Article

Post-Communist Higher Education Expansion in the European Area. The internationalization context

Abstract: *This paper discusses the impact of globalization and internationalization on the expansion of higher education in the European space. Thus, I begin with a brief historical foray into the expansion of higher education in the twentieth century, at the end of which I try to fix some reference notions of this perspective, including key elements such as "global" or "globalization". The usefulness of discussing these concepts supports the understanding of globalization as a gradual cognitive scale, the expansion of higher education being thus explained by the international flow of information on several levels, from global to European and national. More specifically, the fall of the communist systems in Central and Eastern Europe together with the transition to capitalism were essential steps in opening up to new opportunities and exchanges of university experience, issues that are subject to the internationalization of higher education. In this way, European internationalization would not be possible in its present form without the contribution of the Bologna process, which aims to achieve a higher education that is as inclusive and accessible as possible, factors that prove to be essential in terms of the expansion of tertiary education.*
Keywords: *expansion; globalization; internationalization; massification; transition*

1. Introduction. Problems and debates

In this first section I am considering a discussion about what globalization is and, more specifically, what impact internationalization has on the expansion of higher education in the European area. I will thus start from a brief historical foray into the expansion of higher education in the twentieth century, at the end of which I will try to establish some reference notions of this perspective, key elements such as "global" or "globalization". The usefulness of defining and explaining these terms supports the understanding of globalization as a geo-cognitive scale, the expansion of higher education being thus explained by the international flow of information on several levels, from global to European and national. Thus, the fall of the communist systems in Central and Eastern Europe together with the transition to capitalism were essential steps in opening up to new opportunities and exchanges of univer-

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sity experience, issues that are subject to the internationalization of higher education. In this way, European internationalization would not be possible in its present form without the contribution of the Bologna process, which aims to achieve a higher education that is as inclusive and accessible as possible, factors that prove to be essential in terms of the expansion of tertiary education.

To be able to frame the discussion in a context, I will start by reviewing the data that sets some historical and value thresholds regarding the number of students and higher education institutions globally. The previous century was a very broad framework for the deployment and expansion of higher education worldwide, considering that in 1900 there were about 500,000 students worldwide, and the number rose to 100 million students before 2000 (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). The threshold that marked the substantial increase in the number of students during this period was represented by the end of the second World War, an event that saw increasing trends in democratization, respect for human rights and development planning. Therefore, globally, these cultural and institutional changes have laid the foundations for an accelerated expansion in the dimension of higher education systems. For more clarity, in the current context, we can define globalization as *"processes of convergence and integration on a global scale"* (Held et al., 2000). Although it is a simple and widely accepted definition in literature, the normative baggage with which the terms "*global*" and "*globalization*" come has created a favourable framework for theoretical criticism and contestation.

From a normative perspective, the terms *"global"* and "*globalization*" are seen by theorists as associated with one or more political projects. The criticisms thus take into account that the globalization of higher education is deeply disproportionate because it facilitates the combination of the formation of world economic markets and the suppression of cultural differences elsewhere. More specifically, the term *"global"* is considered to be an *"imperialist discourse of domination"* (Conrad, 2016). On the other hand, a more favourable discourse on globalization implies that it leads to the enhancement of the potential of democracies worldwide, so that the exchange of information, knowledge and cultural interaction is encouraged. Moreover, it is also associated with reducing wage disparities between states, increasing regional or national collaboration, as well as the potential of human mobility and cross-border cultural learning (Marginson, 2022). However, globalization can also be seen from a third perspective, that of the explanatory approach, in which the terms "*global*" and "*globalization*" are considered tools for mapping and delineating the natural world. In other words, even though global opportunities and possibilities are achievable today, global higher education practices are neither neutral nor fully open. We thus discuss hierarchy or hegemony, and it is important to note that the institutions of globalization are subject to power relations (Sayer, 1999).

To better understand the global scale, it can be interpreted as a geo-cognitive one that is constantly changing and emerging. More specifically, both knowledge itself and higher education take place on a multi-level cognitive scale, starting from global to regional, European, national and local. All these levels exist simultaneously, each is constituted in a specific way and embodies distinct social practices (Marginson, 2022). In other words, higher education includes, on a global scale, different systems of information flow, knowledge, but also mobility between students or universities, through various interconnected mechanisms or networks. In this respect, globalization allows the expansion of higher education as a space in which various agents and actors, such as students, teachers and administrative staff, operate. Thus, according to Marginson, four assumptions can be made about the aforementioned geo-cognitive scales: (1) they coexist and cannot be reduced to each other, the reality being multi-scalar; (2) scales often in-

tertwine, but are different and heterogeneous – globally there is no centre of government, but an interconnected system of publications and collegial collaboration between groups and individuals (Marginson, 2021); (3) no level is necessarily dominant (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002) and (4) universities may invest in local capacity using revenues from global mobility.

