

Portuguese Institutions' Strategies and Challenges to Attract International Students: External Makeover or Internal Transformation?

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ABSTRACT

Public institutions in Portugal have not invested in strategies to attract international students until recently, when the adoption of new legislation and a national strategy for internationalization created more appealing conditions for it. This article aims to study the strategies institutions employ to recruit international students in a country less attractive than the major receiving countries and the main challenges they encounter. The study draws on interviews with top and middle managers in two public universities. The findings identify three types of strategies: institutional branding, revision of admission procedures, and curricular adjustments. The main challenges are the creation of institutional structures with an exclusive remit for international students and the choice of teaching language, despite a prevailing opinion that the Portuguese language should be maintained as a competitive advantage.

Keywords: challenges, institutional strategies, international student recruitment, Portugal, small countries

INTRODUCTION

The geography of international student mobility is in a state of flux, as an increasing number of countries are now actively engaged in the recruitment of international students. This is evident in the diminishing global share of the four key players—the

USA, the UK, Australia, and Canada (Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2013)—and in the diversification of mobility destinations (Börjesson, 2017; Brooks & Waters, 2011; França, Alves, & Padilla, 2018). A tendency toward regionalization has also been observed recently (Becker & Kolte, 2012; Kondakci, 2011), as certain countries become regional education hubs, which recruit students from neighboring countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, or the United Arab Emirates (Cross-Border Education Research Team, 2018). Having improved their higher education offerings, countries that were traditionally sending students abroad (e.g. China, Mexico or South Korea) are now also becoming receiving countries (Becker & Kolte, 2012). In Europe, the big player countries like the UK, France, or Germany are also losing their lion's share of international students. With a declining young population and reduced public funding for higher education, European countries with little incentive and tradition for enrolling international students in the past are taking measures to boost their attractiveness (Cox, 2012; França et al., 2018; Frølich & Stensaker, 2010; Kubiciel-Lodzińska & Ruszczak, 2016; Urbanovič, Wilkins, & Huisman, 2016).

In Portugal, too, the recruitment of full-degree international students is gaining importance for higher education institutions (Guerreiro, 2015). Changes in the environment, on the one hand, and political actions, on the other, have favored this recent priority; these changes include diminishing state funding; declining enrollments and pessimistic demographic projections (Dias, Mendes, Magalhães & Infante, 2013); the prioritization of international recruitment in the recent strategy for the internationalization of Portuguese higher education (Ministry of Regional Development & Ministry of Education, 2014); and the Statute of the International Student, a new piece of legislation from 2014, which allows public institutions to charge higher fees for international students. However, in the European higher education landscape, when compared to Northern European countries, Portugal is less appealing for foreign students because of its less productive and competitive economy and lower spending on higher education and research (Fonseca, Esteves, & Iorio, 2015). Since international student recruitment is a new priority for Portuguese institutions, their activities in this respect are likely to be recent; therefore, research is also lacking into the strategies institutions use to attract and recruit international students. Therefore, this article aims to answer the following research questions: What strategies do Portuguese institutions employ to overcome the lower appeal of the country and to become attractive for international students? What are Portuguese institutions' main challenges for the recruitment of international students?

The article first presents an overview of the main strategies targeted at improving attractiveness and recruitment of foreign students, as reported by the literature. A brief account of Portuguese policies and institutions' activities in the area of international student enrollment then follows. The article continues with the methodology employed in this study, the presentation and discussion of the findings, and the conclusions about institutional strategies and challenges for the recruitment of international students, specifically for Portugal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategies for the Recruitment of International Students

Several studies have approached international student recruitment from the perspective of marketing and competition in the global arena (Asaad, Melewar, Cohen, & Balmer, 2013; Ross, Grace, & Shao, 2013; Ross, Heaney, & Cooper, 2007; Russell, 2005). In this respect, the need to increase the visibility of the institution by creating a distinctive image has become apparent. Materials such as prospectuses, websites, exhibition stands, stationery, and business cards are important to international students, particularly since they are usually unable to visit the institution before making their choice (Russell, 2005). Branding has thus become an essential means of reaching out to international publics. With the intensification of competition, institutions, including countries that are major players such as the US, have started to adopt more proactive and aggressive marketing campaigns (Choudaha et al., 2013).

