

**INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS:
AN OVERVIEW OF THE SPANISH CONTEXT**

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Abstract

This paper examines the current state of the internationalization of higher education institutions in Spain. Specifically, it explores how academic staff with international students in their classes approach their courses and employ teaching methodologies, and how international students perceive these different approaches and methodologies. A qualitative methodology was used to collect data. Semi structured personal interviews were conducted with 17 participants (academic staff and international students). The tools used were document analysis and semi-structured personal interviews conducted at San Jorge University (Zaragoza, Spain). Results show that, in this context, the process of internationalization still faces some challenges, including the proficiency level of English among lecturers, and a lack of resources to enhance services and teacher training to facilitate the integration of international students and a more intercultural pedagogy based on the internationalization of the curriculum.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education, internationalization of the curriculum, higher education, intercultural pedagogy, intercultural education, Spain.

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Resumo

Este artigo examina o estado atual de internacionalização das instituições de ensino superior na Espanha. Especificamente explora como o corpo docente, com estudantes internacionais nas suas turmas, aborda os seus cursos e emprega metodologias de ensino e como estudantes internacionais percebem essas diferentes abordagens e metodologias. Uma metodologia qualitativa foi utilizada para coletar dados. Entrevistas pessoais semiestruturadas foram conduzidas com 17 participantes (docentes e estudantes internacionais). As ferramentas utilizadas foram análises documentais e entrevistas pessoais semiestruturadas, realizadas na Universidade de San Jorge (Zaragoza, Espanha). Os resultados mostram que neste contexto o processo de internacionalização ainda enfrenta alguns desafios, incluindo o nível de proficiência em inglês dos docentes, a falta de recursos para aprimorar os serviços e formação dos mesmos, com o propósito de facilitar a integração de estudantes internacionais com uma pedagogia mais intercultural baseada na internacionalização do currículo.

Palavras-Chave: internacionalização do ensino superior, internacionalização do currículo, ensino superior, pedagogia intercultural, educação intercultural, Espanha.

1. Introduction

An increasingly important aspect of the globalization era in higher education is, undoubtedly, internationalization. As stated by Albach and Knight (2007, in Sierra-Huedo, 2013), “globalization may be unalterable, but internationalization involves many choices” (p. 291). Consequently, every university has initiated a different internationalization process, with different approaches depending on international, national, and regional policies and contexts (Knight, 2009). According to Sierra-Huedo (2013), “the Spanish tertiary education system is not an exception to these trends and supra-national contexts that affect it, even though the national context differs greatly from that of its neighboring European countries” (p.6). In this globalized context, as educational institutions pursue to prepare their students for a globally interconnected world, the Spanish context provides a unique angle from which to explore and analyze multiple dimensions of internationalization.

For this study, we understand internationalization of higher education as the process “of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of a higher education institution” (Knight, 2004, p. 2). Thus, it is important to acknowledge that it is not an end in itself, but a developmental process that an institution focuses on in a systemic way. This process should include consideration of the importance of the teaching and learning process; attempting to create an intercultural campus; exposing students to knowledge from different cultures and preparing them to become global citizens who are able to work and live in a globalized world (Mestenhauser, 2011; Paige, 2005; Sierra-Huedo, Bruton & Fernandez, 2024). An internationalized curriculum is understood as the “incorporation of international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study” (Leask, 2015, p.9). This research is part of the development of the research phase within an Erasmus + project: Multicultural Classrooms: Inclusive Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (MultiClass) KA220-HED-96EBB3A6, that explores how academic staff with international students in their classes approach their courses and employ teaching methodologies, and how international students perceive these different approaches and methodologies. A qualitative methodology was used to collect data. Semi-structured personal interviews were conducted with 17 participants (academic staff and international students).

The tools used were document analysis and semi-structured personal interviews conducted at San Jorge University (Zaragoza, Spain). First, a review of the literature is presented: a description of the Spanish national higher education system, national policies for its internationalization including numbers of international students in the Spanish context, which is the current context including a summary of national and international reports focusing on internationalization of higher education institutions. Second, the research questions and methodology used to collect data are explained and finally findings and conclusions.

2. Description of the Spanish National Higher Education System

Higher education in Spain dates back from Medieval times and it was established by the Catholic Church. The era was defined by the foundation of cathedral schools and monastic institutions. These first educational institutions were mainly dedicated to religious studies, placing great importance on the fields of theology and philosophy. The educational panorama underwent a dramatic transformation with the emergence of universities in the 13th century. After this period, historically, Spain has always had public universities controlled by the central government. It was not until the 1970s, during the last years of Franco's regime and due to international pressure, that more public universities were built, in a great effort for universalization of higher education access. As for private universities, it was not until the 1990s that the first private universities were allowed to be established. During this time, Spain had gone through two important higher education reforms that had an important impact by the process of the decentralization that started after the death of Franco in 1975, and right after the democracy was established. At present, there is a total of 84 universities in Spain, both public and private (Sierra-Huedo, 2013; Peach, 2001; Vizcarro & Yániz, 2004).

