

Romanian Universities: The Use of Educational Marketing to Strengthen Internationalization of Higher Education



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Abstract With the European Universities Initiative underway, the COVID-19 pandemic and various national or European strategies reaching their initially designated timeline, 2021 is a good moment to take stock of how Romania fulfilled its commitments regarding internationalization. One of the key dimensions of internationalization of higher education, both in Romania and global terms, is marketing and promotion, especially if one looks at the institutional efforts to attract talent. The article aims to show how Romanian universities use educational marketing to promote their study programs offer, in order to attract both international students and national students in the context of a steep student population decrease. The paper addresses two main research questions: How do universities use media and other mechanisms to promote their educational offer globally? Which are the main strengths allowing Romanian higher education to better attract international students? The article presents the main findings of the SWOT analysis for the Romanian higher education system, with information from 47 public universities. It compares the current findings with those from a similar SWOT analysis performed in 2015, while also putting forward a cost-benefit analysis of attracting international students and developing internationalization of higher education. The paper also underlines several areas where universities can focus their efforts in attracting international students (such as the www.studyinromania.gov.ro portal) and policy recommendations based on the data analyzed

Keywords Educational marketing · Promotion · Media · Romanian universities · Strengths · International students · Internationalization of higher education

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Abbreviation

ANS	The national platform for collecting statistical data for higher education
AUF	Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie/Francophonie University Agency
DESI	Digital Economy and Society Index Report
EAIE	European Association for International Education
EUA	European University Association
EUI	European Universities Initiative
GTCI ranking	Global Talent Competitiveness Index, 2020
IAU	International Association of Universities
NCR	National Council of Rectors
NAFSA	Association of International Educators
QS	QS World University Ranking
RMU	National Student Enrolment Registry
THE	Times Higher Education World University Rankings

1 Introduction

1.1 *Research Questions and Aim of the Study*

The Romanian higher education national and institutional stakeholders have to adapt to a world that faces quick changes, with the European Universities Initiative underway, various national/institutional or European strategies reaching their initially designated timeline, as well as new external challenges such as COVID-19 and the demographic downturn. COVID-19 had an impact on the world higher education systems and made the transition to online learning very fast (Marinoni et al. 2020).

The internationalization of higher education in Romania “is not a new concept”, but its redefinition as a “comprehensive process” integrated in a strategic approach is still ongoing. (Deca et al. 2015) Also, “different rationales for internationalization between national and institutional level” (Deca 2014, p. 3) may lead to inconsistency in terms of public objectives and policies (Deca 2014) for all those involved in the formulation and implementation of public education policies. Currently, Romanian universities are facing challenges such as the steady decline of the student population, competition with higher education institutions in the rest of the world to attract international students or, most recently, maintaining relevance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, 2021 was considered by the authors a good time to conduct a new SWOT analysis of the internationalization of Romanian higher education in order to have a clear vision on where Romania stands in terms of internationalization, identify the

strengths it can build to increase the quality of its higher education system and ascertain how universities make use of marketing mechanisms to attract more international students.

This article is based on a more elaborate study—“Marketing study on the promotion potential of the Romanian universities”, developed within the project titled “Quality in higher education: internationalization and databases for developing the Romanian higher education”.¹

The aim of the article is to show how Romanian universities use educational marketing to promote their study program offer to attract international students, in the context of a steep student population decrease caused by a decline in demographics, a low Baccalaureate promotion rate, but also high school dropout or migration (UEFISCDI 2018). The main research questions are:

- How do universities use media and other mechanisms to promote their educational offer globally? and
- Which are the main strengths allowing Romanian higher education to better attract international students?

The paper includes, inter alia, a short analysis on the educational marketing tools used by Romanian universities, the outcomes from a new SWOT analysis of 47 public higher education institutions (HEIs) in Romania, a cost-benefit analysis, and the authors’ perspective on the competitive advantage Romania has for attracting international students. The conclusion section will highlight recommendations for the national and institutional stakeholders on the use of educational marketing.

This article, together with the previously mentioned marketing study (Fit et al. 2020), could be the starting point in shaping a national marketing strategy, with clear priorities, such as building well-defined promotion campaigns in regions of interest to Romania and defining clear, quantifiable targets for measuring the assumed targets. Emerging recommendations in this article could lead to a future increase in Romania’s attractiveness as a study destination.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

While acknowledging the diversity of theoretical approaches used for the internationalization of higher education, the authors chose the following working definition:

Internationalization of higher education is the intended process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary, 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. 9)

¹ Project funded through European Funds and coordinated by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI) in partnership with Ministry of Education.