The literature identifies a wide range of strategies, from traditional models of attending international recruitment fairs/tours or working with agents (Gök & Gümüş, 2018; James-MacEachern, 2018) to emerging practices (Choudaha et al., 2013). Agents serve as influential intermediaries whose value resides in their knowledge of the local environment and student preferences in the sending countries (Falcone, 2017; James-MacEachern, 2018). They are key players in the 'international student migration industry' (Beech 2018), signaling the commodification of higher education (Hulme, Thomson, Hulme, & Doughty, 2014). For instance, in countries like India or China the agent model is highly entrenched, as students generally resort to them to make their higher education choices (Beech, 2018).

Choudaha et al. (2013) identified three categories of emerging recruitment practices: technology for expanding reach in a cost-effective manner, partnerships for creating pathways and visibility, and research to prioritize efforts and measure return on investment. Regarding technology, various authors have identified online recruitment techniques (Gök & Gümüş, 2018; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017; Zinn & Johansson, 2015;). A user-friendly website allowing online applications is now enriched by virtual college fairs, web-based presentations, webinars, videos, web-chats, Skype calls, blogs, YouTube channels, etc. Technology allows universities to reduce response time and personalize communication, which meets international students' expectations of a fast turn-around service.

Partnerships are another way of improving an institution's visibility, possibly signaling "a general shift in international recruitment to long-term and interdependent relationship-building strategies" (Choudaha et al., 2013). Partnerships with foreign secondary and higher education institutions, government agencies, or other organizations help institutions to secure a steady flow of international students. Moreover, there are institutions that encourage their academics to engage with prospective international students during their visits abroad, suggesting a greater reliance on academics to drive recruitment (Beech, 2018).

Finally, a research-based approach to recruitment implies the use of data to help focus efforts and to make informed decisions regarding the target audience, rather

than relying on uninformed methods such as generic promotions (Choudaha et al., 2013; Falcone, 2017). Falcone (2017) highlighted the relevance of having in-depth knowledge about the educational systems of the sending countries and having cultural awareness of students' and parents' perspectives and needs. Similarly, Asaad et al. (2013) stressed how important it is for institutions to be responsive to the complex nature of the international environment, which entails market research and information-generating activities such as surveys, focus groups with international students, or participation in international fairs in order to gauge the different needs of potential candidates from different countries. Ross et al. (2007) found a relationship between institutions with greater market focus and institutions with greater percentages of international students. According to these authors, the existence of an international marketing strategy and a marketing department with staff who understand the marketing concept and are able to apply it in a higher education institution to generate a competitive advantage and improve recruitment in the long term.

Besides marketing and branding, international students' interaction with an institution in the early phases (but also later on) is highly crucial for the institution's attraction capacity. Russell (2005) argued that the service students experience—its bureaucracy and complexity—may influence their initial decision to apply for a program. Their satisfaction following enrollment is also important, as it leads to positive word-of-mouth and to students acting as advertisers, which gives the institution a competitive advantage. Engaging alumni can therefore represent a powerful tool to convey a positive image of the institution, as word-of-mouth is perceived as more reliable than official institutional information (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; Gök & Gümüş, 2018; James-MacEachern, 2018; Yang & Akhtaruzzaman, 2017).

It therefore appears imperative that institutions should provide international students with the necessary information and support in the early days of interaction. As Ross et al. (2013) argued, international students come across numerous entry barriers, which determine whether they eventually enroll or not. They have to interact with various departments within the institution, but also with government bodies and agencies, thus experiencing a variety of points of contact before they even start their studies. For this reason, it is important that the information that they get from these multiple sources is consistent and supportive (Ross et al., 2013). This requires, however, effective internal organization and sharing of information and collaboration among all staff and departments involved in international student recruitment, as well as less reliance on traditional bureaucratic structures. Such aspects favor a perception of diminished entry barriers which, in turn, can provide competitive advantage over other institutions (Ross et al., 2013).

The recruitment of international students has mostly been researched in the context of English-speaking countries, which are the major receiving countries (França et al., 2018). However, in recent years, researchers from countries with lower shares of international students (but with an ambition to boost their numbers) have also started to pay attention to this aspect (Cox, 2012; Kondakci, 2011; Kubiciel-Lodzinska & Ruszczak, 2016; Mosneaga & Agergaard, 2012; Urbanovič et al., 2016; Wilken & Dahlberg, 2017). According to Urbanovič et al. (2016), small countries

