

The internationalisation of doctoral education: the puzzling oversight of incoming mobility strategies

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Abstract

Internationalisation is an important manifestation of the transformation of doctoral education in the last decades. In Portugal, the internationalisation of doctoral education has been a vehicle for the consolidation of the science system and a government priority, with the number of PhD candidates enrolling in universities having doubled in previous few years. The paper investigates the internationalisation strategies of doctoral programmes that can explain their attractiveness for international students. An analysis was conducted of 118 Portuguese doctoral programmes' websites and 11 focus groups with 31 students. Findings show that only about half of the doctoral programmes mentioned strategies for their internationalisation. While incoming student mobility was poorly emphasised by universities and students, a higher importance was attributed to strategies allowing doctoral students' immersion in international research environments. This is puzzling considering the growing number of international students but also demonstrates the implementation of cost-effective internationalisation strategies common throughout European universities.

Full paper

Doctoral education has changed and adapted in the last decades,

one of the most important transformations being its internationalisation. Embodied in the recruitment of foreign students, mobility initiatives, international collaboration, or strategies for engagement of doctoral students in international research contexts (Bao et al., 2018; Kehm, 2020; Nerad, 2020), internationalisation is an unavoidable and growing trend in doctoral education. It represents a strategic priority not only for universities (Hasgall and Peneoasu, 2022; Hasgall, et al., 2019) but also for governments which “are encouraging and funding international collaborations in research and degree offerings” (Nerad, 2020: 59). In Portugal, the internationalisation of doctoral education has been a vehicle for the expansion and consolidation of the national science system. Science policies have favoured doctoral training in Portuguese institutions through individual research grants open to international candidates (Heitor et al., 2014) and funding of collaborative doctoral programmes with prestigious universities abroad. These initiatives have produced positive results, with the number of international doctoral students doubling in the last decade (Sá et al., 2021).

The paper investigates the internationalisation strategies of doctoral programmes that can explain their attractiveness for international students. It draws on the empirical findings of a study completed recently on Portuguese universities’ and doctoral students’ perceptions of doctoral education and its structuring dimensions, including internationalisation. Universities' perceptions were gathered by analysing a sample of 118 institutional websites of doctoral programmes offered by 27 Portuguese universities, representing 20% of doctoral programmes in the country. Students' perceptions were collected through 11 focus groups held with 31 doctoral students in their first year from three Portuguese universities, drawn from the doctoral programme sample. In both cases, category/thematic content analysis (Selvi, 2019), was performed to systematise the strategies for internationalisation identified by universities and doctoral students.

Although internationalisation was present in most university discourses, concrete strategies for its pursuit were mentioned by only about half the doctoral programmes. University discourses appeared to place a greater emphasis on providing doctoral students opportunities of immersion in international research environments

than on making the programme appealing for international students. Incoming student mobility was therefore downplayed, which is surprising in the light of the large increase in international students (Hasgall et al., 2019; Hasgall and Peneoasu, 2022), who make up a third of doctoral students in Portugal (Sá et al., 2021). Strategies for international recruitment may be defined and implemented centrally at the level of the institution, while individual programmes have little leeway in this respect. However, it is still puzzling that doctoral programmes do not make more effort to emphasise their attractiveness to international students in their websites, which is often the first point of contact for these students. How international students are attracted to these programmes needs further investigation since findings revealed no specific strategies in this respect.

Instead, universities stressed strategies that allowed doctoral students to participate in international research environments (Bao et al., 2018; Nerad, 2020; Sobic, 2014). Special emphasis was placed on the existence of collaboration agreements (Harrison, 2015) with international institutions that enabled: international collaboration in doctoral programmes; student mobility for short training stays, for attendance at teaching initiatives, or the development of part of the doctoral work; or contact with international researchers in international research networks, centres, groups, projects, etc.

Corroborating university discourses, students perceived internationalisation primarily through immersion in international research environments. They did not refer either to international students or incoming mobility, what can be possibly explained by the interviews being conducted during the period of lockdown imposed by the pandemic and, therefore, the little or no interaction with their colleagues, whether national or international, making them less sensitive to this issue. Instead, they emphasised the attendance in scientific events, the contact with international researchers or research groups working in the same scientific field or topic of doctoral research; the interaction with foreign professors collaborating in doctoral programmes; and short stays abroad for the development of doctoral work and thesis.

Although discourses hardly view the internationalisation of doctoral programmes as occurring via incoming mobility, internationalisation

is pursued through other strategies which are common throughout European universities. These are an affordable means to internationalise otherwise local programmes. Given the small and locally bound nature of many doctoral programmes, strategies based on mutualisation (e.g., collaboration agreements for teaching staff exchange, joint international research events, etc.) solve several problems. They allow to go around limited resources (intellectual and financial), ensure that doctoral students come across a rich variety of knowledge and methods, and integrate them in international networks and communities (Djelic, 2008).

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