



# The Role of the University in the Integration of International Border Territories: The Case of the Universidade Federal da Integração Latino-Americana (Unila)

O Papel da Universidade na Integração dos Territórios Fronteiriços Internacionais: O Caso da Universidade Federal da Integração Latino-Americana (Unila)

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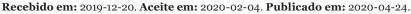
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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to understand the social role played by the University in the international integration of border territories. The following questions guided the study: what are the relations of belonging built by the University's internal actors?; what strategy can collaborate with the integration of the University in the border territory?. The study focused on the case of the *Universidade Federal da Integração Latino-americana* (Unila), founded in 2010 with the purpose of promoting regional integration at an international level, and located in a triple border region between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. Results portray three phases through which integration into the territory constituted itself, which reflect the special contribution of university extension/outreach: strangeness in the territory; identity construction; and belonging relationships.

Keywords: higher education, regional integration, university extension, Unila

#### Resumo

O propósito deste artigo é compreender o papel social que a universidade pode exercer na integração internacional de territórios de fronteira. As questões que orientam esta pesquisa são: quais as relações de pertencimento construídas pelos atores internos da universidade?, qual estratégia pode colaborar com a integração da universidade no território de fronteira?. O estudo considerou o caso da Universidade Federal da Integração Latino-Americana (Unila), fundada em 2010, com a finalidade de integração regional a nível internacional e localizada em uma região de tríplice fronteira entre as cidades de Foz do Iguaçu (Brasil), Puerto Iguazú (Argentina) e Ciudad del Este (Paraguai). Os principais resultados retratam três fases pela qual se constituiu a integração ao território, que refletem a importante contribuição da extensão universitária: estranhamentos no território; construção identitária; e relações de pertencimento.

Palavras-chave: educação superior, integração regional, extensão universitária, Unila

There is potential to build a relationship between a University campus and a city. This relationship can be truncated or synergistic. Costa (2003) affirms that such relationship refers to a complex process, since both the University and the city enjoy some autonomy and some privileges. Thus, recurrently, they do not converge, nor do they help to bring together the involved interests. The author also states that "there is nothing to do as long as one reality and the other are not the same" (Costa, 2003, p. 210, own translation).

The influence of the city in the concretization and consolidation of the project of young public universities and the potential to build a virtuous and integrating relationship between the university campus, the city and the international frontier are aspects that justify the development of this article. The identified research gap is supported by the lack of literature on the creation of universities with specific purposes of regional integration at an international level, as well as their relationship with the territory of the city in which they were installed.

Therefore, it would be worth questioning whether cities really want to host universities and what would be the roles played by these institutions in promoting integration with these border territories, especially at an international level. The following questions guide this study: what are the relations of belonging built by the University's internal actors?; what strategy can collaborate with the integration of the university in the border territory?. Given this context, the objective of this article is **to understand the social role that the University can play in the international integration of border territories.** 

This research considers the case of the Universidade Federal da Integração Latino-Americana (Unila). This choice is justified because it is an intrinsic, authentic, exemplary case of a relevant public university, founded on Latin American principles of regional integration (Corazza, 2010; Ricobom, 2010a, 2010b; Rosevics, 2020), internationalization of higher education (Abba, 2018; Brackmann, 2013), interculturality and multilingualism (Araújo, 2014; Munoz, 2016), as well as counter-hegemony in regard to dominant tendencies grounded on capitalist relations (Alexandre, 2015).

Furthermore, it seems significant to consider that Unila is installed in the city of Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil), located on the border with the cities of Puerto Iguazú (Argentina) and Ciudad del Este (Paraguay). Finally, it refers to a young university, founded in 2010, that comprises over a third of international students, coming from countries that make up Latin America and the Caribbean (INEP/MEC, 2018).

The article is organized as it follows. After this introduction, it addresses the theoretical background that gives support to the purpose of the study and data analyses. After, it presents the methodological path that guided the research. It follows with the exposition and discussion of results, and it ends with the final remarks and references.

