Making international mobility student-friendly: a linguistically embedded assessment of higher education internationalisation strategies

Oana-Roxana Ivan[1,2], Loredana Bercuci[1], Madalina Chitez[1], Roxana Rogobete[3], Andreea Dincă[1]

[1]Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, West University of Timisoara, Romania, [2]Department of International Relations, West University of Timisoara, Romania, [3]Department of Romanian Studies, West University of Timisoara, Romania.

Abstract

Internationalisation is a desired goal for contemporary universities, which are increasingly using concepts like cultural diversity or globalism as selling points to attract students. However, these concepts are not always clearly defined in terms of underlying values and lived experience. We used a corpus linguistics approach to extract university descriptors of the term 'internationalisation'. For that purpose, we compiled the INTER corpus (Corpus of Internationalisation Terminology in Higher Education Institutions in Europe), which includes texts extracted from the websites of 50 European Universities. We analyse the lexical profile of the tokens semantically connected to the concept of 'internationalisation'. To verify whether the advertised concepts of internationalisation match the lived experience of the students, we use a second corpus, LIVIT (Corpus of Lived Internationalisation Experiences), which includes 300 testimonies of student mobility. All data and analyses capture the pre-COVID situation and are intended to inform the post-COVID university policymaking.

Keywords: Internationalisation in higher education; corpus linguistics; student experience; mobility programmes; Romanian universities; university ranking.

1. Introduction

Universities have always been international institutions. The international dimension of higher education (or 'international education') has traditionally been related to "mobility, such as study abroad, exchanges, international students, academic mobility", or to "curriculum, such as multicultural education, international studies, peace education, area studies" (de Wit *et. al.*, 2015, p. 4). Although the development of higher education in the world has never been separated from that of international education, this concept has been regarded as "a rather marginal and fragmented issue in most countries and institutions of higher education until the end of the 1980s" (de Wit, 2017, p. 25). Altbach links this focus on internationalisation to globalisation, namely to " advanced information technology, new ways of thinking about financing higher education and a concomitant acceptance of market forces and commercialization, unprecedented mobility for students and professors, the global spread of common ideas about science and scholarship, the role of English as the main international language of science" (2013, p. 7). These elements have led to certain policy changes in European higher education. The terminology related to 'internationalisation' has also changed. Thus, "the international dimension of higher education" (Knight, 2013, p. 85) has evolved and expanded into multiple meanings spanning from "comparative education", in the last fifteen years, to "planetisation", in recent years (ibid, p. 86).

2. The road to internationalisation in European higher education

2.1. The process of internationalisation

With the launch, in 1987, of the European student exchange programme, Erasmus (EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), 'internationalisation' of higher education institutions (HEIs), as a term, started to gain its ground. Its transfer from a marginal programme of student exchange to a more comprehensive process reflects the increasing importance of the international dimensions in higher education. Three decades later, internationalisation has become the "key driver in modern higher education, in the developed world and in emerging economies […] a mainstream and central component of policies and practices in higher education" (de Wit, 2017, p. 25). In 2013, the European Commission launched "The European higher education in the world" strategy to promote mobility and cooperation between the member states and the third EU countries. With that document, the importance of internationalisation of the curriculum and learning outcomes for all students received a central place, next to mobility, in the European policies for the internationalisation of higher education. According to de Wit, more and more higher education institutions in the world "have an internationalisation policy and/or have integrated internationalisation in their mission and vision" (2017, p. 25).

The process of institutional internationalisation is as diverse as the concept itself. Altbach and Knight identify study-abroad programs, as well as "activities [that] stress upgrading the international perspectives and skills of students, enhancing foreign language programs, and providing crosscultural understanding" (2007, p. 290), as means of internationalisation. Internationalisation, however, comprises several dimensions: recruitment of international students (both for degree and credit/ short-term mobility); participation of foreign professors in teaching and research activities; use of international languages in teaching and administration; joint degrees and cooperative programmes; collaborative activity in the field of research. This diversity of dimensions is fostered at an institutional level by employment of key instruments such as: internationalisation strategies, which ensure that institutional practices are aligned with internationalisation goals; direct partnerships with international universities, facilitating mobilities and research cooperation; framework programmes (such as Erasmus) or bilateral cooperation agreements; and marketing tools oriented towards international students.

