

INTERNATIONALISATION AND EUROPEANISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: ATTITUDES OF ACADEMIC STAFF

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Abstract

This study was inspired by the goals set at the Gothenburg European Council (2017) and the initiative of the European Commission to encourage the establishment of innovative European university networks where multilingualism and interdisciplinarity lay the foundation of research and educational cooperation. Using a qualitative research approach, the study explored how academic staff at Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ perceive internationalisation in higher education. The empirical data show that academics see internationalisation as a very positive trend and a major factor in their professional development. Based on the identified catalysts and barriers to the participation of academics in this process, the paper offers recommendations for institutional measures to facilitate staff involvement in internationalisation activities, and thereby ensure that the institution itself can successfully function in the growing European interconnectedness and interdependence in the fields of education and science.

Key words: internationalisation, Europeanisation, academic staff, higher education

Internationalisation in higher education: theoretical highlights

Globalisation has accelerated the processes of internationalisation in higher education and made the international scope and direction of academia mainstream¹. In response to the demands of the global academic environment,

¹ Altbach & Knight, 2007; Van der Wende, 2001.

academic systems, institutions, and academics undertake policies and practices to internationalise². Internationalisation is defined as a process „integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education“.³

The dominant features of internationalisation at national/sector level comprise primarily funded programmes that provide opportunities for institutions and individuals to engage in international mobility and research activities, establish academic linkages, or provide foreign language training.⁴ The strategies for internationalisation at institutional level refer to programme and organisational initiatives such as academic programmes that promote faculty/staff/student mobility, joint degree programmes, foreign language study, internationalisation of the curricula, cross-cultural training, research and scholarly collaboration in the form of joint research projects, international conferences and seminars, published articles and papers, research exchange programmes, international partnerships, branch campuses, international and intercultural campus events, among others.⁵ Europeanisation could be described as „the European ‘internal internationalisation’“.⁶ This internationalisation on a regional level implies „less culture contrast and opportunities for horizontal communication, cooperation, and community as well as of potentials of integration and joint action to shape the system“.⁷ Europeanisation in higher education is usually associated with the Erasmus+ programme and the Bologna process of standardisation of study programmes and degrees.⁸

„European Universities“

At the 2017 Gothenburg Social Summit the European Union leaders highlighted the significance of education and culture for reinforcing our European identity and values, building inclusive and cohesive societies and maintaining a cutting-edge economic competitiveness on a global scale.⁹ The European Council outlined a vision to harness the full potential of education and culture and called on Member States, the Council and the Commission to take up further steps into „strengthening strategic partnerships across the EU between higher education institutions and encouraging the emergence by 2024 of some twenty „European Universities“, consisting in bottom-up networks of universities across the EU which will enable students to obtain a degree by

² Altbach & Knight, 2007; Van der Wende, 2001.

³ Knight, 2008, p. 21.

⁴ Knight, 2004.

⁵ Knight, 2004.

⁶ Zgaga, 2008, p. 19.

⁷ Teichler, 2004, p. 22.

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/bologna-process-and-european-higher-education-area_en

⁹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32179/14-final-conclusions-en.pdf>

combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities¹⁰.¹⁰ Following the Summit, the European Commission set out its ambition to create a European Education Area by the year 2025¹¹ where European university transnational alliances would be a key pillar in fostering European identity, promoting European values, ensuring the excellence and competitiveness of European higher education.¹² These European university alliances are expected to „trigger unprecedented levels of institutionalised cooperation between higher education institutions, making it systemic, structural and sustainable“.¹³ European university alliances establish their cooperation on the basis of¹⁴:

- „a joint long-term strategy“ where cooperation spans across all levels of their institutions;
- „a European higher education inter-university ‘campus’“ which provides for „a seamless mobility (physical or virtual) to study, train, teach, do research, work or share services at cooperating partner institutions“;
- „transdisciplinary and transnational teams of students, academics and external stakeholders“ to offer solutions to serious issues facing Europe;
- „students can design their own flexible curricula, leading to a European Degree“.

The development of these innovative alliance networks is in the hands of the universities in the Member States. The universities need to plan, organise and test models of transnational networks which include not only other higher education institutions but also external partners – public or private organisations in the field of education and training, research and innovation, or in the world of work, from a broad geographic area across Europe.¹⁵ In this respect, it is important to examine whether a university is prepared to participate in such novel European education networks. Academic staff play an essential role in the internationalisation practices of a higher education institution and are thus a major stakeholder in the process of its Europeanisation. It is therefore important to understand how academic staff perceive these processes of internationalisation and Europeanisation in order to optimise policies at institutional level to encourage staff involvement, and thereby ensure that a higher education institution could successfully function in the European Education Area.

