Insights from international students studying in Brazil

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This paper investigates the experiences of international students in Brazilian Higher Education Institutions within the context of Brazil's evolving internationalisation agenda. Despite significant investment in mobility programs, there is limited evaluation of student experiences and support mechanisms. The research addressed three core questions: Who are the international students studying in Brazil? What are their academic and social experiences? How effective are the support systems in place? Using an adapted international student survey and the Evidencing Value Framework, data were collected from 293 students. Findings reveal high satisfaction with academic quality and international office support, but highlight systemic challenges, including linguistic barriers, bureaucratic barriers to accessing social benefits, and a lack of standardised admissions. The study underscores the need for a more integrated, student-centred internationalisation strategy, including multilingual offerings, improved onboarding, and national data infrastructure to enhance policy responsiveness and institutional planning.

Keywords: Internationalisation; international student surveys; international student experience; support programmes; student mobility school

INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation has shaped the higher education university ecosystem over the last two decades (Lee & Stensaker, 2021). Driven by the winds of globalisation, proponents argue internationalisation enhances educational quality because students benefit from diverse perspectives and methodologies integrated into the curriculum and broader university cultural and intellectual traditions (Beelen & De Louw, 2020). This enrichment of the educational experience results in broader research collaboration (Gao, 2019) and a range of cultural competencies for both home students and their international counterparts. Institutions also benefit from the global networks that accompany internationalisation programs (Lee, 2021) because countries invest and support the competition for a global experience and leverage collaborations to enhance the societal impact of research and the economic benefits of securing funds through international recruitment. In some countries, internationalisation is framed mainly through the lens of economic exchange in the form of fees, diverse and talented labour and varied research ideas (Garson, 2023).

Internationalisation agendas often focus on the most visible aspects: student mobility or exchange. Governments invest substantial time and resources in developing international student mobility (de Wit & Hunter, 2015). The OECD (2023) defines international students as learners who study a proportion or the entirety of a programme in a destination country, having received prior education in another country. They are not residents of their current country of study. The justification for the emphasis on internationalisation in universities has been amplified by the societal impact of promoting diverse epistemologies and inclusion of varied voices, resulting in projects that enhance global collaboration around the Sustainable Development Goals and support development more broadly. However, the internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is a challenge faced by universities worldwide (De Wit & Hunter, 2015). Labraña et al. (2024) argued that New Public Management logics increasingly shape Latin American Internationalisation, though in some areas managerial reforms have resulted in a critical reflection on the purpose and values of internationalisation.

Knight (2012, p. 17) points out that "the importance of the international dimension of higher education in the last two or three decades has led to 'internationalisation' becoming a catch-all phrase, currently used to describe anything and everything remotely linked to worldwide, intercultural, global or international. Consequently, the notion of internationalisation is at risk of losing its meaning and direction". Knight suggests that internationalisation is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education. Accordingly, her typology positions various features linked to transboundary engagement on an administrative continuum, as summarised in Table 1.

De Wit and Altbach's (2021) Model of internationalisation emphasises the multidimensional and contextual nature of institutional policies, developed in collaboration with state agencies over the last 80 years. Across Europe, traditional aid and cooperation initially funded by post-war scholarship schemes aimed to support reconstruction and low-income countries, for

example, DAAD/Germany and British Council/United Kingdom. The strengthening of EU partnerships and exchange since the late 1980s via Erasmus supports Joint Master's Degrees, integrated joint curricula, and staff and student mobility. The 2000s saw a marked increase in market-oriented competition, with institutions in Europe, North America and Australia strategically recruiting international students to support their incomes. More recently, a more comprehensive and integrative approach is developing where internationalisation is embedded across teaching through projects and Problem-Based Learning with global case studies, as well as multinational research projects (see Table 2).

Table 1: Typology of internationalisations

Rationale	Institutional approach
Political {Nation-building & foreign policy}	Student and staff mobility, joint programs, partnerships.
Economic: {Global labour/institutional income	Graduate employability, international rankings, reputation
Academic {Enhancing teaching quality & research collaboration}	Embedding internationalisation across teaching, research and services
Socio-cultural {Promoting intercultural understanding & global citizenship	"Internationalisation at home" such as intercultural campus activities) vs "cross-border education" such as TNE

Table 2: Exemplars of types of internationalisations based on de Wit and Altbach's typology

	Traditional Cooperation/Aid	Partnership-Based	Market-Oriented	Comprehensive/ Integrative
Latin America	Brazilian CAPES Programme – Historically funded postgraduate students to study abroad (e.g., in Europe/US) to strengthen Brazil's higher education capacity.	Universidad de los Andes (Colombia) – Strategic alliances with US and European universities for dual degrees and research.	Fundación Universitaria Empresarial de la Cámara de Comercio de Bogotá (UNIEMPRESARIAL) in Colombia uses international partnerships to enhance student competitiveness in global markets, focusing on internships, dual degrees, and applied research	Universidad de Costa Rica – Focus on curriculum internationalisation, South-South cooperation (with other Latin American universities), and regional leadership in sustainability studies.
Africa	Several countries depend on scholarships and	University of Cape Town (South Africa) – Extensive	South Africa attracts a significant number of students from across	University of Ghana – Embeds global citizenship

