The Interplay between the International and European Dimension: A Case Study of the School of Management of Politecnico di Milano

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Abstract

European higher education institutions (HEIs) interpret in a unique way external impulses that play a core role in implementing the international and European dimensions. These dimensions can both converge and diverge inside HEIs, leading to organizational changes. This study aims to investigate the interplay between international and European dimensions, focusing on the case of the School of Management of the Politecnico di Milano. Using the institutional logics' perspective, this qualitative case study analyzes data collected from institutional documents and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that the international and European dimensions diverge because of their institutional logics. Moreover, the individuals are identified as pivotal for successfully incorporating these dimensions within HEIs. Furthermore, the findings show the transformative potential of the European dimension. This study offers researchers and practitioners a new perspective on internationalization and Europeanization, linking these processes to the organizational dynamics of HEIs.

欧洲高等教育机构（HEIs）以独特的方式解读外部影响。这些影响在实施国际和欧洲维度中起着核心作用。这些维度在高等教育机构内部既可以趋同，也可以分化，从而引发组织变革。本研究旨在探讨国际和欧洲维度之间的相互作用，重点分析米兰理工大学管理学院的案例。通过制度逻辑的视角，本质性案例研究分析了从机构文件和半结构化访谈中收集的数据。研究结果表明，由于制度逻辑的不同，国际和欧洲维度存在分歧。此外，个体被认为是在高等教育机构中成功融入这些维度的关键。研究还揭示了欧洲维度的转型潜力。本研究为研究人员和实践者提供了一个关于国际化和欧洲化的新视角，将这些过程与高等教育机构的组织动态联系起来。

Keywords: Europeanization, higher education, higher education institutions, institutional logics, internationalization, Politecnico di Milano

Introduction

The European area is a vivid example of how the context could shape the international development of higher education, given the concurrent presence of both international and European dimensions. The European dimension may be understood, following Radaelli's definition of Europeanisation (2004, p. 3), as the set of formal and informal regulations, procedures, policy paradigms, daily practices, shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the European Union (EU) and in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and are subsequently incorporated in public policies and organizational identity and structure of higher education institutions (HEIs). The development of the European dimension has not always aligned with international development, as it initially focuses on a specific area before fostering broader international development. Consequently, internationalization in the European context can be regarded as a unique phenomenon characterized by a continuous interplay between the international and the European dimensions.

Within the European area, economic, political, and health crises highlight the quintessential role of HEIs in contending with global challenges and that has implications for the internationalization of higher education. In response, the current strategy launched by the European Commission (2022) aims to empower HEIs to carry out European objectives in higher education. European HEIs play a crucial role in interpreting and implementing both international and European dimensions of higher education.

European HEIs are increasingly prominent in the higher education landscape, since they simultaneously foster both dimensions. However, international and European dimensions do not develop in parallel; they can converge and diverge within HEIs, generating organizational changes. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to investigate the interplay between international and European dimensions within a European HEI, specifically the School of Management of Politecnico di Milano in Italy, which comprised both a public and a private sub-organization. The main research question driving this study is: How do international and European dimensions converge and diverge within the School of Management of Politecnico di Milano?

Literature Review

Internationalization and Europeanization are dynamic concepts challenged in their definitions. The debate around these two concepts has been ongoing for almost three decades (Dagen et al., 2019; de Wit, 2024, 2023; de Wit et al., 2015; Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Knight, 2008; Knight & de Wit, 1995; Marginson, 2023). Major discussions currently focus on the necessity of defining internationalization (de Wit, 2024, 2023; Hunter, de Wit, et al., 2023) and adopting a new decolonized approach, that considers emerging countries beyond the Western hemisphere (Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Marginson, 2023). Moreover, the main approach in the literature is to view Europeanization as either a trend or a nuance of internationalization in Europe (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Tight, 2021). This approach leads inevitably to the loss of understanding of the interplay of international and European dimensions, as they are part of a single macro-process. Despite a growing number of recent studies identifying Europeanization of higher education as a distinct process which fosters the European dimension (Butnaru Troncota & Makarychev, 2022; Kushnir & Brooks, 2022), it is still commonly categorized under the broader umbrella of internationalization (Dagen et al., 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Internationalization and Europeanization in higher education are dynamic processes orchestrated by HEIs, pragmatically implemented in alignment with their organizational practices and identities through strategies and individuals. The primary goal of internationalization and Europeanization is to integrate, respectively, the international or European dimension into the institutions' core missions, responding to external impulses. On the one hand, this integration occurs via a modality that is coordinated with national regulatory frameworks in mind. On the other hand, it aligns with European principles, values, standards, and procedures. This working definition showcases through words how easy is to conflate

internationalization and Europeanization as the same concepts, even though they are distinct processes with different goals and scopes. The working definition is loosely based on the works by Knight and de Wit (1995), de Wit et al. (2015) and Hunter et al. (2023). It adopts an HEI-centered approach, acknowledging the pivotal role played by HEIs (Buckner, 2022; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Stensaker et al., 2019; Tight, 2021). The definition is not intended to be ideal or definitive but aims to delineate the directions for navigating the concepts of internationalization and Europeanization within this study.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs the perspective of institutional logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991), which are defined as 'the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality' (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). This perspective clarifies how HEIs can simultaneously pursue both international and European dimensions, driven by logics that sometimes overlap and sometimes diverge. Specifically, this study employs the four main principles of institutional logics concerning organizations (Thornton et al., 2012): historical contingency, multiple levels of analysis, duality of agency and structure, and their material and symbolic composition. Moreover, the interinstitutional system proposed by Thornton et al. (2012) is pivotal in identifying the main logics fostering internationalization and Europeanization within HEIs, namely: market, profession, corporation, community, and state.

