



Financial Support as a Pillar of Internationalization in Higher Education: Enhancing Mobility and Global Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the pivotal role of financial support in advancing the internationalization strategy of Ovidius University of Constanța (OUC) between 2013 and 2024. Using data from Erasmus Plus Program funding and institutional reports, the research evaluates the impact of external funding for mobilities for staff and students. Over the analyzed period, OUC increased its funding by 2.5 times and enhanced its absorption rates, highlighting the effective implementation of financial strategies despite challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The dual framework of "internationalization abroad" and "internationalization at home" enabled broader global engagement through increased student and staff mobilities and expanded partnerships, particularly with third countries. Key findings reveal the significance of external funding in reducing institutional budget pressures while promoting cultural exchange and academic growth. The outcomes position OUC as an example for integrating financial strategies into higher education internationalization frameworks, fostering global collaboration in a rapidly interconnected academic landscape.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 30 years, in a global, interconnected and competitive educational environment, it has been essential for the higher education institutions to develop an internationalization strategy, not as an addition to their current institutional strategy, but rather as a vital tool for growth and development. Moreover, starting with 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalization of services in general and educational ones specifically, it is proven that, today, the question of a solid internationalization strategy is raised for the very survival of the higher education institution on the global map of educational services. The benefits of internationalization as improving academic quality, promoting cultural exchanges, building global partnerships and preparing students for global citizenship, have become undeniable assets of the higher education institutions in a world increasingly shaped by international cooperation and interdependence. The institutions that prioritize and implement internationalization strategies are better positioned to address global challenges, remain competitive, and have a lasting impact on both local and international communities.

In Romania, the internationalization strategies of higher education institutions are relatively young, with the oldest dating back to 2010. A national initiative supported by a project -IEMU, represented a bust for several dozen Romanian universities in 2014 to lay the foundations for their first internationalization strategy.

The "Ovidius" University of Constanța was one of the Romanian universities that set out to develop and consolidate its international dimension by creating the first internationalization strategy. Building on the advantage of the largest multidisciplinary and multicultural university, located in southeastern Romania, the strategy created in 2015 for 2015-2019 implementation period considered all areas of university life: from students and staff to collaborations and partnerships that address issues that transcend national borders, as well as the important scientific, cultural and social contributions the university makes.

The internationalization strategy created in 2015 was based on 3 strategic directions that contributed to increasing the international dimension of the university, as presented in figure 1. In the 5 years of implementation, most of the objectives were achieved and a better understanding of what needs to be added was achieved in order to create a better strategy for the next period in 2020.

The entire construction of the strategy was based on two concepts: internationalization abroad and internationalization at home. For all three strategic objectives established in 2014, the basic element

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considered to contribute to the achievement of the proposed indicators and support the entire internationalization process was international mobility, both for students and staff, outgoing mobilities and incoming mobilities. The most important aspect of supporting and developing international mobility was, as for most Romanian universities, finding external non-reimbursable financial resources to support the implementation of the strategy without putting pressure on the institution's own budget. For Ovidius University of Constanta, this source was the European Erasmus program. Although it was a beneficiary of Erasmus Life Long Programme funds, OUC used reduced funds from this program until 2013 and did not fully exploit this opportunity.

