

# *Integrated Strategic Approach for Improving the Quality of the International Master Programs*

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**Abstract:** *Globalisation is influencing the internationalization of the education process all over the world. There are a series of factors that influence education internationalisation. Part of them are explained in the content of this paper together with a new integrated strategic approach for improving the quality of an international master program. The new approach was developed by the author based on an empirical research and can be adapted to other internationalised master programs in order to improve their quality, efficiency and competitiveness.*

**Keywords:** *strategy, education, quality, master degree, program, internationalisation.*

**JEL:** *I23; I25; M16.*

## **Introduction**

Improvement of the quality and relevance of internationalised master education is a fundamental objective, derived from the strategy of implementing changes as stated by the Bologna process, from which it's being ensured a common framework over higher education in Europe. Thus, making this process operational in nature, commitments for fundamental changes become mandatory in multiple areas, which in turn are interconnected. It is necessary a step by step approach of this process of transformation and thus, it should begin with formulating of a clear vision followed up by the mission of each national education system. Next, fundamental objectives and strategic options need to be defined by the universities top management, alongside a modus operandi and the required resources in order to develop their own capability for delivering high-end international research programmes with a broad acknowledgement from similar European institutions.

Once the strategy coordinates are settled by management at educational system level and by deduction for each university, the next step would be to incorporate this coordinates that are expected to succeed by offering high-end specialised master programmes in accordance with the requirements of the national, regional and global markets.

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Given this broad context, marked by a series of transformations at the educational macro and micro-system level, it becomes imperative developing and implementing of such educational quality process assurance methodologies. It can be able of integrating adequate instruments not solely for evaluating the degree of fulfilment over European standards, but also for the purpose of designing and developing a high quality educational process.

In order to tackle this broad and complex process it would deem necessary to chose a bottom-up approach. Such approach would promote integration of these internationalised master programme graduates onto the labour market and would support the endeavour of repositioning European higher education on the global scale.

This paper contains a strategic approach which in turn could be personalised for each internationalised master programme from Romania and abroad in order to assist in a constant reshaping, while maintaining economic efficiency, quality and competitiveness at European and global level.

### **1. Literature review**

With regards to the concept of internationalisation, generally speaking, there are various acceptations. Among these we need to stress out those proposed by OECD in 2008, in which a clear distinction between internationalisation of higher education and globalisation is being done, stating that the two terms are being wrongfully associated as equivalents in order to designate cross-border activities in higher education, activities which in one form or another surpass national borders. Still, between these two concepts exists a specific relationship, distinguished by the fact that globalisation implies certain uniformity whilst internationalisation set between boundaries of academia, reaches out to compensate by stating out individualised characteristics of a given cultural, political, social and economic space.

According to OECD, higher education internationalisation is „an aggregate of processes whose combined effect, be that planned or not, is to ensure the international dimension of higher education experiences in similar universities and educational institutions”.

According to the UNESCO, higher education internationalization integrates „*all types and ways to supply higher education programmes, sets of courses or educational services (including distance education) in which students reside in another country than the one in which the institution which grants the qualification or diploma is being settled*”.

One of the best suited definitions over the content of internationalisation in higher education systems belongs to Jane Knight. She explains internationalisation „as an integration process of the international, intercultural or global dimension onto the objective, mission and supply of post secondary education” (Knight, 2003). This acceptation approaches internationalisation „as a dynamic process and

not a set of isolated activities and it refers to the basic functions of a higher education institution: teaching, researching and the overall services brought to society” (Knight, 2003).

In special literature, we can identify other key words that define higher education internationalisation such for example, that of „cross-border education” and *transnational education* (Kritz, 2006). There are a series of factors that influence education internationalisation. In special literature, we identify opinions of Aigner and Scott (1992). They suggest that there are three major motivations for internationalising higher education: interest for international security, maintaining economic competitiveness and intercultural acceptance among nations. Authors state that such motives are not absolute or mutual. Also they vary up to a great extent in content and features. Scott (1992) identifies seven imperatives of global education: economic competitiveness, natural environment interdependencies, local communities ethnic and religious diversity, the known fact that more and more people work for foreign companies, international trade influence over small sized businesses, the fact that graduates will work amongst groups with various ethnic and racial features, national security and peaceful relations among nations.