## **Theoretical Background**

The physical spaces in which university institutions are located have been an object of attention and study since the end of the 19th century and to some extent dialogue with the "Ivory Tower" metaphor of which these institutions came to be referred over time. While universities from European countries were originally developed in imposing historic buildings at cities with great attractiveness, in the United States they emerged at large,

distant campuses. The dominant understanding, in the latter case, was that such distance would contribute to the neutralization of influences that could compromise students' concentration and their full dedication to studies (Pinto & Buffa, 2009; Buffa & Pinto, 2016).

In theory, universities should bring together characteristics adjusted to the promotion of teaching, research, and extension/outreach, in addition to favoring curiosity and thinking. But given the multiplicity of functions attributed to these institutions contemporarily (Santos, 2013) – a reflection of a series of normative orders and cultural logics, with different prescriptions to action, that define their contexts – more and more the physical spaces of university institutions gain complexity and require high investments for the construction of buildings and subsequent maintenance. Furthermore, the demand for academic spaces oriented towards teaching and learning (classrooms, laboratories, multi-media libraries, incubators, etc.), and other imposed needs, such as food services, accommodation, public transport, justifying the existence of "university cities".

The reference to university territories – without any explicit geographical delimitation or time frame – represents the concept of networked territory (Godoi, 2017). Santos (1994) defines territory as a geographical space (used territory) mediated between the world and the society, which can be organized horizontally (bringing neighbors side by side) and vertically (bringing together distant neighbors by forms and/or social processes in a network format).

The mention of university territory as a place, in turn, is evidenced by the human presence; it materializes the existence of a real or possible everyday life that goes beyond the concept of territorial extension and its limits. In this line of thought, the author (1994) defines place as a tangible territory in which actions are territorialized, that is, territory asserts itself from the occurrence of daily activities, socially developed.

The university territory, understood as a place, gains intimate characteristics, acquires different features and understandings, in line with the experience of each user. For a university community, such recognition occurs when the people who live there have intimate, sociable experiences. It also occurs when those experiences become possible and go beyond the mere physical aspect of the territory. This territory becomes a place from the moment the space is recognized by its own community (Buffa & Pinto, 2016; Godoi, 2017).

In Brazil, the first universities, created in the decades of 1920 and 1930, were strongly influenced by the Europe and the United States' university cultures. As a result of economic and political options, both "models" – universities located in urban centers and in more remote locations – can be found (Pinto & Buffa, 2009). Even when maintained away from urban centers, Brazilian universities and their populations depend on products and services offered by the city, such asfood, housing, public transportation, health, culture, among others.

Because of this economic dependence, and the contribution that universities might give in terms of cultural and social development, one can argue that cities benefit from universities (Prolo & Lima, 2019). However, despite the potential of building a virtuous, integrating relationship between a university campus and a city, many issues might emerge from such relationship.

# Methodology

The study consolidated in the article was guided by the qualitative approach (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012; Stake, 2016), and resulted from a combination of typical resources of bibliographic, documentary and field research.

The field research mobilized resources for semi-scripted interviews, both in individual and group formats. All interviews were conducted in person at Unila, in four stages: March 2014, August 2015, October 2015, and May 2017. This circular stages movement that characterized the collection, the treatment and the interpretation of data was significantly contributive to understanding a new and complex reality, averse to any attempt to create linear narratives (Godoi & Mattos, 2010; Stake, 2005), as required by the qualitative approach. The field research involved 65 people: 31 students, 26 faculty members, and eight administrative staff members, from eleven nationalities – and respected all ethical principles in research involving human beings, according to the guidelines of Brazilian Resolution No. 510/2016.