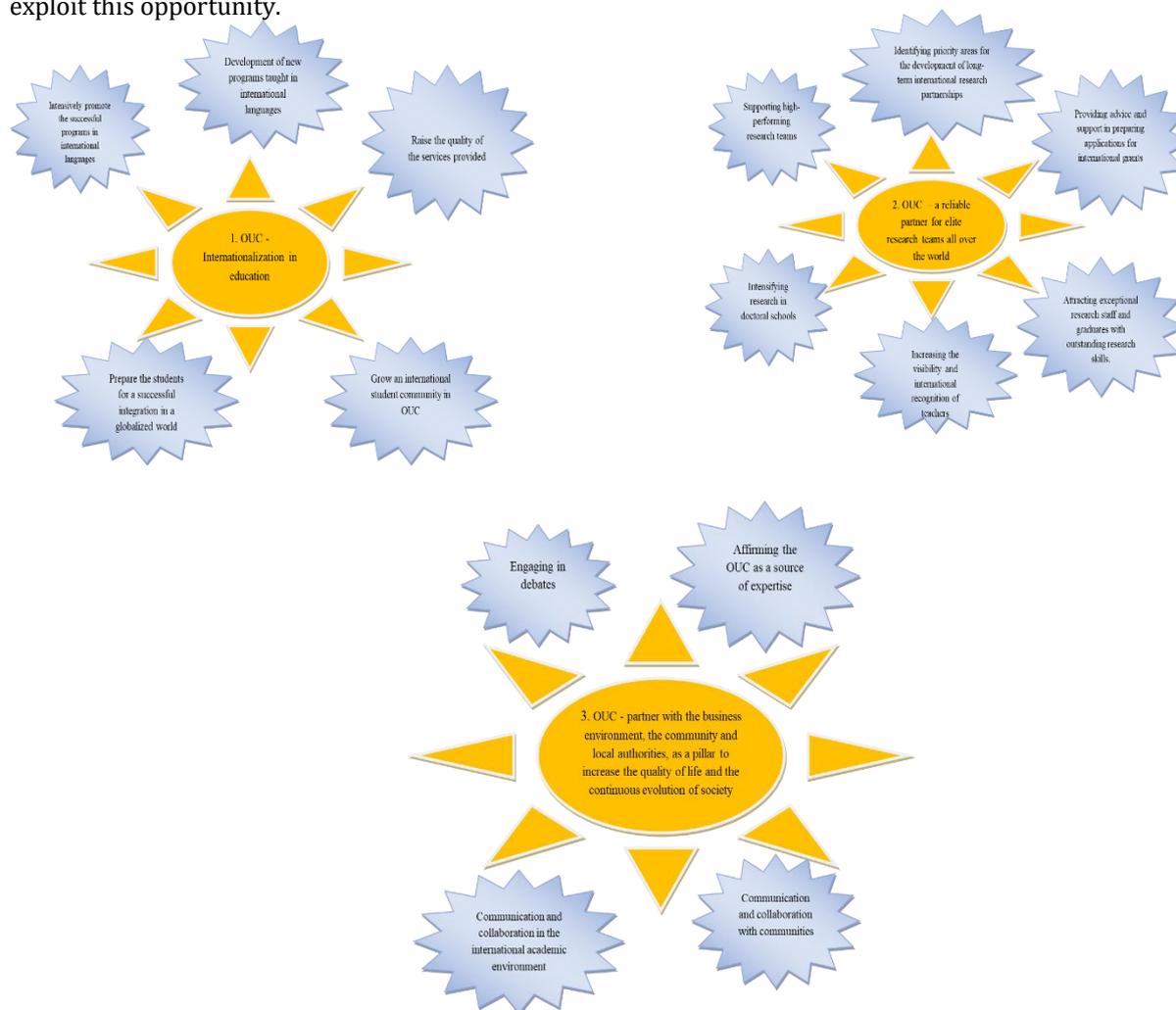


Figure 1. Main pillars of the 2015 OUC Internationalization strategy

Source: Authors' processing

Starting with 2020 an improved internationalization strategy has been created and implemented and from 2025 OUC will move to implementing a new strategy adapted to the newest trends in internationalization.

The implementation of an internationalization strategy made OUC aware of the need to find funding sources to support this approach and the funds that could be accessed through the Erasmus Plus program, both directly for mobility and for international projects that would contribute to achieving internationalization objectives, represented the first option.

The paper aims at analysing how the financial support obtained through the Erasmus Plus program contributed to achieving the objectives of the OUC internationalization strategy through mobilities, the challenges that the institution faced in developing the two concepts of internationalization abroad and internationalization at home.

2. Literature review

At the beginning of the 2000s, various studies began to crystallize new directions for the development of the higher education that put internationalization at the centre of development strategies (Chen & Barnett, 2000; Knight, 2012) highlighting two directions - on the one hand, the imperative of developing the concept of internationalization at the university level and on the other hand, putting international mobility at the centre

of this process without putting equality between them but rather showing that mobility is an essential tool of internationalization.

