

## EDUCATION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN UKRAINE DURING THE WAR: CHALLENGES AND VECTORS OF DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** The study attempts to outline deep reasons of insufficient global competitiveness of Ukrainian higher education. State of the art in the field of attractiveness of Ukrainian higher education among foreign students is traced both in the period of Russia' invasion and in pre-war period. The author investigated overall trends in higher education export, and, based on the experience and practices of countries, suggested the perspectives for improving attractiveness of Ukrainian higher education for foreign students, in particular, employing the potential of higher education as soft power tool.

**Keywords:** education; globalization; education export; war; competitiveness.

### 1 Introduction

One of the leading trends in social development in the modern world is the constant growth of all types of mobility: tourism, labor, information mobility, etc. Modern higher education around the world follows this trend, and, accordingly, academic mobility is also growing. The objective basis for the emergence of the global education market is the comprehensive development of the education system and the increase in its importance. This corresponds to the general trend of globalization of education and science, which is expressed in increased mobility of scientific personnel and an increase in the number of joint international research. Global education (including online) and export of educational services are gaining momentum. UNESCO states that universal access to high-quality education is essential as it is the basis for peace, social and economic development, and intercultural dialogue [3]. Internationalization of education has become an important part of the current educational process. An analysis of global trends in the field of international education shows that the leader in the export of educational services is the USA - 40% of the world market, followed by the UK - 13%, Germany - 12%, France - 10%, Australia - 9%, Japan - 5%. All other countries 'receive' only 11% of international students [20]. Competition in the field of education between leading countries is very high, and this is not only about the economic efficiency of attracting foreign students. For modern scientific and technological development, the state needs many highly qualified specialists, including foreign ones.

In addition, education becomes a resource of soft power in political dominance, a competitive economic factor in the global market, and a way of producing social capital. Through the export of educational services, countries acquire not only economic dividends, but also the opportunity to implement their own geo-economic interests through the mechanism of soft power [5]. In these conditions, education becomes an indicator of social transformations, sensitive to megatrends that change the present and shape the future of society [3]. Such a megatrend is the desire of most states to establish a balance between the social and technological development of the country, attracting the resources and capabilities of the education system. Therefore, in assessing the competitiveness of a state, the socio-economic aspects of its development are increasingly taken into account, the provision of which is entrusted to the export potential of education. Because of this, the possibilities of exporting education become the subject of transdisciplinary research using the methodology of sociology of education, sociology of international relations, economic sociology, sociology of management, and economics. Based on the results obtained, national education export projects are built.

Most foreigners study in the United States today, but it will be quite difficult for the United States to maintain this position, since competition in this market is getting tougher. Many countries are taking measures to activate and stimulate the

export of educational services. For example, in Germany in 2010 they set a goal to increase the number of foreign students to 350 thousand by 2020, however, according to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Center for Research in Science and Higher Education (DZHW), this figure has already been achieved in 2018. France is not lagging behind Germany – it plans to increase the number of foreign students by one and a half times, that is, to 470 thousand by 2025 [2]. In the United States, higher education is the fifth largest export item of the American economy in monetary terms, which sometimes exceeds even the amount of revenue from arms exports. In Australia, the education sector is the third largest source of budget revenues in the country's economy [11].

The internationalization of education pursues various goals, including: diversification and growth of financial revenues through attracting foreign students for paid education; expansion of curricula and training of its students in foreign partner universities; expansion of the university's regional network to effectively use its resources; improving the quality of education and research through the participation of students and teachers in the international process of knowledge exchange, etc. The development of international inter-university cooperation makes it possible to organize joint research projects, exchange programs for students and teachers, and special programs for foreign students.

Various programs of the European Union (for example, ERASMUS, SOCRATES, TEMPUS), as well as projects initiated by national organizations of member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (USAID, IREX, British Council, DAAD, CIDA, EduFrance, etc.), aimed at developing mobility, greatly contribute to the development of the internationalization process. Objectively existing trends in the internationalization of education are turning into a controlled process.

