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LIGIA DECA

**UNDERSTANDING THE
INTERNATIONALIZATION
OF HIGHER EDUCATION
AS A POLICY PROCESS**

***The case of Romania
1990-2015***

This volume is based on the author's doctoral research, which resulted in a doctoral thesis successfully defended in 2016 at the University of Luxembourg. The research and the subsequent writing of this book was conducted under the supervision of Professor Robert Harmsen, currently the UNESCO Chair on Human Rights and Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, University of Luxembourg.



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Ligia Deca
Understanding the internationalization of higher education as a policy process
The case of Romania
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Abstract

This research volume analyzes the internationalization of higher education in Romania as both an international norm diffusion process and a discrete policy process in the wider context of post-communist transition (1990–2015). It is conceived as a study of policy for policy, with the explicit aim of contributing to better decision-making at the national and institutional levels. As such, it is intended to facilitate a strategic pursuit of internationalization strategies in Romania, which may further inform our understanding of other similar (post-communist transition) national cases.

The research objective is to understand the internationalization of higher education as a distinct policy process at the national and university level, by using a five-point star model of the policy field, which highlights the multiplicity of actors involved and acts as a ‘cat’s cradle’. A multi-theory approach for higher education governance is used to unpack this policy field’s complexity. Stakeholder and resource dependency theories are employed to understand the articulation of the actors’ interests, capacities, and interactions. At the same time, discursive institutionalism is used to examine the role of ideas (norms) mobilized by actors to influence policy change and construct policy frames. In terms of scope, the research volume addresses the rationales, drivers, and impacts of the internationalization of higher education and its strategic use by relevant actors.

The conclusion yields that internationalization in Romania, especially at the national level, is more a fruit of the existing context – the overall globalization trends, the Bologna Process, and the EU pre- and post-accession policy processes – than a deliberate

SEAMEO RIHED	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Centre
SNSPA	National School (University) of Political Studies and Public Administration
TEMPUS	Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies
THES	Times Higher Education World University Ranking
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UAIC	“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi
UBB	“Babeş Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca
UCSC	<i>Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore</i> (of Milan)
UEFISCDI	Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding
UEFISCSU	Executive Unit for Higher Education, Research and Funding
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO-CEPES	UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education
UNESCO-IESALC	UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean
WUT	West University of Timisoara

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 General context and main trends on internationalization of higher education

In the context of globalization and in light of recent technological developments, the internationalization of higher education has moved from a being a trend reserved for systems with an already existing competitive position in the global arena to a priority for most institutions¹ and governments.

Even though internationalization of higher education can be traced back to the foundation of universities, due to the inherent circulation of knowledge, scholars and students, its conceptual understanding has evolved. A historical overview of this chronological evolution² is useful in understanding its inter-play with the changing role of higher education in society, as well as other relevant trends. For the purpose of research, internationalization of higher education is understood as ‘the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education’ (Knight 2008: 11).

In two decades, the OECD estimates that the current 99 million students enrolled worldwide will increase to

¹ For the purpose of this thesis and for the sake of brevity, I use institutions as a synonym for universities in the Romanian context, even though the term itself has a wider meaning in the political science literature.

² As presented in chapter 2.1 of the present thesis.

414 million³, with large disparities between world regions in terms of demography. The traditional openness of universities to the world has been replaced by an imperative to expand their partnership networks, internationalize their academic communities and increase their standing in international league tables, in order to remain competitive and sometimes in order to survive. More than half of the approximately 1400 universities from 131 countries surveyed by the International Association of Universities in 2014 responded that they have an internationalization policy or strategy, while most European universities list internationalization of higher education among the top three influencing factors for their future strategic endeavours (Sursock, 2015). So, even though internationalization of higher education is a relatively new and inescapable process triggered by the economic globalization and the increased inter-connectedness of our societies, it has also become a deliberate strategic endeavour by governments, institutions and academic communities to be better positioned and to adapt to a fast changing environment.

At the same time, internationalization of higher education is increasingly been perceived, compared and contrasted in relation with other processes, such as globalization and regionalization (with its most studied form – Europeanization) (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley 2009; Knight 2008; Scott 1998; Teichler 2004).