In time, equal amounts of attention have been given to both defining the concept and implementing the process of internationalisation in higher education. In this sense, de Wit and Hunter define internationalisation 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" (2015, p. 29). Of course this definition, far from being intended as exhaustive, has spurred considerable debate. Although internationalisation is a complex process that is initiated often by governments or institutions, it develops organically due to networking effects and other factors, such as "[w]hen students travel to study abroad, faculty are engaged in collaborative research and publishing, or a university signs a memorandum of understanding with foreign institutional or development partners" (Teferra, 2019). Thus, the most visible dimension of the internationalisation of a higher education is represented by student mobility.

2.2. Internationalisation in the COVID-19 era and post COVID perspectives

In the COVID-19 era, HEIs need to reconsider student mobilites, since physical movement cannot always be taken into account. Although the pandemic brought challenges, it also offers opportunities for universities to redesign mobilities and internationalisation in terms of digital experience: studies already argue that there is a need for more flexibility and stronger emphasis on "new environments and initiatives for global learning […]; internationalisation at home" (Bista et al., 2022, p. 9).

3. Linguistic framework

3.1. Rationale

According to de Wit et al., internationalisation in higher education in recent years has shifted from "cooperation to competition" (2015, p. 6), with universities competing for profit, although not all institutions have undergone this process of commercialization to the same extent. As such, universities are trying to attract more international students according to their own profile and the policies of the countries in which they are based. However, the report released by the British Council and DAAD in 2014 points to the lack of research that measures the benefits of student mobility: "much remains to be done to fully appreciate what these scholarship programmes actually achieve" (p. 6).

3.2. Aim of the study

In the present paper, we investigate the use of terms related to the concept of 'international' and / or 'internationalisation' at the institutional level. We simultaneously address the question 'What role do the concepts used by universities play in the attraction of international students?' Using corpus linguistics methods (see below), we looked at: (a) the correlation between the concepts used by universities and their attractiveness reflected in ranking positions; (b) the correlation between the concepts used by universities and the concepts used by students reflected in their mobility testimonials.

3.3. Corpus data

The data analysed in this paper is organized into two self-compiled corpora: INTER (Corpus of Internationalisation Terminology in Higher Education Institutions in Europe) and LIVIT (Corpus of Lived Internationalisation Experiences). The data selection parameters are the following:

The INTER corpus, comprising 77,476 tokens, consists of sections from the websites of 50 European universities that are regarded to be highly international by online university rankings, such as U-Multirank (2018) and QS Top Universities (2019). From the university webpages, we selected sections dedicated to internationalizstion related to the profile and mission of the universities. A considerable number of webpages featured a section named 'International'. For the websites which did not have such a section, we included parts of sections titled 'About' or 'Our Mission' that addressed the topic of internationalisation.

The LIVIT corpus consists of two data subsets: LIVIT-EN (student testimonials in English) and LIVIT-RO (student testimonials in Romanian). During a preliminary stage of this study, we noted that universities post student testimonials as part of the International section to promote student mobility. The selection of texts was performed by availability, with no other criteria being applied. The testimonials about a study or internship period abroad within the

Erasmus+ exchange programme were the most popular. LIVIT-EN contains testimonials in English from 27 European universities. It comprises 50,297 tokens, from 252 student testimonials. The LIVIT-RO corpus consists of 75,332 tokens, from 145 student testimonials, gathered from 13 Romanian universities.
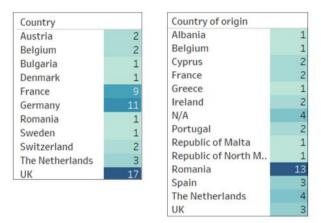
Country	
Austria	2
Belgium	2
Bulgaria	1
Denmark	1
France	9
Germany	11
Romania	1
Sweden	1
Switzerland	2
The Netherlands	3
UK	17

