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**INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION FROM
TEACHERS' POINT OF VIEW**

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Abstract

Internationalization of higher education is one of the main layers of changes in universities. Different practices of internationalization of studies can be met in any university/ faculty/ department. However, in spite of notable developments, mainly since the implementation of Bologna Process, the obstacles toward an efficient internationalization are still there (different formal procedures inside the universities, bureaucracy, resources, attitude of the staff etc.). Even the faculties/ departments/ programs being more active in international activities, and setting joint study programs, consolidated and diverse international partnerships, both for didactic and research purposes, have to cope with different levels of openness of the academic staff towards the teaching from and in international perspective. The paper will highlight some of the points of view of the academic staff regarding their internationalization practices. The data gathered from semi-structured interviews is presented with the purpose to provide a better understanding both of their needs for better internationalization of the teaching and research, but also for providing some possible explanations about their hesitations/ resistance toward a more extended international activity.

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1. Introduction

Internationalization of the higher education institutions (HEIs) is an increasingly debated topic, very important for universities, both varied and complex. In Romania, over the past 25 years, the international dimensions of higher education have further evolved, having an explosive trend, once re-opening the higher education institutions (HEIs) to the wider world, and benefiting for freedom of communication, mobility and exchange, as far the communist dictatorship was away. An even more intensive focus towards internationalization could be noticed since the implementation of the Bologna

Process, the building up of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the joining of European Union (2007). In the last five years, since the more intensive debate of the international ranking of universities, to focus towards internationalization is even more intensive, as internationalization of HEIs is one of the criteria influencing the ranking of the universities. Universities are struggling for an increased reputation, for attracting an increasing number of students, for enhancing the quality of teaching and research (Knight, 2008; Guri-R, 2015; de Wit, 2015; Sursock 2015 & UEFISCDI, 2014), to improve student preparedness, enhance the international profile of the institution, strengthen research and knowledge production, diversify its faculty, staff, educational offer and its comparability (Henard, 2012; Sursock, 2015 & EC 2015).

Giving these strategic benefits underlined by different studies (EU, 2014 & Sursock, 2015 etc.), the member states were asked by the European Commission to set up their national strategies of internationalization, and, in a cascade way, each HEI was asked to act this way, setting up clear aims, targets, actions and related resources and capacity building (EC, 2015).

Internationalization of education is a process which may take various forms, and we refer to these two main related components – “*internationalization at home*” and “*internationalization abroad*”. Internationalization abroad, understood as all forms of education across borders: mobility of people, projects, programs and providers, consortiums and networks. *Internationalization at home*, which is more curriculum-orientated and focuses on activities that develop international or global understanding and intercultural skills (Beleen, 2015; de Wit, 2015; Knight, 2016 & UEFISCDI, 2015), activities ranging from supporting incoming staff and students, till organizing joint degrees, scientific and academic events, joint partnerships, etc.

Both forms of internationalization are effects on institutional strategies for internationalization, the management of the HEI striving for a “comprehensive” internationalization (Beleen, 2015). But the ones to make the different desiderata reality are the academic staff, their attitude towards internationalization being therefore determinant. The academic staff can act either by their own initiative, in a bottom up way, mainly for the internationalization at home, or they can act within a given frame and resources made available by the HEI. The attitude of the academic, administrative and managerial staff of university lay on a continuum ranging from rejecting such discourse and activities (even not in a declarative way), till enthusiastically embracing it, being convinced by its added value. The conservative, „nationalist,, ones, have as arguments the primacy of national values, of national language, the limited language competences of students, the extra-resources needed, the different formal procedures and regulations to be faced with in different systems of higher education etc. In reality, they are the ones usually lacking language competencies, the ones preferring the easy, traditional, experimented way, with less effort, having the fear of competition, of being exposed. On the opposite, the advocates of internationalization are stressing all its benefits which motivate them to go for it, for improved personal and professional competencies, for improved teaching and learning (Trede, 2013; EU, 2014; Henard, 2012; EC, 2015 & Sursock, 2015).

Within departments, faculties, universities, one can notice both forms of internationalization with various degrees, depending on the engagement of the academic and managerial staff, above all the other stimulating or hindering factors which might be listed. It is why we have chosen to find out more about the reasons of academic staff, their inner values and openness towards internationalization.