In the last decade, debates in the academic communities led to a redefining and rethinking of the internationalization of higher education. Following the 5th Global Survey Report, developed by IAU (Marinoni 2019), the benefits of internationalization are seen as predominantly improving “international cooperation and capacity building” and the “quality of teaching and learning”. The relevance of internationalization is becoming increasingly important, depending on the size of the institution. According to Egron-Polak and Hudson (2012), the way institutions approach international dimensions depends very much on the size of the Higher Education Institution (HEI): institutions of small size have the tendency to focus more on the mobility dimension (having a strong economic motivation related to the extra funds brought by international fee-paying students), while universities with a comprehensive character have the tendency to concentrate more on research partnerships. Universities worldwide increased their interest in internationalization since it contributes to the increased differences between universities. Marinoni (2019).

Institutions with a strong economic motivation are more and more interested in attracting international students (Marinoni 2019) and, in order to attract students, universities design and implement comprehensive marketing campaigns. Universities view social media, in particular Facebook, as an efficient mechanism for attracting international students (Assimakopoulos et al. 2017 cited in Bamberger et al. 2020). This preference seems to be influenced by how target groups use social media platforms. As the Pew Research Center (2018) shows, the new generation is active on social media, with YouTube, Facebook and Instagram being the most frequently used social media platforms for the 18–24 age group.

1.3 Methodology

The methodology consists of desk research, legal documents and strategic documents analysis, analysis of data from the national platform for collecting statistical data for higher education (ANS), or data retrieved from the National Student Enrolment Registry (RMU), official universities’ websites, and their social media pages analysis.

The sample was composed of 47 public universities in Romania (excluding military universities and private universities). The purpose was to have universities from all eight geographic/development regions. Therefore, there are twelve universities from Bucharest-Ilfov region, seven universities from the North-West, seven universities from the North-East, seven universities from the West region, five universities from the Centre, three universities from the South, three universities from the South-East, and three universities from the South-West. At the same time, for the analysis, we took into account the university profiles, divided according to their fundamental fields of study: 16 comprehensive, nine architecture, arts and sports universities, six science, socio-humanities & economics universities, six medical universities, six technical universities, and 4 agronomic universities. The data was collected in four intervals: October–December 2019 for data on how universities use media,

April–May 2019–2021 for StudyinRomania² website statistics, January–April 2020 for social media communication, and October–December 2020 for SWOT-relevant data.

To address the main strengths for better attracting international students, a SWOT analysis for 47 Romanian public universities was performed. A cost-benefit analysis related to the economic advantages that international students bring to Romania was developed, with an emphasis on the financial benefits for the purposes of this article.

The SWOT analysis aims to encourage collaboration between universities and increase their attractiveness and reputation through the study programs. It was based on numerous indicators, the most relevant being: double degree programs, education programs in English/other foreign languages, cost of living, collaboration with stakeholders, international rankings alumni network, participation at international educational fairs, fees for international students, legislation in the internationalization area, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, etc. The SWOT analysis also contains a Political, Economic, Social, and Technological factors (PEST) analysis, providing both a micro and macro-level perspective of the Romanian universities.

Some limitations of the present article: there is no perspective of private and military universities due to the lack of data; also, no questionnaires or interviews with universities' representatives were performed, thus limiting the contribution of qualitative research methods to the conclusions of the article.

2 Internationalization of Higher Education in Romania

2.1 Data on International Students

In the 2019/2020 academic year, Romania had 457,244 students enrolled in 47 public universities at bachelor, master, and doctorate levels. 28,616 international students were enrolled for a full cycle, 6% out of the total student population, an increase of 34% since 2014/2015 when international students represented 5%. In 2019/2020, 27% of international students were from EU/ EEA, 73% of non-EU students were from non-EU countries (out of which 47% were from non-EU, and 53% were from the Republic of Moldova). (Haj et al. 2020a).

According to the policy brief (Haj et al. 2020a), most international students were enrolled in Bachelor studies—94% for EU students and 78% for non-EU. 22 universities also organized the Romanian language preparatory year, and in 2019/2020, there was a 25% increase in the number of international students enrolled in these programs, compared to 2017/2018, and a diversification of the countries of origin.

International students come from over 127 countries, but a majority of them—87%, originate from 17 countries (listed according to the number of students in descending order): Republic of Moldova, France, Israel, Germany, Italy, Morocco,

² Study in Romania portal—is the official website that presents the Romanian higher education offer to a national and international audience.

Greece, Tunisia, Serbia, Syria, Hungary, Ukraine, Iraq, Jordan, Albania, Lebanon, and Nigeria. (Haj et al. 2020a).

62.18% of international students are enrolled in the following ten study domains (listed according to the number of students in descending order): medicine, dentistry, business administration, veterinary medicine, pharmacy, law, economics and international relations, language and literature, computers, and information technology and management. The largest share of international students enrolls in programs taught in French (67%) and English (28%).

2.2 Strategic Perspective at a National Level

Romania still does not have a national strategy for the internationalization of education and no central level institution dedicated to attracting international students or promoting Romanian higher education (Fit 2020). The Ministry of Education is the official institution responsible, and no national marketing strategy for promoting Romanian higher education exists either.

