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INTERNATIONALIZATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AS A PRE-REQUISITE FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Veronika Kareva
Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication,
South East European University, North Macedonia
v.kareva@seeu.edu.mk

Abdylmenaf Bexheti
Faculty of Business and Economics,
South East European University, North Macedonia
a.bexheti@seeu.edu.mk

Besa Arifi
Law Faculty,
South East European University, North Macedonia
b.arifi@seeu.edu.mk

ABSTRACT

There are multiple positive effects of internationalization of Higher Education (HE) on enriching students' experiences in general and providing opportunities for exchange and development of all segments of university functioning. This paper aims to contribute to determining the role of institutional QA in promotion of the international cooperation in HE by analysing undergraduate students' perceptions on their international experience and comparing them to their home University.

Individual experiences of students from the Southeast European University (SEEU) in North Macedonia, who participated in Erasmus exchange program in the last two academic years (2021/22 and 2022/23), with regard to the main quality assurance (QA) principles and measurements applied at their home University, are being considered. Their academic progress at the international universities is also taken into consideration.

The aim is to collect firsthand information from the main stakeholders in the QA process about areas that can be further developed, as well as to position SEEU and self-check where it stands comparing and benchmarking it with some reputable European universities in order to better prepare its students for the international job market. SEEU has one of the most developed QA systems in the wider region, created and constantly being developed based on the international standards and guidelines and the long institutional experience. Thus, the paper also aims to contribute to defining some basic standards of internationalization of QA which would be recommended to the institutions from less developed, ITC (inclusiveness target countries) in order to assist them to place and welcome international students more successfully.

Key words: Internationalization, Quality Assurance, Exchange, Standards

INTRODUCTION

Free movement of staff and students, their increased mobility and exposure to international experiences in order to be more competitive on international job markets in a globalized world has been one of the greatest benefits of the Bologna Process (European University Association). The process of internationalization of Higher Education (HE) has enabled universities to compete for students not only in their countries, but wider and thus to prepare them for becoming engaged global citizens (Hanson, 2010 in Robson and Wihlborg, 2019). It has resulted in creation of new policies, institutional adjustments and reforms, all aimed at making studying more alike everywhere so that students could obtain the same or similar experiences, knowledge and skills, transferable in countries other than their own.

The search and hiring of global talent go beyond Europe and the countries that were initially part of the Bologna process. Countries such as Japan, Korea and China with very developed businesses and industries introduce English as an official language in some of their major companies in order to attract skilled international workers. (Anthony, 2018). This is one more reason for universities to engage in international cooperation and standardization of their offer with regard to the study programs and courses learning outcomes.

INTERNATIONALIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Global citizenship, global partnership, global responsibility, global solidarity, global engagement, collaborative partnership, collective journey etc. are only some of the phrases used for setting common goals in the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015) that well illustrate the importance of globalization and internationalization of all segments of functioning of modern society, including education. In this regard, Wysocka et all, (2022) argue about a few dimensions of internationalization of higher education (HE): internationalization of curriculum, collaborative degree programs with international universities and investments in campuses in other countries, as well as the continuous trends, especially in the post Covid period, in technology development and distant learning technologies. The last element enables HE institutions to provide instructions to learners no matter in which part of the world they are.

There has always been a close link between internationalization and quality of HE with quality improvement paying an important role in the promotion of internationalization.

> This is based on the strong belief that internationalization enhances the quality of higher education. Many policy documents, especially those published in the 1980s and early 1990s consider internationalization as a means to improving quality, rather than an end in itself. Examples include OECD and EU documents, statements on national polices for internationalization and also many institutional-level policy plans for internationalization (Campbell, Van der Wende, 2000, p.5)

At the turn of the century, many EU programs emerged, aimed at increasing cooperation and mobility among its countries. For instance, Erasmus program was launched in 1987 (European Council, 2017). They all expressed positive effects of internationalism on quality improvement with regard to student and staff performance, teaching and learning, student services and the content of the academic programs. Thus, internationalism and quality improvement became interrelated: quality improvement contributed to promotion of internationalization and internationalization required quality improvement in all areas of university functioning.

This paper aims to contribute to determining the role of institutional QA in promotion of the international cooperation in HE by analysing undergraduate students' perceptions on

their international experience and comparing them to their home University. It also considers students' achievement at the well standing European universities in order to attempt to define some basic standards of internationalization of QA which would be recommended to the institutions from less developed, inclusiveness target countries (ITC), (COST, EU). The findings are expected to provide relevant information to HE institutions in ITC countries for placing, welcoming and preparing students for the international job market more successfully.

INTERNATIONALIZATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE AT SEEU

Maintaining and improving the international relations is one of the major strategic goals of SEEU Strategic Plan 2021-2025 (SEEU website). In order to achieve it, numerous agreements for cooperation with international universities are being signed and students are stimulated to gain full grant implementation both for exchange and internship opportunities. At the same time, efforts are being made to increase the offer of academic programs in English so that SEEU becomes more attractive for incoming students. Academic staff is encouraged to use faculty grants for lecturing rather than only participation in Erasmus+ funded training programs aiming. The aim is to get better acquainted with the organization and delivery of instruction at the international universities and share the experiences at home.

Previous research shows that internationalism requires quality improvement. QA system at SEEU is based on the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) (Harris, 1994 in Ali and Shastri, 2009) and it focuses on three main domains: students as customers in HE, the University staff (academic and administrative) and the educational process with all measurable points that it entails. Based on this model, the University has established and constantly develops a system of QA that includes instruments and data tracking of the quality of teaching, learning and satisfaction from all services. As an example, Table 1 below shows the results from all instruments for the pillar - teaching and learning used in the academic 2021/2022.

Type of Instrument used	University average score (on a scale from 1 to 5)
Teaching observation	All grades above 4
Student evaluation of academic courses	Spring 4.62; Fall 4.64
Student satisfaction	3.82
Student satisfaction from administrative services	4

Table 1. Annual average grades from QA instruments

The application of all instruments that are mentioned in the table is based on defined and well elaborated processes conducted throughout the academic year with detailed procedures, action plans and follow up activities. They are run by the Quality Office in close cooperation with University Analytical Office for their processing, analysis and data tracking, used to create new policies linked to university strategic goals.

SEEU has one of the most developed and unique QA systems in the wider region, created and constantly being improved based on the international standards and guidelines and the long experience with QA. (Kareva, Dika, Memedi, 2018). It has led to establishment of an institutional quality culture that is being cherished by both staff and students. The average grades in Table 1 show high institutional achievement although they are compiled of many individual grades. For instance, the average University grade of student evaluation has been deduced from the average scores of 370 individual courses of more than one hundred professors evaluated. Despite this fact, there is awareness that SEEU is still a very young HE institution, established in 2001, operating in a post socialist country with traditional teaching methodologies as the most dominant in HE. Therefore, concrete, comparative data about teaching and learning from students who have experienced both studying at SEEU and studying abroad are highly appreciated, as students should be able to notice similarities and differences directly and objectively.

METHODOLOGY

The paper explores the academic completion of students from SEEU who participated in Erasmus exchange programs in the last two academic years (2021/22 and 2022/23, winter semester) and their perceptions with regard to the main QA principles and measurements applied at their home University, compared to those at the universities they have visited. The aim is to collect first-hand information from the main stakeholders in the QA process about areas that can be further developed, as well as to position SEEU and self-check where it stands comparing and benchmarking it with some reputable European universities in order to better prepare its students for the international job market. A more general aim of the paper is, derived from the information about our own system, to contribute to defining some basic standards of internationalization of QA which would be recommended to the institutions from less developed, ITC in order to assist them to place, welcome and prepare students for the international job market more successfully.

Totally, 64 undergraduate students from five Faculties at SEEU participated in Erasmus + exchange programs in academic year 2021/2022 and in winter semester of the academic year

2022/2023. Data about their academic progress were gathered from the faculty coordinators. The aim was twofold: to gather information about the level to which study programs at SEEU were compatible to those offered at European universities and to consider how successfully students performed at those universities based on the number of accumulated credits. 18 undergraduate students that went to universities in Turkey were not taken into consideration.