It is important to mention that, in Spain, there has been a process of decentralization in which the authority and responsibility of the central government has been transferred to the Autonomous Communities (Rumbley & Howard, 2015). This shift in governance has had significant implications for the administration, funding, and development of higher education institutions in the different regions of the country. At a national level, higher education institutions are regulated by a framework of laws and regulations that set out the general principles, standards, and guidelines for the entire

country. In this sense, the enactment of the higher education law known as *Ley Orgánica de Universidades* (2007) (LOU) brought about significant changes, in order to align Spain with the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) or the so-called Bologna Process. These changes primarily involved the conversion of five-year degrees to four-year degrees, limiting class sizes to no more than 50 students, adopting continuous assessment, implementing the use of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) for measuring workload and acquired competencies, as well as recognizing internships as part of degree programs and awarding ECTS credits for them (Sierra Huedo, 2013).

A new and much demanded higher education law, known as *Ley Orgánica del Sistema Universitario* (LOSU), is currently being developed with the main objective of enhancing the quality of Spanish universities. Change is expected in the four-year-degree program + 1 year master's degree, into a three-year-degree program + 2 years master's program, aligning the current model with the standards of other EHEA countries. Over the past eighteen years, several attempts have been made to enhance the quality and internationalization of the Spanish higher education system. Some of these include the establishment of 'Universidad.es', with the objective of positioning Spanish universities globally and promoting their excellence, and the implementation of the initiative *Intercultural Campus of Excellence*, which aims to encourage universities to become more internationalized. However, these initiatives have failed to achieve their initial objectives (Rumbley & Howard, 2015). The availability of funds has become even scarcer, particularly after the economic crisis of 2008.

Spain ranks among the leading European countries in attracting and receiving incoming students, not only through the European Erasmus programs, but also from universities in the United States. However, the preparation for this large number of international students varies among universities, with some creating their own programs. Each university can decide how they would like to prepare to welcome and to integrate international students in their institutions. The significant number of incoming students contributes almost to 200 million euros a year to the Spanish economy, which makes it an important economy and market for Spain (Grasset, Griffin, and Pérez-Bedmar, 2014).

3. National Policies for the Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization in higher education is actively promoted and supported through several initiatives and programs in Spain, where it is given top priority in educational policies. The following are some of the noteworthy policies in this field:

Exchange programs: Spain has established bilateral agreements to foster and promote the exchange of students and professors with more than 50 countries. The Erasmus+ exchange program is the most well-known, enabling students to complete a portion of their degree at a foreign university.

Scholarship programs: Scholarships are available for both Spanish and international students wishing to study overseas through the Autonomous Regions and the Ministry of Education. Additionally, there are scholarship programs that support academic and researcher mobility.

Strategic alliances: With the aim of fostering academic collaboration and facilitating staff and student mobility, Spanish universities establish strategic alliances with higher education institutions worldwide.

Internationalization of the curriculum: The inclusion of international content in study plans is encouraged and the teaching of foreign languages is promoted at all educational levels.

International research: Spain participates in numerous international research projects and collaborates with research institutions around the world.

In general, Spain seeks to improve the quality of higher education, encourage staff and student mobility, and foster academic excellence in a global context through an open and cooperative international higher education policy. In this sense, as can be observed below, Spain has a number of national and local laws that promote internationalization in higher education:

Organic Law (LOSU) 2/2023, 22nd March, University System. Section VIII is dedicated to internationalization. This law establishes the legal framework for the operation of universities in Spain and promotes cooperation and collaboration between Spanish and international universities.

University 2015-2020 Strategy: This is a government initiative aimed at improving the quality and competitiveness of Spanish universities and promoting their internationalization.

University 2021-2027 Strategy: This initiative maintains the University 2015- 2020 strategy concept and focuses on an activity-based approach based on the internationalization of students, teachers, and training programs. In this sense, the focus is on the skills and abilities acquired by students, as well as on the cognitive knowledge of the specific subject of study; a cultural approach to creating a culture of internationalization; a process approach considering the international dimension of all activities of the university.

University 2030 Strategy: The strategy of the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE) is to provide formulas that bring Spanish master's and bachelor's degrees in line with the international scene, as well as to make current regulations more flexible, in order to exploit the potential of the “European Universities” initiative of the European Commission. This project aims to support the internationalization of campuses, facilitate the integration of students from other countries and systems; promote a more extensive mobility; and guarantee programs and agreements between universities, national and international companies, Spanish and international institutions.

Strategic Plan for the Internationalization of Catalan Universities: An initiative of the Government of Catalonia that seeks to promote the internationalization of Catalan universities and their participation in international research and cooperation networks.

Internationalization Plan for Andalusian Universities: An initiative of the Government of Andalusia that seeks to promote the internationalization of Andalusian universities and improve their presence in the international arena.

Action Plan of the University-Business Strategy 2020: An initiative of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training that aims to promote collaboration between universities and businesses and the international mobility of students and professors.

International Tutorial Action Plan: An initiative of the University of Zaragoza (in the autonomous community of Aragon) that aims to promote the internationalization of the university and improve the attention given to international students. The program includes

actions such as personalized attention, help with integration, and cultural and leisure activities.

Aragon-Québec Program: A cooperation program between the autonomous community of Aragon and the province of Quebec (Canada) that aims to promote cooperation in higher education, research, and innovation.

