

270 Unveiling the path to internationalisation: an evaluation of strategies and understandings in Portuguese higher education

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Portuguese higher education comprises universities and polytechnics, both public and private. Although a relatively new phenomenon in Portugal, internationalisation may be at different stages of development according to institution type. This paper examines how different higher education institutions (HEIs) in Portugal approach internationalisation from a strategic point of view and how they understand this phenomenon. It uses a mixed-methods approach comprising an online survey (N = 65) and semi-structured interviews (n= 4) with HEIs' representatives. The first results indicate that internationalisation represents a strategic objective for most institutions, however less than half have structures dedicated to it. Differences between institution types emerge concerning the activities undertaken to pursue internationalisation as well as concerning the understanding of the concept. The study contributes to the existing literature on the varied nature of internationalisation, stressing the fluid and multifaceted nature of the concept, especially in HE systems marked by diversity.

Full paper

Despite a slow start, a significant commitment to internationalisation has been made by Portuguese higher education institutions (HEIs) since 2014, when an internationalisation strategy for higher education (HE) in Portugal was launched (MADR/MEC, 2014). The Portuguese HE system is not homogeneous, as it comprises different types (universities and polytechnics) both public and private. It is therefore expected that different missions and diverse funding types may lead to diversified conceptions and strategies to foster internationalisation. International student numbers have increased notably, especially within polytechnics, with the diversity of nationalities represented also expanding (Mourato, 2019). Notwithstanding, students from Lusophone countries, particularly Brazil, Angola, and Cape Verde, still dominate (Sin et al.,2022).

Generally, internationalisation strategies include integration into international networks, exchange agreements, and mutual degree recognition (Guerreiro & Barros,2018). Key strategies include Erasmus mobility, research collaborations, language training, and marketing campaigns (Sin et al.,2019). It is important to grasp whether these general strategies differ by type and sector of HEI.

Motives behind internationalisation are predominantly economic, though academic and socio-cultural reasons are also present (Guerreiro & Barros,2018). The current study explores the strategies adopted by different HEIs in Portugal towards internationalisation. It involves a quantitative comparison of how universities and polytechnics, both public and private, define and implement their internationalisation strategies/activities. We also conduct a qualitative assessment of how various HEIs understand the concept of internationalisation.

This research employed a mixed-method approach involving an online survey and semi-structured interviews. All 102 HEIs in Portugal were invited to participate in the quantitative study. Responses were received from 65 institutions (63.1% polytechnics, 52.3% private). We determined any noteworthy variations between the university and polytechnic groups, as well as the public and private sector groups, by conducting Fisher's exact test. Semi-structured interviews were made with representatives of 4 institutions: 2 universities and 2 polytechnics (one public and one private of each).

98.5% of the surveyed HEIs viewed internationalisation as a strategic objective. Less than 6% lacked an activity plan. Those with a plan (88.2%) explicitly included actions for internationalisation. Most institutions (92.8%) monitor their strategy or activity plan annually. Less than half (48.5%) have a centralised office for implementing internationalisation activities, while 33.8% use multiple support offices.

Comparisons by type and by sector are still work in progress. First results indicate that there is a significant difference ($p = .040$) between universities and polytechnics regarding their motivations for internationalisation. Specifically, universities, more than polytechnics, were found to be driven by the intention to enhance institutional competitiveness through internationalisation. Another significant difference concerned two strategic activities envisaged for internationalisation: universities are more prone to consider research publication in international journals in co-authorship with international colleagues as an activity framed within the institution internationalisation plan ($p = .004$). In contrast, polytechnics were more frequently found to consider cross-border HE as a critical activity to consolidate internationalisation ($p = .026$).

Furthermore, there are some differences between public and private institutions. Public institutions tended to emphasise activities that promote joint programmes ($p = .035$) and internationalise curricula ($p = .019$) more frequently than private ones. Moreover, public institutions tend to focus on improving their standings in relevant rankings and prioritise research publications in international journals that involve foreign teams ($p = .046$).

The interviews revealed that internationalisation was broadly understood as a shared opportunity for institutional improvement and learning, particularly for students. However, the specific objectives varied across the institutions. For the Private University, internationalisation aimed to provide diverse experiences for students. In contrast, the Public University focused on bolstering its core missions: teaching and research. A public polytechnic representative expressed a desire to integrate internationalisation transversally into all institutional aspects, demonstrating its multi-faceted nature. The study also examined the activities undertaken to achieve these objectives. Both Public and Private Universities engage in a wide range of activities, including establishing international relationships, participating in global networks and conferences, recruiting international students, promoting staff and student mobility, and participating in international projects. Additionally, the Private University focuses on organisational capacity building, offering English language courses, promoting multicultural awareness, and improving international rankings. The Erasmus+ Programme's role in promoting student and staff mobility was widely acknowledged.

Portuguese HEIs have made significant strides in their commitment to internationalisation since 2014. The study highlights the varying nature of internationalisation efforts across institutions, underlining the need for a comprehensive and strategic approach. Overall, this study provides a contribution for understanding and enhancing internationalisation in HE sectors marked by diversity such as the Portuguese one and the multiplicity of expressions of this phenomenon.

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