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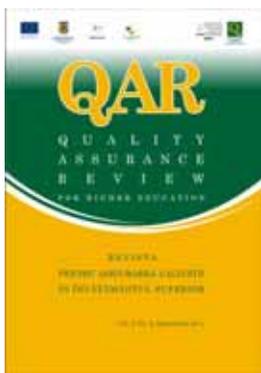


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OPOROSU



AGENȚIA ROMÂNĂ
DE ASIGURARE A
CALITĂȚII ÎN
ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNTUL SUPERIOR



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The quality of the Romanian International Master's Programs. The Students' Perspective

Liliana Donath

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The quality of the Romanian International Master's Programs. The Students' Perspective

Liliana Donath

West University of Timișoara
liliana.donath@feaa.uvt.ro

Abstract: *International study programs have become widespread, allowing a higher mobility of students and academics. In Romania, these programs are rather new, offering information in various fields and allowing students to specialise in such a manner as to acquire specific competences required by rather narrow market niches. The paper summarizes the students' perspective on the quality of international master programs. Their point of view is important given that students' are the main beneficiaries and stakeholders of these programs. The research methodology is based on questionnaires and interviews carried out by master students involved in the ASIGMA project. The data was gathered during best practice exchanges among partner universities and relevant bibliography. The paper concludes that a positive evolution of international master programs can be acknowledged, with a significant number of benefits. Nevertheless, there are still room for improvement given the difficulties students still encounter that were highlighted by the S.W.O.T. analyses.*

Keywords: *quality, study, programs, students*

Rezumat: *Programele de studiu internaționalizate au dobândit o largă recunoaștere, permițând o mobilitate intensă a studenților și a cadrelor didactice. Aceste programe sunt relative noi în peisajul educațional românesc. Ele permit o specializare avansată a studenților în cele mai diverse domenii, acoperind nișe de piață înguste. Lucrarea prezintă o sinteză a punctului de vedere al studenților cu privire la calitatea programelor internaționalizate. Perspectiva studentască asupra subiectului este importantă, dată fiind calitatea acestora de principali beneficiari ai cursurilor. Metodologia de cercetare se bazează pe chestionare și interviuri la care au participat studenții masteranzi în cadrul proiectului ASIGMA în cursul activităților de schimb de bune practici. Concluzia lucrării este aceea că se poate desprinde calitatea și beneficiile recunoscute ale acestor programe de studiu. Totuși, analiza S.W.O.T. relevă faptul că studenții se confruntă cu un număr de dificultăți, dar a căror rezolvare poate conduce la o evoluție pozitivă a programelor internaționalizate.*

Cuvinte cheie: *calitate, studiu, program, studenți*

1. Introduction

One of the main issues higher education institutions must face nowadays is to adapt to the requirements of an ever more globalised labour market. Under these circumstances, a widespread trend to internationalise the study programs is embraced by most of the higher education institutions. The harmonisation of the curricula, the international mobility of students and academics, the involvement of major stakeholders (i.e. students, employers, civil society representatives, etc.) in organising the studies is challenging because it means a change of paradigm in the approach of higher education objectives. The main challenge is to adjust the whole educational process in such a manner as to meet the expectations of quality and effectiveness in public money management.

The ASIGMA project seeks the opinions of managers, academics and students in order to reveal the state of the matter concerning the quality of international master programs and to make suggestions for improvement.

During the Best practice exchanges among the partner universities in the project, students were addressed a number of questionnaires and were interviewed in order to depict the opinion of

the main beneficiaries concerning the international master programs. The aims of the research were to increase the awareness concerning the importance of the international study programs, to emphasise the strong and weak points as well as the opportunities and risks of these programs.

The research also summarises the benefits and difficulties encountered by the students during their studies as well as their proposals to improve the quality of the programs they are enrolled in.

Following this stage of the research, further, an international comparison with foreign universities will be made in order to set a new stance of paradigm for the international study programs.

2. International Master Programs Defined

Literature does not state a single definition of international studies given their complexity and that they are rather new in the educational systems. Nevertheless, the definition of international study programs focus on the integration of an international or intercultural dimension in the objectives and missions of higher education institutions (Knight J. 2003). Or, according to the UNESCO point of view, it involves all kinds of educational programs in which students are enrolled in a different country than the one that grants the diploma or qualification. To note that these approaches are mainly extensive, meaning, undoubtedly, a significant mobility of students and academics. Nevertheless, the globalisation of information and technology does not necessarily require that students go to another institution to study on line courses being available. This development gave way to transnational education a (Kritz 2006).

