ACADEMIC COOPERATION WITHIN BRICS: TEN YEARS OF THE BRICS NETWORK UNIVERSITY (BRICS NU) FROM A BRAZILIAN PERSPECTIVE

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This paper proposes a diagnosis of the state of the art of academic cooperation at the university level among BRICS member countries. To this end, our analysis emphasizes the history and recent evolution of the BRICS Network University (BRICS NU), which thus far constitutes the bloc's main initiative in this field. Methodologically, the study relies on primary sources such as official documents, normative acts, and quantitative data, complemented marginally by secondary sources, including previously published works on the subject. In addition, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the Director of International Relations of the Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – CAPES), given the agency's recent role in strengthening BRICS NU. The main findings indicate that academic mobility – the primary proxy for university cooperation – among BRICS countries remains incipient, with most of its determinants still favoring ties with the so-called global North. Therefore, strengthening intra-bloc academic cooperation requires, inexorably, exogenous stimuli through national and multilateral actions. In this regard, BRICS NU represents an important instrument for the decolonization of academic relations among its member states. However, what can be observed so far are challenges in enabling the Network University to fully achieve its initial purposes, mainly due to shortcomings in governance and funding, as well as overlaps with other similar but less institutionalized mechanisms. It is therefore essential to revitalize BRICS NU's structure through the action of national authorities (such as CAPES in Brazil), which, nevertheless, also requires coordination efforts among member countries – something that has thus far proven difficult to achieve.

Keywords: BRICS; academic cooperation; academic mobility; BRICS NU; CAPES.

COOPERAÇÃO ACADÊMICA NO ÂMBITO DO BRICS: DEZ ANOS DA UNIVERSIDADE EM REDE DO BRICS (BRICS NU) SOB UMA PERSPECTIVA BRASILEIRA

Este artigo propõe um diagnóstico do estado da arte da cooperação acadêmica em nível universitário no âmbito do BRICS. Para tanto, nossa análise enfatiza o histórico e evolução recente da Universidade em Rede do BRICS (BRICS Network University – BRICS NU), que, até o momento, constitui a principal iniciativa do bloco nessa seara. Como metodologia, optou-se pela consulta a fontes primárias, como documentos, atos normativos e dados quantitativos de procedência oficial, consultando-se marginalmente também fontes secundárias, como trabalhos anteriormente publicados sobre o tema; além disso, foi realizada uma entrevista semiestruturada com o diretor de relações internacionais da Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível

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Superior (CAPES) do Brasil, haja vista a atuação recente da agência no fortalecimento da BRICS NU. Como principais conclusões, tem-se que a mobilidade acadêmica – o principal indicador de cooperação universitária – entre os países do BRICS ainda é incipiente, e a maior parte dos seus determinantes segue favorecendo laços com os países do chamado Norte global. Dessa forma, um estreitamento da cooperação acadêmica intrabloco requer, inexoravelmente, estímulos exógenos por meio de ações em nível nacional e multilateral, e, nesse sentido, a BRICS NU representa um importante instrumento de descolonização das relações acadêmicas de seus países-membros. Contudo, o que se percebe até o momento é um insucesso da Universidade em Rede em cumprir os seus propósitos iniciais, o que se deve sobretudo a deficiências de governança e financiamento, além de sobreposições com outros mecanismos similares, porém menos institucionalizados. Faz-se mister, portanto, revigorar a estrutura da BRICS NU por meio da atuação de autoridades nacionais (como a CAPES no Brasil), o que, contudo, também requer um esforço de coordenação entre países-membros – que, até o momento, tem se revelado de difícil consecução.

Palavras-chave: BRICS; cooperação acadêmica; mobilidade acadêmica; BRICS NU; CAPES.

COOPERACIÓN ACADÉMICA EN EL MARCO DE LOS BRICS: DIEZ AÑOS DE LA UNIVERSIDAD EN RED DE LOS BRICS (BRICS NU) DESDE UNA PERSPECTIVA BRASILEÑA

El presente artículo propone un diagnóstico del estado del arte de la cooperación académica a nivel universitario entre los países miembros del BRICS. Para ello, nuestro análisis enfatiza la trayectoria y la evolución reciente de la Universidad en Red de los BRICS (BRICS Network University – BRICS NU), que hasta el momento constituye la principal iniciativa del bloque en esta esfera. Como metodología, se recurrió a fuentes primarias, tales como documentos, actos normativos y datos cuantitativos de procedencia oficial, complementadas marginalmente por fuentes secundarias, como trabajos previamente publicados sobre el tema. Asimismo, se llevó a cabo una entrevista semiestructurada con el Director de Relaciones Internacionales de la Coordinación de Perfeccionamiento de Personal de Nivel Superior (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – CAPES) de Brasil, considerando la actuación reciente de la Agencia en el fortalecimiento de la BRICS NU. Entre las principales conclusiones, se observa que la movilidad académica – principal indicador de la cooperación universitaria – entre los países del BRICS aún es incipiente, y la mayoría de sus determinantes continúan favoreciendo vínculos con los países del denominado Norte global. En este sentido, un mayor acercamiento de la cooperación académica intrabloque requiere inexorablemente de estímulos exógenos a través de acciones en el ámbito nacional y multilateral, y, bajo esta perspectiva, la BRICS NU representa un importante instrumento de descolonización de las relaciones académicas de sus países miembros. No obstante, hasta el momento se constatan limitaciones de la Universidad en Red para cumplir plenamente sus propósitos iniciales, debido principalmente a deficiencias de gobernanza y financiamiento, además de superposiciones con otros mecanismos similares, aunque menos institucionalizados. Por lo tanto, resulta imprescindible revitalizar la estructura de la BRICS NU mediante la actuación de autoridades nacionales (como la CAPES en Brasil), lo cual, sin embargo, también exige un esfuerzo de coordinación entre los países miembros, que hasta ahora se ha mostrado de difícil consecución.

Palabras clave: BRICS; cooperación académica; movilidad académica; BRICS NU; CAPES.

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1 INTRODUCTION[3]

In the year of 2025, under the rotating presidency of Brazil, the BRICS group of countries – comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, plus the new members currently in the process of joining the platform – enters a new phase of consolidation and expansion amidst important international shifts. This context has provided renewed momentum for initiatives aimed at strengthening cooperation across various areas, including higher education internationalization.

A key development in this regard was the recent decision to expand the BRICS Network University (BRICS NU), a cooperation mechanism aimed at promoting joint graduate programs and research projects while also increasing academic mobility among faculty, staff, and students from participant institutions. Created in 2015 with six thematic axes (energy; computer science and information security; BRICS studies; ecology and climate change; water resources and pollution treatment; and economics), BRICS NU decided to incorporate five new areas of knowledge (mathematics; natural sciences; social and human sciences; sustainable agriculture and food security; and health sciences) in May 2024. In parallel, membership was extended to universities from new BRICS countries as well, and the quota of participants from each nation was elevated from twelve to twenty-two higher education institutions.

In such a scenario, in April 2025, Brazil's Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – CAPES) launched a new public call for pre-qualifying Brazilian institutions interested in participating in the Network University, thus adjusting to BRICS NU's renewed format and enlarged structure. Likewise, by encouraging Brazilian higher education institutions (HEIs) to formally adhere to the platform and propose collaborative projects, CAPES signals a strategic commitment to promoting tertiary student mobility, joint research, and institutional partnerships between developing countries.

Since its onset, BRICS NU has served as the bedrock of higher education collaboration among BRICS countries. Over the years, this initiative has been complemented by a growing ecosystem of platforms dedicated to scientific dialogue among members, such as the BRICS Think Tank Council (BTTC) and its academic forum – which actually predate the BRICS NU; the BRICS University League (BRICS UL), a voluntary coalition of universities from BRICS states; the BRICS+ Universities Association, launched in 2023 as an alliance of higher education institutions as well, but with a broader goal of reaching universities from the entire developing world; and, more recently, the newly established BRICS+

3. The authors employed the artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT3.5 to assist in the revision of English-language writing and translation, given that their native language is Brazilian portuguese.

Universities Rectors Forum, which gathered rectors from universities of the bloc in 2024 and 2025. Such initiatives, though varied in scope and governance, collectively reflect the bloc's goal to reposition itself as a key player in global knowledge and scientific production and to reduce traditional dependencies on North-South academic flows and scientific migration networks – Mignolo (2002); Buckner and Stein (2019); Beck and Pidgeon (2020); Glass and Cruz (2023). However, concerns emerge regarding the lack of articulation between these distinct platforms, whose activities and ambitions often overlap and could therefore be streamlined to improve efficacy and optimize resources.

