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**Internationalisation of Higher Education  
– Overview of Recent Developments**

Magdalena CIUBĂNCAN<sup>1</sup>, Viorela-Valentina DIMA<sup>2\*</sup>, Florina MOHANU<sup>3</sup>

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**Abstract**

*The present paper aims at identifying current trends in the internationalisation of higher education. We begin by acknowledging the need for continuously updating the definition of the phenomenon and the key dimensions it implies, so as to reflect developments across the globe. We refer to concepts such as “internationalisation abroad”, “internationalisation at home” and “comprehensive internationalisation”. Next, we provide details on recent trends in the field in Europe (the European Union, including Member State Romania), North America (the USA) and Asia (Japan and the ASEAN - Member States).*

**Keywords:** internationalisation of higher education, in-house internationalisation, internationalisation abroad, comprehensive internationalisation, virtual mobility.

**JEL Classification:** A22, A23, I23, Y20.

**1. Introduction**

The present paper aims at identifying the current trends in the internationalisation of higher education, by reviewing key literature on the phenomenon. We are concerned with defining the term, identifying its key dimensions, and presenting recent trends in higher education institutions from three continents (Europe, North America and Asia).

**2. Problem Statement**

In this section, we examine the way in which the definition of “internationalisation of higher education” has been refined across more than two decades, and point to the fact that the phenomenon has come to refer to more than just study and research mobility overseas (i.e., the so-called “internationalisation

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<sup>1</sup> Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, magdalena.ciubancan@rei.ase.ro.

<sup>2</sup> Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, viorela.dima@ase.ro.

\* Corresponding author.

<sup>3</sup> Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, fmohanu@ase.ro.

abroad”). In fact, nowadays, internationalisation is seen as a “comprehensive” phenomenon, with implications for the entire architecture of participating universities (beyond academics, students and managerial staff, or curriculum and research design).

### **2.1. The Challenge of Defining Internationalization of Higher Education**

Settling on a definition of the internationalisation of higher education has proven to be a rather difficult task, given the complexity and the dynamics of the higher education institutions themselves, on the one hand, and the existence of a diverse range of stakeholders involved in the process, on the other hand. The most widely-used definition of internationalisation of higher education belongs to Jane Knight, who, in 1994, defined it as “a range of activities, policies and services that integrate an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service function of the institution” (Knight, 1994, p. 1). While researchers agree that internationalisation is a dynamic process and not a fixed outcome, Knight’s initial definition has been criticized because of its viewing of the matter as the very goal of the whole process, with no possibilities of further development, while in many countries internationalisation has been considered, especially in recent years, a means to improve the quality of education and research and, in a broader view, the general social and economic conditions. Almost a decade later, in 2003, the terms of the definition slightly change, internationalisation of higher education being defined by the same researcher as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Knight provides a detailed justification for the choice of the key terms in her definition, starting with the fact that internationalisation is understood as “an ongoing and continuing effort” - process, then explaining that the triad *international, intercultural, global* refers to the breadth and depth of internationalisation; the concept of *integration* is strongly related to the centrality of the international and intercultural dimensions of the process, while the other triad in the definition – *purpose, functions, delivery* – refers to “the overall role and objectives that post-secondary education has for a country/region” (Knight, 2004, p. 11-12).

Another decade later, in a comprehensive study on the internationalisation of higher education requested by the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education, the authors further refine the definition with the following additions: “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 et al., 2015, p. 29). The subtle terminological changes and additions in the definition mirror the changes that took place both in the nature of the higher education institutions, as well as in societies, in general. Thus, internationalisation is regarded as a threefold process, not limited to its international – understood as “multinational” – dimension, but also including the recognition of cultural diversity and the distinction between internationalisation

and globalization. Moreover, “internationalisation” must not be mistaken for “internationalism”, the latter being defined by Jones as “common sense notions of international community, international cooperation, international community of interests, and international dimensions of the common good” (Jones, 2000, p. 31). Internationalism has a rather idealistic side, closely connected to international cooperation, progress and human rights.

The fact that the process of internationalisation is an intentional one means that internationalisation is now regarded rather as a conscious and planned strategy rather than an inner characteristic of academic institutions. De Wit et al. also focus on the necessity that the internationalisation of higher education must be open to a larger category of beneficiaries, not only to the elitist few, as it used to be in its beginnings. Furthermore, the idea of internationalisation as a means of enhancing quality, with the broader goal of creating benefits for the society, is also emphasized in the new definition. The transfer of knowledge that takes place in this process is put to use for a larger range of the stakeholders, which go beyond the academic and research environment, including members of the political, economic or social and cultural fields.

