

The Use of Marketing Research in Studying the Internationalization of Higher Education at "Ovidius" University in Constanța

Mariana Jugănaru
Răzvan-Ionuț Drugă
"Ovidius" University of Constanța
juganaru.mariana@yahoo.com
drugarazvanionut@gmail.com

Abstract

Globalization, seen as a complex economic and social process, also has certain consequences for higher education. In this context, the issue of internationalization of education is of interest to all types of higher education institutions, governments, and international institutions.

The aim of this paper is to present the content of the concept of internationalization of higher education, in order to highlight its impact and its connection with the increase in the quality of education and research, and with the development of an open higher education system adapted to the current global context.

The specific aspects of this study are represented by the research into the internationalization of higher education within "Ovidius" University of Constanța (UOC), and the presentation of the results of a direct type of research on the assessment, at the level of international students, of the actions carried out by the institution within the internationalization strategy framework.

Key words: internationalization of higher education, mobility, student perception, opportunities

J.E.L. classification: I23, I24, I25, I28, I29

1. Introduction

"Ovidius" University of Constanța (UOC), a component of the Romanian public education system, is a public higher education institution, with legal personality, it is autonomous, open, being in permanent contact with the activities and performance of other universities and research institutes in the country, as well as from abroad. UOC is a "multidisciplinary and multicultural university, which presents to the interested persons an offer of undergraduate, master's and doctoral degree programmes, organised and carried out in compliance with the national legislation, while also taking into account international trends" (UOC, 2014, pp. 3-4).

The mission undertaken by "Ovidius" University of Constanța is to develop a competitive and collaborative educational and research environment capable of creating, preserving, and disseminating knowledge to the society. The essential coordinates by means of which this mission is accomplished are education, scientific research, and artistic creation at the highest European standards. Among the fundamental elements of the university's mission we are focusing on the objectives of particular interest from the perspective of the topic of this research, i.e., "ensuring a high quality of educational, research and management activities in order to increase the competitiveness of UOC at a national and international level; promoting national and European values in the scientific, cultural and educational fields, through international academic cooperation" (UOC, 2014, pp. 5-6).

2. Theoretical background

Demarcating the content of the concept of internationalization of higher education has been the object of the concerns of various international specialists, and of much research carried out under the coordination of prestigious institutions, such as: Organization for Economic Cooperation and

Development - OECD, Academic Cooperation Association - ACA (Schneller *et al.*, 2009), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO (Barrows, 2000), World Bank (Jaramillo *et al.*, 2011; World Bank, 2020), European Union (de Wit *et al.*, 2015a), etc..

Within certain approaches, one can notice a tendency to equate the terms internationalization of higher education and globalization, by limiting them to "cross-border activities", thus referring to those higher education activities which, in various forms, take place outside national borders.

According to a study published in 2008 by the OECD, there are differences in terms of content between the internationalization of higher education and globalization, even though, in reality, there is a reaction-response type of relationship between globalization and internationalization (Pricopie *et al.*, 2011, pp. 8-9).

Globalization is associated with the tendency towards creating an "integrated global market", "global interconnectivity", "realization of a global society", "a global system", "a world without borders, manifested through a flow of technology, products and services, knowledge, people, values and ideas which crosses national borders" (Pricopie *et al.*, 2011, p. 9). Whereas globalization represents a tendency towards uniformity, the internationalization of higher education is seen as an approach which highlights the specificity "of each cultural, political, economic, etc. space" (Knight, 2008, pp. 1-2 ; Pricopie *et al.*, 2011, p. 9).

