Challenges for research in higher education: the case of internationalization between the *explanandum* and the *explanans*

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Abstract

A key issue in higher education research is that its nature is shaped by the contexts within which it is produced, in response to agendas that reflect more policy coordination demands than disciplinary concerns. The research *problematiques* are construed mostly out of the theoretical framework of the disciplines, which, in turn, are diluted within an applied research mode. Internationalisation, quality, and access, for instance, tend to be explored from an implementation and managerial perspective. We convene the criticisms of methodological "isms" to highlight how they shape our conceptualisations and understanding of the transformations in higher education. Under this stance, conceptual narratives on internationalisation of higher education prompted by the Brexit *momentum* are identified in the study *Higher education and Brexit: current European perspectives* to bring forward the extent to which internationalisation as a conceptual narrative acts as an explanation of the strategies to address the topic, and what is needed to be itself explained. The paper identifies discursive elements stemming from conceptual narratives convened to approach internationalisation in higher education research, and how they reflect the reification of the state and higher education. By focusing on the Brexit *momentum* that brought to the front stage the centrality of the nation-states and their competition/cooperation relationship, this paper contributes to call attention to the epistemological and methodological implications of *isms*.

Keywords: higher education research, the narrative approach, methodological *isms*, internationalisation.

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Desafios da pesquisa no ensino superior: o caso da internacionalização entre o explanandum e o explanans [a]

Resumo

Uma questão crucial na pesquisa sobre o ensino superior é que sua natureza é moldada pelos contextos em que é produzida em resposta a agendas que refletem mais demandas de coordenação de políticas do que interesses disciplinares. As problemáticas de pesquisa são construídas principalmente a partir do referencial teórico das disciplinas, as quais, por sua vez, diluem-se no contexto do modo de pesquisa aplicada. A internacionalização, qualidade e acesso, por exemplo, tendem a ser exploradas a partir de uma perspectiva gerencial e de implementação. Reunimos as críticas aos "ismos" metodológicos para destacar como esses moldam nossas conceituações e compreensão das transformações no ensino superior. Desse ponto de vista, as narrativas conceituais sobre internacionalização do ensino superior, impulsionadas pelo Brexit, são identificadas no estudo *Higher education and Brexit: current European perspectives* para antecipar até que ponto a internacionalização como narrativa conceitual atua como explicação das estratégias para abordar a questão e o que é necessário para que ela mesma seja explicada. O artigo identifica elementos discursivos decorrentes de narrativas conceituais reunidas para abordar a internacionalização na pesquisa do ensino superior e como eles refletem a reificação do estado e do ensino superior. Ao focar o *momentum* Brexit que colocou em foco a centralidade dos Estados-nação e sua relação de concorrência/cooperação, este artigo contribui para chamar atenção às implicações epistemológicas e metodológicas dos *ismos*.

Palavras-chave: pesquisa em ensino superior, abordagem narrativa, *ismos* metodológicos, internacionalização.

Introduction

Higher education policy research has been marked by its focus on policy implementation and managerial issues of the sector (Amaral; Magalhães, 2013). This characteristic is impinging on the way that the objects of study and the theoretical frameworks convened build the *problematiques* to be addressed. The objects of analysis are being built

under the influence of Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons *et al.*, 1997) and its focus on application. In other words, in building the *problematiques* in this research area, the weight of traditional disciplines (e.g., sociology, economics, education, political sciences) has been challenged as their boundaries become diluted into a pragmatic endeavour. The nature of higher education research is being shaped by the need to respond to agendas reflecting rather the policy coordination demands than disciplinary concerns. The problem-solving perspectives impinge on the nature of the knowledge produced and influence the field of higher education research and higher education contexts (e.g., institutional, research centres, disciplinary fields).

This is visible in the issue of internationalisation, which in this paper is indicative of the challenges prompted by this pragmatic stance. The extent to which this perspective influences the research on internationalisation of higher education is questioned here, by bringing forward what is left to be understood or is beyond political, economic, and cultural drivers of education policies. The research question we want to address is whether or not the explanations of internationalisation of higher education policies, strategies and activities fall into the traps of methodological "*isms*".

