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Internationalization and Quality Control of Education in TEI of Athens. Evaluation of the Erasmus Programme.

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Abstract

The international student appeared the last decades in the educational vocabulary in order to reveal a new aspect of Higher Education, that of internationalization. Towards this direction, mobility programmes such as Erasmus have a significant impact and revealed the desire of European students and the intention of HE Institutions to become international, as far as curriculum and studies are concerned. TEI of Athens has also endorsed this new profile and adapted in its academic life. The results of a self assessment process are witnessing this initiative and support the existence of the student “universalis”.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Higher Education has become increasingly international during the last decades as more and more students choose to spend a period of their studies abroad or to enrol in foreign educational programmes and institutions in their home country. Traditional study programmes has been partly replaced by these alternatives, which substituted them for an important period of time. The notion of the international student has appeared in the educational field in order to define the embryonic shape of the new species of global citizens. This phenomenon of cross-border education is the result of several driving forces from different perspectives. Amongst them, a strong desire to promote mutual educational, cultural and linguistic understanding, the move of

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skilled workers in the current globalised financial environment, the need of HE Institutions to generate additional revenues by setting up annexes in foreign countries and the importance to build a more educated work force that will reinforce national economies have been significant factors.

Apart from some social-cultural perspectives and economic reasons that are directly linked with the promotion of internationalisation of Higher Education, the development of European Higher Education Area and the Bologna process have an important impact towards this direction. They created the demand for degrees to be internationally recognised, they promoted the interchange of skills, the training and educational experience through the interconnection of education and market, the student preparedness and the internationalization of the student’s curriculum. The Institutions themselves have turned towards this trend and gave high importance at their international character, aiming at enhancing their international profile, strengthening the research and knowledge production and diversifying their faculties and staff.

Over the years the internationalization of education has been transformed from reactive into proactive and its content has evolved dramatically. The increased competition amongst Higher Education Institutions has challenged the existing forms of educational cooperation and has become an indicator for quality in higher education.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Quality is not just for manufacturers. The internationalization of higher education seems closely related to improving educational quality. It is unquestionable that quality is an elusive and complex concept, difficult to measure but mostly noticed by its absence. Although the Maastricht Treaty provided the basis for action in the European educational field, the notion of quality in the education has mostly gain significance in the Bologna process. "In the decade up to 2020 European higher education has a vital contribution to make in realising a Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative ... Europe can only succeed in this endeavour if it maximises the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education." (Ministers responsible for Higher Education in the countries participating in the Bologna Process, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, April 2009). In the Higher Education sector, the word of quality exceeds the traditional idea of excellence or outstanding performance. The most commonly now accepted is “fitness for purpose”. This interpretation allows Institutions to define their purpose in their mission and objectives and leads to educational differentiation. Their policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure the quality set are predefined and constantly checked. The quality attributes in each Institution should be defined and closely stated.

According the comprehensive approach derived from West, Noden and Gosling (2000)’s viewpoint of quality in higher education, the framework called “the Input–Process–Output (IPO) framework” (in which ‘Input’ refers to the entry requirements, ‘Process’ refers to the teaching and learning process, and ‘Output’ refers to the employability and academic standings) may be used in accordance with the institution’s operation system of converting the inputs (e.g. Selection of Students, Entry requirements) into outputs (e.g. Placement, Academic performance, international curriculum) via the process (e.g. teaching and learning, exchange of students, bilateral agreements, European knowledgeability, learning mobility). In this way, the quality improvements could be associated with the operating system of any organization, including those from the education sector. This framework may also be used for assessing the international quality strategy of the Institution in a simple basis.

