

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION - NEW TRENDS FOR ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: *On a background of significant economic and demographic changes, Romanian higher education must consider the internationalization process as a natural and extremely important step in its future development.*

In an education system where accreditation procedures and rankings became in last decade the main tendencies in terms of quality and the predominant language of science is English, we believe that internationalization is not only positive, but also very relevant as a key component of the changing landscape of higher education.

Also, the participation of Romanian universities in the internationalization process is not just about earning immediate and positive aspects, it also requires greater accountability and the need to improve educational services in order to demonstrate competitiveness at European and global level.

In this internationalization process cannot be involved only private universities or public universities, the effort must be unitary and the law of education in Romania must be deeply rooted in the current economic and social realities.

Internationalization of higher education is a multivalent process. It includes many forms of cooperation in the area of research and student exchanges, massive open online courses or co-taught courses and degrees. Universities discovered that international partnerships are important, but can be costly, and many are not valuable, because of asymmetrical recognition of the reputation and branding of each university. Smaller universities that partner with more renowned universities may consider they will benefit from a transfer of know-how and branding, but later find out that their students are more interested by the university that is stronger in that collaboration (like it is the case of double degree programs).

More than ever before, especially private universities are conditioned by funds and therefore are obliged to make a selection of relevant international partners and projects, in order to achieve institution's own objectives and ambitions.

Key words: *internationalization, higher education, strategy*

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1. Main findings about the internationalization of higher education and the Romanian experience

Knight (1993) describes internationalization of higher education as “*the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution*”.

Jowi (2009) attempts to include in the definition “*any systematic sustained efforts aimed at making higher education responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalization of societies, economy, and labor markets*”.

Romania, like many other developing countries, has experienced, for more than two decades, the occurrence of brain drain risk. More and more well-prepared young people prefer to study abroad and after graduation decide to continue living and working in those countries. Although some other countries are using, in their favor, international student mobility to increase their higher education capacity, and to avoid brain drain, in Romania, the results are not so encouraging.

There were created organizations at European and global level that analyze and do research related with this topic of internationalization of higher education, like *European University Association (EUA)*, *Association of International Educators (NAFSA)* or *International Association of Universities (IAU)*.

IAU released in 2018 the 5th Global Survey Report on Internationalization of Higher Education, being the last version released so far. IAU collected extensive data between 2016 and 2018 via online questionnaire from 90 universities worldwide.

From this research we consider important, and we want to emphasize on the following:

- Although 90% of the interviewed universities mentioned internationalization in their strategic plan, an increase was observed only at the universities with a high level of internationalization already. What is interesting is the fact that North American universities, at least one third, do not have internationalization mentioned in their mission or strategic plan. *In our opinion, an explanation for this type of approach can be the ethnocentric approach of the North American culture and society, and also, the fact that American universities are highly ranked and attract anyway a lot of international students, cooperation or can generate other synergies.*
- In terms of benefits, universities from Europe and Asia see internationalization as a good method to develop international cooperation and capacity building, while universities from North America consider it as a vehicle to raise awareness and expose their students to global issues. *In this regard, we consider that Romania cannot be congruent with this type of answer, for Romanian universities attracting international students is*

important not only for international awareness, but also as important new sources of income. From our university collaboration with American universities, we can certify the fact that exposure to new cultures and different ways of thinking for their students is a priority, and most of the American students coming to Romania stated is their first time abroad or their first international mobility.