In the literature, Dale and Robertson (2007, p. 11-12) identified "four '-isms' as prominent in the analysis of the higher education research: 'methodological nationalism', 'methodological statism', 'methodological higher educationism' and 'spatial fetishism'". The influence of these epistemological and methodological approaches on education policy analysis are frequently based on the "ossification" of the nation, the state, the education system, and the space. To clarify the effects of transnational structures and processes on the nature of the state and higher education policies, the relationships between the global, the national and the local levels are brought to the fore. By convening Dale and Robertson's criticisms addressed to the methodological "isms", we aim to highlight how they shape "our understanding of the nature and significance of the transformations at work in higher education" (Dale; Robertson, 2007, p. 11-12). By doing

so, we analyse the conceptual narratives on internationalisation of higher education and how it may challenge international comparative research.

The paper analyses the discourses shaping internationalisation of higher education to identify the effects of the methodological "isms" on higher education research. It assumes the conceptual narratives of internationalisation to understand the implications of this influence. Conceptual narratives are used by social scientists and researchers to approach their subjects (Somers; Gibson, 1996) (e.g., systems, institutions, organisations, actors). Narratives are built on the basis of discursive "constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space" (Somers; Gibson, 1996, p. 59) and reflect how discourses are appropriated by actors or institutions to make sense of social action and the decisions actors make in social contexts. This paper contributes to make explicit the effects of the assumption of the methodological "isms" as they play a central part in the definition of the field of study. Actually, "isms" feed, and are fed by, theoretical frameworks and methods that impinge on the understanding of the nature and significance of the transformations in higher education caused by internationalisation.

We start by underlining the implications of the critique of methodological "isms" for higher education research. Next, we will argue that the rescaling (Dale, 2007) of the role of the state in regulating (higher) education challenges the analysis of policy drivers in higher education's narratives centred on the role of the nation-state. As the unit of analysis shifts from the nation-state to its rescaling, the understanding of the processes of internationalisation would gain from being problematized beyond the immediate political, economic, and cultural drivers of education policies.

Drawing on the narrative approach (Magalhães; Veiga, 2015), we utilise the study *Higher education and Brexit: current European perspectives* (Courtois, 2018), led by the Centre for Global Higher Education, to bring forward the question of whether the role of conceptual narratives of internationalisation is to explain the national and institutional strategies, or these narratives are what is to be explained. By underlining the epistemological and methodological implications of "isms", the analysis emphasises the need to look at the role

and the functions of education in higher education, reconfigured to respond to the imperatives of internationalisation.

The critique of *isms* and higher education research

A key issue in higher education research is that the urge to respond to policy coordination demands is framing not only higher education itself, research institutions, and disciplinary fields, but also its very nature. The nature of higher education research is, more often than not, focusing on a problem-solving perspective that brings to the field the political drivers to the detriment of disciplinary concerns (Amaral; Magalhães, 2013). In other words, the critique of higher education*ism* refers to the idea that higher education research tends to be externally driven and studies on policy-making and implementation in higher education appear to have been mostly focused on the impact and effects of policies, rather than assuming a critical stance towards the policies' processes. Ashwin and Smith (2015), who in their examination of published articles in leading journals of education and higher education underlined that researchers are much more interested in the impact on policies that their data analyses produce, than in the policy processes and research agenda-setting. It is crucial to look at how the problem-solving perspective leading to higher education*ism* fails to recognise that it influences the foundations of the research field as such. Indeed, the object of research tends to focus on policies and on their implementation and management, and problems raised out of theoretical problematics related to disciplinary fields are diluted in a Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons *et al.*, 1997) melting pot. This favours a managerial perspective of higher education research that hinders the relations concerning social and political dimensions between and within nation-states, thus weakening the analysis of the weight of cooperation and competition in the conceptual narratives of internationalization.

Dale and Robertson (2007) developed an innovative heuristic approach to understanding multiscale governance of education and the

formation of education policies in the context of globalisation. In their work *Researching education in a globalising era: beyond methodological nationalism, methodological statism, methodological educationism and spatial fetishism*, they propose that education policy analysis takes on a critical stance towards the assumptions: (i) that the nation-state is the central and privileged actor of education policies; (ii) that education policies are to be understood within the educational contexts and actors directly involved, and (iii) that globalisation processes only change the relative position of educational phenomena without substantially changing them.

