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## **Southern Europe perspectives on international student mobility**

During the last four decades, higher education institutions (hereafter, HEIs) have experienced an unprecedented level of internationalization, closely linked to pressures induced by economic globalization (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). The dominance of post-industrial capitalism, a revolution brought about by new information technologies and the post-colonial scenario of emerging countries demanding access to higher education are at the core of a worldwide engagement with internationalisation (Lumby & Foskett, 2016). The demand for status-generating tertiary education from middle class and elite families in countries such as China, India, South Korea, Brazil and Nigeria has stimulated the struggle between nations that seek to dominate the global education market (Waters & Leung, 2013). The most prominent universities in the USA, UK, Australia, Canada and Germany have begun offering distance education courses, joint programmes and academic partnerships, opening campus branches overseas and, of course, recruiting as many mobile students as possible (Walker, 2014). In this sense, internationalization might rather be labelled ‘transnationalization’ as its principal feature is not the expansion of HEIs on an international scale but rather the commercialization of educational goods and services worldwide (Verger et al., 2016). In fact, educational goods are now included in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In this special issue we want to reflect on one of the most profitable fields of international education, mobile students, a population that has grown from an estimated 800,000 in the 1970s to five million in 2014, with eight million students expected to be studying abroad annually by 2025 (Altbach & Bassett, 2009). A focal point for this issue is the European continent, which represents something of an exception among the general trends in international education: in a global market where the majority of incoming students now come from Asia (57% of all mobile students across the OECD), Europe - the top global destination – also hosts the largest proportion of international students coming from European countries (OECD, 2020). This can be partially explained by the existence of intra-European agreements and exchange programmes, primarily the most celebrated, successful and renowned human mobility project funded by the European Commission: the Erasmus Programme. However, it is equally necessary to understand the quite profound reforms undertaken in the last decades that have transformed Europe into the most important destination continent for international students. From the first attempts at ‘managerialism’ and commodification in the 1980s to the ‘knowledge-based economy’ of today, a now hegemonic neoliberal governance has prompted the restructuring of European HEIs towards a market-oriented approach (Menelau Paraskeva, 2010). In a sector traditionally funded by the states and directed towards national students, HEIs felt progressively compelled to attract international students through innovative

marketing, branding and franchising strategies for their educational product range (Becker and Toutkoushian, 2013). Moreover, HEIs were also forced to compete with each other in order to survive financially, establishing university-industry partnerships, while striving to improve their global visibility in university rankings (Davies, 2001).

As a consequence of all these adaptations to neoliberalism, education progressively became regarded as a commodity by all parties concerned: students became consumers expecting returns on their investments, and universities were converted into global providers of educational goods in an increasingly profitable sector both for private suppliers of academic services and for the economies of European countries. Furthermore, a shift in the dominant educational paradigm accompanied this process: discourses about knowledge and learning were colonized by economic reasoning, a development traceable through several European documents and reports produced during the 1990s (e.g. European Commission, 1996). Thus, European universities embraced the management argot (and several of its practices) as if they were private companies: ‘strategic planning’, ‘performance indicators’, ‘competitiveness in the sector’ and ‘corporate image’ (Komljenovic & Robertson, 2016). Additionally, HEIs partially adapted their study programmes, research groups and academic specializations to the needs of the labour market, stressing the acquired professional competences, and the corresponding job profiles (Wihlborg & Teelken, 2014). This process of internationalization and commodification of higher education in Europe culminated in the Bologna Declaration (1999) and the Lisbon Agenda (2000-2010), often regarded as effective supra-national governance tools for the neoliberalization of HEIs (Batory & Lindstrom, 2011). As stated in the Bologna Declaration, the harmonization of European higher education systems seeks to transform the continent into a single educational destination, making it attractive as a macro-region to international students: “*We need to ensure that the European higher education system acquires a world-wide degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions*” (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

Whatever the case may be, attracting international students has become central to many European countries, forming part of their strategies for innovation, creativity and scientific development, increasing their pool of future skilled workers in the context of a global knowledge-based economy. However, at the same time, attracting international students becomes an immediately lucrative economic activity for HEIs that charge substantial fees to international students, and for receiving countries and cities that view students as temporal visitors in terms of tourism economy. In this sense, instead of just searching for academic excellence and high quality education, many students seem to choose destinations according to the experiences they expect to encounter in terms of urban sociability, leisure and tourist attractions, among other considerations (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008), leading some authors to consider this phenomenon as “academic tourism” (Rodriguez, et al., 2012) or “educational travel” (Van't Klooster et al., 2008).

