

The Internationalisation of Higher Education, as Keystone for Development in Eastern Europe. A Case Study on Bucharest University of Economic Studies in Romania

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Abstract

This paper elaborates on three innovative processes that have a major impact on the evolution and competitiveness of modern higher education institutions, regardless of the field in which they are specialized, namely: internationalization, the knowledge-based society and leadership. The target segment of our scientific research is represented by higher education institutions in Romania, in correlation with trends in similar organizations in other European Union countries. Higher education institutions are a true backbone of a country's health and economic and social development, but the analysis of this sector is not achieved in an isolated manner, but in close consistency with other systems of national and international economy and society, referring especially to those from the European Union (EU).

Key words: internationalization, Higher Education, leadership, organizational culture.

J.E.L. Classification: I21, I23, I29

1. Introduction

Globalization is an increasingly important and present phenomenon, both in our lives as individuals and at the level of organizations. The phenomenon determines numerous political, economic, social, cultural changes etc.

One thing that is easy to perceive is the ease with which some entry barriers can now be overcome on a number of markets that were considered to be local markets with local actors and which could be easily defended by potential new competitors. These processes are strongly supported by an unprecedented development of information technology and telecommunications.

We notice that universities that until a long time operated locally have now come to provide global products or services as a result of the use of the Internet and other means of communication.

2. The context of internationalization for higher education institutions

Under the conditions of globalization we can talk about a tendency to uniformize some approaches and working procedures. Quite often, the multinational companies use standardized elements that can lead to an increase in the speed of work and a unified understanding of the phenomena addressed. These are elements which, in various forms, are also taken over by universities that internationalize their activities.

However, we can not say that things are so simple, that we can address the management processes and relationships in the higher education institutions identically. Even if the phenomenon of globalization continues to manifest itself with increasing dynamics, nations and cultures try to preserve and even develop their own identity (Năstase, Dobra, Valimareanu, 2016, p. 4-11).

This requires that the organizational leaders to consider to a great extent the local, regional specificity and cultural differences, together with other factors and all these together will continue

to shape the characteristics of interactions between universities and the national and international environments to which they address. At the same time, the values, attitudes and behaviors of educational leaders are largely influenced by the characteristics of the national and organizational culture in which they have formed and acted (Reed, 1999, p. 453-483).

A major challenge in organizational functioning is the way leadership manifests, how leaders of different teams act inside and outside the organization. In building a higher education institution capable of significantly expanding its activities at international level, leaders' vision and determination to develop systems and mechanisms that favor the process of internationalization of the organization and attract all its members is very important. In doing so, a strong organizational culture can be modeled to support openness to collaboration with organizations, not only local and national, but also internationally.

This means capitalizing the cultural dowry of many cultures, civilizations and facilitating an international transfer of know-how that supports the organization's performance orientation.

The Romanian society has undergone numerous transformations and the educational system has also undergone major changes, but also contributed to the quality of the transformations in society. Major changes after 1989, driven by the transition from the communist system to the free market economy, have generated numerous mutations of a quantitative and qualitative nature, including in the educational field (Heath, Norman, 2004, p.247–265). Although over two decades have passed, we can state that the educational system is still in the process of transformation, both in terms of its own functional parameters and in terms of the contribution expected

Internationalization is now seen as a state of normality. Most of those asked about the international activities of the university they work in will say that they are running regularly, at a relatively high intensity. Some even consider that the topic of internationalization of higher education institutions is a false one, because at the moment all these organizations have included such activities in the program (Scherer, Palazzo, 2011, p.48).

However, we can have a simplistic approach in which internationalization is often assimilated to the mobility of students and teachers. It is therefore good to recall some of the various ways in which it is possible to materialize and support the internationalization of higher education institutions, the elaboration and implementation of a strategy of university internationalization, the development of foreign language study programs, the conclusion of strategic partnerships with similar institutions Or complementary programs from other countries, participation in international programs, institutional involvement, as well as teachers in international networks, both institutional and specialist.

3. Trends in the internationalization of higher education institutions

One of the major challenges that higher education institutions at Europe level have to face is the implementation of the EU 2020 strategy and where education and research play a key role.

In this respect, we can mention the increase in the share of graduates of higher education among the population aged 30-34, over 40%, which outlines the major impact that universities are expected to have in the near future.