Despite this evolving institutional architecture, the literature and data on effective student mobility and academic exchange within the BRICS remain limited, with a few exceptions such as Khomyakov et al. (2015), Khomyakov, Dwyer and Weller (2020); Khakhuk et al. (2021); Liu, Hassan and Anuar (2023); and Ogunbanjo (2024). Existing studies in the field are often centered around dominant sending or receiving countries, with scarce analysis of flows within the global South or among developing countries (Baldrighi, 2025). Therefore, questions remain about how attractive BRICS countries are to foreign students, including from within the bloc itself, especially when analyzed through the lens of well-established push-pull and dyadic factors in the canon literature on higher education student mobility – Beine, Romain and Ragot (2014); Caruso and De Wit (2014); Didisse, Nguyen-Huu and Tran (2018) – and academic internationalization – Knight (1994); De Wit (2013).

This paper seeks to address these gaps and contribute to a better understanding of BRICS higher cooperation, with a special focus on future opportunities stemming from the recent expansion of BRICS NU and CAPES's new policy targeted at the involvement of Brazilian HEIs in such a platform. In doing so, it explores both historical and emerging frameworks for collaboration, assesses patterns of student mobility using Unesco's official data, and examines how Brazilian HEIs can strategically position themselves in the broader BRICS context. The analysis also incorporates insights from an interview with the Director of CAPES's Foreign Relations Direction, offering a timely perspective on Brazil's evolving agenda for higher educational diplomacy in the global South and policy design and implementation.

Our main findings were that, despite its ambitious design, BRICS NU has fallen short of its original goals, operating largely as a loose cooperation forum rather than a consolidated academic institution. Structural problems like shortage of funding, a loose governance structure, and overlaps with competing initiatives have limited its effectiveness, and, so far, it has not been able to improve the still marginal intra-bloc academic flows, which remain peripheral in comparison

to mobility figures between BRICS and global North nations. However, the mechanism is recognized to have a strategic potential in bolstering academic cooperation within the bloc, depending on enhanced policies at the national and multilateral levels. In this regard, Brazil's recent actions to strengthen the country's participation in BRICS NU can be seen as a reference to be followed, although insufficient in the face of the absence of a reform in its governance framework.

Accordingly, beyond this introduction, the paper is structured as follows: in section 2, we present an overview of BRICS NU ten years after its establishment, equally discussing the role of the platform in comparison with other initiatives in the realm of academic cooperation within BRICS; particular attention is paid to the impacts of its expansion and Brazil's recent response to this reorganization. Section 3 offers a comparative analysis of student mobility trends among the BRICS countries, drawing on Unesco data and qualitatively comparing how BRICS countries fit in traditional models regarding the flows of international students and recent shifts on mobility trends in the global South. In section 4, we explore the future potential of the CAPES initiative in fostering deeper engagement by Brazilian HEIs in the BRICS academic space, particularly considering the bloc's expansion. Finally, section 5 presents our concluding remarks and outlines recommendations for policy and practice.

2 BRICS NETWORK UNIVERSITY (BRICS NU): CONCEPTION AND EVOLUTION

The internationalization of higher education among BRICS countries emerged as a priority when, having reached a more mature stage after its first quinquennium, the bloc recognized the need to further strengthen ties between different strata of civil society across member states. In this context, the BRICS Network University (BRICS NU) arose as a pioneer initiative in terms of university cooperation within the bloc. After all, in spite of the previous inception of an Academic Forum steered by the BRICS Think Tank Council (BTTC), operational since 2013, there is no record of involvement of HEIs, as BTTC members have traditionally been independent and government-affiliated research bodies rather than universities.

BRICS NU was endorsed by Leaders for the first time at the Fortaleza Summit, held in Brazil in July 2014, whose declaration explicitly "encourage[d] the initiative to establish the BRICS Network University" (BRICS, 2014). Subsequently, the conformation of a jointly run higher education institution was equally supported by Ministers of Education in their second BRICS sectoral meeting, in March 2015, which drove Leaders to ratify it again at the Ufa Summit, in July, highlighting their "support [to] the independent initiatives to establish the BRICS Network University" (BRICS, 2015). Despite the declaration mentioning BRICS NU as an independent project, the idea only materialized

after all Ministers of Education, in November 2015, during another meeting in Moscow, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) aimed at structuring this new, collaborative institution (Iana, 2016).

This constitutive MoU defined that each country would select up to twelve universities to take part in the platform, while its main activities would be devoted to: i) offering master's and PhD programs as well as short-term training courses; ii) developing collaborative research projects across participant institutions; and iii) organizing the mobility of students, faculty, and staff among member universities. The structure proposed, therefore, is a very particular one: while BRICS NU is intended to be an international BRICS university rather than a simple alliance or consortium of existing HEIs, it was conceived without an independent governing body; in other words, the main idea was to create a new, international university drawing on the expertise, staff, and structure of dozens of already existing entities (BRICS NU, 2015).

The hybrid format devised – not being an autonomous university but neither a mere forum of institutions – becomes evident when assessing the structure outlined in BRICS NU's foundational MoU. First, for each selected priority area (energy; computer science and information security; BRICS studies; ecology and climate change; water resources and pollution treatment; and economics), an International Thematic Group (ITG) was to be established, composed of two universities per country. Second, at the national level, each member state was to form a National Coordination Committee (NCC), presided by the respective Ministry of Education and including all national universities participating in BRICS NU. Third, at the top of the governance structure, an International Governing Board (IGB) was envisioned, with three representatives per country – at least one appointed by the Ministry of Education and at least one representing the respective NCC (BRICS NU, 2015). In short, even though there is a governance structure, it is totally reliant on participant universities and national governments, without a permanent administrative body. In addition, there is no clarity regarding the specific attributions of each of the three deliberative instances, with several potential overlaps resulting from the absence of a precise definition of their responsibilities.

Another remarkable bottleneck consists of the lack of specific funding to cover BRICS NU activities. As established in the MoU, member universities were held responsible for providing resources for the initiatives to be carried out, but without a formal commitment around a specific sum deemed sufficient for their implementation. Moreover, the document mentions the possibility of raising resources from other funds, including charitable donations, yet without specifying how that could be done (BRICS NU, 2015). Indeed, as noted by

Khomyakov (2018), financing alternatives varied a lot among BRICS countries, and in most cases there was not a clearly defined national strategy on how to make BRICS NU economically viable.

Likewise, considering the existing asymmetries within the bloc, this lack of uniformization regarding the source of funding for the Network University led to the prevalence of some countries over others in its operation, which contradicts key principles of BRICS and South-South cooperation, such as horizontality, equality, and autonomy. During the first BRICS NU meeting, in 2016, for instance, Russia's mission was much larger than initially expected, whilst South Africa sent an incomplete delegation due to lack of early planning and ongoing social unrest in the country's universities (Dwyer, 2017). In the annual meetings held over the following two years, in turn, it was Brazil to send a reduced delegation, mainly due to political difficulties and financial constraints, being noteworthy that, in 2017, it was not even granted a status of official mission by the Ministry of Education (Dwyer, 2017).

Together with the funding problems, the absence of clear definitions regarding how the Network University was expected to function enabled individual countries to instrumentalize the initiative as a platform for advancing their own national interests in the field of higher education. As Khomyakov, Dwyer, and Weller (2020) observe, from the outset, Russia used BRICS NU to attract students from other member countries to its own universities, as part of a broader strategy to internationalize its higher education system – thereby placing limited emphasis on multilateral cooperation or the development of joint programs. This unilateral approach can be exemplified by the announcement, during the 2018 annual meeting, of training programs offered by Russian institutions to students from other BRICS countries, without any collaboration with foreign universities also taking part in BRICS NU (Khomyakov, Dwyer, and Weller, 2020).

Some members of the Chinese delegation, on the other hand, seemed to initially favor another parallel initiative – the so-called BRICS University League (BRICS UL) –, in which Beijing could be more influential, potentially to the detriment of BRICS NU (Khomyakov, Dwyer, and Weller, 2020). The BRICS UL was, after all, a Chinese-led platform, having been launched in Shanghai, in July 2013, with great involvement of the Beijing Normal University and the Fudan University (Kovalev and Shcherbakova, 2019; Moshkova and Seregin, 2013). Although the BRICS UL was also endorsed in various BRICS leaders' declarations – beginning with the Ufa Summit, in 2015 –, it differed markedly from BRICS NU in structure and purpose. As a voluntary association of autonomous universities, it operated without direct ties to government education

authorities; nevertheless, its progress has been considerably slower than that of BRICS NU, lacking "a signed charter, a developed plan of the activities and a clear organizational structure" (Khomyakov, 2018, p. 333). Still, the very existence of a competing academic initiative alongside BRICS NU underscores the significant difficulties in implementing the official network – particularly given that BRICS UL, despite its informal nature and the absence of any connection with the formal one, received repeated endorsement from BRICS leaders.

