CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING THE INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE TRIANGLE FOR INCREASING QUALITY OF STUDY PROGRAMMES

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Abstract
Studies on quality of higher education are more and more highlighting the importance of practical skills within the educational process. Thus, universities focusing on practice are highly valued by students, graduates and employers alike as compared to the theoretical ones and they do seem to be more attractive to future students, especially to international ones. But, how should academic institutions create and implement the Knowledge Triangle: for a specific topic/subject/field of study or for an entire programme of study? This is one issue presented in this paper. It addresses the benefits of creating and implementing the Knowledge Triangle within a study programme delivered by academic institutions and it clearly shows that quality is improved under such circumstances. The results generated have as a starting point the outputs of the European Erasmus+ funded project entitled "European Framework for Knowledge Triangle in Logistics (FRAMELOG)".

Another issue herein presented is the importance of building an international Knowledge Triangle as the national one does not respond, in our view, to universities' internationalization strategies. Nowadays, students of different origins come and go around the world with the purpose of receiving education and gaining international experience. Hence, when creating and implementing a national Knowledge Triangle, universities make all their students (domestic or international) familiar with national (even local) stakeholders, mainly reducing students the chance to increase skill development and employability. In this respect, this paper analyses if an international Knowledge Triangle would bring more value to study programmes and the implied educational process by presenting results generated from primary data gathered with different categories of stakeholders.

Keywords: Internationalization, Knowledge Triangle, FRAMELOG, employability, study programmes.

1 INTRODUCTION
Practical training contributes to the quality and relevance of education as well as continuous and incremental improvements in professional practice [1]. This means that actors implied in the Knowledge Triangle, especially higher education institutions (HEIs), shall respond to the globalized labour market where companies interfere knowledge with practical skills more and more. Thus, this paper addresses the importance of practical skills developed within the international Knowledge Triangle and highlights the importance of crossing the national borders to meet the needs of the 21st century labour market and to improve quality of human resources, being divided into two distinctive parts, one centred on an analysis of the context of international Knowledge Triangle development and one making the connection among skill development as key aim of the Knowledge Triangle and increasing quality and employability.

2 THE CONTEXTUAL SETTING OF THE INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE TRIANGLE IN ROMANIA
As presented in a previous paper [2], best practices in creating and implementing the Knowledge Triangle are highlighted within the intellectual outputs produced in the Erasmus+ KA2 project for strategic partnership entitled "European Framework for Knowledge Triangle in Logistics" (FRAMELOG). Thus, when consulting the website of this project [3], the Compendium of Good Practices shows European examples of Knowledge Triangles created in the field of Logistics and Guidelines for creating and implementing it under specific quality assurance criteria.

In Romania, we identified the major factors influencing Romanian higher education in Logistics, of which the social and cultural factors have great impact, such as general attitudes on skills, competences developed during studies and qualifications received after graduation. To add, the
number of Baccalaureate graduates who have the right to participate in university admission exams as well as population’s attitude towards higher education, life-long education and practical skills development and its interest in education, qualifications, occupations and jobs in Logistics especially, represent factors generating a positive or negative background for creating and developing the Knowledge Triangle. When taking into account the state-of-the-art technology that human resources need to use when performing their activities (considered as innovation development, rate of implementing technological innovations and transfer of knowledge) as well as the consequences of the globalisation on the labour market, Romanian higher education in Logistics depends mainly on the research developed and implemented by research institutions and businesses, two of the key stakeholders in FRAMELOG. Furthermore, investment in education in Logistics, both by HEIs, vocational schools and businesses (with their training programmes) more particularly in infrastructure and human resources seem to be key competences in the Knowledge Triangle which in this paper is extended to the international level to respond better to the globalized labour market.

With regard to creating the international Knowledge Triangle, for Romanian education, the following Romanian and European laws as well as Romanian Government’s decisions on education with further amendments shall be taken into account:

a) Law no.1/2011 on national education
b) Romanian laws for study programmes’ quality assurance and accreditation, with further amendments: Ordinance no. 75/2005 and Law no. 87/2006 on quality assurance, Order no. 6154/2016 on regulating activities in Romania of foreign quality assurance agencies registered EQAR, Decision no. 1418/2006 on approving external evaluation, standards and performance indicators of Romanian Agency of Higher Education Quality Assurance
c) the Romanian provisions of Romanian National Agency for Qualifications: Order no. 3475/2017 on registering higher education qualifications in the National Higher Education Qualification Register
d) the Romanian Occupation Code amended according to Standard Occupation Code Register which regulates the occupations in vigour in Romania
f) European Commission’s communication to the European Parliament, Council, Economic and Social Committee and Region Committee on the new agenda for higher education (Brussels, May 30, 2017)
g) European Council’s recommendation on monitoring graduates’ professional paths (Brussels, May 5, 2017)
h) EQF (European Qualifications Framework), Europass andESCO (European Classification of Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations) adopted by the European Union.

