
*EL-Gate's University International cooperation
model: promoting the globalization
of Latin American Universities*

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Resumen

En una sociedad globalizada como la que tenemos hoy en día, las redes internacionales se han vuelto fundamentales; no solo para los individuos, sino también para las instituciones. En este nuevo contexto, las instituciones de educación superior necesitan adquirir los medios y la expertise el conocimiento para desarrollar estrategias globales, inclusive educación que atraviese las fronteras, pero sin perder de vista las condiciones específicas locales y su bagaje cultural propio. Encontrar una puerta para entrar a lo global y permanecer al mismo tiempo localmente relevante es el desafío que la mayoría de las universidades tiene hoy. Es por eso que es tan crítico para las universidades desarrollar estándares de calidad y modelos de referencia para el gerenciamiento de sus departamentos internacionales. En este trabajo presentamos como el Proyecto EL Gate asumió este desafío al diseminar un modelo específico para universidades latinoamericanas, y en consecuencia, colaborar a promover su internacionalización.

PALABRAS CLAVE: educación superior – internacionalización – departamento internacional – modelo de cooperación

Abstract

In a globalized society as the one we are living in today, international networking has become critical both for individuals and institutions. In this new context, higher education institutions, namely universities, need to acquire the means and the expertise to develop global strategies, including cross-border education, but without losing a clear sense of their local specific conditions and cultural background. To find a «gate» for going global yet remaining locally relevant is the challenge for

most of the universities in the world today. That is why it is so critical for universities to develop quality standards and reference models for International Departments (ID) management. In this paper we present how the EL-Gate Project addressed this challenge, by disseminating a dedicated model for Latin American universities, thus helping to promote its internationalization.

KEY-WORDS: Higher Education – internationalization - International Department - Cooperation Model.

1. EL-Gate project's goals and research results ¹

In the knowledge society and more importantly in the network society we're living, Higher Education institutions (HEI) are increasingly asked to play a new role. One that develops further and more deeply knowledge recreation, dissemination and sharing. For that HEI should take full advantage of all available local and global cooperation networks, at all its levels.

Following the large impact of the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the goals established by the Lisbon Agenda most European HEI have been implementing new models of internationalization. This refers mainly to the integration in local and regional institutional networks and also the starting of cross-border and global operations. Thus, HEI and especially universities, are acting today as gates for local actors to access and cooperate with the world community of teachers and researchers in the process knowledge creation, dissemination and even preservation. This requires of the HEI and the universities in particular the development of a new organizational model, attributing new roles and incorporating representatives of the non-academic world in the management and governance structures.

The EL-Gate project aims precisely at strengthening the management and governance of Latin American universities in order to foster it's institutional capability to identify and implement cooperation activities.

The specific aim of the project is to improve the capacities of International Department (ID) managers of Latin American universities to design and implement a more effective and efficient university cooperation model, recognized and formalized into the university organization chart, integrated into the university development strategic lines, and able to find resources (human, technologic and financial) and to put them in action to run cooperation activities.

Project activities were distributed in six Work Packages (WP). Universidade Aberta's team, responsible for coordinating El Gate research, lead and developed

the tasks in WP1, Cooperation Model and Skills, plus the design of the International Department Management course and the development of its didactical aspects, under WP2.

WP1 was devoted to the research and codification of successful cooperation models implemented by European universities, the analysis of those models relevance for the Latin America context and the definition of both the role and the set of skills needed for operators working in the field of university cooperation, in particular managers of university IDs.

WP1's main output was a report on university cooperation models appropriated for Latin American universities, including the identification of the required skills to implement it. This report also presented a proposal of a reference model for university international departments reorganization in Latin America based on current European best practices. The research in which the report was based, included a set of nineteen (19) interviews to directors or coordinators of IDs from Europe and Latin America conducted during 2009².

WP1 report provided a competences profile for ID managers in which was based the syllabus of the 120 hours online course developed under WP2 International Department Management Course. The above-mentioned competences profile served as a tool to increase visibility and interest in the El Gate course amongst Latin American university management boards, lectures and professionals. This El Gate ID managers course used an e-learning methodology and was delivered in a Claroline learning management system. It was designed as a in job training, allowing students to acquire the set of skills identified as critical to play a successful ID Manager's role. Being a professional-oriented learning experience, the course included a 40 hours assisted project-work module, dedicated to the practical development by students of cooperation models adjusted to their own universities.