If a critical and reflexive analysis is applied to evaluate the international dimension of an Institution, this should be made mostly through benchmarking (comparison made with other institutions abroad or at home) and secondly through a self-assessment process guided by the Institution itself. Of course, the latter is a useful tool of evaluation, which may reveal the weaknesses and the strengths of the strategy followed, but it requires time, commitment and the right preparation steps to be taken in advance.
The notion of internationalization in the educational sector focuses mainly on Europe, as this continent has been a magnet for students’ educational mobility. In national and institutional approach, mobility - either as part of the home degree or for a full degree abroad - has been dominant. The European counties are topping the list in this regard, via Erasmus programme (under Lifelong Learning Programme), which “fosters internationalization at Europe” since its launch in 1987. In the Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven (28-29 April 2009, point 18) on the Bologna Process, there is an ongoing strong emphasis on the importance of mobility: “in 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training abroad”. Nowadays around 90% of European Universities in 31 countries are taking part in it, helping students to go abroad for studies and company placements. Learning mobility is the primary goal of the programme, ensuring that young people in Europe develop the skills and competences they need for today’s rapidly evolving market. The Erasmus Programme proved to be a significant tool for a student in order to gain vital assets (new skills, wider perspectives, European experience) through studying or training in Europe whose future will depend on them as future working force. It caters not only for students, but also for professors interested in teaching in another country, as well as university staff who appreciate the benefits of being trained abroad. Exchanges have beneficial effects, both for the beneficiaries and for the home and host institutions. Through the years mobility via Erasmus became the most useful element of internationalisation, aiming at preparing the students (being national or foreign) for their future career and life in a constantly changing social and financial environment. Thus, mobility is no longer an objective in itself but one of the intermediates to attain the future individual and professional preparation. The international is linked with the multicultural flexibility and efficiency. Mobility is a prerequisite so as to get an international and intercultural experience, a new characteristic that will differentiate the individual, an added value to his/her curriculum putting emphasis in quality.

TEI of Athens joined the Erasmus programme in 1987. During this period, internationalization, and especially actions related to the Erasmus programme, are and will remain an important part of its strategy. Its mission in the field of international student exchange is summarised in allowing its students to compete on the international market, respond to the requirements of globalization and facilitate the creation of a platform of ideas and experiences exchange. Moreover, priority is given to the development of modern educational studies in accordance with European market requirements. As TEI of Athens is placed in the first rank amongst Greek Technological Institutes as far as student and human power are concerned, high importance is attributed to educational cooperation through the establishment of bilateral agreements, which allow mobility and ensure the intereducational dialogue. The existence of more than 300 agreements and the every year increased number of placements in European companies are sufficient evidence for the Institute’s desire to enhance internationalization.

Being Institute of Technological direction, TEI of Athens has a special international focus which is depicted in its mission adopted and is defined according the challenges of the international market. It has been realised that the need to understand how other young people live and work beyond the limited borders of the Institute and to coexist and compete with them requires the existence of an international dimension in a student’s academic experience. Internationalizing each student remains the primal key, the educational goal that may be accomplished only through internationalised curricula and faculty, through study abroad programmes and student exchanges. That goal was attained via Erasmus Programme. The Institute has undertaken a comprehensive strategic process for its international education, which is included in its overall strategic thinking. All decisions are made in that context. The current strategy includes increased participations in recognised exhibitions and for a, increased level of communication, direct contacts and promotion of relationship with similar Institutions, “word of mouth”, encouraging Institute’s exchange programmes with other institutions, arrange agreements with foreign HE Institutions, encouraging the idea of studying abroad, updating publications and web page information to make information easily accessible world-wide.

However, Erasmus in TEI of Athens has been revealed not only beneficial. Linguistic obstacles, the barrier of understanding and been understood in a foreign country, the recognition of the study/training period, the learning
outcomes are some of the common difficulties that should be faced. Through the years, some of them have been discussed and partly resolved. As the Programme evolves, the appearance of problems is evident, due to the significant demand that has been noticed.

A self-assessment process of internationalisation with respect to students has been especially revealing for the Erasmus impact in TEI of Athens. The evaluation of anonymous questionnaires structured in adequate way to be suitable for statistical elaboration and answered by students of the Institute who participated in Erasmus Programme from 2004-2009 (Panagiaris G. et al., 2009) has shown that the results verify the general findings of the evaluation of the students’ mobility under the LLP /Erasmus programme in European level (M.S.Otero and A. McCoshan -2006) and support them at a great extent. More specifically, the proportion between male and female students who participated in the Programme during the aforementioned period was 3:1. In addition, the proportion of the students who participated in the mobility programme for studies against those who moved under the framework of work placement was again 3:1.

In the question: “Were you satisfied with the support/information/advice offered by the sending institution during your stay abroad?” there has been a graduation of answers from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for “very satisfied” and 5 for “completely dissatisfied”. The difference in scale of students’ satisfaction, regarding the support offered by TEI of Athens was focused on the following areas:
- Academic matters concerning their stay abroad
- Administrative matters concerning their stay abroad
- Information about the host institution and the country
- Accommodation matters
- Language preparation

Based on this statistical elaboration regarding the aforementioned question, the language preparation proved to be the main problem of the support we offer to our students (38% of completely dissatisfied students), while there is an important number of students who feel that they have not received the expected help in matters of accommodation. Regarding the aforementioned question, if we group the very satisfied students with the less satisfied ones, as well as the very dissatisfied students with the less dissatisfied ones, and we create three answering groups, the findings mentioned become more obvious:
- 51% of the students feel dissatisfied with the language preparation that we have offered them against a 34% of students who feel satisfied, and
- in matters of accommodation, 45% of the students feel dissatisfied with the support they have received by our Institution against a 42% who feel satisfied.