In light of this scenario, the BRICS Network University has not been able to perform the tasks envisaged in its constitution: the idea of organizing joint graduate programs associated with each International Thematic Group (ITG) was not accomplished, with no master's or PhD degree tracks having been launched so far. Academic mobility, similarly, has been very limited, with regulatory barriers for diploma revalidation still being a major obstacle for increasing movement of students, faculty, and researchers. As a result, the few academic initiatives carried out consist mainly of occasional publications and short-term courses, such as summer and winter schools, typically promoted within the scope of the ITGs and by the country holding the bloc's rotating presidency.

These initiatives are compiled on BRICS NU's website (nu-brics.ru), whose creation had been agreed upon during its third annual meeting, held in Stellenbosch, 2018 (BRICS NU, 2018). The website, however, is currently only available for Russian IP addresses, which draws attention to the Network University's persistent low level of institutionalization. Indeed, the only activities that have been formally institutionalized are the annual meetings, since, as established by the Regulations of the International Governing Body of BRICS NU (2017), such a forum is to hold a meeting every year. In similar fashion, in agreement with the Statute for International Thematic Groups, those bodies are equally expected to meet twice a year (BRICS NU, 2017b).

In an effort to revitalize BRICS NU, a major structural reform was planned in 2024, coinciding with the accession of new countries to the multilateral bloc. In this regard, at that year's meeting of the International Governing Board, it was agreed to extend membership to universities from Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Similarly, the scope of thematic areas was enlarged to encompass mathematics; natural sciences; social and human sciences; sustainable agriculture and food security; and health sciences. At the same time, the cap of two institutions by country per International Thematic Group (ITG) was maintained so that, with the increase from 6 to 11 thematic axes, each nation could now be represented by up to 22 universities. Lastly, the decision also manifested the intention to reinforce joint initiatives among BRICS NU members, explicitly stating the possibility of establishing an institutional journal and creating an

international olympiad to support talented students, besides highlighting the need to make efforts to finally launch inter-institutional graduate programs (BRICS NU, 2024a).

Consequently, in November 2024, Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) agreeing to joining BRICS NU (BRICS NU, 2024b; BTTC, 2025). Earlier in May, Ministers of Education had already praised in their annual declaration the "accession of the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the United Arab Emirates and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia" as well as the inclusion of new "thematic areas such as mathematics, natural sciences, social and human sciences, sustainable agriculture and food security, health sciences" (BRICS, 2024a). Likewise, Ministers endorsed "the establishment of the BRICS NU academic journal, which can provide an international expert platform for scientific and academic information exchange" (BRICS, 2024a).

In sum, the institution opted for expanding and reaching new areas of operation before first consolidating the structure conceived in 2015 – when it was created –, notwithstanding the paralysis and loose coordination that characterized BRICS NU over its first decade. This expansion was deliberated without outlining an action plan or roadmap for its operationalization, which raises doubts about its feasibility in the long run; in particular, the sudden increase in member institutions has the potential of jeopardizing continuity of previous projects and generating conflicts between founding and new participants. At the same time, however, it is certain that an enlargement of members and thematic axes can help it improve its visibility and channel further resources. Indeed, the debate on whether the strategy adopted was appropriate or not is still dependent on how its operationalization will take place.

Some initial sources of concern are related to the emergence of new parallel initiatives with little or no coordination with BRICS NU. For instance, in concomitance with the mechanism's reform, a new university league was created, namely the BRICS+ Universities Rectors Forum, counting with the presence of many institutions that equally participate in the Network University. Its first annual meeting was held in October 2024 at the Lomonosov Moscow State University, with a second edition taking place in June 2025 under the responsibility of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil (BRICS+ Universities Rectors Forum, 2025). The new forum was sponsored by Education Ministers' declarations in 2024 and 2025, also receiving endorsement from Leaders in their 2025 declaration (BRICS, 2024a; BRICS, 2025a; BRICS, 2025b). Although the newly established Rectors Forum is even looser and less institutionalized than the Network University, without permanent members and

serving rather as a platform for broader academic discussions and networking, it is illustrative that such an initiative was conceived independently of BRICS NU, without any attempt to articulate both cooperation mechanisms. Finally, it is also worth mentioning that, in 2023, another alliance denominated BRICS+ Universities Association had been created, albeit with little concrete connection with the bloc; actually, the coalition gathers 210 institutions from 43 countries, representing more a broader grouping of global South universities than a BRICS cooperation mechanism (BRICS+ Universities Association, 2025).

Turning now to Brazil's participation in the BRICS Network University, the first selection of national members had taken place in December 2015, through the release of a call for applications by the CAPES. In line with the BRICS NU constitutive MoU, CAPES allocated two slots for each of the six original thematic axes. It was established that applications should be submitted directly by high-quality graduate programs, rather than by the universities to which they were affiliated. This arrangement reflected the initial vision of BRICS NU as a jointly administered institution that, drawing on the faculty and infrastructure of partner universities, would offer international, collaborative master's and doctoral programs. Such an interpretation is further reinforced by the fact that the main selection criterion was the proposal of intended activities presented, which had to demonstrate "how the research lines of the [applicant] could contribute for developing a common curriculum plan for a graduate program [...] in the context of BRICS NU" (CAPES, 2015, our translation). The universities to which selected programs belong are listed in the following table.

TABLE 1
Brazilian universities selected to take part in the BRICS Network University (2015)

Thematic axis	Universities selected
Energy	Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC); Federal University of Viçosa (UFV)
Computer Science and Information Security	Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG); Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)
BRICS Studies	State University of Campinas (Unicamp); Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (Puc-Rio)
Ecology and Climate Change	National Institute for Amazonian Research (INPA); Fluminense Federal University (UFF)
Water Resources and Pollution Treatment	Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG); Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)
Economics	Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG); State University of Campinas (Unicamp)

Source: CAPES (2016).

Following the decision to expand the Network University in 2024, CAPES launched a new call for applications in April 2025 to update the list of Brazil's representatives; that is, even institutions previously selected in 2015 were required to re-apply. This time, the federal agency did not directly appoint the new list of national members, having just pre-qualified institutions meeting the minimum requirements. However, the same document clarified that CAPES would still rank applicants in accordance with the proposals submitted, delegating the nomination of the 20 best placed to the National Coordination Committee (NCC). Thus, although the International Governing Body's decision allowed each country to appoint up to 22 institutions, Brazil voluntarily adopted a cap of 20, which meant that, in two of the eleven thematic areas, the country could be represented by only one institution. An additional innovation was the introduction of a 5% bonus for applicant universities located in peripheral regions of the country – namely, the North, Northeast, and Center-West excluding the Federal District (CAPES, 2025a).

Also, applications were now to be submitted directly by universities, through their offices of graduate studies, and no longer by individual programs, which might be a direct consequence of frustrated expectations regarding the offer of joint international degrees by BRICS NU. Another related change corresponds to the fact that, whilst in the first call applicants were required to present a concrete curriculum proposal for joint graduate programs, now the selection criteria were less specific, involving, for example, justifying the importance of participating in the Network University as well as demonstrating academic excellence, solid intellectual production, and the maintenance of formal partnerships with institutions from other BRICS members (CAPES, 2025a). In short, the combination of three factors – i) instituting a wholly new selection process for participating in BRICS NU; ii) switching the eligible units from the program level to the university level; and iii) replacing admission criteria closely related to the establishment of joint international degrees with less specific ones – confirmed the government intention of drastically renewing the set of national members, which, despite jeopardizing continuity and the preservation of institutional memory, allowed for new approaches to be explored, overcoming a cycle of institutional paralysis that marked BRICS NU's first decade of existence. Indeed, this strategy was successful, as shown by the results of the public call, which led to almost full renovation, considering the twenty best ranked applications.

