

# A Widely Spoken Lesser-Taught Language: Portuguese in British Higher Education

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## Introduction

In 2016, Portuguese studies lecturer Rhian Atkin of Cardiff University gave a talk to an audience of diplomatic officials, University lecturers and heritage language teachers. (Atkin) Organised by the Brazilian embassy in London, the conference celebrated May 5th, the Portuguese Language Day, which had been created in 2005 by the Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa [The Community of Portuguese Language Countries]. Atkin pointed out that it is difficult to make a strong case for Portuguese language education in British universities because official statistics do not register all the students reading the subject. Yet, Atkin noted, numbers had been increasing, and the traditional profile of language students – middle class white women – had been changing. Atkin argued that these developments should be taken as an opportunity to rethink the standing of Portuguese studies in British academia, as well as an opportunity to reshape the approach to its learning.

Atkin's talk provides the cues for an understanding of Portuguese as a modern foreign language in Higher Education (HE), and hints at possible developments. Her argument was that Portuguese had to overcome its invisibility by debunking official statistics, which do not

give a realistic picture of the increasing uptake numbers. Her intervention also touched upon the need to stray away from the subsidiary position of Portuguese relative to Spanish in British academia (even in students' perceptions), namely by portraying Portuguese as a world language backed up by several national identities, economies and socio-cultural manifestations, including the population of 24,000 children that speak Portuguese in England, making it the 9th most spoken language in schools. Referring specifically to the new Portuguese studies degree at Cardiff and the inclusion of Portuguese as a community/heritage language in the traditional picture of the language in Higher Education, Atkin talked enthusiastically about the "exciting opportunity to develop a programme appropriate for the students of today, a programme that focuses on Portuguese as a global language, spoken in Portugal, Brazil, as well as Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, East Timor (...) and increasingly on the diasporic communities of the United Kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

Discourses on the global import of Portuguese often struggle to make sense of the gap between the fact that Portuguese is one of the most widely spoken languages, and its sizeable but peripheral position in the economy of world languages. Atkin's talk reflects such ambivalence.

On the one hand, it calls for a reassessment of the *lesser-taught* label normally given to the language to situate the subject in a near-equal footing with Chinese and Italian, which do not suffer from a lack of representativeness in forums such as the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML).<sup>2</sup> The reassessment of the standing of Portuguese against other languages with similar student numbers aims at giving the language a higher status amongst modern foreign languages, which normally find a rationale for their study on the existence of nation-states with established standards of cultured language use (Kramsch). On the other hand, Atkin goes beyond the commonplace representation of Portuguese as a multinational language

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1. Translation mine.

2. As of 2016, Portuguese has a separate representative in the executive committee of the UCML.

to include migrant communities, which implies an attempt to accommodate an emerging audience of multilingual learners by reshaping the representations of the language to include non-stabilized varieties of the language, not circumscribed by traditional national borders. (Moita-Lopes)

## 1. Student Numbers

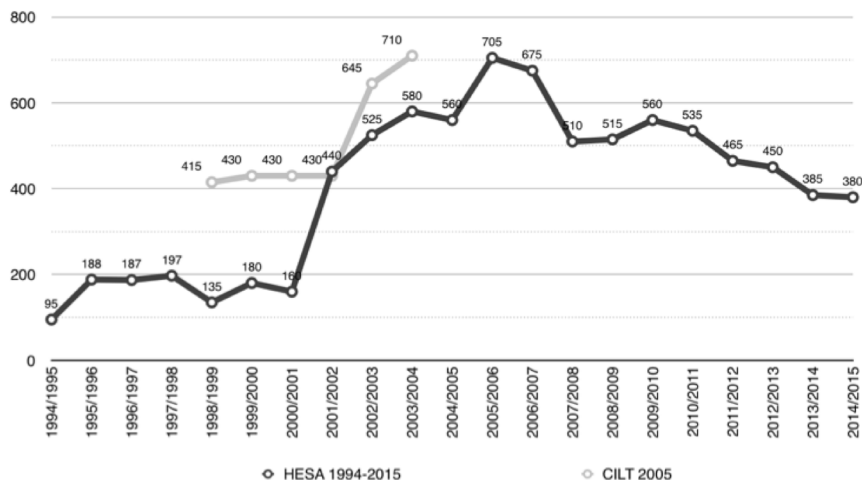
The concern about student numbers relates to the sustainability of Portuguese as a subject. The 2009 report on the provision of MFL in HE (Worton) points out that the overall 5% decline in the number of students reading languages in the 2002-2003 period masks the fact that Iberian studies, which includes Spanish and Portuguese, increased by 16%. However, elsewhere in the report, Portuguese was cited by respondents from language departments as one of “the most vulnerable”.