The concept of internationalization of higher education institutions has developed in the two directions, abroad and at home, and international mobility today represents the engine of this process that allows universities to remain competitive in a globalized academic environment as the study conducted by De Wit et al. (2015) demonstrates in detail. The most important challenge in implementing institutional strategies of higher education institutions in general but especially internationalization strategies is the financing of the actions that allow their implementation. Moreover, the only chance for such processes to reach maturity is to find permanently external funds that would reduce the pressure of financing mobility and thus allow for obtaining all the benefits brought by it (Baxter, 2018).

For the member countries of the European Union but also for their third partner countries, one of the sources of funding that offered an unparalleled boost to the internationalization process is the European Erasmus program as an EU impact study shows (EU, 2017). This study examines the movement of over three million students across geographic and cultural boundaries in pursuit of international education. It discusses the profound implications of this mobility on HEIs and nations worldwide, reinforcing the importance of such exchanges in the global academic landscape.

3. Research methodology and results

In order to carry out an analysis of how the financial support obtained through the Erasmus Plus program supported international mobility within the Ovidius University of Constanta, we collected the primary data from each final report for the concluded financial contracts for which these reports were validated by the national agency and from the financial contracts signed by the Ovidius University of Constanta with the Erasmus national agency for the mobility projects won in the annual competitions, both for the mobilities carried out with institutions from the Erasmus Programme countries and with third countries not associated with the program.

The analysis considered two years preceding the implementation of the first internationalization strategy and its implementation period up to the present, thus considering the entire interval 2013 – 2024.

For each year, we collected data from the financial contract related to two funding lines accessed by OUC – KA 103/131 (for financing mobilities carried out with program countries) and KA 107/171 (for financing mobilities with third countries not associated with the program) and for the concluded financial contracts, we collected data from the reporting platforms related to the final reports validated by the national Erasmus agency. For the period considered, we analysed the evolution of: funding obtained on each funding line and of the funding consumed, the number of mobilities carried out for study and practice for students, the number of mobilities carried out for teaching and training for OUC staff.

During 2013-2024, OUC applied and received funds from both the Erasmus LLP (2013) and Erasmus Plus Programme. Analysing the amounts in terms of contracted value and used value, we found that in 2013 OUC failed to absorb the entire funding received, with the amount of 25,000 euros being returned to the funder. Although in 2014 the amount received as non-refundable funding for mobility exceeded the threshold of 200,000 euros for the first time and was fully absorbed, the past performance principle affected the funding obtained for the following two years – 2015 and 2016, which fell below the threshold reached in 2014. The increased efforts of the Erasmus Plus team to implement the internationalization strategy by promoting international mobility opportunities resulted in the total absorption of the funding obtained. The contract for 2018, which exceeded the threshold of 400,000 euros for the first time, could not be fully absorbed. In terms of absorption, the situation did not repeat itself, in the following years, for the completed contracts, the funds were fully used, as can be seen in figure 2.

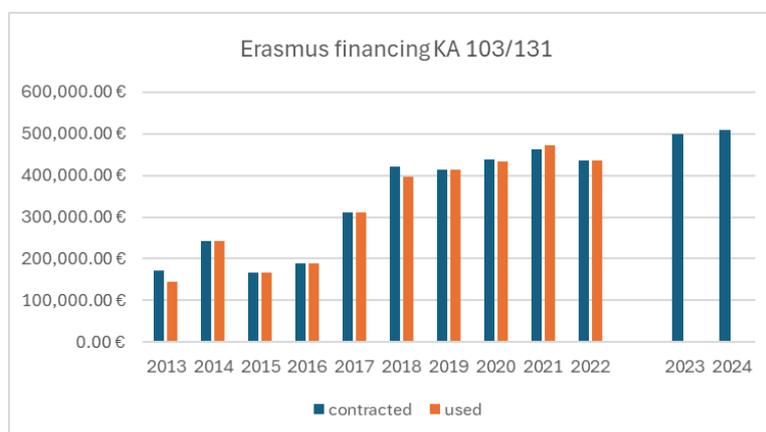


Figure 2. The evolution of financial support from the Erasmus Plus Programme between 2013 and 2024

Source: Authors' processing

For 2023 and 2024, only the amounts received as funding could be included in the analysis because the 2 contracts are still ongoing, and their final degree of use cannot be estimated yet.

