

Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference 4th Edition

How do Romanian universities promote their educational offer and what mechanisms are used to attract international students?

Theme 1: Furthering internationalization of higher education

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Abstract

Overarching strategies at the European level underline the importance of mobility, thus promoting the higher education offer should be among the key topics that dominate the internationalization agenda in Romania, in the context of a highly competitive market worldwide. The paper highlights the disconnect between the internationalization strategies of Romanian universities and concrete measures undertaken to promote their educational offer. The paper includes a short analysis on how HEIs promote their study offer internationally, using three Romanian universities as case studies. Starting from a review of institutional internationalization strategies, strategic plans for institutional development and methods and instruments used to promote their educational offer, the article also includes a short questionnaire interpretation to highlight the most popular promotional mechanisms used to attract international students. Conclusions show what HEIs perceive as the most effective promotional tools and how, despite international trends, social media is still not deemed essential to advertise their educational offer to international students.

I. Research question and purpose of the research

1. Research question and aim of the study

This paper aims at identifying how Romanian universities promote their educational offer, if there is a link between their internationalization of higher education strategies and their actual actions. The purpose is to contribute to the improvement of internationalization of higher education policies/dimension by understanding universities perceptions regarding strategies, actions and mechanism they use in order to develop mobility and contribute to a better quality of higher education. The paper will present the link between the internationalization strategies of the Romanian universities and the status quo of promoting their educational offer. The article also aims to include a short analysis on how universities promote their study offer nationally and internationally, taking into account three Romanian universities as case studies and look into their institutional internationalization strategies, the strategic plans for institutional development and the instruments used for promoting their educational offer.

The main research questions considered are:

- Is there any correlation between the institutional internationalization strategy, the strategic plan for institutional development and the main activities actually performed to promote their educational offer?
- How do universities promote their educational offer and what mechanism do they use to attract international students?
- Which mechanisms are most efficient in attracting international students?.

2. Methodology

The methodology of the article has a mix of qualitative and quantitative data analysis on documents analysis and data collected through a perception questionnaire. As Byrman (Bryman, 1988) stated, each research needs to have a specific research method in order to better answer to the research questions of the study. Therefore, there will be a document analysis of the internationalization strategies and the strategic plans for institutional development, understanding the methods and instruments used for promoting their educational offer.

The universities that were asked to complete the questionnaire will remain anonymous. These institutions were chosen based on the number of students (small or big), geographical position, in order to cover all areas from Romania, type of institution in terms of public and private together with the institution's mission, comprehensive or technical.

In the end, the article will provide several recommendations at institutional level on ways improve the level of promoting the educational offer.

One of the research limitations is the low number of universities that contributed to the questionnaire. However, Romanian universities are rather similar, which is why I considered the institutions that contributed to this study representative at national level.

3. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Internationalization of higher education is defined by many international institutions together with many experts and academics at international level. Jane Knight defined internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2008). Internationalization of higher education according to Knight is a process that has two important components – "internationalization at home" and "internationalization abroad". Internationalization (off campus) at home means

strategies and policies to develop activities that help students achieve and understand intercultural differences, international understanding and intercultural abilities. Internationalization abroad means transnational mobility for students, teachers, of the programs, of the courses, curricula and of the projects. Hans de Wit, one of the most well-known researchers on internationalization has updated the first definition by J.Knight on the internationalization of higher education, describing internationalization as being "the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society." (De Wit, 2015), (De Wit, H., Hunter F., Howard L., Egron-Polak E. (Eds.), 2015)

OECD defines internationalization in general terms, according to Pricopie et al., as "the totality of processes whose combined effect, planned or not, is to ensure the international dimension of higher education experience in universities and similar educational institutions". (Pricopie Remus)

Debates from the last several years in the academic communities expanded and lead to a new wave regarding internationalization of education, namely – redefining and rethinking of internationalization of higher education. If at first the main rationale of internationalization of higher education was perceived as increasing the "international dimension in teaching and research or fostering a climate of greater appreciation for and understanding of other cultures, languages and different ways of approaching and analyzing issues" (Egron-Polak, E., Hudson, R., 2012), now according to the 5th Global Survey Report, developed by IAU (Marinoni, 2019), the benefits of internationalization are seen as predominantly improving the "international cooperation and capacity building" and the "quality of teaching and learning", with an except for North America who sees "increased international awareness of/deeper engagement with global issues by students" (Marinoni, 2019) as the main important benefit. According to the previous General Secretary of IAU, Eva Egron-Polak and of the Global Survey report, developed by IAU (Egron-Polak, E., Hudson, R., 2012), the relevance of internationalization is becoming more and more important depending on the size of the institution. As stated in the Global Survey Report (Egron-Polak, E., Hudson, R., 2012), the way they approach internationalization dimensions depend very much on the size of the HEI: institutions of small size have the tendency to concentrate more on the mobility dimension (having a strong economic motivation related to the extra funds brought by foreign fee paying students), while HEIs with a comprehensive character have the tendency to concentrate more on research partnerships.

According to the 5th IAU Global Survey Report in the last three years, HEIs worldwide increased their interest in internationalization. "However, this increase has happened mainly in HEIs where the level was already high, whereas it has not happened at HEIs where the level was low. This might lead to growing inequality between HEIs." (Marinoni, 2019)

As an EHEA member, Romania has made a series of commitments in the field of education, which imply both the internationalization of education and the increase of quality.

