

The Role of Foreign Languages in International Education

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Abstract

It is a fact that universities around the globe devote a considerable part of their budget to guaranteeing the quality of their international strategy. Most higher education institutions have set up international offices with the aims of increasing the number of exchange students, faculty exchange programs, calls for joint international research projects, access to communities abroad by the use of Information Technology, or the links for academic cooperation and cultural understanding.

However, in some institutions this is no easy task. Universities face financial problems – student and faculty exchange is expensive, getting visas and migration issues is a hassle, moreover most universities in the world offer programs only in their native tongue and, sometimes in a foreign language, mainly English.

This paper lays out recommendations on how to match the international mission with a language development strategy, as well as a proposal of a paradigm shift from the “traditional” view to a “global view” on international education from a Linguistic perspective.

Keywords: accreditation, international education, internationalization, foreign language, joint research.

EL PAPEL DE LAS LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS EN LA EDUCACIÓN INTERNACIONAL

Resumen

Es un hecho que las universidades de todo el mundo dedican gran parte de su presupuesto a garantizar la calidad de su estrategia internacional. La

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mayoría de las instituciones de educación superior cuentan con oficinas internacionales cuyo objetivo es aumentar el número de estudiantes de intercambio, fortalecer programas de intercambio del profesorado, participar en convocatorias de proyectos conjuntos de investigación, acceder a comunidades mediante el uso de tecnología de la información y fortalecer los vínculos de cooperación académica y cultural.

Sin embargo, en algunas instituciones esto no es tarea fácil. Las universidades se enfrentan a problemas financieros, pues es costoso apoyar a estudiantes y profesores. Además, muchas universidades ofrecen cursos solo en lengua materna y a veces en un idioma extranjero, principalmente en inglés. Este texto presenta algunas recomendaciones sobre cómo hacer coincidir la misión internacional con una estrategia de desarrollo del lenguaje; además, se presenta una propuesta de cambio de paradigma de la visión “tradicional” a una “visión global” en la educación internacional, desde una perspectiva lingüística.

Palabras clave: acreditación, educación internacional, internacionalización, investigación conjunta, lengua extranjera.

International education

The concept of international education has long been associated with international student exchange programs. The vast majority of international offices in universities focus most of their efforts on sending students abroad and recruiting international students. Although the main purpose of education is to offer academic programs for young adults to become professionals, international education should not consider student mobility exclusively. The term is much broader than that. According to Jane Knight (2008: 33), international education refers to “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education.”

Using this definition as a reference, the international strategy should be part of all functions of a university; how to include this international strategy in all of these functions is still the main challenge.

The International Association of Universities, IAU, in 2003, surveyed its institutional members about the practices and priorities of internationalization at their institutions. The following is a summary of these findings.

1. Mobility of students and teachers is considered to be the most important reason for making internationalization a priority and is identified as the fastest growing aspect of internationalization.
2. Brain drain and the loss of cultural identity are seen as the greatest risks of internationalization.
3. Student, staff and teacher development; academic standards and quality assurance; and international research collaboration are ranked as the three most important benefits of internationalization.
4. Lack of financial support at the institutional level is identified as the most important obstacle for internationalization.
5. Distance education and the use of Information Technology, IT, are noted as key areas for new developments.
6. Faculty members are seen as the drivers for internationalization, more active than administrators and students.
7. While two-thirds of the institutions appear to have an internationalization policy/strategy in place, only about half of these institutions have budgets and a monitoring framework to support the implementation.
8. Rationales based on academic considerations for internationalization ranked higher than rationales based on political or economic considerations.
9. Intra-regional cooperation is the first geographic priority for Africa, Asia and Europe. Overall, Europe is the most favored region for collaboration.
10. Issues requiring attention include development cooperation, quality assurance/accreditation, funding, and research cooperation.

Looking back on these findings from 2003, it is evident that much progress has been made. Most universities now do have an international strategy and brain drain is no longer considered a threat but an asset in such a way that those who decide to stay in the country where they finished their education end up finding ways in which they might help their country of origin, for example setting up contracts between companies. Information technology is playing a key role in education and there are more students looking for international exchange opportunities.

The following is a summary of key aspects proposed in the Strategic Plan of an International Strategy in a Mexican University, consi-

dering internationalization as a transversal component present in all functions of any university: Instruction, Research and Extension.

Instruction and curriculum

A major revision and most probably redesign of academic programs needs to take place, especially in those universities that have fallen behind the latest trends and are still offering very rigid, full-time programs, in which students have few or no decisions to make about which, when or how many credits to take, and from which departments.

The new international strategy should at least consider a high percentage of flexible credits, on-line courses both from the original university and from other universities, both local and international; visiting professors and lecturers, bilingual courses and courses taught in languages other than the native tongue, as well as courses that cover different areas of knowledge from a global/international perspective.

Research

When it comes to research, the increasing number of research networks should also have a positive impact on international education. Universities should find ways to fund international joint research projects in order to promote collaboration. Joining an existing international research network or setting up a new one will also help the institution improve quality standards. Professors should keep contact with international peers and should be given opportunities and support to attend, or even better, speak at international conferences. Ideally, students should be involved in research; having both national and international students and professors works together in a research project will contribute to the impact of the research and will help raise university rankings.

Extension

The universities contribution to the community is always a priority, and the international strategy should also impact the way the institution serves society. Higher Education Institutions should find op-

portunities for collaboration with major national and international companies, governmental agencies and non-profit organizations both from the public and private sector. For example, all Memorandums of Understanding, MOUs, which are signed, should include an international component which may suggest the participation of international students in professional practices in all fields during their stay.

