

# International cooperation in building a world-class university – The case of Belarusian State University

**Sergey Ablameyko, Michael Zhuravkov, Viktor Samakhval, Alexandr Polonnikov**

*Belarusian State University, Republic of Belarus*

*e-mail: samakhval@bsu.by*

The paper presents an overview of international cooperation practices at Belarusian State University in the context of internationalisation of higher education. It focuses on conceptual and practical alternatives for internationalisation activities, and the conditions and mechanisms for implementing international standards in the research, teaching and management practices of a higher education institution as means to facilitate its continued development.

**Keywords:** Internationalisation of education - concepts, internationalisation strategies in higher education, intercultural education environment, international reputation of higher education institution, cross-border inter-university partnerships, cross-border university networks

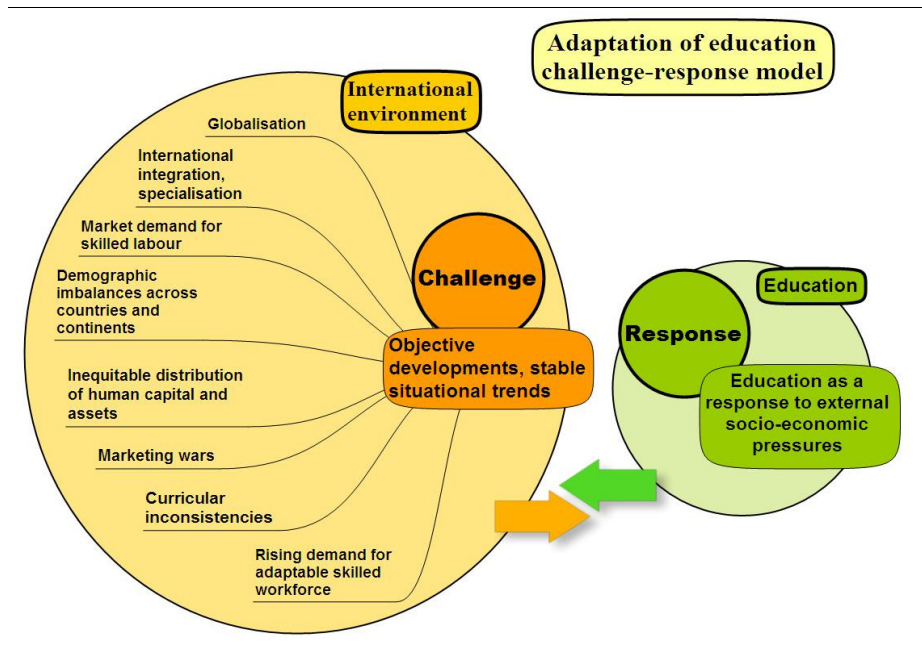
## Introduction

### Internationalising education - alternative concepts

The discussion of internationalisation in higher education presents a range of difficulties due to the fact that the content of this term lies at the intersection of multiple complex notions, such as transnational education, global education, cross-cultural education, international education, and comparative education, among others (Knight, 2006). Recognizing the challenge of discrimination among these terms, Jane Knight suggests the following definition of international education: "internationalisation is a process of integrating the international/cross-cultural aspect of teaching, learning and research in provision of educational services (Knight, 2006). In its basic approach, this definition appears to be shared by the majority of other writers on the subject. Still, there are some other concepts and interpretations of internationalisation.

One approach is based on the classical challenge-response dichotomy proposed by A. Toynbee. Proponents of this approach list among responses the objective developments and situational trends such as globalisation (Krylova, 2005), international integration, specialisation of production, market demand for skilled labour, demographic imbalances among countries and continents, unequal distribution of human and physical capital (Philip, Reisberg, Reisberg, and Rumbley, 2009), marketing wars, cut-price competition, curricular differences, and growing significance of skilled labour that is quick to learn new skills on the job (Tyugashev, 2012). In this context, internationalisation of tertiary education is viewed as 'pre-emptive response' to the changing socio-economic dynamic (Knight, 2006). Obviously, globalisation is at the top of the agenda in the study of cultural and civilisation challenges. In this view, education is approached as an adaptive structure reacting to external demands (Figure 1).

