

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CO-CREATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION POLICIES

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Abstract

The creation of educational policies is currently facing phenomena that are little considered by educational political science, such as academic cooperation, digitalization, and inequality in accessing what knowledge implies. This article describes the exercise of co-creation of educational policies between governments, universities, and international organizations, insisting on the role played by interdisciplinary work teams in the development of inclusive, efficient, and sustainable regulatory frameworks. Experiences from European Union, Latin American, and African countries are presented as successful coalitions that are shown to understand how these models have positive implications for the internationalization of higher education.

Key words: Policies, Internationalization, Co-creation, Governance, Higher Education

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Introduction

Globalization has reshaped tertiary-level education (Salmi, 2017), creating the need for educational policies that are adaptive and collaborative (Altbach et al., 2019). Therefore, it is very relevant to inquire into the processes of co-creation of international educational policies, initially described by Helms et al. (2015) from an interdisciplinary approach, that consider not only the structural challenges but also the opportunities for inclusion and equity.

While internationalization has been widely adopted as a strategic goal across higher education systems, there remains a significant gap in the literature and practice regarding how international education policies are co-created across diverse geopolitical and institutional contexts. Most existing studies focus on top-down policy development or on isolated institutional strategies, often overlooking collaborative, multi-stakeholder processes that incorporate national, regional, and international actors.

This gap raises a central research question: How can co-creation processes involving multiple stakeholders contribute to the development of effective, inclusive, and sustainable international education policies? Exploring this question is critical at a time when transnational collaboration, digitalization, and global inequality are shaping the higher education landscape and demanding new governance frameworks.

The current educational context, particularly seen from the field of higher education, has been characterized by growing inequality that needs to be mitigated with strategies for access to training programs and other policies. For instance, from the virtual academic offer of programs, the gap is mitigated little by little. International and inter-institutional collaboration has been emerging as an indispensable strategy for guaranteeing access to knowledge in an egalitarian manner (De Wit & Jones, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to examine successful experiences of international policy co-creation in higher education and to formulate strategic recommendations for implementing co-created policies in international settings. Through a comparative case study analysis of initiatives in Europe (the European Higher Education Area [EHEA] and Erasmus+), Latin America (*Marca Región*), and Africa (African Quality Rating Mechanism [AQRM]), this study illustrates how co-creation contributes to policy effectiveness, contextual relevance, and global cooperation. Emphasizing the role of interdisciplinary governance, the article will offer a framework for institutions and policymakers seeking to engage more deliberately in inclusive, evidence-informed, and internationally aligned policy development.

The Internationalization of the Higher Education Framework

The internationalization of higher education has undergone a transformation in recent decades, from approaches focused solely on mobility, both of students and teachers, to comprehensive strategies (Jibeen & Khan, 2015) that include internationalization at home, collaborative online learning, internationalization of the curriculum (Leask, 2015), and cooperation in research. Knight (2021) pointed out that internationalization refers to the integration of an international, intercultural, or global dimension, hence all higher education institutions should strive for this integration from their teaching, research, and extension functions, and seek to ensure that all their curricula contain an international training component that facilitates the development of strategies around it.

In this sense, strategies such as collaborative work between institutions have begun to allow the development of regulatory frameworks that favor the transfer and alignment of educational standards. In this collaborative work, Marginson & Van der Wende (2007) highlight the relevance of shared governance models in which decisions are made through consensus among different stakeholders. Based on cooperation agreements between two institutions, regulations related to that educational alignment must be formulated to allow them to have the peace of mind that there is an academic and administrative understanding. Those regulations would be created not only to comply with the training intention they share (Garson, 2016), but also to serve as a guarantor of quality for professors, students, and researchers benefited by the cooperation.

A key challenge in internationalizing higher education is ensuring that the benefits of international collaboration reach all students regardless of their social status or where they are geographically located (Brandenburg et al., 2020). The development of inclusive policies has shown that a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities is possible and has made it possible to recognize a scenario of diversity in training needs, variety in strategies to address different teaching and learning styles,

and adaptability in the dynamics of relationships between institutions thanks to the phenomenon of globalization (Foskett & Maringe, 2012).