Countries that did not previously consider the internationalization of education as part of their development strategy, in the situation of globalization, are now forced to define themselves and find themselves in the emerging global educational space. However, despite the objectivity and obvious irreversibility of the process of globalization of education, it does not lead to internationalization (active and effective cross-country cooperation for the purpose of mutual enrichment and exchange of experience in the field of education) in all countries. The key point is the different capabilities of countries to respond to the process of globalization, the "erasing" of national borders and the need to enter the global economic space. Many countries, for various reasons (low level or transitional stage of economic development, lack of political stability, information isolation, low technological capabilities, etc., and the low level of education of the population associated with these factors) found themselves on the periphery of global trends. As a result of the high pace of globalization and technological progress, the gap between countries is only increasing. The "new educational inequality" is associated with the widening gap between developed and developing countries in the level of education of the population and in the growth rate of educational services (qualitatively and quantitatively) [18].

While the lack of political stability has a very negative impact on the attractiveness of national higher education for foreign students, especially the martial law, the state of a "hot" military conflict, has an extremely negative impact on the country's competitiveness as an exporter of higher education. Ukraine faced this challenge in 2022, after the start of a full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation.

The war led to the largest economic downturn in the history of independent Ukraine. Almost a month later, according to Treasury Department tax revenue calculations, 30% of the economy was not functioning. The budget deficit immediately

rose to \$5 billion per month, against pre-war expectations of \$600 million [8]. However, already from the third quarter of 2022, the economy began to show signs of recovery, primarily due to adaptation to changes and the resumption of consumption. Already at the end of last year, the Ukrainian economy began to recover and grew by 5%. According to experts, economic growth this year, although slowing down, will continue unless new significant security risks appear. Given that the war has entered the phase of protracted trench warfare, it can be assumed that the overall security landscape will not change fundamentally in the near future.

The Ukrainian education system adapted quite well to the war conditions. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic helped to move quickly to online learning. The experience of the 2014 war made it possible to solve the problem of moving higher education institutions and ensuring payments to teachers and students [6]. This time, the country also managed to move the institutions of vocational pre-higher education, while in 2014 such institutions were lost. A lot of institutions working in the rear regions have joined the internal mobility programs.

Before the start of the full-scale invasion, more than 70,000 foreign students were studying in Ukraine. However, because of the war, some people left the territory of the country, and for new students, admission to Ukrainian higher education institutions may not seem so attractive.

In 2023, in the conditions of war, the number of foreign students in Ukraine decreased to the level of 2011-2012 - slightly more than 50 thousand. The following "universal" specialties that are in demand in developing countries remain the most popular: medicine, management, pedagogy. According to information from the Unified State Electronic Database on Education, as of January 1, 2024, 34,462 foreign students were pursuing higher education in Ukrainian educational institutions. Reducing of the number of foreign students during war is quite understandable and unlikely itself is an indicator of any reducing of education quality. However, except war, there are still also other reasons, of a deep nature, and problems with attracting foreign students into the system of higher education in Ukraine arose much earlier than the beginning of RF' full-scale aggression.

First of all, it is expedient to consider the qualitative content of foreign students in Ukraine according to their country of origin. The countries of origin of foreign students in Ukraine in 2019 are presented in Figure 1. The year was chosen not accidentally. This was a period when, except a part of eastern regions (Donbass), the country was not actually affected by war in any significant way for population. Moreover, this was a period of declared increasing cooperation with the EU on the path to European integration, which, naturally, would presume efforts to approach the European quality of higher education.

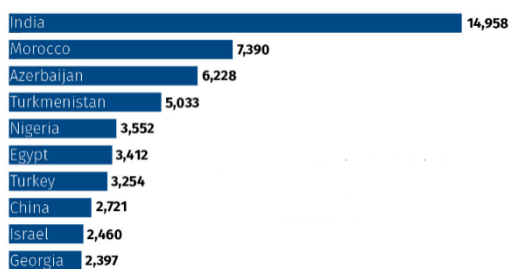


Figure 1. Countries of origin of foreign students in Ukraine [7]

However, the problem is not related purely to war. If to look at the chart of dynamics of number of international students in Ukraine in the period of 2011-2016, rather stagnant trend can be seen (see Figure 2).