## **2.2. Dimensions of Internationalisation**

Beyond the conceptual and terminological discussions regarding the internationalisation of higher education, there are two basic dimensions on which the process is built: *internationalisation abroad* and *internationalisation at home* (Knight, 2004, pp. 21-22). For a long time, the idea of internationalisation was closely connected to what is now called *internationalisation abroad*, understood as “all forms of education across borders: mobility of people, projects, programmes and providers” (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 45). Student mobility, in particular, has been regarded as one of the key elements of internationalisation abroad, being often included in institutional evaluations, as an indicator of the degree of internationalisation of a university. In Europe, student mobility often translates as credit mobility, which, together with staff mobility, degree mobility and cross-border delivery (or transnational education) constitutes the bases of internationalisation abroad. On the other hand, *internationalisation at home* refers to “the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments” (Beelen and Jones, 2015, p. 69). The restrictions and limitations that are sometimes associated with the various types of mobility – credit recognition, inequalities between countries, access for disabled students (de Wit et al., 2015) – can be diminished or eliminated by addressing all students and all types of education “at home”. Internationalisation at home comprises the internationalisation of the curriculum and the development of a global citizenship. The internationalisation of curriculum, especially if we refer to the formal curriculum, implies the fact that the institution should have a clearly planned strategy, which will lead to the development of international and intercultural skills. Sporadic curricular elements focusing on

international aspects or the mere use of English in teaching are not regarded as dimensions of internationalisation at home.

A genuine internationalisation of the curriculum as part of an institutional internationalisation strategy is strongly related to what has come to be called “comprehensive internationalisation”, a recent concept coming from the United States, which builds on and expands Knight’s revised definition:

Comprehensive internationalisation is a commitment, confirmed through action, to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research, and service missions of higher education. It shapes institutional ethos and values and touches the entire higher education enterprise. It is essential that it be embraced by institutional leadership, governance, faculty, students, and all academic service and support units. It is an institutional imperative, not just a desirable possibility. (Hudzik, 2011, p. 6)

The key idea behind comprehensive internationalisation is the recognition of a variety of models and approaches, allowing each institution to choose its own strategy, without a common model or objectives, which might, however, be difficult to implement in the European Union, where the very beginning of the internationalisation process is linked to a unitary framework governed by common rules.

Approaches to internationalisation, be it abroad or at home, range from cooperation to competition between institutions, countries and regions. Both directions have positive effects on societies, and while they both function as engines of the internationalisation process, nowadays it is mainly competition that seems to have gained prominence. The focus on competition is also closely connected to the changing role of the university, from a cultural, knowledge-based establishment to an institution that prepares individuals for an international labour market.

### **3. Research Questions/Aims of the Research**

The purpose of this article is to identify recent trends in the internationalisation of higher education, across several continents: Europe, Asia and North America.

### **4. Research Methods**

To identify the said trends, we review key recent literature on the internationalisation of higher education, as perceived in the European Union (including the EU-Member State Romania), Asia (Japan and the ASEAN-Member States), as well as North America (the USA). We focus mainly on qualitative findings of previous research and we provide a synthesis, doubled by an analysis of said findings.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1. The Current Situation**

While the internationalisation of higher education might be a rather recent issue in terms of its conceptualization and scientific analysis, the international dimension of education has always been one of the defining aspects of the educational process in the institutions that have provided education and/or training in one form or another. From the mere transfer of knowledge – mostly concerning the military art or political or administrative matters – between different geographical and cultural areas in ancient times, to learning foreign languages and studying foreign cultures or to the present-day stage of incorporating different, sometimes divergent values into a country's educational system, education has always had an international side. Starting with the Middle Ages and the appearance of the first universities, (Western) Europe has strengthened its position as a space providing academic education. With the foundation of Harvard University in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, The United States of America also emerges as a powerful player in the field of education. On the other side of the world, Asia – mainly China and Japan – also played an important role in creating institutions of education, even if the first universities understood as academic institutions and not only as establishments of instruction and education (such as the religious centres, for example) appeared here only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The approaches to internationalisation may have varied throughout time, but there is no doubt that Europe, the United States and Japan, through their universities, are the three main actors when it comes to the process of internationalisation.

