Finding a way to win: on competition, internationalization and MOOCs

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Abstract. In the early 21st century, higher education in Europe has become a most competitive terrain and enterprise. From students to researchers in universities, everybody strives for finding a way to win, whether for funding, projects, alternative survival resources or places in universities and a good job. Against the backdrop of competition in general and the facing challenges posed by internationalization and globalization to Romanian universities in the South Eastern European context, my paper explores how competition and/or collaboration are reflected in the search for alternative forms of HE (private), financing sources, new research environment and new modes of HE provision.

Keywords: competition, collaboration, internationalization, higher education provision

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1. Introduction

Students must compete for scarce places in universities whereas admission to the top institutions has become more difficult. Researchers are increasingly viewing their fellows as competitors, rather than colleagues, taking public stands about priorities in funding different fields in their quest for securing research funding sources. Universities compete for everything that ranges from competition for status and ranking, to competition for funding from governmental or private sources. While competition has always been a force in academe and can help produce excellence, it can also contribute to a decline in a sense of academic community, mission and traditional values. On the other hand, cooperation and collaboration represent the most important strategies for survival in the highly competitive sector of higher education.

Looking for most effective and efficient ways to cooperate, university consortia and academic networks keep emerging in a number of places, taking a variety of forms and operating levels (ranging from joint programmes, joint marketing activities to strategic alliances in teaching and research, shared resources and campus facilities, etc.). New academic relationships are emerging with institutional leaders trying to move beyond the lobbying provided by national higher education associations to more effective forms of joint cooperation.

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Against this wide-open higher education background, several key questions are emerging: What is the impact of globalization on the competition, collaboration and cooperation forms in higher education? What are the emerging forms of academic initiatives and entrepreneurship and in what (effective) ways are they engendering adaptive and sustainable innovation in teaching, learning and curricula adjustment? What are the major trends and challenges in student, faculty mobility and internationalization policies? How are competition and/or collaboration reflected in the search for alternative financing sources, new research environment and new modes of HE provision (MOOCs, distance education, partnerships, spin-out organisations, franchising, etc)? Our examination showcases Romania in the South Eastern Europe and zooms in on the final question and the relating issues of competition and internationalization.

2. Internationalization

In the context of Europeanization and globalization, the international dimension of higher education remains an issue of intense interest and debate in this first decade of the 21st century. The ever new realities facing higher education, both domestically and globally, are constantly changing, introducing new trends, achieving new levels and posing different challenges for internationalization. Higher education can no longer be viewed in a strictly national context, the cross-border matching of supply and demand being one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalization.

In this context, national identity and culture become key elements to “the multifaceted process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the curriculum, research and service functions” [1], which represents the very process of internationalization. This is a very dynamic process, involving all functions of higher education and not merely a dimension or aspect of it, or the actions of some individuals who are part of it. Internationalization is not just a set of isolated activities that contributes to the sustainability of the international dimension rather it is to be viewed as a process of integration and infusion of the international and intercultural element into teaching, research and service through a combination of a wide of activities, policies and procedures.

Increasing globalization requires thus a stronger specialisation of institutions of higher education in a global competing education market, more exchanges of students and scientists as well as further internationalization of HE institutions. Recognising these trends, the objectives of the Bologna process aimed mostly at removing the obstacles to student and staff mobility across Europe by establishing a common structure of higher education systems so as to enhance the attractiveness of European higher education worldwide. International exchanges have thus become, more than ever, a precondition for modern institutions of higher education, for cutting-edge research and innovations. The Lisbon objectives stressed out the strategies by which the European Research Area (ERA) can become a favourable environment for the mobility of researchers in the ERA, in order to develop, attract and retain human resources in research and to promote innovation.

European institutions of higher education in their attempt to move towards the European Higher Education Area have taken serious steps towards increasing mobility and exchanges for students and teachers, enhancing teaching and research collaboration, assuring academic standards and quality, promoting institutional profile and last but not least, towards increasing international and intercultural understanding. The actors of HE institutions have understood the importance and the efforts they need to make in order to perform better in growing international competition and have consequently launched marketing programs so as to attract students, young scientists and researchers worldwide to studies and research at other European
institutions of higher education. Internationalization in various national responses has also triggered a certain competition to achieve wider goals, such as solutions for the upgrading of HE systems and services, quality improvement, restructuring, to mention only a few.

Beyond directions, directives, strategic plans and paper commitment, different degrees of, and trends in internationalization at European universities show that such trends are not institution wide, being focused on one aspect of internationalization or on/of one academic unit. In Romania, for example, several university offices that oversee the implementation of the internationalization strategy/policy have fuzzy missions, there are no implementation mechanisms in place, hardly any budget available and there is no real monitoring framework operational. Under such circumstances, the question of who are the champions of internationalization at the institutional level remains an interesting and challenging one.