This heuristic approach has major implications for policy analysis and its methodological assumptions and procedures. Policy analysis has been focusing on the effects to the detriment of the policy processes of education policies. Firstly, globalisation is reshaping the role of education to respond to national priorities in a context of increasing (inter)national competition, reframing the rationales of the political mandates for education. Secondly, the rescaling of education governance requires reviewing the states' functions and role in shaping and enacting education policies. Thirdly, the relationships between education and the forms that capitalist accumulation are assuming are also impinging on the effects education has on social cohesion. Fourthly, globalisation, while diluting the relevance of national boundaries, brings forward the heterogeneity of the modern national spatial features. These assumptions act as an epistemological basis that demands a critical stance towards the theories and methods that have been used in policy analysis in education research.

The disregarding of the relevance of these assumptions in understanding the policy processes are pointed out by Dale and Robertson (2007, p. 11-12) as methodological "isms" influencing "our understanding of the nature and significance of the transformations at work in higher education". The analysis of higher education policies is to be challenged from the perspective of the aforementioned assumptions. Indeed, higher education*ism* contributes to turning a blind eye to what needs to be effectively explained. On the one hand, higher education*ism* reflects the fact that higher education is expected

to play a key role in knowledge economies, and, on the other hand, it disregards that this role impinges on the nature of higher education research.

Rescaling the role of the state and methodological 'isms'

From Dale's perspective (2015), the core of policy analysis is to be found in the rescaling of the role of the state, so that policy changes could be interpreted as contingent to the education systems and their conditions. For instance, evidence-based policy decision-making does not allow for grasping *why* or *how* the claimed universally valid conclusions drawn from the data on policy outputs (e.g., Programme for International Student Assessment - PISA) might work, for which education systems, and under what conditions.

Along the same lines, research on international cooperation and competition in the field of higher education has been legitimating and justifying common interests and the advantages of their benefits. The rescaling of education governance requires reviewing the states' functions and their role in shaping and enacting education policies. Dale argues that the changes in the governance of education have important consequences for the relationships between governance, regulation, and sovereignty. In fact, while recognising that the core problems of the national states, the economy and civil society remain the same, the nature of the national state has evolved and significantly changed in the rescaling processes (Dale, 2007).

The methodological implications of rescaling education governance in shaping the state's functions are related to "indirect effects of the congeries of changes – in a range of spheres and at a number of levels (…)" (Dale, 2007, p. 25). By problematising the relationship between the national state and society, policy analysis turns them into what is to be explained (*explanandum*), rather than the explanation (*explanans*) of education policies. This problematisation represents a significant methodological shift in policy analysis as it is grounded in the transformations of governance and national autonomy. On the one hand, governance has emerged to deal with the

coordination failures attributed to both the "state" and the "market", and, on the other hand, elements of national state autonomy have been voluntarily ceded to supranational bodies (e.g., European Commission, OECD, NAFTA).

In the case of internationalisation, the methodological implications of ceding elements of sovereignty and rescaling education governance is that its processes in higher education are to be understood under the framework of the changing relationships between the state, education, and the coordination of education. Methodologically, it is key to underline that the state "moved from being e*xplanans* to e*xplanandum*" (Dale, 2007, p. 34). In the rescaled governance, the state assumes the *coordinator* role under a "coordination of coordination" framework. Globalisation, while diluting the relevance of national borders, brings forward the heterogeneity of the geographical spaces challenging the limits of national borders. This is of major importance to explain internationalisation processes in higher education as it shifts from what explains these very processes to what is to be explained. Therefore, the question to bring forward is to what extent national priorities regarding internationalisation explain by themselves the internationalisation of higher education institutions, or rather if they are what is to be *explained* under the rescaling of the national state. In other words, are internationalisation policies themselves what are to be explained rather than the *explanation* of the political drivers towards internationalisation.

As a strategy, internationalisation in higher education is being built, legitimised, and justified by policy processes working under a pragmatic form. Strategies are embedded in a range of discursive processes and instruments materialised in the social contexts (Wodak; Fairclough, 2010). Internationalisation strategies include discourses that actively and dynamically construct, in a continuous interaction between the narrative, the audiences and the contexts they share (Wagenaar, 2011). To analyse the conundrum concerning the drivers linked to national priorities and the need to build an explanation for internationalisation of higher education, it is sought to identify the effects of methodological *isms* on the analysis of conceptual narratives on internationalisation.