As seen in Figure 1, an internationalization framework is crucial for guiding universities toward systemic transformation in a globalized academic environment. By embedding internationalization within all pillars—research, curriculum, innovation, and governance—it promotes sustainable and inclusive practices aligned with global academic standards.

Figure 1. *The Internationalization Framework*



Source: Author

Visually depicted through a lightbulb metaphor symbolizing innovation and enlightenment, the core of this framework is surrounded by six interrelated domains: Networking, Research, Curriculum, Innovation, Quality, and Alliances. Each domain is paired with key strategic themes: Integral Strategies, Development-Capacity Building, Teaching-Training, Collaborative Learning, Governance and Policies, and Inclusion and Cooperation. This holistic framework underscores how internationalization is not an isolated process but one that permeates diverse institutional functions, enhancing their

interconnectedness and mutual reinforcement. Therefore, successful internationalization requires concurrent advancement across multiple dimensions, from academic program design to institutional partnerships.

In this context, this research follows a qualitative methodology characterized by case analysis, where the process is organized in several phases in order to guarantee a rigorous and exhaustive analysis of the primary sources of information that refer to the co-creation of international educational policies.

In the first phase, an intensive search was carried out in academic databases such as Scopus and Web of Science to detect the existence of previous studies on collaborative educational policies, international education programs, and governance in higher education. For these studies, only those related to both policy formulation and implementation aspects in different global contexts were selected.

The second phase consisted of identifying and delimiting a total of three representative case studies located in different geographical locations: Erasmus+ in Europe, alliances for higher education in Latin America, and African higher education initiatives. At the same time, official documents, institutional reports, and scientific articles were reviewed for each case in order to understand the strategies related to co-creation and their impacts on policy formulation.

A comparative analysis was then applied as a methodological practice that allows identifying common patterns in the co-creation processes but also factors in which each of the regions is distinctive. The comparative analysis facilitated the drawing of lessons and recommendations for other initiatives. Finally, qualitative analysis techniques such as stakeholder mapping were applied to interpret the dynamics of cooperation of the cases studied. The methodological tactics selected provided a more orderly perspective of the factors that can contribute to co-creation and at the same time present the elements that hinder such co-creation of international education policies.

Case Studies

Erasmus+ and the European Higher Education Area

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has constituted one of the most ambitious experiences in the field of harmonization of education policies at the regional level. It is an initiative derived from the Bologna Process whose objective is to homogenize higher education systems in Europe (Bonjean, 2022). The aim is to ensure the compatibility and comparability of university degrees in the participating countries, facilitating mobility and recognition among them and implementing common standards for the evaluation and accreditation of programs.

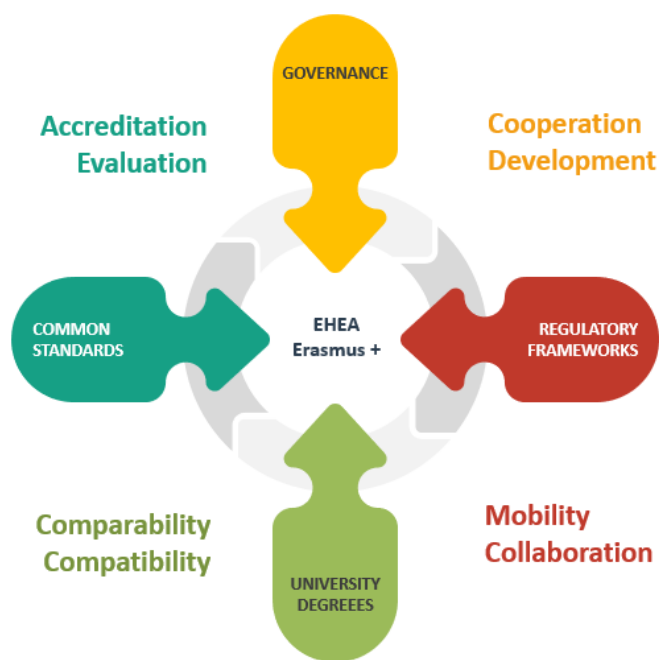
Although this space has served as a promoter of employability, by aligning higher education with the European labor market, and as a promoter of educational policies based on governance, cooperation, and development of both competencies and learning outcomes (Eeva, 2021), there are also some challenges that are still being worked on. On the one hand, there are the challenges of collaborative programs that can be shared by the EHEA and that cannot be easily implemented in some countries with traditional or centralized education systems. There, the adaptation and development of these programs may take somewhat more time and efforts in terms of investment and quality (Zgaga et al., 2013).