During the London Ministerial Conference in 2007, the first strategy that included objectives regarding the development of internationalization of higher education, "European Higher Education in a Global Setting", was adopted. During the 2012 Bucharest meeting (EHEA, 2012), three priorities for 2012 – 2015 were established: offering a quality higher education for everyone, increasing the employability of graduates and enhancing mobility as a way for better learning. At this meeting, internationalization of higher education was recognized as a priority, and the 2020 Strategy for Mobility in EHEA was adopted. Strategies at the European level underline the importance of mobility such as the newly launched Erasmus+ Program that has a substantial increase in funding, which translates in better support for universities.

Since mobility has become a priority, especially in the context of a decrease in the number of students in Europe where “populations in many countries are getting older, and, in the process, the key 15-to-24-year-old college-aged cohorts are shrinking” (Monitor ICEF, 2017) and in the context of a worldwide competition for students (Redden, 2019), promoting higher education offers should be among the key topics that dominate the internationalization of higher education agenda in Romania.

II. Romania - context and status quo

1. Details about internationalization of higher education in Romania

The student population in Romania has been decreasing drastically in the last 10 years. If in 2009/2010 the total number of students at public universities was around 624,000, in 10 years the number of students dropped by 26%, reaching 463,000 students in the 2018/2019 academic year. There are many reasons for this, namely population decrease, and the decrease in the number of Baccalaureate graduates. Also, there is a major phenomenon of “loss”, more specifically “following a generation of children enrolled in the 1st grade in 2003/2004, only 27% of them reached higher education and only 20% finalized the 1st year of higher education.” (UEFISCDI P. P., Access in higher education policy brief, 2018). Some of the reasons for this loss are repetition, dropout, and migration.

In terms of the evolution of students at public universities (Bachelor, Master, PhD), please see below a set of data from CNFIS and ANS:

Table 1 Evolution of Student Population in the last 10 years for public HEIs

	2009/ 2010	2010/ 2011	2011/ 2012	2012/ 2013	2013/ 2014	2014/ 2015	2015/ 2016	2016/ 2017	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019
Total no of stud ents	624,654	616,506	576,290	520,853	479,876	461,582	448,939	426,567	473,304	463,135

Source: (2009-2015) CNFIS, available data according to public HEIs reports - data ref January; Source: (2016-2018) ANS

Since the paper analyzes the correlation between the institutional internationalization strategies and the main activities actually performed to attract international students, it is relevant to make a short introduction on the number of international students, countries of origin and evolution in the last 10 years. Romania had its record on international students in the early '80s, when 10% of students were international. Together with the evolution of politics, the number of international students began to decrease (Deca L., Fit C.R., 2015). In the last years, according to Internationalization of higher education policy brief (UEFISCDI P. P., Internationalization of Higher Education Policy Brief, 2017) that analyzed data from 2017, most populated academic programs with foreign students are taught in French. Most of the international students study a bachelor's degree and more than one third of the non-EU students in Romania study mostly Medicine, Dental Medicine and Pharmacy. Most of these fields are accessed by students from Israel, Moldova, Tunisia, Syria, Morocco, Lebanon, Albania, Jordan and Iran.

In terms of the evolution of incoming international degree students, in the last 10 years in Romania **there was a 74% increase from 15,538 international students in 2009/2010** (together with Romanian ethnics) **to 27,048 in 2018/2019**. The last available clear data is from 2018. If in 2015/2016, the percentage of international degree students out of the total student population (considering the INS data, meaning public and private universities) was 5.5% (MENCS, 2016, pp11), in 2018/2019 the percentage is 5.8%.

Top incoming countries for international degree students in 2018/2019 are **Moldavia, Israel, France, Italy, Germany, Tunisia, Morocco, Greece, Serbia and Hungary.**

In terms of **incoming credit mobility students**, in 2009/2010 there were **1,359 incoming credit mobility students** while in 2018/2019 the number of **incoming students increased by 194% to 3,995 number of students.**

As for **outgoing credit mobility students**, in 2009/2010 there were **4,768 students** and in 2018/2019 there are **7,812 students outgoing.**

National policies

Romania does not have any internationalization national strategy formally acknowledged by the Ministry of Education and with a dedicated budget. There is still the internationalization strategy developed during the IEMU¹ project in 2015 which does not have any action plan and it was not politically assumed.

An in-depth analysis of public strategic documents of Romanian HEIs from 2013, made during the IEMU project' (2014) reveals that 43 of 92 universities had vague or missing information on internationalization and mobility in their institutional strategies and operational plans. 30 universities mentioned internationalization of education, mobility and partnerships in general terms, but HEIs had no comprehensive strategy with concrete targets on this dimension. Thus, only 19 universities have set detailed objectives and concrete references regarding internationalization of HE (at the date of the study 2014) (Deca L., E Egron-Polak, CR.Fit, 2016).

As for internationalization governance, Romania has no institution dedicated to managing the internationalization of higher education. The Ministry of Education is the official institution that manages internationalization currently, but with no dedicated national strategy or objectives. In terms of attracting international students, Romania has no marketing strategy, policies or projects.

Between 2014 and 2015, The National Council of Rectors (NCR) started in a more informal way to manage one of the aspects of internationalization, namely promotional activities. Unfortunately, by the end of 2019, there are no clear objectives, a strategic approach or joint requests to the Ministry of Education for support in the development of internationalization. Managing promotional activities (participation at educational fairs and conferences) by NCR has so far proven to be successful, as developing a bottom-up process of involvement rather than a top-down is a positive aspect, but there are, unfortunately, some negative parts as well. Not all universities are actively involved in the process of promotion or developing internationalization at national level, there is no common budget dedicated to internationalization activities, as well, every HEI has an individual and different budget for promotional activities.

