

**THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION PROCESS OF THE SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR
EXCHANGE STUDENTS FROM THE FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF CEARÁ**

**O PROCESSO DE INSTITUCIONALIZAÇÃO DO PROGRAMA DE APOIO PARA ESTUDANTES DE
INTERCÂMBIO DA UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO CEARÁ**

**EL PROCESO DE INSTITUCIONALIZACIÓN DEL PROGRAMA DE APOYO PARA ESTUDIANTES DE
INTERCAMBIO DE LA UNIVERSIDAD FEDERAL DE CEARÁ**

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ABSTRACT

The Support Program for Exchange Students (PAI, in Portuguese) is an initiative of the School of Economics, Administration, Actuarial Sciences and Accounting (FEAAC, in Portuguese), run in partnership with the Coordination of International Affairs from the Federal University of Ceará (UFC, in Portuguese). The objective of this paper is to present the current stage of the PAI institutionalization process. The detailing of this institutionalization process was operationalized through the model proposed by Tolbert and Zucker (1999). This

research was developed using a qualitative approach. In terms of methodology, it is an exploratory and descriptive study, using interviews as well as bibliographical, documental and field research as sources for the data collection, following the criteria established by Gil (2002) and Vergara (2007). The data were analysed utilizing Bardin's technique of content analysis (2009). It was concluded that the process of internationalization is in the pre-institutionalization stage, given that it is developing standardized procedures for resolving issues related to the Program, which may be considered an active force in its habitualization process. This article contributes to academic knowledge by highlighting the relevance of giving support to foreign university students, as well as the importance of its institutionalization, enabling the replication of similar initiatives in other universities.

Keywords: Institutionalization. Internationalization. Exchange.

RESUMO

O Programa de Apoio para Estudantes de Intercâmbio (PAI) é uma iniciativa da Faculdade de Economia, Administração, Ciências Atuariais e Contabilidade (FEAAC), realizado em parceria com a Coordenação de Assuntos Internacionais da Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC). O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar o atual estágio do processo de institucionalização do PAI na UFC. O detalhamento desse processo de institucionalização foi operacionalizado por meio do modelo proposto por Tolbert e Zucker (1999). A pesquisa desenvolvida utilizou uma abordagem qualitativa. Em relação aos meios, é um estudo exploratório e descritivo, feito por meio de entrevistas, pesquisas bibliográfica, documental e pesquisas de campo como fontes para a coleta de dados, de acordo com os critérios estabelecidos por Gil (2002) e Vergara (2007). A análise dos dados utilizou a técnica de análise de conteúdo de Bardin (2009). Concluiu-se que o processo de internacionalização está no estágio de pré-institucionalização, pois está desenvolvendo procedimentos padronizados para resolver questões relacionadas ao programa, o que pode ser considerado uma força que age em seu processo de habitualização. Este artigo contribui com a academia, ao destacar a relevância do apoio a estudantes universitários estrangeiros, bem como a importância de sua institucionalização, permitindo replicação de iniciativas semelhantes de outras universidades.

Palavras-chave: Institucionalização. Internacionalização. Intercâmbio.

RESUMEN

El Programa de Apoyo para Estudiantes de Intercambio (PAI) es una iniciativa de la Facultad de Economía, Administración, Ciencias Actuariales y Contabilidad (FEAAC), realizado en conjunto con la Coordinación de Asuntos Internacionales de la Universidad Federal de Ceará (UFC). El objetivo de este artículo es presentar el estado actual del proceso de institucionalización del PAI en la UFC. La pormenorización de este proceso de institucionalización fue operacionalizada por medio del modelo propuesto por Tolbert y Zucker (1999). La investigación desarrollada utilizó un abordaje cualitativo. En relación a los medios, es un estudio exploratorio y descriptivo realizado por medio de entrevistas, investigación bibliográfica, documental y estudios de campo como fuentes para la recolección de datos, de acuerdo con los criterios establecidos por Gil (2002) y Vergara (2007). El análisis de los datos utilizó la técnica de análisis de contenido de Bardin (2009). Se concluyó que el proceso de internacionalización está en un estadio de preinstitucionalización, pues está desarrollando procedimientos estandarizados para resolver cuestiones de investigación relacionadas al programa, lo que puede ser considerado una fuerza que actúa en su proceso de habitualización. Este artículo contribuye con la academia al destacar la relevancia del apoyo a estudiantes universitarios extranjeros, así como la importancia de su institucionalización, permitiendo la replicación de iniciativas semejantes de otras universidades.

Palabras clave: Institucionalización. Internacionalización. Intercambio.

1 INTRODUCTION

Globalization has caused impacts for different sectors, including the field of education, particularly higher education (MIURA, 2006). Since the 1990s, to address to these impacts, the process of internationalization of higher education institutions has increased, along with the number of studies on this subject (MUELLER, 2013).

In view of this context, the literature has been highlighting that supporting programs for foreign exchange students are strategies for promoting the internationalization of higher education (QIANG, 2003; KNIGHT, 2004).