	Traditional Cooperation/Aid	Partnership-Based	Market-Oriented	Comprehensive/ Integrative
	external funding. The Soviet Union, Cuba and Western Europe/USA/Canada funded scholarships during the Cold War. Several of these programmes are still supported by countries such as the UK, Finland and Japan.	collaborations with European/American universities in climate change, medicine, and social sciences.	Africa, especially the SADC.	into curriculum, while maintaining international research partnerships and diaspora engagement.
Asia	India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 encourages foreign universities to establish campuses in India and promotes Indian institutions abroad	Tohoku University, Japan, has developed a comprehensive International Strategy under its "Vision 2030" framework, which emphasises strategic partnerships	Malaysia's Monash University Campus – Education as a commodity, hosting thousands of fee-paying international students.	Singapore's National University of Singapore embeds global perspectives across all disciplines and forms strategic partnerships that support an integrative internationalisation strategy

BACKGROUND

Internationalisation of universities has become part of the agenda of academic leaders, major funding agencies, and representative entities of public and private HEIs in Brazil (Neves & Barbosa, 2020). Neves & Barbosa (2020) acknowledged that universities' movement towards broad institutional goals around internationalisation in the global south is being developed along Western models. This is viewed as short-sighted due to regional obstacles, such as language barriers for students and staff involved in exchange programs, and economic challenges that complicate the implementation of the goals. Notably, while traditional host countries continue to attract significant numbers of students and academics, there is a growing trend of reverse mobility toward emerging destinations such as China, Poland and Turkey (Kurek-Ochmańska & Luczaj, 2021; Seggie & Calikoglu, 2021; Xu et al., 2022). These shifts highlight the need to understand international academic mobility not only as a global phenomenon but also as deeply contextual and shaped by diverse national realities. In Brazil,

however, there remains a limited body of literature addressing inbound mobility in higher education from a national perspective (Robles & Bhandari, 2017; França & Padilha, 2021).

Carlson et al. (2025) highlight the emergence of a dynamic and multi-scalar landscape of academic mobility, where students increasingly move not only from the Global South to the Global North, but also in reverse—from North to South—as well as across South–South and East–West axes. Despite these evolving patterns, the overall scale of such multidirectional mobility remains limited (Yessenbekova et al., 2025). The global nature of international student mobility also renders it highly sensitive to geopolitical and socioeconomic disruptions. Events such as the United Kingdom's (UK) withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit), restrictive immigration policies in the United States (US) (Ritter & Roth, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine have significantly influenced cross-border academic flows (Carlson et al., 2025).

In general, internationalisation policies are facilitated by central government agencies; HEIs implement plans aligned with local strategies at institutional levels through specific activities. In Brazil, HEIs are not often proactive; few take advantage of the opportunities to develop internationalisation processes" (Neves & Barbosa, 2020). There is also a distinct lack of funds to support the internationalisation process, which further reduces the potential to address internationalisation. The current federal government of Brazil has significantly scaled back resources allocated to internationalisation; in 2021, the total CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) budget was 73.4% lower than in 2015. In a survey about student mobility, Robles & Bhandari (2017) reported a lack of financial resources for international initiatives. In addition, Tumenas (2021) highlighted that Brazilian universities are suffering a steady decrease in budget allocation and greater pressure to increase international research, foreign student and staff exchange, and their positions in international rankings. This combination has led to limited successful developments in internationalisation in Brazilian HEIs.

The development of internationalisation policies, however, is of significant importance to Brazilian Higher Education; they have been shown to have a demonstrable effect on entry, access, and enrolment rates in HEIs in Brazil (Amorim & Finardi, 2022). National mandatory tests for university entry are standardised in Brazil, but this is not the case in many countries with high inbound student mobility, such as Australia, Canada, Mexico, the UK and the US (Nusche, 2008). The Brazilian national exam for the assessment of undergraduate student performance (called ENADE in Portuguese) started in 2004 and assesses student performance against the syllabus of evaluated courses (Verhine et al., 2006). Internalisation policies, therefore, provide an alternative accessible route to entry for non-Brazilian undergraduate applicants, thereby increasing international student access and success.

A similar picture emerges for graduate programs in Brazil, which are overseen by a national assessment process (established by CAPES), where there is no evident assessment focusing specifically on international students who come to study in Brazil. The lack of evaluation is a prominent issue because it involves understanding diverse cultural, economic and social

dynamics linked to students' experiences and focuses on a specific type of international mobility. As Dorovolomo et al. (2022) argued, supporting international students to develop their social capital increases satisfaction and retention. Support services, therefore, inbound student mobility, enabling institutions to meet volume targets of internalisation plans. This approach favours commercialisation of HE as part of internationalisation, but it fails to account for several complications involving students, faculty and other stakeholders, as highlighted by Finn et al. (2021).