The content of the concept of internationalization is constantly changing, as stated in the study "Affirming Academic Values in the Internationalization of Higher Education - A Call for Action", of April 2012, by the International Association of Universities (IAU) (UEFISCDI, 2013, p.11). It is considered that we can talk about the concept of internationalization since the 1990s, as until then the concept of "international education" was used, both concepts referring to the different ways in which the international dimensions are shaped in higher education, with reference, on the one hand, to mobility (materialized in studies abroad, exchanges, international students or academic mobility) and, on the other hand, to the curriculum (internationalization of the curriculum and of the teaching and learning process, also called "Internationalization at Home", which became as relevant as mobility) (De Wit *et al.*, 2015a, p. 4). More recent theoretical approaches to 'Internationalization at Home' point out the fact that it "refers to both formal and informal curricula and it aims to develop international and intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes for all students, regardless of whether they also participate in mobility opportunities" (De Wit *et al.*, 2015a, p. 5).

The shift towards the new concept emphasizes its character as a more comprehensive process, and compared to the 1960s and 1980s, internationalization takes place "in a new, complex, differentiated and globalized context" (UEFISCDI, 2013, p. 11; Knight, 2008, p. 3).

Researcher Jane Knight, from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada, points to the fact that there are four approaches to internationalization, namely: the activity approach (which includes academic exchange activities for students and teaching staff); the competence approach (which focuses on developing skills, competences, knowledge, attitudes, values and it targets students, teachers and the administrative staff); the ethos approach (aimed at creating an intercultural approach) and the process approach (dealing with research and community service through a combination of various activities, policies and procedures) (UEFISCDI, 2013, p. 9).

Furthermore, De Wit (director of the Center for International Higher Education and Boston College professor) points out that "there are tensions between a short-term neoliberal approach to internationalization, which focuses primarily on mobility and research, and a long-term comprehensive approach to quality, global learning for all" (De Wit, 2019, p. 9).

According to OECD, internationalization is "the set of processes whose combined effect, whether planned or unplanned, is to ensure the international dimension of the higher education experience within universities and similar educational institutions" (Pricopie *et al.*, 2011, p. 9).

The same University of Toronto researcher, Jane Knight, defines internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, mission and delivery of post-secondary education", thus emphasizing the dynamic nature of this approach" (Pricopie *et al.*, 2011, p. 9).

De Wit expands this definition and considers that internationalization is: "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the mission, functions and delivery of secondary or higher education services, with the aim of enhancing the quality of education

and research for all students and personnel, as well as making a meaningful contribution to society” (De Wit, 2020, p. iii; Petcu *et al.*, 2015, p. 6; De Wit *et al.*, 2015b).

The same specialist considers that the 1990s created the framework for the intensification of the globalization process at the level of economies and societies, a process which, combined with the specific aspects of the knowledge economy, created a new context, suitable for a more strategic approach to internationalization in higher education by all countries, regardless of their level of development. In the first decade of the 21st century, one could notice that, in addition to increasing student and teaching staff mobility, there was also a change in strategy, from cooperation to competition (An analysis of the profiles of the universities in Romania on several dimensions: Internationalization and Equity of Higher Education in Romania, p.12). The expansion of some universities beyond national borders has led to the perception that the internationalization of education has become a means to increase revenue, and also a way to improve their image/prestige. At the same time, De Wit considers that what were once considered traditional values in higher education (referring to exchanges and cooperation, peace and mutual understanding, development of human capital and solidarity) would now be overtaken by concerns about competition, rankings, positioning, income, image and prestige (De Wit, 2020, p. iii ; De Wit *et al.*, 2015b).

Furthermore, researcher Jane Knight even mentions an existential crisis regarding the conceptualization of internationalization, drawing attention to the fact that “due to the unprecedented expansion of internationalization at the institutional and national level, there has been a shift from internationalization as an academic goal towards a more commercial definition, thus raising questions about the value added to education” (UEFISCDI, 2013 p.11; Knight, 2008).

As a reaction to these trends, over the last decade more attention is considered to have been paid to issues related to the “internationalization of the curriculum at home” and the “comprehensive internationalization, which deals with all aspects of education in an integrated way” (De Wit, 2020, pp. iii).

