

# Internationalization as a Platform for the Development of Maritime Human Resources Competencies: A Comparative Study between Georgia and Montenegro

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**Abstract:** Contemporary maritime universities are developing an internationalization strategy to foster global academic qualities and values and prepare graduates for the international labor market. This paper explores the extent and quality of international mobility at two significant maritime institutions: Batumi Navigation Teaching University and the Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor, University of Montenegro. The paper reveals the increasing international mobility of both staff and students. A systematic literature review confirms that the examined institutions also cultivate four primary groups of competencies through internationalization: academic, cultural, personal development, and employability competencies. Additionally, the work highlights potential opportunities to enhance international mobility among students and staff and offers insights for decision-makers on future implementation measures.

**Keywords:** Internationalization, Mobility, Maritime, University, Competence.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of internationalization is well-established in business and is driven by various economic, political, and sociocultural factors. Internationalization of tertiary education is a relatively new and broad phenomenon that has different impacts on regions, countries, and institutions based on their specific contexts [1].

For modern universities, internationalization is seen as a new line of thinking and a future agenda. It is defined as the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into post-secondary education's purpose, functions, and delivery. The goal is to

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enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society [2].

Tertiary education has experienced significant expansion in the past half-century. The main factors influencing internationalization are massification, autonomy, academic freedom, reputation (rankings, excellence programs), and the changing economic and political climate [1].

Countries like Montenegro and Georgia aim to meet European education and internationalization standards. The Erasmus+ program has promoted cooperation in Europe through student and staff exchanges, joint curriculum development, and joint research projects since the 1990s. The institutional response to these programs has set a clear path for the European approach to internationalization.

Maritime institutions like the Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor and Batumi Teaching Navigation University further their internationalization activities through membership in renowned international associations such as the International Association of Maritime Universities (IAMU). Moreover, they avail of the Erasmus+ mobility program for staff and students.

The OECD study sheds light on the profile of international mobile students. It provides the number of students studying abroad, which has been growing steadily, with an average increase of 4.8% per year between 1998 and 2018. Most of these students are in OECD countries, but the fastest growth has been in students attending universities in non-OECD countries. In OECD countries, women are just as likely as men to go abroad for a bachelor's or master's degree but less likely to do so for a doctoral program [3].

The COVID-19 pandemic had different effects on international student flows from 2019 to 2021. The share of mobile students decreased in Australia and New Zealand, while it increased in other countries and remained the same in many others. Across OECD countries, STEM and business, administration, and law were mobile and national students' most popular fields of study [4].

Spencer-Oatey and Dauber [5] explain that university rankings based on internationalization often focus on compositional criteria such as the number of international students and staff and student mobility figures. However, additional measures beyond financial considerations are necessary to truly benefit education and research, including the development of intercultural competence. Cost can be a significant barrier for students wanting to study abroad, especially those with limited funds. Additionally, students may face challenges when transferring credits earned abroad back to their home universities. Finally, Shaftel et al. noted that

studying abroad can sometimes delay students' progress toward graduation [6]. Similar results were found in Montenegro and Georgia, with the difference that doctoral student mobility is lower.

The paper presents its findings at two levels. First, it conducts a systematic review of the literature to identify competencies that can be developed in the maritime sector through international mobility. Second, it uses descriptive statistics to illustrate dominant trends in international mobility, focusing on maritime faculties in Georgia and Montenegro.

## **2. Methodology**

The primary frame of reference is based on relevant literature on the influence that internationalization has on the development of key competencies in maritime affairs. The methodology is designed at three levels:

1. A scientometric analysis using Google Scholar, which preceded the paper title conception and involved the examination of the most influential journals, research topics, and quotations;
2. A systematic literature review of the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases, which was conducted through an advanced search: TS= (("internationalization" OR "international mobility") AND (skill\* OR maritime competence OR knowledge)); and
3. Descriptive statistics on data about the mobility of students and academic and administrative staff and comparative analysis, which are based on them, developed key conclusions.

## **3. Literature background on competencies developed through international mobility**

The field of literature distinguishes several key competencies developed through international mobility programs, which can be grouped into academic, cultural, personal development, and employability gains.

Academic competence encompasses a wide range of skills, including critical thinking, empirical research literacy, knowledge synthesis, information assessment, time and project management, teamwork, problem-solving, self-management, analytical skills, and citation skills [7]. According to Hynson [8], the academic success of international students can be influenced by various factors such as language barriers, adaptation to the international environment, university support and structure, social integration, family support, and motivation.

As defined by Wilson et al. [9], cultural competence involves acquiring and maintaining skills specific to a particular culture for effective functioning and interaction within a new cultural context. It helps individuals understand, communicate, and collaborate effectively with people from different cultures. Language competence is a vital sub-component of intercultural competence, playing a pivotal role in the awareness of regional dynamics [10]. The integration of these competencies represents a comprehensive approach to understanding study results abroad as an interconnected whole rather than separate, unrelated aspects.

