Internationalization strategy: Evidence from Italy

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Abstract

This paper aimed at presenting and discussing the internationalization strategy of Politecnico di Milano, a leading technical university in Italy. Based on data collected through interviews, documental analysis and participant observation, this paper aims at investigating how institutional internationalization policies have been implemented and how such policies evolved overtime. The analysis is articulated along two streams, the academic strategy and the organizational strategy, and follows the steps of the university towards internalization based on the concept of incrementalism.

Keywords: Internazionalization; teaching; English; Italy; incrementalism; strategy.

1. Introduction

“In 1963, a faculty member, Giulio Natta, received the Nobel Prize in chemistry. The European communications satellite Siro, launched in 1977, was a Politecnico project. But the school most recent innovation may prove more controversial – and perhaps just as influential. Starting from the 2014-15 school year, all graduate level courses will be taught in English” (Herald Tribune, 11.06.2012)

The term internationalization entered universities’ agendas in the early 1970s (Maringe, 2009). However, it was only from the 1990s that the issue came to the centre of both Higher Education (HE) policy and scientific research (Enders, 2004). After almost two decades of debate and a growing number of scientific contributions, research on HE internationalization is steadily mainstreaming. The debate on internationalization of HE has historically covered a varied range of thematic areas (for a recent review see Khem and Teichler, 2007). A sizable amount of publications have investigated important dimensions that are affected by an institution’s (or a HE national system’s) strategy in terms of internationalization. These aspects include, but are not limited to student and academic staff mobility, internationalization of educational curricula, the creation of research networks and alliances among HE institutions. A second important body of literature studies the process of internationalization from a country-level perspective. Authors like Meiras (2004), Maringe (2009), Frolich (2006), Lo (2009), Horie (2002) and others study this phenomenon focusing on common traits of a set of national universities of specific countries. These studies offer particularly valuable insights in that they link a country-level analysis of the internationalization process with the national and supra-national policies that guide the process itself. As a result of these studies, we have a clearer
idea on the fundamental rationales that drive a national HE system internationalization (e.g. Meiras, 2004; Marine, 2009).

Although these publications provide a solid and large bedrock for the identification and analysis of several dimensions of the HE internationalization phenomenon, there is a large prominence in literature of cases situated in English speaking destination countries, where the internationalization process is naturally not starting from “zero”.

In this paper we aim to enhance knowledge of the process by which universities start and implement internationalization strategies, focusing on an Italian case. Specifically we analyse the case of Politecnico di Milano, which decided in 2004 to put internationalization at the centre of its mission. The authors part of this organisation, although not directly involved in the implementation, hence had to opportunity to follow the process of internalisation since the beginning, performing an analysis of the strategy implementation, which is read through the lens of the logical incrementalism and its advancements (Quinn, 1978). Specifically this paper aims at investigating: how institutional internationalization policies have been implemented and how such policies evolved overtime.

To develop these arguments the paper proceeds as follows: section 2 presents the conceptual framework followed by the description of the research approach; in section 4 the results are presented. Finally we discuss our findings and draw some concluding remarks.

2. Internationalization strategic process: A conceptual framework

As noted by many authors, several conceptualisations of the term “internationalization” exist in the scientific literature. This has led to the emergence of a varied amount of meanings and perspectives to the phenomenon, which, following Knight and de Wit (1995) can be condensed in four approaches. The first is the activity approach, conceiving internationalization as a set of academic activities, such as, student and faculty exchange, curricular development, joint research initiatives; the second is referred to as competency approach, which considers internationalization as a process of development of new skills and knowledge in students, faculty and staff. The third is the ethos approach, which sees internationalization in terms of diffusion of a culture that supports the international and intercultural perspectives within a HE institution and, finally, the last is the process approach, which is the perspective endorsed in this study. Indeed, moving from the conceptualisation of internationalization as a process at the institutional level, Knight and de Wit (1995) and, more recently, Qiang (2003) identify two major categories of strategies that form such process. On the one side are activities which, as the process evolves, progressively integrate an international dimension into the main activities of a HE institution. These activities are called “academic or program strategies” and refer to aspects related to education and teaching. On the other hand are initiatives aimed to develop a set of proper policies and administrative systems whose purpose is to drive the institutionalisation of the international dimension. These are called “ organisational strategies” and comprise dimensions of governance (e.g. involvement of staff, policies, incentives for staff, etc.), support services (that is, the institution of service units to support the process), operations (such as adequate funding and support, budgeting, etc.) and others.