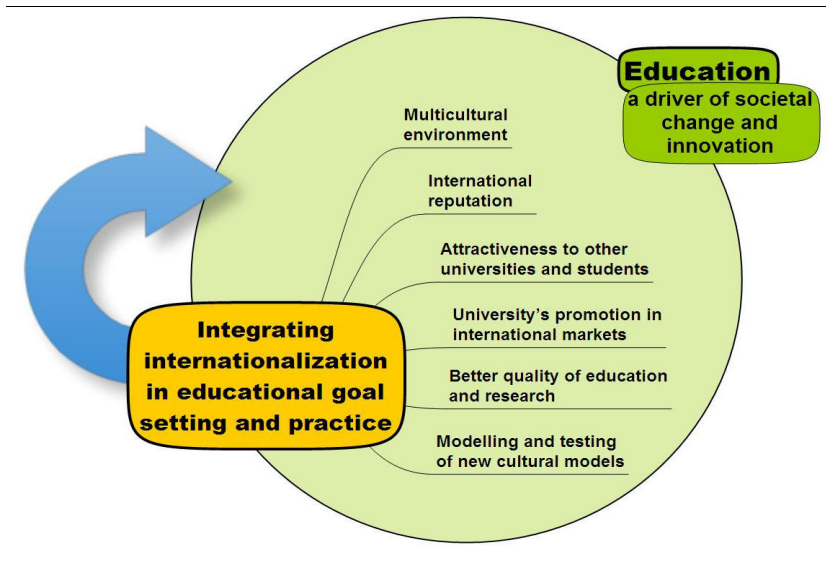
FIGURE 1. INTERNATIONALISATION MANAGEMENT IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION - AN ADAPTIVE MODEL



The second broad approach focuses on the long-term futures of education, by ascribing to it an interest in self-preservation and autonomous development. This interest is very well posed by the French sociologists Bourdieu and Passeron in their seminal work "Reproduction in education, society and culture". It emphasizes the specific mission of education regarding institutional reproduction that is critical to the fulfilment of its intrinsic "teaching mission", rather than being determined by the political, economic and cultural circumstances (Burde and Passron, 2007). In its quest for self-preservation and development, education will view internationalisation as the source of motivation for change. This view anchors to the recognition of the university and its staff of the importance of integrating internationalisation in its practices and teaching goals, without seeing it merely as a reaction to some external requirement or situational demand. In this approach, the presence of international students is viewed as an opportunity for creating a multicultural environment and building the university's international reputation, and being a part of inter-university agreements is a tool for expanding academic exchanges and mobility. Similarly, international certification of courses is regarded as a tool for promoting the university in the global education market (Knight, 2011; Knight, 2006). This conceptualisation is based on the notion of systemic interest in education, and sees internationalisation as a path towards establishing the multicultural, international and global dimensions of education, thus improving the quality of education and research (de Wit, 2013). It is also assumed that education is not simply a function of social and cultural needs, but more, it is an important factor of societal and innovation-driven development. Education thus becomes a model and testing ground for new cultural transactions and innovative products that do not only respond, but also give rise to new social and cultural developments. The education institutions' responsibility, and their ability to impact the socio-economic context, as assumed by the second approach to

internationalisation, are based on a prospective view of the futures and potentials for societal development, not merely a reaction to external challenges, as posited by the first view (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. INTERNATIONALISATION MANAGEMENT IN UNIVERSITY  
EDUCATION - A PRODUCTIVE MODEL



The experiences and practices of internationalisation at Belarusian State University will be described within the framework of this 'productive' approach. The focus on the intra-institutional aspects of internationalisation is not a call for every university to "shape its own unique approach to internationalisation" (Knight, 2012). Rather, it is a matter of preserving and developing the institutional academic, research and cultural experience while moving along the shared path of integration into the global education space.<sup>1</sup>

### Internationalisation strategy at Belarusian State University

It should be noted from the outset that we do not view Internationalisation as the end in itself, but merely as a mean to the end. From the formative perspective, Internationalisation should help to build tolerance and appreciation of ethnic, cultural, and institutional diversity among staff and students. Some researchers and practitioners define two dimensions of internationalisation of higher education - "internationalisation at home" and "Internationalisation across borders" which includes education abroad, education across borders, and cross-border education (EC, 2010). In our view, this division is excessively formal and rigid, putting the boundary between the two dimensions squarely along the perimeter of the higher education institution. In our view, the location of this boundary is very different. A study abroad programme, whose primary objective is the introduction of new values and academic norms by the returning student to his home university environment is as much an instance of "Internationalisation at home" as of

