

Strategies adopted by British universities in the field of higher education. Lessons for Romanian universities

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Abstract: *The number of Romanian students who apply to study in foreign universities is increasing each year. The most important advantages of studying abroad are: high standards of teaching, close relationship between university and companies, opportunities for students to work during studies and after graduation, a strong intercultural experience and improved communication skills. The present article presents the results of a research based on a focus group consisting of 8 Romanian students enrolled in 2 famous British universities, who were asked to describe the teaching methods, assessments of students' work, opportunities to find jobs and internships, quality of facilities, use of information technology in teaching and financial support offered by the government. The results of the study highlight that some strategies adopted by British universities might be successfully used by Romanian universities for attracting international students and for retaining the existing ones.*

Key-words: *education, personalized learning, partnerships*

1. Introduction

In the global world companies are facing increased competition and challenges and there is a higher demand for knowledge workers, people who are better educated and trained. The attitude, skills, behavior and tangible items, the communication way of the employee are of great importance and represent the organization's culture and value (Madar, 2014). Therefore, students apply at the most famous universities, the image of the university highlighting a certain quality level of education. European Union's educational system is, also, facing the same trends. In this sense, European Union established for itself the objective of becoming the "Europe of Knowledge", so, developing education became indispensable (Tescasiu, 2014).

In the process of teaching and learning universities focus on collaboration of students and projects developed in teams, on innovation, research and

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communication based on technology, on cultural understanding and personalized learning.

In the global world, clients want to have confidence in the company's ability to provide the required quality and to maintain this quality (Neacşu, 2015). The same requirement exists in higher educational system. The most important factors that influence the students' perceptions on the quality of higher education are: IT facilities and the use of information technology in teaching, the skills of professors, the availability of staff and promptness and usefulness of feedback, textbooks availability, organization of timetable (Gao, 2012).

Partnerships between universities, companies, students and authorities, transnational agreements with foreign universities and improved learning in a globalized world will help universities to reinvent themselves and to be more competitive.

2. Literature review

In the education process, beside students and teachers, employers, parents, the government and different organizations participate indirectly. According to Levitt (1980) students are not buying degrees but benefits of degrees in terms of employment, status and lifestyle. Tangible attributes include the campus, libraries, sporting facilities and endowment of laboratories. In the intangible attributes are included student loans, library access for graduates and departments for placement and employment. The quality of education should be therefore considered from all these perspectives.

British universities have created a world brand of education based on excellence, high standards and technological innovation. In order to improve learning and teaching the Higher Education Funding Council for England encouraged the integration of technology based materials into teaching (Bradley, 1999).

In a research on students perception and the UK market penetration (Binsardi and Ekvulugo, 2003) it was shown that foreign students choose to study in UK because of the educational standard and recognized qualifications at a global level, ease of admission and immigration procedures, ease of finding employment after graduation and internships during studies and costs of living, accommodation, safety and culture.

The International Education Report published in 2013 shows that Great Britain has the goal to attract more than 90000 overseas students by 2018. The regions targeted are: China, India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Turkey, Mexico, Indonesia and the Gulf. Another strategy is to launch a campaign "Education is great" for students coming from emerging economies.

Student mobilities and international collaborations are supervised by the British Council. Chinese students represent the largest group of international students in UK.

Regarding transnational educational arrangements, the University of Nottingham has more than 75 transnational agreements with Asian universities, the main advantages being research collaboration, students' gain of experience and skills and increase in global competences (Tobenkin, 2014).

Companies require higher skills and competition for best employees has increased at global level. People are changing jobs more frequent and they search the best education offered by world universities. People share information and connect very fast due to development of information technology. Education can be exported through online and distance learning programs.

Strategies in education must take into account differences in religions, beliefs, customs, languages and values and should create skills that take into account cultural diversity. Improved ways of teaching and learning should be developed for helping students to find solutions for environmental problems.

The British Council education plan highlights the collaboration among students, teachers, parents and employers to help students to know their strengths and to fulfil needs and aspirations. The teaching process will be customized for each student but the pressure on resources to finance it will be higher.

As traditional media have become more and more expensive and audiences more and more fragmented, advertisers now seek new ways to reach their customers (Chitu I, Tecau A, 2010). Advertising through social networks supplements both the classic and online advertising. It is considered that online promotion, on social networks, shall be integrated within any company media plan (Chiţu and Tecău, 2012). Social networking sites like Facebook can be used to communicate with the students, to promote creativity by sharing ideas, to give feedback and to attract students to fill in questionnaires and to participate in marketing research. Teachers should reconfigure the learning environment to reflect students' needs and interests (Boyer and Crippen, 2014).

The internationalization of British universities brings several advantages to the British economy because students and graduates are attracted in the field of research and innovation.

Student satisfaction has become a critical issue for universities because satisfied students will promote the university in their country, and will help the university to recruit and retain better trained students. In order to increase the quality of teaching, students are encouraged to report the problems encountered in the teaching process in the university (Gao, 2012).

3. The research method

In order to identify the most important strategies used by British universities in the field of teaching, student selection and assessment, organization of internships, a research based on a focus group with 8 Romanian students who attend courses in British universities as UCL and King's College was conducted. The most important objectives of the research were the identification of admission requirements, the link between theory and practical projects, methods of teaching and assessing students' work, methods for offering feedback to students, how competition between students is stimulated, the implementation of information technology in teaching, the offer of student loans by the government, the link with the former graduates. The interview guide used was conceived on separate discussion topics depending on the objectives set out in order to facilitate the identification of participants' opinion at the focus group.

