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Abstract

Doctoral Dissertation

**Title: The Effects of the Internationalization of Higher Education on Student
Performance and Success Rates in Completing Bachelor's Studies**

Advisor: Prof. Mihai Păunescu, Ph.D.

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1. Introduction - Objective and structure of the thesis

The main objective of this thesis is to analyze the effects of the internationalization of higher education on the quality of education, understood in terms of academic performance and student success rates, defined primarily as the rate of completion of bachelor's degree programs. This study explores how public policies and institutional strategies (the internationalization dimension) influence the quality of education and influence the academic performance and success in completing their studies of international students in bachelor's degree programs. At the same time, the research aims to assess the degree of internationalization of Romanian universities, identify institutional motivations for internationalization, and analyze the factors influencing the academic success of international students, such as the availability of programs taught in foreign languages, mobility for a full cycle of studies, government scholarships, and the Romanian Language Preparatory Program (PPLR).

The thesis is structured into seven chapters, beginning with the theoretical and conceptual foundation, continuing with an analysis of international trends and the Romanian context, developing the methodological framework and the case study on Romania, and concluding with to an assessment of the degree of internationalization of higher education institutions, an analysis of the perceived effects at the institutional level, and an investigation of the relationship between internationalization and student success rates. Within this framework, the thesis brings together conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions and proposes a proprietary matrix for classifying Romanian universities into three internationalization profiles - high, medium, and low, as well as an integrated and comparative analysis of academic success at the undergraduate level,

based on the degree of internationalization of the higher education institution, the duration of the study program, and the language of instruction.

2. Methodology and research questions

The thesis is structured around the following research questions:

1. Does the internationalization of higher education (the degree of internationalization at universities, the proportion of international students, or programs taught in foreign languages) have an effect on the success of students in bachelor's degree programs, defined as the graduation rate?
2. What is the perception of university representatives regarding the effects of the internationalization of education on the quality of education and student success rates?
3. What are the effects of the Romanian Language Preparatory Program (RLPP) on international students, particularly on their participation and transition to higher education?
4. To what extent do scholarships contribute to improving the success rate and transition of international students from the RLPP program to higher education?
5. How can public policies regarding the development of the internationalization of education be improved to enhance the quality, performance, and success rates of academic programs?

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, inspired by Bryman's methodology, which combines quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative component is based on data from the National Student Enrolment Registry (RMUR), and the National Platform for Collecting Statistical Data on Higher Education (ANS) for the period 2016/2017–2022/2023, while the qualitative component draws on an analysis of institutional strategies and public policy documents, as well as responses to a questionnaire administered in 2020 to university staff with responsibilities in the field of internationalization. On this basis, three main lines of analysis were developed: assessing the degree of internationalization at 46 public universities, analyzing institutional perceptions regarding the motivations and effects of internationalization, and examining the relationship between internationalization, PPLR, and the success rate of undergraduate students.

The limitations of the research are related to the low number of responses to the questionnaire administered in 2020, the possibility that some institutional perceptions may no longer fully reflect recent developments, potential reporting and data entry errors in the RMU and ANS databases, as

well as the fact that the degree of internationalization was estimated primarily based on indicators available for the 2022–2023 academic year, under the assumption of relative institutional stability during the period analyzed. Another important limitation is the absence of interviews with international students, which would have allowed for a more in-depth understanding of their motivations, integration challenges, and experiences related to completing their studies.

3. Theoretical framework

This thesis is primarily grounded in sociological neo-institutionalism and rational choice theory. From the perspective of sociological neo-institutionalism, inspired by the contributions of DiMaggio and Powell, organizational choices are influenced by rules, traditions, professional norms, and elements of organizational culture, and organizations tend to become similar through mechanisms of coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism. This explanatory framework clarifies why higher education institutions in Romania adopt internationalization policies and practices not only as a result of autonomous decisions but also under the influence of external pressures stemming from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), quality standards, and institutional models perceived as high-performing.

Rational choice theory is used to interpret internationalization as the result of decisions aimed at maximizing institutional and individual benefits. Following this logic, universities seek, through internationalization, to enhance their prestige, gain access to financial resources and research projects, develop partnerships, and strengthen their competitiveness, while students respond to incentives such as access to attractive study programs, scholarships, multicultural environments, and expanded educational opportunities. Bringing these two perspectives together allows for an integrated analysis of how institutional pressures and strategic decisions intersect in the definition and implementation of internationalization policies.