The international approach of higher education and specifically the master programs also means the reorganisation of curricula according to the specific requirements. The curricula should include comparative studies, teaching in a foreign language, specific procedures of learning outcomes evaluation.

As widely noted in different studies, the teaching is made mainly in English diminishing the cultural input of other languages.

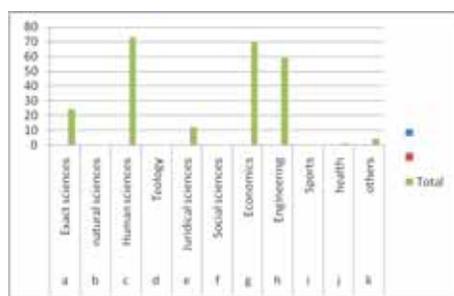
In Romania, such international master studies are quite new, the Romanian universities endeavouring to enter the international circuits. Nevertheless, at least for the time being, there are an insignificant number of foreign students attending these courses the international dimension of studies being given by the teaching in a foreign language (mainly English and on a smaller scale French and German).

3. Brief Analyses of International Master Programs in Romania from the Students' Perspective

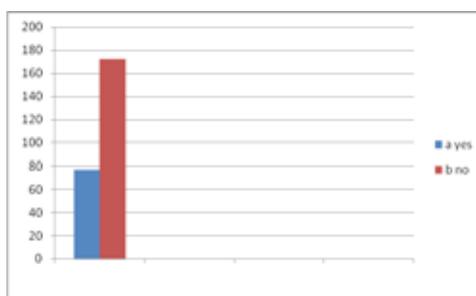
The research is based on the answers given by master students enrolled in international programs organised by the partner universities within the ASIGMA project. Moreover, during the best practice exchanges students' representatives were interviewed in order to allow students to freely express their opinions.

A sample of relevant answers to the questionnaire are given in the charts below:

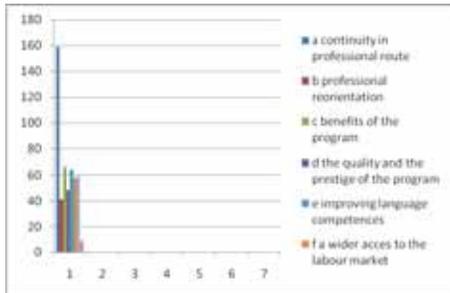
1. The bachelor degree was in:



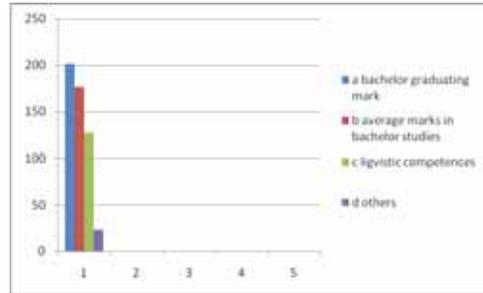
2. Do you have an international bachelor degree?



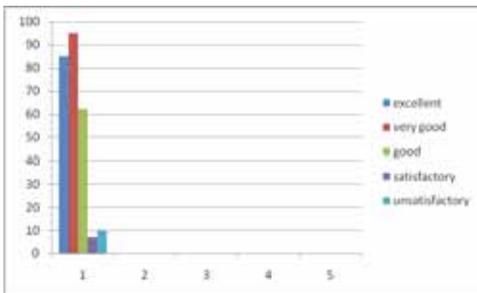
3. Reasons to follow an international study program