face different challenges in recruiting international students compared to their major counterparts. To begin with, they are late-comers in international recruitment, implying that they lack the worldwide recognition for quality higher education and the “first-mover advantage” of countries like Australia, Canada, the UK, and the US. Moreover, for many countries, limited financial resources and a lack of economies of scale may mean an inability to invest in infrastructure (e.g., accommodation and library facilities), marketing/branding, and human resources. For example, Urbanovič et al. (2016) found that recruiting faculty with good English language skills from overseas was seen as a challenge by Lithuanian institutions because of their inability to pay sufficiently high salaries. Additionally, many students—both domestic and international—also lacked sufficient competency in English, which meant that many programs taught in English operated with small class sizes. Therefore, cultural and language issues can also be significant. The concern with the dominance of English in higher education has been expressed, for example, in Sweden and Denmark (Kuteeva, 2014; Werther, Denver, Jensen, & Mees, 2014). It may thus be difficult for small countries to strike a balance between being international and preserving their national identity (Urbanovič et al., 2016).

As to the concrete strategies employed by institutions in countries with less visibility, these include traditional strategies, but also strategies that are rather creative and based on the aforementioned market research (Chouhada et al., 2013). Among the traditional ones, participation in student fairs and meetings has been noted in institutions from Poland (Kubiciel-Lodzinska & Ruszczak, 2016), Sweden, and Finland (Cox, 2012). New administrative resources and structures to support foreign students—such as staff employed solely to work with these students in Polish institutions (Kubiciel-Lodzinska & Ruszczak, 2016) or the establishment of international services in Finnish institutions (Cox, 2012)—are indicative of the novelty of international student recruitment in some smaller countries. Some institutions in Poland have additionally simplified recruitment procedures and offer help to international students to legalize their stay in the country (Kubiciel-Lodzinska & Ruszczak, 2016).

More creative strategies, such as making use of market research and technology, are also documented in the literature. For example, the prestigious Danish Technical University proactively targets prospective students from European countries where unemployment rates among engineering graduates are high and where hierarchical labor market structures make recognition difficult. This allows them to attract students for whom the Danish labor market might be appealing after graduation (Mosneaga & Agergaard, 2012). Online scholarship competitions, aimed at students in specific countries, or cooperation agreements with companies to give foreign students an entry into the labor market, are examples of more targeted recruitment strategies in Swedish institutions. These latter also resort to scholarship schemes and tuition waivers, while some universities have joined efforts and merged their international recruitment activities (Cox, 2012). Similarly, having the “right degree program” is a powerful pull factor for international students, as was the case of some UK universities that prided themselves in their vocational focus and stressed workplace opportunities (Beech, 2018). A Norwegian institution has found a market niche and developed study programs that are unique in Norway—for example, a new

program in aviation (Frølich & Stensaker, 2010). Taster online programs—meant to give students a flavor of the institution's offerings—have also been used to attract prospective students (Papagiannidis, 2013). Institutions are also resorting to technology (the web and digital media) and to new partnerships (Cox, 2012).

International Students in Portugal

Portugal receives two thirds of its international students from the former Portuguese colonies, in the following descending order: Brazil, Angola, Cape Verde, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea Bissau, and East Timor. Except Brazil, which gained independence in the 19th century, and East Timor in 1999, the other countries became independent in the 1970s, around the time of the Portuguese democratic revolution. After some initial tensions between Portugal and these countries, relations have progressively improved and cooperation intensified. This culminated in the establishment of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (Comunidade de Países de Língua Portuguesa [CPLP]) in 1996. The prevalence of students from Portuguese-speaking countries reflects a shared history, culture, and language and an interest in preserving cultural and political relationships with the CPLP (França et al., 2018). This interest was evident in the scholarships that the Portuguese government offered to students from former Portuguese territories (Veiga, Rosa, & Amaral, 2006). In addition, the insufficient development and capacity of higher education in these countries acted as a push factor for students to seek education in Portugal (França et al., 2018).

Proactive recruitment was not a common practice in Portugal, especially in public institutions. The landmark year for change was 2014. At the time, international students in Portugal amounted to 4.1% of enrollments (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2016). The majority came from Portuguese-speaking countries, with Brazilian students becoming more numerous, while the number of African students was decreasing following the growth of higher education in their home countries (Fonseca et al., 2015). Chinese and Iranian students were on the rise, pointing to Asia as a potentially important source of future enrollments. Several developments awakened policy makers' and institutions' interest in proactively recruiting international students: a demographic decline predicted to reduce severely the number of national candidates (Dias et al., 2013), the economic crisis and the decreasing public funding for higher education (Teixeira, 2012), and the need for institutions to supplement revenues (Sin, Veiga, & Amaral, 2016).