The collected data were analyzed using a mixed approach. Interpretation was based on consulted literature (deductive approach) and field research data (inductive approach) (Tello-Rozas, Pozzebon, & Mailhot, 2015). This procedure contributes to insights derived from the interpretive exercise of data (Gaskell, 2008; Godoi & Mattos, 2010). The data were processed using the software Atlas/ti. The period from 2010 to 2017 was the chronological reference for grouping the data.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

Unila was created in 2010, at a time when the Brazilian federal government gave centrality to South-South relations on its foreign policy, and particularly to the strengthening of relations between Brazil and other Latin American countries (Prolo & Lima, 2019).

The decision of implementing Unila in the city of Foz do Iguaçu reflected the combination of a series of factors, such as the following, that have been identified by Prolo and Lima (2019):

- Foz do Iguaçu is bordered by two countries (Argentina and Paraguay), which favors the political
  approximation between national governments based in Brasília, Buenos Aires and Asunción, and
  enables the promotion of regional integration;
- 2. The state of Paraná, where Foz do Iguaçu is located, presents diverse ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds, evidenced by the presence of more than 82 nationalities. This eclecticism would facilitate the integration of citizens with international scholars;
- 3. Foz do Iguaçu promotes a recognized professional tourism, capable of attracting a high number of national and international tourists, which, in theory, gives it a cosmopolitan character that would facilitate the acceptance of a university with Unila's characteristics;
- 4. The University would reinforce the work carried out by Itaipu Binacional and Itaipu Technological Park, contributing to the Foz do Iguaçu's recognition as a technological center.

5. Given the complexity and tensions of a frontier city, which tends to be sensitive to the emergence of illegal activities, the presence of academics willing to drive project capable of involving different countries could help distending relations.

Despite this potential, the integration between Unila and the city of Foz do Iguaçu has not been as smooth as its ideals expected. Due to the complexity of the integration process, there are several ways to understand it.

Based on the data, it was possible to map, with some security, the territorial and social insertion of the University into the city. Initially, the themes that stood out were identified and grouped into subcategories and categories.

The subcategories refer to the interpretation produced from the mixed approach, considering the empirical data from the interpretation of the interviews. Specifically, eight categories were mapped: 1. New Campus; 2. University Foundation; 3. Unila Downtown and Student Accommodation; 4. Itaipu Technological Park, 5. University Garden, 6. Housing 1, 7. University Extension Projects; and 8. Medical Course Offering.

These subcategories qualify the central dynamics (categories) that portray the way in which Unila is constituted in relation to the city and the international frontier, being: 1. Strangeness in the territory; 2. Identity construction; and 3. Belonging relations. Dynamics is understood as something that is in motion, which due to internal and/or external forces tends to undergo changes in time. In this way, the dynamic is a panoramic view and only makes sense for the period in which the field research took place. In the sequence, the results are particularized from Figure 1:

**Figure 1**UNILA's Territorial and Social Insertion in the City of Foz do Iguaçu and its Border - 2010 to 2017

Categories (central dynamics)	Subcategories
Strangeness in the Territory	New Campus
	University Foundation
	UNILA Downtown and Student Housing
Identity Construction	Itaipu Technological Park (Parque Tecnolófico Itaipu) – PTI
	University Garden (Jardim Universitário) – JU
	Housing 1
Belonging relationships	Projects of University Extension
	Local Interest Course Offering

Note. The authors, 2020.

The concepts of place and territory were the basis for the interpretation of the material resulting from documentary and field research, taking into account the central dynamics Strangeness in Territory, Identity Construction and Belonging Relationships, in addition to considering the relationships that bring university distance and city closer together.

The *Strangeness in the Territory* dynamic brings up divergent intentions of groups, social class and subjects materialized in space (Lefebvre, 2013). This conflict of intentions was marked by two aspects. While the first corresponds to the local media phenomenon, determined to highlight what was considered negative at Unila, the

second refers to the emphasis given by the university to a Latin American agenda, disregarding the expectations and needs of the Foz do Iguaçu population.

