
INTERNATIONALIZING MEDICAL UNIVERSITY-PLOVDIV: THEORY, PRACTICE, AND THE ROLE OF PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Slaveyah GoranovaMedical University-Plovdiv, Bulgaria, maestrabella@abv.bg

Abstract: In the present article, we examine the rationale behind internationalizing universities, the way internationalization has been put into practice by a progressive Eastern European university, Medical University-Plovdiv, and the important internationalization role that project development has acquired. We espouse the theory that internationalization of European universities cannot be carried out without successful project development.

These days, internationalization is often considered to be the engine of the process of modernization of higher education. Modernization is meaningless without internationalization, and internationalization is the driving force for the preservation and propagation of the cultural values of our united Europe. Even though the need for internationalization stands unchallenged, there is an ongoing debate about the precise scope of internationalization thus we do not fail to review different understandings of internationalization.

In addition, we examine the process of internationalization at Medical University – Plovdiv: the main directions it is channeled into, and the importance that it has gained for university personnel. We highlight the important role that project development has for internationalization.

As evidenced in our examination of major internationalization aspects such as the elaboration of joint degrees, student and staff mobility, curriculum development and upgrade - aspects that can be greatly influenced by digitalization, the need for outside funding is great and irrefutable. The main way to obtain such funding, especially from its most important providers, state and suprastate institutions, is through putting together first-rate project proposals. Thus we conclude that project development emerges as a prerequisite for the successful internationalization of European universities.

Keywords: internationalization, project development, European universities

1. INTRODUCTION

Internationalization is a key facet of modern European educational institutions. In the present article, we examine the rationale behind internationalizing universities, the way internationalization has been put into practice by a progressive Eastern European university, Medical University-Plovdiv, and the important internationalization role that project development has acquired. We espouse **the theory that internationalization of European universities cannot be carried out without successful project development.**

2. THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING

These days, internationalization is often considered to be the engine of the process of modernization of higher education. Modernization is meaningless without internationalization, and internationalization is the driving force for the preservation and propagation of the cultural values of our united Europe.

The term *internationalization* refers to a multitude of phenomena, all interconnected and all oriented towards one common goal: the opening-up of an otherwise closed system. Should we consider a European university as an entity enclosed by a divisory wall, then internationalization furnishes this wall with a two-way permissibility: new ideas can enter from the outside, and the university's own intellectual achievements can be circulated abroad, thus preventing isolation and self-reference¹. Today internationalization is seen as “a self-evident part of the education process”².

The debate about the precise scope of internationalization is ongoing. Internationalization is understood to encompass “a series of international activities such as academic mobility for students and teachers; international

¹ The European University Association, *Creativity in Higher Education. Report on the EUA Creativity Project 2006-2007*,

http://www.eua.be/typo3conf/ext/bzb_securelink/pushFile.php?cuid=2387&file=fileadmin/user_upload/files/Publications/Creativity_in_higher_education.pdf (last visited on 1 May 2018), pp.8, 2017.

² The Education Council of the Netherlands, *Internationalization and Europe*,

<https://www.onderwijsraad.nl/english/files/internationalization-and-europe/item1204> (last visited on 1 May 2018), pp.1, 2018.

linkages, partnerships, and projects; and new, international academic programs and research initiatives”, yet it may also consist of “the delivery of education to other countries through new types of arrangements such as branch campuses or franchises using a variety of face-to-face and distance techniques”, just as it may simply refer to “the inclusion of an international, intercultural, and/or global dimension into the curriculum and teaching learning process”³.

Even though there are various takes on the scope of internationalization, there is no questioning of the “inevitable” nature of internationalization since it is “a necessary concomitant of a global economy, a growing worldwide labor market for highly skilled personnel, and a knowledge communication system based on the Internet”⁴. Since it is namely colleges and universities that provide training for such expert personnel working in an international and internationalized world, they must be internationalized themselves⁵.

3. PRACTICAL EXECUTION

At Medical University – Plovdiv, the process of internationalization is channeled in a few main directions. To begin with, there has been a major academic innovation: the creation of new curricula, taught in English. This has completely transformed the student body, resulting in an influx of international students from diverse geographical and economic backgrounds. Consecutively, a two-way linguistic diversification has taken place: Bulgarian students have been exposed to a great number of foreign languages (most of our international students are not native speakers of English) such as Greek, Italian, Turkish, Spanish to name a few, while international students have all had to study Bulgarian in their first couple of years at the university.

The process of internationalization has been gaining importance for our university personnel, which, in 2016, resulted in the elaboration of our first institutional *Internationalization Strategy*. This strategy is based on the principle of diversification and the diversification categories outlined in our proposal for the implementation of an internationalization strategy⁶. As pointed out above, the elaboration of English-language programs has successfully resulted in a great linguistic, geographical and economic diversification.

