

The Role of Academic Mobility in the (De)Construction of Internationalization: Dialogues and Perspectives From, In and On Global South & Global North

Ana Rachel M. Mendes^{a*}

^a*Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo, Brazil
& Universitat de València, Spain*

*Corresponding author: Ana Rachel M. Mendes, Email: anarachel.mm37@gmail.com.
Address: Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo, Vitória/ES, Brazil
Universitat de València, Valencia, Spain

Abstract

International mobility has played a central role in the views, policies, and actions of internationalization of higher education, despite representing a highly excluding, elitist process with flows that tend to reinforce asymmetrical relationships and colonial domination by the Global North of the Global South. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate how the international mobility is related to the construction of internationalization. To this end, the views of students and professors participating in the academic mobility of one university in Brazil, the Global South, and another in Spain, the Global North, will be analyzed through interviews and later they will be contrasted with the documental analysis of the official texts on internationalization of both institutions. Data will be approached qualitatively, aiming at enabling the understanding of the role that international academic mobility can play in the (de)construction of the perspectives and practices of internationalization of higher education institutions.

Keywords: Higher education, internationalization, international academic mobility

Introduction

Internationalization of higher education has been on the agenda of higher education institutions (HEIs) as the subject of policies, debates, and research in the last three decades. Research on internationalization has shown that a ‘common-sense’ belief is that international mobility is highly related to the quality of HEIs (de Wit, 2011; Finardi, et al., 2021; Knight, 2011) and that it has been playing a major role in higher education all around the world (Chiappa & Finardi, 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Martel & Goodman, 2022; Morosini & Corte, 2018; Wang & Wang, 2022). In Spain and in Brazil, the countries being addressed in this comparative study, international academic mobility (or exchange) has acquired great visibility,

especially after Erasmus (Altbach & de Wit, 2015) and the Science without Borders program (Freire Júnior & Panico, 2021; Sehnem, 2019), respectively. The benefits of the international interchange that take place in mobility are widely known, for example, the gain in intercultural and linguistic competence, personal, academic scientific, and professional development, expansion of partnerships between institutions and countries, improvement of the quality of research and higher education (Dias et al., 2021; Morosini & Corte, 2018; Ramos, 2018).

However, studies in the field of comparative and international higher education (Liu et al., 2022; Tabasum Niroo & Williams, 2022; Zewelde, 2022) have highlighted some ethical and equity issues as well as the recent field of critical internationalization (Pereira et al., 2018; Stein & Silva, 2020) that has criticized the elitist, exclusivist and colonial aspects of how academic mobility has been carried out throughout the years. Data from UNESCO's website shows that in 2019, international mobility students accounted for only 2.6% of HEI students worldwide. According to Díaz (2018) and Wang (2022), students' most chosen destinations are located in the Anglophone Global North and have English as their official or preferred language of academic instruction. These numbers show internationalization and mobility have favored only a small percentage of the academic community and brought more benefits to the Global North than to the Global South (Piccin & Finardi, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

From a critical perspective, this scenario has been built on ideologies that conceive Global North culture and knowledge as superior to the Global South (Pereira et al., 2018; Stein & Silva, 2020). In the Latin American decolonial framework, Quijano (2005) claims that the dominant global imaginary is governed by the modern pattern of power that began with the territorial 'conquer' of America in the colonial period using race to impose supremacy. The dominated peoples, along with their epistemologies and cultures, have been considered naturally inferior in this system of 'universal' eurocentric classification, which has prevailed economically, cognitively, and socially until today (Quijano, 2005).

For Bakhtin (2006), ideologies are formed in the complex process of social communication through language, which is an essentially dialogic phenomenon considering its linguistic and discursive dimensions. Thus, every text leads to another text in a way that discourses are built on and in contact with other discourses that have been (re)(de) constructed historically (Bakhtin, 2006). In this view, discourses about the internationalization of HEIs are multiple, as well as the perspectives, purposes, and ways in which these meanings are materialized in daily university life.

Literature Review

Research in the field of internationalization shows 'common-sense' highlights the importance of mobility for the institution's quality (Finardi et al., 2021). In fact, it has been found that mobility can bring about many benefits, such as the dissemination of global citizenship and interculturality, personal growth and sense of identity, the acquisition and development of intercultural, scientific, linguistic, academic, technical and pedagogical competences, expansions of partnerships between HEIs and countries, improving the quality of research, scientific production and higher education (Dias et al., 2021; Morosini & Corte, 2018; Ramos, 2018). Many students and professors/researchers engage in mobility motivated by getting to know new cultures, languages, places, and people and by improving their chances of getting better jobs or at their jobs (Oliveira & Freitas, 2017). In view of such potential, mobility has been encouraged and even promoted by government programs such as Erasmus in Europe (Altbach & de Wit, 2015) and the Science without Borders program in Brazil (Freire Júnior & Panico, 2021; Sehnem, 2019).

