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## Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

### The Regional and International Dimension of Higher Education – Common or Separate roads? History, Present and Future

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# The Regional and International Dimension of Higher Education – Common or Separate roads? History, Present and Future

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**Abstract:** *The present paper aims at putting on paper hot current topics related to the international dimension of education, in particular to the higher education system. Starting from the roots and the economical, political and social rationales of internalization, the article offers a pleading for the priority that the academic rationales for internalization have. Particular considerations are offered with regard to the European Higher Education – the Bologna Process, the European Higher Education Area, the European Standards and Guidelines – discussing a possible role that this plays in favor or against the International Higher Education in its' true meaning. Current challenges and future perspective are put under the light of the necessity for continuous research and gain of understanding in this area.*

**Key words:** *Internationalization, Globalization, Regionalization, European Dimension of Education, Bologna Process, EHEA, ESG, UNESCO/OECD, International Institutional Policies*

## A Brief History of the Internationalization of Higher Education

Before focusing our attention on the current debates regarding the internationalization of Higher Education, it is important to review the knowledge on the beginnings and the evolutionary course of this concept. In most of the cases, the present trends have strong roots in the past, and by this we refer to the sum of events that had great effect on today's shape of the economic, social and political context, and especially on the structure and ideology of the Higher Education System, or the concept of education in general. In fact, education is at the very core at all economic, social and political aspects and so it is very much influenced by different factors, and, as well, influences everything around.

The educational paradigms, in the general sense, have been going through wide transformations through time; starting from this point and taking into account all the historical events that took place at a global scale, the internationalization of Higher Education has had at least the same complicated development pattern. Muller points out the rather cyclical character of the internationalization: in the past, the Higher Education has shifted from a global type education system to a more isolated, national one, and now the globalization of the society imposes a revival of the universal character and role of education.<sup>1</sup> Looking in the same direction, the educational institution, through their nature are aiming at progress regarding universal knowledge, but have been living, until now, in a world of the nation-states, of which specificity has left a great mark upon education.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning with the Dark Ages and the Renaissance period until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, we can notice some marks of internalization in Higher Education by looking at the pilgrimages made

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<sup>1</sup> Muller, S. (1995) *International Challenges to American Colleges and Universities: Looking Ahead*; ed. K.H. Hanson & J.W. Meyerson, ACE, Oryx Press, Phoenix.

<sup>2</sup> Kerr, C. (1994) *Higher Education Cannot Escape History: Issues for the Twenty first Century*; Suny Series Frontiers in Education, State University of New York Press, Albany.

by the elite students and scholars. The arguments that originated in the pilgrims are somehow similar to today's rationale for mobility promotion: the uniformization of the programme studies and evaluation, recognition of studies among different areas, the exchange of ideas, experiences, of principles and political perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Taking all these things into account, we fully understand the decision of the European Commission to name its most important mobility programme – the Erasmus Programme- after one of the best-known and “highly mobile” scholar of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

The most important element of internationalization in the period between the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and World War II is the export of the educational systems, more exactly, the export from the colonial powers to the colonies, and later on, to the newly created independent states (for instance, the Indian Higher Education system and the ones belonging to other states from the Asian area, from Africa, Caribbean and North America that belonged to the English Empire, have been shaped according to the English educational model).

After the fall of the empires these influences continued to exist, although, more recently, there are other influences as well coming from the side of other national education systems or from the international sphere. Another component of internationalization in this period is the international area of research and scientific publication, which was actually always, as still is, a reference point for all the Higher Education Institutions, cooperating and knowledge exchange among institutions worldwide being an ascendant trend.

Coming closer to the present, in the time of the World War II and the Cold War, and even before the 1920s, there was a wave of establishment of entities of all types that focus of promoting the internalization of education, such as: the Institute of International Education<sup>4</sup> in 1919 in the United States, the British Council<sup>5</sup> in 1934, UNESCO-CEPES founded on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September 1972 in Bucharest as a unique intergovernmental centre for the Higher Education from the European region, North America and Israel<sup>6</sup>, and the examples can continue.