A pivotal development in OUC's strategy occurred in 2017 with the introduction of the KA 107/171 funding line, facilitating partnerships with third countries not associated with the Erasmus Plus Programme. This initiative significantly contributed to fostering international collaborations, particularly in advancing doctoral studies with institutions in South America.

However, the implementation of KA 107/171 revealed systemic challenges, evidenced by lower fund absorption rates compared to mobilities with program countries, as can be seen in figure 3.

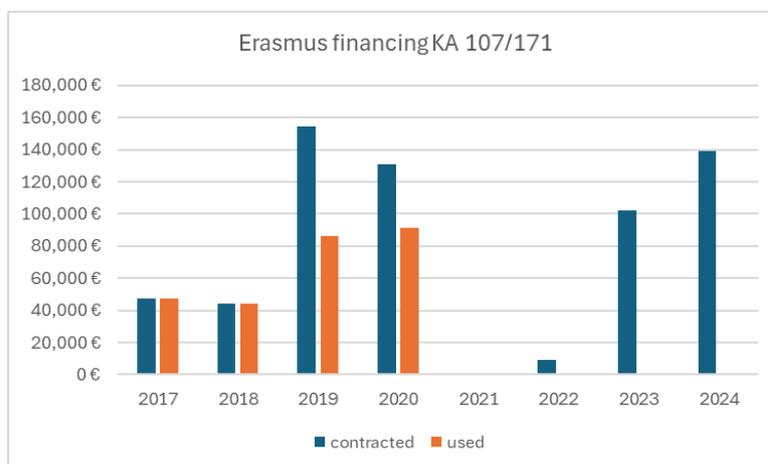


Figure 3. The evolution of financial support from the Erasmus Plus Programme between 2017 and 2024

Source: Authors' processing

In the first 2 years of implementation, the level of funds obtained was low, just over 40,000 euros and the absorption rate were 100%. The situation changed in 2019 and 2020 when the contracted value increased significantly, exceeding the threshold of 120,000 euros, but the absorption rate was much lower at 55% and 69% respectively. Being the first year of implementation of the new Erasmus Plus Programme, 2021 did not have this funding line available, and in 2022 the amount accessed was less than 10,000 euros and the financial contract is still ongoing. Starting with 2023, OUC has received funds exceeding 100,000 euros, but for these two years the absorption rate cannot be estimated because the contracts are still ongoing.

To have a better picture of how the financial support received through the Erasmus Plus Program contributed to achieving the objectives of the internationalization strategy, we developed the analysis in the direction of the evolution of the number of mobilities carried out on the two funding lines for which OUC received funding under the Erasmus Plus Programme, considering number of contracted and realised mobilities for students and staff.

Figure 4 presents the evolution of the number of mobilities contracted and carried out for the 2013 – 2024 period. In 2013 and 2014, the number of mobilities contracted was higher than the number of mobilities carried out, but the degree of absorption was different, as we have previously shown.

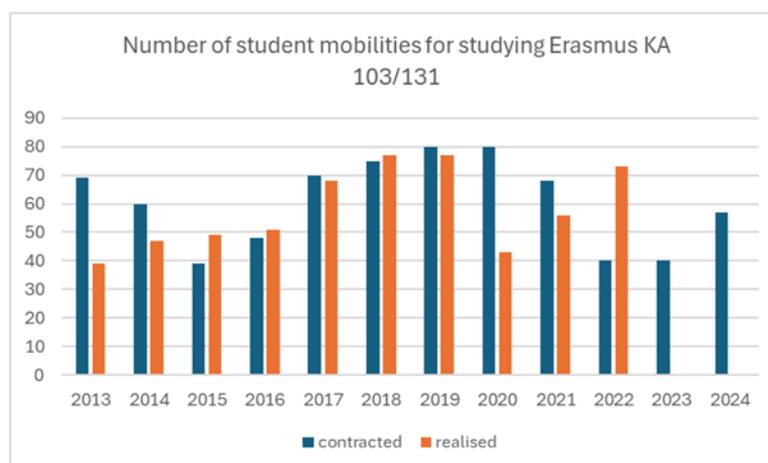


Figure 4. The evolution of number of students mobilities for studying between 2013 and 2024

Source: Authors' processing

If in 2013 some of the funds were not absorbed, in 2014 even if the number of mobilities was lower than the contracted one, the number of mobility days allowed the total absorption of the funds.