- In terms of risks associated with internationalization, most of the universities are considering excessive competition, financial burden, difficulty to access/recognize quality of courses or programs offered by other institutions to be the most important risks. *All these risks are recognized by Romanian universities as well, especially the first two.*
- Regarding the question on who is the most important internal driver for increased internationalization, in general, institutions from all regions of the world concluded in pinning responsibility on the president (rector) of the institution, followed by the international office, and finally, positioning faculty members in third place. *In our opinion, the leadership is very important because it sets a direction, but faculty members and administrative staff should be more involved in this process, especially in the so-called concept of “internationalization at home”.*
- The research showed an increase in funds allocated towards internationalization for most universities. *In our opinion, Romanian universities are not congruent with this trend. In the most optimistic scenario, we can say that funding remained stable in the last few years.*
- Taking into consideration the human resources, international academic staff (full time), represents just a small part of the overall number, less than 5%. But 20 of the respondents do not have international staff. *Romanian universities are more likely to be in this category, they work based on collaboration with international professors or through Erasmus program.*
- In terms of international students, fully enrolled into their programs, most of the respondents mentioned they have, but the percentage is still low. *In Romania, although some universities are more internationalized and offer programs in English, French, German, or other foreign languages, the number of international students is quite low, most of them, have less than 1%, but there are some private and public universities where the percentage is higher, around 5%.*
- Respondents were also asked to provide suggestions on how internationalization could be augmented at the institutional level. The most frequently mentioned areas for improvement were:
 - *language skills of students and staff*
 - *increased funding*
 - *more comprehensive, strategic approaches to internationalization*
 - *the need for staff exchange opportunities, structured cooperation (e.g. joint degrees), and the need for more flexible curricula.*

Another relevant study is the one provided by EUA (European University Association), which conducted a survey in early 2020. Valid responses were submitted by 219 universities from 34 countries. Universities from Germany, Italy or Hungary are well represented, while countries like France, Poland or Romania not so much.

The most interesting findings of this research are the following:

- *more than half of the responding universities have more than 10% of international students*
- *more than half have less than 5% international staff*
- *in terms of international activities, more than 90% are concerned on student credit mobility, EU research projects, and staff mobility. Only few (9%) reported more complex ways of internationalization like branch campuses or shared assets.*
- *most of the universities (97%) collaborate abroad with similar institutions, but also with businesses, NGO's or public institutions.*
- *European Union area is the main geographical area for collaboration, followed by Europe outside EU, and North America. The lowest percentages are for Australia, Middle East, or India in terms of partnerships and collaboration.*
- *The frameworks for collaboration, and the explanation for such high degree of cooperation within EU, are Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programs and EEA grants, as well.*
- *Almost 50% of the respondents have two or three strategic partnerships with partners abroad. Most of them concern a general institutional collaboration.*

These two studies, of course, have not included the recent pandemic challenges for higher education in terms on internationalization.

Initially, universities have been closed, and gradually they switched to online classes. This was a huge effort for a lot of universities around the world, and especially for those from less developed countries. Conferences have been called off, and collaboration between researchers took a downfall.

Prospective students, especially the international ones, have been unable to take examinations, and international students (including Erasmus) have been unable to travel to their campuses or to return home. Faculty members have been asked not to travel to other countries.

There will be a decrease in mobility for a year or more, with declines in global student mobility and with particular implications for the number of students enrolled in programs abroad. In Romania, the general concern is the overall quality of education. But there are some positive signs as well, associated with online

teaching, such as the decrease of dropout rate after the first year of study and higher rates of attendance.

Internationalization must be a major concern for any university in Romania. The beginning of this process was, for our university, represented by the signing, three decades ago, of a cooperation agreement with an American university, which allowed more than 150 students to study in the United States. This opportunity offered by the University was a major element of attraction among those who chose to become students.

For most Romanian universities, internationalization started with participation in the Leonardo da Vinci program and continued with the signing of the Erasmus Charter (2004). We believe that deepening the internationalization process on the axis of creating new bachelor's degree programs in English is vital for the future of many Romanian universities. Many programs have an international specific and not a limited, internal one. Once established, these programs could also be an important recruitment pool for master's programs in English. The organization of undergraduate programs in English can significantly alleviate the pressure on programs in Romanian, in the context in which the number of students enrolled in the latter is strongly influenced by declining demographics. In addition to the elements mentioned above, other actions that can contribute to deepening the internationalization process of Romanian universities, aim at:

- *obtaining an international accreditation (for instance, AACSB for Schools of Business).*
- *focusing on partnerships at the “top of the pyramid” by promoting participation in international alliances, launching double degree programs, study programs based on transnational education (especially considering the opportunities offered by BREXIT).*
- *exploring opportunities for setting up and participating in a consortium of European Universities and submitting the application to the European Commission*
- *identification, based on existing partnerships, of universities for the creation of double degree programs and continuing education.*
- *creating an internationalized work environment that meets the requirements of a diverse student body, including by selecting or allocating staff with language skills for the target countries.*
- *stimulating the operation of Summer Schools organized in partnership with foreign universities or companies, by granting credit points to participating students.*
- *identifying new international partners for participation as members in research consortia.*
- *achieving an increased number of international mobilities for both students and teachers, within the ERASMUS + program.*

- *significant increase in the number of mobility for teachers, based on bilateral agreements concluded before by the University*
- *organizing multicultural activities that contribute to raising awareness among their own, teaching, and administrative staff, about the specifics of internationalization at home.*
- *exploring the field of continuing education in partnership with foreign universities*
- *ensuring a more efficient framework for disseminating the information accumulated by teachers and students participating in international mobility programs.*

2. Conclusions

Higher education can no longer be viewed in a national context, but as a global process. Nowadays, education has become more international than ever. Everywhere, states encourage and focus on internationalization of higher education, looking for more international co-operation and exchanges. As a result of internationalization process, we can see that universities expand their strategies in terms of research departments and teaching programs.

In our view, the challenge of higher education internationalization is manifested in different aspects, such as *language barrier* for countries where English is not the native language, *psychological and cultural barriers* for students and teachers, *economic barriers* related to tuition fees, all these making more difficult the internationalization process.

In the EU, the mobility of students and teachers, sustained by Erasmus program, represents an important factor in transforming internationalization into a priority and can be perceived as the fastest developing aspect of it. The importance of internationalization should be stressed since the journey is long and will involve changing and improving the current trends to suit both local, and foreign policies, demands and situations.

In line with the opinion of *International Association of Universities*, we fully agree that the internationalization of higher education includes “*particular risks for some institutions, uneven benefits, and asymmetrical power relations*”. The following concerns are frequent:

- *Although many universities created English taught programs, driven by the advantages of having more international students, using English as a universal tool for communication diminishes the diversity of languages studied or used by professors, researchers, and students.* On the other hand, there is a plethora of countries where English is the official language and for universities from there can be an implicit advantage to attract international

students and the prospective students from these countries can easily apply for English taught programs worldwide.

- **Global competition may reduce the diversity of institutional forms of what quality higher education represents. The pursuit of a unique model of excellence symbolized in the concept of a “world-class university,”** frequently defined as excellence in research, may lead to the concentration of scarce national resources in a limited number of institutions to the detriment of other members of national system of higher education. This phenomenon is manifested in many countries, including Romania, some large universities being interested to be included in rankings which are not always taking into consideration real competences and resources.
- **Large-scale international student recruitment, sometimes very competitive and aggressive,** may cause a variety of troubles. The presence of a large number of international students may generate misunderstandings regarding the diminished opportunities for domestic students or unintentionally nourish prejudice about foreigners. Some students from developing countries can be motivated to study abroad only to experience other cultures and societies, and not by achieving higher academic performance. A large number of students from the same country studying in the same university abroad can prevent the real understanding of local culture.
- **The development of international programs and establishment of branch campuses abroad generate several questions including how these can increase the educational capacity of host nations for the future.** Expanding internationally can generate issues regarding the maintenance of homogeneous quality of the program and to the appropriate adaptation of the program to the specific needs of the workforce of the country where the program is set up.
- **More recently we may add the uncertainty caused by COVID-19 pandemic, which transforms universities in digital hubs, which cannot replace face-to-face interaction, intercultural experiences, or collaboration with the economic and social environment.** International students analyze if enrolling at a university abroad makes sense, if tuition fees are justified and they question what differentiates universities apart from the online platforms they use in their relationships with students.

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