Although the terms referring to globalization are used extensively to explain the expansion of higher education worldwide, some authors discuss what globalization meant in the beginning and how the transition to the internationalization of higher education occurred. I will refer to Ulrich Teichler's definition that internationalization represents the totality of significant changes in higher education, in relation to an increased frequency of transnational activities. For this, characteristic of internationalization are student physical mobility, increasing knowledge transfer, but also cooperation in international research and education (Teichler, 2004). Also, while globalization initially represented the increase in relations between different parts of the world and the gradual abolition of state borders in the field of education, this term was replaced by "*internationalization*" in the public debate on higher education. According to these interpretations, the internationalization of higher education means international cooperation and cross-border flows of knowledge, staff and students, and globalization is now linked to global trends and developments that have national and local effects (Tight, 2021). A similar but slightly more specific distinction is made by Jocelyne Gácel-Ávila, according to which internationalization refers to a mutually satisfactory relationship between states, whereas globalization is rather forces external to the individual control of states that are perceived as negative factors (Gácel-Ávila, 2005).

Higher education is one of the educational sectors that has undergone substantial changes over the past half century. Whether we are talking about program diversification, expansion, massification, privatization or increasing women's participation, all these factors have contributed to what we call today globalization or internationalization of higher education (Dobbins and Kwiek, 2017). As for Central and Eastern Europe, these changes took place at a much faster and steeper pace than in Western Europe, given all the processes that took place in parallel with the fall of the communist systems. I am referring here to political and economic transformations such as the transition to the capitalist system and the market economy, changes that occurred simultaneously with the democratization of political institutions and later with the accession to the European Union. Therefore, the argument here is that all the reforms that Romania underwent after 1989 were concomitant with the massification of higher education and thus universities faced additional problems, such as the restoration of university autonomy and academic freedoms (Dobbins and Kwiek, 2017). For these reasons, some states and political decision-makers in Central and Eastern Europe aimed, in order to overcome the communist stage, to collaborate with and through various transnational mechanisms and platforms. Thus, cooperation with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and subsequent accession to the Bologna Process were important steps taken by European universities (Kwiek, 2016).

On the Bologna process, it is a series of agreements between European states that aim to establish mechanisms by which European university qualifications and standards can be compared and equated. Thus, the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 created the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). One of the theoretical perspectives through which he is viewed is that of "international regime" (Zahavi and Friedman, 2019). Created to facilitate student mobility and make higher education more inclusive and accessible, the Bologna process can fit, according to Zahavi and Friedman, into the definition *of "implicit or explicit princi-*

ples, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a specific area of international relations" (Zahavi and Friedman, 2019). More specifically, the Bologna Process satisfies the basic criteria for being considered such a regime because: *(1)* it is based on formal rules; *(2)* there is a consensus on what is covered by those rules; *(3)* it presents a clear structure of rules and *(4)* there is a clear connection between those rules and the ideological principles of the whole process (Franck, 1990). The creation of the EHEA can also be placed on the shoulders of the European Union's goal of becoming the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, and it is a priority for European citizens to move and access higher education as freely as possible in the European area (Zahavi and Friedman, 2019).

2. Questions and assumptions: Globalization and the expansion of higher education

The literature discussing globalization presents a connection between it and the expansion of higher education from two distinct perspectives of the dimension, namely a somewhat larger (international) and a more specific (national) scale. Regarding the international perspective, the main hypothesis is closely related to the new societal model that modern societies adopt, based on a liberal vision of post-war development. This new model involved several significant institutional changes, such as the global expansion of human rights, science, and better development of organizational planning. Democratization has also played an important role in its very character of supporting equality and individual affirmation, so that schooling becomes an activity accessible to as many individuals as possible. On the other hand, at national level literature distinguishes between two main hypotheses regarding the explanation of the massification of higher education: the global connection of the state and the type of political system present in it. On the one hand, the prospect of an expansion of higher education is presented, which is triggered by institutional exchanges between universities. Thus, through voluntary agreement, universities organize exchanges of experiences, students or teachers in order to create an information flow beneficial to all those involved in this process. The second aspect concerns the political system of the respective state, given that the states in Central and Eastern Europe have marked substantial regressions in terms of access and participation of individuals in higher education during the communist period of the last century. The following hypotheses are submitted by various authors and do not represent hypotheses proposed by this paper.