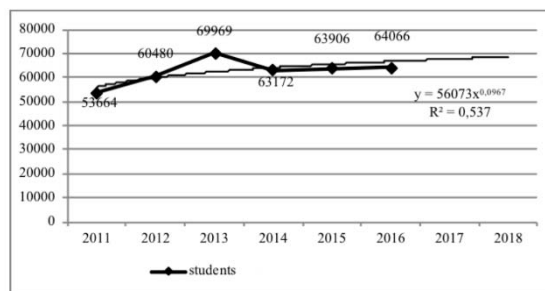


Figure 2. Dynamics of number of international students in Ukraine (2011-2016), (number of people) [16]

In comparison, even in shorter period (2011-2015) Turkey increased the number of foreign students almost 3 times – from 25 to 72 thousand [19].

If to look at the dynamics of overall decrease of students in Ukrainian higher education institutions of III-IV accreditation levels, characteristic for country since 2009 (see Figure 3), the situation in higher education in Ukraine seems to be even more disappointing.

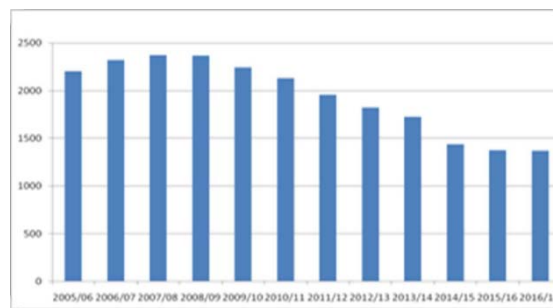


Figure 3. The amount of students in Ukrainian higher education institutions of III-IV accreditation levels, 2005-2016 [12]

According to Hnatyuk [7], "foreign students in Ukraine are attracted by affordable education". Indeed, this is precisely characterizes the factor of attractiveness of Ukrainian higher education. However, in order to gain real European and global competitiveness, Ukraine should attract foreign students rather by quality of education than by its cheapness.

In the conditions of full-scale war, this task naturally complicated. But one should not forget that, as history evidently shows, after the initial shock of the war, individual countries that were victims of military aggression appeared able to effectively mobilize their economies and significantly increase production even during martial law. The rise and development of national higher education, increasing its international competitiveness during the war is also possible with a competent approach.

## 2 Materials and Methods

The theoretical basis of the study is the concept of internationalization of education, based on the idea of readiness of subjects of the educational process for its implementation and ensuring the competitiveness of the university in a single international educational and research space.

The argumentation of theoretical positions and conclusions obtained was carried out by the author on the basis of the use of a constructivist research paradigm and dialectics, applying the following general scientific research methods within the framework of a systematic approach: historical-genetic, structural-functional, subject-object, logical, comparative methods.

### 3 Results and Discussion

The internationalization of the higher education system and the integration of the educational space in the world are the most important trends characterizing the reform of national higher education systems and, therefore, determining the vector of development of modern universities. The need to export higher education and maintain its sustainable competitiveness is the driver of the search for opportunities to expand the attraction of foreign students [9].

It should be noted that many countries have begun to use agents around the world to attract foreign students, who receive commission payments from universities. For example, a Times Higher Education (THE) survey back in 2013-2014 found that of 158 UK higher education institutions, all except 19 elite or specialized institutions currently use agents to attract students from non-European union countries; and namely with the help of such "education" agents, 32.5% of all new foreign students were recruited [4].

Ukrainian universities have sufficient potential to fight for a share of the educational services market. Foreign students in Ukrainian education are attracted by the relatively low cost of education and living, the fundamental nature of certain areas of education (physics, mathematics and chemistry schools are recognized all over the world) and the reputation of leading Ukrainian universities, which has been preserved for many years. However, the majority of foreign students in Ukraine are from African and Asian countries. Most students are from India, Azerbaijan, Morocco, Nigeria, Turkey, China, Turkmenistan, Georgia. Meanwhile, in order to fully enter the European educational space as a full participant, Ukraine needs to increase the attractiveness of its higher education for students from European countries as well.

In order to adequately assess the competitive advantages or disadvantages of Ukrainian education, it is necessary, first of all, to analyze the requirements of the global market. Monitoring of student preferences shows that business education is valued above all in the international market. Almost 20% of students study technical and engineering sciences, the most popular of which are information technologies. About the same number of students choose natural sciences. Medicine closes the list - 4-5%. On the other hand, in Ukraine as of 2014, 25% (over 16,000) of foreign students were studying medicine, 20% (over 13,000) were studying technical sciences. Humanitarian and economic faculties of Ukrainian universities are less popular among foreigners [11].