Taking our cue from these contributions, we frame the analysis of the internationalization process upon two dimensions: (1) the academic strategy, mainly dealing with the teaching offer and the internationalization of the faculty; and (2) the organizational strategy, dealing with the development of promotion activities and support services (see also Arena et al., 2009a; Arena et al, 2010a; Arnaboldi & Azzone, 2010) (Figure 1).

To complement this perspective, given the case at hand, we draw from studies on the incremental approach to inform our analysis. Incrementalism found its main reference in the contribution of Quinn (1978), who proposed a “logic” managing the process, as opportunities and risks incrementally emerge. Instead of defining the sequential steps for developing the strategy, the author discuss how mobilize the organisation to be receptive to change and then reactive to adapt the strategy (Arena & Azzone, 2005; Arena et al., 2010b; Arena et. al, 2011). The contribution has been taken forward by many other authors (Jones & Ross, 1996; Leavy, 1998; Kowalkowski et al., 2012), adapting this approach to different context and field.
3. Research approach

3.1. Data collection

This research adopted a case study methodology to collect data. The case study approach entails the use of multiple methods of data collection to capture key dimensions of the problems analysed (Yin, 1994): semi-structured interviews; official documents and presentations; archives; direct observation and internal document usually not available to the public (Arena & Azzone, 2007; Arena et al., 2006; Arnaboldi et al., 2004). The case analysed is Politecnico di Milano, a scientific-technological university focused on engineering, architecture and industrial design. The University has always aimed at the quality and innovation of research, by developing a fruitful relationship with the economic and productive reality through experimental research and technology transfer. Politecnico di Milano is made up of seven campuses distributed in the cities of Milano (Leonardo and Bovisa campuses), Como, Lecco, Cremona, Mantova and Piacenza. Concerning the size of the university, Politecnico di Milano has about 40,000 students and over 1,400 professors and researchers. There are nine schools, including six different areas of engineering and three areas of architecture and industrial design and 16 departments.

3.2. The research context

An explanation of the general context in which Italian universities are set is important to understand the environment. The Italian university underwent significant reform process in the last years, that started in the mid-nineties, with the introduction of a new financing system. A law in 1993 (n. 537/93) defined new rules to determine resources obtained from the central government, which contributed to budgetary devolution. Previously the Italian system was characterized by the centralized authority of the Ministry of University, which was in charge of defining the allocation of resources to each university: personnel and research funds were directly paid by central government and then assigned locally to the faculties of each university. The 1993 reform introduced three main changes: (1) the definition of a single line budget of financial resources, including all the specific items previously assigned to expense centres; (2) the introduction of “re-balancing” mechanisms, which assigns an increasing part of the resources on the basis of the standard costs per student; (3) the introduction of incentive mechanisms, based on the achievement of government defined results. These reforms has shaped a more autonomous and competitive system in Italy.

In this context, the issue of the internationalization of the Italian university has gradually attracted attention by university managers, and, more recently, it has become a priority of policy makers. The new Minister, appointed with the rise of the technical government in Italy has posed the issue of internationalization at the center of the new
reform wave in order to make Italian universities more attractive for foreign students and more competitive on a global market.

4. The process of internationalization at Politecnico di Milano

As follows, we highlight the main steps of the internationalization strategy of Politecnico di Milano, which was shaped and carried out together with local authorities and the central government. The internationalization project was set as a key pillar of the University’s strategic goals, that aimed at positioning Politecnico di Milano among the first ten technical universities in Europe.

“In order to be among the best technical universities in Europe, we need to be able to attract not only high quality Italian students but also foreign students, in addition to the involvement of international professors and researchers in our faculty”. (Guidelines for the promotion of teaching internationalization at Politecnico di Milano, 2004, p.1).

