and responsiveness of the latter models also highlight that inclusivity cannot be measured solely by institutional order – it depends equally on relational trust and social empathy.

Institutional responses and pedagogical innovation

At the institutional level, all countries experienced a rapid pedagogical recalibration. Universities had to adapt curricula, teaching methods, and support services to accommodate diverse linguistic, psychological, and academic needs.

1. In Poland, universities leveraged prior experience in internationalisation to expand English-medium programmes, hybrid learning platforms, and bridge semesters. Faculty were trained in intercultural communication, aligning with Deardorff's (2011) model of intercultural competence. These measures not only facilitated integration but also strengthened universities' global competitiveness – illustrating the dual function of inclusion as both ethical and strategic.
2. Slovakia showcased strong grass-roots innovation. Faculties at Matej Bel University introduced informal mentoring, bilingual consultations, and Slovak language courses integrated into study plans. These small-scale interventions built an inclusive academic culture despite limited resources. In theoretical terms, they reflect relational inclusion (Booth, Ainscow, 2016; Ioannidi, Malafantis, 2022), where daily interactions create a sense of belonging more effectively than formal policy.
3. Romanian institutions demonstrated pedagogical creativity through multilingual and multicultural provision. English-taught programmes and preparatory language years became main channels for inclusion. While these ensured accessibility, they also risked segmenting student populations into linguistic enclaves. Nevertheless, the Romanian experience validates the potential of linguistic pluralism as an inclusive tool when coupled with community-building initiatives.

4. In Ukraine, pedagogical innovation was synonymous with survival. Universities transitioned *en masse* to digital learning environments, employing Moodle, Zoom, and locally developed platforms. Faculty reconstructed courses for asynchronous delivery, preserving educational continuity. This digital adaptation, though born of necessity, accelerated the modernisation of Ukraine’s academic ecosystem and deepened its interoperability with European partners.

Across the region, these institutional responses indicate a shift from emergency adaptation toward structural innovation. Inclusion catalysed pedagogical renewal, challenging traditional hierarchies and prompting a redefinition of what constitutes academic participation. Universities that internalised inclusion as a pedagogical principle rather than a humanitarian obligation showed stronger resilience and student satisfaction.

Student experience and well-being

Perhaps the most profound insight emerging from cross-country comparison concerns the subjective dimension of inclusion – students’ sense of belonging, safety, and self-efficacy.

1. In Slovakia and Poland, Ukrainian students generally reported high satisfaction with access and teaching quality but expressed difficulties forming close social bonds with domestic peers. Language barriers, cultural hesitance, and emotional exhaustion led to the formation of what faculty described as “parallel communities.” These findings resonate with Strayhorn’s (2018) argument that inclusion extends beyond access to the deeper psychological state of belonging.
2. Romanian students exhibited more diverse trajectories: those enrolled in English-taught programmes experienced smoother academic adaptation but weaker cultural integration, while those studying in Romanian struggled academically but integrated socially once language competence improved. This trade-off illustrates the integration paradox – a tension between linguistic accessibility and cultural immersion.
3. For Ukrainian students remaining within the home system, well-being was defined less by social integration than by stability and safety. Their resilience was remarkable, yet psychological stress and uncertainty remained chronic. Data from EIUS round tables and national reports highlight fatigue and emotional detachment as key risk factors.

Across contexts, well-being correlated strongly with institutional empathy and communication. Universities that maintained personalised contact, mentoring, and responsive feedback cultivated higher trust and engagement. Conversely, bureaucratic rigidity or information gaps amplified isolation.

The comparative analysis thus confirms a theoretical convergence between well-being and inclusion theory: students' ability to learn and thrive depends on their perceived agency and emotional security, not merely on formal entitlements

5.3. Policy and institutional recommendations

The comparative analysis across Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine reveals that the inclusion of displaced Ukrainian students has evolved from an urgent humanitarian intervention into a profound test of systemic adaptability, institutional creativity, and European solidarity. The evidence presented throughout this monograph indicates that sustainable inclusion requires a transition from project-based initiatives to permanent, integrated frameworks that unite policy, pedagogy, and practice.