The internationalization initiative presented in this article takes place in the Brazilian state of Ceará, in the northeast of the country. The Federal University of Ceará (also named in this text by its Portuguese abbreviation UFC) consist of three campuses in Fortaleza: the Benfica, Pici and Porangabussu campuses. The Support Program for Exchange Students (also named in this text by its Portuguese abbreviation PAI) is a project of the School of Economy, Management, Actuary Science and Accounting (called by its Portuguese abbreviation FEAAC), located in the Benfica campus.

Given that the program is part of the activities carried out for university internationalization, the understanding of how much institutionalized the program is allows identifying which actions would have more influence on its organizational structure (TOLBERT; ZUCKER, 1999). This comprehension might permit UFC to devise strategies to improve the program and ensure its continuity.

In this regard, institutional theory is used, as it introduces several models of institutionalization processes for a determined organizational structure. The model chosen for this work was that of Tolbert and Zucker (1999). This model comprises three stages: habitualization, objectification and sedimentation. Drawing on this theoretical background, this work investigates the following research problem: how is the present stage of the institutionalization process of the Support Program for Exchange Students configured?

The general objective was to analyse the institutionalization process of the PAI. This goal unfolded into three specific objectives. Firstly, to determine the motivating factors at the beginning of the PAI institutionalization process. Secondly, to verify which forces are active in the three stages of institutionalization conveyed by Tolbert and Zucker (1999). At lastly, to identify the current stage of institutionalization of the PAI.

Based on the specific objectives introduced above, the following assumptions were developed. The first was that the absence of efficient support for the student in academic mobility, with the institutionalization process of federal universities being an important factor for the emergence of the PAI. The second assumption was that although the institutionalization process performs stages in sequence, it is expected that the forces acting in the program would be closely related to habitualization and objectification. The third is that the PAI would be in the habitualization stage.

The methodological procedure used in this study was the qualitative approach, with explanatory and descriptive objectives, also using documental, bibliographic surveys, and field research. This field investigation was performed through structured interviews. The data were analysed through Bardin's (2009) content analysis, aiming to address the specific research objectives conveyed here.

This article is divided into six sections. Following this introduction, the second deals with the internationalization of higher education, showing its rise, definition, approaches and motivations. The third section explains the model of institutionalization process suggested by Tolbert and Zucker (1999). The fourth section focuses on the methodology used and, and the fifth section introduces and discusses our findings. Some concluding remarks are given at the end, with some suggestions for further research.

2 THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Internationalization has been one of the most critical factors shaping higher education, and has changed substantially in the last three decades (Knight 2012). This term is used in a myriad of ways because it means different things to different people. The internationalization of higher education institutions might be interpreted in a simplistic way, as the mere presence of foreign students on a campus. On the other hand, internationalization can be something as solid as a synergetic and transformative process involving curricula and research, influencing students' activities, faculty, managers, and the community (Bartell, 2003).

The positive impacts of internationalizing education, according to Murphy (2007), occur through three mechanisms: the worldwide distribution of knowledge and technology, the standardization of quality standards, and the transfer of ideas from leading countries to new political, economic and social projects.

As globalization has intensified, issues related to internationalizing education have become important worldwide. Mueller (2013) states that the study of internationalization of higher education has been more relevant since the 1990s, due to globalization.

According to Morosini (2006), this process is closely connected to the characteristics of education, given that it has as prime value the acquisition of knowledge. Miura (2006) states that higher education globalization and internationalization are often treated as synonyms, although they are actually distinct and their relationship demands further scrutiny.

Globalization affects several economic sectors and its impacts have put pressure on educational institutions to adapt to a new reality. Ignoring these impacts is a risk to institutions, as they are influenced by standards concerning the diffusion of knowledge, intellectual property and investments in research (MUELLER, 2013; MIURA, 2006).

To analyse and understand the internationalization of universities, Bartell (2003) adopted a typology of organizational culture. He mentions that the Canadian Internationalization Excellence Award highlights the following indicators: international students participation, changes in curricula, international partnerships, mobilization of financial, human and technological resources to support internationalization, collaborative partnerships with the private sector, research into internationalization, and the contribution of development projects for internationalizing the university.

The method used by Bartell (2003) was the case study. The author used two examples, at a university (Example 1) located in a place of low culture focused on internationalization and internationalized by inner guidance, in other words, administrative choice. The other example (Example 2) was one based in an environment conducive to the culture of internationalization, therefore it was more responsive to external pressures, meeting the community's needs where it was in operation. Data were gathered by observing patterns of behaviour, hearing organizational stories and examining documents. The results of the internationalization process in Example 2 turned out to be better, given that in Example 1, the commitment to internationalization was lower. These findings revealed that a strong culture that is oriented towards the outside environment could offer a lot of support, and facilitate the implementation of strategies and goals for internationalization.

Stromquist (2007), in his study about academic and non-academic responses to globalization trends in a private university, state, on behalf of internationalization, that managers emerge as powerful decisions makers, changing academic contents and academic governance. This fact is apparent in the recruitment of students, in the hiring of teachers, and in the attracting of prestigious scholars, aimed at increasing the reputation of the university and attracting research funding.