Next, two (2) students from each Faculty, randomly selected, were interviewed about the following topics:

- The experience at the international University, compared to what is offered at SEEU, with regard to teaching and learning (this could include courses, professors, teaching methodology, professor – student communication, materials offered, student support, student workload, assessment etc.)
- What, in their opinion, should be changed at SEEU in order to make it easier for students to integrate more successfully at the international university

FINDINGS

All students that spent a semester abroad attempted to earn 30 credits (ECTS) distributed to 5 or 7 courses. Students that managed to earn at least 18 credits were considered as successful. At the Computer Science Faculty (CST) there were 13 such cases (out of 25 - 52%). At the Business and Economics (BE) Faculty – 5 out of 14 students – 37%; at the Languages, Cultures and Communication (LCC) Faculty – 8 out of 15 students – 53%; at the Law Faculty 2 out of 6 students - 33% and at the Faculty of Contemporary Social Sciences CSS) – 2 out of 5 students - 40%. The percentage was the highest at the CST Faculty, followed by the LCC Faculty and the lowest at the Law Faculty.

Table 2 below illustrates the total number of credits attempted versus credits awarded per Faculty, based on the sum of the total number of credits per individual students.

Faculty	Number of students	Credits attempted internationally	Credits awarded (ECTS)	Percentage (level of completion in %)
CST	25	750	300	40
LCC	15	450	240	53
BE	14	420	126	30
Law	6	210	42	20
CSS	2	150	48	32

Table 2. Credits attempted and earned per Faculties at international universities over three semesters with the completion success.

As indicated by these figures, CST and the LCC Faculty can be considered as more successful in completing the program requirements than the other three Faculties, based on the number of students that earned more than half credits and based on the total number of credits attempted and awarded at Faculty level. This might be due to the fact that their disciplines are more universal than those of the other Faculties, especially the Law Faculty, although it is a sign that some more efforts should be made to get the BE Faculty closer to the European trends.

Interviews with students were another tool for getting comparative information about teaching and learning at SEEU and at European universities. Their main perception, no matter which discipline was in question, was that professors at SEEU had good teaching and communication skills and maintained good teacher/student interaction. The only difference with regard to teaching was that compared to SEEU, the teaching process at international universities was more practically oriented with many case studies and work on projects. Another difference was in student workload which was greater internationally than at home. There was also a difference in assessment. At European universities, assessment was based on practical matters and assessment criteria stronger, with strict deadlines. Students had difficulties in managing the practical tasks as they were often related to the local community in which the university operated, and incoming students were not well acquainted with its organization and functioning.

Students believed that they could have been more easily integrated at the international universities, if they had been better prepared at home about what to expect; then if the study programs at home University would be more similar to the international one so that they could

have the same or very similar courses. This was especially pointed out by the BE students who claimed that the courses at SEEU should be more oriented towards economy instead of having general courses.

Discussions about students' life on campus and their socialization activities were not our priority, but students would mention this very often. Compared to SEEU, at European universities, there were more activities on campus, other than those related to teaching and learning which made students stay on campus. One student of Computer Sciences said that at home, they take studying as going to work as they finish classes and leave, while in Germany, there were many extracurricular activities that contributed to more successful integration and connection of all students.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main limitation of the study is that it has not provided direct comparison of data among SEEU and the QA systems at international universities. Instead, since the home system was established based on international standards and guidelines; had quite long and unique national application as well as proven institutional outcomes, it was assumed that such system would yield to positive international experiences. However, establishing a QA system at the University is not self-sufficient as it does not guarantee successful internationalization. Ensuring some standards of teaching, learning and assessment are necessary in order for students to take the advantage of their international studying. However, guidance and further efforts are needed in areas such as the percentage of similarity of curricula, the level of difficulty of the courses, the amount of work required from students, certain regulations about physical presence in classrooms and the necessity for some community work with evidence.

Universities in less developed countries should identify a partner university or Faculty from more developed EU countries that could serve as its model and try to follow the program and course requirements from the particular study program. With this regard, ways should be identified to encourage academic staff visits at EU universities.

Young universities, including SEEU, and generally, Universities in less developed countries, should track students' progress at the international universities, as well as their attitudes upon arrival and come up with regular reports and recommendations based on the findings. Some more formal support needs to be provided to students before their international stay about what they will encounter there so that the initial shock is minimized, and students

do not get discouraged immediately. It is important that they keep their self-esteem and self-efficacy beliefs at a high level in order to be more successful.

If our aim is to produce a global work force equipped with knowledge and universal skills for the future, such as digital leaders, fluent English speakers, soft skills' masters etc., we have to provide universal (standard) conditions for preparation of such intellectual working force. This should be done flexibly, by taking care of the particularities and the local context in each country.

Has the time come for establishing European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Internationalization in Higher Education, 18 years after the adoption of the ESG for QA?

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