Ukraine has seen a remarkable increase in foreign enrollment over the past 20 years and has become a popular destination for Indian students. According to data from the Ukrainian government, India is the nation that sends the most foreign students to Ukraine overall. Additionally, Ukraine is one of the most popular study abroad locations for Indians [1]. Ukrainian experts describe these statistics exclusively as an achievement and, unfortunately, do not see a problem in the lack of diversification of the foreign student population.

But even this statistics become not such joyful when to look at the situation deeper. Pandey [14], analyzing the reasons of popularity of Ukrainian medical education among Indian students, notes that Indian parents prefer to send their children to some state-run colleges in Ukraine because of their reputation for offering top-notch education, as opposed to paying a hefty tuition fee for a lesser-known private medical college in India. In order to be licensed to practice medicine in India after returning home with their international MBBS degrees, students must pass the international Medical Graduate Exam (FMGE) administered by the National Board of Examinations. Only around 700 of the nearly 4,000 Ukrainian medical graduates who take the FMGE each year succeed. Surprisingly, in addition to affordability, there is another reason Indian students select Ukraine for their medical studies: there are no entrance tests to pass in order to enroll in medical schools.

The top majors for which foreign students most often enter Ukrainian higher education institutions are as follows: (in descending order): management, pedagogy (high school teachers), medicine, economics, computer science, finance and insurance, choreography, psychology, international law. Students from China predominate among foreign applicants who enroll in many popular majors, with pedagogy and computer science in first place. While medical majors are popular among students from almost all countries of origin, pedagogy majors are in demand mainly among students from China. Fig. 4 below shows most popular specialties among international students.

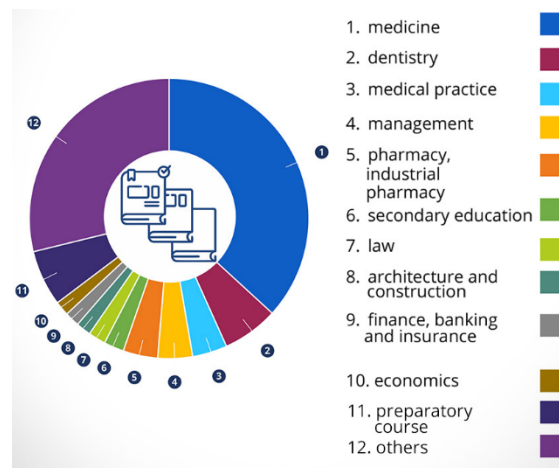


Figure 4. Most popular specialties among international students\*

\* according to the data of Ministry of education and Science of Ukraine

Thus, the competitive quality of education is far not among the main reasons for foreign students to study in Ukraine.

As of January 1, 2022, there were about 320 independent universities, institutes, and academies, as well as 45 independent colleges in Ukraine. Of this number, 220 higher education institutions are in state property, 32 are communal, and 113 are private. Institutions of higher education have 450 branches and professional colleges in their structure [10].

In March-April 2022, most universities resumed distance learning. To facilitate this process, the Ministry of Education recommended for students of non-graduation courses to transfer part of the educational components, which cannot be completed in a distance or mixed format, to the following periods of study or to make a decision on the early completion of the academic year, if there is an urgent need for this. The requirements for certification of higher education applicants were eased. Thus, in 2022, the Government canceled the attestation of medical students in the form of a single state qualification exam (SQET), which is conducted by an institution independent of universities. Instead, certification of graduates should take place in the form of a comprehensive practical-oriented qualification exam. It is necessary to remind that medical students in Ukraine pass the EDKI, which includes the integrated test exam "KROK", an objective structured practical (clinical) exam, and an English language exam for a professional direction. Subsequently, a similar decision to cancel the Unified State Qualification Exam in 2022 was also made for some other specialties. Unlike medical specialties, where the EDKI was already held in previous years, for these specialties this exam was supposed to be held for the first time in 2022. Attestation of students in these specialties was allowed to be carried out in the form determined by the institution of vocational pre-higher or higher education [10].