Aid Program for International Mobility of University Students in Aragon: An initiative of the Government of Aragon that aims to promote international mobility of Aragonese students, by granting economic aid to study at foreign universities.

It is important to mention that the Autonomous Community of Aragon, where San Jorge University is located, currently does not have a specific internationalization strategy for higher education. However, a process of reflection and analysis is taking place to update the internationalization policy in higher education in Aragon. Additionally, The General Directorate of Universities and Research of Aragon is working to develop a research and innovation plan for Aragon, which includes measures to strengthen internationalization and cooperation in the field of research and innovation. The aim of this plan is to improve the region's competitiveness and economic and social development, with internationalization being a key aspect.

Knight (2004) has emphasized the importance of clearly defining the goals and strategies of internationalization to ensure their effectiveness. While the Spanish initiatives such as Erasmus+ and various scholarship programs demonstrate a strong framework for promoting international mobility, Knight suggests that the impact of such programs should be meticulously evaluated against their intended goals. The effectiveness of these programs is contingent on their ability to enhance students' international competencies and integration into a global academic community, which is not clearly assessed in the policies outlined (Knight, 2004).

Knight (2008) also argues for the need of integrating international dimensions into the curriculum and teaching methodologies to ensure that all students benefit from internationalization, not just those who can study abroad, which will be a more strategic focus on the quality of the internationalization process, this is related to the concept of Internationalization at Home (IaH). The Spanish policies heavily focus on mobility and collaboration but might lack depth in areas such as curriculum adaptation and the development of intercultural competencies among students and staff who remain on

domestic campuses. In other words, a fairer internationalization process that focuses on all university students and professors and not only on those who participate in mobility programs.

The decentralization seen in Spanish strategies, with different initiatives at regional levels, can be both a strength and a weakness. Knight (2012) points out that while tailored regional approaches allow for flexibility and local relevancy, they can also lead to inconsistencies and a lack of coherence in national internationalization efforts. Ensuring alignment and synergy among different initiatives is critical for maximizing the overall effectiveness of internationalization policies, what Mestenhauser (2011) calls an approach to internationalization in a systemic way (Sierra-Huedo, 2013; Sierra-Huedo, Bruton & Fernández 2024).

Knight's later work highlights the growing importance of sustainable internationalization strategies that consider the environmental, economic, and social impacts of global educational exchanges (Knight, 2013). The Spanish policies could be more innovative by integrating sustainable practices, such as promoting virtual exchanges and digital collaboration tools, which can complement traditional mobility programs and extend internationalization opportunities to a wider range of students.

4. A Quantitative Overview of Internationalization: Number /Percentage of International Students in the National Higher Education System.

According to the Ministry of Spanish Universities (2022), there were 84 universities in Spain in 2020-2021, 50 public and 34 private. Spanish universities offer a total of 3,602-degree programs, 2,135 (73%) are offered by public universities.

4.1 The internationalization of Spanish Higher Education

A total of 157,835 foreign students, or 9.4% of all students enrolled in Spanish universities, were registered in the Spanish system. Figure 1 shows that most of them were enrolled in degree programs (27,5%), followed by master's students (21,3%) and doctoral programs (6%).

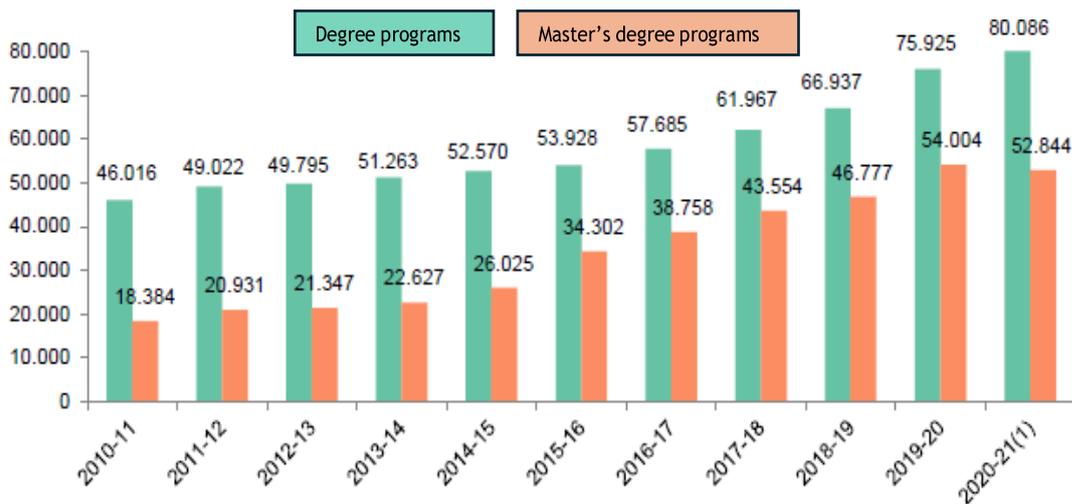


Figure 1. Evolution of the number of international students registered in university degrees and Master's degrees (2010-2021).

Source: Ministerio de Universidades (2022, 86)

As can be inferred from Figure 1, the total number of international students enrolled in 2020-2021 was 132,930. This includes both students who are enrolled in one or two semesters (primarily from the USA and the EU) and those who are enrolled in full degree programs (students from Latin America and the Caribbean). Italy, France, the United States (USA), Colombia, Germany, and Mexico are the nations of origin of most students.