In the last ten years, UEFISCDI implemented various projects focusing on the internationalization of higher education, with a number of outcomes that could support a more strategic national approach on the topic, such as a national analysis of the status quo of internationalization, institutional strategies for 20 Romanian universities, the StudyinRomania platform, a strategic framework for a national internationalization strategy, a blueprint for a structure to promote information about the Romanian higher education system, a methodology to monitor internationalization, or a series of policy briefs.

Half of the universities participating in the 2015 UEFISCDI project do not have marketing or communication strategies, having limited capacity and resources to implement these (Egron-Polak et al. 2015). This can be seen as an obstacle to attract international students. The lack of a strategic approach for recruiting international students was also visible on the universities' websites, which often had little or no information in English.

Moreover, in 2016, the Ministry of Education conducted a questionnaire regarding the internationalization objectives among universities, with 52 respondents out of 92 universities, 43 public, nine private, and five military universities (Fit, 2020). The top five objectives in their internationalization strategy listed by universities were: increasing partnerships with international universities, increasing the number of student and academic mobility, promoting the university internationally, attracting international degree-seeking students, and internationalizing the curriculum and research priorities.

In 2017, the National Council of Rectors (NCR) started to informally support internationalization by coordinating joint participation at educational fairs or international conferences under the StudyinRomania umbrella, although not all universities were involved (Fit 2020).

In 2021, UEFISCDI, together with the Ministry of Education and with the support of the National Council of Rectors, launched the first professional video³ to promote the Romanian higher education and attract international students.

2.3 Marketing Endeavors at the Institutional Level

Since 2016, through the National Council for Higher Education Financing (CNFIS), the Ministry of Education has conducted project competitions to support specific university activities through the Institutional Development Fund (IDF). While priorities have varied, internationalization has remained a constant. During the five years of competitions, 52 universities have received funding for internationalization activities, 31% participating in all yearly competitions.

The main activities for which universities requested funding were: increasing the number of international students, increasing the number of mobility/partnerships (including research), developing support materials to attract international students, websites in English, and participation in international promotion fairs. Other priorities included internationalization at home activities (including improving language skills for teachers and, in some cases, non-teaching staff), study programs in foreign languages, summer schools or "Orientation Days", "buddy system"⁴ programs, or online registration applications/mobile applications for students.

3 Educational Marketing in Romanian Universities. How Romanian Universities Use Media and Other Mechanisms to Promote Their Educational Offer Locally and Globally

Most Romanian universities use a mix of instrument types to promote their education offer, in different combinations, with an emphasis on the four traditional media types: Owned Media, Earned Media, Social Media, and Paid Media (Fit, et al 2021).

As public educational and research institutions, Romanian universities perform marketing actions and campaigns similar to companies. They are large employers in the cities where they operate, interact with a large number of partner institutions and providers, and turn out yearly alumni. The alumni community will always bear the educational "mark" of the university. This is why it is important to understand each type of media separately and which indicators can be relevant for their performance (Brand Watch 2016).

³https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_aOSG_0iOko&t=4s&ab_channel=StudyinRomania.

⁴ Integrating international students by pairing them with national students.

Owned media is considered the base for any marketing activity acting as the organization's "official" source of information. It is essential for any marketing mix, and for universities, this usually includes the website or connected blogs, or any other content created and shared via social media or their website (Corcoran 2009). The indicators monitored to determine if a university makes good usage of its own media include the retention rate of website visitors, the average number of pages visited during a visit, the total number of monthly visits and the average duration of a visit. In addition, official YouTube channels and Facebook events play a key role in owning the communication flow. The number of followers of the official YouTube channel and the number of events created on the universities' official Facebook page are relevant indicators of the effectiveness and consistent marketing activities organized by the university. During 2020 and influenced by the global pandemic, the role of the owned official channels of communication has increased (Mander 2020 and Crisp 2020).

Earned media refers to all the awareness and "buzz" surrounding the brand or product that have been generated by other people or institutions and can include traditional media mentions, social media mentions, shares and retweets, online reviews, and blog articles hosted by authors external to the brand (Corcoran 2009). In this case, the indicator used to monitor universities' performance in earned media was the number of articles published on Mediafax⁵ news agency. This number indicates the notoriety of the university, its students, and Alumni in the media (the articles displayed were shared by other media institutions). The third type of media, paid media, consists of any marketing activity that the university must pay for. This includes TV advertising, radio spots, and outdoor advertising. In online, there are three subcategories of paid media: pay per click (PPC), visual banner advertising, and sponsored newsfeed content (Corcoran 2009).

Since no official university data was available, the authors counted and scored the participation in university/educational fairs, outdoor advertising, TV and radio advertising, paid online advertising. Social media was integrated only in the last decade on the marketing stage. For many age groups, social media has become the best and most used advertising channel, which is strongly influenced by the technology and age groups, and it consists of social networks, blogs, audio-video content (Alalwan et al. 2017). To measure the universities' performance in social media, the following indicators were used: the number of followers of the official Facebook page of the university, number of alumni and followers of the official LinkedIn page, the Google and Facebook ratings of the university (Fit, et al. 2021).