Personal development is a potent process that instills profound, constructive, and enduring transformations in individuals' self-perception and understanding of the world. Engaging in activities that foster the development of skills, knowledge, and self-assurance can empower individuals to recognize their capabilities, unlock their potential, and attain their aspirations [11]. A personal development plan is a systematic process that aids international students in reflecting on their experiences, discerning their strengths and weaknesses, and formulating goals for personal and academic advancement.

In higher education, preparing students for future employment is essential, and the personal development plan plays a critical role in achieving this [12]. A qualitative study by Mahraja [13] examined the impact of intercultural competence and personal development on university students. The study focused on how a semester abroad influenced the development of intercultural competence and personal growth in 150 students studying in different countries. The results indicated that studying abroad can significantly enhance intercultural competence and personal development, as demonstrated by the participants' essays about their experiences. They gained a deeper understanding of their own and other cultures and cultural differences and saw improvements in self-confidence, global awareness, patience, assertiveness, maturity, self-awareness, flexibility, and adaptability.

Genkova et al. [14] discussed how the duration of a student's time studying abroad can impact their personal growth and development of social skills. They found that the length of stay abroad indirectly influences social competence through various dimensions of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire. Additionally, their study revealed that being adaptable to cultural norms while abroad can indicate potential challenges when returning to the home country.

Lee [15] concluded that developing autonomous and personal skills is challenging for students studying abroad. Adapting to a new way of working

and teaching principles is both a challenge and an opportunity to learn new skills and explore other opportunities to expand their knowledge.

Employability competency is defined as a critical set of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that increase individuals' value to organizations, making them more appealing throughout their careers. This competence includes skills such as professional expertise, personal flexibility, anticipation, and optimization, which are key to creating and maintaining employment. Employability skills are essential for individuals to meet the demands of the labor market after graduation, ensuring their acceptance into the workforce [16].

According to Mokhtar et al. [17], employability competency is essential in ensuring that individuals are accepted into the labor market. Employability skills can be defined as the basic skills required to obtain, retain, and successfully perform the job or task for which they are responsible. It is crucial that every degree program at higher education institutions regularly evaluates its curriculum to ensure that the content remains relevant, of high quality, and meets the needs of the labor market.

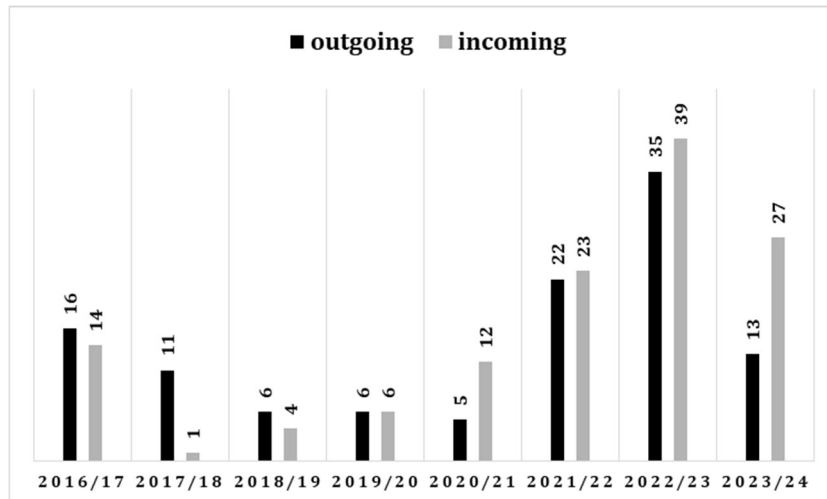
Work experience, professional competencies, and networking are key for graduates. Work experience enables the acquisition of practical knowledge and the application of theoretical skills in real situations, which increases self-confidence and the possibility of finding a job. Professional competencies, including technical and soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, and adaptability, are essential for long-term career success. Networking helps build connections, leading to job opportunities and career advancement [18].

Crossman and Clarke [19] explain how employers, academics, and students perceive the links between international experience and the employability of graduates. Referring to the literature, the authors argue that growing globalization and internationalization have increased the need for graduates capable of functioning in culturally diverse contexts. Universities have focused on exchanges as part of internationalization to prepare students for work. However, there is still limited literature on the nature of the relationship between international experience in a broader sense and graduate employability. The research results suggest that all actors recognize clear links between international experience and employability, given the outcomes associated with establishing networks, experiential learning opportunities, language acquisition, and the development of soft skills related to cultural understanding, personal characteristics, and ways of thinking.

#### 4. Analysis of international mobility performances of Montenegro and Georgia

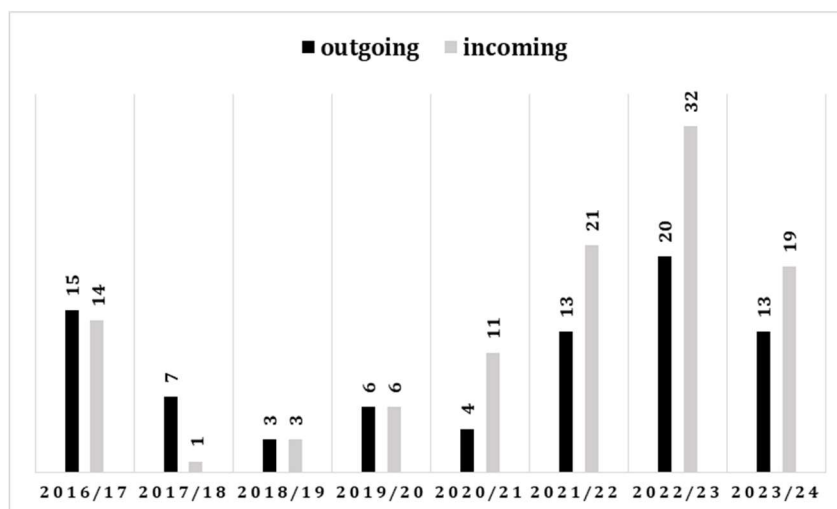
##### 4.1 University of Montenegro, Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor

The Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor actively participates in the Erasmus+ mobility program for students and staff, collaborating with 17 higher education institutions, with which it has signed Erasmus+ inter-institutional agreements (KA 171).



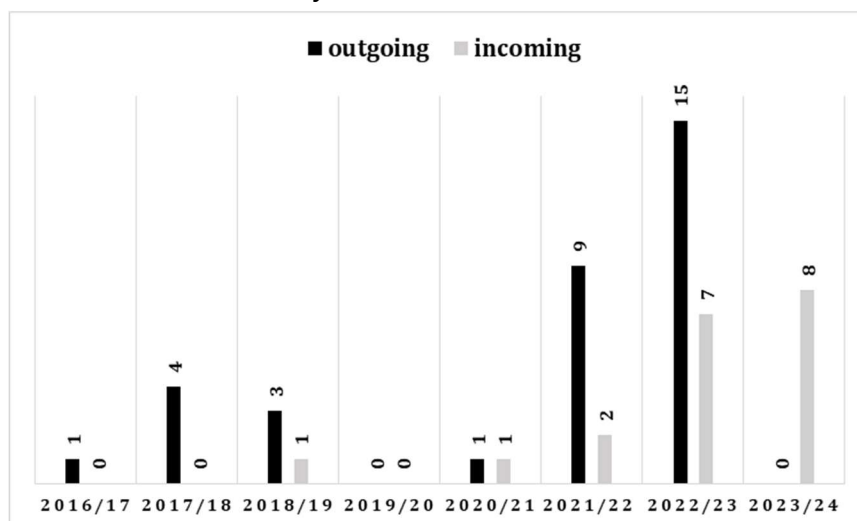
**Fig. 1 - Comprehensive Overview of Staff Mobility – Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor.**

The Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor consistently achieves a significant number of Erasmus+ mobilities and actively works on expanding inter-institutional cooperation with maritime higher education institutions across Europe. Since the beginning of the Erasmus+ program's implementation in 2014, 114 outgoing and 126 incoming staff mobilities have been implemented (Figure 1). Notably, the number of staff mobilities has significantly increased over the past three academic years. The record was set during the 2022/23 academic year, with 35 outgoing and 39 incoming staff mobilities. This upward trend results from more intensive promotion of the Erasmus program, increased exchange opportunities, strengthened contacts with partner universities, clearer administrative procedures for applying, and greater awareness among staff about the benefits of international cooperation. Additionally, a key factor contributing to the heightened activity in all types of mobility during the 2022/23 academic year was the easing of the COVID-19 health crisis.



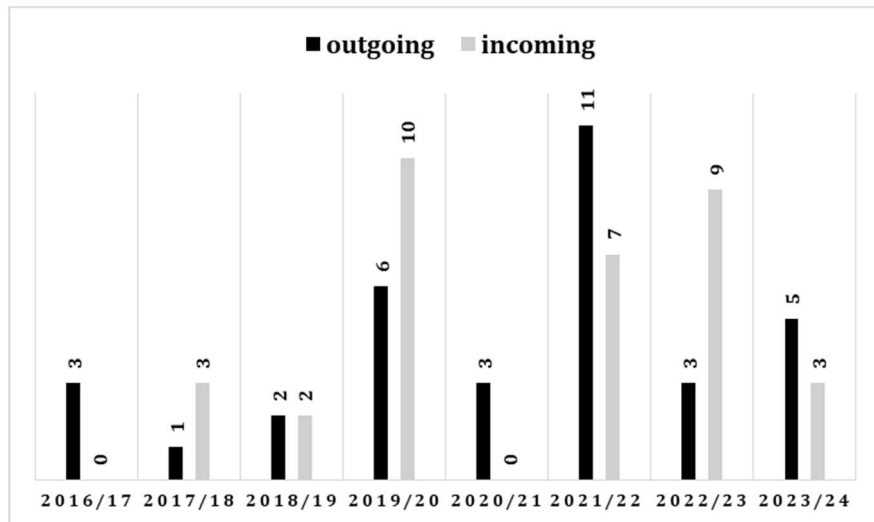
**Fig. 2 - Overview of Academic Staff Mobility – Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor.**

When it comes to both incoming and outgoing academic staff mobility, a total of 81 outgoing and 107 incoming mobilities have been realized to date. A significant portion of these academic staff mobilities has been achieved over the past three academic years, particularly during the 2022/23 academic year (Figure 2). There is a noticeable and continuous increase in incoming mobilities, reflecting the growing interest of staff from European maritime educational institutions in establishing academic connections with the Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor.