TABLE 2
Brazilian universities selected to take part in the BRICS Network University (2025)

Thematic axis	Universities selected
Energy	Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCAR); Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC)
Computer Science and Information Security	Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE); Federal University of Campina Grande (UFCG)
BRICS Studies	Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS); Federal University of Paraná (UFPR)
Ecology and Climate Change	Federal University of Goiás (UFG); Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)
Water Resources and Pollution Treatment	Federal University of Ceará (UFC); Federal University of Uberlândia (UFU)
Economics	State University of Campinas (Unicamp)
Mathematics	University of Brasília (UnB)
Natural Sciences	Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM); São Paulo State University (Unesp)
Social and Human Sciences	Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Unirio); Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG)
Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security	Federal University of Viçosa (UFV); University of São Paulo (USP)
Health Sciences	Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB); Federal University of Bahia (UFBA)

Source: CAPES (2025b).

In a nutshell, the BRICS Network University has a history marked by high aspirations but persistent operational challenges. Conceived as a unique, international higher education institution that relies on existing universities to promote academic cooperation and mobility among BRICS countries, the initiative has faced significant problems such as the lack of specific funding, an unclear governance structure, and the absence of a permanent administrative body; furthermore, it has frequently been instrumentalized for national interests, equally facing competition from parallel initiatives like the BRICS University League and the BRICS+ Universities Rectors Forum. The activities carried out have mostly been limited to a few publications and punctual events such as summer schools, most of them unilaterally organized by member universities, which contradicts the collaborative spirit that theoretically guides the mechanism. The strategy of expanding before consolidating its initial projects and intentions allows for BRICS NU's reinvigoration but also entails uncertainties in view of the unresolved challenges and vulnerabilities as well as possible clashes between old and new members. In this regard, the recent decision by CAPES to renew

Brazil's membership in the initiative represents an attempt to contribute to this revitalization, reducing the emphasis on jointly run programs and envisaging varied possibilities for collaboration. Hence, the future of BRICS NU remains open, particularly in light of the accession of new countries and the introduction of other thematic axes; nonetheless, if it is to become a strong and effective cooperation mechanism, it is indispensable to address the current governance and funding problems.

3 TERTIARY MOBILITY TRENDS AMONG THE BRICS COUNTRIES: TRADITIONAL MODELS AND PUSH-PULL FACTORS

The phenomenon of international academic cooperation encompasses a wide range of activities beyond student mobility, including joint research, faculty exchanges, dual degrees, and the creation of international academic networks. However, tertiary student mobility remains the most visible and quantifiable expression of internationalization, serving as a practical proxy for studying broader academic collaboration. By analyzing mobility flows and the factors associated with it, we can better understand the dynamics and strengths of international academic relationships between countries. Furthermore, when it comes to measuring or identifying the phenomenon of academic internationalization, several authors place mobility as a cross-dimensional variable, comprising students, faculty, staff, researchers, governance, and curricula (Gao, 2019). The scientific literature on international tertiary student mobility has long sought to understand the core variables, or determinants, that influence a higher education student's decision to study abroad. A widely used conceptual framework to analyze these determinants is the push-pull model (Caruso and De Wit, 2014), present in different types of migration studies and canon works on higher education mobility – Beine, Romain and Ragot (2014); Caruso and De Wit (2014); Didisse, Nguyen-Huu and Tran (2018) – and academic internationalization – Knight (1994); De Wit (2013). Within this framework, the so-called push factors refer to circumstances in a country of origin that motivate a student's decision to leave, while pull factors describe the features of a destination country that make it particularly attractive. This framework is particularly relevant in studies of academic migration when a dyadic relation is considered (that is, how country X is attractive to students from country Y given similar and/or complementary features such as language, expected income, hosting capacity, and the presence of a consolidated diaspora).

One of the most robust pull factors identified in the literature is linguistic proximity. Research consistently demonstrates that the presence of a shared official language between origin and destination countries significantly boosts student flows – Beine, Romain and Ragot (2014); Ovchinnikova, Van Mol and Perez-Encinas (2022). Junqueira and Baldrighi (2020), for instance, highlight

that countries that speak languages with global prevalence tend to be more appealing than others. Kahanec and Králiková (2011) underscore that the language of instruction of a given country, particularly when it is English, French, German, Spanish, or Russian, serves as a critical determinant when measuring attractiveness to foreign students.

Social networks also play a pivotal role. The presence of compatriots in a significant diaspora or culturally similar communities abroad can considerably ease the transition for international students. It can reduce asymmetric information and uncertainty costs for newcomers. Studies show that countries with larger populations of foreign-born residents (beyond students) and high numbers of skilled migrants tend to attract more students from similar backgrounds (Junqueira and Baldrighi, 2020; Beine, Romain and Ragot, 2014; Didisse, Nguyen-Huu and Tran, 2018). Beine, Romain, and Ragot (2014) argue that the existence of these networks increases the likelihood of student inflows and also reduces the costs and risks associated with migration. Empirical evidence from surveys conducted by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) in Australia and by Pedro and Franco (2015) in Portugal further supports it.

Academic reputation is another essential factor in traditional models. Often referred to as the "quality dimension" (Van Bouwel and Veugelers, 2013; Mateus and Acosta, 2022), it encompasses metrics such as the impact of scientific publications and researchers, per-capita expenditure and investment (Caruso and De Wit, 2014), as well as the presence of national universities in global rankings such as the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings (QS), the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE). For example, Beine, Romain and Ragot (2014) assess the influence of universities listed in those rankings and find that academic excellence is indeed a significant, albeit moderate, driver of tertiary student mobility.

Economic considerations also weigh heavily in destination decision-making. The economic appeal of a country or region is often proxied by variables such as GDP per capita or average wages for graduates. Caruso and De Wit (2014) and Beine, Romain and Ragot (2014) find that higher income levels or expected income are strongly associated with inflows of international students. Didisse, Nguyen-Huu and Tran (2018) expand this analysis by incorporating variables like youth unemployment in the destination country, revealing that, while high youth unemployment may deter mobility, high tertiary occupation rates appear to encourage it.

Geographic distance between countries typically serves as a deterrent to international student mobility, especially since the canon models often focus

on Europe and its surrounding areas. This inverse relationship is consistently documented in such empirical models. In all six specifications tested by Beine, Romain and Ragot (2014), distance has a significant negative effect. Similar outcomes are found in the gravity models by Van Bouwel and Veugelers (2013), as well as in Caruso and De Wit's work (2014). The authors emphasize that geographic proximity naturally reduces travel costs and facilitates movement.

Cost of living (or currency differences) is another significant variable (Muñoz, 2022). Most of the studies report a negative correlation between living costs and tertiary mobility. Caruso and De Wit (2014) use inflation trends as a proxy, while Beine, Romain and Ragot (2014) draw on Numbeo's Consumer Price Index. Tuition fees are also a critical cost to consider, although data limitations and scholarship availability often complicate the analysis. While some studies argue that tuition fees have little impact due to the availability of financial aid and scholarships (Beine, Romain and Ragot, 2014), others suggest that the combined burden of fees and living expenses, chiefly housing, does deter students (Caruso and De Wit, 2014).

A country's capacity to host, absorb and support international migrants and students is equally a factor worth noting. A large number of universities, a dynamic labor market, and accessible housing or funding opportunities enhance a destination's attractiveness. It also connects with the network and social factor already presented. In quantitative models, common proxies include population size and the number of higher education students (Beine, Romain and Ragot 2014). Van Bouwel and Veugelers (2013) similarly rely on student population measurements in origin and destination countries to establish a gravity-based model.

Furthermore, authors such as Khomyakov, Dwyer and Weller (2020) and Baldrighi (2025) point to the gap between global North and global South as a driving factor for tertiary flows. The former highlight that academic excellence and network building have been historically more prevalent in developed countries, discussing how those features shape or determine the current South-North flows. The latter tests three different dummy variables to better catch how the global South perspective can be added to canon literature models on student mobility. In other words, through a cross-sectional analysis, the legacy of a colonial relationship – the dummy variable demonstrating the strongest explanatory power in the cited study – exerted influence across multiple dimensions of dyadic relation. These include economic dependence, the presence of a diaspora from the former colony in the former colonial power, and shared linguistic ties. However, from a quantitative perspective, potential collinearity issues may compromise the validity of incorporating these variable analyses.

Finally, other additional factors also appear across the literature on the subject. These include personal safety and political stability – often measured by crime or homicide rates, political repression, censorship, or xenophobic attitudes (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Junqueira and Baldrighi, 2020) – as well as national policies aimed at fostering student inflows, inbound or outbound. Examples include the availability of scholarship and fellowship programs, visa facilitation policy, freedom of movement and residence for persons, English-medium education in non-English-speaking countries, and institutional partnerships (Kahanec and Králiková, 2011; Rumbley, 2012). Cultural and even religious affinities may also play a role in bilateral student exchanges, although such variables are harder to quantify and less frequently included in quantitative models for tertiary mobility.

