Rethinking the Internationalization of Higher Education in the Global South[1] in the Wake of a Pandemic[2]

By Telma Nunes Gimenez, Londrina State University, Brazil

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Peters, Rizvi 2020)

As an academic in Brazil, in recent years I have witnessed the increasing interest in the internationalization of higher education, a theme that has generated changes in institutional strategic plans, often resulting in policies aimed at strengthening this process that gained momentum with the growing marketization of higher education. This has resulted in the adoption, to a large extent, of the logic that has guided universities in the so-called *developed world*, operating from a competitive ethos that is reinforced by the publication of international rankings, proudly displayed on institutional websites as indicators of excellence.

However, the pressure to adhere to international standards is putting a considerable strain on the already frail system of state funded universities in our country, constantly under attack by those who would like to see even more competition at a national level, via the privatization of higher education. In their battle for survival, those universities (which, in general,

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[1] Global South does not denote a geographical location, but rather gives visibility to parts of the world that have been historically have been dominated often considered inferior by the Global North. According to Leal (2020) "It embraces those subjects and oppressed by the injustices caused by the main modes of domination since the 17th century, precisely: capitalist exploitation and racial and sexual discrimination".

[2] Some parts of this text are reproduced from the foreword to the book "Language policies and internationalization of higher education institutions (HEI) in Brazil: contributions from applied linguists", organized by Calvo, El Kadri and Passoni (forthcoming).

are better positioned in the international rankings than their private counterparts) run the risk of reinforcing standards and pushing their objectives towards more compliance with *quality assurance* defined elsewhere, even if their mission statements reveal a closer proximity to values such as the promotion of social and cultural development, mutual and intercultural understanding, citizenship, social and community development (Guimarães et al, 2020). The mismatch between mission statements and practical actions is a reality, and one needs only to look at the internationalization plans of the universities to confirm that ideal and real are too different things. While those statements may be indeed the wish for more horizontal relationships, the funding schemes and external pressures pull in another direction, stirring competition.

By trying to *play the game*, universities run the risk of endorsing competition as a driving force of professional training, knowledge generation and dissemination, in a world that is demanding more cooperation and collaborative efforts to solve common problems, as the covid-19 pandemic is teaching us.

As in many parts of the world, internationalization in universities in the Global South has been carried out by focusing on two main dimensions: i) research and publications and ii) student and staff mobility, and both have been deeply affected by the surfacing of many problems exposed by the rapid dissemination of the disease. We are now in countries struggling to deal with (un)satisfactory solutions to mitigate the tremendous impact it has caused on many aspects of life, not to mention the suffering it is provoking, with devastating consequences to human beings, especially those underprivileged and marginalized.

The universities in the Global South may face these problems in more dramatic ways, as they are pulled from the commitment to local development and pushed towards the international agenda dictated by institutions with longer traditions and stronger reputation as centers of excellence. Reconciling the efforts to be responsive to local demands for greater democratization and inclusion and the need to align practices of meritocracy and selection with international standards (i.e. Global North standards) is not an easy task and one that may require deeper reflection on its potential effects.

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Vavrus and Pekol (2015, p. 5) argue that "most internationalization activities are driven by a combination of economic and social imperatives", especially in the case of fee-paying universities who see students from abroad and joint ventures with wealthy governments, organizations and alumni associated with financial benefits[3]. They proceed affirming that according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

> higher education institutions are expected to develop greater international awareness among students and faculty as well as produce graduates with sufficient intercultural abilities to compete in the global economy.

Competitiveness in the global market seems to be a keyword and both social and economic imperatives can explain this pressure, according to those authors. If, on one hand, competition drives internationalization efforts, other motivations may be playing a role and it is important to acknowledge local recontextualizations, especially with reference to universities that give equal weight to their social outreach. The model that is appropriate for universities in the developed North may not suit the interests of universities in the South. As Menezes de Souza (2019, p. 21) points out in relation to mobility programs, "the university of the South, locked in a relation of coloniality with its counterparts in the North, by responding to these 'market' demands of the North (competence in English included) confirm themselves as business-model universities seeking and imposing efficiency".