2. Model's theoretical foundations and empirical background

In our research we followed the methodology of design-based research (BEREITER, 2002); (ANDERSON, 2005). This methodology produces findings that are fed back into further cycles of innovative design. The use of design-based research includes five main principles:

- 1) strategic investigation as an answer for identified problems;
- 2) contextualized research focused on the identified problems;
- 3) research targeted at innovation and practical applications;
- 4) a practice conceived and oriented by research goals;

5) the existence of research and assessment cycles for the planned interventions.

Anderson (2005) specifically refers to the suitability of applying design-based research methods to educational innovation contexts, in general, and to distance education, in particular.

To begin with, it was necessary to define a profile of aptitudes for coordinators/directors of IDs. This profile resulted from crossing the analysis:

- a) of the content of the interviews made to 19 coordinators/directors from IDs of European and Latin American universities, interviews carried out in face-to-face meetings, with Skype being occasionally used. An important amount of quality and quantitative data was collected in the interviews;
- b) of the answers to questionnaires sent to the future entrants into the course, with questions concerning what they expected from it;
- c) of a reflection on the present idea of higher education internationalization (WIT; JARAMILLO; GARCEL-AVILA; KNIGHT, 2005), (KNIGHT, 2003).

In the present context, ID managers have to be able to understand the complexity and know the multiple dimensions of the current notion of internationalization. This is critical for them, since it's expected ID managers should contribute to the definition of institutional internationalization strategies.

In fact, the current meaning and scope of internationalization in higher education is multidimensional due to the complexity of the globalization phenomena. In its several aspects we can point out the following:

- multiple types and modes of student and staff mobility (students exchange only, teachers exchange only, researchers exchange only, all or some of the previous and all of the previous plus administrative and technical staff, permanently or just in special periods);
- active participation in international projects and networks (research only, teaching only, administrative only or all of the previous);
- establishment of formal agreements or consortiums with other higher education institutions in order to foster international sharing of resources for fostering research and education;
- establishment of international partnerships or consortiums in order to foster cross-border research or educational programs including the design of international curricula and awarding international joint degrees and multiple certifications.

In accordance with all of the above mentioned aspects, we've manage to iden-

tify the following set of skills as critical for the role of ID managers in universities today:

- to recognize goals and purposes of national/international networks, projects, agreements, through search of databases and websites;
- to be able to manage and evaluate projects;
- to improve leadership competencies for projects, teams and networks in an international environment;
- to analyze and apply practical notions of accountability and quality management in international higher education institutions.;
- to promote individual/global ethical responsibility;
- to develop the ability to accept and respect different cultural backgrounds;
- to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexity and richness of the cultural interchange processes;
- to compare ID organizational practices, mobilizing competences developed previous;
- to develop competences in the use of technological resources;
- to use proficiently different ways of communication available on the online learning environment

The above-mentioned professional profile was validated by the critical appreciation from the remaining project researchers, some through synchronous discussions, but others at different times.

Afterwards, as already referred, this competences profile was the basis for designing an online course in University International Department Management following the EL-Gate pedagogical model³. 60 managers from Latin American universities, representing 38 universities in 13 countries, were accepted in the course. Teaching was assured by a team of 8 professors/teachers and 5 tutors.

3. An open model for Latin-American University International Departments

The results of our research clearly show that in some Latin-American universities internationalization is still being implemented in a limited scope, not taking full advantage of its tremendous potential to the institutional development of higher educational institutions and the enhancement of their role in society. There is clearly an opportunity for change and improvement in this field. In order to start this process, Latin-American universities should focus more on developing staff

mobility (notably teachers and researchers exchange) as it will contribute decisively to also increase student mobility. Additionally, universities in Latin America should focus in promoting their participation in international research projects and networks, as well as developing more intensive forms of cooperation as for instance joint degrees and international curricula. In fact, this need is widely recognized by Latin American institutional leadership. This, however, represents a long term endeavor, for it's not an easy task and important help from Governments and regional agencies is required, namely in terms of regulation.

