

University of Sopron

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**THE ROLE OF MOBILITY IN THE INTERNATIONALISATION  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

Doctoral (Ph.D.) Thesis

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## **1. THE RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH TOPIC**

In the past few decades the education sector has had to face new challenges created by the globalising economy and the need for developing knowledge-based societies. Higher education (HE) has been even more exposed to those challenges, due to a more intense demand and motivation for transnational cooperation, cross-border knowledge exchange, and for gaining international learning, teaching and research experience. Consequently, by the beginning of the 21st century the international dimension of the HE activities has become a determining factor not only in the operational strategies of higher education institutions, but also in the national and regional educational policies. Internationalisation has become a decisive principle for higher education; the main tool and at the same time the driving force behind the expansion of (student, faculty, researcher and institutional) mobility.

The analysis of mobility trends over the past fifteen years shows that the market for higher education mobility and mobility strategies are changing. The number of market players is growing, while some of the traditional sending countries appear as receivers as well. The competition for international students has definitely become stronger. Various mobility strategies are synchronously practised, including the business approach which focuses on the income generation potential of mobility actions, and cooperation-based practices that seek to promote mutual benefits and the sharing of knowledge. However, the traditional roles of the various countries are also changing. The number of mobility participants, international networks and consortia, joint degree programmes has increased continuously. The export of academic programmes and courses is also growing considerably through franchises and branch campus activities.

Institutions are more and more engaged in recruiting international students, and concurrently interest in the international and regional university rankings is also increasing.

International mobility has and will continue to have a key role in the internationalisation and modernisation of higher education during the coming years. Therefore, the analysis of the experience gained in mobility and that of the impact generated by the mobility actions can reveal significant information about the changes that mobility has generated in higher education. The conclusions from these findings can assist in amending and enhancing the definition of future mobility goals and the redesign of institutional internationalisation strategies to reflect changing demand patterns. This bases the importance and objectives of the thesis.

## **2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The overall aim of the thesis is to introduce and analyse the impact increasing international mobility actions have on higher education, particularly on the Hungarian state universities particularly how they influence institutional operation and academic performance. The specific objectives are:

- an historical overview of the development of cross-border mobility
- an investigation of the nature of current higher education mobility: the identification and analysis of the global trends, with a particular attention to the European dimension
- an investigation of the factors influencing mobility trends
- an analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of mobility
- a mapping of the willingness for mobility in the Hungarian state universities

- an examination of the relation between the intensity of mobility actions and that of other international activities of higher education institutions.
- the identification of changes in the internationalisation of higher education accruing from the mobility actions
- disclosing how the international dimension of the university operation is weighted in the evaluation of their academic performance and how it contributes to their competitiveness.

The study of the international and national literature on the subject and the primary research directed at the international activities of the Hungarian state universities served to realise these specific objectives.

### **3. HYPOTHESES**

Based on the outcomes of the secondary research and practical experience the following hypotheses are proposed:

*Hypothesis1.:* The increase in international mobility is strongly related to the global massification in higher education. However, the absolute growth in the number of mobility actions does not mean relative growth when compared to degree of massification.

*Hypothesis2.:* Within the overall rise in participation in mobility there is strong correlation between increasing student and faculty mobility.

*Hypothesis3.:* International mobility makes an important impact on the intensity of international activities at the institutional level, therefore considerably enhancing internationalisation, regardless of the specifics of the institutions (size, profile, or geographic location).

*Hypothesis4.:* The impact of mobility is significant on the modernisation of higher education, including the development of new curricula and innovative learning/teaching methods.

*Hypothesis5.:* The international dimension of university performance is not adequately weighted in the university rankings.

#### **4. RESEARCH SUBJECTS AND METHODS**

My research included a literature review focusing on the chronological development, related trends and the characteristics of mobility from the mediaeval times up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Special attention was devoted to European mobility strategies.

The empirical research was directed at the Hungarian state universities, and investigated the role of international mobility in the process of internationalisation from two perspectives; (1) the institutional operation and (2) the educational activities. Twenty universities, 770 faculty members and 344 administrative staff people were involved in the survey, and the research findings are based on their answers.

The tools for collecting the required data and information were online questionnaires and interviews. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected; the quantitative data underpinned the justification or denial of the individual hypotheses, while the quantitative data enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the current state-of-the-art. The answers received were analysed with Microsoft Excel and with Version 22.0. of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) programme.