The following recommendations synthesise lessons from the four national contexts and propose actionable strategies at three interconnected levels: 1) policy and governance, 2) institutional and pedagogical practice, and 3) cross-border and European co-operation. They are formulated with reference to the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2 and the empirical findings analysed in previous sections.

Policy and governance level

Institutionalise inclusion as a systemic principle, not a temporary response: Governments should formally embed inclusion into national higher education legislation and quality assurance systems. Slovakia and Poland, where legal instruments such as Lex Ukraine or the Law on Higher Education and Science (Ustawa z dnia 20 lipca 2018 r. – Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce, 2018) already support inclusion, should extend these measures beyond the context of war-related displacement. Romania and Ukraine could follow by developing national inclusion strategies that define minimum standards for access, support services, and data monitoring. Inclusion must become a normative component of higher education governance, evaluated within accreditation and performance frameworks.

Establish sustainable funding mechanisms: The transition from emergency funding to long-term investment is critical. Reliance on short-term EU projects (AMIF, Erasmus+, ESF) leaves universities vulnerable once funding cycles end. Governments, in partnership with the European Commission, should create permanent inclusion funds dedicated to linguistic education, counselling services, and infrastructure. This approach aligns with the European Education Area (EEA) principle of equitable financing and would ensure stability of services for both displaced and international students.

Develop national monitoring and evaluation systems: Reliable data on enrolment, retention, and academic success of displaced students remain scarce across all four countries. Ministries should establish coordinated data observatories to collect quantitative and qualitative indicators of inclusion outcomes. Such systems would allow evidence-based policymaking and cross-country comparability, in line with Bologna Process commitments to transparency and accountability.

Strengthen coordination across policy domain: Inclusion requires inter-ministerial collaboration – linking education, migration, social affairs, and labour markets. Slovakia’s coordination between education and interior ministries provides a promising model. Romania and Ukraine, where fragmentation remains a challenge, could benefit from national steering committees uniting universities, NGOs, and local authorities. Effective coordination ensures policy coherence and reduces duplication of efforts.

Protect the rights and well-being of displaced students: Legal clarity regarding residence, recognition of qualifications, and access to social services must be guaranteed. Countries hosting Ukrainian students should simplify residence renewals and extend work permit eligibility, ensuring that legal uncertainty does not undermine educational continuity. For Ukraine, alignment with EU legal frameworks during post-war reconstruction will be essential for reintegration of returning students.

Institutional and pedagogical level

Create permanent inclusion offices and support units: Every university should maintain a dedicated inclusion or diversity office responsible for coordination of services for international and displaced students. These units should integrate academic, psychological, and social support and act as institutional hubs for inclusion policy. Experience from Matej Bel University and Ovidius University demonstrates that small but well-structured offices can significantly improve communication and student satisfaction.

Integrate language learning into curricula: Round table discussions across all countries highlighted language barriers as one of the most persistent challenges to inclusion. Participants emphasized that while ad hoc language courses were helpful, they were often insufficient in scope or duration. Based on these findings, it is recommended that universities institutionalize comprehensive language support systems, integrated into regular curricula and aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Host universities should offer credit-bearing language courses integrated into study programmes rather than optional preparatory modules. Slovakia and Poland could further develop bilingual instruction in key disciplines, while Romania might expand Romanian language support alongside English-medium programmes. Language training should also include cultural literacy and academic writing components to facilitate deeper integration.

Develop trauma-informed and inclusive pedagogies: Teaching staff must be equipped with the skills to address the psychological and cultural needs of displaced students. Regular training workshops in trauma-informed education, intercultural communication, and inclusive assessment should be institutionalised. Such professional development not only supports vulnerable learners but also enriches teaching quality for all students, aligning with the inclusive excellence paradigm.

Enhance mentorship and peer support systems: Students and teachers in the Slovak and Polish focus groups pointed to the positive role of informal peer support and mentoring. Formal mentorship structures should be expanded to connect Ukrainian students with both local peers and academic mentors. Evidence from Slovak and Polish universities shows that mentoring strengthens belonging and reduces dropout rates. Programmes should combine academic guidance with psychosocial and career support. Creating “tandem study groups” pairing Ukrainian and domestic students could also foster intercultural learning.