There are numerous approaches regarding organisational changes process. The point of view from which this paper approaches the adaptation process of internationalised master programmes is based on an „*action research*”, which is a *systematic research process* (Ghuri and Gronhaug, 2010). According to the authors, it has developed a logical relation among implicated features in the process for uncovering what needs to be changed, why and how would be best to ensue the whole process.

The complexity and diversity of involved variables in the educational process and the plurality of external environment factors of higher education unit in which a internationalised master programme is being organised, determines us to appreciate as proper *the transdisciplinary approach over the research process*. As such, elements related to educational management mix with variables and external factors of economic tendencies, leading to economic efficiency and quality of the education process among universities were such internationalised master programmes are being conducted.

According to Gibbons (1994) approach, the finality of a applicative research process, that seeks out improvement over quality parameters for a internationalised master programme, can be exclusively theoretical or practical in nature. The theoretic size is given shape by mainly academic results, serving especially for field specialists, and the practical size is of some use to universities management teams and to those who run internationalised master programmes, to whom it offers actionable solutions for solving problems in quality of educational process.

*The new strategic approach*, which I propose in this paper, *combines elements of both theoretic and applicative research* and translates them inside the higher education unit in order to help the latter in solving its problems along the management process related to a given internationalised master programme.

This approach starts from the idea that, amongst theoreticians and practitioners there should be a strong bound on the course of the research process (Starkey and Madan, 2001). The utility of such collaboration is given credits by both sides, theoreticians can appreciate that they can obtain the validation of their own models and theories and practitioners can put the new models to good use, offering to the theoreticians a place of their own inside the applicative research team.

Research that is being conducted on the plain of management process from education units must not offer only advanced knowledge, theories, models, concepts, approaches, but more than that it must serve for solving practical problems that the programme management needs to tackle.

Reality shows us that there is a clear distance amongst those two groups (Tranfield and Denyer, 2004). In order to take action for diminishing such differences, Hodgkinson (Hodgkinson, 2001) elaborated the *essential differences matrix*. Two years later, Van De ven and Johnson (2006) analysed these discrepancies and identified *reasons for why they exist*. According to the study, main causes identified are: difficulties in knowledge transfer, meaning that practitioners have a hard time understanding the content of theoretical approaches; a contradictory perception over the relation between theory and practice; implementing process particularities.

All these aspects will be taken into consideration in projecting the strategic model, hence from our point of view *only in mixed teams, theoreticians and practitioners can bring added value* to the management process of a certain internationalised master programme given a certain national, European and global context that is hard influenced by changes on both national and global scale labour markets.

In our acceptance „the engine of organisational changes” needs to be applicative research, as for the new strategic model of approaching educational process is the logical scheme of the management process, which in turn could set the path to a significant improvement in a internationalised master programme.

By reporting such a process to practices conducted in other European internationalised master programmes held by universities all over Europe and beyond, we notice a series of similarities and differences. Such relevant examples of features that significantly alter the quality of such programme and that can be kept under consideration even in the process of transforming internationalised master programmes held by universities in Romania are being presented below:

- recruitment and selection of *high standard candidates*. Such example is given by Pennsylvania State University’s recruitment procedure, which given the circumstances of a hostile demographic environment and a strong competition held on the American market, it continued to foster the quality of its own programmes, just because it started to undertaken a top-notch selection of the best candidates for its internationalised master programmes;