On the other hand, in relation to the policies of compatibility and comparability of university degrees, there could be a scenario of misinterpretation in which excessive standardization may limit the academic and methodological diversity of the participating higher education institutions. It is precisely there where a regulatory framework in the policies themselves could intervene to prevent what today are possible challenges from becoming issues that require intervention in the future.

One of the biggest initiatives that has gained recognition for its implementation and good results has been the Erasmus+ program, which has contributed to the development of academic mobility and inter-university cooperation between the European Union countries (de Olagüe-Smithson, 2019). This program has facilitated the creation of

regulatory frameworks aimed at the harmonization of qualifications recognition, quality assurance and credits recognition. The policies of this program have been incorporated into the legislation of many European countries, allowing the integration of the countries' educational systems to be strengthened. See figure 2.

Figure 2. *European Higher Education Area and Erasmus+ Policies*



Source: Author

One of the great achievements of the program is the development of intercultural competencies for higher education (Deardorff & Arasaratnam, 2017). Although it was born in Europe, Erasmus+ today includes agreements with partner countries in other regions of the world, promoting an experience of cultural exchange, collaboration, accessibility, and of course pedagogical innovation, becoming a platform for sharing good teaching practices and an incubator for collaborative projects. Another benefit of the program is its articulation policies through strategic partnerships between universities, companies, and organizations. This has meant that the impacts of phenomena such as Brexit do not fall severely on new and existing collaborative work

projects, and they may continue to finance projects for the development of new methodologies and practices, both disciplinary and pedagogical (Courtois & Veiga, 2020).

The program may still need to do a little more work in terms of validation and transfer of credits, especially with those countries in which academic recognition is not always uniform; however, in the framework of policy co-creation, the *rapprochement* taken by the EHEA and Erasmus+ has been an example for internationalized education that is inclusive and adaptable (Teichler, 2009).

Higher Education Alliances in Latin America

Both inter-institutional cooperation networks and accrediting agencies in the field of higher education have been promoting regional integration through university initiatives that seek to articulate the training commitments in Latin America and that promote quality assurance (Lemaitre, 2017). These alliances not only facilitate the adaptation of international frameworks to local contexts, but also promote cooperation without compromising the autonomy of the universities involved.

One of its best examples is the *Marca Región* mobility program, which has contributed to the establishment of common standards of preparation and evaluation. An initiative promoted by the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, the program aims to unify and strengthen the identity of the 33 countries that make up the region through policies that guarantee the equivalence of university degrees and promote cross-border university cooperation.

It is known that one of the missions of the internationalization of higher education is to strengthen its academic, research, and social projection links in a global scenario of collaborative work (Tight, 2019). It is precisely in this regard that initiatives such as *Marca Región* are based on the rationale of a university internationalization that is associated with the productive external sector and that meets the training and development needs of its communities.

This program seeks to project internationally the unique and shared characteristics of Latin America and the Caribbean, promoting investments, encouraging tourism, and positioning the region as an entity capable of offering solutions to global challenges. By involving higher education in this commitment to a unified identity, *Marca Región* has managed not only to strengthen a cohesive image that reflects the richness and diversity of the region in international scenarios, but has also called on universities to contribute to the resolution of global problems, such as climate change and food security.