In fact, conceptual narratives of internationalisation are embedded in the scientific field of international relations devoted to the study of international politics. However, as underlined by Schmidt (2002, p. 16), "this does not automatically imply that the exogenous events that comprise the subject matter at any given point in time can explain what happens inside the field". This reflects how international relations' conceptual narratives also tend to respond to problem-solving matters, to the detriment of identifying how external factors reflect the dynamics of politics within which the field evolves.

Within the field of international relations, internationalisation, on the one hand, convenes power relations between nation-states to explain the political management of international relations, and, on the other hand, the narrative is used to legitimise the process itself as translated into institutional strategies. Whether its explanatory potential is subsumed to its legitimising function is what will be discussed in the next sections.

Referring to international relations as a conceptual narrative, Schmidt also brings a concern parallel to that of the critique of higher education*ism*: the *rapport* between the field of study and its external dynamics.

> (…) the crux of the issue should be how the field has, or has not, responded intellectually to external factors rather than how these factors can account for the dynamics inside the filed. And more attention should be placed on the internal context of the field such as its setting in the university system, sources of funding and professional norms (Schmidt, 2002, p. 16).

The narratives of internationalization aim to explain the structures and processes involved in policies and in national, and institutional, strategies. However, our argument is that the conceptualisation of internationalisation of higher education represents a case of higher education*ism*, meaning that internationalisation by itself needs to be explained. The conceptual narratives of internationalisation are caught in the tension, referred to above, between a problem-solving analytical perspective (that higher education research tends to assume) and the need to theoretically address internationalisation.

In other words, under the critique of higher education*ism*, conceptual narratives of internationalisation shift from what explains (*explanans*) to what is to be explained (*explanandum*). For instance, student mobility or internationalisation of academics and staff have been theoretically addressed from a pragmatic, problem-solving perspective to explain the internationalisation fluxes, turning a blind eye to what might explain the internationalisation endeavour by itself.

The challenge is to assume the need to build an explanation for internationalisation of higher education on the basis of the critique of methodological *isms* which the conceptual narratives on internationalisation rely on. Studies in internationalisation have exhibited signs of national*ism* impinging on the construction of conceptual narratives on the matter. National policies of internationalisation of higher education have been driven by political, cultural, academic/educational, and economic rationales (Knight; de Witt, 1995) that can be interpreted as discursive elements feeding the conceptual narratives on internationalisation. In this sense, internationalisation acts, simultaneously, as a description of cross-border activities and as an "explanation" of competition and cooperation between states and institutions, legitimizing these processes. The extent to which these questions enhance the prevalence of internationalisation as a description and an explanation is what needs to be further discussed.

Driving discourses on internationalisation

We use the study *Higher education and Brexit: current European perspectives* (Courtois, 2018), led by the Centre for Global Higher Education, to bring forward the extent to which internationalisation as a conceptual narrative acts as an explanation for the strategies to address the topic. By underlining the epistemological and methodological implications of *isms*, the analysis emphasises the need to look at the role and the functions of education in higher education to respond to the challenges brought forward by the Brexit *momentum*.

Conceptual narratives on internationalisation bring in discursive elements such as competition and cooperation driven by political, cultural, academic/educational, and economic arguments. As such, internationalisation, while exhibiting its explanatory potential, is also part of instrumental stances of strategizing internationalisation. This instrumental stance reflects a tactical use of internationalisation as a tool in the pursuit of nation-states' and higher education institutions' interests in guaranteeing their power and influence within the European landscape (Seidenschnur; Veiga; Jungblut; Magalhães, 2019), which might be exacerbated in a context featured by rapid change, new demands, new roles, new expectations, and new opportunities brought forward by Brexit.

