

**Understanding the internationalization of
higher education as a policy process**

The case of Romania

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis analyzes internationalization of higher education in Romania as a both an international norm diffusion process and as a discrete policy process, in a wider context of post-communist transition. 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 for unpacking the complexity of this policy field. Stakeholder and resource dependency theories are employed for understanding the articulation of the interests, capacities and interactions between the actors, while discursive institutionalism is used to look at the role of ideas (norms) mobilized by actors to influence policy change and to construct policy frames. In terms of scope, the thesis addresses the rationales, drivers and impacts of internationalization of higher education, as well as 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 strategic pursuit based on either foresight or long term planning. Political and economic rationales are predominant, to the detriment of those linked to social and cultural considerations, given the competing pressures linked to the demographic downturn, reduced public funding to universities, the perceived need to 'catch-up with Europe' and the global competitiveness imperative. Another finding is that internationalization of higher education has never reached the stage of policy formulation at the national level and in most Romanian universities; it was used as a legitimating discourse within higher education reform, but a genuine commitment to comprehensive internationalization policies was lacking, leading to an over-reliance on European programs and a narrow focus on mobility and research partnerships.

When looking at the agents of change, it can be inferred that success in pursuing internationalization activities was mostly influenced by policy entrepreneurs and leadership commitment and continuity, regardless of the institutional profile. At the same time, Romania has proven to be an exceptional laboratory for understanding internationalization as a distinctive public policy process within the higher education sector. This is due to the double centralization legacy of the higher education system (caused by its Napoleonic model of higher education system and the communist influence) and the over-sized influence of international actors in policy reform (e.g. UNESCO CEPES and the World Bank). A number of the overall conclusions, mainly aimed at improving decision-making at the national level, are also potentially relevant for a wider regional audience: the need to minimize the over-reliance on international funds and technical assistance of international organizations; limiting over-regulation based on international norms; and improving the national role in the global discussions on internationalization and fighting double discourse. This latter aspect points to the difficulties of replicating policy concepts across borders in a non-contextualized form, especially when domestic contexts differ significantly from the pioneering setting of a given policy.

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