The Brazilian Internationalisation programmes have largely been characterised by inbound mobility. Accordingly, issues such as active and passive internationalisation, curriculum decolonisation, and academic and staff mobility have been placed on universities' agendas. According to Lima and Maranhão (2009), active internationalisation is characterised by the flow of programs and actions aimed at, for example, receiving international students and offering educational services abroad (Luce et al., 2016). This active mobility requires HEIs to respond to the educational needs of the globalised world, which includes the language barrier.

This paper reports on the perspectives of international students at Brazilian universities using a survey adapted from a UK questionnaire. The survey set out to:

1. Examine the profile of international students who study in Brazilian HEIs

2. Investigate the experience of the international students

3. Evaluate the support mechanisms provided to international students

The next section will focus on student mobility and the challenges associated with evaluating inbound mobility in Brazil.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Evaluating Inbound Mobility in Brazil: Challenges and Prospects

In a survey on student mobility in Brazil, Robles & Bhandari (2017) indicated that research should examine factors that attract international students to Brazilian HEIs. The authors concluded that "not enough is known about the student populations that enrol in Brazilian universities" (p. 13). As part of understanding this gap, universities in Brazil are investing in organising international offices.

The current structure of international offices in Brazilian universities is heterogeneous: from a single staff member facilitating all activities, to well-structured offices with highly qualified staff coordinating different services linked to a specific local agenda.

Most Latin American graduate students come to Brazil through the Partnerships for Education and Training Program (PAEC), which is the result of a cooperation between the International Cooperation Group of Brazilian Universities (GCUB) and the Organization of American States (OAS), with the support from the Educational Themes and Portuguese Language Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil (DELP/MRE) and the Pan American Health

Organization (PAHO/WHO). Launched in 2011, the PAEC Scholarship Program is one of the most important regional cooperation initiatives for the development of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean (GCUB, 2022). Its objective is to contribute to the integration and strengthening of the Americas region by granting scholarships for complete graduate courses (Masters and Doctorates) offered by the Brazilian universities associated with the GCUB to students from the 34 OAS member countries (except for Brazil itself).

Most undergraduate students come to Brazil through the Exchange Program for Undergraduate Students (Programa de Estudantes-Convênio de Graduação, PEC-G). PEC-G provides students from developing countries with which Brazil maintains educational, cultural, or scientific and technological agreements with the opportunity to pursue studies in Brazilian HEIs. PEC-G is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE) through the Division of Educational Themes (DCE) and the Ministry of Education (MEC), and in partnership with HEIs throughout Brazil and other countries in South America, Central America and Africa. Students from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and Africa often receive scholarships from either Brazil or their home countries. Governmental programs, such as the PEC-G, have been ongoing for more than 50 years and have brought more than 9,000 foreign students to Brazil since 2000 (MRE, 2022).

The Brazilian MEC is responsible for administering PEC-G stipends. The scholarships honour the famous black geographer and educator Milton Santos, who advocated for Access to Higher Education (Promisaes). Developed by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education in partnership with public and private universities, PEC-G selects foreigners aged 18 or older, preferably up to 23, who have completed secondary education and have been admitted to undergraduate studies in Brazil. A selected foreign student attends the undergraduate course free of charge. In return, the candidate must meet criteria, such as a commitment to return to their home country and contribute to its development upon graduation. The grant is R$622,00 (around US$113 per month or US$3.70 per day) for undergraduate students. PEC-G still attracts the largest number of inbound international students.

International students are offered language support, including the opportunity to speak, study and conduct research in Portuguese. The Brazilian systems also offer opportunities for a rich array of research perspectives and regional epistemologies that are often not accessible outside Latin America. In addition, the Brazilian educational system offers opportunities to study the technical and practical aspects of a discipline, providing students with real-world experience.

Students' International Mobility

Over the last 15 years, research on students' experiences abroad has shown that personal development is a key feature of international academic mobility for students and staff (Amendola & Restaino, 2017; Knight, 2012). International Student Mobility (ISM) is defined in this paper as any form of international mobility that takes place within a student's program of study in higher education (HE) (King et al., 2010). ISM places are highly competitive, with recruitment processes becoming increasingly competitive and complex (Knight, 2012).

The internationalisation of HEIs is beneficial for students—both home and international, universities (Costa & Canen, 2022). For home students and HEIs, international students contribute to the higher education landscape through their wealth of experience, knowledge and insights to the classroom and wider university. The benefit for international students is that they can cross boundaries to study in programs that enhance their skills and opportunities. Such students tend to learn a new language or specific methodologies that are unavailable in their home country and/or seek to study in countries and institutions that are better resourced.

"Internationalisation at home" refers to activities aimed at internationalisation for home students. The concept refers to campus-based strategies, including the intercultural and international dimensions in the teaching, learning process, research, extracurricular activities, relationships with local cultural and ethnic community groups, as well as the integration of foreign students and scholars into campus life and activities (Knight, 2012). We agree with Knight (2012) that universities have the responsibility to integrate international, intercultural, and comparative perspectives into the student experience through campus-based activities. The Brazilian context involves cooperation between countries of the southern hemisphere, the so-called South-South cooperation, which is challenging because students in these partnerships do not have disposable income and need a stipend to live in Brazil.