**Fig. 3 - Overview of Administrative Staff Mobility – Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor.**

Regarding administrative staff mobility, Figure 3 illustrates that their interest in the Erasmus exchange program emerged in the 2021/22 academic year. The positive experiences of academic staff fueled this interest, the increasing number of opportunities for professional development and the more intensive promotion of the program. To date, 33 outgoing and 19 incoming administrative staff mobilities have been realized. The highest number of outgoing mobilities for administrative staff was recorded in the 2022/23 academic year (15), while the highest number of incoming mobilities occurred during the current 2023/24 academic year (8).

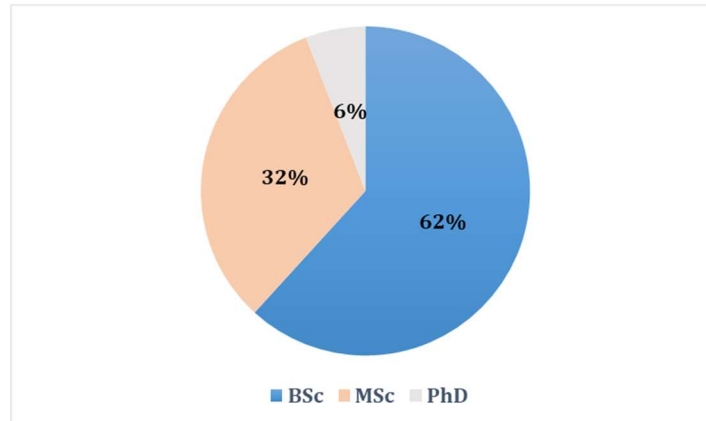


**Fig. 4 - Overview of Student Mobility – Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor.**

Since the implementation of the Erasmus program at the Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor, a total of 34 incoming and 34 outgoing student mobilities have been achieved (Figure 4). The highest number of outgoing mobilities was recorded in the 2021/22 academic year (11), while the highest number of incoming mobilities occurred in 2019/20 (10). Overall, there has been a noticeable increase in student mobilities over the past three years, driven by the positive experiences of students participating in the program. During the 2023/24 academic year, 5 outgoing (undergraduate, master, and doctoral) and 3 incoming (undergraduate and master) student mobilities were realized. Although these recent findings suggest that students of the Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor tend to choose institutions in regions with similar languages for ease of adaptation and learning, this trend only holds when considering the overall results. Of the 34 outgoing student mobilities, 13 were completed at universities in nearby regions

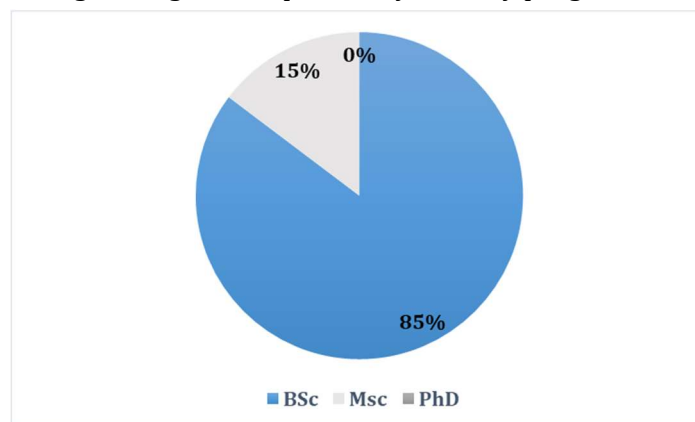


(Croatia, Serbia), while 21 were conducted in countries with different languages (Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Turkey, Poland, Greece). Regarding incoming student mobilities, the Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor has hosted students from Romania, Lithuania, Hungary, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Austria.



**Fig. 5 - Overview of Outgoing Student Mobility by Level of Study – Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor.**

From the perspective of study levels, the largest share of outgoing student exchanges is at the undergraduate level (62%), followed by master's (32%) and doctoral studies (6%), Figure 5. These findings align with the types of mobilities stipulated in the agreements, which are primarily focused on undergraduate studies, where there is a more significant number of students and a higher degree of equivalency in study programs.



**Fig. 6 - Overview of Incoming Student Mobility by Level of Study – Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor.**

The situation regarding incoming student mobility is similar. The largest share is at the undergraduate level (85%), followed by the master's level (15%), with no doctoral students participating (Figure 6).

#### **4.2 Batumi Navigation Teaching University - Georgia**

Batumi Navigation Teaching University (BNTU) has established itself as a key participant in the Erasmus+ mobility program, fostering a robust network of international academic partnerships. Through its proactive engagement, BNTU has cultivated collaborative relationships with 20 distinguished higher education institutions across Europe, underpinned by meticulously crafted Erasmus+ inter-institutional agreements (KA 171).