The new Procedure for admission to higher education in 2022 was approved at the end of April. The key innovations of the Procedure were the replacement of the traditional external

independent assessment (EIA) with the national multi-subject test (NMT) for admission to the bachelor's level of higher education and the replacement of the unified professional entrance test (EVVV) and the unified foreign language entrance exam (EVI) with their simplified versions - depending on the specialty, the master's test of educational competence (MTNK) and the master's comprehensive test (MKT). The NMT in 2022 structurally consisted of three academic disciplines - Ukrainian language, history of Ukraine, and mathematics. At the same time, a number of norms provided for in the Procedure for admission to higher education institutions in 2022 caused criticism. One of these issues was the approved list of subjects of the national multi-subject test - Ukrainian language, history of Ukraine, and mathematics. Among the critical objections, one can single out the impossibility of choosing subjects, the unreasonableness of the choice of mathematics for those who were going to enroll in humanitarian specialties, and vice versa, the unreasonableness of the history of Ukraine for those who were going to enroll in technical and engineering specialties [10]. This criticism is quite fair - the list of disciplines included in the testing actually does not correspond 100% to the trends of globalization of higher education and the convergence of educational standards.

Another important issue of the Admission Procedure was a significant reduction in requirements for applicants compared to the previous year. In addition to the reduction in the number of test tasks from the three components of the NMT, the procedure for setting threshold scores during the conduct of both the national multi-subject test and the master's complex test, as well as the master's test of educational competence has disappeared. The absence of thresholds in 2022 meant the possibility of admission to institutions of higher education if there was at least one correct answer in each of the subjects or passing the test using the blind guessing method. Of course, this creates extremely high risks of graduating students with a critically low level of competencies, as well as risks of students' dropout due to inability to fulfill training requirements.

As for the admission of foreigners to higher education institutions, in accordance with the order of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Ukraine, it is carried out within the quotas for foreigners. The institution of higher education calculates the entrant's points/grades on the basis of the document on the previously obtained level of education and establishes the minimum value of the number of points/grades in the general education subjects required for admission, from which the entrance test is conducted. Enrollment of foreigners to study at the appropriate level of higher education is carried out based on the results of entrance exams in specified subjects and the language of study and on the basis of academic rights to continue studies, provided by a document on the level of education obtained in the country of origin. However, whatever the entry rules for foreigners may be, the simplification of the admission rules for national citizens described above creates sound risks of reducing the quality of Ukrainian higher education and, accordingly, decreasing the level of its attractiveness for foreign citizens.

In 2022, the requirement to pass an external examination in the second and third subjects with a minimum of 150 points for admission to the main medical specialties was also abolished. This requirement was introduced in 2019 to select better-prepared entrants for medical specialties. The reason for abandoning this norm in 2022 was an attempt to compensate higher education institutions training doctors for the loss of foreign students caused by the war by replacing them with Ukrainian students [13]. Such steps negatively affect the reputation of Ukrainian higher education among foreigners and thus reduce its competitiveness. Despite understanding the challenges created by the war, a foreign applicant from a developed country is unlikely to choose a Ukrainian university.

It should be remembered that government policy significantly influences a country's presence in education markets. Thus, in the UK, the number of students from the European Union

decreased due to the government's Brexit policy; US government policy led to a decrease in the number of Chinese students, who constituted the largest segment in the education market.

The state policy of Ukraine in the field of increasing the attractiveness of universities for foreign students should be based on a policy of multiculturalism and at the same time using the potential of education as soft power. It seems appropriate to move away from the victim position in the global educational discourse and focus on the intensive and innovative development of higher education in the western regions of the country, which have not been affected by military operations and have actually changed their security landscape little. Over the past years, Lviv has become one of the major tech hubs in Ukraine. The first Robotics Laboratory in western Ukraine was opened at Lviv Polytechnic in the current year. Chernivtsi National University named after Yuri Fedkovich (ChNU) was able to establish a huge number of international connections with European universities. The favorable territorial location makes it easy to interact with higher educational institutions in Poland, Austria, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Germany.

Only with a position of innovation and a desire for real leadership in those disciplines that have traditionally been at a high level in Ukraine (engineering specialties, fundamental physics and mathematics, IT, medicine, architecture and construction, and a number of other specialties), Ukraine has a good chance of being among the leaders in today's STEM education. However, for this, it is necessary to abandon populism, including ill-conceived and unproductive budget expenditures in the field of higher education, and create an effective road map and appropriate strategies, based on best practices of foreign countries.

