

The Internationalization of Public Universities in the Valencian Community (2019-2022): A Comparative Study in a Crisis Period

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The international vision in the Valencian public universities (Spain) is essential to make them competitive in a changing world, in need of transparency and accountability. Having into account this fact, within the framework of a doctoral research, we propose the following hypothesis: does the economic, organizational and institutional effort that the Valencian public universities are making in terms of internationalization correspond to the expected results in terms of quality, efficiency, institutional effectiveness and impact? From a comparative perspective, a double methodology has been used: qualitative and quantitative. The first one based on open interviews and the second one based on personalized surveys by groups. The results obtained in every university show the importance of the international vision in university policies (mobility, research, agreements, associative participation, networks and alliances, visibility, rankings, etc.) According to the data collected, it is already possible to advance a first conclusion stating that the universities of the Valencian public system are making a great effort in the development of their internationalization policies.

Keywords: internationalization, policies, vision, rankings, Valencian, universities, strategic, position, effort

INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, universities have emerged from mere “international contacts” (Haug, Guy, 2012, p. 13) that are individual, specialized, limited, and national in nature, to become international institutions, beyond being mere universities focused on mobility and cooperation. The reasons that have triggered this change are diverse but, according to Altbrach, Roisberg & Rumbley (2009, p.7) we could indicate the following as the most relevant:

- a) Economic and cultural globalization processes, especially those based on the knowledge economy.
- b) Competitive inertias for attracting resources that encourage better governance of higher education institutions.
- c) The commoditization of education, which pushes for higher quality education and better prepared professionals with the capacity for international collaborative work.

- d) Regional integration processes, particularly that of the European Union.
- e) The need to harmonize the qualifications and competencies of new graduates, so that they can practice their professions anywhere in the European Union and promote the mobility of students, teachers and professionals.
- f) The emergence of the Erasmus Program in the 1980s.
- g) The implementation of the European Higher Education Area after the Bologna Process.
- h) The transformation that the new information and communication technologies have brought to scientific communication.

It could be stated that internationalization increases the quality, reputation and visibility of universities, which translates into the acquisition of resources that are essential for survival in a competitive educational environment. As Hans de Wit (2012) states “Internationalization has become an indicator of quality in higher education” (p. 19). Or as Haug states (Haug, Guy, 2012, p.13), “the internationalization processes of universities in their vertical column for development.”

On the other hand, as Guy Haug (2012) also states, “the symbolic instruments of Globalization are international rankings.” These are tools that, despite their weaknesses, lack of agreement on measurement criteria and credibility, are used at the international level to evaluate and make decisions at the political and institutional level. It seems unavoidable that universities are evaluated with these rankings, in which criteria may appear to measure the degree or level of internationalization and thus be able to know whether the policies applied achieve the expected results (Deardorff, Darla; Down Thornaike Pysarchik & Zee-Sun Yun, 2009), whether in learning, visibility, transparency, quality, reputation or funding.

The Internationalization of Higher Education is changing its orientation: from cooperation to competition between institutions (Hans de Witt, 2005) and not in a similar way in all contexts. Other internal (Frolich, Noline & Veiga, Amelia, 2005, p.120) and institutional (European, state, and regional) policy factors also influence the pace and depth of these processes.

The international vision of all policies developed in universities, especially those related to mobility, the offering of degrees and research, will be the key for making universities as a whole competitive and, therefore, also the public universities of the Valencian Community, in a world in constant change and with increasingly demanding and transparent accountability.

The study herein presented is based on a research work that will lead to a PhD thesis, the objective of which is to find an answer to the following question:

Does the economic, organizational and institutional effort being made by the public universities of the Valencian Community in internationalization policies respond to the expected results, according to criteria of quality, efficiency, effectiveness and impact?

To give the answer to the main research question, it is necessary to take into consideration the following complementary questions that will help to give the general view of the research:

- a) Do the results of the internationalization policies of the Valencian Community’s public universities meet the expectations generated in their university communities, in the political community and in civil society?
- b) Is the effort made having a return that benefits the university communities and society?
- c) Why are the public universities of the Valencian Community in certain positions in international rankings?
- d) Are these positions objective or do they respond to other criteria?
- e) Following the economic, organizational and institutional efforts in terms of internationalization, the positions in national and international rankings are: excellent, good or bad? Why?
- f) With such an effort, do the same results are achieved as other similar national and international universities? Are the expected results achieved?