Thus, considering these variables and features, how do the original BRIC countries plus South Africa fit within traditional models of tertiary student mobility? In other words, how attractive are the five members of the platform to foreign tertiary students, considering factors such as language, social networks, academic reputation, economic appeal, geographic distance, cost of living, hosting capacity, and former political ties? Likewise, how intense is academic mobility amongst these nations? To address such questions, a small-n comparative approach is adopted, focusing on the five countries. Despite the recent accession of new members to the bloc in 2024, they were not incorporated into the analysis, since, given their recent affiliation, it would be meaningless to draw conclusions on how existing cooperation mechanisms contributed (or not) to the results identified.

The analysis first concentrates on the aforementioned variables influencing student mobility to identify patterns of similarity and difference among the cases, while maintaining methodological coherence and avoiding the common "many variables, small-n" problem in qualitative comparisons. To standardize the comparative exercise, international migrant stock and population data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) will be used to assess migrant and social networks, as well as hosting capacity. Academic excellence will be measured by the number of higher education institutions ranked in the QS, ARWU, and THE rankings per country. Economic appeal will be evaluated based on recent GDP growth rates, and cost of living will be assessed using the World Bank's price level ratio of PPP conversion factor (GDP) to market exchange rate. For other factors, such as language, geographic distance, and colonial ties, no specific quantitative database will be employed.

Alphabetically, we begin with Brazil. The country's official language, Portuguese, does not constitute a major asset in attracting international students. Although it ranks among the ten most spoken languages globally, its presence

outside Brazil is limited, with Angola, Mozambique, and Portugal being the main Lusophone countries. In 2024, UN DESA reported over 1.4 million migrants living in Brazil – a large absolute number, yet around only 0.7% of the population, which is below both the average of regional neighbors in South America and that of the emerging world more broadly. In terms of academic excellence, Brazil has 35 institutions in the QS World University Rankings 2025, with the University of São Paulo (USP) among the top 100. In the THE World University Rankings 2025, 70 Brazilian institutions are listed, with USP again in the top 200. The ARWU 1000 2024 includes 18 Brazilian institutions, with USP among the top 150. Economically, Brazil is not currently a booming power, as it was when the BRICS grouping was formed in the 2000s, having faced multiple crises and a sluggish economic performance in the 2010s. Nonetheless, GDP has grown steadily since the pandemic: 4.8% in 2021, 3% in 2022, 3.2% in 2023; and 3,4% in 2024 (World Bank, 2025). Geographically, Latin America is among the most isolated global regions, and Brazil's densely populated areas are located far from international borders, mostly along its Atlantic coast. The country has, however, a low cost of living. In 2024, its price level ratio (or difference in price levels between countries by indicating the number of units of a common currency needed to buy the same volume of the aggregation level in each country) was 0.5, indicating that its cost of living is half that of the United States in US dollars (World Bank, 2025). In terms of hosting capacity, Brazil is huge: with over 200 million inhabitants and 9.9 million tertiary students (INEP, 2023), it has an extensive higher education infrastructure capable of absorbing international students. Finally, Brazil lacks a colonial legacy that might facilitate migratory ties or educational inflows from former – non-existent in this case – colonies.

For Russia, language is an important asset: Russian is an official UN language and is widely spoken in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, even being a *lingua franca* in some former Soviet Union (USSR) republics. As Portuguese, it is also among the ten most spoken languages worldwide, even if its global reach remains largely confined to the areas mentioned. According to the UN DESA, as of 2024, Russia hosted approximately 7.6 million foreign migrants, representing around 6% of its total population of more than 140 million people – just slightly below the European average. Academically, Russia demonstrates considerable standing in international rankings, like Brazil. The QS 2025 Rankings list 47 Russian institutions, with the Lomonosov Moscow State University consistently placed among the top 100. Similarly, the THE Rankings 2025 include 103 Russian institutions, with the same university listed within the top 200. Lastly, ARWU 1000 features 7 Russian institutions, again with the Moscow State University placed in the top 150. Economically, Russia's trajectory has been marked by fluctuations since the 2008 financial crisis. Recently, its GDP has grown by 5.6%

in 2021, -2.1% in 2022 amid war-related and international pressures, 3.6% in 2023, and 4.3% in 2024 (World Bank, 2025). The cost of living is low, with a falling price level ratio in recent years, of 0.3 in 2024 – 30% of the U.S. level. In 2023, the Russian Federation had 4.3 million tertiary students in total (Statista, 2024), reflecting the country's significant hosting capacity. Geographically, although huge, its population centers are relatively close to Eastern and Northern Europe and some important central and oriental cities such as Kazan, Yekaterinburg, Omsk and Vladivostok are close to, respectively, Central Asian countries and China. Finally, Moscow has a long-lasting history of colonization and political ties with countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia dating back to the Early-Modern period and given the legacy of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This is an advantage for attracting tertiary students considering the historical, geographic, linguistic, and social aspects that might influence, for example, Belarusian, Kazakh and Turkmen students to enroll in Russian HEIs.

Following the BRICS acronym, India is next. Linguistically, the country has an advantage – English serves as a *lingua franca* across its different and multicultural regions and is one of the two nation-wide official languages, alongside Hindi. While it is home to a plethora of local languages and even dialects, English remains the primary option in higher education, business, and bureaucracy, facilitating access for international students. According to the UN DESA (2024), India hosted almost 4.8 million international migrants, a sizeable number in absolute terms, yet relatively minor in proportion of its gargantuan population, the largest in the world – more than 1.43 billion in 2023. Regarding the quality dimension, India maintains a solid presence in global rankings, though not as prominent as the two previous countries. The QS World University Rankings 2025 records 46 Indian HEIs, with the Institutes of Technology from Bombay and Delhi ranked among the top 150. In the THE World University Rankings 2025, 133 Indian institutions are listed, albeit none in the top 200. Furthermore, the ARWU 1000 registers 15 Indian institutions, with none appearing in the top 400. In economic terms, India stands out as the world's fastest-growing GDP among major economies in recent years – even surpassing China. It recorded a GDP growth rate of 9.7% in 2021, 7% in 2022, 8.2% in 2023, and 6.5% in 2024, while also having consistently maintained an annual growth rate above 6% in almost every year of the last decade (World Bank, 2025). The country also offers a very competitive cost of living. With a price level ratio of 0.2 in 2024 (World Bank, 2025), India ranks among the most affordable destinations in the world. For hosting capacity, the country is outstanding: with over 43 million tertiary students (British Council, 2024), India possesses a vast and still expanding higher education system, driven by its young and fast-growing population. Geographically, the country is densely populated in all its areas and

bordered by several populous South Asian and Himalayan neighbors, enhancing the feasibility of regional student mobility. Finally, India does not have a colonial legacy – not one as a colonial power, of course – that could foster migratory or academic links through former political and cultural ties.

Linguistically, Mandarin Chinese is spoken by the majority of China's population and is the most spoken mother tongue worldwide. However, outside of the country, it is not a dominant language, even if it enjoys official status in the United Nations. In terms of international migration, Mainland China hosted around 1.64 million migrants in 2024, with Hong Kong and Macao contributing with another 3.5 million. Despite this relatively modest number in comparison to its population of over 1.4 billion, the country's role as an academic and economic powerhouse cannot be overlooked. According to QS World University Rankings 2025, 71 Chinese universities are listed, with several institutions, particularly in Beijing and Shanghai, making prominent appearances in the top 50 and top 100. Similarly, the ARWU 2025 ranks 225 Chinese institutions. The THE World University Rankings 2025 lists 94 institutions from China, further highlighting its expanding academic landscape. Economically, China remains a global powerhouse, even if its growth rates have slowed in recent years. After achieving an 8.4% GDP growth rate in 2021, the country's growth dropped to 3% in 2022 but rebounded with 5.2% in 2023 (World Bank, 2025). In terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), China had an index of 0.5 in 2024. The country boasts a vast higher education system, with over 47 million tertiary students, highlighting a huge hosting capacity. Geographically, China benefits from its proximity to key population centers in East Asia, including Japan, the Korean Peninsula, and Southeast Asia, further enhancing its appeal for regional student mobility and academic cooperation. Like India and Brazil, China does not have a colonial past, which does not contribute to its attractiveness to foreign students from former non-existent colonies.