A good example is Poland, which has become one of the leading countries in the European education system. In Poland, more than 100,000 international students attended universities during the 2022–2023 academic year. Over the investigated period, there was an almost 94% rise in the number of foreign students in Poland (see Figure 5).

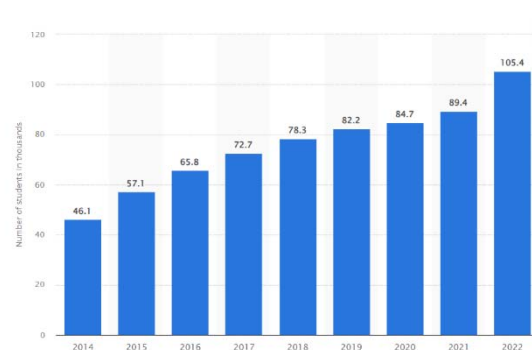


Figure 5. Number of studying foreigners in Poland 2014-2022 [17]

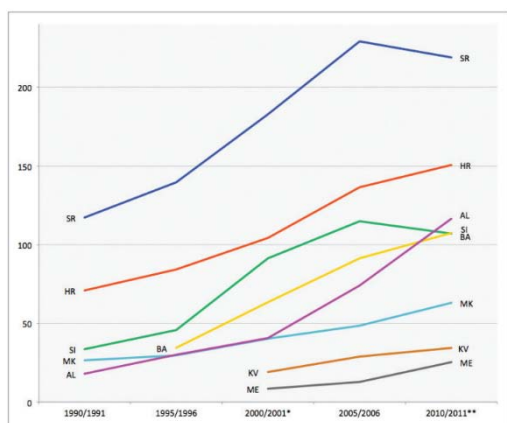
Poland belongs to the top 10 European countries attractive to foreign students.

English-taught study alternatives are now more widely available in Polish universities than ever before. It makes sense, then, that in just ten years, the number of international students studying in Poland has skyrocketed from 12,000 to over 65,000. Thirty European countries were compared by the ranking's writers. The countries of the European Union were not the only ones included in the selection; Norway, Russia, Ukraine, and Turkey were all included [15]. The following countries have positions above Poland in the ranking: the Netherlands (4th place), Russia (5th), Switzerland (6th), Sweden (7th), Belgium (8th) and Italy (9th place) [15].



In this ranking, among 30 countries, Ukraine appeared among the evident outsiders (places 21+), while the aggressor country appeared at the 5<sup>th</sup> place, after the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and France. Concerning Ukraine, being at that time in the state of hybrid conflict with Russia in Donbass, this situation seems shocking – the country did not make efforts to use great potential of soft power provided by education, although had good base for it.

Figure 6 evidently shows that war conflicts quite not ‘obligatory’ lead to decline in higher education: during the Yugoslav Wars – a series of armed conflicts in 1991-2001 on the territory of the former Yugoslavia in times of the collapse of the country – number of students in higher education demonstrated quite sound growth.



Notes: ME – enrolled in 2002-2003; AL – enrolled in 2009-2010;  
BA, KV and ME – earlier data is missing.

Figure 6. Students (in thousands) enrolled in higher education institutions in Balkan countries, 1990/91 – 2010/11, by countries [21]

In order to restore and develop international competitiveness, Ukrainian universities must respond to rapid changes in the field of global education. Those universities that can quickly adapt to modern, including Western, practices will have an advantage. The role of non-state universities, which can be more mobile and open to modern educational trends and ready for challenges, is increasing. Studies of Western educational systems have revealed that universities that develop a market orientation, that is, quickly respond to market needs, are much more effective [20]. The introduction of new technologies, the attraction and decent payment of specialists of the required profile and quality, attention to marketing, the absence of bureaucratic difficulties and openness to cooperation with foreign colleagues – all this gives universities (including non-state ones) a great advantage.

To promote the Ukrainian education system, it is necessary not only to advertise and create specialized Internet resources in various regions of the world (especially in priority regions), but also to actively interact with foreign universities and their Internet and media resources. Ukrainian universities need to create more centers of their presence in various countries, possibly with the participation of Ukrainian diplomatic institutions.

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