Following the recommendations from the Strategic framework for internationalization of Higher Education in Romania, a document developed during the IEMU project, The Ministry of Education started the FDI² program to incentive HEIs that want to enhance their internationalization activities.

As for budgets for internationalization activities, HEIs started to have internal budgets dedicated mostly to promotional activities, more specifically for participations at educational fairs or conferences.

At a national level, as a result of the IEMU project, the www.studyinromania.gov.ro website dedicated to promoting the Romanian higher education and attracting international students was

¹ Internationalization, equity and institutional management for a quality higher education' (IEMU) project, managed by UEFISCDI during 2013-2015, and financed by the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), seek to promote the development of a national strategy by September 2015

² FDI – The Internationalization Development Fund, given by the Ministry of Education

launched in 2015. If in 2015 there were 12 HEIs who submitted their educational offer with 740 study programs, in 2019 there are 45 universities that submitted at least one study program, which is a total of 3,677 study programs in 15 languages.

Presently, according to the HG no.326/2019 there are 235 programs in English, 95 programs in French, and 88 programs in German offered by Romanian universities.

An analysis of the main findings in 20 HEIs self-studies, SWOT analysis and summaries of the universities' goals for internationalization together with the observations of the expert teams, reveals that around **half of all universities which participated in the IEMU project reported that they had no marketing or communication strategies.** (UEFISCDI, 2015). The conclusion is that most universities had very limited capacity and resources to design and implement such strategies. This gap can be perceived as an obstacle to attracting international students and scholars. The absence of a communication strategy was visible in HEIs websites, which often provided insufficient information, are lacking information in English, or there was no strategy to recruit international students.

After analyzing 19 of the HEIs that developed an internationalization strategy during the IEMU project (19 internationalization strategies resulted), all HEIs have the same strategy they developed in 2014/2015, but some of the institutions made a few updates. The same recent analysis revealed that 13 out of 19 universities mentioned in their internationalization strategy that they want to raise the visibility of their educational offer or to develop a marketing strategy. Out of these 20 HEIs involved in the IEMU, 17 have a website in English with information for international students and 18 of them have a dedicated page for international students with at least basic information, such as admission process and educational offer.

In the context of a more competitive higher education area in terms of attracting students, with a focus on international students, new trends have developed in the education sector "what some have called global marketization (Marginson and van der Wende 2007 ; Naidoo and Wu 2011). The term " marketization " refers to the fact that as the HE market has become progressively more competitive, many HE institutions (HEI) have started to engage in strategic marketing and design marketing activities with the aim of increasing the number of applicants to their universities (Angulo et al. 2010 ; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006) (Fernando Angulo-Ruiz, 2016)". **In terms of mechanisms to promote their educational offer or to communicate with enrolled and prospective students, all analyzed HEIs have a Facebook page** on which universities communicate, but not always in English or in a foreign language. In terms of an Instagram account, 12 HEIs out of 20 have an account, but this does not necessary mean that they have an active account (*active account means sharing at least once a week). According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center regarding social media use in 2018, "Share of U.S. adults using social media, including Facebook, is mostly unchanged since 2018" (Research Center Pew, 2018)" the first three social-media platforms adults between 18 to 29 use are: 91% YouTube, 79% Facebook and 67% Instagram. In terms of demographic groups, we can see a fast approach in adults aged 18-24 where 76% use Facebook and 75% use Instagram, while a higher percentage of adults aged 25-29 use Facebook (84%) compared with the younger previous age group, where the percentage of Facebook use is 76%. As for Instagram, 75% of adults between 18 and 24 use it, while only 57% of those aged 25-29 use Instagram.

Following a questionnaire developed by the Ministry of Education in 2016 that was meant to help the Ministry better understand HEIs priorities on internationalization, out of 92 HEIs, 52 universities submitted their answers, 43 being public HEIs, 9 being private institutions and 5 having a military profile. The questionnaire findings revealed 5 top internationalization priorities, namely increasing partnerships with international universities, increasing students and academic staff mobility, promoting the university at an international level (including increasing the visibility of the

educational offer or actions related to university branding and marketing), attracting international degree students, internationalization of the curricula and priorities regarding research (partnerships development or involvement in research networks).

In terms of attracting international students, priority areas were the following: EU member states, EU (Non-member states), DCI Asia, South-Mediterranean (ENI SOUTH), Eastern Partnership (ENI EAST).

III. Case study - Analysis of Romanian higher education institutions

1. Details about the case study universities

Types of universities

The questionnaire was applied to three Romanian universities, which will remain anonymous. These HEIs were chosen based on the number of students (small or big), their geographical position (covering most areas in Romania), the type of institution (public or private), and the institution's mission, comprehensive or technical. The main reason for considering all these indicators while choosing the case study universities was to best cover the types of higher education institutions that exist in Romania. To continue, in order to keep the anonymity of the HEIs that completed the questionnaire, from now on in this article they will be defined as:

- University 1 (U1), big public university, in the technical field, situated in North-East Romania
- University 2 (U2), big public university, with comprehensive mission, situated in West part of Romania and
- University 3 (U3), small private university, comprehensive mission, situated in South Romania.