In one such comparison, globalization is seen by Altbach et al. (2010) as an external reality, which goes well beyond the remit of higher education policies, including ‘economic, technological and scientific trends’, while internationalization is portrayed by the same author as a response to this external all-encompassing reality. At the same time, Scott (1998) highlights the fact that internationalization of higher education

retains a central role for governments (since higher education is a national prerogative) and partnerships, while globalization is seen as a process of ‘disembedding’ higher education institutions from their national contexts (Beerrens, 2004), in which the state loses its central role due to (imperfect) market logics.

Europeanization is characterised by various actors as a particularly ‘thick’ version of higher education regionalism, in which key features have been strengthened over time – the policy discourse, the strong involvement of European actors and institutional arrangements, which prompted clear trends of higher education harmonisation (see the Bologna Process implementation process for example) (Jayasuriya and Robertson, 2010). As such, Europeanization resembles internationalization due to a similar focus on cooperation and its reactive character towards globalization, but its purpose is different – if internationalization focuses on instilling a broad international (beyond Europe) character to higher education and is based on international norm diffusion, Europeanization is linked to the specific regional goal of strengthening the European construction and enhancing harmonization of higher education systems within the area (see for example the Bologna Process or the EU Modernization Agenda).

In Europe, the last 30 years have seen the success of the ERASMUS program, but also the transformation of the higher education system at a regional level in light of the inter-governmental commitments included in the Bologna Process and in the EU 2020 agenda (previously the Lisbon Agenda). The rationales for internationalization vary greatly based on national and institutional characteristics, but are mainly of economic, political, socio-cultural and academic nature. That leads to a lack of a universal model or recipe for internationalization, but a correlation exists between the standing of the higher education system in the

³ www.oecd.org/edu/highereducationandadultlearning/highereducation-to2030vol1demography.htm

global arena and the influence of its internationalization model worldwide.

According to the most recent study developed at the request of the European Parliament (2015), ten key developments for internationalization at the global level were identified. These include: a growing importance of this topic at the global level, including an increased and more diversified level of strategic activities, especially at the institutional level; the risk of homogeneity through mimetism and over-focus on quantitative results; over-reliance on economic benefits, with low funding allotted to internationalization activities; a clear shift from cooperation to competition, coupled with increased regionalization (see the European Higher Education Area, The Space of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean – ENLACES, ASEAN etc.); a general increase in volume of internationalization activities; lack of sufficient data for decision-making and a general emerging focus on internationalization of the curriculum, transnational education and digital learning.

To sum up, the centrality of internationalization of higher education in the strategic concerns of governments and institutions alike has prompted the need for coherent policies at regional, national and institutional level.

1.2 The case of post-communist transition countries

Post-communist transition countries are a privileged site for understanding the transformations triggered by the globalization of higher education, as well as by regional policy initiatives, such as the Bologna Process (Dakowska and Harmsen, 2015). The intensive use of international norms and of European inspired policies by countries in Central and Eastern Europe is linked to the search for models in

order to 'catch-up with Europe', as suggested by prominent political slogans in the 1990s (Králíková, 2014). In fact, universities in Central and Eastern Europe are faced with a 'simultaneous transition' (Radó, 2001), characterized by the same external pressures as Western countries, which were linked to decreased funding, push for academic output and the calls for efficiency (Neave, 2003), as well as domestic processes of transformation focusing on massification, self-governance, academic freedom and privatization of the higher education sector (Dobbins, 2008). Later, after a phase in which European models and structural imperatives (e.g. the 3+2+3 three cycle degree model) were predominant, the narrative linked to international competitiveness and the quest for becoming 'world class universities' became a main driver for policy change in post-transition countries.

The openness towards the technical assistance of the World Bank and to the influence of international organizations allowed for the enhanced use and even misuse of international norms in higher education reforms over the past quarter of a century (Deca, 2014; Cîrstocea, 2014). Essentially, policy changes that took decades in Western countries were compressed into a very short timeframe and with telling results as to the way in which ideas extracted from outside of the national or institutional contexts can be mobilized by actors to effect change. Moreover, Central and Eastern European countries can be also analyzed from a 'periphery' point of view (Tomusk, 2008), in relation to their limited or even marginal role in the overall student and staff mobility flows and global knowledge production, which would pre-dispose these countries to policy download, rather than a real and meaningful say in internationalization policy trends.

