Universities Going Global? Comparative Perspectives on the Internationalization of Postgraduate Education in Brazil and Finland

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Introduction

Globalization has reshaped the life of peoples and institutions (Santos 2017). As important structures in society, universities have not stood averse to globalizing forces (Deem, Mok, and Lucas 2008; Douglass 2005; Leite and Genro 2012; Stromquist 2007). Since the 1990s, states have endorsed global market competition as an ordering principle for higher education dynamics. Universities keep on adapting their work to fit new agendas with which they now deal: they seem to be 'going global', as the state shifts the conceptions of what the 'national task' of universities would be.

As postgraduate education is supposed to be the highest stage of schooling, training knowledge producers and academic leaders (Nerad 2010), it is important to understand how individuals dealing with it make sense of the institutional changes brought about by internationalization, as the shift towards foreign audiences in education and knowledge production demands the update of curriculum, management, evaluation and funding formulae. It is furthermore important to understand how this phenomenon affects very dissimilar national contexts, differentially positioned within the global field of higher education (Marginson 2008).

Problem statement

The research problem guiding my doctoral research is: How are individuals in Brazilian and Finnish contexts of postgraduate education processing changes in university as internationalization takes place?

In order to study the national contexts of postgraduate education, I make use of the notion of 'fields of social action' (Bleiklie and Kogan 2006), considering national higher education systems are composed by a multiplicity of arenas which do not necessarily conform to the same social rules and values in their modes of operation. I work with three fields of social action: national policy, educational institution and academic work. I pursue the following specific questions:

How can change associated to internationalization of higher education be identified in the different fields of social action?

How can power associated to internationalization of higher education be identified in the different fields of social action?

How is internationalization understood and practiced in the different fields of social action?

How do individuals organize their political action to effect internationalization?

Theoretical background

The theoretical-conceptual framework is organized by the integration of the traditional higher education studies (Teichler 1996) and Brazilian social thought (Schwarcz and Botelho 2011) on university. This operation is conducted according to the critical paradigm (Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg 2011). Universities are seen as institutions able to recontextualize international trends, for instance processing propositions elaborated from the Global North to meet the conditions of Global South (Leite 2010). They can both fight off and be vectors of dependency (Fernandes 1975; Ribeiro 1975; Vieira Pinto 1962).

Internationalization of higher education is seen as a process associated to the broader phenomenon of globalization and as an asymmetrical process that concentrates power with the political coupling of ideology and technique (Halliday 2001; Santos 2017). Globalization entails diffusion of hegemony and promotion of an elite research university model for higher education (Hartmann 2014; Marginson and van der Wende 2007; Ordorika 2007; Robertson 2012). By resorting to critical internationalization studies (Leal, Oregioni, and Moraes 2018; Pashby and Andreotti 2016; Stein 2016, 2017; Vavrus and Pekol 2018), I consider how scholars who operate in international interfaces are affected by differential political dynamics.

Methodology

Adopting the perspective of comparative higher education (Kogan 1998; Marginson and Mollis 2001; Teichler 2014; Välimaa and Nokkala, 2014), this research is designed as a comparative case study (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017). It proceeds a horizontal comparison between Brazilian and Finnish experiences, and vertically concatenates the three fields of social action. The empirical material is comprised by semi-structured interviews with individuals working at each national context, drawing on the statements of policy-makers, institutional managers and professors and students to explore practices related to internationalization in each field of social action. Data is generated through qualitative content analysis (Saldaña 2009). The categories of change and power are sought throughout all interviews, allowing for subcategories to emerge.

Contributions to Comparative and International Higher Education

This research contributes to the field of comparative and international higher education by thematizing contexts of postgraduate education, a seldom explored topic in comparative education; and approaching two very dissimilar countries that are not usually compared: Brazil, in Global South, and Finland, in Global North. In terms of the theory activated to interpret data, the combination of critical internationalization studies and Brazilian social yields new perspectives on the political aspects of university change. The cases of Brazil and Finland were selected with the intention to provide contrast (Marginson and Mollis 2001), leading comparative and international higher education to problematize the political limits to internationalization imposed by the North-South divide. Besides the fact that both nations present divergent socio-geographical features, they have taken opposite positions in the global field of higher education. Brazilian policies have characterized a consumer role, while Finnish strategies design 'education export' as a goal for national development.

Main Results

The research will illuminate how internationalization of higher education progresses from the individual academic work to the institutions' functioning. This transition is boosted by national government induction, but is affected by the different histories and social dynamics of the contexts under study. In Brazil, universities start to consolidate *ad hoc* internationalization processes into institutional strategies. Finnish universities experience a more comprehensive

internationalization, articulated to national policy guidelines and networks. The configuration of new thresholds of institutional internationality is operated by a rearrangement of individual's categories of political action.

The research aims to make a seemingly trivial, yet often understated point. Although the isomorphic forces of globalization exert a worldly pull towards a same model – that of the North American elite, 'world-class' research university –, universities race towards it from different starting points around the globe. Therefore, the societal context affects the institutional change brought about by internationalization.

There are mismatches as to what universities are to accomplish with internationalization, and how to do that, both inside and among the fields of social action. However, the learning and the social capital resulting from internationalization experiences equip individuals with strategic skills to progress within the hierarchical scheme of institutions, strengthening their possibilities of entering arenas of decision where they can become agents of change.

The structure of opportunities to do so is less unequal in Finland, where internationalization of higher education is more comprehensive, and there are more developed networks of institutions acting to achieve the goals of national and institutional strategies. In Brazil, postgraduate education is more dependent on steering by the state, and individuals and institutions face many challenges to go global – among them the difficulty to operate in English language. Overall, the change brought about by internationalization in universities relates to fundamental ethical-political tasks: the interaction with the Other and the structure of opportunities to participate in decision-making.

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