Education and Internationalization of Higher Education in Disruptive Times

Ana-Maria Bolborici¹
Teofan Narcis Axinte²

Keywords: Higher education; Education; Internationalization; European education

Abstract: In recent years, most countries around the world, particularly in Europe, have mainstreamed internationalization at the national and institutional levels. Europe is seen around the world as a best-practice case for internationalization, but nowadays with significant challenges having to regard the new realities: as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation in Ukraine, but also the massive impact of the refugees who come over the previous waves of immigrants and which can be meet all over Europe. In this study, we present the tendencies of internationalization in higher education. If, until today, the globalization of economies and societies influenced the internationalization of higher education, today the disruptive times determine the enhanced importance of knowledge to find solutions to these issues. This study presents the pillars of the European internationalization strategy, as regards European Higher Education compared with other regions of the world, and gives a few good-practice cases in internationalization.

Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, economic, political, and social developments are subject to global influences. It is a certainty that globalization has penetrated every sphere of society and public life. On the one hand, this means that borders do not limit ideas and actions, and while disputes can often no longer be solved at the national level, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine prove this.

Despite the multilateral dialogue between states and the economic interdependencies that have culminated in globalization on all levels, there are more and more analysts who consider that the COVID-19 pandemic (and more recently, the war in Ukraine) coincides with the beginning of a reverse process of de-globalization. The crisis generated by the pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of the world’s economic interdependence, and the war in Ukraine is disturbing the stock markets. That’s why analysts, economists, and investors fear that globalization has culminated after 30 years of growth.

Disruption of supply chains, rising costs, and shortages, all these daily realities can be linked to deglobalization. Deglobalization would mark a withdrawal from the process of global economic integration and there are signs that this has been going on for some time. The disruptions caused by the pandemic have provoked a fundamental change in the configuration of supply chains. This has shifted from just-in-time production to stockholding. The result is increased resilience on the supply side, which is a retreat from globalization, with its emphasis on efficiency and profitability.

¹ Transilvania University of Brașov, Department of Social Sciences and Communication, Faculty of Sociology and Communication, Romania, Bdul Eroilor, no. 25, Brașov, Romania
² Theodor Herzl Centre for Israeli Studies, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, 30A, Expoziției Bvd, sector 1, Bucharest, Romania
Globalization is a direction, long-term process, influenced by the real progress and welfare needs of people, which cannot be reversed, given the effects on the well-being and stability of the world, and of each country. It may be possible to consider in the short to medium term a change of the location of production and a reduction in dependence on certain products and services (such as medical or energy resources), a reorientation or reset of flows of goods, but with bigger costs.

Globalization, besides the Bologna Process, is a powerful force that shaped higher education in Europe and worldwide, and the last wave of globalization stimulated in higher education the progress of advanced technologies, communication, and exchange of knowledge, experiences, and ideas among students, faculty, and administrative staff (Kovacevic et al., 2022, p. 3).

As it is well known, the development of technologies and innovations, with universal applications, makes it impossible to use them only at national borders or to return to the self-sufficiency of national production, therefore it is mandatory to identify concrete and necessary solutions. Along with other institutions, education and especially higher education have an essential role.

2. DISCUSSION

Higher education universities experienced an unprecedented issue starting in 2020: how to maintain internationalization practices and student mobility despite a sudden and complete disruption of international travel. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, national borders were restricted and face-to-face teaching had been suspended, affecting 6 million international students.

Higher education plays a significant role in informing young people to face the complex challenges of a globalized world through internationalization and combining an international and intercultural dimension by studying, teaching, and research.

According to Jane Knight, the internationalization of higher education is the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service elements of an institution (Zolfaghari et al., 2009, p. 2).

Whether we are speaking about one or the other of these four reasons, higher education is at its junction, contributing substantially to the development required by the globalization of the world. So, internationalization is a dynamic process involving an international and intercultural dimension; internationalization is not only oriented to countries or national states but also includes different cultural/ethnic groups within a country.

According to Dagen et al., (apud. Kovacevic et. Al, 2022) internationalization is considered to be one aspect of globalization in higher education: “a steerable process of greater cooperation and cross-border formal relations between states, institutions, and organizations in higher education, which includes an international and/or global dimension in the teaching, research, service functions, purpose and delivery of higher education” (p. 5).

