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

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-encapsulating 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’
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