

Modes of international dissemination of ideas and the standardization of postgraduate teaching in Economics in Portugal

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Abstract:

This paper is about the way teaching economics in a peripheral country becomes almost a replica of how economics is taught in countries of the core. The object is post-graduate courses, those courses that are supposed to train tomorrow's teachers. If the current trend continues, it will be very difficult in the future for any economics student to be confronted in his training with ideas other than the neoliberal orthodoxy. Since the first postgraduate course in Economics was created in Portugal in the beginning of the 1980s, a noticeable standardization in the provision of this sort of training in Portugal has occurred indeed. In other words postgraduate courses in Economics have become very similar across Portuguese higher education institutions. There has been a narrowing of the curricula around an increasingly restricted number of modules that have been called "core", eliminating or expelling a large variety of modules to peripheral areas of economics or to other domains of knowledge. This standardization process has also been noticeable within the syllabi and the suggested readings for the main "core" modules. A thorough survey of the curricula and syllabi in the major public universities in Portugal allowed us to reach these conclusions. This standardization not only reduces the chances of a plural teaching of economics, but also pushes many students into other postgraduate studies where they go in search of the scientific framework to study the social realities that interest them. Inevitably the number of graduates in economics with a plural vision of the economy has systematically been shrinking. This process seems to have happened throughout the world and the second part of the paper looks for understanding how this process took place in Portugal through interviews with those responsible for several editions of said courses. Classifying the modes of international dissemination into imitation and coercion we have reached the conclusion that imitation of what are considered the best practices in the world, and most especially in the Anglo Saxon world, can best explain the standardization process in first stage. More recently the search for national and international recognition of postgraduate courses in several institutions has introduced some form of coercion in the shape of assessment and certification processes, for instance. It seems that in their quest for providing the commodified education most appreciated by markets and to attract profitable students, universities got somehow trapped in monism.