4. The internationalization of Higher Education and the Romanian context

The analysis shows that the internationalization of higher education has gone through several distinct stages: from a dominant phase marked by academic cooperation and solidarity in the 1970s–1980s, to a phase of student mobility and curriculum development in the 1980s–1990s, then to a competitive phase, characterized by market logic and the expansion of transnational education in the 1990s–2000s. After 2010, the focus shifted toward comprehensive internationalization,

educational quality, “internationalization at home,” and social responsibility. The pandemic and the geopolitical context following 2022 have accelerated the development of virtual and hybrid mobility, the internationalization of the curriculum, and critical reflection on the relationship between openness, security, equity, and social relevance. Within this framework, education also takes on an important dimension of diplomacy and soft power, with an emphasis on inclusion and sustainability.

Regarding the definition of the concept of internationalization, this thesis draws on Jane Knight’s (2008) formulation, according to which internationalization involves integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the goals, functions, and delivery of higher education, as well as the expansion subsequently proposed by de Wit, Hunter, Howard, and Egron-Polak (2015), which emphasizes the intentional nature of the process and its orientation toward improving the quality of education and research. In this interpretation, internationalization is not reduced to a quantitative or symbolic dimension, but is understood as a process aimed at improving quality, developing global and intercultural competencies, increasing curricular relevance, and strengthening the social role of universities.

For Romania, the paper highlights that internationalization has become more coherent over the past decade, against the backdrop of the launch of the “Study In Romania” platform, participation in international fairs and networks, involvement in European university alliances (the European Universities Initiative), the adoption of Higher Education Law No. 199/2023, and the approval of the strategic framework for the internationalization of the higher education system via Government Decision No. 1524/2024. In the 2022–2023 academic year, Romania had over 457,000 students enrolled in 46 public universities, of whom approximately 7% were international students from over 146 countries, with a strong presence in fields such as: medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, business administration, law, economics and international business, computer science and information technology, international relations and European studies, and management. These developments indicate both a growing openness of the system and the need for a more coherent and better-funded implementation framework.

5. Analysis of the degree of internationalization

An analysis of the degree of internationalization was conducted for 46 public universities using a matrix developed by the author, which combines qualitative and quantitative indicators related to institutional strategy, the existence of dedicated internationalization strategies, participation in European alliances, the proportion of international students, the number of nationalities represented, the organization of the RLPP program, incoming and outgoing student mobility, and faculty mobility. This methodology is explicitly linked to the theoretical framework through the idea that institutional strategies and internationalization practices reflect both rational calculations and processes of mimicry and institutional isomorphism, particularly in relation to European models and quality standards.

The final analysis led to the identification of three levels of internationalization: high, medium, and low. Of the 46 universities analyzed, 7 were classified in the high internationalization category, 23 in the medium category, and 16 in the low category. The results show that all universities in the high-level category had internationalization strategies for the 2016–2020 period, and most also had them for the 2020–2024 period, confirming that internationalization has become a strategic and systemic process. At the same time, the analysis shows that the proportion of international students is not, in itself, a sufficient determinant of the level of internationalization, which supports the interpretation that internationalization must be understood as a comprehensive, multidimensional concept encompassing policies, governance, curriculum, services, and mobility.

6. Institutional motivations and effects

Data from the questionnaire administered to institutional stakeholders indicate that universities perceive internationalization as a strategic tool for increasing international visibility and prestige, for developing research collaborations, and for attracting new financial resources. These motivations reflect both a logic of rational choice, through which universities pursue concrete institutional benefits, and a process of progressive institutionalization, in which values such as transparency, diversity, multiculturalism, and participation in global networks become stable components of organizational culture.

The conclusions of this section show that internationalization has evolved from an ad hoc process into a strategic and systemic one, driven both by European and global regulatory pressures and by

the internalization of the benefits associated with the quality of education, research, and institutional development. The perceived effects are predominantly positive and include the diversification of the learning experience, access to international resources, the improvement of intercultural and language skills, the strengthening of research, and the adaptation of the institutional mission to the global context. However, universities also point to a number of challenges, such as an excessive focus on quantitative metrics, the risk of brain drain, the need for specialized support services for international students, and difficulties arising from bureaucracy, legislative rigidity, and limited resources.