Lastly, South Africa: the rainbow nation has eleven official languages with English functioning as a *lingua franca* as well, especially in the academic environment.[4] According to UN DESA (2024), the country hosted more than 2.6 million international migrants, accounting for more than 4% of its total population – a sizeable share, notably in Africa. As reported by the QS World University Rankings 2025, 11 South African universities are listed, with the University of Cape Town (UCT) among the top 150. In the THE World University Rankings 2025, 14 institutions are listed, with UCT again in the top 200. The ARWU 1000 2024 includes 8 South African institutions, with

4. Or twelve, since sign language has an official status in the country. Furthermore, even if English is a *lingua franca*, the country differs from India since it also has a sizeable community speaking it as a mother tongue.

the first appearance only in the top 300 – meaning that the country is the weakest among the former BRICS in this measure. South Africa has a sluggish economy and one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, frequently fluctuating at around 30% – which is not attractive for international students seeking to integrate the country's job market after a diploma. After achieving a 5% GDP growth rate in 2021 after the pandemic shock of 2020, the country's growth dropped to 1.9% in 2022, 0.7% in 2023, and 0.6% in 2024 (World Bank, 2025). In terms of PPP, South Africa had an index of 0.4 in 2024. The country's higher education system is relatively moderate in size, mainly when comparing it to the other BRICS countries: over 1.7 million students in 2025 according to the nation's Department of Higher Education and Training (2025) – which represents, nonetheless, a relevant figure in the African continent. Geographically, the country benefits from being close to other nations in Southern Africa. Furthermore, it lies in the center of the more traditional projections of the world map, being closer than most regions comparatively. Finally, regarding former colonial ties and attractiveness to foreign students, unlike India, Brazil and China, South Africa had Namibia as a possession up to 1990. However, one can hardly consider it a colonial power such as Russia.

Given the alignment of BRICS countries with established models of international student attractiveness, we now turn to an analysis of inbound student mobility across the five nations. Table 1 presents Unesco data on the total number of internationally mobile tertiary-level students received in recent years (based on the five most recent years for which data are available). Table 2 provides corresponding figures for the net flow of inbound versus outbound students, while table 3 displays the inbound mobility rate for each BRICS country.[5]

TABLE 3
Series of total inbound internationally mobile students: tertiary

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Brazil	21,803	22,364	22,225	24,009	25,186
Russia	282,922	N.A.	321,845	340,326	336,453
India	47,424	49,348	48,035	46,659	45,700
China	201,177	225,100	221,653	210,903	200,892
South Africa	40,712	36,050	33,974	30,631	N.A.

Source: Unesco (2024).

5. According to Unesco's glossary, the indicators shown in tables 3, 4 and 5 are, respectively, defined as follows: 1) Internationally mobile students are individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination of a given student is different from their country of origin; 2) Number of inbound internationally mobile students minus the corresponding number of outbound internationally mobile students; and 3) Number of students from abroad studying in a given country, expressed as a percentage of total tertiary enrolment in that country.

TABLE 4
Series of the net flow of internationally mobile students (inbound minus outbound): tertiary

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Brazil	-48,901	-59,908	-66,989	-64,856	-63,328
Russia	204,841	229,944	396,244	260,230	276,748
India	-333,589	-415,267	-473,116	-467,047	-574,964
China	-819,387	-858,847	-884,224	-817,233	-841,380
South Africa	30,225	28,057	22,695	21,270	17,958

Source: Unesco (2024).

TABLE 5
Series of the inbound mobility rate: tertiary (In %)

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Brazil	0.25	0.25	0.24	0.25	0.24
Russia	4.97	11.27	8.11	8.49	4.79
India	0.13	0.14	0.12	0.12	0.11
China	0.43	0.45	0.41	0.37	0.34
South Africa	3.47	3.04	2.92	2.5	N.A.

Source: Unesco (2024).

From the data, we can infer that Brazil and especially India and China are great exporters of outbound students, while South Africa and particularly Russia are important destinations for inbound international students. Also, the global Covid-19 pandemic did not have a sizeable impact on those numbers. Furthermore, the variables tend to be numbers and rates do not change much, especially considering that the general denominator (total number of higher education students) is big in all the five countries, notably in India and China.

Regionally, the BRICS' inbound rates are not outliers, notably given their total student population as denominators: Unesco's latest data for it are 1.15 for Latin America and the Caribbean (2002), 4.95 for Central and Eastern Europe (2022), 0.11 for South Asia (2022), 1.42 for East Asia and the Pacific (2022), and 1.77 for Sub-Saharan Africa (2021). Worldwide, the latest data indicates a 2.68 rate of inbound mobile international students. Now, table 6 brings the latest Unesco data on the intragroup mobility numbers, highlighting where do BRICS tertiary students go within the bloc. The cells show the number of students from the country of origin (line) in the destination (column).

TABLE 6
Intra-BRICS inbound internationally mobile students (2019-2023)

			2019		
	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Brazil	-	427	13	55*	61
Russia	44	-	43	55*	27
India	26	12,105	-	729*	446
China	319	18,531	106	-	165
South Africa	70	548	164	26*	-
			2020		
	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Brazil	-	552	21	53*	41
Russia	47	-	36	57*	20
India	28	15,910	-	810*	427
China	281	32,033	122	-	146
South Africa	51	727	161	27*	-
			2021		
	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Brazil	-	453	27	44*	36
Russia	52	-	26	62*	19
India	25	16,861	-	765*	390
China	242	35,674	83	-	154
South Africa	61	641	139	24*	-
			2022		
	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Brazil	-	358	13	40*	37
Russia	56	-	23	63*	13
India	28	19,734	-	642*	386
China	252	40,797	46	-	118
South Africa	80	361	121	23*	-
			2023		
	Brazil	Russia	India	China	South Africa
Brazil	-	227	13	58*	N.A.
Russia	58	-	23	64*	N.A.
India	26	24,904	-	548*	N.A.
China	242	46,046	46	-	N.A.
South Africa	79	244	121	20*	-

Source: Unesco (2024).

Note: Two observations about this table: one, South Africa's data for 2023 are not yet available as of July 16, 2025 in Unesco's UIS database. Also, the desegregation of inbound students in Mainland China's data are not available in any given year in Unesco's time series. The numbers present with an asterisk (*) are only for Macao and Hong Kong. In this case, in the absence of data for the whole country, they are presented here as weak proxies.

Therefore, one can conclude that, except for flows from India and China to Russia, the mobility of students between the BRICS is peripheral to the overall flows regarding the five countries. While international academic cooperation encompasses a broad spectrum of initiatives, including joint research projects, faculty mobility, dual or joint degree programs, and the establishment of global research networks, tertiary student mobility remains its most visible and readily measurable dimension. Although such mobility figures offer a reductionist view of international academic engagement, they still provide useful insights into broader patterns of cooperation and institutional attractiveness. In the case of the BRICS countries, an analysis of these flows reveals that, with the notable exceptions mentioned, intra-BRICS mobility plays only a marginal role within the overall international student flows related to them. This limited exchange suggests that deeper forms of academic collaboration among the bloc's members, including the BRICS NU, remain underdeveloped and fragmented. Therefore, expanding the scope of and formalizing cooperation mechanisms, such as CAPES's recent public call for Brazilian HEIs to join the network university, should be more than welcome.

4 NEW SCENARIOS AND STRATEGIC SHIFTS: INSIGHTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH CAPES

This section analyzes the implications and prospects of the 2025 public call launched by CAPES to promote the participation of Brazilian higher education institutions (HEIs) in BRICS NU, as well as recent changes and challenges in the international scenario for higher education internationalization. The findings are based on primary qualitative evidence and data gathered during a semi-structured, open interview conducted in person with the Director of International Relations of CAPES, Mr. Rui Oppermann, who acknowledged full permission for the authors to nominally mention him and to use his answers for academic purposes. The interview took place at CAPES's headquarters in Brasília on May 9, 2025, at 3 PM (BRT), and was guided by a set of 16 open-ended questions prepared and sent in advance to the agency's Foreign Relations Direction (DRI/CAPES). The conversation was recorded with open expressed consent and complemented by formal, written responses later submitted by CAPES to the authors. The complete transcript and formal replies are included as metadata submitted to the journal alongside this paper, ensuring traceability and research reproducibility. The sixteen guiding questions are presented below.

1) Could you please provide context regarding the creation of the public call launched by CAPES for the adhesion of Brazilian Higher Education Institutions to the BRICS Network University? In particular, we would like to understand the institutional narrative surrounding the emergence of this policy.

