**OS DESAFIOS DA COMUNICAÇÃO ESTRATÉGICA DAS UNIVERSIDADES PÚBLICAS PORTUGUESAS NOS PROCESSOS DE INTERNACIONALIZAÇÃO**

THE CHALLENGES OF THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION OF THE PORTUGUESE PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN THE INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESSES

#### RESUMO

## A ideia que direciona o artigo é provocar nos comunicadores, maior atenção aos processos de internacionalização das Instituições de Ensino Superior (IEs), no que diz respeito à sua dimensão institucional, e revelar oportunidades possíveis de atuação, especialmente em relação à mobilidade acadêmica. Numa perspectiva teórica, foi possível discorrer sobre o fenômeno da internacionalização, contextualizar as IES portuguesas e a relevância estratégica que as mesmas têm direcionado para o recrutamento de estudantes internacionais, e discorrer sobre o quanto a comunicação pode otimizar esse processo, desde que devidamente integrada à gestão, e com vistas ao alcance da missão institucional de internacionalização. Remete à complexidade do processo de decisão e aos vários fatores que influenciam o estudante internacional à procura e escolha por um país e por uma instituição. Por fim, ratifica que o estudante prioriza a reputação tanto para a escolha do país quanto da instituição, o que evidencia uma grande oportunidade para a área de Relações Públicas.

#### ABSTRACT

## The main goal of this article is to drive organisations’ communications managers to pay more attention to internationalisation processes at higher education institutions (HEIs) and uncover new opportunities for action focused on academic mobility. From a theoretical viewpoint, there is a discussion on the phenomenon of internationalisation, Portuguese HEIs and the strategic relevance of recruiting international students are put into context, with a reflection on how communication can improve that process provided it is duly integrated into the institution’s management and mission. The complexity of the decision-making process is highlighted, along with factors that influence international students when they look for and choose a host country and institution. The conclusion is reached that students prioritise reputation when choosing the country and the institution, which reflects a great opportunity for the public relations field.

Palavras chave:internacionalização do Ensino Superior; mobilidade acadêmica; recrutamento de estudantes; Relações Públicas; comunicação estratégica.

**Keywords:** Internationalisation of higher education; academic mobility; recruitment of students; public relations; strategic communication.

## INTRODUCTION

Against the complex days at present, and taking into account a highly dynamic, changing and competitive environment, Portuguese public universities have adopted internationalisation as a fundamental part of their strategic sustainability process. It is a significant challenge to draw up an internationalisation plan aligned with the institution’s mission, duly integrated into its communications plan.

Communication, as part of broad-reaching internationalisation processes at higher education institutions, in particular in their strategies for recruiting international students, may be the great driving force of that internationalisation and a fundamental resource in gaining a competitive advantage in the long term.

In this paper, it is aimed to present a theoretical discussion on the phenomenon of internationalisation, Portuguese HEIs and the strategic relevance of recruiting international students are put into context, with a reflection on how communication can improve that process provided it is duly integrated into the institution’s management and mission.

## THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Globalisation – something that is responsible, among other things, for liberalising trade, intensifying the movement of people, expanding higher education and knowledge, increasing levels of private investment and reducing public support for education and technological development – has also transformed the education market.

## One of the most important characteristics of the global education market over the last decade has been the extensive growth in demand for international education. According to Bohm, Davis, Meares e Pearce (2002), there were around 1.8 million international students at higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world in the year 2000. There are currently around five million and this figure is expected to rise to 7.2 million international students in 2025.

## Knight (2015: 2) defines internationalisation as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”. It is a dynamic, complex phenomenon that is subject to internal and external restrictions and should always be analysed individually and in context.

## Broadly speaking, two important features can be identified in higher education programmes’ internationalisation policies. One is internationalisation abroad, understood as all forms of cross-border education: mobility for people, projects, programmes and providers. The other is internationalisation at home, which is more directed towards the teaching curriculum itself and focuses on actions contributing to a better understanding of the international landscape and the development of students’ international skills (Knight, 2008).

## Several reasons are cited for the internationalisation of higher education. *Economic justifications* include a desire to prepare students for international careers, produce income for the institution, develop competitiveness. *Political reasons* focus on the need to provide students with an awareness of world cultures and skills needed to deal with national security and foreign policy. *Academic reasons* underline the fact that in order to enhance liberal education it is essential to provide opportunities for students to: (a) gain a well-informed and diverse view of the world; (b) understand the international features of their main fields of study; and (c) develop global critical thinking skills. Socio-cultural reasons emphasise the need to develop students’ intercultural communication skills, essential for dealing with growing cultural and ethnic diversity within and between countries (Childress, 2009).