The trends of cooperation at international level in the academic environment have increased after World War II mainly in the USA and the Soviet Union, both super-powers having strong political interests in promoting international cooperation, like the extension of their influences as far as possible; meanwhile Europe was still recovering from the grave damages caused by the war. The old continent had either lost its academics in war or due to migration reasons, the main destination for these being the USA, Canada and Australia.<sup>7</sup> At the same time the USSR was widening its political, economic, social and academic control in Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, there wasn't a real internationalization of Higher Education just yet, since the cases of regional and international cooperation were isolated.

The '70 and '80 are characterized by an expansion of Higher Education and a reorientation of the educational institutions towards forming human resources, additional to their traditional role of knowledge production. Still, it's the '80 that represent a decisive moment for internationalization, since the constant power-gaining of the European Commission and the rising of the economical power of Japan will have great roles in turning the world context around. Hereby the American domination in the fields of education and research would be put under threat, and also, in the decade that follow we witness the fall of the USSR. The end of the Cold War leaves the world in a somewhat anarchical state, the hegemony of the USA and USSR turning into a state of emerging nationalism, confronted even with inter-ethnic conflicts.

Thus and so, today we find ourselves at the birth of a proper context for globalization in all sphere of life: the economical, social, political and in the knowledge and educational area.

<sup>3</sup> De Ridder-Simoens, H. (1992) *Mobility. A History of the University in Europe*, ed. H de Ridder-Simoens, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, vol.I, 280-304.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.iie.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/new/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cepes.ro/>

<sup>7</sup> Kerr, C. (1994) *Higher Education Cannot Escape History: Issues for the Twenty first Century*; Suny Series Frontiers in Education, State University of New York Press, Albany.

## Internationalization vs. Globalization

Internationalization, which is perceived as the emerging of border-crossing activities among national systems of Higher Education, is seen as losing ground in the front of globalization, which is referring more to the border-crossing activities among blurred and scattered national systems, a state that actually is reflecting global tendencies and increases global competition.<sup>8</sup>

The problem discussed by Teichler is a very interesting one and it points directly to the core of current debates in the field: are we talking about the internationalization of Higher Education or about the globalization of it? Are we dealing with “global education”? If so, is this an effect of capitalism (or “turbo-capitalism”, as Teichler calls it) or a “global understanding”?

If we talk about a common vision on education, or more specific, upon Higher Education, are we still talking about national diversity in tertiary educating?

## International Dimension vs. European Dimension of Higher Education. The European Higher Education Area

The main rationale of the Bologna Process is well-known: the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This is seen as the instrument for the strengthening and enrichment of the cultural, intellectual, social, scientific and technical dimensions of Europe.<sup>9</sup> Thereby, it is possible that we might be talking about the Europeanization of Higher Education.

Among the most important instruments for the establishment of EHEA we mention the comparability and compatibility desiderate among national education system in Europe. As concrete measures for this we have the Bologna action lines that refer to comparability and compatibility, as follows: equivalence and recognition of competences and prior learning among any EHEA state, mobility promotion (both students and academics), the development and implementation of a common credit transfer system – named the European Credit Transfer System, ECTS – which would facilitate mobility and recognition of competences and learning outcomes. This was subsequently build upon and formed the principle of Life Long Learning (LLL) of permanent education.

Another instrument for the consolidation of the EHEA was the mechanism of quality assurance through developing a methodological framework and also common standards in the EHEA – but we will discuss the trajectory of this European methodology in quality assurance and its range of influence. Last, but not least, the promotion of the European dimension of Higher Education, in particular in the case of curricular development, inter-institution cooperation, mobility partnerships and the integrated programme studies, training and research, represent needful prerequisites in order to establish EHEA.

All the premises of the Bologna Process are created as a set of measures of a voluntary process of harmonization, and not as contractual-based clauses.<sup>10</sup> All of these are the first instruments for the accomplishment of the Bologna Process, but, together with the institution of Ministerial Conferences every two years as contexts for debate and decision, the sphere of the process has widened, by paying more attention and efforts into the correct implementation of the measures.