All case study universities have developed their most recent internationalization of education strategy during 2014/2015 in the IEMU project. Most of the HEIs made an update of the previous strategies, but in few areas.

a. Analysis of the Internationalization strategies

Even though there is a variety between the analyzed strategies, the goals for internationalization covered the following areas (first four areas are priority areas as stated by the universities):

Mobility - All case study universities want to enhance incoming and outgoing mobility of students, academic or administrative staff. Main goals refer to increasing numbers, but the private university mentioned increasing mobility opportunities for academic staff and highlighting the qualitative aspect of mobility, such as its impact on institutional development. It is worth mentioning that all case study universities set at least one measurable target referred to increasing mobility with a certain percentage or targets regarding a certain percentage of academic staff out of the entire staff team.

Internationalization at Home - The most common goals focused on internationalization of the curriculum, increasing the number of programs taught in foreign languages, especially English, increasing language skills (mostly English) of the academic, auxiliary and administrative staff; creating an international and friendly environment through extracurricular activities and attracting international speakers/teachers. One university also mentioned focus on developing double degree programs. Moreover, universities mentioned creating a buddy system dedicated to international students. None of the universities proposed to introduce international competences (such as intercultural competences, language skills for both teachers and students,"skills, values and

behaviours that prepare young people to thrive in a more diverse and interconnected world” (Savvy, 2019)) into the curriculum (Leask, 2009), (Jones, 2013)³, showing that the concept of Internationalization at Home is not well understood.

Marketing & promotion - All institutions formulated goals related to marketing and promotion. The main common goal was to increase the international visibility of the university and to design a dedicated marketing strategy or have defined marketing elements. The private university stated as an objective involving in new international associations or networks.

Partnerships – The private comprehensive university and the public technical institution mentioned goals to develop a network of relevant partners, increase the percentage of non-EU partners, increasing bilateral partnerships or focus more on developing strategic partnerships with international networks. Worth mentioning is the fact that institutions did not seem to pay attention to strategically choosing and prioritizing partnerships, resulting in a focus on the quantity rather than the quality of the partnerships. Focusing on quantity could in many cases lead to inactive partnerships.

Research - All HEIs expressed interest in this area, especially in developing more international research partnerships, creating a framework for academic scientific research in order to build a competitive academic and research environment, thus attracting new funding opportunities and international researchers. The private comprehensive university mentioned developing interdisciplinary research programs focusing on international relevant topics and finding more being more strategic way of choosing partnerships.

Services for international students – The technical public institution and the private comprehensive one has objectives to improve services for international students, but none addressed services for international staff.

Internal organization matters - The public technical and the private comprehensive institutions proposed goals that address internal organizational issues, mainly focusing on digitization of various processes, such as recruiting, admission process and adapting to modern communication instruments.

Quality of educational provision - Two HEIs, both public universities want to improve the level of internationalization of the curriculum, meaning to adapt to scientific and technological evolution and as well to have high quality programs, this being a pre-condition to increase institutional branding and to attract international students.

Priority areas for internationalization

In the questionnaire developed for this study, one of the questions referred to priority areas for which institutions set targets and objectives and all institutions have chosen four main areas, out of nine, which are: mobility, internationalization at home, marketing and promotion, and partnerships. As data shows, from the internationalization strategy analysis, even though 3 out of 3 HEIs mentioned increasing their education offer visibility or developing a marketing strategy, in the end, the public technical institution has an actual marketing strategy in place.

³ As Leask stated “Internationalisation of the curriculum is the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning processes and support services of a program of study. An internationalised curriculum will engage students with internationally informed research and cultural and linguistic diversity. It will purposefully develop their international and intercultural perspectives as global professionals and citizens.(Leask 2009: 209)”, see also E. Jones (2013) - The global reach of universities: leading and engaging academic and support staff in the internationalization of higher education

b. Internationalization strategy vs HEIs strategic plan analysis.

While analyzing the internationalization strategies and the Institutional Development Strategy for each institution, the current study developed the following matrix. First, the study looks if there are at any common dimensions between those two documents and then attempts to identify the same key words in the strategies searching for similarities.

Please see below the matrix and results.

Quality of educational provision	Research	Mobility	Services for international students	Internal organization matters	Internationalization at home	Marketing	Partnerships	
3	3	3			3	3	3	Internationalization
		3				3		Branding and international communication/mkt
			3					Partnership with students and Student services
	3							Research and Innovation
3				3	3			University management and Quality Assurance
							3	Entrepreneurship & bridge with economic stakeholders/market place

Figure 1 Strategy Matrix - Links between Institutional internationalization strategies & HEIs Institutional Strategies

As a general conclusion, all institutions had comprehensive institutional documents. As J. Knight and de Wit say “comprehensive internationalization does not reflect widespread reality, however: for most institutions around the world, internationalization is still characterized by a collection of fragmented and unrelated activities.” (Knigh J., de Wit H., 2018). Looking at the internationalization dimensions that were defined in the internationalization strategies vs main areas defined in the institutional strategies, the study can conclude that there is a certain link between those two strategic documents developed by the case study institutions, but it is not known if there is a real connection between the strategic approach and the actions. Analyzing from the perspective of institutional strategy, for each dimension defined in the document, we could find a common denominator in the internationalization strategy. The main six areas that were common for all three universities are: Internationalization, Branding and International Communication, Partnership with Students and Student Services, University Management and Quality Assurance and the last dimension was Entrepreneurship & Bridge with Economic Stakeholders. It is important to keep in mind that “the presence of a strategy does not necessarily align with a strategic approach to internationalization if there are no activities to implement it and support structures in place, if the strategy is not monitored, and if progress is not evaluated.” (Marinoni G., de Wit H., 2019).