This expansive partnership spans a diverse geographical and cultural landscape, encompassing partner universities from an array of nations. The network includes institutions in Turkey, strategically positioned at the crossroads of Europe and Asia; the Baltic states of Latvia and Lithuania, known for their rapidly evolving educational systems; Romania and Bulgaria, with their rich academic traditions; Poland, a hub of Central European scholarship; Greece, the cradle of Western civilization and maritime heritage; Croatia and Serbia, representing the dynamic Balkan academic sphere; Slovenia, bridging Central and Southeastern Europe; and Finland, renowned for its world-class education system.

BNTU's participation extends beyond these explicitly mentioned countries, hinting at an even broader reach of academic exchange and cooperation. This extensive network not only facilitates student and staff mobility but also serves as a conduit for the exchange of knowledge, best practices, and cultural understanding. It positions BNTU at the forefront of internationalization in higher education, particularly in the specialized field of maritime studies and navigation.

Through these partnerships, BNTU demonstrates its commitment to providing global perspectives and opportunities to its academic community, thereby enhancing the quality and relevance of its educational offerings in an increasingly interconnected world.

Batumi Navigation Teaching University has demonstrated remarkable progress in its Erasmus+ program implementation, achieving substantial mobility figures and actively expanding its inter-institutional network within the European maritime higher education landscape. Since the program's inception at BNTU in 2019, the institution has facilitated an impressive total of 101 outgoing and 99 incoming staff mobilities, as illustrated in Figure 7. This near-parity in bidirectional exchanges

underscores BNTU's commitment to balanced, reciprocal academic collaboration.

The trajectory of staff mobility has shown a marked upward trend, particularly over the past triennium. The 2022/23 academic year emerged as a watershed moment, setting an unprecedented benchmark with 64 outgoing and 61 incoming staff mobilities. This surge in international academic exchange can be attributed to a confluence of strategic initiatives and external factors.

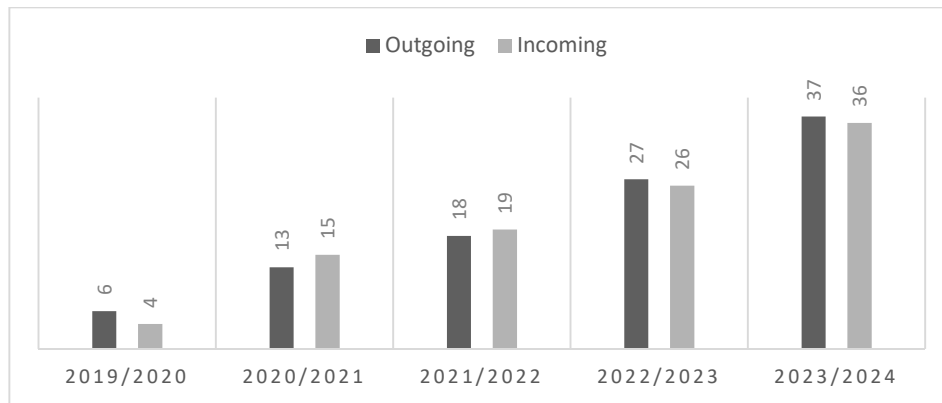
BNTU has implemented a multifaceted approach to bolster its Erasmus+ participation. This includes a more vigorous promotion of the program, capitalizing on various communication channels to reach potential participants. Concurrently, the university has successfully negotiated an expanded array of exchange opportunities with partner institutions, broadening the scope for academic and professional development.

The institution has also invested considerable effort in fortifying its relationships with partner universities, fostering a robust network that facilitates smoother exchanges and collaborative ventures. This enhanced inter-institutional synergy has been complemented by streamlined administrative procedures for Erasmus+ applications, reducing bureaucratic hurdles and encouraging greater participation.

Furthermore, BNTU has prioritized raising awareness among its staff regarding the multifaceted benefits of international cooperation. This initiative has cultivated a culture of global engagement within the institution, motivating faculty and administrative personnel to seek out cross-border academic experiences.

It is noteworthy that the significant uptick in mobility across all categories during the 2022/23 academic year coincided with the abatement of the COVID-19 health crisis. The easing of pandemic-related restrictions acted as a catalyst, releasing pent-up demand for international academic exchange and allowing for the full realization of BNTU's enhanced Erasmus+ infrastructure.

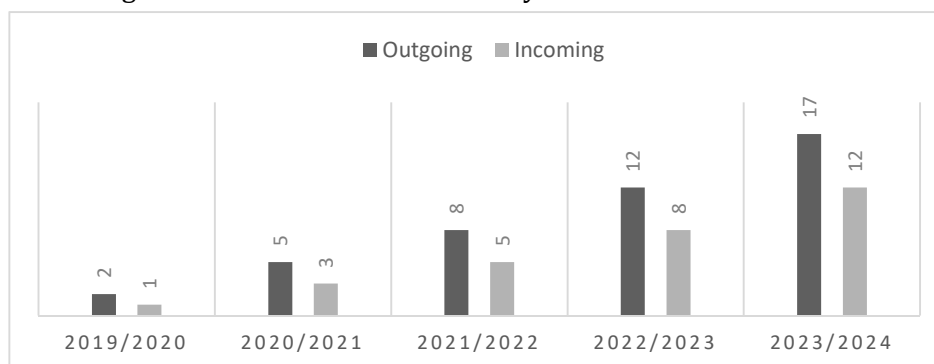
This comprehensive approach to internationalizing academic exchange not only quantitatively boosts mobility figures but also qualitatively enriches the institutional fabric of BNTU. It positions the university as a dynamic hub for maritime education, fostering a globally-oriented academic community primed to address the complex challenges of the maritime sector in an increasingly interconnected world.