Based on this approach, the PhD research aims to demonstrate the real balance or unbalance existing between the efforts made by the public universities of the Valencian Community in terms of internationalization policies and the results they finally obtain, especially according to criteria of real impact on the university community and the quality of the internationalization policies developed.

This chapter briefly explains the mixed methodology used in the research, where priority has been given to the comparative method as the study's base. The overall results for all Valencian public universities are shown below. Finally, some of the provisional conclusions reached are presented, which will serve as a basis for corroborating or rejecting the research hypothesis.

METHODOLOGY

For a research work such as the one we are dealing with, framed within the Social Sciences field, such as Political Science, in this case focused on public policies related to Higher Education, it has been considered necessary to use a mixed methodology because both quantitative and qualitative methods, by themselves, show their limitations. To choose one of them as the only true one would end up showing a short and limited reality. In addition, this is a comparative study of several institutional items, so it was considered appropriate to use comparative methods and techniques.

In accordance with the above, the characteristics of the methodology used in this research are as follows:

- a) Analytical method: The whole, in other words, the Valencian Public University System, was divided into its constituent elements: the Valencian public universities, in order to have a particular vision of each one of them and of the implementation of internationalization policies in them. This method allows a better understanding of the subject of study, i.e., the internationalization policies of the Valencian Public University System. At the same time, it facilitates the collection of information, understanding the individual behavior of each public university and establishing contrasted theories in each of them.
- b) Synthetic method: Once the elements that integrate the Valencian Public University System have been analyzed, it is possible to make general extrapolations. It is possible to go from the simple to the complex through reasoning contrasted by the case study. Based on this fact, it is possible to formulate general theories and frameworks.
- c) Comparative method: The data from each university are compared with each other over a corresponding period of time of four years, from 2019 to 2022, which has made it possible to determine the evolution of the impact of internationalization policies in Valencian public universities. This period of time is considered significant given the context of continuous crisis in which internationalization policies were developed, from the last effects on the budgetary restrictions caused by the 2008 financial crisis on university budgets, to the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion and subsequent war in Ukraine, without forgetting the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union or Brexit and its repercussions on mobility and alliance policies. The comparative study includes three main items of data in each university: the annual reports, the strategic plans and the information gathered in interviews with the different vice-rectors.

Based on the methodology proposed, the following is a detailed description of how the qualitative and quantitative techniques have been developed and applied in this research, always from a comparative perspective:

Qualitative Technique

In this research, this technique is based on semi-open interviews with the main people responsible for the internationalization policies of the Valencian Community's public universities (vice-rectors). The interviews were performed on the basis of an indicative guide, prepared in advance, which focused on the indicators of internationalization and its relationship with the quality, effectiveness, efficiency and impact of university policies:

A total of twelve interviews were performed, corresponding to the following vice-rectorships of each university:

- a) Miguel Hernández University of Elche: Vice-rector of International Relations and Vice-rector of Research.

- b) University of Alicante: Vice-rector for International Relations and Cooperation (2012-2020), Vice-rector for International Relations and Cooperation for Development and Vice-rector for Research.
- c) Universitat Politècnica de València: Vice-rector and Chief of Staff of the Rector until 2021, Vice-rector of Internationalization and Communication and Vice-rector of Research.
- d) Universitat de València-Estudi General: Vice-rector of Internationalization and Cooperation and Vice-rector of Research
- e) Universitat Jaume I de Castelló: Vice-rector of Internationalization and Cooperation and Vice-rector of Research and Transfer.

Quantitative Technique

The University Community of the University of Alicante was selected as a representative sample of Valencian public universities. This decision responds to the fact that we have considered that this university represents a middle ground in comparison with other Valencian public universities, characterized by different sizes, both in terms of population, resources, representativeness and visibility regarding internationalization policies.

In order to verify the use and impact of the different programs/projects implemented at the University of Alicante, as well as the organizational units in charge of developing them, a personalized survey was carried out by groups, sent to all members of the university community (students, Teaching and Research Staff and Administration and Services Staff).

In conjunction with the quantitative technique of the survey, the documentary and data analysis technique were used, as follows:

- f) Documentary analysis of each Valencian public university: we used as a source the public information available on their websites, according to the transparency principle of public administrations, as well as the information provided by the participants in the interviews.
- g) Analysis of statistical data collected by Valencian public universities and the CRUE (Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities) concerning internationalization policies and the impact they have produced on the results of quality, effectiveness and efficiency, as well as their correspondence in terms of international visibility.
- h) Analysis of the main indicators and results related to the presence of the five Valencian public universities in international rankings, their comparison and evolution during the period studied within the framework of the internationalization process of each one of them.