A collaborative perspective, however, would focus on how to create solidarity by connecting with other institutions in different parts of the world in order to address common issues. If the education of professionals as global citizens can benefit from curriculum innovation, inspired by the experiences of other higher education institutions abroad, internationalization efforts should be directed to identifying those potential partners and finding ways of sharing resources and expertise in the languages that make this possible. If knowledge production and dissemination can be enhanced by joint research projects and collaborative

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[3] The concern with the financial difficulties of the higher education sector is already on the radar screen of institutions like the World Bank published a policy paper entitled " The COVID-19 Crisis Response: Supporting tertiary education for continuity, adaptation, and innovation", available at < http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/621991586463915490/WB-Tertiary-Ed-and-Covid-19-Crisis-for-public-use-April-9.pdf>

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work, internationalization efforts should be directed at creating opportunities for them to happen. Community problems are best addressed by learning about how other communities have dealt with similar issues, and internationalization efforts should be directed at them. Granting that the internationalization model is skewed towards research dissemination and this turns out to be the paradigm for the other pillars of the HEI mission, the danger of promoting a one size fits all cannot be ignored.

With the pandemic, the tensions between competition and collaboration have been exposed and universities are now challenged to rethink what purposes internationalization will serve. I would like to focus on teaching, or professional preparation as one aspect that will deserve attention.

Teaching for global mobility or global solidarity?

One of the most popular interpretations of internationalization has been *student mobility*, in great part due to a massive undergraduate student outgoing mobility program in the country supported by the Brazilian Federal Government (Science without Borders, 2011-2017), that during that period sent approximately 100,000 students abroad. While that program did, in fact, raise the interest in learning foreign languages (especially English) its end drained the physical exchanges, that are now limited to the financial resources available according to parameters established by the funding agencies. Many institutions decided to redirect their efforts towards the so-called internationalization "at home", meaning that they would develop activities on campus within an international dimension, by teaching in English, changing the curricula and developing online collaborative classes.

As workers around the globe started to work from home due to the pandemic, we read in the papers that many organizations (both private and public) are now considering to make this type of labor relation permanent, reinforcing anxieties about the future. In this uncertain times, HEI have to ponder that the education of future generations of professionals will have to take this reality into account. This means acknowledging that competition will be fierce, because of the enlarged pool of potential workers. Many professionals will integrate a global workforce and their skills will be measured by international standards which will guide the recruitment

process. If it does not matter where you live, the pull will be towards meeting the expectations of your employers, or worse still, it will depend on your capacity to sell your services.

How are higher education institutions going to respond to the exacerbation of competition in such a milieu? A collective paper entitled "Reimagining the new pedagogical possibilities for universities post-Covid-19", put together by almost three dozen authors, invite reflections from a myriad of perspectives on how professional education will be carried out. For instance, Radhika Gorur (2020, p.5) states that

> Universities have warm and fuzzy mission statements about solving global issues, but these ideas disappear from the nitty-gritty of disciplinary curricula. What is required is more than just making ethics and social justice part of every curriculum; we need to sharpen our understanding of how our actions in every field – even our day-to-day lives – affect humankind.

This quote highlights the need for ethical education that recognizes interconnectedness and challenges a competitive mindset. Despite not being new, this imperative has been sharpened by the current crisis that has pushed for remote teaching and learning under asymmetrical circumstances that are likely to deepen inequalities.

Higher education institutions face the challenge of addressing two competing perspectives. Both competition and collaboration (or solidarity) are likely to be part of a post-pandemic scenario. If internationalization is a strategy to better prepare professionals to deal with competition, this preparation requires critical pedagogies that raise awareness about who is excluded and on what grounds. An education that swings the scale towards solidarity is more likely to transform competition into collaboration.

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Telma Nunes Gimenez is Senior Professor at Londrina State University (UEL) at the Postgraduate Programme in Language Studies. She holds a PhD from Lancaster University (1994) where she developed a study on teacher education, complemented by postdoctoral research at the Institute of Education/UCL (2014) on globalization and English as a Lingua Franca. After many years of experience as a teacher educator and coordinator of projects with schoolteachers, now she supervises research on English language teacher education and language policies.