7. The Effects of internationalization on success rates and the role of RLPP

The analysis of the effects of internationalization on the success rate tracks a cohort of students enrolled in the 2016–2017 academic year in 3, 4, 5, and 6-year bachelor's degree programs at 46 public universities. The success rate is defined as the proportion of students who graduated by the theoretical completion date or within one additional year ($t+1$). The results indicate that internationalization has real effects, though these are not uniform: international students may have higher completion rates than Romanian students in certain types of programs, but this relationship depends on program duration, language of instruction, gender, and the university's level of internationalization.

One notable finding shows that, overall, the completion rate for international students enrolled in programs taught in a foreign language is 62.52%, compared to 49.97% for Romanian students, and this difference persists even one year after the theoretical graduation date. In contrast, in six-year bachelor's degree programs - particularly those in the medical field - Romanian students achieve higher success rates than international students, suggesting that the effects of internationalization vary depending on the program's complexity and potential language or curricular barriers. An analysis by gender also indicates higher success rates for women among both international and Romanian students.

Regarding the relationship between the degree of internationalization and academic success, the results may seem somewhat counterintuitive: success rates tend to be higher at universities with a low or moderate degree of internationalization than at those with a high degree. This finding does not negate the positive role of internationalization, but rather suggests that highly internationalized

universities often have higher academic standards, greater competition, and more demanding institutional requirements, which may reduce the completion rate, particularly for international students enrolled in more challenging programs. At universities with a moderate degree of internationalization, international students frequently achieve higher success rates than Romanian students, indicating that a moderate level of international openness, combined with adequate resources and support services, can create favorable conditions for completing studies. This finding suggests that the academic performance of international students depends not only on the degree of internationalization itself, but also on the institutional capacity to provide support tailored to their profiles and needs.

An analysis of the Romanian Language Preparatory Program confirms its important role in facilitating the access and integration of international students into Romanian higher education. Out of a sample of 1,536 RLPP graduates, 515 were subsequently identified as enrolled in other degree programs, corresponding to a transition rate of 33.52%; of these, 29.1% continued in programs taught entirely or partially in Romanian, and 4.42% in programs taught in foreign languages. Financial support has a significant effect: approximately 46.6% of RLPP graduates who received scholarships and 53.5% of those who received tuition waivers continued their studies, compared to 14.1% of those who paid tuition. This finding supports the idea that scholarships and financial aid measures not only facilitate access but also substantially increase the chances of academic transition and retention.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the thesis shows that the internationalization of HE in Romania has a positive impact on the quality of education and academic success, but its effect on graduation rates varies depending on the institutional context, the type of program, the language of instruction, and the support policies implemented. Internationalization does not automatically lead to higher completion rates, but it can become a strategic factor in academic success when supported by coherent policies, support services, an appropriate curriculum, and mechanisms for academic and social integration.

At the public policy level, research findings support the need to simplify and digitize administrative procedures related to admission, the recognition of degrees, and the issuance of student visas, with a view to reducing the bureaucratic barriers that impacts the access and integration of international

students and faculty. It is also necessary to strengthen funding for internationalization, including through competitive grants, scholarships, and tuition waivers for international students and participants in the RLPP program, as these tools directly influence academic transition and success. At the same time, it is recommended to develop strategic international partnerships - not merely a large number of them - to introduce mandatory modules on intercultural and multilingual competencies, and to implement a coherent system for monitoring students' academic progress, particularly that of RLPP beneficiaries.

The thesis's major contribution lies in a nuanced interpretation of internationalization that is treated neither as an end in itself, nor exclusively as a numerical indicator, but as a complex institutional process capable of enhancing the quality, performance, and success of students only when it is strategically calibrated and supported by public and institutional policies capable of transforming international diversity into a sustainable educational advantage.

In this context, continuous monitoring, correlating graduation rates with relevant factors, and the ongoing improvement of institutional internationalization strategies remain essential for maximizing the impact on the success of students in undergraduate programs.