When national students participate in internationalisation at home, Institutions gain valuable income and the rich epistemologies, knowledge and insights that international students bring. In addition, society benefits from the global exchange of ideas and experiences. However, as a group of mobile people, international students have been under-studied (Findlay, 2010).

As part of the Capacity Building & internationalization for HE—a Universities for the World Programme promoted by the British Council—we conducted a study on the experiences of international students studying in Brazilian universities. The study included policy analysis and a survey of international students across the country. International students are categorised as those whose primary residence is outside Brazil.

According to the Ministry of Education, Brazilian universities attracted 17,539 foreign students from 177 different countries in 2019. This number of students represents only 0.2% of the total enrolment in HE in the country (INEP, 2020). In other words, though there are no specific targets, the public funds spent on attracting international students to the country lead to very limited success. As such, it is first necessary to understand how international students evaluate their experience in Brazilian HEIs, with a view to identifying new strategies for attracting students based on what works.

When international students pursue a double degree in Brazil, their study plan includes an internship in a company or industry anywhere in the world. Most students prefer taking the internship in Brazil, particularly close to the city where they studied. In these cases, the international office also supports them through various approaches, mechanisms, and activities, such as preparing them for interviews, guiding them through clinical exams, and setting up travel plans to the company site.

The students in the survey responded positively to questions about the core educational components of their programme. The majority reported being satisfied with the learning materials (software, equipment, facilities) and indicated that they felt they were part of the learning community. Over 75% reported being satisfied with the quality of the courses they were on. Overall, the analysis of the modes of support and their inconsistency with respect to the provision indicates the need to evaluate and standardise interventions and support mechanisms.

In this paper, we evaluate the experience of international students in HEIs in Brazil. Data is collated from international undergraduate and graduate students.

MATERIALS, METHODS AND RESULTS

To examine the profile of international students coming to Brazil, the team conducted desk research, cross-examining the national census of HEIs in Brazil (INEP 2022), international students' offices, and MEC data.

To interrogate the international students' perspectives, the project team piloted a survey. The international student survey used by Coventry University, UK, was adapted for use by international students at Brazilian public universities. Three international students and three members of the UFES international team supported the adaptation and piloted the Brazilian version with six students. A few more changes were made before the national rollout. Then, we contacted the Association of the International Relations Representatives of the Brazilian Federal Higher Education Institutions (CGRIFES, in Portuguese) to expand our survey to students from other institutions. After presenting a summary of the results to the Colégio de Gestores de Relações Internacionais das IFES (CGRIFES), all public institutions with international offices were provided with the forms and guidance on how to support students in completing them. Created in 2011, CGRIFES, which is a strategic collegiate body within Brazil's federal higher education system, supports and coordinates internationalisation efforts across 50 federal universities in Brazil. We collated feedback and adjusted the form, resulting in eighteen multiple-choice and eight short-answer questions (see Appendix 1).

We agreed that each institution would collate data from its own students and alumni, while UFES would have the right to use the whole dataset for research purposes. Institutions were required to provide institutional consent. (Form available at https://linktr.ee/ufesinternational developed in three languages (English, Portuguese and Spanish) and sent to each institution. The international offices from each participating university then forwarded the link to their students and alumni. Officers reported students requiring support to complete the forms. This could be due to the novelty of the evaluation and their limited experience completing such forms. It is unlikely that there was any survey fatigue. Students' responses were overwhelmingly positive.

Before filling out the questionnaire, participants provided informed consent, which included information that the project had been registered with the Human Research Ethics Committee (Certificate #33365920.3.0000.5542) and that the data would be used exclusively for the

purposes outlined in the project. The forms were sent on the 30th of March 2021 and remained open until the 31st of May 2021.

We use the Evidencing Value Framework (EVP) developed by Smart, Cleaver, & Robertson (2020 to analyse survey results, integrating it with evidence from a census on students' behaviour and attitudes to studying in Brazilian HEIs. The EVP is designed to identify, map and evaluate intangible assets in higher education, such as personal development, sense of belonging in an institution and engagement with activities provided by HE within and beyond the classroom, with a view to supporting strategic planning that can improve outcomes for students.

The framework focuses on four domains: systems and structures—policies, procedures and organisational frameworks; resources—physical and digital resources available to students; core educational and support components—teaching quality, curriculum design and student support services; and ethos, cultures and Identities—institutional culture, values and community spirit.

We received 293 responses: 162 in Portuguese, 103 in Spanish, and 28 in English. This low return rate meant that only 2 to 5 students completed the form in many institutions. A majority of the students did not complete the demographic section. The data was consolidated into a single spreadsheet in English, where inconsistencies were adjusted (for example, upper versus lowercase letters, typos, alternate spellings, etc.) and answers in different languages were standardised to English. Sixteen responses were excluded because the respondents identified themselves as Brazilian citizens.

The Evidencing Value Framework was used to analyse the responses from the survey, interrogating the support mechanisms provided to students and how student feedback is processed and evaluated to enhance international students' experiences.

**Figure 1: Profile of international students**

International student respondents to the survey came from 45 different countries (Figure 1): 42.9% from South America (24.5% were Colombian). When considering the North and South American continents, 61% of the respondents came from 17 countries in this region.