A decade earlier, Tom F. Earle, who pioneered Portuguese language studies at the University of Oxford, was optimistic about Portuguese language education in the UK and predicted an expansion of provision and student numbers. (Earle) He attributed the relative success of Portuguese studies in British universities to the support of the Instituto Camões<sup>3</sup> and the early-on sharing of resources with Spanish departments, which allegedly contributed to its surviving HE reforms during the Thatcher period. Earle’s prediction proved correct until the mid-2000s, when undergraduate and postgraduate numbers appear to have peaked at over 700. (Chart 1)

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3. Agency operating under the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in matters of cooperation, foreign aid and external language policy.

Chart 1 – Undergraduate and Postgraduate Portuguese Studies Students



(Centre for Information on Language Teaching; Higher Education Statistics Agency)

However, even in circumstances where languages with a low recruitment base report increasing uptake numbers, questions of funding, staffing and perceived relevance influence the vulnerability of subjects. (University Council of Modern Languages) During the late 1990s and early 2000s, language departments saw decreasing uptake numbers, closures, mergers, and staff redundancies. (Coleman) Portuguese studies was not an exception.

In 2007, the University of Cambridge were to suspend Portuguese as a full degree before a faculty board recommended its continuation, not without warning against the underfunding of languages; (Blackburn) and in 2009, King’s College, London, merged the former independent departments of Spanish, and Portuguese into the Department of Spanish, Portuguese & Latin American Studies. In a news piece on the protests following the announcement of the suspension of the Portuguese degree at Cambridge, the subject was simultaneously deemed “too popular” by a student member of the university General Board, and reported to be studied by just over twenty

students, (Mitchell) which was less than 3% of the total number of undergraduates of the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages in the academic year 2007/2008. (University of Cambridge, *Student Statistics 2007-08*)

## 2. Invisibility

Student numbers are an obvious component of the visibility of language degrees. Earle's prediction of an expansion of provision and uptake partially attempted to anchor the relevance of the subject on growth rather than on the existing recruitment base. Atkin's rejection of the *lesser-taught* label mirrors Earle's concern.

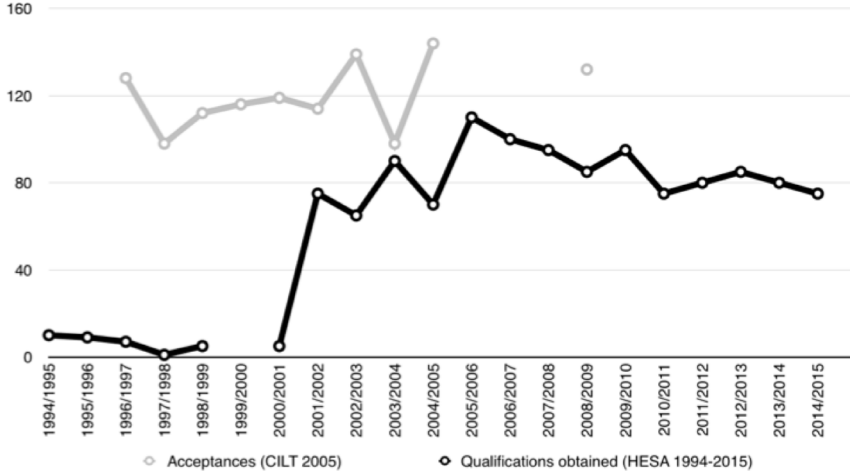
It is difficult to assess the validity of claims on student numbers due to inconsistent statistics. While Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures show a growth rate of 300% in the twenty-year period from 1994/1995 to 2014/2015, the figure is likely to be much smaller. HESA introduced a new subject classification called the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) in 2002/2003, which makes comparisons between the pre and post-JACS periods difficult. In any case, the accuracy of the data depends on how institutions code their figures and whether categories such as other languages are overused.<sup>4</sup>

A report on HE language studies by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching (2005), based on HESA statistics, presented undergraduate numbers more in line with post 2001/2002 figures, (Chart 2) which would bring the rate down to negative growth. A comparison with the figures on acceptance and qualifications obtained (also Chart 2) authorises the assumption that numbers peaked in the mid-2000s and replicated the overall evolution of French, Spanish and German with student numbers plummeting by over 40% from 2005/2006 onwards. (Chart 3)