¹⁰ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32179/14-final-conclusions-en.pdf>

¹¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/towards-european-education-area-2025-2017-nov-14_en

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en

¹³ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/epp-eur-univ-2020>

¹⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-initiative-factsheet.pdf>

¹⁵ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/key-action-2-european-universities_en

Purpose of the study, method and data

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of academic staff at Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ about the processes of internationalisation and Europeanisation in higher education. This paper is based on data from fourteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with academics from the humanities and the social sciences. The interviewees are at the age of 35 to 50, two of them hold full professorships, eight are associate professors, four – assistant professors with a doctorate. The interviews were conducted and analysed by following the paradigm of the Grounded Theory method advocated by Strauss and Corbin. This method adheres to a well-defined coding paradigm where data is constantly compared within and with new data to develop concepts and categories, data is gradually abstracted from the descriptive level to higher order theoretical categories, sampling is theoretical as opposed to purposive, writing of theoretical memos is an important feature, the researcher stays in the field until no new evidence emerges, that is, saturation of the data is achieved.¹⁶

Findings

The empirical data show that academic staff at Sofia University see internationalisation and Europeanisation as a very positive trend in higher education. These processes are perceived as a major factor in the scholars' professional development as well as an important element in their personal advancement. Internationalisation and Europeanisation are estimated highly for the opportunity they provide for the scholars to overcome their scientific isolation and sense of belonging to the academic periphery. It is important to note that all of the interviewed scholars, regardless of age or academic position, express these appreciative views of the process of internationalisation in higher education.

„In the first place, we cannot live in isolation, neither in our personal, nor in our professional aspect, internationalisation is inevitable. It affects the way we plan work, the way we work, the way we choose to develop. The role of a teacher demands constant intellectual effort and enrichment of one's knowledge. We absolutely must compare what we do with what and how is taught abroad, compare where we stand and in what direction our field is developing, we must stay informed, and apply all this in our work.“ (respondent 14, assoc. prof.)

„We can measure our research results and our methods, we do not remain closed in our university, in one country. We see that we can work with colleagues from other universities, and it is not merely exchange of knowledge or incorporation and implementation of their methods. We do joint research, and this brings a feeling of being on par, a feeling that our research is of comparable value.“ (respondent 12, professor)

¹⁶ Strauss & Corbin, 1998.

„My whole academic biography has been shaped by internationalisation. It has widened my perspective. You learn to accept and acknowledge the right to diversity of views. We must open to the international academic community and actively seek participation in it. This is the pathway to follow. This is the way to reinforce our European identity, too.“ (respondent 11, asst. prof., doctor)

Internationalisation is associated with opportunities for knowledge exchange, ideas for new research avenues, innovative educational and research practices. A very high added value of internationalisation is seen to be the establishment of knowledge networks and the opportunity to play an active role in setting and implementing the agenda in the contemporary research environment. This allows scholars to measure their achievements against those of the leading scientists in their field, build a sense of professional worth and enhance their self-esteem.

„Participation in European scientific networks is the key to our professional development. If you are not involved in such networks, you cannot work and deliver quality. If you want to work on interesting research projects, this is your only option. Our country is small and there aren't enough people who specialise in one and the same field of study to make a large team. This is one of the biggest advantages of working at Sofia University. It is one of very few places here where you can participate in large international networks and do interesting research in large European projects.“ (respondent 1, assoc. prof.)

„In the first place it is the opportunity to learn from and work with the best. There are leading researchers in every discipline. Also, being among the ones who determine the course of research, and then participating in the execution of this scientific agenda, because in any field there is this research agenda, and you must have the understanding, you must know this agenda, and influence this agenda, in the ideal case. This is very, very important. A very high added value.“ (respondent 2, asst. prof., doctor)

„Another aspect of internationalisation is the opportunity for a very intensive contact with institutions and colleagues from abroad, and not necessarily from our own field. This interdisciplinarity is very enriching. It is very important that we can see and experience the trends through our research and joint projects, not only reading about them but „living“ them.“ (respondent 6, assoc. prof.)