Internationalization – as it can be seen in the “Strategy Matrix”, in the institutional strategy there were specific goals related to quality of education provision (e.g. goals for increasing the internationalization of the curriculum), goals related to research (e.g. developing strategic partnerships to increase research and innovation), aims for mobility (most of them related to increasing both incoming and outgoing mobility for all stakeholders), internationalization at home (e.g. more visiting/international professors or international conferences), marketing (aims related to increasing universities’ visibility at international level, developing marketing strategies to attract more students and international students), partnerships (increasing strategic partnerships with priority countries or networks).

Branding and International Communication – Universities had objectives related to mobility (such as international marketing in order to promote the HEI internationally or boosting university’s

scientific performances and increasing the national and international visibility of the research results) and marketing (setting specific goals related to marketing indicators and promotion).

Partnership with Students and Student Services – Institutions developed objectives related to student services, both national and international. The public comprehensive university stated the aim to create a study package for international students (that should incentive prospective international students and include teaching materials, information materials, accommodation, scholarships). Similarly, the comprehensive private university mentioned “Increasing students motivations through the use of a diversified study scholarship system”. The same private university mentioned objectives in terms of streamlining the communication process with students through secretariats or the virtual environment.

Research and Innovation – All institutions had objectives related to research, such as developing new international research partnerships, increasing collaboration with international researchers, or receiving national or international accreditation for the research centers created at institutional level.

University Management and Quality Assurance – All institutions had objectives related to quality of education provision (aims to increase the quality of the programs and adapt to international standards), internal organization matters and matters regarding internationalization at home.

Entrepreneurship & Making Connections with Economic Stakeholders – This dimension was not present in the internationalization strategies, but it was important to state its presence since all universities had different objectives related to ways to connect better higher education with the labor market.

2. Questionnaire analysis – collecting HEIs answers

The following questionnaire designed especially for this study contains 25 questions. Some of the questions were related to a better understanding of the main internationalization priority dimensions, priority areas of interest in terms of attracting international students, information about marketing objective, such as goals to attract international students, or budget allocated for promotion. Other questions were related to mechanisms universities use to promote their institution and attract international students, questions related to indicators that institutions collect for a better understanding of the evolution of their actions and efficiency, in terms of mechanisms HEIs use to attract students. There were also questions related to perception, namely if and how do HEIs perceive the impact of internationalization on the quality of education.

All questions defined how HEIs plan, act and measure their results.

Priority countries to attract international students

According to a self-study report completed by all case study universities, in **2014** most of the HEIs did not have priority countries or regions. At that time, most institutions did not have the concept of “prioritizing countries”. Therefore, most of the international degrees seeking students in 2014 were from Eastern Partnership (ENI EAST) – from Moldavia, Europe (Member states) and South-Mediterranean (ENI SOUTH) – mostly Israel, Morocco. There we also some students from Turkey (Europe – non-member states).

In **2017/2018** according to CNFIS data, the top three regions for international degree seeking students were Eastern Partnership (ENI EAST) – most of the students were from Moldavia, Romanian ethnics, South-Mediterranean (ENI SOUTH) – Israel, Tunisia, Morocco or Palestine and Western Balkans IPA – Serbia, Albania. We can see that the focus changed from European countries (member states) to South-Mediterranean (ENI SOUTH) or Western Balkans IPA.

In 2019, when universities were asked to complete their priority areas for attracting international degree students and as it can be seen below, there were three main areas that were chosen by the public universities as main priority:

1. South-Mediterranean (ENI South), this includes the following countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia
2. DCI Asia, this includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, DPR Korea, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam and
3. Region 9 with Iran, Iraq, Yemen

There is a shift between past priority areas and present ones, and a shift from a non-priority type of recruitment to a more aware and prioritized one. South-Mediterranean (ENI South) remained a priority, but two other new areas were added: DCI Asia and Region 9. HEIs are following international trends, that highlight, according to the Institute of International Education, the top 10 countries (Institute of International Education, 2019) of origin of the degree seeking students in the USA are mostly from DCI Asia. An interesting difference between the universities was the fact that the private university mentioned one area as priority for incoming degree seeking students, DCI Central Asia, while the public universities mentioned four and five regions as priority areas, out of which 3 regions were stated the same for the public institutions.

In order to find if there is any correlation between objectives (in this case the stated priority countries) and the actions, in this case the participation at International Education Fairs, I have asked which are the international fairs universities took part in over the past four years. Following the results (see below) we can state that in 2018 all three universities participated in an International Education Fair in Tunisia, which means that was the only time when there was a correlation between objectives and actual actions for all institutions. Following their response, U2, the public comprehensive university went in China in 2017, 2019, in Tunisia in 2018 and Vietnam in 2019, therefore out of 14 participations in Educational Fairs, 4 of them were according to the stated priorities, while the public technical institution (U1) participated at two Educational Fairs that are correlated with its objectives (out of 10 participations in international fairs). These countries are, according to the stated priorities, DCI Asia or ENI South.