The importance of shifting attention/interest towards “qualitative aspects of internationalization, such as citizenship development, employability and improving the quality of research, education and services to society” is emphasized. In this context, De Wit recalls that a study for the European Parliament on the state of internationalization in higher education, “gave this momentum an additional dimension” in the sense that the internationalization of education should be “The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of education, in order to improve the quality of education and research for all students and teaching staff and in order to make a meaningful contribution to society” (De Wit, 2020, p. iii).

3. Research methodology

The aim of this research is to assess the degree of satisfaction of international students with regards to the educational, social, and administrative activities at “Ovidius” University of Constanța.

In order to achieve this, a selective survey type of field research was organized, in which we have used the questionnaire as an instrument for collecting direct information and a sample of 81 international students from the UOC (Jupp, 2010; Silverman, 2004).

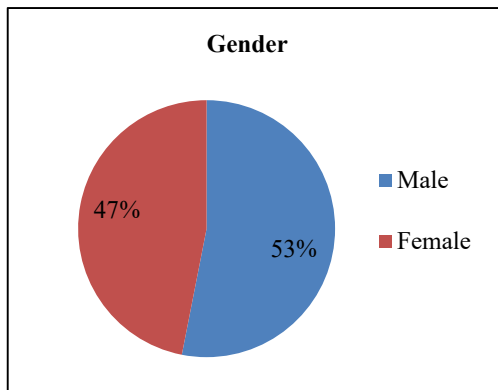
The questionnaire used in this study contained closed-ended questions (with a simple answer or multiple choice) and open-ended questions. The questionnaire, transferred into Google Form, was distributed online in the 15 June - 2 August 2022 period, via the university's social networks and through email services. The entire collectivity was represented by UOC's international students, enrolled in the full-time form of education, in all study programmes.

Furthermore, within this research, information about the real, undeclared, manifested behaviour of the students in the relationship with the Erasmus Office staff of the UOC, collected through the observation method, was used. The provisions of the GDPR were respected throughout the study. IBM SPSS Statistics software, version 26, was used to process the collected data, and Microsoft Office 365 was used to create the graphs.

4. Findings

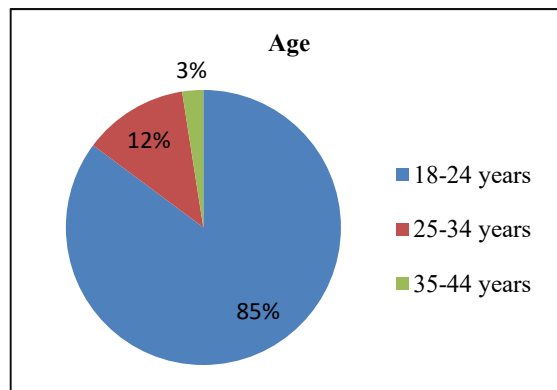
✓ In the first part of the questionnaire, a set of identification questions was formulated, so as to outline the profile of the respondents.

Figure no. 1. Sample structure (Gender)



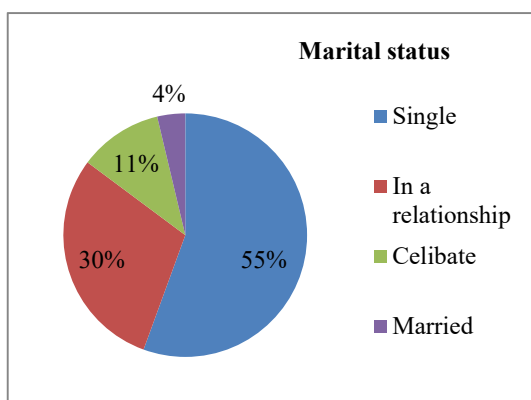
Source: Author's own processing

Figure no. 2. Sample structure (Age)