2) What were the main political, diplomatic, scientific, or academic factors that motivated CAPES to invest in engagement with the BRICS NU at this moment, especially in light of Brazil's presidency of the group in 2025?

3) What are the main objectives CAPES expects to achieve through this initiative?

4) To what extent does this initiative differ from previous internationalization policies formulated by CAPES in recent years, such as the Science Without Borders program, the Institutional Internationalization Program (PrInt), and the forthcoming CAPES Global initiative?

5) Have these previous programs, as well as the Undergraduate Student Program – PEC-G, been successful in fostering student mobility in Higher Education among the BRICS countries?

6) Could you comment on the types of short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes that CAPES considers desirable or expected from the expanded participation of Brazilian HEIs in the BRICS NU?

7) Are there any indicators or mechanisms under consideration to evaluate the success of this public policy? If so, which ones?

8) In your view, what role can the BRICS NU play in reshaping the internationalization strategies of Brazilian institutions, particularly in contrast to more traditional partnerships with countries from the global North?

9) How does this policy contribute to strengthening Brazil's position as an active player in the dynamics of the global South in science, technology, and higher education?

10) Do you believe the expansion of the BRICS bloc with new member countries presents new opportunities or challenges for Brazilian HEIs? How is CAPES preparing for this new scenario?

11) How has CAPES supported the BRICS+ Rectors' Forum, which will be held in Rio de Janeiro from June 5 to 7 2025?

12) How does CAPES envision the possibility of expanding student and faculty mobility programs among BRICS countries as a result of this adhesion? Are there ongoing negotiations to facilitate visas, scholarships, or joint/double degree programs, for instance?

13) Considering your experience leading the international relations office at CAPES, what recommendations would you offer for the improvement of this policy in the coming years, both at the national level and within the multilateral framework of the BRICS?

14) How do you envision the role of Brazil – and of CAPES in particular – in shaping a more plural, inclusive, and demand-driven internationalization agenda aligned with the priorities of the global South?

15) Finally, do you see any pathways for fostering research and mobility of students, faculty, researchers, and administrative staff from Brazilian HEIs with BRICS countries that do not depend on state support from CAPES or similar agencies? Or is there a natural alternative route to strengthen academic and university cooperation among BRICS nations?

16) Following the adhesion of new Brazilian universities to the BRICS NU, are there specific initiatives planned by CAPES to foster internationalization among participating institutions? For instance, are there programs to promote academic mobility or to support full or sandwich postgraduate studies at universities in other BRICS countries?

According to Mr. Opperman, the decision to relaunch the Brazilian engagement with BRICS NU reflects both institutional history and renewed political impetus. As already discussed (section 2), Brazil had initially joined the network in 2015 through a public call for institutional participation in joint projects with the other countries. However, he emphasizes that, due to subsequent shifts in foreign and higher education policy in Brazil in the following years, active participation in the initiative was diminished and even discontinued in some cases.

Therefore, the 2025 call, ten years after the original selection process, marks not only a resumption but a strategic repositioning within the BRICS (now expanded), aligned with Brazil's broader foreign policy objectives during its presidency of the group and its renewed commitment to South-South cooperation. Switching the level of institutional representation from graduate programs – as established in the 2015 public call – to universities themselves – as put in the 2025 call – further corroborates the crucial importance assigned by CAPES's current administration to the initiative. Also, the most recent call also explicitly mentions the possibility of future funding lines to BRICS NU projects, which also reinforces this new priority status conferred to the cooperation platform.

The primary goal of the measure was to select up to 20 Brazilian HEIs to be officially integrated into BRICS NU across the 11 predefined thematic fields. Three days after the interview, on May 12, the selected institutions

were announced (CAPES, 2025b). The selection process was coordinated by the Brazilian BRICS NU National Coordination Committee, composed of representatives from the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE or Itamaraty), CAPES, the National Association of Rectors of Federal Universities (ANDIFES), and the Brazilian Association for International Education (FAUBAI). The policy design was characterized by a structured, inductive model, in which institutional engagement and willingness precede the financing of concrete academic activities.

In this context, as for the deliverables and the policy implementation of the CAPES's new call for BRICS NU, the Agency considers its short-term objective to be the consolidation of the selected HEIs within the framework and their active participation in research projects aligned with the priority fields mentioned. In the medium and long terms, CAPES's policy seeks to increase Brazil's visibility and credibility in international scientific and academic networks, diversify funding and outbound mobility destinations, and promote collaborative outputs such as co-authored publications and even joint graduate programs. Also, the expected outcomes include the development of dual degrees, cotutelle PhD supervision mechanisms, and academic missions supported by forthcoming CAPES funding calls. Given section 3's data, currently, Brazilian students rarely choose a BRICS country as their destination: in 2022 (latest Unesco's outbound mobility data), among Brazil's more than 88,000 higher education students abroad, less than 500 had chosen Russian, India, China (Macao and Hong Kong)[6] and South Africa as destinations.

As confirmed by the interviewee, this renewed approach emphasizing geographic diversity and further cooperation with emerging nations significantly diverges from prior higher education internationalization strategies promoted by CAPES. While programs such as Science without Borders (Ciência sem Fronteiras – CSF) and the PrInt primarily supported outbound mobility to countries of the global North, this revitalized policy emphasizes geopolitical repositioning, diversification and pluralism of partnerships, and strategic protagonism of Brazil in the BRICS and the global South. Therefore, Mr. Oppermann affirms that CAPES aims to enhance the attractiveness of the Brazilian postgraduate system by fostering reciprocal academic relationships with institutions facing similar developmental challenges within the group. This is also true for the institution's

6. As previously noted, data on the number of incoming students to China by country of origin are not available in the Unesco database. Only aggregate figures are provided, along with separate disaggregated data for Hong Kong and Macao. The main destinations for Brazilian tertiary students were Europe (with emphasis on Portugal), North America, and Argentina.

new internationalization program, CAPES-Global, which encourages universities' participation in international research networks.[7]

This movement to strengthen academic mobility with global South countries and reduce the long-standing structural reliance on North American and European nations can equally be illustrated through some other recent policies defined by CAPES. First, in March 2024, the Agency launched the Move la América Program, seeking to increase cooperation of Brazilian universities with other Latin American and Caribbean institutions (CAPES, 2024). The first edition of Move la América offered scholarships to 1,600 students from these countries willing to do a sandwich master's or doctoral program in Brazil, in different areas of knowledge, in one of the HEIs having adhered to the initiative. In addition, other scholarship programs aimed at attracting foreign students to Brazilian universities – but with a focus on the entire formation rather than sandwich periods – were improved. PEC-PG, aimed at graduate students, was reactivated in 2024 after some years of interruption, while PEC-G, aimed at undergraduate students, had its number of scholarships significantly expanded (CAPES, 2025c, 2025d). Both PEC-PG and PEC-G historically attract students from other global South countries, mainly from Latin America and African lusophone nations.

However, it is noteworthy that, while there was an undeniable increase in initiatives seeking to invigorate student flows to Brazil, there are not yet any policies stimulating that Brazilian students go to other emerging countries instead of traditional knowledge centers in the global North, since both CAPES's programs of financial support to a PhD abroad (in the full or sandwich format) still favor academic excellence over geographic representativity. In this sense, BRICS NU constitutes a window of opportunity to receive students from developing nations besides the Latin American and Lusophone communities – already largely contemplated by current policies –, and, likewise, to encourage Brazilian students to choose members of the bloc as mobility destinations, in contrary to the current picture. It is certain, nonetheless, that the fulfillment of such aspirations also depends on coordinated measures to be taken collaboratively with other BRICS partners, particularly regarding financing sources, as also recognized by the interviewee.

Turning back to CAPES's recent call for BRICS NU, the interview also addressed the need to develop better performance and impact indicators for this initiative, aiming at policy evaluation and monitoring. While the current call focused on pre-qualification, a second CAPES call is expected to finance

7. Available at: https://cad.capes.gov.br/ato-administrativo-detalhar?idAtoAdmElastic=17766. Accessed on: Aug. 6, 2025.

selected academic projects, as previously mentioned. For that occasion, the Agency is assessing the possibility of defining supervision instruments to monitor the progress of the projects contemplated. Potential indicators one can think of may encompass the volume of inbound and outbound mobility, bibliometric and publication metrics, collaborative technological initiatives, and qualitative evaluations of specific institutional partnerships. These metrics should allow CAPES to evaluate the policy's effectiveness and its contribution to the broader goal of internationalizing Brazilian HEIs in a strategic, rather than merely quantitative, way.