<sup>1</sup> The University's international research cooperation is not covered in this article

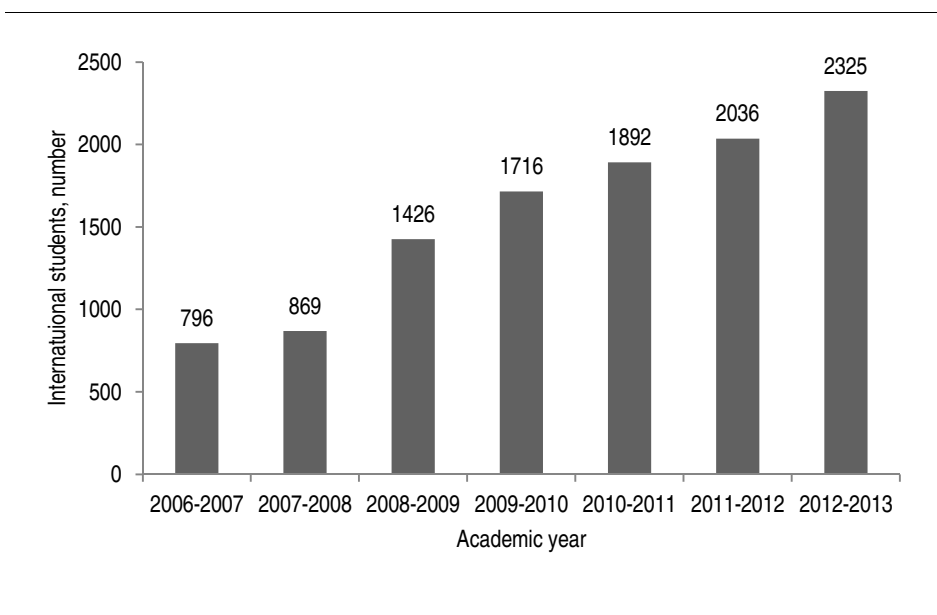
"internationalisation abroad". All actions that were taken to improve the research teaching and learning practices at a higher education institution are of domestic relevance, while others, such as meeting the social demand and national security needs, or presence building in international markets, have a strong external dimension, despite their obvious economic, political and cultural relevance. This distinction is built rather on practical and managerial objectives (such as assessment and coordination of student and staff action) than on theoretical provisions. We shall now consider in detail these domestic and external aspects of internationalisation, as they pertain to Belarusian State University.

### Cross-cultural learning environment

Work on creating of intercultural learning environment at Belarusian State University addresses the following mainstream objectives: to attract international students and academics, to facilitate academic mobility of students and staff, and to implement English-language educational programmes at all levels of university education.

During the last five years, the number of foreign students at Belarusian State University has had an upward trend (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT BELARUSIAN STATE UNIVERSITY



Prospective international students can obtain information about the educational offerings at Belarus State University through the University's Internet portal in English, German, Chinese, Spanish and Arabic. An English language MBA programme is offered to students wishing to earn a management degree consistent with the international standards of business education. In 2012, 93 students were admitted to the programme.

The University's cooperation agreements between with foreign education establishments and research centres have provided a reliable means for attracting international students. The number of such agreements has reached 325.

The Table 3 shows the proportion of international partnership agreements with counterparts from 55 countries and the percentage of international students from a total of 53 countries.