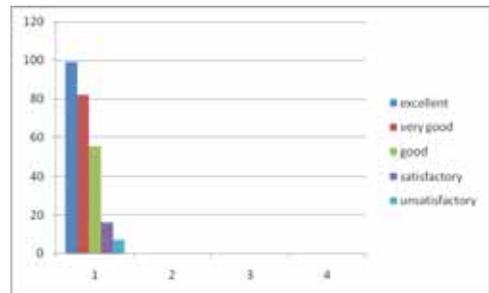
4. Importance of admission criteria



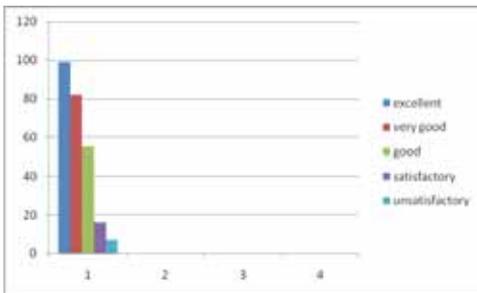
5. The quality of the curricula



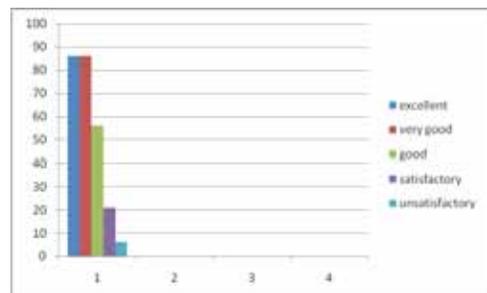
6. The quality of the contents



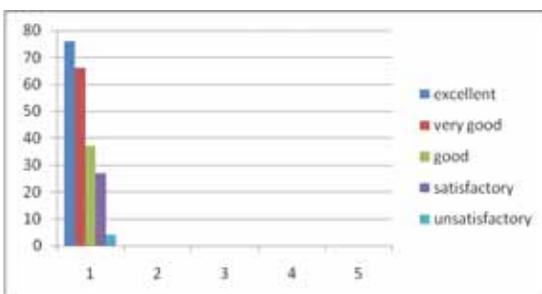
7. The quality of the bibliography



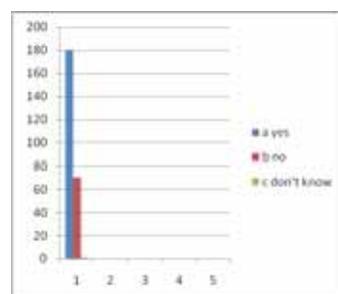
8. The teaching methods are adapted to the requirements of the program?



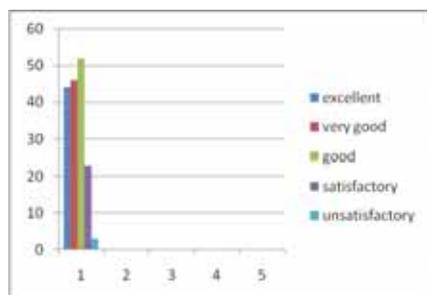
9. The quality of teaching in a foreign language



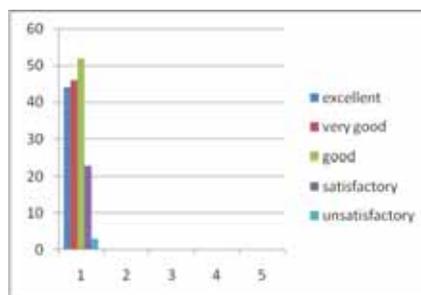
10. Is there a language support centre in the university?



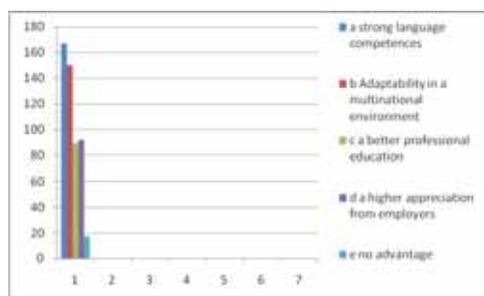
11. The quality of the language support services



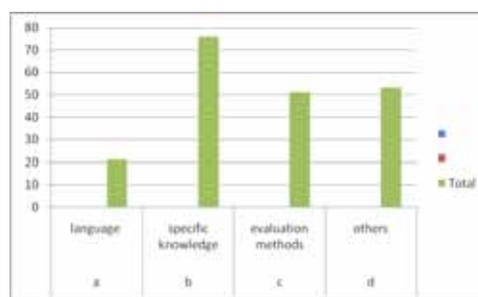
12. International program students' profile



13. Advantages compared to other master's students



14. Main difficulties during the studies



The table below includes the S.W.O.T. analyses summarising the students' point of view concerning the international master studies in Romania.

