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Multiculturalism and internationalization in Spanish universities: ¿North-south socio-cultural differences?

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Abstract

Introduction. Spanish universities are undergoing a process of continuous Europeanization and globalization, translated into a growing interest in studying the development of internationalization and multiculturalism. Objectives: To compare internationalization and multiculturalism in Spanish universities from the north and the south of the country. Methodology: The questionnaire consists of 61 items divided into nine topics. It was implemented in 2014-2015. Results: There were no statistically significant differences in variables on multiculturalism, but some differences regarding internationalization were found, where a higher budget and amount of involved staff in the University of the North versus the ones from the south was observed. Conclusions: All universities met, however, more than 50% of the objectives established on internationalization

Keywords: Multiculturalism; Internationalization; socio-cultural differences; higher education

1. Introduction

In a world characterized by increasing interconnectivity, diversity, and global mobility, many higher education institutions have been compelled to 'internationalize' their operations and their academic offerings to stay competitive

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in a crowded international education market, by ensuring the delivery of a culturally-enriched educational experience (Hanover Research Council, 2010).

The growth of cross-border higher education places universities in an international education context (Breton & Lambert, 2003; UNESCO, 2005; Varghese, 2008; Weber & Duderstadt, 2008), which unavoidably affects the way in which countries regulate their higher education systems. The idea of globalization is considered as a positive phenomenon for many people and questionable for many others, but no one doubts that this new situation is somehow linked to new forms of technology and new forms of economy. In order to compete in a growing globalized world, higher education institutions will need to adapt and formulate new strategies which allow a better positioning in an international and multicultural context. These strategies, as it will be discussed below, will include a wide range of actions that will inevitably reformulate the functioning and approach of the higher education system.

1.1. Internationalization and multiculturalism in higher education

Despite the fact that the concept of internationalization has long been used in efforts surrounding governmental relations, its popular use in higher education only dates back to the 1980s (Knight, 2003). As Marsh et al (2013) state, 'we are in the midst of the biggest global change process facing basic and higher education for over a century' (2013: 9). As more and more institutions seek to develop an international presence, several terms and concepts have been incorporated into these efforts, leading Knight to create an all-encompassing working definition:

> '*Internationalization at the national sector and institutional levels is as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education*' (Knight, 2003, p. 7).

The concept of internationalization in higher education thus refers to the implementation of initiatives by higher education institutions which seek for a scientific, linguistic or commercial edge within a globalised society (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

The Spanish legislation developed to regulate the operation of universities increasingly includes more references to the internationalization process of these institutions. In fact, the Decree 329/2010 of 13th July, by which the new Undergraduate, Master's and Doctorate degrees are authorized, states in its preamble that one of the fundamental objectives of the new teaching organization is to foster student mobility, both within Europe and with other parts of the world (Junta de Andalucía, 2010). It should be added to this, among other actions, the growing interrelationship between international higher education institutions, the introduction of a greater number of programs and agreements that allow both national and international mobility of students and staff, and the increasing commitment to convergence with the principles arising from the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

One of the main measures to support internationalization and multiculturalism in higher education institutions is the promotion of the international mobility of students, research scholars and staff. However, there are experts who consider these measures a limiting feature, since it involves only a small number of university members (Campins, 2007). In order to overcome these limitations, there are many other actions that Spanish universities are carrying out to prepare students for developing skills addressed to manage in international and multicultural environments. This is what Nilsson (2003) defines as 'internationalization at home (IaH)', to refer to different ways to internationalize universities through different domestically oriented practices (Moore, 2011). The complexity involved in working in international higher education environments requires an additional set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and understanding about the international and intercultural global dimension of universities. It is thus necessary to know how these competencies are developed and recognized for those academics, administrators and policy makers working in the field of internationalization and multiculturalism in higher education (Knight, 2004).

A further relevant issue concerning the internationalization of higher education institutions is the 'Internationalization of the curriculum (IoC)', which may include several activities designed to infuse curricula with a greater international scope (Hanover Research Council, 2010). Universities concerned about internationalization pretend somehow to integrate an international and multicultural dimension in the curricula of all students at the university. In fact, According to Nilsson (2000), an internationalized curriculum is:

> '(...) A curriculum which gives international and intercultural knowledge and abilities, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally, socially, emotionally) in an international and multicultural context'

(Nilsson, 2000, p. 22).

Despite the efforts made so far to achieve international and multicultural curricula, the reality in most Spanish universities doing internationalization is however that the education of professionals, such as university teachers and dedicated staff officers are in the side-line of the system while they are potentially 'the key force capable of enhancing the entire system' (Mestenhauser, 2002: 175), and much more involvement is thus necessary on their behalf.