All other participations at International Education Fairs are in countries that according to their responses are not their priority such as: Moldavia, Japan, Ukraine or Georgia. It is worth mentioning that starting in 2018, all universities increased their participation at Edu Fairs. Therefore, in 2018 and 2019, all HEIs participated at the EAIE Conference, which is both a learning experience for the university representatives (in terms of internationalization) and a good opportunity for networking and establishing new partnerships. If we compare the responses by labeling institutions as comprehensive versus technical, we see that the comprehensive institutions participated at 14 Educational fairs in the past 4 years, while the technical university participated at 10 fairs and only two of the participations were strategic according to the set objectives. On the other hand, from the 14 fairs participations made by the private university, only the one in Turkmenistan was correlated perfectly with the stated prioritized area for attracting international degree seeking students, meaning DCI Central Asia. All the other participations made by the institution can fall under the category of actions made in order to attract international credit mobility students.

Marketing strategy and promotion

The comprehensive institutions stated that they do not have a marketing strategy per se, but they have defined objectives and actions. The technical institution (U1) confirmed that they have developed a marketing strategy. In terms of promotion budget to attract international students, all institutions, no matter their category, said they have an allocated budget of more than 10,000 Euro per year. A hypothesis is that most of the allocated budget is used for international education fairs.

Indicators considered by institutions when analyzing the impact of the internationalization strategy

The International Relations Department monitors the internationalization strategy and/or marketing plan, according to all institutions. The four indicators that all universities consider when monitoring the impact of their actions with regards to internationalization are **number of international degree students, number of incoming credit mobility students, number of participations at International Education Fairs** and **number of active partnerships with international universities**. U1, a public technical university that has a marketing strategy and U3, a private comprehensive university, stated that they analyze the increase or decrease of active partnerships with international universities, due to International Education Fairs participation; on the other hand, the comprehensive HEIs look at the number of international students applying for degree mobility (U2, public university and the U3, private institution). The technical public university (U1) and the comprehensive private institution (U3) consider both, eight indicators (not the same) out of 16 indicators presented in the questionnaire when analyzing the impact of the internationalization strategy.

Mechanisms HEIs use to promote their educational offer

Promoting the educational offer is not easy considering the large number of competitors worldwide, the budget or the strategy that top countries/ institutions have.

All case study institutions stated that the used mechanisms to attract international degree seeking students are their English website, HEI presentation video in various languages circulation, participation at International Education Fairs, promotion via the national portal www.studyinromania.gov.ro, promotion via other platforms and through word of mouth (through teachers, students or existing partnerships). The other platforms public HEIs use to promote their education offer are keystoneacademic.com, studyportals.com, masterstudies.com and educations.com.

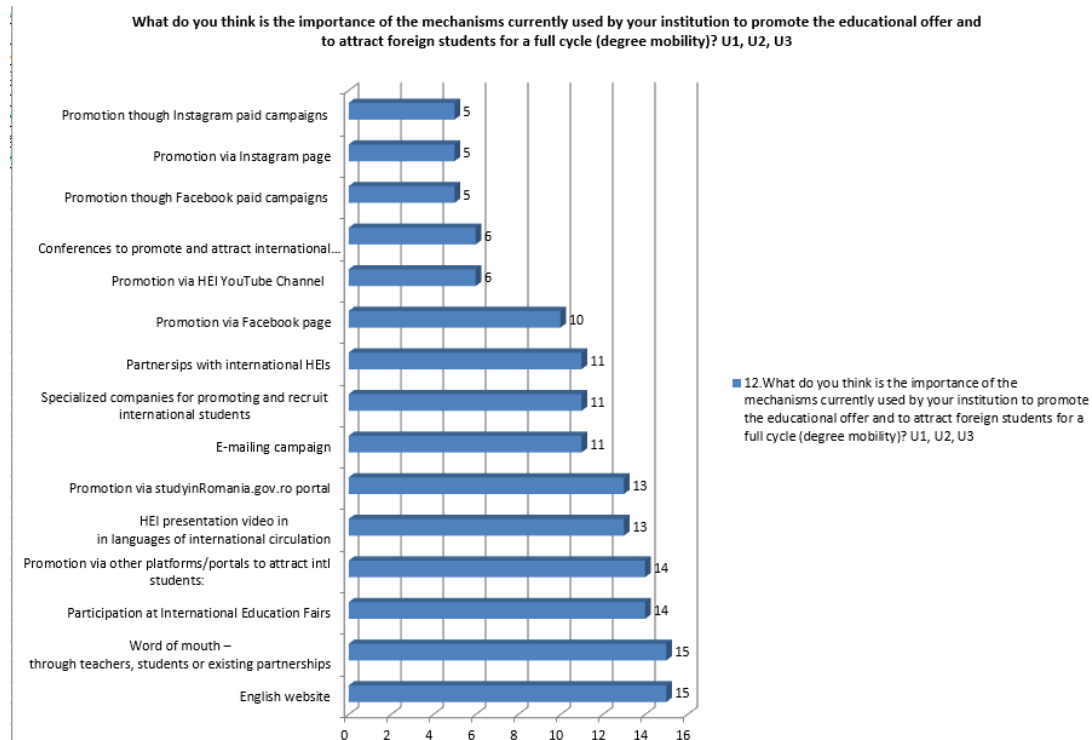
Two universities (U1, public, technical HEI and U3, private, comprehensive HEI) stated they use specialized companies for promoting and recruiting international students. In terms of promotion via their Facebook page, both comprehensive institutions, U3 private HEI and U2 public HEI stated they use this mechanism. The private university stated that they are currently using e-mailing campaigns.