RESULTS

The research reveals the results obtained in the fieldwork, carried out from a global vision of all Valencian public universities. Thus, we could summarize with the following results:

- a) The interim nature of most of the strategic plans of the universities, since they have expired, possibly because their renewal coincided with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the lack of updating of the accountability tools, as well as of the reports describing the execution of the strategic plans and the annual reports, represent an obstacle to progress in current and future internationalization policies. In addition, they represent a breach of the transparency and good governance criteria of which the universities pretend to boast. One of the principal reasons for this delay in the planning and accountability tools has to do with the lack of an update of the multi-year funding of public universities by the regional government Generalitat Valenciana. Thus, we find evidence of systemic underfunding of public universities.
- b) Despite the above, it is also important to note that public universities have made significant and commendable efforts to achieve adequate planning of internationalization actions and policies. Among the efforts made, the following stand out in particular: the Internationalization Strategy of the Universitat Jaume I de Castelló, the Strategic Action Plan for Internationalization of the

Universitat Politècnica de València, the international vision of most of the strategic plans of all the universities, the plans developed for obtaining economic resources, such as, for example, the European Union's resilience funds for economic recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic, etc. In addition, most universities have quality or statistical data analysis units that provide useful updated information on indicators related to internationalization actions and research.

A very important part of the funding of university internationalization policies comes from external sources. Among the most important sources are the ERASMUS+ funds used to finance different mobility actions and internships, especially for students, but also for teaching and research staff and administrative and service staff.

The funds provided by private entities, such as Banco Santander and, of course, by the Generalitat Valenciana itself, to name some of the most relevant, are also important. However, all these external funds are not enough to finance all the policies to be developed. For this reason, the universities themselves make a very important economic effort to complete the external aid and thus stimulate students, professors, researchers and administrative and service staff to carry out mobility actions or international cooperative research. These own economic efforts are generally well managed and focused on real needs. They are a vital complement to ensure the success of internationalization policies, especially in the mobility sector.

- c) Digitalization has been one of the most important values and strategic axes to solve the problems derived from the four global crises experienced since 2008 and with it the internationalization actions of the universities have been developed and not paralyzed. The effort in this regard has been considerable and has represented a quantitative and qualitative leap that has been beneficial to all university activities and policies, not only those related to internationalization, but also to teaching and research. It also represents an advance in the general technological development of universities that will remain once the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been overcome and will help to change ways of working (videoconferences, work meetings, training courses, etc.), procedures (e.g. administrative procedures), services (virtual and more accessible to the university community) and resources (especially teaching, learning and research).
- d) The positioning of the public universities of the Valencian Community in international rankings, according to internationalization and research criteria, in general, is competitive. Beyond the debates and the recognition of international rankings as a valid evaluation tool or not, the five public universities are in high or intermediate positions, depending on the ranking used for their analysis. Nevertheless, there is a significant inequality among the Valencian universities themselves. While the Universitat de València-Estudi General and the Universitat Politècnica de València appear, very often, in high positions, at the international level, the smaller universities in terms of students and resources, such as the Universitat Jaume I de Castelló, the Miguel Hernández University of Elche and the University of Alicante, appear in much lower positions. This difference is even more evident when analyzing their positioning in terms of research criteria.

The causes of this inequality could be mainly due to three factors: on the one hand, the well-known bias that rankings tend to grant in favor of institutions with a larger number of students and budget. On the other hand, the great difference in resources available to one or the other, although in this research it has not been possible to establish a direct correlation. Moreover, even the universities with the greatest resources complain that these are not enough and that there are serious deficiencies in such important matters as the renewal or replacement rate of the staff, in order to overcome their aging. The other weakness of the system is related to the concentration of investment in large research groups, leaving smaller groups with a significant research burden underfunded. Finally, in some of Valencian public universities, a large part of the teaching and research staff does not have a clear idea of institutional identity and belonging as a group. The perception among the members of the university community is worse than from outside the institution, which discourages researchers from including their affiliation in the work they publish and in the international dissemination of their own work, which has repercussions on the ranking indicators.

- e) The four crises analyzed during the 2019-2020 period (latest budget cuts inherited from the 2008 financial crisis; the United Kingdom's exit from the EU, or better known as Brexit; health crisis produced by the COVID-19 Pandemic; invasion and war in Ukraine, with the consequent energy crisis) have very significantly affected the internationalization policies of public universities in the Valencian Community. The actions that have been most affected have been, above all, those related to mobility and the operation of networks and alliances. In addition, the justification regarding the impossibility of carrying out mobility actions led to a reduction in the budget of the universities for this item in order to allocate it to other priorities such as digitization actions.
- f) According to the case study carried out at the University of Alicante, university groups show a mixed knowledge of the internationalization actions available to them.