Country of origin	
Albania	1
Belgium	1
Cyprus	2
France	2
Greece	1
Ireland	2
N/A	4
Portugal	2
Republic of Malta	1
Republic of North M..	1
Romania	13
Spain	3
The Netherlands	4
UK	3

Figure 1. Number of universities per country represented in INTER corpus (left) and in LIVIT corpus (right)

4. Method

The INTER corpus was divided into five sub-corpora, according to university profile criteria: (1) INTER-Prestigious: prestigious universities (ranked in the top 100 by QS Top Universities 2019); (2) INTER-Business: Business schools; (3) INTER-Incoming: higher influx of international students; (4) INTER-Outgoing: more outgoing students; (5) INTER-Balance: balanced incoming/outgoing ratio. The corpora were divided in this manner so that different types of contrastive analyses could be performed. The choice of the INTER-Business sub-corpus, was based on the fact the data showed that some of the most highly regarded international Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Europe are Business Schools (U-Multirank 2018).

We used a mixed-method approach (Figure 1) to compare university descriptors to student lived experience. First, we compared the lexical-semantic profile of the tokens semantically connected to the concept of cultural diversity in the two corpora, using frequency analyses, collocation and phraseology categorizations. Then, we conducted discourse analyses on exemplary texts in INTER and LIVIT in order to assess the perception of the term 'international' through the lens of the students' lived experience.
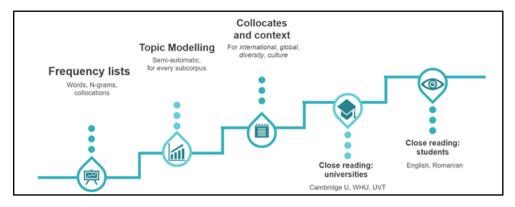
Figure 2. Linguistic analysis methods

5. Results

The results of our analysis show (Table 1) that universities encompass both teaching, research and administrative aspects when promoting themselves as being 'international'.

Table 1. Selected concordances of 'international' in INTER sub-corpora (from 1116 contexts)

Left	KWIC	Right
develop new ideas for intensifying the **intercultural**,	*international*	, and **global perspectives** of lectures, modules, and entire study programmes.
achieves **global impact** thanks to its strong	*international*	**academic network** and **multilateral partnerships**.
discovering Europe and having a unique	*international*	and **cultural experience**
in the context of internationalisation @home and the acquisition of	*international*	and **intercultural competencies**.
trainings related to the **intercultural** and	*international*	aspects of **teaching** as a means of **support** in teaching.
seeks to strengthen its	*international*	**cooperation** in the field of **research**
a wide range of options for first-hand	*international*	**experiences** through stays abroad.
the unique opportunity to enjoy an	*international*	**learning experience**, which is tailored to their specific interests.

An interesting outcome was the preference for the collocation 'global challenges' in best-ranked universities versus the collocation 'global networks' in business universities. To further verify the occurrence of 'global' in multiple contexts, we looked at three distinct HEIs: Cambridge University, WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management and the West University of Timisoara. Cambridge University characterises itself as a 'global institution' with numerous concepts of globalism, some interpreted in the sense of their universality ('global challenges', 'global impact', 'global themes,' 'global society'), others suggesting geographic outreach and profitability ('global activities,' 'global position,' 'global networks' 'global audiences,' 'global providers,').
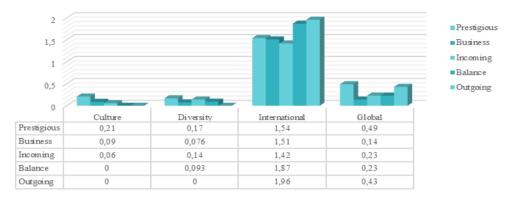
	Culture	Diversity	International	Global
Prestigious	0,21	0,17	1,54	0,49
Business	0,09	0,076	1,51	0,14
Incoming	0,06	0,14	1,42	0,23
Balance	0	0,093	1,87	0,23
Outgoing	0	0	1,96	0,43

Figure 3. Use of the term 'international' in INTER sub-corpora (%). Percentages are calculated per total number of words in each sub-corpus.