In most Romanian HEIs, the general perception at present is still that the administration should be driving the process (which indicates a top-down approach), and that the impetus (and demand) for internationalization should be coming from faculty members who turn out to be often resistant to the process, as they perceive internationalization as a potential threat to their own positions. This explains why it is difficult to get heads of departments and faculties committed to support internationalization, it accounts for the insufficient administrative staff and for the bureaucratic structures and their resistance to change.

Competition and internationalization have also created mixed perceptions that go beyond the local responses and rest on whether HEIs consider ‘human development’ more important than ‘economic development’ and whether the improvement and/or attainment of high academic standards and quality is taken to be top priority in the university development plan. Paradoxically, in Romania, the striving to attain a more visible position at national and international levels seems to have triggered a backwash effect often along with a misperception of all benefits deriving from internationalization. The importance of cultural awareness and identity as well as increased cultural understanding is not prevalent as one of the primary benefits of internationalization rather contemporary concerns are more visibly geared towards the increasing costs associated with internationalization, tipping the scale in favour of income-generating motives rather than to academic, societal and cultural benefits.

Increasing institutional costs indicated in national educational reports are similarly considered a factor that could jeopardize further efforts to integrate an international dimension into the main functions of our HEIs. Nonetheless, the direction is clear despite all momentary institutional obstacles erected: medium and long term survival of our universities means more (and better) measures to increase the number of incoming foreign students, of outgoing Romanian students, of staff and student mobility programs, of visiting scholarships and training programs abroad, of joint international programs in HEIs, researchers’ mobility, and last but not least, of more efficient measures designed to increase the international visibility of scientific research.

3. Globalization: A high price to pay

The Financial Times Lexicon describes globalization as “a process by which national and regional economies, societies, and cultures have become integrated through the global network of trade, communication, immigration and transportation” [2]. Emerging from this, the impact of the economic crisis and subsequent austerity policies has been widespread felt in all European higher education systems, and questions concerning the future of universities, and the ‘society, culture, politics, and the economy’ [3] that sustains them, as well as questions sustaining the very idea of the “public vs. private good” university, have
been raised with ever more insistence and concern in the South East European (SEE) higher education systems, having in particular disquieted the ideals of the state and its social responsibilities in the former Communist bloc countries, now struggling to keep up with streamlined European HE advancement.

The collapse of the “communist” alternative in Eastern Europe in 1989 and its [lessening] ideological influence on the future of global capitalism, the emergent new European and transnational discourses on higher education and its reforms, the European integration of higher education and research as a challenge to the traditional models of higher education in Europe, the changing relations between the state and market forces in providing different public services, including higher education, the transformation of the ideals of the state and its social responsibilities in a period of global capitalism, the gradual decline of the traditional “Humboldtian” idea of the university, the emergent “knowledge societies” with their direct needs to be catered for by educational institutions, as well as the direct and indirect influence of the widely felt (culturally, politically, technologically and economically) effects of globalization have all set SEE HE systems on a fault line, as they are now questioning with ever more insistence whether higher education is a right of every eligible citizen to be supported by the state as a public good, or rather, it should be viewed as a commodity that is available only to those fortunate enough to have or develop private or corporate sponsorship?

The public/private divide [4] in the higher education of SEE countries has loose, overlapping boundaries and the relatively new “marketization” of higher education that has critically emerged post 1990, with its blurring competitive discourses, poses not only weighty challenges to the university’s ability to provide broad education, conduct basic and applied research, as well as augment the quality of intellectual, economic, and social life for communities and nations they serve, but also raises repeated concerns about SEE university’s capacity for further sustainable development within (larger) European HE.

Important public policy implications of the university’s role in the globalizing economy have been emerging after the fracture of communism: structural adjustment policies, new governance challenges, difficult socioeconomic problems, depleted budgets, need to rely upon so-called market mechanisms for significant resources, all the while trying to find (new) solutions and adapt to the emerging issues of: conflict between public service funding and private purchase of educational goods (how can SEE universities better serve increasing integrating ‘postindustrial, global, knowledge and information societies’ with relatively smaller state resources?); return on investment (state/vs private student financial support, loan schemes, cost-sharing and related tensions regarding access and equity issues); the need to shape research “to follow the money trail” (academic staff moving in a more project-oriented direction, giving rise of third space [5] professionals?); transfer of available and new knowledge [6] from the university to outside environments (transformation, under the tenets of neo-liberalism, from ‘papercentric’ scholarship to knowledge factory and profit centre?); challenges to the (new) role of the university vs. the State (is there an increasingly primacy of the market over the state in SEE as one of the main societal steering mechanisms?); the need to maximize on competition, performance [7] and efficiency (does the dominance of the market and a highly competitive bidding culture compromise the conduct and/or outcomes of research, with a threat to critical enquiry?); the gradual homogenization of academic research towards mainstream, short-termism, practical, large applicability areas; gender issues in relation to these developments (does emphasis on competitive individualism, self-assertion and the measurement of publications disadvantage women?) etc.