4. Results

The quality of the students recruited has a strong influence on the image of the university, so the British universities are based on excellence, high standards and are trying to attract the best students from all over the world. The requirements for admission are: high grades at the Baccalaureate, certificates of language proficiency, interviews and tests.

Some British universities offer a four year program which includes one year of paid or unpaid placements at different companies found by the university.

The students can be attracted to study in foreign universities for one year but the selection system is very tough and those who are admitted will pay low fees, although the foreign university has higher fees. In this way, students have incentives to work hard and to gain experience in famous foreign universities.

The link between theory and practice is made through projects having as beneficiaries companies and local organizations. Students work in teams of maximum 4 and have an assistant who is supervising the project.

The beneficiaries of the projects made by students offer diplomas for the best projects and give reviews which are taken into account by professors in calculating the grades.

Competition between student teams is stimulated for all practical projects and theoretical exams represent 40-50% of total assessments. The number of optional disciplines is higher in final years.

The courses are taught in class and are also available in a digital manner and are recorded and placed online, learning and teaching being supported by information technology. The digital services are highly secured. The advantages of participating at the course are linked to discussions, debates and answers to the

issues raised by the students. The presence at the courses is compulsory in a percentage of 75% and absences must be justified to the tutor or the department manager. There is a tutor for each 2-3 students and communication and meetings are set up through e-mail.

There is high accuracy in exams' organization: security, surveillance cameras and the name of the students do not appear on the paper, each student being assigned an identification number. The marking of papers is made by several professors and the grades are approved by a board of professors.

The assessment of courses is made online, anonymous, at the end of the course and before the exam. Following these assessments there are changes of the courses and curricula, but are not fundamental.

The fees in British universities are high in comparison with other European universities but lower in comparison with the American competitors. The fees can be covered with a loan from the government and the loan will be repaid only if the graduate has an annual income which exceeds a certain limit, being a guarantee of the British higher education quality.

A weak point of the British universities is linked to the fact that they do not offer enough feedback and help for the students in developing projects, the focus being on individual study. The assessment of student learning and the feedback offered should be more effective.

The universities are financing different events, like programming marathons, contests and there are societies as part of the universities that can finance different ideas and projects for the students.

There is a strong link between universities and companies as job ads are posted for students. The university can recommend students for different jobs in companies. Social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn are used for communication.

Students can be involved in different volunteering activities and all the activities outside the university are achieved within students' societies coordinated by the Students' Union as: Technology Society, Dance Society, Music Society, Photography, Marketing, Finance, Entrepreneurship and Politics.

The universities have entertainment centers containing clubs, swimming pools and fitness centers with significantly lower prices for the students.

The buildings and the libraries are very well maintained and access cards are used by students.

The link between the university and alumni is strong, graduates being invited to keep student conferences. The graduates continue to have access to different resources of the university.

The university can recommend students for internship programs (paid or unpaid) by companies.

5. Conclusions

In order to raise their competitiveness Romanian universities should adopt strategies linked to new teaching and learning methods based on information technology. This should stimulate the collaboration between professors who can exchange ideas about teaching methods.

Departments which deal with finding jobs and internships for students should be created in each faculty, acting as middlemen between the university and companies. They should offer advice and training for students for having higher chances to be accepted in the labor market. These departments should have strong links with former graduates, who can organize conferences and offer counselling to students searching for job or internships. As a research by Marinescu (2008) shows, former Erasmus students display a higher propensity for earning a high-wage job compared to average students, so they could act as efficient counselors.

Recommendations for students to be employed in companies should be given to the best students.

Regarding the assessment of student work, more professors should be involved in the process for more accuracy. Individual projects should be combined with team work.

Teaching should be more personalized and might include the cooperation between companies, professors and students.

The state of the economy has also a direct link with the quality of education because better paid jobs will require better trained students from high quality universities. An important problem of the labor market in Romania is the lack of jobs in many fields and that is why the demand for many university specializations is decreasing.

The number of the students also has a big impact on quality of education because a lower number of students shows high admission requirements and the teaching process is easily organized. This however, has a negative impact on financial resources.

Transilvania University of Brasov should increase the number of agreements with different companies for job placement and for internships in order to create a stronger link between theory and practice. The British system of one year placement should be introduced. The British model of transnational cooperation with foreign universities can be adopted for offering joint degrees and exchange of students and professors.

Representatives of companies should be attracted to offer feedback to students involved in different projects. Romanian companies might benefit from the projects developed by students, so most of the topics from final thesis should be proposed by companies. Transilvania University of Brasov has already started this cooperation with companies and proposals of topics for graduation papers are found on the university's site, but the program should be developed further.

Regarding the financial support for students, the government should finance loans to cover the tuition fees or the university should find part time jobs for students within the university or in different companies.

Romanian students should be encouraged to develop start-up companies, financing being provided by the state, the government and different European programs. In this way students will be attracted in research and implementation of different projects and will benefit from partnerships between universities, companies and different organizations. The effect will be a better image of the university and an increased opportunity to attract valuable students.

Teachers who received the best results in students' evaluations should receive awards and financial incentives. Sharing good teaching practices, exchanges of ideas should be organized at meetings of professors and discussions for the improvement of the curricula should be encouraged.

The advantage of a very strong labor market with dynamic and flexible companies, with high resources which can be invested for innovation and research cannot be replicated at the moment in Romania. Therefore, universities have to rethink curricula, adapt courses at requirements of companies and increase quality of education. Ensuring qualified and responsible personnel is a main priority for the general economic development (Băltescu, 2010).

Because of the lack of financial resources, highly motivated professors and a weak labor market offering low salaries, it will be hard for Romanian universities to compete with the most famous universities and to attract the best students. As a result, higher investments in education will lead to better results as well as more financial resources attracted from research.

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