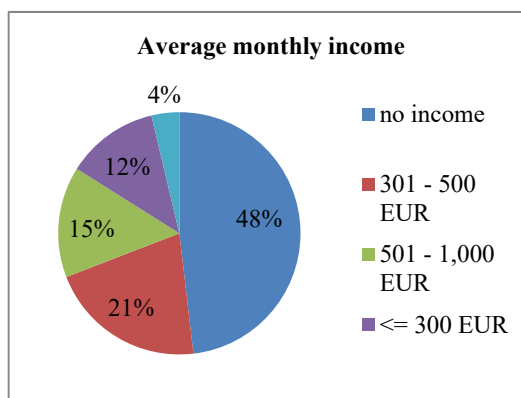
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Figure no. 3. Sample structure (Marital status)



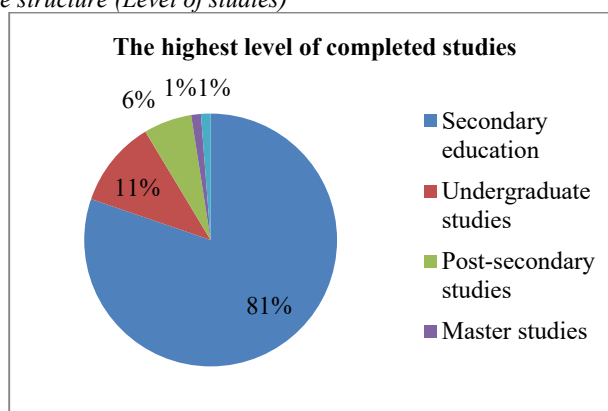
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Figure no. 4. Sample structure (Average monthly income)



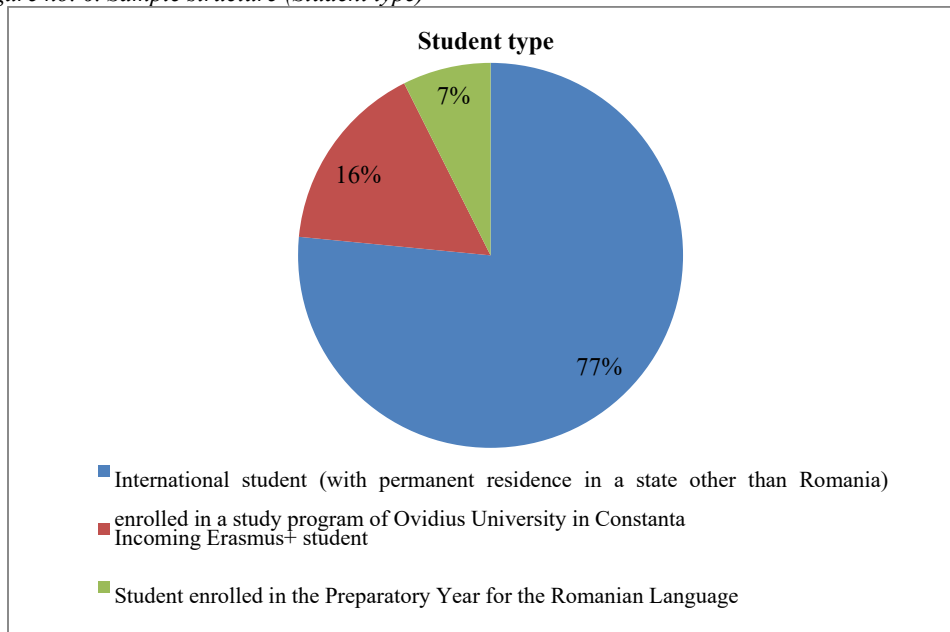
Source: Author's own processing

Figure no. 5. Sample structure (Level of studies)