- granting *attractive motivational packages* for its best candidates, which in turn generates a higher level of commitment in the forming process and by default, reaching higher quality standards in its educational process;
- *international accreditation* of its own programmes, as in the case of Helsinki School of Economics which stands in the first 40% universities in the world and has numerous certifications and registrations on the platforms ment for educational quality improvement: AACSB; AMBA; EQUIS and so on;
- *high levels of cooperation* amongst professors and student and last but not least, long-lasting sustainable partnerships for internationalised master programmes, as can be noticed in universities from Austria, Germany and UK;
- *creativity and innovation* strongly represented alongside the entire educational process, as can be noticed in Universite de Grenoble from France;
- *implementing a evolved mentoring system*, which in turn can facilitate cooperation among master students and professors alike, on the course of the entire programme, as can be seen at Yale University from USA;
- *inveiglement of the best professors* in the educational process, which will not only share knowledge, but more then that – they will directly participate in forming master students practical abilities and in doing so, helping them to grasp and apply theoretical notions, as can be noticed in the case of George Washington University from USA, Harvard University or Cambridge University.

From these examples we can retain that in worlds biggest and best universities the improvement of master programmes quality is an objective, but more then that – *a constant challenge for the universities top management*, which in turn needs to constant reinvent itself in order to give a proper answer for labour markets ever-growing expectations from graduates.

## **2. Empirical study over internationalised master programmes**

The constant concern shown by Romania’s universities top management for delivering high-quality internationalised master programmes determined us to reach out for this subject and to approach it *transdisciplinary, following a given applicative research methodology*.

### **2.1 Studies objectives**

The main pursued objectives are:

- to identify main problems of certain internationalised master programmes, as they are being perceived by both *education suppliers and its beneficiaries*;

- to propose a flexible and integrated strategic approach over internationalised master programmes, which in turn to support universities management in general and also that of internationalised master programmes, to develop and accomplish same quality and viability standards as can be seen in most of Europe's top-notch universities.

### ***2.2 Presentation of the selected master programmes and the involved sample***

In the analysing process there were subjected *two internationalised master programmes*, both on the field of administrative sciences, held by Faculty of Management and by Faculty of Administration and Public Management of Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The exact title of these is: Master in public administration and European studies held with the support of Romanian-Bulgarian Inter-university European Centre in partnership with Ruse's University and the HRK of Germany, which ended two years ago and also the master programme „Economic and Social Administration” based on a partnership between Bucharest University of Economic Studies and Université Sciences Sociales from Toulouse, France.

Subjects group was given by 33 people organised in three subgroups: the first was formed by 10 professors and members of the internationalised master programmes management; the second comprised of 20 graduates of internationalised master programmes from Germany – Freiburg University, Maastricht University of Netherland and Leuven University from Belgium.

### ***2.3 Analysis matrix and evaluation matrix of the quality in a internationalised master programme***

The analysis process includes an analysis matrix with a series of parameters, structured on two components: one associated with programmes management and the other associated with internationalised master programme implementation.

The instruments were designated specially to come to our aid in the analysis process. These are two matrices, *the operational parameters matrix*, recommended for process analysis and *the quality evaluation indicators matrix of a given programme*, recommended for measuring and evaluating quality of certain internationalised master programmes. In the design process required for these two matrices members of both first and the second subgroup were consulted and there were kept under consideration best practices identified in other foreign universities.

Part of the integrated elements into the matrix resulted out of author's own reflection as she was directly involved for three years in the first of the above mentioned internationalised master programmes.

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In table no. 1 we see the analysis matrix, or the analysis specific parameters matrix, which in turn contains a few of the most important characterizing parameters for the concern in which master programmes are perceived by the three subgroups.