Internationalization in higher education is characterized by the importance of international research collaborations between institutions and scholars, the development of an international curriculum, and the mobility of professors and students as well.
Technological advances, and all these new realities, have stimulated a virtual internationalization of higher education, with universities extending their distance education services internationally and experimenting with new ideas like virtual exchange programs.

If before 2020 the growth of MOOCs (massive open online courses) was considered the next big “disrupter” in international education, today the hype seems to have diminished (Beer, 2016). The pandemic required a protracted period to substitute face-to-face activities with online and after two years, we saw that online learning contributed to flexible and continuous programs during the lockdown periods of the pandemic in many countries.

According to Beer (2016), at the beginning of 2022, the tendencies in high education continue toward internationalization of their institutions and share a vision of borderless education transcending political, geographical, and economic divides; however, universities cannot ignore that local conditions in which they operate can impede their ability to operate.

There are countries where academics are under attack from governments fearful that a free exchange of ideas will undermine their regimes (see the situation in Russia). There are entire regions of the world where higher education struggles to survive because of underfunding. Universities are already seeking ways to engage with the growing number of refugees. From the debut of the Ukrainian war, the European Union offers its support to Ukrainian students, young people, teachers, and educators as well.

According to the Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, the EU is helping Ukrainian students and educators with the following measures: greatest flexibility in implementing Erasmus+ projects towards Ukrainian students and higher education staff; Erasmus National Agencies to contact individual participants who are in Ukraine or Russia or are planning to leave to these countries within the coming weeks; guaranteed support for Ukrainian students abroad (Erudera College News, 2022).

The European University Association (EUA), which represents over 850 universities and national rectors’ conferences in 48 European countries, condemned Putin’s aggression against Ukraine and expressed solidarity with students, staff, and all Ukrainian people (European Union Association, 2022). EUA declared that 12 Russian universities which support Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine would have their membership suspended; they had done this decision after the Russian Union of Rectors (RUR) published a statement supporting Russia’s intervention in Ukraine.

Internationalization in higher education is characterized by the importance of international research collaborations between institutions and scholars, the development of an international curriculum, and the mobility of professors and students as well.

Although higher education institutions across Europe differ, scholars speak of particular models among universities from the German, French, Scandinavian, American, and Eastern European political, administrative, and educational traditions and Israel, for example (Kovacevic et al., 2022, p. 6). Universities now have a diversity of traditional and cultural peculiarities, having differences in purpose, principles, objectives, norms, values; missions, targets, policies, strategies, capacities, resources, internal dynamics, and organizational and governance models.
3. EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE IN INTERNATIONALIZATION

In the following, we will give a case of good practices provided by the Transilvania University of Brasov (UNITBV), Romania. In the early 1980s, Romania was one of the top 15 providers of academic services for foreign students, with 16,962 international students enrolled in 1981. After 1989, the transition period and regime change were also reversed in Romania’s declining market importance of international higher education, but slowly the internationalization process strengthened (Batali, 2010).

According to the Internationalization Strategy of the Transilvania University of Brașov enhancement of the internationalization process is one priority and the achievement of this objective, integrated into the general development strategy, will contribute to the adaptation of the university to the current international context of higher education and a changing environment (Transilvania University of Brașov, unitbv.ro).

The general objective of the internationalization strategy of the UNITBV is to increase the international visibility and quality of education and scientific research processes by expanding cooperation with relevant institutions in European Union countries and outside the European area. Among the most important specific objectives of internationalization are: increasing the number of foreign languages teaching programs (including in partnership with other universities), especially master’s and doctoral programs; extending cooperation with foreign companies for internships and internships; supporting and stimulating teachers who teach in foreign language programs; intensifying the university’s efforts to stimulate the participation of teachers and students in international skills and cooperation; financial support for a program of internships abroad for young teachers and researchers at the university; improving the accommodation process of international students, by involving Romanian staff and students in their process of adapting to the life of the university and the city; intensifying attracting specialists, teachers and students from abroad to carry out activities within the University of Transylvania.

The Transilvania University of Brașov is affiliated and cooperates with many institutions such as the European University Association, Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, Danube Rectors Conference, European University Foundation, Open innovation academic network, European University-Enterprise Network, Erasmus for young entrepreneurs, Enterprise Europe Network, International Union of Forestry Research Organizations, Conference of Deans and Directors of European Forestry Faculties and Schools, Silkroad University Network, The network of excellence of intuition. UNITBV has traditional partnerships with the Confucius Institute, French Lecturer, Center for Modern Languages, Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, and Deutscher Akademischer Austauch Dienst (Affiliations and Cooperation, www.unitbv.ro).