Hypothesis 1: The post-war global transition to a liberal, rationalist and developmental societal model generated a pattern of global expansion of higher education (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). In its formulation were considered arguments of an institutional nature, in opposition to those of a functionalist nature, which the authors mention and which I will discuss in the section dedicated to social stratification. In the present case, the change in institutional models of global society occurred mainly with the end of World War II, when a pressing need for qualified personnel appeared in areas such as secondary education, law, research, medicine, or the priesthood (Paulsen, 1895). Thus, the new model of society was closely linked to the following institutional changes that led to the expansion of the educated population: *(1)* democratization, liberalization and expansion of human rights; *(2)* the worldwide expansion of science; *(3)* development of organizational planning and *(4)* institutional and organizational structuring (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). I will discuss them one at a time in what follows.

In terms of democratization and human rights, the post-war period saw significant improvements through global actions to combat social exclusion, thus generating new trends toward equality and individual affirmation. In this sense, schooling became an activity that all individuals could access, compared to the previous period when only elites and closed societies (through institutional constraints) had this possibility. As a result, the expansion of human rights and democratization became emergent processes on a global scale (Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan, 1997) and formal manifestations of equality (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example) became conventional in the international system (Tsutsui and Wotypka, 2004). The evolution of science has found a place in the process of legitimizing the expansion of higher education through contributions such as addressing the social world with the help of the authority of science, increasing the interest of individuals for psychological and medical understandings (Frank, Meyer, and Miyahara, 1995), but also the strategies of states and companies to carry out their activities based on scientific managerial theories and principles (Drori, Meyer, and Hwang, 2006). In this respect, an information system was created that links the knowledge of universities to the specific activities carried out by individuals or organizations and thus provided an important role for the development and expansion of higher education. Compared to the previous era where the connotations attributed to a term such as "academic" were irrelevant, the paradigm has now been overturned due to the possibility of measuring and quantifying data, especially in the social sciences (Schofer and Meyer, 2005).

National development and development planning has been closely linked to the theories of human capital and labour planning. They had this central idea that individuals become more productive when they are more educated, and thus traditional standards have been removed and considered unproductive and undemocratic. For this reason, the reconstruction of Europe after the second World War led to the formation of an international development regime that formally institutionalized aid to the countries affected by the war years (Chabbott, 2003). Towards the end of the 20th century, centralized national planning was replaced by an organizational and individual planning model, according to which anyone could become an educated individual (Hwang, 20 :2003). Finally, all three of the above-discussed trends can be considered to be the creation of a global policy, given that education and development planning have become internationally prominent through various institutions and mechanisms. An example of this is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) because of its concerns for the institutions I have considered so far: the importance of education for national development, science, but also the equal and democratic participation of individuals in the life of society (Schofer and Hironaka, 2005). Thus, the global expansion of the network of organizations and institutions has led to significant progress in all areas mentioned, especially in the educational sphere.

Hypothesis 2: The expansion of higher education is most rapid in countries that are organizationally connected to various global models (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). In this case, the central point is the diffusion in society of educational models based on institutionalist theory, taking into account the effects deriving from the global level to a regional or national level. Because there are substantial differences between states and their education systems in their shape and structure, bureaucratic obstacles have made the European Union not, until recently, become a coherent educational space. However, the establishment of EHEA and the launch of the Bologna process have provided the possibility for such problems to be solved by building this educational framework, based on a voluntary and non-binding agreement (Zahavi and Friedman, 2019). The social and economic globalization of the 21st century has created the

need for universities to generate qualified graduates in order for them to operate in an increasingly competitive global setting. Thus, from the point of view of regime theory, the Bologna process functions as a "self-constraining mechanism" that participants assume. More specifically, they realize that international collaboration requires some regulation from an external entity, which they accept because it is the solution to fulfilling the role of the academic space in the era of globalization (Zahavi and Friedman, 2019).

Hypothesis 3: The context of the global institutionalization of higher education makes its expansion rapid in decentralized and controlled national systems in centralized systems (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). First, strong political groups can limit the expansion of education to reduce the mobility of potential opportunities for competing groups. In this sense, the expansion of public schooling was slow during periods characterized by reluctance to migratory groups that were gaining a threatening status (Ralph and Rubinson, 1980). On the other hand, the case of the communist societies of the last century is of interest to the present thesis, given the internal conflict that arose within them. I am referring here to the crisis between the Party's continued need for control over society (represented by the privileges of the working class power) and the rise of a new class of educated citizens. This conflict was won by the first category and thus, after about 1970, the communist countries resorted to harsh Party control, thus restricting the expansion of higher education (Baker, Kohler, and Stock, 2007). In other words, even though the first years after the end of World War II saw increases in student flows in communist systems, the problem was the model of society that they later imposed. Thus, the pressures of the Party's worker-centred ideology made the option for a protective paternalistic system rather than a modern human capital approach (Schofer and Meyer, 2005).