These legislative acts are to be further harmonized with regard to creating the education needed to respond to the needs of both domestic and foreign labour markets. Population migration is a current phenomenon and multinational companies create work environments more and more challenging both for target as for source countries. Under such circumstances, HEIs may use different strategies to integrate the international Knowledge Triangle according to their mission and values. Thus, teaching-intensive universities start out from their educational mission and align research and collaboration to that mission (“vocational drift”), research-intensive universitites use education and research as prolongations of their research strengths (“research drift”) whereas universities with strong social connections mobilize their research and educational tasks to meet the specific needs and demands of their societal environment (“societal drift”) as Martin and Etzkowitz stated [4].

3 THE ROLE OF PRACTICE WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE TRIANGLE

The three basic functions of education, research and innovation fit well with the traditional role of the university as a core knowledge institution, so the introduction of the knowledge triangle is in itself not a threat to the legitimacy of the university [5]. But for having this importance, HEIs have constantly
developed and contributed to innovation via their education, research and other activities, in conjunction with other actors [6]. It means that the so-familiar nowadays concept of Knowledge Triangle [7] needs an extension of its borders getting from local to global which has in its centre the practical competences.

Hence, we may conclude that there are two main issues herein to discuss: the role of the international knowledge triangle to increase quality, on one hand, and to increase practical skills for international use and recognition, on the other. The simple example of developing skills in analysis of companies’ financial positions and performances as a subject developed at all academic levels and needing professional practice [8] just supports our idea. But practical skills are developed within practical activities which are organized within the international Knowledge Triangle, as for example internships, graduation papers, project management, case studies, interviews etc.

In another research conducted [9], we have emphasized the fact that internships done during study years are positive experiences for students who are very willing to learn and develop practical skills from people working in the fields they consider interesting and think of developing their career within. It is important to transfer practical knowledge to students who shall not only be considered as beneficiaries of the educational system and fresh blood on the labour market, but as partners in the Knowledge Triangle and reliable employees who bring added value to international working environments.

HEIs shall offer international experience not only with regard to courses taught. They should create the supportive environment for companies to implement more internship programmes and to work more projects together with students. Such reliable partnerships at international level shall be part of HEIs’ internationalization strategies motivating international students to use properly and efficiently education, innovation and research facilities of both HEIs and their partners in the Knowledge Triangle. Seen as a core function within the international Knowledge Triangle, employability still represents the main quality indicator of the triangle created and implemented. This makes us also emphasize that academic institutions shall create and implement the Knowledge Triangle not for a specific topic/subject/field of study, but for an entire programme of study which is a complex skeleton of theoretical knowledge to which practical soft and hard skills are added with the help of business (innovation) and research. By transferring practical knowledge from different fields (which companies operate) and different environments, a study programme receives international visibility and recognition, motivating the preoccupations for permanent quality assurance.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The importance of practical skills is definitely a must when referring to the quality of academic study programmes. Domestic and international students, graduates and employers are alike valuing practical skills as a result of their academic education which are worldwide used in the so-many fields of labour. By creating and implementing an international Knowledge Triangle, academic institutions properly respond to globalization and put their effort in developing a plateau labour market. The benefits of the mutual work of HEIs, business, research organisations and private/public authorities regulating the labour fields were herein presented and we can clearly conclude that the trend in skills development regards improvement of quality, as demanded by the Quality Assurance bodies in education.

Therefore, ICT literacy has already gained higher importance within the 21st century skills as well as language skills. These two types of skills have helped people cross local and national barriers for a long time. Meaningful education needs further assistance and support to provide practice and develop practicability needed to increase quality of education and graduates’ employability rate in the field they graduated from. A key factor in determining the attractiveness of a region is the presence of highly skilled specialists on the local labour market, and HEIs are responsible for educating these people. Companies quite often express their educational needs to HEIs by participating in the development of curricula or collaborative educational programs such as dedicated professorships or courses [10].

In this respect, is the Knowledge Triangle still that conceptual and normative framework for understanding the creation and dissemination of knowledge as a multifactorial and systemic process that integrates education, research and innovation in a synergic way [11]? In our view, it has become international and highly focused on practice and it will soon involve other main actors too, becoming the Knowledge Pyramid (public authorities and governance).
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