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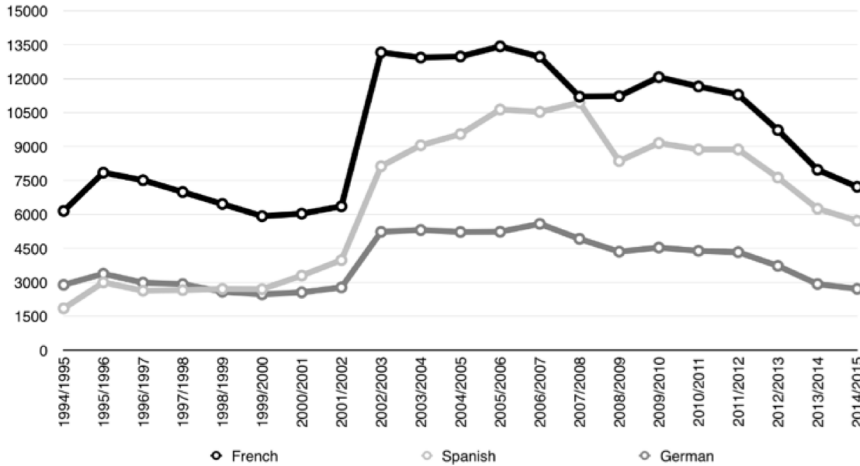
4. Prior to the JASC subject classification, most students were accounted for in the other languages and balanced combinations categories. In the post-JASC statistics, more than 40% of students fall under the category others in European languages, literature & related subjects.

Chart 2 – Acceptances and Qualifications Obtained (Undergraduate)



(Centre for Information on Language Teaching; Higher Education Statistics Agency)

Chart 3 – Undergraduate and Postgraduate Language Studies Students

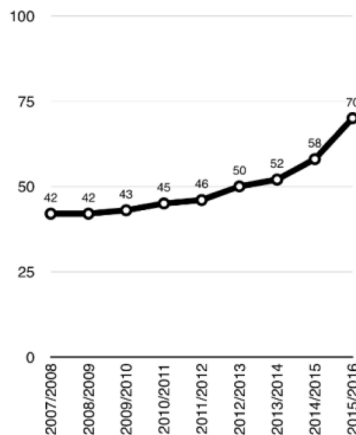


(Higher Education Statistics Agency)

The inconsistent statistics are also related to complex patterns of language provision (Perriam). Universities offer many degree combinations and often courses with varying Portuguese language content are not nominally identified as such. Some courses are offered under the designations of modern languages or Hispanic studies. In the latter case, the designation traditionally includes the study of both Portuguese and Spanish language cultures but can also refer to Spanish studies alone. (Davies)

It is difficult to present an accurate picture of the evolution of total student numbers. The overall decline in student numbers is contradicted by statistics of specific institutions. In the 2007 to 2016 period, the University of Oxford saw a 66% increase in the number of students reading Portuguese (from 42 to 70), especially due to enrolments in combined honours degrees, Spanish and French being the most common options; (University of Oxford, “University of Oxford Student Statistics: Detailed Table”) and an informal survey by Rhian Atkin shows that figures for just five institutions largely outnumber the official statistics for the subject for the 2014/2015 academic year. (Chart 6 and Table 1)

Chart 4 – Students Reading Portuguese Studies Degrees (University of Oxford)



(University of Oxford, “University of Oxford Student Statistics: Detailed Table”)

**Table 1** – Students Reading Portuguese Studies Degrees

University of Nottingham	163
University of Bristol	140
University of Leeds	106
University of Liverpool	103
University of Exeter	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>563</b>
HESA	385

(Atkin, Higher Education Statistics Agency)

As of 2016, twenty-four universities offered over 150 combined honours degrees (undergraduate degrees or integrated MAs) with a component of Portuguese studies, more than 70 degrees under the designation Hispanic studies, and more than 50 degrees under the designation modern languages. (University Council of Modern Languages) Portuguese studies as a single-honours degree was offered by the University of Oxford and King's College London (the latter, under the phrase Portuguese & Brazilian Studies, was discontinued in the 2016/2017 academic year).

### 3. Representations

In online promotional materials geared towards prospective undergraduates, universities highlight the economic relevance of the language, the number of speakers, the territories where it is spoken, and marginally, the sense of personal development one can achieve by studying Portuguese-speaking cultures.<sup>5</sup> The information is limited

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5. The data collected on the representation of the Portuguese language and modules was the result of online searches conducted by or confirmed in May 2016. The degrees with a Portuguese language content were identified using [www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk) and [unistats.direct.gov.uk](http://unistats.direct.gov.uk) and checked against each institution website.



in scope and depth with only a few institutions providing dedicated content on the Portuguese language component of their degrees, either on department web pages or course descriptions.