Fourteen per cent of the respondents came from 12 countries in Africa, while 17.4% came from eight countries in Europe, generating a diversity of 23 distinct native languages.

The mean age among undergraduate students was 27.5 years, and the median was 27. Among graduate students, the mean was 28.8 years, and the median was 33.5. In Brazil, the mean age of undergraduate students was 24.4 years (Andifes, 2018). For graduate students, the mean age for students on masters' programmes was 32.82 years and 36.97 years for PhD students (CGEE, 2020).

Regarding the overall evaluation (Figure 2), more than 82% of the international students reported being satisfied with the course ("definitely agree" or "mostly agree"), and almost 90% reported being satisfied with the support received from the international office. Moreover, 73.7% of the international students surveyed reported that they would actively recommend the university to others interested in applying, and 22.9% would recommend it if asked.

Figure 2: The perspectives of international students studying in Brazilian HEIs
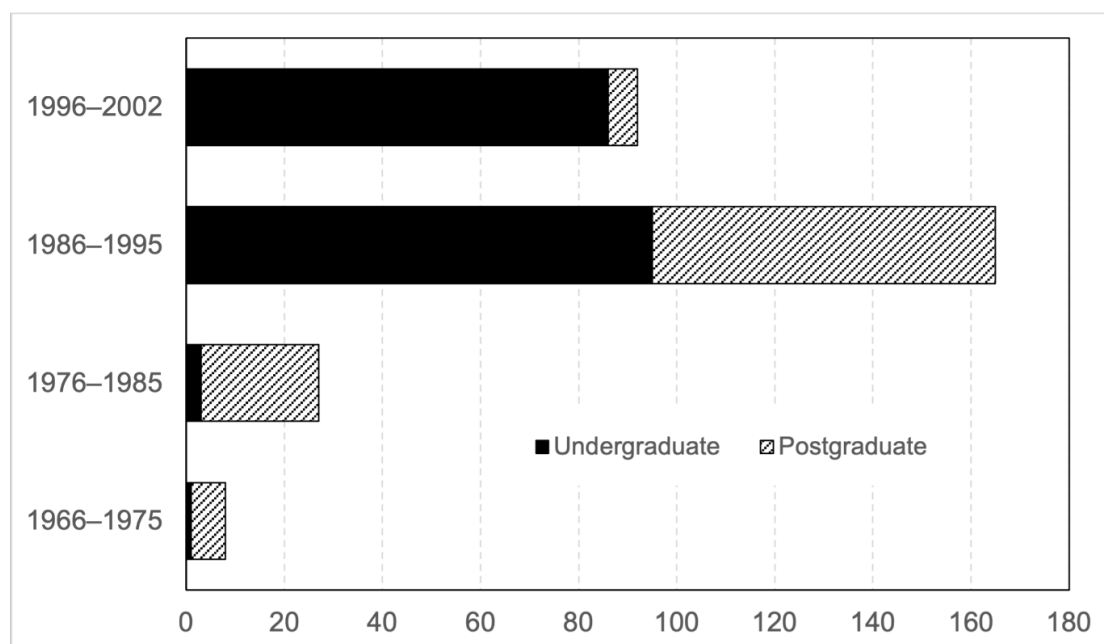
Overall satisfaction with HE experience in Brazil

The majority of responses indicate that students are generally satisfied with their academic experience. For example, when combining the categories "definitely agree" and "mostly agree" (see Figure 3), 82.9% of students are satisfied with the course they are on, and 89.95% are content with the support received from the international office. In addition, 96.6% of the respondents would recommend the university to others, either actively or if asked. This high proportion of positive views raised concerns about the homogeneity of the responses. Homogeneity of results in surveys evaluating students' teaching experience is common; responses are often clustered (Kayas et al., 2022). Participants rarely respond about the entirety of their experience; often, the response is focused on a snapshot of the programme or module they are providing feedback on (Costa & Canen, 2022). In some countries, researchers argue that students are over-surveyed and thus respond passively, leading to random responses (Boring et al. 2016). There are also biases (MacNell et al., 2015) linked to gender, the mean age of participants, sample size, ethnicity/race, and perceptions of class or status, which generally contribute to homogeneity. However, our dataset did not allow for such comparisons.

French (2020) critiques the validity of student evaluations, arguing that student perceptions of teachers' teaching excellence, or otherwise, correlate across different gender and age groups, as well as with the social class of the lecturers. French proposes that it is important to consider how students perceive and respond to evaluative processes within the context of local institutional practices and support mechanisms. Students do not invest in responding to surveys for other reasons. First, they do not feel invested in the survey's goals, and second, they do not trust that the processes or mechanisms will lead to improvement (Winstone et al., 2021). Students are also concerned that survey results may influence their university's reputation, and can become increasingly fatigued by continuous surveying (Fosnacht et al., 2017). It is, therefore, important to ensure that surveys enhance international students' experiences in

tangible ways without eroding their confidence or fostering cynicism or fatigue (Murray Brux & Fry, 2010).

The value and effectiveness of international students' support mechanisms.

