

Global Trends, Local Responses: Navigating Change in Brazilian Universities

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This special issue offers us a selection of papers based on ethnographically oriented and qualitative research which addresses the lived experience of academics and students with internationalisation, digitisation and increasing diversity in Brazilian universities. Taken together, this collection paints a rich picture of how these recent transformations in these universities shape and change the language and literacy practices of academics and students.

Most of the papers in this special issue follow an ethnographic or qualitative approach, developing detailed case studies of individuals and institutions, which allows for an understanding of the emic experiences of the academics and students involved in the research. Such an approach provides insights into how structural changes play out on the ground, whether this is carried out using interviews (Frazatto), interviews and focus groups (Gimenez *et al.*), document and policy analysis (Carvalho and Schlatter), analysis of narratives from interviews and testimonials (Bizon and Pavan), multiple instruments and platforms designed for building relationships with participants over time (Mattos and Diniz), or more in-depth ethnographic work combining recordings, participant-observation and interviews (Rocha; Magalhães; Martin-Jones *et al.*). This coherent methodological stance provides insights into the emic perspectives of those directly involved in these processes and is an important contribution of the collection. This special issue can be located as part of the emergence of a critical sociocultural perspective on academic writing in Latin America, as identified by Trigos-Carrillo (2019), which attends to power, identity, representation and authority, and develops a critical perspective on how education can challenge or reinforce the profound social inequalities which exist in the region.

Several themes recur across the special issue, including the construction of hierarchies of languages and of institutions; the impact of widening access policies and an increasingly diverse student population; the internationalisation of higher education; and the transformation of the landscape of higher education brought by digitisation, particularly in academics' workloads and in tracking their productivity using digital



means. Such phenomena – internationalisation, digitisation, widening participation and increased student diversity – are familiar in higher education contexts around the world, but play out in particular ways in any given context, shaping the experiences of academics and students – and their language and literacy practices – in different ways.

In this Afterword, we will reflect on these themes and locate the contribution of these papers within the broader context of research into the language and literacy practices of higher education. We will consider what we can learn from them about global patterns of change and about how they are experienced in the Latin American context, and identify strategies for resistance to detrimental aspects of some of these trends.

Internationalisation and Hierarchisation

Trends towards increased internationalisation have been seen, and widely researched, in higher education institutions around the world (Lee; Stensaker, 2021). International research collaborations are central to progress in many areas, particularly though not exclusively in science, technology and engineering disciplines, where large international networks can draw on a wider range of national public and private funding sources and scale up in equipment and resources. Competition for the most successful academics is global, and many academic departments are multilingual and multinational in their staff make-up.

International student mobility is another aspect of internationalisation which has come to characterise many higher education systems around the world (Teichler, 2017). Student mobility is frequently an aspect of national and international policy and strategy. It is assumed that increasing student mobility generates positive results that go well beyond the international educational visits that are funded by cross-national institutions like the European Union (in support of many policy agendas). For example, the Erasmus programme has funded international educational mobility for millions of students and researchers, with goals such as developing skills and intercultural competence for individuals, supporting international collaborations between institutions, and building international shared understandings and positive relationships between countries (Jones, 2017). Individual countries such as Saudi Arabia and China include funding for international student mobility as part of their long-term national strategy, in addition to providing large numbers of self-funded international students (David *et al.*, 2017; Yang, 2022).

Although internationalisation is a phenomenon of higher education systems across the globe, the specific form of internationalisation in any given context is particular to that context. As the papers in this collection show clearly, internationalisation in Brazilian universities is shaped both by these broad global and geopolitical trends, and by the particular history and current economic and political conditions of the country. The papers by Martin-Jones *et al.*, Magalhães, and Frazatto provide insights into the historical trajectory of this internationalisation from relying on the networks built up by individual academics with a significant degree of autonomy, to being shaped and encouraged in particular directions by centralised funding focusing on higher-rated research institutes, to being abruptly cut in conditions of economic austerity shifting the focus from mobility to internationalisation-at-home.