2. The Romanian Context of Internationalization of Higher Education

Romania follows the direction of internationalization of European higher education by adopting in 2012, at the Bucharest Ministerial Conference, the Mobility Strategy 2020 for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The document specifies the measures that need to be adopted by higher education institutions and calls for universities to build their own internationalization strategy and to promote mobility considering their profile while involving stakeholders, particularly students, teachers, researchers and other staff. It also underlines that higher education institutions should take into consideration mobility and competences of their staff, giving them formal recognition for competences gained abroad, provide incentives for participating in mobility programs and ensuring quality work conditions for mobile teachers (UEFISCDI, 2015).

Furthermore, at national level in the last five years, mainly due to the activity of UEFISCDI, the national agency for financing higher education and research, the topic of internationalization became more and more visible. From diagnosis studies (UEFISCDI, 2014), till organizing the Ministerial Conference, or dedicated scientific events with related publications (Deca, 2015 & deWit, 2015), or running strategic projects for framing the internationalization of Romanian HEIs, different tools for policy making have been implemented. Acting in line with the European recommendations on internationalization of higher education, the ministry of education, under the coordination of UEFISCDI, has set up in 2015 the strategic frame on internationalization of higher education, with a long term vision, till on 2025 (UEFISCDI, 2015). Similarly, the universities were assisted and asked to set up their institutional strategy on internationalization in a bottom-up way, through a process of consultations at faculty level. For example, the West University of Timisoara (WUT/ UVT) has set up such a strategy in 2015 (UVT, 2015). Being a comprehensive university with a total of 11 faculties, such a strategy development reflects its multidisciplinary character, as well as a focus on the internationalization of the university as the intersection of departmental strategies on this matter.

The bottom-up process of developing an internationalization strategy at WUT is one which allows for a clear focus on both teaching staff, as well as students' specific needs, according to their field of teaching and studying, in an increasingly internationalized university environment. The strategy is built around three key areas: internationalisation at home, international students, internationalisation of academic scientific research. To implement the desiderata of the strategy, at each faculty and department level there are designated teachers and vice-deans to support the staff and student mobility, beside the work of the department for international relations. Each faculty and department can list different kinds of international activities, both at home and abroad, as results of the engaged activity of the academic and managerial staff. It seemed to us therefore useful to ask them what drives them towards internationality of their activity, and what it can be done to extend it. Such findings are useful illustrations, important to enhance the capacity building, and to take the necessary steps to make reality the stipulations of any strategy of internationalization of HEIs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Question

A relatively new approach in the Romanian HEIs space, internationalization tends to be today a trend, a demand and a quality criteria in professionalization. Therefore, it is interesting to analyse the perceptions of academics from WUT about the influential factors, opportunities, barriers, difficulties and possible ways of going forward in internationalization. The main question of this analysis is: “What is the added value of the internationalization in West University of Timisoara?”, “added value” is defined as going beyond the value of the national strategies of professionalization.

3.2. Participants

17 academics from WUT answered a semi-structured interview about internationalization in WUT. From them, 11 are from Faculty of Sociology and Psychology (FSP) and 6 from others WUT faculties, but are implicated in internationalization as Erasmus+ coordinators for international students. 8 of them have the teaching position of senior lectures, 7 of associate professor and 2 are professors. Their experience in higher education vary from 5 to 36 years, with a mean age of 16.11. 16 of them have participated in international mobility programs, and only one have not. It has been chosen mainly the FSP as pilot faculty of investigation, due to existing study programs set as joint degree, or international ones, due to its wide range of international partnerships, consortia, scientific events and projects run, being one of the very active faculties from internationalization point of view. The Erasmus coordinators from the other faculties were also selected, as the ones having a wide view on the barriers, obstacles, the overall international activities in their faculties.

3.3. Research Method

A semi-structured questionnaire, which consisted in 10 questions, 3 identification questions, 1 with multiple responses, and 6 open questions.

4. Data analysis, Findings and Discussions

Internationalization can be found in almost all educational institutions, but in HEIs has a decisive impact on the quality of the academic process. Connecting the curriculum and the research to the newest scientific discoveries and trends can be obtained only by staying in tune with the international scientific community. It is important to determine the academics opinions in the benefits of internationalization, but also about the difficulties they encountered and the importance they give to the process.