However, one of the most evident aspects of mobility is its cost, as international travel and stay represent high expenses for most people. As a matter of fact, only 2.6% of higher education students worldwide went on mobility in 2019, according to UNESCO. Therefore, mobility can be considered exclusive and elitist, after all, it is restricted to those who can afford international mobility or to those who can earn some financial aid or scholarships. Besides being available only for a few, OECD (2021) found that 67% of international students in the OECD area come from developing countries. As

for their destination, Wang (2022) shows that only ten countries host around 80% of all international students: the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, China, Australia, France, Russia, Germany, Japan, and Spain. Based on this data set, it is noticed that mobility flow is still mainly from Global South to Global North.

Morosini and Corte (2018) understand this evident unbalance in mobility flow from South to North reveals the discrepancy of intentions between the countries of each geopolitical region. HEIs in the Global North have made enormous efforts to recruit and attract international students from developing countries as their main internationalization strategies (Wang, 2022). International students represent a significant source of income: they usually pay higher academic fees than nationals and generate several other revenues for the country, region, and HEIs with their expenses with consular fees, accommodation, food, local transport, health, tourism, etc. Furthermore, it is assumed that the more “international” a campus, the more attractive it becomes for new international students (Dias et al., 2021). Also, mobility has shown to be an essential contribution to brain drain (Dias et al., 2021), in which highly qualified students and professionals from the Global South leave for the Global North in search of better career opportunities and life quality, a phenomenon that can also lead to an increase in inequalities among these regions (Pereira et al., 2018).

As a response to the Global North’s internationalization initiatives, HEIs in the Global South, including the countries as a whole invest their human and financial resources in sending students and professors to the North and in importing knowledge and culture from there as means of meeting international standards for quality and achieving recognition by ‘global’ rankings (Leal et al., 2018). However, Leal et al. (2018) point out the current dynamics of internationalization have actually reinforced inequalities between the Global North and the Global South. As Leite and Genro (2012) and Finardi and Guimarães (2017) warn, these international quality indicators used by the rankings are established by the institutional model of countries in the Global North and mostly do not benefit the Global South, but rather disregard contextual specificities of universities and research agendas.

Research Design

This work is the summary of a work-in-progress dissertation for a Doctoral degree in international cotutelle between two partner universities, one in Brazil and the other one in Spain. The cotutelle agreement between both universities establishes that the research candidate is enrolled and fulfills a research stay at both universities with joint supervision from each institution. This study questions the role of mobility in the (de)construction of the meanings of internationalization, acknowledging that academic mobility and the internationalization of HEI have been predominantly infused with and guided by colonial discourses. Drawing on Bakhtin’s (2006) theory regarding language as an ideological phenomenon and on Latin American decolonial studies (Quijano, 2005) regarding modernity and coloniality, this research endeavor analyzes how the mobility experience has (trans)formed the discourses and perspectives on internationalization which, in turn, determine how internationalization is implemented through policies and practices in HEIs. Similar to other researches on international mobility in the field of comparative and international higher education (Krsmanovic, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Tabasum Niroo & Williams, 2022; Zewelde, 2022; Zhang & Unger, 2022), participants experiences and voices play a central role in the methodology approach for this study. To this end, students and professors/researchers participating in the academic mobility of two HEIs located in the Global South and in the Global North - one in Brazil and the other one in Spain - have been invited to participate in this research. The criteria for choosing the institutions was based on the fact that the researcher who has been conducting this study is a doctoral student in the Brazilian institution in mobility for international cotutelle in the Spanish institution. Students and professors/researchers perspectives and discourses have been gathered through surveys and interviews about the mobility experience and contrasted with the document analysis of the official texts on internationalization from both institutions. Data from the Brazilian HEI was from 34 survey answers, 21 interviews and 3 official documents to be contrasted with data from the HEI in Spain, still to be collected. This present work focuses on the findings from the Brazilian HEI, as data from the Spanish HEI is still being produced.