The reservation of funds for internationalisation to only those research institutions ranked above a certain level (Magalhães) is one aspect of a more general hierarchisation of institutions which

is characteristic of the contemporary neoliberal higher education sector. Ranking of research centres in this way is one element of a much bigger pattern which introduces a market logic into the key objectives of universities (Gonzales; Núñez, 2014). This logic can be a circular one, for instance, “international outlook” is one of the characteristics taken into account in the QS world education rankings, measuring proportions of international students and staff as well as international research networks (QS, 2024); and then institutions which come higher up in those rankings are those which are eligible for funding to support further internationalisation, supporting existing inequalities between institutions and potentially increasing them. The impact of cutting the government funding as part of an austerity strategy (Martin-Jones *et al.*) shows how such ‘global trends’ are in fact dependent on the availability of local resources to continue, which may be much more precarious than they appear.

Inward international student mobility is still a feature of this context, as shown by Frazatto’s paper, which explores the challenges for East Asian students coming to Brazil. This is quite different from much of the research on international students coming to study in contexts where English is the language of instruction, whether in Anglo-American contexts or in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) contexts. Most research on international students’ experiences of learning in a language which is not their L1 does focus on EMI settings. As Frazatto lays out, most research on language and internationalisation is in English as an Additional Language (EAL) contexts and is located in a country of the global North, whether in Anglo-American or EMI contexts. Nevertheless, some of the experiences and challenges faced by the Japanese student that Frazatto focuses on here, such as the stereotyping of Asian students as less willing to engage in classroom discussion, resonate with the findings of existing research (e.g. Heng, 2017). The effects are that this student is seen as less skilled and as failing to ‘assimilate’ into the university culture, in comparison with Spanish-speaking students who, while Portuguese is not their first language, have been socialised into Westernised epistemologies. A hierarchy is created between students, on the basis of unequal access both to the language of instruction and the epistemologies associated with the cultural traditions of universities in the West.

Language Hierarchies

The articles show how different languages are positioned, valued, and hierarchised within these processes of internationalisation. One trend which is often expressed as a global phenomenon is the dominance of the English language in scientific and economic contexts. In common with many university systems around the world, the academics in these articles do experience increasing pressure to publish in English, both for reasons to do with how the university values publication in particular kinds of journals, and to enable their work to be read by the broader global academic community in disciplines where English is the dominant language. As the papers by Magalhães and Martin-Jones *et al.* show, though, this pressure is experienced differently in different disciplines, and is sometimes resisted. There is more concern about the shift to English among scholars in the social sciences and humanities, and among academics with different career histories.

In fact, the privileged position of English is part of a global phenomenon that impacts many academic communities around the world. However, the ways in which this global trend unfolds in local communities and universities may vary. In the cases presented in these articles, these phenomena intersect with local circumstances, such as the fact that access to English is not equally distributed and those from lower incomes have fewer opportunities to learn English. This implies that some initiatives of EMI benefit those more privileged and may deepen social inequalities, as noted by Gimenez *et al.* and Martin-Jones *et al.* In this sense, language hierarchies determined by global economic and social dynamics might reinforce local inequalities in particular countries. Drawing on research into a state-funded EMI project in a state university in the South of Brazil, Gimenez *et al.* also show how such initiatives undermine academics' confidence and sense of autonomy.

Other papers, such as those by Frazatto and by Bizon and Pavan, throw light on the contemporary status of Portuguese in academic life in Brazil – the language that was originally imposed during the years of colonisation. They also show that there are new critical debates about the teaching of Portuguese as an Additional Language and about the challenges for language education relating to the diversification of the student population. For instance, Bizon and Pavan argue that teacher education programmes in Portuguese as an Additional Language can open up spaces to think about internationalisation in a different way, taking more account of the ways in which languages and literacies mediate social life.

In a third group of papers, we see that Portuguese occupies a dominant position with respect to indigenous and other local languages. Carvalho and Schlatter identify the continuing power of the one-nation one-language Western colonial language ideology in university life in Brazil. They illustrate this with reference to the design of foreign language proficiency assessments, where the first languages of Deaf students (Libras) and indigenous students (e.g. Guarani) are placed lower down in the hierarchy and not viewed as legitimate resources for learning in university contexts. We will return to these connections between linguistic and social inequality in considering the increased diversity of the student population.

One specific way in which the relationships between languages play out in particular ways in this setting relates to the particular publishing context of Brazil, which provides an alternative well-respected publication route through the local journals which are produced by universities, independent of the global publishing houses (as described in the interview with Sandro Calvino in the paper by Martin-Jones *et al.*). This brings complexity to the picture of English dominance in higher education publishing. It also provides one possible avenue of resistance to the publishing behemoths which dominate much English-language academic journal publication, making publication for scholars from the global South a more difficult process, an area of live debate at the moment (Lillis; Curry, 2022; Navarro *et al.*, 2022).