Miura (2006) elucidates that the internationalization of education must also be understood as a catalyst of this globalization process, besides being a response to it, through the recruitment of foreign students and via the burgeoning offer of academic programs.

Morosini (2006) outlines three stages in the evolution of the higher education internationalization process. First there was the international dimension in the twentieth century, characterized by its incidental phase. Second was the international education organized in the USA between World War Two and the end of the Cold War, mainly for political and national security reasons. Lastly, the internationalization of higher education after the end of the Cold War was identified as a strategic process related to globalization, regionalization and their impacts on higher education.

In the last stage, starting in the 1990s, the relations between universities and research centers worldwide have been widened through cultural and educational cooperation agreements, and by the increasing mobility of professors, researchers and students (MULLER, 2013).

Due to continuous transformations in internationalization processes, the literature on the topic indicates a multitude of rationales, definitions and approaches to this phenomenon, besides highlighting a variety of strategies, policies and application models (KNIGHT, 1995; QIANG, 2003; MIURA, 2006; MOROSINI, 2006; SOUZA, 2010; MULLER, 2013). Given that this study does not aim to give an exhaustive bibliographical review on the topic, the following paragraphs introduce some concepts that are operational and are more closely linked to our goals.

In this sense, Miura (2006), based on de Wit *et al.* (2005), stresses that apart from globalization, there are other reasons for the internationalization process, such as political factors related to seeking peace and mutual understanding. Second, there are economic reasons related to competitiveness and economic growth. Third, social-cultural motivations regarding the expansion of moral and national values; and fourth, academic reasons, expressed by the qualification of personnel as well as the reputation and increase in the quality of the institution.

Knight (2004) states that at institutional level; there are other reasons to be taken into account, for example: the attainment of international standards and reputation, the generation of income and the development of students and professors. Furthermore, the author conveys that strategic alliances improve knowledge production to solve global environmental, health and human problems.

The definition of internationalization has been discussed throughout the past three decades. Despite being used over the centuries by political science, its use by the educational sector has increased since the 1980s (KNIGHT, 2004). Although the definition of internationalization has changed over time, it is relevant to combine its use with a conceptual structure of higher education (DE WIT *et al.*, 2005; MIURA, 2006).

Knight (2004) elucidates that internationalization needs to be understood at three levels: sectorial, national and institutional. Thus, he proposes a definition that acknowledges all levels and their relationships; this definition comprises a process of integration of the international dimension, global in its purposes and functional in the offer of post-secondary education. In this regard, the level comprised by the institutions of higher education is the focus of this study.

In this context, the notion of approach is introduced to describe and evaluate the way the process of internationalization is implemented, as it is not fixed, and reflects values, priorities and actions adopted during the process (MIURA, 2006). Drawing on Knight and de Wit (1995), Qiang (2003) introduces four kinds of "approach". First, the competence-based reception of students, through the development of skills, attitudes and values in the participants to deal with cultural differences. Second, cultural, via the creation of an organizational that increases the value of intercultural and international perspectives. Thirdly, the strategic and process approach, which incorporates several aspects of the previous approaches, with the goal of giving sustainability to the international dimension.

Knight (2004) explains that the term "internationalization strategies" has been used to discuss initiatives with a better planned, integrated, strategic notion. Some examples of these strategies are the exchange of students, the study of a foreign language, peer support groups, and advisory services to assist foreign students.

Knight (2004) also explains that the term internationalization strategies has been used to address to programmatic and organizational initiatives at an institutional level, going beyond the idea of international activities. This is because they have a sense of a more planned, integrated and strategic approach. Some examples the author offers are the exchange of students; the study of a foreign language; and clubs and student associations. Knight (2004) also discusses the relevance of peer-support groups, which are related to programmatic strategies; as well as the support of the institution's service units, such as student accommodation; and support services for arriving students through orientation programs, counsellors, intercultural training, and assistance for obtaining a visa, which are listed as organizational strategies.

According to Knight (2012), the internationalization of higher education branches into two interdependent pillars – "at home" and "cross-border" (or "abroad"). The first refers to campus-based strategies that include "the intercultural and international dimension in the teaching/learning process, research, extracurricular activities, relationships with local cultural and ethnic community groups, and integration of foreign students and scholars into campus life and activities". The second refers to the mobility of people, programs, providers, knowledge, ideas, policies, projects, and services across national boundaries.

According to de Wit *et al.* (2005), internationalization should be incorporated as a response from academia to the homogenizing tendencies of globalization. This homogenization should respect differences between nations and cultural identities; favouring multiple cultural representations, the knowledge generated, and the organizational practices of each educational institution.

Morosini (2006) reiterates that the concept of internationalization of higher education, consolidated after the Cold War, is characterized as a strategic process related to the globalization and regionalization of societies and its impact on higher education. This author, in his turn, emphasizes complexity and presents this through a variety of related terms like globalization, transnationalization and intercultural exchanges.

Breton (2003) questions whether universities' internationalization policies would put aside challenges brought forward by the globalization of higher education, redefining actors in their spaces of action. The academic imaginary is represented by the national university systems, where universities are territorial spaces and each campus has an academic life once the teacher turns out to be the main agent and the classroom the main venue for the dissemination of knowledge.