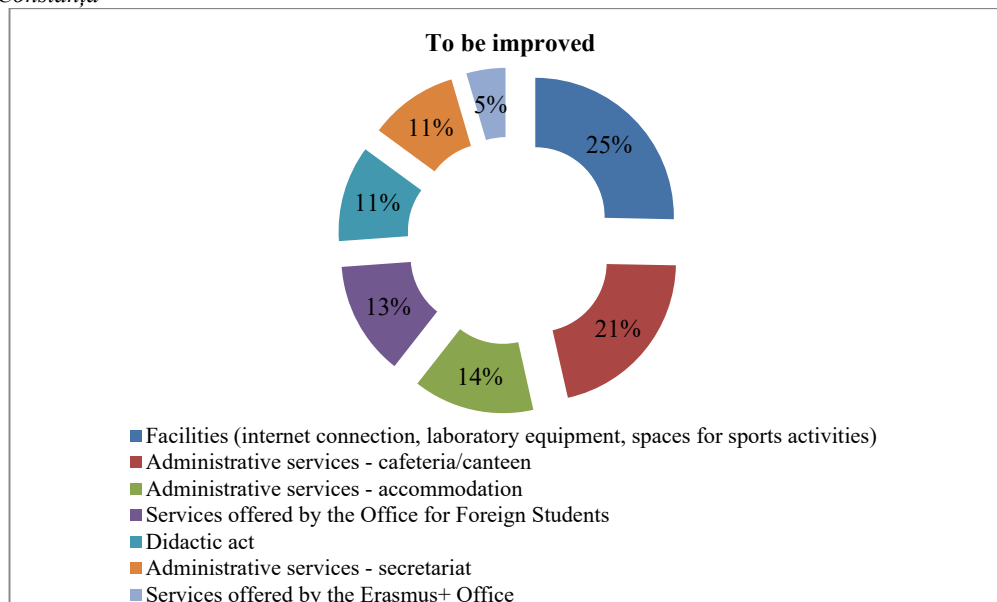
Source: Author's own processing.

Figure no. 6. Sample structure (Student type)



Source: Author's own processing

Figure no. 7. Aspects to be improved in the educational services offered by "Ovidius" University of Constanța



Source: Author's own processing

As can be seen from the graphical representations (Figures no. 1-7) the sample of 81 people used in our research has the following characteristics:

- 43 people are men and 38 are women;
- 69 of them are aged between 18-24 years; 10 people are in the 25-34 age group and only 2 people are in the 35-44 age group;
- most of them, namely 45, are single, 24 are in a relationship, 9 are celibate and only 3 are married;
- in terms of level of education, 65 people are undergraduates, 9 have Bachelor's degrees, 5 have post- secondary education, 1 person has a Master's degree and 1 person has a postdoctoral degree;

- 62 persons have international student status (with permanent residence in a country other than Romania), being enrolled in a UOC study programme, 13 persons are Erasmus+ incoming students and only 6 persons are students enrolled in the “preparatory year” for the Romanian language;

- the majority of people came to study Medicine (67), 2 people each study Economics, Psychology and Education Sciences, Letters, Natural and Agricultural Sciences, Informatics, Construction/Civil Engineering, and 1 person studies Engineering, while another studies Physical Education and Sports;

- the 81 people in the sample come from 27 countries, as follows: 11 people from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 10 from Greece, 8 from Turkey, 6 from Sweden, 5 from Italy, 4 each from Egypt, Germany and Spain, 3 each from Morocco, Pakistan and Syria, 2 each from Finland, France, Iraq and Israel, only 1 from Belgium, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Georgia, India, Jordan, Portugal, Switzerland, the Republic of North Macedonia, Albania, Ukraine and Yemen.

✓ The answers given to another question provide interesting information about the motivation of the people in the sample for choosing to study at UOC.

Even if more than one answer could have been chosen, the ranking of the reasons (after processing the information collected) is the following: the cost level (chosen by 37 people); the geographical location (30 people); recommendations from other people (29); the educational offer of the university (23), the standard of living in the city/country (20), to meet new people (18); to get to know the culture and traditions of another country (14); the social life in the city/country (14); the alignment of the study programme with their personal needs (12); the feedback received from university graduates (11), the language used in teaching activities (10); to get a better job (10), the reputation of the higher education institution/position in international rankings (6); the desire to learn a language different from that of their home country (5).

✓ The processing of the answers from another question allowed us to make a prioritization of the sources of information used by the people in the sample regarding the educational offer of “Ovidius” University of Constanța. In fact, this was a multiple-choice question in the questionnaire used.