In 2014, a long overdue national strategy for the internationalization of higher education was launched jointly by the Ministries of Regional Development (MADR) and of Education and Science (MEC) (MADR/MEC, 2014), filling a political void in nation-wide orientation of institutional policies and activities in this field. Recruitment of international students represents a main dimension of the strategy, as the ambition is to double their number by 2020. Among the strategy's recommendations, the most relevant ones are the promotion of the country and its institutions; cooperation strategies with specific world regions (beyond CPLP countries); better and comprehensive information provision to potential applicants; streamlining bureaucratic processes for obtaining visas, accommodation, fiscal

numbers, etc., through cooperation with public entities (e.g., Immigration and Border Service, consular units, High Commissariat for Migrations, and local authorities); creating a “green channel” for the admission of international students in order to ease their entry and residence in Portugal; and increasing the provision of education in English.

Also in 2014, the Statute of the International Student (Decree-Law 36/2014) was adopted. Per the Statute, the term “international students” applies to all students from foreign countries, except students from European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA) countries. These latter cannot be charged different tuition fees from national students because of EU law. The Statute defined a new entry regime for international students, different from the admission procedures applicable to home/EU/EEA students. This entry regime facilitates recruitment by giving institutions more flexibility to set the admission criteria for international students. Moreover, the statute has given public institutions the possibility of raising tuition fees for these students, based on the real cost of education. Nonetheless, the Statute maintains a special scholarship program for students coming from the Portuguese-speaking African countries and East Timor in order to preserve the privileged relationship with these countries. However, this program has not yet been implemented (França et al., 2018).

Before the new legal framework, differences were obvious between the motivations and behavior of public and private institutions regarding international student recruitment. Public institutions felt no urge to enroll international students in addition to those already coming from Portuguese-speaking countries with Portuguese government grants, and who were included in the funding formula on an equal foot with national students. Private institutions, in contrast, were highly interested in recruiting international students, as tuition fees contributed to their budget and they had started to experience the loss of national candidates after the turn of the century (Sin et al., 2016, pp. 185–186). However, the Statute of the International Student now validates the profit argument in the case of public institutions, too. Mainardes, Alves, Raposo, and de Souza Domingues (2012) referred to the emergence of a market logic in Portuguese higher education further to financial constraints and growing competitiveness, evidenced, among others, by the desire to attract international students as a source of revenue. Indeed, the president of the Internationalization Commission of the Representative Body of Portuguese Public Universities (CRUP) made a telling remark: “There is a mentality to change and an idea to bear in mind: higher education is exportable” (Assunção, 2017, p. 7). Coordinated by CRUP, 15 public universities have recently joined forces and created the initiative “Universities Portugal” to boost their attractiveness. They also summoned the help of other actors (government, Camões Institute, Portuguese Agency for Foreign Investment and Trade, Tourism of Portugal, embassies, etc.); defined priority target countries (Angola, Brazil, China, Colombia, Ecuador, Luxembourg, Macau, Mozambique, and Peru); secured EU funding; created a brand and a website; are active in social networks (including the Chinese ones); and set a timetable for marketing and promotion in the target countries (Assunção, 2017). The newly created website presents affordable living, inclusive healthcare, and safety as

the advantages of choosing Portugal over other destinations. Polytechnic institutions plan a similar strategy for joint promotion abroad (Mourato, 2016).

Regarding the recruitment strategies of Portuguese institutions, literature is scarce, exposing a large knowledge gap in this area. Intensifying the recruitment of foreign students stands out as a priority in the internationalization strategies of several institutions (Guerreiro, 2015). Having interviewed leaders of 10 institutions about their internationalization strategies, Guerreiro (2015) found some initiatives that were clearly aimed at attracting international students: creation of a “year zero” for the integration of foreign students to allow them to learn Portuguese, courses in other languages (French, Italian, or English), or international marketing campaigns. The former two reveal an intention of widening the net beyond Portuguese-speaking countries. The study also found Asia to be an “appetizing market,” but the slowness of visa and residence regulations and the lack of articulation between the Statute of the International Student and the Borders’ Service were criticized. Institutional leaders also lamented the financial constraints to implement an international marketing strategy, to employ sufficient and qualified staff, and to provide the necessary support to international students, reminiscent of the challenges identified for small countries (Urbanovič et al., 2016). Language is another challenge: On the one hand, institutions want to exploit the potential of Portuguese as one of the most spoken languages in the world; on the other, they want to promote English as a second language, but both students and teaching staff can be reticent or uncomfortable with learning and teaching in English (Guerreiro, 2015; Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2018).