On the one hand, students are worryingly unaware of these actions and the importance they may have for their careers. Although they consider internationalization to be important for their curricula, the University of Alicante has not managed to catch the attention of the majority of this group, especially students in their first years of studies, where they should already be preparing themselves to participate in future mobility actions, for example, in language learning.

The group of Teaching and Research Staff has a somewhat higher awareness of internationalization actions, but, at the same time, complains about the lack of institutional support to develop them, especially regarding stays and financial aid.

Finally, the group of Administration and Services Staff shows a greater knowledge of internationalization actions, among other things because, for the most part, they are in charge of managing them. However, this group only shows interest in a specific number of actions directly related to their functions, such as language learning within the framework of the university's language policy. Their interest is much lower in terms of their participation in actions related to mobility.

This limited real impact of internationalization policies on the university community of the University of Alicante is also observed in other Valencian public universities. The use of resources and services associated with internationalization, especially for specific aid and international mobility, is still scarce in relation to the effort made. This is evidenced by the small number of people who obtain financial aid for different internationalization actions, as shown by the resolutions of the calls for applications in recent years from some of the universities. It is also necessary to improve the number and allocation of aids, until they cover a greater amount of the final costs of the mobilities. It is also necessary to improve language training programs, internships and cooperation actions. The reduction of bureaucratic obstacles also needs to be reformulated, since they have been shown to be one of the main discouraging factors in the development of internationalization policies for all groups and, lastly, greater flexibility in the requirements for accessing aid.

Only the Universitat de València is far from this reduced impact on the university community, since it is, by far, the one that carries out more mobilities, both incoming and outgoing students, thanks to the ERASMUS+ funds it has, the one that offers more subjects in English and the one that invests more in research excellence.

- g) Development cooperation has experienced a very damaging impact as a result of the four crises analyzed during the period. If the funds allocated to this mission were already limited and never reached 0.7% of the general university budgets, with the budgetary, health and mobility difficulties, the actions have been greatly reduced. However, there is a great inequality between the actions carried out by some universities and others. Ironically, smaller universities in terms of student body and resources develop more active and committed cooperation policies. This is the case of the Miguel Hernández University of Elche (for example, the Volunteer Program in Rwanda) and the University of Alicante (postgraduate training programs for Latin American students), while other universities, with larger budgets, develop cooperation actions well below their capacities, comparatively speaking with those of smaller size and budget, as is the case of the Universitat de València-Estudi General.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the principal conclusions that can be drawn, in the absence of confirmation or not of the hypothesis, once the current research has been completed, is that the public universities of the Valencian Community make a great effort to develop their internationalization policies, even in those cases where they have fewer resources.

This is mainly due to the fact that the international vision predominates in all policies developed by universities in most areas, as one of their main values and core strategies. In each and every one of the universities, internationalization is considered a backbone. This can be seen in the strategic plans themselves, where most of their axes and policies contain this international vision.

Unfortunately, exaggeration in university image policies is also widespread. In many cases, the news and advances that are promulgated do not correspond to real progress. For example, it is very common to overestimate the importance of some indicators in the rankings, where universities can do better, and to reduce or underestimate where the results are more negative.

It has also been relevant to discover how the crises referred to in the study have impacted the internationalization processes. Although they have produced a negative effect on internationalization policies, it is noteworthy that, as far as possible, they have been overcome with imagination and good strategies, despite the short time and the need for improvisation that, in some cases, they may have entailed, as in the case of the negative effects on mobility caused by the health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The main tools that the universities have used to face these problems have been basically four: budgetary adjustments (in the case of the last effects of the 2008 financial crisis); the strategy focused on Europe as a priority, as it is considered the natural development framework for the universities of the Valencian Community (in the case of Brexit), Digitalization (in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic); and, finally, Solidarity (in the case of the invasion and war in Ukraine).

Finally, it is necessary to highlight the importance of including new criteria for the improvement of the internationalization policies of the Valencian public universities, or criteria that are more adjusted to the needs detected in the new strategic plans. It is also important to review the evaluation tools, annual reports or specific strategies for internationalization, all of which could help to develop a more advanced policy and contribute to greater transparency and accountability of the institution and, of course, to better governance.

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