The number of outgoing students (Spanish students who participate in study abroad programs) was 42,253. Spanish students in mobility programs study mostly in European countries such as Italy, France, and Poland followed by Latin America, the United States and Canada.

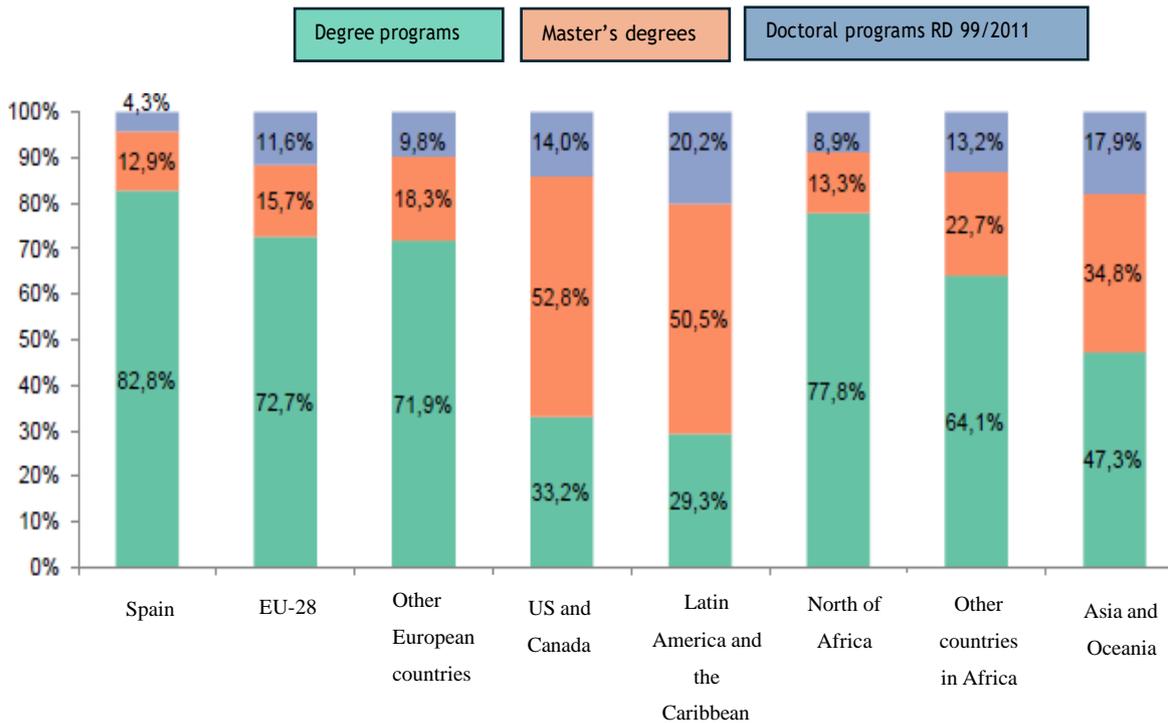


Figure 2. Distribution of the number of students registered in Spanish universities by nationality and study level (Year 2020-21).

Source: Ministerio de Universidades (2022, 86).

According to the data presented in Figure 2, students from North America, Canada, and Latin America primarily registered in Master's and PhD programs, while European, African, and Asian international students were primarily enrolled in Spanish degree programs. This could be linked to an important barrier encountered by international students who wish to study undergraduate programs in Spain: the compulsory official examination to enter higher education institutions (EVAU). The process to obtain a similar standardized test is non-existent in other countries and so entry into undergraduate programs is difficult to process.

It is also pertinent to mention that Spain is one of the EU countries with the highest levels of mobility flows, in terms of incoming and outgoing students and staff, followed by Italy, France and Germany. Spain's active participation in mobility programs such as Erasmus+ and its extensive network of partner institutions contribute significantly to its leading position in mobility flows. According to the *Erasmus+ Annual Report 2022*, published by the European Commission, regarding mobility programs within the European Union, it is notable that while doctoral-level mobility (1,3%) is less frequent than undergraduate (62,5%) and master's-level mobility (33,8%), it nevertheless remains noteworthy.

5. Summary of Research and Report Results of National and International Organizations concerning the Internalization of National HEIs

The report *Internationalization of Higher Education* (2015), commissioned by the European Parliament, was informed by the findings of two surveys. These surveys were conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU) and the European Association for International Education, using the Delphi method, which involved a panel of global experts in international education. The main research question posed in the report was: “How can 'internationalization' be understood within the context of higher education, and what global strategies are being pursued in this area?” (p. 287).

The report compared ten European countries in terms of the following factors: the impact of European policies and initiatives; the influence of European programs and policies; national policies and their influence; stakeholders and funding schemes; the effectiveness of institutional policies; key performance indicators; and, finally, challenges and aspirations.

According to the findings of this report, Spain has strong ties with the European Union and has participated very actively in European programs, particularly Erasmus, since its accession in 1986. National strategies have also depended significantly on funding from European Commission (EC) programs and projects. Internationalization in higher education has been a priority in Spain for almost 30 years, starting with development cooperation programs coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, mainly aimed at Latin American and North African countries. The Program for Inter-university Cooperation and Scientific Research (PCI), which is still active nowadays, was one of those initiatives (Rumbley and Howard, 2013).