Methodology

The research design used for this analysis is qualitative case study (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) argues the importance of this design to examine cases where the context and the phenomenon are intertwined and strictly bounded. Driven by the institutional logics' theory, the study explores the multiple levels of analysis, considering the School of Management and its individuals (Merriam, 1998). The analysis, guided by an interpretive constructionist approach to identify multiple and distinct perspectives on the same phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), aims to explore the interplay between international and European dimensions within the context of the School of Management. Data were collected from institutional documents and from semi-structured interviews with participants, utilizing a codebook based on the theoretical framework.

Participants

The participants (n=10) were chosen through purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) from the academic and administrative staff of the School of Management, who are directly involved in internationalization and represents either the public (n=5) or the private sub-organization (n=5). The aim was to have the most possible comprehensive view of the international and European dimensions in the School of Management, as these participants are knowledgeable, experienced, and can bring a variety of perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Findings

The analysis has shown that the public and the private sub-organizations of the School of Management, while benefiting from a shared overarching strategy and a common approach, pursue different operational priorities. The public sub-organization fosters both an international and European dimension, whereas the private one prioritizes the international dimension. Economic benefits are not the primary drivers fostering international and European dimensions in either sub-organization. Additionally, the activities embedding logics differ between the two sub-organizations based on their operational priorities. However, it is common for both to primarily implement activities that are more related to dissemination and cooperation than to mobility.

The analyzed data revealed that individuals, through their own logics, shape activities fostering the international and European dimensions, thereby influencing the organizational practices and identities. The primary logics identified among the individuals are personal enrichment and professional development. Furthermore, it emerged that European practices are sometimes incorporated into broader international activities, in response to the lack of standards and instruments, particularly at the national level. The implementation of European standards and practices leads to a spillover of logics, impacting the main organizational rationales for international development.

Discussion

The findings indicate that international and European dimensions diverge due to the institutional logics embedded in the institutional activities. Despite the limitations of a single case study, this analysis raises the question of whether economic benefits and mobility remain key factors of international development. Additionally, the study highlights the crucial role of individuals for international and European development. The sense of belonging individuals feel towards the organization reinforces the consistency of internationalization and Europeanization strategies of the School of Management. The findings emphasize the need to view individuals as essential for successful internationalization and Europeanisation inside HEIs.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the European dimension has the potential to transform organizational practices and identities within HEIs. While this research illustrates the transformative potential of the European dimension, it also raises the question of whether this impact is beneficial or detrimental to internationalization. Finally, the findings highlight how international and European dimensions follow a cycle, illustrated in Figure 1, which is closely intertwined with HEI strategies and individuals and shapes their organizational practices and identities.

Figure 1.

Internationalization and Europeanization Cycle
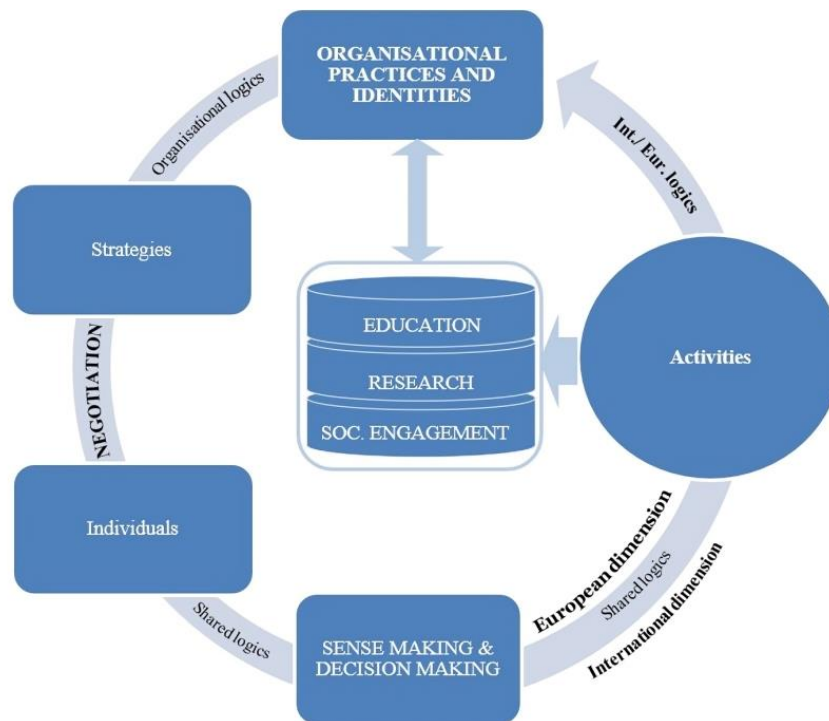
Note. The figure has been created by the author.

Conclusion

This study offers researchers and practitioners a new perspective on internationalization and Europeanization by illustrating how these two distinct processes are linked to the organizational dynamics of HEIs. International and European dimensions converge and diverge following a cyclical development path within HEIs, driven throughout by institutional logics. By following the logics, this approach captures the dynamic nature of internationalization and Europeanization, addressing the challenges of defining these concepts in a fixed manner and instead focusing on their evolving trajectories.

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