The internationalisation of Brazilian HEIs needs to be effectively evaluated to ensure the goals and objectives of the programmes are adequately tracking with the needs of the sector and are effectively aligned to local policies and strategic aims. It appears there is scope to utilise the limited funds and to align the internationalisation strategy in a more comprehensive and integrated manner. In the next section, the paper examines key elements of the internationalisation programme using an Evidencing Value Framework.

DISCUSSION

Though the Brazilian government has made notable investments in both inward and outward mobility, the structural and systemic underpinnings of its internationalisation agenda reveal critical limitations that constrain its effectiveness and scalability. Brazil's approach to internationalisation does not centre on enriching students' experiences.

Systems and structures

Brazil's model of international student mobility, particularly from Latin America, is shaped by bilateral agreements such as the PAEC Program. Unlike European mobility schemes that often emphasise reciprocal exchange and institutional partnerships, Brazil's approach is more selective and academically merit-based. Students are typically chosen while still in their home countries, with academic excellence as a primary criterion. This model, while effective in attracting high-performing students, limits the diversity of international student profiles and may inadvertently exclude those with non-traditional academic trajectories or from less-resourced educational systems.

Furthermore, international students have access to the Política Nacional de Assistência Estudantil (PNAES), designed to democratise access to federal public education and reduce inequalities. However, students have a limited understanding of how to access these funds. Financial support (R$622 monthly) is available to subsidise meals, public health services and discounted transportation. Students from vulnerable backgrounds (including refugees) may also qualify for broader social welfare programs, such as Bolsa Família or Auxílio Brasil, provided they meet income thresholds and complete the CadÚnico registration process.

The complex, highly bureaucratic process for accessing these benefits creates frustration and apprehension. Students require a Social Identification Number (NIS) and often require the support of university social workers to navigate eligibility and documentation requirements. This creates a dependency on institutional actors and may delay or deter access to essential services, particularly for students unfamiliar with Brazilian administrative systems.

Linguistic isolation and limited inward mobility

Brazil's status as the sole Portuguese-speaking country in Latin America presents a unique linguistic barrier that significantly curtails inward student mobility. Unlike countries that benefit from English or Spanish as *lingua francas* in international education, Brazil's linguistic distinctiveness limits its attractiveness to a broader international student base. Although student satisfaction seems to indicate high levels of contentment due to accessible scholarships and tuition-free education, the language of instruction remains a persistent barrier to both academic integration and social inclusion (93.5% of respondents were from three regions: Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC, 59.9%), Europe (18.8%), and Africa (14.8%). More than 40% of respondents come from just three Latin American countries: Colombia (24.5%), Mexico (9.7%), and Argentina (7.9%).

Absence of standardised admission pathways

Brazilian HEIs predominantly rely on national entrance examinations (e.g., ENEM) for student admissions, a system that is largely inaccessible or irrelevant to international applicants. The absence of alternative, standardised pathways for international admissions results in a fragmented and opaque recruitment process. Consequently, the demographic and academic profiles of international students in Brazil remain poorly understood.

The interplay between cost-efficiency and quality assurance increasingly shapes international student mobility. As de Wit and Altbach (2021) observe, students globally seek the highest educational value at the lowest financial cost. In this context, Brazil's public universities consistently rank among the country's top institutions in global rankings, such as the Times Higher Education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), offering a compelling proposition. With tuition-free access for both domestic and international students, these institutions attract a diverse cohort seeking high-quality education without the financial burden typical of many global systems. However, this affordability masks deeper structural disparities in resource access and preparedness among international students, particularly when comparing European and Latin American cohorts.

European students, particularly those enrolled in accredited engineering programs, benefit from a highly structured and resource-rich mobility framework. Verbyla et al. (2023) show that the global competencies of European STEM students improve in Latin America through field-based placements and the development of intercultural capabilities. These programs, governed by bodies such as the European Network for Accreditation in Engineering Education (ENAEE), embed international mobility as a core requirement. Students must complete at least one academic period abroad, typically 17 to 20 weeks, through study, internships, or research placements. This requirement is not merely aspirational but institutionalised through agreements with top-ranked global universities.

Moreover, European engineering education integrates the bachelor's and master's levels, with the final two years of undergraduate study classified as graduate-level education. This creates a misalignment in classification when these students enrol in Brazilian institutions, where they are treated as undergraduates despite their advanced academic standing.

Data deficiency and weak institutional coordination

Perhaps the most critical gap is the lack of a national database or monitoring system for international students. Without reliable data on student numbers, demographics, academic progression or post-study outcomes, Brazilian HEIs and policymakers are ill-equipped to evaluate the impact of internationalisation or to design responsive support services. Figure 3 shows students' satisfaction with mechanisms of support.