The United States of America and its higher education system are generally regarded as late-comers in the process, partly due to a rather isolationist tendency which “paralleled a historical inward orientation of the American psyche overall” (Hudzik, 2011, p. 13). Even now, the USA focuses less on internationalisation abroad (the student mobility dimension), with “just over 1% of all US students enrolled in US higher education at any academic level” being interested in studying abroad (Cantu, 2013, p. 7). Internationalisation at home, through various strategies, is visibly preferred in the American universities.

Japan, with its highly centralized educational system, has generally followed the Anglo-Saxon model, promoting mobility abroad, trying to increase the number of international students and developing English-taught programmes at home. Starting with 1980, the Japanese government initiated internationalisation policies, but the language barrier has been, however, a rather difficult obstacle to overcome, and while inbound international students have reached numbers similar to those of developed European countries such as Germany or France, outbound students are still few, if compared to, for example, European countries. Furthermore, in Asia, starting from and building on the experience and model of Europe, several countries in ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations) are laying the foundations of regional policies towards internationalisation. A study conducted by the British Council in 2018 on internationalisation policies in Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam finds

that ASEAN countries focus on openness and mobility, mainly at an intra-regional level. At the same time, they are trying to develop high levels of “at home” transnational education and to develop their higher education systems through international transnational education partnerships (Ilieva and Peak, 2018).

Europe is, no doubt, the leading player in the internationalisation field. Building on the extensive multicultural, multinational and multilingual European tradition, over the past three decades, various programmes for research and education have been developed, Erasmus being probably the best known and the one with the most visible impact on the internationalisation of higher education. Established in 1987 and rebranded Erasmus + in 2014, it created a framework for transnational collaboration between institutions and it was reinforced by the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999. The role of the Erasmus programme in the internationalisation of higher education has been reiterated continuously, as it has a great impact on the formation of genuine international citizens whose desire for further development in an international environment continues even after the end of the mobility:

the young people [...] express a desire to know more, and discover more places in which they can do so [undergo a transformative experience], demonstrating how a kind of personalized internationalisation is achieved through successive mobility exercises, amounting to a new kind of migration within European space. (Samuk et al., 2021, p. 180)

To sum up the current situation by taking a contrastive look at the three major players in process of the internationalisation of higher education – Europe, the USA, Japan – the current situation of internationalisation appears to have different points of focus in the three regions presented above. Japan largely emphasizes internationalisation at home and its preferred partners for internationalisation abroad are mainly countries in Asia and in the English-speaking world. In the case of the USA, the tendency is to regard internationalisation as a comprehensive process, the borderline between “abroad” and “at home” becoming blurry, while the importance of institutional decision on the internationalization strategy is highlighted. Europe (the EU) remains the area with the most complex system of internationalization strategies, combining common directions for all member states with state-specific programmes and procedures.

## ***5.2. Trends in the Field***

Given the students’ drive for continuous development, internationalisation abroad will continue to grow, especially in its student mobility dimension, but an increasing emphasis is now placed on internationalisation at home, both in terms of the internationalisation of curriculum and of the learning outcomes. Digitalisation and virtual learning were already topics of interest in education before the current COVID-19 pandemic, but during the past year, under the necessity of continuing all forms of education in an environment that does not require the physical presence on

campus, online learning has largely shown its benefits related to internationalisation. It is a means of benefiting from an international mobility open to all students, regardless of the limitations that might arise from financial, administrative, even political restrictions, and we can already talk about the emergence of a new type of mobility – the virtual mobility.

There are already online educational institutions that offer courses that can be taken in order to obtain transferable credits. An example is Future Learn, a social learning platform owned by the Open University, which has been offering massive open online courses (MOOC) from prestigious higher education institutions all over the world since 2016. Such platforms are likely to increase in number in the future and thus, the shift from cooperation to competition in the internationalisation of higher education might need to be regarded not only from the traditional perspective of the competition between the “big players” in the field of internationalisation – Europe, USA, Japan – but also from the perspective of a possible competition between “brick-and-mortar” universities and online educational platforms.