4.1. Academic strategy

The academic strategy mainly deals with the teaching offer and the internalization of the faculty. It was aimed at rendering Master and PhD offer accessible and suitable to an international audience. Since the beginning, the internationalization strategy focused on Master and PhD courses, but their introduction was not massive. In 2005/2006, the university activated six master courses, in these disciplines: management engineering, design, science computing engineering. The choice was instrumental to test the English teaching offer on few courses, which were offered in smaller campuses: two local units in the cities of Como and Lecco. The small scale of these campuses allowed to experiment the change on a limited number of teachers and students, and to react flexibly to emerging problems. Although teachers were selected for their skills and propensity to teach in English, at the start there was a large effort in preparing material. Financial incentives were offered to those teachers. In the following years (2007-2008), the university gradually diversified its offer, by enlarging the number of courses taught in English as well as the geographical provision including Milano campuses. The number of students enrolled in master courses grew significantly, exceeding the 10% in 2010/11, as shown by the Table 1.

During this second phase (2007-2008), the awareness of broader problems of multicultural classes started to rise. There were difficulties concerned to individual cultural diversity such as religion, political inclination, but also differences in habit in following lesson or sustaining exams and tests. For instance, Chinese attitude is dramatically different from Brazilian and Italian, both in class participation and their expectation about exams style and outcomes. In the third phase (2009-ongoing) teachers started to search for devices to ‘solve and deploy’ this cultural

| New entries (foreign students) | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 | 2009/10 | 2010/11 |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Engineering                   | 129     | 145     | 257     | 297     | 395     | 489     | 510     | 579     |
| Architecture                  | 61      | 81      | 106     | 125     | 181     | 217     | 289     | 436     |
| Design                        | 55      | 64      | 114     | 115     | 146     | 128     | 115     | 147     |
| Overall                       | 245     | 290     | 477     | 537     | 722     | 834     | 914     | 1,162   |

| Incidence of foreign students | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 | 2009/10 | 2010/11 |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Engineering                   | 2.1%    | 2.1%    | 4.1%    | 5.1%    | 6.7%    | 7.6%    | 7.6%    | 8.6%    |
| Architecture                  | 2.5%    | 3.1%    | 3.9%    | 5.4%    | 7.5%    | 8.1%    | 11.1%   | 15.2%   |
| Design                        | 4.0%    | 4.4%    | 7.5%    | 8.5%    | 10.8%   | 9.9%    | 9.1%    | 11.3%   |
| Overall                       | 2.5%    | 2.7%    | 4.5%    | 5.6%    | 7.5%    | 8.0%    | 8.7%    | 10.6%   |
diversity. Practically this was translated at various levels: students groups works with country comparative studies; company-students event to favor cultural exchange and reciprocal knowledge; development of cases on country differences and global complexity; collaborative creation of reference literature on national specificities. Then, in January 2012, the Rector of Politecnico di Milano announced that by 2014 all graduate courses, Master of Science and PhD, are going to be taught and assessed in English as a further important step along the internationalization path. However, this announcement created an unexpected global interest, with detractors claiming for the defence of national languages and histories, and with supporters seeing this as essential to internationalization. More than 150 pieces were published, articles and commentaries appeared in both Italian and international news (e.g. BBC news, The Independent, The New York Times…) as well as websites and blogs (e.g. Times Higher Education, IBN Lives, Smartplanet.com…). At present, after eight months from the announcement of the Rector, this choice is still object of a heat debate among the faculty and the public opinion.

Finally it is important to highlight a developing issue: the internationalization of the faculty. When the university started to offer courses in English, it entirely relied on the internal faculty, mainly constituted by Italian teachers. However, Politecnico’s target was not only the internationalization at the student level, but also at the teachers’ level, with the same goal: attracting talents. This emerged as a difficult issue especially for economic reason, given the lower level of wage in Italy compared to other countries-institutions.

“\textit{The still limited internationalization of the Faculty is the main criticism that obstacle the transformation from a University that offer courses in English, open to international students to an international university}” (Official presentation)

Initially financial incentives were put by local authorities and the central government to stimulate foreign teachers, but this action resulted less effective than for students. Hence the governing bodies developed a more target program, separating young scholars from senior professors. Since for the latter a permanent move to Italy is not seen attractive in this moment, not only for personal economic reasons, but also for the uncertain situation of our economy, the university decided to focus on 4-6 month visits or for the provision of workshop courses (1-2 weeks) on specific issues. This style has emerged particularly successful for designers and PhDs courses. In addition, 15 positions of associate professors were reserved to international teachers in a two-years period. Regarding younger scholar instead the governing bodies have committed financial resource up to 1.000.000 € per year to enroll 30-35 post-docs. A public competition for this enrolment has been promoted through different official channels, but also using personal international networks.