In 2008, ‘Universidad.es’, a public foundation, was created to promote Spain globally, as a destination for international academics, both students and staff. And in 2009, the government published its *Estrategia Universidad 2015* (EU2015), a plan to improve the Spanish university system, which placed internationalization at the heart of university policy. Unfortunately, the lack of funding and subsequent cuts to education budgets severely limited the efficacy of this and other programs during this time.

A strategy for the internationalization of Spanish universities was developed by the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (2016) centered around two main axes: quality and language. The main objective of this strategy was to consolidate a strong and internationally attractive higher education system that promotes the incoming and outgoing of the best students, lecturers, researchers, and administrative staff, as well as the quality of education, the Spanish language, and the internationalization of academic programs and RDI activities. The strategy aimed to increase Spain's attractiveness and international competitiveness and to promote its knowledge-based socio-economic development.

Spanish universities themselves play an active role in internationalization policy. The Commission for Internationalization and Cooperation of Spanish Universities (CICUE), the sectoral committee for internationalization of the Spanish Conference of Rectors (CRUE), has a forum in which those responsible for internationalization can collaborate and coordinate joint projects. As mentioned in previous sections of this paper, higher education in Spain is decentralized and this has resulted, for example, in a lack of national guidelines and nationally agreed support services for incoming students and scholars.

La internacionalización de la universidad española y su contribución a la proyección exterior del país (Crespo MacLennan, 2011) highlights the wide gap between Spain's history, economy and culture and its low position in international rankings. This is attributed to a lack of sufficient and stable funding required to implement changes; short-term leadership (rectors are elected for short periods of time), priorities and planning; a strong 'inward orientation' – universities tend to recruit from among their own staff rather than looking 'outside'; low English proficiency among the general population, including academics; a relative lack of programs in English; a University reform that does not have much in common with the rest of Europe (4+1 instead of 3+2) and, finally, a continued focus on quantitative aspects of internationalization. The report concludes that "leadership – at national and institutional levels – appears to be the most important element to ensure the implementation of an effective and sustainable internationalization agenda" (p. 176).

Some of these ideas are also presented in a SWOT analysis included in the document on the Strategy for the Internationalization of Spanish Universities 2015-2020 (p. 20). According to the aforementioned analysis, the main strengths in Spain were the

quality of teaching; Spanish university students' appraisal abroad (particularly in specific areas); the structures for internationalization at national level *Servicio Español para la Internacionalización de la Educación* (SEPIE), the extended international network of the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport and other official organizations such as the Ministry of Labor Migration and Social Security; the Digital Office of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Enterprise; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation; the Spanish Institute of Foreign Trade and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation among many others; as well as its notable participation in the EHEA and EU forums on internationalization strategies and actions.

Weaknesses include, among others, the low number of joint degrees and courses offered in English and other international languages and the difficulties in attracting international lecturers and administrative staff. Additionally, the higher average costs and longer duration of study programs compared to other countries, as well as the low position in global university rankings were also mentioned.

Opportunities mentioned included the development and implementation of joint degrees with foreign universities, as well as the creation of new European educational programs (Erasmus+) and R+D programs (Horizon, 2020).

As far as threats are concerned, those identified within the SWOT analysis included difficulties and obstacles in involving companies in international projects; difficulties in staff renewal due to national regulations and budgets; the estimated decrease in structural funding, difficulty in following the technological and methodological developments related to online training; and the difficulty of attracting and retaining talented people.

Finally, the Spanish Service for the Internationalization of Education (SEPIE) concluded, in its report *The Internationalization of Higher Education in Spain. Reflections and Perspectives* (2017), that Spain should go beyond the student mobility offered under the Erasmus+ program, as student mobility is just one of many global initiatives that contribute to the internationalization of universities. According to this report "participation in world events, fairs, transnational projects, and new employability formula are the defining features of a young organization that is very active in promoting the internationalization of the Spanish higher education system" (p.27).

Thus, even though Spain seems to do very well in the quantitative part of internationalization of their higher education institutions, as the numbers above show Figure 1 and Figure 2, more work is needed in the qualitative part of the internationalization process.

We are aware that, through the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE), an effort is being made to promote more Internationalization at Home (IaH) practices, and they are encouraging the creation of intercultural campi (campuses) among Spanish universities. However, each university should analyze its institutional context and scenario and try to work its potential with their academic and administrative staff to work in a systemic approach, focusing on their internationalization process. This should be done thinking of the quality of each internationalization process and considering that the most important IaH element is the internationalization of the curriculum. To do a critical analysis of the curriculum and analysis of pedagogy should be also done. Therefore, work, training and reflection should be promoted in Spanish universities. The experiences of academic staff who teach Spanish and international students in shared classrooms, as well as the experience of international students in those classrooms, is important to start reflection and analysis of the current situation. The following research questions were followed to conduct semi-structured personal interviews to academic staff and to international students, to help us understand and reflect on the experience and perceptions of the internationalization processes.