Here too, we can mention another strong European strategic objective, namely the participation of at least 15% of the population aged 25-64 in lifelong learning, which will lead to an increase in the quality of the activities carried out by this segment of the population.

The Bologna process is another major factor that has significantly altered the organization and functioning of higher education in Romania, providing a unitary approach at the level of universities and, at the same time, a necessary predictability of the stages of study that a person can go through.

The existence of a unitary structure, correlated with the transferable credit system, allowed the comparison of the results obtained by students from different countries, but also the possibility to integrate them into different educational systems in other countries, without interrupting the educational process (Oplatka, 2007). Practically, their teaching activities in foreign universities and the results obtained are recognized by the universities where they are enrolled, thus giving them a high degree of flexibility in accessing information and diverse training methods in multicultural environments.

Such an example is in Romania the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation (UEFISCDI).

Among the most common used, but also with a powerful impact on internationalization, we can notice the following trends for higher education institutions:

- Development of strategic partnerships at the international level – it implies that two or more universities decide to put together their resources in order to achieve strategic objectives, in a long term vision. It can deal with academic or research or even both fields actions,

- Designing dual degree programs – it is an attractive option for the universities as it easily facilitates the know-how transfer between the two involved institutions, as it is common that the professors who teach in such programs to come from both organizations. At the same time, it allows to both universities to take advantage of the partner's brand, but also to enter new markets in a consolidated manner.

- Develop more aggressive marketing approaches to attract quality students, teachers and researchers – it is a mirror of what it really happens in the business environment where the issues are not any more related to having a good product or service, but to be able to bring to the market. It is important that the universities to be able to reach the market niches that really need their products and services and to be able to continuous update them in order to meet at the highest standards their stakeholders' expectations.

- Increasing the connections between the academic environment and the business environment – more and more students or specialists who want to develop their professional competencies are not more interested only in the name or design of an academic program or course, but by the extent to which that program assures their professional progress and a high chance to be appreciated in the labor market. That's why, the universities struggle to attract as much as possible the important players in business environment, in order to design programs that are in accordance with the labor market demands. On the other hand, the companies are more aware that they can highly benefit by well qualified workforce without many investment from their part, if they strongly cooperate with the higher education institutions. They have also access to a good know-how that is created within universities and can attract talented young professionals.

- Developing publications that include in the Board of Journal, in the category of reviewers and as authors, specialists from several countries – this is a special approach that provide the academic and business community with updates related to different types of research that take place within universities. The cooperation within journals of a wide range of specialists strenghtens the opportunity to build up networks of international experts and to facilitate the international cooperation, at individual, team and institutional levels.

As we now talk about the revolution of knowledge and the transition to a knowledge-based economy, it is clear that these are accompanied by an increase in the educational, scientific, economic, technical, ecological and cultural changes that impact the internationalization of universities (Ronald, Bradley, Donna, 1997, p. 853-886).

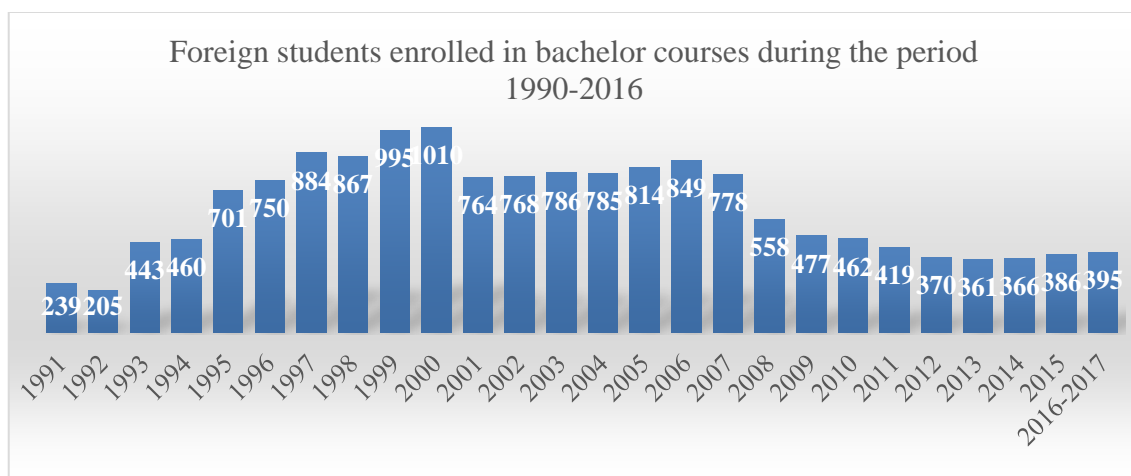
That's why the leadership becomes a central topic that attracts attention and generates numerous discussions about the impact of educational leaders in internationalizing the universities, in setting up and realizing some bold objectives, both in didactic and research fields and they must be able to build up and implement an attractive international vision (European Commission, 2017,p.84).