As a result of the multifaceted attention awarded to international students, the topic gained visibility in the global academic and political agenda in the first decades of the twenty-first century, with a diverse body of literature consequently emerging on student migration, international student mobility and more general processes of studentification in urban environments. However, most research on the mobility of students continues to be produced from a Global North perspective, with a strong emphasis on the Anglophone world, regularly using theoretical and methodological perspectives to understand the phenomenon of student mobility that are not appropriate for engaging with learners from other regions. For instance, it is significant that a large proportion of works on international students use a conceptual framework of “Pull & Push” factors which amounts to little more than a means of scrutinizing the mobility of “others” coming from the Global South. Indeed, we might even regard this as a manifestation of an insidious post-colonial perspective on global mobility, that takes more interest in the socio-economic origins and professional integration of foreign people than in their well-being and social needs in destination countries. Moreover, student mobility in the countries in Global North is already well-studied, including developments within HEIs and the experiences of incoming students, while other countries are generally under-represented or considered just as cash-generative “sending countries” without any bearing upon the annual competition between European and Anglophone countries in attracting students. As a result, we have an unbalanced production of research on international student mobility that conceals the true level of globalization in tertiary education and under-represents mobility from the perspective of students from the non-central countries, including the means through which they select learning destinations.

Taking these remarks into consideration, despite the majority of studies on student mobility either in the Anglophone world or Europe, and increasingly Asia, work relating to other destinations nevertheless exists, including some contributions to this special edition. As discussed before, the circulation of international students is an important issue not only for the familiar destinations but also in countries less visible within the research field, where their mobility can be seen as a product of variables outside the political and economic spheres, including many social, cultural, historical and ecological factors; personal networks and interests; diplomatic and geopolitical relations; geographic proximity and migration policies. For instance, we know that some student mobility follow inter and intra-regional migration patterns (Pelliccia, 2014) and are often supported by existing ethnic or national-based social networks in the destination country (Valentin, 2012). Furthermore, recent geopolitical changes have also contributed to defining distinct features to these flows, such as the EU’s expansion and the rise of new economic powers (BRIC), but also specific events such as Bolsonaro’s victory in Brazil, all of which can have a bearing on student-migrants’ planning. While student mobility literature traditionally looked at these phenomena through the lens

of the 'Pull & Push' factors, and certainly these could be considered as such, we seek here to change the outlook on these factors, focusing less on the countries' economy and their labour needs and more in the problems and rationale of students involved in these mobility processes.

In this issue we seek to tackle all these different topics from a non-central, Southern European perspective, with contributions from Portugal, Slovenia and Greece, which point towards an understanding and analysis of new, emerging issues that go beyond the traditional perspectives on the topic. In a study devoted to analysing the production of higher education research in Europe from the 1980s onwards, Barbara Kehm (2015) divided the existent literature into: 1) quantitative-structural aspects; 2) knowledge and subject-related aspects; 3) teaching and learning aspects; 4) institution, organisation and governance aspects. While the texts contained in this special issue belong mainly to the categories 2 and 3, we go beyond classical considerations around international students. An example is the first text by Thais França, centred on the media representations of international students in two Portuguese newspapers between 2006 and 2019. Portugal appears as a new and non-traditional destination for international students. Its dual belonging to the European Union and the Lusophone world establish original characteristics in the international student field of opportunities. Moreover, the recent investments made by the Portuguese government and higher education institutions to attract international students have created some additional novel traits. From the analysis of 103 articles, we can see how the presence of international students in the country enables journalists to highlight both the prestige and reputation of Portuguese universities and the quality of life offered in the country, reinforcing the narrative of Portugal as an attractive destination for foreigners. More controversial is the portrait of Portugal as a welcoming and friendly destination for all, an idea critiqued though an appraisal of interviews made with international students in newspapers, contradicted with the many cases of violent racism and discrimination suffered by racialized students in the last few years. While for the most part, the articles present positive depictions of international students as assets for national economy (higher tuition fees paid to universities, urban consumption in university towns, future skilled workers), some pieces highlight the cost of maintaining them for the local welfare state, connecting thereby with general xenophobia discourses around foreigners.