6. Research questions

Developing specific and precise research questions becomes crucial, as we explore the subtleties and the particularities of internationalization in the Spanish higher education system. Since our goal is to define the current state of internationalization in Spanish universities by identifying trends, benefits, challenges and needs, our research questions are related to multiculturalism at both institutional and national level. Trends are important because they are the policies that are being implemented (top-down) and that affect teaching and learning processes.

Then the benefits of teaching multicultural classrooms are important to be acknowledged, so they can be continued and promoted to more academic staff. And analysis of the challenges faced by academic staff and international students is important

to help them overcome such challenges and needs and to try to implement new programs within the institution. Multicultural classrooms are the reality of the current context of Spanish higher education institutions. It is key to understand, for the main participants, how it is viewed and how they can be helped to be improved.

The following research questions have become a compass for our investigation, helping us to successfully navigate the complexity of the problem in hand.

1. How do international students experience higher education in Spain in terms of diversity and multiculturalism?
2. What are the perceptions and attitudes of teaching staff towards managing multicultural and diverse classrooms in higher education institutions in Spain?
3. What are the challenges and barriers faced by both international students and teaching staff in promoting diversity and multiculturalism in higher education in Spain?
4. How effective is the current training and support provided to teaching staff for managing multicultural and diverse classrooms in higher education institutions in Spain?
5. What are the best practices and strategies for promoting diversity and multiculturalism in higher education in Europe and how can they be integrated into the training curriculum and teaching materials?

7. Methodology

Qualitative methodology was used to collect the data. Since the majority of internationalization reports about Spain only highlight the quantitative aspects of the internationalization process of higher education institutions, namely the number of students and staff participating in mobility programs, using a qualitative methodology gave us the opportunity to look into what is being done, and assess how strategies and policies are affecting the experiences of international students and staff members. This methodology helped participants express their ideas and the challenges that they face on a daily basis when teaching and learning in a multicultural classroom (Creswell, 2009). The tools used were semi-structured personal interviews with open-ended questions.

The questions to teachers were related to their experiences and perspectives in teaching preparation, institutional support, challenges, and the ideal context for improving their teaching in multicultural classes. On the other hand, the focus of the questions for international students focused on integration, challenges faced in their courses, as well as the main differences with their classes in their universities of origin. The interviews were taped, transcribed, and coded. They last between forty and sixty minutes. The following tables (1 and 2) summarize the main characteristics and profiles of the participants. All the participants signed an informed consent form. The approval number of the Ethics Committee is the following: File reference number 03/2023. Ethics Committee of Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CZU).

Table 1.Characteristics of academic staff

	Gender	Age	Faculty	Field of expertise	Years of experience in teaching	Years of experience in teaching multicultural classrooms
1	Female	50	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Communication; Political Relations	20	9
2	Female	51	School of Engineering & Architecture	Artificial Intelligence; Computer Engineering	12	7
3	Female	55	Institute of Modern Languages	Education; CLIL	29	23
4	Female	52	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Business Administration; Leadership	16	12
5	Male	46	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Audio-visual Communication	12	9
6	Male	45	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Marketing	13	6
7	Male	45	Institute of Humanism & Society	Sociology; Communication	11	10

As can be inferred from Table 1, all the academic staff interviewed have a significant amount of teaching experience including intercultural classes.

Table 2 Characteristics of international students

	Gender	Age	Faculty	Field of study	Country of origin
1	Female	23	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Political Sciences	Italy
2	Female	22	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Communication	Germany
3	Female	21	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Communication	Austria
4	Female	22	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Advertising	Italy
5	Female	19	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Journalism & Communication	USA
6	Male	22	School of Communication & Social Sciences	Translation	Belgium

Table 2 shows the characteristics of the international students interviewed. Five were participating in Erasmus program and 1 was studying the full degree program at USJ, all at undergraduate level. Their time at the university ranged between one semester, one year and two years.

8. Findings

After coding the interviews, the main common themes were identified and are described below in terms of individual experiences and approaches divided into Benefits, Challenges, Mechanisms and Needs, firstly for academic staff and then for international students.

8.1 Academic Staff: Individual Experiences and Approaches

All seven academic staff interviewed have extensive experience teaching multicultural classrooms (see Table 1). The average number of years of instruction in multicultural classrooms is between 7 and 10 years. They all agreed that it was a positive

and enriching experience, but they also acknowledged that at times it was also a challenge for them. At San Jorge University, where our research has been carried out, the teaching staff all attend a short Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) training program which is very useful before beginning to teach multicultural classes. However, most of the teaching staff interviewed expressed a need for additional pedagogical support, particularly in the form of a training course that focuses on intercultural classrooms and on managing diversity in the classroom, mainly intercultural pedagogy. As Participant 2 affirmed “there are moments that we do not know where to go when facing issues, mainly learning or integration issues, with our international students. It would be good to have a department or unit, that helped us out with this”.

Teachers affirm that the current assignment of workload at San Jorge University is fair and well paid. Academic staff who conduct classes in English earn one and a half times more than they do in classes conducted in Spanish. For instance, a 6 ECTS credit course, taught by a professor who has undergone CLIL training, is deemed to be worth 9 ECTS credits. All the participants considered this as a fair deal. According to Participant 6, “The number of credits we are assigned for the extra work we have to do is fair”.