Sebastián (2004), on the other hand, is more sceptical of the research produced in America and northern Europe, emphasizing the need to distinguish between the concepts of internationalization of higher education and internationalization of a university. In his research, he seeks to set the two processes in place, disagreeing with the statement that the internationalization of universities is a response to globalization, as he perceives its regional role.

Although the author's analysis does not consider the influence of region on the global context, he argues that international academic cooperation is a factor for improving academic quality, rather than merely responding to the pressures of globalization. In this regard, "university internationalization is an instrument for improving quality, and has a dual character, as it affects not only the internal structure, but also the external image of the institution" (SEBASTIÁN, 2004).

Incorporating this duality, the author interprets internationalization as "a process of introducing the international dimension of culture and institutional strategy into training, research and extension activities" (SEBASTIÁN, 2004). Therefore, internally, the internationalization of a university conveys qualitative improvements and effectiveness. At the external level, the goal is to promote the potential for teaching and research, key factors for enabling the university to be admitted into formal and/or informal international networks of higher education institutions.

Miura (2006) researched the internationalization of the University of São Paulo (USP) in three different areas: engineering, medicine and applied social sciences. According to the author, institutions focus their internationalization actions on two major dimensions: international partnerships, and education. International partnerships include institutional arrangements, and student and teacher exchanges, while teaching encompasses the international content of disciplines and foreign language education. The conclusion was that the institution had already established an internationalization process, but lacked strategic planning in some units. Also, the internationalization process was uncomplete, i.e. it was only carried out through some isolated actions.

Ayoubi and Massoud (2007) examined whether the actions of British universities in the area of internationalization were aligned with their strategic intentions. The variables used to define the degree of internationalization were the percentage of students abroad compared to the total number of students of the institution, the percentage of foreign income in the total income of a university, and the percentage of participation of first year students in relation to the total. Data were collected through the database of the Higher Education Statistics Agency, which contains information about 117 British universities.

According to their findings, the researchers divided the universities into four groups, based on their level of internationalization. The *losers*, representing 15% of universities, were institutions that were not concerned with internationalization strategies and activities. The *international speakers*, accounting for 37% of the institutions surveyed, claimed a larger number of internationalization goals, but did not take into account the foreign activities of their academics. Universities regarded as *international actors*, representing 11% of the sample, were those that had international activities for their students, even though did not have a clearly-defined internationalization strategy. Finally, universities with internationalization activities and strategies comprised the group of *international winners*, representing 37% of British universities (AYOUBI; MASSOUD, 2007).

In Mexico, Murphy (2007) conducted a case study with students of the Technological Institute of Monterrey and Higher Education (ITESM in Spanish) who had undergone a summer exchange program in Poland in 2004. This study explored the strategies that could be used to internationalize education, and the ways in which the internationalization component could be made accessible to all students, not only those who can afford it. Out of the 46 students who had travelled to Poland, fifteen relied on financial support from the ITESM. Thus, the institution had indeed established an inclusive strategy for its students, though not for all, to have the opportunity to study abroad.

Based on this literature review related to the internationalization of higher education, it is possible to identify the importance of programs to assist exchange students, such as the proposal developed by the PAI. This section sheds light on the concepts used in this process; the next section addresses the institutionalization model used to understand the current stage of the PAI.

3 INSTITUTIONALIZATION PROCESS

Institutional theory suggests an alternative to the traditional concept of social action in organizational

analysis, whereby decisions should be conceived by rational criteria of choice (QUINELLO, 2007). The Institutional Theory started in the Social Sciences at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing since then has taken a path marked by movements of rupture and resumption. These movements led it to behave in different ways (GOULART; VIEIRA; CARVALHO, 2005). This was a recurring theme in economics, politics and sociology until the twentieth century, inspired mainly by the work of authors such as Thorstein Veblen, John Commons, Westley Mitchel, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, who deepened and solidified its underpinnings (CARVALHO; VIEIRA, 2003). What is considered as Institutional Theory today is the result of the confluence of different theoretical bodies, which incorporated into their proposals the idea of “institutions and patterns of behavior, norms and values as well as beliefs and assumptions, wherein individuals, groups and organizations are immersed” (MACHADO-DA-SILVA; GONÇALVES, 1998).

The sociological dimension of Institutional Theory sought to understand the relationships between environment and organizations, beyond economic connections (GOULART; VIEIRA; CARVALHO, 2005). Organizational research began to include considerations on the effects of environmental forces in determining the organizational structure, as well as the influence of social processes in the decision-making process of the actors involved. These actors were disregarded as being exclusively efficiency maximizers; issues such as power and autonomy in the decision-making process started to be taken into account as well (TOLBERT; ZUCKER, 1999). According to Selznick (1972), organizations overcome their purely technical meaning and transform themselves into institutions to the extent that they are infused with values that symbolize the aspirations of a community, in a process called institutionalization. This perspective introduced a form for thinking institutions, which began to be studied as constituted and shaped by rules, classifications, schemes and routines, considering their symbolic role within the formal structure. Institutions would stem from habits and typologies that are socially defined and shared in a context (FERREIRA; CASACA; JERÔNIMO, 2001).