The 2019-2021 period is characterized by the same trend: the number of mobilities achieved is lower than the contracted one but at an absorption rate of almost 100%, unlike the 2018 contract which had a higher number of mobilities achieved than the contracted one but a lower absorption rate. The 2022 contract is the first with the number of mobilities achieved higher than the contracted one as a result of the end of the pandemic period and of an additional funding received. For the last 2 years, the financial contracts are still ongoing, and we do not have the number of mobilities achieved.

Starting with 2014, OUC accessed funding for internship mobilities with the program countries for the first time. Analysing the evolution of the number of mobility contracts and carried out, according to Figure 5, we found a different situation compared to study mobilities: in the 2014-2021 period, the number of mobilities carried out is higher than the one contracted for each financial contract and for 2022 it is identical. For the last two years, the contracts are still ongoing and the number of contracted mobilities is at the same level with 2022.

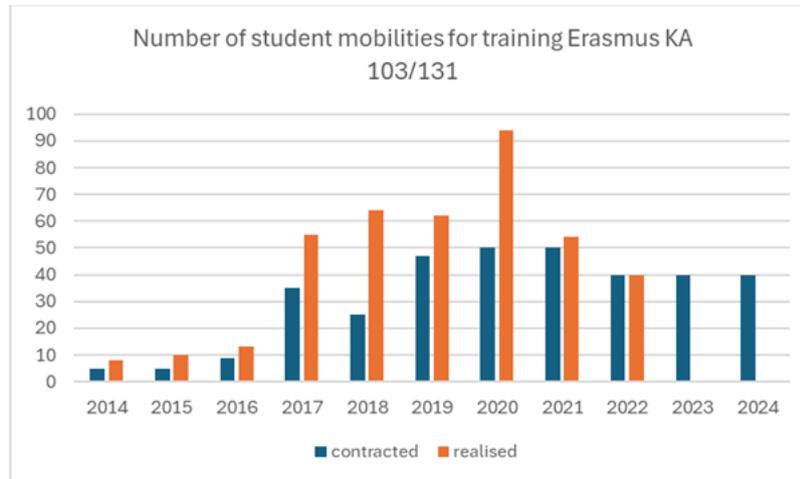


Figure 5. The evolution of number of students mobilities for training between 2014 and 2024

Source: Authors' processing

In figures 6 and 7, the evolution of the number of staff mobilities is presented - the number of mobilities contracted and carried out for each financial contract concluded.

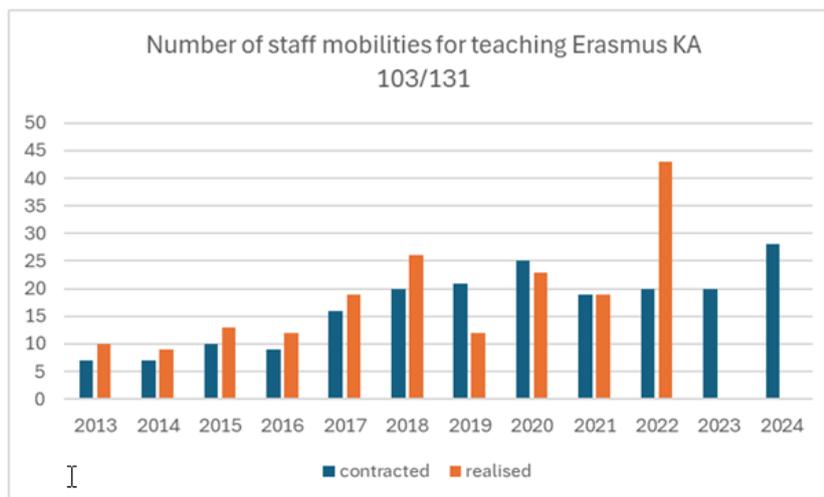


Figure 6. The evolution of number of staff mobilities for teaching between 2014 and 2024

Source: Authors' processing

We can observe that with regard to teaching mobilities, in the majority of the contracts analyzed, the number of those carried out is higher than the one contracted, with the exception of the financial contracts from 2019 and 2020. The financial contract from 2022 was finalised with a double number of teaching mobilities carried out compared to the one contracted.