4. BUES Case

The internationalisation of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES) has been a constant effort of our institution over the last 20-25 years, a process in which support instruments such as TEMPUS and the programme of the World Bank in the mid-1990s were developed; these have encouraged the initiation and the development of study programmes and academic infrastructure. These programmes have been further completed by the Socrates/Erasmus programme and the operational programmes financed by the European Union (POSDRU, PODCA, etc.), the main target of which was the encouragement of mobility and the exchange of experience. The university intends to develop itself at an international level, in line with its centennial tradition and its vocation to be an economics, business and public management school, so that it becomes a visible presence, internationally recognised as a competitive educational and research option.

Looking behind, BUES has some background related to international experience, in terms of students and staff mobility, international cooperation projects as well as bilateral and multilateral academic cooperation partnerships developed through years.

For example, the aggregate analysis of the number of foreign students who have graduated BUES since 1990 shows a fluctuating evolution of this indicator with a growth rate in the period 1999-2000, with a consolidation stage in the range 2001-2007 and with a relative decline after 2008 (a situation explained by the unfavorable international context, the period being marked by the economic and financial crisis that started at the end of 2007). Starting with 2016, the number of foreign students has regained its upward trend, thus creating the premises for a pick-up in the enrollment. All this occurred against the background of an expected improvement in the national visa system. Foreign students from Europe mainly come from Austria, Italy, France, Sweden and from non-EU countries, mainly from Congo, South Africa, South Korea, Guinea, Mongolia, Sudan, Russia, Zaire, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Venezuela, Morocco, Turkey, Nigeria, the USA, Bangladesh, the People's Republic of China, Iraq, the Arab Republic of Egypt, Yemen, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Algeria.



Source: IRD, BUES, 2016 – Foreign students enrolled in bachelor's degree courses between 1990 and 2016

Furthermore, in order to ensure an on-going, growing flow of mobility funded through the ERASMUS Community programme, BUES has consistently sought to increase the number of cooperation agreements with partner universities within the European Union. Thus, the number of these agreements has increased steadily, from one university year to another, reaching from 18 agreements in the academic year 2000-2001 to 133 in the academic year 2015-2016. For the academic year 2016-2017, a total of 151 Erasmus partnership agreements were active. As for the number of outgoing students enrolled in BUES within the Erasmus programme, starting with the academic year 1998/1999 and up to the academic year 2016/2017, 3,288 students participated in mobility study programmes. As regards European students in Erasmus mobility at BUES, the situation for the last 10 years reveals a number of 779 incoming students. Thus, although efforts have been made to increase the number of ERASMUS mobility for both outgoing and incoming students, a proactive new approach is needed to support this mobility programme by ensuring an increase in the number of incoming students) at BUES level. Regarding the situation of Erasmus teachers receiving Erasmus mobility dedicated to teaching assignments within partner universities in the EU, statistics unfortunately provide unsatisfactory data: in the 1998-2016 reference periods, only 64 BUES professors participated in teaching assignments (STA) and 46 people attended training sessions (STT).

As for the evolution of BUES professors foreign mobility, a quantitative approach for 2006-2016 reveals a positive evolution, with a peak in the period 2011 - 2012, which is explained by the numerous projects financed through POSDRU and implemented at university level, these projects having an important component of transnational dissemination. However, it is noted that, in the absence of such a source of external funding, the share of participation in international conferences

and doctoral and post-doctoral research mobility is significantly diminishing.