Although Guerreiro’s study (2015) gives some insights into recruitment strategies and challenges, its focus is broader, on internationalization strategies in general, from the perspective of top institutional leaders. This article concentrates on student recruitment as a specific area of internationalization, eliciting primarily the opinions of middle managers responsible for transposing institutional strategies into practice.

METHODS

This is a small-scale qualitative study based on eight semistructured interviews, conducted in 2017, with institutional representatives in positions of management and decision-making related to international student recruitment in two institutions. Since the study focuses on recruitment strategies and challenges, it was deemed important to gather not only the opinions of top leaders, who are in charge of drafting policies, but also the perceptions of middle managers, who are responsible for the implementation of strategies and whose daily job is to operationalize them. In each institution, all key managers with a role in international student recruitment were interviewed. Besides, the interviews in the second institution did not yield different or new results from those in the first one. Thus, doing more interviews in the same or in other institutions was considered unlikely to add new information, as data saturation appeared to be reached (see Saunders et al., 2018). The converging perceptions of interviewees (Crabtree & Miller, 1992) ensured the trustworthiness of the data collected.

Several procedures were used to ensure the validity and robustness of the research. The inclusion of two different institutions allowed comparing and contrasting different contexts, thus ensuring mutual reinforcement and consistency of the data. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to allow meticulous record keeping and repeated revisiting of the data to check emerging themes and to remain true to participants' accounts and consistent and transparent interpretations of the data. Moreover, the different life experiences of the authors ensured counterbalancing perspectives. None of the authors is a former international student in Portugal, but one of them has double nationality (but not from a former Portuguese territory) and has studied abroad in several countries, which enabled a high level of awareness and sensitivity toward issues related to international students. As the data analysis involved the three authors, the emerging themes in the interpretation of the data were reached through consensus during several discussions, which allowed challenging assumptions and reduced possible individual biases. Finally, verbatim descriptions of interviewees' accounts were used to support findings to assist readers to make their own judgments about the validity of the interpretations that were put forward. Although data triangulation was not possible due to the inexistence of other data sources—for instance, institutional documents—the previous procedures ensured the reliability, credibility, and richness of the study.

The interviewees belonged to two public universities in the north of Portugal (four interviews in each; see Table 1). The choice of public institutions is justified by the fact that international student recruitment has become a priority recently and, therefore, these institutions are now taking their first steps in this area, contrary to private institutions, which have long been interested in attracting international students as sources of revenue. For logistical reasons, the choice rested on northern Portugal, specifically on two universities that are different in size and age, in order to see if such institutional characteristics give rise to different approaches and challenges.

Table 1: Interviewed Institutional Representatives

University A	Vice-rector for internationalization
	Vice-rector for academic affairs
	Head of international office
	Head of academic affairs
University B	Internationalization advisor to rector
	Head of international office
	Head of academic affairs
	Head of communication, image, and public relations unit

The interviews (see questions in Appendix), lasting 1 hr on average, were conducted, recorded, and fully transcribed by one of the authors, an experienced qualitative researcher. Data was organized and coded with the help of the software MaxQDA, following a grounded theory method adapted from Strauss and Corbin (1990). The qualitative analysis was carried out by the three authors and involved discussion to reach agreement on interpretations. Analysis involved open coding and

selective coding. During the former, the data from interviews were broken down into coded segments to yield categories. The codes and relationships between categories were constantly cross-checked against the data to ensure consistency. Then, selective coding generated the final categories and the final analytical framework, organized under three major dimensions regarding international student recruitment: recruitment policies/strategies, facilitators/drivers, and challenges. The analysis grid with the dimensions and categories is shown in Table 2. Codes with examples, leading to one category, are presented in Table 3.

Table 2: Dimensions and Categories of Analysis

Dimensions	Categories
Recruitment policies/strategies	Revised admission procedures Curricular adjustments Institutional branding
Recruitment facilitators/drivers	Previous collaborations/bottom-up initiatives Changes in external environment Country/institution characteristics Demography International Student Statute Portuguese language
Challenges	Staff competences Market research Cultural diversity Student profile Mindset/changing paradigm Teaching in English Recruitment of international staff Financial resources Operational structures

Table 3. Example of Coded Segments Leading to the Category Revised Admission Procedures