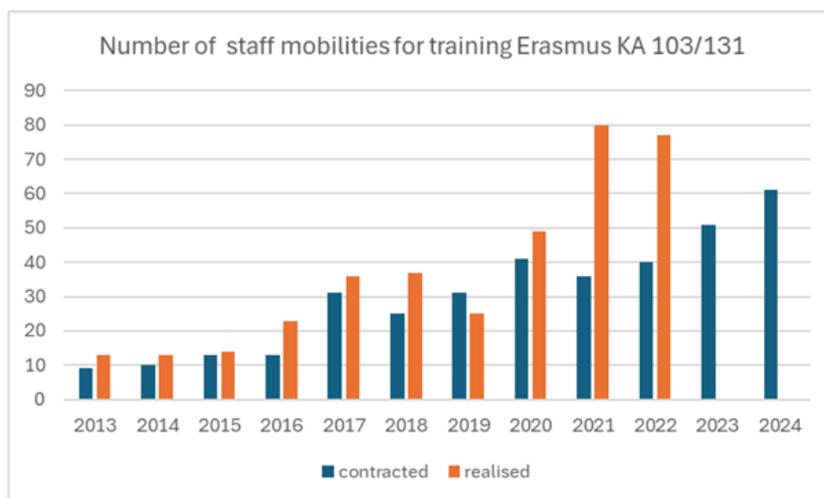


Figure 7. The evolution of number of staff mobilities for training between 2014 and 2024
Source: Authors' processing

The training mobilities for staff have evolved on a similar but more pronounced trend in terms of the increase in the number of mobilities carried out compared to the contracted one. The only year in which the number of mobilities carried out is lower than the contracted one is 2019. Based on the results obtained for the completed contracts, for the last two years, the number requested and contracted mobilities is higher than in the previous period.

To complete the analysis with the image of the level of attractiveness of Ovidius University of Constanta for students and staff from partner universities, we analysed the evolution of the number of incoming mobilities during the period 2013 -2023.

From figure 8, we can see the evolution of the number of incoming mobilities for students from the program countries. It is noteworthy that, after 2015, their number was constantly higher than 50 for study mobilities. We also note that the number of internships mobilities is very small, and for some years this type of mobilities is non-existent.

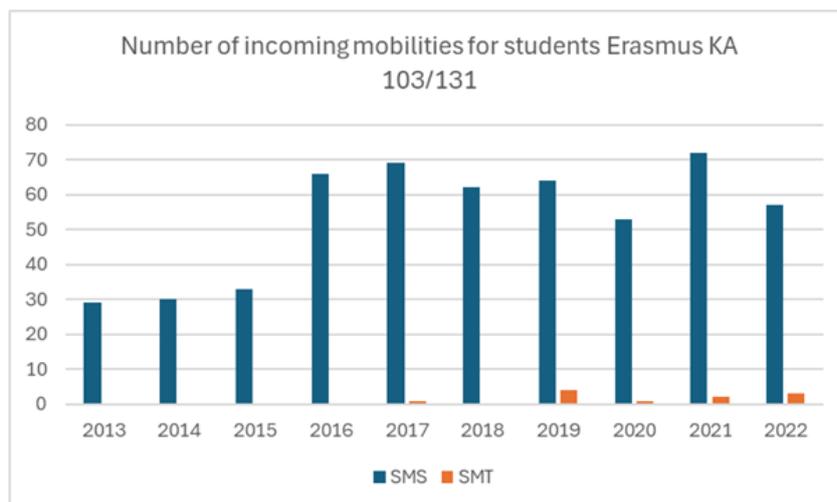


Figure 8. The evolution of number of incoming students mobilities between 2014 and 2024
Source: Authors' processing

Regarding incoming staff mobilities, as can be seen in figure 9, both teaching and training mobilities are present every year. It is worth noting that the years 2017 and 2018 were the first with a significantly higher number of mobilities, a reduction in this number for the period 2019-2021 and a marked upward trend for the years 2022 and 2023 for both teaching and training mobilities.