In the question: “Concerning the following areas, did you face any problems during your stay abroad?” in a scale of 1 to 5, 1 stands for “at a great extent” and 5 for “not at all”.

The problems our students had to face were as follows:
- Credit Transfer and Accumulation (ECTS)
- Attending lectures in the foreign language
- Differences in the teaching methodology used
- Teaching staff availability
- Communication difficulties
- Administrative matters

From the statistical elaboration of the responders’ answers it is obvious that our students do not face significant problems during their stay abroad, despite a certain deficiency in language preparation!

In the question: “Was the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System applied to the study programme of the host Institution?” with the following preselected answers given:
- Yes, partially
- Yes, totally
- No

The most significant result is that an increased percentage (22.5%) of students does not answer at all.
Instead, from the answers given, the overwhelming majority (99%) answers that the ECTS was applied totally or partially at the host Institution. (Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECTS in host Institution</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, partially</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>28.21%</td>
<td>36.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, totally</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>48.21%</td>
<td>62.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.03%</td>
<td>1.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22.56%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relating to the previous question, the preselected answers given to the following question “Were lessons, which you attended with a successful result, acknowledged by your Institution?” are:
- Yes
- No
- Partially
The percentage of the responders, who do not answer at all, is even more significant (36%), and this shows that the previous findings are not random. (Table 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledged lessons</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>42.05%</td>
<td>65.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12.82%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9.23%</td>
<td>14.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>35.90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It seems that a great number of students is not familiarized with and/or informed about the ECTS system. Maybe of course, the most astounding finding of all, results from the students’ replies in the question: “Has your stay abroad prolonged the total duration of your studies?”, at which 1 out of 2 students answered that their stay abroad did indeed result in the prolongation of their studies! This factor in particular seems to be statistically independent from all the rest factors.

The results of the evaluation could be summarised in the following:
- The percentage of female students of TEI of Athens participating in the mobility programme is one of the highest in Europe (75%). The average ratio in Europe is 60% for female students against 40% for male students.
- The high percentage of students of TEI of Athens, who feel disappointed regarding the language preparation offered, reflects the programme’s high demands for competences in foreign languages.

Based on the aforementioned report it is ascertained that “ERASMUS students are highly competent in foreign languages. As would be expected, the vast majority of them speak at least two languages (97%), three quarters (75%) had some competence in at least three languages and around a third (31%) in four languages.”
A great number of the students of TEI of Athens who participated in the LLP/Erasmus mobility programme would like to have received more information on accommodation matters. This is logical since it is true that “ERASMUS students have to make an important investment in terms of accommodation”, according to the aforementioned report.

- The vast majority of the students who participated in the programme finally attended classes at the host institutions without problems.

- A high percentage of students of TEI of Athens have not understood/been informed of the use of the ECTS system at the home institution as well as at the host institution abroad.

- “Just over a quarter of ERASMUS students who replied to the survey, in European level, reported that their degree would take longer to complete, given their ERASMUS period abroad, due to time being added to their degree, problems adapting to the new system, problems of recognition or other factors”. The relevant percentage amongst students of TEI of Athens is over 50%.

Based on this Executive Summary, TEI of Athens should prioritize support and materialization of the following categories of recommendations:

1. Recommendations and innovations on the level of national authorities and agencies
   1.1. Support a uniform implementation of ECTS and the Diploma Supplement in higher education institutions.
   1.2. Stimulate language education in secondary education.

2. Recommendations and innovations on the institutional level – Central management:
   2.1. Be active in creating a good service infrastructure for student mobility (such as public relations, international offices, professional internationalization staff) and in providing student accommodation (e.g. use of online booking systems through which mobile students can arrange their accommodation in advance) and other services.
   2.2. Provide more language training opportunities for mobile students and staff.

   E-Cultural and Linguistic Guides that have been produced by our Institute, is one of our initiatives under this concept.