Segments	Codes	Category
<i>Every year we do something else, we create faster electronic platforms, we abandon paper-based forms, we speed up communication...but it is still work in progress (University A).</i>	Simplification of information	Revised admission procedures
<i>We already recognise the ENEM, the national secondary school leaving exam in Brazil. And we accept the Gaokao or the JAE, which are the exams in China (University A).</i>	Recognition of secondary education diplomas	

Segments	Codes	Category
<i>There were 30 or 50 scholarships for Brazilian students. In fact, these scholarships were a reduction of the international tuition fee, and the university supports the difference (University B).</i>	Fee reduction	
<i>We have created different application timings which allow applicants from certain countries, from the Southern hemisphere, for instance Brazil, to apply when they finish secondary education. It is different from here, they finish in December–January (University B).</i>	Application timings	

FINDINGS

This section starts by presenting the main recruitment policies/strategies and the facilitators/drivers for international student recruitment. It then discusses the key challenges.

Recruitment Policies/Strategies

As the Portuguese context already seemed to anticipate, neither of the two universities has integrated and clearly articulated policies or strategies for the recruitment of international students, according to the interviewees. Several times, interviewees acknowledged the fact that more forward-planning and coordination were necessary, rather than ad hoc measures. The following statement by the internationalization adviser at University B illustrates the need for strategic thinking:

It is all very new, we have only recently started to look at it with a more proactive attitude and we have to bring in a strategic sense, an idea of the actions we can develop, the creation of mechanisms and instruments to advertise the university, its quality, etc.

In University A, the elaboration of an institutional strategy had also been hindered by the organizational structure, with individual faculties having a high degree of autonomy and different expectations, capacity, and experience of receiving international students. At the same time, however, the recruitment of international students was described as a recent priority, triggered by drivers such as the Statute of the International Student and the financial incentives implied therein, as well as by the diminishing population of national students (Dias et al., 2013). Thus, the two institutions were in the process of organizing themselves in order to tackle international student recruitment. Existing international students had usually arrived as a result of pre-existing collaborations of individual academics and/or faculties, and less so due to concerted institutional action. This is indicative of the novelty that international recruitment represents for Portuguese universities as a strategic area. Factors perceived as attractive for international students were also identified: the

characteristics of the country (safety, quality of life, low cost of living), the institution (e.g., presence in international rankings, reputation, and the perceived quality of the institution), and the Portuguese language as one of the most spoken in the world.

However, both universities already took a considerable number of initiatives; although coordinated centrally, these were not systematic, but rather ad hoc initiatives, continuing previous trends observed around a decade ago (Veiga et al., 2006). Three categories of initiatives emerged from the data: institutional branding, revision of admission procedures, and curricular adjustments. The former two are dominant, while the third one has a more modest expression.

Regarding institutional branding, the two institutions have intensified their participation in international fairs, entered into agreements and partnerships with schools and institutions in target countries, created promotional material to advertise the institution, increased their presence in social networks, and have also started to visit secondary schools or other organizations in target countries. The Head of the Communications and Public Relations unit in University B states:

The Unit has produced materials, has done interviews with students which can be posted in social networks, there are materials which can be taken to fairs and which are available for teaching staff and researchers when they travel abroad and can take and distribute, there is printed stuff, PowerPoint presentations, films.

All these initiatives, already identified in the literature (Choudaha et al., 2013), are meant to increase the institutions' visibility in target countries by creating a recognizable image. As expected, the target countries are mainly Portuguese-speaking, especially Brazil, followed by the African Portuguese-speaking countries (Cape Verde, Angola, and Mozambique). However, Asia represents a very appealing market for these two institutions, especially China and, in to a lesser degree, India and Indonesia (see also Guerreiro, 2015). In Latin America, Colombia and Peru were also mentioned, although with less emphasis. Another ambition, expressed by the Head of the International Office and the Internationalization Adviser in University B, was the recruitment of not only more, but also better students, as a way of improving the reputation of the institution abroad.

The second category refers to the revision of admission procedures. In this sense, care was taken to simplify information for potential international students—for example, to clarify who counts as an international student and to guide them through the application process. Then, to cater for the interests of students from different countries, with different structures of the academic year, both institutions revised the application schedule. Previously tailored to the timetable of national students, it now includes different timings. This allows enough time for students to go through all the formalities and bureaucracy necessary to move from one country to another. This simplification and reorganization of the application process aligns with the recommendations made in the literature (Ross et al., 2013; Russell, 2005) about the minimization of complexity and bureaucracy in the interaction with the institution. Another measure to ease admission was the automatic recognition of secondary school leaving examinations in some main target countries (e.g., Brazil and China).