## The greatest benefits of internationalisation mentioned by European HEIs, according to the EAIE’s Barometer survey, are: “Improve the overall quality of education at our institution” and “Prepare students for a global world”. [[1]](#footnote-1)

## With regard to the institutional component of internationalisation, there are many HEIs that find impetus for internationalisation in more diverse income and greater market and niche focus. For that reason, many actively work to recruit international students, driven primarily by the opportunity to generate income but also by a desire to boost cultural diversity. This appears to currently be the case in Portugal.

## Portugal In The Internationalization Of Higher Education

## Higher education in Portugal has seen significant improvements in recent years, but it has still not reached its potential. To improve its competitiveness at global level, structural problems need to be overcome. These relate to learning outcomes, flexibility in curricula, professional qualification, equity, employability, low geographic mobility for students, concentration in major urban centres, accommodation for students, financial dependence on parents and the financial sustainability of the higher education system, among other factors.

## According to the Education at a Glance report (OECD, 2018), Portugal has low levels of public financing, especially when calculated by student, which has led to higher education being subsidised to a large extent by families (26% of higher education costs – almost double the 15% usually found in the European Union as a whole), in the form of tuition fees. [[2]](#footnote-2)

## According to OECD data, just a third of young people aged 25 to 34 have higher education, a long way behind the 44% OECD average. Between 2007 and 2017, the Portuguese average grew from 21% to 34%, but even so it remains 10 percentage points below the OECD average. In 2015, Portugal invested around 1.3% of its gross domestic product (GDP) into higher education, below the OECD average of 1.5%. Portugal’s main goals are to have 60% of young people aged 20 in higher education by 2030 and 50% of people aged 30-34 with a qualification (Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 25/2018 approving the guidelines for a technology and business innovation strategy for Portugal, 2018-2030).

## Student mobility in higher education has increased in most OECD countries, including Portugal. Between 2013 and 2016, the number of international students in the country grew to 36%. In 2016, there were 20,000 international students in Portugal, representing 6% of the total number of higher education students. That is double the percentage found in neighbouring Spain (3%), and is in line with the OECD total (6%) but below the total for the EU23 (9%). The percentage of international students is particularly high for PhDs, where they make up 26% of students in Portugal and also in the total for OECD countries.

## There were 44,485 students registered in Portuguese higher education in 2017/2018, hailing from 167 countries, according to RAIDES18 data.[[3]](#footnote-3) The most common country of origin for international students in Portugal is Brazil (32%), with Spain in distant second place (5%).

## Against a backdrop of limited resources and bold targets, many Portuguese institutions have looked to the offer of international education as a pillar of their strategies. At organisation level, internationalisation: “It is firmly embedded in institutional mission statements, policies, and strategies as well as national policy frameworks. This signals that internationalization has come of age and is a legitimate area of policy, practice, and research in higher education.” (Knight, 2015: 14)

Portuguese HEIs, in order to achieve their internationalisation missions and strengthen their positions within the existing range of teaching on offer, are dedicated to creating a more sophisticated and satisfactory education experience for their student bodies. Many have sought to meet the different expectations and motivations of international students and, under pressure, they make an effort to continually invest in improving their services and processes by supplying social supports, human capital, technical resources, and in their facilities and equipment.

## Challenges Of Strategic Communication In Higher Education Internationalisation Processes

HEIs have highlighted internationalisation opportunities and many have established the recruitment of students in international markets as an expansion strategy. Portuguese HEIs, particularly those located in inland regions of the country, which are undergoing greater demographic deficit, rely on the adoption of strategies like these to guarantee their long-term sustainability.

In organisational terms, Porter (2004 : 36) defines competitive strategy as ''offensive or defensive actions to create a defensible position, successfully tackle the five competitive forces and thus, obtain a higher return on investment for the company.” The author points out three general strategic positions in organisation management: overall cost leadership, differentiation and focus.

According to Carneiro, Cavalcanti and Silva (1997), the central point of Porter’s *overall cost leadership strategy* is the organisation’s ability to reduce its overall cost, which works as a defence mechanism against the rivalry of its competitors, particularly with regard to price wars. The *differentiation strategy* assumes that the organisation offers a product or service that is considered unique by customers, in other words, the characteristics of which distinguish it from those offered by the competition. Loyalty and a reduction in sensitivity to price by customers are a result of the differentiation strategy.

Porter’s *focus strategy* is based on the organisation’s ability to better respond to its strategic market target than the competition. The strategic scope or target should be narrow enough to enable the organisation to serve it more efficiently and effectively and may be defined in a variety of ways: type of customers, product line, variety of distribution channels, geographical area (Carneiro, Cavalcanti & Silva, 1997).