Nevertheless, in general, they saw a need for more training and support in multicultural classes and in intercultural competence and intercultural pedagogy. They suggested the creation of a service to help them during their classes and when they face new issues or challenges.

As for the pedagogy currently used by the academic staff, they all adopt a similar approach to their intercultural teaching, such as using examples from the various countries represented in their classrooms (case studies). They encourage students to share their perspectives on how different situations are handled in their respective countries, as discussed during their lecture. This represents a challenge for the teachers as they must effectively introduce these examples into their lessons and work thoroughly on them. However, they affirm that this classroom dynamic motivates local students to pay more attention and to actively participate in class discussions. Participant 6 states that “international students (maybe specify (again) where they are from – not Chinese!) are used to debates in class and to participating more in discussions, which creates a very nice environment in the classes. This also motivates local students to participate more than they usually do”.

Some teachers stated that the management of curricula and the implementation of continuous assessment at San Jorge University, which is a relatively recent change brought about during the Bologna Process, have had a favorable impact on the engagement of international students in their courses, “It is nice to see international and local students working together if you implement the correct learning activity” (Participant 3). Additionally, the emphasis on practical learning rather than theoretical instruction contributes to the success of multicultural classrooms., thanks you the use of group work, debate, pair work, active participation, and student centered learning. Bridging the knowledge gap is a crucial challenge that needs to be addressed. In this sense, teachers acknowledge that the proficiency level of international students can differ from their local peers, either being lower or higher. This implies challenges and difficulties in creating effective lesson plans and, therefore, in preparing their lessons. Moreover, teachers need to be aware of the varying communication styles across cultures, as it greatly influences the dynamics within the classroom. As Participant 6 affirms “Sometimes there are cultural elements that are difficult to understand when trying to communicate, and I feel a little bit nervous”. In relation to this, we find it relevant to mention that at San Jorge University classes are small and, therefore, the contact with professors is constant and communication between students and teachers is a very close two-way process.

None of them have experienced racism or discrimination in their classes. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are situations where mixing students during group work can present challenges. International students tend to form their own groups, and the same can be observed among local students. International students who were interviewed affirmed that collaborating with local students (specifically Spanish students) can be highly demanding, requiring a considerable amount of time to establish coordination and to understand how they are going to do the assigned task.

Professors believe that the initial training they received in CLIL was beneficial for their early experiences in multicultural classrooms and teaching in English. However, they now feel the need for additional training. They specifically express their need for more knowledge in intercultural issues and intercultural pedagogies. One of them emphasized the challenges of effectively communicating with international students and expressed the wish to be better trained for such situations.

Benefits

The main benefits are how these classes are “different” from the rest of the classes they teach. It is encouraging for them to contribute to a good environment and the way in which international students participate in the classes brings new perspectives to the content they teach. As one of the academic staff explained, “international students participate more in class and give very good examples from their own countries” (Participant 6), which makes the local students think about certain realities and situations that they take for granted or have never thought about.

Challenges

During interviews, some teachers highlighted a major obstacle they face, which involves effectively managing classes with a higher proportion of international students compared to local students. This scenario is frequently encountered in the School of Communication and Social Sciences, which attracts a significant number of international students. Consequently, local students often experience feelings of exclusion, resulting in their limited participation in class discussions and activities. As Participant 1 states “There have been some courses, mostly in the past, where I had more international students than local students, and it was very hard to manage the classes. However, after reflecting on that experience I do believe it was a question of character and bad leadership more than a cultural thing”. The lack of interaction between local and international students can lead to the formation of isolated groups among the international students, hindering the integration process. Another challenge that was mentioned was the limitations that some of the teachers feel when teaching in English, as it is not their mother tongue, and they lack fluency and confidence.

Teachers also mentioned the different cultural approaches to learning and working. These standards and ways of learning vary across different cultures such as German, Korean, and Italian. These variations can impact the classroom environment. An important barrier faced by teaching staff is the need to possess a high level of English proficiency. Moreover, they emphasized the challenge of effectively communicating with students who adopt a different learning and communication approach compared to local students. As a result, they are required to invest more time and effort in thoroughly preparing assessments, because they do not feel secure enough about their English level tasks. Additionally, they voiced concerns about the inadequate adaptation of certain

student services, such as the absence of a psychological helpline, to cater to the requirements of international students.

Mechanisms

As stated in previous sections, at San Jorge University, academic staff receives a Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) training program, which teachers said to be beneficial and useful for their early experiences in multicultural classrooms. Nevertheless, most interviewees affirmed that they needed pedagogical support and additional training specifically focused on intercultural classes and on managing diversity in the classroom. Moreover, it was emphasized that there is a requirement for enhanced intercultural communication training and training on effectively addressing diverse learning styles based on students' cultural backgrounds. Additionally, one of the educators asserted the need for additional support from other university departments, such as the Psychology Department.

Needs

Participants expressed the need for further training in intercultural pedagogies and better strategies for handling group work involving individuals from diverse cultures. Additionally, some of them emphasized the importance of enhancing their English language skills. They mentioned a short training course they received some years ago about adaptation processes and intercultural competence, as useful, and affirmed that it should have been maintained.

In conclusion, all the academic staff interviewed feel and perceive that having international students in their classes is good, it is a challenge for their teaching, but they miss more pedagogical support given by the institution.