As regards global social practices of integration and convergence in higher education, I bring up here three components, ranked according to the scale to which they relate: global connections, global dispersion and global systems. First, cross-border connections represent, in the global era, international relations that include student mobility, exchange of experience, online courses, and long-term physical mobility. Such opportunities do not alter practices developed at national and local level, but have the ability to contribute to a structural transformation of educational processes when they become regular and sustainable practices (Conrad, 2016). In this way, societies can be profoundly shaped by continuous interaction with masses of students from outside, and universities can in turn develop a continuous flow of student talents from outside. Second, global dispersion refers to behaviours, ideas and patterns that are scattered and borrowed globally between different higher education systems. An example of this is the 19-century German research-centred university model, which was later adopted by the United States and then dispersed to the rest of the world a century later. More specifically, we are discussing here about academic structures that have borrowed elements such as quality assurance or research evaluation and implemented them in their own systems. Finally, global systems include the information and communication networks of higher education, but also encompass global comparison between universities, i.e. university rankings globally.

3. Contributions and gaps

We have previously shown the importance of the political system in a state in terms of how it relates to the access of individuals to higher education. In the continuation of this argument, I will discuss what it meant for the European space, but also for Romania, the transition from a

centralized controlled system to a liberal and decentralized one, given the new fields and study programs that appeared after 1989. Taking into account the role of a global institution that the university has assumed in recent decades, the internationalization of higher education has led to the highlighting of organizational and structural similarities between universities, which form bilateral cooperation relationships based on those similarities, be they value or cultural. The role of the university thus became to prepare a large number of students to be able to carry out a large number of activities, giving them various general transversal competences. Therefore, the expansion of higher education at global level has marked a standardization both organizational and curricular, so that students are given knowledge meant to be useful in diverse situations and activities. Thus, several main models of "international universities" have been developed, differentiated by the way they relate to organizational development: "classic" – for universities that choose international partners and initiatives, as well as "satellite" for those that create research centres outside the university campus. Such initiatives were encouraged by the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) whose main objectives were to make studying in Europe as attractive as possible for non-European students, but also to facilitate cooperation and student mobility within European universities.

I will first refer to the university as a "global institution", given how much the social, economic and cultural conditions vary between each state and region individually (Meyer et al., 2007). Also, the main paths of development and change differ according to nations or regions, but nevertheless, globally, we can discuss common and similar models between higher education systems. In other words, if colleges and universities reflect various organizational and structural similarities over time, then we can discuss the university as a global institution, central to the current trajectory of global society (Eisenstadt et al., 1986). In practice, education systems are very similar worldwide and show more and more similarities with the passage of time. Historically, by organizing in the form of a "university", higher education has spread throughout the world with a strong isomorphic character in terms of their form and content (Riddle, 1989).

One of the reasons why, globally, universities present so many similarities with each other is the very role of the institution to train students based on cultural assumptions such as universal values, human-centred, scientific knowledge and rationality. Thus, even though universities did not excel in preparing individuals for very specific activities and roles, they positioned themselves very well in providing general notions and transversal skills to them. (Meyer et al., 2007). Therefore, higher education is not only expanding globally, but is also increasingly standardized, both from an organizational and content perspective. While communities and countries vary significantly from one to the other, universities create similarities with their goals and the programs they set up to meet those goals. For example, the fact that in the social sciences there is constant discussion and appeal to certain founding authors or certain reference theories makes this standardization process closely linked to the agreed curriculum. In this regard, the organizational differences reflected in national or local "path dependence" should be replaced by an international standardization process (Teichler, 2007).