Accordingly to Baron (2000: 12) “The performance of business organizations is affected by their strategies and operations in market and non-market environments”. For Van Riel and Fombrun (2007), an integrated communication system is generally seen as a positive factor for an organisation’s performance and reputation. Organisations rely on visibility, communication and strategic relationships:

“By developing an integrated communication system, an organization can flesh out a structure for corporate communication that can assist in the implementation of strategic objectives, build brand and reputation, and thereby create economic value” (VAN RIEL & FOMBRUN, 2007, p,09)

Again, it is important for there to be an integrated alignment of communication goals with HEIs’ objectives, strategies and internationalisation missions, and we believe in the idea that organisational communication included in a systemic perspective cannot be separated from the strategy for organisational position, differentiation and institutional brand positioning. In the end, communication and branding are set up as intangible assets and only integrated processes can make it possible to create value.

Serralvo and Furrier (2004) acknowledge the work of Ries and Trout (2002) as drivers behind debates on positioning in the field of marketing and show that this expression follows the client’s guidance, in other words, it is based on perceptual schemas. They define brand positioning as the “process of studying, defining and implementing a differentiated offer of value, the attributes of which provide a sustainable, advantageous position for a brand with regard to the competition in a certain category from the point of view of a target audience’s perception” (Serralvo & Furrier, 2004: 8), a concept that is adjusted and focused in the differentiation strategy.

The fact that products and services are assessed from the perspective of the customer/user/consumer can be highly strategic, depending on organisations’ opportunities to influence factors that shape that perception, however, “influencing customer experiences is a complex process that involves interactions among several stakeholder groups” (Schlager et al., 2011: 497).

Perception is built by cognitive, environmental and structural activities/experience and is heavily interlinked with relational factors. In the case of prospecting for international students, it is fundamental to get to know, understand, monitor and assess stakeholders’ needs, preferences and expectations (including competitors’ practices) to better understand the search and decision-making processes when these students look for a country and institution.

This intended student should be able to interact and establish a tie, a dialogue with the brand/institution when coming into contact with it, and this can only be made possible through communication. Accepting communication as a potential resource for creating a long-term competitive advantage and adopting it as a positioning strategy will lead to a differentiated offer and add value to the organisation.

The process of recruiting students is often highly personal and is the product of meaningful connections among students, educators, institutions, agents and other partners, something that characterises it as a public relations activity:

[...] organisations cannot fail to be aware of the following fact: the opinion that publics have about an organisation and their resulting behaviour is always the result of a process of acquiring knowledge about products, services, brand, organisation, etc., which develops over time and does not emerge only from the messages produced by the organisation itself. It is therefore extremely important for the organisation’s image and reputation to be constantly analysed by public relations (Gonçalves, 2010: 17).

## The Process of Recruiting International Students

The effectiveness of recruitment depends on international students’ motivations and decision-making processes. An international student’s decision-making process is a long one; it may last for more than a year and comprises several stages (ICEF Insights, 2018)[[4]](#footnote-4). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) carried out a survey of 2,485 students from four countries – Indonesia, Taiwan, India and China – between 1996 and 2000 over two stages: surveys to find out motivations and focus groups for in-depth discussions on the nature of students’ decision-making processes. They discovered that the process of making the decision to study abroad may involve at least three phases: 1) the student decides to leave his/her country of origin; 2) he/she chooses a host country; 3) he/she selects the institution (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

During these stages, several factors influence the decision-making process. Initially, there are factors that belittle the country of origin: importance of having a course abroad, difficulty in joining the courses offered in the country of origin and the opportunity to better understand “Western culture” by way of an international education.

During the second stage, the choice of a particular country appears to be influenced primarily by the reputation and quality of the education institution. Recognition of the course in the country of origin and the international profile of the host country makes it easier to find out about its educational offer. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) highlight that the reputation of HEIs was mentioned as the most decisive factor in students’ choices. Furthermore, they concluded that the decision to study abroad is fundamentally a family decision.

As for the importance of the “costs” factor when choosing a host country, the students appeared to be more interested in the offer of part-time work than the cost of fees, travel or living expenses. They also found the “social cost” to be an important variable, seen as levels of crime, security and racial discrimination. The existence of an established population of international students in the host country was also considered an important pull factor. Although less important, environmental factors (climate, physical and study setting, lifestyle) should not be disregarded in the attractiveness of the host country, as well as geographical proximity to the country of origin and social links (friends or family members living or studying in the host country).