The scholars actively seek participation and visibility at the international scientific arena. Joint publications in reputable journals hold a very high priority in the scholars' professional agenda as they are an opportunity to achieve higher visibility and increase the number of citations. The significance of citations has come to the fore after the amendments to the Act on Academic Staff Career Development in Republic of Bulgaria came into force in 2018. The Act introduced criteria to measure scientific achievement by means of scientometric indicators. Regardless of the effort to meet these criteria, the

scholars acknowledge that these requirements play a positive role as they stimulate involvement in the international scientific community. The scholars also share that visibility at an international level requires additional effort in making a shift in their research agenda – from topics of local significance to ones of global dimension and applicability, as well as discipline to meet technical criteria and observe deadlines.

„Publishing abroad, participating in international research teams, going global, so to say, all this has become of utmost importance, especially after the latest legislative changes concerning the promotion of academic staff and the introduction of objective indicators for one's achievements.“ (respondent 9, assoc. prof.)

„I write in English and publish only abroad. If you write in Bulgarian, in practice, it is impossible to reach your audience, to have your research cited and achieve some visibility. My priority is to participate in international conferences and publish abroad.“ (respondent 1, assoc. prof.)

The financial aspect of internationalisation activities is another positive aspect for the interviewed scholars. They emphasise the role of international projects and international fellowships as an opportunity to have their research adequately remunerated, presented, and published at international level. The financial dimension is also pronounced when the scholars speak of engagement in bachelor's, master's and doctoral programmes offered in a foreign language (unilaterally by the University or in cooperation with foreign academic institutions). In addition to the higher remuneration, involvement in these programmes is a way to maintain the scholars' required teaching workload. In light of the negative demographic trends in the country and the substantial reduction in the number of students who enroll at the university, and the respective reduction in the state subsidy, such programmes maintain the viability of the institution.

„The market is small, if we work in Bulgarian only, we confine ourselves to a very small academic space with a small population. If we rely only on Bulgarian students, we cannot cope financially, especially with the reduced subsidy from the Ministry of Education.“ (respondent 1, assoc. prof.)

„The opportunities to have our research financed here in Bulgaria are much fewer, the amounts allocated each year are ridiculously insufficient. And what we need, and what I feel as a deficit here, is this sense of periphery, provincialism, this lack of confidence, compared to our colleagues in other parts of Europe who are much more cosmopolitan. If it weren't for the international fellowships and the European projects, it would have been very difficult.“ (respondent 7, asst. prof., doctor)

„The disciplines we teach, their content... knowledge constantly changes, even in the sciences. Internationalisation at institutional level means that we can have joint programmes, change our content and the way we

work, strictly observe requirements, meet the high criteria, and maintain the level of our partner institutions. This requires effort but is very rewarding to know that what you do is of high quality. This is what our students deserve. Also, a very important aspect of teaching in such programmes is the opportunity to have our work remunerated decently.“ (respondent 4, assoc. prof.)

Conclusion and recommendations

The international academic activities of faculty bring about a heightened visibility, a better standing and recognition of their institution. It is very important therefore that academic institutions understand the potential of their scholars' contribution for the institutions' participation in the process of internationalisation in order to nurture international cooperation and fully utilise their scholars' cross-border teaching and research experience. The findings in this study draw attention to several areas where measures at institutional level could be undertaken to facilitate the processes of Europeanisation and internationalisation and thereby support the functioning of the institution in a world of increased global competition in higher education. On the basis of the empirical data of the study, the University is advised to:

- Prioritise the involvement of academic staff in the processes of internationalisation – international research partnerships, participation at international scientific fora, publications in international journals, participation in programmes for teaching and research exchange, adjustment of the curricula and the course syllabi to include content of a global relevance, introduction of intercultural communication teaching and training. This should mean allocation of sufficient funding for these aspects of internationalisation and focused policies to reinforce the inclusion of a new generation of academic staff.
- Set up an administrative unit with the task to:
 - actively seek opportunities for participation in international cooperation activities;
 - manage the administrative affairs of the international projects in which the University is involved in order for the scholars engaged in these project to have the time to focus on their research duties.
- Organise a special electronic platform to inform faculty, in a timely manner, about opportunities for participation in internationalisation activities.
- Set up a unit with the task to promote programmes taught in foreign languages and provide full and adequate administrative support to interested international students. Reduce the administrative burden and speed the process of enrollment in programmes taught in foreign languages.
- Introduce adequate remuneration for academic staff that allows for focused and qualitative research activities which could reach international visibility.

- Optimise the teaching load to free working time for research activities. Remunerate research results. The data speak of a focus on teaching activities at the expense of involvement in research, which negatively impacts the quality, results, and visibility of such endeavours.
- Remunerate participation in international mobility which has an element of teaching (e.g. recognise and count teaching activity abroad as completed teaching in the scholar's semester workload).

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