Regarding the adjustment of application timings, the Head of Academic Affairs in University A said:

We are concerned with tailoring administrative processes to the characteristics of international students, namely by anticipating the schedule of applications, taking into account the mismatches between academic years in Portugal and in other countries.

The reduction of the fee for applicants from Portuguese-speaking countries was mentioned by both institutions as a way of increasing their attractiveness. This may be a strategy employed to preserve the historical and cultural relations with these countries (França et al., 2018), concomitant with a broadening of the recruitment base to other countries.

Finally, the category related to curricular adjustments almost exclusively revealed language concerns. Portuguese classes were offered to international students. In University B the creation of a year zero allowed students to learn Portuguese before enrolling in their study program (see also Guerreiro, 2015). According to the Head of the International Office in University B:

We are alert to the fact that there are students who would like to study in Portugal and do not speak Portuguese. So the university (...) has made rules and conditions for students to be able to learn Portuguese before coming, to take the exams after their arrival and does not make the language a condition for admission to university.

Teaching in English was not a common practice at undergraduate level (for which the International Student Statute applies), but was more common in postgraduate and research degrees. This may be related to the reluctance of teaching staff and students to use another language than Portuguese (see also Guerreiro, 2015; Pinto & Araujo e Sá, 2018), but may also be due to the perceived advantage represented by the Portuguese language on the international student market, discussed below.

Challenges

The major challenge that interviewees highlighted was the creation of an institutional structure (or structures) with dedicated remit and competence to recruit international students and support them in their interaction with the institution, from the stage of application to the completion of their studies. Such a structure could centralize all the information that international students need and ensure that it is consistently and clearly communicated (Ross et al., 2013; Russell, 2005). Currently, during the application phase, these students fall under the remit of academic services, which also deals with national recruitment, but has no expertise to meet the needs of international students. International units, which have experience of working with foreign students on temporary mobility, are only now starting to be summoned to help with the reception and integration of international students, although without a formal remit to do so. According to the Head of the Communications and Public Relations unit in University B:

It is all scattered at the moment, because there is no specific office to deal with international students coming via the Statute (...) We are in charge of communication and attraction; then, when they apply, it is the academic services that take over and we stand back, although applicants sometimes end up asking us for information. Then, when they arrive, it is the turn of the international relations office to help with reception. So at the moment various offices are involved, in a manner not as articulated as it could be. Maybe an office which could integrate all this could guide international applicants from the beginning to the end, this would allow giving them the information they need.

Language was understood by the interviewees as another important challenge, for various reasons. A frequent opinion was that teaching in Portuguese should be maintained and promoted as a competitive advantage to continue attracting not only students from Portuguese-speaking countries, but also other students interested in learning Portuguese, aware of its potential as one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. This opinion emerged clearly from several interviewees—for example the Head of International Office in University A and the Internationalization Adviser in University B:

This means that one of the strategies is not to compete with other countries that are clearly ahead of us in terms of English usage, we have more advantages competing in Portuguese (...), thus avoiding ludicrous situations such as the emergence in London of Portuguese language schools which attract Chinese students to learn Portuguese in London with Brazilian teachers.

Do we have competitive advantages compared to Denmark or the Netherlands because we have another public who does not speak English? If they gave me money to invest in the promotion of the university, I would invest in Brazil, Latin America, Spanish-speaking countries, Angola, regions of Portuguese language. I would also invest in countries like China, because they are trying to teach Portuguese to students, even in different disciplinary areas, because of the potential market that the Portuguese language could open. So I would not ignore Portuguese.

However, even for students from Portuguese-speaking countries, the language can be a problem because the same words can have different meanings, and several interviewees admitted that they often became aware of communication failures. At the same time, teaching in English was identified as another challenge that could broaden the institutions' recruitment area beyond Portuguese-speaking countries. In order to avoid the detrimental effect that this could have on recruitment from Portuguese-speaking countries, one possible measure could be to offer the same study program both in Portuguese and in English to different student cohorts. The teaching staff's ability to deliver classes in English emerged as another challenge related to language.

Another perceived challenge—given the fact that public universities receive most of their revenue from the State and are, thus, largely dependent on public

funding—was the need to invest more financial resources in infrastructures and personnel necessary to support international students, ranging from the recruitment and/or training of administrative staff with intercultural competences to the recruitment of international teaching staff. This would also improve the institutions' capacity of catering for culturally diverse students.