The shift from cooperation towards competition, regardless of its nature, is closely related to a change in the rationales of internationalisation, as nowadays there is a visible shift from the original academic, social or political rationales towards economic ones. The institution of the university itself has come to a point where it needs to redefine its role and purpose and the question currently under debate is whether it is losing its social, cultural and intellectual objectives, becoming a producer of commodities for an international market (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). Even at a conceptual and terminological level, universities are now included in the category of “higher education institutions”, together with other institutions of education such as institutes, academies, higher studies schools, etc., their truly academic nature appearing to be fading away. The economic rationales have obviously gained prominence over the political, social, cultural or academic ones. If we refer strictly to the academic rationales, the ones that are dominant at present seem to be more concerned with strategic alliances and partnerships or status and position in international rankings rather than with the original purpose of academic institutions, that of pure cultural accumulation and transmission of knowledge. While academic values will always be at the core of any academic establishment, the focus now seems to be on the elements that were once marginal in the structure of said institutions.

Closely related to the shift towards competition is the necessity of creating strategies, at regional, national or institutional level and “over the past decades, the emphasis in Europe has moved from the national level to the institutional level on the one hand and the European Union on the other” (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 35). In Romania, the internationalisation of higher education was included as one of the strategic goals in the 2014-2020 overall higher education strategy, which is a pre-condition for accessing EU funds (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 158). The internationalisation of higher education in Romania has been highly influenced by the European Union’s programmes and policies, but there are also some national characteristics and trends which differ from those of other European countries. The

national policies for internationalisation focus on mobility and engaging the Romanian Diaspora (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 160), internationalisation at home being less visible in Romanian higher education institutions. Even so, in 2015, Romanian students were still among the least mobile in Europe, mainly because of financial reasons and issues arising from the recognition of study programmes (ANPCDEF, 2015, p. 95). As regards internationalisation at home, small steps are taken, but the process is still being considered “mainly a bottom-up initiative as a result of the academics’ own interest and involvement in internationalisation activities”, as shown in a study conducted by Carciu & Mureşan in 2016 at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Another finding of the same study is that “whether the partnership begins “bottom-up” or “top-down”, it was felt that some degree of institutional leadership and management was necessary” (Carciu and Mureşan, 2020, p. 219).

Along these lines, Romanian universities have undertaken steps towards increasing the internationalisation of higher education institutions from Romania. For example, the member universities of the “Universitaria” Consortium established in 2009 (i.e., the University of Bucharest, the “Babeş – Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca, the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University in Iaşi, the West University in Timișoara, and the Bucharest University of Economic Studies) have constantly striven to enhance their individual and joint international visibility in various ways: developing study programmes in foreign languages, student and (academic and research) staff exchange, increasing cooperation agreements with universities and research institutes from all over the world, increasing their access to and participation in state-of-the art scientific research jointly conducted with such institutions, undergoing external evaluation so as to be included in leading international university rankings, organizing a large variety of on campus and off campus multilingual and multicultural activities to bring together both Romanian and foreign students, academics, researchers, etc. (cf. Consorțiul Universitaria/ Universitaria Consortium, 2016-2020).

## **6. Conclusions**

The aim of the present article has been to present recent trends in the internationalisation of higher education, across several continents: Europe, Asia and North America. We have shown that, although not a new phenomenon (as an international dimension of education has been present from the very establishment of universities across the globe in the Middle Ages in Europe, the Early Modern Age in the USA, and the Modern Age in Asia), internationalisation of higher education has received increasing attention starting the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it was first defined by Knight (1994). Since then, the definition and description of the phenomenon has been constantly refined, to reflect new developments. Nowadays, universities across the globe are implementing a “comprehensive” view of internationalisation – one that has become an imperative rather than an option in today’s globalized world. Function of regional characteristics, internationalisation of higher education concentrates on aspects such as internationalisation abroad (in



the USA), internationalisation at home or in the vicinity (in Asia), internationalisation abroad and internationalisation at home (in the European Union). Whichever the trend/region, internationalisation of higher education can only be attained by constant improvement of: study programmes (so as to encourage enhanced student and academic staff exchange), research endeavours (so as to facilitate cooperation between research staff and institutions for exchange of ideas and best practices and advancement of knowledge), and institutional organization (so as to involve administrative units to support all those involved in the process).

The findings of this study must be seen in light of some limitations. Being a rather theoretical study largely based on literature review on the topic, the facts presented in the paper have a high level of generality. It remains for future research to provide examples of best practices in the field from universities across the globe.

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