## 5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **Research outcomes to substantiate Hypothesis1**

International studies underline the dynamic growth of mobility in the past 10 to 15 years, but they do not differentiate between absolute and relative growth. The examination of data covering the past 40 years' results reveals that the growing numbers in mobility strongly correlates with the growing number of participants in tertiary education. Until recently the number of students in higher education globally has been growing continuously, although not always steadily and the same applies to the international mobility actions. After 2012 a short stagnation was followed by some decrease in mobility while global student numbers continued increasing, although less dynamically then during the former period. For the past few years major changes have occurred in mobility trends having been dominant for several decades. In addition, the percentage of mobile students in the total student population has fallen in the range of 1.9 to 2,3% for the past 40 years, therefore no significant increase in the percentage of participation can be justified. *Hypothesis1 is accepted.*

### **Research outcomes to substantiate Hypothesis2**

The analyses of data regarding the 20 state universities shows that during the past 15 years both student and faculty mobility have increased, however, the rate of growth highly differs between individual institutions. The correlation between the number of students and that of faculty mobility has been tested both by direct quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The perception of faculty participating in mobility contradicts the statistical evidence; while 85% of the faculty mobility participants trust that their mobility contributed to the increase of student mobility at their institution, the statistical data did not confirm that institutions where the faculty

mobility showed high participation the student mobility participation would also be high. The correlation between the two mobility types could not be justified after clustering the universities, either. In the cluster of small universities with a particular profile the trend shows a strong growth period followed by a drop both in the student and faculty outgoing mobility rate. At the classical universities, the growth rate of student mobility is considerably lower than that of the faculty. In the case of the smaller universities with diverse profiles the growth rates of the various mobility types differ significantly from university to university and no explicit trend can be identified. While student mobility is increasing the faculty mobility participation is decreasing based on the most recent data for large universities with more profiles.

Although a great majority of the faculty mobility participants perceive that they contribute to the growing numbers of student mobility, the statistical research findings confirm that at institutional level there is no correlation between number of student and that of the faculty mobility rates. Therefore, *Hypothesis2 is rejected.*

### **Research outcomes to substantiate Hypothesis3**

In accordance with the outcomes of numerous international research and studies the primary research covering the Hungarian state universities also confirmed that mobility actions play an outstanding role in the internationalisation of the higher education institutions. The research findings sufficiently justified that the mobility actions enhanced the improvement of course provision in foreign languages, the development of international relations and collaborations, and the growth in the number of international publications. During the past 15 years the number of bilateral agreements has increased twenty fold, 3.3 times more other inter-

institutional agreements have been concluded, while the number of foreign language degree programmes have increased 13.5 times.

After having examined the institutions individually regarding the outcomes of their international activities and having compared these outcomes within the various clusters it is confirmed that the intensity and efficiency of the international activities is not related to the main features of the universities, and does not depend on the institutional size, profiles or regional situation. No cluster-specific trends could be identified.

The degree of impact that international mobility actions can generate have been examined in eight areas: (1) change in the role of the internationalisation strategy, (2) change in the international marketing activities, (3) expansion in the international relations at institutional level, (4) increase in the number of courses offered in foreign languages, (5) growth in the participation in international projects, (6) improvement in students services, (7) modernisation of the educational activities, (8) increased income from international activities. 40% of the institutional responses identified were significant, while 60% of the responses indicated a very significant impact in these areas.

An average of 82% of the individual responses coming from mobility participants indicated that the impact of mobility is explicit or rather present in six further areas related to internationalisation.

The cluster-based analysis of these results did not identify any cluster-specific feature in the case of the various questions or areas investigated. There is no correlation between the institutional engagement of the respondents and the type of the response. This further strengthens the conclusion that mobility actions significantly influence the intensity of the other international activities of an institution regardless the institutional

parameters of size, profile, or geographical location. *Hypothesis3 is accepted.*

#### **Research outcomes to substantiate Hypothesis4**

The results of the survey conducted among faculty participating in outgoing mobility confirmed that the modernisation of education is significantly impacted by international mobility. An average of 68% of the total respondents indicated the role of mobility to be rather strong or explicit in the areas in question, i.e. curriculum development, innovation in learning and teaching methods, development of new course material or joint courses, and introduction of good practices.

This research finding is in harmony with the relevant statements of several international studies. The result of the survey sufficiently substantiates that international mobility actions have significantly impacted the modernisation process at the Hungarian state universities. *Hypothesis4 is accepted.*