The institutional approach is traditionally divided into two schools; “old” and “new” (QUINELLO, 2007). The latter is separated into four periods: foundations, from 1977 to 1983; early years, from 1983 to 1991; “taking stock”, from 1987 to 1991; and “looking ahead” from 1991 to date (GREENWOOD *et al.*, 2008).

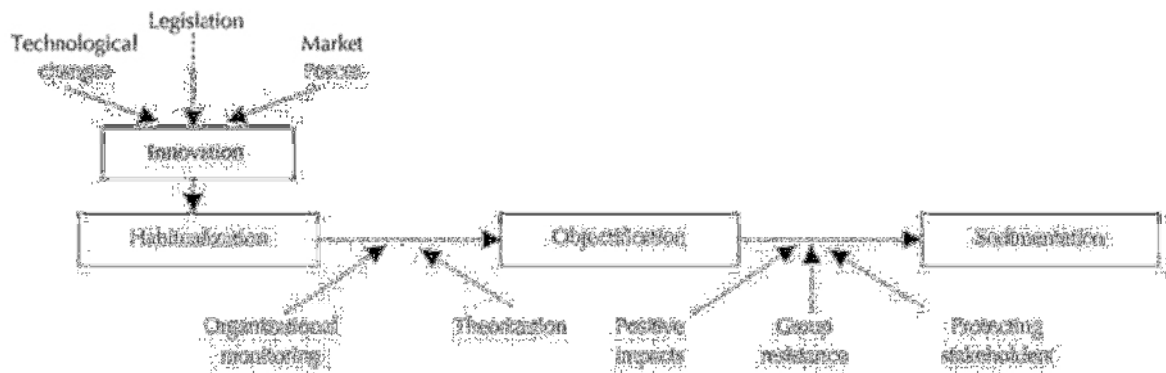
In the first period, organizations were considered to be influenced by their institutional contexts and networks of relationships (GREENWOOD *et al.*, 2008). The institutional contexts consist, in this sense, of rationalized myths of appropriate conduct, these being as powerful manifestations of institutional rules. These rules consist of programs and procedures imposed by public opinion, the concepts of important agents, social prestige, and laws (FERREIRA; CASACA; JERÔNIMO, 2001).

In this period, the work of Zucker (1977) stands out, as it is based on the perception that traditional forms of institutionalization would not be able to explain cultural persistence. Therefore, the author uses a different approach, whereby individual actors transmit a reality characterized by objectivity and exteriority. At the same time, this reality defines, due to its qualities, what is real to these actors.

In other words, Zucker (1977) identifies institutionalization as a process in which individual actors transmit what is socially defined as real and, simultaneously, the meaning of an action that might be defined as “taken for granted” is described. The author adds three aspects of cultural persistence that are directly affected by the level of institutionalization of an action: transmission, maintenance and resistance to change.

Based on previous studies, Tolbert and Zucker (1999) developed a model for the institutionalization process, consisting of three sequential processes, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Institutionalization Process



Source: Adapted from Tolbert and Zucker (1999).

a) **Habitualization:** this involves the creation of structural settings to respond to specific contextual demands within the organization, as well as to formalize these settings within the organization or in an array of similar organizations. The resulting structures are classified as belonging to a pre-institutionalization stage. At this stage, a small group in the organization would adopt a determined behaviour. As a result, the change to be implemented would vary.

b) **Objectification:** this relates to the development of consensus among adopters considering the value of the structure, and the increasing adoption of it. This consensus emerges through two mechanisms: monitoring, performed by the organization as it observes its competitors, evaluating risks concerning the adoption; and theorization, which attributes general and cognitive legitimacy to the structure. The structures that undergo the former process are considered in the semi-institutionalization stage.

c) **Sedimentation:** this is characterized by the diffusion of the structure by a group of actors, regarded as suitable adopters, and by the perpetuation of these practices for a reasonable length of time. This is the stage of complete institutionalization. Some influencing factors at this stage are the diffusion and conservation of the structure.

Tolbert and Zucker's (1999) model was used by Lima *et al.* (2011) to study the process of institutionalization of corporate social responsibility practices in the Water and Sewers Company of Ceará. They concluded that the process is still ongoing, with moderate advances, but with a likelihood of becoming formalized, systematized, consolidated and disseminated.

Lima *et al.* (2012) analysed, through the lens of the previously mentioned model, the process of institutionalization of the creative economy of comedy in the state of Ceará. According to their results, this process is in the objectification and sedimentation stages, as recent structures that have not been perpetuated, and their theorization has not yet occurred.

Finally, Penha *et al.* (2013) also used the same model to investigate the institutionalization process of junior companies in public universities in Ceará. They concluded that these organizations are between the objectification and sedimentation stages.

4 METHODOLOGY

The current research was developed using a qualitative approach, which enabled us to identify the motivations that drive social actors to carry out their practices. In this approach, the most important aspect is foregrounding elements that support the production of a discourse capable of depicting the position of an entire social segment. The history of this group, associated with the contextualization of arrangements involving the individuals' practices in the present time, grants the scientific aspect for this method. This happens once the

necessary procedures of the investigation are outlined in a way that enables understanding of the different interpretations the social actors have of the world (BAUER; GASKELL, 2002).