By comparison, the private university uses 10 mechanisms out of the 16 presented in the questionnaire to promote their educational offer, while the public institutions use 8 mechanisms. Promotion through Facebook paid campaigns, via Instagram, through Instagram paid campaigns, via HEI YouTube Channel or other conferences to attract international students are not mechanisms of interest to universities.

Perceived most important mechanisms and most efficient in attracting international degree seeking students

All universities perceive “highly important” and “important” mechanisms to attract international degree students the following ones: English website, the word of mouth (through teachers, students or existing partnerships), participation at International Education Fairs, promotion via other platforms/portals, HEI presentation video in various languages, promotion via studyinRomania.gov.ro portal. The other entire are considered relatively important, less important or not important at all. Those that are stated as less and not important at all are promotion via HEI YouTube Channel, conferences to promote and attract international students, promotion through Facebook paid campaigns, promotion via Instagram page and promotion through Instagram paid campaigns.

When asked the most efficient mechanisms to attract international degree students, universities stated that the English website, word of mouth, participation at International Education Fairs,



promotion via other portals, HEI presentation video in languages of international circulation and partnerships with international HEIs are highly efficient or efficient.

Figure 2 - Most important mechanism currently used to attract international degree seeking students

HEIs perceptions: link between strategy vs actions and the impact internationalization has on the quality of higher education

Two universities (U1 public, technical and U3 private, comprehensive) consider that there is a very high correlation (80% to 100%) between the internationalization strategy and the actions they implement. The public comprehensive institution (U2) stated that there is a relative correlation (around 20% to 40%) between the implemented activities and the objectives from the internationalization strategy.

In terms of HEIs perception regarding the impact of internationalization of higher education on the quality of education in the university, **public universities consider that actions related to internationalization of higher education have a very high or high impact on the quality of education within the university.** The private institution perceives actions related to internationalization with relative impact (20% to 40%) on the quality of education in the institution.

Despite the last response, the **private university (U3)** considers that **the existence of an internationalized curricula has a very high impact on the quality of the program**, while the public universities perceive that the existence of an internationalized curricula has a high impact (U1) and a relative impact on the quality of the program.

Public universities perceive the curricula of their study programs, internationalized in a relative way, while on the other hand, the private university finds the curricula of their study programs internationalized at a very high level.

Correlation of targets for international degree seeking students from the internationalization strategy

From the case study universities only, the comprehensive ones stated an actual target for attracting international students. In their internationalization strategies, both comprehensive universities aim for an increased number of international students, with 25% for the public institution and 20% for the private one.

Data shows that the number of international degree students increased by 10% for the public institution and 17% for the private one, compared with 2015/2016, the year when universities started implementing their new internationalization strategies. All three universities increased the overall number of international students but did not meet the target.

IV. Conclusions

When looking at the **correlation between the institutional internationalization strategy, the strategic plan for institutional development and the main activities performed to promote their educational offer** the analysis shows that there is a relative correlation. As stated before, there are various correlations between objectives from both institutional documents (for each case study), but there is also a rift between objectives and actual actions.

Even though the institutions stated they want a marketing strategy to increase university's visibility internationally, only one higher education institution has managed to develop such a document. Nevertheless, despite the lack of a marketing strategy, institutions had several actions that were meant to increase the HEI's visibility or to attract more international students.

In terms of prioritizing countries, the private university seems to be more focused, choosing one priority area for attracting international degree seeking students. This type of prioritization could be more efficient in terms of managing the available internationalization budget and have proven results. But as we could see from the analysis, if we look at the surveyed institutions, participation at international educational fairs is only partially correlated (around 10% to 30%) with stated priority countries. From this point of view, we can conclude that institutions fail to correlate their actions with the stated objectives. At the same time, when we look at the perception between internationalization strategies versus actions, most universities perceive there is a high correlation (80% to 100%) between the internationalization strategy and the actions they implement.

How do universities promote their educational offer and what mechanisms do they use to attract international students?

Even though, the surveyed universities have internationalization strategies, most of them lack a marketing strategy (as a standalone document or as a part of the overall internationalization strategy) to attract international students or to promote their educational offer. This shows that institutions do not have clear marketing objectives, targets, priorities and well-defined mechanisms that could help build their brand. Institutions promote themselves through the English website, presentation video, participation at International Education Fairs, promotion via the national portal www.studyinromania.gov.ro, promotion via other platforms and through word of mouth (through teachers, students or existing partnerships). Even though these mechanisms are used, universities do not monitor relevant indicators in order to see the actual efficiency or to have a better understanding on where and why they should use a specific mechanism. Institutions use these mechanisms to attract international students in an ad-hoc way and are not in line with trends in international education marketing or with the new generation, the so called the Generation C (the connected generation).

Even though studies show that the new generation is mostly active on social media, the most frequently used social media platforms for the 18-24 age group being YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, institutions do not yet perceive social media as an essential mechanism to advertise their educational offer or to attract international students.

Most of the surveyed universities use specialized companies for promoting activities and recruiting international students. Using professionalized help, can be a good option when institutions do not have specialized resources to attract international students or since specialized companies have direct contact with the prospective students.

When analyzing the impact of the internationalization strategy, universities fail to consider indicators that could show them relevant data and could give their actions a more focused approach on the objectives, such as the HEI website traffic (international users). This could help institutions understand from which countries originate most of their prospective students, which can then lead to prioritizing all or most educational marketing and promotion actions in certain or dedicated countries. It could be a great opportunity to analyze which webpages from the university website are most accessed to introduce more relevant information.