At the end of 2021, Transilvania University of Brașov has 645 partner institutions, and universities, with which it performs cooperation activities provided by framework partnership agreements, by the European Erasmus + and CEEPUS programs; the university’s partners come from 84 countries around the world. The university has approximately 500 agreements with universities in Europe, 78 partners in Asia, 20 agreements with universities in South America, 22 agreements with universities in North America, and 13 agreements with universities in Africa.

With 512 of the 645 partner institutions, Transilvania University of Brasov’s actions is being realized under the Erasmus + mobility program, both with the program countries (KA103 /
KA131) and with the partner countries (KA107). The number of partner countries is 138 universities in 45 countries, which is a considerable increase over the previous years; an important role in achieving this result was played by the programs initiated and supported by the university from its funds, which encouraged the international mobility of members of the academic community and led to the settlement of new collaborations, especially with European institutions.

In 2021, a total of 407 full-time international students from 76 countries were enrolled (from Africa, America, Asia, and Europe); of these 93 students arrived on Erasmus + mobility and 5 students came on mobility based on bilateral agreements (from Xi’an International Studies University, China). In 2021 at Transilvania University in Brasov there were 89 students in the mobility of studies (among them from Spain - 28 students, from Turkey - 22 students, from France - 16 students, from Italy - 11 students), and 4 students in the mobility of practice.

The students of the Transilvania University of Brasov performed, in 2021, 171 international mobilities (62 participated in international artistic activities, 47 study mobilities, 32 practice mobilities, 17 participated in international student competitions and contests, 5 study internships, 2 participated in specialization courses/summer schools, 2 research internships, 4 mobilities).

The outgoing mobilities, in the same interval, are presented: 127 teachers of the Transilvania University of Brasov and researchers were in 195 international mobilities; so, there were 47 documentation/research internships, 42 project activities, 40 Erasmus + teaching and professional training activities, 36 scientific events (conferences, congresses), 17 participations in sports competitions / artistic events to promote the university, 9 university promotion activities, 2 participations in external evaluation commissions or doctoral commissions, 2 summer courses/schools, 1 participation in CEEPUS activities.

In terms of incoming mobility, in 2021, it was carried out: 51 teachers from abroad visited UNITBV for the following activities: 15 out of 10 countries - participated in conferences, symposia, workshops, summer schools, 31 out of 12 countries - participation in study visits, teaching, artistic events, 5 out of 2 countries - participation in educational or research projects.

Referring to the financing of international collaborations, the main programs for international mobility of UNITBV students and staff were: Erasmus + Programs, International Projects carried out by UNITBV, CNFIS-FDI-2021-0214 Institutional Development Project: “Internationalization at home” which aims to create a culture of continuous international interaction at the Transilvania University of Brasov, UNITBV Scholarship for teachers and researchers. Other international mobility programs at UNITBV, funded by the university, were in 2021: “Transilvania Academica Scholarship” (64 out of 31 countries), “Rector’s Guest” (12 out of 2 countries), “Guests of Transilvania University” (10 from 6 countries), “Keynote speaker” (1 from 1 country), “Transilvania fellowship” - Transilvania Fellowship for Postdoctoral Research / Young Research (3 out of 2 countries).

From the data offered above, we can notice that despite the pandemic of COVID-19, Transilvania University of Brasov continued the internationalization process, even if it limited the specific mobility for a quite long period. The university has shown good resilience to partners, professors, and students as well, who had the initiative to take part in the internationalization process.

Israel offers another example; internationalization has been and is regarded as a key objective by Israeli academics, with both the purpose of attracting talented individuals from all across
the world and improving Israeli schools’ international image. Internationalization has been valued not just from an academic standpoint, but in terms of Israel’s diplomatic and economic contacts with other nations.

The ratio of overseas people studying in Israel is now about 1.4 percent, which is much lower than the OECD average of 6 percent. This is due to a variety of reasons, mainly linguistic limitations (the majority of tuition within Israeli universities being given in Hebrew) and legal obstacles, such as visa and job requirements (Council for Higher Education, https://che.org.il/en/strengthening-internationalism-higher-education/).