Table 1: Interviewees' Home and Host Countries

Home Country	Host Country	Student or Professor
Haiti	Brazil	Student
Colombia	Brazil	Student
Venezuela	Brazil	Student
United Kingdom	Brazil	Professor
Brazil	Portugal	Students (5)
Brazil	Italy	Students (2)
Brazil	Germany	Student
Brazil	France	Students (2)
Brazil	England	Students (3)
Brazil	United States	Students (2)
Brazil	Spain	Student (1)
Brazil	Portugal, Spain and Ireland	Professor

Preliminary Findings

Work done so far has made it possible to notice some of the ruptures and continuities brought about by the Brazilian HEI interviewee' mobility experience, summarized in Table 1.

One of the disruptions was in the assumption made by Brazilian students that Global North HEIs would offer better quality education. After their mobility experience, these seemed to have developed a greater appreciation for their home HEI. For other Brazilian students abroad, international attractiveness and welcoming of their destination HEI reinforced the imagery of European cultural and epistemological superiority. One aspect highlighted by international students in Brazil was that studying in a tuition- free public HEI (all public Brazilian HEI are tuition-free) favored the view of education as a social common good. On the other hand, Brazilian students who went to public (but with tuition fees) HEIs abroad have found benefits in such institutions and strengthened the view of education as a product to be commercialized.

In participants' discourses, there was evidence that participating in Global South-South cooperation programs promoted a more solidarity-focused internationalization and a peaceful coexistence of different cultures and knowledge in the HEI. Conversely, in Global South-North mobility flows, some Brazilian students claimed they should act as agents of globalization by importing models and knowledge from the North applying to their home HEI to make their education more international, clearly in a eurocentric model. Also, other Brazilian students conceived mobility as an improvement to their academic records to find better jobs once they graduate, thus highlighting the view of education as a product and of internationalization as an international market for this.

Professor/researcher mobility differs in many aspects from students' mobility as it mainly happens for research (doctoral or postdoctoral studies and research cooperation) or for shorter stays with participation in events or technical visits. However, motivations for mobility seem to be fairly similar to the general drive to benefit from having an international experience in a superior country, Regarding professor/researcher views, the mobility experience disrupted the romantic view of internationalization by revealing the perverse colonial logic that expects submission from the South. However, later on, mobility was found to be a way to subvert the hegemonic internationalization showing resistance to the dominant logic while operating in alternative logics of horizontal relations, even in South-North relations.

Discussion

Results have shown that HEI view of education and internationalization greatly influence mobility participants' perspectives. In addition, mobility programs are also decisive in terms of the offer of destination countries, weight of the language, and financial conditions for carrying out the mobility, which can restrict or expand access to mobility, as well as favor certain regions and HEI. On the other hand, power relations are not exclusively determined by the flow of interactions, as there was evidence of colonial South-South relations as well as cooperative South-North. Although it does have great importance, the potential for rupture and/or strengthening discourses and imaginaries on internationalization and mobility is mainly related to the awareness of participants, in assuming responsibility and agency in this process.

In addition, as for the relationship between the (trans)formed perspectives and HEI internationalization process, Brazilian HEI official documents place professors/researchers as the main agents of the institution's internationalization. Thus, the flows and dynamics established in professors/researchers mobility are essential for the paths that the HEI internationalization takes. This research has found there are other paths to be followed and other interaction dynamics to be established besides the prevailing Global North-South domination. In this sense, there's also a strategic role that should be played by Southern HEI's managers/stakeholders/staff in order to establish more intentional, decolonial, and active policies aligned with their own view of education instead of importing policies from the Global North.

Expected Contributions

This study is expected to contribute to discussions on international academic mobility and internationalization in the field of comparative and international higher education (Krsmanovic, 2022; Liu et al., 2022; Martel & Goodman, 2022; Tabasum Niroo & Williams, 2022; Wang & Wang, 2022; Zewolde, 2022; Zhang & Unger, 2022). We hope that, by contributing to the understanding and evidence of the role of mobility in internationalization and higher education, the process of internationalization in HEIs can be viewed and practiced in a more, decolonized, inclusive and intentional way to yield more benefits to a larger part of society.

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ANA RACHEL MENDES is a cotutelle PhD candidate at the Graduate Program of Education at Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo in Brazil and at the Doctoral Programme in Language, Literature and Culture, and its Applications at Universitat de València in Spain. She holds a MA in Applied Linguistics and a BA in English Language and Teaching. She works for the International Office in Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo. Her research interests include virtual/non-virtual internationalization and academic mobility. Email: ana.r.mendes@ufes.br. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4359-1109>

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