In University A, the importance of undertaking market research was underlined in order to better adjust admission requirements and, consequently, to improve the institution's attractiveness. In University B, one of the interviewees stressed the fact that a change of mindset was paramount to embrace international recruitment as a legitimate objective and not as an unworthy endeavor for institutions working for the public interest. This is reminiscent of the position of the representative body of Portuguese universities, according to which higher education is exportable (Assunção, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This article has aimed to examine how institutions in Portugal approach the recruitment of international students and the challenges they encounter. Portugal is at a disadvantage compared with the major recruiters in the world and also to the more well-off countries in Europe for several reasons: a weaker economy, a less renowned higher education system (Fonseca et al., 2015), a small country, and a late-comer in international recruitment (Urbanovič et al., 2016). Thus, Portuguese higher education institutions need to ensure that they are prepared to attract and receive international students, as well as to find means of standing out in order to increase their attractiveness.

Despite the difference in size, tradition, and level of centralization between the two selected institutions, the strategies and challenges revealed by this study are similar. The analysis has allowed drawing some conclusions about the initiatives taken to create differentiation and attractiveness. The Portuguese language appears to be the institutions' best and taken-for-granted ally in the recruitment of international students, who mostly come from Portuguese-speaking countries due to the historic links reinforced by the establishment of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (França et al., 2018). However, the Portuguese language does not only come in handy for the recruitment of Portuguese-speaking students. The analyzed institutions are also aware that they can strategically use Portuguese to attract especially students from China, a country where the potential of the language as a door opener for business in Portuguese-speaking countries is valued. Therefore, the apparent disadvantage of Portuguese (as one would expect international students to prefer English tuition) becomes an attractiveness factor. Despite this, the two institutions also recognize the importance of teaching in English in order to attract more diverse students, but always as an add-on to Portuguese, especially at the undergraduate level. The strategies related to the revision of admission criteria reinforce the preference for the two above-mentioned publics: students from Portuguese-speaking countries and Chinese students. Thus, fee reductions are applied to the former, while students from China and Brazil benefit from the automatic recognition of secondary school leaving examinations.

Institutional strategies appear to target both an external makeover, via branding initiatives, and an internal transformation of processes and structures, although this latter is still in an early stage. As for the marketing and branding strategies employed by the two Portuguese universities, they are generally similar to those already reported in the literature. Beyond the traditional methods of participation in international fairs or distribution of promotional material, both institutions also resort to emerging strategies (Choudaha et al., 2013): the use of technology, especially web-based social networks and media, and partnerships with institutions in the target countries. These universities appear to be less involved in market research, although data gathering is acknowledged as a challenge to address in order to help them to make informed decisions about the target regions and students. An international marketing strategy could therefore be important to boost attractiveness (Ross et al., 2007). The major challenge, however, is the establishment of an infrastructure capable of offering a consistent and seamless support to international students in the different phases of interaction with the institution. A unit with an exclusive remit for catering for these students' needs could also gather, systematize, and share information and ensure its consistency within the institution, thus improving international students' experience (Ross et al., 2013; Russel, 2005).

It is possible to argue that the analyzed institutions have become more proactive in recruiting international students, although still largely reliant on the advantage given by the Portuguese language. Their main international publics are students from Portuguese-speaking countries, in alignment with Portuguese policies on international student mobility that aim to maintain Portugal's leading role in the Lusophone space (França et al., 2018). Moreover, there is a growing interest in new countries, especially China, and institutions have taken concrete steps to widen their recruitment area accordingly. Given the asset represented by the language, Portuguese institutions appear to be exploiting a niche in the market of international students and positioning themselves as an emerging competitor.

This article tries to fill a gap in the knowledge about institutional strategies for the recruitment of international students in countries that are not among the key global players. However, the study was limited to two public universities, not representative of the Portuguese higher education system as a whole. They may, however, be indicative of trends among Portuguese public institutions, as they appear to follow the evolution noted in previous research (Veiga et al., 2006; Sin, Veiga & Amaral, 2016). The findings of this study can provide helpful peer learning material for other Portuguese institutions to reflect on and inform their approaches and practices for the recruitment of international students. Specifically, it points to the key areas that need attention and development in institutions from a country which, as discussed above, is less attractive and in an early stage of internationalization of the student body: defining the target publics through market research in a context of high competition; creating adequate and competent support structures for the recruitment of international students; and identifying and capitalizing on the best assets that can help institutions stand out. In this respect, it is important that institutions see Portuguese (one of the most widely spoken languages in the world) as a unique advantage that can enable them to attract a different public than the students seeking tuition in English.

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