Digitisation

All workplaces have faced rapid changes as a result of digitisation since the mid to late 1990s. In the academic context, digitisation has profoundly affected the working lives and responsibilities of academic staff. As with knowledge work more broadly, the shift to digital and online means of working has enabled many new possibilities, but also new demands.

Increases in academic workload linked to the use of technologies have been observed in many contexts. A detailed study of academics' writing practices in UK universities (Tusting *et al.*, 2019) found that academics were facing an enormous number of different kinds of writing demands, almost all of which were mediated by digital technologies. Tasks which until digitisation had been handled by specialised support staff, such as typing up manuscripts, booking travel or looking after research budgets, are now for the most part handled by academics themselves, causing a huge increase in the diversity of the kinds of tasks which make up an academic's daily workload. The combination of mobile digital devices and always-on communication systems such as email and, increasingly nowadays, Teams, Slack or WhatsApp, have made it much harder to distinguish between work and non-work times and places.

These challenges faced by academics based in the UK are mirrored and, to a degree, intensified in people's experiences reported in this special issue, particularly in the article by Magalhães. We see similar challenges in dealing with email and in the always-on nature of academic work, mediated by digital devices that give ever-present access to multiple forms of communication such as emails and virtual learning environments. Magalhães foregrounds the ubiquitous presence of technology in academic life, with the challenges of keeping up with emails and in addition using WhatsApp groups for each university module. This exacerbated admin workload is tied to the "limited administrative support for teaching staff at many universities" (Magalhães, 2024, p. 12) and might be an even more salient reality in less-resourced institutions worldwide. While using WhatsApp groups and personal mobile phones to communicate easily with students may be a creative way for academics to respond to a situation of declining administrative support, it is a double-edged sword in intensifying levels of communication and perhaps expectations of immediate responses.

The demands of representing academic productivity, in checkable database form, add another layer of literacy demands to academics' workloads, with the use of the Lattes online system being required by all research-active academic staff. This is a high-stakes responsibility, since the assessment of the quality of research and in particular the distribution of funding depends in part on academics' self-representations on Lattes.

The increasing pressures to write, publish and teach in English, and to manage international research relationships, add additional burdens for academics with already demanding professional lives. The experiences of Eduardo Cabral (pseudonym) as recounted by Martin-Jones *et al.* are a striking illustration of these demands, when he explains that since the support staff of his Institute are not fluent in English, he has to handle himself all the English-language requirements of running an Institute for Advanced Studies that is visible online to the English-speaking world: translating and checking web pages and papers, and even translating travel details for English-speaking research visitors. Similarly, Gimenez *et al.* demonstrate how teaching in English has emotional implications for academics who experience insecurity about their English proficiency. This emotional strain is likely to compound the overall workload and stress of academic working life.

These articles taken together show a pattern common across much of higher education: the literacy practices and demands of academic staff are now significant, diverse and multiple. Only a small proportion of an academic's time is devoted to doing research and teaching. Many of the other forms of labour often remain unacknowledged, invisible, or taken for granted.

Increased Diversity of the Student Population

One major shift that has taken place in Brazil and in other higher education systems around the world is a shift from an elite to a mass model of higher education. This shift has widened access to higher education and increased the diversity of the student population. The increase in diversity has, of course, been shaped by the particular policies that have been adopted in different contexts. In many Latin American countries, including Brazil, the widening of access has been achieved using a quota or alternative admission system (Santelices; Horn; Catalán, 2019; Villalobos *et al.*, 2017). As Rocha explains, Brazil legislatively mandated in 2012 that a minimum of 50% of places in federal higher education institutions should be reserved for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including students with socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, Black, indigenous, and disabled students and those who had received their secondary education in public schools. The effectiveness of this legislation in diversifying the student population and in promoting inclusion is also evident in some of the statistics quoted by Carvalho and Schlatter.

