

Nation-bounded internationalization of higher education: A comparative analysis of two periphery countries

Betül Bulut Şahin

Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Internationalization of higher education (IHE) has become one of the most prominent strategies in national policies and universities' agendas during the past three decades. IHE provides numerous benefits, however, it is difficult to argue that all countries equally benefit from IHE. To analyze the effects of national boundaries on IHE, this paper presents qualitative research conducted in two periphery countries of Europe: Poland and Turkey. Thirty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with international office professionals. The results revealed that IHE in Poland & Turkey, as examples of peripheral countries, is restricted by political instability, economic impotency, and socio-cultural legacies. These factors lead to a nation-bounded internationalization for higher education institutions and individual stakeholders. It is argued that decentralized internationalization strategies designed based on the unique characteristics of nations are needed to reach to drive the progressive values of IHE forward.

Full paper

Introduction

The concept of emerged over the last 30 years; over the years, the concept has been transformed, affected mainly by neo-liberal economic and global policies, and the progressive values are de-valued. The current challenges of IHE are the rise of nationalist & anti-immigrant policies (Altbach & De Wit, 2018), the globally competitive nature of higher education (HE) driven by international quantitative indicators (De Wit, 2019), focus on international abroad leading the participation of elite subset of students (De Wit & Altbach, 2021), academic capitalism in the Global North (Jones et al., 2021) and an unequal system that follows economic rationales (Crăciun & de Gayardon, 2021).

The critical internationalization framework questions the positivity and assumptions of benefits behind modern internationalization discourse (Vavrus & Pekol, 2015); challenging neo-liberal views and problematizing the overwhelmingly positive nature of mainstream approaches (Critical Internationalization Studies Network, n.d.) and trying to deconstruct the existing dominant strategies reproducing uneven relations (Buckner & Stein, 2020). With this critical stance, this paper focuses on the inequalities between different national contexts in IHE. The asymmetry in HEIs between the Global North and Global South (De Wit et al., 2019; De Wit & Jones, 2022, Vavrus & Pekol, 2015) or between developed and developing countries (Altbach, 2007; Brooks & Waters, 2011; Egron-Polak & Marmolejo, 2017) were mentioned in the literature before. I also argue that these inequalities exist in Europe between Western and Eastern countries.

Method

In this research, the main research question is “how IHE and student mobility is affected by national-level characteristics in peripheral countries?”. A qualitative approach was chosen, and interviews were conducted with 36 international office professionals (IPs) working in different universities in Poland (18) and Turkey (18). The diversity of the participants will be considered in terms of university type (public/private), geographical location, etc.

Results

The analysis results highlighted that IPs in both countries agreed on four main national challenges that affect their universities' efforts for internationalization: political instability, economic impotency, socio-cultural norms and legacy, and the country's position as a periphery. In terms of political instability, IPs mentioned domestic and foreign policy examples. In terms of domestic politics, non-democratic political developments, events threatening national security, the rise of nationalist political views, and direct interventions of governments in universities were mentioned. In addition, foreign and unstable relations with the other countries were another challenge to internationalization. Although developed countries have a higher attraction for international students, developing countries experience fluctuations due to political instability. Moreover, there are several engrained, pre-defined routes of mobility in the world in line with historical and cultural determinants. In addition, a country's foreign policy affects internationalization since universities might be forced to reframe their strategic aims and current actions according to foreign policy decisions. The second category is the economic impotency of financial resources, and IPs strongly advocate that it has a considerable impact on IHE. On the institutional level, participants criticized the state's lack of support for studying abroad and their dependence on Erasmus funds. On the individual level, the low income of the outgoing students' families, insufficient Erasmus grants, and unstable economic situation were mentioned as the restrictions for either participating in mobility programs or country choices for study abroad. The last national characteristic mentioned by the IPs is the country's socio-cultural norms and legacy, which leads to several adaptation problems for international students. The results revealed that historical legacy, traditional or cosmopolite society structure, language proficiency, or religion might undermine the experiences of international students. Moreover, IPs in both countries think their country's position is perceived as a periphery country, which might undermine the progressive outcomes of internationalization. Negative perceptions and prejudices restrict their action of establishing partnerships and flow of student mobility and the diversity and quality of international students.

Significance of research

This research would contribute to IHE discussions by giving concrete examples and practical challenges derived from their national context from two different peripheral contexts in a comparative way. Most of the literature on IHE was developed by scholars from Western countries; therefore, this research would be necessary for their voices to be heard. Secondly, as the primary implementors of IHE, practitioners do not exist in most discussions. This research offers a new insight to reveal their thoughts; on the belief on the importance of connecting research and practice in IHE.

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