**Table 1. Panel of operational parameters needed in the analysis  
of the internationalised master programme**

Selective analysis parameters of the internationalised master programme	Intensity of perception manifested in regards to the internationalised master programme on a scale from 1-5 (1-minimum)				
Applicative nature					
Scientific level					
Academic body professionalism					
Facility of labour market integration					
Professors involvement degree in the educational process					
Teaching methods					
Participative educational process					
Coherence of the curricula					
Studies finality					
Programme efficiency					

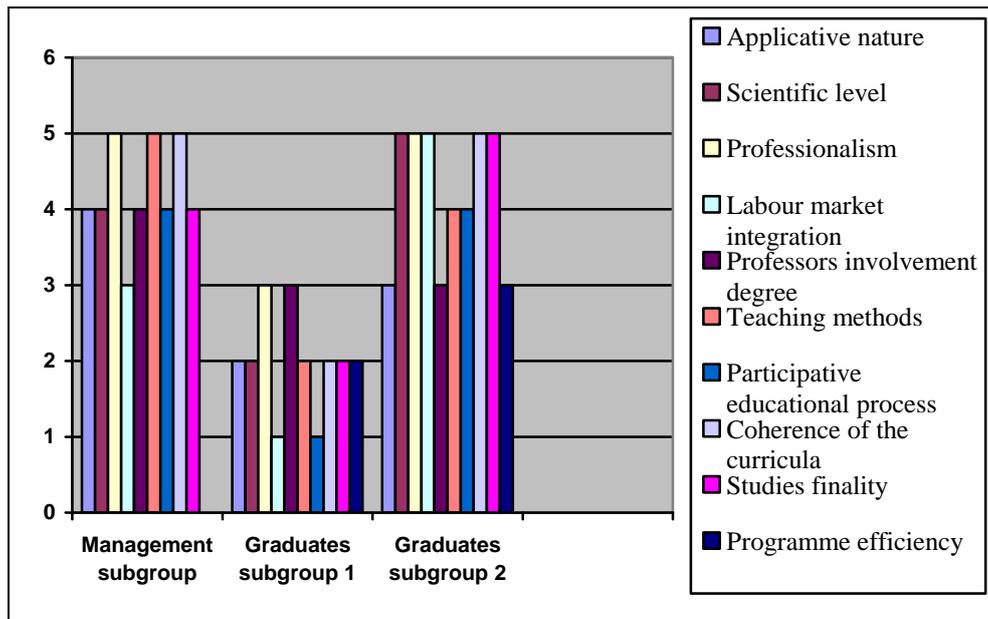
*Source: the author*

In figure 1 subjects appreciations are being presented, as they resulted from centralising expressed individual responses by completion from each subgroup of the operational parameters matrix presented above.

Operational parameters matrix indicates in terms of value, important differences between subjects perception from the three subject categories and provides a clear sight over the most problematic areas, which in turn would require to form applicative research subjects with specific analyzes for determining causes and identifying ways to adjust them.

The fact that the study brought under consideration opinions as they are expressed by master graduates from other countries, shows us quality discrepancies in the internationalised master programmes from Romania and can form the reporting base in relation with standards of similar programmes. Its easy to spot out the above average satisfaction degree of the entire parameters base in the case of subgroup 2, that of foreign graduates and the bellow average opinions expressed by Romanian graduates of the analysed programmes, subgroup 2. The graphic shows major perceived differences over programmes quality between representatives of programme management and their beneficiaries.

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**Figure 1. Operational parameters analysis matrix**

*Source: the author*

A different situation can be noticed when we compare expressed opinions of foreign internationalised master programmes graduates with the management of Romania's internationalised master programmes. In this case the shown differences are negligible, as can be easily spotted in figure no.1. This similarity indicates the bias with which management subgroup tend to express in their analysis, fact that does not help in the changing process, but in turn generates a higher degree of tolerance in the face of a series of quality problems in the programmes they manage, all of course carry an overall negative impact for the programme and its beneficiaries.

