A European perspective on the internationalisation strategies and accreditation of Business Schools

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Abstract

Internationalisation is a key component of higher education institutions that nowadays is embedded in their teaching and research activities, as well as their strategies. In Europe, since the Bologna process in 1999, universities and governments have tried to align their policies, to make procedures more homogenous across the countries. However, for business schools undertaking an accreditation process, it can be challenging to fully comply with both the European and the national guidelines, and the requirements issued by the accreditation agency. This study aims to explore the internationalisation process of higher education institutions, with a focus on business schools' accreditation process. Through document analysis, the comparison between the recommendations issued at the European and at the national levels, and the quality standards and criteria of the accreditation agencies is meant to understand which strategies should be promoted in the future internationalisation agenda of business schools.

Keywords: Internationalisation; Accreditation; International strategies; Quality standards; European guidelines; Globalisation.

1. Introduction

In Europe, the internationalisation of universities has started to play a key role since the 1990s (European Commission, 2020a). One of the most recent and complete definition of this phenomenon, describes it as: "The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society" (de Wit *et al*. 2015, p. 29). According to Knight (2008, pp. 22-24), the main components of internationalisation can be split into two: 'internationalisation abroad' and 'internationalisation at home'. The former defines all the cross-border educational initiatives such as mobility of students and faculty, and joint and double degree programmes; while the latter encompasses the activities meant to foster students' intercultural skills and understanding of international issues, thanks to *ad hoc* changes in the universities' curricula and their teaching and learning practices. These two components are both embedded into the strategies and policies of higher education institutions, which depend on internal and external factors such as universities' strategic plans, national regulations and the guidelines of the European Commission (2013). In particular, business schools are highly influenced by internationalisation policies, for a series of reasons, such as the need to compete against other institutions to offer the highest quality of research and education, and attract the best students and faculty (Hawawini, 2016). Moreover, the nature of business schools is deeply influenced by the global economy, since the knowledge of foreign markets, the growth of technologies and the current environmental issues represent some of the challenges that business schools' graduates need to be able to tackle (cf. Kedia & Englis, 2011).

One of the strategies for business schools to increase their reputation and gain legitimacy (cf. Guillottin and Mangematin, 2015) is to receive the accreditation of a reputable international agency, so as to prove the quality of their education also through their membership among other prestigious business schools. In Europe, one such agencies is the EFMD (European Foundation for Management Development) that issues the EQUIS certification, whose guidelines provide indications on the requirements of the accreditation process (cf. EFMD, 2022). However, since institutions are rooted in their national and socio-economic context, and in their historical traditions, their strategic choices are also defined by their government's policies (at a national and regional/supranational level). Both international accreditation agencies and national guidelines constitute forms of external pressure which may oblige single institutions to modify their strategic agenda to conform to their norms, through isomorphic processes (cf. Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). This study aims to contribute to the literature concerned with the internationalisation of higher education institutions, and specifically, of business schools, to discover how institutions can cope with the challenge of balancing both the requirements set by their supranational and national guidelines, and those

established by the accreditation agency, with regards to their internationalisation strategies. This contribution is organised as follows: first, a brief description of the internationalisation practices that have been implemented in Europe in these years, in comparison with a national perspective, and the quality measures used by business schools to foster their international dimension. In the analysis, the strategies recommended at the European and national levels will be compared with the accreditations guidelines given by a European accreditation agency. The result of the comparison may inform the practices that could be taken into consideration to improve the quality of the internationalisation process for university business schools.