TABLE 1. PROPORTION OF INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS WITH COUNTERPARTS AND THE PERCENTAGE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Region	International partnership agreements, % of the total	International students, % of the total
Asia	20.0	45.5
CIS and Georgia	31.0	42.9
Middle East	5.8	6.7
Africa	2.2	2.3
Europe (excluding CIS and Georgia)	39.0	2.2
America	2.0	0.4

The table data reveal that the number of partnership agreements is not fully proportional to the actual number of international students. The highest proportion of international students from Asia are the nationals of China (90.7%), and citizens of Turkmenistan represent 58.8% of students from the CIS and Georgia. 46.7% of students from the Middle East come from Turkey, and 53.3% of African students are Nigerians. Lithuanians number 48.8% of students from Europe, while 37.5% of students from America are nationals of the United States, and an equal proportion of Ecuador. There are around 50 international students from Europe (excluding CIS and Georgia) and Africa, and only 19 students from America. To make the international student body more geographically balanced, Belarusian State University has launched educational programmes taught in the English language. Such programmes are offered in a range of specialties, but their ability to attract additional numbers of international students has limited so far. One reason for this situation is insufficient knowledge of the local language (i.e. Russian or Belarusian) by the international students, which has a negative effect on the quality of their day-to-day functioning, and their ability to benefit from services, which still lack sufficient numbers of employees who speak foreign languages.

The study areas with the highest international student enrolments are economics (25.8%), international relations (19.8%), and language and literature (17.0%). International enrolments in natural sciences programmes are smaller. For example, only 3.2% of international students are enrolled in biology programmes, and 3.0% in geography and geology programmes.

In the academic year 2012-2013, international student admissions totalled 745, including 454 to first-cycle programmes, 135 to masters programmes and 24 postgraduates.

About 1000-1100 teaching staff and academics travel to counterpart universities to lecture and participate in conferences and academic/research projects, and some 700 students and postgraduates participate in student exchange activities.

The study of at least one foreign language is a part of the core programme at any Belarusian university, and it is possible to study a second foreign language as an optional course. However, not all of the students can master a foreign language at a sufficient level, which is due to the great number of deficiencies in foreign

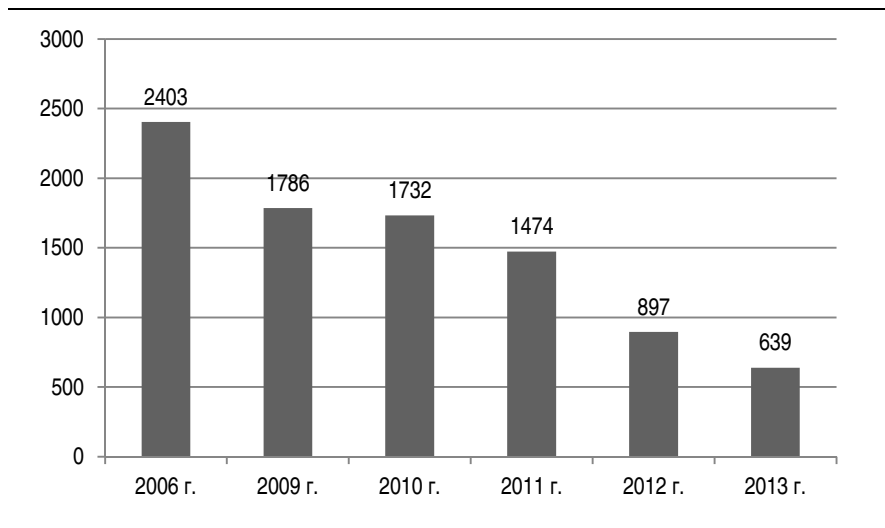
language teaching at secondary school. Starting from 2013, all secondary school leavers will be required take a mandatory graduation examination in a foreign language. This is expected to improve the learning outcomes in foreign languages. Meeting the academic mobility targets, and student integration in the international cultural and learning environment will depend obviously on such improvements.

In addition to enlarging of the international student body, we also consider it critical to facilitate their integration in the university's academic and cultural environment and to discourage the interests and inclinations that are extraneous to education. Creating an international learning environment is ultimately viewed as a key condition to instilling civic responsibility among the international and local students.

## Building an international reputation of the University

One measure of a university's international reputation is its position in global university rankings. Continued participation in the rankings is an integral part of the university's development strategy. Rankings are viewed as a tool to ensure the university's visibility, inclusion in the international education space, promote inter-university partnerships, and academic and cultural exchanges in general. Rankings are a source of information for adjusting the teaching, learning, research and management practices in the university; transition facilitation to international standards and criteria, and, ultimately stimulating long-term institutional development.