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) used a 17-variable scale in the third stage to measure factors that influence the selection of a host institution. Students mentioned the following, in order of priority: institution’s quality and reputation; recognition of the institution’s qualifications in their own countries; quality, reputation and specialisation of the team; links to other institutions (protocols, agreements, conventions); number of international students registered; base of alumni; offer of qualifications that will be recognised by employers; variety of courses and programmes; use of the most up-to-date IT; a reputation of being receptive to students’ needs; recognition for innovation in research and teaching; large campus with good facilities; being financially stable; possibility for flexibility in joining the course throughout the year; and being an institution that significantly promotes itself. Alumni may be a valuable source of influence in directing international students to education institutions and “social links” that emerge when a student has family or friends that have studied or are studying in a host country are another important influence on the choice of destination.

A similar study by Wilkins e Huisman (2011: 313) with 160 international students at a university in the west of England found two other important variables: improving job prospects and improving language skills (in English). For Li and Bray (2007), personal factors also interfere in the decision-making process and should be taken into consideration. After carrying out a study in 2002/2003 on two institutions in Hong Kong and another two in Macau, the authors concluded that factors such as “socio-economic status, academic ability, gender, age, motivation, and aspiration” (Li & Bray, 2007: 794) influenced the choice of institution. They add that “[t]he internal factors include family background, academic characteristics, perceptions, and motivations, which shape the affordability, accessibility and desirability of external higher education” (Li & Bray, 2007: 813).

In examining the role of personality and subjective judgement in student decision-making, Hemsley-Brown (2001) found that although economic, cultural, and structural forces do influence students, they are filtered through layers of preconceptions shaped by family circumstances, culture, life history, and personality.

In 2018, 56,376 international students at 35 universities in Australia took part in the ISB (International Student Barometer) survey that involved the participation of international students from more than 100 countries with the aim of establishing the factors that contributed the most to international students’ happiness. The five main elements identified were: good contacts, employability, course organisation, social facilities and campus buildings. The research indicated that there was a positive correlation between level of happiness and high levels of satisfaction with the overall study experience. However, the data also shows that happiness is influenced by different elements in accordance with the students’ characteristics, including nationality. The same research showed that for graduate students from China – the main sending market for Australia – the three major elements with an impact on happiness were “making good contacts for the future”, “the institution” and “places to eat on campus”. The data suggests that international students’ notion of happiness is influenced by characteristics such as nationality, gender and stage of study and that their subjective satisfaction is determined by several interconnected factors.

As explained, the process to decide on a country and institution is very complex and there are many factors that influence international students’ decisions and that have an influence on a student’s positive experience. And they are very often interconnected. Furthermore, there are several actors that take part in that process: family members, teachers, managers, recruiting agents.

Reputation is the most significant factor influencing the student’s decision to opt for a certain country and institution. And family influence plays a significant role in the choice of institution. We need to show the importance of these results to communications professionals and to public relations professionals in particular. Reputation management and relationship management may be highly strategic for completing higher education institutions’ internationalisation missions and very little appears to be being done in that regard.

For Fombrun and Van Riel (2004), building a positive reputation is related to influence and the way the organisation interacts with stakeholders. The authors suggest that positive reputations are the result of corporate communication when they produce favourable perceptions in the public’s mind. This is manifested as distinctiveness, visibility, transparency, authenticity and capacity to respond, each of which differently affects each stakeholder’s perception.

It is understood that most reputation assessments are measured by university rankings, which end up shaping universities’ competitive behaviour and, according to Altbach (2015: 2) “are widely criticised for their questionable methods or flaws, as well as for the concept itself, but everyone uses them”.

Finally, to optimise the internationalisation process, organisational communication asserts the organisation’s relevance among others by providing information, creating awareness, stimulating, motivating and promoting stakeholder engagement, creating bonds/connections and favouring continued relationships, contributing to the organisation’s positive reputation and aligning processes and practices with the institutional mission, among other things.

## CONCLUSIONS

Internationalisation has been many higher education institutions’ response to globalisation. Portuguese public universities have adopted internationalisation as an essential pillar and find in the recruitment of international students a strategic foundation to guarantee their long-term sustainability.

Education organisations interact with a considerable number of publics over time. In the case of recruiting international students, it is important for HEIs to identify and understand the factors that have the greatest influence when searching for and choosing a country and institution and what has an impact on their experience. This means they can make informed decisions to improve international students’ experiences and drive forward and optimise the internationalisation process.

Finally, there are future opportunities for the organisational communication field in the internationalisation processes of higher education institutions. Communication can become a long-term organisational differentiation strategy for HEIs that also adopt it as a strategy to differentiate their brands. Furthermore, it is public relations professionals’ full responsibility to manage reputation, the number one priority for international students when choosing a country and institution, and to manage relationships, which in HEIs’ case involve a significant public.

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