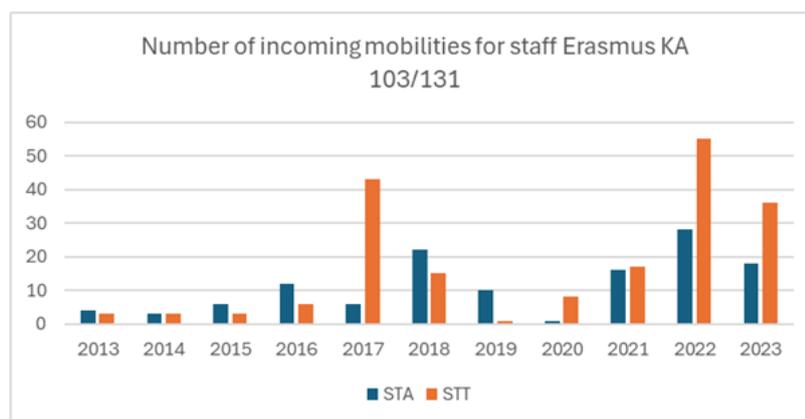


Figure 9. The evolution of number of incoming staff mobilities between 2014 and 2024
Source: Authors' processing

We concluded the analysis with the evolution of the number of incoming staff mobilities carried out with third countries not associated to the program, as seen in figure 10. Although recently accessed by the university, on this funding line, for completed contracts, the number of staff mobilities, both teaching and training, is increasing.

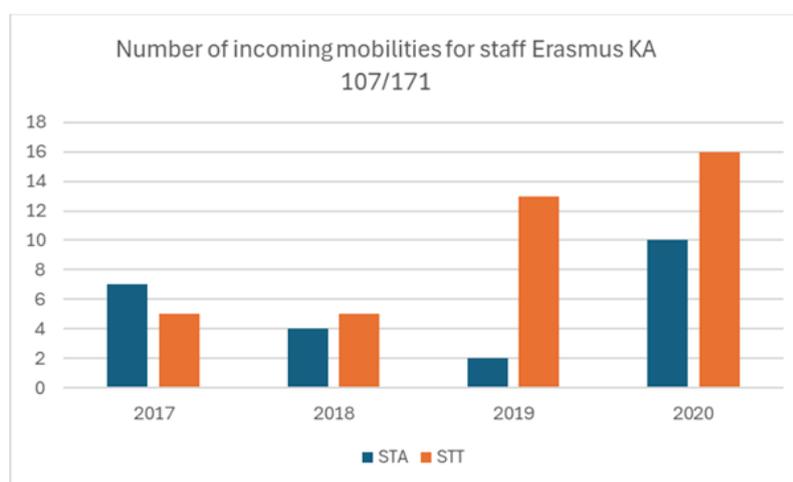


Figure 10. The evolution of number of incoming staff mobilities between 2017 and 2024
Source: Authors' processing

We did not include in the analysis the number of incoming mobilities for students from third countries not associated with the program because for several contracts it is very small and for others non-existent, thus being irrelevant as a performance indicator for the internationalization strategy.

4. Discussions

Ovidius University of Constanta is one of the higher education institutions from Romania that has undertaken, in the last ten years, the implementation of an internationalization strategy that would represent an important pillar of the institutional development strategy and support the achievement of international recognition of the educational process and scientific research carried out within the university.

As numerous studies showed, the greatest challenge in implementing such a strategy is, also for this higher education institution, finding funding sources that would support the international mobility of students and staff as the main instrument for implementing the strategy.

The increase in funding obtained through the Erasmus Plus Programme represented a solution for which concentrated efforts were made in the last 10 years and the analysis carried out in this research proves the achievement of important results but also showed the challenges that the institution faced.