Multi-culturality is only scarcely mentioned. At the WHU, surprisingly, 'global' is not a central concept, being replaced by 'diversity' and terms suggesting equal opportunities (e.g. 'cultural background', 'equality of opportunity'). As for the Romanian university, West University of Timisoara, it seems that 'international' is the prefered concept, used in variations such as 'international relations,' 'international cooperation', 'international partners', 'international lecturers' 'international associations'. The notion 'global' appears in a single standard phrase 'globalized labour market'.

On the other hand, students' testimonials focus more on 'atmosphere', on their contact with other 'international students' and on whether their career opportunities are enhanced (Table 2):

Table 2. Selected concordances of 'international' in LIVIT-EN sub-corpora (from 118 contexts)

Left	KWIC (LIVIT-EN)	Right
has given me the opportunity to meet	*international*	students from **all around the world**.
It is truly an	*international*	place where you meet people from all around the world,
I made a lot of international friends while attending national and	*international*	**conferences**.
it was the pivot moment in my student career that led me to pursue an	*international*	**career**.
high quality education in an	*international*	***atmosphere***.
identify the challenges which exist for	*international*	/**Erasmus students** and were always helpful.
it was a great way to meet other	*international*	students that were also studying law!

In students' view, the key concepts that are connected with 'international' experience are 'global' ("The UvA is so international that my Erasmus sounds more *global* than European!"; "take advantage of the perspective and expertise on *global issues* that SOAS is known for."), 'world' ("It is truly an international place where you meet people from *all around the world*, practice foreign languages and broaden you knowledge and perspective on life."),

'multicultural' ("an insight about the world through the eyes of my *multicultural* colleagues."), 'diversity' ("Also the *diversity* of fellow students will broaden your perspective"):
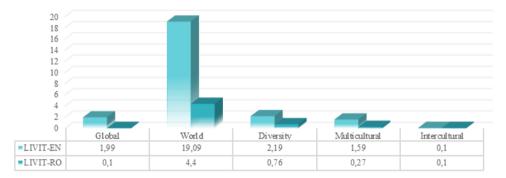
	Global	World	Diversity	Multicultural	Intercultural
LIVIT-EN	1,99	19,09	2,19	1,59	0,1
LIVIT-RO	0,1	4,4	0,76	0,27	0,1

Figure 4. Key concepts in students' testimonials. Normalized frequency per ten thousand words (pttw)

6. Conclusions

In our study, we have developed and tested a methodology by which we aimed to bridge the gap between theoretical approaches in defining concepts belonging to the semantic field of 'international' (e.g. 'internationalisation', 'multiculturalism', 'global', 'diversity) and practical realisations of internationalisation strategies at European universities. By contrasting results from the two corpora (INTER and LIVIT), we were able to verify whether universities operate with different terminology and examine the degree of correlation between the selection of terms and the profile of the HEI. On the other, the personal dimension of the internationalisation experience was investigated, so that objective conclusions could be drawn on the actual perceptions students have regarding their plunging into an international context.

The results of the analysis indicate a division between concepts clustering around keywords from several categories: Mobility/International, Partnership and Collaboration and World/Regions, Academic or Environment. By looking at the LIVIT corpus, we identified testimonials that are representative of the way students react to their international experience. The outcomes of the study confirm the initial assumptions, namely that the benefits mentioned in official internationalisation strategies are often in contrast with the benefits students seek and reap during their mobilities. We propose therefore that future policy making initiatives should consider linguistic research as a resource for pertinent recommendations. The study is also a source of data-supported information on the internationalisation strategies and their conceptual options in European HEIs.

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