Although the program does not have a 100% academic focus, it could work on policies that allow universities to become more involved in the mobility of students and professors for research in the region and, in this way, achieve the recognition and transfer of credits, and/or give a regional academic boost as other programs have (Valencia, 2024). See Figure 3.

Figure 3. *Marca Región Policies*



Source: Author

What *Marca Región* has effectively achieved is a strong integration of policies that connect the economic sector, the productive sector, and the educational sector in the same environment of cooperation and collaborative work, meeting goals related to what Goddard et al. (2016) have called challenges in the leadership and policies of a university that is committed to the development of its environment. This has allowed the co-creation of projects and the development of regional cohesion initiatives, summoning the international community to allocate resources for research, development, and the potentiation of its presence on the global stage.

African Union Initiatives in Higher Education

In the same commitment to high-quality higher education as seen in the previous case studies, the African Union has worked on the development of strategies in universities through multilateral cooperation and with the aim of ensuring inclusion and educational quality. Projects such as the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) have been very significant in establishing quality parameters and promoting inter-university cooperation on the continent.

The implementation of this type of initiatives allows the establishment of educational policies that respond to local needs, promoting hybrid education models and strengthening institutional capacity (Mihut et al., 2017) in a dynamic and adaptive internationalization scheme of education.

For authors such as Temple (2012), the role of the university, as an important stakeholder in the economic and development system of a country, is more relevant when there is a link of international collaboration and there is a tendency to strengthen the region. The interest in academic and research improvement and the possible impact in terms of benefit for communities are the factors that summon higher education institutions towards effective collaborations and alliances that allow the emergence of innovation initiatives and projects for the education sector.

It is in this scenario that the policies co-created by the different members of the African Union, in the field of education, served to shape the AQRM program and establish common standards in African universities in order to promote a culture of quality and continuous improvement in higher education on the continent. See Figure 4.

Figure 4. *African Quality Rating Mechanism Policies*



Source: Author

The axes on which AQRM has concentrated cover several quite striking areas, three of which attracted high attention in this research. The first seeks to provide tools for institutional self-evaluation and thereby improve university governance. As Stein (2017) explains, one of the great challenges in the internationalization of higher education is the identification of schemes or strategies that promote inter-institutional dialogue and understanding between allies and external peers who, although they have particular formative horizons, are all aligned with initiatives that allow institutional governance that works in an articulated way with networks and colleagues (Hagenmeier, 2021) and that is concerned with innovating in its academic offer.

The creation of a common reference framework to facilitate the mutual recognition of degrees and academic mobility in Africa is the second main area of work that AQRM has. This is intended to account for quality standards between institutions to advance in mobility programs and joint work through research projects or academic initiatives leading to degrees. Zhu & Peters (2022) recognize this as one of the best practices that can be advanced in the region and that, as described previously for EHEA and Erasmus+ and for *Marca Región*, motivate the formulation of co-created policies within the educational field, that promise an approach of international scope.

The third area that draws attention is AQRM's interest in strengthening the capacity of national accreditation and evaluation agencies in African countries. Academic improvement in higher education cannot only occur from an internal perspective on the part of the institutions, but must also seek multiple evaluations that provide a glimpse of opportunities for improvement and their strengths (Khudzik & Amalerich, 2023). This third area describes the voluntary evaluation system that African higher education institutions have based on indicators that analyze different aspects that coincide with Clifford & Montgomery's (2017) commitment in terms of global citizenship and of internationalization of the curriculum: Governance and institutional management, infrastructure and resources, quality of the curriculum and teaching, research and innovation, and the links with society and employability.

Paths for Policy Co-Creation

The co-creation of international education policies has proven to be a successful model for addressing the global problems facing higher education. The review of the cases shared here shows that, in the exercise of these same governance models, the creation of policies with the collaboration of many stakeholders allows for the construction of more specific and contextualized policies even when those policies that could be obstacles to processes persist (Song, 2019).

Although there is no common line of challenges for the co-creation of policies, issues such as the asymmetry of resources, the absence of monitoring mechanisms, and resistance to institutional change could play a determining role that could already be considered for the design of new strategies. According to Robertson & Dale (2022), education policy has good experience in this area, including the ability to foresee possible scenarios that require reinforcement and that act from the regulatory framework.