This process is felt needed by most Latin-American officials as an institutional challenge all face, thus demonstrating the high level of awareness of Latin-American higher education leaders to strategic institutional development in universities. Furthermore, there are already good expertise in some universities regarding understanding of the scope and significance of higher education internationalization. This expertise should be shared and that is why a specific community of practices was established by the El Gate partnership.

3.1. Funding

Higher education internationalization should be considered a strategic goal in each institution. Therefore, it should be a significant part of long-term and medium-term planning and be implemented by an autonomous international office operating in the university under the guidance of the institution's top leadership. However, in order to achieve this, specific funding and resources are required. These can be drawn from a combination of different but complementary sources of revenue, as follows:

- Government or public agencies;
- University budget;
- Private organizations and companies willing to promote and fund specific topic areas for strategic purposes;
- International projects/networks budget allocated to partners;
- Mobility students fees;
- Others.

With resource sources mentioned in a), c) and d) Universities can reduce the expenditure and needed investment in international departments activities. Given Government funding is ever scarcer, especially in Europe, the process of fund raising using these sources should become a goal of the international departments activities. Thus, International departments should actively seek self-funding.

International departments should have some degree of financial autonomy

within their organization. For that, it's important to be able to manage resources acquired by such means as the ones depicted in a), c) and d). International departments should be able then to submit detailed programming and implementation plans to institutional leadership, usually a dedicated Vice-rector or Vice-president and subsequently approved by the Rector or President.

3.2. Articulation with other internal structures of the university and external bodies

The ID as a permanent structure of the university should articulate itself in a good and effective way with all the other academic and administrative structures. The process of internationalization of higher education institutions should not be mistaken with individual strategies or with isolated proposals by some university body (departments, research centers, Labs or others). These bodies should be supported by the international departments and should be the drivers of internationalization but should not be sole players working without an institutional strategic framework.

Therefore, international departments should not limit their activity to supporting individual initiatives from professors or researchers, but to focus proactively on the design and implementation of a real internationalization policy. An integrated and consequent action plan that should aim at identifying and establishing programs, agreements, international networks and projects, that would be meaningful and articulate with the mission and strategic goals of the university.

The gathered information should not be randomly disseminated within the organization, but potential internal targets should be selected. Furthermore, international departments should be fully aware of Government policies. The ministries of higher education, foreign affairs, culture and even innovation can be strong allies of universities. Therefore, universities should try to articulate their strategic planning with Government actions, plans and programs, in view of the promotion of international competitiveness of the national higher education systems.

3.3. Autonomy of International Departments

From an institutional point of view, international departments should typically report to a Vice-rector or Vice-president. These senior and top officials are more able to promote a consensual approach to the structure and mission of international departments within the framework of the mission statement and strategic planning of the university regarding internationalization. The same applies to the critical connection between international departments activity and main social actors, as companies and other employers.

3.4. International Offices Staff Profile

International department s staff should hold different and complementary basic skills and receive specific training for international cooperation tasks. Amongst the specific skills needed for international departments staff are the ability to operate in complex and demanding multicultural and multilingual environments, the mastering of organizational cultural interchange processes, a sound capability for making ethical judgments both within the organization and in a global environment. This highly skilled staff requires very professional and trained management.

International departments should have a managing director or coordinator who shares the same strategic vision and is able to interpret it, coordinating the implementation of the university internationalization policy with the top management. The international department manager should work closely with a dedicated Vice-rector or Vice-president and in strong articulation with other university body leaders. It should not be dedicated to any particular field of operation, but solely devote itself to coordinating and articulating activities and expertise in the international office. It is critical managers have personal charisma and leadership capabilities. They should be able to interact with all other actors in and out of the university. Besides, they should be fluent in one or more foreign languages, especially in English. Continuous training of international department s staff should be a top priority of the manager's activity plan.

3.5. International Office Organization

International departments can adopt different organization schemes, following their university tradition and organizational culture. However, we suggest the organization of these offices according to a set of typical domains of expertise, as follows:

- University strategy. The office should have a team focusing on the identification and subsequent dissemination (departments, research centres, labs...) of relevant information on international activities (projects, consortiums, networks, funding sources, exchange programs). This team should have one or more project managers according to the number of activities. This project manager should assure consultation activities for internal actors and management activities when projects are running.
- Support to foreign students, professors and researchers. A team should be responsible for this task. Staff has to be fluent in foreign languages and have good social and interpersonal competences. They should be able to relate effi-

ciently with people from very different cultural backgrounds.

