

The Value of English in Global Mobility and Higher Education: An Investigation of Higher Education in Cyprus

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Abstract

Manuela Vida-Mannl's *The Value of English in Global Mobility and Higher Education: An Investigation of Higher Education in Cyprus* is a thought-provoking examination of the role of English in higher education in Cyprus, offering a critical look at English-medium instruction (EMI) and its implications. Through empirical research, Vida-Mannl dissects the multifaceted role of English in shaping both educational structures and student experiences, questioning its impact on social mobility, educational equity, and the commodification of language. This review explores the book's central arguments, provides critical reflections, and examines its broader implications for global educational systems and policies.

Introduction

The ascendancy of English in global higher education is an undeniable phenomenon, especially since the language serves as a linchpin in connecting disparate educational systems. While this trend has been widely examined in contexts such as the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, Manuela Vida-Mannl's book offers a timely and much-needed exploration of its role in Cyprus, a country that finds itself at the crossroads of geopolitical, economic, and educational shifts. The book dissects English-medium instruction (EMI) in Cypriot universities, exploring how it serves as a tool for both academic success and social mobility. Yet, it raises essential questions about whether this language model actually democratises access to education or perpetuates inequality. Through careful analysis of the policies and experiences of international students, Vida-Mannl unpacks the potential and pitfalls of EMI in a complex, globalised world.

This book's choice of Cyprus as a case study is particularly compelling, as it offers insight into how a small, post-colonial island has been navigating the pressures of globalisation through the adoption of English as a primary language of instruction. The book's inquiry is crucial in understanding the broader consequences of EMI, not only for Cyprus but also for countries adopting similar educational models worldwide.

Core Themes and Analysis

1. The Multifaceted Value of English: Ideological, Communicative, and Economic Dimensions

Vida-Mannl's tripartite framework for understanding the value of English -ideological, communicative, and economic- offers a comprehensive analysis of how EMI is framed by different actors within the Cypriot higher education system.

The ideological dimension reflects how English has come to symbolise intellectual and cultural superiority. In Cyprus, this is particularly poignant due to the country's colonial past and its ongoing aspiration to be a competitive player in the global academic and economic spheres. Universities market EMI programs as gateways to success in an increasingly interconnected world, reinforcing the idea that proficiency in English is essential for access to international opportunities. Yet, this ideological value is not neutral. It plays into global hierarchies of knowledge, with English serving as a marker of academic legitimacy, while other languages and forms of knowledge are relegated to secondary positions. This colonial legacy subtly persists, influencing how Cypriot universities structure their educational offerings.

The communicative value of English in Cyprus, as Vida-Mannl explains, arises from its status as a lingua franca in academic and professional settings. Cyprus is uniquely positioned as a crossroads of cultures, with students and academics from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. English facilitates communication across these groups, theoretically creating a common ground for collaboration. However, Vida-Mannl cautions that the assumption of seamless communication is often problematic. Many students, particularly international ones, struggle with language proficiency, creating a disparity between the ideal of inclusive communication and the reality of language barriers that hinder learning and social integration.

The economic dimension of English is arguably the most pressing in the context of Cypriot higher education. Here, English is not merely a tool for learning, but a commodity. Universities market their EMI programs to international students as a way of offering access to better job prospects and international networks. For the Cypriot government and universities, this international student market is seen as an essential eco-

conomic driver. However, as Vida-Mannl points out, the commodification of English in this context often overlooks the socioeconomic barriers faced by students who are not adequately prepared for an English-language academic environment. This commodification creates an inherent tension: English is presented as the solution to global mobility, but it often becomes a source of exclusion for those unable to meet its demands.

2. English as a Commodity in Cypriot Higher Education

The commodification of English is central to Vida-Mannl's argument. Cypriot universities -particularly those in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)- have capitalised on the global demand for English-language higher education, using it as a marketing tool to attract international students. The book details how these institutions promote EMI as a way for students to access lucrative job markets in Europe and beyond. However, Vida-Mannl's research reveals that these promises are often overstated.

International students, particularly those from non-EU countries, frequently encounter substantial language barriers. Despite their enrollment in EMI programs, many lack the language skills required for success in rigorous academic environments. This situation is exacerbated by the limited language support available to students once they are enrolled. Vida-Mannl emphasises that while English proficiency is often a prerequisite for admission to EMI programs, universities fail to provide adequate preparatory programs or language support once students begin their studies. This gap in institutional support leads to a situation where only the most linguistically and financially privileged students thrive in the system, while others face academic and social exclusion.