Figure 3: Effective mechanisms identified by students
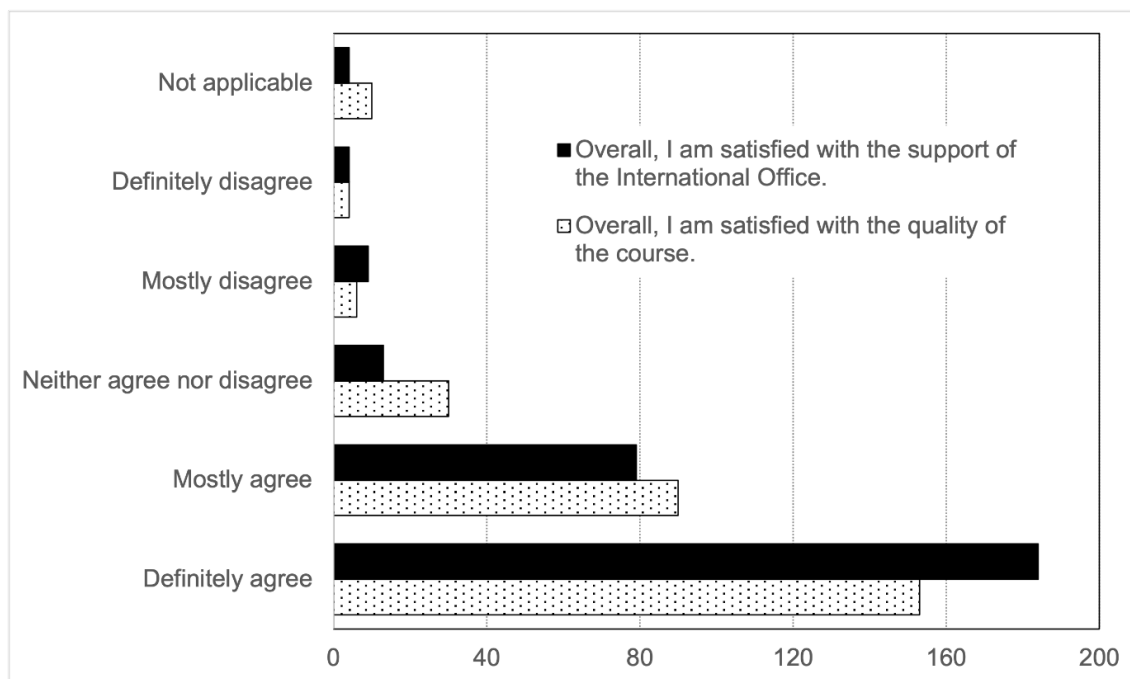
CONCLUSION

Brazil's internationalisation agenda is at a pivotal juncture. While its commitment to educational equity and mobility is commendable, the current model lacks the structural coherence and strategic foresight seen in more mature systems. Addressing linguistic barriers, incentivising institutional engagement, standardising admissions and building robust data systems are not merely operational improvements; they are foundational to positioning Brazil as a competitive and inclusive player in the global higher education landscape. Strategically, government policies need to continuously align with context-sensitive approaches, which are reviewed within the broader educational and social mission of the only Portuguese-speaking country in Latin America (Spanish-speaking region). To avoid instrumentalising internationalisation, all global engagement ought to align with Brazilian local missions and societal needs (Labraña et al., 2024.

The findings reveal how understanding the profile of international students choosing Brazil as a destination for international mobility yields insights that can be used to tailor support mechanisms and services for the inbound student population. The novelty of the survey in Brazil and the lack of baseline data required to construct more evaluative studies of the

internationalisation programmes highlight the limited prioritisation of the student experience. Park (2022) highlighted that international students rely on support services at Australian universities, where there is an increasing focus on their significance. It is important to research what degree-seeking in-bound students need and expect from support services (Perez-Encinas & Rodriguez-Pomeda, 2017; Xu et al., 2025). In Brazil, in particular, the imperatives to use limited resources wisely should be underpinned by good evidence. Though there are many challenges in relation to the culture of evaluating programmes and giving feedback, the necessity of collating data and demonstrating value for money with respect to Brazilian taxpayers' limited resources is poignant.

To enhance its global appeal, Brazil must invest in multilingual academic offerings, including English-taught programs, and provide robust language support services. This would not only broaden its recruitment pool but also improve the academic and social experiences of international students. Holistic processes are needed to support the evaluation of internationalisation, as this paper has argued, to capture both tangible and intangible assets.

Developing a comprehensive national database is essential for evidence-based policymaking, and should be accompanied by institutional mechanisms for onboarding, ongoing support and post-study debriefing to ensure a holistic and high-quality international student experience. Such developments require cultural change that moves away from one-sided evaluation to one that enhances shared responsibility between educators and students (Nash & Winstone, 2017). Furthermore, establishing a centralised admissions framework for international students, complemented by clear and transparent criteria and recognition of foreign qualifications, would streamline recruitment and enable more strategic planning at both institutional and national levels.

Universities need to be proactive to enhance multilingual outreach and onboarding processes that demystify access to social benefits. Embedding social workers within international offices and developing pre-arrival guidance materials could significantly improve uptake and reduce administrative burdens on students. Such support mechanisms also require strengthening communication between Brazil and other Portuguese-speaking countries to support language development. Increasing contributions from The African Fund the Organization of American States to be earmarked for internationalisation activities will also improve pre-registration guidance and the overall student experience.