- Communication and Public Relations. This team cannot be developed if the university already has a good PR department.
- Administrative and Financial Management. A special trained team should focus on administrative issues (secretariat and documentation). This role can be played by staff also contributing to other activities or be solely dedicated to it, depending on the scope of the activities. This team could be in charge of a reference data base including information on all projects, networks, partnerships, consortiums relevant to the international Office; this data base should be open to consultation by all teacher and researcher staff.

3.6. International offices continuous quality evaluation

All internationally-funded projects are subject to evaluation. However, it is important international departments are also subject to internal and external evaluation in order to enhance or improve the quality of the services they provide to the university and the community. In our view, this means institutional internal quality assurance processes must include IDs contribution to the global quality of the university or other kind of higher education institution involved.

In fact, the quality of any higher education course or programme depend also on the level of internationalization which is being assured by the each ID. Thus, internationalization aspects as student exchange schemes, internationally-funded research and other forms of international cooperation in higher education should be included in the evaluation of University courses and programmes. In any case, institutional internal and external evaluation must always include the contribution of IDs and thus evaluate its quality of operation.

4. Conclusion

Our open model proposal should be taken in fact as a flexible approach to higher education internationalization institutional strategy. The model proposal we present in this article operates as an open framework, adjustable to diverse universities organizational culture and history. Latin American universities willing to implement or to reorganize international departments could use this model adapting it to local context and institutional identity, mission statement and institutional strategy. The model is based on the understanding higher education internationalization is rapidly and constantly evolving in its definition and implications, but that should be embedded in each university's strategic development. This implies

internationalization should be an expression of each university's strategic vision and organizational culture. IDs reorganization in order to comply with this new notion should be undertaken in a consistent and programmed fashion.

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1 Project El-Gate – European-Latin American University Cooperation Gate (EUROPEAID/126-821/C/ACT/RAL), is a EU-funded initiative undertaken by a partnership of six universities with advanced expertise and experience in distance learning, as well as consolidated internationalization policies. The partnership includes Università Telematía Guglielmo Marconi (Italy), which is the general coordinator, Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Brazil), Universidade Aberta (Portugal), Universidad del Salvador (Argentina), Fundación Uvirtual (Bolívia) and Universidad Estatal a Distancia (Costa Rica).

2 Interviews were conducted to International Departments Directors/Coordinators from the following universities:

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (K.U. Leuven - Belgium);

Universidade de Coimbra (UC – Portugal);

Universidade do Porto (UP – Portugal);

Universidad de Alicante (UA1 - Spain);

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED - Spain);

Open Universiteit Nederland (OU.nl - Netherlands);

Universidade Aberta (UAb – Portugal);

Universidade Federal do Rio Janeiro (UFRJ - Brazil);

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-RJ - Brazil);
Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP - Brazil);
Universidade do Vale do Itajaí (UNIVALI – Brazil);
Universidad Nacional de San Martín (UNSAM - Argentina);
Universidad Argentina de la Empresa (UADE - Argentina);
Universidad Nacional de Quilmes (UNQ - Argentina);
Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo (UAEH - México);
Universidad de Monterrey (UDEM - México);
Universidad de Chile (UCHile - Chile);
Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Chile (UC - Chile);
Universidad de Concepción (UdeC - Chile).

3 The EL Gate Pedagogical Model is a reference document for the El Gate training course design. The document sets a pedagogical framework for teachers and tutors working in a fully online learning environment. It defines common methods and selects typical tools to be used in the training course. This document is not prescriptive, but intends to establish a common platform for all partners given their diverse pedagogical traditions and cultures. The design of the El Gate pedagogical Model tried to be as open as possible to accommodate all partners specific pedagogical approaches. However, it focused mainly on the official pedagogical models used by Universidade Aberta [UAb] (Portugal) and Universidad Estatal a Distancia [UNED] (Costa Rica).

TEMAS EN RELACIÓN