1.3 Research objectives and rationale for case study selection

1.3.1 Research questions

Existing research on the internationalization of the Romanian higher education system mostly focuses on the history of the Romanian higher education reforms and the influence of international norms, as well as on analyzing the content and impact of various policy initiatives taken at either national or institutional levels. Internationalization of higher education is often seen as a goal in itself, not as an ongoing distinct policy process, with different rationales, mediating factors and features at different levels (regional, national and institutional).

In order to address this research gap, the research volume is conceived as a study of policy for policy, which analyzes the internationalization of higher education in Romania as both an international norm diffusion process and as a discrete policy process in a wider context of transition. The contribution of institutional, national and international actors will be looked at, in order to capture the rationales, drivers and obstacles for furthering internationalization goals. Building on this understanding of internationalization in relation to the policy process at the system and institutional levels, the present volume will then also address the way in which more general reforms might be pursued in the Romanian higher education system so as to support the further development of internationalization as a policy goal. This endeavor is based on a dual research question:

1. How can the internationalization of higher education be understood and analyzed as a policy process at the national and institutional level?
2. How could higher education reforms be pursued so as to further internationalization in the system?

In answering these questions, another under explored research topic will be addressed, namely the potential policy misalignments between the national and institutional levels and their impact on achieving the objectives at both levels.

The innovative character of the research lies within its focus on providing policy advice to decision-makers, while also providing an in-depth analysis of the internationalization of higher education policy in the still poorly mapped and overly descriptive Romanian higher education policy context, which may then enable an understanding of other national cases with similar characteristics.

To conclude, this research is a study of internationalization of higher education policies, at both the national and institutional level, seeking to understand the policy making process and its specific characteristics. It does not as such seek to contribute directly to the wider literature on decision-making, but rather it is mainly intended to contribute to better decision-making at the national level.

1.3.2 Rationale for the national case study selection

Romania's distinct profile in Central and Eastern Europe, which includes a series of similarities and distinctive features in relation to other countries in the region, provides a unique opportunity to observe the process of internationalization of its higher education system. The first decade after the change of regime in 1989 was distinctively impacted by a large degree of permeability to international norms and models, motivated by the need to reform a previously centralized and elitist model specifically geared for a particular political and economic context. Following the start of the EU accession talks and the signing of the Bologna Process declaration, national actors became better at strategically using or indeed misusing international norms to further domestic policy interests. After 2007, internationalization slowly becomes both a separate

policy area, in which global competitiveness imperatives play an increasing role in the shaping of national and institutional objectives. Romania exhibits an interesting combination of similarities and distinctive features in relation to the main trends impacting CEE countries, which make it a privileged site for observing internationalization of higher education.

Massification of higher education and the private sector

Romania was definitely in line with the general trend of the rapid increase in student numbers in CEE – its student population increased dramatically from around 200,000 students in 1990 to almost 1 million students in 2008, only to drop again to around 400,000 in 2015. However, one thing separates the Romanian case from other countries in the region – the mix of growth and volatility of the private sector. The number of students attending private higher education institutions grew from 0 in 1990 to around 350,000 in 2008 and abruptly fell to 65,893 in the academic year 2014/2015. The overall percentage of students attending private higher education institutions dropped from over 40% before 2010 (which placed Romania closer to countries such as Poland and Estonia) to around 16% in 2014/2015 (which places Romania closer to Hungary or Slovenia). This development is more similar to those in the US or UK tertiary systems than to Western European ones (Dakowska and Harmsen, 2015), with a clear shift in recent years, mainly due to migration and demography, but also due to a decrease in the success rate at the Bacculaureate exam (following various anti-fraud measures being introduced).

