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RETHINKING LINGUISTIC NORMS IN GLOBAL ACADEMIA: THE ROLE OF CULTURE AND AI IN SHAPING THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract. The drive for internationalization in higher education has accelerated over the past two decades, reshaping how universities teach, collaborate, and move knowledge across borders. Central to this transformation are not only institutional partnerships and student exchange programs, but the more subtle and powerful roles of language, literature, and culture. These elements shape how students understand the world and how universities construct global learning spaces.

English has taken on the role of academic *lingua franca*, simplifying international communication. Yet, its dominance raises complex questions about equity, inclusion, and cultural diversity. At the same time, we're witnessing rapid developments in artificial intelligence (AI) that promise to radically alter how we think about access, communication, and language learning in higher education. Against this backdrop, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has set a clear goal: by 2030, at least 20% of graduates should have studied or trained abroad (European University Association, 2023). To reach this target, we must reconsider whether English alone can carry the weight of internationalization, or whether a more multilingual, AI-supported approach is needed.

Keywords: Internationalisation, Artificial Intelligence, EHEA

The Rise of English: Efficient but Exclusive?

There's no denying that English has helped open academic doors. It allows students from vastly different regions to meet on common linguistic ground and has become the go-to language for scientific publishing, international conferences, and cross-border curricula. Universities have responded to this demand by rapidly expanding English-medium instruction (EMI) programs, even in countries where English isn't a national language.

But while this model offers clear advantages, it also brings unintended consequences. For many students, especially from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the expectation to master academic English can become a gatekeeper rather than a bridge. It can marginalise those who don't have access to quality English instruction,

and it often reinforces a cultural hierarchy where Anglophone perspectives dominate scholarly discourse.

Linguist Robert Phillipson describes this as a form of “linguistic imperialism,” where English-speaking norms and institutions extend their influence globally, often at the expense of local languages and knowledge systems (Phillipson, 2009). This tension forces us to ask: is the reliance on English helping internationalisation, or is it narrowing the field?

The Value of Local Languages: Beyond Token Inclusion

While English might remain the primary international academic language for now, it’s essential to consider the role that local and regional languages can play—especially in fostering bilateral or regional mobility.

There are many successful examples: Spanish supports exchanges across Latin America and Spain, and French underpins academic mobility throughout Francophone Africa and parts of Europe. These shared linguistic spaces make academic exchange more accessible, often connecting students with cultural and intellectual traditions that feel more relevant and personal.

Moreover, studying in a local language allows for richer immersion. It deepens cultural understanding and fosters longer-lasting academic ties. If universities and governments supported local-language programs as much as they invest in EMI, we might see a more equitable distribution of mobility—one that doesn’t depend so heavily on English proficiency.

AI as a Game-Changer: Not a Threat, but a Tool

Just as the language debate reaches a critical point, AI is emerging as a powerful force that could shift the balance. We’re already seeing real-time translation tools becoming more accurate and accessible. Apps like DeepL and Google Translate, once unreliable for academic work, are now integrated into classrooms and support services. Their quality isn’t perfect, but it’s improving fast.

AI isn’t just helping with translation, it’s reshaping how students learn languages, prepare for mobility, and engage with academic content. Adaptive platforms like Duolingo use AI to tailor lessons to individual needs, speeding up language acquisition. Chatbots and writing tools can assist non-native speakers in structuring essays or emails, reducing the anxiety that often comes with academic communication in a second language.

In short, AI has the potential to level the playing field. It can support multilingual education without placing the full burden of fluency on students. It can help universities offer courses in multiple languages, supported by real-time translation and cross-linguistic feedback. For institutions struggling to increase student mobility, especially among underrepresented groups, AI could be the missing link.

Toward the EHEA 2030 Target: New Thinking Needed

The EHEA’s goal of 20% mobility by 2030 is ambitious but achievable if institutions are willing to rethink the mechanics of internationalisation. A purely English-based model, while efficient, will not be enough to meet this target in an inclusive way.

What’s needed is a shift toward multilingual mobility pathways, supported by digital tools and tailored preparation. AI can support language learning, cultural training, and even virtual mobility where students engage in international experiences without leaving their home institutions. These models are especially crucial in a post-pandemic world where not every student can afford (or wants) to study abroad long-term.

Universities can also invest more in exchange programs between countries that share a common language or cultural ties. These kinds of bilateral partnerships can be more meaningful, often resulting in deeper academic collaboration and long-term networks. AI can support these efforts by easing translation, automating paperwork, and helping students adapt quickly to new environments.

Conclusion

Language, literature, and culture are not just accessories in higher education internationalization, they're its core. While English has allowed institutions to scale their global reach, its dominance also creates blind spots and barriers. Local languages, when treated not as nostalgic remnants but as assets, can play a powerful role in broadening access and making mobility more equitable.

AI, meanwhile, offers a practical and scalable way to support this shift. Rather than fearing that it will replace human learning, universities should embrace AI as a tool to reduce friction, personalise education, and support students as they navigate new linguistic and cultural spaces.

If Europe truly wants to meet its 2030 mobility target, it must move beyond English-only thinking. The future of internationalisation is multilingual, digitally enabled, and culturally inclusive. And with the right policies and tools in place, it's well within reach.

References

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