4.2. Organizational strategy

The organizational strategy concerns two main issues: the promotion of the university and the development of dedicated support services. The promotion strategy of Politecnico di Milano evolved significantly since 2004 entailing an incremental path (Arnaboldi & Azzone, 2005) moving from: a generalist strategy (2004-2006); country strategy (2006-2008); country-institutions strategy (2008-now). Initially, the objective of the university was just to rise the number of foreign students enrolled in master and PhD courses. Hence, a generalist strategy was applied, offering economic incentives to support foreign students coming to Italy. This action was possible due to the financial support of the local Chambers of Commerce and ICE (Institute for Foreign Commerce). In the following years (2006-2008), when the incidence of foreign students reach about the 10% at master level, the promotion strategy was refocused with the aim to enhance the quality of the incoming students and to favor the alignment with the territory needs. To this aim, the promotion effort became country-specific, focusing on countries characterized by a high-level of growth and consolidated relationship with Italy (e.g Brasil, Russia, Cile, China, India…). This phase revealed the high heterogeneity of higher education quality within countries, pushing governing bodies in further refine its promotion, not only prioritizing countries but also specific universities within countries. Part of this country-institution strategy is the setting of partnerships with key institution including also technical universities in US and Europe. To support the enactment of this strategy, more stringent selection criteria and a new admission
procedure were introduced for international students; scholarships for top students were offered, although the overall amount of financial incentive has been decreasing since 2004.

Moving to support services, in the initial phases of the internationalization project, the university focused on essential administrative services, concerning in particular accommodation and students administrative management. As mentioned in the prior paragraph, the English offer was initially concentrated in the decentralized campuses of Como and Lecco. These smaller campuses ensured higher flexibility and often a personalized support to students, including issues not directly related with their academic career, such as embassy relationships, bank accounts. In addition, these locations were particularly suitable for offering some recreational activities to foster the integration of the international community. The experience of decentralized campuses was essential for the top manager to identify the key criticisms and understand which services should be activated, balancing the need to provide quality support but standardizing services, posing the basis for the development of these services in the main Campus in Milan. In this strategy there was the awareness of the importance of service to attract student but also the pressure to be efficient (Arena et al. 2010a; Arena et al. 2009b). The services progressively developed covered all the phases of student life, from the admission, with an online procedures, until the placement, with a progressive enlargement of career service events targeting foreign students. These events were particularly useful to have feedbacks from Italian companies about the enrolment of foreign students, highlighting bureaucratic problems but also reluctance in internationalize their staff unless they are targeting other countries for business.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This paper aimed at presenting and discussing the internationalization strategy of Politecnico di Milano, a leading technical university in Italy.

In 2004, the University decided to put internationalization on the top of its agenda. Since then, several initiatives have been put in place in order to transform Politecnico in an international university, developing an academic and organizational strategy. As concerns the organizational strategy, particular attention was posed to the development of support services and to promotion activities. As concerned the academic strategy, the university gradually started to offer courses in English, with a progressive enlargement of the offer dedicated to international students, which culminated in the announcement made in 2012 that all Master and PhD courses will be taught in English starting from 2014. This decision caused an unexpected debate. It forced teachers, administrative staff, students and, at some extent, also external stakeholders, to reflect on the issue of internationalization and, more generally, on the possible trade off between preserving national-culture and pursuing international culture.

This process pinpointed heterogeneous levels of readiness of different ‘actors’, to internationalization. This calls for the need of fostering an internal and external alignment, passing through a confrontation on controversies, the definition of short terms needs, aspiring to define a common vision on the value of internationalization. In so doing, from our perspective, the key challenge will be to carry out this ‘alignment’ still preserving and valuing the distinctive traits of Italian culture, being able to transfer them to international students and teachers. In this way, it will be possible to achieve the ambitious objectives of concretely contributing to the integration at European level and building a bridge between Europe and Extra-European countries.

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