**Fig. 7 - Comprehensive Overview of Staff Mobility – BNTU.**

To date, a total of 44 outgoing and 29 incoming academic staff mobilities have been successfully completed. A significant portion of these exchanges occurred over the past three academic years, with notable activity during the 2022/23 academic year (see Figure 8). The steady rise in incoming mobilities highlights the increasing interest among academic staff at European maritime educational institutions in building collaborative relationships with Batumi Navigation Teaching University. The Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (ICM) program plays a pivotal role in enhancing the professional development of university academic staff, contributing significantly to their academic and personal growth. Here are several key reasons why this program is important: **Global Networking Opportunities:** The ICM program provides academic staff with the chance to build and expand their professional networks on an international scale. By collaborating with colleagues from partner institutions around the world, staff can exchange ideas, research insights, and best practices, fostering a global academic community. **Exposure to Diverse Educational Practices:** Participating in mobility programs allows staff to experience different educational systems and pedagogical approaches. This exposure can inspire new teaching methods and innovative research methodologies, enriching the academic environment at their home institution. **Professional Development:** The ICM program supports continuous professional growth by offering staff the opportunity to engage in advanced training, workshops, and seminars abroad. This exposure to cutting-edge research and practices helps staff stay current with developments in their field and enhances their expertise. **Cultural Exchange and Personal Growth:** International mobility fosters cultural exchange, enabling staff to gain a broader perspective on global issues and cultural diversity. This experience not only enhances their personal development but also contributes to creating a more inclusive and

culturally aware academic environment. Strengthening Institutional Partnerships: Participation in the ICM program helps to build and strengthen partnerships between institutions. These collaborations can lead to new research opportunities, joint projects, and shared resources, benefiting both the staff and their home institution. Enhancing Institutional Reputation: Engaged and globally connected staff contribute to the institution's reputation for academic excellence. By actively participating in international networks and showcasing their expertise, staff help elevate the university's standing on the global stage. Improving Student Outcomes: Staff who are engaged in international mobility can bring back valuable insights and experiences that directly benefit students. This can lead to improved curriculum design, innovative teaching strategies, and enriched learning experiences for students. The Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility program is a vital tool for advancing the professional development of university academic staff. It fosters global collaboration, enriches educational practices, and strengthens institutional ties, ultimately benefiting the entire academic community.



**Fig. 8 - Overview of Academic Staff Mobility – BNTU.**

Regarding administrative staff mobility, Figure 9 shows that interest in the Erasmus exchange program among this group first emerged in the 2021/22 academic year. This growing interest can be attributed to several factors: positive feedback from academic staff who had participated, an increase in professional development opportunities, and more intensive promotion of the program.

To date, a total of 57 outgoing and 70 incoming administrative staff mobilities have been completed. The 2022/23 academic year saw the highest number of outgoing mobilities for administrative staff, while the current 2023/24 academic year has recorded the highest number of incoming mobilities to date.

The Erasmus+ ICM program offers significant benefits to university administrative staff, enriching both their professional and personal lives. As participants in this program, administrative staff members find themselves immersed in new environments that challenge and expand their perspectives on higher education management.

The program opens doors to a wealth of knowledge exchange, allowing staff to observe and learn from diverse administrative practices across European institutions. They gain insights into innovative approaches to common challenges, such as student services to financial management, which they can later adapt and implement in their home universities.

Networking becomes a cornerstone of their experience, as they forge connections with colleagues from various countries. These relationships often extend beyond the mobility period, fostering long-term collaborations and friendships that span borders.

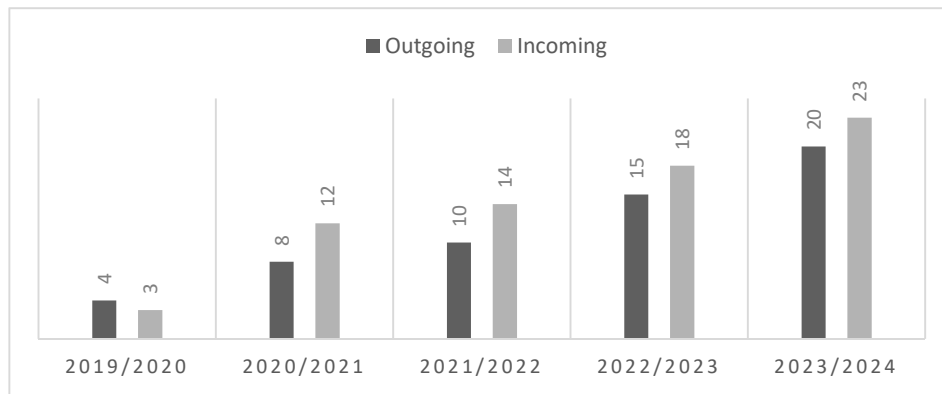
Immersion in a different cultural setting enhances their intercultural competencies, a crucial skill in today's globalized academic environment. Staff members return with improved language skills and a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication, enabling them to better serve international students and faculty at their home institutions.