Private or public, technical or comprehensive, universities seem to use 8 to 10 mechanisms to promote their educational offer. In a context where universities understand and know very well their target audience, there would be no need to have many mechanisms to promote their educational offer. Less, but more targeted mechanisms can certainly lead to more results. However, there is no certainty that universities are aware of their target audience with its specifics and their main selling points.

Which mechanisms are most efficient in attracting international students?

Most efficient mechanisms to attract international degree students stated by universities were the English website, Word of mouth, participation at International Education Fairs, promotion via other portals, HEI presentation video and partnerships with international HEIs. It is interesting how institutions perceive some mechanism highly efficient or efficient without having an actual indicator that can clearly measure or show data in this sense. The English version of their website is seen very effective, but when measuring the impact of the strategy or mechanisms used, none of the HEIs monitor HEI website traffic (international users).

The same happens with word of mouth, because it is a very powerful mechanism, although it also lacks indicators to measure its efficiency. This is the case for almost all other mechanisms, including the much-emphasized participation at International Education Fairs, institutional promotion clips or partnerships.

The perception questions reveal a limited understanding of the concepts of comprehensive internationalization, communication, branding and promotion. While **public universities consider that internationalization has a very high or high impact on the quality of education in the university**, at the opposite pole there is the **private university that perceives internationalization with relative impact (20% to 40%)** on the quality of education in the institution.

When universities were asked if they consider that the existence of an internationalized curricula has impact on the quality of the program, interestingly enough the **private university perceives that an internationalized curricula has a very high impact on the quality of the program** even though the same institution considers that internationalization has a relative impact on the quality of education. At the same time, the private university considers that the curricula of their study programs is internationalized at a very high level, while public universities perceive the curricula of their study programs internationalized in a relative way. As well, public universities perceive that the existence

of internationalized curricula has a high impact on the quality of the program (U1), while the U2 considers the impact in a relative way.

V. Recommendations for institutional level

For better results when creating a brand, increasing visibility at international level and attracting international degree students, the following recommendations can be made based on the analysis presented above:

- Universities should pay closer attention to the correlation between objectives and actions; otherwise they will most likely fail to achieve the stated goals. There is still work when it comes to focusing actions on the stated objectives and a better planning should be put in place in order to use the budget in a more strategic way rather than spending it on actions that are not in accordance with the declared objectives and do not help in achieving anything. For example, in the future, universities could focus more on participating at international fairs that are in the prioritized area countries in order to achieve the desired results or fulfill the strategy objectives.
- For universities to have a realistic perception regarding the correlation between actions and strategy, at the end of each year, I would recommend an exhaustive analysis of all the actions in relations with the stated objectives. This will help them better monitor the process and the results and could make them change or adapt their strategy.
- Universities should develop a marketing strategy, with a mandatory focus on the Why, What and Where, together with an allocated budget.
- In terms of prioritizing countries, institutions should have a realistic approach when defining their target countries, that is why I would recommend an in-depth analysis on which countries they should focus and all actions to be in accordance with the chosen objectives.
- Institutions should have clear objectives when presenting their programs, in terms of defining why and what makes the program different and what competences students will acquire. As well, in order to have a much more focused communication strategy, HEIs should understand what information about the university or about the program is relevant for the targeted audience.
- Universities should define Unique Selling Points, which can help prospective students make more accurate choices based on concise points that differentiate universities. Eventually, this can help attract more international students.
- Universities should consider developing a department or hire specialized human resource representatives in education marketing, to work closely with specialized personnel in recruiting and attracting international students.
- Universities should dedicate more time and resources in creating their own academic brand.

Even though the number of international students increases or may increase, it will be important to understand which were the most efficient mechanisms that made international students chose their university, understand where international students seek information, and what type of information they need.

- When monitoring the efficiency of the most frequently used mechanisms, universities should consider new indicators that could help them in the future, focusing their energy or budget better.

- For institutions to be sure that the stated mechanisms⁴ are the most efficient to attract international students, I would recommend a better monitoring of these mechanisms and analyze the data in order to have a certainty whether these are efficient or not.
- To achieve their internationalization strategy objectives, HEIs should pay more attention to developing their educational marketing strategies to further enhance mobility and attract international students.
- The most used social media platforms for the 18-24 group are YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Therefore, universities should adapt more to these types of platforms, by communicating and promoting their educational offer, as well as branding themselves on these platforms.
- Since 2017, the most populated academic programs with foreign students were taught in French and in Romania there are only 95 programs in French; therefore, universities should develop more Bachelor programs taught in French.

To sum up, institutions miss in several aspects to connect their internationalization strategies with actions. For them to achieve their goals, they should have an action plan that follows each objective.

Even though studies show that prospective students spend a highly large time on social media, from where they take their information, Romanian institutions seem to ignore this aspect and do not concentrate their efforts in better communicating on social media.

To conclude, it seems universities still do not understand what comprehensive internationalization is, since they perceive the impact of internationalization on the quality of education or the impact of an internationalized curricula in slightly different ways.

⁴ Universities perceive English/the bilingual website, word of mouth (through teachers, students or existing partnerships), participation at International Education Fairs, promotion via other platforms/portals, HEI presentation video in various languages, promotion via studyinRomania.gov.ro portal mechanisms as “highly important”, “important” and most efficient mechanisms to attract international degree students.

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