Nevertheless, this policy implementation process presents various challenges. Administrative and bureaucratic hurdles, particularly in areas such as visa facilitation, recognition of academic credits, and language barriers, were identified as obstacles to effective academic exchange between the BRICS countries – the traditional models and the data brought in the previous section highlights this. In this context, Mr. Oppermann affirmed that CAPES is already working to try to address these issues through interministerial coordination and targeted events during Brazil's presidency of the BRICS in 2025. One example being the Brazil-China University Forum that took place in June 2025. Furthermore, the expansion of the BRICS group of countries, with new members spamming from different regions and academic cultures, introduces new horizons but also more complexity.

Yet, as emphasized by Mr. Oppermann, this expanded diversity presents new opportunities for Brazil and Brazilian HEIs to exercise leadership in the shaping of academic cooperation within the bloc and the global South. Events like the BRICS+ University Rectors Forum,[8] held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2025 with the support of CAPES, as well as the parallel establishment of a Rectors Forum between Brazil, Russia, and Belarus (Andifes, 2025), are part of a broader strategy to consolidate Brazil's role in regional and global academic governance and knowledge and scientific diplomacy, seeking a more prominent position in the global South. Mr. Opperman points out that state-led actions are central to a more successful and robust academic cooperation among the BRICS. As observed in section 3, natural ties and appealing features are not abundant in the dyadic higher education relations among the BRICS countries and its students and scholars. Thus, initiatives such as the BRICS NU and the institutional support of polities like CAPES can strengthen collaboration among the countries. However, the interviewee also recognizes that academic cooperation can be further supported by other non-state actors, including university consortia, FAUBAI and ANDIFES (in the case for Brazil), philanthropic foundations, and

8. Available at: https://brics2025.ufrj.br/. Accessed on: Aug. 6, 2025.

international organizations (which could include a more institutionalized BRICS group). Nonetheless, public agencies like CAPES remain the major players in ensuring national and international coordination and funding sustainability of the BRICS NU.

In summary, the 2025 CAPES open call to strengthen Brazil's presence in the BRICS NU follows a significant shift in the country's higher education internationalization strategy. Grounded in structured policy design and supported by interinstitutional and interministerial cooperation, the initiative reflects a broader reorientation of Brazil's academic diplomacy toward the global South, moving away from previous policies such as CSF and PrInt. These findings contribute to understanding how Brazilian higher education policy is being adapted to meet the demands of a changing geopolitical and scientific landscape during the country's presidency of the BRICS in 2025.

After the pandemic, significant changes in migration and higher education policies of countries traditionally central to attracting international students – such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia – have been reshaping the global academic landscape. This shift offers room for maneuver to strengthen intra-BRICS mobility mechanisms and academic cooperation. In the United States, for example, recent measures have signaled a tougher approach to welcoming foreign talent, especially in the scientific field. As highlighted in a Times Higher Education editorial by Glass, De Wit and Altbach (2025) – three of the biggest names in the field –, the country risks losing its leadership position in global science by restricting the entry of international students and researchers, traditionally vital to its universities and research centers. Canada, for its part, announced a cap on new international student visas in 2024, with an estimated number of 360,000 permits issued, a significant reduction of 35% from 2023 (IRCC, 2024). In Australia, a debate about setting a cap at 240,000 international students has been ongoing since April 2025, a measure supported by its main parties that reflects domestic pressures on housing and employment (ABC News, 2025). In the United Kingdom, the recent ban on students bringing dependents on student visas directly affected the country's attractiveness as an academic destination (THE, 2024).

This context of decline in traditional destinations may open the way for a redesign of international mobility dynamics, fostering deeper cooperation between countries of the global South and BRICS members. Those nations can now appear not only as senders but also as strategic recipients in the new higher education map. There is evidence (section 3) of significant growth in enrollments of Chinese and Indian students in Russian HEIs, for example, in the last years – even considering the pandemic period. Given this scenario, a

more robust intra-BRICS mobility agenda could contribute to strengthening global South scientific ecosystems, promoting greater circulation of knowledge and talent within the group, and reducing dependence on academic structures of developed countries and traditional recipients. Henceforth, such efforts could be aligned with multilateral programs within the BRICS framework and internationalization strategies from agencies like CAPES and its peers that are focused on common challenges. In this regard, the new members of the BRICS can contribute to diversifying even more the potential destinations for its students and collaboration opportunities for its scholars and HEIs.

Building a more integrated BRICS academic space, however, as highlighted by DRI/CAPES, depends on the members compromising to expanding bilateral agreements, financing sources, mutual recognition of diplomas, co-tutelle arrangements, scholarships, and courses in English. Leveraging the current geopolitical context to reposition the BRICS as attractive hubs for education and science and outbound students could represent a strategic step toward a more multipolar international order in the field of knowledge and science. In this regard, one can conclude that there is a historical window of opportunity not only to expand Brazil's academic partnerships with the global South (both as a sender and as a receiver in academic mobility flows) but also to diversify the country's cooperation networks with the developing world, moving beyond Latin America and the Lusophone Community to encompass the BRICS nations as well, with which very few partnerships have been established so far.

5 CONCLUSION

In this article, we sought to discuss the state of the art of higher education cooperation among BRICS countries, with particular emphasis on the institutional trajectory of the BRICS Network University, the bloc's main initiative in this realm. BRICS NU was designed in 2015 as an institution jointly run by individual universities appointed by each member country, with the main goal of offering international graduate programs while developing collaborative research projects and fostering student and faculty mobility. As assessed in section 2, these ambitious objectives were not fulfilled, and, in practice, BRICS NU has been operating as a mere forum of higher education institutions with sporadic meetings and thematic events, falling short of the original idea of becoming an actual BRICS university. Other relevant deficiencies include shortage of funding and overlap with other alliances of BRICS universities, like the BRICS University League, the BRICS+ Universities Association, and the BRICS+ Universities Rectors Forum.

In light of this deceiving institutional development, BRICS NU decided to expand its thematic scope from six to eleven areas; at the same time, there was an increase in the cap of universities representing each country in the mechanism from twelve to twenty-two, and four new BRICS member countries – Egypt, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia – were equally admitted to the initiative. Even though this movement does indicate an attempt to reenergize the mechanism, it was not accompanied by a resolution to the main structural inadequacies identified, like the funding problem and the lack of a permanent governing body, which remain major concerns.

This analysis was followed by a theoretical discussion of push-pull factors in academic mobility and a quantitative examination of current intra-BRICS academic flows. In this regard, it was demonstrated that traditional determinants of student mobility – economic appeal, academic prestige, language, colonial ties, and geographic distance –, as per the prevailing literature, do not favor mobility within BRICS, rather triggering outbound flows towards global North nations. Indeed, according to Unesco's official data, intra-bloc exchanges are marginal when compared to BRICS nations' overall flows, with the notable exception of Russia being a relevant destination for Indian and Chinese students. Such conclusions, therefore, underscore the importance of BRICS NU and highlight the need for exogenous stimuli, through public policy, to bolster academic cooperation in the bloc.

Given this context, an interview with the Director of International Relations of Brazil's CAPES was carried out to better grasp how the country views the current scenario and is preparing to manage academic ties with bloc partners during times of BRICS NU expansion. Brazil, whose mobility policies have been historically biased towards the global North, has actually been trying to make some course corrections and prioritize closer ties with developing nations as well – both in Latin America and in Asia and Africa. A recent call to select Brazil's new participants at BRICS NU was an important step in this direction, particularly for elevating the level of universities' institutional representation from graduate programs to universities themselves and equally for leaving open the perspective of specific funding lines for projects within the mechanism, thus tackling one of its main bottlenecks. Nevertheless, the interview also highlighted the need for coordinated action, as positive national policies are insufficient if not accompanied by improvements in the governance of the multilateral mechanism.

In short, BRICS NU represents a strategic institutional space to advance academic cooperation among BRICS nations, although currently underdeveloped due to prevailing, traditional ties with North American and European countries. Given that push-pull factors do not favor spontaneous academic flows within

BRICS, the role of public policy at the national and multilateral levels is undeniable, and mechanisms like BRICS NU can play a crucial role in reversing the current scenario. The recent expansion of the Network University poses challenges but can equally trigger its re-energization. For this revitalization to be successful, however, it is indispensable to address its main structural weaknesses as well, namely the shortage of funding, overlaps with competing initiatives, and the lack of an efficient governance structure.

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