

THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SPAIN

REFLECTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES



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Over the last three decades, the internationalisation of higher education in Spain has undoubtedly made considerable progress, although it has not been constant. It was just over a decade ago that the majority of Spanish Universities even developed international agendas with the support of various government-backed initiatives. As a result of great efforts in recent years the number of international students in our universities has increased to over 85.000 over half of which were in the Erasmus programme.

The Spanish government is strongly committed to internationalisation through the Strategy for the Internationalisation of Spanish Universities, adopted in 2015, on the basis of two clear premises:

- The need for close collaboration between all the actors involved.
- The recognition of the huge potential of our university system.

The Strategy for Internationalisation of Spanish Universities is founded on a concept that goes further than simply promoting student mobility and signing international agreements. It takes into account the internationalisation of university curriculum, research, accreditation, evaluation systems, etc. After analyzing the current challenges and the main factors of internationalisation, a plan of action was proposed with objectives and initiatives related to four main axes:

- 1) A highly internationalized university system.
- 2) The international appeal of universities.
- 3) The international competitiveness of the environment
- 4) Higher education cooperation with other parts of the world, defining a cooperative geostrategy with other countries.

Higher education is one of the pillars of “soft diplomacy” and has been used as such by other European countries in past centuries.

The Spanish higher education system has historically had a great influence on Ibero-America, and its diplomatic role is experiencing a resurgence in the 21st century.

SEPIE backs a wide range of international initiatives, going beyond the student mobility offered by the successful Erasmus+ program. This is because student mobility is not the only factor behind the internalization of universities, it is just one of many global initiatives. 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 internationalisation of the Spanish higher education system.

ANECA, the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation, has been an extremely active participant in international activities, both as a means to contribute to the internationalisation of Quality Assurance (QA) practices and as part of the efforts made by the Spanish higher education system to align itself with the European higher education area.

Three main outputs can be identified as part of ANECA’s international capabilities

- (i) Political leadership
- (ii) Technical competence
- (iii) Geographical focus.

These three provide a roadmap for international engagement.

ANECA’s international activities are based on a strong set of bilateral alliances with peer organizations in Europe, Latin America, and the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The internationalisation of research is defined as a group of elements that help to understand and develop research as a phenomenon involving global inspiration, action, and ambition. The internationalisation of research is superior to that of nationalization or regionalization of the same because it generates more opportunities to solve current and future problems in society.

The internationalisation of research is not a recent phenomenon, it has long been part of the fabric of the classical university tradition as a result of the academic mobility that began in medieval Europe. This is the context in which the origins of scientific exchange and the mobility of knowledge can be placed.

A (2008) study described the internationalisation of research as a fragmented and fairly inconsistent process that is by no means founded on a systematic, sustained, and coherent system with a satisfactory course of action.

There are multiple factors that affect the internationalisation of research in Spain, there is the complexity of the vertical and horizontal distribution of jurisdiction, the lack of consistent and sustained strategy, and the limitation and thinning out of funding.

To remedy these problems we can point out the need for improvement in three fundamental areas.

- International talent must be attracted to Spanish universities and scientific community,
- It must be made easier to give researchers and research groups access to the world's leading research spaces.
- Funds and incentives need to be generated to gain mass access to sources of inputs for global research projects.

Language Policy is a controversial issue in Spain and many European countries, many assume that English taught programmes (ETP's) are always the best instrument for the internationalisation of Education institutions. However they only represent 6% of programs in Europe. In order to promote a better higher education system we need to defend multilingualism as a necessary factor of internationalisation. This means the promotion of other major world languages such as Arabic, Chinese, French, and Russian to promote a rich global heritage and the furthering of intercultural communication and understanding.

There are several consequences when dealing with ETP's, including the questioning of the quality of teaching and learning, the political and social ramifications of not teaching in the local language, and the availability of qualified students and staff to make programs viable.

More work needs to be done to develop the potential of Spanish as a higher education language by exploring possibilities not only in the Spanish speaking world, but also with other countries and regions with a growing interest in our language and culture.

The Times Higher Education (THE) is the only ranking that specifically reflects the internationalisation of universities, entitled "The World's Most International Universities." It uses three typical indicators of internationalisation and complements them with an indicator of international reputation. International staff, international students, international co-authors in journal publications and international reputations are all given the equal weight of 25%.

Higher education has become a key factor in the global economy and society, institutions of higher education contribute to Sustainable Development Goals, innovation and development, and the creation of professionals with skills suited to a globalized government. Some of the most important main characteristics of the internationalisation of higher education in Europe include its position within the European Higher Education and Research Areas, it's engagement with its formal colonial domain, Latin America, and its relation to the United States.

Spain's international agenda is shaped by the ever changing political climate in Europe and other parts of the world in regards to globalization, internationalisation, immigration, and other matters. There will be shifts toward some subjects and away from others, so investing strategically in a country's research and educational systems will increase Spain's attractiveness to international students and staff.