The most important sources of information are considered to be the following: colleagues, friends (for 46 people); the university’s website (for 42 people); the social networks (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) (for 20 people). To a lesser extent, recruitment companies were also used for information (for 11 people); educational platforms (8 people); Erasmus+ students who visited the respondents’ home country and governmental organizations in their home country (5); reports from specialized institutions (4); various student associations (3 people).

✓ A set of questions in the questionnaire aimed to provide information about how international students assess UOC’s offer in terms of teaching activities and administrative services.

Closed-ended questions were formulated, and the statistical-mathematical model “Semantic Differential” was used to process the answers.

The results obtained from the processing of the answers contributed to the knowledge of the degree of satisfaction expressed by the students regarding the aspects pursued, which can be grouped as follows:

- Aspects related to the performance of teaching activities in the UOC: the quality of the course content; the quality of the teaching methods; the interaction with the teaching staff; the classrooms; the study rooms; the laboratories, etc.; the library; the access to a computer room; the access to the Internet; the access to various scientific publications.

- Aspects related to the involvement/participation of foreign students in different activities, such as: opportunities for practice; internship opportunities; volunteering opportunities; Erasmus+ opportunities; Confucius Class opportunities; opportunities offered by student associations; student conferences, congresses, workshops; student camps/excursions; student information service.

- Aspects related to the integration of international students into the UOC, in relation to: the daily life of the institution; the local students; other international students; the local community.

- Aspects related to the administrative and social services, namely: dormitories; cafeteria/canteen; the interaction with local students; the interaction with other international students; the interaction with the faculty’s secretariat; the interaction with the administrative staff.

Among the highest values, which signify a high level of satisfaction, the following are worth mentioning: the quality of course content; the interaction with other international students; the interaction with the faculty’s secretariat; the integration into the daily life of the institution; the interaction with the teaching staff; Erasmus+ opportunities; the quality of the teaching methods; the integration into the local community.

A low level of satisfaction (reflected in the lower values obtained by processing the information) was recorded in relation to the aspects related to: dormitories; cafeteria/canteen; Internet access; access to a computer room; library; interaction with local students.

The research results helped to identify the strengths and weaknesses of some of the activities carried out by UOC in relation to international students.

5. Conclusions

We believe that this research, whose partial results we have presented in this paper, has allowed us to achieve our objective.

The international students, who were studying at the time of the research being conducted, have a positive general image of/ “Ovidius” University of Constanța.

The main sources of information about the UOC offer are represented by colleagues, the university’s website and social networks, and the main motivations for choosing the institution are: the level of costs, its geographical location, other people’s recommendations, the educational offer of the university, the standard of living in the city/country, the desire to meet new people, to know the culture and traditions of another country, the social life in the city/country, and also the alignment of the study program with their personal needs.

The 81 international students come from 27 countries (different in terms of the level of economic development, but also in terms of the organization of the higher education system) and study within 9 of the 16 faculties in the UOC structure. The Faculty of Medicine attracts the highest proportion of international students (82.72%).

The aspects which were less liked by international students (resulting from the processing of the information obtained from the questionnaires) should be the main directions of action for the UOC’s management in the future. These aspects particularly deal with the administrative services offered to the students, but also the support services in order to improve the level of language skills with the objective of participating in the teaching activities of “Ovidius” University of Constanța. Moreover, special attention should also be paid to the initiation and implementation of certain activities which can contribute to increasing the interaction between international and Romanian students, and to the satisfaction of certain motivations expressed by the foreign students with regards to their desire to meet new people, to know the culture and traditions of the city/country and to get more involved in the life of the community.

Increasing the degree of satisfaction of international students with UOC's educational offer can help attract a higher number of international students.

The internationalization of “Ovidius” University of Constanța represents an opportunity to increase the prestige of the institution, to practise a modern higher education, in line with the current and future requirements of the international economy and society.

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