Expand housing, counselling, and employment opportunities: Practical inclusion depends on secure living conditions and economic stability. Universities, supported by local governments, should invest in affordable dormitories and create student employment schemes – such as part-time campus jobs for displaced youth. This dual approach enhances both financial independence and community integration.

Institutionalise student voice and participation: Ukrainian and other international students should be represented in academic senates, student unions, and advisory boards. Inclusion must be co-created with those it serves. Structured feedback mechanisms, such as regular surveys and focus groups, should inform institutional policy design and evaluation.

Cross-border and European cooperation level

Strengthen transnational academic networks: The inclusion of Ukrainian students should be leveraged to deepen regional academic cooperation. Partnerships such as the EIUS Project and the EMERGE Alliance illustrate how shared challenges can produce joint solutions. Establishing Central European consortia focused on inclusion, language education, and digital mobility would sustain long-term cooperation beyond individual projects.

Support the reconstruction of Ukrainian higher education: EU and partner countries should transition from emergency assistance to strategic capacity-building for Ukraine’s post-war education system. This may include dual-degree programmes, joint research projects, and staff exchanges to rebuild human capital and institutional capacity. Integration of Ukrainian universities into European University alliances as associate members could accelerate reintegration and modernisation.

Promote mobility continuity and circular migration: The experiences of displaced students should evolve into sustainable mobility models that allow return, re-integration, and continued academic cooperation. Flexible Erasmus+ pathways, virtual mobility platforms, and micro-credential systems could facilitate learning continuity across borders.

Establish a European observatory for inclusion in crisis contexts: Building on lessons from the Ukrainian crisis, the European Commission could create a permanent Observatory for Academic Inclusion and Mobility in Emergencies (OAIME). This platform would coordinate data, share best practices, and provide rapid response mechanisms for future crises – ensuring that inclusion becomes a structural competence of the EHEA.

Foster intercultural dialogue and European citizenship: Cultural understanding is integral to resilience. Universities should institutionalise intercultural dialogue initiatives, including joint cultural events, volunteer projects, and summer schools promoting European values of democracy and solidarity. These initiatives reinforce the idea of higher education as a space where citizenship and community are learned through interaction.

6. Conclusions and future directions of research

The findings and reflections presented in this monograph provide an integrated overview of how higher education institutions across Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine have responded to the educational, social, and psychological needs of displaced Ukrainian students since 2022. Drawing on policy analysis, institutional case studies, and qualitative fieldwork, the study has revealed that inclusion in higher education is both a moral commitment and a process of systemic learning.

The qualitative phase of the research, realised through document analysis, round-table discussions, and semi-structured interviews, has brought forward a detailed understanding of the contexts, mechanisms, and experiences shaping inclusion at multiple levels, including legal, institutional, pedagogical, and personal. It has shown that inclusion cannot be confined to a single dimension, as it is simultaneously a question of access, participation, well-being, and belonging.

This multi-country comparison highlights several cross-cutting patterns. Firstly, inclusion succeeds where institutional empathy meets structural support, where universities are able to translate values of solidarity into concrete frameworks for language training, academic counselling, and student engagement. Secondly, the results confirm that psychological and social well-being are integral to educational success. The effectiveness of inclusion depends not only on policy measures but on the everyday interactions that generate trust and recognition. Finally, the analysis underscores that inclusion contributes to institutional transformation: it stimulates pedagogical innovation, administrative flexibility, and international cooperation.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms the relevance of combining the Capability Approach, Belonging Theory, and Inclusive Excellence Framework as complementary lenses for understanding inclusion. Together, these frameworks allow for the interpretation of inclusion as both an individual experience of empowerment and a collective process of institutional renewal. The findings also align with the principles of the European Higher Education Area, which positions inclusion and social responsibility as fundamental components of quality and equity in higher education.

Looking ahead, the next stage of this research will focus on quantitative data collection through comprehensive surveys conducted across the participating countries. This upcoming phase will aim to measure, in a structured and comparative way, the dimensions that have emerged from the qualitative analysis: perceived inclusion, sense of belonging, language confidence, well-being, academic adaptation, and institutional support. By collecting quantitative data, the project seeks to triangulate and validate qualitative insights, enabling more precise assessment of inclusion outcomes

and identification of statistical relationships between institutional practices and student experiences.