Particularly, the groups that the local media strategically represented, mainly the groups of private universities, came into direct conflict with Unila's students, individuals who were at odds with the local human landscape and, therefore, easily visible in the urban scene. They were the weakest link between the city and the university; the ones who suffered the most from the rejection of local inhabitants. The construction of a negative image of students came from their ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic profile, especially the non-Brazilians ones. Even in a particularly miscegenated city that defines itself as "cosmopolitan", they were subjected to a provincial, conservative and prejudiced view.

The city's discomfort, from 2010 to a short time ago, was constantly aggravated by the growing number of students who arrived each semester and were favored with the student aid program designed to subsidize housing, food and transportation expenses. The combination of "physical shock" and the breaking of part of "codes of conduct", beliefs and customs agreed in the city compromised the relationship between the City and the University, especially in its early years (2010-2013).

Results of a research conducted by Chibiaqui (2016, p. 33) suggest that the coexistence between very different human groups, in the same place, can both provide "harmonious coexistence", as well as trigger conflicts; it can either promote adaptation to the new environment, or trigger constraints resulting from the strangeness "generated by the instinctive labeling that each person attributes to having contact with the other". The installation of Unila in Foz do Iguaçu generated strangeness expressed in the lettering that sums up the idea that "unileiro [in reference to Unila students] is a pothead" (25:184eb, own translation).

The central dynamics of *Identity Construction* shows that the influence and participation of city dwellers does not occur in a linear way on Unila's academic community. There are also changes resulting from the use of university facilities (*Parque Tecnolófico Itaipu* (PTI) campus and *Jardim Universitário* (JU) campus) and living spaces (Housing 1). Each of these physical spaces has singularities and conditions in the institutional identity formation of the University and different contexts of interaction with the city population, mentioned in the previous topics.

However, the uses, sociability and experiences that occur in these spaces over time make the university population recognize itself and, thus, start to identify them as their places. Such concept associated with Santos (1994) definition of place, that is, one that is formed by the occurrence of activities developed socially, daily, in a territory where the actions are manifested.

On the one hand, the first two spaces used by Unila, PTI and JU, have become places, but with restrictions and limitations of use due to the fact that they do not belong to the university. PTI, being located in a national security area, regulates and restricts its use. The characteristics inherent to it inhibit the administrative and pedagogical autonomies of the University, as well as the performance of student movements.

On the other hand, Housing 1, the university's own space, disabled since 2015 for renovations, became a place and a student reference at the time it was used. It was there that the sharing of many experiences took place.

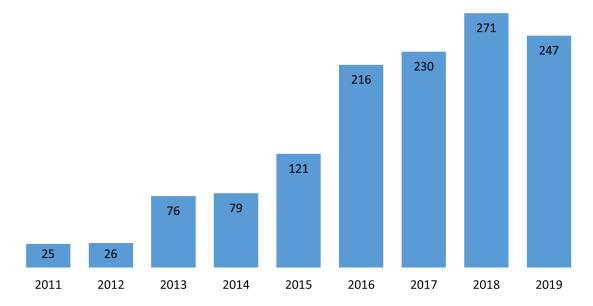
Finally, it is in places like this that the identity construction of the university develops in a sinuous way, with comings and goings, but with advances as the Institution is aligned with the interests of the city.

PTI and JU fit the definition of Pinto and Buffa (2009), although they are not recognized by the university community as a campus. The authors define campus as the territorial and closed demarcation of space, with the establishment of limits, norms, rules and standards for its use, with independent administration and privileged spaces for carrying out teaching, learning and research. Both are far from the urban center of the city and are not self-sufficient, however the JU is closer to popular neighborhoods, offering free access to users, which, in a way, minimizes external, physical and social segregation in relation to the city.