Internationalization at home refers to the efforts made to introduce the international perspective in the curriculum, research and scientific human relations in WUT. From the academics' responses we determined five principal ways of making internationalization at home. The most frequent answers (53%) refer to “making efforts to invite visiting professors to lecture at WUT” and “organizing international scientific events”. The assistant professors adopt in majority (66%) the modality of inviting visiting professors, and the (associate/) professors prefer (56%) to organize international scientific events. The

academics with lower teaching experience in higher education (below 15 years) prefer (78%) to invite international lecturers, and the academics with higher experience (over 15 years) prefer (56%) to organize scientific events. Another response theme (41%) refers to “teaching to international students”. The vast majority (86%) that view international students as an important part of internationalization at home were assistant professors and academics with a lower teaching experience (57%). The services mentioned in relation with international mobility students were “counselling, bibliographic recommendations, and adapted requirements for Erasmus students” (5) “mentoring for Erasmus students, scientific discussions” (7), “insertion of Erasmus students in social programs” (9), and “offering lectures for Erasmus students” (12, 17).

“Updating the curriculum to the international trends” was mentioned in 29% of cases. The higher teaching positions are predominant in this approach (80%).

a. Perception on the level of WUT internationalization

It is important to determine the degree of satisfaction about the internationalization process, in order to develop new strategies and propose new measures. The predominant respondents' perception about WUT's internationalization process is that it takes place at a good level, 6 of them adopt this position. They appreciate that WUT “has great opportunities for development on international visibility” (2), “has a powerful international research” (4) and “has made great efforts in the internationalization process” (12). Others (4, 24%) consider that “the internationalization process is a good one, but it is still a lot of work to do” (1, 5, 7, 15). Between the possible domains of improvement they mentioned: “coordinating the internationalization efforts at the university level” (1), “improving payment procedures for external lecturers” (7) or “going deeper in harnessing international cooperation” (1). 4 respondents (24%) appreciate the WUT internationalization as moderate and only 2 (17%) as very good. One respondent (6.57%) acknowledges that is not informed and cannot appreciate the matter.

b. Pro-internationalization factors

To analyse the international profile of an institution it is important to determine the factors which contribute to foster pro-international choices and behaviours. The most specified was the human resource factor: “Availability, openness and determination of teachers”, present in 47% of responses. The respondents value the academics' implication in establishing international relation in lecture, and research: “Participation of staff and students at conferences, projects, partnerships and international mobility” (2), “personal relationships of WUT teachers with other teachers” (4), “personal ties that teachers' have with other universities or academics” (7), “teachers' participation in research teams and international projects” (9). The organizational factor is not so much mentioned in academics' responses, only four of them mentioned the institutional organization as a decisive influence in internationalization: “existence of a WUT internationalization strategy” (11), “dynamic management and transparent institutional communication” (10), “existence of an operational strategy and consistent international approach” (1). An important factor that emerged from the academics' responses was the academics' English fluency (23.52%), without whom international exchanges cannot be possible. The possibility of participating in Erasmus + mobility program was considered by 17 % of responders an important opportunity in

international exchanges. The academics also mentioned “the existing of English versions of Faculties’ web pages” (5) or “the diverse specializations that can be found in WUT” (7).

a. Barriers perceived in WUT internationalization process

The difficulties identified by the academics are very diverse and heterogeneous. Although the English fluency was mentioned as a pro-internationalization factor, it is also present in many responses as a barrier in internationalization. 6 (35%) of the responders listed the linguistic barrier among the most crucial obstacle in internationalization. “Low English knowledge of the academics” (9, 11), “low competencies in English of the Romanian students” (5), “the need to overcome the shyness to communicate in a foreign language” (16), “lack of free English courses for teachers” (16), or “foreign students are unable to attend classes because they do not speak Romanian” (17). The accessibility issue for international students and staff was also raised: “the existing of a map / diagram of the building at the entrance; tablets bilingual (multilingual) or emoticons showing the locations of WUT: classrooms, offices; special training of public relations personnel (secretaries, teachers)” (15). “The low competency in establishing and maintaining international relations” (9), “a low level in research, incompatible with the international one” (5), or “the lack of interest and implication” (11), “conservatism and the fact that the focus is put more on the national dimension” (17) were also mentioned.

