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Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions: the Case of Romania

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Abstract

Internationalization and quality assurance in higher education have been closely linked at a conceptual level. It is believed that quality assurance enables a higher degree of internationalization, allowing higher education institutions from different countries to promote cooperation and mobility for both students and scholars. This paper investigates the level of internationalization of several higher education institutions in Romania through an exploratory research addressed to those in charge of the master programs. Moreover, the paper aims to identify the connections between quality assurance and internationalization of these institutions, and uses a questionnaire developed around three dimensions: institutional capacity, educational efficiency and total quality management. The study shows that there are quite big gaps between the Romanian higher education institutions that offer master programs in a foreign language in terms of how they perceive the process of internationalization. At the same time, the results indicate that even colleges that are part of the same higher education institution may have different approaches towards internationalization, leading to considerable differences between them. The results of this study are of great importance for the key decision makers in the Romanian higher education institutions, as they may use the insights of this study to develop better strategies that will support the internationalization process within their institutions.

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1. Introduction

Like any business in general, higher education has been going through a stage of internationalization over the last few years. Universities around the world are taking advantage of this phenomenon, as they are competing with each other to attract international students. At the same time, some of the most famous universities are setting up campuses in other countries, contributing in this way to the globalization of higher education system. With internationalization being a key criterion in the majority of university rankings and with the constant pressure of becoming more entrepreneurial (Anderseck, 2004; Deem *et al.*, 2008; Dill & Soo, 2005), universities have started to consider internationalization as a viable source of competitive advantage.

Romanian universities have taken some important steps lately in their battle for internationalization, but still there are many things they could do better. During the last few years, several studies have attempted to assess the internationalization of the higher education system in Romania (Nicolescu *et al.*, 2009; Pricopie *et al.*, 2009). However, these studies have focused mainly on a couple of aspects of internationalization, such as the number of international students coming to Romania or the language used for teaching. Our study aims to examine the internationalization of higher education by considering other important facets of internationalization. This paper strives to offer valuable answers to the following research questions: (1) Are the Romanian universities ready to face the challenges of the internationalization of higher education? (2) What are the main advantages of the internationalization process for Romanian graduate programs?

The paper starts with a literature review of the internationalization process in higher education and describes the main differences between internationalization and globalization of universities with a focus on Romania. Next, the research methodology is presented, followed by an interpretation of the main results obtained. The paper concludes with several implications for those responsible for implementing strategies that would support the internationalization phenomenon within Romanian universities.

2. Literature Review

The link between internationalization and globalization had been much debated in the literature. There is no doubt that the two concepts are closely connected, even though they are two fundamentally different processes (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2012). Globalization can be defined as “the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement” (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 290). Internationalization, on the other hand, has more to do with the “specific policies and programs undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments to deal with globalization” (Altbach, 2006, p. 123).

As with any other theoretical concept that has greatly benefited from scholars’ increased attention, the internationalization of higher education has more than one agreed definition (Hudznik, 2011; Elkin *et al.*, 2007). No matter what the approach used to define the term, the following are generic activities associated with internationalization (Harman, 2004): (1) international movement of students and staff between countries; (2) internationalization of higher education curricula; (3) international links for research and open learning programs; and (4) bilateral, regional and international recognition of higher education qualifications.

Internationalization of higher education has been associated with several benefits. Firstly, one should note the cultural and social impact that this phenomenon is making within the local, regional and even national communities. Secondly, the movement of students and staff among campuses has allowed them to gain new perspectives and become much more aware of the possibilities for cooperation. Thirdly, both students and staff were able to recognize international opportunities and be internationally oriented. Last but not least, the internationalization of higher education offers a new perspective in terms of quality assurance within universities. In fact, all the efforts to ensure quality are an integral part of the international higher education environment.

Not all the countries in the world are enjoying these benefits; some nations benefit more than others (Meek, 2002). A striking difference appears when comparing situations in developing countries with those in developed countries. Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States are not only that top recruiters of international students, but they can also afford to charge very high fees from these students. Internationalization of higher education cannot be neglected by developing countries; although for them it might not be that easy to attract international students and to benefit from all the advantages of internationalization.