The forthcoming quantitative research will also provide the foundation for developing evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and higher education institutions. These data will contribute to a comparative European framework for inclusion monitoring, supporting both the implementation of future Erasmus+ initiatives and the alignment of national policies with Bologna Process objectives. Moreover, the survey findings are expected to offer valuable insights into how universities can design more effective interventions, foster long-term integration, and enhance the overall well-being of displaced and international students.

In a broader sense, this next research phase continues the project's guiding vision: to view inclusion not only as a short-term response to crisis but as a structural commitment to equity and human development. By combining qualitative narratives with quantitative evidence, the research will deepen understanding of how universities can act as transformative institutions, as spaces where knowledge, empathy, and resilience converge to shape the future of European higher education.

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List of Figures

Figure 1.	Enrolment Trends of Ukrainian Students at UMB in 2019–2023	42
Figure 2.	Ukrainian Student enrolment at UMB by Faculty for 2023/2024	44
Figure 3.	Gender of Ukrainian Student at UMB (cumulative data, in %)	45
Figure 4.	Age distribution of Ukrainian Student at UMB (age, % of students)	46
Figure 5.	The structure of documents allowing residence in PolandSource: own elaboration	55
Figure 6.	Structure of studies in Poland	56
Figure 7.	Ukrainians' participation among all foreigners at UR in the years 2019–2022 (in %)	57
Figure 8.	Share of first-year students from Ukraine among all students from Ukraine at UR (2019–2022) (%)	58
Figure 9.	Most popular fields of study among students from Ukraine at UR in 2022	59
Figure 10.	Structure of Ukrainian students at University of Rzeszów by age (in %)	63
Figure 11.	The most popular fields of study chosen by students from Ukraine at UR	66
Figure 12.	Academic level of study of students from Ukraine at UR (in %)	67
Figure 13.	Gender distribution of Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)	91
Figure 14.	Age distribution of Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)	91
Figure 15.	Types of studies of Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)	92
Figure 16.	Distribution of Ukrainian students at the faculties UOC (in %)	93
Figure 17.	Financial support for Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)	94
Figure 18.	Academic progress of Ukrainian students at UOC (in %)	95

List of Tables

Table 1.	Number of Ukrainian students at UMB divided by the most popular study programs (2023/2024)	49
Table 2.	Structure of students from Ukraine at UR by nationality (N = 198)	62
Table 3.	Structure of students from Ukraine at UR studying in fields of study (N = 198)	64

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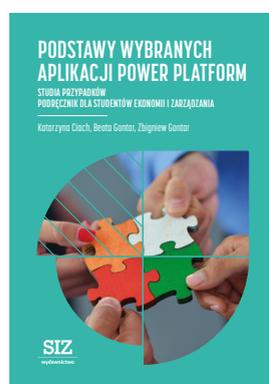
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This monograph examines the inclusion of Ukrainian students in European higher education following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Drawing on qualitative comparative research across Slovakia, Poland, Romania, and Ukraine, the study analyzes legal frameworks, institutional responses, and the lived experiences of displaced students and host communities. Through innovative round-table discussions, the research reveals critical challenges in areas such as credential recognition, language support, and psychosocial services, while also identifying promising practices and systemic innovations. The findings demonstrate how the EU's Temporary Protection Directive has been operationalized in practice and offer evidence-based recommendations for enhancing inclusion. This timely contribution is essential reading for scholars, policymakers, and higher education practitioners working at the intersection of educational migration, crisis response, and European integration.

The monograph represents a solid, coherent, and methodologically well-grounded scientific work addressing a highly topical and socially relevant issue in European higher education. The subject of inclusion of Ukrainian students is approached in a comprehensive manner, combining a well-developed theoretical framework with rich qualitative empirical material and a valuable comparative perspective.

z recenzji prof. Buşu Mihail

I consider this to be a mature, valuable, and methodologically well-conceived monograph, which credibly integrates a scientific perspective with a practical dimension and constitutes an important contribution to the discussion on the inclusion of Ukrainian students in European higher education.

z recenzji dr hab. Pawła Walawendra



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