Therefore, the qualitative approach is used, as it enables a wider analysis of the institutional phenomenon, allowing strong inferences about the environment, and the people who participate in it. These elements interact to build the reality of the participants in the PAI.

Concerning its objectives, this is an exploratory research, as it is aligned with the depiction provided by Collis and Hussey (2005). In this sense, this study considered a research problem that is addressed by few or no previous studies. According to the literature review, the institutionalization process of programs to support exchange students has not been the focus of previous studies, therefore this research is a pioneering contribution.

Furthermore, this study is descriptive because it presents features of the phenomenon investigated, without any obligation to explain what was detailed, although its results might serve as a basis for future explanations (VERGARA, 2007). The description of facts, characteristics and behaviours of the UFC's International Affairs department and the PAI enabled us to understand how the institutionalization process has been occurring. In this regard, the phenomenon was analysed using interviews with open questions, aligned with the specific objectives of this study, and based on Tolbert and Zucker's (1999) institutionalization process.

The abovementioned interviews were conducted with the coordinator of UFC's international affairs department and with PAI scholarship students. Document research was also carried out, dividing the documents into two periods, 2011-2012 and 2013-2014, to improve and facilitate understanding. The aim of this time division was to clarify the factors that determine the present stage of institutionalization of the PAI, following the model of Tolbert and Zucker (1999).

Considering the means used in this study, along with the field and documental research, a bibliographical review was also carried out, following the criteria by Gil (2002) and Vergara (2007). Its bibliographical character was identified by the search, selection and mapping of related literature in journals, books, dissertations and thesis that served as theoretical and methodological background to the theme of institutionalization as a process. For the document research, the used were questionnaires, minutes of meetings, lists of participants, lists of foreign students, training manuals, plans of activities, and publications about the PAI.

The field research collected primary data through interviews with six students who were involved as coordinators in the program between 2012 and 2014. Two of those coordinators were also founders of the program; One further interview was conducted with the current coordinator of International Affairs department of the UFC. Thus, to achieve the specific objectives comprised here, seven interviews were performed using a semi-structured script.

The research subjects were selected non-randomly, considering relevance and availability criteria. To facilitate this study, the following methodological questions were considered: who are the main actors related to the institutionalization of the PAI? And what is the relevance of these actors in this process?

To address to these questions, certain characterizations were chosen, capable of distinguishing those who could provide valid and sufficient information. First, how long the individual had participated in the program. Second, their knowledge of the activities carried out. Third, the person's current responsibilities in the program, and his or her availability.

The interview script encompassed two models; one with six questions applied to the PAI's present and former coordinators, and another with five questions applied to the coordinator of the UFC's International Affairs department. All questions were aligned with the specific objectives proposed here.

Manzini (1990) affirms that semi-structured interviews are focused on an issue on which the main questions are built, to be complemented by others, depending on the circumstances at the time of the interview. For this author, this kind of interview may enable the free emergence of information; and the answers are not conditioned to a pattern of alternatives.

Finally, the data collected were analysed using the technique content analysis. This method encompasses a set of tools for analysing communications, focusing on systematic and objective procedures to describe the contents of the indicators, which may or may not be quantitative. Such procedures would permit inferences connected with the conditions under which the messages were produced and received (BARDIN, 2009).

The categorization performed in the data analysis used, as reference, the identification, in interviewees' accounts, of elements referring to the stages of habitualization, objectification and sedimentation, according to the model proposed by Tolbert and Zucker (1999). The following key words were used to guide the content analysis in this categorization: standardizing activities, formatting, identification, documental adaptation, structure, monitoring, comparison, formalization, accompaniment and control. In addition, due to the kind of interviews used here, it was decided to employ the qualitative form of analysis, given that the goal was to scrutinize the presence or absence of one or more characteristics in the text.

To give a better understanding of how the initiative studied was started, how it operates, and the results it has achieved since its inception, the Program is introduced in the following section.

5 THE SUPPORT PROGRAM TO EXCHANGE STUDENTS

The Program advises and assists students in academic mobility at the UFC in their first few weeks in Fortaleza, the state capital. Besides this support, the project motivates the interchange of cultural and academic experiences between students from UFC and foreign universities.

In 2010, three undergraduate students from FEAAC created PAI. One of them had had an exchange experience through the initiative *Eramus Mundus* and had begun informally to help exchange students after he returned to Brazil. In 2011, the Program selected volunteers known as "companions" to help foreign students, which turned out to be an experimental, but fruitful stage of the program.

In this sense, the PAI is an innovator in the Brazilian northeast due to its companionship system. The inspiration was the "buddy" system established at the Technical University of Munich and a similar project set up at the Federal University of Santa Catarina. In both institutions, the supporting initiative was started by the universities. On the other hand, students, who have been seeking to institutionalize the initiative, created the PAI.