## “Exporting” the European Higher Education Area

With regard to the external visibility of the EHEA, the promotion of the European Higher Education System worldwide is in fact one of the core principles of the Bologna Declaration (1999). Thus, in the Bologna Declaration it is firmly stated that the promotion of the attractiveness of the

<sup>8</sup> Teichler, U. (2004) The Changing Debate of Internalisation of Higher Education. *Higher Education*, Issue 48, 5 – 26, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> The Bologna Declaration, Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Bologna beyond 2010 – Report on the development of the European Higher Education Area, Background Paper for the Bologna Follow-up Group prepared by the Benelux Bologna Secretariat -, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference, 28 – 29 April 2009.

European Higher Education System is crucial, in that the education reflects the coefficient of power and sustainability of Europe.

As I mentioned above, a common methodological framework for quality assurance in the EHEA was set up, generically known as The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG).<sup>11</sup> With the occasion of the Bergen Ministerial Conference in 2005 the ESGs were adopted. Since then a lot of the EHEA states have followed and implemented the ESG, introducing great reforms into their national quality assurance systems, even though not all of the standards or guidelines were fully implemented.

In 2007, the Ministers that met in London have taken into discussion the achievements so far and have supported the creation of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).<sup>12</sup> Also, in the London Communiqué the enhancement of transnational education was mentioned, which should be in line with the ESG, but also with the UNESCO/OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education<sup>13</sup>. The declared scope of these guidelines is that of assuring mutual trust and promoting international cooperation among the suppliers and the beneficiary of the transnational education.

There are different forms of transnational education: studying in a different country, external mobility for a predetermined period followed by the recognition and equivalence of the studies, but also studying in a foreign-originated institution that functions in one's own state and of which releases a certificate recognized in the homeland of the institution. Another form of transnational education is, of course, online learning or e-learning.

Bearing with all these forms of transnational education forms, the variety of ways in which a educational institution can function, the very variety of the educational institution themselves, but also the explosion of new abilities and competences needed by the labour market, the development and implementation of a coherent quality assurance mechanism is an imperative. The role of the ESG and of the UNESCO/OECD as such, is to ensure the fact that regardless of their option for one institution or another for their studies and formation, the student's quality in learning outcomes and certificate will be safeguarded.

It is interesting to reflect on some new challenges that are also the core of today's debates. For example, what should come first in the case of a European educational institution that operates on a different continent – the ESG or the quality assurance standards and guidelines of the respective country? The answer gets even more complicated when we take into account that the respective institution will provide a "European" certificate, with competences recognized in the EHEA. On the other hand, any institution that operates in a certain country should function with regard to that country's legal framework and policies in quality assurance.

The current state of the art is that there are site visits conducted by panels of experts in order to measure the compliance with the ESG of both European and non-European institutions located in different parts of the world, but this is a voluntary process that is conducted only at the will and initiative of the educational institution.<sup>14</sup>

## Internationalization at Institutional Level

It is common that when we talk about internationalization, the first element that is associated with this concept is the mobility, and in the great majority of the (European) cases, this refers to the Erasmus Programme for students and the Socrates Programme for Professors. Without diminishing in any way the importance of this programme, we would just like to point out the fact that

<sup>11</sup> ENQA (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, Publication, ENQA, Helsinki, 2005

<sup>12</sup> London Communiqué *Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges to a globalised world*. Communiqué of the Conference of the Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Londra, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO (United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education*. Paris, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> EUA / *Institutional Evaluation Programme*; <http://www.eua.eu/iep/Home.aspx>

internationalization of Higher Education encompasses a greater range of activities like: projects or programmes that aim at curriculum development so that it should be accessible for all students, regardless of their country of origin, and in the same time the extension of the mechanisms that support the quality of the teaching-learning process in the context of a widening mass of students – but in number and in diversity.

Any act that comes into the support of the international students and also that leads to a greater accomplishment of the Bologna aims are considered in general as being part of the internationalization in education sphere.