National concerns reflecting competition and cooperation

The study shows the prevalence of national concerns reflecting the influence of the competition discourse between higher education systems and institutions. Brexit as a context of uncertainty prompted specific internationalisation strategies as, for instance "both the UK and Ireland have intensified their efforts to recruit international students in new and emerging markets (…)" making "discernible global aspirations and a willingness to strengthen existing partnerships and collaborations with countries outside the EU. China, in particular, was mentioned repeatedly across several case studies (the UK, the Netherlands), with Germany frequently mentioned as well" (Courtois, 2018, p. 21). Thus, what seems to be necessary to explain are the rationales driving these internationalisation strategies. While national internationalisation strategies might be explained by economic rationales, the critique of methodological national*ism* underlines that these rationales are themselves to be explained on the basis of the rescaling of the states. As the sovereignty of the national state is being reconfigured, the power relationships are shaped by market-oriented regulation and, therefore, the concerns of national states are to be understood under the changing nature of the global economy and their political structures and processes.

In line with this, the study underlined that, for instance in Hungary, the inequalities between higher education systems and national contexts also make visible the divide between market vs. public orientations. This raises questions regarding the internationalisation discourse of cooperation "in relation to the nature of European integration and cross-European cooperation in higher education. Discussions around Brexit helped bring these issues to the fore. These differences and unequal relationships also affect the ability of certain countries to strategize around Brexit" (Courtois, 2018, p. 18). While this contributes to explain the prevalence of the economic rationale, it does not account for explaining this prevalence as such. On the other hand, cooperation discursive elements feeding internationalisation discourse are also present when changes in the European Union landscape is at stake, even though the cooperation envisaged aims to boost competition. The Danish minister, when interviewed with regard to the negotiations of the Framework Programme and H2020 grants, argued that Denmark is a UK ally, striving to select the best partners for excellence in research.

> [UK and Denmark] usually work together with the Netherlands, Sweden, UK, Germany, Austria and Ireland. Now they are looking more broadly – to Portugal for some policy areas and to Poland for others. The Nordic countries' alliance will not change – it is always very strong – we have the same issues and have been talking to each other about Brexit (Madsen; Wright, 2018, p. 41).

As Dale (2015) reminds us, in line with Hay (2002), the structures and processes of the nature of the state and higher education policies shape the strategic options in specific national contexts. Indeed,

> only certain courses of strategic action are available to actors and only some of these are likely to realise their intentions. Social, political and economic contexts are densely structured and highly contoured. As such they present an unevenly distributed configuration of opportunity and constraint to actors. Thus, while they may well facilitate the ability of resource- and capital-rich actors to further their strategic interests, they are equally likely to present significant obstacles to the realisation of the strategic intentions of those not similarly endowed (Hay, 2002, p. 209).

In this sense, the economic, cultural, political, and academic rationales are not empirical categories to explain internationalisation; rather, they are analytical approaches that simultaneously legitimate and prioritise internationalisation decisions and actions forms over others. The Brexit *momentum* is quite revealing in bringing forward the methodological implications of national*ism* as

> manifestations of anti-EU feelings and renationalisation in various other EU countries, [it] was detrimental to the image of Europe and posed a threat to the European project at large. In particular in countries where nationalist, anti-EU movements had gained ground (e.g., Denmark, Netherlands), this led interviewees to consider whether the UK securing a "good deal" would be beneficial or instead encourage other countries to leave, with the risk of dismantling the EU. In this sense, broader political considerations and concerns for the European project became intertwined with practical, sector-specific hopes and concerns (Courtois, 2018, p. 18).

The EU's challenge to the nation-state sovereignty rebounds on national*ism* as both a political argument and a central factor in shaping (inter) nationalisation strategies of nation-states and higher education institutions. This is why a critique of nationalism is key to understanding the research conundrum involving the *explanans* and the *explanandum*. Hence, the methodological implications of rescaling education governance are to be understood in the changing relationships between the state, education, and the coordination of education within the global processes and structures. These global processes and structures might explain why higher education systems such as German, Dutch, or Danish see Brexit as a window of opportunity for their European and global ambitions gaining significant competitive advantage (Seidenschnur; Veiga; Jungblut; Magalhães, 2019). In fact,

> Perceptions on managerial consequences, including "quiet opportunism" in the German case, mainly convene the discursive elements of the competition discourse. From the managerial approach, interviewees keep an eye on the balance between gains and losses for the national system and institutions,

highlighting the potential gains that countries might have from Brexit. With this regard, the analysis in two very different systems shows surprisingly similar results in the sense that competition is a strong, and, to a certain extent, the central discourse (Seidenschnur; Veiga; Jungblut; Magalhães, 2019, p. 15).