There are multiple internationalization management models for higher education institutions, such as those collected by Páez & Herrera (2024), that are flexible and adaptive to the context and needs of each region and institution; however, it is possible that several of them work together to think of regulations that facilitate the management of their models and the achievement of their goals.

Flexible regulatory configurations are also important for the effective implementation of internationalization. The co-creation of policies makes it possible to take much better advantage of local objectives by receiving feedback and sharing experience from external colleagues. The educational context in which the global expansion in the 20th century left institutions with a prevailing need to work articulately (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), should offer the scenario of this new century a learning base that, in a regulated and collective way, guides the management of internationalization in a regulated and collective way (Tight, 2022).

In this sense, to guide institutions in advancing co-created internationalization policies, the following strategic recommendations might be useful.

Establish Inclusive Governance Structures

Institutions should create permanent governance bodies or strategic teams composed of diverse participants such as administrators, academic staff, students, alumni, and external stakeholders, to ensure that all voices are considered in policy development.

These bodies should be integrated into formal institutional decision-making processes, and should meet regularly to co-design, pilot, and assess internationalization policies.

Develop Regional Policy Laboratories

Drawing inspiration from innovation ecosystems, universities can form regional policy labs in collaboration with peer institutions, ministries, and NGOs. These labs can test regulatory scenarios and design internationalization models aligned with local needs while ensuring compatibility with global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO's) Global Convention on Higher Education (Miculescu, 2024).

Implement Monitoring and Feedback Mechanisms

A frequent limitation in co-creation processes is the lack of mechanisms to assess implementation progress. Institutions should establish continuous monitoring systems using qualitative and quantitative indicators such as stakeholder satisfaction, mobility data, and curriculum internationalization levels, ensuring that feedback loops inform ongoing policy refinement.

Leverage Asymmetric Partnerships Thoughtfully

While asymmetry in resources between institutions may be inevitable, co-created policies should embed mechanisms for equitable participation and mutual benefit. For instance, resource-rich institutions could offer technical support, capacity-building workshops, or access to mobility funds to partners with fewer resources, fostering balanced collaborations and knowledge exchange (Robertson & Dale, 2022).

Integrate Policy Design into Academic Development Programs

Training university staff in international education policy development should be part of professional development. Embedding policy co-creation as a module within existing capacity-building programs allows stakeholders to acquire the skills and perspectives needed for effective engagement in governance and reform processes.

Foster Transnational Academic Policy Networks

Institutions should participate in or establish networks focused specifically on the co-creation and dissemination of internationalization policies. These networks, whether they are virtual or regional, enable sharing of best practices, benchmarking, and collaborative policy writing across borders, thereby reducing duplication and increasing collective impact (Thomas et al., 2025).

Codify Co-Creation into Institutional Regulations

To ensure continuity and institutional memory, universities should formalize co-creation mechanisms within internal statutes or internationalization policies. This codification guarantees that future leadership changes do not dismantle collaborative structures, and that internationalization remains a strategic, embedded function.

The institutionalization of collaborative governance mechanisms like the ones suggested above actively reinforces the sustainability of relevant educational policies based on their positive impacts and anchoring in the communities where they are implemented. In the same way that institutions responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by articulating strategies and actions that motivated the development of intercultural competencies from the internationalization of the curriculum (Romero & Martínez, 2021), there can also be more articulated work among nations and institutions to continue co-creating policies that impact the substantive functions of higher education.

The evidence of the foster transnational academic policy networks and the studies about comparative and international education covered by Thomas et al. (2025) suggests that the most successful proposals for collaborative governance mechanisms are those that incorporate different elements. In this scenario of co-creation of policies for internationalization, issues such as access to information associated with decision-making, the inclusion of the academic community, the relevance of adequate alignment with the SDGs and the production of transnational networks of academic cooperation

(Maldonado & Delgado, 2023) should be considered as a means to face similar problems and generate innovative solutions.

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