1.2. Previous research and study purpose

While different studies on internationalization and multiculturalism in higher education are being carried out with increasing frequency in other contexts, such as the United States and some European countries (Gornitzka & Langfeldt, 2008; Matros, 2008; UNESCO, 2005; Woodhouse & Stella, 2008), in Spain, most of the studies focused on internationalization and multiculturalism have to do mainly with the business world, and not with universities. Particular aspects of the study such as the internationalization of the curriculum and the particular use of English as the language of communication in the scientific community have been and are being currently studied (Lasagabaster & Huguet, 2007; Salaberri & Sánchez, 2014, 2015; Sánchez & Salaberri (2015a; 2015b). However, this does not occur regarding other aspects of internationalization and multiculturalism, for which we have to refer to studies in other countries (Green, Luu & Burris, 2008; Green & Olson, 2003; Olson, Green & Hill, 2005). This study intends, therefore, to provide some insights on the level of internationalization and multiculturalism in three Spanish universities from the north and the south of the country in order to ascertain the differences among them and to identify the main strengths and weaknesses so that future actions can be implemented to improve the increasingly demanding multicultural and international environment of the Spanish universities nowadays.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The study was conducted in three Spanish universities, one from the north and two from the south of the country. Their names are omitted to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the data at the request of the universities analyzed.

The three universities have a similar distribution of centers and faculties. The most significant difference among them is that the northern university was founded in the seventeenth century, while the Southern universities were founded in the nineties of the last century. This was one of the reasons to suggest that there might be noteworthy differences between the northern university and the southern ones, due to possible socio-cultural differences and the traditional character of the institution of the North versus the other two.

2.2. Procedure

This is a multivariate descriptive study. It was conducted with the approval of the authorities responsible for the Internationalization Plan of the University of Almeria during the academic year 2014/2015.

The instrument used to assess the corresponding indicators of internationalization and multiculturalism was sent to the participating universities and completed by the staff of their respective Vice-Chancellorships of International Relations.

2.3. Instruments

The questionnaire used was composed by 61 items divided into nine fields distributed as follows: (a) Field 1. Integration of internationalization in institutional planning and evaluation (4 items); (b) Field 2. Internationalization of the curriculum and the promotion of multilingualism (17 items); (c) Field 3. Participation of students, faculty and administrative staff in mobility programs (7 items); (d) Field 4. Interest of students to study abroad, learn languages

and take advantage of learning opportunities at international level (5 items); (e) Field 5. Institutional structure and internationalization plan (3 items); (f) Field 6. Institutional investment in internationalization; (g) Field 7. International dissemination (8 items); (h) Field 8. Student recruitment (8 items); (i) Field 9. Distance between institutional rhetoric and reality (2 items).

Questions were responded by a yes-or-no answer, being, in some cases, complemented with a specific percentage.

3. Results

Due to space restraints and for the purpose of the research objectives, only the items related to multiculturalism and those in which there are statistically significant differences will be addressed. In the other fields and items, no statistically significant differences were found between the northern and southern universities.

In the 3 universities, more than 50% of the items regarding internationalization were accomplished.

T tests were conducted since the sample followed a normal distribution.

Table 1. T-test results between the university from the North and the ones from the South

	North	South	T Comparisons
Total number of staff	M=2894	M=1123	$t_1 = -9.83$; $p < .05$
Number of teaching staff	M=1952	M=693.5	$t_1 = -12.41$; $p < .05$
Number of administrative staff	M=943	M=429.5	$t_1 = -6.52$; $p > .05$
Total budget addressed to internationalization	M=6064000	M=136250	$t_1 = -39.68$; $p < .05$
Field 3. (Item 30. Amount of teaching staff participating in internationalization tasks)	M=310	M=72	$t_1 = -54.85$; $p < .05$

With regard to the indicators related to multiculturalism (Field 6), in the three universities, at least two of the four indicators were accomplished, with no statistically significant differences in the number of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees addressed to it in the respective institutions.

4. Conclusion

The slight differences found between the universities from the south and the one from the north may be due, primarily, to the amount of budget devoted to internationalization, being over 40 times higher in the northern university than in the other two. This noticeable difference may be due to the greater experience on that issue of the university from the north since its foundation.

The three universities offer a number of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees with a focus on multiculturalism. However, they lack a multicultural view affecting all the academic programs and not just those that include specific contents related to multicultural education. It is currently worldwide recognized that universities need to be 'multicultural' in different aspects. They need to be open to students coming from varied countries and cultures, creating a social and academic environment that facilitates joint learning and provides opportunities to integrate the views and perceptions from the different cultures into their academic programs. In that sense, the offer of 'neutral' or 'non-cultural' curricula and topics, which is the common stream, does not promote multicultural development. The challenge is implementing multicultural curricula in order to help students develop multicultural skills and competencies that arise when interacting with partners that have different values and beliefs. This involves coping with individual differences, being positive to face the dynamics of multicultural environments, observe details that denote diversity, among others.

The results of this study support the recommendation of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) regarding the need to harness 'the experience of students to facilitate international and intercultural learning on campus, through the development of activities through which students are able to display the intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes and perspectives expected of a globally competent student' (AUCC, 2009: 14).

In conclusion, the complexity involved in working in international higher education environments requires an additional set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and understanding about the international and intercultural global dimension of universities (Troia, 2013). This includes the need to know how these competencies are developed and recognition of this fact on the part of academics, administrators and policy makers working in the field of internationalization and multiculturalism in higher education (Knight, 2004).

Acknowledgements

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