The key issue is to understand whether competition in higher education is to be explained under the changing nature of the global economy and its political structures and processes – or is it the competition discourse that explains national internationalization strategies?

Institutional concerns reflecting cooperation and competition

As noted in the study *Higher education and Brexit: current European perspectives* (Courtois, 2018), there is significant diversity of approaches reflecting academic concerns at the national, university leadership, and academic staff levels, with contrasting perspectives on cooperation on research. In the Portuguese case, for instance, those interviewed at the institutional level brought forward academic arguments regarding the challenges stemming from Brexit. In fact, the future of cooperation on teaching and research activities is expected to continue, as "the academy is much more concerned with the quality of research that is developed than with everything else. From my point of view and from what I have seen, that is what matters (8_HEI A)" (Magalhães; Veiga; Sá, 2018, p. 140). This reflects the fact that in the field of engineering – which the interviewee refers to – cooperation interests widely rely on the relationships between the academic field and the economic fabric.

Given that most influential higher education systems drive the decision-making processes according to the research agenda, it is clear that international relations in the field of higher education respond to external factors that are reflected in the area under consideration. The perceptions of academics in the field of engineering are closely linked to companies, large aeronautical manufacturers, or the automotive industry, and highlighted that the UK, Germany and France drive decision-making

processes at the European level. This makes Portuguese international research and innovation activities dependent on research funding allowing for the use of leading equipment and facilities of those countries. Interestingly enough, the same interviewee underlined that "England is greatly benefiting from our training and graduates…, who are now members of academic staff, and therefore being hired and making their careers in the United Kingdom" (8_HEI A) (Magalhães; Veiga; Sá, 2018, p. 140). Hence, as argued above, internationalisation as a conceptual narrative is deeply influenced by the problem-solving perspective impinging on its dynamics, making competition inevitable as the framing conditions of cooperation are led by the competing interests of big players (e.g., Germany, UK and France).

Under these conditions, a pragmatic stance towards cooperation/competition reflects that, in spite of very different national framing conditions, academics have embraced the lens of a competition discourse since they accept that European higher education systems and institutions have to compete under the political grammar of coordination of higher education.

Dale's approach is key to understanding why these external factors are not explicit in the explanation of internationalisation of higher education. The analysis of how these factors impinge on the dynamics of internationalisation needs to be addressed and brought to centre stage shifting from the *explanandum* to the *explanans*. This highlights how international relations conceptual narratives respond to problem-solving matters instigating a second key issue. In actuality, the concern is to understand whether cooperation in higher education is to be explained under the changing nature of teaching and research activities and their structures and processes – or is it the cooperation discourse that explains internationalisation strategies?

Conclusion

The question to bring forward is then to what extent national/institutional priorities with regard to internationalisation explain by themselves the internationalisation of higher education institutions, or rather if they are

what is to be explained under the rescaling of the national state. To put it succinctly, internationalisation policies are what is to be explained rather than the explanation of political drivers towards internationalisation.

The extent to which national/institutional internationalisation priorities are explained under the rescaling of the national-states to the detriment of the need to respond to the challenges brought forward by the competition/cooperation discourses between states, national higher education systems, and institutions is what remains to be seen. The prevalence of competition and cooperation discourses in explaining internationalisation strategies do not allow for understanding what is changing in the nature of global economy, and national and institutional positioning with regard to teaching and research.

By focusing on the Brexit *momentum*, which highlighted the centrality of the nation-states and their competition/cooperation relationship, this paper contributes to call attention to the epistemological and methodological implications of *isms*. What needs to be explained is why and how cooperation/competition drive the narratives on internationalisation and what are the effects of these discourses on higher education policies. This paper also emphasised how conceptual narratives on internationalisation stemming from different fields of study (international relations and higher education) and policy-making are interrelated. This is of importance as the analysis promotes a reflexive approach with regard to political coordination. Hence, as underlined by Werron (2015, p. 187), more important than "just believing in competition or criticizing it as a product of recent neo-liberal ideology, we should study in more detail the long-term, indeed ages-long, institutionalization of modern forms of competition in various societal field". Indeed, since knowledge about political processes changes the course of the very policies, the analysis puts into perspective internationalisation in higher education policy as a dynamic process. Further research would profit from this critical shift that moves internationalisation policies from an explanation stance to what is to be explained.

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