FIGURE 2. BSU'S POSITION IN THE WEBOMETRICS RANKING, 2006 - 2013 (AT 1 JANUARY)



The international ranking Webometrics is administered by the Spanish research company «Laboratorio de Internet» and measures institutional presence in the World Wide Web. In January 2013, it reviewed 21250 universities around the world and published institutional data on the universities occupying the top 12000 positions. As a result of this review, Belarusian State University emerged in 639th place. The University's place in the Webometrics ranking is shown in Figure 2. The University is fifth in the ranking after Moscow State (in 79th place), Saint

Petersburg State (in 446th place), Tomsk State (in 536th place) and the National Technical University of Ukraine (in 510th place).

According to another authoritative international ranking, conducted by the UK agency QS (QS World University Rankings), Belarusian State University was among the world's top 700 institutions, with a rank of 501 - 550.

Belarus is in sixth place in the online ranking computed by the Top Coder project based on the outcomes of the 2012 algorithmic programming contest. Based on the sum of scores, the Belarusian programming team, composed of students of several Belarusian universities, was in fifth place among the other country teams.

We nevertheless accept the word of caution concerning expressed in Jane Knight's remark that a university's international involvement and rankings per se could not serve as objective indicators of education quality (Knight, 2011). Much will still have to be done to make university rankings a factor in the reshaping and rethinking of the University and its international environment.

### **International partnerships among university and transboundary university networks**

Inter-university partnerships are necessary element of internationalisation, by providing a mechanisms for people-to-people contacts and mutually beneficial exchanges. Only 40% of the University's 325 international agreements contain specific provisions on joint collaborative activities. 39% of the total number of collaborative agreements are with European universities, 31% with those of the CIS, and 20% in Asia.

Some of the most dynamic partnerships are developing with universities in Russia, Ukraine, Germany, Poland, Italy, and China. In the last decade, several productive partnerships have been established with Chinese higher education institutions. Notably: A Confucius Institute has been established on BSU premises jointly with the Beijing University of Linguistics and Culture; a postgraduate programme has been launched in collaboration with the Harbin University of Science and Technology, and programmes in Russian philology, international journalism and international tourism management are being offered in conjunction with the Changchun University of Science and Technology. A Chine-Belarusian centre for cross-cultural communications has been established at the Foreign Languages Institute of Dalian Polytechnic University, and a similar Belarusian-Chinese centre is operating at BSU's Department of Philology. A centre for Belarusian and Russian Language, Literature and Culture study has been established at Harbin polytechnic university.

University networking was given a fresh impetus with the growth of modern ICTs. At BSU, the ICT infrastructure has been developed for over a decade. To date, a high-speed multiservice corporate network has been put in place, linking lecture and administrative facilities. The number of computers has increased by 1.5 times to over 4,000. All users have been provided with free Internet access at 100 MB/s. In 2010, the university network was integrated in the joint data network of Belarus, and access has been assured to GEANT, the pan-European research and education backbone. The idea of such a network is rooted in the theory of information and communication, where the network refers to the system of connections among societal components based on information exchange. This new reality of exchange is often described as 'virtual' and its medium, the Internet, is its ontological equivalent, rather than a mere substructure (Szpernalowski, 2011).

At present, the range of Internet resources at BSU is the most extensive among all HEI in Belarus. The University's web-site, [www.bsu.by](http://www.bsu.by) acts as the institution's

main portal, linking users to the web sites of all divisions, as well as conferences and other temporary resources. In 2010, the University's web site was awarded first prize in the category "Science and Education" at the international fair "TIBO-2010" (Ablameyko, Vorotnickiy, Zhuravkov, and Mandrik, 2012).

We attach significant priority to inter-university cooperation with the Baltic region. Recently, our contacts in this region have become increasingly regular. Such contacts include regular meetings of university leaders under the auspices of the Baltic Sea Region University Network (BSRUN), which debate general matters pertaining to inter-university cooperation (such as legal frameworks, or university management), and also direct inter-university exchanges among students and teachers within the Baltic region. Promotion of such exchanges is a significant part of the mission of the Baltic University Programme, launched in 1991. The programme is being implemented through a university network comprised of 225 higher education institutions from 14 countries. Belarus is represented within this network by some 29 universities. The programme has enabled some 40 Belarusian students to participate in academic exchanges, international research conferences and cultural events organised by Baltic universities. Cooperation with Baltic universities is particularly relevant in light of several ongoing international environmental projects involving the neighbouring states.