As regards the institutional level, casting an eye on the Romanian Universities that are the founders of the so-called “Universitaria Consortium” – Babeş-Bolyai University<sup>15</sup>, University of Bucharest<sup>16</sup>, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iași<sup>17</sup> and the West University in Timișoara<sup>18</sup> - we can find in a certain amount the international elements as described above.

Thus, at least in the case of the above-mentioned Universities, when looking at the sections that refer to the international domain, we find links and documents that attest the Universities’ European and International partners and partnerships, or the bilateral agreements among Universities; their membership in different international networks, and the administrative structure that deals with the European programmes and other events in collaboration with another EU member. Thus we can notice the efforts pushed by these Universities into the direction of internationalization, but still it is clear that continuous focus needs to be placed and Universities need to pursue a permanent activity in this field in order to establish a real internationalization of higher education.

The Universitaria Consortium is an example at the national level of collaboration between Romanian Universities, today composed of 5 members: Alexandru Ioan Cuza University from Iași, Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca, Bucharest University, West University from Timișoara and the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest. In the first instance, the Consortium functioned as a rather informal debate frame, but today the Consortium works under a full legal status. The entity has ordinary assemblies in the case of which numerous discussions regarding higher education trends and challenges are discussed. The outcome of these gatherings is a clear and common position of the 5 Universities concerning different aspects and policies in the Romanian higher education.

Moreover we notice several instances of collaborations between the “Universitaria Universities” in the form of different projects. For instance, in the year 2011 the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University from Iași along with the other members of the Consortium will demarcate a programme named “Academic Community for Quality Management in Higher Education”.<sup>19</sup> This initiative aims at creating an academic community with the scope of sustaining the developments and restructures of the Romanian tertiary system through adapting the working methods, instruments and systems of total quality management (TQM), in accordance with the ever-changing needs of the academic stakeholders.

Another example of good practice regarding collaboration between Universities, taking place among the Consortium members, is the recognition and equation of study credits (ECTS) obtained at the any of the Universities from the Consortium. Therefore, the Babeş-Bolyai University states in its ECTS Statute that any ECTS gained from the different Universities from the Consortium can be recognized.<sup>20</sup> Although it is clear that more effort is necessary in order to establish full inter-universities collaboration, this example of the Universitaria Consortium is a first step towards national collaboration followed by international collaboration.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.cci.ubbcluj.ro/> ; <http://www.ubbcluj.ro/intstudents/> ;

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.unibuc.ro/ro/adminbs\\_bpc\\_ro](http://www.unibuc.ro/ro/adminbs_bpc_ro)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.uaic.ro/uaic/bin/view/Cooperation/DepartamentulRIIU>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.uvt.ro/international/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://media.unibuc.ro/la-vedere/universitatile-din-consortiu-universitarea-membre-ale-unei-comunitati-universitare-de-asigurare-a-calitatii-in-invatamantul-superior>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.ubbcluj.ro/en/studenti/invatamant/ects.html>

## What do Universities think of Internationalization

Sliding from the national context, one study implemented at international scale, in which 176 Higher Education Institutions from 66 different states, reveals a series of important aspects that tells us more about the way in which academic stakeholders perceive the concept of internationalization in their institution, as follows:

1. Mobility of students and professors is perceived as the most important element of internationalization;
2. Brain drain and loss of cultural identity are seen as the greater risks of internationalization. Still, this was not the case for European respondents. This is not necessarily surprising, but what was considered a threat was the emergence of new programme studies in English, which still leads to a nationalist component for the conserving the national language.
3. Student and staff development, setting up quality standards, international cooperation for research, were all regarded as best benefits of internationalization. Still, it is interesting to notice, that in the case of European respondents, the first and most important benefit of internationalization is giving more importance to quality assurance, followed by the awareness of cultural diversity and, only then, the development of the academic stakeholders.
4. Distance learning and utilizing of ICTs are seen as key areas that have received a great deal of attention. In the case of Europe, the emergence of study programmes in English occupy the 3<sup>rd</sup> place for the most important elements that have developed as a result of internationalization – this is very interesting to notice, as it is also perceived as a threat.
5. Academic staff is seen as the most active promoters of internationalization, not students or non-academic staff.
6. The lack of finance is seen as a main obstacle for internationalization.
7. 2/3 of the institutions declare that they have strategies and policy in place for internationalization at institutional level, but they lack financial support for the implementation and monitoring of results.<sup>21</sup>