The distinct academic tradition and the double centralization effect

Romania's Latin heritage and cultural affinity with the Francophonie uncover a very interesting case in a

predominantly Slavic region. This historical link with France makes Romania a unique case of double centralization, on the one hand influenced by the Napoleonic university tradition (Scott, 2002; Dobbins and Knill, 2009), on which the higher education system was set-up in the nineteenth century, and on the other hand impacted by the communist legacy. This combination was hard to overcome in a short time frame and had a path dependent influence in the way in which internationalization norms were mediated by relevant actors, as well as on the development of distinct internationalization policies. In this, the Romania case is different from countries with a strong Humboldtian academic tradition (such as Hungary, Poland or the Czech Republic) and from systems with highly independent faculties such as those shaped by the Tito regime in former Yugoslavia (Dobbins, 2008).

The openness to Europeanization trends and the presence of international actors

In Central and Eastern Europe, the rapid post 1990 reforms were influenced to varying degrees by European and international institutions (Králíková, 2014; Dobbins, 2011; Dakowska and Harmsen, 2015). Even if the policy framing of domestic changes in CEE higher education systems was similar, the different EU accession processes and the public support for this option had an impact on the way in which internationalization and Europeanization influenced on each system. Romania's public opinion was very strongly pro-European and thus the government could easily use the EU pre-accession efforts and a periphery complex to legitimize a number of unpopular reforms (see chapter 4). This is not an unusual finding in CEE, where the double pressure of democratization and EU accession made countries more likely to adopt an understanding of voluntary international reforms such as the Bologna Process as binding commitments,

seeing it as part of the EU *acquis communautaire* (Musselin, 2009). In this context, there was a lot of willingness to take on what was seen as predominant European models in order to become the 'good pupils' in comparative EU and EHEA tables. This opportunistic willingness should not be mistaken with a profound adherence to the principles of EU reforms or the Bologna Process, in light of the limited debate in academic communities and the speed of adoption generated by the EU accession process (Dakowska, 2014; Deca, 2014).

Romania does, however, appear to stand out in terms of the comparative, over powerful influence exercised by international actors. The already existing presence of UNESCO-CEPES in Bucharest and the strong involvement of the World Bank all through the 25 years of transition had a direct, structuring impact on the development of the national system, in contrast to what appears to have been a pattern of more mediated impact elsewhere in the region (Dobbins, 2008; Scott 2002; Tomusk, 2004).

The domestic actors' configuration

In the Romanian case, as elsewhere, the shaping of higher education policies in general and of internationalization policies in particular is mediated by the distinctive configuration of the actors playing a role in the policy process. The reforms principally relied on the government as a proponent and main mediator of international norms, but they were also pushed by an influential group of policy entrepreneurs, socialized in international organizations and wearing multiple hats in the academic and political environments (Cîrstocea, 2014). Student organizations were also quite relevant as an actor and used international reforms such as the Bologna Process as leverage to boost their influence and legitimize their demands (Deca, 2014). As opposed to Poland or the Czech Republic, where the

Rectors' Conference was a powerful player (Dakowska, 2014), in Romania they played a much lesser role in designing the reforms. More general observations are difficult to make, insofar as research on policy-making processes in the region is uneven (Scott, 2007; Dobbins and Knill, 2009). It is clear, however, that the study of the distinct and diverse configuration of actors in the Romanian case is of particular interest in terms of understanding how external norms were mediated and internationalization policies were developed in a context of post-communist transition.

1.3.3 Rationale for the institutional case study selection

The selection of individual universities as cases was determined with two main factors in mind, while also taking into account other criteria to ensure the relevance of the cases for the Romanian higher education system. The first factor was institutional positioning in Romania's 2011 classification system. While this is an imperfect tool in looking at the position of universities within the Romanian higher education landscape, it nevertheless aids in identifying patterns linked to size, prestige, research potential and *de facto* mission (e.g. regional teaching universities vs more outward-looking research-intensive ones). A second key factor was participation in the UEFISCDI IEMU project which heavily discussed and researched internationalization. This offered access to data, chiefly due to the project determining universities to formalize their internationalization approaches by drafting strategies and reports. The selection of universities which participated in the IEMU project as case studies is motivated by the fact that they have proactively engaged in strategic planning to further their internationalization objectives, thus providing enough documentary evidence to become the object of a serious research effort.