### ***2.4 The selective evaluation indicators matrix of internationalised master programmes quality***

There are constant concerns for specialists when they look at *evaluation indicators for the degree of internationalisation in higher education*. An rather interesting approach published well over a decade ago belongs to OECD, which in turn suggests the following indicators:

- the percentage of foreign students in the total student number of the host country (received students);
- the structure of foreign students in a given country by provenance;

- the percentage of students that leave to study abroad from the total student number of the sending country (sent students);
- the structure of abroad students on designated countries;
- the number of foreign students that came from abroad, as a percentage from the total student count of another receiving country;
- net flows of student exchange between OECD countries (the difference between sent and received students).

Also, different internationalisation evaluation procedures can be used at institutional level. One workshop held in Berlin in 2008 on the subject „Benchmarking in European Higher Education” included presentations related to evaluation of internationalisation activity in given institutions. For example, Leipzig University uses two main indicators categories for tracing internationalisation activity: a) by motilities and b) by internationalisation activity. In the case of internationalisation by motilities, the indicators are as follow: number of student exchange contracts, as the number of students that leave to study abroad in such programmes; number of received foreign students by the host university on the basis of such programme – in such case we refer to received foreign students; international studies; courses held in foreign languages and number of received foreign professors (as visiting lecturers). In the case of evaluating the degree of internationalising the research activity we keep in mind: publications made abroad, abroad made PhDs, research projects realised by collaborating with foreign entities, research funds obtained from international sources. Sciences Political University of Paris makes use of similar indicators in appreciating its own activity internationalisation degree, on which it adds even more such:

- a) academic staff (international professors, the mobility of its staff, titular staff of foreign provenance, temporary sent abroad academic staff);
- b) research activity (international publications, the percentage of financial resources from abroad, staff participation on international networks, doctoral coordination in collaboration with foreign universities);
- c) used languages (admission criteria, used teaching languages, number of held courses in foreign languages as percentage in the whole programme);
- d) academic partnerships with foreign universities and strategic alliances; foreign deployed activities (off-shore);
- e) placing graduates in abroad jobs.

All of these are good examples of indicators used for evaluating the degree of internationalisation in higher education.

Following up from this general acceptations regarding internationalisation evaluation indicators, the approach proposed by this paper focuses on *quality evaluation indicators of a internationalised master programme*, as they can be seen in table 2.

Based upon operational parameters matrix and other parameters which in turn do not find themselves in the above matrix, we developed the *evaluation*

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*indicators matrix on the quality of a internationalised master programme*, which can form the base of formulating appreciations, comparisons and so on, related to the quality level of any internationalised master programme.

**Table 2. Evaluation indicators of the quality in a internationalised master programme**

<b>Crt. no.</b>	<b>Selective quality evaluation indicators of a internationalised master programme</b>
1.	Graduates integrating degree on the labour market
2.	International certifications number
3.	Information and documentation base
4.	Internships done in the field as a percentage
5.	Communications and information technologies percentage in the educational process
6.	Curricula's content degree of correlation
7.	Beneficiaries satisfaction degree
8.	International partnerships number and its sustainability
9.	Quality systems for constantly evaluating the educational process
10.	Programme's social and economic efficiency

*Source: the author*

Both the indicators system and the analysis matrix can be found in the content of strategic approach managerial model of a internationalised master programme.

### **3. Integrated strategic approach model of a internationalised master programme**

There are various approach models of universities internationalisation as can be seen bellow.

#### ***3.1 Reference models for universities internationalisation***

In special literature, we notice the models proposed by Warner (1992). He examines various assumptions and imperatives, which determine the internationalisation agenda of various universities and proposes three distinct models which capture various approaches regarding universities internationalisation. In *the competitive model*, introducing content of a international nature in the curricula and in other campus life elements is first and foremost a way to increase the competitiveness of the students, institution and the country itself on the global market. In *the liberal model* he stretches out that the primary goal of internationalisation is self-development in a constantly changing world and/or global education for human relations and citizenship.

*The social transforming model* aims to offer a better understanding over international and intercultural related problems on the matter of equity and justice, so that students can acquire instruments in actively contributing in social transformation.