Romania is one of the developing countries that are struggling to take their higher educational systems to a higher level. From a historical point of view, the internationalization of higher education in Romania can be characterized by two distinct stages (Nicolescu *et al.*, 2009): (1) the period between 1960 – 1990 and (2) the period from 1990 up to present days. During the communist regime, internationalization was highly influenced by the political relationships that Romania was having with other countries. Hence, most of the international students who visited Romania to complete their studies were coming from Asia or even Africa. Another trait of the internationalization process of those days was the language of study, which was Romanian.

Since the fall of the communist regime we have witnessed a shift in the internationalization of the higher education environment. First of all, cooperation agreements have been signed with other states, leading to a diversification of country of origin for international students. Romanian universities have started to launch educational programs in other languages than Romanian. Thus, both undergraduate and graduate programs have been developed in German, Hungarian, English and French. Despite all these, there is still a negative balance for Romania in terms of incoming and outgoing students. According to Feder (2011), in 2009-2010 Romania had 25,100 student mobilities in Europe on the ongoing side and only 3,100 on the incoming part. These students account for a very small part of the total enrolments of the Romanian higher education system (less than 5%). These figures are everything, but encouraging for decision makers of the Romanian universities.

3. Research Methodology

Our study was addressed to twenty key decision-makers from graduate programs considered to follow an international path, based on the following criteria: the language of teaching and the international mobility of both students and staff. Thus, twenty master programs developed within eight universities in Romania were selected for a bigger project (ASIGMA project) that focused on assessing the quality of internationalization of higher education programs. The graduate programs are implemented in universities from the following cities: Bucharest (2), Cluj-Napoca (3), Timisoara (7), Iasi (3), Galati (3), Constanta (1) and Brasov (1). A questionnaire containing 33 questions was administered to those in charge of the masters program, followed by face to face discussion with some of the respondents. The questionnaire was administered during April – May 2012, and included both open and closed questions.

We were interested in finding out what are the main challenges that these graduate programs have to face. Hence, we structured our research design on three pillars: (1) institutional capacity, (2) educational efficiency, and (3) quality management. According to Qiang (2003), it is essential to differentiate between academic and organizational elements when assessing the international side of higher education. A focus on the academic or program activities may represent a missed opportunity, as the process issues can be very important for any institution. Next, we shall highlight the main findings of our research.

4. Discussions

For confidentiality reasons we decided not to disclose the names of the respondents or the names of graduate programs that they manage. However, we refer to these programs using several acronyms. The sample structure according to the field of study and language of teaching is shown in Table 1. English remains the dominant foreign language of study in Romania; 70% of the graduate programs that have been included in our survey are

taught in English. In terms of fields of study, one could easily acknowledge the higher number of programs pertaining to engineering and economics. Indeed, these domains provide students with greater employment opportunities in the future, which could allow them to follow an international career path.

Table 1. Characteristics of the graduate programs surveyed

No.	Acronyms	Field of study	Language of teaching	No.	Acronyms	Field of study	Language of teaching
1	CN	Engineering	English	11	TTC	Languages	English/French/German
2	AES	Engineering	English	12	SPEC	Politics	French
3	TS	Engineering	French	13	MDA	Economics	English
4	ADL	Economics	French	14	APE	Chemistry	English
5	FR	Economics	English	15	IACD	Informatics	English
6	SAAS	Economics	French	16	FMC	Physics	English
7	NA	Engineering	English	17	OOHP	Psychology	English
8	TAAN	Engineering	English	18	NANO	Physics	English
9	MAPS	Engineering	English	19	MBA	Economics	German
10	TI	Informatics	English	20	EDURES	Economics	English

The *institutional capacity* has been addressed in our survey at two distinct levels: university and masters program. In order for internationalization to be both successful and sustainable, it is essential for it to be entrenched in the culture, policy and organizational process (Qiang, 2003). All the respondents said that internationalization is a core element within their university, as it is comprised within the strategic plan. Moreover, the strategic plan contains very detailed and precise information about the internationalization process. It seems that within every university that offers graduate programs for international students there is recognition of the importance that this matter has, and for that reason it is sustained through objectives. All graduate programs have research facilities and libraries that can easily accommodate international students, and they offer a great many scientific books and journals in foreign languages (usually the language in which the graduate program is taught).

However, there is still room for improvement in terms of institutional capacity. For example, 85% of the total respondents said that there is lack of signalization in a foreign language for the laboratories and other classrooms. Moreover, the special equipment that is used in laboratories does not have instructions attached in the language of teaching. This could be a huge impediment for international students as they might find it difficult to work or use that equipment. Another weakness that emerged from the survey was the lack of language skills of the administrative personnel of the graduate programs (in 80 % of the cases we found that the administrative personnel does not speak a foreign language).