Universities emphasise Portuguese as a language on demand in the job market, especially because of the emerging economy of Brazil, which is singled out as “one of the world’s largest economies.” (University of Essex) Portuguese is referred to as of “vital global importance”, (University of Liverpool) as a “language of commerce”, (University of Oxford, “Modern Languages: Portuguese”) and as a “valuable asset” in trade relations with Brazil and Portugal. (University of Essex) While the economic import of the language is mentioned in abstract terms such as *a valuable asset in an international arena*, specific references to the job prospects of future Portuguese language specialists are not common. At one end, the University of Birmingham’s disclaimer – “We cannot claim that knowledge of Portuguese will always change your life, but linguistic competence combined with cultural knowledge does open the door to many career opportunities” – is symptomatic of this lack of specificity as it tries to push forward an agenda of language as a skill for employability while admitting that the correlation is problematic. (Canning) At the other end, there is the optimistic promise that a languages degree will equip the student with “language skills, cultural awareness and critical independence necessary to compete successfully in an almost limitless range of careers.” (King’s College London) Underlying both approaches is an understanding of language degrees as humanities/liberal arts studies meant to develop a range of skills (not just linguistic) that should open up opportunities for further specialisation. (Allen and Canning) Specific references to the language in its most immediate and available aspects within the British context are scarce, apart from two remarks on Portuguese being a key language for the future of the UK according to the British Council, and one of the “most widely spoken community languages in Britain.” (Cardiff University)

The focus is on the territories where Portuguese is spoken and the number of speakers, which are taken as a whole. References converge on Brazil and Portugal, and the language is designated as “one of

the world's most widely spoken languages" (Cardiff University) or "one of the six most widely spoken world languages, with over 230 million native speakers." (University of Oxford, "Modern Languages: Portuguese") Other territories, except for Angola, are often amalgamated into phrases like "Africa and beyond." (University of Oxford, "Modern Languages: Portuguese")

#### 4. Curriculum

With the exception of universities such as Cambridge, Essex, Glasgow and Oxford there is an emphasis on historical, literary, and sociocultural studies, not on linguistics and language *per se*, which is common to the provision in other MFL. (Gallagher-Brett and Canning) The University of Cambridge divides the Portuguese language content into modules covering different skills and knowledge areas. It offers two levels of *Use of Portuguese* (either as an *ab initio* or post A-level subject), two levels of *Portuguese Oral*, two modules on linguistics (*The Hispanic Languages* and *The Romance Languages*), three translation modules (including audio-visual materials), and a *Portuguese: Text and Culture* module that prioritises advanced language learning through analysis and commentary of a range of texts. (University of Cambridge, "Pgc2: Portuguese: Text and Culture") The University of Essex and the University of Glasgow also offer a skills-oriented curriculum. Essex, where students can study Portuguese in combination with another modern language or economics, offers five levels of language learning (including a conversion module from Spanish), *Translation, Interpreting and Subtitling, Careers and Employability Skills for Languages and Linguistics*, and a *Brazil in Focus: Business, Culture and Society* module that focuses on professional uses of the language. (University of Essex) Glasgow offers diverse language levels and pathways, and three levels of translation studies. (University of Glasgow)

The amount of language content of degrees varies considerably. While the average of contact hours offered by the respondents to the *Less-Widely Taught Languages Teaching Survey Report 2016* by UCML

(13 respondents, which is more than 50% of the total number of institutions) was 3.6, some universities reported as much as ten, and others as little as one hour per week. (University Council of Modern Languages) First-year introductory modules for *ab initio* students tend to be allocated more contact time than post A-Level modules but at the end of the degree, the two groups benefit from the same number of hours (or are merged into one class). Most students start learning the language *ab initio* and are expected to aim at C1/2 CEFR level by the end of their degree or A-Level (B1/B2) proficiency by the end of year one of their studies. These objectives are underpinned by the expectation that students rely on previously acquired language learning skills and knowledge of other Romance languages. (Bavendiek and Kelly)

The *ab initio* provision is a standard offer even in cases where there is sizeable take-up at secondary and post-16 level. In a 2011 report, *ab initio* languages as a named component of degree programmes for Spanish, German and French represented 36%, 55%, and 84% of the total offer. (Verruccio) All the 14 institutions offering Portuguese did not have support for post A-Level students. However, as of 2016, at least five universities had some kind of provision for advanced students. Queen's University Belfast, Essex and Cambridge offered modules for post A-Level entrants; Bristol offered an alternative module focusing on cultural content; Cardiff offered modules geared towards advanced and heritage language students; and Queen Mary has been offering a similar provision since 2017-28.