SWOT ANALYSIS REGARDING INTERNATIONAL MASTER'S STUDY PROGRAMS

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The majority of international master's programs are unique in Romania's educational landscape 2. The language is an advantage for those who want to get a job in an international company 3. The master's programs develop additional skills in the foreign language 4. Laboratories and classrooms are equipped according to the needs of the master's program 5. Master's programs in sciences benefit from specialized software similar to that used in big companies 6. Vocational development is better due to the extended reference list 7. There is the possibility that educational qualifications are recognized on the European labour market 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Insufficient hours for developing language skills 2. Difficulties in developing a specialized vocabulary in the foreign language 3. Insufficient hours of internship and case studies 4. Lack of implication of companies in recruiting students for internships 5. Laboratories are not as well equipped as the laboratories from other universities in the EU 6. Scholarships are inferior to those offered by other universities in the EU 7. Lecture support is often poor from linguistic point of view 8. Sometimes the number of hours is reduced for disciplines considered important

<p>8. Teachers are well prepared</p> <p>9. Teachers have conversational abilities in a foreign language</p> <p>10. For engineering profiles, an hard sciences teachers have a long experience in the field</p> <p>11. Support materials are of good quality and the library is sufficiently endowed</p> <p>12. Discussions are often based on case studies</p> <p>13. Curricula is consistent with the labour market requirements</p> <p>14. Teamwork prevails</p> <p>15. There is the possibility to obtain scholarships at universities abroad</p> <p>16. Some courses are given by teachers from abroad</p> <p>17. Teacher – student communication is very good</p> <p>18. Collaborations with universities from abroad represents an advantage on the labour market</p> <p>19. teaching methods are adequate for teaching in a foreign language</p> <p>20. Communication skills are developed</p> <p>21. Number of students / teachers ratio is adequate and allows a good communication</p> <p>22. Participation of students and teachers to national and international research, cross-border activities, or intuitional forms of mobility; teachers (international teachers, mobility of teachers, teachers holding foreign citizenship, teachers with temporary positions in foreign universities)</p> <p>23. Promoting student mobility as well as teacher, researcher or administrative staff mobility</p> <p>24. Accession to European values</p> <p>25. Linguistic level of the students is good</p> <p>26. There exist the possibility to learn a foreign language through the lectures offered to students</p> <p>27. Promoting the international master program through the faculty's website</p> <p>28. Promoting the international master program through brochures or other means</p> <p>29. The existence of support mechanisms for the enrolled students and staff</p> <p>30. Master's programs are based on the student centred teaching paradigm</p> <p>31. Students can engage in Erasmus mobility</p> <p>32. The existence of quality assurance mechanisms regarding the programs (semester evaluations by students, re-evaluation and recalibration of the curricula)</p>	<p>9. Some teachers prefer teaching in Romanian</p> <p>10. No guarantee of obtained a double degree</p> <p>11. Insufficient mobility scholarships</p> <p>12. Modular organization of the studies isn't not always effective</p> <p>13. It is not enough emphasis on developing teachers supported communication skills and synthesis of information in English</p> <p>14. Low number of teachers with practical experience</p> <p>15. Unequal distribution of hours</p> <p>16. Lack of clear standardized criteria for the foundation, development and evaluation of international master programs</p> <p>17. Difficulties in harmonizing/uniformity and homogenization of the curricula</p> <p>18. Lack of the capacity to mobilize human resources and financial resources for developing sustainable policies that will lead to improved performance</p> <p>19. Financial difficulties in funding the studies by the students</p> <p>20. Insufficient funds to buy new books</p> <p>21. Insufficient connections to the labour market</p> <p>22. Periodic identification of the necessities and satisfaction nt</p> <p>23. Insufficient funds for stimulating students to engage in extracurricular activities</p> <p>24. Insufficient funds for national and international mobility of students and teachers</p> <p>25. Lack of effective specialized centre for linguistic support</p> <p>26. Limited methods of attracting foreign students</p> <p>27. Aging of teachers</p> <p>28. Weak motivation of teachers due to budgetary cuts</p> <p>29. Low number of enrolled students</p> <p>30. Low visibility at international level</p>
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OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Possibility to study at a foreign partner university 2. Better chances of being employed in multinational companies 3. Possibility to continue the studies in the same domain in a Ph.D. program 4. Possibility of engaging other specialists in the educational process 5. Capitalization of national and international internship training for both students and teachers 6. Alumni networking 7. Partnerships with foreign universities 8. Academic students/teachers/researchers exchanges 9. International scholarships obtained through the the respective Embassies 10. Development of the students in an international environment 11. Developing skills in a foreign language 12. A better adaptation to the needs of the labour market 13. Increasing the number of foreign teachers 14. Increasing the number of research projects developed in relationships to foreign partner universities 15. Increasing the degree of international visibility of the articles written by Romanian researchers 16. Development of partnerships with universities from abroad for obtaining double degrees 17. Extension of internships with the possibility of being hired at the end of that internship 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Extension of other universities in similar domains 2. Superiority of educational systems in other EU countries 3. Lack of interest of the Romanian public authorities to finance research programs 4. Competition from soft skills master's programs 5. Reduced number of master programs in a foreign language other than English 6. Educational system crisis and lack of interest for thorough study 7. Lack of interest of companies for developing partnerships with universities 8. Legislation, centralistic, non-stimulating policies that don't attract students 9. The programs are relatively new and need time to be consolidated 10. Sometimes, there are too many disciplines to study and some students drop the program 11. Lack of attractiveness for foreign students since the master degree is not recognized at a European level 12. Sometimes an inadequate cost – quality ratio reduces the possibility of attracting elite students 13. Students seldom embrace hard sciences (math IT Physics) 14. Reduced interest in following a career in research as a result of poor funding.

