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INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INTO THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG RESEARCHERS

ІНТЕГРАЦІЯ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ В ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКИЙ ПРОСТІР ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ: ВИКЛИКИ ТА МОЖЛИВОСТІ ДЛЯ МОЛОДИХ НАУКОВЦІВ

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Ukraine’s integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Research Area (ERA) sets strategic guidelines for the modernization of its higher education system. These frameworks offer new pathways for training researchers and fostering international academic collaboration. However, alignment with European standards such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) remains a key challenge. Misalignments reduce international recognition of Ukrainian qualifications and negatively impact graduate competitiveness abroad [8].

The purpose of this study is to analyze Ukraine's progress in integrating into European educational and research spaces, identify current challenges and emerging opportunities, and formulate strategic recommendations for enhancing the capacity of young researchers.

In 2023, Ukraine's R&D expenditure was 0.33% of GDP, slightly lower than in previous years, continuing a trend of long-standing underinvestment compared to EU averages above 2% (World Bank, 2025) [11]. This structural underfunding reduces the country's ability to finance domestic research, making international programmes a critical source of support. Since its association with Horizon Europe in June 2022 (European Commission, 2022) [5], Ukraine has expanded access to EU funding and networks. As of mid-2024, Ukrainian organisations submitted 1,722 applications (0.42% of all Horizon Europe applications), resulting in 180 grant agreements (~€48 million funding) with the participation of 179 institutions. Ukraine now ranks 7th among 19 associated countries in funding volume and participation diversity [9]. In parallel, targeted support schemes have further strengthened research resilience under wartime conditions. The EURIZON Fellowship Programme increased its budget to €4.5 million in 2024, enabling 324 Ukrainian researchers to sustain their projects abroad [3], while an additional €10 million was allocated to the MSCA4Ukraine scheme in 2024, supporting more displaced doctoral and postdoctoral researchers [2]. Together, these instruments illustrate how external funding helps to compensate for domestic constraints and sustain Ukraine's integration into the European Research Area.

One major challenge is aligning higher education programs with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) standards, particularly the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). Insufficient alignment limits the international recognition of Ukrainian diplomas and reduces graduates' competitiveness abroad [8]. Given the limited domestic funding, Ukraine invests less than 0.5% of GDP in research, compared to over 2% in EU countries external initiatives have become increasingly important. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework has played a key role in aligning Ukraine's research and innovation policies with the EHEA and European Research Area (ERA). Since Ukraine's association with Horizon 2020 in 2015, significant steps have been taken to enhance mobility, promote technology transfer, and support the creation of research-intensive clusters. However, challenges remain regarding private sector involvement in R&D funding and the ongoing brain drain, which weakens the regional scientific workforce [7].

Centralized governance often restricts institutional autonomy, which can constrain innovative research initiatives and reduce the quality of doctoral training. In response, the National Council of Ukraine on Science and

Technology Development has established new working groups, including the «European Integration» group. Its activities aim to systematically integrate Ukrainian science into the ERA, align national strategic priorities with European ones, and develop support mechanisms for universities and research institutions in adapting to EU standards [10].

Despite these challenges, European integration offers significant opportunities for young researchers. Participation in international grant programs such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, and COST facilitates access to funding, advanced laboratories, and transnational research networks [4].

Academic mobility programs, including joint PhDs and double degree programs, allow students to gain international experience, collaborate on interdisciplinary research projects, and expand professional networks. According to the Mobility Scoreboard: Higher Education Background Report (European Commission, 2022/2023), successful integration of the national higher education system into the European educational space is impossible without developing mobility for students and researchers. The report highlights key factors that facilitate mobility, such as access to information and guidance, language preparation, financial support, equal opportunities for students from socially vulnerable groups, and simplified procedures for recognition of learning outcomes and qualifications. For Ukraine, these indicators can serve as a benchmark for developing policies that engage students in international programs, harmonize national standards with European ones, and support young researchers in their professional mobility [6].

In addition to domestic initiatives, external frameworks such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP) support Ukraine's integration into European research and innovation networks. Through association with Horizon 2020 and subsequent programs, Ukrainian researchers have gained enhanced access to European research infrastructures, mobility schemes, and technology transfer initiatives. These partnerships aim to strengthen institutional resilience, foster innovation ecosystems, and increase the participation of Ukrainian researchers in international projects while aligning with the strategic priorities of the European Research Area [1].

Digitalization plays a crucial role in supporting Ukrainian researchers. Access to open science platforms, electronic repositories, and virtual doctoral schools allows young scholars to participate in global academic communities even under limited resources. In parallel, European integration promotes academic integrity within Ukrainian higher education institutions, a prerequisite for full participation in the European Higher Education Area. Building a culture of research ethics enhances international trust in Ukrainian scholars.

Key directions for further integration include the harmonization of academic programs with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to ensure international recognition of Ukrainian degrees [8]. It also involves enhancing interdisciplinarity and incorporating innovative approaches into doctoral training to address sustainable development and digital transformation challenges, strengthening academic integrity by embedding international ethical standards within research practices, and developing partnerships between Ukrainian universities, European research institutions, and industry to facilitate commercialization of research and increase its practical impact [4].

Integrating Ukrainian higher education into the EHEA is both challenging and essential for developing a new generation of researchers. It creates opportunities for global academic engagement, enhances research mobility, provides access to international funding, and fosters digital and interdisciplinary competencies. Strategic association with the EHEA and ERA has already yielded concrete benefits for researcher training and international engagement.

Despite these advances, structural underfunding and institutional misalignment remain. To sustain progress, it is essential to: commit to a minimum of 1% of GDP for R&D (gradually increasing toward EU averages), fully integrate ESG and EQF frameworks into national accreditation systems, and institutionalize domestic support for researcher mobility, open access publishing, and academic integrity. Success depends on comprehensive state support, effective university governance, active institutional engagement, and the readiness of young scholars to embrace innovation and openness.

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