As another example of successful networking, the Networked University of the CIS, was established in 2009 with active input from BSU. It operates as a consortium of HEI that includes 16 institutions from Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Moldova, and Armenia. The Networked university is headquartered in the Russian People's Friendship University in Moscow, Russia (Ablameyko, Samohval, and Polonnikov, 2012).

Another notable example of network partnerships is the University's collaboration with counterparts in Germany supported through the German educational exchange service DAAD, an organisation of German universities promoting academic collaboration mainly in the form student and academic exchanges. The contacts developed within the network have evolved into full-scale academic and educational projects. Each year, students and teaching staff from Belarus are awarded DAAD scholarships to participate in German language summer schools, study periods, further education and research trips in Germany. Around 90 students and staff from BSU have been awarded DAAD scholarships in the last five years. At present, the German counterparts are implementing an international project on classics and alternative media education. This includes corporate training courses in international commerce, and masters programmes in computer mathematics.

International programmes such as Tempus, Erasmus Mundus, Central European Initiative, and the EU 7th Framework Partnership programme also have significant potential for the University's international networking. Some specific examples of such networking are presented below.

In 2007 - 2012 the University implemented three Erasmus Mundus projects, and three new projects were launched following the 2012 selection round. The projects are titled "Development of education and training in the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument countries based on environmentally sound technologies and research activity", "Mobility for innovation and development", and "Single Europe without borders". At present, the University's students and staff have the opportunity to participate in Erasmus Mundus integrated training programmes and academic field trips in 27 universities across Europe.

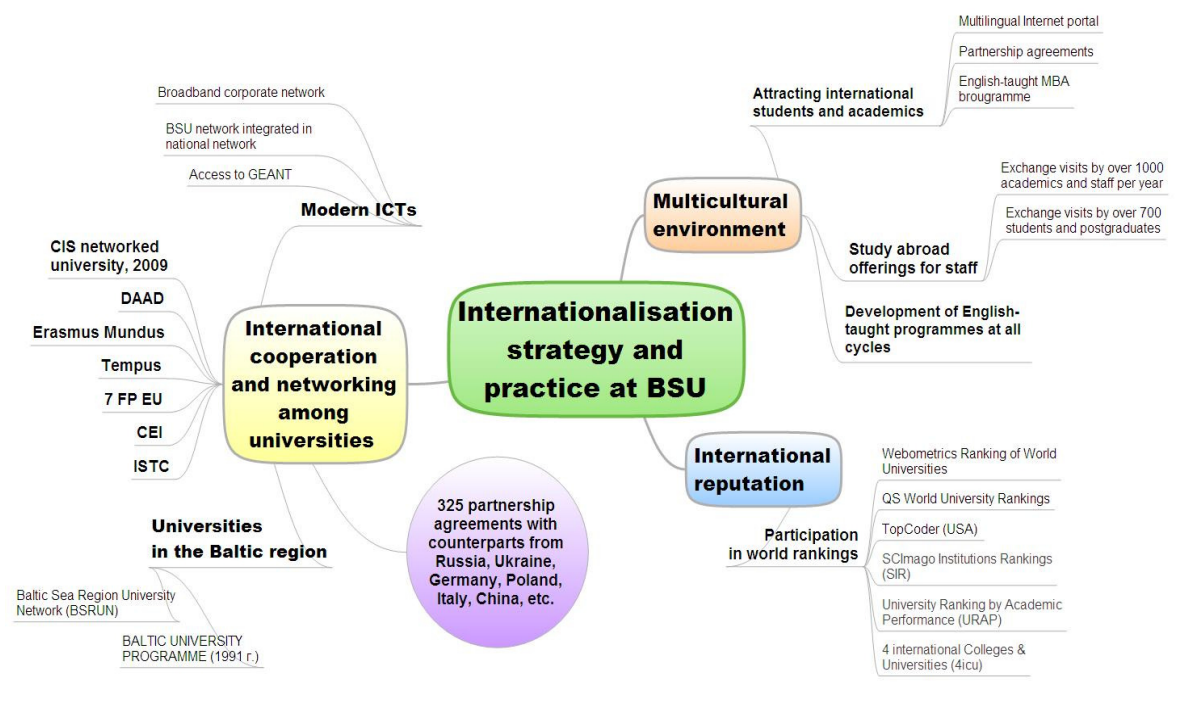
In 1994 - 2012, BSU implemented 12 EU Tempus projects, and four new projects were launched recently. The project titles are: "Inter-university support centres for student innovation", "Integrated university management system - EU practices and