In 2017, Israel enrolled 11,000 international students, accounting for 3% of the country’s total university students. Israel, on the other hand, welcomes fewer international students than it sends. In Israel, there is less than one international student (0.74) for every native student studying abroad, which is significantly lower than the OECD average (4:1). The United States (20%), the Russian Federation (14%), and France are the countries with the most international students in Israel (10%) (OECD iLibrary, 2019, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2019_f8d7880d-en, p. 3).

Quantitative objectives for foreign enrollments have been set as part of the Planning and Budgeting Committee’s internationalization agenda, with an expectation of roughly 24,000 international students studying in Israel by 2022, compared with an average of 11,000 overseas students in 2017 (Council for Higher Education, https://che.org.il/en/strengthening-internationalism-higher-education/).

Throughout 2017 and 2022, the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) has established a variety of quantitative targets for foreign student enrollment, as follows: a 120% growth in the percentage of international postdoctoral students, a 60% increase in the number of international doctoral students, a 100% increase in the number of international master’s degree students, a 30% rise in the number of international bachelor’s degree students. In addition, the number of international students enrolling in short-term programs has increased by 150 percent by participating in summer classes, semesters abroad, and so on (Council for Higher Education, https://che.org.il/en/strengthening-internationalism-higher-education/).

The Israeli Council for Higher Education (CHE) has started a Studying in Israel project intending to raise the number of overseas people studying in Israeli academic institutions (Leichman, 2019).

The Higher Education Council and the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC) established, starting with the academic year of 2011, an educational program as an important element of undergraduate education, which would be offered beyond the student’s primary field. They described it as a significant instrument for defining the grownup form of the undergraduate as an intelligent person with knowledge in a variety of fields, far beyond the sphere of knowledge in which the undergraduate has been studying. As for the period from 2017 to 2022, the PBC has set aside more than $100 million to improve internationalization in Israel’s higher education system. The money primarily supports internationalization inside Israeli higher education institutions as well as international student scholarship programs (Council for Higher Education, https://che.org.il/en/.quality-assessment-division-quad-2/).
Moreover, the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, promotes the growth and presence of enhancement classes within the area of economic education in the context of undergraduate studies in government-financed universities.

Among the CHE/ PBC’s efforts to advertise internationalization are: establishing national aspirations for internationalization; guiding a nationwide strategy to produce and label Israel as a desirable student destination; improving the efficiency of academic norms and attempting to remove restrictions on foreign students and researchers coming to Israel (such as visas, work permits, and so on); and trying to publicize academic ties with other nations (Council for Higher Education, https://che.org.il/en/strengthening-internationalism-higher-education/).

4. CONCLUSION

Given ongoing issues, the internationalization of higher education demands communication skills, rationality, creative thinking, active participation, collective action, tolerance of each other, acceptance of criticisms, and a scientific approach.

Now more than ever, the internationalization of higher education demands tolerance and international cooperation in academic activities and plans to generate science. Based on this, the internationalization of higher education despite culture, geography, and regional policies should pay attention to that: We are human; to encourage the knowledge and realization of cultures and affirming mutual respect; the achievement of necessary skills, tolerance, and learning from others; to prove flexibility in facing cultural affairs; to realize the necessity of the constructive approach to solving international issues (Zolfaghari et al., 2009, p. 4).

Internationalization in higher education is a must and “if we want to resist the powers which threaten to suppress intellectual and individual freedom we must keep clearly before us what is at stake… Without such freedom, there would have been no Shakespeare, no Goethe, no Newton, no Faraday, no Pasteur, and no Lister” (Albert Einstein at the Royal Albert Hall, 1933; CARA, a lifeline to academics at risk, https://www.cara.ngo/who-we-are/).

After this long period of the pandemic, internationalization of the universities is continuing; this period has shown that it can gear academic programmes and collaborations towards ‘virtual internationalization’, meaning that home students can interact virtually with peers at international universities and professors or researchers in their field of study. The reports show students started now to apply again to enjoin to study or other types of mobilities in different institutions abroad.

REFERENCES


CARA, a lifeline to academics at risk, https://www.cara.ngo/who-we-are/


Transilvania University of Brasov, www.unitbv.ro
https://www.unitbv.ro/en/partnerships