In terms of bilateral and multilateral academic cooperation, the current state reveals a multi-level approach to institutional partnerships through memoranda of understanding (MoU), scientific cooperation agreements and specific cooperation agreements, on the priority institutional partnership level and on the BUES faculty-level cooperation. Thus, at institutional level, BUES has concluded a number of 169 Erasmus partnership agreements and 5 multilateral cooperation agreements within academic networks (CEESENet, CEEPUS, VUA, NISPACee, HERMES), agreements generating specific annual mobility for students and teachers, as well as concrete actions of university representation and cooperation in EU and international funded projects. In the field of bilateral cooperation over the past 10 years, BUES has concluded 150 agreements and memoranda of cooperation with universities from over 40 countries. Within the framework of 50 agreements, specific cooperation activities, such as dual degree programmes, bilateral student and teacher mobility, ad hoc cooperation actions, and various collaborations in the field of scientific research have been recorded over time (Freeman, 1984, p.252-284).

From the point of view of the financial impact, between 2010 and 2016, the participation of foreign students in bachelor, masters and doctoral programmes generated gross revenues from the collected tuition fees of 4,621,634.52 euros. As for the financial contribution of the Erasmus +, Key Area 1 - Mobility allocations to the BUES budget, the analysis of the last years (2010-2016) shows a stabilizing trend in the financial allocation, which allowed the use of important resources to support the process of internationalization of BUES:

Academic year	Erasmus financing KA1
2010/2011	616.046 Euro
2011/2012	732.684,56 Euro
2012/2013	665.303,6 Euro
2013/2014	617.851,29 Euro
2014/2015	670.609,65 Euro
2015/2016	755.929 Euro
2016/2017	762.785 Euro
Total 2010 - 2016	4.821.209,1 Euro

For the academic year 2017-2018, at the level of BUES, 1,185,085 euros (related to KA103) were allocated to the ERASMUS National Agency and KA107 - Mobility with partner countries was requested in the competition for 469,514 euros (the results of the competition will be announced in the second part of 2017).

Within a SWOT analysis perspective, we consider that the process of internationalization within BUES shall aim at capitalizing and maximizing the potential of the institution in terms of the educational infrastructure, the international competences and cooperation relations, in the context of the opportunities offered by the external environment, materialized through the possibility of accessing the sources of international financing for the funding of transnational cooperation, capitalization of the results of the participation in various international rankings and the possibility to increase the international prestige through the Alumni Network of the Romanian graduates working / studying abroad as well as the foreign ones. The involvement of the Romanian Diaspora professors of economics, business and public administration will be a priority of the internationalization process.

The strategic approach to internationalization in BUES shall follow the pragmatic integration of a set of conditions that are specific to the internationalization process as part of the institutional strategic approach, respectively (1) the dynamic nature of the internationalization processes and their growing relevance for institutional and national reforms, (2) the general re-assessment of the reasons and purposes for the internationalization of higher education, (3) the demand for increased responsibility of higher education institutions that are required to prove the benefits of internationalization and (4) the required financial support needed for the success of this given process.

Within this context, we consider that internationalization of BUES for the next at least 10 years should focus on: (1) in-house internationalization (related to classroom approaches, on campus or in the academic community, which helps the academic community to develop international knowledge and understanding and intercultural competences), (2) internationalization abroad (focusing on those activities that involve travelling abroad, including the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, the internationalization of study curricula), (3) internationalization of research (meaning the set of actions that allows the expansion of collaborative networks in research, development, innovation (RDI) of BUES researchers, in order to encourage the setting up of international research consortiums or the joining already existing and functioning consortiums, to ensure an efficient background for training BUES researchers in line with the new RDI trends) and (4) the consolidation of international prestige (related to the set of actions that allows for the growth of international visibility of BUES and allows the university to position itself as a regional leader in economic and administrative higher education).

Given the increased importance granted to international university rankings both by potential candidates and international partners, and by national bodies (see in this respect the initiative of the Ministry of National Education to introduce meta-ranking as a criterion for university financing), we consider that, in the same time, the BUES presence and the consolidation of its position in international rankings represent a catalyst for institutional development (Clarkson, 1995, p.92-117).

5. Conclusions

The commitment of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES) to the internationalization process have to be considered as one of the priorities of the academic management structures and have to involve the common effort both of the entire academic community and the administrative support. The BUES findings on internationalization, the powerful international competition, as well as the present legal and financial constraints call for a proactive approach of the internationalization process, meant to reposition BUES on the global education market, and for a coherent vision in accordance with the specific features of the university and of the national and European contexts. The benefits of the internationalization process are measurable and they will give good leverage to motivate the academic community and students in the university.

6. References

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