The internationalization of higher education presupposes, in accordance with contemporary educational developments and developments, three main models of an "international university". The first of these, referred to as *the "classical model"*, refers to an institution that has developed internal or external partners and activities and also involves a wide range of international and intercultural initiatives on academic, research or management issues (Knight, 2015). The second, the *"satellite model"*, discusses institutions that have focused on develop-

ing research centres outside the university campus and assumes the existence of "satellite offices" in several countries and regions aimed at maintaining connections with alumni, recruiting new students or consulting. Internationally co-founded universities are the third model and the latest development in the educational field, given the character of institutions to be independent but formed by co-founding or co-development by two or more partners (Knight, 2015). Therefore, a characteristic shared by universities globally is the collaboration with other university centres internationally, but also the formation and development of distance research centres. This conclusion is apparent from the *"Global study of internationalization"* (initiated by the International Association of Universities – IAU), according to which, in 2014, 30% of universities gave increased importance to internationalization in the last three years (Egron-Polak, 2014).

At European level, the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) laid the foundation for an objective to interconnect national higher education systems in each Member State, but this was achieved through two separate initiatives. First of all, 1999 was marked by a meeting between education ministers from almost three dozen European countries in Bologna. The reason was to express their desire to promote reforms of study programs and to establish a common structure of programs and qualifications, with the ultimate aim of enhancing structural similarities. In essence, the aim of these measures was to make studying in Europe more attractive to students outside Europe, but also to facilitate student cooperation and mobility for students and universities in Europe (Teichler, 2007). The result obtained by the ministers of education and representatives of higher education institutions was thus the cooperation within the "Bologna Process" which aimed to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010. On the other hand, in 2000, the European Council – the Heads of State and Government of 15 Member States at the time – agreed in Lisbon to work together on research and thus decided to create a "European Research Area" by 2010. It also set a target of increasing R&D spending to 3% of GDP so that Europe could become the "*most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*" ((Teichler, 2007).

The post-communist transition that followed the collapse of the Soviet system led to the formation of a new institutional framework for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, changes that had already been emerging in Western Europe for several decades. In other words, at a different time and at a different intensity, newly formed democratic governments in these regions of Europe have adopted measures aimed at leading to a liberalization of higher education institutions, both in terms of economic and academic dimension (research and curricula). Not only that, but also the restoration of university autonomy was one of the main objectives and justifications of the reforms carried out (Dakowska and Harmsen, 2015). These institutional transformations have led, in the case of higher education institutions in Central and Eastern Europe, to the emergence of two interconnected parallel trends: The emergence of private universities and the massification of tertiary education. While these processes are already widespread worldwide, the case of higher education systems in Central and Eastern Europe is more specific, given that after the emergence of private universities, they registered up to one third of the total number of students in countries such as Romania, Estonia or Poland (Slantcheva and Levy, 2007). From this perspective, the "*catch up the West*" narrative is debunked by Daniel Levy, considering that 27.7% of the total number of students in Central and Eastern European universities opted for private, while the percentage is only 6.3% in Western countries. Data indicating the preference of Western students for public universities over private ones (Levy, 2012).

The phenomenon of higher education massification was an increasingly visible trend after 1989, given the significant increase in the number of students in ex-communist states. More specifically, in countries such as Romania, Poland or Bulgaria, access to higher education was so selective during the communist period that the percentage of the population holding a university degree was less than 10% (Dakowska, 2015). Since admission procedures could not be suddenly replaced, the years after the revolution marked a gradual transformation in terms of selection criteria and areas of study, so that ideological criteria were abolished and new areas of study were brought to the public attention, Such as the humanities, political or administrative sciences (Dakowska and Harmsen, 2015). As a result of the changes produced after the revolution, Romania has been exposed to numerous influences from abroad, such as the involvement of international actors such as the World Bank, the OECD or UNESCO. Moreover, the signing of the Bologna Declaration of 1999 marked Romania's commitment to align with European educational standards and models. Thus, Romania joined what was perceived to be the EU acquis on education and responded to calls on the modernization of education, coming from the OECD and the European Commission (Deca, 2015).

4. Conclusions

The goals of this paper was to discuss the impact that globalization and internationalization have on the expansion of higher education in the European space. I began with a brief historical perspective over the expansion of higher education in the twentieth century, followed by the theoretical discussion involving some reference notions of this perspective, including key elements such as "global" or "globalization", or "internationalization". The aim here was to highlight the process of globalization as a gradual cognitive scale, the expansion of higher education being thus explained by the international flow of information on several levels, from global to European and national. More specifically, the fall of the communist systems in Central and Eastern Europe together with the transition to capitalism were essential steps in opening up to new opportunities and exchanges of university experience, issues that are subject to the internationalization of higher education. In this way, we could not talk about European internationalization of higher education today without including the contribution of the Bologna Process and the impact of the European Higher Education Area. The reason is that, given that their target is to achieve a higher education that is as inclusive and accessible as possible, these factors prove to be essential in terms of the expansion of tertiary education.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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