3. Recommendations and innovations on the institutional level – Academic departments
   3.1. Give positive and objective information about student mobility and promote it as a part of the study programmes at an early stage.
   3.2. Use mobile student’s feedback (e.g. use Erasmus Ambassadors) to inspire potential new mobile students, e.g. through seminars and information fairs.
   3.3. Increase the awareness of centralized actions amongst Erasmus coordinators.
   3.4. Try to remove mobility barriers in areas such as recognition, language training and differences in the academic calendars.
   3.5. Reduce the internal bureaucracy around student mobility and do not add unnecessary complementary information request to EU forms.

Furthermore, we should take into consideration on a central European level that:

1. the existence of a risk of setting mobility barriers to students who originate from countries of less spoken languages is eminent, and therefore initiatives should be taken for combating this risk,
2. it is important to investigate and to encounter the reasons for which Erasmus students tend to elongate their studies,
3. it is obvious that the solution to the aforementioned demands of an increased investment to human capital on behalf of the Institutions, as well as of a general increase to the programme’s functional expenses.

Unfortunately, it has been evident for more than 10 years now that the ERASMUS programme is sub-financed (An. Barbian and Ul. Teichler, 1998). Delegating the responsibility for finding a solution to the problem mainly to the National Authorities and Agencies and secondly to the Higher Education Institutions with the recommendation to look for supplementary sources of financing (The Impact of ERASMUS on European Higher Education: Quality, Openness and Internationalization, Dec. 2008) is uncertain to bring the desired result.

Apart from the student part, the self assessment of TEI of Athens has shown that its International Office, although possess limited human and financial resources, has a high level of service. A steady improvement has been seen, and although there is still room for growth, the office is clearly moving in the right direction. Some
points are of particular concern from the point of view of services to international students, such as the orientation procedures which allow international and domestic students to get to know one another before the start of classes (this is made with the aid of ESN of TEI of Athens), the academic advising before classes begin, the Greek Language courses, the Library subscription and the Food service. It is recommended that further recognition should be given to student participation and study abroad scholarship opportunities should be developed.

If we may use a SWOT Analysis in order to identify the success factors for a quality development of students mobility for placement in TEI of Athens and thus internationalization, the results are revealing (Sflomos K., et al. (2009):

A. Strengths
- Strong European Environment
- Development of a reliable Network (home-abroad)
- Academic recognition of the practical training/period of study
- Extra support (residence, food etc.) from host enterprises
- Implementation of quality management philosophy and systems

B. Weaknesses
- Different structures established in each country (different bureaucracy in enterprises not only in the same country)
- Lack of sufficient financial support (avoid expensive cities)
- Coordinators not willing to provide continuous support to the students, in some Institutions (Departments)
- Deficiencies on surveillance on SMEs
- Insufficient language communication in very small Enterprises, in some EU countries

C. Opportunities
- European dimension / added value on studies. Knowledge of the European Labor Market
- Cross-country collaboration between Industry and University (research projects, technology transfer)
- ‘‘fermentation’’ of new projects (transfer of technology and expertise via beneficiaries)
- Improvement of language and cultural competencies
- Job opportunities in EU countries (potential employees)

D. Threats
- Economic barriers in living in expensive cities/countries
- Lack of interest of the training subject
- Poor communication outside the Company
- ‘‘Home – sickness’’, sensitive students
- Not a very friendly environment in the host Enterprise
- Insufficient knowledge of the foreign language and the culture of the country (for a qualitative ‘‘reception-acceptance’’ of the trainee)

E. Critical Success Factors
- Human resources (academics, administrators) committed to support students and inspired with the LdV philosophy
- Win-win situation for all three: students – Institutions – companies
- Clear understanding of mission
- Flexible administration at four levels (National Agency, Coordinating Institution, Sending Institution, Host Enterprises)
• Flexible and adaptable structures (office, telephone, internet, fax, PC and relevant facilities)
• Exciting subject of practical training
• Close supervision and on-going evaluation
• Development of a reliable NETWORK

3. CONCLUSIONS

TEI of Athens has established a comprehensive strategy for internationalisation and stated a clear mission to internationalise its students. While major development has been made during this time, significant challenges remain. These include the integration of the “international” students more into the TEI’s community, the improvement and better promotion of the international curriculum so that students will possess the appropriate knowledge for successful business careers in the 21st century and the introduction of new initiatives in the area of educational exchange. Further steps should be taken in European level, such as coordination and networking in mobility issues, harmonization of award criteria of ECTS, reinforcement of the counties with less spoken languages. National strategies are proved insufficient to deal with these points. Only if they are centrally dealt, internationalization could be better attained. Only then the notion of student “universalis” could be established.

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