Other aspects of extension in which internationalization should play a major role include cultural and sports programs. The promotion of culture is a key factor to understanding and respecting ideas, values, and customs, and it is also crucial for learning more about the world and being able to identify and solve problems from different perspectives in a global approach. Universities need to have a fixed program for cultural exchange with partners around the world. Organizing exhibits, performances, workshops and conferences in partner institutions, for example, will contribute to the community's awareness of the impact of internationalization.

Foreign language competence and internationalization

The notion of having an international strategy suits universities in the first world well; however, in developing countries the challenges and hazards are harder to overcome. Back in 2003, the discussion of an international strategy seemed to take for granted the fact that an advanced level of foreign language competence is required from all members of a university community to succeed in academic work. There is evidence that universities from English speaking countries are the ones that benefit the most from their international strategy and are the ones that manage to recruit the largest number of international students. Institutions that offer programs in English might come next, and of course nowadays there is rising interest in universities in Asian and Latin-American countries, Brazil included. The trends suggest that North-American and European institutions have their eyes on Asian markets and vice versa; in the case of Latin-America, the target is also North-America and Europe, however, it does not seem to be the other way around, with the exception of Brazil.

With the above consideration, one issue which was not considered in 2003 as an obstacle to internationalization but that has come into

play in recent years is foreign language competence. All members of universities will play an important part in the international strategy.

Students

Ideally, students from all academic programs should acquire an upper-intermediate/advanced level of foreign language competence to have access to bilingual courses, instruction in a foreign language, exchange programs, international research opportunities, conferences and colloquia, electronic databases and professional opportunities with international companies.

This means that curriculum redesign should include language instruction in the early years of university along with different opportunities for international language certificates. The target level of competence for an undergraduate student to tackle international activities should be C1 using the Common European Framework of References (table 1).

Along with the inclusion of language development courses in all the programs, there must be a strategy to help in-coming international students develop native language competence for academic work. The vast majority of universities do this through a Language Institute in the university. In-coming students who do not have the required language competence are first immersed in language courses, usually for a full semester. Once they have acquired the competence of the desired level they register for formal instruction. Although this is a very attractive financial support for the university and a successful strategy for in-coming students, it also represents a very high increase in tuition fees. Students who need to have additional funds for a full semester just to achieve language competence might give up on the idea of enrolling in an exchange program. This makes the issue of having formal foreign language instruction from the beginning of their career extremely important.

Faculty

As stated by the findings of the IUA in 2003, "Faculty are seen to be the drivers for internationalization", this means that universities need

to offer foreign language training programs for Faculty. As expected in the international strategy, professors should be able to design and teach courses in at least one foreign language, to speak in international conferences, to do collaborative research and to write academic papers in a foreign language, granted, English.

It is usually a difficult task to convince Faculty to enroll in training and development programs since this might be seen as a threat to all academic work they are expected to do: lecture, teach, research, write, grade, plan, etc. The recommendation is to communicate the need for a successful international strategy with all its components so that internationalization becomes the means for all functions of university; in other words, making internationalization the institutional way of life. This communication process must be addressed both in a Top-Down and a Bottom-Up fashion. Internationalization must become a central part in the Mission and Vision statements. The President, Vice-presidents, Provosts, and Chancellors must be in the loop addressing the issue every way they can, but at the same time, those professors who have already benefitted from an international experience should be raising their voices in favor of internationalization. Along with this, a program of incentives or stipends for faculty who get language certificates might be of great help.

Executives and administration

It is also imperative that university leaders become fluent in a foreign language, since they are the ones who represent the institution in all kinds of settings. Because of the global trends in education, many international associations and university consortia have taken the lead towards international education. The Interamerican Organization of Higher Education, IOHE, International association of Universities, IAU, Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration, CONAHEC, or Asociación Mexicana para la Educación Internacional, AMPEI, are all networks of universities with a similar aim: to promote international collaboration and understanding through education. These organizations have annual conferences which discuss the latest trends in international education and set the path for international collaboration. University leaders who attend these sessions are expected to identify partners, negotiate agreements, and find funding oppor-

tunities and share knowledge on the state of the art of international education. These transactions are usually in English. The more limited their fluency in a foreign language the less likely they are to benefit from such opportunities. Universities should also have language development programs for administration and staff, starting from top executives to lower levels in the organizational pyramid. Those in charge of agreements and the legal department, extension and cultural promotion, deans and chairs, all should be a part of this strategy and enrol in language courses organized by the university. The best idea is to state foreign language competence in the position's profile, or even better, have a professional development plan for each position that includes certification of one or two foreign languages.

Conclusions

As has been discussed, the shift from a traditional approach of education to an open-border international perspective is already in place throughout the world. For universities to adapt soon to this transformation it is necessary to envision their international strategy in all levels, functions and actors of education.

The Strategic Plan, from the Mission and Vision statements should have internationalization as the main policy. A curriculum redesign is necessary to make academic programs more flexible and, at least to some extent, bilingual, and they should focus on broadening access through the use of Information Technology and Distance Education.

Faculty should become the driving force for internationalization which means they should become experts in the field. This expertise is achieved by the institutional training and development programs. The university must plan for an agenda of language development courses for faculty members.

Students should be able to participate in international experiences in different ways, either going abroad or with an in-house approach to internationalization. To guarantee their success, foreign language teaching should be central in all academic programs, always with a clear vision of international certification included.

This leaves a major task for language professionals, teachers, linguists, and language researchers, who will be responsible for design-

ning the programs for staff, faculty and student development, analyzing the best options for certification, designing a native language program for foreign students, and training and developing new language teachers.

Table 1.1
Global Scales.

Common European Framework of Reference for language competence

Proficient	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
User	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
User	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

User	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.
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