8.2 International Students: Individual Experiences and Approaches

Most of the students involved in the study have prior international experience. They unanimously expressed their fondness for being a part of a multicultural classroom.

They enjoy the inclusive atmosphere and the effective learning methods employed. According to Participant 1, "at the beginning was hard, but then I started to feel very well, so well that I came only for one semester, and I decided to extend my stay for a whole year. I love it here". They perceive the academic staff as approachable and supportive, always ready to lend a hand and ensure their well-being. They have never

experienced racism or discrimination although one international full student affirmed that she has felt rejected in some group projects because her Spanish was not very good. According to this student, “I have found hard to do group work, Spaniards express themselves in a very different way, they cry a lot when they are stressed out”. The way local students communicate seems to be a stress and distress factor since it is (culturally) very different from her own culture.

Students have a very positive perception of their experience in multicultural classrooms. They find classes consisting of both local and international students more enjoyable than those where there are only local students. One participant specifically mentioned a notable difference in teaching methods, with San Jorge University adopting a more practical approach while her home country favored a more theoretical approach. As Participant 4 explains “It took me a while to understand how to prepare for my exams or practical exercises. Back home the classes are all theory, and we just have to memorize for the exams. But here, it is very different. This has been very hard for me”. They are excited about the chance to study abroad and view it as a valuable addition to their CV, which will greatly enhance their career opportunities in the near future. According to Participant 2 “This international experience is not my last one. I am going to continue studying abroad next year. I think it is a great benefit for me and my professional future”.

Benefits

All the students unanimously agreed that being in multicultural classrooms offers numerous benefits and positive aspects. They not only acquire knowledge more effectively, but also embrace the challenge of improving their communication skills and expressing their perspectives and points of view while understanding others'. Moreover, they appreciate the different teaching methods employed in these classrooms, which prioritize practical learning over theoretical approaches. As Participant 6 explains “It has been so different in the classroom. I really enjoyed having so much contact with professors and with local students”.

The opportunity to study abroad fills them with excitement as they recognize its potential to significantly enhance and improve their CVs in their near future. In fact, some of them have already planned to engage in volunteer programs in Africa during the summer, while others are going abroad next year (participants 3 and 5).

Challenges

Regarding international students, there are two significant aspects to be considered. Firstly, there is the perspective and experience of incoming short-stay students, primarily those participating in the Erasmus program. These students greatly appreciate the institutional orientation provided by San Jorge University, as it helps them integrate better into their new environment. On the other hand, full-time international students who come to Spain to pursue their entire degree have a different experience. They often feel a lack of support during their adaptation process, as they do not have an institutional orientation process, and find themselves navigating a completely different system, sometimes feeling quite lost. One of the students in this situation stated that she has felt totally alone and very lost in a completely different system.

Mechanisms

All the students agreed on the great support they have received at San Jorge University. The orientation days proved to be immensely beneficial, with particular mention of the session on culture shock and the adaptation process. However, it is worth mentioning that full-time students, in contrast to their international counterparts who join for a shorter duration, expressed feelings of loneliness during the process, as they do not receive the same orientation as international students who come for one semester or one year. Consequently, it is essential to provide additional support tailored to the needs of these full-time international students.

Needs

Students affirmed that the essential skills and competences required to be successful in multicultural classes included the following: collaborative teamwork, adaptability, effective communication skills, open-mindedness, and the willingness to step out of one's comfort zone. Access to the international office and guidance from advisors proved to be immensely helpful. Furthermore, they conducted a comparison between their local university system and that of San Jorge University.

9. Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from this research study, whose aim was to provide an overview of the current situation in Spain regarding the internationalization of higher education. The first and most obvious is that many international students choose Spain as an attractive destination for their study abroad. However, despite this clear impact on the Spanish economy, these kind of educational programs and initiatives receive little or no funding and are not considered a priority for Spanish higher education institutions. Moreover, there is a lack of resources allocated to strengthen internationalized programs, from leadership (qualified and internationalized roles) to promoting the recruitment of non-local academic and administrative staff. Thus, more support is needed at all levels to maintain and improve the quality of what is offered. Support for academic and administrative staff is key to maintaining quality and raising it to higher standards. For academic staff there is a need for more intercultural pedagogical support, as well as some ongoing support for special cases during their teaching.

The internationalization process should be viewed in a systemic way, coming from leadership positions but also including administrative staff. Internationalization should not only be viewed in a quantitative way, but in a qualitative way, including the creation and development of an intercultural campus where the internationalization of the curriculum as well as the development of intercultural competences among all the students (not only those who experience studying abroad) should be a priority.

It is also relevant to mention that more courses taught in English are needed, and an improvement in the English level of academic staff is also required. Additionally, restructuring to a three-year degree program and a two-year master's degree program would be also necessary, in order to align Spanish universities with EHEA requirements.

Universities should be prepared for this number of incoming students. After many years without significant change, the lack of forward-looking roles in university leadership positions shows the need for important structural changes. The future of Europe and the globalized knowledge society of the twenty-first century lies in internationalization and diversity, which are here to stay. Spanish universities should and must meet the challenge and improve the quality of their programs to attract a broad range of international students from different nationalities.

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