The dynamics of such tensions and contradictions arising from the marked hybridity of practices tend to reify a division of higher education as local ‘place’ and globalization as abstract global space, ‘out there’, operating as complex construct within the dominant logics of globalization, yet acting as active, by no means idiosyncratic, participant in its production. In such a context, the work of the ‘local’ in producing the
‘global’ has important implications for the redefinition of the public role of universities, academic and professional identities in higher education, useful knowledge, research and managerial practices.

4. Globalization and private higher education

In the context of private universities that have been expanding rapidly worldwide [8] as a result of the rising demand for higher education (HE) that publicly-financed institutions have been unable to meet fast enough, within such a global generalization trend, the growth of private higher education (PHE) in Europe has been delayed but steady compared to that in most of the world. In the European picture, Central and Eastern Europe jumped from nearly 0% PHE under Communism to even over 30% in a few countries while most of Western Europe has been stationary on its PHE, Europe’s overall being 16% PHE [9].

The conditions for private providers of education seem to have changed significantly in the last few years with national political priorities in the economic and technological domains across Europe [10] and so, in countries dominated by public higher enrolments only a decade ago, a third or more of their students now attend private institutions. However, exposed more openly to market-driven forces than the overall market-driven public sector [11], the private higher education sector remains strong but relatively small compared with the public higher education sector in most European countries, despite the widening gap between increasing demand and existing supply and, more recently, EU27 governments’ inability or reluctance (particularly since emergence of economic crisis) to finance massive and excessive growth in the public sector. The partial privatization within the public sector in the last two decades has further designed the European HE picture, showing not only that the rising number of providers in the European private sector is reflective of state HE institutions’ deficiencies, but also that Europe’s private education sector is not isomorphic to the public sector.

5. Higher Education across Europe: new modes of HE provision

Within this generally uneven, diverse and economic-driven framework, dominated by specific social realities and regional/national demographic decline, globalization and competition for new HE provision modes have generated a strong debate about how to maintain the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education. Significant innovation in HE provision has mostly taken place since 2008 [12] as a result of the need to respond to societal/economic needs, regional accessibility, the need for efficiency and better use of resources. Part of an increasing institutional commitment to innovation, decentralisation and transfer of greater responsibility for decisions and budgets to faculty or school level, often leading to changes to HEI mission statements, a series of module level innovations gradually evolving into program and institution level innovations have been emerging in European HE.

In this respect, online offers have revolutionised the ability to unbundle the traditional educational offer. Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) constitute an example of this trend toward the unbundling of content delivery [13]. The rising new generation of tablet-toting, hyper-connected youth represents a new student community of the future, whose education is unbounded by geography and time zones and at a fraction of the cost of a traditional college education. MOOCs provide access to recorded lectures, online tests, webinars and digital documents as alternatives to traditional classroom instructions and are best viewed as “higher education’s version of TV networks offering individual shows (i.e., parts of the bundle) online for
free” [14]; Various MOOC initiatives, Coursera or the Kahn academy, along with Apple’s online university, Wikipedia, or YouTube provide additional learning channels.

Such a fragmentation of HE provision is seen to be counteracted by a series of factors such as insufficient financial resources and skilled personnel, absent/insufficient control mechanisms, lack of leadership to support/understand change, and related to this, insufficient vision for innovativeness. In what regards the role of university governance in establishing and regulating these new modes of education provision, top management at the rector-level and university teaching staff are considered to be critical for innovation and change leadership, whereas the students, the general public, the administrative and library staff as well as the regional and local external administrative bodies seem to be relatively less significant, as are the media.

Without any doubt, the next years and decades are bringing significant challenges to European HEIs. Improvements in technology, increased use of blended learning, improved teaching methods, internationalization and search for funding and resources will be central not only in the competition among HEIs but also to successful change.

6. Conclusions

In the whirling sweep of globalization and internationalization, the quest of HEIs for efficiency and better use of resources represents an important external factor necessary for institutional survival, driving innovation, improving learning outcomes and catering for more diverse student body needs. While resource constraints are an issue across the sector, new technology is the driver of innovation. Competition is critical and has important implications for the redefinition of the public role of EU universities, academic and professional identities in higher education, useful knowledge, innovation, research and managerial practices.

7. References


[12] Our examination rests on findings and observations based on the 47 responses to the “Survey on the Governance and Adaptation to Innovative Modes of Higher Education Provision” that was circulated on April 2014 to European higher education institutions (HEIs) based in 9 countries. The Project (Reference number: 539628-LLP-1-2013-1-NL-ERASMUS-EIGF) is entitled: Governance and Adaptation to Innovative Modes of Higher Education Provision (GAIHE), it is funded by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) through the Lifelong Learning Programme and it is run by a consortium of 12 European partner Universities. Project Co-management and coordination is ensured by the University of Maastricht, Netherlands and RAND Europe, UK. Project Duration is 36 months (01.10. 2013 to 31.03.2016).