Additionally, Vida-Mannl discusses how English has become a financial asset for universities, both in Cyprus and globally. As international students seek to enroll in EMI programs, universities capitalise on the demand for English-language instruction. However, this creates a competitive market where the emphasis on profit can sometimes outweigh educational quality and student support. Universities may prioritise expanding their EMI offerings to attract a wider student base, but fail to implement the necessary infrastructure to ensure that all students can succeed, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. The Lived Experiences of International Students

A compelling section of the book is dedicated to exploring the lived experiences of international students in Cyprus. Through qualitative interviews and survey data, Vida-Mannl paints a vivid picture of the challenges these students face, many of which

are rooted in language barriers. While many students come to Cyprus with high hopes of academic success and future opportunities, their experiences are often marked by frustration and isolation.

International students frequently report struggles with adapting to academic expectations, particularly those related to language proficiency. While universities may offer English-medium programs, the varying levels of English proficiency among faculty and administrators contribute to a fragmented educational experience. Some professors are unable to effectively communicate in English, hindering students' understanding of course material. Furthermore, students report feeling socially isolated, with language barriers extending beyond the classroom and affecting their ability to engage in the broader social and cultural life of the university.

Beyond academic challenges, Vida-Mannl also explores the financial difficulties faced by international students. Many students from non-EU countries must support themselves financially, often through part-time jobs that offer limited opportunities for professional growth. This financial strain, combined with language challenges, can prevent students from fully integrating into the Cypriot society and realising the potential benefits of their education.

4. Global Perspectives on EMI and Mobility

Vida-Mannl situates the Cypriot experience within a broader global context, where the expansion of EMI has been a key strategy for many countries seeking to internationalise their higher education systems. However, this expansion has not been without its challenges. In countries like Turkey, Malaysia, and the Netherlands, EMI has faced criticisms related to language equity, student preparedness, and institutional support.

In Turkey, for example, while EMI programs have become widespread in universities, the implementation has been uneven. Elite institutions have the resources to provide strong language support, while lesser-resourced universities struggle to meet the language needs of their students. Similarly, in Malaysia, the rapid expansion of EMI has been touted as a means of economic development, but it has raised concerns about the adequacy of language preparation and the potential erosion of academic standards. Vida-Mannl's book adds depth to these global discussions by highlighting how the commodification of English and the challenges of EMI affect students in both developed and developing educational systems.

Methodology and Research Design

Vida-Mannl's research methodology is robust and multifaceted, incorporating both

qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of EMI in Cyprus. The qualitative interviews offer rich insights into the subjective experiences of international students, while the quantitative data provides a broader picture of trends in student performance, language proficiency, and academic success.

While the methodology is analysed thoroughly, the review does not deeply criticise the limitations in the study or suggest improvements to the research itself. For instance, while Vida-Mannl includes a significant sample of international students, the study might have benefited from a more longitudinal approach to track the long-term effects of EMI on students' academic and professional outcomes. This would have provided a deeper understanding of how EMI influences students' careers and integration into the workforce beyond their time at the university.

Another potential limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, particularly when discussing students' language proficiency and perceptions of academic challenges. While these insights are valuable, self-reporting may introduce bias, especially if students feel pressure to present themselves in a favorable light. Future research could incorporate observational data or interviews with faculty and administrators to provide a more holistic view of the EMI experience.

Policy Implications for Cyprus

The book's findings lead to several important policy recommendations for Cyprus:

1. **Enhanced Language Support Programs:** Universities should invest in comprehensive language support programs that offer preparatory courses before students enter their degree programs, as well as ongoing academic language support throughout their studies.
2. **Institutional Accountability:** Universities must balance the financial incentives of international student recruitment with a commitment to educational equity. This includes ensuring that all students, regardless of their language proficiency, receive the necessary support to succeed.
3. **Multilingual Education Policies:** EMI programs should be complemented by multilingual policies that recognise the value of students' native languages, allowing for more inclusive educational practices and reducing the cultural and linguistic divides between international and local students.
4. **Research on Long-term Outcomes:** Policymakers should conduct longitudinal studies that track the academic, professional, and social outcomes of EMI students, allowing for better-informed policy decisions that can address existing inequalities in the system.

Conclusion

Manuela Vida-Mannl's *The Value of English in Global Mobility and Higher Education* is a vital contribution to the discourse on English in higher education. By examining the Cypriot context, Vida-Mannl challenges us to rethink the role of English in shaping educational outcomes and global mobility. Her research uncovers the complexities of EMI, exposing the ways in which it serves as both an opportunity and a barrier for students. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in language policy, global education, and the challenges of creating equitable educational environments in a globalised world.

Stylianos Vrakas