All the indicators for each media type have contributed to a scoring system of 100 maximum points. Some findings are listed below, focused on number of international students, size, and type of university (Fit, et al. 2021)

One can assume universities with a higher number of international students take more and more coordinated actions for attracting them. While medical universities have the highest percentage of international students, their scoring was around 20 points, the best. The high number of international students in these universities is

⁵www.mediafax.ro.

probably linked with a long-standing tradition of attracting them and has its beginnings in the public higher education policies from the 1970s and 1980s. In time, the graduates from these universities have created communities and distinguished themselves as key members of local societies. They created opportunities for students, and this awareness has fueled the flux of international students until today.

In terms of size, the universities have been split in four categories: under 10,000 students, between 10,000 and 20,000 students, between 20,000 and 30,000 students, above 30,000 students. Large universities have better scores since some indicators are determined by numeric values, such as the number of alumni, visitors on the official website, followers on official media channels etc.

In terms of university type, the best scores were registered by those in the field of Sciences, Socio-Human, Economic, and those with a Technical profile. The ones with the lowest score were the Architecture, Art and Sports profiles. The high scores of Sciences, Socio-Human, and Economic universities might have to do with their faculties' profile. For example, these universities have a Faculty of Communication Sciences, which is or may be responsible for the management of an official university blog, or the Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science is or may be responsible for the administration of the website. This is a great opportunity for the expertise created through the educational process to be used in promoting the university.

3.1 Romanian Universities' Preferred Marketing Tools

Although Romanian universities have access to all the instruments mentioned above, they use some more than others. The most accessible and frequently used are official websites, participation in educational fairs, social media, and the StudyinRomania platform. In a recent overview of the websites of 47 Romanian public universities, only 79% have their websites in English. Some of the websites are translated into French or German, as well, but this percentage shows the level of interest that universities have for international students (Fit 2020).

Concerning social media platforms, Facebook is the most widely used. The frequency of communication and promotion shows that 16 of the studied universities have between 2 and 10 posts a month, nine of the universities up to 20 posts per month, 14 universities up to 40 posts per month, and the seven most active universities have over 40 posts, some reaching up to 100 posts per month (Fit 2020).

Taking part in university fairs (nationally and internationally) has been a key activity in promoting their educational offer. During the past decade, the presence of Romanian universities in international fairs has been treated more holistically, but starting with 2017, under the umbrella of StudyinRomania, universities have started to participate in international promotional events. The most important international fairs include the European Association for International Education (EAIE) Conference and Expo (2017–2019) and NAFSA 2019. These seem to be considered the most popular international conferences/fairs by universities in terms of learning and networking. Universities also took part in several fairs in regions and countries aiming

for student recruitment (Vietnam, Dubai, Morocco, Ukraine, Turkmenistan, Tunisia, etc.). Romanian universities also participated in fairs dedicated to attracting Romanian students, such as the Romanian International University Fair (RIUF) organized in Romania. Additionally, universities organize yearly open doors type events, summer universities,⁶ and regional caravans to promote their educational offer. Looking at the countries where Romanian universities participated in international fairs, we found a correlation between these and the countries of origin for international students in 2019/2020. Tunisia, Morocco, Turkmenistan and Ukraine are in the top 15 countries from which almost 83% of the international students originate from. In 2019/2020, 7% of the non-EU students enrolled were from Tunisia (slightly decreasing compared to the previous year), 10% from Morocco (increasing from 8%), 5% from Ukraine (increasing from 3%), and 2% from Turkmenistan (increasing from 1%) (Haj et al. 2020a).

3.2 *StudyinRomania Portal (www.studyinromania.gov.ro)—The Main National Marketing Tool*

The StudyinRomania portal represents one of the most important tools to promote Romanian higher education to an international audience. The portal offers the most complete set of information regarding the study program offer of the Romanian universities. Its content is available in English and gives the visitor the opportunity to research in depth the educational offer in Romania. An analytical focus was performed using Google Analytics⁷ on four indicators: website users, geographical locations of visitors, website access devices, demographic details about visitors.

Almost 25% of website users are from Romania, although some of these visitors could have been foreign nationals in Romania at that time. Visitors from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Morocco, or India have the longest average duration of visit sessions. This finding fits well with the countries from where a significant number of international students originate. The devices used to access the website show an almost 50–50% split between mobile and desktop usage, somehow normal for all internet usage of Romanian websites. In terms of demographics, most users are 25–34 years old, with 58% male visitors (Fit et al. 2021).

The promotion video launched in May 2021 had a clear call to action to visit www.studyinromania.gov.ro. Compared with the pre-pandemic period (April–May 2019), the impact of the video is visible in almost all website indicators (e.g. increase

⁶Another instrument that has been more and more popular in recent years is the summer university programs. These events take place in summertime and are organized by universities together with student organizations. High school students are invited to experience the full-time student life during two weeks in the university's campus. They register for a specific faculty, take part in classes and even take part in exams.