Moreover, the program contributes to their personal growth, boosting confidence and adaptability. Navigating new systems and overcoming language barriers cultivates problem-solving skills and resilience, attributes that prove valuable in their day-to-day work upon return.

The experience also adds a valuable international dimension to their professional profiles, potentially opening up new career advancement opportunities. It demonstrates their initiative and willingness to step out of their comfort zones for professional development.

Furthermore, participating staff become agents of change within their institutions, bringing back fresh ideas and best practices that can drive innovation and improvement in administrative processes. This knowledge transfer contributes to the overall internationalization efforts of their universities, enhancing the institution's global competitiveness.

In essence, the Erasmus+ ICM program transforms administrative staff into more skilled, culturally aware, and globally minded professionals. It equips them with the tools and experiences necessary to thrive in the increasingly international landscape of higher education, ultimately benefiting not just the individuals, but their institutions and the broader academic community.



**Fig. 9 - Overview of Administrative Staff Mobility – BNTU.**

The journey of BNTU's participation in the Erasmus+ ICM program tells a story of growth, opportunity, and increasing global engagement. As we look back over the past five years, from 2019 to 2024, we see a tapestry of student experiences woven across borders and cultures.

In the autumn of 2019, our Erasmus+ adventure began modestly. Five intrepid students from our campus set out to explore academic life abroad, while we welcomed one international student to our halls. Little did we know then how these small numbers would blossom in the years to come.

Each passing year brought new enthusiasm for the program. By 2020, despite global challenges, eight of our students embarked on their Erasmus+ journeys, and four international students chose to make our campus their temporary home. The seeds of cultural exchange were taking root.

The momentum continued to build. In the academic year 2021/2022, a dozen of our students packed their bags for adventures abroad, while five international students brought their diverse perspectives to our classrooms. It was becoming clear that the Erasmus+ program was not just a fleeting interest, but a growing passion among our student body.

As we entered 2022/2023, the numbers told a story of flourishing interest. Thirteen of our students set off to broaden their horizons, and six international students arrived, eager to immerse themselves in our academic community. The corridors of our university were buzzing with a new energy, a blend of languages and cultures that enriched everyone's experience.

Now, in the current academic year of 2023/2024, we've reached new heights. Sixteen of our students are currently studying abroad, experiencing new teaching methods, making international friends, and gaining invaluable

life skills. Meanwhile, our campus is hosting ten international students, the highest number yet, bringing a wealth of diverse perspectives to our community.

This steady growth reflects more than just numbers on a chart. It represents countless stories of personal growth, academic achievement, and cross-cultural understanding. The gap between outgoing and incoming students has narrowed over time, showcasing our university's commitment not only to sending our students abroad but also to creating a welcoming environment for international students.

The Erasmus+ ICM program has become a cornerstone of our university's internationalization efforts. It has transformed the educational journey of our students, preparing them for a globalized world and fostering a spirit of openness and curiosity. As we look to the future, we're excited to see how this program will continue to shape the experiences of our students and the character of our university. From those first few pioneers in 2019 to the robust exchanges of today, the Erasmus+ ICM program has truly become a success story for our institution. It stands as a testament to the power of international education, and the enduring appeal of cross-cultural experiences in shaping the leaders of tomorrow.

The Erasmus+ ICM program offers students a wealth of benefits, enriching their academic and personal development in numerous ways. Here's a concise overview of the key advantages:

Firstly, it provides an unparalleled opportunity for cultural immersion. Students experience life in a different country, enhancing their global awareness and intercultural competencies. This exposure to diverse perspectives and ways of life broadens their worldview and fosters open-mindedness.

Academically, the program allows students to study at prestigious foreign institutions, accessing different teaching methodologies and potentially specialized courses not available at their home university. This diversity in educational approaches can deepen their understanding of their field and inspire new academic interests.

Language skills often improve significantly. Immersion in a foreign language environment accelerates learning and builds confidence in communication skills - a valuable asset in today's globalized job market.

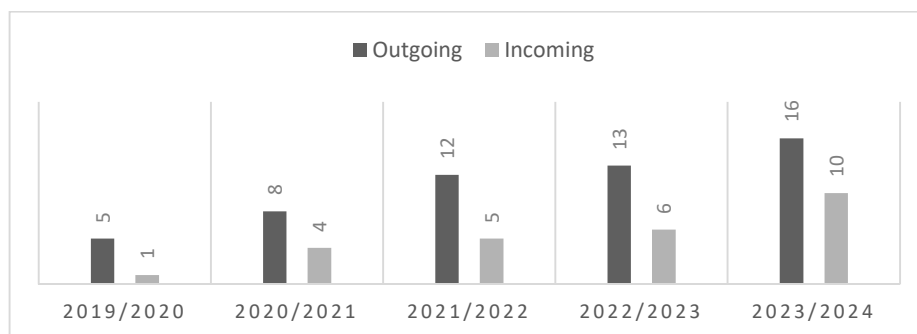
The program also boosts personal growth. Living independently in a new country develops adaptability, problem-solving skills, and self-reliance. These experiences often lead to increased self-confidence and maturity.



