

American University Kyiv evolves and adapts amid ongoing challenges in wartime Ukraine

American University Kyiv launches summer internships for students at top US companies

Students, tutors, local dignitaries, and institutional partners gathered in the Ukrainian capital's Podil district in early 2024 as American University Kyiv marked a major milestone with its first graduation ceremony. The students in question were the first cohort of Masters graduates from American University Kyiv's EPAM School of Digital Technologies and School of Management. As is befitting an institution that claims to offer an authentic American educational experience in Ukraine, this initial batch of graduates were treated to a ceremony closely modeled on the traditional US format.

American University Kyiv's inaugural graduation ceremony was the latest landmark in a remarkable story of institutional evolution and adaptation that has taken place against the backdrop of Europe's largest invasion since World War II. The idea to establish an American university in the Ukrainian capital was conceived around 2020. By the time American University Kyiv officially opened in the first weeks of 2022, the storm clouds of war were already gathering over Ukraine. Despite the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, AUK officials welcomed their first academic intake and began studies in online format. The university has not looked back since.

"We are not only surviving but thriving," says AUK President Dan Rice during an April 2024 interview with Business Ukraine magazine. He argues that the unique challenges presented by today's wartime conditions have fueled a culture of innovation at AUK that is helping to create a dynamic and user-friendly learning environment. After an initial year of online classes, the university has now settled into a hybrid mode that allows students to find the right balance between digital convenience and in-person experience. "A lot of universities are not good at adapting to hybrid models but we have a special expertise born out of necessity," Rice says.

This approach certainly seems to be working. According to Rice, AUK had around 100 students enrolled during the first academic year, rising to 350

undergraduate and graduate students in the current year. Enrollment is currently underway for the coming academic year in September, with Rice expecting to welcome an additional 300-400 new students.

As you would expect from a hybrid model, students are able to study online or attend classes in person, with around half of AUK students currently engaged in distance learning. Rice says one of the university's current goals is to attract more young Ukrainians from across the country while also engaging with potential students based outside Ukraine in Poland and elsewhere in the EU. "We want everyone to know they can enroll without necessarily coming to Kyiv in person for classes. Whenever their situation is comfortable, they are of course welcome in Kyiv, but we offer hybrid and online options to suit different circumstances," says Rice.

Those studying in person will benefit from the university's genuinely stunning campus facilities. AUK is located inside Kyiv's iconic boat-shaped former River Port Building in the picturesque Podil district of the city. Two of the campus's six floors have been comprehensively renovated, with work ongoing to expand study space as the university attracts more students. The historic campus building looms elegantly over the Dnipro River, offering panoramic views of the sandy beaches on nearby Trukhaniv Island. It is also within strolling distance of the cozy cafes and cocktail bars that have made Podil something of a hub for Ukraine's vibrant hipster scene in recent years. "It is such a beautiful campus building," says Rice. "When everything is completed, I think it is going to be among the most beautiful universities in the world."

Rice is one of a number of American staff whose presence underlines AUK's deep ties to the United States. He joined AUK as President in March 2023 after serving as special advisor to Ukrainian Army Commander-in-Chief Valeriy Zaluzhnyi during the first year of the war as an unpaid volunteer. He was the primary advocate who obtained cluster munitions for Ukraine, and continues to advocate for more weapons and ammo for Ukraine in Washington DC. Rice is a graduate of West Point, holds three

masters degrees, and has completed his doctoral classes. He is a decorated combat leader who co-founded and remains co-president of a global company called Thayer Leadership at West Point.

AUK's main institutional link to the US is a long-term relationship with Arizona State University including a twenty-five year licensing partnership coordinated through the Cintana Education network. "They are such great partners," says Rice of his colleagues at Arizona State University. "They give us everything we need in order to look like a one hundred year old university institutionally, while behaving like a two year old university in terms of technology, so we have the best of everything."

The AUK President explains that this developing relationship with Arizona State University has provided his university with direct access to the same content and curriculum as US-based students, allowing AUK to offer what he terms as American educational standards at a much more affordable price. At present, the AUK focus is on IT and business schools, but thanks to the partnership with Arizona State University, the scope to expand academically into new areas is vast. "The resources available to us are just enormous and we have only begun to tap into them," says Rice. Working with partners in Arizona, AUK academics can launch a wide range of new programs based on years of research and development by leading US academics, while largely bypassing the time-consuming planning stages. Instead, existing programs can be imported from Arizona and implemented with some tailoring and adaptation to local Ukrainian requirements. Rice is already looking at a number of potential new additions to support the AUK mission of contributing to Ukraine's postwar recovery, including schools of architecture, engineering, and tourism. All could potentially be established using the firm foundations provided by existing Arizona State University educational resources.

Graduates from AUK receive a Ukrainian degree with the option to then continue their studies for a limited period at Arizona State University in order to secure an American degree. For undergraduates, this requires one year of additional study in the US. Postgraduate AUK students who wish to acquire an American qualification are required to study for a semester in Arizona.

AUK is also launching an innovative internship program that will enable students to spend time in America and gain professional experience working at top-tier companies. "The paid internship program for our AUK students to get real world work experience at an American company is taking off and the list of sponsor companies is growing rapidly," says Rice. "Our market research shows students come to AUK not only to get an American-style education, but to experience American culture. With this summer internship program, they will gain experience in the United States at some of the best global brands, with sponsor companies paying flights, housing, J-1 Visa, insurance, and a salary."

While martial law restrictions currently prevent males from leaving the country, Rice says the goal is to make this new internship initiative an annual program for all AUK students and an important element of the university's overall offer. "For companies like JP Morgan and Logistics Plus that plan to be part of Ukraine's recovery, the internship program will be a way to build their future executive workforce in Ukraine," he notes. "These students will be helping the rebuilding of Ukraine by developing our corporate ties with US companies. The program we are now launching will help us continue to attract the best and brightest undergrad and graduate students. I believe it will also strengthen cultural exchange. After victory, we expect many American students to flood into Kyiv, especially from Arizona State University, which powers AUK. I'd like this initiative to be big news in Ukraine and the US. It's a good news story."



About the interviewee: **Dan Rice** is President of the American University Kyiv

"Our market research shows students come to AUK not only to get an American-style education, but to experience American culture"