2. Literature review

In Europe, the Bologna process in 1999 represents a turning point for the expansion of the internationalisation phenomenon because, with the aim of creating a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the differences across the European higher education systems were made more homogenous. Moreover, since 2009 until today, one of the main priorities for the internationalisation of European universities has been student mobility, with the target that by 2020, at least 20 % of students graduating in the EHEA should have had a study or training experience abroad (European Commission, 2020a). As a consequence, numerous bilateral agreements have been developed to ease student exchanges and knowledge transfer between institutions (European Commission, 2020b). Another effect was the implementation of English-taught programmes also in countries where English is a second or a foreign language, as a way both to attract international students and scholars, and to prepare local students for the globalised labour market (Knight, 2008). Over the past 20 years, the European Union has invested 1.7 billion Euros in the mobility of students, allowing more than 24,500 people to study in Europe thanks to scholarships (European Commission, 2020b, p. 10).

However, despite all these measures to standardise it, the European scenario remains quite fragmented because of the various national legislations about the Erasmus+ and the difficulties in the implementation of joint and double degrees (European Commission, 2020b). This fragmentation is reflected in the heterogeneous approaches to internationalisation across different European countries and types of institutions (cf. de Wit, Hunter and Howard, 2015). For instance, the Italian higher education system, though having a long-standing academic tradition, has lagged behind other countries from the point of view of internationalisation policies (cf. de Wit *et al*., 2015). The reforms made in the past 60 years, as an attempt to modernise its centred governance to a system that enhances more autonomy for the single institutions has not been realised to its full potential (Hunter, 2015). Among other factors, there has been some resistance on the part of the academic community, who perceived the international dimension of higher education as an interference more than

an opportunity (de Wit *et al*. 2015, p. 117). Notwithstanding the lack of a comprehensive national strategy, a series of measures have been developed to improve the higher education system, giving internationalisation a greater importance (Hunter, 2015; cf. MIUR, 2017).

In the field of business education, being awarded by an international accreditation agency is a way for business schools to have their quality standards for education recognised (cf. Kaplan, 2014) and foster their reputation worldwide. Accrediting associations such as the EFMD (European Foundation for Management Development) founded in 1972 , the AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) founded in 1916 in the USA, or the British AMBA (Association of Masters of Business Administration), created in 1967 to accredit graduate business programmes, issue detailed sets of quality standards and criteria that provide clear indications on how to evaluate different aspects of a school's organisational structure, mission, educational programmes, staff qualifications and learning outcomes. In Europe, the EQUIS (EFMD Quality Improvement System) certification was launched in 1997, as a means to counterbalance the overarching presence of American standards for the accreditation of business schools (cf. Kaplan, 2014). One of the features that differentiate EQUIS from other accreditations is the attention given to three main transversal dimensions, namely "Internationalisation, Connections with Practice, and Ethics, Responsibility & Sustainability" (EFMD, 2022, p. 5). According to the guidelines, EQUIS aims at enhancing the internationalisation of business schools, a dimension that is reflected all throughout the chapters of the guidelines, where the schools are guided through a process of self-reflection on their current practices and strategies, as they are expected to "attract students and faculty from other countries, deliver programmes up to internationally accepted standards, effectively prepare their graduates for international management and maintain connections with academia and practice outside their home country" (EFMD, 2022 p. 68). It is relevant to explore the impact of the accreditation agencies, alongside other external agents – namely the European Commission and the national government – on the internationalisation strategies of higher education institutions, by comparing the recommendations issued in their guidelines or policies, to understand how university business schools can cope with the pressures exerted by these external agents.

3. Method

The method selected is the document analysis (Given, 2008, p. 230-231) as it is suitable for qualitative research in which rich descriptions of a single phenomenon or organisation are produced. The documents for the analysis have been selected for their relevance in helping the researchers to uncover hidden meanings and agenda, and to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon observed (cf. Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). Multiple types of documents have been consulted: The European Commission's documents on internationalisation strategies and policies (2013, 2020a, 2020b, 2022a, 2022b), the Italian

government's national guidelines and strategic approaches (MIUR, 2017, 2021; CRUI, 2019), EFMD's EQUIS guidelines (2022). The systematic review of the documents provided the background information that was necessary to understand the regulatory, sociocultural, educational and political contexts in which the internationalisation agenda of business schools should be set, and how it could be developed in the future.