Despite the lack of a more comprehensive picture of the geography of the language in course/department promotional texts, the curricular offer extends to other countries other than Brazil and Portugal. However, this is always done from the standpoint of a postcolonial/imperial or Lusophone worldview. Course titles such as *Representations of Lusophone Africa in Postcolonial Cinema* (Queen's University, Belfast), *Slavery, Colonialism and Postcolonialism in African Cinema* (Queen Mary, University of London) and *Portugal and its Empire in the 20th Century: Trajectories and Memories* (University College, London) suggest an adherence to a Lusophone agenda that has been critiqued as an

imaginary construction aimed at allocating a positive role for Portugal in the postcolonial landscape. (Almeida and Lourenço) However, Portugal shares the focus with Brazil (sometimes under a comparative Hispanic/Iberian or Latin-American umbrella), which is the outcome of the history of the subject in the UK. Until the 1960s the emphasis was on Iberian cultural aspects, but from the 80s/90s onwards there was a shift towards Latin-American topics, which resulted in a revitalisation of Spanish and Portuguese studies. (Perriam) The focus is on literary studies or literature as a gateway to a social, historical or political examination of Brazil and Portugal. However, pure disciplinary approaches are rare (for example, the traditional chronological organisation of literature modules at the University of Birmingham). The titles of the modules suggest an endorsement of eclectic theoretical and methodological approaches akin to Cultural Studies where, besides the study of literature, society, history, and politics, there is a consideration of other categories such as identity, gender, visual arts, film, music or popular culture.

## 5. A Logical Second Step?

In his article on the state of play of Portuguese language in HE, Earle (2000) touched upon a second factor for the vulnerability of the subject: its ambivalent relation with Spanish. Earle welcomed the advantages that the cohabitation of the two languages under one roof had brought to the field of Portuguese studies; however, he also pointed out that the dimension of the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies at King's College was only possible because it had never been merged with Spanish studies (which would happen in 2009). Earle's optimism concerning the evolution of Portuguese studies in the UK in 2000 did not translate into a clear rationale for the learning of Portuguese, apart from the suggestion that it would be a "logical" second step for university students with a knowledge of Spanish. (667-68)

The lack of visibility that Atkin (2016) tried to address is partly a consequence of the “hierarchy of national standing” underlying the organization of language departments, which subsumes the developments of the Portuguese-speaking world to the rubric of Hispanic studies. (Davies 18) In British and North-American academia the subject is linked to an early interest in the history of the Iberian Peninsula of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when well-defined boundaries between nationalities were yet to be established. From the point of view of these scholars, a designation such as Hispanic studies fitted the focus of university departments. (Davies, 2014) An approach to modern languages based on nation-states brings about “logical” hierarchical choices in language study.

Earle’s philosophical underpinning to the learning of the language did little to obviate the history of the subject in academia and a situation of “crisis” in language studies in HE, as labelled by the Nuffield report, which also mentioned Portuguese as an important world language in need of targeted action. (Nuffield Foundation 55) Portuguese as an obvious second step to Spanish results in a logical but vulnerable choice because, from an English and North-American perspective, the Portuguese-speaking world can be by default subsumed in the larger Hispanic narrative (which often includes Galician, Catalan, and Basque studies), or included in a more articulated brand of Iberian studies, underpinned by a comparative approach. (Resina)

## 6. A Shared Responsibility

In a volume dedicated to the global impact of the Portuguese language (an investigation very much circumscribed to the literary genre), Emeritus Professor of Portuguese at King’s College Helder Macedo allows for the realisation that Portuguese amounts to a minority culture in Europe that is part of an international community of countries that share the same language. (Macedo) For Macedo, the minority status can be counterbalanced by the role of Portugal in the history of other territories such as the UK and the USA, and the

presence of diaspora communities in those same territories. The reference to other Portuguese-speaking countries does not prevent Macedo from positing the problem in Eurocentric terms, that is, in terms that describe Portugal as being off the centre of power. Macedo's solution is to advocate that Portugal, the European Union, and the USA act upon a shared responsibility to ensure the access to the study of the Portuguese language and Portuguese language cultures in schools and universities across the world based on two principles, the historical significance of the language and a commitment to cultural diversity by the political and linguistic centres of power.