⁷Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the analyzed period was October – December 2019.

in the number of users, returning visitors, etc.), but also in the demographics of the visitors (e.g. the number of 18–24 age users has increased alongside with the number of female visitors). Fit et al. (2021)

4 The Main Strengths of the Romanian Higher Education to Better Attract International Students

4.1 SWOT Analysis of the Romanian Higher Education System

The 2021 SWOT analysis, performed in the framework of a national project, has revealed key aspects that are relevant both for the calibration of institutional objectives and for national public policy proposal regarding the internationalization process. Furthermore, this SWOT analysis focuses on the particularities of Romania as an attractive study destination for international students.

Strengths

Among the strengths identified, one notes the collaborative programs with European universities (double degree programs), the number of education programs in English/other foreign languages, and student services (accommodation, canteens-restaurants, and sports facilities). Compared to the 2015 analysis (Egron-Polak et al. 2015), the same elements stand out, with a significant increase in the number of double degree programs with European universities, which could be correlated with the significant efforts in terms of promoting mobility together with learning events made by ANPCDEFP together with the Erasmus+ funds available these past years as well. For some universities, the increase could also be correlated with the presence of the institutions at EAIE conferences and other international fairs, which are important learning vehicles and an open door to networking and collaboration with other institutions. Overall, 30% have collaborative programs with European universities (double degree programs). The total number of double degree programs in the Romanian universities is 82, with 26 (32%) bachelor programs, 55 (67%) master programs, and 1 (1%) at the Ph.D. level (see Table 1).

67% of the total double degree programs are developed by two universities: one in Bucharest and one in Cluj-Napoca.

In terms of programs taught in foreign languages, the English language programs are the most dominant, followed by programs in Hungarian, French, and German.

Student services are an important strength, focusing on accommodation, canteens, and sports facilities. All 47 Romanian public universities offer accommodation in student campuses, which could be an important competitive advantage for international students. In Romania, students have 50% discount for public transportation (including train), 75% discount for museums and cultural institutions, free medical services, and free counseling and orientation services. All these facilities apply to the international students (up to 26 years) that study in Romania.

Table 1 Collaborative programs with European universities (double degree) and study programs in foreign languages (English, French, German, Hungarian)

University profile	No of universities by profile	No of study programs (Ba, Ma) in foreign languages (English, French, German, Hungarian)	No of universities with double degree programs/ double degree programs reported at profile universities	No of partner universities for all double degree programs
Science, socio-humanities & economics	6	308	6/26	21
Technical	6	105	5/51	25
Comprehensive	16	132	2/3	7
Architecture, arts and sports	9	30	1/2	2
Agronomic veterinary	4	22	0	0
Medical	6	30	0	0

Source Universities' websites & RMU 2019/2020, data aggregated by the authors

Furthermore, the cost of living in Romania is accessible compared to other European countries. The average cost of living in Romanian cities is approximately 643 EUR/month, according to numbeo.com. For the whole academic year, the average cost of living can reach 5,790 EUR (numbeo.com n.d.).

The accessible study fees for international students is another strength resulting from the national SWOT analysis, a strength mentioned in the previous IEMU study in 2015 (Egron-Polak et al. 2015). In fact, fees in Romania are low in comparison with other states. For instance, the fees for non-EU students (in the academic year 2019/2020) range between 2,600 and 5,500 EUR for an academic year, with the biggest fees for medical universities, followed by architecture, arts and sports universities, agronomy and veterinary universities, comprehensive universities, technical universities, and science, socio-humanities and economics universities.

Another strength is the high-speed Internet connection, Romanian being one of the top ten countries with the highest Internet speed connection—100 Mbps (Netograf.ro n.d.). According to a study made by the Digital Economy and Society Index Report (DESI) in 2020, Romania is in the 9th place at the EU level.

Last but not least, the collaboration with stakeholders (public and private companies) is also a strength and an opportunity for students to find job offers and internships. 37 out of the 47 public universities (79%) have partnerships with public or private companies based on research projects, events and conferences, or job fairs. Medical universities have mainly partnerships with hospitals and institutions, while for the architecture, arts, and sports universities, the partners are usually the sponsors. Almost all universities provide career opportunities for students and some universities have also developed job portals for students. The partnership between

the academic and professional areas can lead further to collaboration between universities and companies, which might be an important competitive advantage for Romania, especially if we look at the research reputation.

Weaknesses

Romania does not yet have a national online admission system, and this is both a weakness and an opportunity. If we take into account the fact that in 2015, online admission was possible only for a few universities, while in 2020 the number of universities that have an online admission system has grown considerably, this means that in the future, this weakness can turn into a strength. The growth of universities that now have an online admission system can be explained by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the digitalization of education and a streamlining of bureaucratic procedures following the restrictions of circulation.