4. Benefits and Difficulties of Attending International Master Programs

The students who chose to enrol in an international master's program consider that the most relevant *benefits* of pursuing such a degree are:

- most of the programs are *unique in the respective field*, students have the opportunity to *study abroad and/or benefit of an internship in foreign companies*,
- when possible students pursue to get a *double diploma*,
- the curricula and the syllabi are modern and represent *an added value as compared to the programs taught in Romanian*,
- students perceive *a stronger connection of the syllabi to the market labour market requirements, competences being quite well defined*,
- the study *programs and the syllabi are comparable with those taught in foreign universities*.
- *teaching is often based on relevant case studies*,

- *student centred learning* applies better, implying more *creativity and an extended international bibliography*,
- students appreciate that *tutorship is better understood* and effectively used.
- universities try, through the respective Embassies to obtain *scholarships, grants, financial support for internships or studies abroad*.
- students consider that a *multicultural spirit* is developed as well as a *better understanding of the economic and business environment*.
- *communication in a foreign language is enhanced* and students are *challenged to choose their guiding values*.
- students appreciate the *multidisciplinary character of the studies* and the *participation of foreign teachers*, even on short periods of time.
- masters in engineering, physics, computing, allow *research in modern avant-garde fields, the interaction with foreign researchers and to enhance professionalism*.

The students that were interviewed also stressed the *difficulties* of attending an international master program:

- there are still difficulties in *understanding the specialised language* (especially in French) and /or the information comprised in a *too complex bibliography*,
- *the modular way of teaching is not characteristic* to the Romanian educational system and is considered quite difficult to follow and stressful because of *the small amount of time granted for each discipline that does not allow an in-depth approach of the information*,
- generally students as well as the teachers *lack specialised knowledge in a foreign language*,
- *insufficient visibility* of international master programs in multinational companies and on the labour market that is not aware that such study programs exist,
- students consider that sometimes *the study program is too loaded*, and therefore the students' evaluation quite difficult.

5. Concluding Remarks

International master's programs are rather well appreciated by the students, the benefits of acquiring such a degree being considerable, despite the difficulties encountered.

Students find that there is still room for improvement, making a number of recommendations that could lead to a dynamic evolution of these programs:

- *more internship places* in companies abroad,
- *more scholarships* at foreign universities,
- *applied studies based on case studies*,
- *professionals from foreign companies and institutions should be invited and share their experience, teach certain specialised lectures*,
- *more tutorial hours* to assist students in their study, especially the communication in foreign languages,
- introductory interactive classes in order to *up- date the basic specialised knowledge* ,
- *a more intense communication* with the teachers,
- *more paper ware bibliography, a better structure of the courses* and of *students' evaluation*,
- *introductory courses held together with foreign students* in order to improve communication in foreign languages,
- *a block approach* of courses and individual tasks that require extensive work,
- constant and permanent support for improving communication and writing in a foreign language through a language centre organised in the university,
- *more intercultural classes* are welcome, intensifying the *teacher and students exchanges*, intensifying the efforts to obtain a double diploma.

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