Limitations

Surveys offer integral insight into the priorities and perspectives of respondents. (Boring et al., 2016) because they gather participants' varied experiences within their perceived context, however, survey results can be biased due to survey fatigue and self-reported prejudices. While we can draw preliminary conclusions from this data, subsequent work should explore the extent to which these results remain valid after accounting for extraneous variables. The survey tool is an important starting point for enhancing systems and provision; however, they should not be the sole instigation for systemic or structural changes (Elliott & Shin. 2002).

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APPENDIX

Free and Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in the research "Evaluation of the experience of foreign students in university education offered in Brazil." The work aims to "Evaluate the training offered by public universities in Brazil at the undergraduate and graduate levels". Filling out the online questionnaire takes between 20 and 25 minutes. The reason for this invitation is that you meet the inclusion criteria of the research - to be a foreign student in academic mobility in Brazil. To participate in this study, you will have no cost, nor will you receive any financial advantage.

The predicted risk is the possible embarrassment or discomfort for sharing the difficulties faced during the pandemic. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, we ask you not to answer it. We are available for any clarifications you need, at any time.

You are assured: a) Secrecy - you will not be identified in any publication that may result from this study; b) Guarantee of privacy; c) You can withdraw consent at any stage of the survey. Participation is voluntary and the refusal to participate will not entail any penalty or change in the way you can be addresses by the researcher; d) No cost to participate in this research; e) Right to seek indemnity in the event of any damage resulting from it.

We commit to: 1) Use the data available exclusively for the purposes contained in the project; 2) Not allow, for any reason, unauthorized persons or institutions to have access to data or individuals; 3) Not disclosure - by any means of communication - of data or information that identifies the research subjects and other variables in the databases that allow the identification of individuals; and 4) Not practice and not allow any action that compromises the integrity of the individuals or the available databases.

We inform that the project has been registered at UFES Human Research Ethics Committee (via Plataforma Brazil) and has the Certificate of Presentation of Ethical Appreciation (CAAE) number 33365920.3.0000.5542 and we commit to forward it (if necessary).

Any questions or information about this research, you can contact Prof. Dr. Arinola Adefila. The Research Ethics Committee should be contacted in case of denunciation and/or complications in the research. The contact can be made by telephone (27) 3145-9820, email or mail by the address: Av. Fernando Ferrari, 514, Campus Universitário, sala 07 do Prédio Administrativo do CCHN, Goiabeiras, Vitória - ES, CEP 29.075-910. Considering this information, we ask you to indicate below whether you agree or not to participate in this research. *Obrigatório

1. Do you agree to participate in this research by answering the following online questionnaire?

Yes or No.

_____

Questionnaire: assessment of the international experience at a Federal University

Please, assess your international experience at a Brazilian Federal University regarding its professors, classes, and the International Office. Your information will be used for statistical purposes only.

1. About the Federal University where you study or have studied at

1.1. Which region in Brazil is the federal university located at?

AC AL AP AM BA CE DF ES GO MA MT MS MG PA PB PR PE PI RJ RN RS RO RR SC SP SE TO

1.2. Which state in Brazil is the federal university located at?

1.3. Acronym of the federal university

1.5. Program you are/were enrolled at the federal university Undergraduate Postgraduate

1.6. Degree level you are/were enrolled at the federal university:

1.7. Year you first enrolled at the federal university:

1.8. Year of entry 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021

Year you left the federal university: 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021, Still enrolled.

2. Information about yourself

2.1. Year of birth:

2.2. Country of birth

2.3. Country of nationality

2.4. Country where you studied before arriving in Brazil.

2.5. First language

Questions 3 - 12

* Definitely agree   *Mostly agree *Neither agree nor disagree   *Mostly   disagree *Definitely disagree *Not applicable

3. Evaluation of teaching during my experience Professors are good at explaining subjects.

Professors made the subjects interesting.

The course is intellectually exciting.

My course has challenged me to achieve my best performance.

4.   Evaluation of Learning Opportunities

My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth.

My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different areas.

My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt.

5.   Evaluation of Grading System and Feedback

Criteria used in grading have been presented since the beginning of my experience. Grading and assessment have been fair.

Feedback on my works has been timely.

I have received helpful comments on my work.

6. Evaluation of Academic Support

I have been able to contact the International Office staff when needed.

I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course.

Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices about my course I have been able to contact the International Office staff when needed.

7.   Evaluation of Organization and Management

The course is well organized and runs smoothly.

The timetable works efficiently for me.

Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.

8.   Evaluation of Learning Resources

Provided IT resources and facilities have supported my learning well enough.

Library resources (e.g., books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well enough.

I have been able to access course specific resources (e.g., equipment, facilities, software, collections) when needed.

9. Evaluation of the Learning Community

I feel part of a community of staff and students.

I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course.

10. Evaluation of Student Opinion

I have had opportunities to provide feedback on my course.

Professors value students' views and opinions about the course

It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been implemented.

The students' union (association) effectively represents students' academic interests.

11. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course

12. Overall, I am satisfied with the support of the International Office.

13. Would you recommend the Federal University where you study/studied to other people interested in applying to this university?

*I would actively encourage people to apply If asked

*I would encourage people to apply

*I would neither encourage nor discourage people to apply If asked

*I would discourage people from applying

*I would actively discourage people from applying