#### **Research outcomes to substantiate Hypothesis5**

The performance of universities is measured by the university rankings. The analysis of four international and three Hungarian ranking lists in terms of the applied compilation methods including the indicators and their weighting has confirmed the following: neither the most prestigious global ranking, the Shanghai List (ARWU), nor the most popular Hungarian HVG ranking consider the international dimension of the university performance in their indicators. The compilation methodology of Times Higher Education (THE), representing a scientific endeavour and a diversified approach in the subject areas, gives a 7,5% weight to the international components of the overall performance. The weighting of international activities is the highest, 10%, in the case of the US News and World Report

and the Quacquarelli Symonds rankings. As both the secondary and the primary research confirmed the growing intensity of international activities at the universities, and the role of internationalisation in the competitiveness of the institutions, it is obvious that the importance of these efforts is not reflected appropriately in the rankings themselves and it is not considered sufficiently by the compilation methods. The international activities and their outcomes are not properly valued as part of the universities performance. *Hypothesis5 is accepted.*

## 6. NEW AND NOVEL SCIENTIFIC RESULTS

The research conducted has yielded the following results:

- The history of **international mobility** is as old as that of the European universities, and it is an **eternal and valuable component of higher education.**
- **The mobility trends** of the recent past and the present feature **massification, globalisation, scheme-orientation and commercialisation**
- Basically there are two types of mobility strategy dominating the mobility market: a **competition-based student recruitment** as opposed to **student exchange based on cooperation and mutual benefits**: Their con-current presence features not only the global, but the national and institutional levels of mobility policies
- Although from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century HE mobility has shown continuous growth, this is closely connected to the global massification of HE, and **no relative expansion** of mobility can be identified; participation has been around 2% during the past 40 years.

- **The positive influence** of cross-border mobility on the academic operation and performance of the universities is **explicitly detectable**. a) **There is strong relation between the increase in the mobility participation and the growing intensity of other international activities at the institutions.**  
b) **International mobility significantly contributes to the modernisation of higher education.**

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **The growth rate of cross-border mobility is lower than the rate of expansion of the higher education.** The main reason for this is the development of local higher education systems in more and more regions of the world. In parallel the number of market players is increasing in the world market of higher education. As a consequence, there is a growing competition for international students, especially for the talented ones. The Hungarian higher education institutions need to look for the market niche in a focused way and identify specific high quality trainings in order to be competitive in the long run.

2. **In terms of mobility strategies, the higher education sector is undergoing change. While the concept of the North-American mobility policy based predominantly on brain-drain and on a business model has started to move towards an attitude considering mutual benefits, in the European strategies, traditionally representing the cooperation model, the concept of competition is being gradually established.** Higher institutions cannot separate themselves from the influence of the global HE environment; they need to follow changes in the mobility trends affecting them, and consider the potential benefits of the various concepts, applicable in their context, and developing their collaborations accordingly.

3. **During the past 15 years international activities have become more intense at the Hungarian state universities; the number of courses and degree programmes offered in foreign languages, that of the international publications, bilateral agreements and international mobility.** However, in several cases it is not explicit what strategy influenced this growth, where institutional priorities include the extension of international relations and establishing partnerships. This might play a role in the minor fall-back experienced in the past 2-3 years nationwide. It is necessary that universities develop the international dimension of their activities in a more focused and purposeful way directed by defined priorities. This could result a more efficient utilisation of the resources and could contribute to the establishment of long-term and high quality relations and collaborations. In the higher education of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is indispensable for the institutions to have an internationalisation strategy in which the ad hoc international actions are gradually substituted by an organised and directed management.

4. The outcomes of this research are clear that **the impact of the mobility is considered to be positive by the majority of the stakeholders, including the students, faculty and administrative staff. This outcome was independent of the respondents' affiliation and the intensity of the mobility activities at the institution the respondents come from.** The degree of impact in the various areas investigated was evaluated to be above medium by the majority of the respondents, and there are special areas, where the impact is considered to be outstanding. These are mainly the expansion of networks, the development of personal competences, and the acquisition of new learning and teaching methods. Therefore, mobility carries universal values. It is all the same if the institution is small or large, has a classical or special profile, urban or provincial, international mobility

benefits it. Therefore, it is crucial that the leadership and management of the universities recognise the importance of internationalisation and provide sufficient human and financial resources to support the promotion, organisation and coordination of mobility actions.

5. The pressure on the Hungarian state universities to generate income influences the process of their internationalisation. This carries the danger that meeting business targets becomes more important than maintaining quality education and considering local interest. **An internationalisation strategy can be successful in the long run only if it is coherent to the institutional strategy and there is a balance between demand and capacities.**

6. International examples show the **state subsidies provided for invigorating internationalisation in HE are generally successful, but not enough in themselves to be the long-term driving force of the process.** The grand state-financed projects (in the United Kingdom, France and Finland) supported higher education institutions as much as a longer campaign, which helped them to ground their international presence. However, following these projects institutions developed their own strategies and made these successful independently. Hungarian state universities should consider these examples and invest the state subsidies provided through the Stipendium Hungaricum and Campus Mundi programmes in a way which bases the long-term market success.

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