It is clear that the combination of the quota legislation in Brazil and the encouragement of inward mobility for international students has led to dramatic changes in the student population in a relatively short timespan. In other countries, there has been a backlash against direct action to increase diversity in universities. A recent Supreme Court decision in the US (United States, 2023) judged that affirmative action based on race in university admissions was unconstitutional, which is likely to affect affirmative action admissions in relation to many other indices of diversity. It is also clear from some of the papers in this collection that the increase in student diversity in Brazil has not been without its challenges. As Carvalho and Schlatter point out, increasing access to higher education is only the first step in a process. If the practices of teaching and assessment remain exclusionary and designed around the skills and practices of the traditional white elite students, retention of students from other groups will be much more difficult. Mattos and Diniz' paper adopts an academic literacies perspective to illuminate the experiences of migrant students in higher education in Brazil. They show that some of the challenges the students face arise from aspects of the curriculum, and also from the frequently implicit expectations of academic staff, which are frequently left implicit and invisible but could be explained, taught, or changed.

Several of the papers in this special issue frame the issue of changing academic practices as one aspect of the decolonisation of higher education, and strategies to foster decolonisation are identified. For instance, Carvalho and Schlatter show how, despite the one-nation one-language ideology underpinning policies around foreign language proficiency assessments for graduate students, there is nevertheless room for manoeuvre in opening up the ways in which these assessments are delivered. They show, for example, how an indigenous student can be fairly assessed with a careful choice of reading text, and how assessment can be meaningfully adjusted to allow a Deaf student to respond, drawing on their first language. While such on-the-ground flexibility is encouraging, it also poses challenges for policy-making and calls for such flexibility need to be built into the system from early on.

Conclusion

Taken together, these articles provide ample evidence of the ways in which academics' and students' lived experiences with languages and literacy are shaped by broader geopolitical power relationships (e.g., the position of English in relation to other languages from the global South), locally situated material, economic constraints and social dynamics (e.g., social inequalities, recent inclusion policies for students who speak minoritised languages).

The close analysis of specific policies, practices and lived experiences, in different university settings in Brazil, has revealed possibilities for alternative ways of doing things which resist managerialist approaches, and some concrete means of resisting dominant discourses in global higher education in some of the areas which are currently sources of debate. For example, the quota system has clearly been highly effective in increasing the diversity of the student population and widening access to higher education. When the numbers change to this extent, addressing practices of teaching and assessment in higher education that perpetuate inequality becomes necessary, even if not always easy; the changing student body forces the institution to at least acknowledge the effects of some of these practices.

For academics, having the possibility to publish research in local journals in languages other than English provides an alternative route to the high-impact international English-language journals that perpetuate the dominance of English as the global language of academia. To have such routes to publication can promote the self-understanding of academics as autonomous knowledge creators and address some of the concerns about EMI raising issues with confidence, although limiting frameworks of evaluation that privilege publishing in English still need to be addressed.

The qualitative and ethnographic approaches have allowed the researchers contributing to this special issue to identify differences between the rigidity of policies and the flexibility on the ground, including creative practice such as the following: opening up possibilities that transcend the language ideologies built into assessment policies; sign language interpreters taking up mediating roles to fill a gap that is left for supporting Deaf students in the higher education system; taking control of multilingual websites to support the building and maintenance of research networks; diversifying sources of funding to support internationalisation initiatives to ensure these are not dependent on a central source which may be cut or heavily controlled; or using local WhatsApp groups with students to counter deficiencies in administrative support.

While some creative strategies have been identified in the research presented here, there are still inevitable tensions between moves to decolonise the university by challenging dominant European language and literacy ideologies and epistemes embedded in Brazilian institutions during the colonial era, and the hierarchisation and rankings systems which position universities in competition with each other globally. Resisting the global hegemony of English by publishing in locally-prestigious university journals does not contribute highly to a university's positioning in international rankings. Moreover, local political and economic realities can shift what is valued, as is shown by the shift described in several of these papers from funding international mobility to funding internationalisation-at-home as part of austerity measures.

Overall, these articles offer valuable insights into the interplay between internationalisation, digitisation, widening participation processes and the use of languages and literacy practices. They also point to many challenges for both academics and students that are tied to these processes, such as increased workload or unequal access to English. However, they also show valuable strategies to embrace an increasingly diverse, multilingual, and complex university, such as allowing use of multiple languages in EMI classes or including follow-up interviews in language assessment with indigenous and Deaf students. Advocating for a decolonised, human-scale university where diverse languages and epistemological frameworks are not only recognised but also valued and where the pressures of academic productivity and hyper-technologisation do not overshadow academic life is critical. These articles provide insights into challenges and potential strategies for navigating these complexities.

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