Although Romania is among the top English-speaking countries according to Education First (2019), the level of English proficiency for academic staff that teaches in Romanian universities is still low. The 2015 analysis proved that there is a need to develop the linguistic competence of academic staff (Egron-Polak et al. 2015, p. 39), but the authors have no recent information gathered to analyze the evolution since.

Incoming and outgoing mobility for students and academic staff is another weak point since Romania is far from achieving the objective of 20% student mobility by 2020 (Deaconu and Haj 2020, p. 42). Overall, in the academic year 2018–2019, twice as many students went to study abroad compared to international students deciding to study in Romanian universities (Haj et al. 2020b, p. 4).

The national and international research grants are also a weak point since Romania has only a 2.6% success rate in the European Research Council (ERC) projects, financed from Horizon 2020 budget (Euractiv 2019). A possible explanation for this is the total number of teaching hours, which implies that the budget and time allocated for research are lower. Romania is a modest innovator in research, with more than 50% below the European average, and on the next to last place in the European Union, followed by Bulgaria (Hollanders et al., 2020).

Among the weaknesses is the public communication of universities in foreign languages, especially if we look at the university websites, official social media pages (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) in English or other international circulation languages.

Opportunities

The SWOT analysis shows five major opportunities for Romanian universities: alumni network, participation in European/global initiatives, participation at international educational fairs, participation in international rankings, and the insertion of graduates on the labor market.

The alumni community is an important image vector for the country brand, as well as for the universities' brand. 90% of universities have an alumni section on their website, and 66% have a LinkedIn dedicated page for alumni. Universities of Science, humanities, and economic profile have the most followers and alumni on LinkedIn, thus contributing to increased institutional visibility. The alumni network

can be a potential source for financing research projects and for launching a national alumni community, reuniting graduates from different backgrounds, and together promote the Romanian HE brand.

The 34% increase in the number of international students since 2014/2015 impacts the diversity in the classroom and, in general, improves internationalization at home.

Participation in European or global initiatives is a potential opportunity, with 19 surveyed universities part of the European University Association (EUA), eight part of the International Association of Universities (IAU), with almost half of them part of at least one of these global initiatives, and 34 part of the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie/Francophonie University Agency (AUF) as a full member, associate or observer. Recently, ten universities also joined the European University Initiative (EUI).

Participation in international educational associations and international fairs can help promote universities and increase their international partnerships.

Therefore, also due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Romanian universities too have migrated to e-learning platforms, and now the websites are geared towards actively engaging learning in the educational process, leaving behind their previous almost exclusive informative role. This constitutes a real opportunity for students, both international and domestic.

Threats

Legislation and excessive bureaucratization of internationalization is still a threat, without significant changes from the 2015 analysis (Egron-Polak et al. 2015), potentially impacting the student and staff recruitment process, as well as financial management. The lack of collaboration between ministries/institutions is also a threat, with a direct impact on admission of international students.

“The new demographic context has already generated a decrease of the students’ number, which will continue if the demographic profile of the ones who enroll in tertiary education stays the same” (Santa and Fierăscu 2020, p. 5). The study emphasizes that discrepancies between the regions and the development areas are concentrated around big university cities such as Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara, and Iasi.

Other threats could be the economic context (inflation, the increase in prices), and the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the ongoing physical mobility (considering the travel limitations).

Finally, yet importantly, the brain drain phenomenon negatively influences the migration of talents, especially the migration of skilled workforce outside Romania, leading to an imbalance between the incoming and outgoing workforce in medicine. In the medical area, Romania has one of the highest migration rates from the last two decades, compared to other countries from Eastern Europe (Botezat and Moraru 2020). This also can influence the attraction and retention of international students by seeing the imbalance between those who choose to work in Romania and those who choose to leave.

The cost-benefit analysis in the Romanian universities

The cost-benefit analysis is a very useful instrument in understanding the socio-economic impact of internationalization, in particular the financial contribution of international students.

The authors looked at the international students that come to study in Romania for a full cycle at Bachelor's degree. The cost-benefit analysis was based on the following indicators calculated only at the Bachelor level: the number of international students (in the 2019/2020 academic year), the study fees at Bachelor's degree for international students from non-EU countries (without taking into account the students from Republic of Moldova, since most of them are beneficiaries of state subsidies) and the average cost of living in Romania for international students (calculated for UE/SEE students, non-EU students and the Republic of Moldova students).

The results of the cost-benefit analysis show that the average study fees for the Bachelor's degree for non-EU students is between 2,600 and 5,500 EUR per academic year. The highest study fees are at medical universities, followed by architecture, arts and sports universities, agronomy universities, veterinary universities, comprehensive universities, technical universities, and science, socio-humanist, and economics universities. The income from study fees from non-EU students is around 28 million EUR for one study year at Bachelor. The highest income was observed at medical universities because 10% of their total student population is comprised of international students coming from non-EU countries, and the study fees are higher compared to other types of universities.