Furthermore, Medical University-Plovdiv has had to adapt its recognition criteria to align itself with the Bologna process’ call for improving the recognition of credits obtained abroad. In spite of the rigorous state regulation of fields such as the ones of Medicine, Dental Medicine, and Pharmacy, our university still succeeds in offering a certain degree of flexibility in credit recognition which, in turn, allows for enhanced mobility opportunities for students.

In addition, the internationalization of Medical University – Plovdiv has been significantly advanced by the growing number of outgoing and incoming mobilities funded by the Erasmus+ program. In the last few years, we have succeeded in attracting funding not only for mobilities within the European Union and neighboring countries considered *program countries*, but also with *partner countries* such as Russia, Israel, and Colombia⁷.

4. THE ROLE OF PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Sufficient funding is key for furthering our internationalization efforts, and the role of project development is growing in importance as it has been proven to be the most efficient means in attracting major funding. Currently it is institutions at the state or suprastate (European) level that provide the greatest funding, and they base their selection criteria on the quality of the applicant’s project proposal.

Outside funding is needed for all aspects of internationalization, including digitalization. Digitalization is indispensable for developing true internationalization: digitalization helps foster ties between remote institutions and

³ Knight, Jane, “Internationalization Remodeled: Definition, Approaches, and Rationales” in *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 6, 2004.

⁴ Altbach, Philip and Ulrich Teichler, “Internationalization and Exchanges in a Globalized University” in *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 5, 2001.

⁵ Altbach, Philip and Ulrich Teichler, “Internationalization and Exchanges in a Globalized University” in *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 5, 2001.

⁶ Goranova, S. “The Power of Diversified Knowledge – a Proposal for the Implementation of an Internationalization Strategy at European Universities” in *International Journal*, Institute of Knowledge Management, Skopje, pp. 147-150, 2016.

⁷ Medical University – Plovdiv. Erasmus. <https://mu-plovdiv.bg/en/erasmus/general-information/> (last visited on 2 May 2018), pp.1, 2018.

promotes international cooperation. In the Fall of 2017 the first *Erasmus Without Paper* project was completed: it is only one of many paper-reduction projects in the EU⁸.

What must not be forgotten is that digitalization can be quite costly. Many universities can afford it only with the help of outside funding. Such funding tends to be generous – one of the Spring Proposal Calls of 2018 is for a 50 million pilot geared towards internationalized digitalization⁹.

Digitalization can play an important role in a relatively new aspect of internationalization, namely the elaboration of joint Masters or Doctoral programs. The creation of such a program is a lengthy and expensive process: again, all too often outside funding is needed and again, the way to obtain it via programs such as *Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees*¹⁰ is by preparing excellent project proposals.

Considered as one of the pillars of university internationalization, student and staff mobility is also becoming increasingly dependent on successful project development. As previously pointed out, Medical University – Plovdiv has been able to offer outgoing and incoming mobility options to a greater number of universities situated in a variety of countries, including some outside of the EU and even ones as remote as Columbia. This internationalization aspect cannot be sufficiently catered to without outside funding, especially without the one of the Erasmus+ program.

The Erasmus+ program also offers funding that especially targets the need to modernize and internationalize university curricula (via initiatives such as Key Action 2 Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices¹¹): in its efforts to boast curricula that satisfy the latest expectations for quality European education, Medical University – Plovdiv is an excellent candidate for such funding. As mentioned, we have already transformed our academic offer (and, consecutively, student body) by including English-based curricula.

5. CONCLUSION

As evidenced in our examination of major internationalization aspects such as the elaboration of joint degrees, student and staff mobility, curriculum development and upgrade -- aspects that can be greatly influenced by digitalization -- the need for outside funding is great and irrefutable. The main way to obtain such funding, especially from its most important providers, state and suprastate institutions, is through putting together first-rate project proposals. In this sense, project development emerges as a prerequisite for the successful internationalization of European universities.

WORKS CONSULTED

- [1] Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. *The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, pp. 20, 2015.
- [2] European Union. *Digital Agenda for Europe*. http://eige.europa.eu/resources/digital_agenda_en.pdf (last visited on 2 May 2018), pp.1, 2014.
- [3] Horta, Hugo. “The Role of the State in the Internationalization of Universities in Catching-up Countries: an Analysis of the Portuguese Higher Education System” in *Higher Education Policy*, No. 23, pp, 63-81, 2010.

⁸ The European Student Card, *Erasmus is Going Digital*, <http://europeanstudentcard.eu/erasmus-is-going-digital-welcome-to-the-erasmus-without-paper-era/> (last visited on 2 Nov 2017), pp. 1, 2017.

⁹ European Commission, *Call for Proposals*, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/newsroom-agenda/funding-opportunity> (last visited on 2 May 2018), pp.1, 2018.

¹⁰ European Commission, *Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees*, https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities/individuals/students/erasmus-mundus-joint-master-degrees_en (last visited on 1 Dec 2017), pp. 1, 2017.

¹¹ European Commission. Erasmus+ *Key Action 2*. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/cooperation-for-innovation-and-exchange-good-practices_en (last visited 3 May 2018), 2018.