4. Analysis

The documents observed through comparative analysis (cf. Gibbs, 2007) highlighted some differences and some similarities between the internationalisation strategies promoted at the European level, the Italian national guidelines, and EQUIS' criteria. Over the course of the years, one of the most evident consequences of the internationalisation strategies adopted by universities in non-Anglophone countries concerns the introduction of English-taught programmes, especially at the master's level (European Commission, 2020a). This main change represents a way to attract a more international audience (cf. Wächter & Maiworm, 2014), but can also benefit local students who are interested in working abroad or in more international working environments where English is used as a lingua franca among speakers of different languages. Since English is already the most widely used language in the academic field of business education, having a number of programmes taught in English is also among the requirements for a business school's accreditation (EFMD, 2022). However, at national level, a law issued in 2018 by the Italian State Council stated that teaching only in English is an unconstitutional act and that the priority should be given to the national language. To meet all these requirements, business schools within the Italian higher education system may decide to offer similar Master's Degree Programmes both in Italian and in English, running parallel but tailoring the suitable and specific learning objectives of each programme. This strategy would not only allow students to choose which language they prefer for their degree programme, but also may help to prevent possible domain loss of the local language (cf. Sanden, 2020).

In the various documents consulted, the type of partnerships required at the level of joint and double degrees appears to be a challenging issue. According to the European Commission, higher education institutions should cooperate with other institutions in developing countries, to favour North-South and South-South collaboration (European Commission, 2013, p. 9). In line with these recommendations, in the Italian guidelines on internationalisation, the government and the universities will make future investments and build partnerships in countries that pertain to low and middle-income categories (cf. MIUR, 2017). In the EQUIS guidelines, it is suggested that business schools should have "high quality strategic partnerships" (EFMD, 2022, p. 71), meant to be with reputable and prestigious partners, as it is more suitable to have fewer but more relevant mobility and exchange agreements, that many but of lesser quality (cf. Hawawini, 2016). Thus, partnerships should be sought with

other accredited business schools displaying similar high standards of quality. Although the purpose is to have partnerships worldwide, in the end, partnerships in western, high-income countries are favoured because the majority of accredited business schools are located there.

For these reasons, the strategic choices of European business schools become particularly important when selecting the kinds of partnerships that should be established and maintained, being aware of the normative pressures exerted by the European and the national guidelines, but also by the international accreditation agency. Otherwise, uncertainties in the strategies may lead to mimetic isomorphism, when the adoption of the internationalisation practices of leading business schools occur (cf. Bradford *et al*. 2017), whether or not it is a rational choice at the organisational and strategic level (cf. Di Maggio & Powell, 1983).

Another relevant point in the document analysis concerns the presence of international students on campus. On the one hand, Italy does not represent one of the main study destinations for international students, as proved by the low numbers registered in the last years by the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI, 2019). An analysis revealed that for students of some non-European countries, Italy is not a destination where to obtain a higher education diploma from an Italian institution, but it is attractive mostly for its institutions of higher artistic and musical education, or for short study periods (CRUI, 2019). On the other hand, a business school should prove its international status also thanks to the numerous presence of foreign students (cf. EFMD, 2022; Hawawini, 2016). Being international does not only mean having many international students (de Wit, 2013), since the amount of international students within an academic institution loses relevance if they do not feel part of the local student population, enhancing their social skills and cultural awareness thanks to their interactions. To favour students' integration and understanding, business schools located in non-Anglophone countries should not only include the provision of intensive language courses, both in English and in the local language, but also courses about the socio-economic and cultural context. Inserting these learning goals should become a requirement especially in international programmes, because it can favour the retention of foreign graduates who may want to find a job in the country in which they studied, instead of moving back home or going abroad after receiving their diploma.

