

41 Challenging Dominant Paradigms: Towards a Decolonised Approach to Internationalisation in Latin America

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper explores the complexities of internationalisation in Latin American higher education, focusing on the power dynamics that shape this phenomenon. While contemporary universities are under increasing pressure to embrace internationalisation for global competitiveness, dominant narratives often reflect Western perspectives and ignore the specificities of postcolonial contexts. This essay explores the evolving concept of internationalisation, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and decolonised approach that takes into account shifting global dynamics and lingering colonial legacies. Critical voices from Latin America emerge, critically examining internationalisation as a new form of colonialism and advocating for the recognition and inclusion of indigenous knowledge and practices. However, these critical perspectives struggle to gain traction and influence policy. The conclusion highlights the challenges faced by Latin American institutions in managing internationalisation and calls for grassroots approaches that empower those directly affected by the process.

Full paper

Contemporary universities are increasingly called upon to promote internationalisation in the pursuit of global competitiveness and quality education (Altbach, 2006; de Wit, 2020; Knight, 2004; Thondhlana et al, 2021). However, these calls often emanate from Western imaginaries and influential organisations that shape policy debates and decision-making processes (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021; Buckner, 2022). Such narratives tend to overlook the historical specificities of postcolonial contexts and perpetuate existing power imbalances (Shahjahan, 2016; Stein & Andreotti, 2016; Stein, 2021).

There is a lack of research that acknowledges the historical legacies of colonisation in the internationalisation efforts of countries in the so-called Global South (Majee and Ress, 2018). The colonial condition, characterised by the subjugation and marginalisation of indigenous communities and Afro-descendant peoples, continues to shape the challenges faced by former colonised countries (McEwan, 2018). Postcolonial studies reveal how Western countries promote their knowledge systems and narratives as universal and superior, with internationalisation serving as a manifestation of these power dynamics (Heleta & Chasi, 2022; Lander, 2013; Quijano, 2002). There is therefore a need to critically interrogate internationalisation, taking into account both the changing world order and enduring colonial legacies (Shein, 2021; author, 2021).

The evolving concept of internationalisation

The concept of internationalisation in higher education has evolved over time, with different perspectives and definitions emerging (Knight, 2004; de Wit, 2019). While some define it as the integration of a global dimension into education, others emphasise its overarching public purpose (de Wit, 2020). However, these dominant definitions still reflect Western perspectives and market-driven higher education systems.

In Latin America, internationalisation is seen as essential to improve research, programme quality and institutional development (Gacel-Ávila, 2021). Policy reports often offer a positive but depoliticised view of internationalisation, with recommendations that may not align with institutional commitments

In response to these challenges, more than twenty years ago, UNESCO pointed to the need for solidarity in international cooperation, with an emphasis on South-South cooperation; the need to create training programmes in developing countries and centres of excellence. Both academic literature (Ress, 2018; Thondhlana et al. 2021) and

international organisations (OECD, 2009; World Bank, 2002) have also highlighted the importance of South-South cooperation and/or internationalisation domestically, especially in less developed regions.

However, concerns remain as to whether these initiatives sufficiently promote the agency of less developed countries and regions and sustain benefits and developments over time (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2023).

Critical voices on internationalisation emerging from Latin America

Critical voices on internationalisation have also emerged. These narratives can be divided into two. The first critically examines internationalisation as a new form of colonialism driven by global market forces and neoliberal ideologies. It raises concerns about global rankings, brain drain, imported theories and the marketization of higher education, while emphasizing the need for equity, empowerment of marginalized groups and South-South cooperation. Concrete policies and strategies to address internationalisation and colonial legacies are often lacking in this narrative (Author, 2022).

The second narrative focuses on the decolonisation of universities in the context of internationalisation. It emphasises the recognition and inclusion of indigenous knowledge and practices to challenge the Western-centric curriculum and promote local knowledges. Some universities have implemented policies and practices to make visible indigenous knowledges and practices. However, the visibility of these initiatives is often limited to regional academic circles (Mato, 2022; Perales Franco & McCowan, 2021).

Both narratives contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by Latin American higher education institutions in engaging with internationalisation (Author, 2021; Leask, 2021).

Conclusion

Competing narratives of internationalisation coexist in Latin America. Traditional normative perspectives influenced by Western ideologies dominate the region, while critical voices challenge internationalisation as a new form of colonialism (Author, 2022; Author and others, 2017). However, these critical perspectives struggle to gain mainstream recognition and influence policy.

Internationalisation in Latin America faces complex challenges due to structural inequalities inherited from the colonial past. While these challenges have been recognised in the literature, practical implementation tends to reinforce a normative view of internationalisation that disadvantages most institutions in the region. Stratification and the inability to meet globalised indicators hinder progress in internationalisation efforts.

Inspired by Appadurai (2000) and his idea of globalisation from below, or 'grassroots globalisation', it is suggested here that internationalisation needs to be driven outside supranational agencies or national governments - which have characteristically privileged global competition and economic growth - in order to involve those directly affected by internationalisation processes.

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