

**PARTICULARITIES OF THE INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESS
OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN
REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES: THE CASE OF CAHUL STATE
UNIVERSITY "B. P. HASDEU"**

**PARTICULARITĂȚI ALE PROCESULUI DE
INTERNAȚIONALIZARE A ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNTULUI SUPERIOR ÎN
UNIVERSITĂȚILE REGIONALE: CAZUL UNIVERSITĂȚII DE STAT
„B. P. HASDEU” DIN CAHUL**

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Sergiu CORNEA

Universitatea de Stat "B. P. Hasdeu" din Cahul

E-mail: cornea.sergiu@usch.md

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0888-5902

Elena MANDAJI

Universitatea de Stat "B. P. Hasdeu" din Cahul

E-mail: emandaji@yahoo.com

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0924-4602

Abstract. *Nowadays, it is customary to talk about globalization and internationalization almost everywhere, and in almost all the fields of human activity. This natural tendency of development also applies to the sphere of higher education, where, due to the specificities of the higher education system itself, internationalization has acquired its special features and characteristics. There is no universal model of internationalization. The existing regional and cross-country differences in internationalization are constantly changing, as well as the differences between the approaches to internationalization used in different universities. Thus, it becomes obvious that – despite some existing skepticism in educational circles about the processes of internationalization – these processes become an integral part of the universities' life. And, most importantly, such processes contribute to the development of the university, increasing its competitiveness in the national and international markets of educational services and scientific research. Awareness of this fact, in our opinion, happened quite quickly, and internationalization become an effective tool for the development of educational institutions.*

Keywords: *internationalization, particularities, higher education, mobility, university.*

Rezumat. *În zilele noastre, se vorbește despre globalizare și internaționalizare aproape peste tot și aproape în toate ramurile activității umane. Aceasta tendința naturală de dezvoltare nu a ocolit sfera învățământului superior, unde*

internaționalizare, datorită specificului propriu-zis al sistemului de învățământului superior, și-a dobândit trăsăturile și caracteristicile sale. Nu există un model universal de internaționalizare. Diferențele existente la nivel regional și între țări în ceea ce privește internaționalizare se schimbă constant, la fel ca și diferențele dintre abordările de internaționalizare, utilizate în diferite universități. Astfel, devine evident că – în ciuda unui scepticism din cercurile educaționale cu privire la procesele de internaționalizare – aceste procese au devenit parte integrantă a vieții universităților. Astfel de procese contribuie cu adevărat la dezvoltarea universității, sporind competitivitatea acesteia pe piețele interne și externe de servicii educaționale și cercetare științifică. Conștientizarea acestui fapt, în opinia noastră, se întâmplă foarte rapid, iar internaționalizarea devine un instrument eficient pentru dezvoltarea instituțiilor de învățământ.

Cuvinte cheie: *internaționalizare, particularitățile, învățământ superior, mobilitate, universitate.*

Introduction

In the contemporary world, both private and public organizations are concerned about the internationalization of their activity that would allow them to have a competitive advantage and improve their situation on multiple levels.

In the last decades, the process of internationalization of the study process has become one of the most important topics debated in the academic environment. In general, higher education institutions treat the problem of internationalization of the study process as vital for their existence. In addition, internationalization is viewed as a continuous process that involves reforms and changes. According to B. Wachter, the understanding of internationalization has become widespread (Wächter B., 2004). This includes not only the mobility of students and staff but also deals with joint international efforts related to the structural and regulatory issues of the higher education systems as such. In recent times, Universities recognize internationalization not as a final goal, but as a process of development, a way of thinking, and an innovative understanding of the educational process. Internationalization is perceived as an innovative tool for increasing competitiveness in the global market (Altbach P.G., 2007).

All the higher education institutions (public or private), without exception, act in a global perspective and implement strategies and actions regarding internationalization. The number of international students has increased enormously. The European Commission states that the number of students from abroad will quadruple by 2030 (Global Trends to 2030: Challenges and Choices for Europe).

Methods applied

In the process of research and article elaboration, we tried to use a series of principles and rules for conducting the investigations, working tools for data

collection and analysis, theoretical research of specialists in the field from abroad and from the Republic of Moldova.

The institutional method allowed us to perform an analysis of the researched problem in the light of the activity of such institutions like higher education institutions, states, governments, etc.

The historical method was the basis for researching the process of internationalization of higher education in the Republic of Moldova in the context of historical evolution, which allowed us to reveal the interconnection between past, present, and future.

The behaviorist and structural-functional method helped us to investigate the detection of the behavior and reaction of the government, ministries, universities, society in the issue of internationalization of higher education of the Republic of Moldova, both internally and externally.

Results

At the national level, many efforts are being made to ensure an upward process of internationalization. The universities of the Republic of Moldova deal with the internationalization processes in the context of the Bologna process, starting with 1999. However, the need to deal with internationalization as a need to provide broader and strategic perspectives emerged later.