According to Johnston and Edelstein (1993), the dominating argument for internationalising higher education is *to ensure the national economy competitiveness*. Authors consider this argument to be strong, but at the same time limited by the reality of ever growing gap between countries and companies, as their activity increasingly becomes international, multinational and global.

Knight and de Wit (1995) mention political and economic reasons (including arguments related with economic growth and future investments, labour market, external policy, financial stimuli and the demand for national education) and educational and cultural reasons (including individuals development, teaching and research international dimension, quality improvement).

### ***3.2 New model of integrated strategic approach for quality improvement in internationalised master programmes***

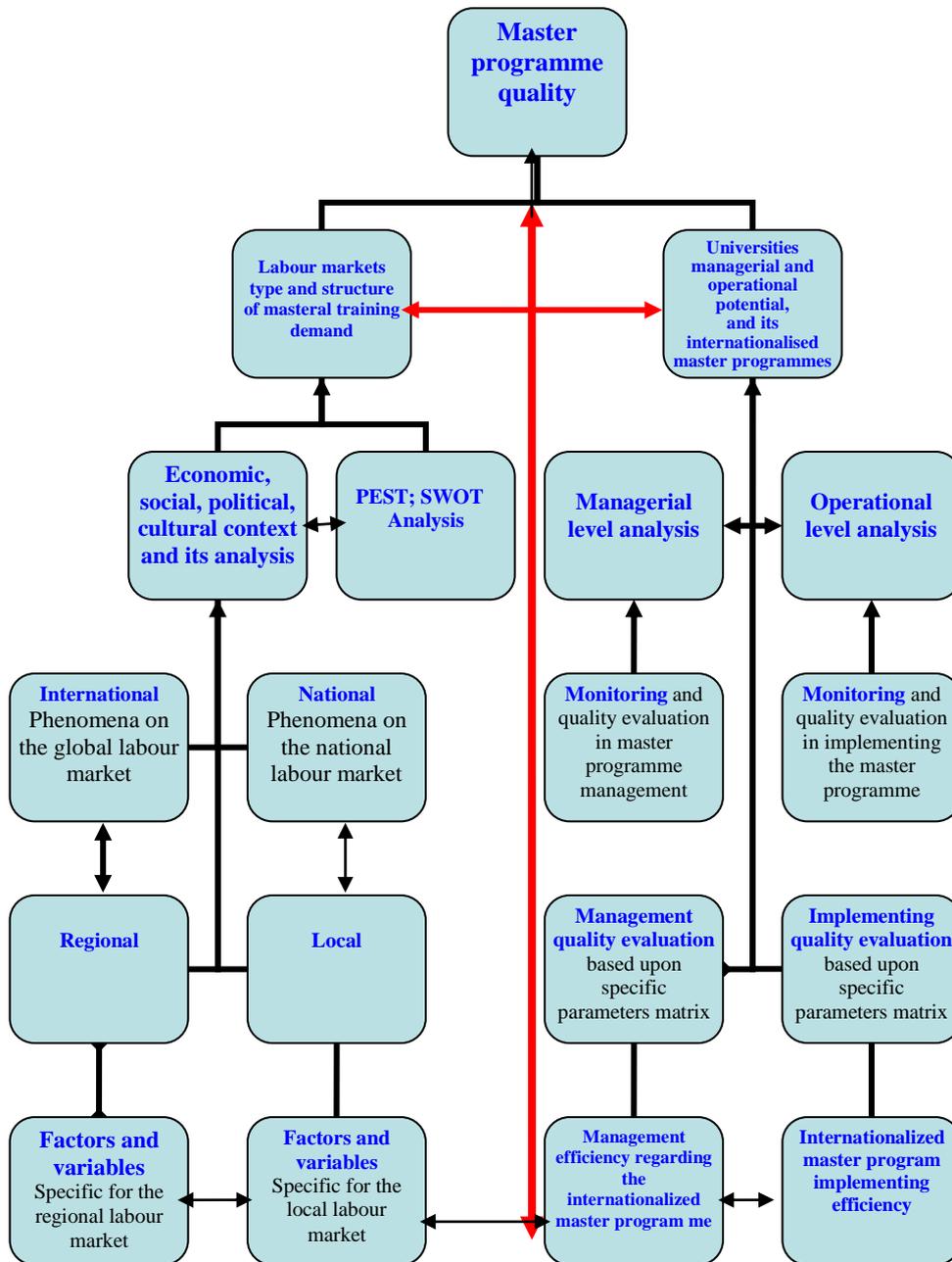
In our acceptance, higher education internationalisation process in general and of a master programme in particular is multidimensional in nature and strongly influenced by a broad spectrum of factors, that in turn require a *specific approach based upon applicative research studies of the type “action research”*. The process of improving quality in a internationalised master programme is dynamic in nature and brings together distinct elements integrated into a *holistic approach*. The novelty of the model is given by the following elements:

- open minded approach perspective over the master programme quality;
- its transdisciplinarity by integrating specific elements to distinct domains;
- execution and management process cyclicity;
- integrating efficiency and efficacy as direct components that relate with the educational process quality, in general and with that of internationalised master programme, in particular.

The approach starts from the premise that a university like any other *organization is an open system*, which needs to constantly report itself on the features given by the labour market, to offer a solicited training profile and to *generate a convenient equilibrium between process quality and the cost requires to supply educational services*. In figure 2 a overview image of the proposed model is shown, as a *strategic approach integrated model* of a internationalised master programme, that in turn facilitates and allows *educational process adjustment*, so that it can lead to its quality improvement.

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**Figure 2. Integrated strategic approach for improving the quality  
of the internationalised master programs**



Source: the author

The main *advantages* of the proposed approach are:

- transdisciplinary approach over the problem imposed over master programme quality management;
- grounding upon results given by an applicative research process;
- shaping processes according to demand and offer of internationalised master programmes;
- constant evaluation and monitoring for regulating management processes and those of programme implementation;
- simultaneous analysis over the extern environment and internal variables;
- correlation analysis between the cost of a internationalised master programme and its benefits towards the hosting university and for the labour market.

Such approach has its *limits* that are bound to form the base of a future thorough research. Among these we mention:

- the general nature of the approach;
- use of a mixt teams approach, at which experts from distinct fields to be involved and work together on the entire process of implementing the programmes: quality management, organizational management, educational marketing, organizational economy and so on;
- costly mechanism from the perspective of used time and deployed financial resources.

As can be noticed, the proposed strategic approach *stimulates the continuous process of organizational transformation* as it is required for identifying in due time deviations from the planned quality standards and facilitates by specific evaluating procedures, intervention at executive or managerial level, and as such, avoiding deviations transformation into problems with bigger impact over the internationalised master programme quality.

### **Conclusions**

Approaching internationalised master programmes quality management from another perspective then the classic its a necessity, as it has been demonstrated in this paper. Integrating applicative research as a method for identifying and analysing changes required in a management programme is essential and needs to become a common practice, which in turn can help programme management to offer training packages that will respond to specific needs at the high-end spectrum of quality standards.

Knowing in advance what needs to be changed and more then that, why such changes are required, but also what are the most adequate ways of intervention inside the structure of a master programme or in strategies of promoting it, can offer the premises for such programme to accomplish its goals. A

management that has the ability to anticipate such changes can greatly influence the final performances.

Realism, flexibility and a innovative-creative character in the management process of a given university, in general and that of a master programme, in particular, are markers that can influence at a great extent the *efficacy of a managerial team and economic and social efficiency of a master programme*.

The start of this century and millennium is marked by major changes in the way of managing universities alongside their programmes and only those who will know and properly understand these changes, will have the ability to adapt and develop a series of competitive edges on the national, regional and global market, that in turn is bound for a constant transformation.

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