In turn, the dynamics of belonging relations at the city of Foz do Iguaçu are triggered by different fronts of Unila's territorial and social insertions. They branch out into the different territorial spaces of the city, mainly due to the volume of university extension actions, as illustrated in Figure 2:

Figure 2

Evolution of Extension Actions at UNILA (2010 to 2019)



Note. The authors from UNILA (2014; 2019; 2020)

Figure 2 illustrates an overall increase in the offer of Unila's extension actions from the period of 2011 (25 actions) to 2019 (247 actions). The importance attached to extension represents a feature of Latin American public universities since the Córdoba Movement (1918). In June 1918, the publication of the *Manifiesto Liminar*, directed by Argentine youth "a los hombres libres de Sudamérica", marked a movement whose demands echoed in university reforms in several Latin American countries. Its principles included university autonomy in the political, academic, administrative and economic aspects; the election of the governing bodies and authorities of the institution by the university community itself; co-government; free teaching; democratization of access and social assistance to students; extension; strengthening the social function of the university and Latin American unity (Rubião, 2013).

The Córdoba Movement marked the emergence of a typically Latin American university model, whose main legacy was the University's engagement with the broader aim of social justice, in the search for a more egalitarian and democratic society (Prolo, 2019). It was, above all, root of a link between university reform and social reform,

which supports the concept of "university extension" in its broad sense: associated with the ideas of autonomy conditioned to society and the contextualization of university activities, "in the sense that they dialogue with society, jointly defining what is best for both parties" (Rubião, 2013, p. 235, own translation). In this understanding, extension is rather a methodology than as an isolated university function; it refers to the social relevance of teaching and research (Rubião, 2013).

Extension projects enable the sharing of knowledge generated at the institution with the community and represent an important source of transformation in social reality. Extension activities collaborate for the citizens' education of students and represent opportunities for everyone to teach and learn, which is why they are recognized as a precious mechanism of approximation between the university and the city, and an important vector for regional integration at an international level (Fernandes, Silva, Machado, & Moreira, 2012).

#### **Final Remarks**

The purpose of this article was to understand the social role that the University can play in the international integration of border territories, given the importance of questioning the roles played by these institutions in promoting integration with these border territories, especially at an international level.

Unila – a young Brazilian public federal university, founded on Latin American principles of regional integration, internationalization of higher education, interculturality, multilingualism and counter-hegemony – was created with its own prerogatives based on interests expressed by the Brazilian federal government. Initially, it has proved to be "alien" to the expectations and needs of the population of the city of Foz do Iguaçu, as it was guided by the Latin American mission that justified its creation. The strangeness of the parties had its consequences.

On the one hand, it triggered processes that moved from denial to rejection by the academic community, mainly students and especially international ones, by the local population.

Several factors contributed to bringing the University closer to the city: the JU space, the offering and multiplication of extension projects, and the offer of courses that met the population's expectations. Through these strategies/initiatives, the beginning of a virtuous relationship between Unila and the city of Foz do Iguaçu was inaugurated. Both University students and other residents of the city started building mutual relationships of belonging. Extension, a university mission associated with the ideas of autonomy conditioned to society and the contextualization of university activities, played an important role in fostering the approximation between Unila and Foz do Iguaçu, emphasizing the social and contextual relevance of teaching and research.

Finally, considering that, within the scope of humanist geography, the recognition of territory permeates shared identities and relationships of belonging (Santos, 1994), the study suggests that a new phase begins, in which Unila and the city of Foz do Iguaçu understand each other and build mutual relationships of belonging. This shift does not exclude the existence of problems and conflicts between the University and the City. However, it reveals that there is potential for a reciprocal construction of belonging between them and that both tend to benefit from this relationship.

In the long run, this approximation will probably contribute to the accomplishment of Unila's mission of promoting the integration of Latin America, one of the values that guided Córdoba students in 1918. Broadly, such integration has the potential to consolidate what Ribeiro (1975) called a "necessary university" (Ribeiro, 1975), that is, an institution that is authentic, non-subordinate, that values local knowledge, and that promotes solidarity and a critical conception of the world.

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