Another topic that was addressed within our study dealt with *educational efficiency*. This variable was addressed from several perspectives, such as services offered to international students, flexibility, number of international events created within the graduate program, the curricula of the program, number of mobility grants, etc. When the respondents were questioned about the curricula, they all answered that it was very well correlated with the curricula of other European graduate programs. In almost all cases (95%), respondents argued that the teaching methods were adapted to suit the needs of international students and were similar to those used in other countries.

Those who designed the graduate programs were very careful about the schedule of classes for their students. They stated that they are flexible when it comes to developing the schedule and that they take into consideration the fact that very many students are employed and thus prefer to come to school in the evening. As we have already seen, one of the most important characteristics of internationalization is represented by the mobility of

students and staff. Table 2 highlights the results according to this criterion. Although we focused our analysis on those graduate programs that are considered as pursuing an internationalization path, we were not able to find many foreign students enrolled in those programs. In fact, there are several graduate programs that have not had a single international student in the last three years.

Table 2. Students and staff international mobility (in the last 3 years)

No.	Acronyms	International students enrolled	No. of students mobility	No. of staff mobility	No.	Acronyms	International students enrolled	No. of students mobility	No. of staff mobility
1	CN	1	17	0	11	TTC	0	13	0
2	AES	0	11	3	12	SPEC	12	16	20
3	TS	7	4	10	13	MDA	4	6	15
4	ADL	0	10	0	14	APE	0	20	1
5	FR	0	15	1	15	IACD	5	10	4
6	SAAS	2	7	11	16	FMC	0	3	6
7	NA	5	5	0	17	OOHP	0	1	1
8	TAAN	0	5	0	18	NANO	0	1	9
9	MAPS	0	8	0	19	MBA	2	2	6
10	TI	1	6	0	20	EDURES	1	3	7

A graduate program with a major in political studies from a university in Cluj-Napoca was able to attract the highest number of international students. Twelve students had been enrolled in this program for the last three years. A post-survey discussion with the person in charge of this program revealed that the students benefitted from a joint-degree diploma as a partnership between the Romanian university and a French university. The partnership also involved an exchange of students, thus explaining the number of international students coming to this graduate program.

Within the higher education system it is believed that there is a direct link between the degree of internationalization and quality assurance. According to the results of the 2005 International Association of Universities (IAU) Survey, developing countries assume that academic quality should be firmly in place before it is possible to reap the benefits of more internationally oriented students and staff (Knight, 2007). We considered that it worth assessing the *quality management* within the graduate programs. With very few exceptions, the respondents declared that their programs possess a methodology for internal assessment of the quality and that it is in practice. The methodologies used for quality assurance are compatible with those that are implemented in other graduate programs from abroad.

However, not all masters programs could offer students or their staff training facilities in a foreign language. Only 70% of the respondents stated that their university had a language center that could accommodate the needs of students in terms of language skills, and in only 10% of the cases the university had an agreed contract with a private company that offers trainings in foreign languages.

5. Concluding remarks

Previous studies that have looked at the internationalization of higher education system in Romania have focused mainly on studying issues related to students' mobility. We argue that this process is much more complex than this, and should be addressed from other perspectives as well. Our study focused on a sample of graduate programs from several Romanian universities and it was addressed to key decision-makers from these

programs. Besides students and staff mobility, we were interested in finding out what are the main challenges that these programs are facing in terms of internationalization and quality assurance.

Our paper sought to answer two research questions that addressed issues related to the benefits of the internationalization of higher education and the readiness of Romanian universities in terms of facing the challenges of such a phenomenon. The advantages of internationalization are strikingly evident considering the fact that both the educational institutions and the professors benefit from an increased knowledge on the one hand, and better-prepared students on the other hand. Moreover, Romanian higher education is benefiting from an increased visibility at the international level. However, these benefits are seen especially in those graduate programs that are delivered in cooperation with other foreign educational institutions.

The results of our survey show that Romanian universities are at a crossroads at the present time. Even though there has been a shift within the universities' policies regarding internationalization of higher education, there are many things to be done in order to overcome the "niche market" status that Romania currently has. Some important aspects of internationalization have been consolidated through graduate programs, such as the internationalization of the curriculum, the growing number of programs taught in English, quality assurance, and control issues.

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