b. Perceived advantages of internationalization

The main perceived advantage of internationalization is the increased institutional visibility, 10 responders mentioned it. Also, attracting resources, both human and material, is perceived by 5 as a main positive consequence of internationalization. The process of internationalization can “involve in the didactic process experienced teachers, experts in the field” (12), and “create international research teams that attract substantial funding for WUT” (5). The internationalization can be “a source of validation of individual competencies”(1), “a real display of good practice cases” (5) and “a field of learning and personal development” (10). Also, advantages on the curriculum planning and in increasing the quality of the educational process were mentioned: “contribute at the correlation of the learning content with the most current scientific findings” (2), “helps to improve the learning process and to establish a character of novelty” (5) and “a chance to learn from diverse experiences, different cultures and a diversity of opinions” (12).

c. Perceived disadvantages of internationalization

The most frequent responses (64.7%) were that there are no disadvantages, and the internationalization process attract, in general, positive consequences. Although, the main mentioned disadvantage is the moving into background the national dimension of teaching and research, with negative consequences on the national scientific language, national scientific themes, and national research identity: “the constraint to publish in English in order to have a good international visibility, can cause the cessation of national scientific language and in long term lousing the cultural and scientific identity” (11), “translating the English academic language can cause confusions and improper use of terminology” (16), “to many imported terminology can have a negative impact on the development on the national scientific language” (1). The internationalization can “negatively affect the learning and research

content” (7), “the desire to connect to international themes can determine the giving up of the specific national and local themes, and the decrease of local relevance” (8). Also, the internationalization process is viewed as “time consuming” (9) and “resource consuming, the best students leave in mobility exchanges” (3).

d. Possible ways of development

The main theme of response (52.3%) refers to continuing and deepening existing efforts: “invite more experienced and international recognized lecturers” (7), “organize more international exchanges and mobility programs”, “organize more international conferences” (2), but mainly go for relevant partnerships for research, putting more efforts in this more sustainable path” (1). Some responders (4, 23.52%) propose “to be organize free English courses for teachers” (11) or “to pay more attention to the sites English version” (3). Other proposals include: “the proposal of transdisciplinary disciplines in English offered by each department” (4), “implementing joint international study programs” (15) or “monitoring and rewarding the internationalization promoters” (1).

5. Conclusions

The internationalization process is very important in increasing HEIs’ visibility, international relevance and academic standards. The existence of a national and local internationalization strategy is an important factor who can foster institutional initiatives and personal behaviours and pro-internationalization attitudes. The coherence between institutional measures and the individual efforts can determine the increased internationalization of tertiary education.

The human resource is viewed as the main beneficial pro-internationalization factor: participation of staff and students at conferences, projects, partnerships and international mobility, personal relationships of WUT teachers, personal ties that teachers’ have with other universities or academics or teachers’ participation in research teams and international projects have definite added value to improved teaching and learning processes. However, it is to be noted, that the young staff is less favourable and experienced in setting up more diverse internationalization activities, being shy, and with less contacts, further support being needed. The organizational factor is not so much mention in academics’ responses, but the existence of a WUT internationalization strategy, or the dynamic management and transparent institutional communication can positively contribute. An important factor that emerged from the academic’s responses was the academics’ English fluency without whom international exchanges cannot be possible, but also the setting up of more motivating tools, and resources to foster the internationalization.

The difficulties in the internationalization process identified by the academics are very diverse and heterogeneous. Although the English fluency was mentioned as a pro-internationalization factor, it is also present in many responses as a barrier in internationalization. The accessibility issue for international students and staff was also raised, and the low competency in establishing and maintaining international relations or the conservatism.

The main advantages perceived are the increased institutional visibility, attracting resources, both human, material, and informational, creating international research teams that attract substantial funding for WUT and the fact that can be a source of validation of individual competencies.

The majority of academics perceived no disadvantages in internationalization, the most frequent mentioned were the moving into background of the national dimension of teaching and research, with negative consequences on the national scientific language, national scientific themes, and national research identity: the cessation of national scientific language and in long term losing the cultural and scientific identity and can have a negative impact on the development on the national scientific language.

Possible ways of development are to continue and deepen the current efforts, to propose transdisciplinary disciplines in English offered by each department, implement joint international study programs or monitor and reward the internationalization promoters. These are some useful hints, some confirming existing research (Sursock, 2015; EU, 2014 & Henard, 2012), some highlighting specificity of Romanian context, but all of them to be taken into consideration while struggling for systematic effort towards extended internationalization of processes within HEIs.

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