Returning to our initial question about the distinction between international education and global education, it is very important to know just what (or whom) we have in mind while using the concept of internationalization, more exactly, what are our geographical priorities. Is it possible that a student might have a preference in terms of the geographical area where he/she wants to study, or is the desire for studying at a specific University (due to its' reputation, performance in a specific field etc.) the main driver for ones choice? Do these values, or preferences, change in the case of an academic staff, or, going further, when it comes to the institutional policy in this field? We shall seek an answer in the case of the latter, since it's clear that the policy of the institution regarding international cooperation will turn into having specific agreements and partnerships with different institutions from specific areas in the detriment of others, and clearly this thing will directly determine an individual range of possibilities to choose from.

It seems like these geographical preferences do exist, and that they are quite different when comparing between areas (see table 1).

It's quite clear that in the case of Europe, Asia and Africa, the first priority in terms of international cooperation is, in fact, an intra-regional one, thus in this cases there is a tendency to prefer implementing international activities inside their own continent. It is possible that the reasons for this fact are of economical and geopolitical nature, being also in connection with the prior existing connections and cooperation experiences. Either way the impact of intra-regional approaches on the internationalization of education policies in Higher Education need to be taken into account through continuing research in this direction.

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<sup>21</sup> Knight, J. (2003) Internationalization of Higher Education Practices and Priorities: 2003 IAU Survey Report. *International Association of Universities*.

**Table 1**

Region	Priority no. 1	Priority no. 2	Priority no. 3
<b>Africa</b>	Africa	Asia, Europe	North America
<b>Asia</b>	Asia	Europe	North America
<b>Europe</b>	Europe	North America	Asia
<b>Latin America</b>	North America	Europe	Asia, Latin America
<b>Middle East</b>	Europe	North America	Middle East
<b>North America</b>	Asia, Europe	Middle East	Latin America

Therefore the great challenge about having a real internationalization in higher education is very much connected with the differences that occur between regions, in terms of how different regions understand and relate themselves to internationalization. If we are to take the European case only, the efforts of the representatives of the European Universities should be directed at the present moment in fully establishing the EHEA, and this is seen as a desiderate in the context of internationalization. This is actually understandable and reasonable, since Europe is aiming at consolidating the European identity.

### **Concluding remarks and future studies**

The only way to fully understand the phenomenon of internationalization is by taking into account all the economic, social, political and educational aspects that derive from this concept. Thus, even though we need to acknowledge the fundamental importance of all of the economical and political rationales for establishing a regional space and a global space for education, the academic and educational arguments for an international education need to be of primary concern, not only seen as side effects. All the rationales that support personal, professional and educational development – of all the stakeholders in the academic environment – and also the ones that enhance curricular development and qualitative growth of the learning and research outcomes and their impact on society – and not in a vacuum of the University – must be the main principles and drivers of internationalization.

For a better understanding of internationalization and, especially, for a better understanding of how different actors from different corners of the world relate themselves to internationalization, continuing the studies in this field is a desiderate. It is also preferable to conduct studies in communities that have received less attention until now in order to get a full picture, and not bias our beliefs with pure regional views.

All in all, the internationalization is a continuous awareness exercise, one of planning and developing policies and strategies, of implementing them from the institutional level, of continuous monitoring and of constant defining and redefining the tools that enhance an “international agreed upon quality” of education. The transition from economical and political rationales for having an international dimension of higher education to educational and academic rationales and also focusing more on brain gain rather than brain drain and also cultural gain rather than cultural loss are prerequisites for a real establishment of internationalization in Higher Education.



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<http://www.uvt.ro/international/>