their adaptation in the CIS", "Development of training network on energy efficiency", "Human security (environmental protection, food quality assurance, health services, social and legal protection) in areas affected by the Chernobyl nuclear accident".

As of January 2013, Belarusian academic and educational institutions were partners in 48 projects under the EU's 7th Framework Programme. Of this number, 27 organisations, including HEIs, are recipients of EU grants. These were mainly awarded within the context of the Programme's "people" and "capacities" teams. Within the latter themes, the sections "Research Potential" and "International Cooperation" attracted the highest number of applicants. The theme "People" is represented by 21 projects, including 15 project to support staff exchanges among research and academic institutions in Belarus and the EU. These projects fund prerequisite exchanges, and do not directly support research activities. The remaining six projects are individual research grants awarded to Belarusian academics and implemented in the academic organisations of the EU. EU funding of such projects approaches € 3 million. Total funding from all sources, reflecting the value of the knowledge accessible to Belarusian researchers, is in excess of € 200 million. The themes and formats of internationalisation activities at BSU are presented in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3. THEMES AND FORMATS OF INTERNATIONALISATION ACTIVITIES AT BSU



## Conclusion

In this conclusion, or, more exactly, concluding remarks, we shall revisit a specific problem area in internationalisation, and highlight the areas for future debate.

Against the backdrop of commercialisation, higher education institutions have been competing, to a degree, for clients and markets. To strengthen their competitive position, they are compelled to reinforce their competitive resources and present their competitive advantages to potential clients. Outside this competitive area is the domain of international competition, which has and will remain mutually beneficial.

As posited in the model proposed by the American student of internationalisation E. Stambach (2012), internationalisation policies fit into two thematic areas. The first area is economic, which emphasises the commercial benefit of exchange in goods and people, and the conversion of symbolic capital into financial assets. The second is humanitarian, amounting to open, mutually beneficial exchange in knowledge, goods, information, and other resources.

In the first thematic area, universities compete with each other for domination in the global education market. Researchers, academics, and teachers are actors in this competition, and universities have been commercialising scientific knowledge, while academics have been competing for the limited openings in universities. People and jobs are assets, and the free exchange of academics and intellectual assets serves needs of a wider circle of people, representing the wider society. In the second thematic area, education is not approached as a competitive commodity, which calls for non-market approaches, such as state subsidies, or philanthropy. One important property of knowledge is that it grows in the process of proliferation, ultimately benefiting the entire humanity (Stambach, 2012). This benefit is the key determinant of the mutually beneficial nature of such collaboration as an element of internationalisation.

On the other hand, it is no secret that relationships among the HEI of different countries in many respects are governed by economic and political motives, compelling universities to be guided by considerations extending behind pure science or education to business and geopolitical criteria. These and other factors present a challenge to the very principle of university autonomy, turning the university into an active player in the economic and socio-political playing field. This is the context that determines complex interactions among universities from different countries, including potential conflicts among them. These potential areas of conflict include competition for students, subsidies, grants, industry contracts and sales markets for knowledge products. Hence, relationships among universities can be characterised both by bilateral collaboration based on goodwill, and by conflicts of interest. This type of relationship was termed by G. Rheinhold as "cooperation", a combination of cooperation and competition. Cooperation refers to a pragmatic and non-ideological approach to business, in which companies can both act as irreconcilable adversaries in some markets, and as successful partners in others (Rheingold, 2010).

The existing system of international cooperation established at BSU and the first positive outcome of such work, can create openings for forthcoming improvements, as no country's sustainable development can be achieved without modern higher education, integrated in the global education area.

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