Whether drawing on more Eurocentric and traditional notions of cultural relevance, as in Earle (2000) and Macedo (2001), or the developments of ethnographic-oriented linguistics, there is a call for a shared responsibility in bringing the study of Portuguese to speakers of other languages. Oliveira (2015) argues that Portuguese is undergoing a phase in which the key stakeholders (the countries where Portuguese is an official language) are achieving parity in the management of the language, and a level of economic development that should enable a convergent standardisation geared towards the promotion of Portuguese as a world language. Specifically adopting a Brazilian viewpoint, Oliveira singles out English-speaking countries as privileged partners in exploring opportunities of reciprocity to stimulate the demand for the language in universities and economies at large.

## **7. An In-Between Language**

In the English and North-American academia, the case for Portuguese has been put forward in terms of historical and cultural import, either subsumed in the field of Hispanic studies or filtered by a theoretical position of in-betweenness. Trindade (2013) identifies two strands of thought that reflect discourses on Portuguese produced abroad, one inaugurated by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987), and another by Portuguese social scientist Boaventura

Sousa Santos (1940-). The former sees Portugal as an exceptional case of colonialism, and the latter resorts to the concept of semi-periphery. For Freyre, Portuguese colonialism displayed an openness to miscegenation that would result in a multiracial Brazil; and Sousa Santos attempts to situate the language in between the European political/cultural centre and the more fluid outcomes of post-colonial linguistic territories. However, such positions have been critiqued as ways to create misguided expectations of a unified identity, and a fictitious homogeneous cultural/linguistic space that disregards a complex colonial history. (Almeida, 2002 and Monteiro, 2014)

The picture of the Portuguese language invoked by Macedo (2001) to justify its relevant position in today's world is the outcome of colonial history as filtered by the figures commonly used to emphasise its importance: spoken by 200 million people, the official language of seven independent nations (in 2001 East Timor was yet to become an independent country from Indonesia), and the third most widely spoken European language. Despite its historical and cultural focus, it aligns both with an economy-focused viewpoint, (Reto, 2012) and with a concept of language as a pluricentric phenomenon in need of a globalised management effort. (Oliveira, 2015) The overall picture is not so much a representation of a diversified language, but a way of conveying the idea that the cultural frontiers of Portugal extend beyond its political borders.

## Conclusion

Liddicoat (2013) notes that language spread policies often "imply a perceived problem in the (inadequate) use of one's own language by others." (173) Discourses on the Portuguese language struggle to come to terms with the fact that Portuguese, while being one of the most widely spoken languages, does not conform to the preconceived idea of what a world language looks like. Discourses about Portuguese language education in HE reflect such a gap. The combination of number of speakers, number of territories and historical

import is taken at face value, without a consideration of the linguistic and educational ecosystems where the Portuguese language might fit in. Often, the result is a language policy with a monolingual bent that sees Portuguese language education as a shared international responsibility.

The representations of Portuguese and the discourses created in HE do not provide a sustainable rationale for Portuguese. Even considering that statistics might have been concealing a considerable recruitment base and growth in uptake numbers, information geared to prospective undergraduates is rather limited, which suggests that there are values and a historical/cultural/economic capital that is perceived as self-explanatory.

Information provided by universities predicates such values on the emerging economic relevance of Portuguese, the number of speakers and the countries where it is spoken and the personal advantages of studying Portuguese, which sways between the promise of a straightforward professional gain and the offering of a stepping-stone for further specialisation. Such a schematic and self-sufficient picture conceals a subject with some vulnerabilities: a history of administrative and conceptual contiguity with Spanish and a strong reliance on support provided by the Portuguese and Brazilian governments. However, while it makes sense to promote an articulation with Spanish studies and to draw on students' previous knowledge of Spanish (and other languages), it is not clear whether it is viable to rely on the conceptualising of Portuguese as a "logical" second step to Spanish. (Earle) As the Cambridge and King's College episodes show, and Earle himself and Davies (2014) acknowledge, this creates unwanted consequences in practical (survival of courses and departments) and disciplinary terms (it narrows the opportunities to study specific issues about Portuguese-language territories).

Arguably, Atkin's inclusion of a community language dimension in her picture of a global Portuguese (and in the language programme at Cardiff) is an attempt to expand the repertoire of support points of Portuguese language education in universities.



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