Universities in the Republic of Moldova still face a challenge of thinking, understanding, and presenting themselves as part of the internationalization process. In this context, it is required the problem of encouraging and stimulating the activities aimed to increase the competitiveness of the universities in the Republic of Moldova or even in European Union markets, where internationalization appears as one of the main preconditions for its achievement.

De Witt expanded his previous understanding of the internationalization process. According to him, higher education institutions should be perceived as global actors and think globally. Such strategic thinking should be implemented in all actions of the universities (from research and studies to management processes) (De Wit H., 2010).

Internationalization, as a result of globalization, particularly affects small states (De Wit H., 2015). The integration into international markets becomes crucial not only for the private sector but also for the higher education institutions, it is a natural tendency to be competitive. Although internationalization has always been an important issue for universities, now it becomes a strategic objective at the global, regional, national and local level. Due to this fact, countries choose to implement the process of internationalization through different strategies, depending on the set objectives and their geographical location.

The small states, such as the Republic of Moldova, treat internationalization as a challenge. The higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova after joining the Bologna process have responded proactively to the internationalization process (Cornea V., 2019). Understanding the importance of internationalization, the higher education institutions, in their strategic and development documents, have allocated sufficient space dedicated to the internationalization process and the development objectives in this direction. In addition, from the initiative of the universities were elaborated concrete documents and guides to deepen the internationalization of all aspects of the activity of the higher education institutions.

We can say that the synergy of the combination of three identities - regionalism, nationalism, and internationalism - is a challenge for all universities of the Republic of Moldova. J. Enders considers internationalization as a universal trend in higher education (Enders J., 2004). Some universities have a clear regional tendency, the Cahul State University "B. P. Hasdeu" or "Alecu Russo" State University of Balti, or even a local focus as identification, for example, Comrat State University. These universities serve the region's interests from an economic and cultural point of view and have their specificity in the orientation of the fields of study. Such universities focus their activity on the closest localities, where potential students can be accessed. But the universities based in the capital of Moldova - Chisinau - are heading towards cosmopolitanism and are implementing the quality assessment for excellence (Trifonova L., 2019).

Modern changes in the field of higher education institutions are considered by experts to be revolutionary. As a result, the main task of a modern higher education institution, together with educational and scientific activities, has been and is to contribute to the economic development of a knowledge-based society. The reduction of the state funding has led universities to market their activities, which was reflected in the increase of the number of attracted foreign students, participations, as partners, in international research projects (Cornea V., 2015), inter-university teaching activities (Cornea V., 2017) in the desire to receive additional funds, etc. In the context of these changes, international education is now seen as a commodity, but it is held as a blessing, not a public obligation.

In the modern world, when the universities are seen as companies, forced to compete in the educational services market, the image of the university has particular importance. The image of the university is understood as the public perception of the organization, resulting from the experience of personal communication with an educational institution, as well as from the media.

The image of the university depends largely on the relationships with

different groups of the target audience: with the society as a whole, with students acting as consumers of educational services, with industry that expects university knowledge from a commercial and government point of view, which demands more economic independence.

Due to the fact that in the field of higher education, the geographical boundaries are erased and the academic flows between the countries increase, the international image has particular importance for the university. The formation of an international image is presented as the most complex process, due to the level of integration of the university in the international educational space, the quality of the offered education, the availability of high-level scientific developments, the level of infrastructure development, etc. (European Commission, 2013).

The main directions for forming a positive image of the university in the international educational environment are:

- Establishing long-term direct contacts of mutual benefits with foreign educational institutions, as well as international organizations, foundations, non-profit organizations;
- Development of the academic mobility system of the faculty, students and managerial staff of the higher education institution;
- Intensifying the work on processing the applications for international projects and grants;
- Extending and intensifying the international research and innovation activities of the higher education institution;
- Maintaining cooperation with the higher education institutions from other countries related to the creation of international common scientific and educational structures within the institution;
- Development of joint study programs, that involves the issuing of a double diploma as the most important means of increasing the competitiveness of a higher education institution in the market of educational services;
- Development of postgraduate education for foreign students, development of short-term programs, summer schools; providing the opportunity for internships (Naletova I., 2009).

The image becomes important in the current competition also for the regional universities. To increase the level of competitiveness and to amplify the internationalization process of the study process within the Cahul State University "B. P. Hasdeu" were carried out several actions and activities. Within the ERASMUS + project, 10 agreements were signed with the universities from Romania, 4 with the universities from Ukraine, 4 with the universities from Poland, 5 with the universities from Turkey, an agreement with the University of Lithuania, and an agreement with the University of Spain. Currently, the university has signed collaboration and partnership

agreements with 10 universities from the Republic of Moldova. Since 2007, within the project “Erasmus Mundus Action 2 - Strand 1 LOT7: for Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine”, USC has received 75 mobilities for students and staff. Starting with 2015, there were carried out 27 mobilities within the Erasmus + Project. In the context of modernization and internationalization of the teaching act, the Cahul State University “B. P. Hasdeu” is actively involved in the realization of European projects in the field of education. Since 1999, Cahul State University has been involved in 26 TEMPUS projects. Currently, the university is a partner of the 3 Erasmus + projects (Avansare instituțională și academică prin internaționalizare., 2017).