Regarding the level of funding obtained during the analysed period, it is noteworthy that from a funding of 170,000 euros for the 2013 financial contract, OUC reached in 2024 more than half a million euros in funding for mobility through the Erasmus Plus Program, a 2.5-fold increase in the funds obtained. The efforts made to increase the absorption rate have made most financial contracts finalized during the analyzed period approach or reach 100%.

The contracts secured by Ovidius University of Constanța in 2019 and 2020, which exhibited absorption rates below 70%, should not be construed as indicative of failure. This performance aligns with the broader context faced by all higher education institutions operating under the Erasmus Charter during the unprecedented disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The implementation periods of these contracts coincided entirely with the global restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus, resulting in a substantial decline in mobility activities for both students and staff.

Additionally, the lingering effects of the pandemic were evident in the subsequent contracts, where widespread reluctance among participants necessitated concerted efforts to rebuild confidence in international mobility programs. Despite these challenges, OUC engaged in targeted promotion of mobility opportunities, which played a pivotal role in gradually restoring upward trends in both fund utilization and the number of mobilities conducted.

The analysis of the number of contracted versus realized mobilities must be approached with caution, as the figures may not fully reflect the actual performance or efficiency of fund utilization. In several instances, despite a lower number of realized mobilities compared to those initially contracted, fund absorption reached 100% due to the financing of longer mobility periods. This highlights the importance of considering qualitative factors, such as the duration and impact of mobilities, alongside quantitative metrics.

From 2019 to 2022, a notable trend emerged indicating that the students demonstrated a preference for practical mobility opportunities. These options offered greater flexibility and shorter durations, aligning with the evolving needs and constraints of participants during this period. This shift underscores the importance of tailoring mobility programs to meet participant preferences while maintaining alignment with institutional internationalization goals.

Since 2017, the implementation of mobilities with partner institutions in third countries outside the Erasmus Plus Programme presented additional complexities compared to traditional mobilities with program countries. Despite these challenges, such initiatives delivered substantial benefits, particularly in advancing the internationalization strategy. These partnerships facilitated valuable collaborations, with doctoral students notably benefiting from enriched academic and research experiences that contributed meaningfully to their individual programs. These outcomes underscore the strategic importance of diversifying mobility partnerships to enhance institutional and participant benefits within the global academic framework.

Carrying out mobilities with partner institutions from third countries not associated with the program starting in 2017, although it proved to be a much more difficult endeavor compared to traditional mobilities with program countries, brought real benefits in implementing the internationalization strategy by facilitating the opening of collaborations, especially for the university's doctoral students who had the opportunity to benefit from valuable experiences for their individual doctoral programs.

5. Conclusions

The internationalization strategy implemented by Ovidius University of Constanța demonstrates the transformative impact of sustained financial support and strategic planning on higher education internationalization. The integration of external funding, particularly through the Erasmus Plus Program, has been pivotal in fostering student and staff mobility, building global partnerships, and enhancing the university's international profile.

Over the analyzed period, from 2013 to 2024, OUC experienced significant growth in both the volume of funding and the number of mobilities conducted. The university successfully increased its funding by over 2.5 times, achieving substantial absorption rates for most of the finalized financial contracts. This progress underscores the effectiveness of the university's focused efforts to maximize the utilization of available resources while navigating challenges such as those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The dual approach of "internationalization abroad" and "internationalization at home" has been central to the subsequent internationalisation strategies already implemented and in place. By leveraging Erasmus funding, OUC has enhanced its attractiveness to international students and staff, while providing local participants with valuable global exposure. The integration of mobility opportunities with partner institutions has been instrumental in supporting doctoral studies and research initiatives.

Despite challenges, including fluctuating absorption rates and pandemic-related disruptions, the commitment to strategic internationalization has yielded tangible benefits, such as the diversification of academic offerings and strengthened global collaborations.

Acknowledging the broader implications of such internationalization initiatives, the experience of OUC may serve as a model for other institutions aiming to integrate financial strategies into their internationalization frameworks.

Acknowledgements

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