From 2010 to 2014, the program had 368 companions, taking 43 undergraduate and graduate courses. The initiative integrates not only foreign students to UFC, but also Brazilian students with each other, and with the institution itself. As they interact with UFC's different *campi* and courses, PAI companions have first-hand knowledge of the institution's facilities and departments.

PAI supported 468 exchange students from 2010 to 2014. Europe is the main partner, as 155 students came from Germany, 136 from Spain, 113 from France, 17 from Portugal, 1 from Finland and 1 from Denmark. From the South American continent, 14 students came from Argentina, 12 from Colombia, and 1 from Ecuador. Cape Verde has had 9 students assisted by the program since 2010. The list goes on, with 8 students from Mexico, 7 from the USA, 2 from East Timor, and 1 from Panamá.

As the figures above suggest, the program has been gathering strength over time, a factor that has led to interest in studying its processes through the lenses of institutional theory. The findings and the discussion related to the research performed are presented in the following section.

6 RESULTS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Analysing the first interviews, the intention was to highlight extracts demonstrating:

1. Perceptions about institutionalization as a concept.
2. The value of processes for the PAI and the UFC.
3. Impressions about each stage of the institutionalization, following Tolbert and Zucker's (1999) model, based on the answers provided, and the specific objectives of the study.

Regarding our first specific objective, related to the factors that motivated the institutionalization of the PAI, there was a noticeable agreement with Tolbert and Zucker's (1999) model, in that the habitualization process encompassed responses to specific demands within structural configurations. In this regard, the coordinator of International Affairs said:

I consider the program fundamental to UFC's internationalization, mostly because this program carries out efforts from students to students, which generates trust between UFC's

students, who are members of the program, and the exchange students. From there emerge new friendships. PAI certainly helps to promote UFC's name and branding, as exchange students obviously talk well about this experience, given that they are contemplated with great reception and attention by the Program. (UFC's Coordinator for International Affairs, 2014).

Furthermore, one of the students who participated in the program confirmed the opinion above, stating that:

I see it as an advantage, a real effort towards the university's internationalization, and to fulfill an existing gap in the support for foreign students. Institutionalization gives an official character to the program, making it part of UFC. I also believe that once institutionalized, the PAI may have a better base to become something greater and more productive within the UFC. (Student collaborating with PAI as a coordinator of activities 1, 2014).

These responses led us to conclude that the university's internationalization, and the need for UFC to adapt to this process, by filling gaps in the support to foreign students, served as drivers to start the PAI's institutionalization process. Moreover, it confirms the first assumption, as it was reported that the inexistence of a university initiative to assist foreign students was also a driver for the creation of the PAI by the students. These motivational factors are in line with what we sought to demonstrate, through the specific objective and the hypothesis.

In this regard, according to Tolbert and Zucker (1999), the habituation process involves structural settings, responding to specific demands from the organizational context, as well as to the formalization of these settings within the organization, or in the array of similar organizations. The most important factors that lead organizations and institutions to innovate and, consequently, to the process of habituation, according to Aguiar *et al.* (2005), are technological change, i.e. technical or technological reorientation. These changes may represent new legal arrangements or create higher (or lower) receptivity by organizations; and market forces, resulting from economic factors.

In this sense, the second specific objective was to check which forces operated in the habituation process of the PAI. The interviewees supported the view that the program has been defining its structure, standardizing documents and activities to become more formal and comply with requirements for its institutionalization. The feedback provided by one program participant is emphasized:

We are working now on the planning and execution of programs, mapping processes, standardizing documents, creating and applying motivation and satisfaction surveys, organizing selective processes, integration events and other things. (Student collaborating with PAI as a coordinator of activities 2, 2014).

The habituation stage becomes evident by analysing certain Program documents, in which there are procedures and a clear search for their standardization between the periods 2011-2012 and 2013-2014. It was found that documents from the first period were not structured, and there was no control over PAI's activities. This standardization of processes coordinates with the habituation, and the objectification stage confirms the second assumption of this research, which emphasizes the role of forces related to the two aforementioned stages. But despite the fact that Tolbert and Zucker's (1999) model proposes a sequence of stages, no progression is observable through the findings. Trends in the Program's subsequent period also confirm this research premise.

In the second period, in addition, the Program standardized its visual identification by adopting a logo on all its documentation. It standardized documents such as participant questionnaires, and minutes of meetings were also developed and implemented. Some key initiatives started to be planned, like selection processes, integrating and monitoring activities for both foreign and native students. In addition, in the second period, two news articles were published in the UFC's newspaper, advertising the Program's services and giving an update of the activities carried out.

Also considering the institutionalization process, Tolbert and Zucker (1999) define objectification as the development of a consensus among adopters about the structure's value, and its increasing adoption, based on

the consensus that emerges through two mechanisms: organizational monitoring and theorization. Given that objectification one of the key components of the institutionalization process, for Quinello and Nascimento (2009), “the search for a more consolidated and permanent stage accompanies the process of diffusion of the new structure, as a response to new challenges”. In the organizational monitoring, according to Tolbert and Zucker (1999): “[...] organizations can use evidence collected directly of a variety of sources to evaluate the risks of adopting a new structure”. Theorization, on the other hand, occurs through “champions”, i.e. individuals with material interest in the structure (VENTURA, 2005).