Like the Portuguese case, other countries present unique and innovative patterns of student mobility, but little is known about them due to a lack of relevant studies. By way of re-dress, we offer within this issue two examples. The first is an article about Greek Erasmus students by Natassa Raikou and Thanassis Karalis, that addresses the implications of mobility programmes such as Erasmus for pedagogy strategies in Higher Education. Using semi-structured interviews with 20 former Erasmus students, the authors look for indicators of pedagogical outcomes experienced abroad (especially informal learning, intercultural skills and personal self-confidence) and how they

serve as a tool for students to reinforce critical thinking, openness and the acceptance of diversity. An examination of student discourses serve to point at the transformative process Erasmus students go through during and after their stays abroad, a civic experience that is central to educating socially responsible young people for democracy and justice in contemporary societies. The second is centred on Slovenian Erasmus students by Alenka Flander and Borut Korada, who look at the development of international student competences in terms of cognitive and interpersonal development while abroad. The study tries to differentiate between study and traineeship types of mobility, looking for indicators of differences in levels of knowledge development and competence acquisition. The article explores thoroughly three different competences in terms of learning and skills: cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal, connecting them with the learning process that we found in international student mobility. The authors found that situation-based and experimental learning is especially stimulated during international traineeships, with other relevant findings regarding the acquisition of competences abroad.

The last article in the special issue, by Ana Raquel Matias and Paulo Feytor Pinto, tackles the exclusionary processes suffered by international students from PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African) countries in Portugal, as speakers of other, non-dominant, Portuguese language norms. In order to understand the problems of inclusion faced by these students, the article points not only towards their sociolinguistic profiles but also their complex socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and their integration process in Portugal. Moreover, the current relations between Portugal and PALOP countries regarding international education and knowledge production still project unequal notions derived from post-colonial power dynamics, keeping the ex-colonies and their students in a peripheral position. A minorization process in respect to linguistic codes and styles characteristic of their countries of origin in the classroom is one of the most evident subordination processes suffered by PALOP students, with important negative consequences for their integration and academic performance. The article contributes towards recognition of the diversity and pluricentrism of Portuguese language in HEIs, representing an important step in the integration of PALOP international students. In connection with this argument, Leonardo Azevedo's review of Susanne Ress's book returns to the idea of cooperation and post-colonial solidarity within the community of Portuguese-speaking countries as the final piece for this special issue. The book presents a discussion of decolonial theoretical foundations and also the practical contradictions and tensions in the Brazilian UNILAB project, an enterprise that seeks to establish South-South collaboration in the field of international higher education between Brazil and Portuguese-Speaking African Countries.

Looking at recent developments in knowledge production about international students in Europe, we can identify a certain reticence to depict the diversity of everyday situations and

quotidian problems relating to students, especially those residing in southern, non-central, European countries. In this sense, the present issue offers opportunities to look at national contexts (Portugal, Greece, Slovenia) and social processes (language discrimination, pedagogical outcomes of studying abroad, newspaper portraits of foreign students) that are not central to the international student mobility paradigm. With the arrival of COVID-19 pandemic these studies also, in a somewhat prescient manner, portray the specific situations facing students abroad and their adaptations at times of crisis, thereby pushing the research agenda towards interesting and hard to avoid directions. In the near future, the challenges posed by the global pandemic on studying international students and transnational mobility will certainly contribute to a great advance in theorizing and researching the topic of mobile education, and we hope that in producing this special issue, we have made a preliminary contribution.

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