The average cost of living in university cities is approximately 643 EUR/month, according to numbeo.com. For the whole academic year, the medium cost of living for 9 study months can reach 5,790 EUR (numbeo.com, n.d.). The financial benefit for the Bachelor level reaches around 165 million euro, taking into account both the cost of living (for all international undergraduate students: EU/EEA, non-EU, including Romanian ethnics) and tuition fees (exclusively for students from non-EU countries) for one academic year, which represents 2.62% out of the education budget in 2019 and around 0.08% of the 2019 GDP (Fit, et al. 2021).

4.2 The Competitive Advantage of Romania

The competitive advantage of Romania is linked to the country's image on the international stage. In the era of globalization, nations are perceived as brands, sometimes even commercial brands. Therefore, the brand of a nation has six fundamental dimensions: tourism, export, diplomacy, investments and immigration, culture and heritage, people (Anholt 2007). This model measures the power of a country brand and constitutes a public opinion barometer (Cheregi 2018, p. 53). According to the Future Brand Index 2020 rank, Romania is in the 62nd place out of 75 countries (Future Brand 2020). Countries such as Japan, Switzerland, and Norway are in the first places, while Iraq is in the last place.

In terms of digital competitiveness at a global level, Romania is in the 49th place out of 63 countries (IMD World Competitiveness Centre 2020, p. 18). In a study published in 2020, Cheregi and Bârgăoanu prove that Romania is framed in the media as "a pole for Artificial Intelligence worldwide", a European destination for tech investors, an IT outsourcing destination with one of the best Broadband Internet speed, science-savvy workforce, and women involved in scientific research (Cheregi and Bârgăoanu 2020, p. 300). Technology is an important competitive advantage, including for the attraction of international students. Furthermore, technology is also a *soft power* instrument linked to the cultural, social, and public policy dimensions (Cheregi and Bârgăoanu 2020, p. 296). And a key role in Romania's competitiveness is given by public diplomacy and international relations, both having an impact on internationalization as well.

In 2020, Romania and Bucharest are situated approximately at the middle of the GTCI ranking (Lavin and Monteiro 2020). Even though Romania has increased its purchasing power and the cost of living, the competitiveness of Romania and Bucharest to attract talents is reduced, compared to other EU countries or North America. As for the attraction level, Romania is surpassed by Poland, but it is in front of Turkey. As for Bucharest's level of attraction, the city is surpassed by Warsaw, but in front of Ankara.

The fact that Romania is part of the European Union increases its competitive advantage as well. For many foreign citizens (outside the EU), the opportunity to spend a limited time in Romania and then relocate to a Western state is an option often considered. Compared to neighboring countries, Bucharest is better situated from a competitive point of view, while Romania has a lower position if we take into account the competitive advantage.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Starting from the two main research questions—*How do universities use media and other mechanisms to promote their educational offer globally?* and *Which are the main strengths allowing Romanian higher education to better attract international students?*—this section of the article outlines the main recommendations for better using higher education marketing in order to achieve the national and institutional goals set for higher education.

In light of the first research question, the media & other mechanisms' mix (official websites, participation in educational fairs, social media, and the StudyinRomania platform) used by Romanian universities for marketing activities is diverse but highly disproportioned in terms of importance attributed by the universities. The official website is the most frequently used mechanism, although not all universities have proper English versions of their websites. Facebook is the most widely used social media platform, and participation at national and international educational fairs has made a shift from a holistic to a more strategic participation, including the presence of the Romanian universities under the StudyinRomania brand. The constant presence

of some universities at the EAIE annual conferences might be due to their need for a better learning about internationalization, marketing and also the need for opening to new collaborations by exploring networking.

As well, it is important to mention there is a correlation between the international fairs where Romanian universities participated and the countries of origin for international students in the 2019/2020 academic year. The data regarding international students shows an increasing trend of participation at studies in Romania from countries where these international fairs were held (Morocco, Tunisia, Ukraine, and Turkmenistan). The StudyinRomania platform is also one of the mechanisms used to promote their educational offer globally, and findings show a good connection between the visitors that have the longest average duration of visit sessions on the website with countries from where a significant number of international students originate. Very few universities make use of all the tools available for promoting their educational offers. These tools are available to all universities and are similar around the world. The reasons for not using all of them might have to do with financial resources, marketing expertise, and strategic approach.

We think that universities should link their objectives to clear marketing goals. This can be done at the beginning of each financial exercise or start of the academic year. Also, for a long-term impact, universities should invest in managing their social media platforms with community managers. With quick-term response time and constant web content provision, universities could gain faithful followers and good online ratings.

As a national online initiative to attract students from abroad (but not only), the StudyinRomania platform has tremendous potential. Now, it serves as an information and awareness tool. The analytical data of the website indicate opportunities to attract students interested in the Romanian educational offer. In the future, the website platform could be a “one-stop-shop”. The brand authority and visibility of the platform offer the opportunity for adding new functionalities, such as centralized online application modules for students. In addition, the practice of recurrent media content together with the promotion video launched in 2021 and promoted in social media in line with a comprehensive communication strategy should be continued, as it proved to be impactful in the number and quality of the website’s users.