Finally, one recurring theme that has become increasingly important is the need for more virtual and digitalised forms of higher education. Although it was already inserted as a feature of comprehensive internationalisation in the European Commission's document (2013), the digital transformation of education has gained relevance over time, thanks to distance education, blended and hybrid teaching and learning (cf. de Wit *et al*., 2015). The most recent version of EQUIS' guidelines (2022) considers digital learning and virtual mobility as an integral part of the international dimension of business school's activities. In the present time, virtual exchange may represent a valid opportunity, and a viable option that can substitute physical mobility, whenever the latter is not possible for shortage of funding or means.

However, there is still room for improvement, because the lack of interoperability between digital infrastructures of higher education institutions across the European Union has hindered the creation of European (virtual) inter-university campuses and platforms for joint digital or blended activities (European Commission, 2022a, p. 2). Moreover, the digitalisation of operations, namely the digital transition, can help higher education institutions "to provide high quality services across multi/virtual campuses which would be difficult to do as individual or smaller institutions or institutions with geographical disparate facilities" (European Commission, 2022b, p. 23). Digitalisation has the additional advantage of creating opportunities for more equal and sustainable approaches to internationalisation, because of its role in creating bridges between institutions, reducing the carbon footprint of on-site international meetings and conferences, and easing the exchange of information, and the knowledge transfer of learning and research contents. Therefore, to maximise their impact, higher education institutions should not only become more engaged, collaborative and open, but also build innovative and hybrid structures to combine physical and virtual places, to connect different sectors and transcend borders (European Commission, 2022b, p. 32).

5. Conclusion

The analysis has highlighted how different forces may regulate the decisions and the internationalisation agenda of higher education institutions, especially for university business schools that are undertaking an accreditation process. Some challenges have been observed when comparing the expectations expressed in the requirements set by the accreditation agency, and the recommendations at European and national levels, on matters related to the language used for teaching and learning, the types of partnerships established with other universities, and the numerous presence of international students on-site. Therefore, to comply with different expectations, universities' strategic decisions imply a constant balance between the quality of the education provided and the quantity, in terms of measurable outcomes, such as the number of English-taught courses, of international double or joint degree programmes, or of foreign students. When confronted with the expectations to conform to these normative pressures, it is important for a single institution to take a sustainable approach in the management of its internationalisation strategies. This requires any higher education institution to have a comprehensive internationalisation strategy (European Commission, 2013). In particular, for business schools that wish to be considered part of a 'world-class' institution, their strategy should always consider which resources they have at their disposal, and that "the strategic alignment of the internationalisation process with the general strategic plan is necessary for a successful implementation of the process" (Bradford *et al*. 2017, p. 449).

Moreover, it is crucial to remember that the intent of internationalisation process is not to make an institution international *per se*, but to use the 'integration of international, intercultural or global dimensions' to achieve its academic objectives, and to improve the socio-cultural, economic, or political goals of its country/region (Knight, 2015, p. 108). In fact, by setting a new agenda for the future, the European Commission's guidelines wish to inspire higher education institutions across the various European countries, having the goal to tackle the inequalities related to socio-economic and environmental problems through internationalisation policies (European Commission, 2013, 2020a). Within the Italian context, the latest guidelines released by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) aim at raising the quality of the academic system, to support universities in reducing these inequalities (MIUR, 2021, Ministerial Decree n. 289, of 23-05-2021). These local and global challenges are the object of business education as well (Bradford *et al.*, 2017; Kedia & Englis, 2011), whose purpose is to have a positive impact on society (EFMD, 2022). Business education is thus required to take a wider and more international perspective (Hawawini, 2016), also thanks to a renewed attention towards ethical and sustainable practices (cf. European Commission, 2020a; EFMD, 2022). Therefore, every future step of the internationalisation strategy needs to be carefully pondered, so as to keep a balanced and equitable perspective, but also to preserve the autonomous and proactive capacity of creating positive change which pertains to business schools.

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