Tolbert and Zucker (1999) state that the champions perform two main tasks in the theorization process: the definition of a generic organizational problem, which includes specifying a set or a category of organizational actors characterized by the problem, and the justification of a particular formal structural arrangement as the solution for the problem with empirical and logical basis. Ventura (2005) highlights that the theorization accredits the structure with general cognitive and normative legitimacy, leveraging the dissemination of the structural model within the organization, and making it more homogeneous and lasting than it was in the previous stage. The forces operating in this process might be identified in activities performed in each semester. The support for exchange students, for example, is one of the program’s consolidated activities, which are gradually becoming more standardized. Initiatives such as cultural activities also foreground the program’s structuring, but to a lesser degree, as emphasized in the passage below:

The program also uses cultural events to integrate foreign students into the local culture, something that would be better enjoyed if the program were institutionalized in the future.” (Student collaboration with PAI as a coordinator of activities 3, 2014).

Regarding the sedimentation stage, Tolbert and Zucker (1999) characterize this moment as the diffusion of a structure by a group of suitable actors and by the perpetuation of this structure over a considerable period of time. Full institutionalization occurs in the sedimentation stage, which Tolbert and Zucker (1999) define as a process supported by the continuity in the structure and in its survival through generations of the organization’s members. Aguiar et al. (2005) identify three main factors for the sedimentation process: positive impacts, which are overt results associated with the structure; resistance groups, i.e. people who are adversely affected by the structure; and the defense of an interest group, i.e. people who are favorable to changes in the structure. It was not possible, however, to identify forces operating in the sedimentation process, given that the program is still structuring its activities and standardizing processes.

The lack of evidence to support identifying the sedimentation stage leads to the conclusion that, based on previous findings, the PAI is currently in the habitualization stage. Therefore, the third specific objective, considering the identification of the stage the PAI institutionalization is in, was also fulfilled in that the present stage of the model was identified. Furthermore, it confirms the third assumption, which was that the Program would be in the habitualization stage. These conclusions well illustrated by one of students who participated in the program:

PAI is still in its embryonic stage. The program needs more time to mature; it lacks clear and regular activities. Nowadays, however, it is in a process of organization, its documents are being standardized and its data are being compiled, but everything will contribute to the planning of pertinent activities for its maturation. (Student collaborating with PAI as a coordinator of activities 4, 2014).

In conclusion, it was verified that the Program, in accordance with the model conveyed by Tolbert and Zucker (1999), is between the habitualization and objectification stages. In other words, in as much as the program has been working on the formalization of its processes and controlling instruments, it can be asserted that the PAI is in its pre-institutionalization stage. Considering the difficulties faced throughout this institutionalization process, the UFC’s coordinator for International Affairs highlighted that:

The lack of physical space in the Coordination is a great difficulty, and another one is the fact that we are not an autonomous entity within the UFC’s organizational structure, given that we are just an advisory body in the Rector’s office. In particular, the Coordination is not a secretary. If we had more physical space, we would be able to receive PAI’s scholarship students who wished, for several hours a week, to work with us as interns. (UFC’s Coordinator for International Affairs).

7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study presents the institutionalization process of the Program to Support for Exchange Students at the Federal University of Ceará, starting from the bottom-up, by a group of students who sought to contribute to the community, helping foreign students adapt to the city and to the university.

Using a qualitative approach, we conducted document, bibliographical and field research to address to three specific objectives. First, the motivating factors leading to the institutionalization process of the PAI were related to bottom-up pressure and the success obtained by the efforts of program participants. Second, the verification of forces acting in the three stages proposed by Tolbert and Zucker (1999) was demonstrated through the content analysis. And finally, the results also outlined that the Program is pre-institutionalized, thereby identifying the Program's present stage of institutionalization.

Based on the content analysis, and using the model proposed by Tolbert and Zucker (1999), we concluded that the process of institutionalization of the Program of Support for Exchange Students from the Federal University of Ceará is at its pre-institutionalization stage. This conclusion is supported by the observation that the program has been developing standardized procedures to solve its problems, what might be considered as a force acting in its habitualization process.

During the research process, influencing factors were detected at the beginning of the PAI's institutionalization process, such as the internationalization of the university, and the need for the university to adapt to this process.

This study seeks to contribute to illustrating the current state of the Program's institutionalization process. The results depicted here might support future studies in the area, with the aim of determining the most important forces in the institutionalization process of higher education institutions.

Although it has attempted to be comprehensive, this study is not without limitations. The perspective was limited to the PAI's coordinators, therefore, it is suggested that future studies contemplate a broader data collection, interviewing other actors, such as its beneficiaries, and former students, as well as more UFC personnel. Future research could also use more generalizing methods, since the case study used here does not allow for such procedures.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not undermine the contribution of this presentation of the path the initiative studied has taken. It is an effort without parallel in the country, according to the research performed, and it has been helping foreign students to adapt to Brazilian universities. This kind of initiative has the potential to foster internationalization, bringing students and professors from different cultural backgrounds closer to one another.

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