As previously mentioned, Romanian universities have the means to promote themselves similar to their international peers. If one looks at the way universities promote themselves/communicate, it is clear that a small number of universities outsource these needs to professional advertising and marketing agencies. Most of them prefer to keep the process “inside” and do not follow multi-annual marketing objectives. One example in this sense is that the student leads attracted at university fairs are not included in follow-up processes.

In this regard, universities should coordinate their strategic objectives with marketing goals. Clear annual Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) should be established, measured, and followed through together with a communication package that should include unique selling points. Based on them, specialists (internal or external from dedicated agencies) can draw strategies and implement them.

Starting from the findings based on the second question—Which are the main strengths allowing the Romanian higher education to better attract international students?—a few conclusions and recommendations are outlined in what follows.

The reduced cost of living, the moderated/affordable study fees, the services and facilities available for students, the available programs in foreign languages and double degree programs, the high-speed broadband Internet connection, and the lack of a *numerus clausus* in some specific universities are among the most visible advantages for promoting the Romanian higher education. As a study destination, Romania is more attractive than Turkey or other neighboring countries but less attractive than countries from Central Europe. The political stability, the process of digitalization and bureaucratization help in differentiating Romania on the global stage, compared to other Balkan countries or to the Middle East.

Romania is an attractive destination for international students and can become more appealing if the common efforts on educational marketing and communication will be part of the universities' strategic approach and a national strategy. Romania still does not have a national strategy for internationalization neither a national marketing strategy, so there is a need for a unitary and comprehensive approach to develop public policies for the internationalization of education.

Other positive reasons of which universities should take advantage of in their efforts to increase internationalization and while promoting their educational offer are the participation in European and global initiatives, such as EUA, IAU, AUF, the EUI, along with the presence of Romanian universities in international rankings such as THE and QS. Furthermore, the Alumni community has an important role as brand ambassador in promoting both the university and Romania's brand and in attracting international students. Alumni networks might be, as well, an important source for financing research projects. The collaboration with different stakeholders (private, NGOs, Governmental) is another opportunity for attracting and integrating international students by offering them career perspectives. The new business rate is also an important vector for attracting international students, which could further develop their career in Romania, especially if we look at the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Romania, open to partnerships between universities, business incubators and hubs.

Nevertheless, the attractiveness of Romania depends on a joint effort on how the Romanian higher education is promoted by each university separately, by all universities under the StudyinRomania umbrella, and by the Romanian state through the institutions at the national level. In addition, public policies that lead to the increase of the population income, the improvement of the medical system, the demographic increase through sustainable measures, and supporting entrepreneurial initiatives would improve Romania's attractiveness. Furthermore, for a higher retention of international students in Romania, more public policies supporting the graduates to stay in Romania together with promoting these initiatives should be taken into consideration.

The research reputation and the success rate of national and international research grants in Romania compared to other EU countries is weak. As a recommendation, Romania's research reputation could improve through strategic partnerships with universities that perform in a specific domain. Furthermore, strategic academic partnerships should be seen as an opportunity to increase the number of double degree programs and consolidate of research and development.

Finally, in order to increase the development of quality study programs in foreign languages, a recommendation would be to prioritize the development on clear objectives for higher education promotion. Defining a target international student (for instance, students that speak French, the focus should be on developing academic programs in French) while also working to improve language skills of academic staff and developing double and joint degrees relevant for the desired target student.

Notes

**Comprehensive universities have programs in fundamental fields (DFI) such as Mathematics and natural sciences, Sports science and physical education, Biology and biomedical science, engineering sciences, social sciences, humanities and arts. Science, Socio-humanities & Economics universities have programs mainly in fundamental fields (DFI) such as Social sciences, humanities and arts. Furthermore, some have programs in DFI areas such as Mathematics and natural sciences, Sports science and physical education, Biology and biomedical sciences, and engineering sciences.*

Architecture, arts and sports universities have programs in fundamental fields (DFI) such as Sports science and physical education, humanities and arts.

Technical universities have programs mainly in fundamental fields (DFI) such as Engineering sciences, and Mathematics and natural sciences. A part of universities from this field have programs also in social sciences, humanities and arts, and biology and biomedical sciences.

Medical universities have programs especially in fundamental fields (DFI) such as Biology and biomedical sciences and engineering sciences.

Agronomy universities have programs in fundamental fields (DFI) such as Biology and biomedical sciences and engineering sciences.

***Detailed information on the objectives and results of IDF competitions can be found in the analysis developed within the project Quality in higher education: internationalization and databases for the development of Romanian education, sub-activity A4.3—Carrying out studies and analyses on financing higher education from a perspective type economics of education for substantiating and optimizing the proposals for financing higher education in Romania, in order to ensure the quality of SIS.*

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