One of these Erasmus + projects has played a vital role in increasing the degree of internationalization and in increasing the international image of the universities of Moldova - „Elevating the Internationalization of Higher Education in Moldova” (ELEVATE) - the project focuses on three main objectives: the development and promotion of national legislation that will enhance the internationalization process of the Moldovan higher education and research; the creation of the university integration function through the institutional policies for the internationalization of education, research, mobility, and services; enhancing the institutional capacities for effective participation in large-scale international collaborations (ELEVATE, 2019).

Based on this project, the Cahul State University has approved the *Internationalization Strategy and Action Plan* according to the priority areas of internationalization. Also, was approved the *Action Plan for the integration into the European Research Area*.

Along with internationalization, arose the issue of the quality of higher education. There is not a single country that could ensure a civilized level of its progress and existence, its political and economic independence without a well-functioning system of higher education and organization of scientific research. For this reason, all countries are interested in the processes of building and adequate national systems of higher education. However, global economic transformations lead to the emergence of new international ties in the system of higher education and direct dependence on world processes. In the 21st century, along with trends in the development of higher education systems at the national level, there have been quite clearly pronounced global trends characteristic of many countries. Among these trends, the following have been noted: an increase number of the students; the education’ openness; the rise of the cost and expenditure of higher education; an increase number of higher education staff; development of distance learning; the growth of students’ age; the growing role of the English language; expansion of the quality control system base (Zapriagaev C., Caravaeva E., Carelina I., Salethci A., 2007, p. 277).

The numerous transformations and changes in the nature of the activity of

the higher education system have led to the need for a close study of quality issues in the field of activity. Comparability of the educational programs, levels of education, qualifications, an increase of students' mobility on an international scale have led to the development of processes of mutual recognition of both educational documents and expressions of confidence in educational systems. The accreditation system based on the quality criteria for various aspects of the university activities is recognized as a tool that makes it possible to compare educational programs. And although in higher education there are no unambiguous, generally accepted criteria and methods for assessing the quality of education, issues related to the concept of quality come to the fore in educational services.

The quality of higher education in the country, its assessment, and monitoring is not only crucial for its socio-economic well-being but are also a factor, determining the international status of this system of higher education. The creation of quality assurance systems is gaining relevance in terms of not only control over the quality of higher education in the country but also the provision of higher education services at the international level. This is why the number of institutions for quality assurance and accreditation of higher education has grown so significantly over the past decades. At the same, the existing national capacity for quality assurance in a number of cases is realized only in relation to the services, provided in the country by its own educational institutions. To meet all the mentioned challenges was elaborated and won an Erasmus+ project "Enhancement of Quality Assurance in Higher Education System in Moldova" that would seek to ensure that university policies are taken into consideration at national-level policy discussions on internal and external quality assurance. It will also support its members in developing internal quality assurance systems and aims to promote the institutional quality culture (QFORTE, 2021).

The universities of the Republic of Moldova adapt their strategies for their new potential students, especially regarding increasing the number of courses taught in English or another foreign language, moving to electronic learning and teaching (e-learning and e-teaching). Sometimes, such actions are more useful to foreign students, and native students suffer inconveniences related to the lack of knowledge of foreign languages or they may not even adapt to multicultural groups. In these cases, applied management is important as a means of efficient implementation of the internationalization strategy.

For every university in the Republic of Moldova, the internationalization strategy is developed adapting to its uniqueness and main goals. But we should mention that the most common is regionalism versus internationalism or something intermediate, which is a challenge and depends mainly on the quality of efficient implementation and management.

According to the analysis that was done, the internationalization of the higher education institutions is of indisputable actuality and a complex and long-lasting process, which integrates international, intercultural, and global aspects. The concept of internationalization has different interpretations based on different approaches and reasons. In order to correctly implement the internationalization process in the higher education institutions and for a better position on the national, regional, and global market it is important to broadly and deeply understand the concept of internationalization (Knight J., 2005, p.37).

Conclusions

It is quite obvious that higher education, which itself acts as the driving force behind the globalization of society and, at the same time, experiences its consequences, opens up new prospects, and, at the same time, faces new tasks and problems. More often than not, highly specialized regional universities find themselves in these situations, solving for the most part (and often successfully) regional problems. And the scattering of efforts on the implementation of internationalization indicators that do not take into account one or another specificity of the university can lead to a negative effect.

In general, it can be stated that, despite some costs, internationalization is becoming a necessary and essential resource for the development of institutions of higher education, improving the quality of educational activities and scientific research.

Thus, the inclusion of any modern university in the process of internationalization of education, as well as quality improvement, is not only a condition for its innovative development but also a factor of survival in a changing socio-economic development. The prospects of modern Moldovan universities in the educational services market largely depend on how successfully they fit into the global processes of internationalization. A successful international strategy of a regional university is a resource for increasing its competitiveness, an additional source of funding, and a factor in increasing the prestige on a national and international scale.

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