Professionally, Erasmus+ enhances employability. The international experience, cross-cultural communication skills, and global network gained are highly valued by employers. It sets students apart in competitive job markets and can open doors to international career opportunities.

Lastly, the program fosters a sense of European identity and citizenship, promoting understanding and cooperation across borders - an increasingly important perspective in our interconnected world.

Erasmus+ ICM offers students a transformative experience that extends far beyond the classroom, equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and perspectives needed to thrive in a global society (Figure 10).



**Fig. 10 - Overview of Student Mobility – BNTU.**

The Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (ICM) program has emerged as a transformative force at Batumi Navigation Teaching University, profoundly shaping its academic landscape and international profile. Since its inception in 2019, the program has demonstrated remarkable growth and impact across all levels of the university community.

The data presented illustrates a consistent upward trajectory in mobility figures for students, academic staff, and administrative personnel. From modest beginnings of just 5 outgoing and 1 incoming student in 2019/2020, the program has expanded to facilitate 16 outgoing and 10 incoming student mobilities in 2023/2024. This growth is mirrored in staff mobilities, with a particularly notable surge in the 2022/23 academic year, marking a watershed moment in the program's development.

The benefits of this international exchange extend far beyond mere numbers. For students, the program offers unparalleled opportunities for cultural immersion, academic diversification, language skill enhancement, and personal growth. It equips them with a global perspective and

intercultural competencies crucial for success in an increasingly interconnected world.

Academic staff have leveraged the program to expand their professional networks, gain exposure to diverse educational practices, and engage in collaborative research initiatives. This international exposure has not only contributed to their professional development but has also enriched the academic environment at BNTU through the infusion of new ideas and methodologies.

Administrative staff, too, have reaped significant benefits from their participation, gaining insights into innovative management practices, enhancing their intercultural competencies, and contributing to the overall internationalization of BNTU's administrative processes.

The success of the Erasmus+ ICM program at BNTU is attributable to a combination of factors, including strategic promotional efforts, streamlined administrative procedures, and the cultivation of strong partnerships with 20 distinguished higher education institutions across Europe. These collaborations have positioned BNTU at the forefront of internationalization in maritime higher education.

Looking ahead, the Erasmus+ ICM program is poised to play an increasingly vital role in BNTU's strategic development. As the university continues expanding its partner network and refining its mobility processes, the program is expected to further enhance BNTU's global competitiveness, attract international talent, and prepare its graduates for leadership roles in the global maritime sector.

In conclusion, the Erasmus+ ICM program has become a cornerstone of BNTU's internationalization strategy, fostering a culture of global engagement that permeates every aspect of university life. As BNTU looks to the future, the continued growth and success of this program will undoubtedly remain central to its mission of providing world-class maritime education in an increasingly globalized academic landscape.

## **5. Conclusion**

A comparative study of internationalization efforts at Batumi Navigation Teaching University (BNTU) in Georgia and the Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor at the University of Montenegro reveals significant progress in fostering global academic engagement through the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (ICM) program. This analysis demonstrates the transformative impact of international mobility on maritime higher education in both institutions.

Key findings include:

**Substantial growth in mobility figures:** Both institutions have seen a marked increase in student and staff mobilities since the program's inception, with particularly notable surges in recent years.

**Balanced exchanges:** The data show a near-parity in bidirectional exchanges, underscoring a commitment to reciprocal academic collaboration.

**Diverse partnerships:** Both institutions have established extensive networks with partner universities across Europe, spanning various cultural and academic landscapes.

**Multifaceted benefits:** The study confirms that international mobility cultivates four key competencies: academic, cultural, personal development, and employability.

**Institutional transformation:** The Erasmus+ ICM program has become a cornerstone of internationalization strategies, fostering a culture of global engagement that permeates all aspects of university life.

**Post-pandemic resurgence:** The 2022/23 academic year emerged as a watershed moment for both institutions, with record-breaking mobility figures following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

**Comprehensive impact:** The benefits of international exchange go beyond individual participants, enriching the entire academic community, enhancing institutional competitiveness and educational quality.

These findings underscore the vital role of international mobility programs in preparing maritime professionals for an increasingly interconnected global industry. The success of these initiatives at BNTU and the Faculty of Maritime Studies Kotor serves as a model for other maritime institutions seeking to enhance their global engagement and educational offerings.

Looking ahead, the continued growth and refinement of these programs will be crucial in maintaining the institutions' competitive edge in maritime education. Future research could explore the long-term career impacts of mobility experiences on graduates and investigate strategies for further increasing student participation, particularly at the doctoral level.

In conclusion, this study affirms that internationalization through programs like Erasmus+ ICM is not merely a trend but a fundamental strategy for maritime higher education institutions to remain relevant and effective in the 21st century. As these universities continue to expand their global footprint, they are not only educating students but also shaping the future leaders of the global maritime industry.

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